

GCSE LEVEL

FACT FILE

Moving Image Arts

Subject content link:

Film Narrative



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## Film Narrative



### Learning Outcomes

Students should be able to:

- Identify and explain the following structures of conventional narratives:
  - three act structure;
  - story/plot; and
  - linear and non-linear approaches.
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the following narrative techniques (in addition to continuity editing):
  - first person/third person narration; and
  - written exposition such as newspaper headlines and on-screen captions.
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of characterization and explain the function and purpose of different characters within a narrative (for example protagonist / antagonist).



### Course Content

#### Three Act Structure

The Three Act Structure is a storytelling model that is particularly common in mainstream cinema. In this model the film is divided into three acts. It is tempting to think of it as just a beginning, middle and end approach to storytelling but it is a little more complicated than that. Each act serves a particular purpose.

In the first act, the world of the story and its characters will be established. The first act will also be likely to end with the main characters or character facing some threat or having to answer a call to adventure.

In the second act complications will follow and this act may often end with it looking as if our main characters will never fulfill their goals.

In the third act the complications are usually resolved and the story reaches its conclusion.

So if, for example, we apply the Three Act Structure to *Toy Story* (1995), its first act sets up the world of the story, a universe where toys come to life when their owners are not present. Woody, an old-fashioned cowboy doll is the leader of the toys and, like all the other toys he lives for the attentions of his owner, a ten year old boy called Andy. At the end of the first act a new toy arrives into this world, a space ranger themed action figure called Buzz Lightyear. Woody takes an instant dislike to Buzz.

In the second act Woody's hostility to Buzz grows. We also learn that Buzz is suffering from the delusion that he really is a space hero and not a toy. When Woody accidentally pushes Buzz out of a window the other toys think that he has intentionally killed him. Woody is banished by the others and both he and Buzz find themselves captured by Sid, a cruel child who loves to destroy toys.

In the third act Woody and Buzz are trapped in Sid's house and are facing certain doom. Buzz, finally accepting that he really is a toy, is depressed by his plight but Woody helps to reignite Buzz's heroic streak and together the two work together to escape Sid's clutches and return to Andy.

#### Story/Plot

The word story refers to any series of related events, real or imaginary, which when presented together in sequence form a complete tale.

The term plot refers to the sequence of events that make up the story. Any event which changes the course of the story is referred to as a plot point. So, for example, in the *Toy Story* example, the first major plot point is the arrival of Buzz Lightyear. Without Buzz's arrival the events of the story simply would not unfold. Without the arrival of Buzz, Woody would have no new change to react against.

#### Linear and Non-Linear Approaches

Most stories and most films use straightforward linear narratives. When we say that something is linear we mean that it is arranged in a straight line and the same is true of linear narratives. In linear storytelling the events of the story

are presented in the order in which they occurred.

In non-linear storytelling the story may begin with a scene which occurs at a later point in the narrative before taking us back to the events leading up to that moment. The film *Batman Begins* (2005) uses a non-linear narrative. It begins with its main character Bruce Wayne, already as an adult before revealing, in flashback, the tragic childhood events which led him into a life of crime-fighting.

## First Person and Third Person Narration

In cinema it is usually best to tell stories visually and to use voice-over narration sparingly. Sometimes, however, voice-over narrations are a useful tool for introducing us to a world and its characters. There are two types of narration. The most common is the First Person narration. In this type of narration, the voice-over is provided by the film's central character. So, for example, in *How To Train Your Dragon* (2010) the story is told to us directly by the film's hero, a young Viking boy called Hiccup. Hiccup's voice-over provides us with information about the world of the film and allows us to better know him as a character.

The alternative to First Person Narration is Third Person Narration. In that type of narration the voice-over is provided by an unseen presence who has an all-knowing, God-like understanding of the world and characters he or she is telling us about. A Third Person Narrator is not a character in the world of the film. The film *Barry Lyndon* (1975), for example, features an unseen Third Person Narrator who serves as a tour guide to the world of that story.

## Written Exposition

Exposition is a storytelling tool that is used to give information to the audience, Exposition may come in the form of one character telling another character about some new development or piece of news. Sometimes exposition

can be conveyed completely visually and may use written text in some cases. Written text may take the form of a simple caption telling us the name of a new location. In other examples, the written exposition might be presented within the world of the story. Newspaper headlines, for example, can be used to tell us of new story developments. So, for example, in *The Incredibles* (2004), close-ups of newspaper headlines are used to tell us about a new law which outlaws superheroes.

Written exposition can also be worked into the environment of a story. In the opening scene of *Super 8* (2011) the sight of somber looking factory workers resetting the "Days Without Injury" sign lets us know that there has been a tragic accident in that workplace.

## Characterisation & Character Functions

Characterisation is the way in which the writer of a fictional character and/or the actor playing the character are able to show us what the character is like. A character's manner of speaking, the way they dress and how they react to the events around them are all ways in which characterisation can be expressed.

Different versions of a character may use different characterisations. So, for example, in film and TV, Batman has been played as everything from a straight-faced buffoon to a grim humourless obsessive.

Most film narratives will be dominated by the two basic character types. The Protagonist is the central figure in the story. The Antagonist is the protagonist's opposite. So, for example, in the Harry Potter film series Harry is our protagonist. His antagonist is Voldemort.

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