

# MAPPING THE NETWORKS IN HYPERLINK MOVIES: RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF CARTOGRAPHY THROUGH NETWORK NARRATIVES

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*Abstract:* Network narratives, hyperlink or ensemble movies are a seductive introduction to the complexity of our globalized world and our social interactions. Using two popular examples, *Babel* and *Love Actually*, I explore the uses and the limits of the social network, respectively through a global and deterritorialized network and a local one that reveals kinship. Using the dynamic of networks to represent the characters' interactions, these types of films nonetheless need boundaries. In the context of globalization, hyperlink movies are the mirror of a new geography but cannot show the complexity and the extent of it all since they are restricted by their own limits, being a narrative medium with a specific length. Hyperlink movies therefore present an interesting compromise, using a popular narrative technique to showcase a complex phenomenon.

*Keywords:* network, cinema, hyperlink movies, cognitive mapping, narrative.

## INTRODUCTION

*"From private to public spheres, from local to national to international stages, networks have become the canvas upon which subjects, governments, and corporations render the modern world"* (Jagoda 2010: 13)

A film genre often referred to as hyperlink movie<sup>1</sup>, network narrative, or ensemble film<sup>2</sup> is the best way to represent a network society by means of fiction. This narrative structure – which existed long before in other media – grasps the essence of the network and represents it via narrative films. Herein two major tendencies are explored: the first focuses on kinship through mutual friends and chronologies of chance, as coined by David Bordwell. The second discusses the reality of deterritorialized networks as a result of globalization. By their definition, hyperlink movies portray intertwined storylines that create a network that the viewer can utilize to understand the dynamic of the film. Yet for the sake of

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understanding these storylines, it is impossible to represent a network that's too complex, and that can sometimes lead to an oversimplification of the concept. As Vivien Silvey states: "Within this emergent paradigm of interconnectedness continues the problem of how to relay the postmodern promise of endless complexity, without subordinating difference to a simplified reduction of totality" (Silvey 2009). Per Silvey's observation, there has to be a certain balance. Could it be reached by choosing to represent simpler networks? Therefore, is there a limit as to how many characters and storylines can cohabitate in one movie? Moreover, how network narratives mirror new social dynamics and help us rethink the notion of traditional cartography? Network narratives present an interesting compromise, using a popular narrative technique to showcase a complex phenomenon.

## THE NETWORK SOCIETY THROUGH HYPERLINK MOVIES

What is a network? While seemingly simple, the answer to this question proves to be more complex. First associated to roads and rails, this concept takes a major turn with the arrival of the Internet and the hypertext dynamic in the 1990s: "Networks are comprised of three main elements: nodes, ties and flows. A node is a distinct point connected to at least one other point [...]. A tie connects one node to another. Flows are what pass between and through nodes along ties" (Barney 2004: 26). For George Landow, hypertext "denotes text composed of blocks of text – what Barthes terms a *lexia* – and the electronic links that join them" (2006: 3). In a network, the nodes (which can be individuals, cities, computers, firms or others) can be strong or weak, stationary or mobile, permanent or temporary, etc. Links can be correspondence, conversation, contracts and so forth, and can be called strong or weak, private or public, single or multiple, etc. Finally, the flows refer the relationships between nodes and can be feelings, data, money or other, while being constant or intermittent, unidirectional or multidirectional. These examples take into account a large number of cases, from interactions between friends to economic relations between companies. Together, each variable affects the overall network, which will be called interactive or not, centralized or decentralized, intensive or extensive. In

the words of Castells, despite the apparent simplicity of the network, these countless variables complicate its essence: “Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within networks [...]. A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance” (Castells 2010: 501-502). In spite of this complexity, this concept has been successfully applied to the hyperlink movie, a branch of the multi-protagonist film that uses the idea of network narratives:

Due to their attempt to connect and afford pattern to the complex landscapes of postmodernity – be they spatial, social or political – such films can also be understood to serve a conceptual and cathartic function in that they can perform for the viewer through narrative and aesthetic means forms of “cognitive mapping” that the individual may not be able to realise in actual life (Sim 2012).

We are in an era where networks help us better understand society. By illustrating something else than traditional cartography, they make us question the idea of systems, especially the hierarchical ones. But networks and systems aren’t complete opposites: “A network is not a sum of individuals: it is a system so long as links connecting the individual nodes frame them into one collective organization. It is the entanglement of the units in time that makes a network, or a network film, complex” (Poulaki 2012: 389). Hyperlink movies are in a way a system, in the sense that they present a certain narrative frame through which it is easier for viewers to understand the network. Since the early 1990s, most viewers have slowly become accustomed to this narrative and are able to expect certain recurring features. But this is a long process that is still underway. If the influence of some innovative TV series and soap operas in the 1980s had a major role to play, movies like *Short Cuts* (1993) by Robert Altman and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) by Quentin Tarantino have contributed to the popularity of the interwoven storylines in films. Usually,

in the course of any network narrative, some strangers will remain oblivious to their counterparts, but others are likely to gain some awareness of the network to which they belong, and some strangers are likely to join together intimately and permanently. As viewers, we tend to expect that at least some vagrant souls will hook up by the conclusion of the film (Bordwell 2008: 201).

Some storylines need to collide somehow, thus creating a network, and this is where the concept of mapping becomes interesting. Admittedly, this sort of mapping can be done for any type of film, but in the hyperlink film, this operation works incredibly well when applied to the narrative and structural complexity created by the plethora of stories and overlapping characters. In fact, this mapping can be applied at two levels: first in the structure of the film, revealed by the editing that makes the storylines intersect and the other discussed in this article, at the intradiegetic level:

Complex network films display a multidirectional and multi-level causality that can be seen as the product of a feedback circuit that connects, in the same network, the agencies of different actors/actants across different diegetic levels. At the intradiegetic level a complex network film brings together and “interlocks”, through parallelism or crosscutting, separate agents and their individual perspectives on the story world” (Poulaki 2012: 393).

So, by revealing the web of links between all the characters, a “map” is presented for the viewer, albeit not in the traditional sense of the word. But films, unlike maps, have to deal with another dimension: time. Every film has a certain duration, which also brings some limits. Maps can’t evolve: they present the state of things at the moment they were made. So even though the traditional concept of mapping might seem interesting at first glance, it remains unsatisfying to fully grasp the essence of the hyperlink movie. There are several visual metaphors to illustrate this narrative structure, but I find that in general, it is very pertinent to refer to the network in order to represent the ever changing dynamic between each character.

Even though hyperlink movies utilize networks, they nonetheless deal with narrativity and cannot offer too much interactivity and complexity to the viewers. These films use a traditional medium to represent the network in a way that reflects our daily interactions and on a much greater scale, unexpected and spontaneous links with anyone on the planet. Movies like *Babel* (2006) by Alejandro González Iñárritu illustrate how an event can link people across the globe. Like *Babel*, hyperlink movies paradoxically explore the idea of the network but use the borders of the “map” to create a framework that is nevertheless understandable.

## A GLOBAL NETWORK THAT REFLECTS OUR SOCIETY

In the film *Babel*, the personal and the global spheres intermingle in the midst of deterritorialized networks as a result of a globalized world. Through four interwoven stories, the film's network emerges when a Moroccan kid accidentally shoots and strikes American tourist Susan Jones (Cate Blanchett). From that point on a new set of connections begin to unravel through the creation of a new network: a traumatic network. The viewer watches helplessly as the scale of this network snowballs into a series of tragic events and collateral damage. As a result of the gunshot wound, the American tourists cannot return to the United States on time to care for their kids. Unable to leave the children unattended, the Mexican nanny whose son is getting married in Mexico, decides to cross the border with the children to attend the wedding. This decision and a set of other factors lead to her deportation from the United States. Meanwhile in Japan, a deaf teenager tries to connect with other people by using her sexuality. Her father gave the gun that injured Susan Jones to a Moroccan huntsman, the father of the kid who fired the gun. Although these events do not geographically connect the protagonists, it serves to interweave them into a previously unrelated network. Writing about globalization, Thomas Eriksen notes that "butterfly effects as such are rarely observed in globalization processes, but the point is rather that in a steadily more interconnected world, the distance between cause and effect is often enormous. Space is relativized" (2007: 70). *Babel* exemplifies that in the context of globalization, networks become international and the consequences reverberate beyond the local. In that specific case, the geopolitical frontiers, the traditional cartography becomes irrelevant since "through the space of flows locales can be connected to and disconnected from one another easily and selectively without regard to their proximity" (Stalder 2006: 187). Moreover, the thematic of incomprehension is also what links every storyline. A strong theme like *Babel's* cultural, political, and dialectical barriers brings together stories that would otherwise seem unrelated. Hyperlink movies can depict, without putting emphasis on one or two heroes, many variations on the same theme and offer a message that does not only offer two options: good versus evil. That being said, sometimes the greater number of seemingly different

protagonists can convey the same message and can still be one-dimensional. Although bold and very well done, the movie *Crash* (2004) by Paul Haggis, has sometimes been labeled as being a moralistic manifesto on racism, even though it showed different social classes and apparently different points of view on the subject. Overall, Iñárritu's

attempt to map and assist the viewer to imagine the complexity of the contemporary world order becomes more ambitious in scope as we proceed through the trilogy: from the socio-economic inequalities of Mexico City in *Amores perros*, to the complex web of relations – personal, economic, technological, circumstantial and legal – that interconnect the diverse ensemble of characters and settings featured in *Babel* (Sim 2012).

#### A LOCAL NETWORK THAT SHOWCASES CHANCE ENCOUNTERS AND KINSHIP

When watching a movie, reading a book, or any type of fictional work, one can choose to adopt a critical and distant approach or fully dive into the story. Marie-Laure Ryan observed the same phenomenon while reading a hypertext fiction: “right from the beginning I face a dilemma: Should I read for the plot [...]? Or should I first try ‘to reconstitute the map and the logic of the linking?’ [...] Fortunately for the pleasure of the investigation, the two operations cannot be kept strictly separate” (Ryan 2001: 228). If she decides not to dive in the story that is offered to her, she can in a way map the structure of the film. If we pause the film and draw the situation at this point, there can be a reconciliation with the “map”, where characters are cities and the links between them are roads. This analogy – even though a tad simplistic – offers a new way to understand the structure of multi-protagonist films within the diegesis. Most of the time it is easy to make such connections as most hyperlink movies – possibly due to the industry's pressure to make movies that remain entertaining and understandable – try to avoid being *too* complex. If some of them, like *21 Grams*, try to mix things up by scrambling the chronology, usually the idea is that the spectator has to find some enjoyment while mapping mentally the characters' relationships in the movie. To make this process easier, “as in most narratives, the actions in network tales take place within a common milieu or time scheme.



Sometimes the geographical stretch is very large, such as a country or a region, but in the course of the action, the arena usually narrows to permit face-to-face interactions” (Bordwell 2008: 203). A good example of this face-to-face interaction is the romantic comedy *Love Actually* (2003) directed by Richard Curtis. Set in Christmas-time London, the paths of friends and family members crisscross and intermingle around the theme of love. In a fascinating attempt to illustrate the relationship between all these characters, scientist David Robinson decided to visually represent the protagonist’s interactions. On his website *Variance Explained*, Robinson created a graphic depicting a network where every character is a node linked to more and more nodes as the film progresses; taken this a step further, he even qualifies flows according to their importance. As the network is gradually evolving and becoming more complex and dense towards the end of the movie, the viewer can mentally reconfigure the lay of the land when new information is given.

In essence, this cognitive mapping is an operation that every viewer mentally undertakes to understand the hyperlink movie. For David Bordwell, the ties or links are stronger if the characters have a close relationship with one another: “If mutual strangers create gaps or weak links, at least initially, the strong ties in the story world are provided by familiars. These characters are bound together by long-term ties of kinship, love, friendship, or acquaintance. [...] By centering on clusters of people with strong ties, the film aids viewer comprehension” (2008: 201). Without having any theoretical notion on networks, the viewer is usually able to understand the logic of linking at work in hyperlink films. In other words, “when sociologists talk about social capital, they often make a distinction between bonding capital and bridging capital. Bonding capital is an increase in the depth of connections and trust within a relatively homogenous group; bridging capital is an increase in connections among relatively heterogeneous groups” (Shirky 2008: 222). In a way, *Love Actually* uses the notion of bonding capital, where *Babel* represents the notion of bridging capital. In the first case, we’re more interested to see how kinship develops a network limited to a city where all the characters meet or could meet at a certain place and time. The proximity and the links of friendship and love for instance, allow for stronger bonds. In *Babel*, the bridging capital brings together strangers

or people living in separate locations. Similarly, the Internet links people who might never meet but are nonetheless connected in a way that differs from traditional kinship. Therefore, “networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture” (Castells 2010: 500).

### LIMITS TO THE CONCEPT OF MAPPING

While the network is evolving, it cannot expand too much for it risks being misunderstood in a fiction film. To avoid possible confusion in hyperlink films with numerous characters, directors like Robert Altman employ various tools; like hiring stars for ease of recognition and identification. However, having many protagonists often implies spending less time following each of them. By doing so, some critics have remarked that hyperlink movies cannot fully show depth, but that they are more interested in exploring chance encounters among clichéd characters. That does not discount the viewer’s ability to relate to them or find them touching. In fact, by having more characters, the viewers are allowed to have a wider range with which they can have some allegiance instead of having solely one hero. Most TV series today use the same strategy. Instead of being black or white, this diversity brings some grey areas. It also brings a certain richness that shows a great diversity. But it is a double-edged sword: “The downside of this richness in communication has been that beyond a certain level of complexity the process of interdefinition has become unmanageable. It involved just too much communication, resulting in a cacophony of voices and a lack of coordination” (Stalder 2006: 181-182).

If it is possible to talk about networks in hyperlink movies, it is still contained within a frame. There has to be a system that allows the viewer to understand the film and the extent of the network without getting lost. Thus, these movies offer an appealing introduction to the concept of networks by using a traditional medium. Moreover, hyperlink movies have open endings so viewers can imagine how the network continues to evolve after the credits appear. It would be interesting to see how far the network



concept can be stretched to its limits in a narrative film. Some interesting cases, like *Time Code* (2000) or a wide range of interactive films and Web Series offer a different view on this matter by adding a certain interaction that gives more freedom to the viewer. Hyperlink movies are the best way to explore the possibilities of networks in a fiction film, but they still use some kind of framing device that is imposed by the medium itself. A new cartography emerges; one that allows the viewer to use cognitive mapping. Perhaps in a few years, these films will indeed become more complex and the limits of time will not be a problem. In the end, one thing is sure: “network aesthetics are not merely an analytic that informs a wide range of contemporary theory, fiction, film, and digital media, but a necessary corollary to an era in which interconnection has become a dominant architectural mode, a multivalent metaphor, and even a weapon” (Jagoda 2010: 66).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alyssa Quart coined the term in 2005 in her review of the film *Happy Endings*.

<sup>2</sup> Although they all share some similarities, these terms are not necessarily synonyms. Some distinctions exist between them, even though it seems impossible for scholars and critics to agree on one term. In this article, I chose to use primarily hyperlink movie and network narratives, since they all use the network dynamic. Ensemble films, although a popular term, is also the least precise. Network narratives could be seen as the dynamic at work in hyperlink movies, as well as in other medias that use the same technique.

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