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Modern Classicism

First, the story must be understood.

—EUGENE VALE, *The Technique of Screenplay Writing*

It's very hard to find any two things the storytelling faculty cannot connect.

—J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *The Notion Club Papers*

WHAT IS THE "NEW HOLLYWOOD"?

The "old" Hollywood grew up during the 1910s and 1920s, as a group of producer-distributors banded together to form an important new industry with production headquarters in the Los Angeles area. From 1916 on, the United States became the number one supplier of movies in the world market, a position it has held ever since. Hollywood's success was based on telling stories clearly, vividly, and entertainingly. The techniques of continuity editing, set design, and lighting that were developed during this era were designed not only to provide attractive images but also to guide audience attention to salient narrative events from moment to moment.

As the big studios' output grew, with each one producing dozens of features a year, they put most of their personnel under long-term contract. Having a set of clear-cut guidelines of filmmaking could help coordinate the labor of all the people involved in the planning, shooting, and post-production phases. To a considerable degree, the classical Hollywood cinema that had developed by the end of the silent era was standardized—though it was never a "factory" system turning out a string of identical products on an assembly line. Since every story was different, the classical guidelines were crucial, granting filmmakers flexibility in achieving their goals. The classical system of storytelling flourished during the "golden age" of studio filmmaking in the 1930s and 1940s.

Since the late 1940s, the studio system has changed enormously. Forced by antitrust decisions to divest themselves of their theater chains after the war, the major companies increasingly focused on distribution and became more dependent on acquiring films made by large independent producers. Beginning in the 1960s, the studios have become part of increasingly large, horizontally integrated corporations. Were these changes so profound that they caused a radical shift in Hollywood's approach to storytelling?

The term "New Hollywood" is now commonly applied to the American film industry since its financial crisis of the late 1960s and early 1970s. During all these changes, have American filmmakers moved away from narrative clarity and coherence as central values? Just what, if anything, is new about the New Hollywood in terms of what audiences see in theaters?

According to film historians, the short-lived "youthquake" phenomenon that began in 1969 with the unexpected success of *Easy Rider* was the first sign that Hollywood was changing significantly. Then came the mainstream success of the "movie brats"—most centrally, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Brian DePalma, Martin Scorsese, and Peter Bogdanovich. In addition, the veteran television director Robert Altman moved into features and proved pivotal in the changes to come. Several directors in this generation had film school educations and were well aware of the auteur theory and of film history in general. They aspired to become auteurs themselves, working within the industry but at the same time consciously establishing distinctive artistic personas. Young critics equally familiar with the auteur theory have helped to promote these directors and other film school alumni ever since.

Many people assume that the youthquake and the rise of the first auteurist generation of directors fundamentally changed Hollywood filmmaking. In recent years some film academics have made claims for a "post-classical," "post-Hollywood," or "postmodern" approach to mainstream popular American filmmaking. Those scholars argue that the old Hollywood was in decline by the late 1960s and that after the youthquake/auteurist phase there arose a new type of filmmaking that is still with us today. As early as 1975, the critic Thomas Elsaesser analyzed several of the auteurist films (including *Thieves Like Us, American Graffiti,* and *Five Easy Pieces*), detecting a "new realism" that he hoped indicated a liberalization of Hollywood politics: "The change I think one can detect is that the affirmative-consequential model of narrative is gradually being replaced by another, whose precise nature is yet to be determined. This is why the films I'm interested in have a transitional status."[1]

That particular direction, I think it is safe to say, was even then in the process of being filtered out of the Hollywood system, as the directors of these films either became more marginalized (like Altman) or more mainstream (like Lucas).

How then can we characterize the films that have dominated Hollywood production since the mid-1970s? In his book *High Concept*, the historian Justin Wyatt has offered a thoughtful discussion of "post-classical" filmmaking, which he defines in this way:

> In terms of film history, the period of the "classical Hollywood" is marked by the mature studio system and a style of filmmaking centered around continuity; however, the traits of the "post-classical" period (i.e., after the postwar disintegration of the studio system and the concurrent rise of television) have been suggested, but not formalized. Most frequently, a "post-classical" period is aligned with the "New Hollywood" of the '60s and the '70s, a period characterized by auteurs and the media conglomeration of the film industry. High concept can be considered as one central development—and perhaps *the* central development—within post-classical cinema, a style of filmmaking molded by economic and institutional forces.[2]

The rest of the book discusses the impact on films of such factors as the need to base many films on an easily pitched, pithy idea ("high concept") and the pressures of synergy (necessitating, for example, hit songs and other marketable ingredients). Wyatt's claim is that these developments have changed Hollywood's basic approach to filmmaking, including its stylistic traits.

I would suggest that the phenomena described by Wyatt are best thought of as intensifications of Hollywood's traditional practices. First, many Hollywood films of all eras have been based on ideas that could be simply summarized. Frank Capra derived the narrative of *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) from a greeting card. (I shall return to this idea in Chapter 5.) As for synergy, the big Hollywood firms have always been driven by market considerations. Marketing and publicity tie-ins go back to the 1910s and have grown steadily in importance.[3]

There is no doubt that the industry changed in many ways in the decades after World War II. In 1948 the federal government won its antitrust proceedings against Paramount, leading to the divorcement decrees that enforced a separation of the exhibition wing of the industry from the main

production/distribution firms. There was no longer a guaranteed week-by-week outlet for those films, and film attendance also sank as a result of the competition of other forms of leisure entertainment. Consequently, each studio cut its output. The earlier division of movies into various levels of A and B filmmaking gave way to today's situation: a more hit-or-miss blend of big-budget, superstar-oriented "event" movies with lower-budget fare, including the occasional "sleeper" that hits box-office gold.

Similarly, the Motion Picture Association of America's shift in 1968 from self-regulation based on the old Production Code to a rating system has led to an obvious change in the types of subject matter dealt with in mainstream Hollywood fare. Increasingly high violent and sexual content has been crucial in the rise of the action film, and the popularity of such fare abroad has expanded Hollywood's hold on international markets.

Still, neither the increased obsession with the bottom line brought about by the uncertainties of the market nor the changing subject matter in itself implies that the basic economic system underlying Hollywood storytelling has changed. Rather, the differences are essentially superficial and nonsystemic. In 1983 the industry historian Douglas Gomery concluded that "little changed in the American film industry during the Seventies, despite all the pundits' claims of a 'New Hollywood.'" He pointed out that aside from RKO, the big Hollywood studios were still in charge at the end of the decade and that the same stable oligopoly that had existed since the 1920s was still in force. He credited this to such factors as the major companies' worldwide distribution networks, economies of scale, and product differentiation.[4] At the beginning of 1998, Gomery assured me that the same still holds true, and that the decline of MGM/UA and the passing of the major companies into conglomerates have only consolidated the control enjoyed by a small cluster of older Hollywood firms. It is not my purpose here to examine the changes in the film industry in recent decades. Jim Hillier, however, offers a useful and detailed examination in *The New Hollywood*, where he comes to much the same conclusion: "In spite of all the changes that have taken place, Hollywood in the late 1980s and early 1990s does not look all that different from the Hollywood of the previous forty years."[5]

By the same token, I would suggest that the youthquake/auteurist films of the period from 1969 to 1977 or so were not harbingers of a profound shift in Hollywood storytelling but a brief detour that has had a lingering impact on industry practice. Despite all the critical attention they received, films like *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, Sugarland Express,*

and *Five Easy Pieces* constituted a tiny portion of the films released by the big Hollywood firms. Certainly such firms proved more open to hiring young or untried directors and scriptwriters after the success of *Easy Rider*, but that was undoubtedly a result of its proportionate rather than its absolute grosses. This film took in $7.2 million on an investment of less than half a million, but it reached only number 11 on the box-office chart in a year when *The Love Bug* was the top grosser with $17 million. Anyone who believes that mainstream Hollywood films went into eclipse during this period would do well to peruse Eddie Dorman Kay's *Box-Office Champs*,[6] which presents its figures in chronological order, revealing a business-as-usual pattern in the era's other number-one grossers: *Patton* (1970), *Love Story* (1971), *The Godfather* (1972), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1973), *The Sting* (1974), *Jaws* (1975), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1976), and *Star Wars* (1977). Only one of these, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, could be considered to deviate significantly from classical storytelling. *M*A*S*H* was the other most successful of the "auteurist" films, at number three in 1970.

There is no doubt that in the early 1970s the auteurist directors set out deliberately to change Hollywood in what at least some of them perceived as a subversive way. In the ironically titled book *The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood* (published in 1979 but current to 1977), Michael Pye and Lynda Myles helped define the new generation. They quote Francis Ford Coppola on his goals: "'The way to power,' he once said, 'is not always to merely challenge the Establishment, but first make a place in it and then challenge and double-cross the Establishment.'"[7] Indeed, some directors who were Coppola's contemporaries credit him as the leader of this challenge. His formation of the American Zoetrope studio in 1969 led to the production of a number of non-mainstream films, including his own *The Conversation* (1974) and Wim Wenders's *Hammett* (1983).

In interviews with Pye and Myles, some of the young directors expressed a cocky sense that they were succeeding in wresting power away from the studio bosses:

"We're the pigs," George Lucas says. "We are the ones who sniff out the truffles. You can put us on a leash, keep us under control. But we are the guys who dig out the gold. The men in the executive tower cannot do that. The studios are corporations now, and the men who run them are bureaucrats. They know as much about making movies as a banker does. They know about making deals like a real estate agent. They obey corpo-

rate law; each man asks himself how any decisions will affect his job. They go to parties and they hire people who know people. But the power lies with us—the ones who actually know how to make movies."[8]

John Milius expresses similar confidence: "Nobody in a studio challenges the final cut of a film now. I think they realize the filmmakers are likely to be around a lot longer than the studio executives. Now, power lies with the filmmakers, and we are the group that is getting the power."[9]

For a brief time, this attitude may have contained a grain of truth. On the whole, however, the auteurists got power for the same reason that any other director would: each made at least one successful film early on. Altman's *M*A*S*H* set the pace, surprising the studio by grossing $12.2 million on a $3 million film with a no-star cast. Coppola's subsequent success was based on *The Godfather*. Brian DePalma built his career on *Carrie*. Peter Bogdanovich seemed golden in 1972, with both *What's Up, Doc?* and *The Last Picture Show* in the year's top-ten box-office list (numbers 4 and 6 respectively). Steven Spielberg's entrée was *Jaws*, which did far better than its producers had dared hope, and Lucas's was *American Graffiti*, which was the tenth top grosser of 1973, flying in the face of a top Universal executive's opinion that it was unreleasable.[10]

The extent to which these and other directors of their generation have been able to keep working within the Hollywood system ultimately depended not on the faltering American Zoetrope but on these directors' continued financial success. Those who pushed too hard to create unusual, personal films became marginalized, with Altman being the most famous example. In fact, the most surprising thing about Altman's career in the 1970s is not that Hollywood could treat a great auteur so shabbily that he finally went into theater, video, and small-scale independent production, but that 20th Century-Fox would undertake to finance his increasingly obscure "art" films like *Three Women* (1977) and *Quintet* (1979). Paul Shrader provides a less extreme instance of a director who has hovered on the fringes of the mainstream with projects like *Mishima* (1985) and *Touch* (1997). Bogdanovich, after his early success, seems now to be largely inactive.

Lucas went in the opposite direction, moving on to bigger hits with the *Star Wars* trilogy and ultimately gaining executive status and his own company through controlling a big share of the merchandising from those films. On a less spectacular level, DePalma has remained a moderately successful commercial director by working largely within the classical tradition, as with *The Untouchables*, the fifth highest grosser of 1987. Like Coppola and other

auteurist directors, DePalma has strategically alternated between popular and more personal projects. In 1998, *Newsweek* commented on *Snake Eyes:* "The success of *Mission Impossible* [1996] has freed DePalma to be himself again—to return, that is, to making psychological thrillers in which helicopters stay safely out of railway tunnels."[11]

The most successful creators embraced classical filmmaking, working within a system where studio executives still usually call the shots. At the time *John Grisham's The Rainmaker* (1997) was released, a summary of Coppola's career published in *Entertainment Weekly* demonstrated the director's realization that the heady ambitions of the 1970s had faded:

> More than 25 years ago, Coppola spearheaded a feisty movement of young visionary auteurs (including George Lucas and John Milius) who wanted to remake Hollywood on their own terms. "Ultimately, we didn't succeed," he says, referring to various incarnations of his boutique production company American Zoetrope, "but we made a dent. We wanted to transform the system by showing a love for writers and directors. We're proud of what we did, but it would have been nice if we changed the system a little."[12]

Coppola does not say what that "dent" was, but I think that the auteurist generation did have a significant impact on the Hollywood industry in at least two ways—neither of which seriously changed the basic guidelines for classical storytelling.

First, the considerable success of some of these films probably convinced company executives that the "auteur" label and publicity based on the personalities of the directors could provide another means of product differentiation for marketing. With the proliferation of "infotainment" coverage of movies on television (including regular "behind the scenes" documentaries on cable stations) and the spread of popular show-business-oriented magazines like *Premiere* and *Entertainment Weekly*, there appeared new opportunities to cover not just famous actors but directors as well. Such publicity has bestowed upon some directors a prominence matched in the studio era only by Alfred Hitchcock (whose TV series and popular publications undoubtedly accounted for much of his fame). When I was drafting this chapter in January of 1998, the mail brought a new issue of *Wired*, with a cover portrait of James Cameron; the caption, "Jim Cameron, Obsessed," assumes that readers would be able to recognize Cameron even without a reference to his then-current megahit, *Titanic.*[13] Less prominent directors also get star treatment. In that

same week's mail was an issue of *Newsweek* containing a set of interviews with what the lead-in describes as "some of Hollywood's hottest directors": Gus Van Sant *(Good Will Hunting)*, Paul Thomas Anderson *(Boogie Nights)*, Curtis Hanson *(L. A. Confidential)*, and Barry Sonnenfeld *(Men in Black)*.[14]

In the era of film production by package deal, such name recognition undoubtedly enhances the power of directors with track records. Recently, for example, we have seen the phenomenon of big-name actors willing to take reduced sums to work with prestigious directors, as when Bruce Willis acted in *Pulp Fiction* and did a formally crucial cameo in *The Player*. Altman's and Woody Allen's reputations allow them to attract all-star casts on slim budgets. (One of Allen's producers has estimated that his actors' willingness to work for small fees saved around $20 million per film.)[15] Kenneth Branagh agreed to star in *The Gingerbread Man* (1998) only if Polygram hired Altman to direct it.[16]

A second, undoubtedly unintended, effect of auteurism was the "juveniliza- tion" of American cinema. The Movie Brat generation's awareness of Holly- wood history led them to inject a "retro" quality into their films, and the tactic proved enormously appealing to the public. Older, minor genres that had previously been designed to attract young audiences were elevated to the level of A pictures: rock-and-roll musicals *(American Graffiti)*, monster movies *(Jaws)*, science fiction tales *(Star Wars)*, and action serials *(Raiders of the Lost Ark)*. These were the kinds of films that the Movie Brat generation had grown up with, and they managed to convey their love of them to young and old audiences alike. Now aging baby boomers go to the same popular sci-fi films that teenagers do. Along these same lines, older films, in terms of both genres and specific movies, proved to be valuable sources of subject matter—hence the growth of the remake and the sequel in the 1970s.

What happened in the mid-1970s was not a shift into some sort of post- classical type of filmmaking. Rather, some of the younger directors helped to revivify classical cinema by directing films that were wildly successful. The three most significant of these were *The Godfather*, *Jaws*, and *Star Wars*, and it is hard to imagine films more classical in their narratives. They perfectly exemplify how Hollywood continues to succeed through its skill in telling strong stories based on fast-paced action and characters with clear psychologi- cal traits. The ideal American film still centers around a well-structured, carefully motivated series of events that the spectator can comprehend rela- tively easily.

This view runs against the grain of some current writing on Hollywood, which claims that the entire trend of Hollywood cinema since the big studios'

forced divestiture of their theaters in the late 1940s has been toward a new type of filmmaking. Warren Buckland has succinctly summarized the standard characterization of the post-studio, post-classical, postmodern Hollywood film:

> Many critics argue that, in comparison with Old Hollywood, New Hollywood films are not structured in terms of a psychologically motivated cause-effect narrative logic, but in terms of loosely-linked, self-sustaining action sequences often built around spectacular stunts, stars, and special effects. Complex character traits and character development, they argue, have been replaced by one-dimensional stereotypes, and plot-lines are now devised almost solely to link one action sequence to the next. Narrative complexity is sacrificed on the altar of spectacle. Narration is geared solely to the effective presentation of expensive effects.[17]

Buckland finds this argument "overstated." Admirably, as a counterexample he tackles a film which would seem eminently susceptible to the "postmodern" blockbuster reading, the self-consciously episodic "serial" *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and demonstrates its classical underpinnings. (It would have been much easier to deal with *Jurassic Park*, which strictly in terms of its causal motivation contains as well-honed a narrative as virtually any film in the history of Hollywood.)

It would take me too far afield here to mount an extensive critique of the position Buckland rebuts. For now, it suffices to say that for a researcher convinced of the appropriateness of a post-classical or postmodern cinema, it is certainly possible to map that model onto a few films and make them conform—especially if the example is chosen precisely because it seems to fit the model (as with Thomas Elsaesser's virtuosic analysis of the wholly atypical *Bram Stoker's Dracula* [1992]).[18] It is quite another thing to account for *Tootsie* and a wide variety of recent popular films using such an approach. In attempting to refute the claim that a post-classical approach is dominant in modern Hollywood storytelling, I present the ten extended analyses in this book as evidence that the classical system is alive and well. In the final chapter, I will offer some suggestions as to why recent arguments for a "post-classical" cinema are unfounded.

In order to demonstrate that the films of the New Hollywood continue to conform to the classical guidelines of the studio era, I will be taking an inductive approach, examining what the industry's artists and craftspeople actually do in creating a wide range of narratives. I will also pay attention to

what Hollywood practitioners themselves have said they are doing, both in interviews and in how-to manuals—though I will not always take such statements at face value. I will also present some observations from educated commentators, the journalists who cover industry news; they often see so many films that they can notice and remark upon typical patterns. The most central body of evidence, however, will be the films themselves, both a small number analyzed in detail and a larger, highly varied survey used for local examples. This chapter lays out a set of critical tools that I will use in analyzing a representative group of contemporary films. By paying attention to how the films tell their stories, we can reveal the enduring power of the classical tradition.

BASIC TECHNIQUES OF PROGRESSION, CLARITY, AND UNITY

In any medium, a narrative can be thought of as a chain of events occurring in time and space and linked by cause and effect. The classical Hollywood narrative system is a set of flexible guidelines that was initially developed during the era before 1918. These guidelines have been in use ever since, though they have been expanded through the introduction of influences from other filmmaking practices. Such influences, like the increasing emphasis on character subjectivity in the wake of German Expressionist imports and Murnau's *The Last Laugh* during the 1920s, have typically been adapted to fit the existing system (primarily through the use of a clearer motivation than an "art film" might employ).

The most basic principle of the Hollywood cinema is that a narrative should consist of a chain of causes and effects that is easy for the spectator to follow. This clarity of comprehension is basic to all our other responses to films, particularly emotional ones, and it will be one of the main concerns throughout this book.

In stating that most Hollywood films aim at being relatively easy to understand, I am not implying that they are simple. There is a common assumption that Hollywood films are slight, thin, and lacking in complexity in comparison with, say, works of the European art cinema like Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* or Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*. Yet I would contend that the best Hollywood films of any era, whether a classic of the studio era like Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* (1940) or a more recent film like *The Silence of the Lambs*, are as complex in their own terms as their art-house equivalents. They

do tend, though, to be much easier to understand, lacking the ambiguities and symbolism that can make many art films fascinating or pretentious, depending on one's tastes. The glory of the Hollywood system lies in its ability to allow its finest scriptwriters, directors, and other creators to weave an intricate web of character, event, time, and space that can seem transparently obvious. The idea of unobtrusive craftsmanship is one thing that the auteur theory—for all the controversies it has stirred up among screenwriters—has helped to teach us. It would seem also to be one of the most basic factors in the enduring international popularity of mainstream American movies.

This craftsmanship has been so unobtrusive that it has largely gone un-documented. Many stylistic features, such as principles of cutting and camera movement, were seldom discussed in print by studio artisans. In those cases we must infer the craft norms from regularities we detect in the finished products. When we turn to principles of storytelling, however, we are a little more fortunate, for we can get some help from screenwriting manuals. Such manuals date back to the 1910s, when the burgeoning studios still depended heavily upon freelance submissions of scripts and stories. With the growth of the studio system during the 1920s, contract writers became the norm, and far fewer scenario manuals appeared over the next few decades. With the rise of package production since the 1970s, however, freelance scriptwriting has en-joyed a resurgence, and a flood of manuals has appeared to cater to aspiring authors.[19]

I have not attempted to survey such handbooks systematically, since they often repeat the same information with minor variations. Yet, alongside the numerous interviews with scriptwriters that have appeared in recent years, the manuals usefully point up the basic techniques of classical storytelling—or at least what Hollywood practitioners think those techniques are. And these manuals have had an impact on recent classical filmmaking. Indeed, there is some evidence that by the mid-1990s some of the more formulaic advice of such manuals was actually having a negative effect on the films coming out of Hollywood (I will return to this theme in a number of my analyses). At any rate, historians and analysts of music or painting or architecture routinely draw upon practitioners' manuals, and there is no reason for film to be any different. My main body of evidence, however, will be the films themselves, which can be used to reveal the craft assumptions of their makers.

What principles of storytelling govern classical films?[20] In Chapters 2 through 11 I present ten extensive analyses that will trace these principles in action, as they cooperate to shape whole films. Here I will set the stage by

sketching out some key strategies and tactics of the mainstream Hollywood movie.

Hollywood favors unified narratives, which means most fundamentally that a cause should lead to an effect and that effect in turn should become a cause for another effect, in an unbroken chain across the film. That is not to say that each effect follows immediately from its cause. On the contrary, one of the main sources of clarity and forward impetus in a plot is the "dangling cause," information or action which leads to no effect or resolution until later in the film. For example, about midway through *Witness* (1985), John Book and his partner Carter agree that Book will stay hidden at the Amish farm guarding young Samuel while Carter tries to enlist the FBI's help. Nearly half an hour of screen time later, Book learns that his partner has been killed and realizes he must save himself and the Amish family from the corrupt cops. Carter's risky investigation serves as a dangling cause that eventually results in his death. That effect in turn causes Book to fly into a violent rage in the town and reveal his whereabouts to the police. Despite the relatively long stretch of action during which he is not mentioned, Carter does not simply drop out of the story or reveal that he has been doing something completely different from what he and Book had discussed. After the phone conversation, the action concentrates on Book's interactions with Rachel and other members of the Amish community, and the line of action initiated by Carter is put on hold until it is needed. Many such dangling causes typically stitch a classical narrative together.

Causes are typically not left dangling at the narrative's end, however. Virtually all Hollywood films achieve closure in all plotlines and subplots. The open, ambiguous endings that often characterize art films like *Bicycle Thieves* (1947) and *The 400 Blows* (1959) are typically avoided. Epilogues often serve to tie up any loose ends, and *American Graffiti* (1973) even launched a vogue for endings that tell what would subsequently happen to the main characters. The main exception to this generalization is the film aimed at generating a sequel, in which a new dangling cause will be introduced late in the narrative. This new cause, however, does not typically generate ambiguity but hints at the direction the sequel's action will take. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice refuses to promise the escaped Lecter that she will not pursue him, and in the first *Back to the Future* film, Marty and Jennifer depart into the future with Doc to help solve a problem with their children.

Unity and clarity demand that everything in the film should be motivated, whether in advance or in retrospect; that is, each event, object, character trait, and other narrative component should be justified, explicitly or implicitly, by

other elements in the film. The lack of such justification is commonly referred to by Hollywood practitioners as a "hole." *Variety*'s review of *Flubber* (1997) provides a good example of an unmotivated device. After praising the inclusion of a "charismatic gizmo," a small flying and talking robot named Weebo, the reviewer adds: "Still, Weebo raises one distracting (and, of course, unanswered) question: If Brainard needs money for his university so desperately, why doesn't he sell the patent for a talking, flying, multifunctional robot?"[21] As this passage suggests, plot holes are "distracting" and hence run counter to narrative linearity and unity.

The motivation may be an impersonal event beyond the control of any character. In the disaster-film genre, cataclysms often precipitate the action, as in *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) where a tidal wave motivates the inversion of the ship and hence all the adventures that follow. In *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), the fact that the otherwise human-looking hero has elaborate blades on the ends of his arms is motivated in a flashback when it is revealed that the eccentric inventor who had assembled Edward died just before he could replace the blades with hands. Similarly, a social system or large organization of some kind can motivate events. Both *Alien* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* are based on the idea of a cold, grasping firm that is willing to tinker with a species *(Alien)* or a technology *(Terminator 2)* that could be fatal to humanity. Genre conventions can also provide motivation. We accept the fact that Judy Garland expresses her joy by breaking into "The Trolley Song" in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) because that's what characters do in musicals.

Ordinarily, as in popular fiction and drama, the characters provide most of the motivations in any given film. Those motivations are based upon the traits of the characters. Even in *The Poseidon Adventure*, the ship's fatal instability is motivated in an early scene when a greedy company representative is blamed for the vessel not having proper ballast and running too fast. In most films, as soon as the characters appear, or even before we see them, they are assigned a set of clear traits, and our first impressions of those traits will last through the film; that is, the characters act consistently. In the opening of *The Bodyguard* (1992), Frank is established as a person who does not take long-term jobs: "I'm no good in a permanent position—my feet go to sleep." This trait resurfaces at the end and motivates the fact that he does not stay with his client Rachel despite his love for her; he goes on living alone, working as a short-term bodyguard. (This trait also, incidentally, allows the filmmakers to sidestep the potential controversy of an interracial marriage.)

If a character behaves in a way that is contrary to his or her traits, the classical narrative will offer some explanation. In *Jaws*, for example, the police

chief, Brody, says he is terrified of the water. Yet he goes out as an assistant in Quint's boat, and ultimately he kills the shark. The implication is that he does something uncharacteristic because of his strong desire to protect his family and community. His fear of the water is still present: during the shark hunt, he is more frightened than the shark hunter Quint and the scientist Hooper and does not enter into the chase with the same delight that they express.

Characters with sufficient traits to be interesting and to sustain the causal action remain central to Hollywood filmmaking. Those films which fail to create rounded or consistent characters draw criticism, as in *Variety*'s complaints about *Twilight* (1998): "Yarn becomes even more farfetched when, on a second attempt to deliver Jack's package, this time under the Santa Monica Pier, Harry is attacked by a vengeful Jeff, Mel's former lover, only to be bailed out by Reuben (Giancarlo Esposito), an eager-beaver limo driver who, utterly implausibly, aspires to be Harry's partner and seems willing to do all manner of flunky work to that end; role is strictly a structural convenience, with no human credibility."[22] Big, special-effects-laden action films come in for similar critiques, as with this assessment of *Armageddon* (1998): "The more prominent of the other thesps are given one trait to define their characters: Will Patton has been a bad father but hopes to redeem himself, Ken Campbell is a big man with big fear, and Steve Buscemi likes busty hookers. None of them has any more depth than a character in a 30-second TV commercial."[23] Thus characters are expected not only to motivate causal action but to do so in an engaging way.

In virtually all cases, the main character in a classical Hollywood film desires something, and that desire provides the forward impetus for the narrative. Hollywood protagonists tend to be active, to seek out goals and pursue them rather than having goals simply thrust upon them. Almost invariably, the protagonist's goals define the main lines of action. These lines are usually at least two in number, making the double plotline another distinctive feature of the Hollywood cinema. Romance is central to most Hollywood films, so one line of action involves that; the other line deals with another of the protagonist's goals. These two goals are usually causally linked. In *Tootsie*, for example, Michael Dorsey's first goal is to get work as an actor, which will earn money to produce his friend's play; when he dresses as a woman and gets a job on a soap opera, he then falls in love with one of the other stars. Winning her love then becomes a second goal. But in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice Starling's two goals are both professional: she wants to become a special agent for the FBI, and specifically to work for Jack Crawford; second, she desperately hopes to catch the serial killer before he murders his next victim. These

goals are thoroughly intertwined, in that we assume her success in saving the victim will ensure her the job with Crawford.

In discussing momentum in a plot, the scenario adviser Dana Cooper has suggested that goals may not provide the main forward thrust in all films: "When discussed at all, one theory claims that it's created by the hero's desire for a goal. However, there are many compelling films, like *The Graduate* and TV's *The Burning Bed*, in which heroes don't know what they want until far into the story, so what provides momentum then?"[24] The answer, she suggests, is that these films set up a series of questions. There is some truth in what Cooper says, but it is a rare film in which the protagonist does not formulate a goal early on. Indeed, one of the main jokes in *The Graduate* is that Benjamin seems such an unlikely Hollywood protagonist precisely because he has no goal. The whole thrust of the story is for him to find one. Another unusual example of an apathetic protagonist is the hero of Frank Borzage's *Lazybones* (1925). Lazybones has a goal thrust upon him when he decides to save a young woman from the unjust rumor that her child is illegitimate by raising the girl himself. In *American Graffiti*, the Richard Dreyfuss character is indecisive about whether to go to college, and his goal is simply to make a decision; the Ron Howard character thinks he wants to leave for college, yet eventually he decides not to do so. Nevertheless, such protagonists are rare.

Most scenario manuals assume that the protagonist has only one main goal, though most do allow for subplots that presumably involve subsidiary goals. David Howard and Edward Mabley's useful book *The Tools of Screenwriting*, however, asserts baldly: "There can be only one main objective if the film is to have unity. A story with a protagonist who has more than one ultimate aim must invariably dramatize the success or failure of one effort before going on to the other, and this breaks the spine of the work and dissipates our interest."[25] Yet most protagonists have at least two goals, and they may be equally important. In *Back to the Future*, Marty must induce his parents to fall in love at a high school dance in 1955, thus ensuring his and his siblings' existence in 1985. He must also, with Doc's help, arrange to take advantage of the bolt of lightning to return to 1985 in the time machine. That these two goals are distinct is shown by the fact that Doc actually handles most of the arrangements for the time travel. The failure of either goal would be fatal for Marty's future existence. The resolution of the parents' romance goal takes place first, but it hardly dissipates our interest in Marty's return to 1985.

Again, the idea of goal-orientation seems obvious, yet there are some types of films that use quite a different strategy. In the European art cinema, for

example, characters often act because they are forced to, not because they want to. Michelangelo Antonioni has made a number of films where the protagonists have goals but seem unable to pursue them actively. *L'Avventura*, for example, involves both a search and a tentative romance, both of which would be the kinds of goals common in Hollywood narratives; yet the film concentrates on the psychological inability of the characters to follow through on these goals. In Jaco van Dormael's *Toto le héros* (1991), the protagonist starts out with a general grudge against the neighboring Kant family, the head of which he blames for his own father's death. He then conceives the idea that he was switched with Alfred at birth, hence the goal of getting his birthright back. Eventually he realizes that his sister is in love with Alfred, the neighbor's son, and later blames Alfred for her death. After a number of plot twists, he conceives the goal of killing Alfred before some terrorists do. And still later he decides to take Alfred's place as a victim of the terrorists. Such a shifting, ambiguous set of goals would be impossible in the classical cinema. In another example, the young sister and brother of Theo Angelopoulos's *Landscape in the Mist* (1988) leave home with the goal of finding their father. Yet they have no clear notion of where he is, and the film deals instead with their adventures on the road. Finally, the heroine of Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) simply has no goal beyond supporting herself and her son.

One thing that sets art-film narratives apart from classical-style ones is that often the protagonist in the former is under little time pressure to accomplish his or her goal. In many Hollywood films, however, both forward impetus and temporal clarity are provided by the inclusion of one or more deadlines. The deadline may last across the film. In *His Girl Friday* (1940), for example, the opening scene reveals that Walter Burns is under intense pressure to obtain a reprieve for Earl Williams before the execution, scheduled for the next morning. Or a deadline may last only a brief while, as in the situation near the end of *Alien* when Ripley sets the spaceship's self-destruct mechanism and has only ten minutes to escape.

Hollywood films tend to convey information about deadlines, character traits, and indeed any sort of story factors redundantly. Eugene Vale's classical scenario manual, *The Technique of Screenplay Writing*, explains the rationale for redundancy:

> The fatigue of concentrated attention during the whole run of a picture is very considerable. Sometimes our ears do not pick up certain parts of the dialog, sometimes our eyes get tired, sometimes we have difficulties

in following and understanding the plot. In all these cases we shall be grateful if certain facts are brought back to our attention by duplication. . . . We must keep in mind that the picture moves fast and that the audience has little time to lean back and think to the end what it is being told.[26]

The same event may be mentioned by a character as about to occur, we may then see it occur, and other characters may then discuss it. Or a character trait will be reiterated often. For example, in *The Silence of the Lambs* Clarice Starling gets two emphatic lectures about how dangerous Hannibal Lecter is before she meets him—one from Jack Crawford, the FBI official, and the second from the asylum doctor, Chilton. Barney, the guard, further cautions her about how to behave. By the time we finally see Lecter, we expect him to be terrifying, and indeed he is—though in a different way than we had anticipated.

Similar information is given to Clarice by three different characters, conforming to the "rule of three" commonly used as a guideline for exposition in the filmmaking community. Another example occurs in *The Untouchables* (1987): when the accountant Oscar is assigned to Elliot Ness's team, he mentions that Al Capone has not filed tax returns, thus planting a crucial motif. In a later scene in which an alderman tries to bribe Ness, Oscar is working on some ledgers. Still later, on a plane with Ness, Oscar suggests prosecuting Capone on tax evasion. After these three mentions, the team begins working toward that goal, which will ultimately lead to Capone's conviction.

Keeping the Narrative Progression Clear

One of the potential sources of complexity in Hollywood films—as indeed in any type of filmmaking—is the medium's ability to move about freely in time and space. Intercutting may link characters who are widely separated. The locale may shift halfway around the world in the instantaneous change provided by a cut. An interval of time, whether only a few seconds or many years, may be elided in the same blink of an eye. In the studio era, the average Hollywood film contained over 600 shots. Most modern dramas consist of over 800 shots; many contain over a thousand; and some of the faster action thrillers, like *The Last Boy Scout* (1991), are cut so quickly that they include around two thousand.[27] Such a huge array of different images creates an enormous challenge to Hollywood practitioners who want to maintain clear,

comprehensible causality, space, and time. Again Vale summarizes the problem well:

> We must understand that the form of the motion picture is not a continuous entity; instead, it is a conglomeration of blocks, represented by shots and scenes. These blocks have the tendency to fall apart, thereby interrupting the continuity of the story in a decisive manner. In order to overcome these breaks we must search for connecting elements within the story. If the elements of the story overlap the breaks caused by the technical subdivisions, we can achieve connection.[28]

As Vale says, the narrative disruptions can occur either within a scene or at the transitions between scenes. Within the scene, there is a host of stylistic devices that were created in the early years of Hollywood to achieve clarity. These include placing a distant framing of the action early in a scene to establish the locale and who is present in it. This general view may be preceded by or include a sign further specifying the locale. The analytical editing system of breaking the space into closer framings makes the action more comprehensible by enlarging the salient visual elements. Matches on action at the cuts promote a sense of temporal continuity. Compositions usually center the most important characters or objects, ensuring that the spectator will notice them. In a shot/reverse-shot conversation, the characters are often balanced in a gentle seesaw of slightly off-center framings. Similar emphasis may be provided by design techniques like bright-colored clothing or staging that calls attention to a moving character.

Such clarity is still valued in modern American cinema, as this review of *Air Force One* suggests: "The movie has its bloody jolts, its leaps into explosive, James Bondish hyperbole (the moments in which Ford and company dangle off the end of the plane are truly scary), yet [Wolfgang] Petersen grounds it with scenes of disarming quiet and with the ferocious physical logic of his staging. The plot may be a comic book, but you always know exactly where you are."[29] Taken together, such techniques constitute a film's style. In general, the classical continuity system utilizes style primarily to make the narrative events as clear as possible, though it also sometimes promotes additional values like humor and big production values (splendid sets, elaborate special effects).

It might be argued that Hollywood style has changed too much in recent decades still to be called "classical." No doubt the music-video aesthetic, with

its fast cutting and occasional jump cuts, has influenced modern films. Lighting and tonality tend to be darker, even outside the realm of the film noir. Dissolves to soften scene transitions have all but disappeared, and fades are used only to mark the few most important scene changes. Startling sound bridges have become common. Dazzling developments in special effects have made flashy style much more prominent, especially in science-fiction and action films. Yet these techniques have not broken down the principle that style's most fundamental function is to promote narrative clarity. Shot/reverse-shot passages still abound in conversation sequences, and the axis of action is typically obeyed in skillfully made films. The faster editing of modern films has been accompanied by a simultaneous simplification of composition by cinematographers seeking to keep shots easily legible.[30]

Moreover, faster, slightly discontinuous editing arguably has become fashionable not because Hollywood has changed its basic approach to filmmaking but because the action genre has, for a variety of reasons, become so prominent since the 1970s. Quick editing is useful for rendering violence, but the sequences between the moments of high action are again handled for the most part in dependable old shot/reverse shot. A similar phenomenon also occurs occasionally in films not belonging to the action genre. In *Dead Man Walking* (1995), for instance, the flashbacks are rendered with discontinuous, somewhat confusing editing that has clearly been influenced by nonclassical films, especially the documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). Yet there are so many of these flashbacks that we can gradually piece together the original crimes, with the main question being to what extent the Sean Penn character participated in them. Aside from the flashbacks, however, the scenes are handled in insistent shot/reverse shot. It is the stable system of classical storytelling that allows such "avant-garde" devices to be selectively assimilated. For this reason, I will be focusing on narrative form rather than on style in this book, though there will inevitably be some discussion of stylistic devices that perform important storytelling functions.

Spectators are most likely to lose track of time, space, or the causal chain during the progression from one scene to another. This is one reason why the establishing shot is so crucial for maintaining a clear sense of locale. The most basic source of temporal and causal clarity is the dangling cause. One simple technique is to leave a cause open at the end of one scene and immediately pick it up in the next; such a transition is known as a "hook." For instance, a famous transition in *Tootsie* moves Michael Dorsey from his agent's office, where he defiantly vows that he will get a job, to the street, where he appears in drag—thus revealing how he intends to go about achieving his goal.

Frequently at the end of a scene a character will mention what he or she is going to do and then will immediately be seen doing it early in the next scene. Such a line is a "dialogue hook." After Rupert Pupkin, an obsessive fan, is kicked out of talkshow host Jerry Langford's office in *King of Comedy* (1983), he tells a fellow fan, Rita, that he is invited to Jerry's country place for the weekend. A cut leads to a scene of Rita and Rupert dressed up, on a train going to pay an unwanted visit to Jerry. Although dialogue hooks provide a high degree of clarity and redundancy, a too-frequent use of them would soon come to seem mechanical and contrived, and they are used for only some transitions.

Another means of providing temporal clarity from scene to scene and across stretches of the narrative is the appointment. The appointment may act as a dialogue hook that reveals the time interval that the next scene transition will pass over. Thus in *The Elephant Man* (1980), Dr. Treves asks the villainous freak-show proprietor to bring John Merrick to his hospital the next morning. The new scene that then follows shows Merrick's arrival at the hospital, making it clear to us that this new action is taking place the morning after the previous scene. Although theoretically an appointment could extend across a large part of a film, in practice such a lengthy and important anticipated moment will tend to place more at stake and hence to be a deadline, which is often a form of appointment.

All of these methods of achieving scene-to-scene clarity can be supplemented or replaced with a voice-over narration, though that relatively self-conscious narrational device is not common in classical narratives. The story of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) extends over a period of more than a year, and the voice of the grown Scout recalling her childhood minimizes the need for dialogue hooks and such transitional tactics.

Finally, a film can achieve overall unity and clarity by means of motifs. These can be auditory or visual. The phrase "Pop quiz, hotshot" in *Speed* helps to pull the elevator, bus, and subway segments together. It also provides a snappy means of exposition, as when the protagonist's answer to the first pop quiz—"Shoot the hostage"—immediately suggests his recklessness. A visual motif may help add redundancy without the need for heavy-handed dialogue, as when Mozart's move from highly fashionable wigs to messy ones to his natural hair in *Amadeus* reinforces our sense of his decline. Since the earliest days of classical filmmaking, Hollywood has been adept at using visual motifs to add emotional resonance to a narrative, from the teddy-bear good luck charm clutched by a dying protagonist in *Wings* (1927) to the finger-to-finger greetings and farewells in *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982).

The five yellow barrels that Quint uses to try to control the shark in *Jaws* provide a splendid example of the virtuosity with which modern classical films can handle motifs. The barrels serve a surprising number of functions. Firing the harpoons that attach the barrels to the shark creates moments of excitement. Once the barrels hook into the shark, they provide the viewer with a visual means to track the movements of a creature that would otherwise be invisible most of the time. The attachment of the barrels also helps create a sense of steady progression during the last half of the film, breaking up what could just be a simple lengthy chase. The shark's ability to dive despite having to drag three barrels inspires awe in Quint, even with his long experience, and hence reemphasizes that the team is confronting a sort of supershark. After the fish's long absence, a shot of one barrel popping up signals the beginning of the long battle that will constitute the film's climax. Finally, the two remaining barrels that were never attached to the shark serve as the survivors' life preservers as they paddle ashore in the epilogue. Such apparently simple devices are woven carefully through the action in such a way that much of the story can be told visually.

How, one might wonder, can films displaying this sort of unity and complexity be made by teams of writers, some of whom—especially given the modern system of endless rewriting—may be at odds with each other? I will address this issue in the conclusion to Chapter 2.

STRUCTURING THE ACTION: LARGE-SCALE PROPORTIONS

From the earliest scenario manuals of the silent era to the latest guides, most authors refer at least in passing to Aristotle's observation that a play should have a beginning, middle, and end. In a temporal art like the cinema, the same principle seems self-evident. The questions are what those parts consist of and what their relative proportions should be.

Early scenario manuals frequently referred to action rising and falling at intervals across a narrative consisting of several parts. For example, William Lord Wright, who wrote a regular scenario advice column in *The Moving Picture News*, wrote in 1922: "There must be the opening of the story, the building and the plot development; the big situations and the climax; comedy relief and a happy ending." For a five-reeler, "there must be no deliberate padding of plot, and yet there must be minor climaxes in the action as well as one great major climax."[31] I have found no discussion from this period of fixed proportions or timings of these parts. Since the earliest years of the feature film, however, many Hollywood practitioners have, whether deliberately or

instinctively, tailored their narratives into large-scale segments of roughly balanced length. Practitioners of the studio era frequently refer to such segments as the "structure" of a narrative.

Why does a narrative need this type of structure? We might posit that breaking a narrative into parts gives the spectator a sense of the direction in which the action will proceed and thus aids comprehension. Structure can be learned instinctively by watching a great many movies. It also helps prevent any one portion of the story from becoming too long and boring the audience. As we shall see, the scriptwriter's idea of failure is having the viewer go out to the lobby for popcorn.

The Three-Act Model

Similar notions of parts and of rising and falling action have been expressed in more modern scenario manuals as well. Since at least the early 1970s, a long portion of a film has been called an "act." In the late 1970s, a much more specific formulation of a "three-act structure" was introduced. The exact origins of the current notion that the three "acts" of a film should be temporally proportioned at ¼ - ½ - ¼ are unclear. Certainly Syd Field's 1979 manual, *Screenplay*, has popularized this idea, and it has become enormously influential among screenwriters, studio heads, and employees alike—so much so that the book is sometimes referred to as the "Bible" of screenwriters. In fact these proportions had already been offered in 1978 in a far less famous manual by Constance Nash and Virginia Oakey, *The Screenwriter's Handbook*. There they recommend three acts as the preferable breakdown of a script into parts. They characterize the first act as "problems introduced" and give its length as approximately 30 pages. The second act involves "conflict between protagonist and antagonist leading to the seemingly unsolvable problem" and occupies approximately 60 pages; finally, the third act consists of "action providing solution to the problem(s)" and lasts for 30 pages. Nash and Oakey allow for flexibility, saying that the "crisis" that ends each act may come as much as ten pages away from these suggested lengths.[32]

Field, usually credited with this formulation, has recalled teaching a scriptwriting class in 1977 and improvising the concept of scripts having a beginning, middle, and end.[33] As we have seen, these Aristotelian terms were widely used in scenario manuals going back to the pre–World War I era. Still, *Screenplay* inextricably linked the ¼ - ½ - ¼ breakdown with Field's work.

Given its wide influence, the basic assumptions concerning act structure laid out in *Screenplay* are worth looking at closely. According to Field, Act I is

the "Beginning" or setup, and it ends with a "plot point."[34] A plot point is "an incident, or event, that hooks into the story and spins it around into another direction." Plot points are also commonly referred to as "turning points" or "curtains." In this book I will use the term "turning point," since it implies a crucial event or change, whereas a plot point would simply seem to imply a significant event that might or might not create a major transition. (Indeed, Field confusingly claims that there are plot points within acts, citing ten in Act II of *Chinatown*.) Act II Field considers the "Confrontation," which contains the conflict and constitutes the bulk of the narrative. Another plot point creates a transition to Act III, the "Resolution." Field claims that this description fits all fiction feature films, including *Last Year at Marienbad*.[35]

Like Nash and Oakey, Field posits large-scale proportions among acts that result in a lengthy "middle." On average, a page of a Hollywood script equals a minute of film. Field specifies that for a two-hour film, the first plot point should begin in the page-25-to-27 range and yield a setup of 30 pages. Act II then occupies a full 60 pages, with the second major plot point falling between pages 85 and 90 and with Act III running from page 90 to page 120. The result is an act proportion of ¼ - ½ - ¼.[36] It is not clear whether Field thinks that in a shorter film of, say, 90 minutes, the second act simply contracts or all three acts shrink to maintain this same proportion, but I suspect it would be the latter.

This three-act model has been repeated by many screenplay advisers. While some declare it to be an absolute rule, others argue that it is simply a set of flexible guidelines.[37] In William Froug's numerous interviews with writers, several claim to follow Field's act structure. An exchange with Anna Hamilton Phelan (scriptwriter of *Mask* and *Gorillas in the Mist*) suggests that she has virtually memorized *Screenplay*:

> *Phelan:* I structure my screenplays in three acts.
> *Froug:* Do you follow a general paradigm? Do you say to yourself, "I need to have a first-act curtain around page twenty or twenty-five"?
> *Phelan:* I do. I think for me it's from coming out of the theater and writing in acts. I wrote plays before I wrote screenplays. I try to find a dramatic event to bring in around page twenty, twenty-five— twenty minutes into the movie—that hooks into the action and swings it around.[38]

Other writers dismiss the idea of acts and page-counts as too rigid or theatrical. Nicholas Kazan (*Frances, Reversal of Fortune*) describes his approach:

I never think about a film's structure in terms of acts. To me, an act is for a playwright and a play because the audience *gets up* and leaves and goes to have something to drink and you've got to have something to bring them back. In a movie, there are different rules. The audience doesn't get up; you *don't want* them to get up for popcorn. You have to keep them in their seats. So the rules are quite different, and I think this emphasis on acts is misleading.

You *do* have to have a novel premise, and it's helpful if the piece can shift one way and then turn another.[39]

The veteran writer Ernest Lehman stressed the importance of structure while questioning the "act" concept:

Walkow: What do you think about screenwriting courses where they stress for example, the three-act structure, plot points, etc.?

Lehman: I have often had the feeling that teaching about formula screen-writing is a little artificial. I have read all the books written by all the well-known teachers of screenwriting and find myself discovering how much I never knew. I must have been doing it without knowing it. Somebody once told me there are 10 acts in "North by Northwest." But don't get me wrong: I truly believe in dramatic structure. . . .

Walkow: You never said, Act I, Act II, Act III, Act IV, but rather, this feels right, this feels wrong?

Lehman: Yes, and I don't know why, but I somehow do have that feeling for what's right and what's not working. I have seen enough Lillian Hellman and Arthur Miller plays. I have seen enough of everything.[40]

Surely the man who wrote *North by Northwest* had seen enough of everything. This is certainly how one would expect a screenwriter to internalize the large-scale pacing of films, and many manuals advise aspiring writers to watch a great number of movies.

Despite the widespread influence of Field's model, there are indications that it has a problem. Manuals, screenwriters, and even reviewers, although they accept Field's timings as correct, consistently refer to the second act as protracted and difficult to write. Linda Seger, author of one of the best manuals, defines the issue clearly:

Act Two can seem interminable. For writers, it means keeping the story moving for forty-five to sixty pages. For movie goers, an unworkable second act is a time to snooze, to buy popcorn, and to vow never to see a film by that filmmaker again.

Most Act Two problems come from insufficient momentum and lack of focus. The movie doesn't move! We're unsure what's happening and why.[41]

Ron Shelton, author/director of *Bull Durham* and *Tin Cup*, was asked in an interview what advice he had for aspiring screenwriters. His reply included this comment: "Second acts are the hardest. Really be ruthless with yourself. We tend to repeat ourselves and not to advance the story. We tend to spin our wheels in the second act."[42] Viki King's manual refers graphically to "the Act II desert."[43]

In the early 1970s, well before the ¼ - ½ - ¼ model came into vogue, William Froug's interview with Buck Henry (*The Graduate, Catch-22*) included this exchange:

> *Froug:* When you're constructing a screenplay, do you consciously have a first-act curtain, a second-act curtain, kind of structure in mind? A beginning, a middle, and end? You talked earlier of a beginning and end. What about the middle? So many films fall apart because they have no middle.
>
> *Henry:* Yeah. I don't know what the middle is. Whether it's really the second act in the theatrical sense, or whether it's just whether you find those changes in gear, which I'm often accused of not finding. When you relax the pace, move back into second gear, give them a breath. If it's just a series of climaxes you can go crazy. You have to find some way to moderate the tempo so that it's not all one crescendo, or one diminuendo. There have to be changes of pace to give the audience time to stop and start again.[44]

Henry has, I think, pinpointed the problem. Whether a writer adheres to Field's model or simply assumes the old beginning-middle-end schema, no one seems to know what "middle" means for a film plot.

What happens in the setup portion is clear to all: the introduction of expository material adding up to an initial situation. Similarly, the end is clearly concerned with bringing the action to its highest pitch and resolving

it, leading typically into a short epilogue. No one has figured out specifically what goes on in the long middle stretch, beyond vague claims about protagonists struggling toward goals and encountering strings of obstacles.

I agree with those commentators who claim that an hour or so of narrative action without a major turning point is almost always difficult to sustain. In fact, I think virtually no films even try to do so. Occasionally a writer who comes up with a very strong situation can write a long "Act II." Despite watching hundreds of films, the only example I can think of is *Speed* (1993), which does conform fairly closely to Field's ¼ - ½ - ¼ proportions. The entire film is 116 minutes long, including credits, with the opening elevator section functioning to introduce the villain and the bomb squad partners, the protagonist Jack and his pal Harry. (Timings are rounded off to the nearest half-minute; if the credits are superimposed over significant causal action, they are included as part of the timed action.) The setup lasts 23 minutes, with its final turning point being the revelation that the mad bomber, Howard, is still alive. A brief, quiet scene of Harry drunkenly heading home ends the setup.

The famous bomb-on-a-bus segment begins after the ellipsis to the next morning and lasts an amazing 66 minutes without a turning point. Most viewers would probably agree that there are no dead spots in that entire time. *Speed*'s climax begins with an elliptical cut to Annie and Jack having their cuts and bruises tended to by paramedics. By this point fully 94 minutes have elapsed, yet the narrative cranks up again for the climax in which Howard kidnaps Annie and the two men fight for her aboard a runaway subway train. Since the bus episode had lasted so long and had its own climax portion, the subway section has struck many audiences and reviewers as anticlimactic. Indeed, Howard's line to Jack early in the climax, "I think Harry would be disappointed feeling that we're right back where we started. Huh?" sums up many a viewer's reaction as well. Moreover, the climax, though full of suspenseful action, lasts only about 18 minutes.

Speed's problem is that it has used up an enormous amount of narrative energy in the bus episode without leaving any dangling cause at the end except the simple fact that the villain is still alive and bent on getting his ransom. Even the quirky passengers who had helped sustain the bus episode have departed. Thus while the film as a whole cannot be said to be episodic, the climax portion becomes an isolated episode that suffers by comparison with the lengthy and exciting large-scale parts that precede it.

Perhaps an occasional film like *Speed* can successfully handle a middle hour, but in general many scenarists confess a problem with writing second acts. I

suspect such difficulties are traceable to the basic drawbacks of the three-act paradigm. It is too often based on page numbers or timings, not dramatic logic; it does not sufficiently analyze the ways in which characters formulate and change their goals; it does not recognize that Hollywood films incorporate a lot of sheer delay; and it does not take into account that the demand for a beginning, middle, and end need not—indeed, usually does not—result in a three-part structure.[45]

An Inductive Approach to Structure

In breaking narratives down into segments for analysis, one always confronts a problem: a plot can be divided up into an indefinitely large number of parts. Field stops at three, while someone who spoke to Ernest Lehman found ten acts in *North by Northwest*. A minute segmentation of a narrative could run to hundreds of parts. To propose a useful schema that is not capricious, I have to show that some principle governs the division. A plausible structural principle will relate to something about which both filmmakers and audiences intuitively care. Field abided by this constraint in choosing as his principle the story "action," declaring that major changes occurred when it was spun into a new direction. This basic idea seems plausible, and practitioners often refer to action "shifting gears."

We can, however, account more precisely for the structural dynamics of Hollywood storytelling by suggesting that the most frequent reason a narrative changes direction is a shift in the protagonist's goals. We have already seen that such goals are central to plotting in the classical film. If we can account for plot structure by means of these goals, we have a schema that has some initial plausibility. Further, we can then analyze a large body of films to see how these goals are formulated, developed, altered, replaced, furthered, blocked, delayed, and eventually achieved (or not). The regularities we find in films' treatments of the heroes' goals can suggest how large-scale parts are commonly articulated.

Instead of starting with an *a priori* assumption that all films must have three acts, we can instead simply study the plot patterns to be found in a sampling of Hollywood films, both from the studio era and from more recent times. What we find is striking. A great many of these films—indeed, I would contend, the bulk of them—break perspicuously into *four* large-scale parts, with major turning points usually providing the transitions.

Drawing upon what seems to me the most usefully descriptive terminology that has been employed by scenario-manual authors and commentators in

other narrative arts, I will refer to the four parts of the average feature as the setup, the complicating action, the development, and the climax. A short epilogue usually follows the climax. This schema points up something I will elaborate shortly: that movies very often present a crucial turning point more or less at dead center.

In the setup, an initial situation is thoroughly established. Often the protagonist conceives one or more goals during this section, though in some cases the setup sticks to introducing the circumstances that will later lead to the formulation of goals. The complicating action then, as Field says, takes the action in a new direction. We can, however, further specify why this happens. That new direction may simply involve the hero pursuing a goal conceived during the setup but having to change tactics dramatically. In many cases, however, the complicating action serves as a sort of counter-setup, building a whole new situation with which the protagonist must cope. *Witness* provides a perfect example. Its setup brings Rachel and her son Samuel from the Amish community into the violent big-city world that John Book inhabits. The first turning point, Samuel's identification of the killer as a cop, forces Book to change tactics completely, and the complicating action consists of his flight to the farm and introduction to the unfamiliar Amish world. Another example occurs in *Top Hat* (1935), where Dale (Ginger Rogers) initially dislikes Jerry (Fred Astaire); the musical number "Isn't It a Lovely Day" ends the setup as Jerry wins Dale's love. Yet this happy, stable situation is reversed early in the complicating action when Dale mistakenly gets the idea that Jerry is her friend Madge's husband. Her belief that Jerry is a married seducer will dictate the many comic cross-purposes at which all the characters operate through much of the rest of the action.

The third large-scale portion of narrative films, the development, often differs distinctly from the complicating action. By now an extensive set of premises, goals, and obstacles has been introduced. This is where the protagonist's struggle toward his or her goals typically occurs, often involving many incidents that create action, suspense, and delay. (That is, the struggle against obstacles that most commentators see as typically constituting a film's central hour seems to me often to be confined primarily to the third quarter.) In *The Miracle Worker* (1962), for example, the development consists of the two weeks Anne spends with Helen in the isolated cabin, trying and failing repeatedly to teach her language. The development ends after the parents have taken Helen back home; the turning point concludes as Anne reiterates her goal: "I know, *one word*, and I can put the world in your hand." That one

word, "water," will cause Helen's breakthrough at the end of the climax. As is typical of many development sections, very little progress is actually made in this 27-minute section of *The Miracle Worker*. We shall see this again quite clearly in *The Silence of the Lambs*. In *Witness*, the turning point that ends the complicating action is Book's conversation with Carter in which he agrees to stay hidden on the farm. The development then moves in a direction which suggests that Book might fit into the Amish community through his love for Rachel, renouncing his violent profession. Since this suggestion proves false, again little actual progress toward narrative closure is made during this section of *Witness*.

The development section usually ends at the point where all the premises regarding the goals and the lines of action have been introduced. Here the climax portion begins, and the action shifts into a straightforward progress toward the final resolution, typically building steadily toward a concentrated sequence of high action. The key question now is: will the protagonists' goals be achieved or not? In *Witness*, the call that informs Book that Carter has been killed ends the development. Book realizes that help cannot come from outside and that his staying hidden has forced his partner to assume the risk alone. Nothing more needs to be introduced to move the film toward the final battle at the farm.

I am assuming that the turning points almost invariably relate to the characters' goals. A turning point may occur when a protagonist's goal jells and he or she articulates it. The complicating action of *Amadeus* ends when Salieri burns his crucifix and declares that he will ruin Mozart and thus revenge himself on God. Or a turning point may come when one goal is achieved and another replaces it. During the setup of *Alien*, the crew's goal is to identify the source of a mysterious radio signal. Once the face-hugger attaches itself to Kane at the end of the setup, the goal becomes to determine the nature of this strange creature. (As we shall see in Chapter 10, two further changes of goal occur that divide *Alien* into four major parts.) The turning point may also involve a shift in tactics to achieve a goal. In the musical version of *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), the song "Feed Me" comes at roughly the halfway point, running from minutes 42 to 44 in an 88-minute film. It changes the premise of the film radically, from Seymour's being willing to sacrifice a few drops of his own blood for the small carnivorous plant Audrey II to his decision to kill the obnoxious dentist in order to keep the plant alive. A turning point may also be a major new premise that will eventually lead to a new goal for the protagonist. In *Back to the Future*, the Libyan attack is a turning point, because

it forces Marty to travel back in time and thus reverses the situation of the setup; that time travel eventually leads him to formulate his two goals of using a lightning bolt to return to 1985 and getting his parents to fall in love at a dance.

Although the turning point usually comes at the end of a large-scale portion, it need not. In *Muppet Treasure Island* (1996), for example, the young hero's expressed goal in the setup is to escape the inn where he does menial work and to have an adventure. Near the end of the setup, a dying man gives him the treasure map that will provide that adventure—clearly the initial turning point. Yet a comic action sequence then ensues in which Muppet pirates attack the inn searching for the map; this sequence simply adds a bit of suspense and delays the boy's departure. After it ends, the lad sets out with the map and his sidekicks, and the film's first fade-out signals the move into the complicating action.

A turning point may also occur just *after* the move from one large-scale segment to another. In *Back to the Future*, for example, the setup ends as Doc prepares to travel into the future. A brief ellipsis marks the transition, and the Libyan attack launches the complicating action. As these examples suggest, the "turning point" is not literally a single moment but an action that may last for some time. When I divide films into large-scale parts, I will do so by the moments at which such actions end or begin. The goal of making such segmentations is not to pinpoint the exact moment of transition but to define the crucial functional change brought about by the turning point.

Usually a turning point serves to change both lines of action in a different direction. Sometimes, however, the plotlines are handled separately, and each has its own turning point. The development section of *The Godfather* ends with two turning points. The development of the romance line between Michael and Kay ends when he predicts that the Corleone family will be "completely legitimate" in ten years and asks her to marry him. The next scene provides the turning point in the criminal line of action, as Michael takes over as head of the family and assigns the various gang members their new positions; the elder Don Corleone's pat on Michael's cheek signals the end of the entire development section.

The Bodyguard goes further, providing double turning points for the two lines of action at every move from one large-scale portion to the next. These two lines involve Frank's attempt to protect Rachel from a stalker and Frank and Rachel's on-again-off-again romance. Although the stalker plot brings the couple together, it develops quite separately from the romance. The

romance's first turning point comes when Rachel spies on Frank watching a video of her singing and realizes that he loves her; from here she will drop her rather hostile teasing of him and ask him on a date. The complicating action then begins, with a second turning point quickly following for the stalker plot: Rachel gets a letter from the stalker and learns from her staff that they have concealed earlier threats from her.

The complicating action of *The Bodyguard* ends with another romantic turning point as Frank inexplicably breaks off the affair with Rachel. The midpoint moves us into the development, which again begins with a turning point relating to the stalker: the man who will later be revealed as the stalker attends a party and tries to rape Rachel. The development ends with a single turning point relating to both plotlines: the revelation of Nikki as the villain, the attack on the house, and Nikki's death. The climax is devoted to the defeat of the stalker, and the epilogue resolves the romance plot as Rachel and Frank part.

Probably the most contentious structural claim I am advancing is the existence of a centrally located turning point. This action has the effect of breaking Field's problematic "middle" into two large-scale portions.

Field himself has more recently suggested that there is something in the film's center called a "Mid-Point." His definition makes it clear, however, that he does not consider the mid-point a third plot point that ends an act: "The Mid-Point connects the First Half of Act II with the Second Half of Act II; it is a link in the chain of dramatic action."[46] How that link differs from all the other links that make up the dramatic chain of events remains unclear. In the one film that I have identified as conforming to Field's proportions, *Speed*, the mid-point would be the moment when Howard makes phone contact with Jack, a significant event because a subsequent conversation will tip Jack off to the fact that a video camera is present and in turn allow him to trick the bomber and save the passengers. That moment does seem to be significant, but it is hardly a turning point.

As I have suggested, however, such sustained central "acts" are rare indeed. As my *Witness* example implies, I am instead proposing that the "mid-point" is usually at least as structurally important as the other turning points. A careful analysis of a wide body of films, both classic and modern, strongly supports this case.

Many historians would claim, for example, that *Casablanca* is a model of Hollywood filmmaking. Ilsa's visit to the bar just after Sam sings "As Time Goes By" leads to her attempt to tell the drunken Rick the story of her

relationship with Victor. He has to decide whether to accept or reject her story, and he rejects it, slumping down on the table despairingly after she leaves. In the second half of the film, Rick initially treats Ilsa as a tramp during the development. Then, during the climax, Rick finally reverses his earlier decision, accepts her story, renews his love for her, and decides to help her escape with Victor. Rick's crucial rejection of Ilsa ends 51 minutes into a 101-minute film.

Similarly, in *Queen Christina* (1933), the famous love idyll in the country inn between Christina and the Spanish ambassador ends 52 minutes into a 99-minute film; from the point where they part, their troubles gradually escalate until the Spaniard's death in the climactic scene. The first half of the 1954 Warner Bros. epic *The Egyptian* concerns the rise of the orphan Sinuhe to become the physician of the Pharaoh Akhenaten and the former's later obsession with a courtesan who strips him of all his possessions. His disgrace and flight into exile culminate 75 minutes into this 140-minute film. The midway turning point is followed by a montage sequence covering several years of time spent in exile, shortly after which Sinuhe conceives the new goal of returning to Egypt. The second half of the film will concern his gradual acceptance of the new, proto-Christian religion espoused by the Pharaoh.

One could almost set one's watch by the central turning point of *Jurassic Park* (1993). Eliminating the credits, the film's narrative lasts for 120 minutes. The central turning point comes when the treacherous geek Nedry sabotages the park's entire computer-based support system, shutting off the electricity and freeing all the dinosaurs but the velociraptors. The scene ends with the discovery of the problem by Arnold and Hammond, and specifically with the latter's line, "Where did the vehicles stop?" That line, spoken 60 minutes in, forms a dialogue hook into the T-Rex attack scene. After this point the plot centers around the characters' two chief goals: to restore the park's power and to get the children back to the visitors' center. Thus *Jurassic Park*'s narrative falls into halves, the first centering around communion with gentle dinosaurs which do not need to be fenced in, the second around attacks by vicious dinosaurs which should be fenced in but are not.

I am not the only observer to notice central turning points. *Variety*'s reviewers not infrequently comment on crucial, temporally centered events that divide films into halves, as in *Deep Impact* (1998): "The mission, which concludes precisely halfway through the picture, proves a dismal failure. . . . The logistics and repercussions stemming from this announcement take up the film's second half."[47] Thus even an effects-based action film generally does

not simply set its plot in motion and let it race ahead for an hour-long central act without decisive new premises.

I am also not the only writer to suggest that films can contain more than three acts. In his 1997 scenario manual, *Story*, Robert McKee posits that three acts are the norm but are not as invariable as Field claims. McKee gives his own optimum proportions, with act one being 30 minutes, act two 70 minutes, and the climax a mere 18 minutes. If the long central act bogs down, "There are two possible solutions. Add subplots or more acts." He prefers the subplot solution but points out that some films, such as *The Fugitive* (1993), are better off without them: "If the writer builds progression to a major reversal at the halfway point, he breaks the story into four movements with no act more than thirty or forty minutes long." This central turning point between two acts he rather confusingly terms the "mid-act climax" (which by his own definition in fact divides the middle into two acts). He explains the advantage of this approach: "a major reversal in the middle of Act Two, expanding the design from three acts to an Ibsen-like rhythm of four acts, accelerating the mid-film pace."[48] McKee offers no indication, however, of how these two middle acts differ from each other or how they might shape the narrative's central portions.[49]

Returning to the definition of turning points, we can see that they need not be moments of high drama. Often a turning point is a small but decisive action that determines the shape that the next large-scale portion must take. *Jaws* provides an excellent example of "quiet" turning points, as well as an opportunity to summarize how the four parts of a narrative typically work.

To the casual observer, *Jaws* undoubtedly seems shaped by its series of shark attacks, and indeed the attacks and the more subdued events that come between them constitute rising and falling action. Yet not one of the plot's turning points comes at a shark attack. The overall trajectory of the action is to destroy the shark—but not to do so before it has provided the requisite thrills for nearly two hours. Quint is the main element that will ultimately permit the destruction of the shark, and all three turning points have to do with him.

During the setup, two lines of action are established. One is Sheriff Brody's desire to solve the shark problem revealed by the opening attack. During the first half of the film he will encounter obstacles that arise from the local business people's resistance to closing the popular tourist beaches; during the second half, the obstacles involve Quint's eccentricities and the elusiveness and menace of the shark. The second line of action involves ex–New York cop

Brody's inability to fit into his new community, symbolized by his fear of the ocean. Although this line of action is clearly subsidiary to the shark threat, the film's last line of dialogue will refer to its resolution.

The setup ends at the town meeting following the second attack, as the locals wrangle over whether to close the beaches. Quint appears and offers to kill the shark for $10,000. His proposal is rejected as too expensive, and the town's hopes are pinned upon the $3000 reward already offered by the second victim's mother. The meeting's end is the first turning point. By now the basic situation is evident, and the main causal element that will eventually solve the problem has been introduced. (In this 123.5-minute film, the setup is relatively short at 22.5 minutes; the reason for this is partly the simplicity of the basic situation and partly the delay in the introduction of the third major character, the shark expert Hooper.)

Early in the complicating action, Brody closes the beaches. The arrival of Hooper serves to confirm that the amateur hunters are dangerous and in fact present obstacles to Brody. Hooper also prevents Brody from abandoning his goal by proving that the shark caught by the fishermen is not the killer. Against Brody and Hooper's advice, however, the Mayor insists that the beaches remain open for the lucrative July fourth holiday. The third attack endangers Brody's son, and in the hospital Brody defiantly insists to the Mayor: "We're gonna hire Quint to kill the shark." This picks up the dangling cause from the first turning point. The central turning point comes as the Mayor signs Quint's contract. (The complicating action, with its introduction of Hooper and the lengthy suspense-and-action beach sequence, lasts nearly 44 minutes.)

The entire second half of the film consists of the shark hunt, but here the narrative risks becoming repetitious through a string of sightings and failed attacks until the final one works. To avoid this, the opening of the development consists of a scene creating animosity between Quint and Hooper. Because all three men will contribute to killing the shark, the climax will not begin until they reconcile. And the series of shark sightings is made more dramatic by the men's bickering over tactics. As is common in development sections, relatively little actual progress is made. The boat sets out and the shark is located, but by the end the fish has resisted all efforts to kill it and has disappeared again. Along the way, significant elements like the compressed-air tanks are introduced, and Brody makes his correct prophecy, "You're gonna need a bigger boat." (True to the rule of three, he twice repeats this in later scenes.)

This section also, by the way, provides an example of a subtle virtuosity that some of the best Hollywood films display. As Hooper mentions his compressed-air tanks, Quint scoffs: "Yes, real fine, expensive gear you've brought out here, Mr. Hooper, but I don't know what that bastard shark's gonna do with it—might eat it, I suppose. Seen one eat a rocking chair one time." Brody ultimately kills the shark by shooting the tank it has indeed tried to eat. This line is not important as motivation; indeed, most viewers would not notice it on first viewing. But it creates a bit of foreshadowing that unifies the plot.

The development ends with the crucial scene in which the three men sit drinking and comparing their scars; Quint then tells his story about being on the USS Indianapolis and spending days in shark-infested waters. The three break into song, confirming that Quint now accepts Hooper as a comrade. This is the turning point that ends the development, since now the men will cooperate to kill the shark. Absolutely no new information needs to be introduced now, and thus we are ready for the climax section. (The development has lasted 28 minutes, right around the norm.)

The climax, as we have seen, begins with the barrel popping up to signal the shark's return. The fish attacks the boat, and the entire climax consists of its repeated assaults, with intervals for the men to make repairs and plans. During this action Quint becomes increasingly irrational, endangering his comrades. And this is one of his main narrative functions: to get the three out in a dangerous situation in a flimsy wooden boat instead of a larger, sturdier one. The climax segment reaches its peak as the shark eats Quint and begins to sink the boat. Brody is able to kill it only through a combination of the specialties of the three men: Quint's ability to locate the shark, Hooper's air tank, and Brody's marksmanship.

During the brief epilogue, Hooper surfaces, and the two survivors swim ashore. Brody's last line, "I used to hate the water," signals that the accomplishment of his first goal has also achieved his second one. Through the cathartic experience of fighting the shark, he is cured of his fear. Presumably he can finally settle into the community. (The climax and epilogue together last 29.5 minutes, with the epilogue occupying about 3 minutes.)

The fact that the turning points of *Jaws* do not come at the moments of high action when the shark attacks is worth examining briefly in light of claims that "post-classical" films favor spectacle over causal logic. The emotional seesaw of the attacks undoubtedly provides the audience's most intense connection to the film. Yet most spectators would undoubtedly be dissatisfied with a string of shark attacks alternating with Brody's ineffectual attempts to

destroy the fish, ending arbitrarily with his inexplicably succeeding at about the two-hour mark. A dominant causal logic based on character motivation, new premises, goals, decisions to change tactics, and the like creates the shape within which those affectively potent moments can be embedded. We are a long way from seeing formless series of pure action sequences of the type that appears occasionally on television (such as "America's Scariest Police Chases") become the basis for Hollywood films.

A Matter of Timing

Even more influential than Field's "three-act" strictures have been his requirements about running times: he contends that the script for a properly constructed two-hour film should end its first act about 30 minutes in and begin Act III about 30 minutes from the end. It seems likely that modern screenwriters' problems with the second act arise partly from this requirement that large-scale parts be of unequal lengths. (The notion of a lengthy middle presenting difficulties to the scriptwriter seems not to have cropped up before the 1970s.) The setup is fairly indisputable as a major portion, and Field was right to suggest that this tends to last about one quarter of a two-hour film. Likewise, the ending section can be clearly marked out. Again, Field accurately notes that this section usually occupies approximately the last quarter of the film. Presumably his insistence that "Act II" should last about an hour derives from simple arithmetic: 60 minutes remain when one subtracts these two half-hours from a two-hour film.

There is good reason, however, to hold that plots tend to be composed of roughly *equal* parts. If we study a large number of films, we find that large-scale portions do not significantly expand to fill up longer films and contract to create shorter ones. Rather, throughout the history of the Hollywood feature, large-scale portions have remained roughly constant, averaging between 20 and 30 minutes in length. This has allowed filmmakers to create subtle patterns of balance in the running times of each section.

For a two-hour film, such balance typically means four large-scale segments. Of the ten films I will be analyzing in this book, all illustrate the tendency of parts to run between 20 and 30 minutes. Nine of them break into four roughly balanced parts, and thus we will see how this happens in considerable detail.

In addition, I have analyed the timing of ten more feature films from each decade since the standardization of the feature during the 1910s (the results appear in Appendix A), and the majority of these narratives also reflect this

pattern of large-scale parts typically running between 20 and 30 minutes. These films were chosen mainly with the aim of providing a considerable variety of directors, genres, studios, and budgets. I deliberately included several musicals to see how the songs and dances would affect the timings. (Answer: they did not, being tucked neatly into the normal large-scale parts.) To specify where the turning points come in all these films would require a book in itself, and such detail would serve little purpose. Virtually all, however, are available on video, and the reader is free to test my decisions on turning points and segmentations. The crucial point is that actual films are far more flexible and varied in their handling of the length of parts than the stringent three-act paradigm dictates.

The tendency for large-scale parts to average in the 20- to 30-minute range also holds good for films that vary from Field's two-hour standard. (Most films, after all, are not exactly two hours long.) For example, features lasting significantly less than 100 minutes may break into three parts. When they do, those parts tend to be approximately equal thirds. Likewise, very long films of, say, 150 minutes or more frequently fall into five roughly balanced parts.

Given that scenario advice manuals seldom mention anything but films in the 110–120 minute range, it may be interesting to look briefly at some examples of distinctly longer and shorter movies.

The existence of films that have more than four parts does not pose a problem for my scheme of setup, complicating action, development, and climax. In long films, the complicating action or more frequently the development section is simply doubled, with an additional turning point setting off the extra part. *Heat* (1995) displays this approach well. Without credits, it runs 168.5 minutes, yielding an average of 33.5 minutes for each of the five parts. The 37-minute setup establishes the situations of the cop Vincent (Al Pacino) and the professional thief Neil (Robert De Niro) and ends when Nate (Jon Voight) tells Neil that the bond deal has been arranged with the corrupt banker Vansant. The complicating action includes Neil's romance and decision to quit after this job; it lasts 30 minutes and ends when Eady agrees to go to New Zealand, defining Neil's new goal. The first development section lasts for 34 minutes and involves the maneuverings between Vincent and Neil. It ends with the hiring of a new driver for the bank heist, followed by brief, quiet shots of two of the female characters at home. The second development portion then begins with a turning point, the beginning of the failed bank robbery which occupies nearly the entire portion. This second development lasts 33 minutes. Eady realizes that Neil is a thief, and the turning point that ends this section is Neil's renewed request that she go to New Zealand with

him, saying that he will not go alone. The climax ends as Vincent shoots Neil, and the epilogue shows Vincent holding Neil's hand as he dies; together these parts last 31 minutes. To accommodate a longer running time, instead of stretching three or four parts, the film provides extra parts. The important point here is that the timings still correspond with remarkable fidelity to the principle of balanced large-scale portions. We shall examine another example, *Amadeus*, in Chapter 7.

Similar principles hold for short features, which often break into three equal parts. This has been true throughout the history of Hollywood. Buster Keaton's *Our Hospitality* (1923) is 72 minutes long and consists of three long segments, each built around a different theme-and-variations gag situation: (1) the train trip and arrival in town (25.5 minutes); (2) Willie wandering around town and inadvertently surviving assassination attempts (22 minutes); and (3) the dodges and chase that follow the title "By the next day Willie had decided to become a permanent guest" (24.5 minutes, with epilogue). *The Producers* (1968), clocking in at 89 minutes, also contains three balanced parts: the setup reveals Max's financial troubles and decision to perpetrate a theatrical fraud, ending with Leo's ecstatic decision to join him (33.5 minutes, including the pre-credits and credits scenes); the central part is the search for script, funding, director, and cast (31.5 minutes); and the climax involves the unexpected success of "Springtime for Hitler" and its results (32 minutes, including the 3-minute epilogue in jail). In the case of three-part short films, the complicating action is usually the portion eliminated. In *The Producers*, the process of gathering the elements for the production adds few new premises and could have been handled in a montage sequence. The scenes are played out for humor, however, simply developing upon the premise established in the setup. Timings for two further examples of three-part short films, *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), are included in Appendix A.

It is equally possible for short films to consist of four parts, again usually roughly balanced in length (see Appendix A). As early as the mid-1910s, this structure was an option, as in *The Italian*. Examples from the studio era include *The Mummy* (1932), *The Thin Man* (1934), and *The Lady Eve* (1941). More recently, *Liar Liar* (1997), though a mere 86.5 minutes, surprisingly turns out to have four parts of nearly equal length. The first turning point, 20.5 minutes in, is obviously the son Max's wish "that for only one day Dad couldn't tell a lie." Max's failed attempt to cancel the wish constitutes the second turning point (making the complicating action 21.5 minutes). Fletcher's first display of sincere feeling for Max comes in this scene and

initiates his redemption, which will occupy the plot's second half. The development lasts for 20 minutes and centers on Fletcher's seemingly hopeless efforts to win his current case without lying. His unexpected success provides a transition into the climax and epilogue (18.5 minutes), which involve Fletcher's attempts to regain his ex-wife and his son.

Longer films occasionally do break into three large-scale parts as well. As with the shorter films, however, these parts tend to be roughly even in length rather than following Field's ¼ - ½ - ¼ proportions. One elegant example of such a film is *Adam's Rib* (1949), which is 101 minutes long; its three parts all run within two minutes of the 33.5-minute average.

I want to emphasize here that I offer these patterns of balanced parts as observations based on what is commonly used in actual films. I do not in any way mean to imply that films must stick slavishly to this pattern in order to be good. Indeed, segments can be unusually long or short for any number of reasons.

In *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947), the first three parts of the 104-minute total are 28, 28, and 27 minutes long respectively. The climax, however, is a mere 19 minutes long. This truncated climax results because one of the two original plotlines—Mrs. Muir's money problems and her romance with the Captain—had been settled back in the development portion. The Captain's literally ghost-written memoirs had provided Mrs. Muir with financial security. The climax consists simply of her disillusionment with the caddish publisher Miles and a lengthy montage sequence as she ages, punctuated by a brief scene of her daughter's engagement. The only goal left is the romance, which she achieves by being reunited with the Captain at her death.

The Wrong Man (1957), at 105 minutes, has an unusually long complicating action of 35 minutes, while the other three parts are closer to average at 20.5, 24, and 25.5 minutes. The turning point that ends the setup is Manny's arrest, and his release on bail provides the second turning point, ending the complicating action. Clearly Hitchcock and Maxwell Anderson, the writer, were most interested in the subjective depiction of Manny's frightening ordeal in police custody. Similarly, in *A Night at the Opera* (1935), the complicating-action segment is nearly double the length of the other three segments. It consists of the shipboard sequences, padded out by the parting song between the romantic couple, the famous stateroom sequence, and the obligatory piano and harp solos by Chico and Harpo. *The Pink Panther* (1964) is 114.5 minutes long, yet it has only three parts because its setup is fully 52.5 minutes; despite the opening reference to the "Pink Panther" jewel, absolutely no progress is made toward its theft during this opening. Instead, the nearly

hour-long segment centers entirely on the sexual frustrations of the Peter Sellers, David Niven, and Robert Wagner characters. Exactly at the midpoint, however, the forward progression begins, and the two remaining portions are roughly balanced at 31 and 27.5 minutes. All these films are distinctly off-kilter by any formulaic standards, yet in no case is the imbalance necessarily a flaw.

It is apparently even possible for a film to have no turning points at all. I cannot find any point in *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* (1963) that changes the trajectory of the action noticeably. Instead, the premise of the hunt for missing bank-robbery loot is set up in the opening of this 154-minute film and pursued in doggedly episodic fashion until the final revelation.

I have focused on Syd Field's account of structure and timings because his books have exercised an enormous influence during the past two decades. Here, however, I am developing what I take to be a more versatile set of analytical tools. To highlight the comparative advantage of my frame of reference, I turn to one last example.

Field has published a lengthy analysis of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*,[50] one which makes many excellent observations and eloquently defends the film against those who would dismiss it as a potboiler. I would suggest, however, that Field has not adequately marked out the film's large-scale segments, and this has crucial consequences for understanding the dramatic propulsion of the film.

True to his system, Field treats *Terminator 2* as a three-act film with a lengthy central act punctuated by a "Mid-Point." The film is almost exactly 136 minutes long, including about 6 minutes of credits. As I have suggested, a narrative this long would be very difficult to sustain in three parts, and in fact I believe the film has four, along with a brief epilogue. Field identifies the turning point (or "Plot Point," as he terms it) that ends the first act as "the moment when the Terminator rescues John from the T-1000," involving "the exciting chase sequence that establishes the structural foundation for the entire film" (p. 116). I would argue, however, that the exposition of the initial situation is far from over by this point. The nature of this new Terminator and his relationship with John have not been defined. If the chase really were the film's entire "structural foundation," the remainder would be nothing but a long series of similar chases.

What gives the film much of its shape comes at what I would consider the first turning point, the conversation just after John prevents the Terminator from killing the two men in the parking lot. He discovers that the Terminator

has been programmed to obey him and orders two things that essentially focus the two plot lines and their related goals: that the Terminator must do his job of protecting John without killing anyone, and that they must rescue Sarah from the mental hospital. This second goal will govern the complicating action and will determine the nature of the next turning point.

Field also considers this dialogue between John and the Terminator important, though he places it well into Act II. For him, it initiates "the Terminator's transformation of character" through a "learning process." It is that learning process that gives the film its moral and thematic shape, culminating in Sarah's final speech in the brief epilogue: "The unknown future rolls toward us. I face it for the first time with a sense of hope. Because if a machine, a terminator, can learn the value of human life, maybe we can too." At the conclusion of his analysis, Field rightly dwells on the Terminator's transformation, arguing that his character helps raise *Terminator 2* above the ranks of ordinary action films. So it is reasonable to conclude that the beginning of that transformation, rather than a chase scene, is what contributes so much to the film's structure.

Field is rather vague about the "Mid-Point" of the narrative. Initially he identifies it as the driving scene in which John teaches the Terminator some current slang (p. 132). Later he states: "This takes us to the Mid-Point, when they pull into a deserted [sic] desert compound near the Mexican border" (p. 134). Apparently Field considers the series of low-key scenes in this portion of the film as an extended Mid-Point, "a rest point, the place where these strange comrades in arms recuperate from their wounds, establish a connection with each other, and make a plan of attack" (p. 133). In fact they do not formulate a plan of attack; Sarah departs from the agreed-upon plan of fleeing south in order to attempt on her own to assassinate Dyson.

Yet there are structural reasons to flag a specific scene in this passage as a turning point, one which ends the complicating action. Here the Terminator presents expository information about the history of the 1997 war and its roots in Miles Dyson's invention of Skynet. This scene is far more than a rest or lull; rather, it presents vital new premises. Up to now the abiding goal has been to allow John to escape from the T-1000 so that in the future he can help win the war against the Machines. The Terminator has been programmed to accomplish this single goal. It is Sarah who realizes that the war itself can be averted by aborting the invention of Skynet; her new goal is signaled quite clearly when she demands: "I want to know everything. What he [Dyson] looks like, where he lives—*everything*." Her critical role explains the fact that

the entire complicating action is devoted to getting her out of the hospital and away from the immediate threat of the T-1000. Her realization triggers a major new goal for the rest of the film, with the second parallel goal still being to escape from the T-1000.[51] Surely this radical shift in goals meets Field's own definition of a "Plot Point" as spinning the action into another direction.

The development includes two efforts to accomplish Sarah's new goal, first in her attempt to kill Dyson as the immediate cause of the future war and second in the theft of the chip from the Cyberdine laboratory. I would agree with Field that "the escape from Cyberdine is the Plot Point at the end of Act II" (p. 141), and I accept his characterization of the climax: "The entire act is an action sequence" (p. 143). Only with the destruction of the last chip, the one in the Terminator, is the main goal accomplished and the invention of Skynet foiled. The exact break between the development and the climax can be located at the brief pause interjected by the shot of the T-1000 driving his motorcycle up to the Cyberdine building and assessing the situation.

The timings of these large-scale parts do not fall into the neat $1/4$ - $1/2$ - $1/4$ pattern on which Field insists. The exposition is unusually long at 42 minutes, but the narrative certainly demands this length. It results partly from the fact that the setup contains two major action sequences, the bar fight at the beginning and the lengthy chase near the end. Moreover, the four main characters who need to be established are all spatially apart for most of the action, engaged in different activities. In most films some of the newly introduced characters engage in conversations, thus giving us exposition about two or more of them simultaneously. Here the narration must move among the four characters to reveal all salient information. The complicating action then occupies 34.5 minutes. The extensive introduction of expository material in the film's first two parts means that no new information needs to be introduced thereafter, and the development and climax are shorter, consisting almost entirely of intense action sequences. They are also nearly identical in length, with the development clocking in at 26:40 minutes and the climax (including the brief 35-second epilogue) at 26:55.

Terminator 2 offers a model of classical plotting. As with many films, one large-scale section—the setup—is longer than the others, but the extra length serves important narrative functions. The narrative also offers the double plotline, and although there is no romance, John's friendship with the Terminator and that relationship's humanizing effect on the latter provide comparable emotional appeal. The film's events are thoroughly motivated, and clarity of time, space, and causality is maintained.

What are the functions of balancing these large-scale parts? One may be to provide a simple, flexible framework for that rising and falling action which has been discussed by practitioners and commentators since the earliest days of feature filmmaking. The early American cinema quickly became noted for being action-packed. The high points were universally assumed in the scenario manuals to generate those staples of narrative action, suspense and surprise. Why not jam as many in as possible? As has often been pointed out, by placing the high points at intervals, the filmmakers afford the spectator a bit of room to breathe.

In addition, I suspect the use of lulls in the plot may be included in order to provide other staples of classical storytelling: most importantly exposition, motivation, romance, and redundancy, but also humor, motifs, subplots, and the like. These elements need to be interlaced with the strong action.

Large-scale parts also foster clear, gradual character change. We shall see several examples of this, including Michael Dorsey's improving attitude toward women in *Tootsie* and Jack Ryan's gradual shift from armchair strategist to man of action in *The Hunt for Red October*. If characters are to change their initial traits, there must be time allotted to thoroughly motivate their progress.

Balanced large-scale segments provide the "structure" that Ernest Lehman and other veteran screenwriters have so often mentioned as critical. Each part has a shape of its own and guarantees variety. Without this shaping principle, *Jaws* might indeed just be a string of shark attacks, *Tootsie* a series of gags about a man in a dress, *Amadeus* a simple drama of Salieri's escalating schemes against Mozart.[52]

The 20- to 30-minute range might also cater to the attention span of the spectator. The studios need not have pinpointed exact timings consciously, but careful attention to the minute-by-minute reactions of preview audiences (used since the 1920s) may have given practitioners an instinctive sense of when to change the direction of the action. Time and again scriptwriters have described this instinctive feel for structure. Caroline Thompson, who wrote the script for *Edward Scissorhands* (1990; see timings in Appendix A), notes: "One reason Tim [Burton] wanted to work with me is that I wasn't stuck with all these rules, like, 'The first act turns on page blah-blah.' On the other hand, I did have instincts for the form—internalized. A prose writer learns to write by reading books; a screenwriter learns by watching movies."[53] These generalizations about the large-scale parts of narratives do not offer a detailed or

definitive explanation as to why they exist. Such an explanation could lie in the realm of cognitive psychology, which might suggest through experimentation what advantages the parts might offer for perception and comprehension of a movie.

Still, we should not be surprised that a film's large-scale parts so often fall within a narrow average time-range. Most classical and popular arts have some sort of balanced parts, whether temporal or spatial. Vivaldi's many concerti tend to have first and third fast movements of similar lengths with a slightly shorter slow second movement.[54] Daily comic strips have generally consisted of four panels, usually of the same size (or more recently, with the shrinkage of newspaper space devoted to comics, three). Medieval altarpieces typically balanced subsidiary hinged side panels designed to swing in and close at the center against a larger central one. (Indeed, such altarpieces are the only type of artwork I can think of that might consistently conform to the Fieldian notion of two small parts framing a middle section twice their size.) The awe-inspiring effect of Khufu's Great Pyramid at Giza results from the simple joining of four triangular sides of virtually identical size (the bases of the sides deviating less than one-fifteenth of one degree from the four cardinal directions). The acts of traditional plays are usually of roughly similar lengths.

One could cite many more examples, but the point is that the evident use of proportions in many narrative films provides one more indication of the enduring classicism of the mainstream Hollywood system. Presumably what practitioners have intuitively assumed to be the optimum range of lengths for each part was discovered early on. It has been passed down the generations of filmmakers as a result of the simple fact that most practitioners gain their basic skills by watching a great number of movies.

TEN EXEMPLARY FILMS

I have chosen to analyze in depth the narratives of ten films in order to demonstrate that classical storytelling techniques are still very much in use in many American films and to reveal how such techniques are woven together in often complex ways. On the assumption that films that are considered models of narrative technique might prove the most revelatory, one criterion I used in making my selection was that the films had to have enjoyed a fair degree of both critical acclaim and popular success. Another criterion was simply that I had to like the films well enough not to get tired of them in the course of the repeated viewings and close scrutiny that such analysis entails.

The ten films are the following: *Tootsie* (1982), *Back to the Future* (1985), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Groundhog Day* (1993), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), *Amadeus* (1984), *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), *Parenthood* (1989), *Alien* (1979), and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). They range from a prestigious best-picture Oscar winner like *Amadeus* to a low-budget sleeper, *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Two won screenplay Oscars (*The Silence of the Lambs* and *Amadeus*), while three others were nominated for this award (*Tootsie, Back to the Future*, and *Hannah and Her Sisters*).

I have grouped the films in a rather unusual way, by the number of protagonists each one contains. It would seem that in achieving a comprehensible chain of cause and effect and keeping spatial and temporal shifts clear to the spectator, a scriptwriter has to use different strategies, depending on whether one goal-oriented protagonist appears in nearly every scene or the narration keeps shifting between two major characters with different goals or even shifts among a whole group of major characters. Thus the analyses are gathered into three clusters: films with single protagonists (Chapters 2–5), those with parallel protagonists (Chapters 6–8), and those with multiple protagonists (Chapters 9–11).

Such a division makes sense, I think, because the Hollywood cinema depends so thoroughly on characters with clearly established traits for both causality and comprehensibility. In discussing his adaptation of *The Silence of the Lambs* from novel to film, Ted Tally emphasizes the centrality of protagonist point-of-view: "So really the most fundamental decision you have to make in an adaptation is the primary point of view. Whose story is it more than anyone else's? Or, in Hollywood terms, who are we rooting for? It seems like such an obvious, simplistic question, but you'd be amazed how often it doesn't get asked or answered. It will determine every other choice you make in the adaptation."[55] The same would presumably be true of original scripts, and the writer would have to make adjustments when balancing two or more point-of-view characters.

Films with single protagonists are far and away the most familiar, and I have already presented several examples in my discussion of character and goal orientation. Such films typically present the fewest challenges to audience comprehension as they move from scene to scene. In *Tootsie, Back to the Future, The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Groundhog Day*, the narration sticks close to the central figure most of the time.

The three films in my second group display an unusual but interesting approach to narrative. Rather than having a single protagonist, such films introduce two parallel protagonists who pursue distinctly different, some-

times conflicting goals and who are often spatially separated during much of the action. I am not referring here to films of the "buddy" genre, such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *48 Hours*, *Lethal Weapon*, and *Thelma and Louise*. Such films essentially split the function of the single protagonist between two roles: the characters share a goal and typically work together toward it. I will call these "dual-protagonist" films in order to differentiate them from my parallel-protagonist category. The problems of organizing a narrative based on dual protagonists are not much different from those of building one with a single protagonist. The parallel-protagonist film, however, offers some unique challenges.

Parallel protagonists are usually strikingly different in their traits, and their lives initially have little or no connection. Yet early on in the action, one develops a fascination with the other and often even spies on him or her. Hidden similarities between the two are gradually revealed, and one character may change to become more like the other. If the two main characters are male and female, the parallel plot pattern may develop as an unlikely romance that gradually blossoms. (To the best of my knowledge, mainstream American cinema has yet to produce a parallel-protagonist romance involving a homosexual couple.) A prototypical example would be *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), where the Meg Ryan character seems successful in her career and satisfied in her engagement to a rich, if allergy-ridden, beau. Yet while listening to a radio talk show she becomes fascinated from afar with a grieving widower and begins investigating him through radio reports, computer searches, and a secret visit. Ultimately the two link up romantically.

If the two protagonists are of the same gender, one character's fascination may develop as a desire to become more like the other. At first glance, *Amadeus*, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, and *The Hunt for Red October* could seemingly not be more unlike in terms of subject matter and tone. Analyzing the underlying patterns of narratives, however, can reveal striking similarities in films of very different types. Both *Amadeus* and *Desperately Seeking Susan* center on two protagonists. One of the pair, prosperous and apparently successful, becomes fascinated by a less successful but eccentric figure. The envious character spies on the other and begins to imitate him or her, and finally seeks in some way to take on the other's identity. In *The Hunt for Red October*, Jack Ryan tracks the activities of Marko Ramius in order to aid the latter's defection to the West. Yet Ryan's attitude is hardly neutral; he admires Ramius and eventually gains him as a friend and father figure. This pattern of one protagonist's fascination with another, often with the latter unaware of

this attention for at least a substantial portion of the plot, seems to be common in parallel-protagonist films. Prior to *Amadeus*, Milos Forman had directed a variant of the parallel-protagonist narrative, *Hair*, in which the John Savage and Treat Williams characters are mutually (and consciously) intrigued and in the end inadvertently switch identities.

In many such films, the two protagonists either do not know each other or, as in *Amadeus*, are only slightly acquainted, and hence are seldom seen together.[56] As a result, the filmmakers face the problem of moving between the two and still maintaining a clear, redundant, linear classical narrative progression.

In the case of *Amadeus*, one might ask whether Antonio Salieri is not simply the antagonist, since he in effect murders Mozart. Yet I would argue that he is in fact a true protagonist. He provides the narrating voice for much of the film, and we are clearly supposed to sympathize with his dilemma as well as deplore his actions. He is a quasi-tragic protagonist in the tradition of classical drama: a man with lofty ambitions and ideals flawed by his overwhelming sense of the irony of his own inferiority.[57] A somewhat similar situation occurs in *Heat*, where one might wonder whether master thief Neil McCauley (Robert De Niro) is an antagonist or a parallel protagonist to Al Pacino's police detective.

Dana Cooper, an American Film Institute scriptwriting instructor, has suggested why such characters are not antagonists. She differentiates four types of heroes: the "Idol" (a lofty, self-confident figure like James Bond), the "Everyman" (Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest*), the "Underdog" (Forrest Gump), and the "Lost Soul." This last is a doomed figure, such as Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* or Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*. The audience initially feels some sympathy for this character—though often grudgingly—but ultimately rejects his or her actions.[58] Salieri is such a character, and hence he forms a protagonist parallel to Mozart.

My third group consists of multiple-protagonist films, which are more common than parallel-protagonist plots. We can arrange them along a spectrum. At one pole, the narrative may involve a series of plotlines which are connected by some shared situation but which do not have significant causal impact on each other. In *The Towering Inferno*, for example, the romance subplot between the Fred Astaire and Jennifer Jones characters develops along its own trajectory in the midst of the disaster plot. Altman's *Nashville* takes the approach to an extreme with its famous inclusion of 24 important characters. In such films, as in parallel-protagonist films, the main characters

have different goals which they pursue independently. The characters may cross paths, but their narrative lines have only occasional and tangential causal effects on each other.

At the opposite pole lies the multiple-protagonist narrative involving a group of people, several or all of whom are roughly equal in prominence and who work toward a shared goal—however much they may disagree on the means of achieving it. Typical examples would be disaster films and other types of plots in which a team works together to overcome danger. *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) provides a simple example, with the Gene Hackman and Ernest Borgnine characters frequently clashing over what escape strategy to pursue but with the group generally cooperating.

In the middle of the spectrum we find the multiple-protagonist narrative involving several major characters and plotlines which have independent resolutions, but which crisscross and affect each other. *Grand Hotel* is perhaps the quintessential example, as the hotel itself provides the setting for a group of major characters who have not previously met to come together, form new individual goals, and affect each others' lives crucially. *The Big Chill* (1983) is a more recent instance, with old friends with very different careers and projects coming together briefly and interacting intensely, then parting.

The three films which I will examine in Chapters 9–11 fall into these three regions of the continuum. In *Parenthood*, despite the fact that all the protagonists belong to the same family and gather at intervals, the main plotlines progress with virtually no causal interaction. Instead, the material that binds these lines together is largely conceptual and motivic, functioning to create generalizations about the challenges and rewards of parenthood. *Hannah and Her Sisters* seems in some ways similar to *Parenthood*, with its examination of an extended family which assembles at intervals for parties. Yet in *Hannah* the plotlines cross each other in deliberately untidy ways, not behaving like the neat parallel tracks of *Parenthood*; in *Hannah* this interweaving serves the film's thematic treatment of love as unpredictable. *Alien* exemplifies films with group protagonists dedicated to a shared goal. Here the use of a group keeps us in suspense as to which character will survive the disaster visited upon them all—a common aim of "shooting-gallery" films.

In analyzing a film, it is often desirable to subordinate the plot order of the film's events to the critic's conceptual argument. When the scene-by-scene progression of the action dictates the structure of the analysis, the latter may occasionally give the impression of a glorified plot synopsis. Nonetheless, in each chapter that follows I will track the film scene by scene, since there is really no better way to show how the plot breaks into discrete parts, how

dangling causes prepare us for a change of time and space, how motifs create echoes and parallels, how goals are formulated, recast, thwarted, or achieved—and, most basically, to see how classical films achieve their fine-grained, scene-to-scene comprehensibility. One further aim of analyzing the films in chronological order is to facilitate video viewings of each with these analyses in hand.

I will also use each film to formulate an additional generalization that can be applied to contemporary classical cinema—a "final lesson." Some of these will address issues of how storytelling in the New Hollywood might be improved. There is a widespread perception that Hollywood filmmaking entered a period of doldrums during the mid- to late 1990s, with formulaic narratives predominating. Yet there is also evidence that this slump has been a passing phase in a generally stable system. I will develop this theme further in the final chapter.