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CURRICULUM

This teaching guide has three curriculum objectives:

- *To help students and teachers using films and videos in the context of the following secondary school curriculum – English Language Arts, Film and Media Studies, Social Studies, and Visual Arts*

- *To assist educators who are planning to teach film studies for the first time*

- *To suggest ways in which traditional literary concepts may be taught using a medium other than printed text*

STAR WARS AND THE STRUCTURE OF THIS FILM GUIDE

This guide has been developed around one of the most popular and successful movies in the history of cinema: George Lucas' 1977 science fiction epic, *Star Wars*. Virtually any film can be used to look at the role of Narrative Structure, Scenes, Characters and Stars, and Myths in movies. What's important is to break down how the visual language of filmmaking is used by looking closely at different kinds of shots and examining how shots are linked together in certain kinds of editing patterns. Another way of saying this is that rather than simply watching a film, to really understand how a film works, it's important to deconstruct how the filmmaker has used individual elements to tell his or her story.

Since its original release in 1977, *Star Wars* has become one of the most recognizable stories in the history of film. It has also been instrumental in popularizing a whole new kind of Hollywood film: the blockbuster. Blockbusters are big budget movies dominated by special computer effects, action-based storylines and popular Hollywood stars. Although *Star Wars* is now considered one of the early blockbusters, it didn't start out that way. In fact, many Hollywood producers expected the film to fail miserably when it was released. As we know, it didn't. Instead, George Lucas' comic book melodrama went on to draw generations of moviegoers into a universe that existed "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away."

That *Star Wars* and the three follow-up films (*The Empire Strikes Back* [Irvin Kershner, 1980], *Return of the Jedi* [Richard Marquand, 1983], and *The Phantom Menace* [George Lucas, 1999]) in the series have been able to do this is no small feat. The Rebel forces and the Empire are neither part of our world nor our time. But if we think about it for a moment, in another way, they are.

The Rebel forces and the Empire are part of our world because we learn about their story with the aid of various kinds of shots, sounds, and lighting techniques that we've seen in any number of movies. Because these shots and edits are so familiar to audiences they work to turn this far-off tale into an adventure we identify with and understand.

As the film begins, audiences enter into the world of Luke, Han Solo, Princess Leia, and Darth Vader. On one level, what allows us to do this is the skilful manipulation of cinema's visual language. In the remainder of this guide we look at four of the most important elements in the visual language of movies: Narrative Structure, Scenes and Mise en Scène, Characters and Stars, and Myths.

Note: *Some films noted in this guide may not be appropriate for all students. Please use your discretion when selecting films for your classroom. Classroom activities are provided after each section along with an answer key at the end of the guide. Answers are not provid-*

BASIC NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Films are great storytelling devices. And for many audiences, this is exactly what they want when they go out to the movies — a great story, with powerful characters and complex plot twists.

If we're watching a suspense thriller, it's great when unexpected twists are thrown into the film to surprise us in some way. Not contrived twists. But subtle twists which force us to rethink the movie we've just seen. Bryan's Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995) was like this. So was M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999). If we're watching comedy romances, most audiences are satisfied if the film traces a reasonably complicated story that ends with a couple living "happily ever after". Cameron Crowe's *Jerry Maguire* (1996) was like this. As was *Liar, Liar* (Tom Shadyac, 1997) and the classic screwball comedy, *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940).

No matter the kind of film, when we talk about movies in this way — good stories that entertain us for two hours — we're talking about the story content of the film. But there are also other ways of describing how stories are put together. Imagine for the moment that stories are like buildings. Buildings work when both their content (offices, stairs, elevators, etc.) and their design (the way all these elements are assembled) function successfully together. The same is true for stories. When we think about stories in terms of both their content and their design, what we're looking at is the narrative structure of stories.

What is Narrative Structure?
Narrative structure is really about two things: the content of a story (i.e. what a story is about) and the form used to tell a story (i.e. how a story is told). Two common ways to describe these two parts of narrative structure are: *story* and *plot*.

Story refers to the raw materials of dramatic action as they might be described in chronological order in a film. *Plot* refers to the form of storytelling, or the structure, the story follows. An example may be helpful.

If we want to analyze narrative structure, we can use "who," "what," and "where" questions to look at the story or content of a movie. "How" questions are used to examine plot structure.

So, to describe the story in *Star Wars*, for example, we would need to answer the following questions:

- Where is the story set?
- What event begins the story?
- Who are the main characters?
- What conflict(s) do they face?
- What happens to the characters as they face this conflict?
- Who wins the conflict?
- What rewards do they receive?

To describe the *plot structure* of the movie, we would need to answer these questions:

- How is the major conflict in the story set up?
- How are the main characters introduced?
- How is the story moved along so that the characters must inevitably face the film's central conflict?
- How is the dramatic confrontation set up as the film draws to its close?
- How does the film resolve most of the major conflicts set up at the outset?

In each case, *story* and *plot* are slightly different ways of analyzing a movie.

From the audiences' perspective, *story* and *plot* refer to the different ways movies construct meaning for spectators. *Story* is about trying to determine the key conflicts, main characters, setting, and events in a movie. *Plot* is about determining the stages at which key conflicts are set up and resolved. What's interesting about most of the movies made in Hollywood is that, while the stories may change, the plot structure is virtually identical in most of the movies made by America's Dream Factory.

HOLLYWOOD AND THE CLASSICAL NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The most common narrative structure in mainstream films is called the Classical Narrative Structure.

The Classical Narrative Structure
The Classical Narrative Structure is called this because it is the way most movies are made in Hollywood. It's not classic because it is the oldest structure of storytelling or the best. But the most common. It is the storytelling structure in *Star Wars*, Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926), *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), and any number of other films we might think of. It's based on a three-act format that organizes the story in the following way.

Act I — The Setup
Here, we are introduced to the main characters in the story, their goals, and the obstacles they are likely to face to achieve their objectives. The main conflict in the story is introduced, as well as the major antagonist (the villain) who will stand in the way of the protagonist's (the hero's) objectives.

We can call Act I in a movie the *Hook*. It sets up the story so that the film engages the attention of the audience and suggests the story's likely development. Act I generally takes up about one-quarter of a film's total length.

Act II — The Development
Here plot complications are added to the story. An increasing sense of urgency is created when the main characters encounter obstacles that stand in the way of their journey. The second act generally occupies the middle two-quarters of the film and it often includes a false resolution to the main conflict set up in Act I. Once the false resolution has been encountered, the action in the movie generally points inevitably toward a necessary climax.

Throughout Act II, *Cause-Effect Relationships* propel the main characters along. Cause-effect relationships involve actions that force a reaction on the part of some character, leading to a new action and reaction, and so on.

Act III — The Resolution
In the final segment of the film, the results of the story's main conflict come to dramatic confrontation. This is called the *Climax*. It is the point where key struggles are waged and an eventual victor is determined. In Hollywood films, needless to say, the eventual victor is usually our hero.

Following the climax, *Closure* is introduced into the story, which simply means that all the major conflicts, issues, or ideas in the story are resolved. The so-called "Hollywood ending" is the most popular kind of closure in the classical narrative structure. Films with this kind of conclusion usually close with a sense that the protagonists in the film live happily ever after.