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

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CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Complex films are not ‘complex’ in the common sense of the word, meaning something that is so complicated that it is difficult to understand. I do not use this label with a qualitative loading, implying that the films of the recent complex narrative tendency are more clever or skillful than other—contemporary or older—films. The word ‘complex’ is used from the perspective of complex systems theory, implying that these films are configurations produced in contemporary cinema amidst the perturbations and volatile conditions that characterize its environment. In the context of this environment, individual films, film tendencies and the cinema institution produce their organization, on the backdrop of fleeting conditions, contingency and, not least, complex systemic crisis. Cinema is a complex system on any scale and at every level, and complex films are the units of its larger organization. In this specific point in time, they are configurations that contribute into rendering cinema adaptable to new media, cultural and economic conditions, but also allow it to transform these conditions.

The complex films I chose to analyze do not come from the peak of the complex narrative tendency in cinema, which was between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s. They are rather latecomers in this trend. However, for precisely this reason they picture the way complex narrative features ‘fertilized’ a wide range of Hollywood, independent and world cinema filmmaking. In between the prevalence of the complex narrative tendency and its possible future fading, or dissolving into larger, and more complex (in the sense of developed and differentiated) formations, these films are snapshots of a post-‘post-narrative’ filmmaking that is evolving.

Through a shift from the narratological to the complex systemic framework, I tried to show how three ‘post-narrative’ characteristics—self-reflexivity, loose causality and description—perform an organizational, rather than disorganizing, function in relation to the diegetic world. I linked these characteristics to processes necessary for the self-organization of complex systems, namely, self-observation/self-reference, aggregation (of units) and emergent pattern formation. Through these characteristics, texts produce wholes that are meaningful and communicate with the recipient in ways that ‘partly knock out the conscious mind’.

Literary theory, linguistics and semiotics are fields that study textual characteristics such as the ones I here connected to complex systemic functions. The study of language and texts is certainly not confined to the study of narratives. What I explored are the borders between narrative and these non-narrative forms, when they coexist textually, as in complex narratives. Moreover, I focused on how self-reflexivity, loose causality and description
produce systemic meaning, and by becoming the ordering principles of the film’s diegesis, turn the latter into a complex systemic entity.

There exist films that are perhaps even more causally loose, descriptive and self-reflexive and that do not belong in the recent complex narrative tendency. Such films could be—and have been—called avant-garde, modernist or postmodern in different socio-historical periods. As to whether the complex systems framework can find a broader application in film analysis and be developed and applied in films and film constellations different from the ones I analyzed here, this is a question that future research could answer. The identification of links between specific textual characteristics and complex systemic functions I made in this dissertation will hopefully be useful to other researchers who are interested in exploring the organizational dynamics of ‘non-linear’ fictional films and possibly of other kinds of texts. These dynamics transcend the level of individual films, and reach out to their environment, which also becomes, in a process of reciprocal causality between the micro and the macro-level, more complex. The existence of emergent dynamics shows texts not just as cultural products but as living cultural organizations, that determine and transform the cultural structures and the media that host them.

Having identified the links between textual modes and characteristics of complex systemic processes, I took a first step towards drawing a framework for the analysis of complex films. I did not however configure a specific complex systemic methodology for the analysis of individual complex films. This would be a second step worth pursuing in the future. The self-referential moments in a film’s plot and the agents’ interactions could be isolated in their units and analyzed more systematically in the patterns they form. In this respect, film analysis could borrow from the complex systemic epistemology terms and methods in order to build diegetic models that follow the units and their aggregates and better capture the reciprocal causality between different levels of diegetic organization (similar to the way agent-based approaches to complex systems do). With an eye to the increasing collaborations between film and media theorists and computer scientists, it seems reasonable for media theory to develop adequate tools and models and take advantage of the capability of computer simulations to follow collections of many heterogeneous elements and to foresee, identify or develop further their patterns. Then the nonlinear links between individual films, film tendencies and (changing) cinematic practices, as well as the reciprocal determination of these levels, could be explored, with potentially fascinating results for media and cultural studies.

By posing the question ‘before or beyond narrative’, already in the title of this dissertation, I do not imply that there is a need to make an exclusive choice between the two,
in an ‘either-or’ way. Rather, the two options, as I see them, contain and generate one another. Complex films are incomplete and open-ended narratives, as ‘before’ narrative would imply, but also formations that include and surpass narrative, multiplying it and miniaturizing it (as in *Gomorrah*), driving it out of control and observing it from a mocking distance (as in *Burn After Reading*), making it one instant in an ongoing loop (as in *The Final Cut*), and ultimately moving ‘beyond’ it. Before and beyond also refer to different but connected levels of analysis, the one of individual films and the other of film networks and networks of practices that constitute cinema as an institution. The complex systems framework allows us to address both levels, and most importantly, the emergent dynamics and feedback loops that connect them.

The narrative structure and analysis is of course still applicable to a large number of texts, and is also able to partially address the cinematic complex narratives that have been my focus here; however, narrative analysis has a blind spot, which becomes visible only from a different standpoint. It does not capture the other kinds of distributed and ‘dissipated’—in Prigogine’s terms—structures that contemporary society and its cultural products form, structures which follow a different kind of ‘order’ than narrative does, and envelop narrative in their own self-organizational drift.

I would situate complex films and complex cinema both before and beyond narrative, in the space of a temporal fold that every observation creates, as Luhmann would have it. In complex systems, the spatialization of time through the doubling moment of observation makes possible a temporalization of space. With every self-observation, a certain section of the past is selected to relate to the present, and the resulting organization also determines the future selections that a system will make, the paths that it will draw. The fragmented, recomposable and spatialized films of the complex narrative tendency mirror cinema’s own recomposable—at the current moment of observation—history. Cinema now ‘remembers’ its pre-narrative past (since narrative was established as a filmmaking form in the years between 1907 and 1909) and prepares for itself a post-narrative future. It is a similar observation that complex films, the units of the complex organism called cinema, fractally produce and also demand from their viewers: by thematically playing with the idea of surveillance they formally create instances of distributed and multiplied observation. And by systemically observing their own constitution as narratives, they already situate themselves beyond it.

Four years ago, starting this dissertation without having the faintest idea about complex systems theory, and wanting to study contemporary films as cultural formations and not only as films, I decided to first pick certain films and follow their texts closely before linking them to a specific theoretical framework. I tried out many diverse theories, from philosophy to sociology, in order to approach theoretically the cultural function of ‘complex’
films, but none of them seemed to fit all the cases; there was always something missing. Without abandoning the films I initially selected as cases, even when the theories I was trying out were failing, I feel like I gradually also witnessed an emergent process. These films seemed totally different at first, and the space they occupied discontinuous. However, the more I engaged in their plots, the more their dynamics showed me a common space, a pattern which all these cases form. The selection of the films was counter-intuitive; not only had these films not been classified under the complex narrative tendency by film theorists, but also they did not seem, at first sight, able to fit in it. However, considering the exceptions more illuminating for the rule than its ‘canonical’ cases, I believe I stayed truthful to these marginal cases, relating them together but not dissolving them into a unity, and connecting them with the broader cultural tendency of complex narratives in cinema without suppressing their differences from it. This, after all, is what (their) complexity is about: to distinguish some units, follow their aggregation in space and time, and to be ready to capture the pattern before it dissolves to new and unforeseeable shapes.