Towards a Cognitive Approach of Understanding Forms of Complexity in Puzzle Film and Slow Cinema.
Abstract

This paper deals with different forms of complexity in puzzle film, a recent trend in mainstream film that has appropriated complex storytelling devices from art-cinema, and slow cinema, a contemporary minimalistic trend in art house cinema that has its roots in post-war European art-cinema and experimental film. This paper will attempt to answer the following questions: how can complexity be understood as a cognitive process; what different forms of complexity can a film play with; and lastly, what viewing strategies can viewers accordingly adopt?

The deficit of most existing accounts on the topic is that they lack a comprehensive definition of the phenomenon of complexity itself, because, it is argued in this paper, they overemphasis the formal-structural aspect over the felt experience of the viewer. Case in point is William Brown’s argument, put forth in his contribution to Warren Buckland’s edited volume Hollywood Puzzle Films (2014), that ‘for all the complexity in and of Inception, […] the film is relatively ‘simple’, while for all of the apparent simplicity in and of Five, it is a deeply complex film’. This line of reasoning is problematic for both its conflation of different forms of complexity and for its underlying normative bias.

This paper adds to the debate a cognitive perspective on complexity, understood as a thwarting of the meaning making processes of the viewer (or the viewer’s understanding that is made difficult) on one or more of the following levels of: perception, comprehension and interpretation. By comparing comprehensive complexity in puzzle film, with Inception (Christopher Nolan, 2010) as a case study, with interpretive complexity in slow cinema, taking Five Dedicated to Ozu (Abbas Kiarostami, 2003) as a particularly interesting case, this paper contrasts different forms of complexity that pertain to different aspects of meaning making on the aforementioned levels.

The theoretical framework is derived from the adaptation of insights from the field of cognitive psychology to the field of film studies. The paper synthesizes cognitive theories of meaning with hermeneutic accounts of viewing strategies.

This paper thus seeks to bridge the gap between text-based approaches and viewer-centered approaches, because it is believed that disregarding either side of the equation will inevitably lead to inadequate or in the worst case invalid solutions to the issue of complexity. By doing so, it aims to get a better grip on the different cognitive challenges as well as pleasures that respectively puzzle film and slow cinema can afford. Ultimately, this is a necessary stepping stone for academia to get out of its normative trenches and move forward to more argumentatively humble, descriptive and explanatory plains.

Key words

Puzzle films; slow cinema; cognition; cognitive psychology; cognitive film studies; narrative complexity; ecological approach of film; interpretation; meaning making; perception of film.
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Introduction

In the debate around complex storytelling in contemporary film and television, a number of competing terms have been coined so far, such as the Hollywood Puzzle Film (Buckland)\(^1\), the Mind-Game Film (Elsaesser)\(^2\) or forking-path plots (Bordwell)\(^3\). Adding to the complexity of it, the debate so far has been centred mostly on providing descriptive typologies of formal features as well as on giving contextual explanations of the popularity of this film form in our contemporary cinematic and televiral landscape (the what and the why).\(^4\) The deficit of most of these accounts\(^5\), is that they lack a comprehensive definition of the phenomenon of complexity itself. This has lead - beside the theoretical or conceptual shortcoming itself, of course – to a heterogeneous corpus of works that is discussed under the header of complex film\(^6\). In this paper, I want to add to the debate by making an attempt at a theoretical coming to terms, towards a firm conceptual framework that will hopefully be useful as an explanatory heuristic tool for analysing the workings of complex storytelling (the how).

More specifically, I will directly address film scholar William Brown’s arguments put forth in his contribution to Warren Buckland’s edited volume Hollywood Puzzle Films (2014). I take this piece as exemplary for the problems that arise from a lack of definitional clarity. He writes that ‘the concept of complexity provides a terrain on which Inception and Five can have an equal footing or at the very least can compete legitimately’\(^7\). I have two main issues with his piece that I will discuss in this paper: first, a lack of theoretical firmness and, secondly, an inherent normativity.

Firstly, I will argue that his lack of theoretical rigor has led him in his contribution to obfuscate different experiences under the header of complexity: on the one hand, that of complexity of comprehension in Inception and, on the other hand, that of interpretive complexity in Five Dedicated to Ozu. So, contra Brown, I will argue that these films have exactly an unequal footing in terms of complexity and that they cannot compete legitimately in this respect. Furthermore, he conflates the related but different concepts of complexity and ambiguity.

Secondly, his rather normative central claim of the article is that ‘for all the complexity in and of Inception, I shall argue that the film is relatively ‘simple’, while for all of the apparent simplicity in and of Five, it is a deeply complex film’\(^8\). Even though I am fond of his advocacy of the slow film genre, I think it is not the position of a film scholar to hierarchize different film forms on their respective worth. I wish to take a more distanced stand point here. In a nutshell, I believe he places one type of meaning above another on a hierarchical scale. The problem with this is that it is not very productive to do so. Or, in other words, as cognitive film scholar Torben Grodal has poignantly put it:

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\(^1\) Cf. Buckland, Hollywood Puzzle Films.
\(^2\) Buckland, Puzzle Films.
\(^3\) Bordwell, “Film Futures.”
\(^4\) Cf. Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television.”, for a convincing account of different economical, institutional, technological factors that have conjointly contributed to the emergence of complex storytelling in television.
\(^5\) With the wonderful exception of the work of Willemsen and Kiss, whom I take as important inspirations here Cf. Willemsen, (Re-)Considering Narrative Complexity in Art-Cinema; and Kiss, in: Eckel et al., (Dis)Orienting Media and Narrative Mazes.
\(^6\) Cf. Buckland, Puzzle Films; Buckland, Hollywood Puzzle Films. Note the wide variety of case studies used, ranging from The Sixth Sense and Lost Highway, to In the Mood for Love and Oldboy
\(^8\) Ibid., 126.
‘Many normative discussions of film are implicitly futile discussions about hierarchies of mental functions: some prefer ‘perceptual’ films; others freer associative memory-activating films; yet others like mental problem solving’.9

To fulfil my goal of providing a heuristic tool, I will delineate different forms of complexity that correspond to the complexification or problematisation of different levels of the viewer’s meaning making – in short: understanding that is made difficult. So, the first thing to do, is locate where exactly complexity arises. Following Steven Willemsen, I argue that complexity is best understood as a cognitive process or a felt experience, rather than a property of the text. Consequently, I will propose a typology, following the work of Per Persson, of different forms of meaning that viewers can make of films and I will name accordingly different forms of complexity that can arise when these processes of understanding are made difficult. Moreover, I will discuss different strategies that the viewer has at its disposal to cope with these experiences of complexity. My theoretical framework is derived from the adaptation of insights from the field of cognitive psychology to the field of film studies. So, in short, I will assess the different parts of Brown’s argument on their accuracy and usability for my purpose here. I will lay bare the shortcomings of his account and I will consequently try to add to him by proposing a more fine-grained theoretical framework. Finally, on the basis of this theoretical frame, I will be able to argue for the different forms of complexity in Inception and Five.

Theory

Complexity as a cognitive process

As I’ve mentioned in the introduction before: I believe that in the debate around complex storytelling in film and television, there seems to be a overemphasis on complexity as a formal property of the art work over the felt complexity on the part of in the viewer. This, I contend, has led to retardation in the process of understanding the phenomenon. A first step in this paper would thus be to locate complexity. I follow the lead given by Steven Willemsen in his MA thesis. The first important argumentative step that Willemsen takes that is relevant for my argument is acknowledge that complexity is not a formal feature but a cognitive experience: ‘I will define narrative complexity as a perceived or sensed complexity or confusion in viewers’, he writes10. So he locates it not in the text, but in the cognitive activity of the viewer. Drawing on Iser’s phenomenology of reading we might say that the viewing process is ‘a dynamic interaction between text and reader [or viewer]. […] [I]t is in the reader that the text comes to life’11. Iser speaks of the more general process of meaning making of the viewer, the activity of completing the text in the act of reading. But, by extension, we can minimally define complexity on that very same level - albeit ex negativo: it is the thwarting or prolonging of the natural perceptual and cognitive processes of meaning making or understanding. To be able to make this claim, I will first proceed by having a look at the unproblematic, natural form of understanding.

9 Grodal, Moving Pictures, 9.
10 Willemsen, (Re-)considering Narrative Complexity in Art-Cinema, 5.
Understanding meaning

In his book *Understanding Cinema*, Per Persson sets out to give a psychological account of the viewer’s reception of film. His theoretical framework, derived from insights in psychology, is, moreover, premised on an ecological account of the understanding of film. This is to say that ‘understanding moving imagery, on all levels, seems to use a great variety of dispositions originating from our interaction with our everyday physical, social, and cultural environment’. In other words, in making sense of film we use the very same meaning making processes that we’ve acquired through our everyday, embodied interactions with our natural, social and cultural environment.

Human interaction with the world can be seen in terms of a continuous process of trying to get at meaningfulness or coherence. *Understanding*, then, is a general term for all the mental processes through which humans strive for meaningfulness on different levels: perceptual, cognitive, emotional and so forth. Now, meaning arises when there is a match – or at least a minimum of overlap - between, on the one hand, that which we perceive or encounter (as stimuli) and, on the other hand, mental structures (existing as memory), that results in coherent wholes or gestalts. These mental structures are rather stable, giving the world a sense of order. When there is a too great mismatch or incongruity, or when there are competing cognitive structures that we can’t reconcile, then we can speak of cognitive dissonance.

Persson talks of *dispositions* to denote the whole of these mental structures:

> ‘the totality of expectations, assumptions, hypotheses theories, rules, codes, and prejudices that individuals project onto the world. Through these capacities, humans are disposed to understand the world in a certain preconfigured way, already prepared for some regularities of the world’.

As in real life, these dispositions also enable and constrain human understanding of film. Finally, *meaning* is the sense of coherence that arises out of the interaction between viewers, with their particular sets of dispositions, and the filmic text. It a subjective, mental state of mind ‘that results from generating or evaluating ideas in relation to one another’.

Meaning, however, is not a monolithic entity itself. It can be said to exist on a variety of levels, ranging from the more basic unconscious, embodied forms of perception to the more cognitively complex and eventually self-reflexive levels of thought. For analytic clarity, I propose to distinguish generally, building on Bordwell’s types, between the levels of perception, comprehension

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14 Note, that this is not to say that our interaction with film is exactly the same as with real life. Discussing the differences between the two forms of interaction lies not within the scope of this paper. We could say, crudely speaking, that the meanings derived at is different, but that the means are the same.
17 Persson, *Understanding Cinema*, 13 (original emphasis, JB).
18 Trabasso, Suh & Payton, as quoted in Ibid., 24.
and interpretation.\textsuperscript{19} I added the level of perception here to account for pre-cognitive forms of meaning that Bordwell doesn’t explicate (although he surely wouldn’t deny their existence).\textsuperscript{20} I will, however, focus here foremost on the other two levels of comprehension and interpretation. As a further delineation, I follow Persson’s typology of level 0 – level 5 meanings that viewers can make in their experience of films. I claim that different forms of complexity correspond to difficulties of meaning making on these different levels.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Level 0} is that of premeaning: a preconceptual or prelinguistic form of meaning that emerges from the interaction with the most basic perceptual phenomena: the experience of ‘formal patterns, independent of their content or representational nature’\textsuperscript{22}. This could be perceiving elemental experiential phenomena such as movement, colour or synchronization of image and sound. So, these are not meanings in the usual cognitive sense of the word, but still they are experienced as coherent or salient by the viewer. \textit{Level 1} is the level of perception, of the experience of objects, depth of the image and recognition of scenes.\textsuperscript{23} All of these require the use of knowledge and they are, moreover, constructed in nature. That is to say that we differentiate them from a background of attention.

\textit{Level 2} is a bit more complex, here viewers recognize characters and behaviour, as well as events. Also the viewer constructs offscreen space by inference.\textsuperscript{24} Next, \textit{level 3} is the level of situation or referential meaning. Here the viewer constructs a mental model or a situation model. A situation is different from an event in that it requires more sophisticated knowledge of psychological motivations of characters and a more complex sense of temporal and causal relation between events\textsuperscript{25}. In turn, \textit{Level 4} is that of thematic or explicit meaning of entire plots. It can be the ‘extraction of a \textit{point} or \textit{moral} of the film as a whole’. The meaning, on this level, might also pertain to ‘symbolic, associational, conceptual, and metaphorical understandings’\textsuperscript{26}. This level thus hoovers between forms of comprehension and interpretation.

Finally, \textit{level 5} meanings are ‘purely’ interpretive. It can consist of aesthetic judgements, inferences of the attitudes and intentions of the filmmaker as well as speculations of the intended audience. What crucially distinguishes this last and highest level is that the meanings here can exist outside the fictional or diegetic world of the film. ‘\textit{A step back}’ from the film, investigating its fictional, narrative, communicatory, rhetorical, and societal functions rather than establishing its fictional meaning.\textsuperscript{27} Now, as I understand levels 0-1 correspond to the level of perception, levels 2-4 to that of comprehension and level 5 to that of interpretation. However, I should stress that this is

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Bordwell, \textit{Making Meaning}, 2, 8–9. He makes a further distinction of the four types of referential, explicit, implicit and symptomatic meanings. The former two arise from the process of comprehension, while the latter two come forth from the activity of interpretation.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} This form of meaning is only later discussed more thoroughly within the paradigm of embodied cognition. Cf. Grodal, \textit{Embodied Visions}, for a comprehensive account of the role of embodiment in understanding films.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} To be sure, in a sense every encounter with reality contains some form of complexity within it: we never encounter prototypical instances that are completely congruent with our existing mental structures. Therefore, it is perhaps apposite to understand complexity in terms of varying \textit{degrees} of incongruence or mismatch between perception and memory.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Persson, \textit{Understanding Cinema}, 26.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 28.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 29-30.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 30–31.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 32, original emphasis, JB.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 34.
\end{itemize}
merely an analytic distinction. In reality (of illusion) these levels will interact and overlap in a complicated and dynamic way. Moreover, the lower levels seem necessary to have been established before the higher levels of meaning can come into being. And finally, the other way around, higher levels can influence the lower ones. That is to say: perception, for instance, is never a neutral, bottom-up processing of incoming stimuli. It is always already guided by top-down cognitive processes of attention-steering-by-intention. Nevertheless, this typology offers a useful heuristic for the task at hands here: that of distinguishing between different types of complexity.

Film

Mainstream complexity

Corresponding to these levels of meaning, levels of complexity can arise when the viewer’s understanding is thwarted in some way. Combining Willemsen’s distinction between mainstream complexity and art-film complexity with the aforementioned levels of meaning, we will finally be able to argue that the forms of complexity of *Inception* and *Five* are indeed of a different kind. But more on that later, first let’s have a closer look at the form of mainstream complexity, that of comprehension, in relation to engagement with puzzle films.

In general, we can say that films can complexify the viewer’s experience on both the levels of content and on the level of formal structure. Willemsen argues that the crucial difference between the art-film and puzzle film is that in the latter, the violations or deviations that lead to a complex experience are embedded within ‘an otherwise classical systems of narration, remaining grounded in classical, unambiguous and coherent notions of narrative epistemology’. He argues, further, that ‘complex films’ appeal to the recognition of generic or classical elements of narration may prevent viewers from applying art-cinema frames of knowledge, proposing more ‘classical’ analytic and interpretive norms. I would argue, therefore, that the complexity of puzzle films can be situated somewhere at the level of comprehension, or at Persson’s levels 2-4. These films are still meaningful for the viewer in any case at the levels of perception (0-1) and the level of interpretation (5), most of the time. Moreover, they are sometimes – albeit in varying degrees - also not complex on some levels of comprehension (mostly levels 2,3).

Willemsen names a number of tactics that contemporary mainstream complex films use to keep the viewer invested in the narrative; that, in other words, restrict the level of complexity of comprehension to prevent them from adopting the recuperative frame ‘art-cinema’ as a coping strategy. In the first place there is the reliance on classical generic conventions. These genres evoke expectations that serve to aid the viewer in its meaning making processes by providing mental scripts: they thus provide the viewer with a sense of predictability and coherence. Furthermore, the films employ classical narrative cohesion devices on a micro-level. This means that the films ensure spatial and temporal continuity at least to a certain degree, by using classical continuity editing devices (levels 0-2). Moreover, on the macro-level, one could add that there is at least a minimum of narrativity sustained by traditional narrative elements such as character unity and a clear goal-

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28 Think, for instance, of well-known psychological phenomena such as chance blindness or the primacy and recency effects.
29 Willemsen, *(Re-)Considering Narrative Complexity in Art-Cinema*, 39.
oriented, teleological structure (level 3). In short, subsumed under the header of investment strategies we can name the provided redundancy of information, the clear demarcation of transitions in narrative level or focalization, the offering of cognitively manageable levels of new information, and micro-narrative causality - i.e. the use of appointments and deadlines.\textsuperscript{30, 31}

In the words of Brown, we can thus speak of

‘the fractal nature of the relationship between chaos and complexity – the same things are simple or complex depending where you wish to view them from – allows us to complicate the relationship between simplicity and complexity. Instead of there being ‘simply’ simplicity and complexity, the two are intertwined in the physical universe in such a fashion that we might better use a term like \textit{simplicity} or \textit{complicity} to describe the intertwined relationship of the two’.\textsuperscript{32}

What Brown means to say, following Janet Staiger, is that “complexity in one area does not necessarily produce overall textual difficulty or sophistication”\textsuperscript{33}. In other words, \textit{Inception} has certain complex features, but is also rather simple in other respects. The complexity of the film resides mostly in its formal structuring, so on Persson’s level 4 meaning. It lies in the cognitive work it demands from its viewer to follow its complexly told story, of which the content is itself rather complex with events happening simultaneously in five embedded layers. The formal complexity resides more specifically in the parallel editing between the different layers the film uses\textsuperscript{34}. This seems in line with Bordwell’s argument in his article ‘Film Futures’ that complex films are not qualitatively different from simple films - they are still adjusted to the rather limited cognitive capacities of human beings for processing information. They have, in his words, been trimmed back to ‘cognitively manageable dimensions’\textsuperscript{35}. We can clearly see how \textit{Inception} fits in here: with its spatiotemporal continuity on the micro-level and its motivated, causal continuity of the macro-level, its limited amount of embedded layers, its redundancy of information, its constant explaining of its own narrative structure, its demarcation of narrative levels by colour coding, its causal structure of deadlines etc.

Now, in a short interlude, I will quickly address the difference between the notions of ambiguity and complexity here. Brown ends by comparing his two examples in terms of a difference in ambiguity. He contends that:

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 44–45.
\textsuperscript{31} Kiss names even more strategies in an unpublished seminar presentation, but his classification by and large coincides with that of Willemsen. He talks of immersion, generic conventions, narrative cohesion and auteurism.
\textsuperscript{33} Staiger, quoted in Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{35} Bordwell, “Film Futures,” 90–91.
While *Inception* does have an ambiguous ending, meaning that the whole film might have been a dream, *Five* is ambiguous from start to finish through the way in which the viewer is invited to contemplate the whole of the screen. However, I contest his claim that he too fastidiously makes without the proper theoretical work that should accompany it. It is helpful to clearly distinguish between ambiguity and complexity here. Ambiguity, according to Miklos Kiss, is the ‘juxtaposition of conflicting version of events’. The ending of *Inception*, therefore, can rightly be considered ambiguous, as it leaves the viewer guessing between two possible competing interpretations. The first option is that Cobb wakes up in reality, whereas in the second interpretation he wakes up in limbo. The ambiguity is upheld because the film cuts away before Cobb’s token either falls or stays spinning. So, indeed this form of ambiguity can lead to an experience of complexity. More specifically, it is a complexity of comprehension, because it leads to doubts about the fictional world as a whole: is it dream, or reality? I would, therefore, locate it on Persson’s level 4. However, saying that ambiguity can lead to complexity, doesn’t mean that they’re the same. *Five*, on the other hand, can hardly be called ambiguous in this sense. There are never competing possibilities: instead, it is better to understand the cognitive difficulties that the film poses to take place on a meta-fictional level, as I will advocate. Besides, Brown doesn’t take the effort what he means with the rather vague formulation that *Five* leads the viewer to ‘contemplate the whole of the screen’. Nor does he fully convincingly explain to me why and how that should add to the film’s ambiguity (or does he mean complexity?).

Picking up on my general argument once more, it is time now to start figuring out how the viewer characteristically copes with these forms of complexity in puzzle films. He does so in a distinct way that I would like to shortly handle here: in a play-like manner he tries to learn the internal structures of the film, its rules of the game, so to say. He can do so with the aid of narrative mapping, by multiple viewings of the film or by averting to extra-textual knowledge, mostly accessed through specialized fan sites on the internet - or, most likely, he combines the three methods. Stephen Mamber has defined narrative mapping as ‘an attempt to represent visually events that unfold over time’. They can function for the viewer as representation, analysis, information space and interface. The most common types of maps that Mamber names are geographic, temporal, thematic or structural, conjectural and conceptual. All of these types might be used by viewers to cope with the forms of complexity that puzzle films typically invoke. Especially the temporal one seems very important, for instance in time travel films that form a substantial part of the puzzle film form. Also the thematic or structural map can be useful as a tool, think of the colour coding overview of the different embedded story world layers in *Inception* (see attachment). On this thematic map, other types of information can be added, such as the activities that take place in different layers, which characters are situated on what level and on what time etc. It could even be combined into a temporal-spatial map, to make sense of what events in the diëgesis play simultaneously and how events of one layers affect other layers.

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39 Ibid., 146–148.
40 Ibid., 148–149.
Art-film complexity

Art-films, by contrast, do not offer this final promise of a coherent game-like system or, in any case, the promise of closure, of having the sense of being able, as a viewer, to solve the puzzle eventually. These films can be said, following Grodal, to de-link embodied actions, goals and minds that are presented in classical narration in an epistemologically clear manner. So art-films can ‘arrest the PECMA flow and overactivate the association areas (...) [and] will provide similar experiences of deep significance’41 42. So, art-cinema seems to require different viewing strategies altogether. It asks

‘that viewers open up their viewing stance to these frames of knowledge, while accepting narrative confusion, incoherence or excess as a necessary, challenging or aesthetically pleasurable part of the experience. [...] Art-cinema narratives draw conscious attention to these [constructivist] processes, playfully highlighting the hermeneutic aspects and struggles of such cognitive confusion and dissonance’43.

So, one could argue that art-film typically generates a meta-reflective stance in the viewer in a way that mainstream complex films do not. Therefore, I argue that the complexity of art-films resides not only on the level of comprehension (levels 3-4), but in addition on the level of interpretation, or Persson’s corresponding level 5. More precisely put, I argue that exactly through the far-reaching or hyperbolic complexification of the level of comprehension, art-films can induce in the viewer a sense of interpretive complexity. Through defamiliarizing devices the film deliberately thwarts understanding through comprehension. In other words, because art-film doesn’t promise the viewer the reward of meaningfulness on the level of comprehension of the fictional world, it encourages him to use another viewing strategy, namely to look for other types of coherence on the level of interpretation.

I want to emphasize here, however, that Five is not complex to the same degrees and in totally the same ways as the examples of post-war European, modernist films that Willemsen uses. So, even though Five might be falling within the category of art-film, it is definitely not a paradigmatic instance. In stead, Five can be considered a telling example of a subset of the category of art-film, viz. slow film44. The complexity of Five, as goes for slow film in general, I contend, doesn’t pertain to perception and only in a particular way to some levels of comprehension. All the images and scenes of Five are perfectly perceivable for the viewer.45 There is no complexity on the formal level, nor is there complexity of the content, in terms of the presented diegetic world. What makes Five complex

41 Grodal, quoted in Willemsen, (Re-)considering Narrative Complexity in Art-Cinema, 39.
42 The riddle, or impossible puzzle films are an in-between category here. They do ‘deny our natural access, based on real-life skills of navigation and orientation’. Yet, they ‘still lure the viewers to keep trying to make rational sense’, they ‘uphold and violate classical narrative ingredients, such as coherency, spatio-temporal unity, linearity, chronology etc., at the same time’ (Kiss, qtd in Willemsen 41).
43 Willemsen, (Re-)considering Narrative Complexity in Art-Cinema, 49–50.
45 The sole exception would be the last scene that starts out in complete darkness and in which the image remains obscure almost throughout, only to be revealed more clearly at the end of the scene when the sunrise sheds light on the image (pun intended). So, here there is a complexity of perception, pertaining to Persson’s level 1.
doesn’t concern the actual filmic world itself, but questions about authorship, about stylistic choices of an inferred auteur. The film thwarts meaning on an interpretive level, raising questions like: why does the film make so stringent use of long take aesthetics, what does the film has to do with Ozu? In Brown’s own words, the film is complex, despite its simple formal structure of five nature shots, because it ‘invites us to reflect and to think’\textsuperscript{46}. The complexity concerned here regards issues that relate to film history, aesthetics and film theory.

Slow film more generally speaking, however, can be considered to offer something that is similar but not the same as complexity of comprehension. I suggest to call this a radical form of \textit{under-determination} of diegetic information. In stead of leaving the viewer puzzled by complexity or ambiguity, it leaves the viewer guessing. It doesn’t pose a cognitive challenge of comprehension, but an attentional challenge of perception. This is a consequence of the often highly de-dramatized narratives – understood in terms of both the form and the content. On the level of the content of slow films, we can name the mundane subjects and everyday topics, as well as how often times the viewer is left with many psychological character-blanks to fill in: character motivations, thoughts, belief, feelings and emotions etc. On the level of form and style, we can think of, amongst other factors, the use of long takes and an observational, distanced style of representation of characters and events (e.g. a tendency of little use of close-up shots) and the sparse use of non-diegetic music (normally used to cue the viewers into the appropriate emotional response). Slow film comes with different degrees of narrativity and this influences the felt experience of under-determination by the viewer. Some films have clear narratives (for example in the works of Reichardt, Reygadas or Tarr), while others are low in narrativity (Benning, Hutton). \textit{Five} can be situated at the low-level end of a narrativity continuum. In the debate sometimes people speak of non-narrative form. I find that rather problematic, because this is again a misplacement of narrative in the film instead of seeing it as a dynamic interaction between viewer and text, as a cognitive process. In other words: the viewer tends towards narrativizing almost automatically, so it makes no sense for me to speak of non-narrativity. What we can say is that the lower the level of narrativity, the less the viewer is prone to try and make sense on the level of comprehension; the more the viewer is pushed towards an understanding of the film that takes places on the level of interpretation.

Willemsen names a couple of recuperative strategies that the viewer has at its disposal when confronted with complexity in art-films: naturalization; recourse to integrating mechanisms; non-prototypical narrativizing efforts (unnatural naturalization); using aesthetic and meta-fictional competences; and taking a position of charity towards cinematic excess\textsuperscript{47}. Not all of these strategies are useful for viewers in their engagement with \textit{Five Dedicated to Ozu}, however. The most promising strategies for my argument here would be the unnatural naturalization, and the meta-fictional competency. Firstly, narrativizing entails that the viewer ‘imposes narrativity by using a certain frame of perceiving and understanding that renders certain artifacts or events ‘narrative’’\textsuperscript{48}. In other words, the viewer deliberately and actively attempts to make a coherent whole out of a film that in itself thwarts this narrative understanding. Interestingly, this recuperative strategy is very visible in Brown’s writing on \textit{Five}. ‘Watching the film, I find my self absorbed by the piece of driftwood: Will it rest on the shore? Will it float off? Will it split? Will it sink?’\textsuperscript{49}. This is exactly an attempt at

\textsuperscript{46} Buckland, \textit{Hollywood Puzzle Films}, 136.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 52.
narrativizing the otherwise uneventful depiction of the first shot of the film. This is a form of coping with comprehensive complexity (3-4). It is different from dealing with interpretive complexity, the more self-reflective or meta-fictional stance.

Willemsen, furthermore makes an important contribution to Fludernik’s use of the term naturalization when he argues that viewers – when adopting the art-cinema frame - not necessarily just use narrative schemata to naturalize a text, but that they are also likely to use ‘non-experiential and disembodied naturalization’, i.e. ‘to read disruptions as aesthetic, theoretical or philosophical statement’50. This process he labels unnatural naturalization. Closely related to this unnatural naturalization is the meta-fictional competences that viewer can employ. These are ‘self-conscious strategies that acknowledge the artificial and constructed nature of viewing a film’. Viewers ‘may infer that narrative devices are ‘intended’ to make them reflect on their participation in the narrative meaning-making’ and ‘on the medium of film itself’51. I propose that both these two strategies of unnatural naturalization and meta-fictional competences can be subsumed under the header of interpretive meaning making, so pertaining to level 5 meanings, because these concern aspects that are not the filmic world anymore – but instead they are ways of dealing with extratextual issues.

It seems appealing, with the theoretical framework in mind, to claim that the use of the extended long takes in Five can lead to a form of perceptual complexity. Brown, for one, argues, following insights from cognitive psychological studies, that ‘a visually complex film like Inception leads to a simple/poor variety of responses, while a visually simple film like Five leads to a complex variety of responses’52. However, I argue, that he draws unwarranted conclusions from these empirical studies. They merely talk about attentional synchrony, or the way the attention (operationalized as the fixation of gaze over duration) of different viewers coincides in greater or lesser degree. The study names a couple of aesthetic strategies that the filmmaker has at its disposal to enhance attentional synchrony and thus actively guide the viewer’s focus on the screen. These, as they explain, are rooted in the innate, evolutionary inherited human cognitive set-up. Among others, these are: light, movement, faces, etc.53 Now, the synchrony of attention is not to be conflated with simple variety of responses in terms of comprehension and interpretation. We can only go so far as saying that the ‘intensified continuity’ editing system (Bordwell) leads to greater attentional synchrony, and not as far as to say that it leads to a general flattening of meaning making. Therefore, I argue, that in watching Five the experience of the viewer might be better described as contemplation, or lingering attention, than as complexity of perception. Contemplation leads to a different effect than complexity does.54 It is a from of meaning making, of course, but it is more associative and pertains mostly to an effect deriving from interpretive complexity.

Similar to Brown, Song Hwee Lim explicitly frames the experience of slowness in the films of Tsai Ming-liang as a Shklovskyan form of estrangement. He states that ‘a cinema of slowness, makes

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50 Willemsen, (Re-)considering Narrative Complexity in Art-Cinema, 53.
51 Ibid., 54–55.
52 Ibid.
54 Boredom is another possible reaction of the viewer that leads him to give up on meaning making altogether, and is thus a form of non-engagement that cannot be part of my investigation here.
us look at mundane things with fresh eyes by altering our perceptual relationship to the object and extending the temporality of the experience.\textsuperscript{55} Karl Schoonover, in turn, claims that ‘the art film encouraging its spectator to acclimate him- or herself to slow time and remain open to its potentialities. The restlessness or contemplation induced by art cinema’s characteristic fallow time draws attention to the activity of watching and ennobles a forbearing but unbedazzled spectatorship.\textsuperscript{56}

To some extent, I can endorse their arguments, as the viewer is indeed placed in a different perceptual relationship to the filmic world than he might be used to in his practice of watching, say, puzzle films. However, I would argue that perception itself is not made complex, as the image itself is still simple and perceived unproblematic. The difficulty that viewers typically encounter in watching a slow film resides on the level of attention, not on that of perceptual meaning. This attentional issue, I might add, is in turn related to the viewer’s dispositions, his set of expectations derived from his viewing habits. In addition to the problem of attention, the viewer might also experience a complexity of interpretation. Humans cannot do otherwise than try to make meaning of their environment. In the case of art, and \textit{Five} might trigger exactly that frame of mind, this will entail that the viewer automatically and involuntarily tries to make sense of the work as an artifact. That is to say: as something intentionally constructed for the viewer and endowed with a meaning by an inferred maker (auteur). This is, again, typical interpretive or level 5 complexity.

\textbf{Conclusions}

As a way of closing this paper, I will shortly recap my arguments so far. Following, I will try to sketch some general implications of my claims, as well as to offer some reflections on the benefits and limitation of my adopted theoretical framework. In this paper, I’ve argued that complexity is best understood as a felt experience and not as a property of the filmic text. Rather than giving structuralist typologies of different forms of complex films, I’ve focussed my attention on the dynamic interactions between film and viewer. Complexity, I claimed, emerges when viewers’ understanding of a film is made difficult. This can happen on the three global levels of perception, comprehension and interpretation. The first two levels concern the textual, or the filmic world, whereas the latter pertains to contextual factors. Mainstream complex films, of which \textit{Inception} is an instance, complexify the experience mostly on the second level of comprehension. They can do so in two ways: by complexity of content (the told) and by complexity of formal structure (the telling). \textit{Inception} is shown to be complex on both levels. Art-films can be thought to be complex on both levels of comprehension and on an added level of interpretation. However, I’ve made the important addition that slow film, as a subset of art-film (of which I took \textit{Five} as an example), is complex mostly on the level of interpretation, and not on the levels of perception and comprehension. In stead, I argued, it is challenging by way of under-determination on both the levels of form and content. It

\textsuperscript{55} Lim, \textit{Tsai Ming-Liang and a Cinema of Slowness}, 151.

\textsuperscript{56} Schoonover, “Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema’s Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the Queer.,” 70 (my emphasis, JB).
thus differs from paradigmatic instances of post-war European art-films that typically work as complexity of interpretation through a hyperbolic complexification of comprehension. Finally, I’ve made the case that these different forms of complexity require different forms of viewing strategies. In the case of a complexity of comprehension, the viewer reverts to strategies of narrative meaning making with the aid of narrative mapping. With art-films, however, he might also use unnatural naturalization or take a meta-fictional stance.

Placing this theoretical emphasis on the reception of the viewer from a psychological standpoint, however, inevitably meant that other factors have gotten less attention in this paper. I have left aside, for one, the question of why puzzle films seem to have gotten to become landmarks in the contemporary film and television landscape. I trust the past and future work of other scholars, in this case, to tackle this issue. Moreover, I have focussed more on the experiential side than on the on the side of the text. I’ve mostly discussed the aesthetics of films in rather broad, general terms. The balance of the dynamic viewer-text might, in its representation in this paper, look somewhat skewed, in this respect. It will come down to work in the form of more in-depth analyses of specific films to adjust or refine my humble theoretical proposal.

What I do feel I should address more thoroughly at this point is the legitimation of my work (and others) on complex storytelling in the film scholarly knowledge field. I see my work fitting in a larger and ongoing trend within the humanities, and film studies more specifically. We might call this the audience turn: the shift of attention from the textual object in text-based approaches of structuralism (early semiotics), via the context-centered paradigm of post-structuralism (the psychoanalytically infused screen theory) towards an emphasis on the cognitive and affect processes in the mind and body of the viewer as legitimate objects of study in the embodied cognitive frame. With my contribution, I have sought to bridge the gap between approaches that position themselves at the edges of the viewer-text continuum, because I believe that disregarding either side of the equation will inevitably lead to inadequate or in the worst case invalid solutions. That is not to say that I expect my own work - or that of others, for that matter - to be complete. For that is an idealistic impossibility, one that we should not even bother to strive for.
References
Attachment

Figure 1