



MAINSTREAM COMPLEXITY. NOLAN'S *INCEPTION* AS A CASE FOR (AMATEUR) NARRATOLOGISTS

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Abstract

At this point in time, popular media practices (mainstream cinema, television, gaming) provide surprisingly complicated multi-layered narrative structures. They urgently call for a closer analysis. The author revisits Genette's theoretical work – in particular his reflections on metalepsis – to examine the narrative experiments now presented to viewers of mainstream cinema. What can we learn from Genette to understand these new forms of narration, their functions and the kind of experiences they create? What do they imply for our theories and theorizing on a broader level? Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) will be used as a case study in order to draw out some of the implications of these new developments – i.e., what Jason Mittell described as the production of films and television series for “amateur narratologists.”

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by moving upwards (or downwards)
through the levels of some hierarchical system,
we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started.¹*

Introduction²

Gérard Genette is renowned for the ingenious and clear methods he developed to aid the study of narrative. In order to demonstrate that structural narratology could deal with highly complex and multi-layered narrative structures in prose, Genette reflected upon Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time (A la recherche du temps perdu)*. This modernist masterpiece remains exemplary of the multifaceted modernist narrative. It stands to reason that if Genette could cope with Proust's intricate temporal structure, then, narratology could deal with simple and difficult structures equally well.³ The application of his method to a manifold narrative structure would prove, moreover, that “nothing is more practical than a good theory,” as this special issue of *Cinéma & Cie* rightly claims. Taking this as my cue, I will revisit Genette's theoretical work on embedded narrative structures and metalepsis, since at this point in time popular media practices (mainstream cinema, television, gaming) also provide surprisingly dense narrative structures that urgently call for a closer analysis. My objective is to examine the somewhat paradoxical combination of *complicated* (and slightly confusing) narrative structures with *mainstream* media practices. What can



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we learn from these new forms of narration, their functions and the kind of (slightly disorienting) experiences they create? What do they imply for our theories and theorizing on a broader level? I will use Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) as a case study in order to draw out some of the implications of these new developments – i.e. the making of television series and films for “amateur narratologists.”⁴

Inception as an embedded narrative structure

Nolan's *Inception* introduces a future world in which, due to scientific advancement, it is possible to enter, affect and influence another person's dream state or subconscious. This is done by a team of well-trained experts who are assigned to invade the subconscious of a powerful tycoon, Mr. Robert Fisher Jr. (Cillian Murphy), to plant an idea in his head (an idea not exactly beneficial to him): namely that he should break up the multi-billion dollar corporation he recently inherited, and sell off its parts. Since the method of “inception” is well-known, at least in the story world of *Inception*, it is necessary to avoid any suspicion on the part of Mr. Fisher himself; therefore, the team decides to create a dream-narrative, to be able to descend into the tycoon's subconsciousness, where they plan to “extract” his old thoughts and “plant” alternative ideas (as in psychoanalysis, to an extent) – but dramatic complications and unexpected obstacles force the experts to extend the number of embedded dream-layers. As Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), the leader of the team of dream extractors, using an appealing paradox, explains to Ariadne (Ellen Page), the new member in their team: “Downwards is the only way forwards.”

Nolan's fiction, built upon the notion of an embedded dream-reality, quite accurately follows the spatial metaphors of psychoanalysis and pictures the human psyche as multi-layered. Nolan suggests that the deeper Fisher dreams, the better the team will be able to descend into the more hidden layers of his psyche, and the closer they will get to the discovery of his deepest and most repressed secrets. In this way, the story Nolan tells in *Inception* touches upon a descent into the (Freudian) subconsciousness (note that Sigmund Freud was also an amateur archaeologist).⁵

In the terms of Genette, the journey into the subconsciousness in *Inception* sets off in the *récit premier*, the primary story in which the other stories are embedded.⁶ It presents the team's laboratory in Paris, where they plan and prepare for the job. They then take the same plane as young Mr. Fisher to Los Angeles, drug him and proceed to make a first descend into a well-constructed dream in which Mr. Fisher is kidnapped and hauled into a white van that gets caught in a chase (embedded level 1); unexpectedly, however, the experts are forced to create a deeper dream level, a dream embedded within that first dream. In this second-level dream, they find themselves in a weird, surrealistic hotel, which could well have been designed by a Willem Willink or a Stanley Kubrick (embedded level 2);⁷ soon after, they are forced yet one level deeper to seek Mr. Fisher's deepest and best-kept secret. This time the action takes place in an isolated fortress situated on snow-covered mountains (embedded level 3). As a team, they are hesitant to descend yet one level deeper, to the ground level referred to as “Limbo” (embedded level 4), as they are well aware that this is the level of the subconsciousness which could trap them indefinitely. Suddenly, though, the team members and Mr. Fisher find themselves back in the *récit premier* and, by the film's conclusion, we see them pass through customs in Los Angeles. In other words, they return smoothly

back to reality (whatever that might mean exactly in a fiction film and more specifically within the multi-layered story world of a film such as *Inception*).

Three ironic touches should not go unmentioned here. First, Cobb returns home at the end of the movie to embrace his children, and Fisher returns to his business, after both having had a personal moment of “catharsis” explicitly mentioned in the film, and which cured them of their fallacies and killed their demons. It could all have happened on a divan, in other words. Second, Ariadne’s “totem,” taken into the dream world to remind her of the existence of reality in the deepest of dreams (as team leader Cobb taught her to do) seems shaped like an Oscar, a tiny one, that is, which adds an ironic touch to *Inception* as a shared dream from which one might wake up with an Oscar in one’s hand. Third, since “reality” inevitably is an ambiguous concept in the world of dreams and fiction films (both represent the very pinnacle of deception and illusion), the end of the movie inevitably raises the question whether it should be understood as a return to reality or merely as a return to the dream level the movie started off from; this immediately provoked a vivid debate on *Inception*’s reality status amongst fans on the internet following its opening weekend in the US.⁸ Behaving like “amateur narratologists,” they quickly focused on the problems created by what Genette would have considered a paradoxical contamination of the embedded levels of the telling and the told.

From the outset *Inception* was marketed and responded to as a puzzle that demanded to be solved by its viewers, who comfortably and confidently found themselves in a labyrinth in which untrained viewers, it was suggested, might easily get lost; moreover, fans noted eagerly the resemblance of the film’s poster to M. C. Escher’s designs (see fig. 1) and, indeed, there is a sequence within the film that seems to be a deliberate reference to Escher’s “infinite staircase” as

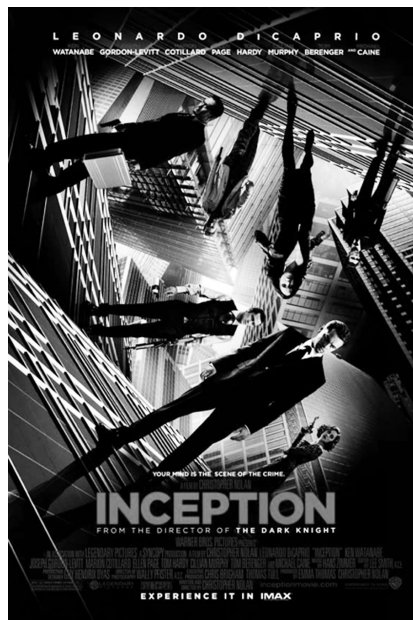


Fig. 1 – Film poster of *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010).



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constructed in his lithograph *Relativity*.⁹ In fact, dream extractor Arthur (played by Joseph Gordon-Levitt) in this sequence directly refers to Escher as he explains to Ariadne, an actual architect, how to construct mentally artificial labyrinth-like structures – which of course may come naturally to an “Ariadne.” The example Arthur shows her is an Escher-like “endless staircase” that traps dreamers in a series of “closed loops,” as Arthur calls them. These loops may endlessly lead the dreamers up and down, to find themselves unexpectedly right back where they started from.

Given the story of *Inception*, it is full of visually spectacular “paradoxical architecture,” as Arthur labels it, and inverted spaces which are also meant to deceive the dreamers. Unsurprisingly therefore, bloggers were quick to remark on the film’s “*trompe l’œil* quality [which] brings Magritte and M. C. Escher to mind.”¹⁰ One fan remarks that “M. C. Escher and Christopher Nolan have one thing in common. They both love never-ending staircases.”¹¹ Critics and fans alike came to the conclusion that two features of the film stand out: the film’s astonishing visuals and its baffling paradoxes. As Peter Travers wrote in *Rolling Stone*: “The visuals, shot by the gifted Wally Pfister [...], are astounding [...] Just as impressive is the way Nolan stays true to the rules of his own brain-teasing game.”¹² But Travers, too, is comfortable with *Inception*’s complexity, because “anyone who’s ever been lost in the layers of a *video game* will have no trouble rising to Nolan’s invigorating challenge to dig out.”¹³ In other words, a gamer is not that easily confused or disturbed by what narratologists – following Genette – may nevertheless quite accurately describe as a highly complicated, multi-layered narrative structure, for the simple fact that he or she is acquainted with this type of structure. Indeed, *Inception* is also constructed as a game presented to viewers by a director who quickly changes spaces, frames and levels, and obviously expects his viewers to catch up with him without making it too easy for them, since *that* would be an insult to a gamer. And, as one blogger wrote: “The sheer outlandishness of the premise may open it up to some narrative nitpicking [...] – and attentive viewers will have a grand time ‘aha!’-ing at certain points.”¹⁴ In the last paragraph I will focus on the “ludic” pleasures to be found in complex narration; but first I will analyse the complex *metaleptic* structure Nolan invented for his viewers as he plays with the mind-scrambling potential of the *metaleptic* logic of dreams within dreams as the basic scheme of *Inception*. I will argue that Nolan and his team visualise and dramatise the narrative feature almost on a textbook level, following Genette (who coined the term), McHale, Hofstadter, Escher, and others quite closely by establishing this futuristic world of embedded dreams.¹⁵

Genette on metalepsis

Genette describes metalepsis as a “*paradoxical* contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told.”¹⁶ Coined and conceptualised as part of his narrative theory, metalepsis is delineated by him as an “intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse.”¹⁷ For a proper understanding of the phenomenon it is indeed crucial to understand metalepsis as an *intrusion* (however minimal, as in the work of Balzac, or prominent, as in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*) that disrupts the clear distinction between narrative levels. As such, metalepsis not only foregrounds the presence of narrative levels or layers, but also marks acutely a “deliberate transgres-



sion of the threshold of embedding.”¹⁸ Elsewhere Genette describes metalepsis as touching upon that “*sacred frontier* between two worlds, the world in which one tells, and the world of which one tells.”¹⁹ Obviously it has been of cardinal importance for Genette’s thinking that this type of confusion and contamination of narrative levels goes against the laws of fiction. In 2004 Genette returned to the topic of metalepsis in order to characterise it as “a deviant referential operation, a violation of semantic thresholds of representation that involves the beholder in an *ontological* transgression of universes.”²⁰

Since the advent of structuralism, the general principles of Genette’s narratology have been scrutinised by scholars all over the world, first in the field of literature, then in film studies (David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson) and television studies (Jason Mittell), and more recently also in the realm of gaming (Marie-Laure Ryan). Only more recently, however, have more profound interventions been made on the topic of metalepsis, and mostly by scholars in the field of literature, such as Marie-Laure Ryan, John Pier, Monika Fludernik, David Herman, and Brian McHale.²¹ In his excellent overview, John Pier commented that Genette’s reflections on metalepsis are in fact “one of the least debated of his theoretical innovations for many years.”²² Interestingly, Genette’s 2004 reflections on metalepsis as a deviant referential operation seem to indicate a shift in interest from a predominantly rhetorical to an ontological approach to metalepsis. In other words, his late exploration of metalepsis as a problem in the field of representation follows on from a series of analyses, such as those of Brian McHale, which centre on complex and ambiguous postmodern narratives and the ways in which the ontological status of the read or seen may be thrown into crisis.²³

Over time it has become clear that, on the one hand, metalepsis may easily be experienced as merely “humoristic,”²⁴ as the 19th century novels of Balzac demonstrate. Balzac creates an auctorial narrator who, through his intervention in the story, precipitates a momentary suspension of the diegetic setting. On the other hand, though, metalepsis may cut deeper into the flesh of the narrative: as the postmodern novel has shown, metalepsis may indeed destabilise the readers more profoundly, throwing their belief in a clear ontological divide, between textual and real, into crisis. The question to what degree television created an experience of a contamination of textual and real, which became such an intrinsic and definitive attribute of the postmodern, seems utterly relevant for contemporary television studies. Did television help to put the notion of the “real” *sous rature*? One could argue so from the mere fact that viewers had started to watch a lot of television in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁵

A more urgent question within the context of the article is, perhaps, whether metalepsis in the fields of cinema, television and gaming, is not of itself a slightly different and potentially more disturbing matter altogether than metalepsis in literature. One might argue that this is the case, since viewers (or gamers) are confronted with a contamination of levels (of representation) that is logically and ontologically impossible – but, paradoxically, is nevertheless *made visible*, and almost tangible to them. Usually it is very hard not to believe in what one sees.²⁶ In other words, viewers need to be reminded that a metaleptic structure in the cinema, as the one Nolan presents, is indeed an overwhelming visual representation on a wide screen not of a story-world reality but of a *logical problem*. The logical problem can perhaps best be explained by pointing to Escher’s drawings, as Nolan does in *Inception*: to clarify that Escher conveys visually (as Nolan himself does) the *logically inconsistent* passage between ontologically separate domains.



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The experience created by this type of metaleptic structure is basically disorientation and confusion. As Genette pointed out in 2004, viewers as well as readers may easily experience the contamination of (narrative) levels as an ontological problem, more specifically as a paradoxical contamination of separate ontological levels.²⁷ Note that McHale in response to some rather radical experiments with metalepsis in postmodern novels did indeed “recast Genette’s narrative levels in terms of ontological levels,” as John Pier keenly observed, because “a metalepsis produced by violation of levels raises ontological considerations resulting from recursive embedding.”²⁸ Further, Genette perfectly understood that these forms of radical metalepsis are more disturbing than minimal forms of metalepsis as found in the novels of Balzac.²⁹ Interestingly – and this may not come as a huge surprise to readers of this article by now – McHale, too, identifies metalepsis with the “Strange Loop,” a phenomenon that occurs “whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started,” as McHale explains in his seminal work on postmodernism, quoting Douglas Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach*.³⁰ Which brings us back to *Inception* and the “closed loops” represented therein.

Downward is the only way forward

Closed loops are part of the “paradoxical architecture” in *Inception*. These loops ensure that the dreamers are properly trapped in their dream construction, as Arthur explains to Ariadne. Ariadne, in this and many other scenes, typically functions as a so-called (intradiegetic) *narratee*: she is the character who, as part of the story world, is “portrayed as listening, reading, or otherwise receiving a narrative being told by someone else in the world of the story, thus furnishing a paradigm for reader response.”³¹ In other words, Ariadne plays an important role as an interlocutor between the complicated story world and the viewer. Such an intermediary is needed in *Inception*, since each of the four separate embedded dream levels has its own (dream) logic; hence, each level needs some explaining: to set the rules, as in a game, and to make it possible for the viewers to quickly learn the rules and catch up with the game. Ariadne is the obvious candidate to play the role of *narratee* or listener: she is the newcomer in the story world (as is the viewer). In fact, Cobb himself after having proved to him that she has a quick mind appoints her. From the start to the end, she is put to the test and shows a quick understanding of all occurring problems and sudden changes of level, logic and rules. In a way, *Inception* tells a familiar type of story, with a familiar theme of problem solving and being put to the test, as in folk tales and age-old stories involving some sort of quest. However, *Inception* tells the story in a new way, that is to say, in such a manner that a certain ludic pleasure is gained from it. The baffling metaleptic structure plays a crucial role in this. Note, moreover, that the explanations given to Ariadne to clarify the ins and outs of the internal logic of each level (i.e., problems of time, gravity, and persons being merely “projections”) in themselves contribute to the mind-boggling contaminations of narrative levels as these explanations by the character-narrators (Cobb, Arthur) to the narratee (Ariadne) transgress their roles as characters in the story-world’s embedded levels. One of the most striking examples is Cobb’s explanation of the “endlessly” extended duration of time, which is characteristic for dreams within dreams within dreams, as Cobb calmly explains to Ariadne amidst a cli-



mactic action sequence. An obvious meta-reflection, like Cobb's, further adds to the already impressive confusion of diegetic levels created by Nolan's "dream logic:" because Cobb's elaborate reflection on what is "really" happening when one dreams creates a contamination of the sort Balzac created when he introduced a narrator *who delays and stops the story for a moment* to insert an explanation and a comment. The crucial difference with Balzac, however, is that the "small window that allows a quick glance across levels" is certainly not closed by Nolan "after a few sentences," as in a Balzac story, to reaffirm "the existence of the boundaries."³² Quite the contrary, Nolan's *Inception* may be said to celebrate the "deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding."³³ By creating this "paradoxical contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told,"³⁴ the author potentially creates a major disruption in the viewer's or reader's orientation on the story world, as Genette explained once again in 2004.³⁵ Nolan may be said to constantly and deliberately transgress the "sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, and the world of which one tells."³⁶ Thus Nolan initially disorients his viewers, and then raises all sorts of questions on the ontological status of (the different levels of reality in) his film. As we have already seen, critics and fans have eagerly responded to this. Interestingly, Cobb also addresses several of these questions in the film in an almost textbook-like way. See for instance his clarifications to Ariadne on how he and his wife both lost track of reality and risked ending up in a constant state of creative disbelief, constantly questioning the real status of reality – as Cobb's wife ends up doing, caught as she is in a (postmodernist) "limbo." In a way, Cobb could be said to offer very abbreviated versions of the illusive reflections on the ontological status of fiction and reality by Gérard Genette, Brian McHale and others, referred to above. In other words, it seems fair to state that Nolan is revering (and referencing) some of the theorists discussed here – and not only the narratologists, but also Escher and Hofstadter. Moreover, Nolan's character-narrators on several occasions sound like (amateur) narratologists – to which his fans have responded accordingly, that is to say, with great sophistication and dedication. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they are tempted to ask the same sort of question narratologists would ask. This indeed seems to indicate that complex narration and narratology have gone mainstream. The question is: what created these "amateur narratologists" in the world of the cinema? And what role did television play in this?

Television, narrative complexity and the notion of "amateur narratologists"

In his seminal article "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," published in *The Velvet Light Trap* in 2006,³⁷ Jason Mittell convincingly argued that narrative complexity has become a given in American television from the 1990s onwards. Moreover, he argued that in addition these series have created a new mode of *active* and *reflexive* viewer engagement. The explanation is that "narratively complex programs," which are "constructed without fear for temporary confusion for viewers,"³⁸ easily trigger a sense of "temporary disorientation and confusion" in the viewers, but they also provoke, invite and allow the "viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement" for these very reasons. In the end, these complex programs turn viewers into *amateur narratologists*, as Jason Mittell claims.³⁹ Regular viewers of complex series are typically "both drawn into a compelling diegesis



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[...] and focused on the discursive processes of storytelling” needed to achieve the series’ “complexity and mystery.” It is in this way that “these programs convert many viewers to *amateur narratologists*.” They become so trained in recognising narrative techniques and understanding narrative processes, because “[n]arratively complex programming invites audiences to engage actively at the level of form.”⁴⁰

What we may learn from this is that viewers can develop an impressive amount of narrative skills over the years through watching narratively complex television. This in itself helps to explain that complexity and popularity are no longer opposite qualities in the world of television and cinema. Complex television programs can indeed be quite popular with a mass audience today, as Mittell has shown.⁴¹ It may be obvious that the cinema has also profited from the narrative skills viewers acquired over the years by mainly watching (narratively-complex) television programs, and often for many hours a week. Note that most viewers spend many more hours viewing television than they do viewing films at the cinema; hence the training effects of television tend to be more profound and more obvious. It may also be clear that these long-lasting effects affect cinema, as it is by the effects of gaming. Many movies from the 1990s onwards (e.g., *The Sixth Sense*, M. Night Shyamalan, 1999; *Pulp Fiction*, Quentin Tarantino, 1994; *Memento*, Christopher Nolan, 2000; *The Usual Suspects*, Bryan Singer, 1995; *Adaptation*, Spike Jonze, 2002; *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Michel Gondry, 2004) have “embraced a *game aesthetic*, inviting audiences to play along with the creators to crack the interpretive codes to make sense of their complex narrative strategies,” as Mittell wrote.⁴²

Inception is also a complex, mainstream movie that is made for the cinema, but cleverly profits from the (narrative) skills viewers acquired by watching television and playing games. Moreover, *Inception*, as the aforementioned films, warrants repetitive viewing and clearly does not fear to disorient and confuse its (mostly well-trained) viewers. Essentially, the film invites them to play along, offering quite a bit of ludic pleasure along the way, as the fan sites have testified.⁴³ That is to say that the metaleptic structure’s main function in *Inception* is a *ludic* and not merely a rhetorical one.

Conclusion

Nolan’s fictional logic of permeability of levels obviously goes against our everyday logic and may therefore well (cognitively) disorient viewers due to what Genette described as the disruption of the clear distinction between narrative levels. However, any sense of cognitive destabilization – which some *untrained* viewers could find unpleasant – seems to be compensated for in advance by all sorts of pleasures to be gained from the film, even when one finds oneself lost within the narrative.⁴⁴ *Inception*, one may argue, compensates for possible losses in one area with spectacular action, astounding visuals and wild leaps of the imagination (see for example the spectacular landscapes, the computer-generated visuals of architectural miracles, or the surrealist images of floating bodies neatly tied together by Arthur to form a human sausage that even Dali might have liked). Still, *Inception* provides a form of (mainstream) complexity, that is accessible for an average viewer (trained in the sense of Mittell), and that for gamers is readily comprehensible, as fan sites testify to. Note, moreover, that the rise in complexity of narrative structures in



the cinema from the early 1990s onwards closely relates to the “cognitive work-outs”⁴⁵ television provided to its viewers on a daily basis and for several hours a day in the same period. It is one of the cultural paradoxes that has surprised scholars in the last two decades: namely that a popular mass medium developed and invented complicated narrative structures as part of its sequel structure.⁴⁶ Many viewers could obviously also enjoy *Inception* without difficulty, as the box office records have testified. My case study may have made it clear once again that though “metalepsis in its narrative form was originally studied in verbal narratives, *it is not a media-specific phenomenon*.”⁴⁷ In cinema and in video games in particular, metalepsis may now surface as a popular yet complex narrative structure which provides well-trained viewers and gamers with a considerable amount of (ludic) pleasure, as their quick understanding of rapidly changing rules and levels are tested in the process.⁴⁸ Indeed, it may be concluded that in an era of constant cross-mediation, Genette’s work on metalepsis, though the least debated of his theoretical innovations for so long, has now become one of the most interesting and pertinent.

- 1 Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, Basic Books, New York 1979, p. 10.
- 2 Thinking of *Inception* in terms of mainstream complexity started off with a discussion with my colleagues Miklós Kiss and Anna Backman Rogers and a workshop presentation at the University of Groningen in 2010. We addressed a variety of questions over time, some of which I will address here; some will find their way in publications by Miklós Kiss and Anna Backman Rogers which are forthcoming. I am most grateful to them for our inspiring discussions and the very many generous ways in which they have contributed to this article.
- 3 See for Genette’s reflections on Proust in particular his *Discours du récit*, in Id., *Figures III*, Seuil, Paris 1972 (eng. ed. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1980). As to narratology in relation to narrative complexity: Vladimir Propp’s seminal work on folktales, *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (University of Texas Press, Austin 1968), had been criticised due to the fact that it was only functional for simple narrative structures.
- 4 For an explanation of the terms “narrative complexity” and “amateur narratologists,” which I will further explain at the end of this article, see Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” in *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 58, Fall 2006, pp. 29-40.
- 5 Note that the prefix *sub* in the word *subconsciousness* in itself already expresses the quality of being repressed by and hidden under, or covered by, something *on top of it*; the German prefix, however, is *un* (not *unter*), as in the German word *Unbewusste*, from which *subconsciousness* offers a translation. The word merely indicates what is *not* conscious or *unbewusst*.
- 6 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, cit., pp. 228-229.
- 7 Willem Willink is a Dutch surrealist painter. An association with film director Stanley Kubrick is created here through the horrifying hotel he had designed for *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980).
- 8 See Matt Sinopoli, Josh Tyler, “An Illustrated Guide to the 5 Levels of *Inception*,” 2010, <http://www.cinemablend.com/new/An-Illustrated-Guide-To-The-5-Levels-Of-Inception-19643.html>, last visit 12 December 2011. Note that this fan site visualizes *five* levels as it does not discriminate between the *récit premier* and the embedded dream levels, but takes the framing story located in Paris and the plane journey to Los Angeles as a dream level too. I thank Miklós Kiss for pointing out these memorable and very early fan comments to me.
- 9 See also the Picture Gallery of the Official M.C. Escher Website: *Relativity* by M. C. Escher Lithograph, 1953. <http://www.mcescher.com/>, last visit 12 December 2011.



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- 10 See Justin Chang in *Variety* Film Reviews, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117943114?refcatid=31>, 5 July 2010, last visit 12 December 2011.
- 11 See Fernando Alfonso III, "Nolan Channels Escher in *Inception*," <http://handshakemag.com/nolan-channels-escher-in-inception/>, 21 July 2010, last visit 12 December 2011.
- 12 See Peter Travers in *Rolling Stones* Reviews, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/inception-20100712>, 12 July 2010, last visit 12 December 2011.
- 13 *Ibidem* (my italics).
- 14 See Justin Chang in *Variety* Film Reviews, cit.
- 15 Note that I will not deal with questions of the relation between *Inception* and Nolan's earlier movies – though obviously there are close connections; on this, see Miklós Kiss (forthcoming).
- 16 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, cit., pp. 234-235 (my italics).
- 17 *Ibidem*.
- 18 Gérard Genette, *Nouveau discours du récit*, Seuil, Paris 1983 (eng. ed. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1988, p. 88).
- 19 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, cit., p. 236 (my italics).
- 20 John Pier, *Metalepsis*, in Peter Hühn et al. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Hamburg University Press, Hamburg 2010, <http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Metalepsis>, last visit 29 November 2011 (my italics). He summarises Genette's *Métalepse. De la figure à la fiction*, Seuil, Paris 2004.
- 21 For an overview of the most recent and relevant publications, see the overview by John Pier, *Metalepsis*, cit.
- 22 *Ibidem*. Note that right before Genette's 2004 publication there was a conference on the topic of metalepsis in France, "La Métalepse, aujourd'hui," Paris, 29-30 November 2002; see Monika Fludernik, "Scene Shift, Metalepsis, and the Metaleptic mode," in *Style*, no. 37, Winter 2003, pp. 382-400. At the end of this article she refers to "a recent conference on metalepsis in Paris [which] has demonstrated [that] the topic has as yet hardly been exhausted. *Allons, enfants de la narratologie, le jour de la métalepse est arrivé.*" See also the conference proceedings: John Pier, Jean-Marie Schaeffer (eds.), *Métalepses. Entorses au pacte de la représentation*, EHESS, Paris 2005.
- 23 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Methuen, London 1987, p. 27. Postmodernist fiction, as McHale stresses here, "foregrounds ontological issues of text and world." See also McHale's substantial contributions to the debate on postmodernism from the late 1980s onwards. His best-known books, on the shift of modernism into postmodernism are his seminal *Postmodernist Fiction*, and *Constructing Postmodernism*, Routledge, London-New York 1992. See also his *Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing*, in Douwe Fokkema, Hans Bertens (eds.), *Approaching Postmodernism*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam-Philadelphia 1986, pp. 53-79.
- 24 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, cit., p. 88.
- 25 I cannot develop the argument in full here; for a further reflection on the dynamics between television on the one hand and narrative complexity in the cinema and (postmodern) literature on the other hand, see the last part of this article.
- 26 See Laurent Jullier, *Should I See What I Believe?*, in Annie van den Oever (ed.), *Ostrannenie*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2010, pp. 119-140.
- 27 See Gérard Genette, *Métalepse*, cit.
- 28 See John Pier, *Metalepsis*, cit.
- 29 See Gérard Genette, *Métalepse*, cit. On radical versus minimal forms of metalepsis, see John Pier, *Metalepsis*, cit.
- 30 See Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, cit., p. 10. See Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, cit., p. 119.
- 31 Explaining Genette, David Herman wrote these words in 2006. In full: "Narratologists have discussed this phenomenon under the heading of the intradiegetic narratee, i.e., an interlocutor portrayed as listening, reading, or otherwise receiving a narrative being told by someone else in the world of the story, thus furnishing a paradigm for reader response." See David Herman, "Genette Meets Vygotsky: Narrative



- Embedding and Distributed Intelligence,” in *Language and Literature*, vol. 4, no. 15, 2006, pp. 357-380; see note 16.
- 32 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis 2006, p. 207.
- 33 See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, cit., p. 88.
- 34 John Pier, *Metalepsis*, cit.
- 35 *Ibidem*.
- 36 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, cit., p. 236.
- 37 Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” cit., pp. 29-40.
- 38 *Idem*, p. 38. To his many examples also belong: *Lost*, *Alias*, *Veronica Mars*, *The X-Files*, *Desperate Housewives* and *Twin Peaks*. Mittell argues that viewers watch such programs, “at least in part to try to crack each program’s central enigmas – look at any online fan forum to see evidence of such sleuths at work” (p. 38).
- 39 *Ibidem*.
- 40 *Idem*, pp. 37-38 (my italics).
- 41 *Idem*, p. 38.
- 42 *Ibidem*.
- 43 See the quotes by fans earlier in this article, referred to in notes 8, 10-14.
- 44 For a more extended elaboration on this topic, see the article on *Inception* by Miklós Kiss, arguing that the director does not overstep the natural borders created by our cognitive make-up, nor does he overstep the borders which are carefully created and protected by the industry (Miklós Kiss, forthcoming).
- 45 See Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today’s Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, Riverhead Books, New York 2005, referred to and cited in Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” cit., p. 32.
- 46 For an earlier discussion of the surprisingly interesting relation between television and story-telling, touching upon the topic of the growing complexity of narration and narrative structures, see Kristin Thompson’s famous Mellon Lecture, published under the title *Storytelling in Film and Television*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2003.
- 47 John Pier, *Metalepsis*, cit. (my italics).
- 48 For a reflection on the ludic pleasures of viewing, see Jason Mittell, cited above; see also Marie-Laure Ryan, “Beyond Myth and Metaphor. The Case of Narrative in Digital Media,” in *Poetics Today*, vol. 4, no. 23, Winter 2002, pp. 581-609; also published in *Game Studies*, the international journal of computer game research, vol. 1, no. 1, July 2001, <http://gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/>, last visit 12 December 2011.