Introducing a tool of analysis of fictional worlds and its visualization

This introduction explains in a minimal way how the tool of analysis we are going to apply to a series of Pixar movies works and how it is visualized. For more information, see Candel 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2016 and forthcoming.

The present tool models fictional worlds via semantic fields. Both the fictional worlds and its semantic fields are derived from the adaptation of possible worlds theory for literary purposes, most noticeably in Doležel 1998. The tool posits audience[1] expectations regarding the semantic composition of the real world and the fictional world about to be accessed – the audience believes that the (fictional) world is such an such. These expectations are either confirmed or corrected by the specific movie through semantic shifts.

The movement from possible worlds theory to fictional worlds and from modality to semantic fields with a cultural value leads to a world composed of four interlocking semantic fields into which we can place movie characters and objects – henceforward existents – to define them semantically. These fields are comprised of the opposites nature – supernatural and society – individuality. Potentially, all combinations of fields are possible, although in practice some combinations are more frequent than others. Visually, the field is organized in the following manner (see figure 1):
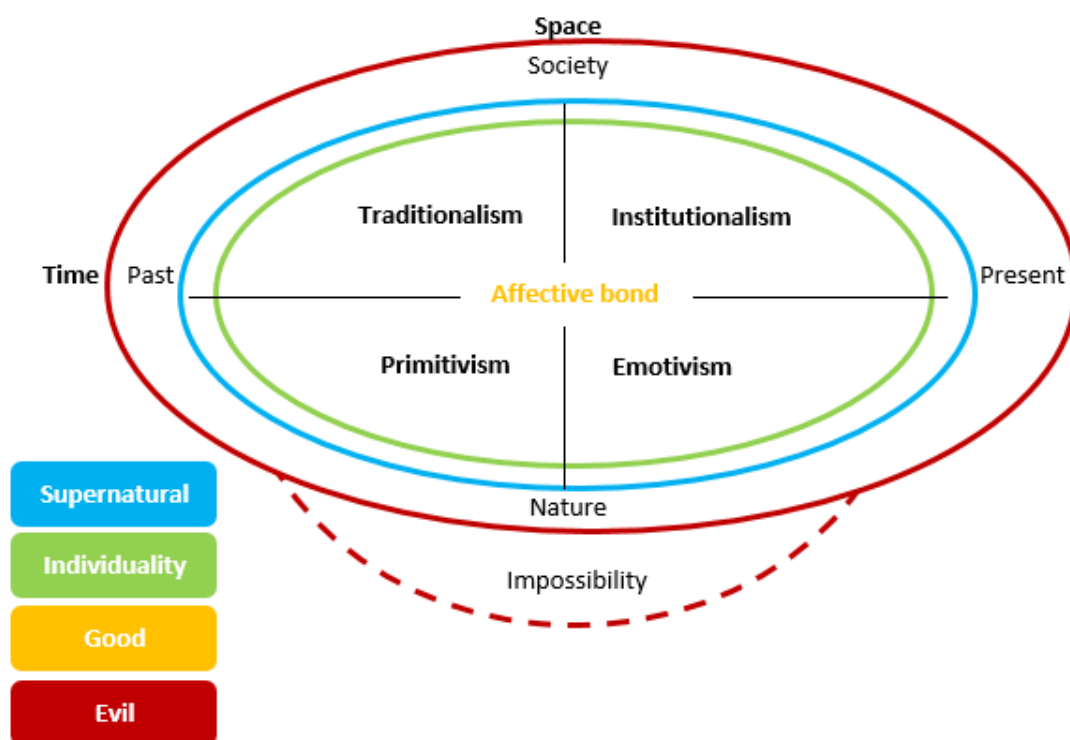

Figure 1

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[1] The words 'audience', 'movie' and 'watching' are used here because this introduction leads to the analysis of Pixar movies. However, what we mean by these words are, more generally, fictional objects and people experiencing / consuming / processing these objects.

1. Since the most frequent opposition in fiction is that between nature and society, visually the fictional world is divided vertically into nature (below) and society (above).
2. Given the more secondary nature of the supernatural and individuality, these values will orbit the field, but in doing so can cover every possible position and thus equally define existents. The blue orbit stands for the supernatural, the green orbit for individuality.
3. Since the audience typically experiences fictional existents as good or evil, these values will also orbit the fictional world and cover those positions which are so experienced. Only the red orbit stands for evil, while good is allotted to those positions which are not covered by evil (see item 4).
4. In the very middle appears the 'affective bond', which is living proof of the partiality of fiction for affection, in whichever form, e.g. love, friendship or more paternal expressions of affection. From a semantic perspective, the affective bond represents a privileged space where nature and society can meet. The word 'bond' acts as a precondition of sociability, signaling a relation between at least two participants in fiction. The term 'affection' suggests that that relationship is not established through the rule – this would return us back to society – but through feeling, wherefore we are moving in the direction of nature. Existents can occupy a series of semantic positions and still be associated to the affective bond. In Pixar movies, as so often in modern fiction, the affective bond is experienced as good, wherefore it is coloured in a different way (ochre).
5. There is finally a sagging dotted line which represents impossibility. Because of the structure of reality and modern culture, the supernatural can oppose not just this or that field, but reality as a whole. It is therefore useful to think of a special orbit which is somehow visually separated from reality as a whole. In its opposition to reality as a whole impossibility tends to be evaluated as 'evil', hence the red colour.
6. This world can be enriched further by organizing it in temporal terms. When we encounter elements from fictional worlds, we tend to situate these elements not only within semantic fields, i.e. space, but also allot these terms a temporal value, either past or present. Visually this temporal dimension is included through a horizontal division of the world: the past is located in the left half of the world, while the present is located in the right half – since we don't know the future, it can only be imagined from our knowledge of past and present. Having thus divided the field into horizontal and vertical axes, we now have a fourfold division of the space within the ellipse, signifying past-natural (primitivist), past-social (traditional), present-natural (emotive) and present-social (institutionalist) views of reality. A description of each of these worlds follows in table 1:

TERM	DESCRIPTION
TRADITIONALISM	The inhabitants of this world prioritize social normative elements, such as hierarchy and traditions.
PRIMITIVISM	The inhabitants of this world behave in primitive ways by following nature. Such behavior is based on a primitive, i.e. incipient and inchoate state of civilization.
EMOTIVISM	The inhabitants of this world express their individuality by following the impulses of their inner nature, their drives and feelings.
INSTITUTIONALISM	The inhabitants of this world are governed by the institutions, anonymous normative bodies which have come to represent them.

Table 1

The whole model presented in figure 1 represents the sum total of possible worlds that the four modalities can generate. Here the word 'possible' alerts us to the fact that every world in the model is only a potential one, and that every specific fictional text will foreground some elements of the model at the expense of others. The foregrounding can take very different forms: a fictional work can for example dispense with the temporal axis to focus only on semantic space; it can conversely foreground time, but by bringing to the fore only primitivist and institutionalist worlds; on the other hand, it can also dispense with virtually the whole model and foreground only the supernatural as opposed to the natural; it can even suggest a certain foregrounding, and then forget about it and highlight another one.

Works cited

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