

Structuralist Perspectives on the Wholeness and Synchronie of Non-Linear Film Narratives

–The Film Babel as an Example

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Abstracts: Structuralism is a methodology that originated in the nineteenth century, which asserts that all human activities are constructed rather than natural or essential and, therefore, emphasises the study of structure and regularities in terms of larger systems. In this perspective, cinema uniquely affects the viewer's emotions or perception of what is on screen through the use of a variety of codes, symbols or conventions that resemble the structure of language. At the same time, non-linear narratives are an important and special category of cinematic, the so-called non-linear narrative being a film in which two or more perspectives and scenes are narrated in alternating and disrupted chronological order. This article uses textual analysis to dismantle and sort out the theme, spatial and temporal construction, audio-visual elements, and more in *Babel*, a typical non-linear narrative film, to prove that the two basic features of structuralism theory - "wholeness" and "synchronise" - are the most important and special category of non-linear narrative films. It argues that even though the non-linear narrative film has the fractured nature of spatial and temporal construction, the core still serves the film as a whole. The non-linear narrative of film breaks the traditional narrative mode of "smooth narrative" in the past, and is now an important exploration and innovation in the history of cinema from the perspective of structuralism.

Keywords: structuralism, non-linear narrative, wholeness, synchronie, *Babel*

1. Introduction

Structuralism is a methodology that originated in the nineteenth century, which asserts that all human activity is constructed rather than natural or essential and "therefore emphasises the study of structure and regularity in terms of large systems (e.g., the various branches of culture or the various genres of literature)" [1].

First used in Saussure's theory of linguistics, structuralism became a highly influential school of thought in French philosophy after World War II. Through the development and criticism by Wittgenstein, Roland Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Althusser, it is now one of the research methods commonly used to analyse language, psychology, culture and society in the late twentieth

century and the twenty-first century. In the view of structuralism, a certain structure (or system) can dominate and explain any object of study.

At the same time, the art of film, which also emerged in the twentieth century as a narrative, has its own language system. Therefore, it becomes possible to analyse film themes in terms of structure, roles and symbols under the perspective of structuralism. Different from literature, which basically relies on words, film's narrative vehicles are subplots, point-of-view, movement, sound effects and montage editing.

Among them, the non-linear narrative is an important and special category of film montage. The so-called non-linear narrative is a film in which two or more perspectives and scenes are narrated alternately and in disrupted chronological order.

For the time being, in the arts, structuralism theory is still more often used in the analysis and study of traditional art forms such as literature, painting, music, and architecture. Less attention has been paid to film, which is a relatively new art form. Therefore, in this article, we hope to add more perspectives to film theory by explaining the structuralist theory and its characteristics for analysing the unique artistic expressions in film narratives (especially non-linear narratives). Secondly, there is a wealth of research on both non-linear narrative film and structuralism, but there are few cases of analysing the combination of the two. Therefore, the direction of this study is to combine the concept of structure and film art, which has the function of a composite summary.

This article focuses on the use of structuralist features to analyse and understand how a non-linear narrative film maintains the concept of space-time and narrative logic in a seemingly messy way of expressing space-time.

2. Structuralism and Narratology

An early form of structuralism could be found in the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*, 1916), who shifted from the study of the historicity and documentation of language (diachrony) to the study of the structure, patterns, and functions of language at a given time (synchrony). Saussure's theory held that human speech activities, despite their great variety, shared a common inner structure (language). This became the starting point for structuralists to focus on the inner structure of the object of study.

After World War II, especially in the 1960s, structuralism emerged in France and spread rapidly across the globe, soon impacting literature, sociology, and psychology. Structuralism rejected the notion of human freedom of choice, focusing instead on how human behaviour is determined by various structures. The most important initial work in this regard is *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1949. In the text, he analysed kinship systems from a structural perspective and demonstrated that those ostensibly different social organisations were, in fact, different arrangements of basic kinship structures. By the early 1960s, structuralism was maturing as a movement, and some saw it as providing a unified approach to human life that encompassed all disciplines. "Roland Barthes was concerned with how structuralism could be applied to literature, and his work, *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of the Narrative*, occupies an important place in structuralist theories of Narratology, analysing the basic elements of narrative works in terms of their universal structure and using this as a focus for his further literary criticism" [2]. In the field of psychology, Jacques Lacan fused Freud and Saussure to apply structuralism to psychoanalysis. Michel Foucault widely surveyed the history of science in *The Order of Things* to examine how epistemology, or the structure of epistemology, shaped how people imagine and perceive knowledge. Another French theorist, Louis Althusser, fused Marxian theory with structuralism, introducing it into his own structural social analyses, giving rise to "structural Marxism". Since then, other authors, both in France and abroad, have extended structural analysis to virtually all disciplines.

In a broader sense, structuralism is a way of perceiving the world in terms of structure, which is essentially the belief that “things cannot be understood in isolation, but must be viewed in the context of the larger structure to which they belong” (Structuralism, Piaget, 1968), and that the context of the larger structure does not exist in itself, but is shaped by the way we perceive the world. Thus, in structuralist criticism, there is a constant shift away from interpreting individual works towards understanding the larger structures that encompass them.

In terms of Narratology, a popular branch of structuralist theory, it was initially used more in literary criticism, and it was not until the 1970s that a narrative approach was used to study film. “Many film semioticians of the time were also film narratologists, as represented by Christian Metz. He believed that the main body of film was the art of narrative, and film produced many narrative forms and structures in its development” [3]. Among them, non-linear narrative, as one of the more unique expressions of film narrative, usually narrates two or more stories in an alternating and disrupted chronological order. As a narrative technique, it is formalistic (the director is clearly manipulating the chronology to reorganise events); as a film structure, it is subordinate to the ‘open structure’. If we follow Metz’s terminology, we can call it “parallel montage” and “parallel assemblage of segments”. There are two main ways of non-linear narrative. “One is ‘non-linear single-line narrative’, which refers to a single thread of incomplete narrative with breaks, omissions, flashbacks, and flash-forward; this kind of story” [4], although confusing, is basically around a main line of narration. The other is the “non-linear complex narrative”, “which is more common in film and television and is simply a two- or multi-line parallel narrative technique” [5]. However, there are many complex manifestations of this structure.

Structuralism is concerned with how human behaviour is determined by cultural, social and psychological structures and tends to provide a unified approach to human life that encompasses all disciplines and assumes that a certain structure or system can govern and explain any object of study. When applied to film theory, structuralism similarly tends to assume that the meaning of a film is the result of the interrelationships of elements within the structure or system of the film. Cinema uniquely affects the viewer’s emotions or perception of what is on screen through the use of various codes, symbols, or conventions that resemble linguistic structures, such as camera shots, point-of-view, sound effects, montage editing, and other structural elements (e.g., lighting or prop placement). Moreover, it differs from linguistic theory in that its composition includes a more obvious temporal aspect. In other words, the object moves through time and must be analysed within a framework that takes into account its temporality.

3. Structuralist Characteristics of Non-Linear Narrative in the Film “Babel”

Babel, directed by Alejandro González, who won the Best Director Award at the 59th Cannes Film Festival for this masterpiece, stands as a prime example of non-linear narrative storytelling. The film employs four distinct timelines to weave together three interconnected tales set in Morocco, Mexico, and Japan. Its thematic core revolves around the pervasive misunderstandings and disconnections that arise from the lack of effective communication.

This study predominantly adopts the method of textual analysis to dissect *Babel*, a quintessential non-linear narrative film. Through an exhaustive exploration of various narrative elements, including thematic presentation, camera composition, visual aesthetics, and sound manipulation, the article endeavours to extract the fundamental principles governing this film genre’s structure. Additionally, it delves into how audiences can derive coherent cognitive and emotional experiences while consuming such films.

3.1. Holistic Characterisation Through Structuralism

Structuralism emphasises the logical primacy of the whole over its constituent parts. For non-linear narrative films, individual segments invariably serve the greater cinematic experience. Even the non-linear structure's underlying significance contributes to the overarching thematic resonance. Hence, while the individual segments crafted by creators might appear disparate, their core alignment with the overarching theme unifies their narrative trajectory, which holds true for both single-line and compound-line narratives, each adapting its expressive form to suit its content.

To consider *Babel* as a case in point, the film ingeniously interlaces four distinct stories set across diverse temporal and spatial contexts, employing a non-linear compound narrative technique. Through this approach, the film constructs a complex narrative that includes a Moroccan family, an American couple, a Mexican babysitter, and a Japanese father-daughter duo, each situated within the backdrop of Morocco, Mexico, and Japan. The narrative unfolds through four narrative threads: “Richard and Susan’s journey to Morocco amidst marital strife, Susan’s encounter with gunshots, the subsequent entanglement of American tourists in a Moroccan village due to Susan’s injuries, and the unfolding investigation into the seemingly terrorist attack. These events, interwoven through the protagonists’ perspectives, collectively illuminate the common theme: the dire consequences of human communication failures, misunderstandings, and the absence of trust [6].”

Furthermore, the film’s narrative segments feature dislocations and juxtapositions, both temporally and logically. This intricate arrangement of the narrative timeline enhances audience comprehension and fosters a holistic perception of the film. These seemingly independent storylines converge to underscore the film’s central motif: “Human interaction deficits lead to tragedies of varying sorts” [7].

Beyond thematic cohesion, the film employs ingenious audio-visual techniques to unify its entirety. The transitions between scenes maintain a consistent conceptual tone, thereby imbuing the film with visual harmony. Even in Tokyo’s neon hues, the film sustains the overall image style, predominantly characterised by low saturation and contrast.

Within the auditory domain, seemingly sparse character dialogues carry substantial allegorical weight. These dialogues are imbued with thematic mapping by the director, using their depth and philosophical resonance to illuminate the film’s central message. “The cascading tragedies, driven by prejudice, deep-seated anger, irrationality, and the chasm between languages and cultures, highlight the communication barriers that culminate in catastrophe” [7]. The unfolding tragedy resembles a butterfly effect, manifesting as an interconnected chain reaction.

3.2. Synchrony in Structuralism

Non-linear multiple-narrative films often evoke confusion and disorder due to the complex interplay of time and space. However, the film’s multi-storyline, multi-level structure, coupled with the montage editing technique inherent to the cinema, creates a semblance of simultaneity, amplifying the impact of co-temporal events.

For instance, recurring pre-story episodes, presented as outtakes or news broadcasts, help anchor viewers to specific temporal points amidst the film’s fluid narrative. This technique alleviates potential confusion stemming from the narrative’s timeline shifts. In an early scene, Chieko’s return home in Tokyo is intertwined with a news segment detailing an attack on American tourists in Morocco. As Chieko changes channels, her action concurs with a narration of the Moroccan shooting, illustrating a parallel occurrence in sync with Chieko’s father’s police investigation.

In another instance, the film unveils significant plot points through clever juxtapositions. “Richard’s solitary moment in a hospital corridor, where he overhears his son’s cheerful voice on the

phone, holds a poignant revelation. This conversation's contextualisation, initially provided through voice-over, subsequently gains clarity through chronological alignment" [8].

Visual techniques also contribute to the film's coherence. Camera compositions consistently transition between different story segments, reinforcing a sense of temporal and spatial unity. Wide shots spanning significant distances evoke a fatalistic sentiment, while reoccurring close-up angles enhance audience memory retention, engendering a sense of character convergence.

The film's visual coherence is underscored by its rich colour palette, leveraging shades of red to establish temporal continuity. The gradual evolution of red hues from lower saturation to neon tones in Tokyo unifies disparate settings, facilitating direct spatial and temporal comprehension for viewers.

At the film's conclusion, "music emerges as a connective thread, facilitating emotional continuity across disparate narratives" [9]. A specific musical motif unites the distinct temporal and spatial realms, emphasising their shared struggles and emotions.

To sum up, non-linear narrative films employ various elements in service of a holistic cinematic experience. *Babel*, directed by González, weaves four distinct timelines into a unified cinematic tapestry. Through meticulous exploration of narrative techniques, thematic coherence, and audio-visual synchronisation, the film successfully navigates the complexities of non-linear storytelling, ultimately underscoring the universal challenges posed by communication barriers. "The non-linear narrative film breaks the traditional film narrative mode of 'explaining one thing clearly and then telling another thing' " [10], which is the inevitable way for film and television works to be transformed from traditional form to modern form and non-linear narrative from the perspective of structuralism completes an important exploration and innovation in the history of cinema.

4. Conclusion

Against the background that structuralism has become one of the commonly used research methods in the late twentieth century and the twenty-first century, this article takes the film *Babel* as an example and demonstrates that even with its temporal and spatial construction of fragmentation, the non-linear narrative of the film is still serving the film as a whole, by arguing for the "wholeness" and "synchronise" of the non-linear narrative in the context of the two basic features of structuralism.

The non-linear narrative film, departing from traditional linear storytelling, represents a significant milestone in the evolution of cinema, embodying a vital exploration and innovation within the framework of structuralism. However, due to the complexity of structuralism and non-linear narrative, it is not yet possible to directly classify the film or provide a detailed breakdown of individual cases. Therefore, this article takes the film *Babel* as an example and only analyses some of its characteristics. It is believed that with the continuous improvement of the public's viewing level and the maturity of narrative techniques, this perspective will bring a broader creative space for film practitioners.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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