

It was Frank S. Mottershaw's *A Daring Daylight Burglary* in 1903 that heralded a new vision for the moving picture as he introduced fictional storytelling to the medium. As part of the Sheffield Photo Company, Mottershaw pioneered a number of what would now be referred to as action films. The techniques that these films established quickly spread across the world and were further developed, most notably in Hollywood.

The film-maker as theorist

This new form of storytelling included numerous scenes, cameras were placed carefully, and editing, particularly cutting on action, was introduced. From these techniques genres were established. This early foray into narrative-based cinema began to define the language of film. This is now as familiar to us as any spoken or written language. Like other languages it appears natural, but the language film uses is as carefully constructed and contextually driven as any other.

Film theory has its esoteric elements, which are often highly divorced from the practice of cinema, but on the whole it interrogates meaning, communication and audience reaction. The vocabulary adopted by film theory may sometimes seem distant from the practice of making a film – the ideas certainly are not. Many great film-makers are often the best (informal) students of their own medium and can talk eloquently about their own art and the work of film-makers they admire. They are aware of the tools of meaning and communication and employ them as second nature.

For the new film-maker, a sound knowledge of theory can lift your craft and turn it into art. It can also speed up a process, aid effective communication with a crew and improve precision.

The theorist as film-maker

The worst kind of theorist is one who takes no account of the context of film production; who sees film as nothing more than literature or history with moving pictures. To ignore the context in which a film is made and received is to disregard one of the things that makes film so special.

A working knowledge of the process of producing film is therefore helpful for the film theorist. Knowledge of shot types, how sound is recorded, how a crew really work together, the realities of having to use available footage in post-production, and so on, is essential information. This doesn't mean that every film theorist should leap out of their chair and grab a camera; much of this can be gleaned from observation or from reading about the experiences of directors. One thing that digital technology does afford the theorist is the opportunity to begin to engage in the process of production. Testing out ideas, shot types and so on is both enjoyable and informative, even if you have no ambition to ever make a film.

The audience

The majority of film theory, and a great deal of this book, is about the audience. Too often audiences are forgotten when film is treated as film, as an entity that exists almost divorced from any point of reception. Film is nothing without an audience. Like theatre, film is designed for an audience; it is meaningless without them. Film theory forces the audience back into the equation. Audiences are varied and contingent, but it is important that we at least acknowledge they exist.

Glossary

Text: A verbal, written or visual artefact. Film is a medium that combines all these elements and thus the complexity of analysis is increased.

Recommended reading

Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE) is the foundation of all narrative analysis; it is thought-provoking and surprisingly accessible. Roland Barthes' *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives* (1965) will help you put the specific filmic theories on narrative into a broader context.

Structuralism is an umbrella term for many different movements that share approaches to the analysis of the world. In structuralism's terms, everything in the world is available as 'text' and can be analysed in the same terms. Text thus means everything is available for analysis by the same set of broad principles. A text such as *Mythologies* (Roland Barthes, 1957) exemplifies this where Barthes uses the rules of structuralism and semiotics to analyse wrestling, red wine and print media all in the same terms. This is the basis of film analysis.

Structuralism for film-makers

Structuralism developed out of the linguistic analysis of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and in particular his book *Course in General Linguistics* (published posthumously in 1916). His principles were taken, developed and applied to all aspects of human interaction to become the movement we understand today as structuralism. Film has its own specific language and as such the theories of a movement based in the study of language are particularly pertinent.

The benefits of a working knowledge of structuralism and its branches of semiotics and narratology are evident for film theorists. The advantages for the film-maker are less obvious, but no less vital. Most film-makers are hugely knowledgeable about the form they work in; be it the cinema history of Martin Scorsese or the avant-garde artistic expression of Derek Jarman. Film-makers tend not to use the vocabulary of structuralism, but they implicitly use the approaches. When you are starting out you should endeavour to use both. Structuralism, as the name suggests, is about structure, and the smallest elements that go together to make up structure; this means that it can be used to ensure precision.

There have been many developments from structuralism such as post-structuralism and deconstruction, which challenge the assumptions made in the original theory. However it is important to note two things:

- 1 Without knowledge of structuralist principles it is impossible to engage in subsequent debates.
- 2 Film language does not evolve in the same way as spoken language – it is a highly structured form.

The foundation of narrative analysis

The study of narrative in film has been examined in a great deal of depth by a wide range of theorists and practitioners in a variety of different academic fields. Film narrative has been studied, appropriated and used by sociologists, psychologists, cultural theorists, anthropologists and semioticians as well as by literary theorists. However, by far the most plentiful source of narrative analysis has come from academics with a literary background who often work under the assumption that all narratives operate in the same way.

Much of the narrative analysis that film theory purports to have developed comes via the structuralist revolution of the 1960s; a theoretical system that still maintains much of its base in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which essentially deals with drama rather than literature or film.

If you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point and diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents.

Aristotle, *Poetics*

Structural analysis

In his *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives* (1965) Roland Barthes made many clear and compelling connections between narrative and the real world. Four of the key points to remember are:

- 1 Narratives appear in many forms: written, verbal and visual – all of which form part of the complex language of cinema.
- 2 Narratives are constructed, they don't just appear; they are selected and ordered. This is true of real life, but we do this on a subconscious level. In film it is deliberate.
- 3 Narratives apply to all human and cultural interaction – narrative discourse operates throughout all culture and throughout all time. This in itself makes the relationship between the real world and a film world even more complex for analysis, but it also allows the maker a great deal of freedom.
- 4 Narratives are 'transhistorical' – they have always existed and by implication always will. This implies that narrative is primordial. In these terms film is now part of the real world – film language is yet another language that we engage with on a regular basis.

This is the basis of narrative analysis in cinema – that there are comparisons between day-to-day communication and film language. However, film has its own specific modes of communication. It is the intersection between everyday life and film form that creates meaning for an audience. This suggests something fundamental.

Narrative is not the same as story; that is too simplistic. Narrative is about comprehension. Narrative is a fundamental facet of human communication.

Narrative may incorporate articulated language, spoken or written; pictures, still or moving; gestures and the ordered arrangement of all of these ingredients. It is present in myth, legend, fable, short story, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, pantomime, painting, stained glass windows, cinema, comic strips, journalism, conversation ... narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; the history of the narrative begins with the history of mankind.... The narrative scorns division into categories of good and bad literature: narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there like life itself.

Roland Barthes,
An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives, 1965

Narratology

Narratology is the name given to the study of narrative and narrative structure. In looking for patterns and trends in all texts it is part of the structuralist movement. This grouping of thinkers is informed by Saussure, but also by Claude Lévi-Strauss who (as a structural anthropologist) looked at repetitive narrative structures across different countries and cultures. In these terms, film narratology is concerned with both language (as in film's specific codes and conventions) and context and often the relationship between the two.

Story and plot

We have established that narrative is about much, much more than simply telling stories, but in terms of filmic narratives meaning starts to be generated when plot is established. In unpicking a film or setting out to create a film, it is possible to start with an overarching story but the plot has to follow quickly in order for things to make sense.

This is essentially because plot is about causality – how one event or action leads to another. If this is not made explicit then a film makes no sense at all. As E. M. Forster said: '*The king died and then the queen died* is a story. *The king died, and then the queen died of grief* is a plot.' If this is not established by the film-maker then an audience will try and establish it themselves.

EXERCISE

Finding the plot

Take the key elements of any well-known film of your choice and write them down as bullet points. Avoid noting the causal relationships and then present this to three or four different people – can they identify the film? Then, try adding in a couple of the actual plot points, noting the different narratives that emerge. Once you have added these plot points you should show the breakdown to the same group of people and assess how many of them can identify the film from this simple breakdown.

Glossary

Surrealism: A short-lived artistic movement that sought to explore subjective dream-states and was concerned with subverting the logic of representation. It is often incorrectly used today to refer to things that are unusual.

The classic Hollywood narrative structure

Tzvetan Todorov developed Propp's notions and boiled them down even further to try and identify the barest elements of narrative structure. Todorov developed his notions of how narrative communication works during the early part of his career and these structuralist principles informed much of his analysis in the 1970s and into the 1980s. His narrative sequencing started with three elements that built on Aristotle's notion of structure.

Equilibrium (beginning) → Disruption of equilibrium (middle) → Return to equilibrium (end)

Todorov expanded this to involve the characters, to offer a recognisable reason for the initial three stages:

- 1 Equilibrium is established.
- 2 Disruption to the equilibrium.
- 3 Character(s) identify the disruption.
- 4 Characters seek to resolve the issue to solve the problem to restore equilibrium.
- 5 Reinstatement of equilibrium.

This is a useful aide-memoire, even if you are attempting to create a non-narrative form. In attempting to do this you cannot create something wholly random. Audiences expect narrative sequences – this is part of the language of cinema that has been established. If you want to challenge an audience the first place to start might be to play with this sequence.

A note on non-narrative forms

Be very careful when setting out to create something which is non-narrative. There is a world of difference between something that is abstract and something that 'plays' with narrative form. The former tends to be video art or some of the more extreme examples of **surrealism** (such as *Un Chien Andalou* (dir: Luis Bunuel 1929)). Other film-makers who tend towards experimentation utilise an audience's knowledge of narrative structure and convention, for example Hal Hartley's short *Ambition* (1991).

The classic Hollywood three-act structure

The classic Hollywood narrative sequence has been developed since the conception of Hollywood as the dominant seat of production. In these terms, it has become part of the vocabulary of cinema not because it is 'natural' but because it has been repeated.

Syd Field is one of the most respected screenwriting gurus working in America. Field identified the following structure and suggested its use for all other film-makers. For Field, the three key stages of any film are: setup, confrontation and resolution. These are broken down as follows:

- Act 1 Comprises the first quarter of the screenplay.
In a 120-minute film Act 1 = 30 minutes.
- Act 2 The next two quarters of the film.
In a 120-minute film Act 2 = 60 minutes.
- Act 3 The final quarter of the film.
In a 120-minute film Act 3 = 30 minutes.

Recommended viewing

There are many films worth examining to investigate Hollywood structure. A film such as *The Apartment* (dir: Billy Wilder 1960) is a classic. An interesting exercise is to compare and contrast the structure of Hollywood remakes, such as *Boudu, sauvé des eaux* (dir: Jean Renoir 1932) and *Down and Out in Beverley Hills* (dir: Paul Mazursky 1986).

Aristotle's *Poetics*

As we've already seen, Aristotle's *Poetics* is the foundation of all criticism and theory as we understand it today. In it he defines the barest elements of narrative:

'A whole is that which has beginning, middle and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and also before another.'

While this seems so obvious that it is almost pointless stating it, this is to misread Aristotle. *Poetics* is a treatise on the nature of drama and what Aristotle is pointing out is that the narrative sequencing resulting in a beginning, a middle and an end is a construction born out of the desire to make drama coherent. This is then distinct from everyday communication, where the requirement for narrative completion is not the same – everyday life doesn't have such neat beginnings, middles and ends.

Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1983) is intended for all narratives in all modes. For this reason, Genette's is the most comprehensive narratology available and it is his connection of narrative and discourse that is most important of all. In these terms discourse can be defined as the imparting of knowledge and, most essentially, debate.

Story (Content)

Events	chronology/causality
Characters	actions/interactions
Settings	spatio-temporal complexes

Narration (Telling)

Types	reliable/unreliable
Levels	embedded narration
Voice	narrator/character

Text (Presentation)

Time	order/duration/frequency
Characterisation	traits/attributes
Focalisation	who sees/perceives/judges events?

In *Narrative Discourse* Genette examines a number of essential points. He does not purport to provide structure, as Propp does, or to oversimplify structure as with Todorov or Field. Instead he identifies the key elements in narrative; elements that have to be present in order for a narrative to make sense. More than this he identifies the key elements that make a narrative mean something to an audience.

With the introduction of the element of 'text' he identified how meaning is not down to the decision-making faculties of an audience. This is not directly the same as the ideology identified and discussed in Chapter 4, instead this is the buried and subsumed meaning that is generated from the structure of the specific narrative form.

Story

Story is the primary level of any narrative. This is the section that the inexperienced film-maker starts and finishes with. The inexperienced critic does the same. This is where the content is developed and meaning begins, but this is not how meaning is communicated. Genette posits that events, characters and settings need to be treated with particular consideration:

Events: things happen, but it is crucial to note the causal relationships. In these terms events become a plot.

Characters: there are characters who interact with each other (interactions) and they do things (actions). This is not the same as characterisation. This is crucial because a character that does not really do anything, or doesn't progress the plot, becomes part of the setting.

Setting: things happen and characters exist in a particular time and place. This frames the characters and the events.

This then provides the starting point for developing the content, but doesn't touch on form in any great detail.

Narration

As a narratologist, Genette is concerned with all narratives and as such his levels of narration are highly detailed. Speech is often overlooked in production and analysis. Who is speaking, when, where and to whom are all vital questions. When placed against how we view characters this becomes even more complicated. The notion of reliability is paramount. If we have seen a character behaving in a duplicitous manner we are unlikely to believe what they are saying. Where characters are consistent we are unlikely to question what they say. This even stretches to the morally ambiguous detectives in film noir.

The positioning of narration is an important consideration and in cinema it can be separated into three main areas:

Extradiegetic: narration from an exterior voice, not a character in the film, or where we don't know who the character is at that stage. A voice-over. The first few seconds of *The Apartment* (dir: Billy Wilder 1960) exemplifies this.

Homodiegetic: a character narrator. A voice-over or the rare example of a character speaking directly to camera. For instance, the opening dialogue from Lester Burham in *American Beauty* (dir: Sam Mendes 1999).

Intradiegetic: two or more characters speaking to each other – remember they speak to further characterisation and/or plot, not for their own benefit.