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Kiss, Miklós and Willemsen, Steven - *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema*, 2016. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, ISBN: 978 1 4744 0672 7 240pp

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My three-year-old daughter loves puzzles. She is very proud every time she manages to complete one and can make the same puzzle repeatedly. Why does she like puzzles? Cognitive scientist Jim Davies seeks the answer in what he calls 'effort justification': the more effort an action costs before it is completed, the more valuable we feel that action is. Humans like making puzzles, Davies says, because they enable us to 'appreciate so many things: the initial incongruity, the pleasure of knowing the solution, the pride of having discovered it themselves, and an increased value of the found solution due to idea effort justification' (198). It is one of the explanations that Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen give in *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema* for the remarkable popularity of films with '[r]adically complex story structures', for instance because their narratives contain large gaps, are told in a confusingly achronologic order, contain a considerable number of stories-within-stories without always being clear about which story certain events belong to, or are ambiguous about the causality of the narrated events. Like my daughter playing with her puzzles, the suave filmgoer can feel a certain pride in having 'solved' such complex narratives.

Kiss and Willemsen are not the first to analyse this phenomenon. Within film studies there has been much attention paid to contemporary complex cinema in recent years and the authors start their book with a balanced summary of the academic debate surrounding this. Their own addition to this debate is original, especially theoretically. They propose to approach complex cinema from a double perspective, amalgamating insights from narratology and cognitive science into a helpful theoretical framework. This framework comes, as the authors point out, with several advantages. Firstly, the narratological perspective allows them to conceive as complex cinema as first and foremost a corpus of *narratively* complex films. Thus, the rather fuzzy term 'complex cinema becomes more clear than it is in others' use of the term 'complex cinema' – a complex film is a film in which narrative coherence is deliberately obfuscated. When dealing with films such as *Inception* or *Memento*, the viewer truly has to 'puzzle' – viz. compile a narrative that is only offered in pieces, in order to come to a coherent story.

The authors then proceed to complement this formal definition of complex cinema with a definition that lies in the viewing experience of such films. For this, they turn to cognitive science and argue that puzzle films 'hinder viewers' narrative sense-making' throughout the entire duration of the film (52). If humans have, as cognitive scientists argue, an inherent 'puzzle instinct', an urge to make sense of what they encounter, then puzzle films trigger this instinct, as it were, by hindering sense

making. Thus, cognitive science allows Kiss and Willemssen to conceive of narrative complexity as first and foremost a *viewing effect*. As so often when the findings of cognitive science are made operational in cultural studies, the authors perform a tightrope act: on the one hand, they locate narrative complexity in the formal aspects of the plots of puzzle films, while on the other hand, by locating this complexity in the viewing experience, they open the possibility that any narrative form may be experienced as complex as long as the viewer is sufficiently unacquainted with it. Whether, for instance, the *Arabian Nights* is read as a complex narrative will depend a lot on the extent to which its reader has experience with its specific storytelling modes. The authors acknowledge this, but point out that there are still forms of storytelling that deliberately hinder sense making by radically subverting current storytelling traditions – and it is films that do this that they define as puzzle films.

The authors go on to differentiate between those puzzle films that ‘ultimately [...] offer (or at least allow the viewer to infer satisfying resolutions to their temporarily ‘puzzling’ scenarios’) and those that don’t’ (52). The latter cause what the authors, relying on the psychological notion of ‘cognitive dissonance’, label ‘cognitions in dissonance’ – ‘elements of sense making that are contradictory, conflicting or form a paradox’ (70). These are the impossible puzzle films of the book’s title. The authors seem to position these at the far end of a scale that has as its other extreme, what they call ‘simple narratives’. While simple narratives merely establish narrative coherence in an act of straightforward, chronological and causal storytelling, the storytelling in complex narratives is more compelling because it contains the previously mentioned cognitive challenges. When this is the case pervasively throughout a film, this film may be called a puzzle film. When this is done in such an extreme manner that narrative coherence is no longer a possibility – as in films like *Donnie Darko*, *Mulholland Drive* or *Triangle* – we can speak of impossible puzzle films. In the fundamentally unstable ontologies established in these films, one person can be two (*Mulholland Drive*), something that happened later can be the cause of something that happened earlier (*Triangle*) and something that happened can have not happened at the same time (*Donnie Darko*).

This notion of a scale on which these types can be placed, however, is somewhat problematic. Equally problematic is the argument that complex narratives are a subgenre of coherent narrative, of which puzzle narratives are then a subgenre, of which impossible puzzle narratives are again a subgenre. After all, while complexity certainly comes in shades – something can be differently complex – possibility does not: something is either possible or not. So, while simple narratives, complex narratives and puzzle narratives all, in the end, belong to the Aristotelean narrative tradition, confined by the condition of narrative coherence, impossible films do not (something the authors themselves acknowledge). And if Aristotelean, or classical, narrative is the main overarching genre here, then impossible puzzle films lie outside of it and can therefore not be a subgenre of the other genres within it. Or, in the case of a scale: impossible puzzle films arguably do not lie at the other end of a scale that has simple narrative at one end – they rather form a fundamental breach with that scale. This objection may place too much focus on the narratological dimension of Kiss and Willemssen’s argument, as it mainly concerns the formal aspects of these films. From a cognitive perspective, the case for impossible puzzle films as a subgenre of puzzle films in general, seems stronger. Further, if we were to divide genres according to delineation, calling impossible puzzle films a subgenre of puzzle films seems obvious, as the former may be seen as pushing certain aspects of the latter to the extreme.

After identifying and defining the impossible puzzle film, the authors discuss cognitive operations and interpretative strategies that viewers may employ *vis à vis* the baffling incoherent viewing experience offered by it. One strategy may entail attempting to solve the puzzle anyway and reaching a definitive and naturalizing interpretation of the film so that it no longer offers – at least not in the viewing experience – an impossible puzzle. Another strategy could result in the opposite of this: what narratologist Jan Alber has called the ‘the zen way of reading’ (117), in which the viewer accepts the dissonance. In the first instance, viewers may succeed in beating the narrative into shape, at least for themselves – though others may disagree. It is exactly the investment of reaching a conclusion and then arguing for it among other viewers that make these films such a rich experience for audiences, expressing itself in so-called ‘forensic fandom’. Or they may interpret the film as meaningful on a higher level, it’s impossible film mimicking the fundamental impossibility of life itself. In the second instance, viewers may prefer ‘poetic and aesthetic

readings' where the incoherence of the 'told' foregrounds the 'telling', or end up acknowledging 'that switching between interpretations – rather than settling on one exclusively assigned meaning – can be a rewarding mode of reception too' (150). The latter interpretative strategy seems especially fitting for the impossible puzzle film because, as the authors argue, what sets impossible puzzle films apart from Art Cinema (for which many of the above statements could also be made), is the extent to which they intend to absorb viewers in the narrative. This is the paradox of the impossible puzzle film: its narrative is fundamentally incoherent, but it is still told in such a way as to 'maintain viewers' interest, immersion and willingness to engage with [its] extensive complexity' (142).

The book ends with a fascinating chapter in which the authors attempt to solve the apparent paradox of impossible puzzle films: 'Why would anyone be interested in confusing films or potentially unsolvable puzzles?' They offer several possible answers to that question, and argue for more research in that direction as this could teach us something about the previously mentioned 'puzzle instinct' that seems such an important human drive. In many ways, this last chapter reads as a research guide and as such, it has implications beyond the field of cinematic studies. The authors have taken theoretical insights from narratology, mostly developed in relation to narrative literary fiction, enriched these with a cognitive perspective and further developed it for this specific research topic. But what they have thus crafted, may very well be useful for the study of incoherent narrative forms in other media too – including literature, where the debate around unnatural narrative that has been going on for about fifteen years could certainly profit from the clarity with which Kiss and Willemsen have defined impossible puzzle narratives.

So, what is it that makes such narratives attractive? Imagine a puzzle that is never finished. Not because pieces are missing, or because they do not fit, but because every time you have placed all of them in what you think is the right place, you either realise there are more pieces or that you could have placed those pieces differently in a way that would also make sense. And off you go again, piecing them together differently, reaching once more a fleeting moment of satisfaction when you think that this time... Only to realise that what you have in front of you is as inconclusive as your earlier solution. Frustrating? Maybe. It would certainly irritate my daughter, who has many virtues, but patience is not one of them – and who hasn't learned yet that the solving can be as pleasurable, maybe more so, than the solution.

About the reviewer

Dr. Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar works for the Learning and Innovation Centre of Avans University of Applied Sciences. His research focuses on applied narratology and aims to use insights from the academic study of narrative to analyse the role of storytelling and life writing in society and to develop narrative methods for improving professional storytelling practices. His recent publications on this topic include *Not Ever Absent. Storytelling in Arts, Culture and Identity Formation* (co-edited with Nicole K. Miller, 2015) and *Stories of Becoming: The Use of Storytelling in Education, Counselling and Research* (co-edited with Lynn Wood, 2017).

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