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The Narrative Psychology of Reversal Endings: An Integrated Model Based on Predictive Coding and Narrative Remapping

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Abstract: Reversal endings are widely celebrated in contemporary narrative across various media, yet existing academic research largely remains confined to the level of basic typological description. Consequently, there is a significant lack of an integrated explanation regarding the underlying psychological and cognitive mechanisms that make these narrative devices so impactful. To address this critical gap, this paper proposes a comprehensive two-stage "predictive coding—narrative remapping" model. In the first stage, the narrative reversal triggers a strong prediction error, leading to the sudden collapse of the viewer's existing mental model and inducing a profound state of cognitive dissonance. In the subsequent second stage, the viewer initiates an active, compensatory reconstruction process termed "narrative remapping." This complex cognitive mechanism integrates retroactive cue retrieval and emotional reappraisal, thereby successfully transforming the original disruptive error signal into profound aesthetic pleasure and enhanced memory durability. Contrary to previous literary studies, this paper argues that the true artistic value of a reversal does not originate merely from the shock of the prediction error itself, but rather from the completability of the remapping process and the subsequent emotional return on cognitive investment. Through detailed close readings of the acclaimed films *Shutter Island* (2010) and *The Piano Tuner* (2010), together with a rigorous comparative analysis of a structurally failed case, *Old* (2021), the paper validates the proposed theoretical model. Finally, three empirically testable hypotheses are offered, charting a robust methodological path for future investigations in the emerging field of cognitive neuro-narratology.

Keywords: narrative reversal; predictive coding; narrative remapping; cognitive dissonance; meaning construction; mental models

1. Introduction: Beyond "Surprise" -- Why Do Reversals Move Us Enduringly?

The reversal ending is a narrative device that has persisted across centuries, blending ancient storytelling traditions with modern cinematic techniques. Its appeal lies not merely in the immediate shock or surprise it generates but in its ability to provoke deeper engagement and reflection. When viewers encounter a reversal, their initial reaction is often one of astonishment, accompanied by a sudden realization of the true nature of the narrative. This moment of clarity prompts them to revisit earlier scenes, reinterpret previously overlooked details, and engage in discussions or repeated viewings of the film. Such enduring engagement suggests that the impact of a reversal extends far beyond the fleeting sensation of being surprised or deceived. Instead, it invites viewers into an intellectual and emotional process of re-evaluation and discovery. As some scholars have noted, a well-crafted reversal does not merely aim to mislead or trick its audience but rather encourages them to actively participate in a retrospective reasoning process, uncovering layers of meaning that were initially obscured. This participatory aspect is what distinguishes a compelling reversal from a mere narrative gimmick, as it fosters a lasting connection between the viewer and the story.

Despite its prominence in storytelling, existing research on reversal endings reveals significant gaps [1]. On one side, narratology and film theory have extensively analyzed

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the structural and technical components that enable reversals, such as the use of restricted points of view, deliberate information asymmetry, and unreliable narration. These elements are crucial for creating the conditions necessary for a reversal to occur. However, such analyses often fall short in addressing the temporal dynamics of how viewers process these narrative twists in real-time. On the other side, cognitive psychology offers valuable insights into mechanisms like prediction errors and belief updating, which are central to understanding how individuals respond to unexpected information. Yet, these psychological frameworks have rarely been applied to the study of narrative experiences, leaving a gap in our understanding of how these two domains intersect. This paper seeks to bridge these disciplinary divides by proposing an integrated model that combines insights from both narratology and cognitive psychology. By doing so, it aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying the psychological and aesthetic impact of reversal endings.

The core argument presented in this paper is that the psychological impact of a reversal ending unfolds in two distinct stages, each governed by different cognitive systems. The first stage, which occurs within a timeframe ranging from fractions of a second to several seconds, is characterized by a process of prediction-error-driven disintegration. During this phase, the viewer's ongoing narrative prediction model is disrupted by new information that cannot be easily integrated, resulting in a pronounced sense of cognitive dissonance. This dissonance is not merely a negative experience but serves as a catalyst for deeper cognitive engagement. The second stage, which spans a longer duration from seconds to days, involves a process termed narrative remapping. In this phase, viewers actively engage in retroactive retrieval of earlier narrative elements, re-cueing specific details, and reattributing emotional significance to previously misunderstood events. This process allows them to resolve the initial dissonance and achieve a higher-order coherence, transforming the negative experience of disintegration into a positive sense of aesthetic fulfillment and memory consolidation [2]. The depth and completeness of this second stage are critical in determining the artistic and emotional weight of a reversal ending, as it is this phase that enables viewers to derive lasting meaning and satisfaction from the narrative.

The structure of this paper is designed to systematically explore the proposed model and its implications. The second section delves into the predictive coding framework, providing a detailed explanation of the concept of narrative remapping and its relevance to understanding reversal endings [1, 3]. The third section illustrates the application of this framework through the analysis of two films, each demonstrating distinct pathways of narrative remapping. By examining these examples, the paper highlights the versatility and explanatory power of the proposed model. The fourth section addresses the boundary conditions of the model by analyzing a case where a reversal fails to achieve its intended impact, thereby clarifying the limitations and prerequisites for successful narrative remapping. Finally, the fifth section outlines testable hypotheses derived from the model and discusses its broader implications, as well as potential limitations, paving the way for future research in this area.

2. Theoretical Framework: Predictive Coding and Narrative Remapping

2.1. Predictive Processing: How the Brain Constructs Story Worlds

Predictive processing theory suggests that the brain functions as a sophisticated prediction system, constantly generating models to anticipate sensory input and refining these models based on discrepancies between expectations and actual experiences. This process, often referred to as prediction error, plays a crucial role in how individuals interpret and respond to their environment. In the context of narrative comprehension, this mechanism is particularly significant. As viewers engage with a story, they continuously form expectations about upcoming events, character actions, and underlying motivations [2, 4]. When the conclusion of a narrative deviates sharply from these expectations, it generates a pronounced prediction error signal. This signal reflects

the brain's recognition of the unexpected outcome and prompts a reevaluation of the narrative framework. Such processes highlight the dynamic interplay between expectation and surprise in storytelling, emphasizing the brain's adaptability in processing complex information.

Unlike the immediate and often unsettling nature of prediction errors in real-world scenarios, narrative reversals offer a distinct cognitive experience. Viewers are aware that the story is a constructed, fictional representation, which allows them to approach unexpected developments with a dual perspective. On one hand, they may acknowledge the surprise with thoughts such as "I did not anticipate this outcome," reflecting a cognitive recognition of the deviation [5]. On the other hand, they may appreciate the creativity and ingenuity behind the narrative twist, perceiving it as a deliberate and skillful design choice. This dual evaluation transforms the prediction error into a source of intellectual and aesthetic engagement rather than discomfort. Furthermore, the ability to integrate and reconcile the unexpected elements within the broader narrative framework can enhance the overall enjoyment of the story. This process underscores the unique capacity of fictional narratives to provide a safe and enriching space for exploring the boundaries of expectation and surprise.

2.2. Narrative Remapping: Definition and Sub-Processes

Narrative remapping is defined as the active cognitive process by which, upon the revelation of a narrative reversal, the viewer engages memory and reasoning to reorganize and reinterpret prior narrative elements. This reorganization allows the construction of a new mental framework that aligns with the reversal information while remaining emotionally coherent and acceptable. The process involves a layered approach, encompassing multiple sub-processes that interact dynamically to achieve this reinterpretation [6]. By engaging in narrative remapping, viewers are able to reconcile discrepancies between their initial understanding of the narrative and the new information presented, fostering a deeper engagement with the story's structure and thematic elements.

1. Retrospective cue-scanning refers to the viewer's active retrieval of previously overlooked or seemingly insignificant narrative details, often referred to as "background cues." These cues, which may have been dismissed or undervalued during the initial viewing, are reassessed and assigned new significance in light of the reversal. For instance, subtle behavioral discomfort or visual anomalies that were initially perceived as inconsequential may later emerge as pivotal indicators of the narrative's underlying truth. This sub-process underscores the importance of attention to detail and the viewer's ability to reinterpret elements that contribute to the coherence of the revised narrative framework.
2. Character and perspective reattribution involves a critical re-evaluation of the reliability of narrators, the motivations driving characters, and the boundaries of point-of-view restrictions within the narrative. This sub-process challenges the viewer to reconsider previously held assumptions about the narrative's perspective and the intentions of its characters. For example, a sudden shift in perspective or the revelation of hidden motivations can prompt the viewer to question the authenticity of earlier portrayals, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the narrative's structure and thematic complexity. This reattribution is essential for constructing a coherent and emotionally resonant mental model of the story.
3. Emotional reappraisal is the process by which viewers experience a shift in their emotional responses to previously encountered scenes or events. This sub-process serves as the emotional engine of narrative remapping, driving the viewer's engagement with the revised narrative framework. For instance, scenes that initially evoked tension may later be perceived as melancholic, while moments of humor may be reinterpreted as reflective of deeper, more somber themes. This emotional transformation is integral to the viewer's ability to reconcile the narrative reversal

with their prior emotional investment, ensuring that the remapped narrative remains both intellectually and emotionally satisfying.

The completability of narrative remapping is a critical determinant of its success. When viewers are able to integrate the majority of narrative cues into a coherent and logically consistent framework, the process culminates in an "Aha!" moment, characterized by aesthetic pleasure and intellectual satisfaction. Conversely, if the narrative reversal relies excessively on withheld information or presents unbridgeable logical gaps, the remapping process fails, leading to viewer frustration or disengagement. This highlights the importance of crafting narratives that balance complexity with accessibility, ensuring that viewers can achieve a sense of closure and appreciation for the story's intricacies [7].

3. Two Pathways of Remapping: Close Reading and Comparison

3.1. *Shutter Island: High-Cognitive-Load, Comprehensive Remapping*

Shutter Island serves as a quintessential example of a narrative that employs a global reversal to challenge and ultimately transform the viewer's understanding of its storyline [5]. The plot initially follows "U.S. Marshal Teddy Daniels" as he investigates a mysterious disappearance on an isolated island. However, the narrative takes a dramatic turn when it is revealed that Teddy is, in fact, Andrew, a patient in a mental institution. The entire investigation is exposed as a therapeutic role-playing exercise orchestrated by his doctors. This revelation fundamentally alters the audience's perception of the story, forcing them to reevaluate the events and characters they have encountered.

The first stage of this transformation occurs at the moment of the reversal reveal. At this juncture, the foundational elements of the viewer's mental model—such as Teddy's identity, the true nature of his partner Chuck, and the perceived conspiracy within the hospital—are entirely dismantled. The magnitude of this shift is profound, as it invalidates the detective genre framework that the audience had been using to interpret the narrative [1, 8]. This abrupt disruption generates a sense of disorientation and cognitive dissonance, compelling the viewer to question their prior assumptions and interpretations.

The second stage involves an intensive process of remapping, wherein the viewer reconstructs their understanding of the story based on numerous subtle cues embedded throughout the film. These cues include the enigmatic figure of the woman in the cave, Teddy's recurring migraines, the flashbacks involving his wife, and the peculiar behavior of the hospital staff. Through careful analysis, the audience can discern that these details, which initially seemed to support the conspiracy theory, are more coherently explained within the framework of Andrew's delusion. This reinterpretation not only resolves apparent anomalies but also facilitates a shift in genre perception. The audience comes to realize that the film is not a detective story but a psychological drama centered on themes of trauma and acceptance [9]. This genre shift is pivotal in transforming the emotional response of the viewer, moving from feelings of frustration at being misled to a deeper empathy for the protagonist's psychological struggles.

The narrative's capacity for reinterpretation is exceptionally high, as nearly every apparent inconsistency can be rationalized within the remapped framework. This reconstructed understanding of the story is not only internally consistent but also imbued with greater thematic depth. It is this richness and coherence that make *Shutter Island* a subject of frequent rewatching and discussion, as viewers continue to uncover new layers of meaning and insight with each viewing.

3.2. *The Piano Tuner: Perspective Blockade and the Sudden Suspension of Remapping*

Olivier Treiner's short film *The Piano Tuner* (2010) presents a compelling narrative centered on Adrien, a piano tuner who feigns blindness. This deception allows him to access private spaces under the guise of vulnerability. During one such visit to a client's home, Adrien inadvertently becomes a witness to a murder. The film's climax is marked by an auditory cue—the sound of a mechanical device being prepared behind him—

followed by an abrupt cut to black. This deliberate narrative choice leaves the audience in a state of ambiguity. Throughout the film, viewers share Adrien's perspective, which is not truly blind but rather a constructed facade. However, in the final moments, this shared perspective is abruptly severed. The audience is left uncertain about Adrien's fate, whether he perceives the threat, attempts to act, or succumbs to the situation [1, 10]. This sudden narrative shift challenges conventional storytelling by withholding resolution, creating a space for interpretation and speculation.

The first stage of this narrative reversal does not rely on a revelation of hidden identities or concealed plot details. Instead, it hinges on the unexpected withdrawal of the audience's privileged perspective. This creates a prediction error rooted in the disruption of the implicit narrative agreement between the film and its viewers. The audience, having been positioned as co-observers alongside Adrien, is suddenly excluded from the unfolding events. This exclusion operates on a meta-narrative level, as it breaches the established contract of shared perspective. The resulting cognitive dissonance is not tied to specific informational content but rather to the abrupt denial of access, which forces viewers to confront their own assumptions about narrative transparency and closure.

In the second stage, the process of remapping becomes notably challenging and ultimately unresolved. Viewers instinctively attempt to reconstruct the narrative by revisiting earlier scenes, questioning whether the murderer uncovered Adrien's deception or whether subtle foreshadowing hinted at the outcome. However, the film deliberately provides insufficient evidence to support any definitive interpretation. This lack of closure leads to what can be termed "open remapping," where different viewers may arrive at entirely divergent conclusions—some imagining Adrien's demise, others envisioning his escape, and still others speculating on his potential complicity. Unlike narratives that culminate in a satisfying resolution, this open-ended approach fosters prolonged reflection and discussion among viewers [11, 12]. The absence of a conclusive "Aha!" moment generates a lingering cognitive and emotional engagement, which aligns with the film's artistic intent. By obstructing the completion of remapping, the film achieves a unique effect, leaving audiences suspended in a state of unresolved tension and curiosity.

When compared to other works, *The Piano Tuner* exemplifies a distinct approach to narrative reversals [13, 14]. For instance, while some films aim to guide viewers toward a singular, emotionally satisfying resolution, this short film deliberately avoids such closure. A comparison can be drawn with works like *Shutter Island*, which employs a completable remapping process that ultimately resolves the narrative's ambiguities. In contrast, *The Piano Tuner* embraces an incompletable remapping strategy, where the lack of definitive answers becomes a central feature of the viewing experience. Both approaches are capable of producing profound artistic effects, yet they rely on fundamentally different modes of audience engagement. The former seeks to provide clarity and resolution, while the latter thrives on ambiguity and the enduring cognitive-emotional engagement it provokes.

4. Failed Reversals: When Remapping Is No Longer Possible

To clarify the model's boundaries, it is useful to analyze a representative case of failure -- M. Night Shyamalan's *Old* (2021). The film portrays a beach where individuals experience rapid aging within hours. The final revelation discloses that this phenomenon is part of a covert pharmaceutical experiment, with the beach being artificially manipulated. Several issues arise with this narrative twist, which undermine its effectiveness and coherence.

One significant issue is the absence of retrospective cues. Throughout the film, the aging phenomena are primarily attributed to the beach's inherent mysteriousness, which aligns with the viewer's natural expectations of a supernatural or unexplained occurrence. However, there are almost no subtle hints or background details that could later be reinterpreted to support the idea of an "artificial experiment." This lack of preparatory groundwork makes the twist feel disconnected and externally imposed, rather than organically integrated into the narrative.

Another critical problem is the high cognitive cost associated with remapping. The audience is required to discard a coherent and intuitive model of the beach as a naturally strange environment and instead adopt a less plausible and less satisfying explanation involving a pharmaceutical conspiracy. This shift does not enhance the narrative's logical consistency or provide additional insights into the story's details. Furthermore, the new model fails to deliver meaningful emotional or thematic rewards, leaving the viewer with a sense of narrative dissonance.

The emotional impact of the twist is also notably weak. Ideally, a reversal should deepen the audience's emotional engagement by reshaping their understanding of the characters' experiences and fates. For example, it might transform initial sadness into a more profound sense of tragedy or offer a sense of relief through resolution. In this case, however, the twist merely adds a superficial layer of "villainy" without altering the viewer's emotional connection to the core events or characters. This lack of emotional reappraisal diminishes the twist's overall effectiveness.

According to the analytical framework proposed here, *Old* demonstrates low remapping feasibility and limited emotional returns. These shortcomings explain why many viewers perceive the twist as unnecessary or contrived, a common criticism of failed narrative reversals. This example underscores the importance of ensuring that a reversal not only surprises but also provides cognitive enrichment and emotional depth, thereby validating its artistic merit and narrative necessity.

5. Discussion: Testable Hypotheses, Limitations, and Future Directions

5.1. Three Testable Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework outlined in this study, three hypotheses are proposed to guide future empirical investigations [15]. These hypotheses are designed to test specific aspects of the model and provide measurable insights into the cognitive and emotional processes involved in reversal-based aesthetic experiences. By focusing on distinct dimensions such as prediction error, cue retrospectivity, and emotional reappraisal, these hypotheses aim to bridge theoretical constructs with observable phenomena, offering a structured pathway for experimental validation and refinement of the model.

1. **Prediction Error -- Remapping Difficulty Hypothesis:** This hypothesis posits that the magnitude of the initial prediction error, triggered by the reversal, plays a critical role in shaping subsequent cognitive and emotional responses. The prediction error is operationalized as the interaction between pre-viewing prediction confidence and the degree of inconsistency perceived post-viewing. It is hypothesized that higher prediction errors correlate with increased cognitive effort during remapping, as measured by retrospective mentions in free recall tasks. Furthermore, the relationship between prediction error and aesthetic pleasure is expected to follow an inverted-U curve, where moderate levels of error yield the highest aesthetic enjoyment. This hypothesis underscores the importance of balancing cognitive challenge and resolution in eliciting optimal aesthetic experiences.

2. **Cue Retrospectivity Hypothesis:** This hypothesis explores the differential impact of reversal events on memory accuracy for background versus foreground cues. It suggests that viewers exhibit enhanced memory accuracy for background cues—details initially perceived as peripheral—compared to foreground cues, which are marked as salient during the first viewing. This phenomenon is hypothesized to be positively correlated with aesthetic evaluation, indicating that the cognitive process of reinterpreting previously overlooked information contributes to the overall appreciation of the reversal. By examining this relationship, the hypothesis aims to shed light on the interplay between attention allocation, memory dynamics, and aesthetic judgment [16].

3. **Emotional Reappraisal Hypothesis:** This hypothesis focuses on the emotional trajectory induced by successful reversals, characterized by high remapping completability. It proposes that viewers experience an affective shift from initial negative

emotions, such as confusion or perplexity, to positive emotions, such as insight or satisfaction. This emotional progression is hypothesized to be measurable through continuous emotion rating scales and physiological markers, such as a secondary decrease in skin conductance response. The hypothesis emphasizes the transformative potential of cognitive resolution in fostering positive emotional outcomes, highlighting the intricate relationship between cognitive processing and emotional reappraisal in aesthetic contexts.

5.2. Limitations

This study is primarily theoretical and qualitative, which inherently limits its ability to provide empirical validation for the hypotheses presented [17, 18]. The absence of quantitative data or experimental results means that the proposed ideas remain speculative and untested in practical scenarios. Additionally, the scope of the case studies is confined to the Euro-American narrative tradition, which restricts the generalizability of the findings across diverse cultural contexts. For instance, narrative techniques employed in other literary traditions, such as the Japanese approach to "narrative tricks," often involve distinct dynamics between the reader and narrator, potentially leading to different cognitive processes during narrative reversal. This cultural specificity highlights the need for further research to explore cross-cultural variations in narrative devices and their psychological impact. Moreover, individual differences among readers, such as variations in working memory capacity or the degree to which individuals seek cognitive closure, are not addressed in this study. These factors could significantly influence how readers process and reinterpret narrative reversals, suggesting that future studies should incorporate a broader range of psychological and cognitive variables to enhance the robustness of the theoretical framework.

5.3. Conclusion

This paper has proposed a "narrative remapping" model that integrates predictive coding theory and narrative cognition research in order to explain the psychological effect of reversal endings with greater conceptual precision and analytical clarity. The model conceptualizes reversal processing as a two-stage sequence. In the first stage, the ending produces prediction-error disintegration, in which previously stable assumptions about character, causality, temporality, or narrative perspective are destabilized. In the second stage, the audience engages in retroactive meaning reconstruction, reorganizing earlier narrative information into a newly coherent interpretive structure. This framework clarifies that the force of a reversal ending does not arise from surprise alone, but from the extent to which the text enables a disciplined and satisfying reconfiguration of prior narrative material.

Through a systematic comparison of *Shutter Island*, *The Piano Tuner*, and the failed case *Old*, the analysis has shown that the completability dimension of remapping is especially important for distinguishing successful from unsuccessful reversals. A successful reversal does not merely invalidate an earlier interpretation; it also supplies sufficient cues, constraints, and retrospective coherence to support the construction of a more comprehensive one. By contrast, when remapping remains incomplete, under-motivated, or structurally unsupported, the reversal may register as arbitrary, confusing, or affectively weak.

The significance of the model lies in its capacity to provide an operationalizable tool for analyzing reversal narratives beyond the limited question of whether an ending is surprising. It offers a vocabulary for evaluating degrees of disintegration, reconstruction, and completability, and it generates concrete hypotheses for future cognitive and empirical testing. More broadly, the argument of this paper suggests that reversal endings are not reducible to narrative tricks. Rather, they function as concentrated demonstrations of the interpretive processes through which audiences seek coherence, revise belief, and produce meaning in narrative experience.

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