It's not so much I don't believe in it [linear storytelling], it's not the fact that I'm on this big crusade against linear storytelling ... but it's not the only game in town. If I had written Pulp Fiction as a novel ... you would never even remotely bring up the structure.... A novel can do that [non-linear storytelling], no problem. Novelists have always had just a complete freedom to pretty much tell their story any way they saw fit. And that's kind of what I'm trying to do. Now the thing is, for both novels and film, 75% of the stories you're going to tell will work better on a dramatically engaging basis to be told from a linear way. But there is that 25% out there that can be more resonant by telling it this [non-linear] way. And I think in the case of both Reservoir Dogs and Pulp Fiction, it gains a lot more resonance being told in this kinda, like, wild way.

--Quentin Tarantino, on "The Charlie Rose Show"

Quentin Tarantino did not invent non-linear storytelling in film, of course, but his first two films, Reservoir Dogs (1992) and Pulp Fiction (1994), did make playing with narration cool and fun, and no doubt emboldened a host of filmmakers to experiment. In the past fifteen years, Tarantino's "wild" techniques are probably the most visible influence on unorthodox film narration, and to that extent we can speak broadly of a "Tarantino effect" to indicate the rising number of alternative narratives over that time. This is not to say that other filmmakers like Richard Linklater (Slacker [1991], Dazed and Confused [1993], SubUrbia [1996], Waking Life [2001]), and before him Robert Altman (Nashville [1975], Short Cuts [1993]) as well as Krzysztof Kieslowski (Przypadek [Blind Chance, 1981]) and Abbas Kiarostami (Nema-ye Nazdik [Close Up, 1990]), and before them, Orson Welles (Citizen Kane [1941]), Akira Kurosawa (Rashomon, 1951), and Stanley Kubrick (The Killing [1956]) all did not have an impact, just to credit Tarantino with leading the latest parade.

Outside of the world of film, many possible contributory factors might have helped shape this surging trend in unconventional narration: the fragmenting "postmodern condition" and its revolt against master narratives; the ubiquity of shorter narrative media forms such as music videos; video games, which stress multiple kinds of interactive narrativity, require various sorts of player strategies including role playing and team building, and repeatedly take players back to the same situations; the branched experience of surfing the net; and hypertext linking that allows users to create a personalized sequence of disparate types of artifacts that might include text, image, video, and sound. In the U.S., the rise of independent film and the need for product differentiation are surely important factors. But whatever the causes, even a cursory survey of films from the last decade and a half reveals that many tell their stories in some non-classical way.

The essays in this volume demonstrate that the trend is beginning to draw attention from scholarly critics. Four years ago, an issue of SubStance looked at one type of new film narrative, what authors of three essays called the "forking path" films. [1] Journalistic reviewers have begun to note alternative narratives too. For example, Roger Ebert's year-end round-up of his top ten films of 2005 included four, Syriana (2005), Crash (2004), Nine Lives (2005), and Me and You and Everybody We Know (2005), that typified a narrative variant that he called "the
interlocking story motif' that was "the sort of film that came into its own this year" (n.p.). Just a month earlier, in November 2005, New York Times movie critic Stephen Farber had also spotted "a complex cinematic mosaic with multiple story lines" in many current films. "This type of fractured narrative," he wrote, "has turned out to be a hallmark of this year's thoughtful, independent-spirited films" (n. p.).

Recent narrative experimentation in fiction films is an interesting phenomenon on several levels. For one thing, my survey indicates that the number of alternative film narratives is increasing, showing modest but steady growth over the past few years. Of course experimenting with cinema narration is not new, dating back to the medium's beginnings. But historically such films were relatively rare novelty pieces that stood out precisely because they deviated from the dominant narrative model that most films utilized: Hollywood's chronologically linear, beginning-middle-end, three-act structure.

A second intriguing aspect of this trend is that these experimental narratives are not restricted to art house cinema and may be found among all kinds of films. Not only have variations on classical linear plotting appeared in independent productions (for example, the meta-narration of American Splendor [2003], the over-lapping and repeated events in Elephant [2003], the absent causality in Last Days [2005], and the daisy-chain structure of Slacker) but also in more mainstream Hollywood fare (the repeated narrative in Groundhog Day [1993], the multi-protagonist plot of Magnolia [1999]) and films somewhere in between (the best example is Go [1999], with its hub-and-spoke structure, which began as an independent film but due to a series of buy-outs was released by Columbia; but there are also the subjective narrations of Adaptation [2002] and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind [2004]). In fact, the same sort of branching narrative that splits time and doubles the protagonist in the unassuming U.S.-British co-production Sliding Doors (1997) also occurs at the climactic sequence of the Hollywood franchise blockbuster Harry Potter: The Prisoner of Azkaban (2004). And a variant of the branching narrative is the basis for Woody Allen's Melinda and Melinda (2004).

Third, as the case of Sliding Doors suggests, recent narrative experimentation is a worldwide development, not solely an American one. One has only to look at a list of contemporary international films to see that playing with movie narration has gone global. To list but a few, from Germany has come Tom Tykwer's Lola Rennt (Run, Lola, Run, 1998) and the French-Romanian-German co-production of Michael Haneke's Code Inconnu: Recit incomplet de divers voyages (Code Unknown, 2000); from Mexico, Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's Amores Perros (2000); from Hong Kong, Kar Wai Wong's Chong qing sen fin (Chunking Express, 1994); from France, Agnes Jaoui's Le Gout des autres (The Taste of Others, 2000), Gaspar Noe's Irreversible (2002), and Francois Ozon's 5 x 2 (2004); from the United Kingdom, Michael Winterbottom's Wonderland (1999), Jasmin Dizdar's Beautiful People (1999), Mike Figgis's Hotel (2001), which he made as a British-Italian co-production in Venice after completing the USA-made Time Code (2000), and Tom Hunsinger and Neil Hunter's Lawless Heart (2001); from Ireland, John Crowley's Intermission (2003); from Korea, Changdong Lee's Bakha satang (Peppermint Candy, 2000); from Argentina, Lucrecia Martel's La Cienaga (2001).

Despite all this alternative narrative activity, however, no one has sought to classify the films by plot types, which is what I propose to do here. The best way to proceed, I believe, is with order
and precision. The need for some sort of systematic approach became clear to me several years back, when I began making lists of as many alternatively plotted films as I could think of. As the list grew and the number of films approached 100, it was plain that umbrella terms like "new narratives" or "alternative plots" were not very helpful. Much more useful would be an arrangement of films based on how these narratives deviated from the dominant narrative paradigm. In addition, categorizing these plot formations will help us perceive and define precise narrative patterns, particularly those that may not be obvious at first glance. We will be able to note, for instance, the aforementioned identical narrative tropes in Sliding Doors and Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, or the structural and thematic affinities between Crash and Code Inconnu. To give another example: comparing Sliding Doors and Kieslowski's Blind Chance reveals that despite their superficial situational resemblance--both have characters running after trains at a station--they are in fact two different sorts of narratives.

With a concise taxonomy in place, the scope of this narrative tendency becomes apparent, and we can begin addressing analytical questions. Do these films represent a movement, trend, cycle, or possibly something bigger, more profound, and potentially more significant? A new kind of film storytelling? A challenge to the hegemony of Hollywood's dominant cinematic discourse? If there have been cinematic antecedents, what is that lineage? And, of course, why is new film narration emerging now? Classification, then, helps us understand the nature and degree of narrative innovation that is occurring.

Previous Classification Schemes

Various critics over the years have categorized films in different ways, and it will be constructive to review them briefly to distinguish them from my approach and to see how they might help me devise my own classification. I begin with Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni's famous 1969 Cahiers du Cinema editorial entitled "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism." A foundational piece of ideological criticism, it was a frontal assault on then-current critical practices ("There can be no room in our critical practice either for speculation [commentary, interpretation, de-coding even] or for specious raving [of the film-columnist variety]") and a call to arms for politically-based criticism that would enlighten readers about the ideological content of films (24-25). In the process, the authors delineated seven types of films, based on how ideology was conveyed (25-28). Since mine is a narratological rather than ideological analysis, those categories are not particularly germane. This is not to say that plot formations do not have ideological implications, but for my purposes here what is most useful is the authors' keen distinction between film content and cinematic form, between the subject of a film and the mode the filmmaker used to depict it.

Needless to say, narratology has developed significantly since then, developed in film studies in large measure by the likes of Seymour Chatman, David Bordwell, and others. (2) We now speak with much more exactness about film form, content, and narration because of their work. The terms proposed by Chatman for Comolli and Narboni's form and content are story (what the film is about) and narrative discourse (how the filmmaker tells the story) (Story, 31-34). Bordwell, in turn, adopted two terms from Russian formalism--fabula (the story material, the series of events that are narrated) and syuzhet (plotting, how the filmmaker relates story events). Because fabula and syuzhet are common to all narration and not just to film, Bordwell makes his approach film
specific by adding another analytical element, "style," which "simply names the film's systematic use of cinematic devices" (50). In Narration in the Fiction Film he proposed four broad modes of films based on their fabulas, syuzhets, and cinematic style: classical Hollywood narration, art film narration (characterized by story gaps, loose or no causality, a high degree of ambiguity, and either lacking closure or arriving at an indeterminate resolution), historical materialist narration (especially the ideologically-driven films of the early Soviet era), and parametric (style-centered) narration (156-310).

In creating my typology, I will focus specifically on films' syuzhets and will define an alternative narrative as one that diverges significantly--but not totally--from classical Hollywood narration, Bordwell's first mode. He defines classical Hollywood narration as characterized by the presence of a goal-oriented protagonist, who is the film's main causal agent. The classical syuzhet coheres due to a causal chain where one cause leads to an effect, which in turn becomes the next cause, and so on until the final goal is attained (or not). The basic plot, in its barest form, "consists of an undisturbed stage, the disturbance, the struggle, and the elimination of the disturbance" (157). Finally, the classical syuzhet usually "presents a double causal structure, two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance (boy/girl, husband/wife), the other line involving another sphere--work, war, a mission or quest, other personal relationships. Each line will possess a goal, obstacles, and a climax" (157). (3) As I hope will be made clear below, what I am categorizing are syuzhets that deviate from but may still adhere to the classical mode due to their conspicuous storytelling imperative, not ones that are so exotic that they are beyond the pale and represent a different mode of film altogether.

Besides Chatman and Bordwell, also instructive was Robin Wood's "Plot Formations" in Hitchcock's Films Revisited, in which he arranged the director's filmography based on five basic types of stories (239-248). In so doing, he revealed a narrative kinship among groups of films that may not have been noticeable at first glance, which I think will occur here as well. Finally, Kristen Thompson's analysis of narrative structure in Storytelling in the New Hollywood informs part of my taxonomy, particularly two categories based on the number of protagonists: parallel protagonist films and multiple-protagonist films (44-49).

A Few Points About the Rationale for Classification

Before we look at the ways that this recent crop of films revises conventional Hollywood narration, a few classificatory points. First, as I said above, I will restrict my focus to films' syuzhets, not their cinematic style. This is not because I deem style unimportant; quite the contrary: it is so important that it deserves a separate, full-blown discussion, which is beyond the scope of what I can do here. Moreover, my survey indicates that many recent alternative narrative films tend to restrict their experimentation to syuzhet construction, and much less to developing new cinematic style. This is one of the ways that recent narration differs from the new waves of the 1960s, which were full fledged attacks on both stylistic and syuzhet fronts. A few of these films, however, do mix unconventional plotting with experimental stylitics. Mike Figgis's Time Code, for instance, combines what I am calling the Polyphonic or Ensemble Plot with certain cinematic innovations (telling four stories at once, each in a single feature-length take, all presented simultaneously on the screen in four split-screen views). The multiple-protagonist stories of Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller's Sin City (2005) are blended with
Rodriguez’s extensive use of green screen special effects, creating an unusual digital mise-en-scene that echoes its graphic novel source.

Second, I have decided to exclude staged and scripted mockumentaries. While a lot of interesting filmmaking is being done in this area and has been for some time, my focus here is on fiction film narration. The best mockumentaries are fictions, to be sure, but their effectiveness derives, I believe, from the fact that they are predicated on the documentary model, on their pretending to be something that they are not. So as interesting as Woody Allen's Zelig (1983), Peter Jackson's Forgotten Silver (1995), Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez’s The Blair Witch Project (1999), and Zak Penn and Werner Herzog’s Incident at Loch Ness (2004) are, I will not be dealing with them here. This is a parallel movement to the one I am describing, one whose primary objective is parodying and/or exploiting the poetics of dominant documentary filmmaking rather than bending the Hollywood paradigm. Needless to say, mockumentaries are related to the topic of film narration, but they are, I contend, different from what I am describing.

Third, I am leaving out most science fiction films, particularly the Matrix series (1999, 2003). The reason for this is that, despite all the bouncing back and forth between alternative worlds and times in such films, the genre provides the motivation for and naturalizes these sudden space-time shifts. For all of Neo's trips in and out of the Matrix, in the main the narrative remains conventionally linear, unambiguous, and relatively clear. Unquestionably, plenty does not remain clear, but deciphering the mystery becomes the object of his quest. Neo, then, is a familiar figure from the sci-fi genre and the classical cinema: a lone male protagonist on a quest to save the universe. The same could be said of Donnie in Donnie Darko (2001). That is, if you are one of the viewers who got writer-director Richard Kelly's expressed intention of telling a science fiction story of a parallel universe threatening the existence of our own (Donnie Darko DVD commentary). One of the fascinating aspects of that film, however, as Elliot Panek notes in his essay in this volume, is that its open ending allows for other interpretations. You could, for instance, understand the film to be the last-second mental narrative of a dying teenager, a la An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge. If so, then it is an example of the Subjective Plot, and as such I have placed it in that category.

Fourth, I have eliminated some films that, while containing narrative elements, are primarily interested in formal experimentation. I classify them as experimental or avant-garde films and have excluded them. Let me single out the films of David Lynch in this regard. Though several of them contain very strange elements, the arcs of their syuzhets take fairly standard generic shape. Blue Velvet (1986) can be seen as a coming of age picture; Wild at Heart (1990) a road movie, and Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me (1992) an unusual but still recognizable genre blend of murder mystery, police procedural, and high school teen flick. As for Lynch's more oblique films like Eraserhead (1977), Lost Highway (1997), and Mulholland Drive (2001), I regard them as fascinating examples of avant-garde filmmaking, firmly within the Dadaist tradition. That they are feature-length, made in the U.S., and that the last two were released and exhibited through mainstream outlets says more about the success of Lynch as auteur and the loyalty of his cult following than about their content. But their poetics underscores Lynch's primary interest in imagery and his appreciation of formal elements purely and simply as formal elements. Their dominant creative sensibility is Lynch the image-making artist rather than Lynch the narrator. They have much more in common with Man Ray's Emak-Bakia (1926) than they do with the
typical Hollywood fare. Janet Staiger makes much the same point when she argues that Mulholland Drive is a remake of Maya Deren's Meshes of the Afternoon (unpublished paper).

The films I have categorized are first and foremost stories, and I am guessing that their filmmakers think of themselves primarily as storytellers. Even as challenging a director as Abbas Kiarostami, when asked if he had ever considered making completely abstract, non-narrative art films, refused to relinquish story. "Every movie," he replied, "should have some kind of story. But the important thing is how the story is told" (Sterritt). This is also true of Tarantino, for all his narrative pyrotechnics. Obviously, he delights in raiding film history and borrowing elements in order, as he says, to

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{twist them around, give them new form, bring things} \\
\text{together that have never been matched up before. But} \\
\text{that should never become referential to the point of} \\
\text{stopping the movement of the film. My first concern is} \\
\text{to tell a story that will be dramatically captivating. What} \\
\text{counts is that the story works and that viewers will be} \\
\text{caught up in my film} \quad \text{(Ciment and Niogret, 87)}.
\end{align*}
\]

Lynch's Eraserhead, Lost Highway, and Mulholland Drive are excluded because they seem to be more focused on the creation of arresting images rather than on the telling of a good yarn. In this taxonomy I am looking for films that are different from typical Hollywood storytelling fare in degree; to my eyes, these Lynch films are different in kind--they are experimental cinema. (4)

Let me summarize my focus, then, by returning to Bordwell's four modes. In this essay I will focus on the syuzhets of films that, for the most part, fall within the dominant, classical tradition along with some that are in the art cinema mode. That is, fiction films--including Hollywood, independent, and art cinema--that are attempting to tell a fairly conventional story using unconventional plotting. I will exclude experimental cinema (like some of Lynch's work), parametric or wholly style-centered films, as well as mockumentaries. Some of the films in the survey are alternative narratives in more than one way, and I will indicate them with an asterisk. Naturally, all of these decisions are judgment calls on my part, but these categories are not meant to be final and definitive, but rather preliminary, inductive, and organic, leading to discussion and debate and subject to inevitable re-categorization as we try to fathom the significance of recent filmmaking. Lastly, let me say that while the films listed under each category are extensive, they are not exhaustive. I began jotting down titles simply to find how many films I was talking about (were there 15? 50? more?) and then to discern narrative clusters and eventually categories. I have seen all of these films listed, but I have not seen every film made in the past two decades. Therefore, consider the films indexed here as a substantial inventory presented to suggest the range of alternative narration in recent filmmaking, not as a complete or final listing.

With these caveats in mind, let me proceed with my classification. I have divided up the films into twelve categories, arranged into three main groups based on the ways they deviate from the Hollywood paradigm, namely: plots based on the number of protagonists, plots with nonlinear temporality, and plots that violate classical rules of subjectivity, foregrounded narration, and the narrative triumvirate of goal-orientation, causality, and exposition.
Alternative Plot Formations

Plots Based on the Number of Protagonists

1. The Polyphonic or Ensemble Plot--multiple protagonists, single location

Antecedents:

The Best Years of Our Lives (1946, d. William Wyler)
The Big Chill (1983, d. Lawrence Kasdan)
Diner (1982, d. Barry Levinson)
Dinner at Eight (1933, d. George Cukor)
Grand Hotel (1932, d. Edmund Goulding)
Hannah and Her Sisters (1986, d. Woody Allen)
Nashville (1975, d. Robert Airman)
The Rules of the Game (1939, d. Jean Renoir)
A Wedding (1978, d. Robert Altman)
L'Auberge espagnole (2002, d. Cedric Klapish)
Beautiful Girls (1996, d. Ted Demme)
Beautiful People (1999, d. Jasmin Dizdar)
La Cienaga * (2001, d. Lucrecia Martel)
Code Inconnu: Recit incomplet de divers voyages (Code Unknown, 2000, d. Michael Haneke)
Crash (2005, d. Paul Haggis)
Dazed and Confused (1993, d. Richard Linklater)
Full Frontal (2002, d. Steven Soderbergh)
Gosford Park (2001, d. Robert Altman)
Le Gout des autres (The Taste of Others, 2000, d. Agnes Jaoui)
Grand Canyon (1991, d. Lawrence Kasdan)

Happy Endings (2005, d. Don Roos)

Hotel (2001, d. Mike Figgis)

The Ice Storm (1997, d. Ang Lee)

Intermission (2003, d. John Crowley)

Lawless Heart (2001, d. Tom Hunsinger and Nell Hunter)

Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels (1998, d. Guy Ritchie)

Love Actually (2003, d. Richard Curtis)

Magnolia (1999, d. Paul Thomas Anderson)

Me and You and Everybody We Know (2005, d. Miranda July)

Mystery Train (1989, d. Jim Jarmusch)

Nine Lives (2005, d. Rodrigo Garcia)

Pret-at-Porter (Ready to Wear, 1994, d. Robert Airman)

Pulp Fiction * (1994, d. Quentin Tarantino)


Short Cuts (1993, d. Robert Altman)

Sin City (2005, d. Robert Rodriguez)

Snatch (2000, d. Guy Ritchie)

Suburbia (1996, d. Rick Linklater)

13 Conversations About One Thing (2001, d. Jill Sprecher)

200 Cigarettes (1999, d. Risa Bramon Garcia)

Two Weeks in the Valley (1996, d. John Herzfeld)
Time Code (2000, d. Mike Figgis)

Wonderland (1999, d. Michael Winterbottom)

Yi Yi (2000, d. Edward Yang)

The majority of the alternative narrative films fall into this category, a variety of the multiple protagonist film. It is "characterized by the interaction of several voices, consciousnesses, or world views, none of which unifies or is superior to (has more authority than) the others" (Prince, 19). Sometimes one character's story intersects with another's, sometimes not. Robert Altman's Nashville (1975) is the often-cited modern antecedent, but the form dates back at least as far as 1932 when MGM's central producer Irving Thalberg used his marketing savvy to maximize the studio's greatest resource: its bevy of stars ("More Stars than there are in Heaven," it boasted). He created the concept of the all-star cast ensemble movie for Grand Hotel, bringing together an array of the studio's top actors that included Greta Garbo, John and Lionel Barrymore, Wallace Beery, and Joan Crawford. They played guests or visitors to an elegant Berlin hotel, and each had her or his own story, which sometimes intertwined with the others. Not surprisingly, Grand Hotel was a major box-office hit, and MGM repeated the formula successfully the following year with Dinner at Eight; together they established the multi-character star vehicle, the basis for the Polyphonic Plot film.

It is important to note that not every multiple protagonist film nor every movie with an all-star cast contains a Polyphonic Plot. The distinction I would make is whether or not the protagonists have a single, shared goal or separate ones. If they share one goal--like the commandos in The Guns of Navarone (1961), the convicts-turned-commandos in The Dirty Dozen (1967), the hired guns in The Magnificent Seven (1960), the band of thieves in Ocean's Eleven (both versions, 1960 and 2001) and Ocean's Twelve (2004)--they can be thought of as a single protagonist, albeit a subdivided one. And often, upon closer examination, star power and casting disclose that the plots actually follow a single main protagonist with a clearly-defined goal, which requires them to assemble a team. In the films just mentioned, Gregory Peck, Lee Marvin, Yul Brynner, Frank Sinatra, and George Clooney play their film's de facto protagonists. The same can be said for buddy movies, in which two protagonists share a single goal. A true Polyphonic Plot, on the contrary, has several characters, each of whom has an individual goal, but none of these characters' goals becomes the featured goal of the film, the narrative's organizing principle.

Thus the exclusion of John Sayles' Lone Star (1994). As a Mexican American who grew up on and traces his roots to the Texas-Mexico border, I am impressed by Sayles' ability to "get" the international frontier and portray its multiple diversities--race, class, ethnic, generational, and linguistic--as few other films have been able to do. One way that he achieves this is by creating a host of well-developed characters with intricately interwoven histories. Yet at its core Lone Star is a murder mystery whose central narrative thrust is following Sheriff Deeds (Chris Cooper) as he uncovers clues to unlock the secret of the human skull and the rusty sheriff's badge found in the desert in the film's opening scene. Neatly--probably too neatly--most of the characters' stories dovetail into his solving of the case, and as a result Lone Star is not Polyphonic. Similarly, in Do
the Right Thing (1989) Spike Lee does a masterful job of rendering an entire Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood community. But the film focuses on its protagonist, Mookie (Spike Lee), who delivers pizza for Sal (Danny Aiello), the Italian American owner of Sal's Famous Pizzeria. As resentment grows between the mostly African American and Puerto Rican locals and Sal and his two sons, Mookie finds himself caught between allegiance to his racial and neighborhood roots on the one hand and his employer on the other. Once again, though depicting numerous characters of various ages, races, and ethnicities, the film centers on Mookie and thus is not truly Polyphonic.

A distinguishing feature of the Polyphonic Plot is its unity of time and space. Some plots follow the Grand Hotel model, gathering characters at a single location (The Big Chill, Hotel, Gosford Park, SubUrbia, L'Auberge Espagnole, Yi Yi); the action in Dazed and Confused centers around the last day of class at a high school). Some, however, have looser spatial boundaries, but still confine their characters to a single geographical region. Crash, Magnolia, Short Cuts, Full Frontal, and Time Code all take place in Los Angeles; Wonderland and Beautiful People (and most of Love Actually) in London; 13 Conversations About One Thing in New York City; Shijie tracks 16 characters as they move in and around the world theme park in Beijing; and Sin City follows the denizens of some dark and forbidding metropolis.

One further point to make is the intriguing fact that, although the Polyphonic Plot could be said to derive from classical farce, very few are comic (200 Cigarettes is the exception here). From Grand Hotel to Grand Canyon, from The Rules of the Game to Gosford Park, Polyphonic films may have some amusing moments, but filmmakers tend to use them to render the complex, multi-faceted nature of an entire society. This is the plot of choice for portraying a social cross-section.

2. The Parallel Plot--multiple protagonists in different times and/or spaces

Antecedents:

Intolerance (1916, d. D.W. Griffith)
The Godfather Part II (1974, d. Francis Ford Coppola)
Ararat * (2002, d. Atom Egoyan)
Before the Rain (1994, d. Milcho Manchevski)
The Hours (2002, d. Stephen Daldry)
Loggerheads (2005, d. Tim Kirkman)
Longitude (TVM, 2000, d. Charles Sturridge)

Syriana (2005, d. Stephen Gaghan)

Traffic (2000, d. Steven Soderbergh)

This is a multiple protagonist film, similar to the Polyphonic Plot in that its characters each have distinct goals, but different in that its multiple characters are not proximate. Characters are separate from each other spatially if the action is roughly contemporaneous (Traffic, Syriana), or they exist in different times and spaces altogether (Intolerance, The Godfather Part II, Ararat, The Hours).

An interesting aspect of this type is that none of them tell more than four stories. That seems to be the maximum number of sub-plots a Parallel Plot film can sustain, the very number that D. W. Griffith utilized in Intolerance. Writer-director Stephen Gaghan tested the four-plot rule by adding a fifth strand to Syriana, but realized he had to draw back. "Five plot lines broke the camel's back," he said. This suggests an inverse relationship: the greater the distance the characters are separated in time and space, the fewer the number of subplots. A Polyphonic Plot with its unity of location is able to maintain many more character story lines. Nashville followed twenty-four characters, Dazed and Confused twelve, and Miranda July's Me and You and Everybody We Know effortlessly juggled the stories of two adults and five children as well as several lesser characters all in just ninety minutes of running time. "If the stories all take place in the same geographical setting, it's easier to incorporate more strands," said Gaghan, implying that the limiting factors were logistic and production-based. "We shot over 200 locations on four continents with 100 speaking parts, and we found that we couldn't balance any more than four stories" (Farber, n.p.). Still, Griffith shot all of Intolerance's four tales in Hollywood, greatly simplifying production, which may indicate that the four-plot tipping point may also have to do with the intricacies of maintaining a clear dramatic structure on the creative end and with the ability of audiences to comprehend individual stories that take place in different times and spaces on the reception end. Maybe a sort of narrative ceiling is being realized here. In two to three hours of running time, the interpretive machinery necessary for viewers to keep track of multiple plots, each with its own goal-centered characters, disparate locations, sets, costumes, and so forth all contribute to limiting Parallel Plots to four strands.

3. The Multiple Personality (Branched) Plot

Antecedents:

The Playhouse (1921, d. Buster Keaton)

Sherlock Jr. (1924, d. Buster Keaton)

Amores Possiveis (Possible Loves, 2001, d. Sandra Werneck)

An interesting variant of the Parallel Plot is one in which the multiple protagonists are the same person, or different versions of the same person. A freak or magical event most often motivates the Multiple Personality (or Branching) Plot. Helen (Gwyneth Paltrow) is rushing to board a subway car when time and her identity are doubled, providing two contrasting versions of her life. In one, she jumps on the train just in time; in the other, she misses it and is left behind on the platform. In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Hermione (Emma Watson) teaches Harry (Daniel Radcliffe) how to shift time so that he can replay a series of recent, tragic events and, hopefully, reverse the outcome. Along with Hermione, Harry returns to Hagrid's hut, saves Buckbeak the Hippogriff, and rescues his other self and Sirius Black from a swarm of Dementors. Note that, as opposed to Helen in Sliding Doors, whose two selves develop into considerably different personalities, Harry's double is essentially the same character returning to alter the course of recently-transpired history, an aspect I will return to momentarily.

The parallel protagonists' personalities may occupy the same time-space (Multiplicity), or a different time and/or space (Melinda and Melinda), or a different reality that occupies the same time-space, as in Sliding Doors and the concluding rescue sequence in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. It is important to bear in mind that these are not, strictly speaking, ghost stories. Ghosts are spirits of the dead who appear to the living, not a second rendition of a living person. In cinema, however, ghost-like effects have sometimes been used to signify a character's doubling.

In fact, ghost versions of characters who inhabit the world (or "a" world) differently from their source characters is a trope that dates back to early silent cinema, where it was relatively common. An early example is Buster Keaton's The Playhouse, a still-astonishing one-reeler that is the forerunner of the cloned character in Harold Ramis's Multiplicity. Keaton's silent classic is built on a one-gag premise--a vaudevillian falls asleep and dreams himself as every member in the theater, audience, orchestra, and performers--and, because of its short length, it remains only a gag. There is no development of the various clone characters as occurs in most recent Multiple Personality Plot narratives. A full-fledged treatment of the gag that does qualify as character branching is Keaton's Sherlock Jr., in which a dream rendition of Buster's sleeping projectionist leaves his "host" self, climbs into the movie theater's screen, and enters the reality of the exhibited film. Woody Allen played with the reverse of this in The Purple Rose of Cairo (1985),
where an actor (Jeff Daniels) abandons the movie he is starring in to court a devoted fan (Mia Farrow). But because the actor only exists in one dimension at a time this is not truly a Multiple Personality Plot. Indeed, one of the film's funniest moments is when the film's abandoned cast come after him to convince him to return to the projected film's diegesis.

A composite example of this category is Just Like Heaven, which superimposes the Multiple Personality Plot onto a quasi-ghost story template. Due to the sudden accidental death of Elizabeth, a workaholic young doctor (Reece Witherspoon), she is transformed into a spirit who still inhabits her apartment after it has been rented to a handsome architect (Mark Ruffalo). The ghost story dominates the first half of the film, filled with the requisite--and predictable--now-you-see-her, now-you-don't jokes. A mid-point twist brings the film's Multiple Personality Plot to the fore. She isn't dead, she's comatose. Thus, there are two versions of her, and the longer she remains in a coma, the more different they become. Watching her friends and workmates, she becomes in effect a voyeur of her own life, which helps her recognize that her dedication to her profession is excessive and is, in fact, a character flaw--one that the comatose Elizabeth can correct once she comes to. Just Like Heaven uses the Multiple Personality Plot to wring out one more variation of a stock romantic comedy situation: a couple can not connect until one partner corrects some personality failing. In addition, it demonstrates a commonsense rule for this category: the longer the split personalities remain separated, the more different they (are bound to) become, and the more difficult to re-integrate into one coherent individual. Harry Potter is basically the same Harry during his brief, "dual-Harry" rescue mission, but if he had not been able to return to real time and rejoin his original self, he would have no doubt begun to change based on the fact that each "twin," like Helen in Sliding Doors, undergoes a different set of experiences. In Just Like Heaven, the length of time the two Elizabeth's are separate is crucial and advantageous, because it gives her voyeur version a chance to see the imbalance in the life of her physical host.

Two special cases deserve mention. One is Kieslowski's The Double Life of Veronique, which tells the story of two characters, both singers and both played by the same actress (Irene Jacob). Veronika lives and suddenly dies in Poland; in Paris, Veronique decides not to pursue a career in music. By juxtaposing their stories, Kieslowski suggests a haunting but unexplained link between the two characters such that Veronique is both Veronika's physical twin and her artistic doppelganger.

The case of Fight Club is unusual, and related to Identity in its story and subjectivity. Its inclusion as a Multiple Personality Plot is based on the fact that, as we come to find out, its doubled protagonists, Jack (Edward Norton) and Tyler (Brad Pitt), simultaneously inhabit the same physical world but separate psychological worlds. Its split structure underscores the disintegration of Jack's personality and, seen as a Multiple Personality Plot, the film is a case history detailing Jack's progressive schizophrenia. The film's syuzhet cleverly hides his condition so that it appears to be a simple dual-protagonist movie. The revelation at the conclusion makes the film much more startling; what looked like a peculiar action-based buddy film is actually something more disturbing: a psychological crack-up.

One more element of this surprising Multiple Personality Plot film deserves mention. Fight Club's splitting or "sliding door" moment is subjective. It is thus linked to Identity (which relies
on the trick of the sliding door incident occurring off screen and being withheld from viewers until the climax) and to the Subjective Plots discussed below. And it is distinguished from Sliding Doors and Just Like Heaven, whose decisive events are shown objectively (Helen's missing/just making the train; Elizabeth's car crash). In Fight Club, the character's doubling is depicted subjectively, representing the gradual deterioration of Jack's mental state. This is spread out over a series of five point-of-view subliminal edits, four of them containing a single frame image of Tyler, and a fifth in which Tyler appears in the background of a video clip. An extremely subtle way to introduce Jack's second personality, these flash images are nearly impossible to see, and if seen at all, appear as a reddish blur to even the most alert first-time viewers. Upon closer inspection, especially repeated viewings of the DVD where shots can be replayed and frames frozen, they can be spotted as symptoms of Jack's psychological break up, as preparation for the eventual appearance of Tyler, and as hints that he exists only inside Jack's deranged psyche.

4. The Daisy Chain Plot--no central protagonist, one character leads to the next

Antecedents:

Au hasard Balthazar (1966, d. Robert Bresson)

Heavy Metal (1981, d. Gerald Potterton and Jimmy T. Murakami)

La Million (1931, d. Rene Claire)


La Ronde (1950, d. Max Ophuls)

Madame de ... (The Earrings of Madame de ..., 1953, d. Max Ophuls)

Tales of Manhattan (1942, d. Julien Duvivier)

Winchester '73 (1950, d. Anthony Mann)

The Yellow Rolls Royce (1965, d. Anthony Asquith)

Chung hing sam lam * (Chinking Express, 1994, d. Kar Wai Wong)

The Red Violin (1998, d. Francois Girard)

Sexual Life (2005, d. Ken Kwapis)

Slacker (1990, d. Richard Linklater)
Twenty Bucks (1993, d. Keva Rosenfeld)

Like the Polyphonic Plot, the Daisy Chain has multiple protagonists, but rather than interwoven stories, each character's story is presented fully, in turn. The narrative passes from one character to the next, sometimes following some object, as with a studio-era example of this category, Tales of Manhattan, whose plot is organized around four owners of a coat in New York City. Other early examples are the French production of Max Ophuls's Madame de ... (The Earrings of Madame de ...), a postwar Hollywood permutation, Anthony Mann's Winchester '73, and The Yellow Rolls Royce, which reveals the Daisy Chain structure to be basically a linked anthology plot. More recent instances are Heavy Metal, tracking the many characters who come into contact with a mysterious green orb; Twenty Bucks, depicting the fates of various holders of a single $20 bill; and The Red Violin, tracing the life of the perfect musical instrument from its creation in seventeenth-century Italy to its auction in present-day Montreal. An alternative form of this narrative follows one character after another in tandem, as they come into contact with each other, rather than with a common, linking object. Ophuls, obviously enamored of this structure, produced a sumptuous example in La Ronde, following a series of love affairs, and Rick Linklater used it to link members of an alternative sub-culture in Austin, Texas, in his mellow Slacker.

The case of Winchester '73 is of interest for the way that it exposes Hollywood's negotiation of the Daisy Chain's alternative structure with the star system. The linking object is a prized, limited edition rifle won early in the film by Lin McAdam (James Stewart) in a sharp-shooting contest, only to have it stolen by the runner-up. The film follows the path of the gun as it works its way into and out of several lives until Lin finally reclaims it. For Hollywood in the late 1950s and for Stewart at this point in his career, the film was a delicate balancing act. After World War II he made two startling career moves that changed the way actors worked for studios. In 1945, Stewart's agent at MCA, Lew Wasserman, helped the star, who had been away in the service during the war, sever his exclusive contract with MGM and go free-lance. This was significant, but not unexpected, especially in the aftermath of Olivia de Havilland's 1944 court victory that struck down the studios' exclusive contracts with actors as violations of California's anti-peonage laws.

But the deal that Wasserman subsequently brokered for Stewart with Universal was groundbreaking. Under the terms of the non-exclusive agreement, instead of being paid a salary for starring in Universal films, Stewart would receive 50% of each film's profits. In light of this, Winchester '73 is a modified Daisy Chain--and for Stewart's sake, it had to be. Like a true Daisy Chain, it followed the journey of the rifle passing through several minor characters' hands, but for career and box office reasons, it was paramount that Stewart also be the star of the film. "The most reliable gauge of any project's market value," writes Thomas Schatz of this transitional period in studio history in The Genius of the System, "especially in the competitive and volatile first-run market, was the marquee value of its star" (470). For these reasons, Stewart had to be the star, and his character, Lin, had to remain prominent in the story. Accordingly, Winchester '73 is a Daisy Chain-chase hybrid, with the plot never losing track of Lin's intense pursuit of the stolen gun.
As this example illustrates, because star power is so critical to the success of a Hollywood film, and because many of these alternative plots minimize the size and importance of individual roles, a built-in conflict exists between such narratives and Hollywood's bottom-line imperative. Still, a sign of the vigor of these new forms is that, in the face of this built-in resistance, stars have nonetheless opted to make them. No big stars appear in any other Daisy Chain films, perhaps because the structure tends to make all the parts minor ones. But a few have appeared in Polyphonic movies, where there is the possibility of longer screen time, a more-developed character, and an entertaining star turn that allows an actor to take a non-typical role, even if it is a smaller one, for example Tom Cruise in Magnolia, Brad Pitt in Snatch, and Sandra Bullock in Crash.

Plots Based on the Re-ordering of Time; Nonlinear Plots

5. The Backwards Plot

Antecedents:

Bathing Made Easy (1902, d. Cecil M Hepworth)

Betrayal (1983, d. David Hugh Jones; sc. Harold Pinter)

Building Made Easy, or, How Mechanics Work in the Twentieth Century (1902, Edison)

Bakha satang (Peppermint Candy, 2000, d. Chang-dong Lee)

5 x 2 (2004, d. Francois Ozon)

Irreversible (2002, d. Gaspar Noe)

Memento (2000, d. Christopher Nolan)


An antecedent of the Backwards Plot might be the number of trick films in the first decade of the medium that exploited cinema's ability to run forwards and backwards, making common activities look magical. The new millennium has seen the reemergence of a small group of films whose entire syuzhets run backwards. What are the consequences of effect-to-cause plotting? Not as drastic as it may seem. The first cause in a classical film is an early, inciting incident. When its effect reaches the protagonist, the causal chain becomes personalized: the hero makes decisions to achieve a goal, each one an action with a consequence. The hero's toughest decision is the climax; the ultimate cause, it comes at the very end and has the final effect of winning the goal (usually). In reverse plotting, however, unearthing the first cause becomes the goal. Despite the backwards movement of the syuzhet, the three-act dramatic structure is maintained, and the climax--in this case, the discovery of the first cause--occurs in the same place, right before the end.
But reverse plotting does draw attention to and emphasizes the causal chain in a way that classical narration does not. In fact, its focus on consequences of actions makes causality the de facto subject of backwards plotted films. The causal chain is important in both forwards or backwards films, of course, the difference being one of ends and means and which has priority. In normal, forward Hollywood plotting, achieving the goal is of primary importance and the means to achieve it are secondary. The means are not unimportant--they are the details that bring the film to life--but they are always in the service of what the film establishes as paramount: the hero's fulfillment of his/her goal. Backwards plotted films begin with the climax, typically in these films a downbeat rather than triumphant conclusion, and it serves as the film's inciting incident. Backwards Plots, then, are causal mysteries; what fuels their narrative engine is the search for the first cause or causes of known effects.

5 x 2, for instance, begins with a couple's signing their divorce papers. How did things come to this? Was one partner to blame? Or did both have a hand in sabotaging their marriage? It turns out it is the latter. Though the husband's (Stephane Freiss) self-centeredness leads to some appalling, reprehensible actions, there is enough blame to go around, and the wife's (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi) promiscuous wedding night activity is an early indication of the degree to which this union leaves her unfulfilled.

However, as viewers, we have far less experience going backwards, so it may feel less predictable--though may not actually be so. The fact that the majority of films go from cause to effect coupled with the fact that most arrive at a happy ending accounts for their predictability; only the means to achieve them are ever in question. The conventional cause-to-effect flow coupled with narrative familiarity creates a steady, going-with-the-grain story comprehension rhythm; Backwards Plots are more challenging, against-the-grain reads. But that may simply be a result of our inexperience in interpreting in reverse rather than any inherent difference in reading strategies. Forwards or backwards, the operations necessary for understanding appear to be similar. In the romantic comedy Hitch (2005), we expect the title character (Will Smith), a dating expert, to encounter difficulties when he follows his own advice in courting Sara (Eva Mendes). More specifically, we probably suspect that the conflicts will involve some sort of comeuppance: the guidance he so confidently doles out to his clients is ineffective when it comes to pursuing Sara. The film clings to the predictable generic formula that says he will win her heart only when he corrects a personality flaw, in this case when he recognizes that his scientific approach reduces male-female relationships to strategic calculations rather than human responses. Thus the ending is anticipated, but getting there is freshened up by plot details different enough to keep us guessing. Sticking to its generic parameters, Hitch succeeds by leading us through a moderately inventive and entertaining cause-to-effect sequence.

Watching 5 x 2 involves a similar process of guessing and confirming, though we move backwards, from effect to causes. The divorce, one might reasonably suppose, was caused by some type of infidelity. We speculate about who was at fault. The unforeseen specifics--their mutual guilt and the exact circumstances of their infidelities--provide a modicum of surprise and narrative interest. Both reading operations, then, forwards and backwards, are essentially the same: a) creating a short list of probables from a longer list of possibles--effects in one case, causes in the other, b) eventually narrowing the list down to one, and c) proceeding to the next narrative cause-effect junction. And, with the exception of Memento, backward plots even
conclude with a happy--or at least happier--ending (the characters' carefree narrative starting point). Indeed, part of these films' poignancy is that they are tragedies in reverse.

This return-to-innocence plotting is particularly moving in Chang-dong Lee's Peppermint Candy, probably the most difficult film from this group to read, especially for non-Korean viewers. But I would speculate that for Koreans it is far less so. The film's reverse narrative asks what would compel its protagonist, Yongho (Kyunggu Sol), to commit suicide in the opening sequence. As the film discloses more about him, the other major enigma is his brutality--at work as a cop, at home in his abusive treatment of his wife, and earlier in his treatment of another woman. In retracing Yongho's sad story from its opening in 1999 back to 1979, Peppermint Candy is simultaneously a history of that troubled period in Korea's history and a critique of the repressive regime that ruled during most of that time. It convincingly argues that Yongho is a natural product of that repression, and that his behavior both mirrors and was caused by the viciousness of the state. No doubt Koreans would find the film less confusing than non-Koreans, and are naturally able to detect many cultural and historical nuances lost on outsiders. Still, for all that, the rhetoric of the film's narration is clear. Even if Koreans have an easier time reading it, they and non-Koreans likely comprehend it in the same way--from confounding effects to explanatory causes.

6. The Repeated Action Plot--one character repeats action

Antecedent:


50 First Dates (2004, d. Peter Segal)

Groundhog Day (1993, d. Harold Ramis)

Lola Rennt (Run, Lola, Run, 1998, d. Tom Tykwer)

"We're going to keep doing this until we get it right" might be these films' collective subtitle. Like most other classical plots, they present their protagonists with a series of character-building obstacles, only in this case the trials are all variations of the same one. Other than the repetition, then, structurally they are identical with a well known classical narration trope: the growth-by-enlightenment character arc. We might divide them up into two varieties, based on whether the obstacles are external or internal. An example of the former is Lola Rennt (Run, Lola, Run) where the eponymous heroine (Franka Potente) is given twenty minutes to raise 100,000 Deutschmarks and save her boyfriend, Manni (Moritz Bleibtreu), in trouble with a local gangster. In the first two attempts she fails, but in the third, however, she draws on powerful and mystical inner resources, manages to shape her own destiny, and succeeds.

The struggle for the protagonists in the other films on the list, however, is an internal one: they must overcome a character flaw. Groundhog Day is the exemplar, where a brash and self-
absorbed TV news anchor (Bill Murray) is trapped in a continual time loop, until he becomes kinder and more caring. Henry the ladies' man (Adam Sandler) makes a similar journey from selfish to selfless in 50 First Dates. An interesting variant is The Butterfly Effect, where Evan (Ashton Kutcher) seems doomed to keep returning to his childhood, trying to alter history in order to make a better present for himself, family, and friends. But every change, however well intentioned, has unexpected and unintended negative consequences. In the end, Evan finally learns what the other self-centered males in this category all eventually learn: egotism traps you in a frustrating and unfulfilling vicious circle. Only when he accepts the fact that he can not play God is he freed from the endless replaying of childhood memories.

Though the number of films in this category is too small a sample to be able to draw any valid generalizations, one gender implication is still interesting. The character are of Lola, the lone woman in this single character Repeated Plot group, begins at selflessness and ends in powerful self-actualization. The male protagonists in the other three films, however, start at a baser level of development, selfishness, and their character arcs go from egocentric to altruistic. They end where Lola begins.

It is notable that the precursor film, Kieslowski's Blind Chance, is not a progressive series of repetitions that chart the improvement of its young protagonist, Witek (Boguslaw Linda). Instead, it utilizes repeated plotting to propose three possible options for the young medical student, each a rumination on the fragility of destiny, and each colored by politics in Communist Poland. Shaken by the death of his father, Witek decides to take a leave of absence from his studies and impulsively buys a train ticket to Warsaw. As the train leaves and Witek runs after it, the film sets forth three outcomes: 1) he just barely boards the train, meets and befriends an older party official, and joins the party; 2) he misses the train, scuffles with a station guard, is sentenced to a month of community service, and joins the anti-communist underground; 3) he misses the train, returns to medical school, becomes a doctor, marries and starts a family. To date, the Repeated Action Plot is Hollywood's new way of relating the old self-improvement narrative. With Blind Chance, Kieslowski did just the opposite, employing it to demonstrate Witek's steadfast sameness. Despite their different trajectories, Witek remains a dedicated idealist across all three versions. Idealism is the bedrock element of Witek's character, and Kieslowski reveals how, depending on the circumstances, that quality could take him in three completely different paths: joining the party, joining the opposition, or opting out of politics to devote himself to medicine. Challenging film narration's heavy dependence on the transformed protagonist, Blind Chance instead builds its story around Witek's consistency and thereby makes all three of his choices seem rational and reasonable. Because of that, it is the most provocative use of the Repeated Action Plot thus far.

7. The Repeated Event Plot—one action seen from multiple characters' perspectives

Antecedents:

Citizen Kane (1941, d. Orson Welles)

Rashomon (1950, d. Akira Kurosawa)
As far as repetition goes, classical narration has no qualms about referring to events or facts multiple times (resulting in the "rule of three": stating key information three times to ensure viewer comprehension [Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 31]). But except for special cases (a mystery, for instance, where several hypothetical versions of the crime may be depicted) the classical paradigm avoids showing the same event more than once. Though classical narration sometimes alludes to an event experienced by several people, it is generally shown from a single perspective. Citizen Kane pioneered breaking with this tradition in one memorable instance. The repeated event, the moments just before and during the curtain's rising on the opening night of the opera starring Susan Alexander Kane (Dorothy Comingore), is shown twice: once more or less objectively, the second more subjectively. Each version begins with a similar though not identical close-up of Susan straining, one last time, to hit that elusive high note. In the first instance, the camera tilts up to a flickering stage light, then back down to her as cast and crew rush about making the final preparations for the curtain's rising, then tracks stage front to record the curtain's shadow rising on Susan and company. In the second, at the light's flickering we cut to a long shot of the commotion from back stage, behind her, then see the curtain rise.

After that, the film reverts to the classical paradigm. Other incidents from Charles Foster Kane's life are related by various characters, but scenes are never repeated entirely. Rather, portions of an incident are presented. Susan's leaving Kane is related first by Susan, then later by the Raymond the butler (Paul Stewart), each account giving discrete parts of the event. Akira Kurosawa adopted both techniques to structure Rashomon, a compilation of multiple views--some partial, some repeating key moments, some nested within a witness's testimony--of a bandit's fatal encounter with a lord and lady in the country. He established the Repeated Event Plot, using it to argue that since events are interpreted subjectively, truth is elusive.
As Charles Musser has demonstrated, Edwin S. Porter dabbled in something similar when he employed a repeated, overlapping continuity around the time he produced The Great Train Robbery (1903). In films like How They Do Things on the Bowery (1902) and especially Life of an American Fireman (1903), actions were repeated twice, relating different character experiences. The fireman's rescue of the woman and her child in Life of an American Fireman is first shown from inside her bedroom, essentially from her perspective. Porter then shows the rescue again, from outside the house, ostensibly the fireman's perspective. Porter's use of this type of continuity was short-lived, and he went on to try something else: the "meanwhile" or crosscutting narration of The Great Train Robbery, where the editing cuts back and forth among simultaneous story strands (212-234).

After Rashomon, the Repeated Event Plot has appeared relatively rarely. In U.S. cinema, this type of narration had its coming out party in Tarantino's Jackie Brown, though it was eloquently used fifteen years earlier in Robert M. Young's The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez. Based on Americo Paredes's non-fiction book of the same name, the film gave multiple accounts of the 1901 shooting of a Texas sheriff and the ensuing tracking down, trial, and conviction of the Tejano farmer Gregorio Cortez (Edward James Olmos). Repeated Event plotting is particularly forceful here in demonstrating the double levels of interpretation in the case. The confrontation itself spiraled into a gunfight because the sheriff did not understand Spanish and misinterpreted Cortez's words. And during the manhunt and trial, the Anglo legal system considered Cortez an outlaw, while Yejanos celebrated him as hero.

Also predating Jackie Brown was the British production of Christine Edzard's Little Dorrit, an ambitious six-hour adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel. The film consists of two three-hour halves, the first told from the point of view of Arthur Clennam (Derek Jacobi), the second from the perspective of Little Dorrit (Sarah Picketing), a destitute servant in his mother's house. The dual frames of reference with scenes repeated from his point of view, then from hers, is more than a stunt. Besides bringing depth and complexity to Dickens' nineteenth-century England, it shores up a considerable weakness in Dickens' storytelling: his all-too-frequent reliance on coincidence. On the face of it, Little Amy Dorrit's rags-to-riches story--raised in a debtor's prison, she becomes a maid in Clennam's household, then inherits a fortune--is pat, melodramatic, and overly fortuitous. By narrating the tale in two parallel sections, Arthur's in Part I and Amy's in Part II, Edzard helps lessen the flagrant serendipity Dickens built into his novel and gives Arthur's predicament more tragic resonance. In Arthur's half, he goes from inheriting his family's estate to being banished to the same debtor's prison that Little Dorrit once called home. Retracing events from Amy Dorrit's perspective in the second part minimizes deus ex machina contrivances for a couple of reasons. To begin with, like Arthur, we do not notice her in the early parts of the film. That is because we have learned how to read mise-en-scene, accepting the movie convention stipulating that minor characters relegated to the background are unimportant and can be disregarded. Dickens' goal was to shame his contemporaries for being oblivious to the poor and destitute; Edzard puts viewers in the same position as the haughty, unfeeling British society Dickens was denouncing, and shames us for not noticing Little Dorrit. Moreover, seeing her rise out of indigence and literally emerge from the background helps us appreciate the effects of poverty on Arthur.
Tarantino uses three character perspectives for the crucial cash drop sequence in Billingsley's department store in Jackie Brown: Jackie's (Pam Greet), Louis's (Robert De Niro), and Max's (Robert Forster). And only by seeing all three do viewers get complete knowledge of the complicated transaction. This is similar to the Hub-and-Spoke Plot, discussed below, but differs from it in that the hub is a critical time-space node for both the characters and the narration. The entire syuzhet follows characters whose tales radiate towards or away from one pivotal time/place where they collide. The narrative of Jackie Brown, on the other hand, utilizes three views of the same action to clarify an important plot point, but does not return to it obsessively, over and over again, as in Amores Perros or Go.

A clearer distinction between Hub-and-Spoke and character viewpoint repetition is seen in Van Sant's Elephant, where several event overlaps depict character plot lines glancing off one another rather than serving to accentuate a single, decisive plot point. Van Sant's repeated actions from different vantage points in Elephant are combined with an extremely complex mise-en-scene that involves long steadicam takes down a high school's endless corridors, around the school grounds, and into and out of class rooms, labs, offices, locker rooms, and libraries. The unhurried moving shots have a documentary quality, but the fictional narration jumps to the fore at the carefully orchestrated overlapping "touch points" where various characters' plot lines converge, but only momentarily and casually, as they pass one another, often without even noticing. As the character threads accumulate, their overlapping layers create a thick narrative matrix, yet a loosely woven one. The violence that erupts shreds this intricate narrative network and destroys the laid-back rhythm established by the gliding tracking shots. Van Sant does not provide clear causes for the violence, much less explain what it means, which is consistent with the Repeated Event Plot's relativity and polysemy: the violence means something different to each student at the school.

8. The Hub and Spoke Plot--multiple characters' story lines intersect decisively at one time and place

Antecedent:

The Killing (1956, d. Stanley Kubrick)

Amores Perros * (2000, d. Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu)

Chung hing sam lam* (Chunking Express, 1994, Kar Wai Wong)


Go (1999, d. Doug Liman)

Lantana (2001, d. Ray Lawrence)

21 Grams* (2003, d. Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu)
As just mentioned, the Hub and Spoke Plot shares some features with the previous category, and might be considered a particular instance of it. Like the Repeated Event Plot, it shows one event from various perspectives and derives from Porter's overlapping editing experiments. The critical difference is that the repeated event in the Hub-and-Spoke Plot is the narrative's dramatic fulcrum and its organizing principle. Characters' stories may begin at the hub and branch out, as with Go and Chungking Express. More typically, the narrative follows characters before and after they converge at the axis point. It also resembles other alternative plots. Like the Polyphonic Plot, its multiple protagonists occupy the same space and time, have different goals, and are all more or less equal in narrative stature. Similar to the Parallel Plot, there seems to be a limit to the number of sub-narratives, none exceeding four. And, except for Lantana and 21 Grams, these can be like the Daisy Chain Plot, with each character's story more or less completed before going on to the next one. But instead of the linking element being an object that passes from one to the other, the characters converge at a time-space focal point. In its narrative structure, Stanley Kubrick's racetrack heist film, The Killing, is an interesting precursor. The returned-to node is the seventh race during which a number of synchronized events must occur for the robbery to take place. In Go, it is a grocery store; in Chungking Express, a fast food stand is the starting and ending place for two stories. A traffic accident is the hub in Amores Perros and 21 Grams. 11:14 and Lantana are crime film variations in which the solution to the mystery depends on which characters can be linked to a certain place at a particular time.

More than any other alternative plot, Hub and Spoke Plots emphasize chance, coincidence, and the freakish nature of fate. Even the smallest occurrence is magnified in importance, and the hub event is shown to be the confluence of a string of seemingly minute details and offhand, even absentminded, decisions. Because destiny delivers characters to the same point in space at exactly the same time, timing and luck figure prominently in the outcome. In Kubrick's The Killing, for example, a cheap suitcase, a high-strung poodle, and airline baggage restrictions conspire to thwart the thief's getaway. Fate, in fact, is the implicit subject of these films. And in the case of Chungking Express, it is made explicit in the opening voice-over. "Every day we brush past so many other people," says Cop 223 (Takeshi Kaneshiro). "People we may never meet or people who may become close friends." We see him running after some criminals and brushing past the Woman in the Blonde Wig (Brigitte Lin), a character who figures prominently in the first story. Director Wong Kar Wai slows down the action here to a measured series of freeze frames while Cop 223 finishes his narration: "This was the closest we ever got. Just 0.01 centimeter between us. But 57 hours later I fell in love with this woman."

The films in this group accentuate the role of chance, but, interestingly, most of the characters' luck is bad rather than good. Other than Cop # 633 (Tony Leung) in Chungking Express and the grocery store crew in Go, things for most characters take a decided turn for the worse, making this very much "the wrong place at the wrong time" category. If only the psychiatrist (Barbara Hershey) in Lantana had not found herself stranded on a country road at night. If only the reformed, born-again ex-con (Benicio Del Toro) in 21 Grams had not killed a father and his two children in a hit-and-run accident. If only the young Octavio (Gael Garcia Bernal) had not raced his car through a red light in Amores Perros and collided with the beautiful actress/model (Goya Toledo), ruining her career and her romantic relationship. Hub-and-spoke films as well as those in the Existential Plot group (#11, below) thus represent a double challenge to the hegemony of causality. Thematically, they demonstrate the frailty of agency by presenting a world where
happenstance prevails and best-laid plans come to naught. At a formal level, they question whether causality and characters' choices, the bedrocks of Hollywood's classical narration and narration in general, are viable as narrative mainsprings particularly in contemporary dramas and romances. And because causality is foundational not just for movies but for life, particularly American life, the ideological implications of such challenges are seriously subversive. If agency is illusory and self-actualization risible, then the notion of rugged individualism, a fundamental component of the American mythos, becomes quaint at best, dangerously delusional at worst. The oppositional consequences of the Hub and Spoke Plot perfectly exemplify Comolli and Narboni's contention that a film's form is tied to its ideology.

9. The Jumbled Plot--scrambled sequence of events motivated artistically, by filmmaker's prerogative False Antecedent: Citizen Kane

Antecedents:

Petulia (1968, d. Richard Lester)
Point Blank (1967, d. John Boorman)
Eye of God (1997, d. Tim Blake Nelson)
Following (1998, d. Christopher Nolan)
The Grudge (2004, d. Takashi Shimizu)
Inside Man (2006, d. Spike Lee)
Ju-on (The Grudge, 2003, d. Takashi Shimizu)
The Limey (1999, d. Steven Soderbergh)
Oh! Soo-jung * (Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, 2000, d. Hong Sang-su)
Out of Sight (1998, d. Steven Soderbergh)
Pulp Fiction* (1994, d. Quentin Tarantino)
Reservoir Dogs* (1992, d. Quentin Tarantino)
The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (2005, d. Tommy Lee Jones)
21 Grams * (2003, d. Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu)
The nonlinear ordering of events as seen in Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs doesn't do away with the cause-and-effect chain, it merely suspends it for a time, eventually to be ordered by the competent spectator. Since this arrested dramatic development only interrupts causality and doesn't break it, it is flashback-like, though not a flashback. Tarantino's Jumbled Plot construction, where scenes are purposely shown out of chronological order, should never be confused with a flashback, and he is adamant about the difference:

... it's not a flashback! No, it's just the order of the information that the author's decided to tell you the story in. It's completely up to the author. I get pissed off when people call my stuff flashbacks. I'll let you know when it's a fucking flashback, all right! Literally, what a flashback is, it is a character thinking back on something. It's not me telling the audience [the story] in a different order.... I try to duplicate a novel kind of thing. Kinda keep going back from time to time (Reservoir Dogs DVD commentary).

He is right to make the distinction, because what Tarantino did in Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs is an original, innovative technique.

Welles' Citizen Kane appears to be the classic, archetypal Jumbled Plot precedent, but isn't really. It is simply a film with a profusion of flashbacks--acquaintances' recounting their memories of Charles Foster Kane--that are told in the chronological order of the reporter's investigation, rather than in the order of Kane's life. The opening--Kane's death abruptly followed by a newsreel--does appear to be scrambled. But the fact that it is a standard framing device becomes clear once the newsreel segues to the reporter's assignment to find the meaning of "Rosebud." From there on out the film is a mystery with a succession of witnesses offering bits of the Kane puzzle.

An important difference between Pulp Fiction and the other films in this category, including Citizen Kane, is that Pulp Fiction is also a true multiple-protagonist Polyphonic Plot film, whereas all of the others in this grouping jumble classical plots with conventional goal-oriented protagonists. Following updates the familiar film noir story of a decent man tempted by a life of crime. Reservoir Dogs is Tarantino's revision of the heist film, and Kill Bill is a female revenge narrative, as is 21 Grams. Though a car accident serves as the narrative hub, as it did with director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu and screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga's earlier Amores Perros, 21 Grams is at heart a Jumbled Plot recounting Cristina's (Naomi Watts) quest for vengeance.

Other idiosyncratic narrative techniques that Tarantino uses deserve mention because they directly affect the syuzhets of his films, particularly Reservoir Dogs and Pulp Fiction. The first is his major modifications of genre formulas, frustrating expectations by omitting obligatory scenes, typically the very ones that define the genre and provide it with action and spectacle. Reservoir Dogs is a heist movie that does not show the heist. The tale of Butch (Bruce Willis) in Pulp Fiction is a mini-boxing film with a familiar set-up: a gangster, in this case Marcellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), tells the fighter to throw a fight. In the boxing genre, the moment of truth is the actual match, which Tarantino skips.
A second Tarantino idiosyncrasy is his filling the gaps created by these omissions with lots of talk, extended conversations that push scenes well beyond the accepted two- to three-minute average length of most recent Hollywood filmmaking. "The average scene length of two to three minutes," writes screenwriting guru Robert McKee, "is a reaction to the nature of cinema and for the audience's hunger for a stream of expressive moments" (291-2). Tarantino's exchanges achieve their decidedly "real" feel because he gives his characters plenty of time to talk, and their dialogue is spiced with allusions to pop culture. But his dialogue violates the classical paradigm in several ways. For instance, he frequently gives characters long speeches, which is generally regarded, as McKee puts it, to be "antithetical with the aesthetics of cinema" (390). Moreover, Tarantino delights in tangential speeches, talk that creates texture and adds atmosphere, but contributes little--if anything--to the narration of the story. Because establishing mood, texture, and atmosphere in this way slows down the film's forward momentum without furnishing information or substantially furthering the understanding of the main plot lines, filmmakers working in the classical paradigm generally minimize or avoid it altogether. Good dialogue, write Ben Brady and Lance Lee in The Understructure of Writing for Film and Television, "reveals information under immediate necessity, and forwards the business of revealing motivation and driving the action forward" (203-4). Mr. Brown's discourse on the meaning of Madonna's "Like a Virgin" and Mr. Pink's defense of never tipping in Reservoir Dogs, and Jules's and Vincent's discussion of Big Macs in Paris in Pulp Fiction are all memorable examples of Tarantino's flouting of Hollywood's screenwriting rules by including dialogue that would not have survived most screenwriting workshops.

To sum up, Reservoir Dogs' and Pulp Fiction's achronological, Jumbled Plots forged a new and original brand of movie storytelling. And among those who have used a scrambled narrative, no one, not even Tarantino, has challenged dominant filmmaking as he did in those first two films by combining the Jumbled Plot with subversions of essential elements of classical film practice such as his sabotaging of genre formulas and his cavalier disregard for the cardinal rules of establishment screenwriting.

Plots that Deviate from Classical Rules of Subjectivity, Causality, and Self-Referential Narration

10. The Subjective Plot--a character's internal (or "filtered") perspective

Antecedents--Many films from the Golden Age of German Silent cinema

8 1/2 (1963, d. Federico Fellini)

La Riviere du hibou (An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, 1962, d. Robert Enrico)

La Jetee (1962, d. Chris Marker)

Shock Corridor (1963, d. Sam Fuller)

Repulsion (1965, d. Roman Polanski)

Adaptation* (2002, d. Spike Jonze)

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A Beautiful Mind (2001, d. Ron Howard)

Being John Malkovich (1999, d. Spike Jonze)

Donnie Darko (2001, d. Richard Kelly)

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004, d. Michel Gondry)

The I Inside (2003, d. Roland Suso Richter)

Jacob's Ladder (1990, d. Adrian Lyne)

Waking Life (2001, d. Rick Linklater)

Film, it has been recognized, is very good at exhibiting physical action but hampered when it comes to revealing a character's interior states. As George Bluestone writes:

> The rendition of mental states--memory, dream, imagination--cannot be as adequately represented by film as by language.... film, by arranging external signs for our visual perception, or by presenting us with dialogue, can lead us to infer thought. But it cannot show us thought directly. It can show us characters thinking, feeling, and speaking, but it cannot show us their thoughts and feelings (quoted in Chatman, Terms, 159).

Over the years, Hollywood films have developed an economic way to capture characters' psychological and emotional states. By braiding the action plot line with a psychological/emotional one, classical cinema allows the former to speak for the latter. In Casablanca, for instance, Rick's orchestrating Ilsa and her husband's escape does a lot of dramatic and psychological/emotional work. It enlists him in the fight against the Nazis (proven by his killing of Major Strasser); it corrects his major character flaw, his stubborn and seemingly uncaring isolationism; and it demonstrates his nobility in putting aside his love for Ilsa for a greater good. For Hollywood films, then, character psychology and emotions are depicted by translating them into physical, external, and observable action.

The films of the German Golden Age, 1919-1931, took another tack. They sought to represent a character's internal states subjectively, by attempting to depict the character's point of view visually. Using classically constructed, linear syuzhets, German cinema developed an expressive cinematic style to represent human psychology and emotions. The most famous example was the expressionistic production design used to represent a madman's world view in Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1920). (5) But a number of other cinematic techniques were employed to indicate characters' states of mind: subjective camera to reflect interior states (the perception of the drunken doorman in Der Letzte Mann [1924]); cluttered mise-en-scene to depict characters' moral confusion (the densely decorated interior of the Blue Angel club in Der Blaue Engel [1930]); placement of characters against massive structures to
depict a loss of self-esteem or a feeling of minimized importance (Freder lost among the giant underground machines in Metropolis [1927]).

Subjective Plots continue in this vein, seeking to go the German Age cinema one better by portraying interior states at the syuzhet as well as the cinematic style levels. Cinematic techniques pioneered by the Germans may be utilized in these films, along with newer special visual effects, usually in conjunction with fragmented, subjective plotting. (Thus I have eliminated Darren Aronofsky's Pi [1998] and Requiem for a Dream [2000]; their impressive cinematic stylistics do help viewers understand the characters' internal states, but their syuzhets are fairly conventional quest plots.) The fractured subjective syuzhet is meant to represent the character's psychologically disordered perspective, or to present the disorienting process of switching back and forth from external to internal worlds. The master of Subjective Plotting is screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, who writes mental adventure films, stories about climbing into characters' heads. While all of his screenplays exhibit Subjective Plotting to some degree, the best, most complete example is Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, a love story about Joel (Jim Carrey) and Clementine (Kate Winslet) that is narrated not objectively but subjectively, from the point of view of Joel's mind and memories. "Clementine is really not in the movie very much," said Kaufman about his screenplay. "Almost everything you see about Clementine is Joel, really" (Feld, 135). And, presumably, everything you hear Clem say are his ideas and words voiced by her as well.

Eternal Sunshine offers ambitious, extremely complex narration that juggles many times. There is the present as well as three past tenses: the previous two years of their relationship; yesterday, when his memories were erased; and his childhood memories, where he and Clementine go to hide in an attempt to preserve their memories. Layered on top of this are multiple levels of Joel's consciousness—his memories, his observation of himself inside his memories, and the world outside his memories. The cumulative result of Kaufman's dazzlingly complex narration is to present the Joel-Clem relationship not as objective history but rather subjective perception, as Joel's psychological and emotional experience of it. "You don't really know what their relationship is," Kaufman has said. "You only know what Joel thinks about their relationship" (Feld, 135).

How different is Subjective Plotting from classical narration? Because a film can do only so much to portray internal states, just a little. It is true that classical narration is typically objective, omniscient, third-person storytelling and that first-person subjectivity is rare, reserved for short POV shots and brief flashbacks. So Eternal Sunshine is distinct in the amount of time the narrative spends in Joel's mind. And with this more intimate brand of first-person narration, Kaufman's psychological examination does promote a more nuanced form of movie character subjectivity, a type of point of view that Chatman calls a "filter," his name for a "range of mental activity experienced by characters in the story world—perceptions, cognitions, attitudes, emotions, memories, fantasies, and the like" (Coming, 143). But is this really different from, say, Fellini's 8 1/2 where Guido's fantasies, memories, visions, and nightmares commingled indiscriminately with one another and with objective reality?

One film that breaks new ground by presenting an original kind of subjectivity is Linklater's Waking Life. This is due in large measure to its usage of Bob Sabiston's innovative digital
animation program, whose striking look--its bold strokes, undulating backgrounds, and rich color palette--was well suited to portraying the dream state. But it is also the result of Linklater's non-linear script, which mimics irregular, unexpected dream narration. Though an unnamed young man (Wiley Wiggins) is a central character and a protagonist of sorts--perhaps the film's dreamer--he is not present in all the scenes, there is little causality to speak of, and many sequences follow one another randomly. Moreover, it is never completely clear which scenes are in or out of a dream or, for that matter, in dreams-within-a-dream. The series of scenes at the very start are a good example. A young boy and girl play a folded-paper, fortune-telling game. The girl reads the boy's fortune: "Dream is destiny." A shot of contrails in the evening sky. The boy walks toward a car, grasps its door handle, and is pulled upside down in the air. A close-up of the protagonist asleep on a train. He opens his eyes to see the passing industrial landscape. A scene of the Tosca Tango Orchestra rehearsing follows a brief credit sequence. The musicians will not appear in the rest of the film, though the music they are practicing will be its soundtrack. The fractured narration is apt for a film about dreaming, dreams, and dreamers, and well exemplifies the Subjective Plot.

11. The Existential Plot--minimal goal, causality, and exposition

Antecedents:

L'Avventura (1960, d. Michelangelo Antonioni)
Il Deserto Rosso (1964, d. Michelangelo Antonioni)
L'eclisse (1962, d. Michelangelo Antonioni)
La Notte (1961, d. Michelangelo Antonioni, particularly the final seven minutes)
Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1976, d. Chantal Akerman)
Cockfighter (1974, d. Monte Hellman)
Two Lane Blacktop (1971, d. Monte Hellman)
Cabeza de Vaca (1991, d. Nicolas Echevarria)
La Cienaga (2001, d. Lucrecia Martel)
Last Days * (2005, d. Gus Van Sant)
Saving Private Ryan (1998, d. Steven Spielberg; the opening Omaha Beach sequence)
The Thin Red Line (1998, d. Terence Malick)

One absolute requirement, not just of classical film narration but narration in general, is exposition, the clear transmission of enough pertinent information for audiences to follow the
story. Classical narration carefully explains and contextualizes the action, especially at the onset, situating the film's characters in a particular diegetic world. The beginning of The Godfather is a textbook example. Its opening wedding reception economically introduces an extended cast of characters as well as delineates the intricate network of the Corelone family's blood ties and mob relationships. The youngest son, Michael (Al Pacino), provides insider details and decodes the ritualized proceedings for his invited guest, Kay (Diane Keaton), a non-Italian outsider and audience surrogate. Then, in accordance with the classical model, once the exposition has explained the story universe and mapped the characters onto it, it recedes into the background, and causality takes over as the narrative motor. Exposition will reappear when needed, smuggled into the proceedings via props (maps, clocks, notes, headlines), cues (costumes, mise-en-scene, lighting, actors' expressions and gestures), or dialogue.

A small group of recent films reduces exposition considerably, in some cases nearly to zero, summarily plopping the viewer into a situation without providing context or even the sketchiest introductions of dramatis personae. Contrast the opening of The Godfather with the beginning of Lucrecia Martel's La Cienaga. Somewhere in the Argentinean countryside several middle-aged adults sit around a pool in their bathing suits (though no one swims in the murky, leaf-covered pool that looks like it hasn't been cleaned in months). They rouse themselves out of their wine-cooler stupor just long enough to drag their patio chairs to new positions. In a bedroom indoors, three girls are napping. Back at poolside, after a peel of thunder a woman asks a man if he knows who Joaquin went with to the mountains. Cut to the forest, where a pack of preteen boys come across a water buffalo mired in a bog. Martel makes no effort to specify the relationships here or in the rest of the film. We are forced to get that information on our own, inferring connections as we do in life, from what people do and say, and how they do and say it. We will discover that the man and woman are married, and some of the children are theirs. One of the young girls we saw sleeping is the maid. Some of it we will never figure out. In his review, Roger Ebert captured the La Cienaga viewing experience well. "It's like attending a family reunion," he wrote, "when it's not your family and your hosts are too drunk to introduce you around" (La Cienaga, n.p.).

La Cienaga and the other Existential films do not just adjust or postpone the flow of information, they contest the centrality of goal oriented causality as an organizing principle. Without a clear goal, there is no causal chain to explain, and little need for exposition. A New Hollywood example is the cult favorite Two-Lane Blacktop (1971), a minimalist road movie that director Monte Hellman stripped down to its generic essence: space and speed. In a world where the open road and velocity are all that matter, explanations about character, back-story, and motivation are superfluous. The nominal protagonist, The Driver (James Taylor), hardly speaks, but he does know one thing: "You can never go fast enough." In this film, that says it all.

Short-term causal chains may arise in these films, but are not sustained and never coalesce to become the film's narrative spine. In the fountainhead Existential Plot film, Michelangelo Antonioni's L' Avventura, Claudia (Monica Vitti) and Sandro (Gabriele Ferzetti) set off to find their friend Anna who has mysteriously disappeared. But they are distracted and gradually forget their goal. Similarly, the cross-country race in Two-Lane Blacktop between The Driver and G.T.O. (Warren Oates) is abandoned, basically for lack of interest. For a while in La Cienaga, Tali (Mercedes Moran) is able to rouse her alcoholic cousin, Mecha (Graciela Borges, the woman from the opening scene), into planning a shopping trip to Bolivia, but it never
materializes. Snippets of traditional war film situations arise in Terence Malick's The Thin Red Line—an AWOL soldier is caught and disciplined, troops assault a beachhead, a hilltop bunker is attacked—but they never assemble themselves into a traditional master plot.

Chatman, after Jean Pouillon, used the term "contingency" to indicate this kind of cinematic narration in which there is connective tissue binding shots and scenes together, but it is not causality (Story, 47-48; Antonioni, 75). These films are not plotless; they just avoid the usual movie formulas—the last-minute rescue, confronting the bad guy, becoming a better person, solving the mystery—that were already hackneyed in silent cinema. Instead, they concentrate on showing things as they are without the need to bring them to a neat climactic conclusion. Chatman distinguishes between the two types of narration by calling conventional ones "plots of resolution" and contingency storytelling "plots of revelation":

In the traditional narrative of resolution, there is a sense of problem-solving, of things being worked out in some way, of a kind of ratiocinative or emotional teleology.... 'What will happen?' is the basic question. In the modern plot of revelation, however, the emphasis is elsewhere; the function of the discourse is not to answer that question nor even to pose it. Early on we gather that things will stay pretty much the same. It is not that events are resolved (happily or tragically), but rather that a state of affairs is revealed (Story, 48).

For Chatman, among the best cinematic examples of revelation plots are Antonioni's tetralogy, the director's four antecedent films listed above, which emphasized "sheer existence as such" (Antonioni, 78).

Lately, Existential Plotting has been adopted for survivalist stories because it places viewers in the same information-deprived situation as the characters. In The Thin Red Line and the first 22 minutes of Steven Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan (1998), the soldiers don't have heroic goals, they just want to stay alive. Likewise, the goal of Cabeza de Vaca (Juan Diego), the marooned 16th-century Spanish explorer who wanders alone in the New World for eight years in Nicolas Echevarria's film of the same name, is subsistence. Without a map or any knowledge of the various native languages, we are as lost as he is. The survivalist strain of Existential Plotted films, then, is interested in telling the "how" of existing.

The other strain, Gus Van Sant's Last Days and Lucrecia Martel's La Cienaga, are, like Antonioni, more classically existential and absorbed in investigating meaning in life. Examining life minus any grand goals, they are interested in the "why" of existence. Put it down if you like to Antonioni's modernism evolving into Van Sant and Martel's post-modernism, but these filmmakers have far less confidence in causality than Antonioni—either in its ability to structure their narrative or as an explanation of human behavior. Antonioni's characters at least caught fleeting glimpses of a more fulfilling goal-oriented existence. In L 'Avventura, for example, because Sandro has sampled life as an architect, he has moments where he regrets selling out for the easy money in cost estimating. He can not gather the will to return to the more fulfilling if riskier career, but at least he knows there is a structured option out there--perhaps one that might
give his life meaning. Antonioni visualizes Sandro's dilemma as the tension between classical and modernist architecture, a visual motif in the film. But neither the characters in La Cienaga nor Blake (Michael Pitt), the musician in Last Days, exhibit any awareness of an overarching organizing principle. The devolution of worldviews from Antonioni to La Cienaga to Last Days is dark indeed: bleak, bleaker, bleakest.

12. The Metanarrative Plot--narration about the problem of movie narration

Antecedents:

81/2 (1963, d. Federico Fellini)

All That Jazz (1979, d. Bob Fosse)

Amator (Camera Buff 1979; d. Krzysztof Kieślowski)


Never Give a Sucker an Even Break (1941, d. Edward F. Cline)

Paris When It Sizzles (1964, d. Richard Quine)

Stardust Memories (1980, d. Woody Allen)

Sullivan's Travels (1941, d. Preston Sturges)

Adaptation * (2002, d. Spike Jonze)

American Splendor (2003, d. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini)

Ararat * (2002, d. Atom Egoyan)

Bas ma ra khahad bord (The Wind Will Carry Us, 1999, d. Abbas Kiarostami)

Nema-ye Nazdik (Close Up, 1990, d. Abbas Kiarostami)


Zendegi va digar hich (And Life Goes On ..., also known as Life, and Nothing More, 1991, d. Abbas Kiarostami)

Zire darakhatan zeyton (Through the Olive Trees, 1994, d. Abbas Kiarostami)

These are movies about movie narration, but of a particular kind: Not simply films with a filmmaking backdrop, nor ones containing a film-within-the-film. Plenty of those exist, and most of them boil down to classical plot variations on backstage career narratives. In contrast, the
films in the Metanarrative category ask ontological questions about the nature of the medium, core questions about film that have been a part of its history for more than a century. What is cinema? How does it function? How is it best employed? What are the responsibilities of filmmakers—to themselves, their subjects, and their viewers? Can cinema capture the richness of life? Or must it always resort to simplifying that complexity into movie cliches? One (or more) of these issues becomes the film's subject, finding the answer is the goal of the protagonist (usually a filmmaker), and the difficulty of answering it is the protagonist's main conflict.

W.C. Fields's Never Give a Sucker an Even Break wonders if there is room in the Hollywood system for his surreal flights of narrative fancy. Yes, the comic fantasy script he presents to the studio boss—parts of which are enacted for us—may be weird, but is it any stranger than the Deanna Durbin-like musicals or King Kong derivatives he parodies? Despite its often frenzied pacing and screwball pedigree, Preston Sturges' Sullivan's Travels essays the responsibilities of the filmmaker, particularly in a world where so many suffer—the same theme that Woody Allen takes up in Stardust Memories. Allen's film and Bob Fosse's All That Jazz are both homages to Federico Fellini's 8 1/2, whose beleaguered director (Marcello Mastroianni) faces a paralyzing creative crisis. At one level, he is blocked not knowing what to do for his next film. But at another level, his dilemma is more profound, and the same one W.C. Fields had: is film capable of depicting the variety of human experience—dreams, visions, fantasies, memories?

Kielslowski's Amator explores other nagging questions of cinema: Does film inherently exploit its human subjects? Necessarily compromise the filmmaker? Will the requisite dedication to the filmmaking art inevitably become obsessive, leading to the ruin of the filmmaker's personal life?

In general, all the films listed in my twelve categories are filmmaking responses to an implied question: What is the best way to tell a film story, and in particular, this film story? To a greater or lesser extent, the makers of these films all found non-classical answers to that question. The films in the Metanarrative Plot category, however, go beyond the rest by asking the question explicitly; they are interrogations of established, classical film narration. The starting point is the utter undesirability of making yet another routinely plotted film. It is expressed very well by the character of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (Nicholas Cage) in Adaptation, who has the job of adapting the non-fiction book, The Orchid Thief Talking with the book's editor (Tilda Swinton), he wonders, "Why can't there be a movie simply about flowers?" Isn't it possible to write a mainstream film about flowers that avoids archetypical movie tropes?

I just don't want to ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing. Like an orchid heist movie or something .... or changing the orchids into poppies and turning it into a movie about drug running. ... I don't want to cram in sex or guns or car chases or characters learning profound life lessons or growing or coming to like each other or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end. The book isn't like that, and life isn't like that, it just isn't. I feel very strongly about this.

Though Charlie is a goal-oriented protagonist, Metanarrative Plots diverge from classical narration in that there is a second, shadow, non-diegetic protagonist: the filmmaker of the film we are watching. In the case of Adaptation, it is Charlie Kaufman, the film's actual screenwriter,
who shares the same goal as Charlie the film character. But more often, it is the director of the film. And even more fascinating, whether or not this goal is achieved is determined by the narrative success or failure of the film unfolding before our eyes. What makes these films so thrilling a narrative journey and so compelling a viewing experience is that we watch to see how the film answers the questions it has posed about cinema.

The dual protagonists in 81/2, All That Jazz, American Splendor, Amator, Never Give a Sucker an Even Break, Stardust Memories, and Sullivan's Travels all succeed: they all come to terms with the medium and find an entertaining way to depict their creative maelstrom. The Kaufmans seem to have failed. The fact that Adaptation degenerates into a pot-boiling thriller suggests that both the diegetic and screenwriting Kaufmans may have recognized the inability of film—or of Hollywood film at least—to break with classical formulas. Atom Egoyan's Ararat falls somewhere in between. It asks how to make a film about the Armenian holocaust that occurred 1915-1918. It responds by being many films in one—part sweeping historical epic, part semi-documentary reportage, part reflexive process essay, and part self-conscious soul searching. Demonstrating the relative strengths and serious shortcomings of each approach, Ararat comes to a more ambiguous, and more sober, conclusion: for some subjects, a film can do only so much.

For Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, however, the very limitations of the medium motivate his filmmaking. In film after film for the past two decades he has tested the boundaries of cinematic narration. For example, in Nema-ye Nazdik (Close Up) he covers the trial of a man caught posing as fellow film director Moshen Makhmalbaf, then has the imposter and the family he duped reenact the story. Bas ma ra khahad bord (The Wind Will Carry Us) is the story of a film crew arriving in a small village to record the burial of a elderly woman. They wait for her to die, but she clings to life, day after day. Waiting for the story becomes the story. Or consider the first two films of Kiarostami's Koker Trilogy (named for a small village, north of Tehran, where they occur). The first, Khane-ye doust kodjast? (Where Is the Friend's House?), is a straightforward story of a young schoolboy trying to find where a classmate lives so he can return his notebook. The next, Zendegi va digar hich (known as And Life Goes On ..., also as Life, and Nothing More), might have been called Where Are the Actors? In it a film director (Farhad Kheradmand) returns to Koker where he made a film called Where ls the Friend's House? several years before. A (real-life) earthquake has devastated the region and, accompanied by his young son, the director searches for the boys who played the two characters in the earlier film. Employing reflexivity and the blurring of fiction-documentary lines, Kiarostami poses without fully answering essential filmmaking questions: What is the responsibility of directors to their actors? Does it change when the performers are not professionals? What is the responsibility of filmmakers to the inhabitants of a film location? And in the face of death and disaster does cinema even matter at all?

New Narration/New Conditions of Reception/ New (for film) Reading Strategies

Quentin Tarantino argues that novels have always had the ability to be nonlinear and that he is simply applying novelistic techniques to film. But there was a good reason for film's conscientious linearity: a film viewer's experience is different from a book reader's. Readers can pause at any time, review earlier passages, and check details; viewers in a theater can not rewind and until recently have had only one shot at comprehending the film passing before their eyes.
For nearly a century now, the poetics of film narration was based on the need to be completely legible to one-time viewers.

Tarantino and new film narration is overturning that, aided by new technologies. Filmmakers are gearing their narration to multiple viewings. During the production of Fight Club, for instance, a question was raised about the rationale for including the "five subliminal Brads," as the too-brief-to-be-noticed inserts of Brad Pitt were termed. If the images of Pitt flashed by so rapidly that they could not be spotted by theater spectators, then why spend the time, energy, and money to include them? The answer the filmmakers arrived at: "We were doing it for the DVD crowd" (Fight Club DVD commentary).

In a similar vein, Charlie Kaufman has said that he deliberately writes scripts for films that require--and reward--multiple viewings:

> I guess my mindset about movies is that I think that film is in a way a dead medium. In that with theater you've got accidents that can happen, you've got performances that can change, but this [film] is a recording. And so that what I try to sort of do is infuse my screenplays with enough information so that upon repeated viewings you can have a different experience. Rather than the movie goes linearly, to one thing, and at the end it tells you what the movie's about. I try to keep it like a conversation with the audience.... with each individual member of the audience, hopefully ("Charlie Rose").

Filmmakers are making denser, more complex, less classical movie narratives. For their part, viewers seem to be discovering the deeper pleasures embedded in these texts, facilitated by technology (video, DVD, Tivo, iPod) that rewards "return visits" to films. Interestingly, all this newness--a new literacy demanded by new narratives that require new reading tactics enabled by new technologies--returns us to something very old: traditional prose reading strategies. Read. Reflect. Review. Repeat as necessary for full comprehension and enjoyment.

I would like to thank the many friends of film who helped me with my list-making: Juan Ortegon, Janet Staiger, Lee Sparks, Drew Ayers, Elliot Panek, Michael Z. Newman, Olivier Tchouaffe, and the staff at Vulcan Video.

Works Cited


Staiger, Janet. "Sophistophobia: Mulholland Dr. as Remake of Meshes of the Afternoon" (unpublished paper, n.d.).


Notes


Furthermore, while this essay was in the editing stages, David Bordwell's new book How Hollywood Tells It appeared. Bordwell's excellent analysis stresses Hollywood's methods of containing the excesses of these complex narratives and certainly deserves serious study.

(2) Besides the works mentioned in this essay, I would be remiss if I did not mention Edward Branigan's Narrative Comprehension and Film (New York: Routledge, 1992), a seminal psychological approach to film narratology.


(5) The production history of this film is illuminating vis-a-vis the Subjective Plot and the problem of portraying internal states in cinema. Sensing that it would be difficult for viewers to understand the film's expressionistic mise-en-scène, producer Erich Pommer added a frame to the original script written by screenwriters Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz. A new opening established that the story in the body of the film was being told by a young man, Francis. The added ending revealed that Francis was a patient in an insane asylum. The film's weird look was a result of the fact that the story had been narrated by a madman.

Berg, Charles Ramirez

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