Narrative

Narrative is defined as "a chain of events in a cause-effect relationship occurring in time" (Bordwell & Thompson, Film Art, 1980).

Diegesis
The internal world created by the story that the characters themselves experience and encounter.

Story and plot

Story – all events referenced both explicitly in a narrative and inferred (including backstory as well as those projected beyond the action)

Plot – the events directly incorporated into the action of the text and the order in which they are presented

Narrative Range

Unrestricted narration – A narrative which has no limits to the information that is presented i.e. a news bulletin.

Restricted narration – only offers minimal information regarding the narrative i.e. thrillers

Narrative Depth

Subjective character identification – the viewer is given unique access to what a range of characters see and do

Objective character identification – the viewer is given unique access to a character's point of view such as seeing things from the character's mind, dreams, fantasies or memories.

Narrative Theory - Conventional narrative theory can be explored via the work of Russian Formalists from the 1920's.

Vladimir Propp's Theory of Narrative

Vladimir Propp suggested that characters took on the role of narrative 'spheres of action' or functions. From a comprehensive study of folktales Propp came up with seven different character types:

- The **hero**, usually male, is the agent who restores the narrative equilibrium often by embarking upon a quest (or search). Propp distinguishes between the victim hero, who is the centre of the villain's attentions, and the seeker hero who aids others who are the villains victims. The hero is invariably the texts central character.
- The **villain** who usually creates the narrative disruption.
- The **donor** gives the hero something, it may be an object, information or advice, which helps in resolution of the narrative.
- The **helper** aids the hero in the task of restoring equilibrium.
- The **princess** (the victim) is usually the character most threatened by the villain and has to be saved, at the climax, by the hero. The father's (who in fairy tales was often the king) role is usually to give the princess away to the hero at the narrative's conclusion. He may also despatch the hero.
- The **dispatcher** sends the hero on her or his task (who can typically be the princess father)
- The **false hero** appears to be good but is revealed, at the narrative's end, to have been bad

Characters can fulfil more than one sphere character type, for example; a princess may also be a helper.

Tzvetan Todorov's Theory of Narrative

Todorov suggested that conventional narratives are structured in five stages:

1. a state of equilibrium at the outset;
2. a disruption of the equilibrium by some action;
3. a recognition that there has been a disruption;
4. an attempt to repair the disruption;
5. a reinstatement of the equilibrium

This type of narrative structure is very familiar to us and can be applied to many 'mainstream' film narratives.

Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema by Allan Cameron

Modular Narratives "articulate a sense of time as divisible and subject to manipulation".

Cameron has identified four different types of modular narrative:

- Anachronic
- Forking Paths
- Episodic
- Split Screens

Anachronic modular narratives involve the use of flashbacks and/or flashforwards, with no clear dominance between any of the narrative threads. These narratives also often repeat scenes directly or via a different perspective. Examples include: *Pulp Fiction* and *Memento*.

Forking-path narratives juxtapose alternative versions of a story, showing the possible outcomes that might result from small changes in a single event or group of events. The forking-path narrative introduces a number of plotlines that usually contradict one another. Examples include *Groundhog Day* and *Run Lola Run*.

Episodic narratives are organised as an abstract series or narrative anthology.

Abstract series type of modular narrative is characterized by the operation of a non-narrative formal system which appears to dictate (or at least overlay) the organization of narrative elements such as a sequence of numbers or the alphabet.

Anthology consists of a series of shorter tales which are apparently disconnected but share a random similarity, such as all 'episodes' being survivors of a shipwreck.

Split screen narratives are different from the other types of modular narrative discussed here, because their modularity is articulated along spatial rather than temporal lines. These films divide the screen into two or more frames, juxtaposing events within the same visual field, in a sustained fashion. Examples include *Timecode*.