

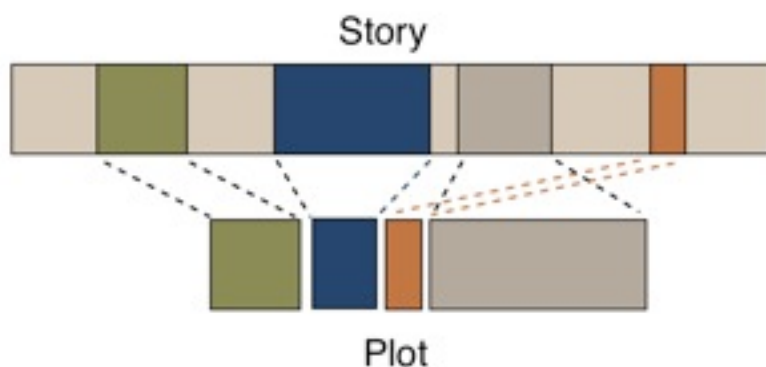
Narrative theory

Lecture notes for MEVIT 1110 Audiovisual esthetics

Story and plot

We discern between *story*, (also known as *fabula*), which is the "what" of the narrative, and plot (a.k.a. *syuzhet*, *discourse* or *narrative*) being the "how" of the narrative. Plot is what you see on the screen, story is what you create in your head, "what really happened".

The plot is rarely strictly chronological. If the plot presents something that happened earlier in the story, it is called a *flashback*. If the plot brings an early view of something that happened later in the story's chronology, it is called a *flashforward*. When something is skipped in the plot it is called an *ellipsis*. If something takes longer in plot than in story (slow motion film, for example), it is called a *stretch*.



Causality

In a narrative, things happen for a reason. Something happens that starts the chain of events, and because of that, something else happens, and because of that, something else, and so on, until everything is settled. This is what Aristotle meant by his statement that a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.¹

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1.vii

In the classical Hollywood films, there are usually *two* causal chains, or what is known as *two plotlines*, one material and one romantic. The protagonist (the leading role, our "hero") wants to achieve something (get free, get revenge, get the job, win the contest), and to get the girl.

In the beginning, the protagonist has many choices, but as the story progresses, the protagonist has fewer and fewer options, until the story reaches its *climax*, where only one or two options are left.

Narratives start from conflicts

Tzvetan Todorov's general model of narrative:

"If we analyze 'The Swan-Geese' this way, we shall discover that the tale includes five obligatory elements:

- (1) the opening situation of equilibrium;
- (2) the degradation of the situation through the kidnapping of the boy;
- (3) the state of disequilibrium observed by the little girl;
- (4) the search for and recovery of the boy;
- (5) the reestablishment of the initial equilibrium—the return home."²

Structural analysis of narrative (or why a story can be told shorter)

Why is it, that you can tell a friend the story of a film in a few minutes, when the actual film ran for two hours? When re-telling, you are in fact constructing a new plot, but only relating key events, skipping many other events. Roland Barthes said that a story consists of *functions* (what happens, the chains of events. *Indices* are descriptions of the storyworld (the *diegesis*).³ When retelling, you skip the *catalysers* and most of the *indices*.

² Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Two Principles of Narrative". 1971. *Genres In Discourse*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge U P, 1990. 29. Print.

³ Barthes, Roland. "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative". 1966. *Image Music Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. 79–124. Print.

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| <i>Functions</i> | | <i>Indices</i> | |
| what happens, the chains of events <i>distributive</i> , they fill the story out in time | | descriptions of the storyworld <i>integrative</i> , they make the story coherent | |
| <i>Cardinal functions</i> | <i>Catalysers</i> | <i>Indices proper</i> | <i>Informants</i> |
| the events with important consequences for the story. Causal functions. | "Filler" events that do not have consequences for later actions. | information about characters | information locating the story in time and place |

While only the cardinal functions are necessary to recognise the story, much (if not most) of the pleasure we get from the story is in the indices.