

# Narrative Structure and Binary Oppositions

17



## DISCUSSION POINT:

- A) Ask yourself how crime is usually presented in film and television narratives. Is it portrayed in social or psychological terms? Compare, for example, the criminal characters in films such as *Gangs of New York*, *Monster*, *Chopper*, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, and *City of God* and those in television programs such as *Prison Break*, *The Bill*, *CSI*, *Law and Order*.**
- B) Find a film which breaks up the chronological narrative sequence, such as *Elephant*. First rearrange the plot segments into their chronological order. Then compare these two different ways of presenting the narrative and consider how the non-chronological sequence changes the way we understand and respond to the narrative**

ADDITIONAL READING: 'Discourses in *Thelma and Louise*'

In *Thelma and Louise* another minor character makes an alliance with the discourses of Thelma and Louise. They have locked a white policeman in the trunk of his car in the middle of the desert. An African-American cyclist rides past and hears the policeman calling for help. He blows the policeman some marijuana smoke but does not release him. This character is on screen for no more than a minute and does not speak at all. The African-American discourse consists of the character's appearance, his actions, and the music soundtrack (an excerpt from Jimmy Cliff's reggae hit 'I Can See Clearly Now'). This humorous moment introduces an African-American discourse into a film that has so far been almost exclusively focused on white Americans. The peaceful refusal to help the police; the celebratory African-American song about a 'sun-shiny day'; and the pleasure-taking, law-breaking smoking of marijuana by a man who is, like Thelma and Louise, 'on the road', together

forge an alliance between this cyclist and Thelma and Louise (neither of whom he has seen). This alliance can be seen as linking two discourses: that of oppressed African-American men and that of oppressed white women. Thus, in a single moment, Thelma and Louise's discourse, their struggle, is widened to include the discourse of other disaffected social groups. The use of cycling is interesting: it connotes an ecologically aware, peaceful, anti-urban subculture, which may invite audience members sympathetic to the concerns of this subculture to identify with the cyclist, and therefore, by extension, with Thelma and Louise.

ADDITIONAL CASE STUDY: Binary oppositions in *Analyse This*

What binary oppositions can you find in the film *Analyse This*? How are they resolved? The first step in using binary oppositions as an approach is to make a table of all the oppositions that you notice. In *Analyse This* there are a number of obvious oppositions, as follows:

Billy Crystal	Vs	Robert De Niro
comedy genre	Vs	gangster genre
Jewish	Vs	Catholic
American	Vs	Immigrant
middle-class	Vs	working-class
Legitimate	Vs	Criminal
Analyst	Vs	Gangster
Thinks	Vs	Acts
Feeling	Vs	Insensitive
Intellectual	Vs	unintellectual
Healthy	Vs	Sick
Timid	Vs	violent
Angry	Vs	frightened
Sons	Vs	fathers

It is a common dramatic technique to bring two different (opposite) worlds together: their differences will inspire conflict and narrative possibility. Here the gangster/mafia world of Robert De Niro meets the law-abiding world of psychiatry. This may seem an unusual meeting (though a series like *The Sopranos* deals with a similar theme). As De Niro is noted as a star for his many gangster film roles and Crystal is a noted comic star this also brings

two film genres into opposition. Note how the two individual characters are linked to general opposing categories of religion, ethnicity, and class, and also general ways of feeling and acting. Our last three oppositions are the most interesting. The sons/father conflict is an opposition shared by both De Niro and Crystal so it is unclear which side of the table to place this on; but this theme is central so the film is exploring issues of contemporary masculinity. It is further complicated as they are both sons in conflict with fathers, but they are also fathers themselves and Crystal in particular has conflicts with his own son. Both characters are also 'flawed': Crystal is too timid, De Niro is too violent; Crystal is angry but unable to express it, De Niro is frightened but cannot handle his fear. These emotional defects and oppositions are crucial to the narrative: both characters have problems with their fathers and are emotionally out of balance. The beautifully symmetrical resolution to these oppositions is for the characters to 'cross over'—Crystal takes on De Niro's gangster role, De Niro becomes at times Crystal's therapist, while Crystal takes on De Niro's violence as a way of expressing his anger, De Niro takes on Crystal's sensitivity to allow himself to feel and express his fear and tears. In this case neither side is 'good' or 'bad', or rather both sides are seen as lacking, incomplete in themselves, or unbalanced. The two sides are actually complementary, they need each other to 'cure' each other and this is what is achieved by the end of the narrative, as in many other narratives. As a film about masculinity it is **interesting in supporting both the value of expressing anger and fear.**

**DISCUSSION POINT:**

---

- A) Examine the endings of films of your own choice in relation to the idea of 'coupling'.**
  
- B) Television has been described as a 'domestic medium'—how does this affect audience responses?**

ADDITIONAL CASE STUDY: *Sex and the City*: Sexuality, coupling, and relationships

How does *Sex and the City* represent sexuality, coupling, and relationships? *Sex and the City* ran as a series for six years (1998–2004). It focuses on four women in their thirties and is explicitly concerned with their experiences of relationships and sexuality providing a continual exploration of how women and men relate in the early twenty-first century. The series is set in a highly affluent New York society where work and money are not primary concerns for the four main characters—they are very much part of a privileged, consumerist class; fashion, the different outfits and shoes worn by the characters, is a major element of spectator pleasure. The series brings together four different types: Samantha who adopts an almost traditional male attitude to sexuality, Charlotte the naïve traditionalist, Miranda the cynical realist, and Carrie the questioning experimenter; they all go through a series of sexual/romantic relationships. In the structure of discourses Carrie's is clearly the dominant one. She has voice-over and comments on all the developing relationships. Her stories normally take up more screen time and are generally less comic. In this way her 'femininity' is privileged over the others.

The series was significant in a number of ways. First, it foregrounded women's voices and experiences so they were clearly dominant; several women writers were involved in developing the scripts basing much of this on their own experiences. Second, it saw the women's friendship with each other as the most important and enduring relationship; as Charlotte observed in one episode: 'Maybe we could be each other's soul mates and then we could let men be just these great nice guys to have fun with.' Third, it was very explicit about sexuality allowing women to proactively experiment with various forms of sexual experience and expression. Out of all this it was a series that on the one hand seemed obsessed with women trying to find their romantic couple partners, but on the other hand presented the positive possibility of women being single and sexual. Kim Cattrall (Samantha) observed: 'Being single used to mean that nobody wanted you, now it means you're pretty sexy, and you're taking your time deciding how you want your life to end and who you want to spend it with'; while Michael Patrick King (writer and producer) commented: 'The greatest thing the show has done for the single woman is basically claimed her and said: "Hey, this might be a choice as well"' (King 2004).

The form of the continuing TV series is one that doesn't seek narrative closure and resolution; on the contrary it maintains a level of narrative openness; thus it didn't want to provide a final answer for any of the women

in their search for a partner. However as the series progressed and was moving towards its final season it clearly was going to end, so then needed to resolve all the romantic/sexual questions it had set up. What message for women and their sexuality would these resolutions convey? We can see a clear difference in the endings of different episodes throughout the series. For example one episode set up the possibility of Carrie's successful reunion with her lover 'Big', a continuing on-off relationship. However, rather than do this the episode showed again how Carrie is let down by 'Big', as are the other women in their various relationships; Carrie goes to a gay ball and the episode finishes with her dancing alone, surrounded by gay men. What a contrast with the end of the final episode: Miranda, the cynic, has got married and has a child and has agreed to help look after her ailing mother-in-law; Charlotte has also married a man who brings her sexual and romantic pleasure and though she can't have children they are adopting a baby. Samantha, who has been the most outrageous of the women in her attitude to sexuality is the one who is in some ways most punished by the narrative as she has breast cancer. But she appears to have overcome this and her identity and lifestyle is celebrated and rewarded as she ends up with the most beautiful, understanding, supportive and devoted man of them all, Smith Jerrod; she herself is in love and now espousing the values of monogamy and fidelity. It is interesting to note how Samantha was also linked to the gay community—she lives in a gay neighbourhood, has many gay friends, and seems to behave almost like a drag-queen in the way she gossips and treats sexuality. She even flirted with lesbianism and bisexuality herself in a previous series. Whereas series 5 seemed to offer the gay life-style as an equally positive option, by the end of series 6 it has been relegated to the sidelines. Carrie seems finally to have found 'the one' as she gets together with Big and even finds out his real name.

The final episodes show Samantha, the eldest, confronting her mortality and Charlotte and Carrie worrying about the ticking of their biological clocks—Alexander Petrovsky's decision not to have any more children is one of the reasons that eventually prompt Carrie to leave him. The series allowed women a time of sexual experimentation, and exploration during their thirties but then through its narrative resolution suggests that the route forward is through very traditional, idealised, romantic, nurturing, familial heterosexual coupling and feminine roles. In a documentary 'special' about the program we see a similar trajectory as towards the end of the program Michael Patrick King tells us the series was 'really about love and relationships ... and the battlefield of trying to be in love' (King 2004). Ultimately this is the stuff of traditional romantic fiction. Television narratives are, in part, attempts to work out how we can live in ways that satisfy our social

and individual needs and desires; how we can live in a society undergoing economic and social change and crisis. In this respect, film and television narratives are a wonderful place to observe how contemporary society understands itself, and this explains audience pleasure and fascination in these media-world dramas.

**DISCUSSION POINT:**

**Discuss the view of women, sexuality, relationships and coupling constructed in the 2008 film of *Sex and the City*.**

**OTHER RESOURCES:**

For initial work on structuralism, see T. Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen, London, 1977; D. Palmer, *Structuralism for Beginners, Writers and Readers*, London, 1996. In relation to narrative, see P. Cook, *The Cinema Book*, British Film Institute, London, 1985. G. Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (4th edn), Routledge, London, 2006, offers an excellent and straightforward account of many of the structuralist issues relating to narrative, film, and genre.

J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin and BBC, London, 1972, and L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in L. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989 are great starting points for considering the different structural roles of men and women in film narratives; see also R. Betterton (ed.), *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, Pandora, London, 1987.

Four useful books that look specifically at television are *The Television Studies Reader*, Robert C Allen and Annette Hill (Eds) Routledge: London, 2004; J. Hartley, *The Uses of Television*, Routledge, London, 1999; J. Fiske, *Television Culture*, Methuen, London, 1987; R. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, Routledge, London, 1992.