



Film as a Narrative

Dr. Sujit Tripathi
I/C. Principal,
K. C. Sheth Arts College,
Birpur, Mahisagar, Gujarat (India)

Film, audiovisual language on the big cinema screen and the little television screen is a wonderful device for story-telling, a marvelous medium of narration. We need hardly extol the narrative strength of film. We have known it since the beginning of 20th century when film originated, and how it rapidly dominated, even penetrated and shaped the consciousness of 20th century spectators is patent. What we need to examine is the way film acts as a narrative. What are the devices by which a story is “told” in the film medium? The following notes attempt to answer this fundamental question.

Of course, we can immediately turn around to remark that a story in film is not “told” but “shown” directly for spectators’ eyes and “made heard” sensuously and directly through their ears. The order in which the sights and sounds are edited for the spectator in the finished film, enables him to apprehend the narrative in the film. We are suggesting that the experience of film – let us call it cinemate experience, parallel to literature if you like – is very different from the experience of any other medium. Its special quality is the direct life-likeness. It shows us what happened without appearing to “tell” us. Is it likely that our thinking of a story being “told” in a film is an aspect of the pre-cinema primary of verbal language as a tool of understanding? Notice that for the same reason perhaps we have to write them as an image along with the other things in the room. Hence, the illusion of the viewer being “in” the same space is very much lower in televiewing experience. The TV image is received as an image in another space and is emotionally much less involving.

Let us recapitulate the concept of narration: silent cinema demonstrated that expressive visual shots edited in a proper chain (sometimes with use of inter-titles) could tell stories; the addition of sound extended further the expressive possibilities. Now the whole world of sound, human speech, environmental noises and music could also enter the expressive compositions of the film language. The meaning of words as spoken with stresses and nuances of intonation could become a part of the narration in the film. Atmospheric sounds would contribute ambience. They could also take the story forward and act as motivating elements. Music could enhance the underlying feeling-tones inherent in the visual image. Hence narration in sound film was not merely a question of narration through words but a new and more complex material to be formed into a flow.

The introduction of sound and speech produced a new relationship between literary text and film depiction. Not only could sound contribute to a cohesive audio-visual narration, It could also detract, undercut, produce effects such as irony, echo, allusion and parody. Thus the introduction of sound into film substantially extended and enriched the narrative language. It made possible further dimensions of film such as allegiance to linguistic text or criticism of that text. The jump from movie to talkie is probably comparable to the enormous jump from still to moving pictures.

The principles of producing chains of visual shots through editing were developed by masters of silent films like Porter, Griffith, and Eisenstein. These principles derived from an understanding of human psychology: in essence, the technique of editing was to emulate the ways in which ordinary human beings in ordinary, everyday perception make sense of what they see and hear. This technique aims not merely at some coherence or structure, but rather at very specific desired effects. Which succession of visual shots would create the desired events and effect? This is the basic question in film narrative. The content of a shot and the total created event have a part-whole relationship. Let us take an elementary example, which too is fraught with many necessary decisions. If we want to show the cutting of a tree, how many shots should we take? Where should we place the camera for a shot? In what order should we join the shots so that the event of the cutting of a tree would be created for perception by the spectators.

There could be several ways of doing it. First, could use the simple chronological order of the event itself, the beginning, the middle and the end, filled out with as many shots as required for the desired degree of continuity of perception. In shot No. 1, I see a tree. In shot No. 2, I see two persons coming with axes and striking them sharply into the trunk of the tree. In shot No. 3, I see the tree as it falls, and so on. The three (or more) shots would connect to constitute a narrative that two persons cut the tree with their axes.

Events within themselves have chronological order, but they link with other events through other relationships as well. Hence, in the total context, other orders may also be involved. For example, if shot No. 1 shows a man running on a pavement, and shot No. 2 shows a bus slowing down at a bus stop, the two shots edited together would narrate that the man is running to catch the bus. Here the connection is made through understanding of motivation and causality.



Apart from the chrono-logic order, editing can also create narration following the psycho-logic order. Suppose the order of shots in a sequence is as follows. A man sitting in a garden looks around; Trees/More Trees/Rolling lawn/More flowers/Two Flowers/More trees/More Trees /More Flowers. This order of shots will make sense because the succession emulates an aspect of an ordinary, everyday experience. Everyone is familiar with the “browsing” mode of receiving impressions of an environment. Add sound to this sequence, for example: if on the sound track you hear a snatch of a romantic song or dialogue which is associated with an earlier romantic event in this garden, the narration of the scene moves into the inner life of the man sitting in the garden. This possibility of packing in this manner, within the visual shots and sound fragments, further levels of psychological narration is a special aspect of film language. The principles of editing, thus, emulate the ordinary everyday ways of making sense. This is why, despite the complexity of their editing construction, most film narratives are followed easily by any spectator. Millions of people do it all the time. Film narration, that is to say, like literary narration has evolved dependable methods, devices and clichés which possess the kind of availability which popular novels possess.

Let us get back to the narrative powers of the basic units of film, the shot and the sound fragments. When the camera photographs a character, his body features will “narrate” something about him; his clothes will “tell” about his socio-economic level; the environment of his house, which will inevitably get into the visual composition, will “reveal” the relationship of the character with the things and objects in the house; when the character moves about engaged in some action in shot, the depiction of his movements will “identify” the tone of these relationships and interactions. The challenging graphic design due to camera movement, or the movement of the character within the shot is an unemployed youth, every element that will enter the shot is would convey some aspect of the character’s unemployed status. If he belongs to a middle class family, the environment has to “show” it; the walls, floors, hangings, the objects in the room, all these should have a “middle-class-ness about them. Such micro-composition of a shot is the very basis of cinematic narration. The camera can only show. Hence it must “show” what it has to “say”. And of course, the camera has many versatile devices for doing this: viewing positions, angles, lenses, lighting, patterns of movement, colour, textures, etc. The faces and bodies and the objects are so composed, not only in relation to each other, but more crucially in relation to the camera, that they become visually articulate. In other words, they start “speaking” the film language.

Likewise, for sound: What kind of sound environment could the middle class unemployed youth have in the house? Which sound would be close? Which distant? The microphone would pick up those sounds which would contribute significantly to the mode of existence of this unemployed youth at his point in the fiction. If verbal language enters the film composition through the character’s speech, the words are thus embedded in the visual environment, and properties of words, while they are on one level restricted to the concrete visual environment, on other levels they will contribute both symbolic and abstract elements to the total narration of that unit of the film.

Someone asked Kurosawa what he wanted to say in the film “Rashomon”. Kurosawas replied that if he were able to say in verbal language what he wanted to say in the film, he would have said in words and not made the film. Narration in cinema is narration through the film language, the brief history and syntax of which we have attempted to outline in this paper.

The problem is that the life-likeness of the concrete visual language of film encourages an illusion in the spectators’ minds; that the events are occurring right in front of them. However, not the events but the unfolding of events is the narrative of a film. Film language is created by the objects and events photographed and by deployment of visual and sound machinery, and then, “edited” to become one whole. It is absolutely necessary to emphasize that in this art form, “what” is narrated cannot be separated from “the way” it is narrated; this is the cardinal principle by which film language functions and according to this principle, therefore, film language must be “read”.