Embodying Conceptual Metaphors in Mainstream Non-linear English Film Narratives
An Analytical Study

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by

Sheetal Madhav Gokhale

Department of Design,
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati
Assam, India 781039

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Abstract

This research is primarily concerned with the ways in which the advent of digital technology influenced the design of a film narrative and brought about innovation in the execution of cinematic storytelling in recent popular English language cinema, especially that of Hollywood. The study shows that not only does the ease of technology lead to new approaches to visual storytelling (viz. non-linearity), but that these novel experiments remain comprehensible to a lay audience by transforming our imagination of the world. Without a linear and teleological understanding of narrative time, imaginative engagement and narrative comprehension must depend upon other kinds of commonalities of language and culture such as embodied cognition and cognitive metaphors. This study sought to show that the newer understanding of the world that non-linear cinema seeks to elicit, is not only based upon embodied cognitive metaphors derived from language in filmic content but is executed at the level of design and form by manipulating the filmic container itself to facilitate an alternative understanding. In this respect, the study is located at the juncture of narrative design, digital humanities, digital media studies, and cognitive film theory.

While I situate the methodology used for the analysis of the film texts within the Conceptual Metaphor Theory framework laid down by CMT scholars in linguistics as well as film, advertisement, and games genres, I also draw generously from the formalist approach of film scholars from the cognitivist traditions to help parse the film texts and find the granularity required for a hybrid approach to this analysis. A comprehensive list of non-linear films was compiled from which high grossing, critically acclaimed and films with mass appeal were chosen. It was noticed while studying the temporal expressions at the level of the film edit that films like *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1998), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *21 Grams* (Alejandro

Iñárritu, 2003), *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016) and *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017) seem to reflect and embody in their narrative structures the overarching thematic metaphors used in their content, making it possible for the viewer to arrive at a double understanding of the story, first by the motifs deployed in the narrative and second by the mode of temporal narration, or the non-linear arrangement of chronology. Using CMT, embodied image schemas, and graphic visualization, this study is able to demonstrate the CONTAINER, SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, FORCE schemas making use of metaphors about time, memory, journey, object and quantity in the narrative expression of the films. In addition to this, the thesis constructs a taxonomy of cinematic transitions that encourage comprehension of story strands in a non-linear representation. This taxonomy is a promising addition to the discourse and offers significant scope for future work in the domain of both linear and non-linear film narratives.

In conjunction with the analysis of film texts, this study suggests a methodology for future researchers to analyse any of the 290-odd films that have been collected in the course of the project and also for filmmakers who may wish to incorporate metaphors in their own storytelling. An essential part of the methodology is rendering the metaphoric representation into a visual manifestation. These visual representations can also aid the viewer's burdened cognitive resources while also possibly assisting in the discovery of previously unknown areas of meaning or previously overlooked connections and patterns. Consequently, this study proposes that conceptual metaphors derived from the theme/content of the film narrative can be used as building blocks for the design of the structure and presentation of non-linear time. The analyses of film texts of the non-linear variety appear to be just a handful of steps away from asking future filmmakers to use specific metaphors in their own films. It is the aspiration of this study that the insights from this research be converted into directly actionable points for creators to use as a compendium while conceptualizing cinematic narratives.

Keywords

Non-Linear Narratives, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Embodied Image Schemas, Mainstream Cinema, Mental Timeline, Graphic Visualization