

**Applications of Vladimir Propp's
formalist paradigm in the production of
cinematic narrative**

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formalist paradigm in the production
of cinematic narrative**

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(Animation and Interactive Media)

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Declaration

I declare that this is the total work (of 56794 words length) of the requirements for award of Masters by Research.

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Janis Lesinskis

6 August 2010

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Instructions for appendices

Appendices One and Two are digital files that present Propp's functions (as summarised in Chapter One) in tabular form. This is essentially a spreadsheet which displays Propp's functions and the summaries and designations as put forward in his *morphology*. It includes variations and examples of each function Propp claims to have observed in the body of folktales he analysed.

The detail below is a static image, whereas the full appendix version is enabled to play video clips representing each scene in *Star Wars* (1977) alongside Proppian functions to facilitate analysis and tutorial discussion. Scrolling along the horizontal axis of the full table (residing on accompanying disk) will reveal all Proppian functions and illustrations from *Star Wars* (1977). The Excel 'zoom' or viewing size tool allows viewing in greater or lesser detail. The detail printed below represents a viewing size of 150%. Copying from attached DVD disk to desktop/hard drive may speed up the loading time on opening this file (which may be very slow on first opening).

The table residing in the attached disk offers the possibility of cutting-and-pasting of function summaries and/ or cinematic illustrations in various linear or grid orders.





story / tale order : Propp aligned			
	Luke learns that his father went to war. β_1 - father gone to war	Uncle says Luke must stay and work on farm γ = told not to leave family farm	Luke follows R2D2 into desert δ = enters desert looking for R2D
FUNCTIONS	1	2	3
as observed in folktales by Propp	I	II	III
summary (relates to essence)	family member leaves	hero is told <i>not</i> to do something	interdiction violated
designation (abbrev. definition)	absentation	interdiction (prohibition)	violation
conventional sign (given by Propp)	β	γ	δ
keyboard key	b	g	d
examples and variations	β_1	do <u>not</u> look at... do <u>not</u> go to...	hero <u>does</u> go / look / do
or subclasses	adults: to work, to business, to war	inverted interdiction - a command	he/she/they are told to do something
	β_2	eg: bring breakfast out into field	II & III may be paired
	death of parents	eg: take your brother with you to the woods	eg: Tsar's daughters were late returning home
	β_3		
	children: go visiting, picking berries, fishing		

Detail from Appendix One.

Appendix Two is much the same as Appendix One, but illustrates a sequential reorganisation of Propp’s functions while preserving the sequential order of the illustrated short film *Snow* (2005).

Viewing either table in its entirety renders the text too small to read. I most commonly present it through a data projector for group viewing and discussion.

Some patience may be required while the Excel software application initially connects with individual video clips (to facilitate playing of these QuickTime clips within the table/spreadsheet).

SNOW (final cut order)					
narrative order : film					
	Shot No 1	2	3	4	
	prologue				tran
	boy alone in forest	father senses violation	boy has violated interdiction	boy	
FUNCTIONS	1	2	3		
as observed in folktales by Propp	I	II	III		
summary (relates to essence)	family member leaves	hero is told <i>not</i> to do something	interdiction violated	hero is trans	
designation (abbrev. definition)	absentation	interdiction (prohibition)	violation	transfe	
conventional sign (given by Propp)	β	γ	δ		
<small>keyboard key</small>	b	g	d		
Propp's examples and variations or subclasses	β_1	do <u>not</u> look at... do <u>not</u> go to...	hero <u>does</u> go / look / do		
	adults: to work, to business, to war	inverted interdiction - a command	he/she/they are told to do something	Spatial tra	
	β_2	eg: bring breakfast out into field	II & III may be paired	Hero is led,	
	death of parents	eg: take your brother with you to the woods	eg: Tsar's daughters were late returning home		
	β_3			Hero flies t	
	children: go visiting, picking berries, fishing			egs: on a st on flvine st	

Detail from Appendix Two.

Abstract

Originally an analysis of underlying structure in European wonder tales (folk tales), Vladímir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (*Morphology*) has been revisited as a reference for various applications including film theory, story generation and interactive drama systems. What applications can Propp's work have within a studio mode of teaching and learning as found in film school pedagogy, where importance is placed on creative endeavour, reflection on action and the end product? How can Propp's work be utilized in film school pedagogy in a way that might contribute to our understanding of formal properties and techniques, art/design thinking and competence and the body of knowledge that underpins the discipline of film and the production of cinematic works?

This thesis will review the place of Propp's *Morphology* in relation to cinematic narrative as encountered in a film school setting. In doing so, it will attempt to identify aspects of Propp's *Morphology* that are relevant and useful to students engaged in the production of film or cinematic artifacts that relate to story and plot formulation. The parallel between Propp's work and classic Hollywood film narrative is illustrated by the correlation between Propp's observations of fundamental folk tale characters and their actions (*dramatis personae* and their 'functions') and their counterparts in commercially successful feature film.

The potential for reapplying this formalist schema for pedagogical and generative purposes beyond its original taxonomic purposes will be explored by using Propp's *Morphology* as a primary reference in relation to a critically successful independent short film produced within a film school.

Ultimately the aim of this study is to reappraise the value of incorporating the formalist logic of Propp as one of a number of potential resources within practical film school pedagogy where storytelling is a key focus.

Introduction

Story, plot and film production pedagogy

On translation from Russian into English, Vladímir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (2000)¹ became an influential point of reference for narratology and structuralist film theory.

Initially an investigation into literary forms, Propp's *Morphology* (2000) has been revisited in structuralist and semiotic approaches to film theorising. Since its first appearance in 1928 and translation into English language in 1968, Propp's *Morphology* (2000) has been revisited over the ensuing decades in a number of contexts and projects, suggesting it has relevance for current film school pedagogy.

This particular review of Propp's *Morphology* (2000) is carried out with an acknowledgement of a widespread practice of using story as a central organizing principle in narrative filmmaking as evident in the proliferation of texts, film school curricula and widespread practice in film industry. It proceeds with the notion of story and plot as useful focal points for informing various filmmaking production areas particularly where the screenplay is used procedurally as the basis for a blueprint for design and production, particularly throughout the gamut of commercial or industrial filmmaking.

Elements of Propp's *Morphology* (2000) continue to be visible in various media and, therefore, may have utility for the current student filmmaker, particularly if preparing for a career in commercial film production in an industrial context. Within the film school, the *Morphology* (2000) can be investigated in a number of contexts where exploration may focus distinctions between 'classical' versus 'alternative' storytelling models, familiar structures as potential vehicular language or bridge between mainstream and novel or challenging filmmaking or a tool within the collaborative

¹ Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* was originally published in Russian language: *Morfológija skázki*, in 1928.

development and design process of filmmaking. While the relevance to filmmaking of Propp's *Morphology* (2000) has been questioned by some (Bordwell 1998), I propose it has current applicability to production of entertainment cinema and explorations in independent filmmaking. This applicability relates to current notions of Proppian functions and conventional structures in screen stories as part of the body of knowledge of discipline that the student filmmaker should encounter. That body of knowledge, depending on individual student filmmaker and film school, may be applied in a relatively conservative strategy or explored through various strategies and remediations.

With the advent of new media, Propp's *Morphology* has been reinvestigated for its potential application to procedural writing and story algorithms, with various experiments in data-based story generation (Proppian tale generators) and tale engines for interactive drama, such as OPIATE (Open-ended Proppian Interactive Adaptive Tale Engine).

One major legacy of Propp (and Shklovsky), is the distinction between story (fabula) and plot (sjuzhet). This has persisted in current filmmaking practice where events are rearranged in order formulate overarching structures for audience involvement such as the familiar progression of events toward a climax and resolution. Sjuzhet/plot (also referred to as discourse) can refer to the process of shaping or re-ordering chronology of story events (fabula), as exemplified in cinema by flashbacks, flash-forwards, to either suggest causal relationships or to shape the overall course of the emotional affect and empathy with characters as is common practice in entertainment cinema.

There has been much development in theorising since the projects associated with Russian formalism undertaken in the 1920s, such as Propp's abstraction of plot 'functions' and Victor Shklovsky's descriptions and abstractions of literary forms. It is interesting to note that between this period in the early twentieth century and the current poststructuralist and postmodern moment, Shklovsky's abstraction of plot ('sjuzhet') has not only survived but is evident in a range of applications in contemporary cinematic narrative design. Populist, commercial cinema provides numerous examples of plot abstractions with the most widespread being the three-act

structures followed by Hollywood ‘orthodoxy’ (Field 1979, Vogler 1992, McKee 1999, Block 2001) and the schemas appropriated and incorporated into this three-act framework. These schemas include Propp’s morphological ‘functions’ and Joseph Campbell’s ‘hero’s journey’ as distilled from his monomyth formulation in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1998). Both Propp and, later, Campbell provide largely compatible fundamental plot models that are ‘closed texts’ in that they posit a fixed set of story events and character functions that are intended to illicit specific audience responses to each and every plot point as premeditated by the ‘storyteller’. Hollywood cinema, particularly during the period David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (1985) refer to as producing ‘classical Hollywood cinema’, typically constructs a closed text model of plot, engaging audience in an orchestrated emotional journey where challenges or ruptures are resolved after a climactic event.

Despite increased ambivalence toward oversimplified causality and closure in cinematic plots (such as scepticism towards ‘fairy tale’ endings), popular entertainment cinema has generally retained fundamental plot schemas that engage the audience in a program of elevating excitement, tension and/or arousal that offers some degree of post-climactic relief. These schemas, sometimes described as the classical screenplay paradigm (as described by Field, McKee, Vogler) have been highly influential in the formation the expectations between audience and the screenwriter. The morphology presents a stable structure but in a highly generalized form, while the classic ‘Hollywood’ screenwriter traditionally has also worked largely within a very stable, clear plot structure which is, therefore, broadly legible to cinema audiences. Aspects of this are often referred to as the ‘rules’ of screenwriting.

In his schematization of alternative plot structure in contemporary independent American film, J. J. Murphy (1997) points out that despite “illegibility and lack of clarity were always considered a defect in the classical storytelling model”, but he points out plot ambiguity has been increasingly explored in the last three decades. Murphy presents a number of examples where traditional, industrial ‘rules of screenwriting’ are in some way redefined rather than totally rejected as “the independent filmmaker is usually aware of the rules but treats them as flexible guidelines.” (1997:6)

Murphy proposes where films present unorthodox non causal structures they are not necessarily free of the influence of familiar conventional dramatic plot, such as expressions of Propp's morphology, because 'we have that expectation and the films play with those expectations.' (262) The presence and strength of these expectations, I suggest, are explored by audiences even in cinematic works that operate at the threshold of recognizable narrative. Despite Yvette Biró's (1998) dissatisfaction with 'simplistic rules of sheer cause-and-effect logic' (1998:x) in favour of meditation on complexity, rhythm, flow and turbulence it could be argued that both she and Propp, in their different methods, fundamentally engage in the drama of the 'relationship between permanence and change' (Biro 1998:3)

Ed Tan (1996) refers to the 'affect structure' of films whereby emotional affect is structured within cinematic narratives. Propp's *Morphology* (2000) could be examined in terms of its function as an affect structure device. In so far as Propp (2000) observes his sample of Russian folktales to be of a fixed linear sequence of fundamental events or 'functions' (even though every one of these functions need not be contained within each individual tale), his morphology presents a set of fixed grammatical rules for constructing plot. Each of these functions can also be described as a gesture that carries a designated or implied emotional association or affect.

I will review Propp's morphology and its potential utility as a taxonomy of gesture types or values and, for cinematic mapping and representation of change, be it social, psychological, cultural, political or other as might be useful for the student filmmaker. The morphology presents one particular schema that offers a sense of congruence to a series of observations, gestures or events. It reflects an inclination or perhaps need to emplot, to organise ideas into causal or relational configurations as narrative therapist Erik Sween (1998) comments in a broader context:

"As people, we are inescapably meaning-makers. We have an experience and then attach meaning to it."

The morphology now provides an opportunity to revisit an influential narrative schema that can offer the student filmmaker insight to one conception of cinematic narrative building blocks illuminating of genre conventions. The morphology is more

widely applicable than in the ‘action based’ genres commonly associated with it, such as the more externalised action oriented genres of Western, war film, adventure. Revisiting the morphology invites review of its workings and its problems and invites remediation of it as tool for narrative design not just narrative reduction. Independent, commercially released films such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), which reviewers have identified by genre of ‘Hollywood romance’, (Fauth 2009) utilize Proppian functions and dramatis personae to emplot an otherwise seemingly chaotic episode in the protagonist’s life. The temporal complexity of this film, or what Yvette Biró (*Turbulence and Flow in Cinema* 2008:2) might refer to as ‘aporia of time’ (2008:2) and ‘shocks of disorder’ (2008:6), has some order brought to it by way of its structure as an eccentric contemporary folk tale complete with Proppian features (which I detail later). Where Proppian functions and dramatis personae are recognizably delineated in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), they are more liminal in the short student film *Snow* (Feneley 2005).

Building blocks of filmmaking

Practical investigation of the filmmaking process as construction process can be approached in various ways, one of which might be to determine the building blocks of filmmaking. The significant minimal units or elements used to assemble into a film might be investigated using various terms and definitions. They may be discernable binaries of emotion created in the screenplay writing process, semiological units such as morphemes, narremes, sememes, rhythmic units distinguished by qualities of ‘turbulence and flow’ (Biró 2008), the individual cinematic shot or SNUs /Smallest Narrative Units connected by POCs /Points of Contact (Thalhofer 2009).

In relation to cinematic meaning-making, more specifically in the craft of filmmaking, various definitions of the ‘building blocks’ of cinematic narrative can be investigated by the student filmmaker. What we might call ‘units of meaning’ or units of cinematic construction have been described and conceptualised in various ways subject to influence of theorised positions in an historic context as well as the practices, procedures, languages and technologies of specific craft practices and their within specific craft disciplines (such as writing, acting, production design, cinematography, musical composition, sound design, editing, etc.).

Robert Rosen² (2010) implies the most fundamental way of describing units of cinematic narrative is, or at least should be, specific gestures that are potent in triggering audience emotion. The morphology offers one schema for the formation or mapping of a series of emotionally charged gestures.

The notion of assembling a series of gestures in order to try to ‘make sense of the world through narrative’ is central to Rosen’s summary of cinema narrative and central to the mission of the film school. Indeed, he proposes that one of the primary functions of the film school is to produce more articulate communicators in order that all collaborators within film production are storytellers rather than technicians. This is central to what he describes as the paradox of individual cinematic ‘vision’ achieved where one director is dependent upon the collaborative efforts of other individuals more expert in their field than the director.

Ultimately my intention here is not to argue an absolute or superior definition of a cinematic morpheme or narreme³ but to briefly review some possible definitions in context of strategies that may be useful in a film school context where the individual student filmmaker might conduct their individual, personal investigation or experimentation into of morphemes, narremes, sememes or other aspects of cinematic narrative.

For Rosen (2010), the film school can play a role in to encouraging the student filmmaker to become more articulate in the creation of emotional affect and building ‘affect structure’ (Tan 1996). This, Rosen asserts, can be done by encouraging students to revisit notable past examples of techniques and tools of cinematic narrative – not for the purpose of replication but to discover the process of creative risk taking that expands and re-defines conventions.

² Robert Rosen, retired Dean of UCLA School of Theatre, Film and Television summarizing cinema narrative in his address to the RMIT University School of Media and Communication, 30 July 2010.

³ I suggest that the student film director and her creative collaborators (actors, art directors, editors, music composers, sound designers, etc.) actively conduct their own investigation and experimentation in defining basic units of narrative structure on a project by project basis. This is in effect one example of practice-led research in production, whether Propp’s morphology is invoked or rejected in the process.

In *The Visual Story: Seeing the Structure of Film, TV and New Media*, Bruce Block (2001) attempts to methodically address the emphasis Rosen places on developing articulate communication within collaborative film production by focusing his attention on communication and design tools.

Block's visual design schema for a cinematic 'affect structure' presents a shift from a literary expression of story (the printed screenplay) to graphical representation that accommodates the fundamental affect triggers contained within Propp's morphology (loss, lack, misfortune, villainy, flight, pursuit, trickery, struggle, combat, rescue, return, etc.) and their quantifiable intensities. Block reinforces the expectation of sequential events culminating in a climax as widely evident in folk tale and Hollywood cinema.

Block's shift from one highly prescriptive form (the printed screenplay) to another interpretive notation recalls the invention of new graphical notation systems by some music composers.⁴ One objective of graphical music notation systems was to break free from the highly specified control of musicians inherent in the tradition European music notation system. Block's schema, while still retaining a highly prescriptive function in quantifying emotional affect of each gesture and each scripted scene, offers this as an anchor to each collaborating production department to facilitate coordination of efforts and some axiomatic guidelines for visual and sonic design.

Where Block has sought to provide a graphical schema that offers quantitative notation (intensity of emotional affect of each gesture), some music composers have used graphical music notation to focus on "qualitative notation" to map territories for interpretation as evident in experiments by John Cage, Walter Mays, Cornelius Cardew and György Ligeti. (Karkoshka 1972).

Where Propp presents plot functions as a linear sequence of story events, Block expresses story as a linear sequence of quantised emotional affects over time. The practice of arranging story events in order of escalating emotional intensity for the

⁴ John Cage, Walter Mays, Cornelius Cardew, György Ligeti, Iannis Xenakis and others.

audience is not particular to Block's schematics for screenplays, however Block suggests each rise in dramatic tension throughout the screenplay be measured in relation to the dramatic tension produced at the climax of the plot as part of pre-production. In the course of this Block proposes a numerical value be given to each rise in tension as evident in the screenplay. If the narrative film were to be described as a machine, for Block it would be a machine to generate a series emotional affects deliberately escalating in intensity for the audience—what Susan Sontag might describe as 'a programming of sensations' (1986:7).

Block's project is in a sense an expression of an assembly line approach to film production that Jean Pierre Geuens, in *Film Production Theory* (2000), attributes to Thomas Harper Ince's establishment of studio as factory.⁵ Geuens observes Ince's codifying and standardising of the practice of (pre-sound) filmmaking where the script served as blueprint for production by specifying individual shots as well as actions depicted. Geuens comments that 'the drama was thus articulated visually ahead of time and the role of the camera limited to the duplication of these shots' (2000:82). For Ince, 'screenplays became detailed shooting scripts that were given to the director for implementation' (Geuens 2000:83), while Block sought to interpret the screenplay as a graphical representation of dramatic tension that would serve as a design reference for various departments in the production process.

Block's (2001) approach is a more abstract, and a less dictatorial attempt at finding common points of focus to anchor the efforts of key collaborators in film production process.

Block's (2001) project can be described as an affect-oriented narratological preoccupation in that it aspires to use emotional intensity of discernable plot points as the foundation and central organising principle of collaborative production, where artists, designers and their production departments all aim for the coordinated expression of the emotional affect of each plot point or function.

⁵ 'Inceville' became a studio-factory where production was controlled by the producer by using the script as a means of specifying design and reducing any influence the director might have over production. The studio included sets that could be repeatedly used for the production of many films.

Contrasting with Biró's (2008a) 'seeking' out of telling gesture through dramaturgical perspective, Block (2001) is more inclined to coordinate the 'building' of emotional affects from a central graphical blueprint that is a direct interpretation of the screenplay.

Block's (2001) project is reminiscent of Richard Wagner's operatic *gesamtkunstwerk* in that they both sought a process by which an ensemble of artists and workers could assemble a seamless, naturalised hybrid work.

The mapping of plot functions into the various disciplines within cinematic production can be, as Block (2001) suggests, procedural with various design, cinematographic, musical and other elements composed and orchestrated around key plot functions and their emotional registers. In practice this is a highly interpretive process. In its simplest form key plot points can be directly signaled and emphasised by simple emotional cues, be they expressed through the use of specific colour palettes, music cues or other means.

The 'colour script' of every Pixar animated production is such an example, where there is a procedural correlation between a plot and colour palette in the design stages of pre-production. This 'colour journey', as it is sometimes called in film production design, is a process of correlating the use of colour palette and colour saturation to be applied in the design of each emotional affect as mapped out for the audience experience of the film. In this way, colour is used to cue emotional responses of audience at precise plot points. In this process colour palette can be used to signal the affect characters have on each other and diegetic environments, hence it can signal causality within narrative. Colour design, in this context, becomes a mechanism of plot.

Similarly, there are many familiar examples of soundtrack music cues used to narrate or trigger very specific emotional responses from the audience at specific plot points: sadness at a character's moment of loss, discord at a moment of conflict, or sounds pitched at low frequencies to signal foreboding, etc.

This manipulative use of soundtrack music for emotional affect has long drawn

criticism, perhaps starting with Theodor Adorno, Hanns Eisler (1947) and others applying Marxist critiques to ‘cultural industries’. Their criticisms of the ‘Hollywood dream factory’ production practices included objection to the use of music as ‘false experience,’ which draws the audience into passive consumption of products of mass culture.

Such critique raises questions concerning closed texts in general, where the audience or ‘addressee’ is presented with structures that evoke limited and predetermined responses. Here we can question and critique the notions of ‘monotale’, ‘monomyth’ or other monovocal schemas.

Regardless of whether we treat Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) as a kind of axiomatic notation for narrative or a contributing part of some other narrative notation it is our conscious and deliberate use of it that is potentially of value to the student filmmaker. As the student filmmaker explores and experiments with any given notation methods and associated conventions their aspirations, and those of the film school, are not limited to simply reproduction of pre-existing cinematic symbols and their mechanical execution on screen. As Karkoschka said of music composers’ experiments in alternative systems of musical notation in the twentieth century: “...in the end what is important is neither the symbols nor the auditive and motoric phenomena they signify, but what lies behind them and what we must create by means of these symbols.” (1972)

A legacy of previous texts and their notation systems brings with it expectation of the familiar and the reassurance of stability while negotiating the new or the problematic. Closed texts or the wish for resolution or stability persist in mainstream entertainment cinema, if not as governing rules, as reference points for audience expectations of screenplays. Closed texts can be described in terms of a wish for satisfaction or resolution particularly within commercial cinema, where the hope for satisfaction or resolution are commoditized and produced by an industry with an inclination to standardize in pursuit of profitability. Industrialised, mainstream filmmaking could be summarized as sticking to the rules (conventions of structure, genre, active protagonist, central conflict, etc.) in order to provide audiences with the familiar and novelty simultaneously.

Jim Jarmusch comments on independent filmmaking: “I do believe that in order to break the rules, you have to know what they are.” (2001:57) Each filmmaker, student and film school decide where they stand on this question of ‘following the rules’, negating them or achieving a particular a balance between convention and innovation.

Yvette Biró (1998) demonstrates that familiar, closed texts can actually be useful as tools to create open texts; texts that clearly expropriate or reverse familiar conventions in order to explore complexity and paradox. In using the fairy tale as material for teaching screenwriting, Biró (1998) proposes both acknowledgement of the influence of tradition and its negation in process of creating new stories. She claims: “The freedom of invention and the longing for order are not opposed.” (1998:164) She advocates a “heritage” and “heresy” approach (1998:164) to using familiar structures and established conventions without being subjugated to a “dogma of structure” (1998:1). For Biró (1998) there is utility in established logic, conventions and structure in the pursuit of the student’s individual narrative voice. Biró implies that there is value in revisiting familiar structures to simultaneously grasp their influence on storytelling while using them to consciously challenge and redefine the conventions and limitations of closed texts or “petrified” genre. Biró’s offers a strategy to use fairy tale to simultaneously illuminate tradition and encourage film students to exercise imagination using the fairy tale as launching site for a more personal or authentic search significance and emotional content.

Raul Ruiz, in *Poetics of Cinema* (1996) presents a more radical approach to use of morphologies. His fundamental objection to the “central conflict theory” that characterizes globalized entertainment cinema can easily be applied to the structural features identified in Propp’s morphology: story proceeds with a clear identification of central character (compatible with Campbell’s monomythic ‘hero’ (1998) and antagonist. Ruiz (1996) argues convincingly that we, the audience, are held “prisoners of the protagonist’s will” (1996:13) while the filmmaker’s task, in this Hollywood-influenced model, is to actively try to hold the audience “captive” within the protagonist’s journey.

Ruiz’s misgivings about “a presumption of hostility” (1996:15) inherent in

protagonist-antagonist binaries characterizing much of the narratives of the global, industrialized filmmaking can be applied to Block's graphic schematic approach to organising film narrative as a sequence of escalating emotional affect to be experienced by the audience.

Block's (2001) search for central organising principles in the design and production process is based on anticipated homogeneity in audience response to a series of constructed events and situations.

Block's (2001) schema need not necessarily demand 'monovocal' compliance among all participating artists and production workers to produce an emotional 'journey' leading to climax and resolution just as Propp's *Morphology* (2000) need not be taken as a simple template for all story plots.

In my experience, all students are capable of reading the morphology but it cannot be assumed all students are familiar with the morphology to a degree that they can display some mastery of its application in the production of film. While I will review some strategies that challenge or purposefully negate the morphology, its inherent notions of causality, conflict and some of the conventions associated with it, I argue that a practical mastery of canonic models constitutes a part of professional filmmaking knowledge. As Kathryn Millard points out, in an industrial context the film financing processes and subsequent development and approval processes, films are typically "re-structured and pruned to fit a template more closely aligned to those promoted by the screenwriting manuals". (2010:12) In this industry context the student filmmaker needs a degree of mastery of what Millard (2010) refers to as the "template" in order to negotiate the development and funding process, whether the strategy is to remediate and transform conventional canonic structures or launch a convincing argument against them to the funding agency readers that constantly refer to them.

Here Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (2000) will be reviewed for its potential as a resource in learning and teaching, particularly where theory and practice might coalesce within a studio mode of learning.

Defining ‘film school’

In current digital technologies, the term ‘film’ has largely ceased to refer to the medium based on photosensitive, silver-halide emulsion on celluloid base material. There remains, however, an attachment to the use of the term ‘film’, which is now interchangeable with ‘motion picture’, ‘movie’ or ‘cinema’. I use ‘film’ to mean the practical production of cinematic texts, that is, linear screen works intended for medium-to-large screen viewing. ‘Film school’ here refers to courses of study in which a substantial portion of the learning and teaching takes place as practical production work—that is, courses of study that relate to a studio mode of learning and teaching.

Studio refers to a mode of teaching and learning in which creative endeavour and a specific way of thinking and doing, through engagement in project work, including reflection on action, is the vehicle for learning.

(2008: 5) de la Harpe et al.

This definition also relates to the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association’s (ASPERA)⁶ classification of institutions engaged in education in screen-based production practices. I use ‘film school’ to refer to courses that require students to research, develop, plan and produce cinematic screen products or artifacts.

In regard to film schools, I make a distinction between populist and avant-garde cinema, as two broad approaches to screen works and audiences. I refer to narrative-based works and practices, and particularly storytelling as relevant to the film industry, but in exploring plot-related schemas I propose they are relevant to a range of media other than film.

⁶ The Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) is the peak discipline body of Australian tertiary institutions that teach and research film, video, television and new media as screen-based production practices.

While any school of art, design, media or communications may adopt a particular focus, mission or sensibility, its graduates apply their knowledge to work of diverse form, style and exhibition and distribution contexts. For example, some art school graduates have had enormous success in the populist or mainstream film industry.⁷ For this reason, I do not make assumptions about types of schools in terms of mainstream or subversive sensibilities. ‘Film school’ model can occur within an ‘art school’ setting and vice versa as ‘film school’ is a subcategory of the studio mode of learning and teaching. By conducting a studio mode of learning and teaching, a school can focus on film making and the production of cinematic artifacts.

School and industry

One element of the relationship between ‘film school’ and ‘film industry’—as raised at the 2008 ASPERA conference (National Conference of Australian film schools)—is the distinction between education and training. In his address to the conference,⁸ producer Ewan Burnett reflected on his own experience, suggesting that a university is more valuable for ‘gaining cognitive insights’ and ‘self discovery’ rather than industry-specific professional training, as this takes place substantially ‘on the job’.

Jean Pierre Geuens (2000) identifies two tendencies in the production of film, and consequently within the film school: to produce a cinema of experience or a cinema of reflection. Either way, he argues against the potentially stultifying effects of any overly conventional filmmaking and any film school in which ‘emulation of commercial requirements superseded artistic experimentation’ (2000:63).

The stultifying effects Geuens (2000) refers to can be discussed in terms of commercial versus artistic aspirations of either student or school. As Kathryn Millard points out, during the film financing processes and subsequent development and

⁷ RMIT University Media Arts (School of Art) graduates James Wan and Leigh Whannel wrote, directed and acted in their horror genre feature film *Saw* (2004) that generated the commercially successful sequels: *Saw II* (2005), *Saw III* (2006), *Saw IV* (2007) and *Saw V* (2007).

⁸ Burnett’s address was given on day one of the ASPERA 2008 National Conference, RMIT University.

approval processes, films are typically “re-structured and pruned to fit a template more closely aligned to those promoted by the screenwriting manuals”. (2010:12)

In light of this observation we might question what outcomes are sought and/or achieved from a studio-based approach to education.

Engagement in the process of creating a product is a major attraction of a film school or studio model of study for prospective students. De la Harpe et al. (2008) point out:

While most educators acknowledge that a core component of creative practice is the product (object or event) of creative thinking, many are also proposing that the process of developing or making (including art or design thinking) is an equally valued outcome of art and design education (quoting Demirbas & Denirkan, 2007; Ellmers, 2006; Koch et al., 2002; Lawson, 2003; Ulusoy, 1999).

Theory and practice

‘Film’ at educational institutions can also be categorised by an emphasis on either theory or practice. Studies are organised as quite separate streams—‘film (cinema) studies’ and ‘film school’—within many institutions. Geuens presents the University of South California film school as an example where ‘scholars end up divorced from production, unable to influence filmmaking in any shape or form’ (2000:76). He comments:

Under the influence of post-structuralism, film theory suddenly exploded in unpredictable fashion. Rather than taking its cues from film practice as it had done in the past, theory was now influenced by recent thinking in semiotics, literary studies, psychoanalysis, Marxism, radical feminism, etc. In the process, the old film generalists gave way to a new breed of instructors, more knowledgeable in these areas. As most of them came out of English departments, the new academics had little or no training in filmmaking. Quite logically, they preferred bypassing the idiosyncrasy of film practice, focusing

rather on the signifying modulations of the texts (2000:76).

Burnett's (2008) ideas on the value of 'gaining cognitive insights' and 'self discovery' could be explored through study of a number of disciplines within educational institutions. However, students of film school generally are committed to developing their craft, and by choosing a practice-based course of study, are often expressing a preference for 'learning by making' consistent with constructionist approaches to learning posited by Seymour Papert (1991).

Parallel exploration of theory and filmmaking practice remains a challenge within the film school setting.

Constructionist learning, defined as actively making things in the real world, can be applied to film production in the film school where most learning is generally focused on producing an artifact for global audiences via film festivals, distributors and /or broadcasters rather than for university examination systems.

We could ask what learning objects and pedagogical resources are suitable for analysis and synthesis for achievement based objectives (culminating in production of films or other cinematic artifacts) as they occur in the film school.

The film school can combine elements of the studio modes of learning and teaching that de la Harpe et al. (2008: 13) characterise for both the areas of design. In their analysis of assessment within the studio model, de la Harpe et al. list abilities such as: distilling, analysing and synthesising; creative and imaginative thinking; and the skills of integration, projection, exploration, innovative decision making, problem solving, teamworking and collaboration.

In describing the 'artmaking process', de la Harpe et al. (2008: 13) refer to inferring values and formulating responses; reflecting and deliberating; creating and transforming; enhancing students' awareness of culture, social environments and the larger social fabric; as well as developing a social conscience—or as Geuens puts it, 'to confront the entire issue of what a representation is' (2000:74).

The definition of 'artmaking', and its purpose in a film school context is open for

negotiation, particularly in terms of the school's relationship with 'industry'.

Does the film school prepare graduates for vocations in art, entertainment or business?

Rosen advocates the film school should participate in cross-disciplinary collaborations between university schools, departments, faculties or silos. Ruiz seems to lament that 'artmaking' may be relegated to a research and development function for the entertainment industry. (1996:76)

The film school, through its focus on collaborative modes of production, offers 'cognitive insights' by way of research, development, consultation and necessary interaction with others throughout the entire production process. The film school can also be the site of investigation of the relationship between procedural design and production as encountered in industry and what F. Robert Sabol calls the 'making of personal meanings' (2006: 6-11). Biro might describe this 'making of personal meanings' as the individual student filmmaker's "search for their own narrative voice" (1998:164) even if it is explored as screenwriting referenced to existing morphologies, paradigms, genres or conventions. The method by which personal meaning-making might take place in collaborative production is a challenging proposition.

The industrial model of collaboration in filmmaking, 'Hollywood style', is generally hierarchical and largely dictatorial.

Geuens is more strident in resisting this model within the film school, as he evokes John Dewey's hope to 'nurture a new kind of community, (Dewey 1916) one in which the typical hierarchies operating in the outside world would not be mindlessly duplicated. He wishes that 'film schools neither operate as little studios nor duplicate fixed industrial rules. There is nothing sacred indeed about the working arrangements that normally control Hollywood shooting' (2000:74).

An instance of where a film school might purposely (and pragmatically) deviate from typical industrial working arrangements in order to stimulate less conventional collaboration is to disassemble individual productions in favour of blended production meetings. By this, I mean meetings that facilitate periods of focused work on multiple, overlapping projects fostering a 'network of enterprises' (Gruber and Wallace 1989:11-13) consistent with an 'evolving system' theory of creativity

approach.

The collaborative, industry-based model of film production that operates through coordinated efforts of people applying specialised skills is a demanding process of logistical and technical problem solving.⁹ While training often focuses on routines (one important strategy to prepare for problem solving in practice), critical thinking is essential to creative output in practice. Rosen suggests figures in key production roles potentially have depth of knowledge and skills beyond the individual director in their specialization. He encourages student directors to consider any key specialist as a kind of narratologist in their own field. In this case, cinematographer, sound designer, art director, music composer and others are assessing their own contribution in terms of how it embodies gesture and narrative.

Film school can be described as an incubator of creative thinking where projects evidence ‘more rhetorically astute, systematically reflecting on habitual thinking and actions, evaluating and adapting to the ambiguous, knowledge-building nature of practice’ (2008: 5) de la Harpe et al. These projects will be realised amidst the logistical and technical challenges that occur in every production.

Where students undergo the processes of concept development, writing, production, direction and editing they are engaging with the design and production process, requiring familiarisation with ‘formal properties and techniques’ (Öztürk & Türkkän 2006: 96).

It is in production that the film student tests his or her understanding of formal properties and techniques of the cinematic medium and carries out an exploration of those properties and techniques.

One strategy for approaching critical thinking in a practice-based learning and teaching model is through stimulating analysis of previous formulations of formal

⁹ The space of this studio of learning and teaching encompasses the lecture theatre, tutorials, the television studio, the ‘real world’ film set, and involves a range of community representatives (actors, the public, local government, police, facility providers, equipment suppliers, etc.).

properties and techniques. In the film school context this might take place by encouraging extensive viewing of diverse films (populist and avant-garde) and review of existing theorisation on cinematic texts. Within the film school this is often organised with a degree of theory–practice split, evidenced by the specialist lectures in cinema studies or film theory. This approach, which usually integrates screenings of diverse works deemed to have made historically significant contributions to formal properties and techniques within the cinematic medium, can provide students with a rich overview that will potentially inform their own work.

One of the challenges of integrating critical thinking into the practical work of the student is the facilitation of flow across a kind of theory–practice gap, that is, exchanges between the two realms of theory and practice. The simplest description of this gap can be expressed in terms of what the individual student sees as directly relevant to achieving their own practical outcome, generally a completed film, and that which he or she perceives to be primarily of academic, and ultimately perhaps lesser importance to their own work.

This gap could be further elaborated upon using some of the definitions provided in the survey of assessment in studio modes of learning and teaching conducted by de la Harpe et al. (2008: 10).

We could categorise ‘practice’ as it relates to film production studies as:

- Product: Outcome of process, emphasis primarily on product (film, cinematic artifact).
- Technology: Use of hardware, software, information communication technologies, virtual studio.
- Professional and innovative practice: Industry and professional capability, new ways of working.
- Interdisciplinary collaboration: Working/collaborating with others in different disciplines/subject domains.
- Content knowledge: Underpinning body of knowledge of discipline.
- Hard skills: Art/design thinking and competence.
- Reflective practice: Reflective thinking, reflection in and on action.

We could describe ‘theory’ as relates to film production studies as:

- Process: Process involved in developing outcome rather than emphasis on product.
- Person: human, emotional aspects.
- Content knowledge: Underpinning body of knowledge of discipline.

I have placed ‘Content knowledge: Underpinning body of knowledge of discipline’ in both the theory and practice categories largely because it contains a potential split: that is, between historical practice and contemporary practice.

De la Harpe et al. (2008: 10) define ‘Content knowledge: Underpinning body of knowledge of discipline. They summarise their description of ‘content knowledge’ as ‘design fundamentals, design knowledge, knowledge of aesthetics, program content basics such as history, theory, contemporary practice’ (2008: 10).

There is, however, potential tension between ‘developing outcome rather than emphasis on product’ (2008: 10) depending on how we define ‘outcome’ and ‘product’. The distinction between ‘outcome’ and ‘product’ can sharply defined for the student seeking a very tangible product of their education and training for the purposes of gaining entry into industry. Students see, often with encouragement from the film school, their own graduating film as a calling card in seeking a profession in industry. The film school experience is potentially highly product focused. If the graduate is to establish and sustain a career their ‘product’ (graduating film) will likely need to demonstrate commercial potential.

Geuens’ (2000) distinction between commercial requirements and artistic experimentation echo Ruiz’s (1996:58-59) concerns about “industrial” versus “craft” approaches to filmmaking. Ruiz characterizes ‘industrial filmmaking’ as a profession rather than vocation, in an industry where the central preoccupation is with cinema as entertainment.

Geuens’ distinction between the ‘commercial’ and the ‘artistic’ might also be extrapolated into a distinction between ‘training’ and ‘education’. As an educator, Biro describes “those learnable skills that may be acquired through training” as both

distinct and complementary with “freedom of invention” (1998:164) found in artistic pursuits. Where *Biro* appears comfortable with the possible coexistence of entertainment and subversion, conventions and experimentation, Ruiz seems less satisfied with the status of poetic or experimental work. He claims the “avant-garde never found an audience” (1996:75) and was instead relegated to “become the R&D section of the industry”. (1996:76).

There is a potential gap between theory and practice which can be described in terms of shift between contemplation and speculation to action. There may be various opportunities to shift attention between speculation and action, process and outcome throughout the lifespan of a filmmaking project. Dewey’s (1916) notion of constructivism might be summarized as “a theory of knowledge growth and life-long development” (Tobias, Duffy 2009:34) but for the student filmmaker the lifespan of their film project generally is under pressure to undergo development within a very specific time frame culminating specific delivery of a singular, tangible product (their graduating film in particular).

The importance of these deliverables and the pressure to comply with them within very strict time frames is reinforced in two significant ways: Firstly, by the assessment procedures of educational institutions and, secondly, by commercial expectations of industry. In the first instance, the film school generally expects a completed work to be submitted by a specific date for their assessment process. In the second instance, industry generally requires coordinated production, marketing and delivery compliant with commercial agreements. Professionalism can be defined in terms of ability to meet contractual agreements - a particularly complex operation when the scale of production involves the interdependent efforts of many individuals. Part of film school training is often framed by, or implies competence in delivering end product.

Is there a moment of commitment where reflection and speculation (theory) must be crystallised into action that yields a product? If we imagine there to be such a ‘moment’ when might it take place? It is common industry practice to crystallise ideas into tangible elements as the preproduction phase of a project culminates just prior to principal photography commences.

This is where the student may experience a gap between theory and practice as a kind of tipping point between exploration (theory) and expectation (practice). Or, as Ruiz (1996) might describe it, experimentation becomes “R&D” to be used in industry. Where the student is under pressure, or actually wishes to deliver a specific end product they may at some point pragmatically abandon reflection and speculation in favour of practical tasks. For example, survey and discussion of techniques may be abandoned in favour of focus on a chosen technique and the tools that will best implement that technique. The student, anxious to produce a ‘good film’, may be tempted to reduce or avoid experimentation once cast, crew and resources (major expenses of production) are assembled for the shoot. In a sense the student must negotiate this ‘gap’ where a transition is made from exploration of conceptual spaces (theory) to construction of product (practice). The transition is from exploration to decision making.

The role the film school plays in encouraging creativity is expressed by the amount and type of risk and experiment it allows. This risk and experiment is most manageable during conceptualization and tends to become more difficult and costly as it occurs during actual production (a notion sometimes referred to as the ‘innovation funnel’ - a process where exploration and experimentation are gradually reduced to the most viable options for final production). So as the production deadline nears, the student is likely to employ increasingly pragmatic means and strategies.

Against both industrial/commercial and educational imperatives to deliver product, how is the question of creativity to be approached? The film school may foster varying degrees of innovation and routine in its program. Giyoo Hatano and Kayoko Inagaki’s terms (1986) ‘classical expertise’ and ‘adaptive expertise’ are applicable descriptors to learning and teaching attitudes. Hatano and Inagaki observed two types of ability: the ability to produce exacting results consistently (classical expertise) and the ability to produce new results (adaptive expertise). We could equate ‘classical expertise’ with grasp of existing narrative, morphologies, structures, paradigms, etc. as they apply in literature and cinema.

The balance between innovation and routine can be related directly to innovation and efficiency. Given the option, most would probably choose to become ‘innovatively

competent’ rather than ‘routinely skilled’ or, in other terms, a ‘virtuoso’ rather than an ‘artisan’. Most film schools and their students, I imagine, would aspire to be innovative to some degree (if even they succumb to industry pressure to produce a blend of the routine or expected along with novelty deemed suitable for existing markets.)

In the context of constructivist learning, Schwartz, D. L., Bransford, J.D & Sears, D. (2005) present two possible trajectories to adaptive expertise: to innovate and then become efficient or to become efficient and then practice innovating. In the film school context this might be expressed as two possible strategies: to teach established conventions as core knowledge and then foster innovative practice, or forego established conventions in the hope of stimulating innovative practice amongst students.

In order to develop knowledge and skills in cinematic narrative for the production of cinematic artifacts or products (such as films), it is useful to acknowledge Jacques Derrida’s proposition that ‘a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without ... a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genre-less text’ (1981: 61).

I propose to survey of some existing resources as potential tools for the film school student to develop expertise ultimately facilitating innovation. In the process I hope this review will present some of the means by which the student of the film school become familiar and articulate in existing paradigms, schemas, conventions and genres.

Screen production educator Gillian Leahy (2008)¹⁰ argues for the importance of critical thinking, innovative approaches, and the understanding of structure, form and genre development in education practice. Her sentiments are supported by Geoff Brown (2008),¹¹ president of the Screen Production Association of Australia.

¹⁰ Gillian Leahy’s address was given on day one of the ASPERA 2008 National Conference at RMIT University.

¹¹ Geoff Brown’s address was given on day one of the ASPERA 2008 National Conference at RMIT University.

Partly in response to this proposition, I take Propp's morphology (2000) and the various formulations that have augmented it¹² as evidence that the morphology has in effect been remediated through its transition in application from folktale to cinema. The term *remediation* here refers to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's (2000) notion that the interplay between 'new media' and 'older media' result in a refashioning of both older and new media. Propp's morphology (2000) is an object that has been transferred through oral, print, film and interactive media.

I argue that Propp's morphology has itself become a media object of sorts, used as a schema, facilitating the narrative processing by which we recognise and categorise plot and characterisation in a variety of contexts.

While Joseph Campbell's hero's journey schema (1998) was first published in 1949 before an English language translation of Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (2000) their commonalities make them interesting companion schemas. As two examples of 'monotale' they can be correlated, compared and assessed as potential resources to enhance the production of cinematic narratives.

¹² This includes the studies in folktale taken as support of Propp's observations already referred to in earlier chapters: Paulme (1963), Dundes (1964), Connelly and Massey (1989), Günay (1994), and also the schemata provided by Campbell (1949) and his supporters in 'Hollywood' cinema production including Vogler (1992), Voytilla (1999). I add to this the application of Propp's morphology to media journalism as put forward by Gaines (2002).

Chapter 1: Introduction to the morphology, Propp's critics and supporters surveyed

Beginnings of Formalism in Russia

At the time of the Russian Revolution in the early twentieth century, the advent of Formalism was characterised by an emphasis on exploring the formal elements of narrative in literature and in the practice and theory of the newest artistic invention of the time: cinema.

While there is no single Formalist manifesto, Viktor Shklovsky is a prominent figure associated with the movement. Peter Steiner (1995) notes Victor Shklovsky's interest in the resemblance of literary works to machines, where there is intentional transformation of raw material into a complex mechanism suitable for a particular purpose.

Shklovsky was interested in abstractions that might facilitate innovation in literature. Two Formalist ideas associated with Shklovsky are the concept of defamiliarisation (*ostraneniye*, more literally, 'estrangement' or 'making it strange') and the distinction between:

plot and story
(‘sjuzhet’ / ‘fabula’)

Shklovsky pursued analysis of literature through emphasis on the text, disregarding biographical study or other speculation on the author. This interest in abstraction and extraction of plot (sjuzhet) from story (fabula) is also evident in the work of Shklovsky's contemporary, Vladímir Propp.

While there is some argument over whether Propp should be situated primarily within Russian Formalist literary theory or within contemporary ethnopoetics, his work became a reference point for Formalist and, later, structuralist projects.

Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (2000), first published in 1928 as *Morfológija skázki*, became a seminal study, highly influential on developments within structural linguistics and film theory.

In the period leading up to 1929, the diversity of approaches to exploring and producing texts that we can associate with Russian Formalism ranged from the methodical observation of plot structure as undertaken by Propp, to the rejection of narrative tradition in the experimental films of Dziga Vertov.

Defining the formal aspects of film became a major project for Soviet film practitioner-theorists Lev Kuleshov, V. I. Pudovkin, Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov.

Formalism and the decline of experimentation

While the revolutionary climate in Russia during the 1920s accommodated lively innovation, government support for experimentation became more restrictive with the arrival of the Stalinist regime. Innovation as practiced by Shklovsky, Vertov and others were deemed elitist by the Stalinist government.

Christie notes that purges in 1929 on Formalists carried the threat of the death sentence, with Soviet authorities discouraging experiment in favour of Socialist Realism, which was to be stridently instituted as government policy.

Joseph Stalin's intervention in arts practice, as exemplified by the 1932 state policy 'On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organisations', marked a sharp distinction between experimental work, previously supported as 'revolutionary', and more easily accessible and familiar forms of expression.

With government hostility towards what it named elitist art coincided with a decline in the experimentation as exemplified by the films of Vertov. Clarity of plot was favoured over Vertov's inclination towards 'plotless' films.

Soviet montage theory, in this historic context, described art as propaganda—

expressing revolutionary thought and political purpose. Cinematic ‘language’, expressed as plot-oriented syntax, carried political messages and stories dictated by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Kuleshov, Pudovkin and Eisenstein benefited from (conditional) government support for their essentially narrative-driven development of montage, whereas Vertov’s ‘plotless’ experimentation did not.

By the 1930s avant-garde experimentation—by then pejoratively labeled ‘formalist’—was shunned by government. Sheila Fitzpatrick describes the turn against formalism: ‘The antithesis of formalism—that is, the art that *Pravda*¹³ endorsed and sought to encourage—was realistic, traditional, and optimistic, and took its inspiration from folk art’ (1992:198).

In the preface of Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson notes Shklovsky’s interest in Russian folktales (Propp 2000 :xx¹⁴). We can speculate as to what extent this interest in Russian folktales may have been in response to anticipated criticism of Shklovsky’s ‘elitist’ preoccupation with abstracted form. We can also speculate about why Propp chose Russian folktales as the subject of his analysis. Perhaps his decision was, to some extent, an attempt to publicly affirm his nationalism. Perhaps he anticipated pressure to express patriotism and compliance with highly interventionist Soviet authorities.

Shklovsky’s search for opportunities for innovation in Formalism can be contrasted to Propp’s emphasis on stability and continuity of structure in his Formalist project.

Indeed, Shklovsky’s work could be explored in relation filmmaking rather Propp. His commentaries on cinema such as *The Semantics of Cinema*¹⁵ (1988) in 1925 propose that “cinema needs action and semantic movement just as literature needs words. Cinema needs plot just as a painting needs semantic meanings.” (1988: 131). Shklovsky’s proposes: “The basic raw material of cinema is the distinctive cine-word: a section of photographic material that has a definite meaning. Hence the raw

¹³ *Pravda* (‘Truth’) was the main newspaper of the Soviet Union and an official publication of the Central Committee of the Communist Party throughout this period.

¹⁴ Pirkova-Jacobson’s (1958) introduction to Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (2000).

¹⁵ Originally published in Russian as *Semantica Kino*.

material of cinema gravitates by its very essence towards plot as a method of organizing cine-words and cine-phrases” (1988: 133).

We might speculate on how Shklovsky might have opened new territory to explore in filmmaking but ultimately Shklovsky seems to express a kind of disappointment in the medium as his comments on Dziga Vertov’s aspirations for Cine-Eye (Kino-Glaz) project suggest:

“In the works of the Cine-Eyes film art does not break any new ground but merely narrows down the old. They work like a man with frostbitten fingers: they do not know how to use small objects and are forced to make do with work on second hand form.” (1988:133)

Shklovsky did not share the enthusiasm of Vertov’s admirers, such as Lev Manovich (2001:xv-xxxvi) who presents Vertov as a “case study” of 1920s avant-garde as predecessor to software in new media.

In *Literature and Cinematography* (*Literatura I kinematograf*, originally written in 1923), Shklovsky (2008: 64-67) does in a sense describe or perhaps even predict one major trajectory of cinema: *plot* as a central organizing principle, in what Ruiz (1996) would refer to as Hollywood influenced, globalised, “industrial” filmmaking. Shklovsky’s observation that “in this art ...so-called masques with constant characters have appeared. These constant heroes move from film to film with no change of make up and without even ever changing their names.” (2008: 65) Here Shklovsky is actually referring to actor Charles Chaplin, but his observation resonates in both the Hollywood star system and plot elements described in Propp’s morphology and Campbell’s hero cycle.

In his introduction to *Literature and Cinematography*, Richard Sheldon claims “film strikes Shklovsky as an inferior branch of art”(2008:xvii) and ultimately this characterises Shklovsky’s contribution to cinema as a critique rather than a source of potentially generative material.

The emphasis or preoccupation with stability and continuity of form present in Propp’s project may be a clue to its longevity despite of misgivings we may have for

its potentially simplistic, prescriptive and canonical applications. Familiarisation with the morphology is warranted by the fact of the numerous applications and reappraisals of Propp's morphology in the decades since its publication, qualifying its value on the grounds of it being part of what de la Harpe, et. al. describe as "content knowledge: Underpinning body of knowledge of discipline" (2009).

Since its first publication in 1928, the morphology has been revisited for various purposes including: film scholars such as Wollen (1976), Wright (1975), Kuhn (1994), Bordwell (1988), television and popular culture scholars such as Fell (1992), Harriss (2008), anthropologists and folklorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963), Dundes (1963), Dégh (1994), Günay (1994), semioticians such as Greimas (1966, 1976), narratologists Barthes (1966), Todorov (1977), journalism scholars such as Luthar (1997), Gaines (2002), interactive media scholars such as Murray (1997), story generator researchers such as Peinado, et. al. (2004), Lim, Tan, Wee (2008), literature scholars such as Lindgren (2006), Kafalenos, (2006) and so on.

Lauren Lindgren (2006) presents the view that *volshyebnaya skazka* (the Russian wonder tale) and its modern descendants continue to feature very familiar, traditional personifications of evil as expressions of authoritarian government. Lindgren explores the notion of putting the good of the state before individual desires, in order to maintain a stable social order, as an expression of the repressive Russian society of the Stalinist regime. This suggests scope for the study of Russia's wonder tales as dual functioning in that they served, unofficially, as an expression of repressed individual desire while being officially used by the Stalinist government as expressions of patriotism and nationalism.

Lindgren cites Andreas Johns's (2004) summary of the 'dual nature' of the Russian tales that 'both express and manipulate their listener's emotions and might also be one way for a group to control the experiences of its members' (2004:262).

Whatever Propp's personal strategising or compromises may have been prior to and during the Stalinist era, his work remained influential well into the twentieth century.

Formalist investigations of literary and film form combined to inform cinematic narrative production practices throughout the remainder of the century and into the present time.

The split that developed between what was to become the more orthodox narrative conventions of Socialist Realism and experimentation apparent in Soviet art practice to some extent parallels a global distinction apparent between mainstream, populist entertainment (such as Hollywood cinema) and the experimental, avant-garde practices to which entertainment cinema sometimes looks for innovation.

With the translation of Propp's *Morphology* into English in 1958, it was appropriated for various applications. It provided material that contributed to structuralist ideas in linguistics. It was also applied to film theory by Peter Wollen (*North by Northwest: a morphological analysis* 1976), John L. Fell ('Vladimir Propp in Hollywood'), Will Wright (*Six Guns and Society* 1975), Annette Kuhn (*Women's Pictures* 1994), Jim Hala ('Fatal Attraction and the Attraction of Fables: A Morphological Analysis' 1992), Chandler Harriss ('Policing Propp' 2008) and others, particularly in relation to plot structure in cinematic narrative. In this regard, Propp's *Morphology* provides a model that has been explored in a number of different narrative procedures and projects where visibility or analysis of plot is important.

Propp's morphology summarised

A type of 'estrangement', even if not exactly that sought by Shklovsky, may be potentially explored through application of Propp's *Morphology* (2000). It presents an abstraction that separates syntactic and semantic operations in a way that is unfamiliar in the usual process of telling or listening to a folktale. Propp isolated and generalised the plot features he observed in a large collection of Russian folktales or wonder tales already assembled by Alexander Afanasyev in 1863 (*Narodnye Russkie Skazki*). He claimed to have found a finite number of recurring features in these tales. According to Propp, events depicted in these stories could be categorised into a finite number of 'spheres of action' comprising of a finite number of 'functions' performed by a finite

number of character types, or ‘*dramatis personae*’. He also claimed to have identified a recurring sequential ordering of the actions depicted throughout this body of stories, regardless of differences in individual stories.

Examples of these functions include: initial situation (exposition presenting a ‘normal’ state); absentation (for example, a family member leaves or goes missing); interdiction (a prohibition is made) and violation (a breaking of that prohibition occurs); misfortune or lack (a need to restore something that has been disrupted); villainy (blame is assigned to a character); trickery; spatial transference (between two ‘kingdoms’ or domains, where the hero/protagonist must act outside her or his normal domain); struggle (the depiction of an ultimate conflict); villainy or lack liquidated (recovery from earlier disruption as a result of victory in conflict); and finally pursuit, rescue and return (of protagonists to their original domain).

With the specific plot features of the individual folktales stripped away, the morphology reduces plot to a handful of dramatic situations (spheres of action) such as social ruptures (the missing family member, a villainous act, or a lack or insufficiency of something important) and anxieties (the vulnerable child, pursuit by villain, and so on).

Propp’s (2000:79) seven spheres of actions are as follows:

1. The sphere of action of the *villain* (antagonist).
2. The sphere of action of the *donor* (provider of magical agent).
3. The sphere of action of the *helper* (provider of transference, and/or assistance in liquidation of misfortune or lack, and/or assistance in rescue, and/or solution of difficult tasks, and/or transfiguration of hero).
4. The sphere of action of the *princess* (a sought-for person) and of *her father* (assignment of difficult tasks, and/or branding, exposure, recognition and/or punishment of a second villain). Propp combines princess and her father into the same sphere of action.
5. The sphere of action of the *dispatcher* (dispatch).
6. The sphere of action of the *hero* (departure on a search, and/or reaction to the demands of the donor, and/or a wedding). There are two types of hero:

the 'seeker-hero' and the 'victim-hero'. The victim-hero does not embark on a search.

7. The sphere of action of the *false hero*.

Propp claimed that these spheres of action can be distributed among the characters of a tale in any of the following three ways (2000:80):

1. the sphere of action corresponds exactly to the character associated with it; or
2. one character can be involved in several spheres of action (e.g. a character that acts in two compatible roles such as *donor* and *helper*, or a character that acts in contradictory roles, such as a witch that helps the hero involuntarily or acts as an antagonistic donor); or
3. a single sphere of action is divided among several characters (e.g. a family or associates may act on a character's behalf, or a function is shared by two characters such as the princess and her father).

Propp's list of possible characters or players in a scenario (the *dramatis personae*) is largely defined in terms of their helping or hindering the hero at the centre of the story. Protagonist–antagonist is one of a number of binary oppositions intrinsic to Propp's schema. The ascribing of positive or negative values to each character is fundamental to their roles / function, as Propp's names for key figures suggest:

- Hero (and characters at his disposal)
- Family (potential victims of villainy)
- Victim (important figure at risk, expelled, abducted or substituted)
- Seeker (on quest to rescue victim)
- Villain (and agents/characters at his disposal)
- Donor (potential helper for hero)
- False Hero (villain or imposter)

Propp's complete set of 'functions' is summarised below. A folktale need not contain

all of these functions; yet the functions contained within any given tale will, according to Propp, reflect the plot sequential order below.

1. Absentation: one of the family members leaves home
2. Interdiction: an action is forbidden
3. Violated: action carried out anyway
4. Reconnaissance: villain watches
5. Delivery: villain gets information about his victim-to-be
6. Trickery: villain attempts to deceive hero
7. Complicity: hero submits to deception
8. Villainy: causes harm or injury (plunder, death, abduction, etc.)
- 8a. Lack: a member of the hero's family lacks or wants something
9. Mediation: lack is made known to the hero
10. Beginning counteraction: seeker-hero agrees to counteraction
11. Departure: hero leaves home
12. First function of donor: hero is tested/questioned
13. Hero reacts to donor
14. Provision of magical agent: hero receives a magical agent/object
15. Spatial transference, guidance: towards object of search
16. Struggle: hero combats villain directly
17. Branding: hero is branded, marked
18. Victory: villain is defeated
19. Lack or misfortune is liquidated
20. Hero commences return
21. Hero is pursued by antagonist
22. Rescue of hero from pursuing antagonist
23. Hero arrives home, unrecognised
24. False hero claims to be true hero
25. Difficult task is set for true hero
26. Task is resolved
27. True hero is recognised
28. False hero is exposed
29. Transfiguration: hero is given a new appearance
30. False villain/ hero is punished

31. Wedding: hero is married and ascends the throne

Binaries

Propp's morphology depends on binary values to create characters or dramatis personae. Within the realm of the folktale it is relatively easy to (re)generate more tales by inscribing the binary values that define Propp's dramatis personae into new sets of characters.

Binary opposites in the *Morphology* (2000) are clearly defined in relation to protagonist and antagonist. Positive outcomes correlate to progress in the protagonist's quest (the hero achieves her or his objectives) and negative outcomes correlate to the protagonist's setbacks (villains or others presenting obstacles to the hero).

Binaries are also ascribed to dramatis personae by way of the range of actions they are deemed capable of: hero or victim, for example.

The morphology and 'closed texts'

Propp's *Morphology* (2000) can be taken as an exemplar of what Umberto Eco (1979a) describes as a 'closed' text, where the audience or 'addressee' is presented with structures that evoke limited and predetermined responses.

If we accept Propp's observations and the methodology of his categorisations, the *Morphology* (2000) might be a basis for the recognition of an 'empirical reader' (Eco1979a:8), who interprets according to the background of codes intended by the author.

In this paradigm of story making, all narrative operations support some essential, unquestioned assumptions. Some examples of such assumptions contained within Propp's *Morphology* (2000) are that:

- we accept the protagonist's objectives as fundamentally right and

appropriate;

- problems are attributable to ‘villainy’;
- the death of villains causes liquidation of villainy; and
- order, as defined at the start of the tale, must be restored by the end of the tale.

The binaries intrinsic to the morphology are inclined (and some might argue intended) to polarise the audience into adopting clear value judgments regarding every action depicted or described within a tale. Hence Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) could be accused of being didactic.

As Eco (1979a) points out, a closed text may seem an inflexible project that aims obsessively ‘at rousing a precise response on the part of more or less empirical readers’ (1979a:8), but it is difficult to find an ‘average addressee’ in any given social context. The text can be contrived or manipulated by the author but the reader’s interpretation ultimately cannot.

How closed is a ‘closed’ text?

As Johns suggests, a tale may both express and manipulate a reader’s emotions, depending upon the reader’s interpretation (2004:262). If we accept Lindgren’s view that one of the shared codes of the Russian folktale, as presented in Propp’s *morphology* (2000), expresses the repressive order imposed by governments throughout the history of Russia, then such a tale’s ‘closed’ text is open to interpretation in relation to the ‘imposition of repressive order’. Such tales, encouraged by the government as expressions of patriotic, nationalistic affirmation, may anticipate that the reader accepts the meaning to be ‘the need for return to established order’. Thus the same ‘closed’ tales may be open to the attribution of different interpretations of meaning, despite their shared, ‘closed’ text.

We might speculate that this duality within the folktale familiar to Russians enabled Shklovsky and Propp to view this area of research as potentially fruitful yet also

relatively 'safe' during the period of bureaucratic hostility towards Formalists after the late 1920s.

Eco (1979a:27) returns to the distinction between *fabula* (story) and *sjuzhet* (plot), presented by Shklovsky and illustrated by Propp, in his explanation of how the reader actualises the discursive level ('what happens') in a given text. According to Eco the *fabula* is the 'basic story stuff', the logic of actions or 'the syntax of characters, the time-oriented course of events' (1979a:27). The plot (*sjuzhet*) is the discursive structure which allows the reader to summarise the story and, therefore, to reach 'a series of levels of abstraction by expressing one or more macropropositions' (1979a:27). The degree of abstraction possible demonstrates, for Eco, the variable nature of *fabulae*. He illustrates this point by asking the question: 'Is *Oedipus Rex* the story of detection, incest, or parricide?' (1979a:28).

Criticism of the morphology

Criticism of Propp's morphology includes challenges to his methodology, concerns about the possible diminution of the reader's importance in the process of interpretation and a distrust of the ideological implications resulting from formulation of a kind of universal, singular meta-tale or mono-schema (which may be extrapolated as a pseudo-empirical basis for a range of assumptions).

The concept of the closed nature of text presented in Propp's *Morphology* (2000) is open to criticism for, or at least suspicion of, the possibility that author and audience might be merged into one, where the author invites the audience to accept that the author and audience are one and the same, somehow fused.

It might be argued that Propp's *Morphology* (2000) insinuates a kind of quasi-objectivity derived from an established body of folk wisdom underlying folk tales.

Suspicion towards the ideology contained within a seemingly inflexible rendition of narrative structure has been the subject of numerous poststructuralist, feminist, post-colonial and other critiques, many of them fundamentally dissatisfied with 'closed' texts that impose limitations on reader (or audience) interpretation of texts.

Propp's *Morphology* (2000), as an example of structuralist thought systematically built on a binarism, is subject to critique by Derrida (1977) in his deconstruction of rigid oppositions such as nature/culture and other/self.

Laura Mulvey (1975) argues against the patriarchal positions that Propp's *Morphology* (2000) can be taken to imply. For example, Propp's *Morphology* accommodates representations of women in terms of stereotypes such as victim (requiring rescue) or bride (sometimes as reward or prize).

Roland Barthes (1977) comments on the limitations of purely linguistic approaches to meaning. Barthes's reaction against the author as 'god' in his essay *Death of the Author* is an objection to authority as expressed by a single, predetermined or 'closed' way to interpret text. This objection can be equally aimed at a meta-narrative that claims authority as the essence of all folktales as they exist in 'total uniformity' (Propp 2000:105). Similarly, Foucault's (1972) objections to 'control and delimitation on discourse' (1972:220) might be applied directly to Propp's project.

Propp's *Morphology* (2000) is built on clear, pre-formulated binaries (such as good or evil, hero or villain, victim or hero), leaving the reader little sense of what Derrida (Dooley and Kearney 1998:66) terms 'undecidability'—the experience of having to consciously engage in decision making in the process of interpreting texts.

Propp sought a morphology that is 'exact as organic formations' (2000:xxv) such as those found in botany. These structured binaries, if taken at face value, make Propp's *Morphology* a closed text and a naturalised formulation as evoked by Propp's reference to botany. Much of the criticism of Propp's morphology hinges on the notion of its purported universality and its assertion of stable, 'decided' or predetermined meanings rather than open texts. Propp's schema implies an empiricism by association with botany. This association, combined with the notion that folktales are not the fabrication of any one, single author, may indicate that a process of mythologising underlies Propp's project. Any assumption that the body of tales transcends the individual storyteller or 'author' as a kind of 'natural' formation is problematic. If we take the *Morphology* to have empirical substance, we may run

the risk of mythologising it as a ‘closed’ text. Frank Kermode (2000) describes this potential problem:

Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. (2000:39)

Kermode (2000) draws a distinction between fictions and myths. The *Morphology* can be seen as a fundamentally static object, a kind of template or set of rules—potentially a sort of myth itself.

Propp’s description of recurring features of texts can be criticised for its potential implementation of stereotypes through ritualised plot ‘moves’ and functions. Taken simply, Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) presents a closed narrative with a limited range of plot possibilities. Accepted passively as ‘natural’ structure, this morphology can be used for, if not prone to, myth-making and ideological manipulation.

We can debate whether Propp’s observations constitute a profound truth, empirical or otherwise. Alternatively, we can decide to treat Propp’s morphology as a device or schema, an interpretive and perhaps fictional construct itself.

Film theorist David Bordwell (1988) seems to take particular umbrage at the enthusiasm with which some film theorists in particular have applied the *Morphology* to cinema in general. In ‘ApPropriations and ImProprieties: Problems in the Morphology of Film Narrative’ (1988) Bordwell attacks Propp’s claim to demonstrate ‘the total uniformity in the construction of fairy tales’ (*Morphology* 2000:105).

At a time when there was a resurgence of interest in the *Morphology* among film theorists, Bordwell’s (1988) criticism of Propp commenced with accusations of Propp’s appropriation of concepts from existing studies. Bordwell (ApPropriations) cites Heda Jason’s survey (1977) which attributes much of Propp’s findings to other theorists, such as: Elena Eleonskaja in 1912, Aleksandr Skaftymov in 1924, Roman Volkov’s *Folktale: Investigations in the Plot Construction of the Folktale* and

Aleksandr I. Nikiforov (1927) who referred to his own project as ‘the morphology of the folktale’.

Noting Propp’s exclusion of various categories of story, Bordwell (1988) is critical of the sample on which Propp drew for his observations. Bordwell points out that Propp ‘neglected religious tales, romantic tales, ballads, fables, cumulative tales and other varieties of folk narrative’ (1988:7), thereby undermining possible claims of the universality of the study. Propp, according to Bordwell (1988), drew on only eighty-seven of the one hundred samples provided by his primary source: Afanasyev’s 1863 *Narodnye Russkie Skazki* collection (Bremond & Verrier 1984:192-194).

Bordwell’s (1988) objection is aimed not only at Propp (who himself declared the limitations of his sample selection of tales) but also at the questionable rigour of structuralists (such as Claude Lévi-Strauss 1963 and A. J. Greimas 1966, 1973) and film theorists who attribute a universal status to Propp’s schema. Perhaps Bordwell’s most serious accusation regards Propp’s claim to empiricism. Bordwell (1988) argues that Propp’s taxonomy does not satisfactorily proceed from data to conclusions because it is highly interpretive, sometimes distorted (Bordwell speculates that perhaps Propp aimed to preserve his schema in doing so), and lacks sufficient interrogation or defence of Propp’s categorisations.

In a somewhat paradoxical dual attack on Peter Wollen’s application of Proppian analysis to Alfred Hitchcock’s feature film *North by Northwest*, Bordwell (1988) is critical of both Propp’s methodology and Wollen’s ‘failure’ to apply it precisely and literally. This criticism is fraught and restricted by Bordwell’s (1988) seeming insistence that the actions depicted in old wonder tales must not be adapted, translated or transformed to fit within contemporary settings in contemporary film narratives. This question of adaptability is addressed in the discussion on the generative possibilities of the morphology in chapters three and four.

The spread of Propp’s morphology

Propp himself did not claim universality of his *Morphology* ‘for the tale as a whole’ (2000:xxv), declaring in his foreword a degree of exactness in his morphological

observations for ‘so-called fairy tales’ only. Despite a range of criticisms and misgivings, the influence of Propp’s morphology has been reappraised at various times. However, the universality of the morphology has been the subject of various explorations and challenges.

The book’s somewhat delayed translation from Russian into English in 1958 initiated fresh interest in Europe and North America. This led to investigation of its applicability in a number of contexts, including:

- Investigation by replication of similar studies
- Development of linguistic and structuralist approaches to narrative logic or grammar
- Transposition or adaptation from oral folk texts to cinematic texts
- Morphology as story algorithm
- Morphology as instrumental in computer-databased storytelling

Propp’s observations of Russian folktales have been explored and largely substantiated through morphological investigations conducted in other cultures, such as those conducted by:

Denise Paulme (1963) in Africa: *Le garçon travesty ou Joseph en Afrique L’Homme*3 no.2:3 5-21)

Alan Dundes (1964) in American Indian cultures: *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales*, FFC 195 Helsinki

Bridget Connelly and Henry Massey (1989) in Egypt and Tunisia: ‘Epic Splitting: An Arab Folk Gloss on the Meaning of the Hero Pattern’, *Oral Tradition* 4/1-2 (1989): 101-24

and Umay Günay (1994) in Turkey: *Application of Propp’s Morphological Analysis to Turkish Folktales* Hacettepe Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi, cm 11/Sayl 1-2 Aralık 1994/ s. 1-6.

Each of these studies presents a case for recognisable Proppian functions. They present evidence of morphological observations as applicable beyond a single, narrow ethnographic sample (that is, the body of Russian wonder tales originally gathered by Alexander Afanasyev in 1863 and analysed by Propp).

While these studies were largely presented as validation of much of Propp's taxonomy over a period of nearly seven decades since the initial publication of his *Morphology* in 1928, theorisation moved from Propp's linear presentation of functions to increasingly sophisticated structural configurations. However, the classifications (dramatis personae and their associated functions in tales) presented by Propp served as a reference for actantial models of narrative structure long after the publication of the *Morphology*.

As a schema, Propp's morphology can be explored in relation to the language of cinema (and television), particularly the process of emplotment—the arrangement of actions and events with reference to Propp's functions—as demonstrated in the writing of Peter Wollen (*North by Northwest: A Morphological analysis*, 1976), John L. Fell ('Vladimir Propp in Hollywood' 1977), Will Wright (*Six Guns and Society*, 1975), Annette Kuhn (*Women's Pictures*, 1994), Jim Hala ('Fatal Attraction' 1992), Chandler Harriss ('Policing Propp' 2008), each of whom finds potential to apply Proppian analysis to media that are more contemporary and hybrid than the oral folktale. These investigations focus on Propp's morphology as a possible tool of text analysis rather than a generative mechanism that might find application in the formulation of new texts.

Some of these writers do, however, sketch out possibilities for the plot–story distinction in configuring stories as cinematic texts. Kuhn (*Women's Pictures* 1994), for example, presents a case for Proppian reference points as potentially useful for reordering the sequence of story events into plot sequence in her analysis of *Mildred Pierce* (1945). She claims that Proppian functions can serve as guidelines for the arrangement of plot as they 'can be instrumental in untangling the somewhat complex interrelationship between story and plot in this film' (1994:29). Kuhn observes that in

the example of *Mildred Pierce* (1945) ‘plot reverses the story order by setting up as its narrative disruption in the central element in the heroine’s downfall—the murder of her lover. The task of the plot of the film, as against that of the novel, is to solve the murder’ (1994:29).

We might describe this as a Proppian operation of sorts in that the adaptation of the novel has involved the original story being re-emplotted to produce a plot more typical of the linear sequencing of the *Morphology*. The reconfigured plot places new emphasis on the function of villainy (a murder) as a rupture that must be resolved.

Kuhn (1994) illustrates the reconfiguring of a print-based story (the novel by James Cain) into a film plot (the Warner Brothers film production adapted from the novel). Kuhn summarises the reconfigured text with reference to Proppian functions:

The first segment sets up villainy—a murder—which is one of the tasks of the narrative to explain and solve. The plot may be seen as a set of retardation devices which function to delay the solution ... when ‘truth’ is revealed by a ‘detective.’

The second segment constructs a further enigma, this time in the form of a lack of centering on Mildred’s relationship with her husband: the lack is liquidated in the final segment, when the two are reunited. These resolutions constitute a final equilibrium permitting narrative closure at the levels of both plot and story. (1994:29-30)

Kuhn’s (1994) example of the Proppian morphology’s application simultaneously illustrates its potential use for performing plot operations and for discourse analysis by making emplotted values more visible.

Will Wright proposes that Propp’s morphology can serve to describe structural features of specific cinematic genres. In *Six Guns and Society* he draws on the morphology to examine the ‘Western’ film genre. Wright claims that the ‘classical’ Western genre provides ‘a conceptual model of social action’ (1975:124) where paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures provide conceptual oppositions and narrative

functions to model social types and the creation of social situations.

Wright cites philosopher Arthur Danto in developing an argument that narrative sequence is a basic form of historical explanation, or as he paraphrases Danto: an attempt ‘to account for change’ (1975:125).

Wright’s (1975) analysis of the Western genre presents the following binaries common to what he refers to as the ‘classic’ Westerns. He argues that they function to develop a ‘social and conceptual explanation of ordinary events’ (1975:49) with particular attention to the relationship between the individual and society:

Inside society–Outside society
 (in relation to the hero and the society depicted)
 Good–Bad
 (villain’s values versus social values)
 Strong–Weak
 (as contrasted between hero and society depicted)
 Wilderness–Civilisation
 (hero’s identification with nature)

As with other critical applications of Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) such as Kuhn’s (1994) analysis of *Mildred Pierce* (1945), Wright’s deconstructive analysis is useful both from a story-craft and a critical analysis perspective. It is instructive in that it describes underpinning knowledge of storytelling craft in relation to specific genre by illustrating typical uses of binaries. It is also interesting in terms of critical analysis because it renders more visible some of the cultural, social and political assumptions operating via recognisable functions and binaries.

When these functions and their binaries are highly visible we can investigate their various aspects and dimensions, such as their semantic component (that is, the specific meaning of each function) and their expression of ‘language instincts’.

Narrative and grammar

Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) may, for example, serve as catalyst for exploration of generative grammar, that is, what Steven Pinker describes as code to translate

between orders or words and combinations of thoughts' (1994: 84).

In *The Language Instinct*, Pinker (1994) proposes that the brain has an innate language processing faculty, existing prior to acquisition of language, equipping it for the task of parsing: 'a process of finding subjects, verbs and objects largely unconsciously' (1994: 196).

Given cinematic narrative is a linear sequence of image and sound 'fragments' we could apply Pinker's (1994) thoughts on organisation of dialogue and text fragments to them:

When a series of facts come in succession, as in a dialogue or a text, the language must be structured so that the listener can place each fact into an existing framework. Thus the information about the old, the given, the understood, the topic, should go early in the sentence, usually as the subject, and information about the new, the focus, the comment, should go at the end. (1994: 227)

Pinker's (1994) observations can be used to analyse the syntax of existing films such as Eisenstein's juxtaposition of the suppression of a workers' rebellion with cattle being slaughtered (*Strike* 1925), presents a sequence that might be described as a 'sentence' of sorts. It organises ideas (representations of workers, soldiers, slaughter-yard), linked to previously established themes (oppressive conditions), into concepts (systematic exploitation and sacrifice) and places 'comment' at the end of the 'sentence'. At first viewing, the sequence seems chaotic and repetitive, but individual shots present a series of contrasts that generate meaning. It commences with a shot of a knife in stabbing motion (signalling violence), followed by shots of a panicked, running crowd, each shot describing a new direction of movement (perhaps signaling panic), followed by shots depicting death blows to cattle, before the final piece of the 'sentence' appears: the soldiers' attack on workers. Each shot is discernibly different and therefore presents the viewer with a new parsing operation from start to end of the sequence.

The sequence has the contrivance of a sentence of written text or monologue, and,

while the visceral depiction of cattle slaughter brings an element of immediacy, the sequence is an exercise in highly methodical structure.

Eco's theory is the fact that, in both industrialised and nature-based civilisations, human beings are evolving in a 'system of systems of signs'.

Therefore Propp's *Morphology* (2000) is an instance of where 'the sign is used to transmit information; to say or to indicate a thing that someone knows and wants others to know as well' (Eco 1988, 27).

Propp and Campbell

Arguably the most striking example of Proppian functions expressed in cinematic narrative is derived from a schema provided by Joseph Campbell (1998). Campbell's work is not directly based on Propp's *Morphology* (2000) but it provides an interesting companion work. Campbell's 'hero's journey' schema is a distillation of his search for commonality among the myths of diverse cultures. The schema is presented in Campbell's influential book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1998).

Campbell's project presents a 'monomyth' schema largely compatible with Propp's *Morphology* (2000). Both propose examples of closed texts organised around a storytelling paradigm that is a protagonist-centric, quest-oriented one.

Given the substantial parallels between Propp's and Campbell's plot paradigms, I propose that the *Morphology* (2000) and Campbell's hero's cycle can be taken as sharing common *dramatis personae*, spheres of action and functions. While neither of these two schemas is a perfect container or map for the other, they do reveal substantial commonality.

Potential commonality between morphology and the hero's journey:

Propp	Campbell
Hero	Hero
Misfortune (e.g. abduction)	Abduction
Departure	Call to adventure
Meeting with donor (helper)	Meeting with mentor
Hero is tested	Road of trials
Magical agent	Supernatural aid
Transference	Crossing the threshold
Combat: hero and villain	Ordeal
Lack is liquidated	Ultimate boon
Transfiguration	Apotheosis
Pursuit	Flight
Rescue from pursuit	Rescue
Hero transfigured	Apotheosis
Hero returns	Hero returns
Marriage	Sacred marriage

We can cross-reference Campbell's hero's journey as would be described by both Propp (2000) and Campbell (1998) as evidenced in Campbell's (1998) cyclical representation below (see Figure 1). A further commonality is that both Propp and Campbell claim that it is common for larger tales to comprise a series of smaller cycles of plot.

THE KEYS

THE adventure can be summarized in the following diagram:

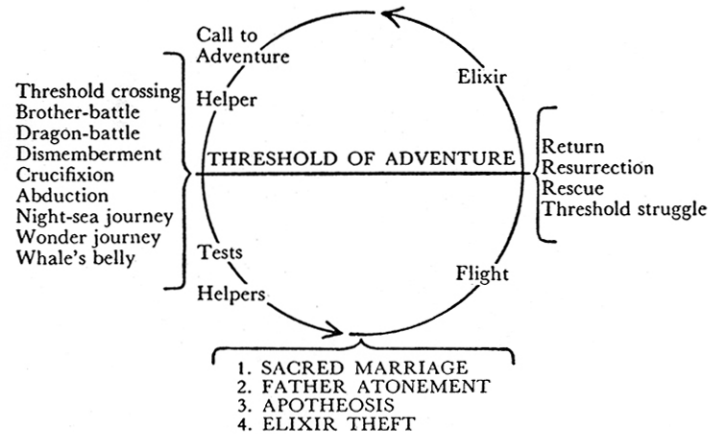


Figure 1: Campbell's 'keys' to his schema for the typical structure of the hero journey presented as a cycle of events - which largely correspond to Proppian functions.

Morphology as actantial paradigm

Grammairian Lucien Tesnière (1965) proposed the notion of 'action' as central to sentence organisation by describing the predicate verb (representing an action) as the most important syntactic node of the sentence. Meaningfulness in sentences, for Tesnière, is centred around the organisational role of action. Tesnière (1965) described this arrangement in terms of the sentence representing a 'little drama' (*une petit drame*), where the predicate represents an action or process and the dependants of the predicate are principal elements in the action. He explains: the verbal node ... expresses a complete short play. Like a dramatic play, in fact, it includes obligatorily a process and most often actors and circumstances. Transposed from the plane of reality to that of structural syntax, the process, actors, and circumstances become respectively the verb, the actants, and the circumstantial indicators (1965:102).

Algirdas Julien Greimas (1966) also drew heavily on Etienne Souriau's (1950) work on dramatic situations and Tesnière's (1965) interest in actants.

Propp's (2000) notion of 'spheres of action' as general categories of 'behaviour' or 'doing' is taken up by Greimas (1966) in investigation of fundamental roles that are played out in the deep narrative structure.

The subordination of character to action and plot as evidenced in the writing of both Propp (2000) and Greimas (1966) can also be found in contemporary story writing practice as advocated by Robert McKee (1999).

Despite criticism of the usefulness of Propp's *Morphology* (2000) for the cinema—in terms of methodological rigour (Bordwell 1988) and its limitations for exploring narrative complexity (Fell 1977)—much of Propp's morphological observation has been discernible in a large body of cinematic narrative throughout most of the twentieth century up to the present.

Emma Kafalenos (2006) summarises Propp's *Morphology* (2000) as the following paradigm: 'a destabilizing event' that must be alleviated, but will require the actant (protagonist) to become empowered to take action to alleviate that destabilising event. Kafalenos outlines her distillation of story functions arrived at through observations of narrative texts from various periods and genres, and drawing also on Propp's morphology. Her observations correspond to the 'orthodox Hollywood' screenplay paradigm as found in the instructional writings of Field (1979), Vogler (1994), McKee (1999) and Block (2001). The notion of cinematic narrative (certainly in populist or entertainment cinema) as structured around a 'restorative' (Dancyger and Rush 2002) paradigm clearly echoes Propp's *Morphology* (2000).

Propp's *Morphology* (2000) is also useful as an illustration of abstraction. It is an exercise in reduction of folktales in an attempt to make fundamental structural features apparent. Through the lens of the morphology, much of cinema appears as a process of (and inclination towards) generating or arranging binaries in cinematic narrative.

Propp's analyses facilitate the binary formulations put forward by Lévi-Strauss (1963), Eco ('Narrative Structure in Ian Fleming' 1979a) and McKee (1999). The latter two contribute specifically to cinematic narrative as explored through theory

and practice in film school. Eco (1979a) and McKee (1999) both propose that cinematic narrative is fundamentally a sequence of oscillation between binary elements and values.

I argue that Propp's work has value and relevance in its potential for connecting history, theory and contemporary practice because it remains useful in identifying and working with fundamental processes of grammar and meaning-making in cinema. As Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake put it, Propp's morphology 'showed that it was possible to analyze the production of meaning at a macro level' (2006:131).

In this context, Formalist approaches such as Propp's constitute part of what de la Harpe et al. define as the 'underpinning body of knowledge of discipline' (2008:10), particularly relevant to the intersection of theory and practice in the film school.

Indeed, 'the process of discovering forms, strategies and techniques includes the development of a critical attitude toward craft' (de la Harpe et al. 2008:5) and familiarity with existing forms ideally should be part of the students' knowledge of their discipline to enable systematic reflection on habitual thinking and actions.

Art or design: Propp in the film school

Production of cinematic works (such as the short film, or the feature film) requires distilling, analysing and synthesising; creative and imaginative thinking; skills of integration, projection and exploration; innovative decision making; problem solving; teamwork and collaboration. These are all descriptors that de la Harpe et al. (2008:13) use to characterise the study and practice of 'design'.

The studio model of art education referred to by de la Harpe et al. (2008:13) describes 'art' with reference to the 'artmaking process' in terms of inferring values and formulating responses; reflecting and deliberating; creating and transforming; enhancing students' awareness of culture, social environments and the larger social fabric; as well as developing a social conscience.

Using these definitions of the practices of design and artmaking as they are

encountered in film school we can see that the student will hopefully be engaged in mastery of skills and the making of personal meanings.

Kafalenos (2006), for example, puts forward the idea that an interpretive process, where we conceive of given events as potentially causally related, constitutes a narrative ‘competence’, to use Gérard Genette’s term (2006:77). We might see this competence in terms of communication or expression.

The practice of cinematic production (filmmaking) clearly embraces all of the above activities. In fact it is a challenge to exclude any of these art and/or design activities from the core business of the film school. The student, under the duress of a challenging production schedule, may (and frequently does) explain his or her meaning using pre-existing ‘industrial’ frameworks and references. These could be well-defined cinema genres or perhaps a synopsis highlighting key dramatic situations (that may be reminiscent of functions in Propp’s morphology).

Propp can be used as a source for development of a generic plot that is fundamentally compatible with Hollywood screenwriting ‘orthodoxy’ (Field 1978; Vogler 1992; Block 2001). Hollywood orthodoxy posits that stories must include an inciting incident (Field *The Screenwriter's Problem Solver: How to Recognize, Identify, and Define Screenwriting Problems* 1988; Levy 1994; Aronson 2000; Press 2004) that has triggered rising action (Bordwell *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* 2006; Aronson 2000) which will reach a climax (Vogler 1992; Block 2001; Aronson 2000).

This Hollywood preoccupation with a procedural approach to cinema production perhaps is most enthusiastically expressed by Vogler’s description of the ‘hero’s journey’ schema (Campbell 1998) as his discovery of ‘the secret code of story’ (Vogler 1994:4). These texts and their advocates have proceduralised narrative description so as to make it reasonably easy to reduce any specific cinematic narrative to a simple plot.

Cinematic narrative and schema

Some psychologists use the term schema as the basic building block of cognition (Rumelhart, 1980b; see also G. Mandler, 1984). On this view all mental organisation is schematic in nature (Jean Mandler 1984:2).

If Propp's morphology is to be generative, it is unlikely to be so as a simple 'template' for manufacturing new folktales (cinematic or other), as it was conceived of as a means of abstraction and analysis rather than story making.

The morphology can be taken as an example of our inclination to 'emplot' or seek causal associations and our predisposition to formulate binaries. Bordwell (*A Case for Cognitivism* 1999) notes Mandler's proposal that 'prototypical schemata' exist that relate directly to story and plot formulation:

Stories that do not follow the schema, such as tales lacking causal connections between episodes, are demonstrably more difficult to follow and remember. Most striking of all, when people are asked to reconstruct deviant stories, the result tends to revise the original by making it more canonical. Mandler's most recent experiments show consistent findings across adults and children and across populations of different cultures. (Mandler 1984, 50)

As Jameson comments: 'the Real itself necessarily passes through prior textualization' (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* 1981:35). Propp's *Morphology* (2000) is just one example of this textualisation process.

Cultural shifts

The history of thought is the history of its model. (Jameson *The Prison House of Language, A Critical Account of Structuralism Russian Formalism* 1975:v)

Jameson (1975) describes ‘a fairly predictable rhythm’ for the life span of any given model of thought where it can be observed to remain stable for a period, then is readjusted and is finally subjected to a theoretical re-examination of its presuppositions.

What happens to models of thought? Robert B. Ray (2001) proposes that, at various periods in time, European culture can be observed as moving between the tendency to consolidate around dominant principles, notions and orthodoxy and reactions against those principles, notions and orthodoxy. He illustrates this alternation or oscillation by presenting a series of cultural movements:

Classic	Baroque
Renaissance	Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo
Neo-Classicism	Romanticism
Positivism, Realism, Naturalism	Symbolism, Decadence
Modernism	Postmodernism

On this account none of the movements listed above ever becomes entirely redundant or invisible. Ray’s list could be read as an ongoing process of readjustment in a balancing act between the singularity characteristic in one movement and the plurality characteristic of the next movement. Modernist, formalist and structuralist methodologies can be considered to be expressions of a broad cultural alternation between an impetus to expand/diversify and an impetus to consolidate/standardise. Ray’s list of cultural movements can be read as a series of transitions between a cultural impetus towards singularity/standardisation and a cultural impetus towards plurality/subversion, which ultimately points to an ongoing tension between the two broad tendencies.

Geuens (2000) proposes another, perhaps related, pair of tendencies: the inclination to standardise, which he associates with industrial practice, and the inclination towards the radical or avant-garde. He illustrates these with the example of the swing in popularity away from Ince's silent film 'factory' products, via the new complexities of sound filmmaking to the more individual and challenging (but critically and financially successful) films of early- to mid-1970s American cinema (2000:63). David Thomson claims that films such as *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971), *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974), *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975), added 'to the discourse and ferment of the country' (1996:59). Presented as open texts when compared to preceding Hollywood studio films, these films are characterised by their invitation to audiences to interpret and reflect on the work of the writer and the director. It is interesting to note that Geuens takes *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) as a turning point in a swing back towards production of a conventional, standardised product, or as Geuens puts it: 'For a while then, everything seemed possible. Then came *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) and that was the end of it' (2000:63).

Informed by Joseph Campbell's work, particularly *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1998), and examined alongside Propp's morphology, *Star Wars* (1977) presented to Vogler and the large studios an argument for a return to convention and singularity of meaning in entertainment cinema. As cinema spectacle, it presented an emphasis on spectacle rather than reflection for its audience.

Eco discusses the 'debate on the meaning' with reference to 'the plurality of meaning, or the absence of any transcendental meaning of a text' (1990:145) through a historical comparison between Hermetic thought (as in the texts of Hermes Trimegistos: *Corpus Hermeticum*) and Platonic thought. Eco points out that Hermes Trimegistos's revelations come to him by way of dream or vision, in contrast to Platonic reflection and rational activity. The comparison is intended to present two notions of 'nous': as ineffable (Hermetic) and effable (Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian). It is also meant to offer an illustration of the shifting emphasis between

two fundamental positions at various moments in history: firstly, that of the inability of language to capture meaning or ‘knowledge of cosmic mystery’ (other than superficially); and, secondly, the discursive tradition of Western thought.

Eco (1990) identifies the thread of Hermetic influence in relation to Galileo, Francis Bacon, Copernicus, Kepler and Newton, claiming that this demonstrates ‘the Hermetic model was suggesting the idea that the order of the universe described by Greek rationalism could be subverted and that it was possible to discover new connections and new relationships in the universe such as would have permitted man to act on nature and change its course’ (1990:153).

The tension or interplay between the linear, causal thinking of the rationalist principal of ‘Post hoc ergo propter hoc’ (Latin: ‘after this, therefore because of this’)¹⁶ and what Eco calls a non-rational or an ‘instantaneous and non-discursive vision’ (1990:152) can be viewed alongside Ray’s summary of cultural movements contrasted or subverted by other movements.

Both Eco (1990) and Ray (2001) present a picture of cultural oscillation between different ‘rationalisms’ where postmodernist concepts of criticism can embrace the notion of ‘the continuous slippage of meaning’ or, as Eco (1990:154) puts it, the idea that there can be no true sense of a text.

We find in the ancient Hermeticism and in many contemporary approaches some disquietingly similar ideas: A text is an open-ended universe where the interpreter discovers infinite interconnections. Language is unable to grasp a unique and preexisting meaning—on the contrary, language’s duty is to show that what we can speak of is only the coincidence of opposites. (1990:158)

The sentiments ascribed to any of these movements may occur interstitially. In this conception of cultural shifts, we could extrapolate a kind of rhythm consisting

¹⁶ This describes the potential for logical fallacy where coincidental correlation is taken as interchangeable with causation (a potential hazard of linear, causal thinking).

of alternating periods of orderliness and discipline that is sought by consolidations of centralised knowledge (such as the classic, the renaissance and the modernist, scientific viewpoints), and contrasting periods of ‘centrifugal’ dispersals of knowledge and thought characterised by ‘new values’ claimed in Baroque and Post-modern periods.

In the production of cinematic texts (films) ‘textualisation’ passes through a number of processes or filters during the various stages of production, including concept development, screenplay writing, production design, principle photography and editing. Some of these processes are presented by McKee (1999) with reference to story writing, and by Walter Murch (1999) in relation to film editing.

Review of the schemata put forward by Propp (2000) in 1928 and Campbell (1998) in 1949 can serve as an exploration of how we might operate with schemata in various contexts.

Schemas are, by definition (Bartlett 1932), knowledge structures characteristic of a concept or category. They are a formulation of categorical rules or scripts we use to interpret the world. These rules must be adaptable and overwriteable if they are to be useful in interpreting and predicting situations. Much of narrative cinema can largely be described as a temporal unfolding of events that invites the audience to speculate on causality.

As long as our cognitive processing continues to use schemas, the linear form of Propp’s morphology will be potentially useful for investigation of cause and effect thinking. As Bordwell (1999) explains: ‘Cognitivists in anthropology and social theory propose intersubjective representations: mental maps, tacit diagrams of how gadgets work, and so forth’. We can argue that Propp’s *Morphology* (2000), and indeed cinema in general, are media that are both examples of ‘intersubjective representations’.

One way to describe the production of cinematic narratives (in film school or in the film industry) is in terms of schema construction. Each individual narrative film can be considered a schema. A film could also be described as an arrangement of

hypothetical, conflicting schemata.

Perhaps the most common fundamental description of emotional affect as a means of engaging an audience with the cinematic artifact is the theatrical term ‘dramatic tension’. Conventionally, as audience members we experience dramatic tension in response to the question of whether the plot is presented with sufficient vibrancy and/or plausibility to generate emotional affect and empathy. As McKee (1999) suggests, we are inclined to engage if we sense ‘a meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a value and achieved through conflict’ (1999:34). Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) presents one schema where these meaningful changes are generically named or labelled: villainy, lack, absention, etc. Here the *Morphology* defines a schema we initially use as a closed text.

We could, however, speculate on more complex configurations of Propp’s schema within the same story. For example, conflict may be generated by the depiction of multiple schemas as presented by two characters that might both ‘compete’ for the role of ‘hero’ as defined by Propp.

From a dramatist’s point of view, one source of dramatic tension is the perceived uncertainty of outcome between conflicting schemas—for example, where opposing schemas are presented through protagonist and antagonist (within the narrative schema that ‘contains’ them both). In this case plot may be constructed to resolve conflicting schema presented as recognisable binaries (such as hero versus villain, or individual versus bureaucracy); but what if plot is configured around rival protagonists? Both Propp and classic Hollywood cinema emphasise the notion that there should be only one hero in any given story.

The workings of narrative as presented in the morphology are simplistic, yet still operate in cinema production, particularly in the realm of commercial / entertainment cinema. The ‘folk wisdom’ transmitted through folktales (old or new) can be observed in many contemporary cinema narratives, particularly in Hollywood narratives that can be broadly described as cautionary tales. These are narratives that feature goal-driven protagonists who are propelled through what Dancyger and Rush would call a

‘restorative three act structure’ (2002:18-21). Dancyger and Rush trace this ‘restorative three act structure’ to middle-class French and English theatre of the 1820s as exemplified by the work of Eugene Scribe, characterised by ‘a clear and logical denouement’ and is ‘restorative’ in that any possibility of profound disruption or change will be liquidated ‘by a return to complete order’ (2002:19).

One overarching binary opposition within the narrative codes of both middle-class theatre and the oral folktales described in the *Morphology* (2000) is the liquidation of disruption¹⁷ and return to order. Annette Kuhn (1994) argues that this is also applicable to classical Hollywood films, where ‘the task of the tale is to restore order to the world of the narrative by vanquishing the villain or liquidating the lack. In the fairy tale, resolution is brought about in a limited number of ways: by a battle in which the hero conquers the villain, perhaps, or by the marriage of the hero and the princess’ (Kuhn 1994: 29).

Hypermediacy and remediation in cinema

Manovich observes a trend in the language of cultural interfaces increasingly becoming more dominated by cinematic elements rather than the printed word (*The Language of New Media* 2001:78), which he speculates upon as the emergence of a new Esperanto. Specifically he refers to “cinematic ways of seeing the world” increasingly becoming the “basic means by which computer users access and interact with all cultural data”. (2001:78-79)

Manovich suggests most cinema ‘users’ are “able to understand cinematic language but not to speak it (i.e., make films),” (2001:79) and so he goes on to distinguish between ‘cinema users’ and ‘computer users’ as the latter can easily both use and speak the language of the computer interface.

The term ‘computer users’ is becoming potentially obsolete terminology as we move into more ubiquitous computing devices and environments. As the description ‘computer users’ comes to describe the increasingly vast number of people using increasingly commonplace digital devices rather than a group specialists.

¹⁷ The relevant Proppian functions are: XIX The initial lack is liquidated (the ‘peak’ of the narrative); XXVI The task is resolved—solution; and XXX The villain is punished.

It could be argued that there are various indicators of a general increase in those able to ‘speak’ cinematic language as it moves from the domain of the professional and specialist into a wider vernacular use. For example the emerging term *digital storytelling* reflects the pervasiveness of cinematic language and the increase in amateur ‘speakers’. This is evident in increasing use of digital storytelling in education as a method of communicating, reporting, documenting and the use of cinematic narrative to organize cultural and technical data. The proliferation of professional, industrial digital video production tools and sophisticated amateur tools is a function or driver of this broader uptake of cinematic narrative tools.

Where this production or ‘speaking’ of cinematic language was once the domain of professionals and specialists it is now increasingly introduced to children and community in general, as evident in digital storytelling projects conducted by the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI),¹⁸ the BBC (eg: *Capture Wales*) or the Center for Digital Story Telling¹⁹.

Parallel with this accessibility of tools and production processes has come an increasingly widespread and articulate knowledge of cinematic terminology and production practice.

Robert Rosen(2010)²⁰ summarises cinematic narrative as essentially a process of making sense of the world by organizing information as a series of gestures conveying emotion. He proposes the ability to discover vivid gestures that

¹⁸ The Digital Storytelling program at ACMI runs regular workshops to guide people through the telling of a personal story using multimedia tools. Participants combine the audio visual resources of their personal archives (photographs, video footage, text, music and sound) to produce a 3-4 minute personal story which they then narrate. www.acmi.net.au/digital_storytelling.aspx

¹⁹ The Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) is an international non-profit training, project development, and research organization based in California, USA, dedicated to assisting people in using digital media to tell meaningful stories from their lives. <http://www.storycenter.org/index1.html>

²⁰ Rosen emphasized empathetic narrative as both the essence of cinema and key to future expansion of cinematic narrative both within and beyond the film industry in his address the RMIT School of Media and Communication, 30 July 2010.

encapsulate and convey emotional significance and the ability to organize these experiences is essentially cinematic but not restricted to cinema practice. Rosen applies this core ability to organize and share a personal vision to filmmaking, entertainment, business and politics.

The ability to ‘speak’ cinematic language can have numerous applications outside commercial, or as Ruiz (1996) would call it, industrial filmmaking. This can be seen in various fields of endeavour from digital storytelling to narrative therapy strategies that address issues of meaning, subjectivity, power and ethics in the context of therapy culture.²¹ In each of these endeavours narrative used to explore how we frame our notions of ‘self’ and ‘identity’.

Besley (2002:127) quotes Michael White, founder of narrative therapy, on its premise that; ‘the idea that the lives and the relationships of persons are shaped by the knowledges and stories that communities of persons negotiate and engage in to give meaning to their experiences.’ This premise seems very applicable to Rosen’s (2010) notion of cinematic narrative and its wider relevance and applicability.

Erik Sween (1998) comments: “Narrative therapy proposes that people use certain stories about themselves like the lens on a camera. These stories have the effect of filtering a person's experience and thereby selecting what information gets focused in or focused out.”

Given the diversity of appropriations of cinematic metaphors and procedures both inside and outside of the film industry, I intend to appropriate Bolter and Grusin’s notion of hypermediacy for the purposes of applying it to narrative making on the basis that there is an increasing spread communities of practitioners self consciously using cinematic narrative. Bolter and Crusin describe hypermediacy as “an expression of our fascination with the medium itself.” (2001:53-54) which, I would argue, is present in the cultural fascination with media and mediation evident in increasingly knowing and sophisticated use of (or play with) cinematic tropes. These include mimesis, selection of images, events, ellipsis, isolating details using optical means

²¹ Narrative therapy evolved out of family therapy where educator A. C. Besley (2002) describes in relation to the influence of Michel Foucault’s questioning of dominant assumptions underlying humanism and psychology.

(eg: the zoom, the close up, etc.) to frame views and so on, with knowing references to existing cinema narratives.

Audiences are becoming increasingly articulate and informed about cinematic language by various forms and means. Audience and filmmaker both proceed with some mutual expectations regarding narrative, such as reference to established genre conventions. Indeed there is an expectation that writer and director will re-invent, play with or parody some of these conventions. The audience increasingly brings existing knowledge and preoccupation with the workings of the medium into their engagement with it. The cinema audience as connoisseur or flâneur does not necessarily equate with couch potato. The division between consumer and producer of cinema is blurred in the tale (familiar to many filmmaking students before arrival at film school) of Quentin Tarantino's career transition from video rental shop attendant²² to Hollywood director. One interpretation of his success would have it that studious watching of commercial movies is adequate if not excellent preparation for the vocation of filmmaking. Tarantino famously quotes scenes from previous films in his own films, and in doing so openly, transparently blends the activities of 'using' and 'speaking' cinematic language. Here hypermediacy as an expression of our fascination with the medium itself is expressed as self conscious reprises of previously used cinematic devices.

The same kind of knowing nod to previous cinema conventions is absent from the cinema magic and science fiction of Melies. Where Melies preserved the 'secrets' of his cinematic magic tricks, current cinema, in contrast, invites audience to engage with the construction and production process of cinema, including its 'secrets' as evidenced by the proliferation of 'behind-the-scenes', 'making of', 'director's commentary' and plog²³ material produced for audiences. In doing so, audiences are invited to increase their ability to 'speak' cinematic narrative.

If film schools are to offer something more than reprise of previous cinematic narrative, mediation and remediation may present opportunities for future

²² Tarantino's dropping out of high school and job Manhattan Beach Video Archives, a movie rental store has presented a vivid alternative to attending film school.

²³ plog: blog as 'production log', that is, a blog or vlog that is a production diary which gives audiences a view into productions while they are in progress.

development.

This may take the form of aggressive remediation where an item of ‘old media’ is taken out of its previous contexts and placed into a new context. This new context may be a reconfiguration or reapplication of linear storytelling or perhaps a new approach to developing and configuring ‘360’ or cross-platform²⁴ production and distribution.

We could perceive the work of Propp (2000) and Campbell (1998) as ‘old media’ and the morphological schemas produced from them as ‘new media’—that is, templates (Vogler 1992), algorithms for procedural authorship (Murray 1997) or story generators (Lim, Tan and Wee 2001). These are examples of media that reference other media (folktales and myths), rather than external ‘reality’.

These projects are investigations of Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) that illustrate Bolter and Grusin’s case ‘that this is all *any* new technology could do—define itself in relationship to earlier technologies of representation’ (28). Propp’s *Morphology* (2000), as Wright describes it, is a representation of ‘social action’ (124). In *Transference and Transparency: Digital Technology and the Remediation of Cinema* (2005), Bolter claims popular film ‘proceeds according to formulas’ (13) while contesting newer media in the field of constructing the authentic or the real. Remediation, Bolter proposes, can be a process of transfer ‘in which the definition of the real or the authentic is transformed from one form to another.’ (14)

Bolter emphasizes the contest between film industry producers and digital media producers (of games, interactive television, World Wide Web) as rivalry in their construction of the authentic or the real.

²⁴ The terms ‘360’ and ‘cross-platform’ are temporary terminology destined for obsolescence as media devices converge. Rosen speculates on collaborative, cross-disciplinary developments between the UCLA School of Theatre, Film and Television and faculty of Science offering a possibility of a new era of live performance greatly enhanced by technology and unlike film, television or games difficult to produce pirate copies – a prospect of great interest to the small number of major media companies of the world.

Lev Manovich (2001:89) summarises Bolter and Grusin's idea of remediation as 'translating, refashioning and reforming other media, both on the level of content and form'. Propp's *Morphology* (2000), as a representation of social action, can also be subjected to remediation. If the morphology was to be explored in terms of the 'authentic' or 'real', such exploration would likely be an exploration of its veracity or relevance as a model of social action. In this regard, the purpose of revisiting or remediating Propp's *Morphology* (2000) is not primarily a pursuit of the 'real' through what Bolter and Grusin (2000) call transparent immediacy – that is, the illusion of direct experience, seemingly without interface.

Bolter and Grusin (2000) remind us, for example, that acknowledging the novel during viewing of the film version would disrupt the continuity and the illusion of immediacy and result in an instance of hypermediacy. However, some cinema works are conceptualised from the outset to involve the audience in their very contrivance (thus generating hypermediacy), such as *Groundhog Day*, *Adaptation*, *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* and the *Scream* trilogy. Construction and contrivance are made obvious; deliberate aspects of the schema are presented and explained to the audience to engage in as they view these films.

In the context of theatre production, Andy Lavender describes the effects of hypermediacy as 'producing an awareness of the constructed nature of the artwork and the presence of the media in play' (2006:56) in theatrical staging. The term hypermediacy could be applied to Brecht's (1964) alienation effect, where it could describe his strategy to inhibit immersion in immediacy by his audience.

Hypermediacy as a theatrical strategy or operation is illustrated in Lars Von Trier's film *Dogville* (2003) where simplified sets and props sketch out a simulacrum rather than a naturalistic, immersive immediacy. Diegesis in *Dogville* (2003) is obviously theatrical and mimetic and consequently it is largely an experience of hypermediacy. This is an example of hypermediacy from an audience point of view.

From the point of view of the filmmaker, the term hypermediacy can be used to describe the process of developing, shooting and assembling a cinematic artifact via the coordinated efforts of various specialists or production departments. In this

context hypermediacy could be used to refer to the strategies, concepts and procedures used to produce a cinematic artifact. Here hypermediacy can describe the hundreds or thousands of hours of production activity that finally yields a single short film or feature film. In production, hypermediacy is the configuration and construction of dramatis personae, functions, binary opposites, causal propositions using all the disciplines that combine in the hybrid that is cinema. The use of any or all of these elements is open to reconfiguration and conceptualisation at the start of every new production project in the film school.

Eco and McKee's story 'values'

Umberto Eco (1979a) provides an example of the diminished importance of linearity and causality in favour of formulating binaries, in his observation of James Bond cinema narratives. Eco proposes that these narratives are configurations of the following finite opposing characters and values:

1	Bond	M
2	Bond	Villain
3	Villain	Woman
4	Woman	Bond
5	Free World	Soviet Union
6	Great Britain	Non Anglo-Saxon Countries
7	Duty	Sacrifice
8	Cupidity	Ideals
9	Love	Death
10	Chance	Planning
11	Luxury	Discomfort
12	Excess	Moderation
13	Perversion	Innocence
14	Loyalty	Disloyalty

Eco further proposes that the first four sets of characters function to personify the rest of the values listed. The narrative operations sketched out so far are mostly embraced by Robert McKee in *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of*

Storytelling (1999). He advocates that writers undertake the following processes:

1. Attribute or inscribe ‘story values’ to selected ‘story events’.

This requires a positive or negative expression of one or more of what McKee calls ‘universal qualities of human experience’ (34). Pudovkin might express this process in terms of bringing ‘plastic forms’ to ‘plastic images’ – the difference being that ‘story event’ is an imagined action (in the mind of the writer and reader), while ‘plastic image’ is the material representation of an action (visible through the viewfinder, editing screen or cinema screen). Pudovkin’s terminology—‘plastic images’ (externally expressive units of image) and their ‘plastic forms’ (premeditated formulation of meaning)—could be correlated to the semiotic notions of the ‘sign’ and the ‘signified’. We could argue that these are combined to a degree in Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) if we accept recurring features such as the dramatis personae and magical objects as an existing body of signs with already formulated denotations and connotations. For example, ‘villain’ suggests clear denotations and connotations.

2. Express designated ‘story events’ as a series of conflicts that are designed to culminate as a positive or negative state. Such a state may be either an affirmation or a denial of a particular value (ethical, moral, political or other) that is substantially recognised and shared by the audience.

Morphology as schema

Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) can be explored as a model (schema) for processing information about changes. It can be used to learn more about ‘how certain interpretive traditions have been generated and perpetuated’ (Bordwell, *A Case for Cognitivism* 1999).

The morphology (2000) organises social ruptures (such as the missing family member, a villainous act, or a lack or insufficiency of something important) and

anxieties (the vulnerable child, pursuit by villain, and so on). In doing so it presents one example of a schema which Propp posits as common to a large sample of narratives (folk tales in this case).

During its conceptualisation every individual cinematic text is a metaphor for and/or illustration of cognitive schema in operation. Bordwell (1999) refers to cognitivist perspectives on narrative schemas:

But more striking, Mandler and her colleagues propose prototypical schemata that are characteristic of narratives. These ‘canonical stories’ consist of certain elements in a standard order: an initial description of time and place; a delineated episode that undergoes development; a development which consists of either characters’ simple reactions that trigger immediate action, or characters’ complex reaction that causes a ‘goal path’ to be initiated; and other components. This schema, with a few hierarchical branches, acts as a structured set of expectations into which the data of a given story text can be factored. Such a schema can be shown to facilitate understanding and recall of a wide number of stories. (1999)

For Bordwell (1999), the classical Hollywood narrative delegates the task of assembling events into a coherent causal whole to the spectator via a ‘canonical story’ structure, while ‘art-cinema’ narration encourages the spectator to perceive ambiguities of space, time, and causality and then to organise them.

In any case, the student of film school will in some way engage with ‘how things get organized into meaningful entities’ (McGowan 2006:3). In this regard, narrative as a schematic approach to memory and the identification of social relations can relate to a kind of ‘philosophical anthropology’, or as Ed Pluth describes, ‘an attempt to say something about what it is to be human in general’ (2007:1).

Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) can be explored as an example of what I propose to be one of the most fundamental underlying formal aspects of cinema: a linear configuration and representation of something in a state of change. Whether or not we find Propp’s taxonomy useful for every cinematic instance of a mapping and

representation of change, be it social, psychological, cultural, political or other, it presents one set of observations of the general inclination to emplot—that is, the inclination to organise ideas into causal or relational configurations.

Chapter 2: Propp applied to the viewing of narrative film. Propp, Campbell and Hollywood film: Star Wars

Units of meaning and Proppian functions

In this chapter I choose to focus on narrative coherence as a function of emplotment and propose it is of value in teaching models of narrative filmmaking craft. Indeed, I propose all student filmmakers should have access to a vivid presentation of the morphology and some examples of its expression in cinema.

In praxis this results in remediation as purely procedural replication of formulaic story and cinematic conventions will simply prove to be unsatisfying and if not boring to the filmmaker and audience.

What are the ‘units of meaning’ in cinematic production? What are attributes of these units? Is each a unit of gesture, action or event, ‘a thought or cognitive unit, a syntagmatic unit’, or a unit of rhythm? What are its dimensions? What is the material of production? We can investigate these questions using sources drawn from the professions and departments of cinematic production, ranging from independent to commercial (‘Hollywood’) practices.

If we seek to identify and describe the essential, crucial material units used in cinematic praxis, drawing on the disciplines hybridised within cinema, we may arrive at multiple, rather than singular, schema sets that might be configured in relation to each other. This is particularly appropriate within the ‘film school’ setting where conscious exploration of method and practice is a pedagogical aspiration.

Units of Meaning and Narrative Functions: Or What is a Cinematic Morpheme?²⁵

There have been numerous definitions and conceptualizations of the basic unit of cinematic construction:

gestures endowed with emotion, the shot, a thought or feeling signaled by ‘the blink of an eye’, the shot, plastic (externally expressive) images, units of subtext underlying a shot or sequence, the SNU (Thalhofer 2009)²⁶, “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” (Biro 1998:163), and so on.

A generic description the ‘shot’, or the gesture, action or event contained within it, as a ‘unit of meaning’ is limited in its usefulness. Gesture, action and event are visible units but their meaning may be explicit or implicit, overt or tacit. Propp’s (2000) project, by way of reduction, produces a set of functions which have the potential to be used as a system for designating meaning. The functions have been extrapolated into contemporary cinema practice, particularly in relation to certain genres and formats.

While Propp’s morphology has literary origins, it also has resonances in cinematic form and procedure. What I wish to emphasise here is the opportunity for applying the morphology to make conceptual ‘jumps’ between depictions of gestures, actions and events and more sophisticated units of meaning—in particular, units of meaning that can be applied in the practice of constructing specific, individual cinematic narratives.

The morphology is a potential conceptual tool that has direct practical applications. I propose that there is value in the exploration of Propp’s (2000) functions and dramatis personae as tools to define or designate units of meaning as part of the filmmaking

²⁵ A morpheme is defined as the minimal meaningful unit of a language.

²⁶ SNU: Smallest Narrative Unit, usually a video sequence or shot, as defined by Florian Thalhofer, for the Kosakov system - his computer program for the creation of database films.

process. Propp's functions, as units of meaning, may be explored, reconfigured and ultimately deconstructed to remediate the narrative elements they transmit. The practitioner of cinematic narrative is pragmatic about the use of units of meaning. Ideally the filmmaker theorises during, rather than after, practice: that is, during conceptualisation, development, pre-production, production and post-production.

While Propp's project was not specifically cinematic by nature or intention, it has provided a schema by which story (in Propp's case, the folktale) can be conceptualised as syntagmatic structure with defined syntactic components (dramatis personae and functions) for the production of cinematic narratives (films).

Cinematic units of meaning: Proppian functions and their applications

Propp's morphology (2000) was not originally formulated for the purposes of generating or constructing story. However, it has been applied as a system for describing film plot, particularly among film reviewers and film critics.

Film reviewers have referred to morphological features to encapsulate and summarise key story features. Proppian (2000) functions and dramatis personae (2000:25-65) can be translated into shorthand descriptors of plot when reviewing a specific film. This can be applied to a range of cinema genres that extend beyond 'folktale'. Proppian functions, as summarised in Chapter One, can be utilised for film review purposes for both narrative fiction and narrative nonfiction.²⁷

Edward Branigan (1992) notes Propp's interest in 'what is done' before 'who does it and how is it done'. This presents a simple starting point for the organising of plot for either narrative fiction or nonfiction.

A simple film review is often merely a summary of plot features with some broad evaluative (rather than analytical) comments on the effectiveness with which director,

²⁷ For example, Derrick Barry (2006), applies Proppian analysis in his review of Errol Morris's documentary *Fog of War* (2003)

cast and crew have interpreted and conveyed these plot features.

As film critics, we can embark upon an assessment and appraisal of the auteur's expression and reconfiguration of units of meaning into a singular work. If we correlate functions and their specifically inscribed values as the auteur's units of meaning, we can use this as a tool to discuss and appraise the individual works of an auteur. We can appraise the auteur's consistency in the application of the functions/units and consequent assembly. The functions themselves are very generalised and open to reconfiguration in their expression and contextualisation. In any individual cinematic work they can be operated on in a very literal sense or explored for their various possible figurative expressions and connotations. The binaries implied or insinuated by Proppian functions (2000) (for example, hero/villain = delineation of right/wrong, normal state/disrupted state = delineation of stasis as good/change as bad) can be criticised for forcing an audience to adopt a polarised perception of the subjects represented in the cinematic work—thus ultimately imposing a polarised position onto the audience.

Because the functions are widely recognisable in a range of literature and cinema we can appraise the auteur's decisions to utilise, question or challenge these functions. These functions may in fact exist in either or both of two locations: in the cinematic work itself (the screenplay, the interpretation of the screenplay as it appears on screen) and expectations brought to films by the audience (a three act structure, clearly defined protagonist, recognizable genre conventions, etc.).

We can also appraise the auteur's deconstructivist strategies once the constructions have been identified.

These are all examples of procedure or strategy in reading or investigating narrative product—after the fact of production. I propose, therefore, that Proppian functions can be utilised both procedurally and critically during cinematic production.

The filmmaker is intrinsically engaged with a process of construction of a linear (but generally not lineal²⁸) sequence of units of meaning. The advent of film editing

²⁸ Lineal in this instance refers to continuous, unbroken lengths.

brought the conceptualisation of montage or ‘constructive editing’. Its widespread use in cinematic practice is evidence that one of the formal aspects of cinema is bound up in accepting, appropriating or challenging the practice of formulating and assembling units of meaning. Procedurally and intellectually this is easily grasped. Any media-savvy child can now effortlessly assemble digital media clips using one of the digital video editing tools proliferating across domestic computers globally. A far more profound challenge is for student filmmakers to consciously engage in meaning-making simultaneously with their filmmaking.

The drive to seek congruencies can be linked to or expressed as a proclivity for emplotment for both filmmaker and audience. I argue that this proclivity is so widespread that it characterises much, if not the vast majority of our engagement in cinema and as such, deserves particular attention. I describe this activity of emplotment as a largely inescapable inclination to configure of fragments for the purpose of constructing plot. This preeminence of emplotment, however, does not satisfactorily account for all cinema. There is a long history in cinema of that deliberately seeks to operate without placing primary importance on plot, or indeed rational logic at all as apparent in the works of various surrealist filmmakers. cinema that is emphatically visceral or sensual or spectacular to the point of excluding plot configurations.

In his *Surrealist Manifesto (Le Manifeste du Surréalisme)*, André Breton declares ‘Surrealism, such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete *nonconformism*’ (1924). While it could be said surrealism essentially rejected emplotment as it rejected rational notions of causality, it is interesting to note the appropriation of surrealist work into mainstream cinema (such as Dali’s collaborations with Disney²⁹ and Hitchcock³⁰). Directors associated with Cinema of Sensation such as Claire Denis present work that may not be considered primarily concerned with plot, but are not makers of plot-less films. Indeed, I would argue the liminal nature of plot present in some of these works provokes audience interest if not tension, despite it not being the canonically configured dramatic tension as found in ‘central conflict theory’ as

²⁹ *Destino*, Salvador Dali (writer), Dominique Monféry (director), Baker Bloodworth, Roy Disney (producers, Disney Studios), production commenced 1945 and was completed 2003.

³⁰ *Spellbound* (1945) Angus MacPhail, Ben Hecht (writers), Alfred Hitchcock (director), David O. Selznick (producer) Salvador Dali (designer – dream sequence)

described by Ruiz (1996).

The *dramatis personae* of the morphology are defined by their plot role—that is, their role in serving the morphological functions. The morphology is a schema that can be applied to the process of emplotment, which is a primary process of configuration inherent in cinematic form.

Kuleshov's (1974) montage experiment, carried out in 1918, could be argued to be evidence of this coincidence of coherence and emplotment: the anonymous characters depicted in his shot fragments are 'emplotted', through montage, into a relationship. In this way, Propp's morphology can be characterised as a taxonomy of emplotment.³¹

Units of meaning: functions and the act of ascribing values

Kafalenos (1997) suggests: 'the act of reading a narrative includes, in addition to identifying events as they are revealed, a process of creating hypotheses about the causal relations among the revealed events and other events that may be revealed as one continues to read' (1997:470)

While Kuleshov's (1974) experiment illustrates our inclination to seek coherence when presented with fragments, Propp's morphology (2000) can be used to evidence and illustrate our inclination to also ascribe positive or negative values to elements within story. McKee (1999) actually proposes methodical assignation of positive-negative binaries to every scene in the process of writing the screenplay. The reductive process that culminates in Propp's morphology (2000) provides sharply defined binaries such as: lacking and completeness, order and disruption, villainy and heroism, prohibition and violation.

Propp's (2000) list of possible characters/players in a scenario (the *dramatis personae*)

³¹ Albeit from a limited cultural/geographic sample. This sample has been expanded by other morphological studies in other parts of the world.

is largely defined in terms of their helping or hindering the hero. Configured at the centre of the story, protagonist–antagonist is one of a number of binaries intrinsic to Propp’s schema. The ascribing of positive or negative values to each character is fundamental to his or her role or function, as Propp’s names for key figures suggest. These simplistic roles are recognisable in a number of contemporary cinema genres, as are the following functions, which are instantly recognisable as the basic ‘plot points’ of the three-act screenplay paradigm³² that is at the centre of Hollywood cinema production practice:

- ‘The initial situation’ (Propp 119) = Act One or ‘the set up’ (Field *Screenplay*)
- ‘The preparatory section’ (Propp 121) = ‘plot point one’ (Field *Screenplay*)
- ‘The complication’ (Propp 122) = Act Two (Field *Screenplay*)
- ‘Beginning of second move’ (Propp 125) and ‘Continuation of second move’ (Propp 126) = Act Three (Field *Screenplay*)

‘The initial situation’ (Propp 2000) = Act One or ‘the set up’ (Field 1979)

Here a diegetic space is formulated to signal a ‘normal’ state, the initial place and relatively undisturbed state of being for the hero/protagonist. While typically this would be presented as the primary ‘kingdom’ of a specific folktale it could be spatialised in any way within a cinematic representation. The counterparts to these folktale ‘kingdoms’ could be said to have developed into the various cinema genres.

In this part of the folktale/Hollywood screenplay there may be the signs of potential change to come to the future hero/protagonist’s situation: these may take the form of forewarnings, prophecies, prayers, rivalries, a potential false hero, or the mischievousness of a future hero.

‘The preparatory section’ (Propp 2000) = ‘plot point one’ (Field 1979)

Propp observes a pivotal action or event which occurs within the folktale that has

³² This screenplay paradigm is outlined in Syd Field’s influential 1979 work on writing for ‘Hollywood’ feature film, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* 1979.

consequences for its protagonist/hero-to-be, such as: an interdiction violated, an absention, or the first appearance of the villain. This is paralleled in Syd Field's (1979) notion of 'plot point one': the event that initiates an irreversible series of actions/events which constitute the screenplay. Instrumental to this function of the folktale is the designation of a 'misfortune' or 'lack'.

'The complication' (Propp 2000) = Act Two (Field 1979)

Propp's 'complication' and 'donors' can be related to Field's Act Two. Here the complications for the hero/protagonist typically escalate as the folktale/screenplay moves towards the major conflict within the plot, involving characters additional to the hero and villain. This culminates in struggle and victory over the villain (but not the total annihilation of the villain or his influence) and over the misfortune or lack that was the original catalyst for the actions and events driving the folktale/screenplay.

What Field proposes as 'Plot Point Two' is an unexpected action or consequence of the major conflict just experienced by the hero/protagonist.

For Propp, what commonly follows this conflict for the hero is pursuit by the villain (and/or his agents), rescue and subsequent downfall of the villain.

'Beginning of second move' (Propp 2000) and 'Continuation of second move' (Propp 2000) = Act Three (Field 1979)

For Propp, Act Three entails challenges, complications and transfigurations to which the hero is subject on his/her return to the diegetic space or 'kingdom' where the tale commenced.

Propp's morphology and plot-making

The ease with which the morphology and the three-act structure can be merged suggests a correlation between them. Chandler Harriss (2008) observes the integration of Russian Formalist methods into film and television scriptwriting as most 'successful' when applied to genre. Genre, he suggests, is suited to recurring designs, particularly where procedural narrative is married to procedural attributes of characters like police, detectives and forensic scientists.

I argue that the morphology is more malleable and subject to remediation. For example, Propp's (2000) functions of 'misfortune' and 'lack' are central to the folktale as catalyst for plot. They are integral to the framework which facilitates the change that must be enacted to restore order to the disrupted, diegetic world of the tale. What constitutes 'misfortune' or 'lack' is subject to interpretation, so these are highly amorphous once removed from the context of Russian folktales. 'Misfortune' and 'lack' can be explored and redefined without necessarily conforming to their examples in Propp's sample of Russian folk tales. The two functions of 'misfortune' or 'lack' can be mapped across the three- or four-act paradigms of Hollywood screenplay writing. The function 'misfortune' or 'lack' could also be considered as the primary function in the telling of television news stories in a very literal sense. These same functions could also be applied to other nonfiction forms such as documentary, particularly where dramatic structure is schematised much like fiction works. In this regard, Michael Rabiger (1998:117-119) proposes plot construction as part of documentary praxis. His 'documentary proposal helper' is a checklist that invites the documentary maker to emplot the 'real' subjects of documentary, such that documentary practitioners formulate 'characters', 'action sequences', 'conflict' and 'resolution'.

For documentary practitioners like Rabiger (1998), binaries, intrinsic and unquestioned in Propp's folktales (such as lack/liquidation of lack, victim/villain or hero/villain), should be made overt in purpose and discourse.

For Rabiger (1998) and others who see documentary as a catalyst for social change,

the depiction of binaries can serve a discursive purpose: to clearly identify two possibilities, and present one as preferable.

McKee (1999) and writers who share his views propose that the formulation of binaries is a fundamental process in story construction. Binaries as essential features of story are explored by Umberto Eco in his analysis of James Bond films (1979a). As seen in Chapter 1, Eco presents the plots of these films as a series of binaries: for example, Bond/M, Bond/Villain, Bond/Woman, Free world/Soviet Union, and Luxury/Discomfort.

Form, structure and modes of production

In examining cinema production methods, I will look at some of the key practices in what Pudovkin (2007) referred to as ‘collective’³³ filmmaking rather than ‘artisan’ filmmaking. The term collective has political connotations that can refer to a group working cooperatively and in a non-hierarchical manner. However, in this context we understand it to mean a group of people working under the direction of one—‘the director’. Both ‘Hollywood’ and independent production are instances of ‘collective’ filmmaking practice.

A significant factor in all modes of production is the division of tasks into roles and departments and as the scale of production increases these become more specialised. We can investigate the methods by which each delegated specialisation operates on their ‘plastic material’. We can investigate the ‘gestalt’ of each production via its integral procedures and their respective formal methods. This opens discussion on the praxis of each production department and its role in the hypermediacy of cinematic work.

In collective production, the director engages with specialists to form a range of possible coherent working relationships. The sophistication of these relationships and methodologies continues to develop. Consider Pudovkin’s (2007) critique of the advent of synchronised film sound below (another instance of a tendency toward *immediacy* of the medium). After dismissing synchronised dialogue and sound effects as a temporary curiosity, he conceives the future of film sound as a Formalist project:

I visualize a film in which sounds and human speech are wedded to the visual images on the screen in the same way as that in which two or more melodies can be combined in an orchestra. The sound will correspond to the film in the same way as the orchestra corresponds to the film today. The only difference from the method of today is that the director will have the control of the sound in his own hands, and not in the hands of the

³³ A group of people working under the direction of one.

conductor of the orchestra. (2007:143)

We could speculate on the ‘plastic forms’ that would comprise the material of these ‘melodies’ referred to by Pudovkin (2007). While Pudovkin imagines a future where he, as director, will be the ‘composer’ at the centre of this orchestration, this role, in the contemporary context, can perhaps be better described as the domain of post-production practice. In the contemporary environment digital production tools increasingly facilitate workflow between previously discrete workplaces using different tools and media. In the past, the visual image was recorded onto film and sound was recorded onto magnetic tape, in different technical facilities, whereas now metadata facilitates a cross-flow between camera, visual effects and sound design.

Formalism and the formal aspects of cinema

The movie takes us ‘from the world of sequence and connections into the world of creative configuration and structure. The message of the movie medium is that of transition from lineal³⁴ connections to configurations’.” (McLuhan 1994:12).

We can generalize that the vast majority of cinematic works with some form of story involve a sequencing and configuring of fragments. This has been so since the advent of film editing. The informed cinema producer/director and/or film school student can benefit from exploring other sources or expressions of cinema’s hybrid components. Literature and theatre can be investigated as sources of plastic (externally expressive) images. To investigate literature and theatre in this context, it may be valuable to refer to dramaturgical praxis³⁵ in relation to cinema production. This praxis includes the literary operations of writing, adaptation, editing, script doctoring, scene analysis,

³⁴ Lineal in this instance refers to continuous, unbroken lengths.

³⁵ This is a reference to the interplay of literary and dramatic operations that are integrated into film production practice, rather than a reference to the specific role of dramaturgy as found in theatre practice. Dramaturgy is generally associated with theatre and fiction, but it could be applied to the production of nonfiction and documentary forms that depend substantially on dramatic expression and structure (e.g. *The War Game* (1965) and *Culloden* (1965) directed by Peter Watkins). Contemporary applications of dramaturgy can include technical and production strategies, particularly in hybridised contexts (i.e. involving text/performance/visual and sonic media).

rehearsal and performance. Dramaturgist Melanie Beddie summarises its pedagogical potential:

Dramaturgy could be considered to be the midwife between theory and practice. It provides a process of bringing performance ideas into a concrete form, and it can also allow for the essential luxury of contemplation and evaluation of both process and product. (Beddie 2002:4)

Perhaps ultimately the value of integrating Formalist strategies in learning and teaching in the film school context relates to becoming aware of the functions as contrivances or tropes in cinematic use.

Propp, Campbell and *Star Wars*

The practice of adapting existing stories for retelling as cinematic narratives has been present since the early stages of cinema history. Morphological operations are common to cinema practice as frequently illustrated by the portability of story configurations, rather than stories themselves, as the plastic material of cinema.

One of the most notable examples of this in the film industry is *Star Wars (Episode IV: A New Hope 1977)*. Written, directed and produced by George Lucas, the original feature film has been substantially widely attributed to two sources: the Akira Kurosawa film *Hidden Fortress* (1958), and the morphological schemas formulated by Joseph Campbell in his influential book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1998). These sources provided the narrative material that contributed directly to the formulation of the dramatis personae and functions elaborated upon and illustrated in the film.

In his role as a film production company story analyst, responding to the enormous financial success of this first *Star Wars* film (*Episode IV: A New Hope* 1977), Christopher Vogler created an example of procedural writing by applying Campbell's (1998) schema to the dominant structural schema of Hollywood movies: the three-act

screenplay paradigm. At first, Vogler wrote a memo—“A Practical Guide to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*”—for his employer the Walt Disney Company, describing Campbell’s work as ‘useful story technology’ (5). Vogler later expanded this into book form in *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (1992).

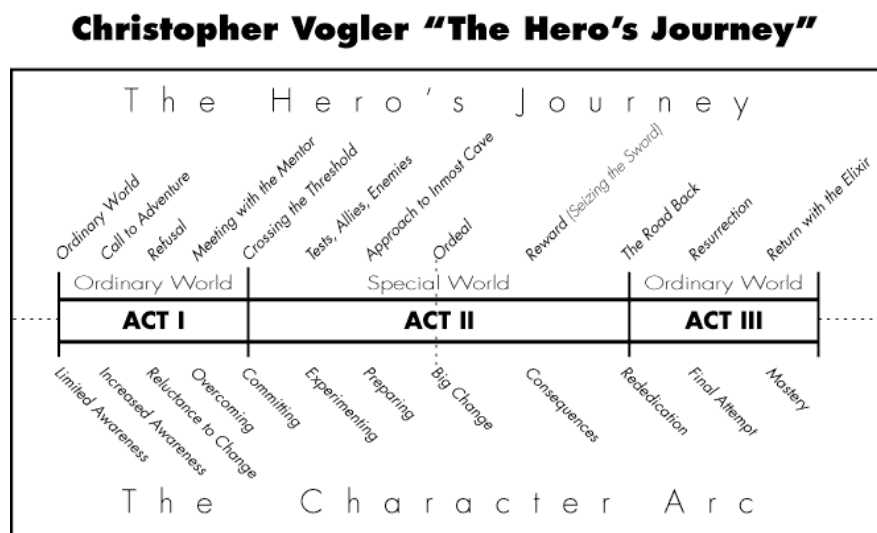


Figure 2: Vogler's linear representation of Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*

In Hollywood, Vogler’s (1992) reiteration of Campbell’s journey structure was taken as a reaffirmation that ‘screenplays are structure’ (Goldman 1983:195). Vogler’s own encounters with Campbell while at film school provided him with ‘the secret code of story’ (4), which for Vogler illuminated the success of the first *Star Wars* (1977) film.³⁶

This morphological approach to screenplay construction recalls David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompsons (1985) description of the ‘Fordist’ principles of industrial organisation of film production in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. For Vogler and his supporters,³⁷ these morphological specifications form a part of the specifications for manufacture. The

³⁶ Vogler refers to the financial success of the film as expressed through a significant number of repeated viewings by its audience.

³⁷ Stuart Voytilla echoes Vogler on this point in *Myth and the Movies: Discovering the Mythic Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films*.

‘plastic forms’,³⁸ to use Pudovkin’s (2007) terminology, have been given an assembly line.

The morphology provides ‘plastic images’ (externally expressive units of image) and their ‘plastic forms’ (premeditated formulation of meaning), as Pudovkin (2007) refers to them. The modularity of morphemes as plastic forms in cinema is evident in highly defined genres.

In *Star Wars* (1977), the plastic forms have already been ‘imported’ into a cinematic writing environment. George Lucas has acted as a direct conduit for these morphological functions and the discourse inherent in them—specifically the monomythic metanarrative advocated by Campbell (2000). The representation of dramatis personae and functions in *Star Wars* (1977) is intact and recognisable according to the Proppian taxonomy. This is also reflected in the production design which, despite the futuristic setting, presents a vision evocative of medieval fantasy world in which many of the plastic images/signs observed in the folktales originally studied by Propp, such as swords/sabres, knights, and a princess are preserved.

I present a detailed Proppian analysis of *Star Wars* (1977) by arranging each scene of this film alongside the most appropriate morphological function in tabular form (see Appendix 1). This facilitates review of specific film scenes to test the applicability of Proppian functions to the plot of this film. Figure 3 below shows a screen snapshot of an extract from this Proppian table. In the left hand portion of this image Propp’s functions are summarised. Each scene from *Star Wars* (1977) has been individually aligned with a Proppian function. In this process the typical sequential order of functions as presented by Propp has been preserved and scenes from *Star Wars* (1977) have been appropriately positioned alongside them.

The green portions of the table in Figure 3 display subcategories of functions along with illustrative examples from Alexander Afanasyev’s collection of wonder tales *Narodnye Russkie Skazki* (1855), as studied by Propp (2000).

³⁸ That is, the premeditated formulations of meaning.

This chart (Appendix 1) incorporates playable movie files to view the individual scenes as cinematic ‘units of material’ in *Star Wars* (1977). This process of cross-referencing each scene in *Star Wars* (1977) with a Proppian function (2000) is a way of scrutinizing the extent of the film’s compatibility with Propp’s morphology (2000). The ability to review the scenes and reorder their sequence facilitates examination of the nature of these narrative units. It also presents material suitable for group viewing, analysis and discussion on the nature of the component units of story and the means by which their meaning is conveyed. This also makes visible how the various texts (performance, mise en scène, cinematography, sound, music, etc) have been combined as cinematic text in relation to Propp’s functions.

story / tale order : Propp alignec			
			
	Luke learns that his father went to war.	Uncle says Luke must stay and work on farm	Luke follows R2D2 into desert
	β_1 – father gone to war	γ = told not to leave family farm	δ = enters desert looking for R2D
FUNCTIONS			
as observed in folktales by Propp			
	1	2	3
	I	II	III
summary (relates to essence)	family member leaves	hero is told <u>not</u> to do something	interdiction violated
designation (abbrev. definition)	absentation	interdiction (prohibition)	violation
conventional sign (given by Propp)	β	γ	δ
	b	g	d
examples and variations	β_1	do <u>not</u> look at... do <u>not</u> go to...	hero <u>does</u> go / look / do
or subclasses	adults: to work, to business, to war	inverted interdiction - a command	he/she/they are told to do something
	β_2	eg: bring breakfast out into field	II & III may be paired
	death of parents	eg: take your brother with you to the woods	eg: Tsar's daughters were late returning home
	β_3		
	children: go visiting, picking berries, fishing		

Figure 3: Detail from Proppian analysis of *Star Wars* (1977)—see Appendix 1.

This analysis presents evidence that plot functions and scenes in this particular film can be easily cross-referenced with Propp’s morphological functions (2000). It also shows deviations from the linear sequencing of the functions Propp claimed was typical of the body of tales he examined. However, this variation does not significantly disrupt recognition of the plot grammar in *Star Wars* (1977) as based on Propp’s morphology (2000). The causal relations are recognisable as minor

reconfigurations in Propp's sequential arrangement of functions.

The currency and relevance of Propp's work can be demonstrated when applied to cinematic works such as *Star Wars* (1977), where the morphology can not only be observed to be intact, but has in fact been deliberately applied (by way of conscious homage to Joseph Campbell) to the development and construction of the finished product. This provides sufficient grounds to present it as a case study for discussion in a film school setting. The units of meaning in this cinematic narrative can be directly charted to Proppian functions and dramatis personae. The binaries and their emotional 'charge', as described by Propp, are not only traceable, but are also methodically preserved in this production (see Appendix 1: Where Proppian functions are illustrated by excerpts of *Star Wars* in table form). Characters, actions and depictions of diegetic space are familiar Proppian formulations. The causalities and associations expressed through the morphology are present syntactically in the film. The compatibility of sequence and linearity of both the morphology and *Star Wars* are very apparent.

As a consequence of the enormous financial success of *Star Wars* (1977) it became the basis of many sequels and an extensive marketing franchise that built upon previous successes achieved through the popularity of the *Star Wars* saga.

Vogler's (1992) use of *Star Wars* (1977) as a plot structure case study for the film industry suggests it is suitable as a case study in the film school context, where it can be used to illustrate an historic example of background knowledge that student filmmakers should be acquainted with.

Morphology and genre

Fantasy genre films are obvious remediations of folktale and myth. Umberto Eco provides a list of binaries that he observes as essential to James Bond narratives (see Chapter 1). These binary oppositions are also readily applicable to a number of ‘special agent’ franchises, such as the ‘Bourne’ films (*The Bourne Identity* 2002, *The Bourne Supremacy* 2004 and *The Bourne Ultimatum* 2007).

While it might be argued that the Proppian morphology is strictly limited to particular genres (action oriented genres such as the western, war film, adventures), independent filmmakers have demonstrated inventive reconfigurations of the morphology. In Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (writers: Kaufman, Gondry, Director: Gondry 2004) we see a hybrid romance as adventure / science fiction genre in which formulations of Proppian dramatis personae and functions are playfully applied to underpin the dramatic structure and shape central theme:

Within the first minutes this film our hero expresses a Proppian ‘lack’: a partner, and the lack of ability to seek out a partner. The protagonist Joel declares: ‘If only I could meet someone new...my chances...are somewhat diminished... seeing I’m incapable of making eye contact with a woman I don’t know’. His predicament presents a rupture substantial enough to prevent him functioning in his ‘normal’ world. He phones his workplace to announce his absence due to illness but this conceals his real torment: the absence of his would be partner, Clementine. Proppian functions unfold through contemporary representations of Propp’s dramatis personae presented in novel manner. In the following summary I include Propp’s ‘conventional sign’/ shorthand for each function.

Villainy first manifests in typical Proppian form as ‘villain attempts reconnaissance’ (⊕): members of ‘Lacuna Inc.’ keep Joel under surveillance from their van. Joel and Clementine submit to the deception that Lacuna Inc. will help them, resulting in their ‘complicity’ (⊖). Discovery of the villainy that is done does not happen immediately

because the villain, head of Lacuna Inc. Dr. Howard Mierzwiak, has committed ‘trickery’ (η) by offering a supposedly helpful psychological ‘pain relief’ service: partial memory erasure. The erasure process itself, we discover, is abduction by memory removal. Clementine is abducted from Joel by Howard and Lacuna Inc. (A_2) This villainy results in a very specific ‘lack’: the love of the princess, Clementine (α_4) and, Howard informs us, minor brain damage, that is ‘bodily damage’ (A_6). Further villainy and trickery (η) are committed when Lacuna employee, Patrick, commits identity fraud using memories gleaned from Joel to seduce Clementine. Here the ‘magical means’ (η_2) employed in trickery illustrate Günay’s point that contemporary folk tales can substitute ‘technology’ for ‘magic’. (1994) When Joel realizes the nature of the abduction in which he has been unwittingly complicit, he assumes the role of ‘hero as seeker’ (B), searching for the kidnapped girl. This search is depicted as ‘transference between two kingdoms’ in this case manifested as a ‘means of communication’ (G_5) between past and present. Joel travels back and forth between present moments and various memories to locate his ‘princess’ Clementine as the villains, Howard and the staff of Lacuna Inc., attempt to remove her permanently (from Joel’s memory). Joel seizes back Clementine by seizing on the memory of her. This becomes a ‘struggle’ between Joel (hero) and Howard (villain) where the hero ‘wins by cleverness’ (H_2). This results in ‘pursuit’ by the villain, whereby Howard tries to use his mastery of his technological/magical memory-erasing device to regain possession of Clementine. It is an ‘attack on the hero’s refuge’ (Pr_7) as Howard invades Joel’s mind in order to re-capture Clementine. Joel ‘saves himself’ and his princess, Clementine from this pursuit and attack by ‘transformation’. This is a rescue (R_6). In the course of this villainy, Howard is caught in a compromising situation that exposes his dubious morality to his own wife and so the ‘villain’ is punished (U) by compromised marriage.

For Joel and Clementine there is the possibility of ‘wedding’ and the resumed relationship approximating a Proppian ‘resumed marriage’ as ‘result of quest’ (W_2).

The novelty, energy and the what Ruiz might call ‘athletic fiction’ (1996:14) of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) Kaufman and Gondry’s plot substantially utilizes Proppian functions as a source of emotional sense, flow, continuity, empathy and ultimately a recognizable structure or topos against which the

potentially chaotic actions are counterpointed.

Movement backwards and forwards through time in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) serves the dual functions of retardation of story to generate interest in its puzzle of its relationships and causalities while also structuring verisimilitude between plot the depiction of the protagonists' emotional states for purposes of empathy. The plot is a case study for utilizing the Proppian morphology.

If the student filmmaker hopes to engage audiences within the gamut of commercial cinema (whether that be mainstream or the independent fringes of mainstream) there is a strong argument for film school to encourage the ability to enter into a kind of dialogue with audience; that is, an understanding, which proceeds on the assumption of shared preexisting expectations of narrative. In this sense the filmmaker and audience are part of an ongoing remediation in which previous narrative media that have lost their initial immediacy are now subject to refashioning. Because schemas such as Propp's morphology and Campbell's hero's journey are widely accessible and widely referred to, both audience and filmmaker are aware of them as media objects ready to be addressed in new stories and storytelling strategies. For audience and filmmaker they now prevent a certain innocence and sense of immediacy. Instead they bring about an immersion into familiar conventions that are often genre-specific iterations of existing schemas.

This immersion into the opaque hypermediacy of existing story schemas such as Propp's morphology means ongoing remediation for audience and filmmaker. Such remediation might even lead to new expressions of transparent immediacy. We might say the immediacy we may have experienced as a child hearing for the first time a vivid cautionary folk tale increasingly diminishes as our sophistication grows. However, as folklorist Dégh (1994) points out, folk tales constantly revisit us in various contemporary guises, including entertainment, advertising and news narratives. Dégh (1994) quotes Hermann Bausinger: 'folklore can persist *only* in its function... *variability* is the essence of its existence.' (1980:48). Bausinger's observation can be applied to industrial filmmaking where there is a constant search for new product that presents as familiar yet novel (or function with variability).

Filmmaker and audience are increasingly familiar and knowing of cinematic narrative conventions that act as both shorthand allowing greater economy of narrative and a kind of ‘game’ of narrative expectations between filmmaker and audience. It is this constant variability in expectation that is engaged in ongoing mutations of familiar genres as well as explorations of liminal narratives.

***Star Wars* presented as Proppian table ‘in the classroom’**

The morphology, presented as a table (Appendix One) illustrated by specific films, in this case *Star Wars* (1977), is offered as a discussion trigger. More specifically it is presented as background to three key questions or topics: Firstly, to gauge class participants’ familiarity with the morphology and its conceptualization. Secondly, to provide a vivid, detailed illustration of the precision with which it can be seen to operate with outside of folk tales and literary forms. This provides an opportunity to discuss the notion that each scene in a film can be consciously designed to fulfill a specific function with great precision. Thirdly, it can be used an opportunity to invite responses to the morphology in the context of filmmaking practice.

This presentation of the morphology evokes a range of responses. On the question of students’ familiarity of Propp’s *Morphology* (2000), a group of students may be sharply divided. Some students are surprised to find such a schema exists. Some indicate awareness that a schema or formula of some type might be or has been applied to *Star Wars* (1977). Some of these students may be aware of a link between Joseph Campbell and George Lucas. Some will be aware of a correlation between ‘the hero’s journey’ and the notion of ‘character arc’ and the idea that a screenplay can be organized around this as a type of skeleton. Some may show awareness or comprehension of the workings of the morphology but not a degree of mastery that they can demonstrate when applied to filmmaking practice.

Where Proppian functions and dramatis personae are illustrated by corresponding cinematic narrative units, that is fragments of film (whether that be *Star Wars* or another film), the cinematic means of expression become very tangible and clear.

Visual composition (cinematography), production design, mise en scene, soundtrack, actor’s gesture and inflection are all available for scrutiny. The work of each department or specialist craft of production can be analyzed in terms of the narremes

it contributes. This can be a useful trigger for discussion of contributions and collaborations between cinematic craft areas. Different production strategies can be compared in very specific comparison of narremes between equivalent functions and *dramatis personae*. This facilitates cross-genre comparisons of narrative design in a very specific manner.

Students' responses to the morphology, for its potential in generating or shaping material for filmmaking, varies greatly. There is enthusiasm from those previously unaware of the morphology's existence and are stimulated by the possibility that offers structural strategies, including an existing plot 'shorthand'. There scepticism or disinterest from those hoping to create a unique work or those who confuse the point of the exercise with the notion that *Star Wars* (1977) is being suggested as template for reiterations of itself.

Ultimately the exercise is intended to stimulate a course of methodical investigation of plot structures and narremes or morphemes that, in the process, may trigger innovative thinking in individual film projects.

NOTE: Appendix 1 (*Star Wars* 1977 analysis). This table exists on the accompanying disk is viewable with Microsoft Excel software, and for legibility is best viewed at magnifications between 75% and 150% 'zoom' settings.

Chapter 3: Propp applied to the making of independent film: Story ‘generation’, story shaping, in *Snow*

In this chapter I will make reference to the production of the independent short film *Snow* (2005), written and directed by film school student Dustin Feneley. My intention is to draw on my involvement in the development and production of this film in order to reflect and extrapolate on the possible use of Propp’s morphology as a resource within the film school. I argue that film school students, and staff, should be familiar with existing schemas of plot as part of the body of knowledge drawn upon for narrative and creative decision making in film production, regardless of whether it conforms to a ‘Hollywood’ assembly process or challenges mainstream narrative.

We can revisit Propp’s morphology (2000) when addressing Eco’s (1979b) notion of the sharing of ‘private codes and ideological biases of the sender’ (the film’s ‘authors’) and the ‘private codes and ideological biases of the addressee’ (the audience). The prevalence of Proppian functions and dramatis personae evident in a range of contemporary media (as observed by Gaines 2002, Dégh 1994, Harriss 2008,) provides grounds for speculation that author and reader may draw on Proppian notions as a body of ‘knowledge’ shared between ‘sender’ and ‘addressee’ (Eco 1979b). The definition of Proppian morphology (2000) as ‘knowledge’ is disputable, but the morphology stands as a recognisable set of binary configurations or reference points.

In *Reading Narrative Causalities*, Kafalenos (2006:5) revisits Propp’s thirty-one functions and revises them by selecting the ten she identifies as recurring in narratives across various periods and genres. Echoing Todorov’s (1977) description of equilibrium and disequilibrium as central to the grammar of narrative, Kafalenos says functions ‘represent events that change a prevailing situation and initiate a new situation’ (2006:7).

Ten functions as adapted by Kafalenos:

- A** (or **a**) destabilising event (or reevaluation that reveals instability)
- B** request that someone alleviate **A** (or **a**)
- C** decision by **C**-actant to attempt to alleviate **A** (or **a**)
(The **C**-actant is the character who performs function **C**)
- C'** **C**-actant's initial act to alleviate **A** (or **a**)
- D** **C**-actant is tested
- E** **C**-actant responds to test
- F** **C**-actant acquires empowerment
- G** **C**-actant arrives at the place, or time, for **H**
- H** **C**-actant's primary action to alleviate **A** (or **a**)
- I** (or **I neg**) success (or failure) of **H**

Kafalenos explains her schema:

A function is a position in a causal sequence. The ten functions locate positions (sites, stages) along a path that leads from the disruption of an equilibrium to a new equilibrium. A complete sequence—from the onset of imbalance to its resolution—will include all five key functions (A, C, C', H, I) and may include any or all of the five additional functions (B, D, E, F, G).

Kafalenos (2006) notes that Propp (2000) makes no attempt to investigate *who* defines the significance and consequences of the act in any of the functions. Propp's definition of a function as 'an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action' (2000:21) and 'defined according to its consequences' is left unexplained and unqualified. In this sense, Propp's omission of any inquiry into how 'significance' and 'consequence' are determined is highly problematic.

However, for the student developing a concept or story, critiquing Propp's methodology is not a primary concern. So Kafalenos's (2006) more cautious approach to an actantial paradigm, in which 'villainy' and 'lack' are replaced by 'change in a

prevailing situation', is perhaps less useful for its understatement of dramatic potential. Kafalenos's 'change in a prevailing situation' neither explicitly nor implicitly suggests an important, urgent or significant change.

Having removed Propp's inscriptions of unqualified value judgments into many of the functions, Kafalenos (2006) offers a more 'neutral' set of functions. After reviewing Propp's 'signifieds' from a poststructuralist perspective, Kafalenos (2006) renders the functions into an ideologically less problematic schema. However, it can also be said that she has surgically removed 'the voice of concern, fear, daydream, and hope' (1994:2) that enjoys blatant expression in folktales, fairy tales and folklore, and in doing so has lost some of the potential of schemas such as Propp's to be used as catalysts for creating drama.

Propp's *Morphology* (2000) is problematic if applied as a schema of causality because it encourages attribution of causal relationships by way of plot syntax and grammar rather than any rigorous analysis of causality. The *Morphology* (2000) posits binaries that might be tempting to treat as causal simply by way of habitual binary relationships, such as change or rupture being a consequence of 'villainy'. The underlying notion here is that negative developments are naturally attributable to another party that is held responsible for villainy. More simply, the *Morphology* (2000) ritualises blame through plot, such that trouble is the result of the action of an 'outsider', someone to be demonised.

While Kafalenos (2006) understandably removes some of the more controversial facets of Propp's morphology (2000), such as its potential as a schema of blame, her reinterpretations of functions are consequently less provocative and/or meaningful in dramatic terms. The functions as rendered by Kafalenos (2006) appear far less interesting to storytellers.

Proppian functions are intrinsically problematic in so far as they represent both the shortcomings and attractions of linear thinking. They invite the use of plot to contextualise events in order to make some sense of them, but at the same time remind us of the temptation awaiting both storytellers and audiences to categorise or stereotype people and their actions.

Peter Brooks comments on the attraction of linear arrangement of plot for the storyteller in *Reading for the Plot* :

Plot ... is the logic and dynamic of narrative, and narrative itself a form of understanding and explanation. (1984:10)

Brooks (1984) offers an invitingly simple summary of the storyteller's challenge in formulating and designing plot: to create a mental construct of 'what really happened'. For Brooks, plot presents a mechanism for reflecting on the significance and meaning of story events (*fabula* or *récit*), with temporal arrangement (*sjuzhet* or *discours*) an opportunity to order and juxtapose observations and ideas.

The shortcomings of Proppian functions can be summarised in terms of their working as ideological mechanisms for imposing meaning. The whole morphology can be construed as a ritualised sequence of order–rupture–return to order, and a closed text that imposes specific discourse.

One of the most prominent instances of what is problematic in the *Morphology* is evident in the function of 'villainy'. It is problematic because it has the potential to insinuate the existence of an 'us and them' binary where the 'other' can be defined as the excluded and the malevolent, to be blamed for any given misfortune. Propp's (2000) examples of 'villainy' that he drew from folktales range from the literal and physical 'attack' and 'abduction' to the more tenuous and ambiguous subcategories of 'seizure of magical object', 'spoilt crops', 'plunder', 'disappearance of family member', 'casts spell', 'effects substitution' and 'declares war'. This taxonomy of villainy is clearly subject to metaphor and interpretation.

This may be deemed a flaw if we expect the morphology to function as an empirical instrument. However, once we accept it as a schema that is flexible and adaptable we can use it to question and review our own assumptions as we build story and formulate plot. For example, where the morphology signals 'villainy', invoking blame and need for punishment, we can recognise the potential and possible temptation to apply this Proppian function and choose instead to interrogate the notions associated

with villainy and the inclination to lay blame. Applying this logic we can take ‘villainy’ as a starting point for the exploration of demonisation (Propp observed that villainy manifests through witches, dragons etc.) and stereotyping. In this sense the morphology can be used as a reference schema prior to examining the inclination to apply certain functions in more detail. That some of the functions are questionable, perhaps even inflammatory, means they are emotionally, ideologically and dramatically charged.

Using descriptors that are limited in or devoid of emotion Kafalenos (2006) creates a causal schema which is perhaps as much suited to a statistical application as a dramatic application, whereas Propp (2000) has used emotive, action-oriented descriptors when naming functions. (These include: lack, desire, misfortune, home, hero, search, violation, villain, victim, difficulty, donor, magical agent, test, interrogation, request for mercy, request for freedom, request for division, attempted annihilation, proposal for exchange, skirmish, find, sale, seizure, offer, deception, enemy, combat, pursuit, rescue, defeat, falsity, recognition, punishment, marriage, ascension.)

This emphasis on action perhaps has given rise to the idea that the morphology is strictly limited to ‘high-action’ genres, an overly restrictive interpretation I review later the ‘relationship’ film *Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind* (2004) as a case study. Perhaps sometimes overlooked in theory, the practice of actors’ work is largely a process of illuminating actions and discovering the nuances of these actions. Propp’s morphology (2000) as a lexicon of sememes (embedded in actions) is not necessarily restricted to externalized larger-than-life action that characterizes conventional adventure, western, crime, war genres.

These suggested descriptors evoke vivid, emotionally charged predicaments, and as a consequence may generate more dramatic plot formations. We can attempt to revisit these emotionally charged functions when ruminating upon a single mental image and its possible place within a story structure as a part of story creation and development.

In the case of *Snow* (2005) the story and plot were preceded by a germ of a story idea. Writer/director Feneley’s mental image of a boy in the snow with a frozen rabbit was

developed into a film. In situations where an image is used as a starting point for developing a new story, one possible strategy is to ‘illuminate the underlying emotions’ (Biró 1998:163) of it before exploring possible contexts for it. Biró (1998) encourages such a process, where images or ideas are emotionally charged gestures that can be utilized as ‘triggers’ for narrative extrapolation. She suggests exploring the place such an image might occupy in relation to an end of a story, before extrapolating a possible start to the same story so ‘beginning and ending are like twins, inseparable, securing the supporting pillars of a building.’ (1998:157) In order to form a ‘meaningful sentence’ (2008b:103) Biró suggests seeking out some kind of ‘closure’ that might relate to the single image, as ‘close attention requires some form of restriction.’ (1998:1). At this point Biró, who has also declared a dislike of ‘dogma of structure’ as insisted upon in the Hollywood three-act paradigm, proposes structural strategies) such ‘closure’, beginnings and sometimes fairy tales as ‘archetypal tales’ (1998) as potential navigation points for developing screen stories.

In the case of Feneley’s ‘boy with a frozen rabbit’ image we can apply Biró’s procedure of exploring possible closure then story beginning within which this single image can be placed. Alternatively, or in tandem with this procedure, we can use archetypal or morphological instruments to look at such images.

We can start exploring possible resonances or synergies between this emotionally charged image and Proppian functions. We can ask a variety of types of questions, ranging in complexity. If this boy existed within a tale, what role might he occupy as *dramatis personae*? To what extent does he fit (or not fit) a typical categorization? Are there paradoxes or contradictions in the employment of characters in this tale? Do characters in the story inhabit their own liminal or disintegrating narratives?

Using Propp’s functions as a sort of menu we could attempt to allocate them to the image of ‘boy and frozen rabbit’. Regarding Proppian *dramatis personae*, if we assume the boy is to be a key character within a narrative we can ask: is the boy a hero, victim or villain? Propp’s definition of folktale ‘hero’ takes three primary forms: hero as seeker who must find and save a victim; or hero who must seek out a significant object that will bring about a positive change; or the hero as a victim who must overcome a predicament.

While Kafalenos (2006) understandably removes some of the more controversial facets of Propp's morphology (2000), such as its potential as a schema of blame, her reinterpretations of functions are consequently less provocative or meaningful in dramatic terms. Functions as rendered by Kafalenos (2006) appear, as I have mentioned, far less interesting to storytellers.

One means by which I explore applications of Propp's *Morphology* (2000) in a film school context is by the use of Propp's *Morphology* (2000) in table form. This allows insertion of footage or images from any film to be arranged visually next to Proppian functions. I carried out a Proppian analysis of *Star Wars* (1977) in the previous chapter using such a table arrangement (see Appendix 1). The horizontal axis shows the complete set of functions as described by Propp in the sequential order he claims is most often apparent in the tales he analyses. It includes designations and conventional signs used by Propp. In the vertical axis of each chart there are subcategories for each function and examples from specific folktales (drawn from Alexander Afanasyev's collection *Narodnye Russkie Skazki* published in 1855) by Propp.

This chapter makes reference to Appendix 2, which sets out a table that presents the independent short film *Snow* (2005). *Snow* (2005) is presented in Appendix 2 in its entirety as a sequence of individual shots arranged to preserve the director Dustin Feneley's final edited sequence (that is, the final cut). This sequence is juxtaposed with proposed corresponding Proppian functions for the purposes of analysis and discussion. In this table, the sequence of Propp's functions is reordered to explore pairings between the edited shots and specific Proppian functions. This arrangement of Proppian functions is a result of cut and pasting selected functions in order to align them with each shot from the film *Snow* (2005). Figure 4 below illustrates a section of this table.

Snow (final cut order)				
narrative order : film				
	Shot No 1	2	3	4
	prologue			tran
	boy alone in forest	father senses violation	boy has violated interdiction	boy
FUNCTIONS	1	2	3	
as observed in folktales by Propp	I	II	III	
summary (relates to essence)	family member leaves	hero is told not to do something	interdiction violated	hero is trans
designation (abbrev. definition)	absentation	interdiction (prohibition)	violation	transfe
conventional sign (given by Propp)	β	γ	δ	
keyboard key	b	g	d	
Propp's examples and variations or subclasses	β_1	do <u>not</u> look at... do <u>not</u> go to...	hero <u>does</u> go / look / do	
	adults: to work, to business, to war	inverted interdiction - a command	he/she/they are told to do something	Spatial tra
	β_2	eg: bring breakfast out into field	II & III may be paired	Hero is led,
	death of parents	eg: take your brother with you to the woods	eg: Tsar's daughters were late returning home	
	β_3			Hero flies t
	children: go visiting, picking berries, fishing			egs: on a st on flying sl

Figure 4: Table applying Propp’s functions to shots as they occur in the final cut of Snow.

While both films could be described as ‘tales’, *Star Wars* (1977) is presented here as a contrast to the short film *Snow* (2005). Both films offer recognisable functions but with different degrees of ambiguity.

There is a sufficient sense of logic and causality in both films to invite the audience to engage with a sequential flow of emotionally and/or rationally linked events. This engagement, shared between writer, director, text and audience, is summarised by Walter Murch (Koppelman 2005) simply as ‘coherence’. Speaking from his perspective as a film editor, Murch views editing as the last stage of film production where the logic created by the ‘author’ (writer, director and/or editor,) is rendered as an experience of some ‘coherence’ for an audience that possesses individual ‘histories’ and diverse experience.

This notion of ‘coherence’ can be explored in terms of structure. In the case of *Star Wars* (1977), Vogler (1992) made it his project to articulate the source of this particular film’s ‘coherence’—with a view to commodifying this experience. Both

Lucas (1977)³⁹ and Vogler (1992) embraced Joseph Campbell's (1998) schema as a model for assembling and structuring functions that have widespread emotional resonance for diverse audiences. In an entertainment industry context, 'coherence' can be framed as an outcome of a kind of narrative competency, an ability to bring a logic to cinematic experiences that have emotional resonance which is not purely aleatory⁴⁰—that is, the audience response is not purely random.

While it could be argued that one role of the film school is to educate students about existing schematics such as Propp's morphology (2000) and to encourage investigation of them, neither Propp's nor Campbell's schema (1998) is limited to the template or checklist application pursued by Vogler (1992). Proppian functions can also be investigated for their use in developing the 'logic' of individual cinematic works.

Discussion of the film *Star Wars* (1977) with film students generally reveals their immediate grasp of its syntax and logic and much commonality in emotional resonances. Even those who do not enthusiastically embrace the film share a similar perception of the emotional affect engendered by this cinematic narrative. Similarly, the short student film *Snow* (2005)⁴¹ presents units of meaning or functions that film students generally perceive as having an underlying logic. Post-screening discussion of *Snow* (2005) reveals varying degrees of shared meaning, emotional experience and reading of the story, but then its ambiguity generates discussion on significance and meaning.

While we could say that the shaping of *Star Wars* (1977) is exemplary of Proppian morphology (2000) and substantially referential to Campbell's hero's journey (1998)

³⁹ Lucas has attributed major significance to Campbell's writing as an influence on *Star Wars* in numerous interviews and documents.

⁴⁰ Umberto Eco refers to 'aleatory connotations' in terms of potentially 'aberrant presuppositions' made by the reader (audience) which are unrelated to the message and expression intended by the sender (author) (*The Role*).

⁴¹ I have chosen this film because my involvement as Supervising Producer has allowed me some insights into the development and production of it. I have found it to be a useful short film for stimulating discussion with student groups, largely on the pretext that *Snow* was selected for the 2006 Cannes Film Festival, thus allowing easy segue into the topic of festival selections.

schema, *Snow* was not deliberately or consciously developed with a Proppian plot structure. I refer to this short film in order to extrapolate from it to an investigation of the uses of Proppian functions in the development and production of new cinematic narratives—particularly for the short film form—rather than to undertake an analysis of existing tales.

Dustin Feneley's short film *Snow* (2005) began with an image, or idea, of a boy obsessed with freezing rabbits in snow, which was subsequently developed into a story—a cinematic narrative.

Synopsis of the short film *Snow* (2005)

In alpine bushland a boy returns from the snowy landscape to a cabin, where he waits for a sleeping man to awaken. They do not speak but know each other. Perhaps they are father and son. The boy leads the man into the snowy woods. The man seems to know what is about to happen. He has come prepared with a shovel and blanket and starts digging in the snow at the spot the boy has led him to. He uncovers a rabbit, buried in the snow. It is still alive. The boy seems pleased that the rabbit is freed from the snow. In a disapproving tone, the man asks where the boy got the rabbit. This is not the first time this has happened. He asks the boy if he will quit doing this and walks away with the rabbit carefully wrapped in a blanket.

Another morning comes and the boy arrives as if to silently call upon the man. The man tells him this will be the last time. The boy leads him out into the snow again. The man is upset at what he finds. He uses the boy's name, Benjamin, for the first time and tells him the breathing hole is too small. The boy looks on silently until he is asked to help dig the snow. Alone in the snowy forest, the two continue digging until the man uncovers another rabbit. He is upset to find that this one has died. The boy remains silent, unresponsive to the man's insistence that this does not happen again. Disapproving and frustrated, the man leaves the boy to dig up the dead, frozen rabbit from the snow. The boy is now alone in the snow with only the dead rabbit as company. When the next morning arrives, the man wakes to find Benjamin is not standing at his doorway. He searches the snowy forest for him only to find him lying next to a small improvised grave. He holds the boy's frozen, dead body.

Where the plots of folktales as described by Propp (2000) are generally recognisable and the actions of dramatis personae predictable, the plot of *Snow* (2005) follows a sequential pattern entailing a distinct sense of unfolding: it presents figures that simultaneously evoke the archetypal folktale figures of father and son and functions such as lone child unattended in the forest, while also functioning to maintain a level of ambiguity. The audience is left to reflect on its own reading of this narrative. If it appears to have some of the attributes of a folktale, why can't we clearly, confidently establish the identities of the victim, the hero or the donor, or the nature of the 'lack' that afflicts this family, domain or kingdom?

The development of *Snow* (2005) did not start with a process of structural design, but with an imagined character: a boy and his strange preoccupation. Taking this imagined character as a starting point, if we were to paint a picture, rather than make a film, the painting might be titled 'Boy with frozen rabbit'. Indeed, at this stage of concept development, a simple, one shot film could be made. The result might be described as a film-portrait-poem, possibly more avant-garde than 'mainstream' or 'orthodox' Hollywood film (as in the three-act paradigms or story shapes proposed by Field 1979, Vogler 1992, McKee 1999, and Block 2001).

For writer/director Feneley, this singular image of the boy and the frozen rabbit might be pregnant with significance and meaning that may or may not be apparent to his would-be audience.

A central and formative question can be asked in relation to any independent film at the early development stage: how do you hope the audience will engage with the finished work? One way to frame this question of intention is to clarify the degree to which the work is intended as an expression and the degree to which it is intended as a communication. In Feneley's case, he may have been satisfied to simply create a single image, content that it contained adequate significance for himself. This single image may have been an adequate expression for Feneley.

Robert McKee (1999), best known for his advice on 'classical' story design or the

‘archplot’ (entailing recognisable features of causality, external conflict, active protagonist and closed ending), would describe this hypothetical one-scene film—‘Boy with frozen rabbit’—as ‘minimalist’ or ‘miniplot’ story design. Using McKee’s (1999:45) terminology we could describe this concept or hypothetical film as involving ‘a passive protagonist, internal conflict and an open ending’.

The nature of a student or independent work will be largely shaped by the creator’s attitude towards what Eco has called ‘presuppositional effort’ (1979a:142) during concept development and production. This refers to the effort to present codes that will likely match the codes and biases of the addressee (audience). This will determine to what extent the individual writer or director (‘author’) develops a logic that is accessible to their audience. The concept for *Snow* was developed as a story—that is, a sequence of actions that explored links and potential causalities.

We can approach the processes of concept development, screenplay writing, production and editing as a series of constructions where fragments are reviewed and then (re)organised prior to formulating syntactical arrangements. However, we might ask: what elements are used to construct these syntactical arrangements in the case of a film that has an image or notion at its genesis—an idea that is not yet a story? This is a common scenario faced by students at the earliest stages of concept development.

In seeking tools for developing a sequence out of fragments we can test Propp’s morphology (2000) for its suitability to a generative rather than analytical application.

In this regard the concept for *Snow* (2005) was developed as a story—that is, a sequence of actions that explored links and potential causalities.

For the purposes of generating and/or shaping plot we can attempt to assign Proppian functions to a conceptual ‘fragment’—in this case the idea of a boy’s obsession with rabbits freezing to death in snow.

The following is an exploration of building a narrative logic from a single image into a sequence and then a complete short film through analysis that draws on Propp (2000) and Kafalenos (2006).

We can start by investigating the possibility that the syntax of Propp's *Morphology* (2000) can be reconstituted around any one given plot fragment. In this case we could try to pair our image of a boy in the snow with a frozen rabbit with possible Proppian functions. This is a highly interpretive and subjective process. Ultimately the objective is not to identify the 'correct' fragment–function pairing but to explore possibilities for developing potential plot structure out of the fragments. One strategy to expand a fragment into a plot is to speculate on how it might exist within a cluster of causal connections. Propp's *Morphology* (2000) presents a set of implied causal links that are generally configured around a central notion: that a rupture or significant change occurs and the plot revolves around the consequences of this rupture.

To use Kafalenos's (2006) terms in relation to the dramatis personae in *Snow*, we can ask:

The boy:

Could the boy be acting to 'alleviate a situation'?

Could the boy have been subject to a 'destabilising event'?

Is the boy being subjected to a 'test'?

The man:

Is the man (the boy's father) being subjected to a 'test'?

Any or all of these questions might be useful in developing the concept out of the image that was a starting point for the plot of *Snow* (2005): the boy with frozen rabbit. The same questions may be useful again when reviewing the syntax of the fragments of this story in the process of editing, when links, correlations and causal possibilities are reviewed to formulate what will become the final configuration of this story.

Using Proppian terminology, which function offers a potential resonance with this boy in the snow? We can survey the Proppian possibilities:

Function: 'IV' Absentation (designation: β)

The boy has left his family.

Function: 'IV' Violation (designation: δ)

Hero does something prohibited.

The boy has done something he has been told not to do.

Function: 'VIIIa' Lack (designation: α)

(E.g.: lack of friend or human being generally.)

The boy has no friend.

The rabbit is indicative of the boy's lack of human friends.

The companionship offered by the rabbit has come to an end.

Function: 'VIII' Villainy (designation: A)

Boy is responsible for the death of the rabbit:

A11 'Villain casts a spell on someone or something'

A14 'Villain commits murder'

Could this child, counter to the plots typical of folktales, actually be committing villainous acts, and therefore be the villain of the tale?

Function: 'XIV' Provision of magical agent (designation: F)

'Animals possessing magical properties'

F1 'Forest animals offer offspring'

f1 'Negative reaction is followed by no transference, possibly retribution'.

Through speculation and imaginative extrapolation we can assign any of these functions and dramatis personae categories and proceed to 'build' a Proppian tale because the morphology offers previously observed syntactical relationships between the functions. Propp has organised his functions in sequence representing the most commonly occurring sequential arrangements he observed within his original sample of Russian folktales.

The tale of *Snow* (2005) includes a number of elements recognisable as Proppian

functions and dramatis personae. The complexity of the film develops, as vivid, archetypal dramatis personae are invoked but their actions are not as clearly defined or explained as in the folktales examined by Propp. Though never stated, we assume that the boy and the man of this tale are father and son. (It is interesting to note that Propp's morphology reveals or emphasises the recurrence of the delineation of family members or groups. The tale of *Snow* (2005), however, does not offer any stereotypical villain.

The first three shots of *Snow* (2005) comprise a silent prologue that evokes the first three Proppian functions as they manifest exactly in their most typical morphological sequence:

- I absentation (β) – adults are not seen, boy is in forest alone
- II interdiction, prohibition (γ) - father says do not go...
- III violation (δ) - boy acts despite father's advice

In the first three shots of *Snow* (2005), both characters are presented as isolated – an isolation that may possibly call for some form of 'rescue'. Their contrasting locations (mise en scène) of snowed forest and concealment under white bed clothes, and their mutual silence, suggests that a remoteness or 'absentation' of sorts may have occurred already, despite their physical proximity. These three functions are repeated until the audience understands that there is some form of absentation, prohibition, violation, call for help and rescue; all recognisable as Proppian functions.

The ambiguity that brings complexity, mystery and an atypical finish to this tale resides in the dramatis personae of father and son characters. There is evidence of three possible instances of 'absentation': the boy seems alone in this snowscape, the father is buried in his bedding within their alpine shack, and there is no visible evidence of the mother.

The configuration of dramatis personae applicable to this film could be:

1. The boy cast as a victim requiring rescue by hero (e.g. his father), or the boy

as victim who needs to become the hero in the process of overcoming their predicament.

2. The father cast as hero searching for a lost boy (e.g. a boy physically present but emotionally absent or distant).
3. Less conventionally, the boy seeking to find his emotionally absent father.
4. The boy as family member who ‘lacks’ or ‘desires’: A lack of friend? A lack of mother? A lack of connection with his father?
5. Father as ‘donor’, perhaps a helper in the boy’s ‘rite of passage’ in some way.
6. Boy as donor—setting tests for father.

As the story of *Snow* (2005) reveals, the Proppian functions of lack, misfortune, absention, interdiction, transference and departure are relevant and pivotal in this contemporary tale. Thus, the use of Proppian functions to develop a sense of plot where plot is yet to be formed may be generative in some situations. Proppian functions may serve as useful references to adjust and clarify plot construction during the editing stages of production because, as Murch (1995) points out, it is a new opportunity to survey footage and reconsider potential binaries that might be formulated by alternative juxtapositions. Murch’s editing procedure includes simultaneous display of shots to be edited in order to increase the potential for constructing binaries other than those present in the text of the screenplay. The editing process, according to Murch (1995), is an important opportunity to reconsider and explore new juxtapositions and binary arrangements. For this reason he creates visual displays for viewing key frames from each shot alongside the images usually displayed within the digital environment of his editing tools, as depicted in the figure below.

In this sense Peter Greenaway’s (McKenna 1997) comments on variations in the organisation of narrative material can, as Murch (1995) demonstrates, be applied to the production process as well as the finished product: ‘There are ways other than linear narrative to organize material ... the grid, numerical systems, color coding, all [of which] are capable of putting the chaos of existence into some kind of comprehensible pattern’. (McKenna1997)



Figure 5: Murch builds a display of images on the wall to augment the images viewed within the electronic editing environment.

Snow (2005) does not present a typical Proppian ‘problem and solution’ plot configuration. An important aspect of engaging with this film involves audience participation in interpreting potential functions. In doing so, the functions evident in *Snow* (2005) signal their own lack of completeness, while still evoking a sense of emotion around and cognition of what is unfolding.

As a result we are encouraged to articulate Propp’s simple functions into other potential frames of reference: linguistic or psychoanalytical. For example, the functions of transference and departure in this tale may evoke a plot design that is reminiscent of Brooks’s (1984) linking of plot with a fundamental binary between life and death. Brooks (1984) finds Freudian terms useful in that they provide a general schema for narrative desire: that is, an engagement in tension between the ‘pleasure principle’ and the ‘death drive’ schemas conceptualised by Freud. *Snow* (2005) does present a life–death binary as the boy pursues his unexplained rituals or experiments with rabbits buried in snow. Where the metaphors of Propp’s folktales are more easily comprehended, *Snow* (2005) requires reflection on the meaning and significance of its functions because they are liminal.

In this application of Propp, the morphology is ultimately a set of reference points which can serve to bring into focus events and forces that can be translated into

dramatic terms in order to explore the sense and meaning of things and perhaps to reach, temporarily, some quiescence of closure.

Ultimately, Propp's morphology does not explain the narrative of *Snow* (2005). It does provide, however, references that resonate as they evoke the binaries that are so familiar from folk tales: lack (the incomplete family, no friend), absention (mother is physically missing, the man is emotionally distant, the boy goes into the icy forest alone) and so on. While it has the sense of simplified folktale and cautionary tale, self explanatory causality does not exist within this film. As in Gus Van Sant's film *Elephant* (2003), dramatic expectations are mostly created without grandiose gestures or 'Hollywoodesque' spectacle for spectacle's sake. In *Snow* (2005), as in *Elephant* (2003) the liminal nature of plot generates dramatic tension by presenting understated plot elements which challenge audience to attempt to formulate their own congruities and causalities and attach meaning to the plot they are witnessing. Both films 'fail' to provide explanations to the tragedies they depict. As Van Sant puts it: "The way I thought the film is supposed to work is that it leaves a space for you to bring to mind everything you know about the event. It doesn't give you an answer." (Murphy 2007).

Where *Star Wars* (1977) makes emphatic and pragmatic use of familiar morphological structures and binaries to facilitate reading by the audience, *Snow* (2005) provokes re-examination of our inclination to make assumptions about the functions of characters. In *Snow* (2005), Proppian functions, and the assumptions we are inclined to read into them, can be recognised or interpreted, but not without ambiguity. As a result, we are forced to explore our own cognition of the functions insinuated in this film.

The film *Snow* (2005) everything is a puzzle and meditation on the notion of 'lack'. The 'call for help' (Propp 2000:37) is problematically coded in this narrative and, as a result, engages us in the tension between the characters.

It is a dark meditation on the Proppian functions of transference and ascension. This film also explores its own schematisation of domains that function as exterior representations of interior or psychological spaces.

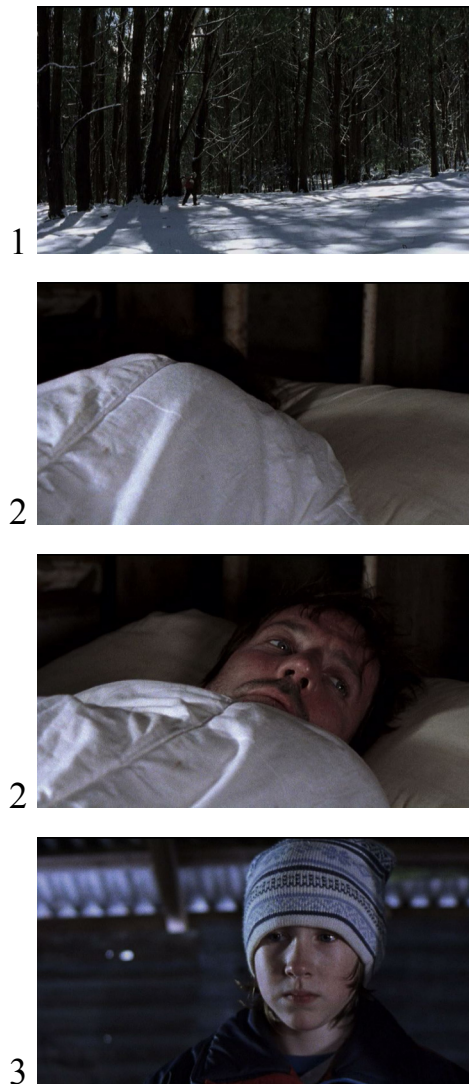


Figure 6: Opening three shots of Snow (2005)

These frames represent the first three shots from the film *Snow* (2005). The young protagonist sees the father buried in white, as the landscape outside is also buried in white. The film *Snow* (2005) presents an opportunity to explore the meaning and significance of these representations of domains. The film is in effect a meditation on notions of absention. All verbal communication is limited to the prohibitions and reprimands issued by the man to the boy, who remains mute throughout the tale. Visually the audience is presented with the suggestion that all living creatures in this story are susceptible to inaccessibility of some sort: whether buried in bedclothes, snow, alone in the forest or frozen emotionally and physically.



*Figure 7: The binaries offered to audience in *Snow* (2005) provide an opportunity to juxtapose different notions of absention and its consequences.*

Snow presents traces of morphological functions but simultaneously presents them as problematic. We struggle to reconcile and reassess narrative assumptions in trying to understand the characters' intentions and actions. We experience difficulty in matching the actions in *Snow* (2005) with Proppian functions, but we nevertheless persist as a result of our inclination to emplot. In *Snow* (2005) this inclination to find plot hinges largely on the power of functions that evoke empathetic responses to vulnerability, particularly in relation to the sense of risk conveyed by the isolation of the boy. The function of absention is emotionally charged with the potential dangers of disconnection from family and abandonment.

The figures below (8 and 9) identify some of the functions invoked by Propp's morphology (2000) applied to the film *Snow* (2005). The frames from the film indicate the multiple interpretations in which the audience must engage when trying to reconcile them to a specific, recognisable function.



*Figure 8: Scene 1:
The child is alone in the woods.*



*Figure 9: Scene 2:
The adult is remote, withdrawn.*

From the outset there is ambiguity about the role of the ‘absent’ and the role of the ‘seeker’ of the absent.



Figure 10: Scene 2: Nothing is spoken, but gestures convey a sense of disapproval and tension consistent with an interdiction’.



Figure 11: Scene 6: Interdiction: being told not to trap rabbits in the snow.

Pivotal to Propp's definition of 'villainy' is the idea of attack or theft instigated from outside the family. Applying Propp's framework to *Snow* (2005), the most villainous acts are not consistent with Proppian instances of villainy where an outsider commits the villainous act on the family or community. The destructive acts of the boy in *Snow* (2005) are more symptomatic of a 'lack' than a villainous act. If the boy is the 'hero' and the 'seeker' in this tale, have we satisfactorily identified the 'lack' that he must address? What happens in the absence of a 'donor' or 'magical objects' to help a 'seeker'? Are we witnessing the failure of the father as 'donor' in the mentoring of his own son?

Snow (2005) illustrates the minimal 'textual' suggestion required to invoke narrative functions reminiscent of Propp's functions. The film includes scant dialogue (only one character speaks), relying instead on facial expression, gesture and action as clues to emotion, intention and the nature of each exchange between characters. We might describe this as a liminal narrative space.

In 'Convention Construction and Cinematic Vision' (1996), Bordwell invokes anthropologist/philosopher Robin Horton's notions of 'primary theory' and 'secondary theory'. For Horton, 'primary' refers to the level of human cognitive interaction with the environment characterised by observational, everyday objects posited as entities that are directly experienced 'givens'. These entities do not generally require much examination to yield 'meaning'; rather they tend to be 'givens', and exist in the realm of 'commonsense' and 'self-evident' explanations as a kind of folk (or 'rational') psychology. Horton's concept of 'secondary theory' refers to operations involving theoretical discourse—theoretical formulations and entities (including beliefs, whether folk or scientific)—operations that he points out are characteristically laced with paradox.

Both filmmaker and audience, unless exercising effort to resist, will be inclined to seek recognizable topoi in the process of seeking congruence in a cluster of cinematic units or fragments. *Snow* (2005) generates interest for the viewer (and filmmaker) through at least two processes. Firstly, it does so by creating fragments and sequences that are not self-explanatory and therefore require curiosity and effort to seek

congruence or meaning. Secondly, it does so by way of emotional affect and empathetic engagement with protagonist, which evokes dramatic tension centred on the possibility of this boy being at risk. This emotional evocation is a cornerstone to a plot that is liminal in that does not complete a satisfactory explanation of a cycle of events. This evocation of risk associated with the protagonist presents a source of dramatic tension whereby we hope the anxiety associated this risk might be alleviated.

Propp's *Morphology* (2000) functions as a tool that has captured a number of common evocations (itemized as functions and dramatis personae) that we are inclined to link, if for no other reason than our general preference to move from evocations of anxiety to evocations of less anxiety. It remains a schema for presenting irrational hopes that is and references in seeking recognizable topoi when we are exploring or are confronted with liminal stories that audience are likely to draw upon.

Where Propp would suggest the traditional folktale must complete a cycle (from instability to stability), *Snow* (2005) foregrounds engagement in the cognitive process, particularly 'theory of mind' explorations into the positions occupied by characters.

It thus moves from 'primary theory' to 'secondary theory' engagement as it engages first filmmaker, then audience a liminal story activity where the significance and possible consequence of each emotional gesture is not without ambiguity.

Drawing on Proppian terms, there is the 'magical object' and the 'object sought'. An object sought may be a person, potential partner or the cause of some misfortune, and may be a symbol or metaphor rather than a literal reference to a 'real' object. A 'magical object' may, for example, 'overcome poverty' or be instrumental in progress towards the object being sought in the tale.

In *Snow* (2005) we are left to wonder about the nature of the 'object sought'. The characters of the tale, much like real people, do not eloquently articulate their desires or needs, but the plot structures a cycle of events that encourages observation and speculation on the part of the audience. *Snow* (2005) asks the audience to exercise some 'theory of mind' to speculate on the significance of both characters' actions within the story. This engagement in 'theory of mind' involves a kind of folk

psychology whereby we attempt to imagine and understand things on the basis of someone else's experience or point of view. It is such cognitive engagement in cinema that underlies cinema as an empathetic process rather than one of spectacle.

A trial-and-error process of attempting to link narrative fragments into narrative clusters using Proppian functions potentially serves at least two purposes. It can be a purely generative process for the purpose of creating a story—at its simplest, a template approach to plot construction, and it can serve to help draw the student's attention to the fundamental issues and emotional concerns in which they are primarily interested in exploring within their own story, at the early stages of concept development, shooting and editing.

In the example of *Snow* (2005), Proppian structure is not complete. Functions of villainy or lack are not 'liquidated'. There is no 'Hollywood ending'. Instead there is a cyclic return—what can be described in Proppian terms as a repeated function—of the boy's inarticulate, but cinematically observable 'call for help'. The story of *Snow* (2005) grew from a single image (the boy and the frozen rabbit) into a plot.

My observations of this process (from idea to finished film) spanned one year (2005), a common time frame imposed on students producing work within a film school or studio model situation. Depending upon course and school structure, a student will have contact with a number of teaching staff in the form of lectures, workshops, tutorials and/or consultations. *Snow* (2005) was certainly not developed as a Proppian experiment, but reflects a culmination of a number of methodologies and influences drawn on throughout its incubation and production.

In this regard, the *Morphology* (2000) can ultimately be seen as just one instrument that might be used for development of plot.

Proppian analysis of *Snow*: graphical investigation

Proppian analysis, or more accurately in the case of concept development, Proppian *speculation* can be highly interpretive. The specific analysis presented graphically (see Appendix 2) has been assembled retrospectively and references the finished film *Snow* for the purposes of adapting it into a reference for use during the development and production stages including editing.

Appendix 2 presents an examination of Proppian morphology in tabular form, applied to the viewing of *Snow* (2005). It presents *Snow* (2005) in its entirety (15 minutes) as a series of individual clips (shots) presented in the order in which they were edited and screened. Each shot has been aligned with a corresponding Proppian function for the purposes of analysis and discussion with students in concept and story development workshops prior to students concentrating on developing their own cinematic production projects.

Relevant excerpts from Propp's *Morphology* (2000) have been placed alongside these shots. The morphological functions are displayed with their subcategories and illustrative examples from Alexander Afanasyev's collection of wonder tales *Narodnye Russkie Skazki* (1863) as studied by Propp (2000).

This chart incorporates playable movie files to illustrate the individual cinematic 'units of material' in *Snow* (2005) that could be said to correspond to mythemes (the smallest units of myth) represented in Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (2000). The table presented in Appendix 2 is viewable with Microsoft Excel software, and for legibility is best viewed at magnifications between 75% and 150% 'zoom' settings.

Chapter 4: Synopsis: Reflection on experience of studio-based teaching

Industrial procedures and the film school

Where film school curricula present an industry-based procedure of the sequential steps (of story development, treatment, screenplay, script editing, production design, staging, shot listing, shooting, editing, music scoring, sound design, etc.) the examination of story is a good focal point for learning in all filmmaking production areas. In this approach, the script is taken as a kind of master blueprint for all collaborating parties.

As Rosen (2010) would have it, regardless of their field of specialization, each key contributor, acts as a kind of narratologist in that they engage in a systematic narrative study within each specific project they work within. Procedurally, key department heads or collaborators directly, physically refer to the story (in script form) to perform their own narrative analysis before formulating and producing their contribution to the completed final product. This process, to greater or lesser degree, relates to many if not most of the details decided upon by each department. The cinematographer and director will collaborate to evoke and frame the specific anticipated empathetic, sensual and cognitive responses of audience directly in relation to the dramatic function of each scripted scene. The production designer or art director will specify and initiate a search for specific props that are chosen for their efficacy as signifiers in direct relation to their intended dramatic function in the screenplay. The prop is used as a tangible narreme. The screenwriter understands this when specifying visible or audible objects appearing in specific scenes. The assistant director procedurally itemizes each of these (carries out breakdowns) knowing that they will be investigated for their narrative function by the art department before a props buyer or builder provides the specific physical object and its qualities. The profession-specific, industrial jargon of their various production departments ultimately links to the predominance of story as cemented into the centre of these working relationships. Production managers, designers, art directors, cinematographers, visual effects

producers, editors, sound designers, music composers each perform their own analysis commencing with their own mark up of the script. Story (the script) generally remains central focus of breakdowns carried out by managers and designers prior to shooting, the music composer carries out the spotting process (usually after the script is rendered into shot and edited sequences).

This industrial procedurality applies to both fiction or non-fiction. Michael Rabiger, in *Directing the Documentary* (1998), encourages sequence design in non fiction film that evokes the procedures of industrial, entertainment filmmaking including ‘deciding the action’, ‘casting the players’ and ‘assigning metaphorical roles’ (1998:127-139). Rabiger’s believes ‘the need for development, conflict and confrontation’ is essential in non fiction and actually offers his own graphical representation of ‘the dramatic curve’ which is instantly recognizable alongside the schematics offered by McKee (1999), Block (2001) and many others.

In this production model the script is the central reference for a cinematic *Gesamtkunstwerk* as each specialist operating in their own discipline engages in their own process of identifying narremes (as discernable in the script), whatever form they might take relevant to their field of production specialization.

For example a physical object appearing in a scripted scene is identified and then investigated in terms of its roles as a narreme. When the props master seeks out the physical prop corresponding to scripted object it is (ideally) sought out for its efficacy as a signifier in the context of the story.

This narratological dimension of specialist contributors take the form of a simple observation or complex interweaving of narrative elements . For example, the music soundtrack composer may carry out the spotting procedure simply to cue music that underlines or amplifies an emotion contained within a scripted scene: happiness signaled by a celebratory musical theme in a major key and brisk tempo, unhappiness signaled by a sparse musical notes in a minor key and slow tempo, ominous circumstances signaled by a sustained deep note, and so on. These are obvious, simplistic (but sadly still used) cues to elicit a targeted emotional affect from audiences. More complex narrative exploration takes place where the composer expands upon signification within a specific musical motif or contrasts sonic signifiers with visual signifiers. Some composers conceptualise their soundtracks as

having an ekphrastic nature or function.

The film school's attitude towards industrial procedures will almost inevitably be a blend of engagement in both 'classical expertise' and 'adaptive expertise' (Hatano, Inagaki 1986), industrial and artisan (Ruiz 1996), mainstream and 'indie' or convention and experimentation.

Even a most conservative perspective on mainstream entertainment cinema would recognize that procedurality manifesting entirely routine product would become moribund.

Scholarship and the film school

It would be naïve for the student filmmaker to imagine there are no preexisting expectations of story in the minds of audiences, script assessors, investors and marketplaces. It would be irresponsible for film schools to lead students to believe no such expectations existed in the film industry – mainstream or independent.

In studio based teaching, each film school sets its own agenda in terms of its stated mission or tacitly through the atmosphere of the school or the particular combination of teachers present at any given time. Within the agenda of the school, the individual teacher enacts their own individual agenda according to how they see the school: as industry training, as career preparation, as an industry research and development unit, as an experimental laboratory, as an ideas incubator for the arts, etc.

Regardless of how a particular school positions itself in relation to any dichotomies of entertainment versus art, commerce versus creativity, industrial versus craft approaches, mainstream versus independent, orthodoxy versus avant-garde there remains strong argument for enabling students to be aware of and articulate in the various expressions of story design in cinema, their historic contexts and potential strategies and applications.

Kathryn Millard (2010:13) rightly points out that the idea of script as blueprint and script as an end in itself are dominant in industry and embedded funding processes but not necessarily the only viable model for organizing production. She offers the examples of independent writers and filmmakers Gus Van Sant, Jim Jarmusch, Tony Grisoni, Michael Winterbottom, Wong Kar Wai, Wim Wenders and Chantal Ackerman, as examples of those who have embraced what Millard calls *cinematic* scriptwriting, where methods involve “shifting between writing and production, working with both words and images” (13) with a potentially greater degree of fluidity than the more industrial notion of script as blueprint. Clearly Millard, despite concerns over preserving the ‘aliveness’ of a work during a protracted and potentially stifling ‘template’ approach development and assessment process, does not reject the convention of script as part of working method. Millard is in accord with J.J. Murphy when he says ‘real innovation in screenwriting ... comes not from ignorance of narrative film conventions but from being able to see beyond their limitations’ (Murphy 2007: 266).

Rather than suggest Propp’s Morphology (or Campbell’s ‘hero’s journey’) as some form of recipe for cinematic story, I would suggest it in an educational context where it can be presented as a recognizable narrative configuration still applied in various media contexts. In this context it may be explored or utilized in development of story and some production processes by remediating the morphology.

While it might be argued that the Proppian morphology is strictly limited to particular genres (action oriented genres such as the western, war film, adventures), independent filmmakers demonstrate inventive reconfigurations of the morphology. In Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (writers: Kaufman, Gondry, Director: Gondry 2004) we have seen a hybrid romance as adventure / science fiction genre in which formulations of Proppian dramatis personae and functions are playfully applied to underpin the dramatic structure and shape central theme.

If the student filmmaker hopes to engage audiences within the gamut of commercial cinema (whether that be mainstream or the independent fringes of mainstream) there is a strong argument for film school to encourage the ability to enter into a kind of dialogue with audience; that is, an understanding, which proceeds on the assumption

of shared preexisting expectations of narrative. In this sense the filmmaker and audience are part of an ongoing remediation in which previous narrative media that have lost their initial immediacy are now subject to refashioning. Because schemas such as Propp's morphology and Campbell's hero's journey are widely accessible and widely referred to, both audience and filmmaker are aware of them as media objects ready to be addressed in new stories and storytelling strategies. For audience and filmmaker they now prevent a certain innocence and sense of immediacy. Instead they bring about an immersion into familiar conventions that are often genre-specific iterations of existing schemas.

This immersion into the opaque hypermediacy of existing story schemas such as Propp's morphology means ongoing remediation for audience and filmmaker. Such remediation might even lead to new expressions of transparent immediacy. We might say the immediacy we may have experienced as a child hearing for the first time a vivid cautionary folk tale increasingly diminishes as our sophistication grows. However, as folklorist Dégh (1994) points out, folk tales constantly revisit us in various contemporary guises, including entertainment, advertising and news narratives. Dégh (1994) quotes Hermann Bausinger: 'folklore can persist *only* in its function... *variability* is the essence of its existence.' (1980:48). Bausinger's observation can be applied to industrial filmmaking where there is a constant search for new product that presents as familiar yet novel (or function with variability).

Filmmaker and audience are increasingly familiar and knowing of cinematic narrative conventions that act as both shorthand allowing greater economy of narrative and a kind of 'game' of narrative expectations between filmmaker and audience. It is this constant variability in expectation that is engaged in ongoing mutations of familiar genres as well as explorations of liminal narratives.

'Transparent immediacy' to 'opaque hypermediacy'

The evolution of cinematic production is described by Bolter and Grusin (2005) as involving a process of 'remediation', where an interplay or challenge exists between

‘new media’ and ‘older media’ (15). They assert: ‘What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media, and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media’ (15).

This movement from ‘transparent immediacy’ to ‘opaque hypermediacy’ can be described in terms of the initial impression of electronic media and new media as that of immediacy and transparency. It would seem that the pre-constructed, linear narratives of ‘old media’ can be bypassed or made redundant via the interactivity, connectivity and sense of user-centricity of networked media. The initial experience is therefore one of directness or ‘transparent immediacy’.

A comparable ‘transparent immediacy’ could be observed at the premiere of Auguste and Louis Lumières’ early cinema footage, or ‘actuality’, as it was known at the time, which sent a train towards its audience to generate a visceral experience as its basis for transparent immediacy. As with any media, the transparent immediacy initially attributed to many early films waned as their contrivances—mechanical or theatrical—become more apparent.

Perhaps the transparency and immediacy of any given piece of media can be assessed in terms of its function and (or versus) its contrivance. ‘Opaque hypermediacy’ is a suitable description for many of the constructions with which we engage as part of the remediation intrinsic to cinema, particularly within its production processes.

Advocates of new media may privilege ‘transparent immediacy’ by assuming a sceptical position on those formal, ‘opaque’ aspects of cinema that are mediated and remediated; drawing on conventions and contrivances of literature, mimetic practices and music. According to Bolter and Grusin’s definition, ‘opacity’ is not a term of denigration as it can be used to describe instances where an emphasis is placed on the devices of meaning and the processes of the construction of cinematic work. Engagement in cinema, either as audience or producer, is largely based on the challenges, rewards and pleasures of engaging in its opacity or hypermediacy—such as the complex unfolding of causal links and chains of events rather than the immediacy of pure visual (and sonic) spectacle.

The ‘real’ of cinema is accessed via a constructed linear excursion of meaning-making. Cinema’s formal elements are fragmented, and sequentialised arrangements and explorations. Unless it is a duplication of a previous production, any cinematic production is potentially an exploration of remediation. By this definition, the filmmaker or film school student generally faces questions concerning remediation at the outset of each cinematic project as he or she embarks on the processes of concept development and pre-production. A significant pedagogical strategy in a film school context is to develop opportunities to explore narrative processes as they unfold in the key stages of production practice.

As a generalisation, cinematic production delivers an artifact or product of finite screening duration (such as the fifteen-minute short film, the fifty-minute documentary, or the ninety-minute feature film), which represents a vastly greater amount of time spent in research, concept development, story development, screenwriting, production design, rehearsals, staging, soundtrack design and editing.

As long as there is a substantial difference between the duration of the audience’s cinematic experience and the duration of development and construction of the cinematic product or artifact, we can apply Bolter and Grusin’s descriptor of ‘hypermediacy’ to the cinematic production process. The cinematic production process involves a combination of constructions and configurations, divided and allocated to specialised production disciplines (production departments) whose processes may be invisible to an audience engaged primarily in a spontaneous response to the screen experience. In this scenario, the ‘transparent immediacy’ (Bolter and Grusin 2000) we experience when we feel a direct connection with what we, as audience, see on the screen is in contrast to the ‘hypermediacy’ of the production process.

In an industrial context this ‘expansion’ of screen duration into the duration of the production period occurs as a result of aesthetic, commercial and/or logistical necessity. In the film school context this contrast between time spent in pre-production, production and post-production on the one hand and the duration of the finished film on the other offers the opportunity to reflect on conceptualisation in direct relation to craft as encountered within specific student productions.

Convention, experimentation and creativity

Kathryn Millard (2010) argues against a bureaucratized production model that places screenplay centrally in a production development procedure dominated and consequentially stultified by protracted script development editing and funding approval funding process. In *After the typewriter: the screenplay in a digital era*, Millard calls for more explorative approaches to the traditional ‘Hollywood’ script format, with more flexibility to integrate media other than traditional printed text forms as preparation and basis for executing the film. On the topic of improvisation in production, she cites Robert Keith Sawyer’s observations of Jazz performers: ‘good jazz improvisers have years of experience ... they build a repertoire of phrases, overall forms, and memories of other musicians’ famous solos and recordings ... When improvising, they draw on this material’ (Sawyer 2007: 170). Millard, however, does not exactly specify what these ‘phrases’ or ‘overall forms’ forms might be for the student filmmaker.

Margaret Boden makes mention of music with reference to ‘conceptual spaces’ which she defines as ‘structured styles of thought’. (2004:4) These, says Boden are a kind of an idealization which may be potentially limiting if we are to consider operating outside of their structures, hence her interest in transformations of such spaces: ‘A person requires a map of music space not only to explore the space, or transform it, but also to locate unfamiliar compositions within it. (2004:99)

The jazz performer may explore an existing structure, such as a familiar song or melody, with surprising results much like a conventional folk tale or Hollywood plot might be endowed with novelty or innovation. The jazz performer might also perform a transformation of conceptual spaces in people’s minds where the musical performance presents a liminal reference to a recognizable melody or rhythm. Boden comments that ‘to be appreciated as creative, a work of art or a scientific theory has to be understood in a specific relation to what preceded it.’(2004:74)

Plot and particularly causality in Feneley’s *Snow* (2005) is located in a liminal narrative space, much like Van Sant’s *Elephant* (2003). In *Snow* dramatis personae

(as described by Propp) are present but ambiguous (particularly absented adults, disconnected from the child). Proppian functions are liminally discernable but not clearly drawn: there is villainy, lack, interdiction and other functions.

The story is centred on a hero (the boy) who appears to be alone while the man never quite comes into focus as parent, donor or helper and the resulting liminality we sense in relation to the man's function is unsettling. It becomes a source of dramatic tension in itself as it situates the audience within the liminal space occupied by the characters themselves. We share their possibility of narrative disintegration which generates tension because we feel 'although liminal space is potentially creative, it can also be dangerous. For example, there are dangers in liminal space where there are no large enough narratives (myths) to support someone going through these stages of disintegration.' (Leonard, Willis 2008:197)

J. J. Murphy (2007) surveys explorations and transformations in conceptual spaces as found in his selection of independent American filmmakers of the last three decades. He presents his schematization of story structure as apparent in the alternative approaches of these independent films, which challenge mainstream conventions but are still situated within the gamut of commercial cinema. Murphy presents examples of alternative approaches to both story structure and script strategies including hybrid collections of planning materials such as combinations of print descriptions of scenes to be improvised, maps, music, etc. Writer/directors he has chosen, such as Jim Jarmusch and Gus Van Sant, express their preference for deviating from the traditional Hollywood script format in favour of a collection of various media objects as preparation for more diversely nuanced 'script' suitable for more improvised filmmaking methods. Murphy points out director Gus Van Sant's eventual abandoning of conventional script for *Elephant* (2003) in preference of strategies for improvisation, including maps of the school featured in the film a key narrative design document. Murphy observes this shifted Van Sant's focus to a more formal and visual approach to narrative.(2003:163) Jarmusch's approach to script in *Stranger than paradise* (1982) is also described by Murphy as 'not the kind of literary film that exists on the page, but a film that operates on a more purely visual and stylistic level.' (2003:31)

For films that are not the ‘literary kind’ we might reference Manovich (2001) for possible new media objects that replace print-based scripts in future, using cinema technology itself for juxtaposing images as consecutive moments in time to generate ideas and for superimposition of multiple images viewed simultaneously to generate a new image/idea. (2001) Such a shift in cinema, from the printed text as central reference (screenplay, script) to a new media object that does not privilege printed text could be described as a further move to hypermediacy, with the filmmaker oscillating between creating material for this new media object and viewing its output as preparation for generating a new type of blueprint for production. Such a new media object may be a refinement on past story generator experiments or it may be an idea generator of sorts. A new media object that was to replace the traditional printed treatment or script document that used a narrative algorithm of some sort may be designed to access a database of potential morphemes (assembled by the producer/writer/director) to generate a potential syntax. The morphemes in such a database may be items of moving image, still image, sound, music, spoken word, written text.

If we accept the existence of distinct conventions of narrative structure (whether they be Propp’s morphology or other formulations) they may well be open to further experiment, perhaps as algorithms to explore new media objects as defined by Manovich. (2001) Perhaps this is fertile ground for investigation beyond some of the limitations inherent in the linguistic bias of semioticians referred to by Manovich when he says ‘the discrete units of modern media are usually not units of meanings in the way morphemes are.’ (2001:29)

Manovich suggests: ‘Not surprisingly, modern media follows the logic of the factory, not only in terms of division of labor as witnessed in Hollywood film studios, animation studios, and television production, but also on the level of material organization.’ (2001:29-30)

In terms of fostering qualities of individuality, authenticity, creativity, innovation or what Millard (2010) identifies as ‘aliveness’ of a work within an industrialised procedure it is hard to predict if a migration of cinematic narrative into new media as defined by Manovich (2001) will result in alienating mechanisation or reinvigoration of media production. Perhaps this is one type of activity that might be

carried out in the film school that sees part of its function as laboratory for experiment. Manovich's (2001) definition of a new media object as having variability: 'not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions' echoes a notion familiar to folklorists (Dégh1994): that folklore persists only in its function while variability is the essence of its existence.

Propp's morphology - a starting point, a point of departure

When viewed as a tool that has captured a number of common evocations or emotional gestures that we are inclined to link, Propp's *Morphology* (2000) can then be reassessed, appropriated, or remediated. It can simply be taken as a reminder that audience engagement occurs where movement between binaries is evident and of emotional interest. Biro's (2008) interest in rhythmic shifts between turbulence and flow might be described as orchestrated progression through periods of tension and release. Biro (2008) offers her own binaries of continuity and confusion (2008:3), ascents and descents (2008:x), dramatic and ordinary (2008:70), sometimes engaging us through 'anxiety, dread and irrational hope'. (2008:208)

Propp's documentation of an inclination towards closure presents evidence of a widespread wish or irrational hope for the possibility of the ending an anxiety or tension. It would be throwing the baby out with the bath water to dismiss entirely Propp's *Morphology* (2000) because it presents a prevalence of closed texts. It remains a schema for presenting irrational hopes that is and references in seeking recognizable topoi when we are exploring or are confronted with liminal stories.

Having argued the legacy of the morphology continues in various guises, we can turn to various possible uses for it in a film school context. For Biró (1998) this is quite a straight forward process: existing conventions, structures, genres are best investigated as sources of 'triggers' for the individual writer. In teaching, she utilizes various media objects as triggers to stimulate individual student responses to initiate personal investigations and stories. – initiating a search for the 'authentic' and the 'memorable'. (Interview 2008:102). In *To Dress a Nude: Exercises in Imagination* (1998), Biró presents the folk tale as both a writing 'trigger' and economic method of storytelling, given the audience prior familiarity with the structure: 'Reinterpreting these widely-known models is also a common practice in the literary, cinematic and

theatrical arts. By basing his work on the public's shared knowledge, the author may spare himself the effort of inventing new characters, dramatic situations and twists. With all this as a starting point, he can then seek a more daring, playful, original point of view on the story. Depending on his goal, the adaptation can become either a tame or subversive commentary.' (1998:128)

The agenda can then shift to the task of 'illuminating the underlying emotions' (1998:63) and 'mocking petrified genre conventions, expropriating and reversing the overused rules'(1998:164).

Of her own working method, Biró anticipates that a kind of model will take shape, in a distinct design, a living structure, a recognizable 'topos', built on gestures that embody the latent turmoil of characters. (Interview 2008:100)

Raul Ruiz reminds us too that the morphology might be a source of narrative strategies, but suggests perhaps the most radical response to it. He points out we can actually construct our own morphologies in what he refers to as 'shamanic activity in cinema' (1996:78) and describes trying 'to film a summed-up version of a man's weekly routine, without necessarily looking for the most dramatic moments.' He continues: 'We'll construct a montage sequence of a group of people's entries and exits from his house; or of all the moments these people drink a glass of milk; even of all the times they sneeze. We can use this catalogue to construct various series: the milk series, the sneeze series, the exit series. We can also build other series with other rules of seriality. For instance, using as a recurrent element the glass of milk, or the exit. Then we will relate all these series by some analogy (any kind of analogy).' (1996:78-80) Ruiz calls these series that do not conform to dominant schemas (such as that of Propp, Campbell or the Hollywood three act structure) 'little monsters' that could be juxtaposed to create a large monster. Ultimately, in this scenario 'nothing is truly arbitrary, for the combinations inevitably produce meaning' and it can be demonstrated that it is possible to obtain different morphologies.(1996:79). In this context we could speculate of alternative uses for Propp's functions and dramatis personae, perhaps used much like a set of tarot cards to trigger a individual narratives, similar to Biró's use of 'triggers'(1998).

Ruiz's enthusiasm for undermining the commercial cinema is demonstrated also by his willingness to experiment with ludic approaches to integrating chance and destiny with the actions of characters. For Ruiz emotions or actions of characters may be

determined by a ‘throw of the dice’(1996:19).

Theory and collaborative practice

Rosen implies every film production department head functions as a kind of as narratologist, or perhaps a kind of folk mythographer, that has greater craft-specific knowledge than the director. Collaborative roles in production might be generalised in the following way: writer as notator of morphemes (gestures, words, symbols); director as conductor of sememes; actors, art directors, cinematographers , music composers as producers of morphemes and, finally perhaps, editor as orchestrator of morphemes (pieces of recorded images and sound) into sememes (juxtapositions and sequences). Perhaps there is a future for collaborations where these kinds of contributions are made prior to the writing of a traditional printed text screenplay. Perhaps it will be a new media object, equally drawing upon a range of media assets assembled by writer, director, designer, composer.

Millard draws a connection between the ‘evolving systems’ theory of creativity proposed by Gruber and Wallace (1989) and filmmaker Guy Maddin’s approach to improvising screenplay where ‘in fact, his script never really existed as a traditionally presented and formatted screenplay. Instead, Maddin and his collaborators worked from a story outline with lists of sets and props. He also describes gradually introducing other elements into the mix.’ (Millard 2010).

Cross referencing different productions using the morphology as a workbench, structural filter or comparison device that is not predominantly literary text base can be used to open discussion on alternative digital representations of design across various craft tangents. It is one of a number of possible environments within a studio teaching context; material examined here can be carried into and cross fertilized in companion teaching scenarios, particularly ‘open’ production meeting teaching situations where there is simultaneous development of multiple projects. These simultaneous incubation situations can foster the conditions described in ‘evolving systems’ theories of creativity, where students’ shared thoughts and responses across each others projects promote conditions of what Gruber and Wallace describe as a ‘network of enterprises’ (1989:11).

The *Morphology* can be presented as entirely malleable and can be hybridized with other strategies. One could propose strategies for combining Proppian dramatic personae and functions with randomization strategies such as Ruiz's (1996) use of ludic strategies: exchanging protagonist-driven notions of plot with a 'roll of the dice' to decide what happens next in the plot.

For the film student, the relationship between conceptualisation and craft raises the question of how theory can be integrated into practice. In cinematic production this is complicated by the fact that the 'practice' is most likely to be a hybrid collection of skills and craft practised by numerous people in a collaborative venture. It also raises the question of what aspects of theory are *relevant and applicable* to particular areas of specialisation or craft as practised in production. A conventional answer to this question in both film school and industry contexts can be found by positing the centrality of 'story'—both as a descriptor of the primary means by which audiences engage in a cinematic experience, and as a reference for all design and production activity.

On this basis, any theorising potentially relating to narrative engagement and coherence may present an opportunity for exploration, learning and practical application. In the film school, a studio-based model of learning and teaching, production can be 'a vehicle for learning' (de la Harpe et al. 2008:5). A typical model of collaborative production operates by coordinating skills and craft with reference to a central objective. A common strategy within the film school model is the promotion of 'story' as the central organising principle for structure and design as it extrapolates to the various production specialisations involved. In much of the theoretical writing on cinema or filmmaking, conceptualisation and construction are attributed to 'the filmmaker', implying a single person or 'mastermind' assumed to be responsible for what is presented on screen. Auteur theory is based on this perspective.

The use of the term 'filmmaker' for cinematic productions of a scale larger than the 'artisan' film (in which director, camera operator, narrator and editor can be the same person) can be taken simply as shorthand for 'all those who collaborated under the auteur'. Alternatively it may be indicative of commentators clearly writing from outside the production process itself, describing the cinematic experience or text as

‘authored’ by an individual, with no basis in knowledge of the actual creative process. This reduction of the collective work of production to a single figure (‘the filmmaker’) is somewhat typical of cinema studies writing and perhaps is also symptomatic of a disconnection or disinterest in how the materials and praxis shape cinematic text.

In production, cinema literacy is formulated (or perhaps reformulated) in praxis and within a community. Those people included within the production process could be viewed as both a community of practice and one of discourse.

Collective modes of production:

***Gesamtkunstwerk* and cinematic production**

The question of a central, coordinating reference for the production of hybrid works of art had been explored prior to the advent of cinema. One example is Richard Wagner’s notion of a ‘*gesamtkunstwerk*’. Given that cinematic production evolved as a theatrical hybrid it can be compared with the earlier hybrid concept of Wagner’s *gesamtkunstwerk*, or ‘total artwork’⁴². Wagner’s aspirations for the *gesamtkunstwerk*, expressed at that time as the opera, could be claimed to be the precursor of the kind of cinema recognisable in the products of the contemporary movie industry. Wagner’s *gesamtkunstwerk* can be examined either as an integrated theatrical product or an integration of process. In *The Art-work of the Future* he championed the notion of a ‘fellowship of artists’ with ‘units which make up the total of a commonality’.

The performative and plastic arts of Wagner’s *gesamtkunstwerk* were music, poetry, dance or mime, painting, sculpture, and architecture. These are all present in contemporary cinema production departments. In many ways, the Hollywood movie is the realisation of the *gesamtkunstwerk*: both the production methodology and its cultural colonialism, which Wagner would describe as the ‘spreading of culture

⁴² Wagner pursued the idea of *gesamtkunstwerk*/total artwork—‘a single artistic enterprise to which different arts were each to contribute, though without surrendering their independent standards or their autonomy’—in *The Art-work of the Future* (originally published in 1849 as *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*). Wagner was primarily engaged in operas or ‘music dramas’ but the materials of his ‘enterprise’ included music, scenario, dramatic performance, stage and scenic art.

abroad'. However, the Hollywood movie industry is an antithesis to Wagner's vision in its derivative repetitions (such as genre and sequel) and integration with fashion (consumer/market trends).

Wagner describes the *gesamtkunstwerk* as 'an associate work' adding that 'only an associate demand can call it forth' (Verstraete 2006:477). This 'associate work and demand' can be examined in the contexts of the business of cinema, cinema as art or, in relation to either or both of these, cinema-making within a pedagogical context. However, Wagner would probably despair at the commodification of 'associative demand' at work in the Hollywood film industry. Wagner's further idea of 'commonality' amongst collaborating artists is what we might now describe as communities of practice. We could also describe Wagner's aspirations today in terms of creating a hegemonic discourse community.

Those who have worked in a (functional) film production crew will recognise elements of E. Wenger's (2000) definition of 'community of practice', that is the existence of: a sense of joint enterprise and accountability; mutual engagement through trust and relationships with one another through regular interactions; and a shared repertoire of stories and language that embodies the distinctive knowledge of the community and allows members to negotiate meaning.

We can describe the artistic personnel of both Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk* and the contemporary cinematic production as groups of people using, and therefore creating, a particular discourse—their modes of production being the forums in which they operate. According to J.M. Swales's (1990) definition, a discourse community includes: a broadly agreed set of common public goals, mechanisms of intercommunication, and participatory mechanisms primarily established to provide information and feedback.

We can observe the procedural interrelation of the components or artistic practices as we review the key roles within narrative cinematic production. A review of the 'business' of key production roles and departments may shed light on where and how discourses enter and are transmitted, mutated or challenged throughout production as it progresses.

Story and production

Wagner's utopia of a 'unified fellowship of artists' reveals its inherently hierarchical features as P.M.G. Verstraete (2006) points out: 'in practice, however, the ideas of *gesamtkunstwerk* lead to a necessary hierarchy of the disciplines with music as the element that fuses all'. Verstraete (2006) notes that for Wagner 'both the score and the libretto would give indications for the scenographic design, which in its turn had to support the organic whole in order to keep the total illusion and immersion for the spectator'. In contrast, in the 'Hollywood *gesamtkunstwerk*', *story* is generally privileged as central to the cinematic work, both aesthetically and organisationally. This sentiment is reiterated in many film schools: 'story' is central to cinematic literacy and production procedure.

In conventional models of film that include cinema narrative 'orthodoxy' (Field 1979 ; Vogler 1992; McKee 1999; Block 2001) ranging from Hollywood style film to 'art' film (or, as McKee would describe it, 'minimalist' structure (1999:45), story informs the work of various specialists or production departments that actively form parts of the cinematic text in which the audience will engage. The hybridity of texts within the cinema text, when examined from within the production process, reveals various instances where the story is not told by the actor playing the protagonist or antagonist but is told by others within the collaborative production group.

For example, the scenic artist and set dresser can become the primary 'storyteller' at the moment their creation of *mise en scène* becomes a signifier of the back-story. In this case they are doing more than decorating the set—they are composing a history of a person (character) as 'spoken' through their belongings, their environment, and perhaps in the physical absence of that person. In this production context, fragments (or perhaps whole histories) are designed and constructed for the audience to read forensically.

Designing a hybrid text: Wagner and Block

Block's *The Visual Story: Seeing the Structure of Film, TV and New Media* (2001) is an attempt to formulate a master schema for constructing cinematic story shapes that accommodates, but is not limited to, orthodox story paradigms. Block's schema recalls Wagner's project of *gesamtkunstwerk*: a schema that sought to coordinate the specialised crafts called upon to produce a hybrid work where the 'texts' of music, performance and staging commingle to create a theatrical work. Similarly, Block advocates a strategy for shaping cinematic text in all its constituent parts through a process of quantisation. In a sense, Block suggests that the cinematic story has an optimum shape—dimensions that are best recognised and with which the filmmaker must comply. Ideally this 'story' shape, according to Block (2001), is an analogue of the orthodox Hollywood paradigm whereby functions (or 'story events' as Robert McKee (1999:33) would call them) are organised into dramatic encounters or episodes (scenes) in order of escalating emotional intensity. This 'shape' is familiar to anyone familiar with Propp's morphology (2000), Campbell's hero's journey monomyth (1998), Field's three-act structure (1979) or McKee's 'classical design' of 'archplot' (1999:45). The abstract that Block (2001) generates out of an existing story (e.g. a film script) is a quantisation of the emotional intensity of each individual scene. The optimal 'shape' requires that the peak of audience emotional arousal occurs at the story climax. Where Propp, Campbell and Field, amongst others, identify the climactic story event, Block presents this as a peak to which he assigns a maximum numerical value. All other moments of emotional intensity are then quantised in relation to this one established peak—the story climax.

This process, Block (2001) suggests, should be carried out for the entire story as well as repeated within each scene. This is intended as a process of abstraction that will produce a graphical shape that corresponds to the plot's temporal structure, as in the graph in Figure 12 below.

GRAPH C: NORTH BY NORTHWEST

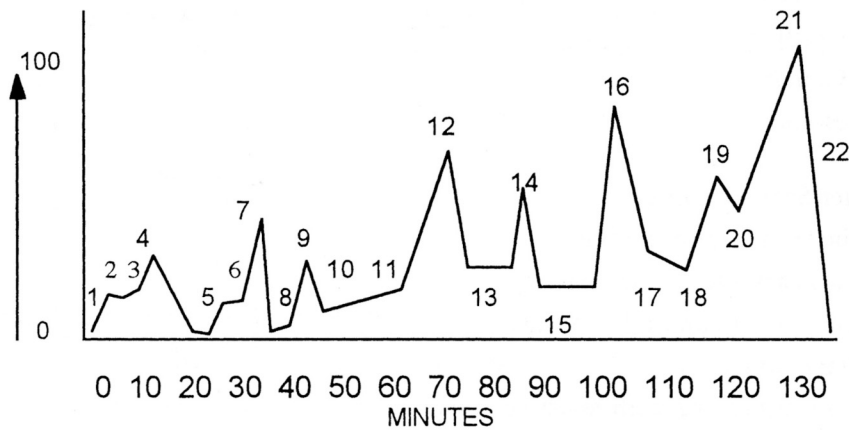


Figure 12: Block's graph plotting peaks in story intensity along a temporal axis, in this instance for the analysis of the structure of Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.

The comparison between Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk* and Block's (2001) graphical schema raises questions in relation to organising principles and strategies for combining multiple texts into one hybrid text that an audience experiences as 'natural' and coherent. Both Wagner (Verstraete 2006) and Block (2001) appear to have the intention to produce an immersive emotional effect where constituent texts seamlessly combine to create a singular audience experience. Where music and libretto provide Wagner with his central organising principles, Block uses the emotional intensity of plot points (functions) as his key reference for artists and workers in the various film production departments to collaborate on coordinated designs and constructions, be they cinematographic, scenic, choreographic, musical, sonic, or other.

As Block's (2001) graphical analysis for *North by Northwest* (Figure 12) illustrates, plot shape can be represented as a series of events of emotional intensity intended to be experienced by the audience. Consistent with Propp's *Morphology* (2000) and 'Hollywood orthodoxy', Block (2001) quantises the anticipated emotional intensity of plot events to present a typical sequence of escalating tensions that culminates in a climactic event. The climactic plot event or function is allocated the maximum emotional/numerical value and then all other peaks in tension or excitement are calibrated in relation to that value.

Framed within Block's graphical schema, Propp's *Morphology* (2000) could serve as what Ed Tan might describe as an affect structure device. Clearly, Block places great importance on the cinematic product as an emotion affect generator for audiences, as his graphical schemas for production design prioritise the sequential ordering of escalating interest, tension, agitation, arousal and excitement.

Where Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk* drew on music and libretto as central organising principles for artistic and craft collaboration on the creation of a hybrid medium (theatrical opera), Block (2001) draws on plot as a design reference for the various crafts represented in each film production department.

For Block (2001), abstraction of story by graphical means enables various specialists or departments within film production to coordinate their textual expressions of the same peaks and troughs of story. In searching for a universal organising principle that can be expressed through a diversity of craft specialisations (such as cinematography, choreography or *mise en scène*) Block (2001) proposes that emotional intensity can be conveyed through the juxtaposition of binaries. He generalises in denoting these as 'contrasts' and 'affinities', which he claims can be expressed through a number of different texts (such as two dimensional photographic composition, movement of camera or subject through space, rhythm in editing, and so on).

Block's (2001) schema may be of strategic use in an organisational role within production but it is fundamentally and intentionally derivative. It does not present obvious generative potential because it functions as an echo of an *existing* story. It is, therefore, unlikely that the student filmmaker would construct a work out of this schema itself (unless pursuing a highly abstract approach to cinema). It is not a likely starting point for formulating or 'growing' a story. For this we need to look for another source of story. It will be more fruitful to look for specific instances of meaningful situations and dramatic predicaments.

We can extrapolate Block's (2001) approach to the production design process by examining an example of how plot abstractions can be translated into colour journeys

or ‘colour scripts’.

In production design colour palette and colour saturation are used for emotional affect as correlated to plot points. The colour script is just one example of the construction of emotional devices designed for emotional affect based on clearly identified plot features. As many storytellers, film directors and production designers already grasp intuitively, colour hue, tone and saturation can be directly utilised to signal changes in mood or atmosphere and to identify individual characters in relation to their function within the plot. In these instances the colour palette (at the design stages of production) can provide markers for character roles as defined by Proppian dramatis personae, or their counterparts in Campbell’s (1998) schema, not unlike the operatic device of leitmotiv where recurrent use of specific music themes denotes specific characters and objects and, simultaneously, some of their dramatic attributes.

Pixar use examples of these affects such as where ‘scenes of adventure are bright, and the scenes of danger get dark’, or a particular character may bring a particular hue and saturation with them into a scene. Each animation produced by Pixar has a colour journey or ‘colour script’ that is created during the pre-production stages to provide an at-a-glance look at the colour keys and tones for the entire film. This ‘colour script’ is an example of expression of story arc translated into ‘colour arc’.



Figure 12: An example of the colour script created by Lou Romano for the Pixar animation Up.

Development of student production concepts

There is a parallel between the development of individual student productions and the development of cinema itself. Initially, many student production projects begin with a single image, action, situation or emotion, which might be described as a ‘spectacle’ of sorts, or perhaps a fragment of a story. When discussing potential story ideas, it is common to find that a student will have a small ‘piece’ of cinema in mind.

Before the film *Snow* (2005) existed as a story it existed as an imagined cinematic fragment. This small imagined ‘fragment’ can be compared with the examples of earliest cinema where the rudimentary film camera was set up to record a single cinematic fragment: a train arriving, a kiss, a brief dance, or the death of an elephant. Each of these fragments is a moment of interest or fascination, something ‘film-worthy’. Initially, the mechanical limitations of the film camera meant that a film could be nothing more than a small cinematic fragment that lasted only a few minutes. The genesis of the individual student or independent film often has one such fragmentary moment also: an imagined or remembered cinematic moment that is intriguing, vivid, haunting or amusing.

A review of early, silent cinema reveals its potential to develop as either a narrative or non-narrative form. There is evidence of cinema’s potential as both ‘spectacle’ and ‘story’ very soon after its invention. The evolution of structure in cinematic narrative can be investigated through a historic overview, beginning with the archaeology of cinema. We can formulate practical definitions of some of the formal aspects of cinema by reviewing the pre-existing art forms that have become part of cinema. These include the visual image (drawn, painted or photographed compositions), literary forms, mimetic forms (performance, imitation), architectural forms (scenography and/or ‘location’), movement (choreography) and temporal constructions (rhythm, music). The films of Georges Méliès demonstrate a synthesis of these elements: they incorporate ‘magical’ spectacle and theatricality into an

entertainment form. In *Film and the Narrative Tradition*, John L. Fell (1974) focuses on the culmination of business, art and culture during the period 1886–1911—which he calls the nickelodeon⁴³ era—as formative for cinematic narrative. Fell links cinema narrative and the narrative tradition of representational painting in the evolution of a ‘conventional narrative code’. These elements are present in Méliès’s works.

Writing on early, silent cinema, Tom Gunning (2004) observes a ‘struggle between theatricality and narrativity’ (2004:42). Gunning presents the notion that early cinema, being mute, necessitated other ‘regimes of signifiers’ and eventually a cinematic language to distinguish it from theatre. Gunning (2004) also argues that the cinema prior to 1908 cannot be accurately described as primarily narrative. In relation to the early nickelodeon mode of exhibition, he describes it in terms of fairground *attraction*, coining the phrase ‘cinema of attraction’ (2004:42).

Gunning (2004) observes that the temporal qualities of silent films of the nickelodeon era (up to 1910) elicit a ‘now you see it, now you don’t’ relationship with the audience. He claims that this suggests two different possible configurations of time in cinema: firstly, an isolated form of present tense; and secondly, with reference to Paul Ricoeur (1984), time that assumes a sort of shape through the interacting logic of events. Both of these ‘temporalities’ can be observed in the work of Méliès, in which John Frazer (1979) observes causal narrative links that are relatively insignificant compared to the ‘rapidly juxtaposed jolts of activity’ (1979:124). The potential hypermediacy of narrative construction is diminished in favour of the immediacy of Méliès’s presentation of pictorial surprises.

A review of early cinematic practice can help illuminate the knowledge, skills and procedures that constitute contemporary narrative cinematic practice, particularly its formal aspects. These formal aspects include the elements of cinema that facilitate narrative being shared between makers and audiences. They include established principles and conventions of storytelling, affect and meaning as presented through the moving image and the sequential arrangement of moving images.

⁴³ An early twentieth century form of small, neighbourhood movie theatre in the USA, originally charging an entry fee of five cents.

Mechanisation and fragmentation in early cinema

It is interesting to examine cinema's beginnings as a mechanical device in order to explore both the formal and practical aspects of cinematic form. As McLuhan observes:

Mechanization was never so vividly fragmented or sequential as in the birth of the movies. (2003:205)

If we consider the cinematic medium to have been born of the industrial revolution, we can investigate the organisation of its production in relation to the mechanisation, fragmentation and standardisation that are characteristic of a mechanical and, later, 'factory' approach to production.

We can deduce that some of the processes and procedurality of cinematic practice and form have their origins in the physical and mechanical parameters of the earliest filmmaking. Fragmentation can be observed as intrinsic to the earliest films by way of their technological limitations.

The term 'fragmentation' may be used in at least two senses: the *technological components* that constitute the filmed image, and the *narrative components* that enable cinematic narrative. Firstly, in relation to the fundamental mechanics of motion picture technology (whether film or video-based media), the base units are the individual frames, which constitute a sequence representing 'movement'. The single frame as the indivisible unit of filmmaking was at first an individual photographic image. These are significant 'fragments' in that they are the basis for film's illusion of movement. However, the fragmentation that I propose as integral to more profound elements of cinematic form relates more to the filmed 'shot'. Conceptually the 'shot' can be investigated in at least two possible contexts. The first is in terms of temporality, as the nature of the shot was initially governed by the duration (that is screen time) possible, given the mechanical capability of early motion picture cameras and the length of the roll of film. The limitations imposed by early optics and the immobility of early cameras further shaped, by restriction, the nature of

compositions and (lack of) movement and choreography. These limitations and how they manifested as characteristic of the medium of cinema apply particularly to early filmmaking, but can also be seen to apply to some extent to temporary limitations at the introduction of new technologies. For example, various stages of the evolution of video technology into digital cinema technology have informed formal, aesthetic definitions of the medium of video.

Secondly, ‘the shot’ can be investigated as the ‘container’ of specific tokens of meaning; the shot deployed as a consciously constructed, functional unit of storytelling operating like a phrase or a sentence. That is, ‘the shot’ can be considered to be a manifestation of an inclination to formulate a cinematic language predicated upon storytelling. We could speculate as to whether the notion of fragmentation can be explored in terms of the material units of narrative meaning and related cognitive processes of cinematic narrative construction.

This is consistent with a widely held assumption which Gunning (2004) links to the semiological writing of Christian Metz: that ‘cinema only truly appeared when it discovered the mission of telling stories’ (1974:42).

The preoccupation with fragmentation, sequentiality and structure, and their permutations, is an example of the shift of attention from the *immediacy* and transparency of the medium (foregrounding the subject) to the *hypermediacy* and opacity of cinema as a narrative contrivance.

Brevity characterised the short, one-roll films of early, silent cinema. From the outset, the pioneers of filmmaking were faced with the decision of what subject matter to capture within a limited period of time (as limited by a single roll of film). The earliest films produced by W.K.L. Dickson and William Heise for Thomas Edison’s workshop ran for only a few seconds. Auguste and Louis Lumière’s 1895 historic film of a train arrival (*L’Arrivée d’un Train à la Ciotat*) has a duration of less than one minute.

Reports of the perceived immediacy of these media experiences when they were first seen reflect the interplay between the novelty and surprise of representing moving figures photographically. Henri de Parville, who attended the screening of December

28, 1895, noted: ‘the carriage was galloping in our direction. One of my neighbors was so much captivated that she sprung to her feet ... and waited until the car disappeared before she sat down again’.

In the very earliest cinema works, a common response to the limited time duration offered by cinematographic technology was to choose events or even simple gestures that could be encapsulated within these short durations. A single roll of film stock equated to a very short cinema product.

The impulse to perform for the camera and audience, as evidenced in *Dickson Greeting* (1891), *Newark Athlete* (1891), and *Men boxing* (1891), continued to grow throughout the early years and became one of the prominent aspects of cinema’s hybrid nature—in both fiction and non-fiction forms. These very brief ‘micro-films’ made at Edison’s workshop, which generally encapsulated ‘micro-performances’ of some sort, were a small preview of the dominant mode of cinema production to come. They also make evident the relationship between filmmaker (Dickson and Heise) and entrepreneur (Thomas Edison), and the beginnings of the inclination towards entertainment and adopting the formal elements that would later characterise the film form (shots as units of theatrical performance), particularly the ‘Hollywood’ model of cinema.

These earliest film productions manifest the limitations of their primitive cinematographic equipment on screen as brief, episodic fragments. From the outset, Auguste and Louis Lumière’s work embodied what could be argued to be some of the formal elements or aspects of contemporary cinematic practice: the premeditated choices of actions or events⁴⁴ to be recorded within very limited time durations, the construction of deliberately framed and composed images, and the capture/staging of a performance.⁴⁵ The archaeology of cinema and its earliest pioneer works reveal the

⁴⁴ In current production technology, the term ‘event’ is used as a technical term for each individual procedure itemised within an edit decision list (EDL) whereby specific fragments are procedurally processed in editing.

⁴⁵ Louis Lumière, already a practising photographer, applied conventions of two dimensional perspective as diagonals within the compositional frame. The brothers’ early films were depictions of specific actions, situations or ‘events’. These were not strictly ‘objective’ or detached documentations. They also included people acting

origins of cinema to be characterised by short fragments of time, which are the beginnings of one of the formal aspects of cinema: fragments and sequences.

It could be argued that examination of the earliest silent film practice reveals evidence that there has always been a hybrid art form of theatrical, linguistic and photographic recording devices, or, to put it another way, that cinema as we know it existed in embryonic form in the very first film artifacts.

Technical limitations cease to be an adequate explanation for cinema's evolution into fragments joined to create sequences, particularly as André Gaudreault (2003) has presented evidence of the impulse to assemble cinematic fragments in the films of the Lumière brothers prior to 1900.

We could speculate that the Lumières' division of rolls of film into smaller fragments (individual shots) represents a discovery that there is some means of measuring an optimum temporal unit (length of shot). This is certainly examined constantly in the practice of the film editor. It can therefore also be explored in linguistic terms, where we can investigate cinematic syntax and grammar.

During this early, gestative period, other formal elements of the medium also started to take shape—partially as consequences of technological limitations, but also through the contributions of other components of cinema's hybrid nature. An important example of this early hybridising is seen in the influence of theatrical conventions, such as the proscenium arch, which exerted its presence particularly in early cinema but also throughout the medium's whole history.

Technological constraints in the earliest years of film were manifest in the representation of on-screen space as fixed within a static frame (prior to the advent of mechanical inventions that enabled the pan, tilt, crane and dolly movements). The early motion picture camera was physically not easy to manoeuvre (particularly during operation), resulting in the diegetic space being presented within a static frame. This static frame was easily correlated to the well-established practice and

under the direction of the Lumières.

technology of the proscenium arched theatrical stage. The camera's 'point of view' was correlated to 'the best seat in the theatre'. This early 'theatricality' of cinema can be described as an inclination towards *hypermediacy*.

This preoccupation with the cinematic medium as theatrical rather than observational is obvious in the grandly theatrical and magical works of Georges Méliès, but also apparent in the knowingly contrived voyeuristic films of the nickelodeon era investigated in Tom Gunning's 'Now You See It, Now You Don't'(2004).

Units of fragmentation

Are the fragmented units, as observed in early cinema, expressions of an instinct or inclination to formulate units for syntactical purposes?

As early as the very beginning of the twentieth century, evidence of in-camera editing presented by Gaudreault (2003) suggests that the Lumière brothers found some reason to stop filming before reaching the end of every roll of film they shot. A number of the Lumière brothers' films of this period have been found to have both in-camera edits and glued splices. These archival discoveries suggest the inclination to create sequences was present at the earliest stages of film production.

The films of Georges Méliès demonstrate another aspect of fragmentation and combination in film. His exploration of stop motion combinations of fragments (that is, *jump cuts*) seems entirely to have been for the purpose of generating affect (through magic and illusion); however, each of his special visual effects has some narrative meaning, or, at least, some sequential, causal context. They are not purely abstract spectacle as we might describe fireworks or a laser light show. In his construction of effects, Méliès combines two fragments of film to present one single—usually fantastical—unit of meaning.

Defining fragmentation

We can investigate the definition of this fragmentation into 'units of meaning' in cinema in mechanical and/or syntactic contexts.

From a review of the earliest films, it could be claimed that the primary unit of fragmentation is either one or both of the following: a) the shot; or b) the event, the action or, the gesture contained within it. Both of these ‘fragments’ can be taken as fundamental units and formal aspects of cinema.

Formalisation of fragments: meaning and communication

Early filmmakers and theorists Lev Kuleshov, V. I. Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein presented cinema’s defining formal aspects in terms of a system of communication. Each of these theorists described this system largely in terms of language, with the raw materials (images, mise en scène and gestures) used to communicate through denotation or connotation.

Soviet montage theory, as associated with the ideas of Kuleshov, Pudovkin and Eisenstein, provides an opportunity to explore linguistic and cognitive aspects of cinematic narrative. Montage, the ‘putting together’ of elements to generate meaning, invites exploration of syntax. The linguistic study of word combinations can also be transferred to cinema’s multiple component texts, such as visual compositions, movement, or mimetic performance.

Soviet montage theory, in its historic context, is an expression of revolutionary thought and political purpose. This ‘purposefulness’ manifested as a deliberate intersection of propositional language and thinking.

Eisenstein’s interest in syntax is hinted at when he quotes Goethe:

‘In nature we never see anything isolated, but everything in connection with something else which is before it, beside it, under it and over it’.

Fragmentation in cinema did not disappear as the technical improvements in the cinema apparatus facilitated longer takes and decreased the necessity for interruption by film splices. Even with the advent of the technical possibility of producing entire feature length cinema works as one single shot, the majority of films continued to be created through a process of joining fragments to construct linear sequences. This substantiates the notion that the evolution of the fundamental aspects of cinematic

narrative was not primarily determined by mechanical or technological limitations.

The formal aspects of cinema narrative can also be explored in terms of the inclination to structure meaning. In the examples of both Soviet montage theorists in the politically charged context of revolutionary Russia and the early filmmakers working in the American entertainment industry emerging after the 'nickelodeon era', cinema increasingly manifests as a narrative form predominantly organised into linear sequences of fragments.

Story and spectacle, hypermediacy and transparency

Gunning (2004), however, reminds us that the dominance of narrative that developed did not mean that non-narrative material disappeared from cinema. For Gunning, both 'attraction' (or spectacle) and 'narrative integration' (story) remain fundamental elements of cinema. His distinction between attraction (or spectacle) and narrative integration can be correlated with Bolter and Grusin's notions of transparency and hypermediacy (2000). For example, a voyeuristic moment is both an instance of attraction and of transparency as it engages us (as audience) in the sensation of potential contact with the on-screen subject.

Gunning (2004) sees these cinematic instances of attraction as fundamentally transitory because their effect is a result of a brief appearance followed by disappearance—a kind of titillation as might be expected of a fairground attraction, as exemplified in the more voyeuristic one-shot nickelodeon films of the early twentieth century.

At any time the 'desire to display' may even eclipse the 'desire to tell a story' (Gunning, 2004:43), particularly in genres such as musicals or 'crazy comedies' where 'attractions actually threaten to mutiny' (2004:43) against a film's narrative organisation. Gunning (2004) proposes that attractions remain a key element in film structure, where the telling of a story can take various forms from classical to avant-garde. The conventions born of this history reveal cinema's hybridisation of theatrical and literary practices: simultaneously to perform and to tell a story.

Méliès's use of fairy tale scenarios demonstrates his interest in spectacle and attraction over narrative unfolding, whereby the fairy tale is a pretext for a series of special effects as 'magical' attractions. Méliès also exemplifies Fell's (1974) notion of cinema's reference to representational painting as a part of its narrative code. Méliès's films display an obvious interest in the composition within each frame and are a reminder of those aspects within the hybridity of cinema that are not adequately defined by reference to the mechanical recording of image. The practice of composing images pioneered by Méliès has grown to become the sophisticated digital painting and compositing practices widespread throughout contemporary cinematic narrative.



Figure 13: Image from: *Le royaume des fées* (Kingdom of the Fairies), Georges Méliès (1903) director and producer.

Procedural authorship

Given that the development of cinema has evolved 'the shot' as a unit of meaning for the construction of narrative, we can now look at how these units are arranged together in a syntactic procedure, both consciously and unconsciously, by the film student.

The tension between fully developing a concept and delivering a product by a deadline is familiar to the film student. Under the pressure of time constraints the student may opt to mimic aspects of works that they have found influential (consciously or unconsciously) or work to familiar genre conventions in order to

accelerate the production process. These are procedural ‘short cuts’ because they cluster many production possibilities and questions into familiar configurations. Specific genres invoke specific narrative and aesthetic reference points and guidelines. These, in turn, introduce an element of procedurality to the student’s concept development and production. In this context, the procedural approach to concept development and production design can be driven largely by the need to make decisions under time pressure constraints. Drawing on familiar structures and tropes can thus speed up the process.

Vogler’s (1992) call to fellow staff at the Walt Disney Company to apply a procedural approach to script writing and script editing was driven predominantly by the intention to produce consistently engaging (and therefore profitable) cinema entertainment.

The morphological process in the concept development and screenplay writing for the first *Star Wars* (1977) movie provides an illustration from the industry of what Janet H. Murray (1997:183) describes as ‘procedural authorship’—that is, where structure formulates narratives by ‘substituting and rearranging formulaic units according to rules as precise as a mathematical formula’ (1997:197).

We could take Murray’s (1997) notion of Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) as ‘algorithm’, akin to a library of functions and operands, and apply it to cinematic narrative where we may discover that genre can be largely formulated as algorithm. Proppian functions, or ‘morphemes’ as Murray (1997) calls them, represent pre-constructed values, isolated from any form of political or ethical inquiry.

Two general examples of procedurality in the work of the screenplay writer can be summarised as follows:

- 1) Formulating plot as a series of plot points (functions) that escalate in dramatic tension towards a climax as advocated by the orthodox paradigms of Hollywood screenplay writing (exemplified by Field 1979 and Vogler 1992). Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) continues to provide the fundamental reference points for this

procedure as evidenced by the preponderance of narratives structured around a protagonist's journey which culminates in a climactic struggle with another in order to arrive at some resolution or closure.

2) Constructing a vehicle for the positing of binaries. Propp's *Morphology* (2000) specifies functions that are intrinsically and unambiguously coded in positive or negative forms: misfortune, villainy, lack, hero, donor, throne. The *Morphology* (2000) *emplots* characters. This procedure is particularly obvious in the horror genre, for example, where writer and audience share pre-formulated expectations of plot.

The morphology as generator of story

Murray (1997) describes the morphology as an 'algorithm' in her chapter on procedural authorship. Murray speculates on this formalist approach with recognition of its positive and negative potential:

Stereotypical thinking is both useful and pernicious. It is useful because it is a form of abstraction that helps us to organise information. It is pernicious because it distorts the world and can make it hard to see things individually. (1997:199)

Stereotypical characterisations are certainly the cause of one widely held criticism of reproductions of the 'Hollywood' entertainment product, which ultimately aims to construct a mass consumer audience.

With these cautions in mind, we can review the possibility of the morphology being remediated as a story generator.

The monomyth/mono-tale configurations of Propp and Campbell have been extrapolated in a number of ways. Some experimentation with the construction of a Proppian tale generator has been carried out: for example, the *Protopropp: a Fairy Tale Generator*, the *Proppian Folktale Outline Generator v1.0* and the *Proppian fairy tale generator* (based at Brown University).

Federico Peinado and Pablo Gervás describe their project objectives in their

Evaluation of Automatic Generation of Basic Stories as follows:

The aim of our project is to generate creatively new basic stories (short textual representation of the story fabula, a narratological term for the set of main events that happen in the plot) using a knowledge base that contains previously known fabulas.

Peinado and Gervás define ‘creatively’ in terms of allowing for a high degree of originality and high number of alternative fabulas, while maintaining narrative coherence. In their conclusion, Peinado and Gervás (2005) express the desire to expand on the formalisation achieved through Propp’s morphology, to improve the adaptation algorithm and enrich the representation of the fictional world for each tale.

In another investigation into the potential for generating stories, Celeste Lim, Laura Tan and Nicole Wee’s *Proppian Fairy Tale Generator v1.0* tests the modularity and functionality of Propp’s schema. It does so by randomly accessing pre-written text passages (as authored by the research team Lim, Tan and Wee) that express specific Proppian functions, in readiness for reconfigurations that arrive at producing new stories. Their findings demonstrate limited coherence and story viability when piecing together narratives with this process. The resulting tales were partially coherent but were perplexing stories with seemingly obscured parts. This experiment in the use of ‘Propp’s theories to create a seamless narrative’ can be judged a failure in the context of ‘remapping the act of storytelling onto a computer’ and creating ‘complete’ stories. These experiments demonstrate applications which Propp had never intended for his morphological study

The interface for this Proppian generator (Lim, Tan and Wee) (pictured in Figure 15 below) is an invitation to users to select their own choice of Proppian functions. A story is then composed automatically by arranging pre-written narrative segments (expressing the selected functions) in Proppian plot order.

proppian fairy tale generator

select your functions:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> absention | <input type="checkbox"/> struggle |
| <input type="checkbox"/> interdiction | <input type="checkbox"/> branding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> violation | <input type="checkbox"/> victory |
| <input type="checkbox"/> reconnaissance | <input type="checkbox"/> liquidation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> delivery | <input type="checkbox"/> return |
| <input type="checkbox"/> trickery | <input type="checkbox"/> pursuit |
| <input type="checkbox"/> complicity | <input type="checkbox"/> rescue |
| <input type="checkbox"/> villainy | <input type="checkbox"/> unrecognized arrival |
| <input type="checkbox"/> lack | <input type="checkbox"/> unfounded claims |
| <input type="checkbox"/> mediation | <input type="checkbox"/> difficult task |
| <input type="checkbox"/> beginning counteraction | <input type="checkbox"/> solution |
| <input type="checkbox"/> departure | <input type="checkbox"/> recognition |
| <input type="checkbox"/> first function of the donor | <input type="checkbox"/> exposure |
| <input type="checkbox"/> hero's reaction | <input type="checkbox"/> transfiguration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> receipt of a magical agent | <input type="checkbox"/> punishment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> guidance | <input type="checkbox"/> wedding |

Figure 14: Propp's functions as 'tick box' selections in the *Proppian Fairy Tale Generator v1.0* (Lim, Tan and Wee).

The story presented below comprises seven paragraphs generated in response to the seven 'Proppian' functions I personally selected (users are invited to make their own selections.) They are not parsed as a flowing story and seem slightly disjointed and oddly episodic. Much like the Khuleshov experiment, where we experience our own desire to combine sequential images to formulate meaning, the software-generated story challenges us to parse elements ourselves in order to create the continuity of meaning or coherence normally expected of a conventional story. Below is an example of a story generated by the *Proppian Fairy Tale Generator* (Lim, Tan and Wee).

After the following Proppian functions were selected (on the tick- box form), the Brown University software-based story generator automatically sequenced corresponding story fragments:

Functions selected for story generation:

absentation
interdiction
complicity villainy
difficult task
recognition
transfiguration

the generated 'story':

(1st function in Proppian order)

The village people buried my father in a plot of land near our home.

Every night following his death, I prayed for rain.

I prayed that water from the heavens would soak the ground under which my father lay so that his soul would not thirst as it had during his life. I prayed that the rain would cleanse my father's soul, and leave him to rest in peace.

(2nd function in Proppian order)

One last pear hung precariously from a tree growing on the other side of the fence. It glowed like it was golden, and I could close my eyes and imagine the succulent juices falling down the back of my throat. Pear juice. An extravagance I could only dream about. But the more I dreamt of this luxury the louder I heard my husband's voice cry out "No, No," and I would fall in the misery of my discontent.

(3rd function in Proppian order)

All of the people's voices came prying into me, digging through the hairs of my scalp to find answers to their questions. They sifted through my body like water sifts through rice. I felt their presence probing through the deep recesses of my head until they discovered what they longed to know. I told them how I was searching for my father. I told them that his shoes brought me here. I told them about his satchel and the magic that was inside. That magic would take me back home whenever I needed to leave.

(4th function in Proppian order)

Under my feet I felt the rhythm of aches and sighs breathe with each step I took. I felt like I was walking on quicksand. And indeed, when I tried to move my feet I could not feel my toes but only the inability to move them on the surface of palpable danger. When I turned to ask for his help he only laughed. Then I began to think it was he who was making my feet turn to stone.

(5th function in Proppian order)

The bearded man approached me in heavy garb of silk and flower embroidery. He told me that my tongue would be tested for truth by way of needle. "If upon the needle's prick your tongue does not bleed you will be telling the truth. If, however, it does bleed, you are a liar, and hence will swallow poison through your broken tongue."

(6th function in Proppian order)

As mother smoothed her hand over father's forehead she looked at me reassuringly.

Mother licked her fingers and placed them to my face, wiping the thick layer of dirt away. Then I truly began to look like my father's son, in form, face, and color.

This resulting 'story' can be taken to illustrate the limited functionality of this particular Proppian generator in terms of syntagmatic capabilities. In an industrial context (that is, for the formulation of stories for commercial production purposes), this generator fails to provide the fundamental continuity expected of a Hollywood style narrative, or, for that matter, a conventional story. The customary continuity of narrator is undermined by an unexpected, unexplained change in the narrator's gender. The narrator's father is dead and buried and then reappears. The discontinuous presentation of time is less confusing for our familiarity with the now commonplace cinematic practice of reordering chronology (for example, with the 'flashback' or the increasing use of non-linear structure). This is not to say that such a generator cannot be of value in any form of narrative process. As a tool for procedural writing it presents some potential for the synthesis of random story elements. For example, this story generator could be utilised to procedurally combine 'cut-ups',⁴⁶ as

⁴⁶ 'Cut-ups', or 'permutation poems', refers here to Gysin's procedure in which

adopted by Brion Gysin, with the intentionality of story event design as advocated by McKee (1999).

The familiarity of Hollywood or Proppian ‘algorithms’ makes cinematic texts that utilise them immediately coherent, purposeful and perhaps even reassuring. The speculation on story generation procedure and technology outlined here has not addressed ‘units of meaning’ as something with which the student might directly engage and reflect upon in their cinematic praxis. The procedures surrounding episodic ‘cut-ups’ of text in the Proppian generators reviewed here appear unable to account for the complexities of the ‘text’ (or intertextuality) of cinema, wherein multiple texts of image, sound and performance coalesce.

Functions and essences

The process of assigning a Proppian function to a cinematic fragment in the early conceptual stages of developing a cinematic narrative can also be correlated to a process of identifying the ‘essence’ of a scene as it will eventually appear in a completed script. This is a practice familiar to those working within the crafts of screenwriting and directing of screen actors. Proppian functions can be investigated for their potential use in identifying the nature of exchanges between characters or between characters and their environment. This can be summarised as correlating Proppian function with scene ‘essence’.

The screenplay writer or director will, as a matter of craft, make their own designations when they identify the ‘essence’ of any particular scene. When the film director seeks to clarify the essence of a given filmic scene (as it appears in the screenplay) she or he is seeking an emotive, gerund summary of the principal action performed by the principal character in that scene. This descriptor will then serve to provide a key to the intention of characters, which in turn provides insight into the task required of the actor(s) in that scene.

a phrase was repeated several times with its words rearranged at each reiteration. Some of these were derived via a random sequence generator in an early computer program written by Ian Sommerville.

Both Proppian functions and scene essences take the form of a brief gerund summary—that is, they are both formulated as a noun from a verb, and consequently invoke action of some sort. The Proppian functions and their subcategories provide action-oriented descriptors: absention, interdiction (prohibition), violation, reconnaissance, trickery, deception, complicity, villainy, departure, testing, struggle, marking, capture, release, challenge, victory, defeat, pursuit, hiding, return, rescue, recognition, transfiguration, punishment, marriage, and ascension. These are mostly action words, and therefore fit within the lexicon of directives that can be verbally communicated to actors by the director. They mostly relate, quite directly, to the fundamental question constantly asked by actors: What is my character doing in this scene? The vocabulary of the director used to direct actors, of course, will not be limited to Proppian functions. However, they do present an opportunity to discuss and clarify the interface between story, director and actor

Where genre-specific cinematic writing is highly procedural (such that the writer and audience share very specific structural expectations) we might reassess the importance of the formulation of causality and linear plot design in narrative in screenplay writing, and focus instead on constructing and presenting binaries to the spectator, because to a large extent the plot is already given. In this instance the fundamental audience experience of the film is characterised by nervous anticipation of *affect* devices: sudden, violent intrusions that are expected but not precisely predictable. In this regard, in *Scream* (1996), Wes Craven's characters remind or even instruct the audience on the structure, in order to engage audience in a game of anticipation and predictability.

If we were to define the 'units of material' and the 'units of meaning' with which the student engages during production in terms of texts used, there is a possibility that written text will dominate the production process. If we revisit the film set and observe this stage of the production process to scrutinise the process taking place, we might be inclined to take it (as some students do) as a ventriloquising operation. If the words, gestures and language have been taken as all contained within the written screenplay, the work of the actor might simply be (and frequently is) taken as voicing the words and animating the gestures described on the page.

The work of the actor, post-Stanislavsky, was predominantly ‘naturalistic’ (throughout most of Europe and the USA) in that meanings suggested in the printed text were re-examined during the director’s and actors’ processes of dramatic analysis, rehearsal and performance. By application of mimetic and ostensive practices, the meaning of text could be further investigated before performances were finally recorded as ‘material units’ to be assembled into the final cinematic product.

In this process of articulation, it is common practice for cinema directors (and writers) to identify and name the *essence* of emotional ‘units of meaning’.

In a sense, the cinematic production process could itself be described as the organising of parallel processing of cognition and emotion.

Béla Balázs proposes the human face to be the location of crucial cognitive processes in cinema, where the ‘inner’ can be made ‘visible’: ‘the art of facial expression and gesture will bring just as many submerged contents to the surface. Although these human experiences are not rational, conceptual contents, they are nevertheless neither vague nor blurred, but clear and as unequivocal as music’ (1948:42).

Balázs’s excitement about the human face as a primary site for cinematic meaning provides sufficient impetus to revisit Gunning’s (‘An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator’ 1989) definition of ‘spectacle’ in cinema.

In the close up, Balázs finds ‘micro-tragedies in the peace and quiet of ordinary families were shown as deadly battles, just as the microscope shows the fierce struggles of micro-organisms in a drop of water’ (1948:84-5).

The moment of ‘transparent immediacy’ that can occur when ‘the imaginary is perceived as real’ (Gunning 1989:115) need not be a result of large-scale spectacle. It could occur in the ‘small spectacle’ that can be experienced by witnessing a subtle, intimate facial gesture. Facial gesture as signifier of characters’ ‘interior’ states and pivotal moments in narrative is integral to the methodology of the editor. Gestures as markers of change are the subject of Walter Murch’s treatise on editing *In the Blink of an Eye* (1995). In this instance, actor and editor are both engaged in an exploration of

gesture as a unit of meaning for integration within the various sources of binaries that will be arranged to construct coherent narrative sequences.

Propp's functions are not exactly interchangeable with cinema actors' sense of 'essence' (as it would be used to summarise individual scenes) or the nuances enacted within scenes, but the functions could be examined as a kind of prototype, which in a pedagogical context might be a productive way to identify and acknowledge culturally 'inherited' meanings.

Complexity and the morphology: from closed to open texts

While the application of Propp's *Morphology* (2000) in filmmaking might be criticized for its reductive, simplistic nature it offers potential tools for assembling more complex narrative clusters that utilize or re-examine recognizable topoi.

One strategy for negotiating complexity can be via exploration of the liminality of simple narrative structures. In this context we might aim to illuminate transforming narratives that undergo rhythms of construction and deconstruction, integration and disintegration (Holmes 1992:61). In this case we might explore a disintegrating narrative structure as a means of articulating our awareness of an irrational hope for closure. Alternatively we may explore transformations by portraying characters whose self-narratives are disintegrating or being reconstructed. Such characters might be described or defined in terms of entering a liminal phase in their self-narratives because their previous beliefs and behaviours have been challenged, undermined or destroyed. In these cases a plot may be constructed around one or more transforming narratives.

Both *Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind* (2004) and *Life's little dramas* (2006) consciously navigate the audience through 'naive expectations' (Biró 1998:156) of protagonists as they struggle to come to terms with key relationships. In both films plot moves us backwards and forwards in time to reveal childhood narratives as locations of refuge that are ultimately inadequate for new challenges in adult life.

David Moore's short independent film *Life's Little Dramas* (2006) provides a specific exploration of Proppian schema, and of Lucas's exemplar of Campbell's schema, in terms of their generative use for a closed text. It does so by intertwining adult and child perspectives in order to explore cognitive and linguistic abilities as they evolve in his protagonist with reference to the very familiar *Star Wars* narrative. In his film Moore depicts his protagonist during both childhood and adulthood as a person seeking a means to make sense of his childhood experiences and their impact on his life. Moore presents a number of aspects and applications of the closed text of *Star Wars* (1977) within his work. Firstly, the *Star Wars* (1977) text is used by the young protagonist and his brother as a means of escape from the unhappiness generated by their tyrannical father. This is simply expressed through their re-creation of scenes from *Star Wars* as they role-play in costume in their suburban backyard. As the children argue over who will play which role, Moore represents one of the fundamental problems that can arise with Propp's or Campbell's schemas: their inclination to designate and reinforce roles.

Moore then presents the *Star Wars* (1977) text as a filter through which the child protagonist naïvely views his angry father. As a child unequipped with adult ways to understand or intervene in domestic violence, he imposes a *Star Wars* schema onto his predicament. The adult audience experiences this fraught attempt by the protagonist to both make sense of and survive his predicament through the lens of what McKee calls a classical designed archplot—characterised by causality, external conflict, and a single, active protagonist. Moore creates a structure based on a dual tension in this work, in that he invokes schemas familiar to all commercial cinema-goers (the schemas of Propp, Campbell, Vogler, Field and McKee) and the empathies, dramatic tensions and closure they construct. However, Moore reveals a gap between these structured cinematic experiences and the more difficult to resolve 'real life' problems that are represented in the film. As these schemas fail to provide suitable refuge, Moore's protagonist moves to the texts and schemas of psychoanalysis in his adult life. Thus, the film's narrative is structured to simultaneously present a search for closure and a reflection on the nature of the cinematic narrative schemas we might encounter.

These schematic elements of story and plot design in Moore's film are evidence of

exploration of plot, texts and their use, thus distinguishing his film from the more simplistic mimicry demonstrated in *Star Wars* fan films, which ultimately are totally closed works.

The *Morphology* (2000) may be of use as a starting point for identifying and then speculating on what we believe to be the source of what McKee has described as ‘volition, response, conscious and unconscious’ (1999:52), in order to further explore the associations we formulate in constructing cinematic narratives. Ultimately the morphology is a starting point for enquiry, not an end.

Conclusion

Habitual thinking, improvisation and morphologies

‘The process of discovering forms, strategies and techniques includes the development of a critical attitude toward craft’ (de la Harpe et al. 2008:5), and familiarity with existing forms ideally should be part of the students’ knowledge of their discipline to enable systematic reflection on habitual thinking and actions.

In a sense Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) is a record of habitual thinking and as such it makes a particular area of habitual thinking more visible than it might otherwise be. Therefore it has potential to facilitate either methodical reproduction of habitual thinking or deliberate extension beyond the same habitual thinking. The *Morphology* (2000) can be applied in pursuit of banality or nuance. In commercial, industrial filmmaking it may be used as a tool to attempt duplication of successful products. Alternatively, structures such as the *Morphology* (2000) could be used to anchor a potentially chaotic works to a sufficiently recognizable topos to prevent audience alienation or hostility. As such, it may offer a bridge between mainstream cinema and the avant-garde practice as is evident in some independent filmmaking at the fringes of commercial cinema. Rather than being an impediment reflection on habitual and consequent innovation the *Morphology* may provide a platform from which improvisation can take place. An analogy could be drawn with creativity theorist Robert Sawyer’s observations that jazz improvisations. He reminds us that jazz musicians improvise after they have built ‘a repertoire of phrases, overall forms, and memories of other musicians’ famous solos and recordings’ so ‘when improvising, they draw on this material’ (Sawyer 2007: 170). In this context, musical virtuosity usually relates directly to knowledge of strict conventions and structures: shared consistent tempered scale, rhythm conventions, recognizable melodies, song structures, etc. on the basis of which improvisation can be performed. The more liminal these references are to recognizable music forms, the more experimental the improvisation.

The non-fiction interview is also an improvisational form, whereby the interviewer

may not procedurally asked a sequence of scripted questions, but will likely have formulated key points and ‘destinations’ to explore within the interview.

Independent film producer Christine Vachon refers to the type of commercial filmmaking that will require substantial improvisation as the ‘execution dependent’ film (1998:16), meaning financiers are required to make a leap of faith in the writer/director’s ability to improvise production of screen material successfully when script prepared is scant by comparison to ‘Hollywood’ industry formats.

While the *Morphology* is not intended or recommended as a substitute for a script, it may have utility in provide key features of a narrative landscape to be navigated or improvised around. Indeed the *Morphology* might be utilized in assembling key narrative elements other than the conventional ‘Hollywood’ formatted script. Millard observes filmmaker Guy Maddin commenced a film project without script, using instead autobiographical material, a poem the result that ‘Maddin and his collaborators worked from a story outline with lists of sets and props.’ (Millard 2010:18) Millard (2010) calls for more flexibility in what might be considered a screenplay, suggesting it may be an ‘open script’ or map drawing on various media – text, images, music - other than the printed ‘industrial’ script format. This is certainly more achievable than ever with digital technologies and tools.

Scripts, maps, schemas and notation.

The notion that tradition film script conventions and formatting might be replaced by alternative notation systems raises the question of what, exactly, would be notated in such a system. Walter Murch (*Conversations* 2002:49) points out European music has undergone observable changes where it has moved from transmission by oral systems and simple tablature systems to more sophisticated and standardised notation systems resulting in progression from simple unison or harmony to more complex possibilities such as counterpoint, polyphony, dissonance. Murch attributes new compositional attributes directly to new modes of notation.

We could speculate what cinematic structural units might be drawn upon for new

modes of cinematic notation and what structural features might form its basis. As Millard (2010) and Manovich (2001) remind us, print based text may not be the preference of the near future. Past experiments in notation⁴⁷ and morphologies may provide some of the means by which narrative units are arranged and orchestrated in future production. If we accept Rosen's (2010) core assumption that emotional gesture is a fundamental building block of cinematic narrative, a morphology such as Propp's may have some applications.

Familiarity with Proppian functions may be one useful resource in developing the ability to recognize and determine scene essences. Both take the form of a brief gerund summary—that is, they are both formulated as a noun is from a verb, and consequently invoke action of some sort. They are not emotionally neutral. They are emotional gestures. The Proppian functions and their subcategories provide action-oriented descriptors. These are mostly action words, and therefore fit within the lexicon of directives that can be verbally communicated to actors by the director. They mostly relate, quite directly, to the fundamental question constantly asked by actors: What is my character doing in this scene? The vocabulary of the director used to direct actors, of course, will not be limited to Proppian functions. However, they do present an opportunity to discuss and clarify the interface between story, director and actor. Propp's *Morphology* (2000) is one of a number of possible tools to explore or interrogate the emotional gestures that characterize or resonate within the individual building blocks of a narrative film, whether or not the end result is a naïve plot. The fact that it may have some utility for bringing into focus the emotional gestures that combine to form cinematic plot renders it potentially useful for writer, director, actor, designer or composer. This has potential when cross-referenced with Block's (2001) cross-disciplinary, cross-departmental notation for collaborative film production.

As summarized in previous chapters, there are various existing schemas available to film students for application in their own productions. The mono-tale and monomyth schemas developed by Propp (2000) and Campbell (1998) has been used extensively in what we might describe as Hollywood orthodoxy (such as Vogler's 1992

⁴⁷ These might include examples such as the graphical notation experiments documented by Erhard Karkoschka in 1972.

appropriation of these forms). The influence of these schemas has spread largely via interest in story as commodity for commercial exploitation. This is exemplified in the work of writers such as Vogler (1992), Voytilla (1999) and Block (2001) in their ‘template’ approach to story structure based on the notion that these structures facilitate formulaic success in the design and production of cinematic entertainment.

Such a schema is also reproduced through ostension—that is, mimicry by cinephiles and fans who actively make a transition from audience member to producer.

Star Wars (1977) illustrates one instance of a schema (Lucas’s interpretation of Campbell’s monomyth) which has not only yielded sequels produced by George Lucas, but also a league of amateur tribute films made by *Star Wars* fans. This regeneration of *Star Wars* films by amateur filmmakers is based on careful viewing of the existing body of *Star Wars* films produced by Lucas’s company. The resulting films include examples of collective productions involving medium to large production teams and departments. They range from serious drama such as *Broken Allegiance* (2002), to affectionate satires like *The Emperor’s New Clones* (2006), and are sometimes feature length. This phenomenon could be argued to present an alternative to the film school model; however, from an industry point of view, none of these tributes has produced a film that has generated interest on a scale comparable to those produced by Lucas films. (It is interesting to note that Lucas himself is a film school graduate.)

If a cinematic artifact is understood as a text, it can be investigated, as Julia Kristeva suggests, on the basis that ‘any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another’ (1986:37).

Star Wars (1977) producers and their audience form a loop resulting in an example of ‘lector in fabula’, or ‘the model reader’ (Eco 1979b), where all who are involved consciously share a very familiar ‘mosaic of quotes’.

Successful replication of commercial success is not, however, the core purpose of film

school. The analysis of *Star Wars* (1977) in this thesis is certainly not for the purposes of replicating a ‘Star Wars formula’. In a studio model of learning and teaching, the underpinning body of knowledge for the discipline is addressed as theory and practice. Exposure to and engagement with a range of methodologies is central to the film school experience. This means surveying theory, including how it informs practice and the role it may have in the formulation of organising principles in practice.

Film school pedagogy, ideally, addresses methodologies drawn from a range of theoretical approaches to various styles of production. This includes those projects for which the student’s intention is to construct a cinematic artifact where the audience is able to grasp the meaning of the text by, as Eco puts it, discerning the modes of sign production and interpretation (1979c).

Personal expression or communication with audience

The grammatical implications of Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) for the film school student can be framed around the question of whether the film is primarily an ‘expression’ or a ‘communication’ of the ‘author’ (in this case the would-be student writer, director or editor). In this context, the *Morphology* (2000) can be explored as a foundation or grammatical structure for the signs used by the student in their production. How much will the student’s film be a polyvocal expression or closed communication? Most film school students are mindful of a polarity between Hollywood (entertainment) and gallery (art), despite the potential for those working in the genre of ‘art’ film (such as Peter Greenaway or David Lynch) to expand or challenge these divisions.

Block (2001) attempts to provide a practical, production-oriented organisational schema that links the constituent crafts and texts that combine to form cinematic artifacts by positing ‘contrasts and affinities’ as universals. According to Block, the specialisations of production such as cinematography, production design, sound

design and wardrobe can all, in their own ways, produce varying degrees of tension by manipulations of contrast or affinity between design elements perceived by audience.

If Block (2001) is advocating that cinematic narrative is fundamentally a manipulation of audience emotion, it can be reduced to an exercise in behaviourist psychology. What Block calls emotion may simply be an act of stimulating audience arousal and agitation in controlled degrees.

Ed Tan's (1996) interpretation of the 'affect structure' of films reminds us that emotional affect can be, and indeed is necessarily, structured within any given cinematic narrative. We can differentiate between emotion and affect if we consider there to be a difference between cinematic stimuli that forcibly extract sensory response (such as loud and unexpected intrusions that characterise certain genres like horror and action films), and the eliciting of emotion through construction of an empathetic relationship between audience and characters.

Ultimately Propp's *Morphology* (2000) suggests that most folktales commence with a description of normality, followed by a disruption and close with a return to normality. McKee (1999) encourages writers to commence their story with one option within a binary and finish with the other. For McKee, story is a process of making a shift or change palpable as an alternation between 'negative' or 'positive' outcomes in relation to a value represented (held) by a character—and these are values with which an audience can readily empathise. McKee describes emotional engagement (between writer and audience) in 'structure' in the following terms:

Structure is a selection of events from the characters' life stories that is composed into a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions and to express a specific view of life. (1999:33)

McKee's intention is that the audience will be cognisant of the 'emotional charge' generated through 'meaningful' changes in a character's life situation. In this regard McKee reveals an affinity with the 'cognitivists' of film theory, such as David Bordwell (1999), who rejects strictly behaviourist accounts of human action in favour

of exploring and understanding human behaviour by postulating ‘such entities as perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, desires, intentions, plans, skills, and feelings’. In the development of story McKee advocates persistent exploration of human behaviour through methodical study of character, particularly seeking out the gap between a character’s expectation and the results of their action (or inaction).

For Bordwell (1999), story needs to be differentiated from reportage, with a conscious examination of mental representation. This means an examination of the semantic content of representation, the structure of representation and the processing of mental representations with reference to perceptual judgments, construction of memories, problem solving and the drawing of inferences.

Bordwell relates cognitivist frameworks in film interpretation (1999) to ‘how social action is mediated by mental representations’. This suggests a generative, rather than purely replicating, application of Propp’s *Morphology* (2000): the morphology as a point of departure from past processes of emplotment, whereby protagonist–antagonist binaries have been overly simplistic.

Propp’s functions can be examined for the prototypical situations they present, which are based on fundamental human concerns and anxieties, such as social rupture and instability, change and stasis in family structure, demonisation and attribution of blame, beliefs and technologies, predatory impulses, punishment and justification of violence.

While Propp’s morphology distills the action of folktales, it deliberately omits an exploration of intentionality in its dramatis personae. These are open to the student filmmaker to explore and speculate upon. Here lies an opportunity to explore discourse using Proppian functions as coordinates.

In this context, we can use Propp’s functions and dramatis personae as a kind of checklist for the ‘units of meaning’ assembled by the students in the development of their cinematic projects. The simplicity and lack of sophistication of the morphology may indeed, for some projects, be more pragmatically useful in the context of a cinematic production (that must be completed and delivered by a specific delivery date). In this context the morphology could have an application in the reviewing of

the ‘primary’ logic of the student’s story, before investigating its more complex narrative implications. Any Proppian function that might be identified as relevant to a specific student project could then be further explored in relation to that project. The morphology is potentially useful for identifying the essence of specific dramatic situations (scenes) and the economy with which exposition might be achieved in the form of recognisable, pre-formulated units of meaning.

The morphology also offers a schema for understanding spaces as domains within narrative. These are domains of ownership, possession, home/family belonging, enhanced status, displacement, banishment, imprisonment, battle, punishment and/or death. Some tales depict a passage of ‘transference’ between domains (or ‘kingdoms’) in order to facilitate a particular action. The functions and their spatial representations are all open to investigation and speculation. This relates to space, geography and other design elements within film production as narremes and sememes to be explored and specified in communications between director and production department heads.

Stripped of their fantastical expressions, Propp’s functions, in a sense, relate to Horton’s notions of ‘primary theory’. Propp’s functions operate in the realm of self-explanatory and self-evident relationships as found in ‘folk’ physics and ‘folk’ psychology—for example: ‘snow is freezing and has the potential to end life’, or ‘adults are capable of nurturing and guiding children’. These propositions are widely accepted as assumptions that are pragmatically treated as self-evident. Propp’s functions are in a sense also observations that relate to Horton’s ‘secondary theory’ (theoretical formulations and entities, including beliefs, either folk or scientific), although they are not intended as a means of examining these theoretical formulations. However, once the morphology’s dramatis personae and functions are made overt they become more available for examination.

Assuming that the film school has aspirations beyond the duplication of existing cinematic narratives, these schemas can serve other purposes. Where the student is formulating the particular logic that will bring coherence to his or her work in progress, it may be useful to creatively engage existing schemas as references and resources in new ways.

Despite the abundance of literature available that advocates the ‘Hollywood orthodoxy’ of three-act, actantial paradigms for screenplay writing, these schema represent a methodology that is largely redundant to the film school, after a certain point, because they can be learned by repeated viewings of successful exemplars of this paradigm. For example, viewing and analyzing samples of a particular genre will reveal screenplay paradigms and some of their variations. Teaching the replication of a specific paradigm is a limited aspiration for a film school. Students generally sense the risk of producing clichés through adoption of an overly formulaic approach.

In this context, some students welcome an introduction to Propp’s *Morphology* as it clearly identifies the characteristics of narrative, and more specifically plot, of which they have usually had some prior recognition, but which they could not articulate. For these students the morphology, particularly when presented alongside cinematic case studies, can be a moment of clarity. As the workings of plot become more overt, some students gain more precise insights into the narratives they view in the works of others and subsequently into those they develop and produce themselves. This systematic approach can be valuable at the early stages of concept and story development, but it can also be adapted to the analysis of narrative in the editing stages of production where plot configurations and reconfigurations are of major importance in shaping the final product.

Alternatively, some students perceive the possibility of a cinematic application of the morphology as overly procedural, and respond with some suspicion that it might somehow smother originality or creativity in their own work.

By making the processes of linear plot arrangement more visible, I argue that there is an opportunity to be more innovative, once conventional approaches are made very clear. The concept of authenticity in work can also be discussed in relation to what might be perceived as the proceduralism of plot design.

One distinction that generally becomes apparent in working with film school students

is their preference *either* for film as entertainment (and commercial product), *or* film as a representation of personal experience and belief. This distinction can also be framed as the question: to what extent will the student's project be one of communication or one of expression? The former approach may embrace structures such as the morphology as tools that potentially help hone one's craft in terms of understanding and mastering plot, particularly where specific genres require specific 'knowing' shared by audiences of that genre.

For those students who aspire to invest their work personal and individual qualities, schemas like the morphology or hero's journey may be perceived as potentially undermining the individuality, and consequently the authenticity, of their work. My response to this concern is to present examples of film works that exemplify Proppian structure alongside works that are problematic when cross-referenced to the morphology. The latter films generate opportunities to reflect on our own personal experience of perceiving associations and causality, and inclination to formulate linear logic and plot.

Analysis and discussion *using* the morphology can easily be turned to analysis and discussion *about* the morphology, and about procedurality and stereotypical thinking in general. The fact that we all operate on a daily basis using various schemas is directly relevant to much of the theory of mind or 'folk psychology': 'Some psychologists use the term schema as the basic building block of cognition (Rumelhart, 1980b; see also G. Mandler, 1984). On this view all mental organization is schematic in nature' (Mandler 1984:2).

Propp's *Morphology* (2000) can be described as at the stage of theoretical re-examination of its presuppositions; however, it remains a useful metaphor or analogy for cognitive schema. If Propp's morphology is to be generative, it is unlikely to be so as a 'template' for generating new folktales (cinematic or other), as it was conceived of as a means of story abstraction and *analysis* rather than story *making*.

The morphology can be taken as an example of our inclination to 'emplot' or seek

causal associations, and our predisposition to formulate binaries. Bordwell (1999) notes Mandler's proposal that 'prototypical schemata' exist:

Stories that do not follow the schema, such as tales lacking causal connections between episodes, are demonstrably more difficult to follow and remember. Most striking of all, when people are asked to reconstruct deviant stories, the result tends to revise the original by making it more canonical. Mandler's most recent experiments show consistent findings across adults and children and across populations of different cultures (Mandler 1984:50).

That Derrida (1981) denies the existence of an absolute origin of meaning in narrative structural components and/or signs as suggested by Propp's *Morphology* (2000), or any other manifestation of a 'closed text', may be astute critical analysis, but it is of limited use or value to the student who wishes to engage in what Eco calls 'presuppositional effort' (1979b). Eco describes this as the knowledge that the sender and addressee—in our case filmmaker and audience—should supposedly share. In other words, the filmmaker consciously seeks a degree of commonality between 'author' and audience: the 'coherence' to which Murch (Koppelman 2005) refers where some shared empathy or emotional affect is intentionally sought.

In this context, Propp's *Morphology* (2000) provides a kind of workbench or learning laboratory of plot and sign production where signs are intentionally produced as functions, or visible and audible cinematic artifacts. Here Propp's *Morphology* (2000) may have some application as a device to identify or extrapolate functions and their potential emotional affects, as just one of a number of schemas that could be used to construct a cinematic emotional affect device as Ed Tan would call it, or what Shklovsky would describe as a 'machine' of sorts. Perhaps Shklovsky anticipated the Hollywood 'dream factory' of which Adorno (1974) would later be so critical for its production of mass culture.

Students respond in a range of ways to the notion that cinema, and more specifically, the films they are about to make, can be approached as schemas and 'machines'. I have noticed that students express both attraction and objection to various examples

of translation of plot functions into cinema texts. I have observed that the film student's interest in this is typically characterised by engagement in the hypermedia of cinema production because they are responding to both the cinematic artifact and their own practice-based interest in cinematic craft (particularly the specialisations they associate with their own career pursuits).

Just as the film school student may be excited by what they see as exemplars of fine cinematic craft, they can equally be inclined to reject what they perceive to be overly contrived cinematic artifacts. We can refer this dichotomy back to Bolter and Grusin's binaries of hypermediacy and opacity, and immediacy and transparency. The film school student is, by vocation, engaged in hypermediacy as they are engaged in the practices, devices, tools and mechanisms that comprise the craft of cinematic production. This preoccupation with contrivance can be opaque in that it can eclipse the sense of potential immediacy in instances of cinema production and viewing characterised by spontaneity and directness. Put simply, some students perceive these schemas as undermining their spontaneity.

The relationship between these two aspects (hypermediacy and transparency) of the cinema artifact is constantly being renegotiated in the filmmaking process. *Cinéma vérité*, or 'direct cinema', may have originally been a strategy for achieving immediacy and transparency—the sense of presence within an event or situation—but it has now itself developed into sign, and become a fashionably self-conscious device to signal a sensation of presence by pseudo-spontaneity (such as the mimicking of unstable camera, attempts to frame and focus on actions in front of the camera, or video camera viewfinder displays being constructed in post-production effects).

These notions of hypermediacy and transparency arise in relation to the value of schematic approaches to the production of cinematic narrative artifacts, particularly with regard to concepts of 'authenticity'. Some students approach the schemas of Propp or Campbell with a suspicion that they represent restrictive, formulaic procedures for manufacturing cinematic product. Such concerns are sometimes associated with authorial notions of authenticity and originality or, more precisely, with a fear that use of these schema may diminish their own personal, individual expression in their work as writer, director and/or editor.

Technical competence in narrative filmmaking

The ‘technical competence’ to which Andrew Sarris refers can be defined as familiarity with the underpinning knowledge of the cinematic medium. Here technical competence refers to narrative, directorial and editorial skills and insight rather than the purely technical operations required by the physical, mechanical operation of equipment. Sarris’s definition of competence is largely an expression of the auteur theory, as founded the understanding of, and competence to influence, the production and combination of the texts that constitute cinema. This auteurist sentiment is particularly prevalent in some film schools and addresses directorial skills in particular. These auteur skills include a comprehension of organisational principles and an ability to develop a method and logic that can be applied to the multiple texts that are produced for integration into the completed hybrid text that forms the cinematic artifact, be it a short film, a narrative feature film, or other cinematic form. Furthermore, this competence incorporates a level of knowledge of the nature of texts as produced by each film production department (such as visual, performative or musical), and the existing methods or schemas that may be called upon to provide a foundation logic for any given production or project.

It is interesting to note that Feneley declined to use any musical cues for his soundtrack for *Snow* (2005), effectively opening his text to a greater range of interpretive possibilities for his audience.

While practitioners of the two crafts of visual design and musical composition may likely never directly consult with one another within a large-scale production, their common reference points for design will generally be plot functions—derived from script analysis mediated by the director and later the editor. These functions are what constitute the sequential organisation of binaries, the arranging of elements into syntactic order to facilitate comparisons and contrasts for cognitive and linguistic processing as posited by Soviet montage theory, McKee (1999) and Block (2001) in both classic linear and so-called non-linear cinematic narratives. The notion that the

organisation of binaries is central to the design and production of cinematic narrative has remained a fundamental concern, and a formal aspect of cinema which is part of the underpinning knowledge of the practice of producing cinematic screen narratives. For this reason, the review of formalist projects and their relationship to movements in cinema remains of value within film school pedagogy. In this context, the schemas provided by Propp and Campbell are potentially useful.

Authenticity

Propp's *Morphology* (2000) is sometimes perceived as a template that seemingly undermines the originality of individual narratives. Here notions of originality and individuality are frequently claimed to have a kind of authenticity by way of the direct personal experience or individuality expressed by student filmmaker through their work.

The notion of authenticity can be (and in some film school programs is) addressed by the inclusion of strategies to encourage autobiographical exploration in relation to concept and story development of individual student projects. This may result in the realisation of a wholly autobiographical work. Alternatively it may encourage the student to relate their work more directly to first-hand observations and perspectives even if reapplied to fictionalised adaptations. Rosen (2010) describes a story exercise given to film school students by teacher, Paul Schrader, whereby students were asked to recall a personal trauma they had suffered. Rather than describe that trauma literally, Schrader asked students to produce a metaphor for the trauma they had experienced. If, as Biró put it, student filmmakers are 'to unearth or detect those traces of memory or experience, bring them to the fore and try to create something coherent out of it' (1997) they may draw out raw, autobiographically authentic material or draw on existing topoi, schemas or morphologies that might facilitate this material's delivery to audience as a 'meaningful sentence' (Biró 2008b:103).

Some schools describe this process in terms of an aspiration to help the student 'develop their own voice', where the school mission is characterised by a desire to foster independent filmmakers who possess the confidence to develop a distinctive

work method. This aspiration compliments auteurism as advocated by film director and film critic François Truffaut (1954). In attempting to define auteur theory Andrew Sarris (1979) proposed that a director must realise technical competence and personal style. While this is a particularly director-centric view of cinematic production these attributes are still highly regarded in film school graduates within film schools. Developing the student's 'own voice' does not simply equate to the use of their own personal experiences as primary sources of material for their own work. It usually refers also to a capability to craft expression into cinematic artifacts. Biró refers to this as reintroducing 'the sense of the *real*, real' into what might otherwise be simply banal. (1997:163)

In classical Hollywood cinema, overly mechanical translation of plot into constituent cinematic texts—visual composition, gesture/performance, mise en scène/scenic art, montage, music or soundscape—often manifests as cliché.

The nature of a student or independent work will be largely shaped by the creator's attitude towards their 'presuppositional effort' as Eco (1979b) would call it, during concept development and production. This will determine the extent to which the individual writer or director ('author') develops a logic that is accessible to their audience. The example of *Snow* (2005) illustrates the possibility of making a very personal and 'authentic' story that evokes some of the characteristics of the folktale while not complying with the stereotypical closure expected within Propp's schema.

The inclination to emplot events and inscribe characters with stereotypical attributes that correlate to Propp's functions remains widely evident throughout a range of categories including entertainment film, tabloid television, television news, television advertising (see for example Vogler 1992, Luthar 1997, Gaines 2002, and Dégh 1979). The *Morphology* remains useful while it has constructivist potential, whereby cognitive structures such as schemas or mental models offer meaning and organisation to our experiences and allows the individual to 'go beyond the information given' (Bruner 1973). Furthermore, the application of a 'closed text' such as Propp's *Morphology* (2000) has value where the significance of creating cinematic narratives that aspire to some degree of commonality of meaning is recognised.

As Eco explains: ‘What I want to say is that there are somewhere criteria for limiting interpretation’ (1990:59).

The presentation of Propp’s *Morphology* (2000) in the form of a digital, graphical chart has helped to merge the potentially separate endeavours of theory and practice. In chart form, the morphology can be viewed easily, at a glance and at different scales. More importantly, the Proppian chart can act as a sort of ideas workbench because it allows configurations and reconfigurations of actual cinematic sequences and plots through cut-and-paste operations. The footage (scene, shot, gesture) can be viewed exactly in the context of its plot function. This means the chart can be used to illustrate existing cinematic texts which can be precisely correlated to a Proppian schema. While this is primarily a means of reviewing and analysing existing plot configurations, it can also be used to review and compare different iterations of the same Proppian function as expressed or designed in different cinematic texts. This can serve two purposes. It can facilitate macro and micro views of the specific texts that constitute a cinematic iteration of a plot function. This entails identifying specific instances of any of the hybrid constituent texts that may carry meaning as relates to plot function: for example, gesture/mimetic performance, image composition, movement and choreography, montage, music or sonic design. As a tool for cross-referencing multiple cinematic works, a chart form of Propp’s morphological functions can be particularly useful for comparison and contrast between their design and plot characteristics.

However, there are clearly films that do not conveniently correlate to the Proppian functions. *Snow* (2005) was chosen for a Proppian analysis precisely because it could not be adequately described as an exemplar of Proppian morphology.

In this context, the Proppian chart can be a useful tool for students to examine and explore their own cognitive processes against a Proppian reading. Given that the Proppian chart allows cut-and-paste operations, there is scope to allocate and reallocate functions as an active exploration of plot design. This can serve as a prelude to the processes students will later encounter in their production practice. It relates to what informs plot decisions and design in students’ own work at the concept development and story development stages. It also relates to sequence and plot

design as encountered during the edit stages of production. A practical encounter with the morphology can also be a prelude to the analysis required for constructing and refining the logic of a given linear arrangement as performed by the student as editor.

Arrangement of the morphology into an ‘at-a-glance’ chart also provides an example of organisational strategy for more complex narrative projects. The idea of placing cinematic fragments (shots) within a single field of view is routinely practised by Walter Murch, specifically to facilitate exploration of the links and potential syntax amongst fragments (see earlier Figure 5 on Murch at work). In this example of editing practice, the objective is not limited to mere replication of story events as per the script order. Murch creates a wall of fragments represented by still photographic images of key frames from each take with which he will work in the edit. In the process of reconsidering the potential links between each of these fragments, Murch may formulate and suggest to the director alternate syntactical arrangements to that conceptualised by the writer and/or director.

Similarly, the morphology in chart form might be used as an ideas ‘workbench’ where syntactical and sequential logic can be analysed and reviewed before further decisions are made. In this instance, Proppian functions may serve as an entry point into a process that ultimately challenges Proppian inclinations rather than fosters compliance with the *Morphology* (2000).

Finally, the value of Proppian analysis and analysis of Proppian methods is pedagogical in that it presents one example of a method that can be linked and contextualised in relation to formalist and narratological thought. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly for the student, it can be explored in relation to students’ rigorous explorations of the ‘rules’ of story as they conceptualise, develop and shape their own cinematic works. Ultimately, the most valuable use of the *Morphology* may not relate in any way to replication of end product, but simply to introduce the filmmaking student to the concept of morphologies. As Raul Ruiz (1996) points out, students can, in the manner of shamanic filmmaking, create their own morphologies in which they can conduct their own investigations free of traditional, industrial filmmaking conventions. Karkoschka (1972) comments on various notation systems and schemas that in the end what is important is not the symbols or machinations but

phenomena they signify, what lies behind them and what we must create by means of these symbols.

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