

Deconstructing films: New ways to teach cinema using hypermedia tools

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Abstract

This paper describes a new, interactive and open way of teaching cinema and analytical watching of films. It uses concept mapping software, films in DVD format, hypermedia tools, and DVD software on PC to provide a way of “deconstructing” films. It consists of a concepts maps based hypermedia system that allows the film teaching and film analysis via non-linear access to the film, film script, interactive analysis writing, and the performance of tests on the film to evaluate learning. Methodology is based on J.J. García Rueda’s framework for narrative and structural dimensions of hypermedia. The system is conceived as a free and flexible tool with minimum specific requirements so it can be used in any teaching environment without extra expenses. This is achieved by using software under public license for concept mapping, hypermedia material display and standard PC software and hardware platforms.

Keywords

Film teaching, deconstruction, hypermedia, e-learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Hypermedia typical non-linear access is well suited to the analysis of films. While current film criticism works separately from the criticized product, hypermedia allows the analysis to be read at the same time that the object of analysis. Our objective was to create with hypermedia something similar to a cine forum session where different film experts first introduce a film and at the end comment on it, their comments being illustrated sometimes with the referenced sequences. But we have used the information structuring potentialities of Concepts Maps [1], and the personalization in accessing information characteristic of Hypermedia, instead of the oral opinions of experts.

This work also intends to take full advantage of the new way in which people begin to watch movies. Current facilities like the tool described here and the availability of films in DVD show changes in the way of watching films. From the traditional, linear, complete and unique watching to the repeated, selective, non-linear watching of sequences. It is well known that cinema language is “learnt” by watching films [2], that we understand pictures because we have seen other pictures before. Repetition means different perception of the film and will probably modify our film language. Furthermore, now people want to know more and more about the films they watch. The increasing amount of complementary materials added to DVDs is a good example of this tendency.

2. DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION

We use the term deconstruction, coined by Jacques Derrida. His original deconstruction concept meant something like conceptually decomposing the literary/artistic work into separate components looking for items inside that subvert the explicit and original intention of the work, as a new way to analyze culture products. Ferrán Adriá (El Bulli restaurant) uses the term deconstruction in the sense of re-composition in a different way. Our approach can similarly provide not only a tool for film analysis, but new ways of watching films versus the classic linear or sequential watching, causing a similar effect in the watcher: discovering a new and deeper way of understanding a film. The film is decomposed into its different elements (narrative, script, metaphors, sequences, etc), using hypermedia for establishing links between different elements, allowing the learner to do the opposite operation: the “re-composition”. This way back into the whole film takes place in the mind of the learner: the learner reconstructs the film in a way he could not have thought of before. When applied to film teaching, this approach allows for a deeper analysis and understanding of film masterpieces.

2.1 Deconstruction as a method of analysis and learning

Although our tool can be used with any film theory for analysis, we focus specifically, although not exclusively, on deconstructionism, because our tool could heavily help to the advance in new types of film criticism inspired in deconstruction. The term *deconstruction*, was coined by Jacques Derrida in the late sixties. The American Heritage Dictionary defines deconstruction as "A philosophical movement and theory of literary criticism that questions traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth; asserts that words can only refer to other words; and attempts to demonstrate how statements about any text subvert their own meanings: *"In deconstruction, the critic claims there is no meaning to be found in the actual text, but only in the various, often mutually irreconcilable, 'virtual texts' constructed by readers in their search for meaning"*. Barbara Johnson clarifies the term: *"Deconstruction is not synonymous with "destruction", however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means "to undo" -- a virtual synonym for "to de-construct." If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself."* Application of deconstructionism to film theory has been approached by Brunette and Wills [3].

In our system, different views of the film are prepared by the expert(s) as focused navigational aids (narration, metaphors, symbols, sequences, etc). The film is navigated through different views mapped in concept maps or web pages using hypermedia for establishing links between different elements, allowing the learner to do the opposite operation: the "re-composition". This way back into the whole film takes effect in the mind of the learner: the learner reconstructs the film in a way he could not have thought of before. When applied to film teaching, this approach allows for a deeper analysis and understanding of film masterpieces. Some authors use the term deconstruction in the sense of exposing the internal structure of a communicative item or of a discourse.

Another important aspect of the tool is that the film criticized and the critic coexist and are not in sequence, the descriptive part of the critic is redundant, the immediacy increases, the comments on the sequences appended to them appear like the voice of the guide when visiting a museum, the same sequence can be revisited accompanied by different guides (i.e. different film critics view of the same sequence).

2.2. Pedagogical implications

The pedagogical uses of concepts maps and hypermedia have a long tradition now [1][4]. The former provides a general view of the structure of knowledge the learner is about to face. The latter allows for non-linear navigation of the space of knowledge. The essence of this work is to use them together, using the maps as a superimposed structure to the hypermedia network. Than way, beginning in the level of structure, the learner will dive into the non-linear distribution of contents, but keeping in mind the general organization of the system. The final aim is to mix both, navigation freedom (exploratory learning) of an apparently unstructured space of contents, and clear structuring of the main concepts.

The learning process takes place by the continuous change of level: from the structure to the exploration, and back again.

These ideas cover the Structural Dimension of the system. What about the Exposition Dimension [4]? The kind of media included in the nodes of the system and the information they provide are fundamental. When learning about films, multimedia is mandatory. As a result, our nodes are always based on small fragments of the film under analysis, conveniently complemented with explanations, selected frames highlighting some important aspect of a scene and, obviously, references to further readings.

That way, after navigating the system, the learner will have been exposed to a new way of understanding the film, while watching it in a non-sequential way. As a result, he will have "reconstructed" the film and his ideas on it under a new light.

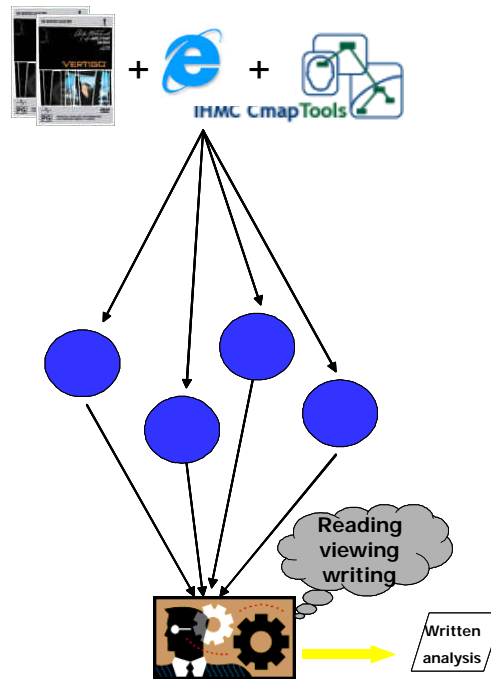


Fig. 1. The deconstruction and recombination process.

3. SYSTEM'S ARCHITECTURE

As mentioned above, the system has a two-layer architecture, as shown in fig. 2. The upper layer is formed by concepts maps linked to each other, beginning with a concept map acting as a "home page" of the film tool. These concepts maps express in a general way the basic elements in films analysis. From these, it is possible to access information more specifically related to the film under analysis via hyperlinks. This specific information is implemented in nodes located in the lower layer, actually a hypermedia network layer. The node's contents normally include text, video clips, screenshots, text templates and even interactive tests.

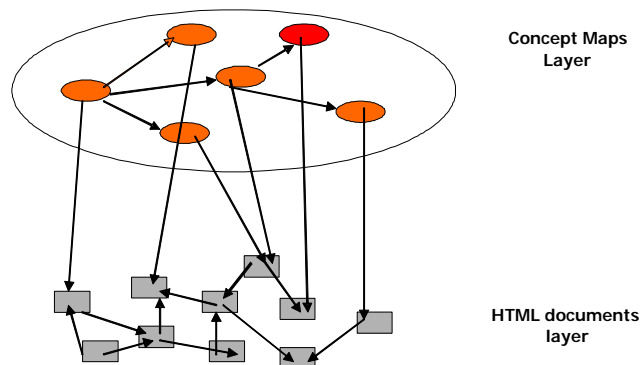


Fig. 2. Architecture of the system.

3.1. General Design Guidelines

Such a complex system as the one we are describing here must take special care of some basic design aspects, in order to be useful for the analysis and effective when learning. Next, some of these aspects are briefly introduced.

- Design of hypermedia: Hypermedia "narration" has its own rules as it is well-known in literature, but not so much in cinema [5]. It is essential to know the language of hypermedia (how to narrate with hypermedia) [6], and not just the hypermedia software, although much more importance is usually

given to the last. In our project, "narration" is not exactly applicable in the same way as when telling a hypermedia story. However, basic language rules must be taken into account for an efficient usage of hypermedia.

- Openness and connectedness: Citing C. Tomás: "Network connectivity plus hypermedia makes possible new types of cultural products that are consumed in a non linear way, oriented to integration of knowledge, that departs from the centralized authorship, developing participative communication processes". The Web and information technologies change the way information is structured and obtained. It also makes it possible for the user to generate and connect cultural significances. In our project, we find that an example of this kind of product may be constructed around a concept map like "my view of the film Vertigo" which would correspond to a film critic view of the film enriched with the relevant material and extracts from many sources related to the author [7].

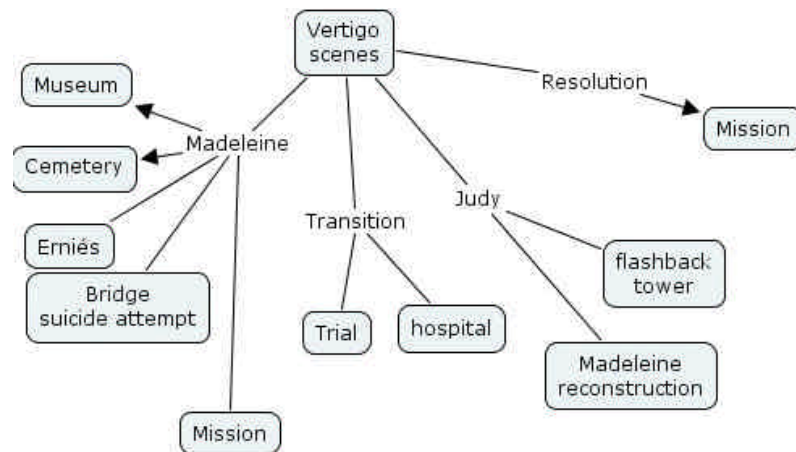


Fig. 3. One of the concepts maps for the film "Vertigo"

- Implementation recommendations: The design process of the tool prototype started with the capture of requirements. These included the types of users' foreseen profiles definition, usability, flexibility and portability, conceptual design, detailed design with selection of tools, node identification, navigational structures, functions and contents. We also considered as a must the iterative evaluation of the prototype by professional film people and film students. From this experience, built on the prototype, recommendations for the final tool design were derived. We mention here the main requirements for the system:
 - Compact. Minimum special HW requirements for maximum portability. Standard PC platform.
 - Windows and Linux compatibility whenever possible.
 - Using Free software whenever possible for maximum diffusion, usage and collaboration.
 - Flexibility in use: To be used by a student as film analysis practice and by a film analyst cooperating with others, for simple analysis and for specialized ones, as a multimedia information organization and multimedia content access tool.

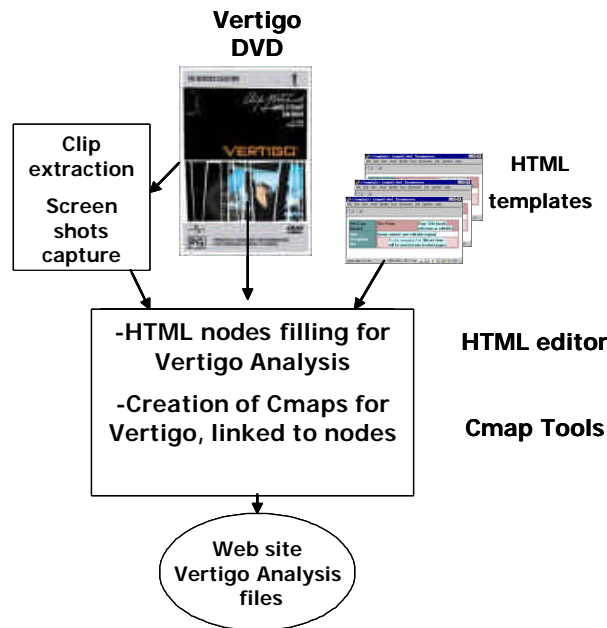


Fig. 4. The developing process.

4. CONCLUSIONS

A new system for film theory teaching is described in this paper, based on the structuring properties of concepts maps and the freedom for the access to knowledge of hypermedia.

Nowadays, when not only film professionals and students, but also most people show and increasing interest in getting to know more of the films they watch, a system like this can fulfil the needs and interest of a wide range of film fans. Its carefully studied structure and design makes it suitable for different contexts, from the professional to the informal.

If films are one of the most successful multimedia communication devices, it is about time for them to take a relevant place in the emerging world of hypermedia. But that raises a need for conceiving new ways of approaching films.

The system presented in this paper is just an answer to that need.

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