

3

Narrative Form

Humans have an endless appetite for stories. As children, we devour fairy tales and myths; we like to watch the same cartoons over and over. As we get older, we become captivated by other stories—in religion and history, in novels and comic books and video games and, of course, movies. We recount our lives, or just what happened at work today, to anyone who'll listen. Politicians and journalists talk about “changing the narrative.” In the courtroom the jury hears competing stories, and in our dreams we imagine ourselves in scenes and situations. Narrative is a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world.

Stories grab and hold us. In Chapter 2 we considered how a sequence of items, even letters of the alphabet, can prod us to ask what comes next. A story, filled out with characters and their actions, intensifies that urge to the maximum. In 1841, Charles Dickens serialized his novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* in magazine installments. When ships brought the latest installment to America, crowds of readers packed the wharf crying out, “Is Little Nell dead?” Almost two centuries later, children and their parents lined up for hours outside bookstores to buy the newest Harry Potter novel. Many of those youngsters rushed home and started reading it immediately.

They were not that different from fans binge-watching a whole season of a TV show, or from fans eagerly waiting for the next installment of a movie franchise and speculating online about upcoming plot twists. Whether the story is fictional or factual, we feel driven to know how the action develops, how the characters react, and how it all comes out in the end.

Because storytelling is so common and so powerful, we need to take a close look at how films—both fictional and nonfictional—embody **narrative form**.

Principles of Narrative Form

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've read the book that the film is based on, or this is a sequel to a movie we've seen.

Even if we aren't already acquainted with the story's particular world, though, we have expectations that are characteristic of narrative form itself. We assume that there will be characters and that the actions they take will involve them with one another. We expect a series of incidents that will be connected in some way. We usually expect that the problems or conflicts that arise will somehow be settled—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.

While watching the film, the viewer picks up cues, recalls information, anticipates what will follow, and generally participates in the creation of the film's form. As we

suggested in Chapter 2 (pp. 54-55), the film shapes our expectations by summoning up curiosity, suspense, surprise, and other emotional qualities. 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 Conversation* (see pp. 300-302). As we examine narrative form, we need to recognize how it engages the viewer in a dynamic activity.

It's the filmmaker's task to create this engagement. How does this happen? We can start to understand the filmmaker's creative choices and the viewer's activity by looking a little more closely at what narrative is and does.

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'll be using that term 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.

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 how the events are connected by causality or time or space.

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, unexciting though it is. 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. Time is important as well. The fight starts things off, and the sleepless night, the broken mirror, and the phone call occur one after the other. The action runs from one day to the following morning. Above all, we can understand that the three events are part of a pattern 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, so the narrative ends. 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. 66), parallelism points up a similarity among story elements. Our example was the way *The Wizard of Oz* paralleled the three Kansas farmhands with Dorothy's three Oz companions.

A narrative may cue us to draw parallels among characters, settings, situations, times of day, or any other elements. *Julie & Julia* parallels two women, living in different periods, trying to juggle their marriages and their passion for cuisine (3.1, 3.2). Julie never meets her idol Julia Child, but there is still a cause-effect link: Julie is inspired by the older woman's life. Sometimes a filmmaker goes further and doesn't link the parallel stories causally. Veřá Chytilová's *Something Different* alternates scenes from the life of a housewife and scenes from the career of a gymnast. Since the two women lead entirely separate lives, there are no causal connections between them. The parallel patterning encourages us to compare the women's life decisions.

“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*



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When filmmakers create a prequel to an existing film story, they need to weave new patterns of cause and effect that lead to the story we already know. We discuss how prequels manage this task in “Originality and origin stories.”



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We analyze *Julie & Julia* in more depth, along with the parallel plot in *Enchantment*, in “Julie, Julia & the house that talked.”



3.1



3.2

3.1–3.2 Narrative parallels. *Julie & Julia*: Staging and composition emphasize similarities between the two women's stories.

The documentary *Hoop Dreams* makes a similar use of parallels. Two high school students from a black neighborhood in Chicago dream of becoming professional basketball players, and the film follows each one's pursuit of an athletic career. The film's form invites us to compare 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. *Hoop Dreams*, like *Julie & Julia* and *Something Different*, remains a narrative film. Each of the parallel lines of action is organized by time, space, and causality. But parallelism allows the film to become more complex than it might have been had it concentrated on only one protagonist.

Telling the Story

We make sense of a narrative, then, by identifying its events and linking them by cause and effect, time, and space. We also look out for parallels that can shed light on the ongoing action. But there's a lot more to narrative than this bare-bones account. To dig deeper, let's again try to think like a filmmaker.

CREATIVE DECISIONS

How Would You Tell the Story?

You have a story. Let's say it's a romantic comedy following the development of a love affair. Your problem is: How to tell it?

For example, should you start at the beginning of the story, when the partners meet? You could trace the action chronologically from there, showing them falling in love, being separated, meeting other people, reuniting, and eventually being reunited as a couple in marriage. But you might consider another option. Suppose you break chronology and start your film with the couple's wedding day. Then you might flash back to the beginning, showing how they met, and then trace the love affair through its ups and downs.

But why stop your rearranging there? Why not start with the wedding day, flash back to the first meeting, then return to the wedding day, then flash back to the budding romance, then return to the wedding day, and so on? Instead of one long flashback framed by the wedding, you have several shorter ones that keep interrupting the wedding.

Then you might ask: Who says the love-affair flashbacks have to be presented in chronological order? Maybe I can create more curiosity, or suspense, or surprise, or emotional engagement if I show the first meeting later in the film, out of chronological order. Perhaps just before the wedding, or just after their big bust-up? Although one event causes another, you don't have to respect 1-2-3 order.

While you're speculating about shuffling time periods, you might pause again. Wouldn't it be more engaging to start not with the wedding but with the couple's "darkest moment," the scene in which it seems they're never going to get together? Then flashing back to earlier, happier days could increase the suspense. Will they be reunited? That makes the wedding a sort of epilogue rather than the big event framing the overall action.

Each choice brings up further choices. If your flashbacks skip around a lot, you might worry about viewers' losing their bearings. So to help out, you might add superimposed titles identifying the time and place of the scene.

Time structure is only one of the storytelling choices you face. If you're planning the romantic comedy we sketched, from whose viewpoint will the tale be told? You could limit things to one character's standpoint, showing only what she or he knows about the unfolding action. *(500) Days of Summer* puts us firmly with the man who has fallen in love with the mysterious Summer. Alternatively, you could follow the more common convention of showing both members of the couple when they're alone or with other friends. You could mix in scenes of parents, coworkers, and the like. This asks your viewer to see the central relationship in a wider context.

Storytelling decisions about viewpoint involve what we'll be calling *narration*. Whatever the area of choice you face, you'll want to consider how the options affect the viewer. As we saw, presenting the story out of order could trigger curiosity or suspense. Confining us to what one character knows can enhance surprise, so that we learn new information only when he or she does.



Our romantic comedy is deeply unoriginal, but the point is just to show how filmmakers face choices in planning narrative form. Those choices involve time structure, narration, and other possibilities we'll examine.

Plot and Story

In our hypothetical movie, the love affair that runs from first meeting to wedding is what we'll be calling the **story**. The story is the chain of events in chronological order. But as we've seen, that story may be presented in various ways. If we use flashbacks instead of linear time, or if we decide to organize events around one character rather than another, or if we make other choices about presentation, we will be creating a different **plot**. As we've just seen, the same story can be presented in different ways—rendered as different plots—and each variant is likely to have different effects on the audience.

As viewers, we have direct access only to the plot that the filmmakers finally decided on. Yet eventually we arrive at an understanding of the underlying story. The filmmakers have built the plot from the story, but viewers build the story from the plot.

How do viewers do that? By making assumptions and inferences about what's presented. 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 (3.3). Then we watch Roger Thornhill as he leaves an elevator with his secretary, Maggie, and strides through the lobby, dictating memos (3.4).

Already we can 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're probably not aware of making these inferences, but insofar as we understand what we see and hear, we are making them. The filmmaker has steered us to make them.



3.3



3.4

3.3–3.4 Depicted and inferred story events. Shots of hurrying Manhattan pedestrians in *North by Northwest* are followed by a shot introducing us to Roger Thornhill and his secretary. Viewers make inferences about the story and characters based on the information that is presented onscreen.

So the plot guides the viewer in building up a sense of all the relevant events, both the ones explicitly presented and those that must be inferred. In our *North by Northwest* 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.



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Can you make a plot out of several stories? Yes. “Pulverizing plots: Into the woods with Sondheim, Shklovsky, and David O. Russell” shows how.

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.

From the viewer’s perspective, the *plot* consists of the action visibly and audibly present in the film before us. The plot includes, most centrally, 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. The plot also includes the information that characters may supply about earlier events in the story world, as when Roger mentions his many marriages.

Note, though, that the filmmaker may include material that lies *outside* 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 a film’s score are thus *nondiegetic* elements. Similarly, in silent films, many of the intertitles don’t report dialogue but rather comment on the characters or describe the location. These intertitles are nondiegetic. In Chapters 6 and 7, we consider how editing and sound can function nondiegetically.

Suppose Hitchcock had superimposed the words “New York City” over the traffic shots at the start of *North by Northwest*, in the way we considered adding dates to the scrambled scenes of our hypothetical rom-com. Such titles would be nondiegetic as well. (They aren’t part of the story world; the characters couldn’t read them.) Today superimposed titles are the most common sorts of nondiegetic inserts, but we can find more unusual ones. In *The Band Wagon*, we see the premiere of a hopelessly pretentious musical play. Through nondiegetic images, accompanied by a brooding chorus, the plot signals that the production bombed (3.5–3.9). The filmmakers have added nondiegetic material to the plot for comic effect.

From the standpoint of the filmmaker, the story is the sum total of all the events in the narrative. As the storyteller, you could present some of these events directly (that is, display or mention them in the plot), hint at events that are not presented, and 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. You, the filmmaker, could also add nondiegetic material, as in the example from *The Band Wagon*. This is why we can say that the filmmaker makes a story into a plot.

The spectator’s task is quite 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, thanks to cues in the plot. And in telling someone about the movie we’ve just seen, we can summarize it in two ways: We can recap the story, or recap the plot.

We’ll see that the story–plot distinction affects all three aspects of narrative: causality, time, and space. Each offers the filmmaker a huge array of choice for guiding the viewer’s experience of the film.



3.5



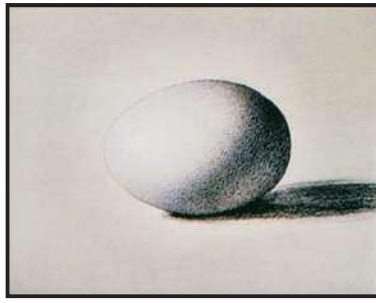
3.6



3.7



3.8



3.9

3.5–3.9 Nondiegetic imagery in *The Band Wagon*. A hopeful investor in the play enters the theater (3.5), and the camera moves in on a poster predicting success for the musical (3.6). But three comic nondiegetic images reveal it to be a flop: ghostly figures on a boat (3.7), a skull in a desert (3.8), and an image referring to the slang expression that the play “laid an egg” (3.9).

Cause and Effect

If narrative depends on changes created by cause and effect, what kinds of things can function as causes? Most often, characters. By triggering events and reacting to them, characters play causal roles within the film’s narrative form.

Characters as Causes Most often, characters are persons, or at least entities like persons—Bugs Bunny or E.T. the extraterrestrial or 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 overall form, 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 in *A Letter to Three Wives*, a film narrated by the woman who has sent a letter to three of her rivals. 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 Haynes takes this innovation further in *I’m Not There*, in which a folksinger is portrayed by actors of different ages, genders, and races.

Along with a body, a character has *traits*: attitudes, skills, habits, tastes, psychological drives, and any other qualities that distinguish him or her. 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 others, we tend to call that character complex, or three dimensional, or well developed. Sherlock Holmes, for instance, is a mass of traits. Some stem from his habits, such as his love of music or his addiction to cocaine, while others reflect his basic nature: his arrogance, 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 usually 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, even a little impetuous. 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.

All 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 manage it. Like most qualities assigned to characters, Jill's marksmanship 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. In *Jaws*, the townspeople pursue a variety of strategies to deal with the shark, propelling the plot as they do so. The primary cause of the action in *Contagion* is a lethal virus spreading across the world, but the action concentrates on individual researchers struggling to find an antidote and on ordinary citizens trying to survive.

Hiding Causes, Hiding Effects As viewers we try 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. 63).

Causal motivation often involves the planting of information in advance of a scene, as we saw in the kitchen scene of *The Shining* (2.14, 2.15). 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 may seem to offer only an insight into Exley's personality. Yet later, when the corrupt police chief Smith shoots Vincennes, the latter mutters "Rollo Tomasi" with his last breath. Later, the puzzled Smith asks Exley who Rollo Tomasi is. Exley's earlier conversation with Vincennes motivates his shocked realization that the dead Vincennes has fingered Smith as his killer. Near the end, when Smith is about to shoot Exley, Exley says that the chief is Rollo Tomasi. Thus an apparently minor detail returns as a major causal and thematic 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.

Consider the mystery 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. We want to know about things that happened 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 didn't see).

Although this pattern is most common in detective narratives, any film's plot can withhold causes and thus arouse our curiosity. Horror and science fiction films often leave us temporarily in the dark about what forces lurk behind certain events. Not until three-quarters of the way through *Alien* do we learn that the science officer Ash is a robot conspiring to protect the creature. In *Caché*, a married couple receives 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, the plot initially suppresses certain story causes and presents only enigmatic effects.

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 Lecter has switched clothes with a dead guard and escaped.

When a plot withholds crucial consequences at the ending, it can ask us to ponder possible outcomes. In the final moments of François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, the boy Antoine has escaped from a reformatory and runs to the seashore. The camera zooms in on his face, and the frame freezes (3.10). The plot does not reveal if Antoine is captured and brought back, leaving us to speculate on what might happen in his future. As in *Rome Open City* (pp. 478–479), the story of *400 Blows* is, by the conventions of mainstream cinema, incomplete.



3.10 Withholding story effects. The final image of *The 400 Blows* leaves Antoine's future uncertain.



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For examples of plots that keep causes secret from the audience, see “Side effects, safe haven: Out of the past” and “Gone grrrl.”

Time

Causes and their effects are basic to narrative, but they take place in time. Our story–plot distinction helps us to understand how filmmakers use narrative form to manipulate time.

As we watch a film, we construct story time on the basis of what the plot presents. For instance, a plot may present story 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, eating, traveling, and so forth, so the periods containing such irrelevant action can be 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.

In short, filmmakers must decide how the film's plot will treat chronological *order* and temporal *duration* and *frequency*. In turn, the viewer must actively pick up the cues about these time-based factors. Each one harbors important artistic possibilities.

Temporal Order: How Are Events Sequenced? Filmmakers can choose to present events out of story **order**. A flashback, like the ones we proposed for our hypothetical romantic comedy, is simply a portion of the story that the plot presents out of chronological sequence. 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 the old lady was in high school. Likewise,

The Hangover starts at a point of crisis, when the bridegroom's buddies report that he's missing. The plot then flashes back to them assembling for their bachelor party.

Flashbacks usually don't confuse us, because we mentally rearrange the events into chronological order: teenage years precede old age, the hangover comes after a night of partying. If story events can be thought of as 1-2-3-4, then the plot that uses a *flashback* presents something like 2-1-3-4, or 3-1-2-4. The filmmaker can also shuffle story order by employing a *flashforward*. This pattern moves from present to future, then back to the present, and could be represented as 1-2-4-3. In either case, given the plot order we figure out story order.

Even a simple reordering of scenes can create complex effects. The plot of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* begins with a couple deciding to rob the diner they're sitting in. This scene actually takes place somewhat late in the story's chronology, but the viewer doesn't learn this until the final scene. At that point, the robbery interrupts a dialogue involving other, more central, characters eating in the same diner. Just by taking a scene that occurs late in the story and placing it at the start of the plot, Tarantino creates a surprise that maintains our interest through the film's last moments.

Tarantino was influenced by the film noir trend of the 1940s and 1950s, which exploited time ordering in ingenious ways. *D.O.A.* (1949) shows how flashbacks can shape the viewer's expectations across a whole film. A man strides into a police station to report a murder. "Who was murdered?" asks the officer. The man replies: "I was." As he starts to explain, we move into an extended flashback. The earliest story action in the past is rather innocuous and slowly paced. Had the plot presented the story in chronological order, viewers might have found these scenes flat. But knowing that the protagonist is dying makes us vigilant. Every encounter he has puts us on the alert: Is this what will kill him? Our anticipation wouldn't have been aroused so keenly if the story had been told in 1-2-3 order.



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Mark Romanek learned the *D.O.A.* lesson in directing *One Hour Photo*. "Creating suspense through film form" discusses how, after preview screenings fizzled, Romanek rearranged his plot to start late in the story action and to flash back to the beginning. "Now the audience is paying closer attention."

Temporal Duration: How Long Do the Events Take? 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, indicated by the information about the past that 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 smuggling activities.

In general, a film's plot selects only certain stretches of story **duration**. As a filmmaker you might decide to concentrate on a short, relatively cohesive time span, as *North by Northwest* does. Or you might let your plot unfold across many years, highlighting significant stretches of time in that period. *Citizen Kane* 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 seven-plus hours (as Béla Tarr's *Satan's Tango* does). So there's 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 complicated, 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 story 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 plot'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 filmmaker 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. A process taking hours or days is often condensed into a few swift shots. These examples suggest that film techniques play a central role in creating screen duration, and we'll see how in Chapters 5 and 6.

Temporal Frequency: How Often Do We See or Hear an Event?

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's plot, and then, later in the plot, there is a flashback to that event, we see that same event twice. Some films use multiple narrators, each of whom describes the same event; again, we see it take place several times. This increased **frequency** may allow us to see the same action in several ways. Repetition can take place simply on the soundtrack. Sometimes only a single line of dialogue will reappear, haunting a character who can't escape the memory of that moment.

Why would a filmmaker want to repeat a story event in the plot? Sometimes it's to remind the audience of something. Or the repetition reveals new information. This occurs in *For a Few Dollars More*, in which the repeated scene gets expanded more fully each time that characters recall it. In *Amores Perros*, a traffic accident is shown three times, and each iteration reveals how a different person is affected by the crash.

The manipulations of story order, duration, and frequency in the plot illustrate how viewers actively participate in making sense of the narrative film. The filmmaker designs the plot to prompt us about chronological sequence, the time span of the actions, and the number of times an event occurs. It's up to the viewer to make assumptions and inferences and to form expectations. Fortunately, we can usually put things together by appealing to our ordinary sense of time and cause and effect. A flashback, for instance, is often motivated as a character's memory. Other cues, such as clothing, age, settings, and the like can help us sort out a film's story time.

Still, some filmmakers have offered quite complicated time schemes. In *The Usual Suspects*, a 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 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. Christopher Nolan's *Inception* creates several stories-within-stories, all unfolding simultaneously in dream-time, but the plot makes each one take place at a different rate. One second in one dream might last many minutes in another, so that we have several scales of plot duration. Through magic, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* permits action we've already seen to run again, with different results (3.11).



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A repeated scene is used to convey fuller story information at the climax of *Mildred Pierce*. To accomplish this, however, the film plays a further trick with story time. See our "Twice told tales: *Mildred Pierce*." Repetition may mislead us in other ways, as we try to show in "Memories are unmade by this."

“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*



3.11 Creating complex time schemes. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry and his friend Hermione use a magical device to go back in time. Here they watch themselves playing out the action from a scene we had witnessed earlier in the film.



A CLOSER LOOK

Playing Games with Story Time

For both filmmakers and viewers, reconstructing story time on the basis of 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, in unusual films, we can enjoy the challenge of unpredictable orderings of story events.

Pulp Fiction (1994) popularized “broken timelines” for a new generation of filmmakers and moviegoers. The film’s plot begins and ends with stages of a restaurant holdup, seemingly a conventional frame situation in the present. Yet in fact the final event in the story, the flight of the Bruce Willis character and his girlfriend from Los Angeles, is not the final scene in the plot. The reordering of events is startling and confusing at first, but it becomes dramatically effective in forcing us to rethink scenes we have seen earlier.

The success of *Pulp Fiction* encouraged American filmmakers to play more freely with story time. *Go* (1999) presents the events of a single night three times, each time from a different character’s point of view. We cannot figure out what happened until the end, since various events are withheld from the first version and shown in the second or third. Ten years later, audiences had become quite familiar with such “replay” plots. *Vantage Point* repeats an assassination and bombing, with each version clarifying a bit more of what actually happened in the story.

Replay plots can tease the viewer into fitting everything together. *Out of Sight* begins with 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 separate story line, and their purpose is puzzling until the film’s second half. Then the last flashback, perhaps a character’s recollection, loops back to the action that had begun the film and explains the main events. As often happens, the filmmaker uses cause-effect cues to help the viewer straighten out the broken timeline.

If replay films work to tease us with what happened in the past, filmmakers can use science fiction or fantasy premises to present alternative futures. These are sometimes called “what if?” narratives. Such films typically present a situation, then show how the story might proceed along different cause-effect chains if one factor is changed.

Sliding Doors 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, Helen arrives after the

other woman has left and stays with her faithless lover. The plot shifts back and forth between these alternative cause-effect chains before dovetailing them at the end.

Groundhog Day (1993) helped 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. The variants depend on how Phil acts—some days behaving frivolously, some days breaking laws (3.12, 3.13), and later trying to improve himself. Only after many such days does he become an admirable character, and the repetitions mysteriously stop.

Neither *Sliding Doors* nor *Groundhog Day* provides any explanation for the forking of its protagonist’s life into various paths. We simply must assume that some higher power has intervened to improve the character’s situation. Other films motivate the alternative futures by a piece of technology. The three *Back to the Future* films (1985, 1989,



3.12



3.13

3.12–3.13 “What if?” narrative—replaying the same day. During one repetition of February 2 in *Groundhog Day*, Phil tests whether he can commit crimes. He’s tossed in jail in the evening (3.12), only to wake up, as on other Groundhog Days, back at the bed-and-breakfast inn (3.13).

1990) posit that Marty's friend Doc has invented a time-travel machine, and this gadget permits complicated criss-crossings of cause and effect. In the first film, the machine accidentally transports Marty back to 1955. By accidentally thwarting his parents' romance, Marty endangers his own existence in 1985. Eventually, 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 in the second *Back to the Future* installment, events in Marty's life in 2015 have effects in 1955. The villain Biff uses the time machine to travel back and change what happened then. In the process he wreaks harm on Doc and Marty's family. Marty must again travel back to 1955 to stop Biff from changing events. At the end of Part II, Marty becomes trapped in 1955, while Doc is accidentally sent back to 1885. Marty joins him there in Part III for another set of threatened changes to the future. Although the films maintain a unified cause-effect chain, the story becomes so convoluted that at one point Doc diagrams events for Marty (and us) on a blackboard. Variations on Doc's time-machine device for creating alternative futures can be found in *Déjà vu*, *Source Code*, and *Project Almanac*.

The game of what-if emerged outside the United States as well. In *Run Lola Run*, the heroine's desperate attempts to replace a large sum that her inept boyfriend owes to drug dealers are shown as three alternative stories. Each one ends very differently because of small changes of action on Lola's part.

Although 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 we can piece it together. Characters sometimes point out 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." The characters and settings tend to remain quite consistent for all the alternative story lines—though often differences of appearance are introduced to help us keep track of events (3.14, 3.15).



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We examine what-if narratives in "Forking tracks: *Source Code*" and "What-if movies: Forking paths in the drawing room." *Inception* presents a complex plot involving dreams within dreams. We look at its exposition, motivation, and embedded plotlines in "*Inception*: Dream a little dream within a dream with me" and a follow-up, "Revisiting *Inception*."

Moreover, the individual story lines tend to parallel one another. In all three presentations of events in *Run Lola Run*, the goal of getting money is the same, even though the progression and outcomes are different. The final version of events tends to give us the impression of being the definitive one, and so what-if films usually achieve a sense of closure.

Replay and what-if films appeal to the way we think in ordinary life. Our minds sometimes revisit certain events, and we speculate about how our lives would have changed if a single moment had been different. We easily understand the sort of game that these films proffer, and we're willing to play it.



3.14



3.15

3.14–3.15 Cues for alternative futures in *Sliding Doors*. In one story line Helen gets her hair cut short (3.14). This helps distinguish her from the Helen of the other story line, who keeps her hair long (3.15). Before the haircut, a forehead bandage was a crucial cue.



A CLOSER LOOK

Continued

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 example is *Memento*, which presents the hero's investigation along two time tracks. Brief black-and-white scenes show an ongoing present, with story action moving forward chronologically. The more extensive 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. So did the Internet. Websites still buzz with speculations about what really happened in *Donnie Darko*, *Identity*, *Primer*, *The Butterfly Effect*, and *Inception*. Like other films that twist or break up story time, puzzle movies seek to engross us in the dynamic game of narrative form.

Space

In film narrative, space is usually an important factor. Events occur in particular locales, such as Kansas or Oz; the Flint, Michigan, of *Roger and Me*; or the Manhattan of *North by Northwest*. We'll consider setting in more detail when we examine *mise-en-scene* in Chapter 4, but we ought briefly to note how plot and story can manipulate space.

Normally, the locale of the story action is also that of the plot, but sometimes the plot leads us to imagine story spaces 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 his duties in a Nazi concentration camp (3.16). 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 how he survived.

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. Just as screen duration selects certain plot spans for presentation, so screen space selects portions of plot space. We'll consider screen space and offscreen space when we analyze framing in Chapter 5.



3.16 Imagining offscreen locales. 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.

Openings, Closings, and Patterns of Development

Our early experiment in romantic-comedy plotting began with beginnings and endings: How will you start your film? How will you conclude it? This echoed our discussion of formal development in Chapter 2, where we suggested that it's often useful to compare beginnings and endings. A narrative usually presents a series of changes from an initial situation to a final situation, and by considering how that pattern works, we can better understand the film.

Openings A film does not just start, it *begins*. The opening provides a basis for what is to come and initiates us into the narrative. It raises our expectations by setting up a specific range of possible causes for what we see. Indeed, the first quarter or so of a film's plot is sometimes referred to as the *setup*.

Very often, the film begins by telling us about the characters and their situations before any major actions occur. Alternatively, the plot may 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. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* begins with investigators arriving in the desert to study World War II airplanes. An *in medias res* opening grabs our interest, but as Robert Towne notes (p. 51), sooner or later the filmmaker has to explain what led up to these events.

In either case, some of the actions that took place before the plot started—often called the *backstory*—will be stated or suggested so that we can understand what's coming later. The portion of the plot that lays out the backstory and the initial situation is called the *exposition*. Usually exposition takes place early in the film, but the filmmaker may postpone chunks of exposition for the sake of suspense and more immediate impact. James Cameron and Gale Anne Hurd did this in their screenplay for *The Terminator*. For nearly 40 minutes the plot provides chases, gunplay, and glimpses of a war-torn future before the fighter Reese explains what has caused the plight that he and Sarah Connor are in.

Development Sections As a film's plot proceeds, the causes and effects create patterns of development. Some patterns are quite common. Change is essential to narrative, and a common pattern traces 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*, John Book, hiding out on an Amish farm, learns that his partner has been killed and his boss has betrayed him. His rage leads to a climactic shoot-out.

Another common pattern of development is the *goal-oriented* plot, in which a character takes steps to achieve an object or condition. 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 *North by Northwest*, Roger Thornhill looks for George Kaplan. The goal-oriented plot pattern often takes the shape of *investigation*, itself a kind of search. Here the protagonist's goal is not an object, but information, usually about mysterious causes.

Time 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 1985. This creates a goal toward which he must struggle. Space can structure plot development, too. The filmmaker might confine the action to a single locale, such as a home (as in the *Paranormal Activity* films). In *Lebanon*, the action is restricted to the inside of a military tank, and the plot develops as the tank moves to different locations. Similarly, in *Locke*, after a brief introduction the plot attaches us to



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Sometimes a film's opening will signal that we are not going to get much exposition. See “How to watch an art movie, reel 1.”



“No exposition except under heat, and break it up at that.”
—Raymond Chandler, novelist and screenwriter for *Double Indemnity*



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Some filmmakers develop their plot in large blocks—more or less self-contained episodes or “chapters.” We discuss this strategy in “The 1940s are over, and Tarantino's still playing with blocks.”



3.17 Time and space in plot patterning. In *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, Hulot's aged, noisy car has a flat tire that breaks up a funeral—consistent with a comic pattern in which the vacationing Mr. Hulot repeatedly disturbs townspeople and other guests.

the protagonist during his long car drive; the drama arises from several phone calls he conducts on the trip.

A filmmaker can combine any of these plot patterns. Many films built around a journey, such as *The Wizard of Oz* or *North by Northwest*, also involve deadlines. 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 disrupts the routines of the guests and townspeople (3.17). Although cause and effect still operate in *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, time and space are central to the plot's formal patterning.

Any pattern of development will encourage the viewer to create specific expectations. As the film trains the viewer in its particular form, these expectations become more and more precise. Dorothy's trip through Oz isn't a casual sightseeing tour. Once we understand her desire to

go home, each step of her journey (to the Emerald City, to the Witch's castle, to the Emerald City again) is seen as delaying or furthering her goal.

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



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How do we learn to recognize that an ending is coming? Starting from an anecdote about a three-year-old watching *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, we speculate on this subject in "Molly wanted more."

Climaxes and Closings A film doesn't simply stop; it *ends*. The plot 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*, 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. Because the viewer knows that there are relatively few ways the action can be resolved, she or he can hope for a fairly specific outcome. When Brody slays the shark and discovers that Hooper has survived, their relief echoes ours. In the climax of many films, formal resolution coincides with an emotional satisfaction.

A few narratives, however, are deliberately anticlimactic. After creating 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. 79). In Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* ("The Eclipse"), the two lovers vow to meet for a final reconciliation but aren't shown doing so. When the filmmaker has chosen to let the ending remain open, the plot leaves us uncertain about the final consequences of the story events. The absence of a clear-cut climax and resolution may encourage us to imagine what might happen next or to reflect on other ways in which our expectations might have been fulfilled.



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A film is constantly giving us story information. How much do we remember, scene by scene? Some filmmakers exploit our difficulties in remembering what happened earlier, as we show in "Memories are unmade by this."

Narration: The Flow of Story Information

In looking at how a filmmaker tells a story, we've emphasized matters of plot structure: how the parts, from beginning to end, are fitted together to shape the viewer's experience. Filmic storytelling involves decisions about another sort of plot organization. Back when we were sketching alternatives for a romantic comedy (p. 74), we also faced the question of whether to build the scenes around one member of the couple, both members, or the couple and other characters around them. We could tell the same story from different characters' perspectives. The story of Little Red Riding Hood will be very different depending on whether we attach ourselves to the girl or to the wolf.

This means deciding what information to give the spectator, and when to supply it. Thinking like a filmmaker, should you restrict the viewer just to what the character knows? Or should you give the viewer more information than the character has? In a stalking scene, should you show just the person being pursued, watching and listening for a threat we never see? Or should you show both the victim shrinking away and the stalker in pursuit? There is no right or wrong answer. The choice depends on the effect you want to achieve. What is clear is that a filmmaker can't avoid choosing how much information to reveal and when to reveal it.

Similarly, you might ask how objective or subjective your scene should be. Should you show only how characters behave, without any attempt to get inside their heads? Or should you add voice-over monologues that expose what they're thinking, or point-of-view shots that show what they can see? Should you try to dramatize their dreams, fantasies, or hallucinations? Again, it's a forced choice, and again you can imagine presenting the same story in a plot that is deeply subjective or one that is more objective.

These decisions involve **narration**, the plot's way of distributing story information in order to achieve specific effects. Narration is the moment-by-moment process that guides viewers in building the story out of the plot. Many factors enter into narration, but the most important ones for our purposes involve the factors we've just sketched out: the *range* and the *depth* of story information that the plot presents.

Range of Story Information: Restricted or Unrestricted?

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 *unrestricted*. We know more, we see and hear more, than any of the characters can. Such extremely knowledgeable narration is often called *omniscient* ("all-knowing") 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 Marlowe does. Throughout the rest of the film, he 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 *restricted* to what Marlowe knows.



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We examine the idea of restricting the narration to what one character knows in "Alignment, allegiance, and murder."

“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 leveler. 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

Each alternative offers certain advantages. *The Birth of a Nation* seeks to present a panoramic vision of a period in American history (based on a racist ideology). 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* benefits 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 such films engage our interest by hiding important causes. Confining the plot to an investigator’s range of knowledge plausibly motivates concealing important story information. *The Big Sleep* could have been less restricted if the screenwriter had alternated 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 both *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Big Sleep*, the narration’s range of knowledge functions to elicit particular reactions from the viewer.

Range of Knowledge: A Matter of Degree Unrestricted narration and restricted narration aren’t watertight categories but rather two ends of a continuum. A filmmaker may choose to present a broader range of knowledge than does *The Big Sleep* and still not attain the omniscience of *The Birth of a Nation*.

Early scenes of *North by Northwest*, for instance, confine us pretty much to what Roger Thornhill sees and knows. After he flees from the United Nations building, however, the plot takes us to Washington, where the members of the U.S. Intelligence Agency discuss the situation. Here the viewer learns something that Roger won’t learn for some time: the man he seeks, George Kaplan, doesn’t exist. From then on, we have a greater range of knowledge than Roger does. And we know a bit more than the Agency’s staff: we know exactly how the mix-up took place. But we still don’t know many other things that the narration could have divulged in the scene in Washington. For instance, the Agency’s staff members don’t identify the secret agent they have working under Van Damm’s nose.

This oscillation between restricted and unrestricted narration is common in films. Typically the plot shifts from character to character, giving us a little more than any one character knows while still withholding some crucial items from us. Even if the plot is focused on a single protagonist, the narration usually includes a few scenes that the character isn’t present to witness. *Tootsie*’s narration remains almost entirely attached to actor Michael Dorsey, but a few shots show his acquaintances shopping or watching him on television.

Lebanon, set during the June 1982 Israeli-Lebanese war, comes very close to purely restricted narration. Apart from the beginning and ending, the entire film is set inside a tank, where we are limited to what the four team members know. Usually films with such strong attachments to characters cheat a little by cutting to action taking place outside. Here there is no violation of the setting (3.18, 3.19). Necessary information from outside comes via radio communications. Director Samuel Maoz has said that his goal was to make audience members experience young soldiers’ sense of the horror of war and their oppressive confinement. “You see only what they see. You know only what they know.” Yet there are still moments when one soldier’s reactions aren’t noticed by the others, so we gain a slightly wider range of knowledge than any one character has.

Analyzing Range of Narration An easy way to analyze the range of narration is to ask, “Who knows what when?” This question applies to the characters and the spectator as well. At any given moment, we can ask if we the audience knows more than, less than, or as much as the characters do. Sometimes we may get information that *no* character possesses. We shall see this happen at the end of *Citizen Kane*.



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Cloverfield uses an unusually restricted narration, confining itself to a video recording shot by the main characters. See our analysis, “A behemoth from the Dead Zone.” As if corresponding to *Cloverfield*, the teenage superhero movie *Chronicle* found ingenious ways to expand the video recording as the plot develops. We discuss this problem of motivation in “Return to paranormalcy.”



3.18



3.19

3.18–3.19 Severely restricted range of knowledge. In *Lebanon*, we see the world outside a tank as the characters do, through a gunner's crosshairs (3.18) or when the hatch is briefly opened (3.19).

Filmmakers can achieve powerful effects 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 dose of unrestricted narration helps to 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

“Narrative tension is primarily about withholding information.”
—Ian McEwan, novelist

longing to warn the characters on the screen: “You shouldn’t be talking about such trivial matters. There’s a bomb beneath you and it’s about to explode!”

In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second case we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed.



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In a series of entries starting with “Hitchcock, Lessing, & the bomb under the table,” we consider where Hitchcock may have gotten his ideas on suspense and surprise.

Hitchcock put his theory into practice. In *Psycho*, Lila Crane explores the Bates mansion in much the same way as our hypothetical character was doing. 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 greater range of knowledge creates suspense because we can anticipate events that the character cannot. Once more, the filmmaker guides the viewer’s expectations.

Depth of Story Information: Objective or Subjective?

A film’s narration manipulates not only the range of knowledge but also the *depth* of our knowledge. The filmmaker must decide how far to plunge into a character’s psychological states. As with restricted and unrestricted narration, there is a spectrum between objectivity and subjectivity.

A plot might confine us wholly to information about what characters say and do. Here the narration is relatively *objective*. Or a film’s plot may give us access to what characters see and hear. The filmmaker might give us shots taken from a character’s optical standpoint, the **point-of-view (POV) 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 (3.20–3.22). Or we might hear sounds as the character would



3.20



3.21



3.22

3.20–3.22 Perceptual subjectivity in *North by Northwest*. Roger Thornhill looks in Van Damm’s window (objective narration; 3.20), and an optical POV shot follows (perceptual subjectivity; 3.21). This is followed by another shot of Roger looking (objectivity again; 3.22).

hear them, what sound recordists call *sound perspective*. In short, through either sight or sound, the filmmaker gives us what we might call *perceptual subjectivity*.

The filmmaker can go deeper, beyond the character's senses and into her or his 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 showing his memories, particularly one image of the woman he loves (3.23, 3.24). 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, the filmmakers may render those perceptual states through slow motion, blurred imagery, or distorted sound. Similar techniques may suggest a dream or hallucination.

But some imaginary actions may not be so strongly marked. Another 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 (3.25, 3.26). But the next shot presents Jamal still on the skyscraper, glaring at Salim (3.27). Now we realize that the images of the falling



3.23



3.24

3.23–3.24 Memories motivate flashbacks. Early in *Slumdog Millionaire*, it's established that during the quiz show (3.23) Jamal recalls his past—most often, his glimpse of Latika at the train station (3.24).



3.25



3.26



3.27

3.25–3.27 Suppressed cues for subjectivity in *Slumdog Millionaire*. Furious with Salim, Jamal grabs him and rushes toward the edge of the building (3.25). Several shots present their fall (3.26), but then the narration cuts back to Jamal, glaring at Salim (3.27). This shot reveals that he only imagined killing both of them.

men were purely mental, representing Jamal's rage. Because the shots weren't marked as subjective, we briefly thought that their fall was really taking place.

Typically, moments of perceptual and mental subjectivity come in bursts. They tend to be embedded in a framework of objective narration. POV shots, like those assigned to 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 are really happening in the plot. Other sorts of films, however, may avoid this convention. Fellini's *8½*, Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour*, Peter Haneke's *Caché*, and *Memento* mix objectivity and subjectivity in ambiguous ways. *Inception* doesn't signal its dreams with the usual special effects, so that often we're not sure whether we're in reality or a dream (or a dream nested inside another dream).

If a filmmaker restricts our knowledge to a single character, does that restriction create 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 psychological depth with optical POV shots, flashbacks, and the hero's final fantasy vision of a world without war. To maximize suspense, Hitchcock's films may give us slightly greater knowledge than his characters have. But at certain moments, he confines us to their perceptual subjectivity (usually relying on POV shots). For the filmmaker, range and depth of knowledge are independent variables. These examples show that for the filmmaker, choices about the range of knowledge can be made independently of choices about depth of knowledge.

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'll use "point of view" only to refer to perceptual subjectivity, as in the phrase "optical point-of-view shot," or POV shot.

Why would a filmmaker manipulate depth of knowledge? Plunging into 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 Federico 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* (3.28–3.31). 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 what caused 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 investigator'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 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



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For more on the distinction between perceptual and mental subjectivity in narration see "Categorical coherence: A closer look at character subjectivity."



3.28



3.29



3.30



3.31

3.28–3.31 Characters sharing memories. One of the early flashbacks in *Sansho the Bailiff* starts with the mother, now living in exile with her children, kneeling by a stream (3.28). Her image is replaced by a shot of her husband in the past, about to summon his son Zushio (3.29). At the climax of the scene in the past, the father gives Zushio an image of the goddess of mercy and admonishes him always to show kindness to others (3.30). 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 (3.31). It is as if he and his mother have shared the memory of the father's gift.

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. These responses make judging her decisions difficult, and they lead us to reflect on why someone would volunteer for a suicide mission.

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 filmmaker has chosen to present or withhold story information. We can then ask about what effects the narration has on us, the viewers.

The Narrator

Narration, then, is the process by which the plot presents story information to the spectator. The filmmaker may shift between restricted and unrestricted ranges of knowledge and varying degrees of objectivity and subjectivity. The filmmaker 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 *D.O.A.*, the dying man 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. Even an unseen character can serve as a narrator, as an unborn child does in Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*.



A CLOSER LOOK

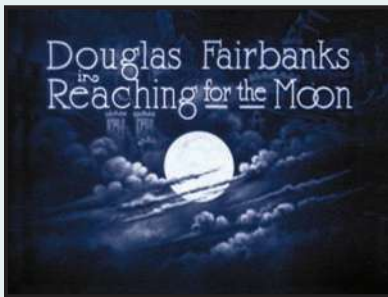
When the Lights Go Down, the Narration Starts

When we open a novel, 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 book's back cover. But filmmakers can start giving us narrative information during the credit sequences, and the process can continue to the very last moments we're in the theater.

Credit sequences are nondiegetic material, but they can assist our understanding of the story. Long ago filmmakers realized that credits could be enlivened by drawings and paintings keyed to the action (3.32). Since the 1920s, the credits' graphic design and musical accompaniment have often conjured up the story's time and place (3.33). The breezy credits of Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* offer glimpses of scenes to come while firmly establishing the two young men's friendship in 1910s Paris.

The film can set a mood simply by the music playing over simple titles, as in the nervous score for *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 geometrical designs (3.34). 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 (3.35).

Plot elements can be announced quite specifically. Illustrations can anticipate particular scenes (3.36). *Goldfinger's* credits present a key motif, the gold-skinned woman, and anticipate several later scenes (3.37). The



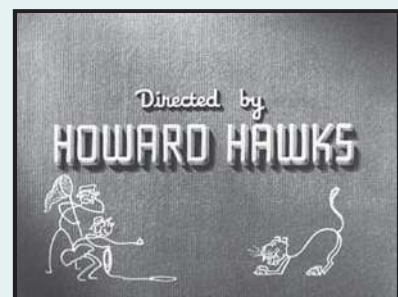
3.32 Incorporating illustration. An early example of illustrated credits for the 1917 comedy *Reaching for the Moon*.



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



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



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



3.34 Hinting at actions and themes. Saul Bass's elegantly simple credits for *Advise and Consent* hint that the story will lift the lid off Washington scandals.

plot premises of *Catch Me If You Can* are previewed in the title sequence, which pays affectionate homage to the animated credits of the film's period (3.38). *Se7en*'s scratchy glimpses of cutting, stitching, and defacement launched a cycle of nightmarish credit sequences showing violation and dismemberment. Less overtly, the opening of *The Thomas Crown Affair* hints at the hero's scheme for stealing a painting.

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

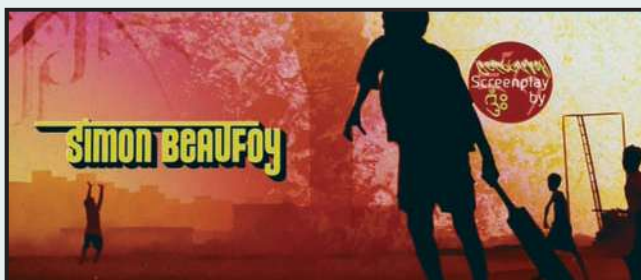
that situation can be presented during the credits (3.39). Sometimes key scenes will be replayed under the final credits, or new plot action will be shown. *Airplane!* began a fashion for weaving running gags into its final credits.

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 (3.40). These "credit cookies" remind us that an enterprising filmmaker may exploit every moment of the film's running time to engage our narrative expectations.



3.37 Introducing motifs. *Goldfinger*: The gilded woman will reappear in the film, while other scenes to come, including visions of the villain, are projected on areas of her body.

3.38 Evoking a time period and previewing a story. 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.



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



3.40 Credit cookies. 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.

The narrator needn't be a character in the story. 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. *Amélie*'s cozy commentator adds a touch of fantasy, while the urgent voice-over we hear during *The Naked City* suggests that the film has a documentary authenticity.

Either sort of narrator may give us any range or depth of knowledge. A character narrator is not necessarily restricted and very often tells of events that she or he didn't witness. This happens in *The Quiet Man*, when the relatively minor figure of the village priest recounts the action. Likewise, a noncharacter narrator might 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 the information 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.

CREATIVE DECISIONS

Choices about Narration in Storytelling

The Road Warrior (also known as *Mad Max 2*) offers a neat summary of how narration contributes to a film's overall effect. At certain points in the film, director George Miller and writers Terry Hayes and Brian Hannant chose to supply information that builds expectations and help us grasp the story. At other points, they decided to withhold information for the sake of surprise.

The 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. Who is he? We aren't told yet.

The rest of the plot is organized around Max's encounter with a group of peaceful desert settlers. They want to flee to the coast with the gasoline they have refined, but they're under siege by a gang of vicious marauders. Max agrees 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 settlers flee their compound. He learns that only by joining them can he hope to survive. The struggle against the encircling gang comes to its climax in Max's attempt to escape with a tanker truck.

Max is the protagonist; his goals and conflicts propel the developing action. 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 narration also gives us a degree of subjectivity, again focused on Max. We get optical POV shots as Max drives his car (3.41) or watches a skirmish 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 (3.42). All of these narrational choices 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 doesn't know about. In such scenes, unrestricted narration builds up suspense by showing both pursuers and pursued or different aspects of the battle. At the climax,

“The whole art of movies and plays is in the control of the flow of information to the audience . . . : how much information, when, how fast it comes. Certain things maybe have to be there three times.”

—Tom Stoppard, playwright and screenwriter of *Shakespeare in Love*

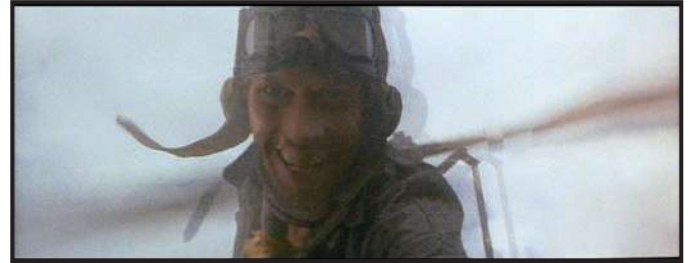


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Stretches of unrestricted narration allow a filmmaker to show characters' reactions to a situation. We trace some examples in *Road Warrior* and other films in "They're looking for us."



3.41



3.42

3.41–3.42 Narration in *The Road Warrior*: Optical point of view and perceptual subjectivity. The narration provides a POV shot as Max drives up to an apparently abandoned gyrocopter (3.41). The injured Max's dizzy view of his rescuer uses double exposure to present his delirium as perceptual subjectivity (3.42).

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 settlers 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 (3.43)—suggests both a perceptual subjectivity (the boy's point of view as he rides away) and a mental subjectivity (the memory of Max dimming for the dying narrator).

The narrative form of *The Road Warrior*, then, rests on decisions about both plot and narration. The plot organizes causality, time, and space through an extended flashback, and it gains further coherence through consistent choices about narration. The main portion of the film channels our expectations through an attachment to Max, alternating with briefer, more unrestricted portions. This main section is in turn 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. The filmmakers' creative choices have organized narration in order to give us a unified experience.



3.43 Mental and perceptual subjectivity. 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

Perhaps you've decided to try your hand at writing a screenplay and you've investigated books and websites that offer advice. *Make sure your main character wants something. Emphasize conflict. Take your character on an emotional journey. Be sure that your ending resolves the initial situation.* Suggestions like these can be valuable, but we need to recognize that they reflect only one tradition. This tradition has often been called that of "classical Hollywood" filmmaking.

The tradition is called "classical" because it has been influential since about 1920 and "Hollywood" because the tradition assumed its most elaborate shape in American studio films. The same mode, however, governs narrative films made in other countries. For example, *The Road Warrior*, although an Australian film, is constructed along classical Hollywood lines. And many documentaries, such as



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David Koepp, screenwriter of *Jurassic Park* and *War of the Worlds*, discusses the cult of storytelling in "David Koepp: Making the world movie-sized." *Premium Rush*, written and directed by Koepp, is a model of a modern film in the classical Hollywood tradition. We discuss it in "Clocked doing 50 in the Dead Zone."

Primary or *Super Size Me* rely on conventions derived from Hollywood's fictional narratives.

This model of narrative form tends to present individual characters making things happen. Large-scale events such as floods, earthquakes, and wars may affect the action, but the story centers on personal psychological causes: decisions, choices, and traits of character.

Typically the plot focuses on one or two central characters who want something. Characters' desires set 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; at first she wants to save Toto from Miss Gulch, and later she seeks to get home from Oz. Her desire to get home creates short-term goals along the way, such as 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 in the classical narrative there's a blocking element: an opposition that creates conflict. Typically, the protagonist comes up against a character with opposing traits and goals. As a result, the protagonist must overcome the opposition. Dorothy's desire to return to Kansas is opposed by the Wicked Witch, whose goal is to obtain the Ruby Slippers. Dorothy must eventually eliminate the Witch before she is able to use the slippers to go home. We shall see in *His Girl Friday* how the two main characters' goals conflict until the final resolution (pp. 401–404).

The classical plot traces a process of change. Often characters achieve their goals by changing their situation—perhaps they gain fame or money or just survival—but they also change their attitudes or values. In *The Road Warrior*, Max comes to appreciate loyalty to a community. At the end of *Jerry Maguire*, the hero has found professional success but also has learned the value of friendship and a loving family.

But don't all narratives tell stories 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 rhythm of life in the latter). In narrative films such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, the protagonists are not active but rather passive. So a filmmaker need not put the striving, goal-oriented protagonist at the center of a film's story.

Classical Hollywood filmmakers tend to let psychological causes motivate most events. 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 express the characters' emotions or display stage shows featuring the characters. When there are discontinuities of character traits, those need explaining. 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. What caused the abrupt change? Mickey explains via a flashback that he achieved a serene attitude toward life while watching a Marx Brothers film. Now the cause-effect pattern is clear.

In creating a classical film, the filmmakers adjust time to fit the cause-effect progress of the story. Every instant shows something that contributes to the flow of the story, and stretches of time that don't contribute are skipped over. 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. Specific devices such as *appointments* and *deadlines* make plot time depend on the story's cause-effect chain as well. When characters agree to meet and then we see them meeting, the stretch of time between the plan and the meeting becomes

“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*



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For a discussion of how characters' goals can be crucial to major transitions in the plot, see “Times go by turns.”

insignificant. Similarly, a deadline forces the action to reach a certain stage at a specific time.

Filmmakers working in the classical tradition have a range of choices about narration, but most tend to present the action objectively, in the way discussed on pages 90–92. The film will usually present an objective story reality, against which various degrees of perceptual or mental subjectivity can be measured. Classical filmmakers also tend 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 filmmakers prefer a strong degree of *closure* at the end. Leaving few loose ends unresolved, the films seek to wrap things clearly. 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 a law of 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. *Love Affair, or the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* uses flashforwards interspersed with the main plot action; only gradually do we come to understand the causal relations of these flashforwards to the present-time events. More recently, puzzle films (p. 84) tease the audience to find clues to enigmatic presentation of 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 unexpectedly 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 open endings like that of *The 400 Blows* (p. 79).

Great films have been made within the classical tradition. Yet it remains only one way of using narrative form. If we want to gain a wider appreciation of all types of cinema, we can't demand that every movie conform to Hollywood conventions.

Narrative Form in *Citizen Kane*

Citizen Kane is one of the most original films to come out of Hollywood. It has won praise on many counts, not least its subtle approach to storytelling. Director Orson Welles and screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz made creative choices that continue to influence how films are made today. *Kane* is an ideal occasion to test how principles of film narrative can work in both familiar and fresh ways.

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. Before you saw *Citizen Kane*, you may have known only that it is regarded as a film classic. 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, a businessman as



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Coincidences supposedly have no place in tight storytelling, but they are more common than you might think. We talk about how filmmakers get away with them in “No coincidence, no story.”



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The classical approach to narrative is still very much alive, as we show in “Your trash, my treasure,” devoted to *National Treasure*, and “Understanding film narrative: The trailer,” on *The Wolf of Wall Street*.



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How much variation can classical Hollywood storytelling permit, especially in regard to the plot's ordering of story events? We try for answers in "Innovation by accident" and "What-if movies: Forking paths in the drawing room."

famous as Steve Jobs became. Spectators would thus be looking for events keyed to Hearst's life.

Several minutes into the film, the viewer can form more specific expectations about the relevant 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. In this genre, the plot typically traces an individual's life and dramatizes certain episodes. The most prominent fictional biographies released before *Kane* would include *Anthony Adverse* (1936) and *The Power and the Glory* (1933), about a somewhat Kane-like tycoon.

The viewer can also spot the 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 exposure 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 such films as *Maytime* (1937; p. 253). 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.

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, because 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 storytelling tradition. Even without specific prior knowledge about this film, we expect that, as an American studio product of 1941, it will follow that tradition. In most ways, it does. We'll see that characters' desires propel the narrative, causality is defined around traits and goals, conflicts lead to consequences, time is motivated by plot necessity, and narration is mostly objective and mixes restricted and unrestricted passages. We'll also see some ways in which *Citizen Kane* is more ambiguous than most films in the classical 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. *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*

After Welles and Mankiewicz decided to tell the life story of a fictional newspaper magnate, Charles Foster Kane, they faced a choice that's familiar to you by now. They could have presented Kane's life story chronologically, letting their plot present incidents in story order as most fictional biographies do. They chose another option. They decided to trace Kane's life through flashbacks, recalled by people who knew him. But Welles and Mankiewicz needed something to motivate the characters' flashbacks. They hit upon the idea of having a media reporter seek the meaning of Kane's dying word, "Rosebud." This generates a second line of action, the reporter Thompson's investigation of Kane's life. The result is a film that creates an unusual relation of plot to story.

We can start to understand this by outlining a segmentation like the one we made for *The Wizard of Oz*. The basic segments are typically scenes, and they

form part of a larger section of the film. In the following 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.

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.
- Fourth flashback*
- 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.
- Fourth flashback (cont.)*
- 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:

- Fifth 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:*Sixth
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.

This sort of outline lets us recover the film's overall architecture. Our segmentation lets us see at a glance the major divisions of the plot and how scenes are organized within them. It also helps us notice how the plot organizes story causality and story time.

Citizen Kane's Causality

Citizen Kane's plot has two main lines of action, but the chain of causality in each one is somewhat unusual. Welles and Mankiewicz give us an investigation—one not conducted by detectives but by reporters. A media company has made a newsreel about tycoon Charles Foster Kane, and that newsreel is already completed when the plot introduces the reporters. But the newsreel fails to satisfy the boss, Rawlston, and his desire to revise the newsreel gets the search for Rosebud underway. He assigns the reporter Thompson a goal, which sets him digging into Kane's past.

Another line of action, Kane's life, has already taken place when the plot begins. Many years before, a poverty-stricken boarder at Kane's mother's boarding-house has paid her with a deed to a gold mine. Thanks to these newfound riches, Mrs. Kane appoints Thatcher as young Charles's guardian. Thatcher's guardianship results in Kane's growing up into a spoiled, rebellious young man.

Usually an investigator searches for an object or a concealed set of facts. In this respect, Thompson's mission is straightforward: Who or what was Rosebud? But Thompson is also looking for a set of character traits. Rawlston's order is clear: "It isn't enough to tell us what a man did, you've got to tell us who he was." So finding the meaning of Rosebud promises to reveal something about Kane's personality. Kane, a rather complex character, has many traits that influence other characters' actions. But, as we'll see, *Citizen Kane's* narrative leaves some of Kane's character traits uncertain.

Thompson has a goal, then. So does Kane, although his is less well-defined. At various times of his life he seems to be searching for fame, friendship, social justice, or a woman's love. But part of the point of the film is that his real goals are uncertain. At several points, characters speculate that Rosebud was something that Kane lost or was never able to get. Such vagueness about a major character's goal makes this an unusual narrative for the Hollywood tradition.

Thompson and Kane are the prime movers of the action in their plot lines. In Kane's life, other characters come into conflict with him, and he changes their lives. In Thompson's plot line, however, these characters serve to provide information about Kane. Thatcher knew him as a child. Bernstein, his manager, knew his business dealings. His best friend, Leland, had access to his personal life, his first marriage in particular. Susan Alexander, his second wife, knew him in middle age. The butler, Raymond, managed Kane's affairs during his last years. Without these witnesses, Thompson couldn't pursue Rosebud. These secondary characters help us, too, as we reconstruct the progression of story events.

The use of testimony spanning Kane's life solves a major storytelling problem Welles and Mankiewicz faced. But as we've seen, one creative choice often demands others. The film's story includes Kane's wife Emily and his son, so shouldn't they be given a chance to share their impressions of the great man? The problem is that

their recollections would largely duplicate what we learn from Leland. Welles and Mankiewicz solve this problem in a simple way. They kill Emily and her son off in an auto accident, which occurs well before Thompson's investigation starts.

Time in *Citizen Kane*

Citizen Kane reshapes time in complex ways, and this gives the film much of its originality, particularly in the Hollywood of 1941.

Duration and Frequency The most conventional aspect of narrative time in the film involves duration. We know that Kane is 75 years old at his death in 1941, and the earliest scene shows him at around age 10. Thus the plot covers roughly 65 years of his life, plus the week of Thompson's investigation. The only earlier story event is Mrs. Kane's acquisition of the mine deed in 1868, which probably took place shortly before she turned her son over to Thatcher. So the story runs a bit longer than the plot—roughly 73 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). Montage sequences became conventions of classical Hollywood cinema in the 1920s, and here they have their traditional function of condensing story duration in a comprehensible way. We'll discuss montage sequences in more detail in Chapter 6 (see pp. 252–253).

Kane is a little more unusual in its treatment of temporal frequency. One specific story event appears twice in the plot. In their flashbacks, both Leland and Susan describe her debut in the Chicago premiere of *Salamambo*. 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, emphasizing her humiliation. The plot's repeated presentation of Susan's debut 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.

Chronology and Flashbacks *Kane* presents an unusual ordering of story events. The central structural decision, that of using Thompson's investigation to motivate a series of flashbacks, asks us to put things in chronological order. For example, the earliest *story* event 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 we encounter in the *plot* is Kane's death.

To illustrate the maneuvers that Welles and Mankiewicz ask us to execute, in building up 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

At first the plot doesn't present these story phases in chronological order. The early portions of the film boldly jump back and forth over many phases of Kane's life. The "News on the March" sequence (2a) gives us glimpses of all periods, and



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Flashbacks were part of film-making tradition 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."

Thatcher's manuscript (4) shows us Kane in boyhood, youth, and middle age. 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* office and his engagement to Emily (5b, 5f). The plot demands that we sort these events into chronological story order.

The film becomes less demanding as it goes along, however. Later portions of the plot tend to concentrate on particular periods, and the flashbacks respect chronological order. Bernstein's recollections (5) concentrate on episodes showing Kane as newspaper editor and fiancé of Emily. Leland's flashbacks (6) run from newlywed life to middle age. Susan (7) tells of Kane as a middle-aged and an old man. Raymond's brief but significant anecdote (8b) concentrates on Kane in old age.

By getting more linear, the plot helps us grasp 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 in the more nonlinear scenes. For instance, we know that Kane will lose his newspapers to Thatcher, and that knowledge lends a certain poignancy to Kane's "Declaration of Principles" in which he pledges to fight for the common man.

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 die alone and, apparently, unmourned?

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. What will break Leland's friendship with Kane? What will trigger Susan's decision to walk out on him? As Hitchcock pointed out (p. 89), giving us more knowledge than the characters have can promote suspense.

"News on the March" as a Map of the Plot In 1941, one of the most original sequences of the film was the "News on the March" newsreel. By looking over our segmentation, we can see that the newsreel is not only daring but very helpful. 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 quickly supplies a great deal of information about this mysterious figure. Moreover, by reviewing Kane's life, the newsreel makes it much easier to rearrange the plot events we'll see into linear story order. Here is an outline of "News on the March."

- A. Shots of *Xanadu*.
- B. Funeral; headlines announcing Kane's death.
- C. Growth of financial empire.
- D. Gold 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.

Now we can see that the newsreel offers us a capsule preview of the film's overall plot. "News on the March" begins by emphasizing Kane as "Xanadu's Landlord"; a short segment (A) presents shots of the house and the compound. This is a variation on the opening of the whole film (1), which consisted of a series of shots of the grounds, moving progressively closer to the house. That opening sequence had ended with Kane's death; now the newsreel follows the shots of the house with Kane's funeral (B). Next comes a series of newspaper headlines announcing Kane's death. If we compare this portion with the segmentation of the entire film's plot, we see that 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 told 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 boarding-house deed and the mine (including an old photograph of Charles with his mother, as well as the first mention of the boy's sled). This bit parallels the first flashback (4), which 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 flashbacks (6) cover the first marriage, the affair with Susan, the political campaign, and the premiere of the opera *Salammbô*.

We haven't charted 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 watch scenes in the flashbacks, we already expect certain events and have a rough chronological basis for fitting them into our story reconstruction.

Motivation in *Citizen Kane*

Citizen Kane follows classical Hollywood tradition in motivating the causes and effects that push the story forward. Even small details are justified causally. Why did Welles and Mankiewicz decide to make Thatcher a prosperous businessman? Their script could have had Mrs. Kane turn her son over to a kindly but poor family, one that wouldn't treat him as cruelly as apparently his father has. But Thatcher's social position motivates important events. By giving her son to Thatcher, Charles' mother catapults him into a wealthy circle, where he will wield the power we witness across the film. Thatcher's elite standing also makes it easy for Thompson to pursue his initial research on Kane's life. Thatcher is influential enough to testify at a congressional hearing, so he can appear in the newsreel (the first time we encounter him). As a self-important tycoon, he has chronicled his life in a journal, which Thompson can scan for information about Kane's childhood.

A striking instance of motivation involves Thompson's visit to Susan, Kane's second wife at the El Rancho nightclub (3). It's plausible that Thompson would start his search with Kane's ex-wife, presumably the surviving person closest to him. But let's think like a screenwriter. In the story, the young Kane is an audacious editor, thumbing his nose at the stuffed-shirt Thatcher and taking up the cause of



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Citizen Kane helped popularize flashback-based narratives in the 1940s. We look at some less familiar but equally interesting examples in "Chinese boxes, Russian dolls, and Hollywood movies." For more on flashbacks in movies old and new, see "Puppetry and ventriloquism."

the poor. But Susan didn't know Kane then. If she had been given the first flashback, it would have dwelt on Kane's old age, a period in which he was pompous and self-centered. If Susan had told her story first, showing the elderly Kane, we would not sense his character change gradually. By delaying her flashback, the plot lets Thatcher, Bernstein, and Leland fill in Kane's early, rambunctious years. By then we're prepared to appreciate, from Susan's testimony, how he has decayed into a selfish, aggressive old man.

So the creative problem was, find a way to prevent Susan from telling her story. The solution that Mankiewicz and Welles chose was to make Susan drunk and angry during Thompson's visit. Her refusal to speak to him motivates postponing her flashback. It also enhances the mystery around Kane—why won't she go on the record?—while her alcoholic haze suggests that he has damaged the people closest to him.

Some critics have argued that the search for Rosebud is a flaw in *Citizen Kane*, because the revelation of the boy's sled is an oversimplification. Does all this come down to the fact that Kane just longs for his lost childhood and his mother's love? If we assume that the point of the plot is simply to identify Rosebud, this charge might be valid. But in fact, Rosebud serves a very important motivating function. It creates Thompson's goal and thus focuses our attention on his digging 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.

Furthermore, it's not clear that the plot lets us conclude that Rosebud is the final answer to the quest. In the final scene, Thompson gives up the search. He doubts that "any word can explain a man's life." Moreover, in the scene in the newsreel projection room, Rowlston 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.

Linked to the uncertainties around Rosebud is a degree of ambiguity about psychological motivations. These relate primarily to Kane's character. The characters' varying portraits of Kane don't neatly tally. Bernstein still looks on Kane with sympathy and affection, whereas Leland is cynical about his own relationship with Kane. Likewise, 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. The ambiguities around Rosebud and Kane's character are unusual for the classical Hollywood tradition, which usually prefers more clear-cut explanations of character psychology.

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. There is as well a parallel between the two major lines of action: Kane's life and Thompson's search. 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."

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 progression. Thanks to the delay in presenting Susan's flashback, 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. Bernstein gives an account of the newspaper's growth, and then Leland traces Kane's changing political views. Both men provide the background to Kane's early success and lead into stories of Kane's personal life. Here we get the first real indications of Kane's failure. Susan continues to trace his decline by explaining how he ruled her life. Finally, in Raymond's flashback, Kane becomes a pitiable old man. Thompson's present-day inquiry has its own pattern of development, that 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 showing the protagonist gaining greater knowledge. Still, in most classical narrative films, the main character reaches his or her initial goal, and Thompson, the main character of this line of action, fails to achieve his aim.

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

Still, the search for Rosebud does lead to a certain resolution. 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 final shot of the "No Trespassing" sign hints that neither Thompson nor we should have expected to know Kane's mind fully. 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 Rowlston 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. We can contrast this somewhat open ending with those of

“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

His Girl Friday and *North by Northwest*, as well as with another open-ended film, *Do The Right Thing*. All are discussed in Chapter 11.

Narration in *Citizen Kane*

In analyzing how *Kane*'s plot manipulates the moment-by-moment 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 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. For example, 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 allotted 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 by having Leland suggest that Kane told him about it, but the scenes present detailed knowledge that Leland probably didn't possess.) By the time we get to Susan's flashback (7b–7k), however, the range of knowledge again fits the character more snugly. (In one scene, 7f, 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 a plausible depiction of the process of investigation, since we expect any reporter to assemble information through interviews. 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 multiple narrators make the film resemble 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 witnesses to gather data, the plot uses the narrators both to furnish story information and to *conceal* information. The narration can motivate gaps in knowledge about Kane by appealing to the fact that nobody can know everything about anyone else. 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 motivates the withholding of key pieces of information, and this in turn arouses 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) reveals her fatigue and frustration. These scenes help make her the most sympathetic narrator, reinforcing our sense that Kane has cruelly forced her to pursue a singing career.

Against the five character narrators, the film's plot sets another source of knowledge, the "News on the March" short. We've already seen the crucial function of the newsreel in introducing us to *Kane's* 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's assigns Thompson to add depth to the newsreel's superficial version of Kane.

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.

It's very striking, especially for a film made over 70 years ago, that Thompson is barely characterized. We can't even identify his face (3.44). 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 central protagonist, as reporters tend to be in the journalism genre. But *Citizen Kane* is less about Thompson the man than about his *search*. The plot's handling of Thompson makes him a neutral channel for the story information that he gathers, even 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. That's 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 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 trip. Here, however, an omniscient narration conducts the tour. Eventually, we enter a darkened bedroom. A hand holds a paperweight, and over this is superimposed a flurry of snow (3.45).

The image teases us. Is the narration making a lyrical comment on the action? 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 bustles into the room. Apparently, no character knows what we know.

At other points in the film, the omniscient narration calls attention to itself. During Susan's opera debut in Leland's flashback (6i), we see stagehands high above reacting to her performance. Most vivid 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. We can now associate the opening's emphasis on the snowy cottage with the closing scene's revelation of the sled.

This framing narration is truly omniscient. It withholds a key piece of story information at the outset, teases us with hints (the snow, the tiny cottage in the paperweight), and finally reveals at least part of the answer to the initial question. A return to the "No Trespassing" sign reminds us of our point of entry into the film. The film derives its unity not only from systematic choices about causality and time but also from a patterned narration that arouses curiosity and suspense and yields a surprise at the very end.



3.44 Deemphasizing Thompson. Camera angle and selective lighting make the reporter less important than the witnesses he interviews.



3.45 Narrational omniscience in *Citizen Kane*. The elusive image of the paperweight in *Citizen Kane*—seen by film viewers but not by any characters in the film.



SUMMARY

Not every analysis of a narrative film runs through all the categories we have covered here. Our purpose was as much to illustrate these concepts as to analyze *Citizen Kane*. With practice, you can become more familiar with these analytical tools and can use them flexibly, suiting your approach to the specific film at hand and the things that intrigue you about it. Should you become a filmmaker, all these matters, from cause-effect patterns to narrational organization, will confront you with a cascade of decisions. You may make your choices intuitively or through lots of thought and soul searching, but these remain essential dimensions of storytelling.

In looking at any narrative film, then, asking these questions will help you understand it better:

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. How are story events connected in time? Have the filmmakers manipulated order, frequency, and duration in the plot so as 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 principles 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 consider aspects of nonnarrative form in Chapter 10.

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 patterning. A film, however, also presents a complex blend of images and sounds. Like the overall architecture of film form, the finer grain of cinematic techniques involves the filmmaker in creative problem solving and decision making. Our experience of the film is shaped by the filmmaker's choice and control and patterning of those techniques. Part Three shows how this all happens.