



Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

**THE APPLICATION OF A NON LINEAR NARRATIVE
STRUCTURE IN A FICTIONAL FILM**

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**Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours
(Cinematography)
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STRUCTURE IN A FICTIONAL FILM**

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ABSTRACT

THE APPLICATION OF A NON LINEAR NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN A FICTIONAL FILM

by,
Izwan Bin Masnan

Cinema is a powerful medium of expression. Cinema has been continuously improving and developing towards something different from what it is known for or what it was in the past. The classical narration is the type of narration that we all as spectators normally expect from a film while nonlinear narratives have emerged from the classical narrative form. Non linear narratives have been in style for a long period of time and were considered by some as being mediocre to classical narrative. However, non linear narratives are now present in many media forms and the digital formats have played a crucial role in their development.

The researcher believes that researching something which is contemporary can be very motivating and beneficial. This dissertation would offer the researcher a good knowledge and understanding of a concept that would be crucial for the researcher's future career as a filmmaker. For the research, the researcher have collected ample amount of literature from diverse sources. Based on the literature collected, the researcher have analyzed three nonlinear narrative films chronologically. Further to the analysis and literature collected, the researcher have understood many concepts related to non linear narratives and its issues on why audiences seem incapable to differentiate between a linear and a non linear narrative structure film. Besides that, the researcher have arrived at a conclusion as to how non linear narratives have been applied to a fictional film.

ABSTRAK

APLIKASI STRUKTUR NARATIF NON LINEAR KE DALAM FILEM FIKSYEN

oleh,
Izwan Bin Masnan

Sinema merupakan salah satu medium untuk meluahkan ekspresi dengan berkesan. Sinema juga telah berkembang menjadi sesuatu yang lebih baik dari yang terdahulu. Oleh itu, naratif merupakan satu strategi yang mana elemen-elemen disusun lalu disampaikan kepada penonton. Penceritaan klasikal atau classical narrative adalah contoh penceritaan yang biasa ditonton oleh penonton manakala non-linear narrative telah berkembang daripada stail penceritaan klasikal. Non-linear narrative telah diperkenalkan sejak dulu lagi dan dianggap sebagai satu stail yang berbeza berbanding penceritaan klasikal. Walau bagaimana pun, stail penceritaan menggunakan non-linear narrative telah diaplikasikan dalam pelbagai format media masa kini dan format digital merupakan tunjang perkembangan stail ini.

Pengkaji percaya bahawa mengkaji sesuatu permasalahan yang kontemporari boleh memberi banyak faedah dan motivasi. Hasil dapatan kajian ini akan memberi peluang kepada pengkaji untuk memahami konsep kajian dengan lebih mendalam agar pengkaji di masa akan datang, terutama sekali pengkaji yang bergiat dalam bidang perfileman boleh menjadikan hasil dapatan kajian ini sebagai sumber rujukan yang berguna. Untuk kajian ini, pengkaji telah mengumpul sorotan kajian daripada sumber-sumber yang berbeza. Berdasarkan daripada data yang telah dikumpul, pengkaji telah menganalisis 3 filem yang berkonsep non-linear narrative secara kronologi dan dengan itu, pengkaji berupaya untuk memahami konsep non-linear narrative dan kenapa sesetengah penonton sukar untuk membezakan antara struktur linear naratif dan non linear naratif. Seterusnya, pengkaji akan mengaplikasikan dapatan kajian tersebut ke dalam video cereka pendek.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preface

Films have undergone vast and various changes over the recent years. The narrative structure in film has also undergone many changes throughout these whole years. It can be assumed that the classical narrative has given way to and has emerged as newer forms.

According to Lindroos (1999), films revolutionized story telling as it was possible to deconstruct time scales and reconstruct them in any order. The viewer's perception of the story changed. Cinema offered the viewer a newer form of spatial and temporal experience (Lindroos, 1999, p.3).

In the book *The Language of New Media*, written by Manovich (2000), he argues that “new media” abandons this “human-centred” representation altogether – to put represented time fully under human control. Time is mapped onto two dimensional space where it can be managed, analyzed and manipulated more easily” (Manovich, 2000, p.51)

Non linear narrative replicate the real life method in which an information or story is transferred between people. This technique is now been increasingly used in both fictional and non fiction films alike. Non linear films now consist of an immersive narrative where the viewer or audience assumes an interactive role. In this interactive environment, the viewer gets transformed into a protagonist.

Non linear films have changed a submissive audience and stifling surroundings characteristic of a linear film into a strong, attentive audience and offer no boundaries viewing environment.

1.2 Research Background

According to Henderson (2008), non linear narrative has transpire to prevent spectators from just seeing and comprehending sequentially arranged story material. (Henderson, 2008, p.2)

The non linear narratives accompanied with its unconventional style, dialogues, camera angles combined with non linear editing techniques have brought changes to fictional and non fiction films alike. This research attempts to understand the use of non linear narrative techniques in a fictional film and how it

will effect the audience mind through its techniques. The researcher believes that the topic is appropriate and valuable because the intentions are to do an insightful study on a form of narration and narration is a basic and significant element in fictional films.

Non linear narrative is a new way of storytelling for motion picture because of its unconventional way of storytelling, the use of suspense that will grab the audience attention, the cross cutting technique of editing and its psychology state that enables the audience to *roam* around in the movie itself and be the protagonist rather than just an audience.

1.3 Problem Statement

In modern filmmaking, many elements come together to generate an authentic and original piece of art. In modern narration, non linear narrative to be specific has changed the way an audience sees a film. It lets the audiences immerse themselves into the film rather to let the audience stay stagnant and wait for what to come.

The problem lies within the contexts of the non linear narrative film itself. The narrative structure and the style that is used in a non linear narrative film seems to make the audience confuse as it uses cross cutting editing techniques and a rather unconventional way of storytelling.

1.4 Research Objectives

The objective of this topic is to;

- i. To understand the meaning of a narrative, the elements and the components of the narrative.
- ii. To comprehend the various issues of non linear films.
- iii. To differentiate between a classical narrative and non linear narrative structure.
- iv. To formulate a different kind of non linear narrative structure.
- v. To apply the findings into the final year project video.

1.5 Research Questions

- How has non linear narratives change the way fictional films is being told?
- Why non linear narrative is a better way for storytelling through visual interpretation?

1.6 Conceptual Framework

The purpose of creating a conceptual framework is to create a further understanding towards the purpose and objective of this research. Therefore, figure 1.6.1 shows an example of a classical linear narrative film structure as it

uses the three act structure concept and theory. All screenplays contain this basic linear structure (Field, 1979, p.7). Each scene is represented by a block, for example, A, B, C, etc.

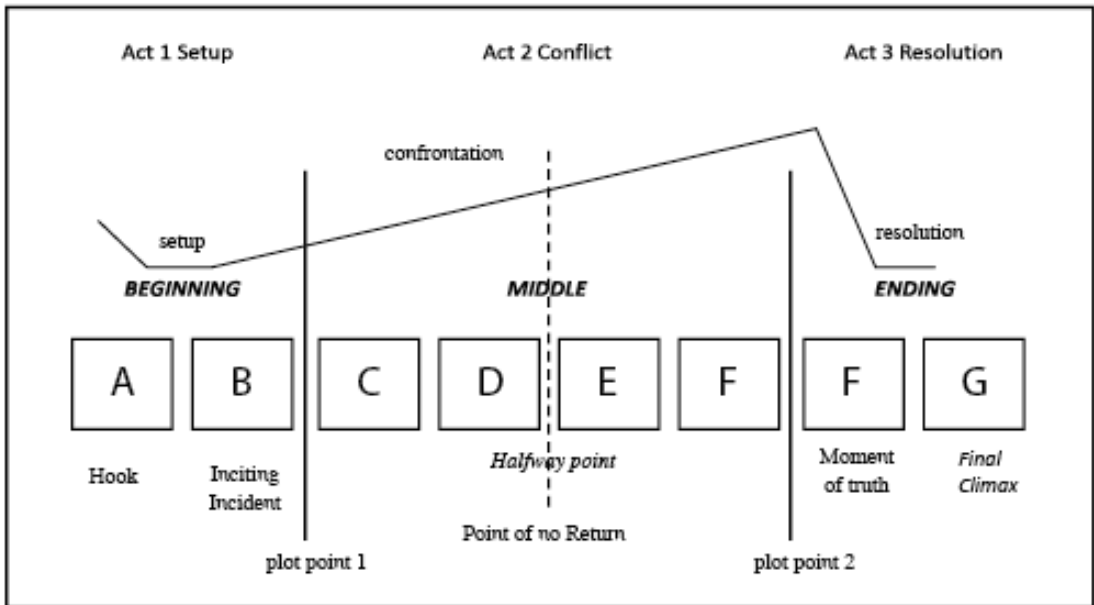


Figure 1.6.1 Three act structure

As shown as the figure above, Act 1 (Setup) refers to the setup of the film in which it let the audience hooked onto the film. In this act, the audience will know who is the main character, what is the premise of the story and what is the situation of the story. This can be seen in the first two blocks (A and B) in the figure above. At the end of the first act, there is a plot point. According to Field (1979), a plot point is an incident, or event, that hooks into the story and spins it around into another direction (Field, 1979, p.9)

Act 2 (Conflict) refers to the conflict in which the film represents. It can create obstacles and tension in the film and let the audience grasp onto the movie. Block C, D, E and F represent Act 2 in the narrative structure. At the end of Act 2, the plot point will lead to the resolution of the story.

Act 3 (Resolution) tells the conclusion of the story. It concludes the whole entire film and resolves the conflicts (block F and G). According to Field (1979), “A story ending resolves your story in order to make it comprehensible and complete.” (Field, 1979, p.10)

Figure 1.6.2 however shows the sequence of scenes (block A, B, C, etc.), which uses the three act structure to portray linearity in which it follows the sequence chronologically.

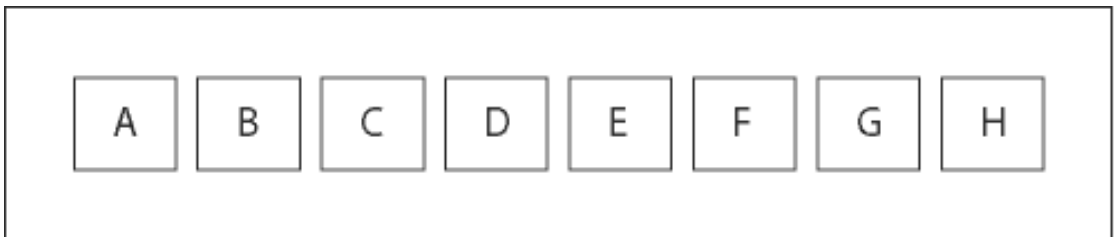


Figure 1.6.2 Classical linear narrative structure

Although commonly used in motion pictures, the three act structure can also be manipulated through rearranging the scenes or plot.

According to Jean Luc Godard, a French film director and the founder of French New Wave cinema, stated that, “A story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end... but not necessarily in that order.” Therefore, figure 1.6.3 shows an example of non linear narrative sequence from the movie *Pulp Fiction*.

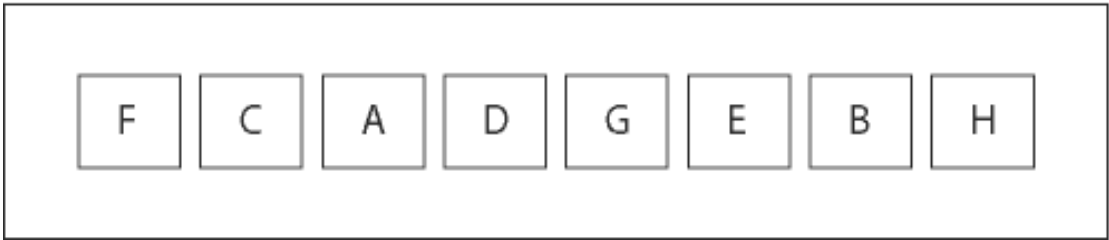


Figure 1.6.3 Non linear narrative structure for *Pulp Fiction*

As shown in the figure above, *Pulp Fiction* uses entirely a non linear narrative approach. The movie starts somewhere around scene (F) in which it captures the audience’s attention (hook) during the scene at the diner where the two young couple robbers plan on robbing the diner. We can see later at the end of the movie, that the first scene is related to the last scene (H). As discussed earlier, *Pulp Fiction* utilizes the three act structure which includes ‘hook’ and plot points but used it in an unconventional way to story tell.

Similar to *Pulp Fiction*, *Memento* also uses non linear narrative structure in portraying the movie. However, *Memento* uses the *reverse chronological* order but still maintains the viewer’s attention in understanding the film.

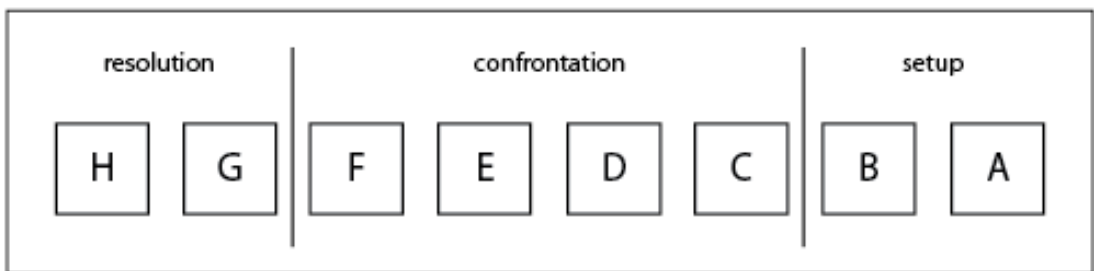


Figure 1.6.4 Reverse chronological order for *Memento*

Figure 1.6.4 shows the reverse narrative structure of the main plot with its conclusion being revealed in the early part of the movie, and the use of

few aspects of the film being shown more than once, makes the viewers feel confuse but the closer the film gets to an end, the less the viewers are confused. The narrative structure are cleverly constructed that it allows the audiences to navigate the film itself and also requires multiple viewings.

1.7 Importance of the research

This research is intended to create an understanding towards the topic and the many elements that is used in creating a non linear narrative film. This research is also aimed serve the purpose of non linear narrative to create understanding for the audience and create awareness towards the use of non linear narrative in fictional films.

1.8 Project Scope

In order to accomplish this non linear narrative research dissertation, the researcher tend to narrow down the scope of this project and focus solely on Hollywood films such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino), *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu) and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan).

The researcher intends to examine the style and learn the main characteristics that make non linear narrative so distinctive through insightful

research of the directors who used non linear narrative technique in their film. Besides that, the researcher also aims to verify the most common elements for a non linear narrative film.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This literature review is a compilation of publications that has been done on the field of non linear narrative in a film. Also included are sources collected from diverse sources such as journals, books, films and web pages. The purpose of this literature review is to present a summary of what is and is not known about the topic and to have a better understanding on the basic concepts of narratives and non linear narrative in particular.

2.2 Narratology

In understanding a film narrative, a spectator employs top-down and bottom-up cognitive processes to transform data on the *screen* into a *diegesis* – a world – that contains a particular *story*, or sequence of events. “Story” data takes two forms: declarative knowledge, (“what” happens) and procedural knowledge (“how” it is witnessed and known) (Branigan, 1992).

The story becomes a narrative or a narration when the story is placed on a medium and is viewed by spectators. Story is a chronologic ordering of events related causally while the method of presentation of a story is called narration. This is possible after the story is edited determining which part of the story should be told and how it should be told. Narrative and narration can be distinguished as the collection of the elements of a story and the navigation between the elements of the story respectively.

2.3 What is Narrative?

Humans have always found the urge to narrate and communicate their experiences to others through various mediums (Thuresson, 1998, p.5). According to Thuresson, a researcher on Elements of Narration in a Digital Environment says that in general, a narrative is a linear, organized, uniform progression of

ideas. Narrative is “chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2005, p.69).

2.4 Elements of a Narrative

A narrative has certain elements such as

- **Action:** the events of the story
- **Characters:** the enactors of the story
- **Setting:** the location of the story
- **Perspective:** is the way the story elements are told

(Tomaszewski, 2005).

2.5 Components of a Narrative

According to Thuresson (1998), “Narrative includes five basic components. They are spatiality, temporality, causality, dramaturgy and personification. In simpler terms a narrative takes place in a certain location (spatiality), at a certain time or within a certain time frame (temporality), has characters which perform certain actions (causality), the actions which the characters perform are arranged in a sequence (dramaturgy) and all these are received by the audience who identifies with the events that has happened

(personification)”. Not all the elements are present neither in narratives always nor in the same degrees (Thuresson, 1998, p.5).

2.5.1 Spatiality

A narrative has to take place in a location which can either be a real one or an abstract one. Though location plays an important part in books and non digital medium to draw the reader into the situation the role of the same in digital media can't be discounted. The linear narrative details about the history of the plot and has a strict time line while a non linear narrative doesn't employ a time line and is more a reflection of a particular moment. “Impossible space leads to perceptual problems of a new kind that force the spectator to reconsider prior hypotheses about time and causality.” (Branigan, 1992, p.44)

As stated by Edward Branigan, caution should be exercised when using the space or the environment in the narrative as there are chances that the viewer might be confused about the story or the story might become patchy. Certain elements of the space or environment can be utilized to effectively increase the potentiality of the narrative.

2.5.2 Temporality

“The temporal relations in the fibula is derived be inference; the viewer fits schemata to the cues proffered by the narration. This process affects three aspects of time: the order of events, their frequency, and their duration. (Bordwell, 1985)

Temporality is the incidence of an event or a sequence of events within a time frame. Temporality in films is achieved through single images presented one after another within equal time intervals (Thuresson, 1998, p.6). However, the temporality between the successive frames is less effective as the images repeat the concept of time only indirectly. According to Arnheim (1957), “the fact that two sequences follow each other on the screen does not indicate in itself that they should be understood as following each other in time.” (Arnheim, 1957). Also the concept of time in a narrative in films can be divided into “story time” and “actual time”.

2.5.3 Causality

Causal relationship between the various events is very important in a film narrative. It is the required force which brings together events that are ordered by both temporally and spatially. In simpler words, the actions of certain