

Toward an Integrated Theory of Fictional Narrative

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A quest for an integrated theory of fictional narratives must begin by asking why human beings listen to and tell stories. Jonathan Gottschall contends that we are genetically wired for story: “Like a flight simulator, fiction projects us into intense simulations of problems that run parallel to those we face in reality . . . Fiction is a powerful and ancient virtual reality technology that simulates the big dilemmas of human life.”¹ So fictional narratives expose us to what life’s concretes can teach us, without endangering our lives every minute of the “lesson.” Ayn Rand has a different emphasis. She contends: “The primary value [of art] is that it gives him [man] the experience of living in a world where things are *as they ought to be*.”² Both purposes seem legitimate: solving current problems and providing a vision. Our integrated theory must be inclusive. At times, only a glorious vision can make some aware of a “current problem.”

We can learn via concepts and abstractions, too, but that’s relatively new in human history and certainly too difficult for children under six to do. Life’s first lessons, then, must be imparted via concrete illustrations that exemplify the abstraction. Because we may be genetically geared (through our “ancient virtual reality technology”) to be fond of narratives, we remain fond of receiving these “lessons” well into adulthood. Indeed, most humans don’t stop consuming stories until they die.

Fictional worlds do affect us—and not just during the reading or viewing. They seem capable of changing our worldview. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* may have changed a nation by

¹ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), pp. 57 and 58.

² Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto*, Centennial ed. (New York: Penguin Group, 1971), p. 163.

painting a blueprint of a world that wasn't there yet.³ Hence Rand's preference for art to be visionary; in that context, she quotes Aristotle: "[H]istory represents things as they are, while fiction represents them 'as they *might be* and *ought to be*.'"⁴

Is the "might be" paintbrush the only one that "ought to be" used, though? We must also ask what purposes are served by observing historic folly as against getting lost in a utopian vision.

Tribal elders told stories to the tribe's young "by the campfire." In the modern world, we have publishers, producers, and financiers who seek to make a profit in the "entertainment" industry, which capitalizes on the human predisposition to consume stories.

And the storytellers? Most novelists, playwrights, filmmakers, screenwriters, and the network-show creators know that they must entertain, but their inner drive is also typically fueled by purposes they may consciously identify in their soul. Their purposes may instead be subconscious, but are nevertheless achieved when the audience is highly engaged.

Can we exhaust these purposes in a conceptual framework with a limited classification? I believe we can. The aims of the artist who writes narrative fiction are often not stated explicitly and may not even be in the artist's conscious awareness. However, one could categorize them all into the following:

- (1) Persuasion: To persuade people to a point of view.
- (2) Situational Empathy: To incite an empathy for, or understanding of, a faraway situation, people, or problem, in a risk-free and low-cost environment, including exposing readers and viewers to two or more alternate viewpoints.
- (3) Assuaging: To assuage negative feelings, such as grief, fear, or helplessness, by having the protagonist experience similar emotions. In this case, the immersion experience may have a soothing rather than a curative effect on the individual with negative feelings.
- (4) Inspiration: To inspire people to do courageous things (or things they otherwise may not attempt).

³ Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, "Impact of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Slavery, and the Civil War," *Harriet Beecher Stowe Center website*, accessed online at: <https://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/utc/impact.shtml>.

⁴ Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto*, p. 162.

- (5) Sense-of-life Experience: To convey the experience of a positive sense of life (as with laughter) or a sense of wonder and joy (often from comedies and musicals), or a negative sense of life such as despair or helplessness (often from tragic stage plays or print literature).

These goals can overlap and most narratives have more than one objective. At the creative end of the spectrum, then, we have these purposes. At the financing and consuming end, though, we mostly have the desire to be “entertained.” The artists must therefore entertain while attempting to accomplish their innermost objective.

Before we move our theoretical framework to the synergy, or lack thereof, between purposes and entertainment, we must ask what it actually means to be “entertained.” Since, “enjoyment may be derived from the arousal of any emotion, including those which on their face would not seem enjoyable, such as sadness,”⁵ I offer the following definition: “Entertained” is a state in which a person has emotion (whether of joy, fear, excitement, sadness, trepidation, etc.) much higher than normal, and the person is moved between opposing states—from joy to grief or anticipation to surprise or fear to relief, and so on—or across differing states, typically while sitting stationary in a comfortable and safe place.

Hence, the higher the emotion and more frequent the changes in emotion, the more one is *entertained*. At first glance, this makes no sense, but we do seek entertainment that causes affect. We seek songs that induce sadness in us much more than music that does not move us at all. We love and remember films that made us laugh *or* cry, and feel cheated by ones that leave us detached. The longer the narrative, higher seems the requirement to move our emotional state to keep us engrossed.

For fiction to heighten a person’s emotional state and vary it, it must succeed in transporting the individual to the world of the narrative to such an extent that she becomes almost unaware of her surroundings during the engagement. Cognitive Science research calls this state of becoming and then staying almost unaware of surroundings, “transportation” or “immersion.” Melanie Green defines transportation as “[A] state of cognitive, emotional, and imagery engagement. Transported individuals are completely focused on the

⁵ Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic, “Measuring Narrative Engagement,” *Media Psychology* 12, no. 4 (2009), pp. 321-47.

world of the story; they may lose track of time or fail to notice events going on around them.”⁶

Entertainment, therefore, has three components: emotional heightening, emotion-state variation, and transportation. These three components are interrelated. Narrative cannot heighten the emotion of an individual who stays detached. The narrative that *varies* the emotion-state during engagement of a transported individual does a better job of maintaining the immersion in the story world.

Of the three components, which comes first? Transportation. Once the individual is transported, her emotional state must be heightened to maintain the immersion in a deep state. In order to keep her lost in the story universe, it must *stay* heightened, which is easier if the state is varied (from joy to fear to trepidation, and so on).

How, then, do we contrast the *effectiveness* of fiction, that is, the ability of narratives to achieve their implied purposes, and how does that relate to fiction’s ability *to entertain*?

Cognitive Science research tells us that fiction’s effectiveness and its ability to entertain are tightly intertwined. What we know today about the “science of narrative” is that *transported* individuals:

- (1) stay better transported if emotional states vary during engagement⁷;
- (2) experience the engagement as typical of humanity, even though the sample of key characters is too few to be a statistical sample⁸;
- (3) imbibe the messages of the narrative more readily since a heightened emotional state numbs the brain’s critical, reflective faculty⁹;

⁶ Melanie Green, “Research Challenges in Narrative Persuasion,” *Information Design Journal* 16, no. 1 (2008), p. 47.

⁷ Robin L. Nabi and Melanie C. Green “The Role of a Narrative’s Emotional Flow in Promoting Persuasive Outcomes,” *Media Psychology* 18, no. 2 (2015), pp. 137-62.

⁸ Jeffery Strange and Cynthia Leung, “How Anecdotal Accounts in News and in Fiction Can Influence Judgments of a Social Problem’s Urgency, Causes, and Cures,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25, no. 4 (April 1999), pp. 436-49.

⁹ Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, p. 151.

- (4) retain the messages when the emotional highs of engagement end¹⁰;
- (5) integrate the messages with their existing worldview to alter it¹¹;
- (6) reinforce and actually strengthen the integration by changing the lens by which the world is subsequently seen¹²;
- (7) are more likely to perceive the real world to be a just world if they immerse in fiction often (as fictional worlds are often just)¹³; and
- (8) perceive a realism in the narrative world, that is, even though they are aware that the narrative world is unreal.¹⁴

The greater the immersion, the stronger the belief that the story events are plausible, that they could eventuate in real life. Thus, facilitating, deepening, and maintaining transportation is critical to enhancing the effectiveness of fiction, if the storyteller has implicitly or explicitly any legitimate objective.

Now that we have inexorably entwined entertainment, emotion-state heightening, and artistic purposes, we can seek to integrate into this framework a model (or models) of entertainment that work as methodological prescriptions for artists and critics.

Let's ponder the situation of death. Death affects us far more, the closer we are to the people who have passed, the more we know them, and the more we love them. Since "mirror neurons" can embody in us the actions, thoughts, and feelings of other people, including

¹⁰ Michael Dahlstrom, "The Persuasive Influence of Narrative Causality: Psychological Mechanism, Strength in Overcoming Resistance, and Persistence Over Time," *Media Psychology* 15, no. 3 (2012), pp. 303-26.

¹¹ Markus Appel and Tobias Richter, "Persuasive Effects of Fictional Narratives Increase Over Time," *Media Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2007), pp. 113-34.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Markus Appel, "Fictional Narratives Cultivate Just World Beliefs," *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 1 (2008), pp. 62-83.

¹⁴ Melanie Green, "Transportation into Narrative Worlds: The Role of Prior Knowledge and Perceived Realism," *Discourse Processes* 38, no. 2 (2004), pp. 247-66.

fictional characters,¹⁵ we should expect that if the make-believe situation is to trigger our mirror neurons, we must first get to know the fictional characters *before* they are placed in jeopardy: a gradual immersion, then the shock. In industry parlance, the shock is called “an inciting incident” or “the catalyst.”

What else does classical structure involve? Increased jeopardy. That’s good for emotion-state heightening.

Why bother with dramatic highs and lows? The long narrative needs emotion-state variation.

Why a resolution? Unless the artist wants to inculcate a sense of life characterized by ineffectualness, he will resolve the situation or conflict. Ironically, Aristotle is still the master most quoted at screenwriting school, even as Hollywood delves more frequently into unresolved drama. His words ring true: “[A] well-formed plot is therefore closed at both ends, and connected in between.”¹⁶

Why does the archetypal structure need a *climactic* resolution? The emotion has been pushed to its zenith. Now is the time to convey the final message, when the brain’s reflective faculty is most numbed, and then commence the final downturn on the roller coaster.

Why include a soul-searching moment for the characters before the external climax? Because, by this time in the narrative, we are them and they are us; it’s like making us delve into our own conscience. Ideally, the jeopardy will rise to its peak if the character crosses the Rubicon, choosing to risk even death to achieve his life-affirming objective.

Our theoretical framework affirms what’s known as the classical storytelling structure, fed down over the centuries without the imprimatur of neuroscience. We can and should test our theory. Major studios and networks have started using biometric technology to track engagement.¹⁷ Furthermore, there is now a new field of study called

¹⁵ Norman N. Holland, “Stories and the Mirror Inside You,” *Psychology Today*, accessed online at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/is-your-brain-culture/201108/stories-and-the-mirror-inside-you>.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), p. xxiii.

¹⁷ “The Biometrics Lab Project: AFTRS at the cutting edge of the biometric measurement of audience engagement,” *Australian Film, Television, and Radio School website*, accessed online at: <https://filmink.com.au/public-notice/biometrics-lab-project-aftrs-cutting-edge-biometric-measurement-audience-engagement/>.

“Neurocinematics.”¹⁸ This is one reason why novelists seek beta readers for manuscripts. But we can test the end-product as consumers, too.

Let me take you on my brief journey of one such test. You can do the same any number of times, that is, introspect *after* the consumption event.

In July 2017, I indulged twice in the pleasure of cinema. A *pleasure*? Here we go, paying to sit in a darkened, air-conditioned hall, with our partners and a bunch of strangers, to watch visuals of a narrative that can make us laugh and cry and feel its “suspense.”

I saw *The Promise* and, one week later, *Dunkirk*.¹⁹ Both are survival stories, set against the backdrop of war: the Armenian genocide and World War I in the former, World War II in the latter. However, one left me in tears, and the other left me disengaged.

My two immediate *ex post* questions were: Why? And *does it matter*? I reminded myself that the level of my emotional engagement matters a lot—to me, obviously, but also to the storytellers.

Then a third, more baffling question briefly invaded my consciousness: Why was I “crying” in one if this was supposed to be “entertainment”? Was it? Of course it was. Let’s remember this: emotion-state heightening, no matter the direction.

I pondered why one narrative seemed so empty to me, and the theory was vindicated. In classical structure, we must first get to “know the character.” *Then* they get an obsessive goal, most often due to an inciting incident. *Dunkirk*, though, dispenses with the concept of character. We never get to know anyone. Even main characters have no names. While too much exposition gets preachy in a “show, don’t tell” visual medium, too little exposition leaves viewers with no context—neither historical nor, more importantly, of the characters’ decisions. In *Dunkirk*, the beast of Postmodernist nothingness sinks to a whole new low.

¹⁸ Uri Hasson et al., “Neurocinematics: The Neuroscience of Film,” *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* (2008), accessed online at: http://www.cns.nyu.edu/~nava/MyPubs/Hasson-et-al_NeuroCinematics2008.pdf.

¹⁹ *The Promise*, directed by Terry George (Open Road Films, 2016); *Dunkirk*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2017).

A “slice of life” narrative often doesn’t paint the “ought to be,” but, in our framework, a slice-of-life narrative is not without attendant benefits; it can assuage us. It can also provide a situational empathy, historical or imagined, but one heightened by emotion.

Despite that potential benefit, for our mirror neurons to be activated, we need characters to feel for. A narrative’s classical structure must involve characters with goals and internal and external conflicts that fill the journey with jeopardy and difficulty.

For a story to lack classical structure is one thing, but for a film to lack a story? That’s a whole new low. *Dunkirk* takes us well beneath the low of the naturalistic “slice of life,” which must at least strive for authenticity, and characters who affect our mirroring neurons. The drive for a play, novel, film, or even journalistic book or documentary, has always been “I want their story to be told” or “I want to tell this story.”

We arrive at last at why *Dunkirk* leaves so many, albeit not all, unengaged. During the screening, I was well aware of the theater, and my companion and I even moved seats; immersion was low. Anecdotally, some who appreciated this film seemed to do this as an afterthought, after becoming aware of the context that was missing, or worse, to play along with critics who praised it. Superbly shot scenes strung together in gimmicky non-linear time doesn’t a narrative make, *Warner Brothers’* \$100 million-plus movie budget notwithstanding. David Cox at *The Guardian* sums it beautifully, citing, to boot, *Dunkirk’s* betrayal of history in its facts, let alone the heroism.²⁰

But can one show a “slice-of-life” full of despair and yet inspire, too? *Dunkirk’s* fans contend that the event was a military disaster, a retreat. In fact, the evacuation was a success, albeit needed because it was *preceded* by a miscalculation.

On the other hand, we have *The Promise*, which made me smile and cry, in about equal proportions. Quite possibly, it’s the most expensive “indie” film ever. It cost an estimated \$100 million to produce, all financed by the man who bought and sold MGM thrice, the late tycoon Kirk Kerkorian.²¹ Director Terry George (*Hotel*

²⁰ David Cox, “Bloodless, Boring, and Empty: Christopher Nolan’s *Dunkirk* Left Me Cold,” *The Guardian* (July 26, 2017), accessed online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2017/jul/26/bloodless-boring-empty-christopher-nolan-dunkirk-left-me-cold>.

²¹ Brent Lang, “‘*The Promise*’: The Armenian Genocide Epic Kirk Kerkorian Spent a Fortune to Make,” *Variety* (October 20, 2016), accessed online at:

Rwanda) takes a situation far worse than Dunkirk's. In Dunkirk's famous evacuation, estimates are that England may have lost 100,000 soldiers to death or captivity, but over 300,000 survived in part due to civilians in little boats who entered the theater of war to rescue their soldiers; there *was* heroism to celebrate if one wanted to.²²

The genocide of Armenian Christians, however, cost an estimated 1.5 million lives; the French navy rescued a mere 4,100.²³ George cleverly focuses on us getting to know only two of them well, Mikael and Ana, fictitiously caught in a love triangle with an American journalist. It's actually a "love rectangle" of sorts, for Mikael is betrothed, with the betrothal tied to his survival. I was immersed. Once we get to *know* Mikael and Ana, we feel their incessant jeopardy. Death lurks—it waits for every forward step, but it will come for you if you stop or retreat, too. And so we shed tears, of joy at the humor they steal in the face of danger, of relief every time they escape Death's ever-widening locus, and grief for their plight, which, in the darkened, air-conditioned room, becomes ours.

If financier Kirk Kerkorian wanted situational empathy, he got mine. If director and co-screenwriter Terry George wanted to inspire me, he did.

When Mikael's Christianity conflicts with his desire for revenge, Ana answers with the narrative's sense-of-life theme:

Mikael: God help me, I want revenge.

Ana: I don't care. Hey, our revenge will be to survive.

And that is how one can find a heroic sense of life when it looks like there is none—via a packet of inspiration neatly constructed within a

<http://variety.com/2016/film/news/promise-film-armenian-genocide-1201892838/>.

²² BBC Press Office, "Dunkirk—A Few Facts," *BBC* (September 24, 2014), accessed online at:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2004/02_february/03_dunkirk_facts_figures.shtml.

²³ Weekly Staff, "French Rescuers of Musa Dagh Honored," *The Armenian Weekly* (October 16, 2010), accessed online at:

<http://armenianweekly.com/2010/10/16/french-rescuers-of-musa-dagh-honored/>, and "The Armenian Genocide," *Wikipedia*, accessed online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_Genocide.

lava of genocidal despair, all the while sticking to classical structure. Terry George, take a bow; you don't need the theory.

Feel free to try this exercise. Go to the theater and reflect on the experience *afterward*, not during, with a focus on purposes, emotional engagement, and story structure—the building blocks of a unified theory of fictional narrative.²⁴

²⁴ The author benefited from comments made by Sarita Rani, Donna Paris, Carrie-Ann Biondi, and Shawn Klein on earlier drafts of this article.

