Storytelling in Film & Media – FMMC 0357

Fall 2010, Professor Jason Mittell

T/Th 1:30 – 2:45, Axinn 104

Screening: Wed 7:30 – 10:30, Axinn 100

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Office Hours: Mon 1:30 – 2:30, Wed 10:30 – 11:45, or by appointment

All artistic and popular media offer their own particular techniques of storytelling. This course explores how narrative structures and models operate differently between film, television, and digital media such as videogames. Drawing heavily on various theories of narratology developed to understand the structures, techniques, and impacts of narration for literature and film, we will consider how different media offer possibilities to creators and viewers to tap into the central human practice of storytelling. We will focus on works that challenge convention in a variety of ways, centered on contemporary media and trends in narrative technique.

Students will read advanced theoretical materials and view narrative examples, culminating in a final research project, to better our understanding of narrative as a cultural practice. Additionally, students will complete a video-based exercise in pairs, and participate in ongoing online discussions reflecting on screenings and readings. The course is designed as an advanced theoretical seminar – the readings are often quite complex, and class discussions will engage the material at a sophisticated level.

Learning Goals:

- Familiarize yourself with major concepts concerning storytelling and narratology as applied to diverse media
- Connect theoretical readings to your own media creation and consumption
- Be able to conceive and execute a large-scale research project

Required Texts & Readings:

Books available at Middlebury College Bookstore:

David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) [NIFF]

Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms* (Cornell University Press, 1990) [CTT]

Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers & Other Media Paratexts* (New York University Press, 2010) [SSS]

Note: If the bookstore runs out of these titles, it is the student's responsibility to get access to a copy for assigned readings. All titles are on reserve and easily available at online bookstores.

Other required readings will be available online or via Electronic Reserve (password: 3387jm). The *Living Handbook of Narratology* is a highly recommended resource, available at http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/ . Readings for each week are due for the Tuesday class meeting, unless otherwise listed on the schedule. Some readings, marked with an *, directly address the screenings for that week, so you may wait to read those until Wednesday night

after screening if you haven't seen the relevant screenings before.

Weekly screenings will be required for this course, taking place Wednesday at 7:30 pm; it is up to each student to make arrangements to screen the required materials at the Library before Thursday's class if they cannot attend screening. Since most of the screenings we'll be watching use complex storytelling devices, it is **highly recommended** that you have watched the film or show once before the screening, allowing you to focus on the storytelling strategies rather than just the plot.

Course Requirements:
All of the following requirements must be completed in order to pass this course – if you do not complete the two essays and video project, you will automatically fail the course:

20% Analytical essay
15% Video remix
35% Final research essay
15% Online participation
15% In-class Participation

Assignments:
    More information will be presented about these assignments, but here is a brief overview.

Analytical Essay:
Due via email by midnight on Oct. 7, this 4-5 page essay will ask you to apply some theoretical concepts to a film or television show or videogame, selected from a list.

Video Remix Essay:
Students will work in pairs to create a short video (no more than 5 minutes) that remixes one of the films or television programs that we view in class. The goal of the video is to explore how shifts in editing can impact storytelling—it is not intended to create a parody video or mash-up between unlikely sources, but rather to use the tools of filmmaking to re-narrate a segment of a program or film. Projects will be screened in class on Nov. 9.

Research Essay:
The major assignment for the course will be an original 12-15 page research essay on a topic of your choosing. You may write about any issue concerning narrative within one medium or across media, focusing on a case study or exploring a theoretical issue. Students should begin thinking about topics that interest them as they move through the course materials. Potential topic ideas should be sent via email to Professor Mittell by 10/21, with an elaborated paper proposal turned in by 11/12. The final paper will be due by noon on 12/10.

Online Discussion:
Students will be expected to actively participate on online discussions to respond to course readings and materials, as well as serving as a forum to discuss any issues related to the course. Students who do not post weekly responses as described below will receive no higher than a C for online participation. For each day 's reading and screening, Professor Mittell will post a brief set of discussion questions. You are responsible for answering **one of these questions each week** before the class meeting, for an average of 11 posts throughout the semester – you can respond to either day's questions during a given week, but you must post your response by 6 am on the day of the class meeting. In addition to responding to the given question(s), you should read the postings of your peers and construct your own response in dialogue with your classmates. You will not receive credit for posting responses after the day on

which the readings were assigned unless you have been absent from class for an excused reason and have made specific arrangements with Professor Mittell.

Students should use the blog to exchange ideas about anything tangentially related to class, posting articles and material of interest to classmates. Please use the site to share relevant material and links that will be useful to your projects, as this course encourages group exploration and discovery.

Videogame Play:
One of the topics we'll be discussing in the class is how videogames tell stories (or not). Since a game cannot be "screened" like a film or TV episode, each student will commit to playing through a game of their choosing throughout the semester. A number of games for PS2, PS3, Wii and Xbox 360 will be available through the Axinn Equipment Room, but students may select other games if they choose, as long as it relates to narrative in important ways. If relevant, students can work in pairs to play through a game.

Additionally, all students will be required to playthough *Portal*, a fairly short multiplatform game available for Xbox 360 in the Axinn basement, or on PC/Mac through Steam (http://store.steampowered.com/app/400/). It will be expected that everyone will have completed *Portal* by Oct. 21.

Class Participation & Attendance:
As a seminar, participation is key to this course. Classes will only work if students are prepared, engaged, and participating. You are expected to attend all class meetings on time, having done the readings, viewed screenings, thought about the material, and prepared the necessary assignments. Attendance will be taken daily. Students who miss a class should find out what they missed from their classmates and make-up the necessary material. Your participation grade will be lowered one mark (e.g. A- becomes B+) for each **unexcused absence in excess of one**. If you know that you will be absent, please contact Professor Mittell as soon as possible to make necessary arrangements and avoid penalties. The class participation component of your grade will reward students who actively participate in class and otherwise demonstrate their engagement with the material. Likewise, this grade will be used to downgrade students who are clearly disengaged with the class or fail to uphold their end of the course policies.

Grades:

You will be graded based on the following scale, using a 4.0 scale on all assignments:

- A (4.0) is for students who truly excel on assignments, demonstrating mastery of the material and dramatically surpassing the expectations of the assignment.

- B (3.0) is for students who do above-average work, clearly achieving the course goals and completing all assignments in a strong fashion.

- C (2.0) is for students who satisfactorily meet the course requirements in an adequate fashion.

- D (1.0) is for students who do not achieve course goals and whose work does not adequately meet expectations.

- F (0.0) is for students who dramatically fail to meet course goals and do not fulfill course

expectations.

Submitting Work:
Late papers are highly discouraged, as they throw off schedules for both student and professor. If you must hand in any assignment later than the deadline, please contact the professor in advance as soon as the situation becomes apparent. If a paper is not turned in on time without advance approval from Professor Mittell or a Dean's excuse, the paper will be penalized by one mark (e.g. an A- becomes a B+) for each day of lateness.

All papers should be submitted via email as an attached .doc, .odt or .rtf file format document – Professor Mittell will reply via email within 24 hours when a paper has been received. If you have not received such a notification, you should email him to ensure that the paper was in fact received. Please do **NOT** slip papers under the door to Professor Mittell's office.

Cutting You Some Slack:
College is one of the few situations in life where the expectations are clearly laid out and the consequences for meeting or missing those expectations is transparent. The grading system and workload has been designed to be as fair and straightforward as possible, allowing students to choose how to prioritize the class versus other obligations or interests. However, there may be times that things become challenging and you want to ask for some leniency. **One time per semester**, students may request to be cut some slack, resulting in a more flexible attitude toward grading, attendance or other policies. Simply write on an assignment, or send an email describing the request, with the phrase "please cut me some slack" - Professor Mittell will adjust his expectations accordingly. Slack cannot be requested after a grade has been given.

Academic Dishonesty:
All work you submit must be your own and you may not inappropriately assist other students in their work beyond the confines of a particular assignment, in keeping with the Middlebury College Honor Code. All papers and exams must include the statement of the Honor Code along with the student's name (as a digital signature) in order to be graded. **There is a no-tolerance policy for academic misconduct in this course!** The minimum penalty for academic misconduct will be a failing grade (F) for the course – further academic and disciplinary penalties may be assessed. The definitions of plagiarism and cheating used in this course are consistent with the material in the College Handbook, Chapter V.

Course Policies:
Any student with a disability or who otherwise needs accommodation or assistance should make arrangements with Professor Mittell as soon as possible. If you know that you will have conflicts due to athletics or other college activities, you must notify Professor Mittell in advance and arrange to make up missed work – athletic absences are not excused and it is the student's responsibility to make all arrangements.

Email is Professor Mittell's preferred mode of communication (besides face-to-face conversation!), generally checking regularly during the work week – if you email him asking for a response and do not receive one within one working day (M-F), assume that your email may not have been received. Office voicemails will typically be answered less promptly. Please do **not** call Professor Mittell at home.

Printing & Computer Use Policy:
Writing assignments for this course are either based on the course website, or should be submitted via email, with no printing required. Many readings are online – students are welcome

to print or not print at their choosing, with the understanding that students should take notes on readings either via digital annotation or separate notebook or word processing file. You should bring readings to class each day, either via paper or on a laptop screen. Feel free to use laptops throughout all class meetings except during screenings, where the light from the screen can disrupt the viewing experience. If you are on your laptop, you are expected to engage with course materials, not free-range surfing the web, checking email, Facebook, etc.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1: *Week of Sept. 7* – **Introduction to Narratology**
WATCH 9/8: *Trapped in the Closet*, eps 3-4 – PN1992.77 .T745 v. 1 2005D
   Lost, "Walkabout" – PN1992.77 .L6725 v.1 2009B
   Groundhog Day (Ramis, 1997) – MCTR 5841D
READ 9/9: Meister, "Narratology" [Online]
   Abbott, "Defining Narrative" [eRes]
   *Thompson, "*Groundhog Day*"

Week 2: *Week of Sept. 14* – **Storytelling in Moving Images**
READ: Bordwell, *NiFF*, Ch. 1-2
   Mittell, "Film & Television Narrative" [eRes]
   Chatman, "What is Description in the Cinema?" [CTT]
   *Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" [Online]
   *Munro, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" [Online]
   *Habibi, "The Magic Moment" [Online]
WATCH: *Trapped in the Closet*, eps 5-6 – PN1992.77 .T745 v. 1 2005D
   An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge (Enrico, 1962) - PN1992.77.T87 v5 2006D
   Away From Her (Polley, 2006) - PN1997.2.A939 A1 2007D

Week 3: *Week of Sept. 21* – **Narrative Comprehension & Cognition**
READ: Bordwell, *NiFF*, Ch. 3-5
   Herman, "Cognitive Narratology" [Online]
   Mittell, "Previously On" [eRes]
   *Barratt, "Twist Blindness" [eRes]
   *Hills, "*Torchwood*" [eRes]
WATCH: *Trapped in the Closet*, eps 7-8 – PN1992.77 .T745 v. 1 2005D
   Torchwood: Children of Earth, "Day One" – PN1992.77 .T587 v.3 2009B
   The Sixth Sense (Shyamalan, 1999) – PN1997.S535 A1 2008B
RECOMMENDED VIEWING: *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954) – MCTR 6236D

Week 4: *Week of Sept. 28* **– Character**
READ 9/28: Jannadis, "Character" [Online]
   Newman, "Characterization as Social Cognition" [eRes]
   Smith, "A Case of *Cold Feet*" [eRes]
   Pearson, "Chain of Events" [eRes]
   *Rosenblum, "*Annie Hall*: It Wasn't the Film He Set Out to Make" [eRes]
WATCH: *Trapped in the Closet*, eps 9-10 – PN1992.77 .T745 v. 1 2005D
   Torchwood: Children of Earth, "Day Two" – PN1992.77 .T587 v.3 2009B
   Annie Hall (Allen, 1977) – PN1997.A463 A1 2005D
IN-CLASS THURSDAY: *Torchwood: CoE*, "Day Three" – PN1992.77.T587 v.3 2009D

Week 5: *Week of Oct. 5* – **Narrative Temporality and Spatiality**
READ: Ryan, "Space" [Online]
   Bordwell, *NiFF*, Ch. 6-7
   Thanouli, "Post-Classical Time" [eRes]
   Juul, "Fiction" [eRes]
   *Ghislotti, "Narrative Comprehension Made Difficult" [eRes]
WATCH: *Trapped in the Closet*, eps 11-12 – PN1992.77 .T745 v. 1 2005D
   Torchwood: Children of Earth, "Day Four" – PN1992.77 .T587 v.3 2009B
   Memento (Nolan, 2000) – PN1997.M43341 A1 2006B

WRITE: Analytic Essay due by email, 10/7

Week 6:   *Week of Oct. 12* **– Narrative Complexity**
READ: Mittell, "Narrative Complexity" [eRes]
                Simons, "Complex Narratives" [eRes]
                Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film" [eRes]
                Newman, "Games of Form" [eRes]
                *Bordwell & Thompson, "Functions of Film Sound: *The Prestige*" [eRes]
                *Bordwell, "Niceties" [Online]
WATCH: *Trapped in the Closet*, eps 13-14 – PN1992.77 .T745 v. 2 2007D
                Torchwood: Children of Earth, "Day Five" – PN1992.77 .T587 v.3 2009B
                The Prestige (Nolan, 2006) – PN1997.2.P725 A1 2007D

Week 7:   *Week of Oct. 19* – **Focalization & Point of View (no class 10/19)**
READ: Niederhoff, "Focalization" [Online]
                Chatman, "New Point of View" [CTT]
                Gray, *SSS*, Intro – Ch. 2
WATCH: *Trapped in the Closet*, eps 15-16 – PN1992.77 .T745 v. 2 2007D
                The West Wing, "Noël" (2000) – MCTR 8099D
                Lone Star (Sayles, 1996) – MCTR 5838D

Week 8:   *Week of Oct. 26* – **Authorship & Narrators**
READ: Margolin, "Narrator" [Online]
                Schmid, "Implied Author" [Online]
                Chatman, "In Defense of…", "Implied Author at Work", "Cinematic Narrator" [CTT]
                Foucault, "What is an Author?" [eRes]
                Clarke, "*Lost* and Mastermind Narration" [eRes]
                Gray, *SSS*, Ch. 3
WATCH: *Trapped in the Closet*, eps 17-18 – PN1992.77 .T745 v. 2 2007D
                Pushing Daisies, "Pie-lette" (2007) - PN1992.77 .P87 v. 1 2008B
                Adaptation (Jonze, 2002) – MCTR 7755D

Week 9:   *Week of Nov. 2* – **Classical vs. Art-Cinema Narration**
READ: Bordwell, *NiFF*, Ch. 8-10
                Thanouli, "'Art Cinema' Narration" [Online]
                Ndalianis, "Television and the Neo-Baroque" [eRes]
WATCH: *Trapped in the Closet*, eps 19-20 – PN1992.77 .T745 v. 2 2007D
                La Jetee – PN1997.J444 A1 2007D
                12 Monkeys (Gilliam, 1995) – PN1997.T778 A1 2005D

Week 10:   *Week of Nov. 9* – **Experimental Modes of Narration**
READ: Bordwell, *NiFF*, Ch. 11-13
                Gray, *SSS*, Ch. 4
                *Laass, "Unreliable Narration" and "Is There a Story?"
PRESENT: In-class 11/9, present video narrative projects
WRITE: Email research paper proposal to Professor Mittell by 11/12
WATCH: *Trapped in the Closet*, eps 21-22 – PN1992.77 .T745 v. 2 2007D
                Mulholland Drive (Lynch, 2002) – PN1997.2.M865 A1 2002D

Week 11:   *Week of Nov. 16* – **Television & Serial Form**
READ: Allen, "Reader Oriented Poetics of Soap Opera" [eRes]
                Newman, "From Beats to Arcs" [eRes]

Warhol, "Feminine Intensities" [eRes]
Mittell, "Serial Boxes" [Online]

WATCH: *South Park*, "Trapped in the Closet" (2005) - PN1992.77 .S68 v. 9 2007D
Arrested Development, "Top Banana" (2003) – PN1992.77.A786 v.1 2004
Buffy the Vampire Slayer, "Surprise" and "Innocence" (1997) – MCTR 7237D

Week 12:   *Week of Nov. 23*– **Transmedia Narratives**
             (No screening or class 11/24-25)
READ: *Gray, SSS*, Ch. 5 – Conclusion
Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101" [Online]
Tryon, "TV Time Lords" [eRes]
Series of videos on transmedia storytelling, 10 parts [Online]

Week 13:   *Week of Nov. 30* – **Videogame Narrative Logics**
READ: Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" & ripostes [online]
Frasca, "Ludologists Love Stories Too" [eRes]
Ip, "Narrative Structures in Computer & Video Games" parts 1 & 2 [eRes]
Booth, "Narractivity and the Narrative Database" [eRes]

WATCH: *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer, 1998) – PN1997.L65351 A1 2008B
The Simpsons, "Trilogy of Error" (2001) - PN1992.77 .S58 v.12 2009D
TBA

WRITE: **Research paper due via email by 12/9**