

## **ANIMATION AND VISUAL EFFECTS SUBTEXT IN MOTION PICTURE NARRATION**

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### **Abstract**

Even though the three-act narrative structure which is the basic screenwriting guide gives some principles in screenwriting for motion picture. The act, for scores and decades has become a normative or rule of thumb for screenwriters and has been adapted by almost all major motion picture industries across the world, for narrative creativity thereof; motion picture producers rearrange the acts in telling their story. The three-act narrative doesn't constitute the totality of story narration, dialogue, camera angles and shots, sound, costume complement in subtexts communication to audience and it has been the practice was employed for years until technological novelties gradually brought paradigm shift of subtext communication to a technique known as visual effects. This paper empirically discusses the metaphorical use of visual effects in narrative communication. Special reference were made to selected motion picture productions as well as journal publication to substantiate the goals and claims of this research paper, the future of visual effects and its efficaciousness in comparison to sound and traditional camera angles in narrations.

**Keywords: motion picture, metaphor, normative, narration, subtext, visual effects**

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## 1. Introduction

Motion picture directors are usually associated with their peculiar techniques use in narrating their story and the efficacy of the subtext carried by the message of the motion picture of film. Defining what a subtext is, will be a justifiable compliment to this discourse. Subtext could simply be defined as an implicit and individual variant subject of discourse carried in motion picture productions. Alfred Hitchcock and Mel Gibson are the some renowned Hollywood motion picture directors known to be 'masters' of communicating subtexts efficaciously. During early days of cinema, Alfred Hitchcock, who [1] attributed as the master of suspense, found ways of using traditional camera framing, angles, shots and sound to create suspense, the suspense Hitchcock creates invokes both emotional and cognitive process of the viewer.

A few of motion picture directors, such as Mel Gibson, used visual effects in emphasizing subtext in his productions, especially *The Passion of the Christ* [2] and *Apocalypto* [3], recent productions by Ang Lee *Life of Pi* [4], and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [5], Quentin Terantino's *The Hateful Eight* [6], and even how James Cameron postponed the production of *Avatar* [7] as suggested by [8] are conscious for a discourse to carefully fish out the rationale behind the gradual paradigm shift to visual effects in modern motion picture production and how it helps in the narrative of production's message or content.

The advancement of technology gives unprecedented opportunities to motion picture producers in finding effective ways of narrative storytelling even though they may go by the normative three-act structure. The prolific use of visual effects underscores the rapid development of visual effect tools. Visual effects have tremendously been explored in productions by motion picture industries around the world due to its capabilities, opportunities and conveniency it avails to producers of such productions. This has made its usage unprecedented since its discovery. The prolific use of visual effects in motion picture production is as a result of factors which will be discussed in successive sections of this discourse.

Georges Méliès, who is acclaimed by [9] as the originator of visual effects, was an illusionist who later turned into a filmmaker during the early days of cinema [10] creatively used visual effects in his motion picture presentations, prominently in *A trip to the Moon* [11]. Successive

sections looks at the development of visual effects to aid in the comprehension of its novelty and development chronomically.

## **2. Motion Picture Visual Effects**

The novelty of modern day visual effects has its history documented during the time of Georges Méliès [9]. This sections discusses the contribution by Georges Méliès and the paradigm visual effect brought to motion picture production during its novelties and breakthrough.

Georges Méliès was said to have accidentally discovered the trick during a production, as documented by [9]. Even though the discovery came by accidentally, Méliès was happy with the result he got fortuitously. Méliès' interest in filmmaking commenced when he attended a private screening by the Lumière brothers [12], he saw their cinématographe as a great tool to help him achieve variant tricks to his trade as an illusionist, but his offer of buying the cinématographe was turned down by the Lumière brothers' [5]. Méliès finally bought the animatograph as a starting point of adding different dimension to his already-existing trade, through Méliès' creative experimentations, he discovered tricks such as; multiple exposures, dissolves, time-lapse photography, substitution splices and hand painted colour [10]. Due to Méliès' interest in illusion and tricks, he was more interested in using techniques in narrating his stories and enhanced his illusion profession. Méliès became successful with his prolific experimentations to the extent that he was said to have produced 500 productions within 17 years [13].

In view of the fact that visual effects was still at its novelty without any normative yet formed, Méliès covered broad genres such as everyday happenings, comedies, historical reconstruction, drama, magic tricks and fairy stories. Because he was more interested in how visual effects metaphorical narrative prowess than the story structure, he also did a few re-enactment of Shakephere's Hamlet [9] and a few other real-life events. As it has been the fundamental use of visual effects in modern motion picture production, same was the desire of Georges Méliès; to achieve what could not or nearly impossible to achieve in real life. His experiments with superimposition lead to the production of The Cave of the Demons [14] and The Four Troublesome Heads [15]. George Méliès' mastery of visual effects produced his famous A Trip to the Moon [16] in 1902 and The Kingdom of the Fairies [17] in 1903 respectively. His works

made him famous that other motion picture or film directors relied on him for visual effects production. The Lumière brothers also contributed immensely towards the development of cinema as Georges Méliès' did but the Lumière; Auguste and Louis Lumière were rather focused on the development of cinematography tools for more of scientific and historical studies unlike Georges Méliès who was interested in how he could use it to narrate his stories.

### **2.1. Stratification of visual Effects**

The art has gone through copious experimentation and exploitation. With the development and emergence of tools through inventions, it has brought endless possibilities and changed the production of motion pictures. The classifications during the streamlining process of standardization or normative, categorization were fundamentally done according to the technique and procedures used in achieving the effect. Thus mechanical, optical and computer generated imagery (CGI) [18].

Mechanical effects categorized with practical or physical effects that can be created on scene or location during a production; such as creating artificial wind, rain, snow, fog. Optical or photographic effects on the other hand, are the types that are done photographically either using the camera or optical printer after the careful stratification, diverse techniques were developed through technological inventions and the realism of productions seem to be improving and Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey [19] and George Lucas' Star Wars [20] were visual effect benchmark during the era of science fiction. The success of these productions were massive that it created a rapid paradigm and triggered huge investment into science fiction genre and as a result, visual effects studios saw a rapid rise as well as exploitation, experimentations and development of new techniques, hence the natality of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI).

The introduction of Computer Generated Imagery was yet another milestone in the visual effect industry. It overhauled all aspects of motion picture visual effects, it was a great relief for motion picture producers; this was because scenes, models, animations, can be added to the already shot production during post-production stages, it was also cheaper as compared to mechanical and optical compositioning. Through computer generated imagery, visual effects artist uses computer

software to create and model scenes, effects which are incorporated with live footages to create a convincing look.

### **3. Metaphorical Subtext**

In modern motion picture production, the introduction of computer generated imagery brought more refinement and as a result, diverse software tools were designed for such purpose and one of the tremendous software is MASSIVE [18] a software developed by weta workshop, the software is an 'intellectual grafted' of artificial intelligence and visual art developed to enhance fuzzy and chaotic scenes which can assign task to different characters in a scene to avoid repetition as used in Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings Trilogy: The Fellowship of the Ring [22] fighting scene and fish raining from the sky in Ang Lee's Life of Pi [4].

Technology has suppressed the use of optical effects in motion picture production except for live production mechanical effects. A careful chronological study of filmographies and textual evidence strongly vindicate a paradigm shift from traditional camera angles and shots, sound to visual effects in creating subtext and emphasis in motion picture production as compared to the early days of cinema where renowned directors such as Alfred Hitchcock used combination of shots and sound to create visual subtexts in his productions in Psycho [23], Martin Scorsese could be identified by the use of slow motion and freeze frame in Taxi Driver [24], Goodfellas [25], The Wolf of Wall Street [26] and Departed [27].

The way a motion picture Director depicts or evokes visual subtexts in productions becomes his style, and the phenomenal use of visual effects in modern motion picture productions has created another benchmark. Selected works of Ang Lee, Quentin Terantino, James Cameron and Mel Gibson are referred in this discourse. In Ang Lee's Life of Pi, it centered around a little boy with a Hindu parents but also introduced to other religion such as Christianity and Islam, the film relied on visual effects in its narration referencing to scenes where the ship of which Pi and his family, including their animals was traveling in sunk, ocean scenes were all shot in a giant wave tank with water volume of more than a million gallons, the lion in which Pi was with, in the small boat, the stunning evening underwater look were all visual effects done during post-production. The raining fishes from the sky effect is a powerful narrative subtext created by the

director; when Pi was left all alone in the little boat with the lion, he was scared the lion could eat him whenever it gets hungry, he therefore had to find means of feeding the lion to prevent it from killing and eating him. Pi prayed to the "Lord Vishnu" [4] for assistance and food to feed the lion and apparently, fishes started raining from the skies which served as food for both Pi and the lion and gradually they both became fond of each other with Pi seeing the lion more of a friend than a prey. This metaphorical raining of fish could only be based on religious sentimentalism, Hindus who pray to lord Vishnu, the god Pi prayed to before fishes started raining, this subtext could emotionally and cognitively rejuvenate worshippers of Lord Vishnu that their god is powerful and capable enough to provide them with all what they pray for, on the other hand, Christians who are ignorant of the Hindu god Vishnu, might think Pi used Vishnu to refer to God or Jesus Christ and even Christian who may know about Hinduism will still attribute the raining of fishes to Jesus Christ due to the portrayal of Jesus Christ as the son of Almighty God of whom all powers has been entrusted, hence; Jesus Christ is the only being that posses such power to rain fishes from the skies instead on the accounts of his numerous miracles performed. Even the survival of Pi will be sentimentally attributed to variant god depending on one's religious background because most people will be of the view that God is the only being who could make someone survival in such a situation with mysterious questions remaining in the minds of the audience (a) How come Pi and the tiger survived were the only ones to survive the shipwreck (b) how was Pi able survive all these days in an ocean with a little boat without enough food and drinking water (c) how was Pi able to survive harsh atmospheric conditions on high seas without any proper or appropriate clothing (d) how come he wasn't eaten by a hungry tiger, a carnivorous animal. Findings to these few questions will only lead one to a religious sentiment that God helped Pi to survive which God in this context is subject to religious affiliation.

In both *The Passion of the Christ* [2] and *Apocalypto* [3], Mel Gibson the director used visual effect to create visual emphasis which also metaphorically evoke the audience with visual emotivism, it catches the attention of the audience, even though the audience knows what they are watching on screen isn't what the characters in production goes through but are representations, yet the audience can't help themselves than to get emotionally involved with the narrative subtext. The flogging of Jesus Christ in Christopher Spencer's *Son of God* [28] and Mel

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* [2] used mechanical effects to make the flogging of Jesus bloodier than any other motion picture production about Jesus Christ which is a more powerful means of communicating subtext to the audience.

#### **4. Technology and Visual Effects in 21st Century**

After the successful implementation of visual effects in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* [19], the spectacles of which the world sees visual effects changes; it was seen as the new avenue or tool for the transformation of the motion picture producing industry, hence led to a rapid paradigm shift of attention to visual effects and its use became apparent and gave rise to a prolific use of visual effects in adaptation, reconstruction of earlier productions such as *King Kong* [29] which is a remake of an earlier version in 1933 by Cooper and Schoedsack [30]. James Cameron found the powerful prowess of visual effects and postponed the shooting of *Avatar* [7]. The few examples and instances cited above couldn't have been possible without the rapid technological advancement. There have been several technological advancement in both gadgets, machines as well as software towards the advancement of visual effects in motion production and interestingly, there have been the based on mathematical, computer, physics, chemistry and artificial intelligence algorithms in the programming of the software for visual effects. de Rham curve as used in Adobe After Effects to mimic an atmospheric landscape and 7-dimensional bidirectional scattering texture function [31] employed by Blender cycles engine to render hyper-realistic shading effects in material shading and fluid rendering are just a couple of examples of algorithms used software for visual effects in modern motion productions.

The use technological incorporation into the building of visual effects software has brought so much relief to motion picture producers in the following areas [31] (a) Financial relief: even though much goes into the recent tools and production of films but the technology has brought more flexibility into film production, since scenes can be created by using animation and visual effects which can be created easily and cheaply as compared to using actors (b) producers have so much possibilities in narrating their stories forgoing the normative of motion picture production.

## 5. Conclusion

This discourse is carefully crafted with selection of selected bibliography and filmographies, the intent of using visual effects as a metaphorical subtext communication in motion picture production as established in the introduction, selected filmographies [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7] and [8]. The focal or fundamental point of interest was on the use of visual effects in the message's content of motion picture productions, even though the metaphorical use of visual effects in motion picture could be seen as a non-verbal, it was strictly avoided to be termed as such to avoid conflicting definition of non-verbal communication type.

The prolific use of visual effects in modern motion pictures triggered a curious but brief historical exploitation. The normative stratification of visual effects was given a background interpretation as well as its economic impact on cinema after its success in Stanley Kubrick's production [19] and George Lucas' [20]. An important visual effects tool [21] is cited as an example of how software for the visual effects production relies on computer, mathematics, chemistry and other natural science algorithms as well as the usage of such works created with some of the above-listed algorithm were mentioned in [31].

An intriguing example of metaphorical use of visual effects was discussed drawing reference from Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* [4] and so did the comparison and gradual paradigm shift from traditional methodologies of using shots, camera angles and sound in creating suspense, emphasis to visual effects due to reasons given in [31]. The circumstances leading to the postponement of the production of *Avatar* by James Cameron [7] strongly underscore the importance of visual effects in modern motion picture productions.

Visual effects has contributed immensely and has rapidly changed the narratives of storytelling, it has given producers so much flexibility due to the fact that scenes as well as manipulations can be done during post-production and has made the production of motion pictures exciting and very impactful in communication a production's message to the audience and the rapid technological advancement will make it more powerful in achieving intended realism in the coming years which will totally eliminate the conventional or traditional methodologies of creating emphasis and communicating subtext with camera angles and shots.



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