

Article

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Motifs, Metaphors and MacGuffins



The medium of cinema speaks to us through images. Filmmakers create images that communicate their intentions to viewers. Images by themselves, however, are concrete. They express only the physicality of a situation. For a creative filmmaker, it is a challenge to give these images meaning. If a film only presents what these images show, there is no art in it. Therefore, filmmakers need to develop tools to transcend this limitation of visual communication. Some such popular tools are motifs, metaphors and MacGuffins.

Motif

A film's motif, across all genres, is what gets everyone talking about it. It is that special ingredient that adds depth and meaning to a film and that film scholars talk about for a long time after watching it. It sets the work of the writer/director apart from the crowd. By definition, a motif is the recurring thematic element in a film – a repeated narrative element that supports the story's theme.

The word 'motif' is originally German, meaning 'motive'. In movies, motifs are used to

signify a character, place or specific action or emotion.

A film's motif can be presented in a number of ways: physical items, sound design, dialogues, music, colours or symbols. Any motif with narrative significance will vastly improve the story. For example, visual motifs occur in recurring patterns through props, set designs, costumes, symbols and events to support the story's intended theme.

Theme vs. Motif

A motif can be a symbolically significant image, sound, action or figure that highlights the theme. Motif and theme will always be linked because they feed off each other. Thus, if the motif is a recurring image, then the theme is the central idea behind these recurring images. One type of motif is a leitmotif, an intentionally recurring aural element associated with a particular idea or action. Leitmotifs present themselves as a repeated sound, shot, dialogue or piece of music. One example would be 'Hedwig's Theme' which plays every time Harry Potter appears onscreen. Others are the iconic opening of James Bond shooting toward the camera as the theme music kicks or the Indiana Jones movies opening with the Paramount logo dissolving into a mountain near Indy. We also hear the Bond theme during moments that are distinctly Bond-like.

A theme is the central thesis of the story. The filmmaker wants the story to convey the film's underlying philosophy. In short, a theme is what you want your story to mean, and a motif supports and conveys the theme. A theme is not dependent on the use of a motif; however, a theme often might not be effectively communicated without one.

Examples of Motifs

Some examples of motifs: A child's doll, birds, mirrors, trees and even the letter X shown throughout the X-Men movies.

Alfred Hitchcock was known to use mirrors in all his works to show a person's dual personality. In fact, he used mirrors and birds in *The Birds* to show both sides of Melanie Daniels' personality, her penchant for mischief and the result of letting the birds out of the cage.

Like Hitchcock, Christopher Nolan loved using birds in *The Prestige*. These birds had to be identical to make the trick work. But one bird also had to give its life for the others. Birds and the images of doubles can be found throughout *The Prestige*.

Perhaps one of the most famous motifs in modern cinema is the glowing briefcase from *Pulp Fiction*. The film is full of motifs, from bathrooms being bad luck to breakfast being the most important meal of the day.

What makes an element an effective motif?

When it comes down to it, almost anything can be a motif; first and foremost, however, it must support the story's theme. One can repeat multiple elements to support the theme, but they all must work cohesively to complement the same message. The motifs must recur throughout the film and enhance the narrative.

What does a motif do?

Motifs are a great way to reinforce a film's theme and have grown into one of the best narrative devices. Great stories are not passive occurrences; they are events that reveal something about us. Without the meaning they hold, the film remains lifeless. The secret to making a meaningful film is finding that meaning and identifying an element that best symbolizes the theme. This could be a prop (the car in *Chalti Ka Naam Gaadi*), a song (*Kal Ho Na Ho*'s title track), a dialogue ('*Babumoshai, zindagi badi honi chahiye lambi nahin*' from *Anand*), and anything else that encapsulates the film's message.



Magic of Metaphors

A metaphor is the presentation of one idea in terms of another that belongs to a different category, so that either our understanding of the first idea is transformed, or a new idea is created from the fusion of both ideas. The original idea is referred to as the ‘tenor’, and the second idea that modifies or transforms it is known as the ‘vehicle’. The juxtaposition of the two ideas or images must involve a transformation, generating a new/extended meaning – without it; there is no metaphor, only a simple analogy or juxtaposition.

An analogy entails a literal comparison only, in which the categories of the chosen ideas or images remain undisturbed. In contrast, metaphors are figurative. Categories are compacted and broken down so that a fresh meaning can be expressed. The vehicle will either reconstruct the category of the tenor, or the fusion of both will create something for which no category exists. This account implies that metaphors are born at the frontier of human consciousness, where language and image (with their inadequacies) and our mental framework of classifications (with its restrictions) encounter unassimilated experiences to derive new interpretations. Metaphors, in a way, dissolve our fixed notions in order to produce fresh insights.

One of the special properties of the film medium is its ability to present a variety of images concurrently. Prose narratives are generally linear, describing events in sequence. In a film, however, a panoramic shot can encapsulate what it would take a novelist multiple pages to describe in words. Paintings can show coincident occurrences, but only statically. Stage productions can render multiple events simultaneously, but only to a limited degree; stage settings are relatively constant, and if contemporaneous action is parcelled out to different actors or groups, there is a danger of dividing the audience’s attention.

Film, however, constantly sets people, objects and milieu within the same frame. The mobility of the camera permits variety of viewpoint, freedom of composition and rapid changes in focal interest. Normally, the elements that comprise a shot are interpreted literally. They are present, we feel,

because they are contiguous with real life. However, the filmmaker can give the objects or events depicted within the shot a metaphorical function without distracting from the probability of their appearance. The filmmaker can also choose to accentuate the metaphor or keep it subtle. The metaphor is not thrust on the audience, it is implied.

Metaphor is one way of universalization



If Apu of *Pather Panchali* had remained just Apu, the film would have been a piece of insignificant communication. There are thousands of Apus, and the audience isn’t interested in listening to each one’s story. However, if Apu represented ‘the early twentieth-century boy discovering an increasingly industrialized India where the drift from village to city has started’, then the audience would react to his story differently. Now, it would no longer be the story of any Apu. To transform the story of ‘an Apu’ to one of ‘an early twentieth-century boy discovering a new India’, the filmmaker incorporated a number of elements that elevated static images from their banal representative state to one where they were universalized.

A cinematic metaphor not only talks about a particular individual or situation, but also generalizes and talks about the corresponding ‘time and space’. Such imagery or visual communication helps the audience get deeper insight into history, into a situation and above all, into their own experiences. These metaphors universalize an image or a visual experience and make the audience relate with them within the context of their own situations or experience.

Examples of Metaphors

The Coen brothers’ *No Country for Old Men* is a metaphor for retirement and life thereafter. The elderly people featured in the film are treated as if they are a disease that the world should get rid of,

which is in line with the way many old people feel about the lack of healthcare and housing provided by their governments.

The entirety of the film *Groundhog Day* by Harold Ramis, is a metaphor centred on Buddhism. The main character, a shifty weatherman, is stuck in a time loop and forced to live the same day over and over again until he changes his ways, ultimately becoming a better person. The charitable acts featured in the film are an important tenet of the Buddhist way of life.

The metaphor in Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* – child prostitution – is glaringly obvious. The film centres on a girl undergoing various rites of passage. She is brought to a bathhouse, the equivalent of a brothel, where she is made to please male clients, including the wealthy man called 'No Face', who has the inappropriate desire to own her.

Apart from the above examples, films also make extensive use of trains, old houses, clouds, rivers, rain and mountains.



In *27 Down*, Awtar Krishna Kaul uses the metaphor of a train journey to build a story about the ups and down in the life of a young couple in a metropolitan city.

In *Maya Darpan*, Kumar Shahani uses a big old mansion and its huge empty corridors to reflect the suffocation of the young female protagonist.

In *Stanley Ka Dabba*, the restaurant where Stanley works as a child labourer is a metaphor for the state of the unaccounted number of child labourers in our country.

Ritwik Ghatak, the celebrated Bengali filmmaker, harboured a great love for metaphors. In his most famous film, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, which deals with the exploitation of a daughter by a family,

Ghatak leverages his metaphors for melodrama. In the crucial sequence in this iconic film, rain is used as a metaphor.

Balachandran Menon used parallel railway tracks as a metaphor in his famous Malayalam film *Samantharangal* to depict the never-ending disparity between two generations, a principled father and his pragmatic son.

In Avinash Arun's *Killa*, the fort is a metaphor for the protagonist's feelings – abandonment and loneliness, with strength despite the turbulent events that cause an upheaval. These are universal emotions, and that's why the audience instantly connects with the movie and characters.

Girish Kasaravalli, a Kannada filmmaker, uses metaphors in almost all his films. His diploma film *Avashesh* (The Remnants) is the story of crumbling relationships in a family of three generations. Apart from an old lady and a young boy, the film has a dilapidated and crumbling traditional house. The structure is a metaphor for the crumbling relationships in the family.

Another of Kasaravalli's works, *Dweepa*, has five characters. The first four are human: the husband, wife, grandfather and Krishna. The fifth is the rain, used as a metaphor to convey happiness, romance, fear, tragedy and helplessness. It adds to the subtext in various scenes, giving each a different connotation.

In *Bannada Vesha* (The Mask), the mask of the protagonist's Yakshagana character is used as a metaphor for an acquired image that is often identified as a person's real character.

The language of Motifs and Metaphors

Movies themselves are metaphors for the deeper perspective of the human experience. Creating a unique language of metaphors and symbols (aka motifs) is a big part of visual storytelling. Symbolic images help us understand abstract concepts that cannot always be translated into words. Strictly speaking, metaphors are visual or auditory representations of an action, experience or idea, like the flame of a lamp (*diya*) that blows out to signify a death. The lit *diya* is a symbol of life or a living being. Metaphors and motifs can be used for the in-depth development of plot, theme and characters.

The key to making a film relatable for a large cross-section of its audience is to integrate and weave metaphors and motifs into the texture of the story. Otherwise, the film lacks resonance, however realistic it may be.

Crafting a cinematic visual

Creating a cinematic image in a film, therefore, is a matter of craft; it depends on the cinematographer's skill and sensibility as well as the framing, composition, pacing, sound design, rhythm, colour and tonality of the image. Through such means, the object is transformed within the image or shot and described differently. Metaphor is, therefore, encapsulated within the image itself. Mise-en-scene can be as much a source of metaphors within a shot as the cinematography.

What is a MacGuffin?

A MacGuffin, in short, is a plot device that helps drive the narrative forward but is ultimately not that important to the story. Hitchcock gives a pretty good explanation of MacGuffins when he describes them as the things that characters onscreen worry about but the audience does not care about.

Hitchcock popularized the term with his film *The 39 Steps*. In the movie, a man is mistaken for a spy and consistently hounded for information about the 39 Steps, a mystery object or piece of information worth killing over. Yet when the movie ends, the viewer is no closer to learning what those 39 Steps are.

To the audience a MacGuffin may seem unimportant, but its purpose is to propel the story forward. A MacGuffin can be a goal, person, object or idea that the characters are in pursuit of, and it generally needs to be revealed in the first act. Unlike other plot devices, MacGuffins are vague and interchangeable; they are the plot objective you don't choose until the story planning is complete.

Examples of MacGuffins

The MacGuffin itself is not important; it only matters as a means of moving the plot forward. MacGuffins serve the following purpose:

- Set the plot

- Give the character something to care about
- It is not usually paid too much attention by the audience.

The screenwriter has to complete the story's outline before they can decide what the MacGuffin should be, whether it is a necklace, money or a telephone call. The actual object does not matter. All that matters is that the character wants to have it, which kick-starts the story. For example, in 1944, Hitchcock was working on a spy movie called *Notorious*. The MacGuffin he chose was uranium sand because he had heard that uranium was going to be a big deal in the years to come. When Hitchcock's choice elicited pushback from the producer, Hitchcock told him that the uranium was not the foundation of the story, only the MacGuffin, and therefore not very important. Finally, he said, 'Look, if you don't like uranium, let us make it industrial diamonds, which Germans need to cut their tools with. He pointed out that if *Notorious* had not been a war story, they could have hinged their plot on the theft of the diamonds, that the gimmick was unimportant. That's the key. The MacGuffin is purposely trivial, so it can be changed even after the entire movie has been written. A couple of examples are the stolen money that motivates all of Marion Crane's actions in *Psycho*, or the Heart of the Ocean necklace in *Titanic*.



These are known as 'pure MacGuffins' because they follow Hitchcock's strict criterion: They must be incredibly important to the character, but meaningless to the story itself.

Some examples of Hitchcock's MacGuffins are:

- Uranium ore stored in white bottles in *Notorious*
- The necklace in *Vertigo*
- The suspected murder across the courtyard in *Rear Window*

- The coded message in a piece of music in *The Lady Vanishes*
- A spare apartment key in *Dial M for Murder*.



In the majority of these instances, you could watch the movie and not even remember the MacGuffin. In the rest, like *Rear Window*, the MacGuffin looms large over every single scene. Either method is effective so long as the plot device drives the narrative forward.

The movie *Pulp Fiction* is full of symbolism. Still, the symbol that stands out the most is the briefcase. Its glow shows us the importance of being a man of your word. It is one of the best MacGuffins in cinema history.

Citizen Kane has one of history's most unforgettable MacGuffins: Rosebud. The word uttered by a dying magnate becomes a source of fascination for one reporter. He learns other things over the course of the film, but never what Kane meant by the word.

In *Aakrosh* by Govind Nihalani, Amrish Puri's character, a defence lawyer, keeps getting anonymous telephone calls, which only increase the tension in the film but ultimately amount to nothing.

In contrast to Hitchcock, George Lucas considered a MacGuffin a plot device that is just as important to the audience as it is to the characters. Things like the ring in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of Rings*, the Horcruxes in the *Harry Potter* series and the Ark of the Covenant in Stephen Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* are good examples of Lucas' version.

No rules in arts

The single rule of creating art is that there are no rules. In other words, a rule acts as an open invitation to artists to defy it, circumvent it, violate it or shape it to some other purpose. At one time, flashbacks were signalled by a close-up or dolly-in shot of the face of the person remembering, followed by a slow dissolve to a sequence that was foggy at the end of the frame. Nowadays, all these tricks have been dispensed with. Straight cuts are employed to connect to flashbacks. At one time, jump cuts were regarded ungrammatical, but now these are commonplace. How the audience responds to these tropes depends on their education, experience, expectation and cinematic literacy. It takes a comprehensive understanding of the craft and subject matter to create a universal and everlasting metaphors and motifs.

Motifs, metaphors and MacGuffins are plot devices used by screenwriters and directors to make the film and its story more interesting and memorable. Theoretically, they may seem disparate devices, but in practice all three overlap, supplementing and complementing to serve the same purpose: To make the narrative more cinematically effective.

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