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

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In this dissertation three films are used as lenses in order to approach the complexity inherent in contemporary ‘complex’ films and to revisit three ‘anti-narrative’ notions: self-reflexivity, loose causality and description. The framework of complex systems theory and philosophy is used to show how these notions are textual organizing principles, corresponding to processes at work in complex systems and their organization and evolution, namely, self-observation/self-reference, aggregation (of units) and emergent pattern formation. Time, causality and space, the traditional axes along which narratives are organized, become the products, rather than the starting points, of these self-organizing functions.

Part 1 puts into focus the growing tendency for self-reflexive narration that has been observed in complex narrative and ‘post-classical’ films. In my consideration of self-reflexive narration, I adopt the perspective of (post-)classical cinema by using the film *The Final Cut* (Omar Naim, 2004) as a starting point. *The Final Cut* is an ‘experimental’ Hollywood film, as it coincided with the attempt to popularize digital film distribution. Combining this ‘top-down’ form of self-reference with a plot-oriented bottom-up investigation of the self-referential moments in *The Final Cut* as well as in other complex films (as pointed out by other scholars), I show how the time-juggling they perform through flashbacks, flashforwards and *mise-en-abyme* structures can be considered moments of self-observation and self-organization of the diegesis along the dimension of time. Although self-reflexive moments have traditionally been considered disruptive for the smooth constitution of narrative, and have acquired an ‘anti-narrative’ status in this respect, I argue that through a shift from the narratological to the complex systemic framework these same self-reflexive gestures may be re-appreciated as organizational, rather than disorganizing, devices.

In Part 2, I further engage in the nonlinear, emergent dynamics of complex films. The particular issue I address in this part of the dissertation is the nature of causality that the diegesis of complex films shows when conceived as a complex system. In order to highlight this causal function of complex films, I distinguish it from the representational causality that connects the events depicted in the film, which, in complex and especially ‘network’ films, appears to be rather loose. Using the film *Burn After Reading* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2008) as the primary point of reference, I show that the application of the complex systems framework to complex films allows us to connect causally, by way of ‘emergence’, the representational with the non-representational levels of the diegetic organization. In between the two levels, multiple and distributed elements (such as the multiple characters and agents of ‘ensemble’ or ‘network’ films) form aggregates through nonlinear connections, and thus generate causal dynamics that shape the structure of the plot. This dynamic movement drives the *syuzhet* into a
type of organization that is different from narrative, as long as it rejects the causal-logical attempts of interpretation and opens out instead of closing into a beginning-middle-end schema.

The analysis of individual films through the complex systemic framework, as I further argue in Part 3, ‘opens out’ to the function of cinema as a complex system, and the way the contemporary complex film tendency, combining characteristics of older waves and traditions, transforms the current and future practices of film production, distribution, and reception. As a particular case of this transition I take the film *Gomorrah* (Matteo Garrone, 2008), which ‘belongs’ to contemporary world cinema and shares common characteristics with various classes of complex narratives. What is striking in *Gomorrah* is the bottom-up and ‘obscure’ way through which the film constitutes its diegetic world, as a space that, in order to be weaved, demands from the viewer to invest sensorimotor and cognitive effort. With *Gomorrah* as a point of reference, and also referring to other films of the complex narrative tendency, I suggest that description, as a mode of discourse traditionally subordinated to narrative, becomes more pertinent in complex films, which are characterized by a discontinuous (and in this sense spatial) distribution of their diegetic and filmic elements—elements that description aggregates in a bottom-up way. In the concluding chapter I argue that, from the complex systems perspective, these aggregates are emergent patterns, instantiations and agents of an interplay between order and randomness, contingency and structure, through which every complex system, like cinema, creates its world.