overall story utilizes previous knowledge. The rest of this
book will consider various schemata specific to narrative
comprehension.

3. The material and structure of the film itself. In narra-
tive cinema, as we shall see in the next chapter, the film
offers structures of information—a narrative system and a
stylistic system. The narrative film is so made as to encour-
age the spectator to execute story-constructing activities.
The film presents cues, patterns, and gaps that shape the
viewer’s application of schemata and the testing of hypoth-
eses.

I have isolated these factors for convenience, but plainly
they interact in any single case. Consider the role of time in
film viewing. While watching a narrative film, the spectator
takes as one goal the arranging of events in temporal se-
quence. Our prior commerce with narrative and the every-
day world allows us to expect that events will occur in some
determinate order, and in most films specific cues encourage
us to treat each distinct action as following previously
presented ones. If the narrative presents events out of chron-
ological order, we must fall back on our ability to rearrange
them according to schemata. But such films run the risk of
confusing us. Moreover, cinema’s viewing conditions add a
constraint: under normal conditions, it is not possible to
review stretches of a film as one can reread passages of
prose. The relentless forward march of stimuli in a film puts
an extra strain on the spectator’s memory and inferential
processes. A filmmaker who presents story events out of
chronological order thus risks forcing the spectator to choose
between reconstructing story order and losing track of cur-
tent action. This is probably why most films avoid temporal
reshufflings. But we have seen in recent decades that films
with complex time patterns can supply audiences with new
schemata or encourage them to see the film more than once.
The history of film form can thus alter the perceiver’s prior
experiences.14 (This history is investigated in Part 3 of this
book.)

In opposition to all passive notions of spectatorship, then,
we should consider film viewing a complicated, even skilled,
activity. Watching a movie may seem as effortless as riding a

bicycle, but both draw on a range of practiced acts. Here,
perhaps, is the most significant relation between the spec-
tator and the reader. We are accustomed to think of reading
printed matter as automatic, but even after the language has
been learned, reading is an immensely intricate achieve-
ment, requiring the selection of salient cues, the processing
of large units, decisions about how to sample the text, anticipa-
tions, and the projection of an ongoing semantic whole.15
Comprehending a painting seems no less formidable. E. H.
Gombrich has shown that the beholder needs a knowledge of
the medium’s constraints and conventions, a sense of the
painting’s purpose, the ability to fill in what is missing, and a
proclivity to compare the painting with pertinent experi-
ences of the world.16 It would be surprising if a film, with its
mixtures of visual, auditory, and verbal stimuli, did not de-
mand active and complex construction.

Narrative Comprehension

The point of the previous section is that the spectator thinks.
To make sense of a narrative film, however, the viewer must
do more than perceive movement, construe images and
sounds as presenting a three-dimensional world, and under-
stand oral or written language. The viewer must take as a
central cognitive goal the construction of a more or less
intelligible story. But what makes something a story? And
what makes a story intelligible?

Since the early 1970s, several psychologists and linguists
have sought to understand how people comprehend and
recall stories.17 The research is still limited by its reductive
assumptions, since the stories are simple, short, written in
prose, and shorn of most aesthetic interest. Yet what data the
researchers have discovered offer some pointers for theoriz-
ing. First, these studies have revealed that even five-year-old
children in our culture recognize certain activities as charac-
teristic of storytelling and story-following. Second, the pat-
terns of comprehending and recalling a story are remarkably
uniform for all age groups. People tacitly assume that a story
is composed of discriminable events performed by certain
and linked by particular principles. People also share general criteria for the story's point and what is a scene, or character action, seems to be basically similar. Such general criteria direct personal events through anticipations and hypotheses, and they are in turn modified by the data supplied by the film.

We can specify these schemata more exactly. In constructing a narrative film, the spectator seems to grasp the filmic continuum as a set of events occurring in definite settings and unified by principles of temporality and action. To understand a film's story is to grasp what happens and where, when, and why it happens. Thus any schema for events, locations, time, and cause/effect may become pertinent to making sense of a narrative film. More vaguely, we can follow Reid Hastie in distinguishing various types of schemata; each has a role to play in narrative comprehension.¹

"Central-tendency" or prototype schemata, Hastie suggests, involve the attribution of characteristics of a schema to postured form. In narrative comprehension, prototype schemata seem most relevant for identifying individual agents, actions, goals, and locales. Understanding Bonnie and Clyde involves applying prototypes of thieves "bank robbery," "small South-town town," and Depression era." We cannot inventory all the possible prototypes schemata that might be pertinent to narrative comprehension; each film will call on a particular configuration of them.

More useful for our purposes is the tendency for prototypes to operate in a larger structure. Hastie suggests such structures term narrative schemata or templates. Template schemata can add information when it is absent and test for proper classification of data. The early results of story comprehension research suggest that in our culture perceivers tend to presuppose a particular narrative structure, a schema for the kind of story we have read. That is, the perceptual system comes with certain expectations about the order of events and role pairs in the whole. Perceivers tend to use this master schema as a framework for understanding, recalling, and summarizing the narrative particular. The perceiver expects each event in the story to be unambiguously and to occur in an identifiable locale and causal necessity. (For perceivers of all ages, texts with repeated

story events or ambiguous causal connections tend to reduce comprehension, and what is often central is what is causally specific.) As the film proceeds, perceivers tend to invert the order of events more frequently when the link is only sequential ("and when... and then...") and not also consequential ("as a result of..."

Several experiments yield evidence for the schematic function of a narrative structure in contemporary Western cultures. The perceivers tends to recall a narrative story as being more central than it was when presented omit causal connections, perceivers tend to supply them when retelling the tale. This is also strong evidence for the active qualities of narrative understanding: spectators are filling in material, extrapolating and adjusting what they remember. Perceivers also agree about what can be deleted in summarizing a story. And adults have developed strategies to deal with deviations from the master schema; these are seen in the way they elaborate and reconstitute the narrative.

In such ways, basic structural principles continue to serve as reference points for the identification of "less intelligible" narratives. The narrative schema is like those circles, squares, and triangles which artists revive and adorn to permit the portrayal of any object; the perceiver constantly refines the basic schema to fit the narrative at hand.

Near all story-comprehension researchers agree that the most common template structure can be articulated as a "canonical" story format, something like this: introduction of setting and characters—explanation of a state of affairs—conflict—resolution. Each movement or shot or sound and plot elements in the film can be slotted into the schema. Template schemata specific to narrative structure (e.g., what is likely to be causally prominent). Guided by something like the iconic story, the perceivers "chunks" the film into story patterns, or sets of story elements. Only some such process can explain how the perceivers understand that very different forms of surface information convey similar meanings. In a film, a buying of a loaf of bread might concern a goal situation, a scene, or several scenes. As Roland Barthes remarks, "To read a narrative continuum is in fact to arrange it—at the quick pace set by the reading material—
NARRATION AND FILM FORM

Ma ta processes are nonconscious, of applying an operation. We think of ourselves as interpreters, because of a causal chain that fails to make way for a song and dance. Most films ask the spectator to employ compositional hypodermics. When we consider a story "realistic" detail as having no bearing on the unfolding action, or when in the visual sense the causal chain fails, to cut to be off. Some stylistic alternatives are unlikely and some are completely ruled out. We also know that spectators accustomed to one stylistic tradition can use procedural schemata to comprehend other stylistic options (e.g., "impose this cut by my own method."). A spectator's viewers would wonder if the size of a great spectator depends on notice to learn and recall stylistic features of any film. At later points in this book we will consider these stylistic traditions as a vehicle for narration and a system for understanding.

To what extent, we might now ask, does the viewer possess stylistic schemata? Most narratives use their stylistic category, whether as a vehicle for narrative information or as a stylistic translation. Our own schemata thus tend to be shaped by the text, the text that has received so little only when the spectator may be held to the extent the spectator may be held.

The spectator assumes, for example, that the character is sad. Like our hero bursts into tears, we conclude that he is sad. On the other hand, the narrative also may derive its less scale expectations from the textual level. In the cinematic "microscope," moment-by-moment processing of the action. Across scenes, hypodermics emerge with some clarity: will the character be or a? A more indecisive but highly significant are of "maximum hypodermics" may extend across a whole film. A narrative style can itself reflect these levels, such as by playing down small-scale portions (transitions, or the secondary actions Barthes calls "catalyzes") in order to stress larger-range hypotheses about significant action sequences (Barthes's kernels or "fingers"). Other narratives may derive their large-scale expectations, in such a case we call the text episodic. Hypodermics also vary in precision according to their placement in the text: they tend to be more "open" at the start of a scene; some remain in force throughout a scene.

The primary focus of hypodermic forming remains what Sternberg calls suspense—anticipating and weighing the probabilities of future narrative events. Consider the atten-

When so action back up an already confirmed hypodermic, it is redundant and cannot trigger the full artistic range of hypodermic casting. Our "whole sensory experience, the spectator assumes that certain stylistic schemes will be adhered to, as when we identify a story as a melodrama. A doctor makes hypotheses of various sorts. A hypothesis may pertain to past action that the text infers from specifying. Sterbe-

This suggests a story with a stylistic plot. As in many of his films, it is one aspect of his world of memory and possible only in a very computational manner. The viewer also makes hypotheses: a cue is likely to be followed by a camera move, and a musical bridge is more apt to fade out than to be cut. Some stylistic alternatives are unlikely and some are completely ruled out. We also know that spectators accustomed to one stylistic tradition can use procedural schemata to comprehend other stylistic options (e.g., "impose this cut by my own method."). A spectator's viewers would wonder if the size of a great spectator depends on notice to learn and recall stylistic features of any film. At later points in his book we will consider these stylistic traditions as a vehicle for narration and a system for understanding.

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From this chapter forward, my focus is on how film form and style function in relation to narrational strategies and ends. As an alternative, we could undertake empirical investigations of how actual spectators construe particular films. While worthwhile, this enterprise would not necessarily lead to insights into how films encourage, sustain, block, or undercut specific viewing operations. As I have said throughout, formal systems both cue and constrain the viewer's construction of a story. The theory I propose cannot predict any actual response; it can only construct distinctions and historical contexts which suggest the most logically coherent range of conventionally permissible responses.

We have seen theories of narration founded upon superficial analogies between film and other media—literature or theater (the mimetic approach); literature, speech, or writing (the diegetic approach). The theory I propose sees narration as a formal activity, a notion comparable to Eisenstein's rhetoric of form. In keeping with a perceptual-cognitive approach to the spectator's work, this theory treats narration as a process which is not in its basic aims specific to any medium. As a dynamic process, narration deploys the materials and procedures of each medium for its ends. Thinking of narration in this way yields considerable scope for investigation while still allowing us to build in the specific possibilities of the film medium. In addition, a form-centered approach sets itself the task of explaining how narration functions in the totality of the film. Narrational patterning is a major part of the process by which we grasp films as more or less coherent wholes.

**Fabula, Syuzhet, and Style**

In previous chapters I have assumed a difference between the story that is represented and the actual representation of it, the form in which the perceiver actually encounters it. This crucial distinction may go back to Aristotle, but it was most fully theorized by the Russian Formalists, and it is indispensable to a theory of narration.

Presented with two narrative events, we look for causal or spatial or temporal links. The imaginary construct we create, progressively and retroactively, was termed by Formalists the *fabula* (sometimes translated as "story"). More specifically, the fabula embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field. In *Rear Window*, as in most detective tales, there is an overt process of fabula construction, since the investigation of the crime involves establishing certain connections among events. Putting the fabula together requires us to construct the story of the ongoing inquiry while at the same time framing and testing hypotheses about past events. That is, the story of the investigation is a search for the concealed story of a crime. By the end of the typical detective tale, all story events can be fitted into a single pattern of time, space, and causality.

The fabula is thus a pattern which perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inferences. It is the developing result of picking up narrative cues, applying schemata, framing and testing hypotheses. Ideally, the fabula can be embodied in a verbal synopsis, as general or as detailed as circumstances require. Yet the fabula, however imaginary, is not a whimsical or arbitrary construct. The viewer builds the fabula on the basis of prototype schemata (identifiable types of persons, actions, locales, etc.), template schemata (principally the "canonic" story), and procedural schemata (a search for appropriate motivations and relations of causality, time, and space). To the extent that these processes are intersubjective, so is the fabula that is created. In principle, viewers of a film will agree about either what the story is or what factors obscure or render ambiguous the adequate construction of the story.

It would be an error to take the fabula, or story, as the proilmic event. A film's fabula is never materially present on the screen or soundtrack. When we see a shot of Jeff looking out his window, his action is a representation which signals us to infer a story event (Jeff looks out his window). The same piece of information might have been conveyed many other ways, many of them requiring no sight or sound of Jeff at all. The staging of the action, as Eisenstein showed, is itself a representational act. This theoretical move lets us
avoid that a priori favoring of certain film techniques characteristic of mimetic theories.

The fabula, writes Tymianov, "can only be guessed at, but it is not a given." What is given? What sorts of phenomenally present materials and forms do we encounter? We can analyze the film as consisting of two systems and a remaining body of material, diagramed in figure 4.1. The syuzhet (usually translated as "plot") is the actual arrangement and presentation of the fabula in the film. It is not the text in toto. It is a more abstract construct, the patterning of the story as a blow-by-blow recounting of the film could render it. The fabula is a system because it arranges components—the story events and states of affairs—according to specific principles. As Boris Tomashevsky puts it: "The fabula is opposed to the syuzhet, which is built out of the same events, but the syuzhet respects their order in the work and the series of information processes which designate them." "Syuzhet" names the architectonics of the film's presentation of the fabula; hence the rightward arrow in the diagram. Logically, syuzhet patterning is independent of the medium; the same syuzhet patterns could be embodied in a novel, a play, or a film.

Style also constitutes a system in that it too mobilizes components—particular instantiations of film techniques—according to principles of organization. There are other uses of the term "style" (e.g., to designate recurrent features of structure or texture in a body of films, such as "neorealist style"), but in this context, "style" simply names the film's systematic use of cinematic devices. Style is thus wholly ingredient to the medium. Style interacts with syuzhet in various ways; hence the two-way arrow in the diagram.

An example may illustrate how syuzhet and style differ. In Rear Window, the syuzhet consists of the particular pattern of events (actions, scenes, turning points, plot twists) depicting the tale of Thorwald's murder and its investigation and the tale of Lisa and Jeff's romance. When in the preceding chapter I described formal patterns of withheld knowledge or abrupt revelation, I was referring principally to the construction of the syuzhet. The same film, however, can be described as a steady flow of applications of cinematic techniques—mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound. In one scene, Jeff and Stella are spotted by Thorwald. They step quickly back into Jeff's room (figure movement, setting); they whisper (sound) and douse the lamp (lighting); the camera tracks quickly back to a long shot (cinematography); and all of this occurs after the crucial shot of Thorwald turning to look out his window (editing).

Note that in a narrative film these two systems coexist. They can do this because syuzhet and style each treat different aspects of the phenomenal process. The syuzhet embodies the film as a "dramaturgical" process; style embodies it as a "technical" one. While it would often be arbitrary to separate the two systems in the process of perception, the distinction has precedent in much narrative theory. Indeed, we shall discover one mode of narration that requires us to keep syuzhet and style conceptually separate. Assuming that the distinction is warranted, I want now to spell out the relations between syuzhet and fabula, and syuzhet and style.

In discussing the spectator's activity, I stressed the role of narrative schemata. The theoretical concept of the syuzhet offers a way of analyzing the aspects of a film that the spectator organizes into an ongoing story. It should be clear, though, that the syuzhet is not identical with what Chapter 3 called the canonic story format. The latter, we can now see, comprises schematic assumptions about both the fabula and the syuzhet. The viewer's tendency to assume that characters have goals pertains to causality in the fabula; it does not imply anything about syuzhet organization. But the assumption that the spectator will encounter an exposition or an ending pertains to the organization of the syuzhet. The "canonic story" nonetheless offers an example of how
assumptions about syuzhet and fabula factors play a considerable role in narrative comprehension. As a distinction, the fabula/syuzhet pair cuts across media. At a gross level, the same fabula could be inferred from a novel, a film, a painting, or a play. Thus one difficulty of enunciative theories—the forced analogy between linguistic categories and nonverbal phenomena—vanishes. As Meir Sternberg puts it, any narrative medium utilizes "a largely extraverbal logic" that includes "the twofold development of the action, as it objectively and straightforwardly progresses in the fictive world from beginning to end (within the fabula) and as it is deformed and patterned into progressing in our mind during the reading-process (within the syuzhet)." The conception of syuzhet avoids surface-phenomena distinctions (such as person, tense, metalanguage) and relies upon more supple principles basic to all narrative representation. Consequently, and contrary to what some writers believe, the fabula/syuzhet distinction does not replicate the histoire/discours distinction held by enunciation theories. The fabula is not an unmarked enunciative act; it is not a speech act at all but a set of inferences.

I asserted that the syuzhet composes story situations and events according to specifiable principles. Chapter 3 showed that when we perceive and comprehend a narrative text, we tend to construct certain patterns among events. We can now see how the film's syuzhet provides a basis for this activity. Three sorts of principles relate the syuzhet to the fabula.

1. Narrative "logic." In constructing a fabula, the perceiver defines some phenomena as events while constructing relations among them. These relations are primarily causal ones. An event will be assumed to be a consequence of another event, of a character trait, or of some general law. The syuzhet can facilitate this process by systematically encouraging us to make linear causal inferences. But the syuzhet can also arrange events so as to block or complicate the construction of causal relations. This happens with the false clues in Rear Window. Narrative logic also includes a more abstract principle of similarity and difference which I call parallelism. Thorwald's murder of his wife has no significant effect on most of his neighbors; one function of the courtyard vignettes is to parallel the romantic relations of Jeff and Lisa with other male/female relations. What counts as an event, a cause, an effect, a similarity, or a difference—all will be determined within the context of the individual film.

2. Time. Narrative time has several aspects, well analyzed by Gérard Genette. The syuzhet can cue us to construct fabula events in any sequence (a matter of order). The syuzhet can suggest fabula events as occurring in virtually any time span (duration). And the syuzhet can signal fabula events as taking place any number of times (frequency). These aspects can all assist or block the viewer's construction of fabula time. Again, temporal representation will vary with historical convention and the context of the individual film.

3. Space. Fabula events must be represented as occurring in a spatial frame of reference, however vague or abstract. The syuzhet can facilitate construction of fabula space by informing us of the relevant surroundings and the positions and paths assumed by the story's agents. The confinement to Jeff's courtyard in Rear Window is an instance of the use of syuzhet devices to advance our construction of fabula space. But the film could also impede our comprehension by suspending, muddling, or undercutting our construction of space.

Depending on how the syuzhet presents the fabula, there will be particular spectatorial effects. Armed with the notion of different narrative principles and the concept of the syuzhet's distortion of fabula information, we can begin to account for the concrete narrational work of any film. It is obvious, for instance, that Rear Window depends upon withholding certain fabula information; we can now see that our schematizing and hypothesizing activities are guided by the syuzhet's cues about causality, time, and space. The basic-training aspect of the film's early portions—its tendency to give visual cues, let us draw inferences, and then confirm or disconfirm them by verbal statement—arises from manipulation of causal information. To take a specific scene: while Jeff is asleep, we see a woman leave with Thorwald
and wonder if she is his wife; the syuzhet has generated this suspicion that Mrs. Thorwald is still alive by not showing us this woman (who is not Mrs. Thorwald) entering the apartment. The syuzhet of Rear Window also blocks our knowledge by limiting space; we can use only narrowly restricted views of the courtyard to construct the fabula. And Rear Window is not exceptional in its limitations, concealments, and revelations. For theoretical purposes it may sometimes be convenient to take as an ideal baseline an instance in which the syuzhet is constructed so as to permit maximum access to the fabula. But every syuzhet uses retardation to postpone complete construction of the fabula. At the very least, the end of the story, or the means whereby we arrive there, will be withheld. Thus the syuzhet aims not to let us construct the fabula in some logically pristine state but rather to guide us to construct the fabula in a specific way, by arousing in us particular expectations at this or that point, eliciting our curiosity or suspense, and pulling surprises along the way.

In some cases, the syuzhet will include masses of material that block our construction of the fabula. Such material may encourage us to treat the syuzhet as interpreting or commenting on the fabula. In October, both Kerensky and General Kornilov appeal to the slogan “For God and Country.” Suddenly we cut to a series of statues of gods from many cultures. These shots do not help us to construct the spatial, temporal, or logical connections among story events; in fabula terms they are a digression. Nonetheless, the sequence constitutes syuzhet manipulation. As a little dissertation on the very idea of God, the passage emphasizes the cultural variability of religion and suggests that an appeal to the holy often veils political opportunism. The inserted material insists in its patterned development that we motivate it transtextually, as a species of rhetorical argument. A novelist’s commentary, however digressive, forms an integral part of the syuzhet, and so do Eisenstein’s essayic interpolations.

The syuzhet, then, is the dramaturgy of the fiction film, the organized set of cues prompting us to infer and assemble story information. As the diagram on p. 50 suggests, the film’s style can interact with the syuzhet in various ways. Film technique is customarily used to perform syuzhet tasks— providing information, cueing hypotheses, and so forth. In the “normal” film, that is, the syuzhet system controls the stylistic system—in Formalist terms, the syuzhet is the “dominant.” For example, patterns in the syuzhet’s presentation of story information will be matched by stylistic patterns, as when at the close of Rear Window a camera movement homologous to that in the opening underlines the changes in the lives of the courtyard’s inhabitants.

Still, this is not to say that the systematic employment of film techniques—that is, the film’s style—is wholly a vehicle for the syuzhet. When alternative techniques exist for a given syuzhet purpose, it may make a difference which technique is chosen. For instance, the syuzhet may require that two story events be cued as occurring simultaneously. The simultaneity may be denoted by crosscutting from one event to the other, by staging the two actions in depth, by use of split-screen techniques, or by the inclusion of particular objects in the setting (such as a television set broadcasting a “live” event). Whatever stylistic choice is made may have different effects on the spectator’s perceptual and cognitive activity. Style is thus a notable factor in its own right, even when it is “only” supporting the syuzhet.

Film style can also take shapes not justified by the syuzhet’s manipulation of story information. If in Rear Window Hitchcock systematically cut from Jeff’s gaze to close-ups of misleading or irrelevant objects which he could not see, then the stylistic procedure itself could vie for prominence with the syuzhet’s task of presenting the story. True, we might take this stylistic flourish as a syuzhet maneuver to baffle us about causality or space; but if the device were repeated systematically across the film with no clear link to the developing syuzhet and fabula, then the more economical explanation would be that style has come forward to claim our attention independent of syuzhet/fabula relations. Chapter 12 will show how this happens in a variety of films. For analytical purposes, then, we must grant a potentiality, even if such a tendency is rare.
It is evident that both syuzhet and style invite the spectator to apply the motivational rationales discussed in Chapter 3. At the syuzhet level, when Jeff and Stella recoil from Thorwald's look, the audience justifies this event as psychologically plausible and compositionally necessary for what follows. At the stylistic level, when Jeff scans the apartment block and the next shot is of Thorwald's windows, we assume the shot to be compositionally relevant, grant it a certain realism (Jeff's point of view), and acquiesce to a generic convention (this could be a suspenseful buildup). In the hypothetical example of patterned cutaways to irrelevant objects, we would try to motivate them compositionally, realistically, or transtextually; but if all were unequal to the task set by the style, we would have a case of "artistic motivation," whereby the materials and forms of the medium constitute the chief object of interest.

It is time for a formal definition. In the fiction film, narration is the process whereby the film's syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the fabula. Thus it is not only when the syuzhet arranges fabula information that the film narrates. Narration also includes stylistic processes. It would of course be possible to treat narration solely as a matter of syuzhet/fabula relations, but this would leave out the ways in which the filmic texture affects the spectator's activity. We have already seen that the spectator possesses stylistic schemata as well as others, and these invariably affect the overall process of narrative representation. Moreover, by including style within narration, we can analyze stylistic departures from the syuzhet's project. In an earlier example, a cut from Jeff's gaze to irrelevant objects would be a narrational act as much as would a cut to relevant ones. Narration is the dynamic interaction between the syuzhet's transmission of story information and what Tynianov called "the movement, the rise and fall of the stylistic masses." 12

Is there anything in a narrative film that is not narrational? Any image or sound can contribute to narration, but we can also attend to an element for its sheer perceptual salience. Roland Barthes has spoken of a film's "third meaning," one lying beyond denotation and connotation: the realm in which casual lines, colors, expressions, and textures become "fellow travelers" of the story. 13 Kristin Thompson has identified these elements as "excess," materials which may stand out perceptually but which do not fit either narrative or stylistic patterns. 14 (See fig. 4.1.) As we have seen, the spectator's categories push her or him to construct objects and denotative meaning from the outset. The canonic story in particular favors the dominance of story-world factors. From this standpoint, it is as if nothing but narration matters. But in the first shot of Rear Window, we can choose not to construct a story world and instead savor random colors, gestures, and sounds. These "excessive" elements are utterly unjustified, even by aesthetic motivation. Now, this attitude is actually quite difficult to maintain over a long period, since it offers little perceptual and cognitive payoff. The trouvailles will never add up. Nonetheless, there may be aspects of a film that we cannot attribute to narration. In some cases, as Thompson shows with Ivan the Terrible, "excess" may offer a useful way into the film's overall formal work. "A perception of a film that includes its excess implies an awareness of the structures (including conventions) at work in the film, since excess is precisely those elements that escape unifying impulses. Such an approach to viewing films can allow us to look further into a film, renewing its ability to intrigue us by its strangeness." 15

Whatever its suggestiveness as a critical concept, excess lies outside my concern here. The rest of this book is devoted to the process of narration. In the rest of this chapter and in all of the next, I will concentrate on basic principles of syuzhet patterning. We need to examine how a syuzhet may organize story material, how it may limit or expand our access to fabula information. We also need to understand overall narrational strategies, the broad aims that syuzhet tactics and film style may fulfill. Subsequent chapters will concentrate on how narration may render fabula time and space, and there we will take up specific stylistic procedures.
Tactics of Syuzhet Construction

The analysis of narration can begin with the syuzhet's tactics for presenting fabula information. We must grasp how the syuzhet manages its basic task—the presentation of story logic, time, and space—always recalling that in practice we never get ideally maximum access to the fabula. In general, the syuzhet shapes our perception of the fabula by controlling (1) the quantity of fabula information to which we have access; (2) the degree of pertinence we can attribute to the presented information; and (3) the formal correspondences between syuzhet presentation and fabula data.

Assume that an ideal syuzhet supplies information in the "correct" amount to permit coherent and steady construction of the fabula. Given this hypostatized reference point, we can distinguish a syuzhet which supplies too little information about the story and a syuzhet which supplies too much: in other words, a "rarefied" syuzhet versus an "overloaded" one.

Now at any given point an ordinary narrative may give us more or less information than the hypostatized ideal. A detective tale might bamboozle us with a plethora of clues and a paucity of motives. Our normal syuzhet, then, reduces to a demand for enough information for the construction of a fabula according to conventions of genre or mode. *Rear Window* holds back some data and sometimes gives us "too much" to assimilate at the moment, but eventually the quantity proves "just right" for generic needs. The momentarily overloaded or rarefied approach of the mystery film is in fact normal for syuzhet construction in its genre. But our detective story would leap out of its genre if it were radically to pursue either strategy in its recounting of the detective's investigation or in its construction of the solution. For example, Antonioni's *Blow-Up* fails as a detective story: it presents too few pieces of information to enable the protagonist, or us, to solve the crime (or even to determine what the crime involves). Two conclusions follow. At local points, "ordinary" films can indulge in either overload or rarefaction tactics; and extraordinary films can indulge in either, or both, consistently and throughout.

Again, assume an ideal syuzhet which supplies information which is relevant to the coherent and steady construction of the fabula. Opposed to this, we can situate any syuzhet which indulges in information not relevant to such construction. Godard's films, for instance, are often peppered with citations, skewed allusions, and interruptions which cannot be clearly related to the story. We tend to take these as digressions. It is of course often difficult to judge the pertinence of a piece of information at the moment it emerges. Something which seems out of place may eventually slot itself neatly into the total fabula. (Here we touch on the problem of gaps, to be taken up shortly.) In any case, in judging the pertinence of information as in judging its quantity, the analyst will need to specify generic and other transtexual constraints. The criteria of relevance in a drama will not be appropriate to a farce. And some films, such as *L'année dernière à Marienbad* or *Not Reconciled*, make it hard to determine a main fabula path from which we could measure deviations—exactly a point which characterizes these films' formal operations.

The most analytically important variable is the set of formal correspondences between fabula and syuzhet. That is, to what extent does the unfolding syuzhet correspond to the construct? Are there disparities, incompatibilities, lacks of synchronization? Any syuzhet selects what fabula events to present and combines them in particular ways. Selection creates gaps; combination creates composition.

No syuzhet explicitly presents all of the fabula events that we presume took place. A princess is born; in the next scene she is eighteen years old. In leaving a gap in the syuzhet, the narration implies that nothing extraordinary took place in those intervening years. We will assume that the princess had an infancy, a childhood, and an adolescence. (Knowing will soon meet a prince.) Temporal gaps are the most common sort, but any mystery or riddle narrative may also contain causal gaps. (Why is Mrs. Thorwald missing?) The syuzhet can present us with spatial gaps too, as when it

...
Sternberg points out that gaps can be temporary or permanent. That is, the informational hole in the fabula can be plugged (quickly or eventually) or never plugged. In our fairy tale, the gap is fleeting: we leave the princess’s cradle and then see her as a young woman; we very rapidly fill in the gap. In a detective story, the crucial causal gap—e.g., what became of Mrs. Thorwald—is maintained much longer, but it too is eventually plugged. In some narratives, however, a gap remains open to the end; Iago’s motive is the classic example. We can characterize syuzhet processes as working to open, prolong, or close gaps in fabula events.

We can also describe a gap as relatively diffuse or focused. How the princess passed those eighteen years is unspecified; we can fill the gap only with general and typical assumptions. But “Did Thorwald kill his wife?” is a clear-cut question demanding a precise answer. Sometimes a syuzhet will conjure up a diffuse gap only to bring it into focus later. For instance, a flashback might jump back to an otherwise unremarked interval and sharpen our sense of what information might fill the gap.

The syuzhet can also flaunt or suppress gaps in the fabula. A gap is flaunted when we know that there is something we need to know. Our fairy tale calls the temporal gap to our attention, demanding that we fill the eighteen years of the princess’s life with the help of our conventional assumptions. A detective story also typically calls attention to its gaps, making us fret over our lack of certain data. Other syuzhets do not call attention to their gaps. That Rear Window does not show Thorwald’s mistress enter his apartment is a striking case of a suppressed gap. At the time we see her leave, we do not know that her entry has been omitted.

It should be evident that selections of fabula events shape the constructive activities of the spectator. Temporary gaps point us forward and build up surprise; a permanent gap invites us to apply a “scanning” strategy, sorting back through single episodes looking for information we might have missed. A focused gap obviously tends to solicit exclusive and homogeneous hypotheses, while a diffuse gap yields room for more open-ended inferential work. A flaunted gap may warn us to pay attention; either the omitted fabula information will become important later, or the narration is misleading us by stressing something that will prove insignificant. If a gap is suppressed, however, surprise is the likely result, especially if the omitted information ranks low on a scale of probabilities. These are only general indications, but they suggest the range of effects that “gapping” tactics can achieve. In each case, it must be remembered, the viewer will strive to justify the very presence of the gap by appeal to principles of compositional, realistic, trans-textual, and artistic motivation.

Gaps are created by choosing to present certain pieces of fabula information and to hold back others. The pieces of information selected can be combined in a great variety of ways. In cinema, the narration can arrange fabula information temporarily or spatially, as we shall see in Chapters 6 and 7. For now we can look at two general principles that govern syuzhet composition in any medium: retardation and redundancy. Both offer clear-cut instances of how textual form both triggers and constrains spectator activity.

We have already noted the overall importance of retardation in cueing the spectator’s comprehension. Only by delaying the revelation of some information can the syuzhet arouse anticipation, curiosity, suspense, and surprise. For example, Rear Window lays out its fabula information so that (a) the crucial murder evidence emerges piecemeal and the case is not solved too quickly, and (b) the murder investigation suspends and (possibly) resolves Jeff and Lisa’s romantic problems. The “God and Country” sequence of October breaks off from presenting the fabula and interpolates material that not only retards the outcome of the story action (how will the battle between Kornilov and Kerensky turn out?) but also has its own miniature retardatory curve: the point could have been made by an intertitle rather than dozens of shots which form, to say the least, a fairly difficult passage.

The very centrality of retardation as a principle demands that we make some distinctions. Meir Sternberg has shown
Unlike prose fiction, the fictional film seldom confines its narration to what only a single character knows. Most commonly, portions of the syuzhet will be organized around one character’s knowledge and other portions will confine themselves to the knowledge held by another character. Such restrictions and divisions will inevitably create gaps in the fabula. We tend to motivate restricted narration realistically (“After all, we know as much as she plausibly could”) but to motivate more unrestricted narration transtextually (“In films of this sort, you always know more...”). Both sorts of narration are, of course, fundamentally motivated by compositional requirements.

We can ask a second question. How profound is the knowledge available to the narration? This is a matter of depth, of degrees of subjectivity and objectivity. A narration may present the whole of a character’s mental life, either conscious or unconscious; it may confine itself to the character’s optical or auditory experience; it may eschew any but behavioral indicators of psychological states; it may even minimize those. For example, although the narration of The Birth of a Nation is relatively unrestricted in range, it penetrates the characters’ minds less deeply than does the narration of, say, Secrets of a Soul, which represents the protagonist’s dreams. The Maltese Falcon, which contains one shot cued as being through Spade’s eyes, is less subjective than Rear Window, with its many optical point-of-view shots. Again, depth of knowledge can be justified on compositional, realistic, and/or transtextual grounds.

Range and depth of information can be related in various ways. Restricted narration does not guarantee greater depth, nor does depth at any point guarantee that the narration will stay constantly limited. Hitchcock’s films alternate between sequences of great subjectivity and sequences that flaunt the narration’s unrestricted knowledge. In general, narrative films are constantly modulating the range and depth of the narration’s knowledge. Such shifts provide strong cues for hypothesis formation.

Narration also relates “rhetorically” to the perceiver, and this opens up other areas of inquiry. To what extent does the narration display a recognition that it is addressing an audience? We can call this the degree of self-consciousness, for example, Eisenstein’s films often intensify an emotional max by having characters look at or gesture to the audience. Similarly, a retrospective voice-over commentary can pull the narration toward a greater self-consciousness, especially if the addressee is not another fictional character. We can see many tactics of redundancy, such as repetition of factual information by the syuzhet, as evidencing a degree of self-consciousness (e.g., Eisenstein’s repeated intercutting of Kerensky with statues). At the beginning of Rear Window, the camera movement presents aspects of courtyard life for purposes of quick exposition. In contrast, the artificial but relatively inoffensive frontality of figure position we observed in figure 1.1 earlier is less self-conscious than these cases. When we speak of being “aware of manipulation” in a Lang film and “unaware” of such manipulation in a Hawks film, we are usually referring to the narration’s greater or lesser acknowledgment that a tale is being presented for a perceiver.

The concept of self-consciousness offers distinct advantages over “enunciative” accounts of speaker-listener relations, such as the applications of Benveniste’s grammatical theory. For one thing, self-consciousness is a matter of degree, not of absolutes (as, say, “first person” and “third person” are). All filmic narrations are self-conscious, but some are more so than others. Furthermore, “self-consciousness” varies in degree and function within different genres and modes of film practice. Groucho Marx’s asides to the audience are more self-conscious than Popeye’s muttered imprecations, but the patriotic voice-over of Popeye’s uttered Fight is more self-conscious than either. The staging of most Hollywood shots reveals a moderate self-consciousness by musical, characters may sing directly to us—a moment of self-consciousness codified by the genre. By contrast, Antonioni will stage scenes with characters turned away from us, and the overt suppression of their expressions and reactions becomes in context a token of the narration’s awareness of the viewer. In the celebrated filling station sequence of Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle,
The Detective Film

Detective films provide clear illustrations of how the syuzhet manipulates fabula information over an entire narrative. In fact, specific sorts of syuzhet tactics are the differentia specifica of the genre. Most basically, the viewer construes the fabula's causal chain as consisting of a crime and its investigation, which may be represented schematically in this way:

CRIME
- cause of crime
- commission of crime
- concealment of crime
- discovery of crime

INVESTIGATION
- beginning of investigation
- phases of investigation
- elucidation of crime
- identification of criminal
- consequences of identification

The fundamental narratological characteristic of the detective tale is that the syuzhet withholds crucial events occurring in the "crime" portion of the fabula. The syuzhet may conceal the motive, or the planning, or the commission of the crime (an act which includes the identity of the criminal), or aspects of several of these. The syuzhet may commence with the discovery of the crime, or it may start before the crime is committed and find other ways to conceal the crucial events. In either case, the syuzhet is principally structured by the progress of the detective's investigation. Thus the detective film creates gaps which are usually focused and flaunted by being posed as questions, such as "Who killed Arthur Geiger?" (The Big Sleep) or "What has become of Moose Malloy's girlfriend Velma?" (Murder My Sweet). The viewer creates a set of exclusive hypotheses—a closed set of suspects, a gradually defined range of outcomes. The genre promotes suspense with respect to the twists and turns of the investigation and plays upon curiosity about the missing causal material.

Since the investigation is the basis of the syuzhet, there is obviously a more or less constant revelation of prior fabula information. The circumstances governing the investigation will typically be explained compactly: General Sternwood hires Marlowe (The Big Sleep), or Moose comes to his office (Murder My Sweet). But the most pertinent missing causes will emerge only gradually, often near the very end of the syuzhet. In other words, exposition about the investigation itself tends to be concentrated in preliminary portions of the syuzhet, while information about the motive, agent, and circumstances of the crime will be distributed and gradually summed up clearly in later portions. Thus no gap will be permanent.

This tidy description is oversimplified, however. For one thing, the exposition tends to temper the primacy effect. This tempering is generically motivated, since the spectator knows that, in a detective film, almost anyone may turn out to be the culprit and that first impressions may therefore be misleading. On a larger scale, the investigation is usually complicated by retardatory material. In the detective tale, the syuzhet typically delays revelation of the criminal by inserting comedy (e.g., byplay with incompetent police), romance (a young couple falls under suspicion, or the detective is prey to romantic inclinations), and the commission of more crimes. This last retardatory device is especially useful since it generates new causal gaps and hypotheses. In Murder My Sweet, two lines of action—Moose Malloy's search for Velma, and the theft of Mrs. Grayle's jewels—alternately block one another until Marlowe finally realizes that Mrs. Grayle is Velma.

The Big Sleep proffers such a mare's nest of retardations that it is not easy to reconstruct the crime fabula's causal chain. In fact, Hawks and some critics have talked as if the fabula could never be reconstructed: "I never could figure the story out . . . They asked me who killed such and such a man—I didn't know." One virtue of the theory that I suggest is that its categories can explain the viewer's difficulties here. The Big Sleep has an abnormally overloaded syuzhet;
many events occur offscreen or before the syuzhet opens, and one major character (Sean Regan) is never seen. There is also a low level of redundancy in the presentation of the fabula: characters and narration seldom repeat causal information about the crime. Perhaps only the analyst can come up with a coherent causal chain, but it certainly can be done. The Big Sleep is a detective film in which the interest of constructing the investigation fabula takes precedence over the construction of a coherent crime fabula.

The detective film justifies its gaps and retardations by controlling knowledge, self-consciousness, and communicativeness. The genre aims to create curiosity about past story events (e.g., who killed whom), suspense about upcoming events, and surprise with respect to unexpected disclosures about either story or syuzhet. To promote all three emotional states, the narration must limit the viewer's knowledge. This can be motivated realistically by making us share the restricted knowledge possessed by the investigator; we learn what the detective learns, when he or she learns it. There can be brief marks of an unrestricted narration as well, as we shall see, but these function to enhance curiosity or suspense. By restricting the range of knowledge that possessed by the detective, the narration can present information in a fairly unconscious way; we pick up fabula information by following the detective's inquiry. Again, the narration can signpost information more overtly, but this is occasional and codified. Most significant, of course, is the coded communicativeness of the detective genre. The demands of "fair play" have dictated a particular solution to the problem of how suppressive to be.

Both The Big Sleep and Murder My Sweet restrict our range of knowledge to that possessed by the detective. In The Big Sleep, for instance, when the butler asks Philip Marlowe to stop to see Vivian Sternwood, Marlowe asks: "How did she know I was here?" The butler responds: "She saw you through the window, sir, and I was obliged to tell her who you were." It would have been simple for the film to have shown Vivian looking out her window and observing Marlowe's entrance, but it would have made the narration more overtly knowledgeable. Similarly, in Murder My Sweet, Marlowe is exploring a thicket when a sound catches his attention; he flashes his light; cut to his optical point of view on a terrified deer. In both films, we typically enter or leave a locale when Marlowe does; most if not all subjective shots are from his optical vantage point; and he is often placed so that we look over his shoulder at the action. The music often reflects his understanding of the scene: in Murder My Sweet, when Marlowe remembers a clue, the music announces it; and Max Steiner's score for The Big Sleep signals whether Marlowe judges the scene to be menacing, comic, or romantic. What surprises Marlowe often surprises us. He returns to a nightclub table, and at the moment he discovers that his companion has vanished, the camera reveals it to us (Murder My Sweet). Or he comes home to find Carmen in his armchair, disclosed when the camera pans with him tossing his hat onto a chair (The Big Sleep). In both films, the final scene confines itself to what Marlowe, inside a parlor with a killer, could perceive; the film never depicts action outside the house unless he sees it. To a great extent, our "identification" with a film's protagonist is created by exactly this systematic restriction of information.

Several stylistic conventions come into play to restrict our knowledge. Point-of-view shots are obvious examples, as is the voice-over commentary in Murder My Sweet. At certain moments in The Big Sleep, the narration needs to underscore our perception of what Marlowe hears rather than sees, and thus resorts to an image yielding limited information. For instance as he approaches Geiger's house, we cut to a shot of a man's feet sprinting away; the shot is a compromise between restriction to Marlowe and suppression of the killer's identity.

What this last convention reveals, though, is that the film is in fact constituted by an omniscient narration that "voluntarily" restricts itself for specific purposes (e.g., the need to conceal story events) but which can at any instant diverge from its confinement to character knowledge. Often, of course, Marlowe is a little ahead of us, spotting a detail we miss or making a discovery that a new shot then shares with us. But sometimes the film gives us a slight edge over him, and then we glimpse omniscient narration's work. In both
films, Marlowe’s head will turn for a moment and we will spy a gesture or expression he cannot see. In The Big Sleep, we see Joe Brody draw his gun before Marlowe does. Similar situations crop up in Murder My Sweet: we see Helen enter Marlowe’s apartment before he glimpses her in the mirror, or we notice Moose strolling behind Marlowe’s table before he does. True, our extra knowledge often turns out to be a fleeting satisfaction; in these instances, the detective gets the message very soon after we do. The point remains, though, that an omniscient narration can frame the detective’s field of knowledge within a slightly wider compass for purposes of suspense, curiosity, or surprise.

Omniscience, in these films, is thus still paradoxically “limited”; it is that of the ideal—but-not-impossible observer praised in mainstream mimetic theory. This discreet omniscience often emerges in a rhetorical flourish. For instance, Canino fires into the car where he believes Marlowe to be hiding. The framing gives us the “point of view” of the car’s nonexistent occupant before Marlowe shoots Canino, an action filmed from another angle. Such camera positions, while motivated by Marlowe’s knowledge, could proceed only from an omniscient, or at least “omnipresent,” narration.

We can watch this omniscience at work elsewhere. Credit sequences are very important narrational gestures. These extrafictional passages usually present information in highly self-conscious and omniscient fashion. Transitions between scenes also tend to play up knowledge which the detective doesn’t yet have. The camera can begin on a sign and then crane down to the detective arriving beneath it (Murder My Sweet). Such expository shots—establishing shots of locales, signs, or other indices of location—can be attributed only to the omniscient narration, relatively self-conscious in its mounting of these images for our benefit. Usually, however, the film does not reinsert these images when later scenes return to the locale; the classical narrative cinema assumes that we will recall these earlier expository shots. For such reasons, we can best study the narration’s omniscience when the expository burden is heaviest: in the very first scene of the film.

The beginning of The Big Sleep might seem a paragon of the sober, “invisible” filmmaking for which Howard Hawk is famous, but scrutiny reveals a moderate self-consciousness and omniscience. A medium shot reveals a heavily carved door with the name “Sternwood”, the camera pans left to a hand pressing the doorbell. We are not shown the hand’s owner. A dissolve takes us into the foyer as a butler goes to answer the door. But he does not swing the door wide enough for us to see the caller. A voice says: “My name’s Marlowe. General Sternwood wanted to see me.” The butler ushers Marlowe in; the camera tracks with him as he looks around the foyer and encounters Carmen. The visual ubiquity (from outside to inside, anticipating Marlowe’s entrance) sets the knowledge limits of the film as a whole. The first two shots have also posited the narration as initially self-conscious, not only informing us where we are (via the sign) but delaying the revelation of our protagonist and creating a brief build-up of anticipation. Once Marlowe enters, however, the camera subordinates itself to his stride, and the degree of self-consciousness drops as the narration filters salient facts through his conversations with Carmen and the General. Within two shots, the narration glides smoothly into a restricted and comparatively communicative and self-conscious presentation.

Murder My Sweet opens in a more flamboyant fashion, but the principles are the same. Under the credits we crane down toward a table around which several men are seated. Eventually all we see is a dazzling patch of light on the table’s surface. After a dissolve, the camera tracks back from cracks about Marlowe. Soon the framing reveals policemen camera movements, the geometrical arrangement of the source) all mark out a narrational process addressed to the audience—opening gaps for the sake of intensifying curiosity, up a potential disparity between Marlowe’s knowledge of the (As the last scene will reveal, we haven’t seen everything
important either, but we will still be one jump ahead of him.) Only after Marlowe begins his tale and the camera tracks to the window as a transition to the flashback does our range of knowledge begin to approximate his. When the transition is over, we slide into as restricted a narrational state as we had enjoyed in The Big Sleep.

Both films, then, motivate the withholding of certain story information by restricting the narration to what the investigator learns. This restricted narration is framed and interrupted by an omniscient narration that asserts itself chiefly in expository passages and during moments of localized suspense. The alternation of restriction and omniscience and the variations in self-consciousness that result are characteristic of classical narrative cinema, but the degree of restriction is specific to the mystery genre.

The two films are also similar in their need to respect yet another generic convention, and this leads to an interesting problem of communicativeness. One convention of detective fiction since the 1920s has been the rule of "fair play," in which the reader has as good a chance to discover the solution as the detective does. But this raises a difficulty, which Dorothy Sayers explains in this way: "The reader must be given every clue—but he must not be told, surely, all the detective's deductions, lest he should see the solution too far ahead. . . . How can we at the same time show the reader everything and yet legitimately obscurate him as to its meaning?" Put in our terms, how is the author to motivate a particular lack of communicativeness in the narration? The solution which Sayers indicates involves a play between various degrees of depth in representing the detective. She shows how prose in detective fiction modulates between a "purely external" description; a "middle viewpoint" in which "we see what the detective sees but are not told what he observes"; a "close intimacy" in which we see all the detective sees, and he then states his inferences; and "a complete mental identification with the detective," in which we follow his thoughts without the need of external report. Through an analysis of a page from Trent's Last Case, Sayers shows that E. C. Bentley shifts three times among these different registers.

Despite the lack of close analogies between prose and cinema, suzhet/fabula patterning—Sternberg's "preverbal compositional constructs"—can be homologous across media. Like the novel, the detective film employs the generic convention whereby we are not allowed access to the detective's inferences until he or she voices them (unless—Sayers also reminds us—the detective is baffled or turns out to be wrong). The detective film will utilize a restricted narration to justify gaps in our knowledge of the crime fabula, and when the detective is in the dark, we will be too; but the narration will make sure that we do not become privy to the investigator's solution until he or she states it at the proper time.

Hiding the detective's thinking poses no problem in The Big Sleep, for here Marlowe is a closed mouth. Until very late in the film, he takes no confidants and trusts no one. The narration is wholly external, yielding no access to any conclusions he has drawn until he speaks his mind. When Marlowe goes into Geiger's bookshop and asks for certain rare editions, the clerk Agnes replies that she hasn't any of them. He does not expose her, but leaves (after a little more banter). Only later will we learn that her answer revealed to him that Geiger's business is a front. This is Sayer's "middle viewpoint" in action. Compare the film with the novel. Even before Agnes gives her reply, Marlowe shares his thoughts with us: "She didn't say: 'Huh?' but she wanted to." As soon as she answers, Marlowe draws a conclusion: "She knew about as much about rare books as I knew about handling a flea circus." Here the narration is much more internal, providing the "mental indentification" Sayers mentions. In the film, the narration need never supply direct access to Marlowe's mind, so we must often figure out the clues and also try to figure out what Marlowe makes of them. This process is nicely laid bare by the film itself. After Vivian has tried to pump him, the impassive Marlowe says: "You're trying to find out what your father hired me to find out and I'm trying to find out why you want to find out—" Vivian interrupts: "You could go on forever, couldn't you? Anyway, it'll give us something to talk about next time we meet."

Murder My Sweet offers a more complex case. Unlike The
"Who told you to sugar me off this case?" In Murder My Sweet, we are asked to wonder if Marlowe's interest in Mrs. Grayle is feigned for investigative purposes; this is another aspect of his character which the final blindfold test in the police station will reveal to Ann and to us. Restricting us to the detective's range of knowledge while limiting how internalized the narration will be affects our judgments about the detective's personality as the syuzhet takes its course.

Detective films illustrate one way that classical cinema has solved problems that every narrative must face. But these solutions are not the only ones available. We can examine how another genre motivates a different approach.

The Melodrama

It is a critical commonplace that film melodrama as a genre subordinates virtually everything to broad emotional impact. Translated into the theoretical categories Chapter 4 outlined, this is to say that the narration will be highly communicative about fabula information—specifically, information pertaining to characters' emotional states. There will be fewer focused gaps in fabula information. The narration will also be quite unrestricted in range, closer to an omniscient survey, so that the film can engender pity, irony, and other "dissociated" emotions. Whereas the detective story emphasizes the act of unearthing what already occurred, the melodrama typically relies on a firm primacy effect, plays down curiosity about the past, and maximizes our urge to know what will happen next—and, especially, how any given character will react to what has happened. Viewer interest is maintained by retardation and carefully timed coincidences that produce surprise. All of these narrative strategies can be seen at work in In This Our Life.

The cause-effect chain of the film's fabula centers on Stanley Timberlake, an impetuous and selfish young woman from a declining Southern family. Stanley seduces Peter, her sister Roy's husband; drives him to alcoholism and suicide; and then makes a play for Craig, the man she had spurned to run off with Peter. When Craig avoids her attentions, preferring Roy instead, Stanley drives off in a rage. Her car runs over a mother and her child. She testifies, however, that Parry, a family servant, is guilty. After Craig forces Stanley to tell the truth, Stanley flees the police in a reckless chase. Her car crashes and she is killed. I have skipped over many details and some characters, such as Asa, the saintly but ineffectual father; Lavinia, the neurasthenic mother; and Uncle William, a vest-popping toper who at one point implies that he would like to make his niece his mistress; but the general outline is clear enough. (My reader will also have to accept the fact that the principal women characters have male names.) Given that Stanley's actions propel the fabula (not to mention that she is played by Bette Davis), it may seem odd that the film's range of knowledge is not restricted to her. If The Big Sleep and Murder My Sweet enhance identification with a single character by limiting our information to what he could know, In This Our Life shuttles us from person to person; we "identify" less with a single character than with a presentation of the emerging situation as a whole.

The emotional expressiveness of the film issues partly from the narration's tendency to be omnicomunicative. For one thing, characters usually speak their minds. When Craig mopes after losing Stanley, he declares: "I don't believe in anything." Later Roy's emotional numbness is exposed: "I don't want to hear anything or feel anything." After Peter kills himself, Stanley breaks down in a fit of remorse bordering on hysteria. The "big scenes" of melodrama, full of soul-bearing histrionics, bear witness to the narration's desire to communicate "everything." All the expressive resources of mise-en-scène—gesture, lighting, setting, costume—work to convey inner states. Dressed in a sexy frock, Stanley declares she won't wear widow's black, stamping might be a slogan for the melodramatic character: "I'm fed up with pretending something I don't feel." When Roy and son to their intense but brief affair. And music, one of the communicates characters' perceptions and attitudes. It is espe-
ially identified with the two sisters, punctuating major discoveries and underlining intense passages.

To wring every emotional drop out of fabula situations, the narration employs omniscience. This procedure is established during the first extended sequence of the film. While the family sit at home waiting for Stanley, we cut to Stanley and Peter making plans to run off that night. The primacy effect works fully: all of Stanley's subsequent behavior will be measured against her traits displayed here. Stanley comes home, followed soon by Peter. We know something crucial that the family does not, and the narration dwells on Roy's ignorance and confusion about the true state of affairs (the better to build up pity for her). When Craig calls for Stanley, we understand her “headache” as a pretext to stay home and sneak out with Peter. It might seem that our knowledge is restricted to Stanley's were it not for all the behavior (Roy's attraction to Craig, Uncle William's decision to control Stanley through his power of the purse, and so forth) which we witness but which Stanley does not. Thus the film's first big scene yields a range of knowledge far beyond that available to any single character.

One interesting consequence of this is that subsequent scenes often consist of little more than various characters’ discovering what we already know. For instance, after Stanley and Peter have run off, the next scene shows Asa informing his in-laws, and the scene after that presents Roy's response. By shifting from one character to another and giving us a comparatively wide field of view, the narration multiplies opportunities for our anticipating characters' reactions. How, for example, will Stanley respond when Roy confronts her with her lies? A scene is devoted to working this out. (The high number of scenes devoted solely to the playing out of reactions would seem to be a convention not only of film melodrama but of television soap opera.)

Unrestricted knowledge, then, is created in several ways. Cutaways to action nearby, crosscutting different plot lines, following several characters from one locale to another—all expand the range of knowledge in In This Our Life. As in the detective films, the omniscience of narration tends to become more overt in transitional passages, with signs, musical cues, and establishing shots all contributing to a degree of self-consciousness. The score can anticipate what will occur, as when over a shot of Stanley's car the dependable Max Steiner supplies the strains of “Here Comes the Bride.” And the film as a whole can alternate lines of action, shifting us from a scene restricted to Stanley or Peter to one limited to Roy or Craig. Both specific film techniques and systematic principles of syuzhet presentation are used to enhance our range of knowledge.

An emphasis on omnipresent consciousness and omniscience does not imply that the film does not manipulate knowledge in as complicated a fashion as do Murder My Sweet and The Big Sleep. It is true that after the opening few scenes, very little of prior fabula information comes to light. (The sole instance involves Uncle William's confession to Stanley of how he bilked her father, which is not a major issue in the film.) The principal interest arises from the question of what will happen next. We have already seen that character reaction scenes are one case in point. The syuzhet also manipulates interest through unfocused temporal gaps. The melodrama's syuzhet will inform us of initiation of a chain of action and then skip over some time or move to another line of action; we will then wonder what happened in the interval. For example, after Stanley's hit-and-run, the scene ends abruptly. The next scene starts the following morning, when the police visit the family home. Only when the police reveal that they found the car abandoned do we get an answer to the question about what Stanley did after the accident. Another scene consists of a heated quarrel between Stanley and the drunken Peter. He slaps her, and the shot quickly fades out. We assume that the marriage will continue to deteriorate, but we see no more of it. Two sequences later we are told that Peter has killed himself. In general, the practice of parallel plotting retards the revelation of fabula information, compelling us to suspend questions about the progress of one line of action while another occupies our attention.

The detective film tends to presuppose a stable but concealed emotional nexus (A hates and kills B; but pretends that he did not hate or kill). The melodrama, however, assumes violent and overt changes of emotional attitudes.
When Peter leaves Roy, she vows to be "hard"; yet she later softens through love for Craig. Craig’s loss of Stanley temporarily makes him cynical, but through Roy’s love he recovers his old idealism. Even the apparently inflexible Stanley seems overcome by Peter’s suicide. Another source of melodrama's typical syntagm pattern is thus what we normally call character change; we try to anticipate how an event will alter a character’s conduct. This inverts what a commonsensical account of viewing might lead us to posit. It is not that the world of the melodramatic film contains volatile characters which the narration faithfully records. Rather, if the viewer is to execute the inferential moves conventional in the genre, character behavior must trace an emotional zigzag. From a rhetorical standpoint, the characters’ volatility is a structural necessity for the genre’s narrational processes and effects.

There is one other way that the film maintains the forward course of its fabula despite being omniscient and highly communicative. Most commentators on the melodrama, in both theater and film, have observed the central role played by coincidence. As Daniel Gerould, paraphrasing the Russian critic Sergei Balukhtiy, puts it: “At those moments when separate phases of (the syuzhet) are united, ‘chance’ plays a key role as a cohesive element, combining and cross-cutting lines of action and intrigue and producing sharp dramatic situations... Thus ‘chance’ allows for new, unexpected plot twists.” Coincidence retains our interest in the unfolding syuzhet. Roy happens to encounter Craig in the park, a meeting which rehabilitates him and triggers their romance. At the moment Roy and Craig agree to marry, Asa tells them that Peter is dead. The evening that Stanley is out to pursue Craig, a mother and her little girl step in front of her car. And the night that Stanley begs Uncle William for help is also the night he has just learned that he has only six months to live. We get an overall knowledge of such events when they occur (cutaways to Asa in the house getting a phone call, crosscut shots of mother and child stepping into a street, a portentous composition showing the doctor’s bag, etc.), but we could never have predicted the occurrence of these events, or at least their occurrence at a particular moment. Coincidence in the melodrama serves one purpose of the investigation in the detective film: both provide generically conventional occasions for surprise.

Against the background of a general unrestrictedness and omnipresence, any sharp restrictions or suppressions stand out. In In This Our Life, these elements remain isolated moments, briefly intensifying our emotional investment. For instance, Peter angrily abandons Stanley at a bar and we follow him home. When he arrives, he—and we—discover that she is there ahead of him, waiting in a negligee; her tantrum in the bar was solely a lesson in who is boss. (This is a good example of successive hypothesis forming; one hypothesis simply replaces another.) At another point, Craig’s plan to make Stanley confess to the hit-and-run accident is temporarily kept from us. But again, it gets quickly revealed. On the whole, restricted and suppressed knowledge cannot come to the fore without reducing our anticipation of those misalliances and fatal misunderstandings so central to the genre.

If I have said little about the depth of information available, it is because In This Our Life explains the characters’ feelings squarely through speech, behavior, and other aspects of mise-en-scene. Other melodramas of the 1940s go deeper into characters’ mental states: Possessed, for example, presents visual and acoustic hallucinations of the protagonist. The degree of internal information presented seems to vary within the genre, the basic demand being exposure of the critical emotional processes. Stanley’s hysteria at Peter’s death might have been rendered more subjectively than it is. This genre has no inherent need to suppress aspects of the protagonist’s mental life, as in the detective film’s “middle-viewpoint” convention. By the same token, the narration’s degree of self-consciousness is not stipulated by genre. One could argue that certain patterns of staging—very frontal playing, the habit of making a scene end with a somewhat stylized reaction by Stanley, or the unusual angling of certain sets—all enhance the film’s self-consciousness. So does the typically overwrought score. The “stylization” commonly remarked in melodrama stems from
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a considerable narrational self-consciousness allied to a high degree of communicativeness, especially about emotional conditions and effects. A shot like figure 5.2, in which the table at which the couple will sit stands waiting for them in the foreground, signals a recognition of what would be the audience's best view.

The Big Sleep, Murder My Sweet, and In This Our Life by no means exhaust the narrational options of genre-bound filmmaking, but perhaps two conclusions can be drawn from my brief analyses. First, the basic narrational properties are fulfilled through both syuzhet construction and stylistic embodiment—everything from gaps and retardation to figure movement and music from the construction of space (e.g., Carino firing into the car in The Big Sleep) to the arrangement of temporal order (e.g., the flashback in Murder My Sweet). All film techniques, then, can function narratively. Secondly, transnarrative motivation is a strong factor in determining a film's narrational options. All films exploit disparities between fabula and syuzhet, but different genres do so in different ways. We should not expect any film to adhere to a single pitch of knowledge or self-consciousness or communicativeness. There will be shifts between omniscience and restriction, greater and lesser self-consciousness, more or less suppressive narration. It is the patterns and purposes of these shifts that become conventionalized. In the mystery film, the shifts promote that emphasis upon curiosity characteristic of the genre; the melodrama's insistence upon communicativeness justifies shifts that reveal a range of emotional experience. Each film operates, in its own way and with its own devices and systems, within a frame of reference codified by past practice. This will become evident again in Part 3, when we consider several conventional modes of narration.

Other theoretical regions still want exploring, however. This chapter and the previous one have concentrated on basic fabula/syuzhet strategies and overall narrational qualities. I have not done sufficient justice to the ways in which film style can serve narrational purposes. As a medium, cinema is particularly suitable for supporting the syuzhet's manipulation of time and space.