

Alternative Forms of Narrative Structure

While Classical Narrative Structure is the dominant form of storytelling in mainstream movies, alternative storytelling formulas include Realistic Narratives and Formalist Narratives.

Realistic Narrative

Films with Realistic Narratives generally favour episodic stories, which means stories that move along from one episode to the next, in no particular order, almost like a “slice of life”. As audiences, we only get to see a part of a main character’s experiences, but we generally learn enough about the character to identify and sympathize with him or her.

Audiences who are most familiar with action films or films that move along at a quick pace are often disappointed by Realistic Narratives. Generally, this is because it takes time for the main storyline to emerge. As well, these movies avoid clichés, stock characters and situations, simple melodrama, romantic ideas of Destiny and Fate, and happy, expected endings. Because of this, audiences often have to work harder to enjoy Realistic Narratives, and many movie-goers simply aren’t prepared for this when they head out to the theatre.

It should be said that Realistic Narratives are no more “real” than movies that follow a Classical Narrative Structure. They are perhaps more complex, but films like John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and Robert Altman’s *M*A*S*H* (1969), both memorable realist films, are still imaginary stories told to entertain audiences in particular ways.

Formalist Narratives

Unlike Realistic Narrative, Formalist Narratives generally make it very clear to audiences that we are watching a made-up story, which the director can play with in any way he or she likes. They tend to use the narrative structure to highlight themes the director feels are important by stylizing, exaggerating, or distorting particular elements in ways that convey the artificiality of the film experience.

In the history of film, directors like Jean Luc Godard, Alfred Hitchcock, and Steven Soderbergh have all explored Formalist Narratives with striking results. Contemporary examples of films with Formalist Narrative structures include *Run Lola Run* (1998) and *Moulin Rouge!* (2001).