

Notes on Narrative InfoVis Spring 2011

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed. The narrative impulse is as old as our oldest literature: myth and folktale appear to be stories we recount in order to explain and understand where no other form of explanation will work. The desire and the competence to tell stories also reaches back to an early stage in the individual's development, to about the age of three, when a child begins to show the ability to put together a narrative in coherent fashion and especially the capacity to recognize narratives, to judge their well-formedness.

Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*

Narrative: a chain of events in cause-effect relationships occurring in time and space. Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, 1993

...the form of the story [not the content of the story]. Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 1980

... is derived from the Latin *narrare*—'to relate,' [and] rooted in the Greek *gnō*, to know.

...narrative relates all of its parts to each other.... Michael Roemer, *Telling Stories*, 1995

Rhetoric: the art of persuasion, and by extension, the organization of discourse.... Peter Brooks, *Law's Stories*, 1996

Visual rhetoric: the social construction of the visual.

"Visual rhetoric" is an emergent key term being used to describe the attention being devoted to the symbolic and performative dimensions of visual culture, including everything from cartography to photography and from architecture and interior design to public memorials and museums.

University of Iowa conference, http://www.uiowa.edu/~commstud/visual_rhetoric/ 2001

Context: the circumstances in which an event occurs; a setting; that part of an entire situation which explains another part.... Jacques Barzun, *Simple & Direct*, 1975

To tell what a thing is, you place it in terms of something else. This idea of locating or placing, is implicit in [the] word for definition: to define, or determine a thing... to mark its boundaries.... to define a thing in terms of its context we must [also] define it in terms of what it is not.

Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 1952

Non-Narrative Formal Systems

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, in *Film Art*, distinguish four broad types of non-narrative form in film:

Categorical Rhetorical Abstract Associational

Instructional films, political advertisements, TV news programs, experimental films, etc. may not contain any explicit 'conventional' stories at all, but use non-narrative forms to sell, explain and communicate their various messages.

Categorical films, as the name suggests, divide a subject into parts, or categories.

Rhetorical form presents an argument and lays out evidence to support it.

Abstract form draws the audience's attention to abstract visual and sonic qualities of the things depicted—shape, color, aural rhythm, and the like.

Associational form expresses an attitude, or evokes a mood through the juxtaposition of loosely connected images, suggesting an emotion or a concept to the spectator.

The differences among types of nonnarrative form are important because each type will call upon different viewing conventions and will prompt different types of expectations in the spectator. If we know we are watching a rhetorical film that is trying to convince us to support a certain governmental policy, we may adopt a skeptical attitude, testing the evidence and perhaps ultimately rejecting it. But as we watch an abstract film, we may become more contemplative, watching shapes and colors pass before us. Even though we may seldom consciously classify the films we watch as "rhetorical" or "associational," we do differentiate among different types of films, and we have a range of viewing skills upon which we can draw, depending on which is appropriate.