SIGHTLINES

Edited by Edward Buscombe, The British Film Institute and Phil Rosen, Center for Modern Culture and Media Studies, Brown University, USA

Cinema Studies has made extraordinary strides in the past two decades. Our capacity for understanding both how and what the cinema signifies has been developed through new methodologies, and hugely enriched in interaction with a wide variety of other disciplines, including literary studies, anthropology, linguistics, history, economics and psychology. As fertile and important as these new theoretical foundations are, their very complexity has made it increasingly difficult to track the main lines of conceptualization. Furthermore, they have made Cinema Studies an ever more daunting prospect for those coming new to the field.

This new series of books will map out the ground of major conceptual areas within Cinema Studies. Each volume is written by a recognized authority to provide a clear and detailed synopsis of current debates within a particular topic. Each will make an original contribution to advancing the state of knowledge within the area. Key arguments and terms will be clearly identified and explained, seminal thinkers will be assessed, and issues for further research will be laid out. Taken together the series will constitute an indispensable chart of the terrain which Cinema Studies now occupies.

Books in the series include:

NARRATIVE COMPREHENSION AND FILM
Edward Branigan

NEW VOCABULARIES IN FILM SEMIOTICS
Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Beyond
Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis

CINEMA AND SPECTATORSHIP
Judith Mayne

Forthcoming:

UNTHINKING EUROCENTRISM
Towards a Multi-cultural Film Critique
Ella Shohat/Robert Stam

Edward Branigan
First published 1992
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
a division of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001
© 1992, Edward Branigan
Set in 10/12 pt Palatino by Intype, London
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ Press (Padstow) Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or
reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic,
mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter
invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any
information storage or retrieval system, without permission in
writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Branigan, Edward
Narrative comprehension and film.
I. Title
809.923

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Branigan, Edward
Narrative comprehension and film/Edward Branigan.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Motion pictures and literature. 2. Narration (Rhetoric)
3. Motion picture plays – History and criticism. I. Title.
PN1995.3.B73 1992
791.4375–dc20 91–25883
ISBN 0–415–07511–4
ISBN 0–415–07512–2 pbk

To Carol and Will, and to the memory of my sister Lorel
In recent years the study of narrative has acquired a new and prominent role in theorizing about film. Since at least 1907 narrative has been the dominant mode of filmmaking as well as the principal source of examples for writers exploring the ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, and ideology of film. Even so, it has only been within the last decade that writers have fully recognized the formative power of narrative and begun the task of integrating sophisticated theories of narrative with theories of the general nature of film and film style. Indeed it was discovered that classical film theories were often premised on a tacit and fragmentary view of the nature of narrative.

The current situation is the result of two trends. In the mid-1960s film theory began to stress epistemological and psychological questions, developing, first, an object-centered epistemology (where the goal was to present numerous methods by which to segment and analyze the parts of a film) followed by a shift toward a subject-centered epistemology (where the goal was to investigate the actual methods employed by a human perceiver to watch, understand, and remember a film). Feminist theory, for example, shifted from identifying cultural stereotypes in film to concentrating on the role of sexuality and gender in a perceiver’s ongoing encounter with film. At about the same time, a second trend appeared in which narrative began to be explored as a discourse in its own right, apart from its manifestation in any particular medium. This study came to be called “narratology.” Its goal was also epistemological: at first descriptive and objective, but more recently focused on a perceiver’s “competence” – on the conditions that govern and make possible both the comprehension and creation of narrative texts. Today narrative is increasingly viewed as a distinctive strategy for organizing data about the world, for making sense and significance. As the features of narrative came to be specified more precisely, it was detected in a bewildering number of places: not just in artworks, but in our ordinary life and in the work of historians, psychologists, educators, journalists, attorneys, and others. It became clear that narrative was
nothing less than one of the fundamental ways used by human beings to think about the world, and could not be confined to the merely “fictional.”

The aim of this book is to examine various approaches to narrative in order to isolate a set of basic issues and problems which must be addressed by any new theory of narrative. These approaches to narrative will cast light on the general epistemological issues addressed by specific theories of film and, to some extent, theories of literature, since both film theory and narratology often rely on literary studies. My method will draw upon an interdisciplinary field known as “cognitive science” that emerged in the mid-1970s and whose effect is beginning to be felt in film study. Cognitive science poses questions about how the human mind functions and how we are able to think. Its answers are framed through the concepts of linguistics, cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, ethnography, literary theory, and philosophy of language. I believe that film theory, even in its classical formulations, has something to contribute to cognitive science, and equally that cognitive science has something important to contribute to film theory.

My examples of narrative principles will be taken mainly from films, but always with the idea that the principles illustrated extend to the narrative organization of literary and other kinds of material. I will not present a historical account of the development of narrative analysis in film, but rather present an interpretation of theoretical ideas arranged as a logical account of how different theories construct answers to certain, but not all, issues of narrativity. I will be concerned primarily with classical narrative, with Hollywood films and their near relatives. These narratives are prototypical cases against which some other kinds of narrative organization may be measured. It will be seen that classical narrative is a remarkably complex phenomenon.

The emphasis in the book will fall upon narrative fiction, though I will touch upon some types of narrative in nonfiction. I will illustrate concepts with close analysis and small-scale examples, rather than analyses of entire films. I have not assumed that the reader of this book is familiar with any of the films that are discussed nor have I assumed that the reader has any prior familiarity with the methods of cognitive science. Although some knowledge of film structure is presumed, this should not cause any difficulty for a student who has had an introductory course in film, or for a professional trained in another field with an interest in narrative.

My argument in the book develops along the following lines. I first examine a number of theories about the nature of the patterns, or structures, that are created in consciousness when we read a text as a narrative. Here I draw heavily on recent experimental studies of narrative comprehension.

In chapter 2, I introduce the basic concepts of space, time, and causality, and their analysis in terms of data on the screen and in an imagined story world. It will be seen that the process of understanding a narrative arises from an unsteady, sometimes volatile competition among a variety of perceptual mechanisms.

Chapters 3 and 4 consider a pair of issues generally overlooked in experimental studies, but conspicuous in literary and film theory: narrational and point of view. If these issues are to escape fuzzy conjectures concerning the psychology of characters, narrators, and authors, they must be stated more concretely in terms of the actual mental processes initiated by readers and spectators. Which aspects of consciousness are relevant to our comprehension of an object being narrated and depicted “under a view”? What kind of knowledge is at stake, of what use is it, and how does it complement story, character, and plot? These questions lead to an analysis of how diverse epistemological boundaries are inscribed, explicitly or implicitly, within a narrative text in order to guide the processing and construction of global patterns. Whether complementary or antagonistic, such boundaries exert powerful effects on our comprehension of narrative events. I conclude by offering an extended definition of all aspects of narrative and a sketch of five broad types of narrative theory.

The next two chapters illustrate how the five broad types of theory engage several basic problems of narrative organization. What is the nature of first-person narration? What does it mean to talk about objective, factual representation in narrative? And what happens when a reader or spectator is confronted by uncertain mixtures of subjective and objective narration – when a text actively challenges us to assess how knowledge of the world is possible at all within symbols and language?

In the final chapter I separate fiction from narrative. A study of the fictional reference of narrative is concerned with how a given narrative pattern may be connected to a world or worlds, how we come to believe in its truth and find a value in it. I briefly survey some theories of fiction and offer one account of how a cognitive theory might deal with the philosophy of fictional reference. I conclude by analyzing a film which tests many of the concepts and boundaries associated with our ordinary comprehension of narrative.

The book seeks to draw together three basic modes of analysis. Certain concepts from cognitive psychology (e.g., schema, top-down/ bottom-up processing, declarative/procedural knowledge) will be joined to concepts from narratology (e.g., diegesis, focalization, levels of narration). This combination, in turn, will be interpreted as a way of thinking about temporal structure; here, linguistics will become my model because of its carefully worked out logic of time and tense. We
will discover that perceiving the world narratively is intimately tied to our ways of arranging knowledge (schemas), to our skills of causal reasoning, and hence to our judgments about temporal sequence. Thus – to take one example – the spectator’s recognition of a “scene” in a narrative film will be analyzed as a complex temporal event (expressed through the historical present tense) that is being generated by a level of narration which is presenting one (past, now made present) time but from the perspective of another (later, and still future) time. Not only is the “end” of the story already known at its beginning, but in its telling there is the implicit assertion that the story will be important and worth the time. The spectator’s recognition of such a complex time (and causality) in a film narrative can be explained by top-down mental processes and schemas that are not dependent upon the actual time during which data appears on a motion picture screen. Although somewhat surprising, we will discover that the purest instance of a narrative scene may be found in the classical documentary film which seeks to make the past immediate for the spectator by compressing and reducing the levels of narration. It is my belief that many other analytical terms besides narrative “scene” will yield new meanings when considered through the methods of cognitive psychology, narratology, and linguistics.

Books are not written in a vacuum. I would like to acknowledge the many persons who have provided an atmosphere within which to work, have circulated ideas to me, and read drafts.

The National Endowment for the Humanities provided a 1987 Summer Stipend and the American Council of Learned Societies awarded me a 1987-8 Fellowship. These monies, along with the tangible and intangible support of my parents, Evelyn and Henry Odell, made the writing of this book possible.

None of the material written for this book has been previously published. I am grateful to Marvel Entertainment Group for permission to reprint a sequence of panels from the comic book Nick Fury, Agent of SHIELD and equally grateful to the story’s writer and illustrator, Jim Steranko, for his assistance.

I would like to thank David A. Sprecher, Provost, College of Letters and Science, for his support as well as past and present colleagues at Santa Barbara who have contributed on a regular basis: Anna Brusutti, Kathryn Carnahan, Mary Desjardins, Manthia Diawara, Dana Driskel, Willis Flachsenhar, Victor Fuentes, Naomi Greene, Paul Hernadi, Lea Jacobs, Harry Lawton, Paul N. Lazarus, Suzanne Jill Levine, Marti Mangan, Constance Penley, Michael Renov, Laurence A. Rickels, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Alexander Sesonske, Janet Walker, and Mark Williams.

Special help and encouragement at particular moments during the project were offered by the following: Rick Altman, Dudley Andrew, David Alan Black, Dave Cash, Donna S. Cunningham, Thomas Elsaesser, Ronald Gottesman, Christopher Husted, Henry Jenkins III, Vance Kepley, Jr., Russell Merritt, Mark Smith, Vivian C. Sobchack, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson.

I have been fortunate to have had thoughtful commentaries on my arguments by Edward Buscombe, Nataša Durovičová, and Marsha Kinder. Particularly close and detailed readings were offered by Sabine Gross, Garrett Stewart, and Charles Wolfe. I have appreciated the comradeship since, as the philosopher Heraclitus noted, the trail up the mountain is the same as the one down.

David Bordwell is the most indefatigable friend and generous scholar one could ask for. I have benefited enormously from his teaching, his work, and his reactions to my work. The keenness and wit of his writing has been my model.

I have been excellently well-served by the editorial and production staff at Routledge: Jane Armstrong, Rebecca Barden, Philippa Brewster, Stephanie Horner, Sarah Pearsall, Maria Stasiak, and Penny Wheeler. Philip Rosen has provided me expert advice. He is a superlative editor as sensitive to syntax and organization as he is to argumentative detail. Fortunately for me he is also possessed of patience and humor. I have used many of his ideas.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the continuing energy and companionship of my nine-year-old son Alex and, since I last penned a preface, second and third sons, Evan and Liam, loved just as dearly. I’m indebted also to Roberta Kimmel who has taken part in all my projects.

The book is dedicated to my sister and brother, Carol and Will, and to the memory of my sister Lorel. Their enthusiasm and earnestness are a permanent inspiration.

Santa Barbara, California
November 1991
NARRATIVE COMPREHENSION AND FILM

NARRATION

KNOWING HOW

There are many ways to represent a particular event within a narrative schema. In The Girl and Her Trust, Grace, clinging to a handcar, is pursued by the hero in a locomotive and finally rescued from the tramps. Griffith decides to represent this simple event through a subtle and intricate series of cross-cuts between the handcar and the locomotive. He could have chosen many other ways to represent the chase and rescue. What effect does Griffith’s choice have on our comprehension of the story?

The chase comprises twenty-eight shots arranged into seven groups followed by two shots which end the film showing Grace united with the hero. In each group we see the handcar and the locomotive moving in the same direction on the screen: in the first group toward the left, in the second toward the right, then left again, and so on. In the story it is clear that the handcar and the locomotive move in only one direction; that is, they do not turn around, circle back, or take short cuts. The changes in direction exist only on the screen as an effect of the narration. The direction of the chase on screen and the number of shots in each group are as follows:

```
<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

It is apparent that the number of shots in each group decreases proportionately resulting in more frequent changes of direction as the event approaches a climax and resolution. The amount of time each group is on the screen decreases according to the approximate ratio,
Griffith is careful not to show the actual distance between the handcar and the locomotive until they are progressively brought together in four careful compositions in the final four shots. This allows the rhythm of the editing, rather than the story locale, to direct the way in which we comprehend the chase. We are forced to constantly reassess the distances as we wonder how close the locomotive might be now and when Grace might be rescued. Closure for the event is suggested visually by the fact that the camera frames the beginning and end of the chase from similar positions near the tracks and the chase ends in the same direction in which it began. Overall, the simple patterns created on the screen work in parallel with the simple actions and reactions of the participants in the chase to create a feeling of unity and inevitability.

Part of the effect of this chase sequence on a spectator is due to the structure of expectations created by a narrative schema: the heroine's goal reaffirmed, new complicating action on a handcar, the hero's goal of rescuing Grace, an approaching collision of forces, and so forth. The chase sequence illustrates how a narrative schema in general works to create expectations which are clearly defined, validated at several points, directed toward a future outcome, and sharply exclusive (either Grace will protect her trust, be rescued, and fall in love, or else she will not); story time is rendered as a deadline to be met by the hero – stop the tramps before they escape and injure Grace. However, the narrative schema does not account for the total impact on a spectator; part of the effect is due to the particular way in which the event is represented as a visual “spectacle.” Christian Metz provides a hint about what is at stake in the Griffith film:

> When [alternating editing] first appeared in early films – and something of this still remains in films of our own time – it was a kind of phantasy of “all-seeingness,” of being everywhere at once, having eyes in the back of your head, tending towards a massive condensation of two series of images.

If the world consists of only three things – a girl, a boy, and forces of disruption (another suitor, the tramps) – and the teller of the story has the power to reveal their motives and to show us all three, each in its perfect time, then the teller has all the power in the world, but so also do we. The rhythm of alternation between the handcar and the locomotive forces time into a strict pattern at the same time that we are seemingly everywhere at once. I want to begin to address the ways in which a spectator acquires such power and is implicated in a “phantasy” of seeing where he or she can imagine seeing everything of importance. More generally, how is narrative comprehension affected by the particular way we imagine we are seeing events? How is it possible for us to possess the knowledge we come to possess in a narrative? The answer to these questions is given through the narration and so I turn to a closer examination of narration: the conditions under which it operates and its varieties.

Two fundamental concepts are required in order to analyze narration and evaluate competing theories of film narration. The first concept is that narration is concerned with how an event is presented, how it happens, rather than what is presented or what happens. A “how” question asks about the mechanism which has created a given state or situation and may also seek an “agent” or an agent’s “purpose” in bringing about the situation. Although a “how” question may initially be answered in the story by presenting it in the mode of “what” (e.g., by identifying a particular character acting as an agent), such an answer is only provisional. The more important “how” question(s) will concern the very readability of the story and its characters: how is it possible for us to know what happens. By contrast, a “what” question merely asks that a situation or object (who, what, which one) be identified so that it may be referred to and talked about. Narrative – construed narrowly as what happens in the story – is then seen as the object or end result of some mechanism or process – narration.

We can carry this analysis one step deeper by associating “how” and “what” with two different ways of acting upon knowledge: “knowing how” and “knowing that.” It is important to realize that knowing how to do something is not reducible to knowing that something is the case. Knowing that something is round, or a whale, or a mammal, or erroneously called a fish is different than knowing how to follow a set of instructions or rules in accomplishing a result; such as, knowing how to apply criteria in determining whether a whale is a mammal, or knowing how to draw a picture of a whale. “Knowing how” involves the exercise of a skill in which something is achieved; it does not involve questions of truth or belief. Procedures may be more or less useful with respect to a purpose but not strictly true or false. (Knowing how to play the piano is neither true nor false.) Wittgenstein referred to such procedural knowledge as “knowing how to go on.” Psychologically, “how” and “what” translate into two different types of knowledge: procedural knowledge and declarative (or postulated) knowledge. Of course, both are necessary for one cannot exercise a skill or method without exercising it on something with some result, while knowing that something is the case presupposes a procedure which has been exercised in knowing. Applying this distinction to the study of narrative, we may say that narration addresses issues of procedure: how are we acquiring knowledge about what is happening in the story? To what degree are various procedures incompatible? Do conflicting
interpretations of a text suggest conflicting procedures or points of view at work?

When specific narrative theories are examined in later chapters, we will discover that any complete model of narrative comprehension will need to incorporate both types of knowledge. The real issue will concern what knowledge to represent procedurally and what to represent declaratively, and how different the two formalisms should be that represent these types of knowledge. In watching a film we acquire and exercise skills in managing experiences while at the same time we discover what happens through the exercising of those skills. The study of narration in film is the study of the skills and procedures we apply in order to know narrative events.

DISPARITIES OF KNOWLEDGE
The second fundamental concept that is needed to analyze narration is the notion of a disparity of knowledge. Narration comes into being when knowledge is unevenly distributed — when there is a disturbance or disruption in the field of knowledge. Informally, one can grasp the importance of disparity by imagining a universe in which all observers are perfect and all-knowing. In such a universe, there can be no possibility of narration since all information is equally available and already possessed in the same ways. Therefore I will posit that the most basic situation which gives rise to narration will be comprised of three elements: a subject in an asymmetrical relationship with an object. As we shall see, the perceiving “subject” may be a character, narrator, author, the spectator, or some other entity depending on the context that is being analyzed. The situation may be represented graphically as follows:

```
S ——<——— O
```

The vertical line acts as an “obstacle” which creates a disparity, or asymmetry, giving the “subject” a unique access to the “object.”

For example, in The 39 Steps there is a literal obstacle, the window through which the husband is able to spy on his wife and Hannay, but without being able to hear what they are saying (see figs 8 and 9). This simple situation is used by Hitchcock to create a rather complex distribution of knowledge among the characters and the spectator which reverberates throughout the film creating various shades of truth and falsity. In The Girl and Her Trust, Griffith stretches out the action of the tramps surreptitiously watching Grace through a window into a mini-scene of being watched, growing suspicion, mistaken security, new apprehension, discovery, and fear.

It is no accident that flamboyant genres, such as melodramas and television soap operas, are filled with excessive forms of narration whereby characters spy upon, eavesdrop, and gossip about other characters, producing a chain of tellings and retellings based on various disparities. Each retelling manages to be slightly different from preceding ones by provoking differing reactions to the “same” event (outrage, sympathy, envy, puzzlement, scheming). Melodrama often seeks to exhaust a matrix of possible reactions to a single event by exploring differing points of view each of which reconstitutes the “event” in a new light because each is filtered through a different disparity. Comedy, too, often explores a variety of reactions to an event and often by the same person, the comedian.

I would like to offer a more detailed, concrete example of a disparity of knowledge at work in order to demonstrate how narration might be modulated through a spectrum of possibilities for the spectator of a filmed event. I will take as my “subject” character S who is spying around the corner of a building at two characters engaged in conversation, A and B. This entire event will then be represented as an “object” of perception for another subject — the spectator of the film. Just as the corner of the building functions as a barrier between S and A/B, so the motion picture screen functions as a barrier between the spectator and the diegetic world represented in the film. The situation may be depicted graphically as follows:

```
S ——<——— A/B
```

To simplify the discussion, I will make two further assumptions: First, the disparity of information (which is the condition for the narration) will be based only on what the spectator and the characters are able to see (not, for example, on what the spectator might hear, or might remember from previous scenes, or might expect because of genre conventions) and, second, the film’s manipulation of this visual access to knowledge will be based only on a few variables associated with the position of the camera.

Figure 14 is an overhead view of character S looking around the corner of a building at characters A and B in conversation. How might this event be represented for the spectator? The illustration shows a number of alternative camera positions. The problem is to analyze how these camera positions function to restrict the spectator’s access to visual information by creating different sorts of disparity. Notice that the illustration itself exhibits the principles of narration at work for we are
Camera position 3 begins like that of 2 but through camera movement ends by showing the spectator the precise relationship of S to A and B. This camera movement transforms screen duration into a story rhetoric of question and answer (what does S see?) followed by suspense (will A or B see S?). Although camera position 3B is not a point-of-view shot, it very nearly represents S’s angle of view and distance to A and B, and hence our inferences about causality and action will develop in a context similar to that of S. Note that other devices would measure out this knowledge of space and causality differently: an eyeline match would instantaneously frame the answer to the above questions while a somewhat broader use of juxtapositions, based on the competing intentions and goals of several characters, would yield the cross-cutting Griffith used in representing the chase in The Girl and Her Trust.

Camera position 4 will be referred to as the "best possible," or "perfect," view of the event since it simultaneously shows the spectator both S and A/B, each in a complete spatial and temporal context. It is meant to show us everything of importance from the best possible angle. By contrast, position 5 is a perfect but "impossible" view. It could be inside the building (if the walls become "transparent") or else underground (if the ground becomes "transparent") or suspended overhead. It is perfect, but "impossible" because it represents a position and view which no character in the diegetic world can possess.

Camera position 6 does not show S. It is the inverse of position 2 and we must rely on the reactions of A and B to learn about the event. We do not yet know, for instance, if S is present. Position 7 is a shot of A over-the-shoulder of B. It is nearly the inverse of position 1. Whether S is seen in the background or is blocked by A’s body, one of the questions posed by this articulation is whether B has noticed or will notice S, and how that will affect what is said to A.

Position 8 begins as a "best possible" view but only of A and B in conversation: it ends with the camera inexplicably moving away from this event in order to explore a wall of the building. The spectator is thus faced with a sudden loss of information in favor of new information which may or may not be meaningful using S, A, and B as coordinates.

Filmmakers have employed all of the above ways of articulating disparities of knowledge, and many others, in order to elaborate significant patterns by which to develop and know an "object." A specific narrational device is only partially defined by technical criteria (e.g., the position of the camera); more important is an assessment of its relative "power to expand and contract perception." Narration is ultimately a way of making knowledge "intermittent" and hence what is described in figure 14 is not a list of the elementary building blocks of visual narration but a set of possibilities for controlling time, for regulating our access to a fluctuating field of information. A point-of-view shot,
for instance, or a camera position revealing the “best possible” view, must actually transform knowledge in a specified way for the spectator. The function of such camera set-ups cannot be determined strictly from the position of the camera but will also depend on broader (top-down) considerations which define knowledge and pertinence, including a narrative schema which defines characters who may have a sequence of views, and whose particular goals and actions may be seen through their eyes or best seen in a certain way (while other goals and actions will not be perfectly seen or known). A character’s goal is seldom as simple as “looking toward” an object but more often includes a reason for looking, and the anticipated consequences of having seen. A spectator’s assessment of these factors is a crucial part of what the spectator sees when he or she looks at a character. Thus in naming the camera set-ups of figure 14, I am only describing familiar or initial interpretations – conventions of seeing in film which may be revised or overturned in the proper circumstances when more is known about the events. To speak of a “convention” in this way is merely shorthand for the fact that a spectator must risk some hypothesis and take on faith that subsequent events will justify the interpretation; a “best possible” view, for example, must actually turn out to be such with respect to the narrative goals and actions of the characters, with respect to a sequence of events, with respect to the value system of the epilogue, and so forth. Even the point-of-view shot which appears to be formally precise because of its camera positioning is excessively fragile and depends on broad forms of knowledge to establish the pertinence of the camera positioning. The reason that certainty cannot be achieved through a limited empirical testing of the data on the screen (e.g., by locating the position of the camera) is that any spatial, temporal, and causal configuration may denote any other configuration, given the proper conditions. An apparent point-of-view shot, for example, may represent merely a view from very near a character’s head, or represent what would have been seen if the character’s eyes were open, or represent how a distant character imagines that he or she might be seen by another, or represent what might have been seen from that position if a character were not standing there.15

Let’s alter slightly the event represented in figure 14 so as to highlight the temporal element of narration and include new types of information. Character S is now in a room with character A who is speaking on the telephone with character B. How might this event be represented for the spectator of the film? The most important obstacle that motivates the distribution of knowledge in this scene is the telephone. Therefore one method of presenting the event would be to intercut shots of A speaking on the phone with shots of B in a distant locale speaking on the phone. In this way we might come to know more than any of the three characters since A and B cannot see each other while we can see everyone’s actions and hear everyone’s words. This method is similar to the cross-cutting of The Girl and Her Trust during the chase sequence.

A second method would be to present shots of A and S, coupled with the voice of A talking on the phone. Suppose we do not actually hear what B is saying or see B; and perhaps his or her identity is withheld from us. In this situation our knowledge is restricted to what S, or perhaps an invisible witness in the room, might come to know about A’s telephone conversation. Other factors in the scene would determine more exactly what knowledge we were able to acquire.

A third method would be to present close shots of A, coupled with the voice of B as heard through the telephone in A’s hand. Here our knowledge is “subjective” in some measure because it is roughly congruent with some of the key information available to A to the exclusion of S who cannot hear what B is saying. (There are, of course, many degrees of character subjectivity: A’s thoughts are not being represented, A’s view of the telephone receiver is not shown, and so forth.) These three methods of presenting the event are entirely different and potentially may make a difference in how we understand the story. They may not make a difference, of course, if the filmmaker switches among them indifferently, or the story is not concerned with basic problems of knowledge and belief.

The example of the telephone conversation illustrates that narrative information acquired by the spectator cannot be evaluated in the abstract as to its quantity or relevance. Do we need to hear what B is saying, or do we learn more by watching A’s behavior, or seeing S’s reaction? What is the proper camera distance or angle to represent an object? In order to analyze the effects of narration, we first need to posit an epistemological boundary, or barrier (with respect to a narrative schema), then measure its changes, and then evaluate its interaction with the next boundary to appear. These boundaries, of course, need not correspond with material or onscreen divisions, such as the appearance of a new shot, decor, or camera movement. We cannot decide in advance the precise contours of a boundary nor can we state that only three boundaries are possible when only three characters are in the scene. For example, the following are some additional non-character sources of knowledge that could be part of the representing of the above event: a musical chord coupled with the expression on a character’s face that “tells” us all we need to know; or, a “tell-tale” glance; or, a narrator’s whispered commentary on what B must be saying on the telephone to A; or, a pattern of editing that shows A and B but not at the “best possible” or “perfect” time; or, especially unusual, a shot of A but matched with the sound of A’s voice as heard through the telephone by B in a distant (unseen) locale.16 Consider also the representation of
the following two telephone conversations in Jean-Luc Godard's *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (Every Man For Himself, 1980):

1. We see and hear Denise speaking to Paul on the phone but the next shot does not show him talking on the phone, but instead speaking to someone else in a room (before, or after, Denise's phone call?). We cannot hear what is being said; we hear only nondiegetic music which is interrupted by Denise's voice continuing her phone conversation with Paul. We cut back to Denise still speaking on the phone, and then return to Paul who is now seen talking with Denise on the phone, continuing the same conversation. He is in the room where we previously saw him. The scene ends when Paul hangs the phone to Yvette and asks her to finish the conversation with Denise for him. Yvette in her own voice converses with Denise but is saying what we imagine Paul might have said to Denise (or is she reciting for us what Paul actually did say to Denise to end the conversation?).

2. Paul gets up from a table in a restaurant to make a phone call. Cut to a very brief shot of Denise answering the phone and cut back to Paul already seated at the table. We then hear Denise say, "Hello." Paul then talks about Denise with his companions in the restaurant.

The last several examples of unusual depictions of phone conversations illustrate that while a given narration may be familiar, or seem natural, or be consistent with previous scenes, it can, in fact, be only one of many ways of knowing an event, and only one of many ways an event may be told.

**Hierarchies of Knowledge**

It should be clear from previous examples that the problem of describing narration becomes increasingly complex as one adds variables associated with character action, *mise-en-scène*, editing and dialogue, and considers their change through time. One must also expand the notion of a spectator's "knowledge" beyond immediate "seeing" to include various effects produced by the sound track, our memory of previous scenes, anticipated pleasure or anxiety, generic and cultural expectations, and so forth. Thus the knowledge we acquire need not coincide with "visual" forms of knowledge nor on-screen knowledge even in simple cases. For example, our ability to learn from a conversation between characters may not be attributable to the position occupied by the camera. We may seem to hear from a diegetic place distant from the camera (e.g., from a point closer to the conversation so that the words are more distinct) or from a place we never see which is evidence that another disparity, which is not visible, has been put into play allowing us a unique access to the object different from the nominal visual access.

Or, we may not hear what the visual position would allow. For example, in *The 39 Steps* the camera position of figure 8 from inside the house should allow us to hear the conversation between the wife and Hannay even though the husband cannot hear it. The sound track, however, is silent (without even music) because the disparity selected to be represented is that associated with the husband who is outside the house; in this case, *not* being able to hear helps us to define the actual disparity that underlies the representation of the event.

Theorists have proposed many sorts of schemes by which to analyze the fine details of disparities (i.e., epistemological boundaries) within texts. George Wilson proposes that narration be analyzed along three axes: the relative epistemic distance from our usual habits of perception and common-sense beliefs (including our knowledge of film conventions); the degree of epistemic reliability or justification for the inferences that we draw from the "visual manifolds" of film; and the epistemic authority or degree of alignment between audience knowledge and character knowledge (or other source of knowledge). David Bordwell proposes that narration be analyzed along five axes: the range of knowledge (more or less restricted) presented to the spectator and its depth (more or less subjective); the degree of self-consciousness by which the narration addresses the audience (whether direct address or more covert); the degree of communicativeness shown by the narration, that is, how willingly it shares the information to which its degree of knowledge entitles it; and the judgmental attitudes shown by the narration (ranging from mockery to compassion). My present purpose is not to appraise these sorts of scheme, but to establish the reasons why theorists identify "narration" as a special area of inquiry within a spectator's overall comprehension of narrative.

While the above categories of narration exploit an analogy with literal measurements ("distance," "depth," "alignment"), they are actually broader in scope and must be evaluated with entirely different procedures of inference, and within a very different time frame, than the split seconds of (bottom-up) spatial perception. In general, the spectator knows and anticipates much more than the information available on the screen at any point in a film. The spectator is subject to an array of (sometimes competing) clusters of knowledge and thus is in a very different epistemological "place" than the camera or the microphone. This situation resembles the complexity attributed to perception by a modular description of mind (separate functions, often competing and unable to "communicate"). It is also consistent with the notion of an "unconscious" self which is deemed to be constructed and contradictory rather than unified: "I think where I am not and I am where I do not think." In the next chapter we will discover that in order to analyze narration even more precisely, it will be necessary to distinguish
several, potentially conflicting narrations which operate simultaneously on different "levels" of the discourse with varying degrees of explicitness, and are addressed to different disparities or contexts in which knowledge is being acquired (or rejected) by the spectator. First, however, we must examine disparity in greater detail.

Colin MacCabe has proposed that classical narratives are composed of a "hierarchy of discourses" which aim to place the spectator in a position of superior knowledge by using the camera to equate vision with truth. A hierarchy permits the spectator to make judgments and to measure relative truth moment by moment. At the end of the story, for example, the spectator is finally able to solve all the enigmas of character and action because the structure of disparities responsible for managing the partial truths of the plot becomes known through the camera. Thus one function of a graded hierarchy is to conceal and delay the end of the story by presenting the events through "less knowledgeable" agencies (e.g., characters) at appropriate moments. Higher levels of the hierarchy are meant to be concealed from the spectator who is to witness partial truths developing into moral imperatives by seeing only the characters and the diegesis. By contrast, for MacCabe, "radical" narratives are constructed on the basis of unstable hierarchies in which the spectator alternately identifies with, and then is alienated or "separated" from, diegetic events. Some of the higher-level discourses may be made explicit early in a radical film. In this way the spectator is able to gain a critical "distance" from the hierarchy and its other "discourses," and so appreciate the "social and psychoanalytic" dimensions of being part of a community which uses specific discourses in thinking about the world.

The notion of a hierarchy is also a way of talking about the organization of a group of disparities whereby some perceivers are represented as acquiring more accurate knowledge about certain events relative to other perceivers. Ben Brewster has asserted that "changes of viewpoint" in a narrative "make possible hierarchies of relative knowledge for characters and spectators." He shows how early Griffith films create an "asymmetry of awareness" or "pyramid of knowledge." Applying his notion to The Girl and Her Trust, we may say that in global terms the spectator is accorded a position of superior knowledge with the characters arranged in descending order as follows:

1 Spectator
2 Tramps (early events)
3 Grace
4 Tramps (later events)
5 Hero.

Another way to measure relative knowledge is to evaluate whether the spectator knows more than (>), the same as (=), or less than (<) a particular character at a particular time. Although this is a crude measure for it says nothing about types or degrees of knowledge, it has the merit of suggesting broadly how the spectator is being asked to respond to a given narrative situation. Knowledge is linked to response as follows:

S > C  suspense
S = C  mystery
S < C  surprise

Alfred Hitchcock conceived his films in this way. Using the example of a bomb placed in a briefcase under a table, he explained how he could create feelings of suspense, mystery, or surprise in the audience. If the spectator knows about the bomb, but not the characters seated around the table, then the spectator will be in suspense and must anxiously await the bomb's discovery or explosion. If the spectator and a character both know that there is something mysterious about the briefcase but do not know its secret, then the spectator's curiosity is aroused. Finally, if the spectator does not know about the bomb or the briefcase, then he or she is in for a shock. Hitchcock recognized that these effects can be intensified according to what we know about a character and our emotional involvement with him or her. He realized that there is a close relationship between a spectator's wish to know, and his or her wishful involvement with situations and persons in a film.

One can compare the relative knowledge of subjects other than the spectator and a character in order to evaluate how the story is being disclosed moment by moment. For instance, a narrator's knowledge of an event may be greater than, the same as, or less than that of a particular character at a particular time. Such a comparison leads to additional typologies of narration besides introducing new complexities. For example, in the next chapter we will see that some important narrators are only implicit in the text, that is, their "presence" must be inferred and constructed by the spectator. The knowledge possessed by an implicit narrator is thus difficult to compare with the knowledge of a character. Also, an implicit narrator who is not directly seen or heard, such as an implied author, raises a theoretical problem about narration: Is a narrator to be thought of as a real person, or instead as merely the personification of an abstract textual process? If it is decided that only an explicit narrator can be thought of as a real person, then defining what counts as "explicit" becomes crucial. (How explicit are the following narrations: fictional speech, an anonymous voice-over commentary, a written title containing sentences in the third-person, an eccentric camera angle?)

When one chooses to measure the spectator's knowledge by
NARRATIVE COMPREHENSION AND FILM

comparing it with the knowledge of an implicit narrator, one can readily see that the notions of suspense, mystery, and surprise may be generalized and related more broadly to the manipulation of a spectator's expectations and to shifts in his or her attention. Thus narration in the widest sense may be defined as follows:

Narration is the overall regulation and distribution of knowledge which determines how and when the spectator acquires knowledge, that is, how the spectator is able to know what he or she comes to know in a narrative. A typical description of the spectator's “position” of knowledge includes the invention of (sometimes tacit) speakers, presenters, listeners, and watchers who are in a (spatial and temporal) position to know, and to make use of one or more disparities of knowledge. Such “persons” are convenient fictions which serve to mark how the field of knowledge is being divided at a particular time.

It is evident that specific accounts of narration have many decisions to make. What is the status of “style”? In what ways do the stylistic devices of a given medium open up or constrain our abilities to acquire knowledge? What “abilities” of the spectator are to be included in deciding how the spectator “knows” something? How sensitive to context is seeing? Or, for that matter, hearing, prior knowledge, memory, anticipation, desire, gender, and social class? Moreover, knowledge cannot exist in a vacuum; it must be made “worthwhile” with respect to a use or purpose, otherwise it is not recognized. Thus in addressing how knowledge may be possessed, one must also address the desire to know, and the importance of knowing relative to a frame of action. I believe that the text, and its implicit “contexts,” should be analyzed as a set of interacting “levels” or “strata” analogous to, but more complex than, the pyramid of character knowledge discussed above. The proliferation of disparities of knowledge creates a multiplicity of involvements for the spectator. The multiple disparities of narration break down the impression that a film narrative is a mere photographic record of a real environment. Instead, references are generated which are only partially determined in contexts not yet fully known, leaving to the spectator the task of anticipating and constructing the various frames of reference that will be appropriate to an understanding of a world not yet seen.

NICK FURY AS AN EXAMPLE

So far I have examined narration in a rather artificial way either by describing the narration after the narrative has ended (a hierarchy of relative knowledge), or else by isolating a few moments of a narrative event (e.g., a glimpse from the corner of a building, figure 14; a phone conversation; a spectator's response of suspense, mystery, or surprise). I would now like to consider some dynamic properties of narration by looking at a short sequence in which narrative space, time, and causation are more extensively developed for a spectator. The sequence comprises the first sixteen panels of a comic book adventure featuring Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., which could easily have been a storyboard for a film.* I will first simply trace what happens.

A man climbs up a fortress-like structure. In the moonlight we recognize him as Nick Fury. He climbs down into the fortress through a vent, cuts through a door, and discovers a robot guard. He throws a coin onto the floor, and when the robot bends down to pick it up, Nick swiftly knocks him unconscious with a kick to the head. Meanwhile another robot is rising up through a secret trapdoor in the floor behind Nick. Caught unawares, Nick is shot dead.

These events could be represented in many different ways and still be understood to refer to the same “focused chain” of actions as defined through a particular application of a narrative schema. The “center” which gives the chain its focus is, of course, Nick Fury. When the panels are interpreted in this manner (as opposed to other, nonnarrative interpretations), a host of elements are understood as merely parts of larger, directed movements. Although all the elements in the panels are significant, the elements are not all equally significant. For example, in panels 3 and 4, the pipe on the roof, Nick's rope and blue uniform, and his action of climbing into the vent are seen as merely initial conditions and initiating actions toward larger goals. Moreover, there is no reason to doubt that the character in the shadows in panel 4 is the same one we saw in 3; or that panel 8 continues the action of 7. These are the sorts of effect produced by a narrative schema which works to generate a focused, causal chain as opposed to, for example, a catalogue of Nick's arm movements which would organize the panels in a quite different way. However, rather than examining what the narrative schema has accomplished, I want to concentrate on how the spectator is being asked to use the narrative schema to build up a scene through partitioning and embedding a series of actions on various scales of space, time, and causality. How has the spectator been encouraged and constrained moment by moment in achieving a large-scale structure with which to represent the 16 panels as a single narrative event?

Consider the “camera” positions through which the spectator builds the experiences of Nick Fury. In panel 1 we are so close to the action that paradoxically we cannot decide what the action is: is someone climbing a wall, or pulling on two handles, or hanging helplessly? Though it would seem to be almost a point-of-view shot (because of the position of the hands), we have no idea who the person is or what
Figure 15 Nick Fury (panels 1-4)
© 1968, 1992, Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Figure 16 Nick Fury (panels 5-8)

Figure 17 Nick Fury (panels 9-12)

Figure 18 Nick Fury (panels 13-16)
pointing a weapon. Where is this robot? What is happening? More importantly, where is Nick? Again, clues are suppressed by the lack of background detail. The final panels show Nick being surprised from behind and killed. Thus within the story Nick has been shown to know more than the first robot but less than the second. These disparities of knowledge may be diagrammed as follows:

```
2nd Robot > Nick > 1st Robot
or:
2nd Robot ← Nick ← 1st Robot
```

It is evident that choices are being made for the spectator by presenting the events in one way rather than another. After all, the second robot could have been shown earlier hiding under the floor which would have altered our relationship to Nick and his actions even though it would not have altered the outcome. (The spectator would feel suspense; Nick would seem less invincible.) Broadly speaking, the spectator’s knowledge has been presented as equal to Nick’s — producing “mystery” — in panels 1–12 and greater than Nick’s — producing “surprise” — in panels 13–16. These responses, however, have been punctuated by moments of insufficient knowledge and surprise in panels 1, 11, and 13. Thus what initially appears as a smooth string of events is actually composed of a rapid oscillation in the balance of knowledge. Roland Barthes suggests that classical narration in literature “alternates the personal and the impersonal very rapidly . . . so as to produce . . . a proprietary consciousness which retains the mastery of what it states without participating in it.” In order to describe the effects associated with such an oscillation, one must specify a reference point. Thus when the first robot bends down in panel 10, the spectator feels suspense with respect to the robot (i.e., we know more than it does) but mystery or surprise with respect to Nick. The ambiguity of our response with respect to Nick is then forcefully resolved in the next panel as Nick is shown capable of taking us by surprise. We did not know as much about him as we thought; or rather, he has demonstrated what we had hoped such a hero could do. The chain of events in the first 9 panels, encouraging us to use Nick as a reference point rather than an unknown robot, has been validated.

Curiously, there is a moment in the story which reveals an almost pure movement of narration — where knowledge is being shifted and realigned but nothing else is happening. Consider the space of panel 12 which seems to halt the story. We see Nick’s shadow falling gracefully across a door as he stands offscreen, pensive, dreamy, unmoving. This is the sort of transitional moment that Barthes calls a “catalyst.”
NARRATIVE COMPREHENSION AND FILM

He argues that it is of great importance in a narrative because it acts to maintain contact with the spectator. A catalyst addresses the spectator's interest and attention by enhancing, accelerating, or (here) slowing down an event but without altering its course. It encourages a spectator to remain attentive by relating fascinating but minor incidents, or by providing additional description and detail (perhaps even offering a spectacle). It sums up, anticipates, and promises further significant events. (By contrast, a "nucleus" for Barthes is an action which determines or constitutes a causal sequence; adding or deleting a nucleus would alter the course of events.) Panel 12 seems to hint that there is something important on the other side of the door. Also, Nick's shadow on the door captures our attention by asking us to pause and admire the beauty of the composition, the harmony of angle and color, the mastery and brilliance of the artist who has drawn it. But equally important for the narration is the fact that the door and the shadow are an elaborate decoy! We are looking in exactly the wrong direction. The door and the shadow are not significant in the way that the previous panels have been; what is important is a new robot rising up through the floor tiles behind Nick - a robot who is not seen because we are busy admiring a shadow. We have been misled by a view of the action. The shadow must now be reinterpreted, perhaps reclassified as some type of "symbol" that prefigures an epilogue brought on by Nick's untimely death and the end of the causal sequence. Again we must pause and wonder what Nick has really meant to us.

Nick's shadow illustrates two crucial facts about narration that we’ve already encountered. First, narration involves concealing information as much as revealing it. Secondly, the function of narration – what it conceals and reveals – cannot be fully determined in advance by bottom-up processing, or by comparing it against formal criteria (e.g., shot or camera position). Despite initial appearances, the view of the shadow on the door is neither the best view of the action nor the view of the second robot (cf. panel 12 with 14) nor the view of an "invisible witness" at the scene nor even Nick’s view (why should he, or a witness, pause to marvel at a shadow?). Narration is determined by a flow of knowledge, not by surface features of a text. Moreover, a flow of knowledge means that some knowledge is excluded and not shown. One of the tasks of a narrative theorist is to provide a set of terms and categories with which to uncover the distribution of knowledge in a text and define the logic which moves our thinking through a series of phases. I have used these panels to demonstrate that the logic of recognizing, for example, a detail within its setting (panels 1 and 2), or an exterior space adjoining an interior one (panels 7 and 8), or sudden changes in our inferences about story time (cf. panels 5 and 6 with 10 and 11, and with 12 and 13) is no less special and exact than a point-of-view articulation (panels 8 and 9). As figure 14 demonstrates, each moment of the story has the potential of opening new ways for the spectator to acquire knowledge and solve perceptual problems. A theory of narration must define this ongoing potential for meaning and specify the effects of what is actualized.

Although Nick is apparently dead in panel 16, we cannot accept this pause in the action as a resolution for the story as a whole. The narration has presented Nick throughout as strong, acrobatic, resourceful, courageous, and pensive while the second robot seems to be merely a vicious coward. Nick has come to an inappropriate end; a more complete explanation must be offered. When the story continues (after a full-page advertisement), a narrative schema again dictates the rhythm: the spectator is reoriented, exposition is given, a new initiating event occurs, and so on. Previous events are transformed and reversed. We learn that the “Nick Fury” who penetrated the fortress was, in fact, only a robot; the real Nick Fury was disguised as the robot who emerged through the floor and was forced to shoot “himself.” Even more surprising is the fact that someone else was in the room waiting to kill Nick and, fooled by the robot, also shot and killed “Nick Fury.” This other person was not seen by us, the robot guard, or by either of the two Nick Furies. He or she must certainly be powerful, cunning, and dangerous. The only clue to this person’s identity is a tiny disk left behind with a scorpion engraved on it. As the story continues, our former knowledge is entirely recast. We knew much less than we imagined and will need to know much more. The first sixteen panels, however, are not rendered irrelevant by the new events nor were our initial interpretations simply a mistake; rather, the first sixteen panels embodied a phase of our thinking about the story. By rationalizing step by step its method for knowing a story world, narration confronts a spectator in the most profound and subtle way with a representation of what that world is or might be, what it might become, and how other, similar worlds might be found.

FORGETTING AND REVISING

As a spectator engages the procedures which yield a story world, something extraordinary occurs: his or her memory of the actual images, words, and sounds is erased by the acts of comprehension that they require. Comprehension proceeds by cancelling and discarding data actually present, by revising and remaking what is given. A new representation is created which is not a copy of the original stimuli nor an imperfect memory of it. In comprehending a narrative, the spectator routinely sees what is not present and overlooks what is present. For example, the viewer of Nick Fury probably does not notice that the floor
tiles of panels 9, 12, and 14 have disappeared in panel 16; or that the shoulder strap of the second robot mysteriously changes shoulders in panels 14, 15, and 16; or that color schemes change drastically from panel to panel. In *The Girl and Her Trust* a truly startling range of "mismatches" that are plainly visible are seldom noticed even by experienced viewers. Recall also the "impossible" causation of *The Lady from Shanghai*, the virtual space of *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler*, and the integrated match of *The 39 Steps*. All these effects rely upon, or else counter the conventions of, a so-called "transparency" or "invisibility" of classical texts. Defining "transparency" in film, however, has proven no easier than defining it in semantics (where it is entangled with questions of synonymy and modal logic). Transparency may be achieved for a spectator even when continuity conventions (e.g., "invisible" editing) are violated, or may not be achieved when continuity conventions are adopted. This demonstrates once more that such effects cannot be explained simply by formal and technical criteria but require a theory of top-down processing in human perception.

Many explanations have been offered for transparency effects ranging from the purely perceptual (based on the fact that visual illusions and constancies are part of everyday perception) to the psychical (e.g., deferred revision, repression, and hallucination) and the ideological (e.g., "false consciousness"). In some theories transparency and invisibility become faintly sinister because they are believed to promote a dangerous illusionism which, in turn, may be complicitous with custom, ordinary language, narrative, and/or art. Certain anti-narrative devices, e.g. reflexivity, irony, paradox, contradiction, novelty, or alienation, may be prescribed to provide a critical and intellectual distance ("opacity") that frees the viewer from delusion.

Alan Williams addresses the issue of transparency by arguing that when we watch a narrative film we are actually watching four films: a celluloid strip of material; a projected image with recorded sound; a coherent event in three-dimensional space; and finally a story we remember (i.e., the film we think we have seen). There are perceptual "gaps" between each of these four films in which certain facts are concealed and "forgotten" about one film in order to perceive another. For example, the perception of movement in the projected image depends on not seeing the individual frames on the celluloid strip which do not move (or do not move in the same way). By contrast, if some of these same facts separating the films were emphasized, the spectator could not so easily substitute one "film" for another with the result, presumably, that a new critical distance as well as new kinds of reference would be possible. Although the notion that watching a film entails watching several films is one that is open to interpretation, it is a natural consequence of a theory of mind based on modularity and levels of structure. Using Williams's four films, narration could be defined quite broadly by simply saying that narration is the process that operates to transform one "film" into the next. Nevertheless, we seldom define narration in such a sweeping way, preferring instead to limit it to processes operating near the "remembered film." The reason is that we seem to resist the idea that a film projector could be conceived of as a "narrator" who transforms celluloid into moving images. We resist personifying a machine in this way perhaps because a narrative schema emphasizes goals and characters, and we naturally expect that such goals and characters have been produced for us by other, albeit concealed, agents with similar goals and human-like qualities. However, we are less successful in resisting the urge to personify the camera as an "eye" perhaps because the camera seems to act from within the diegesis in proximity to the goals of characters. Therefore, in general, an important issue for a narrative theory will concern how narration should be connected to an explicit human activity and which metaphors should be selected to pose the connection. For example, one may choose to say simply that a screenwriter "communicates," or a director "intends," or a community value is "expressed" in narrating. Still another possibility explored by some narrative theories is the rather startling belief that the spectator is the narrator. In this approach to narration, the spectator both identifies with, and recognizes, only himself or herself in the perceiving of the "remembered film." Such concepts as "narrator," "character," and "implied author" (and perhaps even "camera") are then merely convenient labels used by the spectator in marking epistemological boundaries, or disparities, within an ensemble of knowledge; or rather, the labels become convenient in responding to narrative.

In order better to understand the commitments of specific narrative theories to human activities, we must investigate such terms as author, narrator, voice, viewing, camera, character, narratee, and invisible witness. The next chapter will demonstrate how narrative theories seek to explain narration by breaking it into constituent parts. We shall see that for some theories, the parts will merely open new gaps and indeterminacies, open new kinds of "films" within the film. These kinds of gap will reaffirm a tension and conflict internal to texts (and to perceiving, and perceivers). The resulting conflicts can never be totally resolved but at best can only be concealed anew by an arbitrary "end" to the story, and in the widest sense, by an arbitrary end to language and perception.
NARRATIVE COMPREHENSION AND FILM

creation of stylistic metaphors and brings onto the screen characteristic themes of passion, desire, dread, guilt, and death, producing the ambivalence – the “pleasurable anxiety” – typical of the suspense genre.

Hitchcock’s use of expressionist mise-en-scene also encourages the spectator to search for stylistic metaphors. For example, Hannay, and the husband and wife, are later framed through the bars of a chair. This unusual camera position moves William Rothman to summon the author of such a style:

With this signature shot, the author steps forward and declares the imprisonment of these people. John [the husband] is imprisoned in his anguish, vengeful nature. Margaret [the wife] is imprisoned in her marriage and can only dream of freedom (how can she leave her husband when his anguish is too terrible for him to bear alone and when she holds herself responsible for him?). And Hannay is no more free to save Margaret than she is to release John from his curse.

Rothman’s use of an imprisonment/freedom metaphor radiates outward into his descriptions and elaborate summaries of the action as well as infuses his speculations and pronouncements about character thought (“locked in the spirit of revenge”; “one cannot escape the condition of being human”; “closes out her dream of freedom”; “resent those terms and rebel,” etc.). Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 134–41. Nick Browne constructs a stylistic metaphor by linking the bars to certain effects of the lighting. “Representation and Story,” pp. 38–9 (“the darkening prospect of liberty”). On expressionism, see note 57 above.


3 NARRATION

1 Griffith could have created an accelerated montage by systematically varying any of a number of parameters. The screen durations of the twenty-eight shots does not reveal a simple pattern. Similarly, although a variety of angles is employed, resulting in movement along diagonal lines, the only simple pattern seems to be based on whether the movement is toward screen left or right. Movement which is almost directly toward or away from the camera, I have considered as neutral since Griffith uses it as a way of crossing the 180-degree axis of action, that is, as a transition between groups of shots.

I have not counted the first shot after Grace rushes from the interior of the station as part of the chase sequence even though she confronts the tramps at the handicap. I have considered the next shot as the beginning of the chase because, rather than be left safely behind, she takes the decisive action of jumping onto the handicap and refusing to leave without the strongbox. Grace’s action has thus escalated the confrontation. Moreover, this shot ends with a near match on action as the tramps react by putting the handicap into motion in spite of Grace.

Screen duration for the seven groups was based on a projection speed of sixteen frames per second and derived from a frame count of a 16mm print of the film. The actual times in seconds were as follows: 65.0, 16.7, 18.8, 18.8, 4.2, and 5.2. In computing the duration of the last shot of the sequence, I have used only that portion of the shot which shows the tramps jump off the handicap followed by Grace jumping off the handicap.

2 The chase sequence ends with the following four shots: the handicap and the locomotive are both in the same shot but at different times; the handicap is shown but with only the smoke of the locomotive behind it; the handicap and the locomotive appear together; the locomotive is now so close that the tramps abandon the handicap.

3 The time of the chase is left largely to our imagination: do the cross-cuts signify continuous time, simultaneous time, or something in between? Cf. temporal situations B1, B2, B3, and B4 in figure 3 of chapter 2 which depicts several varieties of story time relationships A8. The rhythmic aspects of the film are heightened by the fact that there are only nine intertitles in the film and none in the final thirty-three shots.

4 The patterns on the screen in this chase scene are primarily rhythmic and directional. They act in parallel, rather than duplicating or opposing, the rhythm and direction of the story event; both screen and story patterns are completed at the same time. Cf. figures 10–13 in chapter 2 which show possible relations between two-dimensional screen and three-dimensional story spaces in representing an event in The 39 Steps. Joyce E. Jesionowski, however, argues that the screen does use graphic matches in an important way, and has a graphic resolution and climax; Thinking in Pictures: Dramatic Structure in D.W. Griffith’s Biograph Films (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 47–52, 138, 177–8 (includes some stills from the chase sequence).


6 Christian Metz, The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema, trans. by Celia Britton, Arunnwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Gazzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 299 n. 9. Hugo Münsterberg argued in 1916 that film is unique among the arts in its ability to create a feeling of “omnipresence.” He discusses some examples in which a certain notion of time as succession is abolished so that the spectator feels as if he or she is in several places at once and a single action “irradiates in all directions.” The Film: A Psychological Study: The Silent Photoplay in 1916 (New York: Dover, 1970), p. 45.


8 Ryle, “Knowing How and Knowing That,” pp. 4–5, 11–12, 15–16. Ryle asserts that “knowing . . . a rule [of inference] is not a case of knowing an extra fact or truth; it is knowing how to move from acknowledging some
NARRATIVE COMPREHENSION AND FILM


In chapter 6 I will analyze a camera position like that of 3B from Letter from an Unnamed Woman where a character, Lisa, secretly watches from a staircase as Stefan brings a woman to his apartment.

11 The usual form of a "split-screen" technique shows 5 in one panel and A/B in another and represents simultaneity but does not show the direct spatial relationship between the characters. It is thus intermediate between a "best possible" view (which represents simultaneity and the continuity of space between the characters) and an eyeline match (which usually represents neither simultaneity nor direct spatial continuity). A flashback might represent direct spatial continuity without simultaneity.


13 The camera movement from position 8A to 8B in figure 14 is an example of "unmotivated" framing and is derived from examples in Antonioni's Red Desert (1964) and The Passenger (1975). On unmotivated camera movement see Branigan, Point of View, pp. 45–6.


15 There are many ways to destabilize this convention. See Branigan, Point of View, chap. 5, "The Point-of-view Shot," pp. 103–21, and also pp. 17–19, 73–5, 96–7, 172–4, 182–4. There may even be point-of-view shots in which we never see the watcher because it is invisible in some sense; p. 120 n. 13.

16 A variety of ways of representing telephone conversations are crucial to the kind of story being told may be found in Trouble in Paradise (Lubitsch, 1932), The Man Who Knew Too Much (Hitchcock, 1934), You Only Live Once (Lang, 1937), His Girl Friday (Hawks, 1940), Pillow Talk (Gordon, 1959), The Misfits (Huston, 1961), The Rain People (Coppola, 1969), The Mirror (Tarkovsky, 1975), All the President's Men (Faulk, 1976), Slacker (Tarkovsky, 1979), and When Harry Met Sally... (Reiner, 1989).


18 Bordewich, Narration in the Fiction Film, pp. 57–61.

19 Branigan, Point of View, pp. 96, 179.


24 Grace's boyfriend is at the bottom of the pyramid of knowledge because events of the romance and crime stories mostly catch him unaware: he does not know that Grace was secretly thrilled by his kiss nor does he know about the danger posed by the tramps.


The following films illustrate a range of possibilities for creating suspense, mystery, or surprise using a bomb as a narrative device: Sabotage (Hitchcock, 1936), The Wages of Fear (Clouzot, 1953), Touch of Evil (Welles, 1958), Juggernaut (Lester, 1974), Sorcerer (Friedkin, 1977), Outrageous Fortune (Hiller, 1987),
and *The Untouchables* (De Palma, 1987).

On a spectator's wishful involvement in a film, Christian Metz remarks: "I shall say that behind any fiction there is a second fiction: the diegetic events are fictional, that is the first; but everyone pretends to believe that they are true, and that is the second; there is even a third: the general refusal to admit that somewhere in oneself one believes they are genuinely true." Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, p. 72. Cf. chapter 7 below on the notion of fiction and see chapters 4, 5, and 6 on psychoanalytic theories of narrative. See also Peter Wollen, "The Hermeneutic Code" in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 40–8.


28 The story is entitled "Who is Scorpio?" and appears in *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Marvel Comics, June 1968). The writer and illustrator is Jim Steranko. Though Nick Fury had appeared in numerous earlier stories, this issue was the first to be devoted entirely to him. Len Lipton reproduces these sixteen panels as an example of a good storyboard in *Independent Filmmaking* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, rev. edn 1973), pp. 378–9. The extraordinary sophistication of recent comic art is well illustrated by the *Watchmen* series (1986), the new versions of *Batman*, and in many issues of *Swamp Thing* (all from DC Comics).

29 Recall that the concept of a "narrative schema" is meant to be a concise explanation of certain remarkable facts about narrative comprehension while a "focused chain" is shorthand for a type of causal organization. See chapter 1.

30 I am here ignoring the first page of the story which is a full page drawing of the fortress showing a figure on the wall seen impossibly from the waves of a raging ocean. The title of the story appears on the fortress walls and other credits and publication data are given. The representation of space introduces a metaphor of power and conflict. The extreme framing of panel 2 highlights a sharply receding linear perspective to create a fortress of monumental dimensions. But panel 3 shows that Nick is equally imposing: his hand reaching into the foreground is shown as three times the size of his head. A narrative schema is already at work.

31 On focalization, see chapter 4, p. 100 ff.

32 Creating a "fuzzy" space has many uses and is analogous to the creation of "fuzzy" concepts and "fuzzy" causation; cf. the discussion of "double motivation" in chapter 1.

33 An alternate interpretation would be that it was not necessary for the robot to turn around to pick up the coin and that Nick came up from behind the robot (even though Nick is not seen in panel 10), then jumped in front of the robot to knock it down. Notice that in either interpretation the uniform size and spacing of the comic panels does not indicate a uniform passage of story time. As in the case with film, time cannot be determined mechanically but must be made to fit with other judgments about space and causality consistent with a narrative schema.

34 The spectator may not notice the lack of background detail because previous panels also exhibit a suppression of spatial information (e.g., panels 1, 5, 6, 10, and 11) and the suppression is connected in various ways to the causal chain (e.g., low light conditions in the story space, explanatory close-up, etc.) and thus is made to seem merely descriptive.


37 Since a catalyst literally is a chemical that is not consumed in a reaction, Barthes may have chosen the term in order to suggest that some aspects of a text (narration, realism, fascination) are of a different order than narrative cause and effect, and hence are not subject to the irreversible time of the plot. Barthes's catalysts are opposed to cardinal functions, or nuclei, and are analogous to the Russian formalists' notion of "free" motifs as opposed to "bound" motifs.
NARRATIVE COMPREHENSION AND FILM

tramp is in the "wrong" corner of a window spying on the hero; the
strongbox "suddenly" appears on the front of the locomotive between Grace
and the hero). The film also includes flawless matches on action and careful
uses of an axis of action.

In chapter 6 I will examine a specific instance in which a spectator produces
a continuous action in spite of what is literally discontinuous on the screen;
see discussion of figures 49, 50 from Letter from an Unknown Woman.

Art films of the 1960s showed that invisible editing was no guarantee of
invisibility. See above, p. 45.

Williams, Max Ophuls, pp. 17-24, 35-6. Although Williams focuses on only
"two films," I think that a fair reading of his essay points to at least four
films. One could, of course, further subdivide these four films or extend
them in either direction; that is, extend them backward in time toward an
optical printer film, an edited film, a profilmic film (principal photography),
a script film, etc., as well as forward in time toward the writing of a
review, a meeting with a friend who has a different opinion of the film, the
recognition of a place or situation from the film, etc.

44 On modularity and levels of structure in human cognition, see generally
Ray Jackendoff, Consciousness and the Computational Mind (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT
Press, 1987). See also note 33 in chapter 2 above.

45 Do we personify the microphone or the tape recorder or the loudspeaker in
the theater as an "ear"? How is listening to a diegetic world fundamentally
different from seeing a diegetic world? I examine these issues in "Sound
and Epistemology in Film," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, vol.
47, no. 4 (Fall 1989), pp. 311-24.

4 LEVELS OF NARRATION

1 I have added the bottom two levels and have renamed several of Lanser's
levels consistent with my terminology; for example, Lanser's "public" and
"private" narrators become "nondiegetic" and "diegetic" narrators. I have
also made other changes, most notably reversing Lanser's levels of "focal-
izer" and "character" consistent with my revised definition of "focalization." See
Susan Snider Lanser, The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction

2 My definition of a text is meant to rule out, for example, such objects as
trees and tables, as well as a book being used to patch a hole in the roof.

261. (Barthes's emphases.)

4 On the "biographical legend," see David Bordwell, Ozu and the Poetics of
Legend," pp. 5-7, and The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer (Berkeley: University
authorship generally, see Theories of Authorship: A Reader, ed. by John
Caughie (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) and Stephen Crofts,

5 See my discussion of the paradigmatic statement, "I am lying" in Point of
View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film (New
York and Berlin: Mouton, 1984), pp. 2-5, 172-3, 182-4. The analysis of
narration into "levels," each with a nominal subject, is one way of talk-
ning about how a text as a whole may represent a "splitting of the subject.

6 Recall that a narrative schema organizes causal patterns in order to ma
important, and make relevant, our already existing interests and activities.
Hitchcock's opening statement is based upon pressing together two familiar
metaphors: fact is stranger than fiction (but otherwise is like it), and life is (li
tory. His opening, "And yet . . . ", inaugurates the complex interplay
between the probable and the improbable, nonfiction and fiction, no
narration and narrative that is held together by the metaphors.

7 See Marshall Deutelbaum, "Finding the Right Man in The Wrong Man," A
Hitchcock Reader, ed. by Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland Foague (Arni

8 Initially the distant figure walks toward the camera but then stops, plar
his feet squarely, and begins to speak. The figure has not really come
as closer to us nor can we see him any better. Why has he moved at all? I
moving he has demonstrated that he is facing us directly and has emphasized
that we are being specially addressed as extra-fictional spectators. By pair-
ing his gigantic shadow into the camera, he has drawn attention to hims
and demonstrated that his role will be active. Characters in the story, ho
ever, will not look directly into the camera and speak to us in this way
(addressing us as "you"). Certainly there are conventions involved here, b
more importantly the conventions are being used to draw epistemological
boundary lines within this particular text. Also, the shot permits us
indulge in stylistic metaphors, if we wish, for example, relating the shi
of Hitchcock's shadow to an otherworldly power to create; or, rela-
the shadow to a presumed, and prior, "first cause" of the story who
mly seen as a figure that breaks the light and has the power to "shine
light" on (enlighten, illuminate) matters.

9 After the end title of The Wrong Man a final title appears:

We are grateful to Mr. Sherman Billingsley for his gracious cooperation i
permitting scenes of this picture to be photographed at the Stork Club i
New York City.

This title amounts to a final assertion by an extra-fictional narration that w
we have seen is true by virtue of being filmed on location. The Hitchcock "i
is now hidden behind a "we.

10 Figure 20 is taken from Ray Jackendoff, Consciousness and the Computation
in discussing David Marr's theory of vision.

11 In chapter 6, I will analyze in detail how an implicit narration is create
from elements that are missing from the explicit narrations of Letter from an
Unknown Woman. Also relevant to the concept of implicitness is the gener
issue of the separation of material and structure which is discussed i
chapter 5.

12 In chapter 2, I examined the relation of screen and story space in the con
of another sort of "perception of a misperception" that concerned a husban
spying on his wife in Hitchcock's The 39 Steps.

13 Hitchcock qualified his dislike for The Wrong Man by saying, "But I did fanc
the opening of the picture because of my own fear of the police. I also lik
the part where the real culprit is discovered just as [Henry] Fonda is praying
Yes, I liked that ironic coincidence." François Truffaut, Hitchcock (New York