

## *Introduction*

Well, I'd like to meet you,  
Why,  
You have doubtless already noticed that our voices are identical,  
They do seem to be rather similar,  
No, not similar, identical

José Saramago, *The Double*

*A man is sitting in his favourite armchair, green velvet upholstery with a high headrest, reading the final chapters of a book he had begun to read a few days before. He keeps his cigarettes close at hand to be able to fully immerse himself in the story, and sits with his back to the door of his study. The tranquil scenery is underscored by the study's window that looks out upon a park planted with oaks. Once he opens the book, his memory retains the familiar names and images of the characters with ease. Engrossed by the story, he disengages, line by line, from the surrounding reality, and gently slides into the fictional world . . . A man and woman meet secretly in a cabin. The woman kisses the man, but he resists her passion. He has deadly business ahead. After going over their cold-blooded plans once more, they split up. Leaving the cabin with a dagger hidden against his chest, the man follows a path, lined by trees, leading to a house. It is getting dark. He enters the house and, following the woman's instructions, arrives at the door of a large room. With the knife in his hand, he looks inside and sees a man, his back to the door, sitting in an armchair of green velvet upholstery with a high headrest, reading a novel.*

Those who know Julio Cortázar's 1956 mind-bending short story *Continuidad de los parques* (*Continuity of Parks*) will probably remember the shock of realising that the reading character *in* the story shares the fate of the character he is reading *about*: that the reader of Cortázar's novel reads about a character who is reading about a character that becomes this reading character's murderer. The impossible transgression between the telling and the told could suggest a collapse of ontological boundaries; a train of thought that even seems to imply the unsettling idea that the threatened fictional reader actually could also be the novel's actual reader – that is, he could also be *us*. But wait a minute. Is there really a murder taking place in the story

at all? More importantly, are we even sure that the fictional reader and the threatened reader are the very same character? After all, what if the fictional reader's high-backed armchair covered in green velvet is only very similar but not identical to the one in which the other, threatened reader sits? What if the story is only a narrative *mise-en-abyme*, without a short-circuit among its embedded levels? And if there is such a narrative breach between the telling and the told, how to make sense of this anomaly?

Although Cortázar's story can be read as an implausible scenario, unlikely in fiction but possible in reality (a huge coincidence among similar rooms, chairs and readers), most people will probably read it as a *conceivable impossibility*, only 'possible' in fiction (a paradoxical confrontation between identical elements from the embedded story and the story that frames it). Readers are therefore likely to find themselves facing one of two key questions: what to do with this *ambiguity* balanced by Cortázar's polysemous telling; or, if one goes with the mind-bending suggestion of transgressed narrative levels, how to handle the *paradoxical impossibility* presented in this fictional story. After all, on the one hand, it is hard to imagine someone taking the short novel's suggested impossibility seriously, and by that questioning his or her well-founded beliefs about the world – about time's chronology and irreversibility, about human beings' uniqueness, or about the ontological difference between actual readers and fictional characters. Yet, due to their obvious impossibilities and baffling experiences, stories like Cortázar's do potentially trigger various implied meanings, connotative interpretations and imaginative possibilities. Readers may feel that the novel's aim is to blur the line between fiction and reality, to comment on immersion and the power of storytelling, to mock passive readership, and so on. But one can also read this type of intricate stories very 'literally'. Many impossible but seemingly realistic stories skilfully tempt us into their diegetic worlds, presenting them as highly immersive, potentially logically coherent and perfectly inhabitable. These stories often present themselves as 'puzzles' to be solved, luring us into figuring out what is going on, and by what laws their storyworld and story logic work. Narratives like this may also invite us to engage in 'meta-fictional' appreciation and reflection, marvelling at the cleverly designed narrative gears at work and making us aware of our own involvement and interpretive activity when construing such worlds of fiction.

In short, the tangled fiction in Cortázar's intricate narrative design purposely generates various possible questions for its readers. These questions are in many respects related to the topics explored in this book. What we aim to find out is *what such puzzling and enigmatic stories do and how viewers make them work*. What difficulties do they pose? What is engaging about these stories' challenges, and what do readers and viewers draw from these experiences?

Why would one take such clearly fictional scenarios seriously in the first place? What keeps an audience guessing about logical and coherent solutions to these otherwise impossible plots? Or, on the contrary, when would one give up on deciphering such puzzling mysteries? Under what conditions do viewers abandon a rationalising and problem-solving approach, and exchange it for, for instance, a more metaphorical or symbolic reading? Ultimately, our questions are about what makes these stories *complex* beyond being simply *complicated*. Although the topics might be similar, our aim is different from Cortázar's. We are interested in the effects of these 'impossible' stories in the context of cinematic storytelling, where such narrative forms seem to be increasingly used. Moreover, it is our ambition to provide systematic answers to these questions and to reveal what is hidden in 'the continuity of parks': an engaging narrative art experience that is ultimately about experiencing *complexity* itself.

## I.1 IN THIS BOOK

This book's main topic is the palpable trend of *narrative complexity in contemporary cinema*. As many critics and scholars have noted, over the last two decades a significant and distinct group of contemporary movies has offered specific kinds of viewing experiences that seem to be all about complexity. Naturally, complexity in relation to film can have many different meanings and manifestations. Films can present complex stories (convoluted stories of classic noirs and neo-noirs), complex emotions (from Alexander Payne's subtle psychology to Kim Ki-duk's eccentrics), complex visuals (from meticulously staged mise-en-scène to stylistic overloads of CGI effects), complex interpretive possibilities (see, for example, William Brown (2014) on Abbas Kiarostami), or complex systems (as in Maria Poulaki's work (2011, 2014) on Omar Naim, Matteo Garrone or the Coen brothers' cinema). Among these many options and aspects, our focus will be restricted to formal-structural complexity in stories and storytelling.<sup>1</sup> Hence, whenever this book makes reference to 'complex films', this is shorthand for fiction films featuring some kind of *narrative complexity*. We certainly do not intend to deny all other constituents of the cinematic experience (such as cinematography, style, sound, mise-en-scène or acting) the ability to evoke complexity in viewing experiences. But this book focuses on the specific aesthetic engagement of *story-related*

<sup>1</sup> It should be stressed that our use of the term 'complexity' is intended to be value-free: we do not wish to convey any normativity that could be implied in the notion (for instance as being superior to 'simplicity') and will not consider complexity in narrative to be in any way an intrinsically 'good' or 'bad' quality.

complexity, and for the sake of this focus, we only analyse matters of film style or sound to the degree that these take on explicit relevance in relation to issues of narrative.

Complex story structures have been notably abundant in mainstream cinema over the past two decades: from the reversed amnesia neo-noir plot of Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) through the riddling dream logic of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) to the time-travel paradox of Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012), recent film history has seen the emergence of a range of films, both surprising cult hits and major blockbusters, making clever use of confusing plots. It is films such as these that we want to understand better or, rather, the type of *viewing experiences* that they offer. Therefore, instead of examining the possible meanings and thematic variations of complex films, and besides refining existing taxonomies based on these movies' recurring formal-structural features, we will primarily investigate the *cognitive-psychological impact* of formally complex narratives. This book analyses how different types of complex movies can evoke varieties of viewing effects. Our investigation attempts to identify these effects as caused by different kinds of *cognitive puzzlement*. We also aim to explain the positive mental responses that seem to (somewhat paradoxically) accompany such confusing viewing experiences. After all, complex stories do not seem to fit the picture of ordinary narrative enjoyment; people tend to think of stories as having a function to organise human experience, or to mimetically communicate and provide clear and life-like access to the emotions and experiences of others (whether fictional or actual). But *confusing* narratives seem to upset this 'ordinary' organising function. They often even problematise the access to the basic mimetic level of actions and emotions in which viewers normally immerse themselves. So why then do confusing films fascinate large audiences worldwide?

In this book, we will explore and discuss possible reasons for the engaging potential of narrative complexity in film, drawing from various fields (narrative theory, embodied-cognitive theory, cognitive sciences, psychology, media theory and game studies). To better understand the viewing experiences that complex films provide, we aim to bring together three branches of theorising in particular. These are, firstly (and most obviously) *film studies* and the work that has been done on narrative complexity, both with regard to contemporary audiovisual culture and in a broader film historical perspective (for instance, regarding the narrative experiments of the European modernist art films of the 1960s). Secondly, we draw from *literary theory* and *cognitive narratology*, as these fields have offered some very insightful work relating to storytelling, story structures, story comprehension and complication, as well as more general thinking about narrativity as a key tool of the human mind to organise data and make sense of events. The most recent findings

from cognitive narratology have not often been brought into dialogue with the question of complexity in film studies, and we find this encounter to be very fruitful for thinking about complex story experiences. Thirdly, our study connects to work from the paradigm of *cognitive sciences*, as we aim to understand the kinds of (embodied-)cognitive activities that are implicated in making sense of complex stories. Cognitive approaches entered film and literary studies from the 1980s and 1990s onwards. These approaches have handed humanities scholars models and theories that describe how people interact with and make sense of both fictional-mediated and real-world situations. For us, such theories provide a basis to think further about how various complex films may challenge or even obstruct these processes. In this book, we contend that complexity does not only lie in intricate narrative structures themselves, but should also be analysed as *cognitive effects* and *experiences* that such formal disruptions bring about in viewers. Hence, we do not intend to define ‘complexity’ as an objective property of a film, but rather propose to see it as an effect that emerges (or that can emerge) from the rich dynamics between a film and its viewer. This *cognitive reconceptualisation* of complexity forms one of the book’s core aims.

Throughout this study, we will illustrate our findings by analysing different types of complex film in relation to these theories and approaches; each chapter will open with a brief illustrative case study, foreshadowing the theoretical issues it precedes. Ultimately, the aim of this book is to explore and understand the appeal of the cognitive struggles that result from disorientingly complex narrative experiences.

Chapter 1 briefly introduces the trend of narrative complexity in contemporary cinema. It concisely positions narrative complexity within broader shifts in the audiovisual media landscape, including the relation to recent developments in a techno-economical context, as well as this changing context’s impact on modes of viewing. This introductory chapter also briefly reviews existing studies on taxonomies that have so far offered *formal-structural approaches* to narrative complexity.

Chapter 2 focuses on a *cognitive approach* as a pertinent method to address complex narratives’ ‘difficult’ viewing experiences. As we argue, complexity does not only lie in a story’s formal composition itself, but is best understood in terms of how the narrative hinders viewers’ comprehension and meaning-making routines. Noticing that some films pose more conspicuous impediments to sense-making efforts than others, in this section we differentiate movies in regard to their relative complexity in cognitive terms – that is, their ability to cause various states of cognitive puzzlement and trigger diverse mental responses in their viewers. The cognitive approach will lead us to reconsider the classificatory accuracy of existing concepts, such as

the umbrella term of *puzzle film*. From there on, we propose more refined categories within the overarching division of narrative complexity, aiming to discern between different types of film that offer various degrees of complexity.

Among these emerging options, we will concentrate on the distinct group of what we call *impossible puzzle films*. This category comprises narrative movies that are characterised by pervasive paradoxes, uncertainties, incongruities and ambiguities in the narration, and which, as a consequence, tend to elicit a state of ongoing cognitive confusion throughout the viewing experience. Examples include David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Inland Empire* (2006) (the 'Los Angeles trilogy'), Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001), Shane Carruth's *Primer* (2004), James Ward Byrkit's *Coherence* (2013) as well as confusing loop narratives such as Nacho Vigalondo's *Los cronocrímenes (Timecrimes)* (2007), Christopher Smith's *Triangle* (2009) or Quentin Dupieux's *Réalité (Reality)* (2014). These impossible puzzle films will be the focal point of this book, particularly because, through the distinct viewing effects of their highly confusing stories, they foreground cinematic experiences of 'genuine' complexity, often for the sake of complexity itself.

Chapter 3 describes how impossible puzzle films create paradoxical, incongruent or impossible narrative experiences. To understand the nature of the confusion these films create, this chapter adopts Leon Festinger's original theory on the psychological state of *cognitive dissonance* (1957). We argue that the perplexing effects of impossible puzzle films can be understood as cognitive dissonances. These films strategically evoke and maintain *dissonant cognitions* in their viewers through internal incongruities (contradictions in their narration) and projected impossibilities (narrative structures or elements that disrupt the elementary knowledge, logic and schemas that viewers use to make sense of both real life and fiction). Along with more recent insights from embodied-cognitive sciences and narratology, cognitive dissonance theory offers us a tool to explain the effects that impossible puzzle films have on viewers.

In consequence, Chapter 4 addresses how these effects of cognitive dissonance incite in viewers an *urge to make meaning*, and therefore asks how viewers cope with dissonant experiences in narrative fiction. In this chapter, we offer an overview of the different *interpretive strategies* and *hermeneutic manoeuvres* that viewers may utilise to 'tame' troubling or puzzling dissonances in narrative artworks. Regarding the reception and interpretation of highly complex stories, we aim to answer relevant questions such as 'How do viewers usually make sense of or assign meaning to contradictory and impossible narrative elements?', 'What kinds of interpretive activity do these challenging films evoke in viewers?' and 'How do such interpretive activities shape our viewing experiences?'

Chapter 5 returns to the formal make-up of impossible puzzle films, asking how they regulate viewer responses to their excessive complexities. In this section we address two specific questions: ‘How do impossible puzzle films cue certain sense-making and meaning-making operations over others?’ and ‘How do they keep viewers hooked on trying to solve their ultimately unsolvable puzzles?’. In line with these questions, a significant portion of the chapter will be dedicated to a *comparative perspective* on the storytelling mode of impossible puzzle films and that of (modernist) art cinema. Art cinema, as a narrative mode, has used complex means similar to its contemporary counterpart, but, as we will demonstrate, has generally done so to different ends. We will argue that impossible puzzle films draw from both the tradition of (modernist) art-cinema and classical narration, but remain fundamentally rooted in the latter by carefully balancing their pervasive complexities with more classical elements of mainstream film storytelling.

Finally, in Chapter 6, our exploration concludes with an outlook on the reasons why viewers may find narrative complexity *engaging* or even *attractive*. As a kind of outro, here we offer hunches (and by that we hope to incite further research) regarding the possible reasons why viewers may be fascinated by such confusing story experiences. After all, why would anyone want to engage with complex puzzles that perhaps cannot even be solved? The final aim of this book is to disclose this peculiar appeal – the pleasures and fascinations of engaging with highly complex, cognitively challenging if not confusing experiences of impossible puzzle narratives.

## *Contemporary Complex Cinema*

The joy of the technological media revolution is that it has proved viewers like shows that are reassuringly complicated . . . They want to be able to pause and reflect about what's happened, to watch something that's chewy.

Stuart Murphy, Entertainment Director of Sky, interviewed  
by Sarah Hughes (2015)

*On 2 October 1988, during his regular sleepwalking nights, schizophrenic Maryland teenager Donald Darko (Jake Gyllenhaal) meets a mysterious man wearing a creepy rabbit costume. Frank, the giant bunny, informs Donnie that the world will end in twenty-eight days, six hours, forty-two minutes and twelve seconds. While Donnie is still outside, a huge passenger plane engine crashes through the Darkos' roof, destroying Donnie's bedroom. Notwithstanding the curious fact that no plane or engine has been reported missing, had Donnie not been sleepwalking, he would have been killed. Haunted by Frank, the introverted Donnie gradually becomes the school's unruly troublemaker. After sunset, he turns into a radical rebel. One night he floods his high school, while on another evening, he burns down the home of a local celebrity (revealing the man's hidden child porn dungeon). Despite his violent acts, Donnie makes new friends and seemingly enjoys his new-found status. He starts dating a new girl in town, Gretchen (Jena Malone), and, after Frank makes him curious about time travel, makes contact with the school's science teacher, Mr Monnitoff (Noah Wyle). Monnitoff gives Donnie a book, *The Philosophy of Time Travel*, written by former teacher Roberta Sparrow (Patience Cleveland), alias 'Grandma Death', the freak of the town. As the film unfolds, we see pages from this book that expounds on the possibility of time travel, including some cryptic notes about tangent universes and alternative realities (these regularly appearing scenes are available only in the director's cut of the film). As part of his night-time hallucinations, Donnie starts to see fluid light tunnels streaming out of people's chests, anticipating their future acts. His own emerging light tunnel leads him to his father's closet, revealing a gun . . . 29 October – one day remains. While his parents are away, Donnie and his sister hold a Halloween party. Realising that there are only hours left before Frank's apocalyptic prophecy, Donnie and Gretchen decide to visit Grandma Death. When they arrive, they run into the school's bullies, who are attempting to rob Sparrow's house. In the heat of the fight that spills into the street, a speeding car comes*

*out of nowhere and runs Gretchen over, leaving her dead. The car is driven by a boy called Frank (James Duval), wearing an eerie rabbit costume for the Halloween party – an exact copy of Donnie’s hallucination. Using his father’s gun, Donnie kills Frank and drives off with the lifeless body of Gretchen . . . It’s dawn, the time is up and as a sign of an imminent apocalypse, a dreadful vortex cloud forms over the town. While peacefully contemplating the unfolding events, Donnie spots his returning mother’s plane. The next moment we see that due to violent turbulence, one of the plane’s engines breaks free and falls into the vortex . . . Fast-rewind, all events of the last 28 days reverse and we’re back at 2 October. At midnight the huge engine of the plane crashes into Donnie’s bedroom and kills him . . . The next morning Gretchen rides her bike to the wrecked house, learning about the fate of some guy called Donnie. The film ends with a déjà vu moment between her and Donnie’s mother. They wave at each other kindly, even though they have never met before.*

Richard Kelly’s 2001 cult hit *Donnie Darko* is one of the early trendsetter examples that brought an opaque story to a wide audience. Drawing on the beloved high-school teen genre, the movie builds a realistic world with its own intrinsic scientific laws that closely corresponds to – but also disturbingly subverts – our known physical reality. The necessary explanations of the workings of these fictional laws unfold partially in the film itself (thanks to the appearance of Stephen Hawking’s 1988 pop-science book *A Brief History of Time*) but, more remarkably, also across a variety of supplementary paratexts that surrounded the film: clues could be found on its official website,<sup>1</sup> in an abundance of DVD extras and commentaries, by scrutinising differences in the theatrical and director’s cut versions, and even through Roberta Sparrow’s fictitious book *The Philosophy of Time Travel*, from which excerpts were released in the film’s DVD box. Initially failing at the box-office (the film had a limited release, a month after 9/11), *Donnie Darko*’s ‘cult-hit’ status actually emerged precisely thanks to this richly built paratextual aura, which, by utilising the novel affordances of technological changes in media consumption and online interaction, amplified the film’s full experience. A director’s cut DVD was released in 2004, and an extended, paratext-packed version – including twenty minutes of clue-studded extra footage – followed in 2005. Arguably, without these extensions, the film would be even more puzzling. One might even look at these officially designed supplements as compensating tools for the film’s arresting complexity.

<sup>1</sup> Quite progressively for its time, the official website of the film incorporated, among other things, audio, visual and audiovisual materials, luring fans into active investigation of the film’s puzzling universe. The site was built as a kind of non-linear hypertext, giving navigational and investigative freedom to the user-viewer. The original URL is now unavailable; the entire site has been archived at <http://archive.hi-res.net/donniedarko/> (Van den Berg and Kiss 2016).

Instead of concentrating on this film's specific diegetic enigma,<sup>2</sup> let us start with some more fundamental interrogations regarding general aspects of the complex puzzles that films like *Donnie Darko* offer. How and when did such story complexity enter mainstream film and television? What are the basic forms and mechanisms of these complex film experiences? And, more essentially, what is this 'complexity' that we are talking about in the first place?

### 1.1 COMPLEX CONDITIONS: THE RESURGENCE OF NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY

Let us start with a concise statement: *narrative complexity is a trend in contemporary cinema and television*. Both components of this assertion require some brief explanation.

By *narrative complexity* we mean a kind of structural-constructional complexity in storytelling logic.<sup>3</sup> This complexity can be witnessed through the increasing popularity of what critics and scholars have called *database, multilineal, forking-path, fractal, episodic, alternative-plot, cubist, loop, modular, multiple-draft, multiform, multiple-embedded, hyperlink* or otherwise formally unconventional narratives.

Also, one can justifiably speak of a *trend* – or at least a 'certain tendency'<sup>4</sup> – in terms of the profusion and 'mainstreamification' of complex stories in film and television. This trend emerged in the mainstream in the mid-1990s, and, as the below text box illustrates, arguably persists to the present day. Even though narrative complexity has not eclipsed more traditional forms of narration and representation, being only one among many parallel trends in contemporary audiovisual storytelling, it is likely that this period of film and television history 'will be remembered as an era of narrative experimentation and innovation, challenging the norms of what the[se] medium[s] can do' (Mittell 2015: 31).

<sup>2</sup> According to probably the most thorough among the film's explanatory sites ([www.donnie-darko.org.uk/explanation/](http://www.donnie-darko.org.uk/explanation/)), Kelly's movie fantasises on a possibility of a tangent universe (created at midnight on 2 October) parallel to the film's primary reality. Being an occasional and unstable time-construction in an alternative reality, a tangent universe lasts only for a few weeks (in this case a bit longer than twenty-eight days), but, upon its collapse, might have catastrophic consequences for the primary world. Gradually understanding the situation and accepting his role in it, Donnie sacrifices himself (according to Sparrow's explication, he is endowed with supernatural powers and is the only person who could prevent the apocalypse): he restores the time-construct of the primary world by throwing a jet engine into the vortex, and therefore saves his family and, indeed, the whole world from apocalyptic destruction.

<sup>3</sup> The word 'complex' is rooted in the Latin *plectere*, meaning *to weave* or *to entwine*.

<sup>4</sup> In deference to François Truffaut's famous essay 'A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema' (1976 [1954]), Thomas Elsaesser acknowledges the complex trend as 'certain tendency' in contemporary cinema (2009: 14).

Trailing the immense success of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* in 1994, the current trend of narrative complexification started with sporadic examples of progressive films such as Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los ojos* (*Open Your Eyes*) or David Lynch's *Lost Highway*, both from 1997, and continued through trendsetter threshold movies like Tom Tykwer's *Lola rennt* (*Run Lola Run*) (1998), David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999), Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *Adaptation* (2002), Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), Michael Walker's *Chasing Sleep* (2000), Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001), Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2001), Cameron Crowe's *Vanilla Sky* (2001), Jee-woon Kim's *Janghwa, Hongryeon* (*A Tale of Two Sisters*) (2003), Christoffer Boe's *Reconstruction* (2003), or Shane Carruth's *Primer* (2004). In recent years this tendency has culminated in an abundance of manifestations in art-cinema, midcult and mainstream platforms alike. Titles may include Emmanuel Carrère's *La moustache* (2005), Marc Forster's *Stay* (2005), John Maybury's *The Jacket* (2005), Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006), Csaba Bollók's *Mirac* (2006), Nacho Vigalondo's *Los cronocrimenes* (*Timecrimes*) (2007), John August's *The Nines* (2007), Mennan Yapo's *Premonition* (2007), Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), Jaco Van Dormael's *Mr. Nobody* (2009), Christopher Smith's *Triangle* (2009), Thomas Jane's *Dark Country* (2009), Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2010), Abbas Kiarostami's *Copie conforme* (*Certified Copy*) (2010), Duncan Jones's *Source Code* (2011), Jack Heller's *Enter Nowhere* (2011), Nolan's personal projects like *The Prestige* (2006) as well as his 'complex narrative blockbuster[s]' (Campora 2014: 36) such as *Inception* (2010) and *Interstellar* (2014), Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012), Tom Tykwer and the Wachowskis' *Cloud Atlas* (2012), Richard Ayoade's *The Double* (2013), Danny Boyle's *Trance* (2013), Denis Villeneuve's *Enemy* (2013), James Ward Byrkit's *Coherence* (2013), Dennis Iliadis' *+1* (2013), Bradley King's *Time Lapse* (2014), Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice* (2014), Michael and Peter Spierig's *Predestination* (2014), Quentin Dupieux's *Réalité* (*Reality*) (2014), Michael Hurst's *Paradox* (2016), Isti Madarász's *Hurok* (*Loop*) (2016) and so on. Beyond the general tendency of enhanced playfulness in the storytelling sophistication of television series and serials across their genres (Johnson 2006), popular shows like *Lost* (J. J. Abrams et al. 2004–10), *Fringe* (J. J. Abrams et al. 2008–13) and recently *Person of Interest* (Jonathan Nolan 2011–), *12 Monkeys* (Travis Fickett and Terry Matalas 2015–) or the second season of the neo-noir *True Detective* (Nic Pizzolatto 2015) have embraced radical forms of narrative complexity, further underlining the trend's widespread domestication.

In the wake of the popularisation of narrative complexity in film, an abundance of scholarly works has scrutinised the development and permanence of the trend from a variety of perspectives (see, among others, Bordwell 2002a; Branigan 2002; Young 2002; Eig 2003; Everett 2005; Mittell 2006, 2015; Staiger 2006; Lavik 2006; Berg 2006; Panek 2006; Diffrient 2006; Cameron 2008; Simons 2008; Elsaesser 2009; Buckland 2009a, 2014a; Ben Shaul 2012; Poulaki 2011; Kiss 2012, 2013; Klecker 2013; Campora 2014; Ghosal 2015; Coëgnarts et al. 2016). As Allan Cameron notes, providing one of the most comprehensive overviews of the complex narrative development in the cinematic context, it has become apparent that ‘popular cinema has displayed a turn towards narrative complexity . . . The resurgence of this type of formal experimentation became particularly prominent following the success of Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994)’ (Cameron 2008: 1). Indeed, the contemporary tendency of narrative complexity in popular cinema is best characterised as a ‘resurgence’; after all, as David Bordwell laconically puts it, ‘nothing comes from nothing’ in film narration (Bordwell 2006: 75). The present-day innovative movies that push the limits both of narrative expression and of their viewers’ cognitive and interpretive abilities do operate ‘within a tradition’, one ‘that demands a balance between innovation and adherence to norms’ (ibid.: 103). Certainly, narrative complexity is not an entirely new phenomenon in film history. One can think for example of the intricate stories and story paths found in 1940s film noirs (ibid.: 72–103), or of the narrative experiments of the European ‘modernist’ art cinema in the 1950s, 60s and 70s (Kovács 2007: 120–40; Bordwell 1979). As this book too will demonstrate, many contemporary complex films have partially borrowed or adapted strategies from these earlier traditions of cinematic storytelling. What is new, however, is that the current trend seems to be significantly more pervasive and widespread than these earlier traditions, manifesting itself across multiple genres and platforms, and in both national and international cinemas.

Narrative complexification in contemporary mainstream film has proven to be a significant and enduring tendency. Although this book does not aim (or claim) to untangle the various reasons that have led to this trend, in the below we will attempt to concisely sketch some of the contextual factors that form the background against which the mainstream success of complex films can be understood. The reasons behind the comeback of this trend are various but cumulative, and seem to have been mainly propelled by changes in (1) *technological* and (2) *economic* conditions (see, among others, Manovich 2001; Kinder 2002; Mulvey 2006; Mittell 2006, 2009, 2010, 2015; Lotz 2007; Cameron 2008; Gillian 2010; Johnson 2006; Ang 2011; Kiss 2012; Buckland 2014b), resulting in shifts both in film *viewership* (addressed in section 1.2) and in larger *formal* trends within (post-)classical film narration (see section 1.3).

Considering the *technological aspects* (1), complex films not only respond to, but also play with and capitalise on the novel affordances of technological advancements. The growing consumer access to technological goods – for example, to broadband internet, fuelling participatory engagement, granting connection to online communities and creating collective intelligence; or to time-shifting technologies, materialised in diversely advanced analogue (VHS) or digital (Laserdisc, DVD, Blu-ray, VOD) versions of home cinemas – has given *agency* and *control* to the viewer. The traditional passive role of viewers-as-spectators, which asked audiences to submit themselves to the time-bound conditions and conventions of the cinematic screening, has been upgraded with more (inter-)active potential. As the example of *Donnie Darko* illustrated, complex narratives often require such technical augmentation; for instance, filmic puzzles and enigmas incite activity in viewers who engage in collective deciphering and share their explanations on online message boards – performing what Jason Mittell called the ‘forensic’ mode of fandom (2009). Complex narratives also invite close and controlled tinkering, allowing viewers to embrace time-shifting technologies’ support in pausing, rewinding and replaying films and television shows. One early example, regarding a (then) ‘particularly complex’ television series, *A Very British Coup*, is discussed by Brad Chisholm, who describes the show’s complexity as ‘a high shots-per-minute ratio and an obsession with placing dialogue from one scene over the images of another’ (Chisholm 1991: 394). Chisholm interprets these qualities as conscious choices of the producers who ‘seem to have fashioned their program to be watched on a VCR delay-tape, so that a viewer could regularly rewind and take second looks’ (ibid.: 394). Chisholm already understood that ‘[d]ifficulty can be offset and complexity conquered by taping programs and watching them at the viewer’s pace’ (ibid.: 401). Today, such realisations almost sound like truisms. Moreover, filmmakers nowadays commonly design their narrative experiences in ways that allow for (if not prey upon) an interplay between these technical and narrative dimensions. For instance, Charlie Kaufman, one of the most notable screenplay writers and filmmakers associated with complex story experiments within Hollywood filmmaking, talks openly about the strategy he follows: ‘what I try to do is infuse my screenplays with enough information that upon repeated viewings you can have a different experience’ (Johnson 2006: 164). Chan-wook Park, director of the cult hit *Oldenboi (Oldboy)* (2003), similarly admits that he made his film ‘with the DVD viewers in mind so that they could watch it several times and discover new elements each time’ (Thanouli 2009b: 218).

The mindful cooperation between technological and authorial innovations has impacted audiences’ behaviour; their changes in attitude, in turn, further

encouraged narrative experimentation. Contemporary consumers of art are well-equipped to handle (and, what is more, often demand) narrative challenges beyond the often easy-to-access, linear and transparent experiences of the classical mode of film narration.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, our everyday experiences with new and increasingly sophisticated technological affordances and flows of information inspire more and more complex stories and modes of storytelling. For example, doppelgänger and other schizophrenic stories and their corresponding narrative modes – multilinear, forking-path or loop – are said to be prompted by our customary practice of digital lossless copying, our familiarity with hyperlink and database logic, the habitual virtualisation of our selves through varied avatars on videogame and other online platforms, and our routine in the creation and maintenance of different social media profiles to express the diversity of our *multiple characters*, both professional and private. Producers of audiovisual fiction embrace the novel affordances of technological advancements and meet with the challenge of the new demands from viewers who have been precisely trained by such technical innovations. They set out to experiment with narrative modes, complexifying forms and structures and often ‘designing a cultural form explicitly to train the cognitive muscles of the brain’ (Johnson 2006: 56).

The strategy of making films rely heavily on multiple viewings has strong ties to the industry’s *economical demands* (2). By introducing the idea of ‘rewatchability value’, Steven Johnson identifies ‘repeatability’ as one of the most essential characteristics of contemporary audiovisual programmes. Johnson has derived his finding by analysing the evolution of principles that govern US broadcast television programming. We have already summarised Johnson’s study elsewhere:

During the late sixties and the seventies, a safe principle governed the narrative schedules of prime-time television. Thinking about addressing the widest possible audience, NBC’s ‘Least Objectionable Programming’ philosophy followed a cautious rule prioritising the formula of the ‘lowest common denominator’ in their viewers’ tastes (Klein 1971). With the new technological platforms and opportunities, the abounding appearance of specialised, 24/7 broadcasting television channels and, last but not least, with the quick exhaustion of possibilities that the rule permitted, the faint-hearted encompassing principle of the LOP model became obsolete. Although aiming for the same economic outcome, the ‘Most Repeatable

<sup>5</sup> In this book we use *classical narration* to refer to the dominant ‘Hollywood-type’ of story-driven, mimetic and immersive narrative mode, most thoroughly defined by Bordwell 1979; Bordwell 1985: 156–204; Bordwell et al. 1985. Comparing classical film narration against art-cinema narration, section 5.2 will provide a more specific definition of classical narratives’ transparent, causal and goal-oriented representations.

Programming' model established and, more importantly, allowed new strategies. Arm-in-arm with these changes of the media landscape, 'the MRP model cultivates nuance and depth; it welcomes "tricks"' (Johnson 2006: 162), generally, it opens its governing principles beyond a one-dimensional emotional gratification. (Kiss 2012: 44)

As the example of the success of a screenwriter like Kaufman proves, television's 'M[ost] R[epeatable] P[rogramming] model has infiltrated Hollywood' (Johnson 2006: 163). By playing with viewers' habitual comprehension, 'tricks' in storytelling and story logic encourage repeated viewing, thereby raising the rewatchability value of complex narratives. Taking on the concept of 'two-tiered system of communication' (Carroll 1982), 'multiple entry point' strategies create excuses for a repeated viewing when permitting "access" to the film emotionally and intellectually' (Elsaesser 2011: 248). Whether it is about merely misleading, temporarily confusing or outright lying to the audience, unreliable and twist-narratives knowingly capitalise on viewers' feeling of competence, if not their vanity, as their disbelief that they missed something or that they were outsmarted by the film can lure them back to the box offices. And if not there, audiences may leave their money in regular and online stores, buying physical copies or renting and streaming digital versions of films and television shows. Getting around the elusive flow of scheduled cinematic screenings or television broadcasts, the harnessing of proprietary control holds the promise that a repeated viewing might lead to essential revelations – answering acute questions, resolving pressing ambiguities or at least discovering vital clues – that might have escaped attention during first-time viewing. Often, as exemplified by the case of *Donnie Darko's* belated cult success, DVD and Blu-ray sales or iTunes, Hulu or Netflix rentals outweigh box-office revenues.

We leave it to those who are specialised in these contextual nexuses to determine whether recent technological alterations and economical recalibrations *reflected* (Everett 2005), *encouraged* (Johnson 2006), were *answered by* (Buckland 2014b), *extended in* (Cameron 2008), *feedbacked* (Hayles and Gessler 2004), *set the stage for*, *impacted* or simply *coincided with* (Mittell 2015) the changes in contemporary narrative modes. In this book, we will instead focus on different questions, particularly relating to why many viewers are engaged in (if not attracted by) the specific viewing *experiences* that complex film narratives offer. While the apparent success, in terms of box-office earnings and viewer ratings, might justify why producers and filmmakers invested money and energy in making these films and television series and serials, an explanation about *how* complex programmes evoke an effect on viewers, and the reasons *why* audiences value their narrative experimentation, is lacking.

## 1.2 COMPLEX CINEMA AS BRAIN-CANDY FOR THE EMPOWERED VIEWER

With regard to *viewing modes*, complex film narratives take aim at an audience that is used to these rapidly changing techno-economical conditions. The recent *puzzle films* (Buckland 2009a, 2014a), *mind-game films* (Elsaesser 2009), *mindfuck movies* (Eig 2003) or perhaps *mind-tricking narratives* (Klecker 2013) seem to offer cinematic brainteasers. That is, they seem to be ‘movies that are “playing games”’ (Elsaesser 2009: 14) mostly for the game’s sake. Naturally, beyond their self-contained games and genre-limited issues, such playful puzzles can ultimately also be seen as addressing certain ‘epistemological problems (how do we know what we know) and ontological doubts (about other worlds, other minds) that are in the mainstream of the kinds of philosophical inquiry focused on human consciousness’ (ibid.: 15). Nevertheless, at the heart of the matter, the playfulness of these puzzle films also offers a new deal to the audience, one that is certainly unusual in the history of mainstream cinema and that can be said to possibly stimulate more active or devoted modes of viewership.

There seems to be a close connection between the emerging trends in what one might call ‘participatory’ film viewing and narrative complexification; that is, between audiences’ increased need for active and participatory viewing modes on the one hand, and narrative intricacy, attractive complexity and other means of challenging viewer competences on the other. The recent trend of puzzle films seems to support arguments that highlight a transition from the *naive* and *informed* passivity (Carroll 1982) that characterised traditional film viewing, to more *empowered* positions (Elsaesser 2011: 260) of interactive, actively devoted, *pensive* (Bellour 1987 [1984]) and *possessive* (Mulvey 2006: 161–80), even *forensic* (Mittell 2009) viewership. Laura Mulvey astutely sketches this shift as a transformation of a voyeuristic spectator (Mulvey 1975) to a curiosity-driven viewer, whose needs to decipher ‘respond to the human mind’s long-standing interest and pleasure in solving puzzles and riddles’ (Mulvey 2006: 191). Registering the same transition, Thomas Elsaesser aptly notes that in many contemporary complex films the fictional pact with the viewer is no longer based on ‘identification, voyeuristic perspectivism and “spectatorship”’ (Elsaesser 2009: 37). Rather, these films set out to elaborate and test known textual forms, narrative tropes and story motifs, providing ‘brain-candy’ to the viewer – an expression that Elsaesser (ibid.: 38) borrows from Malcolm Gladwell (2005). Indeed, by designing narratives that allow ‘cognitive workouts’ (Johnson 2006: 14), complex plots offer forensic playgrounds of participatory experiences for the viewer. One might even suggest that the joint effect of the ‘mainstreamisation’ of complexity and the upgraded roles of new viewership contributes to the fading distinction between professional and ‘amateur narratologists’ (Mittell 2006: 38; 2015: 52). In both a

seminal article, 'Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television' (2006), and a comprehensive book, *Complex TV* (2015), Jason Mittell demonstrates how television viewership has been 'upgraded' through the interaction between complex forms of serialised television and the possibilities offered by new media. While television networks slowly began to capitalise on transmedia storytelling across traditional screens and new media platforms (through accompanying websites, videogames and so on), viewers too quickly adapted to the digital era, sharing their experiences, interpretations and puzzle-solving activities on blogs and other podiums of social media. Television writers, in turn, having found a way to bind viewers more strongly to their serial narratives, showed increasing interest in employing narrative puzzles and complexities to elicit such participation and online discussion.

Narrative complexity, in both television and film, seems to encourage this intensified participation from viewers: 'In contrast to . . . accidental difficulty, difficulty by design invites the viewer to engage in a narrative that is purposely obscured, impeded, or otherwise made hard to assimilate' (Chisholm 1991: 391). The success of many complex narratives in both film and television is often ascribed to the effective stimulation of an active viewer response. For instance, in his work on director David Lynch, Dennis Lim looks back on the perhaps surprising success of the highly complex *Mulholland Drive*, noting that

[a]udiences who responded to *Mulholland Dr.* loved it precisely for its unique architecture as a puzzle movie that required some degree of assembly in the viewer's head. The online magazine *Salon* ran a piece titled 'Everything You Were Afraid to Ask about *Mulholland Drive*,' untangling the film's narrative threads and mapping out its cosmology; various websites, some maintained to this day, went even deeper, parsing the significance of minor characters and the symbolism of individual objects. The cult that emerged around *Mulholland Dr.* bespoke a participatory engagement with fiction, a collective hunger – to solve, decode, demystify – that Lynch had tapped into with *Twin Peaks*. (Lim 2015)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Lim further acknowledges how the popularity of Lynch's mysteriously puzzling film was embedded in the broader trend of narrative complexification that was becoming particularly apparent around the time: 'Fractured, elliptical stories were not new to cinema – they were in fact the stock in trade of modernist giants like Alain Resnais and Michelangelo Antonioni – but *Mulholland Dr.* coincided with a mounting appetite for narrative complexity. Audiences were by then accustomed to the shifting time signatures of Quentin Tarantino's movies, or to the gentler fissures in the films of the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, who explored the cosmic patterns of interlocking lives in *The Double Life of Véronique* (1991) and the *Three Colors* trilogy (1993–4). The rug-pulling trickery of hits like *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999) popularized the notion of narrative as a game; Christopher Nolan's reverse-chronology *Memento*, another amnesia neo noir, was released several months before *Mulholland Dr.*, and temporal loops were becoming an increasingly common device, in such films as *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Primer* (2004), and *Déjà Vu* (2006)' (Lim 2015).

In many complex films, the ‘invitation’ for active investigation is even extended, rather literally, as part of an overt game that these films set out to play with the viewer. While the first uttered words in Nolan’s *The Prestige* – ‘Are you watching closely?’ – are a modest plea for the viewer’s attention, the very beginning of Louis Leterrier’s *Now You See Me* (2013) – ‘Come in close! Closer! Because the more you think you see, the easier it’ll be to fool you’ – offers a highly self-conscious invitation, overly confident in its authorial mastery of the game. All things considered, one could even go as far as claiming that narrative complexity is a novel invitational strategy, which upgrades television and film’s traditionally offline – ‘cool’ and ‘hot’ – media (McLuhan 1964) with some possibility of (inter-)activity that characterises the ‘sizzling’ new media.

### 1.3 NARRATIVE TAXONOMIES: SIMPLE, COMPLEX, PUZZLE PLOTS

Lastly, in conclusion to this introduction, we would like to briefly discuss some of the work that has been done on the *formal* study of narrative complexity in contemporary cinema. Multiple works have aimed at understanding how contemporary complex films differ from classical narration by problematising or modulating traditional modes of narrative representation. The question of ‘classification’ is often central to these studies: can contemporary complex films still be said to belong to the ‘same old’ category of *classical narrative cinema* – the dominant paradigm of popular film storytelling from which they seem to originate? Or does their complexity go beyond classical storytelling standards and principles, deserving recognition as an altogether new phenomenon with distinct formal strategies, conventions and viewing routines? Theorists like Eleftheria Thanouli have argued that these films belong to a *post-classical* mode of film narration. Among a number of tendencies, post-classical narratives are said to display traits of ‘hypermediacy’, are characterised by a high degree of ‘self-consciousness’ and exhibit ‘a complex and multi-faceted system of time that problematises the natural progression of real time with the aid of numerous technical devices’ (Thanouli 2006: 191). Comparable claims have been made with regard to narrative complexity through more specific labels such as *complex narratives* (Staiger 2006; Simons 2008), *modular narratives* (Cameron 2008), *mind-game films* (Elsaesser 2009) or *multiform narratives* (Campora 2014), while in his 2009 and 2014 anthologies Warren Buckland branded these movies as *puzzle films*. Particularly the latter term requires some elaboration – not least because of its presence in the title of this book.

Although for Buckland, and for several others, ‘puzzle films’ serves to denote the specificity of contemporary complex movies, it must be noted

that the concept also has a broader historical context. While as a *phenomenon* ‘puzzle film’ appeared first in the mid-1910s in the form of German filmmaker Joe May’s ‘Preisrätsselfilme’ or ‘prize-puzzle-films’ (Pehla 1991; Canjels 2011),<sup>7</sup> and later, in the mid-1920s, as ‘Rebus-Filme’, short animated crossword puzzles by Paul Leni,<sup>8</sup> the *term* ‘puzzle film’ stems from Norman N. Holland’s 1963 article entitled ‘Puzzling Movies’, in which he referred to a new genre of European art films of the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to Holland, a movie like Ingmar Bergman’s *Det sjunde inseglet* (*The Seventh Seal*) (1957) or Alain Resnais’ *L’année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*) (1961) ‘puzzles, disturbs, presents us with an emotional riddle, but puts it in an intellectual and aesthetic context’ (Holland 1963: 24). Almost half a century later, reflecting on the emerging trend within contemporary mainstream cinema, ‘puzzle film’ has been resurrected as a distinct category of narrative in several film publications (Panek 2006; Bordwell 2006; Klinger 2006; Mittell 2006), after which a new use of the term received full acknowledgement in Buckland’s anthologies (2009a; 2014a). While for Holland, the heady intellectual and aesthetic contexts of ‘puzzling films’ primarily offered a vehicle for the expression of complex *emotional*, philosophical and psychological contemplations – in short, issues in cinematic modernism (Kovács 2007) – today’s narrative complexification seems to aim at eliciting *cognitive* puzzles, primarily for the puzzle’s sake.

According to Buckland, the term ‘puzzle film’ should be used to distinguish contemporary complex films as a novel category of popular film storytelling. For him, the ‘puzzle plot’ represents a distinct ‘third type of plot that comes after [the simple and] the complex plot’ (Buckland 2009b: 3). Puzzle films, he argues, are ‘intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but entangled’ (ibid.: 3). We find this definition of the puzzle plot rather general. It lacks a precise characterisation, apart from adjectives

<sup>7</sup> ‘The first *Preisrätsel*film, *Das Verschleierte Bild von Groß-Kleindorf* ([Joe May] 1913), dealt with a female statue that aroused many men, but when the statue was covered up after some incidents it suddenly disappeared. The film stopped there and asked the audience the question, ‘who might have stolen the statue?’ The moviegoer had to guess the outcome. Answers could be sent to the *Berliner Tageblatt* and other local newspapers, and for each film there was prize money of 8,500 Marks. The following week the solution could be seen in the cinemas’ (Canjels 2011: 27).

<sup>8</sup> The short-lived (between 1925 and 1927) German genre of *Rebus-Film*, or, as an advertisement in the period journal *Der Kinematograph* named it, the ‘crossword puzzle film’ is often considered to be a precursor of today’s interactive screen media: ‘upon buying their tickets, spectators received puzzle cards which they filled out based on visual clues screened before the feature film and could check against the “solutions” segment shown a week later’ (Cowan 2010: 197).

like ‘*complex*’, ‘*perplexing*’, ‘*interwoven*’ or ‘*entangled*’, while the spectrum of case studies also seems to remain rather broad. Hence, in our view, the argument for the specificity of these films (whether formally, experientially or film-historically) should require further clarification. Both Cornelia Klecker and Matthew Campora have similarly questioned this definition, and specifically the usefulness of such an all-encompassing classification. While for Klecker ‘*puzzle film* does little more than replace the vague concept of complex storytelling’ (Klecker 2013: 128), Campora notices that ‘gaps in the conceptual work as well as a lack of specificity in some of the analysis . . . has led to a profusion of labels and categories’ (Campora 2014: 5). Already in the introduction to the first anthology, Buckland acknowledges the looseness of the puzzle film label, stating that the term’s “‘unity” is of course outweighed by the diversity of each film’ (Buckland 2009b: 6). Later, in his 2014 *Introduction*, Buckland further nuances the term: referring to Anjan Chakravartty’s classification theory, he suggests a ‘polythetic definition’, a definition based on the “‘possession of a clustered subset of some set of properties, no one of which is necessary but which together are sufficiently many” (Chakravartty 2007, 158)’ (Buckland 2014b: 13).

Yet another question remains: whether such a lenient classification is able to maintain the claim that puzzle plot extends ‘far beyond’ the Aristotelian traditional complexity concept (Buckland 2009b: 2). While *simple plots* – by maintaining seamless chronology, straightforward action-reaction-based causality, character integrity, and tight narrative continuity and coherency – are ‘excessively obvious’ (Elsaesser 2009: 37), *complex plots*, according to the Aristotelian tradition, are

simple plots with the additional qualities of ‘reversal’ and ‘recognition’ . . . Reversal and recognition introduce a new line of causality into the plot: in addition to the actions and events motivated and caused by characters, there’s the plot’s additional line of causality that exists over and above the characters. Reversal and recognition are not obviously carried out by characters; they are imposed on the characters and radically alter their destiny. The addition of a second line of causality that introduces reversal and recognition is what, for Aristotle, makes the complex plot complex. (Buckland 2009b: 2)

Buckland’s argument for the novelty of the puzzle plot has been disputed by David Bordwell. Downplaying contemporary narrative intricacies as ‘part of business as usual’, Bordwell sees puzzle films’ complications as remaining within the Aristotelian complex paradigm (2006: 73). Moreover, Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have the impression that most puzzle films like ‘*Inception* might be complicated rather than complex’ (2013: 53). In their view, many ‘puzzle plots’ are kept within the classical confines by a *narrative coherency*,

maintaining a balanced representation by countering complexity's cognitive challenges with an adherence to classical norms and unity. Indeed, many of the film narratives that are currently being filed under the header of 'complex' seem to remain fairly classical. As we will examine more closely in the next chapter, most of these films embed their complicating techniques in a highly classical structure, or, in other cases, ultimately integrate their interwoven paths, resolve their gaps or offer solutions for the challenges they pose. In so doing, such films maintain most of the core principles of classical film storytelling, albeit in an intensified manner (see Kiss 2013: 247). Once more, Buckland argues to the contrary, claiming that 'the complexity of puzzle films far exceeds Aristotle's meaning of complex plot' (Buckland 2009b: 1). In Elsaesser's words, '[w]hat once was "excessively obvious" must now be "excessively enigmatic"' (Elsaesser 2009: 37). Yet one may wonder whether this applies to all the films filed under the denominator 'puzzle films'. After all, what does 'excessively enigmatic' mean, for instance, in Kar-wai Wong's 2000 *Fa yeung nin wa* (*In the Mood for Love*) or in Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*? It seems to us that Buckland's seminal anthologies group together variously complex movies that do not only use a wide variety of different storytelling techniques, but which can also be said to provide significantly dissimilar experiences. One can easily argue that films such as Lynch's *Lost Highway*, Ye Lou's *Suzhou he* (*Suzhou River*) (2000), Stephen Daldry's *The Hours* (2002), Chan-wook Park's *Oldboy* or Kar-wai Wong's *2046* (2004) – to name just a few of the discussed titles – pose completely different cognitive (and hermeneutic) challenges. Our view, which leans towards Bordwell's standpoint, is that the complexity that Buckland claims to his puzzle film definition seems to be too permissive; the excess of complexity that should characterise and define the specificity of 'puzzle plot' is not always present in the films discussed. For example, against their own claim that contemporary puzzle plots should be distinguished from the Aristotelian notion of complexity, Buckland's anthologies incorporate some fairly common and rather Aristotelian reversal and recognition-based cases – see, for example, Eleftheria Thanouli on *Oldboy* (Thanouli 2009b) or Daniel Barratt on *The Sixth Sense* (Barratt 2009). These films show little to no baffling or pervasive story complexity, especially when compared to David Lynch's or Charlie Kaufman's significantly more 'puzzling' films. As we will argue in the following chapter, our understanding of a film being a complex puzzle is stricter and sharper than that of Buckland's heterogeneous group. Moreover, we also mark out different gradations of complexity within the 'complex' or 'puzzle film' category, which will lead us to our discussion of the subset that we will call 'impossible puzzle films'. It is by taking a narrower definition of 'complexity' that we aim to ensure that the term remains analytically meaningful in relation to film narratives.

At this point we would like to make clear that given the particular interest and analytical angle of this book, we will refrain from partaking in the more general discussion about the usefulness of distinguishing between labels like *classical* (Bordwell et al. 1985), *post-classical* (Wyatt 1994; Thanouli 2006, 2009a) or even *post-post-classical cinema* (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002). In this book, we will not aim to tie – at least not in terms of their definitions – already precarious terms like *simple*, *complex* or *puzzle* narratives to these highly debated categories of different *classical narrative modes*. While many would see the contemporary trend of complex films as part of – and actually an argument for asserting – (post-)post-classical developments, one could also take Bordwell’s moderate position, and see today’s formal-structural complexification as *narrative variations* on classical principles, or as part of cinema’s more general ‘stylistic intensification’ (Bordwell 2002b).<sup>9</sup> According to this cautious view, many of the variously complex films’ *formal-narrative intensifications* do *not* reject classical storytelling aims and standards, but offer playful or challenging variations on them. We will in fact argue that most contemporary complex narratives are in some ways dependent on principles and conventions of classical film narration. As we will later see (particularly in Chapter 5), even the most confusingly complex films often still rely on classical narrative elements to mobilise familiar viewing routines and retain immersion and engagement.<sup>10</sup>

All in all, we may agree that formal-narrative complexification – as a trend or tendency, rather than as an altogether new narrative mode – might not amount to a sea change that washes away deeply cemented modes of classical filmmaking and film viewing. However, we are also confident in registering that the palpable trend causes more than a tiny ripple, and, in many cases, can be said to encompass significant deviations from traditional forms of classical narrative film viewing. This is certainly the case for the specific subset of complex movies on which this book is focusing – what we have called

<sup>9</sup> In his seminal paper Bordwell writes about the visual style that characterises mainstream cinema at the turn of the millennium. He defines intensified continuity as a new style within the mainstream that amounts to an intensification of existing techniques: ‘Intensified continuity is traditional continuity amped up, raised to a higher pitch of emphasis’ (Bordwell 2002b: 16). The list of features includes the more rapid editing, the bipolar extremes of lens lengths, the more close-ups in dialogue scenes and the free-ranging camera movement.

<sup>10</sup> Be aware that the disagreement between the views of Bordwell and Elsaesser and Buckland is only of a gradual kind: what for Bordwell is a mere intensification of the ever-prevailing classical values (Bordwell 2002b) is for Elsaesser and Buckland something that already goes beyond the classical paradigm: ‘the post-classical is not the non-classical or the anti-classical, but the excessively classical, the “classical-plus”’ (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002: 39).

the ‘impossible puzzle films’ – and for these films’ subversive approach to mainstream narration, which seriously challenges classical norms, yet without overthrowing them altogether.

In sum, simple, complex, puzzle or impossible puzzle films can be (and often are) studied and classified by the degree to which they complicate the relationship between their stories and storytelling modes, or through careful narrative and stylistic analyses that can lead to arguments for their interrelation in terms of classical and (post-)post-classical modes of representation. However, in this book, rather than focusing on such formal typologies, we will only reconceptualise them, aiming to primarily address variously complex films in terms of fundamental differences in the *viewing experiences* they offer. Our particular attention to cinematic ‘cognitive poetics’ will lead us to an alternative classification that will be able to account for the diverse kinds and degrees of complexity across various films. Such a cognitive approach will also allow us to identify a specific set of highly complex popular films that have so far remained untheorised, which we will call ‘impossible puzzle films’. In the next chapter we embark on this endeavour, introducing the cognitive approach as an alternative and productive method for explaining the challenges and pleasures that complex films pose in the viewing experience.