



Key Concept: **Narrative**

Higher Media: Support Notes

Narrative

“For anyone who wants to understand the art of storytelling, this film [*The Hunt for Red October*] should suffice; one wonders why universities persist in teaching narrative principles on the basis of Propp, Greimas or other such punishing curricula, instead of investing in a projection room. Premise, plot, protagonists, adventures, quest, heroes and other stimulants: all you need is Sean Connery in the uniform of a Russian submarine officer and a few well-placed aircraft carriers.”

— **Muriel Barbery, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog***

“Escapism isn't good or bad of itself. What is important is what you are escaping from and where you are escaping to. I write from experience, since in my case I escaped to the idea that books could be really enjoyable, an aspect of reading that teachers had not hitherto suggested.”

— **Terry Pratchett, *A Slip of the Keyboard: Collected Non-Fiction***

“Flowery prose. Verbosity. Some folks think they're Neil Gaiman, and have ambitions of their scripts being reprinted for their adoring fans to pore over, when in reality, scripts are working documents designed to provide the narrative framework for their collaborators to decorate and embellish with imagery.”

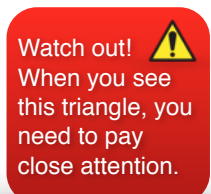
— **Brian Michael Bendis, *Words for Pictures: The Art and Business of Writing Comics and Graphic Novels***

“[...] the film opens with the woman as object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film. She is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualised. But as the narrative progresses she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participating in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too.”

— **Laura Mulvey, *Visual And Other Pleasures***

“This is called the theory of narrative causality and it means that a story, once started, takes a shape. It picks up all the vibrations of all the other workings of that story that have ever been. This is why history keeps on repeating all the time.”

— **Terry Pratchett, *The Last Continent***



*“Narrative: The way in which a story is told in both **fictional** and **non-fictional** media texts.”*

From the moment we are born we will encounter narratives... stories that **delight**, or **frighten**, or **teach** us, are as much a part of our experience of growing up as the food and clothing and love we receive from our parents. We are told stories to help us make sense of the world, and in listening to them, we are comforted by their easy familiarity and predictable outcomes. As we grow older, we begin to realise there are *stories* in the ‘news’... though these are not always as predictable and comforting. When things become too much, however, we can always escape to the cinema. Sitting in the dark, our faces reflecting the light from innumerable movies as they **delight**, or **frighten**, or **teach** us. We are drawn to narratives as they help us to make sense of our own lives by vicariously seeing the world through the eyes of others. It is a truly magical experience...



What story could we construct from this image?

How would we answer these questions:

- Who is the girl?
- What are the people in the background doing?
- What is the relationship between the three?
- Where is this?
- When is this?
- Who is the girl smiling at?

Narrative: An Overview

There are specific areas of narrative that we are interested in when studying the media, and especially when studying film in particular. In no particular order, these are:



- Story
- Plot
- Narrative Structures
- Resolution and moral of story
- Conventions used to tell the story
- Codes that affect the narrative
- Audience engagement/hooks
- Narrative theories

Story vs Plot

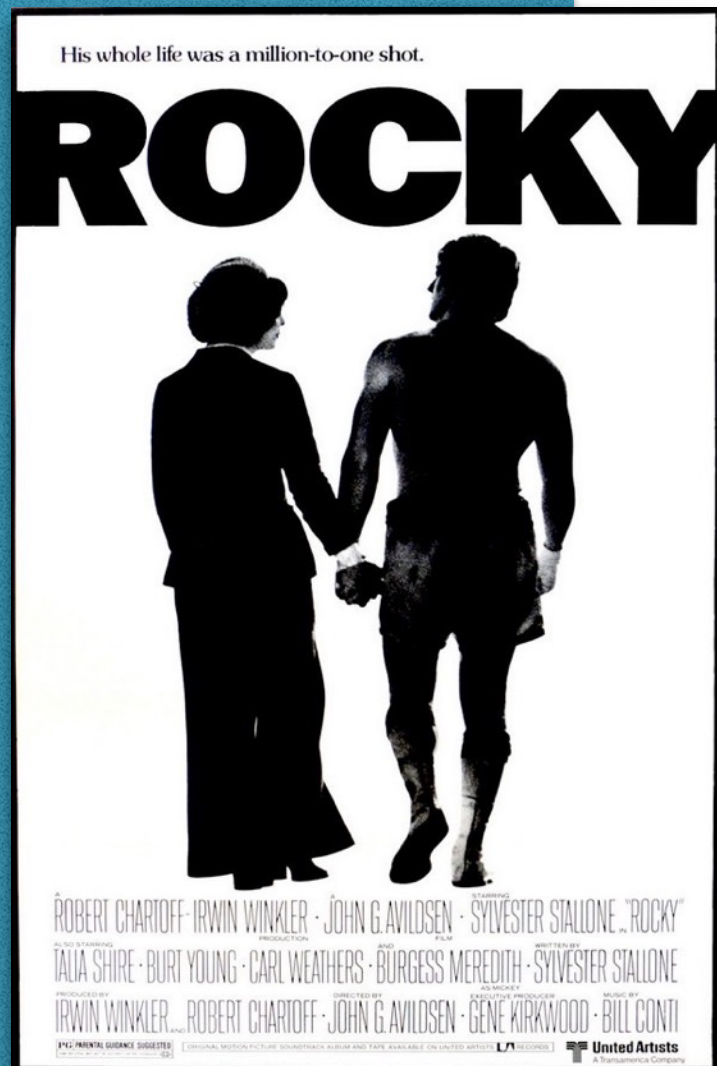


Story	Plot
The actual events that happen, in the order they appear in the text (<i>i.e. the audience's reconstruction of events</i>).	The way the creator of the text arranges the story (<i>e.g. could use flashback to tell the story</i>).
Plot is the sequence of events that happen within a story.	
Story is what it is about .	Plot is what happens .

This is an essential difference to remember.

Plot: The champ, Apollo Creed, needs a new opponent when his scheduled opponent pulls out due to injury. In a decision of promotional genius, Creed gives a title shot to down-on-his-luck journeyman Rocky Balboa on the country's 200th anniversary. Rocky goes on to shock the world by going the distance with Creed in a competitive fight.

Story: Rocky, the underdog, overcomes great odds to find love and self-worth in going the distance with the champ.



PLOT:

Michael Corleone, the son of Mafia kingpin Don Vito Corleone, returns home from the war. In a meeting with other mob bosses, Don Corleone refuses to get into the heroin business. Someone attempts to murder Don Corleone who is shot several times in the attempt. Don Corleone's top man, Tom Hagen, is abducted and an ultimatum is issued to Sonny, the oldest Corleone son. Sonny retaliates by killing the son of another mafia boss.

Michael, the lone Corleone son who stayed away from the family business, volunteers to kill a mob boss and a corrupt cop to avenge his father and succeeds in doing so. Michael is sent to Sicily for his protection and Don Corleone is distraught to learn that Michael has taken up the family business. Sonny is gunned down at a toll booth. Don Corleone meets with the mob bosses and agrees to back the drug trade in an effort to end the mob war.

Michael returns from Sicily and takes over the family business. He promises to his girlfriend Kay that he will legitimize the family business within five years. Michael attempts to get into the casino business and is forced to resort to tactics even more brutal than his father's to get his way. He also confronts his older brother Fredo, who was passed over because of his weakness, and warns him to never again take sides with anyone against the family.

Vito passes away from a heart attack. Michael arranges for the murder of the heads of the Five Families. This completes Michael's rise to power as the new "Godfather" and finishes his revenge against those who attacked his family.

STORY:

The movie is about the corruption of Michael Corleone as he takes over the family business replacing his father after his death.


The Godfather®



NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

Narrative plays an important part of our lives. It acts as an **organising principle** that allows us to make sense of the world, and in doing so, it also has the potential to **shape and influence our behaviour** (*by encouraging us to take sides — think of a time when you have been happy to see the hero 'win' at the end of a film*)

Narrative allows people within media to shape and organise sometimes random and incoherent events into a **logical form that the audience can understand**

 There are **seven** specific **narrative structures** that we need to consider when discussing film.

Classic Hollywood Narrative (Todorov)

- Events occur in the order they happen
- There is a cause and effect relationship - everything happens for a reason
- Plot begins with normality being shown. Normality is then disrupted and the characters need to overcome this disruption.
- A happy ending where all problems are resolved.
- eg: **The Untouchables** (dir. Brian de Palma, USA, 1987)



Chronological / linear (events unfold in order)

- Events are shown chronologically, can be used to suggest 'real-time' narrative.
- eg: **Cloverfield** (dir. Matt Reeves, USA, 2008)

Non-chronological / non-linear (flashback/forward/dream)

- Events are not shown chronologically, but the text jumps back and/or forward in time to shown events from the past and/or future.
- eg: **Memento** (dir. Christopher Nolan, USA, 2000)

Multiple story-lines / Interwoven story-lines (Propp)

- Various different plots are happening at the same time, with the text jumping between these plots.
- Often, these plots are interwoven – they relate to each other.
- eg. **Crash** (dir. Paul Haggis, USA, 2004)

Fragmentation / Fragmented (jigsaw)

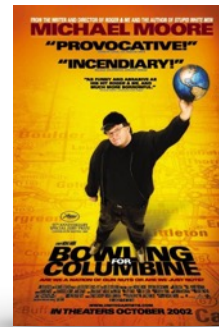
- A narrative that is mixed up and not in any sensible order. It requires the reader to construct order/meaning
- eg: **Memento** (dir. Christopher Nolan, USA, 2000)

Episodic story-lines (series)

- ▶ Short, self-contained plots within something larger. Situation comedies and soaps have episodic narratives.
- ▶ eg. **Lord of the Rings** (dir. Peter Jackson, USA/NZ, 2001/2002/2003)

Investigation (documentaries)

- ▶ Contains interviews and observations, concluding with a summary of findings/opinions.
- ▶ eg. **Bowling for Columbine** (dir. Michael Moore, USA, 2002)



Case Study: BRAVEHEART

What follows is a look at **some** of the **narrative structures** used in **Braveheart** (dir. Mel Gibson, USA, 1995)

- The film is **not** historically accurate. The relationship with the princess did not happen; the battle at Stirling centred on a bridge; and Wallace backed the Baliols, not the Bruces.

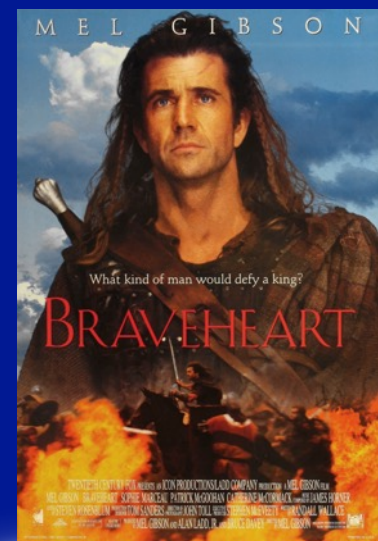
- Although historically inaccurate it does present an **interesting narrative**. The strands of the narrative can be teased out.

- **Firstly** it tells the life of **Wallace** from childhood to death. It presents his political shaping, his actions, and his private life.
- **Secondly** it presents Edward's drive to conquer Scotland from the re-introduction of *prima nocta* until his death.
- **Thirdly** it follows the manoeuvrings of the Bruce family for the throne until the death of Robert the Bruce's father. The three deaths occur at the end of the film, and the preceding two hours and forty minutes tell the intertwining story which reaches this simultaneous conclusion. As with any text of multiple narratives each plot has to be laid, then developed and intertwined until the **resolution**.

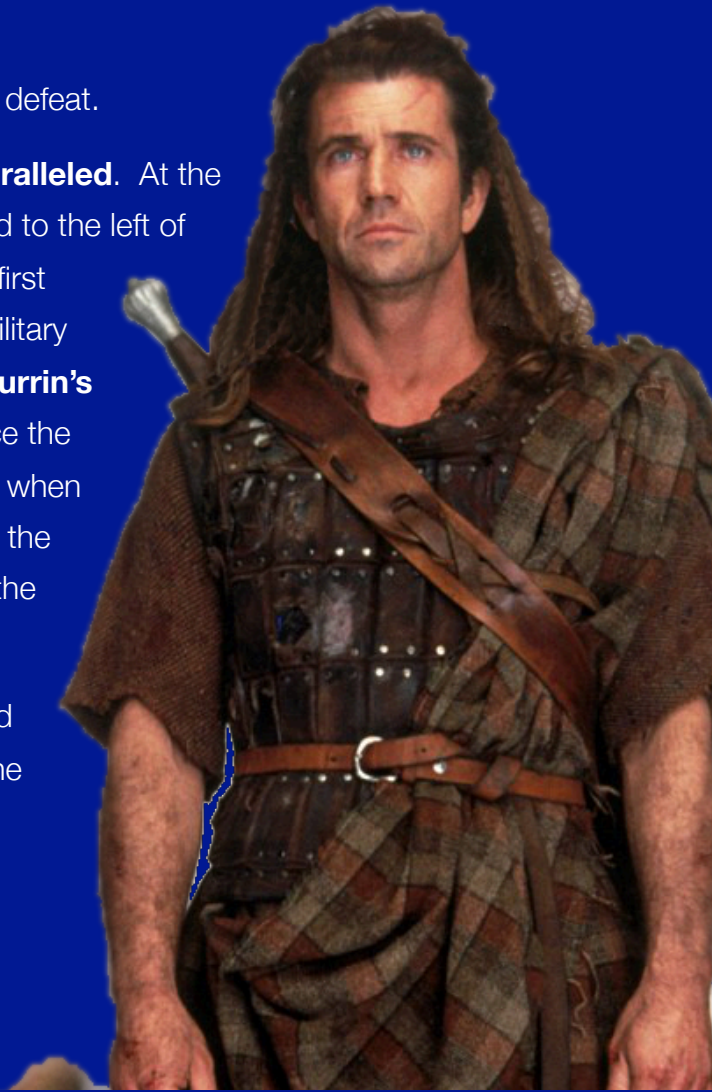


Braveheart won 5 Oscars at the 68th Academy Awards.

- Best Picture
- Best Director
- Best Sound Editing
- Best Makeup
- Best Cinematography



- The narrative is built on a series of **parallels**, which allows for an exploration of *the central issues* of the text. As well as the three deaths at the end, there are three young men, all with fathers, who are held as foils against each other. Wallace senior is concerned about his son, and will not permit him to accompany him on what becomes his fatal journey. The other two fathers, Edward of England and Bruce senior totally disregard the needs and wishes of their sons in their obsessive desire for power.
- The three mothers are also missing. Their absence allows space for the other females in Wallace's life to emerge. Murrin and the Princess could not be further apart socially, yet they are linked within the text when Wallace tells the Princess that he sees Murrin's beauty in her. Ultimately these women merge to develop the figure of Wallace. The **narrative parallels** do not end there. There are three weddings, each one very different from its counterparts, and consequently **ideologically** very different.
- Murrin's funeral is very similar to that of Wallace's father, and this **semi-repeating of the narrative** reinforces the devotion of Wallace to these two figures.
- The battles also are **balanced**, the victory by the defeat.
- **Many of the actual camera shots are also paralleled.** At the end of Murrin's death scene, Wallace is positioned to the left of the screen, and this is *echoed* after Stirling. The first marks his becoming an outlaw, the second his military power. The music also helps to tell the story. '**Murrin's Theme**' is first introduced when she gives Wallace the thistle at his father's funeral. It is picked up again when he is reunited with her, and again when he is with the Princess. The music is **used** to fuse Murrin and the Princess into one.
- There are other examples of parallels. Fire is used repeatedly to justify Wallace, from the sword scene early on to riding through fire after Falkirk.



- It is important to understand the following:
 - the use of parallels in the narrative to balance and contrast characters;
 - the strands of the plot being separately built, but moving to a unified conclusion;
 - the use of camera work and music to drive the plot.

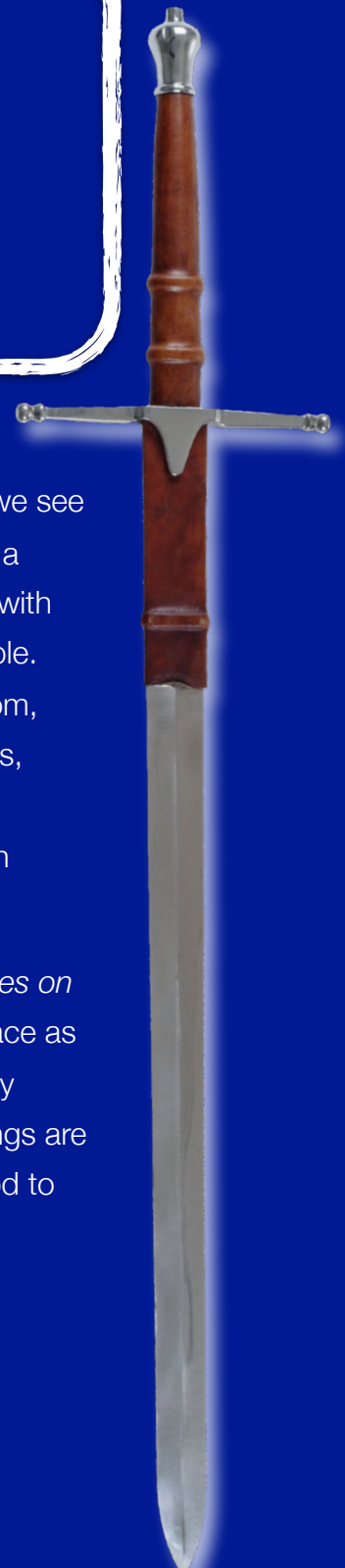


Understanding of the narrative allows you to explore the central concerns of the text which are in summary:

- the paternal / filial relationship;
- the nature of freedom;
- the role of monarchy;
- where power ultimately lies;
- nationhood.

The construction of Wallace as the **hero**, through all the devices employed, ensure that he carries the **ideology** of the text. Because we see him as a whole, rounded figure, and we see him suffering so badly as a child, *we are positioned as sympathetic to him*. Thus his relationship with his father is held up as ideal, his desire for children natural and desirable. His explanation that a home and children are worthless without freedom, and that freedom as self-determination, not crumbs from the overlords, becomes paramount. Kings who ride roughshod over people are the **villains** and, although Wallace is executed, he has won the moral high ground.

Furthermore his message continues in the final scene when *Bruce takes on his role*. This scene scotches any notion that the film celebrates Wallace as a revolutionary. Wallace says he will follow Bruce, and Bruce ultimately leads the Scots to freedom. **The final message** of the film is that kings are necessary, and indeed good when they allow their sense of nationhood to override their class interests. Bruce will finish what Wallace began.



Resolution and Morals

When we reach the end of a narrative, there are a number of questions we should ask of the text. These are about the resolution of the narrative, and the moral message of the narrative.



Resolution:

The outcome of the narrative.

- ▶ What happens at the end? How does the text finish?
- ▶ How does the resolution relate to the text's **representations**, **ideologies** and **myths**?

Moral of the story:

- ▶ What was the point of the narrative?
- ▶ What is the text saying about people, society and the world?

TASK: Think of a film or other media text you have viewed recently and apply these questions to it. For example:

Resolution:

- ▶ Does the **villain** win or lose?
- ▶ Does the **hero** 'get' the love interest?
- ▶ Does the resolution resolve a problem?
- ▶ Is it a 'satisfying'/appropriate resolution with regards the narrative of the text?

Moral of the story:

- ▶ Was the **narrative** making a specific point about *behaviour/attitudes/morality/or something else*?
- ▶ Was the **message** about *individual or collective* behaviour?
- ▶ Does the **resolution** of the **narrative** send out a particular message such as: It is okay to kill someone if they are 'bad' (for example **Con Air**, or that even a troubled marriage can be saved if the hero is violent enough (as in **Die Hard**)?

Conventions And Codes



CONVENTIONS is the name we give to those aspects of a media text that we are used to seeing in a particular medium or genre. They are the *familiar and predictable forms* and **techniques** used by the media to communicate certain ideas or to convey a desired impression.

CODES are the signs that are used to create meaning and can be subdivided into technical and symbolic codes. (*Technical codes include camera angles, sound, and lighting. Symbolic codes include the language, dress, and actions of characters. You may wish to check your notes on media language for a reminder on this*).



Jeremy Kyle Show: Conventions And Codes

Which conventions (voice-over, point-of view, format, colour etc.) of the genre of the text are used to help in telling the story?

This relates to **categories** (genre/conventions) and **language** (codes - systems of signs which can be analysed in terms of denotation and connotation. These may be technically and/or culturally produced. For example, a high angle camera shot of a human figure suggests the vulnerability of that person

Use of captions on screen to summarise story

Recap on "before the break"

Guests to explain/tell the story – with differing perspectives

Host used to oversee events

Close-ups – show emotion and feelings

Audience reactions to events – has an effect on the portrayal of events

Anything else?