

Media Studies - Narrative & Characterisation

TRISTAN TODOROV (1939-) AND VLADIMIR PROPP (1895-1970)

Todorov, a Bulgarian literary theorist, suggests that most narratives start with *a state of equilibrium* in which life is “normal” and protagonists happy. This state of normality is disrupted by an outside force, which has to be fought against in order to return to a state of equilibrium. The model can easily be applied to a wide range of films.

Propp, a Russian critic and literary theorist, analysed 100 Russian fairy tales in the 1920s. He proposed in ‘The Morphology of the Folk Tale’ that it was possible to classify the characters and their actions into clearly defined roles and functions (8 character roles and 31 narrative functions). In other words Darth Vader and The Joker would not be seen as having individual characteristics, but both having the role of 'villain'.

These ideas about narrative are usually adhered to in “mainstream” Hollywood cinema. Films such as *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) fit Propp's model precisely.

Art films or so called “European” films have often been at odds with this traditional narrative structure and a significant number of more recent films from North America such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1996) do not follow it

The model is useful, however, as it highlights the similarities between seemingly quite different stories.

Vladimir Propp's Character Roles

- The hero (seeks something)
- The villain (opposes the hero)
- The donor (helps the hero by providing a magic object)
- The dispatcher (sends the hero on his way)
- The false hero (falsely assuming the role of hero)
- The helper (gives support to the hero)
- The princess (the reward for the hero, but also needs to be protected from the villain)
- Her father

Propp's Narrative Functions

Note: Narratives do not have to include all the functions, but they should always be in the order listed.

Preparation

- A member of a family leaves home
- A prohibition or rule is imposed on the hero
- This prohibition or rule is broken
- The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance
- The villain learns something about his victim
- The villain tries to deceive the victim to get possession of him or his belongings
- The victim unknowingly helps the villain by being deceived or influenced by the villain

Complication

- The villain harms a member of the family
- A member of the family lacks or desires something
- This lack or misfortune is made known; the hero is given a request or command, and he goes or is sent on a mission or quest
- The seeker (often the hero) plans action against the villain

Transference

- The hero leaves home
- The hero is tested, attacked, interrogated, and, as a result, receives either a magical agent or a helper
- The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor
- The hero uses the magical agent
- The hero is transferred to the general location of the object of his mission or quest

Struggle

- The hero and villain join in direct combat
- The hero is branded
- The villain is defeated
- The initial misfortune or lack is set right

Return

- The hero returns
- The hero is pursued
- The hero is rescued from pursuit
- The hero arrives home or elsewhere and is not recognised
- A false hero makes false claims
- A difficult task is set for the hero
- The task is accomplished

Recognition

- The hero is recognised
- The false hero/villain is exposed
- The false hero is transformed
- The villain is punished
- The hero is married and crowned.

Either:

Discuss in detail the characters and narrative from two Hollywood, mainstream films that you are familiar with, showing how Prop's theories are justified.

Or:

Discuss two contrasting recent films you are familiar with showing how one can be seen to adopt Prop's narrative structure (and character roles) and the other doesn't.