



## NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND CINEMA

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### ABSTRACT

Narrative has existed in every known human society. Like metaphor, it seems to be everywhere: sometimes active and obvious, at other times fragmentary dormant and tacit. Narrative is indeed a perceptual activity that organizes data into a special pattern which represents and explains experience. Like literature in cinema also various narrative theories has been evolved throughout the ages. Some of these theories or strategies has been practiced in all the places and others exists as experiments. The present paper will try to give an overview of these narrative strategies.

**Keywords:** narrative, representation, counter-narrative, cinema, representation

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Narrative in film rests on our ability to create a three-dimensional world from two-dimensional wash of light and dark. A bare facility of graphics on screen such as colour, size, angle etc. are transformed into an array of solid objects and a texture of noise is transformed into speech, music and the sounds made by solid objects. Therefore the spectators encounter at least two major frames of reference in film: the space and time of a screen and as well as the space and time of the story world. Causality on screen involves patterns of a purely visual and phenomenal logic. Many concepts have been proposed to describe how on-screen data is transformed through various spatial, temporal and causal schemes, culminating in a perceived story world. The various stages have been described with concepts like set decoration, script, technology, technique, performance, material, shot, form, style, plot, diegesis, code, narration and referent. Since

ways of organizing data in narrative may coexist with narrative, there is a conflict among discursive schemes and an "excess" within the story (Branigan 34). However, in the history of cinema there are changes in narrative pattern which are determined by technological advancement and socio-political dimension. Some major narrative styles are described below which are admired the film directors.

The first twenty-five years of the cinema was a time of assessment of telling stories with the imperfections of new techniques. In the early attempts at story-telling the embryonic forms of codes became dominant from 1930 to 1950. From 1912 to '13 most films were one-reelers and the duration of them was approximately ten minutes. This format limited the scope of the narrative form. The elementary manner of putting across a story was to present it in a series of tableaux which used

to be interconnected by titles. A tableau usually of short duration, was shot with a static camera, little depth of field, with actors entering and exiting by the sides. At that time there was hardly any scope for characterisation. Characterisation requires a more elaborate narrative system, capable of revealing motivation. Close-up used to show faces and other remarkable details. It assisted to develop the concept of characterisation. Close-up, characterisation, a degree of editing call for a spectatorial attitude, different from that elicited by the straightforward tableau (Roberge 72). For the purpose of suspense cross-cutting was familiar among the directors which used to engage the spectator with the cinema. Certain identification with the hero was elicited. In the late 1920s different techniques like the optional point of view, editing conventions of eye line match, camera angle and shot-reverse shot made the cine-narrative tighter. Later the cinematic look permitted the use of expressionistic camera and intensified the appeal of characterisation in narrative cinema by giving the subjective view of a protagonist.

Pam Cook in *Cinema Book* writes: "The era of classic cinema may be regarded as a period in which the cinematic image remained largely subservient to the requirements of a specific type of narrative structure" (212). In the early cinema narrative system is articulated upon a certain identified structure. Here an event occurs which perturbs the order of the fictional world. It is a process whereby problems are solved and the order is restored to the world of fiction. In the plot the relation of causality from one event to the next is manifested. The narrative proceeds step by step in a linear fashion, towards an apparently inevitable resolution. But it is also characterised by a conventional form of realism, since it does not follow documentary style of representation and a matter of verisimilitude. The fictional space and time must be plausible so that causality may appear to operate naturally. In the plot of the movie the action is propelled by a hero, who is a well delineated character and his motivations become integral to the resolution of the drama. A typical classic narrative is one in which all the problems posed are resolved and all the questions raised are answered.

The function of the narrative is precisely to unearth these solutions and these answers. The basic tenets of classical narrative are the following: the hero is presented as the motor of the resolution of the enigma, at the closure the problem is solved and the open end is preferred, illusionistic verisimilitude of the fictional pace-time continuum and dramatic linearity with cause effect relationship. These codes are marshalled firstly to keep the story going through to its resolution logically and coherently; secondly, to achieve verisimilitude in the spatio-temporal fiction; thirdly, to clarify the casual links in the plot and finally, to establish the characterisation according to the plot. The editing rules of classical narrative structure are distinct. The shots are arranged sequentially to link the shots and to establish a credible space-time fiction. The foremost aim of editing in classical narrative is to achieve "continuity". But it is executed so meticulously that the spectator can effortlessly follow it. Techniques that are followed in this system are: consistency of screen direction, match on action, the 180° rule and the 30° rule. These techniques create a three-dimensional space. The ordering of shots of multiple dimensions is also indispensable to spatial verisimilitude. Close shots of the agents of the action draw attention to their agency and contribute to characterisation. The interaction of the protagonist is delineated by an exchange of looks between them. Therefore editing is then done following the principle of eye line match. This technique contributes to the continuity. But its frequent use at the peak of the classic era in the 1940s made it characteristic of the classic narrative.

Alternative narrative system challenged the time-worn practice of classical narrative cinema. But the will to challenge the classical narrative style is not merely the response to a creative urge. There is a political dimension behind it also. For instance Laura Mulvey makes it clear in her discussion of visual pleasure: "Psychoanalytical theory is... appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form". At the levels of both film theorizing and filmmaking the creation of alternative narrative system is a political act. The alternative systems are not characterised by

disparate codes. But the classic model is really departed at the advent of alternative cinema which deconstructs the familiar narrative structure and then reconstructs it. The directors who voiced for alternative cinema experimented with techniques like linearity, closure, human agency to propel the action and the verisimilitude of space-time fiction. Annette Kuhn prescribes three alternative systems which are art cinema, soviet cinema and counter cinema. The features of narrative schema of these types of movies are illustrated below.

Art cinema is the cinema of the *auteurs* like Fellini, Bergman, Truffaut, Ozu, Dreyer, Antonioni, Satyajit Ray and others. It shows a tendency to “eschew linear cause-effect relationship between narrative events”. Moreover fictional characters in art-cinema often seem to lack defined desires, aims and the relationship between character motivation and narrative events may not be immediately apparent. Here digressions break the narrative. The verisimilitude of space-time characteristic of the classic narrative model is often replaced by a subjective verisimilitude. The ending is, unlike narrative cinema, often problematic. The codes of continuity are often set aside and replaced by unpunctuated ellipses, flashbacks and flash forwards. However, the differences between the art cinema and mainstream films is lesser today than it used to be during 1950s and even 1960s.

In the heyday of the classic narrative of Hollywood, the soviet film directors made a distinct style of narrative. The montage of Eisenstein sought to produce an emotional and intellectual impact among the audience and had little concern for the verisimilitude of the space-time continuum of the narrative. At least the first three films of Eisenstein had no individual hero like classical narrative. And Eisenstein was not alone in his iconoclastic approach; Dziga Vertov introduced the “cinema-eye” and Dovzhenko discussed about “poetic cinema”. These forms of cinema called for a spectatorial response which is different from that required for the classic narrative.

Apart from these two diversified approaches in the west, there germinated an *avantgarde* film style which came to be known as “counter-cinema”. Counter-cinema is not merely a

departure from the classic model like art cinema, rather it subverted the model. The exponents of counter cinema felt that the classic narrative is a mystification. They wanted to free the audiences from the spell of the classic narrative. The chief filmmaker of counter-cinema is Jean-Luc Godard and the others are Jean Marie Straub, Daniele Huillet to name a few. Peter Wollen has systematized the opposition between classic narrative and counter-cinema narrative. The comparison is described below:

Narrative transitivity	Narrative intransitivity
Identification	Estrangement
Transparency	Foregrounding
Single diegesis	Multiplediegesis
Closure	Aperture
Pleasure	Unpleasure
Fiction	Reality

Brian Henderson identified that the strategies of counter-cinema was to subvert classical narrative form. In his acclaimed essays like “The Long Take”, “Towards a Non-bourgeois Camera Style”, he prescribes typical qualities of counter-cinema: the lateral tracking shot which creates flatness as opposed to naturalistic depth of field, a species of the long take but without the aesthetics that Bazin had attached to it, use of sound as a formative principle and collage instead of montage (Roberge 70-80).

Thus this evolution of the theory of narrative shows how films in their formal and stylistic operations, solicit story-constructing and story-comprehending activities from spectators. There is goal-directed spectator for each of these narrative strategies, equipped with schemata and ready to make assumptions, form expectations, motivate material, recall information and project hypotheses. Each has its own relatively stable compositional “dominants” and its fundamental choices about how the viewing activity will occur. The growth and development and experiments in the narrative of cinema instigate to know broader cultural, economic and ideological questions about the filmmaking institution. The theories analysed here can define, describe and analyze processes that other experiments in narrative approaches take into account. Therefore the narrative techniques

discussed here are like the Russian Formalists, who, in Eichenbaum's term, considered themselves "specifiers" and structure the historical poetics of cinema. (Bordwell 336).

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