



Fakulti Seni Gunaan dan Kreatif

COMPLEX NARRATIVE AND POSTMODERNISM IN FILM

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This project is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours
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Abstract

This thesis seeks to research on complex narrative and postmodernism as the perspective to study complex narrative. Complex narrative and postmodernism also being analyzed notably on elements and the reviews carries into the in-depth research for correlational studies between complex narrative and postmodernism. This thesis examines alternative perspective to study on complex narrative in contemporary cinema. Researcher applied the elements of postmodernism in complex narrative into a short film called “Stall”.

Abstrak

Tesis ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji mengenai naratif kompleks dan postmodernisme sebagai perspektif untuk mengkaji naratif kompleks. Naratif kompleks dan postmodernism dianalisiskan untuk mengenalpasti unsur-unsur yang terdapat didalam kompleks naratif dan dapatannya dibawa ke kajian seterusnya yang lebih mendalam bagi mengenalpasti hubungan antara naratif kompleks dan postmodernisme. Tesis ini mengkaji perspektif alternatif untuk mengkaji naratif kompleks dalam kontemporari sinema. Penyelidik telah mengaplikasikan unsur-unsur postmodernisme dalam naratif kompleks ke dalam filem pendek yang bertajuk "Stall".

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This thesis presents the finding through analysis of previous theoretical framework conducted on this field of study and emphasizes on defining the term “complex narrative” in film studies along with multiple perspectives and second phase film theories.

In this chapter, introduction of my study and background is explained and outline of my research is overviewed. This chapter also introduce a statement of hypothetical justification on complex narrative in contemporary cinema then followed by objectives with rational along with postmodernism perspective.

1.1 Background of Study

Classical narratology (films) had been evolved, progressed and developed ever since narrative or fictional film is introduced. A 14 scenes, roughly 10 minutes long film *The Great Train Robbery (1903)* is the first narrative film that started the evolution of film, from objective display to subjective experience, films have significantly evolved for more than a century and still are evolving.

Reversal and recognition as proposed by Aristotle using the term ‘*peplegmenos*’, which means “interwoven” when translated to English, is part and parcel of storytelling. Aristotle proposed that when reversal and recognition occur at the same time, plot is interwoven and eventually stronger. In the story of Oedipus Complex, the moment of the discovery when murder of Oedipus’s father together with moment of reversal where ultimate realization of marriage with his mother as the classic complex narrative is considered yet to be conveying complexity in narrative for contemporary cinema but the fundamental idea of “interwoven” is greatly manipulated and evolved then put into modern film language in contemporary cinema.

Narrative is an essential and fundamental element in film, Cutting (2016) stated that narrative structure in plays, manga, novel, folktales and also oral histories are the same, the only difference is the construction for the runtime constraint is unique to the medium which for this thesis refers to film per se. This is an extension of statement from Thompson (1999) suggestion in his study of narratology, narrative is a chain of events where cause and effect as linkage for time and space displaying in any medium.

Complex narrative has an increasing recognition in contemporary cinema, complex narrative in film has blossomed since new Hollywood which mainly influenced by German expressionism and a few movements during forties and fifties. Kiss and Willemsen (2017)

stated that “As many critics and scholars have noted, over the last two decades a significant and distinct group of contemporary movies has offered specific kinds of viewing experiences that seem to be all about complexity.” (p.3). This also indicates that spectators demand for more complexity in contemporary cinema and complexity can be subjected to changes in comparison to complexity decades ago due to filmmakers’ innovation and creativity.

The studies of complex narrative is not a new thing in this decade. A lot of studies and approaches is crowded particularly in this field of study. This also suggested that complexity is relatively important in contemporary cinema compares to classical cinema. The influences of other medium and high accessible of these mediums had encourage spectators to demand for more complexity to challenge their minds. There is considerable amount of academic studies which focused particularly on this subject of complexity. Most of the studies conducted is mainly focus on certain style of complex narrative such as puzzle film proposed by Warren Buckland and multiple narratives proposed by Peter F. Parshall, some even call complex narrative as ‘perturbatory’ narration as suggested by Sabine Schlickers and Vera Toro (2017).

There are also several approaches such as narratology which is most crowded approach; cognitive and psychological approach which is more concentrated on connection of film and spectators; framework studies which based on narratology but more on construction of restriction of complexity in narration. Some of the scholars and researchers had realized that though this particular field of study is overcrowded, however it is considered to be chaotic and unorganized.

1.2 Problem Statement

“It seems safe to write, however, that at the moment, the field of complex narrative studies is itself rather complicated, if not, even messy.” (Campora, 2009). He referred that the field in study of complex narratives is unreliable at the moment even with progressive amount of scholars had been conducting researches on this topic. Campora (2009) stated that “the proliferation of terminology used to categorize films with complex narratives. With each new analysis of *Memento (2000)*, for instance, comes a new label. To date, *Memento (2000)* is a post-modern film, a puzzle film, a twist film, a mind-game film, and a trauma film”, though several scholars had done a few improvement and adjustment specifically in certain type or style of complex narrative rather the complex narrative as a term for all.

Scholars and researchers had conducted significant of studies on complex narrative in film and contemporary cinema. Though several approaches had been discussed and reviewed, there are more perspectives to be recognize and examine.

In short, ambiguity of complex narratives in contemporary cinema extended uncertainty of the definition of complex narrative in contemporary cinema. Hence, with alternative perspectives in film study, firm definition of complex narrative can be defined in contemporary cinema.

1.3 Research Objectives

- i. To clarify alternative perspectives to constitute a complex narrative in contemporary cinema.
- ii. To analyze films with elements of complex narrative in contemporary cinema.
- iii. To apply complex narrative in contemporary cinema into upcoming short film.

1.4 Research Questions

- i. How to identify perspectives that constitute to complex narrative in contemporary cinema?
- ii. What are the elements in complex narrative in contemporary cinema?
- iii. How to apply complex narrative in contemporary cinema in short film?

1.5 Significance of Study

The supposition of this research is to verify alternative perspectives in film studies in contemporary film study. From here, the definition of complex narrative can be detected and determined in studies of narratology and contemporary cinema. This research is also expected to catalyze recognition of the importance of second phase film theories in regarding to the study of complex narrative.

1.6 Limitation and Scope of Study

The scope of study is to carry out using various second phase film theories such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, metafiction and so on along with Eastern perspective on complex narrative. In addition, case studies on film which is released after 90s and based on various verified film scholars, film critics and reviewers.

The limitation in conducting this research is second phase film theories is lack of recognition in film studies within these recent years. In addition, overcrowded studies and unorganized studies on complex narrative have also led to untrue researches.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter had introduced the fundamental framework of this studies which particularly look at complex narrative in contemporary cinema. Although the studies distinctively on complexity in film has swarmed, there are some important aspects need to be taken into consideration whereas the studies of complex narrative in recent years had not complete and exhaustive. The second phase film theories had been recognized but limited amount of attention is given, alternative perspectives have put into consideration in studies of complex narrative as to comprehend this field of studies. Complex narrative will be discussed further in detail notably on prominent elements. Moreover, postmodernism which particularly shared some similarities with complex narrative will be reviewed.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

From the previous chapter, general idea and direction of this research had been discussed. Complex narrative films had been greatly increasing in number in recent years. Most complex narrative films associate distinctive styles and themes while the most prominent one is postmodernism. Postmodernism had been greatly influenced literary theories and applied in films since it was introduced and popularized in 70s.

In this chapter, complex narrative and complex narrative structures are discussed and reviewed in coherent of elements or characteristics. Postmodernism is also discussed and reviewed in arts and particularly in film.

2.1 Complex Narrative

The problem in this field of study had been occurring ever since narratology studies of complex narrative had started. Most of the studies had been conducted with different approaches and perspective. However, most of the scholars focused on the studies of complex narratives using first semiology which consist of semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxism and so on. Though these scholars had conducted significant studies of complex narrative but the term “complex narrative” itself is still being debated and discussed until now. Some even call it ‘perturbatory’ which means intentionally confusing.

When it comes to narrative complexity, Poulaki (2014) states: ‘It is no longer enough to show how complex films are not conventional narratives; the need for a positive definition and description of their processes has become apparent.’ Complex narrative also demonstrates that our involvement and construction of a narrative is as affective as it is cognitive which encourage cognitive theory studies on complex narrative. Blockbuster films also incorporate narrative complexity but is hardly a thing, said Parshall (2012). Complex narratives are engaging in storytelling and it brings in more excitement for audiences compares to classical narrative. However, artistic and entertainment value should be emphasized equally in film to achieve a good complex narrative film.

Most prominent consensus of style of complex narrative are puzzle film, mind game film, modular film and forking-path film. The potential of complex narratives had become a canon of classical narrative where the demand of complexity in film had been increase since 80s and the most notable example is *Blue Velvet (1986)* by David Lynch. The film wildly rich in intertextuality and the film itself is well made which makes it looks like an art itself.

Self-reflexivity explained by Poulaki (2017) created an effects of “distancing and estranging” which projected in film worlds. In *Inception* (2010) by Christopher Nolan, spectators feel as the dream’s architect manipulates the protagonists’ experience. The involvement of spectator keeps their mind active while the narration goes. The awareness of two world within the mind of spectator actively constitute complexity and by maintaining the link between real world and fiction world, the establishment of feedback between spectator and narration in film constantly creates a mild self-consciousness. This phenomenon occurs mostly in challenging narrative especially in complex narrative film which narrative complexity reflects on film language and structure.

Complex system which introduced by Niklas Luhmann pointed out self-reference in which processes of systems as generating and growing their complexity. Poulaki then explained that, “in the realm of art, reality and illusion can coexist, since artworks are real objects that construct imaginary worlds. Through the various twists that many of them contain, complex films seem to be inviting the viewer to observe their narrative worlds, and to make distinctions between reality and illusion, producing through these distinctions a unity that is the system of narrative.” (p. 7). In this aspect, postmodernism shares the same concern as blurring the existence of objective truth and subjective truth.

In short, these ‘complex narratives’ embrace non-linearity, time loops, and fragmented spatial and temporal realities (Buckland, 2009) to demonstrate a contemporary interest in personal identity, memory, history, trauma, embodied perception, and temporality and Hven (2017) extended that “it is located somewhere in the encounter between film and spectator, the complexity of these complex narratives turns out to be a complex phenomenon itself.” (p. 7).

2.2 Elements of Complex Narrative

Complex narrative has some notable elements in general in order to constitute narrative complexity. Kiss and Willemsen (2017) stated, “films can present complex stories, complex emotions, complex visuals, complex interpretive possibilities or complex systems.” (p. 3). Film itself is complex and thus, there are crucial elements that define complex narrative.

2.2.1 (Post-)classical Narrative

This term has yet to be used officially in narrative theory in film studies but several researchers had introduced this term in their studies of complex narrative. “The spectators investigate ‘how the film works’ rather than asking ‘what it means’; they attempt to ‘crack the codes’ of complexity, rather than extracting symbolic, symptomatic or meta-fictional meanings of the type associated with art cinema,” (Kiss and Willemsen, 2017). The statement clarifies that spectators are watching a complex narrative film in such a way that classical narrative could not do. This storytelling technique indeed is abusing classical storytelling and spectators particularly who are familiar with the classical narratives. In extend, Kiss and Willemsen (2017) explained further that, “noteworthy and unexpected events, narrative elements of surprise or the successful evocation of curiosity resulting from a complex story structure may all enhance viewers’ general interest and immersion in a narrative – even if the presented mystery ultimately proves unsolvable.” It is clear that this technique had greatly increased the engagement of spectators in a narrative by introducing a story that told in an unfamiliar way.

2.2.2 Nonlinearity

Nonlinearity in complex narrative films often confused with non-linear storytelling. It is different, Poulaki explained that, “we could say that they have a nonsequential temporal and spatial structure; they also tend to contain multiple levels of reality and different but parallel and interconnected stories, with chance, coincidence or fate often becoming central forces for the plot development.” (p.2). The different between nonlinearity in complex narrative and non-linear storytelling is that nonlinearity does not apply only to the story structure only. The fractured spatial and temporal reality in fiction worlds provoke spectator to be active in their mind and at the same time decipher of clues cannot be done at one due to the entangled plot in the film.

Hven (2017) then elaborated that, “*Memento (2000)* departs from a comparable defamiliarization in order to allow us to sense the habitual processes that usually operate unattended to structure our cinematic perception of the narrative in causal-linear terms.” He then continued that *21 Grams (2004)* also set up a similar and yet in different in sense that spectators are encouraged to experience this type of narrative structure. Parshall (2012) also described that, “separate story strands may each have a strong forward causal drive as in a classic plot, but the viewer’s interest is shifted to the story connections.” This way of storytelling kept the interest of spectators by not only showing them a story but allowed them to immerse in the fiction world.

2.3 Postmodernism in Film

“A deliberation from its original roots in the aim of dazzling the beholders, driving them into contemplation of the revolutionary art’s re-definitions and representations and revisions as it works on eradicating any variations as a whole,” explained by (Postmodernism in Films, 2014). Postmodernism is a rejection of modernism while complex narrative in certain extend is a rejection of classical storytelling. Taylor and Winquist (2001) explained that, “applied to the cinema, postmodernism regularly functions as an aesthetic category, a loosely construed mood or sensibility, a broad-based technological development, and a periodizing concept.” (p. 125). They argue that postmodernism in fact is not an ordinary film theory that should be study in ordinary way.

“Postmodernism consist in the accumulation, collision, and finally embrace of a vast spectrum styles, genres, and conventions, both high and low, in a kind of dizzy pluralism – eclecticism.” (Taylor and Winquist, 2001). They then elaborated that cinema itself is an example of eclecticism where cinema art is in fact a hybrid art. Cinema art had been influenced by some noteworthy art movement such as impressionism and auteurism; genre also imported from theater and literature such as melodrama; and style from aesthetic movements like expressionism and pop art, as we go through film history.

Postmodernism means no definite terms, boundaries, or absolute truths exist. Postmodernists do not attempt to refine their thoughts about what is right or wrong, true or false, good or evil. This idea provokes the filmmakers to involve pastiche in their film aesthetically or stylistically. Taylor and Winquist (2001) stated that sequel and remake of previous film had always been done in cinema, postmodernist tends to blend the new and the old together or even make spectators aware of the previous being blend into the new film.

In conclusion, postmodernism had influenced filmmakers aesthetically and stylistically. Postmodernism in film brings particular film into question on philosophy that escalated by application of postmodern thematically. There are also films that apply postmodernism ideology into the context of film itself which then led to a more provocative way in defining the eligibility of postmodern in film due to postmodernism itself is still a debate in philosophy field of study. However, there are some shared qualities from the researches that had been done before were discussed on previous paragraph for further acknowledgement in chapter 4.

2.4 Conclusion

Complex narrative is a technique in constructing a story to tell in a more engaging way and it has been used a lot notably in 90s until recent years. The growth in narrative complexity has increasing progressively in tendency throughout the years. Complex narrative encouraged two communication between the film and spectators. Postmodernism had been used in film theories and its potential in this field of study is yet undiscover yet. Complex narrative and postmodernism share some noteworthy similarities notably in the context of film. In the following chapter, method of data collection and analyzation will be put into discussion.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the research design, research approach along with the choice of suitable research instruments. This study intends to study the similarities and different in terms of element between postmodernism in film and complex narrative.

3.1 Research Design

Descriptive research design is used in this research to gather accurate information for the research question in this research. Research question in this research need vast and accurate information to testify the eligibility of the information by research and review the similarities

and differences from gathered information. In this case, case study is the most suitable research tool to study complex narrative and postmodernism in film especially in contemporary cinema.

The design of the research method must be tackled in such intellectual technique to realize the eligible of postmodernism theory to be implemented into the studies of complex narrative. There are many ways of research techniques and data collection methods to bring about the desired objective of this study. The difficulty would be deciding which method the data should be collected in which no actual framework to support this.

The in-depth document analysis was chosen as a prime data collection method due to two main reasons: first, the framework of complex narrative is varied and is hard to unify a framework to collect the data as whole and secondly, the relationship of postmodernism and complex narrative is hardly being bring about together. To overcome the difficulties, in-depth document of postmodernism and complex narrative needs to be collected and sorted in a way to carry out to the next step.

3.1.1 Document Analysis

Writings on complex narrative in contemporary cinema are being evaluated and studied in order to relate with the research questions. Documents of complex narrative is found and filtered to only trusted film researchers and all documents are being researched and reviewed and only crucial and eligible information is gathered and carried into this research. Only literature and literary postmodernism documents is relatable in this research. All documents of complex narrative and postmodernism will be reviewed second time to compare and summarize the relationship between complex narrative and postmodernism.