

Computational Modeling of Narrative Texts, Films and Games

Course 1 - Narratology

Rémi Ronfard, March 2016

Course outline

- Course 1: Narratology
- Course 2: Characters and agents
- Course 3: Time and space
- Course 4: Plot and story grammars
- Course 5: Story annotation
- Course 6: Reasoning about time and change



Why study narratology ?

Academic disciplines, unlike people, usually don't have birthdays, but if one could be given to narratology, it would fall on the publication date of issue 8 of the French journal *Communications* in 1966. The issue contained articles by Claude Bremond, Gérard Genette, A. J. Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, and Roland Barthes. (One of Genette's favorite stories is that Barthes's invitation to contribute to this issue was the incentive that resulted in his lifelong dedication to narrative.) In his contribution, "L'Analyse structurale du récit," Barthes wrote:

The narratives of the world are numberless.... Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's Saint Ursula), stained glass window, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every place, in every age, in every society.... Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (1977, 79)

Story across media (Bremond)

[Story] is independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet, that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow; and it could be the same story.¹

What is a story ?

- Oxford English Dictionary: A narrative (or story) is any fictional or nonfictional report of connected events, presented in a sequence of written or spoken words, and/or in a sequence of (moving) pictures.
- Aristotle: A story (mythos) must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and the events must causally relate to one another as being either necessary or probable. Stories arouse emotion in the psyche of the audience.
- Russian formalists: The fabula ("Story") is what happened in chronological order. The syuzhet ("Plot") is the sequence of discourse that was sorted out by the (implied) author. That is, the syuzhet consists of picking up the fabula events in non-chronological order; e.g., Fabula= $\langle a_1, a_2, a_3, a_4, a_5, \dots, a_n \rangle$, Syuzhet= $\langle a_5, a_1, a_3 \rangle$.

What is a story ?

- McKee: A story is a series of acts that builds to a climax which brings about absolute and irreversible change.
- Syd Field : a story is a three act structure. In the first act, the main character protagonist experiences a 'plot point' that provides a goal to achieve. In the second act, the character struggles to achieve this goal. The third act depicts the final struggle by the protagonist to finally achieve (or not achieve) his or her goal and the aftermath of this struggle.
- Barthes: a story is an exchange carried on by multiple voices, on different wavelengths.

What is a story ?

- Genette: in place of the two main traditional narrative moods, diegesis and mimesis, Genette contends that there are simply varying degrees of diegesis, with the narrator either more involved or less involved in the narrative, and leaving less room or more room for the narrative act.
- Torben Grodal: a story is a sequence of events focused by one (a few) living beings, where “focused” means “mentally represented.”
- Todorov: A story is composed of actions performed by characters, as perceived and told by a « narrator ».

What is a story ?

- Bremond: the registration of a change or continuation of the status quo ante. A story is a combination of narrative atoms, which are triads of goals, actions and outcomes.
- Hierarchical structure of stories within stories.

What is a story ?

Marie-Laure Ryan:

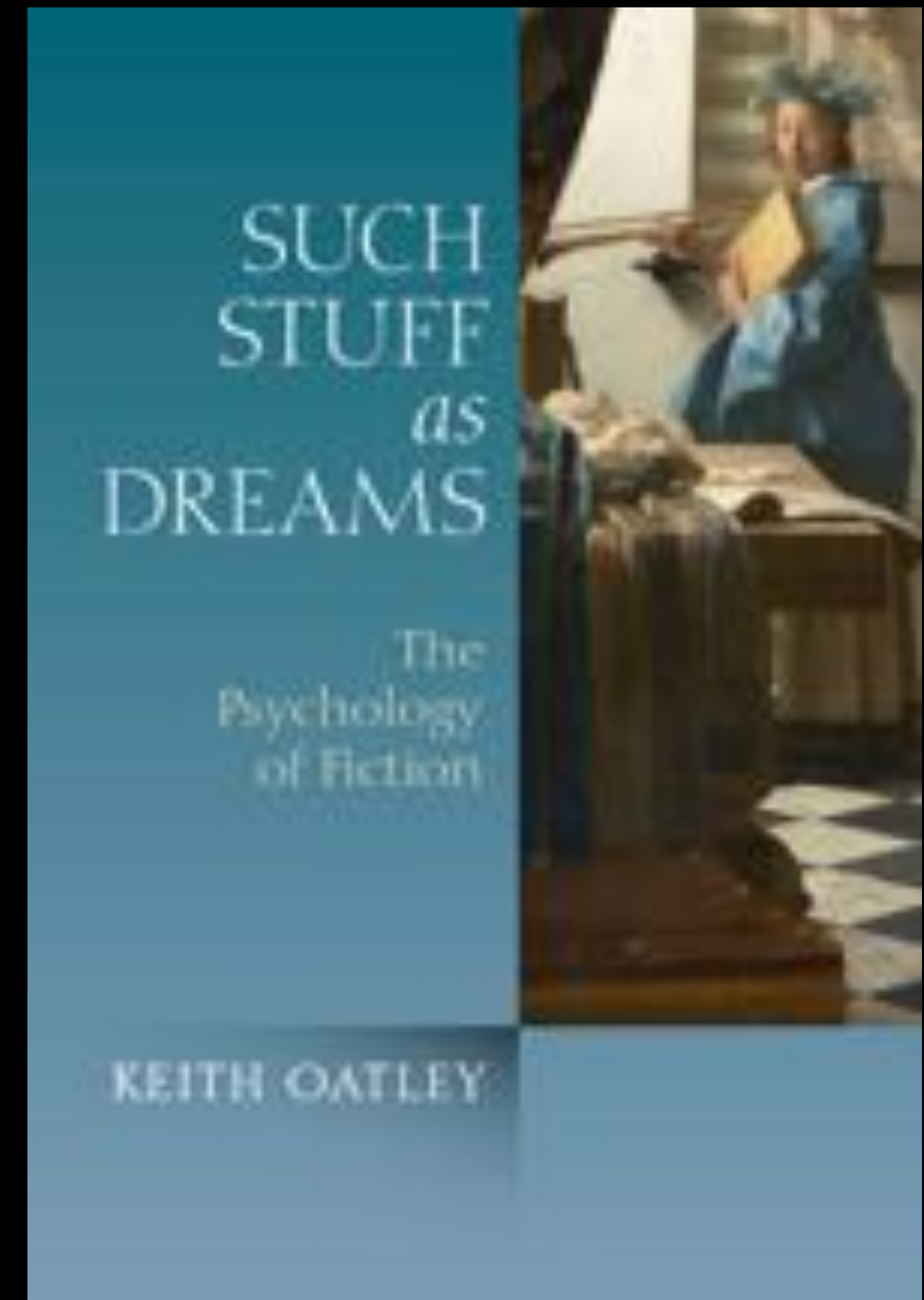
1. Story takes place in a world populated with individuated agents (characters) and objects. (Spatial dimension).
2. This world must undergo not fully predictable changes of state that are caused by non-habitual physical events: either accidents ('happenings') or deliberate actions by intelligent agents. (Temporal dimension).
3. In addition to being linked to physical states by causal relations, the physical events must be associated with mental states and events (goals, plans, emotions). This network of connections gives events coherence, motivation, closure, and intelligibility and turns them into a plot. (Logical, mental and formal dimension)

What is a story ?

- Forster:
 - Not a story : King dies and queen dies
 - Story : King dies then queen dies of grief
 - Event causes Emotion causes Event ...

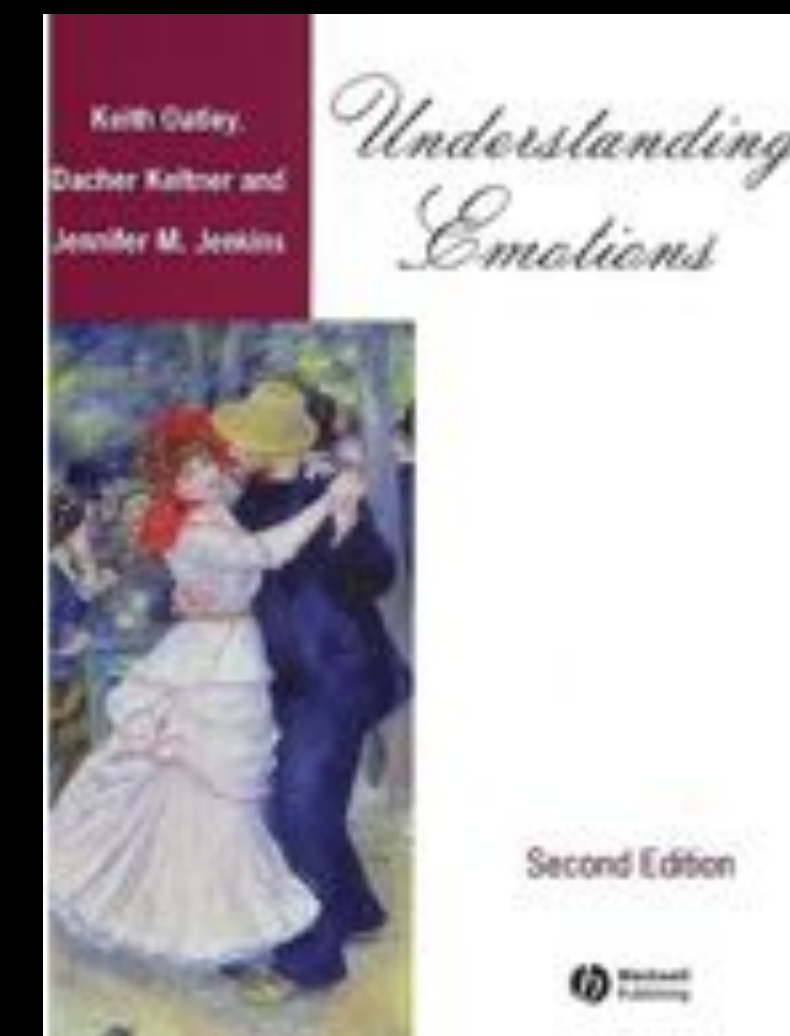
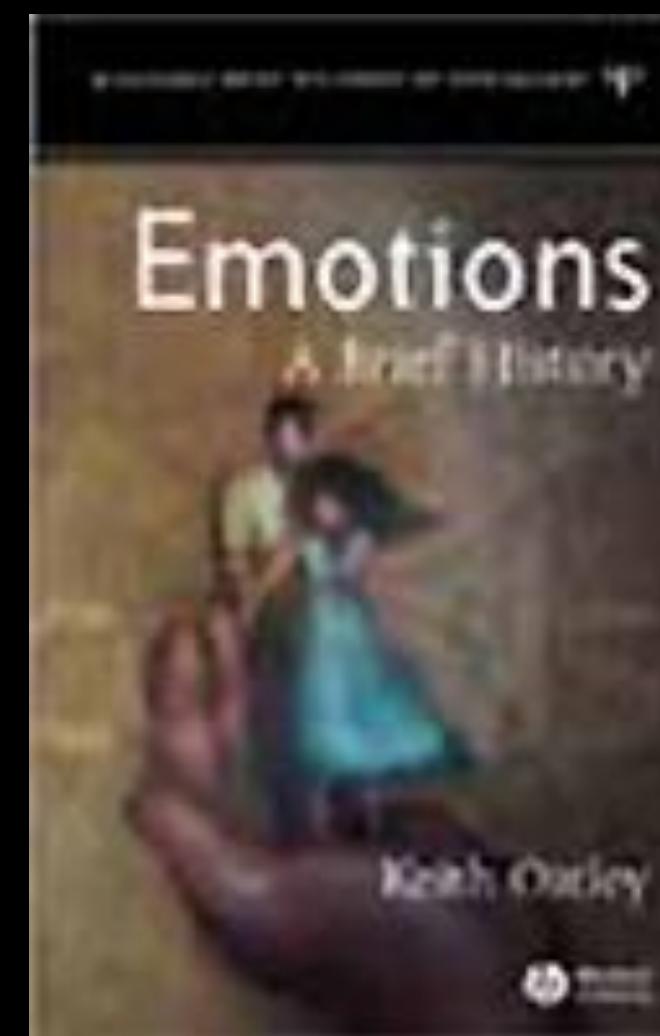
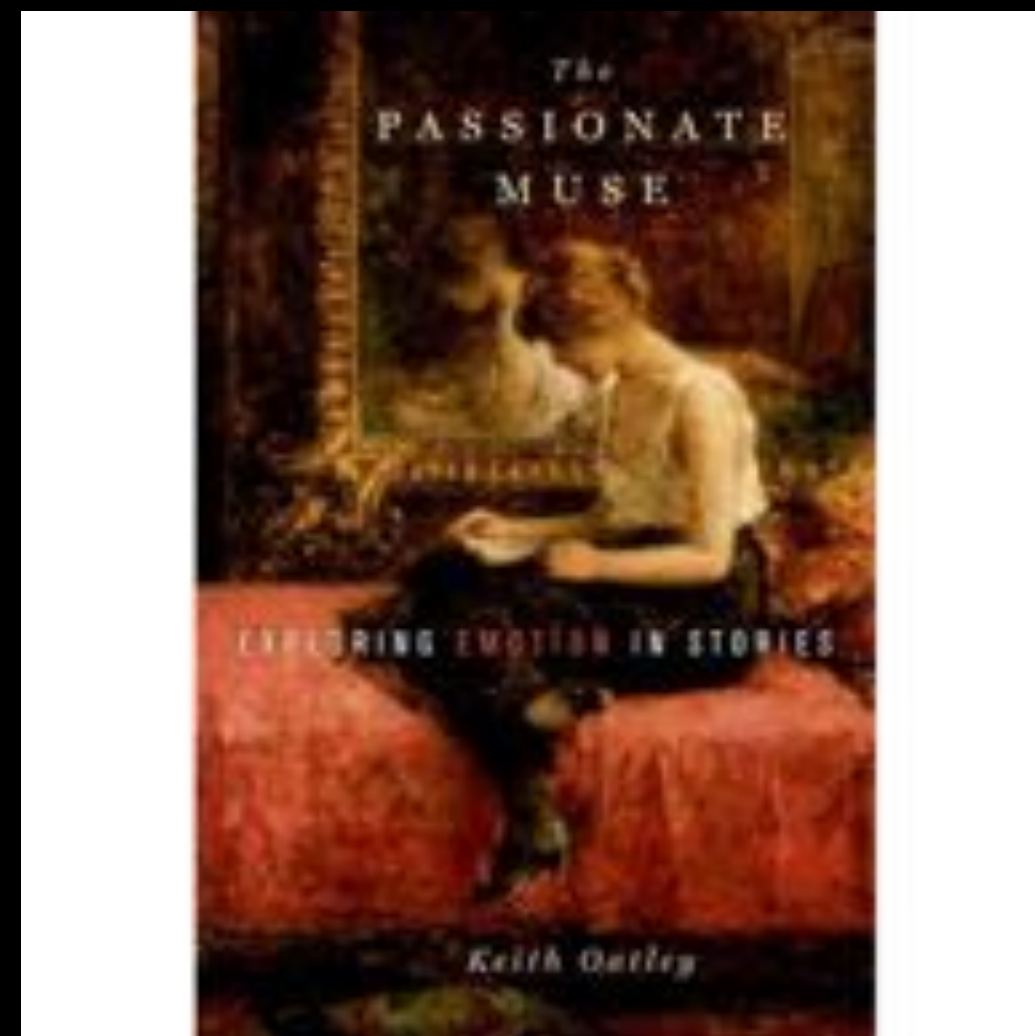
Emotions in Fiction

- Aristotle's *Poetics*: "the historian speaks of what has happened, the poet of the kind of thing that *can* happen"
- Fiction writers are PROGRAMMERS, whose programs are executed by the HUMAN MIND
 - Proust's programming language was French
 - Shakespeare's user interface was the GLOBE THEATRE



Keith Oatley on emotions

Oatley, K., & Johnson-Laird, P. N. (1987). Towards a cognitive theory of emotions. *Cognition & Emotion*, 1, 29-50.



Oatley, K. (2008). The mind's flight simulator. *The Psychologist*, 21, 1030-1032.

Oatley, K. (2001). Shakespeare's invention of theatre as simulation that runs on minds. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 19, 27-45.

Story and discourse

- Story (Fabula) things
- Story characters
- Story events
- Story time
- Discourse (Suzjet) things
- Discourse characters
- Discourse events
- Discourse time

Story-telling (diegesis) and story-showing (mimesis)

- Audio and visual narrator
- Audio and visual focalizer
- Onscreen and offscreen action
- Onscreen and offscreen voices
- Internal/external narrator

Smut's dilemma

[...] what exactly constitutes the “story” that is retold? Although it is plausible to say that the same story can be retold, it is difficult to say exactly what this means. The primary difficulty for proponents of the transposability thesis is to come up with an acceptable theory of story identity.²

Strict: Two tellings, t_1 and t_2 , tell the same story iff the set of propositions true according to t_1 is the same as the set of propositions true according to t_2 .⁵

Lenient: Two tellings, t_1 and t_2 , tell the same story, S , iff there is a core set of propositions essential to story S true according to t_1 and true according to t_2 .

Stories as generic entities



























a few). As generic entities, these are then understood in terms of a set of conditions that an 'instance' of the entity must meet in order to be an instance of *that* entity. For example, it might be claimed that a musical performance is a performance of such and such a work if, and only if, it sounds like so and so. The musical work is a generic entity that demands that its instances sound a certain way.¹⁴

Stories as historical individuals

Stories come into existence: Unless we are tethered by some metaphysical constraints about abstract entities, it is not hard to be persuaded that stories come into existence. They are created by individuals when they are first told. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* did not exist before Shakespeare, and came into existence when *Romeo and Juliet* was written. Likewise *The Parable of the Sower* did not exist before Jesus uttered the relevant words.

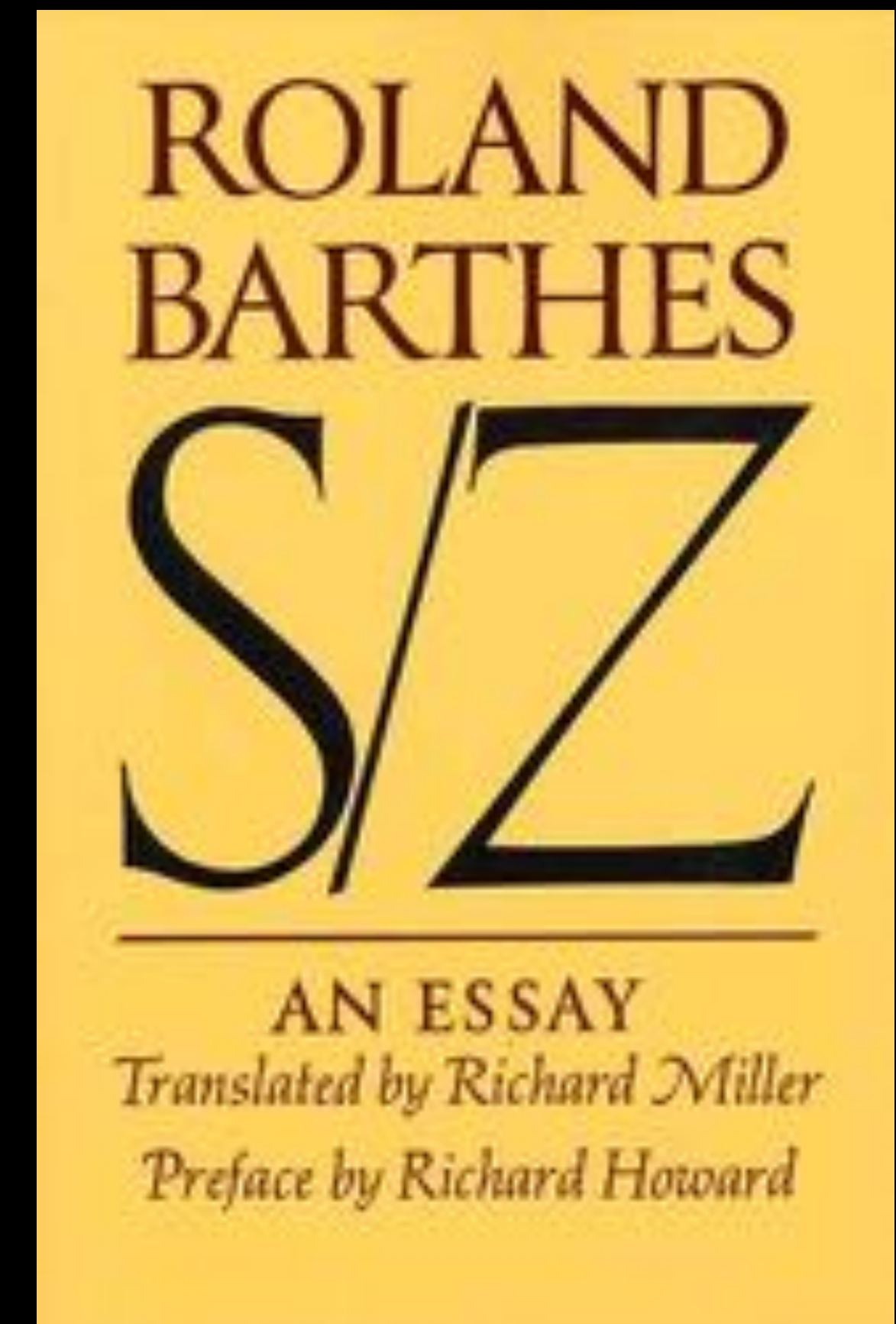
Stories change through time: This is highly plausible, especially if we consider the folk tales and ballads of the oral tradition. As the story is passed on from one generation to the next, it changes in small (and sometimes large) ways as details are added and dropped. The development of the printing press has surely had a significant impact on story change, but change is still present even in the digital age. When the novelist drafts and re-drafts their book the novel changes and so does the story that is being told. Similarly, when a group of writers work on a series drama for television the story being told will undergo the radical change of growing considerably over time as new series are added.

Roland Barthes : Polyphonic stories

LEXIAS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
Senses														
Cultural codes														
Antithesis														
Enigma 1														
"Deep in"														
"Hidden"														

Roland Barthes' five narrative codes / voices

- 1. Hermeneutic (HER)
- 2. Proairetic (ACT)
- 3. Symbolic (SYM)
- 4. Cultural (REF)
- 5. Semantic (SEM)



Hermeneutic code (HER): the voice of the truth

1. Thematisation. What in the narrative is an enigma?
2. Positioning. Additional confirmations of the enigma.
3. Formulation of the enigma.
4. Promise of an answer of the enigma.
5. Fraud. Circumvention of the true answer.
6. Equivocation. Mixture of fraud and truth.
7. Blocking. The enigma cannot be solved.
8. Suspended answer. Stopping the answering after having begun.
9. Partial answer. Some facets of the truth are revealed.
10. Disclosure of the truth.

Proairetic code (ACT): empirical voice

- The proairetic code contains sequential elements of action in the text.
- The proairetic code pictures the text as a location with spatial and temporal dimensions through which the reader moves.

Semantic code (SEM): the voice of the person

The Semantic Code refers to elements of the text that carry referential, extra-literal meaning.

Elements of the Semantic Code are called Semes.

Symbolic code (SYM): the voice of symbols

The Symbolic code refers to organized systems of semes.

When two connotative elements are placed in opposition or brought together by the narrator, they form an element of the Symbolic Code.

Cultural code (REF): the voice of science

The Cultural Code refers to anything in the text which refers to an external body of knowledge such as scientific, historical, and cultural knowledge.

Levi-Strauss : Binary oppositions

- masculine vs feminine
- light vs dark
- good vs evil
- self vs other
- subject vs object
- sacred vs profane
- body vs mind
- nature vs history
- positive vs negative
- heaven vs hell
- beginning vs end
- love vs hate
- pleasure vs pain
- existence vs nothingness
- left vs right

Rhetorics and narrative

- Aristotle described three "modes of persuasion," or « appeals." The first mode comes from the matter of the case (logos), the second mode comes from with the character of the speaker (ethos), and the third mode comes from the emotions of the audience (pathos).
- Each mode of persuasion can be intentional, helping an orator create an effective argument.
- Similarly, a narrator can tell an effective story.

Aristotle's Poetics

- Aristotle distinguishes between narrative genres in three ways:
- Matter: use of language, rhythm, and melody.
- Subjects/Agents: Aristotle differentiates between tragedy and comedy by distinguishing between the nature of the human characters that populate either form. Tragedy treats of serious, important, and virtuous people. Comedy treats of human "weaknesses and foibles ». Aristotle introduces here the influential tripartite division of characters in superior to the audience, inferior, or at the same level.
- Method: One may imitate the agents through use of a narrator throughout, or only occasionally (using direct speech in parts and a narrator in parts, as Homer does), or only through direct speech (without a narrator), using actors to speak the lines directly. This latter is the method of tragedy (and comedy): without use of any narrator.

Aristotle's Poetics

- Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements [used] separately in the [various] parts [of the play] and [represented] by people acting and not by narration, accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions.

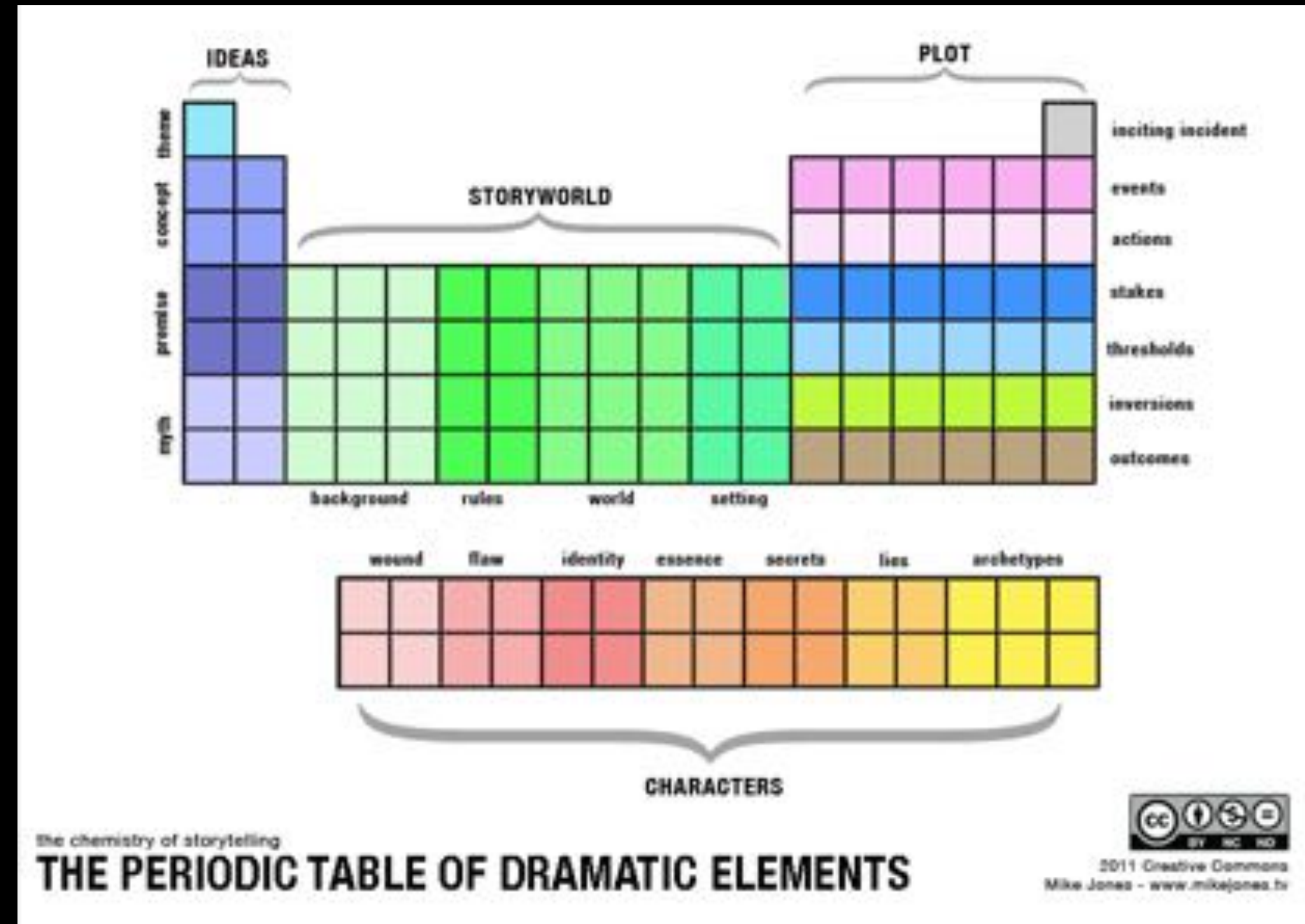
Aristotle's Poetics

- The Tractatus Coislinianus is considered to be the « Lost Second Book of Aristotle's Poetics ».
- The manuscript now resides in Paris, France, at the Bibliothèque Nationale
- The tractates states that comedy invokes laughter and pleasure, thus purging those emotions (catharsis), in a manner parallel to the description of tragedy in the Poetics. It proceeds to describe the devices used and manner in which catharsis is brought about.

Topos

- Topos (τόπος, Greek 'place' from τόπος κοινός, common place; pl. topoi), in Latin locus (from locus communis), referred in the context of classical Greek rhetoric to a standardised method of constructing or treating an argument.
- The technical term topos is variously translated as "topic", "line of argument" or "commonplace."
- It is illustrated in the study of archetypal heroes and in the theory of The Hero With A Thousand Faces (1949), a book written by modern theorist Joseph Campbell.
- The biblical creation myths and "the flood" are two examples, as they are repeated in other civilizations' earliest texts such as the Epic of Gilgamesh or deluge myth), and are seen again and again in historical texts and references.

Tropes and the periodic table of story



- Tropes are devices and conventions that a writer can rely on as being present in the audience's minds and expectations.

Story structure

- Simple story : beginning, middle and end
- Complex story : peripetia and incidents
- Story grammars

Verstraten : film narratology

- Audio narrator
 - is telling the story
 - sound focalization / microphone
- Visual narrator
 - is showing the story
 - visual focalization / camera

First person shots in movies



Second and third person shots

Story examples : Sunset boulevard



Story examples : Vertigo



Story examples : The big sleep



Story examples : The searchers



Next week : characters and agents

