

Narrative

Narrative describes the structuring of stories. A more formal definition is that narrative is a series of connected events involving characters and their actions. Narratives may be fictional or not, although here we will deal with fictional ones.

A significant distinction in the study of narrative is that of *plot* — how events are ordered according to specific patterns — and *story* — the chronological sequence of events that we infer from the plot. In other words, plot is what we see when we watch a movie or a show, while story is what we construct individually and relate to our friends after. Every plot is made up of at least one and usually multiple *scenes*; each scene being a sequence of shots in a single space and time. A scene consists of one or more *sequences*: a unified series of shots that show a complete action.

Narrative Structure

Every story has a particular *narrative structure*; the way in which the plot is organized. We distinguish broadly between a *linear* structure, also known as chronological structure, where earlier events are followed by later events — linear narratives provide causes and effects in conventional, temporal order. Opposed to this is the *non-linear structure*, where at least one scene is out of chronological order. Whether this is simply the first scene that produces a kind of framing for the rest of the work, or multiple scenes are switched around is simply a matter of degree rather than kind. Because our lives unfold chronologically, linear narratives tend to be easier to follow than non-linear ones, although the narration also affects our comprehension (see later chapter).

Openings are highly significant, in that they need to present us with the setting, the protagonist, set the theme and mood, and often hint at the end. Most openings also have *hooks* that make us keep following the story. Similarly, *endings* are highly significant, not simply because they produce *closure* — provide clear explanations for how the conflict has been resolved — or withhold that closure. Endings also suggest thematic resolutions and whether or not the story might continue.

Time is often manipulated in stories. We distinguish between *story time* — the time that a story takes to unfold — and *screen time* — the time that a cinematic work lasts. These two times are rarely the same, which suggests that duration and frequency must be refined by the plot.

Duration is the length of time we spend on a given piece of story event. An event may be narrated in extreme detail, such as the climactic shoot-out, or the meditative peeling of a potato. Conversely, duration may be shortened through montage sequences or simply left implied because the event has little significance, whether it be peeling a potato or traveling from one destination to another.

Frequency describes how often we see a given event. The convention is once, no matter the duration, but there are times when a given event is shown repeatedly, either for dramatic emphasis, audience comprehension, or to add detail. Any frequency higher than one is referred to as *redundant*, since it is repetition. Frequency may also be zero, such as in detective stories where we never see the crime being committed, although it is more conventional to simply (non-linearly) show the event at the end of the plot. When an event has a frequency of zero — and is significant for the story — we refer to it as *retardation*.

Desire and Conflict

Generally, stories revolve around characters who want something, whether that something is ephemeral, such as fame or knowledge, or concrete, like a ring or money. These goals are usually frustrated, either by the character themselves or by other people. What the protagonist wants we refer to as their *desire*. This may be quite literal in the case of love stories, where the desire is inherently sexual (in the broadest sense), or some other desire, whether professional, emotional, or material. Many protagonists are not aware of their desire per se, yet still pursue it. This pursuit is frustrated in what we term *conflict*. Maybe someone else wants the same love interest as the protagonist or maybe the love interest is not interested.

When we talk about narrative desire and conflict, we talk about whether or not the desire is achieved or left unfulfilled. This is the point of narrative resolution, also referred to

as the *climax*. Oftentimes narrative desire is only partially fulfilled or changes over the course of the story. Sometimes multiple characters pursue the same goal but for different reasons, such as in *The Lord of the Ring*, where Frodo and Sam both want to destroy the ring but for different reasons: Frodo wants to do it because it is the right thing to do, while Sam wants to protect the Shire and his gardens.

Narrative Modes

There are distinct modes of telling stories. The most typical way is known as the *classical narrative*, often associated with Hollywood where this narrative mode was shaped, but is found today in almost all national visual cultures. The classical narrative mode is distinguished by following a single or very few protagonists. The dramatic structure is mostly linear, with a few flashbacks for characterization or possibly flashforwards for suspense. The plot is usually constructed around clear cause-and-effect, where we see what reactions result from the protagonist's actions.

The classical narrative tends to follow the so-called *three-act structure*. We are presented with a state of affairs that is usually stable. About a quarter into the story, that state is disrupted by a *conflict*, after which follows a number of *complicating actions*, until about three-quarters into the story, where the *climax* takes place, followed by a *denouement*. Many classical narratives also have a *double narrative structure*, where a secondary storyline is resolved through the resolution of the main storyline. For a lot of movies, this is the romantic subplot.

Although it is difficult to describe in one category all the many different narrative modes to classical narratives, they are sometimes referred to as *alternative narratives*, because they in one way or another deviate significantly from the classical narrative. Whether this is a matter of introducing multiple protagonists, breaking the clear cause-and-effect logic, having a radically different structure than the three-act structure, some other variation, or perhaps a mix of all of the above, depends on how different the cinematic work truly is.

Although the classical narrative may vary quite a bit, since the 1960s a gradual shift in mainstream moving image production can be traced. Since these cinematic works remain

within the Hollywood tradition, they are often referred to as *post-classical narratives*. These narratives tend to vary one aspect of the classical narrative mode but maintain the other aspects to reinforce audience comprehension.

The sprawling narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* with its many characters with almost equal screen time and complex connections between each narrative strand, which violates the first convention of classical narrative, reinforces the very clear cause-and-effect structure by making everything about the clear-cut goal of destroying the One Ring.

The multiple narration of *Crash* still maintains a clear three-act structure, as well as several repeating narrative elements of crashes and reversals. The unreliable narration of *Fight Club* employs a narrative structure that makes the reveal of Tyler Durden's true identity the movie's climactic turning point. The non-linear narrative of *Kill Bill* retains clarity by focusing on only one protagonist and using the non-linear structure to slowly reveal character information, where the cause-and-effect logic remains strong. The looping narrative of *Spring Breakers* dislodges clear chronology and replaces it with a more musical logic of repeating motifs and rhythms.