



Story Elements in Film

Transcript

- Narrator: Film. The magical combination of moving image and sound is a form of storytelling enjoyed around the globe. Like the written narrative, different story elements combine to create the fictional media narrative. So let's look at some of the key story elements by comparing and contrasting two Australian films: *The Dressmaker* and *Animal Kingdom*.
- In the opening sequences of a film, we enter the world we will inhabit for the next couple of hours.
- Thug 1: Hey, hey, hey! Whoa, whoa, whoa, brother.
- Narrator: Through elements, including the mise-en-scène, acting, camera techniques and editing, the opening sequence, or 'set up', presents us with narrative possibilities. Where will this film take us? *Animal Kingdom*, produced in 2010, is set in Melbourne's criminal underworld.
- Thug 1: Got a staring problem, mate? What the fuck you looking at? You're a fucking animal.
- Narrator: We're in a small flat. An ordinary domestic scene. A schoolboy and his mother watch a game show.
- Paramedic: Did you call an ambulance?
- Narrator: The banality of the scene is shattered by the arrival of paramedics. The true nature of the situation is revealed. We learn of J's situation.
- J: Mum's gone and OD'd and she's died, so...
- Smurf: Are you okay?
- J: Yeah, I'm okay. Sorry, I probably should've said it a bit slower, and not just gone and blurt it out like that. I don't really know what I'm supposed to do now.
- Smurf: Where is she?
- J: They took her away. The ambulance came...
- Narrator: His sweet, smiling grandma arrives.
- Smurf: Oh, puffed. Got your bags packed?





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Narrator: And we see lions. A symbol of power, strength and violence. Top of the animal kingdom. Followed by blurry, black and white stills of an armed robbery, coupled with unsettling music. All these details combine to inform us that we're in a crime drama that's more gritty than glamorous.

We've established the genre. Themes are there, too. One theme is fear.

J: I didn't realise it at the time, but they were all scared. Even if they didn't show it.

Narrator: We are introduced to the main characters in the crime family. There is a foreshadowing that sets up the plot.

J: Everyone felt safe around Baz. He'd punch your head off if you got in the way. If he was in the middle of an armed rob and...

Baz: Nine-four.

J: ...you got between him and the door, he'd put you on the ground and not think twice about it.

Cathy: Morning, baby.

Narrator: We sense we are about to witness a tragedy unfold.

J: Even if they're all having to do what crooks do all the time which is block out the thing they must know. They must know it.

Cathy: Yeah. Sure. All right. I'll pick you up at Chatty's then. No, no. We'll go to the...

J: Which is that crooks always come undone. Always. One way or another.

Narrator: The opening to *The Dressmaker*, the 2015 comedy drama set in a small country town, introduces different story elements.

We open on a bus in the country. The middle of nowhere. It cuts to washed-out footage, children in the schoolyard, a past trauma for our unseen protagonist, we wonder. The music recalls the score to a western. We get the sense that this is a dramatic film. A 1950's bus, telling us the time period the film is set in. In a small country town shrouded in darkness, our protagonist steps off the bus. She is stylishly dressed, sophisticated. Her Singer sewing machine is centre of frame, like a case holding a weapon. In true western style, she takes out a cigarette. She lights it.





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- Narrator: The drama has been undermined. The action establishes her somewhat humorously, in the tradition of the gunslinger who's come back to town for revenge.
- Tilly: I'm back you bastards.
- Sue: *The Dressmaker* is many things. It is a comedy. It's a drama. It's a love story. It's a revenge story. But its emotional heart is about a mother-daughter relationship, and that is the reconciliation of Tilly with her mother, Molly.
- Molly: They nearly killed me when they sent you away.
- Narrator: The world has been set up. We then follow the development of the characters' relationships and sometimes new characters are introduced, creating more narrative possibilities.
- Mae: Myrtle Dunnage is back.
- Teddy: Haven't seen her since she was a kid.
- Barney: She moved.
- Mae: They sent her away, Barney, for the good of us all.
- Narrator: The producer of *The Dressmaker* talks about the development of the narrative.
- Sue: Tilly does not want to be back in this town. The townspeople want her there even less, but they realise she's got something they want and that is she can make those gowns.
- Narrator: Different story elements combine to give depth and texture to the narrative.
- Miss Harradine: She's back!
- Man: Jesus!
- Miss Harradine: The murderess is back!
- Marion: In *The Dressmaker*, fashion is used as a tool for, um, revenge and, um, to work out what actually happened in a past life and to extract the information from the town.
- Narrator: Narrative development in *Animal Kingdom* has a less obvious story arc.





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Baz: Our game? It's over, mate. It's getting too hard. It's a fucking joke. Your know, Craig's making a fucking fortune with the drug thing. You saw the house he's bought. I don't know I got that in me. It's grubby, you know? Grubby business. The stock market, mate, there's a resources boom.

Narrator: Baz wants out of the criminal world. A reoccurring theme of the genre. He wants out of armed robbery and doesn't want to deal drugs. We realise he has some moral code – a good guy in a bad world. Is Baz going straight? What does this mean for J? Then...

Baz: Aww shit, guys, you just missed him.

Detective: That's all right. I like you better. He's got a gun!

Narrator: The narrative goes in a different direction. An abrupt change in direction and narrative possibilities have opened up. Before the closing sequence brings the narrative to a conclusion, there is a climax in the story and our emotional engagement with it.

Conflict comes to a head and is resolved. The protagonist's transformation is all but complete. Throughout *Animal Kingdom*, J has been trying to work out where he fits. Is he on the side of good or bad? Who can he trust to protect him?

The climax is understated. The emotional tension builds but there is no big shootout.

Detective Leckie: Have you worked out where you fit?

Narrator: We don't see Pope and Darren's trial, rather learn of their acquittal through the TV interview. And our protagonist?

Smurf: Well a young kid, like J, gets the idea you can't even trust the law to work properly? The justice system, yeah?

Narrator: There is nowhere safe for J to go. He returns to the family to deal out his own justice.

Pope: It's a crazy fucking world.

Narrator: The film is open-ended. We wonder what will become of J. Is he the next Pope?

Cause and effect is a basic narrative function that drives the narrative forward. How characters react to events with the choices they make determine what events will follow. In *Animal Kingdom*, J's mother OD-ing set off the whole narrative chain.





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- J: This is where I was and this is what I was doing. After my mum died, this was just the world I got thrown into.
- Narrator: One action sets off a chain of events that informs us about the character. Character and its development is a major story element in any film.
- It fosters emotional engagement for us as we identify, empathise, or are repulsed by them.
- Thug 1: Hey, hey, hey! Whoa, whoa, whoa, brother. Just chill bro. Fuck this! Fuck outta here, man!
- Ben: Character is really what character does and says, you know? And reacts to and so then you find it.
- J: Yeah. I'm okay. Umm...is it okay if I move back here?
- Narrator: J's character is established and developed through elements including the mise-en-scène, setting, James Frecheville's acting style and J's narration.
- J: Mum kept me away from her family because she was scared.
- Narrator: Let's look at the development of Tilly's character and her relationship with Teddy in *The Dressmaker*.
- Jocelyn: Tilly is a beautiful, accomplished, highly creative haute couture designer who's been living in Paris all through the '30s and '40s, and now it's the 1950's and she has had some pretty tragic events happen to her, and she decides to go home.
- Coach: Outside, outside, outside!
- Teddy: Don't look at her! Eyes on the ball.
- Liam: And the first time we...they meet is at a football game, and Tilly comes to this football game, is wearing a beautiful dress and looking stunning, and distracting all the players on the ground.
- Teddy: Dunnybum's come home.





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- Narrator: Tilly is a strong woman determined to stir up trouble. Her glamour and sophistication help to distance herself from who she once was.
- The relationship with Teddy also helps to understand more about the protagonist, Tilly.
- Teddy: I've decided you didn't come home to help us win the Grand Final. I reckon you came home for one of two things: bloody revenge or...me.
- Kate: The relationship is really...it's really very, very sweet and tender. He's a sincere man. He has no airs, no graces. You know, he looks like a right scruff pot most of the time, but he's utterly genuine.
- Jocelyn: The beautiful thing about the love story in *The Dressmaker* is it's between two people that couldn't be more different.
- Teddy: I think we should run away together, Til.
- Tilly: Huh, what?
- Teddy: Yeah, you and me. Forget all about Dungatar. Leave them to themselves and fate.
- Jocelyn: Tilly has lived in Europe. She, uh, she's classy, she's worldly and she meets this footballer who is the hero of the local town.
- Narrator: Other characters serve the narrative to help the protagonist achieve their goal.
- Tilly: Gertrude Pratt, what's the matter with you? I hear the footballer's dance is Saturday night. I could make you something.
- Gertrude: A dress can't change anything.
- Tilly: Watch and learn, Gert. Watch and learn.
- Marion: Gertrude becomes Tilly's first tool of...in her, mmm, revenge I suppose. How to actually get the information she wants from the town.
- Man: Who is that?
- Muriel: Oh.
- Sgt Horatio Farrat: Stunning.





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- Marion: And she uses Gertrude. Gertrude had gone to school with her. Gertrude was slightly unfortunate in her shape, but she transforms Gertrude and she's the person that she uses to tantalise other people from the town to get the information she wants etcetera.
- Narrator: A lot of character exposition is about how they relate to each other. In *Animal Kingdom*, J's interactions with other characters, like Baz, tell us that he is trying to work out where he fits.
- Baz: Your hands go anywhere near your ass or your cock, you wash them after. Jeez, go on. A bit of soap. Get a lather going. Rinse. All right, that's enough. Now stick them under there.
- J: I'm invisible. These things never see me.
- David: There's something very warm and paternal about that guy. And it felt really important to me that, in this world of criminals that J walks into, that there be one, at least in Baz, who kind of offers an image, as skewed as that image is, of what it might mean to be a good criminal, you know? To be a good person in a bad world.
- Baz: Hey!
- Smurf: Are you all right, love? J?
- Pope: Okay, tell them. Tell them.
- J: I'm all right.
- Pope: You sure? Guess who am I.
- J: Uncle Pope.
- Narrator: The character of Baz is in stark contrast to Pope, the bad person in a bad world. He is remote and unfathomable.
- Very few films take place in real time. Time is compressed so that events, in particular key dramatic events, occur within the film. In a conventional narrative, the sequence of events unfold in a linear fashion. Like they do in *Animal Kingdom*.
- Tilly: We both remember Mr Almanac.
- Narrator: In *The Dressmaker*, however, flashbacks are used to develop Tilly's character, understand her motivation, and build dramatic tension as the mystery is solved.
- Mr Almanac: Your mother's a slut and you're a bastard.





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- Narrator: 'Setting' refers to the location and time period in which the story unfolds.
- Tilly: Do you remember Miss Harradine? The schoolteacher?
- Narrator: While *The Dressmaker* is essentially a comedy-drama, the setting adds the western element to the narrative.
- Molly: You never came back for me. You came back for them. Well, go on, make 'em their dresses. Make 'em think they're classy. They'll still hate you.
- Roger: Tilly Dunnage comes back with revenge in her heart. It's like the gunslinger coming back into town, you know. And, uh, she wanted a slightly Western look to the town.
- Narrator: In contrast with *The Dressmaker*, the urban crime drama *Animal Kingdom* open in suburbia, with a gritty, realistic feel to it.
- Darren: Ah, mum. Fuck, seriously?
- Craig: The fuck is going on? Who said you could bring that noise-thing in my house?
- Smurf: It's yours.
- Craig: It is not. Bullshit.
- Smurf: Yes it is, I found it under the sink. Do you want a juice?
- Narrator: And Craig's home, where much of the action takes place, was an important location.
- David: It was one of those houses where I just walked in and I, suddenly, I could see all of the scenes of the movie. Um, and it had enough space to shoot in. And it feels a little bit like a cave. I always wanted this house to feel...feel like a dark cave in which bad things happen.
- Narrator: As we've seen, film is an incredibly complex art form. The magic works when the relationship between story elements comes together so naturally, we barely even notice them.

