

NARRATIVE THEORY

Narrative theory studies the devices and conventions governing the organisation of a story (fictional or factual) into a sequence.

TZVETAN TODOROV (Bulgarian structuralist linguist publishing influential work on narrative from the 1960s onwards) Todorov suggested that stories begin with an equilibrium or status quo where any potentially opposing forces are in balance. This is disrupted by some event, setting in chain a series of events. Problems are solved so that order can be restored to the world of the fiction.

VLADIMIR PROPP (A Russian critic who examined 100s of examples of folk tales to see if they shared any structures. His book on this 'Morphology of the Folk Tale' was first published in 1928) Propp looked at 100s of folk tales and identified 8 character roles and 31 narrative functions.

The 8 character roles are

1. The villain(s)
2. The hero
3. The donor - who provides an object with some magic property.
4. The helper who aids the hero.
5. The princess (the sought for person) - reward for the hero and object of the villain's schemes.
6. Her father - who rewards the hero.
7. The dispatcher - who sends the hero on his way.
8. The false hero

The character roles and the functions identified by Propp can be applied to all kinds of narrative. In TV news programmes we are often presented with 'heroes' and 'villains'. Just think of the media portrayal of Saddam Hussein or Princess Diana.

CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS Levi-Strauss looked at narrative structure in terms of binary oppositions. Binary oppositions are sets of opposite values which reveal the structure of media texts. An example would be GOOD and EVIL - we understand the concept of GOOD as being the opposite of EVIL. Levi -Strauss was not so interested in looking at the order in which events were arranged in the plot. He looked instead for deeper arrangements of themes. For example, if we look at Science Fiction films we can identify a series of binary oppositions which are created by the narrative:

Earth	Space
Good	Evil
Humans	Aliens
Past	Present
Normal	Strange
Known	Unknown

NARRATIVE - TIME & SPACE

Narrative shapes material in terms of space and time - it defines where things take place, when they take place, how quickly they take place. Narrative, especially that of film and TV, has an immense ability to manipulate our awareness of time and place e.g. flashbacks, replays of action, slow motion, speeding up, jumping between places and times.

NARRATIVE MODES There are two main modes of narrative which need to be structured.

- 1 . **The narrative of events e.g. - A** hero shoots an enemy agent, dives into a lake,
triggers a remote control device which will destroy the enemy submarine.
2. **The narrative of drama e.g. -** The heroine has a tense argument with the hero
and decides he was never her type and she is going to leave. Nothing has really
happened in terms of events but a lot has happened dramatically.

Using narrative to build suspense

Restricted narrative can be used to surprise an audience, e.g. when a character does not know what is waiting around the corner and neither does the audience. A degree of unrestricted narrative, the other 'half', can be used to effectively build suspense, as the audience are anticipating the events to come, of which the character has no knowledge.

We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, "Boom!" There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence.

Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware that the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the decor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions this innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: "You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There's a bomb beneath you and it's about to explode"

In this first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the

moment of explosion. In the second case we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed.

[Francois Truffaut, Hitchcock (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p.52]

USING NARRATIVE TO MAKE MEANING IN FILM

Why is narrative important to us? Stories are very important in helping us to make sense of our lives and the world around us. Bordwell and Thompson point out the different ways in which we are surrounded by the story form;

- As children we listen to fairy tales and myths. Reading material as we progress becomes short stories, novels, history and biographies.
- Religion is often presented through collection of stories/moral tales e.g. the Bible/ the Koran.
- Scientific breakthrough is often presented as stories of an experimenter's trial. Cultural phenomena such as plays, films, TV, dance, paintings tell stories. Newspapers tell stories, Dreams are little stories in themselves

Narrative in film

Most of the films we see at the cinema are narrative films, films that tell a story. Even films which are factual often employ story methods to get this point across, for instance a documentary may follow the 'story' of a group of environmental warriors over a period of six months in their fight to prevent a road being built. We are so steeped in the narrative tradition that we approach a film with certain expectations, whether we know anything about the story or not. For example: We expect The opening to give us information about who, what and where. There to be characters who interact with each other. To see a series of incidents, which are connected with each other. Problems and/or conflicts. The ending to resolve the action or cast new light on what has happened

As the viewer watches a film, they pick up cues, recall information, anticipate what will follow, and generally participate in the creation of the film's form. The film shapes the particular expectations by summoning up curiosity, suspense, and surprise. The viewer also develops specific hunches about the outcome of the action, and these may control our expectations right up to the end. The ending has the task of satisfying or cheating the expectations prompted by the film as a whole. The ending may also activate memory by cueing the spectator to review earlier events, possibly in a new light. As we examine the narrative form, we will

consider at various points how it engages the viewer in a dynamic activity.

Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K. 4th ed. Film Art: An Introduction, New York, McGraw-Hill Inc., 1993

Cause and Effect

Narrative relationships occurring in time and space can be defined as "**a chain of events in cause-effect**". It typically begins with one situation, a series of changes occur according to a pattern of cause and effect; finally a new situation arises that brings the end of the narrative. Todorov's narrative theory is based on this; an equilibrium is set up which is then disrupted, causing disequilibrium, which is resolved into a new equilibrium by the end of the tale.

When we are watching a film we try to connect the events to make sense of what is happening, to see a line of cause and effect. This is by far the most important factor in narrative because even if there is no obvious connection, we still try to make one. This is a natural reaction because making connections is how we make sense of the world around us, for example looking for a reason for feeling sick and concluding that we ate an undercooked sausage. What we are actually doing in film terms is connecting the images that we see in both time and space and creating a causal effect between them.

How does the director manipulate cause and effect?

The director can create a mood or atmosphere by choosing certain shots in a certain order, to build a picture in our minds. We automatically link what is happening in one shot with what happens in those either side of it, as this is what happens in real life. Thus, by showing us a window frame and then a shot of a house, we presume the house is what you see out of that window. In this way we are interacting with the film.

Some directors have exploited this idea to extremes. **Lev Kuleshov**, a Russian filmmaker in the 1920's experimented by showing people shots of an actor in between shots of different objects - food, a dead woman and a child. The audience interpreted the actor's expressions (although it never changed!) as being hungry, sad and affectionate. This is because our brains try to make a continuous sense of what we see. This placing together of images is called montage.

Sergei Eisenstein, another Russian filmmaker of the same era, believed that it was more effective if consecutive shots were not obviously linked as the audience were forced to think and interact more to make the mental jump from shot to shot. Montage can be used effectively in propaganda, where the filmmaker wants the audience to believe in a certain idea or concept. In a more light-hearted way it is used today in pop videos and advertising, to encourage us to make associations and link ideas.

LEV KULESHOV'S EXPERIMENT

A BOWL OF SOUP



↓
AN ACTOR WITH
NO PARTICULAR EXPRESSION



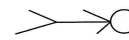
↓
A BABY



↓
AN ACTOR WITH NO EXPRESSION



↓
A DEAD BODY



↓
AN ACTOR WITH NO EXPRESSION



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STORY vs PLOT

When we are linking images together in terms of cause and effect, one of the ways in which we do this is to look at what is happening on screen and assume that other events have taken place that we haven't actually seen. For instance, if we watch the opening to *Gladiator*, where a huge battle is about to take place we will assume that preparation for this battle has taken place, that the hero has proved himself to be a worthy leader in battle, that he has had a successful home life before this point. These events will have taken place in a different time and space to what we see on screen at present.

When discussing film narrative, we can make a distinction between the story and the plot (the plot is sometimes called the discourse)

a) The term **plot** is used to describe the events on screen and how they are organized/presented.

b) The term **story** is used to describe the whole set of events in a narrative that we bring to the plot in order to make sense of it. This will include not only the plot elements, which we have seen, but also the events we have inferred, which we have assumed have happened.

The story world is often referred to as the diegetic world of the film, the imaginary world that we enter into when we set out to watch the film. (Thus we refer to a film's diegesis.) We should note that the plot may also include non-diegetic material that is part of the plot but not part of the story world. So, the plot may include music and voiceover elements for instance - these are not part of the story world because we know they would not really happen in this created world we are seeing - they are 'add-ons'.

TIME

Cause and effect take place in time. As we watch a film, we try to put events in chronological order and allow them duration and frequency.

a) Temporal Order

The plot does not always show us events in strict chronological order i.e. the order in which they would have happened in real life. For instance, sometimes a flashback technique is used to show us what happened in the past, or less frequently, a flash forward to events which have not yet occurred. The narrative can also be presented in parallel terms, for instance we watch a scene where a character is getting ready for a party, then we see another scene where a friend is doing the same. The time when this is happening is parallel to each other - it is happening at the same time in real terms. As with all narrative choices the filmmaker has made, we must look at why s/he has chosen to present events in this fashion and the effect it has upon us as an audience.

b) Temporal Duration

There are 3 distinctions of time within a film:

Screen duration: the time the film takes to show

Plot duration: the length of time the plot covers

Story duration: the length of time the story covers (including all the inferred events we bring to it)

c) Temporal Frequency

The plot of a film may show us an event which happens once in the film but we know to have happened many times in the story - a short-cutting of information for the viewer. For instance, in a film such as *Gladiator*, we see the hero fight four battles before his final triumph. We assume that many more battles have actually taken place, but we are being shown the most important ones in whatever respect. Alternatively, but less frequently, a story event may be shown more than one time during the plot - we see an event occur from another angle which may lead us to view characters or events in a different light.

SPACE

Space is important in a film because the location is usually quite important. The plot sometimes leads us to infer other story space, which we may never see e.g.

we know a character has gone off on holiday but we do not see this 'space'.

Screen space selects portions of plot space to show us, just as it selects certain time events and leaves others out. The decisions that are made in terms of film space need to be examined in conjunction with close study of the visual elements of film language.