New Directions in Film Studies:
A Systemic Functional Linguistic Approach

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Halliday and Hasan's Cohesion Framework this paper examines the textual organization in the short film titled, "Migration" directed by Mira Nair. The textual of the targeted narrative of the short film, focusing on the mobilized filmic cohesive resources is unpacked. This investigation exhibits the pre-structuring done by the filmmaker to keep the target viewers in constrained interpretive domains. Cohesion analysis opens up the basic structuring and design pattern of the film for further debates and interpretations. It explicitly shows how characters move in respect to other objects, settings and other characters in the film. The result of such an analysis is the systemic exploration of the filmic corpus.

KEYWORDS
Textual; Structuring; Cohesion; Design patterns; Films.

Introduction

"Film as dream, film as music. No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does, straight to our emotions, deep into the twilight room of the soul." Ingmar Bergman (Luko 43)

Watching movies has always been on the list of a weekend off. As the work load of office increases or the home-work piles on or the expensive movie tickets kick off our budget plans we find alternate ways to entertain ourselves. But nothing seems to replace the visual trance. As Bergman rightly expresses in the above quoted lines, film is the art form that touches our soul and replenishes our mind.

In such a scenario, short films are emerging as a congenial genre that entertains us, without taking too much of our time, money and planning. Short films are freely available on web portals and are easy to circularize. Most short film as the name suggests deal with short subject in adherence to subject matter, time, budget, characters. Despite these limitations short films are emerging as a genre of its kind. It gives us a

similar experience of a feature film, at times more intense in the limited time span. It holds the power to deal with subjects that main stream cinema shies away from. Short films are a powerful branch of art that bares the power to question, criticize the structure of the community (Erkani 1). They usually last less than forty minutes (Abbasi 1) in which the viewers are lead into carefully planned trajectories such that the desired filmic effect is achieved and the idea conveyed. This planning that goes in the pre-structuring defines the narrative style of the film. The film style is an outcome of the significant choices made by the filmmaker at various stages. All the choices made collaboratively and cohesively create meaning. In this paper, we have selected a short film, "Migration", by Mira Nair and we propose a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) approach for a systemic study of the film corpus. "Migration" has a targeted narrative which deals with the problem of AIDS in India. Targeted narratives are story based components that give out a message to its viewers and exert positive influence (Christy et al. 433).

We study the cohesive ties between film segments of Migration with the tools of Halliday and Hasan's cohesion framework (Halliday, and Hasan 4-6). Cohesion analysis opens up the basic structuring and design pattern of the film for further debates and interpretations. It explicitly shows how characters move in respect to other objects, settings and other characters in the film that establishes narrative unity mono-modally and cross-modally (Tseng & Bateman 93). We then identify the phase by phase patterns formed that contribute to the narrative continuity.

Framework

In the 1960s and 1970s structural linguistic approach for theorizing filmic meaning was rejected by cognitive theorists on the ground that film cannot be studied using models of language. With the development of social semiotic theory by Halliday and Matthiessen reattempts are made to understand filmic meaning with the help of a robust framework by drawing upon and complementing the cognitive film theories (Bateman 641).

The publication of the book titled *Cohesion in English* by M. A. K. Halliday & R. Hasan (1976) marked the establishment of Cohesion Theory in functional linguistics. J. R. Martin (Martin 1-10) extends Halliday and Hasan's Cohesion Framework, reformulating the notion of cohesive ties drawing on discourse semantics. Cohesion studies have mainly concentrated on the language system (Allard and Ulatowska 63-79) and cohesion study moving beyond the language system demands more abstract categories that can be applicable to other semiotic systems. Tseng (Tseng 2) refers to the cohesion framework of Martin for audio-visual analysis. She effectively unravels how cohesive ties are established between characters, their actions, settings and objects in selected films and has carried out the image by image analysis of the selected scenes from films like Memento (2000), North by Northwest (1959), The Birds (1963), Comandate (2003), etc. Her study demonstrates how meaning is created mono-modally and cross-modally and how the co-patterning of film devices constructs coherent film narratives.

Filmic Cohesion framework

Construction of coherent filmic narrative wholes that create patterns leading to specific interpretations is dependent on how the film discourse is arranged and knit together. Filmic Cohesion Framework tracks how characters, objects and settings are presented and re-presented forming narrative chains that lead to the narrative understanding and narrative prediction by the viewers.
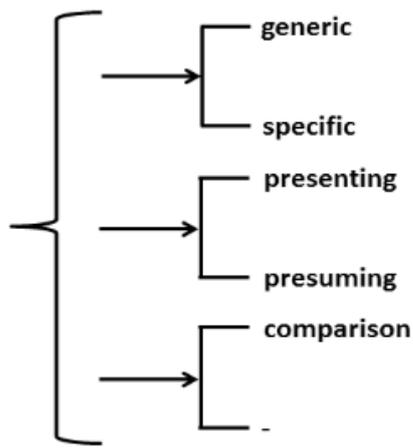
Fig. 1 Three central systems of identification in film [Tseng 2013]

As seen in Fig. 1 the characters, settings and objects can be presented as general or specific entities. In films, there is no definite distinction between the two unlike language. A general participant can gain salience by being presented and re-presented mono-modally or cross-modally.

The presuming system is involved in tracking the reappearance of the filmic entities once they are presented. The explicit re-presentations are tracked in the visual mode, verbal mode, audio mode (sound, music and voices) and implicit re-presentations are signaled when some physical part or parts of the participant reappear in different shots to make the participant's presence felt or when we hear the voice of an invisible participant or with the use of strategies of continuity editing like match-on-action, establishing shot and shot reverse shot.

Analysis

In this section, the short film "Migration" is taken up to substantiate the way in which filmic analysis can be done using the proposed approach. Segmentation is done on the basis of unity of action in the scenes and sequences in the film. The first ten segments of the film are discussed below.

UNITS	Birju's Father	Birju	Villager Men/Women	Yamuna	Setting	Worker	Divya	Show Piece	Mil	Abhay	Buyers	Imran	Man(Condoms)	Condom Dummy	Crowd(Speech)	Saree	Gold Chain	Movie Theatre	Nurse	Gender Symbols
1																				V
2	V	V																		
3			V																	
4	V	V																		
5			V																	
6		V																		
7		V		V																
8		V																		
9					V															
10			V																	

Fig. 2 Plotting the narrative points, V= Visuals

Analyzing the cohesive resources mobilized among the filmic segments as plotted in Fig.2

1. Gender Symbols: [presenting] + [specific] + [cross-modal] + [immediate salience]

2. Birju: [presenting] + [specific] + [cross-modal] + [immediate salience].
   Birju's Father: [presenting] + [specific] + [cross-modal] + [immediate salience].
3. Villagers: [presenting] + [generic] + [mono-modal(visual)] + [immediate salience].
4. Birju: [presuming] + [specific] + [explicit reappearance] + {[anaphoric] + [cross-modal]}
   Birju's father: [presuming] + [specific] + [explicit reappearance] + {[anaphoric] + [mono-modal(visual)]}
5. Village woman: [presenting] + [generic] + [mono-modal(visual)] + [immediate salience].
   Yamuna: [presenting] + [generic] + [mono-modal (visual)] + [gradual salience].
6. Birju: [presuming] + [specific] + [explicit reappearance] + {[anaphoric] + [mono-modal(visual)]}.
7. Birju: [presuming] + [specific] + [explicit reappearance] + {[anaphoric] + [cross-modal]}.
   Yamuna: [presuming] + [specific] + [explicit reappearance] + {[anaphoric] + [cross-modal]}.
8. Birju: [presuming] + [specific] + [explicit reappearance] + {[anaphoric] + [mono-modal(visual)]}
9. Roadside view: [presenting] + [generic] + [mono-modal(visual)] + [gradual salience].
10. Villagers: [presenting] + [generic] + [cross-modal] + [gradual salience].

Discussion

As the analysis shows, there are nineteen threads weaving the narrative of Migration. All the threads are woven by the cohesive resources mobilized to hold the narrative together to conform to the targeted message of AIDS awareness. In the initial ten segments of the film, six filmic narrative chains become active – Birju, his father, his wife Yamuna, Villagers, Settings and the gender symbols

The first image shows the animated gender symbols moving towards each other and as they come in contact they turn red. This symbolizes the upcoming film is about sexual health and awareness. Segments 2 to 10 form the establishing phase of the film. The backdrop for Birju's decision to migrate to the city is built up - Birju leaving the village, his father advising him not to go, his wife Yamuna doing his Tilak ceremony before his leaving. In these segments the main protagonist is introduced and glimpses into his professional and personal life are presented to the viewers such that the narrative trajectory is set up cohesively by the director. There are no leaps and jumps felt by the viewers.

This kind of segment by segment break-up of the film corpus and then plotting the narrative chains on a graph opens up the basic structuring of the film. It situates the researcher at a vantage point as to which aspect he or she wants to further explore. This is the starting point of a semantic and syntactic dissection of the film. Form and content are considered collaboratively. This analysis clearly establishes how characters move in respect to other objects, settings and other characters in the film that establishes narrative unity mono-modally and cross-modally (Bateman, and Tseng 145-146). This analysis unpacks the organization of filmic matter and the staging of events as a goal-oriented activity.

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