

Narrative and Ideology Part One: FILM

What is narrative?

Narrative is the art of storytelling, something we all do every day. It is an important part of our lives and something that we value highly, if you consider the amount of time we all spend in front of television and cinema screens receiving narratives.

In media terms, narrative is the coherence/organisation given to a series of facts. The human mind needs narrative to make sense of things. We connect events and make interpretations based on those connections. In everything we seek a beginning, a middle and an end. We understand and construct meaning using our experience of reality and of previous texts. Each text becomes part of the previous and the next through its relationship with the audience.

The difference between Story & Narrative:

“Story is the irreducible substance of a story (A meets B, something happens, order returns), while narrative is the way the story is related (Once upon a time there was a princess...)”

Key Concepts in Communication – Fiske et al (1983)

Media Texts

Reality is difficult to understand, and we struggle to construct meaning out of our everyday experience. Media texts are better organised; we need to be able to engage with them without too much effort. We have expectations of form, a foreknowledge of how that text will be constructed. Media texts can also be fictional constructs, with elements of prediction and fulfilment which are not present in reality.

Successful stories require actions which change the lives of the characters in the story. They also contain some sort of resolution, where that change is registered, and which creates a new equilibrium for the characters involved. Remember that narratives are not just those we encounter in fiction. Even news stories, advertisements and documentaries also have a constructed narrative which must be interpreted.

Narrative Conventions

When unpacking a narrative in order to find its meaning, there are a series of codes and conventions that need to be considered. When we look at a narrative we examine the conventions of

- Genre
- Character
- Form
- Time

and use knowledge of these conventions to help us interpret the text. In particular, Time is something that we understand as a convention – narratives do not take place in real time but may telescope out (the slow motion shot which replays a winning goal) or in (an 80 year life can be condensed into a two hour biopic).

It is only because we are used to reading narratives from a very early age, and are able to compare texts with others that we understand these conventions. A narrative in its most basic sense is a series of events, but in order to construct meaning from the narrative those events must be linked somehow.

Classical narrative theories

Narrative fascinates academics, and over the last century, a number of highly intellectual people have gone about unpicking the fabric of narrative structure. Rather unhelpfully, each has done it in their own way, and the result is a multitude of perspectives on this concept. Nonetheless, teachers and examiners love it when students use one of two appropriate theories to analyse a text, and if nothing else they will give you new insight into the many common threads running through the media's approach to storytelling.

Barthes' Codes

Roland Barthes describes a text as

“a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can read, they are indeterminable...the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language...” (S/Z – 1974 translation)

What he is basically saying is that a text is like a tangled ball of threads which needs unravelling so we can separate out the colours. Once we start to unravel a text, we encounter an absolute plurality of potential meanings. We can start by looking at a narrative in one way, from one viewpoint, bringing to bear one set of previous experience, and create one meaning for that text. You can continue by unravelling the narrative from a different angle, by pulling a different thread if you like, and create an entirely different meaning. And so on. An infinite number of times. If you wanted to.

Barthes wanted to – he was a semiotics professor in the 1950s and 1960s who got paid to spend all day unravelling little bits of texts and then writing about the process of doing so. All you need to know, again, very basically, is that texts may be ‘open’ (ie unravelled in a lot of different ways) or ‘closed’ (there is only one obvious thread to pull on).

Barthes also decided that the threads that you pull on to try and unravel meaning are called narrative codes and that they could be categorised in the following five ways:

- Action code & enigma code (Answers & questions)
- Symbols & Signs
- Points of Cultural Reference
- Simple description/reproduction
- Structures

You don't need to know all these, but it is helpful to think about the **action** and **enigma** codes, as a) they are the two ways Barthes says suspense is created in narrative and b) they're great to drop into your textual analyses!

The Enigma (hermeneutic) code refers to those plot elements that raise questions on the part of the reader of a text or the viewer of a film. For example, in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode, “Cause and Effect,” we see the Enterprise destroyed in the first five minutes, which leads us to ask the reason for such a traumatic event. Indeed, we are not

The action (proairetic) code, on the other hand, refers to mere actions – those plot events that simply lead to yet other actions. For example, a gunslinger draws his gun on an adversary and we wonder what the resolution of this action will be. We wait to see if he kills his opponent or is wounded himself. Suspense is thus created by action rather than by a reader's or a viewer's wish to have mysteries explained.

Tzvetan Todorov's Equilibrium

Todorov is a Bulgarian philosopher now living in France. His theory is a relatively simple one and goes something like this:

1. The fictional environment begins with a state of equilibrium (everything is as it should be)
2. It then suffers some disruption (disequilibrium)
3. New equilibrium is produced at the end of the narrative

There are five stages the narrative can progress through:

- A state of equilibrium (all is as it should be)
- A disruption of that order by an event
- A recognition that the disorder has occurred
- An attempt to repair the damage of the disruption
- A return or restoration of a NEW equilibrium

Here narrative is not seen as a linear structure but a circular one. The narrative is driven by attempts to restore the equilibrium. However, the equilibrium attained at the end of the story is not identical to the initial equilibrium.

Todorov argues that narrative involves a transformation. The characters or the situations are transformed through the progress of the disruption. The disruption itself usually takes place outside the normal social framework, outside the 'normal' social events. For example:

- A murder happens and people are terrified
- Someone vanishes and the characters have to solve the mystery

So, remember:

- Narratives don't need to be linear.
- The progression from initial equilibrium to restoration always involves a transformation.
- The middle period of a narrative can depict actions that transgress everyday habits and routines.
- There can be many disruptions whilst seeking a new equilibrium (horror relies on this technique).

Vladimir Propp's Folk tales

Vladimir Propp was a Russian academic who argued that fairy tales could be studied and compared by examining their most basic plot components. In "The Morphology of the Folk Tale" he developed an analysis that reduced fairy tales to a series of actions performed by the *dramatis personae* in each story. Propp argued that all fairy tales were constructed of certain plot elements, which he called *functions*, and that these elements consistently occurred in a uniform sequence. Based on a study of one hundred folk tales, Propp devised a list of thirty-one generic functions, proposing that they encompassed all of the plot components from which fairy tales were constructed. While not all are present, he found that all the tales he analysed displayed the functions in unvarying sequence.

Media and Film theorists have re-applied Propp's approach to Folk tales to the construction of narratives in other media. Try applying these to *Star Wars* or episodes of *X-Files* or *Star Trek* – it can be interesting to see how powerful are the narrative structures of folk mythology, and how they are continually reinserted into contemporary popular culture. The functions he described were as follows:

After the initial situation is depicted, the tale takes the following sequence:

1. A member of a family leaves home (the hero is introduced);
2. An interdiction is addressed to the hero ('don't go there', 'go to this place');
3. The interdiction is violated (villain enters the tale);
4. The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance (either villain tries to find the children/jewels etc; or intended victim questions the villain);
5. The villain gains information about the victim;
6. The villain attempts to deceive the victim to take possession of victim or victim's belongings (trickery; villain disguised, tries to win confidence of victim);
7. Victim taken in by deception, unwittingly helping the enemy;
8. Villain causes harm/injury to family member (by abduction, theft of magical agent, spoiling crops, plunders in other forms, causes a disappearance, expels someone, casts spell on someone, substitutes child etc, commits murder, imprisons/detains someone, threatens forced marriage, provides nightly torments); Alternatively, a member of family lacks something or desires something (magical potion etc);
9. Misfortune or lack is made known, (hero is dispatched, hears call for help etc/ alternative is that victimised hero is sent away, freed from imprisonment);
10. Seeker agrees to, or decides upon counter-action;
11. Hero leaves home;
12. Hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc, preparing the way for his/her receiving magical agent or helper (donor);
13. Hero reacts to actions of future donor (withstands/fails the test, frees captive, reconciles disputants, performs service, uses adversary's powers against them);
14. Hero acquires use of a magical agent (directly transferred, located, purchased, prepared, spontaneously appears, eaten/drank, help offered by other characters);
15. Hero is transferred, delivered or led to whereabouts of an object of the search;
16. Hero and villain join in direct combat;
17. Hero is branded (wounded/marked, receives ring or scarf);
18. Villain is defeated (killed in combat, defeated in contest, killed while asleep, banished);
19. Initial misfortune or lack is resolved (object of search distributed, spell broken, slain person revived, captive freed);
20. Hero returns;
21. Hero is pursued (pursuer tries to kill, eat, undermine the hero);
22. Hero is rescued from pursuit (obstacles delay pursuer, hero hides or is hidden, hero transforms unrecognisably, hero saved from attempt on his/her life);
23. Hero unrecognised, arrives home or in another country;
24. False hero presents unfounded claims;
25. Difficult task proposed to the hero (trial by ordeal, riddles, test of strength/endurance, other tasks);
26. Task is resolved;
27. Hero is recognised (by mark, brand, or thing given to him/her);
28. False hero or villain is exposed;
29. Hero is given a new appearance (is made whole, handsome, new garments etc);
30. Villain is punished;
31. Hero marries and ascends the throne (is rewarded/promoted).

Propp's eight spheres of action

This is a large model to absorb, so it's fortunate that Propp developed a smaller approach to character with similar themes. He identified eight 'spheres of action' or character roles common to every folk tale. NOTE: One character can occupy more than one sphere of action.

1. **The villain**
2. **The hero**, or character who seeks something, usually motivated by a lack of something (money, love etc.) The hero doesn't have to be heroic in the way most people would understand it – heroes can be male or female, brave or cowardly.
3. **The donor**, who provides an object with some magic property.
4. **The helper**, who aids the hero
5. **The princess**, reward for the hero, and object of the villain's schemes. Again, this is not necessarily a beautiful damsel in distress – the princess can be male!
6. **Her father**, who rewards the hero.



7. **The dispatcher**, who sends the hero on his way
8. **The false hero.**

Propp's theories become particularly interesting when film-makers **break the rules**. Audiences may not be particularly conscious of these spheres of action, but they notice when media producers mess around with them. For example, the character we perceive as the hero in *Psycho* is killed half an hour into the film. And try making Kubrick's *2001* fit within the spheres of action...

TASK		
Apply Propp's character types to the media text of your choice. One example has been done for you.		
	Star Wars	
Villain	Darth Vader	
Hero	Luke Skywalker	
Donor	Obi-Wan Kenobi	
Helper	Han Solo	
Princess	Princess Leia	
Father	The Rebellion	
Dispatcher	R2-D2	
False Hero	Darth Vader	

Claude Levi-Strauss's Oppositions

Levi-Strauss (pronounced Lev-ee, and no relation to the Jeans guy), introduced the notion of binary oppositions as a useful way to consider the production of meaning within narratives.

He argued that all construction of meaning was dependent, to some degree, on these oppositions.

Examples of binary oppositions found in some moving image narratives might be:

good	vs	evil
male	vs	female
humanity	vs	technology
nature	vs	industrialisation
East	vs	West
dark	vs	Light
dirt	vs	Cleanliness

Beyond its application to individual narratives, Levi-Strauss's theory can and should be used to assess groups of texts and genres. Westerns, for example, went through a period in which binary oppositions included Homesteader vs 'Red Indians', Christian vs pagan and so on.

You can read more about Binary Oppositions and their connection to Ideology later in this booklet.

Separating Plot And Story

Think of a feature film, and jot down a) the strict chronological order in which events occur b) the order in which each of the main characters finds out about these events a) shows story, b) shows plot construction. Plot keeps audiences interested eg) in whether the children will discover Mrs Doubtfire is really their father, or shocks them, eg) the 'twist in the tale' at the end of *The Sixth Sense*.



Identifying Narrator

Who is telling this story is a vital question to be asked when analysing any media text. Stories may be related in the first or third person, POVs may change, but the narrator will always

- reveal the events which make up the story
- mediate those events for the audience
- evaluate those events for the audience

The narrator also tends to POSITION the audience into a particular relationship with the characters on the screen.

Comprehending Time

Very few screen stories take place in real time. Whole lives can be dealt with in the 90 minutes of a feature film, an 8 month siege be encompassed within a 60 minute TV documentary. There are many conventions to denote time passing, from the time/date information typed up on each new scene of *The X-Files* to the aeroplane passing over a map of a continent in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Other devices to manipulate time include

- flashbacks
- dream sequences

- repetition
- different characters' POV
- flash forwards
- real time interludes
- pre-figuring of events that have not yet taken place

Locating the Narrative

Each story has a location. This may be physical and geographical (eg a war zone) or it may be mythic (eg the Wild West). Virtual locations are now a feature of many newsrooms (eg the computers and holograms of the BBC's Ten O'Clock News). There are sets of conventions to do with that location, often associated with genre and form (eg all space ships seem to look the same inside).

Modern theories: Narrative in Cinema

The study of film narrative today starts as you do, with the opening of the film. Syd Field the American screenwriter has said that in any good film, the audience will be grabbed by the first ten minutes – in that short time it is up to the film-makers to interest the audience while at the same time alerting them to what the film will be about and giving them a sense of what kind of film they have let themselves in for. In the terms of what you have been reading, the first ten minutes should be the beginning of the process of revealing the enigma behind the narrative image of the film.

Short units of narrative – sequences of shots

Of course reading about a film loses so much – the main impact of a film and the way that it tells a story is not in the words of the script, but in the look of the film – the way it moves from shot to shot – the visual dimension.

We call a series of shots a sequence and it is a part of the language of film that we are all very used to – this is why we all see the same story in the pictures. We are used to seeing sequences like this which move back and forth between two characters and making the connections between them. Think about this example: we watch a man getting out of a car and looking up at a building, we then cut to another shot from inside a building of the same man walking in. No-one could doubt that it is the same building, the sequence of shots implies this.

As you analyse sequences of shots in class, you should look at the ways that you are led to follow the action in certain directions. A good director will often push you and the narrative in interesting ways, using our expectations of narrative to confuse us. So in *Halloween*, for example, the types of shot used often imply to us that the killer is present and that the narrative is about to move on to a murder when in fact he is no-where near.

When you look at shots, you need also to look beyond just their sequence, to examine how their varying lengths and the type of shot used affect our sympathies and raise excitement. The set of shots of the car chase are very boring and static as they are, but could be made into an exciting sequence if they were used more imaginatively.

Causality

All of these different sequences are joined together into a general structure of the film. They are joined together in a pattern which is called causality – one thing leads to another which leads to another. As you watch any film, you should be able to plot the pattern of causality throughout it, watching a structure develop of events providing the seeds for other events

throughout the film. The best account of how this works to produce an overall structure for a film is given by the American screenwriter Syd Field in his book *Screenplay*.

Syd Field's Three Act Plot Structure

Syd Field is an American Screenwriter who has made a lot of money during the last few years out of the theory you are about to read. This is because, unlike the other theories in this booklet, his ideas are not just intended as a way of analysing existing films, but also as a set of advice for potential film makers.

Broadly, Field's ideas can be summarised as follows:

The typical Hollywood film, according to Field can be separated into three separate dramatic sections or acts: the setup, the confrontation and finally resolution. To move the action on from one act to another there are what he calls **plot points** – particularly important pieces of the plot, which turn around the lives of the characters, change their relationships with others and alter the tone of the film. Of course, films often have a number of plot points such as these, but Field points to two major ones between the acts and a less important one at the middle of the film.

Act One – setup

In many ways this act is the most important for Field. He claims that within the first ten minutes in particular, the audience will decide whether they like the film and will normally be unwilling to change their minds later. It is therefore vital for the film-maker to give the audience a sense in those ten minutes what the film is going to be about, who the main character is and why they should care about him/her and what they can expect in terms of style. In the rest of the first thirty minutes, the audience should learn the nature of the problem facing the hero although this can be left all the way to plot point one.

Act Two – Confrontation

In this longest act of the film we see the main character in a number of more and more extreme problem situations where they confront their enemies normally quite helplessly. Often there will be a mid-point where they begin to turn things around and win what looked like a helpless struggle, but there is still a long way to go and at plot point two they will realise that the way they have been going about things is not working and they will be ready for...

Act Three – resolution

The hero will finally take control in the struggles with their problems (often by going to confront the enemy on their own home territory) and will achieve a final, decisive victory.

How this works in practice: *Speed*

For the first act of the film we see Keanu Reeves doing his work as a policeman and socialising with his friends – we learn enough about him to know that he is brave and likeable. The first ten minutes are an early action sequence, which prepare us for the style of what follows and also introduce the villain who will return at plot point one. At this plot point, Reeves' peaceful world is destroyed as he learns about the bomb on the bus that he has to deal with.



The second act follows Reeves' at first hopeless attempts to save the people on the bus. A love interest – Sandra Bullock, is also introduced. At around the middle of the film he realises the workings of the camera on the bus, which allow him to trick the villain and get the people off to safety. The bus then explodes – providing a neat plot point.

The third act is the final confrontation. Reeves goes to face the villain on his own territory and also discovers that he has kidnapped the love interest making a final battle inevitable.

Some possible problems with Field

Does it actually work?

If you read Syd Field's original book, you will see that he makes great claims for the accuracy of his scheme – even saying that the timings are exact. If you sit in the cinema with a watch on, you will often be astonished how close many formula Hollywood movies are to these 'rules' but at the same time many recent films have adapted Field's scheme. In fact, if you were to time *Speed*, you would find that the first and last acts are only twenty minutes long and the middle an hour and twenty. Whether this should bother us as much as it probably upsets Field is another matter, but it does suggest something about recent trends in action movies where anything that gets in the way of the explosions is seen as being time wasting.

Is it too male?

Field is writing in a time when the vast majority of Hollywood films are principally targeted at a male audience and his language of confrontation seems particularly to suit films which are as full of testosterone as *Speed*. However, if you consider terms like 'confrontation' to fit any kind of dramatic situation, the theory could just as easily be applied to a romantic comedy such as 'When Harry met Sally' with its amiable bickering as a blood bound gore-fest for boys.

Is it too prescriptive?

This has been the main criticism of Field. Making films is an extremely expensive business and when it was published in the eighties, appearing to offer the answer to how to produce a sure-fire hit, Syd Field's book was at first treated like the bible. Some Hollywood studios actually produced contracts for film-makers which ordered that all films should be between One hour fifty and two hours thirteen minutes long. There is no doubt that this kind of thing had a stifling effect on creativity – directors such as Martin Scorsese have complained about being bullied into re-jigging their films into Field's structure. More recently there has been a backlash as people have pointed to the popularity of films, which appear to veer from Field's scheme such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Magnolia* and *Dazed and Confused* as proof that his rules aren't needed.

The Problematic

You could say that Field's ideas are too slick to work in all cases, but if you try to apply them to the films you see this term, and indeed the whole of the course, you will be amazed at how neatly they do fit. Take *Fatal Attraction* as an inevitable example. Act one establishes Dan in his normal life and then shows him risking it all by sleeping with Alex. Act two shows the growing tension as she tries to stay in his life and act three shows him fight and defeat her. The plot points that move the film on from one act to another are as follows. Plot point one is when Alex slashes her wrists – this moves the action on from act to act because it shows to us and to Dan that this is not just a harmless fling, but something dangerous. Plot point two is the infamous bunny death, because in the same way this moves Dan on to a full realisation that Alex has to be stopped and forces him to take action. Incidentally, I haven't timed these, but my guess would be that they fit into his timings.

It is a good idea now to look in more detail at what is happening in the most important first act of the film. Remember that this is the part of the film when Field said the audience needs to get an idea of what is going on and what the film is going to be about. In *Fatal Attraction* we see Dan's life as it normally is, being disrupted by a problem – a tempting woman, Alex, who will destroy his normal life. The film will follow the course of him resolving this problem and returning his life to some kind of normality. This is **Todorov's** approach to narrative in action, or what John Ellis (in his book *Visible Fictions*) calls the **theory of the problematic**. It is another all-embracing theory which can be applied to any film.

The theory of the problematic

A film, unlike a television series has a very limited time to tell a story and the makers of film narratives therefore need to narrow down their plot to one individual story – a problem which the film sets up close to the start and which will be resolved by the end. That is not to say that there won't be other problems on the way, but there will clearly be one central concern which will form the main part of the narrative and which should be enough to keep the audience interested – they should want the problem to be solved.

If you ever get asked what a film is about, you will almost certainly describe the problematic in your answer – “It's about a shark terrorising a seaside resort, a serial killer who has to be caught, a heroin addict. etc.” Sharks, serial killers and heroin are all problems that have to be solved. For there to be a problem, we have to have a sense of what life was like before the problem so films will often start with the narrative in a state of calm or equilibrium. At the start of *Jaws* we see a group of teenagers playing around on the beach – everything is calm and idyllic and then along comes a problem which starts biting them. At the start of *Fatal Attraction* we see the calm of Dan's family life which will be destroyed by the problem of Alex. Many film-makers today feel that this idea of setting up a normal world and then disrupting it with a problem is too unsubtle so they will often go straight for the problem. However, there will always be a sense in the film of what life was like before the problem came along and therefore what the characters can return to if they can only sort the problem out.

Ideology

Looking at the problematic is a good way of spotting the ideology of the film – if you can recognise the problematic, you can see what the film is against. So *Jaws* is saying that nature is dangerous; *Trainspotting* is anti-heroin and *Fatal Attraction* anti-women. This last example is depressingly common – there are an enormous number of films, from *Basic Instinct* to *Aliens* to *Star Trek*, where the problem is a woman who has to be sorted out. The way the problematic is sorted out also helps us understand the ideology.



In Victorian times most novels ended with the loose ends being tied up and the problematic resolved by a marriage – this was the ultimate solution for their society. How will people look back at our society which is represented in films which end with the violent deaths of women who dare to be different as in *Fatal Attraction* or even *Thelma and Louise*.

Ideology is a key concept of the course and just as ideas like representation and audiences, you should be thinking about ideology all the time. A couple of things to remember:

- You will not find a media text without an ideology although you will probably be able to think of ones where you can't spot what the ideology is. Unfortunately, the examiner will notice if you don't mention ideology
- One reason why you might miss the ideology in a text is if it is part of the dominant ideology. If a text only seems to be saying what "everyone takes for granted" it might not seem worth pointing out -but it is.

A good way of spotting ideology is through looking at things like the representation of main characters as you did with *Fatal Attraction*, or at the narrative. If you look at the problematic, for example you will often be able to make an ideological point – the problem in *Jaws* is a shark – *Jaws* is about the dangerous side of nature, the problem in *Fatal Attraction* is Alex, *Fatal Attraction* is saying that single women are evil.

Once you have spotted the problematic, you should be able to look in more detail at how this is produced. Once again, remember how we did this in *Fatal Attraction*, looking at the mise en scene, the shots used, the editing, the soundtrack and so on -all of which reinforced the idea that Alex was evil and Beth good and therefore helped produce the film's ideology.

Finally, remember ideology is probably the most difficult thing you will write about. The examiner will not be looking for a "right answer." Instead s/he will simply be impressed to see that you are thinking ideologically and that whatever point of view you take, you are able to back it up with the detail of your analysis.

Some examples of the dominant ideology to look for:

The following is not by any means a complete list of the features of the dominant ideology that you may find, but it may help ...

1. The ideology of the family and family values:

- Ideally children should grow up with two married heterosexual parents and one or two brothers and sisters.
- Marriage is the ideal kind of relationship.
- Sex outside of marriage is a bad thing particularly when it is casual.

2. The ideology of materialism/consumerism:

- Buying things and having lots of money are ways to achieve happiness.

3. The ideology of the work ethic:

- Hard work is not just a way of becoming successful, but is a good thing in itself.
- Those who choose not to work hard should be looked down on – "work-shy layabouts"

4. The ideology of self determination:

- People should not rely on anyone else or society to help them through life, they should achieve things for themselves.
- It is quite possible for anyone to be successful if they are willing to try.

5. The ideology of deference:

- We should have respect for those who are in authority over us.

6. The ideology of sexual difference:

- Women and men have very different abilities in almost everything they do.
- In general the abilities of men are greater when it really matters.

Narrative and Ideology – the link

When we are studying narrative it can seem a meaningless exercise. Just spotting the plot points in a narrative doesn't seem to tell us much about what the film is really saying. Instead, it may just seem to be exposing the mechanics of plot structuring which is more useful for screenwriters than any one else.

In fact the opposite is true: the study of narrative can take us to the heart of the film so that by looking carefully at the structuring of a narrative we can get a clearer understanding of the themes and ideology of the film.

I can perhaps make this clearer if I start by analysing a simpler narrative than any you have studied – the story of Little Red Riding Hood. If I try to use the same techniques as you might do with a film, I find the following:



The opening – the story is set up with Little Red Riding Hood in a state of equilibrium in the calm world of the home. She is given a task to perform and an instruction “Keep to the path and don't talk to strangers.” The moral of this, if we consider it with the rest of the narrative, is that we should listen to our parents.

Plot point one – Little Red Riding Hood meets a wolf in the forest, but stupidly trusts him. The technique of dramatic irony is used here because we know that she is in danger, but she doesn't. This reinforces a second moral – that nature is dangerous.

The ending – Little Red Riding Hood is saved by the woodcutter. This reinforces the moral that children should rely on adults and introduces a new one that men are stronger than women and can protect them.

The **problematic** of the narrative is the wolf itself – a symbol of the danger of nature which can only be sorted out by someone whose job is to keep nature under control – a woodcutter.

I could go on in this manner using Vogler's theory for example to reveal further the morals of the story. The truth is that these morals which would be either consciously or sub-consciously be learned by the child audience of the fairy tale are what adults would call ideology and importantly they are most apparent in exactly the key moments which narrative theory tells you to look at. The narrative of the story is a kind of journey that the audience go through where every important point in the narrative reinforces the ideological message of the story.

TASK

Choose a film you are familiar with and apply this approach to its narrative structure.

The Two Goal plot

David Siegel has taken the idea of the problematic further to suggest that rather than one problem, the typical Hollywood film these days has two central problems. The following section is taken from an article by him on the Internet:

The Single-goal Plot

In a single-goal plot, the protagonist has one problem to solve from the point of commitment to the end of the film. Accomplishing a single goal will solve the overall problem. The African Queen, Raider's of the Lost Ark, The River Wild, and Star Trek: Generations, are well known single-goal films (most are not well known, since they don't tend to stay in theatres very long). While single-goal, or linear, stories used to suffice, today's film consumers don't find them stimulating enough. They find these stories predictable and flat. In today's market, they are a bad investment. Yet studios continue to make a surprising number of single-goal films each year.

The Two-goal Plot

In contrast, most films we see these days have a two-goal plot. This involves the protagonist striving for the false goal, then learning something that changes the whole situation and going for the real goal to save the day in the end. The reversal of the protagonist's goal takes the entire story in a legitimate new direction half-way through the film.



Let's look at some examples:

In *E.T., the Extraterrestrial*, Elliot's first goal is to keep E.T. as a friend; his second goal (minute 53 of 107) is to help him get home.

In *Jurassic Park*, Alan Grant's first goal is to verify the safety of the park; his second goal (minute 88 of 119) is to get Ellie and the kids to safety after he discovers the dinosaur eggs and the natural tendency for the dinosaurs to get out of control.

In *Star Wars*, Luke's first goal is to get R2-D2 to the rebel base for analysis; his second goal (minute 94 of 115) is to destroy the Death Star by dropping a bomb in the right place.

Over 190 of the top-200 money-making films of all time have two-goal plots. Steven Spielberg hasn't made a single-goal film in twelve years. Though it may sound obvious, no one uses this goal-oriented method of plot development.

TASK

Siegel goes on to explain the dual goals from the following films: *Home Alone*, *The Return of the Jedi*, *The Lion King*, *Batman*, *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Ghostbusters*. If you know these films try to spot their two goals. Otherwise try with any other film you have seen recently.

Binary Oppositions: Narrative and Ideology

All stories have characters that we sympathise with and those we dislike – at a more ideological level, they are presenting us with examples of good and evil. Furthermore, because narratives are often in the business of simplifying in order to make sense, they will often present us with good and evil as straightforward opposites. Indeed some people have spent a lot of time looking at narratives in terms of oppositions. This is partly a reflection of the way the human mind works: we like to see the world neatly, and psychologists have found that this often results in us polarising ideas or people into opposites – good/bad, old/young,

beautiful/ugly, male/female. Films reflect this and you can find a lot about the ideology of a film if you try to produce a list of the same kind. The average western, for example works like this:

Homesteaders	vs	Indians
white	vs	red
Christian	vs	pagan
domestic	vs	savage
helpless	vs	dangerous
clothed	vs	naked

All drama works through conflict so this kind of binary opposition is essential to make the film interesting and to help us decide who we are loyal to, but it obviously has big ideological implications. If you have seen *Dances with Wolves*, you can see how that film takes some of the same oppositions and swaps them round so that a different ideological representation of the Indians is given. Also in making the film, the director can go to great lengths to show what is good and bad in these oppositions, so the paganism of the violent human-sacrificing Indians in traditional westerns changes to the mystical, noble paganism of the heroes of Kostner's film.

The binary opposition theory is another which should be applicable to all of the films you study on the course. The narrative of the film will be made from the meeting and inevitable clash of these opposites – that will produce the problematic and the resolution will come from the clash being sorted out, either by the destruction of one of the opposites as in *Fatal Attraction* or *Jaws* or by some kind of compromise between them.



An example of this is the film *Seven*. Here, one of the oppositions is between the optimistic love of humanity as seen in the Brad Pitt character and the pessimistic hatred of humanity which is felt by the killer. The two oppositions are resolved in the ending where the Morgan Freeman character who has always been unfriendly and pessimistic, realises that he can mix his distaste for the people around him in the dreadful world of the film with a wish to continue in his work of trying to save them

The binary oppositions don't just play themselves out in the narrative of a film, they are normally a big part of the iconography of the film – you can see them up on the screen, symbolised by mise-en-scene, and the whole look of the film. So, in *Fatal Attraction*, the opposite worlds of the family and the single woman are clearly shown in the different houses that we see the characters in. If you consider one of the oppositions between Dan and Alex in this film you can see how this works: Dan, as a man is presented as being rational while Alex is emotional, a typical representation of the different genders in film which is demonstrated by her listening to opera music in her flat, and wild Brazilian music

when she goes out. Dan really should realise that even the film's soundtrack is warning him which side of the binary opposition between men and women she is on.

Events or actions

One binary opposition which should probably be at the front of your mind whenever you study a film is between actions and events. These may seem like the same thing – once again Richard Michaels explains this better than I can:

An action is something that a character does to himself, an object, or another character. An event is something that happens to the character, something that impacts him, and over which he has little control. Being hit by a car is an event, but the antagonist intentionally hitting another character is an action.

Drama is not about accidental events that happen to individuals. It is about how the characters react to these events. It is also about characters making decisions under conflict and performing actions while in pursuit of an objective that represents fundamental human values.

In a film like *Halloween* our sympathy for Laurie grows more and more as she becomes responsible for actions in the narrative and is no longer the slave of events as her friends are. You can see this process in any of the films you watch and it is something that ties together all of the theories in this booklet:

- The problematic is an event which is resolved by the action of the protagonist.
- Repetition in the narrative may sometimes take the form of an event which is repeated as an action of the protagonist. So, for example, we first see the event of Thornhill being dragged to the country house in *North by Northwest*, then, when the scene is repeated, he is acting and taking the police there.
- Campbell's journey is one where events push the hero out of the ordinary world and force him/her to act in the unfamiliar new world of the narrative.
- Field's plan begins with an opening of events including the first plot point. Somewhere in the middle act this will normally change and the second major plot point will push the hero into a climax of action.

TASK
Choose a couple of films that you know well and make a list of major actions and events involving their main character – am I right that the events are mainly in the first half and the actions in the second?

By Steve Baker

Additional material sourced from MediaKnowall.com

Compiled and edited by David Allison