We live in a world where nearly everything we do is made possible by infrastructures. Infrastructures are the structures and built constructions that define how we move, travel, communicate, store, dispose of stuff, buy, sell, distribute, arrange, organize, etc. They are so basic in our daily lives that they generally, and paradoxically, operate invisibly on the background of society. It is not until it breaks down that infrastructure comes to us as something meaningful, something to scrutinize and investigate.

In this dissertation, Thijs Willems studies various infrastructure breakdowns in the Dutch railway system, ranging from daily delayed trains to a winter-storm and railroad suicides. Using an ethnographic approach, the dissertation unravels these breakdowns through the eyes of the employees that are involved in their management. Drawing on plenty of detailed empirical data gathered through observations, informal talk, as well as interviews, the dissertation sets out to understand what is at the core of infrastructure breakdowns: their complexity. Two different perspectives on complexity are discerned: one in which complexity shows up as an enemy – as a 'Monster' or as 'Mess' – that must be tamed and managed, and one in which railway employees cope with complexity by embracing it and dealing with it in practice. In several engaging chapters, what turns out as truly disruptive is not the breakdown per se but the ways in which the two perspectives on how to cope with complexity interrelate and are played out.

The dissertation shows that distinctions between infrastructures that either function or are broken down cannot be drawn unproblematically. Rather, it urges us to rethink infrastructure as a process – rather than an object – in which breakdowns and repair work are constitutive of how it functions on a daily basis.