Note: Some Key concepts

Linearity

Linearity in narrative has been variously addressed by structuralist narratology, studies tracing the historical vision of fiction, and those which unmask the ideological implications of linear time. In the study of contemporary narrative fiction Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan writes:

The disposition of elements in the text, conventionally called text-time, is bound to be one-directional and irreversible, because language prescribes a linear figuration of signs and hence a linear presentation of information about things. We read letter after letter, word after word [. . .]. There are some modern attempts to liberate narrative fiction from these constraints, but the liberation is never complete because a complete one, if possible, will destroy intelligibility. (45)

Louis Parkinson Zamora's study of the historical vision and narrative forms of contemporary US and Latin American fiction in terms of an apocalyptic vision inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition, examines the temporality of such an interpretation of experience:
The spiritual realities described by the biblical apocalyptist are given a historical embodiment which is essentially linear. Time becomes the vehicle of divine purpose: It moves teleologically (here the root is telos, goal) toward a specified end. The apocalyptist assigns to event after event a place in a pattern of historical relationships that will not repeat itself in the cyclical manner of oriental myth, but that presses steadily toward culmination. The repeated, numbered series of events in Revelation underline this sense of the inexorable movement of history.

Jeremy Tambling in his *Narrative and Ideology* observes:

Narrative which assumes linearity is strongly ideological, buying into the concept of cause and effect, itself an ideology of empiricist sciences [. . .]. There is no original real-life time against which you can check narrative time: however you consider real-life time, you must think of it in some represented, narrative form—even a sense of time as linear is a representation of it, just as the word 'time' is an attempt to conceptualize something felt about the nature of reality. (85-88)

Derrida in his deconstruction of linear time, narrative and history in his *Positions* exposes 'linearity' as,
[...] the common denominator that links histories together into a general, metaphysical concept of history [...]. The implication that one thing leads to another, which supports an entire system of implications (teleology, eschatology, elevating and interiorising accumulation of meaning, a certain type of traditionality, a certain concept of continuity, of truth etc.). (Currie 79)

**System**

For the fantastic metaphysicians of Tlön in Borges’ story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “a system is nothing more than the subordination of all the aspects of the universe to some one of them [...].” (qtd. in Ermarth, *Sequel* 24).

**Closure**

E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* touches on narrative continuity and closure as “the fascination of following,” which resides “in the presumability somewhere of a convenient [...]. visibly appointed stopping-place” (27). As can be seen in Henry James’ *The Art of the Novel* or Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*, “stopping places” in fiction are not considered “entirely natural or easily found” (Torgovnick 4). To James one has to ‘invent’ and ‘establish’ endings, “by a difficult, dire process of selection and comparison, of surrender and sacrifice,” (6) where “relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his
own the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so" (5). Kermode persuades how narrative plots and endings are similar to the other fictions men construct to make sense of the world, like religion, philosophy and the sciences (Torgovnick 7).

The concept of ‘closure’ in narrative has been considered another aspect of its ideological dimension. Roger Webster observes:

The concept of closure refers to the ways in which a text persuades a reader to understand and accept a particular ‘truth’ or form of knowledge, to accept a certain view of the world as valid or natural. Closure is not considered to arise directly from the author or to be dependent on the reader’s views, but to be inherent in a text’s form and the writing strategies and reading expectations associated with a particular genre such as the novel. [. . .] works which have apparently ‘open,’ unresolved or ambiguous endings still contain an ideological closure. (53)

A.S. Byatt, one of our contemporary novelists makes a significant statement in Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings about “some ferocious ordering principle,” which tends to drive “the aleatory” and “the multivalent” forms of postmodern narratives with their random and proliferating connections, to some structured ‘end.’ He says, “Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently
unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable” (qtd. in Alsop and Walsh 163).

Juxtaposed with this is a thought from Milan Kundera’s *Immortality*, where we find a metafictional stay over the limitations of conventional plot conceptions:

I regret that almost all novels ever written are [. . . ] at their core one single chain of causally related acts and events. These novels are like a narrow street along which someone drives his characters with a whip. Dramatic tension is the real curse of the novel, because it transforms everything, even the most beautiful pages [. . . ] surprising scenes and observations merely into steps leading to the final resolution [. . . ]. The novel is consumed in the fire of its own tension like a bale of straw. (266)

He adds on, “A novel shouldn’t be like a bicycle race but a feast of many courses” (266). Our concern is how postmodern fiction is preoccupied with the basic structuring notions of closure and coherence, in seeking alternatives to the systematic plot structure, and in its refusal to stop the ‘play’ and integrate its fragments.

Causality

The concept is usually considered in terms of “the relation between a cause and its effect or between regularly correlated events or phenomena” (*Webster’s* 217). ‘Causation’ becomes an important
metaphysical issue when we consider the relations existing between events in a narrative. In historical studies, events are said to be 'causally' related "if event A occurs then event B occurs, and it can be reasonably demonstrated that event A explains the subsequent (temporally sequential) occurrence of event B" (Munslow 37-38). The central issue in causality is the determining nature of the relationship.

Causal explanation in narratives is based on some pre-formed ideas on the meaning of the occurrence of one form of events after another. In history the historian's teleological assumptions ("the future conceived in the present determines the past") determine the form of causal analysis: these include the forces he believes to be influential, "processes and events like free agency, intentionality, motivational psychology, and various determinisms such as geography, gender, ideology, ethics, materiality, culture and race" (Munslow 40). These assumptions and prefiguration 'impose' or 'construe' the intended causal explanation of events.

With the poststructuralist break in historical thinking, the focus gets shifted to the 'narrative form' in which history is deployed. Historical knowledge, with thinkers like Michel Foucault and Hayden White, becomes as much 'linguistically determined' as a literary artifact. 'Narrative explanation' and 'causation' become essential concerns of history. For historians like White history is not different from fictional narrative in that "historians make causal links as part
of their overall constitution and prefiguration of the historical field through the exercise of their historical imagination and employment of trope, emplotment, argument, ideological preference and philosophical orientation" (Munslow 41). Foucault challenges conventional causality with such terms as 'episteme' used to refer to the cultural coordination of knowledge in a particular historical context. It is a reworking of the conventions of causal explanation (causality) and the recording of change over time (temporality) (Munslow 42).

**Teleology**

It is explained as "the study of evidences of design in nature; a doctrine that ends are immanent in nature; a doctrine explaining phenomena by final causes; the fact or character attributed to nature or natural processes of being directed towards an end or shaped by a purpose" (Webster's 1212). Western metaphysics and its offspring 'history' are considered to be 'teleological' in that they possess "a discernible end-directedness" (Munslow 211). In this view history and explanation are linear and "temporally directional" (Munslow 213). Teleological writing with its sense of progression towards a 'final cause,' is now recognized to be 'made' of ideological intentions. Munslow's discussion of 'teleology' in history is as well applicable to any other narrative:
There is no givenness about it. As people in the past had choices so do historians in interpreting these choices. This relationship between cause and explanation, as Friedrich Nietzsche argued, is often one of the effect directing the search for cause. It is this that makes history unavoidably teleological [. . .]. Once the historian moves to interpretation he/she is making choices about preferred ends, and teleology cannot be avoided. (213)

“Structure of Exclusion”

We attribute a “structure of exclusion” to narratives for their ‘selection’ and sequential arrangement of events in which they ‘exclude’ some things from being depicted (Cobley 9). For Derrida, ‘the sign’ is “a structure of exclusion,” because the sign, in the fixing of its ‘meaning’ fences off ‘other meanings’ (Currie 79). This is also consequent on Derrida’s deconstruction of ‘narrative linearity,’ in itself “a form which represses difference” (Currie 79).

Currie elaborates on this “multidimensional repression of difference” (76-91). In opposition to the idea of the “pure self-identical sign” (80) or ‘word’ as a free form bearing “meaning as presence” (81), Derrida posits a “trace structure of the sign”:

[. . .] any sign is embedded in a context and its meaning bears the trace of the signs which surrounded it, which have preceded it and which follow it. In short, the meaning
of a sign is not complete in itself, or is not present within itself, but somehow spread out across all the others. [. . .]

the model of difference posits that neither the beginning nor the end of a sentence or a book can stop this movement. (Currie 77)

The meaning of a word is thus 'context-bound,' ever-evolving as part of a discourse. The process is markedly temporal, unlike the spatial or structural determination of 'meaning' posited by structural linguistics. The word accrues meaning as part of a combinative sequence, also by the trace of words, which though not part of the discourse, are "ghostly intertextual presences inhabiting the word" (Currie 81). This 'boundless' context to which meaning is 'bound,' or the 'structure of trace' cannot be conceived in terms of conventional time concepts of present, past and future. Derrida's deconstruction of pure meaning therefore is also a deconstruction of narrative time.

The principle of the 'trace' when moved up the scale to the level of discourse gains political significance, where the 'repression of differences' or the "assumed linearity of discourse" gains ideological dimensions (Currie 81). Deconstruction thus draws the complicity between narrative linearity and the ideological bent of the narrative, which excludes 'other' utterances. Narrative history is therefore recognized as "a structure of exclusion in the sense that it bears the
traces of other stories, stories that are not told, stories that are excluded, stories of the excluded" (Currić 84).

**De-doxification**

Linda Hutcheon adapts the term from Roland Barthes' notion of ‘doxa’ as “public opinion or the ‘Voice of Nature’ and consensus,” in her study of how postmodernism ‘de-doxifies’ cultural representations and their ideological import (*Poetics*; Maltby 21). The category of works she considers “historiographic metafiction” paradoxically incorporates the conventional forms of historical narrative, only to subvert and expose them as social constructs. Thus ideological ‘closure’ is contested or ‘de-doxified.’

In *The Politics of Postmodernism* Hutcheon defines ideology as “how a culture represents itself to itself,” “doxifies” or naturalizes narrative representation,” so that ‘constructed’ meaning passes off as something ‘inherent’ to the representation (232). Keith Jenkins uses the term in the context of the postmodern historical questioning of the ‘doxa’ concerning the ‘proper,’ ‘legitimate,’ and ‘objective’ study of the past (2).