INTRODUCTION

Fatal Attraction and Scarface

How We Think about Movies

When Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004, plate 1) came out, it caused an uproar. Some people loved it and others hated it; some revered it as a religious classic and others condemned it as a sadistic spectacle; some people hailed it as the very essence of Christianity, while others deplored what they saw as virulent anti-semitism full of negative stereotypes that did nothing less than blame Jews for Christ’s death.

People respond to movies in different ways, and there are many reasons for this. We have all stood in the lobby of a theater and heard conflicting opinions from people who have just seen the same film. Some loved it, some were annoyed by it, some found it just OK. Perhaps we’ve thought, “Well, what do they know? Maybe they just didn’t get it.” So we go to the reviewers whose business it is to “get it.” But often they do not agree. One reviewer will love it, the next will tell us to save our money. What thrills one person may bore or even offend another. Disagreements and controversies, however, can reveal a great deal about the assumptions underlying these varying responses. If we explore these assumptions, we can ask questions about how sound they are. Questioning our assumptions and those of others is a good way to start thinking about movies. We will soon see that there are many productive ways of thinking about movies and many approaches that we can use to analyze them.

In *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1992), the actor playing Bruce Lee sits in an American movie theater (figure 1.1) and watches a scene from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961) in which Audrey Hepburn’s glamorous character awakens her upstairs neighbor, Mr. Yunioshi. Half awake, he jumps up, bangs his head on a low-hanging, “Oriental”-style lamp, and stumbles around his Fig. 1.1
apartment crashing into things. The audience in the theater laughs uproariously at this slapstick comedy but Lee does not. To the contrary, he becomes more and more enraged until finally he and his girlfriend leave the theater.

Lee is Chinese, his girlfriend is white, and Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story has shown him to be the victim of anti-Asian prejudice in the United States. In this scene, the butt of the humor, Mr. Yunioshi, is an Asian man played by a white man (Mickey Rooney); the character’s appearance (exaggerated make-up that makes him appear to be bug-eyed with buck teeth), dialect (he speaks with an exaggerated accent), and actions (comic ineptness), all reinforce stereotypical and degrading views of Asian behavior (figure 1.2). Lee feels that this representation, combined with the audience’s laughter, reflects and contributes to his own assimilation problems. Others in the audience, however, do not see the movie in this way at all. They respond, or think they respond, only to the slapstick: the same scene, but very different responses. Furthermore, Lee’s girlfriend initially joins in the laughter but becomes uncomfortable when she senses his pain.

Movies and Entertainment

Why do we go to the movies? Most of us go for entertainment. Indeed, Bruce Lee and his girlfriend are on a date when they see Breakfast at Tiffany’s, a common context in which young people see movies. Going out on a date, having fun, and eating popcorn may all make it seem as if movies are fairly simple things that do not require much thought. But, as Dragon illustrates, having fun is not isolated from serious issues. Lee does not go to the movies in order to contemplate his social oppression but, in the midst of a light-romantic comedy, that is precisely what happens. He comes to an awareness that motivates his entire career: he dedicates his life to offering alternative representations of Asian men in the cinema.

Far from being frivolous, entertainment may actually provide a pleasurable smokescreen beneath which disturbing issues can be either reinforced or, more helpfully, contemplated. Different genres lend themselves to the examination of particular social and cultural issues. The modern horror film, beginning with Psycho (1960, figure 1.3) and including such films as The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) and The Hills Have Eyes (1977), locates the most hideous horror at the center of the home and family. People go to those films, of course, to get scared to death, shriek, and jump out of their seats, not to contemplate whether the once joyous nuclear family with a working father and housewife mother is an outmoded institution that has become the breeding ground for psychotic murderers. Yet, as we will see in chapter 5, it may be precisely because we enjoy being scared to death that these films can take
such an unflinching look at the family. (Both of these films have recently been remade, *The Hills Have Eyes* in 2006 [plate 2] and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 2003 [plate 3], and in chapter 6 we will discuss the significance of such remakes.) Similarly, most people go to Westerns because they enjoy the action and the scenery, not because they want to contemplate the tensions within American society between the wilderness and the frontier and between white civilization and Native Americans. Yet, a film like *Dances with Wolves* (1990) makes very clear that that, in part, is what the genre is about.

At times, different films or genres reflect virtually opposed responses to common cultural concerns. As the modern horror film has focused upon the collapse of traditional images of the supportive nuclear family, a number of historical epics have championed a return to conservative family values and linked the maintenance of those values with grand issues of national identity and continuity. Films like *Braveheart* (1995), *Saving Private Ryan* (1997, plate 4), *Gladiator* (2000), *The Patriot* (2000), and *Pearl Harbor* (2001) begin with devastations to or dysfunctions within traditional families and show their damaged heroes going on to help save their nation during a time of national crisis; these films conclude with a sense of a triumphant society realigned to “proper” values. *Saving Private Ryan, The Patriot,* and *Pearl Harbor* all close with images of strong nuclear families that signify national continuity. *Gladiator* closes with the dying hero envisioning an Elysian reunion with his lost family, and the implication that his sacrifice has made the Roman Empire safe for such families in the future. Such endings could hardly be more different from the endings of recent horror films, but modern horror films and historical epics both respond to a common cultural impulse—anxiety about the decline of the traditional family at the end of the twentieth century.

Part of understanding movies is understanding the complex ways in which they relate to the society that produced them. People frequently assume this with movies like the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), but we will see that it is just as useful in exploring issues of race, class, and gender in a wide variety of genres including horror films, historical epics, action films, comedies, and Westerns. A Western like *Posse* (1993), for example, with its large cast of central black characters, seems odd when compared with most Westerns, such as *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953), which have no central black characters and frequently do not even contain marginalized images of blacks. The “civilized” West, these films assume, was a West peopled with whites. *Posse,* however, explicitly refers to the fact that the historical “West” contained many blacks; this implicitly leads the viewer to question their absence in traditional Westerns. When we look at the vast majority of Westerns from 1900 to 1970 and see virtually no blacks anywhere, we begin to learn about the racial priorities of American society and of the film industry during that period. We can often learn a great deal not only from what we see in a film but also from what we do not see.

Certain films “push all the buttons” to stimulate widespread enthusiasm or anger at the time of their release. Such a widespread reaction can reveal a great deal about the ways in which we look at films and think about them. In 1915,
The Birth of a Nation became a lightning rod for both adoration and anger for its representation of blacks and the Ku Klux Klan. In 1993, both Jurassic Park and Schindler’s List pushed all the buttons, but they were different buttons.

Jurassic Park is, worldwide, one of the largest grossing box-office movies ever made. Half a year after Jurassic Park appeared, its director, Steven Spielberg, released Schindler’s List, one of the most critically acclaimed films of that year. They are very different kinds of films. Schindler’s List received twelve Academy Award nominations, whereas Jurassic Park received only three, but earned much more money. Jurassic Park was, in many ways, exactly what Spielberg’s fans expected – a fantasy filled with childlike wonder and moments of great terror, like Spielberg’s Jaws (1975, figure 1.4). Schindler’s List (figure 1.5) seemed to come from a “different” Spielberg, since it is a three and a half hour, intensely serious, black-and-white film about the Nazi Holocaust. Most of the critical respect went to Schindler’s List; most of the money went to Jurassic Park.

Yet we must question rather than simply accept the seeming dichotomy between these two films. The Academy Awards typically honor serious films that represent Hollywood in a respectable light. That may help explain why many of the most successful genre directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and Blake Edwards never won best director awards during the years in which their best mysteries, Westerns, and comedies were made. All of these directors were honored late in their careers as if to acknowledge the oversight. Blake Edwards, for example, received an Oscar for lifetime achievement in 2003, a decade after making his last film, Son of the Pink Panther (1993, plate 5), one of his typical physical comedies. This neglect of genre directors may also help explain why comedies seldom win best film of the year and why, when they do, they are likely to be comedies with overtly serious subject matter rather than slapstick. From this perspective, Jurassic Park is too much of an action-adventure, science-fiction film to be taken seriously. But this may tell us more about the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences than it tells us about anything intrinsic to Jurassic Park.

If we switch perspectives to that of authorship, as we will in chapter 4, we may begin to notice unexpected similarities between Spielberg’s genre entertainments and Schindler’s List. Although the latter film is about the Jews during the Nazi Holocaust, its central character is an Aryan played by Liam Neeson, a handsome young actor. He thus parallels the character of Indiana Jones played by Harrison Ford in the series of popular films featuring that character. Furthermore, the Jews are reduced to an historical backdrop of undifferentiated people who show no active agency on their part; they must be saved by Schindler, who thus becomes a hero figure like Indiana Jones. Is this a whole new Steven Spielberg?
Critical Approaches to Movies

Throughout this book, we will be encouraging a critical process that is, by definition, never finished. As soon as we stop questioning, we are in danger of accepting easy and obvious “truths” that can, in fact, blind us to important issues. Let us return for a moment to *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* to illustrate how this works. As we have suggested, the film provocatively dramatizes the evils of racial stereotyping in Hollywood films. As such, many might think that it should simply be embraced as a progressive step forward. Notice, however, that in the movie theater scene that we have discussed, Lee, the central character, is with his girlfriend. He is the one who has insight and, when she sees his rage, she adopts his position. If we just look at this scene, there is no problem. He, after all, is Asian and she is white, so it makes perfect sense that he would recognize the ugly racism of the film they are watching and she would adopt his insights. This, however, is not an isolated incident. *Dragon* constantly reinforces traditional gender roles by marginalizing her role and limiting her to comparatively brief scenes in which she is seen primarily as a girlfriend or wife/mother. She is narratively subordinate to the central male character in a manner that, like most contemporary Hollywood films, *Dragon* never questions or challenges. At every level, *Dragon* asks us to unquestioningly accept current stereotypes of women in film that are equivalent to the racial stereotypes in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* that so anger Lee. Yet, how many people watching *Dragon* are equally angered by its treatment of women as passive, marginalized characters who are beautiful to look at and whose primary function is to support important men?

People respond differently to films depending upon their gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and personal background. In *Dragon*, Lee’s race and American experience make him respond to *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* differently from the rest of the audience. In actuality, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* received many different responses at the time of its release. A brief survey of them complements the fictionalized Lee’s response in *Dragon* and points to many central issues we will be exploring in the following chapters. In 1961, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* was dominantly perceived as a sophisticated romantic comedy. It was also seen as a star vehicle for Audrey Hepburn. Holly Golightly, the character that she plays, was, by early 1960s’ standards, a free-wheeling, daringly sexual woman (figure 1.6). This image departed significantly from Hepburn’s previous roles. During production of the film she was concerned that her character should not be too shocking for her fans. She wanted, in other words, to change her image but not to change it too drastically. But Audrey Hepburn was not the only famous name associated with this film. It was based on Truman Capote’s well-known novella of the same name. As always happens in such cases, many people focus attention on similarities and differences between the novel and the film: how “faithful” is the movie to the novel; what changes have been made?

Fig. 1.6
Within the industry, and increasingly for the public, another famous film associated with the film was that of its director, Blake Edwards. He had his major box-office success with the immensely popular service comedy, *Operation Petticoat* (1959), which starred Cary Grant and Tony Curtis, two hugely successful stars of the time. But Edwards had never directed a sophisticated comic For some, this film was seen as marking a shift within the career of a director unlike the manner in which *Schindler’s List* is currently seen within Spielberg’s career. Yet, another film director, Radley Metzger, primarily saw the film at the time of its release as opening the door to treating disturbing sexual topics in a manner that would not offend audiences. Based upon his perception of *Tiffany’s* as a sexually daring and groundbreaking film, Metzger made a series of successful and critically acclaimed films such as *Carmen, Baby* (1967) with much more overt and graphic sexuality than that in *Tiffany’s*. Perhaps related to this, *Tiffany’s* has remained an immensely popular film within the gay male community, where it still receives theatrical screenings.

Some of these responses to *Tiffany’s* may seem bewildering. How is it possible that the same film can be seen by mainstream audiences as a nice romantic comedy, by another film director as the inspiration for making heterosexual softcore pornography, and by gay men as a cult classic? Is one of these perceptions more correct than the other? Is someone “misreading” the film? For those who respond to the film primarily as a literary adaptation, we should ask, “What is the relationship between a novel and a film based on it?” Can a film be “faithful” to its literary source, or is the concept of “faithfulness” a murky one that may obscure rather than illuminate its subject? In what sense can the film be seen as a Blake Edwards film, particularly one such as this for which he receives no screenwriting credit? What are the assumptions behind attributing a film’s authorship to its director? What can we learn from studying *Tiffany’s* in relation to Edwards’s following films, *The Days of Wine and Roses* (1962) and *The Pink Panther* (1964)? For those who see the film as a star vehicle, in what sense does an actor like Audrey Hepburn shape and control her performance in a film? Is it her performance, or is her performance part of something larger that someone else controls? How does the character of Holly Golightly differ from those of previous Hepburn parts such as Sabrina in the film of the same name? Questions like these lie at the center of each of the following chapters. They are complex and require careful consideration. In many cases, assumptions that many of us share about the nature of movies will have to be revised or discarded.

**Outline of the Book**

The following chapters employ the structure of this one, with the first half introducing the chapter’s basic critical focus and the second half illustrating it with close readings of individual films. The second half of this chapter uses * Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Scarface* (1932) to introduce approaches that later chapters will develop more fully. The book’s underlying premise remains constant:
that there are many productive ways to think about movies; that we must never think we know everything about a movie; and that the more we learn about movies, the more that knowledge will help us to understand not only those films but also important aspects of our culture. Far from destroying our pleasure from movies, this process enhances our appreciation of the complexities of this popular, influential art form.

We have arranged the chapters in such a way as to systematically expand our understanding of film while avoiding potential pitfalls and confusions. Chapter 2 discusses narrative structure or the manner in which a film’s story is told and organized. Most people, when asked what a movie is “about,” think first in terms of its storyline, so a look at the ways in which movies tell stories is a useful place to begin a study of their meaning. We will examine the standard narrative techniques as well as alternatives to them, and then illustrate those techniques with a detailed look at two films from different narrative traditions. *Jurassic Park* (1993) is a popular film which uses classical Hollywood narration; *Rashomon* (1950) is a widely respected one which works in an entirely different tradition, that of the international art cinema. Studied together, these films reveal a good deal about how movies tell stories.

Movies do much more than tell stories, however, and they also tell stories differently from other narrative forms. The novel *Jurassic Park*, for example, is not the same thing as the movie. We cannot begin to think with any sophistication about movies until we understand their formal workings, the things that make them different from other art forms such as plays or novels. Chapter 3, on formal structure, discusses the properties of film, such as cinematography, sound, and editing, and shows how these formal properties function in two films from different periods and different national cinemas, *Rules of the Game* (1939) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999).

These early chapters deal with approaches that help us to understand the workings of individual films. The remainder of the book explores larger contexts that enable us to understand the relation of individual films to other films or to cultural issues. It is essential, however, for the student to begin with the specifics of the individual film because, unless we have a detailed sense of the construction of a film, we cannot intelligently and accurately relate it to larger issues.

The first of these issues, discussed in chapter 4, is authorship. One traditional way of relating artworks to larger issues is by raising the issue of authorship. This is a complicated issue since film is a collaborative form, but we show why the director is commonly considered the author of a film and then examine two films by quite different American directors from different decades, *The Searchers* (1956) by John Ford and *Jungle Fever* (1991) by Spike Lee. We show how placing these films within the perspectives of their directors’ other works can give us valuable insights.

An entirely different context into which film can fruitfully be placed is genre, the subject of chapter 5. Genre study relates films not to other works by the same author but to other works of the same type, such as Westerns, musicals, or horror films. It shows us how different eras have treated similar material in different ways.
and helps us to understand the role of both formula and creativity in genre films. We discuss *Sin City* (2005, plate 6) in relation to both the detective genre and *film noir*, and *Gunfight at the OK Corral* (1956) in relation to the Western.

Chapter 6 looks at a major phenomenon of the past twenty years: *series*, *sequels*, and *remakes*. This approach explores individual films within the context of films that are either sources for them or other films to which they are related by sharing common characters or continuing stories. We examine as examples the classic 1933 *King Kong* and the 2005 remake of it, as well as *Goldfinger* (1964) from the popular James Bond series, which has continued over decades.

Stars constitute a major part of the appeal of some films as well as a substantial part of their budgets. Some people, in fact, think of films mainly in terms of the actors in them. Chapter 7 looks at the difference between *stars* and actors and at how an actor's "image" can contribute substantially to a film's meaning. We show how such an image changes over time and examine the careers of a major female and male star from the perspective of their work in two films made decades apart, Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco* (1930) and Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry* (1971).

Up to this point, this book explores ways in which film can be understood by either examining internal aspects of the films themselves or by relating them to patterns within the world of cinema, but that world does not account for much of the significance that film has or what we can learn from it. To understand this, we have to consider wider areas. The first context, explored in chapter 8, is audiences and *reception*. The same film can mean different things at different times and even different things at the same time to different spectators and audiences. Much of this depends on the reception context in which the film is viewed. Reception contexts include how a movie is advertised and publicized as well as such things as public outcries and protests. This chapter will look at the initial reception of Charles Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* (1923) within the context of the popular comedian's career at that time and how its meanings shifted at different points in his career, and at *The Crying Game* (1992), a controversial film whose initial reception context included a highly successful advertising campaign with which popular reviewers initially played along, creating a reception context that was soon to be altered.

Another way in which we can learn about film by stepping outside its world is to look at its relation to other art forms, the subject of chapter 9. We will look at areas of similarity and difference with art forms to which film is often compared: theater (a performance art) and fiction (a narrative form). We will illustrate these relations by means of two movies based upon novels, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932), one of the many movies based upon Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (and influenced by plays based upon the same novel), and *Nosferatu* (1922), a German film from the silent era based upon Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*.

As well as being an art form, film is part of the mass media, and chapter 10 examines film's relation to the other mass media of radio and television. While
all three use narrative, the formal properties and industrial practices of each make them very different things with different capabilities and traditions. Blake Edwards has had a long, successful career that includes work in radio and television narrative series and many Hollywood feature films. We will illustrate the differences and similarities among these media using one of his works from each medium: the radio show Richard Diamond, Private Detective, the television show Peter Gunn, and the movie Victor/Victoria (1982).

At this point, with a number of critical perspectives behind us, it is important to look at some of the major theories of film. Most people assume that film is in some ways “realistic,” though they mean many things by this. We examine the theoretical assumptions underlying The Battleship Potemkin (1925), a Russian formalist film from the silent era, and Umberto D (1952), an Italian film made within a realist tradition. Film theorists help us explore and understand such notions as realism, and it is important that we do so before moving on to discuss social and cultural issues, since naïve notions about realism block exploration of such issues.

The next three chapters take up the vital issues of gender, race, and class in film. All of us are in part defined through the nexus of these three categories, whether we are a white, middle-class man living in the suburbs or an African American woman living in the inner city. Films draw upon, promulgate, and challenge common ideas about race, class, and gender in our culture. They frequently do so implicitly rather than explicitly and by invoking invisible norms by which we judge characters and actions: masculinity is the norm against which femininity is judged; the middle class is the norm against which the lower and upper classes are judged; heterosexuality is the norm against which homosexuality is judged; and white is the norm against which people of color are judged.

Chapter 12 examines how movies construct gender (e.g., masculinity and femininity) and sexuality (e.g., heterosexuality and homosexuality). These assumptions affect not only characterization but also narrative structure and visual style. We have chosen American Gigolo (1980) as a film that represents masculinity in an unusual way and The Silence of the Lambs (1990) as a film that represents femininity in a challenging departure from Hollywood norms. Yet, both films contain contradictions that caution us from simply thinking of these representations as all good or all bad.

Chapter 13 similarly examines representations of race and ethnicity in film. To do so, we raise questions about what stereotypes are, how they function, and whether they affect all people in the same manner. We also consider the related issue of role models and show how seemingly progressive films with positive role models may nevertheless be racially troubling. Close readings of LA Confidential (1997) and Boys N the Hood (1991), films which both engage and challenge traditional racial representations from profoundly different perspectives, conclude the chapter.

Chapter 14 explores class in a comparable way. Characters are stereotyped by economic class much as they are by race and gender. Frequently these issues intertwine, as in the common representation of certain minorities as belonging
almost exclusively to a servant class. Our culture also promulgates class myths such as the ones that rich people are miserable and that we are all better off being middle class or that class injustices exist only in other societies, not in the contemporary United States. We then analyze two Hollywood films, one of which, Pretty Woman (1990), simply affirms common notions of class; the other, The People Under the Stairs (1991), challenges those notions.

Chapter 15 breaks the pattern of the book and concentrates entirely upon one film, Citizen Kane (1941). Undoubtedly the most heralded and praised American film of all time, it enables us to illustrate how the major approaches of the book can be applied to a single film and gives students a model that integrates many useful methods for thinking about any film, including those that they will see in the years to come.

The world we live in and the place of movies in that world are changing dramatically. Chapter 16 analyzes the three most significant current trends at work in the world of cinema: globalization, digitalization, and convergence. We will examine how the global economy has changed the way in which movies are made and marketed; the way in which digital technology has changed not only such things as visual effects in films, and in some instances even eliminated the use of 35 mm film altogether, but also how it has created new home-viewing contexts; and how the once separate entertainment and technology industries are converging or coming together in an increasingly interrelated manner. All of these developments are not only changing the nature of cinema in front of our eyes but will continue to have a profound impact upon its future. We use The Matrix (1999) as our primary example of a film that both uses state of the art digital technology for visual effects and is about such technology.

Our approach to understanding movies will take us on a quite different path from the one we are used to from reading movie reviews in newspapers and magazines or watching reviews on television. The purpose of reviews is to tell the reader whether or not the reviewer likes the movie and thinks people should see it. Accordingly, most people read reviews to help decide which films they should see; they commonly have a favorite reviewer with whom they frequently agree. The purpose of this book is quite different. Our primary purpose is not to tell students which films to see or which films are good or bad but, rather, to help students understand all the films they see and to learn ways of thoughtfully evaluating and talking about them. This process may lead some students to change their previous opinions about some movies and to become more responsive to others than they have been in the past.

We offer a close analysis of two films at the end of most chapters not because we think our interpretation is correct or the best one but, rather, because we want to demonstrate how a particular critical method or approach can be applied to specific films. As such, we encourage students to think critically about our interpretations, questioning our readings and formulating their own. A textbook such as this is not just a presentation of factual information to be memorized. We offer our readings of films not to tell students what those films mean for all viewers at all times but, rather, to show what they mean to us within a particular
critical framework. As such, we have chosen the films for their illustrative value, not because we think they are all good or favorites of ours. We have drawn heavily on popular Hollywood films and recent films since many students will have seen them. But one of the purposes of a textbook such as this is to broaden students' viewing habits and introduce them to films with which they are not familiar. Thus, we have selected films from different national cinemas and older, classical Hollywood films to augment those with which most students will already be familiar. There is nothing privileged about the list of films except that they work for us and supply a balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

We turn now to two analyses that will briefly introduce the wide variety of topics with which the following chapters deal in detail. We have chosen *Fatal Attraction* and *Scarface*, commercially successful films from different genres and different eras in film history that attracted a great deal of attention at the time of their release, generating controversy and conflicting interpretations. They provide us with useful springboards from which to introduce many of the topics with which the remainder of this book will be concerned.

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**Fatal Attraction (1987)**

When Vice President Gore appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman* in 1993, during an attempt to lighten and popularize his image, he joked that his security code name was “Buttafuoco.” He was referring to the widely publicized case in which Joey Buttafuoco’s teenaged lover attempted to murder his wife. It was often called the “Fatal Attraction” case and was not alone. At around the same time, national attention focused upon the case of a Long Island schoolteacher, Carolyn Warmus, who actually murdered her lover’s wife. This was also called the “Fatal Attraction” case.

“Fatal Attraction” has become a popular expression to describe almost any romantic triangle that ends badly. It comes from the 1987 movie that became the second highest grossing film of that year, behind *Beverly Hills Cop II*. But, unlike *Beverly Hills Cop II*, *Fatal Attraction* generated widespread and passionate debate. That controversy is helpful to us because it reveals common assumptions about movies.

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**Reception**

One of the most helpful assessments of the film came from one of its producers, Sherry Lansing, who called it a Rorschach test for everyone who sees it. Different people see it in different ways. This happens with all films but the differences are more immediately obvious with controversial ones like *Fatal Attraction*.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the film’s unexpected and widespread popularity, not only in the United States but also in Europe. This came despite
the fact that many critics did not consider the film particularly good, tending to describe it as overly manipulative. Its popularity can be seen not only in the film's box-office success but also in the number of newspaper and magazine articles written about it, widespread reports of intense and vocal responses in theaters, talk-show discussions in which the term "Fatal Attraction Syndrome" was used as a pop psychological term to describe ruinous erotic attractions, a *Saturday Night Live* parody, and the widespread use of the title to characterize and popularize situations like the Joey Buttafuoco and Carolyn Warmus cases. Much of the talk-show interest focused in particular on women who were characterized as resembling the Glenn Close character, successful single women frustrated by the lack of a traditional husband and family.

The movie is about a brief affair (figure 1.7) between a married man (Dan, played by Michael Douglas) and a single woman (Alex, played by Glenn Close). When the man tries to end it, she refuses and, after first attempting suicide to gain his sympathy, she begins to menace him and his family. She finally invades his house brandishing a knife and is shot dead by his wife (Beth, played by Anne Archer).

While Alex, who has a traditionally masculine name, is established as an independent career woman, her independence is shown to be a veneer hiding her desperate envy of Dan's close relationship with his wife and daughter. In a key scene, she stands outside his house and secretly watches as he gives his daughter a pet rabbit while the whole family sits cozily beside a fireplace (figure 1.8). The domestic serenity of the scene is so disturbing to Alex that she staggers away to vomit uncontrollably (figure 1.9). Her frustration, which she first turned suicidally against herself, she then turns against the family. She kills the child's rabbit and later tries to kill the wife.

Different reviews described the film as "about" many things: a warning about the dangers of casual sexual relationships, even a masked warning about the dangers of sex in the age of AIDS; a melodrama about the importance of and dangers to family life; a condemnation of independent career women who express sexual desire; a half-horror film that turns such a woman into a monster; or even a feminist slant on a triangular relationship, since it is the woman who initiates the affair, the man who is weak, and the wife who kills the threatening Alex.

Its story was considered particularly appropriate for its times, the late 1980s, in which the conservative Reagan administration sought to reverse what it considered the excesses of 1960s' liberalism and, most appropriately in this case, those of the "sexual revolution" and the rise of feminism, by emphasizing "family values." From this perspective, the film can be seen as a corrective to many movies of the 1960s and 1970s in which people experiment with different sexual partners.
without harmful consequences. Here, there are brutal consequences that imperil the husband’s cherished family life and lead to Alex’s death.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, many films such as *The Turning Point* (1977), *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), *Norma Rae* (1979), and *Private Benjamin* (1980) showed single women living productive lives without the necessity of marriage to be happy. This film depicts such a lifestyle as a cover-up for desperate unhappiness and a yearning to belong to a family unit. Many feminists argued that the film was part of a brutal backlash against feminism that removed the option of a happy, single life for women and, in fact, represented single women with sexual desires as monstrous threats to society. Others countered that, although the film undoubtedly strove to that end, it nevertheless created a strong point of identification and sympathy with the “monstrous” woman and made the “normal” family appear smug and repulsive. Rather than accept the film’s family values and condemnation of the independent career woman at face value, such a response rejects those very values and opinions. We will see in chapter 12 that such gender issues comprise an important aspect of film criticism.

**The Film as a Construct rather than Reality**

Part of the response brought attention to the fact that a film is not a “natural” but a constructed object. Many reviewers called the film overly manipulative and attributed this quality to the director (Adrian Lyne), who had a background as a maker of television commercials. They considered him clever with “surface” effects but as having little depth. Such a response reveals many assumptions. In calling the film manipulative and excessive, the reviewers presumed that certain moments in the movie were “more” than the material “required.” They particularly cited the scene in which the child’s rabbit is found killed and the ending, which depicts Alex as a knife-wielding monster resembling the supernatural killers in the *Halloween* movies.

Alex appears to be killed twice, by two people. When she attacks Beth, Dan comes to Beth’s rescue and pushes Alex into the bathtub, attempting to drown her (figure 1.10). A number of close-ups show her apparently dead—under water, eyes open, the water no longer rippling from the struggle; everything is still and quiet (figure 1.11). Suddenly, she rises from the water, brandishing the knife, as if returning from the dead to kill Dan (figure 1.12). Beth enters the room and shoots her through the heart (figure 1.13). Such an ending strongly mimics endings in horror films like *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) in which the monster is apparently killed only to rise again and, in some cases,
to be killed yet again. Since *Fatal Attraction*, such endings have appeared in a number of mainstream films such as *The Jackal* (1997) in which Bruce Willis’s character, a brutal international assassin, is apparently killed by his nemesis, played by Richard Gere, only to rise again and then be shot dead by another character. In fact, what was once an exciting plot surprise in thrillers can become, over time, an expected one. After John Travolta’s villain appears to be blown up before the audience’s eyes in *Swordfish* (2001), and even after his scorched body is graphically displayed on an autopsy table, some opening-day audience members said aloud, “He’s coming back,” and he does.

**Norms for Judging the Film**

Reviewers’ objections to the excesses of *Fatal Attraction*’s ending point to their assumption of a proper dramatic norm. Deviation from this norm becomes excess, or manipulation. Such an assumption, however, obscures the fact that the norm is equally manipulative, although it is likely to go unnoticed since it conforms to expectations. Furthermore, norms for different types of movies are different. The ending would not be excessive in a horror film; on the contrary, if many recent horror films did not have such endings, they would be considered deficient. Most of *Fatal Attraction* conforms to norms for romantic thrillers; its use of devices more appropriate to horror films at the end violated many reviewers’ notions of what is “realistic” for romantic thrillers. It is important to note, then, that many notions of realism conform less to any correspondence with “real life” than with the standards accepted for films of a certain type.

The DVD of *Fatal Attraction* includes two endings shot for the film, the one in the release print and the original one. The release ending probably accounted for most of the excitement in theaters during the movie’s release. It did so by turning Alex into a homicidal monster, and then by letting the audience revel in her brutal destruction. It is not only the fact of her demonization and obliteration that contributed to the film’s success with audiences, but also the formal, technical skill with which Adrian Lyne shot and edited it. A look at some of the shots in the sequence preceding the attack will illustrate this and point not only to the role of a director in making a film but also to the value of close formal analysis of the films we see.

**The Style of the Ending**

The sequence opens with a shot of water swirling into a bathtub drain. The bright light makes the porcelain ominously white, recalling a similar shot of water in a drain during the famous shower murder scene in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). Here, Beth, dressed in white, is filling the bathtub. During the following scene, the bathroom is brightly white, with the light becoming more and more diffused by steam (figure 1.14).
The bathroom shots are _intercut_ with shots of Dan downstairs as he goes about the house checking the locks, so the sense of danger from Alex outside builds. He puts a kettle of water on the stove. The lighting downstairs is a warm amber, which contrasts sharply between cuts with the bright white of the bathroom. In the bathroom, Beth looks vulnerable with her black eyes from an auto accident (figure 1.15). When she wipes steam from a mirror, she, and we, are shocked to see Alex in the room. We then get a full shot of Alex holding a large knife (figure 1.16).

The scene is intensified by a number of carefully organized elements. Alex, also dressed in white, does not lunge right at Beth but, with a puzzled look on her face, asks Beth what she is doing there — as if Alex belonged in the house and Beth were the intruder. This adds an aspect of insanity to her menace, which is further intensified with shots of her absent-mindedly cutting her thigh with the knife and not reacting to the pain. A number of shots of overflowing liquids builds the explosive tension in the scene. The bathtub overflows, blood drips on Alex’s foot, and finally the kettle downstairs boils and whistles. Then Alex attacks. The audience-pleasing excitement of the ending comes from much more than the simple story element of an attack; it comes in part from the way in which the director organizes and edits the specific images and sounds of that attack.

_The original ending_

The debate over manipulation would not have been so intense had the original ending been used. When the film was test-marketed with the original ending, audiences objected because they did not feel that Alex suffered enough. Where the ending in the release version borrows its violent impact from horror movies, the original one has more muted associations of artistic drama.

In the original ending, Dan and Beth are quietly raking leaves when the police arrest Dan for murder. Alex has been found with her throat cut and his fingerprints on the knife. When Beth searches for their lawyer’s telephone number, she comes across a menacing audiotape that Alex had sent Dan in which she threatens suicide. Alex has killed herself in a way that implicates Dan who has been arrested, and it seems as if the tape will exonerate Dan. In the final shot we see a flashback of Alex in her bathroom. As _Madam Butterfly_ plays loudly, she slowly begins to cut her throat.

This ending is much quieter than that of the release version. It makes Alex less of a monster and gives Dan no chance to partially redeem himself by coming to his wife’s rescue. The test audiences specifically objected to the fact that Alex’s fate was not punishment enough for her behavior.
Unity

By the standards of classical Hollywood filmmaking this ending is, however, more complex and unified than that of the release version. A standard rule of Hollywood filmmaking is that there should be no irrelevant plot elements: things introduced should be woven tightly into the fabric of the film. The original ending provides an ideal example. First, it reintroduces the threatening audiotape that Alex had sent Dan and that we have heard earlier. Secondly, the last shot shows Alex in her bathroom where she had originally attempted suicide by slashing her wrists when Dan prepared to leave for the first time. It is also where Dan had cared for and comforted her. Thirdly, the knife is the knife with which each had menaced the other during the brutal fight that occurred when Dan broke into her apartment after Alex had briefly kidnapped his daughter. Finally, Madam Butterfly works on a double level. It is not only an opera about a woman who commits suicide after a man abandons her, but it is also a favorite of both Alex and Dan. Their love of the opera helped bring them together; it also signified their estrangement when she bought two tickets to a performance and he refused to go. On the night of the performance we see her alone in her apartment dementedly switching her light off and on as Madam Butterfly plays on the soundtrack. Now it plays as she kills herself.

The two endings point to an important aspect of movies: they are shaped by a multitude of forces, from screenwriters to directors to producers to actors to audiences. Even when “finished,” a film is not necessarily finished. Movies are often changed extensively as a result of audience testing.

Even when “finished” again, films are not necessarily finished. They are often cut or cropped or even colorized for television viewing; footage is often added for European or video or DVD release; and, years after a movie’s release, a “director’s cut” is sometimes assembled from material never shown in theaters (as is the case with the DVD version of Fatal Attraction). It is useful, then, to question what a film is or if a film is ever a single thing. Not only is it possible to interpret a film from a number of perspectives, but it is also possible to develop a number of perspectives about what the film itself actually is.

The Development of the Movie

Fatal Attraction is based upon a story that became the basis for a 45-minute short film, Diversion, by screenwriter James Dearden. Producer Sherry Lansing originally supported the development of the film as a big studio feature because she felt it was important to develop sympathy for the single woman and show the guilt and responsibility of the man. By the time the script had gone through several stages of development, the final film did exactly the opposite. It softened the man’s guilt and made a monster out of the woman. The original developers of the script – Dearden, Lansing, and her partner Stanley Jaffe – were involved with the project until the end. They got screen credit and did not claim
that the project was taken away from them. They participated in the complex process of developing an idea into a commercial film, even though basic aspects of its meaning changed along the way.

Directors often have a great role in this, since they not only shape the form of a film in areas such as composition, lighting, and editing, but they also, generally without screen credit, shape and reform the story. Adrian Lyne admits to this quite readily in the interview on the DVD of the film. He speaks of his dissatisfaction with the ending in the script and the reasons for reforming it into his original ending for the movie. In that version, Beth does not find the tape and Alex has succeeded in framing Dan for killing her. Lyne also speaks of the preview reactions to his ending that led him to change the film into its release form. Comparably, Blake Edwards, responding to preview reactions, added a number of slapstick scenes to the end of *Blind Date* (1987), drastically altering the final third of the movie. Like Adrian Lyne, he gets no screenplay credit.

**Glenn Close’s Star Image**

*Fatal Attraction* involved another transformation of an entirely different kind—that of a *star’s image*. Glenn Close changed her image entirely with *Fatal Attraction*. Previously, after success as a stage actress, she was largely known for playing “good,” largely asexual, women in movies like *The World According to Garp* (1982) and *The Big Chill* (1983). No one considered her for this role and, unusual for an important actress, she campaigned and tested for it. Her success with it turned her into a major star and has affected the kind of roles in which she has subsequently been cast, such as the ruthless and sexual manipulator in *Dangerous Liaisons* (1989) and, in a role directly reminiscent of *Fatal Attraction*, the ruthless, independent, sexually active career woman in *The Paper* (1994), as well as the crazed, jaded movie star in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s stage musical, *Sunset Boulevard*, the greedy heiress in *Cookie’s Fortune* (1999), and the sinister Cruella de Vil in Disney’s *101 Dalmatians* (1996) and *102 Dalmatians* (2000). As we will see in chapter 7, a star’s image is a carefully constructed entity, often an enormous financial asset, and something that helps create a film’s meaning in basic ways.

**Scarface** (1932)

When Paul Muni appeared in the title role in *Scarface*, he had no star image. A successful stage actor, associated with the Jewish art theater in the 1920s, he had appeared in a few undistinguished and virtually unknown films. The success of *Scarface* led to his becoming one of the most prestigious star actors of the 1930s, but one with a profile very different from that of Glenn Close. As we discuss in chapter 7, there is a major difference in films between stars and star actors. Stars
like Clint Eastwood, Marilyn Monroe, and John Wayne establish charismatic star images that follow them throughout their careers. Audiences tend to perceive all of their roles as variations upon their dominant image, such as sexpot or rugged cowboy. Many such stars often play a greater variety of roles than they are given credit for, but their fans’ perception of them returns to the dominant star image. Star actors, to the contrary, often have no dominant image and often pride themselves on the diversity of roles they play: examples are Marlon Brando, Meryl Streep, Tom Hanks, and Laurence Olivier.

In the 1930s, Paul Muni was a pre-eminent star actor, so much so that some critics commented that he never looked the same from film to film. He became associated with roles in “prestige” historical dramas and commonly played highly ethnic or foreign characters, often using elaborate make-up. His ethnically Italian gangster in Scarface was only one example; others included the title French physician in The Story of Louis Pasteur (1936, for which he won a Best Actor Academy Award), a Chinese peasant in The Good Earth (1937), another nineteenth-century Frenchman in The Life of Emile Zola (1937), and the eponymous Mexican revolutionist in Juarez (1939).

Interestingly, Scarface also produced an actor with an indelible star image, George Raft. From the time of Scarface’s release, Raft became associated with gangster characters and, although he tried repeatedly, he could never divest himself of the typecasting. His attempts to break from his gangster image and develop a more “wholesome” one made him legendary for poor script decisions. He purportedly rejected the lead in High Sierra (1939) because he did not want to play another gangster, and the lead in The Maltese Falcon (1941) because he did not want to play a private detective with questionable morals. Both roles went to Humphrey Bogart and helped establish his career as a major star. Raft’s attempts to avoid his gangster image, combined with Bogart’s successes, became something of an industry joke. Hearing that a film about Mark Twain was to be made, Bogart quipped that he hoped the studio would offer it to Raft because he (Bogart) would love to play it. Raft never divested himself of the image. A quarter of a century after Scarface, in Some Like It Hot (1959), and nearly a decade after that, in Casino Royale (1966), he was still playing parodies of his coin-tossing, gangster role.

The Gangster Genre

Along with Little Caesar (1930) and The Public Enemy (1931), Scarface helped establish the urban gangster genre, one which began in the early sound era and generally involved the meteoric rise and violent end of a young male criminal. His rise frequently involves the murder of the previous mob boss and his frenzied acquisition of extravagant consumer goods (clothes, automobiles, apartments) as well as women. The genre has often been seen as a critique of consumer capitalism of the 1920s, with the gangster as stand-in for the successful businessman.
Each of the three films mentioned launched the career of a major actor (Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar*, James Cagney in *The Public Enemy*, and Muni) and the genre became a male action genre. The films generated much controversy since they were accused of glorifying crime and reveling in violence. The stars created by the genre soon distanced themselves from it for more law-abiding roles, and the genre itself, for a number of reasons, soon became marginalized as a “B” genre, seen as unsavory, overly formulaic and repetitive, receiving little critical attention and seldom drawing established stars or major studio financing. As we see in chapter 5, however, the components and industry profile of genres change over time, and by the 1970s the genre would achieve a new respectability with films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Godfather* (1972), and the 1983 remake of *Scarface* starring Al Pacino.

Set during the Prohibition era, *Scarface* tells the tragic story of the rise and fall of Tony Camonte (Paul Muni), a small-time Italian mobster who takes over a crime organization before being killed by the police in a shoot-out. Although the Depression backdrop of bootleg liquor and Camonte’s rise and fall typify conventions of 1930s’ gangster films, *Scarface* is in other ways highly unusual for the genre.

*Scarface* is not only a cornerstone of the gangster genre but it was also significant for the careers of important Hollywood figures. Independently produced by the legendary Howard Hughes and directed by Howard Hawks, it began the star careers of Paul Muni and George Raft. Its cinematographer, Lee Garmes, and one of its writers, Ben Hecht, are among the most respected in film history.

We will discuss *Scarface* in ways that continue where we left off with *Fatal Attraction*, introducing various approaches that this book will take. We have already looked at star image and genre. We will now consider the film’s reception and social context (see chapter 8), then develop its formal construction (see chapter 3), discuss a remake (see chapter 6), and touch upon issues such as race, ethnicity, and class (see chapters 13 and 14).

In pairing *Scarface* with *Fatal Attraction* at the beginning of this book, we hope to make another point. It is not unusual for older people to declare that “Movies today just aren’t what they used to be” and complain that things such as sexual content, graphic violence, and profanity render contemporary films inferior to those of Hollywood’s “Golden Age.” Comparably, students sometimes adopt a condescending attitude toward older films in black and white, or silent films. Even when praising such films, some students use patronizing terms like “It was good for films back then.” We hope to break down both prejudices and show that, regardless of their era, films can manifest a great deal of complexity and are worthy of serious and rewarding study.

**Social Context**

*Scarface* was as controversial a film in its day as *Fatal Attraction* was in 1987. In 1932 there was widespread concern that gangster films glorified violence and
might corrupt the young. This tapped into the extensive publicity of the era given
to actual gangsters like “Scarface” Al Capone and anxiety that a wave of violence
was overtaking the country. Many films in the genre were marketed as coming
“from the headlines,” or directly representing contemporary urban reality. Studio
attempts to avoid censorship led to a number of significant changes in Scarface
before its release and, even when it was released, it appeared in different versions
in different states (many of which had different censorship boards). What we now
accept as the standard release version of Scarface opens with a written prologue
directly asking the viewer what should be done about violence in society. The
prologue, along with a scene of a newspaper editor meeting concerned citizens,
was added after censors objected to the film’s violence. The studio responded by
claiming that the film was centrally concerned with violence as a real social
problem. Yet nothing in the film hints either at the causes of its characters’ violence
or at what might be done to eliminate such behavior. In fact, Scarface is notable
for its lack of any real social context. The film represents gangsterism as a form
of male bonding and contrasts it with the family sphere and the home, which is
the traditional place for women. This narrative structure gives central importance
to Tony’s obsessive concern with keeping his sister at home with their mother
and thus far removed from his world of male violence. He fails in this mission:
Cesca (Ann Dvorak), his sister, ends up dying in a hail of police fire.

Such thematic observations contribute to the important awareness that film is
never an unmediated reality but always a construction.Scarface might have had
its inspiration from “the headlines” but is not equivalent to them, just as the
headlines themselves are mediations of the events they report. Scarface has a rig-
orous formal structure.

The X Motif and Male Violence

Howard Hawks, the director, structures the film around a visual
motif of Xs (see chapter 3 on formal analysis). Initially, the X
motif is associated exclusively with male violence but it later
becomes complexly interwoven with the world of women and
romance. Indeed, this is already hinted at in an early use of the
X motif. An X-shaped scar on a close-up of Tony’s face in a
barbershop identifies him as the title character (figure 1.17).
Shortly after, a woman asks him how he got the scar and he
replies, “In the war.” Another gangster cynically interjects,
“Yeah, some war with a blonde in a Brooklyn speakeasy.” Scars
resulting from wars are traditional signs of masculinity that show
that a man has been tested in violence and survived. The scars
imply that he is tough, not weak. Tony’s scar, however, implies
an inability to control women.

Scarface begins with Tony killing a gangster. At the moment
that he fires the shot, we see his shadow fall directly upon the
shadow of a large cross or upright X (figure 1.18). From this
moment on, all the killings will be marked by the presence of the X motif. During a montage of violence, for example, we see a body lying directly over a shadow of an X on the ground and, in a high angle, we see the X shape of street signs above the body (figure 1.19). We see a wounded gangster lying in a hospital bed with an X behind the bed (figure 1.20); moments later, he is shot dead. Another gangster, hiding in a dark room, sits beneath and then stands in front of a large white X on the wall (figure 1.21). He leaves to go bowling and, in a comic variation of the motif, we see him bowl a strike and die while the X is marked on the scoring sheet (figure 1.22). A mass murder of gangsters in a garage takes place beneath a rafter lined with Xs (figure 1.23) and, after the shooting, we see a bright X shape on their bodies (figure 1.24).

**The X Motif and Male–Female Relationships**

In all of these instances, the X motif characterizes the world of male violence. As in the old cliché, X does, indeed, mark the spot. It even functions as a form of foreshadowing, marking some who will soon be dead. Somewhat ominously, then, the
X appears in the first scene between Cesca and Guino Rinaldo (George Raft), one of Tony's comrades. Cesca looks down at Guino, who stands on the street below her balcony. The shape of an X appears in the grill-work of the balcony railing (figure 1.25) and is visible in shots representing both his and her points of view. From the start, their relationship is doomed and they are marked for death. Later, we see Cesca at a party and Tony flies into a rage at her sexual behavior. After Tony confronts her, she turns around and the straps of her sleeveless dress form a large X across her bare back (figure 1.26). She leaves the party and we see a midshot of the X on her back as she stands looking out of her bedroom window, from which she first saw Guino. Although Tony has been obsessed with keeping Cesca out of his world, the X motif of male violence has now literally migrated on to her body.

The uses of the X motif both as a sign of male violence and as signifying a breakdown of Tony's effort to keep Cesca from that world come together in two remarkable scenes. Cesca and Guino, unbeknown to Tony, have got married. Tony, enraged at Cesca's presumed immoral behavior, approaches their apartment. As he rings at the door, we see the Roman numeral X, indicating apartment number ten (figure 1.27). When Guino opens the door, he stands directly in front of a huge, white X on the wall behind him (figure 1.28). Seconds later, Tony shoots him.

Whereas the Roman numeral for ten has a "realistic" explanation for its presence, there is no such explanation for the X on the wall. Like the white X on the
bodies of the massacred men in the garage, it appears painted on. The use of the motif, then, cannot always be explained by reference to the fictional world of the film, as can the doorway motif in *The Searchers* (discussed in chapter 4). Unusual for a Hollywood film, the development of the motif takes precedence over both concerns with realism and the invisible style. The large X on the wall behind Guino is there only because the filmmakers put it there, not because it appears, for example, to be a shadow cast from light coming through a window.

**Incest Theme**

The film ends ironically with Cesca being killed not only with Tony, but in the very sanctuary that he built to protect himself. He virtually imprisons himself in a fortress and yet Cesca enters it. Just as he fails to keep her home with his mother and fails to keep her from entering into a relationship with Guino, he fails to keep her out of his inner sanctuary and then fails to protect her after she enters it. Once again, both death and the failure to separate the two worlds are marked by the X. We see an X on the wall of Tony’s room as he carries his mortally wounded sister to a sofa. That and other Xs are now at the very center of his private sanctuary.

The scene of Cesca’s death points to the unusual relationship Tony has with her. From the very beginning of the film, Cesca talks of something strange about her brother’s relationship with her, and this initiates a sexual subtext in the film. Such a subtext deals implicitly rather than overtly with a sexual theme. The iconography of the climax makes Tony and Cesca appear more like lovers than brother and sister. Her death in Tony’s arms recalls countless scenes of a lover dying in a lover’s embrace. Within the film’s subtext, Tony’s obsession with keeping his sister safely at home with his mother has strong incestuous implications; the intensity of his response at the dance, for example, stems from jealousy rather than protective brotherly love. He must keep Cesca out of his world and, paradoxically, keep her for himself because of his illicit desires for her.

Neither the X motif nor the incest theme is necessary to an understanding of the film’s plot; indeed, many people have enjoyed the film with no awareness of their presence. They do work, however, to develop the complexity and artistic individuality of the film and an awareness of such things can increase our enjoyment of it. Interestingly, the 1983 remake of the film does not develop an X motif and the incest theme is represented quite differently.

**The 1983 Remake of Scarface**

In chapter 6 on series, sequels, and remakes we discuss ways in which films use works of the past. The remake of *Scarface* appeared not only during a time in
which the gangster genre enjoyed a renewed respectability but also during one in which films of the classical Hollywood era were widely quoted. Brian De Palma, the film’s director, has developed a reputation for citing the works of older Hollywood directors like Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock in his own films. He did not do this in isolation but as part of the first generation of Hollywood directors who received their training not as apprentices within the film industry but in academic film schools. These directors appeared after the studio system had collapsed but often referred extensively and nostalgically to its products in their own work. It is indicative of this climate that just a year before De Palma’s Scarface remake appeared, John Carpenter, another film-school graduate, remade Howard Hawks’s production of The Thing (1951).

De Palma’s remake of Scarface seems to tell a story similar to the original. Once again, an ambitious gangster who is overly protective of his sister rises to prominence in the mob and dies. The obvious differences are that De Palma’s film is set in Florida during the 1980s and deals with the drug trade and with emigrés from Castro’s Cuba, while Hawks’s film deals with bootleg liquor and Italian Americans during the 1930s. A closer examination of the relationship between the two films reveals some of the ways in which remakes both differ from and refer back to the original film.

De Palma’s film makes no attempt to slavishly reproduce dominant structures in Hawks’s film but rather deals with Hawks’s material in an innovative fashion. A simple illustration lies in its non-use of the X motif so central to Hawks’s film. Aside from the scar on the title character’s face, there is no X motif in De Palma’s film; it might as easily have a different title. Why, then, is it called Scarface?

Part of the reason points to the film’s profoundly different narrative implications from those of Hawks’s film. The title of Hawks’s film referred to a contemporary reality. Viewers would have associated the name “Scarface” with that of “Scarface” Al Capone, a Chicago gangster active in 1932; this would have underscored the “from the headlines” appeal of the film. For 1983 viewers, however, Al Capone was a long-dead historical figure and the term “Scarface” was likely to invoke not a contemporary gangster but rather a famous old film. This invocation of history is also evident in the narrative context.

The movie opens with newsreel footage of Fidel Castro. We soon see an internment camp in the United States for Cuban refugees in which we witness Tony Montana (Al Pacino), the title character, being interrogated about his criminal past. The historical context of the Cuban migration and later scenes of Montana working in a low-class Cuban restaurant create a social context for Montana’s character and his actions. He is a man motivated by his experiences as a poor immigrant and turns to violence as a way of elevating his class status.

No such scenes nor similar motivations exist for Cameron in Hawk’s film, and the difference is crucial. Hawks’s film focuses so entirely on the role of male violence and the separate sphere of the family that the “real” social world is virtually non-existent. The Depression and Prohibition are reduced to backdrops for the personal relationships. De Palma’s film, to the contrary, literally throws its characters into an international context with several scenes taking place in South
America. Here, the “real” world of social, economic, and class experience is anything but a backdrop; it is a central presence. And just as the film develops much of its meaning from its relationship to then contemporary “headline” issues, it also in its status as a remake courts its relationship to Hollywood history. This makes it an engagement of Hawks’s film, but one with fundamentally different imperatives.

**Ethnicity and Class**

Issues of class and ethnicity figure prominently in each film. Neither of the central characters conforms to the cultural ideal of white, middle-class male but, rather, they come from marginalized immigrant classes in the United States and seek elevation through violent crime. Marked by their accented English, clothes, and social deportment, their behavior engages contemporary *stereotypes* about “those” types of people being “inherently” criminal. The immigrant class for each film is different – Italian Americans in the 1930s as opposed to Cuban Americans in the 1980s – as is the outlawed business they enter – liquor during Prohibition as opposed to illegal drugs in the 1980s – but both films engage contemporary prejudices against immigrant classes. A very real question for us is whether or not the films promote or deflate ethnic stereotypes. And if they promote stereotypes, what significance does that have? We will return to racial and ethnic stereotyping in chapter 13. A related issue emerges in the fact that the working-class gangsters of both films desire to leapfrog the middle class and rise directly into the wealthy, upper class. As we will see in chapter 14 on class, this simply places them in comparably untenable positions.

The study of film tells us not only about artistic objects but also about the cultures from which they come. If we are used to simply going to movies to have a good time, it may seem that thinking about such things as visual style and the manner in which women are represented will take the fun away. We hope in the following chapters, however, to show that the opposite is the case: the more ways one learns about watching and thinking about movies, the more one will get out of them and the more one will enjoy them.

**SELECTED READINGS**

Susan Faludi describes the shift from sympathy for the single woman to the construction of her as evil in the various story and script versions of *Fatal Attraction* in *Backlash* (New York: Doubleday, 1991). Deborah Jermyn rejects Faludi’s notion that the film is a simple backlash against feminism in “Rereading the Bitches from Hell: A Feminist Appropriation of the Female Psychopath,” *Screen*, 37: 3 (Autumn 1966), pp. 251–67. Chris Holmlund analyzes the reception context for the movie, as well as different approaches to character construction in it, in “Reading Character with a Vengeance: The Fatal Attraction Phenomenon,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, 27 (Spring 1991), pp. 25–36.
2

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Jurassic Park and Rashomon

What is a Film About?

If, after seeing a movie, we run into friends who ask us, “What was it about?” we are likely to answer by telling them the story or at least the premise of the story. If the film is Superman Returns (2006), we will talk about how the title character returns to Earth after years of absence to find Lois Lane, the woman he loves, living with a man with whom she has a child, only to discover later that he, Superman, is in fact the child’s father. We would probably also relate part of the epic battle that Superman engages in with the villain Lex Luthor, his arch enemy bent on destroying the United States. With Jurassic Park (1993), we might say something like: “After scientists bring dinosaurs back to life from fossilized DNA fragments, a dinosaur expert is coerced into inspecting a dinosaur park in the hopes that his approval will calm the fears of investors in the park. The dinosaurs break loose, terrifying everyone and killing several people. The survivors escape and the park is closed down.” We might mention the exciting chases and describe some of the main characters and their relationships. Two of the scientists, for example, are potential lovers who are united at the end.

Our friends would probably be happy with these answers. If, however, we answered by saying, “It’s all about this great tracking shot . . .” and then describe a moving camera shot in detail, they would probably look at us strangely. Even with films like Jurassic Park and Superman, which are known for their amazing visual effects, audiences are not likely to say that the films are about those effects but that, rather, they are about their stories and characters. This leads us to the issue of narrative, which is a term for the way in which the story events of a movie are organized; in exploring narrative we explore the structure of those events or the way the story is told.

Feature films are generally perceived first in narrative terms; everything else is secondary. If Steven Spielberg, the director of Jurassic Park, had employed the
same visual effects in a documentary about dinosaurs, it is unlikely that he would have ended up with one of the biggest, worldwide box-office hits of all time. In fact, when he directed its popular sequel, *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997), and served as executive producer on *Jurassic Park III* (2001), he not only used comparable effects but also placed them in a comparable narrative structure. Even though *Jurassic Park* has a strong emphasis on spectacle, that spectacle is part of a narrative. The dinosaurs at the center of the spectacle are even presented like human characters with, for example, the dreaded, deadly Velociraptors becoming “the bad guys.”

**Narrative Primacy**

In chapter 3, we will see that this dominance of narrative in feature filmmaking is not as simple as it seems and that films are as much about their style of storytelling as about the stories they tell; the two may not even be separable. But, for now, let us assume that the story is what interests us in a film. Even that is more complicated than it seems at first. As daily experience tells us, there are many ways to tell a story. We have all been bored by someone telling us a story by relating every detail in exactly the order in which the events happened. We would like to reveal our impatience by saying, “Get on with it” or “Cut to the chase.” The latter expression is revealing for our purposes since it refers to several aspects of filmmaking—cutting and excitement. The term “cut” quite rightly implies that we do not need to hear or see everything to appreciate a story; parts can, and probably should, be left out. The word “chase” implies that some parts of a story, such as the climax of an action film where the hero finally catches up with the villain, are more exciting than other parts, and we want to get to that excitement. Storytelling involves decisions about what gets told and what does not as well as how the events that are told should be arranged. This chapter deals with ways of understanding such narrative decisions.

Let us return to *Jurassic Park*. It begins with a mysterious, darkly lit, night scene in which a group of men transport a cage (figure 2.1). Although we do not see what is in the cage, we hear scary animal sounds, witness violent shaking, and see looks of great anxiety on the faces of the workers, all of which suggest a ferocious beast inside. Moments later, something goes wrong and one of the workers is gruesomely killed. The film then cuts to an entirely different time, place, and setting. This is one instance of the result of a narrative decision. The film could just as easily have started at the chronological “beginning” of its events, with a group of scientists theorizing about how fossilized traces of DNA could be used to return an extinct species to life. We could then have seen their experiments, their efforts to determine where such fossil remains could be found, their journey to the site, and the laborious excavation of the fossils. Had the filmmakers chosen such a route, *Jurassic Park*, instead of being one of the biggest
grosing box-office films of all time, might have quickly wound up in second-run theaters and video store shelves. *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* and *Jurassic Park III* would probably never have been made.

At the simplest level of storytelling, the opening of the film involves us with the events by raising many questions: who are these men and what are they doing? Are they engaged in some forbidden activity that they attempt to hide in the darkness of night? What is in the cage? In addition to all of these story questions, the first scene of the film introduces an important theme: no matter how extreme the precautions and no matter how careful the workers, some unforeseen disaster can take place. This becomes one of the film’s main themes as the story develops to show the dinosaurs that are supposedly safely contained within the theme park break loose and go on a rampage. As with many science-fiction films, *Jurassic Park* develops a theme that apparent scientific progress can be dangerous and threaten the human race.

The decision to begin *Jurassic Park* in mid-action has important implications. In the above-described alternative of following the scientists, audiences would be likely to say, “Cut to the chase.” And that is precisely what Spielberg has done. Or, more accurately, he has cut to a chase but not the chase, for part of the art of storytelling is to build anticipation by delaying the outcome. Thus, Spielberg also knows when to cut to the next portion of the story. After the exciting but mystifying opening scene, we do not learn anything about who the victim was or how anyone in charge of the operation responded to the accident. Many things that could have been told have been left out. The filmmakers proceed from what they consider one important event to another, implicitly telling us that some things are not worth taking the time to relate, or that we will have to wait for the outcomes of some events. These filmmakers do not make such decisions in a vacuum: they have mastered a long-established and highly profitable tradition of narrative filmmaking – the classical Hollywood style.

**Private and Public Goals**

The classical Hollywood narrative style was established around 1915. One of its major requirements is that a film’s plot should have a clear forward direction. One event should logically lead to the next and all should fit together. Such plots generally focus on a small group of people whose goals are very clear; everything in the movie must contribute toward the resolution of those goals. The goals tend to be twofold: a private and a public one. The private one is frequently a heterosexual romance and the public one involves the accomplishment of an important deed or the attainment of something valuable.

Hollywood movies do not need to have happy endings, although many do. What they need are endings that clearly resolve their goals, one way or the other. In one of the most beloved of Hollywood films, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), the hero (Humphrey Bogart) fails in both goals. He does not have a successful romance with the leading lady and he never finds the Maltese Falcon, but the
audience clearly understands why these things do not happen and, therefore, the movie is very much a classical Hollywood narrative. In one sense of the term, all such endings are happy endings since they satisfy audience expectations by tying up all loose ends.

**Plots and Subplots**

There are many ways that we can understand narrative patterns such as those in *Jurassic Park*. Hollywood films frequently have a main dramatic plot with subplots. In *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), for example, the main dramatic plot involves the final mission of a retiring cavalry captain (figure 2.2). A comic subplot revolves around the impending retirement of his sergeant who drinks heavily and thereby risks his pension (figure 2.3). A romantic subplot centers on two young lieutenants who want to marry the same woman (figure 2.4). Near the end of the film, all three plots are resolved when we learn that a new position has been created for the retiring captain, that he has found a way to guarantee that his sergeant’s drunkenness will be contained until retirement, and that the young woman has chosen the suitor she will marry.

Not all films conform to this pattern. *Alien* (1979) is notable for its lack of either a romantic or a comic subplot. The entire film is structured around the dramatic mission of a space crew that encounters alien life forms. Only one crew member is left alive at the end of the film (figure 2.5). *Alien* may be one of the earliest examples of some recent films that resist conventional romantic subplots. We will see in chapter 12 that there are important gender implications in these plot decisions. Unlike *Alien*, which has no romantic subplot, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1990, which we discuss in detail in chapter 12) seems to set up a conventional romantic pairing between a young, beautiful female FBI agent and her attractive, older male supervisor. There is, however, never a moment of romance between them. In the classical Hollywood cinema, they would be united when the crime is solved at the end of the film. This more conventional plot structure can be seen in *In the Line of Fire* (1993), in which an older Secret Service agent falls in love with a younger woman who is assigned to a case with him. By the film’s conclusion, they are romantically coupled.

*The Silence of the Lambs* even points to its unconventional plot structure by including moments in which
two powerful male characters in the film, a doctor and a scientist, attempt to initiate a romantic relationship with the female agent, only to be quickly rebuffed. *A Few Good Men* (1992) is another film that promises the likelihood of a romantic subplot and then thwarts it. The film stars Tom Cruise and Demi Moore, and the star system, which we discuss in chapter 7, implies that these two young, attractive leads are likely to be involved with each other. The plot has the conventional structure of having the young man and woman work together on the same case. There is even a scene where they go out to dinner together, a moment that generally signals the beginning of a romance, but they talk only about work. There is never a moment in which they kiss or even look at each other in a romantic manner.

**Story and Plot**

Our awareness of the significance of such plot decisions will be helped by understanding the distinction between a story and a plot. The term “story” refers to the events that must be narrated and the term “plot” refers to the arrangement of those events as they are told. Story events occur in chronological order; plot events occur in the order the filmmakers choose to present them, and such choices often reveal a good deal about the meaning of the film. The above-cited example of the exciting scene at the beginning of *Jurassic Park* is an example of a filmmaker presenting an event out of story order for plot purposes.

The story of *A Perfect World* (1993) involves two escaped convicts, who kidnap a boy, and the law-enforcement team that pursues them. Anyone telling that story must include the information that one of the convicts is killed by the other and that the boy eventually shoots and mortally wounds the remaining convict, who dies as he is about to be captured. The film begins with a brief scene of haunting images with Kevin Costner, the film’s star, lying in a field (figure 2.6). He appears to be sunning himself on a beautiful day. Dollar bills drift through the air, stirred up by the blades of a helicopter (figure 2.7). Were it not for the somewhat ominous presence of the helicopter (figure 2.8), we would accept these images as the ideal world to which the title refers. After this brief prologue, the film cuts to the convicts making their escape. We only learn near the end of the film that,
far from sunning himself in a utopia bountiful with money, Costner's character lies dead or dying as the police helicopter circles in for a landing.

This kind of rearrangement of narrated events constitutes one significant way in which stories become structured as plots. Other filmmakers might have chosen to begin the story chronologically with the prison escape. Or, if they had chosen to begin with a brief glimpse of the end, they might have made that end clear rather than ambiguous. Indeed, the poetic ambiguity arising from the opening of _A Perfect World_ supplies a highly unusual plot structure, since the audience is left wondering about what they have just seen and what its importance is for what follows. In this regard, the prologue to _Jurassic Park_ is more conventional, since it clearly establishes the idea of a threat that humans cannot adequately contain and control.

**Flashbacks and Plot Structure**

_Intersection_ (1994) uses a related device for structuring story events into a plot. It begins with its central character driving in his car. To avoid an accident, he slams on his brakes and goes into a skid. The film cuts to shots of a clock's mechanism and then to a **flashback**. Near the end of the film, we recognize the same shots that the film opened with and the skid leads to a crash. The film then continues in present time. This flashback structure, which is emphasized by repeated shots of the clock's mechanism, creates a plot with added suspense. Instead of just watching the story events unfold, we keep wondering when the skidding car will reappear and what will happen to its driver.

Since the 1940s, flashbacks have been a common device filmmakers use to structure their plots. _Citizen Kane_ (1941), perhaps the most critically praised American film ever made (which we analyze in detail in chapter 15), begins with the mysterious death of its central character. He drops an object and utters a meaningless word as he dies. The entire film is structured around a reporter's quest to learn what the final word spoken by this powerful man meant. As the reporter interviews acquaintances, we get flashback segments about Kane's life. The story of his life would have begun with his birth and proceeded to the writing of the story of his death; the plot, however, begins near the end of that story, and then jumps back and forth among its events.

_The Man who Shot Liberty Valance_ (1962) also makes important use of a flashback structure, but in a different manner. It begins and ends with a frame story. A US senator and his wife come to a Western town for the funeral of an old, forgotten man (figure 2.9). Rather than supplying a brief prologue, the frame story introduces many of the main characters and delineates relationships among them. The senator then tells his story about meeting the man whose funeral he is attending.
(figure 2.10). At this point, a flashback begins and the main portion of the film takes place within the time of the flashback when the senator and his wife were young (figure 2.11). *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* contains the unusual plot structure of a flashback within a flashback. Within the tale the senator narrates, another character tells him that he is mistaken about what happened during a shoot-out (figure 2.12). We then see the shoot-out again, this time from that other character’s perspective. When he finishes, the film returns to the senator’s flashback and, shortly after that, it returns to the frame story. Now we know the truth about who shot Liberty Valance.

*Citizen Kane* and *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* are particularly instructive for illustrating the crucial difference between a story and a plot because they both structure their plots around people telling stories. *Citizen Kane* could have told the same story by beginning with the events in the life of the little boy and progressing through his education, career as a politician and newspaper editor, marriage, divorce and remarriage, and ending with his reclusive old age and death. Similarly, *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* could have begun with the senator arriving in the town as a young man and progressed through his election as senator and ended with his return to the town for the funeral of his old friend. By presenting these story events out of temporal order and from the perspective of various characters, these films show how not only what we learn, but also when we learn it and from whom, can be important parts of narration. The same story can yield an infinite number of plots, some of which will be more interesting and exciting than others.

Since the late 1980s there have been a number of major experiments in mainstream cinema with classical narrative form. Quentin Tarantino, for example, has manipulated traditional expectations about narrative gaps. As discussed above, expressions like “cut to the chase” indicate a desire to eliminate tedious intermediary events and move on to narratively important material. If, for example, we see a bank robber prepare to leave his home by placing his pistol, ski mask, and the floor plan of the bank in his pocket, we then want to see him robbing the bank. We don’t want to see him walking to and opening his car door, starting it up, and driving for twenty minutes to the bank. Hence, when we see him preparing for the robbery and then see him at the robbery, we presume the activities elided are irrelevant. Tarantino, in films like *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Jackie Brown* (1997), has inserted major sequences involving events that have occurred during earlier parts of the story into the narrative at places where the audience presumes that they know everything relevant about what has already happened. It thus comes as a jolt in such films to discover that significant
events involving major characters have occurred during earlier gaps in the storyline that, hitherto, have seemed irrelevant.

Robert Altman has long employed non-traditional narrative structures, perhaps beginning with *Nashville* (1975) and clearly evident in *A Wedding* (1978) and *Short Cuts* (1993), in which he employs an almost bewildering number of characters with only the most tangential connections. Some never even meet. The films are much more about their cross-section of characters than about any common narrative direction and clearly defy the dominant paradigm of a limited group of characters heading toward a clear, common goal. But Altman is not alone. Highly respected recent films such as *Magnolia* (1999), *Crash* (2004), *Syriana* (2005), *Sin City* (2005, see chapter 5), and *Babel* (2006) work in a comparable manner. They weave a loosely structured narrative employing diverse narrative strands (at times set in different parts of the world) and involving characters of different social classes who may never even have met. This is not to say that the films are not formally and thematically rigorous, but their very diversity decenters the primacy of traditional narrative structures. The events in the films are important but, unlike traditional Hollywood films, we have the sense that many of those events could be replaced by others that could serve as significant a purpose. Such films do not generate the sense of the centrality and inevitability of their plot events.

A film that initially seems to promise, but then entirely denies, such a traditional narrative structure is *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) which centers upon the famous image of the raising of the American flag during the World War II battle of Iwo Jima. Other Hollywood films have dealt with the battle, most famously *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) starring a heroic John Wayne. That film shows the US assault on the island and presents the flag-raising as signifying definitive victory as well as the imminent wrap-up of the narrative. In *Flags of Our Fathers*, however, the flag-raising comes at the beginning and not at the end. It does not signify triumphant and conclusive victory but rather one stage in a battle that continued long after the flag had been raised. It does not wrap up a narrative of military triumph but instead initiates one that is much more about unraveling traditional narrative expectations than fulfilling them. Although the film does focus upon a relatively small group of soldiers, it stresses that not only did they come together by accident but also that it is unclear precisely which soldiers were even represented in the photograph. Not only that, but there were two photographs and two flags raised. The film has no stars and no central character, and the soldiers depicted immediately become caught up in social and political forces they barely understand. They have virtually nothing in common with one another and little connection after the event. Although it is an American war film dealing with a famous victory, it fulfills few of the traditional expectations about such films. It does not present glorious heroism or redemptive violence and does not subsume the sacrifices of the men who died on the island under these notions. It was directed by Clint Eastwood, whom some have called John Wayne’s successor as a Hollywood action hero. Eastwood has acted in and directed war films about
military triumph. Here, however, he directs a film that profoundly undercuts the cultural and political premises upon which such films have been based, and he does it using a narrative structure that undercuts classical Hollywood narrative conventions.

Free and Bound Motifs

In examining classical narrative structure, learning the significance of the reorderings of story events, with strategies such as flashbacks, is one of the most important reasons for making the distinction between a story and a plot, but other narrative distinctions are helpful also. An equally important one involves the difference between a free motif and a bound motif. Motifs result from the repetition of visual images or sounds in a manner that forms a perceptible pattern. These patterns may or may not have thematic meaning (in Hollywood cinema they usually do), but they structure the film by ordering sights and sounds.

A bound motif is one that is necessary for telling a story. In Fatal Attraction (see chapter 1), the child's pet rabbit is a bound motif since it is a necessary part of the story that we see it boiled in a pot by Alex (figure 2.13), demonstrating just how far she will go to terrorize Dan. The images of slaughtered animals that we constantly see outside Alex's apartment, however, are a free motif (figure 2.14). By situating her apartment in a meat-packing area, the film implies that the kind of one-night-stand, no-commitment sex in which the lovers engage dehumanizes human beings and reduces them to little more than meat. In Intersection, cars are a bound motif in that any filmmaker must include the car crash in narrating that story. The story cannot be told without cars but repeated shots of the clock mechanism, on the other hand, are a free motif that stresses the idea that time is running out for the central male character, who is having a midlife crisis. In Stagecoach (1939), the stagecoach referred to in the title and in which the passengers travel is a bound motif. Any film that narrates the story of those passengers taking that trip through the Western wilderness must include the coach. In this film, however, two of the characters on the coach, the Ringo Kid and Hatfield, both wear similar large white hats. In many ways, they are opposite characters. The Ringo Kid is the Western hero and Hatfield is a displaced Southern gentleman who has become a gambler. The similarity in their hats, however, suggests a similarity between them and, in fact, they each live their lives and even risk death to follow a strict code of behavior. This hat motif, which also includes other characters in the film, is a free motif since the story of the journey can be told (and, in fact, has been told in remakes) without a hat motif.
Scarface (1932), which we analyzed in chapter 1, includes the careful use of an X motif, which initially refers to an X-shaped scar on a gangster’s face (figure 2.15). Since the film’s title refers to its central character’s face and since the dialogue in one scene refers to it, the scar is a bound motif. Throughout the film, however, Xs are carefully placed in scenes in which gangsters are killed. Sometimes they are presented as a natural part of the setting, such as a street sign, an “X” mark on a score sheet in a bowling alley, or a Roman numeral on the door of apartment ten (see figures 1.19, 1.22 and 1.27 in chapter 1). On other occasions, however, they simply appear in the frame with no plausible explanation of where they are coming from. Before the gangster in apartment ten is killed, for example, we see the Roman numeral on the door (figure 1.27). When he opens the door, we see a large white X on the wall behind him (figure 1.28). No object or light source accounts for its presence; it simply appears painted on the wall. The X motif, which characterizes male violence in the film and which indicates that someone will be killed, is also then a free motif. The story can be told (and has been in a remake) without the motif.

Similarly, the film has a major sound motif linked to its central character. During the film’s opening scene, the gangster with the scarred face whistles as he prepares to shoot his first victim. Later, when we see him walking down the hall to apartment ten, we hear him whistle the same tune. In this case the sound motif signals the same thing that the visual motif of the X does: the gangster in apartment ten is doomed. This sound motif is also a free one. The gangster’s story can be told without hearing him whistle before he shoots someone.

Free Motifs, Aesthetic Complexity, and Thematic Meaning

Free motifs frequently give aesthetic complexity and thematic meaning to films. In The Man who Shot Liberty Valance, we have seen how the rearrangement of the story events into a complex flashback structure creates an interesting plot. That plot is further structured around several free visual motifs including doorways and letters of the alphabet. The doorway motif relates primarily to Tom Doniphon, a central character. He is frequently framed through and by doorways which suggest that he is separated from the spaces and characters within – that he somehow does not fit in the social order (figure 2.16). The narrative action in the film confirms this when Doniphon loses both his “girlfriend” and his political power in the town of Shinbone, dying a forgotten old man. He is associated with the old West at a time of transition and he does not fit into the new order. The new order is associated with literacy, as opposed to the law of the gun, and its chief proponent is Ransom Stoddard, a lawyer and schoolteacher. He is associated with the letters of the alphabet that he teaches to the townspeople and with which he introduces new ideas about law and order. At a key
point in the film, he stands in the street outside the newspaper office at night and the shadow of a letter on the window falls on his body (figure 2.17). As he prepares for a gunfight, he does so in the name of literacy.

We have also seen how the opening of *A Perfect World* rearranges narrative events to create its plot. Like *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance*, *A Perfect World* uses free visual motifs to give complexity to its plot. After one of the kidnappers has been killed, the other takes the boy to a clothing store, since he is wearing only underwear. Due to a strict religious upbringing, the boy has never worn a Halloween costume, and he takes a ghost costume with a mask from the store. Excited by the opportunity to wear the mask, which had been forbidden, the boy wears it for most of the rest of the film. When he’s not wearing the mask on his face, it is pushed up on his head. Several shots emphasize this strange costume by placing the mask prominently in the composition (figure 2.18). This motif strongly affects the tone of many scenes by juxtaposing this image of child’s play with the deadly serious circumstances of crime, violence, and death in which this child finds himself. The child’s invocation of fear and death by playfully pretending to be a ghost reflects the truly adult world of fear and death that we witness.

In *Psycho* (1960) birds and mirrors are important free motifs. Norman Bates, the psychotic murderer of the film’s title, pursues taxidermy as a hobby. His room is full of stuffed birds, which associate him with attack birds and a woman he is about to kill with innocent songbirds. He talks about his life as if he were a bird trapped in a cage. At one point, he even stands in front of a tree branch, seemingly perched upon it as he nibbles at food reminiscent of bird seed. The action takes place near Phoenix, a city named after a bird.

At the end of the film, we discover that birds are not all Norman has been stuffing. He has stuffed his mother and, at times, taken her place by dressing and talking like her; he is really two people – himself and his mother. This duality is not, however, limited to Norman. Nearly all the characters in the film lead some sort of double life. Marion, who becomes Norman’s victim, is a decent, hard-working woman who takes care of her younger sister, but she also hides an affair from her and steals money. At several points in the film we see her image reflected in a mirror – in an hotel after an illicit lunchtime affair (figure 2.19), in her apartment after she has stolen the money, and in the Bates Motel when she checks in under an assumed
name. These mirror images are free visual motifs that develop her character as one with a hidden, double side. Norman is literally two people and Marion is figuratively two people.

Color can be used as a free visual motif. *Dead Ringers* (1988) tells the story of twin gynecologists who operate a fertility clinic for women. The opening credit sequence is set against a bright red background. There is much talk in the film about menstruation and, during the film's climax, we see blood as one of the twins kills the other. Furthermore, red has strong cultural connotations that associate it with blood. During several scenes in the film, we see surgical procedures in which the brothers as well as the entire surgical team are dressed in bright red robes and hoods that cover their entire bodies, again, strongly connoting blood.

**The Revelation of Narrative Truth**

Another way of understanding narratives focuses on how they reveal their "truth" to us. By the time most films are over, we feel that we know what has happened. In fact, the common feeling that the film is about to end usually means we know that the main plot elements have been resolved. Sometimes and most obviously this comes when a main character dies, as in *Scarface* with the gangster, in *King Kong* (1933 and 2005, see chapter 6) with the title character, and in *Titanic* (1997) with one of the central lovers. But death need not be involved, simply the evident resolution of major plot events. In *Jurassic Park* the entrepreneur declares the park unsafe and several of the main characters, including the romantic couple, escape unharmed; in *Stagecoach* most of the passengers survive the dangerous journey and the hero is romantically united with the woman he loves; in *Independence Day* (1996) the alien invasion is defeated and the two Americans who destroyed the alien mothership return safely to earth; and in *A Perfect World* the kidnapper dies and the boy is safely returned to his mother. But how do narratives maintain our interest until they are resolved, and what is the significance of the fact that we walk out of the theater feeling that we "know" what has happened? Indeed, this feeling is so standard with Hollywood films that it comes as a surprise to many viewers to discover that in some styles of filmmaking the audience does not always know either what has happened or why it has happened.

We mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that filmmakers frequently begin their films by cutting to the chase; that is, by placing a significant or exciting piece of action at the beginning of the film: the death of the old man in *Citizen Kane* or the death of the worker transporting the beast in the cage in *Jurassic Park*. Yet, these are obviously not the chase that implies the end of the action and the end of the story. These instances raise many questions that remain unanswered. What is the importance of the object that the old man holds in his hands and what does his dying word mean? What additional threats do the beasts in the cage pose to the humans who attempt to control them?
Narrative Questions: Delays, Snares, and Answers

Hollywood films typically pose a variety of narrative questions and then answer them using delays and snares. The viewer of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, for example, is snared into believing that Ransom Stoddard, the Eastern lawyer, shot Liberty Valance, the outlaw of the title, in a fair gunfight. Even Stoddard believes that. However, later in the film, we learn that Tom Doniphon secretly shot Valance from an alley. Both Stoddard and we, the spectators of the film, were fooled into believing Stoddard had done it.

Delays sustain spectator interest. In *Fatal Attraction*, if, after the first time that Dan rebuffs Alex’s attempts to continue their affair, Alex entered his home, threatened his wife with a knife, and was shot dead, the film would be too quickly — there would not be “enough” story. This simple example shows us that we have come to expect movies to resolve their main narrative questions at a certain rate because, when those questions are resolved, we presume the story will soon be over — which indeed is the case when we see Alex killed or learn that Tom Doniphon, not Ransom Stoddard, killed Liberty Valance. *Citizen Kane* supplies a simple variation: the reporters trying to find out what the dying man’s word meant fail in their mission, but we the spectators are privy to a shot that at least partially answers the question for us — Kane died referring to a childhood sled on which we saw him playing in the snow during one of the flashbacks. The snow also explains the glass ball with snow that he holds in his hands and drops at the moment of his death.

Our interest in Hollywood films is not sustained, however, solely by awaiting the answer to a big question that is usually delayed for ninety minutes or more. Some questions are posed and then answered quickly but nevertheless intensify our interest for short periods of time. In *Fatal Attraction*, as soon as we learn that the mother is surprised to find a pot boiling on the stove, we see the little girl running to her rabbit’s cage. We wonder and probably fear what the connection between these two seemingly disparate actions is but, after a few moments of cross-cutting, we learn the answer when we simultaneously see the mother discover the rabbit in the pot and the girl discover it missing from the cage.

Other narrative questions are posed and answered at different rates from that of the extremely long delay of the major question or the extremely brief delay of a question such as what’s in the pot and what does it have to do with the girl running to her pet’s cage? After Dan sleeps with Alex and she pursues the relationship, we wonder: will he leave his wife for Alex? Will his wife find out and, if so, how will she respond? Will this affair wreck their marriage? The answers to these questions are somewhat delayed but, after the rabbit is killed, Dan decides to tell his wife that he knows who did it. She asks if he is having an affair and he replies truthfully that he is. We now know the answer to the question “Will she find out?” Although she tells him to get out of the house and he packs and leaves, we still wonder whether or not they will reconcile. The answer comes when she has a car accident and Dan rushes to her side in the hospital. She decides to
forgive him. Dan notifies the police of Alex’s crimes and harassment but, when they go to question her, they cannot find her. Thus, a new question is opened immediately: what will this deranged woman do next? We learn the answer in the next scene when she invades the home with a knife. The climax includes a snare, since the audience breathes a sigh of relief when they think Alex has been drowned, but she suddenly rises from the tub, knife in hand, and is then shot by the wife. Now we know what the word “fatal” refers to in the film’s title, and the main question as to how these relationships will be resolved is answered.

We will see in chapter 12 that this ending and indeed Alex’s behavior throughout the film reveal strong assumptions about gender and sexuality. But for now the important thing to notice is how the structure of posing and then delaying the answers to various questions moves the viewer through the film by promising that everything will be explained and that, when all the important questions have been answered, he or she will know the truth about this story. A film like Stage Fright (1950) wreaks temporary havoc with these assumptions when the audience learns that what they have accepted as the truth in a flashback is in actuality a lie. In most films, such as The Man who Shot Liberty Valance, flashbacks normally reveal what “really” happened. Stage Fright tricks us by giving us a duplicitous flashback. In this case, however, both the character and the film lie to us. But since the lie is revealed, everything is set right in the end and we do know the truth about what has happened.

Classical narrative films operate upon the assumption that there is a truth to every story and that revealing that truth is the goal of storytelling. Other traditions of narrative filmmaking do not operate on such presumptions. We will see shortly with Rashomon (1950) that it is possible to deny the single truth of a story. It is also possible not to explain what has happened or why it has happened. The “what” and the “why” are central to Hollywood narration and, therefore, in Fatal Attraction we learn that part of Alex’s psychological problems derive from her relationship with her father. We similarly learn that Dan is ripe for an affair since his domestic life is full of interruptions ranging from the dog to his daughter and visiting friends that constantly frustrate his sexual desires for his wife. Thus we understand why Dan and Alex do what they do.

Art Cinema and Narrative Ambiguity

By way of contrast, in Nagisa Oshima’s In the Realm of the Senses (1976), a Japanese film about an obsessive affair, we learn nothing about why the husband leaves his wife and enters into the affair with the woman (figure 2.20) and, although we learn that the woman is “hypersensitive,” we learn nothing about what caused this hypersensitivity or anything else about the woman’s background. The lovers simply devote themselves totally to their passion. Similarly, in Oshima’s Death by Hanging (1968) and The Man who Left his Will on Film
(1970), we never even learn what has taken place. In the former film, we repeatedly see the same man executed but, if he has already been killed, how can he be killed again? In the latter film, we see two people try to understand the death of a third but we never really learn what happened to the title character, who died with his camera recording his death.

Films within the post-World War II European and international art cinema tradition frequently present characters whose actions are psychologically explained. Why they do what they do remains unknowable. Their behavior cannot be explained with reference to their childhood or to a past traumatic event. The title character of the French film *Pickpocket* (1959) devotes his life to pickpocketing. Yet, we never learn why he has become this kind of criminal or why, at the end of the film, he suddenly accepts the love of a woman. In *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), another French art film, we see an encounter between three people in a luxury hotel but are totally confused as to what is real and what is not; the film’s conclusion does nothing to resolve that confusion.

The “Real” World and Narrative Truth

Narratives employ various kinds of references to the “real” world as a way of explaining the actions of their characters. Hollywood films draw a close connection between these references to the “truth” of life and the truth we learn at the end of the story when the main question posed by the narrative is answered. In *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977), a woman finds herself in danger from a man she picks up in a New York singles bar. The audience is likely to understand the man’s bizarre behavior by saying to themselves, “That’s the kind of person who’s likely to hang out at that kind of bar.” Although most people have never been to New York singles bars in the 1970s or met a man like the pervert in the film, they feel that they “know” what such bars and such perverts are like. This supposed “knowledge,” however, is based upon cultural assumptions about the way things are. If some people do not share those assumptions, they may be puzzled or outraged by what they see. At times cultural assumptions can shift. A simple example is assumptions about space aliens. In the 1950s, in films like *The Thing* (1951) or *Invaders from Mars* (1953), they were usually evil and murderous. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, with films like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), they often appeared benign. More recently, films like *Predator* (1987) and *Independence Day* (1996) have returned to the evil representational pattern.

Imagine someone with no knowledge of our culture watching a film in which a woman in a dangerous situation suddenly starts screaming and behaving irrationally until a man slaps her and brings her to her senses. The action would be inexplicable. If, however, spectators share (this does not necessarily mean accept) the knowledge of the common cultural assumption that women get hysterical in the face of danger and that men retain their composure, then the action is comprehensible. We will see in the following chapters that these apparent “truths”
have strong political implications and that narratives often confirm for us what we think we already know. But, for now, it is sufficient to note that the manner in which narratives refer to commonly accepted truths about the real world and the manner in which they relate the “truth” of the story they are telling combine to give spectators a strong sense of possessing truth about life.

We now turn to a detailed analysis of *Jurassic Park* and *Rashomon* to illustrate many of the general observations we have just made about narrative. We have chosen *Jurassic Park* since it is likely that most students will already have seen it and since its box-office success is directly related to the manner in which it successfully characterizes the current Hollywood style of narration. We have chosen *Rashomon*, a Japanese film, as a contrasting example of a distinctly alternative style of film narration with which most students will not be familiar.

**Jurassic Park (1993)**

*Jurassic Park* is one of the most popular movies ever made, and the reasons, at first, seem obvious – dinosaurs and the “realistic” special effects. As we pointed out earlier, however, those effects would not have had nearly the popularity of *Jurassic Park* if the movie had been a documentary study of dinosaurs. But if those “realistic” and terrifying dinosaurs alone did not bring people to the theaters in droves, what did? Part of the answer lies in the film’s use of narrative.

**Public and Private Narrative Goals**

The public goal of *Jurassic Park* is established very early in the film. Multimillionaire John Hammond has nearly completed an amusement park with real dinosaurs but, because a dinosaur kills a worker, his investors want a dinosaur expert, Alan Grant, to assure them that the park will be safe and that they will not lose their investment. Throughout the movie, we see what Grant sees, or soon learns, about the park. At the end, he declares the park unsafe, and John Hammond agrees with him.

The movie does not show us any of the investors. We see few of the scientists who achieved the startling accomplishment of creating the dinosaurs, and few of the people who designed the park. They might be important to the park but not to the way this classical narrative deals with the park. This story focuses on the small group who takes the first tour of the park and the exciting dangers they encounter. Unlike what we will soon learn about *Rashomon*, the truth of what we see is never called into question. It is all so clearly and unambiguously “true” that even Hammond eventually agrees with Grant that the park should not open.

Virtually every event in the plot moves toward this conclusion. Once the major question is established, everything in the movie contributes directly to its
resolution. If an event does not do this, it has no place in this type of movie. When Hammond’s grandchildren arrive, we learn nothing of their parents, their past history with Hammond, or their home life. A different kind of film might have developed some of those aspects; here, the children matter only in so far as they further the plot. They are in this movie as evidence that Hammond will risk his family to ensure the park’s safety and to provide innocent and vulnerable potential victims to enhance the dinosaurs’ threats.

The children also relate to the private goal of the film. Hollywood narration is flexible and has modified over the years to accommodate a wide variety of structures. Indeed, *Jurassic Park*, like many other contemporary films, has much more emphasis on spectacle and less time devoted to its character development than most classical Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s. Nor does every movie need an explicit romantic plot, and Spielberg’s films tend to have minimal interest in romance, focusing more on displaced children and family concerns. Here, while a romantic subplot exists, little time is spent developing it. Alan Grant is living with Ellie Sattler and, although there is a potential rival for her affections, none of this is developed in any detail. Rather, Alan’s dislike of children is established near the beginning of the film. He even takes pleasure in terrifying one smug youngster with a tale of a Velociraptor attack. As the film develops, however, he saves the lives of Hammond’s grandchildren and, through them, becomes more tolerant of children, thus apparently deepening his relationship with Ellie. The movie ends with a strong sense of them as an intact “couple.”

**Narrative Unity**

At the beginning of the movie, when all arrive on the island in a helicopter, we see Hammond walking toward the camera in smiling anticipation of the wonders his park has to display (figure 2.21). At the end of the film, as all are escaping, Hammond is on the same helicopter pad and again walks toward the camera in much the same way as he had in the beginning of the film, only now the look on his face is sad: his dream has been destroyed (figure 2.22). These two rhyming shots provide a unifying frame for the whole film. Their similarity reminds the viewer at the end of the beginning and how the whole film, in a way, falls between the two states of Hammond’s mind. His goal was clear at the beginning; its failure is now clear at the end.

Everything in the movie contributes to our awareness of the failure of Hammond’s dream, even the major subplot, which concerns the efforts of a traitorous employee, Dennis, to steal some of Hammond’s discoveries for a rival corporation. He
places important embryos in a specially rigged aerosol shaving-cream can and shuts down some of the park’s systems so that he can escape with the can. His efforts fail, however, when he gets his jeep stuck in the jungle and is killed by a Dilophosaurus. The shaving-cream can rolls off and disappears in the mud.

This at first seems to be a trivial deviation from the main plot but, upon closer inspection, we can see its relationship to the rest of the movie. First, it does influence the main plot since Dennis’s shutting down of the computer systems in the park causes the breakdown of the safety systems that allows the dinosaurs to escape. Secondly, the very non-success of his plan gives a prophetic parallel for the failure of the park as a whole. The safety systems are a bound motif since his shutting them down is directly related to the progress of the plot. The aerosol can is a free motif that is not essential to the story the film tells but it provides symbolic reinforcement for the notion that the park is dangerous because too many things can go wrong. The free motif of the aerosol can, which includes the image of it now worth millions of dollars but lost in the jungle (figure 2.23), is a reinforcement of the major theme that humanity at its most powerful and ambitious is no match for the forces of nature.

All the film’s subplots provide complications to and commentary on the main plot. Late in the film, Hammond’s two grandchildren are in the visitor center recuperating from a dinosaur attack. On the wall behind them is a backlit mural of dinosaurs in a prehistoric setting. Suddenly, the silhouette of a real dinosaur appears behind the painting and covers the figure of a painted dinosaur; the children are now in real danger (figure 2.24).

This tells us a good deal about the movie’s narrative priorities. The children are in the foreground; the ancient world of the dinosaurs is depicted in the background. The movie is not a documentary about the world of dinosaurs. It gives only as much information about them as we need to make the story of the characters’ plight understandable. As soon as we get the background sketched out, we go on to the real threat to the children.

Plot Confusion and Clarification

In a similar way, the movie does not immediately give us its main narrative goal but first, although very briefly, establishes a context to make that goal compelling and meaningful. Its first three scenes mystify and tease us as much as they inform us. In the first, shot at night and near Costa Rica, we see a man killed by something ferocious in a closed container. We are not shown what it is but we do know that the stern, well-armed men surrounding it are afraid of it. All we see of it are brief glimpses, including a shot of a sinister eye looking out.
In the second scene, set in the Dominican Republic, we see a lawyer, looking out of place in his suit, come awkwardly ashore on a raft. He speaks with a scientist about the investors who are anxious about the “accident” and want verification of their investment by Alan Grant. The scientist is skeptical about Grant’s willingness to become involved but, during the scene, becomes excited by the discovery of a mosquito mummified in amber. Now the viewer is even more puzzled. Is the “accident” the death we saw in the first scene? If so, why was that scene set near a country in Central America and this one set in an island in the Caribbean? Who are the investors and why are they insecure? Who is Alan Grant? What is the significance of the mosquito?

In the third scene we see paleontologists on a dig in Montana delicately uncovering the bones of a dinosaur. We now see Alan Grant, the respected leader of the group. When he talks of a Velociraptor, a boy makes fun of it, saying it sounds like a six-foot turkey. Grant, using a real Velociraptor claw, describes the dinosaur’s hunting methods in ways so detailed and dramatic that he makes the dinosaur “come alive” for the now-awestruck boy.

This scene resembles the one with the children in front of the mural since the plot first gives the viewer enough information to understand what is going on, then makes it “come alive” or enter the action, whether by terrifying the boy with the claw or having the Velociraptors attack the children. The two scenes are further related in that Alan’s knowledge is of a danger millions of years removed from his reality. By the time he meets the children in Jurassic Park, the dinosaurs he animates through words are very real and life-threatening.

Later in the scene the dig is disturbed by John Hammond’s aggressive helicopter landing, his intrusion into Grant’s trailer, and coercion of Grant and his companion to accompany him to Jurassic Park to restore investor confidence. We still know nothing about what is going on at the park, and we have a number of unexplained or barely explained pieces of evidence to try to piece together.

This is a traditional way of beginning a Hollywood movie by structuring the story into a plot that puzzles the viewer but then quickly draws all the threads together to inform the viewer of the major issues at stake. In Jurassic Park we see Hammond, Grant, and others arrive at the park, the nature of which is still unexplained until, driving through a meadow, Grant suddenly becomes awestruck by the sight of a number of real Brachiosaurus dinosaurs. Soon after, he gets a tour in which the rationale for the park is explained. We see an educational film and tour showing how dinosaur DNA was extracted from mosquitoes which had drunk dinosaur blood and become trapped and mummified in amber. The tour also shows how the dinosaurs are bred, hatched, and contained in the park.

Where the beginning of the film seemed concerned with mystifying, the film suddenly goes out of its way to clarify. It almost parodies Hollywood narrative techniques by literally incorporating an educational film into itself, in case anyone does not realize that major questions are now being answered. We now know why the scientist was so excited to find the mosquito in amber, why the “accident” threatened investor confidence in the park, which was to open soon if it
could be proved safe, and why Alan Grant, a noted dinosaur expert, is needed to declare the park safe.

By this point in the movie, Spielberg and his screenwriters have given us enough information to make the plot credible, and given it in ways tantalizing enough to whet our interest. The major question of the plot has been clearly defined, “Will Alan Grant declare the park safe?”

Now the delaying begins. Alan and a number of characters take a tour of the park. First, they go to the Dilophosaurus area. A recorded message tells them what to look for, but no Dilophosaurus show up. Then they go to the area of the Tyrannosaurus Rex but, again, it fails to show up. One of the characters even sarcastically asks Hammond if there are going to be any dinosaurs on his dinosaur tour. They then come upon a sick and disabled Triceratops.

The movie’s first scene presented a scary and murderous dinosaur. Even though we never see it fully, its threat is real. But once we reach Jurassic Park, the threat is muted. The first dinosaurs we see are the graceful and unthreatening Brachiosaurses, not at night but in sunny daylight. Then we don’t see either the expected Dilophosaurus or the Tyrannosaurus Rex; then we see a virtually comatose Triceratops. But then the action begins. A storm comes and the traitorous Dennis shuts down the park’s safety mechanisms. The Tyrannosaurus Rex attacks the tour cars and kills the lawyer, and a Dilophosaurus kills Dennis.

The beginning of the movie does what the rest of the movie never does – it confuses us. We do not know what is going on. This does not happen in the body of the film, which certainly scares us, but we know very clearly what is going on, how it has been developing, and what is at stake. We follow the fate of a few people, and the action moves forward unrelentingly. We may be scared but we are never confused, especially at the end. Such things make Jurassic Park very much a classical Hollywood narrative, but very few of them are at work in Rashomon.

Rashomon (1950)

Rashomon, which is probably the most praised Japanese movie ever made, begins like many Hollywood movies: we are presented with a mystery, an unanswered question. A woodcutter mutters over and over again to a priest, “I don’t understand it. I don’t understand it at all” (figure 2.25). A commoner arrives and asks what it is that he does not understand. The priest amplifies the confusion by saying that even Abbot Konin of Kiyomian Temple would not understand it. The woodcutter starts to tell the story, and we see a flashback from three days earlier that begins to define the question for us. The woodcutter, walking through a forest, comes upon a hat, a rope, and an amulet case strewn along the way. He is then shocked to find a dead body.
Narrative Confusion without Clarification

At this point, nothing could be more like a classical Hollywood narrative. *Citizen Kane* (1941) opens with a dying man saying “Rosebud” and nobody knows what the word means, so the movie becomes a quest to learn its meaning. *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) opens with the main character blindfolded in a sinister interrogation room asking a police officer, “Boys tell me I did a couple of murders. Anything in it?” The rest of the movie answers the question. And *Jurassic Park* opens with an attack by something monstrous and a number of other confusing events.

In *Citizen Kane* we learn what “Rosebud” means – it was the name of a sled that the man cherished as a boy; in *Murder, My Sweet*, we learn who committed the murders and why the main character is blindfolded; in *Jurassic Park*, the confusing events are quickly cleared up. *Rashomon* does not work that way. We see testimony at a trial from the priest who saw the man and his wife before the man was killed and then testimony from a man who captured the bandit who confesses to the killing. The man claims that the bandit had fallen from his horse. The bandit interrupts this testimony, saying he did not fall off the horse at all but was sick from drinking from a poisoned stream and was resting. He then admits killing the man with a sword and raping his wife.

Unresolved Contradictions

The question of whether the bandit fell from his horse or climbed off to rest seems like a minor one but it points to major aspects of the movie. It is the first outright contradiction in the film, and it is never resolved. Later, the wife tells the story of the rape and killing, but her story contradicts that of the bandit. In her version, she, and not the bandit, may have killed her husband with a dagger. One would think that, since the killing was only days ago and the body was found, it would be a simple matter to check to see if the body had a sword or dagger wound in it, but we never learn why this apparently was not done. Nor do we even learn the outcome of the trial or see the judges.

Furthermore, the priest says that not only was the woman’s story completely different from the bandit’s but that he also disagrees entirely with the bandit’s characterization of the woman. The bandit found her strong, the priest found her pitiable. Now we not only have contradictions about the events but also contradictions about perceptions of the people involved. Since much of the material is given to us in flashbacks, we also see the contradictory material played out. The commoner, the only character with no direct experience of the events, says that, the more he hears, the more confused he becomes. Viewers share his confusion.

In a classical Hollywood movie like *Jurassic Park*, this would be the time for Steven Spielberg to come galloping to the rescue with an educational-type film
clarifying things and focusing on the main question posed by the film. Instead of clarifying the situation, however, Kurosawa now gives us another version that contradicts the first two. To compound the confusion, this version is told by the dead man through a medium. Granted, the movie is set in the twelfth century, but it is for twentieth-century audiences who are likely to seriously question the reliability of a dead man’s testimony told through a dancing conjurer. However, the flashbacks of the medium’s tale are shown in the same manner and with equal reliability as the first two, and the very presence of the conjurer at the trial implies that the testimony is given equal weight by the judges. In this tale, the husband is not murdered at all but commits suicide with the dagger.

*Citizen Kane* might be seen as comparable to this movie since we get incidents from Kane’s life told by people with different perceptions of him. They agree, however, about factual information and disagree only in their perceptions of the man. And the “Rosebud” question is cleared up at the end. *Rashomon* does nothing of the sort. Virtually nothing is cleared up, and we do not even learn the outcome of the trial.

**Narrative Unity and Closure**

As with *Jurassic Park*, we get a frame for the plot. *Rashomon* opens and closes with shots of the dilapidated Rashomon gate where the story is recounted (figures 2.26 and 2.27). The movie begins in the pouring rain, and the priest and the woodcutter are in the building, apparently for shelter. The commoner arrives seeking shelter and the others tell their tale to him. When the rain ends, the commoner leaves and the film closes with shots of the gate. Like the two shots of Hammond on the helipad in *Jurassic Park*, the shots of the gate frame the film – it opens and closes there – but, unlike the shots of Hammond, nothing is resolved between them.

It is not the resolution of the narrative question that ends the film but simply the fact that the rain ends. In a sense, the film simply stops rather than ends. The
storytellers disperse without resolving the questions raised by the different versions of the story. To underline the arbitrary quality of the ending, an entirely new story element is introduced when an abandoned baby is discovered by Rashomon gate. The commoner steals its clothing, the priest cuddles it, and the woodcutter takes it home to be raised with his other children as the film ends.

**Integrated versus Separated Plot Events**

Like much in the movie, the baby is presented without being integrated into the plot. In a classical Hollywood movie, exactly what happened with the rape and killing would be clarified by this point. It is quite traditional in classical movies for the official truth-seekers to fail and for only the viewer or a privileged few characters to learn the truth. In *Citizen Kane*, for example, only the viewer learns what “Rosebud” is. In *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance*, only the participant and a few reporters learn who shot Liberty Valance, and they decide to conceal the truth. But in both movies the viewer knows. In *Rashomon*, however, no one knows.

This does not indicate in any way that *Rashomon* is a failure as a narrative film but simply that it operates under different conventions from those of classical Hollywood narration. It more readily fits into the international art cinema, which at times explicitly critiques presumptions of classical narration, such as those of rigorous clarity and knowability of basic plot elements. There are many narrative traditions.

Classical narration integrates the elements of the plot in such a manner that everything fits together in a related way and nothing is random. In *Jurassic Park*, Alan Grant terrifies a boy with a tale of the Velociraptor’s hunting techniques; later, we see a real Velociraptor kill an experienced hunter using those techniques. In *Rashomon*, the woodcutter finds an amulet case at the murder scene. At the end, an amulet is found on the foundling child. A Hollywood screenwriter would be tempted to make the baby the child of the devastated couple and thereby link up those parts of the story in an integrated manner by means of the amulet. This movie makes no such attempt; they are separate, unrelated events.

This lack of clear and integrated story development makes it difficult to separate free from bound motifs. In classical films it is easy. Bound motifs are what directly contribute to the resolution of the basic narrative question. But here, that question is only multiplied, never really clarified and never resolved. What relevance does the poisoned stream have, the bandit’s prized Korean sword, the amulet case? On a larger scale, why does the wife’s tale not agree with the bandit’s, or the husband’s with the wife’s? A traditional explanation for lying at a murder trial might be that they were trying to escape guilt, but this hardly makes sense since all three claim they killed the husband, and the bandit freely admits to the rape. Furthermore, traditional logic gives all three strong motivation to be truthful since all exist under the shadow of death. The bandit presumes that he will be executed, the wife has tried to drown herself, and the husband is already dead.
Why lie? Of course, reasons could be created, but this movie is not concerned with looking for them.

The woodcutter’s story is slightly different, since he may have stolen the dagger and would, therefore, have reason to testify falsely, but this does nothing to clarify the rest.

*Rashomon* clearly violates basic rules of classical narration. Like other films within the international art cinema tradition, the story it tells is not clear but confusing and it does not build logically to a clear resolution of its plot threads but rather leaves them unresolved. Part of the “point” of the movie is that the events in the wooded grove will never be known and that the testimony of the participants is not reliable for reasons no one can ever know. Yet, even as the movie undercuts nearly everything about the story of the killing in the grove, it undercuts virtually nothing about the frame story.

### The Frame Story and Narrative Reliability

The frame story is much more conservative in its narrative techniques; it bears many resemblances to classical narration. Most obviously, it is reliable. Nothing contradicts its presentation of a story being told under Rashomon gate. Nothing makes us question the fact that it is raining or that each of the characters is a certain type of personality. In the story of the grove, on the contrary, we question everything. We see characters presented in entirely different ways; we do not even know basic facts about the incident, like how the man died or whether it was murder, suicide, or an accident. The constant cuts back to the people giving testimony at the trial do not help. In a classical film we would scrutinize their demeanor while they testify, looking for clues as to whether or not they are telling the truth. But here we get no such clues; we just get more contradictions. We do not know what to believe about the story of the grove. We do, however, know what to believe about the Rashomon gate. We know that three men gathered there seeking shelter from a downpour and that they exchanged details of a puzzling story. They found a baby, the rain ended, and they dispersed. Nothing contradicts these things; they are quite clear.

The commoner intrudes upon the quieter world of the woodcutter and priest in ways similar to the intrusion of the bandit into the journey of the man and woman. Like the bandit, the commoner is loud, aggressive, and abrasive in his manner, given to outbursts of derisive laughter and indifferent to traditional morality. The woodcutter and priest tell him the story of the grove and he frequently admits to being confused, but this confusion does not particularly bother him. The priest tries to give the story apocalyptic significance, but the commoner cannot be bothered with the priest’s pious and overblown interpretations, saying he would rather listen to the rain than to the priest’s sermonizing. He also says that stories of murders are plentiful and that this is only one of many. He is not disturbed by plot contradictions, saying simply that he enjoys a good story. At the end he sees the contradictions clearly enough to pressure the woodcutter into
admitting that he saw more than he testified to and then into giving his eyewitness account. He also implies that the woodcutter stole the dagger and, therefore, that his story was compromised.

But none of this interests him beyond the level of a good yarn. When the baby is discovered, he steals most of its clothes and leaves. He has listened as long as he was interested and, now that he has a good reason, he leaves. But his reason has nothing to do with the plot resolution. The only storyline in the movie that fully makes sense is his. He arrives at the beginning, listens for a while to an interesting story, and leaves. He leaves, however, not because the story is resolved but because he wants to escape with the clothing he has grabbed, because the rain is stopping, and because he has had enough. The film ends with the priest uselessly announcing that he once again has faith in humankind and with the woodcutter taking the foundling off. But the priest’s interpretations of things are not particularly reliable, and the woodcutter acts from unknown and unknowable motives.

_Rashomon_ has been widely praised for over half a century as powerful and provocative in its probing of the nature of truth, but it is clearly not a classical Hollywood narrative and never attempted to be. Movies tell their stories in many ways.

**SELECTED READINGS**