

Introduction

Steven Willemsen and Miklós Kiss

Prologue

Boom! ‘Trinity’ (codename for the first nuclear weapon) and our minds are blown. The five-minute explosion in the outstanding, and standing out, eighth episode of the third season of David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks: The Return*, through its aesthetic qualities and ambiguous narrative affordances, lends itself to an intertextual comparison to Kubrick’s Starchild scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But while Kubrick’s hovering fetus gleaming in a placental orb emanates a certain optimism about a new beginning for the human race, Lynch’s mesmerizing spectacle depicts a dark genesis of the downfall of mankind. It is not only marking the birth of all evil – manifested in the show as Killer BOB (16 July 1945, White Sands, New Mexico) – but also signposting a pivotal moment in the history of televisual seriality (25 June 2017, Showtime).

The ‘horrifying, horrifyingly beautiful, thought-provoking and thought-annihilating’ (Seitz 2017) episode and its awed detonation scene – ‘a mesmerizing rush of pure-cut WTF’ (Jensen 2017) – is the sublime apex of a complex show that has been building up to, but did not prepare viewers for, this jaw-dropping segment. At this point in time, eight episodes or 409 minutes deep into the third season, the episode bears an unclear relation to all the storyworld construction that the viewer of the series has been engaged in so far. None of the central characters are involved, and nor do we know anything about the scene’s connection to the show’s setting, events or backstory. Its black-and-white-shot images, which include strange ghostly woodsmen circling around an abandoned convenience store, and a scene of a young girl swallowing an amphibious or insectoid creature – ‘a hideous frog-cockroach hybrid, seemingly hatched from an egg on the nuked salt flats of New Mexico’ (Seitz 2017) – increasingly raise the question of what exactly we are

witnessing. The bold indeterminacy calls forth a variety of responses from its puzzled viewers: it might represent a specific narrative clue (the birth of the show's ultimate antagonist), or invite a symbolical or allegorical reading (the original sin that conceives of all evil); it might point at experimental surrealism and non-narrative stylistic excess (psychedelic images appealing to a pure perceptual pleasure); or it could be seen as a deliberate disruption of the conventions of seriality (upsetting the rulebook of what television is supposed to be).

This hypnotic, beautiful and utterly bizarre scene, occurring within an already quite unruly series, seems to be illustrative of a wider trend among contemporary narratives. Labyrinthine storytelling, intricate enigmas, and persistent ambiguities that have been central to the effect of various narrative traditions (e.g. modernist and postmodern literature, art-cinema) have now found their way into popular fiction (e.g. the so-called 'puzzle films', 'complex television', or 'new weird fiction'). While some degree of cognitive challenge (e.g. novelty, complexity, uncertainty) has been recognized as an aspect of many art experiences, responses such as confusion, puzzlement and incomprehension have not generally been regarded as conducive to aesthetic liking. After all, high degrees of complexity and persistent confusion seem to upset the organizing and communicative functions usually attributed to narratives; they may even obstruct access to the elementary mimetic levels of action and emotion in which readers or viewers are typically immersed. But then, what are the reasons for audiences' engagement with such mind-bending works of fiction? What could be attractive, or at least engaging, about complex narratives' triggered perplexity – a state of mind that most people in real life would prefer to avoid? Why would anyone be interested in confusingly complex stories or storytelling forms?

The Appeal of Cognitive Challenge in Narrative

Narrative theorists have long understood the importance of knowledge gaps to story engagement. Moderate information gaps and other 'spots of indeterminacy' (Ingarden 1973: 249) can work to raise an audience's interest in a story, stimulating their involvement by inviting mental activities described as 'gap-filling' (Iser 1978: 169), 'naturalization' (Culler 1975: 138), 'mental model building' (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983; McNamara and Magliano 2009) and 'problem-solving' (Tan 1996: 90). The notion that aesthetic appeal is optimal at moderate and

manageable levels of complexity recurs in many theories of aesthetic engagement, such as Daniel E. Berlyne's influential model of the inverted U-curve of optimal arousal (Berlyne 1971), or, more recently, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) notion of the 'flow' state. Consequently, confusion may appear as an unwanted result that occurs when the challenge becomes too complex or dominant. This subjective result – a consciously experienced state of cognitive disequilibrium – has not typically been associated with heightened aesthetic appeal. This has at least two reasons.

Firstly, confusion is typically seen as a *negative valence* state – an emotional or cognitive state not associated with reward or enjoyment but rather with disengagement, frustration or avoidance. As Winfried Menninghaus et al. (2019) note in their review of aesthetic emotions, these feelings have proven more resistant to being integrated into accounts of aesthetic enjoyment: '[T]hroughout the entire tradition of aesthetics, aesthetic emotion terms that designate unambiguously negative emotions have been far less nuanced and frequently used than those of the positive spectrum, with boredom and anger as elicited by artworks being the most pronounced exceptions' (ibid.: 181). Although still a minority, recent work in emotion studies and empirical aesthetics has been seeking to nuance this – for instance, by pointing to the role that negative or 'mixed' valence states may play in aesthetic experiences (e.g. Silvia 2009, 2010; Larsen and Green 2013; Menninghaus et al. 2015; Menninghaus et al. 2017).

Secondly, many views of (empirical) aesthetics have been prone to associate aesthetic appeal with *fluent processing* of a stimulus (Reber, Schwarz and Winkielman 2004) and the positive affects that accompany cognitive and perceptual fluency (e.g. Winkielman and Cacioppo 2001; Belke, Leder and Carbon 2015). In the study of narrative, too, findings have pointed to factors like 'ease of comprehension' as a reliable predictor of what makes a text interesting (Wade, Buxton and Kelly 1999; Silvia 2006) and a key determinant of narrative engagement (Buselle and Bilandzic 2009). However, when seeking to explain more challenging aesthetic stimuli, many scholars have pointed out the shortcomings of the processing fluency thesis (e.g. Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell 2008; Graf and Landwehr 2015; Belke, Leder and Carbon 2015). Moreover, research on the concept of 'foregrounding' (Bálint et al. 2017) indicates that, in some cases, aspects of a story perceived as strange or deviant do not obstruct absorption but rather enhance meaningful engagement with narratives.

In our previous work on complex narratives in contemporary cinema (Kiss and Willemsen 2017), we ran into similar questions concerning the appeal of high degrees of cognitive challenge. In the process, we became aware of the rich diversity of approaches these questions can entail. After all, is the enjoyment of complex and confusing works primarily related to recipients' expertise or 'literacy', or is the attraction to such works more determined by psychological factors, such as one's tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity? Can we assume that puzzling stories tap into more universal modes of cognitive and aesthetic engagement, as the more widespread popularity of complex narratives in today's mainstream film, television and literature suggests? Or are they best understood in the contexts of shifting conventions, competencies, and culturally situated reception practices?

We felt that both the weight and scope of these questions warranted an anthology: an opportunity to invite a range of specialists to approach and unpack these questions from a variety of angles. The goal of this volume has been to host contributions from leading scholars in narrative theory, literary studies, film and media studies, cognitive psychology, media psychology, and philosophical and empirical aesthetics, seeking to offer the first comprehensive – multidisciplinary and transmedial – approach to questions of audiences' fascination with cognitively challenging narratives.

While common to all contributions is an interest in the notion of complexity, the chapters vary in the exact types of complexity that are being scrutinized: many of these address narrational complexity or complex narrative temporalities, while others focus on moral complexity, the complexity of the interpretive responses that a story can evoke, or ideas of complex systems as developed in the sciences. Unifying all chapters, however, is an ultimate interest in the potentially *engaging effects* of these complexities. Collectively, the theoretical and case-study-driven chapters cover psychological, philosophical, formal-historical and empirical perspectives in their attempt to explore the appeal of cognitive challenge in puzzling stories.

Outline of the Chapters

The various authors' contributions mark out interesting affinities and common ground in their choices of media, approaches, and case studies. Based on these commonalities, we have organized the volume into four parts, which we

hope will help our readers to orient themselves through the book's multiple angles and interests.

Part I, *The Attractions of Cognitive Challenge in (Post-)Classical Narratives and Genre Fiction*, examines the status that challenging storytelling forms have enjoyed in popular fictional stories. While cognitive disfluency is often regarded as a staple of avant-garde art and experimental narrative, the contributions in this part all demonstrate how the rewards of challenged comprehension have become integral to some popular genres of storytelling – from classical Hollywood to the contemporary ‘puzzle film’, and from traditional genres to the ‘new weird fiction’.

The opening chapter, *Aesthetics and ‘Active Discovery’: The Pleasure of Moderate Cognitive Challenge in Mass Art* by Todd Berliner, explores how Hollywood cinema – often regarded as the definitive mass art form – balances the pleasures of cognitive challenge against the pressure of ease of comprehension for a mass audience. The chapter surveys how a number of works in philosophical and psychological aesthetics have recognized both cognitive challenge as a key component of aesthetic value, and when this challenge may produce some amount of confusion and stress. Consequently, Berliner demonstrates how even a celebrated classical Hollywood film such as *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) creates moderate degrees of cognitive challenge through odd narrative structures and inconsistent information, even if such movies appear to be designed to facilitate effortless understanding.

Warren Buckland's chapter *Narration, Implicature and the Deceptive Puzzle Film* examines the role of ‘deception’ in popular film narration, likening it to magic – the art of deceiving everyday rational understanding. Building on H.P. Grice's influential theory of ‘conversational implicature’, Buckland defines narrative deception as any violation of communication conventions that problematizes a spectator's cognitive construction of the fictional storyworld. The chapter proposes a hierarchy of four types of filmic narration – cooperative, discrepant, flouted and deceptive – to describe the degrees to which film narration may facilitate or obstruct a spectator's cognitive construction of the storyworld, leading to different viewing pleasures that may be associated with each.

Hilary Duffield's contribution, *Cognitive Challenge in Complex Science Fiction: Knowledge, Reason and Threat in Narratives of Time Travel and Extraterrestrial Contact*, turns the focus to the connection between cognitive challenge and genre appeal. Tracing the lineage and development of the science fiction genre from

literature to contemporary cinema, Duffield points out a consistent tradition of ‘complex science fiction’, structured around knowledge-seeking narrative formats. The tradition includes the story’s introduction of a ‘novum’ (defined by Darko Suvin [1979] as a storyworld departure from real-world possibilities entailing a mode of ‘cognitive estrangement’) and a ‘conceptual breakthrough’ that promises an insight or expansion of perception to resolve the narrative incongruities. Duffield shows how contemporary exponents of the genre, such as *Looper*, *Interstellar* and *Arrival*, adopt this logic to provide pleasures related to a distinct kind of cognitive exhilaration in discovering higher-level truths within the narrative world.

Marco Caracciolo’s *Strange Loops and Nonhuman Realities: Complex Narrative Faces the Climate Crisis* elevates the stakes of these questions by interrogating the ability of complex fictional narrative forms to mimetically express and channel the complexity of real-world interrelations. A global issue like the current ecological crisis confronts us with complexity on a scale that ranges beyond – yet is deeply enmeshed with – that of human actions. Examining Shane Carruth’s 2013 *Upstream Color*, Caracciolo shows how narrative, through complex form and puzzling experiences, can defamiliarize the world of human-scale interactions. The analysis highlights how storytelling strategies can create effects that approximate the qualities of real-world complexity, such as nonlinearity, multiscalarity and self-organization, as well as the enmeshment of the human and nonhuman. The chapter thereby shows how challenging narrative strategies can also work as platforms to (re)shape our thinking and affects about real-world matters characterized by complex interrelations.

Part II, *Mesmerized Minds and Bodies: Art Cinema and Modernist Aesthetics*, focuses on the phenomenon of art-cinema narration, which has historically been the primary mode for experimentation with challenging formal play in audiovisual storytelling. Paying particular attention to the bodily and affective dimensions of cognition, the contributions of this part are unified by their in-depth explorations of how art-cinema narratives challenge their audiences’ cognitive routines and embodied dispositions to create distinct aesthetic effects – and of where the limits of this appeal may be.

Steffen Hven’s chapter, *The Puzzling Film Environments of Fellini’s 8½*, looks into the landmark Italian art film from 1963. While much has been said and written about its intricate formal and narrative design, Hven contends that this descriptive

focus on the film as a ‘cognitive-analytical puzzle’ has sidelined another important set of effects: the film’s creation of ‘impossible spaces’ and ‘complex narrative environments’ that create a disorienting experience through bodily influenced forms of meaning-making – complexities that need to be experienced to be understood. In his argument, Hven highlights the importance of ‘second generation’ cognitive-narratological approaches that draw attention to the bodily, affective and enactive strategies of comprehension.

Maria Poulaki’s *2 Or 3 Things? Polyphony, Cognitive Challenge and Aesthetic Pleasure in Godard’s (Counter) Cinema* scrutinizes the work of another often-discussed cinematic auteur, Jean-Luc Godard. Through an in-depth exploration, Poulaki claims that the challenges in Godard’s counter cinema do not just reside on the narrative level of disrupted causality or chronology but are also characterized by complexity on the primary sensory and perceptual level. Her analysis shows how Godard’s stylistic innovations create perceptual ‘noise’ that already affects the film experience at the stage of front-end processing. This, Poulaki argues, not only results in challenged comprehension and heightened medium-awareness but also contributes to modes of heterogeneity and polyphony that entail unique aesthetic pleasures.

Maarten Coëgnarts’ *Embodying Fragmentation in Film: The Spatio-temporal Logic of Cinematic Modernism* provides an embodied-cognitive perspective on the aesthetic effects of modernist European art cinema. Building on findings from cognitive linguistics and conceptual metaphor theory, Coëgnarts shows how in film, like in language, abstract concepts such as time are grounded in everyday action patterns and concrete spatial concepts. The chapter then illustrates how various modernist filmmakers – Antonioni, Resnais, Bresson and Godard – have adopted and adapted this logic of embodied cinematic meaning to convey more puzzling and fragmented conceptions of time. Coëgnarts thereby shows how modernist films employ the same preconceptual patterns and sensory-motor experiences that inform our everyday sense-making, but at the same time, challenge the commonly unreflected narrative functioning of these patterns to facilitate a different kind of embodied-cognitive resonance in the spectator.

András Bálint Kovács’ *The Most Difficult Riddle: Paradoxical Personalities in Puzzle Films* examines the connection between historical art cinema and contemporary ‘puzzle films’. Kovács argues that the transposition of complex and confusing storytelling techniques from art cinema to popular film genres may be explained by cultural habituation, but that the potential for a wider appeal of such

techniques also has a natural limit. This limit, according to Kovács, occurs at the coherence of a protagonist's identity: narrative engagement is so intricately tied up with the actions, motivations and intentions of characters that a disruption of these central components means a disruption of narrative coherence altogether. Some films have nonetheless experimented with such disruptions in character identity, and so the chapter examines how avant-garde cases have differed from their more widely viewed counterparts, resulting in different kinds of spectator engagement.

Part III, *Novel Pleasures in Contemporary Serial Television: From Complexity to Confusion*, targets television, the medium that seems to have witnessed the strongest upsurge in novel storytelling approaches recently, delivering unique narrative pleasures by challenging, bewildering, and yet hooking their audience.

Matthew Campora's chapter, *Multiform Television*, surveys how the rise of complex narrative television is rooted in prior storytelling traditions, such as art cinema and the puzzle film. He takes a closer look at *Mr Robot* (2015–19), *Maniac* (2018) and *Russian Doll* (2019–), examining how these shows use multiple ontologies in their storyworlds to create novel and sometimes jolting narrative experiences. They combine the series/serial hybridity (Mittell 2015) with the multiform narrative tradition (Campora 2014) to produce a mode of television that offers the viewing pleasures previously associated with modernist and postmodernist literature or art cinema.

Jason Gendler's '*I Can't Keep Track of Any of It Anymore: Cognitive Challenge and Other Aesthetic Appeals in Community*' provides a close examination of a very distinct kind of cognitive challenge – one that functions as a mode of parody. Focusing on a single episode – 'Conspiracy Theories and Interior Design' – from the second season of the cult show *Community* (2009–15), Gendler argues that its hard-to-follow, twist-ridden narrative seems not so much to tempt viewers to resolve its puzzling plot, or to marvel at its clever construction, but rather invites them to identify and then appreciate it as a reflexive parody of the tropes of the conspiracy theory genre, thus catering to a wholly different kind of appeal – namely, that of the *comedy* that can result from incongruity and exaggeration.

Jason Mittell's *How Not to Comprehend Television: Notes on Complexity and Confusion* offers a reflection on a new aesthetic phenomenon that seems to have emerged in serial television after his seminal monograph *Complex TV* (Mittell 2015). Besides noting how the narrative innovations of complex television are still

in place and have expanded globally in the twenty-first century, Mittell also observes a new trend: programmes that move into the territory of excessively unpredictable, illogical or incongruous narrative moments in order to bewilder viewers. Mittell proposes that while this phenomenon may be more like a playful rarity, it marks a novel mode, that of ‘Batshit TV’, which forms a new step in the medium’s experiments with complex storytelling, and provokes a new range of affective and puzzled responses.

Our final part, Part IV, *Reading, Viewing, Engaging: Conceptualizing the Pleasures of Being Challenged*, turns the focus predominantly onto questions of reception. These chapters target some of the more general processes and factors that underlie engagement with complexity and cognitive challenge in art and fiction.

The contribution by Ed S. Tan, Monique Timmers, Claire M. Segijn, Suzanna J. Oprea and Guus Bartholomé, *Challenges of Enjoying Morally Ambiguous Character Drama: The Dexter Case*, draws attention to a particular sort of challenge: the moral and psychological complexity of engaging with ambiguous protagonists who regularly commit immoral acts. Focusing on what they define as the ‘Morally Ambiguous Character drama’ in television, popularized by shows such as *Breaking Bad*, *The Wire*, *House of Cards* and *Dexter*, the authors investigate this phenomenon from a psychological point of view. They characterize its challenges as primarily affective, and propose how such fiction invites viewers to engage in elaborate emotion regulation strategies that may produce their own kind of aesthetic reward.

Marina Grishakova’s *The Fascination of Failure: On Predictability, Unpredictability and Postdictability in Art* explores how engagement with cognitively challenging art may be understood from the perspective of the ‘predictive processing’ framework. Predictive processing has emerged in recent years as a new approach that may bridge the Cartesian gap by positing how the internal and external resources of cognition function together in a continuous predictive-corrective loop, making sense of the environment through the (dis)confirmation of predictions. Grishakova’s chapter explores how art’s tendency to amplify (rather than minimize) prediction errors may produce perceptual and cognitive challenges that can engage the human ability to tolerate uncertainty and explore alternate meanings, thus providing a new take on long-standing discussions of the aesthetics of defamiliarization.

Don Kuiken’s *Expressive Challenge and the Metaphoricity of Literary Reading* offers an in-depth, medium-specific examination of the cognitive challenges

unique to literary reading. While many of the other contributors focus on audiovisual media or on concepts assumed to be largely medium-independent, Kuiken zooms in on challenges specific to the comprehension of written text. The chapter explores two forms of challenging deviation that may occur in the reading process: the first resulting from metaphoric cross-domain resemblances, the second involving explanatory relations between temporal intervals. Kuiken argues how these two challenges entail two different modes of absorbed reading – *expressive enactment*, associated with the challenges of constructing metaphoricity, and *integrative comprehension*, predominantly associated with plot assembly – with both modes entailing different forms of aesthetic responses and engagement.

Finally, Steven Willemsen, Katalin Bálint, Frank Hakemulder, Miklós Kiss, Elly Konijn and Kirill Fayn's *Who Likes Complex Films? Personality and Preferences for Narrative Complexity* offers an explorative empirical approach to people's preferences for complexity in storytelling. Complex narratives often produce a particular kind of experience characterized by heightened degrees of uncertainty, ambiguity and sensed incongruity. In everyday life, people vary in their willingness and ability to cope with uncertain, ambiguous or contradictory epistemic states. Could these personality factors also influence one's enjoyment of complexity in fiction? Through an online survey that combined a newly created 'Preference for Narrative Complexity Scale' with existing measures of the 'Big Five' personality traits, 'Tolerance for Ambiguity' and 'Need for Cognition', this final chapter provides evidence for the link between one's personality and one's preference for, or dislike of, complexity, ambiguity and incongruity in storytelling.

The variety of topics, media, disciplinary backgrounds and methodological approaches presented in this anthology inevitably entails some notable differences in tone between chapters. We hope our readers will be willing to not only tolerate but embrace this diversity (which may itself pose some degree of cognitive challenge) and, while joining the contributors in exploring the central questions, ultimately learn as much as we have in the process of editing this volume.

Steven Willemsen is Assistant Professor in Arts, Culture and Media at the University of Groningen, and Senior Researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics in Frankfurt. He is co-author of *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema* (with Miklós Kiss, Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

Miklós Kiss is Associate Professor of Audiovisual Arts and Cognition, and Chair of the Arts, Culture and Media department at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. His research intersects the fields of narrative and cognitive film studies. He is co-author of the books *Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video* (with Thomas van den Berg, Scalar, 2016) and *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema* (with Steven Willemsen, Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

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