



# NARRATIVE

## Invasion of the Body Snatchers and E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial

### Before film screenings: Introduction to NARRATIVE

When we discuss the **narrative** of a film we are looking at the way it has been structured, **how the story has been told**. What information are we shown, and in what order? What aren't we told? How does the plot propel us through the story? How is the plot made to be believable and 'realistic'? Here are some useful terms to help answer these questions:

- **Linear** narrative - story is told in a chronological order
- **Non-linear** narrative - story is told in disjointed sections e.g. with the use of flashback or forwards
- **Allegory** - a story rich in symbolism that can be interpreted to have different or hidden meanings
- **Binary opposition - thematic** opposites (e.g. imprisonment vs freedom) that are used to create **dramatic conflict** (which makes a more interesting story!). Could be expressed through **aesthetic** opposites (e.g. dim vs. bright lighting)
- **Self / Other** - the Self is represented by 'normal' people we can identify with; the Other is anything that is *not* like us e.g. aliens, monsters, terrorists
- **Enigmas** - narrative questions the plot constructs and that the audience want answered - from what is going on? (**mystery**) to what will happen next? (**suspense**).

### Todorov's Structure

Todorov was a theorist who believed that all stories could be boiled down to five distinct **narrative stages**.

These are:

- **Equilibrium** - what is the normal life of the characters like? Establishes time, place and



characters - and a sense of order

- **Disruption** - something happens that disrupts the normal life of the characters. Normally this is created by the **Other**.
- **Recognition** - characters realise the order is disrupted; this often leads to a **crisis** where action to repair the disruption (or tackle the problem) must be taken.
- **Repair** - characters attempt to resolve the problem or defeat the **Other**.
- **Restoration** - the equilibrium (normal life) is restored; or a new stability is created

## After film screenings: ANALYSING NARRATIVE

### Narrative structure

The films have a different narrative structure. *What is different about the plot (i.e. the order and style the story is told in)?*

### Ideas:

- *ET* has a linear structure, whilst *Bodysnatchers* is non-linear - the main story takes place in flashback. *How do we know this? Pick out three things the filmmakers have done to show the story is a flashback.*

A similarity between them is the structure of sci-fi sub-genre termed '**Alien Invasion**'. In these films some kind of alien (**the Other**) invades human space (usually Earth), is confronted by humans, and is either defeated and repelled or... Sometimes these stories are left open, and hint at the alien victory. The structure to these films also follows Todorov's.

**Task:** *Think of scenes/events in the films which would show each stage. Choose a screen-shot of the film, and cut and paste the image onto the chart to illustrate your point.*



| Todorov's          | 'Alien Invasion' structure   | <i>E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial</i> | <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i> | Screen-shot |
|--------------------|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Equilibrium</b> | Normal life of the humans  |                                   |                                       |             |
| <b>Disruption</b>  | Aliens arrive - begin to infiltrate or invade  |                                   |                                       |             |
| <b>Recognition</b> | First contact with aliens - initial conflict (or friendship). Plan hatched to resolve situation. |                                   |                                       |             |
| <b>Repair</b>      | Plan put into action. Might be a big battle or chase.  |                                   |                                       |             |
| <b>Return</b>      | Aliens leave and normal life is resumed... Or left open: might the aliens be here to stay?       |                                   |                                       |             |

**Extension:** What do you think of the final scenes of each film?

*ET* has a **closed** ending - ET leaves, 'Keys' gets to see a spaceship, Eliot's 'broken' family has been healed. Each plot strand is 'tied up'. This is called **narrative closure**.

*Body Snatchers* has an **open** ending - the last we see of the aliens are hundreds of pods being taken by truck to every town in America, while the hero (having lost his town and his girlfriend) is now a gibbering wreck. Even though his tale seems to be believed, the story isn't concluded. *What questions are left at the end of the film? If a sequel was to be made, what might happen?*

**Further work:** *Body Snatchers* originally didn't have the scenes of the Bennell at the hospital that 'bookend' the story. Don Siegel originally wanted the film to begin with the hero's voiceover about



everything appearing normal; then to finish with him screaming at the camera "You're next!". The studio felt this was too upsetting and forced him to add the extra scenes. *How do the added scenes change the film? Which do you prefer?*

**Idea:** The final (added) scenes, where Bennell's tale is believed and the FBI are called, not only suggests a far happier ending - they also reassert authority: the doctors and detectives are rational (initially don't believe Bennell but when given evidence they change their minds) and dependable (the FBI will sort out the problem... save humanity!)

Read this article about how the different endings send different political messages, and how the film can be seen as an **allegory**.

Allegorical stories are often ambiguous and symbolic, rather than realistic or naturalistic.

*How does ET create a sense of realism and believability?*

## Binary Oppositions

Here are some binary oppositions which feature in both films. How are they shown in specific scenes that highlight the opposition?

| Opposition   | <i>E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial</i> | <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i> |
|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Alien / Human  |                                   |                                       |
| Conformity (doing as you're told/ fitting in) / Autonomy (doing things your way) |                                   |                                       |
| Empathy and emotion (or hysteria) / Logic and rationality (or 'coldness')        |                                   |                                       |



| Opposition             | <i>E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial</i> | <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i> |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Imprisonment / Freedom |                                   |                                       |

## Exploring Self / Other

Both films feature humans and aliens ‘joining together’ in different ways. At numerous points the division between **Self** (the humans) and **Other** (the alien) becomes ambiguous and confused.

*How does this happen in Body Snatchers?*

*How does this occur in ET?*

*What messages do the film about the merging of Self and Other?*

### Ideas:

*Body Snatchers:* The aliens duplicate human individuals, mimicking them precisely in appearance and somehow (it isn’t clearly explained) ‘absorbing’ their thoughts and memories. This is portrayed as a horrific loss of the **Self**. The **Other** becomes something that looks and behaves exactly like our friends and family - and all the more scary and threatening because of it.

*ET:* empathy between Elliott and ET (even their names are almost identical) is built on their similarities: both are outsiders, both are vulnerable and ‘lost’. From their first encounter, they communicate with facial expressions more than words, and their ‘merged experience’ is shown early on (especially during the frog scene - see **focus scenes** section). Later their physical health is also ‘merged’. This blurring of **Self** and **Other** is portrayed as a positive and magical experience that saves both their lives.

**Discussion:** *How might the **historical contexts** of the films influenced the way Self and Other are portrayed?*



## Enigmas

- What questions are created at the start of each film that makes us want to find out what happens?
- When are they answered?
- What new questions are raised?
- Which are answered or resolved by the end of the film?

|                        | <i>E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial</i>  | <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i>                                     |
|------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Initial enigmas</b> | E.g. What is ET doing on Earth?<br>Your e.g.:  | E.g. What happened to drive this man to near insanity?<br>Your e.g.:      |
| <b>Answered</b>        | E.g. Collecting plant specimens - we see ET doing this, plus he is able to resuscitate the dying plant.<br><b>Your e.g.:</b> | E.g. His town has been taken over by alien invaders!<br><b>Your e.g.:</b> |
| <b>New enigmas</b>     |  |   |



|  | <i>E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial</i> | <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i> |
|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Answered?</b><br><b>Unresolved?</b> |                                   |                                       |