

## Storytelling and Film

### Fairy Tales, Myth and Happy Endings

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The result therefore of our present enquiry is that we find no vestige of a beginning and no prospect of an end.  
James Hutton, *Theory of the Earth*

Be sure to exhaust what can be communicated by stillness and silence.  
Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographe*

Film has developed out of a narrative and dramatic tradition in which the art of storytelling is a central concern. Yet filmmakers have also challenged the seductive and manipulative power of story through playful resistance to narrative convention or by exploring other elements of the medium: the interplay of image and sound, rhythm and gesture, rather than reliance on plot mechanics or character psychology. But the audience for non-narrative film is small: the rapt faces of the aircraft passengers watching the flight attendant point out the nearest exit, remind us that we enjoy the frisson of disaster but need to believe in the possibility of a happy ending.

#### Why story?

The appeal of storytelling as a form of communication and entertainment comes precisely from this ability to excite then resolve tension and restore equilibrium in a neat and satisfying way. Stories are all pervasive in our culture: news stories, soaps, tabloid scandals, medical histories, workplace gossip and the endless stream of movies, videos, and dvd's that frame our dreams of memory, adventure, and escape. We are storytelling creatures who seek to report experience, clarify tangled emotion, define and amuse ourselves through narrative: jokes, anecdotes, myth, romance, parable, folktale, history, fiction. Stories, it is argued, [1] inspire, heal, inform, and empower: forms of consciousness, ways of thinking that help us to deal with the unexpected, to imagine other possibilities. We identify with the protagonist, the one who struggles at the heart of the narrative to connect past, present and future in a coherent, causal way that bridges the empty spaces [2]: her struggle is our struggle to make our lives meaningful and different. We can change by rewriting our stories, and make our lives more interesting, interpersonal, and hopeful. [3]

#### What is a story?

At its simplest a story elicits our curiosity: someone is in *trouble* and we want to know what happens next, we identify with his or her predicament (we all have our troubles), we want to know how it *ends*. A story entertains by posing a question and finding complicating and surprising ways of holding back the answer: plotting, ellipsis, parallel action, multiple perspectives - are all designed to keep us in suspense. The minimum story is structured like a joke with a beginning, middle and twist in the tale end. But there is another aspect to the compelling nature of story.

Narrative is derived from the Latin *gnarus* or "*knowing*" and story from the Welsh root "*to see*" : in oral cultures story implied guidance, direction, instruction, knowledge. The *storyteller* was originally a seer or teacher who guided the souls of his listeners through the world of mystery which is also this world; the angelic space between the divine and the chaotic; Blake's eternity in an hour. The oral storyteller suspends time; in the immediacy of his presence and the improvised interplay of teller and audience the story is alive, immediate and eternal; through developing patterns of meaning and catharsis the listener is released from time and his human self: the pleasure is both aesthetic and emotional. For Paul Schrader screenwriting is embedded in this oral tradition:

I do not think that screenwriting is really about writing at all. I think it is about telling stories. Screenwriting has a lot more to do with the time your uncle went duck hunting and the bird got away, than it has to do with great literature. You do not have to be particularly gifted in terms of craftsmanship of language to be a good screenwriter; all you have to be able to do is be able to tell a good story. [4]

Then too, good stories have certain formal characteristics: an inviting beginning that gets straight into the action; a clear and well-developed plot; believable but unusual characters; a problem that comes early and helps to create *suspense*; action that builds to a *climax*; no superfluous explanation; repeated rhythms and phrases; an ending which is surprising and resolves the problem in a satisfying way. The key concept here is *reversal*: what

Aristotle [5] defined as a change of fortune for the protagonist that along with *discovery* illuminates the meaning of the story events for both the protagonist and the spectator. What propels and defines the story is the desire of the character, what he is after and how he copes with adversity along the way: because the task must be difficult with complicating turns and twists to keep us watching. To which could be added Levi-Straus's observation that simple narrative patterns underlie most stories: the dialectics of struggle/victory; bound/free; lost/found; problem/solution: universal plot-themes constructed around desire and catharsis.

For Freud reality was whatever frustrates or tempers our *desire*: we need to be thwarted, to encounter obstacles to that desire: frustration disrupts routine and propels us into action, renewal and reinvention. From here it was a short step to see all life as a mythic war between nurture, growth, delight and the death instinct: a story of growing up, attaining a sense of moral achievement by setting limits to our wanting. Yet these very limits are what the storytelling impulse seeks to transgress.

### Screen Stories

Screenwriters and filmmakers are part of this transgressive/ redemptive tradition and in many ways cinema, especially classical Hollywood, is closer to the energy and engagement of oral storytelling than other narrative media. The novel for example is a more private production and pleasure, full of words and digressions to be enjoyed in solitude: whereas the screenplay is written to be *performed* before an *audience*: film is both narrative and dramatic, a melding of text, image, sound and music experienced in one sitting; a form of *enacted* storytelling which in its classical form is action oriented and goal-driven while remaining internally ambiguous. [6] The roller coaster action is the attraction and addiction, the adrenaline rush of the modern multiplex experience. But in the best work there is more to contemplate:

Oedipus investigates the causes of the plague and, upon discovering that he has murdered his father and married his mother, blinds himself: this is the plot of Oedipus Rex. But the tragic action lies at a deeper level, where the complex relationship between deed and guilt unfolds according to immutable laws, steeped in existential angst. The plot is univocal but the action is fraught with ambiguity, open to a thousand possible interpretations." Umberto Eco [7]

With filmmaking the role of storyteller is taken over from the screenwriter by the director and editor: the storytelling now refracted through framing, light and shade, colour, texture, objects, sounds, movement, - the shot/counter-shot and mise en scene of *cinema*. Suggestion and ellipsis mean we can never know for certain what the characters are thinking or feeling nor do we know the complexity of our own subliminal experience in the immediacy of the images coming to us in the darkness; we are only partly guided through the mystery. The best screenwriters study and understand the specific qualities of the medium and their role in the shaping dream of a film: they know that what they write will be open to reinterpretation by actors, directors, and editors.

For the screenwriting manuals too often emphasise story *structure* [8] and struggle to find a language to illuminate the deeper, ambiguous and *collaborative* process of film writing and filmmaking. Too often they speak a rhetorical language (the irony here is that storytelling itself can be seen as a form of rhetoric; controlling, ideological, manipulative) or resort to a technical jargon that kills the object of their love: in these books you will also find the more profound insights on storytelling and dramaturgy reduced to commandments and formulas ready to be used by script editors, insecure teachers and development executives to pull the recalcitrant, meandering storyteller back into line. The rules are out there but like death itself from which story snatches life, they need to be forgotten before you can begin to tell your own tale or respond with intelligence and sensitivity to the tales of others.

### Fairy stories

The Ur- stories of our culture that are available to all, are the folk or fairy tales: narratives of initiation and redemption with their own formal and familiar patterns, rituals and rules. They define universal plot themes from (Cinderella's) hidden worth being finally recognized to the theme of re-birth. (In this sense *The Sleeping Beauty* is a story about stories: about how story's kiss wakes us up and produces desire; produces reality.) The overarching tale that shadows all this daydreaming and wishful hoping is the one where the questing self meets helpers and enemies and the ending is always happy. Walter Benjamin [9] saw the first true storyteller as the teller of fairy tales: economical, elliptical, lacking psychological explanation or pedantic exposition they communicate directly as oral narration; fairy tales are true stories not the elaborated, over-determined literature of high culture. For the great folklorist, Max Luthi [10], fairy tales are works of art that place Man at the centre of the action overthrowing the old myths of a traditional, static culture with cunning and high spirits; charting a journey from narcissism to Love.

Fairy tales in their simplicity and sense of wonder lay down the tracks of future film genres in their sublimation of the

erotic and religious. They express a world full of domestic conflict and social aspiration; but also a poetic vision of man and his relationship to the world where *wishing* makes man move and live. In this sense the Sleeping Beauty is also an image of the human spirit: the story portrays the peril, paralysis and redemption not just of one girl but also of all mankind: the theme of death and re-birth so beloved of the Hollywood happy ending. The literary fairy tale developed by the brothers Grimm with its confident protagonists, psychological motivation and its preference for action over reflection drew its energy from the oral tale while anticipating the directness of contemporary cinema. When David Mamet[11] talks of telling the story in the cut, through uninflected images of a goal-driven character, he is suggesting that film stories work best like fairy tales - simple, direct, complete.

### **Mythic stories**

Fairy tales are essentially optimistic in spirit though more disturbing and complex than Disneyfication will allow. There are other forces at work not so easily domesticated: deeper troubles that might never be finally resolved: where the energy and wit of one individual is not enough; where you might yet be overwhelmed. Film narratives (including of course many of Mamet's films) also draw on the more tragic sense underlying mythic discourse: the chaotic, the demonic, the transitory that threaten human endeavour on all sides: where suffering and moral ambiguity are the consequence of the original overarching myth: the Fall. In the Garden of Eden we first gain the knowledge of good and evil and on our expulsion the consequence of our new self-awareness: suffering, guilt and the longing for a lost paradise. We can of course choose an alternative story: the Enlightenment one that self-awareness leads directly to a sense of responsibility for one's actions and relations in this world.

We can write our own version because whether heroically secular or sacred tales of origin, myths in their original form are bare outlines: allusive, lacking in completeness or logical sequence and therefore perfect stimulus for screen stories and filmmaking: but when they are over-interpreted or reduced to a universalising essence[12] they lose much of their creative power and charm. Like Benjamin's approach to history or Jean Luc Godard's to film, there are truths that lie beyond the reach of the selective, linear, sequential grasp of narrative. The fragment, the quotation or the image might be closer to the ambiguous reality of things.

### **Anti-Stories**

The episodic, the multi-narrative, the shifting and contradictory point of view are some of the ways that films continue to slip the net of all-consuming story. Godard has always been more interested in alternative approaches and his last feature film, *Eloge de l'Amour (2001)* is predictably less storytelling than essay: a collage of image and sound, music, still photos, interviews, found footage, documentary, quotations, possible stories - held together by an elegiac voice-over. The film makes us think about our need to tell stories and the struggle for truth between technology and history, memory and ideology, the personal and political. Yet our endlessly narrating consciousness can detect the love story that binds together the elements of an intellectual and emotional life: those ideas, places, people I have loved: and the political story: there can be no resistance without memory which is threatened by state and corporate power. In the fragmentary, the momentary, the meditative there is room for a lifetime of thought as well as emotion: melancholy, nostalgia, the transitory, the absolute strangeness and beauty of the world - without the distraction of narrative tropes. As Tarkovsky believed, a *poetic* logic might be closer to our lived experience: internal rather than external experience, the story of our thoughts, memories, dreams. Storytelling by contrast is melodramatic, full of tricks and artifice: all is vanity.

Yet for many writers and filmmakers in the modernist tradition like Antonioni or Becket there is not even this limited lyrical consolation: all our stories go nowhere: characters are left stranded, lateral plotlines are taken up and abruptly vanish: the Hollywood happy ending never comes because complexity and randomness continue to accumulate and nothing is ever satisfactorily tied up. However compelling there is something mendacious in telling stories but we can't stop: I can't go on, I must go on. With storytelling you have to be careful about claims to veracity, memory is always selective and everyone has their own story. The truth as it happens may turn out to be uncanny or unknowable like in the anti-fairy stories of Kafka: loose ends, hesitations, a lack of connection and conclusion. "There is hope but not for us." [13]

### **Endings**

For most mortals however life without stories is too bleak a prospect: we need to have something to look forward to: to anticipate possible future outcomes based on past and present activity. We want to believe in a hopeful, shareable world where we are understood. However fragile, narrative coherence remains important to our sense of self and acting in the world and catharsis, an essential release from action. But as that world changes and fragments, older styles of storytelling are giving way to new narrative forms; digitally driven developments of a modernist aesthetic that continues to probe for alternative and ironical ways of making sense, creating meaning or acknowledging the impossibility of both.

And to understand the relationship between storytelling and film narratives we need to go beyond merely formal concerns to the medium itself and its metaphorical possibilities: to the process of storytelling as it is refracted through the movement from script to screen: where the story is transformed or disappears altogether. Stories can be limiting, tyrannical, ideological and always partial: but there is no escape. Another story is always just beginning: an endless branching pathway in hyperspace that connects us all. As a character in *Eloge de l'Amour* remarks, "It's strange how things take on meaning when the story ends." To which his lover replies, "It's because that's when history begins."

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- <sup>1</sup> Kearney, R. *On Stories*. London: Routledge, 2002:  
Bruner, J. *Making Stories*. London: Harvard University Press, 2002
- <sup>2</sup> Kermode, F. *The Sense of Ending*. London: OUP 1966
- <sup>3</sup> Zipes, J. *Creative Storytelling*. Routledge, 1995
- <sup>4</sup> McGrath, D. & Macdermott, F. *Screencraft: Screenwriting*. Rotovision, 2003
- <sup>5</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*. London: Penguin, 1988
- <sup>6</sup> Armes, R. *Action and Image*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994
- <sup>7</sup> Eco, U. *The Open Work*. London: Hutchinson, 1989
- <sup>8</sup> McKee, R. *Story*. Methuen, 1999
- <sup>9</sup> Benjamin, W. *Illuminations*. London: Harper-Collins. 1992
- <sup>10</sup> Luthi, M. *Once Upon a Time*. Indiana University Press, 1976
- <sup>11</sup> Mamet, D. *On Directing*. Faber and Faber, 1989
- <sup>12</sup> Campbell, J. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Glasgow: Collins, 1988  
Vogler, C *The Writer's Journey*. Michael Wiese Productions, 1992
- <sup>13</sup> Frank Kafka to Max Brod in Brod, M *Franz Kafka* Da Capo Press, 1995
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