

8

Story



Lions Gate Films

*Narratives are composed in order to reward, modify,
frustrate, or defeat the perceiver's search for coherence.*

—DAVID BORDWELL, FILM SCHOLAR

Overview Stories: showing and telling. Narratology. Who's telling the story? Voice-over narrators: characters as storytellers. Realistic, classical, and formalist narratives. Story versus plot. The role of the spectator: co-creator in making meaning. Meaning from outside: star iconography, genre expectations, the symbolic implications of titles, credit sequences, the musical score. The seductive lure of what happens next. Classical narrative structure: shaping the conflict, motivating the action. The narrative elegance of Buster Keaton's *The General*. Realistic narratives. Realism as a style: the illusion of being "lifelike." Slice-of-life, open-ended stories. The pretense of authorial neutrality. Realism's tradition of "shocking" exposés. Formalistic narratives: the importance of pattern and design as values in themselves. Intrusive narrators: brazen manipulation of the storytelling apparatus. Nonfictional narratives: documentaries and avant-garde films. New technologies, new truths: *cinéma vérité*. Neutrality versus propaganda. Genre and myth. Screwball comedies, coming-of-age films, musicals, science fiction. The need to repeat: genre cycles. Primitive, classical, revisionist, and parodic phases of a genre's evolution. Jung and Freud. The social need for myths.

Since ancient times, people have been intrigued by the seductive powers of storytelling. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle distinguished between two types of fictional narratives: *mimesis* (showing) and *diegesis* (telling). *Mimesis* is the province of the live theater, where the events "tell themselves." *Diegesis*, the province of the literary epic and the novel, is a story told by a narrator who is sometimes reliable, sometimes not. Cinema combines both forms of storytelling and hence is a more complex medium, with a wider range of narrative techniques at its disposal (8–1).

8–1. *Sunshine* (Hungary/Britain/Germany/Canada, 2000), with James Frain, Jennifer Ehle, and Ralph Fiennes, directed by Istvan Szabo.

Epic stories are usually concerned with important themes, in heroic proportions. The protagonist is generally an ideal representative of a culture—national, religious, or ethnic. This epic saga takes its title from the family's name, Sonnenschein, which translates as sunshine. It's only the first of many ironies in the film. The family is Jewish, trying to survive in an anti-semitic Hungary through three convulsive epochs—the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Nazi occupation, and the brutal Communist era. They work hard, they excel. They bring honor to their family and their

country. They downplay their religion. But it's never enough. The family is degraded, their wealth confiscated, their religious identity almost obliterated. Most successful epics capture the values and aspirations of a culture, sometimes in a bitterly ironic mode. As critic Richard Schickel pointed out about *Sunshine*: "It makes you feel, quite poignantly, the crushing tides of history: heedless, inhuman—and tragic." (*Paramount Classics*)



8-2a. *Speed* (U.S.A., 1994), with Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock, directed by Jan De Bont. (Twentieth Century Fox)



8-2b. *The Home and the World* (India, 1984), with Victor Bannerjee and Soumitra Chatterjee, directed by Satyajit Ray. (European Classic)



Ever since the silent era, commentators have remarked on how “fast” American films move compared to the “slow” Europeans and the “very slow” movies of Asia. Even today, American films feature narratives that jump-start almost immediately and drive relentlessly toward a climactic explosion of action. *Speed*, for example, is about a psychopath who plants a bomb on a bus, which must be driven above 50 mph or it’ll explode, killing all its passengers. The task of driving the vehicle through

city traffic falls on the Bullock character, who is totally out of her element, though she is guided in her heroic efforts by a resourceful police officer (Reeves). Everything in the story is geared toward a fast-moving narrative: the very premise of the film, the time limit, the speed limit, the volatile urban environment, and the tense cross-cutting between the heroes and the villains. *The Home and the World* is an adaptation of a novel by the Indian Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. Set in the early twentieth century, the movie is a subtle psychological study of a triangle involving a rich, liberal, and high-caste Hindu who urges his wife (Chatterjee) to emerge from the traditional *purdah* (seclusion) to meet his best friend, a charismatic revolutionary (Bannerjee). Ironically, she eventually falls in love with the friend. The story moves slowly, emphasizing the heroine’s insecure, tentative steps toward intellectual independence. There are very few big dramatic scenes, for she rarely ventures outside her home. The action is mostly interior—psychological and spiritual rather than physical. Realist film artists like the great Satyajit Ray are usually at their best when the action is slowed down to correspond to the rhythms of nature. Such stories require more patience than the lapel-grabbing urgency of a movie like *Speed*. Each movie provides its own kind of pleasure, each at its own natural pace.

NARRATOLOGY

Scholars in modern times have also studied narrative forms, with most of the focus devoted to literature, film, and drama. Narratology, as this new interdisciplinary field was called in the 1980s, is a study of how stories work, how we make sense of the raw materials of a narrative, how we fit them together to form a coherent whole. It is also the study of different narrative structures, storytelling strategies, aesthetic conventions, types of stories (**genres**), and their symbolic implications.

In traditional terms, narratologists are interested in the “rhetoric” of storytelling; that is, the *forms* that “message senders” use to communicate with

8-3. *Crash* (U.S.A., 2005), with Thandie Newton and Matt Dillon, screenplay by Paul Haggis and Bobby Moresco, directed by Haggis.

“Character-driven” stories tend to downplay narrative in favor of exploring people’s psychological complexities. In this ensemble drama, for example, we get to see many of the characters in two different contexts. The movie is set in the sprawling city of Los Angeles, where the chances of meeting the same people twice in a short period are very unlikely. In a sense, the doubled narrative structure of this film is deliberately artificial, despite the realism of the visual style, the acting, and the individual scenes. We first meet the Dillon character early in the movie. He’s a police officer who is rudely brushed off by a female African-American municipal bureaucrat, when he tries to get some help for his invalid father. Later in the story, he stops an auto containing an upscale black couple (Newton and Terrence Howard). The cop deliberately humiliates them by pretending to body search the woman in front of her helpless husband. Later in the movie, the officer comes to the rescue of the same woman whose crashed auto has trapped her inside. Initially repelled by his presence at the accident site, she reluctantly yields to his commands in getting her out of harm’s way. In fact, he saves her life. Which is the real police officer, the sadistic racist or the heroic savior? (*Lions Gate Films*)





8-4. *Masculine-Feminine* (France, 1966), with Chantal Goya and Jean-Pierre Léaud, directed by Jean-Luc Godard.

“I consider myself an essayist,” Godard said, “producing essays in novel form or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them.” Godard’s cinematic essays are a frontal attack on the dominance of classical cinema. “The Americans are good at storytelling,” he noted, “the French are not. Flaubert and Proust can’t tell stories. They do something else. So does the cinema. I prefer to use a kind of tapestry, a background on which I can embroider on my own ideas.” Instead of scripts, Godard set up dramatic situations, then asked his actors to improvise their dialogue, as in this interview scene—a technique he derived from the documentary movement called *cinéma vérité*. He intersperses these scenes with digressions, opinions, and jokes. Above all, he wanted to capture the spontaneity of the moment, which he believed was more authentic when he and his actors had to fend for themselves, without the security of a script. “If you know in advance everything you are going to do, it isn’t worth doing,” Godard insisted. “If a show is all written down, what is the point of filming it? What use is cinema if it trails after literature?” See also Louis D. Giannetti, “Godard’s *Masculine-Feminine*: The Cinematic Essay,” in *Godard and Others: Essays in Film Form* (Cranbury, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975). (Columbia Pictures)

“message receivers.” In cinema, a problem with this triadic communications model is determining who the sender is. The implied author is the filmmaker. However, many stories are not created by a single storyteller. Multiple authorship of scripts is common, especially in the United States, where the story is often pieced together by producers, directors, writers, and **stars**—a truly joint enterprise. Even prestigious filmmakers like Fellini, Kurosawa, and Truffaut preferred collaborating with others in creating the events of a story.

The problem of the elusive film author is complicated when a movie has a **voice-over** narration (8-5). Usually this off-screen narrator is also a character in the story and hence has a vested interest in “helping” us interpret the events. A film’s narrator is not necessarily neutral. Nor is he or she necessarily the filmmaker’s mouthpiece. Sometimes the narrator—as in the **first-person** novel—is



8–5. *The Shawshank Redemption* (U.S.A., 1994), with Morgan Freeman and Tim Robbins, directed by Frank Darabont.

Who tells the story and why? These are two questions every spectator should ask of a story. This movie centers primarily on the character of Andy (Robbins), a man who is imprisoned for killing his wife and her lover. Inside prison he meets Red (Freeman), who becomes his closest friend. The story is narrated by Red in a voice-over. But why him? We never get inside Andy's mind the way we do with Red, who is a more ordinary person, more like us. He never fully understands what's going on in his friend's head, so we (like Red) are limited in our knowledge. We are kept in suspense about Andy until the very end—with its surprise twists. If Andy had told his own story in the first person, there would have been no suspense and no surprises because Andy would have told us in advance what he was going to do. And that's why Red tells the story. See also Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), which analyzes voice-over narration in American fiction films. (Castle Rock Entertainment)

the main character of a movie. (For a fuller discussion of these ideas, see the “Spoken Language” section of Chapter 5 and “Point of View” in Chapter 9.)

Narration also differs according to a movie's style. In **realistic** films, the implied author is virtually invisible. The events “speak for themselves,” as they do in most stage plays. The story seems to unfold automatically, usually in chronological sequence.

In **classical** narrative structures, we are generally aware of a shaping hand in the storyline. Boring gaps in the narrative are edited out by a discreet storyteller, who keeps a low profile yet still keeps the action on track, moving toward a specific destination—the resolution of the story's central conflict.

In **formalistic** narratives, the author is overtly manipulative, sometimes scrambling the chronology of the story or heightening or restructuring events to maximize a thematic idea. The story is told from a subjective perspective, as in Oliver Stone's polemic *JFK* (8–20).

Narratology is often arcane, and occasionally incomprehensible, because of its abstract language and jargon. Exotic terms are often used to describe

traditional concepts. For example, the differences between a story and its plot structure (that is, between a narrative's content and its form) can be expressed in a bewildering assortment of terms. *Story* versus *discourse* are favored by many American scholars. Others prefer *histoire* versus *discours*, *mythos* versus *logos*, or *fabula* versus *syuzhet*.

What are the differences between story and plot? The story can be defined as the general subject matter, the raw materials of a dramatic action in chronological sequence. The plot, on the other hand, involves the storyteller's method of superimposing a structural pattern over the story.

The implied author motivates the characters and provides a cause-effect logic to the sequence of events. Peter Brooks defines plot as "the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intention of meaning." In short, plot involves the implied author's point of view as well as the structuring of the scenes into an aesthetic pattern.

THE SPECTATOR



It's impossible to understand a movie without being actively engaged in a dynamic interplay with its narrative logic. Most of us have been watching movies and television for so long that we're hardly aware of our instantaneous adjustments to an unfolding plot. We absorb auditory and visual stimuli at an incredibly rapid rate. Like a complex computer, our brain click-clicks away in many language systems simultaneously: photographic, spatial, kinetic, vocal, histrionic, musical, sartorial, and so on.

But in the American cinema especially, the story reigns supreme, even if no one seems to take the story very seriously (8-6). All the other language systems are subordinated to the plot, the structural spine of virtually all American fiction films, and most foreign movies as well.

David Bordwell and others have explored how the spectator is constantly interacting with a movie's narrative. We attempt to superimpose our sense of order and coherence on the film's world. In most cases, we bring a set of expectations to a movie even before we've seen it. Our knowledge of a given era or genre leads us to expect a predictable set of variables. For example, most westerns take place in the late nineteenth century and are set in the American western frontier. From books, TV, and other westerns, we have a rough knowledge of how frontier people were supposed to dress and behave.

When narratives fail to act according to tradition, **convention**, or our sense of history, we are forced to reassess our cognitive methods and our attitude toward the narrative. Either we adjust to the author's presentation, or we reject the offending innovation as inappropriate, crude, or self-indulgent.

Narrational strategies are often determined by genre. For example, in those types of movies that thrive on suspense (thrillers, police stories, mysteries), the narrative will deliberately withhold information, forcing us to guess, to



8-6. *Oceans Twelve* (U.S.A., 2004), with George Clooney, Matt Damon, and Brad Pitt, directed by Steven Soderbergh.

Pseudo-narratives. In many light entertainment movies such as this, the story is merely a pretext, an excuse to watch some beautiful and charming people being beautiful and charming. Star power is what this movie is really about. The narrative is a transparent structure of display, like the setting for some glittering diamonds. The main attraction is the sparkling jewels; the setting merely the mounting. (Warner Bros.)

fill in the gaps. In romantic comedies, on the other hand, we generally know the outcome in advance. The emphasis is on *how* boy wins girl (or vice versa), not if he or she wins.

Our prior knowledge of a film's star also defines its narrative parameters. We wouldn't expect to see Clint Eastwood in a Shakesperean adaptation. Eastwood's expertise is in action genres, especially westerns and contemporary urban crime stories. With personality stars especially, we can guess the essential nature of a film's narrative in advance. With actor stars like Johnny Depp, however, we are less certain about what to expect, for Depp's range is extraordinarily broad.

Audiences also judge a film in advance by the connotations of its title. A movie with a moronic title like *Attack of the Killer Bimbos* is not likely to be shown at the prestigious New York Film Festival. On the other hand, *Lady Windermere's Fan* would probably not play at the local mall theater because of its somewhat effete, aristocratic-sounding title. Of course, there are always exceptions. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* sounds like a porno film, but it's actually a respected (and sexy) British social comedy. Its title is deliberately aggressive, a bit crude. It's meant to be.

Once a movie begins, we begin to define its narrative limits. The style of the credits and the accompanying score help us to determine the tone of the picture. In the early exposition scenes, the filmmaker sets up the story variables and mood, establishing the premise that will drive the narrative forward. The beginning scenes imply how the narrative will be developed and where it's likely to end up.

The opening expository scenes also establish the internal “world” of the story—what’s possible, what’s probable, what’s not very likely, and so on. In retrospect, there should be no loose threads in a story if the implied author has done a careful job of foreshadowing. In *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, for example, Spielberg prepares us for the supernatural events that occur in the middle and later portions of the movie because the opening scene (showing us how E.T. got left behind by his spaceship) establishes supernaturalism as a narrative variable.

When a critic asked the radical innovator Jean-Luc Godard if he believed that a movie should have a beginning, middle, and end, the iconoclastic filmmaker replied: “Yes—but not necessarily in that order.” The opening exposition scenes of most movies establish the time frame of the story—whether it will unfold in **flashbacks**, in the present, or in some combination. The exposition also establishes the ground rules about fantasy scenes, dreams, and the stylistic variables associated with these levels of the story (8–8).

An elaborate game is played out between a cinematic narrative and the spectator. While watching a movie, we must sort out irrelevant details, hypothesize, test

8–7. *Hannah and Her Sisters* (U.S.A., 1986), with Mia Farrow, Barbara Hershey, and Dianne Wiest, written and directed by Woody Allen.

Many movies are structured around the Grand Hotel formula, so called after the 1932 film that features an assortment of characters who are thrown together in a single location or are unified by a common concern or a shared lifestyle. This anthology formula is ideal for exploring multiple narratives, with no single storyline predominating. It’s a favorite structural device of Woody Allen, who has used it many times. This modern comedy of manners explores the lives of three sisters (pictured), their neuroses, and the various other neurotics in their lives. By using the Grand Hotel formula, Allen is able to include at least a dozen interesting characters who all live in New York City and are connected in some way to these three women. (Orion Pictures)





8-8. *8 1/2 (Italy, 1963)*, with Sandra Milo and Marcello Mastroianni, directed by Federico Fellini. Although it is one of the most admired movies in the history of the cinema, Fellini's masterpiece features a plot that's diabolically tough to follow. Most viewers are unable to comprehend it all on first viewing because it's constantly shifting levels of consciousness without warning. Fantasies spill over onto reality, which splashes over memories, which fuse with dreams, which turn into nightmares, which . . . (Embassy Pictures)

our hypotheses, retreat if necessary, adapt, formulate explanations, and so on. The spectator is constantly subjecting the narrative to questions. Why does the heroine do that? Why does her boyfriend respond that way? What will the mother do now? And so on.

The more complex the plot, the more cunning we must be—sorting, sifting, weighing new evidence, inferring motives and explanations, ever suspicious of being taken off guard. We constantly monitor the narrative for unexpected reversals, especially in deceptive genres, such as thrillers, detective movies, and police films.

In short, we are never really passive in the face of a film's plot. Even when the story is boring, mechanical, and utterly derivative, we still can get sucked into its plot machinations. We want to know where the action is leading: We can find out only if we go along.

8-9a. *My Life As a Dog* (Sweden, 1985), with Anton Glanzelius (center), directed by Lasse Hallström. (Skouras Pictures)



8-9b. *The Insider* (U.S.A., 1999), with Russell Crowe, directed by Michael Mann. (© Touchstone Pictures. All Rights Reserved.)



Some movies are so unusual that it's virtually impossible to predict where the plot will lead. In *My Life As a Dog*, for example, the young hero is separated from his parents and moves in with an eccentric uncle and aunt in a remote village. His escapades in the country are bizarre, funny, and totally unpredictable. On the other hand, creating suspense is very difficult when audiences already know the outcome of a story. For example, *The Insider* focuses on Dr. Jeffrey Wigand (Crowe), whose life was almost ruined when he blew the whistle on the tobacco industry by exposing its lies and hypocrisy on the television news magazine, *60 Minutes*.

Despite its artistic excellence, the film failed to excite much interest with the public, and it was a box-office disappointment.

THE CLASSICAL PARADIGM

The classical paradigm is a term invented by scholars to describe a certain kind of narrative structure that has dominated fiction film production ever since the 1910s. It's by far the most popular type of story organization, especially in the United States, where it reigns virtually unchallenged. The model is called

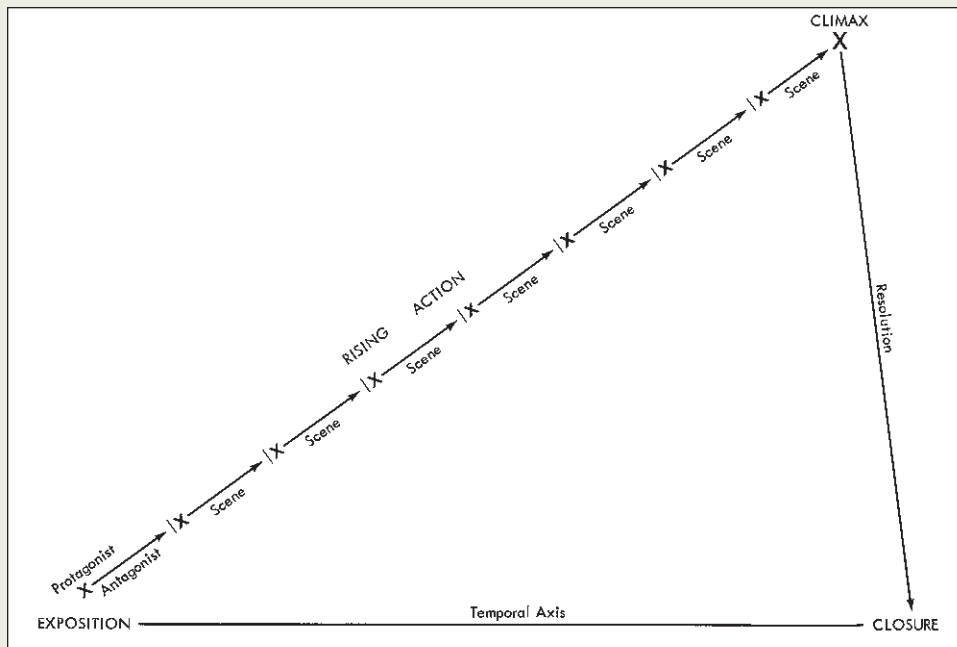
“classical” because it’s a norm of actual practice, not necessarily because of a high degree of artistic excellence. In other words, bad movies as well as good ones use this narrative formula.

Derived from the live theater, the classical paradigm is a set of conventions, not rules. This narrative model is based on a conflict between a protagonist, who initiates the action, and an antagonist, who resists it. Most films in this form begin with an implied dramatic question. We want to know how the protagonist will get what he or she wants in the face of considerable opposition. The following scenes intensify this conflict in a rising pattern of action. This escalation is treated in terms of cause–effect, with each scene implying a link to the next.

The conflict builds to its maximum tension in the climax. Here, the protagonist and antagonist clash overtly. One wins, the other loses. After their confrontation, the dramatic intensity subsides in the resolution. The story ends with some kind of formal closure—traditionally a wedding or a dance in comedies, a death in tragedies, a reunion or return to normal in dramas. The final shot—

8–10. The classical paradigm.

Aristotle implicitly suggested the structure of classical drama in *The Poetics*, but it was not until the nineteenth century that the inverted V structure was diagrammed by the German scholar Gustav Freytag. This type of narrative structure begins with an overt conflict, which is increasingly intensified with the rising action of the following scenes. Details that don’t relate to this conflict are eliminated or kept incidental. The battle between the main character and his or her antagonists reaches its highest pitch in the climax. Someone wins, the other loses. In the resolution, the strands of the story are tied up and life returns to normal with a closing off of the action.



because of its privileged position—is often meant to be a philosophical overview of some kind, a summing up of the significance of the previous material.

The classical paradigm emphasizes dramatic unity, plausible motivations, and coherence of its constituent parts. Each shot is seamlessly elided to the next in an effort to produce a smooth flow of action, and often a sense of inevitability. To add urgency to the conflict, filmmakers sometimes include some kind of deadline, thus intensifying the emotion. During the Hollywood studio era especially, classical structures often featured double plot lines, in which a romantic love story was developed to parallel the main line of action. In love stories, a comic second couple often paralleled the main lovers.

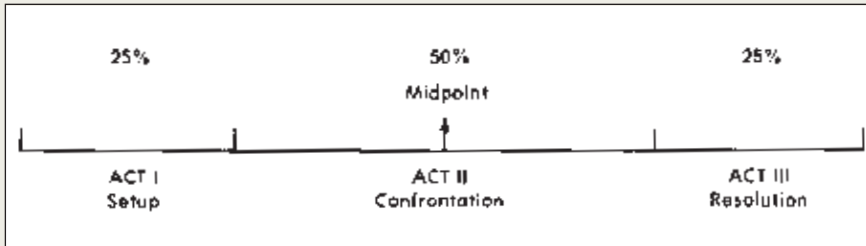
Classical plot structures are linear and often take the form of a journey, a chase, or a search. Even the characters are defined primarily in terms of what they do. “Action is character” insists Syd Field, the author of several handbooks on screenwriting. “What a person does is what he is, not what he says.” Field and other advocates of the classical paradigm are not very interested in passive characters—people to whom things are done. (These types of characters are more typical in foreign films.) Classicists favor characters who are goal oriented so that we can take a rooting interest in their plans of action.

Field’s conceptual model is expressed in traditional theatrical terms (8–11a). A screenplay is composed of three acts. Act I, “Setup,” occupies the first quarter of the script. It establishes the dramatic premise: What is the main character’s goal and what obstacles are likely to get in the way of its attainment? Act II, “Confrontation,” consists of the middle two quarters of the story, with a major reversal of fortune at the midpoint. This portion of the screenplay complicates the conflict with plot twists and an increasing sense of urgency, showing the main character fighting against obstacles. Act III, “Resolution,” constitutes the final quarter of the story. This section dramatizes what happens as a result of the climactic confrontation.

One of the greatest plots in the history of cinema is found in Buster Keaton’s *The General*, a textbook example of the classical paradigm. It fits Freytag’s inverted V structure as well as Field’s three-act play approach. As Daniel Moews has pointed out, all of Keaton’s feature-length comedies use the same basic comic formula. Buster begins as a sincere but clumsy greenhorn who bungles every attempt to ingratiate himself with a person he holds in awe—usually a pretty girl. At the conclusion of the day, he falls asleep, lonely, depressed, and dispirited. When he awakens, he’s a new man. He goes on to succeed, usually at the same or parallel activities of the earlier portions of the movie.

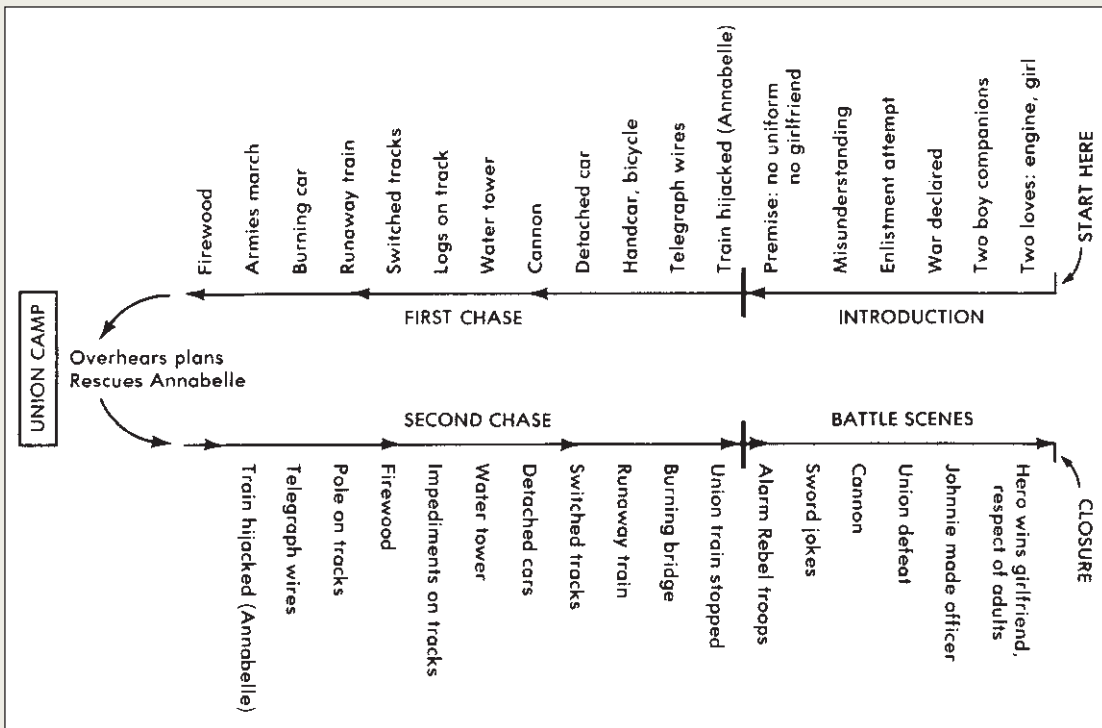
A Civil War comedy loosely based on an actual event, *The General* is laid out with the narrative elegance of a play by Congreve. The first act establishes the two loves in the hero’s life: his train, *The General*, and Annabelle Lee, his somewhat flaky girlfriend. His only friends, apparently, are two prepubescent boys. (Among other things, the movie is a coming-of-age story.) When war is declared, our hero, Johnnie Gray, trying to impress his girl, attempts to enlist. But he’s rejected by the authorities: He’s more valuable to the South as an engineer. Through a misunderstanding, Annabelle thinks Johnnie is a coward. “I don’t want you to speak to me again until you are in uniform,” she haughtily informs him. End of Act I.

8-11a. According to Syd Field, the narrative structure of a movie can be broken down into three acts. The story should contain about ten to twenty “plot points,” major twists or key events in the action. At the midpoint of the second act, there is usually a big reversal of expectations, sending the action spinning in a new direction. Although the diagram might not be helpful in analyzing most realistic or formalistic narratives, it is surprisingly apt in movies using a classical structure.



8-11b. An outline of the plot structure of *The General*.

The plot moves forward with such smoothness and poise that we’re hardly aware of its dazzling symmetry until the second chase, when most of the earlier gag clusters are triumphantly reprised.



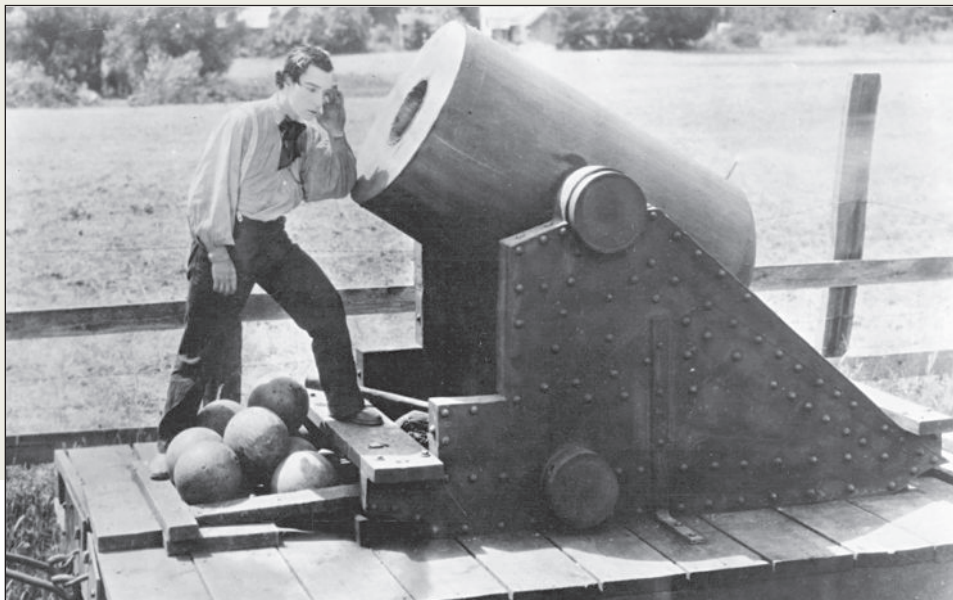
A full year is edited out of the story as we begin Act II. (The rest of the movie covers only about twenty-four hours.) We see the plans of the Union officers to hijack a Confederate train, thereby cutting off the supply lines of the Southern army. The Yankee leader's map shows the major stops and rivers along the railroad route. In fact, this map is a geographical outline of Act II.

On the day that the hijacking is to take place, Annabelle Lee boards Johnnie's train to visit her wounded father. She snubs her former suitor. The hijacking of the train sets off the rising action. The second quarter of the movie is a chase sequence: Johnnie pursues the stolen *General* (with Annabelle on board) as it flees northward. There are a series of gag clusters, each involving different props, such as telegraph wires, switched tracks, a water tower, a cannon (8–13), and so on. Johnnie is usually the butt of the jokes.

At the midpoint of the film, our hero sneaks into the enemy's camp, alone and exhausted. Nonetheless, he manages to rescue Annabelle. They fall asleep in the woods in a downpour, discouraged, almost wiped out.

The next day, a second chase begins, reversing the pattern of the previous day and taking up the third quarter of the plot. Now the jokes are inflicted on the pursuing Yankees as Johnnie and Annabelle speed southward in the recaptured *General*. The gag clusters are also reversed. Most of them are parallels to those of the first chase: telegraph wires, logs on the tracks, a water tower, a

8–12. *The General* (U.S.A., 1927), with Buster Keaton, directed by Keaton and Clyde Bruckman. Silent film comedians were masters of improvisation, capable of spinning off a profusion of gags with a single prop. For example, the gag cluster involving this cannon is a miniature drama, complete with exposition, variations on a theme that constitute the rising action, and a thrilling climax that serves as a topper to the sequence. Even more extraordinary, Keaton and his regular crew never used written scripts or shooting schedules. They knew only the premise of the film and its conclusion. The rest was improvised. They shot for about eight weeks, making due allowances for baseball games between scenes. Later, Keaton viewed all the footage, edited out the dull stuff, and created the narrative structure. (*United Artists*)



burning bridge, and so on. Just in time, Johnnie and Annabelle arrive at the Confederate camp and warn the troops of an impending Union attack.

Act III is a battle sequence between the two great armies. Johnnie shows himself to be a doggedly perseverant soldier, though not always a successful one. He is rewarded for his heroism with a commission in the army. He also wins back the love of his girl. All ends happily.

Keaton's narrative structure follows an elaborately counterbalanced pattern, in which the earlier humiliations are triumphantly canceled out on the second day. Described thus schematically, Keaton's plots sound rather mechanical. But as his French admirers have pointed out, his architectural rigor can be likened to the works of the great neoclassical artists of the eighteenth century, with their intricately worked-out parallels and neatly balanced symmetries.

Ordinarily, one would consider such an artificial plot structure as an example of a formalist narrative. However, the execution of each section is rigorously realistic. Keaton performed all his own gags (many of them dangerous), usually on the first **take**. He also insisted on absolute accuracy in the costuming, the sets, and even the trains, which are historically true to the period. This combination of realistic execution with a formally patterned narrative is typical of classical cinema. Classicism is an intermediate style that blends conventions from both stylistic extremes.

8–13. *The Motorcycle Diaries* (Brazil, 2004), with Gael García Bernal (front) and Rodrigo de la Serna, directed by Walter Salles.

The journey motif is a narrative structure that's at least as old as Homer's *The Odyssey*. It forms the structural spine of many other literary classics as well, including *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. Artistic journeys are usually learning experiences in which a central character is exposed to a variety of communities along the open road, providing insights into the human condition. *The Motorcycle Diaries* is set in the 1950s, and centers on a young Argentinian medical student, Ernesto Guevara (Bernal). He was later known as "Che" Guevara, an iconic figure in the world of left-wing Latin American mythology. Based on Guevara's actual diaries, the film's journey is both geographical and spiritual. What the 23-year-old sees on his motorcycle trip across South America is poverty, exploitation, and desperation. But he also experiences the color and exoticism of the gorgeous landscape, and the camaraderie and decency of the people. The journey later provided the central core of Guevara's values as a Marxist revolutionary. (*Focus Features*)



Ernesto Guevara (Bernal). He was later known as "Che" Guevara, an iconic figure in the world of left-wing Latin American mythology. Based on Guevara's actual diaries, the film's journey is both geographical and spiritual. What the 23-year-old sees on his motorcycle trip across South America is poverty, exploitation, and desperation. But he also experiences the color and exoticism of the gorgeous landscape, and the camaraderie and decency of the people. The journey later provided the central core of Guevara's values as a Marxist revolutionary. (*Focus Features*)

REALISTIC NARRATIVES

Traditionally, critics have linked realism to “life,” formalism with “pattern.” Realism is defined as an absence of style, whereas style is a preeminent concern among formalists. Realists reject artifice to portray the material world “transparently,” without distortion or even mediation. Conversely, formalists are concerned with fantasy materials or throwaway subject matter to emphasize the world of the imagination, of beauty for its own sake.

8–14a. *Chinatown* (U.S.A., 1974), with Faye Dunaway and Jack Nicholson, directed by Roman Polanski.

In movies that depend on mystery and suspense for their effects, the narrative often withholds information, forcing us to fill in the gaps, teasing and tantalizing us with possible solutions to mysteries that aren't totally resolved until the end.

(Paramount Pictures)



8–14b. *Mulholland Drive* (U.S.A., 2000), with Laura Elena Harring and Naomi Watts, written and directed by David Lynch.

Some narratives are, well, not quite . . . more like a . . . They're different. Almost from the inception of the cinema, filmmakers and critics have noted the similarity of movies to dreams. For example, the great Surrealist film artist Luis Buñuel said:

In the hands of a free spirit, the cinema is a magnificent and dangerous weapon. It is the best instrument for expressing the world of dreams, of emotions, of instinct. The mechanism that produces cinematic images most closely resembles the workings of the mind during sleep.

Perhaps no one is more in touch with this irrational, trancelike state than David Lynch. This movie was originally conceived as a pilot for a TV series. Unable to market it, Lynch added a new ending and released it as a movie. To say the least, it's confusing. But it's never dull. It's also strange, shocking, and very sexual. Like a dream.

(Universal Pictures)





8-15a. *Late Spring* (Japan, 1949), with Chishu Ryu (seated) and Setsuko Hara (center), directed by Yasujiro Ozu. (New Yorker Films)

Love and Marriage from a Realist Perspective. One of the most common genres in Japan is the home drama. It was the only genre Ozu worked in, and he was one of its most popular practitioners. This type of film deals with the day-to-day routines of domestic life. Although Ozu was a profoundly philosophical artist, his movies consist almost entirely of “little things”—the bitter pills of self-denial that ultimately render life disappointing. Many of Ozu’s films have seasonal titles that symbolically evoke appropriate human analogues. *Late Spring*, for example, deals with the attempts of a decent widower (Ryu) to marry off his only daughter (Hara) before she wilts into spinsterhood.

True Love is a wry exploration of male–female tensions in an Italian-American working-class community shortly before the marriage of the two main characters. Like most realistic movies, the plot line is loose. The scenes are arranged in apparently random order, and the everyday events are presented matter-of-factly, with no “heightening” for dramatic effect. The dialogue is raw, the language of the streets rather than the genteel living rooms of middle America. The conclusion of the film is ambivalent and ambiguous, with no neat solutions to the complex problems that the movie addresses.

8-15b. *True Love* (U.S.A., 1989), with Kelly Cinnante and Annabella Sciorra, directed by Nancy Savoca. (United Artists)



Today, these views are considered naive, at least so far as realism is concerned. Contemporary critics and scholars regard realism as a *style*, with an elaborate set of conventions that are less obvious perhaps, but just as artificial as those used by expressionists.

Both realistic and formalistic narratives are patterned and manipulated, but the realistic storyteller attempts to submerge the pattern, to bury it beneath the surface “clutter” and apparent randomness of the dramatic events. In other words, the pretense that a realistic narrative is “unmanipulated” or “like life” is precisely that—a pretense, an aesthetic deception.

Realists prefer loose, discursive plots, with no clearly defined beginning, middle, or end. We dip into the story at an arbitrary point. Usually we aren’t presented with a clear-cut conflict, as in classical narratives. Rather, the conflict emerges unobtrusively from the unforced events of the exposition. The story itself is presented as a “slice of life,” as a poetic fragment, not a neatly structured tale. Rarely is reality neatly structured; realistic art must follow suit. Life goes on, even after the final reel.

Realists often borrow their structures from the cycles of nature. For example, many of the movies of Ozu are given seasonal titles that symbolize an appropriate human counterpart—*Early Summer*, *Late Autumn*, *Early Spring*, *The End of Summer*, *Late Spring* (8–15a). Other realistic films are structured around a limited period of time, like summer vacation or a school semester. Such movies sometimes center on **rites of passage**, such as birth, puberty, first love, first job, marriage, painful separations, death.

Often, we can’t guess the principle of narrative coherence until the end of the movie, especially if it has a circular or cyclical structure, as many realistic films do. For example, Robert Altman’s *M*A*S*H* opens with the fresh arrival of two soldier-surgeons, Hawkeye Pierce and Duke Forrest. The movie ends when their tour of duty is over. Yet the M*A*S*H unit will continue saving lives, even after these two excellent surgeons have left. (This same structural principle is used in a later military comedy, Barry Levinson’s *Good Morning, Vietnam*.)

The episodic structure of *M*A*S*H* is what appealed to those who adapted it as a television series. Realistic film narratives frequently seem episodic, the sequence of events almost interchangeable. The plot doesn’t “build” inexorably, but seems to drift into surprising scenes that don’t necessarily propel the story forward. These are offered for their own sake, as examples of “real-life” oddities.

Spectators who like fast-moving stories are often impatient with realistic films, which frequently move slowly. This is especially true in the earlier scenes, while we wait for the main narrative strand to emerge. “Digressions” often turn out to be parallels to the central plotline. But this parallelism must be inferred; it’s rarely pointed out explicitly. Other traits of realistic narratives include the following:

1. A nonintrusive implied author who “reports” objectively and avoids making judgments.



8-16. *City of God* (Brazil, 2003), with Alexandre Rodrigues, directed by Fernando Meirelles.

Ever since the late nineteenth century, when it became a dominant international style in the arts, realism has provoked controversy for its “sordid” or “shocking” subject matter, its preoccupation with details that the conventional majority finds repulsive but fascinating. This story is set in a vicious slum of Rio de Janeiro, ironically nicknamed City of God. Many of the youngsters in the cast were actu-

ally street children of the neighborhood. “Some of them worked for drug dealers,” Meirelles said. “They knew much more than me about the film I was doing.” Violent, brutal, and bloody, the movie offers very little hope for these lost children. Most of them will never reach adulthood. Viewers are likely to ask themselves: How did the world get this way? (Miramax Films)

2. A rejection of clichés, stale conventions, stock situations and characters in favor of the unique, the concrete, the specific.
3. A fondness for *exposé*, with “shocking” or “low” subject matter that is often criticized for its grittiness and “bad taste.”
4. An antisentimental point of view that rejects glib happy endings, wishful thinking, miraculous cures, and other forms of phony optimism.
5. An avoidance of melodrama and exaggeration in favor of understatement and dedramatization.
6. A scientific view of causality and motivation, with a corresponding rejection of such romantic concepts as Destiny and Fate.
7. An avoidance of the **lyrical** impulse in favor of a plain, straightforward presentation.

FORMALISTIC NARRATIVES

Formalistic narratives luxuriate in their artificiality. Time is often scrambled and rearranged to hammer home a thematic point more forcefully. The design of the plot is not concealed but heightened. It’s part of the show. Formalistic plots come in a wide assortment, but usually they are structured according to the filmmaker’s theme. For example, Alfred Hitchcock was obsessed by themes dealing with “doubles” and “the wrong man”—a technically innocent man who is accused of a crime committed by an undetected counterpart.



8–17. *The Lion King* (U.S.A., 1994), directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff.

Movie plots often derive from the weirdest sources. This is a coming-of-age story of a lion cub named Simba, who is next in line to succeed his father, a benevolent and wise leader. But the king's evil brother brings about the monarch's death, and Simba's destiny is to avenge his father's death and return legitimate rule to the jungle. Sound familiar? The story is a shameless steal from *Hamlet*, with touches of *Oedipus Rex*, the story of Moses, *Bambi*, and *The Jungle Book*. Pretty classy stuff. (© The Walt Disney Company. All Rights Reserved.)

Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* is his most explicit treatment of these narrative motifs. The entire plot is doubled, structured in twos. There are two imprisonments, two handwriting tests, two conversations in the kitchen, two legal hearings, two visits to a clinic, two visits to the lawyer. The hero is arrested twice by two policemen. He is identified (wrongly) by two witnesses at two different shops. There are two transfers of guilt: The main character (Henry Fonda) is accused of a crime he didn't commit, and midway through the movie, his emotionally disturbed wife (Vera Miles) takes on the guilt, requiring her to be committed to an asylum. "People say that Hitchcock lets the wires show too often," Jean-Luc Godard noted. "But because he shows them, they are no longer wires. They are the pillars of a marvelous architectural design made to withstand our scrutiny."

Many formalistic narratives are intruded on by the author, whose personality is part of the show. For example, it's virtually impossible to ignore the personality of Buñuel in his films. He slyly interjects his sardonic black humor into his narratives. He loves to undermine his characters—their pomposity, their self-deception, their mean little souls (8–18). Godard's personality is also highly intrusive, especially in his nontraditional narratives, which he called "cinematic essays."

Formalistic narratives are often interrupted by lyrical interludes, exercises in pure style—like the enchanting dance numbers in the Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers RKO musicals of the 1930s. In fact, stylized genre films like musicals, science fiction, and fantasies offer the richest potential for displays of stylistic rapture and bravura effects. These lyrical interludes interrupt the forward momentum of the plot, which is often a mere pretext anyway.

An excellent example of a formalistic narrative is *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* (My Uncle in America), directed by Alain Resnais, with a script by Resnais and



8-18. *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (France, 1972), directed by Luis Buñuel.

Most of Buñuel's movies feature bizarre scenes that are left unexplained, as though they were the most normal thing in the world. He delighted in satirizing middle-class hypocrisies, treating them with a kind of affectionate bemusement mingled with contempt. In this film, he presents us with a series of loosely connected episodes dealing with the inane rituals of a group of well-heeled semizombies. Interspersing these episodes are shots of the main characters walking on an empty road (pictured). No one questions why they are there. No one seems to know where they are going. Buñuel doesn't say. (Twentieth Century Fox)

8-19. *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* (France, 1980), with Gérard Depardieu, directed by Alain Resnais.

Depardieu portrays a hardworking idealist whose conservative values and faith in God are severely tested. The significance of the title? It's taken from European pop mythology—the proverbial adventurous uncle who left for America, made a fortune, and will someday return loaded with money to solve all their problems. Resnais was also thinking of Samuel Beckett's bitter stage comedy, *Waiting for Godot*, which revolves around an obscure figure (God?) who's constantly waited for, but never shows up. (New World Pictures)



Jean Gruault (8–19). The film’s structure is indebted to Godard’s essay form, which can combine elements from the documentary and avant-garde film with fiction. The ideas in the movie are the stuff of Psychology 101. Resnais frames and intersperses his fictional episodes with footage of an actual medical doctor and behavioral scientist, Dr. Henri Laborit, who indulges in the French mania for dissection, analysis, and classification. He wittily discusses the relationship of human behavior to the makeup of the brain, the conscious and subconscious environment, social conditioning, the nervous system, zoology, and biology. He alludes to the behavior-modification theories of B. F. Skinner and other theories of human development.

The fictional episodes in the movie are concrete demonstrations of these theories. The characters are autonomous, not mechanized zombies. Nonetheless, they are victims of forces they hardly understand. Resnais focuses on three appealing characters. Each is the product of a unique biological makeup and cultural environment. Their paths intersect by chance. “These people have everything to make them happy,” Resnais observes, “yet they’re not happy at all. Why?”

Resnais then shows us why through his dazzling editing and multiple narratives. In a kaleidoscope of shifting perspectives, Resnais juxtaposes snippets of the characters’ lives, dreams, and memories with Dr. Laborit’s abstract formulations, statistics, and wry observations. The three main characters are movie freaks, and at various points during the story, Resnais intercuts brief clips from the films of their childhood idols—Jean Marais, Danielle Darrieux, and Jean Gabin. Some of these movie clips bear a not-so-coincidental resemblance to the dramatic situations of the characters. Resnais is also paying homage to three great stars of the French cinema.

NONFICTIONAL NARRATIVES

There are three broad classifications of motion pictures: fiction, documentary, and **avant-garde**. Documentaries and avant-garde films usually don’t tell stories, at least not in the conventional (that is, fictional) sense. Of course, documentaries and avant-garde movies are structured, but neither uses a plot. Rather, the story—if any—is structured according to a theme or an argument, especially in documentaries. In the avant-garde cinema, the structure is often a matter of the filmmaker’s subjective instincts.

First, documentaries. Unlike most fiction films, documentaries deal with facts—real people, places, and events rather than invented ones. Documentarists believe that they’re not creating a world so much as reporting on the one that already exists. They are not just recorders of external reality, however, for like fiction filmmakers they shape their raw materials through their selection of details. These details are organized into a coherent artistic pattern. Many documentaries deliberately keep the structure of their films simple and unobtrusive. They want their version of the facts to suggest the same apparent randomness of life itself.



8-20. *JFK (U.S.A., 1991)*, with Kevin Costner (center), written and directed by Oliver Stone.

History as narrative. As a number of historians have pointed out, “history” is actually a jumble of fragments, unsifted facts, random events, and details that no one thought were important enough to explain. This chaos is sorted out by a historian who superimposes a narrative over the sprawling materials. But as Napoleon observed, “History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.” The historian excludes some data, heightens others. Effects are provided with causes; isolated events are connected with other superficially remote events. In short, many modern historians would insist that the past contains various histories, not just one. Each history is the product of a person who assembles, interprets, and shapes the facts into a narrative. Oliver Stone’s controversial depiction of the assassination of President Kennedy is told from the point of view of New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison (Costner). The movie does what a historian does: It offers a possible explanation for a traumatic national tragedy that was never adequately resolved in the minds of much of the American public. *JFK* is a dazzling display of bravura editing, encompassing dozens of characters, many years, thousands of miles, and hundreds of thousands of historical facts. (Warner Bros.)

Sound familiar? In fact, the concepts of realism and formalism are almost as useful in discussing documentaries as fiction films. However, the overwhelming majority of documentarists would insist that their main interest is with subject matter rather than style.

The realistic documentary is best illustrated by the **cinema vérité** or “direct cinema” movement of the 1960s. Because of the need to be able to capture news stories quickly, efficiently, and with a minimal crew, television journalism was responsible for the development of a new technology, which in turn eventually led to a new philosophy of truth in documentary cinema. The technology included the following:

1. A lightweight 16-mm hand-held camera, allowing the cinematographer to roam virtually anywhere with ease.

2. Flexible **zoom lenses**, allowing the cinematographer to go from 12-mm **wide-angle** positions to 120-mm **telephoto** positions in one adjusting bar.
3. New **fast film stocks**, permitting scenes to be photographed without the necessity of setting up lights. So sensitive were these stocks to available lighting that even nighttime scenes with minimal illumination could be recorded with acceptable clarity.
4. A portable tape recorder, allowing a technician to record sound directly in automatic **synchronization** with the visuals. This equipment was so easy to use that only two people—one at the camera, the other with the sound system—were required to bring in a news story.

The flexibility of this hardware permitted documentarists to redefine the concept of authenticity. This new aesthetic amounted to a rejection of preplanning and carefully detailed scripts. A script involves preconceptions about reality and tends to cancel out any sense of spontaneity or ambiguity. Direct cinema rejected such preconceptions as fictional: Reality is not being observed but is being arranged to conform to what the script says it is. The documentarist is superimposing a *plot* over the materials. Re-creations of any kind were no

8-21. *Welcome to Sarajevo* (Britain/U.S.A., 1997), with (l. to r.) Stephen Dillane and Woody Harrelson, directed by Michael Winterbottom.

Welcome to Sarajevo is based on a true story of how some British and American journalists covered the Bosnian war in the once-beautiful city of Sarajevo, in what was once Yugoslavia, before fierce warring factions blasted the city to pieces. The movie combines acted footage (pictured) with genuine newsreel footage photographed during the war itself. The historical events shown on these newsreels are often sickening—former neighbors slaughtering each other like thugs, raping and pillaging without restraint. See also *Cinema of Flames*, by Dina Iordanova (British Film Institute, distributed by University of California Press, 2001), a study of Balkan movies and culture. (Miramax Films)



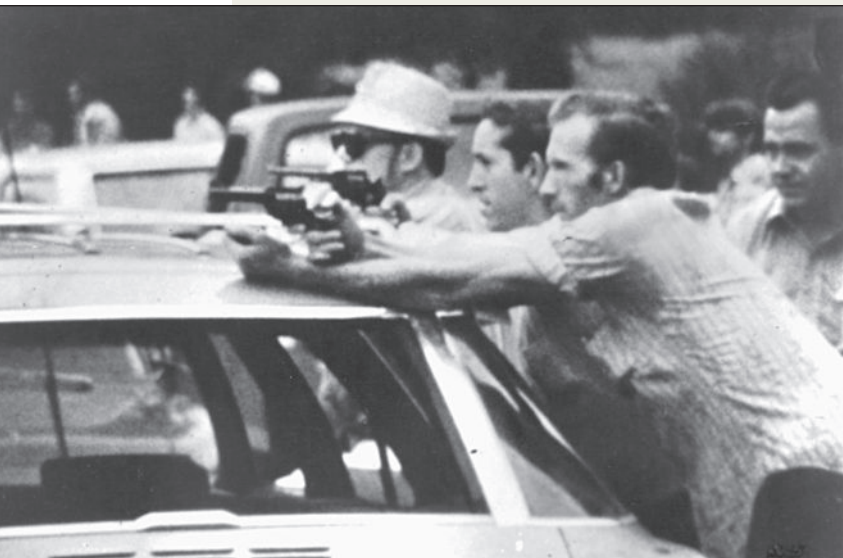


8-22a. *Law and Order* (U.S.A., 1969), directed by Frederick Wiseman.

Cinéma vérité, or direct cinema, prided itself on its objectivity and straightforward presentation. Certainly, these documentarists realized that total neutrality is an impossible goal to achieve. Even Wiseman, among the most objective of documentarists, insists that his movies are a subjective *interpretation* of actual events, people, and places. He tries to be as “fair” as possible in presenting his materials. For example, he refuses to use off-frame narrators. The subjects of the film are allowed to speak for themselves, and the burden of interpretation is placed on the spectators, who must analyze the significance of the material on their own. Of course, most participants are aware of being photographed, and this surely influences their behavior. No one wants to look like a fool on camera. (*Zipporah Films*)

8-22b. *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (U.S.A., 1977), directed by Barbara Kopple.

Direct cinema is most effective with materials that are intrinsically dramatic, like crisis situations in which a conflict is about to reach its climax. For example, during the production of this documentary, which deals with a bitter coal-miners’ strike for decent working conditions, Kopple and her crew were repeatedly plunged in the middle of violence. In one sequence, they are actually fired on by a trigger-happy moron. The camera recorded it all. Implicit in the concept of documentary is the verb *to document*—to verify, to provide an irrefutable record of an event. (*Museum of Modern Art*)



8-23. *March of the Penguins*

(France., 2005), directed by Luc Jacquet.

Documentarians, like fiction filmmakers, superimpose a narrative structure over the sprawling disorder of nature. Jacquet's Academy Award-winning documentary is structured like an epic saga, a tale of heroic endurance in the face of ferocious opposition. The setting is the frozen antarctic. Each winter, thousands of emperor penguins trek across the frigid terrain to their ancient breeding grounds. The region is so bleak and inhospitable that it supports no other kind of wildlife at this time of the year. In a single file, the determined, endearing penguins march against blizzards and gale-force winds, propelled by an overpowering need to



reproduce and ensure the survival of the species. Jacquet is also a superb visual stylist. For example, this image might also be an abstract expressionist canvas, somewhat like the paintings of Georgia O'Keefe, which are often stylized images of flower blossoms. In a similar manner, these two cuddling penguins form a pattern of symmetrical harmony, visually reinforcing the tender loyalty that the penguins display for each other in their teamwork.

(Warner Independent

Pictures/National Geographic Feature Films)

longer necessary because, if the crew members are present while an event is actually taking place, they can capture it while it's happening.

The concept of minimal interference with reality became the dominating preoccupation of the American and Canadian schools of *cinéma vérité*. The filmmaker must not control events in any way. Re-creations—even with the people and places actually involved—were unacceptable. Editing was kept to a minimum, for otherwise it could lead to a false impression of the sequence of events. Actual time and space were preserved whenever possible by using **lengthy takes**.

Cinéma vérité also uses sound minimally. These filmmakers were—and still are—hostile to the “voice of God” commentaries that accompanied traditional documentaries. Off-screen narration tends to interpret images for the spectator, thus relieving us of the necessity of analyzing for ourselves. Some direct cinema advocates dispense with voice-over narration entirely (**8-22a**).

The tradition of the formalistic or subjective documentary can be traced back to the Soviet filmmaker Dziga-Vertov. Like most Soviet artists of the 1920s, Vertov was a propagandist. He believed that the cinema should be a tool of the Revolution, a way of instructing workers about how to view events from an ideological perspective. “Art,” he once wrote, “is not a *mirror* which reflects the historical struggle, but a *weapon* of that struggle.”

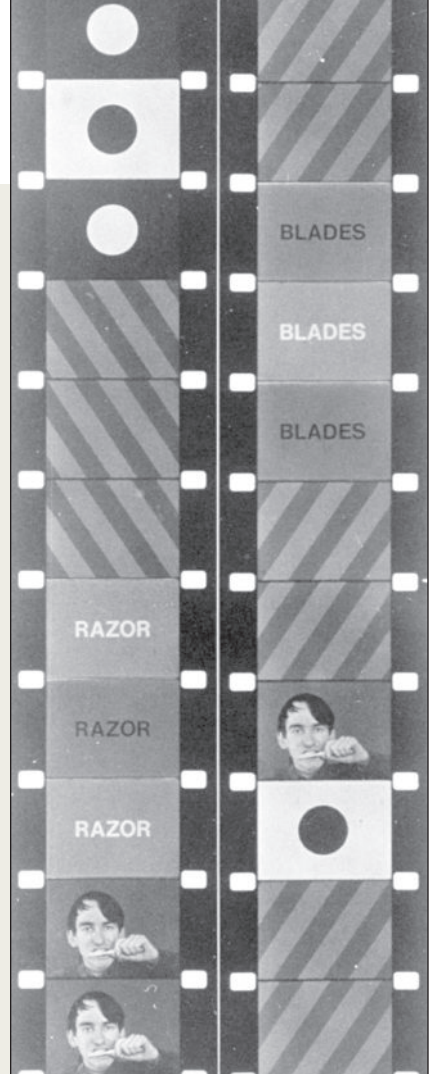
8-24a. *Razor Blades* (U.S.A., 1968), directed by Paul Sharits.

Structuralism was an avant-garde movement that rejected narrative in favor of an abstract structure that owed nothing to subject matter. In the structuralist cinema, the codes of cognition are totally self-defined. They are structured according to the principles of recurrence, dialectical polarities, time and space increments, and so on. The process of deciphering these cognitive codes and their interrelationships is analogous to the film's working itself out, fulfilling its structural destiny. In Sharits's flicker film, two images (requiring separate screens and projectors) are simultaneously juxtaposed. Each filmstrip consists of irregularly recurring images—two or three frames in duration, interspersed by blank or color frames—or purely abstract designs, like colored stripes or circular shapes. The rapid flickering of images creates a mesmerizing stroboscopic effect, testing the audience's psychological and physiological tolerance. The content of the film is its structural form rather than the subject matter of the images as images. (*Anthology Film Archives*)

8-24b. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (U.S.A., 2004), with Kate Winslet and Jim Carrey, directed by Michel Gondry.

The modern avant-garde cinema is rooted in its Surrealist past, especially in its disdain for conventional storytelling. The narrative structure of

this movie is aggressively fragmented, torn up. Written by the bizarre Charlie Kaufman, the script—a philosophical exploration of the concept of memory—flips back and forth in time and place. The editing style is often wrenching and meant to disorient the viewer. The visual style is classically Surrealistic, with its emphasis on dreamlike settings and events, and incongruous juxtapositions—like a fully dressed bed on the beach. The movie is militantly anti-mainstream: It challenges rather than reinforces stereotypical thinking. It's also not easily accessible, like many avant-garde films. Unsurprisingly, the picture was not a popular success, despite its excellent cast. But like most avant-garde movies, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is another world entirely, where the usual rules don't apply. (*Focus Features*)



Documentarists in this formalistic tradition tend to build their movies thematically, arranging and structuring the story materials to demonstrate a thesis, like the news stories on television's prestigious *60 Minutes*. In many cases, the sequence of shots and even entire scenes can be switched around with relatively little loss of sense or logic. The structure of the film is not based on chronology or narrative coherence, but on the documentarist's argument.

Avant-garde films are so variable that it's hard to generalize about their narrative structures. Most of these movies don't even try to tell a story. Autobiographical elements are common. Many avant-garde artists are primarily concerned with conveying their "inner impulses," their personal and subjective involvements with people, ideas, and experiences. For this reason, avant-garde movies are sometimes obscure and even incomprehensible. Many of these filmmakers create their own personal language and symbology.

With some exceptions, avant-garde films are not written out in advance. In part this is because the same artist usually shoots and edits the footage and is therefore able to control the material at these stages of the filmmaking process. Avant-garde filmmakers also value chance and spontaneity in their movies, and to exploit these elements, they avoid the inflexibility of a script.

Maya Deren, an American avant-garde filmmaker of the 1940s, differentiated her kind of movie (which she called "personal" or "poetic") from mainstream commercial films primarily in terms of structure. Like a lyric poem, personal films are "vertical" investigations of a theme or situation. The filmmaker is not concerned so much with what's happening as with what a situation feels like or what it means. The film artist is concerned with probing the depths and layers of meaning of a given moment.

Fiction movies, on the other hand, are like novels and plays, according to Deren. They're essentially "horizontal" in their development. Narrative filmmakers use linear structures that must progress from situation to situation, from feeling to feeling. Fiction directors don't have much time to explore the implications of a given idea or emotion, for they must keep the plot "moving along."

Other avant-garde filmmakers disdain any kind of recognizable subject matter. Hans Richter and other early avant-garde artists in Europe totally rejected narrative. Richter was a champion of the "absolute film," which consists solely of abstract shapes and designs (see 4–7). Insisting that movies should have nothing to do with acting, stories, or literary themes, Richter believed that film—like music and abstract painting—should be concerned with pure non-representational forms. Many avant-garde filmmakers share these biases (8–24a).

GENRE AND MYTH



A genre film is a specific type of movie: a war picture, a gangster film, science fiction, and so on. There are literally hundreds of them, especially in the United States and Japan, where virtually all fiction movies can be classified



8-25a. *It Happened One Night* (U.S.A., 1934), with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, written by Robert Riskin, directed by Frank Capra.

Genres can be classified according to subject matter, style, period, national origin, and a variety of other criteria. In the 1930s, a new American genre was born: screwball comedy. Its heyday was roughly 1934–1945. Essentially love stories, these films feature zany but glamorous lovers, often from different social classes. More realistic than the slapstick of the silent era, screwball comedy is also more collaborative,

requiring the sophisticated blending of talents of writers, actors, and directors. The snappy dialogue crackles with wit and speed. Sappy, sentimental speeches are often meant to deceive. The narrative premises are absurdly improbable, and the plots, which are intricate and filled with preposterous twists and turns, tend to snowball out of control. The movies center on a comic-romantic couple rather than a solitary protagonist. Often, they are initially hostile, with one trying to outwit or outmaneuver the other. Much of the comedy results from the utter seriousness of the characters, who are usually unaware that they're funny, even though they engage in the most loony masquerades and deceptions. Sometimes one of them is engaged to a sexless prude or a humorless bore: This lends an urgency to the attraction between the coprotagonists, who are clearly made for each other. The genre usually includes a menagerie of secondary characters who are as wacky as the lovers. (Columbia Pictures)

8-25b. *Night Watch* (Russia, 2006), with Dima Martynov, written and directed by Timur Bekmambetov.

Since *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968, science fiction has experienced a golden age, not only in America but many other countries as well. Combining horror with sci-fi, *Night Watch* was

described by critic Stephen Holden as “Star Wars Meets the Vampires in Moscow.” Based on the novels of Sergei Lukyanenko (who co-scripted the screenplay), this film was a huge box-office hit in Russia, and is the first installment of a projected trilogy. The movie is steeped in red, the color of blood, the food of vampires. The special effects include such scenes as letters that dissolve into bloody clouds, a vampire’s vision of a head as a web of throbbing blood vessels, and bloody steam emanating from a character’s eyes (pictured). Juicy stuff. (Fox Searchlight)



according to genre. Genres are distinguished by a characteristic set of conventions in style, subject matter, and values. Genre is also a convenient way of focusing and organizing the story materials.

Many genre films are directed at a specific audience. Coming-of-age films are generally aimed at teenagers. Action-adventure genres tend to focus on all-male activities. Women are usually relegated to an incidental function, or they provide “romantic interest.” The American **woman’s picture** and Japanese mother films focus on domestic life. In these female-oriented genres, men are conventionalized in a similar manner—usually as breadwinners, sexual objects, or the “other man.”

André Bazin once referred to the western as “a form in search of a content.” The same could be said of all genre films. A genre is a loose set of expectations, then, not a divine injunction. That is, each example of a given story type is related to its predecessors, but not in ironclad bondage. Some genre films are good; others are terrible. It’s not the genre that determines artistic excellence, but how well the artist exploits the conventions of its form.

The major shortcomings of genre pictures is that they’re easy to imitate and have been debased by stale mechanical repetition. Genre conventions are mere clichés unless they’re united with significant innovations in style or subject matter. But this is true of all the arts, not just movies. As Aristotle noted in *The Poetics*, genres are qualitatively neutral: The conventions of classical tragedy are basically the same whether they’re used by a genius or a forgotten hack. Certain genres enjoy more cultural prestige because they have attracted the most gifted artists. Genres that haven’t are widely regarded as innately inartistic, but in many cases, their déclassé status is due to neglect rather than intrinsic hopelessness. For example, the earliest film critics considered slapstick comedy an infantile genre—until such important comic artists as Chaplin and Keaton entered the field. Today, no critic would malign the genre, for it boasts a considerable number of masterpieces.

The most critically admired genre films strike a balance between the form’s preestablished conventions and the artist’s unique contributions. The artists of ancient Greece drew on a common body of mythology, and no one thought it strange when dramatists and poets returned to these tales again and again. Incompetent artists merely repeat. Serious artists reinterpret. By exploiting the broad outlines of a well-known tale or story type, the storyteller can play off its main features, creating provocative tensions between the genre’s conventions and the artist’s inventions, between the familiar and the original, the general and the particular. Myths embody the common ideals and aspirations of a civilization, and by returning to these communal tales the artist becomes, in a sense, a psychic explorer, bridging the chasm between the known and the unknown. The stylized conventions and **archetypal** story patterns of genres encourage viewers to participate ritualistically in the basic beliefs, fears, and anxieties of their age.

Filmmakers are attracted to genres because they automatically synthesize a vast amount of cultural information, freeing them to explore more personal concerns. A nongeneric movie must be more self-contained. The artist is forced



8-26a. *Windtalkers* (U.S.A., 2002), directed by John Woo. (MGM)

8-26b. *Three Kings* (U.S.A., 1999), with George Clooney, Mark Wahlberg, Ice Cube, and Spike Jonze (behind wheel), written and directed by David O. Russell. (Warner Bros.)

A common complaint about genre films is that they're all the same movie. True, there are certain traits that are typical of most examples of a given genre. Combat films, for example, always contain battle scenes, they tend to be dominated by male characters at the virtual exclusion of females, and they all extol courage, camaraderie, and masculine fortitude. But genre films must also feature a certain degree of novelty, either in the subject matter or its stylistic treatment, otherwise there's not much point in watching a movie with nothing new to offer. *Windtalkers*, which takes place during the Battle of Saipan in World War II, is based on historical events in which the Navajo language was used by American marines to prevent the enemy from understanding their radio communications. This central narrative premise is unique to this movie, even though John Woo observed most of the other conventions of the combat genre. On the other hand, *Three Kings* is much more concerned with character development than is typical of most combat films. In the chaos of the first U.S. military invasion of Iraq, some renegade American soldiers (pictured) try to liberate a cache of Kuwaiti gold for their own private use. While trying to pull off their scam, they become the reluctant protectors of some innocent civilians who are being persecuted



by the brutal dictator, Saddam Hussein. Technically, both movies are of the same genre, yet there are more differences between them than similarities. Genre merely defines the general aesthetic arena. What each individual film does within those parameters is what distinguishes the best from the rest. See also *Guts & Glory*, by Lawrence Suid (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2d revised edition, 2002), a history and analysis of the combat film genre.

8-27a. *Unforgiven* (U.S.A., 1992), with Gene Hackman and Clint Eastwood, directed by Eastwood.
(Warner Bros.)



8-27b. *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (U.S.A., 1996), with Woody Harrelson and Courtney Love, directed by Milos Forman. (Columbia Pictures)



8-27c. *Fargo* (U.S.A., 1996), with Frances McDormand, written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen.
(Gramercy Pictures)



Genres in their classical phase tend to portray a world where right and wrong are fairly clear-cut, where the moral values of the movie are widely shared by the audience, and where justice eventually triumphs over evil. Today's most respected film artists are likely to find such values out of touch and naive, if not out-and-out false. The contemporary cinema tends to favor genres that are revisionist—less idealistic, more ambiguous morally, and far from reassuring in their presentation of the human condition. For example, *Unforgiven* is a revisionist western whose grim protagonist, William Munny (Eastwood), is a hired killer, so lost in violence that he has doomed his soul. When a youthful crony remarks that their victim “had it coming,” Munny replies, “We all got it coming, kid.” *The People vs. Larry Flynt* is a biography film—not of an admirable role model or moral exemplar, but of a notorious pornographer and his zonked-out junkie wife. It's a love story. It's also a paradoxical defense of the First Amendment by a filmmaker who grew up in the communist police state of Czechoslovakia—where a Larry Flynt would never have been possible. *Fargo* is a revisionist detective film that's loosely based on an actual police case. The protagonist is Marge Gunderson (McDormand), the very pregnant police chief of Brainerd, Minnesota. The movie is often funny, interspersed with unsettling scenes of brutality and gore. Though the chief finally solves the case, the film's “happy ending” is considerably undercut by its tone of sadness and pessimism concerning our pathetic species.

to communicate virtually all the major ideas and emotions within the work itself—a task that preempts a lot of screen time. On the other hand, the genre artist never starts from scratch (8-26). He or she can build on the accomplishments of predecessors, enriching their ideas or calling them into question, depending on his or her inclinations.

The most enduring genres tend to adapt to changing social conditions. Most of them begin as naive allegories of Good versus Evil. Over the years, they become more complex in both form and thematic range. Finally, they veer into an ironic mode, mocking many of the genre's original values and conventions. Some critics claim that this evolution is inevitable and doesn't necessarily represent an aesthetic improvement.

Film critics and scholars classify genre movies into four main cycles:

1. *Primitive*. This phase is usually naive, though powerful in its emotional impact, in part because of the novelty of the form. Many of the conventions of the genre are established in this phase.
2. *Classical*. This intermediate stage embodies such classical ideals as balance, richness, and poise. The genre's values are assured and widely shared by the audience.
3. *Revisionist*. The genre is generally more symbolic, ambiguous, less certain in its values. This phase tends to be stylistically complex, appealing more to the intellect than to the emotions. Often, the genre's preestablished conventions are exploited as ironic foils to question or undermine popular beliefs.
4. *Parodic*. This phase of a genre's development is an outright mockery of its conventions, reducing them to howling clichés and presenting them in a comic manner.

For example, the western's primitive phase is exemplified by Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the first western ever made, and an enormously popular movie with the public. It was imitated and embellished on for decades. The western's classical phase could be typified by many of the works of John Ford, especially *Stagecoach* (1939), one of the few westerns of that era to win wide critical approval as well as box-office success. *High Noon* (1952) was one of the first revisionist westerns, ironically questioning many of the populist values of the genre's classical phase. Throughout the following two decades, most westerns remained in this skeptical mode, including such major works as *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971). Some critics pointed to Mel Brooks's parodic *Blazing Saddles* (1973) as the genre's deathblow, for many of its conventions are mercilessly lampooned. However, genres have a way of springing back to life after being allowed to rest for a few years. For example, Kevin Costner's *Open Range* (2003) is unabashedly classical. Many cultural theorists insist that questions of individual value in a genre's evolution are largely matters of taste and fashion, not the intrinsic merit of the phase per se.

Some of the most suggestive critical studies have explored the relationship of a genre to the society that nurtured it. This sociopsychic approach was

8–28a. *Nicholas Nickleby* (Britain, 2002), with Jamie Bell and Charlie Hunnam, adapted and directed by Douglas McGrath.

The literary adaptation has long been a traditional stronghold of the British cinema, especially adaptations of famous English novels, like Charles Dickens's powerfully emotional *Nicholas Nickleby*. Britain also boasts some of the greatest character actors in the world, including, in this movie, Jim Broadbent, Tom Courtenay, Timothy Spall, Alan Cumming, and Edward Fox—an embarrassment of riches. (*United Artists*)



8–28b. *Beverly Hills Cop* (U.S.A., 1984), with Eddie Murphy, directed by Martin Brest.

America has always excelled in violent genres like police films, thrillers, and private-eye movies, often combined with generous doses of comedy. This expert Eddie Murphy vehicle, features one of his best performances. American network television also excels in violent genres, especially police stories. (*Paramount Pictures*)

pioneered by the French literary critic Hippolyte Taine in the nineteenth century. Taine claimed that the social and intellectual anxieties of a given era and nation will find expression in its art. The implicit function of an artist is to harmonize and reconcile cultural clashes of value. He believed that art must be analyzed for both its overt and covert meaning, that beneath its explicit content there exists a vast reservoir of latent social and psychic information (8–30).



8-29a. *Rocky* (U.S.A., 1976), with Sylvester Stallone, directed by John Avildsen.
One of the most popular story patterns in America is the Horatio Alger myth—the inspiring tale of a social nobody who, through hard work and perseverance, and against all odds, manages to pull himself up by his bootstraps and achieve extraordinary success. *(United Artists)*



8-29b. *Austin Powers: The Spy who Shagged Me* (U.S.A., 1999), with Mike Myers and Heather Graham, directed by Jay Roach.

Film parodies delight in mocking the aesthetic conventions of a popular genre. “Swinging England” of the late 1960s is gleefully revisited in this James Bond parody, complete with a smirking, supercool, beruffled espionage agent (Myers) and a bevy of groovy chicks.

(New Line Cinema)



8–30. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (U.S.A., 1956), directed by Don Siegel.

Genre films often appeal to subconscious anxieties in the audience. For example, many Japanese science-fiction films of the 1950s dealt with hideous mutations that resulted from atomic radiation. A number of cultural commentators have remarked on the “paranoid style” of most American sci-fi movies of the 1950s, when the “Red Scare” intensified the Cold War atmosphere between the United States and the Soviet Union. Siegel’s low-budget classic deals with how some alien pod-people insidiously invade human bodies, reducing their owners to anonymous zombies, incapable of feelings. The movie was produced during an era when many Americans were seriously discussing the possibility of building backyard bomb shelters to “protect” themselves from an expected nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. (*Allied Artists*)

This approach tends to work best with popular genres, which reflect the shared values and fears of a large audience. Such genres might be regarded as contemporary myths, lending philosophical meaning to the facts of everyday life. As social conditions change, genres often change with them, challenging some traditional customs and beliefs, reaffirming others. Gangster films, for example, are often covert critiques of American capitalism. They are often vehicles for exploring rebellion myths and are especially popular during periods of social breakdown. The protagonists—usually played by small men—are likened to ruthless businessmen, their climb to power a sardonic parody of the Horatio Alger myth. During the Jazz Age, gangster films like *Underworld* (1927) dealt



8–31. *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (U.S.A., 1982), with Henry Thomas and E.T., directed by Steven Spielberg.

All narratives can be interpreted on a symbolic level. There is a principle of universality that can be inferred no matter how unique or strange a given story may be. In this scene from Spielberg's masterpiece, E.T. and his friend Eliot must say good-bye. But E.T. will live forever inside Eliot's mind. Symbolically, the boy will soon outgrow his childhood world of imaginary best friends, scary-looking creatures, and the vast Unknown. But he will never forget the beauty and innocence of that world. Steven Spielberg has always referred to *E.T.* as his most personal film. "My parents split up when I was 15 or 16 years old," he pointed out. "I needed a special friend and had to use my imagination to take me to places that felt good—that helped me move beyond the problems my parents were having, and that ended our family as a whole." Orson Welles once stated: "A film is a ribbon of dreams. The camera is much more than a recording apparatus; it is a medium via which messages reach us from another world that is not ours and that brings us to the heart of a great secret. Here magic begins." (*Universal Studios*)

with the violence and glamour of the Prohibition era in an essentially apolitical manner. During the harshest years of the Depression in the early 1930s, the genre became subversively ideological. Movies like *Little Caesar* (1930) reflected the country's shaken confidence in authority and traditional social institutions. In the final years of the Depression, gangster films like *Dead End* (1937) were pleas for liberal reform, arguing that crime is the result of broken homes, lack of opportunity, and slum living. Gangsters of all periods tend to suffer from an inability to relate to women, but during the 1940s movies like *White Heat* (1949) featured protagonists who were outright sexual neurotics. In the 1950s, partly as a result of the highly publicized Kefauver Senate Crime Investigations, gangster movies like *The Phenix City Story* (1955) took the form of confidential exposés of syndicate crime. Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather; Part II* (1974) are a virtual recapitulation of the history of the genre, spanning

8-32. *Sweet Hours* (Spain, 1982), with Inaki Aierra and Assumpta Serna, directed by Carlos Saura.

Almost all civilizations have myths dealing with the rebellion of son against father, resulting in son and mother reunited in exclusive love. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, identified one such variant as the Oedipus complex (named for the Greek mythical hero), which Freud believed was the paradigm of prepubescent human sexuality. Its feminine form is known as the Electra complex, a name also derived from Greek myth. In most cases, this narrative motif is submerged beneath the surface details of a story, or sufficiently disguised to appeal primarily to the subconscious. Saura's *Sweet Hours* plays with this motif in an overt manner. The movie deals with the love affair between a filmmaker (Aierra) and an actress (Serna) who is playing his mother in an autobiographical film



he is making about his childhood. (*New Yorker Films*)

three generations of characters and reflecting the weary cynicism of a nation still numbed by the hearts-and-minds hoax of Vietnam and the Watergate conspiracy. As Sergio Leone's fablelike title suggests, *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) is frankly mythical, treating the traditional rise-and-fall structure of the genre in an almost ritualistic manner. Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is a witty send-up of the genre, parodying many of its conventions.

The ideas of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have also influenced many genre theorists. Like Taine, both psychiatrists believed that art is a reflection of underlying structures of meaning, that it satisfies certain subconscious needs in both the artist and audience. For Freud, art was a form of daydreaming and wish fulfillment, vicariously resolving urgent impulses and desires that can't be satisfied in reality. Pornographic films are perhaps the most obvious example of how anxieties can be assuaged in this surrogate manner, and in fact, Freud believed that most neuroses were sexually based. He thought that art was a by-product of neurosis, although essentially a socially beneficial one. Like neurosis, art is characterized by a repetition compulsion, the need to go over the same stories and rituals to reenact and temporarily resolve certain psychic conflicts (8-32).

Jung began his career as a disciple of Freud but eventually broke away, believing that Freud's theories lacked a communal dimension. Jung was fascinated by myths, fairy tales, and folklore, which he believed contained symbols and story

patterns that were universal to all individuals in all cultures and periods. According to Jung, unconscious complexes consist of archetypal symbols that are as deeply rooted and as inexplicable as instincts. He called this submerged reservoir of symbols the *collective unconscious*, which he thought had a primordial foundation, traceable to primitive times. Many of these archetypal patterns are bipolar and embody the basic concepts of religion, art, and society: god–devil, active–passive, male–female, static–dynamic, and so on. Jung believed that the artist consciously or unconsciously draws on these archetypes as raw material, which must

8–33. *Pinocchio* (U.S.A., 1940), by Walt Disney.

The French cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss noted that myths have no author, no origin, no core axis—they allow “free play” in a variety of artistic forms. Disney’s work draws heavily from fairy tales, myths, and folklore, which are profuse in archetypal elements. *Pinocchio* is a good example of how these elements can be emphasized rather than submerged beneath a surface realism. Early in the film, the boy/puppet Pinocchio is told that to be a “real boy,” he must show that he is “brave, truthful, and unselfish.” The three principal episodes of the movie represent ritualistic trials, testing the youth’s moral fortitude. He dismally fails the first two, but redeems himself in the concluding whale episode, where he does indeed demonstrate courage, honesty, and unselfishness (pictured). Other archetypal elements include a monster (Monstro, the whale), magical transformations, a father’s search for his lost son, supernatural creatures like a talking cricket (Jiminy Cricket, Pinocchio’s “conscience”), a son’s search for his imprisoned father, an anthropomorphized portrayal of nature, and a fairy godmother who rescues the improvident young hero when he fails to act responsibly. Like most of Disney’s works of this era, the values in *Pinocchio* are traditional and conservative, an affirmation of the sanctity of the family unit, the importance of a Higher Power in guiding our destinies, and the need to play by society’s rules. (Walt Disney Productions)



then be rendered into the generic forms favored by a given culture. For Jung, every work of art (and especially generic art) is an infinitesimal exploration of a universal experience—an instinctive groping toward an ancient wisdom. He also believed that popular culture offers the most unobstructed view of archetypes and myths, whereas elite culture tends to submerge them beneath a complex surface detail.

A story can be many things. To a producer it's a property that has a box-office value. To a writer it's a screenplay. To a film star it's a vehicle. To a director it's an artistic medium. To a genre critic it's a classifiable narrative form. To a sociologist it's an index of public sentiment. To a psychiatrist it's an instinctive exploration of hidden fears or communal ideals. To a moviegoer it can be all of these, and more.

In analyzing a film's narrative structure, we ought to ask ourselves some basic questions. Who's telling the story? A voice-over narrator? Why him or her? Or does the story "tell itself," like most stage plays? Who is the implied narrator of such stories, the guiding hand in the arrangement of the narrative's separate parts? What do we as spectators supply to the story? What information do we provide in order to fill in the narrative's gaps? How is time presented—chronologically or subjectively rearranged through flashbacks and other narrative disjunctions? Is the narrative realistic, classical, or formalistic? What genre, if any? What phase of the genre's evolution? What does the movie say about the social context and period that it was made in? How does the narrative embody mythical concepts or universal human traits?

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