

PART TWO

FILM FORM

Chapter 1 outlined some ways in which people, working with technology, make films. Now we can get a little more abstract and ask other questions. By what principles is a film put together? How do the various parts relate to one another to create a whole? Answering these questions will help us understand how we respond to individual movies and how cinema works as an artistic medium.

In the next two chapters, we will start to answer such questions. We assume that a film is not a random collection of elements. If it were, viewers would not care if they missed the beginnings or endings of films or if films were projected out of sequence. But viewers do care. When you describe a book as “hard to put down” or a piece of music as “compelling,” you are implying that a pattern exists there, that some overall logic governs the relations among parts and engages your interest. This system of relationships among parts we shall call *form*. Chapter 2 examines form in film to see what makes that concept so important to the understanding of cinema as an art.

Although there are several ways of organizing films into unified formal wholes, the one that we most commonly encounter in films involves telling a story. Chapter 3 examines how *narrative form* can arouse our interest and coax us to follow a series of events from start to finish. Narrative form holds out the expectation that these events are headed toward dramatic changes and a satisfying outcome.

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The Significance of Film Form

The experience that art offers us can be intensely involving. We say that movies *draw us in* or *immerse us*. We get absorbed in a book or lost in a song. When we can't finish a novel, we say, "I couldn't get into it," and we say that music we don't like "doesn't speak to me," as if it were a sluggish conversational partner.

All these ways of talking suggest that artworks involve us by engaging our senses, feelings, and mind in a process. That process sharpens our interest, tightens our involvement, urges us forward. How does this happen? Because the artist has created a pattern. Artworks arouse and gratify our human craving for form. Artists design their works—they give them form—so that we can have a structured experience.

For this reason, form is of central importance in any artwork, regardless of its medium. The idea of artistic form has occupied the thinking of philosophers, artists, and critics for centuries. We can't do justice to it here, but some well-established ideas about form are very helpful for understanding films. This chapter reviews some of them.

The Concept of Form in Film

Form as System

Artistic form is best thought of in relation to the human being who watches the play, reads the novel, listens to the piece of music, or views the film. Perception in all phases of life is an *activity*. As you walk down the street, you scan your surroundings for salient aspects—a friend's face, a familiar landmark, a sign of rain. The mind is never at rest. It is constantly seeking order and significance, testing the world for breaks in the habitual pattern.

Artworks rely on this dynamic, unifying quality of the human mind. They provide organized occasions in which we exercise and develop our ability to pay attention, to anticipate upcoming events, to construct a whole out of parts and to feel an emotional response to that whole. Every novel leaves something to the

imagination; every song asks us to expect certain developments in the melody; every film coaxes us to connect sequences into a larger whole. But how does this process work? How does an inert object, the poem on a piece of paper or the sculpture in the park, draw us into such activities?

Some answers to this question are clearly inadequate. Our activity cannot be *in* the artwork itself. A poem is only words on paper; a song, just acoustic vibrations; a film, merely patterns of light and dark on a screen. Objects do nothing. Evidently, then, the artwork and the person experiencing it depend on each other.

The best answer to our question would seem to be that the artwork *cues* us to perform a specific activity. Without the artwork's prompting, we couldn't start the process or keep it going. Without our playing along and picking up the cues, the artwork remains only an artifact. A painting uses color, lines, and other techniques to invite us to imagine the space portrayed, to compare color and texture, to run our eye over the composition in a certain direction. A poem's words may guide us to imagine a scene, to notice a break in rhythm, or to expect a rhyme. In our *Shadow of a Doubt* sequence (pp. 3-7), the dialogue and camerawork during Uncle Charlie's reflection on idle women cued us to see, very starkly, his cold menace, and this created dramatic tension. In general, any work of art presents cues that can elicit our involvement.

We can go further in describing how an artwork cues us to perform activities. These cues are not simply random; they are organized into *systems*. Let us take a system as any set of elements that depend on and affect one another. The human body is one such system; if one component, the heart, ceases to function, all of the other parts will be in danger. Within the body, there are individual, smaller systems, such as the nervous system or the optical system. A single small malfunction in a car's workings may bring the whole machine to a standstill; the other parts may not need repair, but the whole system depends on the operation of each part. More abstract sets of relationships also constitute systems, such as a body of laws governing a country or the ecological balance of the wildlife in a lake.

As with each of these instances, a film is not simply a random batch of elements. Like all artworks, a film has **form**. By film form, in its broadest sense, we mean the overall system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film. In this part of the book and in Part Three (on film style), we shall be surveying the elements that interact with one another. Since the viewer makes sense of the film by recognizing these elements and reacting to them in various ways, we'll also be considering how form and style participate in the spectator's experience.

This description of form is still very abstract, so let's draw some examples from one movie that many people have seen. In *The Wizard of Oz*, **the viewer can notice many particular elements. There is, most obviously, a set of narrative elements;** these constitute the film's story. Dorothy dreams that a tornado blows her to Oz, where she encounters certain characters. The narrative continues to the point where Dorothy awakens from her dream to find herself home in Kansas. We can also pick out a set of *stylistic* elements: the way the camera moves, the patterns of color in the frame, the use of music, and other devices. Stylistic elements depend on the various film techniques we'll be considering in later chapters.

Because *The Wizard of Oz* is a system and not just a hodgepodge, we actively relate the elements within each set to one another. We link and compare narrative elements. We see the tornado as causing Dorothy's trip to Oz; we identify the characters in Oz as similar to characters in Dorothy's Kansas life. Various stylistic elements can also be connected. For instance, we recognize the "We're Off to See the Wizard" tune whenever Dorothy picks up a new companion. We attribute unity to the film by positing two organizing principles—a narrative one and a stylistic one—within the larger system of the total film.

Moreover, our minds seek to tie these systems to one another. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the narrative development can be linked to the stylistic patterning. Colors

"Screenplays are structure."

— William Goldman, scriptwriter, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*

"Because of my character, I have always been interested in the engineering of direction. I loved hearing about how [director] Mark Sandrich would draw charts of Fred Astaire's musicals to work out where to put the dance numbers. What do you want the audience to understand? How do you make things clear? How do you structure sequences within a film? Afterwards—what have you got away with?"

— Stephen Frears, director, *The Grifters*

identify prominent landmarks, such as Kansas (in black and white) and the Yellow Brick Road. Movements of the camera call our attention to story action. And the music serves to describe certain characters and situations. It is the overall pattern of relationships among the various elements that makes up the form of *The Wizard of Oz*.

“Form” Versus “Content”

Very often people think of “form” as the opposite of something called “content.” This implies that a poem or a musical piece or a film is like a jug. An external shape, the jug, *contains* something that could just as easily be held in a cup or a pail. Under this assumption, form becomes less important than whatever it’s presumed to contain.

We don’t accept this assumption. If form is the total system that the viewer attributes to the film, there is no inside or outside. Every component *functions as part of the overall pattern* that engages the viewer. So we’ll treat as formal elements many things that some people consider content. From our standpoint, subject matter and abstract ideas all enter into the total system of the artwork. They may cue us to frame certain expectations or draw certain inferences. The viewer relates such elements to one another dynamically. Consequently, subject matter and ideas become somewhat different from what they might be outside the work.

Consider a historical subject, such as the American Civil War. The real Civil War may be studied, its causes and consequences disputed. But in a film such as D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, the Civil War is not neutral content. It enters into relationships with other elements: a story about two families, political ideas about the Reconstruction, and the epic film style of the battle scenes. Griffith’s film depicts the Civil War in a way that is coordinated with other elements in the film. A different film by another filmmaker might draw on the same subject matter, the Civil War, but there the subject would play a different role in a different formal system. In *Gone with the Wind*, the Civil War functions as a backdrop for the heroine’s romance, but in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, the war aids three cynical men in their search for gold. Thus subject matter is shaped by the film’s formal context and our perceptions of it.

Formal Expectations

We’re now in a better position to see how film form guides the audience’s activity. Why does an interrupted song or an uncompleted story frustrate us? Because of our urge for form. We realize that the system of relationships within the work has not yet been completed. Something more is needed to make the form whole and satisfying. We have been caught up in the interrelations among elements, and we want to develop and complete the patterns.

One way in which form affects our experience, then, is to create the sense that “everything is there.” Why is it satisfying when a character glimpsed early in a film reappears an hour later, or when a shape in the frame is balanced by another shape? Because such relations among parts suggest that the film has its own organizing laws or rules—its own system.

Moreover, an artwork’s form creates a special sort of involvement on the part of the spectator. In everyday life, we perceive things around us in a practical way. But in a film, the things that happen on the screen serve no such practical end for us. We can see them differently. In life, if someone fell down on the street, we would probably hurry to help the person up. But in a film, when Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin falls, we laugh. We shall see in Chapter 5 how even as basic an act of filmmaking as framing a shot creates a particular way of seeing. We watch a pattern that is no longer just “out there” in the everyday world; it has become a calculated part within a self-contained whole. Film form can even make us perceive

things anew, shaking us out of our accustomed habits and suggesting fresh ways of hearing, seeing, feeling, and thinking.

To get a sense of the ways in which purely formal features can involve the audience, try the following experiment. Assume that “A” is the first letter of a series. What follows?

AB

“A” was a cue, and on this basis, you made a formal hypothesis, probably that the letters would run in alphabetical order. Your expectation was confirmed. What follows AB? Most people say “C.” But form does not always follow our initial expectation:

ABA

Here form takes us a little by surprise. If we are puzzled by a formal development, we readjust our expectations and try again. What follows ABA?

ABAC

Here the main possibilities were either ABAB or ABAC. (Note that your expectations *limit* possibilities as well as select them.) If you expected ABAC, your expectation was gratified, and you can confidently predict the next letter. If you expected ABAB, you still should be able to make a strong hypothesis about the next letter:

ABACA

Simple as this game is, it illustrates the involving power of form. You as a viewer or listener don’t simply let the parts parade past you. You enter into an active participation with them, creating and readjusting expectations as the pattern develops.

Now consider a story in a film. *The Wizard of Oz* begins with Dorothy running down a road with her dog (2.1). Immediately, we form expectations. Perhaps she will meet another character or arrive at her destination. Even such a simple action asks the audience to participate actively in the ongoing process by wondering about what will happen next and readjusting expectations accordingly. Much later in the film, we come to expect that Dorothy will get her wish to return to Kansas. Indeed, the settings of the film give *The Wizard of Oz* a large-scale ABA form: Kansas-Oz-Kansas.

Expectation pervades our experience of art. In reading a mystery, we expect that a solution will be offered at some point, usually the end. In listening to a piece of music, we expect repetition of a melody or a motif. (Songs that alternate verses and refrain follow the ABACA pattern we have just outlined.) In looking at a painting, we search for what we expect to be the most significant features, then scan the less prominent portions. From beginning to end, our involvement with a work of art depends largely on expectations.

This does not mean that the expectations must be immediately satisfied. The satisfaction of our expectations may be delayed. In our alphabet exercise, instead of presenting ABA, we might have presented this:

AB . . .

The ellipsis puts off the revelation of the next letter, and you must wait to find it out. What we normally call *suspense* involves a delay in fulfilling an established expectation. As the term implies, suspense leaves something suspended—not only the next element in a pattern but also our urge for completion.

Expectations may also be cheated, as when we expect ABC but get ABA. In general, *surprise* is a result of an expectation that is revealed to be incorrect. We do not expect that a gangster in 1930s Chicago will find a rocket ship in his garage; if he does, our reaction may require us to readjust our assumptions about what can happen in this story. (This example suggests that comedy often depends on cheating expectations.)

One more pattern of our expectations needs tracing. Sometimes an artwork will cue us to hazard guesses about what has come *before* this point in the work. When



2.1 Dorothy pauses while fleeing with Toto at the beginning of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Dorothy runs down the road at the beginning of *The Wizard of Oz*, we wonder not only where she is going but where she's been and what she's fleeing from. Similarly, a painting or photograph may depict a scene that asks the viewer to speculate on some earlier event. Let us call this ability of the spectator to wonder about prior events *curiosity*. As Chapter 3 will show, curiosity is an important factor in narrative form.

Already we have several possible ways in which the artwork can actively engage us. Artistic form may cue us to make expectations and then gratify them, either quickly or eventually. Or form may work to disturb our expectations. We often associate art with peace and serenity, but many artworks offer us conflict, tension, and shock. An artwork's form may even strike us as unpleasant because of its imbalances or contradictions. For example, experimental films may jar rather than soothe us. Viewers frequently feel puzzled or shocked by *Eat, Scorpio Rising*, and other avant-garde works (pp. 357–372). And we'll encounter similar problems when we examine the editing of Eisenstein's *October* (Chapter 6) and the style of Godard's *Breathless* (Chapter 11).

Yet even in disturbing us, such films still arouse and shape formal expectations. For example, on the basis of our experience of most movie stories, we expect that the main characters introduced in the first half of a film will be present in the second half. Yet this does not happen in Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (pp. 406–409). When our expectations are thwarted, we may feel disoriented, but then we adjust them to look for other, more appropriate, ways of engaging with the film's form.

If we can adjust our expectations to a disorienting work, it may involve us deeply. Our uneasiness may lessen as we get accustomed to a work's unusual formal system. Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*, for example, slowly trains the viewer to associate a series of images with the letters of the alphabet. Viewers often become quite absorbed in watching the series take shape as a cinematic picture puzzle. As *Chungking Express* and *Zorns Lemma* also suggest, a disturbing work can reveal to us our normal expectations about form. Such films are valuable because they coax us to reflect on our taken-for-granted assumptions about how a movie must behave.

There is no limit to the number of ways in which a film can be organized. Some films will ask us to recast our expectations in drastic ways. Still, our enjoyment of the cinema can increase if we welcome the unfamiliar experiences offered by formally challenging films.

Conventions and Experience

Our ABAC example illustrates still another point. One guide to your hunches was *prior experience*. Your knowledge of the English alphabet makes ABA an unlikely sequence. This fact suggests that aesthetic form is not a pure activity isolated from other experiences.

Precisely because artworks are human creations and because the artist lives in history and society, he or she cannot avoid relating the work, in some way, to other works and to aspects of the world in general. A tradition, a dominant style, a popular form—some such elements will be common to several different artworks. These common traits are usually called *conventions*. We looked briefly at one convention in a shot from *The Shining* (1.12), in which Kubrick prepared the audience for the use of the knife at the film's climax. *Genres*, as we shall see in Chapter 9, depend heavily on conventions. It's a convention of the musical film that characters sing and dance, as in *The Wizard of Oz*. It's one convention of narrative form that the conclusion solves the problems that the characters confront, and *Wizard* likewise accepts this convention by letting Dorothy return to Kansas.

From the spectator's standpoint, the perception of artistic form will arise from cues within the work and from prior experiences—experiences derived from everyday life and from other artworks. You were able to play the ABAC game because you had learned the alphabet. You may have learned it in everyday life (in a

classroom or from your parents) or from an artwork (as some children now learn the alphabet from television cartoons). Similarly, we are able to recognize the journey pattern in *The Wizard of Oz*. We've taken trips and we've seen other films organized around this pattern (such as *Stagecoach* or *North by Northwest*), and the pattern is to be found in other artworks, such as Homer's *Odyssey* or J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Our ability to spot cues, to see them as forming systems, and to create expectations is guided by our real-life experiences and our knowledge of artistic conventions.

In recognizing film form, then, the audience must be prepared to understand formal cues through knowledge of life and of other artworks. But what if the two principles come into conflict? In ordinary life, people don't simply start to sing and dance, as they do in *The Wizard of Oz*. Very often conventions demarcate art from life, saying implicitly, "In artworks of this sort the laws of everyday reality don't operate. By the rules of *this* game, something 'unreal' *can* happen." All stylized art, from opera, ballet, and pantomime to slapstick comedy, depends on the audience's willingness to suspend the laws of ordinary experience and to accept particular conventions. It is simply beside the point to insist that such conventions are unreal or to ask why Tristan sings to Isolde or why Buster Keaton doesn't smile. Very often the most relevant prior experience for perceiving form is not everyday experience but previous encounters with works having similar conventions.

Further, artworks can create new conventions. A highly innovative work can at first seem odd because it refuses to conform to the norms we expect. Cubist painting, the French "New Novel" of the 1950s, and ambient music seemed bizarre initially because of their refusal to adhere to conventions. But a closer look may show that an unusual artwork has its own rules, creating an unorthodox formal system that we can learn to recognize and respond to. Eventually, the new systems offered by such unusual works may themselves furnish conventions and thus create new expectations.

Form and Feeling

Certainly, emotion plays a large role in our experience of form. To understand this role, let's distinguish between *emotions represented* in the artwork and an *emotional response felt* by the spectator. If an actor grimaces in agony, the emotion of pain is represented within the film. If, however, the viewer who sees the painful expression laughs (as the viewer of a comedy might), the emotion of amusement is felt by the spectator. Both types of emotion have formal implications.

Emotions represented within the film interact as parts of the film's total system. For example, that grimace of pain might be consistent with the character's response to bad news. A character's sly expression may prepare us for the later revelation of his or her villainous side. Or a cheerful scene might stand in contrast to a mournful one. A tragic event might be undercut by light-hearted music. All emotions present in a film may be seen as systematically related to one another through that film's form.

The spectator's emotional response to the film is related to form as well. We have just seen how cues in the artwork interact with our prior experience, especially our experience of artistic conventions. Often form in artworks appeals to ready-made reactions to certain images (for example, involving sexuality, race, or social class). But form can create new responses instead of harping on old ones. Just as formal conventions often lead us to suspend our normal sense of real-life experience, so form may lead us to override our everyday emotional responses. People whom we would despise in life may become spellbinding as characters in a film. We can be enthralled by a film about a subject that normally bores us. One cause of these experiences lies in the systematic way we become involved in form. In *The Wizard of Oz*, we might, for example, find the land of Oz far more attractive than Kansas. But because the film's form leads us to sympathize with Dorothy in

"To a story-teller a journey is a marvelous device. It provides a strong thread on which a multitude of things that he has in mind may be strung to make a new thing, various, unpredictable, and yet coherent. My chief reason for using this form was technical."

— J.R.R. Tolkien

“If my film makes one more person feel miserable, I’ll feel I’ve done my job.”

—Woody Allen, director, *Hannah and Her Sisters*

her desire to go home, we feel great satisfaction when she finally returns to Kansas.

It is first and foremost the dynamic aspect of form that engages our feelings. Expectation, for instance, spurs emotion. To have an expectation about “what happens next” is to invest some emotion in the situation. Delayed fulfillment of an expectation—suspense—may produce anxiety or sympathy. (Will the detective find the criminal? Will boy get girl? Will the melody return?) Gratified expectations may produce a feeling of satisfaction or relief. (The detective solves the mystery; boy does get girl; the melody returns one more time.) Cheated expectations and curiosity about past material may produce puzzlement or keener interest. (So he isn’t the detective? This isn’t a romance story? Has a second melody replaced the first one?)

Note that all of these possibilities *may* occur. There is no general recipe for concocting a novel or film to produce the “correct” emotional response. It is all a matter of context—that is, of the particular system that is each artwork’s overall form. All we can say for certain is that the emotion felt by the spectator will emerge from the totality of formal relationships she or he perceives in the work. This is one reason why we should try to notice as many formal relations as possible in a film; the richer our perception, the deeper and more complex our response may become.

Taken in context, the relations between the feelings represented in the film and those felt by the spectator can be quite complicated. Let’s take an example. Many people believe that no more sorrowful event can occur than the death of a child. In most films, this event would be represented so as to summon up the sadness we would also feel in life. But the power of artistic form can alter the emotional tenor of even this event. In Jean Renoir’s *The Crime of M. Lange*, the cynical publisher Batala rapes and abandons Estelle, a young laundress. After Batala disappears, Estelle becomes integrated into the neighborhood and returns to her former fiancé. But Estelle is pregnant by Batala and bears his child.

The scene when Estelle’s employer, Valentine, announces that the child was born dead is one of the most emotionally complex in cinema. The first reactions represented are solemnity and sorrow; the characters display grief. Suddenly, Batala’s cousin remarks, “Too bad. It was a relative.” In the film’s context, this is taken as a joke, and the other characters break out in smiles and laughter. The shift in the emotion represented in the film catches us off guard. Since these characters are not heartless, we must readjust our reaction to the death and respond as they do—with relief. Estelle’s survival is far more important than the death of Batala’s child. The film’s formal development has rendered appropriate a reaction that might be perverse in ordinary life. This is a daring, extreme example, but it dramatically illustrates how both emotions onscreen and our responses depend on the context created by form.

Form and Meaning

Like emotion, **meaning** is important to our experience of artworks. As an alert perceiver, the spectator is constantly testing the work for larger significance, for what it says or suggests. The sorts of meanings that the spectator attributes to a film may vary considerably. Let’s look at four things we might say about the meaning of *The Wizard of Oz*.

1. **Referential meaning.** *During the Depression, a tornado takes a girl from her family’s Kansas farm to the mythical land of Oz. After a series of adventures, she returns home.*

This is very concrete, close to a bare-bones plot summary. Here the meaning depends on the spectator’s ability to identify specific items: the American Depression of the 1930s, the state of Kansas, features of Midwestern climate. A viewer unacquainted with such information would miss some of the meanings cued by the film.

We can call such tangible meanings *referential*, since the film refers to things or places already invested with significance.

A film's subject matter—in *The Wizard of Oz*, American farm life in the 1930s—is often established through referential meaning. And, as you might expect, referential meaning functions within the film's overall form, in the way that we have argued that the subject of the Civil War functions within *The Birth of a Nation*. Suppose that instead of having Dorothy live in flat, spare, rural Kansas, the film made Dorothy a child living in Beverly Hills. When she got to Oz (transported there, perhaps, by a hillside flash flood), the contrast between the crowded opulence of Oz and her home would not be nearly as sharp. Here the referential meanings of Kansas play a definite role in the overall contrast of settings that the film's form creates.

2. *Explicit meaning.* *A girl dreams of leaving home to escape her troubles. Only after she leaves does she realize how much she loves her family and friends.*

This assertion is still fairly concrete in the meaning it attributes to the film. If someone were to ask you the *point* of the film—what it seems to be trying to get across—you might answer with something like this. Perhaps you would also mention Dorothy's closing line, "There's no place like home," as a summary of what she learns. Let us call this sort of openly asserted meaning an *explicit meaning*.

Like referential meanings, explicit meanings function within the film's overall form. They are defined by context. For instance, we might want to take "There's no place like home" as a statement of the meaning of the entire film. But, first, *why* do we feel that as a strongly meaningful line? In ordinary conversation, it's a cliché. In context, however, the line gains great force. It's uttered in close-up, it comes at the end of the film (a formally privileged moment), and it refers back to all of Dorothy's desires and ordeals, recalling the film's narrative development toward the achievement of her goal. It is the *form* of the film that gives the homily an unfamiliar weight.

This example suggests that we must examine how explicit meanings in a film interact with other elements of the overall system. If "There's no place like home" adequately and exhaustively summarizes the meaning of *The Wizard of Oz*, no one need ever see the film; the summary would suffice. But like feelings, meanings are born from the dynamics of form. They play a part along with other elements to make up the total system.

Usually, we can't isolate a particularly significant moment and declare it to be *the* meaning of the whole film. Even Dorothy's "There's no place like home," however strong as a summary of *one* meaningful element in *The Wizard of Oz*, must be placed in the context of the film's entire beguiling Oz fantasy. If "There's no place like home" were the whole point of the film, why is there so much that is pleasant in Oz? The explicit meanings of a film arise from the *whole* film and are set in dynamic formal relation to one another.

In trying to see the meaningful moments of a film as parts of a larger whole, it's useful to set individually significant moments against one another. Thus Dorothy's final line could be juxtaposed to the scene of the characters getting spruced up after their arrival at the Emerald City. We can try to see the film as about, not one or the other, but rather the relation of the two—the delight and risk of a fantasy world versus the comfort and stability of home. Thus the film's total system is larger than any one explicit meaning we can find in it. Instead of asking, "What is this film's meaning?" we can ask, "How do *all* the film's meanings relate to one another?"

3. *Implicit meaning.* *An adolescent who must soon face the adult world yearns for a return to the simple world of childhood, but she eventually accepts the demands of growing up.*

This is more abstract than the first two statements. It goes beyond what is explicitly stated in the film, suggesting that *The Wizard of Oz* is in some sense about the passage from childhood to adulthood. In this view, the film suggests or implies that, in adolescence, people may desire to return to the apparently uncomplicated world of childhood. Dorothy's frustration with her aunt and uncle and her urge to flee to a place "over the rainbow" become examples of a general conception of adolescence. Unlike the "no place like home" line, this meaning isn't stated directly. We can call this suggestion an *implicit meaning*. When perceivers ascribe implicit meanings to an artwork, they're usually said to be *interpreting* it.

Clearly, **interpretations** vary. One viewer might propose that *The Wizard of Oz* is really about adolescence. Another might suggest that it is really about courage and persistence or that it is a satire on the adult world. One of the appeals of artworks is that they ask us to interpret them, often in several ways at once. Again, the artwork invites us to perform certain activities—here, building up implicit meanings. But once again, the artwork's overall form shapes our sense of implicit meanings.

Some viewers approach a film expecting to learn lessons about life. They may admire a film because it conveys a profound or relevant message. Important as meaning is, though, this attitude often errs by splitting the film into the content portion (the meaning) and the form (the vehicle for the content). The abstract quality of implicit meanings can lead to very broad concepts, often called *themes*. A film may have as its theme courage or the power of faithful love. Such descriptions have some value, but they are very general; hundreds of films fit them. To summarize *The Wizard of Oz* as being simply about the problems of adolescence does not do justice to the specific qualities of the film as an experience. We suggest that the search for implicit meanings should not leave behind the *particular* and *concrete* features of a film.

This is not to say that we should not interpret films. But we should strive to make our interpretations precise by seeing how each film's thematic meanings are suggested by the film's total system. In a film, both explicit and implicit meanings depend closely on the relations between narrative and style. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the Yellow Brick Road has no meaning in and of itself. But if we examine the function it fulfills in relation to the narrative, the music, the colors, and so on, we can argue that the Yellow Brick Road does indeed function meaningfully. Dorothy's strong desire to go home makes the road represent that desire. We want Dorothy to be successful in getting to the end of the road, as well as in getting back to Kansas; thus the road participates in the theme of the desirability of home.

Interpretation need not be an end in itself. It also helps in understanding the overall form of the film. Nor does interpretation exhaust the possibilities of a device. We can say many things about the Yellow Brick Road other than how its meaning relates to the film's thematic material. We could note that the road marks Oz as a fantastical land, since real-world bricks are a brownish-red color. We could analyze how the road becomes the stage for dances and songs along the way. We could see how it is narratively important because her indecision at a crossroads allows Dorothy to meet the Scarecrow. We could work out a color scheme for the film, contrasting the yellow road, the red slippers, the green Emerald City, and so forth. From this standpoint, interpretation may be seen as one kind of formal analysis, one that seeks to reveal a film's implicit meanings. Those meanings should be constantly tested by placing them within the concrete texture of the whole film.

4. **Symptomatic meaning.** *In a society in which human worth is measured by money, the home and the family may seem to be the last refuge of human values. This belief is especially strong in times of economic crisis, such as that in the United States in the 1930s.*

Like the third statement, this is abstract and general. It situates the film within a trend of thought that is assumed to be characteristic of American society during the 1930s. The claim could apply equally well to many other films, as well as to many

novels, plays, poems, paintings, advertisements, radio shows, political speeches, and a host of cultural products of the period.

But there is something else worth noticing about the statement. It treats an explicit meaning in *The Wizard of Oz* (“There’s no place like home”) as a manifestation of a wider set of values characteristic of a whole society. We could treat implicit meanings the same way. If we say the film implies something about adolescence as a crucial time of transition, we could suggest that emphasis on adolescence as a special period of life is also a recurrent concern of American society. So, it’s possible to understand a film’s explicit or implicit meanings as bearing traces of a particular set of social values. We can call this *symptomatic meaning*, and the set of values that get revealed can be considered a social **ideology**.

The possibility of noticing symptomatic meanings reminds us that meaning, whether referential, explicit, or implicit, is largely a social phenomenon. Many meanings of films are ultimately ideological; that is, they spring from systems of culturally specific beliefs about the world. Religious beliefs, political opinions, conceptions of race or sex or social class, even our most deeply seated notions of life—all these constitute our ideological frame of reference. Although we may live as if our beliefs were the only true and real explanations of how the world is, we need only compare our own ideology with that of another group or culture or era to see how historically and socially shaped many of those views are. In other times and places, *home* and *adolescence* don’t carry the meanings they carry in 21st-century America.

Films, like other artworks, can be examined for their symptomatic meanings. Again, however, the abstract and general quality of such meanings can lead us away from the concrete form of the film. As when analyzing the implicit meanings, the viewer should strive to ground symptomatic meanings in the film’s specific aspects. A film *enacts* ideological meanings through its particular and unique formal system. We’ll see in Chapter 11 how the narrative and stylistic system of *Meet Me in St. Louis* can be analyzed for ideological implications.

To sum up: Films have meaning because we attribute meanings to them. We cannot therefore regard meaning as a simple content to be extracted from the film. Sometimes the filmmaker guides us toward certain meanings; sometimes we find meanings the filmmaker didn’t intend. Our minds will probe an artwork for significance at several levels. One mark of our engagement with the film as an experience is our search for referential, explicit, implicit, and symptomatic meanings. The more abstract and general our attributions of meaning, the more we risk loosening our grasp on the film’s specific formal system. In analyzing films, we must balance our concern for that concrete system with our urge to assign it wider significance.

Evaluation

In talking about an artwork, people often *evaluate* it; that is, they make claims about its goodness or badness. Reviews in newspapers and magazines and on the Internet exist almost solely to tell us whether a film is worth seeing; our friends often urge us to go to their latest favorite. But all too often we discover that the film that someone else esteemed appears only mediocre to us. At that point, we may complain that most people evaluate films only on the basis of their own, highly personal, tastes.

How, then, are we to evaluate films with any degree of objectivity? We can start by realizing that there is a difference between *personal taste* and *evaluative judgment*. To say “I liked this film” or “I hated it” is not equal to saying “It’s a good film” or “It’s wretched.” Very few people in the world limit their enjoyment only to the greatest works. Most people can enjoy a film they know is not particularly good. This is perfectly reasonable—unless they start trying to convince people that these pleasant films actually rank among the undying masterpieces. At that point others will probably stop listening to their judgments at all.

So personal preference need not be the sole basis for judging a film’s quality. Instead, the critic who wishes to make a relatively objective evaluation will use

specific *criteria*. A criterion is a standard that can be applied in the judgment of many works. By using a criterion, the critic gains a basis for comparing films for relative quality.

There are many different criteria. Some people evaluate films on *realistic* criteria, judging a film good if it conforms to their view of reality. Aficionados of military history might judge a film entirely on whether the battle scenes use historically accurate weaponry; the narrative, editing, characterization, sound, and visual style might be of little interest to them.

Other people condemn films because they don't find the action plausible. They dismiss a scene by saying, "Who'd really believe that X would meet Y just at the right moment?" We have already seen, though, that artworks often violate laws of reality and operate by their own conventions and internal rules.

Viewers can also use *moral* criteria to evaluate films. Most narrowly, aspects of the film can be judged outside their context in the film's formal system. Some viewers might feel any film with nudity or profanity or violence is bad, while other viewers might find just these aspects praiseworthy. So some viewers might condemn the death of the newborn baby in *The Crime of M. Lange*, regardless of the scene's context. More broadly, viewers and critics may employ moral criteria to evaluate a film's overall significance, and here the film's complete formal system becomes pertinent. A film might be judged good because of its overall view of life, its willingness to show opposing points of view, or its emotional range.

While realistic and moral criteria are well suited to particular purposes, this book suggests criteria that assess films as artistic wholes. Such criteria should allow us to take each film's form into account as much as possible. *Coherence* is one such criterion. This quality, often referred to as *unity*, has traditionally been held to be a positive feature of artworks. So, too, has *intensity of effect*. If an artwork is vivid, striking, and emotionally engaging, it may be considered more valuable.

Another criterion is *complexity*. We can argue that, all other things being equal, complex films are good. A complex film engages our interest on many levels, creates a multiplicity of relations among many separate formal elements, and tends to create intriguing patterns of feelings and meanings.

Yet another formal criterion is *originality*. Originality for its own sake is pointless, of course. Just because something is different does not mean that it is good. But if an artist takes a familiar convention and uses it in a way that makes it a fresh experience, then (all other things being equal) the resulting work may be considered good from an aesthetic standpoint.

Note that all these criteria are matters of degree. One film may be more complex than another, but the simpler film may be more complex than a third one. Moreover, there is often a give-and-take among the criteria. A film might be very complex but lack coherence or intensity. Ninety minutes of a black screen would make for an original film but not a very complex one. A slasher movie may create great intensity in certain scenes but may be wholly unoriginal, as well as disorganized and simplistic. In applying the criteria, the analyst often must weigh one against another.

Evaluation can serve many useful ends. It can call attention to neglected artworks or make us rethink our attitudes toward accepted classics. But just as the discovery of meanings is not the only purpose of formal analysis, we suggest that evaluation is most fruitful when it is backed up by a close examination of the film. General statements ("*The Wizard of Oz* is a masterpiece") seldom enlighten us very much. Usually, an evaluation is helpful insofar as it points to aspects of the film and shows us relations and qualities we have missed: "*The Wizard of Oz* subtly compares characters in Kansas and Oz, as when Miss Gulch's written order to take Toto is echoed by the Wicked Witch's fiery skywriting to the citizens of the Emerald City, 'Surrender Dorothy.'" Like interpretation, evaluation is most useful when it drives us back to the film itself as a formal system, helping us to understand that system better.

In reading this book, you'll find that we have generally minimized evaluation. We think that most of the films and sequences we analyze are more or less good

based on the artistic criteria we mentioned, but the purpose of this book is not to persuade you to accept a list of masterpieces. Rather, we believe that if we show in detail how films may be understood as artistic systems, you will have an informed basis for whatever evaluations you wish to make.

Principles of Film Form

Because film form is a system—that is, a unified set of related, interdependent elements—there must be some principles that help create the relationships among the parts. In disciplines other than the arts, principles may be sets of rules or laws. In the sciences, principles may take the form of physical laws or mathematical propositions. In research and invention, such principles provide firm guidelines as to what is possible. For example, engineers designing an airplane must obey fundamental laws of aerodynamics.

In the arts, however, there are no absolute principles of form that all artists must follow. Artworks are products of culture. Thus many of the principles of artistic form are matters of convention. In Chapter 9, we shall examine how various genres can have very different conventions. A Western is not in error if it does not follow the conventions of classic Westerns. The artist obeys (or disobeys) *norms*—bodies of conventions, not laws.

But within these social conventions, each artwork tends to set up its own specific formal principles. The forms of different films can vary enormously. We can distinguish, however, five general principles that we notice in experiencing a film's formal system: function, similarity and repetition, difference and variation, development, and unity/disunity.

Function

If form in cinema is the overall interrelation among various systems of elements, we can assume that every element has one or more **functions**. That is, every element will be seen as fulfilling roles within the whole system.

Of any element within a film we can ask, What are its functions? In *The Wizard of Oz*, every element in the film fulfills one or more roles. For instance, Miss Gulch, the woman who wants to take Toto from Dorothy, reappears in the Oz section as the Wicked Witch. In the opening portion of the film, Miss Gulch frightens Dorothy into running away from home. In Oz, the Witch prevents Dorothy from returning home by keeping her away from the Emerald City and by trying to seize the ruby slippers.

Even an element as apparently minor as the dog Toto serves many functions. The dispute over Toto causes Dorothy to run away from home and to get back too late to take shelter from the tornado. Later, when Dorothy is about to leave Oz, Toto's pursuit of a cat makes her jump out of the ascending balloon. Toto's gray color, set off against the brightness of Oz, creates a link to the black and white of the Kansas episodes at the film's beginning. Functions, then, are almost always multiple. Both narrative and stylistic elements have functions.

One useful way to grasp the function of an element is to ask what other elements demand that it be present. For instance, the narrative requires that Dorothy run away from home, so Toto functions to trigger this action. Or, to take another example, Dorothy must seem completely different from the Wicked Witch, so costume, age, voice, and other characteristics function to contrast the two. Additionally, the switch from black-and-white to color film functions to signal the arrival in the bright fantasy land of Oz.

Note that the concept of function does not always depend on the filmmaker's intention. Often discussions of films get bogged down in the question of whether the filmmaker really knew what he or she was doing by including a certain element. In

asking about function, we do not ask for a production history. From the standpoint of intention, Dorothy may sing “Over the Rainbow” because MGM wanted Judy Garland to launch a hit song. From the standpoint of function, however, we can say that Dorothy’s singing that song fulfills certain narrative and stylistic functions. It establishes her desire to leave home, its reference to the rainbow foreshadows her trip through the air to the colorful land of Oz, and so forth. In asking about formal function, therefore, we ask not, “How did this element get there?” but rather, “What is this element *doing* there?” and “How does it cue us to respond?”

One way to notice the functions of an element is to consider the element’s **motivation**. Because films are human constructs, we can expect that any one element in a film will have some justification for being there. This justification is the motivation for that element. For example, when Miss Gulch appears as the Witch in Oz, we justify her new incarnation by appealing to the fact that early scenes in Kansas have established her as a threat to Dorothy. When Toto jumps from the balloon to chase a cat, we motivate his action by appealing to notions of how dogs are likely to act when cats are around.

Sometimes people use the word “motivation” to apply only to reasons for characters’ actions, as when a murderer acts from certain motives. Here, however, we’ll use “motivation” to apply to any element in the film that the viewer justifies on some grounds. A costume, for example, needs motivation. If we see a man in beggar’s clothes in the middle of an elegant society ball, we will ask why he is dressed in this way. He could be the victim of practical jokers who have deluded him into believing that this is a masquerade. He could be an eccentric millionaire out to shock his friends. Such a scene does occur in *My Man Godfrey*. The motivation for the beggar’s presence at the ball is a scavenger hunt; the young society people have been assigned to bring back, among other things, a beggar. An event, the hunt, *motivates* the presence of an inappropriately dressed character.

Motivation is so common in films that spectators take it for granted. Shadowy, flickering light on a character may be motivated by the presence of a candle in the room. (We might remember that in production the light is provided by offscreen lamps, but the candle purports to be the source and thus motivates the pattern of light.) A character wandering across a room may motivate the moving of the camera to follow the action and keep the character within the frame. When we study principles of narrative form (Chapter 3) and various types of films (Chapters 9 and 10), we will look more closely at how motivation works to give elements specific functions.

“You can take a movie, for example, like *Angels with Dirty Faces*, where James Cagney is a child and says to his pal Pat O’Brien, ‘What do you hear, what do you say?’—cocky kid—and then as a young rough on the way up when things are going great for him he says, ‘What do you hear, what do you say?’ Then when he is about to be executed in the electric chair and Pat O’Brien is there to hear his confession, he says, ‘What do you hear, what do you say?’ and the simple repetition of the last line of dialogue in three different places with the same characters brings home the dramatically changed circumstances much more than any extensive diatribe would.”

—Robert Towne, screenwriter, *Chinatown*

Similarity and Repetition

In our example of the ABACA pattern, we saw how we were able to predict the next steps in the series. One reason for this was a regular pattern of repeated elements. Like beats in music or meter in poetry, the repetition of the A’s in our pattern established and satisfied formal expectations. Similarity and repetition, then, constitute an important principle of film form.

Repetition is basic to our understanding any film. For instance, we must be able to recall and identify characters and settings each time they reappear. More subtly, throughout any film, we can observe repetitions of everything from lines of dialogue and bits of music to camera positions, characters’ behavior, and story action.

It’s useful to have a term to describe formal repetitions, and the most common term is **motif**. We shall call *any significant repeated element in a film* a motif. A motif may be an object, a color, a place, a person, a sound, or even a character trait. We may call a pattern of lighting or camera position a motif if it is repeated through the course of a film. The form of *The Wizard of Oz* uses all these kinds of motifs. Even in such a relatively simple film, we can see the pervasive presence of similarity and repetition as formal principles.

Film form uses general similarities as well as exact duplication. To understand *The Wizard of Oz*, we must see the similarities between the three Kansas farmhands



2.2 The itinerant Kansas fortune-teller, Professor Marvell, bears a striking resemblance to . . .



2.3 . . . the old charlatan known as the Wizard of Oz.



2.4 Miss Gulch's bicycle in the opening section becomes . . .



2.5 . . . the Witch's broom in Oz.



2.6 As the Lion describes his timidity, the characters are lined up to form a mirror reversal of . . .



2.7 . . . the earlier scene in which the others teased Zeke for being afraid of pigs.

and the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion. We must notice additional echoes between characters in the frame story and in the fantasy (2.2–2.5). The duplication isn't perfect, but the similarity is very strong. Such similarities are called *parallelism*, the process whereby the film cues the spectator to compare two or more distinct elements by highlighting some similarity. For example, at one point, Dorothy says she feels that she has known the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion before. At another point, the staging of a shot reinforces this familiarity (2.6, 2.7).

Motifs can assist in creating parallelism. The viewer will notice, and even come to expect, that every time Dorothy meets a character in Oz, the scene will end with the song "We're Off to See the Wizard." Our recognition of parallelism provides part of our pleasure in watching a film, much as the echo of rhymes contributes to the power of poetry.

Difference and Variation

The form of a film could hardly be composed only of repetitions. AAAAAA is rather boring. There must also be some changes, or *variations*, however small. Thus difference is another fundamental principle of film form.

We can readily understand the need for variety, contrast, and change in films. Characters must be differentiated, environments delineated, and different times or activities established. Even within the image, we must distinguish differences in tonality, texture, direction and speed of movement, and so on. Form needs its stable background of similarity and repetition, but it also demands that differences be created.



2.8 Through her crystal ball, the Wicked Witch mocks Dorothy.



2.9 Centered in the upper half of the frame, the Emerald City creates a striking contrast to . . .



2.10 . . . the similar composition showing the castle of the Wicked Witch of the West.



2.11 Dorothy puts her feet on the literal beginning of the Yellow Brick Road, as it widens out from a thin line.

This means that although motifs (scenes, settings, actions, objects, stylistic devices) may be repeated, those motifs will seldom be repeated *exactly*. Variation will appear. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the three Kansas hired hands aren't exactly the same as their "twins" in Oz. Parallelism thus requires a degree of difference as well as striking similarity. When Professor Marvel pretends to read Dorothy's future in a small crystal ball, we see no images in it (2.2). Dorothy's dream transforms the crystal into a large globe in the Witch's castle, where it displays frightening scenes (2.8). Similarly, the repeated motif of Toto's disruption of a situation changes its function. In Kansas, it disturbs Miss Gulch and induces Dorothy to take Toto away from home, but in Oz, his disruption prevents Dorothy from returning home.

Differences among the elements may often sharpen into downright opposition among them. We're most familiar with formal oppositions as clashes among characters. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy's desires are opposed, at various points, by the differing desires of Aunt Em, Miss Gulch, the Wicked Witch, and the Wizard, so that our experience of the film is engaged through dramatic conflict. But character conflict isn't the only way the formal principle of difference may manifest itself. Settings, actions, and other elements may be opposed. *The Wizard of Oz* presents color oppositions: black-and-white Kansas versus colorful Oz, Dorothy in red, white, and blue versus the Witch in black; and so on. Settings are opposed as well—not only Oz versus Kansas but also the various locales within Oz (2.9, 2.10). Voice quality, musical tunes, and a host of other elements play off against one another, demonstrating that any motif may be opposed by any other motif.

Not all differences are simple oppositions, of course. Dorothy's three Oz friends—the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Lion—are distinguished not only by external features but also by means of a three-term comparison of what they lack (a brain, a heart, courage). Other films may rely on less sharp differences, suggesting a scale of gradations among the characters, as in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*. At the extreme, an abstract film may create minimal variations among its parts, such as in the slight changes that accompany each return of the same footage in J. J. Murphy's *Print Generation* (p. 359).

Repetition and variation are two sides of the same coin. To notice one is to notice the other. In thinking about films, we ought to look for similarities *and* differences. Shutting between the two, we can point out motifs and contrast the changes they undergo, recognize parallelisms as repetition, and still spot crucial variations.

Development

One way to keep ourselves aware of how similarity and difference operate in film form is to look for principles of development from part to part. Development constitutes some patterning of similar and differing elements. Our pattern ABACA is based not only on repetition (the recurring motif of A) and difference (the varied insertion of B and C) but also on a principle of *progression* that we could state as a rule: alternate A with successive letters in alphabetical order. Though simple, this is a principle of *development*, governing the form of the whole series.

Think of formal development as a *progression moving from beginning through middle to end*. The story of *The Wizard of Oz* shows development in many ways. It is, for one thing, a *journey*: from Kansas through Oz to Kansas. The good witch Glinda emphasizes this formal pattern by telling Dorothy that "It's always best to start at the beginning" (2.11). Many films possess such a journey plot. *The Wizard of Oz* is also a *search*, beginning with an initial separation from home, tracing a series of efforts to find a way home, and ending with home being found. Within the film, there is also a pattern of *mystery*, which usually has the same beginning-middle-end pattern. We begin with a question (Who is the Wizard of Oz?), pass through attempts to answer it, and conclude with the question answered. (The Wizard is a fraud.) Most feature-length films are composed of several developmental patterns.

In order to analyze a film's pattern of development, it is usually a good idea to make a *segmentation*. A segmentation is simply a written outline of the film that breaks it into its major and minor parts, with the parts marked by consecutive numbers or letters. If a narrative film has 40 *scenes*, then we can label each scene with a number running from 1 to 40. It may be useful to divide some parts further (for example, scenes 6a and 6b). Segmenting a film enables us not only to notice similarities and differences among parts but also to plot the overall progression of the form. Following is a segmentation for *The Wizard of Oz*. (In segmenting films, we'll label the opening credits with a "C," the end title with an "E," and all other segments with numbers.)

THE WIZARD OF OZ: PLOT SEGMENTATION

C. Credits

1. Kansas

- a. Dorothy is at home, worried about Miss Gulch's threat to Toto.
- b. Running away, Dorothy meets Professor Marvel, who induces her to return home.
- c. A tornado lifts the house, with Dorothy and Toto, into the sky.

2. Munchkin City

- a. Dorothy meets Glinda, and the Munchkins celebrate the death of the Wicked Witch of the East.
- b. The Wicked Witch of the West threatens Dorothy over the Ruby Slippers.
- c. Glinda sends Dorothy to seek the Wizard's help.

3. The Yellow Brick Road

- a. Dorothy meets the Scarecrow.
- b. Dorothy meets the Tin Man.
- c. Dorothy meets the Cowardly Lion.

4. The Emerald City

- a. The Witch creates a poppy field near the city, but Glinda rescues the travelers.
- b. The group is welcomed by the city's citizens.
- c. As they wait to see the Wizard, the Lion sings of being king.
- d. The terrifying Wizard agrees to help the group if they obtain the Wicked Witch's broomstick.

5. The Witch's castle and nearby woods

- a. In the woods, flying monkeys carry off Dorothy and Toto.
- b. The Witch realizes that she must kill Dorothy to get the ruby slippers.
- c. The Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion sneak into the Castle; in the ensuing chase, Dorothy kills the Witch.

6. The Emerald City

- a. Although revealed as a humbug, the Wizard grants the wishes of the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion.
- b. Dorothy fails to leave with the Wizard's hot-air balloon but is transported home by the ruby slippers.

7. Kansas—Dorothy describes Oz to her family and friends

E. End credits

Preparing a segmentation may look a little fussy, but in the course of this book, we'll try to convince you that it sheds a lot of light on films. For now, just consider this comparison. As you walk into a building, your experience develops over time. In many cathedrals, for example, the entryway is fairly narrow. But as you emerge into the open area inside (the nave), space expands outward and upward, your sense of your body seems to shrink, and your attention is directed toward the altar, centrally located in the distance. The somewhat cramped entryway makes you feel a contrast to the broad and soaring space. Your experience has been as carefully planned as any theme park ride. Only by thinking back on it can you realize that the

planned progression of the building's different parts shaped your experience. If you could study the builder's blueprints, you'd see the whole layout at a glance. It would be very different from your moment-by-moment experience of it, but it would shed light on how your experience was shaped.

A film isn't that different. As we watch the film, we're in the thick of it. We follow the formal development moment by moment, and we may get more and more involved. If we want to study the overall shape of things, though, we need to stand back a bit. Films don't come with blueprints, but by creating a plot segmentation, we can get a comparable sense of the film's overall design. In a way, we're recovering the basic architecture of the movie. A segmentation lets us see the patterning that we felt intuitively in watching the film. In Chapters 3 and 10, we'll consider how to segment different types of films, and several of our sample analyses in Chapter 11 will use segmentations to show how the films work.

Another way to size up how a film develops formally is to *compare the beginning with the ending*. By looking at the similarities and the differences between the beginning and the ending, we can start to understand the overall pattern of the film. We can test this advice on *The Wizard of Oz*. A comparison of the beginning and the ending reveals that Dorothy's journey ends with her return home; the journey, a search for an ideal place "over the rainbow," has turned into a search for a way back to Kansas. The final scene repeats and develops the narrative elements of the opening. Stylistically, the beginning and ending are the only parts that use black-and-white film stock. This repetition supports the contrast the narrative creates between the dreamland of Oz and the bleak landscape of Kansas.

At the film's end, Professor Marvel comes to visit Dorothy (2.12), reversing the situation of her visit to him when she had tried to run away. At the beginning, he had convinced her to return home; then, as the Wizard in the Oz section, he had also represented her hopes of returning home. Finally, when she recognizes Professor Marvel and the farmhands as the basis of the characters in her dream, she remembers how much she had wanted to come home from Oz.

Earlier, we suggested that film form engages our emotions and expectations in a dynamic way. Now we are in a better position to see why. The constant interplay between similarity and difference, and repetition and variation, leads the viewer to an active, developing engagement with the film's formal system. It may be handy to visualize a movie's development in static terms by segmenting it, but we ought not to forget that formal development is a *process*. Form shapes our experience of the film.



2.12 The visits of the final scene.

Unity/Disunity

All of the relationships among elements in a film create the total filmic system. Even if an element seems utterly out of place in relation to the rest of the film, we cannot really say that it isn't part of the film. At most, the unrelated element is enigmatic or incoherent. It may be a flaw in the otherwise integrated system of the film—but it does affect the whole film.

When all the relationships we perceive within a film are clear and economically interwoven, we say that the film has *unity*. We call a unified film tight, because there seem to be no gaps in the formal relationships. Every element present has a specific set of functions, similarities and differences are determinable, the form develops logically, and no element is superfluous. In turn, the film's overall unity gives our experience a sense of completeness and fulfillment.

Unity is, however, a matter of degree. Almost no film is so tight as to leave no ends dangling. For example, at one point in *The Wizard of Oz*, the Witch refers to her having attacked Dorothy and her friends with insects, yet we have never seen them, and the mention becomes puzzling. In fact, a sequence of a bee attack was originally shot but then cut from the finished film. The Witch's line about the insect attack now lacks motivation. More striking is a dangling element at the film's end: we never find out what happens to Miss Gulch. Presumably, she still has her legal

order to take Toto away, but no one refers to this in the last scene. The viewer may be inclined to overlook this disunity, however, because Miss Gulch's parallel character, the Witch, has been killed off in the Oz fantasy, and we don't expect to see her alive again. Since perfect unity is scarcely ever achieved, we ought to expect that even a unified film may still contain a few unintegrated elements or unanswered questions.

If we look at unity as a criterion of evaluation, we may judge a film containing several unmotivated elements as a failure. But unity and disunity may be looked at nonevaluatively as well, as the results of particular formal conventions. For example, *Pulp Fiction* lacks a bit of closure in that it never reveals what is inside a briefcase that is at the center of the gangster plot. The contents, however, give off a golden glow, suggesting that they are of very great value (as well as evoking the "whatsit" in *Kiss Me Deadly*, a classical film noir). By not specifying the goods, the film invites us to compare characters' reactions to them—most notably, in the last scene in the diner, when Pumpkin gazes at it lustfully and the newly spiritual hitman Jules calmly insists that he will deliver it to his boss. In such ways, momentary disunities contribute to broader patterns and thematic meanings.

Summary

If one issue has governed our treatment of aesthetic form, it might be said to be *concreteness*. Form is a specific system of patterned relationships that we perceive in an artwork. Such a concept helps us understand how even elements of what is normally considered content—subject matter, or abstract ideas—take on particular functions within any work.

Our experience of an artwork is also a concrete one. Picking up cues in the work, we frame specific expectations that are aroused, guided, delayed, cheated, satisfied, or disturbed. We undergo curiosity, suspense, and surprise. We compare the particular aspects of the artwork with general conventions that we know from life and from art. The concrete context of the artwork expresses and stimulates emotions and enables us to construct many types of meanings. And even when we apply general criteria in evaluating artworks, we ought to use those criteria to help us discriminate more, to penetrate more deeply into the particular aspects of the artwork. The rest of this book is devoted to studying these properties of artistic form in cinema.

We can summarize the principles of film form as a set of questions that you can ask about any film:

1. For any element in the film, what are its functions in the overall form? How is it motivated?
2. Are elements or patterns repeated throughout the film? If so, how and at what points? Are motifs and parallelisms asking us to compare elements?
3. How are elements contrasted and differentiated from one another? How are different elements opposed to one another?
4. What principles of progression or development are at work throughout the form of the film? More specifically, how does a comparison of the beginning and ending reveal the overall form of a film?
5. What degree of unity is present in the film's overall form? Is disunity subordinate to the overall unity, or does disunity dominate?

In this chapter, we examined some major ways in which films as artworks can engage us as spectators. We also reviewed some broad principles of film form. Armed with these general principles, we can press on to distinguish more specific *types* of form that are central to understanding film art.

Where to Go from Here

Form in Film and the Other Arts

Many of the ideas in this chapter are based on ideas of form to be found in other arts. All of the following constitute helpful further reading: Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1958), especially chaps. 4 and 5; Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), especially chaps. 2, 3, and 9; Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); and E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

On the relation of form to the audience, see the book by Meyer mentioned above. The ABACA example is borrowed from Barbara Herrnstein Smith's excellent study of literary form, *Poetic Closure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). Compare Kenneth Burke's claim: "Form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor and the adequate satisfying of that appetite." (See Kenneth Burke, "Psychology and Form," in *Counter-Statement* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], pp. 29–44.)

This chapter presupposes that any filmmaker uses basic formal principles. But is the filmmaker fully aware of doing so? Many filmmakers use formal principles intuitively, but others apply them quite deliberately. Spike Lee's cinematographer Ernest Dickerson remarks, "A motif we used throughout [*School Daze*] was two people in profile, 'up in each other's face.' That was a conscious decision" (*Uplift the Race: The Construction of "School Daze"* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988], p. 110). Sidney Lumet decided to give *Twelve Angry Men* a strict progression by shooting from different camera positions as the story developed. "As the picture unfolded I wanted the room to seem smaller and smaller. . . . I shot the first third of the movie above eye level, the second third at eye level, and the last third from below eye level. In that way, toward the end, the ceiling began to appear" (Sidney Lumet, *Making Movies* [New York: Knopf, 1995], p. 81).

Form, Meaning, and Feeling

How does cinema evoke emotion? It's actually a bit of a puzzle. If a giant ape were lumbering toward us on the street, we'd run away in fright. But if King Kong is lumbering toward us on the screen, we feel frightened, but we don't flee the theater. Do we feel real fear but somehow block our impulse to run? Or do we feel something that isn't real fear but is a kind of pretend-fear? Similarly, when we say that we *identify* with a character, what does that mean? That we feel exactly the same emotions that the character does? Sometimes, though, we feel some emotions that the character isn't feeling, as when sympathy for her is mixed with pity or anxiety. Can we

identify with a character and not have the same feelings she has?

In the 1990s, philosophers and film theorists tried to shed light on these issues. For a sampling, see Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, eds., *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). The essays in this collection grew out of debates around some influential books: Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990); Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Joseph Anderson, *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1996); and Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

An alternative approach to understanding spectators' response to films has been called *reception studies*. For an overview, see Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). Often scholars working in this tradition seek to understand how specific social groups, such as ethnic groups or historically located audiences, respond to the films offered to them. Influential examples are Kate Brooks and Martin Barker's *Judge Dredd: Its Friends, Fans, and Foes* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2003) and Melvin Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds., *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era* (London: British Film Institute, 1999). In *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), Janet Staiger discusses how audiences and critics can respond to films in ways that the filmmakers could not have anticipated.

Many critics concentrate on ascribing implicit and symptomatic meanings to films—that is, interpreting them. A survey of interpretive approaches is offered in R. Barton Palmer, *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches* (New York: AMS Press, 1989). David Bordwell's *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) reviews trends in film interpretation.

Linear Segmentation and Diagramming

Dividing a film into sequences in order to analyze its form is usually called *segmentation*. It is usually not difficult to do, though most often we do it intuitively.

Usually, a feature-length film will have no more than 40 sequences and no fewer than 5, so if you find yourself dividing the film into tiny bits or huge chunks, you may want to shift to a different level of generality. Of course,

sequences and scenes can also be further subdivided into subsegments. In segmenting any film, use an outline format or a linear diagram to help you visualize formal relations (beginnings and endings, parallels, patterns of development). We employ an outline format in discussing *Citizen Kane* in the next chapter and in discussing modes of filmmaking in Chapter 10.

Websites

www.uca.edu/org/ccsmi/ A site devoted to the Center for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image, which examines various aspects of psychological and emotional responses to film.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art>. A helpful introductory essay on the role of form in different art media.

Recommended DVD Supplements

DVD supplements tend to focus on behind-the-scenes production information and on exposing how techniques

such as special-effects and music were accomplished. Sometimes, though, such descriptions analyze formal aspects of the film. Despite its title, the supplement “City of Night: The Making of *Collateral*” deals largely with principles of narrative development: the use of chance to bring characters together, character change as a result of the two protagonists’ interaction, contrasting types of music, and so on. In “Sweet Sounds,” the supplement on the music in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, composer Danny Elfman discusses how the musical numbers that follow the disappearance of each of the obnoxious children created parallels among them and yet achieved variety by being derived from different styles of music.

“Their Production Will Be Second to None,” on the *Hard Day’s Night* DVD, includes an intelligent interview with director Richard Lester in which he talks about the overall form of the film. He remarks, for example, that in the first third, he deliberately used confined spaces and low ceilings to prepare for the extreme contrast of the open spaces into which the Beatles escape.

3



Narrative as a Formal System

Principles of Narrative Construction

Stories surround us. In childhood, we learn fairy tales and myths. As we grow up, we read short stories, novels, history, and biography. Religion, philosophy, and science often present their doctrines through parables and tales. Plays tell stories, as do films, television shows, comic books, paintings, dance, and many other cultural phenomena. Much of our conversation is taken up with telling tales—recalling a past event or telling a joke. Even newspaper articles are called stories, and when we ask for an explanation of something, we may say, “What’s the story?” We can’t escape even by going to sleep, since we often experience our dreams as little narratives. Narrative is a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world.

The prevalence of stories in our lives is one reason that we need to take a close look at how films may embody **narrative form**. When we speak of “going to the movies,” we almost always mean that we are going to see a narrative film—a film that tells a story.

Narrative form is most common in fictional films, but it can appear in all other basic types. For instance, documentaries often employ narrative form. *Primary* tells the story of how Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy campaigned in the Wisconsin presidential primary of 1960. Many animated films, such as Disney features and Warner Bros. short cartoons, also tell stories. Some experimental and avant-garde films use narrative form, although the story or the way it is told may be quite unusual, as we shall see in Chapter 10.

Because stories are all around us, spectators approach a narrative film with definite expectations. We may know a great deal about the particular story the film will tell. Perhaps we have read the book on which a film is based, or we have seen the film to which this is a sequel. More generally, though, we have anticipations that are characteristic of narrative form itself. We assume that there will be characters and some action that will involve them with one another. We expect a series of incidents that will be connected in some way. We also probably expect that the problems or conflicts arising in the course of the action will achieve some final state—either they will be resolved or, at least, a new light will be cast on them. A spectator comes prepared to make sense of a narrative film.

As the viewer watches the film, she or he picks up cues, recalls information, anticipates what will follow, and generally participates in the creation of the film's form. The film shapes particular expectations by summoning up curiosity, suspense, and surprise. The ending has the task of satisfying or cheating the expectations prompted by the film as a whole. The ending may also activate memory by cueing the spectator to review earlier events, possibly considering them in a new light. When *The Sixth Sense* was released in 1999, many moviegoers were so intrigued by the surprise twist at the end that they returned to see the film again and trace how their expectations had been manipulated. As we examine narrative form, we consider at various points how it engages the viewer in a dynamic activity.

"Narrative is one of the ways in which knowledge is organized. I have always thought it was the most important way to transmit and receive knowledge. I am less certain of that now—but the craving for narrative has never lessened, and the hunger for it is as keen as it was on Mt. Sinai or Calvary or the middle of the fens."

— Toni Morrison, author, *Beloved*

What Is Narrative?

We can consider a *narrative* to be a *chain of events in cause–effect relationship occurring in time and space*. A narrative is what we usually mean by the term *story*, although we shall be using *story* in a slightly different way later. Typically, a narrative begins with one situation; a series of changes occurs according to a pattern of cause and effect; finally, a new situation arises that brings about the end of the narrative. Our engagement with the story depends on our understanding of the pattern of change and stability, cause and effect, time and space.

All the components of our definition—causality, time, and space—are important to narratives in most media, but causality and time are central. A random string of events is hard to understand as a story. Consider the following actions: "A man tosses and turns, unable to sleep. A mirror breaks. A telephone rings." We have trouble grasping this as a narrative because we are unable to determine the causal or temporal relations among the events.

Consider a new description of these same events: "A man has a fight with his boss; he tosses and turns that night, unable to sleep. In the morning, he is still so angry that he smashes the mirror while shaving. Then his telephone rings; his boss has called to apologize."

We now have a narrative. We can connect the events spatially: The man is in the office, then in his bed; the mirror is in the bathroom; the phone is somewhere else in his home. More important, we can understand that the three events are part of a series of causes and effects. The argument with the boss causes the sleeplessness and the broken mirror. The phone call from the boss resolves the conflict; the narrative ends. In this example, time is important, too. The sleepless night occurs before the breaking of the mirror, which in turn occurs before the phone call; all of the action runs from one day to the following morning. The narrative develops from an initial situation of conflict between employee and boss, through a series of events caused by the conflict, to the resolution of the conflict. Simple and minimal as our example is, it shows how important causality, space, and time are to narrative form.

The fact that a narrative relies on causality, time, and space doesn't mean that other formal principles can't govern the film. For instance, a narrative may make use of parallelism. As Chapter 2 points out (p. 67), parallelism presents a similarity among different elements. Our example was the way that *The Wizard of Oz* made the three Kansas farmhands parallel to Dorothy's three Oz companions. A narrative may cue us to draw parallels among characters, settings, situations, times of day, or any other elements. In Veřá Chytilová's *Something Different*, scenes from the life of a housewife and from the career of a gymnast are presented in alternation. Since the two women never meet and lead entirely separate lives, there is no way that we can connect the two stories causally. Instead, we compare and contrast the two women's actions and situations—that is, we draw parallels.

The documentary *Hoop Dreams* makes even stronger use of parallels. Two high school students from Chicago's black ghetto dream of becoming professional basketball players, and the film follows as each one pursues his athletic

"I had actually trapped myself in a story that was very convoluted, and I would have been able to cut more later if I'd simplified it at the script stage, but I'd reached a point where I was up against a wall of story logic. If I had cut too much at that stage, the audience would have felt lost."

— James Cameron, director, on *Aliens*

career. The film's form invites us to compare and contrast their personalities, the obstacles they face, and the choices they make. In addition, the film creates parallels between their high schools, their coaches, their parents, and older male relatives who vicariously live their own dreams of athletic glory. Parallelism allows the film to become richer and more complex than it might have been had it concentrated on only one protagonist.

Yet *Hoop Dreams*, like *Something Different*, is still a narrative film. Each of the two lines of action is organized by time, space, and causality. The film suggests some broad causal forces as well. Both young men have grown up in urban poverty, and because sports is the most visible sign of success for them, they turn their hopes in that direction.

Plot and Story

We make sense of a narrative, then, by identifying its events and linking them by cause and effect, time, and space. As viewers, we do other things as well. We often infer events that are not explicitly presented, and we recognize the presence of material that is extraneous to the story world. In order to describe how we manage to do these things, we can draw a distinction between *story* and *plot* (sometimes called *story* and *discourse*). This isn't a difficult distinction to grasp, but we still need to examine it in a little more detail.

We often make assumptions and inferences about events in a narrative. For instance, at the start of Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, we know we are in Manhattan at rush hour. The cues stand out clearly: skyscrapers, bustling pedestrians, congested traffic (3.1). Then we watch Roger Thornhill as he leaves an elevator with his secretary, Maggie, and strides through the lobby, dictating memos (3.2). On the basis of these cues, we start to draw some conclusions. Thornhill is an executive who leads a busy life. We assume that before we saw Thornhill and Maggie, he was also dictating to her; we have come in on the middle of a string of events in time. We also assume that the dictating began in the office, before they got on the elevator. In other words, we infer causes, a temporal sequence, and another locale even though none of this information has been directly presented. We are probably not aware of having made these inferences, but they are no less firm for going unnoticed.

The set of *all* the events in a narrative, both the ones explicitly presented and those the viewer infers, constitutes the **story**. In our example, the story would consist of at least two depicted events and two inferred ones. We can list them, putting the inferred events in parentheses:

(Roger Thornhill has a busy day at his office.)

Rush hour hits Manhattan.

(While dictating to his secretary, Maggie, Roger leaves the office and they take the elevator.)

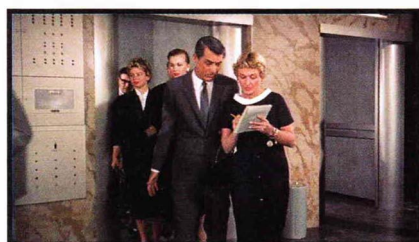
Still dictating, Roger gets off the elevator with Maggie and they stride through the lobby.

The total world of the story action is sometimes called the film's *diegesis* (the Greek word for "recounted story"). In the opening of *North by Northwest*, the traffic, streets, skyscrapers, and people we see, as well as the traffic, streets, skyscrapers, and people we assume to be offscreen, are all diegetic because they are assumed to exist in the world that the film depicts.

The term *plot* is used to describe everything visibly and audibly present in the film before us. The plot includes, first, all the story events that are directly depicted. In our *North by Northwest* example, only two story events are explicitly presented in the plot: rush hour and Roger Thornhill's dictating to Maggie as they leave the elevator.



3.1 Hurrying Manhattan pedestrians in *North by Northwest*.

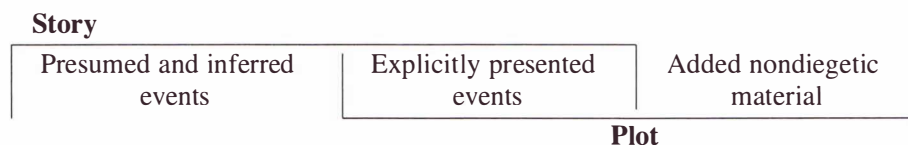


3.2 Maggie takes dictation from Roger Thornhill.

Note, though, that the film's plot may contain material that is extraneous to the story world. For example, while the opening of *North by Northwest* is portraying rush hour in Manhattan, we also see the film's credits and hear orchestral music. Neither of these elements is diegetic, since they are brought in from *outside* the story world. (The characters can't read the credits or hear the music.) Credits and such extraneous music are thus *nondiegetic* elements. In Chapters 6 and 7, we'll consider how editing and sound can function nondiegetically. At this point, we need only notice that the film's plot—the totality of the film—can bring in nondiegetic material.

Nondiegetic material may occur elsewhere than in credit sequences. In *The Band Wagon*, we see the premiere of a hopelessly pretentious musical play. Eager patrons file into the theater (3.3), and the camera moves closer to a poster above the door (3.4). There then appear three black-and-white images (3.5–3.7) accompanied by a brooding chorus. These images and sounds are clearly nondiegetic, inserted from outside the story world in order to signal that the production was catastrophic and laid an egg. The plot has added material to the story for comic effect.

In sum, story and plot overlap in one respect and diverge in others. The plot explicitly presents certain story events, so these events are common to both domains. The story goes beyond the plot in suggesting some diegetic events that we never witness. The plot goes beyond the story world by presenting nondiegetic images and sounds that may affect our understanding of the action. A diagram of the situation would look like this:



We can think about these differences between story and plot from two perspectives. From the standpoint of the storyteller—the filmmaker—the story is the sum total of all the events in the narrative. The storyteller can present some of these events directly (that is, make them part of the plot), can hint at events that are not presented, and can simply ignore other events. For instance, though we learn later in *North by Northwest* that Roger's mother is still close to him, we never learn what happened to his father. The filmmaker can also add nondiegetic material, as in the example from *The Band Wagon*. In a sense, then, the filmmaker makes a story into a plot.

From the perceiver's standpoint, things look somewhat different. All we have before us is the plot—the arrangement of material in the film as it stands. We create the story in our minds on the basis of cues in the plot. We also recognize when the plot presents nondiegetic material.

The story–plot distinction suggests that if you want to give someone a synopsis of a narrative film, you can do it in two ways. You can summarize the story, starting from the very earliest incident that the plot cues you to assume or infer and running straight through to the end. Or you can tell the plot, starting with the first incident you encountered in watching the film.

Our initial definition and the distinction between plot and story constitute a set of tools for analyzing how narrative works. We shall see that the story–plot distinction affects all three aspects of narrative: causality, time, and space.

Cause and Effect

If narrative depends so heavily on cause and effect, what kinds of things can function as causes in a narrative? Usually, the agents of cause and effect are *characters*. By triggering and reacting to events, characters play roles within the film's formal system.



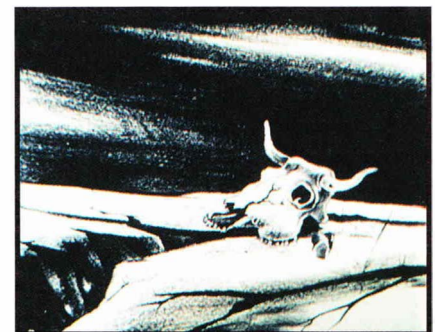
3.3 A hopeful investor in the play enters the theater . . .



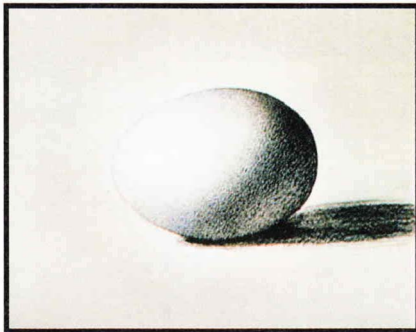
3.4 . . . and the camera moves in on a poster predicting success for the musical . . .



3.5 . . . but three comic nondiegetic images reveal it to be a flop: ghostly figures on a boat . . .



3.6 . . . a skull in a desert . . .



3.7 . . . and an egg.

Most often, characters are persons, or at least entities like persons—Bugs Bunny or E.T. the extraterrestrial or even the singing teapot in *Beauty and the Beast*. For our purposes here, Michael Moore is a character in *Roger and Me* no less than Roger Thornhill is in *North by Northwest*, even though Moore is a real person and Thornhill is fictional. In any narrative film, either fictional or documentary, characters create causes and register effects. Within the film's formal system, they make things happen and respond to events. Their actions and reactions contribute strongly to our engagement with the film.

Unlike characters in novels, film characters typically have a visible body. This is such a basic convention that we take it for granted, but it can be contested. Occasionally, a character is only a voice, as when the dead Obi-Wan Kenobi urges the Jedi master Yoda to train Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back*. More disturbingly, in Luis Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire*, one woman is portrayed by two actresses, and the physical differences between them may suggest different sides of her character. Todd Solondz takes this innovation further in *Palindromes*, in which a 13-year-old girl is portrayed by male and female performers of different ages and races.

Along with a body, a character has *traits*. Traits are attitudes, skills, habits, tastes, psychological drives, and any other qualities that distinguish the character. Some characters, such as Mickey Mouse, may have only a few traits. When we say a character possesses several varying traits, some at odds with one another, we tend to call that character complex, or three-dimensional, or well developed. A memorable character such as Sherlock Holmes is a mass of traits. Some bear on his habits, such as his love of music or his addiction to cocaine, while other traits reflect his basic nature: his penetrating intelligence, his disdain for stupidity, his professional pride, his occasional gallantry.

As our love of gossip shows, we're curious about other humans, and we bring our people-watching skills to narratives. We're quick to assign traits to the characters onscreen, and often the movie helps us out. Most characters wear their traits far more openly than people do in real life, and the plot presents situations that swiftly reveal them to us. The opening scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* throws Indiana Jones's personality into high relief. We see immediately that he's bold and resourceful. He's courageous, but he can feel fear. By unearthing ancient treasures for museums, he shows an admirable devotion to scientific knowledge. In a few minutes, his essential traits are presented straightforwardly, and we come to know and sympathize with him.

It's not accidental that all of the traits that Indiana Jones displays in the opening scene are relevant to later scenes in *Raiders*. In general, a character is given traits that will play causal roles in the overall story action. The second scene of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) shows that the heroine, Jill, is an excellent shot with a rifle. For much of the film, this trait seems irrelevant to the action, but in the last scene, Jill is able to shoot one of the villains when a police marksman cannot do it. This skill with a rifle is not a natural part of a person named Jill; it is a trait that helps make up a character named Jill, and it serves a particular narrative function.

Not all causes and effects in narratives originate with characters. In the so-called disaster movies, an earthquake or tidal wave may precipitate a series of actions on the parts of the characters. The same principle holds when the shark in *Jaws* terrorizes a community. Still, once these natural occurrences set the situation up, human desires and goals usually enter the action to develop the narrative. A man escaping from a flood may be placed in the situation of having to decide whether to rescue his worst enemy. In *Jaws*, the townspeople pursue a variety of strategies to deal with the shark, propelling the plot as they do so.

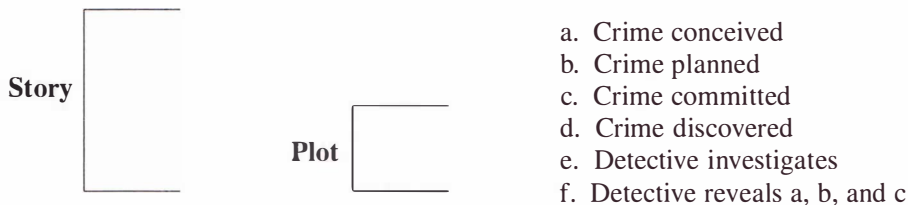
In general, the spectator actively seeks to connect events by means of cause and effect. Given an incident, we tend to imagine what might have caused it or what it might in turn cause. That is, we look for causal motivation. We have mentioned an

instance of this in Chapter 2: In the scene from *My Man Godfrey*, a scavenger hunt serves as a cause that justifies the presence of a beggar at a society ball (see p. 66).

Causal motivation often involves the planting of information in advance of a scene, as we saw in the kitchen scene of *The Shining* (1.12, 1.13). In *L.A. Confidential*, the idealistic detective Exley confides in his cynical colleague Vincennes that the murder of his father had driven him to enter law enforcement. He had privately named the unknown killer “Rollo Tomasi,” a name that he has turned into an emblem of all unpunished evil. This conversation initially seems like a simple bit of psychological insight. Yet later, when the corrupt police chief Smith shoots Vincennes, the latter mutters “Rollo Tomasi” with his last breath. When the puzzled Smith asks Exley who Rollo Tomasi is, Exley’s earlier conversation with Vincennes motivates his shocked realization that the dead Vincennes has given him a clue identifying his killer. Near the end, when Exley is about to shoot Smith, he says that the chief is Rollo Tomasi. Thus an apparently minor detail returns as a major causal and thematic motif. And perhaps the unusual name, Rollo Tomasi, functions to help the audience remember this important motif across several scenes.

Most of what we have said about causality pertains to the plot’s direct presentation of causes and effects. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Jill is shown to be a good shot, and because of this, she can save her daughter. But the plot can also lead us to *infer* causes and effects, and thus build up a total story. The detective film furnishes the best example of how we actively construct the story.

A murder has been committed. That is, we know an effect but not the causes—the killer, the motive, and perhaps also the method. The mystery tale thus depends strongly on curiosity—on our desire to know events that have occurred before the events that the plot presents to us. It’s the detective’s job to disclose, at the end, the missing causes—to name the killer, explain the motive, and reveal the method. That is, in the detective film, the climax of the plot (the action we see) is a revelation of prior incidents in the story (events we did not see). We can diagram this:



Although this pattern is most common in detective narratives, any film’s plot can withhold causes and thus arouse our curiosity. Horror and science fiction films often leave us temporarily in the dark about what forces lurk behind certain events. Not until three-quarters of the way through *Alien* do we learn that the science officer Ash is a robot conspiring to protect the alien. In *Caché*, a married couple receive an anonymous videotape recording their daily lives. The film’s plot shows them trying to discover who made it and why it was made. In general, whenever any film creates a mystery, it suppresses certain story causes and presents only effects in the plot.

The plot may also present causes but withhold story *effects*, prompting suspense and uncertainty in the viewer. After Hannibal Lecter’s attack on his guards in the Tennessee prison in *The Silence of the Lambs*, the police search of the building raises the possibility that a body lying on top of an elevator is the wounded Lecter. After an extended suspense scene, we learn that he has switched clothes with a dead guard and escaped.

A plot’s withholding of effects is perhaps most disruptive at the end of a film. A famous example occurs in the final moments of François Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows*. The boy Antoine Doinel, having escaped from a reformatory, runs along the



3.8 The final image of *The 400 Blows* leaves Antoine's future uncertain.

seashore. The camera zooms in on his face, and the frame freezes (3.8). The plot does not reveal whether he is captured and brought back, leaving us to speculate on what might happen in Antoine's future.

Time

Causes and their effects are basic to narrative, but they take place in time. Here again our story–plot distinction helps clarify how time shapes our understanding of narrative action.

As we watch a film, we construct story time on the basis of what the plot presents. For example, the plot may present events out of chronological order. In *Citizen Kane*, we see a man's death before we see his youth, and we must build up a chronological version of his life. Even if events are shown in chronological order, most plots don't show every detail from beginning to end. We assume that the characters spend uneventful time sleeping, traveling from place to place, eating, and the like, but the story duration containing irrelevant action has simply been skipped over. Another possibility is to have the plot present the same story event more than once, as when a character recalls a traumatic incident. In John Woo's *The Killer*, an accident in the opening scene blinds a singer, and later we see the same event again and again as the protagonist regretfully thinks back to it.

Such options mean that in constructing the film's story out of its plot, the viewer is engaged in trying to put events in chronological *order* and to assign them some *duration* and *frequency*. We can look at each of these temporal factors separately.

Temporal Order We are quite accustomed to films that present events out of story **order**. A flashback is simply a portion of a story that the plot presents out of chronological order. In *Edward Scissorhands*, we first see the Winona Ryder character as an old woman telling her granddaughter a bedtime story. Most of the film then shows events that occurred when she was a high school girl. Such reordering doesn't confuse us because we mentally rearrange the events into the order in which they would logically have to occur: childhood comes before adulthood. From the plot order, we infer the story order. If story events can be thought of as ABCD, then the plot that uses a flashback presents something like BACD. Similarly, a flash-forward—that is, moving from present to future then back to the present—would also be an instance of how plot can shuffle story order. A flash-forward could be represented as ABDC.

One common pattern for reordering story events is an alternation of past and present in the plot. In the first half of Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, we

see scenes set in the present during a young woman's wedding day. These alternate with flashbacks to a time when her family lived under the sway of an abusive, mentally disturbed father. Interestingly, the flashback scenes are arranged out of chronological story order: Childhood episodes are mixed with scenes of adolescence, further cueing the spectator to assemble the story.

Sometimes a fairly simple reordering of scenes can create complicated effects. The plot of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* begins with a couple deciding to rob the diner in which they're eating breakfast. This scene takes place somewhat late in the story, but the viewer doesn't learn this until near the end of the film, when the robbery interrupts a dialogue involving other, more central, characters eating breakfast in the same diner. Just by pulling a scene out of order and placing it at the start, Tarantino creates a surprise. Later in *Pulp Fiction*, a hired killer is shot to death. But he reappears alive in subsequent scenes, which show him and his partner trying to dispose of a dead body. Tarantino has shifted a block of scenes from the middle of the story (before the man was killed) to the end of the plot. By coming at the film's conclusion, these portions receive an emphasis they wouldn't have if they had remained in their chronological story order.

Temporal Duration The plot of *North by Northwest* presents four crowded days and nights in the life of Roger Thornhill. But the story stretches back far before that, since information about the past is revealed in the course of the plot. The story events include Roger's past marriages, the U.S. Intelligence Agency's plot to create a false agent named George Kaplan, and the villain Van Damm's series of smuggling activities.

In general, a film's plot selects certain stretches of story **duration**. This could involve concentrating on a short, relatively cohesive time span, as *North by Northwest* does. Or it could involve highlighting significant stretches of time from a period of many years, as *Citizen Kane* does when it shows us the protagonist in his youth, skips over some time to show him as a young man, skips over more time to show him middle-aged, and so forth. The sum of all these slices of *story* duration yields an overall *plot* duration.

But we need one more distinction. Watching a movie takes time—20 minutes or two hours or eight hours (as in Hans Jürgen Syberberg's *Our Hitler: A Film from Germany*). There is thus a third duration involved in a narrative film, which we can call *screen* duration. The relationships among story duration, plot duration, and screen duration are complex (see "Where to Go from Here" for further discussion), but for our purposes, we can say this: the filmmaker can manipulate screen duration independently of the overall story duration and plot duration. For example, *North by Northwest* has an overall story duration of several years (including all relevant prior events), an overall plot duration of four days and nights, and a screen duration of about 136 minutes.

Just as plot duration selects from story duration, so screen duration selects from overall plot duration. In *North by Northwest*, only portions of the film's four days and nights are shown to us. An interesting counterexample is *Twelve Angry Men*, the story of a jury deliberating a murder case. The 95 minutes of the movie approximate the same stretch of time in its characters' lives.

At a more specific level, the plot can use screen duration to override story time. For example, screen duration can *expand* story duration. A famous instance is that of the raising of the bridges in Sergei Eisenstein's *October*. Here an event that takes only a few moments in the story is stretched out to several minutes of screen time by means of the technique of film editing. As a result, this action gains a tremendous emphasis. The plot can also use screen duration to compress story time, as when a lengthy process is condensed into a rapid series of shots. These examples suggest that film techniques play a central role in creating screen duration. We shall consider this in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Temporal Frequency Most commonly, a story event is presented only once in the plot. Occasionally, however, a single story event may appear twice or even more in the plot treatment. If we see an event early in a film and then there is a flashback to that event later on, we see that same event twice. Some films use multiple narrators, each of whom describes the same event; again, we see it occur several times. This increased **frequency** may allow us to see the same action in several ways. The plot may also provide us with more information, so that we understand the event in a new context when it reappears. This occurs in *Pulp Fiction*, when the robbery of the diner, triggered at the start of the film, takes on its full significance only when it is repeated at the climax. In *Run Lola Run*, a single event is repeated many times after it first occurs: Lola's boyfriend reports by phone that he has lost a bag (*Tasche*) full of drug money, and we hear him and Lola shouting "Tasche" several times, even though we realize that they really say it only once or twice each. The repetition of their shouts underlines their terror in a way characteristic of this hyperkinetic movie. In our examination of *Citizen Kane*, we shall see another example of how repetition can recontextualize old information.

The various ways that a film's plot may manipulate story order, duration, and frequency illustrate how we actively participate in making sense of the narrative film. The plot supplies cues about chronological sequence, the time span of the actions, and the number of times an event occurs, and it's up to the viewer to make assumptions and inferences and to form expectations. In some cases, understanding of temporal relations can get quite complicated. In *The Usual Suspects*, a seemingly petty criminal spins an elaborate tale of his gang's activities to an FBI agent. His recounting unfolds in many flashbacks, some of which repeat events we witnessed in the opening scene. Yet a surprise final twist reveals that some of the flashbacks must have contained lies, and we must piece together both the chronology of events and the story's real cause-effect chain. Such time scrambling has become more common in recent decades. (See "A Closer Look", p. 83.)

Often we must motivate manipulations of time by the all-important principle of cause and effect. For instance, a flashback will often be caused by some incident that triggers a character's recalling some event in the past. The plot may skip over years of story duration if they contain nothing important to the chains of cause and effect. The repetition of actions may also be motivated by the plot's need to communicate certain key causes very clearly to the spectator.

Space

In some media, a narrative might emphasize only causality and time. Many of the anecdotes we tell each other don't specify where the action takes place. In film narrative, however, **space** is usually an important factor. Events occur in well-defined locales, such as Kansas or Oz; the Flint, Michigan, of *Roger and Me*; or the Manhattan of *North by Northwest*. We shall consider setting in more detail when we examine *mise-en-scene* in Chapter 4, but we ought briefly to note how plot and story can manipulate space.

Normally, the place of the story action is also that of the plot, but sometimes the plot leads us to infer other locales as part of the story. We never see Roger Thornhill's office or the colleges that kicked Kane out. Thus the narrative may ask us to imagine spaces and actions that are never shown. In Otto Preminger's *Exodus*, one scene is devoted to Dov Landau's interrogation by a terrorist organization he wants to join. Dov reluctantly tells his questioners of life in a Nazi concentration camp (3.13). Although the film never shows this locale through a flashback, much of the scene's emotional power depends on our using our imagination to fill in Dov's sketchy description of the camp.

Further, we can introduce an idea akin to the concept of screen duration. Besides story space and plot space, cinema employs screen space: the visible space

PLAYING GAMES WITH STORY TIME

For a spectator, reconstructing story order from the plot might be seen as a sort of game. Most Hollywood films make this game fairly simple. Still, just as we enjoy learning the rules of new games rather than playing the same one over and over, in unusual films, we can enjoy the challenge of unpredictable presentations of story events.

Since the 1980s, occasional films have exploited that enjoyment by using techniques other than straightforward flashbacks and flash-forwards to tell their stories. For instance, the story events might be reordered in novel ways. *Pulp Fiction* (1994) begins and ends with stages of a restaurant holdup—seemingly a conventional frame story. Yet in fact the final event to occur in the story—the Bruce Willis character and his girlfriend fleeing Los Angeles—happens well *after* the last scene. The reordering of events is startling and confusing at first, but it is dramatically effective in the way the conclusion forces us to rethink events we have seen earlier.

The success of *Pulp Fiction* made such a play with story order more acceptable in American filmmaking. *GO* (Doug Liman, 1999) presents the actions of a single night three times, each time from a different character's point of view. We cannot fully figure out what happened until the end, since various events are withheld from the first version and shown in the second and third.

Pulp Fiction and *GO* were independent films, but more mainstream Hollywood movies have also played with the temporal relations of story and plot. Steven Soderbergh's *Out of Sight* (1998) begins with the story of an inept bank robber who falls in love with the FBI agent who pursues him despite her obvious attraction to him. As their oddball romance proceeds, there is a string of flashbacks not motivated by any character's memory. These seem to involve a quite separate plotline, and their purpose is puzzling until the film's second half, when the final flashback, perhaps a character's recollection, loops back to the action that had begun the film and thus helps explain the main plot events.

Mainstream films may also use science fiction or fantasy premises to present alternative futures, often called "what if?" narratives. (The film industry website Box Office Mojo even lists "What If" as a separate genre and defines it as "Comedies About Metaphysical Questions That Come to Pass by Fantastical Means but in Realistic Settings.") Such films typically present a situation at the beginning, then show how it might proceed along different cause-effect chains if one factor were to be changed. *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1998), for example, shows the heroine, Helen, fired from her job and heading home to her apartment, where her boyfriend is in bed with another woman. We see Helen entering the subway and catching her train, but then the action runs backward and she enters again, this time bumping into a child on the stairs and missing the train. The rest of the film's plot moves between two alternative futures for Helen. By catching the train, Helen arrives in time to discover the affair and moves out. By missing the train, she arrives after the other woman has left and hence she stays with her faithless boyfriend. The plot moves back and forth between these mutually exclusive cause-effect chains before neatly dovetailing them at the end.

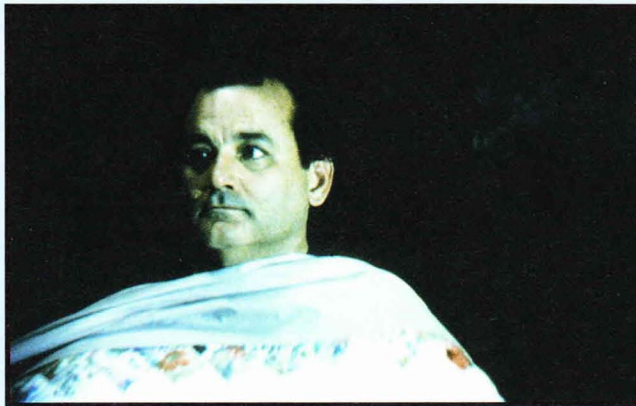
Groundhog Day (Harold Ramis, 1993) helped to popularize "what if?" plots. On February 1, an obnoxious weatherman, Phil, travels to Punxsutawney to cover the famous Groundhog Day ceremonies. He then finds himself trapped in February 2, which repeats over and over, with variants depending on how Phil acts each day, sometimes frivolously, sometimes breaking laws (3.9, 3.10), and later trying to improve his life. Only after many such days does he become an admirable character, and the repetitions mysteriously stop.

Neither *Sliding Doors* nor *Groundhog Day* provides any explanation for the forking of its protagonist's life into various paths. We simply must assume that some higher power has intervened in order to improve his or her situation. Other films may provide some

3.9 During one repetition of February 2 in *Groundhog Day*, Phil tests whether he can get away with crimes, getting himself tossed in jail in the evening . . .



3.10 . . . only to find himself waking up, as on other Groundhog Days, back in bed at the bed-and-breakfast inn.



motivation for the changes, such as a time machine. The three *Back to the Future* films (Robert Zemeckis, 1985, 1989, 1990) posit that Marty's friend Doc has invented such a machine, and in the first film, it accidentally transports Marty back to 1955, a time just before his parents fell in love. By accidentally changing the circumstances that caused their romance, Marty endangers his own existence in 1985. Despite being comedies aimed primarily at teenagers and despite providing the time machine motivation for the changes, the three films, and particularly Parts I and II, created complex crisscrossings of cause and effect. Marty induces his parents to fall in love and returns safely to 1985 (where his life has been improved as a result of his first time trip). But events that take place in his life in 2015 have effects in 1955, as the villain Biff uses the time machine to travel back and change what happened then in yet another way—one that ends with terrible consequences for Doc and for Marty's whole family. Marty must

again travel back to 1955 to stop Biff from changing events. By the end of Part II, he becomes trapped there, while Doc is accidentally sent back to 1885. Marty joins him there in Part III for another set of threatened changes to the future. If all this sounds complicated, it is. Although the narrative maintains a remarkably unified series of cause-effect chains, it becomes so convoluted that at one point Doc diagrams events for Marty (and us) on a blackboard!

Not surprisingly, such narrative games were influenced by a similar trend in European films. In 1981, Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski made *Blind Chance*, which showed three sets of consequences depending on whether the protagonist caught a train at the beginning or not. Unlike *Sliding Doors*, however, *Blind Chance* presents these alternative futures as self-contained stories, one after the other. The same approach appears in *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998, Germany), where the heroine's desperate attempts to replace a large sum that her inept boyfriend owes to drug dealers are shown as three stories that end very differently after small changes of action on Lola's part. Alternative versions of events based on characters' conflicting recollections had already been used, most famously in Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) and Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).

Although temporal scrambling and "what if?" premises make it more difficult for us to piece story events together, filmmakers usually give us enough clues along the way to keep us from frustration. Usually, the film does not provide a huge number of alternative futures—perhaps only two or three. Within these futures, the cause-effect chain remains linear, so that we can piece it together. The characters and settings tend to remain quite consistent for all the alternative story lines—though often small differences of appearance are introduced to help us keep track of events (**3.11**, **3.12**). The individual story lines tend to parallel one another. In all three presentations of events in *Run Lola Run*, the goal is the same, even though the progression and outcomes are different. The final presentation of



3.11 In one story line of *Sliding Doors*, Helen helpfully gets her hair cut short so that we can distinguish her from . . .



3.12 . . . the Helen of the other story line, who keeps her hair long. (A bandage on her forehead was a crucial clue before the haircut, when the two Helens were otherwise identical.)

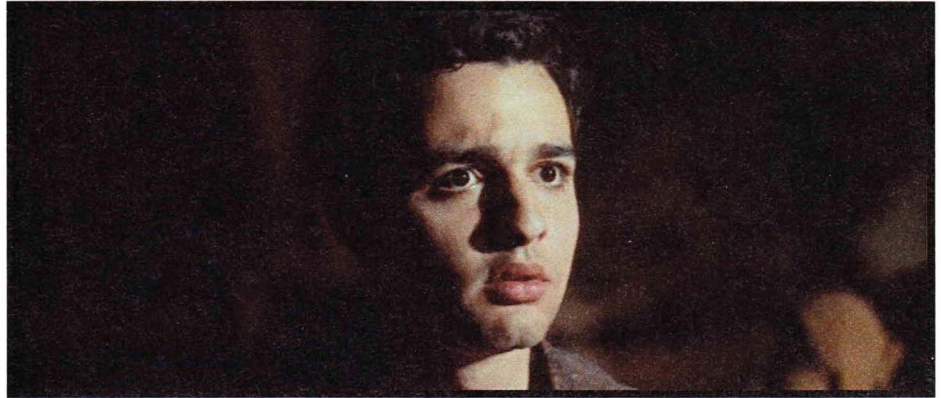
events tends to give us the impression of being the real, final one, and so “what if?” films usually achieve a sense of closure. Characters sometimes even talk about the events that have changed their lives, as with Doc’s blackboard explanation in *Back to the Future II*. In *Sliding Doors*, Helen remarks, “If only I had just caught that bloody train, it’d never have happened.”

These films appeal to the way we think in ordinary life. We sometimes speculate about how our lives would change if a single event had been different. We easily understand the sort of game that these films present, and we’re willing to play it.

More and more, however, *puzzle films* have denied us this degree of unity and clarity. Here filmmakers create perplexing patterns of story time or causality, trusting that viewers will search for clues by rewatching the movie. An early example was Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (1998), which presents the hero’s investigation along two time tracks.

Brief black-and-white scenes show an ongoing present, with story action moving forward chronologically. The more expanded scenes, which are in color, move *backward* through time, so the first plot event we see is the final story event, the second plot event is the next-to-last story event, and so on. This tactic reflects the hero’s loss of short-term memory, but it also challenges viewers to piece everything together. At the same time, there are enough uncertainties about the hero’s memories to lead viewers to speculate that some mysteries remain unresolved at the close.

The DVD format, which allows random access to scenes, encouraged filmmakers along this path, as did the Internet. Websites and chatrooms buzzed with speculations about what really happened in *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Identity* (2003), *Primer* (2004), and *The Butterfly Effect* (2004). Like other films that twist or break up story time, puzzle movies try to engross us in the dynamics of narrative form.



3.13 In *Exodus*, Dov Landau recounts his traumatic stay in a concentration camp. Instead of presenting this through a flashback, the narration dwells on his face, leaving us to visualize his ordeal.

within the frame. We'll consider screen space and offscreen space in detail in Chapter 5, when we analyze framing as a cinematographic technique. For now, it's enough to say that, just as screen duration selects certain plot spans for presentation, so screen space selects portions of plot space.

Openings, Closings, and Patterns of Development

In Chapter 2, our discussion of formal development in general within the film suggested that it's often useful to compare beginnings and endings. A narrative's use of causality, time, and space usually involves a change from an initial situation to a final situation.

A film does not just start, it *begins*. The opening provides a basis for what is to come and initiates us into the narrative. In some cases, the plot will seek to arouse curiosity by bringing us into a series of actions that has already started. (This is called opening *in medias res*, a Latin phrase meaning "in the middle of things.") The viewer speculates on possible causes of the events presented. *The Usual Suspects* begins with a mysterious man named Keyser Söze killing one of the main characters and setting fire to a ship. Much of the rest of the film deals with how these events came to pass. In other cases, the film begins by telling us about the characters and their situations before any major actions occur.

Either way, some of the actions that took place before the plot started will be stated or suggested so that we can start to connect up the whole story. The portion of the plot that lays out important story events and character traits in the opening situation is called the *exposition*. In general, the opening raises our expectations by setting up a specific range of possible causes for and effects of what we see. Indeed, the first quarter or so of a film's plot is often referred to as the *setup*.

As the plot proceeds, the causes and effects will define narrower patterns of development. There is no exhaustive list of possible plot patterns, but several kinds crop up frequently enough to be worth mentioning.

Most patterns of plot development depend heavily on the ways that causes and effects create a change in a character's situation. The most common general pattern is a *change in knowledge*. Very often, a character learns something in the course of the action, with the most crucial knowledge coming at the final turning point of the plot. In *Witness*, when John Book, hiding out on an Amish farm, learns that his partner has been killed, his rage soon leads to a climactic shoot-out.

A very common pattern of development is the *goal-oriented* plot, in which a character takes steps to achieve a desired object or state of affairs. Plots based on *searches* would be instances of the goal plot. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the

protagonists try to find the Ark of the Covenant; in *Le Million*, characters search for a missing lottery ticket; in *North by Northwest*, Roger Thornhill looks for George Kaplan. A variation on the goal-oriented plot pattern is the *investigation*, so typical of detective films, in which the protagonist's goal is not an object, but information, usually about mysterious causes. In more strongly psychological films, such as Fellini's *8 1/2*, the search and the investigation become internalized when the protagonist, a noted film director, attempts to discover the source of his creative problems.

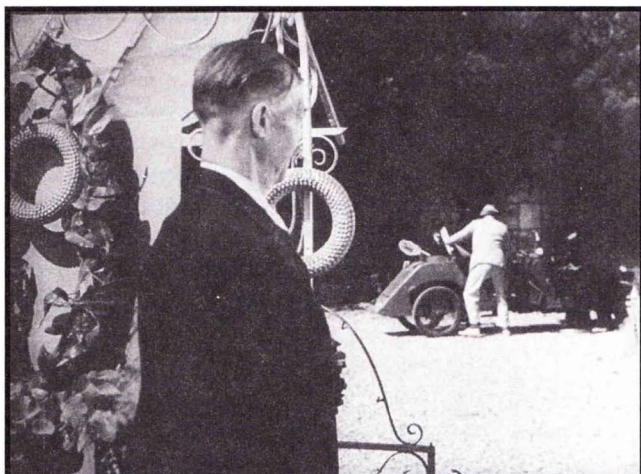
Time or space may also provide plot patterns. A framing situation in the present may initiate a series of flashbacks showing how events led up to the present situation, as in *The Usual Suspects*' flashbacks. *Hoop Dreams* is organized around the two main characters' high school careers, with each part of the film devoted to a year of their lives. The plot may also create a specific duration for the action, a *deadline*. In *Back to the Future*, the hero must synchronize his time machine with a bolt of lightning at a specific moment in order to return to the present. This creates a goal toward which he must struggle. Or the plot may create patterns of repeated action via cycles of events: the familiar "here we go again" pattern. Such a pattern occurs in Woody Allen's *Zelig*, in which the chameleon-like hero repeatedly loses his own identity by imitating the people around him.

Space can also become the basis for a plot pattern. This usually happens when the action is confined to a single locale, such as a train (Anthony Mann's *The Tall Target*) or a home (Sidney Lumet's *Long Day's Journey into Night*).

A given plot can, of course, combine these patterns. Many films built around a journey, such as *The Wizard of Oz* or *North by Northwest*, involve deadlines. *The Usual Suspects* puts its flashbacks at the service of an investigation. Jacques Tati's *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* uses both spatial and temporal patterns to structure its comic plot. The plot confines itself to a beachside resort and its neighboring areas, and it consumes one week of a summer vacation. Each day certain routines recur: morning exercise, lunch, afternoon outings, dinner, evening entertainment. Much of the film's humor relies on the way that Mr. Hulot alienates the other guests and the townspeople by disrupting their conventional habits (3.14). Although cause and effect still operate in *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, time and space are central to the plot's formal patterning.

For any pattern of development, the spectator will create specific expectations. As the film trains the viewer in its particular form, these expectations become more and more precise. Once we comprehend Dorothy's desire to go home, we see her every action as furthering or delaying her progress toward her goal. Thus her trip through Oz is hardly a sightseeing tour. Each step of her journey (to the Emerald City, to the Witch's castle, to the Emerald City again) is governed by the same principle—her desire to go home.

In any film, the pattern of development in the middle portion may delay an expected outcome. When Dorothy at last reaches the Wizard, he sets up a new



3.14 In *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, Hulot's aged, noisy car has a flat tire that breaks up a funeral.

obstacle for her by demanding the Witch's broom. Similarly, in *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock's journey plot constantly postpones Roger Thornhill's discovery of the Kaplan hoax, and this, too, creates suspense. The pattern of development may also create surprise, the cheating of an expectation, as when Dorothy discovers that the Wizard is a fraud or when Thornhill sees the minion Leonard fire point-blank at his boss Van Damm. Patterns of development encourage the spectator to form long-term expectations that can be delayed, cheated, or gratified.

A film doesn't simply stop; it *ends*. The narrative will typically resolve its causal issues by bringing the development to a high point, or *climax*. In the climax, the action is presented as having a narrow range of possible outcomes. At the climax of *North by Northwest*, Roger and Eve are dangling off Mount Rushmore, and there are only two possibilities: They will fall, or they will be saved.

Because the climax focuses possible outcomes so narrowly, it typically serves to settle the causal issues that have run through the film. In the documentary *Primary*, the climax takes place on election night; both Kennedy and Humphrey await the voters' verdict and finally learn the winner. In *Jaws*, several battles with the shark climax in the destruction of the boat, the death of Captain Quint, the apparent death of Hooper, and Brody's final victory. In such films, the ending resolves, or closes off, the chains of cause and effect.

Emotionally, the climax aims to lift the viewer to a high degree of tension or suspense. Since the viewer knows that there are relatively few ways the action can develop, she or he can hope for a fairly specific outcome. In the climax of many films, formal resolution coincides with an emotional satisfaction.

A few narratives, however, are deliberately anticlimactic. Having created expectations about how the cause-effect chain will be resolved, the film scotches them by refusing to settle things definitely. One famous example is the last shot of *The 400 Blows* (p. 80). In Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* ("The Eclipse"), the two lovers vow to meet for a final reconciliation but aren't shown doing so.

In such films, the ending remains relatively open. That is, the plot leaves us uncertain about the final consequences of the story events. Our response becomes less firm than it does when a film has a clear-cut climax and resolution. The form may encourage us to imagine what might happen next or to reflect on other ways in which our expectations might have been fulfilled.

Narration: The Flow of Story Information

A plot presents or implies story information. The opening of *North by Northwest* shows Manhattan at rush hour and introduces Roger Thornhill as an advertising executive; it also suggests that he has been busily dictating before we see him. Filmmakers have long realized that the spectator's interest can be aroused and manipulated by carefully divulging story information at various points. In general, when we go to a film, we know relatively little about the story; by the end, we know a lot more, usually the whole story. What happens in between?

The plot may arrange cues in ways that withhold information for the sake of curiosity or surprise. Or the plot may supply information in such a way as to create expectations or increase suspense. All these processes constitute **narration**, the plot's way of distributing story information in order to achieve specific effects. Narration is the moment-by-moment process that guides us in building the story out of the plot. Many factors enter into narration, but the most important ones for our purposes involve the *range* and the *depth* of story information that the plot presents.

Range of Story Information

The plot of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* begins by recounting how slaves were brought to America and how people debated the need to free them. The plot

then shows two families, the northern Stoneman family and the southern Camerons. The plot also dwells on political matters, including Lincoln's hope of averting civil war. From the start, then, our range of knowledge is very broad. The plot takes us across historical periods, regions of the country, and various groups of characters. This breadth of story information continues throughout the film. When Ben Cameron founds the Ku Klux Klan, we know about it at the moment the idea strikes him, long before the other characters learn of it. At the climax, we know that the Klan is riding to rescue several characters besieged in a cabin, but the besieged people do not know this. On the whole, in *The Birth of a Nation*, the narration is very *unrestricted*: We know more, we see and hear more, than any of the characters can. Such extremely knowledgeable narration is often called *omniscient narration*.

Now consider the plot of Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep*. The film begins with the detective Philip Marlowe visiting General Sternwood, who wants to hire him. We learn about the case as he does. Throughout the rest of the film, Marlowe is present in every scene. With hardly any exceptions, we don't see or hear anything that he can't see and hear. The narration is thus *restricted* to what Marlowe knows.

Each alternative offers certain advantages. *The Birth of a Nation* seeks to present a panoramic vision of a period in American history (seen through peculiarly racist spectacles). Omniscient narration is thus essential to creating the sense of many destinies intertwined with the fate of the country. Had Griffith restricted narration the way *The Big Sleep* does, we would have learned story information solely through one character—say, Ben Cameron. We could not witness the prologue scene, or the scenes in Lincoln's office, or most of the battle episodes, or the scene of Lincoln's assassination, since Ben is present at none of these events. The plot would now concentrate on one man's experience of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Similarly, *The Big Sleep* derives functional advantages from its restricted narration. By limiting us to Marlowe's range of knowledge, the film can create curiosity and surprise. Restricted narration is important to mystery films, since the films engage our interest by hiding certain important causes. Confining the plot to an investigator's range of knowledge plausibly motivates concealing other story information. *The Big Sleep* could have been less restricted by, say, alternating scenes of Marlowe's investigation with scenes that show the gambling boss, Eddie Mars, planning his crimes, but this would have given away some of the mystery. In each of the two films, the narration's range of knowledge functions to elicit particular reactions from the viewer.

Unrestricted and restricted narration aren't watertight categories but rather are two ends of a continuum. Range is a matter of degree. A film may present a broader range of knowledge than does *The Big Sleep* and still not attain the omniscience of *The Birth of a Nation*. In *North by Northwest*, for instance, the early scenes confine us pretty much to what Roger Thornhill sees and knows. After he flees from the United Nations building, however, the plot moves to Washington, where the members of the U.S. Intelligence Agency discuss the situation. Here the viewer learns something that Roger Thornhill will not learn for some time: the man he seeks, George Kaplan, does not exist. Thereafter, we have a greater range of knowledge than Roger does. In at least one important respect, we also know more than the Agency's staff: we know exactly how the mix-up took place. But we still do not know many other things that the narration could have divulged in the scene in Washington. For instance, the Agency's staff do not identify the real agent they have working under Van Damm's nose. In this way, any film may oscillate between restricted and unrestricted presentation of story information. (For more on narration in *North by Northwest*, see pp. 81–82.)

In fact, across a whole film, narration is never completely unrestricted. There is always something we are not told, even if it is only how the story will end. Usually, therefore, we think of a typical unrestricted narration as operating in the way that it does in *The Birth of a Nation*: The plot shifts constantly from character to character to change our source of information.

"In the first section [of *Reservoir Dogs*], up until Mr. Orange shoots Mr. Blonde, the characters have far more information about what's going on than you have—and they have conflicting information. Then the Mr. Orange sequence happens and that's a great leveller. You start getting caught up with exactly what's going on, and in the third part, when you go back into the warehouse for the climax you are totally ahead of everybody—you know far more than any one of the characters."

— Quentin Tarantino, director

Similarly, a completely restricted narration is not common. Even if the plot is built around a single character, the narration usually includes a few scenes that the character is not present to witness. Though *Tootsie*'s narration remains almost entirely attached to actor Michael Dorsey, a few shots show his acquaintances shopping or watching him on television.

The plot's range of story information creates a *hierarchy of knowledge*. At any given moment, we can ask if the viewer knows more than, less than, or as much as the characters do. For instance, here's how hierarchies would look for the three films we have been discussing. The higher someone is on the scale, the greater his or her range of knowledge:

<i>The Birth of a Nation</i>	<i>The Big Sleep</i>	<i>North by Northwest</i>
(unrestricted narration)	(restricted)	(mixed and fluctuating)
viewer	viewer—Marlowe	the Agency
all characters		viewer
		Thornhill

An easy way to analyze the range of narration is to ask, *Who knows what when?* The spectator must be included among the "whos," not only because we may get more knowledge than any one character but also because we may get knowledge that *no* character possesses. We shall see this happen at the end of *Citizen Kane*.

Our examples suggest the powerful effects that narration can achieve by manipulating the range of story information. Restricted narration tends to create greater curiosity and surprise for the viewer. For instance, if a character is exploring a sinister house, and we see and hear no more than the character does, a sudden revelation of a hand thrusting out from a doorway will startle us. In contrast, as Hitchcock pointed out, a degree of unrestricted narration helps build suspense. He explained it this way to François Truffaut:

We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden. "Boom!" There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware that the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the decor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions this innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: "You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There's a bomb beneath you and it's about to explode!"

In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second case we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. (François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967], p. 52)

Hitchcock put his theory into practice. In *Psycho*, Lila Crane explores the Bates mansion in much the same way as our hypothetical character is doing above. There are isolated moments of surprise as she discovers odd information about Norman and his mother. But the overall effect of the sequence is built on suspense because we know, as Lila does not, that Mrs. Bates is in the house. (Actually, as in *North by Northwest*, our knowledge isn't completely accurate, but during Lila's investigation, we believe it to be.) As in Hitchcock's anecdote, our superior range of knowledge creates suspense because we can anticipate events that the character cannot.

Depth of Story Information

A film's narration not only manipulates the range of knowledge but also manipulates the depth of our knowledge. Here we are referring to how deeply the plot

plunges into a character's psychological states. Just as there is a spectrum between restricted and unrestricted narration, there is a continuum between objectivity and subjectivity.

A plot might confine us wholly to information about what characters say and do: their external behavior. Here the narration is relatively *objective*. Or a film's plot may give us access to what characters see and hear. We might see shots taken from a character's optical standpoint, the **point-of-view shot**, as we saw in our very first example from *Shadow of a Doubt* (pp. 3–7). Or we might hear sounds as the character would hear them, what sound recordists call *sound perspective*. Visual or auditory point of view offers a degree of subjectivity, one we might call *perceptual subjectivity*.

There is the possibility of still greater depth if the plot plunges into the character's mind. We might hear an internal voice reporting the character's thoughts, or we might see the character's inner images, representing memory, fantasy, dreams, or hallucinations. This can be termed *mental subjectivity*. In such ways, narrative films can present story information at various depths of the character's psychological life.

Does a restricted range of knowledge create a greater subjective depth? Not necessarily. *The Big Sleep* is quite restricted in its range of knowledge, as we've seen. Still, we very seldom see or hear things from Marlowe's perceptual vantage point, and we never get direct access to his mind. *The Big Sleep* uses almost completely objective narration. The omniscient narration of *The Birth of a Nation*, however, plunges to considerable depth with optical point-of-view shots, flashbacks, and the hero's final fantasy vision of a world without war. Hitchcock delights in giving us greater knowledge than his characters have, but at certain moments, he confines us to their perceptual subjectivity (as we've seen, relying on point-of-view shots). Range and depth of knowledge are independent variables.

Incidentally, this is one reason why the term *point of view* is ambiguous. It can refer to range of knowledge (as when a critic speaks of an "omniscient point of view") or to depth (as when speaking of "subjective point of view"). In the rest of this book, we will use point of view only to refer to perceptual subjectivity, as in the phrase "optical point-of-view shot."

Manipulating the depth of knowledge can achieve many purposes. Plunging to the depths of mental subjectivity can increase our sympathy for a character and can cue stable expectations about what the characters will later say or do. The memory sequences in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* and the fantasy sequences in Fellini's *8 1/2* yield information about the protagonists' traits and possible future actions that would be less vivid if presented objectively. A subjectively motivated flashback can create parallels among characters, as does the flashback shared by mother and son in Kenji Mizoguchi's *Sansho the Bailiff* (3.15–3.18). A plot can create curiosity about a character's motives and then use some degree of subjectivity—for example, inner commentary or subjective flashback—to explain the cause of the behavior. In *The Sixth Sense*, the child psychologist's odd estrangement from his wife begins to make sense when we hear his inner recollection of something his young patient had told him much earlier.

On the other hand, objectivity can be an effective way of withholding information. One reason that *The Big Sleep* does not treat Marlowe subjectively is that the detective genre demands that the detective's reasoning be concealed from the viewer. The mystery is more mysterious if we do not know his hunches and conclusions before he reveals them at the end. At any moment in a film, we can ask, "How deeply do I know the characters' perceptions, feelings, and thoughts?" The answer will point directly to how the narration is presenting or withholding story information in order to achieve a formal function or a specific effect on the viewer.

One final point about the depth of knowledge that the narration presents: Most films insert *subjective* moments into an overall framework of *objectivity*. For instance, in *North by Northwest*, point-of-view editing is used as we see Roger



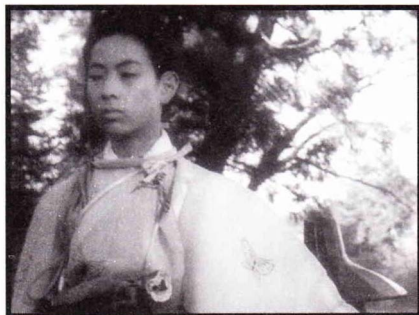
3.15 One of the early flashbacks in *Sansho the Bailiff* starts with the mother, now living in exile with her children, kneeling by a stream.



3.16 Her image is replaced by a shot of her husband in the past, about to summon his son Zushio.



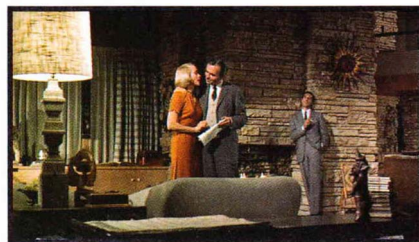
3.17 At the climax of the scene in the past, the father gives Zushio an image of the goddess of mercy and admonishes him always to show kindness to others.



3.18 Normal procedure would come out of the flashback showing the mother again, emphasizing it as her memory. Instead, we return to the present with a shot of Zushio, bearing the goddess's image. It is as if he and his mother have shared the memory of the father's gift.



3.19 In *North by Northwest*, Roger Thornhill looks in Van Damm's window (objective narration).



3.20 A shot from Roger's point of view follows (perceptual subjectivity).



3.21 This is followed by another shot of Roger looking (objectivity again).

Thornhill crawl up to Van Damm's window (3.19–3.21). Similarly, a dream sequence will often be bracketed by shots of the sleeper in bed.

Flashbacks offer a fascinating instance of the overarching power of objective narration. They are usually motivated as mental subjectivity, since the events we see are triggered by a character's recalling the past. Yet, once we are inside the flashback, events will typically be presented from a wholly objective standpoint. They will usually be presented in an unrestricted fashion, too, and may even include action that the remembering character could have no way of knowing.

In other words, most films take objective narration as a baseline from which we may depart in search of subjective depth but to which we will return. There are, however, other films that refuse this convention. Fellini's *8 1/2*, Buñuel's *Belle de jour* and Haneke's *Caché*, Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*, and Nolan's *Memento* mix objectivity and subjectivity in ambiguous ways. Here, as elsewhere, the manipulation of story information is not just a matter of what action takes place in the film. Any choice about range or depth affects how the spectator thinks and feels about the film as it progresses.

The Narrator

Narration, then, is the process by which the plot presents story information to the spectator. This process may shift between restricted and unrestricted ranges of knowledge and varying degrees of objectivity and subjectivity. Narration may also use a *narrator*, some specific agent who purports to be telling us the story.

The narrator may be a *character* in the story. We are familiar with this convention from literature, as when Huck Finn or Jane Eyre recounts a novel's action. In Edward Dmytryk's film *Murder, My Sweet*, the detective tells his story in flashbacks, addressing the information to inquiring policemen. In the documentary *Roger and Me*, Michael Moore frankly acknowledges his role as a character narrator. He starts the film with his reminiscences of growing up in Flint, Michigan, and he appears on camera in interviews with workers and in confrontations with General Motors security staff.

A film can also use a *noncharacter narrator*. Noncharacter narrators are common in documentaries. We never learn who belongs to the anonymous "voice of God" we hear in *The River*, *Primary*, or *Hoop Dreams*. A fictional film may employ this device as well. *Jules and Jim* uses a dry, matter-of-fact commentator to lend a flavor of objectivity, while other films might call on this device to lend a sense of realism, as in the urgent voice-over we hear during *The Naked City*.

A film may play on the character/noncharacter distinction by making the source of a narrating voice uncertain. In *Film About a Woman Who . . .*, we might assume that a character is the narrator, but we cannot be sure because we cannot tell which character the voice belongs to. In fact, it may be coming from an external commentator.

Note that either sort of narrator may present various sorts of narration. A character narrator is not necessarily restricted and may tell of events that she or he did not witness, as the relatively minor figure of the village priest does in John Ford's *The Quiet Man*. A noncharacter narrator need not be omniscient and could confine the commentary to what a single character knows. A character narrator might be highly subjective, telling us details of his or her inner life, or might be objective, confining his or her recounting strictly to externals. A noncharacter narrator might give us access to subjective depths, as in *Jules and Jim*, or might stick simply to surface events, as does the impersonal voice-over commentator in *The Killing*. In any case, the viewer's process of picking up cues, developing expectations, and constructing an ongoing story out of the plot will be partially shaped by what the narrator tells or doesn't tell.

Summing Up Narration

We can summarize the shaping power of narration by considering George Miller's *The Road Warrior* (also known as *Mad Max II*). The film's plot opens with a voice-over commentary by an elderly male narrator who recalls "the warrior Max." After presenting exposition that tells of the worldwide wars that led society to degenerate into gangs of scavengers, the narrator falls silent. The question of his identity is left unanswered.

The rest of the plot is organized around Max's encounter with a group of peaceful desert people. They want to flee to the coast with the gasoline they have refined, but they're under siege by a gang of vicious marauders. The plot action involves Max's agreement to work for the settlers in exchange for gasoline. Later, after a brush with the gang leaves him wounded, his dog dead, and his car demolished, Max commits himself to helping the people escape their compound. The struggle against the encircling gang comes to its climax in an attempt to escape with a tanker truck, with Max at the wheel.

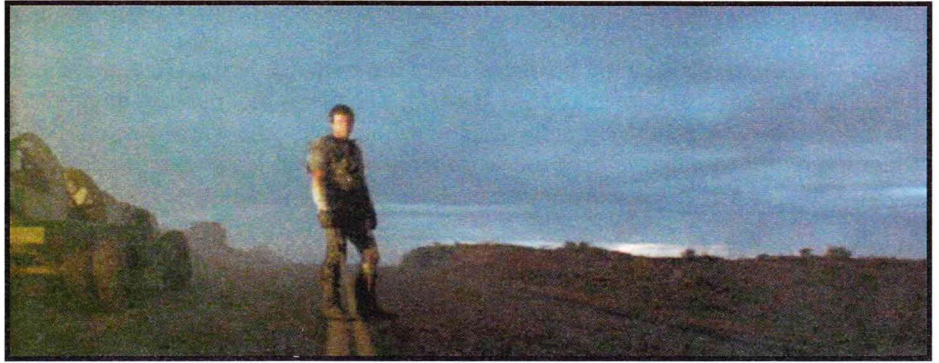
Max is at the center of the plot's causal chain; his goals and conflicts propel the developing action. Moreover, after the anonymous narrator's prologue, most of the film is restricted to Max's range of knowledge. Like Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*, Max is present in every scene, and almost everything we learn gets funneled through him. The depth of story information is also consistent. The narration provides optical point-of-view shots as Max drives his car (3.22) or watches a skirmish through a telescope. When he is rescued after his car crash, his delirium is rendered as mental subjectivity, using the conventional cues of slow motion, superimposed imagery, and slowed-down sound (3.23). All of these narrational devices encourage us to sympathize with Max.



3.22 A point-of-view shot as Max drives up to an apparently abandoned gyro in *The Road Warrior*.



3.23 The injured Max's dizzy view of his rescuer uses double exposure.



3.24 As the camera tracks away from Max, we hear the narrator’s voice: “And the Road Warrior? That was the last we ever saw of him. He lives now only in my memories.”

At certain points, however, the narration becomes more unrestricted. This occurs principally during chases and battle scenes, when we witness events Max probably does not know about. In such scenes, unrestricted narration functions to build up suspense by showing both pursuers and pursued or different aspects of the battle. At the climax, Max’s truck successfully draws the gang away from the desert people, who escape to the south. But when his truck overturns, Max—and we—learn that the truck holds only sand. It has been a decoy. Thus our restriction to Max’s range of knowledge creates a surprise.

There is still more to learn, however. At the very end, the elderly narrator’s voice returns to tell us that he was the feral child whom Max had befriended. The desert people drive off, and Max is left alone in the middle of the highway. The film’s final image—a shot of the solitary Max receding into the distance as we pull back (3.24)—suggests both a perceptual subjectivity (the boy’s point of view as he rides away from Max) and a mental subjectivity (the memory of Max dimming for the narrator).

In *The Road Warrior*, then, the plot’s form is achieved not only by causality, time, and space but also by a coherent use of narration. The middle portion of the film channels our expectations through an attachment to Max, alternating with more unrestricted portions. And this middle section is framed by the mysterious narrator who puts all the events into the distant past. The narrator’s presence at the opening leads us to expect him to return at the end, perhaps explaining who he is. Thus both the cause–effect organization and the narrational patterning help the film give us a unified experience.

The Classical Hollywood Cinema

The number of possible narratives is unlimited. Historically, however, fictional filmmaking has tended to be dominated by a single tradition of narrative form. We’ll refer to this dominant mode as the “classical Hollywood cinema.” This mode is “classical” because of its lengthy, stable, and influential history, and “Hollywood” because the mode assumed its most elaborate shape in American studio films. The same mode, however, governs many narrative films made in other countries. For example, *The Road Warrior*, though an Australian film, is constructed along classical Hollywood lines. And many documentaries, such as *Primary*, rely on conventions derived from Hollywood’s fictional narratives.

This conception of narrative depends on the assumption that the action will spring primarily from *individual characters as causal agents*. Natural causes (floods, earthquakes) or societal causes (institutions, wars, economic depressions) may affect the action, but the narrative centers on personal psychological causes: decisions, choices, and traits of character.

Often an important trait that functions to get the narrative moving is a *desire*. The character wants something. The desire sets up a *goal*, and the course of the narrative's development will most likely involve the process of achieving that goal. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy has a series of goals, as we've seen: first to save Toto from Miss Gulch, then to get home from Oz. The latter goal creates short-term goals along the way: getting to the Emerald City and then killing the Witch.

If this desire to reach a goal were the only element present, there would be nothing to stop the character from moving quickly to achieve it. But there is a counterforce in the classical narrative: an opposition that creates conflict. The protagonist comes up against a character whose traits and goals are opposed to his or hers. As a result, the protagonist must seek to change the situation so that he or she can achieve the goal. Dorothy's desire to return to Kansas is opposed by the Wicked Witch, whose goal is to obtain the Ruby Slippers. Dorothy must eventually eliminate the Witch before she is able to use the slippers to go home. We shall see in *His Girl Friday* how the two main characters' goals conflict until the final resolution (pp. 401–402).

Cause and effect imply *change*. If the characters didn't desire something to be different from the way it is at the beginning of the narrative, change wouldn't occur. Therefore characters' traits and wants are a strong source of causes and effects.

But don't all narratives have protagonists of this sort? Actually, no. In 1920s Soviet films, such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, *October*, and *Strike*, no *individual* serves as protagonist. In films by Eisenstein and Yasujiro Ozu, many events are seen as caused not by characters but by larger forces (social dynamics in the former, an overarching nature in the latter). In narrative films such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, the protagonist is not active but passive. So the active, goal-oriented protagonist, though common, doesn't appear in every narrative film.

In the classical Hollywood narrative, the chain of actions that results from predominantly psychological causes tends to motivate most other narrative events. Time is subordinated to the cause–effect chain in a host of ways. The plot will omit significant durations in order to show only events of causal importance. (The hours Dorothy and her entourage spend walking on the Yellow Brick Road are omitted, but the plot dwells on the moments during which she meets a new character.) The plot will arrange story chronology so as to present the cause–effect chain most strikingly. For instance, in one scene of *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Mickey (played by Woody Allen) is in a suicidal depression. When we next see him several scenes later, he is bubbly and cheerful. Our curiosity about this abrupt change enhances his comic explanation to a friend, via a flashback, that he achieved a serene attitude toward life while watching a Marx Brothers film.

Specific devices make plot time depend on the story's cause–effect chain. The *appointment* motivates characters' encountering each other at a specific moment. The *deadline* makes plot duration dependent on the cause–effect chain. Throughout, motivation in the classical narrative film strives to be as clear and complete as possible—even in the fanciful genre of the musical, in which song-and-dance numbers become motivated as either expressions of the characters' emotions or stage shows mounted by the characters.

Narration in the classical Hollywood cinema exploits a variety of options, but there's a strong tendency for it to be objective in the way discussed on pages 90–92. It presents a basically objective story reality, against which various degrees of perceptual or mental subjectivity can be measured. Classical cinema also tends toward fairly unrestricted narration. Even if we follow a single character, there are portions of the film giving us access to things the character does not see, hear, or know. *North by Northwest* and *The Road Warrior* remain good examples of this tendency. This weighting is overridden only in genres that depend heavily on mystery, such as the detective film, with its reliance on the sort of restrictiveness we saw at work in *The Big Sleep*.

Finally, most classical narrative films display a strong degree of *closure* at the end. Leaving few loose ends unresolved, these films seek to complete their causal

“Movies to me are about wanting something, a character wanting something that you as the audience desperately want him to have. You, the writer, keep him from getting it for as long as possible, and then, through whatever effort he makes, he gets it.”

— Bruce Joel Rubin, screenwriter, *Ghost*

chains with a final effect. We usually learn the fate of each character, the answer to each mystery, and the outcome of each conflict.

Again, none of these features is necessary to narrative form in general. There is nothing to prevent a filmmaker from presenting the dead time, or narratively unmotivated intervals between more significant events. (François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Carl Dreyer, and Andy Warhol do this frequently, in different ways.) The filmmaker's plot can also reorder story chronology to make the causal chain *more* perplexing. For example, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Not Reconciled* moves back and forth among three widely different time periods without clearly signaling the shifts. Dušan Makavejev's *Love Affair, or the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* uses flash-forwards interspersed with the main plot action; only gradually do we come to understand the causal relations of these flash-forwards to the present-time events. More recently, puzzle films tease the audience to find clues to enigmatic narration or story events.

The filmmaker can also include material that is unmotivated by narrative cause and effect, such as the chance meetings in Truffaut's films, the political monologues and interviews in Godard's films, the intellectual montage sequences in Eisenstein's films, and the transitional shots in Ozu's work. Narration may be completely subjective, as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, or it may hover ambiguously between objectivity and subjectivity, as in *Last Year at Marienbad*. Finally, the filmmaker need not resolve all of the action at the close; films made outside the classical tradition sometimes have quite open endings.

We'll see in Chapter 6 how the classical Hollywood mode also makes cinematic space serve causality by means of continuity editing. For now we can simply note that the classical mode tends to treat narrative elements and narrational processes in specific and distinctive ways. For all of its effectiveness, the classical Hollywood mode remains only one system among many that can be used for constructing narrative films.

Narrative Form in *Citizen Kane*

With its unusual organizational style, *Citizen Kane* invites us to analyze how principles of narrative form operate across an entire film. *Kane*'s investigation plot carries us toward analyzing how causality and goal-oriented characters may operate in narratives. The film's manipulations of our knowledge shed light on the story–plot distinction. *Kane* also shows how ambiguity may arise when certain elements aren't clearly motivated. Furthermore, the comparison of *Kane*'s beginning with its ending indicates how a film may deviate from the patterns of classical Hollywood narrative construction. Finally, *Kane* clearly shows how our experience can be shaped by the way that narration governs the flow of story information.

Overall Narrative Expectations in *Citizen Kane*

We saw in Chapter 2 that our experience of a film depends heavily on the expectations we bring to it and the extent to which the film confirms them. Before you saw *Citizen Kane*, you may have known only that it is regarded as a film classic. Such an evaluation would not give you a very specific set of expectations. A 1941 audience would have had a keener sense of anticipation. For one thing, the film was rumored to be a disguised version of the life of the newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst. Spectators would thus be looking for events and references keyed to Hearst's life.

Several minutes into the film itself, the viewer can form more specific expectations about pertinent genre conventions. The early "News on the March" sequence suggests that this film may be a fictional biography, and this hint is

confirmed once the reporter, Thompson, begins his inquiry into Kane's life. The film does indeed follow the conventional outline of the fictional biography, which typically covers an individual's whole life and dramatizes certain episodes in the period. Examples of this genre would be *Anthony Adverse* (1936) and *The Power and the Glory* (1933). (The latter film is often cited as an influence on *Citizen Kane* because of its complex use of flashbacks.)

The viewer can also quickly identify the film's use of conventions of the newspaper reporter genre. Thompson's colleagues resemble the wisecracking reporters in *Five Star Final* (1931), *Picture Snatcher* (1933), and *His Girl Friday* (1940). In this genre, the action usually depends on a reporter's dogged pursuit of a story against great odds. We are therefore prepared to expect not only Thompson's investigation but also his triumphant discovery of the truth. In the scenes devoted to Susan, there are also some conventions typical of the musical film: frantic rehearsals, backstage preparations, and, most specifically, the montage of her opera career, which parodies the conventional montage of singing success in films like *Maytime* (1937). More broadly, the film evidently owes something to the detective genre, since Thompson is aiming to solve a mystery (What is Rosebud?), and his interviews resemble those of a detective questioning suspects in search of clues.

Note, however, that *Kane's* use of genre conventions is somewhat equivocal. Unlike many biographical films, *Kane* is more concerned with psychological states and relationships than with the hero's public deeds or adventures. As a newspaper film, *Kane* is unusual in that the reporter fails to get his story. And *Kane* is not exactly a standard mystery, since it answers some questions but leaves others unanswered. *Citizen Kane* is a good example of a film that relies on genre conventions but often thwarts the expectations they arouse.

The same sort of equivocal qualities can be found in *Kane's* relation to the classical Hollywood cinema. Even without specific prior knowledge about this film, we expect that, as an American studio product of 1941, it will obey norms and rules of that tradition. In most ways, it does. We'll see that desire propels the narrative, causality is defined around traits and goals, conflicts lead to consequences, time is motivated by plot necessity, and narration is objective, mixing restricted and unrestricted passages. We'll also see some ways in which *Citizen Kane* is more ambiguous than most films in this tradition. Desires, traits, and goals are not always spelled out; the conflicts sometimes have an uncertain outcome; at the end, the narration's omniscience is emphasized to a rare degree. The ending in particular doesn't provide the degree of closure we would expect in a classical film. Our analysis will show how *Citizen Kane* draws on Hollywood narrative conventions but also violates some of the expectations that we bring to a Hollywood film.

Plot and Story in *Citizen Kane*

In analyzing a film, it's helpful to begin by segmenting it into sequences. Sequences are often demarcated by cinematic devices (fades, dissolves, cuts, black screens, and so on). In a narrative film, the sequences constitute the parts of the plot.

Most sequences in a narrative film are called *scenes*. The term is used in its theatrical sense, to refer to distinct phases of the action occurring within a relatively unified space and time. Our segmentation of *Citizen Kane* appears below. In this outline, numerals refer to major parts, some of which are only one scene long. In most cases, however, the major parts consist of several scenes, and each of these is identified by a lower-case letter. Many of these segments could be further divided, but this segmentation suits our immediate purposes.

Our segmentation lets us see at a glance the major divisions of the plot and how scenes are organized within them. The outline also helps us notice how the plot organizes story causality and story time. Let's look at these factors more closely.

CITIZEN KANE: PLOT SEGMENTATION

C. Credit title

1. Xanadu: Kane dies

2. Projection room:

- a. "News on the March"
- b. Reporters discuss "Rosebud"

3. El Rancho nightclub: Thompson tries to interview Susan

4. Thatcher library:

*First
flashback*

- a. Thompson enters and reads Thatcher's manuscript
- b. Kane's mother sends the boy off with Thatcher
- c. Kane grows up and buys the *Inquirer*
- d. Kane launches the *Inquirer's* attack on big business
- e. The Depression: Kane sells Thatcher his newspaper chain
- f. Thompson leaves the library

5. Bernstein's office:

*Second
flashback*

- a. Thompson visits Bernstein
- b. Kane takes over the *Inquirer*
- c. Montage: the *Inquirer's* growth
- d. Party: the *Inquirer* celebrates getting the *Chronicle* staff
- e. Leland and Bernstein discuss Kane's trip abroad
- f. Kane returns with his fiancée Emily
- g. Bernstein concludes his reminiscence

6. Nursing home:

*Third
flashback*

- a. Thompson talks with Leland
- b. Breakfast table montage: Kane's marriage deteriorates
- c. Leland continues his recollections

*Third
flashback
(cont.)*

- d. Kane meets Susan and goes to her room
- e. Kane's political campaign culminates in his speech
- f. Kane confronts Gettys, Emily, and Susan
- g. Kane loses the election, and Leland asks to be transferred
- h. Kane marries Susan
- i. Susan has her opera premiere
- j. Because Leland is drunk, Kane finishes Leland's review
- k. Leland concludes his reminiscence

7. El Rancho nightclub:

*Fourth
flashback*

- a. Thompson talks with Susan
- b. Susan rehearses her singing
- c. Susan has her opera premiere
- d. Kane insists that Susan go on singing
- e. Montage: Susan's opera career
- f. Susan attempts suicide and Kane promises she can quit singing
- g. Xanadu: Susan is bored
- h. Montage: Susan plays with jigsaw puzzles
- i. Xanadu: Kane proposes a picnic
- j. Picnic: Kane slaps Susan
- k. Xanadu: Susan leaves Kane
- l. Susan concludes her reminiscence

8. Xanadu:

*Fifth
flashback*

- a. Thompson talks with Raymond
- b. Kane destroys Susan's room and picks up a paperweight, murmuring "Rosebud"
- c. Raymond concludes his reminiscence; Thompson talks with the other reporters; all leave
- d. Survey of Kane's possessions leads to a revelation of Rosebud; exterior of gate and of castle; the end

E. End credits

Citizen Kane's Causality

In *Citizen Kane*, two distinct sets of characters cause events to happen. On the one hand, a group of reporters seeks information about Kane. On the other hand, Kane and the characters who know him provide the subject of the reporters' investigations.

The initial causal connection between the two groups is Kane's death, which leads the reporters to make a newsreel summing up his career. But the newsreel is already finished when the plot introduces the reporters. The boss, Rowlston, supplies the cause that initiates the investigation of Kane's life. Thompson's newsreel fails to satisfy him. Rowlston's desire for an angle for the newsreel gets the search for Rosebud under way. Thompson thus gains a goal, which sets him delving into Kane's past. His investigation constitutes one main line of the plot.

Another line of action, Kane's life, has already taken place in the past. There, too, a group of characters has caused actions to occur. Many years before, a poverty-stricken boarder at Kane's mother's boardinghouse has paid her with a deed to a silver mine. The wealth provided by this mine causes Mrs. Kane to appoint Thatcher as young Charles's guardian. Thatcher's guardianship results (in somewhat unspecified ways) in Kane's growing up into a spoiled, rebellious young man.

Citizen Kane is an unusual film in that the object of the investigator's search is not an object but a set of character traits. Thompson seeks to know what aspects of Kane's personality led him to say "Rosebud" on his deathbed. This mystery motivates Thompson's detective-like investigation. Kane, a very complex character, has many traits that influence the other characters' actions. As we shall see, however, *Citizen Kane's* narrative does not ultimately define all of Kane's character traits.

Kane himself has a goal; he, too, seems to be searching for something related to Rosebud. At several points, characters speculate that Rosebud was something that Kane lost or was never able to get. Again, the fact that Kane's goal remains so vague makes this an unusual narrative.

Other characters in Kane's life provide causal material for the narrative. The presence of several characters who knew Kane well makes Thompson's investigation possible, even though Kane has died. Significantly, the characters provide a range of information that spans Kane's entire life. This is important if we are to be able to reconstruct the progression of story events in the film. Thatcher knew Kane as a child; Bernstein, his manager, knew his business dealings; his best friend, Leland, knew of his personal life (his first marriage in particular); Susan Alexander, his second wife, knew him in middle age; and the butler, Raymond, managed Kane's affairs during his last years. Each of these characters has a causal role in Kane's life, as well as in Thompson's investigation. Note that Kane's wife Emily does not tell a story, since Emily's story would largely duplicate Leland's and would contribute no additional information to the present-day part of the narrative, the investigation. Hence the plot simply eliminates her (via a car accident).

Time in *Citizen Kane*

The order, duration, and frequency of events in the story differ greatly from the way the plot of *Citizen Kane* presents those events. Much of the film's power to engage our interest arises from the complex ways in which the plot cues us to construct the story.

To understand this story in its chronological order and assumed duration and frequency, the spectator must follow an intricate tapestry of plot events. For example, in the first flashback, Thatcher's diary tells of a scene in which Kane loses control of his newspapers during the Depression (4e). By this time, Kane is a middle-aged man. Yet in the second flashback, Bernstein describes young Kane's arrival at the *Inquirer* and his engagement to Emily (5b, 5f). We mentally sort these plot events into a correct chronological story order, then continue to rearrange other events as we learn of them.

Similarly, the earliest *story* event about which we learn is Mrs. Kane's acquisition of a deed to a valuable mine. We get this information during the newsreel, in the second sequence. But the first event in the *plot* is Kane's death. Just to illustrate the maneuvers we must execute to construct the film's story, let's assume that Kane's life consists of these phases:

Boyhood
 Youthful newspaper editing
 Life as a newlywed
 Middle age
 Old age

Significantly, the early portions of the plot tend to roam over many phases of Kane's life, while later portions tend to concentrate more on particular periods. The "News on the March" sequence (2a) gives us glimpses of all periods, and Thatcher's manuscript (4) shows us Kane in boyhood, youth, and middle age. Then the flashbacks become primarily chronological. Bernstein's recounting (5) concentrates on episodes showing Kane as newspaper editor and fiancé of Emily. Leland's recollections (6) run from newlywed life to middle age. Susan (7) tells of Kane as a middle-aged and an old man. Raymond's perfunctory anecdote (8b) concentrates on Kane in old age.

The plot becomes more linear in its ordering as it goes along, and this aids the viewer's effort to understand the story. If every character's flashback skipped around Kane's life as much as the newsreel and Thatcher's account do, the story would be much harder to reconstruct. As it is, the early portions of the plot show us the results of events we have not seen, while the later portions confirm or modify the expectations that we formed earlier.

By arranging story events out of order, the plot cues us to form specific anticipations. In the beginning, with Kane's death and the newsreel version of his life, the plot creates strong curiosity about two issues. What does "Rosebud" mean? And what could have happened to make so powerful a man so solitary at the end of his life?

There is also a degree of suspense. When the plot goes back to the past, we already have quite firm knowledge. We know that neither of Kane's marriages will last and that his friends will drift away. The plot encourages us to focus our interest on *how and when* a particular thing will happen. Thus many scenes function to delay an outcome that we already know is certain. For example, we know that Susan will abandon Kane at some point, so we are constantly expecting her to do so each time he bullies her. For several scenes (7b–7j), she comes close to leaving him, though after her suicide attempt he mollifies her. The plot could have shown her walking out (7k) much earlier, but then the ups and downs of their relations would have been less vivid, and there would have been no suspense.

This process of mentally rearranging plot events into story order might be quite difficult in *Citizen Kane* were it not for the presence of the "News on the March" newsreel. The very first sequence in Xanadu disorients us, for it shows the death of a character about whom we so far know almost nothing. But the newsreel gives us a great deal of information quickly. Moreover, the newsreel's own structure uses parallels with the main film to supply a miniature introduction to the film's overall plot:

- A. Shots of Xanadu
- B. Funeral; headlines announcing Kane's death
- C. Growth of financial empire
- D. Silver mine and Mrs. Kane's boardinghouse
- E. Thatcher testimony at congressional committee
- F. Political career

- G. Private life; weddings, divorces
- H. Opera house and Xanadu
- I. Political campaign
- J. The Depression
- K. 1935: Kane's old age
- L. Isolation of Xanadu
- M. Death announced

A comparison of this outline with the one for the whole film shows some striking similarities. "News on the March" begins by emphasizing Kane as "Xanadu's Landlord"; a short segment (A) presents shots of the house, its grounds, and its contents. This is a variation on the opening of the whole film (1), which consisted of a series of shots of the grounds, moving progressively closer to the house. That opening sequence had ended with Kane's death; now the newsreel follows the shots of the house with Kane's funeral (B). Next comes a series of newspaper headlines announcing Kane's death. In a comparison with the plot diagram of *Citizen Kane*, these headlines occupy the approximate formal position of the whole newsreel itself (2a). Even the title card that follows the headlines ("To forty-four million U.S. news buyers, more newsworthy than the names in his own headlines was Kane himself. . . .") is a brief parallel to the scene in the projection room, in which the reporters decide that Thompson should continue to investigate Kane's "newsworthy" life.

The order of the newsreel's presentation of Kane's life roughly parallels the order of scenes in the flashbacks related to Thompson. "News on the March" moves from Kane's death to a summary of the building of Kane's newspaper empire (C), with a description of the boardinghouse deed and the silver mine (including an old photograph of Charles with his mother, as well as the first mention of the sled). Similarly, the first flashback (4) tells how Thatcher took over the young Kane's guardianship from his mother and how Kane first attempted to run the *Inquirer*. The rough parallels continue: The newsreel tells of Kane's political ambitions (F), his marriages (G), his building of the opera house (H), his political campaign (I), and so on. In the main plot, Thatcher's flashback describes his own clashes with Kane on political matters. Leland's flashback (6) covers the first marriage, the affair with Susan, the political campaign, and the premiere of the opera *Salammbô*.

These are not all of the similarities between the newsreel and the overall film. You can tease out many more by comparing the two closely. The crucial point is that the newsreel provides us with a map for the investigation of Kane's life. As we see the various scenes of the flashbacks, we already expect certain events and have a rough chronological basis for fitting them into our story reconstruction.

Kane's many flashbacks allow us to see past events directly, and in these portions story and plot duration are close to the same. We know that Kane is 75 years old at his death, and the earliest scene shows him at perhaps 10. Thus the plot covers roughly 65 years of his life, plus the week of Thompson's investigation. The single earlier story event of which we only hear is Mrs. Kane's acquisition of the mine deed, which we can infer took place a short time before she turned her son over to Thatcher. So the story runs a bit longer than the plot—perhaps closer to 70 years. This time span is presented in a screen duration of almost 120 minutes.

Like most films, *Citizen Kane* uses ellipses. The plot skips over years of story time, as well as many hours of Thompson's week of investigations. But plot duration also compresses time through montage sequences, such as those showing the *Inquirer's* campaign against big business (4d), the growth of the paper's circulation (5c), Susan's opera career (7e), and Susan's bored playing with jigsaw puzzles (7h). Here long passages of story time are condensed into brief summaries quite different from ordinary narrative scenes. We will discuss montage sequences in more

detail in Chapter 8, but we can already see the value of such segments in condensing story duration in a comprehensible way.

Citizen Kane also provides a clear demonstration of how events that occur only once in the story may appear several times in the plot. In their respective flashbacks, both Leland and Susan describe the latter's debut in the Chicago premiere of *Salammbô*. Watching Leland's account (6i), we see the performance from the front; we witness the audience reacting with distaste. Susan's version (7c) shows us the performance from behind and on the stage, to suggest her humiliation. This repeated presentation of Susan's debut in the plot doesn't confuse us, for we understand the two scenes as depicting the same story event. ("News on the March" has also referred to Susan's opera career, in parts G and H.) By repeating scenes of her embarrassment, the plot makes vivid the pain that Kane forces her to undergo.

Overall, *Citizen Kane*'s narrative dramatizes Thompson's search by means of flashbacks that encourage us to seek the sources of Kane's failure and to try to identify "Rosebud." As in a detective film, we must locate missing causes and arrange events into a coherent story pattern. Through manipulations of order, duration, and frequency, the plot both assists our search and complicates it in order to provoke curiosity and suspense.

Motivation in *Citizen Kane*

Some critics have argued that Welles's use of the search for "Rosebud" is a flaw in *Citizen Kane*, because the identification of the word proves it to be a trivial gimmick. If indeed we assume that the whole point of *Citizen Kane* is really to identify Rosebud, this charge might be valid. But in fact, Rosebud serves a very important motivating function in the film. It creates Thompson's goal and thus focuses our attention on his delving into the lives of Kane and his associates. *Citizen Kane* becomes a mystery story; but instead of investigating a crime, the reporter investigates a character. So the Rosebud clues provide the basic motivation necessary for the plot to progress. (Of course, the Rosebud device serves other functions as well; for instance, the little sled provides a transition from the boardinghouse scene to the cheerless Christmas when Thatcher gives Charles a new sled.)

Citizen Kane's narrative revolves around an investigation into traits of character. As a result, these traits provide many of the motivations for events. (In this respect, the film obeys principles of the classical Hollywood narrative.) Kane's desire to prove that Susan is really a singer and not just his mistress motivates his manipulation of her opera career. His mother's overly protective desire to remove her son from what she considers to be a bad environment motivates her appointment of Thatcher as the boy's guardian. Dozens of actions are motivated by character traits and goals.

At the end of the film, Thompson gives up his search for the meaning of Rosebud, saying he doesn't think "any word can explain a man's life." Up to a point Thompson's statement motivates his acceptance of his failure. But if we as spectators are to accept this idea that no key can unlock the secrets of a life, we need further motivation. The film provides it. In the scene in the newsreel projection room, Rawlston suggests that "maybe he told us all about himself on his deathbed." Immediately, one of the reporters says, "Yeah, and maybe he didn't." Already the suggestion is planted that Rosebud may not provide any adequate answers about Kane. Later Leland scornfully dismisses the Rosebud issue and goes on to talk of other things. These brief references to Rosebud help justify Thompson's pessimistic attitude in the final sequence.

The presence of the scene in which Thompson first visits Susan at the El Rancho nightclub (3) might seem puzzling at first. Unlike the other scenes in which he visits people, no flashback occurs here. Thompson learns from the waiter that Susan knows nothing about Rosebud; he could easily learn this on his later visit to her. So why should the plot include the scene at all? One reason is that it evokes curiosity and deepens the mystery around Kane. Moreover, Susan's story, when she does tell it, covers events relatively late in Kane's career. As we've seen, the

flashbacks go through Kane's life roughly in order. If Susan had told her story first, we would not have all of the material necessary to understand it. But it is plausible that Thompson should start his search with Kane's ex-wife, presumably the surviving person closest to him. In Thompson's first visit, Susan's drunken refusal to speak to him motivates the fact that her flashback comes later. By that point, Bernstein and Leland have filled in enough of Kane's personal life to prepare the way for Susan's flashback. This first scene functions partly to justify postponing Susan's flashback until a later part of the plot.

Motivation makes us take things for granted in narratives. Mrs. Kane's desire for her son to be rich and successful motivates her decision to entrust him to Thatcher, a powerful banker, as his guardian. We may just take it for granted that Thatcher is a rich businessman. Yet on closer inspection, this feature is necessary to motivate other events. It motivates Thatcher's presence in the newsreel; he is powerful enough to have been asked to testify at a congressional hearing. More important, Thatcher's success motivates the fact that he has kept a journal now on deposit at a memorial library that Thompson visits. This, in turn, justifies the fact that Thompson can uncover information from a source who knew Kane as a child.

Despite its reliance on psychological motivation, *Citizen Kane* also departs somewhat from the usual practice of the classical Hollywood narrative by leaving some motivations ambiguous. The ambiguities relate primarily to Kane's character. The other characters who tell Thompson their stories all have definite opinions of Kane, but these do not always tally. Bernstein still looks on Kane with sympathy and affection, whereas Leland is cynical about his own relationship with Kane. The reasons for some of Kane's actions remain unclear. Does he send Leland the \$25,000 check in firing him because of a lingering sentiment over their old friendship or from a proud desire to prove himself more generous than Leland? Why does he insist on stuffing Xanadu with hundreds of artworks that he never even unpacks? By leaving these questions open, the film invites us to speculate on various facets of Kane's personality.

Citizen Kane's Parallelism

Parallelism doesn't provide a major principle of development in *Citizen Kane's* narrative form, but it crops up more locally. We've already seen important formal parallels between the newsreel and the film's plot as a whole. We've also noticed a parallel between the two major lines of action: Kane's life and Thompson's search. In different sense, both men are searching for Rosebud. Rosebud serves as a summary of the things Kane strives for through his adult life. We see him repeatedly fail to find love and friendship, living alone at Xanadu in the end. His inability to find happiness parallels Thompson's failure to locate the significance of the word "Rosebud." This parallel doesn't imply that Kane and Thompson share similar character traits. Rather, it allows both lines of action to develop simultaneously in similar directions.

Another narrative parallel juxtaposes Kane's campaign for the governorship with his attempt to build up Susan's career as an opera star. In each case, he seeks to inflate his reputation by influencing public opinion. In trying to achieve success for Susan, Kane forces his newspaper employees to write favorable reviews of her performances. This parallels the moment when he loses the election and the *Inquirer* automatically proclaims a fraud at the polls. In both cases, Kane fails to realize that his power over the public is not great enough to hide the flaws in his projects: first his affair with Susan, which ruins his campaign, then her lack of singing ability, which Kane refuses to admit. The parallels show that Kane continues to make the same kinds of mistakes throughout his life.

Patterns of Plot Development in Citizen Kane

The order of Thompson's visits to Kane's acquaintances allows the series of flashbacks to have a clear pattern of progression. Thompson moves from people who knew

Kane early in his life to those who knew him as an old man. Moreover, each flashback contains a distinct type of information about Kane. Thatcher establishes Kane's political stance; Bernstein gives an account of the business dealings of the newspaper. These provide the background to Kane's early success and lead into Leland's stories of Kane's personal life, where we get the first real indications of Kane's failure. Susan continues the description of his decline with her account of how he manipulated her life. Finally, in Raymond's flashback, Kane becomes a pitiable old man.

Thus, even though the order of events in the story varies greatly from that given in the plot, *Citizen Kane* presents Kane's life through a steady pattern of development. The present-day portions of the narrative—Thompson's scenes—also follow their own pattern of a search. By the ending, this search has failed, as Kane's own search for happiness or personal success had also failed.

Because of Thompson's failure, the ending of *Citizen Kane* remains somewhat more open than was the rule in Hollywood in 1941. True, Thompson does resolve the question of Rosebud for himself by saying that it would not have explained Kane's life. To this extent, we have the common pattern of action leading to greater knowledge. Thompson has come to understand that a life cannot be summed up in one word. Still, in most classical narrative films, the main character reaches his or her initial goal, and Thompson is the main character of this line of action.

The line of action involving Kane himself has even less closure. Not only does Kane apparently not reach his goal, but the film never specifies what that goal is to start with. Most classical narratives create a situation of conflict. The character must struggle with a problem and solve it by the ending. Kane begins his adult life in a highly successful position (happily running the *Inquirer*), then gradually falls into a barren solitude. We are invited to speculate about exactly what, if anything, would make Kane happy. *Citizen Kane's* lack of closure in this line of action made it a very unusual narrative for its day.

The search for Rosebud does lead to a certain resolution at the end. We the audience discover what Rosebud was. The ending of the film, which follows this discovery, strongly echoes the beginning. The beginning moved past fences toward the mansion. Now a series of shots takes us away from the house and back outside the fences, with the "No Trespassing" sign and large K insignia.

But even at this point, when we learn the answer to Thompson's question, a degree of uncertainty remains. Just because we have learned what Kane's dying word referred to, do we now have the key to his entire character? Or is Thompson's final statement *correct*—that no one word can explain a person's life? Perhaps the "No Trespassing" sign hints that neither Thompson nor we should have expected to explore Kane's mind. It is tempting to declare that all of Kane's problems arose from the loss of his sled and his childhood home life, but the film also suggests that this is too easy a solution. It is the kind of solution that the slick editor Rawlston would pounce on as an angle for his newsreel.

For years critics have debated whether the Rosebud solution does give us a key that resolves the entire narrative. This debate itself suggests the ambiguity at work in *Citizen Kane*. The film provides much evidence for both views and hence avoids complete closure. You might contrast this slightly open ending with the tightly closed narratives of *His Girl Friday* and *North by Northwest* in Chapter 11. You might also compare *Citizen Kane's* narrative with that of another somewhat open-ended film, *Do The Right Thing*, also discussed in Chapter 11.

"Kane, we are told, loved only his mother—only his newspaper—only his second wife—only himself. Maybe he loved all of these, or none. It is for the audience to judge. Kane was selfish and selfless, an idealist, a scoundrel, a very big man and a very little one. It depends on who's talking about him. He is never judged with the objectivity of an author, and the point of the picture is not so much the solution of the problem as its presentation."

— Orson Welles, director

Narration in *Citizen Kane*

In analyzing how *Kane's* plot manipulates the flow of story information, it's useful to consider a remarkable fact: The only time we see Kane directly and in the present is when he dies. On all other occasions, he is presented at one remove—in the newsreel or in various characters' memories. This unusual treatment makes the film something of a portrait, a study of a man seen from different perspectives.

The film employs five narrators, the people whom Thompson tracks down: Thatcher (whose account is in writing), Bernstein, Leland, Susan, and the butler, Raymond. The plot thus motivates a series of views of Kane that are more or less restricted in their range of knowledge. In Thatcher's account (4b–4e), we see only scenes at which he is present. Even Kane's newspaper crusade is rendered as Thatcher learns of it, through buying copies of the *Inquirer*. In Bernstein's flashback (5b–5f), there is some deviation from what Bernstein witnesses, but in general his range of knowledge is respected. At the *Inquirer* party, for example, we follow Bernstein and Leland's conversation while Kane dances in the background. Similarly, we never see Kane in Europe; we merely hear the contents of Kane's telegram, which Bernstein delivers to Leland.

Leland's flashbacks (6b, 6d–6j) deviate most markedly from the narrator's range of knowledge. Here we see Kane and Emily at a series of morning breakfasts, Kane's meeting with Susan, and the confrontation of Kane with Boss Gettys at Susan's apartment. In scene 6j, Leland is present but in a drunken stupor most of the time. (The plot motivates Leland's knowledge of Kane's affair with Susan by having Leland suggest that Kane told him about it, but the scenes present detailed knowledge that Leland is unlikely to possess.) By the time we get to Susan's flashback (7b–7k), however, the range of knowledge again fits the character more snugly. (There remains one scene, 7f, in which Susan is unconscious for part of the action.) The last flashback (8b) is recounted by Raymond and plausibly accords with his range of knowledge; he is standing in the hallway as Kane wrecks Susan's room.

Using different narrators to transmit story information fulfills several functions. It offers itself as a plausible depiction of the process of investigation, since we expect any reporter to hunt down information through a series of inquiries. More deeply, the plot's portrayal of Kane himself becomes more complex by showing somewhat different sides of him, depending on who's talking about him. Moreover, the use of multiple narrators makes the film like one of Susan's jigsaw puzzles. We must put things together piece by piece. The pattern of gradual revelation enhances curiosity—what is it in Kane's past that he associates with Rosebud?—and suspense—how will he lose his friends and his wives?

This strategy has important implications for film form. While Thompson uses the various narrators to gather data, the plot uses them both to furnish us with story information and to *conceal* information. The narration can motivate gaps in knowledge about Kane by appealing to the fact that no informant can know everything about anyone. If we were able to enter Kane's consciousness, we might discover the meaning of Rosebud much sooner—but Kane is dead. The multiple-narrator format appeals to expectations we derive from real life in order to motivate the bit-by-bit transmission of story information, the withholding of key pieces of information, and the arousing of curiosity and suspense.

Although each narrator's account is mostly restricted to his or her range of knowledge, the plot doesn't treat each flashback in much subjective depth. Most of the flashbacks are rendered objectively. Some transitions from the framing episodes use a voice-over commentary to lead us into the flashbacks, but these don't represent the narrators' subjective states. Only in Susan's flashbacks are there some attempts to render subjectivity. In scene 7c, we see Leland as if from her optical point of view on stage, and the phantasmagoric montage of her career (7e) suggests some mental subjectivity that renders her fatigue and frustration.

Against the five character narrators, the film's plot sets another purveyor of knowledge, the "News on the March" short. We've already seen the crucial function of the newsreel in introducing us both to *Kane's* story and to its plot construction, with the newsreel's sections previewing the parts of the film as a whole. The newsreel also gives us a broad sketch of Kane's life and death that will be filled in by the more restricted behind-the-scenes accounts offered by the narrators. The newsreel is also highly objective, even more so than the rest of the film; it reveals

nothing about Kane's inner life. Rawlston acknowledges this: "It isn't enough to tell us what a man did, you've got to tell us who he was." In effect, Thompson's aim is to add depth to the newsreel's superficial version of Kane's life.

Yet we still aren't through with the narrational manipulations in this complex and daring film. For one thing, all the localized sources of knowledge—"News on the March" and the five narrators—are linked together by the shadowy reporter Thompson. To some extent, he is our surrogate in the film, gathering and assembling the puzzle pieces.

Note, too, that Thompson is barely characterized; we can't even identify his face. This, as usual, has a function. If we saw him clearly, if the plot gave him more traits or a background or a past, he would become the protagonist. But *Citizen Kane* is less about Thompson than about his *search*. The plot's handling of Thompson makes him a neutral conduit for the story information that he gathers (though his conclusion at the end—"I don't think any word can explain a man's life"—suggests that he has been changed by his investigation).

Thompson is not, however, a perfect surrogate for us because the film's narration inserts the newsreel, the narrators, and Thompson within a still broader range of knowledge. The flashback portions are predominantly restricted, but there are other passages that reveal an overall narrational omniscience.

From the very start, we are given a god's-eye-view of the action. We move into a mysterious setting that we will later learn is Kane's estate, Xanadu. We might have learned about this locale through a character's journey, the way we acquaint ourselves with Oz by means of Dorothy's adventures there. Here, however, an omniscient narration conducts the tour. Eventually, we enter a darkened bedroom. A hand holds a paperweight, and over this is superimposed a flurry of snow (3.25).

The image teases us. Is the narration making a lyrical comment, or is the image subjective, a glimpse into the dying man's mind or vision? In either case, the narration reveals its ability to command a great deal of story information. Our sense of omniscience is enhanced when, after the man dies, a nurse strides into the room. Apparently, no character knows what we know.

At other points in the film, the omniscient narration calls attention to itself, as when, during Susan's opera debut in Leland's flashback (6i), we see stagehands high above reacting to her performance. (Such omniscient asides tend to be associated with camera movements, as we shall see in Chapter 8.) Most vivid, however, is the omniscient narration at the end of the film. Thompson and the other reporters leave, never having learned the meaning of Rosebud. But we linger in the vast storeroom of Xanadu. And, thanks to the narration, we learn that Rosebud is the name of Kane's childhood sled (see 8.13). We can now associate the opening's emphasis on the paperweight with the closing scene's revelation of the sled.

This narration is truly omniscient. It withheld a key piece of story information at the outset, teased us with hints (the snow, the tiny cottage in the paperweight), and finally revealed at least part of the answer to the question posed at the outset. A return to the "No Trespassing" sign reminds us of our point of entry into the film. Like *The Road Warrior*, then, the film derives its unity not only from principles of causality and time but also from a patterned narration that arouses curiosity and suspense and yields a surprise at the very end.



3.25 The elusive image of the paperweight in *Citizen Kane*.

Summary

Not every narrative analysis runs through the categories of cause–effect, story–plot differences, motivations, parallelism, progression from opening to closing, and narrational range and depth in that exact order, as we have done here. Our purpose in this examination of *Citizen Kane* has been as much to illustrate these concepts as to analyze the film’s narrative. With practice, the critic becomes more familiar with these analytical tools and can use them flexibly, suiting his or her approach to the specific film at hand.

In looking at any narrative film, such questions as these may help in understanding its formal structures:

1. Which story events are directly presented to us in the plot, and which must we assume or infer? Is there any nondiegetic material given in the plot?
2. What is the earliest story event of which we learn? How does it relate to later events through a series of causes and effects?
3. What is the temporal relationship of story events? Has temporal order, frequency, or duration been manipulated in the plot to affect our understanding of events?
4. Does the closing reflect a clear-cut pattern of development that relates it to the opening? Do all narrative lines achieve closure, or are some left open?
5. How does the narration present story information to us? Is it restricted to one or a few characters’ knowledge, or does it range freely among the characters in different spaces? Does it give us considerable depth of story information by exploring the characters’ mental states?
6. How closely does the film follow the conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema? If it departs significantly from those conventions, what formal principle does it use instead?

Most films that we see employ narrative form, and the great majority of theatrical movies stick to the premises of Hollywood storytelling. Still, there are other formal possibilities. We’ll consider aspects of non-narrative form in Chapter 11.

In the meantime, other matters will occupy us. In discussing form, we’ve been examining how we as viewers engage with the film’s overall shape. The film, however, also presents a complex blend of images and sounds. Art designers, actors, camera operators, editors, sound recordists, and other specialists contribute to the cues that guide our understanding and stimulate our pleasure. In Part Three, we’ll examine the technical components of cinematic art.

Where to Go from Here

Narrative Form

The best introduction to the study of narrative is H. Porter Abbott’s *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For an overview of narrative in history and culture, see Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

Most conceptions of narrative are drawn from literary theory. Umberto Eco’s *Six Walks in the Fictional*

Woods (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) provides an entertaining tour. A more systematic introduction is offered by Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978). See also the journal *Narrative* and the anthology edited by Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

The Spectator

What does the spectator *do* in making sense of a narrative? Richard J. Gerrig proposes what he calls a “side-participant” model in *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). Meir Sternberg emphasizes expectation, hypotheses, and inference in his *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). David Bordwell proposes a model of the spectator’s story-comprehending activities in chap. 3 of *Narration in the Fictional Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). Compare Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension in Film* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Narrative Time

Most theorists agree that both cause–effect relations and chronology are central to narrative. The books by Chatman and Sternberg cited above provide useful analyses of causation and time. For specifically cinematic discussions, see Brian Henderson, “Tense, Mood, and Voice in Film (Notes After Genette),” *Film Quarterly* 26, 4 (Summer 1983): 4–17; and Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

Our discussion of the differences between plot duration, story duration, and screen duration is necessarily simplified. The distinctions hold good at a theoretical level, but the differences may vanish in particular cases. Story duration and plot duration differ most drastically at the level of the *whole* film, as when two years of action (story duration) are shown or told about in scenes that occur across a week (plot duration) and then that week is itself rendered in two hours (screen duration). At the level of a smaller *part* of the film—say, a shot or a scene—we usually assume story and plot duration to be equal, and screen—duration may or may not be equal to them. These nuances are discussed in chap. 5 of Bordwell, *Narration in the Fictional Film* (cited above).

Narration

One approach to narration has been to draw analogies between film and literature. Novels have first-person narration (“Call me Ishmael”) and third-person narration (“Maigret puffed his pipe as he walked along slowly, hands clasped behind his back”). Does film have first-person or third-person narration, too? The argument for applying the linguistic category of “person” to cinema is discussed most fully in Bruce F. Kawin, *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-Person Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

Another literary analogy is that of point of view. The best survey in English is Susan Snaider Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981). The applicability of point of view to film is discussed in detail in Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Nar-*

ration and Subjectivity in Classical Film (New York: Mouton, 1984).

As we’d expect, filmmakers are particularly interested in narration. They must decide what the audience should know at various points and how to present that information in the most striking way. Just as important, the filmmakers must decide how to keep information back and let the audience’s curiosity ripen. Gus van Sant’s *Elephant*, whose story traces events leading up to a high school shooting, has a plot that shifts backward and forward in time, as scenes are attached to what different characters know. “The multiple points of view replaced the linear story,” van Sant explains. “Watching a repeated action or an intersection happen again and again . . . they hold the audience in the story. It’s like watching a puzzle unfold.”

Is the Classical Hollywood Cinema Dead?

Since the early 1990s, some film historians have claimed that the classical approach to Hollywood narrative faded away during the 1970s, replaced by something variously termed postclassical, postmodern, or post-Hollywood cinema. Contemporary films are thought to be characterized by extremely simple, high-concept premises, with the cause–effect chain weakened by a concentration on high-pitch action at the expense of character psychology. Tie-in merchandising and distribution through other media have also supposedly fragmented the filmic narrative. Other historians argue that the changes are superficial and that in many ways underlying classical principles endure.

For important early texts arguing for postclassicism, see Thomas Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8–36, and Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), contains essays supporting (by Thomas Elsaesser, James Schamus, and Richard Maltby) and opposing (Murray Smith, Warren Buckland, and Peter Krämer) this notion. For arguments that Hollywood cinema still adheres to its traditions, see Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), and David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

Screenwriting teachers have also argued that the best modern moviemaking continues the classic studios’ approach to structure. The two most influential script gurus are Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Delta, 2005), and Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

“Rosebud”

Critics have scrutinized *Citizen Kane* very closely. For a sampling, see Joseph McBride, *Orson Welles* (New York: Viking, 1972); Charles Higham, *The Films of Orson Welles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970); Robert Carringer, “Rosebud, Dead or Alive: Narrative and Symbolic Structure in *Citizen Kane*,” *PMLA* (March 1976): 185–93; James Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Laura Mulvey, *Citizen Kane* (London: British Film Institute, 1993).

Pauline Kael, in a famous essay on the making of the film, finds Rosebud a naïve gimmick. Interestingly, her discussion emphasizes *Citizen Kane* as part of the journalist film genre and emphasizes the detective story aspect. See *The “Citizen Kane” Book* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), pp. 1–84. In contrast, other critics find Rosebud an incomplete answer to Thompson’s search; compare particularly the Naremore and Carringer analyses above. In “Interpreting *Citizen Kane*,” in *Interpreting the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 155–65, Noël Carroll argues that the film stages a debate between the Rosebud interpretation and the enigma interpretation. Robert Carringer’s *Making of “Citizen Kane,”* rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), offers the most extensive account of the film’s production.

Websites

www.screenwritersutopia.com/ Contains discussion of screenwriting problems, including debates about classic screenplay structure.

www.wga.org/writtenby/writtenby.aspx/ The official site of the magazine *Written By*, published by Writers Guild West, the professional organization of American screenwriters. Includes informative articles about trends in screenwriting.

www.creativescreenwriting.com/index.html/ Another magazine, *Creative Screenwriting*, that publishes selected articles and interviews online.

Recommended DVD Supplements

Discussions of narrative form are rare in DVD supplements. In “Making of *Titus*,” director Julie Taymor talks about such narrative elements as motifs, point of view, tone, and emotional impact, as well as the functions of film techniques such as music, setting, editing, cinematography, and lighting. In an unusual supplement for *The Godfather*, “Francis Coppola’s Notebook,” the director shows how he worked by making detailed annotations in his copy of Mario Puzo’s original novel. Coppola discusses rhythm, emphasis, and the narrative functions of various techniques. The “Star Beast: Developing the Story” section of *Alien*’s supplements traces the story as it went through a series of very different versions.