Before or beyond narrative? Towards a complex systems theory of contemporary films
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8. Complex space: Narrating and describing

The ‘obscure’ space of *Gomorrah* and the disorienting effect that the film creates gives me the chance to have a closer look at the relationship between space and narrative in film, and to question whether the construction of space in contemporary ‘complex narrative’ films differs from that of classical narratives. In narratology space is conceived as a layered composition of the places where the story unfolds. However, I find that in contemporary complex narratives, space more generally adheres to a discontinuous arrangement of filmic elements (that are not always locales), which needs to be addressed in its heterogeneity. In these films we find different and often contradicting geographical and ontological levels that coexist in the filmic text (for example, in *Run Lola Run*), while the films themselves are visually and narrationally discontinuous (like *Gomorrah*). Taking this heterogeneity into account, I will suggest that description, in its particular relation to space, is an equally or even more appropriate term than narration when we approach the mode of discourse of complex films. Description places emphasis on the individuality of each unit out of which an image, a scene or a story is composed. It also allows for a discontinuous approach to the world of the text, foregrounding the text’s spatial character as it creates relations between entities simultaneously present. Thus, I will look into the history of the term in literary theory and narratology, where description, although intrinsic to narrative, has always been considered antithetical to the latter’s temporally progressive mode of presentation. A change of hierarchy between description and narrative in complex films has implications for the modes of reception as well, and creates doubt as to whether the types of sense-making associated with narrative are appropriate when it comes to the spatialized forms of reception that these films put forth.

The ‘complex of space’ in cinema and narrative

Space is an important axis around which the viewer composes the story world of a film. It is an abstract relationship between entities, a spatial arrangement, that the term ‘space’ primarily implies. Yet there can be a connection between this space and the topographic space (the locations) in which the action unfolds. Film theorist André Gardies distinguishes between four types of spaces in cinema: the cinematographic space (with its iconic, verbal and musical modes of signification), the diegetic space, the narrative space, in which space becomes an “actant” and serves the development of the story (as the order of the places presented might be telling their own story), and the space of the spectator. His conception of diegetic space is of particular interest here, since it connects the notion of space with that of place, but also differentiates between the two. Gardies sees the place as actualizing space, and making it
visible to the viewer. Thus, the places, i.e. all location marks appearing in the text of the film, are *paroles*—in Saussurian terms—through which the spatial system of the film (as *langue*) is composed. The place adheres to perception while the space to cognition (Gardies 1993: 90).

In narrative theory but also in film theory,\textsuperscript{136} we mostly find conceptions of space tied to its ‘topographical’ aspects, in the sense of locations that are cognitively composed in larger arrangements. Summarizing the existing literary-narratological literature on space, Ryan distinguishes between five different levels of space in narratives, which can also be considered to be spatial ‘layers’, because they are not exclusive but coexistent, each one extending and completing the other. Thus, according to Ryan’s classification, there are the “spatial frames”, defined as “the immediate surroundings of actual events, the various locations shown by the narrative discourse or by the image”. Then, there is the “setting”, which corresponds to “the general socio-historico-geographical environment in which the action takes place”. The category/layer of “story space” refers to “the space relevant to the plot, as mapped by the actions and thoughts of the characters”. The story space contains the immediate surroundings of the action plus other mentioned locations. The “narrative (or story) world” is “the story space completed by the reader’s imagination on the basis of cultural knowledge and real world experience”. The narrative world corresponds to the construction of a coherent space in which the various places of the narrative form a unity in the mind of the reader/viewer. Lastly, the layer of the “narrative universe” is superimposed on other layers and refers to “the world (in the spatio-temporal sense of the term) presented as actual by the text, plus all the counterfactual worlds constructed by the characters as beliefs, wishes, fears, speculations, hypothetical thinking, dreams, and fantasies” (Ryan 2011: paragraphs 9-13). As it becomes apparent especially in this last category, the spatial-topographical aspects of narratives are interwoven with ontological aspects, concerning different levels of reality being involved.

In *Gomorrah*, the category of ‘setting’ remains rather obscure, as discussed in the previous chapter. But also the ‘spatial frames’ in the same film acquire strange dimensions and properties because of the multiple ‘shifts’ effectuated by the camera work and editing. The ‘story space’ becomes difficult to compose through the vague and often out-of-context mentioning of places. The levels of narrative world and narrative universe are rather abstract and depend on the cognitive processing of each viewer. This processing is arguably affected by the way each of the other spatial levels is constituted.

A general remark that Ryan makes is that the narratological conception and categorization of space is done retrospectively, “from a static perspective as the final products of interpretation”. However, in the process of reading, the different layers of space mentioned above are gradually constituted. When a text provides information about places it could be said that it describes. Narrative is coupled with purposeful action, as discussed in Chapter 5,
and topographical space (or place) is not just described as in tourist guides but narrated, only as long as it serves the unfolding of events. As Ryan notes, “We may call the dynamic presentation of spatial information the textualization of space [she refers to Gabriel Zoran’s “textual level” of space—see Zoran 1984]. This textualization becomes a narrativization when space is not described for its own sake, as it would be in a tourist guide, but becomes the setting of an action that develops in time” (Ryan 2011: par.14). However, sometimes whole narrative segments and the action unfolding through them can be described, as we will see later in this chapter, but this implies a step away from the topographical conception of space (which I find more precisely defined as ‘place’) and into the cognitive one.

A process of cognitive layering involved in the construction of space by the viewer—and not necessarily bound to location markers—has informed film narratology. In *Narration in the Fiction Film* Bordwell divides the scenographic space (the space we perceive in the end product of a film) in three—both on-screen and off-screen—subspaces: the “shot space”, the “editing space”, and the “sonic space” (1985: 113). The shot space includes the texture, “atmospheric perspective” (manipulated by the lens focus, the depth of field and various effects that can be used), light of objects or bodies on the screen, movement of figures, etc. (114). All these features are the ways in which a shot can provide us with spatial cues. Different cues are provided by the editing, which demands from the viewer to construct an “intershot space” (117), aided by his or her short and long-term memory, as well as cognitive schemata and (narrative) cause and effect sequences that act as links between the separate shots and scenes. Thus, the construction of the space of a series of shots (the editing space), involves a process of cognitive and temporal layering, between the spatial cues that we have already collected and the ones that follow. Sonic space is created by the composition of voice and sound, and its texture depends on the distance of the microphone from the action, the stereo or mono recording as well as many other technical choices.

Space in narratives has been called “a complex”, in the sense that it consists of multiple interwoven layers. The borders between these spatial layers, which can retrospectively fall into theoretical categories such as the ones mentioned by Ryan, are not always brought to the attention of the reader/viewer by the text. In classical Hollywood films, narrative—even in its dynamical and temporal unfolding and not in retrospect—achieves a seamless interlocking of these layers into a multi-layered whole, ‘a complex’ that subsumes its elements. While a viewer follows the film, their attention is not attracted to the borders between different spatial layers but is aided to construct the complex of space in a way that does not disturb their immersion to the story. This is exactly the service of continuity editing, which was the bedrock of classical Hollywood cinema.
The textual organization of space in films (in terms of shot space, editing space and sonic space, to use Bordwell’s categories) and the way it is composed through cinematography and editing arguably affects the cognitive organization of the story world on behalf of the viewer. In certain complex narrative films, the continuity of editing space is often disrupted, but also the shot space becomes discontinuous, as pastiche techniques are used in the shot composition. Thus, as I am going to argue, complex films, the visual space of which has been characterized as “discontinuous and opaque” (Thanouli 2006: 193), foreground a heterogeneous distribution and spatial composition of elements, rather than a smooth layering of levels. This heterogeneity becomes manifest in their syuzhet as well.

The juxtaposition of heterogeneous spatial elements is a characteristic of complex films. Let us take as an example Tom Tykwer’s Run Lola Run (Lola Rennt 1998), one of the most oft-cited films of the 1990s complex narrative tendency. Tykwer’s film is characterized by spatio-temporal discontinuity in a number of different analytical levels (scene, plot, story). In Run Lola Run, the diegetic space or “story space”, in Ryan’s terms, is constructed out of bits and pieces of contemporary Berlin. Thus the film creates, according to Everett, “a hyperrealist architecture” of the city, which functions in a way reminiscent of Foucault’s city as heterotopia: “juxtaposing in a single real space, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Everett 2005: 167). Run Lola Run performs such juxtaposition not only in terms of story space but also in terms of editing space. Visually, the film uses abrupt inserts of animation and Polaroid stills. There is also a fast transition between different and discontinuous points of view, aided by dizzying vertical and horizontal zooms and swirling camera movements (in this respect, Everett comments on the shift from the aerial to the street view in the beginning of Run Lola Run). In terms of sound, Run Lola Run is a collage of loud techno beat, street sounds, silence and dialogue. Regarding the plot-level, the film contains three alternative forks of Lola’s destiny. Michael Wedel points at the film’s “discontinuity” in sonic rhythm, in editing, in space, and in plot structure. As to the latter, he refers to the way the plot does not progress in a linear temporal sequence but returns to specific starting points to unfold again differently, providing Lola, the protagonist, with three alternative destinies (2009: 144-145). The alternative destinies of Lola coexist not only in the syuzhet but also in the fabula, as the film does not allow us to reject any of them as false as we construct the story. I would argue that the temporal discontinuity of the plot in Run Lola Run, with its iterative rhythm, is also a spatial discontinuity at the cognitive level of the film’s composition. This happens as long as the spectator has to place the three alternatives of the plot as coexistent albeit heterogeneous pieces in the same cognitive space.

In Gomorrah, discontinuity is found between episodes but also between and within shots. The scene composition in this film is elliptical, omitting large segments of action in a
sequence (for example at the scene where Don Ciro goes out of his house, described in the previous chapter) and also discontinuous, in terms of an abrupt transition from shot to shot. Moreover, the *mise-en-scene* contains multiple layers, both in depth, when action unfolds simultaneously in the foreground and the background—with the two sometimes disconnected through shifts in the lens focus—and on the vertical axis, especially in the scenes shot at the housing complex, in which different action going on at its different levels is placed in the same frame.

Narratively, discontinuity is produced in *Gomorrah* due to the ‘uncontaminated mixing’ of the different episodes. The shift from one character/episode to the other is at the same time a shift in point of view and location. This creates a spatialized cognitive experience of the diegesis, which also has to do with the film’s withholding of what Zoran calls global information:

> When the global information appears at an early stage in the description, the concrete items join in later on, and the picture takes on a unified character. On the other hand, it is possible to delay the appearance of this global information, in which case the individual items appear—at least for a while—without clear-cut context, and one receives the impression of a non-unified, disconnected space. (1984: 322)

In the case of *Gomorrah*, the “global information” is the information provided at the end, about how the individual stories connect to each other, through the common denominator of Camorra. The fact that the film withholds this information (in an extreme degree, unlike what happens in other ‘network’ films) places its separate episodes in a disconnected space.

Narrative construction, as a spatio-temporal composition that needs to impose some degree of (causal-logical) coherence to the story it forms, is arguably affected by the discontinuity observed in films of the complex narrative tendency. I find that three aspects of textual narrative structure, as indicated by Zoran (1984: 320), are challenged to a greater or lesser degree by these films: “the essential selectivity”, “the temporal continuum” and the “point of view”. Thus, complex films do not select (only one character/plot thread/version upon an event). It often happens that there is no one finite version of events. The development of the films is done in a non-sequential way and by following an iterative rhythm, revisiting persons and events. Moreover, films of the complex narrative tendency often include a multiplicity of viewpoints (for example, as multi-character films do), which sometimes contradict each other, as happens in *Pulp Fiction*, for instance. The multiplicity of viewpoints offers the viewer different and constantly shifting entry points into the diegesis. This keeps the viewer in a state of dis/re-location, as s/he is never comfortably following one single story or
story version, but has to cognitively juxtapose and ‘juggle’ alternatives. This has an overall spatializing effect upon narrative.

It is not just the illumination of the spatial layering that every text or every artwork creates but the way that films such as Run Lola Run ‘produce’ space (to borrow Lefebvre’s expression) out of their diegetic pieces, that is of interest here. While we may a priori separate different spatial layers and look at how they are embedded/connected to each other, or how individual texts activate them, as most narratological theories of space do, it is a different strategy that we need to follow in order to account for the spatialized experience that many complex films evoke, through the tensed juxtaposition of diegetic units—which are highlighted in their heterogeneity (audiovisually and narrationally) rather than unified. Moreover, it is not by following the temporal unfolding of the story that viewers gradually construct the complex of space, as it happens in every story. Rather, a spatialized perception of the different units becomes the primary contact zone between the film and the viewer, and this infiltrates the viewer’s following of the story. As Thanouli observes, “in films like Fight Club, Lola Rennt, Trainspotting or Magnolia we are asked to follow the action in a fragmented manner and to construct the story out of excessively intermittent diegetic pieces” (2006: 191). The piecemeal articulation of stories spatializes narrative, and in a sense adjusts it to the larger complex filmic space, of which narrative becomes one constitutive element.

Everett names many of the films belonging in the complex narrative tendency “fractal”. Fractal films express, according to Everett, “a new narrative and spatial awareness based on multiplicity, simultaneity and fragmentation” (2005: 160). Multiplicity, simultaneity and fragmentation, are the properties that in literary theory have been associated with description as opposed to narrative. Description arguably occupies a central position in contemporary complex films, and prioritizes the spatial juxtaposition of textual elements over that of the causal-temporal transformation of narrative.

**Literary theories of description**

There has been a tension drawn in both literary and film theoretical tradition between narrative and description. The traditional view of narrative considers it to be distinct from description, because description does not conform to the overall causal and temporal succession of the story; it rather suspends time and action. This tension between description and narrative is not new. It comes from the period of Enlightenment and its system of ideas and was systematically treated by Lessing in his distinction between temporal and spatial arts, and particularly literature and painting. Joseph Frank notes that Lessing used to advise poets to give emphasis on action and not on description, because action fits the linear temporality of
language (Frank 1978: 282). In the same vein, descriptive passages in narratives have been considered extra-narrative prostheses rather than organic parts of narrative.

In narratology as well as in literary criticism, description is traditionally considered spatial, while narration is thought of as temporal. However, since space and time cannot be separated, both forms express their own temporality. The temporality of narrative differs from the one of description, Todorov contends, as the former pertains to a successive unfolding of time—through the changes and ‘events’ that are the constitutive units of narratives—while the latter to the “perpetual present” of poetry (1971: 39, 42). As he notes elsewhere, logical order (causality) and temporal order (succession) are the fundamental processes of fiction, whereas poetry has a distinct, spatial order, based on repetition (Todorov 1977: 136).142

There have been periods in literary and art history where the descriptive and spatial aspects of texts come to the fore. Description has been a central characteristic of baroque art and poetry, as Genette notes (1976: 6). The development of narrative, however, gave prevalence to another, “symbolic and explicatory” function of description, for example in the novels of Balzac, where the description of things is expressive of the inner life of the characters, and thus in a way serves the development of the narrative. Like Todorov, Genette finds that description has a spatial character that brings it closer to poetry, while “narration puts emphasis on the temporal and dramatic aspects of narrative” (1976: 7). Description lingers on objects, turning actions into “scenes” (7). The word scene is relevant to the arrangement of objects in space:

[...] narration restores, in the temporal succession of its discourse, the equally temporal succession of events, while description has to model in successiveness the representation of objects coexisting and juxtaposed in space.143

Genette finds the case of Balzac exemplary because of the harmonic coexistence of description and narration in his novels. In general, for Genette, description comes to serve the needs of the dramatic unfolding of the diegesis, and thus is in a sense subordinate to narrative (1976: 6).

The revival of description in late modernist novels such as those of Robbe-Grillet is seen by Genette as just an attempt (certainly innovative) to constitute narrative by descriptive means:

it appears clearly that description as a mode of literary representation does not distinguish itself sharply enough from narration, either by the autonomy of its ends or the originality of its means, to make it necessary to break the narrative-descriptive unit (with the narration dominating) which Plato and Aristotle named narrative. If description marks a boundary of narrative, it is an internal and rather ill-defined boundary. (Genette 1976: 7)
‘Spatial’ representation of objects and people (description) may be included in narratives, but, according to Genette, it has just a supportive role and never becomes their defining characteristic. Rather, Genette considers the temporal progression of action and events to be the defining characteristic of narratives. Spatial dimensions of texts, like description and self-reflexive reference (the latter here discussed in Part 1), are thus considered to be in a constant internal tension with narrative.

In his article “Spatial form: Some further reflections”, Frank refers to Genette’s essay “Borders of Narrative”, and to the discussion of self-reflexive discourse and description therein. In this article, Genette refers to the novels of Robbe-Grillet, which he reads as somehow extreme examples of how description, even when occupying the entire text, still remains subordinate to narrative, as it is, in Genette’s view, ultimately stories that Robbe-Grillet’s novels tell. Frank, despite being a big admirer of Genette (as well as of Todorov) and considering this specific essay of his “brilliant”, he nonetheless comments: “Whether one can still speak of description as subordinate in a work composed exclusively of the variation of descriptive fragments seems very doubtful; but disagreement on this point does not detract from the usefulness of Genette’s categories” (1978: 287). Frank uses Genette’s insights in the “Frontiers” essay in order to hint at the connection between description and a text’s “spatial form”—which will be discussed in the last chapter.

There have been, however, scholars who studied description and descriptive genres in their autonomy from narrative. From this perspective, perhaps the ‘canonical’ theorist of description in literature is Philippe Hamon. Hamon explicitly relates description to notions such as “piece”, “fragment”, or “detail” (Hamon 1981: 24). He also connects it to the paradigmatic dimension of a text, as opposed to its syntagmatic one, which prevails in narration. The effect of temporal ‘delay’ that we find in an extreme degree in Gomorrah and also in many ‘network’ films, this suspension of “global information”, in Zoran’s terms, is characteristic of description. Hamon explains how description creates a “digression” and “expansion” (amplification) of the text and its temporality (1981: 96-97). As long as the temporal dimension is concerned, Hamon calls the descriptive system synchronic and he differentiates it from the diachronic system of narrative (1981: 18). There are specific mechanisms that hold the descriptive system together synchronically, such as parallels and antitheses, and “subsystems of equivalences (analogies, comparisons, metaphors)” (Hamon 1981: 131).

Hamon makes a historical link between description and topographical space. In literary critique, description had somehow been neglected and considered a qualitatively inferior part of the text, but a change of attitude can be observed in the end of the 18th century. Then, description becomes visible (especially in prose poetry) as a textual unity worth of
investigation in the European circles of literary critique, especially in France. Among the other factors that contributed to this ‘visibility’ of description has been, according to Hamon, “the spreading of travels and the creation of the notion of ‘site’, classified in the Guides, cultural objects to visit with the Baedeker at hand” (1981: 24). The reference to places, sites and ‘details seen’, made the textual mode of description more prominent.

Not only the descriptive gains ground in texts because of cultural transformations affecting the notion of space, but also the experience of the recipient becomes spatial in his or her encounter with description. Hamon points out that the object of description (for the one who describes, but also for the one who follows the description) is considered “a surface, a space, rationalized-rationalizable, articulated, fragmented, segregated” (1981: 61). Description and its “aesthetics of fragment”—with manifest influence, according to Hamon, upon the European realist tradition—favours the staging of a discourse of transit (“discours de parcours”), in which “mobile persons cross and link these juxtaposed spaces” (62). This mode of discourse that description stands for is different from that of narration. The latter can also be compared to a ‘journey’ (parcours), but this journey is always towards a destination.

Description at once encompasses two seemingly opposite tendencies, one towards fragmentation and another towards linkage of the fragments. This linkage does not however surpass the aesthetics of the fragment, but rather coexists with it. The pieces maintain their heterogeneity, and it is through this heterogeneity that a world comes to existence: describing the pieces is a way, according to Hamon, to build a “lived space” or a chronology and situate oneself within it (1981: 57). Description thus, I would add, fleshes out “experimental constructed realities”, to use Hamon’s expression, for both words/terms (in a text) and readers/recipients to feel at place.

The linkage of pieces implies a systemic quality of description. Description does not contradict the systemic logic, by suggesting a juxtaposition of elements without any connection to each other. As Hamon points out, description at once creates heterogeneous pieces, and operates on them by linking the pieces in a different way than narrative does. Thus, description proposes a different connection between units, prioritizing spatial disparity over temporal progression. Hamon refers to the way description creates a topos—literally ‘a place’ and figuratively a pattern or motif—and this happens only as soon as there is some sort of organization to the otherwise dispersed elements: he notices that both in Jules Verne and Emile Zola, and despite the differences in the function of description in the work of each one of them, “the topos distributes and puts in correlation certain number of posts, postures, objects and subjects, habitats, inhabitants and habits” (1981: 251; emphasis mine). The function of description as topos implies a double movement of distributing and correlating, juxtaposing and linking, which is fundamental in description. The space that description
creates is thus a complex *topos*, a system or network where heterogenous elements are connected through links, rather than placed in a sequence.

**Description in film**

But how does description work in the medium of cinema? Seymour Chatman, perhaps the main representative of classical structuralist narratology in film, wrote extensively on the role of description in narrative cinema. Among other influences, he drew on the work of Hamon and his questioning of the—often presupposed—hierarchical superiority of narrative to description. Chatman quotes: “Classical theoreticians seem to have seen in Description only a risky ‘drift’ from detail to detail—a process which, among all else, threatens the homogeneity, the cohesion and the dignity of the [narrative] work” (Hamon, as cited in Chatman 1990: 23). Chatman, like Hamon, also points at the ‘systemic’ qualities of description. As he stresses, “Description has a logic of its own, and it is unreasonable to belittle it because it does not resemble the chrono-logic of Narration” (1990: 24). Description for him renders contiguity (spatial proximity) more important than causality. Thus the impression of a “‘putative drift’ from detail to detail” that description creates is not aimless. I will use some of Chatman’s remarks on the role of description in cinema in order to argue that contemporary complex films do not just question but subvert the hierarchy between description and narrative.

Chatman does not reject Genette’s contrast between narrative and description in cinema; like Genette, he problematizes the role of description in narrative films. In his book *Story and Discourse* (1978) Chatman declares his conviction that “description per se is generally impossible in narrative films”. Description in literature is associated with pause and lingering; in film, however, “the story-time keeps going as long as images are projected on the screen, as long as we feel that the camera continues to run” (74). Thus, ‘pure’ description is for Chatman impossible in the medium of film. Films do not permit the ‘lingering’ found in literary narratives. In film, even when no action takes place, “the focus remains on the event”. Descriptive details, Chatman repeats in *Coming to Terms* (1990), “can only occur as a byproduct of plot action; they do not have a separate existence” (42). Description for Chatman is the opposite of the cinematic summary of action; it is “pause, which occurs when story time stops, though the discursive statement continues” (1990: 50). Such instances of description as pause and lingering is possible in cinema in the case of “freeze frame” (1978: 75), according to Chatman. A freeze frame, instead of serving plot needs, would allow more time to be given to objects or persons in the frame “to reveal their own properties” (Chatman 1990: 50).
In literature, description is vital exactly because the viewer does not see; in film, however, there is a plenum of visual details in every frame that cannot be avoided (40). Films do not need to describe because they show. Their modes of description can only be “tacit” and not explicit, Chatman contends (38). Thus, on the one hand, film is always descriptive (in terms of the “cornucopia of visual details” (40) provided in every frame), on the other hand, it is seldom descriptive on purpose. In my view, in both cases of tacit (cinematic) and explicit description, the latter is a mode of discourse that demonstrates, even implicitly, a textual (describing) agency.

In cinema, it is by means of contiguity and parallelism that description might evoke patterns connecting disparate images, objects or episodes. In order to reveal the cinematic “logic” of description, and the “topos” it creates, in Hamon’s terms, Chatman draws on Christian Metz, who identified the descriptive as one of the two chronological syntagmas of film, the second being narrative. Metz refers to description in the editing space, and not the shot space. Thus, in the chapter “Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film” from Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema, Metz defines description as the “absence of consecutiveness” and the presence of simultaneity between shots.

There is one syntagmatic type in which the relationship between all the motifs successively presented on the screen is one of simultaneity: the descriptive syntagma [...]. [...] In the descriptive syntagma, the only intelligible relation of coexistence between the objects successively shown by the images is a relation of spatial coexistence. (1991: 127)

Action, one of the main foundations of narrative, is possible to be described instead of narrated in cinema, provided that this action is composed by elements, the relation between which is one of “spatial parallelism at any given moment in time” (ibid: 128). This is a type of action that, as Metz points out, is impossible for the viewer to “mentally string together in time” (ibid). To explain this Metz brings the example of “a flock of sheep being herded”, an action which is described through a montage of shots of “the sheep, the shepherd, the sheepdog, etc.” (1991: 128). It is not that one of these shots precedes the other in a causal-logical way; rather, they are chronologically simultaneous.

Based on Metz’s descriptive syntagma, Chatman defines instances of this kind of syntagmas in fiction films as cases of cinematic description. He borrows another example used by Metz, that of a landscape described through a shot sequence including “a tree, followed by a shot of a stream running next the tree [sic], followed by a view of a hill in the distance, etc.” (Metz 1974: 127, as cited in Chatman 1990: 42). In such instances, Chatman stresses,
the point is not that the shots are diegetically simultaneous but that story time has temporarily been suspended. The [descriptive] shot sequence forms a narrative pause. The sign of the pause is precisely the temporally unmotivated shifting from one shot to the other. On the other hand, exactly the same sequence of shots would be narrative if the preceded or followed shots indicating the eye movements of a character looking at something (“first he looked at the tree, then at the stream, then at the hills”). (Chatman 1990: 42)

In this line of thinking, Chatman suggests that “camera movements that have no other motive (for instance, to communicate a character’s perception of a scene) are often purely descriptive” (43). Thus, apart from freeze frames, there is another mode of cinematic description, and this is the parallelism of objects that appears as the purposeful (and self-reflexive) act of the camera, and not that of the characters. The camera acts as a “describer”, when it moves independently of a perceptor’s point of view, undermining the viewer’s conventional—in narrative cinema—sense of eyeline matches. This creates an effect of “spatial disorientation” (Chatman 1990: 52), which I also stressed in the case of Gomorrah. Chatman uses as an example of description Antonioni’s film The Passenger (Professione: Reporter, 1975). There, the camera work and editing disturbs the viewer’s sense of scale, rendering the dimensions of objects indeterminate (Chatman 1984: 8-9). It also ‘tricks’ the viewer with eyeline match shots that suddenly ‘bump into’ the figure of the supposed perceptor. In Gomorrah exactly the same effect has been stressed as creating a mise-en-abyme impression as well as disorientation to the viewer.

**Narrative being described: A change of hierarchy**

The hierarchy between description and narrative does not always place narrative higher than description, Chatman contends. There are cases where narrative is contained to description rather than the other way around. It is not always description that “serves” narrative, according to Genette’s formulation; sometimes it is narrative that serves description: “in many works whose overriding text-type is Description, the ‘service’ is performed by a contained Narrative, not the other way around” (Chatman 1990: 24). The example that Chatman uses in order to prove his point is an oft-cited passage from Homer’s Iliad, with the detailed description of Agamemnon’s armor. Chatman characterizes this description as “a mini-narrative” (33), because the parts that compose the armor are mentioned in an order that corresponds to the process of dressing, which may be considered a narrative, because it follows a causal-logical sequence. Here Chatman relies on Hamon, who, referring to the same scene of the Iliad, observes how “the ornamental aspect of the descriptive is integrated into the
finality of the narration; thus the paradigmatic aspect of the list becomes one with the syntagmatic aspect of the narration, the derivational into the transformational” (Hamon 1981: 17). However, according to Chatman, this mini-narrative serves the description of Agamemnon’s armor, and this description in turn “subserves the overriding narrative of the *Iliad*” (1990: 33). Therefore Chatman observes “a multiple layering of ‘service’” taking place between narrative and description, and rejects the presumption that it is always description that serves narrative (34). At the same time, he refuses to ascribe a qualitative value to ‘service’ (and to imply that the textual type that each time serves the other is in a sense ‘inferior’), proposing the term as a textual device.

There have been other theorists apart from Chatman, who have proposed a reconsideration of the role of description, which cannot anymore be considered just “*ancilla narrationis*”—according to Genette’s expression (1966: 157). The prevailing view among these proposals is that description is not inferior to narrative but an important constituent of narration. Ryan, for example, holds that description is not antithetical to narration—it rather establishes the spatial relations that are essential to its construction: “Though description is often regarded by text typologists as the antithesis of narration, it is also the major discourse strategy for the disclosure of spatial information” (Ryan 2010: paragraph 27).

My suggestion for reconsidering the role of description, taking as a starting point contemporary complex films, would nonetheless differ from the above views, as well as from that of Chatman. The example of *Gomorrah* can be used as indicative of how the hierarchy between narrative and description tends to be not only challenged but more decisively subverted in the case of contemporary complex films, as narrative is found more often overall ‘serving’ description than the other way around. The aspect of description is highlighted through the iterative rhythm of *Gomorrah*, which suspends the diegetic relations between the separate characters. Characters resemble objects where the narration lingers on, in its ‘parcours’ from one story to the other, a *parcours* which is not motivated by narrative action and causality but rather by the self-reflexive agency of the camera. This *parcours* participates in the overall piecemeal aesthetics of the film (which new media theorists like Manovich would call ‘database’). The multiple episodes of the narrative thus become themselves objects of description.

At the (micro-)level of shot space, the camera work and editing follow a drift unmotivated by narrative. The camera is driven from piece to piece, only that now the pieces are not the characters’ stories, but shots of the setting from different, discontinuous and sometimes contradicting angles. The “disorienting effect” that Chatman talks about is created through the shifts in scale and lens focus, discussed in Chapter 8. At the (macro-)level of episodes, the drift is performed between the five mini-narratives that are used in order to
describe the world of Camorra—and make it emerge out of its fragments. The editing of the episodes could be considered as subsuming narrative under description. The excerpts from the lives of the different characters become pieces that are juxtaposed in the space of the film, considered to be contemporaneous and with no temporal successiveness between them. More than a “multiple layering of serving”, like the one Chatman finds in the _Iliad_, and that, in his view, ultimately serves and not subverts the narrative, I find in _Gomorrah_ a subversion of the narrative-description hierarchy, more decisively ‘privileging’ the side of description. Thus, the mini-narratives of _Gomorrah_ do not serve the composition of an overarching narrative. There is not a beginning, middle and end in which we can place these autonomous stories. If this applies in other complex films too (and I think it does in forking-path films such as _Run Lola Run_ and in other films with multiple contained stories), then we can legitimately doubt their overall labeling as narratives.

Chatman’s primary concern in _Coming to Terms_ seems to be to show how description can be incorporated in narrative films, not as inferior to narrative but as an equal helper. He also pointed at instances of narrative serving description; however, there seems to be, in the examples he used, a ‘narrative umbrella’ that covers this layering of ‘serving’ going on underneath. My concern here is to show how description, along with other traditionally considered “anti-narrative” or “non-narrative” features, now becomes the ‘umbrella’. Starting from the pieces that are being juxtaposed, and moving in a bottom-up way, description participates in the incorporation of narrative into forms of (complex) textual and cognitive organization that subsume and transgress narrative.

**New media and description**

As Hamon observed, description is in semantic terms closer to the paradigm, as opposed to narrative that is closer to the syntagm. Semantic units have a paradigmatic relationship to each other as long as the replacement of one with another does not affect meaning. On the contrary, a syntagmatic relationship implies that the existence of one unit depends upon its specific placement in a sequence of units. Drawing on Saussure’s and especially Roland Barthes’ theory of sign systems, Manovich argues in _The Language of New Media_ that the prevalence of digital computer and electronic storage devices tends to make paradigmatic forms of organization more prominent in contemporary culture than they have been since the beginning of the 20th century, when (narrative) cinema was gradually established as the prevailing cultural form. As he points out, with new media “[t]he paradigm is given material existence, while the actual narrative (the syntagm) is de-materialized” (Manovich 2001: 230-231). However, Manovich finds that, when the formation of cultural objects is at hand, most interfaces, although constituted paradigmatically out of databases,
tend to finally impose a syntagmatic order upon their elements. Nonetheless the cultural penetration of the paradigm is nowadays much more pervasive than it was for the most part of the last (20th) century.

‘Complex narrative’ films illustrate this centrifugal, as I call it, tendency to organize their elements paradigmatically rather than syntagmatically. Of course, the syntagmatic mode of narrative is still present and coexistent with the paradigmatic mode in complex films; however, the hierarchy between the two seems to be shifting more often. A hierarchical shift from syntagm to paradigm would thus be one from narrative to description. Although the relations between the pieces of complex films eventually give rise to a whole that we may call, after Hamon, a topos, the initial selection of elements is contingent. In the example of Gomorrah, the principle characters and their developed stories were contingently selected out of a database of characters contained in the homonymous book. Moreover, some of the five stories of the film could possibly be altered with different ones without affecting the overall organization of the film, because the latter is not dependent upon that of the particular narratives included in it. The film contains them, yet it subjects them to an ordering principle that is ‘more than their sum’. As I already pointed out, like Gomorrah, complex films appear non-selective, containing multiple points of view, and temporally discontinuous. They thus subject themselves to an overriding paradigmatic principle that treats the narrative segments as units that can be individually accessed and altered with others out of a set of possible elements, without affecting the overall organization. The transformation that narrative cinema goes through, and which becomes manifest in complex films, cannot be explained away as a superficial imitation of new media modes. Independently of the duration and the inevitable commercial appropriation that this cinematic phenomenon may have, it nevertheless provides a chance to question some of our certainties about narrative and its relation to cinema.

Although Manovich sees the concept of description relevant in the case of new media techniques of image composition, he does not connect it to new narrative forms. In his reference to description, he does not draw on literature but on painting, and specifically the work of art historian Svetlana Alpers on the 17th century Dutch painting, in which the descriptive mode prevailed, as opposed to the Italian Renaissance painting, which privileged the narrative mode (Manovich 2001: 327). Manovich relates this descriptive mode to the “aesthetics of density” that resurface in the context of new media and “new cinematic aesthetics”, as long as digital compositing offers more options to create dense and synthetic images, putting every detail in focus. This aesthetics of density can also be applied in films as compositions of mini-narratives. This can work in a wide range of films, from Short Cuts and Magnolia to Gomorrah. Description becomes a mode that fits the dense diegetic aesthetics of complex films.
The way new media use software that operates upon individual units is also reminiscent of how description functions. Ian Bogost suggests that the logic of “unit operations” that software technology follows,\textsuperscript{149} may also characterize our critical approach and analysis of cultural objects, apart from informational data. Bogost makes an attempt to apply the logic of unit operations in film analysis discussing the film \textit{The Terminal} (Steven Spielberg, 2004). The unit operational approach could be developed, as he suggests, into an alternative to the classical narrative approaches to films, by privileging “discrete components of meaning over global narrative progression” (2006: 19). In this view, \textit{The Terminal} is not a narrative system (“the story of a handful of developed characters”), but a “procedural” one, “a framework for general figures of waiting” (2006: 18-19). He explains:

As the film plays out the interwoven stories of Viktor, Dixon, and Amelia, it challenges the viewer to abstract the film’s specific representations of waiting into general, individual units of meaning that the viewer naturally combines with his or her own experience. In my unit analysis of the film, the story serves as the glue for a configurative work about specific modes of uncorroborated waiting. (Bogost 2006: 19)

From the perspective of description, the mini-narratives I referred to can be seen as “units of tightly encapsulated meaning” (\textit{ibid}: xii) which operate independently of each other but still can have relations between them that may be conceived by means of contiguity, analogy, parallelism or metonymy, the relations that description gives way to. Approaching semiotics from the point of view of his theory of unit analysis, Bogost uses Saussure’s distinction between \textit{parole} and \textit{langue}, noting that \textit{parole} refers to a unit operation, a “single use of a sign”, while \textit{langue} refers to “the general system underlying the use of any particular sign” (23). Description is in my view a “unit operational” process, performed by ‘old’ media such as literature and film. It highlights elements as units that may relate to other elements and form aggregates and emergent organizations.

The units of complex films may be heterogeneous and distributed, but they nonetheless form a system, or a \textit{topos} as Hamon called the textual systems that description forms, and this feature differentiates them from the elements of a heap or a catalogue, as discussed in Part 2. This \textit{topos}, however, while connecting the elements in the same space, maintains the elements’ heterogeneity from each other. These elements are not connected by necessity (as a syntagmatic structure would imply) but by contingency. They are codependent only at higher level of the pattern they form, but this pattern is also contingent and uncertain, characterized by the non-stationary dynamics of complexity. Thus, the way that narratives are turned into units makes it possible to operate upon them in a way that subsumes narrative under the
parallel and distributed modes of organization that expand in contemporary culture, and make narratives nodes in larger complex networks of media and cultural production, which, as complex systems, are never static.

In this chapter I tried to show that description as a type of discourse produces a textual ‘system’ different from that of narrative. It facilitates relations among units that suggest a parallel and spatialized processing of them on behalf of the recipient. Calling this type of processing ‘spatial’ I do not refer to the topographical notion of space (the place depicted in a film or novel), although place and its markers can also be processed spatially; I rather refer to the type of cognitive processing that emerges from the ‘parcours’ through different units (objects/characters, shots, sequences, embedded narratives) of a film and their relations to each other. The mode of discourse that facilitates this parcours, i.e. description, can be connected to an epistemological stance towards complexity.

Pia Tikka, filmmaker and researcher, refers to a paradigm shift that has taken place from the governing of complexity—a stance prevailing in cybernetics—to its description, a stance represented by complex systems theory, according to Tikka (2008: 287). Governing corresponds to the classical cybernetic approach that aimed at the control of complexity (homeostasis) while description to the interest in what complexity might bring when it is left to develop, even in a preconstituted environment (emergence). Emergent and ‘descriptive’ approaches suggest following in a bottom-up way the patters of the connections between units in their never-ending drift. In the next chapter I will examine whether such an emergent sense of ‘pattern’ can have application in contemporary complex films.