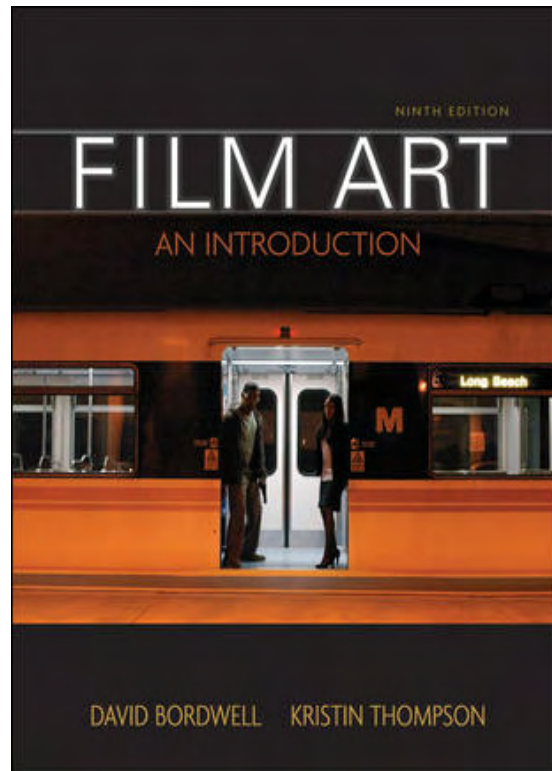


# Pre-publication Copy

*Chapters 1 through 3*



Please realize that these pages have not been through the final editing process and are still undergoing final revisions and editing and may contain typographical errors. Any errors will be corrected before the book goes to press.

No part of this publication can be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.



## PART ONE

# 1

Film is a young medium, at least compared to most other media. Painting, literature, dance, and theater have existed for thousands of years, but film came into existence only a little more than a century ago. Yet in this fairly short span, the newcomer has established itself as an energetic and powerful art form.

It's this aspect of film that we explore in this book. The chapters that follow show how creative people have used film to give us experiences that we value. We'll examine the principles and techniques that give film its power to tell stories, express emotions, and trigger ideas.

But this art has some unusual features we should note up front. More than most arts, film depends on complex technology. Without machines, movies wouldn't move, and filmmakers would have no tools. In addition, film art usually requires collaboration among many participants, people who follow well-proven work routines. Films are not only created but produced. Just as important, they are firmly tied to their social and economic context. Films are distributed and exhibited for audiences, and money matters at every step.

Chapter 1 surveys all these aspects of the filmmaking process. We start by considering film art in general, and we look at one film that illustrates how skillful and effective that art can be. The chapter goes on to examine the technology, the work practices, and the business side of cinema. All these components shape and sustain film as an art.

# Film Art and Filmmaking

# 1

## CHAPTER



# Film as Art: Creativity, Technology, and Business

**M**otion pictures are so much a part of our lives that it's hard to imagine a world without them. We enjoy them in theaters, at home, in offices, in cars and buses, and on airplanes. We carry films with us in our laptops and iPods. We press the button, and our machines conjure up movies for our pleasure.

For over a hundred years, people have been trying to understand why this medium has so captivated us. Films communicate information and ideas, and they show us places and ways of life we might not otherwise know. Important as these benefits are, though, something more is at stake. Films offer us ways of seeing and feeling that we find deeply gratifying. They take us through experiences. The experiences are often driven by stories, with characters we come to care about, but a film might also develop an idea or explore visual qualities or sound textures. A film takes us on a journey, offering a patterned experience that engages our minds and emotions.

It doesn't happen by accident. Films are *designed* to have effects on viewers. Late in the 19th century, moving pictures emerged as a public amusement. They succeeded because they spoke to the imaginative needs of a broad-based audience. All the traditions that emerged—telling fictional stories, recording actual events, animating objects or pictures, experimenting with pure form—aimed to give viewers experiences they couldn't get from other media. The men and women who made films discovered that they could control aspects of cinema to give their audience richer, more engaging experiences. Learning from one another, expanding and refining the options available, filmmakers developed skills that became the basis of film as an art form.

The popular origins of cinema suggest that some common ways of talking won't help us much in understanding film. Take the distinction between *art* and *entertainment*. Some people would say that blockbusters playing at the multiplex are merely "entertainment," whereas films for a narrower public—perhaps independent films, or festival fare, or specialized experimental works—are true art. Usually the art/entertainment split carries a not-so-hidden value judgment: art is high-brow, whereas entertainment is superficial. Yet things aren't that simple. As we just indicated, many of the artistic resources of cinema were discovered by filmmakers working for the general public. During the 1910s and 1920s, for instance, many films that aimed only to be entertaining opened up new possibilities for film editing. As for the matter of value, it's clear that popular traditions can foster art of high quality. Just as Shakespeare and Dickens wrote for a broad audience, much of the greatest 20th-century music, including jazz and the blues, was rooted in popular traditions. Cinema is an art because it offers filmmakers ways to design experiences for viewers, and those experiences can be valuable regardless of their pedigree. Films for audiences both small and large belong to that very inclusive art we call *cinema*.

Sometimes, too, people treat film *art* as opposed to film as a *business*. This split is related to the issue of entertainment, since entertainment generally is sold to a mass audience. Again, however, in most modern societies, no art floats free from economic ties. Novels good, bad, or indifferent are published because publishers expect to sell them. Painters hope that collectors and museums will acquire their work. True, some artworks are subsidized through taxes or private donations, but that process, too, involves the artist in a financial transaction. Films are no different. Some movies are made in the hope that consumers will pay to see them. Others are funded by patronage (an investor or organization wants to see the film made) or public monies (France, for instance, generously subsidizes film projects). Even if you decide to make your own digital movie, you face the problem of paying for it—and you may hope to earn a little extra for all your time and effort.

The crucial point is that considerations of money don't necessarily make the artist any less creative or the project any less worthwhile. Money can corrupt any line of business (consider politics), but it doesn't have to. In Renaissance Italy, painters were commissioned by the Catholic church to illustrate events from the Bible. Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci worked for hire, but it would be hard to argue that it hurt their artistry.

Here we won't assume that film art precludes entertainment. We won't take the opposite position either—claiming that only Hollywood mass-market movies are worth our attention. Similarly, we don't think that film art rises above commercial demands, but we also won't assume that money rules everything. Any art form offers a vast range of creative possibilities. Our basic assumption is that as an art, film offers experiences that viewers find worthwhile—diverting, provocative, puzzling, or rapturous. But how do films do that?

To answer that question, we'll go back a step and ask, Where do movies come from? Most basically, they come from three places. They come from the imagination and hard work of the filmmakers who create them. They come from an extraordinarily complex set of machines that capture and replay images. And they come from companies or individuals that pay for the filmmakers and the technology. This chapter examines the artistic, technological, and business sides of how films come into being.

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Film art comes from many places and eras. For a personal take on why it's important not to watch only recent English-language color movies, see "Subtitles 101," at

[www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=361](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=361).

## Artistic Decisions In Filmmaking

In *Day for Night*, French filmmaker François Truffaut plays a director making a movie called *Meet Pamela*. Crew members bring set designs, wigs, cars, and prop pistols to him, and we hear his voice telling us his thoughts: "What is a director? A director is someone who is asked questions about everything."

Making a film can be seen as a long process of decision making, not just by the director but by all the specialists who work on his or her team. Early decisions come as the script is written and the various elements are designed. More decisions come daily during the actual filming, especially as unexpected problems or opportunities arise. Decisions continue up to the point where the director okays the last shot to be completed. These decisions could be as important as who plays the lead or as trivial as which buttons look best on a costume.

A great many decisions, however, do affect what we see and hear on the screen. There are the artistic choices made by the filmmakers. What lights will enhance the atmosphere of a love scene? Given the kind of story being told, would it be better to let the audience know what the central character is thinking or to keep him enigmatic? When a scene opens, what is the most economical, understandable way of letting the audience know the time and place? Which is more dramatic, to show an explosion or just have it heard from offscreen? The sum total of all such decisions culminates in a finished film.

Sometimes the decisions have to do with the business side of the production. What are some ways to save money? Which of the planned special effects being

done on a tight budget are more important and necessary? These decisions, too, affect what we see and here in the finished film. Other times the decisions are practical ones that won't affect the look or sound of the final film, as when a source of electricity has to be found to power the lights when a movie is shooting on location.

In this book, we'll be looking at two basic aspects of film art: form and style. **Form** is the sum of all the parts of the film, unified and given shape by patterns such as repetition and variation, story lines, and character traits (Chapters 2 and 3). **Style** is the way a film uses the techniques of filmmaking. Those techniques fall into four categories: (1) mise-en-scene, or the arrangement of people, places, and objects to be filmed (Chapter 4); (2) cinematography, the use of cameras and other machines to record images and sounds (Chapter 5); (3) editing, the piecing together of individual shots (Chapter 6); and (4) sound, the voices, effects, and music that blend on a film's audio track (Chapter 7). Throughout the book, we'll discuss how they can be patterned and combined to create movies that entertain us, inform us, and engage our imaginations.

The first time we watch a film, we usually don't know or think about the artistic decisions that were made during its production. For much of film history, most spectators never got a chance to learn much about the making of a specific movie. Today, however, DVD supplements offer "making of" documentaries and voice-over commentaries by the filmmakers. The Internet offers a vast array of clips, articles, and interviews about specific movies' creation. Let's examine how choices made by filmmakers lead to artistic results by looking at the production of a single movie.

## To See into the Night: Artistic Decisions in the Making of *Collateral*

Michael Mann's *Collateral* was released in 2004. It's a visually beautiful psychological crime thriller. Set in Los Angeles, it introduces Vincent (Tom Cruise), a mysterious man who hires a cab driver, Max (Jamie Foxx), to drive him to a series of appointments in the course of one night. When Max learns that those appointments are a series of killings, he struggles to break their bargain and escape. But Vincent forces him to carry on as an unwilling getaway driver. In the course of the evening, the two men spar verbally and gradually force each other to confront his flaws.

Mann and his crew made thousands of decisions during the making of *Collateral*. Here we'll look at five important choices: one that impacted the film's form and one apiece for our four categories of mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound.

Scriptwriter Stuart Beattie originally set *Collateral* in New York City. Max was to be portrayed as a loser, hiding from the world in his cab and getting little out of life. Vincent was to goad him about his failures until Max had finally had enough and stood up to him. Once Mann came on board as director, he made numerous changes. The setting was changed to Los Angeles. Max became less a loser and more a laid-back, intelligent man content to observe the world from behind a steering wheel and to interact with his passengers, endlessly delaying his plans to start his own limousine service. The story largely consists of this pair interacting, so Mann's decision to change Max's traits altered the nature of the conflict between them. Moments of reluctant mutual respect and even hints of friendship complicate their relationship. This more appealing Max becomes our point-of-view figure for most of the film. Unusually for a film about a professional killer, we don't see the first murder but stay with Max in the cab until the shocking moment when the body falls onto his cab roof.

The switch to Los Angeles profoundly affected many aspects of the film's style. For Mann, one of the attractions was that this tale of a random crossing of destinies took place almost entirely at night, from 6:04 p.m. to 4:20 a.m. He wanted to portray the atmospheric Los Angeles night, where haze and cloud cover reflect the artificial lights of the city back to the huge, flat grid of streets. According to one

of the cinematographers, Paul Cameron, “The goal was to make the L.A. night as much of a character in the story as Vincent and Max were.”

This was a major decision that created much of the film’s look. Mann was determined not to use any more artificial light than was absolutely necessary. He relied to a considerable degree on the existing street lights, neon signs, vehicle headlights, and other sources in the locations where filming took place. To achieve an eerie glow, his team came up with a cutting-edge combination of technologies.

**High-Definition Cinematography** Although Part Three will deal with mise-en-scene first, here we’re beginning with cinematography. That’s because certain choices about photographing *Collateral* were absolutely central to its final look and also dictated many other decisions.

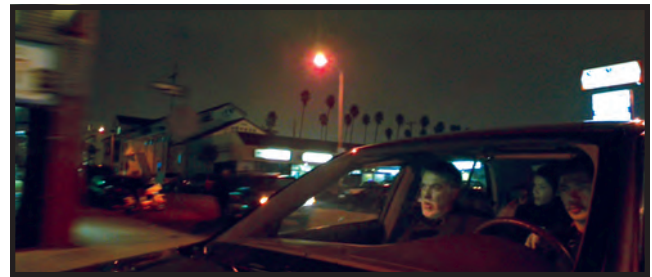
For many decades, traditional Hollywood productions employed cameras loaded with rolls of photographic film. For exterior scenes shot at night, large banks of specialized spot- and floodlights would pump enough illumination into the scene to register on the film stock. If not enough light was used, objects in dark areas would tend to go a uniform black.

Mann and his cinematographers decided to shoot extensive portions of *Collateral* on recently developed high-definition digital cameras. Those cameras could shoot on location with little or no light added to the scene (1.1). They could also capture and convey the distinctive night glow of Los Angeles. As Mann put it, “Film doesn’t record what our eyes can see at night. That’s why I moved into shooting digital video in high definition—to see into the night, to see everything the naked eye can see and more. You see this moody landscape with hills and trees and strange light patterns. I wanted that to be the world that Vincent and Max are moving through.” Cinematographer Dion Beebe enthused, “The format’s strong point is its incredible sensitivity to light. We were able to shoot Los Angeles at night and actually see silhouettes of palm trees against the night sky, which was very exciting” (1.2).

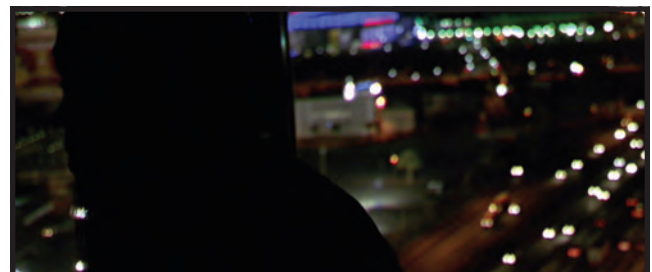
The filmmaking team pushed the digital cameras’ capabilities in one particularly dark scene, when Vincent stalks one of his victims in a law library with huge windows overlooking the cityscape. In several shots, the characters become visible only as black shapes outlined by the myriad lights behind them (1.3). As we strain to see who is where in each shot, the suspense is heightened.



**1.1** A digital camera filming in a dimly lit alley in *Collateral*. Here and in many other shots, the skyline of downtown Los Angeles figures prominently.



**1.2** An eerily beautiful cityscape, with a row of palm trees against a dark sky visible in a way that could only be achieved with digital cameras.



**1.3** Digital filming in extremely low lighting conditions. This technique creates suspense in this scene where Vincent tries to find his next victim. On regular photographic film, the background would go uniformly dark.

**Custom-Made Lights** Though digital cameras could pick up a great deal in dark situations, the audience needed to see the faces of the actors clearly. Much of the action takes place inside the cab as Max and Vincent drive around and talk. The filmmakers had to light the actors' faces, but they wanted the added illumination to be so low and diffuse that there would not seem to be any artificial light within the cab.

To create that effect, the filmmakers tried an innovative approach: electroluminescent display (ELD) panels. It's the same technology used to make the light-up backings of digital watches and cell phones, but it had never been employed in lighting units for filming. Flexible plastic panels of various sizes and shapes were custom-made for the production, all with Velcro backings that would attach to the seats and ceiling of the cab (1.4, 1.5). These ELD panels could then be turned on in various combinations. Although they look bright in Figure 1.5, the effect on the screen was a soft glow on the actors. In a shot like Figure 1.6, we might simply take it for granted that the light coming through the windows and the glow of the dashboard panel are all that shines on the characters. Such dim illumination on their faces allows the lights visible through the windows to be brighter than they are, helping to keeping the city "as much of a character in the story as Vincent and Max were."

Here's a case where an artistic decision led to new technology. The filmmakers could have said, "We have various types of lights available. Which one would work best in the cab?" Instead, they realized that the type of dim illumination they wanted could not be achieved by existing lighting units. It was a problem, and one that the team went to considerable lengths to solve by ordering a new type of light made.

**Seamless Editing** As a thriller, *Collateral* contains several dynamic action scenes, including a spectacular car crash. The plan was for a cab going nearly 60 miles per hour to flip and then bounce and roll several times before coming to rest on its top. At that speed, the vehicle would have traveled hundreds of feet. The filmmakers had options about how to portray the crash onscreen. They could have put

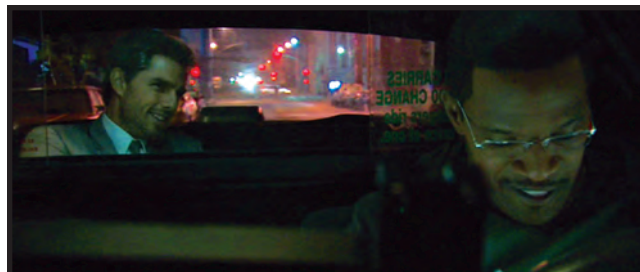


**1.4** One of the ELD panels specially made for illuminating the cab interior.



**1.5** Several such panels attached to the back of a seat to shine on Tom Cruise as Vincent.

**1.6** The dim glow created by such lighting on the two main characters.



the camera in a single spot and had it swivel as the car rolled past, keeping it in the frame from the beginning of the accident to the end. That would have been a good idea if the scene showed us the crash through the eyes of an onlooker whose head turns to watch it. But there is no character looking on.

The filmmakers wanted to generate excitement by showing several shots of the car rolling, each taken from a different point along the trajectory of the crash. One possible approach would have been to have multiple cabs and execute numerous similar crashes, each time filmed by a single camera that would be moved between crashes from place to place to record the action from a new vantage. Such a procedure would have been very expensive, however, and no two crashes would have taken place in exactly the same way. Splicing together shots from each crash might have created discrepancies on the car's position, resulting in poor "matches on action," as we'll term this technique in Chapter 5.

Instead, the team settled on a technique commonly used for big action scenes. Multiple cameras were placed along the route of the crash, all filming at once (1.7). The economic benefits were that only one car had to be crashed and the high expense of keeping many crew members working on retakes was reduced. Artistically, the resulting shots allowed the editing team considerable flexibility to choose portions of any of the shots and splice them together to match the action of the car precisely (1.8, 1.9). The result is an exciting series of shots, each taken from farther along the path of the crash and keeping the cab in clear view.

**Music in Movements** Composers are fond of saying that their music for a film should serve the story so well that the audience doesn't notice it. For *Collateral*, Mann needed help from James Newton Howard to score the climax so as not build too quickly to a high pitch of excitement. According to Howard, "Michael was very clear about the climax taking place in three movements." "Movements" as an artistic term is usually applied to the parts of a symphony, a concerto, or a sonata. Thus



**1.7** On location after the execution of the car crash in *Collateral*, director Michael Mann surveys digital monitors displaying shots taken by multiple cameras covering the action.



**1.8** A seamless continuation of the cab's movement results as a shot taken from one camera shows the car flipping over, its hood flapping wildly, followed by a cut to . . .



**1.9** . . . another shot, taken from a camera placed on the ground and continuing the same movement, now with the vehicle hurtling directly toward the viewer. This particular camera was placed in a very thick metal case.



the idea was that the score for this last part of the film should play a major role in shaping the progression and rhythm of the action.

The climax involves Vincent trying to kill a character who is important to Max and Max trying frantically to save both himself and this other character. Howard and Mann called the first movement “The Race to Warn,” since Vincent gets ahead of Max in running to the building where the potential victim is located. Despite the fact that both men are running and the situation is suspenseful, Howard avoids very fast rhythms. He begins with long-held string chords over a deep, rumbling sound, then adds sustained brass chords with a strong beat accompanying them. The accompaniment is dynamic but doesn’t reach a high pitch of excitement.

The second movement, “The Cat and Mouse,” involves Vincent getting into the building, turning off the electricity, and stalking his victim in near darkness (1.3). Again, the chords are slow, with ominous undertones, dissonant glides, and, at a few points, fast, eerie high-string figures as Vincent nears his goal. During the most suspenseful moments in the scene, when Vincent and his prey are in the darkened room, strings and soft, clicking percussion accompany their cautious, hesitant movements.

Finally, there is a rapid chase sequence, and here Howard finally makes the music louder and faster, with driving tympani beats that ratchet up to a very quick rhythm as the danger grows. Once the final climactic events occur, the percussion ends, and slow, low strings create a sort of coda to accompany the final quiet shots.

As the making of *Collateral* demonstrates, the technological basis of filmmaking plays a crucial role in bringing the artistic plans of its makers into reality. With the recent proliferation of digital tools for production, filming teams have more choices than ever to make.

These decisions and many others that Mann and his team made during their work on *Collateral* affect our experience of the film. The unfamiliar look that the digital cameras and innovative lighting give Los Angeles may draw our attention to the settings and give us a more vivid sense of the world through which the characters move. The music accompanying the fast-chase/slow-stalking/fast-chase progression of the climax helps heighten the suspense and build the excitement.

## Mechanics of the Movies

Films are everywhere now, almost as widely available as print or music. But how do they get made in the first place? “Making a movie” means two very different things. First, people make films with machines. Anyone with a pen and paper can write a novel, and a talented kid with a guitar can become a musician. Movies require much more. Even the simplest home video camera is based on fiendishly complex technology. A major film involves elaborate cameras, lighting equipment, multi-track sound-mixing studios, sophisticated laboratories, and computer-generated special effects. Making a movie also involves businesses. Companies manufacture the equipment, other companies provide funding for the film, still others distribute it, and finally theaters or other venues present the result to an audience. In the rest of this chapter, we’ll consider how these two sides of making movies—technology and business—shape film as an art.

### Illusion Machines

Moving-image media such as film and video couldn’t exist if human vision were perfect. Our eyes are very sensitive, but they can be tricked. As anyone who has paused a DVD knows, a film consists of a series of *frames*, or still pictures. Yet we don’t perceive the separate frames. Instead, we see continuous light and movement. What creates this impression?

No one knows the full answer. Many people have speculated that the effect results from “persistence of vision,” the tendency of an image to linger briefly on

our retina. Yet if this were the cause, we'd see a bewildering blur of superimposed stills instead of smooth action. At present, researchers believe that two psychological processes are involved in cinematic motion: critical flicker fusion and apparent motion.

If you flash a light faster and faster, at a certain point (around 50 flashes per second), you see not a pulsating light but a continuous beam. A film is usually shot and projected at 24 still frames per second. The projector shutter breaks the light beam once as a new image is slid into place and once while it is held in place. Thus each frame is actually projected on the screen twice. This raises the number of flashes to the threshold of what is called *critical flicker fusion*. Early silent films were shot at a lower rate (often 16 or 20 images per second), and projectors broke the beam only once per image. The picture had a pronounced flicker—hence an early slang term for movies, “flickers,” which survives today when people call a film a “flick.”

*Apparent motion* is a second factor in creating cinema's illusion. If a visual display is changed rapidly enough, our eye can be fooled into seeing movement. Neon advertising signs often seem to show a thrusting arrow, but that illusion is created simply by static lights flashing on and off at a particular rate. Certain cells in our eyes and brain are devoted to analyzing motion, and any stimulus resembling movement apparently tricks those cells into sending the wrong message.

Apparent motion and critical flicker fusion are quirks in our visual system, and technology can exploit those quirks to produce illusions. Some moving-image machines predate the invention of film (1.10, 1.11). Film as we know it came into being when photographic images were first imprinted on strips of flexible celluloid.

## Machines That Use Film

At all stages of a film's life, machines move the film strip one frame at a time past a light source. First, there is the *camera* (1.12). In a light-tight chamber, a drive mechanism feeds the unexposed motion picture film from a reel (a) past a lens (b) and aperture (c) to a take-up reel (d). The lens focuses light reflected from a scene onto each frame of film (e). The mechanism moves the film intermittently, with a brief pause while each frame is held in the aperture. A shutter (f) admits light through the lens only when each frame is unmoving and ready for exposure. The standard shooting rate for sound film is 24 frames per second (fps).

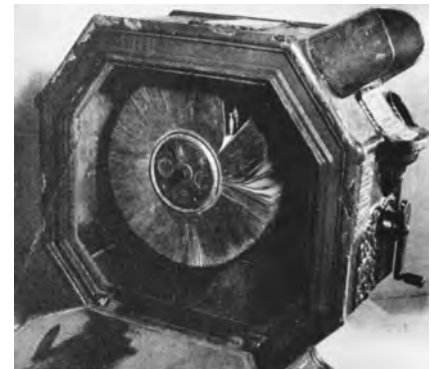
The projector is basically an inverted camera, with the light source inside the machine rather than in the world outside (1.13). A drive mechanism feeds the film from a reel (a) past a lens (b) and aperture (c) to a take-up reel (d). Light is beamed through the images (e) and magnified by the lens for projection on a screen. Again, a mechanism moves the film intermittently past the aperture, while a shutter (f) admits light only when each frame is pausing. As we've seen, the standard projection rate for sound film is 24 fps, and the shutter blocks and reveals each frame twice in order to reduce the flicker effect on the screen.

A feature-length film is a very long ribbon of images, about two miles for a two-hour movie. In most theaters, the projector carries the film at the rate of 90 feet per minute. In the typical theater, the film is mounted on one big platter, with another platter underneath to take it up after it has passed through the projector (1.14). In digital theatrical projection, the film is stored on discs.

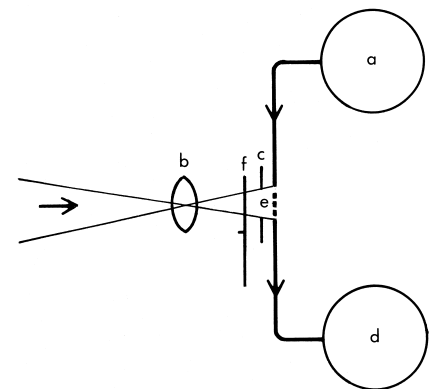
The film strip that emerges from the camera is usually a *negative*. That is, its colors and light values are the opposite of those in the original scene. For the images to be projected, a *positive* print must be made. This is done on another machine, the *printer*, which duplicates or modifies the footage from the camera. Like a projector, the printer controls the passage of light through film—in this case, a negative. Like a camera, it focuses light to form an image—in this case, on the unexposed roll of film. All printers are light-tight chambers that drive a negative or positive roll of film from a reel (a) past an aperture (b) to a take-up reel (c). At the same time, a roll of unexposed film (a', c') moves through the aperture (b), either



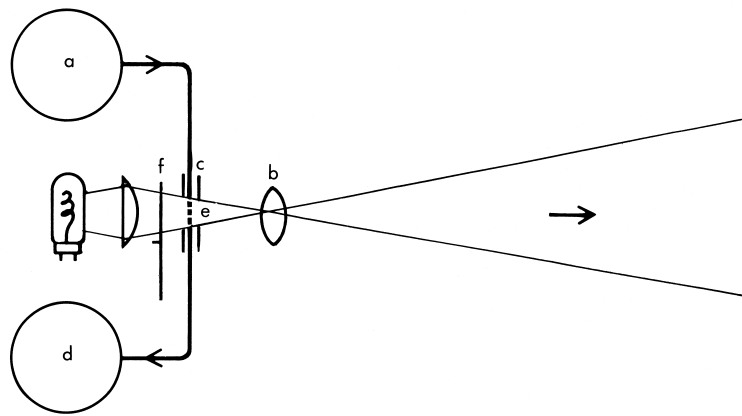
1.10 The Zoetrope, which dates back to 1834, spun its images on a strip of paper in a rotating drum.



1.11 The Mutoscope, an early-20th-century entertainment, displayed images by flipping a row of cards in front of a peephole.



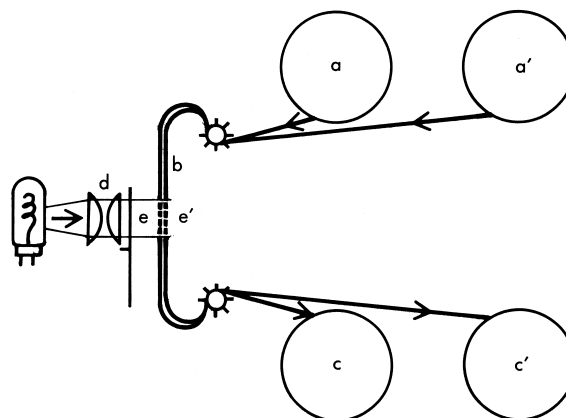
1.12 The camera.



1.13 The projector.



1.14 Most multiscreen theaters use platter projection, which winds the film in long strips and feeds it to a projector (seen in the left rear). The film on the platters is an Imax 70mm print.



1.15 The contact printer.

intermittently or continuously. By means of a lens (d), light beamed through the aperture prints the image (e) on the unexposed film (e'). The two rolls of film may pass through the aperture simultaneously. A printer of this sort is called a *contact printer* (1.15). Contact printers are used for making work prints and release prints, as well as for various special effects.

Although the filmmaker can create nonphotographic images on the filmstrip by drawing, painting, or scratching, most filmmakers have relied on the camera, the printer, and other photographic technology.

If you were to handle the film that runs through these machines, you'd notice several things. One side is much shinier than the other. Motion picture film consists of a transparent acetate *base* (the shiny side), which supports an *emulsion*, layers of gelatin containing light-sensitive materials. On a black-and-white filmstrip, the emulsion contains grains of silver halide. When light reflecting from a scene strikes them, it triggers a chemical reaction that makes the crystals cluster into tiny specks. Billions of these specks are formed on each frame of exposed film. Taken together, these specks form a latent image that corresponds to the areas of light and dark in the scene filmed. Chemical processing makes the latent image visible as a configuration of black grains on a white ground. The resulting strip of images is the negative, from which positive prints can be struck.

Color film emulsion has more layers. Three of these contain chemical dyes, each one sensitive to a primary color (red, yellow, or blue). Extra layers filter out the light from other colors. During exposure and development, the silver halide crystals create an image by reacting with the dyes and other organic chemicals in the emulsion layers. With color negative film, the developing process yields an image that is opposite, or complementary, to the original color values: for example, blue shows up on the negative as yellow.

What enables film to run through a camera, a printer, and a projector? The strip is perforated along both edges, so that small teeth (called *sprockets*) in the machines can seize the perforations (sprocket holes) and pull the film at a uniform rate and smoothness. The strip also reserves space for a sound track.

The size and placement of the perforations and the area occupied by the sound track have been standardized around the world. So, too, has the width of the film strip, which is called the *gauge* and is measured in millimeters. Commercial theaters use 35mm film, but other gauges also have been standardized internationally: Super 8mm, 16mm, and 70mm (1.16–1.20).

Usually image quality increases with the width of the film because the greater picture area gives the images better definition and detail. All other things being equal, 35mm provides significantly better picture quality than does 16mm, and 70mm is superior to both. The finest image quality currently available for public screenings is that offered by the Imax system (1.21).

The sound track runs down along the side of the filmstrip. The sound track may be either *magnetic* or *optical*. In the magnetic type (1.20), one or more strips of magnetic recording tape run along the film's edges. During projection, the film's track is "read" by a sound head similar to that on a tape recorder. Magnetic tracks are nearly obsolete in theaters today.

Most filmstrips have an optical sound track, which encodes sonic information in the form of patches of light and dark running down along the frames. During production, electrical impulses from a microphone are translated into pulsations of light, which are photographically inscribed on the moving filmstrip. When the film is projected, the optical track produces varying intensities of light that are translated back into electrical impulses and then into sound waves. The optical sound track of 16mm film is on the right side (1.17), whereas 35mm puts an optical track on the left (1.18, 1.19). In each, the sound is encoded as *variable-area*, a wavy contour of black and white along the picture strip.

A film's sound track may be *monophonic* or *stereophonic*. The 16mm filmstrip (1.17) and the first 35mm film strip (1.18) have monophonic optical tracks. Stereophonic optical sound is registered as a pair of squiggles running down the left side (1.19). For digital sound, a string of dots and dashes running along the film's perforations, or between the perforations, or close to the very left edge of the frames provides the sound-track information. The projector scans these marks as if reading a bar code.



**1.16** Super 8mm has been a popular gauge for amateurs and experimental filmmakers. *Year of the Horse*, a concert film featuring Neil Young, was shot partly on Super 8.



**1.17** 16mm film is used for both amateur and professional film work. A variable-area optical sound track (p. 00) runs down the right side.



**1.18** 35mm is the standard theatrical film gauge. The sound track, a variable-area one (p. 00), runs down the left alongside the images.



**1.19** In this 35mm strip from *Jurassic Park*, note the optical stereophonic sound track (p. 00), encoded as two parallel squiggles. The stripe along the left edge, the Morse code–like dots between the stereophonic track and the picture area, and the speckled areas around the sprocket holds indicate that the print can also be run on various digital sound systems.



**1.20** 70mm film, another theatrical gauge, was used for historical spectacles and epic action films into the 1990s. In this strip from *The Hunt for Red October*, a stereophonic magnetic sound track runs along both edges of the filmstrip.



**1.21** The Imax image is printed on 70mm film but runs horizontally along the strip, allowing each image to be 10 times larger than 35mm and triple the size of 70mm. The Imax film can be projected on a very large screen with no loss of detail.

It's odd to think that our memories of the films we love have their origins in something as inert-looking as a strip of perforated celluloid. With all their appeals to our emotions and imagination, movies depend on some very tangible materials and machines. Without them, the filmmaker would be as lost as a painter without paint. Much of the artistry we'll be examining in the chapters to come depends on how filmmakers choose to use the palette provided by technology.

## Machines That Use Digital Media

Digital cinema cameras gradually came into common use in the 1990s and early 2000s, about a hundred years after the initial spread of filmmaking. Some predicted that the digital revolution would soon make 35mm film obsolete. That didn't happen, because 35mm has many advantages that even high-end, high-definition (HD) video cannot duplicate.

Instead, a few filmmakers enthusiastically embraced HD, finding it cheaper, easier, and more flexible to use at every stage of production. Yet within the movie industry, most filmmakers have continued shooting on film, then taking advantage of digital tools for editing, special effects, and sound mixing.

In some ways, digital motion picture cameras are not that different from 35mm ones. They record scenes by using a lens to gather light. They have a viewer for the operator to frame the scene and controls to manipulate factors like the amount of light entering through the lens and the speed of recording. A casual observer probably couldn't tell the difference between a 35mm camera and a digital one. Indeed, manufacturers have tried to make digital cameras as familiar as possible to cinematographers reluctant to embrace the new technology. Some of these cameras can even use lenses made for traditional 35mm cameras.

The most important difference in a digital camera is the medium it records on. As the light passes through the lens, it hits a computer chip functioning as a sensor to convey visual information digitally, encoded as a complex series of 0's and 1's, onto digital tape, discs, memory cards, or hard drives. The material on these storage media can be loaded into computers after shooting ends, leaving the media free to be used again—thus eliminating the considerable cost of film stock. Even here, the recording unit that holds the tape and attaches to the camera looks something like a traditional film magazine that attaches to a 35mm camera (**1.22**).

As with film, there are different image formats of digital video (DV), and they are shot on different types of cameras. *Consumer* cameras are more or less the equivalent of Super 8mm. They give relatively low-resolution images and are mainly used by amateurs. These are the little cameras that fit in the palm of a hand



**1.22** The Panasonic Genesis, which has been used on such films as *Superman Returns*. A recorder containing a digital tape cassette attaches to the rear or top. The tape can run for 50 minutes.

and are used to record a birthday party or a baseball game. Using consumer cameras, children can shoot and edit their own films with simple computer programs.

The next step up is the *prosumer* camera, comparable to 16mm. As the name implies, this type of camera appeals to both professionals and those amateurs enthusiastic enough to pay for a camera yielding better image quality. Independent filmmakers also use such cameras, which are cheaper than high-end ones but yield good enough results to show in festivals or sell on DVD.

Finally there are the professional HD digital cameras (1.22). These cameras have two big advantages over prosumer and consumer models: (1) they primarily use files with low or no compression, (2) they shoot at 24 fps. (Non-professional DV is shot at higher rates per second.) These factors make for higher image quality and ease of transfer onto 35mm film stock for release to theaters. Such cameras also have larger sensors behind the lenses, capturing higher-resolution images. Often these sensors are about the same size as a frame of 35mm film.

As with all digital technology, the storage capacity for digital files is constantly increasing. Digital recording capacities are measured in *pixels* (short for “picture elements”), the tiny dots that make up the electronic image on TVs and monitors. There are now four commonly used levels of resolution in professional digital recording: 720p, 1080p, 2K, and 4K. Since the information carried on each image increases both vertically and horizontally, each step up multiplies the resolution: 4K carries not twice, but four times the amount of information as 2K.

The 720p formula is used mainly in broadcast television and Internet distribution of HD video. George Lucas commissioned Sony to make a high-quality digital camera for *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*. It used the 1080p format, which has remained the most widely used standard in Hollywood. The digital camera Michael Mann used in making *Collateral* delivered 1080p images. (See 1.1.)

The company that introduced the first 4K camera, Red One, commissioned Peter Jackson to make a short, *Crossing the Line*, which was used in 2008 as a demonstration film at industry conventions. Steven Soderbergh used the same cameras for *Che* (2008), and the technology was quickly adopted. Many have claimed that 4K images are the equal in visual quality to those of 35mm.

Although research on and development of 6K systems is ongoing, it seems unlikely that film production will move beyond 4K in the near future. For one thing, digital exhibition has not spread widely, and most digital projectors are 2K or less. For another thing, beyond about the sixth row of a theater, the difference in detail between 2K and 4K is not visible to the human eye. Moreover, filming and project-



**1.23** In *Julien Donkey-Boy*, pixels and grain yield a unique texture, and the high contrast exaggerates pure colors and shapes to create a hallucinatory image.

ing at high resolution produces staggering quantities of data that need to be transferred, manipulated, and stored.

During the 1990s, low-budget filmmakers were drawn to the low costs and flexibility of DV. Lit by an experienced cinematographer, even consumer format video can look attractive, as in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*, shot by Ellen Kuras. Perhaps most important, audiences don't notice shortcomings in image quality if the story is engrossing. Strong plots and performances helped carry *Chuck and Buck*, *Pieces of April*, *Personal Velocity: Three Portraits*, and other independent films shot on DV.

Some filmmakers have also seized upon DV's distinctive pictorial qualities. Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* uses saturated DV imagery to suggest the fantasy world of a young mother going blind. Harmony Korine shot *Julien Donkey-Boy* with mini-DV consumer cameras, transferred the footage to film, and reprinted it several times (1.23).

Some directors making big-budget films have embraced HD digital formats wholeheartedly. Lucas claimed that apart from creating spectacular special effects, using HD for *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith* saved millions of dollars. A comparable system was used for *Sin City*, which combined HD footage of the actors with graphic landscapes created in postproduction. Basing the entire project on digital technology allowed director Robert Rodriguez to edit, mix sound, and create special effects in his home studio in Austin, Texas. These two prominent directors thoroughly embraced the new format and vowed never to shoot on film again. Rodriguez declared, "I've abandoned film forever. You can't go back. It's like trying to go back to vinyl after you've got recordable DVD."

Within mainstream Hollywood filmmaking, however, these directors remain in the minority. The complexity of digital filming technology, the incompatibility among various makes of camera, and innovations in equipment have led many cinematographers and directors to stick with tried-and-true 35mm systems. They may also use both 35mm cameras and digital ones for the same film, exploiting the best capabilities of each. Despite shooting most of *Collateral* with digital cameras, for instance, Michael Mann chose 35mm for some interiors and for slow motion shots.

Some cinematographers dispute the notion that digital filmmaking saves money, citing extra time spent on the set solving glitches. Christian Berger, who shot Michael Haneke's *Caché*, complained, "We ended up using six cameras because they kept breaking, and we *still* had focus problems two or three times a day. . . . It all worked out in the end, but shooting digitally was definitely *not* cheaper for the producer."

The debate will no doubt continue, but for now, most directors and cinematographers are relying chiefly on film and turning to HD only for occasional scenes.



Most professional filmmaking, both 35mm and digital, is done on rented cameras. Older models continue to be available. The Viper model used for *Collateral* is still available, and 2K and 4K are not likely to make these obsolete. All yield an image of high enough quality to be acceptable to audiences when projected in theaters.

## Making the Movie: Film Production

Important as technology is, films are part of social institutions as well. Sometimes the social context is very intimate, as when a family records their lives on film to show friends and relations. But films that aim at the public enter a wider range of institutions. A movie typically goes through three phases: *production*, *distribution*, and *exhibition*. A group or company makes the film, a distribution company rents copies to theater chains, and local theaters exhibit the film. Later, the DVD version is distributed to chain stores or rental shops, and it's exhibited on TV monitors, computer screens, or portable displays. For video on demand and many amateur videos, the Internet serves as a distribution medium.

The whole system depends on having movies to circulate, so let's start by considering the process of production. Most films go through four distinct phases:

1. *Scriptwriting and funding*. The idea for the film is developed and a screenplay is written. The filmmakers also acquire financial support for the project.
2. *Preparation for filming*. Once a script is more or less complete and at least some funding is assured, the filmmakers plan the physical production.
3. *Shooting*. The filmmakers create the film's images and sounds.
4. *Assembly*. The images and sounds are combined in their final form. This involves cutting picture and sound, executing special effects, inserting music or extra dialogue, and adding titles.

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

In "Do filmmakers deserve the last word?" we suggest why we should always be cautious in accepting claims filmmakers offer.

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1174](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1174).

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Aspiring filmmakers might want to check out our entry "The magic number 30, give or take 4."

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1300](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1300).

The phases can overlap. Filmmakers may be scrambling for funding while shooting and assembling the film, and some assembly is usually taking place during filming. In addition, each stage modifies what went before. The idea for the film may be radically altered when the script is hammered out; the script's presentation of the action may be drastically changed in shooting; and the material that is shot takes on new significance in the process of assembly. As the French director Robert Bresson puts it, "A film is born in my head and I kill it on paper. It is brought back to life by the actors and then killed in the camera. It is then resurrected into a third and final life in the editing room where the dismembered pieces are assembled into their finished form."

These four phases include many particular jobs. Most films that we see in theaters result from dozens of specialized tasks carried out by hundreds of experts. This fine-grained division of labor has proved to be a reliable way to prepare, shoot, and assemble large-budget movies. On smaller productions, individuals perform several roles. A director might also edit the film, or the principal sound recordist on the set might also oversee the sound mixing. For *Tarnation*, a memoir of growing up in a troubled family, Jonathan Caouette assembled 19 years worth of photographs, audiotape, home movies, and videotape. Some of the footage was filmed by his parents, and some by himself as a boy. Caouette shot new scenes, edited everything on iMovie, mixed the sound, and transferred the result to digital video. In making this personal documentary, Caouette executed virtually all the phases of film production himself.

## The Scriptwriting and Funding Phase

Two roles are central in this phase: producer and screenwriter. The tasks of the *producer* are chiefly financial and organizational. She or he may be an "independent"

producer, unearthing film projects and trying to convince production companies or distributors to finance the film. Or the producer may work for a distribution company and generate ideas for films. A studio may also hire a producer to put together a particular package.

The producer nurses the project through the scriptwriting process, obtains financial support, and arranges to hire the personnel who will work on the film. During shooting and assembly, the producer usually acts as the liaison between the writer or director and the company that is financing the film. After the film is completed, the producer will often have the task of arranging the distribution, promotion, and marketing of the film and of monitoring the paying back of the money invested in the production.

A single producer may take on all these tasks, but in the contemporary American film industry, the producer's work is further subdivided. The *executive producer* is often the person who arranged the financing for the project or obtained the literary property (although many filmmakers complain that the credit of executive producer is sometimes given to people who did little work). Once the production is under way, the *line producer* oversees the day-to-day activities of director, cast, and crew. The line producer is assisted by an *associate producer*, who acts as a liaison with laboratories or technical personnel.

The chief task of the *screenwriter* is to prepare the *screenplay* (or script). Sometimes the writer will send a screenplay to an agent, who submits it to a production company. Or an experienced screenwriter meets with a producer in a "pitch session," where the writer can propose ideas for scripts. The first scene of Robert Altman's *The Player* satirizes pitch sessions by showing celebrity screenwriters proposing strained ideas like "Pretty Woman meets *Out of Africa*." Alternatively, sometimes the producer has an idea for a film and hires a screenwriter to develop it. This approach is common if the producer has bought the rights to a novel or play and wants to adapt it for the screen.

The screenplay goes through several stages. These include a *treatment*, a synopsis of the action; then one or more full-length scripts; and a final version, the *shooting script*. Extensive rewriting is common, and writers often must resign themselves to seeing their work recast over and over.

Shooting scripts are constantly altered, too. Some directors allow actors to modify the dialogue, and problems on location or on a set may necessitate changes in the scene. In the assembly stage, script scenes that have been shot are often condensed, rearranged, or dropped entirely.

If the producer or director finds one writer's screenplay unsatisfactory, other writers may be hired to revise it. Most Hollywood screenwriters earn their living by rewriting other writers' scripts. As you can imagine, this often leads to conflicts about which writer or writers deserve onscreen credit for the film. In the American film industry, these disputes are adjudicated by the Screen Writers' Guild.

As the screenplay is being written or rewritten, the producer is planning the film's finances. He or she has sought out a director and starts to make the package seem a promising investment. The producer must prepare a budget spelling out *above-the-line costs* (the costs of literary property, scriptwriter, director, and major cast) and *below-the-line costs* (the expenses allotted to the crew, secondary cast, the shooting and assembly phases, insurance, and publicity). The sum of above- and below-the-line costs is called the *negative cost* (that is, the total cost of producing the film's master negative). In 2005, the average Hollywood negative cost ran to about \$60 million.

Some films don't follow a full-blown screenplay. Documentaries, for instance, are difficult to script fully in advance. In order to get funding, however, the projects typically require a summary or an outline, and some documentarists prefer to have a written plan even if they recognize that the film will evolve in the course of filming. When making a **compilation documentary** from existing footage, the filmmakers often prepare an outline of the main points to be covered in the voice-over commentary before writing a final version of the text keyed to the image track.

"A screenplay bears somewhat the same relationship to a movie as the musical score does to a symphonic performance. There are people who can read a musical score and 'hear' the symphony—but no two directors will see the same images when they read a movie script. The two-dimensional patterns of colored light involved are far more complex than the one-dimensional thread of sound."

— Arthur C. Clarke, collaborator on screenplay for *2001: A Space Odyssey*



1.24 A page from the storyboard for Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

## The Preparation Phase

When funding is more or less secure and the script is solid enough to start filming, the filmmakers can prepare for the physical production. In commercial filmmaking, this stage of activity is called **pre-production**. The *director*, who may have come on board the project at an earlier point, plays a central role in this and later phases. The director coordinates the staff to create the film. Although the director's authority isn't absolute, he or she is usually considered the person most responsible for the final look and sound of the film.

At this point, the producer and the director set up a production office, hire crew and cast the roles, and scout locations for filming. They also prepare a daily schedule for shooting. This is done with an eye on the budget. The producer assumes that the separate shots will be made out of continuity—that is, in the most convenient order for production—and put in proper order in the editing room. Since transporting equipment and personnel to a location is a major expense, producers usually prefer to shoot all the scenes taking place in one location at one time. For *Jurassic Park*, the main characters' arrival on the island and their departure at the end of the film were both shot at the start of production, during the three weeks on location in Hawaii. A producer must also plan to shoot around actors who can't be on the set every day. Many producers try to schedule the most difficult scenes early, before cast and crew begin to tire. For *Raging Bull*, the complex prizefight sequences were filmed first, with the dialogue scenes shot later. Keeping all such contingencies in mind, the producer comes up with a schedule that juggles cast, crew, locations, and even seasons most efficiently.

During pre-production, several things are happening at the same time under the supervision of the director and producer. A writer may be revising the screenplay while a casting supervisor is searching out actors. Because of the specialized division of labor in large-scale production, the director orchestrates the contributions of several units. He or she works with the *set unit*, or *production design unit*, headed by a *production designer*. The production designer is in charge of visualizing the film's settings. This unit creates drawings and plans that determine the architecture and the color schemes of the sets. Under the production designer's supervision, an *art director* oversees the construction and painting of the sets. The *set decorator*, often someone with experience in interior decoration, modifies the sets for specific filming purposes, supervising workers who find props and a *set dresser* who arranges things on the set during shooting. The *costume designer* is in charge of planning and executing the wardrobe for the production.

Working with the production designer, a *graphic artist* may be assigned to produce a **storyboard**, a series of comic strip–like sketches of the shots in each scene, including notations about costume, lighting, and camera work (1.24). Most directors do not demand a storyboard for every scene, but action sequences and shots using special effects or complicated camera work tend to be storyboarded in detail. The storyboard gives the cinematography unit and the special-effects unit a preliminary sense of what the finished shots should look like. The storyboard images may be filmed, cut together, and played with sound to help visualize the scene. This is one form of *animatics*.

Computer graphics can take planning further. The process of **previsualization**, or “previz,” reworks the storyboards into three-dimensional animation, complete with moving figures, dialogue, sound effects, and music. Contemporary software can create settings and characters reasonably close to what will be filmed, and textures and shading can be added. Previsualization animatics are most often used to plan complicated action scenes or special effects (1.25). For *Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith*, George Lucas's previsualization team created 6500 detailed shots, a third of which formed the basis for shots in the finished film. In addition, previsualization helps the director test options for staging scenes, moving cameras, and timing sequences.



1.25 Animated previsualization from *King Kong*.

## The Shooting Phase

Although the term *production* refers to the entire process of making a film, Hollywood filmmakers also use it to refer to the *shooting phase*. Shooting is also known as *principal photography*.

During shooting, the director supervises what is called the *director's crew*, consisting of these personnel:

- The *script supervisor*, known in the classic studio era as a “script girl.” (Today one-fifth of Hollywood script supervisors are male.) The script supervisor is in charge of all details of **continuity** from shot to shot. The supervisor checks details of performers’ appearances (in the last scene, was the carnation in the left or right buttonhole?), props, lighting, movement, camera position, and the running time of each shot.
- The *first assistant director (AD)*, a jack-of-all-trades who, with the director, plans each day’s shooting schedule. The AD sets up each shot for the director’s approval while keeping track of the actors, monitoring safety conditions, and keeping the energy level high.
- The *second assistant director*, who is the liaison among the first AD, the camera crew, and the electricians’ crew.
- The *third assistant director*, who serves as messenger for director and staff.
- The *dialogue coach*, who feeds performers their lines and speaks the lines of offscreen characters during shots of other performers.
- The *second unit director*, who films stunts, location footage, action scenes, and the like, at a distance from where principal shooting is taking place.

The most visible group of workers is the *cast*. The cast may include *stars*—well-known players assigned to major roles and likely to attract audiences. The cast also includes *supporting players*, or performers in secondary roles; *minor players*; and *extras*, those anonymous persons who pass by in the street, come together for crowd scenes, and occupy distant desks in large office sets. One of the director’s major jobs is to shape the performances of the cast. Most directors spend a good deal of time explaining how a line or gesture should be rendered, reminding the actor of the place of this scene in the overall film, and helping the actor create a coherent performance. The first AD usually works with the extras and takes charge of arranging crowd scenes.

“If you wander unbidden onto a set, you’ll always know the AD because he or she is the one who’ll probably throw you off. That’s the AD yelling, ‘Places!’ ‘Quiet on the set!’ ‘Lunch— one-half hour!’ and ‘That’s a wrap, people!’ It’s all very ritualistic, like reveille and taps on a military base, at once grating and oddly comforting.”

— Christine Vachon, independent producer, on assistant directors

On some productions, there are still more specialized roles. *Stunt artists* will be supervised by a *stunt coordinator*; professional dancers will work with a *choreographer*. If animals join the cast, they will be handled by a *wrangler*. There have been pig wranglers (*Mad Max Beyond Thunder Dome*), snake wranglers (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*), and spider wranglers (*Arachnophobia*).

Another unit of specialized labor is the *photography unit*. The leader is the *cinematographer*, also known as the *director of photography* (or *DP*). The cinematographer is an expert on photographic processes, lighting, and camera technique. We have already seen how important Michael Mann's two DPs, Dion Beebe and Paul Cameron, were in achieving the desired look for *Collateral* (pp. 000–00). The cinematographer consults with the director on how each scene will be lit and filmed (1.26). The cinematographer supervises the following:

- The *camera operator*, who runs the machine and who may also have assistants to load the camera, adjust and follow focus, push a dolly, and so on.
- The *key grip*, who supervises the *grips*. These workers carry and arrange equipment, props, and elements of the setting and lighting.
- The *gaffer*, the head electrician who supervises the placement and rigging of the lights.

Parallel to the photography unit is the *sound unit*. This is headed by the *production recordist* (also called the *sound mixer*). The recordist's principal responsibility is to record dialogue during shooting. Typically, the recordist uses a tape or digital recorder, several sorts of microphones, and a console to balance and combine the inputs. The recordist also tries to capture some ambient sound when no actors are speaking. These bits of room tone are later inserted to fill pauses in the dialogue. The recordist's staff includes the following:

- The *boom operator*, who manipulates the boom microphone and conceals radio microphones on the actors.
- The *third man*, who places other microphones, lays sound cables, and is in charge of controlling ambient sound.



**1.26** On the set of *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles directs from his wheelchair on the far right, cinematographer Gregg Toland crouches below the camera, and actress Dorothy Comingore kneels at the left. The script supervisor is seated in the left background.



**1.27** Sculpting a model dinosaur for *Jurassic Park: The Lost World*. The model was scanned into a computer for digital manipulation.

Some productions also have a *sound designer*, who enters the process during the preparation phase and who plans a sonic style appropriate for the entire film.

A *visual-effects unit*, overseen by the *visual-effects supervisor*, is charged with preparing and executing process shots, miniatures, matte work, computer-generated graphics, and other technical shots (1.27). During the planning phase, the director and the production designer will have determined what effects are needed, and the supervisor consults with the director and the cinematographer on an ongoing basis. The visual-effects unit can number hundreds of workers, from puppet- and model-makers to specialists in digital compositing.

A miscellaneous unit includes a *makeup staff*, a *costume staff*, *hairdressers*, and *drivers* who transport cast and crew. During shooting, the producer is represented by a unit called the *producer's crew*. Central here is the *line producer*, who manages daily organizational business, such as arranging for meals and accommodations. A *production accountant* (or *production auditor*) monitors expenditures, a *production secretary* coordinates telephone communications among units and with the producer, and *production assistants* (or *PAs*) run errands. Newcomers to the film industry often start out working as production assistants.

All this coordinated effort, involving perhaps hundreds of workers, results in many thousands of feet of exposed film and recorded sound-on-tape. For every shot called for in the script or storyboard, the director usually does several takes, or versions. For instance, if the finished film requires one shot of an actor saying a line, the director may do several takes of that speech, each time asking the actor to vary the delivery. Not all takes are printed, and only one of those becomes the shot included in the finished film. Extra footage can be used in coming-attractions trailers and electronic press kits.

Because scenes seldom are filmed in story order, the director and crew must have some way of labeling each take. As soon as the camera starts, one of the cinematographer's staff holds up a *slate* before the lens. On the slate is written the production, scene, shot, and take. A hinged arm at the top, the clapboard, makes a sharp smack that allows the recordist to synchronize the sound track with the footage in the assembly phase (1.28). Thus every take is identified for future reference. There are also electronic slates that keep track of each take automatically and provide digital readouts.

In filming a scene, most directors and technicians follow an organized procedure. While crews set up the lighting and test the sound recording, the director rehearses the actors and instructs the cinematographer. The director then supervises the filming of a *master shot*. The master shot typically records the entire action and



**1.28** A slate shown at the beginning of a shot in Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise*.



**1.29** For the climax of *Jurassic Park*, the actors were shot in the set of the visitor's center, but the velociraptors and the *Tyrannosaurus rex* were computer-generated images added later.

dialogue of the scene. There may be several takes of the master shot. Then portions of the scene are restaged and shot in closer views or from different angles. These shots are called *coverage*, and each one may require many takes. Today most directors shoot a great deal of coverage, often by using two or more cameras filming at the same time. The script supervisor checks to ensure that details are consistent within all these shots.

For most of film history, scenes were filmed with a single camera, which was moved to different points for different setups. More recently, under pressure to finish principal photography as quickly as possible, the director and the camera unit might use two or more cameras. Action scenes are often shot from several angles simultaneously because chases, crashes, and explosions are difficult to repeat for retakes. The battle scenes in *Gladiator* were filmed by 7 cameras, whereas 13 cameras were used for stunts in *XXX*. For dialogue scenes, a common tactic is to film with an A camera and a B camera, an arrangement that can capture two actors in alternating shots. The lower cost of digital video cameras has allowed some directors to experiment with shooting conversations from many angles at once, hoping to capture unexpected spontaneity in the performance. Some scenes in Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* employed a hundred digital cameras.

When special effects are to be included, the shooting phase must carefully plan for them. In many cases, actors will be filmed against blue or green backgrounds so that their figures can be inserted into computer-created settings. Or the director may film performers with the understanding that other material will be composited into the frame (1.29). If a moving person or animal needs to be created by computer, a specialized unit will use *motion capture*. Here small sensors are attached all over the body of the subject, and as that subject moves against a blank background or a set, a special camera records the movement (1.30, 1.31). Each sensor provides a point in a wire-frame figure on a computer. That image can then be animated and built up to a completely rendered person or animal to be inserted digitally into the film.

## The Assembly Phase

Filmmakers call the assembly phase **post-production**. (If something goes wrong, someone may promise to “fix it in post.”) Yet this phase does not begin after the shooting is finished. Rather, post-production staff members work behind the scenes throughout shooting.

Before the shooting begins, the director or producer probably hires an *editor* (also known as the *supervising editor*). This person catalogues and assembles the takes produced during shooting. The editor also works with the director to make creative decisions about how the footage can best be cut together.



**1.30** For *Iron Man*, Robert Downey Jr. performed in a motion-capture suit covered with sensors. Zoetrope, which dates back to 1834, spun its images on a strip of paper in a rotating drum.



**1.31** The same scene with computer animation partially added over his figure.

Because each shot usually exists in several takes, because the film is shot out of story order, and because the master-shot/coverage approach yields so much footage, the editor's job can be a huge one. A 100-minute feature, which amounts to about 9000 feet of 35mm film, may have been carved out of 500,000 feet of film. For this reason, postproduction on major Hollywood pictures often takes up to seven months. Sometimes several editors and assistants are brought in.

Typically, the editor receives the processed footage from the laboratory as quickly as possible. This footage is known as the *dailies* or the *rushes*. The editor inspects the dailies, leaving it to the *assistant editor* to synchronize image and sound and to sort the takes by scene. The editor meets with the director to examine the dailies, or if the production is filming far away, the editor informs the director of how the footage looks. Since retaking shots is costly and troublesome, constant checking of the dailies is important for spotting any problems with focus, exposure, framing, or other visual factors. From the dailies, the director selects the best takes, and the editor records the choices. To save money, “digital dailies” are often shown

*“A couple of guys in a coffee shop set out to write a gag; a couple of guys with a camera set out to film a gag; a couple of guys in an editing room set out to make sense of the trash that’s been dumped on their desks.”*

— David Mamet, director, *The Spanish Prisoner* and *Redbelt*



## A CLOSER LOOK

### SOME TERMS AND ROLES IN FILM PRODUCTION

The rise of packaged productions, pressures from unionized workers, and other factors have led producers to credit everyone who worked on a film. Meanwhile, the specialization of large-scale filmmaking has created its own jargon. Some of the most colorful terms are explained in the text. Here are some other terms that you may see in a film's credits.

**ACE:** After the name of the editor; abbreviation for the American Cinema Editors, a professional association.

**ASC:** After the name of the director of photography; abbreviation for the American Society of Cinematographers, a professional association. The British equivalent is the BSC.

**Additional photography:** Crew shooting footage apart from the *principal photography*, supervised by the director of photography.

**Best boy:** Term from the classic studio years, originally applied to the gaffer's assistant. Today film credits may list both a *best boy electric* and a *best boy grip*, the assistant to the key grip.

**Casting director:** Member who searches for and auditions performers for the film, and suggests actors for *leading roles* (principal characters) and *character parts* (fairly standardized or stereotyped roles). She or he may also cast *extras* (background or nonspeaking roles).

**Clapper boy:** Crew member who operates the clapboard (slate) that identifies each take.

**Concept artist:** Designer who creates illustrations of the settings and costumes that the director has in mind for the film.

**Dialogue editor:** Sound editor specializing in making sure recorded speech is audible.

**Dolly grip:** Crew member who pushes the dolly that carries the camera, either from one setup to another or during a take for moving camera shots.

**Foley artist:** Sound-effects specialist who creates sounds of body movement by walking or by moving materials across large trays of different substances (sand, earth, glass, and so on). Named for Jack Foley, a pioneer in postproduction sound.

to the producer and director, but since video can conceal defects in the original footage, editors check the original shots before cutting the film.

As the footage accumulates, the editor assembles it into a *rough cut*—the shots loosely strung in sequence, without sound effects or music. Rough cuts tend to run long—the rough cut for *Apocalypse Now* ran 7½ hours. From the rough cut, the editor, in consultation with the director, builds toward a *fine cut* or *final cut*. The unused shots constitute the *outtakes*. While the final cut is being prepared, a *second unit* may be shooting *inserts*, footage to fill in at certain places. These are typically long shots of cities or airports or close-ups of objects. At this point, titles are prepared, and further laboratory work or special-effects work may be done.

Until the mid-1980s, editors cut and spliced the *work print*, footage printed from the camera negative. In trying out their options, editors were obliged to rearrange the shots physically. Now virtually all commercial films are edited digitally. The dailies are transferred first to tape or disc, then to a hard drive. The editor enters notes on each take directly into a computer database. Such digital editing systems, usually known as *nonlinear* systems, permit random access to the entire store of footage. The editor can call up any shot, paste it alongside any other shots, trim it, or junk it. Some systems allow special effects and music to be tried out as well. Although nonlinear systems have greatly speeded up the process of cutting, the editor usually asks for a 35mm projection print of key scenes in order to check for color, details, and pacing.

As the editing team puts the footage in order, other members of the team work to manipulate the look of the shots via computer. If the footage has been shot on film, it is scanned frame by frame into computer files to create a *digital intermediate* (DI). The DI is manipulated in many ways, including changing its look through *digital color grading*. The color grader may work alone on a low-budget film or, on a larger one, supervise a group of assistants.

**Greenery man:** Crew member who chooses and maintains trees, shrubs, and grass in settings.

**Lead man:** Member of set crew responsible for tracking down various props and items of decor for the set.

**Loader:** Member of photography unit who loads and unloads camera magazines, as well as logging the shots taken and sending the film to the laboratory.

**Matte artist:** Member of special-effects unit who paints backdrops that are then photographically or digitally incorporated into a shot in order to suggest a particular setting.

**Model maker:** (1) Member of production design unit who prepares architectural models for sets to be built. (2) Member of the special-effects unit who fabricates scale models of locales, vehicles, or characters to be filmed as substitutes for full-size ones.

**Property master:** Member of set crew who supervises the use of all *props*, or movable objects in the film.

**Publicist, unit publicist:** Member of producer's crew who creates promotional material regarding the production. The publicist may arrange for press and television interviews with the director and stars and for coverage of the production in the mass media.

**Scenic artist:** Member of set crew responsible for painting surfaces of set.

**Still photographer:** Member of crew who takes photographs of scenes and behind-the-scenes shots of cast members and others. These photographs may be used to check lighting or set design or color, and many will be used in promoting and publicizing the film.

**Timer, color timer:** Laboratory worker who inspects the negative film and adjusts the printer light to achieve consistency of color across the finished product.

**Video assist:** The use of a video camera mounted alongside the motion picture camera to check lighting, framing, or performances. In this way, the director and the cinematographer can try out a shot or scene on tape before committing it to film.

For special effects, filmmakers turn to computer-generated imagery (CGI). Their tasks may be as simple as deleting distracting background elements or building a crowd out of a few spectators. George Lucas has claimed that if an actor blinked at the wrong time, he would digitally erase the blink. CGI can also create imagery that would be virtually impossible with photographic film (1.32). Computers can conjure up photorealistic characters such as Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*. (See p. 000.) Fantasy and science fiction have fostered the development of CGI, but all genres have benefited, from the comic multiplication of a single actor in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to the grisly realism of the digitally enhanced Omaha Beach assault in *Saving Private Ryan*. In *The Curious Case of Benjamin*



**1.32** In the chase through the airways of Coruscant in *Attack of the Clones*, the actor was shot against a blue or green screen, and the backgrounds and moving vehicles were created through CGI.



*digital intermediate*. Here the negative is scanned digitally, frame by frame, at high resolution. The result is then recorded back to film as an internegative. The digital intermediate allows the cinematographer to correct color, remove scratches and dust, and add special effects easily.

Once the internegative has been created, the master sound track is synchronized with it. The first positive print, complete with picture and sound, is called the *answer print*. After the director, producer, and cinematographer have approved an answer print, *release prints* are made for distribution. Using a digital intermediate makes it possible to generate additional internegatives as old ones wear out, all without any wear on the original negative or interpositive.

The work of production does not end when the final theatrical version has been assembled. In consultation with the producer and the director, the postproduction staff prepares airline and broadcast television versions. For a successful film, a director's cut or an extended edition may be released on DVD. In some cases, different versions may be prepared for different countries. Scenes in Sergio Leone's *Once upon a Time in America* were completely rearranged for its American release. European prints of Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* featured more nudity than did American ones, in which some naked couples were blocked by digital figures added to the foreground. Once the various versions are decided upon, each is copied to a master videotape or hard drive, the source of future versions. This video transfer process often demands new judgments about color quality and sound balance.

Many fictional films have been made about the process of film production. Federico Fellini's *8½* concerns itself with the preproduction stage of a film that is abandoned before shooting starts. François Truffaut's *Day for Night*, David Mamet's *State and Main*, Christopher Guest's *For Your Consideration*, and Tom DiCillo's *Living in Oblivion* all center on the shooting phase. The action of Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* occurs while a low-budget thriller is in sound editing. *Singin' in the Rain* follows a single film through the entire process, with a gigantic publicity billboard filling the final shot.

## Artistic Implications of the Production Process

Every artist works within constraints of time, money, and opportunity. Of all the arts, filmmaking is one of the most constraining. Budgets must be maintained, deadlines must be met, weather and locations are unpredictable, and the coordination of any group of people involves unforeseeable twists and turns. Even a Hollywood blockbuster, which might seem to offer unlimited freedom, is actually confining on many levels. Big-budget filmmakers sometimes get tired of coordinating hundreds of staff and wrestling with million-dollar decisions, and they start to long for smaller projects that offer more time to reflect on what might work best.

We appreciate films more when we realize that in production, every film is a compromise made within constraints. When Mark and Michael Polish conceived their independent film *Twin Falls Idaho*, they had planned for the story to unfold in several countries. But the cost of travel and location shooting forced them to rethink the film's plot: "We had to decide whether the film was about twins or travel." Similarly, the involvement of a powerful director can reshape the film at the screenplay stage. In the original screenplay of *Witness*, the protagonist was Rachel, the Amish widow with whom John Book falls in love. The romance and Rachel's confused feelings about Book formed the central plot line. But the director, Peter Weir, wanted to emphasize the clash between pacifism and violence. So William Kelley and Earl Wallace revised their screenplay to stress the mystery plot line and to center the action on Book and the introduction of urban crime into the peaceful Amish community. Given the new constraints, the screenwriters found a new form for *Witness*.

Some filmmakers struggle against their constraints, pushing the limits of what's considered doable. The production of a film we'll study in upcoming chapters,

*Citizen Kane*, was highly innovative on many fronts. Yet even this project had to accept studio routines and the limits of current technology. More commonly, a filmmaker works with the same menu of choices available to others. In directing *Collateral*, Michael Mann made creative choices about how to use digital cameras, low lighting levels, and script structure that other filmmakers working in 2004 could have made—except that Mann saw new ways of employing such techniques. His choices even led to experimentation with a new type of lighting device, the ELD panels for the cab interior. The overall result was a visual style that no other film had ever achieved, though others soon imitated it.

Everything we notice on the screen in the finished movie springs from decisions made by filmmakers during the production process. Starting our study of film art with a survey of production allows us to understand some of the possibilities offered by images and sounds. Later chapters will discuss the artistic consequences of decisions made in production—everything from storytelling strategies to techniques of staging, shooting, editing, and sound work. By choosing within production constraints, filmmakers create film form and style.

## Modes of Production

### Large-Scale Production

The fine-grained division of labor we've been describing is characteristic of *studio* filmmaking. A studio is a company in the business of manufacturing films. The most famous studios flourished in Hollywood from the 1920s to the 1960s—Paramount, Warner Bros., Columbia, and so on. These companies owned equipment and extensive physical plants, and they retained most of their workers on long-term contracts. Each studio's central management planned all projects, then delegated authority to individual supervisors, who in turn assembled casts and crews from the studio's pool of workers.

Organized as efficient businesses, the studios created a tradition of carefully tracking the entire process through paper records. At the start, there were versions of the script; during shooting, reports were written about camera footage, sound recording, special-effects work, and laboratory results; in the assembly phase, there were logs of shots catalogued in editing and a variety of cue sheets for music, mixing, looping, and title layout. This sort of record keeping has remained a part of large-scale filmmaking, though now it is done mostly on computer.

Although studio production might seem to resemble a factory's assembly line, it was always more creative, collaborative, and chaotic than turning out cars or TV sets is. Each film is a unique product, not a replica of a prototype. In studio filmmaking, skilled specialists collaborated to create such a product while still adhering to a "blueprint" prepared by management (1.33).

The centralized studio production system has virtually disappeared. The giants of Hollywood's golden age have become distribution companies, although they often initiate, fund, and oversee the making of films they distribute. The old studios had stars and staff under contract, so the same group of people might work together on film after film. Now each film is planned as a distinct package, with director, actors, staff, and technicians brought together for this project alone. The studio may provide its own soundstages, sets, and offices for the project, but in most cases, the producer arranges with outside firms to supply cameras, catering, locations, special effects, and anything else required.

Still, the detailed production stages remain similar to what they were in the heyday of studio production. In fact, filmmaking has become vastly more complicated in recent years, largely because of the expansion of production budgets and the growth of computer-based special effects. *Titanic* listed over 1400 names in its final credits.



**1.33** Studio production was characterized by a large number of highly specialized production roles. Here several units prepare a moving-camera shot for *Wells Fargo* (1937).

## Exploitation, Independent Production, and DIY

Not all films using the division of labor we have outlined are big-budget projects financed by major companies. There are also low-budget *exploitation* products tailored to a particular market—in earlier decades, fringe theaters and drive-ins; now, video rentals and sales. Troma Films, maker of *The Toxic Avenger*, is probably the most famous exploitation company, turning out horror movies and teen sex comedies for \$100,000 or less. Nonetheless, exploitation filmmakers usually divide the labor along studio lines. There is the producer’s role, the director’s role, and so on, and the production tasks are parceled out in ways that roughly conform to mass-production practices.

Exploitation production often forces people to double up on jobs. Robert Rodriguez made *El Mariachi* as an exploitation film for the Spanish-language video market. The 21-year-old director also functioned as producer, scriptwriter,

*“Deep down inside, everybody in the United States has a desperate need to believe that some day, if the breaks fall their way, they can quit their jobs as claims adjusters, legal secretaries, certified public accountants, or mobsters, and go out and make their own low-budget movie. Otherwise, the future is just too bleak.”*

— Joe Queenan, critic and independent filmmaker

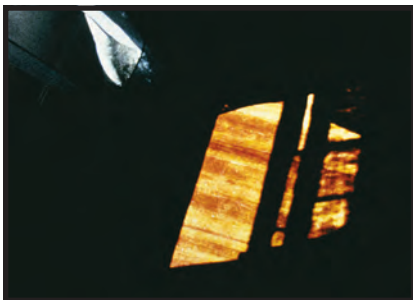
## CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Studio films and independent ones aren't always that far apart, as we suggest in "Independent film: How different?"

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=22](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=22).



**1.34** In making *Just Another Girl on the IRT*, independent director Leslie Harris used locations and available lighting in order to shoot quickly; she finished filming in just 17 days.



**1.35** In *The Riddle of Lumen*, Stan Brakhage turned shadows and everyday objects into vivid distant patterns.

cinematographer, camera operator, still photographer, and sound recordist and mixer. Rodriguez's friend Carlos Gallardo starred, coproduced, and coscripted; he also served as unit production manager and grip. Gallardo's mother fed the cast and crew. *El Mariachi* wound up costing only about \$7000.

Unlike *El Mariachi*, most exploitation films don't enter the theatrical market, but other low-budget productions, loosely known as *independent* films, may. Independent films are made for the theatrical market but without major distributor financing. Sometimes the independent filmmaker is a well-known director, such as Spike Lee, David Cronenberg, or Joel and Ethan Cohen, who prefer to work with budgets significantly below the industry norm. The lower scale of investment allows the filmmaker more freedom in choosing stories and performers. The director usually initiates the project and partners with a producer to get it realized. Financing often comes from European television firms, with major U.S. distributors buying the rights if the project seems to have good prospects. For example, David Lynch's low-budget *The Straight Story* was financed by French and British television before it was bought for distribution by Disney. Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* was made for about \$15 million and nearly went straight to DVD when Warner Bros. declined to release it. Art film distributor Fox Searchlight picked it up, and it became an unexpected critical and financial success. Roughly half of *Slumdog Millionaire* was shot on 35mm. The rest was done on 2K digital cameras, which are smaller and facilitated shooting in the crowded streets of Mumbai.

As we would expect, these industry-based independents organize production in ways very close to the full-fledged studio mode. Nonetheless, because these projects require less financing, the directors can demand more control over the production process. Woody Allen, for instance, is allowed by his contract to rewrite and reshoot extensive portions of his film after he has assembled an initial cut.

The category of independent production is a roomy one, and it also includes more modest projects by less well-known filmmakers. Examples are Victor Nuñez's *Ulee's Gold*, Phil Morrison's *Junebug*, and Miranda July's *Me and You and Everyone We Know*. Even though their budgets are much smaller than for most commercial films, independent productions face many obstacles (**1.34**). Filmmakers may have to finance the project themselves, with the help of relatives and friendly investors; they must also find a distributor specializing in independent and low-budget films. Still, many filmmakers believe the advantages of independence outweigh the drawbacks. Independent production can treat subjects that large-scale studio production ignores. No film studios would have supported Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* or Kevin Smith's *Clerks*. Because the independent film does not need as large an audience to repay its costs, it can be more personal and controversial. And the production process, no matter how low-budget, still relies on the basic roles and phases established by the studio tradition.

## Small-Scale Production

In large-scale and independent production, many people work on the film, each one a specialist in a particular task. But it is also possible for one person to do everything: plan the film, finance it, perform in it, run the camera, record the sound, and put it all together. Such films are seldom seen in commercial theatres, but they are central to experimental and documentary traditions.

Consider Stan Brakhage, whose films are among the most directly personal ever made. Some, such as *Window Water Baby Moving*, are lyrical studies of his home and family (**1.35**). Others, such as *Dog Star Man*, are mythic treatments of nature; still others, such as *23rd Psalm Branch*, are quasi-documentary studies of war and death. Funded by grants and his personal finances, Brakhage prepared, shot, and edited his films virtually unaided. While he was working in a film laboratory, he also developed and printed his footage. With over 150 films to his credit,

Brakhage proved that the individual filmmaker can become an artisan, executing all the basic production tasks.

The 16mm and digital video formats are customary for small-scale production. Financial backing often comes from the filmmaker, from grants, and perhaps from obliging friends and relatives. There is very little division of labor: the filmmaker oversees every production task and performs many of them. Although technicians or performers may help out, the creative decisions rest with the filmmaker. Experimentalist Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* was shot by her husband, Alexander Hammid, but she scripted, directed, and edited it and performed in the central role (1.36). Amos Poe made his lengthy, evocative experimental film *Empire II* by placing a small digital camera in a window of his Manhattan apartment and exposing single frames in bursts at intervals over an entire year (1.37). Poe edited the film himself, manipulated the images digitally, and assembled the sound track from existing songs and original music by Mader.

Such small-scale production is also common in documentary filmmaking. Jean Rouch, a French anthropologist, has made several films alone or with a small crew in his efforts to record the lives of marginal people living in alien cultures. Rouch wrote, directed, and photographed *Les Maitres fous* (1955), his first widely seen film. Here he examined the ceremonies of a Ghanaian cult whose members lived a double life: most of the time they worked as low-paid laborers, but in their rituals, they passed into a frenzied trance and assumed the identities of their colonial rulers.

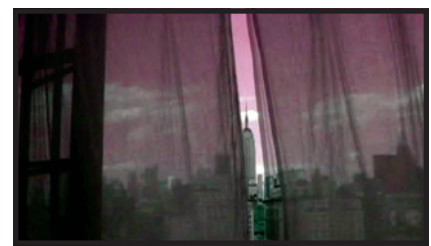
Similarly, Barbara Koppel devoted four years to making *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, a record of Kentucky coal miners' struggles for union representation. After eventually obtaining funding from several foundations, she and a small crew spent 13 months living with miners during the workers' strike. During filming, Koppel acted as sound recordist, working with cameraman Hart Perry and sometimes also a lighting person. A large crew was ruled out not only by Koppel's budget but also by the need to fit naturally into the community. Like the miners, the filmmakers were constantly threatened with violence from strikebreakers (1.38).

Sometimes small-scale production becomes *collective* production. Here, instead of a single filmmaker shaping the project, several film workers participate equally. The group shares common goals and makes production decisions democratically. Roles may also be rotated: the sound recordist on one day may serve as cinematographer on the next. A recent instance is the Canadian film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. Three Inuits (Zacharias Kunuk, Paul Apak Angilirq, and Paul Qulitalik) and one New Yorker (Norman Cohn) formed Igloolik Isuma Productions in 1990. After making several video shorts and a television series, the group composed a screenplay based on an oral tale about love, murder, and revenge. With funding from television and the National Film Board, cast and crew spent six months shooting in the Arctic, camping in tents and eating seal meat. "We don't have a hierarchy," Cohn explained. "There's no director, second, third or fourth assistant director. We have a team of people trying to figure out how to make this work." Because of the communal nature of Inuit life, the Igloolik team expanded the collective effort by bringing local people into the project. Some had to relearn traditional skills for making tools and clothes from bone, stone, and animal skins. "The Inuit process is very horizontal," Cohn explained. "We made our film in an Inuit way, through consensus and collaboration." Showcasing the strengths of digital Beta video (1.39), *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* won the prize for best first film at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival. That, said Cohn, convinced people "that a bunch of Eskimos from the end of the world could be sophisticated enough to make a movie."

Small-scale production allows the filmmakers to retain tight control of the project. The rise of digital video formats has made small-scale production more visible. *The Gleaners and I* (see 5.42), *The Yes Men*, *Encounters at the End of the World*,



**1.36** In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, multiple versions of the protagonist were played by the filmmaker, Maya Deren.



**1.37** For *Empire II*, Amos Poe digitally manipulated this tantalizing glimpse of the Manhattan skyline, making it lyrical.



**1.38** In *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, the driver of a passing truck fires at the crew.

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

For more on Poe's *Empire II*, plus a link to his website.

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1709](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1709).





**1.39** The hero of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* pauses in his flight across the ice.

and other recent releases indicate that the theatrical market and festival circuit have room for works made by single filmmakers or tiny production units.

The introduction of consumer and prosumer digital cameras and affordable software for computer post-production has led to the rise of “do it yourself” (DIY) filmmaking. Individuals or small groups of amateurs can make their own films and share them over the Internet via YouTube and other websites. Perhaps the most prominent DIY film is Arin Crumley and Susan Buice’s *Four Eyed Monsters*, a filmed reenactment of the couple’s unconventional romance. Although it was shown in a few theaters and at some festivals, the film’s main distribution was via a self-published DVD. The filmmakers promoted it in *Second Life*, on YouTube, and on their own website. *Four Eyed Monsters* ultimately receiving screenings on the Independent Film Channel, which also published a new edition of the DVD.

## Artistic Implications of Different Modes of Production

We categorize films on the basis of how they were made. We can distinguish a *documentary* film from a *fiction* film on the basis of production phases. Usually, the documentary filmmaker controls only certain variables of preparation, shooting, and assembly. Some variables (such as script and rehearsal) may be omitted, whereas others (such as setting, lighting, and behavior of the figures) are present but often uncontrolled. In interviewing an eyewitness to an event, the filmmaker typically controls camera work and editing but does not tell the witness what to say or how to act. For example, there was no script for the documentary *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*. Filmmakers Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick instead shot long interviews in which Chomsky explained his ideas. The fiction film, in contrast, is characterized by much more control over the preparation and shooting phases.

Similarly, a *compilation* film assembles existing images and sounds that provide historical evidence on a topic. The compilation filmmaker may minimize the shooting stage and create a story from archival footage. For *The Power of Nightmares*, Adam Curtis gathered newsreel and television footage, television commercials, and clips from fiction films to track the rise of fundamentalist politics and religion after World War II.

One more kind of film is distinguished by the way it’s produced. The *animated* film is created frame by frame. Images may be drawn directly on the film strip, or the camera may photograph drawings or three-dimensional models, as in the *Wallace and Grommit* movies. *Corpse Bride* was created without using motion picture cameras; instead, each frame was registered by a digital still camera and transferred to film. Today most animated films, both on theater screens and on the Internet, are created directly on computer with imaging software.

**Production and Authorship** Production practices have another implication for film as an art form. Who, it is often asked, is the “author,” the person responsible for the film? In individual production, the author must be the solitary filmmaker—Stan Brakhage, Louis Lumière, you. Collective film production creates collective authorship: the author is the entire group. The question of authorship becomes difficult to answer only when asked about large-scale production, particularly in the studio mode.

Studio film production assigns tasks to so many individuals that it is often difficult to determine who controls or decides what. Is the producer the author? In the prime years of the Hollywood system, the producer might have had nothing to do with shooting. The writer? The writer’s script might be completely transformed in shooting and editing. So is this situation like collective production, with group authorship? No, because there is a hierarchy in which a few main players make the key decisions.

Moreover, if we consider not only control and decision making but also individual style, it seems certain that some studio workers leave recognizable and unique traces on the films they make. Cinematographers such as Gregg Toland, set designers such as Hermann Warm, costumers such as Edith Head, choreographers such as Gene Kelly—the contributions of these people stand out within the films they made. So where does the studio-produced film leave the idea of authorship?

Most people who study cinema regard the director as the film’s primary “author.” Although the writer prepares a screenplay, later phases of production can modify it beyond recognition. And although the producer monitors the entire process, he or she seldom controls moment-by-moment activity on the set. It is the director who makes the crucial decisions about performance, staging, lighting, framing, cutting, and sound. On the whole, the director usually has most control over how a movie looks and sounds.

This doesn’t mean that the director is an expert at every job or dictates every detail. The director can delegate tasks to trusted personnel, and directors often work habitually with certain actors, cinematographers, composers, and editors. In the days of studio filmmaking, directors learned how to blend the distinctive talents of cast and crew into the overall movie. Humphrey Bogart’s unique talents were used very differently by Michael Curtiz in *Casablanca*, John Huston in *The Maltese Falcon*, and Howard Hawks in *The Big Sleep*. Gregg Toland’s cinematography was pushed in different directions by Orson Welles (*Citizen Kane*) and William Wyler (*The Best Years of Our Lives*).

During the 1950s, young French critics applied the word *auteur* (author) to Hollywood directors whom they felt had created a distinctive approach to filmmaking while working within the Hollywood studio system. Soon American critics picked up the “auteur theory,” which remained a central idea for film academics and students. Now you will occasionally read reviews or see spots on television that use the term, which has become a common term for a well-respected director.

Today well-established directors can control large-scale production to a remarkable degree. Steven Spielberg and Ethan and Joel Coen can insist on editing manually, not digitally. Both Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese dislike ADR and use much of the on-set dialogue in the finished film. In the days of Hollywood’s studio system, some directors exercised power more indirectly. Most studios did not permit the director to supervise editing, but John Ford would often do only one take of each shot. Precutting the film “in his head,” Ford virtually forced the editor to put the shots together as he had planned.

Around the world, the director is generally recognized as the key player. In Europe, Asia, and South America, directors frequently initiate the film and work closely with scriptwriters. In Hollywood, directors usually operate on a freelance basis, and the top ones select their own projects. For the most part, it is the director who shapes the film’s unique form and style, and these two components are central to cinema as an art.

*“The thing that makes me sad is that there’s tons of kids that I meet all the time . . . who don’t know anything about film history. . . . The number who couldn’t say that Orson Welles directed Citizen Kane was staggering. . . . They were infatuated with the business and the glamour of the business, and not filmmaking.”*

— Stacy Sher, producer, *Pulp Fiction* and *Erin Brockovich*

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Screenwriters often take issue with this idea, but we defend it in “Who the devil wrote it? (Apologies to Peter Bogdanovich).”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=41](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=41).

## Bringing the Film to the Audience: Distribution and Exhibition

We've spent some time considering film production because that is where film art begins. What of the other two phases of filmmaking? As in production, money plays a significant role in both distribution and exhibition. We'll see as well that these phases have effects on film art and viewers' experiences of particular films.

### Distribution: The Center of Power

Distribution companies form the core of economic power in the commercial film industry. Filmmakers need them to circulate their work; exhibitors need them to supply their screens. Europe and Asia are home to some significant media companies, but six Hollywood firms remain the world's major distributors. The names are familiar: Warner Bros., Paramount, Walt Disney/Buena Vista, Sony/Columbia, Twentieth Century Fox, and Universal.

These firms provide mainstream entertainment to theaters around the world. The films they release account for 95 percent of ticket sales in the United States and Canada, and about half of the international market. In world capitals, the majors maintain branch offices that advertise films, schedule releases, and arrange for prints to be made in local languages (either dubbing in the dialogue or adding subtitles). With vigorous marketing units in every region, the majors can distribute non-U.S. films as well as Hollywood titles. For example, Hayao Miyazaki's popular animated films (*Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle*) are distributed on video by Disney's Buena Vista arm—even in Miyazaki's homeland of Japan.

The major distributors have won such power because large companies can best endure the risks of theatrical moviemaking. Filmmaking is costly, and most films don't earn profits in theatrical release. Worldwide, the top 10 percent of all films released garner 50 percent of all box office receipts. The most popular 30 percent of films account for 80 percent of receipts. Typically, a film breaks even or shows a profit only after it has been released on cable, satellite, and home video.

In the United States, theater owners bid for each film a distributor releases, and in most states, they must be allowed to see the film before bidding. Elsewhere in the world, distributors may force exhibitors to rent a film without seeing it (called *blind booking*), perhaps even before it has been completed. Exhibitors may also be pressured to rent a package of films in order to get a few desirable items (*block booking*).

Once the exhibitor has contracted to screen the film, the distributor can demand stiff terms. The theater keeps a surprisingly small percentage of total box office receipts (known as the *gross* or *grosses*). One standard arrangement guarantees the distributor a minimum of 90 percent of the first week's gross, dropping gradually to 30 percent after several weeks. These terms aren't favorable to the exhibitor. A failure that closes quickly will yield almost nothing to the theater, and even a successful film will make most of its money in the first two or three weeks of release, when the exhibitor gets less of the revenue. Averaged out, a long-running success will yield no more than 50 percent of the gross to the theater. To make up for this drawback, the distributor allows the exhibitor to deduct from the gross the expenses of running the theater (a negotiated figure called the *house nut*). In addition, the exhibitor gets all the cash from the concession stand, which may deliver up to 70 percent of the theater's profits. Without high-priced snacks, movie houses couldn't survive.

Once the grosses are split with the exhibitor, the distributor receives its share (the *rentals*) and divides it further. A major U.S. distributor typically takes 35 percent of the rentals as its distribution fee. If the distributor helped finance the film, it takes another percentage off the top. The costs of prints and advertising are deducted as well. What remains comes back to the filmmakers. Out of the proceeds,

"Selling food is my job. I just happen to work in a theater."

— Theater manager in upstate New York

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Every Monday, the weekend box-office figures are news, but what do they mean? We add some nuance in "What won the weekend? or how to understand box-office figures."

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=21](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=21).

the producer must pay all *profit participants*—the directors, actors, executives, and investors who have negotiated a share of the rental returns.

For most films, the amount returned to the production company is relatively small. Once the salaried workers have been paid, the producer and other major players usually must wait to receive their share from video and other ancillary markets. Because of this delay, and the suspicion that the major distributors practice misleading accounting, powerful actors and directors may demand “first-dollar” participation, meaning that their share will derive from the earliest money the picture returns to the distributor.

**Majors and Minors** The major distributors all belong to multinational corporations devoted to leisure activities. For example, Time Warner owns Warner Bros., which produces and distributes films while also controlling subsidiary companies New Line Cinema, Picturehouse, and Warner Independent Pictures. In addition, Time Warner owns the Internet provider America On Line. The conglomerate owns broadcast and cable services such as CNN, HBO, and the Cartoon Network; publishing houses and magazines (*Time*, *Life*, *Sports Illustrated*, *People*, and DC Comics); music companies (Atlantic, Elektra); theme parks (Six Flags); and sports teams (the Atlanta Braves and the Atlanta Hawks). Since distribution firms are constantly acquiring and spinning off companies, the overall picture can change unexpectedly. In late 2005, for instance, DreamWorks SKG, a production company that was strongly aligned with Universal, was purchased by Paramount. In 2008, DreamWorks announced that it was leaving Paramount to become an independent company distributing through Universal, before abruptly revealing in early 2009 that its distribution partner would instead be Disney.

Independent and overseas filmmakers usually don’t have access to direct funding from major distribution companies, so they try to presell distribution rights in order to finance production. Once the film is finished, they try to attract distributors’ attention at film festivals. In 2005, after strong reviews at the Cannes Film Festival, Woody Allen’s *Match Point* was picked up for U.S. distribution by DreamWorks SKG. In the same year, the South African production *Tsotsi* won the People’s Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, and its North American rights were bought by Buena Vista.

Specialized distributors, such as the New York firms Kino and Milestone, acquire rights to foreign and independent films for rental to art cinemas, colleges, and museums. As the audience for these films grew during the 1990s, major distributors sought to enter this market. The independent firm Miramax generated enough low-budget hits to be purchased by the Disney corporation. With the benefit of Disney’s funding and wider distribution reach, Miramax movies such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Scream*, *Shakespeare in Love*, and *Hero* earned even bigger box-office receipts. Sony Pictures Classics funded art house fare that sometimes crossed over to the multiplexes, as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* did. More recently, Fox Searchlight released a film that Warner Bros. had turned down, and it achieved popular and critical success with *Slumdog Millionaire*.

By belonging to multinational conglomerates, film distributors gain access to bank financing, stock issues, and other sources of funding. Branch offices in major countries can carry a film into worldwide markets. Sony’s global reach allowed it to release 11 different sound track CDs for *Spider-Man 2*, each one featuring artists familiar in local territories. Just as important, media conglomerates can build *synergy*—the coordination of sectors within the company around a single piece of content, usually one that is “branded.” *Batman* and *The X-Files* are famous instances of how the film, television, publishing, and music wings of a firm can reinforce one another. Every product promotes the others, and each wing of the parent company gets a bit of the business. One film can even advertise another within its story (1.40). Although synergy sometimes fails, multimedia giants are in the best position to take advantage of it.

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

One example of how such a change affects the rest of the industry is discussed in our entry on the absorption of New Line Cinema into Warner Bros. in 2008—“Filling the New Line gap.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2983](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2983).

“Our underlying philosophy is that all media are one.”

—Rupert Murdoch, owner of News Corp. and Twentieth Century Fox



**1.40** In *Lethal Weapon*, as Murtaugh and Riggs leave a hot-dog stand, they pass in front of a movie theater advertising *The Lost Boys*, another Warner Bros. film (released four months after *Lethal Weapon*). The prominence of Pepsi-Cola in this shot is an example of *product placement*—featuring well-known brands in a film in exchange for payment or cross-promotional services.

Distributors arrange release dates, make prints, and launch advertising campaigns. For big companies, distribution can be efficient because the costs can be spread out over many units. One poster design can be used in several markets, and a distributor who orders a thousand prints from a laboratory will pay less per print than the filmmaker who orders one. Large companies are also in the best position to cope with the rise of distribution costs. Today, the average Hollywood film is estimated to cost around \$70.8 million to make and an additional \$35.9 million to distribute.

The risky nature of mass-market filmmaking has led the majors to two distribution strategies: *platforming* and *wide release*. With platforming, the film opens first in a few big cities. It's then gradually expanded to theaters around the country, though it may never play in every community. If the strategy is successful, anticipation for the film builds, and it remains a point of discussion for months. The major distributors tend to use platforming for unusual films, such as *Munich* and *Brokeback Mountain*, which need time to accumulate critical support and generate positive word-of-mouth. Smaller distributors use platforming out of necessity, since they can't afford to make enough prints to open wide, but the gradual accumulation of buzz can work in their favor, too.

In wide release, a film opens at the same time in many cities and towns. In the United States, this requires that thousands of prints be made, so wide release is available only to the deep-pocketed major distributors. Wide release is the typical strategy for mainstream films, with two or three new titles opening each weekend on 2000–4000 screens. A film in wide release may be a midbudget one—a comedy, an action picture, a horror or science fiction film, or a children's animated movie. It may also be a very big-budget item, a *tentpole* picture such as *War of the Worlds* or the latest Harry Potter installment.

Distributors hope that a wide opening signals a “must-see” film, the latest big thing. Just as important, opening wide helps recoup costs faster, since the distributor gets a larger portion of box office receipts early in the run. But it's a gamble. If a film fails in its first weekend, it almost never recovers momentum and can lose money very quickly. Even successful films usually lose revenues by 40 percent or more every week they run. So when two high-budget films open wide the same weekend, the competition is harmful to all. Companies tend to plan their tentpole release dates to avoid head-to-head conflict. On the weekend in May 2005 when the final installment of Fox's *Star Wars* saga opened on nearly 3700 U.S. screens, other distributors offered no wide releases at all. *Episode III—Revenge of the Sith* grossed nearly \$160 million in four days.

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

With help from some colleagues, we examine the recent phenomenon of movie franchises and defend the idea in “Live with it! There'll always be movie sequels. Good thing, too.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=836](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=836).

Wide releasing has extended across the world. As video piracy spread, distribution companies realized the risks of opening wide in the United States and then waiting weeks or months before opening overseas. By then, illegal DVDs and Internet downloads would be available. As a result, U.S. companies have begun experimenting with *day-and-date* releasing for their biggest tentpole pictures. *Matrix: Revolutions* opened simultaneously on 8000 screens in the United States and 10,000 screens in 107 other countries. In a stroke of showmanship, the first screening was synchronized to start at the same minute across all time zones.

**Selling the Film** The distributor provides not only the movie but a publicity campaign. The theater is supplied with a *trailer*, a short preview of the upcoming film. Many executives believe that a trailer is the single most effective piece of advertising. Shown in theaters, it gets the attention of confirmed moviegoers. Posted on an official movie website, YouTube, and many fan sites, a trailer gains mass viewership.

Publicists run press junkets, flying entertainment reporters to interview the stars and principal filmmakers on-set or in hotels. “Infotainment” coverage in print and broadcast media or online build audience awareness. A “making of” documentary, commissioned by the studio, may be shown on cable channels. A prominent film’s premiere creates an occasion for further press coverage (1.41). For journalists, the distributor provides electronic press kits (EPKs), complete with photos, background information, star interviews, and clips of key scenes. Even a modestly budgeted production such as *Waiting to Exhale* had heavy promotion: five separate music videos, star visits to Oprah Winfrey, and displays in thousands of bookstores and beauty salons. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* cost \$5 million to produce, but the distributors spent over \$10 million publicizing it.

In 1999, two young directors found their target audience by creating a website purporting to investigate sightings of the Blair Witch. “The movie was an extension of the website,” noted a studio executive. When *The Blair Witch Project* earned over \$130 million in the United States, distributors woke up to the power of the Internet. Now every film has a web page, enticing viewers with plot information,

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Recently, fan events like Comic-Con have provided a new way for Hollywood distributors to publicize popular films directly to moviegoers, as we discuss in “Comic-Con 2008, Part 2.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2710](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2710).



**1.41** A press conference held at Te Papa Museum in Wellington, New Zealand, as part of the December 1, 2003, world premiere of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*.

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Even Oscar races become the subject of considerable publicity. For one gimmick a studio used to promote the award chances of *There Will Be Blood*, check out “I drink your Oscar promo.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1959](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1959).

## CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Internet sites are no guarantee of success. We speculate on why in “Snakes, no, Borat, yes. Not all Internet publicity is the same.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=269](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=269).

star biographies, games, screen savers, and links to merchandise. Distributors have realized that web surfers will eagerly create “viral marketing” if they’re allowed to participate in getting the word out. Fan sites such as Harry Knowles’s Ain’t It Cool News can publicize upcoming films through steady leaks and exclusive access. Online contests can harvest email addresses for promotion of products and other films. Building on the thriving *Lord of the Rings* web culture, Peter Jackson sent nearly 90 Production Diaries of *King Kong* to a fan site, and they were later released as an elaborate boxed set of DVDs. Wireless communication became the next logical step, with trailers downloaded to cell phones and text-messaging campaigns such as that for *Cry Wolf*.

*Merchandising* is a form of promotion that pays back its investment directly. Manufacturing companies buy the rights to use the film’s characters, title, or images on products. These licensing fees defray production and distribution costs, and if the merchandise catches on, it can provide the distributor with long-term income from an audience that might never have seen the film. Although *Tron* did poorly in theatrical release in 1982, the *Discs of Tron* video game became a popular arcade attraction. Today nearly all major motion pictures rely on merchandising, if only of a novelization or a sound track CD, but children’s films tend to exploit the gamut of possibilities: toys, games, clothing, lunch boxes, and schoolbags. There were *Shrek* ring tones, bowling balls, and hospital scrubs. The basis for George Lucas’s entertainment empire came from his retention of the licensing rights for *Star Wars* merchandise.

A similar tactic is *cross-promotion*, or *brand partnering*, which allows a film and a product line to be advertised simultaneously. The partner companies agree to spend a certain amount on ads, a practice that can shift tens of millions of dollars in publicity costs away from the studios. MGM arranged for the stars of the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* to appear in advertisements for Heineken, Smirnoff, BMW, Visa, and Ericsson. The five partner companies spent nearly \$100 million on the campaign, which publicized the film around the world. As payback, the film included scenes prominently featuring the products. For *Shrek 2*, several companies committed to cobranded ads, including Burger King, Pepsi-Cola, General Mills, Hewlett-Packard, and Activision. Baskin-Robbins stores featured cardboard stand-up figures of Shrek, Donkey, and Puss-in-Boots grouped around a giant “Shrek’s Hot Sludge Sundae.” The U.S. Postal Service was drawn into the act, stamping billions of letters with a postmark featuring Shrek and Donkey. Less mainstream fare has relied on cross-promotion too. Starbucks filled its stores with posters, coffee cup sleeves, and other promotional material for *Akeelah and the Bee*. The documentary *Hoop Dreams* was promoted by Nike and the National Basketball Association.

## Exhibition: Theatrical and Nontheatrical

We’re most familiar with the exhibition phase of the business, the moment when we pay for a movie ticket or drop in a DVD or download a movie. *Theatrical* exhibition involves screening to a public that pays admission, as in commercial movie houses. Other theatrical sites are city arts centers, museums, film festivals, and cinema clubs. *Nontheatrical* exhibition includes all other presentations, such as home video, cable and satellite transmissions, and screenings in schools and colleges.

Public movie exhibition, however, centers on the commercial theater. Most theaters screen wide releases from the major distributors, while others specialize in foreign-language or independent films. In all, the theatrical moviegoing audience is not a colossal one. In the United States, admissions average around 30 million per week, which sounds like a huge number until we realize that the weekly television audience numbers about 200 million. Only about a fifth of the population visits movie theaters regularly.

The most heavily patronized theaters belong to chains or circuits, and in most countries, these circuits are controlled by a few companies. Until the 1980s, most theaters housed only one screen, but exhibitors began to realize that several

GUS VAN SANT: *Your films have dominated the museum circuit in America—Minneapolis, Columbus . . .*

DEREK JARMAN: *Yes, Minneapolis in particular. That’s where the films have actually had their life. They’ve crept into the student curriculum—which is a life. And now they go on through video. I never really feel shut out.*

—Gus Van Sant, director, interviewing Derek Jarman, independent filmmaker

## Movies on Screens: A 2007 Profile of International Theatrical Exhibition

Worldwide production of theatrical motion pictures: **5039 features**

Worldwide attendance: **7.1 billion admissions**

Worldwide number of screens: **147,207**

Worldwide box-office gross receipts: **\$26 billion**

USA box-office receipts: **\$8.84 billion**

Western Europe box-office receipts: **\$7.5 billion**

Japan box-office receipts: **\$1.69 billion**

### Countries and Numbers of Screens

**Highest:** USA 38,974; China 36,112; India 10,189; France 5398; German 4832; Spain 4296; Italy 4071; Mexico 3936; UK 3596; Japan 3221

**Lowest:** Luxembourg 24; Oman 19; Azerbaijan 17; Algeria 10

### Screens per Million People

**Highest:** Iceland 156

**Lowest:** India 9.2

**Others:** USA 129; Sweden 115; Spain 95; Australia 95; Canada 91; UK 59; China 27; Japan 25; Russia 19

### Average Ticket Prices

**Highest:** Norway \$12.80; Denmark \$12.47; Switzerland \$12.17; Sweden \$11.71

**Lowest:** Peru \$1.79; Bolivia \$1.67; Philippines \$1.61; India \$0.53

**Others:** UK \$10.12; Australia \$8.87; France \$8.16; Canada \$7.70; USA \$6.82

### Domestic Films' Share of Box-Office Revenues Abroad

**Highest:** China, 54.5%; Japan, 47.7%; South Korea, 44.6%

**Lowest:** Austria, 1.9%; Lithuania, 2.6%; Portugal, 2.7%

**Others:** Italy, 31.7%; Mexico, 13.2%; Latvia, 5.4%

Source: *Screen Digest*

screens under one roof could reduce costs. The multiplex theater, containing 3 or more screens, and the megaplex, with 16 or more, lured far bigger crowds than a single-screen cinema could. Centralized projection booths and concession stands also cut costs. The boom in building multiplexes allowed exhibitors to upgrade the presentation, offering stadium seating, digital sound, and in some cases Imax and 3D. Multiplexes can also devote occasional screenings to niche markets, as when live opera broadcasts are shown digitally or a weekly morning matinee is aimed at women with babies. Multiplexes are now the norm in North America, Europe, and parts of Asia, with snacks adjusted to local tastes—popcorn and candy nearly everywhere, but also beer (in Europe) and dried squid (in Hong Kong).

The United States is the most lucrative theatrical market, contributing 32 percent of global box office receipts. (See chart.) By nation, Japan comes in second, chiefly because ticket prices are very high. Western European and Asian-Pacific countries follow. Providing about 25 percent of the global box office, western Europe (including the United Kingdom and the Nordic countries) is the most important regional

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Why cater to mothers and babies? We investigate in “Women and children first.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2917](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2917).



market outside North America. For these reasons, filmmakers around the world aim for distribution in these prosperous countries.

The less significant markets are Latin America, eastern Europe, mainland China, India, the Middle East, and Africa. The multiplex strategy has been the wedge opening up these territories. They have few screens per head of population, and entrepreneurs have launched ambitious multiplex projects in Russia, China, and Latin America. Hollywood distributors see overseas multiplexes as a golden opportunity. By investing in theaters overseas, they are guaranteed an outlet for their product. (U.S. antitrust law blocks them from owning theaters at home.) Historically, Hollywood distributors have withheld films from many countries when the local ticket prices were too low to yield much profit. In 2000, the average ticket price in the Philippines hovered around 70¢; in India, 20¢. As underdeveloped countries expanded their middle class, comfortable multiplexes began to attract upscale viewers who wouldn't visit aging single-screen cinemas. By 2007, thanks largely to multiplex expansion, the global average ticket price was \$3.73, an all-time high.

In 1999, four of the 3126 theaters in which *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* played had digital projectors. Those four made headlines, though, and many people predicted that theaters would steadily convert to digital. The advantages were obvious. The thousands of 35mm prints needed for such a wide release cost an enormous amount, and the shipping costs were a burden to distributor and theater alike. Films delivered to theaters on compact hard drives would be far cheaper. With no film to thread, high-paid projectionists would be eliminated; a theater manager could press buttons to start showings, no matter how many screens a theater had. No scratches or dust would accumulate on the print.

The obstacle was that outfitting a single screen with digital projection would cost \$150,000 or more, while 35mm projectors cost only around \$30,000—and many theaters already had projectors that would last for years. The rate of conversion to digital was slower than expected, and the Hollywood studios pressed reluctant exhibitors hard, offering rental discounts. Producers like Jeffrey Katzenberg of DreamWorks Animation and director like James Cameron wanted to work exclusively in 3D, which required digital projectors. In mid-2008, when the scope of the world financial crisis was beginning to become apparent, only 4847 screens of the total 38,159 in the United States had converted to digital projection. The severe economic downturn slowed the changeover even further. In 2009, Katzenberg had to abandon his plan to release *Monsters vs. Aliens* on over 5000 3D screens. He had to settle for about 2000.

Although films are shown in venues like museums, archives, and film clubs, the most important theatrical alternative to commercial movie houses has become the *film festival*.

The first major annual film festival was held in Venice in 1938, and although it had to be suspended during World War II, it was revived afterwards and endures today. Festivals were mounted in Cannes, Berlin, Karlovy Vary, Moscow, Edinburgh, and many other cities. Today there are thousands of festivals all over the world—some large and influential, such as the Toronto Film Festival, and others aimed primarily at bringing unusual films to local audiences, such as the Wisconsin Film Festival in Madison. Some festivals promote specific genres, such as the Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film, or specific subject matter, such as the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

Occasionally, such festivals show major Hollywood films. In 2006, *The Da Vinci Code* was the opening-night presentation at the Cannes International Film Festival. Usually, however, the focus is on less mainstream cinema. Some festivals, like those in Cannes and Pusan, South Korea, include markets where such films can find distributors. The International Film Festival Rotterdam even helps finance films made in developing countries. Not all festivals award prizes, but the bigger ones that do—most notably Cannes, Venice, and Berlin—can draw attention to films that might otherwise get lost among the hundreds of movies circulating among festivals.

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

The Cannes Film Festival is the biggest of them all. We review an excellent history of it in “Cannes: Behind the art, hype, and politics.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=931](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=931).

Festivals offer a distribution and exhibition outlet for films that might never be picked up for release beyond their country of origin. For example, during the mid-1980s, festival programmers were drawn to new and exciting work coming from Iran. Even without much exhibition in theaters, the films of Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and their compatriots became major attractions at festivals. Their high profiles led to occasional films being given commercial distribution in Europe and North America. Although festival screenings didn't make films profitable, the Iranian government sponsored such works as a way for the country and its culture to gain a higher profile internationally.

Passing from festival to festival becomes a mode of distribution for many films, which are sometimes promoted by the stars or directors in question-and-answer sessions. If a film fails to find a theatrical distributor, it may go straight to DVD and to screenings on specialized cable channels, such as the Sundance Channel and the Independent Film Channel in the United States.

Film festivals offer "theatrical" exhibition, since most of them show films in local theaters and sell tickets. At the two-week Palm Springs International Film Festival, for example, one nine-screen multiplex, a three-screen one, an auditorium in a local museum, and one in a community arts center all participate in the festival.

## Ancillary Markets: Taking Movies Beyond the Theater

When a film leaves theatrical distribution, it lives on. Since the late 1970s, video has created a vast array of ancillary markets, and these typically return more money than the theatrical release. Distributors carefully plan the timing of their video release, putting the film first on airline flights and hotel television systems, then on pay-per-view TV, then on DVD release, and eventually on network broadcast, satellite and cable stations, and cable reruns. Video has proved a boon to smaller distributors, too. Foreign and independent films yield slim theatrical returns, but video markets can make these items profitable.

With only a fifth of Americans being regular moviegoers, television, in one form or another, has kept the theatrical market going. During the 1960s, the U.S. television networks began supporting Hollywood production by purchasing broadcast rights to the studios' output. Lower-budget filmmakers depended on sales to European television and U.S. cable outlets. Television created an important nontheatrical market for films, one that film studios have exploited ever since.

When videocassette rentals became popular in the 1980s, studios were initially convinced that their business would suffer. It didn't. During the 1990s, worldwide film attendance increased significantly. In 1997, when the DVD format was introduced, consumers embraced it eagerly. The disc was portable, took up less storage space than a VHS tape, and offered superior picture and sound quality. It could be played on tabletop players, portable players, game consoles, and computers. It encouraged families to install home theaters with big-screen TVs and multiple speakers. And it was widely available. In the United States, the Wal-Mart chain became the main purveyor of DVDs, accounting for over a third of all sales. Again, despite studio fears, even the arrival of the DVD failed to draw people away from theaters.

The major U.S. studios started their own home entertainment divisions to sell DVDs. Because the discs cost less than VHS tapes to create, the studios reaped huge rewards. In 2007, the major U.S. studios earned about \$9.6 billion worldwide in theaters, whereas home video sales and rentals yielded \$24 billion. Most of the video income came from DVD sales, which yield much higher profits to studios than rentals do.

Today the DVD market sustains most of the world's theatrical filmmaking. Yet movie theaters remain central to the exhibition system. A theatrical screening focuses public interest. Critics review the film, television and the press publicize it, and people talk about it. The theatrical run is the film's launching pad, usually determining how successful it will be in ancillary markets. Theatrical hits may account for as much as 80 percent of a video store's or an Internet service's rentals.

*"I've come to realize that my festival run is my theatrical run."*

— Joe Swanberg, independent film director,  
*Hannah Takes the Stairs*

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Have DVDs changed the way movies tell their stories? Not much, we argue in "New media and old storytelling"

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=827](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=827).

Even though the worldwide audience grew during the 1990s, most of the growth was in new markets. U.S. and European attendance showed signs of dwindling slowly. Commercial theaters were competing with home theaters, video games, and Internet entertainment. Since the early 2000s, exhibitors have worried especially about shrinking windows—the time between a film’s theatrical release and its release on DVD and other platforms. The concern is that if the DVD comes out too soon after the theatrical run, people will simply wait for the DVD. Some small distribution firms are experimenting with simultaneously releasing a film to theaters, on DVD, and on cable television, a practice that would eliminate the window that protects the exhibitors.

One lure that exhibitors are using to keep audiences loyal is building Imax screens in multiplexes and showing studio tentpole pictures in that immersive format. *The Polar Express*, *Chicken Little*, and other releases earned a large portion of their returns in Imax and in Imax 3-D. Entries in the Harry Potter and Batman series also play in both Imax and regular theaters. Higher ticket prices benefit exhibitor and film studio alike.

Apart from using the Internet to promote films, Hollywood sells DVDs through online merchants like Amazon.com. These offer a far wider choice of titles than a bricks-and-mortar store, and courier delivery reaches remote parts of the United States and other countries where such stores did not exist. DVD rentals could also be profitable if handled online through Netflix, which offers unlimited rentals for a subscription fee. The big rental chains like Blockbuster have established similar programs in addition to walk-in stores.

The next step for the studios has been to eliminate the cost of physical copies by selling movies as downloads or renting them as streaming video. As broadband access increases in capacity and more people acquire high-speed connections, films of any length can be made available online. Video on demand promises huge profits, and digital encryption can be used to prevent consumers from copying films. The distributors’ aim is to create a system depending less on buying or renting an object than on purchasing a service.

To further this goal, Netflix has expanded its service, added its “Watch Instantly” feature. As part of customers’ monthly fee, they gain access to streaming-video copies of movies at near-DVD quality. Instead of the lengthy wait necessary in downloading a feature film to own, viewers can begin watching the video within a minute but are not able to save or burn a copy. Apple also has a service through its iTunes store, renting access to streaming video of films on PCs, Macs, iPhones, and iPods. Recent movies are available a month after their DVD release, with older titles available for a lower fee.

Despite the swift success of the format, DVDs caused distributors some worries as well. The discs were easy to copy and manufacture in bulk, so piracy took off worldwide. A bootleg DVD of a Hollywood movie could sell for as little as 80¢ in China. Moreover, with nearly 60,000 titles available at the end of 2005, shelf space was at a premium, so discount chains dumped slow-moving titles into bargain bins. DVD retail prices began to drop. The distributors hoped that a new format, the high-definition DVD, would block piracy and recharge the market, coaxing viewers into buying their favorite titles yet again. In the long run, they hoped, consumers would start to bypass packaged media. Far better to purchase films online and, using a convergence device such as XBox 360 or PlayStation, watch them on the family television monitor. But then the movie theater would be even more jeopardized.

Home video in all its varieties brings commercial films into the home. A major additional type of nontheatrical exhibition arises from movies made by amateurs and by aspiring filmmakers. Most of these are shared over the Internet on YouTube and other sites. Some filmmakers, however, want to show their work before a live audience.

To meet that desire, festivals of DIY films have arisen, including the DIY Film Festival, based in Los Angeles and traveling to other cities. Another started in 2001, when 10 small teams of filmmakers in Washington, DC, accepted a challenge to make a short film in 48 hours. All the completed shorts would be screened as a

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Many movies are available on the Internet, for legal or illegal downloading. That doesn’t mean every movie ever made will someday be online. We talk about why with two restoration experts in “The celestial multiplex.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=595](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=595).

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

For thoughts on watching movies on iPods, see “Area man lives in fear that attractive woman will ask what’s on his iPod.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=40](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=40).

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

We talk about bootleg DVD covers in “Our first anniversary, with a note on the unexpected fruits of film piracy.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1351](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1351).

program immediately after the deadline. The result was the 48 Hours Film Project, which has offered similar challenges annually in an increasing number of cities, totaling over 70 by 2009. More informally, the Kino movement began in 1999 in Montréal with the slogan “Do well with nothing, do better with little, and do it right now!” The movement consists of local chapters in about 50 cities internationally. These typically meet once a month to screen their members’ latest films.

With the spread of small-format video capacity to cell phones and the availability of cheap post-production software, more people can shoot moving images with no training. Much of what they shoot remains raw footage. It may be shown to friends or family and then erased. Handheld personal music devices have added video screens, so that movies can be viewed on the go. Digital technology has made nontheatrical film viewing more casual and omnipresent than ever.

## Artistic Implications of Distribution and Exhibition

Grosses, synergy, ticket prices, and movies on video game consoles might seem very remote from issues of film as an art. Yet film is a technological medium usually aimed at a broad public, so the ways in which movies are circulated and shown can affect viewers’ experiences. Home video turns viewing into a small-group or individual activity, but seeing a film in a packed theater yields a different response. Comedies, most people feel, seem funnier in a theater, where infectious laughter can ripple through a crowd. Filmmakers are aware of this difference, and they try to pace comedies slowly enough that crowd laughter doesn’t drown out a key line.

Video distribution and exhibition have created new choices in the realm of storytelling. Until the 1980s, people couldn’t rewatch a movie whenever they wished. With videotape and, especially DVDs, viewers can pore over a film. Bonus materials encourage them to rerun the movie to spot things they missed. Some filmmakers have taken advantage of this opportunity by creating *puzzle films* like *Memento* and *Donnie Darko*, which fans scrutinize for clues to plot enigmas (1.42, 1.43). Video versions can complicate the theatrical release version, as the extra ending of *The Butterfly Effect* does. Some interactive DVD movies permit the viewers to choose how the plot develops. The DVD of Greg Marks’s *11:14* allows you to enter parallel story lines at various points, in effect recasting the film’s overall form.

As the Internet becomes a more common platform for distribution, we should expect variations in narrative form. Short-form storytelling is already at home online, in cartoons and comedy. Events like the festivals run by the 48 Hour Film Project also encourage the making of short films, especially given the assumption that most of the films will later be posted on the Internet. We’re likely to find movies designed specifically for mobile phones; television series like *24* are already creating “mobisodes” branching off the broadcast story line. The web is the logical place for interactive films that use hyperlinks to amplify or detour a line of action.

Marketing and merchandising can extend a theatrical film’s story in intriguing ways. The *Star Wars* novels and video games give the characters more adventures and expand spectators’ engagement with the movies. The *Memento* website hinted at ways to interpret the film. The *Matrix* video games supplied key information for the films’ plots, while the second movie in the trilogy sneaked in hints for winning the games. As a story world shifts from platform to platform, a multimedia saga is created, and viewers’ experiences will shift accordingly. *Matrix* viewers who’ve never played the games understand the story somewhat differently from those who have.

Style can be affected by distribution and exhibition, as is evident in image size. From the 1920s through the 1950s, films were designed to be shown in large venues (1.44). A typical urban movie house seated 1500 viewers and boasted a screen 50 feet wide. This scale gave the image great presence, and it allowed details to be seen easily. Directors could stage dialogue scenes showing several characters in the frame, all of whom would be prominent (1.45). In a theater of that time, a tight close-up would have had a powerful impact.

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

In this age of new media, have movies lost their importance to audiences? Some would say yes, but we argue against that idea in “Movies still matter.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=475](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=475).

Have Hollywood films declined in popularity internationally? Again, we don’t believe it, as we explain in “World rejects Hollywood blockbusters!?”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=458](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=458).

“The *Matrix* is entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium.”

— Henry Jenkins, media analyst

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

For some pictures of a spectacularly restored movie palace, see “A tale of 2—make that 1 and 1/3 screens,” at

[www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=3941](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=3941).

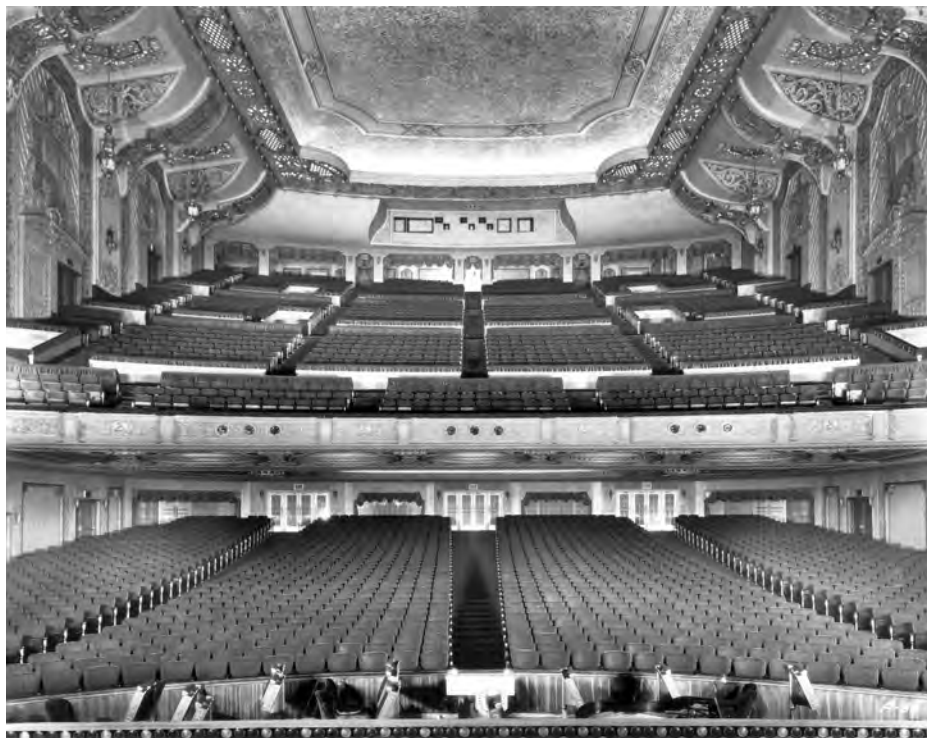
**1.42** In *Magnolia*, the extraordinary meteorological event at the climax is predicted by the recurring numerals 82, referring to chapter and verse in the biblical book of Exodus.



**1.43** In *Magnolia*, the figure 82 appears as coils in the rooftop hose.



**1.44** The interior of the Paramount Theater in Portland, Oregon, built in 1928. Capacity was 3000 seats, at a time when the city population was about 300,000. Note the elaborate decoration on the walls and ceilings, typical of the “picture palaces” of the era.



When television became popular in the 1950s, its image was rather unclear and very small, in some cases only 10 inches diagonally. Early TV shows tended to rely on close shots (1.46), which could be read easily on the small monitor. In the 1960s and 1970s, movie attendance dropped and theaters became smaller. As screens shrank, filmmakers began to rely more on close-ups in the TV manner. This tendency has continued until today. Although modern multiplex screens can be fairly large, audiences have become accustomed to scenes that consist chiefly of big faces (1.47). Now that most films are viewed on video, and many will be watched on handheld devices, it seems likely that commercial films will continue to treat conversation scenes in tight close-ups. In this respect, technology and exhibition circumstances have created stylistic constraints. Yet some contemporary filmmakers have stuck to the older technique (1.48), in effect demanding that audiences view their films on a large theater screen.

There's also the matter of image proportions, and here again, television exhibition exercised some influence. Since the mid-1950s, virtually all theaters have shown films on screens that were wider than the traditional TV monitor. For decades, when movies were shown on television, they were cropped, with certain areas simply left out (1.49–1.51). In response, some filmmakers composed their shots to include a “safe area,” placing the key action in a spot that could fit snugly on the television screen. This created subtle differences in a shot's visual effects



**1.45** On the large screen of a picture palace, all the figures and faces in this shot from *The Thin Man* (1934) would have been quite visible.



**1.46** *Dragnet* (1953): Early television relied heavily on close-ups because of the small screen size.



**1.47** *Red Eye*: Extreme close-ups of actors' faces are common in modern cinema, due partly to the fact that most viewing takes place on video formats.



**1.48** In *Flowers of Shanghai*, director Hou Hsiao-hsien builds every scene out of full shots of several characters. The result loses information on a small display and is best seen on a theater screen.

*“Not until seeing [North by Northwest] again on the big screen did I realize conclusively what a gigantic difference screen size does make. . . . This may be yet another reason why younger people have a hard time with older pictures: they've only seen them on the tube, and that reduces films' mystery and mythic impact.”*

— Peter Bogdanovich, director, *The Last Picture Show* and *Mask*

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

We explore another peril of watching films on video—logos superimposed on films—in “Bugs: the secret history.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=3296](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=3296).



**1.49** In Otto Preminger's *Advise and Consent*, a single shot in the original . . .



**1.50** . . . becomes a pair of shots in the television version . . .



**1.51** . . . thus losing the sense of actors simultaneously reacting to each other.



**1.52** As Rose, the heroine of *Titanic*, feels the exhilaration of “flying” on the ship’s prow, the strongly horizontal composition emphasizes her outstretched arms as wings against a wide horizon.



**1.53** In the video version, nearly all sense of the horizontal composition has disappeared.

“What about a mobile version of every film? Maybe in the future there will be four versions—film, TV, DVD, and mobile. No one knows yet.”

— Arvind Ethan David, managing director of multimedia company Slingshot

**(1.52, 1.53).** Relying on the safe area often encouraged filmmakers to employ more *singles*, shots showing only one player. In a wide-screen frame, a single can compensate for the cropping that TV would demand **(1.54)**.

Today most cable and DVD versions of films are *letterboxed*. Dark bands at the top and bottom of the screen approximate the film’s theatrical proportions. The great majority of filmmakers approve of this, but Stanley Kubrick preferred that video versions of some of his films be shown “full frame.” This is why we’ve reproduced the shots from *The Shining* (2.7, 2.8) full-frame, even though nobody who watched the movie in a theater saw so much headroom. Almost no commercial theaters can show films full-frame today, but Jean-Luc Godard usually composes his shots for that format; you couldn’t letterbox **1.55** without undermining the composi-



**1.54** *Catch Me If You Can*: As with many modern wide-screen films, the essential information on screen left would fit within a traditional television frame. Still, cropping this image would lose a secondary piece of information—the pile of take-out food cartons that implies that Agent Hanratty has been at his desk for days.



**1.55** A very dense shot from the climax of Godard's *Detective*. Although Godard's films are sometimes cropped for theater screenings and DVD versions, the compositions show to best advantage in the older, squarer format.



**1.56** *Angel Face* as rendered on an incorrectly set widescreen television monitor.

tion. In these instances, distribution and theatrical exhibition initially constrained the filmmakers' choices, but video versions expanded them.

The introduction of widescreen TV sets has created a new problem for film images. The screens of traditional sets had a 4:3 ratio, partly because a lot of programming either consisted of old films or was shot on film. Widescreen TVs may be fine for recent films, but older material can suffer—including TV shows originally made to fit standard sets. A widescreen TV image has an aspect ratio of 16:9. If we multiply a 4:3 ratio by three, we get 12:9. So the widescreen image is a third wider than the standard one. Some sets have controls to adjust the ratio and allow black bands on the sides to provide “windowboxing,” the vertical equivalent of letterboxing. But if there's no windowboxing, the picture is stretched horizontally, so that people and objects look squashed (**1.56**). Many viewers do not know how to change the ratio, and some video monitors make it difficult to correct the problem.

Even product placement offers some artistic opportunities. We're usually distracted when a Toyota truck or a box of Frosted Flakes pops up on the screen, but *Back to the Future* cleverly integrates brands into its story. Marty McFly is catapulted from 1985 to 1955. Trapped in a period when diet soda didn't exist, he asks for a Pepsi Free at a soda fountain, but the counterwoman says that it's not free—he'll have to pay for it. Later, buying a bottle of Pepsi from a vending machine, Marty tries frantically to twist off the cap, but his father-to-be George McFly casually pops it off at the machine's built-in opener. Pepsi soft drinks weave through the movie, reasserting Marty's comic inability to adjust to his parents' era—and perhaps stirring some nostalgia in viewers who remember how bits of everyday life have changed since their youth.

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Jean-Luc Godard's films present special challenges to the projectionist and DVD producer, as we show in “Godard comes in many shapes and sizes.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1592](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1592).



## SUMMARY

The art of film depends on technology, from the earliest experiments in apparent motion to the most recent computer programs. It also depends on people who use that technology, who come together to make films, distribute them, and show them. As long as a film is aimed at a public, however small, it enters into the social dynamic of production, distribution, and exhibition. Out of technology and work

processes, filmmakers create an experience for audiences. Along the way, they inevitably make choices about form and style. What options are available to them? How might filmmakers organize the film as a whole? How might they draw on the techniques of the medium? The next two parts of this book survey the possibilities.

## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

### The Making of *Collateral*

Our case study of *Collateral*'s production derives in part from the making-of supplement, "City of Night: The Making of *Collateral*." This 39-minute documentary covers the decisions about filming on HD-video, about lighting the interior of the taxi, and about the three-movement musical track that accompanies the climax. This and some short films on the actors rehearsing and on the special effects of the final sequence appear in the two-disc DVD set (DreamWorks Home Entertainment #91734; this DVD was issued only in a letterboxed version).

Jay Holben's *American Cinematographer* article "Hell on Wheels" (pp. 40–51 in the August 2004 issue) deals in greater detail with the cameras used in the production and with the lighting. David Goldsmith describes the original version of the script, set in New York City, in "*Collateral*: Stuart Beattie's Character-Driven Thriller," *Creative Screenwriting*, 11, 4 (2004): 50–53. Two online articles that deal with the film's filmmaking choices and style are Bryant Frazer's "How DP Dion Beebe Adapted to HD for Michael Mann's *Collateral*," on the website of the International Cinematographers Guild (n.d.), [www.cameraguild.com/interviews/chat\\_beebe/beebe\\_collateral.html](http://www.cameraguild.com/interviews/chat_beebe/beebe_collateral.html), and Daniel Restuccio's "Seeing in the Dark for *Collateral*: Director Michael Mann Re-invents Digital Filmmaking" (August 2004), [findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0HNN/is\\_8\\_19/ai\\_n6171215/pg\\_1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0HNN/is_8_19/ai_n6171215/pg_1).

### The Illusion of Cinematic Motion

For about 80 years, writers on film have maintained that the reason we see movement in movies is due to "persistence of vision." Today, no researcher into perception is likely to accept this explanation. Several optical processes are involved, but as we indicate on p. 000, the two most prominent are flicker fusion and apparent motion. More specifically, the stimuli in a film instantiate "short-range" apparent motion, in which small-scale changes in the display trigger activity in different parts of the visual cortex. Filmic motion takes place in our brain, not on our retina. For an explanation of

these ideas, and a thorough critique of the traditional explanation, see Joseph and Barbara Anderson, "The Myth of Persistence of Vision Revisited," *Journal of Film and Video*, 45, 1 (Spring 1993): 3–12. It is available online at [www.uca.edu/org/ccsmi/ccsmi/classicwork/myth%20revisited.htm](http://www.uca.edu/org/ccsmi/ccsmi/classicwork/myth%20revisited.htm).

### Film's Roots in Technology

André Bazin suggests that humankind dreamed of cinema long before it actually appeared: "The concept men had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven" (*What Is Cinema?* vol. 1 [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967], p. 17). Still, whatever its antecedents in ancient Greece and the Renaissance, the cinema became technically feasible only in the 19th century.

Motion pictures depended on many discoveries in various scientific and industrial fields: optics and lens making, the control of light (especially by means of arc lamps), chemistry (involving particularly the production of cellulose), steel production, precision machining, and other areas. The cinema machine is closely related to other machines of the period. For example, engineers in the 19th century designed machines that could intermittently unwind, advance, perforate, advance again, and wind up a strip of material at a constant rate. The drive apparatus on cameras and projectors is a late development of a technology that had already made feasible the sewing machine, the telegraph tape, and the machine gun. The 19-century origins of film, based on mechanical and chemical processes, are particularly evident today, since we've become accustomed to electronic and digital media.

On the history of film technology, see Barry Salt's *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (London: Starword, 1983); and Leo Enticknap, *Moving Image Technology: From Zoetrope to Digital* (London: Wallflower, 2005). Douglas Gomery has pioneered the economic history of film technology: For a survey, see Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985). The most comprehensive reference book on the subject is Ira Konigsberg, *The Complete Film Dictionary* (New York: Penguin, 1997). An entertaining

appreciation of film technology is Nicholson Baker's "The Projector," in his *The Size of Thoughts* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 36–50. Brian McKernan provides an overview of the introduction and development of digital technology in *Digital Cinema: The Revolution in Cinematography, Post-production, and Distribution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005).

## Film Distribution and Exhibition

For comprehensive surveys of the major "content providers" today, see Benjamin M. Compaine and Douglas Gomery, *Who Owns the Media? Competition and Concentration in the Mass Media Industry* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000); Barry R. Litman, *The Motion Picture Mega-Industry* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998); and Edward S. Herman and Robert W. McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism* (London: Cassell, 1997).

Edward J. Epstein offers an excellent overview of the major distributors' activities in *The Big Picture: The New Logic of Money and Power in Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 2005). Douglas Gomery's *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: British Film Institute, 2005) traces the history of the distributors, showing their roots in vertically integrated studios, which controlled production and exhibition as well.

On moviegoing, see Bruce A. Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988); Gregory A. Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); and Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen, eds., *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007). Douglas Gomery's *Shared Pleasures: A History of Moviegoing in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992) offers a history of U.S. exhibition.

## Stages of Film Production

A very good survey of production is Stephen Asch and Edward Pincus's *The Filmmaker's Handbook* (New York: Plume, 1999). For the producer, see Paul N. Lazarus III, *The Film Producer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) and Lynda Obst's acerbic memoir, *Hello, He Lied* (New York: Broadway, 1996). Art Linson, producer of *The Untouchables* and *Fight Club*, has written two entertaining books about his role: *A Pound of Flesh: Perilous Tales of How to Produce Movies in Hollywood* (New York: Grove Press, 1993) and *What Just Happened? Bitter Hollywood Tales from the Front Line* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002). The details of organizing preparation and shooting are explained in Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's *The Film Director's Team: A Practical Guide for Production Managers, Assistant Directors, and All Filmmakers* (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 1992). For a survey of directing, see Tom Kingdon, *Total Directing: Integrating Camera and Performance in*

*Film and Television* (Beverly Hills, CA: Silman-James, 2004). Many "making-of" books include examples of storyboards; see also Steven D. Katz, *Film Directing Shot by Shot* (Studio City, CA: Wiese, 1991). On setting and production design, see Ward Preston, *What an Art Director Does* (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 1994). Norman Hollyn's *The Film Editing Room Handbook* (Los Angeles: Lone Eagle, 1999) offers a detailed account of image and sound editing procedures. Computer-based methods are discussed in Gael Chandler, *Cut by Cut: Editing Your Film or Video* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese, 2004). A wide range of job titles, from Assistant Director to Mouth/Beak Replacement Coordinator, is explained by the workers themselves in Barbara Baker, *Let the Credits Roll: Interviews with Film Crew* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).

Several books explain how independent films are financed, produced, and sold. The most wide-ranging are David Rosen and Peter Hamilton, *Off-Hollywood: The Making and Marketing of Independent Films* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), and Gregory Goodell, *Independent Feature Film Production: A Complete Guide from Concept Through Distribution*, 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). Billy Frolick's *What I Really Want to Do Is Direct* (New York: Plume, 1997) follows seven film-school graduates trying to make low-budget features. Christine Vachon, producer of *Boys Don't Cry* and *Far from Heaven*, shares her insights in *Shooting to Kill* (New York: Avon, 1998). See also Mark Polish, Michael Polish, and Jonathan Sheldon, *The Declaration of Independent Filmmaking: An Insider's Guide to Making Movies Outside of Hollywood* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2005).

In *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* (New York: Random House, 1990), Roger Corman reviews his career in exploitation cinema. A sample passage: "In the first half of 1957 I capitalized on the sensational headlines following the Russians' launch of their Sputnik satellite. . . . I shot *War of the Satellites* in a little under ten days. No one even knew what the satellite was supposed to look like. It was whatever I said it should look like" (pp. 44–45). Corman also supplies the introduction to Lloyd Kaufman's *All I Needed to Know about Filmmaking I Learned from the Toxic Avenger: The Shocking True Story of Troma Studios* (New York: Berkeley, 1998), which details the making of such Troma classics as *The Class of Nuke 'Em High* and *Chopper Chicks in Zombie-town*. See as well the interviews collected in Philip Gaines and David J. Rhodes, *Micro-Budget Hollywood: Budgeting (and Making) Feature Films for \$50,000 to \$500,000* (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 1995).

John Pierson, a producer, distributor, and festival scout, traces how *Clerks*; *She's Gotta Have It*; *sex, lies, and videotape*; and other low-budget films found success in *Spike, Mike, Slackers, and Dykes* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1995). Emanuel Levy's *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York: New York University Press, 1999) provides a historical survey. The early

history of an important distributor of independent films, Miramax, is examined in Alissa Perren, “sex, lies and marketing: Miramax and the Development of the Quality Indie Blockbuster,” *Film Quarterly* 55, 2 (Winter 2001–2002): 30–39.

We can learn a great deal about production from careful case studies. See Rudy Behlmer, *America’s Favorite Movies: Behind the Scenes* (New York: Ungar, 1982); Aljean Harmetz, *The Making of “The Wizard of Oz”* (New York: Limelight, 1984); John Sayles, *Thinking in Pictures: The Making of the Movie “Matewan”* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Ronald Haver, “A Star Is Born”: *The Making of the 1954 Movie and Its 1985 Restoration* (New York: Knopf, 1988); Stephen Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of “Psycho”* (New York: Dembuer, 1990); Paul M. Sammon, *Future Noir: The Making of “Blade Runner”* (New York: HarperPrism, 1996); and Dan Aulier, “Vertigo”: *The Making of a Hitchcock Classic* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998). John Gregory Dunne’s *Monster: Living off the Big Screen* (New York: Vintage, 1997) is a memoir of eight years spent rewriting the script that became *Up Close and Personal*. Many of Spike Lee’s productions have been documented with published journals and production notes; see, for example, “Do The Right Thing”: *A Spike Lee Joint* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989). For the independent scene, Vachon’s *Shooting to Kill*, mentioned above, documents the making of Todd Haynes’s *Velvet Goldmine*.

## Moviemakers Speak

Collections of interviews with filmmakers have become common in recent decades. We will mention interviews with designers, cinematographers, editors, sound technicians, and others in the chapters on individual film techniques. The director, however, supervises the entire process of filmmaking, so we list here some of the best interview books: Peter Bogdanovich, *Who the Devil Made It* (New York: Knopf, 1997); Mike Goodrich, *Directing* (Crans-Prés-Céligny, 2002); Jeremy Kagan, *Directors Close Up* (Boston: Focal Press, 2000); Andrew Sarris, ed., *Interviews with Film Directors* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967); and Gerald Duchovnay, *Film Voices: Interviews from Post Script* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004). Paul Cronin has collected the writings of Alexander Mackendrick in *On Filmmaking* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004). Mackendrick was a fine director and a superb teacher, and the book offers incisive advice on all phases of production, from screenwriting (“Use coincidence to get characters into trouble, not out of trouble”) to editing (“The geography of the scene must be immediately apparent to the audience”). See also Laurent Tirard, *Moviemakers’ Master Class: Private Lessons from the World’s Foremost Directors* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2002). Some important directors have written books on their craft, including Edward Dmytryk, *On Screen Directing* (Boston: Focal Press, 1984); David Mamet, *On Directing Film* (New York: Penguin, 1992); Sidney Lumet,

*Making Movies* (New York, Knopf, 1995); and Mike Figgis, *Digital Filmmaking* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2007).

Rick Lyman had the intriguing idea of asking a director or performer to choose a film and comment on it as it was screening. The results are in *Watching Movies: The Biggest Names in Cinema Talk About the Films That Matter Most* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003). See also Mark Cousins’s *Scene by Scene: Film Actors and Directors Discuss Their Work* (London: Laurence King, 2002).

## Screenwriting and Rules

In mass-production filmmaking, the screenwriter is expected to follow traditional storytelling patterns. For several decades, Hollywood has called for scripts about strong central characters who struggle to achieve well-defined goals. According to most experts, a script ought to have a three-act structure, with the first-act climax coming about a quarter of the way into the film, the second-act climax appearing about three-quarters of the way through, and the climax of the final act resolving the protagonist’s problem. Writers will also be expected to include *plot points*, twists that turn the action in new directions.

These formulas are discussed in Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Delta, 1979); Linda Seger, *Making a Good Script Great* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1987); and Michael Hauge, *Writing Screenplays That Sell* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988). Kristin Thompson has argued that many finished films have not three but four major parts, depending on how the protagonist defines and changes important goals. See her *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). See also David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Older but still useful books on screenwriting are Eugene Vale, *The Technique of Screenplay Writing* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1972), and Lewis Herman, *A Practical Manual of Screen Playwriting for Theater and Television Films* (New York: New American Library, 1974).

Filmmaker J. J. Murphy identifies and examines the distinctive conventions of independent screenplay writing in *Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

Roger Ebert provides an entertaining collection of overworked storytelling conventions in *Ebert’s Little Movie Glossary* (Kansas City: Andrews & McMeel, 1994). Learn about “The Fallacy of the Talking Killer” and “The Moe Rule of Bomb Disposal.”

## Small-Scale Production

There are few studies of artisanal and collective film production, but here are some informative works. On Jean Rouch, see Mick Eaton, ed., *Anthropology—Reality—*

*Cinema: The Films of Jean Rouch* (London: British Film Institute, 1979). The makers of *Harlan County, U.S.A.* and other independent documentaries discuss their production methods in Alan Rosenthal, *The Documentary Conscience: A Casebook in Film Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Maya Deren's work is analyzed in P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Stan Brakhage ruminates on his approach to filmmaking in *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings* (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1982). For information on other experimentalists, see Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), and David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

Collective film production is the subject of Bill Nichols, *Newsreel: Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left* (New York: Arno, 1980), and Michael Renov, "Newsreel: Old and New—Towards an Historical Profile," *Film Quarterly* 41, 1 (Fall 1987): 20–33. Collective production in film and other media is discussed in John Downing, *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

The DIY movement has largely been fostered on the Internet. For the DIY Film Festival, see its homepage, [www.diyconvention.com/](http://www.diyconvention.com/). The 48 Hour Film Project is here: [www.48hourfilm.com/](http://www.48hourfilm.com/). Many of the films can be found on the website or on YouTube, where a search on either "DIY film" or "48 Hour Film Project" yields thousands of results. For a list of the cities that hold screenings of locally made 48 Hour films, see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/48\\_Hour\\_Film\\_Project](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/48_Hour_Film_Project). New Zealand has created its own version, 48Hours; see [www.48hours.co.nz](http://www.48hours.co.nz). Films from this festival can be found at YouTube by searching "48 Hour New Zealand."

## Production Stills Versus Frame Enlargements

A film may live in our memory as much through photographs as through our experiences of the movie. The photograph may be a copy of a single frame taken from the finished film; this is usually called a *frame enlargement*. Most movie photographs we see in books and magazines, however, are *production stills*, images shot by a still photographer on the set.

Production stills are usually photographically clearer than frame enlargements, and they can be useful for studying details of setting or costume. But they differ from the image on the filmstrip. Usually, the still photographer rearranges and relights the actors and takes the shot from an angle and distance not comparable to that shown in the finished film. Frame enlargements therefore offer a much more faithful record of the finished film.

For example, both **1.57** and **1.58** have been used to illustrate discussion of Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game*. In

1.57, a production still, the actors have been posed for the most balanced composition and the clearest view of all three. It is not, however, faithful to the finished film. The actual shot from the film is shown in 1.58. The frame enlargement shows that the composition is looser than that of the production still. The frame enlargement also reveals that Renoir uses the central doorway to suggest action taking place in depth. Here, as often happens, a production still does not capture important features of the director's visual style.

Virtually all of the photographs in this book are frame enlargements.



**1.57** A production still from Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*.



**1.58** A frame from *The Rules of the Game*.

## Websites

### General Reference

**www.imdb.com/** A basic reference for films, people, and companies worldwide. The Power Search is particularly helpful. Not infallible, so double-check on other sites.

**www.afi.chadwyck.com/** The American Film Institute catalogue of U.S. motion pictures. Offers detailed film-by-film information, including extensive plot synopses. Proprietary site accessed through libraries.

**www.fii.chadwyck.com/** A Film Index International site containing bibliographical information about films and people. Accessed through libraries.

For a description of two useful podcasts on filmmaking and the movie industry, see “Movies on the radio,” at [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=902](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=902).

### On the Film Industry

**www.cjr.org/tools/owners/** The *Columbia Journalism Review* site on media conglomerates, with up-to-date lists of holdings.

**www.boxofficemojo.com/** Lists U.S. and international gross receipts for current films, as well as records of films released in previous decades.

**www.indiewire.com/** Provides current information on U.S. independent cinema.

**www.wis-kino.com/kino.htm/** Offers links to the worldwide Kino movement.

**www.aintitcoolnews.com/** A popular film fansite hosted by Harry Knowles.

**www.mpa.org/** The official site of the major distribution companies, with heavy emphasis on antipiracy activities.

**www.natonline.org/** The official site of the National Association of Theatre Owners, with some statistics.

For a description of two useful podcasts on filmmaking and the movie industry, see “Movies on the radio,” at [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=902](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=902).

## Recommended DVDs

*Sunday Morning Shootout: Best of Season 1.* Peter Bart, editor of *Variety*, and Peter Guber of Mandalay Pictures discuss current industry trends. Our marginal quotation from Stacy Sher comes from the third disc in this set.

## Recommended DVD Supplements

Before laser discs and DVDs, making-of documentaries weren't common, but some documentaries on older films have been put together using modern cast and crew interviews, finished footage, still photography, and other material. Excellent examples of these include “The Making of *American Graffiti*,” “The Making of *Jaws*,” “The Making of *Amadeus*,” “Guns for Hire: The Making of *The Magnificent Seven*,” and “Destination Hitchcock: The Making

of *North by Northwest*.” The supplements for *Alien* are grouped in “preproduction,” “production,” and “postproduction” sections, and a particularly good example of a screen test (Sigourney Weaver) is included. “The Making of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*” is one of several supplements on the DVD for that film, making it an unusually thorough treatment of an older film (1954).

Once the laser disc and especially the DVD age began, supplements came to be a part of the filmmaking process, with on-set footage and interviews planned in advance. A good early example is “The Making of *Jurassic Park*,” with its accompanying supplements. As the popularity of DVD supplements became apparent, longer and more systematic supplements were concocted. An outstanding example is “The Hundred Days” documentary for *Master and Commander*. The extended-edition DVDs for *The Lord of the Rings* raised the bar for in-depth coverage, with two supplemental discs for each entry in the trilogy.

Supplements often include storyboard images as galleries. Director Ridley Scott trained in painting and design, and some of the impressive storyboard images that he created for *Alien* are covered in its supplements. The “Story” section of *Toy Story*'s documentaries shows scenes of a storyboard artist explaining the action to the main filmmakers, with the sketches shown side-by-side with his presentation. Later the storyboard images are compared with the final images.

Many making-ofs stick to the most prominent parts of filmmaking: design, musical composition, casting. Occasionally, however, unusual aspects of the process receive coverage. Take animal wrangling. Horses are the obvious topic, and the “Home of the Horse Lords” track of the *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* deals with them. “Inside the Labyrinth,” a making-of for *The Silence of the Lambs*, includes a moth wrangler. One of the funniest of such segments must be “Attack of the Squirrels” on the *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* DVD.

Some unusual supplements include an unconventional production diary for the independent film *Magnolia* and an evocative 8-minute compilation, “T2: On the Set,” of footage from the shooting of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. “The Making of *My Own Private Idaho*” demonstrates well how cost-cutting can be done on a low-budget indie.

As previsualization becomes more common, DVD supplements are beginning to include selections: “Previsualization” on the *War of the Worlds* disc (where the animatics run in split screen, beside finished footage), animatics for each part of *The Lord of the Rings*, and the “Day 27: Previsualization” entry in *King Kong: Peter Jackson's Production Diaries*, as well as a featurette on previz, “The Making of a Shot: The T-Rex Fight” (including the scene in 1.26).

The marketing of a film seldom gets described on DVD, apart from the fact that trailers and posters come with most discs. There are rare cases of coverage of the still photographer making publicity shots on-set: “Taking Testimonial Pictures” (*A Hard Day's Night*) and “Day 127: Unit Photog-

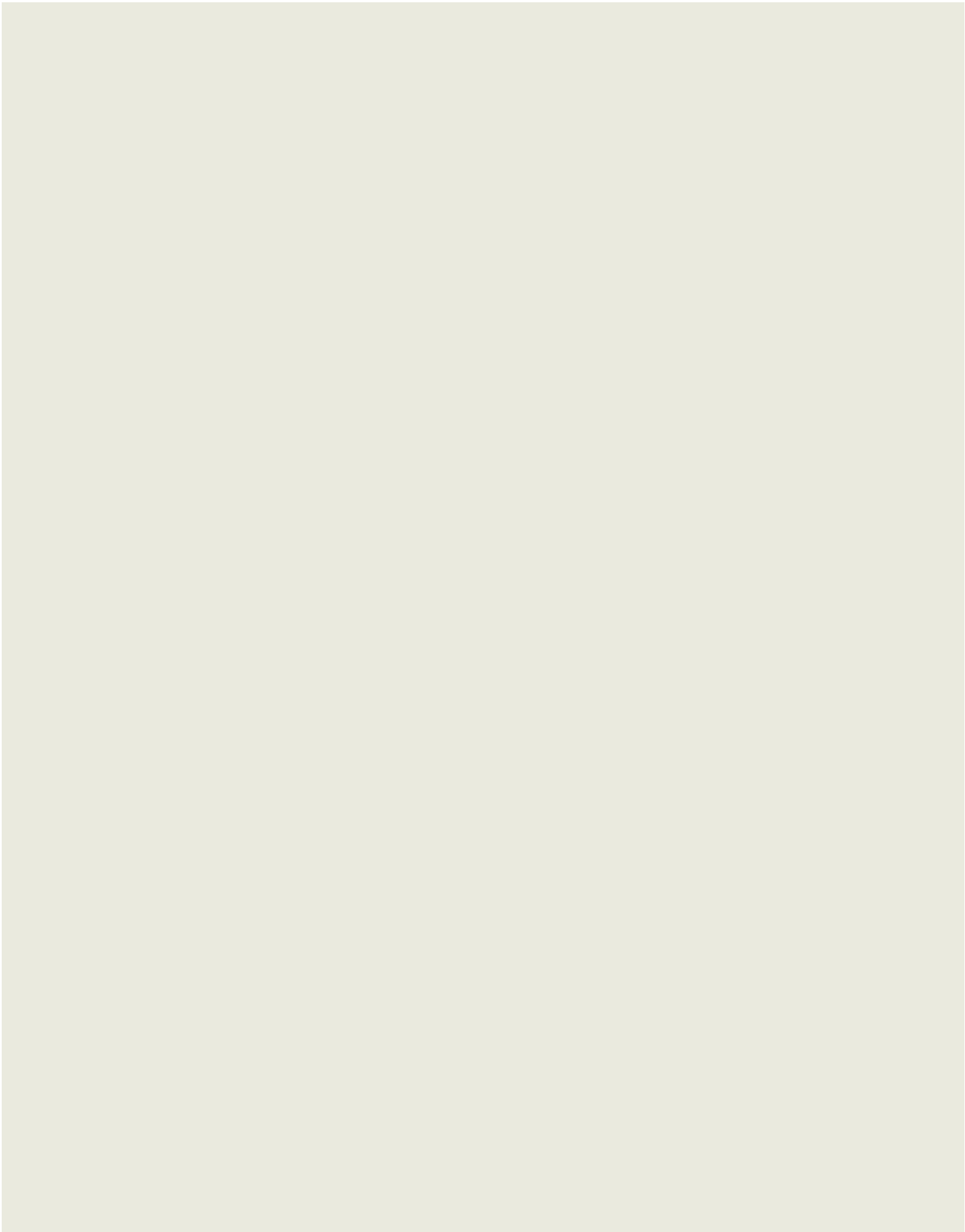
raphy” (*King Kong: Peter Jackson’s Production Diaries*). The same two DVDs include “Dealing with ‘The Men from the Press,’” an interview with the Beatles’ publicist, and “Day 53: International Press Junket,” where *King Kong*’s unit publicist squires a group of reporters around a working set.

In general, the *King Kong: Peter Jackson’s Production Diaries* discs deal with many specifics of filmmaking and distribution that we mention in this chapter: “Day 25: Clapperboards,” “Day 62: Cameras” (where camera operators working on-set open their machines to show how they work), “Day 113: Second Unit,” and “Day 110: Global Partner Summit,” on a distributors’ junket.

Agnès Varda includes a superb film-essay on the making of *Vagabond* in the French DVD, which bears the original title *Sans toit ni loi*. (Both the film and the supplements have English subtitles.) Director Varda’s charmingly personal making-of covers the production, marketing, and showcasing of *Vagabond* at international film festivals. Varda also prepared an affectionate making-of featurette about her husband Jacques Demy’s 1967 *Young Girls of Rochefort*, which is available on the British Film Institute’s DVD release.

*Hellboy II: The Golden Army* has a lengthy making-of documentary, “*Hellboy: In Service of the Demon*,” that touches on most phases of production. *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* has two detailed, surprisingly candid supplements: “Charting the Return,” on preproduction, and “According to Plan,” on principal photography. *The Golden Compass* has a series of short documentaries that are more interesting than their bland titles suggest. “Finding Lyra Belaqua” traces the casting process rather than simply showing audition tapes; “The Launch” deals briefly with press junkets and even interviews a junket producer. Other useful making-ofs are “Deciphering Zodiac” (*Zodiac*) and “I Am Iron Man” (*Iron Man*).

For more details on some of the supplements we have recommended in *Film Art*, see “Beyond praise: DVD supplements that really tell you something,” at [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1339](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1339), and “Beyond praise 2: More DVD supplements that really tell you something,” at [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=4004](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=4004). On the DVD of *The Da Vinci Code*, discussed in that entry, see “Another little *Da Vinci Code* mystery,” at [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=224](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=224). Further entries in this series will be added occasionally.



## PART TWO

# 2

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.

## Film Form



# 2

CHAPTER



## 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 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. A song asks us to expect certain developments in the melody. A 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 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 or 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.

Like a painting or a poem, a film employs cues in order to involve us. At the start of *Collateral*, the taxi driver Max is shown wiping down his cab's dashboard and steering wheel before setting out on his night shift. He then carefully attaches a snapshot to his sun visor. For a moment, he simply gazes at the postcard view of a tropical island. These gestures prompt us to see Max's personality as neat and orderly. They also suggest that in the city's turmoil, he clears a quiet mental space for himself. The next scene's cues reinforce our judgment of Max's character. While a couple quarrel in the back seat, he tips down the visor and stares at the island vista, as if to shut out the unpleasantness behind him.

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*. In any system, a group of elements affects 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. One 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 survey 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 has adventures. 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 utilize 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 identify prominent landmarks, such as Kansas (in black and white) and the Yellow Brick

"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*

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.

“Now, if you’re going to do action films, a certain amount of repetition, which certainly is a kind of straitjacket, is inevitable. You are going to have to deal with gunfights and chases. . . . So it becomes a kind of game. The audience knows what the conclusion will be, but you still have to entertain them. So you are always walking on the edge of a precipice—trying to juggle the genre expectations. . . .”

—Walter Hill, director, *The Driver* and *The Warriors*

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 would 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 refrains 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 Dorothy runs down the road at the beginning of *The Wizard of Oz*, we wonder

“The idea of suspense is closely bound up with the idea of fiction. This is as it should be: to tell a story is to create suspense, and the art of the storyteller resides in this ability to make dull subjects sound entertaining and plots whose solution everyone knows in advance, exciting.”

— Thomas Mann



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

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Why is it that we feel suspense even if we’re rewatching a film and know the outcome? We talk about why that happens in “This is your brain on movies, maybe.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=300](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=300).

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's 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. They may be gratified quickly or after a delay. 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. 000–000). And we'll encounter similar problems when we examine the editing of Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (Chapter 6) and the style of Jean-Luc 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. 000–000). 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 expectations is your *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.

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*. For example, the first few scenes of a film often explain background information about the characters and the action; this sort of exposition is a narrative convention. *Genres*, as we will see in Chapter 9, depend heavily on conventions. Urban crime thrillers tend to feature spectacular car crashes, so Michael Mann's use of the device in *Collateral* (p. 000) accords with that genre convention. 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.

If the filmmaker can't avoid connecting to both art and the larger world, neither can the audience. When we respond to cues in the film, we call on our prior experiences of everyday life and of other artworks. You were able to play the ABAC

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

*Slumdog Millionaire* uses many conventions in novel ways, as we show in “Slumdogged by the past.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=3592](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=3592).

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 convention is to be found in other artworks, such as Homer's *Odyssey* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

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

"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*

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 (2.2). Suddenly, Batala’s cousin remarks, “Too bad. It was a relative.” In the film’s context, this is taken as a joke (2.3). 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.



**2.2** In *The Crime of M. Lange*, the neighbors initially display grief at the news of Batala and Estelle’s baby.



**2.3** The same characters soon break out in smiles and laughter in reaction to Batala’s cousin’s remark.

## 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 hard times of America in the 1930s and 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 have been 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 has learned. 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 take 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 movement toward 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. 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. But once we identify a film's meaning, we're often tempted to split up 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 Dorothy's indecision at a crossroads allows her 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 statement 3, 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 adoles-

"Critics enable us to see how parts of an artwork serve larger designs. Often this requires that the critics offer interpretations or explications of the larger aims of the work, but these overviews are often introduced, in large measure, in order to explain why the works have the parts they do."

— Noël Carroll, philosopher of art

cence 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's values—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 carried in 1930s 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 we analyze implicit meanings, we should 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 should 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 of us limit our enjoyment 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. 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. Coincidental encounters, usually at embarrassing moments, are a convention of comedy.

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 that 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 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 addressed 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 the sciences, principles may take the form of physical laws or mathematical propositions. For researchers and inventors, 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 violating a law of nature if it does not follow the conventions of classic Westerns. The artist follows (or disobeys) *norms*—bodies of conventions, not laws.

But within these 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 major character 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



**2.4** The heroine of *My Man Godfrey* studies her prize while the society crowd urges the unemployed Godfrey to make a speech.

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 homeless man (2.4). 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. (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.

## 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. (See “A Closer Look,” pp. 00–00.) 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 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 (2.9–2.12). 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

“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*

## A CLOSER LOOK

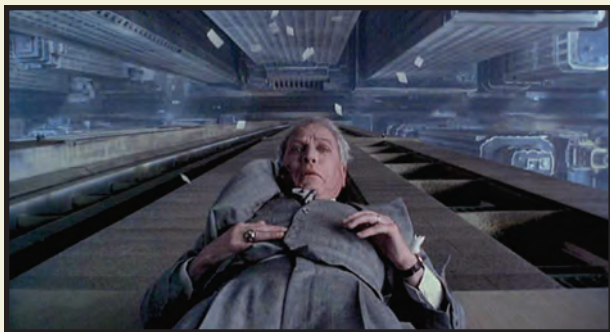
### PICKING OUT PATTERNS

In studying film as an art, you might sometimes wonder: Are all the patterns of form and style we notice really in the film? Do filmmakers actually put them there, or are we just reading them in?

When asked, filmmakers often say that their formal and stylistic choices aim to create specific effects. Hitchcock, a director who had an engineering bent, planned his stories carefully and chose techniques in full awareness of their possibilities. His film *Rope* confines the action to a single apartment and presents it in only 11 shots. *Rear Window* limits the action to what the hero can see from his apartment. In these and other films, Hitchcock deliberately created formal and stylistic challenges for himself, inviting his audience to come along. Most directors aren't so adventurous, but throughout this book, we'll include comments from filmmakers that show how the ideas we present are part of their working craft.

Sometimes filmmakers work in a more intuitive way, but they still must choose one story development or another, one technique or another. The finished film can have an overall unity because the momentary choices tend to mesh. Joel and Ethan Coen, the brothers who created *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*, and *Fargo*, say they don't set out with a particular style in mind. As Ethan puts it, "At the point of making the movie, it's just about making individual choices." Joel picks up the thread:

... about the best way to tell the story, scene by scene. You make specific choices that you think are appropriate or compelling or interesting for that particular



**2.5** In the *Hudsucker Proxy*, the boss dangles above the street in a very steep, centered-perspective composition.

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

In "Do filmmakers deserve the last word?" we suggest why we should always be cautious in accepting claims filmmakers offer.

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1174](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1174).

scene. Then, at the end of the day, you put it all together and somebody looks at it and, if there's some consistency to it, they say, "Well, that's their style."

Even if the Coens don't map out every option in advance, the finished films display distinctive patterns of form and style (**2.5, 2.6**).

Professionals pay attention to other filmmakers' formal and stylistic choices. While watching Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, Nicole Kidman pointed out how the composition of one shot had both an immediate point and a long-range story purpose (**2.7**):

Here, in this scene, look at how there is this rack of knives hanging in the background over the boy's head. . . . It's important because it not only shows that the boy is in danger, but one of those very knives is used later in the story when Wendy takes it to protect herself from her husband [**2.8**].

Kubrick told Kidman that a director had to repeat story information so that the audience could keep up. In other words, the pattern helped organize the film and in doing so shaped the viewer's experience, if only unconsciously.



**2.6** The same sort of composition is used to show the impersonal layout of desks in the Hudsucker company.

Kubrick's comment points up another reason we can have some confidence when we pick out patterns. A filmmaker doesn't create a movie from scratch. All films borrow ideas and storytelling strategies from other movies and other art forms. A lot that happens in films is governed by traditional rules, usually called *conventions*. When Kubrick shows us the knives behind Danny, he's following a very old storytelling convention: prepare the audience for action that will come

later. In contrast, *The Hudsucker Proxy* is a satirical comedy, and the perspective in 2.5 and 2.6 follows a convention of using exaggeration to create humor.

Very often, patterns in one film resemble patterns we've seen in other films. Even when filmmakers don't explain what they're doing, as experienced viewers, we can notice how they treat familiar conventions of form and technique.



**2.7** In *The Shining*, an early scene in the Hotel Overlook kitchen displays the telepathic rapport between Halloran and Danny, whose parents are caretaking the hotel for the winter. The knives are a natural part of the kitchen set but are aligned above Danny.



**2.8** Later Danny's mother, Wendy, goes to the same knife rack, seen from a different angle, to grab a weapon.

the *Cowardly Lion* before. At another point, the staging of a shot reinforces this familiarity (2.13, 2.14).

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

A film couldn't rely only on 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 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.

This means that although motifs (scenes, settings, actions, objects, stylistic devices) may be repeated, those motifs will seldom be repeated *exactly*. Variation will



**2.9** The itinerant Kansas fortune-teller, Professor Marvel, bears a striking resemblance to . . .



**2.10** . . . the old charlatan known as the Wizard of Oz.



**2.11** Miss Gulch's bicycle in the opening section becomes . . .



**2.12** . . . the Witch's broom in Oz.



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



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

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 (2.9). Dorothy's dream transforms the crystal into a large globe in the Witch's castle, where it displays frightening scenes (2.15). 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. Settings are opposed as well—not only Oz versus Kansas but also the various locales within Oz (2.16, 2.17). 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





**2.15** Through her crystal ball, the Wicked Witch mocks Dorothy.



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



**2.17** . . . the similar composition showing the castle of the Wicked Witch of the West.



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

*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. 000).

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. Shuttling 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 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” (2.18). 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 formal progression. 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 in 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 when you enter 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 (2.19), 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

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

If beginnings are important, then the very beginning is even more important, as "First shots" demonstrates.

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=139](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=139).



2.19 The visits of the final scene.

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 engagement with the film's developing 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.

## Unity and 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 classic 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.

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

One distinctive type of film form comes in the anthology film, combining short segments by several directors. It's a theme-and-variations approach that we discuss in "Can you spot all the auteurs in this picture?"

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=932](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=932).

## 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 things that we know from life and with conventions found in art.

The concrete context of the artwork expresses and stimulates emotions. It 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 do-

ing 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). Our quotation from Nicole Kidman on the knife motif in *The Shining* comes from *Watching Movies: The Biggest Names in Cinema Talk About the Films That Matter Most* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003).

Maya Deren, the American experimentalist who made *Meshes of the Afternoon* (p. 000), was quite self-conscious about formal principles. She argued that a film should exploit the features that differentiate cinema from other arts—chiefly, its unique handling of space and time.

Deren believed that a film's organization emerges from the ways in which all the images subtly affect one another. "The elements, or parts, lose their original value and assume those conferred upon them by their function in this specific whole." For more thoughts on this, see her 1946 essay "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film," in *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, N.Y.: Documentext, 2005).

## 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).

Most of these authors draw upon an approach called *cognitive studies*. We reflect on similar topics on our blog. In "Minding movies," at [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2004](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2004), we give a sketch of how cognitive studies can help understand how we perceive and understand films. For a related approach, see "Simplicity, clarity, balance: A tribute to Rudolf Arnheim," at [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=956](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=956).

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

When we're analyzing a scripted fiction film, creating a segmentation often amounts to retracing the screenwriter's creative steps. The writer typically builds a screenplay out of a list of scenes, sometimes noting each scene on a card and laying out the cards to assess how the plot is shaping up.

Because today's feature films tend to have short scenes (typically running one to three minutes each), there may be 60 or more sequences in a film. Older films seldom contain more than 40, and silent films may have only 10 or 20. 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/](http://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

The Warner Bros. two-disc special edition of *The Wizard of Oz* contains supplements documenting the film's production. See also Aljean Harmetz, *The Making of the Wizard of Oz* (New York: Limelight, 1984), and John Fricke, Jay Scarfone, and William Stillman, *The Wizard of Oz: The*

*Official 50th Anniversary Pictorial History* (New York: Warner Books, 1989).

While the film was in postproduction, MGM executives quarreled about whether the song “Over the Rainbow” should be dropped. Some thought it was too long and slowed the pace; others suggested that singing in a barnyard was undignified. Producer Arthur Freed argued passionately for retaining the ballad, and he won. His reasoning was expressed in an early memo, and its wording shows that he was conscious of the song’s role in motivating Dorothy’s journey:

The whole love story in *Snow White* is motivated by the song “Some Day My Prince Will Come” as Snow White is looking into the well. Dialogue could not have accomplished this half as well. I make this illustration for the purpose that we plant our *Wizard of Oz* script in a similar way through a musical sequence on the farm. Doing it musically takes all the triteness out of a straight plot scene. (Quoted in Fricke, Scarfone, and Stillman, *The Wizard of Oz*, p. 30)

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. 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.

The “Production Design” supplement for *The Golden Compass* discusses motifs: circular elements in the sets and props associated with the heroine Lyra and the Oxford setting opposed to oval elements associated with the villainous Mrs. Coulter and the Magisterium.

# 3

CHAPTER



## 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. Something similar happened with *The Prestige* (see pp. 000–000). As we examine narrative form, we consider at various points how it engages the viewer in a dynamic activity.

## What Is Narrative?

We can consider a *narrative* to be a *chain of events linked by cause and effect and 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. 00), 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 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 pursue 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

“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*

“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*

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

For a more theoretical discussion of the concept of narrative, using the stories offered up during the 2008 presidential campaign, see “It was a dark and stormy campaign,” at

[www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2962](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2962).



## CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Sequels can extend a story and even jump back in time if a prequel is made. We discuss prequels in “Originality and origin stories.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=44](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=44).



**3.1** Hurrying Manhattan pedestrians in *North by Northwest*.



**3.2** Maggie takes dictation from Roger Thornhill.

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 *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.

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 plot—the totality of the film—can bring in nondiegetic material.



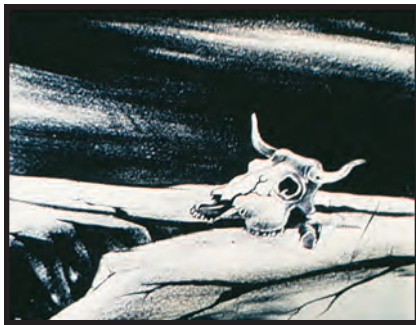
**3.3** A hopeful investor in the play enters the theater . . .



**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 . . .

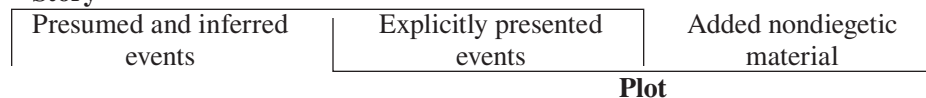


**3.7** . . . and an egg.

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 bombed. 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:

#### Story



#### Plot

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 chronologically to the end. Or you can tell the plot, starting with the first incident you encountered in watching the film and presenting narrative information as you received it while watching the movie.

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.

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*: 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 others 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 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. 00).

Causal motivation often involves the planting of information in advance of a scene, as we saw in the kitchen scene of *The Shining* (2.7, 2.8). 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 to 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 motif.

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



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

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 can provide a vivid ending. 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 seashore. The camera zooms in on his face, and the frame freezes (3.8). The plot does not reveal if 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 alternate with scenes of adolescence, further cueing the spectator to assemble a linear 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 fairly 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. At another point 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 process taking hours or days 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. When a plot repeats a story event, the aim is often to provide new information. 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, our 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. 00.)

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.

## A CLOSER LOOK

### 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 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 final scene we see. 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 events 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 or 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. 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 story line, and their purpose is puzzling until the film's second half, when the last 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 the story 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 arrives on the platform 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 her boyfriend's affair and moves out. By missing the train, she arrives after the other woman has left and hence she stays with her faithless lover. The plot moves back and forth between these alternative 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 Connor, 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 behaving frivolously, sometimes breaking laws (3.9, 3.10), and later trying to improve himself. Only after many such days does he become an admirable character, and the repetitions mysteriously stop.



**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.



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 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!

Such narrative games were influenced by a similar trend in European films. In 1981, Polish director Krzysz-

tof 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). Here the heroine's desperate attempts to replace a large sum that her inept boyfriend owes to drug dealers are shown as three stories. Each one ends very differently after small changes of action on Lola's part.

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 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 is Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (1998), which presents the hero's investi-

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

Do modern audiences even care about closure and coherence anymore? We argue that they do in "The end of cinema as we know it—yet again."

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=39](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=39).



**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.)

gation 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.

“The multiple points of view replaced the linear story. 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.”

— Gus van Sant, director, on *Elephant*

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 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 *8½*, 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 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



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

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. 00). 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

"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

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.

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, 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.

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!”

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

*Cloverfield* uses an unusually restricted narration, confining itself to film shot by the main characters. See our analysis, “A behemoth from the Dead Zone,” at

[www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1844](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1844).

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 manipulates not only the range of knowledge but also 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**. For instance, in *North by Northwest*, point-of-view editing is used as we see Roger Thornhill crawl up to Van Damm's window (3.15–3.17). 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 can call this *mental subjectivity*. 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. In *Slumdog Millionaire*, the hero is a contestant on a quiz show, but his concentration is often interrupted by brief shots of his memories, particularly one image of the woman he loves (3.18–3.19). Here Jamal's memory motivates flashbacks to earlier story events.

Either sort of subjectivity may be signaled through particular film techniques. If a character is drunk, or drugged, or disoriented, the narration may render those perceptual states through slow motion, blurred imagery, or distorted sound. Similar stylistic qualities may suggest a dream or hallucination.

But some imaginary actions may not be so strongly marked. A later scene in *Slumdog Millionaire* shows Jamal reuniting with his gangster brother Salim atop a skyscraper under construction. Jamal hurls himself at Salim, and we see shots of both falling from the building (3.20–3.21). But the next shot presents Jamal still on the skyscraper, glaring at Salim (3.22). Now we realize that the images of the falling men were purely mental, representing Jamal's rage. We briefly thought that their fall was really taking place because the shots lacked any marks of subjectivity.

Typically, either perceptual or mental subjectivity is embedded in a framework of objective narration. Point-of-view shots, like those of Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest*, and flashbacks or fantasies are bracketed by more objective shots. We are able to understand Jamal's memory of Latika and his urge to kill Salim because those images are framed by shots of actions that we take to be really happening in the plot. Other sorts of films, however, may avoid this convention. Fellini's *8½*, Bunuel's *Belle de Jour*, Haneke's *Caché*, and Nolan's *Memento* mix objectivity and subjectivity in ambiguous ways.

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

We present a more detailed discussion of the distinction between perceptual and mental subjectivity in narration in "Categorical coherence: A closer look at character subjectivity."

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2927](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2927).



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



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



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





**3.18** Early in *Slumdog Millionaire*, it's established that during the quiz show Jamal recalls his past . . .



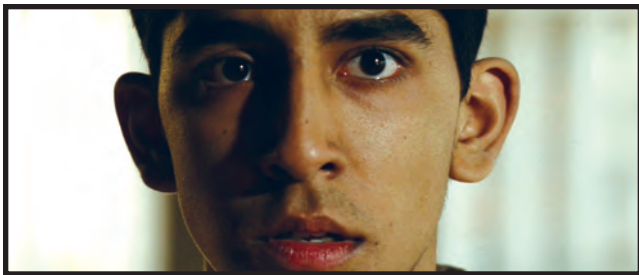
**3.19** . . . most often, his glimpse of Latika at the train station.



**3.20** Furious with Salim, Jamal grabs him and rushes toward the edge of the building.



**3.21** Several shots present their fall.



**3.22** Cut back to Jamal, glaring at Salim. The shot reveals that he only imagined killing both of them.

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. But 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 (usually 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," or POV 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



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



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



**3.25** 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.

Fellini's 8½ 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* (3.23–3.26). 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 the investigator's hunches and conclusions before he reveals them at the end.

A film need not be in the mystery genre in order to exploit objective and restricted narration. Julia Loktev's *Day Night Day Night* follows a young woman who has been recruited as a suicide bomber. We see her accepted into the group, awaiting orders, and eventually embarking on the mission. One scene utilizes optical point of view extensively, while another does so briefly. There are a few moments of auditory subjectivity, when the noises of street traffic drop out. Yet these flashes of subjective depth stand out against an overwhelmingly objective presentation. For nearly the entire film, we have to assess the woman's state of mind purely through her physical behavior. Moreover, our information about the story action is very limited. We are never told what political group has recruited her or why she has volunteered for the task. The woman herself does not know the plan, the members of the terrorist group, or the reasons she was picked. In fact, we know less than she does, because we get only hints about her past life. The impersonal, tightly restricted narration of *Day Night Day Night* not only creates suspense about her mission but also encourages curiosity about a rather large number of story events.

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 specific effect on the viewer.

In all of these examples, the filmmaker's choice about range or depth affects how the spectator responds to 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



**3.26** 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.

## A CLOSER LOOK

### WHEN THE LIGHTS GO DOWN, THE NARRATION STARTS

When we open a novel for the first time, we don't expect the story action to start on the copyright page. Nor do we expect to find the story's last scene on the back cover. But films can start emitting narrative information in the credit sequences and continue to the very last moments we're in the theater.

Credit sequences serve to identify the participants in a production, and today the list can run many minutes. In the late 1910s, filmmakers realized that credits could be enlivened by drawings and paintings keyed to the film (3.27). Since the 1920s, the credits' graphic design and musical accompaniment have often quickly conjured up the time and place of the story (3.28). The breezy credits of Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* offer glimpses of the action to come while firmly

establishing the two young men's friendship in turn-of-the-century Paris.

An overall mood is often set simply by music playing over simple titles, as in *The Exorcist*, but the credits can take a more active role through type fonts, color, or movement. Saul Bass, a celebrated designer of corporate logos, gave Alfred Hitchcock's and Otto Preminger's films dynamic geometric designs (3.29). Rainer Werner Fassbinder was famous for his imaginative credit sequences, some in homage to the 1950s Hollywood melodramas he admired. In a similar vein, the brash collages in Pedro Almodóvar's credit sequences lead us to expect sexy irreverence (3.30).

Plot elements can be announced quite specifically. Illustrations can anticipate particular scenes (3.31).



**3.27** An early example of illustrated credits for the 1917 comedy *Reaching for the Moon*.



**3.30** A collage design suggesting sophistication and glamorous lifestyles (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*).



**3.28** *Raw Deal*, a crime film from 1948, begins in prison, and the credit sequence suggests the locale before the action begins.



**3.31** Some of the stick-figure credits in *Bringing Up Baby* anticipate scenes that will take place in the story action.



**3.29** Saul Bass's elegantly simple credits for *Advise and Consent* hint that the story will lift the lid off Washington scandals.

*Se7en*'s scratchy glimpses of cutting, stitching, and defacement launched a cycle of nightmarish credit sequences showing violation and dismemberment. *Goldfinger*'s credits present a key motif and anticipate several scenes (3.32). Many of the scenes in *Catch Me If You Can* are previewed in the title sequence, which pays affectionate homage to the animated credit sequences of the film's period (3.33). More subtly, the opening of *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1999) hints at the method by which the hero will steal a painting.

Films often end their plot with an epilogue that celebrates the stable state that the characters have

achieved, and that situation can be presented in tandem with the credits (3.34). Sometimes key scenes will be replayed under the final credits, or new plot action will be shown. *Airplane!* began a fashion for weaving running gags into its final credits.

Occasionally, the filmmaker fools us. We think the plot has ended, and a long list of personnel crawls upward. But then the film tacks an image on the very end (3.35). These "credit cookies" remind us that an enterprising filmmaker may exploit every moment of the film's running time to engage our narrative expectations.



**3.32** *Goldfinger*: The gilded woman herself will reappear in the film, while other scenes to come are projected on areas of her body.

**3.33** The streamlined animation of *Catch Me If You Can* evokes 1960s credit sequences while previewing story action and settings. Here the Tom Hanks character starts to trail Leonardo DiCaprio, who plays an impostor pretending to be an airline pilot.



**3.34** In *Slumdog Millionaire*, the dance epilogue in the railway station is intercut with the major credits, which recall scenes from the film.



**3.35** Takeshi Kitano's *Sonatine* follows its final credit sequence with desolate images of a beach, wistfully reminding us of earlier scenes showing childish gangsters at play.



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

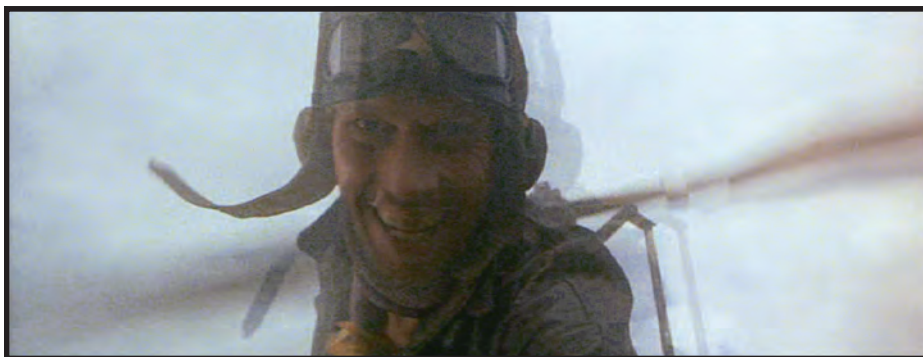
We can summarize the shaping power of narration by considering George Miller's *The Road Warrior* (also known as *Mad Max II*). The film's plot opens with a voice-over commentary by an elderly male narrator who recalls "the warrior Max." After presenting exposition that tells of the worldwide wars that 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 (3.36) or watches a skirmish



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



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

through a telescope. When he is rescued after his car crash, his delirium is rendered as perceptual subjectivity, using the conventional cues of slow motion, superimposed imagery, and slowed-down sound (3.37). All of these narrational devices encourage us to sympathize with Max.

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 (3.38)—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 main portion of the film channels our expectations through an attachment to Max, alternating with more unrestricted portions. In turn, this 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.

*"Narrative tension is primarily about withholding information."*

— Ian McEwan, novelist



**3.38** 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."

## 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 called "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.

Typically what gets this sort of narrative going is someone's *desire*. A 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: from saving Toto from Miss Gulch to getting 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 with opposing traits and goals. 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. 000–000).

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 striving, goal-oriented protagonist, though common, doesn't appear in every narrative film.

"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*

In the classical Hollywood narrative, psychological causes tend to motivate most other narrative events. Time is subordinated to the cause–effect chain. 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 00–00. 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 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. (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 (pp. 000–00) 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 end; 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 through 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

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

For a discussion of how characters’ goals can be crucial to major transitions in the plot, see “Time goes by turns,” at

[www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2448](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2448).

#### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

The classical approach to narrative is still very much alive, as we show in “Your trash, my treasure.”

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1781](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1781).



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, 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 therefore 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 (Who or 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 guidelines 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 lowercase 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, Rawlston, supplies the cause that initiates the investigation of Kane's life. Thompson's newsreel fails to satisfy him. Rawlston's desire for an angle for the newsreel gets the search for Rosebud under way. Thompson thus gains a goal, which sets him digging 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. 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 our segmentation 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 (I), 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

### CONNECT TO THE BLOG

The flashback tradition developed a rich history before *Citizen Kane*. For analysis of flashbacks in Hollywood films during the 1930s, and especially *The Power and the Glory*, which influenced Orson Welles, see "Grandmaster flashback."

See [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=3253](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=3253).

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 merely 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. Characters' skepticism about the Rosebud clue helps 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 a 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 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



“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

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.

## 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 character 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 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



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

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 (3.39).

The snow 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 8.22). We can now associate the opening's emphasis on the snowy cottage 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.

## 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. 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*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). A more advanced collection of essays is David Herman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). 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). David Bordwell offers a survey of narrative principles in "Three Dimensions of Film Narrative," *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 85–133. Other essays in this book analyze forking-path films like *Run Lola Run* and "network narratives" like *Nashville* and *Magnolia*.

### 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 Fiction 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 Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (New York: Mouton, 1984).

The title of a film can be an important factor in its narration, setting us up for what is to come. We reflect on what kinds of titles Hollywood tends to use here in "Title wave," at [www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2805](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2805).

On credit sequences, see Gemma Solana and Antonio Boneu, *Uncredited: Graphic Design and Opening Titles in Movies* (Amsterdam: Index Books, 2007).

### 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 arguments 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); Laura Mulvey, *Citizen Kane* (London: British Film Institute, 1993); and James Naremore, ed., *Orson Welles's Citizen Kane: A Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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/](http://www.screenwritersutopia.com/) Contains discussion of screenwriting problems, including debates about classic screenplay structure.

[www.wga.org/writtenby/writtenby.aspx/](http://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/](http://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.

“Filmmakers' Journey Part One,” a supplement for *The Da Vinci Code*, discusses character, timing, and rhythm. One passage that is particularly good for showing how filmmakers think about the form of films comes in a segment on the introduction of a major new character (Sir Lee Teabing) fully halfway through the film. There is also discussion of the film's series of journeys: “There was this sort of classic structure that we were working with.”

The Warner Bros. DVD of *Citizen Kane* offers a remastered print of the film with commentary tracks by Roger Ebert and Peter Bogdanovich. A second disc contains a two-hour documentary, *The Battle over Citizen Kane*, exploring William Randolph Hearst's efforts to have RKO destroy the film.