

9 Unravelling the Myth of Multiple Endings and the Narrative Labyrinth in *Mr. Nobody* (2010)

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1. Introduction

The main goal of this chapter is to elucidate just how the comprehensive analytical frameworks developed by social semioticians to date, including Van Leeuwen and others (cf. Van Leeuwen, 2005; Bateman, 2007; Tseng, 2013a), can be employed to effectively deal with significant empirical issues, such as narrative complexity, genre, and transmedial comparisons, which have been the subject of perennial debate in studies of narrative and the moving image. In particular, this chapter will focus on the issue of multiple endings in fiction films.

The feature of multiple endings is a narrative device often employed in complex narratives in film and literature. In recent decades, a considerable body of research has endeavoured to unravel just how non-linear fictional narratives trigger puzzling effects in readers/viewers and lead them to adopt interpretation paths distinct from those for conventional linear fiction. Particularly in film analysis, multiple endings/open endings are often targeted as a phenomenon that could help develop tools for analysing complex narratives, including the complexity of puzzle films with multiple plot lines, non-linear narratives, and the mechanism of multiple endings (cf. Buckland, 2009, 2014).

The mechanism, its cognitive impact, and ideological power are most thoroughly discussed in the recent work by Cova and Garcia (2015). Although the authors do not provide a definitive answer as to why multiple endings are rare, the way they investigate the uses and functions of multiple endings confuse several issues at distinct analytical levels. This highlights the need to broaden the theoretical grounds of the discussion as well as to situate this issue of multiple ending in a framework clearly distinguishing between the concepts of *textuality*, *media*, and *genre*.

Most importantly, this chapter will show how addressing the issue of multiple endings drawing on systematic multi-level analysis suggests effective strategies for unravelling puzzle films in general: these non-linear, unconventional narrative films can be most effectively unpacked using a multi-dimensional discourse framework. In the following sections, I will elucidate

precisely how the multi-dimensionality can be achieved on the basis of the methods proposed by Theo van Leeuwen and other social semiotic research on film discourse (cf. Van Leeuwen, 2005; Bateman, 2007; Tseng, 2013a). The contention will be empirically supported through a social semiotic analysis of the well-known puzzle film with multiple endings, *Mr. Nobody* (van Dormael, 2010).

2. Problems Raised by Multiple Endings in Fictional Narratives

In addressing multiple endings as unnatural, non-immersive, and an incoherent design of story events in fiction, Cova and Garcia (2015) compare multiple endings of fiction to open endings of serial comic books and TV series. Despite the fact that very often each issue of a comic book series or each episode of a TV series is open-ended, and readers/viewers need to wait for days until the story continues in the next issue/episode, comic books, and TV series remain popular and readers/viewers don't seem to be disturbed by the incomplete and incoherent story events in each issue/episode. Yet, multiple endings, which also violate the conventional and natural single-ended, close-ended fiction structure, are rare (p. 108–109).

This comparison immediately brings to the fore the issue of the audience's top-down expectation of media genres. Specifically, a reader/viewer's understanding and evaluation of story events is substantially supported by several devices mobilised in the surrounding context within a novel, a film, a TV show or a comic book, as well as in the cultural context outside the work being read or viewed, including expectations of genre and media.¹ It is fairly unlikely for a long-time comic book reader or TV series viewer to be taken by surprise when seeing 'to be continued' at the end of each issue or episode. In other words, readers/viewers expect an open-ended story structure in these media genres.

In addition, there is a paradox in Cova and Garcia's discussion of the effects of open endings in comic books and TV series: Even if it is true that open endings undermine immersion and make an appreciator uncomfortable about having to wait for the next issue/episode, that must also indicate that the story events within the present episode/issue are well presented, highly coherent, and the viewers/readers are immersed until the last minute, until realising the issue/episode is not an immediate resolution of the story. This paradox brings to light another fundamental difference between multiple endings in fiction and open endings in serialised media genres. That is, they deal with different levels of textual structures.

Here it is necessary to take into account the social semiotic concept of meaning strata and textual coherence, particularly the cohesive mechanisms between textual units and how text structure is related to genre. Several conceptual frameworks have been developed by text linguistics over recent decades, for instance, SFL and Rhetorical Structure Theory.² More recently,

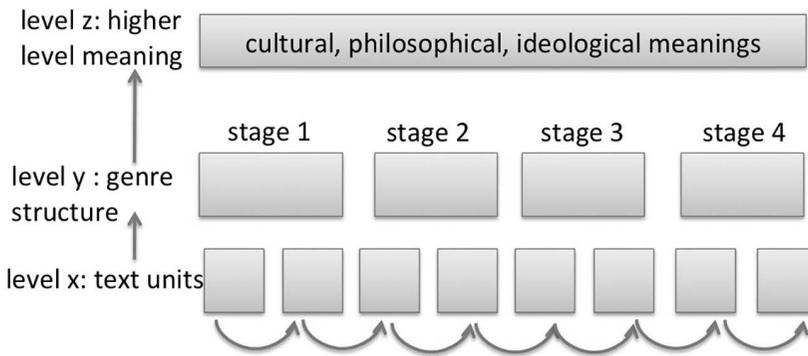


Figure 9.1 Meaning strata—a multi-level meaning structure of text

Note: The curved arrows between textual units at level x are cohesive ties, which make a text a meaningful unity and which guide the reader/viewer to understand a coherent narrative. The straight arrow between level x, y, and z refers to the process of realisation of meaning strata, a construct and mechanism much used in linguistics

these frameworks have also been applied to the analysis of non-verbal and multimodal texts, such as visual images, films, comic books, printed documents, etc.³

Figure 9.1 illustrates the concept of *stratification*, a construct and mechanism much discussed in linguistics, particularly within social semiotic theory (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The strata are inter-related through *realisation*. In Figure 9.1, the lowest level x refers to units within a text. The coherent co-patterning of these units realise the stratum at a higher level, such as a genre structure widely recognised within a cultural context. Different conventional genre structures then realise and reflect certain ideologies and cultural interpretations at the highest level.

At level x in Figure 9.1, the curved arrows between the units at the level x are cohesive ties that give the necessary cues for the recipient to interpret a text as a meaningful whole. Within SFL, several analytical tools have been developed to describe this kind of cohesive tie (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The present chapter makes significant use of the tool of logical relations, as it considers whether the paragraphs and chapters of a novel or scenes and the shots of a film are related spatially, temporally, causally, etc. can be analysed using this tool.

Conventionally, the storylines in each issue/episode of serial comic books and TV series are presented linearly and temporally and thus coherently. Although sometimes in a comic book, “fictional characters are referencing events that happened in a previous issue” (Cova & Garcia, 2015, p. 108), often enough cohesive ties, e.g., cohesive reference links (Tseng, 2012), are mobilised to avoid disorientation in the comprehension of a narrative.

Level y in Figure 9.1 refers to genre structure. A genre structure is realised by configurations of larger blocks of text units, e.g., a well-known drama structure can be generally summarised by the following stage blocks: beginning—complications—crisis—climax—resolution—ending. In serial comic books or TV series, the storyline in an issue or episode might end before the resolution (e.g., David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* is a classic example), and this genre structure, as mentioned above, is familiar to a competent audience.

Finally, configurations of levels x and y realise higher-level abstract meanings.⁴ For instance, when Cova and Gracia convincingly point out that multiple endings in fiction can be used to symbolise fate and determinism in our lives, they are addressing abstract themes, namely, level z in our framework, which is supported by the coherent deployment of lower-level textual features. In Figure 9.1, the straight arrows between levels x, y, and z, refer exactly to this kind of meaning realisation across strata.

Drawing on this stratified theoretical framework, we can uncover several myths of the puzzling phenomenon discussed by Cova and Gracia. First of all, one should not assume that multiple endings are a phenomenon exerting a specific kind of effect, because, analysed on the basis of the textual stratum (level x in the figure), multiple endings could be realised in different textual forms and lead to very different narrative evaluations and interpretations. For instance, Kieslowski's film *Blind Chance* (1987), mentioned by Cova and Gracia, presents three separate storylines and three different outcomes in succession. Nevertheless, each storyline is shown in a conventional temporal narrative structure. In the beginning of the second and the third storylines, clear visual repetitions function to signal the re-telling of the characters' story. That means this film, although with multiple endings, is presented in a straightforward, coherent textual form. We can compare *Blind Chance* to another film with multiple endings, *Mr. Nobody* (2010). This film also shows the different storylines and outcomes of a character's life. However, these storylines are interwoven throughout the film rather than separately told. This kind of complex narrative structure with complicated spatial, temporal and causal relations between the scenes and shots challenges the viewers' inferences of story events and guides them to a very different narrative interpretation process from that in *Blind Chance*. In later sections, I will show just how the narrative complexity of *Mr. Nobody* can be effectively unravelled, drawing on the multi-levelled analytical frameworks of social semiotics.

Another example of multiple endings of fiction is the novel *Hopscotch* (Spanish: *Rayuela*) by the Argentine writer Julio Cortazar. The novel can be read in two ways: either linearly, from Chapters 1 to 56, or by 'hopscotching' through the entire book of 155 chapters according to a 'Table of Instructions' provided by the author. In the author's table of instructions, the last 99 chapters are inserted among the first 56 chapters and function as filling information gaps and at some point also solving some questions in the main storyline. This means that in the second route of reading, the cohesive

ties between the chapters are re-configured into a different and more complex set of logical relations.

To sum up, according to the stratified framework presented here, the frequency of multiple endings is simply a matter of choice-making: Multiple endings is a narrative choice. It can be realised in various forms of textual configuration with very different degrees of coherence and thus lead to different narrative evaluations and interpretations. Along the same lines, the philosophical meaning of determinism is also a thematic choice and multiple endings is one possible textual choice to realise this ideological meaning. The degree of rarity of multiple endings is probably comparable to that of other unconventional textual choices, such as reversing the temporal order of storylines (e.g., the films *Memento* (2000), *Irreversible* (2002), and Harold Pinter's play *Betrayal* (1978)), which could be used to stress the meanings of causation, despair in life, etc. Furthermore, comparing multiple endings in fiction to serial comic books/TV series is not theoretically plausible. As Figure 9.1 suggests, multiple endings are realised by the employment of textual units at level x, while storylines with open endings in comic books and TV series are conventional genre structures at level y.

Furthermore, Cova and Gracia also compare multiple endings in traditional fiction to interactive fiction, where the user always plays a role and can reach different endings depending on different choices along the narrative routes. They consider why multiple routes are feasible and welcomed in interactive fiction, while multiple endings in traditional fiction are rare. In this context, one philosophical concept they refer to is the theory of *make-believe* proposed by Kendall Walton (1990). In Walton's theory, our engagement with fiction should be understood on the model of games of make-believe. Briefly speaking, the readers/viewers are convinced that they are witnessing story events personally. On the basis of this philosophical theory, Cova and Garcia (2015) contend that if Walton's theory were true, multiple endings should have thrived in traditional fiction because having multiple endings available to freely choose from, and being able to select a preferred one, should increase our enjoyment and engagement with fiction, because this process is similar to the 'make-believe' effect in interactive role-playing games. In the course of their discussion, the authors finally admit that "It seems very likely that our engagement with traditional forms of fictions rests on very different psychological bases than our engagement with interactive fictions" (p. 113).

Precise comparisons between the engagement with interactive fiction and traditional fiction require more empirical investigations. However, there have been empirical studies of the fundamental differences between an appreciator's ongoing perceptual reaction in the traditional versus interactive media genres, particularly in film studies.⁵ While in interactive games, a user actively participates in the development of story events, empirical evidence shows that a viewer of a traditional fiction film always keeps a certain perceptual distance from the screen (Zacks, 2015). No matter how

immersive a film seems, viewers remain to some degree distanced and fully conscious of their outsider role in the story events. In other words, it is unlikely that a viewer really believes he or she can participate in the story events. That means, in the context of traditional fiction, the philosophical theories about immersion and games of ‘make-believe’ are metaphorical descriptions rather than cognitive explanations. Based on the fundamental difference in perceptual distances, the textual form of multiple-endings in traditional fiction is unlikely to provide a cognitive response similar to the active participation in story development in interactive media.

I will end this section by pointing out that Cova and Gracia’s stimulating discussion can definitely be seen as opening several lines of discussion and there are still many empirical discussions in the offing regarding traditional and interactive media genres; nevertheless, probing into the uses and functions of features of fiction could be more effective and theoretically better grounded if one applied a broader and fine-grained conceptual framework as suggested above. This contention will be exemplified through the analysis of *Mr. Nobody* presented in the following section.

3. Untangling the Labyrinth of Multiple Endings in *Mr. Nobody* (2010)

This section analyses the narrative complexity of *Mr. Nobody* on the basis of the multi-level social semiotic framework delineated in Figure 9.1. This film is well known for its ideological theme of *choices in life*. Most discussion of this thematic revolves around the interpretations at the level of cultural, philosophical or ideological meanings (see level z in Figure 9.1). The following sections will elucidate just how this abstract thematic can be reflected and supported by functional structures, patterns of textual mechanisms at the analytical levels x and y. Figure 9.2 maps out the three tools used throughout this section: 1. **schematic structures**, namely, Van Leeuwen’s concept of multimodal genre structures (Van Leeuwen, 2005), 2. **cohesion** (Tseng, 2013a), and 3. **character development** (Tseng, forthcoming). This figure also shows how these tools are related back to levels x and y in Figure 9.1. In particular, different from the problem-solving approach taken

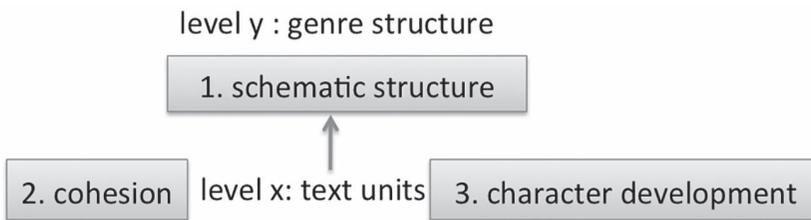


Figure 9.2 Three analytical tools used in this section

by several fabula/suzhet-based descriptive schemes (cf. Bordwell, 1985), the social semiotic analysis presented in this chapter shows how meaning patterns combine bottom-up construction of and top-down constraints on discourse and can more effectively unpack how a non-linear film guides its viewers to coherent narratives.

In brief, through employing these three tools, this section will show how the narrative strands in this film are intertwined yet equipped with certain discourse devices for guiding the viewer's interpretation.

3.1 Schematic Structure

This section maps out the overall functional structure of the entire story in *Mr. Nobody*, namely, the meaning structure at level γ in Figure 9.1, by employing Van Leeuwen's (2005) concept of genre as a staged and multi-modal process. The key characteristics of Van Leeuwen's multimodal genre analysis, drawing on social semiotic theory (Eggins, 1994; Martin, 1992), rest on the construction of a series of stages. The sequence of stages as a whole, also referred to as a schematic structure, realises a particular strategy for achieving an overall communicative goal—in this case, to present the film story. In other words, applying Van Leeuwen's multimodal genre structure to a film can be seen as a more functionally oriented analysis of plot and story structure.

The schematic structure of *Mr. Nobody*, consisting of five stages, is shown in Figure 9.3. The story of *Mr. Nobody* starts with **stage 1: prologue**, composed of fragmented scenes of the main character, Nemo. The bits and pieces of sequences of Nemo in unspecified time and space immediately function to 'anchor bias', namely, to frame and direct the viewer's inferences to a rather demanding, non-linear narrative structure (Bateman & Tseng, 2013).

The prologue is followed by **stage 2: beginning of the story**, which functions to present the background of the main storyline and the identity and traits of the main character. This stage is realised in a longer scene set in the year 2092, where the character Nemo Nobody is first specifically introduced—he is the last mortal man on earth. For some reason, the 118-year-old man Nemo Nobody never had telomerisation treatments that granted immortality to everyone else on Earth. Nemo was probably too old to benefit from them when they were first introduced, and he simply

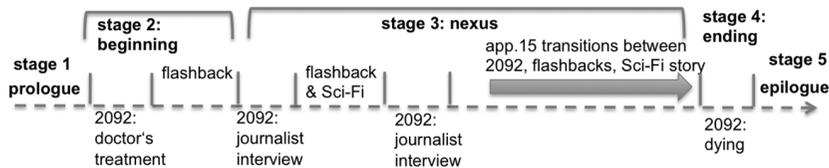


Figure 9.3 Overall schematic structures of *Mr. Nobody* with five stages

outlived everyone else from his generation. As the viewers first see him, he is staying at a hospital in a very frail state and under constant supervision. Being the last man to die of old age, he is in all the headlines, and his death is promised to be televised for the masses. Everyone wants to know the story of Nemo Nobody. The only problem is that Nemo's memory is vague and fading. Therefore, his doctor helps him put together his memories by using hypnosis. Following the hypnosis, Nemo starts to remember his childhood and hallucinate some jumbled images from his life with different women and children.

The next stage, **stage 3: nexus**, functions to map out the connection between several choices and their possible results in Nemo's life. This stage starts with a scene depicting a young journalist slipping into Nemo's room to interview him. The film then unfolds, following Nemo's non-linear flashbacks and descriptions of several tangled lines of his life stories picked up from his fragmented memories. Some memory strands are often contradictory—for instance, in some flashbacks, he dies, and in others, he is paralysed after a motorbike accident.

The clearest strands involve the adult Nemo with three different women: Anna, the love of his life, although fate keeps getting in their way; Elise, his depressed wife, whom he loves hopelessly; and Jeanne, the wife Nemo never loved. The permutations of these love stories with the three women, seemingly unfolding at the same time, leads the viewers across the entire film. These fragmented narrative strands around the three different women all trace back to the film's central point, at which Nemo's life branches out and splinters into a myriad of possible realities. This focal point is a scene in which the nine-year-old Nemo Nobody finds himself at a train station in the early 1980s, as his divorced parents go their separate ways. His mother will leave for North America, while his father will stay in England. Nemo has to decide whether or not to get on that train, which will dramatically alter the course of his life.

These sometimes converging yet jumbled narrative strands across Nemo's life are also intercut with the interview scenes in 2092, in which the 118-year-old Nemo is never sure which of the lives he actually lived and which he could have lived. Furthermore, some scenes in this stage also show the story contents of a science fiction story about a group of people travelling to Mars, written by the 15-year-old Nemo when he was living with his father. These complex intercuts repeat approximately 15 times in this stage and present a highly complex, non-linear narrative structure with jumbled scenes across different times and spaces in Nemo's life and his imagined science fiction story. Nevertheless, as the next two sections will show, despite its demanding spatio-temporal structure, this stage actually consists of a well-mapped goal-oriented causal plan cued to the viewers through well-mobilised cohesive mechanisms. These dimensions can only be effectively unpacked by using other discourse analytical methods.

This stage is followed by **stage 4: ending**. This stage functions to explicitly point out the overall theme of the film—while the young journalist finishes recording the interview and is fully frustrated by not knowing which story is the right story, Mr. Nobody states the motif of the story by quoting Tennessee Williams: Every path is the right path, and “everything could have been anything else and it would have just as much meaning”.

Before his death, Mr. Nobody tells the journalist that neither of them exist. They are figments in the mind of the nine-year-old Nemo at the train station, as he was forced to make an impossible choice. The young boy tries to find the correct decision, following each choice to its conclusion. In this stage, a scene shows another possible outcome of his life, when the boy takes a third option. He leaves both parents and runs away towards an unknown future.

The final stage, **stage 5: epilogue**, functions to wrap up the theme by a symbolic sequence, in which the expansion of the universe comes to a halt and time begins to reverse. The 118-year-old man springs back from his deathbed into awareness, cackling triumphally with the realisation that he is now able to freely return to any path in life and to reunite with Anna.

The mapping of the overall generic structure shows that *Mr. Nobody* is actually similar to some other complex, non-linear films, such as Wong Kar-Wai's *2046*. In particular, Tseng's (2012) exhaustive analysis of scene transitions in *2046* shows a precise similarity of genre structures between the two rather demanding puzzle films: *2046* also starts with an unspecified sequence, followed by a main chronological narrative strand, cross-cut with several fragmented sequences of the main character's flashbacks and contents of a science-fiction story written by the main character. Furthermore, another possible inter-textual reference between *Mr. Nobody* and *2046* is the use of the same soundtrack, an aria from Bellini's opera *Norma*, as in *2046*, when the scene transitions into the sequences of the science-fiction world are cued to the viewers.

In sum, despite the non-chronological nature of the scenes in these two films, one main linear narrative strand is nevertheless identifiable and coherently presented as the main schematic structure with a chronological progression of functional stages. The coherent construction of a schematic structure is supported by the configurations of several lower-level discourse dimensions analysed in the following subsections.

3.2 Cohesive Devices in Scene Transitions

This and the following sections show how several dimensions at level x in Figure 9.1, the stratum of discourse and textuality, can be systematically analysed on the basis of social semiotic frameworks.

In several non-linear puzzle films, one main set of discourse mechanisms that hold together an interpretable narrative path is *cohesion* (cf. Bateman & Tseng, 2013; Tseng & Bateman, 2012; Tseng, 2012;

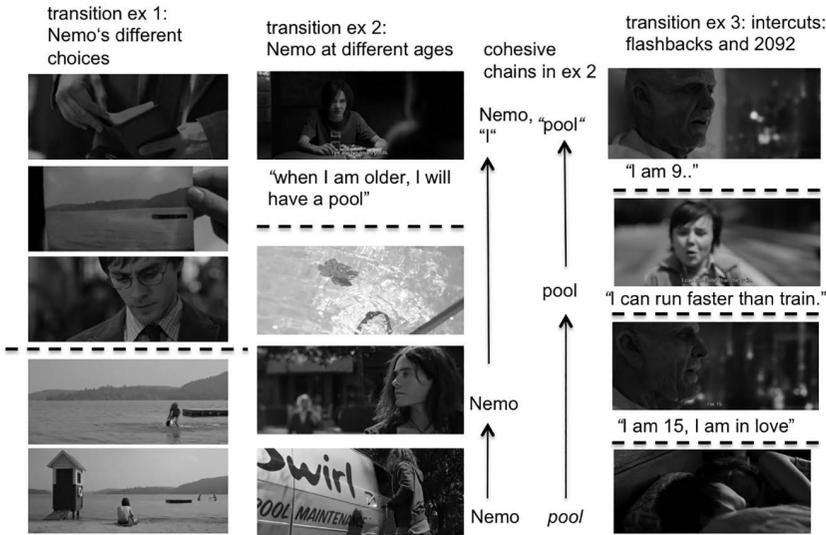


Figure 9.4 Three examples of the hook: cohesive mechanisms of scene transitions and intercuts across different narrative strands

Note: The dotted lines indicate transitions of scenes and settings.

Tseng & Bateman, 2010). In *Mr. Nobody*, the cohesive devices are also well mobilised to guide the viewers across the jumbled scenes and shots of the entire film. As described in the last section, this film intercuts scenes at two levels: It intercuts the main chronological strand of 2092 with Mr. Nobody's memories; and within his memories, the film also intercuts across the different narrative lines following Nemo's multiple choices, the science fiction novel Nemo is writing and another artificial world full of argyle patterns in which Mr. Nobody seems to be trapped sometimes during his navigation across different parts of memories. These intercuts and scene transitions are, nevertheless, mostly cohesively *hooked* together (cf. Tseng, 2012) by devices such as explicit repetition of the same characters, their actions, and their settings. Figure 9.4 includes three examples of such cohesive devices at work in the non-linear transitions of scenes and intercuts in this film.

The first example is a transition between Nemo's two different choices of reactions to and relations with Anna: In his first choice, 15-year-old Nemo, although secretly in love with Anna, deliberately insults her friends and rejects her invitation to swim at the beach for fear of revealing that he cannot swim. Anna then walks away and never comes back. Nemo regrets this choice ever since. He bumps into Anna with her kids one day in front of the train station. The first three images in Figure 9.4 show that Nemo takes out a picture from his wallet after Anna and her kids leave.

He stares with regret at the picture of the exact beach where Anna walked away from him. This is then cut to Nemo's second choice, in which he admits to Anna that he cannot swim, and Anna stays with him. Across the scene transition, the picture of the beach in Nemo's hand is hooked to the reappearance of the same beach, shown in the fourth and fifth images in Figure 9.4. The same identity of the setting and the repetition of Nemo's and Anna's actions (e.g., Nemo sitting at the beach, Anna running to him and asking him to swim) are robust devices signalling the cohesive ties between Nemo's two different choices. Throughout the film, a focal point, from which every choice splits in another branch, is explicitly signalled by this kind of cohesive strategy.

The second example in Figure 9.4 shows how the repeated motifs of this film, such as pools, swimming, and drowning, are often used as hooks across different scenes. This example uses 'pool' to hook together two stages in Nemo's life. The first image shows the last scene of the strand following young Nemo's second choice described above—he falls in love with Anna, whose father has an affair with Nemo's mother. Anna and Nemo develop a close relationship. However, it is forcefully broken when Nemo's mother and Anna's father separate. This image shows Nemo full of anger, telling his mother that she never understands him and he actually would like to have a pool. "When I am older, I will have a pool", Nemo says. This image is cut to the next scene, beginning with a pool and panning to the adult Nemo as a pool cleaner, suggested by his van labelled 'Pool Maintenance'.

The two scenes are tied by at least two cross-modal cohesive chains, displayed next to the screenshots in Figure 9.4. The cohesive chain of Nemo is linked across the two scenes with the visual and spoken element 'I' in the first image when he refers to himself. The motif of the film, pool, is also realised cross-modally: in Nemo's spoken text, in the visual track shown in the second screenshot, and in the printed text on the van in the fourth screenshot. Analysing such cross-modal cohesion chains effectively highlights just how cohesive mechanisms are mobilised and the same identities of people, places and settings throughout a film are cohesively tracked (Tseng, 2013a).

The third example in Figure 9.4 is a rapid intercut between the three different flashback strands of the 118-year-old Mr. Nobody, and the nine- and 15-year-old Nemos. Apart from the repetition of the same identity, the cohesive ties are simultaneously established by using the same action patterns cross-modally (Tseng, 2013b). In the first image, the 118-year-old Mr. Nobody says: "I am 9". This is then cut to the nine-year-old Nemo running next to a train, while the old man's voice continues to describe the same action "I can run faster than a train". This is cut back to the old Mr. Nobody, continuing to say: "I am 15 and I am in love". This is followed by a transition to the next scene in his flashback, cohesively hooked back to the action of 'being in love' by showing Nemo lying in bed with her.

In sum, sufficient cohesive mechanisms for cuing and tracking the reappearances of the same identities, settings, and actions dominantly function

to hook together the jumbled shots, scenes, and rapid intercuts across the multiple, non-linearly structured narrative strands throughout the film.

3.3 *Character Development and Event Progression*

The cross-cutting of the multiple layers of storylines following Nemo's multiple choices within and across three different women are the most intertwining and demanding narrative designs of the entire film. However, the complex labyrinth of Nemo's different choices and their consequent outcomes can be effectively unpacked by applying the tool of character development (Tseng, forthcoming) through mapping out goal- and motivation-oriented causal relations across the progression of events the main character experiences.

This tool is developed on the basis of combining the social semiotic framework of event and action patterns (Tseng, 2013b) with the tools developed by Trabasso and his colleagues (cf. Trabasso, van den Broek, & Suh, 1989; Trabasso & Nickels, 1992), particularly their framework for causal network discourse analysis originally designed for examining children's understanding of coherent verbal narrations of events and narrative goals. Causal logical relations in a filmic text have been investigated in several social semiotic studies (cf. Van Leeuwen, 1991; Bateman, 2007; Wildfeuer, 2014). These studies all suggest systematic methods for constructing fine-grained analyses of discourse relations across meaningful units in moving images. In the present paper, the analysis of character development focuses on another dimension of causal relations in film narratives—this discourse dimension examines how the main characters experience main events in the narrative lines and achieve their goals throughout a film. The discourse analysis builds on a series of event progressions. With the discourse method proposed in this section, event progression can be systematically analysed through examining how the narrative events of the main characters are motivated, enabled, and psychologically or physically triggered.

Figure 9.5 maps out the complex plan of the event progression and character developments of Nemo across the ages of nine, 15, and 35. Nemo's different choices at the age of nine at the station enable different branches of further choices. His choice to stay with his father enables him to meet Elise. This then triggers two possible paths: dating and marrying Elise, or being abandoned by Elise and then dating and marrying Jeanne. Each path leads to further event progressions logically and causally built and developed toward the end of the story: for instance, marrying Elise enables two types of event progressions: Nemo and Elise happily go on a honeymoon trip, which then leads to a car accident. Elise dies in the accident, or Elise suffers depression from their marriage and eventually leaves Nemo.

The choice of Nemo to leave with his mother enables his encounter with Anna. This then enables their relationship, which also branches out to different types of event progressions and outcomes. For example, Anna's leaving

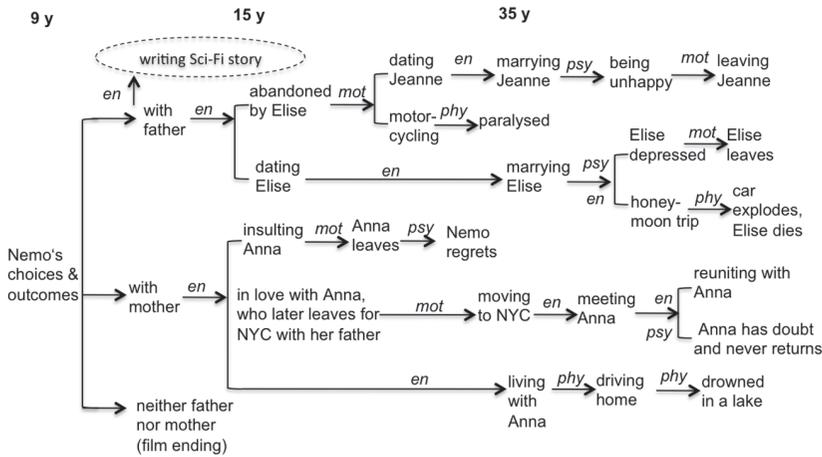


Figure 9.5 Goal plan and event progression of Nemo's choices and outcomes (en = enabling, psy = psychologically trigger, phy = physical trigger, mot = motivating)

for New York motivates Nemo to move to New York, with the goal of meeting her some day. This enables him to bump into Anna coincidentally.

In sum, despite the seemingly loose connections between bits and pieces within and across multiple layers of Nemo's story lines, a clear event progression concerning Nemo's goals and character development are nevertheless coherently constructed and tightly planned.

4. Conclusion

Targeting the narrative device of multiple endings, this chapter combined Van Leeuwen's (2005) method of multimodal schematic structure analysis with Tseng's (2013a, forthcoming) methods of multimodal cohesion and character development to highlight just how a highly demanding film with a non-linear structure and multiple endings can be systematically anatomised to see just which underlying discourse mechanisms function as robust cues for the viewers' narrative interpretation.

Through analysing the well-known puzzle film *Mr. Nobody*, this chapter showed that the film's schematic structure carries a straightforward, chronological narrative strand similar to the main scaffolding of other puzzle films, such as *2046*, and the cohesive strategies work well to hook the jumbled transitions and cross-cuts and often to function as motifs linking different paths of the character's life. In this chapter, I also presented the hypothesis that the most complex yet narratively significant dimension of the film for the audience is to make sense of Nemo's multiple choices and their consequent paths. Nevertheless, as the results of the analysis of Nemo's character development reveal, the discourse dimension of character development is

equipped with a highly compact and tightly planned event progression with identifiable, goal-oriented causal relations between the events experienced by Nemo.

In sum, this chapter has demonstrated that a multiple-level framework is needed in order to avoid the confusion of different concepts such as media materiality, genre expectations, ideological interpretations, textual coherence, and narrative impact. In particular, it has presented one such framework, which draws on the work of Van Leeuwen and linguists working in the social semiotic realm and illustrated how it can be employed to untangle the narrative complexity of puzzle narratives such as fiction films with multiple endings.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, the empirical study on genre prediction of fiction films by Magliano et al. (1996).
- 2 See Martin (1992); Mann and Thompson (1988).
- 3 For recent developments applying the functional linguistic analysis of text coherence to multimodal text, see, for example, Bateman (2008) for the analysis of printed documents, Van Leeuwen (1991); Bateman (2007) for logical relations in film, Tseng (2013a), for cohesive reference in film, and Bateman and Wildfeuer (2015) for text coherence in comics.
- 4 See Halliday (1978) for the original idea of meaning realisation across strata in SFL.
- 5 For more comparisons and discussions of narrative interpretation in interactive media, traditional films, and fictional films with computer-generated materials, see Tseng (2016).

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