The Impact of Non-linear Narrative Structures on Better Character Development in Animated-short Movies

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Abstract

Nonlinear narrative structures are infrequently used in animated short films and their benefits seems to be relatively neglected in comparison with cinema. Yet, the revolutionary potential of utilizing such structures in animated short films is endless. Nonlinear narratives provide techniques and tools which helps in better introduction and development of characters, resulting in in-depth emotional involvement of the audience. Such engagement is viable without the emphasis which classical structure puts on irrevocable principles such as linear timeline. This paper discusses the impact of nonlinear narrative structures in four animated short films, "The coin" (2019), "Negative Space" (2017), "Late afternoon" (2017), "The boy who saw the iceberg" (2000), which demonstrate a restructure of temporal factors. Each of these films is not only taking advantage of an exclusively tailored nonlinear structure using time distortion, they are also enforcing the impact they have on the way characters are delineated which could be inspired by other film-makers in animation. This paper discusses such innovative potentials in narrative structure of animated short films by relying on David Bordwell classical narration theories in "Narration in the fiction film" (1985), which are then diversified into nonchronological structures according to temporal feature of the narration. The present study argues that not only applying various nonlinear storytelling structures is possible in the context of animated short films, it also provides film-makers with measures and capabilities to achieve memorable and engaging characters.

Keywords: Nonlinear structure, animated short film, character development, time distortion, David Bordwell

Introduction

Reality defined according to temporal logic is usually considered an indisputable requirement of linear narrative structures. Therefore, the order of incidents in which the character is involved ought to be chronological. Contemporary stories, on the other hand, are defined by concepts with which modern human is dealing. These concepts demand targeting the lifestyle, thoughts, unconsciousness and mental status of characters on account of modern world features. Psychology of the mind and philosophy of time are hence an integral aspect of contemporary written and visual narrative. Psychological theories, in particular, are in the realm of contemporary filmmaker's interests since they are apparently reflecting the spheres by which the modern human and their outlook is surrounded.

Non-chorological aspects of the contemporary film narratives might not always be depended on reorganized position of incidents according to calendar time. Other perspectives on time could position themselves in the narration as a result of modern era issues experienced by the character. These issues are usually interconnected with memory. They may include mental instabilities reflected through incoherent associations, anxieties, reminiscences of the past situations or even mental disease including amnesia. In this sense, memory has turned to an important subject to introduce the character personality and background. Time can therefore be defined as a virtual, floaty component in the narrative structures of such stories. The border between mental constructs and reality could be genuinely blurred. This could result in gentle back and force sway between projecting the real, physical world events and the character's mental state. Non-linear narrative structure can hence best develop characters in stories which are incorporating memory and mental conditions.

Animated-short films have been affected by such wave of modern character development, although they might traditionally be considered to be disinclined to such departure from linear approach. The impact of identification with characters through observing more hidden aspects of their life is relatively identical in animated shorts and feature films.

Theoretical Preliminaries

Character psychology is noticeably of paramount importance in modern narratives. What is claimed in this article is the effect of contemporary non-linear narrative on characterization and the dimensions of characters' life that might be accentuated by them. Art-cinema narration, as indicated by David Bordwell in his book called "Narration in the fiction film", is applicable when a different viewpoint on reality is adopted in the story, which is usually resulted from prioritizing character's mental world as opposed to perfectly unambiguous external intentions and targets. In linear narratives, "the narration simply needs to link scenes as they relate to temporal and causal changes in a single character's situation." (Thompson 1999, 53). However, In modern narratives, a number of effects with psychological reasons/causes are required to be narrated, which can only be clarified by mental exploitations. "Art-cinema narration can blur the lines separating objective diegetic reality, characters' mental states, and inserted narrational commentary" (Bordwell 1985, 162). Such mental, sometimes cognitive, journeys can offer considerable insight into the character's deeper layers of consciousness, despite the interruption or entanglement of inner and outer realities.

Specific sorts of realism motivate a loosening of cause and effect, an episodic construction of the syuzhet, and an enhancement of the film's symbolic dimension through an emphasis on the fluctuations of character psychology. (Bordwell 1985, 206)

As Bordwell confesses, memory may cause nonchronological order of the plot when using flashbacks. However, the quality of being preoccupied with thoughts, dreams and memories might also accompany surrealist visual representation, which can interrupt or change the cause-effect chain of real-world events. In this sense, Powell contends that temporal aspects of narration can be displayed using a variety of techniques as a result of differentiating the two worlds.

Here recognition of the way in which the temporal order of waking life has no bearing on the construction of dreams is reproduced through the implementation of fragmentation, recombination and juxtaposition. the fluctuations of character psychology. (Powell 2012, 65)

"The coin" (Siqi Song, 2019), "Negative space" (Max Porter, Ru Kuwahata, 2017), "Late afternoon" (Louise Bangall, 2017) and "The boy who saw the iceberg" (Paul Driessen, 2000) are four animated-short films which are representing characters in a psychological context. Their narrative structure is therefore not only encouraging the projection of other dimensions of time, they are also suggesting a more in-depth characterization. Non-linear narration hierarchize non-clock time in the plot since the story needs to project the mental causes behind real world effects. Discovering the private world of characters can be a main reason behind the interest that the audience shows in grabbing more information about the character. Hosein Payandeh refers to the fact that discovering characters with ambiguity of psyche have always been an enticing feature in the long history of Iranian short stories.

One of the attractions of the short story in our country, from the emergence of this genre around ninety years ago till now, has been the creation of characters whose dark and hidden aspects of soul has been known, and this has increased the reader's desire to read the story. (Payandeh 2020, 539)

The article discusses observations on the division of time into internal and external spheres which both deserve due attention, and the way they affect better character development in the context of four animated-short films. The main question relevant to this study is the way characters, and thus the animated short, are introduced more engagingly as a result of narrating both real world and emotional or mental world of characters in the above-mentioned films. These films are benefiting from other definitions of time "reality of the imagination" (Bordwell 1985, 206) as David Bordwell quoted from Marcel Martin. In order to achieve the answer, the narrative models applied in these short films are analyzed in this paper. As mentioned earlier, new temporal definitions are pivotal in these films, which are defined as nonlinear or non-clock time narratives in this paper. Consequently, a number of viewpoints on time are initially investigated. The study is then followed by individual discussions about each of the animated shorts and the narrative model applied in each one.

Literature Review

Strategies of developing appealing characters has constantly been an integral part of storytelling and been discussed in a variety of research. Bordwell, in particular, has discussed the standing and impact of characters in both linear and non-linear narration. However, it appears that the inner mind, which can cause the development of more credible characters is required to be invesitigated more extensively in animated shorts. Because this approach is encouraged in contemporaty films. This is the reason why this paper is focusing on such issue particularly in animated shorts.

Various Perspectives on Dimensions of Time

As mentioned earlier, modern fictional narratives are influenced by a variety of theories in different fields such as psychology, philosophy and physics. Based on these observations, temporal structures and the aspects of narration highlighted by them are varied. Narratives may intend to prioritize specific details such as internal thoughts and certain ebullitions, which emphasizes the distinction between the character's inner life and the exteriority. "By receiving mental materials, the temporal and special quality of today's story is changed." (Naderi Jafari 2015, 78). Regarding one of these views by Heidegger, time experienced by human's mind is even considered to be the producer of outer world's time.

Time is not something which exists in the world and is then reflected in the human mind, but something which arises from human being (Dasein) and is then projected onto the world. (Currie 2007, 51)

According to the story's requirements and character's conditions, different approaches of time representation might be adopted in order to project mental aspects of the character's life. The story may prefer either a subtle swing between the real life and mental state or more evident transformations via flashback. In either way, the time of the story is constantly shifting from the external reality to the internal world of characters.

It can be concluded that narrative time dedicated to mental events might be varied depending on the delicacy and importance. Therefore, different categorizations are defined to explain the outlooks on temporal dimensions of narration. Paul Ricoeur calls stories with an emphasis on time in their narration as "tales about time". He confesses that "it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural transformations." (Ricoeur 1988, 101). In another

approach by Allen Cameron, two kinds of time as public and private are mentioned.

> The predominant modern discourse was predicated upon a division between two types of time: public (linear) and private (non-linear). Whereas public time continued to be thought of as homogeneous and continuous, private time came to be seen as heterogeneous and multiple. (Cameron 2008, 27)

David Bordwell considers subjective and objective narrations. He contends that the subjective narration is "the strategy of plunging into a character's mind." (Bordwell 2017, 43). The same view point on time is adopted in psychological theories of seasoned professionals such as Sigmund Freud. The relationship between consciousness and time is highlighted by him.

> One of the most striking aspects of Freud's work is the omission of direct references to time; this can be attributed to the way in which the unconscious lacks such a concept as we would understand it in waking life. (Powell 2012, 65-66)

Based on these definitions, predefined certainty about the character is denied by modern storytelling and it is the mental time which determines and stablishes the outer world narrative projections.

Surrealistic Imagination and Reality

"The coin" depicts a story about a journey to a foreign country and the issues that are in contrast with the character's cultural traditions. A combination of real time events as well as imaginations and recollections of the character memories are all represented in this film. It is benefiting from surreal representation of imaginary scenes. An instance of alternative representation of reality is provided in the well-known short film, "An Andalusian dog" (1929) by Luis Buñuel. The film is questioning both temporal aspects of linear narratives and manifestation of thoughts. Maureen Turim discusses the surrealist aspects of the film which is properly used to project temporal and mental dimensions.

> Perhaps it indicates the constantly shifting temporality of the unconscious, a temporality without reference to the clocks and calendars of a real world. In marking the play of its images against the conventional temporal structure of filmic representation Un Chien Andalou develops an alternative practice of representation. (Turim 2013, 227)

In the first scene of "The coin", the real time story about the traditional food recipe is infused with the character's imaginations. The surreal mix of facts and imaginary scenes of the character's involvement in preparing the food are provided in a way that has blurred the boundaries of reality and mental projection. These memories are developing the character's personality through the descriptions of family traditions.

The long-held, traditional beliefs is deeply imprinted on her mind as she develops into adolescence. The second coincidence of the emanation of her mind and outer world is projected after she misses her coins. The audience is already informed about the impacts that she believes the coins have on her life. At this second point, shifting from real world is initiated through a camera push-in when associations and anxieties begin to flood her mind. At this point of the film, the psychological side effects concerning unprecedented experience of leaving the hometown and adaptation to new circumstances are taken into consideration. Therefore, objective events and external behavior are serving the purpose of character delineation and are not pursuing a classical approach to storytelling as expected in films with linear structure. The film is considered nonchronological due to the fact that it is enjoying different narrative times. This means that, the film is exploiting mental time in order to express the emotional impacts and therefore the viewers are able to be acquaint with the character along with mental time periods.

Childhood Memories and Reality

The narrative structure in "Negative space" is using flashback in order to switch between outer world events, the character's childhood memories and imaginations. The issues that are brought to the character's attention as a child are the first thoughts which are recalled later on in his life. This emphasizes the way childhood memories and patterns of child-rearing can affect the formation of priorities in mind. The audience's familiarization with the character's world, personality and family relationships has made possible through flashbacks. A considerable time of the film, therefore, is dedicated to the character recollections about the perfect, confirmed way of packing for a journey taught by his father. In this film, it is the emotional state of the character regarding his father's funeral that triggers such memories. Associations and childhood imaginations about packing the suitcase appears to be embarked on due to loneliness and isolation on his way to the funeral.

> Another standard trigger for memory flashbacks is isolation. The character sits in a room or paces the floor or settles down in a park or forest, and the solitude provokes a return to the past. (Bordwell 2017, 82)

His trip to the funeral of his father is the main reality of the outer world, however, a developed empathy with the character at the funeral is possible since the audience already has obtained a great deal of information about his personality, family bonds and some aspects of his upbringing. In fact, the mental association at the end of the film could be comprehended owing to the preceding journey through flashbacks. Otherwise, those associations might be considered absurd or inappropriate. Such information has provided through mental time which

is directly relevant to the nonchronological narration. A blurring boundary can also be recognized between the character's imagination and memories throughout flashbacks in a way that childhood imaginations seem to be embedded into childhood memories. This has placed a greater emphasis on psychological cognition.

Mental disease and Reality

"Late afternoon" is the story of mental fluctuations as a result of amnesia. The character's life is narrated in a present and past context with a constant shift between mental world of character's memories and her present situation. Mental disease has always provided an opportunity to reflect memories by which the character is driven. Associations of past events, which are activated by a number of objects, encourages the transformation that temporarily delays the continuity of real-world events in present time. Even after moving back to the physical world, her mental submergence is depicted through the presence of younger versions in the present time.

The flashbacks not only familiarize the audience with the main character suffering from amnesia, it also introduces the young woman who is taking care of her in real time. A quick review of influential stages in the woman's life, ranging from her childhood till adulthood, is displayed through flashbacks and each iteration is used to supply a more extensive range of information regarding her sentimental attachments to the past. "Flashback can provide new meanings about a person or place by unexpected representation of the past." (Salami 2015, 98). Her recovery from amnesia as the resolution of the story is possible as a result of such mental journeys. The character's development as well as identification with her is occurring through recollection of past events.

Unconsciousness in Dreams and Reality

"The boy who saw the iceberg" is a film that offers the opportunity to witness both mental and physical worlds from an external frame. Concurrent yet separate observation of visual outcomes caused by getting into the character's thoughts and dreams is represented in this film. In other words, standing outside both frames provides the opportunity to experience simultaneous psychological and physical worlds. This may remind the audience of the experience they can have while looking at a painting.

> When we contemplate time we do so from within time; but when we contemplate a picture we stand outside it. We look at it, not from within it, because it is framed for us. And so we imagine doing the same thing with time. Literature, philosophy, religion, and mythology are replete with pictures of time that allow for an external vantage point. (Morson 1996, 18)

Slices of the boy's life are narrated according to the linear time. However, it is the perception of the viewer which is required to be switched between the two frames at any given time in order to perceive the impacts of same incidents on both the character's mentality and outer life. Such approach is, in fact, describing a concurrent insight into the cause-and-effect chain of events in the film. The anxiety resulted from the dreams appear to have been regularly overlooked not only by the character himself, but also by any other individuals in his life. Nevertheless, such emotional fluctuations are constantly coming to the surface of his conscious mind. According to Freud's ideas about dreams, they are "a means of gaining knowledge of the unconscious, of accessing that which has been repressed during waking life." (Powell 2012, 67). As mentioned earlier, split-screen is a modern narrative technique which is adopted in this film in order to make simultaneous presentation of a child's mental status and the exterior effects of them on his life. The spectator is, in fact, figuring out the child's personality, anxieties and concerns while catching a glimpse of his ordinary life with his family. The film is solely visualizing limited aspects of the child's life, however, a relatively deep understanding of his unstable mental world can be thoroughly perceived.

A sense of simultaneous comparison of the internal and external worlds reminds the viewer of questioning the reality as the main concern of modern narratives as professed by Jesse Matz: "Questioning reality transformed realism in the modern novel, producing a *new* realism based strangely on doubt about reality itself." (Matz 2004, 33). The film therefore is an introduction of the character through the integral part of his life, which is his mental disorders.

Conclusion

There might be theories and viewpoints based on which the projection of mental time ought to be considered as a part of linear narrative time. However, it was discussed in this article that the narrative structure in mentioned animated shorts could be considered nonchronological mainly because the linear narration of real time events is disrupted or mixed with non-click time forms. In fact, narrative intervals owing to objective dimensions may distort, delay or change chronological order of physical events. Such contemporary narrations are influenced by the exploration of memory and a fictive universe. That is why they appear to be more flexible than linear narratives when it comes to their structure. Animated-short films studied in this article are emphasizing modern character developments which has led to addressing mind-related aspects as a paramount factor in familiarization with such characters. As a result, a solid linear chain of exterior events based on clock-time framework may not correspond with the plot when it comes to exploring mental disorders, anxieties, dreams, hallucinations and memories. These films are taking emotional inspections at stake through established psychological theories and this can help in better character development owing to in-depth investigation of unexplored/less-explored emotions.

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