



FILM STUDY GUIDES PROGRAM

introduction

The cinema has been at the centre of life in the 20th century — and it will continue to be in the next century. Movies tell us stories about places never seen and people never met; they bring us together and keep us apart; they help us to remember childhood and to dream about the future; they tell us about each other and they sometimes even help us to understand the places we call home.

For all these reasons, and many more besides, Pacific Cinémathèque introduces the Film Study Guides Program, a collection of primers for teachers and students which examine contemporary movies through the lens of film and media education.

The study guides, while independent of each other, are linked together by a love for the cinema and a desire to create critical examinations of how contemporary films affect our lives. More than seven decades ago the Russian filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin grasped the power of cinema for educators. He wrote: “Film is the greatest teacher because it teaches not only through the brain but through the whole body.” As the 20th century ends and the 21st begins, this remains true and now with the introduction

of film and media studies into the Canadian secondary and elementary school curricula, an opportunity exists to explore Pudovkin’s lesson.

The Film Study Guides Program does this by providing teachers with critical tools to examine and discuss a range of new Canadian and international films in the context of various grade levels and discipline areas. Each study guide refers to provincial secondary school curricula through concepts drawn from media education, by which we mean: the critical examination of how the media affects the world and our place in it.

Pacific Cinémathèque is Western Canada’s leading centre for the study and appreciation of contemporary cinema and while we gratefully acknowledge the support of our sponsors and partners, the Film Study Guides Program is an editorially independent program of the Cinémathèque.

We look forward to hearing from teachers and students throughout the country who use these guides and welcome comments which can help to improve our packages.

Stuart Poyntz
Pacific Cinémathèque

This teaching guide has three purposes:

To help teachers address the learning outcomes in the English Language Arts, Social Studies and Media Education curricula which deal with visual media as a form of communication;

To help teachers who are planning to teach film for the first time; and

To suggest ways in which traditional literary concepts may be taught using a medium other than printed text.

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

This Film Study Guide is specifically designed for teachers working with the following Learning Outcomes from the Grades 11 and 12 B. C. English Language Arts Curriculum. The outcomes are similar to the learning outcomes in the Western Consortium document for Language Arts adopted by Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, as well as the new Ontario curriculum and the Consortium of Atlantic Provinces curriculum.

Explain the effects of a variety of literary devices and techniques, including figurative language, symbolism, parody and irony.

Develop coherent and plausible interpretations of abstract, complex or specialized materials.

Interpret ambiguities in written, oral or visual works and support these interpretations with evidence from that work.

Support opinions or respond to questions and tasks about the works students have read or viewed.

Make connections between students' own values, beliefs and cultures and those reflected in literature and the mass media.

Support a position, interpretation or response by citing specific details, features and information from what students have read, viewed or heard.

Demonstrate a willingness to present, seek out and consider diverse, contrary or innovative views.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *The Sweet Hereafter* almost all the school-age children in a small rural town are killed in a fatal school bus crash. While the families of the victims are still coping with their grief, lawyer Mitchell Stephens (Ian Holm) arrives in town and offers to help the families get legal compensation for their loss. Although the town is united in its grief, there is considerably less unanimity about whether financial compensation, through a legal suit, will ease their pain.

As lawyer Stephens visits the victims' families to try to persuade them to join the legal case we learn that some of the families are also dealing with their own more personal grief. We also learn that Stephens is troubled by events in his own family. He is separated from his wife and his daughter is a drug addict. Stephens tells the families that he wants to channel their anger, but is he really trying to deal with his own guilt for having 'lost' his daughter to drugs? Director Atom Egoyan skillfully weaves a number of subplots together into a tense and provocative story.

Some of the exercises in this study guide deal in a very specific way with film as a media 'text', i.e. the use of different 'shooting' angles, mise-en-scène, etc. Other exercises, particularly those dealing with character and plot, are just as appropriate for use with more conventional literary texts.

Written by Dan Blake

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Most Hollywood movies follow a fairly conventional narrative structure. In the opening scenes the setting is established, a mood or ambience is created and we meet the main characters. We next observe the characters as they experience a series of adventures of increasing excitement. Each succeeding adventure builds on and follows from what has gone before. Eventually, a crisis point is reached where the hero triumphs, or some resolution of the conflict that drives the story is achieved.

In most films, although we may not know precisely what happens from one scene to the next, there is a certain predictability about the events. We have seen many similar stories before and as a result we come to know what to expect. You might think this degree of 'expectation' would spoil the film, but, in fact, it is more likely to contribute to our enjoyment of the movie. There is a certain comfort and pleasure in knowing what is likely to happen next. This form is called a linear or chronological storyline.

In *The Sweet Hereafter*, the storyline is not chronological. Indeed, some audiences may find the narrative structure of the film difficult. (*Because of this teachers may want to discuss the difference between linear and non-linear narrative with their students before watching the movie.*) Most students will likely be familiar with the use of 'flashbacks' in movies – *Forrest Gump*, to name only one film, made considerable use of flashbacks – and in a very simple form flashbacks are an example of a non-linear technique. In *The Sweet Hereafter* flashbacks as well as a series of other interesting techniques are used by director Atom Egoyan to create a complex and fascinating story-telling style.

Here is what Russell Banks, the author of the book on which the movie is based, had to say about the way in which Egoyan, dealt with the complex structure of the novel:

"The book is constructed like a spiral. Each narrator picks up from the one before and backs up what has just been said...With a book, you can return to it, turn back the pages. Since that is impossible in a film... [Atom Egoyan] superimposes several different periods around the heart of the tale and switches between the before, the after, and the during."

- activity 01**
1. Brainstorm as many different time periods in the movie as you can remember. (*Atom Egoyan has said that there are thirty different time periods in the movie.*)
 2. Does the narrative structure of the movie add or detract from the enjoyment of the film?



Tom McCamus and Sarah Polley

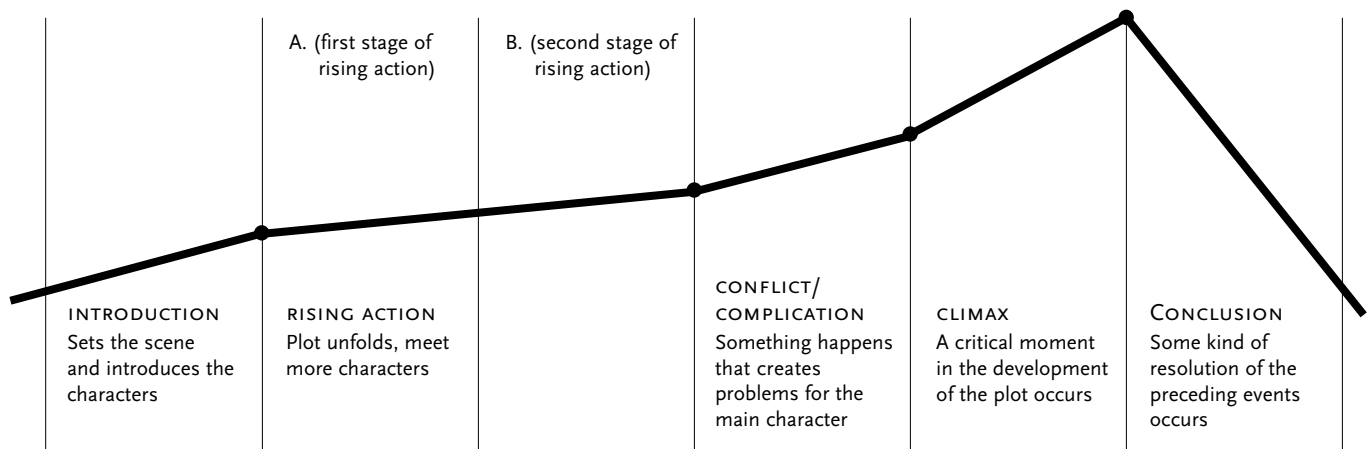
Linear narrative versus non-linear narrative

activity 02 The following six scenes are listed in the order in which they occur in *The Sweet Hereafter* :

1. Mitchell Stephens, the lawyer, convinces the owners of the Bide-A-While Motel, who are the parents of one of the drowned children, to be part of a legal suit against various parties that could be considered responsible for the accident.
2. Bear, a First Nations boy, is brought by his adoptive parents to meet the school bus on the day of the accident.
3. Mitchell Stephens tries to convince Dolores, the bus driver, to sue the manufacturer of the bus for pain and distress arising out of the accident.
4. The bus crashes into the lake, and all but one passenger, Nicole, is drowned.
5. Nicole lies to the accident enquiry when she says that Dolores, the bus driver, was speeding, effectively killing all hope of a legal case against the manufacturers of the bus and various other parties.
6. The bus driver has moved to the city and has a new job driving seniors.

Arrange these scenes in the order in which they would have occurred in real life (chronological order). To help students to situate the scenes, the following chart uses the language of a linear plot structure.

LINEAR NARRATIVE STRUCTURE



activity 03 Clearly the chronological plotline is easier to follow, if only because we are more familiar with it. However, it could be argued that Egoyan's disjointed 'plotline' is more interesting and engaging. Do you agree or disagree? Try to make reference to specific elements in *The Sweet Hereafter* or think of other movies that you have enjoyed that had a non-linear plotline.