CIN105
3 – Narrative (16 May 2023)

Housekeeping

- Any questions before we jump into this week's material?

NARRATIVE

On Thursday we started to dig into this class's material properly by considering broadly what it means to understand a film formally.

This week, we want to start to interrogate the specifics of a film's formal system. Films make meaning in and through their formal elements – cinematography, editing, mise en scene, and sound – and these formal properties operate through two different sub-systems that should be thought of as interrelated but semi-distinct – these are the **narrative system** and the **stylistic system.**

Today, we will be focusing on the first of these systems, the narrative system. Then, in the next four sessions, we will break down the stylistic system. Finally, we will zoom back out and consider how both of these systems operate in tandem to make meaning as a film's overall **formal system**.

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Let's start today with a quote from French scholar and literary theorist Roland Barthes, who has this to say about our impulse to create narratives:

"Under [an] almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds.

Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural; it is simply there, like life itself."

Barthes is just one of multiple scholars who makes the claim that human society is defined, in part, by its impulse to create narratives.

But why do we think in terms of narratives in the first place? Other scholars, like Paul Ricouer and David Carr, argue that narrative is simply inherent in our way of living and acting — that our brains are programmed in such a way that we cannot help but think in narrative patterns.

They also suggest that it's **a good thing** that we think in narrative patterns since it is through narrative that we make sense of the world—and of the events, both large and small—that define the present and the historical past.

Narrative, they say, is the very means by which we, as human beings, understand who we are, how we make sense of our place in the sociohistorical world.

Think about how you introduce yourself to someone you've never met. Usually, you offer some sort of personal history comprised of events that are linked temporally, spatially, and causally. – "I was born in Owen Sound, Ontario, where I lived until I was 19 when I moved to Toronto for university. I moved to Ottawa to do my Master's degree after graduating in 2017, and then came back to Toronto in 2020 for my PhD, where I've been ever since. "

We organize our existence into a grand narrative structure, or arc, otherwise known as our life, and within that large, overall arc are contained smaller narrative arcs – daily routines, weekly routines, special events, and so on.

In addition to narrativizing our own lives, we also – as individuals, and as a culture – narrativize other phenomena.

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Obviously, relevant to the concerns of this course, **artists** are often what we call people who try to make sense of their vision of the world by arranging material into narrative form. Artists sense-make by imbuing life experience with structure and meaning, which they then relay through any variety of media: poetry, prose, drama, sculpture, painting, graphic novels -- and, of course, the cinema.

SLIDE

But not only artists do this. History itself is relayed not as a series of discrete events that happen sans context or reason, but as an unfolding drama wherein particularly powerful people or particularly profound events set off a chain of reactions that read to us retrospectively like a story. We often synthesize extremely complex events with multiple, often not fully knowable causes into a legible, understandable story, often one that imparts lessons of behaviour for the future.

SLIDE

Even science is subject to narrativization: for example, human evolution gets narrativized as the progression *into* the upright creatures capable of complex thought that we are today. This may seem fairly normal, because we want to explain why it is that we're all here in this room learning about a thing we invented called cinema. But its important to remember that when we narrativize things, we inevitably imbue them with meaning.

We tend to think of the culmination of stories as being their purpose, so when we narrativize evolution – a process that did not have any motivation in itself, not in the human sense of the term – we can incorrectly come to assume that the human form we take today was inevitable, when it wasn't necessarily.

This is an inherent part of what stories *do* on a fundamental level.

Actions become intelligible through narrative; stories create order out of chaos; they link individual events into a chain of events by relating them temporally, spatially and, perhaps most importantly, causally, and this is the key point: stories provide causation, a reason that one action is related to another action.

As if events in human history were like physical molecules bumping up against eachother, we think of events as *related*. Of course, many events certainly *are* related – I wake up in the morning and remember I forgot to buy coffee to make at home, so I go to the coffee shop around the corner of my apartment to get coffee instead. One thing *caused* the other thing, in some way.

But when we narrativize, we inevitably *choose* which events are important and which ones aren't. We link certain actions and forget others. This is a process of human creativity, and needs to be understood as such. This is what *storytelling* is.

It is a result of that chain that we construct in the act of storytelling that each event therein comes to assume a significance; that it comes to emerge as consequential. It is because of that chain that each event is revealed to be the effect of some prior event and perhaps the cause of some future one.

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This brings us to B+T's definition of narrative in the cinema: "a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space."

Now it's important to keep in mind that narrative in life and narrative in film are very different.

On any given day, a thousand things happen to us and to others, but not every one of those things is germane to an account we might give of the day.

In film, however, this isn't necessarily the case. Film is a highly constructed representation of events that is quite distinct from the real world itself.

Film is not reality. It uses reality as its material, and it constructs representations of reality through filmic form.

Normatively, in this constructed representation everything that is not pertinent to the narrative at hand is screened out so that there is nothing superfluous or extraneous.

So most often, everything that may not be linked directly to cause-and-effect situations will be eliminated.

We will of course encounter many films in this course where this is not necessarily absolutely true – after all, rules exist to be broken. But the standard operating procedure, especially for films that are molded in the classical Hollywood model, is for all other stylistic elements of a film to be subordinated to the needs of the narrative.

This is not just true of the cinema. Who here has heard the old adage about guns in the theatre? If you ever see a gun … ??? … you can be sure it will be used.

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This is also known as Chekhov's gun, named for the Russian playwright who said that if you introduce a gun in the first act, it must go off in the second or third, otherwise it's extraneous to the plot and should be removed.

The principal that underlies Chekov's gun can be extended much more broadly to understand the function that people and props play in conventional narrative in general.

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For instance, in *The Player*, we do not understand the postcards that Griffin receives as superfluous to the story. They function as the inciting incident – the thing that kicks of the story and provides motivation for the character to begin doing the things that he does, namely trying to figure out who is sending them, which sends him on the path to murder.

The postcards then have a purpose, and they generate action. They open threads that need to be resolved in some way by the story's conclusion. In *The Player*, this does not necessarily happen the way we expect, as we never do discover who is sending them, but the thread is closed nevertheless, as Griffin and the mystery writer strike a deal, ensuring Griffin's safety.

Something else to note is that in real life, the process of producing narratives is an ongoing endeavor, for events keep evolving and the story keeps changing as time marches on. Our role as narrator of our lives, for example, is unrelenting.

But in a film, a narrative typically has a definite beginning and a definite end. As a result of this, narratives are typically contained and highly structured. In other words, narratives, to use that word from last week, have FORM.

When thinking about the structure that many filmic narratives typically take, it is helpful to invoke the philosopher Aristotle, whose text *Poetics* remains influential in art theory to this day. Some of the terms we are about to learn still bear within them meaning attributed by Aristotle thousands of years ago.

About the form of a narritve, Aristotle argued, quite simply, that a narrative should have a beginning, a middle and an end.

SLIDE (with each point)

This will probably sound fairly obvious, but he also assumed certain things about that beginning, middle, and end:

- first, that the **beginning** would be defined by exposition

- second, that the **middle** would begin with the introduction of some element that introduces a problem and thus serves as a catalyst for change of some sort: this could be a crisis, a journey, or a goal

- and, finally, that the **end** would bring closure of some sort, be it resolution of the crisis, completion of the journey, or realization of the goal

- this is what has come to be known as **three act structure**

Romantic comedy as a genre often offers us really tight examples of the three-act structure. Some have summarized the traditional romantic comedy plot as "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girls back." We can complicate this structure a little bit, however, and think about the first act as beginning with exposition – we are introduced to the characters and who they are before we get what is often called the inciting incident. This might involve the couple meeting in the form of a meet-cute or, for established couples, an attempt to take the next step. Then there is the building of action before some sort of problem introduced, often leading to a break-up, before the couple overcome their differences and reconcile, leading to the narrative resolution.

In the wake of Aristotle, many other philosophers, critics, and writers themselves have offered numerous variations on this formula, including structures involving not 3 but rather 4 or 5 acts. And they have made varying arguments about what, exactly, defines the movement between these acts.

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You'll note from your reading that Bordwell and Thompson don't really trouble over the 3-act structure or any of these theories. It's less important that you can identify the acts themselves, which don't always have extremely clear dividing lines between them, than you become conscious of the need for narrative structure and the common modes through which filmmakers create those structures. Having the idea of different acts, and of exposition, rising action, a climax, and resolution, can help with this.

If we connect this narrative structure to the five principles of form that we learned about last week, we can start to see how we might understand narrative FORMALLY.

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When we speak of function, for instance, as we did above in reference to the postcards in *The Player*, one thing we are asking is to what purpose various elements within the film are put in terms of advancing our understanding of the narrative.

When we speak of development, likewise, we are considering the way the parts of a film build upon eachother to create meaning through juxtaposition. The postcards that Griffin receives take on new significance when, for instance, he continues receiving them after killing David Kahane. This tells us immediately, through the function of the prop itself, that he killed the wrong man, and the narrative develops.

And when we think about unity and disunity, we are generally speaking about the ways a film's entire set of relationships fit together – the narrative is a huge part of this. Does the story resolve itself? Does it feel like all the problems opened in the first and second act are somehow solved, for better or worse? If so, we'd probably say the film has some kind of unity, a coherence. *The Player* has unity, because Griffin gets away with the crime and keeps his job. He doesn't get what he deserves in a moral sense, but he wins, it's a "happy ending."

But moments of difference and variation, in particular, are part of what allows a story to unfold – the principle of development, which you might now think about in terms of the development of the film's story over the course of 3 acts, is driven in important ways by the introduction of difference and variation, those forms that disrupt the first act's established equilibrium, introducing a disequilibrium in the second act that must give way to a renewed sense of equilibrium and resolution in the third act.

When we watch today's film, *April Story*, I want you to, in particular, pay attention to principles of repetition and variation, as this is a key way story information is communicated through the film's form. We'll talk more about that in tutorial, once you've seen the film.

Before that, let's return to the definition of narrative given by B+T to make sure it's fresh in our minds: narrative, they explain, involves "a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space."

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One thing this definition puts immediately on the table is causality. The logic that fuels narratives, B+T argue, is causality; it's causality that determines how different events are linked together.

Even films that lack conventional narrative structure like *Les Sieges de L'Alcazar*, which we watched on Thursday, bear some sense of causal structure.

To understand better why this is the case, we need to learn some new terms that will help us distinguish the WHAT of the story from the HOW that story is told through form.

SLIDE (on each bolded term)
The terms are story and plot.

Colloquially, in everyday usage, you probably use these terms interchangeably. But they are distinct.

Story is the entire narrative of the film, incorporating both those events which are actually depicted on screen and those which we infer as having occurred…

Plot, in contrast, is the ordering and presentation of those events as they occur in the film (that is to say, as they are seen by us directly, or told to us through dialogue).

Put another way, plot is the actual arrangement of narrative material which the film makes available to us, while the story is what we construct from the plot provided.

As your book suggests, plot is what the filmmaker makes from the story, while in the reverse process, story is what the viewer re-creates from taking in the plot.

Obviously, almost all films leave some blanks. There is almost always some quantity of background story material that we are expected to infer from the plot, without it being explicitly provided.

So the gap between story and plot evokes blatantly something that we talked about at length last week: the spectator is always actively engaged with a film's formal system, and cinematic meaning is created in the interaction between text and viewer. In a sense, breaking narrative down into story and plot should help us see this – we, as viewers, *actively construct the story in our minds* and we do so by perceptually engaging with the film's plot in the act of viewing.

Some films make us work harder than others to make these connections, but ALL FILMS do this on some level.

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Another term that we need to throw into the mix here since it has relevance for the plot/story distinction is **diegesis**.

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Diegesis refers to the world of the story. The *non*-diegetic refers to parts of the film that are not part of the film's story world.

Most of the elements in a film belong to its diegesis, but some may not.

Probably the easiest way to make a distinction between the diegetic and the nondiegetic is to think about music in film: sometimes when you hear music in a film, it is coming from within the story world: for example, if the song is shown to be playing on the radio and the characters are able to hear this music

But just as often the music doesn't come from within the story world; rather, it is coming from a source outside the story world: the characters in the film can't hear it; only we, the audience, can hear it. That music—the music

characters don't hear—is *non*-diegetic because it doesn't belong to the story world. For example, the music that plays during Tai's make over in *Clueless*.

Other examples might include narrators: if the narrator is not part of the story, it's non-diegetic. How can we tell?

Sometimes it's hard. A narrator may appear omniscient, with knowledge that no character in the story could possibly possess, and who is never introduced to us as a character that exists in the same world as the others – this would be non-diegetic narration

Other times, the narrator may be a main character themselves – as is the case in *The Sieges of the Alcazar*, where multiple named characters narrate their motivations. In these cases the characters may be speaking from the future, relating information in a way that we infer is retroactive, but these are diegetic narrators as they belong to the world of the story – their speaking may simply be, from a plot perspective, non-chronological.

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or think about the use of title cards such as the usual "The End" seen at the end of a film to literally mark its conclusion – that is a non-diegetic element of the story. The characters don't know it's the end, only the audience.

Show clip from *The 400 Blows* (external)

In this clip, which concludes Francois Truffaut's famous coming of age film *The 400 Blows*, we see a definitive conclusion to Antoine's story, at least insofar as we will be privy to it, for now. Obviously, events will continue to happen after this moment, but the film itself is finished. The character himself is presumably is not aware that story transmission has ended here – only we the audience infer meaning from this cut-off point. The freeze frame and title card are non-diegetic, they have to do with film form and

manipulate the story, but they are not part of the story world of the film itself.

So another way to think about diegesis is the make-believe world of the story. When we suspend our disbelief and immerse ourselves in a film that we know otherwise to be fictional, the diegesis is the world that we accept as true for the duration of the film. It is the world of the characters that we infer from what we are shown.

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With that distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic, we can further adjust our definitions of story and plot:

- **story**: involves both explicitly presented + implied events

- **plot**: includes both explicitly presented events + additional nondiegetic material

So a musical score, which is added to create mood for the viewer but is not part of the story world, *is* part of the plot. A musical score modulates *how* we construct the story by playing with feeling, but it is not itself part of the story.

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Lets return again to B+T's definition of film narrative.

The next important element we need to highlight from this definition is this notion here – that stories are typically based on cause and effect.

Causality is the engine of most narratives; it pushes the narrative forward. Causality binds together the events that serve as links in a narrative chain.

A film usually initiates this propulsion—and thereby hooks us into the story—by forcing us to ask why the events on screen are happening. This is especially the case when a film starts *in media res*, or in the middle of the action.

As a narrative unfolds, we engage with questions of causality by way of character psychology – since it is usually characters who function as the agents of causality – we live vicariously through their desires and fears, their flaws and their will to accomplish goals and complete tasks.

For Bordwell and Thompson, in fact, this is how we should define characters: as bundles of traits that dictate how they will react to events. In this way film causality is character-based most of the time – events happen and characters react to these events, initiating new causes and new effects.

If we think back to *The Player*, the entire film is structured according to a cause-and-effect logic based on Griffin's reaction to two things: the threat of the postcards, and the perceived threat to his job. He begins doing things as a direct consequence to these threats, and everything that follows is, in various ways, the playing out of the consequences of his actions.

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Let's return one last time to this definition of narrative by B+T.

The last feature of this definition we need to clarify is this: narrative is *"A chain of events linked by cause and effect and* ***occurring in time and space****."*

For now, we've already covered space – that's the diegesis. Stories occur within space such that they occur within *a world* that the film establishes through visual form. We'll talk more about this when we consider mise-en-

scene and cinematography, but the point is the film establishes a story world that we buy into as viewers through the process of suspension of disbelief.

Time in narrative, on the other hand, is governed by three variables: order, duration and frequency. These variables are important for understanding the relationship between plot and story.

Order pertains to the placement of narrative events with regard to chronology.

Some films are perfectly chronological…insofar as the order of events in the plot is the same as the order of events in the story.

Other films, however, re-order the presentation of events, causing a deviation from straightforward chronological order.

The single most common way that films do this is through the introduction of a **flashback** -- that is, a sequence that takes us as spectators into the past only to then return us to the film's present. Flashback sequences will play an important role in today's film *April Story*, helping us learn more about our central character – pay attention to the way the film uses them to flesh out character motivation, where previous plot information makes more sense only once we have gone back in time and learned about things we previously had not seen.

Alternatively, narratives can play with chronological order and present us with a puzzle-like narrative.

Some of the most famous examples of this disordered approach include Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* or Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, where the chronological order of events is reversed, such that things from a story perspective only begin to unify at the end of the film, as we retroactively make sense of everything we previously saw but which lacked full context.

Duration pertains to how long an event lasts.

Typically the duration of an event as depicted in the plot of a film is less than the duration of that event in the story.

What I mean by this is that films typically elide or omit a lot of material so as to maintain viewer interest. For example, we may watch a film where we see a character get up in the morning, and in the next shot they are fully dressed. We did not watch them get dressed, but we can infer that it did happen within the diegesis of the film. IN a case like this, the plot (what we see) has skipped some of the story (what we can infer as having happened).

Occasionally, however, plot duration will exceed story duration. How can this be so?

One example would be through the use of Slow Motion, where an event plays for longer on screen than we understand it to be happening within the diegesis.

Lastly, we need to think about **Frequency** – how often do we see an event? Is it repeated for some reason?

This is less commonly deployed than playing with order or duration, but it does happen. For instance, sometimes we will see the same event from two different characters' perspectives, which will change how we make sense of that event within the overall story. In this case the plot has repeated itself, but we are meant to infer that in story terms the event really only happened once.

Okay, hopefully now we have fully walked through and elucidated B+T's definition of film narrative. Our last topic for this session is something we're

actually only going to touch on now and return to later, and that is film narration.

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Narration

Most simply put, narration can be defined simply as the process by which plot presents story information to the viewer.

In other words, narration is the term we give for the part of the film's formal system that is concerned with narrative. Narration asks, literally, how does film form *narrate* the story to you?

You might be thinking to yourself: but story information is made available to us by the plot, so plot and narration must be the same thing. But they aren't. Not quite.

Remember, plot is really just *what* story information we are presented with. What is at issue is not just *what* story information the plot presents, but *how* it does so.

So we might slightly adjust our definition to say that **narration** is: "the process by which story information is made available to us via the plot."

Here we start to get into the question of style, which we haven't really talked about yet. This is why we're going to come back to narration later, once we have learned more about film's stylistic system (that we'll be talking about starting on Thursday).

For now, we just want to lay out a few key principles of narration, which we'll think about in terms of the **range** and **depth** of knowledge that a film produces through plot.

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The *range* of knowledge a film offers falls on a continuum between the most restricted, where its control over what we know and when is very tight, and the most unrestricted, where the film seems more willing to share a lot of information with us, perhaps about character motivation, story background, or maybe knowledge of events that only we, and none of the characters, know about.

A film's narration is **Restricted** when it deliberately limits narration to the knowledge of just a single character.

In contrast, a film's narration is **Unrestricted** if the story information appears to be possessed by more characters, or even omniscient to everyone in the story world. While *The Player* is more a case of restricted narration, where we know what Griffin knows and not much else, *The Sieges of the Alcazar* plays in the lines between restricted and unrestricted narration, where we see some things from an unsituated perspective not limited to any one character's knowledge.

These are not water-tight categories, but are rather ends of a continuum, and films frequently oscillate between types of narration as the story progresses. We may begin only knowing what one character knows, but have that range of narration expanded later with the introduction of a new character, for instance.

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A separate but related dimension of the film's provision of information is depth of narration, which can range from subjective to objective.

[slide] Here we say that a film engages in **subjective** narration if the type of information it presents us is related to a character's interiority or to the world seen through his or her eyes.

[slide] A film engages in **objective** narration if the information presented to us pertains to the external world and is experienced from a disembodied perspective.

Like with depth of knowledge, a film may play with its range of knowledge over the course of the film.

Narration thus poses a key question for all filmgoers – "How is it possible for us to possess the knowledge we come to possess in a narrative?"

So the question to ask yourself when thinking about narration is: how much information do I, the viewer, have at any given point and how does that information differ from that of the film's characters?