

INTEREST WHEN NOTHING HAPPENS; A NOTE ON NARRATIVE
RETARDATION

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INTRODUCTION

Alfred Hitchcock is famous, among many, many other things, for his mastership in throwing out red-herrings, christened 'MacGuffins' by one of his co-workers. A MacGuffin is a part of a film that has no other function than to keep the story going, being in itself immaterial to the plot.¹ Hitchcock is, of course, not the inventor of the device. It is only one instance of a larger class of narrative material serving the purpose of withholding information that really matters, a purpose basic to the function of stories.² Retarding material can assume various forms, for instance, like the MacGuffin, it may not be initially discernable. Alternatively, the recipient may be aware of the fact that he or she is withheld from a desired outcome, sometimes almost painfully, as in high suspense. Furthermore, it can interact in several ways with the delayed actions and events, e.g. act as a false cue as to these or distract attention from them completely. Finally the material itself may consist of various elements like actions, descriptions, comments, etc. And there are more aspects than those just mentioned in which particular retardations differ from each other. (See for an overview Sternberg, 1978 and for applications to film narrative Bordwell, 1985.)

The best known function of delaying action or its outcome is creating suspense. (Cf. Chatman, 1978; Sternberg, 1978) A suspense discourse structure is according to Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982), characterised by an initiating event raising our concern for a protagonist, followed by an outcome or resolution. 'Typically additional discourse material is placed between the initiating event and the outcome event, to encourage the build up of the suspense' (p. 481). In a written narrative this could be achieved by a blank filled with periods, in a film one could resort to presenting a black image for some time. 'Nothing happens' literally. Such a device is generally not very satisfactory to the recipient, especially when the delay is considerable. The means will be judged to be completely subordinated to the end and interest will soon be lost. What then serves as adequate retarding material?

In this paper we shall discuss some additional functions of retarding material by presenting an analysis of an example film narrative. In connection with the additional functions, we will briefly outline some affective consequences of retardation. Finally, in analyzing our example story we will meet with some problems posed by retarding material to current story representation systems.

AN EXAMPLE: RETARDATION IN ACTION

The Film

A short (11.5 min) Dutch fiction film called 'Punishment' ('Straf', Madsen, 1974) was selected for analysis. Anticipating the structural analysis, its story can be summarized as follows:

Marjan, an approximately eight-year-old girl, demolishes her father's violin. She then joins her little brother and her mother in the living room. Some time later the father returns home from work. They have dinner. After dinner the father goes to his room, discovers the remnants of the violin and punishes Marjan by tearing her dolls to pieces and hanging them on a rope.

Structural Analysis

Identification of elementary events

Our analysis consisted of two steps. In a norming study (Tan & De Wied, in preparation) subjects reported on what they saw happening. Following a method borrowed from Lichtenstein & Brewer(1980) a list of 181 events was obtained which was presented to another group of subjects who were asked to select clusters of events belonging together. Twenty-four groups of events resulted, from now on referred to as 'Events'. They are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. List of Events

1. Marjan goes to father's room and damages his violin.
2. Marjan is called downstairs by mother.
3. Marjan goes downstairs to the living room.
4. Marjan and Robbie play the piano.
5. Mother sits and waits.
6. Mother looks forward to father.
7. Mother announces father's arrival.
8. Marjan, Robbie and mother tidy up the room.
9. Father enters the house.
10. Marjan does not react.
11. Father performs his homecoming ritual.
12. Mother urges Marjan to lay the table.
13. Marjan lays the table.
14. Father ritually ends reading his paper.
15. Father demonstrates Marjan how to lay the table.
16. Dinner starts.
17. Father forbids Robbie to play with his food.
18. Father finds fault with everyone and everything.
19. Robbie tries to tell a story but is interrupted by father.
20. Marjan is humiliated by father.
21. All rise from the table and father goes to his room.
22. Marjan, in expectation, goes to the kitchen.
23. Marjan is fetched by father and sees the damaged dolls.
24. Marjan and father exchange looks; Marjan brings out the hidden scissors.

Identification of plot units: the main action

In order to expose the story structure, Lehnert's plot unit analysis (Lehnert, 1981) was applied to the event units. This analysis is characterized by a bottom-up search for gradually more embracing plot units. The primitive element is the affect state. An event can be positive (+), negative (-) or neutral (M) to the fate of a character. Neutral events are mental acts or states, such as wants, intentions, speech acts and the like. Affect units relate to each other by four possible links: motivation (m), actualization (a), termination (t) and equivalence (e). Pairs of affect units thus linked form simple plot units. These units combine into larger, complex ones, which may involve more than one character. For example, RETALIATION is composed as follows (A and B are characters):

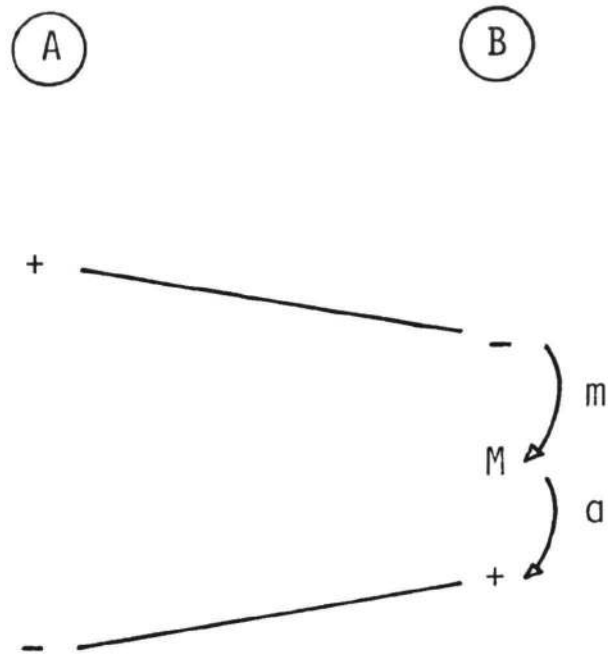


Figure 1 Complex plot unit RETALIATION including from top to bottom Mixed Event, Problem, Success born of Adversity and Mixed Event. From Lehnert (1981)

A succeeds (affect state +) somehow in harming B (-), which motivates B to think of how to harm A (M). The plan works out well (+), resulting in A being harmed. This complex plot unit is composed of overlapping smaller ones, a Mixed Event (+—-), a Problem (-→M), a Success Born of Adversity (-→M→+) and another Mixed Event (-—+).

Figure 2 shows the pivotal plot unit within the largest cluster, a Retaliation. The first element, the positive affect state, corresponds to Marjan's damaging the violin (Event 1). This constitutes a Mixed Event, since it means a loss to father.

The Mixed Event links Event 1 with the series of Events 22 and 23 in which father contrives a loss equivalent to his and shows the outcome to Marjan (Success Born of Adversity).

If Events 2-21 do not belong to the kernel of the story, there are two possible functions within the structure left. First they can act as unimportant side lines. In this case one should try to incorporate them in the plot unit analysis. It can be easily seen however, that a number of smaller and at best loosely connected clusters will emerge as points of view determining affect states, that is, intentionally acting characters shift frequently. (Marjan, father, Robbie and mother all contribute to these events). Second, they can serve as elements of the setting of the story. It is not unusual practise to treat events which are irrelevant to a plot as elements of setting or exposition. (See Gee & Grosjean, 1984. These authors also applied Lehnert's analysis).

To test whether the latter of these functions does prevail, a new group of subjects were asked to generate a summary. It was expected that very few if any of the Events 2-21 would emerge in the summaries. This prediction was based on Lehnert's model of summarization behavior; summaries are built on pivotal units of the largest clusters.³ If summaries must be short, side line events will be omitted. Further, it was expected that setting statements would show up that can be linked to Events 2-21. 31 new subjects were asked to generate a summary.

The average length of the summaries was about six lines. Results as to the main action corresponded very closely to those obtained in the answers concerning the most important moments. Of Events 2-21 only father's homecoming was mentioned by 6 subjects. Four subjects mentioned the word dinner. Neither mother nor Robbie were mentioned one single time. It seems reasonable therefore, not to treat Events 2-21 in the same way as the main action and to leave them out of the plot unit structure.

The summaries, short as they were, contained a great deal of setting information, distinguishable from any of the Events. Paramount were characterization statements, mostly concerning father, who was depicted as an unfeeling authority or tyrant by sixteen out of thirty-one subjects. Furthermore, eleven subjects characterized the relation between Marjan and father. ('hatred', 'power', 'competition' and the like). Three subjects characterized the family and one Marjan. Space limitations prevent us from discussing the derivation of such setting information. Apart from film stylistics, Events 11, 14, 15 and 17 to 20 play an important part, as will easily be seen.

Relations between retarding Events and the main action

First, there are two Events that are directly related to the main action. In 9 father comes home and in 21 he goes to his room. They do not only function as retardation that builds up suspense, but more directly heighten it, by making a feared negative outcome more probable. (Comisky & Bryant (1982) have shown that suspense is maximal if a protagonist's odds are as unfavourable as possible.)

Secondly, the retarding material may be said to be indirectly linked to the main action through the setting. It is difficult to express this two-step relation within Lehnert's plot unit system. That is, setting states and events cannot be collected under some special label. This is probably due to the fact that in a bottom-up representation system instantiation of the smallest primitive is sought first. And in Lehnert's system, as in others, this is a structure having to do with the realization or non-realization of a goal.

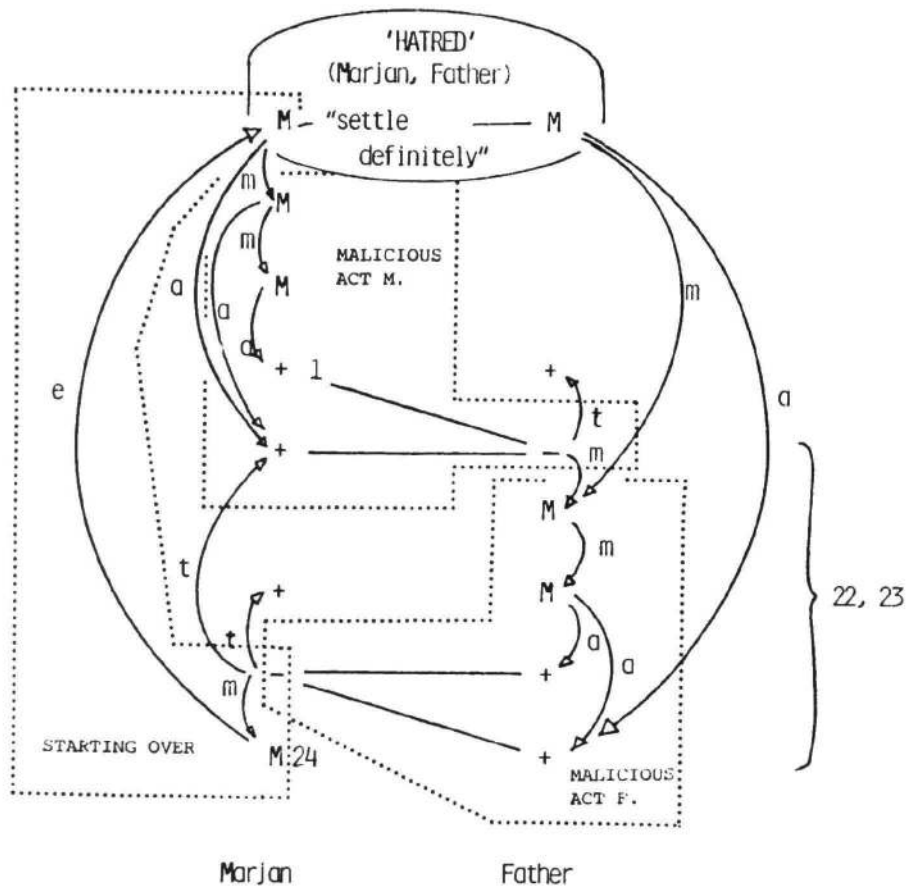


Figure 3 Extended plot unit configuration incorporating setting information. See text.

A primitive affect state reflects satisfaction or non-satisfaction of the needs of a character. However, it is possible to extend any given plot unit with antecedent and consequent units, which in a top-down story grammar driven analysis would fill the slots of a separate structural unit. Figure 3 shows the extensions which are supported by setting information extracted from the summary data.

To begin with, the destruction of the dolls is a Malicious Act, since the setting makes clear that the actor, father, is a mean person. Furthermore the setting gives us further reasons behind the two main acts. If the relation between Marjan and father is characterized by 'Hatred', 'Power' or 'Competition', then Marjan's act is also part of a Malicious Act, a contrived harming of the other producing some form of enjoyment. The father's character and the relation with his daughter enable us furthermore to consider the possibility that the struggle is to continue, that we have witnessed just one Retaliation episode. This means that the Malicious Acts are Nested Subgoals subordinate to some other goal, for instance 'settle definitely with the other'. And that this higher level goal is satisfied by a successful Malicious Act, but is activated again as soon as retaliation has taken place; this plot unit configuration is called Starting Over. It is further supported by the last Event in which Marjan pensively looks at the scissors she used in destroying the violin.

RETARDATION AND BI-DIRECTIONAL PROCESSING

The extended plot unit configuration is gradually built up in the subject during the processing of the film. Now that we have sketched the more or less complete representation of the story after the whole film has been processed, we can take a closer look at the dynamics of retardation and its affective consequences during the actual processing of the film. The first Event comes as a surprise as no expository information has been given. Curiosity is aroused as to the reason for damaging the violin. The representation is not altered very much by Events 2 to 6. Events 7, 8 and especially 9 prepare for a Retaliation and a Malicious Act by father. The latter expectation is weak, however. Simultaneously the ground is prepared for understanding the reason behind Event 1. This 'backward inference' is about as weak as the 'forward inference' of a future Malicious Act by father. After Events 10 and 11 both Malicious Acts have grown in probability and the interpersonal theme Hatred has come up. Events 12 and 13 do not change much in the probability values of forward and backward inferences. Fourteen and 15 heighten probabilities of the inferences and the interpersonal theme again. By now it will be 'certain' for most recipients that Marjan committed a Malicious

Act and that the reason for it is Hatred. Here then a first basis is laid for the Starting Over plot unit. Events 17 to 20 increase the probability of a Malicious Act by father as a retaliation. Events 21 and 22 increase the expectation of a Retaliation to a maximum. The last part of 23, where Marjan is confronted with the puppets completes most plot units: father's Malicious Act, (mutual) Hatred, father's supergoal to settle definitely with Marjan, Retaliation. Starting Over may be weakly activated. The last event completes this high-level plot unit.

This sketchy account of the process of plot unit formation may at best serve as a preliminary version of a theoretical subject protocol. Sophisticated experimentation is needed to obtain a 'timetable' representing the state of completion of the various plot units and the momentaneous strengths of the inferences. It may show, however, what the function of various retarding events can be. Some of them seem to perform no other function than to bring the progress of the story towards a resolution to a halt: Events 2 to 6, 12 and 13 act like this. They contribute to suspense in that they furnish the 'additional discourse material'. Events 2 and 3 can be 'postdicted' (see Kintsch, 1980) because a change of location is, as turns out soon, required by the main action. This insight, however, is not realized at the moment of their presentation. Events 21 and 22 are also merely retarding, but the level of suspense is so high at that point, that they are probably not experienced as 'unmotivated cheap tricks'. Moreover, their function is to raise suspense still further, by increasing 'expectation strength'.⁴ The remaining retarding Events seem to help in 'bi-directional processing' (Sternberg, 1978): They establish forward expectations which increase suspense and at the same time resolve curiosity due to gaps in the representation of the story left at an earlier point. The recipient is thus both rewarded and frustrated at the same time which as has been noted by other researchers (Kintsch, 1980; Moynihan & Mehrabian, 1981), is a condition favourable for maintaining a high level of interest.

Finally, we conclude that the cognitive representation of background knowledge in story processing is not to be neglected if understanding in some depth of affect in the processing subject is sought for. More specifically, an account of such knowledge is needed in order to explain why narratives can be arresting when nothing of importance to goal directed action happens. Representation systems based on bottom-up processing, including Lehnert's proposal⁵ seem to be built on primitives involving an implicit notion of goal-directedness and therefore, in need of extension with units representing the static 'given' (exposition, characterization, atmosphere) in relation to the dynamic 'new' (goal-directed action).

NOTES

1. Two men travel to Scotland on a train. In the luggage rack there is an odd looking parcel. 'What have you there?', asks one of the men. 'Oh, that's a Macguffin.' 'What's a MacGuffin?' 'It's a device for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.' 'But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands'. 'Well, then, I guess that's no MacGuffin.' (From Spoto, 1984).
2. Moynihan & Mehrabian present evidence suggesting that postponement of knowledge, provided that it is counterbalanced by a resolution, makes a story by far the most preferred among eight alternative types. In addition they quote sources from the theory of literature to the same effect.
3. We have, for convenience, dropped the distinction made by Lehnert between a 'family' and a 'cluster'. We only speak of 'clusters', employing the term in a rather loose sense synonymous with 'groups'.
4. Frijda (in press) coins the term 'expectation strength' which refers to one of the major determinants of the intensity of emotion in general. It is influenced by factors like temporal and spatial proximity.
5. In research not reported here, an empirically based representation of the same film's narrative was sought for by following the bottom-up procedure outlined by Lichtenstein & Brewer (1980). Subjects were asked to indicate in-order-to relations they felt to exist between events obtained before. Subjects reported that this seemed impossible and to make no sense, since many events did not serve any purpose in terms of other events.

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