For the Art of Filmmaking

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Acknowledgments

The author is indebted to:

Academic Studies Press for giving me the opportunity to publish this book.

The University of the Arts London for allowing me access to some of the rich material stored at The Stanley Kubrick Archive.

Prof. Mark Johnson and Prof. Stephen Prince for their helpful suggestions and comments on an earlier draft of the introduction.

The anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive reports.

The University of California Press, for permission to use Rudolf Arnheim's figure of the structural skeleton of the square, figure 3.7.

Mr. Garrett Brown, for permission to use the behind-the-scenes photo of *The Shining*, figure 3.19.

Mr. Martin Pope for sharing, in cooperation with Mr. Filippo Ulivieri, the behind-the-scenes photo of *Paths of Glory*, figure 3.20.

Prof. Jeremy Barham, for permission to use his diagrams of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* as used in *The Shining*, figure 5.6 and figure 5.7.

Anthony Blampied, friend and archivist at Cinematek (Brussels) for his help in obtaining various written sources on Kubrick.

All the scholars listed in the notes and bibliography with some of whom I had the pleasure and honor to discuss my ideas in person. Without their insights this book could not have been written.

Annick for her continuous support, strength and patience throughout the writing process.

Introduction

The Theoretical Context of This Study

> *Dialogue tends to be employed as the principal means of communication, but I believe that without doubt there is a more cinematic manner of communicating.*
>
> —Stanley Kubrick[1]

The goal of this introductory chapter is to establish the theoretical context upon which this book is founded, starting with a discussion of a paradox that lies at the heart of what constitutes the central subject matter of this study, namely meaning in film. Second, we briefly discuss what has been the most influential model in film theory for dealing with this paradox, namely the linguistic model (also known as the film-as-language view). At the same time, we argue why this model is no longer sustainable in the light of the recent "embodied turn" in cognitive science. Third, we show how an embodied view of meaning forces us to address the paradox of cinematic meaning anew, thus prompting the need for a new research agenda. Fourth and last, we will lay out the main intentions and structure of this book as they emerge from the reorientation of the theoretical focus.

1. The paradox of cinematic meaning

This book is about meaning and cinema and the way this relationship is manifested in the films of the great American film director Stanley Kubrick (1928–1999).[2] In this regard, Kubrick's oeuvre can be considered among the finest and most remarkable in film history. With films such as *Paths of Glory* (1957), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Barry Lyndon* (1975), *The Shining* (1980) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), he created some of the most engaging cinematic artworks in modern cinema that continue to fascinate audiences and critics today.[3] In attempting to explain this endless fascination with Kubrick's work, scholars have recurrently pointed toward the filmmaker's ability to shape its conceptual content in an almost exclusively visual way. *2001: A Space Odyssey* is perhaps the purest embodiment of this thought. Out of two hours and nineteen minutes of film, there are only a little less than forty minutes of dialogue, yet, the film conveys a richness and complexity of themes rarely equalled in other films. As Michael Benson recently stressed in his book, exactly fifty years after its release: "*2001* is essentially a nonverbal experience, once more comparable to a musical composition than to the usual dialogue-based commercial cinema. . . . It spoke its own language, . . . the authority and power of the images themselves didn't necessitate literal comprehension."[4] This refusal to fit meaning into the "straitjacket of words," as Kubrick calls it, also runs as a red thread throughout the interviews that were conducted with the director over the years.[5] Cited below is one excerpt from Kubrick's comments, as it appeared in 1969 in the magazine *Action*:

> In *Space Odyssey* the mood hitting you is the visual imagery. The people who didn't respond, I now, for want of coming up with a better explanation, categorize as "verbally oriented people." . . . Communicating visually and through music gets past the verbal pigeonhole concepts that people are stuck with. You know, words have a highly subjective and very limited meaning, and they immediately limit the possible emotional and subconscious designating effect of a work of art. Movies have tied themselves into that because the crucial things that generally come out of a film are still word-delivered. There's emotion backing them up, you've got the actors generating feeling, etc. It's basically word communication.[6]

However intuitively true the attribution of themes or meanings to the non-verbal, perceptual level of Kubrick's cinema may sound, the less clear it is from a purely logical and theoretical point-of-view. That this attribution is less evident than it appears at first sight becomes clear once we isolate the premises on which it is founded:

(1) Films present the opportunity to communicate abstract meanings without the traditional reliance on words.[7]
(2) Meaning is a matter of conceptual structure.
(3) Films, as opposed to words, do not connect so easily to concepts.[8]
(4) How, then, can films be capable of communicating conceptual meaning?

So despite the fact that premise (1) sounds intuitively true, it bears a set of premises, (2) and (3), that, apparently, seem to contradict each other. We shall label this logical inconsistency, which leads again to a questioning of the relationship between meaning and cinema (4), the *paradox of cinematic meaning*.

Let us start our investigation of this paradox by considering the question underlying the first premise: On what conditions does successful communication of meaning depend? Perhaps the most straightforward answer to this question has been provided by the British philosopher Paul Grice. In his influential article from 1957 called "Meaning" the author has argued that communication of meaning is successful insofar the perceiver of the representation (e.g., the hearer) understands the representation that is being communicated (e.g., the utterance), that is, and here is where the central claim of his argument becomes manifest, insofar the perceiver recognizes the communicator's intention to represent, and further recognizes that he himself is intended to recognize it. In Grice's own words, "for A to mean something by x, A must intend to induce by x a belief in an audience, and he must also intend his utterance to be recognized as so intended."[9] This aspect is also known as the "self-referentiality" of the intention to communicate and is, as the American philosopher John Searle pointed out fifty years later, "seldom remarked on."[10] The crucial question, then, is this: if successful communication of meaning depends on the audience's recognition of the communicator's intention to represent the meaning, how then can this recognition be achieved? The key to answering this question lies in the representation x.

Here we may quote Noël Carroll, who adds the following note to Grice's analysis: "The intention A intends to be recognized must be discernible in x. Where x is an artwork, the intention the artist means to convey must be discernible in the work."[11] If we further define this intention in terms of mental conceptual structure (let us call this y), it follows that y has to be imposed onto x for it is only when y is embodied in x that the audience will be able to extract y from x, and thus achieve recognition of the communicator's intention.[12]

The conception of meaning and communication just sketched out is not a new one, but it echoes the underlying theoretical assumptions of two different, but neighboring areas of research, namely *cognitive semantics* and *inferential pragmatics*. The first discipline began in the 1970s and initiated a radical critique of the truth-conditional view of meaning in language, as advocated by the Anglo-American tradition in philosophy.[13] This view rests upon the assumption that meaning can be objectively described as a relationship between words and an objective external reality, and that this relationship can be modelled in terms of truth or falsity.[14] Cognitive semantics, as put forth by such scholars as Leonard Talmy, George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and Ronald Langacker, rejects this view, which inevitably leads to an undervaluation of the role of the mind, and asserts instead that semantic structure (i.e., the meanings conventionally associated with words) can be equated with conceptual structure, "the nature and organisation of mental representations in all its richness and diversity."[15] Moreover, cognitive semantics claims that this conceptual structure is fundamentally embodied. This principle is known as the thesis of the "embodied mind" and roughly states that the nature of conceptual content emerges from bodily experiences and interactions with the environment.[16]

The second discipline began to flourish in the late 1970s and 1980s and initiated an alternative to the classical code model of communication, according to which utterances are signals that encode messages and comprehension is achieved by decoding the signals to obtain the messages. On the inferential view, originally suggested by Grice, but further developed by such scholars as Wilson and Sperber, representations such as utterances are not signals, but pieces of evidence about the speaker's meaning, and comprehension is achieved by inferring this meaning from evidence provided by the representation and the context in which it is produced.[17]

What quality, then, does the representation need to possess in order for it to express and externalize the conceptual structure? The general answer is that the representation has to "connect to" the conceptual structure. As for language, the key focus of both cognitive semantics and inferential pragmatics, this connection is inherent to its *symbolic* function. When we use language and write the word "tree," the meaning conventionally paired with it, is not the particular physical object of a tree, but the idea of a tree, that is, the *concept* of a tree.[18] As a result of this pairing of form and concept, language is often taken at face value when discussing the process of transmitting meaning from one entity to another. This is evidenced in the many references people make to language when talking about the phenomenon of communication itself (i.e., our meta-language). Consider, for example, the following list of English expressions, as compiled by the cognitive linguist Michael Reddy:

> Whenever you have a good *idea* practice capturing it *in words*. You have to *put* each *concept into words* very carefully. Try to *pack* more *thoughts into* fewer *words*. Insert those *ideas* elsewhere *in* the *paragraph*. Don't *force* your meanings *into* the wrong *words*.[19]

As Reddy argued, these expressions can be seen as linguistic manifestations of a general metaphor system which he coins the "conduit metaphor." According to this metaphor, people, when communicating, "insert" internal concepts (e.g., ideas, thoughts, emotions) "into" external "containers" (e.g., words, phrases, sentences, etc.) whose contents are then "extracted" by listeners and readers. Because language allows for a symbolic assembly of form and meaning, it is only natural to refer to words and paragraphs as the proper "insides" wherein the meanings can reside. Diagrammatically, this "trajectory" from mind to language might be represented as in figure I.1 by means of an arrow running from one container to another. The first part of the trajectory designates an EXIT path: the conceptual meaning goes from inside the communicator's head (the body as container for the mind) to its outside. The second pattern, by contrast, describes an ENTRY path: the meaning goes from outside the communicator's head to the inside of language.[20] As stated, this ENTRY path is facilitated by the symbolic function of language.

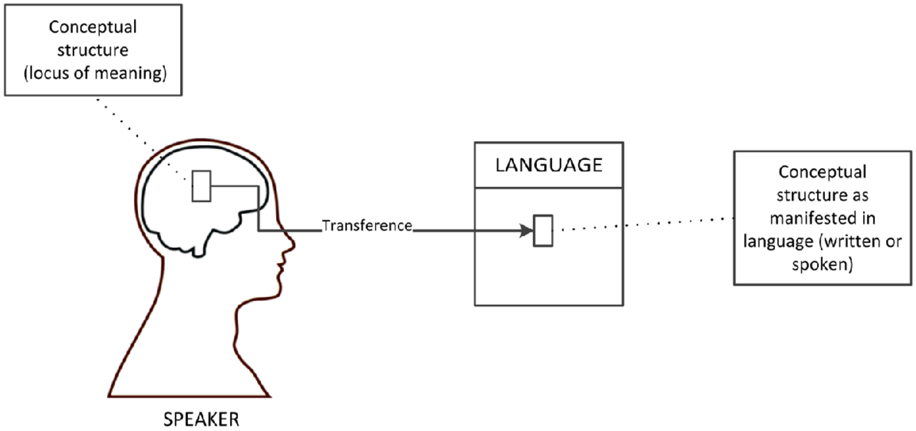
Conceptual structure (locus of meaning)
Transference
LANGUAGE
Conceptual structure as manifested in language (written or spoken)
SPEAKER

Figure I.1 Language as the "conduit" of conceptual structure.

A look at film, however, reveals a far more complicated picture. First, there is the question of identifying the communicator. Who is the agent who intentionally makes an utterance in a medium that usually implies the contribution of more than one individual? Raising this question brings us to the much-complicated matter of authorship in cinema.[21] As Sellors aptly points out, "authorship is a problem in film studies that simply will not go away."[22] Exploring this debate lies beyond the scope of this book. On a general note, it is sufficient to say that whoever the communicator in film may be, whether it be an individual mind or a collective of minds, it does not change anything to the central principle of cognitive semantics that meaning is equated with conceptual structure. In other words, it is less important to know to which "concrete" individual artist (e.g., filmmaker) the conceptual structure can be attributed than to assume for now that it is the conceptual structure that is being manifested in the representation, whether it be an utterance or, as in our case, a film. Following Turner's book, we may call this general and unspecified mind to which the conceptual structure adheres "the artful mind."[23]

Having said this, Kubrick, however, presents us with a rather unique case in motion-picture history if it comes to defining authorship in cinema. As has been repeatedly stressed in the literature, Kubrick, more than any other major filmmaker working within the context of a studio system, was able to maintain an uncommon high degree of independence and directorial control in the sense of decision-making authority and responsibility with regard to the making and overall design of his films. As Philips writes: "By steadily building a reputation as a filmmaker of international importance, he gained full artistic control over his films, guiding the production of each of them from the earliest stages of planning and scripting through post-production."[24] Because Kubrick stood much closer to his material than almost any other filmmaker working in Hollywood, it is not surprising, as Young already observed in 1959, that there is a "strong feeling of unity and single-mindedness in his films."[25] Although such a result can never be guaranteed given the collective nature of film-making, Kubrick's unique reputation allows us, in other words, to speak of Kubrick as a "cinematic author" or a "filmic author," in the senses defined by Livingston and Sellors, respectively.[26]

The critical reader, however, might object here that we are putting too much emphasis on the filmmaker's or artist's or speaker's intention. Indeed, does the meaning available in films often not exceed the artist's intention? Do we not value the work partly because it enacts possibilities of meaning that go beyond anything that the speaker or filmmaker consciously intends? This is a very good point, and therefore, we have to be very clear from the start about the sort of meaning that this book will be engaged in. To sort this out, we may turn to Bordwell's distinction between "referential and explicit meanings," and "implicit and symptomatic meanings."[27] The former constitute the backbone of narrative comprehension as they fall together with the "apparent, manifest, or direct meanings" of a work.[28] They are close to the bare-plot summaries of the films as they largely result from the viewers' attempts to construct a mental model of the situation in which the narrative action takes place. Van Dyck and Kintsch call this the "situation model."[29] Spectators construe such models by drawing not only on their knowledge about conventions, but also and more profoundly, as chapter 1 will make clear to us, on conceptions of causality, space and time. As Persson points out, it is an important feature of the situation or the referential meaning that it is closely tied to the "spectators' abilities to understand the behavior in terms of character psychology" and to infer "causal relations between events and scenes," which often involve "a character's mental states and traits" (e.g., "Alice is angry with her husband Bill because he did not get jealous when she told him that another man wanted sex with her," "Alex feels sick when he watches violence on the screen," "Wendy is shocked when she sees the word REDRUM in the mirror," "HAL 9000 decides to terminate the astronauts Bowman and Poole because he thinks they want to disconnect him").[30] In the field of philosophy of mind these causal relations involving mental events are known as instances of "mental causation."[31] This concept provides us with a thick and rich level of meaning that is central to our understanding of narratives, including, as we shall see in chapter 1, the narratives of Kubrick's work.

The latter, by contrast, are more "hidden" and "non-obvious," and have to do with the process of interpretation.[32] At this level, we enter a more abstract and symbolic understanding of cinematic meaning. They often contain speculations and claims about "how the film supposedly is bound up with certain ideas, values, or ideologies than in itself is not 'aware of'" (e.g., "The monolith is Kubrick's representation of the cinema screen itself," "*The Shining* is about the genocide of Native Americans," "*Eyes Wide Shut* is rife with Illuminati symbolism").[33] Although these symptomatic meanings or meanings "against the grain" emanate out of the film, many of them operate outside the film's diegetic and fictional world. They "take a step back," as Persson writes, "from the film, investigating its fictional, narrative, communicatory, rhetorical, and societal functions rather than establishing its fictional meaning."[34] As Bordwell and Thompson have stressed, the abstract qualities of such implicit meanings "can lead to very broad concepts often called *themes*."[35] Many of Kubrick's films seem to exhibit the theme of dehumanization. How valuable such descriptions may be, they nevertheless stay very general; they fit for literally hundreds of films. Therefore, Bordwell and Thompson suggest that "the search for implicit meanings should not leave behind the *particular* and *concrete* features of a film. . . . we should strive to make our interpretations precise by seeing how each film's thematic meanings are suggested by the film's total system."[36] A good scholarly example of such a combined incorporation of thematic interpretation and close formal analysis, can be found, for instance, in Robert Kolker's seminal chapter on Kubrick entitled "Tectonics of the Mechanical Man."[37] The work explicitly adopts an ideological and cultural approach, yet the thematic wanderings offered by the author never lose touch with the formal evidence offered by the filmmaker's work.[38]

Although the line between comprehension and interpretation is not always easy to draw, it will be the referential or situational meanings that will be the primary focus of this study for the basic reason that these are concerned with the "overt facts about story or theme that are directly presented as such within the film."[39] In other words, if we wish to show how films are capable of conveying meaning non-verbally, then it is best to focus on the sort of meaning of which we are certain to a confident degree that it is actually intended to be communicated by the films to the viewer. Situational meanings and plot summarization largely meet this condition and are therefore most appropriately fitted to examine the question of meaning in film. Speculations about the philosophical and allegorical meanings of the film, on the other hand, how interesting as they might seem, do not always offer this degree of specificity and are, in this sense, less appropriate. Not surprisingly, the "lowest," literal level of meaning, that of straightforward explanation of the plot, was also the only level of meaning that Kubrick was keen to discuss himself as he rightly felt that a verbal summary of the "deeper" meaning was not only impossible, but also deceptive given the fact that it is intended to involve the audience in an experience. As he once stated in an early interview: "Films deal with the emotions and reflect the fragmentation of experience. It is thus misleading to try to sum up the [deeper] meaning of a film verbally."[40]

By focusing upon intended situational meanings, do we not disregard the emotional and subconscious effects that Kubrick's cinema seem to emphasize? This is correct only if one assumes that the one has nothing to do with the other. As soon will become clear, however, such a distinction is not something that this book intends to maintain. Indeed, it will be one of the key objectives of this book to demonstrate that much of the intended visual situational meanings in Kubrick's film have their roots in bodily and nonconscious meanings that escape any intentional verbal articulation. In other words, the focus upon situational meanings should be seen as a way (and an opportune way at that) to reveal the cognitive unconscious dimensions of meaning-making that so forcefully account for our endless fascination with Kubrick's films.

But we must not run ahead of our argument. Now that we have sorted out the kind of meaning that this book will take as a starting point, let us further stress two more basic observations that may account for a film's complexity. The first one is that film, as opposed to language, can be conceived as a container for many other subcontainers: one for each mode of representation it contains (a visual container, a gestural container, a musical container, a linguistic container, etc.). In other words, the "trajectory" of meaning that runs from the conceptual and mental level to the external level of representation does not develop in one direction as it is the case with language, but in various directions, thus giving rise to many potential ENTRY paths. Moreover, these paths do not co-exist as parallel lines. Belonging to the generic container called "film," they are interconnected thus influencing each other in various ways.

The second observation is that many of these subcontainers have a profoundly different ontological status than language. Take, for instance, the visual subcontainer, the one most relevant to our understanding of cinema. It has been frequently noted in the literature that pictorial representations, as opposed to words, maintain a relationship with the represented reality that is based on resemblance rather than on arbitrary convention.[41] They are what semioticians call *iconic* signs instead of *symbolic* ones.[42] Although iconic signs do not literally possess the properties of the represented or denoted object, they nevertheless seem to "reproduce" some of its properties.[43] In film studies this is often further explicated in causal terms. As Gaut writes, "we speak of a photograph of some object only if that object caused a light pattern to be imprinted on the photographic emulsion."[44] This causal relation, the author points out, is not arbitrary, but "fixed by empirical facts." In other words, if the symbolic function of language facilitates the transference of concepts, and this function is absent from iconic images, how then can these images connect to conceptual structure?

The picture becomes even more complicated when we consider the subcontainer of music ("pure" or "absolute" instrumental music, that is), which appears to be quite different from the standard representational arts, such as (figurative) painting, photography and literature. As Scruton asks himself, "is there anything, other than itself, that music means?"[45] For this reason, because music lacks a clear object or reference, music has often been characterized as "abstract."[46] Consequently, if the representational capability of music is questioned and this capability is conditional for communicating meaning, how then can music become a container for meaning? It is a question frequently posed, but seldomly answered in a manner that is satisfying.

It should be obvious by now, then, that the "entrance" question of meaning is much more complicated in film than it is in language. It is at this point in our argument that we can see how the paradox of cinematic meaning starts to emerge: Film seems to lack the form-concept pairing that makes symbolic language such a suitable container for the storage of meaning, yet scholars and layman alike assume that film, just like language, is capable of conveying meaning. In a diagrammatical way, this may be visualized as in figure I.2.

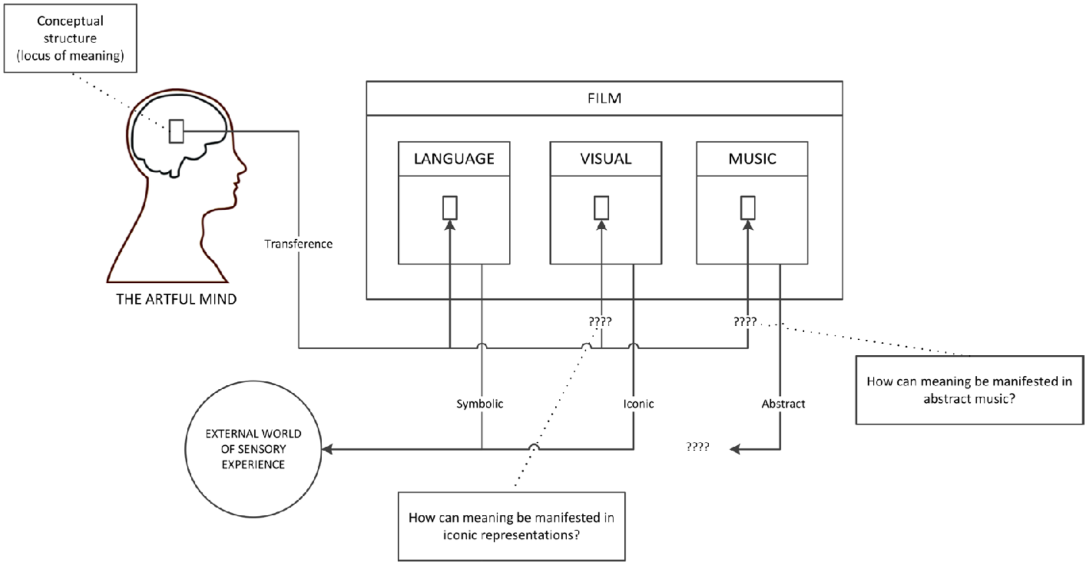
Conceptual structure (locus of meaning)
FILM
LANGUAGE
VISUAL
MUSIC
Transference
THE ARTFUL MIND
????
????
How can meaning be manifested in abstract music?
Symbolic
Iconic
Abstract
EXTERNAL WORLD OF SENSORY EXPERIENCE
????
How can meaning be manifested in iconic representations?

Figure I.2 The paradox of cinematic meaning.

Given this diagram, then, one may argue that the key challenge lies in finding a way to reconcile the conceptual structure of meaning with the distinctive representational structure of film by facing such questions as: How can conceptual structure be bridged to the iconic surface of visual representations? How can music be meaningful while at the same time being non-representational? How do the answers to these questions interact with each other within the generic container called film? Yet, from early on, film scholars have predominantly preferred to evade these questions by pursuing another challenge, one that is not so much motivated by the essential differences between film and language, but by the question of how meaning in film can be modelled upon linguistic, symbolic meaning. The broad metaphor used to describe this linguistic turn in film studies has come to known as the FILM AS LANGUAGE metaphor.

2. The film as language metaphor

Ever since the birth of cinema it has been customary to talk about film as if it were a "readable text" with its own "syntax" and "grammar." References to linguistic terminology can be traced back to the earliest writings on film, to reach its height in the 1970s with the rise of film semiotics.[47] Taken together, phrases such as "the cinematic text," "cinema speech," "the grammar of film" or "the language of film" provide linguistic evidence for the existence of the FILM AS LANGUAGE metaphor.[48] This metaphor presumes a set of cross-domain mappings between the source domain of language and the target domain of film (usually restricted to the visual subcontainer), some of which are summarized as in table I.1.[49]

Table I.1 The FILM AS LANGUAGE metaphor.

Source domain [Language]	*Target Domain [Film]*
Text	Film
Reading	Film comprehension
Words	Shots
Sentences	A montage sequence
Syntax	Principles for combining shots

It is not difficult to see why this metaphor is so appealing. Because most of us assume that film can be meaningful in the same way that language is meaningful, it makes intuitive sense to draw on linguistic terminology to describe our understanding of film. But what does this analogy substantially mean? What does it mean to say that a non-symbolic medium such as film can be compared to a symbolic medium such as language and more importantly what are its consequences for the conception of meaning in cinema? To avoid any misunderstanding, it might be useful to first distinguish, as John Carroll did, between two general ways of interpreting the analogy between film and language, namely as a strong *theoretical* claim or as a weaker *methodological* assumption.[50] The theoretical claim asserts that language and cinema resemble one another directly. They are conceived of as

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