

Cinematic Symbolism: Delving into Metaphor within Film

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Abstract: Metaphor transcends its role as mere embellishment and emerges as a pivotal process within both language and cognition. This article ventures into uncharted territory within film studies by exploring the potential application of Max Black's interactional theory of metaphor and cognitive metaphor theory to analyze metaphor in film language. This perspective, though hitherto unexplored in film studies, proves indispensable for dissecting complex metaphorical structures within film texts and offers a precise framework for understanding associative language in film. Initially, this study delves into the description of the metaphorical process as delineated by interaction and cognitive metaphor theories, applying them to the analysis of film texts. Special emphasis is placed on elucidating how ideology intricately intertwines with the construction and reception of both conventional and non-conventional metaphors. In the article the final segment, meticulous analyses of Roland Emmerich's "2012" is conducted, spotlighting the interplay of structuring, personification, and displacement metaphors in shaping the ideological discourses embedded within the films.

Key words: metaphor, cinema, personification

Introduction

Metaphor is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of both language and cognition¹. In everyday conversation, scholarly discussions, literature, and even cinema, our experiences are often understood and expressed in terms of other experiences and representations. Thus, metaphor serves not merely as ornamental language but as a crucial tool for interpreting texts². It functions

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¹ Grotty Andrew, *The Language of Metaphors*, London, Routledge, 1997, *Washing the Brain: Metaphor and Hidden Ideology*, Amsterdam, Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2007

² Semino, Elena, *Metaphor in Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008

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as a key organizational principle in narratives, efficiently conveying meaning by linking signs or engaging various cognitive structures, whether basic or conventional³. Furthermore, when analyzing films, particularly through a critical lens, metaphors play a significant role in constructing meaning from the text⁴.

This article endeavors to explore metaphor in the language of film through the lens of cognitive metaphor theory, which offers a comprehensive understanding of the metaphorical process within linguistics. Surprisingly, this theory has not been extensively applied to the examination of metaphor in film. The key advantage of this approach lies in its capacity to dissect complex metaphorical structures within film texts. Moreover, cognitive metaphor theory provides a unified framework for interpreting various textual phenomena such as metaphor, simile, metonymy, and personification, as well as elucidating the effects of associating different signs or concepts. While the symbolic meaning of individual signs can be explained through secondary signification, metaphor theory delves into the interactions between multiple signs. Additionally, it offers insights into how a specific connotative meaning of a sign emerges in a particular context, which alternative meanings are emphasized or diminished, and the ensuing effects. Furthermore, it elucidates how this meaning can extend into other related metaphorical and textual configurations. This article explores its potential applications in analyzing the language of film.

In film studies, a cognitive perspective on metaphor remains relatively uncommon. Scholars like Trevor Whittock and Noël Carroll have transitioned

³ Goatly Andrew, *The Language of Metaphors*, London, Routledge, 1997. *Washing the Brain: Metaphor and Hidden Ideology*, Amsterdam, Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2007, p. 21-25.

⁴ Kim Heesun, "Conceptual Metaphors in Film Reviews", *Journal of English and American Studies*, Online journal. Volume 1, 2002.

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from a purely rhetorical understanding of metaphor to exploring its semantic dimensions, drawing upon the insights of Lakoff and Johnson's theory. However, their discussions often overlook the significance of conventional metaphors in film, focusing instead on metaphorical expressions rather than delving into their underlying conceptual frameworks. Although Whittock briefly acknowledges the importance of conventional metaphors in film within a section of his book dedicated to Lakoff and Johnson⁵, the bulk of his analysis primarily centers on non-conventional metaphors—those that exist at the fringes of human consciousness—rather than those that form the foundation of it. Furthermore, Whittock's classification of metaphor primarily distinguishes between different forms of metaphorical expressions, rather than exploring variances in their conceptual relationships. Similarly, Noël Carroll's discussion of homospatial metaphors, which he considers as the most characteristic and fundamental type of metaphor in film⁶, should be understood as a specific instance of non-conventional metaphor within the broader framework provided by cognitive theory.

Homospatial metaphors, as highlighted by Carroll, involve the fusion of elements from disparate domains within a single cinematic figure, often a character, creating a juxtaposition of contrasting elements typical of non-conventional metaphors according to cognitive metaphor theory. However, Carroll and Whittock's examinations of cinematic metaphor tend to underappreciate the significance of conventional metaphors. Consequently, they overlook the unique ideological influence wielded by basic and conventional metaphorical structures in film.

⁵ Whittock Trevor, *Metaphor and Film*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 111-122

⁶ Carroll Noël, "Nightmare and the Horror Film: The Symbolic Biology of Fantastic Beings", *Film Quarterly*, University of California Press, 1981, p.214

Unnatural Selection: Decoding Disaster in the Film '2012'

The film "2012" revolves around a central "deluge" metaphor, which intertwines with various "displacement and death" motifs, alongside prevalent themes of personification throughout the narrative. The most significant ideological impact of this metaphorical framework lies in its portrayal of the disaster's aftermath as inherently superior to the pre-existing state. This ideological message permeates all levels of the narrative, from the experiences of the main characters to the broader implications for global society.

Despite the destruction of numerous cities and loss of lives, the film suggests that the disaster serves as a cathartic cleansing process. In "2012," every aspect, from the characterization to the plot twists and even the characters' deaths, adheres closely to established conventions, resulting in a sense of conceptual predictability. This very adherence to conventionality and apparent neutrality forms a central ideological aspect of the film. Consequently, the critical interest in analyzing a film like "2012" lies not in what it signifies, as these are often well-known or easily identifiable ideological tropes, but rather in how it signifies these ideas. The study of metaphor in "2012" does not specifically address the social significance of framing death in terms of redemption. Instead, it focuses on elucidating the connections between these ideas within language and cognition. The deluge metaphor is particularly noteworthy in the film. Even at the surface level of interpretation, many elements prompt viewers to perceive the film as grounded in the deluge narrative, portraying destruction as a precursor to rebirth. The focus on the final wave of tsunamis and the construction of the "arks" in "2012" underscores the significance of the deluge narrative. Despite the impending apocalypse, there's a palpable assurance that the disaster will

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culminate in a happy ending, with some surviving to usher in a better world. This narrative parallels the deluge myth, wherein destruction precedes renewal. Implicit in this fundamental narrative structure is the belief that the new world will be an improvement.

In "2012," the coherence with the deluge metaphor overrides internal coherence within the storyline. From an objective or alternate perspective, there would likely be no positive outcome to the disaster. However, it's only through the specific metaphorical lens of the film that we can interpret the end of the world as a triumphant new beginning. The entire film of "2012" appears structured to illustrate what Robert Torry termed "the selective benefits of Apocalypse"⁷, revealing who will survive and why. Survival is driven by ideological discourses and genre conventions, displaying more ideological than narrative consistency. Consequently, characters embodying positive ideological values seem unrealistically fortunate, while those associated with negative ideologies face inevitable demise, regardless of probability. The ideological significance of the deluge framework is reinforced on a formal level by the emphasis on visual effects over plot intricacies. Furthermore, the film's content underscores the randomness and apparent naturalness of survival, enhancing the ideological impact of the deluge metaphor. Both of these devices serve to divert attention from the more fundamental ideological factors determining who survives. In the original deluge narrative, survivors were chosen directly by God based on their faith and moral integrity. However, in "2012," the criteria for survival are not explicitly stated, and in many instances, life and death appear to be determined by chance. Importantly, the fact that the majority of survivors are wealthy Westerners is

⁷ Torry Robert, "Apocalypse Then: Benefits of the Bomb in Fifties Science Fiction Films", *Cinema Journal*, University of Texas Press, 1991, p. 11

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systematically obscured. This serves to reinforce and solidify the moral and cultural values upon which the selection is based, thus amplifying the ideological impact.

Fundamentally, in a highly conventional manner, the disaster depicted in "2012" is portrayed as a cathartic event for both society and the individual family units, effectively merging them into a covertly moralistic and Christian narrative of those who perish and those who are saved. The deluge metaphor in the movie essentially frames the survivors of the catastrophe as symbols of society's redemption. This involves projecting societal concepts onto various typified characters, essentially personifying different elements of societal discourse. In essence, the demise of these characters serves as a negative judgment on the values they represent. Indeed, there's a consistent correlation between social deviance, non-conformity to ideological and social norms, and the deaths of characters, a connection frequently observed in popular film and television. The allocation of various ideological statements within the film occurs on two distinct levels: the individual level, which encompasses characters like Jackson Curtis, his family, and other individuals, and the global level, which involves the crowds of people either boarding or failing to board the arks. These two levels interact, with the individual level shaping our understanding of the overarching narrative. At the individual level, one of the most significant ideological deaths in the film is that of Gordon Silberman, the current boyfriend of Jackson's ex-wife, Kate. Gordon's demise serves an ideological purpose by restoring the integrity of the American middle-class family unit. It is further justified by Gordon's decision to abandon Jackson during their escape from a volcanic eruption, portraying him as an unsympathetic character. However, Gordon's death occurs purely by chance. Similarly, the reunion between Jackson and Kate is portrayed as fateful rather than a deliberate choice. In this manner, the ideological imperative of the

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nuclear family is solidified and presented not as an outcome of deliberate institutional or personal decisions, but rather as an innate and unquestionable aspect of reality. Gordon can be viewed as a personification of everything that might disrupt the unity of the nuclear family. The selection of a person, and specifically the choice of a particular type of "lover," to symbolize the challenges to familial harmony reflects significant conventional ideological discourses. This form of personification carries several noteworthy implications. For instance, it involves the emasculation of the main character, who must undergo a metaphorical "cure" through the deluge metaphor. Ultimately, Jackson not only survives but also emerges as a hero, a father figure, and a recognized author, thereby solidifying his place within the conventional narrative structure.

Once again, these developments are not driven by personal qualities but largely by chance occurrences. For instance, Jackson's book is only saved because Dr. Helmsley unintentionally brings it with him on the ark. Additionally, the ideological implications of the family narrative extend to the global level, shaping the overarching narrative of the film. Ultimately, the film's happy ending hinges on the complete dominance of the personal perspective over the global one, whereby the latter is understood in terms of the former. As is typical within the disaster genre, the discourse of "2012" only makes sense when perceived as an individual narrative. The outcomes of the global and personal narratives are inherently intertwined. This parallel is facilitated by the personification metaphor. At the ideological level, personification bridges the discourses surrounding the family's salvation from both internal and external threats to broader themes concerning the entire human race, creating a symbiotic relationship between them.

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In essence, the connection facilitated by personification leads us to automatically equate the acceptability of one discourse with the acceptability of the other. This results in a paradoxical syllogism: if it's good that the family is reunited, then it's good that only a few people survive. However, in the collective narrative, who are these few survivors? Personification creates the impression that everyone is saved along with Curtis, but in reality, all other American families are eradicated, leaving only the idea of them surviving.

In truth, a completely different group of individuals is saved aboard the arks—those who possess the power, intellect, or financial means required for boarding. The representation of a prototypical family in "2012" does not operate in a referential manner; rather, the Curtises will emerge as the sole exemplars of the US middle class in the new world. Indeed, the vast majority of those saved are affluent individuals who funded the construction of the arks, representing those who hold power and wealth in society. The significant aspect of the personification metaphor lies in the fact that the funds come from private citizens rather than directly from governments. Furthermore, the individualized nature of both the construction of the arks and the selection of the survivors reinforces the personification metaphor. The collective nature of the apocalypse is partially obscured through the film's focus on characters like Curtis and Helmsley. However, events immediately preceding the boarding of the arks further conceal this aspect. As passengers await boarding, an unforeseen accident appears to compel world leaders to abandon most individuals on the docks. This random event triggers two sequences crucial to our analysis: Helmsley's speech on humanity and Yuri's revolt and subsequent demise. The first sequence serves as a diversion from the true scope of global annihilation. Helmsley, advocating for the acceptance of all passengers on board despite the imminent danger, emphasizes that the new world cannot

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begin with an act of cruelty. However, this apparent display of humanity is overshadowed by the fact that cruelty has already been perpetrated. Helmsley's ostensibly compassionate speech pertains to the rescue of a privileged few at the expense of countless others facing imminent demise. Once again, this scene operates within the framework of a personification metaphor, wherein the small group of passengers symbolizes the entirety of humanity.

However, such use of metaphor cannot be purely referential, as the wealth of the passengers holds significant implications. Additionally, Helmsley's reference to his scientist friend from India, who discovered the disaster but died "in vain" without aid from the global governments, further reinforces the personification structure. This aspect serves to channel sentiments of pity and grief toward the individual narrative of Dr. Satnam, diverting attention from the broader global catastrophe, which likely resulted in the exclusion of countries like India and many third-world nations from the list of survivors. This underlying theme is subtly woven into the fabric of the film without being explicitly highlighted. The second sequence portrays Yuri as a representation of the wealthy elite, particularly their arrogance and selfishness, epitomized by his decision to abandon Tamara and her dog. When the authorities refuse to open the ark doors, Yuri incites a small revolt, leading a crowd of people to the gates, where many perish in the ensuing chaos. The moment Tamara is rescued, she defiantly gestures to Yuri, and shortly thereafter, the Russian mogul sacrifices himself for his sons. This exchange of insult and Yuri's subsequent demise serve to absolve the unpleasantness associated with the other privileged individuals and reinforce the notion that only the morally upright survive.

The final piece of the metaphorical structure in "2012" is the survival of Africa, where the continent miraculously rises above sea level without any

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rational explanation. This event serves as a conventional return to origins and is steeped in moralistic undertones, based on the assumption that less civilized regions are inherently less sinful and therefore more deserving of salvation. However, this narrative element is also hypocritical, as it glosses over the severe responsibilities of developed countries in causing political unrest and economic crises in the third world. In reality, Africa faces similar threats of destruction due to the interventions of economic and political powers from developed nations. By reversing the narrative and absolving any human responsibility, the survival of Africa is portrayed as redemption from exploitation. It's not explicitly stated that Africa survives due to its superior morality or for the sake of Africans themselves; rather, it appears as an act of divine intervention, symbolizing Africa as both a lost paradise and a promised land.

However, in "2012," divine intervention seems more focused on the survival of a middle-class ghost and second-rate science fiction, with human institutions and ideological structures taking precedence over any divine presence. The Vatican's dome crumbling further underscores this shift away from divine intervention. At the diegetic level, the self-proclaimed Noahs of "2012" are unlikely to view Africa as an opportunity for redemption, but rather as a potential settlement and source of labor post-catastrophe. The conventional structures of signification and ideological discourses within the film suggest a bleak aftermath despite the apparent happy ending of the world.

Conclusion

The elucidation of the metaphorical process provided by cognitive metaphor theory offers a valuable tool for analyzing various elements within film texts,

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including metaphorical expressions, similes, personification, narrative, and conceptual structures. Particularly significant are conventional conceptual metaphors, which play a central role in examining ideological discourses in film. This article initiates the exploration of how cognitive metaphor theory can furnish a framework for understanding interactions between concepts in film texts, especially concerning metaphorical expressions. However, for a comprehensive understanding of this task, further research is necessary. Future studies should delve into the relationship between cognitive metaphor theory and the theory of ideology within film studies, as well as incorporate the psychoanalytic theory of cinema. Such investigations should encompass not only the cognitive but also the emotional dimensions of metaphor configurations. While this undertaking exceeds the scope of the current work, it is essential for a thorough evaluation of metaphor as a universal process of association between signs, echoing the insights of Sergei Eisenstein.

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