3 Investigating narrative

Narrative is the glue that binds together media products. A narrative can exist within a single production such as a video or photograph, or across a number of pieces such as a photographic series. How these products are constructed and how the content is arranged and revealed is all related to narrative and storytelling.

This chapter explores how a narrative and story can be told; how style, story and genre work together; how different media forms tell stories in their own way; and how style is created by the individual or team producing the media product. In this context, 'narrative' is used as a general term and 'story' is used when discussing a specific narrative form.

> Story is your enemy. Story will sink you. Conversely, in a movie, if you don't have a story, that will sink you.
>
> Tina Fey, Screenwriter and actor

Day for Night (1973)

3.1 Narratives

People live with stories—from television, films, video games, online readings and viewings they consume in the evening—to a novel in bed before they turn out the light.

NARRATIVE AND STORY

There is a distinction between narrative and story, even though the two words are used interchangeably. At its most basic, a narrative is a series of events and a story describes how those events are arranged; that is, a story has elements such as character, and a beginning, middle and end.

Narratives and stories surround everyone and are encountered constantly throughout daily life. People live with stories: from newspapers, radio and television in the morning to encounters throughout the day at school or work and even the various forms of advertising that people consume while travelling. People receive stories via print, audio and visual productions.

The way narratives are formed into stories may change as well as the way they are told. A film tells a story in a different way to a book and video games create a story in a different way to a television show, but all contain the essential characteristics of storytelling. Even forms not immediately associated with storytelling, such as the television news, arrange and structure their pieces to construct a narrative. They are called news stories for a reason.

The essential elements of a story are quite simple. First of all, a story needs a structure and this is usually a beginning, a middle and an end. A story also needs a purpose, intention (or reason for being told) and a story needs an audience.

> French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard is famous for saying that his films always had a beginning, a middle and an end, except that he did not necessarily arrange them in that order. Godard's intention was to disrupt his viewers' expectations of a story and of their traditional viewing patterns. By playing with the audience's ideas of story Godard's films often reinforced people's need or desire to be able to read a text as a story.

FIGURE 3.1.1 Call of Duty video game. Narratives can be delivered in a variety of ways and read by a variety of audiences.

The basic structural elements of a story will be essentially the same across the different mediums. The core elements of a narrative will stay the same in a book, a film, a television show, a play, a photographic essay and other mediums. However, the medium may cause the story elements to be arranged differently.

Much of the writing on narrative and story seems obvious when looking at what appear to be the 'natural' storytelling mediums of film and television, but it also applies to other mediums. In photography, a story can be told within the frame of a single image or across multiple frames or images in a photographic essay or photojournalist shoot. In print, apart from the obvious written stories in a magazine, the form of a magazine tells a story in itself. There is a narrative structure to a magazine that takes the reader on a journey through its pages. Graphic novels and zines also have an overarching structure in addition to the storytelling codes and conventions of the narratives told within its pages.

The term 'narrative' is often used interchangeably with the term 'story' and, while it is usually acceptable to do this, there is a difference between story and narrative at a more academic level. Narrative is the overall term, and story and plot combine to form a narrative. The story contains the story elements such as character, time and space and the plot is the way the story elements are arranged.

The best way to think of this is that the story is how you would describe a film, play, book or so on to someone who had not yet seen it. Generally, the story would described what happened in chronological order, along the lines of: 'There was a private detective who had been hired to look for an old girlfriend by her husband'.

The plot is how the story is told and can include flashbacks, flash-forwards and voice-over narration. In the case of the private detective example, the film might start with a flashback of the private detective with a voice-over showing him breaking up with a girl years ago, then a flash-forward to the present and the girl's husband entering the detective's office.

The essential difference is that the story is *what* is told and the plot is *how* it is told.

NARRATIVE ESSENTIALS

AUDIENCE

An audience is fairly necessary to the storytelling process. A story is usually constructed for a particular audience and this audience and their expectations in turn will influence the structure of the story.

An audience rarely comes to or views a work or text with no expectations. Audience's expectations can be based on their previous experiences with the medium or form or with the genre of the story, or may even be based on their expectations associated with the particular actors, directors, photographers, artists or publishers. Just knowing that a comic is published by Marvel or DC brings with it a host of expectations.

At the most basic level, the audience expects a story to be established, for events to happen and for there to be a resolution.

If an audience is essential for a story to exist, can the teller also be the audience? Or is a story without an audience merely a daydream?

SELF-REFLEXIVE FILM

A self-reflexive film is a film about filmmaking, creativity, audiences and the conflict between creative expression and commercial interests. Jean Luc Godard's 1963 film *Les Mempris* (*Contempt*) seen in Figure 3.1.2 is a film about a film being made. Many of the roles in the film being made within *Les Mempris* are played by people who had that role in real life; for example, the fictional director in the film was played by Fritz Lang, himself a famous director.

FIGURE 3.1.2 Jean Luc Godard's *Les Mempris* (*Contempt*) (1963) is a self-reflexive film.

STRUCTURE

The structure of a story is very dependent on the medium it is told through. A basic story structure contains a beginning where the story/journey commences, a middle where the story unfolds, and an end where the story concludes or is resolved.

Some mediums explicitly show audiences each of these stages with quite clear delineations. In other mediums, these stages may be inferred or left for the audience to construct. For example, with a single photographic image a viewer can see the initial situation, create a backstory, infer how the story will unfold, and create a resolution.

IN MEDIA RES

Generally media stories start *in media res*, which is Latin for 'in the middle of things'; that is, audiences come into an existing situation, which then unfolds and develops over the course of the story.

Film

In the case of film, the audience arrives assuming that there is a backstory and it is very rare to start the story/film with a character's birth. There are exceptions though: *The World According to Garp* (1982) starts with Garp's conception and ends with his death.

Photography

In Figure 3.1.3, the Iranian photographer Gohar Dashti shows a situation that makes viewers ask questions such as: Who are these people? What has happened? What is happening? What will happen? Viewers are invited to construct a history, a present and a future for the image. The surreal or dreamlike quality of the scene frees the viewer from having to 'understand' it in a realistic or logical way; viewers can also see it as meaning something on a symbolic level. This image also illustrates how a story does not have to relate to realism but can reflect a symbolic code that viewers also use when attempting to create meaning in the reading of a story.

STORY, STYLE AND GENRE

Once the basics of what a story is are understood, how the story is told needs to be examined. Each medium has its own styles and genres. 'Style' can be defined as the approach that is taken by an individual or collective's creative decisions when telling the story. One way of looking at this is that the story may be considered like a recipe—the story elements are the ingredients and the style is how the cook or chef puts the ingredients together.

FIGURE 3.1.3 Image from Iranian photographer Gohar Dashti's series Today's Life and War (2008)


FIGURES 3.1.4 AND 3.1.5 *Hail Caesar* (2016) [left] and *Fargo* (1996) [right] show how the Coen brothers have explored different genres.

Another way is to consider a song by one artist that is covered by another artist—the words and tune will be the same, but how they are arranged is a result of creative decisions by the covering artist—that is, their style.

Genre is a French word meaning 'type' or 'kind' and when used in English it is typically used to categorise media products. Genre can be seen as part of an industrial or institutional type of production. Filmmakers, photographers and other artists can, and usually do, have a distinctive style, but they can also work within a genre. Genre can feel quite restrictive sometimes to a writer but those constraints can be very satisfying to an audience. Genre can also be played with, referenced and used out of context to surprise and engage an audience on a number of different levels.

The Coen brothers' films are a good example of filmmakers playing with genre and they bring their own distinctive style to a number of different genres, as illustrated in the films *Hail Caesar* (see Figure 3.1.4) and *Fargo* (see Figure 3.1.5).

Both style and genre also play a large part in the expectations an audience has when they approach a film, a print product or other media texts. Filmgoers often talk of seeing the new Wes Anderson film or that latest action film. Both style and genre codes and conventions shape the story and the way it unfolds and is read by an audience.

Learning activities

1. What are the three essentials to telling a story?
2. Explain the importance of an audience.
3. Look at Figure 3.1.3. Using no more than five sentences, create a story centring on the photo. What medium would you use and what genre might it fall under?
4. Look at the following scenarios for the beginning of a film. Using your knowledge of genre convention, add two or three lines describing what happens next and how it ends.
   - The 'unattractive' nerdy girl is always being left out and being picked on by the 'cool' group.
   - A 'mad' bomber holds the city to ransom. There are only two detectives available to deal with the crisis. One is just about to retire and one is just about to be suspended.
   - It is one week before the wedding and an old boyfriend comes back to visit the bride.
   - A prisoner is released from prison. He decides to get a team together for one last robbery before he skips the country forever.

3.2 Narrative and story in film and television

In film and television, narratives and stories follow the same pattern as all stories; narratives tell stories and stories consist of a series of events that link together and occur within a logical time in a specific place or space.

NARRATIVE

In his book *Film Art: An Introduction* David Bordwell provides a basic definition of a narrative as 'a chain of events in cause and effect relationship occurring in time and space'. This definition uncovers the 'spine' of a story and gives a solid foundation upon which to build. A story has, at its core, events that happen and these events are linked together so that one action leads to or causes another action to happen. All this occurs within a logical time in a specific place or space. Bordwell also describes another basic element; that is, who or what is it that causes these events to happen, allowing the story to advance—in other words, character.

STORY AND STRUCTURE

Before creators start writing a story, there are important questions they need to be able to answer:

- Why they are telling the story?
- Who are they telling it for and who are they telling it to?
- What and who is their audience?

The answers to these questions will inform the structure of the story. A creator may be communicating a grander theme or idea. It may be: 'love will come', 'bad guys don't prosper', 'revenge is unsatisfying', 'be careful of strangers/ welcome strangers' or 'don't build a house on an ancient Indigenous burial site' (which can really mean 'respect other cultures').

THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

Most stories have what is known as a three-act structure: a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is also known among screenwriters as the set-up, the play-out and the wrap-up:

- The set-up or the beginning sets the scene, introduces the main characters and presents the audience with the key questions, the dilemma or the problem that needs to be resolved or solved.
- The play-out or middle is where the problem is expanded, and the main character(s) try to overcome it while obstacles are placed in their way.
- The wrap-up or end is where there is a resolution, a goal is usually achieved and the audience is usually presented with a final outcome.

The three-act structure plays out across most genres (including non-fiction). In a police drama, the three-act structure may function as follows:

- Set-up: A homicide squad detective has one more chance before he retires to apprehend a serial killer he has been chasing for most of his career. Towards the end of the first act, the detective's wife gets in touch with him to ask if he has heard from their daughter, who appears to be missing.
- Play-out: The detective's primary investigation is thrown off track by his daughter's disappearance. As he embarks on a journey to find to find her, he discovers his daughter's life rests in the hands of the serial killer and he must overcome a series of challenges to be reunited with her.
- Wrap-up: The detective utilises his special skills to find and save his daughter. He tracks down and shoots the man he believes is the killer, only to realise the criminal he has been chasing all these years is actually his old trusted partner who had become corrupt.

This example classically conforms to a narrative formula with a theme (good triumphs and the corrupt get justice) and a three-act structure. It also adheres to familiar genre conventions (good cop/bad cop story) and resolves audience expectations (the corrupt get a serving of justice).

CHARACTER

As Bordwell has pointed out, a narrative is a series of events —obviously something must happen and it is usually this event or these events that form the central questions that the story asks the audience. It is these questions—who, why and how—that propel the narrative forward. In most stories, it is characters to whom the audience attaches these questions. The majority of stories are character based and the structure is driven by the characters' wants and desires. It is often the tension between what a character wants and what a character needs that creates narrative interest.

FIGURE 3.2.1 *The Dark Knight* (2008). Batman is a classic protagonist and his enemies, such as the Joker, are the classic antagonists.

In a teen drama this may be that Joey wants to be a world skating champion. As the story unfolds, the audience realises that what Joey really needs is to be loved and his desire to fulfil his wants (through ruthlessly training) take him further away from what he needs (his parents'/girlfriend's support and love). Tension and engagement is also created by our character having a central goal (to be a world skating champion) and obstacles being placed in his way (lack of sponsorship, a seemingly crippling injury, a cheating rival) and then overcome. The resolution comes when the character's goal is reached (becoming a world skating champion) or a sense of clarity is achieved (there are more important things in life that winning). The audience may not necessarily have all their questions answered but are usually satisfied with the resolution.

Characters are the ones that cause the events to happen; it is their motivations, needs or wants that move the story forward. There are usually two major characters that can feature in a story: the protagonist and the antagonist. The protagonist is usually the 'hero' or the main player whose quest the audience follows. The story is often told from the protagonist's perspective. Narrative tension is provided by the antagonist—the character that is usually portrayed as the 'villain' who stops or attempts to prevent the protagonist from reaching their goals. An antagonist could be a vengeful ex, an uncaring parent or a corrupt detective.

CREATING CHARACTERS IN FILM

Stories build up consistent, multilayered three-dimensional characters so we as an audience feel we know them. A film is about character. A character will have a consistent voice. They often have a verbal or physical trait or costume which helps create depth.

In this scene from *Strangers on a Train* (see Figure 3.2.2), the antagonist Bruno helps a blind man across the road. Normally, an audience would read this as a good character trait and tend to like Bruno as a result. However, in the scenes immediately before this, Bruno had burst a child's balloon and strangled a woman. The audience is put off balance by Bruno's actions and perhaps sees him as a split and conflicted character.

FIGURE 3.2.2 In *Strangers on a Train* (1951), the antagonist Bruno helps a blind man across the road.

FIGURE 3.2.3 This camera shot from *Psycho* (1960) reflects Hitchcock's film style.

FILM NARRATIVE AND STYLE

Style in film can be defined as the creative decisions taken by the director or the creative team that is producing the work. Style can exist within genre conventions or as a statement in itself. Style can sometimes be hard to define because it is often one of those elements of film that is only known when it can be seen. David Bordwell has provided some guidelines to analysing film style. They can be used to analyse a film's structure and then to look at individual filmmakers to see if there is any consistency of these elements across their films. To analyse style the following guidelines and questions can be used in regards to film techniques:

- Look at the structure of the film. How is the story organised? Is it a linear narrative; that is, does the film unfold in chronological time, starting at day one and continuing without flashbacks or flash-forwards until the resolution? Or, is it a non-linear narrative? These structures set the limits.
- Look at the important and noticeable (salient) techniques that the filmmaker or creative team has used and that the film relies on. Techniques such as camera shot, camera movement, lighting, colour schemes/palette, editing and so on, all contribute to the style.
- See if there are patterns of using these techniques in the film. Does the filmmaker use these techniques often, when and how?
- Think about why the filmmaker has used these techniques and what affect they have on the viewer.

Bordwell also emphasises that film techniques should not be examined individually but need to be read in the context of the entire film. Remember that there is no one specific meaning attached to these techniques; and all the techniques need to be seen and interpreted in relation to the other stylistic elements in the film. These film techniques can also be examined if they are used across other films that the filmmaker or creative team have made. Figure 3.2.3 shows a still from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) in which Hitchcock has used particular camera shots, largely mid-shot and close-up, to emphasise the 'trappedness' of the characters. This, along with his use of editing, is an important element of the film's and Hitchcock's style.

Learning activities

1. What does a story rely on?
2. What role does character play in a story?
3. What are the protagonist and the antagonist?
4. Provide three examples each of a protagonist and an antagonist from films you have watched this year. In each case, describe the protagonist's goals and the obstacles that the antagonist created.

Wes Anderson

Wes Anderson is an American filmmaker born in 1969 whose career started in 1996 with the short film *Bottle Rocket*. He has made eight films since then and has been nominated for and won various awards including Golden Globes and Academy Awards. There is no doubt that Anderson's films have a distinctive style.

Using David Bordwell's guidelines and questions in regards to film techniques it can be seen that Anderson and his collaborators have forged a distinctive style.

STRUCTURE

Apart from *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), the narrative structure of Anderson's films tends to be linear; that is, there are no flashbacks or flash-forwards and the story progresses chronologically from day one of the story. Anderson's films have a resolution that means the questions that have been raised in the film are answered. While his endings are not always happy, they are resolved. Anderson's films also tend to be structured around themes that are usually either based on family or relationship and these create the main narrative conflicts.

SALIENT TECHNIQUES

Salient techniques include camera, colour, *mis en scène*/visual composition, dialogue, characters and recurring actors.

Camera

Anderson often uses an overhead shot, which gives the viewer additional story information. In Figure 3.2.4, Anderson uses deep focus in this scene from *The Royal Tenenbaums*—everything in the frame is in focus to give the audience information about the characters and their relationship to each other. Anderson also uses tracking shots to provide or keep up the pace or momentum of the narrative, as well as giving the viewer the feeling of being part of the action.

FIGURE 3.2.4 A scene from *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001)

Colour

Anderson's films use colour to tie the film together aesthetically and create a unity that is pleasing to watch. Colour also helps to establish and build a sense of eccentricity or unusualness in the film. Figure 3.2.5 from *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) illustrates a typical Anderson shot, using symmetry to isolate the character in the shot and colour to highlight the character. *Moonrise Kingdom* is typical of Anderson's use of a limited colour palette with contrasting highlights. Shown in this scene are browns and yellows contrasted with the red of the dress.

Mise en scène/visual composition

Anderson uses symmetry in his visual composition including one point perspective. As shown in Figure 3.2.6, he also uses planes to compose his actors, which means he tends to either have them isolated or crowded together using the depth of the screen, rather than placing them in a straight line. Viewers tend to find symmetry very pleasing to the eye. It also creates points of interest and focuses attention on these points and, in Anderson's case, it often enhances the comic effect. In Figure 3.2.6, Anderson uses the depth of the frame to create a pyramid of characters which reflect the shape of the tent's doorway, typically the shot is balanced symmetrically and the colour palette is again browns and yellows with a red highlight. All these emphasise that Sam is missing.

Moonrise Kingdom is a coming-of-age comedy. Set in an island off the coast of New England in 1965, two 12-year-olds, Sam and Suzy, have fallen in love and decide to run away. A search party is then mobilised before disaster occurs.

FIGURE 3.2.5 *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012)

FIGURE 3.2.6 *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012)

Dialogue and music

Anderson often uses what is called 'deadpan dialogue' in his films. Deadpan means that an actor delivers a line of dialogue in a flat or emotionless way. This gives the audience a sense of comedy in the seeming seriousness of the line. Anderson also uses music as a major element. The music he chooses can enhance a character or the viewer's attitude to them, provide a comment on a character or situation, or put the audience off balance such as in *The Life Aquatic* (2014), which uses Brazilian samba versions of David Bowie songs.

Characters and recurring actors

Along with co-writing three of Anderson's films, Owen Wilson has acted in all but two of them. Bill Murray has acted in all Anderson's films.

Learning activities

1. Watch one of Wes Anderson's films. Find examples from it demonstrating how each of the following style elements are typical of an Anderson film:
   - camera
   - colour
   - visual composition
   - deadpan dialogue
   - music.
2. Look for still images from Wes Anderson's films on the internet. Find three still images for each of the elements of camera, colour and visual composition that you think are typical of Wes Anderson's style. Present your findings to the class.

Film noir and neo noir

As a media student when you look at style you should also look beyond the individual or creative team of filmmakers and look at styles that are the result of social or industrial factors. Good examples of this are ***film noir*** and ***neo noir***.

FILM NOIR

Film noir is a descriptive term that was initially applied to a style of film that emerged in the late 1930s and 1940s. It was coined by French film critics and it means black/dark film. Those critics used the term to describe films that dealt with dark issues or themes and had common narrative and production codes and conventions. The social and political climate of the time had a large influence on these films and it can be said that this climate was responsible for the genre. At the time these films were being made, the world was seeing the rise of fascism in Europe, the Second World War, the subsequent Cold War between the USA and the USSR and the threat of annihilation from nuclear war. People were seeing the world as a dark and dangerous place and films such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Touch of Evil* (1958) reflected their fears.

NEO NOIR

Neo noir, ***neo*** meaning 'new', is a revival of film noir, which uses, and often pays tribute to, the film noir genre's techniques and conventions, but with updated themes, issues and a new sense of contemporary relevance. While neo noir is a fairly loose category, films such as *Chinatown* (1974), *Body Heat* (1981), *Fargo* (1996), and *Sin City* (2005), seen in Figure 3.2.7 could be said to exemplify this style.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FILM NOIR AND NEO NOIR

There is a unity of style that ties together film noir works. While a film does not need to tick every box to be classified as a part of the genre the films, do have to share many of these stylistic devices.

Setting

Film noir is set in the big city, an urban space that is dark, dangerous and lonely. Much of the action takes place at night.

FIGURE 3.2.7 *Sin City* (2005) captures the gritty realism and hard-edged feel of classic film noir, but in a contemporary setting.

Plot and themes

The world of the film noir is a dark, dangerous and corrupt place. Things are not what they seem on the surface and evil lies beneath. The main themes are the male protagonists search for personal gain and a woman. The plot then revolves around the protagonists search for money and/or power and the investigation of a woman. This is made obvious in *Double Indemnity* (1944) where at the beginning of the film the protagonist Walter Neff speaks into a dictaphone.

> I killed him for money—and a woman—and I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman. Pretty, isn't it?
>
> *Double Indemnity* script, Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder

Film noir plots inevitably resolve, but the ending is rarely a happy one.

Character

The main character is usually a lone male who is an outsider and flawed. If he is a detective he is usually an outsider in the department. In *The Big Heat* (1953), Sergeant Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford), seen in Figure 3.2.8, plays the outsider cop attempting to break down a corrupt society.

FIGURE 3.2.8 Glenn Ford as Sergeant Dave Bannion in *The Big Heat* (1953)

The main female character is the *femme fatale* or 'deadly woman' (see Figure 3.2.9). She is attractive and irresistible to the main character. Over the course of the film, she manipulates him and lures him to his death or downfall. Along the way she usually dies too. In contrast to the femme fatale, there is the 'pure' woman who represents family and 'normal' society: she usually survives. Feminist film theory sees this as an ideological position that 'rewards' the conventional woman for sticking to the traditional role of women in the society at that time.

Camera

The shots are often tight mid-shots or close-ups, which increase the tension and give the viewer the feeling of the characters being trapped. The shots are also deep focus, where everything from the foreground to the background is in focus. The camera often is placed above characters, below their eye line, or tilted on an angle known as the 'dutch tilt', as seen in Figure 3.2.10.

Lighting

There is a stark contrast in the lighting between the light and dark. There are long shadows and the lighting often emphasises bars and lines across characters, highlighting the feeling of their being trapped.

Editing

The editing is often non-linear; that is, there are flashbacks. Often, viewers are told what has happened at the start of the film and the story that unfolds is how these things happened.

Sound

There is often a voice-over narration from the male protagonist, usually a confession. This, along with camera techniques, places the viewer in the position of the protagonist and enables them to identify with him and his struggles. This is taken to an extreme in *The Lady in the Lake* (1947) where the entire film is seen from the main character's point of view—the audience only hears him speak or sees his reflection when he looks into a mirror.

FIGURE 3.2.9 Faye Dunaway played the classic femme fatale Evelyn Cross Mulwray in Polanski's neo noir film *Chinatown* (1974).

Learning activities

1. Define film noir and write down at least four characteristics you think help define the genre.
2. Look for still images from film noir films that reflect the aspects of camera, character and lighting that you think are typical of this style. Present your findings to the class. Apart from the films mentioned above, other films you may want to investigate are *The Big Sleep* (1946), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) and *L.A. Confidential* (1997).

FIGURE 3.2.10 The use of camera angles such as the 'dutch tilt' heightens the viewer's anxiety in Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

FIGURE 3.2.11 In *Lady in the Lake* (1947), the story is told through the eyes of private detective Phillip Marlowe. The viewer sees the film through his eyes via the camera lens.

3.3 Photography narrative and style

Photography may not seem one of the 'natural' narrative mediums. At first glance, an image may appear to be just a snapshot but, beyond the surface, it shares common characteristics with all narratives and their forms.

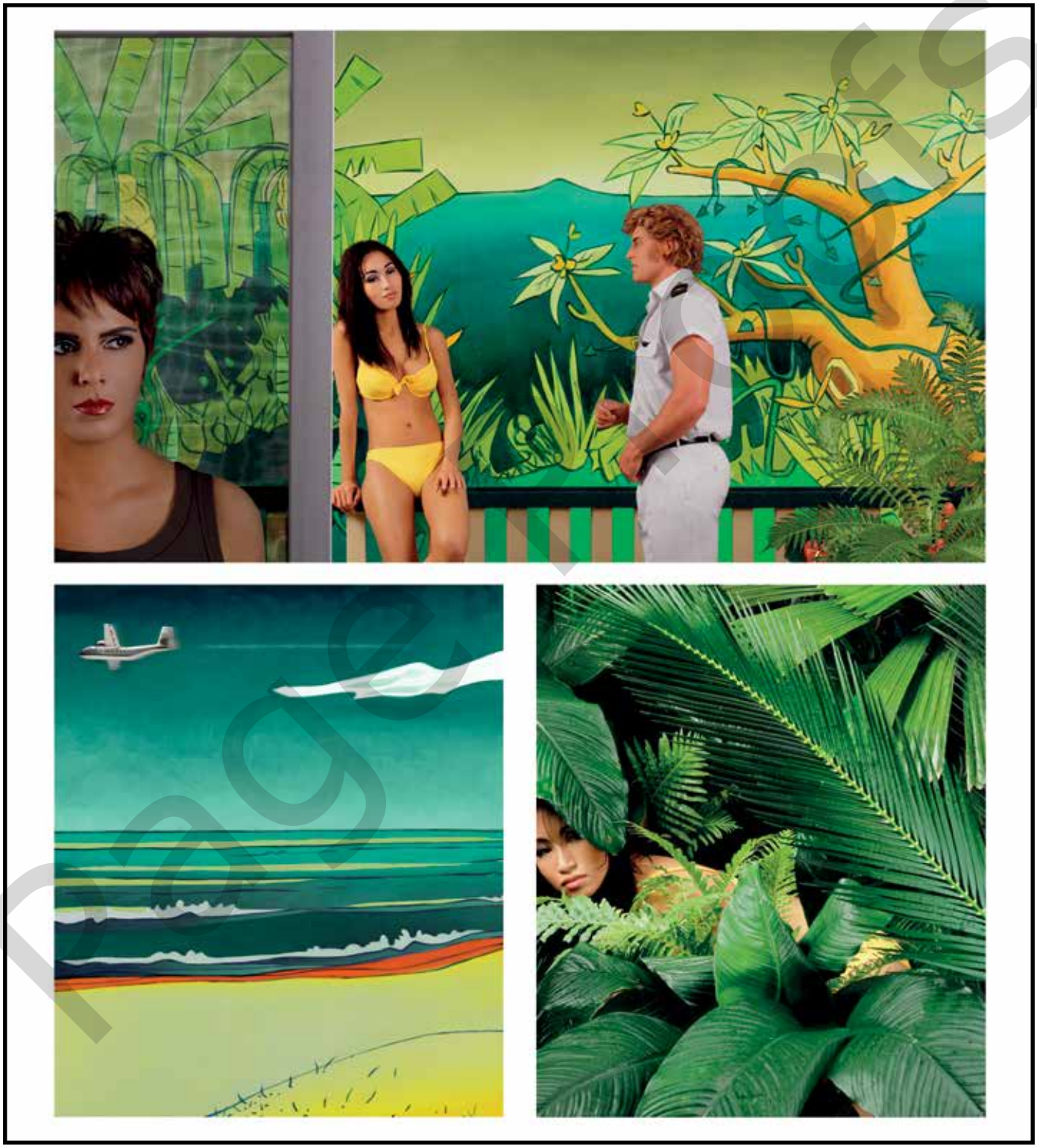


FIGURE 3.3.1 In Tracey Moffatt's Adventure Series we can imagine a narrative: Where is this? Who are these people? What has brought them together? Moffatt also seems to mix fantasy with reality, with a combination of photography and drawing.

PHOTOGRAPHY

A photograph is an image that occurs in time and space and this is significant in narrative terms. Time and space implies a here or there, a now and before, a past, a present and a future, and when an audience encounters these elements they begin to construct a story. This construction of story may be conscious or unconscious but it seems humans are drawn to the making and telling of them.

NARRATIVE

Narrative can occur in photographic images in a number of ways. A story can exist in a single image and that story can be explicit, implied or a combination of the two. This is what's called 'the story within the frame'. Story can also exist across a number of frames, such as within a series of images in a photographic essay or photojournalist piece. A story can also exist across a series of frames in a more implicit way; for example, in the works of Tracey Moffatt who creates images that are part of a sequence. While Moffatt's work is often put together as part of a narrative series, each individual photograph tells its own story, as shown in Figure 3.3.1.

NARRATIVE WITHIN THE FRAME

Storytelling is inherent in most photographic images, even seemingly abstract ones can tell a tale of abstraction. Stories can be told within the frame in two main ways: implicitly by the use of compositional and design elements, and explicitly with the use of narrative elements.

IMPLIED STORYTELLING

The composition of an image and the use of formal visual elements are prime creators of a story told within the frame. Like all storytelling, stories told within a frame need a purpose and need to be constructed to engage an audience. In this mode of storytelling, the audience actively constructs a story from the elements presented to it by the producer/artist.

Lewis Hine was a photographer who told stories within the frame using formal art elements and with a clear intention of educating his audience. Hine saw in photography a way of communicating to people and educating them about their society and about the role of the human worker in a mechanical age. In Figure 3.3.2 Hine, through the use of formal compositional elements of contrast, creates a story of harmony between man and machine. However, this apparent harmony can also tell a story of workers losing their individuality and becoming a mere cog in a mechanical process. Hine emphasises his points through the use of elements such as colour, tone, shape, line and texture.

FIGURE 3.3.2 Lewis Hine, Steamfitter, gelatine silver print, 1920

Lewis Hine was a US photographer who came to realise that documentary photography could be used for social change and reform. In 1908, he became a staff photographer at the National Child Labor Committee. The photos he took for the committee helped with their lobbying to end child labour.

FIGURE 3.3.3 Daniela Edburg, Death by Tupperware, 2005

FIGURE 3.3.4 Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #54, 1980

EXPLICIT STORYTELLING WITHIN THE FRAME

Explicit stories also have an implied element when told within a single frame. This can be seen in the work of artist Daniela Edburg in Figure 3.3.3, in which she uses conventional narrative elements to allow the viewer to construct a story. The image can be read in multiple ways and tell multiple stories. It contains themes of consumption, consumerism and gender, while at the same time engaging the viewer via the codes and conventions of the horror movie. Cindy Sherman in Figure 3.3.4 also sets up her shot as though it were a still from a movie—a movie that does not exist. The viewer creates the story of before and after

Learning activities

1 What story do you think Hine is telling in Figure 3.3.2?

2 How do the formal elements Hine uses contribute to your interpretation of the story? You should look at elements such as contrast, repetition, harmony and balance, as well as shape, colour, line and texture.

3 Carefully examine Figure 3.3.3.
- What references do you see in the image to the codes and conventions of a movie genre?
- How has Edburg used formal elements such as shape, colour and so on to construct her story?
- Describe what you see and what you think is happening in the frame.
- What themes do you see emerging from the story you have constructed?
- Give this image a backstory and then write what you think will happen next. You may choose to go with or ignore genre conventions.

Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman is a contemporary American photographer. Her work is usually presented as a series of images and it often references other narrative media or art history and plays with photographic technique. Sherman's images revolve around narratives that are both implied and explicit, and created by the artist and the viewer.

CINDY SHERMAN'S STYLE

Cindy Sherman's breakthrough early work was a series called 'Untitled Film Stills' (see Figure 3.3.3). In this series, Sherman cast herself as the lead actor in what appear to be still frames from movies. In fact, these movies do not exist except in hers and the viewer's imagination.

Many of Sherman's works are concerned with narrative: her images create a story. We come to her photos *in media res*—that is, 'in the middle of things'—just as we often do with a film narrative. The viewer creates a before and an after and they help to construct the narrative. This is at its most obvious with the Untitled Film Stills series but it is a continuing theme in Sherman's work.

Other core elements of Sherman's style are casting herself as the subject (and only character) of the image and not giving her work conventional titles. After the Untitled Film Stills series she has called all her subsequent works 'Untitled'. They are differentiated only by a number. Sherman's work explores how women have been represented in the mass media and the art world and she examines the ideas of identity and self–identity.

ANALYSING CINDY SHERMAN'S STYLE

If we look at Figure 3.3.5 we can see and analyse some of the elements of Sherman's style:

- Themes: As in all her work, Sherman asks questions that the viewer creates the answer to. Who is the woman? Why is she on the floor? Is she alone? What is on the piece of newspaper she clutches in her hand? Where, how and in what other contexts have we seen this representation of women? We construct a narrative. There is no one 'correct' reading, but multiple ones—as many readings as there are viewers.

FIGURE 3.3.5 Cindy Sherman, Untitled #96

FIGURE 3.3.6 Cindy Sherman, Untitled #92

- Colour: Sherman uses a limited palette but one that has a large tonal variation.
- Repetition/Pattern: The checks on her skirt are repeated in the tiles; while the colours are repeated in her top, skirt, the tiles and even in the skin tones.
- Line: The vertical and horizontal lines of the tiles contrast with the diagonals of the body.
- Light: The light is coming from the top left of the frame, placing the lower areas in shadow.
- Space: The monotone colour of her top creates a positive space.
- Contrast: The white squares on the skirt and the subtly varied colours of the tiles, when combined with the lighting, create a contrast that emphasises the elements of shape, line and colour.

Learning activities

1. What is the effect of Sherman calling all her works 'Untitled'?
2. What effect do the elements listed above have on the viewer?
3. Apply these elements to an analysis of Figure 3.3.6.
4. What themes or concepts can you see in Sherman's work? What stylistic elements do Figures 3.3.5 and 3.3.6 have in common?
5. Write a personal response to Figures 3.3.5 and 3.3.6. What do you think about Sherman's concepts and style? What do you like or dislike about her work?

3.4 Storytelling and print

Print has been a natural medium for telling stories for hundreds of years. With the advent of print, stories have been published and distributed to mass audiences.

MAGAZINES

Apart from the obvious writings in a magazine, the structure of a magazine tells a story. From the front cover to the last page, a magazine contains a storytelling structure designed to take the reader on a narrative journey through the magazine.

As with any media product, the audience arrives with expectations that are usually based on their previous experiences and knowledge of the form or genre. When a reader picks up a magazine, they are expecting it to have the features, codes and conventions of other magazines within the same genre. For example, a reader would not expect a surf magazine to have an article on pony grooming.

FIGURE 3.4.1 While the sales of some magazines have fallen others like *frankie*, with a specific audience, have thrived.

MAGAZINE STRUCTURE

At a structural level, storytelling in a print magazine conforms to our classical narrative structure of beginning, middle and end.

- Beginning: This is usually the front cover, which is a combination of image and text that raises the reader's expectations of the stories to unfold within the pages. The beginning also usually includes the title and contents pages, with readers' letters or an editorial statement to provide an overview of what is to come. Then there are some shorter articles, which lead the reader into the middle.
- Middle: This is the body of the magazine and is where the feature articles are located. Feature articles are not just randomly dropped into the pages; they are carefully sequenced to follow a thematic structure or logic, and are juxtaposed in a complementary manner.
- End: Most magazines do not just stop, they end. There is usually a regular section or repeated feature that provides a resolution or closure. This may be a short article or a cartoon or humorous column.

Learning activities

1. How and why does a reader arrive at a magazine with certain expectations?
2. Name five genres of magazine and list at least three conventions you would associate with the genre. These can be conventions of structure, content (types of articles), images and or advertising.
3. Look at an issue of a magazine you like and explain how it is broken down into beginning, middle and end.
4. Create the contents page for a magazine you would like to create. You can use any genre and you can model your magazine after an existing one or create an entirely new one.

Graphic novels/comics

Increasingly popular forms of print are graphic novels and comics. Comics started as individual drawings or cartoons and, while these can be traced back to drawings from the Renaissance, cartoons seen today originated in the 1840s in the satirical magazine *Punch*.

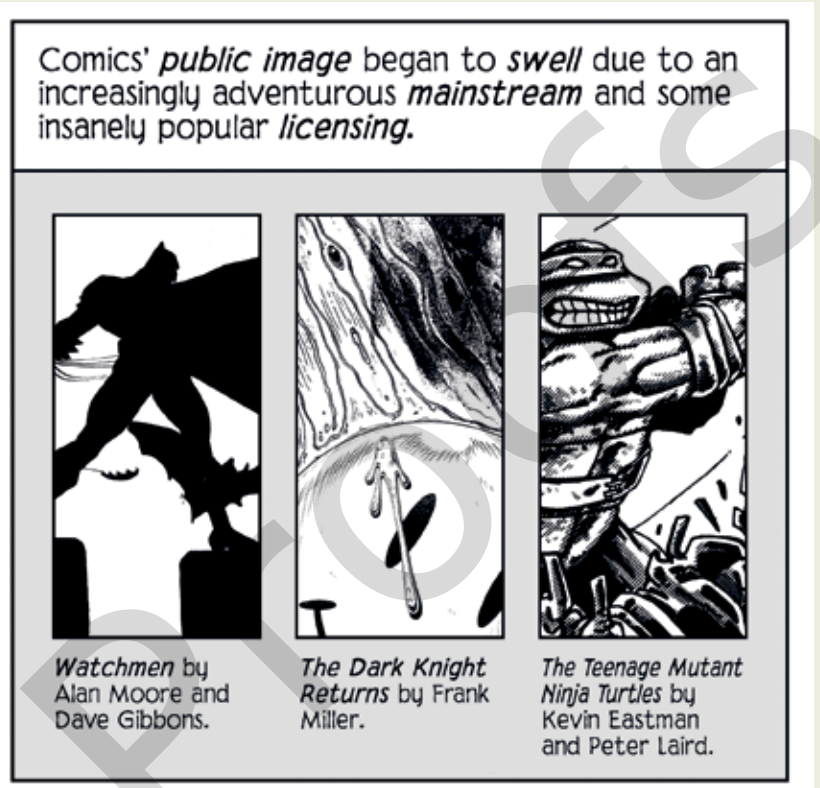
Cartoons have continued to be popular in newspapers and magazines. Cartoons evolved into a separate branch in the late nineteenth century when several drawings where linked together to form the comic strip. In the 1920s, this grew into a longer form narrative of about twenty-two pages. By the end of the twentieth century, many of these comic books had evolved into what is now called a graphic novel..

A simple definition of a graphic novel is an extended comic book; that is, it is approaching the size of a novel—anything between 50 and 200 pages or more. The famous graphical novelist Art Spiegelman, the author of *Maus*, called a graphic novel 'a comic that needs a bookmark'.

THE COMIC INDUSTRY AND THE INDEPENDENTS

The graphic novel and comic book have branched out in a number of directions and can be divided roughly into two streams, the mainstream comic industry and the independents.

The mainstream comic industry covers publishers such as Marvel and DC Comics and tends to publish in sci-fi, fantasy and superhero styles, such as Superman, Batman and Spiderman. This stream could be classified as more popular and mainstream. The independent stream is often self-published or published by much smaller publishing houses or co-operatives, and the subject matter is usually more personal and quirky. This stream could be classified as 'alternative' or 'niche'.



FIGURES 3.4.2 AND 3.4.3 Scott McCloud classifies comics into 'mainstream' and 'independent'.

FIGURE 3.4.4 *The Avengers*, Marvel Comics

FIGURE 3.4.5 *Trains*, Mandy Ord

Both the mainstream and independent stream follow the general qualities of a narrative; they have a beginning, middle and an end, but there are narrative and stylistic differences. On a narrative level, the mainstream comic industry's narrative is a classical one. The hero starts out on a journey, encounters an evil or an enemy, struggles with them and the story resolves with the superhero prevailing. The independent's graphic novels tend to focus on the everyday. They are often about friends, family, relationships or situations that the author has been in. While there is a narrative structure often, as in the real life that these are based on, there is no resolution. Of course, both of these styles are, like all narratives, also shaped by genre and audience expectation—no one wants to see Superman or Batman destroyed.

STYLE

One of the major differences between the two genres, mainstream and independent is style. The superhero comics tend to have a cinematic style; that is, they often look as if they could be stills from a film. The point of view changes often and the frames look like film close-ups, mid-shots and long shots. The drawing style is realistic and the colours are bright and saturated. There are few words and action drawing dominates. The words act as support for the pictures. In contrast, the independent graphic novel is often in black and white or a single colour; the drawings are line drawings and there is often a lot of blank space; and the drawings are more expressionistic than realistic, that is, they try to convey a sense of something rather than look 'real'. The drawings act to support the words. The independent style is harder to nail down than the industry style as they are more an expression of the author than the genre. Figures 3.4.4 and 3.4.5 and show the range of styles used in graphic novels.

Learning activities

1. Compare the styles of Marvel Comics and Ord in the above images. Look at the role of composition, point of view, text and technique such as colour, line and shape.
2. What expectations do you think an audience would have of each? How might an audience expect the story to play out? What do you think happens next?
3. Draw one frame or a sequence of frames from both the industrial and independent genres of graphic novel, showing an event that has happened at your school.

Zines – an anti-style

A zine is a small, self-published print publication that is often produced simply with a typewriter, photocopier and a stapler. Zines are usually in black and white. When colour is applied it is simple and for a specific impact. The colour is often hand-applied and then colour-photocopied. The typeface is usually one we would associate with a typewriter or it is hand-lettered. A zine can contain writing, images, cartoons, graphic stories or a combination of these, which are usually created by the author themselves. The classic zine is A5 size, which is usually achieved by folding A4 paper in half.

ZINE RULES

The main rule that can be applied to zines is that there are no rules—although, that is not strictly true as, like all media products, there are codes and conventions that have grown up around their publication of zines and there are general principles like the above which can be used to define them. One of these general principles is that a zine is not a mass publication and it does not have mass distribution.

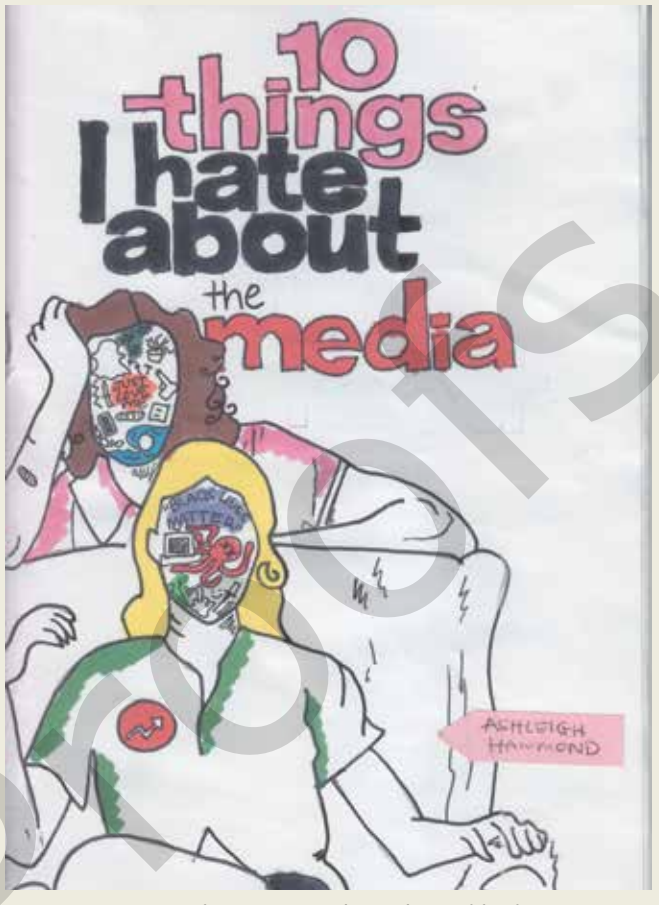


FIGURE 3.4.6 A zine by Year 11 media student Ashleigh H examining her feelings towards the media

FIGURES 3.4.7 Sticky Institute, Melbourne

Zines are low-budget, independent publications usually made on photocopiers and circulated within their own informal or underground networks. They are difficult to define too precisely. It is the freedom of what may or may not constitute a zine that allows zines to experiment with form and play with various print-based mediums. There's no set page numbers to a zine, no set content or prescribed style, no set dimensions and basically no rules whatsoever. Zines are best defined by their intentions, and the intention is usually an unprofessional labour of love rather than a money-making exercise with high production values and established distribution networks and aspirations to become the next *frankie*. So, zines can often be considered subversive because they bypass an entire established system. They are not interested in being 'discovered'—they are comfortable 'underground'—and they don't care what other people think. Zines may be sequential, an ongoing series, or one-off creations.

Eloise Peace, former director of Sticky Institute

It may have a wide audience but it would be very unusual for a zine to have a print run of more than a few thousand and most have a run of a few hundred. One of the prime intentions or purposes of creating a zine is not to make a profit, but to make the writer's voice heard and to tell the story they want to tell and one that they think others will enjoy.

One of the main emphases in zine culture is on doing it yourself and avoiding the established media organisations and industrial methods of distribution. Zines are often made available for sale by being placed in shops by the maker or via mail order. A good example of zine distribution is that conducted by Sticky Institute in Melbourne (see Figure 3.4.7).

Sticky Institute in Melbourne is an artist-run initiative or a 'collective'. It operates as a place where zine-makers can take their work to be sold, but it also acts as a production studio. There are typewriters, photocopiers and other supplies for creators to make their zines. The ethos behind Sticky Institute is open access, do-it-yourself. A potential zine-maker can walk into Sticky Institute with an idea and walk out later with a completed zine on the shelf ready to be sold. The proceeds go to the maker with Sticky Institute taking twenty per cent to cover expenses.

NARRATIVE AND STORYTELLING STRUCTURES

For all their alternative distribution methods, zines still conform to classical storytelling structures and techniques, both within their content and structure. The broad structure of a zine is still beginning, middle and end.

- Beginning: Most zines have a front cover that introduces us to the theme, genre and expectations of the story. Often a front cover has a combination of images and text with a short subtitle. This functions as the 'intro'.
- Middle: This is the actual content. Some zines resemble conventional magazines in that they have a number of stories and images, while others contain a single story.
- End: This often coincides with the resolution of the main story, but it may also be a cartoon, phrase or collection of quotes that serve as an 'outro'. It is also usual to have some contact information at the end.

Zines present the story from a specific point of view and they occur over a specific time—perhaps an hour, a day, a week or even a lifetime—and in a particular space. As in comics, the audience reads the space between the frames, called the gutter, as time passing. It is said that the gutter is as important in graphic storytelling as the frames themselves.

Learning activities

1. How would you define a zine?
2. What are some of the stylistic elements of a zine?
3. Create the front cover of a zine.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The essentials of storytelling are audience, purpose, character, cause and effect, time and place.
- Style exists in how a story is told, regardless of the form.
- Genre helps to shape the style.

ASSESSMENT TASKS

FILM

1 Explore the style of a director or creative team (some examples include Martin Scorcese, Aardman, Baz Luhrmann, Studio Ghibli or the Coen Brothers). You will need to:

- give a detailed explanation of the how they started out and became prominent, and how they developed their style
- analyse at least two of their films using Bordwell's guide on page xx
- create a poster or video trailer (coming soon) for one of their films, which you believe represents their style.

OR

2 Explore a film genre (some examples include film noir/neo noir—*The Big Heat*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Chinatown* and *Sin City*; gangster—*The Godfather* (1972), *The Departed* (2006) and *Donny Brasco* (1997); or musical—*Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *West Side Story* (1961) and *Chicago* (2002)). You will need to:

- provide a detailed account of its history, and the characteristics of and techniques used to achieve its style
- analyse at least two films exploring how the films are part of the genre, both in theme and style
- create a poster or video trailer (coming soon) for a film by your chosen director or team that emphasises their style.

You may present your work as an essay, a slideshow, multimedia presentation or by another method you have negotiated with your teacher.

PHOTOGRAPHY

1 Explore the style of a particular photographer (some examples include Henri Cartier-Bresson, Tracey Moffatt, Weegee and Andreas Gursky). You will need to:

- give a detailed examination of their history, style and use of art elements and principles in at least two images
- develop a folio of a minimum of four images in the style of your chosen photographer.

OR

2 Explore a genre of photography, such as fashion, sports, photojournalism or a photo essay. You will need to:

- give a detailed explanation of the history and development of the genre and the role individual photographers have played
- explore and explain the characteristics and techniques of the genre
- develop a folio of a minimum of four images in the style of your chosen genre.

PRINT/ZINE

1 Explore the history and development of an industry comic (examples include DC Comics, Marvel, Dark Horse and Manga). You will need to:

- examine its theme, style and techniques.
- produce two pages from a comic book in the industry style, highlighting the appropriate techniques.

OR

2 Explore the history and development of an independent graphic novelist (some examples include Daniel Clowes, Julia Wertz, Harvey Pekar, Gabrielle Bell and Art Spiegelman). You will need to:

- examine their history and the themes, issues, style and technique
- produce two pages from a graphic novel in the style of the particular author, highlighting their style and techniques.

OR

3 Compare the style of an industry comic book genre, such as one of the superheroes or Manga, with a specific graphic novelist. You will need to:

- trace the development of the different styles and compare and contrast themes, issues, style and techniques
- produce one page of a print publication for each of the styles you are examining.

OR

4 Complete a written history of zines, including the role played by institutions such as Sticky Institute, and produce a zine of at least eight pages on an issue relating to the media in general or media in your school.