

# IS EVERY PATH THE RIGHT PATH? A SEMIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE AXIOLOGICAL CHOICES IN *MR NOBODY* (2009)

**MA Mathieu Bokestael**

*Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia*

## **Abstract**

Jaco Van Dormael's 2009 film *Mr Nobody* presents the viewer with a set of different choices and lives. The explicit moral of the film is that each of these lives is the right one, that every path is the right path. This paper proposes a semiotic analysis of the romantic interests of Nemo to investigate whether this is truly the case. Through the use of different semiological models (among others Metzian semiotics of cinema, Fontanille and Zilverberg's tensive model and Greimas' semiotic square), it disproves the axiological position of the film and shows that the different lives of Nemo are presented as unequal.

**Keywords:** *Semiology, Mr Nobody, Jaco Van Dormael, Christian Metz.*

Christian Metz famously attempted to “study the ordering and functioning of the main signifying units used in the filmic message” [Metz 1990: 68]. In light of more contemporary semiotic systems, Metzian model perhaps presents an outdated and oversimplified distinction between denotation and connotation. However, this oversimplification can, through its rigid oppositional differentiation, add to a clearer understanding of the distinctions between the different axiological positions and choices presented in *Mr Nobody* since axiological concerns are predominantly connotative. Metzian system understands the ‘shot’ as the smallest possible unit of signification [ibid.: 74] in the linguistic paradigm of cinema and the “[sequence (...) [as] a sort of coherent syntagma within which the “shots” react (semantically) to each other” [ibid.: 77]. Metzian categorisation of cinematic syntax offers multiple linguistic structures but the different potential lives of Nemo are mostly represented in a manner that is closest

to what Metz calls the 'Alternate (Narrative) Syntagma', i.e. as parallel, simultaneous and chronological<sup>1</sup>. Metz defines this specific syntagma as follows:

“[t]he alternate syntagma is well known by theoreticians of the cinema under the names “alternate montage,” “parallel montage,” “synchronism,” etc., depending on the case. Typical example: shot of the pursuers, followed by a shot of the pursued, and back to a shot of the pursuers. Definition: The montage presents alternately two or more series of events in such a way that within each series the temporal relationships are consecutive, but that, between the series taken as wholes, the temporal relationship is one of simultaneity (which can be expressed by the formula “Alternating of images equals simultaneity of occurrences”)<sup>1</sup> [sic] [ibid.: 84].

Each of these syntagmatic lives is supposedly equal since, in the movie, the 118-year-old Nemo explicitly says that “[e]ach of these lives is the right one! Every path is the right path. Everything could’ve been anything else. And it would have just as much meaning.” It is a thought that is reiterated once more near the very end of the film when the narrator says that “[b]efore, [the child] was unable to make a choice because he didn’t know what would happen; now that he knows what would happen, he’s unable to make a choice.” This entails once more that no life is preferable and that every choice is equal, but is that really the case? Jaco van Dormael, the director and writer of the film, in that regard, states that he “wanted to make some sort of philosophical tale without a moral: [t]he experiment that Mr Nobody suggests is to not choose but to explore everything in order to understand that all experiences are interesting in the end. That is what I would like the audience to feel: that there are no good or bad choices. That it is all in the way we live them. In this respect, the question of freedom is one of the essential themes of my film” [Wild Bunch 2009].

Yet, it is also undeniable that, to the audience, some lives seem more preferable to others. In that regard it is important to notice how Van Dormael states that “[c]inema allows us to multiply the possibilities of life: to live for a few hours the life of an inhabitant of Uzbekistan or to be a trapper in Alaska” [Wild Bunch 2009]. What follows is therefore a semiological analysis of the axiological connotations of the adult characters of Anna, Elise and Jeanne which tries to evaluate how equal or unequal these lives are. This paper limits itself to these choices and this paradigm because analysing all the possible lives of Nemo would lead too far and because what matters is acknowledging the structural inequality of these lives and not their interdependent

<sup>1</sup> This is true even before the nine-year-old Nemo is faced with the initial choice between his mother and his father – which sets the plot in motion – as the narrative alternates between the lives of Nemo as a child and his 118-year-old self.

status of preference. The analysis will mostly be grounded in Saussurean semiology and its exponents (such as the theories of Metz) since these theories rely on oppositional differentiation and are therefore well-fitted for uncovering the distinctions between denotation and connotation on the one hand, and between multiple axiological positions or connotations on the other. Moreover, Van Dormael often also discusses his films in terms of ‘cinematic language’ and thereby acknowledges his indebtedness to a linguistic and structuralist understanding of cinema.

However, before we analyse the film it is important to acknowledge the fact that axiological evaluations rely on a value system that is highly constructed. Barthesian *Mythologies* has shattered the illusion of a ‘natural’ value system by unmasking it as cultural and constructed. We should therefore both consider which values the world in which the film is produced and received considers central, and which axiological categories the conceptual world within the film emphasises. The value system in which the film is produced and (most often) received needs little explication for it is the one in which we live. Common sense<sup>1</sup> and the understanding of the constructivist character of our axiological system should therefore suffice in guiding us through the analysis. The answer to the latter question, however, is more complicated but seems to lie in the centrality of the theme of love in the film: in the director’s commentary included with the DVD, Van Dormael states that “*l’amour (...) est évidemment central au film*” [Mr Nobody 2009] since a lot of the choices Nemo is faced with and that will distinguish between all his possible lives have to do with the concept of love<sup>2</sup>. What’s more, it is similarly interesting to consider the fact that ‘love’ and all the other themes of the film (such as choice, happiness, time) each have to do with what Floch calls ‘existential values’ in his evaluation of axiological categories,

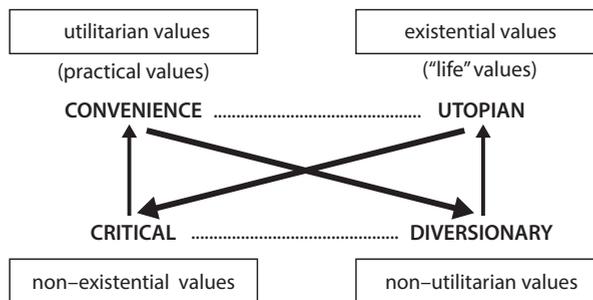


Figure 1. Floch’s axiological semiotic square [1988: 239].

<sup>1</sup> Language, especially when idiomatic or metaphorical, will also prove very helpful in that regard.

<sup>2</sup> This is also why this analysis focuses on the potential love interests of the protagonist.

values which have to do with the human as a social being looking for fulfilment [1988: 239–243]. We will therefore consider these values as central to the film.

In addition, it is also important to understand that the axiological categories associated with the women are not really of a denotative character but more of a connotative one, for values are not naturally inscribed in the word or the image. Although it is rather impossible to completely distinguish between pure denotative meaning and connotative meaning, Metz offers us an interesting methodology that, exactly because it is perhaps a little oversimplified, can help us in our analysis. He writes that

“In the cinema, [the denoted meaning] is represented by the literal (that is, perceptual) meaning of the spectacle reproduced in the image, or of the sounds duplicated by the soundtrack. As for connotation, (...) its significate is the (...) cinematographic “style,” “genre” (the epic, the western, etc.), “symbol” (philosophical, humanitarian, ideological, and so on), or “poetic atmosphere” – and its signifier is the whole denoted semiological material, whether signified or signifying. (...) The same scene filmed in a different light would produce a different impression; and so would the same technique used on a different subject. (...) This is another way of saying that the significate of connotation can establish itself only when the corresponding signifier brings into play both the signifier and the significate of denotation [sic]” [1990: 71].

“[e]ven the subtlest and most ingenious cinematographic connotations are based then on this principle, which we might state as follows: A visual or auditory theme – or arrangement of visual and auditory themes – once it has been placed in its correct syntagmatic position within the discourse that constitutes the whole film, takes on a value greater than its own and is increased by the additional meaning it receives. But this addition itself is never entirely “arbitrary,” for what the theme symbolizes in this manner is an integral situation or whole process, a part of which in fact it is, within the story told by the film (or which the spectator knows to be an actual part of life). In short, the connotative meaning extends over the denotative meaning, but without contradicting or ignoring it [sic]” [1990: 76].

Connotative Level	Signifier		Signified
Denotative Level	Signifier	Signified	

Figure 2. Visual representation of the links between denotative and connotative meaning in Metzian theory.

Both the filming techniques (the denotative signifiers), and their visual results (the denotative signifieds) will therefore be analysed as signifiers of the connotative meaning. Moreover, Metz argues that contrary to Saussurean linguistic semiology, the relationship between signifier and signified in film language is not always arbitrary. He argues that the relationship between the denotative signifiers and signifieds is one of non-arbitrary analogy or iconicity in both image and sound – “that is to say, [one of] perceptual similarity between the signifier and (...) the significate” [1990: 75]. The relationship between the connotative signifiers and signifieds, however, is “always symbolic in nature” [1990: 76] and this symbolism is of course arbitrary since “the form of the sign is not related to its signification” [Storkerson 2010: 14]. Moreover, this signification is “assigned by convention” [ibid.] and can be based on both cultural<sup>1</sup> and specialised codes [Metz 1990: 77]. Metz argues that the former are “so ubiquitous and well “assimilated” that the viewers generally consider them to be “natural” (...) (although they are clearly products, since they vary in space and time)” [ibid.]. He adds that they require “no special training” [ibid.], whereas the specialised codes do since they “concern more specific and restricted social activities” [ibid.]. The latter therefore also “appear more explicitly as codes” [1990: 77]. The film of course uses what Metz calls the regular cultural code of encoding and decoding which is exactly why common sense can suffice in the analysis since the axiological system in which the film is produced and received is also part of our cultural code. However, it is important to realise that every image is connoted and that no film is in “a kind of Edenic state (...); cleared utopianically of its connotations” [Barthes 1980: 277]. In short, no image is “radically objective or (...) innocent” [ibid.: 277], no matter how hard Van Dormael tries to convince us of the opposite.

Finally, to understand the connotations that are inscribed in the different love interests of Nemo, it is also necessary to recognize the fact that the women only exist in their relationship to the protagonist. They are never active subjects but always remain passive objects of (fetishistic) spectatorship. In an interview included with the press kit of the film, Jaco Van Dormael confesses that

“[t]he writing of the wives is built on a paradigm based on the relationship each of them has with Nemo. There is the case where he is in love with her and she’s in love with him too (Anna), he is in love with her

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Louis Gassée, chairman of the Apple Products Division, gave an accurate description of the ‘cultural decoding’ of the firm’s logo: [i]t is obvious, here, that the figurative reading is a cultural event or, to put it another way, that the perception of readily recognizable images (...) is always achieved via a personal grid for reading the world, a grid acquired from childhood onwards and specific to one’s culture [qtd in Floch 2000: 54].

but she isn't quite in love with him (Elise), she is in love with him but he isn't totally in love with her (Jeanne). In the end, the story with Anna – the one where both are (...) madly in love – is lived out in waiting, in absence, whereas the other two lives are lived daily but in the tragedy of non-reciprocity” [Wild Bunch 2009].

It is therefore important to note that the three women belong to the same paradigm relating to the protagonist – a paradigm that could perhaps be described as ‘potential wives for Nemo’ – for Floch, in following Metz, correctly argues that “[i]n more semiotic terms, identity can be conceived or perceived along the two axes of ‘system’ (paradigm) and ‘process’ (syntagma) and that visual identity can, in the first instance, be defined in terms of both difference and continuity” [2000: 33]. Jared Leto, the actor playing Nemo, understands this paradigm and this tension between difference and continuity in the following manner: “I started looking for differences rather than similarities. But ultimately, I didn't want to play 12 clearly different people, but 12 different versions of the same person according to the different choices he makes. Because this is actually the same person in 12 different existences” [Wild Bunch 1990]. Anna, Elise and Jeanne are therefore always represented in a romantic relation to Nemo and are thus necessarily part of the same discourse or paradigm. However, that is not the only continuity that bridges the three women: other motifs – such as the diverging traintracks<sup>1</sup> or the often threatening presence (of large bulks) of water (be it a lake, a swimming pool or a bath) – are present indiscriminately throughout the different lives of Nemo and contribute to a form of coherence that holds the paradigm of possible lives together.

Meaning is however also created by difference, and subjectivity is, as Benveniste famously argued, a product of language. As the French semiotician puts it: “[i]t is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in its reality which is that of the being” [Benveniste 1971: 224]. Nemo's different accents, which depend on the life and love interest he chooses, therefore create a set of negative oppositions that enables the spectator to differentiate between the lives with Anna, Elise and Jeanne. However, cinema is primarily a visual language and we should also consider what Floch, in adapting André Lhote's term, calls the ‘visual invariants’ [2000: 35–36], of what Greimas calls the plastic categories, i.e. “the ‘minimal’ units of the [visual] signifier”

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<sup>1</sup> The diverging traintracks are of course also cultural metaphors for the representation of diverging possibilities and lives, and are related to the metaphor of the ‘fork in the road’ as for instance used in Robert Frost's poem ‘The Road Not Taken’.

[Greimas 1989: 639]<sup>1</sup>, of a visual object. Visual invariants are therefore “differential and recognized traits; and they are so because of their variables of realization because they are prone to being traits relevant to the form of expression of a visual identity” [Floch 2000: 36]. The most obvious visual invariants of the three women are of course the colours<sup>2</sup> associated with each of them, since each love interest is connected to a specific primary colour. Van Dormael explains that he tried to

“find a visual language for each one of Nemo’s lives, by playing with colour. Three little girls: one wears a red dress (Anna), the second a blue one (Elise) and the third a yellow dress (Jeanne). We kept these three colours as visual codes for each of their lives. Thus, in the life where Nemo chooses the little girl in yellow, the whole set is tinted in yellow whereas red and blue are absent. Same logic and same consequences for the two other stories. It could sound very forced, but on screen it works very discretely. It’s as if in choosing [sic] a life, he renounces colours and goes towards monochrome. In childhood, all the colours exist. For Old Nemo only white remains” [Wild Bunch 2009].

However, with each colour not only comes denotation, but also connotation. Anna’s fiery red associates the character with love and passion. Red has been a symbol of the passion of the Christ in Christian iconography throughout the history of western art and has been reinterpreted in popular culture as a symbol of love and romantic passion as can perhaps best be illustrated by the ubiquitous association of the colour with Saint Valentine’s Day<sup>3</sup>. Thus, since Anna is associated with love and that the concept of love is so central to the film and its emphasis on ‘existential values’, Anna proves to be a very successful character. Elise’s colour, on the other hand, is blue which is a colour often associated with depression, sadness and melancholy as in the idiom ‘feeling blue’ which motivates Miles Davis’ seminal album. In the film, her character is therefore characterised by feelings of

<sup>1</sup> Greimas writes: “[t]he procedures by which the semiotic object is constructed consist in determining combinations of minimal units – which we will call plastic figures – and then moving on to still more complex configurations, thus confirming the general postulate according to which all language is at first a hierarchy” [1989: 641].

<sup>2</sup> Storkerson notes how colour is often, in Peircean terms, a ‘decorative’ “which evoke[s] feelings” [2010: 26].

<sup>3</sup> This semantic reinterpretation can perhaps best be understood as a form of Peircean semiosis. The colour red (representamen) refers to the colour of blood (object) and thus creates an interpretant in western art (the idea of the passion of Jesus). This interpretant constitutes a new representamen that refers to the life and teachings of Jesus (object) and associates the colour, through the centrality of love in the Christ’s teachings, with the concept of romantic love (interpretant).

unfulfillment, guilt and depression which categorise her as very unsuccessful in terms of Floch's existential values. Jeanne's colour, finally, is yellow. It is, through its resemblance with gold, a symbol of the material wealth and power<sup>1</sup> Nemo acquires in his life with her<sup>2</sup>. Jeanne therefore stands for values that are, in Floch's system, more 'utilitarian' than 'existential' as can be exemplified by the fact that the Nemo who is married to Jeanne exactly chooses not to choose but to let any decision be taken by the tossing of a coin.

The semiotic oppositions, however, go a lot further than a mere colour-coding. Van Dormael explains:

"I wanted each life in MR. NOBODY to have a different cinematic language. I also wanted to use the camera in a very specific way for each life so that one would know which life we are talking about from the first shot of a scene. We filmed the life with Anna (Diane Kruger) like their adolescence: I used with Anna and Nemo as adults the same set up I'd used with them as teenagers so that the two emotional charges would merge on screen. The life with Elise (Sarah Polley) plays on the distance between her and Nemo, with one of the two characters out of focus, filmed with a hand-held camera, in a realistic way. In the life with Jeanne (Linh-Dan Pham) we used an out of shot technique. The feet appear on screen before the face. The heart of the matter is always out of shot, as if no one's paying attention to it. The life of the teenager in the coma is completely out of focus. The life of the widower is composed of different independent camera movements; they are contemplative, with no connection to the character's movements. The life of "the one who was never born" is flat, unreal; everything in it is clean [sic]" [Wild Bunch 2009].

These different cinematic languages are not innocent or arbitrary either. First of all, it's interesting that in interviews Van Dormael seems very reluctant to describe the specific cinematic language associated with Anna and often remains very vague when talking about these issues, especially compared to the willingness he displays to discuss the ones associated with Elise and Jeanne. In the director's

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<sup>1</sup> Wennerlind correctly argues that "money serves as a general claim on social wealth and confers the privilege to exercise power over other people" [2001: 566]. However, although capitalist consumer culture tries to convince society that money and power equals happiness, it has not yet succeeded in doing so as can be illustrated by a lot of products of the culture industry (e.g. a lot of rom-coms where a wealthy man is unhappy until he finds the love of his life) or the popular idiom 'money doesn't buy happiness'.

<sup>2</sup> In that manner, it resembles the use of the colour yellow in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (e.g. Gatsby's golden car).

commentary added to the DVD, he does, however, reveal that “*dans la vie avec Anna, (...) les plans de l'enfance, ce sont des plans qui se répètent de façon identique à l'âge adulte*” [Mr Nobody 2009]. He illustrates that statement by pointing to the similarities between the scene where the nine-year-old Nemo almost drowns in the pool, and the one where the Nemo who is married to Anna drives into a lake and finds his death. Similarly, the scene where the long-haired Nemo who works as a ‘poolboy’ and Anna chase each other in his apartment recalls an almost identical scene between Nemo and Anna as teenagers. By creating this narrative arc from childhood to adulthood with Anna (and denying it to the storylines with Elise and Jeanne), the film thus seems to suggest that the choice for Anna is the most ‘natural’<sup>1</sup> one. What’s more, with regards to the cinematic language of the lives with Elise, Van Dormael notes that the ‘realism’ of the hand-held camera plays ‘on the distance between her and Nemo’. The fact that one of the two characters is always out of focus thus carries an axiological quality of distance that can be added to the colour symbolism of Elise’s character. Similarly, in the life where Elise dies on her wedding day, the contemplative and independent camera movements signify a form of solitude and alienation in the life of the widower. Finally, Van Dormael argues with regards to the cinematic language associated with Jeanne’s character that ‘the heart of the matter is always out of shot’. Here of course, Van Dormael’s verbal language and choice of metaphor is quite striking as well. Jeanne’s storylines are the ones where Nemo doesn’t love his wife. Anna, Nemo’s real love and the real ‘heart of the matter’, is therefore necessarily always out of shot. This illustrates Floch’s claim that a signifier is “not primarily what it represents, but what it transforms – that is to say, what it chooses not to represent” [2000: 62].

Moreover, in both Elise’s and Jeanne’s representation, there is therefore not only a relationship of symbolism in the use of colour but also one of iconicity between filming techniques – or, in Van Dormael’s words, cinematic language – and the denotative signifieds that carry the axiological qualities ascribed to the women. This illustrates quite well the strict hierarchical structure of denotative analogy and connotative symbolism of Metz discussed above (cf. Figures 3 and 4)<sup>2</sup>. If a character is out of focus, it entails a physical distance between him/her and the

<sup>1</sup> Although of course, as noted above, Barthes has deconstructed these myths of the cultural codes – which incidentally relate to the hierarchies of denotative and connotative signification that Metz identifies –, they are still quite pervasive and keep influencing the spectator in his assessment of the different lives.

<sup>2</sup> Here we encounter the oversimplification of Metzian semiology mentioned above: it is unlikely that the denotative and connotative meanings are so strictly separated. This ‘categorical’ thinking, however, helps us to easily identify the axiological implications of the cinematic languages of Elise and Jeanne, which, for our purpose are more important than Barthesian semiological plausibility.

subject that is in focus, which, in turn, on a second denotative level, by analogy, signifies an emotional distance. This emotional distance combined with a physical distance, according to our cultural norms, then acquires the connotation of an unhappy or bad marriage. Similarly, the ‘out of shot’ technique implies a physical absence that on a second denotative level can be understood as an absence of love, which once again combined with a physical absence carries, in our western culture, the connotation of an unhappy or bad marriage.

Connotative level		<i>Signifier</i> physical and emotional distance		<i>Signified</i> unhappy marriage
2 <sup>nd</sup> Denotative level		<i>Signifier</i> physical distance	<i>Signified</i> emotional distance	
1 <sup>st</sup> Denotative level	<i>Signifier</i> out of focus	<i>Signified</i> physical distance		

Figure 3. Adaptation of Figure 2 to Elise’s life camera techniques.

Connotative level		<i>Signifier</i> physical and emotional absence		<i>Signified</i> unhappy marriage
2 <sup>nd</sup> Denotative level		<i>Signifier</i> physical absence	<i>Signified</i> emotional absence	
1 <sup>st</sup> Denotative level	<i>Signifier</i> out of shot	<i>Signified</i> physical absence		

Figure 4. Adaptation of Figure 2 to Jeanne’s life camera techniques.

This semiological analysis of Elise’s and Jeanne’s cinematic languages reveals that both camera techniques actually share the same connotation. The semiotic relationship between the characters is therefore not one of strict negative opposition but rather of scalar continuum. In fact, this is quite logical since the ‘out of shot’ technique can be understood as a stronger form of the ‘out of focus’ technique: if an object is moved more and more out of focus, it will eventually disappear from the shot. This also relates to another aspect of the film, namely the unequal

amount of screen time allotted to the different storylines. In this competition of allotted screen time, Nemo's lives with Anna take the lead. The ones with Elise take second place, whereas the ones with Jeanne drag far behind as Van Dormael notes in the director's commentary included with the DVD: "*dans l'ensemble du film, [l'histoire avec Jeanne] est très court[e] (...) simplement parce que le personnage principal ne la voit pas. Il passe à côté*" [Mr Nobody 2009]. This inequality of course shifts the spectator's preference significantly in favour of Anna, as do a lot of other details. Nemo seems for instance to have a telepathic relationship with Anna that he doesn't have with Elise or Jeanne (thereby denoting that they have a special relationship, which – contrary to the connotations that the camera techniques of the lives with Elise and Jeanne bear – in our culture is considered a good basis for marriage or love). Similarly, the nine-year-old Nemo faced with the divorce of his parents at the train station seems to want to choose his mother over his father. In the lives where Nemo ends up with his father – which are the ones associated with Elise and Jeanne, whereas the choice of the mother leads to the lives with Anna –, it is mostly just because he happens to lose his shoe, stumbles and is unable to get on the train in time.

In the press kit accompanying the release of the film, Van Dormael also insists that "the story [he] was trying to tell [is] not binary [and] that [he] was above all interested by the multiplicity and complexity of choices" [Wild Bunch 2009]. The absence of a clear opposition and of a simple "inverted symmetry" [Floch 2000: 44] in favour of a continuum of lives should therefore not surprise the viewer. This is also the reason why rigid and binary (post-)Saussurean systems, although they offer clear distinctions between denotation and connotation, are also slightly ill-adapted to analyse the relationships between Nemo and his love interests. Fontanille and Zilverberg's 'tensive model' [Fontanille 2006; Zilverberg 2006], however, is more dynamic and offers an interesting approach. Louis Hébert exhibits the possibilities of the model and offers an interesting approach to the 'feelings of attachment' central to the film [Hébert, his graph]:

"Consider, for example, a group of emotions associated with attachment to other beings. (...) The axis of intensity indicates the intensity of the emotion, and the axis of extent the number of beings toward which a given subject directs this emotion. By partitioning the graph into four zones, we will distinguish four main kinds of emotions. In zone one, we have (a) love (ordinary love); (b) in zone two, "true love", or "the love of a lifetime"; (c) in zone three, we have friendship; and (d) in zone four, "universal love" or compassion. Now we shall refine the analysis. If we distinguish in terms of extent, true love generally applies to fewer beings

than ordinary love, and conversely, universal love, as the name indicates, generally applies to more beings than friendship. Then if we distinguish in terms of intensity, friendship is generally a less intense feeling than love, and we consider universal love to be absolute compared to true love, not just in terms of extent but also intensity. This more exact analysis can be represented as follows”:

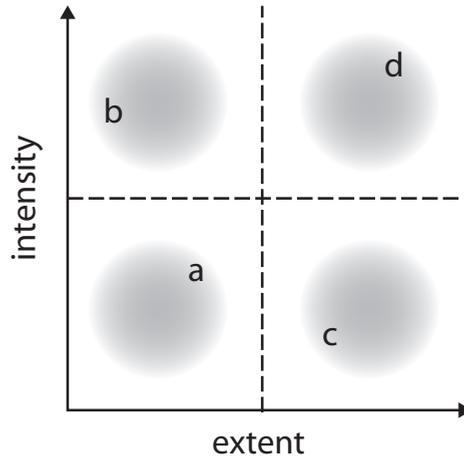


Figure 5. The tensive configurations of feelings of attachment.

In this analysis, one could draw a line from (b) to (c) that would approximately display a relationship of inverse correlation between our cultural definitions for ‘true love’ and ‘friendship’: whereas true love is high in intensity and low in extent, friendship is a feeling that extends to more people but is therefore also less intense. If we subsequently consider the characters of Anna, Elise and Jeanne and try to position them along that arrow of inverse correlation according to the feelings Nemo seems to display for them, then we would position Anna high on the left, Elise a little bit more to the right but still in the upper-left corner – for even though Nemo seems to display some romantic affection for Elise, she is unsuccessful in her ‘existential’ values and she does not share some of the signs of true love that Anna and Nemo share (e.g. the telepathy, the fact that she is allotted less screen time, the fact that she is associated with the father and that she lives in England, etc.) –, and finally Jeanne significantly more to the bottom right – for she represents ‘utilitarian’ values and even though she displays signs of ‘romantic love’ towards Nemo, he doesn’t share her feelings. In a more cognitive approach to the film, we might therefore have said that in the category ‘true love’ Anna is more prototypical than Elise, who in turn is more prototypical than Jeanne.

*Mr Nobody's* alternate narrative syntagma thus utilises a paradigm of unequal storylines located across a continuum from most preferable to most undesirable life. The different lives of Nemo are therefore not as equal as the director would like us to believe. However, although we have tried to identify Anna as the most preferable of the three love interests within the frame of the conceptual world of the film and the one of Western European culture, it is ultimately true that it is impossible for us to conclusively identify which one of these lives is the best choice for Nemo due to the impossibility of escaping semiosis and the volatility and arbitrariness of value systems and cultural norms. Philippe Godeau, the producer of the film, states that Van Dormael “could have spent 10 years working (...), exploring all the possibilities of the editing and coming up with an entirely different film” [Wild Bunch 2009]. We therefore cannot exclude the possibility that, in this ‘entirely different film’, another character would be a better match to Nemo than Anna, and we can similarly not exclude the possibility that an untold (but still possible) storyline in the current film might be preferable to the ones that we have explored. Moreover, this is true not only for the conceptual world of the film but also for our very own cultural norms. Thus, in societies where arranged marriage is the norm, Floch’s utilitarian values might prevail over the existential ones emphasised here and the lives with Jeanne preferred over the ones with Anna. This is another way of saying that signs only exist in relationship to each other, that they are constantly assembling and producing meaning, and that a fixed meaning would be impossible to pin down. However, for our purpose it is not really important to pin down exactly which life is the most preferable. What is important, however, is to acknowledge that the lives are structurally unequal and that the explicit moral of the film, namely that every life is equal, is untrue. In fact, in displaying the inequality of Nemo’s choices and playing with the spectator’s identification and inability to (conclusively) identify the best one, Van Dormael thus also magnificently exemplifies the Orwellian maxim: all choices are equal, but some are more equal than others.

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