Texas Film and Media Studies Series
Thomas Schatz, Editor

AESTHETICS OF FILM

JACQUES AUMONT
ALAIN BERGALA
MICHEL MARIE
MARC VERNET

TRANSLATED
AND REVISED BY
RICHARD NEUPERT

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS AUSTIN

It is thus necessary to distinguish between the terms "story," "diegesis," "scenario," and "plot." "Scenario" can be understood as the description of the story within the order of the narrative. "Plot," on the other hand, is a summary, given in the order of the story's telling, of the setting, relations, and actions that tie together the various characters.

In his famous *Dictionary of Films*, Georges Sadoul gives the following brief account of the plot of Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar:* "Johnny Guitar (Hayden), a reformed gunfighter, defends Vienna (Crawford), a saloon owner, against the Marshal (Bond), a jealous female banker (McCambridge) who hates her and wants her run out of town, and an attempted lynching."[11] It is worth noting that what Sadoul means to relay to us in this summary is both the film's plot and its diegetic universe (1800s, American West, gunfighter, female saloon owner, Marshal).

There is still one subordinate point to be covered before moving on. Occasionally the term "extradiegetic" is used, but not without raising a few problems. It is used most often in regard to music that intervenes in order to emphasize or to express characters' emotions, without its actual production ever being localized or even imagined within the given diegetic universe. For instance, there is the typical and even caricatured use of violins erupting in a western during a scene when the hero is about to join the heroine out by the corral at night. During this scene the music plays a role within the diegesis by signifying love, yet without really being part of the diegesis in the same way that the night, the moon, and the sound of the wind in the trees would be.

RELATIONS BETWEEN NARRATIVE, STORY, AND NARRATION. *Relations between Narrative and Story.* There are three kinds of relations between narrative and story that are labeled here to coincide with Gérard Genette's terms "order," "duration," and "mood."[12]

Order includes the differences between the unfolding of the narrative and that of the story. Quite frequently, for reasons of suspense, mystery, or dramatic interest, events within a narrative are not presented in the same order in which they are supposed to have happened. Thus, these cases involve instances of anachrony between the two series of events. Moreover, it is possible that an event may be mentioned after the fact in the narrative while it has already occurred earlier in the diegesis or fictional time frame. The flashback is a prime example of such manipulation of narrative order, as is any narrative element or strategy that demands reinterpreting an event that has already been presented or understood previously in another form. This process of inversion is used very frequently in

the case of a detective or psychological mystery, where the scene constituting the reason behind a given character's behavior is shown by "delayed action."

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), for instance, it is only after many episodes and numerous attempts that the crazed doctor, John Ballantine (played by Gregory Peck), successfully remembers the day when his younger brother was impaled on a spiked fence. The two boys had been playing together and the death was partially John's fault.

In Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946), nearly the entire film is a flashback. Within the first minutes of the film we are shown the death of the hero, Swede (Burt Lancaster), while only afterward are we shown the inquest that searches through his past to learn the reasons behind his murder.

The opposite strategy also exists, in which elements of the narrative tend to evoke some future diegetic event by anticipation. This instance obviously involves the flashforward, but also any sort of announcement or indication permitting the spectator to anticipate the unfolding of the narrative by imagining a future diegetic event.

The flashforward is a fairly rare technique in film. In a strict sense it designates the appearance of an image (or a series of images) whose position in the story's chronology is situated *after* it is shown. This cinematic figure occurs particularly in films that play with the fiction's chronology, such as Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1963), in which the main character realizes at the end of the film that the image of the quay that has obsessed him from the beginning is the scene of his own death. Similarly, Alain Resnais's "science fiction" film *Je t'aime, je t'aime* (1968) is built on related principles.

The flashforward is also found in modern films tending toward "dysnarration": Godard's *Weekend* (1967) uses brief flashforwards to the eventual car crash of Roland and Corinne, while during another scene (the garbage workers' dialogue) images of the rebel band, the FLSO, are presented far in advance of that group's appearance in the story. Alain Robbe-Grillet's *L'Immortelle* (1962) presents a unique instance of sound flashforward since we hear the sound of an accident at the beginning of the film even though that crash will occur later in the film. Moreover, this technique is even commonly used in genre films that strongly introduce structures of suspense: in Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), for example, the heroine perceives a painting of a city on fire during her earliest nightmares, while she will later discover that painting in the Castevets' apartment at the end of the film. Similarly, the shot under the title sequence of Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946) represents two burning cigarettes on the edge of an ashtray, foreshadowing the eventual love relations of the film's central couple.

Thus, it is obvious that if the flashforward is indeed rather rare, the construction that it implies is, by contrast, rather common, most often employing objects that function as announcements of what will eventually happen.

According to Jean Mitry, this sort of announcement by the narrative of later diegetic events arises from a *logic of implication* that is understood and put in motion by the spectator during the film's projection.[13]

Hence, it is possible that in a western a shot from high atop a mountain looking down on a stagecoach preparing to enter a mountain pass is adequate, without any further clues, to inform the spectator of an impending Indian ambush (see the section on the genre effect in this chapter).

The narrative strategies of recall and foreshadowing may each evoke either a great expanse of time (over twenty years in the case of *Spellbound*) or a very minuscule period (as in the case of sound overlapping from one shot into the preceding or subsequent shot) and may operate in both the diegetic and fictional time schemes.

In Robert Bresson's *The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne* (1945), for example, the heroine lies in her silent bedroom after an encounter with her former lover. Suddenly there is the sound of castanets. This sound actually belongs to the following sequence, situated in a nightclub.

The second type of time relation, duration, concerns the agreement or disagreement between the imagined duration of the diegetic action and the time of the narrative as it presents that action. It is very rare that the narrative's duration agrees precisely with the duration of the story being told: Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) pretends to unfold "in a single shot," while *The Set-Up* (Robert Wise, 1949) and *The Twelve Angry Men* (Sidney Lumet, 1957) are famous instances of films whose story time coincides with their screen time (even going so far as to reveal the diegetic time by inserting shots of a clock on the wall at the beginning and end). Generally the narrative

is shorter than the story, but certain sections of the narrative may occupy more time than the story events they narrate.

There are involuntary examples of narrative time exceeding story time in certain films by Méliès, since the technique of matching on action had not yet been established. For instance, the passengers of a train might disembark in a shot filmed from inside the train, then we might see them descend the same steps in a following shot from a camera on the platform. More frequently, time may be extended by slow motion, such as the representation of memory in Sergio Leone's *Once upon a Time in the West* (1969) or the many step-printed scenes in Godard's *Every Man for Himself* [*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*] (1980). Time may also be extended by repeating actions or portions of actions, such as the repeated takes on the Russian sailor breaking a plate in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

The category of duration also includes the case of narrative ellipsis. In *The Big Sleep,* Philip Marlowe is on a stakeout in his car: one shot shows him getting settled for a long wait; a brief fade to black follows; next we fade up on exactly the same shot of Marlowe, except he has shifted his position slightly, the cigarette that he was smoking only seconds before has disappeared, and the rain has stopped abruptly. These slight changes in the setting indicate that several hours have passed in the story time.

Finally, the third category, mood, is determined by the point of view that guides the relating of the events and controls the quantity of information given about the story by the narrative. For our purposes here we will only discuss the concept of focalization in considering the relations between these two narrative instances. It is necessary when determining narrative mood to distinguish between focalization *by* a character and focalization *on* a character; however, focalization may not always be singular, but instead may vary, fluctuating considerably during the course of the narrative. Focalization *on* a character occurs quite frequently since it springs rather naturally from the organization of every narrative involving a protagonist and secondary characters: the protagonist is simply the one that the camera isolates and follows. In film this procedure allows a certain number of effects so that, for instance, while the protagonist occupies the image and thus monopolizes the screen, the action may continue elsewhere; such events are thus revealed later to surprise the spectator.

Focalization *by* a character is just as frequent and manifests itself most often in the guise of what is known as a subjective camera

position, yet it often appears in a rather dazzling form, fluctuating dynamically within the film.

At the beginning of *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947), the spectator can only see what is in the immediate field of vision of the escaping prisoner, while the police alert is set in motion around him.

A more typical strategy of the narrative film is the sporadic presentation of shots that are attributed to the vision of a specific character (see chapter 5, on primary and secondary identification).

Relations between Narration and Story. Genette designates the relations between narration and story with the term "voice."[14] We will restrict ourselves to asserting that the organization of a classical narrative film often leads to the phenomenon of diegetization of elements that belong exclusively to narration. Thus, the spectator may be led to consider diegetic an element that is actually a prominent intervention of the narrative instance into the development of the narrative.

There is an example of this phenomenon in Truffaut's *The Wild Child* (1969), wherein the succession of shots is quite often motivated by the characters' attention. Hence, when Dr. Itard prepares for the arrival of the child he is seen approaching a window where he then stands daydreaming. The next shot shows the imprisoned child in a barn, trying to reach a skylight from which light is streaming in. The mise-en-scène manages to relay the impression of having followed the doctor's thoughts during the shot change.

THE EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CLASSICAL CINEMA. The phenomenon of diegetization, mentioned above, is an effect of the general functioning of the cinematic institution that seeks to efface the traces of its labor, and even its presence, from the film spectacle. In the classical cinema the impression often created is that the story "tells itself" and that its narrative and narration are both neutral and transparent. The diegetic universe pretends to offer itself without any intermediary and without the spectator having the feeling that s/he must posit a third instance or presence to understand what is seen and heard.

The fact that the fiction film is offered to the viewer's comprehension without overt reference to its own enunciation is homologous to Emile Benveniste's proposals to analyze linguistic *énoncés* by dividing them into *histoire* (story) and *discours* (discourse).[15] Accord-