Film Form and Narrative

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INTRODUCING FORM AND NARRATIVE

Films tell stories. Of course, this is not true of all films: documentaries, abstract animations, and early film genres such as ‘cinema of attractions’ (see Tom Gunning in Elsaesser 1990: 57) are all types of film which exploit other properties of cinema besides its narrative capabilities. Yet for most of us, our principal experience of cinema is the experience of narrative film. This chapter seeks to analyse how films tell stories, and what kinds of stories films tell.

For a film to be a ‘narrative’ it must present us with a series of events in ways that imply connections between one event and the next. Narratives must, therefore, have constituent parts, which are also discernibly related (though the type of relationship may vary greatly). Most commonly we expect a ‘cause-and-effect’ relationship: one event has the effect of causing another event, which causes another, and so on. Narratives also require ‘narration’, or communication. Cinematic narration is arguably the most sophisticated of all narrative media, because it is ‘multi-track,’ both visual and audio. This enables films to co-opt the communicative capabilities of a whole host of other media and forms. For example, films have linguistic communication through the presence of dialogue or voice-over on the sound-track, or the inclusion of printed text within the image (such as intertitles, shots of newspapers, books, letters etc.).

Since moving images also record the three-dimensional physical world, film can incorporate other visual arts, such as painting, still photography, theatre, and architecture. Thus the tomb of ‘El Khasne,’ in Petra, Jordan, features in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (Steven Spielberg, 1989), Richard Neutra’s modernist Lovell House is used as a location for LA Confidential (Curtis Hanson, 1997), whilst Alberto Libera’s Casa Malaparte is the Capri setting of Le Mépris (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963). In Grigori Kozintsev’s Hamlet (1964), meanwhile, pictures and tapestries that resemble the film itself decorate the walls within the castle of Elsinore. Films not only have the potential to photograph the other visual arts, they may also copy their techniques. The techniques developed in theatre, painting and photography in staging, framing, and image composition have been highly influential in shaping cinema. We may understand filmic expression, therefore, as combining a mixture of practices which are unique to narrative cinema with those that it has borrowed and developed from other media. In its narration and its narrative structures cinema has also been heavily influenced by the novel.

This chapter will examine both the techniques which make up cinematic narration, and the structures which combine to make a narrative. It is concerned with rules (or ‘codes’) which shape the production of images and sounds on the small scale, and with rules (or ‘conventions’) which shape the depiction of scenes, events and characters on a large scale. The visual codes of cinema may be broadly divided into mise-en-scene and editing. The audio codes may be divided into speech, music, and noise.

CONVENTIONS, HOLLYWOOD, ART AND AVANT-GARDE CINEMA

The notion of ‘rules’, albeit ones that are fluid and adaptable, is crucial to the study of form and narrative. As with other narrative media, such as novels, theatre, comic books, epic poems etc., films organize stories according to sets of conventions, which are understood by filmmakers and recognized by film viewers. Thus we respond to films based on, not only our experience of the ‘real world’, but also, the expectations we have formed through watching other films. Film narratives only gain meaning through these expectations, which may be met, or else thwarted in ways that reference and influence such expectations.
The history and evolution of cinematic narrative conventions allows us to distinguish between, on one hand, ‘Classical Hollywood,’ or mainstream cinema, and on the other, art cinema, which has traditionally been the province of Europe. In other words, it is possible to identify a series of narrative conventions which emerged out of the imperatives of commercial cinema, in which the project of entertainment for the purpose of profit is paramount, and a series of narrative conventions which emerged in industries where state subsidies, and a tendency towards small-scale independent production, facilitated an emphasis on aesthetic innovation and personal expression.

Obviously such generalizations require qualification. For example, in contemporary Hollywood horizontal integration and increasing conglomeration has brought about the emergence of large independent producers and specialised production and distribution wings within the major companies. This environment has resulted in films such as The Usual Suspects (Bryan Singer, 1995), Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000), and Crash (Paul Haggis, 2004) which arguably utilize a number of art cinema characteristics. Conversely European film industries have consistently produced films, such as comedies and musicals, belonging to genres popularised by Hollywood, whilst the European propensity for art cinema may also be understood in commercial terms, with aesthetic and national specificity proving a profitable means of product differentiation in a global market. As narrative categories, classical and art cinema are linked, each responding to the methods, creativity and competitive presence of the other. Thus French New Wave cinema pays homage to and parodies film noir (Itself indebted to German Expressionism). Hollywood cinema, always particularly adept at cinematic ‘borrowing’, has tended to adopt art cinema aesthetics and conventions as a means of refreshing its own genres, and the inventiveness of the films listed above may be understood in these terms.

Art cinema is also closely related to a further category, the avant-garde. The avant-garde is most readily distinguishable from art cinema in economic and institutional, rather than aesthetic, terms, in that avant-garde films are distributed outside the structures of the film industry (in film clubs, galleries, or academic institutions). Art films, though frequently subsidized, are exhibited in commercially run cinemas and their larger production scales demand greater financial success than do avant-garde films. In terms of content and form the two categories are over-lapping, and both can be related to the rise of Modernism.

Both art cinema and avant-garde cinema can be understood in terms of responses to – and reactions against – mainstream cinema. Indeed many critical accounts of art cinema define its conventions as being opposite to Hollywood’s, describing it explicitly in terms of what Hollywood is not. As a means of getting to grips with art cinema’s conventions this is a useful approach, but it is important to bear in mind that art cinema is not only this. In its relation to Modernism, and in its existence within different national cinemas, art cinema is varied, and has conventions of its own that are not simply ‘other’ than what Hollywood does.

The above definitions of both ‘mainstream’ and ‘art’ in cinema are admittedly western and ‘first-world centric,’ since the former is conceived in terms of Hollywood and the latter in terms of Europe. This reflects Hollywood’s global domination of the film industry, and the powerful influence American and European cinematic traditions have had world-wide. However, there are a number of other powerfully influential national and transcontinental cinemas which offer their own art and commercially-orientated conventions (the cinemas of India and Japan most obviously come to mind).

**Story and plot**

In order to understand the fundamental components of any narrative it is first necessary to make a distinction between a narrative’s ‘story’ and its ‘plot’. ‘Story’ (labelled ‘fabula’ by Russian formalist literary theorists) refers to the events of the narrative, and the actions and responses of characters. ‘Plot’ (or ‘syuzhet’) refers to the ways in which the

**Classical Hollywood**

This term refers to both a historical period within Hollywood cinema (which ended with the decline of the vertically-integrated studio system in the 1950s), and to the narrative and formal conventions established and promoted during this time; the terms ‘classical narrative’ and ‘Hollywood narrative’ are frequently used interchangeably with the term ‘mainstream narrative,’ since this constitutes cinema’s dominant mode of story-telling.

**avant-garde**

Meaning literally advanced guard (that is those who ‘march ahead’ of the troops in a military campaign), ‘avant-garde’ has been taken up as an aesthetic term for art (and artists) seeking to challenge, subvert, or reinvent artistic tenets and conventions.

For further discussion of avant-garde cinema see Chapter 14, p. –

**Modernism**

This refers to a dramatically experimental trend within the arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, music and film) which grew up at the start of the twentieth century encompassing a wide array of movements (Expressionism, Vorticism, Symbolism, Imagism, Surrealism etc.) along with the innovations of individual artists not directly affiliated with a particular movement. Modernism involved a rejection of 19th century styles, traditions and ideas, and a self-conscious (or ‘self-reflexive’) approach to aesthetic forms, in which artistic expression was itself explored, questioned and reinvented.

For further discussion of Indian cinema see Chapter 13, p. –

**Russian formalism**

A literary theory which developed in Russia in the early 1920s, which sought to establish a scientific basis for the study of literature and literary effects.
story is presented to us in terms of its order, emphases, and logic. A succinct distinction between these two ideas has been provided by Seymour Chatman, who suggests that ‘the story is the what in a narrative that is depicted,’ and plot ‘the how.’ (Chatman 1980: 19)

The most conspicuous way that the plot shapes how the story is told is in terms of its chronology. One way in which a plot may present a story is the order in which we presume events take place, and the characters experience them. Thus the film Bambi (David Hand, 1942), which is essentially the story of the central character’s life from birth to parenthood, has a narrative in which the story and plot order are the same. By contrast, Marcel Carné’s Le Jour se lève (1939) has a plot which begins close to the end of the story (and the hero’s life), with François (Jean Gabin) committing a murder. There then follows three separate flashbacks, which show us the events which led to this. This plot structure clearly has the effect of creating intrigue by raising the question of how François could have descended to such desperate measures. It also imbues the film with a pervasive air of pessimism, since even as flashbacks show us a burgeoning romance, we know that the liaison must be ill-fated.

Thus our responses to the story are shaped by the manipulations of the plot. Plot strategies which play with the story’s chronology demand that we piece together the order in which we presume the events take place. The ease with which this can be done depends on the method and degree of connection between one story-moment and the next. Le Jour se lève, for example, employs cinematic codes (such as the ripple-dissolve) to make such links clear. (Of course, these only work because there is a shared understanding between filmmakers and viewers that ripple-dissolves introduce characters’ memories.) The plot can also emphasise or de-emphasize moments of the story through other types of temporal manipulation. The least important moments of story are liable to be missed out of the plot altogether (as when, for example, a character travels from one story-location to another). The omission (or ellipsis) of a portion of the story from the plot may have a number of other effects, such as the evocation of mystery. In Bambi the plot does not dramatize the period of Bambi’s life immediately after the death of his mother, a gap which eases our shock and allows us to assume, without having to witness it, that Bambi has recovered from his grief. The film’s tone is immediately lifted with the lively, comical ‘Let’s Sing a Gay Little Spring Song’ number; thus the plot manipulates our emotional responses to the story, providing a musical interlude as recovery-time and as a means of cheering us up.

Film plots also operate in conjunction with film running-times; where an ellipsis occurs the portion of the film’s running time assigned to the incident in question is none; however, a story-incident can be emphasized if a large portion of the film’s running time is devoted to it. Thus, Robert Mulligan’s To Kill a Mockingbird (1962) devotes 35 of its 129 minute running time to the trial of Tom Robinson. The plot’s uneven distribution of the story across the running time of the film gives us time to appreciate Atticus’s (Gregory Peck) defence tactics, the injustice of the racially-motivated conviction, and the profound effect the trial has on Atticus’s children. The relationship between the three temporal categories of story, plot and running time can be further manipulated by such cinematic codes as editing and fast- or slow-motion photography.

The plot also stages the story across space as well as across time. In Bambi the story takes place in the two distinct spaces of the forest and the meadow, and we are guided as to the type of story-incident liable to occur in the meadow on Bambi’s first visit there, when his mother warns him that ‘Out there we are unprotected.’ When the plot next dramatizes a scene on the meadow Bambi is stranded whilst gunfire sounds off-screen, and in the third meadow scene Bambi’s mother is shot. The plot therefore uses the spaces of the story to alternate between periods of safety (represented by the forest) and danger (represented by the meadow). The climax of the narrative is signalled by a breaking of this pattern, and we are alarmed by the threat of the hunt and the fire precisely because they invade the safe spaces of the forest.
The plot’s staging of the action in space is also crucial to our grasp of narrative point of view. The presentation of point of view takes place at the level of cinematic codes, where editing and camera movement can be used to posit certain shots as representing (or approximating) what it is a particular character sees. However, a broader notion of point of view – or what Gerard Genette (Genette 1980: 189) has termed ‘focalization’ – also exists at the level of narrative conventions, in that we often infer that a particular story ‘belongs to’ someone. Where the plot remains always, or for the most part, in the same space as a particular character, then the film will seem entirely, or principally, ‘focalized’ through that character (as in The Big Sleep [Howard Hawks, 1946] where Philip Marlowe [Humphrey Bogart] is shown in almost every scene, so that we know and understand as much as he does). Curtis Hanson’s LA Confidential (1997) uses multiple focalization, with the three opening scenes introducing our three police-officer, central characters in turn. Our understanding of the ensuing narrative is dictated by the way the plot switches between the investigative activities of the three men so that we know more than any one of them.

The operations of focalization are crucial to the emotional investment most Hollywood films ask us to make in the fate of central characters. Often focalization through a particular character invites us to like that character, since we understand what causes them to act as they do. LA Confidential engages our interest by guiding us to understand why two focalizing characters, Bud (Russell Crowe) and Ed (Guy Pearce), conceive a violent dislike for each other. We like and understand both men, though they do not like or understand each other, and this heightens our expectations of the moment when they realize that they are in fact on the same side. However, focalization through a particular character need not necessarily result in our feeling empathy for them: Thompson is the ‘focalizer’ of Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941) but remains little more than a narrative device, since he only sees the story rather than acts in it. A number of Hollywood films in recent years, such as The Shawshank Redemption (Frank Darabont, 1994), The Sixth Sense (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999) and Memento, have played with the conventions of focalization, providing focalizers whose understanding is partial or deluded. Such strategies influence our response to characters, either through provoking distrust of the characters’ unreliability or pleasure at the plot’s ingenuity.

**Hollywood and mainstream narratives**

Many of the examples given above shed light on the key characteristics of classical film narratives. Because entertainment is the principal priority, the operations and conventions of mainstream films are dictated by the need to arouse and sustain our interest. This has led to a particular stress on character – on active characters, whose exploits reveal motives we can readily appreciate – and on what may be termed ‘benevolence’ and ‘transparency’.

Hollywood narratives and codes are dictated by a desire to make the story readily comprehensible to the audience. This does not mean that techniques and structures are themselves simplistic; rather it means that a sophisticated set of conventions has evolved which aims to guide viewers through the story (in this sense they are ‘benevolent’). The techniques are ‘transparent’ because they seek to keep viewers focused on the story; they are therefore unobtrusive, so that audiences remain absorbed in *what* is happening, rather than become distracted by *how* the story is told. Part of the sophistication of Hollywood narratives and techniques lies in their invisibility, in the effort involved in appearing effortless.

It is in Hollywood narratives where the principle of cause and effect is adhered to most rigidly, since it is this which produces story clarity. It is usually character which provides the causal elements, driving the story forward, and providing connections between the elements which the plot places side by side. For this reason most Hollywood films have heroes who have definite goals: the central character desires something, seeks to
achieve something, and the story consists of the actions the character undertakes to
fulfil such aims. In most cases the story is ‘closed’, that is the ending offers a complete
conclusion to the character’s goal (obvious exceptions to this include where a film is part
of a franchise, so that the ending sets up the scenario for a sequel.) The narrative will end
with the character’s goal having been met, or the attempt having failed – although the
industry’s aim of giving pleasure has led to the predominance of the former outcome.

Sometimes heroes have more than one goal, although usually such multiple goals will
coincide and reinforce each other. In His Girl Friday (Howard Hawks, 1939), for example,
Walter (Cary Grant) seeks to prevent Hildy (Rosalind Russell) from marrying Bruce (Ralph
Bellamy), because he wants regain his star ‘newspaper “man”’ at the Washington Post,
and because he wants to marry her for a second time himself. Thus his professional goal
and his romantic goal result in his pursuing a single course of action. In Grosse Pointe
Blank (George Armitage, 1997), meanwhile, contract killer Martin Blank (John Cusack)
pursues two different courses of action when he is forced into taking on one last ‘hit’,
whilst trying to win back the love of his former girlfriend, Debi (Minnie Driver). However
these two goals intersect when Martin discovers that the man he is supposed to kill is
Debi’s father, and he is able to gain her love by changing his approach to his professional
goal, killing his employers instead. Most mainstream movies contain a romantic story-
line of some kind, and the interweaving of romance with another story-line represents a
common type of multiple-goal narrative. In mainstream narratives characters’ methods
of achieving goals are shaped by personality ‘traits’ which are clearly identified: in LA
Confidential, for example, Bud is motivated by a need to protect women from violent
men. Characters provide direction for the story, and the narrative provides clear
delineation of what characters are like, and what they want.

For an illustration of classical narrative see Case Study One
Art cinema narratives

Because art films are not governed to the same degree by a commercial imperative to provide entertainment and pleasure, their narrative conventions differ from those of mainstream films. Art films are not shaped by the formulaic approach to story-telling described above, although in their oppositional position to mainstream cinema they offer recurring characteristics that suggest broad guidelines in terms of conventions.

Art films are not governed by the narrative strategy of cause and effect: coincidence, chance and random sequences of events are common in their narratives. Frequently the story-connections offered by the plot are jarring and confusing rather than elucidatory: thus Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Conformist* (1969) does not make clear for some time that early scenes in a radio station are a flashback in relation to the plot’s opening car journey, and our sense dislocation is furthered by the presence of flashforwards within the flashback sequence. The film’s structure is highly fragmented, with individual story-moments repeatedly interrupted by other moments, in a disorientating fashion. Similarly the motivations of characters are also not readily discernible, and they cannot be relied on to explain the logic and direction of the story. In *Le Mépris* (1963), for example, Camille (Brigitte Bardot) vacillates between reassuring her husband, Paul (Michel Piccoli) that she still loves him, and angrily voicing her contempt for him. Art films do not necessarily invite us to like their heroes and heroines: Godard’s *A Bout De Souffle* (1959) presents us with an arrogant central protagonist (played by Jean Paul Belmondo) who repeatedly insults his girlfriend; *The Conformist*, more radically, depicts a character who spies for the Fascists, and passively colludes in murder.

In many art films characters are not particularly active, and typically the story moves more slowly than in Hollywood films, with plots assigning long portions of running time to scenes showing little story-progress. In *Le Mépris* much of the film’s first 72 minutes are taken up with little more than Paul’s indecision about whether he will accept film producer Prokosch’s (Jack Palance) offer of a job, and Camille’s indecision about whether she will accompany him. François Truffaut’s *Baisers Volés* (1968) contains a scene in which Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud) sends a love-letter, and there follows a series of shots of the letter as it is sucked down the vacuum-tubes of the postal system and delivered to its destination. This sequence constitutes a plot-dramatization in which no significant action takes place, and is pointedly superfluous to the unfolding of the story.

Art cinema also tends to avoid closed endings, favouring instead a sense of irresolution and indecision. Many art films give the impression that they have ‘stopped’ rather than ‘ended’ – that the plot has ceased to dramatize rather than resolved the story’s dilemmas. Famously, François Truffaut’s first Antoine Doinel film, *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (1959), ends with a freeze frame as Antoine is in the process of running away, whilst *Le Mépris* cuts short the marital conflicts of its protagonists with a shocking car crash.

All these properties may be related to a number of broad preoccupations which art cinema explores. Whilst in mainstream narratives the characters and their traits are put in service of telling the story, in art cinema the logic, progress, and resolution of the story are often subordinate to the exploration of character. Characters’ subjectivity and mental states become a key focus, and it is not uncommon to find characters who are emotionally unbalanced – or even psychotic – acting as the principal focalizers of the narrative (as in, for example, Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* [1919] or Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* [1965]). The subjectivity of characters is one way that we may account for the films’ fragmented structures and dramatic ambiguities, although such readings are not usually confirmed for us by the narrative.

Implicit in these uncertainties is the idea that human behaviour and human stories cannot in life be as readily resolved as they are in mainstream narratives: our experience of the world is not one of neat cause and effect, nor do we necessarily approach our lives with clear-cut goals in mind and an understanding of our motives. Art films suggest that
characters cannot control events, and that the action will not necessarily reward us with satisfying answers. *The Conformist* constitutes an exploration of the idea that people and causes can never be understood, in that initially it seems to suggest that it will uncover why people become Fascists; however, its fragmented structure seems to bury rather reveal explanations, implying that the causes of history and human behaviour can never be fully comprehended.

Just as story is put in service of character, it is also subordinate to plot. Art cinema prioritises the question of how narrative is presented rather than what is told. Despite the fact that many of its archetypal films were released decades after the era of Modernism, art cinema is Modernist in that it takes up a self-conscious position in relation to its own aesthetic forms, seeking to explore the properties of cinematic expression itself. This may take the form of jarring, fragmented, or superfluous narrative devices, which make the operations of the plot conspicuous as opposed to transparent; it may also take the form of experimental cinematic codes, such as the jump-cuts of Godard's *A Bout De Souffle*, which again force us to notice, rather than enjoy, cinematic technique. A number of art films, such as *Le Mépris* and Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963), are also more bluntly self-referential in that their stories are themselves concerned with filmmaking. In such instances it is often the limitations of the medium which are explored, as the frustrations of undertaking fictional film projects serve as metaphors for the fractured narratives of the films themselves – and perhaps also for the impossibilities of achieving any satisfactory communication.

Art cinema is sometimes – problematically – associated with the personal expression of the director in ways that Hollywood cinema is not. This is in part because the production contexts of art films mean that the director’s role is likely to be more prominent than it is in larger, commercial ventures. In addition, the self-consciousness of art cinema encourages us to associate the films with a particular artist, since the invitation to notice techniques draws our attention to the possible creative presence behind them. The figure of the auteur originated in European cinematic discourses, and has been central to much critical writing on European cinema, although more recent interest in European popular genres has eroded this dominance (see Dyer and Vincendeau 1992). However, since auteurism has also featured prominently in critical approaches to Hollywood, and has been subject to considerable revision and critique, it is an approach towards art cinema which should, perhaps, be treated with caution.

Some critics also define art cinema in terms of a tendency to engage in political and/or social commentary (see Street 1997: 47). This does not typify all art cinema but there are certain national movements (such as Italian Neo-Realism or the British New Wave) where this criteria does apply. It is also the case that the art cinema of certain countries displays a preoccupation with questions of national politics and history. This is particularly apparent where countries have turbulent national histories, as in the case of New German Cinema which seeks to explore Germany’s Nazi past and legacy.

**CINEMATIC CODES**

Critical accounts of cinematic codes have tended to differ in the ways that they have broken down, or categorized for analysis, cinema’s key communicative procedures. This chapter considers three basic areas – two visual codes (mise-en-scene and editing) and one audio code (soundtrack).

**Mise-en-scene**

The term ‘mise-en-scene’ originated in the theatre. Meaning literally ‘putting into the scene’ it referred to the staging of a drama within theatrical space. The term as it has been applied to cinema may be understood in two ways. For some critics it has retained its theatrical connotations, and is used only to refer to those elements of the shot which
are staged in front of the camera at the time of filming. These elements comprise setting, props, costume and make-up, lighting and performance. For others, the term has broader significance, and is used to refer to everything which appears within the frame of the finished film. According to this definition cinematography and special effects are both aspects of mise-en-scene, even though the former is performed by, rather than placed in front of, the camera, and the latter are often added to the image during post-production. For the purposes of this study I will adopt this second definition, but will maintain the distinction between the different ‘phases’ of mise-en-scene by dealing first with what takes place in front of camera at the time of shooting, then with what the camera does, and finally with what is added to the image afterwards.

Setting

Setting is a crucial part of film’s expressive capabilities, and because it is subject to the techniques of other aspects of mise-en-scene (it may be lit strikingly, or elements may be shown in close-up) it constitutes much more than simply a backdrop for the action of a story.

A filmmaker may select a setting from a pre-existing environment, or may construct a set within a studio lot or sound-stage. Films may also use a combination of construction and pre-existing environments: the Roman scenes of Gladiator (Ridley Scott, 2000), for example, were shot in a Napoleonic barracks in Malta, to which additional structures were added.

In many instances the primary aim of the setting is to suggest authenticity, and the content and style of the set are dictated by what is appropriate to the story’s time and place. Period dramas are often marketed on the basis of the setting’s visual pleasure, and also on the efforts undertaken to provide accurate recreations of the past. Setting is central to bringing plausibility and clarity to the narrative diegesis: in Bladerunner (Ridley Scott, 1984) the film’s elaborate futuristic skylines with its postmodern architecture and flying ‘cars’, combine with rainy, chaotic street level market-places and squalor to suggest a fictional world which is at once startling and convincing in its scope and coherence.

Setting may also be used to imbue the image with graphic properties which comment on story and characters: in The Conformist’s Fascist ministry, for example, the patterns

Plate 3.2

of straight lines provided by windows, pillars and stair cases are strongly suggestive of prison bars. Setting, particularly in art films, may also create a sense of alienation from the story, or draw attention to the narrative’s artificiality: in Le Mépris bold, vibrant colours recur in ways that make the narrative and its environment feel staged even where real exterior locations are used. Clearly for films shot on colour film stock, colour shades and contrasts are important ingredients of the mise-en-scène; the film Pleasantville (Gary Ross, 1998) bases its narrative premise around the effects of colour, using CGI to turn a black and white world into a colour one as the knowledge and freedom of the central characters grow.

The German Expressionist movement of the 1920s took the metaphoric possibilities of setting to their furthest extreme, making sets representative of the psychological disturbances of characters. Thus in The Cabinet of Dr Caligari the exaggeratedly canted, angular, backdrops are conspicuously artificial in that they are painted sets (even ‘light’ and ‘shadow’ are painted on), and are ultimately revealed to exist only inside the mind of one of the characters. In other Expressionist films, such as Destiny (Fritz Lang, 1921), the setting, though not the product of a character’s imagination, nevertheless takes on non-naturalistic, often nightmarish appearances, which reflect characters’ experiences or inner torment. With the financial take-over of the German studio UFA in 1927 and the rise of Nazism in 1933, key Expressionist directors such as Lang and F. W. Murnau, along with many members of their creative teams, left Germany for Hollywood; this assisted in the spread of Expressionist tendencies in mainstream cinema – most obviously in Universal Studio’s horror cycle of the 1930s and in the film noir cycle of the 1940s and early 1950s.

**Props**

The term props, short for ‘property’, refers to movable objects within the set, specifically those which take on a significant function within the story. Thus props are more than simply ‘things’ which are used to dress the set: they may serve as iconographic demonstrations of genre (we associate stakes, crosses, coffins, silver bullets etc. with horror films, guns with westerns, and so on); they can also be used to drive the narrative forward, and, crucially, may also take on metaphoric significance.

Props can provide narrative drive in a number of ways. Most obviously they may contribute to character motivation: in Pirates of the Carribean: Dead Man’s Chest (Gore Verbinski, 2006), the story is structured around competing characters’ desires to possess four related artefacts – the magic compass which may point the way to the ‘dead man’s chest’, the key which opens the chest, the chest itself, and the still-beating heart which is the chest’s contents; the possession of these four props are what motivate all the leading characters (though each character has a different reason for this need), and each prop is in turn (often comically) abandoned as the importance of the next prop is revealed. Props may also contribute to the unfolding narrative by shaping the staging of action across time and space: in His Girl Friday, for example, the constantly ringing telephones of the newsroom contribute to our sense of the environment’s frenetic pace, but they also contribute the pace of the plot itself, continually interrupting one event with news of action taking place off-screen, and providing reasons for characters to enter and depart, often at high speed.

Props may also take on metaphoric significance, depending on how attention is drawn to them through cinematography or dialogue. In Rebecca (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) our unnamed heroine (Joan Fontaine) and her husband (Laurence Olivier) forget to take their wedding licence with them after they are married; it is dropped down to them from the registry office staircase, and shown floating downwards in a way that suggests a downward spiral in the couple’s future marriage. This example provides a clear illustration of why props are highly significant to film’s ability to signal metaphor and connotation, since one of the most common, and expressive, forms of cinematic metaphor is metonymy (see Metz, 1982). Metonymy refers to a figure of speech whereby
an object or detail associated with an idea is substituted for the idea itself (thus, in Rebecca, the marriage licence stands in for the entire conjugal relationship). In cinematic metonymy, therefore, props play a key role in suggesting a whole array of meanings beyond what is shown; they are a rich, and extremely economic, source of connotative expression.

Crucially, the prop as metaphor may also draw on metaphorical associations which exist outside the film itself: when in Pleasantville, a black-and-white Margaret (Marley Shelton) plucks a bright red apple from a tree and gives it to David (Tobey Maguire), the moment takes on significance because it references, and renders positive, the Biblical connotations of picking forbidden fruit. Props are more likely to imply metaphorical significance if they are shot in ways which draw attention to both the prop and the cinematic techniques used to shoot it:

in Pleasantville the shot of the apple stands out as a unique, and therefore symbolic, because once the apple is picked it reveals the moon through the branches behind it (the camera refocuses quickly so that we see first a blurred orb, then a clear, glowing full-moon.) Similarly props tend to take on symbolic meanings when they are repeated in the narrative and mise-en-scene: in The Draughtsman’s Contract (Peter Greenaway, 1982), for example, fruit is a recurring motif, and is piled high in opulent displays and frequently eaten by the characters. The visual properties of the fruit suggest multiple metaphoric possibilities (which we draw from both specific narrative contexts and wider cultural connotations), such as sexual pleasure, the luxuries of aristocratic life, and the urgent need for wealthy women to ‘bear fruit’ in the form of male heirs.

Costume
Costume and make-up have similar expressive and symbolic capabilities to the other graphic properties of mise-en-scene, but are also explicitly connected to characterisation. Costumes may be used to indicate to us information about the personality or status of the character. In His Girl Friday, for example, Hildy Johnson’s pin-striped suit and jaunty hat (which resembles the trilbies worn by the film’s male journalists) indicate
that she is better suited to the cut-throat environment of the *Washington Post* than to child-rearing in Albany, despite her own protestations to the contrary.

As with props, costumes may draw on existing cultural connotations: thus in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann, 1996) our hero and heroine first meet at a fancy dress ball at which Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio) is dressed as a knight and Juliet (Claire Danes) as an angel. Here the inclusion of a story-occasion involving dressing up is utilised to establish clear associations of goodness and innocence which stand out in an otherwise corrupt world. At the same time, the bold symbolism of the costumes also subtly suggests that the characters’ sudden, extreme infatuation with each other may be attributed in part to a teen-aged propensity to ‘play-act’ certain roles.

Costume can function to signal a change in a character’s status, as in *Trading Places* (John Landis, 1983) where Winthrop Winkle’s (Dan Ackroyd) privileged life is indicated by his elegant suit and tie, and his change in fortune is accompanied by comical, humiliating changes in clothing – culminating in a filthy, soaking-wet Santa outfit. Changes in costume may equally reflect alterations in a character’s psychology: in *The Madness of King George* (Nicholas Hytner, 1994), the king’s mental disintegration, as well as his medical torture, is emphasized by his ragged appearance in undergarments and straitjacket. In *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926), meanwhile, although the evil Robot Maria frequently wears the same costume as her virtuous human counterpart, their differences in morality are connoted by the heavier, darker eye make-up worn by the robot. Costume may also take on significance in its relationship to other elements of mise-en-scene: in German Expressionist cinema costume and setting, as well as lighting and performance are complementary, creating the impression of a single, coherent visual design in which people and environment merge together. Similarly in *The Draughtsman’s Contract* the characters’ elaborate wigs often seem to complement the displays of fruit in ways suggestive of ludicrous extravagance and vanity.

**Performance**

Performance is an extremely rich area of cinematic expression. As with narrative itself, many elements of cinematic performance have their origins in conventions imported from the theatre. Thus the vaudeville tradition informs the types of performance often found in musicals and comedies, where physical dexterity – in the form of dancing, acrobatics, slapstick or mime – may be required. The more high-brow theatrical tradi-
tions of repertory theatre inform many performances which seem more naturalistic (that is, closer to the way we feel people behave in ‘real’ life), particularly those where emphasis is placed on the actor’s voice – as in Philip Seymour Hoffman’s performance in Capote (Bennett Miller, 2005). In the 1950s Lee Strasberg’s ‘Actor’s Studio’ had an important influence on Hollywood cinema through its promotion of ‘method acting’, in which actors were encouraged to explore their own psychology and personal history as a means of producing performances. In practice ‘the method’ often produced highly mannered, ‘visible’ acting styles, such as Marlon Brando’s in A Streetcar Named Desire (Elia Kazan, 1951).

However, it is important to note that notions such as ‘naturalism’ and ‘visibility’ are relative terms, in that they operate in relation to existing conventions and audience expectations. Thus what may, to one generation of movie-goers, seem like a highly naturalistic performance, might, to their children, seem overtly stylized and exaggerated, because these judgements are based not so much on how people actually behave in life, but on what audiences are used to seeing on stage and screen. Having said this, it is clear that certain performance styles do seek to draw attention to their own artificiality. German Expressionism falls into this category, with actors – many of them trained by theatre director Max Reinhardt – adopting highly exaggerated gestures derived from theatrical melodrama (as when, in Metropolis, Maria clutches her hands over her heart to signify anguish).

Any analysis of performance involves breaking down what it is an actor does into constituent elements. This can be difficult, since we are accustomed to decoding performances in terms of the motivations and emotions of characters, rather than the techniques of the actor. Richard Dyer, however, has identified the following performance ‘signs’: ‘facial expression; voice; gestures (principally of hands and arms, but also of any limb, e.g. neck, leg); body posture (how someone is standing or sitting); body movement (movement of the whole body, including how someone stands up or sits down, how they walk, run, etc.).’ (Dyer 1979: 134) These categories allow us to make distinctions between how characters behave and what actors do. So, for example, in Rebecca when our heroine encounters the housekeeper, Mrs Danvers (Judith Anderson), on her first morning in her husband’s stately home, we see that she feels out of place – that she is lonely, inexperienced, and extremely nervous. The actress, Joan Fontaine, meanwhile conveys this through the following performance signs: she wraps her arms around her body and turns her head jerkily as she walks; she slumps into a chair, and jumps and recoils when she is interrupted; her hands shake when she answers the telephone and she stammers and swallows as she speaks; she gives short, twitching half-smiles and she licks and bites her lip. As this list suggests, actors’ performances and our decoding of them are shaped by our everyday shared understanding of human body language, which alerts us to the possibility that the act of chewing a lip, for example, may signify anxiety.

**Lighting**

Lighting is clearly crucial in that it shapes how we respond to all of mise-en-scene’s other properties, providing compositional emphasis through illumination and shadow. Lighting may come from sources that we see on screen (lamps, torches, candles etc. which are part of the setting or props), but more typically they come from off-screen sources. Conventionally in mainstream cinema lighting set-ups are designed to be consistent with the light sources that we see on-screen, so that we are not distracted from the action of the story by shafts of light which seem to come from nowhere (again, therefore, our attention is directed towards story rather than techniques). However, inconsistencies between on and off screen light sources are sometimes used to disturbing effect (for example in horror films). Colour also provides an important stylistic variant within lighting set-ups: in Wong Kar-wai’s Chungking Express (1994), for example, scenes are frequently illuminated by blue, yellow, and green tinges of light.
Classical Hollywood lighting traditionally involves either a two- or a three-point system, in which a key light is the primary light source, and normally corresponds to visible light sources on-screen. A fill-light, frequently placed just over 90 degrees from the key light, serves to soften the effect by cancelling out some of the shadows cast by the key light. In some cases a back light is also used; normally this is placed behind actors to highlight their shape and make them stand out against the setting. Thus lighting set-ups are usually dictated by the position of actors in relation to the camera; where more than one actor is in shot, one actor’s key light may serve as another’s fill, and vice versa; each new camera position, however, demands a rearrangement of the lighting. The precise nature and arrangement of the lights determine whether or not the overall lighting effect of an image is high-key or low-key.

Lighting is also important to characterization: backlighting, frontlighting, toplighting or underlighting may influence the light (in the metaphorical sense) in which we view characters. In Carl Dreyer’s La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc (1928), for example, toplighting shines down on the face of Joan of Arc (Renée Jeanne Falconetti), intensifying our impression of her holiness. By contrast, in The Draughtsman’s Contract, underlighting serves to exaggerate protagonists’ facial features, so that our sense of their debauchery is heightened. (Underlighting is also a staple technique in horror films, giving an otherworldly air to monstrous or psychotic villains).

 Crucially lighting also creates shadows, and these play an important part in the expressive properties of mise-en-scene. Setting and props may be transformed by shadows cast by, and onto, them: in the ministry scenes of The Conformist it is not only the structural elements of the setting which suggest prison bars, but also the long shadows cast onto the floor. Several genres, most noticeably German Expressionism and film noir, owe much of their stylistic properties to the effects of light and shadow, and the use of low-key lighting. Film noir is a cycle of thrillers and detective films of the 1940s and 1950s, adapted from hard-boiled fiction of the 1930s. The lighting in film noir is low-key, and evokes a dangerous world, in which characters (especially femmes fatales) are not what they seem. In Out of the Past (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), for example, the character of Kathy (Jane Greer) is frequently shrouded in shadows, and when she and Jeff (Robert Mitchum) first kiss, we scarcely see her face at all, which sets an ominous tone for their relationship. Later, when Jeff and his business partner fight, their movements throw a series of shadows over Kathy, so that we see her watching (and enjoying) the violence in a pool of erratically flickering light. This serves at once to illuminate her true character, whilst also implying her continued threat. The device of minimizing fill lighting, so that a character’s eyes remain in shadow, is frequently used to alert us to a character’s untrustworthiness – as in Hitchcock’s Sabotage (1936), where the saboteur’s hat casts a shadow across his face when we first see him. Film noir, in particular, has had a lasting impact on cinema as a whole in terms of lighting techniques, and lighting as a tool in shaping characterization and tone.

Cinematography

The precise parameters of what ‘cinematography’ refers to have been defined differently by different critics. It is used here to refer to all those elements of cinematic expression which are performed or controlled by the camera. These include framing and shot scale, camera angle and movement, and depth of field and focus. Clearly the presentation of all elements of mise-en-scene are shaped by the way they are treated and recorded using camera and film stock; thus, although it is important to be aware of the distinction between what the camera photographs and what it does, in the processes of film analysis these elements are often considered in terms of their relationship to one another.

The basic component of film is the shot, or take, which may constitute a static framing or a mobile one. In a mobile framing the image within a single shot may change radically as the camera moves. The frame itself is crucial to the presentation of the image, since all aspects of mise-en-scene are subject to their placement within the
The composition of an image may be balanced or unbalanced, depending on whether the right and left, and top and bottom of the frame offer matching, harmonious, or mismatched, uneven patterns. A shot may also appear ‘shallow’ or ‘deep’ depending on whether the mise-en-scene is framed in a way that suggests few or many depth cues. The Draughtsman’s Contract, which features an elaborately-landscaped, seventeenth-century garden, is an exercise in such aspects of framing: shots of the garden emphasize deep space, with lines of trees, shrubs, ornaments and pathways receding backwards, or else crossing the screen horizontally to suggest planes, or layers, to the space. We also see the garden shot through the grid that the draughtsman uses to compose his drawings, so that the frame itself is divided into sixteen rectangles. This helps us to recognize the compositional balance created by elements of the mise-en-scene, which are distributed in precise geometric patterns within the cinematic frame. The film provides a Modernist demonstration of the pictorial possibilities of cinematic space.

Shot scale is another crucial element of cinematography, and is measured according to the following categories: the close-up, the extreme close-up, the long shot, the extreme long shot, the medium long shot, and the medium shot. These framings are crucial in depicting characters and their interactions: the medium long shot is the scale frequently adopted in Hollywood films for two- or three-shots, whilst the close-up affords the opportunity for intimate scrutiny of characters, and has facilitated approaches to screen performance not possible on stage, since the smallest changes in expression (such as eye movements and flinches) may be witnessed by viewers. A predominance of certain shot-scales may serve to convey particular aspects of character or situation:

**depth cues**
These are provided by the arrangement of setting, lighting and props within the frame, which determines the degree to which the space depicted in the cinematic image appears to recede backwards, and take on three-dimensionality. Converging lines, size diminution, and the suggestion of different ‘planes’ in the fore-, middle-, and background of the shot all accentuate the sense that there is a lot of space between the camera and farthest visible object in the frame.

**shot scale**
This refers to the range of shots which suggest the apparent distance of an object from the camera; it is conventionally defined according to the framing of the human form.

**close-up**
A framing in which the object shown takes up most of the screen (as in a shot where a person’s face is shown from the neck up)

**extreme close-up**
A framing in which the object shown takes up virtually the whole screen (as in a shot of a body part, such as a leg, or an eye)

**long shot**
A framing in which the object shown takes up a small fraction of the height of the screen

**extreme long shot**
A framing in which the object shown (typically a human body shown from head to toe) fills around three-quarters of the screen

**medium long shot**
Also known as the ‘plan américain’ because of its frequency in Classical Hollywood, this is a framing in which the human body is shown from mid-calf or knees upwards

**medium shot**
A framing in which the human body is shown from the waist upwards. two-shot/ three-shot A framing containing two/ three people.
the accumulation of close-ups in *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* creates a proximity between viewers and Joan of Arc which heightens our sense of her suffering. In *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959), meanwhile, when Roger Thorwald (Cary Grant) is under attack from the crop-duster aeroplane, his vulnerability is stressed through a number of extreme long shots conveying his remote location; in particular, the opening shot of the scene is a high-angle shot, in which the vastness of the landscape is accentuated by the converging lines of the road, crops, fences and telegraph poles.

Camera angle is another key element of framing, and the crop-duster sequence in *North by Northwest* also contains a number of low-angle shots, in which we see the plane from below as it swoops down to attack, as well as straight-on angles as we watch Thorwald scanning the horizon or taking cover. Camera angle can also be instrumental in conveying character and establishing literal and figurative point of view: thus in *Oliver Twist* (David Lean, 1948) we frequently either look up at adults from Oliver’s eye-level, or we look down at Oliver from the perspective of adults; both angles enhance our sense of Oliver’s helplessness, disempowered position in a dangerous world. Canted framing is also important in conveying mood and point of view: thus in *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949) repeated canted framings suggest Holly Martin’s (Joseph Cotton) fear and confusion, as well as the structural disintegration of post-war Vienna, and sometimes also Martin’s literal view as he hides amidst the rubble.

The camera also has four basic types of mobility – the pan, the track, the tilt, and the crane shot. The latter, especially in conjunction with distant framing, is particularly useful for the narrative convention of the establishing shot. Camera movement can again be utilized to suggest character point of view, as in *North by Northwest*’s crop-duster sequence, when Thorwald hesitatingly approaches a man at the bus stop, and the camera produces his viewpoint by tracking in on the man. This cinematic code makes the moving camera a powerful tool for the horror genre: in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) the camera’s pans and tracks follow Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis) as she walks to school, creating the uneasy impression that someone is stalking her. Camera movement, since it results in a continuous change in the space occupying the frame, can make us powerfully aware of the area outside the frame, a property again exploited in horror films, where characters may seem continually under threat from things that we cannot see. A number of art films also use camera movement to draw our attention to cinematic space: *Jules et Jim* (François Truffaut, 1961), for example, employs whip-pans and fast tracks to jarring effect in the scene where the two friends visit a statue; both *Le Mèpris* and *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, meanwhile, stage conversations with the camera tracking slowly between speakers in ways that emphasize the distance (literally and emotionally) between characters, and the dimensions of the space that they occupy.

Depth of field is another key aspect of cinematography. This is the distance between the furthest and nearest point from the camera at which subject details will be recorded in sharp focus. Depth of field is determined by the aperture and focal length of the camera lens: in order to obtain a wide depth of field a shorter focal length lens is used, and/or a smaller aperture; in order to use a smaller aperture, either more light is required in the mise-en-scene, or a faster speed film-stock may be used (or a combination of the two). *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) was highly influential in its use of large depth of field (or ‘deep focus’), achieved by the use of fast film stock, short-focal-length lenses, and powerful lighting set-ups. The effect in Welles’s film was to create extremely rich images in which cavernous spaces are clearly defined in sharp focus and contrasting tones of light and dark. Another important function of the camera lens is its capacity to zoom. The abrupt change in framing brought about by the zoom tends to make its effect jarring (as in the end of *North by Northwest*’s crop-duster sequence where Thorwald is nearly hit by a truck, and his alarm, as well as the vehicle’s speed, is signified by a sudden zoom in on Grant).
Special Effects

Special effects is a broad term referring to image manipulations that change the appearance of other aspects of mise-en-scene: it includes superimposition, matte shots, and CGI. Whilst digital technology has seen radical advances in the possibilities of such manipulations, special effects are not in themselves new to cinema: at the turn of the twentieth century, for example, George Méliès used such techniques as hand-tinted film stock in his fantasy films. Nowadays most special effects are achieved by ‘laboratory’ work which takes place in post-production.

Amongst the effects which the advent of CGI has heralded, two important techniques are digital matting, and motion capture. Digital matting enables shots to be stitch together out of a series of other images, some of which may be photographed, some of which may be designed and animated using computer software. In Gladiator, aerial shots of Rome were created by matting computer-drawn buildings onto a helicopter shot of the production’s Malta location; the stone and brick textures of these ‘virtual’ structures were then matted onto the image using photographs of existing buildings.

Motion capture is a technique which combines live-action performances with computer-generated animation: in The Lord of the Rings: the Two Towers (Peter Jackson, 2002) and The Lord of the Rings: the Return of the King (Jackson, 2003) the character of Gollum was created by recording the performance of actor Andy Serkis whilst he wore a suit with nodes identifying key parts of the body. The movements of these nodes were scanned into a computer, and used to define the movement and posture of the wholly computer-generated Gollum. This enabled the expressiveness of the individual actor’s physical performance to be replicated by the virtual character. The case of Gollum is interesting, in that it suggests that advances in CGI utilize, rather than usurp, the craft that actors bring to films.

Because of such technology it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between effects achieved during shooting and those of post-production: in Gladiator,

• Plate 3.6
The crop-dusting sequence of North by Northwest (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959)
approaches to studying film texts

for example, there is a sweeping pan across a battlefield; however, the shot was achieved using three ‘locked off’ (stationary) cameras, whose images were scanned into a computer and joined together digitally. The panning motion was then performed during post-production in the computer rather than on location using a camera. This enables the film to show in one fluid, mobile shot, a battle featuring many more times the number of soldiers than there were extras employed on the production.

Editing
The actual process of editing involves the joining together of separate pieces of film. Each take consists of one or more exposed frames on a length of film stock, and it is the task of film editors to review all recorded footage, ‘cutting’ unwanted material, and joining the wanted strips of film in the desired order. Formally editing took place in the laboratory, the join being achieved with either a dry splice, using tape, or a wet splice, using liquid cement. Nowadays editing is undertaken digitally, using specialist hardware and software, such as those developed by Avid Technology, Inc. during the 1990s. Digital editing involves the importing of a film’s rushes onto hard disk, after which the material can be edited in a non-linear fashion, with each cut saved on an ‘edit decision list,’ so that no alteration is irreversible, and no material is destroyed in the process.

Unlike mise-en-scene, which inherited and developed its codes from other art forms, the practices of film editing are unique to cinema. Without editing the expressive and narrative capabilities of the moving image would not be anything like as rich as they are. The power of editing lies in its ability to create juxtapositions, which in turn may change the impact and meaning of each individual shot. Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s sought to explore the possibilities of such juxtapositions (in the movement known as Soviet Montage cinema), and in a now famous experiment filmmaker Lev Kuleshov cut together shots of actor Ivan Mosjoukine’s face with three other images – a bowl of soup, a child at play, and a body in a coffin. Kuleshov claimed that audiences ‘read’ the actor’s performance as being different in each case, their responses shaped by the shot with which the face was juxtaposed. Kuleshov probably overstated his case: the experiment undervalues the role of performance, the footage has not survived, and several attempts to recreate it have not produced the decisive results to which Kuleshov laid claim (although a reconstruction using shots of actor Bruno Ganz, posted on the University of Alabama website by the Department of Telecommunication and Film, is not unconvincing). Regardless of its precise veracity, the story remains suggestive of editing’s potential to shape and override the content of a single shot.

The juxtaposition between one shot and the next may be presented in a number of ways: a cut provides an immediate change from one image to the next, whilst a dissolve offers a more gradual transition, as does the fade. Early filmmakers made use of other types of transitions, such as the wipe (offering a similar changeover to ‘magic-lantern’ slide shows), and the iris-in and iris-out. These were intended as additional attractions to the phenomenon of the moving image (see Salt 1992: 53 and 84), and are nowadays most often used for comic effect, or as the type of self-conscious device found in Modernist narratives: Tony Richardson’s Tom Jones (1963), for example, uses its wipes and iris shots to add to the ironic playfulness of its tone. In narrative cinema different transitions have come to signify particular types of plot organization; thus fades in and out often signal breaks between scenes. Dissolves sometimes suggest story-ellipses: in Stand by Me (Rob Reiner, 1986), for example, the night the boys spend out in the forest is rendered using dissolves to show snippets of their aimless, comical camp-fire conversation. The scene is a variant of the montage sequence, in which segments of story are summarized through the editing together of images which ‘typify’, or symbolise, events: thus in Jules et Jim a montage of shots of the two men (and various women) in cafés, forests, and river boats sums up their early romantic relationships. Dissolves and fades are useful for rendering ellipses in that their slow transitions provide visual metaphors for missed out portions of story-time; however it should be noted that such techniques
do not automatically signal specific plot devices, the narrative function of editing being shaped by the content of the shots involved, and the context in which they are placed.

In that editing itself involves the cutting together of images filmed at different times and of different spaces, it is clearly instrumental to how films plot stories in time and across space. The development of cross-cutting, for example, pioneered by D. W. Griffith, enables films to imply that two different actions, dramatized alternately on screen, take place simultaneously in the story. Because editing imbues sequences and scenes with particular rhythms in cutting, it can also be highly influential in generating mood: the shower scene in Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), for instance, contains 78 separate shots (see Maltby 1995: 218), with aggressively rapid cutting that emulates the slashes of the knife; in this scene the editing forms a kind of visual assault on the viewer, chopping up the time and space of the film with a violence of its own. By contrast, Hitchcock’s Rope (1948) was shot entirely in 10-minute takes, that were edited together to disguise the joins so that the film appears to have no cuts at all. This, combined with very mobile framing, produces tension in that the camera seems to probe unremittingly the space of the story. Long takes may suggest tranquillity, however: the beginning of Pride and Prejudice (Joe Wright, 2005) features a one-and-a-half minute take which follows Elizabeth (Kiera Knightley) as she walks home, tracks through the house, out of a window, then back into the house. The effect is a serene opening, allowing viewers time to observe the dilapidated charm of the Bennetts’ home, and the pastoral aimlessness of the girls’ lives.

Editing also creates juxtapositions between all the aspects of the mise-en-scene, and may be used to suggest matches, or contrasts, between setting, costumes, props, and performances. Soviet montage director Sergei Eisenstein utilized montage’s potential for spatial juxtaposition to maximum metaphoric effect in his use of ‘non-diegetic inserts’ – that is shots which do not belong to the narrative context, but serve to commentate on (or symbolize) narrative content: Oktober (1927), for example, features cuts between Kerenksy and images of Napoleon and of a peacock, which imply the tyranny and vanity of the leader of the Provisional Government. Eisenstein wrote extensively on editing, and his films abound with striking montage innovations, from jump-cuts, fast, rhythmic editing (most famously in the Odessa steps sequence of Battleship Potemkin (1925), impact editing, and over-lapping editing. His films are powerful demonstrations of the potential of editing as a tool of expression and persuasion.

Continuity Editing

The conventions which govern editing in Classical Hollywood cinema, and which have come to dominate much filmmaking outside Hollywood, are known as ‘continuity editing’. Continuity editing developed early in cinema’s history, and most of its key features were in place by around 1919. The purpose of continuity editing is to maintain the viewer’s understanding of, and engagement with, the story. As with Hollywood’s treatment of plot, the guiding principle is transparency – that is, the rendering of techniques unobtrusively so that audiences retain their focus on what is happening, and not on how things are shown.

This means that shots are generally juxtaposed in ways that minimize the disruption inherent in editing. Cuts are designed to avoid confusing ellipses, or disorientating changes in screen space. The convention of the establishing shot assists this in, making clear the lay-out and parameters of a scene; the closer shots which follow, can then be understood as framings within this larger space. Another frequently employed technique is the 180° rule, which ensures spatial consistency across successive shots, preventing aspects of mise-en-scene which appear on one side of the frame in one shot from appearing on the other side of the frame (as if in mirror image) in the next. The 30° rule operates in a similar way, in that it ensures sufficient change in framing from one shot to the next so that jump-cuts are avoided. Also central to achieving smooth, coherent spatial juxtapositions are techniques which ‘match’ successive shots – such as the eyeline match, the match on action. These map out for us the spatial position of one

crosscutting
Editing that alternates shots occurring in different story-locations to imply that the events shown are occurring simultaneously.

impact editing
Editing that produces violent contrast between images, most often by switching between close and long shot scales.

over-lapping editing
Editing where shots repeat part or all of the action shown in the previous shot.

180° rule
An editing technique which dictates that the camera should remain on one side of an imaginary line drawn through a scene

30° rule
An editing technique which dictates that the camera should be stationed at an angle of at least 30° from its location in the previous shot.

eyeline match
A cut in which one shot shows a person looking at something off-screen, and the other shot is thereby posited as the object of that person’s gaze. More usually the shot showing the gazing person come first, although cuts which show the gazer second are by no means uncommon.

match on action
A cut which joins two spaces together by virtue of the fact that an action shown in the first shot is then completed in the second.
framing in relation to the next, using the story itself – its characters and actions – to link shots together.

As is implied by eyeline matching, editing is central to the cinematic construction of characters’ point of view (meaning, literally, what they see, as opposed the metaphorical connotations implicit in the term ‘focalization’.) Conversely the phenomenon of on-screen characters who look at things is also extremely valuable in conveying intelligible links between shots. This can be seen in another recurring technique of continuity editing, namely shot/reverse shot constructions. These are used most frequently for the staging of conversations between two characters, in which the camera looks at each character in turn over the shoulder of the other character. The technique offers us a clear understanding of where each speaker stands and what each sees, whilst also affording intimacy in the staging of character interactions.

The opening of His Girl Friday provides a demonstration of the operations of continuity editing: the film’s establishing shot is a track through the newsroom of the Washington Post, which makes clear both the bustle of this environment and the relative locations of the editor’s office (on the right of the set), the journalist and typist pool (in the middle) and the elevators (on the left). Following a dissolve to bring us to a closer shot, Hildy and Ralph exit an elevator; their subsequent exchange is depicted in an over-the-shoulder, shot/reverse shot sequence, which contrasts the previous mobile framings, and seems to place the two in a world of their own amidst the newsroom commotion. A series of tracking shots then follows Hildy, and a match on action is used as she leaves the pool and enters Walter’s office. Hildy at first stands in the doorway looking slightly to the right of camera, and there follows a shot of Walter and Louie, whom we identify as the object her gaze. Hildy announces herself, and a cut introduces a medium long shot showing all three characters, which in turn establishes the lay-out of this new room.

Following initial greetings and an interruption by Duffy, a medium long two-shot introduces a prolonged exchange between Hildy and Walter, during which Hildy crosses to sit behind Walter: she is now to the right of the frame with Walter on the left. Walter responds by swivelling his chair, so that he sits facing her with his back to the camera; there follows a cut so that Walter is now facing us. Although this cut involves a transition from Walter with his back to us to Walter facing us, the camera has moved less than 180°, as is made clear by the fact that the first shot has Walter slightly to the left of camera, whilst the second has him slightly to the right; there follows a point-of-view shot of Hildy, in which the spatial relations of the earlier medium-long shot are retained, with Hildy still on the right, and Walter’s shoulder on the left.

This scene adheres to continuity editing and shows how variety is available within continuity rules. We might also note that Hildy’s move to sit behind Walter serves to alter the position of the imaginary line governing the 180° rule: whilst the scene contains four people, three of whom enter or leave, the line runs from the door to the window; once the scene involves only Walter and Hildy, Hildy effectively realigns the scene along an axis which runs straight through the characters, thus expanding the number of camera positions possible overall. This also subtly uses editing to signal a shift in the character interaction, as Walter and Hildy embark on a bantering, bickering reminiscence. Throughout the scene the editing is unobtrusive, serving and enhancing our appreciation of story in ways that, normally, we scarcely notice.

Whilst continuity editing remains central to film ‘language’ in mainstream and art cinema, it is also the case that audiences’ increasing film literacy has enabled such rules to be broken with greater frequency. The 180° rule, in particular, is frequently discarded in action sequences, for example, where camera mobility and variety in framing complement dynamic mise-en-scene. Art films also frequently disrupt editing continuity (as in Godard’s use of jump-cuts) as part of their self-conscious exploration of film technique.
Sound

Sound was introduced to cinema in 1927, and is now an extremely rich element of cinematic expression. Its properties and possibilities extend beyond the scope of this chapter, but some key considerations are noted here.

Although sound played an important role in cinema exhibition before 1927, in the form of live musical accompaniment and sometimes commentating ‘showmen’, the advent of the recorded soundtrack had a profound effect on the stories films told and the possibilities of cinematic narration. Synchronized sound, of course, brought speech to cinema, and this allied cinema more closely with theatre than previously. New cinematic genres arose, such as the musical and the screwball comedy, which had their roots in theatrical traditions, and which offered sound as a key attraction. Whilst recorded speech is clearly crucial to screenplays, it is not the only element of sound to have significantly shaped cinema’s development, and we might divide film sound into three basic areas – speech, music and sound-effects.

Sound in film narrative may be identified as either diegetic or nondiegetic – in other words it either belongs within the story ‘universe’, or we attribute it as originating from outside the fictional world inhabited by characters. The film’s musical score is the most common form of nondiegetic sound, although it is not the only one: we might distinguish, for example, between diegetic voice-overs spoken by characters – as in The Big Sleep or Amy Heckerling’s Clueless (1995) – and nondiegetic voice-overs, which originate from seemingly omniscient ‘narrators’ – as in Jules et Jim. Films may blur the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound, sometimes for comic effect, and sometimes as an element of aesthetic innovation. Early sound films frequently introduced nondiegetic score unobtrusively by including melodies diegetically first. This occurs in Jean Vigo’s L’Atalante (1934), where the melody played by Père Jules (Michel Simon) suddenly becomes a nondiegetic accompaniment to two singing voices as we see the honeymoon couple embrace. Diegetic and nondiegetic sound should not be confused with on- and off-screen sound: a sound may originate off screen (as when a person not in shot speaks or cries out) but still belong within the diegesis. Off-screen sound has the effect of changing our relationship with the image, drawing our attention specifically to the space outside the frame (making it another staple technique of horror films).

The presence of sound alongside the image creates a whole series of possible relationships between sound and editing, and sound and mise-en-scene: the rhythms of noise and music, for example, may seem to match the rhythm of editing, or of movements within the mise-en-scene, or they may seem at odds with them; sound-effects may appear faithful to the sources we assume produced them, or may seem incongruous with them. In The 39 Steps sound and editing are used to create a striking scenic transition, in which there is a cut from a woman who is about to scream to a train exiting a tunnel; the train’s screeching whistle is substituted for the woman’s cry, making the human reaction to the story’s murder scenario seem piercingly acute. Sound, in the form of sound-bridges, may also be used as means of smoothing over divisions between scenes.

The distinction between sound which seems faithful to image and sound which does not, may be extremely subtle: in The English Patient (Anthony Minghella, 1996) the soundtrack of the desert scenes includes a whole series of effects – clicks suggesting insects, rubbing noises representing grains of sand – many of which would not, realistically, be picked up by the human ear. However, these noises evoke the desert terrain, and paradoxically, give us an eerie sense of ‘a space that is silent’ (Ondaatje 2002: 118). Thus the sounds, though not precisely true to what we might hear in this location, do not strike us as out of place, since they enhance both the mood of the setting and the metaphors of emotional isolation within the narrative. As with performance, therefore, our assessment of the verisimilitude of noise is as much shaped by cinematic conventions as it is by our experiences of real life. In terms of sound volume in relation to image, we conventionally expect some degree of ‘sound perspective’, so that loud sounds
represent actions depicted in close-up or near depth planes, whilst quieter sounds represent actions depicted in longer shot scales or distant depth planes. However, films may subvert this rule, as Godard does in *Weekend* (1967), where the characters’ indoor conversations are sometimes drowned out by the outdoor noise.

The selection, generation, recording, distortion, amplification and mixing of film sounds creates an array of possibilities for films’ audio tracks which means that we may consider them as ‘soundscapes’ – as a sophisticated orchestration of multi-faceted techniques comparable to the production the film’s visual elements. Technological advances that originated in the music industry have led to the advent of soundtracks where speech, music, and noise may overlap and fluctuate in highly complex ways: in *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Coppola, 1979), for which the chief sound editor was, as with *The English Patient*, Walter Murch, sounds of war, jungle, speech, diegetic and nondiegetic music are mixed in a disorientating, multi-layered fashion which evokes the (drug-enhanced) terrors of the soldiers in Vietnam; the degree of multiplicity within the audio track is aptly demonstrated by the trouble Murch and his team went to in producing the sound of crickets: one cricket was recorded close to a microphone, the sound was then electronically multiplied and all the resulting noises were then all overlaid on top of each other; this mix was then itself mixed with other elements of the soundtrack. The effect is to produce a cricket noise which is not so much a life-like version of how many crickets sound as it is a nightmare rendition of a jungle cacophony.

Sound in cinema fluctuates not only in volume and rhythm, but also in pitch and timbre. These properties are particularly important to music, although they also characterize vocal performance and sound effects: in *His Girl Friday*, for example, Cary Grant’s voice frequently veers to a high pitch, suggestive of urgency (or even megalomania), whilst in *L’Atalante* Père Jules entertains Juliette (Dita Parlo) with series of toys that produce noises and notes of contrasting timbre (ranging from tinkling glockenspiel to a hollow rattle.) A film’s nondiegetic music conventionally matches timbre, pitch, volume and rhythm to the action depicted on screen – so, for example, Alfred Newman’s score for *Wuthering Heights* (William Wyler, 1939) has soaring strings accompanying its love scenes. Thus music guides and enhances our responses to the story. In *Jaws*, for example, John Williams’s rhythmically-monotonous score, with its modulation between only two notes, alerts us in advance of imminent danger, heightening our fear of the seemingly relentless predator.

In his economy of melody Williams was heavily influenced by film composer Bernard Herrmann, whose work with Alfred Hitchcock has been particularly influential in shaping and advancing approaches to film music. In Herrmann’s score for *Psycho*, for example, three notes recur and form the basis of the violent chords of both the opening theme and the shower scene’s screeching violins. Timbre, as well as pitch, play a role in the score’s insistent menace, in that Herrmann omitted both the woodwind and brass sections from his orchestra, limiting the tonal ‘colour’ of the music only to strings. Herrmann, throughout his career, made innovative, unexpected choices in his allocation of musical instruments to particular visual motifs, as, for example, in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), where the ‘vertigo effect’, achieved by the camera’s simultaneous track in and zoom out, is accompanied in Herrmann’s score by harps. Herrmann demonstrated that considerable expressive possibilities are opened up through the selection or composition of seemingly incongruous nondiegetic music: thus *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1969) transforms our impression of space flight into something balletic and peaceful through its appropriation of Johann Strauss’s *The Blue Danube*. 

**pitch**
The height or depth of a musical sound, as it is determined by its frequency relative to other notes.

**timbre**
The tonal quality of a musical sound; timbre is what makes a saxophone sound different from a clarinet, for example.
CASE STUDY ONE: CLASSICAL CONVENTIONS IN GLADIATOR

At first sight Ridley Scott's Gladiator (scripted by David Franzoni, John Logan and William Nicholson) may not seem to conform to mainstream conventions, in that our hero, Maximus (Russell Crowe), dies at the end. However the film constitutes a persuasive demonstration of the dominance of classical story-telling, in that its norms persist even in this tale: all the hero’s goals are met, and the film is so ingeniously plotted that death itself is presented to us as a ‘happy ending.’

The film opens with intertitles that set the scene as 180 AD during the reign of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius; the plot begins prior to the last battle between the Roman Empire and Germania, however the battle is preceded by a fleeting moment of tranquillity achieved by shots of golden cornfields, which are then posited as Maximus’s imaginings. With the battle won, the significance of this becomes clear: Maximus, the great Roman general, wants to go home. This is the character’s primary, overarching goal, but almost as soon as it is established a second goal is presented, which must delay the achievement of the first: Marcus Aurelius charges Maximus to ‘give Rome back to the people’, a task that he will undertake as ‘Protector of Rome’ after the emperor’s death. Marcus Aurelius gives Maximus until sunset to decide his course of action, but before then the Emperor is murdered by his son, Commodus. Commodus orders Maximus to be murdered also, but Maximus escapes and returns to his farm in Spain. At this point the narrative seems to thwart, permanently and horrifically, Maximus’s goal of returning home, because his wife and son have been crucified, and his farm ransacked and burnt. It seems therefore that this goal, motivated by love, will be replaced by one motivated by hate, namely revenge against Commodus. However, even this goal is thwarted, because at the end of the first act, an injured, distraught Maximus is captured by slave-traders.

In this opening the motivations for characters’ actions are made clear: Marcus Aurelius wants to rid Rome of corruption and leave behind a noble legacy; he chooses Maximus because he loves him as a son and because he is untainted by politics; Maximus, because he is uncorrupted, wants only to return to his family and a quiet, county life; however, he is also motivated by his sense of duty towards Rome and by his love for the emperor. Commodus’s motives, meanwhile, are at once psychologically complex and childishly simple: he is ambitious, but this in itself is rooted in a desire to be loved; we see his desperate longing for his father’s approval, and his hatred of Maximus is a product of both political rivalry and ‘fraternal’ jealousy; Commodus wants to be emperor because he seeks to substitute the love of the people for the father’s love he cannot win, and because his love for his father makes him want to live up to him.

At the start of the next act Maximus is sold to Proximo, a gladiator ‘impresario,’ and so becomes a gladiator. All the goals of the previous act are therefore left hanging, and are replaced by new ones necessitated by his changed circumstances: he needs to stay alive in the arena, and he also seeks to avoid the humiliation of becoming an ‘entertainer,’ of turning the fighting skills which once brought glory to Rome into a public spectacle. Maximus’s reluctance to win over the crowd posits his character as the exact opposite of Commodus’s, and the plot now switches between Maximus in Zucchabar and Commodus in Rome, who conceives the idea of 150 days of gladiatorial games as a means of winning the people’s love. An ironic cause-and-effect pattern is therefore set in motion, in that Commodus’s desire to be loved leads directly to the arrival in Rome of Maximus, Commodus’s former rival for his father’s affection. Maximus learns that Proximo used to be a gladiator, and that he was granted his freedom by Marcus Aurelius; this conversation changes Maximus’s goals, because he realises that by winning over the crowd as a gladiator ‘entertainer’ he may meet Commodus again. Thus Maximus and Commodus are again rivals (this time for the love of the Roman people) and Maximus’s goal of killing Commodus is made clear.
We are now presented with the first spectacular fight at the Colosseum, and the plot turns this into a high-point in character-interaction too, because Commodus realises that Maximus is alive. Maximus postpones killing Commodus because Lucius, the son of Commodus’s sister, Lucilla, is present, but the scene marks a turning point in the narrative, in that Maximus’s popularity blatantly renews his status as Commodus’s rival: the two men now pursue parallel goals of murdering each other. Lucilla visits Maximus, and a third source of rivalry is now spelled out, in that Lucilla, for whom Commodus has an incestuous love, was once romantically involved with Maximus. Motivated by grief for her father, attachment to Maximus, duty towards Rome and, above all, fear for her son’s life, she urges Maximus to meet with Senator Gracchus and plot the overthrow of Commodus. Maximus refuses, saying that he is a slave, and not the man he used to be. This establishes a path for Maximus which he himself does not acknowledge – namely, to rise to be again the man he once was. From now on the narrative charts the recovery of his former goals, a process initiated by Maximus’s reunion with Cicero, a friend whose loyalty convinces Maximus that his former regiment will fight for him. Cicero’s absence from, and return to, the story is explained by the fact that Maximus was previously assumed dead; his return reminds us of Maximus’s former, foremost goal – to return home – in that he restores to Maximus keepsakes of his wife and son that he used to carry. Maximus now agrees to Lucilla’s scheme, but Gracchus is subsequently arrested. Commodus threatens Lucius, thereby forcing Lucilla to confess their plans, but a cause is now picked up from much earlier in the plot, in that Proximo frees Maximus, motivated by loyalty towards Marcus Aurelius, the man who freed Proximo himself. Maximus is captured, however, owing to Lucilla’s confession, and the scene is now set for a final showdown between Maximus and Commodus; as Commodus says: ‘People want to know how the story ends.’

Although Maximus still wishes to kill Commodus, his motives have been transformed in the second half of the film: he is no longer driven primarily by revenge, but is now fulfilling the goal of ‘giving Rome back to the people’ set for him by Marcus Aurelius. He retains our sympathy through his restoration to a man fulfilling a duty out of love, as opposed to a man bent on murder as vengeance. Commodus, of course, still wishes to kill Maximus, but his difficulty is that if he kills such a popular man, he will fail in his other goal of securing the people’s love. This dilemma motivates Commodus to fight Maximus himself in the Colosseum, since he is seeking precisely the adulation accorded to gladiator ‘entertainers;’ the plot therefore utilizes Commodus’s weaknesses as a means of accommodating its implausible dramatic climax. Commodus’s willingness to battle a champion in public is further explained when he stabs Maximus in secret before the fight. In the Colosseum a dying Maximus kills Commodus with the concealed dagger Commodus used to stab him, and asks Lucilla to free Gracchus and honour her father’s wish of re-establishing a republic. The film’s recurring motif of the golden cornfields which are Maximus’s farm accompany his death, and kneeling by Maximus’s body, Lucilla whispers ‘You are home.’

Thus the film offers Maximus’s death as his longed-for reunion with his lost wife and son. The plot signals this trajectory right at the start, when Maximus, briefing his soldiers before battle, tells them ‘If you should find yourself alone, riding in green fields with the sun on your face, do not be troubled, for you are in Elysium and you are already dead.’ The story’s end is also anticipated through the scenes Maximus shares with fellow gladiator, Juba, with whom he discusses the wife and son who are ‘waiting for him.’ The evocation of Maximus’s family as at once dead but waiting, is both moving and convenient, since it offers a romantic story of marital fidelity which does not conflict with the more intriguing unfulfilled romance with Lucilla. The plot’s ingenuity rests in the way it manages to pull off the story it promises at first but then seems irretrievably to subvert: Maximus does exactly what Marcus Aurelius says he will do – he performs one last task for his emperor and Rome and then he goes home.

The above analysis demonstrates the film’s goal-oriented, cause-and-effect plot-
structure. It seeks, not to tell the story, but to show the logic by which the story is told. However, we might also use it to draw out other aspects of the film, namely its meaning, or ‘themes.’ These operate on several levels: most simply, the narrative promotes love over hatred in its depiction of a man who rises above revenge to do his duty, and is rewarded with eternal happiness; the narrative also promotes democracy over tyranny, and its repetition of Marcus Aurelius’s lament that ‘there once was a dream that was Rome,’ aligns Maximus with an American ‘dream’, and Rome’s republican future with contemporary Western conceptions of ‘democratic freedom.’ Moreover, the film demonstrates a preoccupation with ‘entertainment’, and since the gladiators fight for their lives for spectacle and profit they provide an obvious metaphor for both contemporary sports industries and the film industry, where ‘players’ are ‘owned’ by huge corporations. We might conclude that the film critiques such dehumanization, but this message is subtly undermined by the way that the gladiatorial arena increasingly becomes the political arena: Commodus and Maximus fight there over the future of Rome, and the gladiators who formerly fought for sport are transformed into Maximus’s ‘real’, loyal army. Thus the film offers us a celebration of Commodus’s games and of itself, where ‘truth’ and true heroism are represented by ‘the entertainers.’

CASE STUDY TWO: ART AND ARTIFICE IN WILD STRAWBERRIES/ SMULTRONSTÅLLET (INGMAR BERGMAN, 1957)

Ingmar Bergman wrote, as well as directed, Wild Strawberries, and its cast includes recurring Bergman collaborators – Ingrid Thulin, Max von Sydow, Gunnar Bjornstand and Bibi Andersson (who was Bergman’s mistress) – as well as Lena Bergman, Ingmar’s daughter. The film stars Victor Sjöström, a film director of the silent era, whose status as a towering figure in Swedish cinema has been usurped only by the status of Bergman himself. Thus Wild Strawberries presents itself as art cinema through Bergman’s insistent creative presence and through the film’s self-conscious cinematic referencing.

A pre-credits scene introduces Isak Borg (Sjöström), whose voice-over narration establishes him as a cynical, 78-year-old widower who spurns human company. However, he confesses to loneliness and is surrounded by photographs of his family (his son, his mother, his dead wife). We learn that tomorrow he is going to Lund to receive a ‘jubilee doctorate’, an honorary accolade awarded fifty years after a doctorate. The narrative then depicts Isak’s one-day journey, on which his daughter-in-law, Marianne, accompanies him. Journey-motifs are common in fiction (as in the road movie), and there is generally a correlation between physical travel and metaphorical, spiritual odyssey. Bergman’s film, however, is ambivalent in its employment of this symbolism, leaving us uncertain how much Isak learns or changes at the story’s end.

After the credits the voice-over recurs, but it has now changed tense: whilst Isak previously spoke of the journey as taking place ‘tomorrow,’ he now looks back at a dream he remembers having the night before departure. A technique we associate with reliable exposition, therefore, is utilised here to create uncertainty about ‘when’ the story is being narrated to us, and whether or not what is to come constitutes a memory. There follows an enactment of Isak’s dream, whose nightmarish, random images draw heavily on the avant-garde movement of Surrealism: Isak wonders down a lonely street, sees a clock with no hands, a ‘faceless’ man who disintegrates into blood, and a hearse which spills its coffin onto the road; Isak sees himself in the coffin, and this alter-ego tries to pull him into the coffin as well. The dream sequence makes clear that the subject of the film is Isak’s troubled psyche, and the symbolism suggests either that he is a member of the ‘living dead’ (a fear he will later voice) or that he is literally about to die. Isak assumes the latter possibility and, with uncharacteristic superstition, decides to drive rather than fly to Lund.
The first stop he makes (at his childhood summerhouse) provides further narrative confusion: Isak’s voice-over tells us that he began to reminisce, however the reliability of the flashback that follows is undermined by the fact that during the family gathering depicted one of Isak’s sisters remarks that Isak is out fishing. Isak is therefore ‘remembering’ a scene that he never witnessed, and which possibly never took place. The flashback features Isak’s childhood love, Sara (Bibi Andersson), who picks strawberries, flirts with his brother, and talks about Isak’s ‘sensitivity’; this suggests that the youthful Isak was very different to the cold Isak of today, although since the memory is unreliable we cannot be sure if this is merely a representation of himself that the old Isak wishes to imagine. The flashback also breaks cinematic conventions in that the older Isak is physically present within it, watching, and walking amongst, his family of the past.

Isak and Marianne than pick up three young hitch-hikers, one of whom is also called Sara (and is also played by Andersson). This spilling over of the past into the present remains unexplained, although one possibility is that Isak’s memories of his lost love are clouding his impression of a pretty girl he meets in old age. This further renders the story’s non-flashback scenes unreliable. During the course of the day the five travellers have several encounters – with a fighting couple, a garage attendant, and Isak’s mother – and Isak has another dream. The enactment of this dream lasts a full 17 minutes of the film’s running time, and its mise-en-scene evokes the artifice and artificiality of German Expressionism through its low-key lighting, cast shadows, and grotesquely gnarled trees. In the nightmare Isak is tormented by the Sara of his youth, fails an examination,
and is made to watch his wife having sex with another man (or possibly being raped); we are told that this is a memory, but since this information comes from a character within a dream it is again dubious. When Isak awakes, Marianne tells him that she is pregnant and that Ewald, his son, does not want to be a father. In contrast to Isak's earlier behaviour towards Marianne, he now appears concerned and caring.

At the end of the film we are given some indications that Isak has changed as a result of his mental journey: he embraces Marianne, tells her he is fond of her, and possibly attempts to cancel the financial debt Ewald owes him. However, Ewald simply repeats 'You'll get your money,' and Isak does not pursue the matter; this leaves the reconciliation between father and son half-finished, and suggests that relationships cannot be healed as readily as narratives often have us believe – particularly since Ewald is himself the product of Isak's uncompromising approach to human intimacy. The narrative of *Wild Strawberries* makes reference to conventional, cause-and-effect structures through the motif of the linear journey, but fractures this with flashbacks and dreams whose status and reliability are unclear. Furthermore, the entire plot may, or may not, be circular in construction since the past-tense of most of the voice-over suggests a narrative 'frame' outside the story from which Isak is remembering. Thus the whole narrative may constitute a memory of past memories of events which never took place. The voice-over is also troubling in that it is sometimes downplays the importance of flashbacks ('It is possible I became a bit sentimental,') and seems unable to comprehend the dreams; thus it does not seem to belong to a future Isak who has really achieved self-knowledge. We are left with the impression that Isak's learning process has been only partial and semi-honest.

The film finishes with a flashback that the voice-over introduces as memory, though its veracity is again doubtful: the old Isaac is seen amongst the family of his childhood, and Sarah takes him by the hand and leads him to where he can see his parents, who sit tranquilly on a distant shore. The combination of extreme long shot, idyllic setting, and picturesque composition suggests that this not an image of his parents as they were, but instead symbolises Isak's unattainable ideal of them. The narrative finishes by rewarding Isak and us with this moment of bliss, whilst also undermining our capacity to believe in it. Bergman's film, therefore, suggests the impossibility of reconciliations, full self-knowledge, and dying at peace. It is characteristic of art cinema in its exploration of character subjectivity, its irresolvable plot-links, and its opposition to mainstream narratives, where fathers and sons forgive each other, and lives and stories end in unproblematic happiness.

**CASE STUDY THREE: POSTMODERNISM AND PLAYING GAMES IN *RUN LOLA RUN/LOLA RENNT*** (**TOM TYKWER, 1998**)

Director and script-writer Tom Tykwer has described *Run Lola Run* as 'an experimental film for a mass audience' (Halle and McCarthy 2003: 401), which suggests that it seeks to break down some of the conventional distinctions between mainstream and art cinema. Its two, opening-intertitle quotations – one by T.S Eliot, the other by the former coach of former West Germany's national football team, Sepp Herberger – reinforces this blurring of boundaries. In its mixing together of styles and forms from high and popular culture, and its frequent use of pastiche, *Run Lola Run* constitutes a 'postmodern' narrative.

The film tells three stories, or rather it provides three alternative sets of outcomes all proceeding from the same opening. The narrative premise makes use of a plot technique known as a ‘time lock’ (Hunter 1994: 51), or story-deadline; this is a common means of generating suspense in mainstream film narratives which makes use of the audience’s experience of cinematic running time. In *Run Lola Run*, Lola’s (Fanka Potente) boyfriend
Manni has lost DM 100,000 (the proceeds of a stolen car deal with which a gangster, Ronnie, has entrusted him) on the Berlin underground and Lola has 20 minutes to replace the money and deliver it to him. Over the phone, Manni tells her that Ronnie will kill him, and that if she does not deliver the money by noon he will commit robbery to obtain it. The film plays out the story three times. Lola always chooses the same solution (to ask her bank-manager father) but for each version a different cause-and-effect chain is set in motion and so the outcome changes: first she dies, then Manni dies, then she legally obtains the money whilst Manni recovers the lost funds. The final version is the happy ending on which the film finishes.

The film does not explain the links between the stories, and its ambiguity, coupled with the themes of fate and all-conquering love which are suggested, seem to align it with art cinema. However, the narrative also offers us the possibility of another explanation which draws on contemporary popular culture, namely that this constitutes a live-action enactment of a computer game: thus Lola keeps playing until she overcomes all obstacles and ‘wins.’ Several aspects of the film point to this: when Lola runs down the stairs the camera zooms in on a television set on which an animated Lola is seen; Lola also sometimes seems to learn from one story to the next as if through trial and error (as when she releases the safety catch of the gun in the second story, or when the cartoon Lola takes a huge leap over the dog in the third). The narrative is also free of any ethical consideration of Manni’s actions, as if the story exists in the ‘virtual moral vacuum’ of, for example, Grand Theft Auto: as the film’s opening football metaphors attest, this is all a game.

Run Lola Run is one of a number of recent films, such as eXistenZ (David Cronenberg, 1999) and The Matrix Trilogy (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999, 2003, 2003), which draw on the phenomenon of computer games to construct narratives where ‘reality’ and illusion are blurred, or where ‘the real’ emerges as a type of fictional construct. These films draw on the work of postmodern theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, for whom the pervasiveness of contemporary mass media and popular culture has led to an obliteration of ‘reality’ and history, in favour of an endless production and recycling of images (of ‘reality’ and history). Tykwer’s film invites us to invest in the urgency of Lola’s story, without identifying which outcome is ‘real,’ or if the stories themselves are a story (or game) within a story. This suggests the absence of ‘truth’ which is again central to postmodern thought, whereby there are no overarching ‘grand narratives’ (such as religion, patriarchy, Marxism, science etc.) only different ways of telling stories. Thus the narrative’s imitation of a computer game becomes a metaphor which expounds postmodern philosophy.

Run Lola Run, with its frenetic plot, dizzying camera mobility, split-second montages, split-screen framings, and pounding soundtrack, also draws on the style of the music video, a postmodern pastiche which simultaneously functions as a Modernist critique of the benevolent, transparent codes of classical cinema. Finally the film offers us a self-reflexive exploration of mainstream narratives. The operations of cause and effect are demonstrated, so that, for example, when Lola runs more slowly in the second story than she does in the first, because she trips down the stairs, her slightly later arrival at each subsequent encounter shapes the different events shown. Similarly the film draws our attention to classical narrative’s focus on central characters, through its ‘snapshot’ montages of what happens next to three people Lola encounters (these stories too are different each time, suggesting an endless web of possible outcomes). However, the film eschews ‘grand narratives’ and single answers, and this extends to its self-reflexivity, since it does not always demonstrate cause-and-effect logic: in the third story Lola jumps over the dog, does not hesitate on the stairs, and so we assume, is slightly ahead of ‘schedule’ this time; nevertheless, she appears to arrive in front of Herr Meyer’s car slightly later than she does in the first story, and what follows is shaped by this unexplained variation. Thus, as with Modernist narratives, a ‘single’ reading of this narrative of multiplicity is not possible. The film incorporates popular culture into a
European tradition of innovation and ambiguity. It blurs of the categories of mainstream and art cinema and at the same time affirms their cultural distinction and importance, since we can only appreciate what Run Lola Run does through our familiarity with film’s form and its various narrative traditions.
All film viewing constitutes appropriate study activity for the subject of this chapter. In order to understand further the differences and relationships between mainstream and art cinema, careful viewing of the examples cited in the chapter – such as *His Girl Friday*, *Bambi*, *Le Mépris*, *The Conformist* etc. – is recommended. You will also find the films cited in the sections on film form useful. Some further examples – chosen for the conspicuous and/or unusual use they make of particular techniques – are listed below.

### Setting, Props, Costume and Make-Up
- **Black Narcissus** (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1947)
- **The Fifth Element** (Luc Besson, 1997)
- **Orlando** (Sally Potter, 1992)
- **Ying xiong/ Hero** (Yimou Zhang, 2002)

### Performance
- *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950)
- *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955)

### Lighting
- *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944)
- *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (Joel Coen, 2001)
- *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922)

### Cinematography and Special Effects
- *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941)
- *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994)
- *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

### Editing
- *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991)
- *The Man with Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929)

### Sound
- *Blackmail* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1928)
- *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)
- *Singin’ in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952)

### Resource Centres
- [http://www.filmeducation.org](http://www.filmeducation.org)
- [http://www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk)
- [http://www.screensite.org](http://www.screensite.org)
- [http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk](http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk)