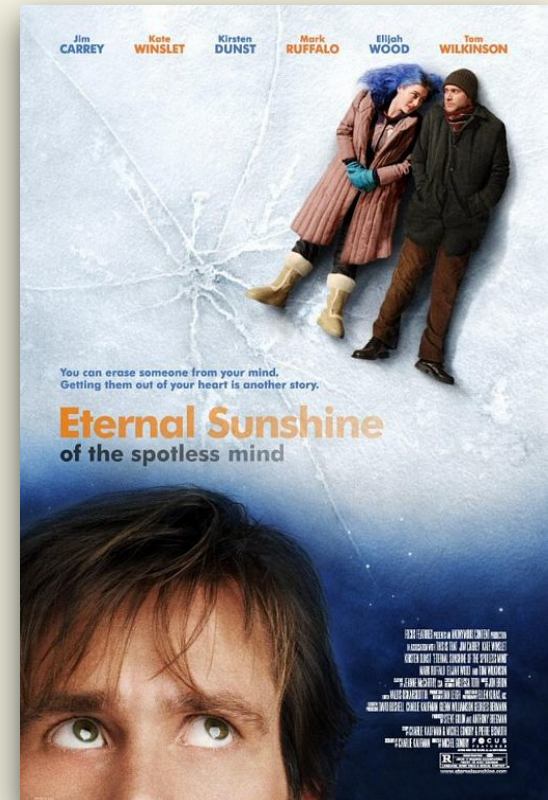
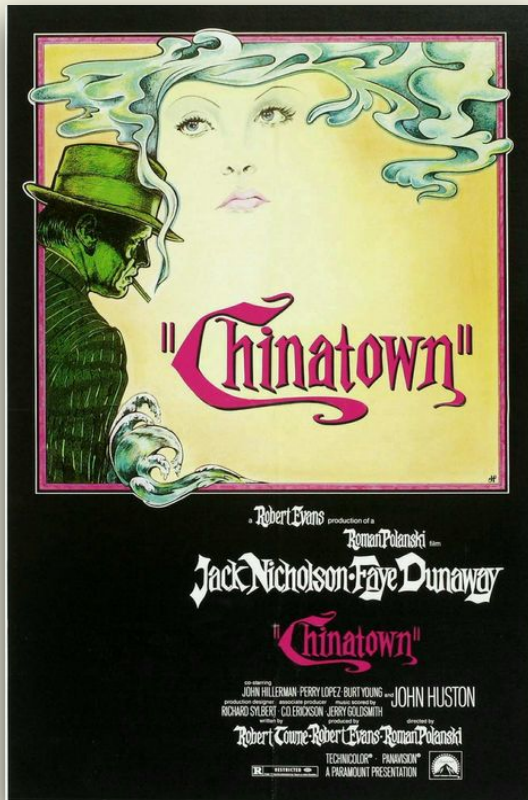


Lecture 3: Narrative Form



Professor Michael Green

What is Narrative Form?

- **Narrative** refers to HOW movies tell stories.
- **Story** (fabula) is the linear order of all events and may include events that occur offscreen.
- **Plot** (syuzhet) refers to a story's structure (its arrangement). The events may be organized into a 5 act structure for example: exposition, the rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Or generic plotting patterns (Romantic comedy: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back)

Events Occur in Space and Time

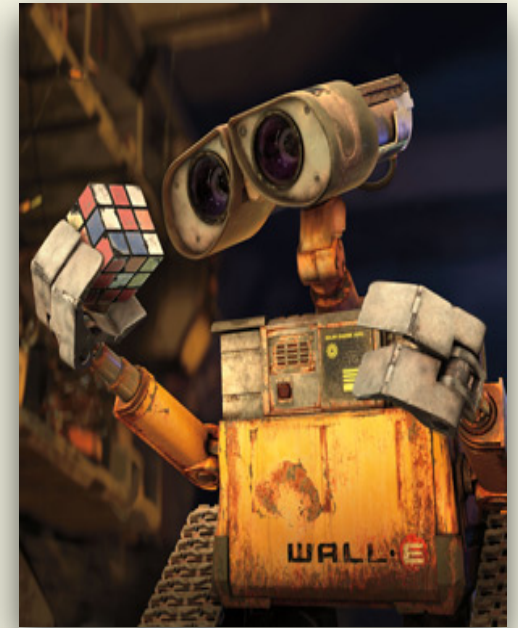
- A narrative is an account of a string of events occurring in **space** and **time**.
- Narratives do not unfold randomly, but rather as an ordered series of events connected by the logic of **cause and effect**.
- This logic of cause and effect ties together **character traits, goals, obstacles** and **actions**.

Choices and Goals

- Characters create cause and effect through **choices** that lead to conflict and consequences.
- These patterns are designed so that the viewer clearly sees and understands them.
- Characters possess traits, face conflicts, make choices and undergo changes that enable or hinder pursuit of a specific **goal**.

Goals and obstacles

- Goals might include locating treasure, choosing a foster parent or looking for love.
- Characters encounter **obstacles** in pursuing these goals – the collision of goals and obstacles create conflict and thus drama.



Kinds of Obstacles

- Obstacles to character goals can come from within the character, from other characters, from non-humans (such as aliens or monsters), and from nature.
- Obstacles may come in the form of concrete physical challenges, the actions and desires of others, or psychological/emotional issues.
- Many narrative films involve characters overcoming obstacles on more than one level.

How Narrative Unfolds

- Typically a narrative begins with one situation.
- A series of changes occurs according to a pattern of cause and effect.
- Finally a new situation arises – through character choice and conflict – that restores equilibrium to the world of the story and brings about the end of the narrative.
- The new story equilibrium almost always results in character **change**.

Example

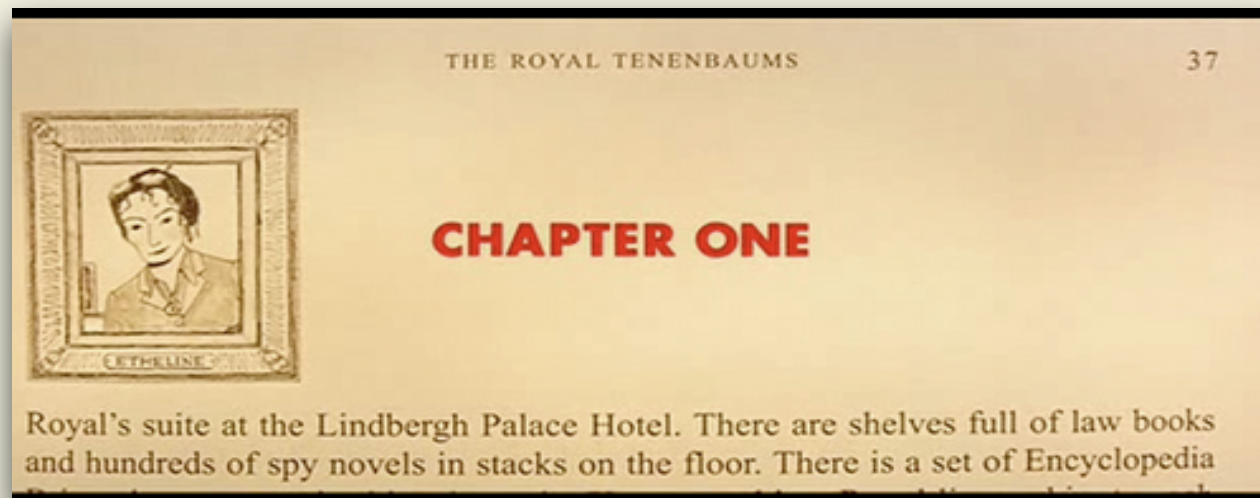
- *The Empire Strikes Back* begins with the **protagonist** Luke Skywalker hiding from the Empire.
- Story changes that result from conflict and character choice force him into a climactic showdown with **antagonist** Darth Vader.
- Vader triumphs and equilibrium is restored.
- Though Luke is defeated, he changes by becoming wiser and more humble.

Diegetic vs. Nondiegetic Elements

- **Diegetic** elements are everything that exists in the world that the film depicts – including everything implied offscreen: settings, sounds, characters, events.
- **Nondiegetic** elements are elements within the film, but not within the film's world, such as credits, music or voice-over narration.
- Characters are unaware of these elements.

Examples

- Examples of non-diegetic narrative elements include:
 - The voice-over in *The Shawshank Redemption*
 - The opening “crawl” of text in *Star Wars*
 - The printed book pages that designate ‘chapters’ in *The Royal Tenenbaums*



Narrative Structure

Exposition

- Act I of a film is often dense with narrative detail, backstory and plot **set-up**.
- This density of story information is called **exposition** and it is designed to orient viewers into the world of the story.
- The exposition briefs viewers on place, time, characters and circumstances.
- For example, James Cameron spends a great deal of Act I orienting viewers to the fictional world in *Avatar*.

Three Act Structure – Act I

- The **three act structure** is the standard structure that shapes narrative films.
 - **Act I** introduces characters, goals and conflicts and ends with the first **turning point**, an important change that affects characters and situations.
 - A turning point can be thought of as a point of no return for the characters, when the initial situation can no longer exist.

Three Act Structure – Acts II and III

- **Act II** presents complications:
 - The **protagonist** meets obstacles – often the result of an antagonist – that prevents her from achieving her goals.
 - The conflicts increase in number and complexity, leading to a major turning point, often referred to as the **climax**.
- **Act III** presents the **dénouement**:
 - Here a series of events resolves the conflicts that have arisen – not always happily.

Four Part Structure

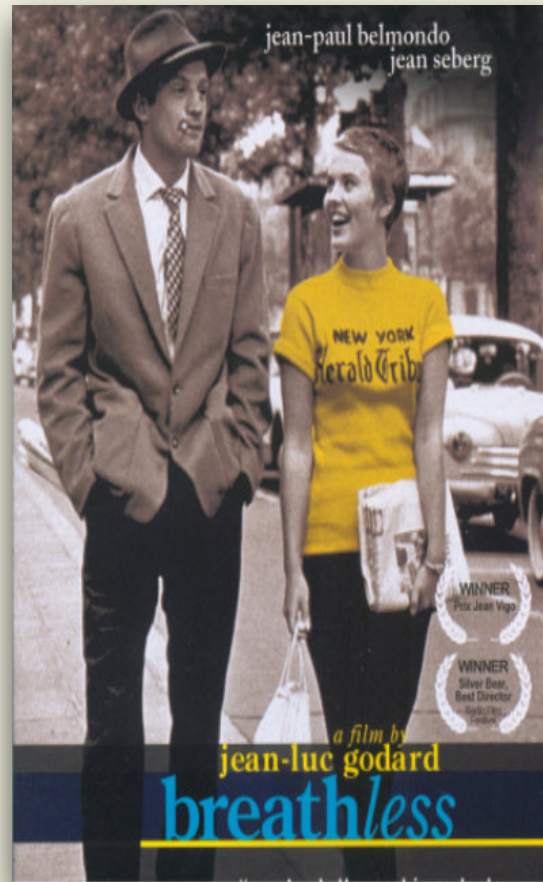
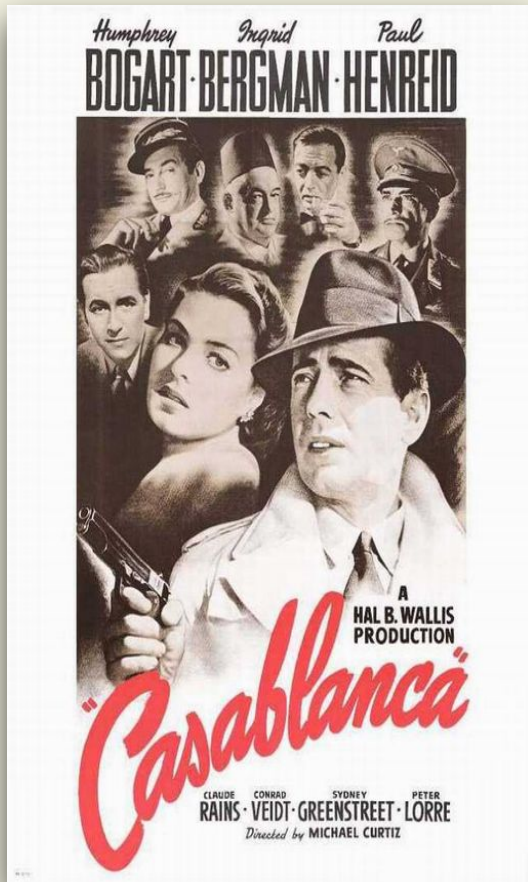
- Some film scholars and screenwriters prefer to think of feature films as being comprised of a **four-part structure**.
- The major difference is that the four-part structure features an extra turning point known as a **midpoint**, which happens at the dead center of the film.

Example

- In *Jaws*, the midpoint comes at minute 60 of a 120 minute film, when the hero realizes that he will have to kill the shark at sea.
- This turning point – also known as a **reversal** – sends the film off on another direction. The initial situation can no longer exist until equilibrium is restored.



Classical Vs. Non-Classical Structure



Lesson 3: Part IV

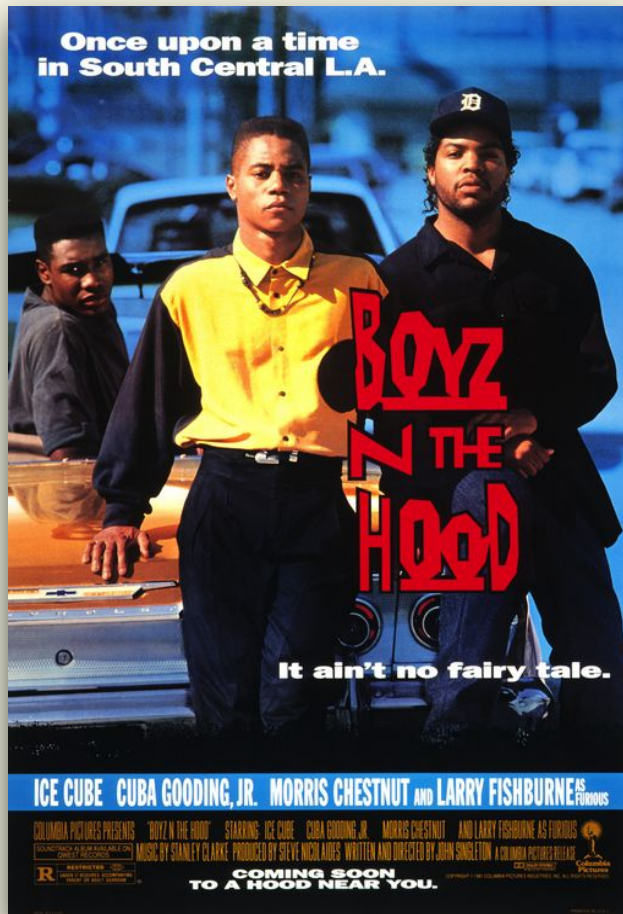
“Rules” for Classical Narrative

- **Clarity:** Viewers should not be confused about space, time, events or character motivations.
- **Unity:** Connections between cause and effect must be direct and complete.
- **Characters** should invite viewer identification, be active and seek goals.
- **Closure:** Third acts and epilogues should tie up loose ends and answer all questions.

Other Aspects of Classical Hollywood Narration

- Individual characters serve as causal agents and the narrative centers on their personal psychological causes.
- Desire often moves the narrative
- Cause and effect imply change.
- Objective point of view
- Closure

“Classical” can also mean Contemporary



Unobtrusive Craftmanship

- Hollywood stories are told in a manner that draws viewers into the diegesis - the world of the story - and does not call attention to the storytelling process.
- Filmmakers use other formal properties beyond the screenplay to create this seamless narrative style: mise-en-scene, cinematography editing, and sound.

Alternative Storytelling Forms

- A number of narrative filmmaking traditions have modified or rejected the rules of the dominant Hollywood method of storytelling.
 - Art films
 - Independent films
 - Non-western films
 - Unconventional Hollywood films
 - Experimental / Avant-Garde films

Rejecting Traditional Rules

- Some examples of rejecting traditional narrative rules include:
- **Lack of clarity** – multiple, conflicting lines of action, inconsistent characterization, extreme degree of character subjectivity
 - *Run, Lola, Run, Fight Club*
- **Lack of unity** - broken chain of cause and effect
 - *Mulholland Drive, Reservoir Dogs*

Rejecting Traditional Rules (Continued)

- **Unconventional characterizations** – audience is distanced from characters rather than invited to identify
 - *There Will be Blood, Badlands*
- **Unclear character goals; unreliable narrator**
 - *The Graduate, The Usual Suspects*
- **Devices** such as **direct address** that call attention to the narrative process
 - *Do the Right Thing, 25th Hour*

Alternative Narratives

- Some non-traditional films may be **open-ended** - that is they conclude without resolution: *No Country for Old Men*.
- **Frame narration** - used in *Citizen Kane* and *The Princess Bride* - consists of a character who narrates an embedded tale to onscreen or implied listeners.
- In **episodic** narratives, such as *The 400 Blows* or *Pulp Fiction*, events are not tightly connected in a cause and effect sequence and characters do not focus on a single goal.