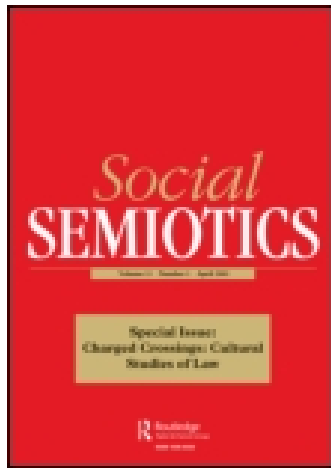


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### Analysing characters' interactions in filmic text: a functional semiotic approach

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## Analysing characters' interactions in filmic text: a functional semiotic approach

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This paper presents an analytical tool for constructing characters' action patterns in film. Understanding characters in moving images has been regarded as one of the most significant elements of narrative comprehension and interpretation because spectators' inferences of narrative structures are substantially mediated by characters. The social semiotic method presented in this paper shows how characters' actions and interactions can be systematically constructed based on the co-patterning of textual elements in film and how the patterns provide an analytical foundation for understanding and interpreting characters. In addition, this paper also reviews the previous explorations of the more fine-grained approaches to character analysis and then demonstrates how the method the paper suggests can support and strengthen the accounts provided to date. Most importantly, by comparing scenes within and across two war films, *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *Black Hawk Down* (2001), the article will show the potential of this method for effectively constraining hypotheses for empirical investigations of filmic meaning.

**Keywords:** film analysis; characters' actions; multimodality; multimodal semiotics; cohesion; language and film; functional linguistics

### 1. Introduction

As observers, we are compelled to attribute character based upon the actions and behaviour we observe... The analogy to judging characters in film is direct: the first time we see a character, he behaves in a certain way, and based upon the behaviour, we categorise the character. (Anderson 1996, 135)

For the past two decades film researchers have been developing systematic, character-based approaches to film analysis. As the above quote implies, characters' faces, expressions, actions and all kinds of behaviours function as the main resources for the viewer to construct predictions and inferences about characters' traits and emotions and entire narrative<sup>1</sup> structures are substantially mediated by characters (cf. Eder 2010; Smith 1995). In addition, characters' actions and interactions are of immense importance in studies of visual cognition and narrative comprehension. Research on visual cognition shows that the visual features of action function most robustly to capture the attention of viewers (Mital et al. 2011); the research conducted by Visch (2007) also shows how actions in film function to constrain viewers' predictions of film genre. Drawing on the significant role characters' actions

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and interactions play in film analysis, this paper will provide a socio-functional semiotic method for analysing this specific dimension of character understanding.

The method is developed building on research results from studies of both film and linguistics. There are three reasons. First, our previous research has shown that linguistically motivated film analysis has a strong potential for systematically reflecting the viewer's narrative inferences and expectations (cf. Tseng and Bateman 2012). Second, as the next section will elucidate, the concept of "stratification" in linguistics-based theorising, such as that in systemic functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; Martin 1992), can most effectively strengthen multi-levelled analyses proposed in film studies such as the ground-breaking work of Murray Smith (1995) on the *Structure of Sympathy* and the four-levelled character descriptive model by Jens Eder (2010). Third, the linguistically motivated multimodal approach (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) can systematically uncover the collaborative effect of visual, verbal and audio cues in the viewer's narrative comprehension; this provides insights into similar research topics studied by cognitive scientists, for instance, those aiming to demonstrate the collaboration between visual and linguistic modalities in referent assignments given to experiment participants (cf. Coco and Keller 2009).

In brief, this paper specifically addresses two main issues:

1. Can we systematically examine how patterns of characters' (inter)actions are multimodally constructed?
2. Building on frameworks of character analysis proposed to date in film studies, can we further develop a method for constructing patterns of characters' (inter)actions for comparative purposes and for broader corpus investigation?

The first question is dealt with by presenting the analytical method. We begin by analysing a beginning sequence in the war film *The Thin Red Line* (1998). Here a bottom-up analysis shows how action patterns are systematically established from the co-patterning of cross-modal elements in film. Subsequently, in order to show the possibility of contrasting patterns and comparing genre conventions, the second question is addressed through comparing scenes within *The Thin Red Line* and contrasting patterns between *The Thin Red Line* and another war movie, *Black Hawk Down* (2001). The divergent patterns will provide some insight into the constrained path of the viewer's narrative inference, in particular, concerning how the unconventional features of the war film genre (cf. Plantinga 2010) are construed.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 locates the study in a broader spectrum of research on film character research in recent decades. Section 3 demonstrates the method by analysing a beginning scene in *The Thin Red Line*. Finally, Section 4 conducts two comparative analyses for addressing just how the narrative inferences and interpretations in film are mobilised and directed.

## 2. Analysing actions as the basis for understanding and interpreting characters

That characters' behaviours, actions and interactions significantly determine how the characters are understood, engaged with and interpreted as not being controversial. A significant piece of research in this respect is the monograph by Murray Smith (1995). Seeing the insufficient analytical delicacy of "character identification", the

term conventionally used by psychoanalytic film theories, Smith proposes a more fine-grained framework to analyse characters in a film and the relationship between characters and viewer. This framework offers a useful account of how viewers interact with film characters and how the interaction results in emotions and sympathy.

Sympathy is theorised by Smith with three main descriptive levels: *Recognition*, *Alignment* and *Allegiance*. *Recognition* addresses mechanisms cueing viewers to recognise characters' identities throughout a film. This level of description focuses on viewers' perception of filmic elements and the way these elements are constructed coherently throughout a film into a recognisable form around individual agents (Smith 1995, 82). The next level of description *Alignment* goes beyond formal and textual strategies that cue viewer's perception and deals with "the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel" (83). It is mediated by a range of film narration techniques such as actions, spatio-temporal paths and subjective access to characters. *Character allegiance* "pertains to the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator" (84); allegiance has "both cognitive and affective dimensions" because spectators might be "affectively aroused" in their judgement of a character (84). Hence, the viewer's allegiance to characters is mediated by several factors such as information gathered through alignment, character actions and behaviour, etc.

Figure 1 illustrates generally the link between the three descriptive categories defined by Smith. Here we can see how mechanisms of recognition support the mobilisation of alignment and allegiance. In other words, how sympathy is mobilised and how information about characters is gathered is anchored in the perception of formal/textual elements which construct characters coherently throughout a film. The multi-levelled framework as such is a systematic framework of character analysis. Drawing on the delicacy of descriptive levels defined by Smith, the method presented in this paper supports one significant part of Smith's complex framework: namely, how the information concerning characters' behaviour and traits is mediated by the coherent construction of characters' identities.

In other words, this paper particularly demonstrates the left part of Figure 1. It first elucidates the ways identity recognition is coherently mobilised. It then shows how another level of information concerning character is constructed, namely, what characters are doing and experiencing.

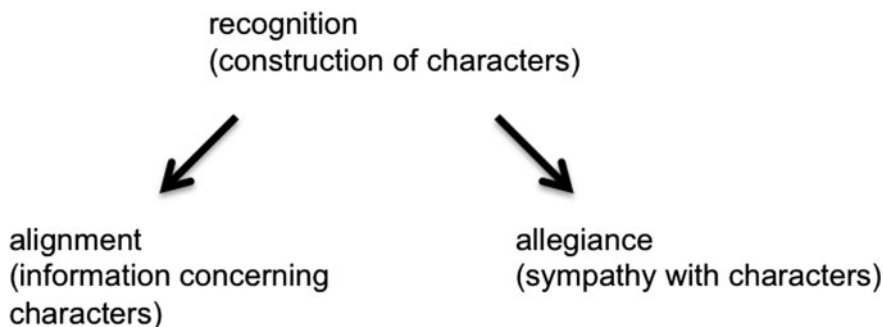


Figure 1. Relationship between recognition, alignment and allegiance defined by Murray Smith (1995, 105).

This paper does not claim that the analytical result provided by the proposed method provides an overall, exhaustive description of characters' information. Character alignment in Smith's terms is mediated by a wide variety of filmic resources in different dimensions such as music and lighting, which engenders mood and emotion, camera positions, characters' actions and behaviours, etc. The method proposed here focuses specifically on one significant resource, namely, characters' actions including those seen in the visual-track and expressed in the verbal text. To provide a complex description of character traits and information, additional analytical methods accounting for other dimensions still need to be developed, such as methods for systematically describing filmic resources which manipulate emotions or different camera uses which affect and constrain information about characters.

In addition to the approach proposed by Murray Smith and Jens Eder (2010) also conceptualises a framework, which demonstrates the descriptive process of character analysis. He contends that unravelling how characters are understood and interpreted involves four major levels of description, which "build on each other and are in constant interaction with each other" (Eder 2010, 21). The four levels are:

- **Artefact:** the first and lowest level deals with the composition of concrete materials and aesthetic structures. It addresses how the characters are represented textually and stylistically.
- **Fictional being:** building on the first level, the second level addresses the formation of socially contextualised character traits and characters' mental models, i.e. features possessed by the characters in the fictional world.
- **Symbol:** based on the above two aspects, the higher descriptive level "symbol" describes what the characters stand for and what indirect meanings they convey. This level of description is comparable to thematics defined by the Russian Formalists (cf. Tomashevsky 1965).
- **Symptom:** finally, the highest level in Eder's framework involves more culturally framed description of effects produced by characters, e.g. film-maker's intentions, characters as role models for the viewers, etc.

The method of action analysis proposed in this paper rests on the lower descriptive levels as defined in Eder's framework; that is, the method focuses on the patterning of action and character elements and it reflects the textual structures and stylistic formations of characters in film. Drawing on Eder's conceptual framework, these descriptions of aesthetic patterns can then be seen as robust support for further symbolic and symptomatic interpretations.

The approaches developed by Smith and Eder both demonstrate an important aspect of theorising in filmic analysis – they are broadly conceptualised as theoretical models with distinct, yet, inter-relating strata, which encompass lower descriptive levels of textual formation realising more abstract, higher-level descriptions of character information. This analytical trait is seen as particularly significant in the development of linguistic approaches to discourse analysis such as approaches drawing on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; Martin 1992).

The following sections show how linguistics-based theorisation can be effectively used to develop an analytical approach to filmic descriptions in terms of the stratified analysis of meanings in film.

### 3. Method for constructing action patterns of characters

This section presents the analytical approach to filmic action. To explicate the bottom-up construction, we need to first elucidate the concepts of stratification and realisation in more detail.

#### 3.1. Stratification and realisation

A stratified conceptualisation of how filmic meanings is realised is displayed in [Figure 2](#), which is one component of the broader methodological framework for film proposed by Tseng (2013). The stratified approach is constructed following the model developed in functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). The basic assumption made here is that filmic meaning, just as is the case with linguistic meaning, can be seen as constructed through a complex process of realisation across strata: namely, concrete filmic devices at the bottom-level are deployed to realise discourse strategies; different kinds of discourse strategies are in turn manipulated to realise certain genres or styles; and, finally, film genres and styles then realise abstract social and ideological meanings.

“Realisation”, as the semiotic relationship that holds between strata, is often characterised as a relationship of co-patterning – that is, patterns at a more abstract level of description (higher stratum, such as genre/style) regularly occur together with patterns at less abstract levels of description (lower strata, such as filmic devices and structural sequences). The details of this relationship vary across distinct text types (genres) and across the unfolding of an individual text, and so provide precisely the kind of flexibility that is required for a suitable treatment of film. It is this concept of stratification that allows us to start bridging the gap between the formal devices employed in a film and their contextualised interpretation.

The action patterns constructed through the method presented in this paper can be seen as the formally specifiable, less abstract configurations that stand as one “realisation” of more abstract patterns of social significance; and similarly, as we

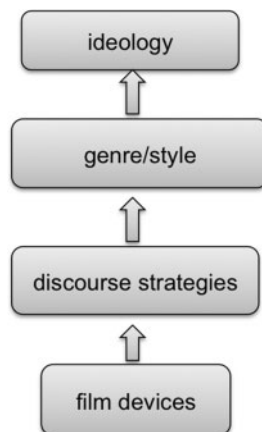


Figure 2. Strata of filmic meaning realisation. The arrows depict the process of meaning realisation.

shall explore in the following section, these action patterns are themselves realised in more concrete audio-visual features of the filmic material.

### 3.2. Constructing action patterns

The analytical method proposed in this paper was first set out in Tseng (2013). It is based on an application to film of principles originally developed for language within functional semiotics (Martin 1992; van Leeuwen 2005). To introduce the method, we focus on one short segment from the beginning of the war film *The Thin Red Line* (1998), depicting the monologue of one main character, Witt, and his contemplation about Nature. The segment is displayed in Figure 3.

The method we call upon for tracking salient narrative elements and for examining how viewers are guided to particular ways of comprehending film narratives is the tool of cohesive chains developed by Tseng (2008, 2013). Generally speaking, this tool is for unravelling how one particular kind of cohesion device operates and how the cohesive devices bring together characters, objects and settings coherently throughout a film. The origin of the notion *cohesion* goes back to a linguistic proposal of Halliday and Hasan (1976) for describing the workings of verbal text; it draws on a classification of the ways in which textual elements can depend on previously presented elements in a text in order to construct “cohesive chains”, which interlink textually related elements. The relevance of this tool for cohesion analysis in film has been suggested by several authors (cf. Bellour 2000; Bordwell 2006; Janney 2010; Palmer 1989), but had not previously been explored in the detail necessary for supporting a precise analysis. Here, we present how cohesive

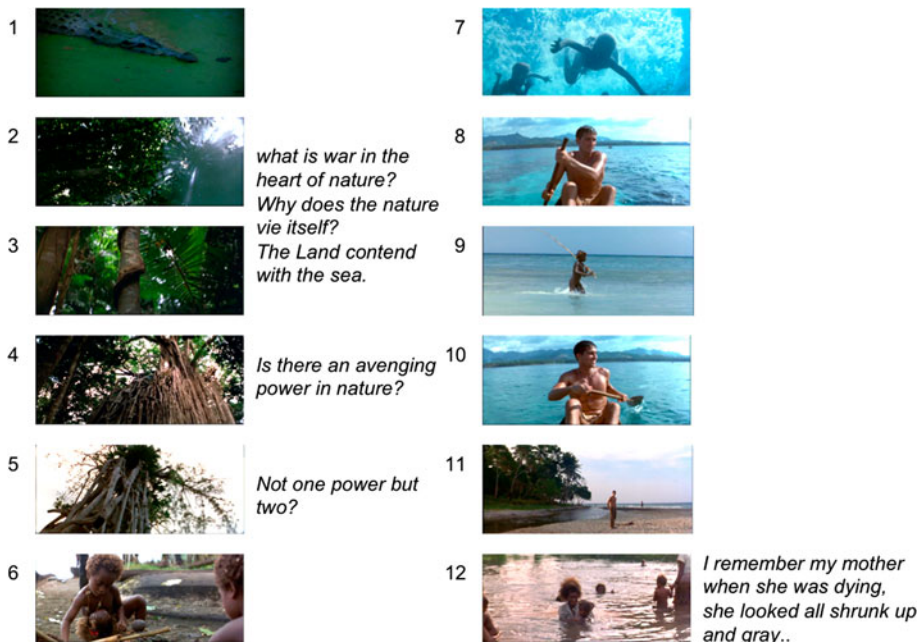


Figure 3. The first two minutes of *The Thin Red Line*. Italic text: the off-screen monologue of the character, Witt.



chains can be systematically established in order that “chain interaction” can be precisely characterised. This is the level of abstraction required for pursuing event analysis at a higher level.

### 3.2.1. Cohesive chains in the monologue scene

The approach to cohesion in film taken here draws most immediately on an extended version of Martin’s identification discourse semantic system as developed for language text (Martin 1992, Chapter 3). According to Martin, the identification system in natural language realises the identity tracking of people, places and things throughout a text. The patterns of identification revealed, namely, how relevant people, places and things are actually tracked, highlight the unity of any specific text. This kind of cohesive pattern, consisting of cohesive chains, then tracks people, places and things in a precisely analogous way in film, i.e. characters, settings and objects.

Cohesive chains are formed whenever particular elements are placed repeatedly in sequences of cohesive ties over the unfolding of a text. Whereas any element in a textual artefact typically enters into a large number of cohesive links with other elements, it has been observed in work on language texts that a particularly strong textual role is played by cohesive chains rather than the individual elements (cf. Hasan 1984b). Since the first type of cohesive chain is concerned with tracking “identities” of characters, objects and settings, we term them more specifically “identity chains”, while a second type of cohesive chains that we will demonstrate later, termed “action chains”, deals with actions based on which characters interact.

The identity chains of the monologue scene are shown in Figure 4. In this brief scene five prominent narrative elements can be identified. Each of these participates in a cohesive chain made up of a sequence of cohesive relations of the kind used to classify the appearance and reappearance of Witt, other people and objects he is looking at/talking about and the setting of nature. Other narrative elements that may potentially have been relevant only due to their presence in the shot are not included at this point, e.g. the boat Witt is paddling in images 8–10, the stone the child is holding in image 6, etc., because they do not play a significant role individually for narrative construction. For example, the trees in image 11 are contextualised within the setting of nature and thus they need not be singled out as individual narrative elements in our cohesion analysis.

The construction of each identity chain is based on “filmic resources”, which can be used to cue viewers to a reoccurring identity along the chain, and the maintenance of each chain is shown using arrows that link successive elements back to previous elements of the same chain. For instance, Witt is seen explicitly in images 8, 10 and 11 and viewers should have no problem recognising his reappearance. However, in some cases such as dialogue scenes, characters often reappear with only parts of their torso; and here the filmic resources of continuity editing are usually used to cue viewers to the identity of the partly invisible character. In Section 4.1, such a dialogue scene will be exemplified and elucidated in more detail.

Moreover, referring to these chains, we can see that the tracking of identities can be realised *cross-modally*. For instance, the first element, Nature, starts in shot 1 with a visual realisation [v], an image of a crocodile sinking in the swamp, but it is cross-modally realised in images 2–4, when Witt’s verbal text mentions “nature, land, sea”.





Before action patterns can be constructed, another type of cohesive chain needs to be introduced, the action chains, building on which identity chains are connected to each other for action pattern constructions.

### 3.2.2. Action chains and chain interaction

The creation of filmic action chains draws centrally on the notion of *process types* developed for language within systemic-functional grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). These process types characterise the very general kinds of activities that are constructed by the grammar of a language: this refers to how any particular language “construes” activities and events in the world, embedding them within particular configurations of categories deemed to be culturally significant and relevant. They describe, therefore, “what is being done”. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) subsequently extended this linguistic notion to visual analysis, distinguishing two types of representation that denote two domains of meaning construed in visual images – dynamic narrative representations and static conceptual representations.

The former are realised by the presence of a perceptible “vector”, an oblique line formed by some part of what is represented, e.g. the arms of the soldiers in Figure 5, an image from *Black Hawk Down*, or by abstract graphic elements such as arrows. The character/object from whom or which the vector emanates is then the Actor, e.g. the soldiers in Figure 5; the character/object at whom or towards which the vector is directed is the Goal, e.g. the wounded soldier on the stretcher. Processes which have both an Actor and a Goal, as in Figure 5 where the soldiers (Actor) “are carrying/ touching” (process) the wounded man (Goal), are termed *transactional actions*; in contrast, non-transactional processes only have an Actor.

One specific kind of narrative process is of considerable relevance for visual analysis: this is the “reaction”, realised by an *eyeline vector*. Reactions, too, may either be transactional, having both a Reactor, the person who looks, such as the soldiers in Figure 5 who are looking at the wounded soldier and a Phenomenon – the character, object or scene looked at, e.g. the soldier on the stretcher. A reactional process is also realised in the sequence of *The Thin Red Line*. In images 8, 10, 11, for instance, Witt is the reactor, looking at people around him; and the people presented in images 9 and 12 are the Phenomena who are observed by Witt. This construction naturally overlaps considerably with filmic discussions of point-of-view shots (e.g. Branigan 1984).

In contrast to narrative processes, conceptual processes lack a vector. For instance, the image of the poster in Figure 6 shows the main characters of the film. They are visually decontextualised and none of their prominent actions are depicted because their appearance in this poster is to suggest who the main characters are. Conceptual processes show the more static relationships of characters and objects such as the relations of part–whole and superordinate–subordinate. The image of soldiers in this poster can then be seen as a “part” (termed “Attribute” by Kress and van Leeuwen 1996) of the “whole” (termed “Carrier” by Kress and van Leeuwen) poster design to present basic information about this film.

Table 1 summarises the process types in narrative and conceptual domains as originally developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) and as now further revised for film analysis; a detailed review of Kress and van Leeuwen’s system and its application to moving images is given in Tseng (2013).



Figure 5. An image extracted from *Black Hawk Down*. Example of transactional and reactional processes in visual transitivity.



Figure 6. Example of conceptual process (Source: the poster of *Saving Private Ryan*).

Table 1. Categories of processes and participants (Actors, Goals, etc.) in film.

	Types of processes	Characters/objects
Representational domains	Non/transactional action	Actor/interactor; Goal
	Non/transactional reaction (gaze)	Reactor; Phenomenon
	Mental	Senser; Phenomenon
	Verbal	Sayer; Addressee
Conceptual domains	Analytic	Carrier; Attribute
	Classificational	Superordinate; Subordinate
	Symbolic	Symbolic carrier; Symbolic attribute

Kress and van Leeuwen's work on establishing common categories of visual and verbal process types is the point of departure for an approach capable of constructing *cross-modal* meaning patterns. According to Kress and van Leeuwen:

(Semantic) comparisons such as these can highlight which ways of representing the world can be realised linguistically, which visually and which in both ways. And this, in turn, is useful as a background for analysing representation in multimodal texts. (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 78)

Returning to our example of the beginning segment from *The Thin Red Line*, three action chains drawing on the categories of process types can be established from the text. These are displayed in Figure 7. The first chain is a mental one and is also realised cross-modally: it encompasses Witt's voice-over in the audio-visual track, depicting a character's action of inner contemplation. The chain also includes a verbal element "remember" (spoken by Witt in image 12), which realises *mental processes* according to the categories in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). The second and the third chains are mono-modal – the verbal *transactional process* is realised in Witt's verbal text when he talks about nature viewing and contending with itself in images 2 and 3; and the visual *reactional process* is realised when Witt's actions of looking and gazing are involved.

The purpose of establishing identity chains and action chains is to construct action patterns and to see how the prominent characters, places and things are

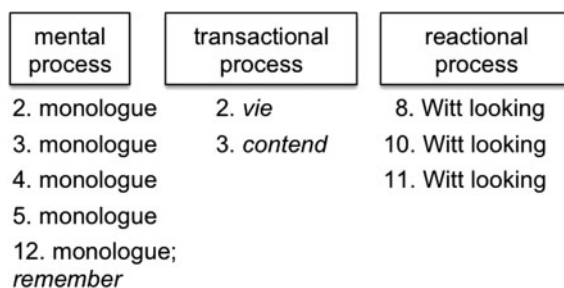


Figure 7. Action chains in the beginning scene from *The Thin Red Line*. The numbers refer to the images in Figure 3.

brought together to interact through prominent action types. Figure 8 displays the action pattern of this beginning scene. In the diagram we see the main character, Witt, and the types of interactions between Witt, other people and objects. Their relationships are labelled with *functional roles* according to the categories of process types in Table 1.

Figure 8 abstracts an aspect of just which direction of subject matters are dealt with in this brief scene: it is mainly about Witt's mental ruminations and observations. In addition, the theme of "mother" and the people around Witt in nature are also the narrative focus. From the diagram we can also see where Witt is located – Nature, which also functions as a main narrative focus involved in transactional process ("how nature vies itself").

Moreover, the chain of the verbal element "power" in Figure 4 does not participate in the chain interaction in Figure 8, because the process type in which this verbal element is involved is not prominent enough to form an action chain: namely, the conceptual process "is there" in image 4 in Figure 3 only appears once in this brief scene and is thus not considered for the present analysis.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, this style of analysis shows how particular cues present within filmic images can be abstracted to produce generic schemes of more prominent actions, roles within actions and relations between actions. We could hypothesise that the patterns in Figure 8 are typical of a scene without the involvement of any dynamic actions but with more communication and inner reflections. To frame the hypothesis more broadly, differences and similarities across story events can be identified on the basis of such patterns.

To examine whether this hypothesis is supported or refuted, it is necessary to apply the method to a larger sample of data. To further demonstrate the empirical potential of the method for a broader corpus analysis, the next section provides two comparative analyses.

## 4. Two comparative analyses

### 4.1. Comparing action patterns of beginning scenes in war films

This section focuses on one short segment from one of the beginning scenes (around minutes 27–9 after the film begins) in the war film *Black Hawk Down* (2001). It is a dialogue scene depicting a conversation between two soldiers about their feelings concerning the war and politics. The scene is displayed in Figure 9.

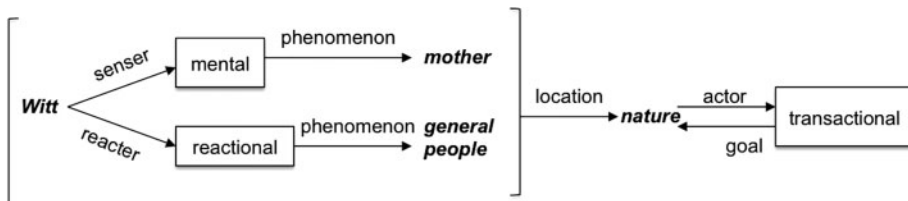


Figure 8. Schematic representation of action pattern and actor-activity relationships in the beginning scene in *The Thin Red Line*.

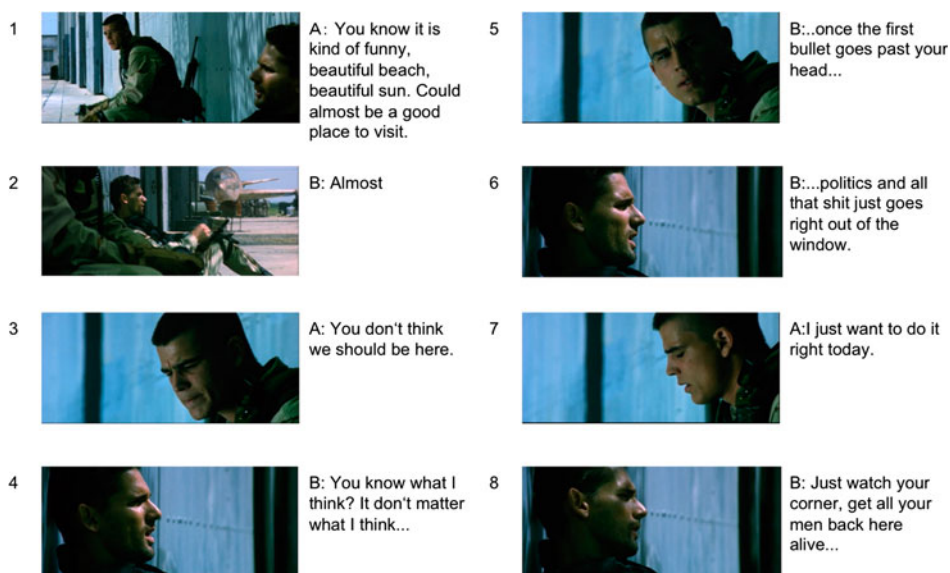


Figure 9. A dialogue scene in *Black Hawk Down*. Soldier A refers to the man on the left in image 1.

The method presented in the previous section is applied again to this scene. The cohesive chains, namely, identity chains and action chains are constructed in Figures 10 and 11. Three salient identity chains can be established: Soldier A, Soldier B and the setting “camp”. These chains are also cross-modally constructed: for instance, Soldier B starts in image 1 with a cross-modal realisation both as [v] in the visual-track and “you” in the soundtrack mentioned by Soldier A: “You know . . .”. This cross-modal realisation in image 1 is followed by Soldier B’s mono-modal realisation in the visual-track in image 2. So is the chain of “camp”, which begins with the setting in the visual-track as well as “place” mentioned in the spoken text of Soldier A. This location is mentioned again in images 3 and 8, referred to by Soldiers A and B as “here”. While the chain of Soldier A begins with the mono-modal link [v] in images 1, 2, 3 and “you” in images 4 and 8 as verbal elements mentioned by Soldier B, this character is also cross-modally realised in images 5 and 7 in the visual- and sound-tracks.

The filmic resources of continuity editing, briefly mentioned in Section 3.2.1 above, are mobilised in this example to cue the viewers to the same identities of the soldiers although they are not shown completely in some images. For instance, only parts of Soldier A’s torso are seen in image 2, nevertheless, the filmic resource of *shot-reverse shot* cues viewers to believe that the partly invisible man in image 2 is the Soldier A just seen in image 1.

Three action chains are established according to the prominence of process types defined in the previous section. They include mental processes realised as the verbal elements “know, think, want”, a *verbal process* realised when the soldiers are seen speaking, and *reactional processes*, realised when the actions of looking or gazing are involved.

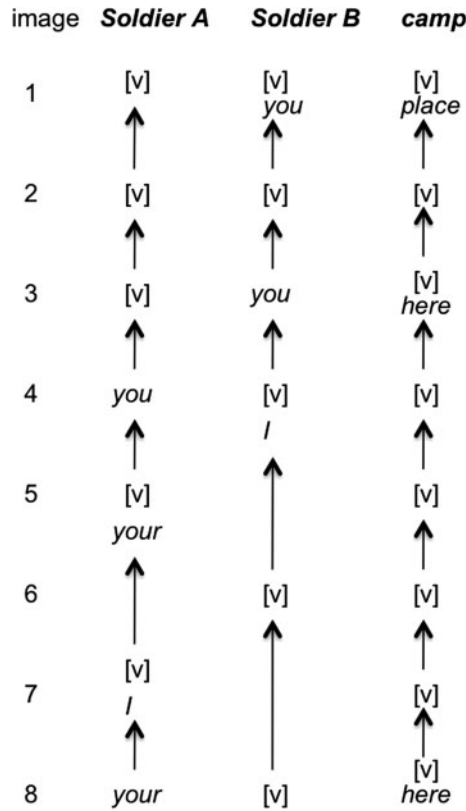


Figure 10. Cohesive identity chains in the dialogue scene from *Black Hawk Down*. [v] = visual figures, italic = spoken text.

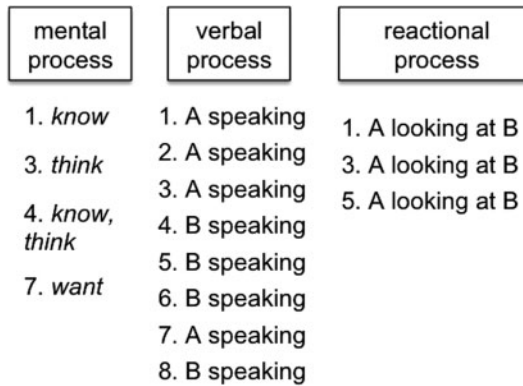


Figure 11. Action chains in the dialogue scene from *Black Hawk Down*. The numbers refer to the images in the dialogue scene.



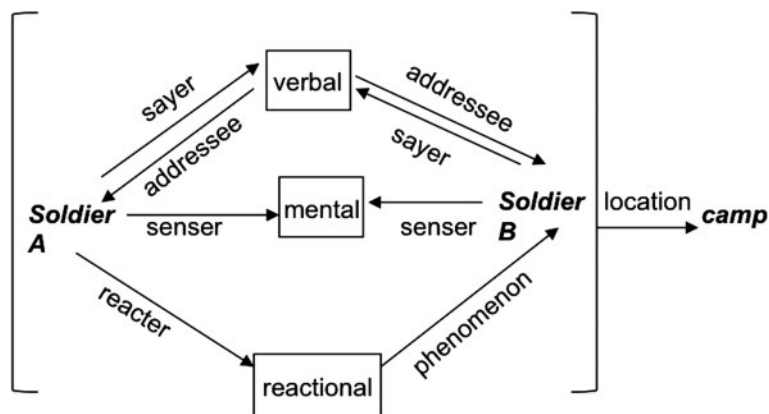


Figure 12. Action patterns in the dialogue scene in *Black Hawk Down*.

Finally, the action pattern in Figure 12 displays how Figures 10 and 11 are brought to interact and depicts the prominent relationships between the two characters, Soldiers A and B.

Comparing the action patterns in Figures 8 and 12, we can see that the characters in the two scenes, Witt, Soldiers A and B, are involved in similar action types: the salient uses of mental and reactional processes in the two scenes show how the subject matters here are concerned less with soldiers' dynamic actions in the battle than their observations and inner thoughts. The only difference in process types lies in the visualisation of the soldiers' verbal interaction in *Black Hawk Down* while, in this very brief scene in *The Thin Red Line*, visual cues that indicate Witt is talking have not yet been shown to the viewer. Hence, the voice-over of Witt in this brief segment is categorised as a mental process.

From the higher analytical stratum, we can then further examine how the pattern constructed by textual elements supports those claims generally made for film interpretations. For instance, one central theme of war films, particularly those made during a war, is the revelation of doubt and despair of soldiers amidst attempts to tell the viewers that fighting the war is justified (cf. Basinger 1986). The story background of *Black Hawk Down* is a true event between 1992 and 1993, when a US military raid that went disastrously wrong (optimistic plans ran into unexpected resistance in Mogadishu, Somalia). The beginning tells the viewers that some 300,000 Somalis had died of starvation because Somali warlords who occupied the land were more interested in protecting their turf than feeding their people. The US purpose was to help deliver UN food shipments and, in 1993, a troop of elite soldiers was sent to eliminate a Somali warlord. Hence, the beginning of the film first explicitly justifies the combat before scenes like Figure 9 express soldiers' doubt and anger about the war.

Building on the comparative analysis, tentative hypotheses can be drawn such as: one feature of the war film genre is that soldiers' doubts and inner thoughts are often depicted in the beginning of the film before their battles start; and this theme at the higher stratum is realised through the prominent use of certain textual elements at a lower stratum, namely, prominent mental and reactional action types. To examine

these hypotheses, we again need to apply the same method to a broader range of war films and see whether similar action patterns to those demonstrated in this paper are frequently constructed in their beginnings.

#### 4.2. Comparing scenes across *The Thin Red Line*

This subsection analyses a scene in *The Thin Red Line* displayed in Figure 13. This is a scene where soldiers retreat to the woods after a disastrous battle. On the basis of Witt's perspective, the scene illustrates the suffering of soldiers observed by Witt with several point-of-view shots. The voice-over accompanying the images is again the monologue of Witt, which continues throughout the scene.

The construction of action patterns of the scene is displayed in Figure 14. Analogously to Figure 8, the patterns demonstrate Witt's mental and reactional processes in the setting of Nature (woods). Witt's transactional action in this example is realised when he is seen helping the wounded soldier from image 5 to image 8. According to Plantinga (2010), Witt is "the character who in many ways is the locus of this film, the individual whose subjectivity and vision is elevated above all others" (95). Hence, if we conduct analysis throughout this film we could possibly see the repetition of a similar pattern formed around this character. Unlike the narrative in *Black Hawk Down*, which focuses on the accurate hour-by-hour chain-event of battles (except for the beginning scenes, revealing soldiers' doubts and questions), the frequent use of characters' mental and reactional processes throughout *The Thin Red Line* realises its narrative structure that bears the interrogative and ruminative thematics throughout the film. This is precisely why the film has been regarded as a strange, unconventional war film (Plantinga 2010, 91).



Figure 13. A scene depicting Witt's monologue in *The Thin Red Line*. Italic text: Witt's voice-over.

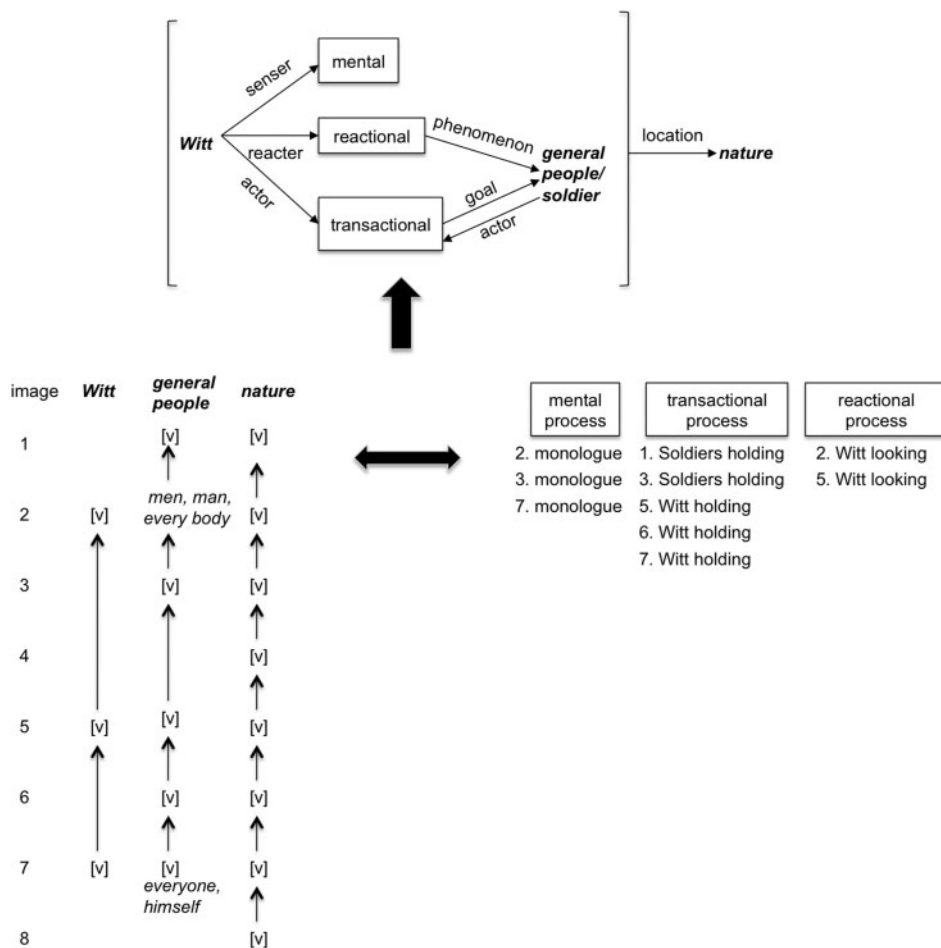


Figure 14. Constructing action patterns of the scene in Figure 13. From left to right, bottom to top: identity chains, action chains and action patterns.

### 5. Conclusion

This paper proposed a functional semiotic method for patterning filmic characters' actions and interactions. Since the late 1960s, analysis which systematically examines the co-patterning of multimodal elements across the audio, visual and verbal tracks in film has been pursued. In the growing trend of multimodal analysis, the method presented in this paper particularly contributes to bridging different analytical approaches. As elucidated earlier in this paper, the stratified functional analysis, unlike other structural semiological frameworks, can empirically complement and strengthen the more recent developments in cognitive film theories.

One issue that future theorists might take up is to what extent a multi-levelled conceptualisation such as the *Structure of Sympathy* by Murray Smith and the descriptive approach to film characters by Jens Eder is empirically supported. To this end, we need a method for abstracting the complex interaction of filmic textual elements at the lower analytical stratum to structures that reflect meanings at the

higher stratum. The method should be used to effectively compare these structures to a broader and larger corpus, for instance, within and across a wide variety of film genres. Only through a broader comparative corpus analysis can we evaluate the link more effectively across different descriptive levels such as film as artefact, viewers' cognitive experience, narrative interpretation, and genre prediction. It is in this perspective that the functional semiotic framework proposed in this paper can be seen as methodology for effectively generating testable claims across different levels of filmic meaning analysis.

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### Notes

1. The term film narrative has been defined in different scopes as there are many different approaches to this field of study (Chatman 1978; Metz 1974; Stam, Burgoyne and Fliterman-Lewis 1992). In this paper, film narrative refers to the representation, structure and process of narration as defined by David Bordwell (1985).
2. A detailed treatment of the linguistics-based principle of highlighting salient semantic patterns rather than exhaustive analysis can be seen in the linguistic work by Halliday (cf. 1971) and Hasan (1984a).

### Notes on contributor

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