

Narrative film story | film studies dissertations

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This essay will look at the importance of narrative in two CG animated films which are Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within (Hironobu Sakaguchi, 2001) and The Incredibles (Brad Bird, 2004). The essay focuses specifically on the narrative and the spectacle of the films and how through the cinematic medium, they help each other to deliver a visual story across to the audience. The essay will discuss if a solid storyline is needed for a successful feature length animated film or are the animated films just a platform for spectacular imagery.

This essay will discuss topics such as the different narrative theories and how the majority of contemporary films have a similar narrative structure, how films have become more sophisticated in terms of raw video footage being just one element necessary to complete a single shot in a film. It will also discuss modern film techniques and how it can help the story being told.

The essay will first focus on the various theories of narrative and a brief history of the spectacle of cinema before moving on to the analysis of my chosen case studies.

People have been communicating since the day they have been born. From gossiping, bed time stories to little white lies people have been subconsciously or consciously telling stories in some form of a narrative structure. By this I do not mean that all human discourse takes the form of a true story itself but the elements of the basic narrative structure such as having, a beginning, middle and an end are present. Vast majority of mainstream films have the classic three stage act structure of the 19th

century stage melodrama, set-up, conflict and resolution as the basic linear structure. "...time is experienced as linear (past-present-future)."

From starting to read this essay to the end time has passed. Narratives that have manifested itself into other forms of medium more or less have a tendency to follow this fact. Dreams, flashbacks, characters or a narrator reciting earlier events or future events which are due to happen are eccentric elements of breaking up the linear time format. Hence the arrangement of the plot being the story or as described by the Russian formalist, Viktor Shklovsky, *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot). A prominent example of this is in such films as *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995) or *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) where the plot and story are quite different, the story not being presented chronologically.

Narration, the plot's way of distributing story information in order to achieve specific effects. Narration is the moment by moment process that guides us in building the story out of the plot.

Re-arranging the plot of narratives can be a powerful technique as it can easily create suspense, curiosity, fear, satisfaction, motivation to know more of the situation. Film as a narrative medium, more or less does have closure of story or events, as in the end order is established, stability has been restored. In other words restoring the balance, a theory concluded by Tzvetan Todorov, a Bulgarian structuralist.

Todorov reported that the majority of narratives have the same structure, i. e: in a linear storyline, initially all the forces are in balance (equilibrium) and

by some event or another the forces are disturbed and majority of the storyline involving around further complications of the initial situation at hand and eventually the balance being restored in the end, even though this balance is not the same as it was at the start of the narrative. When speaking of events happening or that have already happened to disturb the equilibrium, I am referring to character driven and event driven plots or moments.

Major film blockbusters tend to follow this pattern with a high tendency of closure with the notion of appealing to the mass audience. This concept of commercial aesthetics may or may not be frowned upon by directors, producers or the script writers but I can comfortably agree with the fact that major film studios highly consider what will or wont appeal to the audience, how much funding they are willing to provide, generating revenues, running time, sequels and prequels and this greatly effects the quality of the storytelling and spectacle of the films, thus the director's or producer's true vision of the film not being fulfilled.

There are many theorists in different fields of study who have studied to devise logical ways of thinking about narratives. The main theorists I have looked at are Carl G. Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist who studied Archetypes and their influences in western storytelling, Claude Lévi-Strauss, a French anthropologist studied that narratives were made up of binary oppositions and that key terms in narratives had differences. Joseph Campbell, an American professor studied mythology and religion. His works have been published in a book, ' Hero With A Thousand Faces.' He described the term

monomyth, an idea which he outlined some archetypal patterns that he realised. He focuses on the role of the hero and the various events that the hero can go through.

Gustav Freytag, a German critic suggested a method for representing and analysing plots through a simple diagram of a triangle. The triangle highlighted the setup, conflict and resolution of conventional narrative structures. Starting from the left side (setup), going up the triangle would suggest the apex of the crisis (conflict) and falling back down to the end of the story or the equilibrium being restored (resolution).

Meanwhile going across the bottom of the triangle would be the time passing by in relation to the events in the story. This triangle is an adaptation of Aristotle's work on narrative structures. Aristotle's work has been collected together into a book called *The Poetics* which is a series of lectures and workings, which essentially sums up that "there are causes and effects that occur over time."

Tzvetan Todorov and Viktor Shklovsky I have mentioned before as theorists in narrative and finally Vladimir Propp. They all came to the conclusion of their own theories of narrative however, it will be most useful to concentrate on two particular theorists whose works compliments each others quite well.

...all conventional films are characterized by the same narrative structure by the work of Tzvetan Todorov and Vladimir Propp.

The majority of mainstream films have a similar narrative structure and the works of Todorov and Propp are evidently clear within these narratives.

Vladimir Propp, a Russian critic and folklorist analysed many folk tales to see if they shared any common attributes and structures. He concluded that there are eight main characters such as ‘ the dispatcher’ or ‘ the donor’ and that there are 31 narrative functions such as ‘ villain is punished’ or ‘ the hero is pursued.’ His analysis also mentioned that not all these are evident in all narratives.

Todorov and Propps theories have been influential in modern narratives and work fluently with my chosen case studies and I will apply their theories in more detail later.

One last person worth mentioning is Christopher Booker, an English journalist who published the book, ‘ The Seven Basic Plots.’ This book outlines that all narratives fall into one of the seven various forms of storytelling. These plots are overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy and rebirth. These plots all had alternative darker versions, except for tragedy which already is the dark version. Furthermore two new plots were added outside this list, rebellion against the one and mystery. Both my case studies fall under the plot, overcoming the monster which I will briefly look at later when analysing my case studies.

“ The pleasure of looking – scopophilia has been central to cinema since the beginning” Film is a visual storytelling medium. More people are keen on using their eyes to visualise the story as the audience willingly lose suspension of disbelief, sitting in a film theatre staring at a flat wall for two hours as the story unfolds before their eyes. Before I discuss some of the

contemporary film techniques of storytelling I will briefly focus on the ‘cinema of attractions’ an expression used to describe the early cinema by film historian Tom Gunning.

As technology began to evolve over the 20th century, the moving image was born. People were overwhelmed by this form of medium and what technology could do thereafter. It was all about the ‘wow’ factor, the look of the film. Since most films during this time were unedited sequences of footage, the narrative was not an important issue. Film makers were more fascinated with the possibilities of this particular medium and capturing the ‘real’ and what they could do with it.

There were people like the Lumiere Brothers (Auguste Marie (1862-1954) and Louis Jean (1864-1948)) who successfully captured the ‘real-life’ imitation of film. One famous example is the short film called *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de la Ciotat* (1895). When this film was shown people were so shocked and in fear that the train was going to run them down they fled the theatre. This was a turning point in film history as the Lumiere Brothers inspired so many other film makers. One particular other magician turned film maker was Georges Melies (1861-1938).

He was another French film pioneer who made over a thousand films, the most memorable ones being *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (A Trip to the Moon, 1902). His views on film making was not to mimic ‘real-life’ but to explore other possibilities, using the camera to subvert what the camera sees into abstractness or creating illusions. He discovered the dissolve effect by chance when his equipment jammed. He explored the ‘magical’ possibilities

of the camera and other techniques such as split screen techniques and stop motion photography. He was a pioneer in cinematic special effects and also a film maker who inspired the likes of Jan Svankmajer, Terry Gilliam, etc.

Films made during this period were only a couple of minutes long and over the years up until the present films have got longer, in the nineties being an hour and a half but now the average running time is at least two hours, which I definitely support the idea of, since we at least as the audience will be getting our moneys worth. This is not to say that quantity is more essential than quality but I would like to argue the fact that film producers and directors are adding extra running time to enhance the narrative, by adding sub plots or developing characters to improve the story or explain situations or events clearly and not to extend the running time so the spectacle can be the main attraction, even though Hollywood has a tendency to refer to its films as motion pictures rather than film. This can be a signal that Hollywood is faithful to the spectacle of the moving image.

A new cinema of attractions has risen, particularly within action genres, where plot and story are of less importance than the spectacle.

This can be true since the action genre relies on the spectacle to deliver the film. The action genre is an area where the narrative is simply a platform for spectacle where the audience can sit back, relax and enjoy the film visually, instead of participating in the story and working out clues and problem solving the story. It is more or less the dominant element, meaning in days to come we will remember the 'spectacle' but might fail to remember what actually happened. Furthermore I think films in theory have to have at least

a sequence where the narrative is disrupted and spectacle takes over, such as a car chase or a well choreographed fight scene. In theory the 'cinema of attractions' still exist to this day with the huge cinema screens with surround sounds and films still offering the spectacle as the attraction.

In Russia during the Soviet Union (1920's) spectacle was still the attraction but besides that, editing of films was also used to draw the audiences attention. Editing created powerful effects on the spectators. One particular example I would like to mention is the famous Odessa steps sequence from Sergei Eisenstein's, Battleship Potemkin (USSR, 1925). This well known sequence is where the army restores order among the sailors and civilians of Odessa. He used a 'montage' type of editing to create a pulsating attraction after attraction to intensify the feeling and effect. The point I am trying to make here is that spectacle can be a potent technique in storytelling without the strong element of narrative.

Editing has evolved over the years and has become an art form in itself. It can be used to clarify events, establish a location and to build up tension and emotions. Editing itself is a unique process of shots being composed together to maximise the dramatic effect of the story. It combines the mise en scene of the shot along with all the rest to make sense of the film. It is how information can be held back to the director's content, what to reveal and what not to the audience. Filmmakers are editing in specific ways or cutting more shots out of the final film recently since the audience's sophistication grows.

This can also be referred to as restricted and unrestricted narrative.

Restricted narrative is when we have limited information as to what is going on, we only know what the characters know, being it false information or not. We are told information from a first person perspective, as if we are in the films ourselves within that space. Unrestricted narrative is where we are told everything, we know things that the protagonists don't as in a third person perspective.

Editing shots in a way that one shot transitions into another giving the sense of a smooth, flowing edit is called continuity editing. This is a technique where a seamless edit takes place, this can be helpful as it can interpolate the audience into the physical space where the action is taking place. But some narratives shots require the edits to be visible to achieve a particular effect such as the Odessa steps sequence as mentioned before.

In continuity editing there is rule known as the 180degrees rule. This rule takes place seamlessly also within the film. When two characters are talking, the action is shot on one specific side of the characters, being the one side or the other and the camera being placed anywhere on that side. This is just to clarify which direction the characters are facing and to establish the space in which they are in. This rule can be used for close-ups for intimate conversations and happenings or far out as we look on as spectators.

Another important aspect of storytelling is mise en scene. This is a term given to describe everything involved within that particular shot. It is everything that makes up the frame, i. e: actors, dialogue, the music, diegetic material, cinematography, cg elements or as Richard Maltby

describes, "... arrangement of screen space as a meaningful organisation of elements..."

Lev Manovich a professor in visual arts, wrote an article among many, but one that I found particularly interesting was on Digital Cinema and he quotes, " Cinema is the art of the index; it is an attempt to make art out of a footprint." He states the fact that contemporary cinema has become a platform where film-makers can edit and simulate real world actions through different forms and techniques such as CGI.

Cinema has evolved from movies being mostly live footage to contemporary digital cinema where the live footage in film has become little or used as a basis for experimentation, 3d manipulation, etc. The fact that he used the expression ' an attempt to make art out of a footprint' in reference to raw video is an indication as how it is used as a ground element for the CG to build upon and to manipulate it until all the elements are finalised to complete the shot.

How did cinema arrive at using animation in its projects? I am going to try to explain this as short and briefly as possible. Cinema was born when the moving image was created, a sequence of images, footage or hand drawn, which theoretically is animation, since a series of images give the illusion of movement, hence animation. Film makers took this new format and made films in the tendency of the ' Lumiere style' or the ' Melies style' as mentioned before, adding animation as a supplement. As technology developed, the future made digital cinema possible incorporating animation and special effects as the main essence of films while live recording was

used as the basis or even reference, "...hence, the production becomes just the 1st stage of post-production."

Manual construction and animation of images gave birth to cinema and slipped into the margins...only to re-appear as the foundation of digital cinema. The history of the moving image thus makes a full circle. Born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its boundary, only to become one particular case of animation in the end.

These contemporary film techniques and processes which I have just discussed are clearly evident in the two films of my choice. The first film I want to examine is Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within.

The film is the first photorealistic computer generated film ever to be made as all the cast are life like computer generated characters. The film is set in the future and it focuses on Dr. Aki Ross and her finding of the eighth spirit, in doing so will erase the alien phantom spirits from earth who have more or less taken over the world and left a barren like wasteland.

The film follows a linear narrative structure and even though the film shares the same title as the computer games it bears no reference or relation to any of the stories in the computer games. Todorov suggests that conventional narratives are structured in five stages and this film's narrative structure seamlessly integrates within those five stages. The first stage is clearly the equilibrium, however the film starts off with an already unbalanced state, which is the world has been laid waste to an alien race.

The second and third stages, is the equilibrium being disturbed by some event and the recognition of this disturbance, which also has already happened before the story has begun, in being that the aliens have crashed on planet earth, and the human population reacting to this by evacuating to gigantic like plane hangers cities around the world which are protected by some sort of special field against the threat. The majority of the film is in reference to stage four which is trying to repair the unbalance, meaning Dr. Aki Ross with the help of a special task force unit trying to find the remaining spirits. The story finishes off in the fifth and final stage where the balance is restored in the end and the alien race eradicated from earth.

Final fantasy also bears a resemblance to Christopher Bookers work and his theories of the seven plots, specifically ‘overcoming the monster’. The phantoms are the great and mysterious evil which the world has fallen to. The source of threat is the phantoms. The hero is Dr Aki Ross who is armed with the seven spirits and with the help of the scientist Dr Sid, they set out to travel to the source of the evil and with some amount of struggling, finding the last spirit and finally by discovering the eighth spirit the monstrous entity is destroyed. The threat has been lifted and the world has been saved with the loss of her companions.

Looking at the film, the sense of photorealistic spectacle can help intensify and value the story better particularly the scenes of the phantoms. To clarify this notion in the scene where Dr Aki Ross is having her dreams of the phantoms charging towards her, I would find it quite difficult and would feel emotionless if the CGI was ‘unrealistic’ to say the least, you wouldn’t feel

threatened because they didn't look real or menacing enough. As a serious science fiction film the visual look can help communicate the narrative across at some points in the story by making the scenes more authentic and grittier. To be honest that is the only positive aspect I can mention about the look of the film.

But on the other hand a point worth mentioning is the fact that the digital actors were quite emotionless. This led to the notion that they were artificial. In traditional animation, the facial features and body movements are extremely vivid. The motions are slightly exaggerated to give the illusion of life and personality so the movement can blend from one frame to another and that is why films that are made by Pixar are so rich in character because their animators have strong backgrounds in traditional animation.

Nonetheless Final Fantasy strived for life like replicas of real human people. The film's photorealistic look with the serious live action feel can also be considered as its weakness. While they did look amazingly real their emotions and actions were lifeless which led to the fact that they were artificial characters. The characters had no chemistry with each other on screen, an example is the love/romantic scene with Dr Aki Ross and Captain Gray Edwards, I did not feel like they genuinely liked each other, it was not shown successfully with their reactions or on their faces.

This brings me to my next point. My initial reaction to the life like characters was mostly surprised and mesmerised. But striving for the human believability of the characters solely on the look was not enough. Maybe if the characters were created for a still image in a magazine for example it

would have been suffice. But for a motion picture, the digital characters felt strange and eerie. This might be down to the fact that, the photorealism in an animated feature film was a first but I would like to believe it was down to a theory hypothesised by a Japanese roboticist, by the name of Dr. Masahiro Mori. His theory was that the more human like a robot becomes or looks like, people are fascinated by it, but when the robot borderlines human likeness the natural response by people is negative. People focus on that negativity. The human like robot is considered odd and bizarre and leads to the feeling of strangeness within the viewer. This theory was named 'The Uncanny Valley.'

Imagine a perfectly human-looking face that suddenly grimaces or smiles in a non-human way... It's profoundly disturbing when something blurs the line between human and non-human.

I myself, think the story was not strong enough for the film, it does not hold up to the magnificent CGI. I personally thought it failed to articulate the plot well. It is why I think the film was a let down. Some questions were left unanswered. Why were the alien phantoms a threat to the human race? Why were the alien phantoms fighting each other on their home planet in Dr Aki Ross's dreams? Why did their home planet explode? Some of these questions, answered would have given us as the audience a better understanding of the plot.

The narrative was simply a platform for spectacular imagery. When I watched the film for the first time I suspended disbelief on the visual realism, I was attracted to how believable the characters and environments were. I

was conscious to the excellent CGI being shown the whole time. In the future looking back at this film, people will remember this film and automatically think of how brilliantly photorealistic the animation was, how life like the characters were and how new and ever evolving technology made this possible.

My next case study is another feature length animation made by the incredibly talented people at pixar studios. Pixar have been making animated feature length films and short films for over 10 years now and each one has been more successful than the previous one.

The Incredibles is a computer generated film that is not photo realistic. It does have that classic pixar look, heavily stylized with human attributes. It is arguably, one of my favourite animated films mainly because it is not just the typical comedy from pixar. It does have its comedic moments but what sets this apart from any other animated film especially from the studio of pixar is that it is darker and has some form of violence. It feels like a live action film. It has moved away from the cute, lovely characters from previous pixar films. I liked this notion because it mainly appeals to a much wider audience.

The narrative structure does follow Todorov's linear theory of equilibrium but I would like to apply Propp's theory of character types with Gustav Freytag's Triangle. The story film begins with an equilibrium, superheroes exist, living amongst normal people saving the world and keeping peace and order in society. Problems begin to evolve as the main 'Hero' Mr Incredible is being sued for injuring the same civilian he just saved moments before. One thing

leads to another and all superheroes have been forced to live normal lives under a superhero witness protection program.

Thus the balances have been disturbed and according to Freytag's Triangle the density of the problems are growing as time goes on and as the story makes its way up the triangle. The hero by temptation has been called into action by the 'villain' into using his powers. The hero without knowing what he is doing has willingly helped the villain in his master plans and when Mr Incredible realises what he has done he is inevitably captured. His family are now on their way to release him.

This is the peak of the crisis or triangle as all the problems are laid bare and the tension has built up, we know what Syndromes (villain) intentions are. The climax or the solving of the problems are to follow next as we climb down the triangle, as the family of superheroes solve the problems one by one. The family now together try to find a way to stop Syndromes plans and save the world, restoring the balance in the end and the story coming to an appropriate closure of the current events. I say appropriate closure because the film's ending is more or less an open possibility for a sequel or maybe more.

I loved the narrative as it has a bond-esque feel about it, saving the world from a mad man. I was easily and simply able to establish who the heroes and villains were and the fact that the story had a suitable closure as all the loose ends of the story were tied up. Examining the narrative overall I can safely say that the relatively straightforward narrative fits Freytag's triangle

perfectly in view of the fact that all the problems that grew were resolved in the end.

I would like to mention the beginning of the film was a parody to the 1950/1960's U. S superhero comics and films. The likeness is significant in the terms that the film begins in the past and works its way to the present day and when the superhero's lived alongside average citizens and the fact that the look of the film mimicked the same style of news reporting when the superheroes over the world were being sued. In addition the stylised characters with the large upper torso, broad shoulders, square jaw and smaller than average legs evidently represented by Mr Incredible were mimics of the 1950/1960's U. S superheroes. This parody worked well as it gave the film authenticity and it felt that time had moved on within the film to the present day.

Even though the characters were not photorealistic, the animation sold the concept that they were real. The exaggerated motions like I mentioned before convinced me that these artificial characters had feelings and they genuinely exist. This was quite an achievement for pixar, as cg characters before The Incredibles, whether in television adverts, cartoons or short animated films have not been quite rigid but lacked that sense of energy and dynamic in them.

This can raise the question, is animation only successful with non-human or non-realistic characters? This question in itself is worth another essay, to be studied accurately, but in short I would like to think not, since there have been films that have major success such as The Incredibles clearly, Toy Story

1&2 also made by people at pixar studios, Shrek 1&2 by Dreamworks Animations and feature length films which include 'CG doubles' of their live counterparts. Again the theory of 'The Uncanny Valley' comes into play as successful films of non-realistic characters maybe down to the fact that people find it strange when CG characters end up looking 'too real' on screen.

The appearance of the film was simplistic, almost approaching a 'minimalist' look and stylised but not over done as to steal the limelight of the narrative. The narrative is the dominant element within this film as I believe that the spectacle supported but did not dominate the narrative. On watching this film I was drawn into the story, what was going to happen next, it was engaging and I wanted to know more. I felt that an actual story was told to me, that I was watching the events unfold from a third person view within the film, that I was successfully entertained. On first time round watching the film I was not thinking how that was made. The film will be remembered for its entertaining, excellent storytelling factor, a film the whole family can watch.

All feature animated films that have been produced by the pixar studios have had massive success. I think of pixar as any other major film studio emphasising on telling an entertaining narrative but telling it through a specific medium of film. Films such as the Toy Story series, Finding Nemo, Shrek series, Ice Age series and Madagascar all have had major success due to the strong narrative element running through the film. All films are non photo-realistic as the spectacle supports and is just the platform for story.

It is kind of ironic that a photorealistic character felt unconvincing in Final Fantasy but felt realistic in The Incredibles even though the creators of Final Fantasy were aiming for realism. It proves my point of the fact that intending to achieve realism will only go so far without the narrative, vigour or the personality behind it. Narrative is compulsory in giving spectacle depth and more over 'life' so it will become believable and to work and blend as one as a feature length animated film.

So is story and plot less significant in feature length animation then spectacle? I think not. I strongly disagree with the fact that spectacle is more vital than narrative primarily because of the apparent reason that the whole idea of feature films is to tell a story. The public go to cinemas to be entertained for two hours. They set out to be enthralled by a story, that is what a 'film' is, a narrative in by which the spectacle helps to communicate the information across.

As CG effects get more complicated the audiences want more than spectacle, they yearn to be motivated by other means rather than to watch a sequence of frames. To lose the sense of reality and be mesmerised into a fictional world of wonderful computer generated characters and environments. I believe that full feature animation is just another medium of spectacle that stories can be told through, that narrative is essential for a successful CGI animation, as only recently due to new software and powerful hardware more and more CGI feature films are being made and it is technically quite a new process as filming the real has been done for a while.

There is of course the excuse of the cinema to show off how the latest technology can create spectacular imagery and special effects, and show off new film and CG techniques. I also agree that spectacle can sometimes enhance the narrative being told, by exotic scenery and sets that would be impossible to manually build on location, or unrealistic physical attributes such as walking on water or punching holes in walls.

The visual storytelling medium has changed, evolved for better or worse due to commercial aesthetics in meeting needs for the mass audiences to ensure that the films being produced are logical and understandable. An interesting point to note is that technology can be put to work either to create a 'convincing of the real' or create the opposite and in my chosen animated films Final Fantasy is clearly the 'Lumiere Brothers' tendency of cinema while The Incredibles is more of the 'George Melies' tendency of cinema.

Modern cinema has become quite impressive, in terms of merging old and new practices into one product, a hybrid of traditional narrative plots with the wonderfully executed animation and special effects. The reason I think why such established narrative theories are still present in contemporary cinema is the fact that, it is how film makers today are still able to captivate the mainstream mass audiences. Again the notion of commercial aesthetics might have an influence on my opinion but nonetheless, it is another fact which proves that a well-built narrative structure along with spectacular imagery can provide a successful film.

While speaking of traditional practices, both films still respect the cinematic language, meaning that the hand held camera feel, camera shake and the

established cinematography, such as mise en scene, editing and continuity editing are without a doubt evident. These techniques are clearly apparent in both of my chosen case studies. These techniques provide the film with that cinematic, live action/motion picture feel rather than just another ‘ animated film’. I think it helps to blur that difference between animations and motion pictures because in the end feature length animations are inevitably just another manifestation of the cinematic medium where narratives can be told through.

Other animation studios around the world are producing feature length animated films because this is a booming market and as long as they keep a balance between the story and the look of the films they can inevitably become successful movies.