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Mindscaping Oskar Schell: Mental Spaces and Conceptual Blending in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

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Abstract

Profiling the mindscape of characters and mapping their cognitive terrain in the course of the plot's development is crucial to a film's aesthetic interpretation. The mental spaces constructed and reconstructed gives an insight into the character's motives and their spiritual journey visualised in the films. A myriad mindscape of wishes, inhibitions and phobias characterises the near autistic eleven year old mind of Oskar Schell in the 9/11 based film *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a 2012 Oscar best picture nominee by Stephen Daldry. As quoted in Jonathan Safran Foer's book that the film is based on Oskar can 'hear my bones straining under the weight of all the lives I'm not living'. Oskar Schell, in search of the lock that his father's key unlocks, is on a subconscious quest to unlock the trauma and guilt which weighs him down after his father's death at the 9/11 attack. Conceptual blending proposed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002) is utilised to schematise Oskar's relentlessly active mindscape and the images he printed of a man falling/jumping from the Twin Towers. The falling man is a recurring image in the pre-credit scenes of the film and although Oskar's crusade ends ironically, he physically embodies his father's image in the end pages of his handmade scrap book made from his expedition project. This paper attempts at cognitively plotting the mindscape of the protagonist and his emotional quest at making sense of his father's death and his life afterwards.

Key Words: Conceptual blending, conceptual integration, mindscape, fictional minds, text worlds

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Humans have the indelible capacity of building wide arrays of mental space configurations in any given situation. This human faculty helps them to integrate and create meaning where interestingly, none might exist before. The advanced ability to blend incompatible conceptual arrays is a basic part of what makes us cognitively progressive. The integration of mental spaces is sometimes idiosyncratic and may not rely on any pre-existing similarities but is generated in the inimitable mind of the

conceptualizer. These conceptual integration processes are not static but are dynamic structures that can be innovated and manipulated incessantly. Fauconnier (1994) defines mental spaces as domains of 'backstage cognition,'- abstract mental constructs that are generally set up on the basis of general scenarios. They are mental constructs of potential realities dynamically prompted as a conceptualizer listens to a string of speech or reads a text or sees a photograph. The mental space networks created are sometimes widely shared or restricted. Meaning making in this framework of referential structure

‘depends on our ability to delimit the orbit of reference’ (Coulson 2001). Mental spaces are local rather than global and are thus not describable in truth-conditional terms. Elements of mental spaces may not refer to entities in the real world, but is a cognitive blend of the real and the imaginary worlds. The peculiarity of mental spaces lies in the fact that they are constructs of potential realities rather than perfect mirrors of the world we live in. Ryan (1991) describes these alternate possible worlds as different versions of the text actual world which may correspond to characters’ beliefs (Knowledge worlds), expectations (Prospective Extensions of Knowledge worlds), plans (Intention worlds), moral commitments and prohibitions (Obligation worlds), wishes and desires (Wish worlds), and dreams or fantasies (Fantasy Universes). Narrative fiction and its visual counterpart-film is in fact a creative presentation of the fictional cognitive functioning of an individual (intramental thinking) and/or a group of characters (intermental thinking). This covert mental operation is reflected in the characters’ speech and mannerisms and a

cognitive analysis of the speech acts recreate the mental processes and maps the mindscape of the characters shedding light on ‘why he does what he does’.

A conceptual blend is the product of a particular communicative situation where at least two different conceptualizations of an event are merged. It is an integrated merged structure for which two or more mental spaces work as inputs. The generic space is an inventory of the shared inputs and is schematized as a third space. A blend, the fourth space, is, “both less and more than the sum of its inputs” (Turner and Fauconnier 2002). It is less because it incorporates only those aspects of the two spaces which constitute the generic space, and it is more because the structure, resulting from the integration is not available in any of the inputs. The blend space has emergent information that is not contained in either the input or generic spaces. The mapping between the input spaces is schematically expressed by intersecting correspondences and all the four spaces are connected via interconnective links (Figure 1).

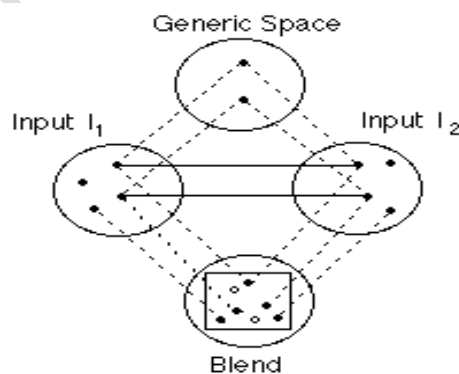


Figure 1. *Conceptual Blending Schemata*

Source: markturner.org

These mental spaces are either introduced by grammatical expressions or by means of pragmatic information projected onto the overt input. These overt indicators either open up new mental spaces or shift the focus to some existing ones. In oral languages, space-builders may take on a variety of grammatical forms, such as subject verb complexes (e.g. she wants, He believes, the child thought), prepositional phrases (e.g. in her dream, in 1983, behind bars), adverbials (e.g. perhaps, actually, theoretically, probably), conjunctions (e.g. if, because, when) etc. These conceptual elements have no fixed properties. Instead, they are interpreted with regard to the conceived domain within which they are construed.

Research Analysis and Discussion

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is a film that unfolds from the chaotic pinball intellect of the emotionally strung eleven-year old Oskar Schell. His troubled and yet unconfirmed asperger's syndrome psyche is unable to come in terms with the death of his father Thomas Schell in the 9/11 World Trade Centre attacks. His father was Oskar's sole intellectual companion and they played impromptu, ingenious mind games which were Thomas's bridge into Oskar's world of social inhibitions and eccentric reasoning. Oskar's final mission/expedition project requires him to find out proof that a sixth borough existed in New York. After his father's death, when Oskar accidentally finds a mysterious key addressed 'Black' he is convinced that the key opens the lock to his father's final message/clue which is hidden somewhere in the city. He reaffirms his relentless search of the 472 people named 'Black' with his father's words – "if things were easy to find, they wouldn't be worth

finding" and "not [sic] stop looking" (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012) and is in an subconscious quest to make sense of his father's death and yawning gap it left in his heart and life.

The opening credits of the film shows a close up and mid shot of a man falling. The falling man cannot be recognized as Oskar's father just as he is unable to confirm the identity of the falling man in the photographs he printed from the internet. Oskar calls it a "pretend funeral" when an empty coffin is kept at his father's funeral. Oskar's psyche cannot come to terms with the fact that his father has left him clueless on how to cope with his absence. Oskar is also tormented with guilt as he was unable to pick his father's last call in the morning of the "the worst day" (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012).

In order to mediate and cope with the reality of his tragedy Oskar creates several alternative mental spaces which blend reality and potential realities. Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) notion of 'conceptual integration network' can provide a useful account of the kind of cognitive process which viewers need to attribute to Oskar, and therefore go through themselves, in order to make sense of his cognitive functioning.

In his quest for 'Black' and the lock, Oskar's rigid, logical mind breaks,

"...everything down into the smallest parts,
... and tried to think of each person as a
number in a gigantic equation
... But it wasn't working.
Because people aren't like numbers.
They're more like letters.
And those letters want to become stories.
And Dad said that stories need to be shared."
(*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012)

This gives an insight into Oskar's rigorous analytical psyche, which desperately tries to find the source of the key and to interpret the baselessness in his father being "killed by people who didn't even know him at all" (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012). He integrates the concept of his search problem with a mathematical equation. He equates each person with a number in a gigantic equation. Here the Input space one contains attributes of his quest and input space two has the logical characteristics of a mathematical equation. The generic space equates the exploration with a mathematical problem. The blended space compartmentalizes his mission as an equation which Oskar should solve to exemplify the tragedy and move on (Figure 2)

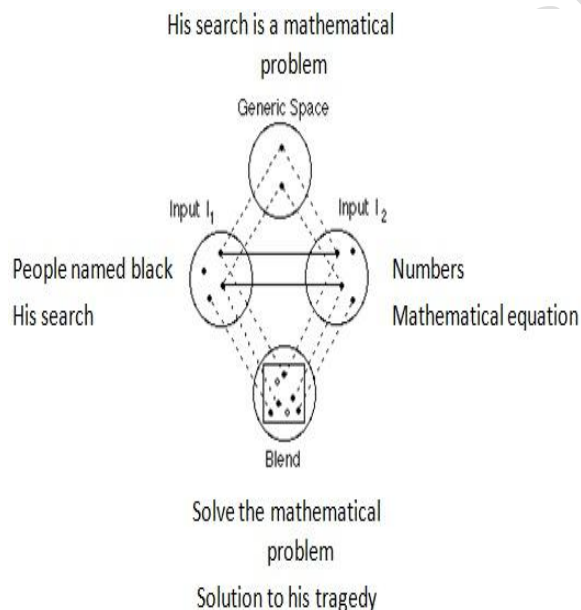


Figure 2. Conceptual Blending: People and Numbers

But Oskar soon realizes that "it wasn't working" because people are not numbers but are "more like letters" that provide input for emergent mental spaces that are linked to stories that "need to be shared".

Oskar's strikingly perspicuous thinking induces him to categorize his crusade as one of the many expeditions his father had set him to solve. This ratiocinative world conceived by Oskar activates his dynamic intellect and makes him proactive to the search and signposts the way to go about solving the problem. But his search is interspersed with people trying to comfort him and make him feel better about his dad and that is not what he wants. He does not want to make friends, he just wants to unriddle the problem and gets annoyed and stymied at having calculated and discovered that it would take three years to cover the 472 people named Black.

Oskar in his frustration at not yet having met the real 'Black', takes his grandfather to his room and shows him the photographs of a man falling (presumably) from the Twin towers at the 9/11 tragedy.

Oskar's discourse is as follows:

"I printed these out from the Internet.
This is probably him.
Or it might be him.
He's dressed like he was.
When I magnify it until the dots are so big
it stops looking like a person...
...sometimes I can see glasses on him
...or I think I can.
Probably the other kids see their dads too."
(*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012)

This association between the falling man in the photographs and Thomas Schell articulated in the two sentences "This is probably him. Or it might be him." can be captured in terms of the conceptual integration network, consisting of four spaces. The first input space has the photograph which captures the image of a man falling. It is an image of a male, dressed in formals, freeze framed on his fall. The second input space has Oskar's father Thomas Schell, killed in the 9/11 attack. The generic space has a middle

aged man formally dressed, on his death fall from the twin towers; the blended space concocted in Oskar's mind supposes that the falling man is his father and that is how he died. He is desperately trying to read meaning into the dotted images and can "sometimes" see glasses on the man or he "thinks" he can. His wishful thinking and superior intellect creates a belief world or an alternative blended mental space where the falling man becomes Thomas Schell (Figure 3).

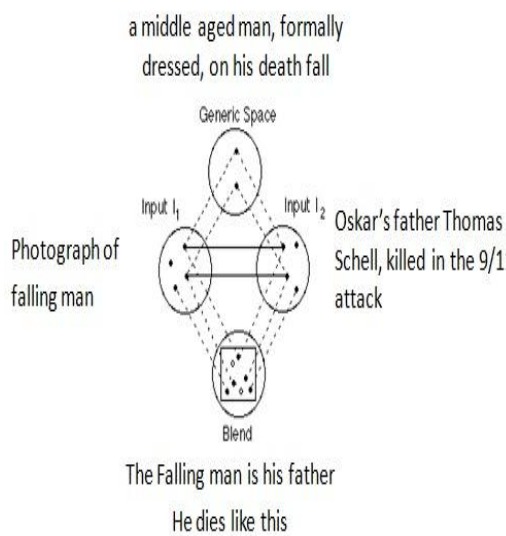


Figure 3. *Conceptual Blending: Falling Man and his father*

Conceptual integration networks can include more than four input spaces, however, resulting in "multiple blends" (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). Such Multiple-space networks can also include 'local' generic spaces that are shared by only some of the spaces in the network. The last sentence in the discourse "Probably the other kids see their dads too." provides input for another mental space which is created from the perspective of other kids who have also lost their fathers in the 9/11 attack. The

inhabitants of each of the inputs are mapped onto each other with his father and the falling man demiurgically blended by Oskar's psyche as a means to comprehend the 'reality' of his loss.

The notion of a conceptual integration network is particularly apt to capture the creative and dynamic nature of Oskar's mental construct, which develops over time with emergent structures resulting in him reinstating his father to his original position at the Twin towers, modeling him as a hand drawn stick figure in the last page of his handmade scrap book made of paper cut works and photographs from his expedition project. Cognitive blends compress complex and disparate scenarios and relations into simpler ones that are cognitively more manageable. The blend enables Oskar to transform his traumatic reality into a simpler alternative scenario which is more concrete and documentable just like his expedition project. The alternative world disappears or is restored to the real world form with one pull of the string, when Thomas Schell is taken back to his factual life scenario of being present inside the twin towers at the time of attack. It is at the same moment that Oskar speaks out in a monologue:

"... As much as I want him to...
...my dad is never coming back.
And I thought I couldn't live without him,
but now I know I can.
I think that would make my dad proud...
...which is all I ever wanted."

(*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012)

Finally, Oskar, through sheer strength of will, gets reconciled with his father's death and can do without escapades into the alternative world scenarios. Oskar was in a quest to locate the lock that the key opens, and though his pursuit ends in disappointment, he is glad that "it's (the

key) where it belongs” (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012). He thought that he could never live without his father and that he would remain the socially awkward boy who lacked emotional reciprocity. But his hunt for Mr. Black had brought him closer to his grandfather and also made him reach out and thank all the ‘Blacks’ he met on his journey. With his new found clarity of thought, unburdened by guilt, he finds the hidden message from his father below the swing set and he is lauded for his bravery and excellence at having solved “Reconnaissance Expedition Number Six”, and is told “Now it’s time to go home” (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012) and confront his everyday ‘real’ life. He subjugates his dread of swings when he sits on the swing and tries to push himself off the ground. The last still frame shows Oskar swinging high into the air “as free as a bird” (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012), having stretched the “eight minutes” to cover his lifetime.

Fauconnier and Turner (2002) suggest that the same process of conceptual integration underlies the perception of true motion as the visual system infers motion from the spatial displacement of a single object over time. The integration processes utilized to comprehend the perception of motion are a central component of higher cognition. Manipulation of visual perception through editing produces higher order blending effects. The shot/reverse shot editing technique in film where the film maker cuts from one vantage point to another is an example where the viewer’s cognitive blending faculty composes the separate shots into an integrated sequence. The

opening frame and the concluding frame of *Extremely loud and Incredibly close* landmarks Oskar’s odyssey. The falling man denoting his father in the opening frame and the final still frame showing a mid shot of Oskar rising/swinging to the clouds marks Oskar’s spiritual journey to freedom from his guilt, loneliness and intense phobias.

Conclusion

Fauconnier and Turner’s notion of conceptual integration and the non arbitrary nature of blending explain the workings of Oskar’s mental struggle to develop a satisfactory alternative to his tragic reality. It is not surprising that his ‘make believe’ mind which created “sky scrapers that existed below the earth for the dead” (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2012) leans towards a cognitive blend of the real and the imaginary worlds. The viewers have to construct the blend as part of their ongoing construction and assessment of the characters’ mental lives within the world of the story. The intramental escapades processed solely in the mind of Oskar makes him an interesting character, but unintelligible to the peripheral audience. This incomprehensibility leaves him to be one of the less loved child characters in the reviews of the film. But beyond all pain lies hope of friendship triggered purely by a shared traumatic past and Oskar realizes that he is not as alone as he thinks he is. Oskar Schell’s story is one to cherish, even when he is talking extremely loudly and his pain is incredible close, that the viewer can cognize the agony and share the blended spaces created by the distressed, agitated yet alluring mind of Oskar Schell.

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