MODULE 2: NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND MOTIFS

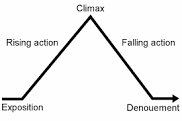
**THE CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD NARRATIVE FORM OF FILMMAKING**

We understand that most films have only 90-120 minutes to tell a story that takes place over an often much longer period of time; how a film successfully does this involves the combination of a variety of techniques and conventions that help compress time, but it all begins with a well-constructed story that contains characters involved in situations that audiences want to relate to.

Learning how to identify the **structure** of a film is different from just being able to recount what happens in the story, and that is what you will be asked to do this in the first essay for this class, on the famous film *Casablanca.*

Most films have a **beginning, middle, and an end** --- or often what we can also term the **set-up, conflict, and resolution of that conflict**. Mostly the stories also rely on a cause and effect pattern to move the action along that will seem logical to the viewers. These films contain engaging clues that let you anticipate what we be happening next.

A German Playwright named Gustav Freytag came up with **‘Freytag’s Pyramid’** that went a bit further and outlined a five part dramatic structure: The Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution. After an introduction, the story builds to the scene of greatest importance to the protagonist, where his or her life is either going to change for the better or the worse. This story plays out in the latter part of the film, eventually coming to the conclusion or resolution.



In **Classic Hollywood Narrative** filmmaking, the story is almost always told in **chronologica**l order. One exception to this rule is the inclusion of **flashbacks**, which can be used to give clarity to the motivations of the actions of the main characters in the present situation.

The focus of these films is primarily on the main characters; the editing of the film is seamless, in the sense that the film intentionally does not try to call attention to anything that would break the illusion that the audience is seeing something “real”.

This style of filmmaking ruled during the era when Studio Production dominated Hollywood, from the 1920’s to the 1960’s; the simplicity of this style made it easier for films to be made much like cars on an assembly line.

Successful films engage the audience in different ways. Sometimes the audience only knows what the characters know; sometimes the audience knows more.

**Unrestricted** **narration** is when the viewer knows more than the characters. A great example of this is “The French Connection”, where the viewer knows more about the heroin dealers than the cops played by Gene Hackman and Roy Scheider.



**Restricted narration** is when the viewer's understanding is limited to what characters know. A good example of this is “Star Wars”; the viewer only learns that Luke’s father is Darth Vader when Luke himself discovers this truth.



**PARALLEL STORY LINES AND HOW THIS DIFFERS FROM CROSS CUTTING**

There’s a great scene in the famous film *High Noon* where the Sheriff is writing out his last will and testament in his office while the bad guys coming for him are getting off at the train station. This is a classic example of **cross cutting** – the two events are happening **simultaneously**, but just in **different places**, but the audience has been given an absolutely clear understanding of the connection between the two. This technique goes back to the earliest days of filmmaking and *Life of an American Fireman,* when this silent film cut back and forth between a fire in an apartment building, and the fire station which gets the call, and has the firemen respond.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHQeYSQhjfw>

Annotated version of *Life of an American Fireman*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOuvcMkaXUU>

Clock Scene from *High Noon*

Cross Cutting is a structural device intended to create tension. Will Sheriff Kane get his will written out before Frank Miller and his Gang can walk from the train station to the town? Will the woman in the apartment survive until she can be rescued by the firemen?



**Parallel story lines** are different, because the audience does not know the connection between what is happening in the different scenes. A great example of this is in *The French Connection.* The film starts off in Marseilles in Southern France; an undercover detective is following a man near the waterfront. Later this detective is gunned down in front of his apartment.

The film then cuts to a drug bust in Brooklyn, New York. Two undercover cops, one dressed as Santa Claus, chase down a drug dealer and beat him up to try and get some information out of him. We have absolutely no idea of how these scenes are connected until more than half way through the film. The film keeps cutting back and forth between these different stories, which is why we call it a parallel story line. It is also part of the construction of the narrative, and the audience assumes that the connection will eventually be explained.

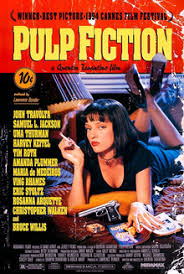


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dzYV_hXdU4>

New York Times reviewer looks at *The French Connection* forty years later

**NON-LINEAR FILMMAKING:**

For artistic reasons, some very successful directors have chosen to construct non-linear story lines for their films, including Orson Welles, Quentin Tarantino, and Christopher Nolan. Non-linear means ***not***in chronological order. It frankly can be very tricky in these films to keep the audience from being confused, but there are also many film enthusiasts that love films to challenge them in this way.

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*Pulp Fiction,* Tarantino’s 1994 film, has three different stories that are told completely out of sequence. We start off at a scene in a diner where this strange couple is deciding to rob the place. We then cut to an earlier scene where two of the other diner patrons pay a visit to some low level drug dealers who have ripped off their crime boss, and end up whacking these unwary dealers. Another story line involves an aging boxer who ticked off this same crime boss by not taking a dive in a big fight. At the end of the film, we are again back at the original diner scene, but this time seeing it from an entirely different point of view. It’s hard to describe how all of this works so well, but it does, and part of the appeal of this film is this unique story structure. Other famous non-linear films include *Citizen Kane, Memento, and Kill Bill: Parts I and II.*

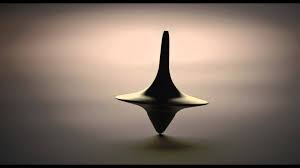
**MOTIFS** are any significant elements repeated in a film. These are usually repeated in films for different reasons. The song “As Time Goes By” is heard many, many times in “Casablanca” and is used nostalgically, referentially, bitterly, sarcastically, and heroically in the end.

Many students confuse a motif with a theme --- they are *not* the same thing.

The sled “Rosebud” in *Citizen Kane* is a great example of a motif. It’s just a sled, but it represents the lost childhood of Charles Foster Kane. It is the word he mutters as he dies, that is not understood by those around him, and thus forms a major plot device of the film as various people investigate what it means. When Kane was 7, gold was discovered on his Mother’s land in Colorado, and she used this new wealth to send the young boy to private schools back east, and even turned over guardianship of the boy to a trustee at a bank. The secret is revealed at the end of the film, as workers go through acres of Kane’s material possessions, and discard the ones that they think are worthless.



A more recent classic example of a motif is the “totem” in *Inception.* This short clip from the film even explains the meaning:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKvnRSKUgC4> The Totem Scene

Some other great examples of motifs include the plane to Lisbon in *Casablanca* and the fields of lavender flowers in *The Color Purple.* The plane represents freedom and life in a new world to all of the many people trying to escape Casablanca during World War II. *Casablanca* is full of motifs, including the Letters of Transit, Rick’s Café, Sam’s piano, the Search Light, the fly swatter, and even the choices of color for the clothing worn by the main characters. Give this some thought as you watch the film. What do you think are the larger meanings of these motifs?



Please read the blog piece on *Casablanca.* Notice that even the main characters are also living, breathing motifs. Rick represents the USA, given his initial neutrality. But like the USA, he is forced to make a choice about which side to be on during World War II. What countries do characters like Louis, Major Strasser, and Victor Lund represent? What aspects of their characters are representative of those countries?

<https://filmhistoryandculture.wordpress.com/2011/12/31/casablanca-rick-blaine-the-personification-of-isolationism/>



The color purple represents both the freedom and joy Celie experiences at the end of that film, but it also had represented the color of the bruises she received from her brutal husband towards the beginning of the film. So it represents both pain and joy, and that is the dual meaning of the title.

Motifs can also be repeated musical songs or phrases, or repeated lines of dialogue – again, a motif is the **repetition** of a significant element of a film, like an object, a line of dialogue, or a musical phrase or song.



Another example of a motif is the use of the song “As Time Goes By” in *Casablanca.* It is used in at least four different places in the film, with different meanings, and the “tone” of how the music is played varies according to whether the mood is carefree and romantic, or serious and dramatic. The lyrics are also significant in terms of the plot of the film.

*You must remember this   
A kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh.   
The fundamental things apply   
As time goes by.*

*And when two lovers woo   
They still say, "I love you."   
On that you can rely   
No matter what the future brings   
As time goes by.*

*Moonlight and love songs   
Never out of date.   
Hearts full of passion   
Jealousy and hate.   
Woman needs man   
And man must have his mate   
That no one can deny.*

*It's still the same old story   
A fight for love and glory   
A case of do or die.   
The world will always welcome lovers   
As time goes by.*

*Oh yes, the world will always welcome lovers   
As time goes by*.

© 1931 Warner Bros. Music Corporation, ASCAP

A great example of a repeated musical phrase as a motif is the one from *Jaws* that all of you are undoubtedly familiar with:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rW23RsUTb2Y>

The Shark Attacks the Little Boy from *Jaws* (notice the music at about 1:29 into this clip)



**HOW CLOSELY YOU IDENTIFY WITH THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN A FILM**

Another influencing factor is how well you relate to a film is how closely you may identify with one of the main characters. The converse is also true – if you hate all of the characters in a film, chances are you are not going to have a high overall opinion of the film itself.

Think about some screen characters you have particularly identified with. What do you think they have in common? Did they face similar obstacles, and overcome them? Did they persevere, and win the love of their romantic interests? Are they some kind of super hero, with powers that you wish that you have?

This even extends to animated characters. Many of us lobbied Disney for years to create female characters who were brave, strong, and independent, as opposed to always being just “pretty” and extremely dependent on and deferential to the Princes and other male characters in their films. We wanted these as role models for our daughters, in a society that has equal numbers of men and women in the workplace.

A particular film of Disney’s that inspired a lot of public backlash was *The Little Mermaid.*  Ariel (the mermaid) falls in love with the human Prince Eric; she makes an agreement with the evil (and obese) Sea Witch named Ursula to give up her voice (!) in exchange for a 3 day period where she will get human legs. Eric has to kiss her within the 3 days for them to be together. All of this played into stereotypes of older women getting fat, ugly, and conniving – and of young women waiting for nothing more than the kiss from Prince Charming, supporting every horrible thing Mother’s ever said to their daughters about just “letting the boy talk about himself, and he will think you are terrific.” This was *not* the message many of us wanted teenage girls to be hearing.



Disney did finally respond – and thus we eventually got films like *Brave, The Princess and the Frog, Mulan, Pocahontas,* and *Frozen.* We got on screen heroines who were strong and independent, role models that our daughters would identify with.

Here are some examples of some great screen characters, in case you are having trouble thinking of any on your own: See how many you can immediately associate with their famous films, and you can also use this as a list you can choose from for this week’s discussion question. Just as one example, I’ve had quite a few African American women students over the years who have identified with the Monica Wright character from *Love and Basketball.*  She and her boyfriend are both great athletes; this question always seems to come up around whose career is the priority, and how does this affect the relationship? This was exactly the same theme, by the way, in *La La Land.*  Sebastian’s inability to ever make her career needs important enough to alter his plans ultimately sinks their relationship.

This week’s discussion question asks you to identify an on screen character that you particularly identified with, and to tell us why.

Here’s the list of just some of the great screen characters just in case you need some inspiration, but feel free to use any character in the discussion.

Rick Blaine, Norman Bates, Terry Molloy, James Bond, Neo, Morpheus, Mookie, Sal, Lester Burnham, Lola, Popeye Doyle, Indiana Jones, Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Princess Leia, Obiwan Kenobe, Axl Foley, Celie, Forrest Gump, Marty McFly, Jack Dawson, Rose Dewitt Bukater, Vito Corleone, Michael Corleone, Sarah Connor, Lt. Dunbar, Hannibal Lecter, Clarice Starling, Atticus Finch, Norma Rae, Red Redding, Tre Styles, Monica Wright, Quincy McCall, Katniss, Peeta, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn, Chiron, Sebastian, and Mia.