

The Golden Age of Cinema

Hollywood, 1929–1945

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noir, just as he would be unable to prevent the erosion of his beloved Production Code in the post-war years. The period of PCA hegemony in Hollywood was drawing to an end.

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Narrative and Style

When moviegoers settled into theater seats during the Classical Period, the lights would dim and a company logo would flash up on the screen. It is doubtful these spectators paid much attention to the fact that the roaring lion meant they were about to see an MGM film or the beeping radio tower revealed the movie came from RKO or a stylized depiction of the Statue of Liberty indicated it was a Columbia product. Rather, these logos, plus the music or sound effects that accompanied them, subtly announced that the patrons were about to be transported to a very special world where a cinematic story would unfold before them. The logo prepared them to be entertained, possibly even enthralled, by a screen story.

Hollywood movies are vehicles for the presentation of stories. In the earliest days of the cinema as a commercial enterprise, producers came to realize that audiences preferred films that contained a story, not just pleasing images, and they set about developing the most effective techniques to tell stories in a visual fashion. Through trial-and-error methods, they created a cinematic "language" which conveyed narrative events effectively and could be readily understood by the full range of audience members. Although this "language" was, in fact, quite varied and complex, it functioned both to deliver narrative information in a clear, concise and dramatically effective fashion and to engage viewers actively in the on-screen happenings. Indeed, studio executives and their creative employees were convinced that good screen storytelling would immerse spectators so completely in the plot of the movie that they would never think about the totally constructed and artificial nature of the experience.

The storytelling principles mobilized to create screen entertainments were distilled from centuries of drama and literature and then reformulated to meet the requirements of the feature film. This meant that each story had to be told completely in a time frame that usually lasted between 60 and 125 minutes. Because of the necessity of fitting tales that often covered much longer periods of time into such a compact temporal "box," the members of the production

team would take scripts crafted by studio screenwriters and translate them into stylistic techniques that, they hoped, would transfer the story to the screen in a captivating manner. A good movie meant a good story told in seamless fashion.

This chapter will investigate the narrative strategies and stylistic techniques employed to fashion the Hollywood movies of the period – strategies and techniques developed during the silent era and then modified and augmented during the early years of sound. Following this discussion, the film *Stagecoach* (Wanger/United Artists, 1939) will be analyzed from both perspectives in order to illustrate and further elucidate the storytelling principles and stylistic elements of the Classical Period.

Narrative Strategies

The “world” of the film

One useful way to think about the narrative strategies employed by producers, directors and screenwriters is to recognize that their principal function is to create special “worlds” in which interesting stories could be told. These worlds might bear a strong resemblance to the real world that human beings inhabit on Planet Earth. In fact, the makers of many films worked hard to convince customers that their stories were realistic depictions of human experience. But despite this veneer of authenticity, all films produced in Hollywood were totally fabricated and fictional. They imposed artificial dramatic or comedic structures on their stories, employed actors to impersonate characters who were often very different from themselves, manipulated time and space in ways that defied the laws of physics, usually relied on extramundane music to heighten the impact of their narratives and featured individuals who communicated in the English language whether they were supposed to live in ancient Rome, eighteenth-century France or contemporary China. Thus, the world of each movie had its own special qualities and internal logic which its makers fashioned so that audience members not only could comprehend it readily, but also would embrace its elements, especially its characters.

The quest for order

Most Classical narratives were tales of providential order. Either before or near the beginning, one or more events transpire that throws the world of the film

into disorder. In gangster films like *Little Caesar* (Warner Bros, 1931), a dangerous criminal is on the loose, menacing society which cannot be safe until he is brought to justice or killed. In an adventure film like *The Mark of Zorro* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1940), a just and humane leader is replaced by an egocentric tyrant, throwing the local area into chaos. For order to be restored, this tyrant must be overthrown and the proper leader returned to his position of authority. In a screwball comedy like *The Awful Truth* (Columbia, 1937), the marriage of two lovely and well-matched young people comes apart, leading to a series of tumultuous experiences until the main characters return to their senses, reunite and agree to settle down together again. In a horror film like *Frankenstein* (Universal, 1931), a scientist's monomaniacal quest to create life spawns a monster who brings death and destruction to the local community before its villagers apparently destroy the “thing.” In a musical like *Swing Time* (RKO, 1936), a series of mistakes and misunderstandings cause a man and a woman who are “made for each other” to nearly marry the wrong mates. But, just in time, they see things clearly and dance off together in the end.

As always, there are exceptions. The Marx Brothers comedies made in the early 1930s at Paramount, such as *Horse Feathers* (1932) and *Duck Soup* (1933), are surrealistic declarations of the fatuous nature of modern life. As such, they lionize the verbal non sequitur and the visual incongruity. Disorder reigns from beginning to end in these films. Indeed, one of the reasons the Paramount Marx Brothers efforts still stand out today was the decision by their makers to work against the accepted narrative and stylistic norms of the period. (Figure 5.1)

Manipulation of time

The presentations of these Hollywood allegories of order are not hampered by any significant temporal restrictions. Though the running time of features was fixed at plus or minus 90 minutes, each story could encompass days, or months, or even years. By making sure audience members always knew approximately when the action was taking place (through such devices as superimpositions, intertitles, montages, dialogue, make-up, costumes, etc.), filmmakers were free to manipulate time in a variety of ways. Usually, this meant condensing time by focusing only on the most important narrative “moments” and omitting all material that did not have a direct bearing on the development of the tale. *The Conquerors* (RKO, 1932), for example, is an episodic story that begins in 1873 and concludes in the early 1930s, encompassing several economic crises, World War I and numerous familial triumphs and tragedies – all conveyed to the audience in 84 minutes of screen time.



Figure 5.1 The anarchic Marx Brothers (left to right, Chico, Zeppo, Groucho and Harpo) in *Duck Soup* (Paramount, 1933). Courtesy of the USC Cinema-Television Library.

Although this happened less frequently, filmmakers could also elongate time, causing the on-screen action to take place over a longer period than might have been the case if the actions had occurred in real life. Parallel action (the juxtaposing of two or more scenes that are supposed to be taking place simultaneously), pioneered by D.W. Griffith, was employed in many westerns and other genre films to increase the excitement of a climactic scene. A good example may be found near the end of *Union Pacific* (Paramount, 1939). Two men (Joel McCrea and Robert Preston) and a woman (Barbara Stanwyck), holed up in a wrecked railroad car, fight a seemingly hopeless battle against a band of Indians. But intercut with their last stand are shots of a train full of soldiers roaring through a fiery trap set by another group of Indians and arriving just in time to save the three principal characters. Similarly, such filmmakers as Alfred Hitchcock would “stretch” time to increase the suspense of a scene like the Statue of Liberty finale of *Saboteur* (Universal, 1942) in which hero Robert Cummings tries to save villain Norman Lloyd from plunging to his death.

Omniscient point of view

Another important feature of the special worlds created in American cinema was their presentation from an omniscient point of view. Though there are exceptions, most filmed stories originating in Hollywood were told from a “god’s eye” narrative perspective. This enabled the audience to experience what is happening to a number of different characters at different times and in different locations, rather than confining them to the point of view of one of the characters. In *Anthony Adverse* (Warner Bros., 1936), the eponymous hero is a founding raised by nuns who, after growing up, attempts to find out about his lineage. Several of the other characters know who his parents were and the audience does as well, having been introduced to his mother and father in the early section of the movie. But Anthony never learns the secret nor, for that matter, does he discover that the man who has been his employer for many years is actually his grandfather.

Occasional films were produced that contained a more limited point of view. Among these were tales told by a single narrator. But, at least until the end of the period when a new kind of narrator emerged in film noir (see below), films of this sort do not maintain a consistent narrative point of view. For example, *The Power and the Glory* (Fox, 1933) and *How Green Was My Valley* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1941) both contain narrators who are not present during a number of the events they describe. Even *Citizen Kane* (RKO, 1941), one of the most intricate narrative experiments to emerge during the period, contains shots that eschew the limited perspectives of the film’s several narrators. In other words, audience members see things that no particular character in the film is seeing. Among these reversions to the omniscient point of view are the film’s famous concluding shots of the burning sled, “Rosebud.”

Characterization

One can detect the pattern of order–disorder–order, plus the manipulation of time and the omniscient point of view operating in the narratives of nearly all American films during the Classical Period, but it would be a reductive oversimplification to boil their cinematic stories down to just these three characteristics. The studios offered a wide variety of stories and each one presented narrative challenges that had to be overcome. Anecdotes from Hollywood insiders offer plenty of evidence of how difficult it was to fashion an exciting popular movie. *Gone with the Wind* (Selznick/MGM, 1939) required the efforts of more than a dozen screenwriters before an acceptable script was

produced, and the precise resolution of *Casablanca* (Warner Bros., 1942) was so in doubt that its writers were still laboring deep into the actual shooting to determine how to wrap up the story.

Nevertheless, there are principles of characterization and structure that governed most screen stories produced during the 1930s and 1940s. Because these principles were viewed as necessary prerequisites to a successful film by studio production heads, as well as producers, screenwriters and directors, their works often did seem to be predictably formulaic. However, there were exceptions and deviations from the norm, as we will see.

With respect to characterization, Hollywood films were constructed around a protagonist, or main character. While there might be other characters of nearly equal importance, one individual tended to be the focal point of the drama or comedy. This person did not necessarily have to be sympathetic – e.g., Tony Camonte in *Scarface* (Caddo/United Artists, 1932) or Regina Giddens in *The Little Foxes* (Goldwyn/RKO, 1941) – but he or she did have to be charismatic. In most instances, the protagonist was a sympathetic, often heroic, force in the story. In addition, this person would usually be an active rather than passive character – someone who instigated the action instead of allowing others to determine his or her fate.

Even in “ensemble” films containing several important characters and plot lines, such as *Grand Hotel* (MGM, 1932) and *Dinner at Eight* (MGM, 1933), one individual would usually emerge as the protagonist. In *Grand Hotel*, this person is the Baron, played by John Barrymore. Although he is killed shortly before the film ends, his actions strongly affect the lives of all the other important characters.

The main character usually “grows” or “changes” in important ways during the course of the narrative. The events presented in the story bring a kind of maturation or enlightenment to the individual which shapes his or her actions in the concluding section of the film. In *Dark Victory* (Warner Bros., 1939), Judith Traherne, played by Bette Davis, is a spoiled, frivolous narcissist in the early scenes. But the onset of a terminal cancer and her love for and eventual marriage to a doctor (George Brent) who attempts to cure her, transform Judith into a mature, responsible and caring woman able to face death with courage and dignity. Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) in *Casablanca* is a cynical, apolitical saloon keeper unmoved by the devastating effects of the World War on the lives of many of the people who surround him. But a series of interactions with the other characters, including the woman he loves, provoke a change in Rick; at the end, he relinquishes his hold on this woman (Ingrid Bergman) in order to further the Allied cause, shoots a German officer and becomes a “patriot” who

evidently will continue to fight against the Nazis. It should be noted that there are important exceptions to this emphasis on character growth and change. For example, the protagonists in “B” films like the “Charlie Chan,” “Hopalong Cassidy” and “Torchy Blane” pictures remain essentially the same throughout the run of each series.

Another important character is the antagonist – an individual determined to frustrate the goals of the protagonist. This individual may be a positive, respectable figure such as Flaherty (Thomas Jackson), the sarcastic policeman who labors to bring Rico to justice in *Little Caesar*. He will kill the gangster at the end. But, in most cases, the antagonist is an evil presence, dangerous not only to the main character but to others as well. In *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror* (Universal, 1942), Holmes (Basil Rathbone) matches wits with the mysterious “Voice of Terror” whose radio broadcasts are frightening the British public and undermining their efforts to defeat the Nazis. A worthy antagonist to the brilliant Holmes, the “Voice” turns out to be a master spy, a trusted member of the British Intelligence Inner Council named Sir Evan Barham (Reginald Denny). Aided by a woman (Evelyn Ankers) whose husband has been murdered by the Nazis, Holmes unmasks the villain who is killed when he attempts to escape.

A great many films contain romance as a crucial ingredient. Consequently, the romantic partner of the protagonist is generally a major character who sometimes also functions as the chief antagonist, especially in comedies. In certain instances, the duo are so well-matched that it is difficult to determine who the main character actually is. In *Bringing Up Baby* (RKO, 1938), Susan Vance (Katharine Hepburn) would seem to be the protagonist since she initiates all the action. But Dr. David Huxley (Cary Grant), the initially passive young man she bedevils, is the one who finally changes, tossing aside his repressed fiancée and his stuffy scientific pursuits for a roller coaster life of adventure with Susan. The fact that David changes and that Susan represents the antagonistic force throughout much of the narrative, causing him to endure a series of humiliating and ultimately dangerous experiences, indicates that David Huxley is the actual protagonist of the picture. In most cases, however, the protagonist will be clearly defined. This is true even in films in which romance is an essential element. In *The Thin Man* (MGM, 1934), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Warner Bros., 1937) and *Ball of Fire* (Goldwyn/RKO, 1941), the protagonist is the male half of the romantic couple. In *Back Street* (Universal, 1932), *The Palm Beach Story* (Paramount, 1942) and *Cover Girl* (Columbia, 1944), the protagonist is the female half.

Stories told in Hollywood movies always require a number of supporting

characters. These characters may be interesting and distinctive individuals, but their position in the narrative is secondary and functional with respect to the development of the plot. They may be helpful to the protagonist (friends, sidekicks, admirers) or they may be in league with the antagonist and represent impediments the main character must overcome. Sometimes, they pop up simply to provide information that moves the story forward. In a film like *The Letter* (Warner Bros., 1940), there are a small number of supporting characters but some of them are extremely important to the story's development. In others, such as *Wilson* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1944), a screen biography of the 28th President of the US, the supporting cast is huge, though only a few of these characters have a major impact on the narrative.

Like the protagonist and other major characters, the secondary characters may also grow and change as the story unfolds. But such changes are usually triggered by their relationship with the protagonist or another major character. In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Columbia, 1936), hard-boiled press agent Cornelius Cobb (Lionel Stander) jettisons his sarcastic façade and becomes a sympathetic supporter of the gospel of common sense and generosity espoused by Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper). In *Crime School* (Warner Bros., 1939), a gang of young toughs sent to a reformatory are rehabilitated and directed toward productive lives by enlightened government official Mark Braden (Humphrey Bogart). And in *The Shop Around the Corner* (MGM, 1940), the clerk Pirovitch (Felix Bressart) is so upset when the film's protagonist (James Stewart) is fired that he challenges the boss, telling him, in effect, that he has made a terrible mistake. Up to this point in the story, Pirovitch has been so terrified of Mr. Matuschek (Frank Morgan) that he would go into hiding whenever the head man asked for an opinion.

The actions of characters in Hollywood movies are supposed to be clearly motivated. They are expected to make sense, based on the character's values, beliefs, attitudes, psychological make-up and goals. Thus, even when a character's decision may seem, on the surface, to be crazy or contrary, the audience is usually given enough information to comprehend (and appreciate) his or her motivation. Longfellow Deeds in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, for example, may appear insane for deciding to give away most of the \$25 million fortune he has inherited, but the theatergoers understand why he decides to do so; the money has messed up his formerly happy and stable life. And when Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Stella Dallas* (Goldwyn/United Artists, 1937) pushes her beloved daughter away from her, we understand why she pretends not to care about her anymore; she wants Laurel (Anne Shirley) to enjoy a better life among the privileged class, a social set that Stella could never be part of.

Occasionally, the reasons why an important character acts in a certain way are withheld from the audience, creating a tension that will be released later in the narrative. In *Destry Rides Again* (Universal, 1939), the new deputy sheriff of Bottleneck (James Stewart) refuses to wear a gun, making him the local laughingstock. Eventually, the audience will learn why he has such an antipathy to guns and appreciate the magnitude of his decision when he chooses to strap them on.

Similarly, a pleasing dramatic or comedic tension can be created when an individual acts "out of character." In this instance the audience understands the motivation, but other characters in the story do not. In *Queen Christina* (MGM, 1934), Don Antonio (John Gilbert), a dashing Spanish envoy to the throne of Sweden, finds himself snowbound in a mountain inn where all the rooms are occupied. There he meets and befriends a handsome and aristocratic young man, eventually asking if he may share the fellow's room for the night. The young man instead insists that the Don take his room, which the envoy interprets as polite but somewhat insulting. Eventually the young man relents and agrees to spend the night with the Don. This sets up two very powerful surprises. For what the audience knows, but the Don does not, is that the young man is actually a beautiful woman (Greta Garbo) who also happens to be the Queen of Sweden. Another example occurs in *The Awful Truth* when Lucy Warriner (Irene Dunne), posing as her husband's sister, feigns drunkenness and behaves outrageously. The humor in this very funny scene is heightened by the audience's recognition that her act is just a ploy to prevent the breakup of her marriage. With the exception of her husband (Cary Grant), the characters who witness her exhibitionistic behavior do not understand it and are deeply offended, which is precisely what Lucy hoped their reaction would be.

Structure

A Hollywood film that lacked interesting characters whose behavior was convincingly motivated was doomed to failure. Similarly, a film in which the elements of the plot were not organized according to certain dramatic principles first enunciated, in part, by the Greek philosopher Aristotle was unlikely to engage an audience. Hollywood motion pictures employed an organizational structure designed to involve spectators in the on-screen events and to elicit emotional responses based on their characters and plot developments. Indeed, the studio heads felt that it was crucial to affect the customers emotionally – to scare them, thrill them, stir them, make them feel giddy, make them laugh or cry. If patrons were totally unmoved by their visit to the theater,

they almost certainly left it feeling they had not been properly entertained, had not gotten their money's worth.

Introduced in the early scenes of each film would be an obligatory structural element of Hollywood storytelling: conflict. Without conflict, there could be no drama or comedy. Without conflict, there could be no audience interest or involvement. Indeed, screenwriting manuals from the period constantly advise budding writers to devise a structure in which order is thrown into disorder via conflict.

The most obvious conflicts would pit one character against another or one group of characters against another. In *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, Robin (Errol Flynn) and his band of outlaws oppose Prince John (Claude Rains) and the supporters of his Norman regime. Personal conflict is equally ubiquitous and important in comedies. In *Holiday* (Columbia, 1938), for example, free spirits Johnny (Cary Grant) and Linda (Katharine Hepburn) gravitate toward each other as their opposition grows to Linda's status- and money-fixated sister (Doris Nolan) and father (Henry Kolker).

Though all Hollywood movies included individualized conflicts, many also contained a variety of other, more generalized conflicts. Some examples: conflicts between humans and the natural world (*The Big Trail*, Fox, 1931), between humans and the law (*I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, Warner Bros., 1932), between humans and machines (*Modern Times*, Chaplin/United Artists, 1936), between humans and society (*You Only Live Once*, Wanger/United Artists, 1937), between humans and tyranny (*Hitler's Children*, RKO, 1943).

It was also not unusual for internal conflicts to become crucial to a screen story. These conflicts create doubts in a character's mind about an important decision or action. In *Camille* (MGM, 1937), French courtesan Marguerite Gautier (Greta Garbo) struggles to resolve an internal conflict concerning her relationship with her true love Armand Duval (Robert Taylor). After deciding that his life will be irreparably harmed if their affair continues, she makes the anguished decision to sever the relationship and return to a rich baron who was formerly her "keeper."

While all films contain multiple conflicts, some of these conflicts go through a reversal process as the stories develop. In *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, Robin is initially involved in physical conflict with both Little John (Alan Hale) and Friar Tuck (Eugene Palette), but their disagreements are quickly reversed and both men join Robin's band of outlaws. The conflict between Robin and Maid Marian (Olivia de Havilland) who initially sides with her uncle, Prince John, and Sir Guy of Gisbourne (Basil Rathbone) against the men of Sherwood Forest, takes longer to reverse. Eventually, she recognizes the honorable nature

of Robin's actions, falls in love with him and helps him to achieve his goals. This particular reversal – in which future lovers are, at first, antagonistic toward one another – is quite common in comedies, musicals and other genres as well.

Hollywood stories always had a beginning, a middle and an ending. The screenwriter's job was to write scenes that propelled the story forward in dynamic fashion, increasing the audience's interest and involvement in the tale as it unfolded. Some of these scenes might be very short, lasting only seconds, while others might take 30 minutes or more of screen time.

A filmed story typically was told in chronological sequence. Whether its duration was only a few hours or covered many years, the plot would develop in A-B-C-D fashion with section A preceding section B, section B preceding section C and section C preceding section D in a straightforward linear progression. The major exception to this structural principle was the introduction of one or more flashbacks into the narrative. Audiences were quite comfortable with this device despite the fact that it disrupted the normal continuity, transporting them backwards in time. Flashbacks usually functioned to help explain relationships, behavior and the motivations of the characters, and thus helped to clarify the story for the spectator. Flashbacks in *Casablanca* and *Laura* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1944), for example, add immeasurably to the dramatic impact and, as previously mentioned, *How Green Was My Valley* was, essentially, one extended flashback. Even in a film like *The Power and the Glory*, in which the multiple flashbacks are not chronologically sequential, screenwriter Preston Sturges was careful to make certain that audience members were always clear about where and when the action was occurring. Since the story recounts the life of one man – railroad tycoon Tom Garner (Spencer Tracy) – and each flashback is related by a single narrator, Garner's friend and associate Henry (Ralph Morgan), the jigsaw puzzle of a story may be easily pieced together by the audience.

Three-act organization

The writer of a film organized its scenes into larger units which roughly corresponded to the acts of a play. The plots of most films made during this time could be divided neatly into three acts.

The first act would introduce the principal characters and contain all the expository material. It would quickly establish the world in which the story was set, pinpointing the time and place and identifying the salient personal and psychological traits of the characters. Very quickly, the audience would begin to comprehend the motivations for their actions and, most importantly,

the key conflicts would be "locked" into place. These conflicts would drive the narrative forward. By the end of the first act, the audience should be keenly aware of what is at stake in the story and have a rooting interest in the efforts of the main character to accomplish his or her goals.

In the second act, additional conflicts would be introduced and the lives of the characters would become more complicated and unstable. In this section of "rising action," the audience should become fully invested emotionally in the difficulties of their favorite characters who are often forced to cope with a series of frustrations and reversals of fortune which make it seem they will never achieve the desired outcome. It was normal for the protagonist and/or other characters to begin to change and show growth in this section.

The third act completed the process of personal growth in the characters, some of whom view life very differently at the end of the story than they did at the beginning. Though generally the shortest of the three sections, it also contained a climax, or series of climaxes, in which the major conflicts are resolved and the key characters fulfill their destinies. When the final climax occurred, the story was essentially over, but there might be some loose ends involving other characters or plot strands that must be tied up so that the audience can depart feeling that a state of order and equilibrium has returned to the imaginary world they have visited. If this is the case, a short "denouement" section would be included to "wrap up" these matters before "THE END" flashes up on the screen. In Classical Period movies, the ending was usually a happy one – though there may be surprises along the way, most films provided closure in a manner that patrons appreciated and found reassuring.

Stylistic Techniques

Hollywood filmmakers favored a stylistic approach that would animate the scripts assigned to them. For most, the myriad techniques at their disposal were simply a means to an end; these techniques were useful insofar as they could be deployed to tell the story in a way that audiences would deem entertaining. Dazzling stylistic effects were always possible, but if these effects did not help to put the story across effectively, they could be a hindrance to the overall goal.

Motion picture style is the sum total of staging (including acting, costuming, make-up and art direction), cinematography (including special effects), editing, and sound (including musical scoring). Taken together these components determine the look of a film, the rhythm of a film, the tone of a film, the ambiance of a film and, ultimately, the impact of a film. The studios employed

an army of experts, organized along departmental lines, in these specialty areas. Their work would be overseen by directors and producers with a knowledge of how all the elements should fit together. The departments worked together collaboratively, and many different individuals made important creative contributions to each project.

Ironically, their contributions were not supposed to be noticed by the spectators. Rather, they were intended to appear so integral to the story that patrons would leave theaters talking about the "great" film they had just witnessed – not about the bravura acting, the spectacular production design, the exquisite lighting, the dynamic editing or the impassioned musical score. In fact, the intricacies of the filmmaking process in Hollywood were, to a large extent, concealed from the public during this period so as not to spoil the "magic" of the viewing experience. Like the famous wizard who lives in Oz, Hollywood's creative talent operated behind an opaque curtain that hid their bag of tricks, making their work seem spontaneous and effortless.

Staging

Staging included acting, make-up, costuming and art direction. All were important but acting took precedence.

The preferred acting style of the period was naturalistic. Though many performers, such as Janet Gaynor and Greta Garbo, made the transition from silent to sound films, the emphasis on facial expressions, body language and stylized gestures which characterized performance in the former era gave way to a more straightforward approach that placed a premium on an actor's ability to deliver dialogue in a convincing and expressive manner. This is not to suggest that the subtleties of silent film acting were abandoned. While the more histrionic aspects of silent performance quickly became unfashionable, the best actors, whether trained in silent acting techniques or not, used their bodies and, especially, their faces to communicate with audiences in ways that were subtle but strikingly effective.

Because of their expert ability with spoken dialogue, many actors made the move from Broadway to Hollywood during this period. Those who became successful quickly learned to act "for the camera," toning down a performance style necessary to reach patrons sitting in the back rows of large "live theater" houses. With the assistance of directors and studio acting teachers, they developed a character-driven approach which enabled them to play a wide variety of parts convincingly. Stanislavsky's "method" acting had an impact on American theater during the 1930s, but its influence in Hollywood was not significant

until after the end of World War II. Nevertheless, the work of Spencer Tracy, Fredric March, Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis, Paul Muni, Katharine Hepburn, Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Edward G. Robinson, Henry Fonda, James Cagney, Olivia de Havilland, Humphrey Bogart, Orson Welles, James Stewart, Greer Garson and Walter Huston, among others, has stood the test of time. Even though most of these actors had no training in the "method," they still managed to create some of the most memorable characters in film history.

An actor's ability to deliver a good performance was abetted by the work of studio costumers and make-up experts. These individuals designed the characters' clothes and transformed actors' physical features to fit the requirements of their roles. For example, the wardrobe created by costume designers Adrien and Gile Steele and the make-up devised by Jack Dawn were critical in establishing the ambiance of Victorian England and making the transformations between the protagonist (Spencer Tracy) and his doppelgänger both frightening and believable in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (MGM, 1941).

Superior art direction, which determined the look of the sets and exterior environments in which a film's action took place, was another essential aspect of the style of every film. For example, art director Van Nest Polglase, working with associate Carroll Clark and set dresser Thomas Little, produced a dazzling re-creation of Venice which helped to free the musical *Top Hat* (RKO, 1935) from the realm of the ordinary and point it in the direction of the sublime. An opposite approach was adopted by art directors Hans Dreier and Bernard Herzbrun and interior decorator A.E. Freudeman on *Make Way for Tomorrow* (Paramount, 1937). To make certain that the problems of an aging couple (Victor Moore and Beulah Bondi) were taken seriously, Dreier, Herzbrun and Freudeman grounded the story in environments that were simple and mundane, thereby heightening the authenticity of the drama.

The art direction and costume design of many movies from the Classical Period were influenced by the intertwined art nouveau, art moderne and streamline moderne styles (now generally lumped together under the rubric "art deco") in architecture, decor, costuming and graphics. A film like *My Man Godfrey* (Universal, 1936) is a kind of time capsule showcasing these contemporary styles in everything from Charles D. Hall's sparkling art direction to Travis Banton's resplendent gowns.

Cinematography

The director of photography (cinematographer, an all-male fraternity during this period) was responsible for capturing the images that would eventually

flicker across the movie screens of the world. An expert on lighting, framing, lenses, film stocks and the development process, among other things, he approached every shot with the understanding that there were many different ways to execute it. He and the director were expected to make the most fitting choice.

Among the questions that a cinematographer would ponder: should the shot be still or contain movement (panning, tracking, tilting, swooping, zooming)? Should the camera be a substantial distance from the subject (long-shot), or positioned closer (medium-shot) or be placed snug to the subject (close-up)? What angle should the shot employ – low, eye-level, high above the subject or some other position? What lens should be used – a wide-angle (typically less than 35 mm) which produced a "fish-eye" effect but facilitated greater depth in the image, a normal (35–50 mm) which most closely simulated the optics of the human eye, or a telephoto (over 50 mm, usually 75 mm in Hollywood features) which magnified objects in the distance but tended to produce a flattened image? What lighting approach should be employed – high-key which meant that everything in the shot would be brightly and evenly illuminated with minimal shadows, or low-key which produced extreme contrasts between light and dark and evocative shadow effects? (Most lighting fell somewhere in between these two extremes.) How much backlighting and/or spotlighting should be employed? How should the shot be framed? Should the composition be balanced or unbalanced? Would the shot employ any special effects, such as matte paintings, or miniatures or process photography?

Most importantly, every director of photography was expected to make certain his imagery was in focus and consistent in its lighting and, with the director's guidance, provided adequate coverage of every scene so that the editor would have ample footage to assemble the story into a seamless and coherent whole.

One of the most interesting stylistic evolutions that occurred during this period was the cinematographic movement from a soft pictorial style to a sharp-edged approach. The soft style, which was popular during the silent era, used various methods (including Vaseline-smear plates placed in front of the camera lens) to create fuzzy, impressionistic images with shallow depth of field that were felt to "beautify" the production. This approach was almost always employed for close-ups of the prominent actresses, but numerous silent filmmakers also strived for and achieved a consistent soft look throughout their films.

Though the soft style became less prominent during the sound era, a moderate amount of diffusion is still apparent in many 1930s films. Backgrounds

were often rendered in soft focus so that actors would stand out against them. Additionally, the images of women were generally softer than those of men. In *It Happened One Night* (Columbia, 1934), director Frank Capra and cinematographer Joseph Walker consistently photographed Ellie (Claudette Colbert) more softly than her romantic counterpart Peter (Clark Gable). They even risked destroying the audience's engagement with the story and characters by including a heavily gauzed, practically indistinct close-up of Ellie just before she finally confesses that she loves Peter and wants to share his adventures with him. The amount of diffusion in the shot was so extreme that it called attention to the technique.

In 1938, Eastman Kodak introduced its Plus X film stock. This faster film was quickly embraced as the industry standard and it, along with other superior emulsions from Agfa, Du Pont and Kodak, plus the introduction of better lighting units and lenses, paved the way for a major change in cinematographic style. While the preference for the fuzzy look did not give way immediately, a growing partiality for imagery that was distinct and hard-edged and for compositions in depth became discernible. Director Orson Welles and cinematographer Gregg Toland demonstrated the extraordinary expressive potential of this approach in *Citizen Kane* and, within a short time, many Hollywood filmmakers had embraced their deep-focus style. Two byproducts of this change were an increasing interest in "realistic" images and a growing fondness for the incorporation of long takes into cinematic narratives. Even though the soft style did not totally disappear – e.g., diffuse imagery is employed quite effectively in the "transformation" section of *The Enchanted Cottage* (RKO, 1945) – it is considered somewhat antique by the end of the period.

Editing

Hollywood editors were crucial members of the storytelling team, and there are many tales of films being "saved" by clever editorial manipulations. Like the cinematographers, they also had innumerable decisions to make concerning shot selection, pacing, the duration of each shot, how each scene could be best constructed from the available footage, which transitional devices should be used to move from one scene to the next or to indicate a passage of time, etc.

Editors were experts in "continuity cutting." They understood how to build a feature film so that it seemed to be a continuous, uninterrupted flow of images and sounds that told a story in a comprehensible and compelling fashion. In fact, there was nothing continuous or "flowing" about the process at all – every film was composed of hundreds of different shots, taken from many points of

view and stitched together to create constantly changing, multiple perspectives that bear no relationship whatsoever to the normal perceptual experience of human beings. Yet editors understood that if they followed certain principles which audience members had come to accept and expect – the principles of continuity editing – movie fans would not notice the bumpy, discontinuous nature of the process. Those principles included respect for the 180-degree axis (the camera shots remain on one side of the action in order to maintain consistent screen direction from shot to shot); the 30-degree rule (camera position must change at least 30 degrees from shot to shot to avoid a jarring jump cut); the pattern of shot/reverse shot (crosscuts, mainly used in scenes of conversation and often framed over the shoulders of the different characters); eyeline matching (a cut from a person looking off-screen to a shot of what the person sees); parallel editing (shots from different locations cut together in such a way that the audience understands the actions are taking place simultaneously); cutting on action or at appropriate moments in the dialogue (to "mask" or camouflage the cuts); and the use of dissolves, fades, wipes, montages or intertitles to mark important transitions and to keep the spectator always comfortably grounded within the story.

The editing process contained infinite opportunities for confusing audiences and/or calling attention to the completely synthetic nature of moviemaking. But the work of skillful Hollywood editors, such as Margaret Booth (*Mutiny on the Bounty*, MGM, 1935), Ralph Dawson (*The Adventures of Robin Hood*, Hal C. Kern [*Rebecca*, Selznick/United Artists, 1940], Robert Wise [*Citizen Kane*], Daniel Mandell [*Pride of the Yankees*, Goldwyn/RKO, 1942], Barbara McLean [*Wilson*] and George Amy [*Objective, Burma!*, Warner Bros., 1945], surmounted the potential trouble. They were masters at cementing shots together in ways that caused audiences to become completely absorbed in the filmed story, noticing nothing except what was happening to the characters on the screen.

Sound

The recording of dialogue on the set was one of the primary functions of the sound experts who labored on studio movies. But even more important was the creative sound work that took place during post-production. Just as each film's visual information was constructed by the editor, each film's sound track was assembled by members of the sound crew who were expected to deliver a myriad of sound effects – everything from the creaking doors of a "haunted" house (*The Cat and the Canary*, Paramount, 1939) to the "spitting" of a tommy

gun (*Scarface*) to the windy fury of a catastrophic storm (*The Hurricane*, Goldwyn/United Artists, 1937) to the fantastical roars of two giant beasts engaged in deadly combat (*King Kong*, RKO, 1933). Sounds could be manipulated in any number of ways. They could be louder or softer than they would be in the real world or have a different pitch or timbre, or even be "subjective" (the audience hears what a character is thinking inside his or her head), but they had to seem "right" – appropriately modulated and "in synch" with the action and dialogue.

Working closely with each film's sound team would be the composer of the musical score. Early in the sound era, films typically contained little or no underscoring, but this began to change around 1932. After that, the "A" films would usually feature a score performed by a full orchestra, and this score would underpin most of the scenes in the picture. The score had several functions, including magnification of the emotional quotient of scenes, setting and maintaining a mood and propelling the story forward rhythmically. Scoring was a special art and such respected film composers as Max Steiner (*Gone with the Wind*), Alfred Newman (*The Grapes of Wrath*, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1940), Erich Wolfgang Korngold (*The Adventures of Robin Hood*), Miklos Rozsa (*Double Indemnity*, Paramount, 1944) and Dimitri Tiomkin (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Columbia, 1939) added immeasurably to the impact of many of the most beloved films of the era.

After picture editing was complete and the dialogue, sound effects and musical score were finished, all the different auditory elements would be combined in a final sound mix. This painstaking job brought the post-production process to an end and, barring additional changes that might be deemed necessary after the movie was previewed, meant that a new filmed story was ready for acceptance or rejection by the public.

A "romantic" style

The foregoing description of the elements of the Classical Style makes no attempt to define the overriding stylistic approach of the era. Perhaps the best word to describe this approach is "romantic," referencing the broadest meaning of the term.

Sustaining the narrative inclinations of Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s, which favored stories in which courage, sacrifice, benevolence, justice, freedom, optimism, individualism and, above all else, love were figured as sacrosanct qualities, the prevailing style deftly amplified the triumphs of the human spirit. The principal actors and actresses were costumed, made up and photographed

to emphasize their beauty and physical perfection, their aspirations were presented as noble and important but nearly impossible to achieve and the usually positive outcome of their struggles pointed toward a utopian world in which all things great and good were possible. Of course, one can name any number of important films (e.g., *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, *You Only Live Once*, *Citizen Kane*, various examples of film noir) that directly challenged the romantic mythology of the period. But the majority of Hollywood filmmakers fervently embraced this "larger than life" approach, employing a style that magnified the idealistic nature of their stories.

Narrative in Stagecoach

In order to demonstrate how these principles were typically deployed in Classical Hollywood Cinema, let us take a detailed look at the famous western, *Stagecoach*. This 1939 film, adapted to the screen by Dudley Nichols from a short story by Ernest Haycox and produced by Walter Wanger, was atypical in that it contained more major characters than most other films and, thus, was propelled forward by a dizzying array of conflicts. Nonetheless, like *Grand Hotel*, *Dinner at Eight*, *Week-end at the Waldorf* (MGM, 1945) and other "omnibus" narratives, it conformed nicely to the storytelling principles that have been discussed so far in this chapter. To begin, we will synopsise the story according to its three-act structure.

Act I

The world of this story is the old west, some time after the end of the American Civil War. It begins in Tonto, in the Arizona Territory, where members of the military learn that the dangerous renegade Geronimo has jumped the reservation and gathered his Apache brethren to wage all-out war against the white interlopers.

The stagecoach arrives and we meet Lucy Mallory, a pregnant southern gentlewoman determined to find her husband who is serving in the cavalry. Taking special notice of her is a gambler named Hatfield. The driver of the stage, a nervous, garrulous fellow named Buck, stops by the marshal's office to find out who will be riding shotgun with him on the rest of his journey. Curley, the marshal, informs Buck that the Ringo Kid has broken out of the penitentiary and will undoubtedly be determined to get even with the Plummer brothers who were responsible for his incarceration. When Buck tells Curley

that Luke Plummer is in Lordsburg, the final destination of the stagecoach, Curley decides to take over the shotgun position himself.

Meanwhile, the town banker, Gatewood, accepts and signs a receipt for a local payroll that totals \$50,000. Gatewood's wife and a number of the town's other female citizens are, at the same time, escorting a prostitute named Dallas to the stagecoach. They do not want undesirables like Dallas corrupting their town. Dallas is soon joined by Doc Boone, a physician whose fondness for the bottle has caused his practice to decline to a point where he cannot pay his rent. He, too, will decide to leave Tonto via the stage. Doc stops by the saloon for one last drink. There he meets Mr. Peacock, a lamblike whiskey drummer who arrived on the coach and plans to continue his journey aboard it.

Just before the stage departs, troops ride up and warn the passengers about the Apache threat. All of them decide to proceed with the dangerous journey, although Mr. Peacock is shamed into continuing by Doc who intends to take full advantage of the drummer's whiskey samples along the way. Learning of the danger, Hatfield joins the group with the clear though unstated intention of protecting Mrs. Mallory. The passengers are relieved to learn that the soldiers will follow the stage to its first stop, Dry Fork, where another contingent of soldiers should be available to protect them on the remainder of their journey.

On the outskirts of town, the banker Gatewood hails the coach, claiming that he just received a message ordering him to come to Lordsburg. Curley wonders about this, since the soldiers had told him that the Indians had cut the telegraph wires. In fact, Gatewood received no telegram; he has decided to steal the payroll money and is attempting to flee the territory.

Farther out in the wilderness, the stage comes upon the Ringo Kid whose horse has broken down. He is immediately arrested by Curley and joins the other passengers inside the coach. As they continue, Curley and Buck talk and it is clear both think Ringo is a "fine boy," despite his outlaw status. Inside the coach, Doc and Hatfield, who were on opposite sides in the Civil War, spar verbally, and it is revealed that Ringo's brother was killed by the Plummers.

At the first stop, Dry Fork, the passengers find no troops to accompany them on the remainder of the journey. The other soldiers have orders to return and cannot be of further assistance, despite the outraged entreaties of banker Gatewood. Ignoring the danger, the occupants of the stage vote to keep going despite the objections of Peacock and Buck. During lunch, Mrs. Mallory, Hatfield and Gatewood snub Dallas and Ringo by moving away so they won't have to eat with them.

They depart Dry Fork with the cavalry taking the road back to Tonto and the stagecoach the road to Lordsburg.

Act II

Curley and Buck continue to discuss the conflict between Ringo and the Plummers. It turns out that the Plummers are pure evil and are causing lots of problems in the territory. Nevertheless, Curley does not want Ringo to get into a skirmish with them because he feels certain the kid will be killed. The safest place for Ringo, he believes, is back in the pen. Inside the coach, Mr. Peacock is unable to stop Doc from swigging his liquor. Mrs. Mallory's health is clearly declining, yet she won't accept any help from Dallas.

They arrive at the next rest stop, Apache Wells, where a Mexican named Chris and his Apache wife are in charge. Not only are there no troops there, but Chris tells Mrs. Mallory that he believes her husband might have been badly injured in a confrontation with the hostiles. Again, Dallas offers to help Lucy Mallory but is rebuffed. Soon afterward, Mrs. Mallory faints. Dallas immediately orders hot water, and the drunken doctor is called upon to minister to her. Doc drinks plenty of coffee, sobers up and prepares to deliver Mrs. Mallory's baby. Dallas will assist while the men remain in another room.

After the baby girl is born and Mrs. Mallory is on the road to recovery, the relationship between Dallas and Ringo ripens from friendship into love. Eventually, Ringo proposes and Dallas agrees to meet him at his ranch across the border if he will escape from Curley and forgo his quest for revenge against the Plummers.

Meanwhile, Gatewood pressures the others to depart immediately, but Doc tells him that Mrs. Mallory is not strong enough to travel. Now Hatfield sides with the Doc, who has renewed his love affair with the bottle, and so do the others.

Ringo decides to make a break and Curley chases after him, despite Dallas' efforts to impede the marshal. But Ringo spots something that causes him to stop – smoke signals that confirm the Indian menace. Despite Mrs. Mallory's condition, it is too dangerous to remain. Leaving Chris behind, they board the stagecoach and head toward Lordsburg.

Act III

On board the coach, the passengers are understandably scared and fractious. Gatewood, in particular, has become increasingly difficult and mean-spirited. He insults several of his fellow travelers. Peacock asks them all to have "a little Christian charity – one for the other."

The next stop is Lee's Ferry, a burned-out encampment where, once again,

there is no sign of any soldiers. But there are signs of a massacre, including a dead woman whom Hatfield covers with his coat. Because the ferry has been destroyed, the men tie huge logs to the coach and float it across the river. The characters then resume their journey toward Lordsburg.

Just as the passengers begin to relax, the Indians attack. Peacock is shot in the arm by an arrow and Buck is also shot as the coach attempts to outrace the Indian ponies. The cowardly Gatewood tries to jump out of the coach, forcing Doc to punch the banker which knocks him out. Curley and Ringo shoot several of the Indians and Ringo jumps on the horses and guides the coach after Buck is disabled. Still, the chance of escape looks very dim when the men run out of ammunition. Hatfield saves one bullet and is about to use it on Mrs. Mallory (not wanting her to fall into the Indians' hands) when he is shot. As Mrs. Mallory prays, the sound of bugles is heard and the cavalry arrive, rout the Indians and save the stagecoach. However, the passengers' jubilation is tempered by the death of Hatfield.

In Lordsburg, Mrs. Mallory learns that her husband is all right. After Dallas returns her baby, the gentlewoman looks up at the prostitute she had formerly shunned and says, "If there is ever anything I can do for you . . ." Peacock is also okay. While being carted off on a stretcher, he invites Dallas to visit him and his family in Kansas City, Kansas.

Word quickly spreads through Lordsburg that the Ringo Kid is in town. It reaches Luke Plummer in a saloon where he is playing cards.

Back at the stagecoach, Gatewood is arrested by the local sheriff for stealing the payroll. It seems the telegraph was repaired before he made it to Lordsburg. Ringo has three bullets left. Surprisingly, Curley allows Ringo to walk away with Dallas, knowing that Ringo will find the Plummers and engage them in a gunfight. But before this happens, Dallas takes Ringo on a short tour of the red-light district to make sure that he comprehends what she has been. Ringo understands but indicates that he still wants to marry her.

By now, Luke Plummer has summoned his two brothers and they nervously prepare to face Ringo. Luke orders the bartender to give him a shotgun for the confrontation but before he can leave with it, Doc tells him he will have Luke indicted for murder if he uses the gun against Ringo. Luke angrily gives up the weapon.

The local newspaper editor prepares a headline announcing Ringo's demise, but Ringo prevails in the shoot-out, apparently killing all three of the Plummers.

Returning to Dallas, Ringo is soon joined by Curley and Doc who drive up in a buckboard. They invite the two lovers to "ride a ways" and Ringo, believing he's headed back to prison, says his goodbyes to Dallas. But Curley and Doc

surprise them, shooting the horses and sending Ringo and Dallas off into the night, headed toward freedom. Though he hasn't followed the letter of the law, the marshal seems quite pleased with his decision to let Ringo go and offers to buy Doc a drink. "Just one," Doc replies.

Three-act structure

The plot of *Stagecoach* is divided neatly into three acts. In the first act, all the important characters are introduced and given distinctive personalities, the two major conflicts that will propel the story forward are established (see below), and a number of other minor conflicts are "locked" into place. In addition, the expository information necessary for an audience to understand the story is provided. We quickly gather that *Stagecoach* will take place in the wild west at a time when newcomers (mostly with European roots) are endeavoring to build a safe environment in which to raise their families and prosper. We also understand that this project won't be easy because there exist antagonistic forces (represented principally by the Indians and the Plummer brothers) who oppose their goals. They are the main destabilizing forces in the story; until the Indians and heinous individuals like the Plummers are overcome, there will be no peace or order in this new land.

In the second act, the lives of the characters become more complicated and their situation more perilous. The outlaw and the prostitute fall in love, the doctor overcomes his alcoholism and ministers to Mrs. Mallory whose baby is born, the Indian threat to the undefended coach increases and a number of other conflicts are introduced, heightening the tension for characters and audience alike. The action is definitely building toward a crescendo.

The third act includes two major climaxes and a number of smaller ones which resolve all the conflicts that have been developing. These events bring closure and a sense of order to the story and suggest that there is hope for the civilizing efforts of the white settlers.

Conflicts and climaxes

Screenwriter Dudley Nichols injected so many conflicts into *Stagecoach* that it would be numbing to attempt to isolate and discuss each one. However, I will point out several of them, beginning with the two overriding conflicts mentioned above. Each of these conflicts will be resolved in a major third-act climax:

1. The white settlers vs. the Indians – the film opens with the information that Geronimo has provoked the Apache tribe to go on the warpath. Though Geronimo never becomes a fully developed character, he and his fellows represent a powerful, destructive force that menaces the passengers of the stagecoach throughout their journey. This conflict is resolved during the climactic Indian attack in which the Indians are defeated, though Buck and Peacock are wounded and Hatfield is killed.
2. Ringo vs. the Plummers – we also learn, early in the film, about the bad blood between Ringo and the Plummer brothers. Soon enough the audience meets Ringo and discerns that the comments made by Curley and Buck about him are accurate: he is a “fine boy,” not a despicable outlaw. The despicable character is Luke Plummer. As Buck says, “There’d be a lot more peace in the territory if that Luke Plummer was so full of lead he couldn’t hold his liquor.” We are made to understand that this new land will not be a safe and stable place until Luke and his brothers are no longer a threat. Therefore, Ringo’s quest represents something more than simple revenge. The climactic gun battle which resolves this conflict, just like the victory over the Indians, helps to bring peace and order to the territory. Thus, both of the major conflicts and the climaxes which resolve them relate directly to the overriding theme of the western genre during this period: the carving of a vibrant new civilization out of the wilderness. (See chapter 6.)

While a great deal of the film’s energy and tension are fueled by these overriding conflicts, we should also briefly survey some of the other conflicts that contribute to the dramatic impact of the story:

1. Mr. Peacock vs. Doc who is intent on draining all Peacock’s whiskey samples.
2. Hatfield vs. Doc – a complicated conflict that initially arises out of their respective allegiances to the South and the North in the Civil War.
3. The conflict between the passengers who want to continue on to Lordsburg (most of them) and those who want to return to Tonto (Buck and Peacock).
4. The class conflict between the “aristocratic” citizens (Mrs. Mallory, Hatfield, Gatewood) and the “dregs” (Ringo, Dallas, Doc).
5. The conflict between Ringo and Dallas concerning his possible escape or continuation on to Lordsburg to face the Plummers.
6. The conflict between the hypocritical and disagreeable Gatewood and the soldiers.
7. The conflicts between Gatewood and several of his fellow passengers over a variety of topics.

In addition to these personalized conflicts, the film also contains such general conflicts as:

1. The passengers of the stagecoach vs. nature – the smallness and vulnerability of the coach in the vast, forbidding landscape is emphasized and, in the final section, the men must devise a way to get the coach across the river when they find the ferry has been destroyed.
2. Gatewood vs. the law – though the other passengers are unaware that he has stolen the payroll, the audience knows what he has done and hopes for the banker’s arrest.
3. Dallas vs. society – her “expulsion” from Tonto early in the film is based on societal notions of her undesirability and carried out by the “respectable” women of the town. Doc is also branded as an undesirable because of his alcoholism and both, along with Ringo, are stigmatized during the journey (see 4 above).
4. Doc vs. the bottle – though Doc Boon’s alcoholism is presented in a comic light throughout much of the story, it is clear that his performance and reputation as a physician have suffered because of it. However, at a crucial point in the story, Doc is able to sober up and successfully deliver Mrs. Mallory’s baby.

Finally, the film contains several notable internal conflicts as well:

1. Hatfield’s tortured soul – while the audience is never given enough information to fully understand the gambler’s personal demons, there are enough clues to suggest that they relate directly to the defeat of the South in the Civil War, to his relationship with his father and to his current vocation as a “notorious gambler.” For Hatfield, the trip to Lordsburg seems to be a journey of redemption. His selfless protection of Mrs. Mallory helps restore his pride, and he appears to die contented.
2. Dallas’ past life – after she and Ringo fall in love, she wrestles with the question of whether to let him know about her life as a prostitute or hide it from him. Despite her fear that she will lose him, Dallas shows Ringo where she “comes from” in Lordsburg and he accepts her anyway.
3. Curley’s duty – it is Curley’s duty as a peace officer to send Ringo back to the pen. But he is torn internally by the knowledge that Ringo should never have been imprisoned in the first place. Curley finally decides to follow his own ethical compass rather than the abstract one required by the law, setting Ringo free so he and Dallas can start a new life together.

The question of what will become of Ringo and Dallas, which Curley determines, is the only unresolved strand of the plot after the second major climax (the shoot-out). It occurs during the final "denouement" section of the film. When the two lovers take off for Ringo's ranch "across the border," all the conflicts have been resolved, order has been achieved and the film can end. The audience leaves the theater with a satisfied sense of closure – no loose ends or nagging questions remain.

Characterization

Because of its "omnibus" approach, *Stagecoach* contains more major characters than most Hollywood movies. Indeed, it could be argued that all the passengers on the coach are major characters, though some are less important (Peacock, Buck, Hatfield, Gatewood, Mrs. Mallory) than others (Ringo, Dallas, Curley, Doc). The salient point is that each of these characters is interesting, adroitly developed and skillfully integrated into the plot.

It is difficult to determine who the protagonist is in this film, but a strong argument could be made for Ringo. He plays a crucial part in both of the major conflicts/climaxes. His bravery helps to save the passengers during the Indian attack and his shoot-out with the Plummers eliminates a destructive presence in the territory. Even though he seems not to change as much as some of the other characters, he sets an example which helps elevate the behavior of several of them.

A number of the others do grow and change. Dallas goes from outcast and prostitute to selfless nurse and loving bride-to-be; Hatfield from cynical gambler to chivalrous protector; Mrs. Mallory from snobbish aristocrat to tolerant appreciator of those less fortunate than she. The film also contains several reversals, such as Mrs. Mallory's ultimate recognition of the innate nobility of Dallas, Hatfield's newfound respect for Doc Boone after Doc delivers the baby and Curley's decisions to allow Ringo to fight the Plummers and then to go free rather than back to prison. In addition, a sly ironic reversal occurs when Peacock, the whiskey salesman who has been repeatedly mistaken for a clergyman by his fellow passengers, finally seems to accept the role, entreating the others to have "a little Christian charity – one for the other."

With respect to motivation, the actions of the characters all seem clear and plausible. No one in the film does anything that strikes us as strange or out of character. Even when the others don't understand why an individual acts as he or she does, the audience is privy to the reasons. The motivation for Gatewood's bullying insistence that they push on to Lordsburg as quickly as

possible may be obscure to his fellows, but we know why he is in such a hurry. The filmmakers even provide enough hints about the mysterious Hatfield's background to enable a moviegoer to view the gambler's behavior as consistent and motivated.

The film contains only a few minor characters because so much of its time is given over to the major figures. These secondary parts would include the lieutenant who leads the first contingent of cavalry, Gatewood's wife, Doc's landlady in Tonto, a few Tonto and Lordsburg women who know Lucy Mallory, several bartenders, Chris, Chris' wife and the sheriff in Lordsburg. Each has a function within the plot but none could be described as a developed character. The rest of the large cast is composed of extras, most of them dwellers of Tonto or Lordsburg or members of Geronimo's raiding party.

Time, chronology, point of view

Little need be said about time, chronology or point of view. By concentrating on the most important and dramatic events, the story, which appears to cover about two days in the lives of the characters, is effectively told in 96 minutes of screen time. Its chronology is straightforward and sequential with some parallel action but no flashbacks. And it maintains an omniscient point of view throughout most of its telling.

Summary

Stagecoach provides an excellent illustration of Hollywood's Classical approach to narrative. But before we move ahead to a discussion of the stylistic techniques employed by the filmmakers to bring depth, texture and vividness to the road map provided by the screenwriter and producer, it seems important to pause for a moment in order to underline one important point: the narrative strategies elucidated thus far were neither monolithic, nor inflexible, nor prescriptive. Many Hollywood films, among them some of the most popular and critically esteemed of the period, did not conform perfectly to the Classical narrative formula, just as many violated the rules of the Classical style which we will now begin to investigate. Herewith, a few examples of plot resolutions that disregard expectations, rupturing the usual patterns of closure: even though the formerly blind girl (Virginia Cherrill) in *City Lights* (Chaplin/United Artists, 1931) finally recognizes that her benefactor is the little tramp, the ending leaves the audience "hanging," offering no suggestion that these characters will ever develop a relationship of any kind; despite the conspicuous

dramatic requirement (reinforced by the Hollywood censors) that evildoers must be punished, the villain Rupert of Hentzau (Douglas Fairbanks Jr.) escapes unfettered at the end of *The Prisoner of Zenda* (Selznick/United Artists, 1937); instead of settling down together to rebuild their lives like Dallas and Ringo, Rhett Butler abandons Scarlett O'Hara near the finale of *Gone with the Wind*; and no last-minute rescue takes place to prevent the lynching of three innocent men in *The Ox-Bow Incident* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1943). Shockingly, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* contains no closure at all. At the end, the innocent protagonist (Paul Muni) is still a fugitive fleeing from the authorities. While paying a quick visit to the fiancée (Helen Vinson) he will probably never be allowed to wed, he is asked, "How do you live?" Retreating into the darkness, he replies, "I steal," and the film is over.

Style in *Stagecoach*

The style of *Stagecoach* is carefully calibrated to deliver the story to movie audiences in humorous, dramatic and "romantic" fashion. Director John Ford and his collaborators adhere to the accepted norms of Classical filmmaking throughout much of the film, but they are not afraid to make "mistakes" or break the "rules." Rather than attempt to provide a scene-by-scene analysis, it seems best to isolate the different components of the style and discuss them in the context of the overall production.

Staging: acting

Stagecoach is a well-cast film. It contains a number of recognizable western "types" such as the rugged hero, the whore with a heart of gold, the shifty gambler, the thoughtful marshal, the gentlewoman from the east, the drunkard, etc., and the actors chosen to play the parts were well-suited physically to their roles. But with Ford's help, most of these actors were able to elevate their characters beyond standard western stereotypes. One of the reasons this film continues to be highly regarded more than 60 years after it was released is the quality of the performances.

The acting of the main characters ranges from the the boisterous (Andy Devine as Buck) and the blustery (Berton Churchill as Gatewood) to the emotionally restrained (Louise Platt as Lucy Mallory) and introspective (John Carradine as Hatfield). The performances of the two leads are particularly impressive. John Wayne brings precisely the right combination of strength and



Figure 5.2 Louise Platt (left) as Mrs. Mallory, John Carradine as Hatfield and Claire Trevor as Dallas in *Stagecoach* (produced by Walter Wanger for United Artists, 1939). Courtesy of the USC Cinema-Television Library.

forcefulness plus naiveté and mannerliness to the role of the Ringo Kid. And Claire Trevor's impersonation of Dallas communicates, often without words, the pain and humiliation she endures when the "respectable" characters ostracize her, as well as the mental anguish she feels while struggling to decide whether to tell Ringo about her past. (Figure 5.2)

Some of the other performances contain satisfying surprises. The aptly named Donald Meek is perfect for the role of Peacock, a man so unassuming that his fellow passengers never get his name straight. But we also know Peacock has five children; thus, when he "shushes" the other men, telling them to be quiet out of respect for the infant and Mrs. Mallory, his newfound assertiveness seems both motivated and a pleasant surprise. Likewise, Curley's decision to release Ringo rather than return him to prison may be unexpected but seems "right" because George Bancroft's acting has conveyed his fondness for the boy and sympathy for his plight from the very beginning of the picture. Finally, Doc Boone's transformation from bombastic dipsomaniac to capable physician is believable since,

even in his most inebriated state, Doc's education and intelligence are apparent. Thomas Mitchell won an Academy Award for this performance.

Only in the supporting characters does true stereotyping exist. Chris Martin, for example, is unable to bring any depth to Chris, the overseer of the station at Apache Wells. His buffoonish mangling of the English language and low spirits brought on by the loss of his horse (not his wife who runs away with the horse) are typical of the Mexican characters one finds in many lesser westerns of the period. Geronimo and his Apache warriors are not characterized at all. They are simply the stereotypic savages menacing the progress of white civilization on the frontier. We do spend a bit of time with Luke Plummer and his brothers, but we don't discover anything about them either. They are standard-issue bad men whose extermination is necessary to make towns like Lordsburg safe.

In sum, the naturalistic acting in *Stagecoach* is one of the movie's strengths, adding to the feeling of verisimilitude which the filmmakers wish to convey. Most of the performers flesh out their characters in ways that make them more interesting, attractive and affecting, and their ensemble efforts add weight and shading to the narrative.

Staging: costume, make-up, art direction

The costumes by Walter Plunkett and make-up (uncredited) contribute to the personas of the characters and the performances of the actors. One of the most obvious examples of this can be seen in a comparison of the two main female characters. Mrs. Mallory wears attractive, understated clothing befitting her aristocratic upbringing and status as the wife of an army officer. Her make-up is subdued. Dallas' costume, on the other hand, is much more colorful and flamboyant. Her clothes, combined with the heavy, "painted lady" quality of her make-up, make it quite clear why the female members of the Law and Order League force her to leave Tonto. Interestingly, it is Ringo's inability to read the cues provided by Dallas' clothing and make-up that let the audience know how innocent and pure of heart he is. Ringo truly is still a "kid." (Figure 5.3)

Ringo's costume and make-up help to convey his adolescent nature as well. Although John Wayne was in his early 30s when *Stagecoach* was shot, he is made to appear at least 10 years younger. His clothing shows off his height and rawboned physicality and, from his white hat down to his suspenders and boots, accentuates the fact that he will be the true hero of the tale. Likewise, the clothing and make-up help to reinforce the character traits of each of the other characters, e.g., Peacock's business attire which makes him look like a minister;



Figure 5.3 Claire Trevor as Dallas and John Wayne as the Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* (produced by Walter Wanger for United Artists, 1939). Courtesy of the USC Cinema-Television Library.

Doc's shabby outfit and disheveled appearance; Hatfield's natty gambler's duds and well-manicured features.

The art direction contributes to the verisimilitude. Two of the most important interiors are the way stations at Dry Fork and Apache Wells. These interiors were planned and executed by art director Alexander Toluboff and his associate Wiard B. Ihnen in the southwestern style with adobe or stucco walls, period furniture and other simple props. Comparing the two, one notes that the Apache Wells set seems less spacious and open than the station at Dry Fork. Since there is considerably more tension and drama in the scenes that take place in Apache Wells, the claustrophobic feeling conveyed by the art direction (and the lighting) helps to reinforce the growing sense of danger that all the characters are feeling at that point in the story. It should be noted that ceilings are rare in Hollywood films from this period since interior sets generally were left open to facilitate lighting. Audiences never noticed the absence because of careful framing by the director of photography. In *Stagecoach*, however, ceilings are visible in numerous scenes, increasing the naturalism of

the environments and, in the case of the Apache Wells interiors, exacerbating the sense of confinement.

Cinematography

The cinematography by Bert Glennon, as overseen by director Ford who had one of the best "eyes" in Hollywood, accomplishes several different goals. First, it smoothly integrates footage shot in Monument Valley and other locations, exterior footage shot at one of the studio's "western town" sets, footage shot on exterior sets within the studio, footage shot on interior sets inside the studio, and special effects footage shot against a process screen inside the studio – all sufficiently consistent that it could be edited together without the audience realizing that there was an ongoing disconnect between the images photographed in such disparate locations and ways.

Second, the footage includes magnificent long-shots, such as images of the tiny stage dwarfed by the immensity and remoteness of the wilderness. These images not only visually communicate the human beings vs. nature conflict and the vulnerable position which the characters are in, they also use the extraordinary rock monoliths of Monument Valley to create dynamic compositions which magnify the mythic qualities of the story. In case one misses the point that this saga is intended to take on meaning that transcends its component parts, Ford and Glennon's presentation of landscape, most especially the otherworldly topography of Monument Valley which had not been widely seen in films before *Stagecoach*, separates it from other contemporary westerns and raises the film into a special category. (See Figure 5.4)

Most of the story is told in medium-shots that are carefully balanced compositionally. They typically feature the most important characters in the foreground and center of the frame. When a composition becomes unbalanced, the usual response is to cut away quickly, reframe the image, or move the actors around so that a better composition results. A prime example of the latter solution occurs in the saloon in Lordsburg after Luke Plummer's brothers join him. At the beginning of the shot Luke is on the far left side of the frame with his brothers standing at the bar next to him. The composition is unbalanced with too much visual information on the left side and a sizable gap on the right. For no discernible reason (other than to make the composition more balanced), Luke suddenly walks behind his brothers and repositions himself at the bar, filling in the dead space in the composition.

The film features fewer close-ups than long- or medium-shots. They are saved for intense moments in the narrative, such as the developing love relationship



Figure 5.4 The stagecoach ferries its passengers through the beautiful but dangerous Monument Valley in *Stagecoach* (produced by Walter Wanger for United Artists, 1939). Courtesy of the USC Cinema-Television Library.

between Ringo and Dallas. Their growing affection is partially communicated to the audience in shot/reverse-shot sequences featuring close-ups of the two faces. Other examples of the film's use of dramatic close-ups include the shot of Mrs. Mallory praying as Hatfield prepares to shoot her in the head and the shot of Doc as he stands up to Luke Plummer, preventing Luke from arming himself with a shotgun for the shoot-out with Ringo.

From the standpoint of pictorial style, this film was ahead of its time in its preference for sharp focus and numerous compositions in depth. Ford and Glennon will often position characters close to the camera, characters in middle depth and characters in the background of a shot. While these individuals are not all in perfect focus, the effect is quite close to the deep focus style of the 1940s. A good example of this may be seen in the Dry Fork section. At the lunch table, just before Hatfield, Mrs. Mallory and Gatewood move away from Dallas and Ringo, there is a shot of Lucy Mallory sitting close to the camera on the right side of the frame with Hatfield standing to her left and slightly behind

her, Gatewood positioned in the middle distance on the left side and Doc and Billy in the left middle background at the bar. While the focus is sharpest on Mrs. Mallory, all the characters are in relatively distinct focus. Orson Welles claimed that he learned everything he needed to know about making movies from watching *Stagecoach*, and the influence on *Citizen Kane* seems quite apparent in Ford and Glennon's efforts to bring greater depth to the images of their western.

Even though the pictorial style looks forward rather than backward, the filmmakers do not completely abandon "softness" in their imagery. In the last half of the movie, they use more diffusion in photographing the women than the men. This is particularly true of Dallas; as her generosity, essential goodness and love for Ringo become more and more evident, her image grows a bit softer. It's almost as if the camera is changing its opinion of her, just as Mrs. Mallory does.

In an approach that parallels the judicious use of the close-up, Ford and Glennon move their camera when necessary but do not overdo this technique. There are several outstanding examples of camera movement, such as the far-shot looking down on the stage in Monument Valley which then pans left and up to reveal the Indians about to attack, as well as numerous shots from a moving camera car as the Indians chase the coach. But the most spectacular camera movement in the film is the forward tracking shot which introduces John Wayne as the Ringo Kid. Beginning with a medium-shot and quickly moving in to a close-up of Ringo's face, this famous shot provides a striking contrast to the simple, non-theatrical introductions of the other characters and lets the audience know immediately that this young fellow is going to be a very important character. The use of sound adds to the impact of this shot, as I will point out in a subsequent section.

Finally, Glennon's approach to lighting evolves gradually from light to dark. The initial scenes in Tonto are shot primarily in high-key with bright illumination and little in the way of shadows. As the stagecoach proceeds, a mid-key look predominates which includes some shadow effects but favors even illumination. This changes at Apache Wells where numerous low-key shots are included in both the evening and morning images. The low-key look will culminate in Lordsburg during Ringo's "tour" of the red-light district with Dallas and his subsequent shoot-out with the Plummers. This shift does not seem accidental or arbitrary. As the pressure builds in the story, the lighting becomes more stylized and dramatic. One obvious example occurs during the introduction of Luke Plummer. He is playing poker in the Lordsburg saloon when he hears that Ringo is in town. Preparing to dispatch one of his amigos to fetch

his brothers, Luke stands up and his upper torso is suddenly so obscured by shadows that we cannot even see his face. We don't really need to know that Ringo's antagonist drew aces and eights in his final hand; the lighting tells us that Luke Plummer is a "dead man walking."

Editing

John Ford was known for "cutting in the camera." Unlike most directors, he typically shot a minimum amount of footage, thus guaranteeing that the film would be put together, during the post-production process, as he envisioned it. Nevertheless, producer Walter Wanger employed three people, Otto Lovering, Dorothy Spencer and (uncredited) Walter Reynolds to edit *Stagecoach*. In all likelihood, they worked on different sections in order to finish the film as rapidly as possible. For the most part, their work conforms to the principles of Hollywood continuity editing, though they and their superiors were not afraid to junk those principles when they felt it necessary.

The most glaring example of this is the abandonment of respect for the 180-degree axis during the Indian attack scene. This chase scene includes numerous cuts from a camera position on one side of the stagecoach to a position on the opposite side. This causes screen direction to become completely jumbled, making the coach appear to move right to left in one shot and then left to right in the next. It is, of course, possible to make this kind of transition smoothly if a neutral shot (from in front of the coach as it proceeds toward the camera, for example) is used to bridge the cut, but the editors generally don't bother with the bridge. They (and probably Ford) seem to believe that the excitement of the scene and the rapidity of the cutting style used to heighten that excitement will carry the customers along without causing them to become confused or disconnected from the story.

This particular editing "mistake" has been mentioned in numerous film history books. What is not often noted is that other examples of the filmmakers' disdain for the 180-degree axis occur earlier in the film. For example, back in Tonto when the passengers first board the coach there is a shot of Dallas getting in and sitting on the right side and as far from the camera as she can get. This is followed by a shot from the other side wherein she appears to be sitting on the left side closest to the camera. Screen direction is so jumbled throughout the remainder of this scene that it is practically impossible to figure out the geographical relationships of the characters to each other by the time they have all entered the coach. But, again, the editors evidently feel the audience will never notice these continuity "bumps" because they will be so engrossed in the story.

Two other interesting "violations" occur in the initial scenes featuring Gatewood. In this case, the editors include two odd but purposeful jump cuts. In the first scene, we are introduced to Gatewood in his office at the bank. After the men who have brought in the payroll money leave, the editors cut in a closer shot of Gatewood, taken from an angle that is less than 30 degrees different from the previous shot, which causes it to appear to "jump" on the screen. A short time later we return to Gatewood's office for a short scene in which his demanding wife orders him to do certain things. After she departs, the editors jump cut to almost exactly the same shot of the glowering banker that they used in the first scene. Thus, before we even watch Gatewood transfer the \$50,000 to his traveling bag, we sense that there is something shady about this character. The jump cuts inform the audience that Mr. Gatewood is not the model citizen he pretends to be.

Another odd moment in the film that might have left audience members scratching their heads occurs just before the Ringo Kid is introduced. The stagecoach has left Tonto with a cavalry escort. At some point and for reasons that are not explained, the soldiers no longer accompany the coach. We see the coach traveling ahead in isolation when suddenly there is an awkward cut to a short shot of the troops crossing a river. Since the stagecoach has been traversing arid ground, we wonder where this river is and how the coach got around it. Then the filmmakers cut back to the introduction of Ringo – a scene that ends with the soldiers rejoining the coach. There might be any number of explanations for this strange sequence, including the elimination of one or more scenes that would have shown why the cavalry became separated from the coach and what they were doing in the river. As it stands, the sequence plays as if somebody "goofed," and the editors felt that cutting in the river shot was the only way to explain why the troops are not present when Ringo is first introduced.

I do not mean to imply that *Stagecoach* is, by Hollywood standards, either an editorial mess or some sort of experimental film. Throughout most of its running time, the editing is faithful to continuity principles, respecting the 180-degree axis and the 30-degree rule. There are some excellent examples of shot/reverse-shot sequences (already mentioned), cutting on action (e.g., Doc Boone's introduction to Peacock with the cut coming in the middle of Doc's move to shake the whiskey drummer's hand) and eyeline matches (a nice one occurs in Lee's Ferry where Hatfield looks off-screen and the cut shows us what he sees – signs of the hostile Indians in the surrounding hills). The editors employ standard transitional devices, including a good many dissolves to mark short passages of time and a few fade-outs to suggest longer time ellipses or

major turning points in the story. They eschew intertitles, wipes or montage sequences.

One of the film's great triumphs is the aforementioned Indian attack scene. Setting aside the 180-degree axis issue for a moment, the overall editorial design of this scene is a model of how to invigorate movie chases. The editors interlace many moving camera shots with low-angle shots in which the stage and Indians ride directly over the camera, shots of Buck and Curley driving the stagecoach forward and fending off the Apaches, shots of Ringo shooting the Indians and then leaping on the horses and guiding them after Buck loses the reins, shots of the passengers inside as some fight while others cower, etc. This sequence even includes point-of-view shots, such as the moment in which we see an Indian on horseback fire his rifle at Hatfield through Hatfield's eyes. The rapid pacing of the shots helps to increase the breathless nature of the action. The fact that the chase includes many studio and process shots joined together in fluid fashion with shots made on exterior locations at the dry lake bed and elsewhere is a testament to the editors' ability to squeeze every bit of potential excitement out of the footage without losing the audience in the process. Indeed, even the numerous continuity "mistakes" seem not to have bothered the customers or the professionals. The film was nominated for an Academy Award for best film editing.

Sound and music

The sound work credited to Frank Maher is professional throughout *Stagecoach* and dynamic at various moments in the narrative. The film contains a good deal of important dialogue which is crisply recorded and mixed together felicitously with the sound effects and musical score. At certain points, sound is used to increase the impact of a scene. As already mentioned, one of the memorable moments in the film is the rapid tracking shot that introduces Ringo. But even before the audience sees Ringo, we hear him fire his rifle and yell, "Hold it!" which prepares us for the introduction of this crucial character. Likewise, the beginning of the Indian attack is "announced" by the sound of an arrow which will end up in Mr. Peacock's shoulder. Other examples of important creative sound work would include the segue from the baying of a coyote to the similar-sounding cries of the newborn baby, and the sounds of the bugles during the Indian attack, which appear to be part of the musical score but turn out to be real bugles blown by soldiers who have arrived just in time to save the stagecoach. The filmmakers even allow sound to carry the final climax. After Ringo and the Plummer brothers advance toward each other on

the Lordsburg street, the editors cut to a shot of Ringo lunging forward and firing the first shot from his rifle. They then cut away to a shot of a very worried Dallas, allowing the battle to be communicated solely by the noise of the gunshots. This serves to increase suspense because the audience remains unsure of the outcome until it sees Luke collapse on the floor of the saloon and Ringo, who is apparently not seriously injured, reunite with Dallas.

The musical score is quite unusual in that five different individuals (Richard Hageman, Franke Harling, Louis Gruenberg, John Leipold and Leo Shuken) are credited for adapting American folk songs (such as "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie" and Stephen Foster's "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair"). With Boris Morros also listed as Musical Director it is impossible to determine who knitted the different songs together into the final score and who wrote the connective music that gives the score coherence. As might be expected, the result is a potpourri of different thematics (there are Indian and Mexican motifs as well as the flavorful Americana theme which predominates). However, the basic thrust of the music is epochal; like the other aspects of this "romantic" style, its function is to magnify the characters and their tribulations into a story of greatness – great courage, great love, great achievement. As a consequence, the music hyperbolizes the many different moods of the story. At one moment, it enlarges the satiric march of Doc and Dallas to the "guillotine" in Tonto; at another, it simulates the cold wind chilling the passengers as they pass through higher ground on the coach; at several others, it embellishes the increasingly ominous threat posed by the Indians; at another, it plaintively mourns the death of the woman whom Hatfield covers with his coat at Lee's Ferry; and at the end it swells triumphantly, reprising some of the earlier themes and heralding the happy ending of this mythic tale. The score received an Academy Award.

Summary

The Classical style of Hollywood filmmaking conformed to a more pliable, less restrictive model than has generally been recognized. While an unwritten compendium of rules and principles may be deduced from contemporary stylistic practices, filmmakers often set aside this "text" when it did not serve them well. Sometimes their determination to defy convention was clearly intentional. Director Ben Hecht and cinematographer Lee Garmes on *Crime Without Passion* (Hecht-MacArthur/Paramount, 1934), director Fritz Lang and cinematographer Charles Lang Jr. on *You and Me* (Paramount, 1938) and director Orson Welles and cinematographer Gregg Toland on *Citizen Kane* trespassed well beyond traditional stylistic boundaries in their attempts

to expand the expressive possibilities of the medium. Though their experiments were all highly ambitious, only *Citizen Kane* ended up having a major impact on the aesthetic development of cinema. And it, like the others, was not embraced by the general public. All three films were financially unsuccessful.

However, as the analysis of *Stagecoach* demonstrates, one also finds a multitude of stylistic "infractions" in highly popular films. Director Frank Capra and his editors, for example, were not overly impressed by the 30-degree rule. His movies, including *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, contain numerous jump cuts which, unlike the ones in *Stagecoach*, appear to be motivated by nothing more than a desire to bring the spectators a bit closer to certain characters. It seems that Capra's audience did not find these unusual cuts bothersome; both *Deeds* and *Smith* were highly profitable. A closer look at many other highly regarded films from the era would reveal similar departures from the dominant style.

Once again, I should re-emphasize the overriding theme of this chapter. Style was supposed to serve storytelling. Its job was to carry the story forward in a way that was clear, concise and compelling. Sometimes this meant that the style had to be as simple and invisible as possible (*Wild Boys of the Road*, Warner Bros., 1933). On other occasions, a more flamboyant, exhibitionistic style could be fitting (*Love Me Tonight*, Paramount, 1932). The possibilities were infinite, but the most talented filmmakers of the 1930s and 1940s understood how to bend and shape the malleable ingredients of the Classical style to accomplish their ultimate objective: the creation of cinematic stories that would galvanize the moviegoing public.

A Note on "Studio" Style

In his seminal study of film history, *The Liveliest Art*, Arthur Knight wrote: "Until fairly recently, almost any movie fan, after a few moments of gazing at a Hollywood film, could make a fairly accurate guess as to which company produced it without seeing either titles or trade-marks . . . By and large it is the studio that leaves the strongest imprint on its films." In fact it was a studio's stars, not its stylistic propensities, that would have signaled which studio made the picture. Audience members recognized that Gable and MGM, Temple and Twentieth Century-Fox, Crosby and Paramount, Bogart and Warner Bros., etc. were practically inseparable. But they would have had no sense that studios imposed particular stylistic signatures on their products.

While a good deal of research has been done by scholars since Mr. Knight

published *The Liveliest Art* in 1957, and some of this work suggests that different companies did have certain stylistic "tendencies," disparities among the products from the major studios are so subtle that making a case for the "mark" of each studio is neither tenable nor particularly useful. In fact, stylistic variations appear to have had more to do with the specific genres that studios favored than any other single factor, and so let us briefly turn our attention to the topic of genre style.

A Note on Genre Style

Audience expectations concerning the "look" of a film and the amount of stylistic embellishment that viewers would tolerate were conditioned by genre. The horror film, for example, is one of the most interesting in this regard. In addition to employing a low-key, shadowy, night-world look and generally accelerated pacing compared to other genres, these pictures allowed for an excessive amount of stylistic exaggeration. The creation sequence in *Bride of Frankenstein* (Universal, 1935) contains all manner of bizarre camera angles and outlandish lighting effects that heighten the impact of the scene but would have been unthinkable in most other genres. Similarly, the set design of *Son of Frankenstein* (Universal, 1939) is completely out of scale; it literally dwarfs the characters, helping to create the impression of a malignant environment not suitable for the raising of children. Finally, the "sound shocks" injected into the swimming pool and bus scenes in *Cat People* (RKO, 1943) are unnaturally magnified in order to ratchet up the fright level of this thriller.

While other genres that favored the imaginary over the realistic, such as fantasies, musicals, and certain comedies, also allowed for a good deal of stylistic exaggeration, most genres offered more limited possibilities. Still, one can detect certain general tendencies that help differentiate one genre from another. The preferred low-key look of some (horror, detective, gangster) may be contrasted to the more mid-key and high-key look of others (westerns, woman's films, biographies, comedies, musicals). And the so-called "action pictures" (westerns, adventure films, war movies) are typically paced more swiftly than musicals, biographies, woman's pictures and social consciousness films.

Without question, genre influenced style in ways that are reasonably predictable. And yet it must be re-emphasized that one can always find exceptions to the general tendencies. Stylistic decisions were made on a picture-by-picture basis, and these decisions took into account a broad spectrum of possibilities. (See chapter 6 for further discussion of genre styles.)

A Note on Film Noir

One of the most celebrated developments in 1940s American cinema was the film noir movement. Though it had antecedents, including German Expressionism in the 1910s and 20s and French Poetic Realism in the 30s, as well as a few silent and sound films made in Hollywood, film noir began to take shape in the early 40s and continued to gain momentum after the conclusion of the war. French critics first noticed this strange new development when they were flooded with American movies after their country's liberation. They gave the movement its name.

There is an ongoing debate whether film noir is a genre or a style. While acknowledging that even the adherents of the latter position often discuss these pictures in terms of their characters, themes and world view (basic genre ingredients), I prefer to treat film noir as a stylistic development.

One of the justifications for examining film noir as a style is the many established genres which were affected by it. Indeed, contemporary journalistic reviewers began to note that there was something different about these pictures, but they had difficulty connecting them together because they cut across so many genres: the detective film (*Murder, My Sweet*, RKO, 1945), the spy film (*Ministry of Fear*, Paramount, 1944), the woman's film (*Mildred Pierce*, Warner Bros., 1945), the social problem film (*The Lost Weekend*, Paramount, 1945), the gangster film (*High Sierra*, Warner Bros., 1941), the horror film (*The Leopard Man*, RKO, 1943), even the musical (*Blues in the Night*, Warner Bros., 1941).

The key elements that allow us to classify these pictures into a coherent group are their style and, in many cases, their unusual approach to narrative. Let us examine narrative strategies first. The point of view in a number of noir films is limited to a single character. Thus, unlike the omniscient point of view which is practically ubiquitous in Hollywood movies before the advent of film noir, these films rely on one individual to guide the audience through the story. This can be true whether the character is the actual narrator "telling" the story via a series of flashbacks (*Double Indemnity*) or simply appears in every significant scene (*The Maltese Falcon*, Warner Bros., 1941), confining the audience to his perspective throughout. This strategy sets up a different dynamic within the relationship between spectators and story because the central character is often not only a fallible individual who does not view the unfolding events clearly but also may be something less than an objective observer.

Not every example of film noir shuns the omniscient point of view or creates a narrative tension between the protagonist and the audience. But the

filmmakers who created these works did approach style differently than their predecessors. Determined to portray a less "romantic" vision of the world, they pushed the possibilities of low-key cinematography farther than they had been pushed before. Such directors of photography as Nicholas Musuraca (*I Walked with a Zombie*, RKO, 1943), John F. Seitz (*Double Indemnity*), Woody Bredell (*Phantom Lady*, Universal, 1944), Milton Krasner (*The Woman in the Window*, International/RKO, 1945) and Benjamin H. Kline (*Detour*, PRC, 1945) rationed light as if it were one of the precious commodities of the war years, creating a cinema rich in the shadows of suggestive malevolence. The chiaroscuro lighting, combined with claustrophobic, often unbalanced compositions and unusual camera angles, conveyed a sense of entrapment, alienation, psychological instability and paranoia that was out of "synch" with the majority of Hollywood productions.

The odd fact that the film noir movement began during World War II, a time when Americans were extraordinarily unified, determined and hopeful about the future, can be partially explained by European influences. Most of the directors who set out to make these pictures were European expatriates sickened by the devastation wreaked on their friends, their families and their homelands by the war. They had good reason to be more cynical, less optimistic than the typical American, and they used their Hollywood clout to push these idiosyncratic projects into production. To compound the irony, some of their films, such as *Double Indemnity*, directed by Billy Wilder, and *Laura*, directed by Otto Preminger, were so fresh that they flourished both critically and commercially, paving the way for the production of more films of this kind. Other European directors who emigrated to Hollywood in the 1930s and subsequently helped to create film noir included Alfred Hitchcock (*Shadow of a Doubt*, Universal, 1943), Robert Siodmak (*The Spiral Staircase*, RKO, 1945), Fritz Lang (*Scarlet Street*, Diana/Universal, 1945), Edgar G. Ulmer (*Detour*) and John Brahm (*Hangover Square*, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1945).

A Note on Directorial Style

This book has avoided the privileging of directors which still characterizes many studies of Hollywood film history. While outstanding directors worked in the American cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, very few had "final cut," the ability to guarantee that their work reached the screen in the form they wished. Instead, producers and studio executives determined all the final details of their products, which is only one of several reasons the "auteur"

theory is of limited usefulness for the study of American cinema during this period.

Still, it must be acknowledged that certain directors were able to imboss films with their own personality and vision. I have already noted this with some of the film noir directors, but it is also evident in the works of Charles Chaplin, Ernst Lubitsch, John Ford, Frank Capra, Howard Hawks, Frank Borzage, Preston Sturges, Orson Welles and others. However, the personal visions of these filmmakers have often been referenced as a function of style when, in most cases, the stylistic differences between their films are not dramatic. Rather, the directors' thematic preoccupations make their works stand out and give them coherence and personality: Chaplin's concern for the vagabonds of society and his growing political sensibility; Hawks' fascination with adventure, professionalism and the battle of the sexes; Ford's veneration of the family and of the traditions and rituals that cement human beings together; Capra's belief in the heroic possibilities of the common man; Lubitsch's sly and sophisticated deconstruction of the European class system; Borzage's sentimental faith in the transcendental power of love. It would be wrong to state that there was nothing distinctive about the style of these filmmakers. They were both artists and exceptional craftsmen and their works were usually more interesting, on every level, than those of most studio directors. No one in Hollywood had a better compositional sense than Ford, for example, and Hitchcock instinctively recognized how to shoot a film so that it could be edited to produce maximum suspense. And yet these filmmakers never forgot the dictum that style must always be in the service of story. They understood that a good story could be told with a minimum of stylistic ornamentation, but no amount of stylistic razzle-dazzle could compensate for a weak, uninvolved narrative.

Josef von Sternberg did not recognize this truism, and his career suffered as a consequence. One of the filmmaking titans of the early 1930s, the director helped mold Marlene Dietrich into an international star and gave Paramount several hits before his obsession with style began to overwhelm his interest in story. Though Sternberg may not have been wholly conscious of this, *The Scarlet Empress* (Paramount, 1934) and *The Devil Is a Woman* (Paramount, 1935) appear to be exercises in stylistic extravagance perversely designed to antagonize audience members hoping to witness an involving story. Indulging his love of scrims, veils, nets, fog, smoke and striking costuming and symbolic decor, Sternberg captured a plethora of luminescent and striking images in these two pictures. But most movie patrons did not appreciate their beauty and evocative qualities. Not only were the films major commercial failures, they

also tarnished Ms. Dietrich's star image and sent her career into a tailspin. Not surprisingly, Josef von Sternberg was soon expelled from the elite cadre of Paramount contract directors, and he had difficulty securing and keeping jobs as a director for the rest of his life. Sadly, the career of Orson Welles, another distinctive stylist, would have a similar trajectory.

6

Genres

Genres, or distinct types of films, were a crucial component of the creative and economic strategies of Hollywood entertainment companies during the Classical Period. The basic idea of diversifying a studio's production output developed out of the dynamic relationship between film producers and their customers. Early in the history of cinema as a commercial enterprise, the people who made movies realized that one of the key elements needed to attract audiences was an interesting story. The quality of the story was of primary importance, but these pioneers also recognized that spectators gravitated to certain, specific types of narratives while remaining indifferent to, or less enthusiastic about, other types. By the time sound movies became the norm, genre-thinking as a production philosophy had been embraced by every studio.

Each company specialized in certain genres (see chapter 2). Decisions were based upon the strengths of the contract talent (especially the actors), as well as the preferences of the production head who naturally had to consider the perceived audience that the company was attempting to reach. Universal, for example, became the leading producer of horror films because of such actors as Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi and Lon Chaney Jr., directors James Whale and George Waggner, writers Garrett Fort and John L. Balderston and, initially, production chief Carl Laemmle Jr. who favored their production. Likewise, Paramount made exceptional comedies throughout the 1930s and 40s, thanks to the efforts of the Marx Brothers, Mae West, Carole Lombard, Claudette Colbert, W.C. Fields, Barbara Stanwyck, Bob Hope, Paulette Goddard, Bing Crosby and Fred MacMurray, plus behind-the-camera talent that included Ernst Lubitsch, Preston Sturges, Billy Wilder and Mitchell Leisen.

A studio's "B" picture program would be conceptualized almost exclusively along genre lines. A well-rounded "B" program involved the release of a predictable number of low-budget westerns, detective films, crime pictures, comedies and woman's pictures each year. The advertising of these movies graphically