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I. The elements of narrative

1. Narrative is the presentation of an event or a series of events: the presentation may be in words (novel, short story, epic poem...) or in some other medium (drama, cinema, comics...). The two components of narrative are **story** and **discourse** ('*storia e racconto*')

story is the events (real or fictitious) that occur within a certain span of time (chronology), and the settings and characters involved in them;

discourse (or narrative discourse) is the way the story is presented.

The same story can be presented through different expressive means (linguistic text or comic strip) and in different ways of the same medium (narrated by the protagonist or by an external narrator, in the chronological order of the events or through flashbacks). When stories are transposed from one medium to another – from novel to film –, what changes is the narrative discourse.

Take this fable by Aesop...

A Lion, unable from old age and infirmities to provide himself with food by force, resolved to do so by artifice. He returned to his den, and lying down there, pretended to be sick. The beasts expressed their sorrow, and came one by one to his den, where the Lion devoured them. After many of the beasts had thus disappeared, came the Fox, who had understood the trick; she stopped outside the cave and asked him how he was. "Bad," replied the Lion, and asked her to come in. "I would have come in," replied the Fox "if I hadn't noticed that there are many prints of beasts going in, but none coming out." Thus shrewd men from clues foresee dangers and escape them.

...and think of the ways in which it might be re-told:

1. changing the narrator: the fox pleasedly recounts one of her feats;
2. changing the order of presentation: from fox approaching the den to lion explaining the trick;
3. creating suspense: omit the detail that the fox has understood the trick;
4. varying the moral: "If you do not want to be the victim, learn to be the detective";
5. dramatizing the story: dialogues only;
6. adapting it for other media: comic strip or animation (with or without words).

Notice that in 5 you would use option 2, whereas in 6 more options are open.

But we might change the story itself by transforming setting, characters and genre – from a beast fable to a horror story: a serial killer, a Bluebeard, entices his victims into his house and kills them, until an alert girl comes along, starts noticing the clues and saves her life.

Reduced to its bare plot (a neglected daughter and sister), Jane Austen's *Persuasion* resembles a famous fairy tale.

2. Elements of discourse I: voice, focalization, order ('voce, focalizzazione, ordine').

Voice: who narrates? Verbal narratives need narrators (but see **Gallery 1**), while drama, film and comics don't (see **Gallery 2**). The basic distinction is whether the narrator is a character in the story (homodiegetic or internal or first-person narrator) or not (heterodiegetic or external or third-person narrator).

The homodiegetic narrator may be the protagonist of the story or a secondary character. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) has the sub-title 'An Autobiography'; whereas in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900) the protagonist is first introduced by a heterodiegetic narrator, then the narrative of his life is entrusted to an eye-witness, Marlow, whose tale includes other characters' tales, also the protagonist's.

Heterodiegetic narrators have varying degrees of prominence. They may characterize the characters and comment on the story, as is the case in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72), whose final words on the protagonist are a philosophical generalization:

...the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

Or they may simply report the characters' actions and thoughts: the narrator of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* gives no independent characterization besides what the characters think of themselves or of each other; his contribution is linguistic, in that he uses his own language to formulate the characters' impressions and thoughts.

The choice between homodiegesis and heterodiegesis is one of distance from or involvement in the story. Homodiegesis is telling from the inside, and the telling itself can be part of the story and/or of the characterization. A further difference is authentication: internal narrators may be unreliable, as is the narrator of McGrath's *Spider* (**Gallery 3c**).

Focalization: from whose point of view is the story narrated? In first-person narrations the point of view is necessarily restricted and fixed: the narrator can only tell what he/she knows or has learned or can conjecture about events and other characters (and authors often force first-person narrators to eavesdrop in order to provide them with more information than they could possibly have).

External narrators have more options. They can adopt a fixed and restricted point of view by picking up a character, usually the protagonist, and only narrating what he/she does or thinks or the events in which he/she is present (with small variations this is the case of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*). Or they can adopt a variable point of view by ranging from character to character and telling their experiences and their views of the world and of each other, as in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Or they can use zero focalization: this is when the heterodiegetic narrator does not confine himself to the points of view of the characters, but tells more than they know or participate in ('omniscience').

Order. To begin at the beginning and end at the end is only one of the options: the chronological order of the events does not have to be the order in which they are narrated. In general we expect the narrative discourse to start at any point of the story and, while pushing forward to the end, go back in time to retrieve previous events through analepsis (or flashback in films). It is a principle as old as the *Odyssey* (**Gallery 6**).

Less frequent is prolepsis, or jumping forward in time to anticipate future events.

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice, thus the beginning of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967; English translation, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*): the episode of the firing squad will be resumed 150 pages later, one third through the novel.

3. Elements of discourse II: ellipsis, summary, scene ('ellissi, sommario, scena').

Ellipsis is when a part of the story is omitted in the narration: "I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence," says the narrator of *Jane Eyre* (by Charlottë Brontë, 1847), the protagonist herself, jumping from her tenth year of age to her eighteenth. Parts of the story can also be skipped over by briefly summarizing the events: this is **summary**. If, on the other hand, an event is narrated in detail, we have the **scene**: the term, taken from drama, suggests that the narration lasts as long as the event itself.

Ellipsis, summary and scene contribute to the rhythm of the narrative discourse: ellipsis leaves out irrelevant or uninteresting events, or events that can be inferred by the reader, whereas summary speeds up narration and scene slows it down. The rhythm of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* is made of an alternation of summaries and scenes, the narration extending over several months; the rhythm of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, on the contrary, is rather uniform, being only made of scenes,

since the narration extends over one day and is concerned with the characters' streams of consciousness.

4. Beginning, ending, closure.

Narrative discourse has a beginning-when and a beginning-how.

Beginning-when is the chronological point of the story from which the discourse begins: the *Odyssey* begins in the last of Ulysses' ten-year voyage back home. **Beginning-how** is the way in which the discourse actually starts, its first sentences: the *Odyssey* sets off with the ritual invocation to the Muse.

Beginning-how can be very diverse, but there are a few basic types connected with the components of the story: the discourse can start

a. by describing the setting:

Except for the Marabar caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely...

(*A Passage to India*, by Edward Morgan Forster, 1924);

b. by presenting the characters:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her...

(*Emma*, by Jane Austen, 1816);

c. *in medias res*, that is by plunging into the events without any preliminary description or presentation:

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and rain so penetrating, that further outdoor exercise was out of the question...

(*Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë, 1847);

d. the generalization is a further type:

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there...

(*The Go-Between*, by Lesley Poles Hartley, 1953).

Notice that in type **c** beginning-how and beginning-when coincide.

Beginning-when is also diverse for a number of reasons. A story may not have a definite beginning, and it may be more effective to start when events are well under way and then use analepsis to retrieve earlier ones when they are necessary; or it may have several beginnings if it intertwines several series of events. In his re-telling of the Bruneri-Canella case (**Gallery 15a**) Sciascia starts from the arrest of the impersonator, but he might have started from the disappearance of the true Canella. In narrating the similar story of Martin Guerre (**Gallery 15b**) Natalie Zemon Davis starts from the family history of one of the three protagonists. Deaglio, instead (**Gallery 15c**), starts with 'the story of the story', that is with how the story and its protagonist were re-discovered more than forty years later.

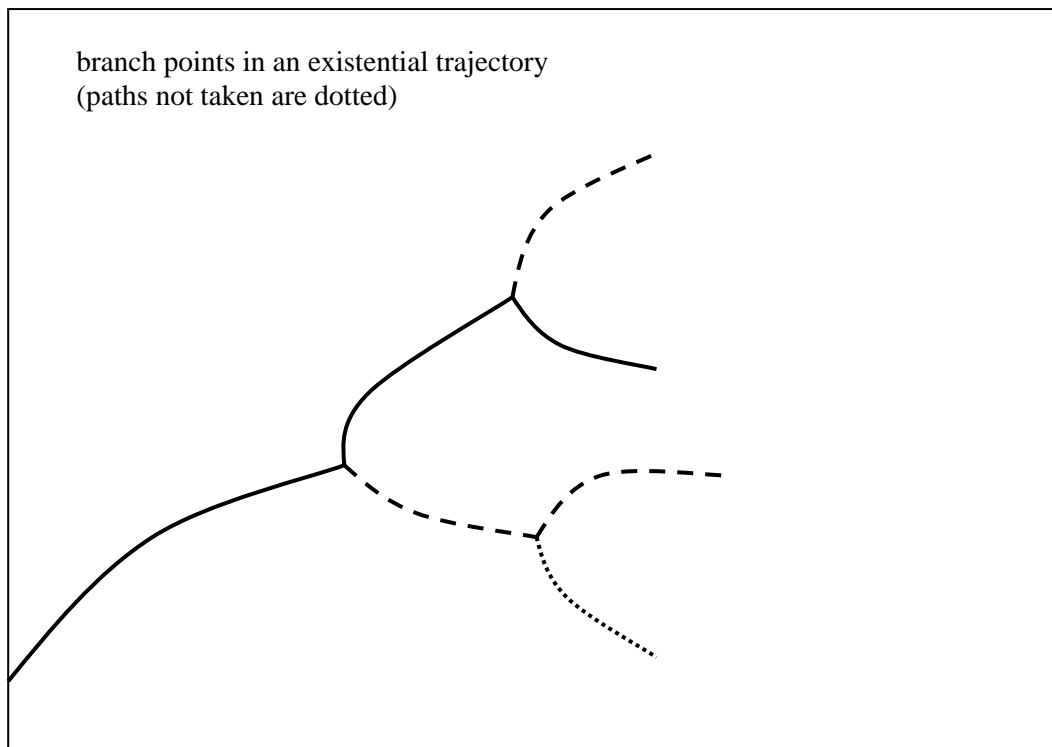
Notice the asymmetry of alignment: we don't expect the beginning of the discourse to coincide with the beginning of the story (the *Odyssey* principle), but we do expect the end of the discourse to coincide with the end of the story (and if the end of the story is anticipated, we expect the narration to go back to it and explain how it came about). The alignment of endings may not always occur: in *Pulp Fiction* (**Gallery 12**) the event that is chronologically last is narrated well before the end of the film, and in *Spider* (**Gallery 3c**) the last event to be narrated is not the last that occurred but the last that is remembered: and it is the crucial event of the story. These examples show that, whatever event is narrated last, the real alignment is between the end of the discourse and closure: closure

means completion, resolution, expectations satisfied, questions answered. We expect marriage at the end of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, and at the end of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* we expect to see whether the various threads will be brought together, and how; a detective story must close with the solution of the case.

Certain narratives deliberately avoid closure (see **Gallery 10**); others may have ambivalent closure: in *Il teatro della memoria* and *The Return Martin Guerre* (**Gallery 15a,b**) the judicial case is closed, but the psychological one is left open – how could the impersonation be so prompt and convincing? was Bertrande complicit in it? how could Giulia's belief overrule all evidence to the contrary?

5. Events

Events are changes of state: they are what the characters *do* (more or less intentionally: actions) or what *happens* to them (independently of their will: happenings). The events of a story do not have all the same importance: some events are turning points that make the story take one direction instead of another, others have no such effect; the former might be called singular events, the latter ordinary events. In Jane Austen's *Persuasion* two singular events are Anne's decision to give up Wentworth in 1806 (an action) and the set of circumstances that brings him back in 1814 (a happening). Mrs Dalloway's day, in Virginia Woolf's novel, is made up of ordinary events: the singular events of her past are re-lived in her thoughts. When a story takes one of two possible paths, the other remains unrealized and unnarrated (apart from the characters' speculations and regrets); but the stories in **Gallery 13** are made of the alternative possibilities branching from a singular event.



6. Table of story and discourse

		events		
	story	time	story	
		settings		
		characters		
narrative				beginning
		voice		ending
		focalization		closure
		order		
	discourse		discourse	
		ellipsis		
		summary		
		scene		

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- L. Doležel, *Heterocosmica. Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press 1998 (Italian trans., *Heterocosmica*, Milano, Bompiani 1999).

II. A gallery of notable narratives

1. The non-narrated story.

La scomparsa di Patò, by Andrea Camilleri (2000).

Antonio Patò mysteriously disappears while playing Judas in the Easter pageant of his Sicilian village: inquiries and conjectures follow. But there is no narrator to tell us this: the novel is in the form of a dossier collecting newspaper articles, reports by the Questura and by the Carabinieri, letters and other documents. Through this material, which is part of the story, the story narrates itself.

2. The voice-over.

Films do not need a narrator, but they may use one.

The Killing (director Stanley Kubrick, 1956: *Rapina a mano armata*), the story of a robbery at a race-track office, has a third-person narrator keeping track of the seven men carrying it out, each with his own task and time schedule, fitting into each other like ‘jigsaw puzzle pieces’.

In the opening sequence of *Sunset Boulevard* (director Billy Wilder, 1950: *Viale del tramonto*) we see police cars turning into a driveway and hear a voice saying that a murder has been reported; then we see a dead man floating face down in a swimming pool and realize that the voice-over is his: “Let’s go back about six months and find the day when it all started. I was living in...” The original opening was more macabre than that: it showed a dead body brought to the morgue and starting a conversation with the other corpses, saying that he has been murdered and found in a pool and then beginning the narration. This opening was scrapped because when it was shown for the first time the audience burst out laughing. The voice-over is kept throughout the film as a running commentary on the story.

A posthumous narrator is used also in *American Beauty* (director Sam Mendes, 2000): “...I’m 42 years old. In less than a year I’ll be dead... I don’t know that yet...” (notice the prolepsis).

The original release of *Blade Runner* (director Ridley Scott, 1982) was interspersed with the protagonist’s intrusive voice-over, which was omitted in the 1992 release (‘the director’s cut’): notice that the novel of which it is an adaptation – Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) – uses a heterodiegetic narrator.

3. Homodiegetic narrators.

a. *To Kill a Mocking-Bird*, by Harper Lee (1960).

“When he was nearly thirteen my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow.” This is the opening sentence of the novel, anticipating the end of the story: we will learn that the fracture is the outcome of an attempted murder, which in its turn is the consequence of the fact that the children’s father (Jem’s and the narrator’s), a lawyer, is entrusted with the defence of a black man charged with the rape of a white girl. The character who narrates the events in later years adopts her point of view at the time: how she – the pugnacious, precocious and loyal Jean Louise, nicknamed Scout, four years her brother’s junior – understood or misunderstood or learnt to understand what happened. And thus it is also the narration of what it is to grow up in a racist society (Alabama 1935).

The film (directed by Robert Mulligan, 1962: *Il buio oltre la siepe*) preserves the first-person narration as a voice-over.

b. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, by Agatha Christie (1926).

“A strange end to my manuscript. I meant to publish it some day as the history of one of Poirot’s failures!”, writes the narrator in the last chapter: he has narrated a murder case and its investigation

by Hercule Poirot omitting one crucial detail, that he himself is the murderer; but in the previous chapter he has been found out and has been left the way out of committing suicide, which he announces before closing the narration.

c. *Spider*, by Patrick McGrath (1990).

The narrator, a mentally disturbed man, shuttles between past and present – between present tense and past tense – reconstructing, through memory and conjecture, the tragic events of his boyhood. He is back in London, he says, after twenty years spent in Canada; and gradually he tells us that his father killed his mother and replaced her with a prostitute he had become infatuated with; then he jumps to the twenty years spent not in Canada but in a lunatic asylum in Sussex among the criminally insane, “because I’d murdered my mother”; finally he retrieves the memory of the crucial event, when by means of a rope contraption he turned on the gas knob and killed the prostitute...actually his mother, as we understand that there was no other woman in the story: he has spun his web-discourse out of his own schizophrenic mind.

Also a film directed by David Cronenberg (2002), with script by McGrath himself.

4. Multiple narrators.

a. *The Ring and the Book*, by Robert Browning (1868-69).

This verse novel tells of a trial for a murder case (Pompilia killed by her husband Guido) in ten monologues spoken by nine different characters who give their different versions or opinions (I and XII are the external narrator’s introduction and conclusion):

- I The Ring and the Book
- II Half-Rome
- III The Other Half-Rome
- IV Tertium Quid
- V Count Guido Franceschini
- VI Giuseppe Caponsacchi
- VII Pompilia
- VIII Dominus Hycinthus de Archangelis
- IX Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius
- X The Pope
- XI Guido
- XII The Book and the Ring

The Pope pronounces the truth of the case: the husband’s guilt and the wife’s innocence.

b. *Rashomon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa (1950).

This film also tells of a trial for a murder case, in which a samurai, his wife, a bandit and an eye-witness give four incompatible versions of the events:

- the bandit says that the wife accepted his sexual advances and then asked him to kill her husband;
- the wife says that, after the rape, she asked the samurai to kill her, but then she fainted and when she woke up she found her husband dead;
- the samurai, conjured up from the dead, says that, having been defeated by the bandit and betrayed by the wife, he committed suicide;
- the eye-witness says that, after the rape, the wife urged the two men to fight a duel and the samurai was killed.

No final truth is asserted.

5. The composite discourse.

The Blind Assassin, by Margaret Atwood (2000).

It is the story of two sisters and their tragically interlocked lives. The narration is made of three interwoven strands: [1] the older sister's first-person narration, which covers her long life and is left to her grandniece as a revelation of the truth; [2] newspaper and magazine articles reporting deaths, marriages and other social events; [3] a novel written by the younger sister and published posthumously by the older, which narrates in the third person a clandestine love story between two nameless characters, where at each tryst the man, a writer of pulp fiction and a political agitator living underground, narrates to the woman an episode of a story set in another dimension of space ('the blind assassin' is a character of this embedded story). The love story of [3] is thought to be autobiographical, but we gradually come to suspect that its protagonist is the older, not the younger sister, and at the end of [1] we discover that the novel of [3] was written by the older sister as an elaborate form of vengeance against her husband, the villain of the main story.

Notice the repeated embedding: a novel containing a novel containing a novel.

6. Beginning from anywhere.

"Tell us this story, goddess daughter of Zeus, beginning at whatever point you will." Thus the invocation to the Muse in the *Odyssey* (line 10; the non-finite clause is a simple adverb in ancient Greek: *hamóthen* 'from anywhere'). And the narration of Ulysses' return home begins near the end of the story, the last forty days, after he has been three years on the seas and seven years with Calypso.

The first part of the poem deals with Telemachus leaving Ithaca to look for his father (books I-IV); Ulysses is introduced in book V, when he builds a raft and leaves the nymph Calypso; he is shipwrecked on the island of the Phaeacians, who give him hospitality (books VI-VIII); moved to tears by a singer celebrating the Greek warriors at Troy, Ulysses reveals his identity and narrates his adventures: the Cyclops Polyphemus, Circe, the evocation of the dead, the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis... (books IX-XII). Books XIII to XXIV narrate Ulysses' landing on Ithaca and, after meeting with Telemachus, his revenge on the suitors of Penelope. This narrative arrangement foreshortens an otherwise long and boring story into a few dramatic and emotionally intense events, and leaves to the protagonist himself responsibility for narrating its marvellous part (and it is proverbial that travellers tell tall tales).

7. Narrating backwards.

Time's Arrow, by Martin Amis (1991).

It is the story of a man's life told backwards, from his old age in America to his childhood in Germany. The narrator – apparently the man's soul, speaking when the man is about to die or has just died – sees the man's life as a film running backwards: thus, for instance, writing letters and giving them to an attendant to be posted becomes "My letters to Herta are brought to me by the valet. I laboriously erase them, here, at night, in the silent room." Seeing things backwards is also understanding them backwards: the man was a doctor at Auschwitz, and his purpose there is understood as "to dream a race. To make a people from the weather:" from the smoke of the ovens to living bodies sent home to populate Germany... Destruction seen backwards is creation: that is the narrator's view, at the same time perverse and innocent.

8. Reading in any order.

a. 253, by Geoff Ryman (1996, 1998).

252 passengers of a London tube train, plus the driver: each is described in 253 words (Outward appearance, Inside information, What she/he is doing or thinking). The 253 life sketches can be read in any order. The journey lasts seven and a half minute and ends in a crash...

It is in the Internet at <http://www.ryman-novel.com/>, presented as 'A novel for the Internet about London Underground in seven cars and a crash.' Visitors are invited to help write its sequel.

b. Hypertext fiction is made of a number of short texts (paragraphs, also called *lexia*), each having a number of links with others: the reader is free to follow his/her own path stringing the texts together in a single one. Each path gives a different overall text. Graphics and sound can be added. See:

Reach, a fiction by Michael Joyce (2000)

http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/tirweb/hypermedia/michael_joyce/ReachTitle.html

Hypertext poetry and fiction at:

<http://www.wordcircuits.com/>

<http://www.cyberartsweb.org/cpace/>

9. Endings.

a. *Reunion*, by Fred Uhlman (1971).

"...I opened it at the letter H and read, 'VON HOHENFELS. Konradin, implicated in the plot to kill Hitler. Executed.'"

The narrator remembers an intense friendship from his school days in Stuttgart in 1932-33, which ended abruptly with the advent of Nazism, when his friend, Konradin, became a believer in Hitler, and the narrator himself, a Jew, had to leave Germany. Thirty years later ("today") he receives a little book from his old school with an appeal to subscribe for a war memorial to the boys who had fallen in the Second World War: that has sparked off his memories. Now he goes through the names listed in the book, and after much hesitation looks up his friend's name... What the last words leave unsaid is revealed by the title.

Also a film directed by Jerry Schatzberg (1989; in Italian *L'amico ritrovato*), with script by playwright Harold Pinter, who starts the story with the old protagonist's trip to Germany, thus juxtaposing past and present and gradually revealing both.

b. *Persuasion*, by Jane Austen (1818).

While revolving in her mind what she has just been told about Mister Elliot's past, Anne meets Admiral Croft, who insists that she visit her wife at their house. There Anne meets Captain Wentworth and is left alone with him. Wentworth has to speak to her on behalf of the Admiral, who has heard that Anne is about to marry Mister Elliot and is ready to cancel the lease of Kellynch Hall if the couple wishes to live there. To Wentworth's relief Anne denies the report, and he sits beside her "& looked, with an expression which had something more than penetration in it, something softer; – Her Countenance did not discourage. – It was a silent, but very powerful Dialogue; – on his side, Supplication, on her's acceptance. – Still, a little nearer – and a hand taken and pressed – and 'Anne, my own dear Anne!' – bursting forth in the fullness of exquisite feeling – and all Suspense & Indecision were over. – They were re-united." Explanations follow...

This is Jane Austen's first version of the ending. That there should be a re-union is a foregone conclusion; the question is whether this is a satisfactory way of reaching it. In the re-written ending the two characters are made to speak out their feelings: she indirectly, in her impassioned defence of woman's constancy, he directly in his letter. And notice the symmetry: he overhears her

conversation with Captain Harville as she had overheard his conversation with Louisa in the first part of the novel. This contributes to the sense of closure.

Read the original ending at

<http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/p anchap.html>

<http://www.tilneysandtrapdoors.com/prs/prscancel.html>

c. *The Third Man*, directed by Carol Reed, script by Graham Greene (1949).

The film, a *noir*, is set in post-war Vienna, the city in ruins occupied by the four powers. Holly Martins, a naïve writer of pulp fiction, has been called by his old friend Harry Lime, but he arrives just in time to be present at Lime's funeral. From a witness's account Martins learns of an unidentified 'third man' present at the car accident that killed Lime, and starts his own investigation – finally to discover that his friend has faked his death in order to disappear and continue running his criminal racket. Martins meets Anna, Lime's lover, and their common devotion to Lime makes him emotionally involved with her. At the end, after a pursuit through Vienna's sewers, Martins kills Lime, and a second, real funeral takes place. The setting of the ending is the road from the cemetery: it is lined by bare trees, and Anna comes to the foreground where Martins is waiting for her... In the written version of the story Greene had envisaged a happy ending, with Martins catching up with Anna and walking side by side with her, "her hand was through his arm". But the director, Reed, disagreed, and the shot version of the ending closes on Anna walking out of the frame and Martins remaining motionless: "ANNA is approaching. MARTINS stops and waits for her. She reaches him and he seeks in vain for a word. He makes a gesture with his hand, and she pays no attention, walking right past him and on into the distance. MARTINS follows her with his eyes. From outside our vision we can hear a car horn blown again and again." (See the final shot at http://imv.aau.dk/publikationer/pov/Issue_02/section_3/artc3C.html ; an outstanding contribution to the film was Anton Karas' zither music, which can be heard at <http://www.noircinema.com/html/ThirdMan/music.htm>).

10. Stories without closure.

a. *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, by Carlo Emilio Gadda (1957).

A jewel robbery and a murder occur on the same landing in the same building of via Merulana in Rome (March 1927). Police commissioner Ingravallo investigates the two cases, as do the Carabinieri of Marino, in the Alban hills, where the first clues lead. Their interrogations and surmises draw a tangled web of relationships, throwing light on a number of life stories and social realities, from the rich Lilitiana Balducci, the murdered woman, who compensated for her frustrated motherhood by taking into her home young women as provisionally adopted daughters, to the corrupt vitality of poor young men and women of the town and the countryside. The jewels are found out and the first case seems solved; and when Ingravallo is about to intuit the solution of the murder case ("Egli non intese, là pe' llà, ciò che la sua anima era in procinto d'intendere"), the novel abruptly ends. Do the readers have enough clues to arrive at a solution by themselves? or is it less important than the process of cognition? The novel's lack of closure may correspond to Ingravallo's theory that "le inopinate catastrofi non sono mai la conseguenza o l'effetto che dir si voglia d'un unico motivo, d'una causa al singolare: ma sono come un vortice, un punto di depressione ciclonica nella coscienza del mondo, verso cui hanno cospirato tutta una molteplicità di causali convergenti. Diceva anche nodo o groviglio, o garbuglio, o gnommero, che alla romana vuol dire gomito.".

In 1946-47 Gadda also wrote a filmic treatment, *Il palazzo degli ori* (published 1983), in which the tangled story is orderly presented and solved: the murderer is Virginia, one of Lilitiana's adopted daughters.

In 1996 Luca Ronconi made a theatrical adaptation of the novel, and it was filmed in 1997 by Bernardo Bertolucci; Ronconi assumes that the murderer is Assunta, Liliana's servant and Virginia's double.

b. *Mulholland Drive*, written and directed by David Lynch (2001).

A beautiful brunette escapes an assassination attempt thanks to a car crash, but loses her memory. Another woman, a young blonde just arrived in Los Angeles to become an actress, helps her to investigate her identity, and falls in love with her. Then the two suddenly and inexplicably change identities and names: the brunette is a successful star who dumps the blonde actress, her lover, for a young director, and in a fit of jealousy the blonde arranges to have the brunette killed – which is the point at which the film begins. The blonde commits suicide. Are the two blondes different persons? or is the second blonde a projection of what the first one might become after living in Hollywood too long? or is the first one a fantasy of what the second might have liked to be in the past?

11. Double stories.

a. *Possession*, by Antonia S. Byatt (1990).

From a letter accidentally found in a book, two literary critics, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, start researching into a secret love affair between two (fictitious) Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte: they go through diaries and letters, re-read between the two poets' lines, discover their secret correspondence, visit the places they had been to, find out that a daughter was born – all the time moving among the ambitions, rivalries and squabbles of the academic world. The story of their investigation reconstructs the love story, and also re-enacts it: the two critics become lovers themselves. The two poets' lives and personalities come out of their poems and letters, but are also partially narrated by the external narrator, who in the Postscript adds a detail that has escaped the two critics.

The film, directed by Neil LaBute (2002), presents the two stories in cross cutting ('montaggio alternato').

b. *Maus. A Survivor's Tale*, by Art Spiegelman (1986, 1991).

Artie, a cartoonist (and the narrator), wants to draw a book about his father Vladek and urges him to tell about his life in Poland and the war. And by alternating strips or juxtaposing panels the comic book visualizes both the telling and the tale: the former takes place over a number of years from the late 1970s to 1982, the latter covers the years 1935-1945. We see Vladek as he describes himself amid the horrors of the past, resourcefully surviving with his first wife in Nazi-occupied Poland and Auschwitz; and as he is in present-day America, sick, stingy, racist, impossible to live with (his second wife abandons him). The book visualizes its own making – and the difficulty of making it, both because of the unusual combination of content and medium and because of the fact that Artie, the son and cartoonist, is the author himself, who wants to come to terms with the history of his own family (Artie was born after the war; his mother, Vladek's first wife, committed suicide in 1968; an older brother was poisoned by the woman to whom he had been entrusted to prevent him from being deported to Auschwitz).

Vladek's telling ends on his deathbed in 1982, when he narrates the re-union with his first wife in 1945, and this is also the end of the book; but by then we also know the sequel up to the day of Vladek's death.

The Jews are mice, the Germans are cats, the Poles are pigs; the drawing is crude, as is the story.

12. Interlace.

Pulp Fiction, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino (1994).

[A1] Two young people, man and woman, start a robbery in a coffee shop. Credits. [B1] Two gangsters in dark suit and tie do a killing job for their boss: the black one has a propensity for preaching, the white one for drugs. [C1] A boxer agrees with this same boss to fix a match: they are in a bar where the two gangsters turn up wearing shorts. Then storyline [B2] is resumed: the white gangster chaperones the boss's wife for a night out. Then storyline [C2] is picked up: the boxer changes his mind and wins the match, and while on the run with his girl he kills the white gangster and saves the life of the boss from the hands of two psychopaths. Then storyline [B3] is resumed: when they have done the killing, the two gangsters get into trouble, and after they have been helped out, they find themselves in the coffee shop of the beginning, where storylines [A2] and [B4] merge: the gangsters let the two young people rob everybody else except themselves and leave, then they too leave, in shorts. Credits.

Notice that when the film ends storyline [B] has gone back to the point when it interlaces with storyline [C]. The end of the film is not aligned with the end of the story:

A1	B1	C1	B2	C2	B3	A2-B4	order of the discourse
B1	B3	A1-A2-B4	C1	B2	C2		order of the story (chronology)

A masterpiece of interlace is Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1521, 1521, 1532), where a number of narrative threads criss-cross and converge in the end. TV serials also make much use of it to provide variety and duration.

13. Forking-path stories.

a. *Roads of Destiny*, by O. Henry (1909).

David Mignot, a would-be poet, sets out from his village in search of his fate and his future, arrives at a crossroads and ...[1] takes the road to the left: meets the Marquis de Beaupertuys, marries his niece, who has just refused to marry an old man of her uncle's choice, fights a duel with the marquis and is shot dead by his pistol. ...[2] takes the road to the right: reaches Paris, is unwittingly involved in a plot to kill the king, takes the place of the king and is shot with a pistol belonging to the Marquis de Beaupertuys. ...[3] turns back: resumes his shepherd's life, some time later reverts to writing poetry, receives negative criticism by a learned man, buys a pistol from a junk shop and shoots himself – the pistol bears the arms and crest of the Marquis de Beaupertuys.

Find the story in the Internet.

b. *Sliding Doors*, written and directed by Peter Howitt (1997).

Helen is sacked from her job, [1] catches an underground train and when she gets home she finds her boyfriend in bed with another woman... [2] misses the underground train, is hurt by a mugger and taken to hospital by a taxi driver, and when she gets home her boyfriend's lover has just left... The train is a bifurcation in time, from which two alternative storylines branch out: in [1] Helen leaves her boyfriend, cuts her hair, meets another man, starts a small business of her own, is pregnant, is run over by a car and dies in hospital; in [2] Helen finds a new job as a waitress, is pregnant (and so is the other woman), discovers the unfaithfulness, has a miscarriage, dismisses her boyfriend and while leaving hospital starts conversation with another man (the same as in [1]). The two storylines are intercalated in cross cutting ('montaggio alternato').

In *Blind Chance*, by the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski (*Pzypadek*, 1981), the story trifurcates from a train that is either caught or on the way to being caught or missed. Other films dealing with alternative existences are *It's a Wonderful Life* by Frank Capra (1946) and *The Family Man* by Brett Ratner (2000).

c. *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, by Jorge Luis Borges (1941, in *Ficciones*).

The title of this short story is that of the novel by the imaginary Chinese writer Ts'ui Pen, which is described in these terms: "In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses simultaneously all of them. He creates, thereby, several futures, several times, which themselves proliferate and fork. That is the explanation for the novel's contradictions. Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger knocks at his door; Fang decides to kill him. Naturally, there are various possible outcomes – Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they can both live, they can both be killed, and so on. In Ts'ui Pen's novel, all the outcomes in fact occur; each is the starting point for further bifurcations." (English translation, *The Garden of Forking Paths*)

d. A psychological alternate story is *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, by Ambrose Bierce (1891). It is only a few pages long: find it in the Internet.

e. Hints of alternate stories are present in most narratives. Consider these from Jane Austen's *Persuasion*:

- "...she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it" (ch. 4);

- "... 'if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up.' " (ch. 23);

- "... 'when I returned to England in the year eight..., if I had then written to you, would you have answered my letter? would you, in short, have renewed the engagement?' ..." (ch. 23).

Imagine re-writing *Persuasion* in forking-path fashion: the alternate Anne marries Wentworth in 1806 (or 1808) and lives more or less the life sketched by Mrs Croft in ch. 8; she might be happy or unhappy, as is (contradictorily?) said in ch.s 4 and 23; she comes back with her husband in 1814, when she can be seen in contrast with the unmarried Anne who has been fading at home following Wentworth's career through the newspapers.

What about Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*?

14. Stories from other stories.

a. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, by Jean Rhys (1966).

An important character of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is a "mad lady" living on the third floor of Thornfield Hall, the wife of Mr Rochester: she sets fire to Thornfield and flings herself from the roof. Not much is said about her: Jean Rhys imagines a life for her, and has the character tell it herself – from her youth as a Creole heiress in Jamaica to the moment when she is about to set fire to Thornfield.

b. *The Hours*, by Michael Cunningham (1999).

One day in the lives of three women separated in space and time: [1] Clarissa Vaughan is preparing a party for her friend Richard, a poet, who is dying of AIDS ("It is New York City. It is the end of the twentieth century."); [2] Virginia Woolf is beginning *Mrs Dalloway* ("It is a suburb of London. It is 1923."); [3] Laura Brown is reading *Mrs Dalloway* and meditating suicide ("It is Los Angeles. It is 1949."). At the end of [1] Richard commits suicide and Clarissa meets Laura, who is revealed to be Richard's mother.

'The Hours' was the original title of Virginia Woolf's novel, of which Cunningham's is a re-writing and update, especially in its homo-erotic theme. It has been made into a film directed by Stephen Daldry (2002), with script by playwright David Hare.

c. *The Lady and the Unicorn*, by Tracy Chevalier (2003).

The Unicorn Tapestries (Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris) were made towards the end of the fifteenth century: in each there is a lady and a unicorn in a configuration suggesting one of the five senses – the sequence being an allegory of the passage from one life to another. Very little is known about them: Chevalier imagines the story of their making – the Paris family who commissioned them, the artist who designed them, the Brussels family who wove them – and especially the stories of the women portrayed in the ladies of the tapestries; and she narrates this story in a tapestry-like fashion. “Looking at a tapestry is not like looking at a painting [...]. You see only a part of it, and not necessarily the most important part. So no thing should stand out more than the rest, but fit together into a pattern that your eye takes pleasure in no matter where it rests”. Thus seven characters tell each his or her part of the story, and the several threads interweave with equal prominence, developing the story to the final closure. Even the reading of the tapestry sequence is made ambivalent, as the artist explains to one of the women: “you can start with this tapestry, of the Lady putting on her necklace, and go around the room to follow her seduction of the unicorn. Or you can go the other way, with the Lady bidding farewell to each different sense, and end with this tapestry, where she takes off her necklace to put it away – to let go of the physical life.”

See the tapestries at <http://www.tchevalier.com/>

15. True stories.

a. *Il teatro della memoria*, by Leonardo Sciascia (1981).

A pithy re-telling of the Bruneri-Canella case, which divided Italy in 1927-31, and was the inspiration of Luigi Pirandello’s *Come tu mi vuoi* (1930). In March 1926 a man was arrested in Turin and transferred to the local asylum as an amnesiac (‘lo smemorato di Collegno’); in February 1927 his photo was published on a weekly magazine with the caption “Chi lo conosce?”; Giulia Canella from Verona recognized him as her husband Giulio, a respectable, rich professor of medieval philosophy who had disappeared in war in 1916, and she took him home with her. But soon another woman recognized him as her husband Mario Bruneri, typographer and petty criminal. The trials that followed established that the man was Bruneri: the evidence was overwhelming (on previous occasions Bruneri had left his fingerprints with the police), but Giulia Canella refused to believe it all and the man continued to assert his identity as Canella in written memoirs to the end of his life; two children were born from their new union. Sciascia stresses the Pirandello-like aspects of the case: Giulia’s unflinching belief that the man was her husband and the man’s prompt and convinced identification with the new role.

A comic rendition of the case is *Lo smemorato di Collegno*, directed by Sergio Corbucci (1962), with Totò as protagonist: three different identities are claimed for him in the trial – the husband of a rich woman, the husband of a poor woman, the accomplice of a thief – all false, and in the end he remains the amnesiac of the beginning, a dog his only companion and truthful but mute recognizer. A later serious rendition is *Uno scandalo perbene*, directed by Pasquale Festa Campanile (1984).

b. *The Return of Martin Guerre*, by Natalie Zemon Davis (1983).

In 1548 Martin Guerre, a rich peasant of the Pyrenean village of Artigat, left his wife Bertrande and was not heard of any longer. Eight years later another man, Arnaud du Tilh, came along passing himself off as Martin and stepped into Martin’s life. After three years and two daughters (one dead) Bertrande was forced by her step-father (who was also Martin’s paternal uncle) to bring a legal action against Arnaud-Martin. During the first trial, confronted with Bertrande, he declared that he was ready to die if Bertrande swore that he was not her husband: Bertrande remained silent; the judge found him guilty. In the second he had almost convinced the judges of his truthfulness when a man with a wooden leg turned up, the true Martin; and in September 1560 Arnaud was hanged in Artigat.

A historian from Princeton University, Natalie Zemon Davis, collaborated with the French director Daniel Vigne in the production of the film *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (1982); then she wrote her own historical narrative to explore the possible motivations of the characters in the context of their rural society (The case had already been made into a novel: *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, by Janet Lewis, 1941).

The French story was transferred to the American Civil War in *Sommersby*, directed by John Amiel (1993).

The cinema is particularly fond of stories of impersonation: *Il generale Della Rovere*, by Roberto Rossellini (1959); *Kagemusha*, by Akira Kurosawa (1980)...

c. *La banalità del bene. Storia di Giorgio Perlasca*, by Enrico Deaglio (1991).

The story became known only after 1987, when Giorgio Perlasca was 'discovered' in Padua by a group of Hungarian women who remembered him and wanted him remembered for what he had done in 1944-45 in Budapest. An Italian working for an import firm, he had passed himself off as a Spanish consul and had saved thousands of Jews from Nazi extermination by issuing to them protective passes and hosting them in 'safe houses' flying the Spanish flag. Deaglio reconstructs the whole story from documents of various types, including Perlasca's own diary.