



Part I – Film Production: Who Does What?

Film is a highly collaborative art form that relies upon the skills and talents of many, many people – as you know if you’re the sort to sit all the way through the credits at the end of a movie.¹ But chances are that, even if you’re one of those movie dorks who stays in the theatre until the last note of the score plays and the lights come up to reveal the popcorn and Mike & Ikes stuck to the floor in congealed puddles of Dr. Pepper, you still don’t really know what all those people whose names took ten minutes to scroll across the screen actually, you know, *do*. So this part of Chapter 1 – the “Who Does What?” part – is for you.

The following descriptions don’t go to ridiculous lengths to explain every title you’ll ever see in the end credits.² But they do make an attempt to give you a clue about the major functions of the major players in the art and business of moviemaking.

Preparation (Pre-Production)

The preparation phase (a.k.a. the pre-production phase) of filmmaking is defined as the part of the timeline that stretches from the initial idea for the film to the beginning of principal photography (shooting). The central activities involved in the preparation phase are writing and revising the script, raising money, hiring cast and crew, and making logistical arrangements for shooting. The producer is the dominant force in this stage of moviemaking. The major players at this point are:

The **Producer** oversees logistics and is responsible for the actual physical product – he or she ensures that the project is completed, often taking on significant financial risk. Although the producer is involved throughout the process, his/her contribution is most prevalent in pre-production because that’s when all the resources (human, physical, financial) are brought together under the producer’s control.

The **Executive Producer** technically supervises the producer, but realistically doesn’t do any actual work. Typically the EP is the person who bought the rights to the book/play or who brings a lot of money to the production (often one of the stars).

In pre-production, the **Line Producer** is typically involved in negotiations with crew. In production, the LP serves as the on-set liaison between the producer and the director and manages the budget and day-to-day operations as soon as principal photography begins.

¹ Which you should do, if only because all those gaffers and best boys and spider wranglers deserve a little recognition, too.

² Because I’m assuming you already know what caterers and accountants are, and you probably don’t really need to know exactly what the “Assistant to Christian Bale” does.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the **Screenwriter** writes the screenplay (or script). But what you may not know is that the creation of the script can happen in a variety of ways. Some scripts are original and completed before being pitched to a development executive; some are *adaptations* (which can be commissioned or pitched); some are pitched as *treatments* (initial script proposals) prior to the script being written. The *shooting script* is the completed screenplay prior to shooting (production); in many films, the screenplay changes during shooting through authorial revision, notes (from directors/producers), actor contributions, and even audience response at early screenings.

Shooting (Production)

The shooting phase (a.k.a. the “production” phase) of filmmaking is defined as the part of the timeline that begins as soon as principal photography begins and ends when principal photography is complete. The central activities in this stage of moviemaking revolve around the recording of actors as they bring their characters to life. The director is the dominant force during this stage. The major players are:

The **Director** oversees all aspects of shooting by directing the contributions of both cast and crew throughout the production phase. The director controls the film’s overall artistic vision by translating the concept of a story into a collaboratively created work of art involving actors, designers, technicians, artisans, composers, musicians, and editors. There are widely varying directing styles, ranging from hands-off directors who begin with a general plot and encourage improvisation (*Spike Lee, Gus Van Sant*) to intensely controlling administrators (*Steven Spielberg, Alfred Hitchcock*) to jacks-of-all-trades who write, direct, perform, and even compose their own music (*Charlie Chaplin, Clint Eastwood, Woody Allen*) to those who routinely collaborate with specific writers (*Martin Scorsese, Peter Jackson*) or who routinely edit or shoot their own films (*Steven Soderbergh, Joel & Ethan Coen*).

The **Production Designer** oversees all aspects of the visual creation of the film and is ultimately responsible for the overall look of the movie. The PD collaborates closely with the director and the cinematographer, and supervises the work of the art department, costumers, makeup artists and hair stylists.

Also known as the **Director of Photography**, the **Cinematographer** oversees camera position, distance, angle, etc., as well as film stocks, lenses, and filters. A crucial area of responsibility for the cinematographer is lighting. He or she supervises the camera operators as well as others on the camera crew (loaders, grips) and the lighting crew (electricians, gaffers).

Actors bring the script to life by performing the roles created by the screenwriter under the guidance of the director. Depending on the size/significance of the role played, actors can be classified as stars, supporting players, minor players, and extras. An additional category is stunt players, who perform in scenes (such as fights) that are too risky for other actors (typically stars).

Actors

Stars



Supporting
Players



Minor Players



Extras



Stunt
Players



The Director's Team

The director has an entire team of people who work directly for him/her. Some of the more significant players on the director's team are:

The **Casting Director** recommends/selects actors for the film. Although the actors performing the major roles (stars) are often pre-selected – are indeed a part of the initial pitch in a package that includes writer and director – the supporting and minor players are often hired through an audition process coordinated by the casting director.

The **Script Supervisor** oversees continuity by keeping track of scenes shot and making notes about any differences between the shooting script and the recorded action. He or she works closely with the director during shooting to ensure continuity of props, blocking, costume, hair styles, and other identifiable elements from shot to shot.

Now this one might surprise you: the **Dialogue Coach** feeds lines to actors in place of their co-performers who may not be on set at the time the scene is being rehearsed or filmed. Not to be confused with a **Dialect Coach**, whose job is to help actors master regional accents or foreign languages necessary for a role.

The **Second Unit Director** shoots at secondary locations (a.k.a. “on location”) to create **B roll** footage, typically used in establishing shots³ when the action in a film shifts from one place to another.

Production Sound Mixers oversee the capture of live sound during shooting. In the past, very little of the sound captured during shooting was used in the final film, but with advances in the quality of sound recording, less and less automated dialogue replacement⁴ is needed. The **Boom Operator** assists the PSM by placing and moving the boom microphone during shooting.

The Production Designer's Team

The production designer likewise has a team of people working to ensure consistent adherence to the original artistic vision of the film's look:

The **Art Director** reports directly to the production designer regarding all aspects of the setting for the film's various locations, and also supervises the set designers, graphic artists, and illustrators.

The **Set Designer** is a draftsman, usually an architect, who makes the vision of the production designer and the art director into reality by creating the design and supervising the construction crews. The **Set Decorator** selects objects and props in keeping with the art director's conception of the world of the film. The analogous person in the live theatre would be the property master. The **Set Dresser** is responsible for precise placement on the

³ You'll learn much more about this in the editing chapter.

⁴ More about this later in this chapter.

set of the objects and props and set elements (drapes, rugs, etc.) selected by the set decorator.

The **Costume Designer** creates the vision for clothing worn by the actors during filming. Often this means that the costume designer actually creates original costumes by drawing them for use by costume makers. Sometimes, though, the costume designer is more like the set decorator: he or she finds existing clothing that fits the vision of the artistic director. The **Costume Supervisor** reports to the designer and is responsible for managing the wardrobe department and supervising the construction and/or purchase of clothing for use as costumes. The **Key Costumer** is assigned specifically to the star in productions involving multiple and/or elaborate changes of costume for the central character.

The **Make-Up Artist** transforms actors into characters through manipulation of hair, makeup, and special effects. **Hairdressers** maintain and style the hair (or sometimes wigs) of performers.

Storyboard Artists draft images of intended shots at the direction of the director, art director, and cinematographer. Individual storyboard images – which in the early days of film were always hand-drawn but which are now often created with the help of computers – provide a useful outline for everyone involved in the behind-the-camera aspects of shooting: the director, the cinematographer, the visual effects director, the grips, the gaffers, and the camera operators. Storyboards can also be used in editing to ensure that the finished product adheres closely to the original vision for the film.

Special Effects Teams (matte artists, model makers) create physical or practical effects used in live-action shooting to approximate spectacular events such as explosions, fires, and other things that go boom or crash. Films today are more likely to have visual effects teams,⁵ which use computers and other photographic effects to integrate spectacle into the film during the editing process.

The Cinematographer's Team

You will not be surprised to learn that the **Camera Operator** actually operates the camera during shooting. But because that piece of information is relatively boring, here's a treat for you: the reason that the person who makes all of the decisions about how the camera will be used has two different titles (cinematographer and director of photography) is that there is some disagreement in film-land about what those two terms mean. The purists⁶ claim that the person who directs all things camera-related is the director of photography – and that he⁷ can use the title of cinematographer only if he is *also* the camera operator.

Loader is another job title you can probably figure out with a little thinking: the loader puts film in the camera (i.e. *loads* the film), and is also responsible for labeling and organizing the reels of film as they are completed. This also is a job that is changing as a result of the

⁵ More on these guys in the Assembly section below.

⁶ Yes, there are purists in filmmaking, even in Hollywood.

⁷ I realize I could have said “he or she” here, but at least in Hollywood, there are *very* few female directors of photography – even fewer than, say, female directors or female editors. And there aren't very many of them, either.

number of filmmakers who now shoot on digital video rather than celluloid. For such films, the production might employ a **Digital Imaging Technician** rather than a loader. The end results expected from either a loader or a DIT are essentially the same, but a completely different set of skills is required for each job.

The **Key Grip** is the lead stage hand, which means that he or she supervises all of the other **Grips** (stage hands), whose job it is to move objects around the set. These objects can be on-camera elements like set pieces or off-camera elements like cameras, rigging, light screens, etc. The **Dolly Grip** is the person responsible for moving and operating the camera dollies and cranes used for mobile framing.⁸

Perhaps you've always wondered what the **Gaffer** is. Well, now you know: the gaffer is the lead electrician, meaning that his or her job is to supervise all of the electricians on set. If you're wondering why a movie set would need a whole battalion of electricians, consider for a moment how important good lighting is even when doing something as simple as taking a photograph. Now think about how many lights with precise levels and qualities of illumination and precise placement might be needed to capture the exact look that the art director and the cinematographer demand for even a single scene of a Hollywood film. That's right: many of the people who are employed in the movie business are electricians – and when they get enough experience, they can become gaffers.

Best Boy is the title assigned to the chief assistant to either the gaffer or the key grip. In some film credits, the distinction is made clear by adding either the word *electrical* or the word *grip* in parentheses. Whether Best Boy (electrical) or Best Boy (grip), this person is a boy even if she's not a boy.

The **Clapper Boy** is probably not actually a “boy,” either. Another name for this person is **Second Assistant Camera** or **Slate/Loader**. He or she is responsible for keeping track of every take – that is, every run of the camera during the entire shooting process – which is accomplished by marking scene, take, roll, and date before each run of the camera using one of these:



Assembly (Post-Production)

The assembly phase of filmmaking, which is also illogically⁹ called post-production, is defined as the part of the timeline that begins as soon as principal photography is finished and ends when the actual film is complete and ready for distribution. The central activities in this stage of moviemaking revolve around bringing together the various pieces: the individual shots recorded by the camera crews as well as the various sounds created by many of the humans described below. Although the director remains a dominant force during this stage, the film editor takes on a central and controlling role in assembly. The major players in “post-production” are:

⁸ More on mobile framing in the chapter on cinematography.

⁹ Illogical because “post-production” implies “after production,” even though – as you will soon see for yourself – a lot of film production is still happening in the assembly stage.

The **Film Editor** oversees the artful cutting and compilation of shots into a coherent whole. This doesn't sound like much, but trust me, it is. The editor works closely with the director and typically supervises several **Assistant Editors** because – really – editing a film is a huge undertaking. The central task of the editor and his/her team is to take all of the best existing footage from the *dailies* (daily compilations of takes) and create, first, a *rough cut* (a version of the film that everyone acknowledges is too long), and ultimately a *final cut*, to be printed and projected in your local multiplex.

Others who work directly for the editor include the **Negative Cutter**, who catalogs negatives and creates negative reels for printing the ultimate positives for projection; and **Color Timers** (who adjust the color of the film for consistency) and **Color Graders** (who adjust the colors in the film for brightness and contrast).

The **Visual Effects Team** is a huge part of the assembly process, and is also a relatively recent development in filmmaking. Whereas some special effects in film can still be created through physical processes (live-action shooting of models, miniatures, and specialty props), much of the spectacle in the modern movie is created in the computer – and this is where the VFX crew comes in. The **VFX Creative Director** is like a production designer for computer-generated imagery; the **VFX Supervisor** oversees an entire crew of technicians whose task it is to create in-camera optical effects. The **VFX Editor** integrates the CGI sequences into the live-action sequences during the assembly (editing) process. The **Compositor** integrates into the live-action sequences other visual material from video, other films, 2D animations, still photos, text, and matte paintings.

The **Sound Designer** (also known as the **Supervising Sound Editor**) oversees all elements of sound during the assembly phase. He or she supervises the **Dialogue Editor** (who assembles and edits all dialogue into the soundtrack), the **Sound Editor** (who integrates noise, or sound effects, into the soundtrack), and the **Re-Recording Mixer** (who balances the levels of dialogue, noise, and music).

Other technicians in the sound department include the **Spotter** (who identifies places in the film where sound needs to be edited in); the **ADR Technician** (who records and replaces dialogue to improve the audio quality of dialogue recorded during shooting); and the **Foley Artist** (who creates mundane sound effects using sometimes surprising objects).

The **Composer** creates the musical score for the film. This, like editing, is huge. Most movies have an *underscore* (music playing under the dialogue and other sounds) throughout most of the film's run time. The composer writes the music, but also often arranges, conducts, and records the music as well.

Part II: Elements of Meaning

Film Content and Film Form

Content + Form = Meaning

All varieties of art exist as an attempt to impose a satisfying order onto the chaotic world of human experience through the creation of works that make sense, entertain, compel, and demand a response from the audience. This is true whether we're talking about poetry, theatre, music, painting . . . or film. It is that imposition of order on chaos that implies (or necessitates) that art have *meaning*. For those of you who would prefer just to kick back and enjoy a movie, this may be bad news ("Why does it have to *mean* something? Why can't it just *be*?"), but don't worry – there's good news as well.

As an audience for narrative film, you aren't required to invent meaning, or to torture the meaning out of a sly and secretive movie. The meaning¹⁰ is right there in front of you, to be gleaned through observation of this fairly simple equation: CONTENT + FORM = MEANING.

The **content** of a film is *what the film has to say*. For example, the content of *Casablanca* is a love triangle in wartime, an unlikely friendship between former enemies, an opportunity to do the right thing when it isn't easy. Of course there are other pieces of content in the film (innocent people are rewarded, criminals are punished, we could go on for hours), but these are some of the major points of content within the film.

The content of a film is communicated to the audience through form. **Form** is how the content is expressed – it is *how the film says what it says*. For example, *Casablanca*'s content is communicated through how the characters dress, how they speak, how they look at each other. It is also communicated through film techniques such as camera angles, lighting, editing, and sounds. You will learn much more about these techniques in subsequent chapters.

The meanings of a film are interpreted through observation of how the narrative and stylistic elements of form are used to communicate significant content. These meanings exist on several different levels.

Levels of Meaning

Literal meaning in a film is essentially its perceivable, recognizable content and form. It is derived through observing content and form without going beyond that observation to draw any inferences about thematic meaning. For example, we know that *Casablanca*'s meaning involves doing the right thing when it's not easy because we can observe Rick's suffering over having lost Ilsa (the night he gets drunk in his office with Sam) as well as his stoic decision to stay in Casablanca with Louis while putting Victor and Ilsa on the plane to Lisbon.

Textual/Connotative meaning in a film is derived through careful consideration of explicitly stated meanings – lines of dialogue that carry significant weight thematically. We can build on the

¹⁰ Or, more accurately, the *meanings*.

literal meaning discussed above by recalling that Rick repeatedly claims “I stick my neck out for nobody” and “I’m the only cause I’m interested in” even while he is planning to help Victor and Ilsa (and, incidentally, his employees and the young Bulgarian couple) at considerable risk to his own freedom and happiness. He lets us in on the thematic rationale behind his sacrifice when he says at the airport that “The problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.”

Thematic/Universal meaning in a film is derived through drawing a larger thematic inference from a literal or textual meaning. Universal meanings are essentially complete statements about the human condition as exemplified within the specific narrative of the film. For example, we can build on the textual meaning above by asserting that *Casablanca*’s meaning is that even a cynical man will abandon his own self-interest and make sacrifices when he recognizes his small role in a larger struggle. Note that this statement isn’t specifically about Rick – it’s about humans – but that Rick’s statements and behaviors can be used as evidence in support of the claim.

Cultural/Symbolic meaning in a film exists when the textual or thematic meaning can be applied to a specific situation in the real world. This type of meaning can only be applied by placing a film in the context of the society in which it is created or perceived. For example, because we know that *Casablanca* was made in America in 1941-1942 – a time when the United States was conflicted about whether, or how, to become involved in the war in Europe – we can see Rick’s explicit statements cited above as representative of the American government’s struggle between cynical self-preservation (staying out of the war) and sacrifice for a larger cause (joining the fight). In this way, we can see Rick (the American in a film full of Europeans) as a symbol for the U.S.

Note that interpretation of film meaning is about **objective analysis** rather than **subjective reaction**: our task in this class is to discuss how films mean what they mean rather than how much we love or hate a particular film – it’s OK to love or hate a movie, of course, but *that’s not interpretation*. The sooner you understand this distinction, the happier you will be in this course.

Elements of Film Form

Film form can be broken into two broad categories: narrative form and stylistic form. The remainder of this chapter focuses on narrative form. The remainder of this book (chapters 2-5) focuses on the elements of stylistic form: mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound. You are not likely terribly familiar with these, which is good because you’re enrolled in a class whose sole purpose is to teach you about how the stylistic elements of film form combine with the narrative elements of film form to communicate significant meaning. The narrative elements of film form are diegesis, structure, character, setting, point of view, and metaphor. You are probably familiar with most of these terms from previous study of literature – which is also good, because we’re going to cover them relatively quickly in the next few pages and then move on.

Narrative Elements: Diegesis

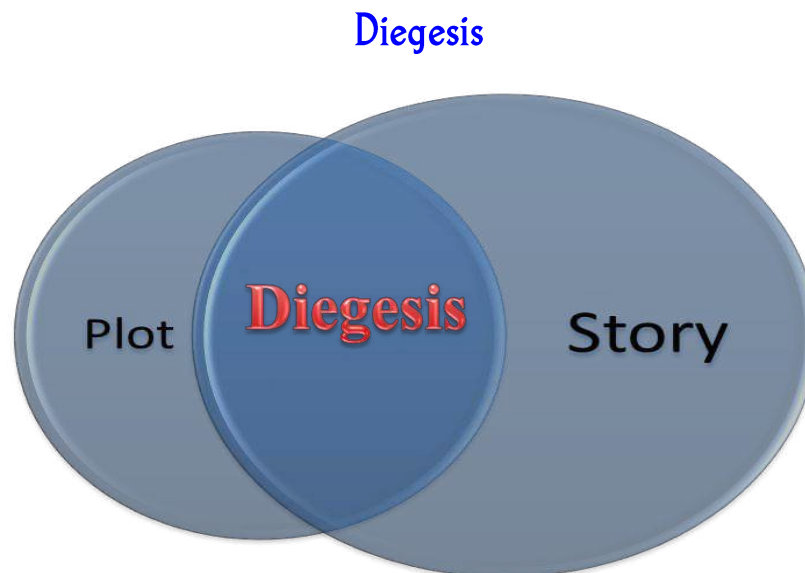
In casual conversation, the terms *plot* and *story* tend to be used interchangeably. In the discussion of written literature as an art form, the *plot* is an element of a piece of fiction (or a *story*) – specifically, it is the series of events that tell the reader what happens in the story.

In film, however, the terms have somewhat different meanings. This distinction has not been created simply to annoy you – it exists because of the particular qualities that film has as an art form that other art forms lack. In film, there are elements of the moviegoing experience that the audience perceives (sees or hears) that aren't actually a part of the world in which the characters are playing out their lives. As a result of these layers of experience that differ for audience and character, the two terms take on subtly different meanings from those you might be accustomed to:

In film we use the term **plot** to refer to everything that is seen and heard by the perceiver of the film (the audience) – everything that is presented, whether it's a part of the characters' experience or not. This means that opening credits, onscreen locators (like captions and maps), as well as most of the music you hear in most narrative films, are all elements of the film's plot even though they're not a part of the film's story. For example, in *Casablanca* the globe used at the beginning to show the escape route from France to Morocco to Portugal is plot but not story (because the globe, as well as the narration that goes with it) is presented to the audience completely apart from any of the characters in the film.

Story in a film is everything that happens in the lives of the characters – everything they experience, whether it is explicitly presented to the perceiver or not. This means that all of the things that happen to the characters off-screen – all of the implied events that the audience is aware of but does not actually see happen – these things are all elements of the film's story even though they're not a part of the film's plot. So in *Casablanca* such events as Rick and Ilsa's first meeting in Paris, Ilsa's illness in Marseilles, and Victor's time in a German concentration camp are elements of story that are not a part of the plot.

The **diegesis** of a film's narrative is the intersection of plot and story – it is everything that the audience sees and hears that is also a part of the world of the characters. In other words, everything that we see and hear that is not *nondiegetic* (i.e. everything seen and heard that is also seen, heard, or experienced by the characters) is a part of the film's diegesis.



Narrative Elements: Structure

Narrative films are generally presented in a three-act structure. Generally, the line between one act and another doesn't call attention to itself – the structure overall in most movies is fluid. But upon close observation, the structure of a good film can often be observed as follows:

Act I

The Exposition (aka the **Stasis**) is the part of the film, usually at the beginning, in which the audience learns what “situation normal” is for the people and places that fill the story. It's like a smooth pond, undisturbed. It's the part of the movie in which we discover where we are and with whom, so we get accustomed to the environment. This is also the section in which we are presented with necessary details – things we have to know in order to understand the action to come (are we at war? has there been a divorce? is it Christmas?). The exposition can take up a few minutes or it can be significantly longer – but sooner or later we will encounter . . .

Complications, which are exactly what they sound like: actions or events that serve to upset the stasis of the story. They're like little pebbles tossed into that still pond, and just like those pebbles, they cause ripples. A film might have one major complication (this is rare) or twenty small complications (this also is rare). In general, there will be a handful of interesting complications – more, interestingly, in a comedy than in a tragedy. The major function of complications in a story is to motivate character behavior, although they also often function as **foreshadowing** – a hint of something significant yet to come. When characters react to complications, they typically cause – Well, they cause Act II, actually.

Act II

Conflict (aka **Rising Action**) is the result of characters with competing or conflicting needs attempting to achieve their goals. See, narrative film is all about conflict. If the characters just got along and had a good time together and didn't have any points of contention, nobody would watch the movie. It's all about the conflict. The fact that Character A wants to sleep and Character B wants to dance is what keeps us in our seats. And the thing about conflict, the reason it's called Rising Action, is that it rises and rises and rises until finally there's . . .

The **Climax** – a point of maximum tension, when something changes. Typically one character “wins” and the other “loses,” but that's not always the way it plays out. One way or another, at the climax of the story, the audience realizes fully what's at stake for the characters – and realizes as well what the consequences of the characters' actions will be. The climax traditionally occurs near the end of the movie, just in time for Act III.

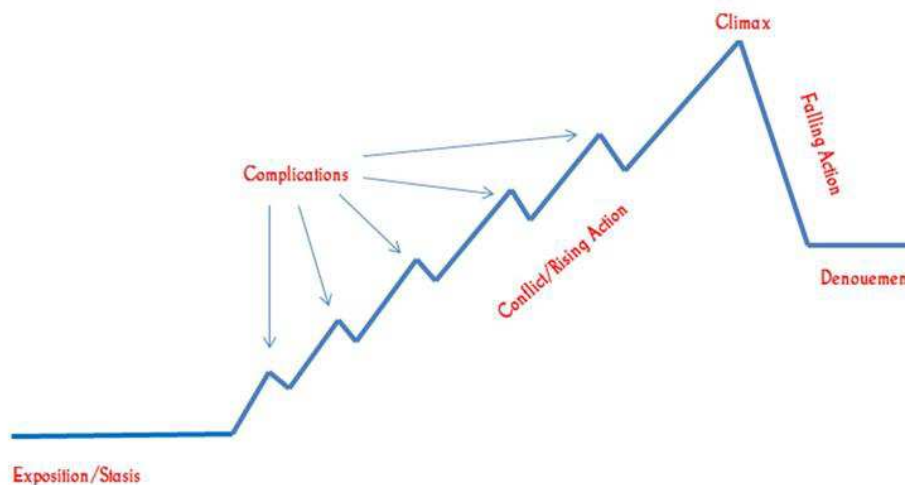
Act III

Falling Action is the release of tension that occurs immediately following the climax. It's the recounting of events that happen as a direct or indirect result of the climactic moment. The falling action is all about consequences. In many modern films, there's not really any falling action to speak of, with the filmmakers instead opting to let the reader imagine what the consequences

might be. But regardless of whether the movie provides us with recounted falling action, we always have a sense of the . . .

Denouement, a French word that literally translates as “unraveling.” The denouement is also referred to as the resolution. It’s a new stasis, a new “situation normal” at the end of the movie. It’s not the same as at the beginning of the movie – if it were, there would be no point in sitting through the whole thing. One requirement of a satisfying experience with narrative film is that something significant must change between the beginning of the story and the end. The denouement is a manifestation of that change.

Standard Narrative Structure



Narrative Elements: Character

You may have noticed that it’s very difficult to talk about story/plot/structure without talking about characters. This is because narrative film is all about personalities and motivations. It’s about **characters** and their competing desires and the conflict that inevitably results when different personalities with different motivations have different reactions to the situations and actions they confront in the course of living their lives. In other words: characters create narrative. Or, to put it another way, narrative is a direct result of characters having a cause-and-effect relationship with each other, with their situations, and with themselves.

Characters in movies can be classified according to the *qualities* they are given by their creators. Characters must be classified as either round or flat, and also as either dynamic or static. A **round** character is one who is well developed and fully detailed. We understand round characters’ actions because we are given access to what motivates these characters. Don’t confuse “understand” with “approve” – we don’t have to *like* round characters; we just know a lot about them. Most major or central characters in films are round. A **flat** character is the opposite of a round character, in that we aren’t given access to sufficient detail to develop a full understanding of what motivates the character’s actions. Flat characters are often minor characters or even stock characters – they’re more like a part of the setting than like characters. A **dynamic** character is one who undergoes a

significant change (of philosophy, of understanding, of motivation, of attitude) between the beginning of the movie and the end of the movie. Note that going from alive to dead does not constitute a significant change for the purposes of determining whether a character is dynamic. A **static** character is one who remains static – that is, one who doesn't change in any significant way over the course of the film.

Beyond these character qualities, there are also specific character *types* that can be identified within a narrative. The **protagonist** is the main character. In classical narrative, the protagonist is the hero. In modern and contemporary narratives, heroes are in short supply so “protagonist” is rarely a synonym for “hero” these days. But the protagonist does have some required qualities. First of all, s/he must be dynamic. Beyond this, s/he must be the one central character who is meant to engage the audience's interest and empathy. Typically this is accomplished by having the protagonist be the character who strives for something – and whom we root for in his or her efforts.

The **antagonist** is the character who antagonizes the protagonist – but not in the way you might expect, given the contemporary connotations of the word “antagonize.” Today we use that word to mean, roughly, to be hostile or unfriendly. But the words *antagonist* and *antagonize* come from the Greek *antagonizesthai*, meaning to compete with, to struggle against. So the antagonist is the character who competes with the protagonist, or stands in the way of the protagonist achieving his/her goals. The antagonist is essentially an obstacle to the protagonist's success. In some movies, the antagonist isn't a character, but instead is some other force: society, nature, fate . . . Sometimes, especially in modern and contemporary narratives – and in real life! – the protagonist is his/her own antagonist.

Narrative Elements: Setting (Place and Time)

As with other forms of literature, the setting in a film is essentially the environment in which the characters experience the narrative. It's about place, time, and atmosphere. But film is its own unique art form, distinct from written literature in that we aren't required simply to read and imagine. Instead, the filmmakers present us with visual and auditory content that dictates – to a greater degree than written literature does – how we will interpret the setting of the narrative. In order to understand how filmmakers create setting for the audience, it's important to be familiar with the following concepts:

Setting and Place

Location in a film is quite literal. The cameras, cast and crew can (and do) go to specific places – or create specific places – in order to present to the audience environments that are authentic, artificial, mundane, spectacular, interior, exterior, etc. As a result, we can be in Rick's smoky bar one moment, in a crowded street bazaar buying linens the next, and finally end up on a foggy airstrip as a plane flies over our heads.

Screen Space is a term that refers to everything we see on the screen at any given moment in the film. It is all content – characters, setting, props, etc. – that fits within the frame of the shot.

A significant difference between film and its closest relative, live theatre, is the director's and/or cinematographer's control over what the audience sees through **Directed Attention**. In the live

theatre, the director (and designers and performers) can encourage you to focus your attention on a particular spot on stage through lighting, movement, loudness, etc. But filmmakers can go beyond encouragement and literally force (or direct) your attention by choosing exactly what to include in the screen space. If the filmmakers want you to notice the secret ring that Mr. Berger shows to Victor Laszlo in Rick's bar, then they will force you to notice it through the use of a close-up shot of that ring.

Imagery in film is similar to imagery in other forms of literature. Interestingly, though, imagery in film functions more like imagery in poetry than in stories or novels. In part because film as a medium directly appeals to multiple senses (primarily sight and sound) and in part because of the filmmaker's advantage of directed attention, the audience's interpretation of meaning can be influenced by directing attention to significant objects, colors, or sounds: Sam's piano, for example, or the bottle of Vichy water that Louis throws away at the airport.

Setting and Time

Aside from the general issue of time in setting (when does it occur? in the past? the present? the future? in 1776? in 2009? in spring? in winter? on a Saturday? in the morning? etc.) time in film has several very specific implications as described below.

The **Temporal Duration** of a film is the passage of time for the characters from the beginning of the film to the end of the film. Sometimes the temporal duration is arguable – for example, we can argue about whether to include flashbacks as a part of the temporal duration or not. The temporal duration of *Casablanca*, therefore, might be a few days (from the evening Ilsa shows up at Rick's bar to the evening when she and Victor get on the plane) or it might be several years (including the time Rick and Ilsa spend in Paris). Note that only elements of the film's *diegesis* (directly presented events) are included in the temporal duration; we would not, for example, consider Ilsa and Victor meeting and getting married, or Victor's capture and imprisonment in a concentration camp, to be a part of the temporal duration because we don't see those things happen.

A film's **Screen Duration** is much simpler: it's the passage of time for the audience. The screen duration of a film is not arguable. *Casablanca*'s screen duration is 102 minutes. End of story.

The **Temporal Order** of a film is its chronology – the order in which events are presented. Most films are largely chronological, meaning that events move forward in time and that the end of the movie occurs later than the beginning. But most films also employ some disruptions to the chronology through the use of **flashbacks** (presentations of scenes that occur earlier than the central timeline) and, occasionally, through **flashforwards** (presentations of scenes that have not yet occurred). *Casablanca* is fairly standard, in that it employs a consistently chronological narrative line with the exception of the fairly long flashback of Rick and Ilsa in Paris.

Temporal Frequency is an interesting term that has two distinct meanings. On one hand, the term can be applied to an event that we see happen once in the diegesis even though we understand that it has happened multiple times in the story – for example, in *Casablanca* we see Karl come home from a resistance meeting only once, but we understand that he has attended many such meetings. On the other hand, the term can be applied to a single event that is shown more than one time – usually in order to provide the audience with the opportunity to view the event from different

angles or points of view. A brief example of this technique in *Casablanca* occurs when Major Strasser goes for the telephone at the airport: we see Strasser notice the phone, and then we see Rick realizing that Strasser is noticing the phone. This is the same precise moment within the same event, and we see it twice in order to experience it from both characters' perspectives. This leads us to . . .

Narrative Elements: Point of View

Point of view in film is a different concept from point of view in written literature. Films don't typically come to us in first-person vs. third-person narrations. But that doesn't mean that point of view is irrelevant in film. On the contrary, film makes use of the camera – as well as of recorded sound – to create distinctly different points of view.

Restricted Narration in a film is sort of like third-person limited point of view in written literature in that it exposes the audience to a specific character's perspective. Whenever we are experiencing events from the vantage point of a particular character, we are experiencing restricted narration. For example, in *Casablanca* when Ilsa turns from the window in Rick's apartment and we are surprised to see her holding a gun, we realize that we are standing in Rick's shoes: we are seeing her from his point of view, and our surprise is his surprise.

Unrestricted Narration is analogous to third-person omniscient point of view in fiction. It exposes the audience to a perspective that is not limited to a particular character's vantage point, but is instead broad and all-encompassing. When we see everyone having a good time at Rick's bar from above, or when we see Major Strasser and his men racing toward the airport, we are experiencing unrestricted narration. In the chapter on editing, you will learn how filmmakers can make use of alternating shots of restricted narration from different characters' perspectives in order to create a sense of exciting and suspenseful unrestricted narration.

When we perceive what a specific character perceives – when we see what he is seeing or hear what she is hearing – then we are experiencing **Perceptual Subjectivity**. For example, when Victor is preparing to have the band in Rick's bar play the French national anthem, he looks up and we see Rick looking down at him and nodding. We see Rick's approval from Victor's perceptual subjectivity.

When we perceive what the character is thinking – that is, when we are experiencing sights and sounds that represent what's happening inside a character's head – we are experiencing **Mental Subjectivity**. For example, the entire Paris flashback scene is an example of mental subjectivity from Rick's point of view because it is his memory that we're experiencing.

Point of View and the Perceiver

Point of view in film is used to create the most basic of narrative impacts – impacts that evoke specific reactions in the audience. These impacts are created through the use of **cues** – things that the audience sees or hears and that cause the perceiver to have an expectation. What happens after that cue – how the expectation is resolved – is crucial in developing the overall narrative impact of the film.

Suspense is the resulting impact when there is a delay in fulfilling expectation of a cue. Most narrative films make significant use of suspense – after all, if it weren't for delayed expectations, we wouldn't be quite so willing to sit in our seats for two hours. Horror films and thrillers are particularly fond of this technique, but all films use suspense to one degree or another. For example, in *Casablanca* we perceive the cue of Louis calling Major Strasser instead of the airport, but we have to wait to find out whether Strasser will arrive in time to stop Rick from carrying out his plan.

Surprise is the resulting impact when a cue is followed up by an incorrect, or cheated, expectation. Again, most narrative films make good use of this technique, which is especially powerful in both thrillers and comedies because surprise typically makes us jump or laugh. Sometimes, though, the reaction to surprise is more sophisticated than fear or giggles. In *Casablanca* (at least on our first viewing of the film), we are surprised when Rick tells Louis to write the names of Ilsa and Victor on the letters of transit: we are not expecting him to sacrifice his own happiness with the woman he loves in order to ensure Victor's safety. We are neither horrified nor amused – our reaction to this surprise is more nuanced.

When a cue causes the audience to wonder about what has happened in the past, the result is **Curiosity**. Much of what keeps us interested in a narrative film is suspense (wondering what will happen next) but an equally important technique is making us curious about why the characters are behaving the way they do – and this is always about the past: what happened to make him/her that way? In *Casablanca*, we are presented with the cue of Rick reacting angrily to Sam's playing of "As Time Goes By." At first, we're wondering, "What's his problem?" – in other words, we're curious about what happened in Rick's past to make him hate this song – but before long, Ilsa arrives and talks to Sam. We listen in on their conversation, and we begin to understand Rick's broken heart.

Irony is achieved when a cue causes a disparity between what the audience understands and what the character understands. For example, by the second time Rick insists that he sticks his neck out for nobody, he has already demonstrated that he makes many sacrifices, large and small, for strangers as well as friends. We get the sense that he genuinely believes himself to be cynical and selfish, but we know that he is neither. The result is a satisfying sense of irony.

All films have a **Hierarchy of Knowledge** that is created through cues and expectations. Each character in the film – as well as the audience – can be placed on a hierarchy based on the answers to the question "Who knows what?" Generally – but not always – the highest character on the hierarchy of knowledge is the protagonist. In some films, the protagonist only achieves that position during the climax of the film – such films are generally tragic rather than comic. Also generally – but not always – the audience occupies the highest position in the hierarchy, even higher than the protagonist. Films that don't place the audience at the top of the hierarchy are typically movies that rely on a final plot twist, a.k.a. a surprise ending. In *Casablanca*, who is at the top of the hierarchy? Who's next? Who's next? Why? How does this affect our understanding of the film's meaning?

Narrative Elements: Metaphor

You probably already know what metaphor is, but just in case: **metaphor** is a figurative, or non-literal, use of content (words, images, etc.) in which the concrete element of content is offered up as a comparison, either explicit or implicit, through which the meaning of an abstract idea can be gleaned.

Because narrative film involves observable, physical sights and sounds that add up to a coherent story, most metaphor in film is actually **Symbol** – meaning that the object/word/image/sound in question has both literal and figurative meaning. In *Casablanca* Sam's piano, for example, is really a piano. But it's also a concrete representation of the past joy that Rick shared with Ilsa in Paris.

Iconography in a film is a symbol whose meaning transcends the individual film in which it's observed. In *Casablanca*, for example, the uniforms that Major Strasser and his men wear are examples of iconography because a Nazi uniform, with its universally understood swastika armband, will mean exactly the same thing no matter what movie (or painting, etc.) it is observed in.

A **Motif** is a repeated symbol or image, which means it is often related to temporal frequency. A motif can be a line of dialogue, a phrase of music, a color, a sound, a gesture . . . pretty much anything that's repeated in a way that allows for not only repetition but variation – and in a way that allows for interpretation of underlying meaning in the film. An example of a motif in *Casablanca* might be Rick's repeated statement "Here's looking at you, kid." Think about the situations in which he says it, and about how it means something slightly different each time.

An **Allusion** is a direct or indirect reference to another work of art. Many films make allusions to other films – this is a form of paying *homage* to a filmmaker's influences – but they also make allusions to works of literature, pieces of music and visual art, and other art forms. Many allusions in Western/English/American films are to the cornerstone texts of Western culture: the Bible, Greek mythology, Shakespeare. Combing through the screenplays for most serious American films will result in at least a few references to these seminal sources. But allusions might also be to less familiar, more specific sources. In *Casablanca*, the scene in which Victor instructs the bar's band to play *La Marseillaise* makes use of another work of art (the song, the French national anthem) in order to communicate significant meaning about the principles upon which that song was created: liberty, fraternity, equality. These principles become even more important when juxtaposed against those espoused by the Nazis who try (unsuccessfully) to drown out the French anthem with their own.

And that's narrative meaning in a nutshell: the ways in which content interacts with the elements of narrative form to create significance. In subsequent chapters, we'll explore the various components of a film's stylistic form: mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound.