AS Media Studies;
Narrative Theory

Once upon a time…
Story? Narrative? Plot?

- What is narrative?
- While the term ‘narrative’ certainly is not used as commonly as ‘story’, most people know that it refers, in some way, to stories; in fact stories are endemic to our lives.
Where do we see/hear stories on a day to day basis?

- TV Programmes
- Novels or short stories
- Films
- Advertisements
- News in papers or on TV and radio
- Via the internet
- Through talk, ‘gossip’ and chat.
What is narrative then?

• Narrative has probably existed as long as human beings; it is likely that the stone age artists who drew 18,000 year old cave paintings in the Ardeche, in France, expected narratives to be woven around their images.

• Because narrative seems to be such a truly universal aspect of the human race, it is impossible to completely discuss relevance to our existence.

• In media studies, we need to have a good working knowledge of narrative theories and debates.

• Narrative is the way a story is told.
‘Narrative’ is changing

- What we understand by narrative is going through a process of transition as textual formats and audience responses change.
- Many texts now include audience involvement in the narrative – in computer games the player takes charge and makes decisions about where the narrative will progress. In sports programmes on TV, the viewer can select the desired narrative by using interactive features such as the ‘red button’
Once upon a time...

- Many of us experience our first story at a very young age, possibly beginning with the immortal phrase of countless fairy tales, ‘Once upon a time...’
- What does this phrase really mean to us?
- “Once” =
  - “Once” invites us into the narrative world which is set in the past; indeed, most narratives are recounted in the past tense.
- “upon a time” =
  - Situates us in a world we know is different to our own, in a time that is not now.
Once upon a time…

• Write down quickly what story you expect to happen after the line below.
• ‘It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.’
Openings

- Openings are important. They are usually intended to grab and hold the attention of the receiver of the text. People will walk out of the cinema, turn over the TV station and abandon a novel if it doesn’t capture the attention immediately.
- The extract is from George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four*. What makes this sentence intriguing is that the clocks strike ‘thirteen’. This immediately sets up a puzzle or an ENIGMA CODE as Barthes would call it.
- We would probably expect a science fiction style narrative (the novel was written in 1949 and is an alarming vision of a future time and place where the world has different rules.)
Task

- Storyboard a sequence of 6-8 shots you would use to make a short film of your day so far.
Task

• Look at your storyboard and consider:
• What you have selected and why
• What you have omitted
• Whether your ‘story’ is linear or moves about in time
• What camera shots you have used and why

• When trying to understand how narratives are ‘told’ or ‘shown’ to an audience, it is essential to consider what is included and what is omitted.
Narrative in Non-Fiction Texts

- Non-fictional texts also have a narrative structure:
- News programme – constructed to a clear and recognisable format starting with the headlines and ending with the weather
- Newspaper – audiences know what to expect in each section of the text and on the front and back pages
Openings

• In media studies, the opening of any film/TV show has to orientate the audience quickly, giving them unambiguous signs about such things as:
• Who is the hero and the villain (using realistic or believable characters or ‘types’ of characters)
• A recognisable setting
• An understandable style
• A conventional narrative structure which includes cause-effect motivation.

These elements are usually determined by the text’s genre.
Naom Chomsky

- Narrative is a fundamental aspect of human existence – we need stories with recognisable structures to make sense of and describe human life.
Claude Levi-Strauss

- Maintained that narratives are the surface expression of deep seated myths.
Roland Barthes

- A French writer who has influenced the study of the ways in which meanings are produced by texts through signs and code systems (semiotics).
- Through an understanding of semiotics, we are equipped with the specific language to allow a detailed study of all texts.
Vladimir Propp

- Studied folk tales and proposed that it is possible to identify 8 character roles and 31 narrative functions.
Propp’s Character Types:

- Hero – seeks something
- Villain – opposes the hero
- Donor – helps the hero, often by providing a magical object
- Dispatcher – sends the hero on his way
- False hero – falsely assumes the role of the hero
- Helper – gives support or help to the hero
- Princess – the reward for the hero
- Princess’ father

- Sometimes the princess’ father can also be the villain or donor
- This model recognises that characters drive the narrative
Tzvetan Todorov

- He suggests 2 narrative structures can be found in texts: linear and circular.
- He stated that narratives are led by events in a cause and effect format:

  The narrative starts with an equilibrium

  An action / character disrupts the equilibrium

  A quest to restore the equilibrium ensues

  The narrative moves to a confrontation / climax

  Resolution / equilibrium is restored
Tzvetan Todorov

- He suggested that the primary function of the narrative was to solve a problem and that the characters pass through a series of stages of a linear narrative where events follow a chronological order.

- He maintains that within classical narrative a fictional world has a state of *equilibrium* – an ogre living in a swamp, a hobbit living in the Shire.

- A disruption of the equilibrium by some action causes a state of *disequilibrium* – Lord Farquaad rounding up the fairy tale creatures, ogre leaving swamp to go on quest, hobbit leaving Shire to go on quest.

- Resolution ultimately happens and is a state of *new equilibrium* – order is restored but things have changed (usually for the better).
• This is a simple structure, and some texts defy the idea of a resolution or return to equilibrium, as they seek to challenge audiences by offering open-ended narratives that require the audience interpret what they understand by the ending.

• Other resolutions are far from ‘return to equilibrium’ eg. the ending of the film Se7en which is bleak and desolate – the audience comes to realise that the only resolution will be a tragic one and there will be no return to equilibrium for the main characters.
Task

- Choose a film of a TV programme that fits Todorov’s frame for linear narrative. Break down the narrative into Todorov’s structure.

- What experiences do linear narratives offer audiences?

- Suggest a linear plot outline for a new film / television programme using Todorov’s stages.
Narrative

• Narratives can be unambiguous and linear – a series of cause and effect events, like a fairy tale ‘once upon a time...and they lived happily ever after’

• They can be factual – as in the news ‘The trial continues...’ ‘These are today’s headlines...’

• They can be “altered, chopped up or manipulated” (O’Sullivan) – non-linear eg. Memento, Pulp Fiction
Non-Linear structured narratives

- Not all texts conform to a linear structure. A key aspect of narrative is its ability to manipulate time and space and to involve the audience at an interactive level with the text.
- Many narratives are circular in structure and move around within a timeframe. In films like Memento and Pulp Fiction and in TV programmes like Heroes, the narrative is complicated and the audience is challenged due to the narrative structure.
- In crime drama, the narrative may start in the middle, work back to the crime and then forward to the resolution.
- Split-screen narrative may be used when there is more than one narrative going on in each separate panel – again, challenging the audience to interpret parallel narratives that occur at once.
- In non-fiction sports programmes, we readily accept action replays and seeing the event from a range of different camera angles, perhaps evoking different audience responses.
The Narrative of Computer Games

- Some narratives are very simple because the world and settings are more important than the plot.
- Some games conform to the 3-part structure of equilibrium – disruption – return to equilibrium.
- Other games experiment with more complex narrative structures, where there is a series of levels and movement through the levels is the domain of the player.
- Resolution may never be attained if certain narrative stages are not completed.
- There may be choices to make which takes the narrative in different directions and the flow is interrupted depending on the ability of the player to solve the puzzles.
- The same narrative event may be revisited and different choices made which lead to different narrative consequences.
Narrative

• In advertising there is often a before and after narrative
• Narrative time – very few media texts attempt to tell a story in accurate chronological sequence
• Conventions used to show the passing of time include:
  the movement of the hands of a clock
  the use of fade outs
  slow mixes from 1 shot to another
  captions
  speeded up clouds
• Conventions used to represent the past:
  sepia or black and white film
  simulated degradation of film quality
• Conventions used to suggest a dream:
  black and white
  wobbly fade
  blurred dialogue
• In soap operas, the convention is that narrative events run parallel to ‘real’ events
Action codes / Enigma codes

- Barthes proposed that there are 2 key narrative codes – action and enigma
- Action – a kind of shorthand is used to alert the audience that something is happening and to advance the narrative – eg. the buckling on of a gunbelt in a western (signalling an imminent gun fight) the packing of a suitcase in a thriller (signalling panic or escape)
- Other action codes might include:
  - The starting of a car
  - The whistle of an approaching train
  - Flashing blue lights

- What might these signal?
- Make a list of 8 other common action codes and write what they signify.
• **Enigma codes:**

• An enigma code is like a question or a problem – the producer of a text controls the flow of information to an audience in order to capture the audience’s attention and interest.

• Enigmas or problems are set up throughout a text – but then resolved (closed texts).

• Part of the pleasure which audiences gain from a text is in identifying the enigmas and attempting to answer them.

• Examples: a mysterious figure in the opening sequence, the headlines of a news report, the cover lines in a magazine.

• Trailers for new films and TV programmes are an institutional device employing enigmas designed to tease the audience and raise expectations.
Examples of common enigma codes

- Who was the murderer whose hand we saw in the opening sequence?
- What will happen to Ian Beale when Phil Mitchell finds out he grassed on him?
- Will the characters in Notting Hill realise that they should be together?
- Will Silar in Heroes revert back to being the villain?

- Sometimes audiences know more than the characters in a text – sometimes audiences receive information at the same time as characters – sometimes there is a twist, which neither audience or characters predicted
Levi-Strauss and binary oppositions.

- Claude Levi Strauss, a French theorist (not the jeans!) gave media studies a number of influential theories that help us to understand how meaning is established quickly in openings.
- **Binary Oppositions** create meaning through establishing what something is not. We understand the world through a system of power weighted oppositions.
Binary Oppositions

- Man vs Woman
- White vs Black
- Young vs Old
- Hero vs Villain
- West vs East
- Good vs Bad

Which of these lists have the most power?
Binary Opposition

- Binary oppositions can help establish who the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ characters are in 24 very quickly.
- The teenage girls are having ‘harmless’ fun Vs. the young woman who is hiding important information = Innocence vs. Evil
- The idea that we cannot conceive the concept of ‘good’ without the presence of ‘bad’ with which to compare it to and therefore define it against.
- Binary oppositions are obviously present in narratives because fundamentally a narrative must be based on a conflict of forces, opposition between hero and villain.
Audience Positioning in Narrative

- Privileged spectator position
  The camera places the audience within a superior position in the narrative. They are shown elements that the characters in the mise-en-scene cannot see. Eg. close up shot of character taking a gun out of a bag, action replays in sports, from a range of viewpoints. This position gives the audience more power with increased knowledge.

- Apparently impossible positions
  The camera gives the audience a view of the narrative from an unusual position eg. from behind a wall or from the air. The audience suspends its disbelief as the position increases its involvement in the scene.
  
  http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=rOC-zvyhrCU
  http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=NKg27i5Y3T4

- Point-of-view shots (POV)
  The audience sees the action from different points-of-view that will change its perception and involvement in the scene. Eg. camera may show POV of the murdered or the victim or move between the 2. POV shots affect the way the audience relates to the characters.

- Flashback
  Audience is given additional information about the narrative which enhances its understanding. Various techniques are used to alert the audience to a shift in time, these may be overt, or subtle such as a change in clothing and other iconography.
  
  http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=IQpQJfxBxmk
Technical Codes in Narrative

- The camera shows the audience the narrative through a range of camera shots, movements and angles that have been edited into a sequence.
- The editing process is where decisions are made about how characters are represented and events told that will affect the response of the audience. Eg. Big Brother is filmed over a 24 hour period, but only 45 mins are shown – this gives the producers the opportunity to manipulate ‘characters’ and storylines.
- The soundtrack is a narrative device that communicates messages about the plot and what is to come. Eg. Tense music is a signal of a particular narrative, fast paced music signals pace, drama and action in the storyline.
Task

- Watch the opening sequence of *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and then consider how the narrative is conveyed through the use of technical codes, character and audio codes.
Task

• Storyboard the opening sequence for a TV drama or film employing the following plot outlines and using a range of narrative devices:
  A murder
  Establishing a setting
  Establishing the feelings of a character
  Creating an atmosphere
  Creating suspense
Assessment

- Study extracts from these 3 different texts: a news programme, a web page and a computer game.
- Analyse the narrative construction of each text using the following headings:
  - structure
  - techniques
  - characters
  - technical and audio codes
  - audience response

http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe-MstbSE0M
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7459669.stm
http://www.myspace.com/amywinehouse
How are these elements established in the pre-credit sequence of the 20th Century Fox drama 24?

- **Theme of Espionage/Spying**
- **Intrigue in the characters**
- **Enigma Codes**
24 – Season 1, Episode 1

- **Theme of Espionage/Spying**
- This is established through:
  - The digital clock – suggests technology and a digital age.
  - The use of satellites – as a surveillance device.
  - The code-card device that Jack suggests contains secret data – threatening tone.
  - Helicopter over a familiar city landscape ‘eyes in the sky’. High angled, establishing shot.
  - Images of CTU (Crime Terrorist Unit)
  - Agents – image of man wearing black tie/suit.
  - The contrast is established between the ‘agents’ and ‘the villains’.
  - Image of the spot light from the surveillance helicopter sweeping down into the ‘shadowed’ streets where unknown activity is taking place.
  - The streaking fuselage of a plane across the sky – reminiscent of 9/11.
• Intrigue in the characters is established through:
• The foreboding relationship between the agent in the suit and tie and Jack. The tone of his voice suggests impending destruction.
• The policewoman holding the gun in the darkened street – unknown danger
• The family unit – is all as it seems?
• The split screen depicting various characters and their activities during this 1 hour in the life of...
• The senator’s security man on the phone with Mrs. Palmer and David Palmer in the background – sense of foreboding created through the telephone conversation.
• Kim and her friend being chased by two teenagers – what is their motive?
• The mystery woman and mystery man – who are they? Are they baddies?
• The seemingly beautiful man on the plane - who is he?
• **Enigma Codes (puzzles we want solved) are established through:**

  • The use of simultaneous action delivered through split screen; we see what is happening at Jack and Terri’s house, we see Jack at CTU and Kim’s whereabouts on the run all at the same time. This creates a fuller picture of the implications of each of the actions.

  • Split screen showing simultaneous actions of agent wanting to find stolen information and information being used by the criminals in the Mojave Desert.

  • The policewoman – where is she going? Who is she chasing?

  • The teenage boys – who are they, what are their motives?

  • The burning plane – why has it been blown up?

  • Why is someone targeting David Palmer? (the Senator)

  • Who is the woman on the plane? Who is the man asking her for information?
24

- The music intensifies the enigma and creates a tone of foreboding and threat.
- The ‘technological’ sounding music emphasises the theme of espionage and digital involvement.
- The close-up of the woman burying something in the sand creates fear and mystery – what is she hiding? Who is she endangering?
- The sound of the plane exploding and accompanying passenger screams creates fear and tension. This series of 24 is pre-9/11. This would create great pathos with a post 9/11 audience.
- The flickering digital 24 in the middle of the screen reminds the audience of the temporal time of the narrative and plot duration. 24 signifies the day – will good triumph over evil within this time frame?
Therefore:
In the opening of 24 Season 1, Episode 1 pre-credit sequence established the following in less than 5 minutes:
- Enigma codes
- Characters, agents, extras
- Goodies and baddies – how?
- Tone/mood
- Genre
- The back stories of Jack and Terri, and David Palmer and family.
- The setting of CTU as the show’s ‘base’
- Simultaneous action
- Real time
- The theme of espionage/ spying / surveillance and the accompanying technology (a recognisable theme).
The tone and mood of the show is established largely through the background music; this is a non-diegetic element of the narrative. This means it is not in the narrative world, the characters cannot hear the music unlike the sound of the mobile phones, gun shots, explosions, which they can hear and is a diegetic element of the narrative.

The word DIEGESIS means the narrative world; the world of the story that exists for the characters and because of them. Voice-over, credits and other over-laid text are all non-diegetic elements.