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The Narration of Beginnings in Classical Cinema

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Television

by

Jason Paul Wasserman Gendler

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Narration of Beginnings in Classical Cinema

by

Jason Paul Wasserman Gendler

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Stephen D. Mamber, Chair

This dissertation is about how the beginnings of films tell stories. Beginnings are extremely important for narratives, more so than has been previously acknowledged, both because beginnings are carefully designed to introduce story information in specific ways, and because viewers perceive, comprehend, and respond to information in the beginning differently than they do later in the narrative. Two primary questions guide its approach: What sort of storytelling principles are normally found in the beginnings of films? What sort of cognitive processes do viewers bring to films that make the beginning important for understanding entire narratives? I focus on classical beginnings in the American tradition, where “classical” refers to the mode of narration normatively employed by mainstream films, which strive for ease of comprehension and the concealment of artifice, and attempts to solicit easily accessible and precise aesthetic, cognitive, and emotional responses from viewers.

I argue that the normative, formal properties of classical beginnings include the establishment of characters, the introduction of exposition, and the setting up of conditions that are causally necessary for later events. In accounting for why these formal properties are normative for classical beginnings, this dissertation considers the cognitive processes viewers use to understand stories, including: how expectations about the narrative's direction change as the narrative progresses; the organization of new information into abstract, preexisting mental categories; the influence of first impressions, and the assumptions inherent in identifying something as a "beginning." Finally, it also examines how classical beginnings can mislead viewers by deviating from these norms.

Ultimately, this dissertation makes the case that the answers to its primary questions are interrelated: A beginning's form strongly influences how viewers understand a film's narrative, while simultaneously, the cognitive processes viewers use to process narratives often inform why a beginning is designed the way it is. Films manipulate and distribute information *to* viewers, but viewers simultaneously perform mental activities *on* narratives. By combining both formal properties and cognitive processes, this dissertation achieves new insights and a fuller understanding of the function of narrative beginnings.

The dissertation of Jason Paul Wasserman Gendler is approved.

Janet L. Bergstrom

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2014

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Epistemology and Parameters of a Narrative Beginning¹

The focus of this dissertation is the beginnings of classically narrated films. It asks how and why films begin the way they do, and what sort of narrational principles and practices inform the way in which beginnings are designed. Accordingly, this dissertation is concerned with the formal properties of narrative beginnings: the quality and quantity of information introduced during the beginning, including information about characters, events, objects, settings, and other motifs; the order in which that information is introduced; the way in which the narration implies relations between events, and other ways that the narration can manipulate information.

However, examining narrational form will only go so far. In order to address *why* narrative beginnings are designed the way they are, it will also be necessary to address how viewers comprehend narrative beginnings. Narrative comprehension refers to a viewer's ability to understand the narrative by cognitively engaging with it as it progresses: understanding character psychology (including traits, emotions, and intentional states like beliefs and goals); understanding implied causal relations between actions or events; casting expectations and making hypotheses and inferences about narrative developments, and applying schemata derived from world knowledge and from previous experience with narratives. The narration manipulates and distributes narrative information *to* viewers, but narrative comprehension comprises the mental activities that viewers perform *on* narratives. Therefore, I will also make use of some

¹ Parts of this chapter were first published in an article entitled, "Where Does the Beginning End? Cognition, Form, and Classical Narrative Beginnings," *Projections* 6:2 (Winter 2012), 64-83.

powerful cognitive psychological models for thought processes that contribute significantly to understanding how viewers engage with narrative beginnings.

In combining examinations of both form and cognition, I will follow the lead of other narrative scholars who have also recognized the importance of both for the study of narrative. For instance, Roland Barthes implies the necessity of accounting for both mental activity and formal design in his early and influential essay, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” where he makes the point that narrative exists in our minds as well as in media.² Cognitive narratologist David Herman also puts it well when he writes that “stories are cognitive as well as textual in nature, structures of mind as well as constellations of verbal, cinematic, pictorial, or other signs produced and interpreted within particular communicative settings.”³ Narrative films are formally structured and designed, but viewers also perform cognitive activities on films, and often the two complement one another: narratives -- and narrative beginnings -- are typically designed to elicit specific cognitive responses from viewers. In short, it is necessary to combine both formal properties and cognitive processes when inquiring into the form and function of narrative beginnings because they are interconnected, and mutually influence one another. A film’s form strongly influences the way in which viewers think about and understand the narrative, while at the same time, the cognitive processes viewers use to understand narratives often inform why a film is designed the way it is.

Ultimately, in addressing why films begin the way they do, I will attempt to construct a model for the narration of beginnings (particularly classical beginnings) that explains in

² Roland Barthes, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” trans. Lionel Duisit. *New Literary History* 6:2 (Winter 1975): 237-272.

³ David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (West Sussex: Wile-Blackwell, 2009), 8.

cognitive terms the (flexible) parameters of their formal design.⁴ Doing so is a fruitful venture because it elucidates the importance of narrative beginnings. Beginnings are extremely important for narratives, more so than has been previously acknowledged, because they are the introduction of the narrative to viewers. They serve as an entry point for the forthcoming narrative, and are thus carefully constructed to introduce story information in specific ways, to achieve certain effects, and to establish expectations about the story. As Murray Smith describes the importance of narrative beginnings, “Openings have a special function in our experience of narrative, because we base our viewing strategies and expectations on the information we receive at the beginning of a text.”⁵ Viewers perceive, comprehend, and respond to information in the beginning differently than they do later in the narrative. For instance, during the beginning, viewers are particularly reliant on previous experience both with life and with other narratives to understand the action and events of the beginning, because viewers lack other, more narrative-specific contexts through which the beginning can be understood. Thus the information provided in the beginning strongly shapes first impressions and expectations about the general direction of the narrative. As Menakhem Perry writes of literary narratives, “The reader of a text does not wait until the end before beginning to understand it.... The reader tries to organize the so-far incomplete... material given him in the best possible way. He relates, links, arranges the

⁴ The kind of model this dissertation proposes should not be confused with structuralist narrative formulae. In seeking to explain the design of narrative beginnings in terms of the cognitive processes viewers perform on narratives, this dissertation is mounting *explanations* for the ways in which (classical) narrative beginnings tend to be designed, rather than attempting to create a prescriptive model for how all film beginnings operate.

⁵ Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 118. For other statements on the importance of narrative beginnings, see Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1987), 59. See also Douglas Pye, “Seeing by Glimpses: Fritz Lang’s *The Blue Gardenia*,” *CineAction!* Summer 1988, 76. See also Brian Richardson, “Introduction,” in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1, 6.

elements in hierarchies, fills in gaps, anticipates forthcoming elements, etc.”⁶ Accordingly, inquiring into both the cognitive processes solicited from viewers by narrative beginnings, as well as the ways in which narrative beginnings are designed to solicit those responses, can broaden our understanding not only of the narration of film beginnings, but also of how cinematic narration and narrative comprehension function in general. These are important subjects not only for cognitivists and narratologists, who study human thought and the general principles of narratives and narration, respectively, but also for film scholars who are interested in how and why films tell stories.

This chapter will address a number of important preliminary issues, including: the scope of this dissertation; distinguishing between narrative comprehension and retrospective analysis; defining the term “beginning”; exploring the epistemology of beginnings in order to identify the function they perform in human cognitive processes, and arguing for a means of identifying where a narrative beginning starts and where it ends based on both formal properties and cognitive processes. It will conclude with an overview of subsequent chapters. Addressing these issues will clarify exactly what the concept of a beginning entails and substantiate the notion of a beginning as a large-scale narrative segment, while also providing considerable insight into the way in which beginnings function in narratives and the way in which viewers process and understand stories.

Methodological Matters

⁶ Menakham Perry, “Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings,” *Poetics Today* 1:1/2 (Autumn 1979), 46.

First, it is important to stress three methodological points. The range of films much of this dissertation is meant to characterize is restricted to those films which employ classical narration, particularly in American cinematic traditions, including both classical and contemporary Hollywood and (and to a lesser extent independent) cinema. Chapter 2 will discuss at length what constitutes classical narration, but I've chosen such a scope both for reasons of manageability (classical narration still constitutes a very large body of films), and because different national cinemas offer diverse narrative traditions and norms in addition to those of classical narration. While some of the subsequent arguments might indeed apply to classically narrated films falling outside of these parameters, for the purposes of clarity, comparison, specificity, and cohesiveness, the application of the arguments of this dissertation should be considered largely restricted to classical narration in American cinema.⁷ While this is undoubtedly a wide body of films, examining such a broad swath of classically narrated films will demonstrate the powerful consistency of classically narrated beginnings (or simply, classical beginnings). As we shall see, this body of films provides considerable diversity, with some mainstream and independent films pushing the boundaries of what can be considered classically narrated.⁸

In addition to limiting the scope to classical narration, this dissertation is also focused on examining narrative comprehension processes that don't necessarily rely on the extratextual knowledge of historically (and to a certain extent culturally) specific audiences, such as knowledge of creative personnel like stars or directors, or knowledge of presold properties or

⁷ Occasionally some concepts will be illustrated by non-American films, simply because these films serve as perfect examples of the concepts under discussion.

⁸ Michael Newman characterizes independent cinema as a mode of film practice unto itself, one distinct from other modes of narration. Michael Newman, "Characterization in American Independent Cinema." (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005), 39-68.

source materials like a book on which a film adaptation might be based. Such knowledge can and often does influence narrative comprehension; a viewer's extratextual knowledge of an actor's star persona, for instance, can influence the degree to which the viewer assigns importance to a particular character, or their first impression of the character. While these concerns will be addressed when they become relevant for subsequent concepts or examples, the principal focus here is on the more general knowledge structures and narrative comprehension processes that viewers bring to narratives and that are solicited by a film's narration.⁹

Finally, as the above distinctions imply, this dissertation is also mainly focused on narrative comprehension -- how viewers process and understand the beginnings of narratives *while they watch them* -- and on how a narration's formal properties are shaped to influence that comprehension. That is, the focus here is on how cognition acts on the narrative, and how narrational form influences cognition *during* the act of viewing the beginning of a film, rather than on analyzing or interpreting beginnings retrospectively. Such a focus does not preclude the possibility of retrospection, either on the part of the viewer, or on the part of the analyst: not only do narratives prompt viewers to reflect upon previously acquired information rather frequently, such as when surprises recast expectations and understandings of the narrative, but insightful formal analyses are also almost always performed after the fact. Focusing on the cognitive and

⁹ To that end, comprehension, conceived here as understanding the narrative, is distinct from other ways in which viewers process narratives, such as interpretation. For some frameworks concerned with the distinction (or lack thereof) between comprehension, interpretation, and reading or perceiving, see Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 18-21. See also Per Persson, *Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21-37. Persson's taxonomy of different "levels" of reception coherence overlaps with Staiger's, but offers a more detailed breakdown of the different kinds of meanings viewers read out of narratives, organized on a scale from least to most abstract. Persson suggests that while different levels of reception are mutually influential upon one another, lower levels of coherence (such as comprehension of character behavior) must first be established before spectators can move on to higher levels coherence (such as interpretive activities like speculation about the intention of filmmakers). As Persson writes, "To make thematic inferences about the whole of a narrative it seems intuitive that spectators must have understood the different situations of the plot." 36-37.

narrational factors that influence narrative comprehension simply means that the principle subject of analysis will be how viewers process narratives in the moment, and how narrations are designed to affect those processes (both of which are inquiries that can be addressed retrospectively), rather than on how we think about and interpret a narrative beginning after it has concluded.¹⁰

The kinds of issues that will be discussed in this dissertation can be understood as what literary narratologist Peter Rabinowitz calls questions of “configuration,” a term which he uses to describe a reader’s experience of a text during the act of reading. Questions of configuration can broadly be described as asking, “How did this particular element make me think at the time I encountered it?” This is a question that is asked retrospectively, but is not *about* retrospection per se.¹¹ Rabinowitz contrasts questions of configuration with what he calls questions of “coherence,” or the reader’s understanding of the total work after the fact, which can be summarized as asking, “Given how it [the text] worked out, how can I account for these particular elements?”¹² Examples of coherence inquiries can be found in the work of

¹⁰ In discussing how narratives frequently prompt viewers to reflect upon previously acquired information, Edward Branigan writes, “it has been amply demonstrated through many psychological experiments that an individual’s attention does not spread equally through a narrative text but works forward and backward in an uneven manner in constructing large-scale, hierarchical patterns which may represent a particular story as an abstract grouping of knowledge based on an underlying schema.” Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16.

¹¹ This is an extrapolation of Rabinowitz’s point; he further confines his discussion of a text’s configuration to its resolution. That is, for Rabinowitz, after-the-fact questions of configuration ask, “How did this particular element make me think, at the time I encountered it, that the text would work out?” Rabinowitz, 112. However, while elements of a text do indeed occasionally prompt us to think -- at the moment we encounter them -- about how a text will resolve, they can also prompt us to ask about many other things *aside* from potential story resolution, including character psychology, moral evaluations of characters, notions of cause and effect in the story world, our understanding of past events, or the schemata we’re using to understanding the situation in which the characters are engaged. That is, elements of the text can encourage us to think and ask questions about short *and* long term developments, and about *past* actions or events as well as future narrative developments. Thus the questions of configuration under discussion in this dissertation are somewhat broader than those which Rabinowitz asks.

¹² Ibid.

structuralists such as Seymour Chatman, who attempts to identify minimal narrative units by distinguishing between kernels, or major plot events that propel stories forward, and satellites, or ancillary developments not essential (or causally relevant) to the forward progress of the narrative.¹³ Such an inquiry is a question of coherence because it relies on an *a posteriori* analysis of a narrative and narration: It is impossible to definitively distinguish the consequential from the inconsequential while the narrative is still progressing. Susan Suleiman echoes these sentiments in regard to characters, writing, “It is only after having read the whole novel that one can fully distinguish major characters from secondary or minor ones.”¹⁴

It is because such inquiries rely on an analysis of a narrative as a completed whole, rather than on the ways in which the uptake of information affects our experience of them, that we must distinguish between inquiries concerning configuration (or comprehension processes), and those concerning coherence (or the retrospective interpretation of events). Not only does such a distinction provide, in Rabinowitz’s words, some much needed clarity in what otherwise has been a “vexed topic in critical discourse,” but the distinction also makes some concepts more relevant than others (as will become evident in the following discussion of a narrative’s *fabula* and *syuzhet*).¹⁵ While this dissertation asks questions after the fact, the questions it asks are about a work’s configuration. That is, out of interest in moment-to-moment cognitive processes and their facilitation by a film, I will ask questions about how the particular elements of the narrative

¹³ Russian formalist Boris Tomashevsky and Roland Barthes (in his structuralist writing) have also made the same distinctions. Tomashevsky calls them bound and free motifs, while Barthes calls them functions and catalyses. See Boris Tomashevsky, “Thematics,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 68. See also Barthes, 247-248.

¹⁴ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel As a Literary Genre* (Princeton: Columbia University Press, 1983), 173. See also Meir Sternberg’s comments on the “hindsight of retrospection,” in *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 71, 85.

¹⁵ Rabinowitz, 110.

encourage viewers to think about the story when those elements are encountered, without total knowledge of its completion. Julian Hochberg and Virginia Brooks describe well the significance of such inquiries, writing, “It is important to consider the film as it is experienced in the course of its first viewing... Such an approach scrutinizes the act of viewing itself, forcing us to attend to the rich mix of processes by which that act proceeds, and by which a mental representation of the narrated event is achieved.”¹⁶ Before getting to that “rich mix of processes,” however, first it will be useful to clarify some terminology.

Defining a Narrative Beginning

What is a narrative beginning? Answering this question requires a brief discussion of how the term “beginning” will be used throughout this dissertation, and why temporal order is insufficient to determine what a beginning is. By “beginning,” I am referring to a film’s narrative, rather than to the more general experience of watching a movie, which in a theater involves taking one’s seat and watching various paratextual material like trailers and studio logos (although occasionally there is some bleed between logos and diegetic, narrative material).¹⁷ Such a distinction is necessary for at least two reasons, one being manageability: Narrative is a large, yet relatively delimited topic that lends itself to exclusive study. The other reason for such a distinction is that engaging with a narrative is a unique activity within the overall experience of watching a film, and both the kinds of questions one would ask and the methodology one would

¹⁶ Julian Hochberg and Virginia Brooks, “Movies in the Mind’s Eye,” *In the Mind’s Eye: On the Perception of Pictures, Films, and the World*, ed. Mary A. Peterson, Barbara Gillam, H. A. Sedgwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 398.

¹⁷ Examples of logos that incorporate diegetic elements are the Universal logo at the start of *Waterworld* (1995) and *Serenity* (2005), the Paramount logo at the start of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), the 20th Century Fox logo at the start of *The Simpsons Movie* (2007), and to a certain extent, the Warner Bros. logo at the start of *The Matrix* (1999) and *Speed Racer* (2008).

use to analyze general viewing experiences differ significantly from the inquiries and methodology useful for a cognitive-narratological inquiry.

In addition to referring to a film's narrative, I also use "beginning" to mean a large-scale segment of the narrative, rather than an instantaneous moment at the start of the diegesis. There are at least three reasons it is important to distinguish the beginning as a large-scale part of narrative. For one, beginnings are a formally distinct part of a narrative, rather than just a theoretical construct or an analytical tool. This is especially true of classical narratives, which have often been described as divided into varying numbers of "acts" (one such description is Kristin Thompson's four-act segmentation, as discussed later in this chapter). As we shall see, even though there is reason to hesitate before equating a narrative beginning with the first act of a film, such descriptions are useful for pointing out the various kinds of information beginnings contain, and the functions they perform in relation to the rest of the narrative. For instance, a classical narrative beginning will typically provide basic information crucial for understanding subsequent narrative developments by introducing characters and establishing expositional antecedents. As Noël Carroll puts it, beginnings ensure "that we have enough information to understand further questions that the subsequent changes in the initial states of affairs and their accompanying complications elicit."¹⁸

A second reason it is important to distinguish the beginning as a large-scale segment of the narrative is because the way in which viewers engage with the narrative during the beginning differs from the way they engage with it later, after the narrative has undergone some development. That is, both the narration and a viewer's interaction with it changes as the film

¹⁸ Noël Carroll has commented on this and other purposes of beginnings in "Narrative Closure," in *The Routledge Companion to Film and Philosophy*, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (New York: Routledge, 2009), 211.

progresses from the start to the end, and one of the ways to describe this difference is to segment the narrative into large-scale units such as beginning, middle, and end. To take just one example, in the beginning, there exist fewer situational parameters, or psychological contexts, through which we can infer and attribute mental states to characters than later in the narrative, which means that it is more difficult to fully understand and process the potential richness of character interiority in the beginning. Thus beginnings provide information that enable viewers to make more complex mental attributions in later parts of the narrative.¹⁹

Finally, it is also important to distinguish the beginning as a large-scale segment of narrative because both the functions beginnings perform and the cognitive processes viewers perform on them each take time to carry out. For example, it takes time both for the beginning to introduce characters and establish expositional antecedents, and for viewers to form hypotheses about how the information introduced in the beginning will become relevant for the narrative (an important cognitive process that viewers bring to beginnings). The same is true of the aforementioned introduction of information that allows for the emergence of psychologically rich situations. As Per Persson describes it, “establishing psychologically rich situations takes time. The viewer must follow a character over time, picking up aspects of situations, before beginning to differentiate between different mental states.”²⁰ Thus it is useful to identify beginnings as a large-scale part of the narrative because the various cognitive processes and formal functions of the beginning that set it apart from other portions of the narrative occur over a length of time.

¹⁹ Situational parameters will be discussed at length in Chapter 4. Per Persson argues that the socioeconomic explanations for the historical transition from the cinema of attractions to more fully-formed narrative cinema can be complimented by the temporal demands of psychologically rich situations. More psychologically complex situations demanded more processing time, and thus more screen time as well. See Persson, 237.

²⁰ Ibid., 223.

If beginnings occur over a length of time, then an easy impulse might be to think that temporal order alone is enough to determine what a beginning is. Wouldn't the beginning consist of whatever happens in the narrative from the first moment of the narration of the diegesis, and simply last until a certain point in time? While temporal order is important, it is insufficient for defining a narrative beginning because it does not account for the formal properties specific to narrative beginnings, nor does it account for differences between the ways in which we engage with the information in the beginning and the ways in which we use information presented in subsequent parts of the narrative. For example, unlike middles and endings, classical narrative beginnings cannot rely on a viewer's familiarity with preceding narrative information, so beginnings typically are designed to answer many viewers' immediate questions about the initial situation, such as the time and location of the setting and the identity of the characters.²¹ Similarly, the primacy effect, or the effect of first impressions upon cognition, describes how viewers use information presented in the beginning as a frame of reference that colors the processing of subsequent information.²² While these issues will be discussed further in later chapters, it is enough to note here that the order of narration of a story's events would matter much less than it does if beginnings didn't differ in their formal properties and the cognitive processes they solicit from viewers.

Temporal order also is insufficient for defining a narrative beginning because it does not distinguish between the different possible beginnings a narrative might possess. Narrative information is presented to viewers in a particular arrangement (what the Russian formalists called the *syuzhet*, roughly the equivalent of plot), which can differ from the chronological

²¹ Carroll, "Narrative Closure," 211.

²² Sternberg, 93-95.

cause-and-effect sequence viewers construct of the narrative in their minds (what the formalists called the *fabula*, roughly the equivalent of story). For instance, the narration can create discrepancies between where the *fabula* and the *syuzhet* each begin. The beginning that viewers experience (the beginning of the *syuzhet*) isn't necessarily the only beginning, and it is often the case that the beginning of the *fabula* and *syuzhet* do not coincide.²³ Differences between *fabula* and *syuzhet* beginnings are clearest in instances where the *syuzhet* shuffles the events of the *fabula*, such as those narratives which begin *ab fine* (beginning from the end). *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) is one example of an *ab fine* beginning: The *syuzhet* begins at the end of the *fabula*, after all of the events of the story have concluded. Shortly into its *ab fine* beginning, the film flashes back to a point closer to the start of the *fabula* (a common tactic of films that begin *ab fine*). Films with even more experimental narratives sometimes take even greater liberties with temporal order, as Jean-Luc Godard once famously quipped in a response to a question about whether films should have beginnings, middles, or ends: "Yes, but not necessarily in that order."²⁴

Rather than relying solely on temporal order, we can arrive at a more comprehensive account of a narrative beginning -- including the means through which we can identify where a narrative beginning starts and ends -- by examining a narrative beginning's epistemological traits, formal properties, and some of the cognitive processes we use when engaging with

²³ Brian Richardson also identifies the "authorial antetext" and "institutional antetext" as yet two other types of beginning, albeit ones that lie outside the bounds of narrative. The former includes "the prefatory and framing material provided by the author that circumscribes the narrative proper," while the latter is analogous to advertising campaigns promoting the narrative. Brian Richardson, "A Theory of Narrative Beginnings and the Beginnings of 'The Dead' and *Molloy*," in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 113. Of these four kinds of beginnings, the beginning of the *syuzhet* is the most important for inquiring into narrative comprehension processes.

²⁴ Quoted in James Monaco, *The New Wave: Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 109.

beginnings. While all of these qualities of a narrative beginning will be elaborated in further detail over the course of this dissertation, what follows here is a brief description of each of these components. First, the idea of a narrative “beginning” is a forward-looking epistemological concept derived from cognitive biases regarding the ways in which people conceive of and label events. Second, a narrative beginning is also determined by the functions of the narration’s formal properties and way in which the *syuzhet* manipulates *fabula* information located in the beginning, which may include: the introduction of characters; causally necessary conditions for later events, and often (although not always) exposition. Third, while there are many important cognitive processes that contribute to the comprehension of beginnings in general, such as schema use, the primacy effect (or the effect of first impressions upon cognition), folk psychology, and dispositional attribution, the cognitive process that is the most important to a *definition* of a narrative beginning is the formation of a long-term, or global hypothesis about the direction of the rest of the narrative, which, in conjunction with the beginning’s formal properties, is crucial to determining where a beginning ends.

Only by combining epistemological traits, formal properties, and cognitive processes can we arrive at the following definition: A narrative beginning is an arbitrarily determined, forward-looking, large-scale segment of a narrative which humans are cognitively biased to conceive of as separate from that which precedes it, and which in classical narration lasts for as long as it takes the narration to introduce enough information (such as characters, causally necessary conditions for later events, or exposition) to allow for viewers to form a probable and exclusive long-term hypothesis about the direction of the rest of the narrative. In combining formal properties and cognitive processes, this definition is comprehensive enough to account for the formal diversity of narrative beginnings, and flexible enough to account for the different possible

knowledge bases viewers bring to narratives that inform their comprehension of the beginning. At the same time, including epistemological traits helps to describe how the very concept of “beginning” implies a particular relationship to the material surrounding it. Much of the rest of this chapter will address two of the components contributing to this definition in further detail, including a narrative beginning’s epistemological traits and the formal and cognitive properties that determine its boundaries.

Epistemological Concerns

Where does a narrative beginning start? This may seem a question with an intuitively obvious answer, but addressing it without resorting to unhelpful tautologies such as “it begins at the beginning” requires an exploration of a beginning’s epistemological and cognitive status, or the meanings we assign to an event or series of events by calling them a beginning. While a beginning’s formal properties (including order) certainly play a part in determining the boundaries of a beginning, the very concept of a beginning only takes on meaning through the addition of these other methodologies. Epistemology is particularly useful for addressing this inquiry because it recognizes that beginnings are not independent from human conceptions of the world. A beginning becomes a beginning only by being labeled and used in that way. As Niels Buch Leander writes, “there can be no beginning independent of the particular narrative we bring to it.... In life there are temporal events, but a beginning is an event under a certain description that needs to be established.”²⁵ In other words, no event is the “beginning” of anything unless we

²⁵ Niels Buch Leander, “To Begin with the Beginning: Birth, Origin, and Narrative Inception,” in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 19. See also Hayden White’s comments on historical stories, where any given event can serve as a beginning, middle, or end depending on the story being told. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7.

think of it *as* a beginning. Otherwise, the event is just an event, just something that happens. This is especially true in fictional works, as Philippe Carrard acknowledges when he writes that “fictional beginnings are most discretionary.”²⁶ Anything can become a beginning if we think of it and use it as one, and thus beginnings can come at any point (the *syuzhet* can start anywhere). However, this does not mean that beginnings are merely a trick of the mind, and do not actually exist. As Leander writes, beginnings are not “pure fiction; they exist in time, but simply cannot be located independently of us.”²⁷

One of the ways we label an event as a beginning is through our expectation that a narrative will follow from it. Edward Branigan makes precisely this point when he describes temporal order as a necessary but insufficient condition for determining where a narrative begins. Branigan writes that “the first sentence of a novel is not itself ‘the beginning.’ It acquires that status in relationship to certain other sentences.”²⁸ It follows, then, that narrativity is an important component for determining an event or series of events as a beginning, and that a narrative beginning is a forward-looking epistemological concept, in that it involves our expectations about what is to come.²⁹ It also follows that narrativity, in turn, is at the very least a

²⁶ Philippe Carrard, “September 1939: Beginnings, Historical Narrative, and the Outbreak of World War II,” in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 71.

²⁷ Leander, 19. Leander’s conclusion seems to be a more reasonable one than that which A. D. Nuttall makes in his work on narrative beginnings. In his defense of natural (as opposed to artificial) beginnings, Nuttall does not dispute that beginnings are socially construed, but writes that this does not mean we can deny “the separate existence of that-which-is-construed.” Such a conclusion applies well enough to events or objects (an event happens, or an object exists, regardless of how we interpret it), however, beginnings are not preexisting events in themselves, but are a means of *describing* an event, and therefore, while events or objects might lend themselves to being described as beginnings (like the opening of a narrative text), that description cannot exist independently of our construal. See A. D. Nuttall *Openings: Narrative Beginnings from the Epic to the Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 202-203.

²⁸ Branigan, 4.

²⁹ This includes narratives that contain flashbacks to prior events. By forward-looking, I mean that we anticipate that a narrative will follow from a narrative beginning, regardless of whether or not that narrative is presented in chronological order.

representation of temporally ordered and causally related events; the causal relations are implicit in our anticipation that a narrative will follow *from* a beginning (i.e., that the beginning will function as a causally necessary condition for other events).³⁰

While a narrative beginning is a forward-looking epistemological concept, it also has an epistemological relationship with the narrative material preceding it (even if the preceding material exists only in our minds). Aristotle indicates that labeling something as a beginning implies it is separated from that which comes before, that a beginning is “that which does not have a necessary connection with a preceding event, but which can itself give rise naturally to some further fact or occurrence.”³¹ Patrick Colm Hogan suggests that this quality of narrative beginnings is a product of cognitive bias for how we think of beginnings in life. We think of beginnings as causally separate from anteceding material because it is more efficient and manageable for us to do so, even though, as Hogan notes, “Causal sequences do not begin from nothing. They are multiple and continuous.”³² Even if we are conscious of the fact that every effect stems from some cause (or that every beginning is a result of prior conditions), it takes *effort* to reason back from effects to causes, and such effort is often unnecessary. Thus labeling something as a beginning is particularly useful for our comprehension of narratives, because it

³⁰ However, this is not to say that causality is necessarily the primary organizing principle behind all kinds of narration, but that narrative events themselves are somehow causally related. For a discussion of the competing concepts of what constitutes narrativity, see Paisley Livingston, “Narrativity and Knowledge,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009), 25-36.

³¹ Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 39. Aristotle still acknowledges that there are some events that pertain to a story that exist outside it. According to Aristotle, prior events exist, but the narrative shouldn’t require us to look back upon them to understand the story. Thus for Aristotle, beginnings can be defined through their epistemological status: what is important for a beginning is that it be thought of in relation to a set of events yet to happen, and causally removed from that which precedes it.

³² Hogan, 46. See also Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 47.

implies a causal disconnect from anteceding narrative material, making such effort unnecessary. That is, we assume that by themselves, the state of affairs before the beginning of a narrative does not contribute significantly to the initial cause that starts the story (and if it does, it is told to us through exposition).³³ Many narrative beginnings (especially classical ones) are designed so that we don't have to make the effort to reason out the causes of the initial situation. Indeed, one of the reasons "beginning" is a common term, and common concept for the way in which people think about both events in the world or the start of a narrative, is that identifying an event (or series of events) as a beginning is an easy way for someone to know that the event will be understandable without having to go to the effort of reasoning back to the event's prior causes. That is, identifying an event as a beginning is easy shorthand for "no prior knowledge necessary for adequate comprehension."

Moreover, reasoning back to prior causes is a potentially infinite endeavor; as Philippe Carrard writes, beginnings "open gaps that the most detailed analepses could never fill" because to fill them all, one would need to explain every causal element all the way back to the Big Bang.³⁴ Indeed, the film *Adaptation*. (2002) makes a joke of the potential for infinite causal relations. Shortly into its beginning, when protagonist Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) wonders at how he got to where he is, there is a flashback that begins with a title reading, "Four Billion and Forty Years Earlier," followed by a montage of the formation of Earth and the evolution of

³³ This cognitive bias helps to explain the first three propositions of structuralist narratologist Tzvetan Todorov's definition of a narrative sequence: 1) a state of equilibrium 2) is disturbed by some force, 3) resulting in disequilibrium. By Hogan's account, the state of equilibrium exists only as a product of our cognitively biased view of causality. Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 51.

³⁴ Carrard, 71. "Analepsis" is a narratological term roughly the equivalent of a flashback. Gérard Genette defines it as "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment." Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 40.

life, culminating in Charlie's birth. J. Hillis Miller refers to the unending chain of causal relations as a problem of "infinite regress," and claims that narrative beginnings are impossible; the beginnings of stories consist of stopgap measures, means of "covering over this impossibility... of getting started."³⁵ However, if we take into account the epistemological and cognitive bases for the concept of a beginning, then narrative beginnings are not impossible, but are simply one of the means humans have at their disposal for organizing and understanding information, a segmentation that assists us in efficiently processing and understanding events in narratives (and to a certain extent in our day-to-day encounters as well).³⁶

Fabula and Syuzhet Beginnings

As these discussions of the epistemology of narrative beginnings make clear, "beginnings" are a mental phenomenon. Thus it follows that mental (cognitive) processes would be involved in attempts to identify and define their boundaries in actual texts: where beginnings start, and where they end. This is especially the case for identifying the start of the *fabula*, because the *fabula* itself is a mental construct. Narratives where the *syuzhet* presents *fabula* information out of order provide particularly clear illustrations: In such narratives, construction of a coherent *fabula* relies on our mentally reordering the events presented in the *syuzhet*. However, it is important to combine both form and cognition when attempting to determine a beginning's boundaries, rather than relying on either one or the other. Even though the *fabula* is a mental construct, identifying its beginning involves specifying it in the actual text (to a certain

³⁵ J. Hillis Miller *Reading Narrative* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 58.

³⁶ For an evolutionary account of the advantages of our tendency to segment events, see Patrick Colm Hogan, "Stories, Wars, and Emotions: The Absoluteness of Narrative Beginnings," in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 44-58, esp. 51-58.

degree), and as we shall see later, combining both form and cognition is especially useful for identifying the end of the beginning.

Meir Sternberg identifies the beginning of the *fabula* in literature as “the earliest event... that we learn about in the course of the novel.”³⁷ This event can come at any point in the *syuzhet*. In detective literature, for example, the earliest event of the *fabula* is usually narrated at the end of the *syuzhet*, when the detective explains the means and motivation of the crime committed by the guilty party. However, Brian Richardson finds Sternberg’s identification of the start of the *fabula* too simplistic. He writes that ambiguous or unreliable narration, for instance, might complicate pinpointing the start of the *fabula*, as might distant, narrated events. For example, does a historical event mentioned or described in the *syuzhet* count as a part of the *fabula*, even if it is not causally related to the events of the narrative? One solution Richardson proposes is to include in the *fabula* only “the first incident that is causally connected to those that follow.”³⁸ However, Richardson also identifies a problem with this solution: it is too restrictive because it does not account for *syuzhets* that begin with what Boris Tomashevsky calls “free motifs,” or those narrative events that are “not directly connected to those that follow.”³⁹

There are two other problems with using causal relations to determine the first *fabula* event aside from those that Richardson identifies: it is epistemologically problematic because such events are not actually causally independent from prior ones (causal relations do not end), and it is problematic because it can be difficult (perhaps even impossible) to determine the extent to which an event is causally relevant *during* one’s engagement with the narrative. A viewer

³⁷ Sternberg, 9-10.

³⁸ Richardson, 116.

³⁹ Ibid, 116-117.

cannot really know if a seemingly irrelevant action or event observed in a film is causally relevant until the film's end, when the extent of the action or event's relevance has been proven by the role it ended up playing (or not playing) in the story. One can only speak in terms of causal probabilities, based on knowledge thus far made available by the narration and knowledge of how narratives typically work. While the retrospective determination of causal relevance might be useful for an *a posteriori* analysis of a narrative and narration, it is much less useful for inquiring into the way in which viewers process narratives, and the way in which narrations are shaped to affect those cognitive processes. Richardson concludes that "there is no ready formula for ascertaining the actual beginning of a story," and that instead, one must determine the beginning of a *fabula* on an individual basis, each time selecting the first significant event.⁴⁰

While this conclusion does point toward the *fabula*'s status as a *mental* construct, and as Richardson notes, the "often arbitrary nature of beginnings" themselves, it does not resolve Richardson's objection over the possible complications introduced by ambiguous or unreliable narration. One way to account for ambiguous or unreliable narration that makes use of the *fabula*'s status as a mental construct is to suggest the possibility of a single story containing multiple possible *fabulas* rather than a single, fixed *fabula*. Such a possibility is akin to David Herman's notion of "fuzzy temporality," where "it [is] difficult or even impossible to assign narrated events a fixed or even fixable position along a timeline in the storyworld."⁴¹ In cases of multiple or fuzzy *fabulas*, viewers would hold in mind multiple possibilities simultaneously. Such a concept would be of assistance in determining the beginning of the *fabula* in narratives where unreliable narration never resolves, and we're never told what the "truth" is, such as

⁴⁰ Ibid, 117.

⁴¹ David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 212.

Rashoman (1950), or *The Usual Suspects* (1995). In such films, the beginning of the *fabula* could be one of many different possibilities.⁴²

No matter how one deals with the start of the *fabula* in stories with unreliable narration, there is reason not to be terribly concerned about the inclusion of distant narrated events when identifying the start of the *fabula*. Richardson's implicit concern over the possibility of marking the start of the *fabula* as the most distant narrated event (even if it is a historical one unrelated to the narrative) seems to be that to do so would be ridiculous, because in some stories, the *fabula* could extend as far back as a cosmological event like the creation of the Earth or the sun, or even the Big Bang. Richardson's example is Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, which in one sentence implies a time before the sun existed.⁴³ However, if we keep in mind that the *fabula* is a mental construct, then extending its beginning back this far does not seem such a ridiculous proposition, especially when considering the epistemology of narrative beginnings. As the above discussion of epistemology makes clear, narratives will *always* indirectly imply tangential *fabula* events because causal relations are potentially infinite. For example, if a story takes place in contemporary New York City, then the history of the city up to that point is implied by the city's very existence in the story. This does not mean, however, that the history of the city is a part of the *fabula*. In other words, a distinction can be made between implied events and actual *fabula* events, and the extent to which something should be considered a part of the *fabula* should be

⁴² Menakhem Perry also suggests the possibility of multiple *fabulas*, although he does so by suggesting that there are alternative possible chronologies available for readers to reconstruct aside from the "natural" chronological order of events. For example, one alternative is the order of events as determined by a character's consciousness, while another is the order in which characters relate information to other characters. All of these chronologies can exist simultaneously with one another, although in Perry's description of them, they seem to rely on focalization, a narratological concept more suited to literature than film. Perry, 39-40. For a discussion of focalization, see Genette, 189-194.

⁴³ Richardson, 115. Richardson makes clear that such references needn't be this explicit -- even indirectly alluding to past events could be enough for inclusion in the *fabula*. For example, merely mentioning Christmas implies Jesus's birth.

based on explicitness of the reference to it in the *syuzhet* or the *degree* to which it is causally necessary for the events of the *syuzhet* to take place (some causes are more directly relevant than others). Moreover, even if a story explicitly mentions (or “narrates”) the founding of New York City, there is no reason that the *fabula* cannot be a mental construct that spans great physical and temporal distances. Such a *fabula* might be diagrammatically ungainly, but would not be detrimental to narrative comprehension; audiences can and do call on their knowledge of historical and/or cosmological events with relative ease. Moreover, a *syuzhet*’s invocation of a distant *fabula* event does not mean that the *syuzhet* must spend a lot (or nearly any) time or space on the distant event. Therefore, merely citing historical or cosmological events does not pose as big a hurdle as Richardson implies if one is willing to allow for large and unwieldy *fabulas*. Such *fabulas* may appear ridiculous from an analytical perspective, but from the perspective of viewer comprehension they pose much less of an obstacle.

Regardless, these problems with identifying the start of the *fabula* become much less pressing when we acknowledge that the construction of an accurate *fabula* is a *retrospective* process, similar to that of assigning causal relevance to events upon a story’s conclusion. As David Bordwell writes, “we aren’t aware of building up a *fabula* in our heads, the way we can be at least partially aware of, say, solving a crossword puzzle.... Given that our memories are reconstructive rather than photographic, creating an accurate *fabula* is extremely difficult.”⁴⁴ The construction of a precise *fabula* from a *syuzhet* is an *a posteriori* analytical challenge rather than a cognitive activity on which viewers rely, which is why large and unwieldy *fabulas* do not impede narrative comprehension. While viewers do still build up memories of what’s happened

⁴⁴ David Bordwell, “Common Sense + Film Theory = Common Sense Film Theory?” May 2011. <http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/commonsense.php>, accessed 7 July 2011.

in the story as they move through a film, as Bordwell writes, it is only an idiosyncratic approximation, distorted by “strong moments, and... subject to error.”⁴⁵ Moreover, as Emma Kafalenos notes, the *fabula* is unstable while the narrative progresses; it continually “grows and changes” as we modify it through the addition or subtraction of information (the latter occurring when a narration is revealed as unreliable), and this modification can come at any point during the *syuzhet*.⁴⁶ In other words, while possessing a temporal structure, the *fabula* does not depend on the temporal progression of the narrative for its construction. Therefore, for the purposes of an inquiry into how cognition and narration influence comprehension *during* the beginning of a film, determining the start of the *fabula* is less important and less relevant than determining the start of the *syuzhet*, because the *syuzhet* is what viewers actually engage with *during* the process of watching a film.

Compared to the start of the *fabula*, the start of the *syuzhet* is easy to identify. As Brian Richardson notes, in literature it is nearly always unambiguously “the first page of the narrative proper.”⁴⁷ In film the equivalent is likely the first sound or image pertaining to the diegesis.⁴⁸

Identifying the start of the *syuzhet* as the first sound or image pertaining to the diegesis

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Emma Kafalenos, “Not (Yet) Knowing: Epistemological Effects of Deferred and Suppressed Information in Narrative,” in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 37.

⁴⁷ Richardson, 113. Richardson also lists some literary exceptions, such as hypertext narratives or narratives with shuffled pages.

⁴⁸ While it might be simpler to say that the beginning of the *syuzhet* is coincident with the first diegetic sound or image, rather than the first sound or image *pertaining* to the diegesis, the latter definition is preferable for its flexibility. For instance, it allows the *syuzhet* to begin with an omniscient, extradiegetic voiceover narrator or intertitle, rather than with the first diegetic sound or image. An example includes the title that begins *His Girl Friday* (1940): “It all happened in the ‘dark ages’ of the newspaper game -- when to a reporter ‘getting that story’ justified anything short of murder. Incidentally you will see in this picture no resemblance to the men and women of the press today. Ready? Well, once upon a time...” The title is a part of the narrative, and thus should certainly be included as a part of the film’s *syuzhet*, but it is not necessarily diegetic itself.

necessitates some clarification concerning a film's paratextual material, such as titles and opening credits. There is a distinction between the start of the entire film and the start of the *syuzhet*. Films often begin with paratextual material, such as studio logos, titles, and opening credits; however, these materials are external to the narrative. While this sort of paratextual material most likely informs the way in which viewers think about a film's narrative prior to and during its beginning (particularly in terms of soliciting various schemata that can assist subsequent comprehension), normally paratextual material does not count as a part of the *syuzhet* or the narrative itself. Even in cases where paratextual and diegetic materials are presented simultaneously, the start of the film and the start of the *syuzhet* are still conceptually distinct from one another. For example, the very first image of *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) is of the Paramount logo superimposed over a sidewalk. The camera tilts down, revealing the film's title painted on the curb, and then tracks backward and to the right as the film's opening credits are superimposed on the boulevard. In this example, the start of the *syuzhet* is simultaneous with the start of the film, although the paratextual material could have just as easily been presented before or after the diegetic material.⁴⁹ Additionally, in films where a title appears after the start of the *syuzhet*, the title might be better considered a part of the text, rather than paratextual (although it is not necessarily a part of the narrative). In any case, the beginning of the film and the beginning of the film's narrative must be distinguished from one another because they need not occur simultaneously.

⁴⁹ Although given the trademarking function of the classical Hollywood studio logo, it is very unlikely that *any* material would have preceded the Paramount logo. See Adam Duncan Harris, "Extra Credits: The History and Collection of Pacific Title and Art Studio," (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2006), 31-32. Of course, there are exceptions: the very first image in *Speed Racer*, which precedes even the Warner Bros. logo, is a rotating kaleidoscope of colors, which gradually part to reveal the distributor's familiar shield.

Leopold Joseph Charney attempts to complicate the notion that an instantaneous moment marks the start of the diegesis, arguing that such a moment is invariably connected to intertextual information and extratextual rituals that lead up to it. Charney offers a compelling argument, but one that describes what he terms the “film experience” rather than the presumably narrower subject of a film’s narrative. As Charney writes, “The beginning always gestures outward, beyond the enclosure of its immediate present. As its progressive tense implies, it’s always moving out of itself.... Its function lies in its movement away from itself.”⁵⁰ Charney’s description of the “film experience” certainly applies to the epistemology of beginnings insofar as a beginning is a forward-looking concept. However, for the purposes of a study of *narrative* beginnings, we needn’t forego entirely the notion that the *syuzhet* begins at a specific point.

So far, it would seem that the start of the *syuzhet* is strictly a formal matter: it starts whenever we first glimpse an image or hear a sound from the diegesis. However, the start of the *syuzhet* only appears to be a formal matter because it natively inhabits one of the epistemological characteristics of a narrative beginning: separation from anteceding material. It is impossible for there to be anteceding *syuzhet* material -- what is ordered as first in the *syuzhet* is preceded by nothing other than non-diegetic textual markers like titles, credits, logos, blank screens, or the experience of sitting down to watch the movie (which is itself an action that exists outside of the narrative). Even in films with *syuzhets* that jumble the order of *fabula* events, whatever is presented as “first” has no narrational antecedents, because the *syuzhet* is determined by order. In other words, prior to the initiation of the *syuzhet*, there is simply an absence of diegesis. This is not to say that the *fabula* events or situations conveyed by the start of the *syuzhet* are causally

⁵⁰ Leopold Joseph Charney, “Just Beginnings: Film Studies, Close Analysis, and the Viewer's Experience,” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1992), 46.

independent from anteceding *fabula* events. The beginning of the *syuzhet* is subject to all of the epistemological and causal considerations discussed thus far, including the potentially infinite nature of causal relations. Rather, it is only that the beginning of the *syuzhet* itself -- whatever scene or event comes first in the order of presentation -- has nothing preceding it. Thus it is not that cognition is unnecessary for identifying the start of the *syuzhet* -- “identification” itself implies cognition -- but that this recognition is instantaneous, a product of the film’s form complying with our epistemological notions of the concept of a narrative beginning.

The End of the Beginning: Two Models

Compared to where a narrative beginning starts, identifying where a narrative beginning ends is a complicated matter. As with identifying the start of a beginning, it is once again important to take into consideration both formal properties and cognitive processes, rather than relying on either one or the other, because only through their combination can we arrive at a model for the end of the beginning that is both flexible enough to account for the formal diversity of classical narrative beginnings and comprehensive enough to account for the different possible knowledge bases viewers bring to narratives, and that inform their comprehension of the beginning. As we shall see, identifying the end of a classically narrated beginning solely through form is made difficult by the potential formal diversity of different narrative beginnings, while relying on cognition alone to determine the end of the beginning makes the beginning a little too flexible and disregards too much of the film’s actual narrative information. When combined, form can act as a stabilizing force for cognitive means of determining a beginning’s length, in turn reinforcing the beginning’s status as a large-scale unit of the narrative. In order to show why this is the case, it will be useful to compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of two

previous models that can be used to determine where narrative beginnings end - one model that relies on a narrative's formal properties, and another that relies on cognitive processes.

Kristin Thompson and James Phelan each have attempted to describe a narrative beginning, and have proposed models that can be used to determine where a beginning ends. Comparing their models makes salient the advantages and disadvantages of relying mostly on either form or cognition to determine a beginning's end, and points to the usefulness of a model that incorporates both means of analysis. Thompson specifies the beginning's length and function in relation to a narration's formal characteristics, while Phelan identifies the end of the beginning primarily through cognitive means.

In *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, Thompson uses screenwriting manuals as a basis for segmenting classical Hollywood narratives into parts based on a narrative's formal properties. Contra many screenwriting manuals that prescribe a three act structure, Thompson persuasively argues that Hollywood films typically contain a four act structure, each act approximately equal -- between about 20 and 30 minutes.⁵¹ Thompson identifies "turning points" as the markers that indicate transitions between acts, or segments, and writes that turning points typically consist of changes in character goals, because "almost invariably, the protagonist's goals define the main lines of action."⁵² Thompson calls the first narrative segment the "setup," writing: "In the setup, an initial situation is thoroughly

⁵¹ Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 36. According to Thompson, shorter feature-length films lasting less than 80 minutes and longer feature-length films lasting more than two hours simply subtract or add more middle acts, rather than reducing or expanding the length of the four acts she identifies. Thompson suggests a number of reasons for the balance in the length of each act, one of them being that 20 to 30 minute segments "cater to the attention span of the spectator." 43. Thus her work is not devoid of cognitive concerns; however, they are ancillary to a primarily formal analysis.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14.

established. Often the protagonist conceives one or more goals during this section, though in some cases the setup sticks to introducing the circumstances that will later lead to the formulation of goals.”⁵³ The end of the setup, then, is marked by a change in a character’s goal, most likely the explicit or implicit formation of a goal, although Thompson mentions that other kinds of changes to a character’s goals also can serve as a turning point (at the end of the setup or elsewhere), such as one goal’s achievement and its replacement with another, or the introduction of a major new premise.⁵⁴ For example, the setup of *Casablanca* (1943) can be described by the introduction of an initial situation -- many people fleeing Europe during World War II are stuck in Casablanca, and their desire to leave has created a new social order -- and by the establishment of both Rick’s (Humphrey Bogart) privileged status within that order and his goal of remaining neutral and comfortably numb to the concerns of those around him. The setup ends with the introduction of a major new premise when Victor (Paul Henreid) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) arrive at Rick’s café and pose a challenge to his goal by seeking the letters of transit in Rick’s possession (which, in accord with Thompson’s model, occurs just over 25 minutes into a 102-minute film, or a quarter of the way through).

Phelan also makes a compelling argument for how to define a narrative beginning, including how to identify a beginning’s end, although he does so through cognitive means. In *Reading People, Reading Plots*, Phelan argues that narratives generate and sustain reader interest

⁵³ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁴ Thompson also points out that turning points need not necessarily coincide exactly with the end of a large-scale segment of the narrative, and provides examples where a turning point both precedes and follows transitions between segments. Ibid., 29, 30. Thompson revisits the idea of the turning point in her blog post, “Times Go By Turns,” where she lists 11 kinds of turning points, including one that shades into cognition: the “major revelation,” where the narration reveals or establishes a character’s preexisting goal, as when viewers learn that a protagonist’s ally is actually an antagonist. Here, the change that marks the turning point is located in a viewer’s understanding of the character (i.e., cognition), rather than in any particular change in the narrative action. See Kristin Thompson, “Times Go By Turns,” <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2008/06/21/times-go-by-turns/>, accessed 27 June 2011.

by creating two different kinds of unstable relations, or “instabilities.” Phelan writes that “the first are those occurring within the story, instabilities between characters, created by situations, and complicated and resolved through actions. The second are those created by the discourse, instabilities -- of value, belief, opinion, knowledge, expectation -- between the authors and/or narrators on the one hand, and the authorial audience on the other.”⁵⁵ He refers to unstable story relations as “instabilities,” and unstable discourse relations as “tensions.”⁵⁶ In “The Beginning of *Beloved*: A Rhetorical Approach,” Phelan attempts an overall definition of a narrative beginning, in which he uses instabilities to identify the end of the beginning. Phelan writes that “the moment in the narrative that marks the boundary between the beginning and the middle” is “the revelation of the first set of global instabilities or tensions in the narrative.”⁵⁷ By “global,” Phelan means long-term instabilities that will continue throughout the rest of the narrative, sustaining and driving audience interest. As Phelan implies, the establishment of the first global instabilities allows the reader to make a long-term hypothesis (implicit or explicit) about “the direction and purpose of the whole narrative.”⁵⁸ That is, the end of the beginning is the moment

⁵⁵ James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 15.

⁵⁶ I will use instabilities to refer to both tensions and instabilities. The concepts share much in common with David Hume’s suggestion that a story’s narration makes us wonder what will happen next, and with Barthes’ notion of a text’s hermeneutic code, both of which Noël Carroll summarizes in his model for erotetic narration, or narration which “proceeds by generating questions [in viewers] that the narration then goes on to answer.” “Narrative Closure,” 211. Carroll writes that “a story sustains our attention, often irresistibly, by presenting us with *questions* that we want answered -- questions that the narrative implicitly promises to answer and which we expect will be answered.” *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵⁷ James Phelan, “The Beginning of *Beloved*: A Rhetorical Approach,” in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 197-198. The notion of the global tension is akin to Boris Tomashevsky’s “exciting force,” or a motif that disturbs an initially harmonious situation. See Tomashevsky, 72. It is also akin to the complicating action or inciting incident advocated by many screenwriting manuals. For instance, Syd Field calls it the first “plot point” in *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982), 9, while Richard Walter calls it a “complication” in *Screenwriting: The Art, Craft and Business of Film and Television Writing* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 52.

⁵⁸ Phelan, “The Beginning of *Beloved*,” 198.

at which we are able to recognize the first global instabilities and make a long-term or global hypothesis about the direction of the rest of the narrative.⁵⁹ The concept of a global hypothesis is similar to that which Noël Carroll puts forward in his model for erotetic narration, the “presiding macroquestion,” which is “the question that dominates the motion picture globally from one end to the other.”⁶⁰ Like Thompson’s model, Phelan’s also dictates that the beginning of *Casablanca* ends when Victor and Ilsa show up at Rick’s café seeking the letters of transit, but here it is because this event (in combination with the other information leading up to it) prompts us to form a global hypothesis, most likely that the rest of the film will involve the conflicts that arise in the course of Rick’s decision over what to do with the letters.⁶¹

As the *Casablanca* example indicates, at a glance, Thompson’s model for the end of the setup and the formation of character goals seems to correspond with Phelan’s ideas about the end

⁵⁹ In Phelan’s model, the global instability and the global hypothesis are intimately, yet ambiguously connected. Even though Phelan writes that the establishment of the first global *instability* marks the end of the beginning, rather than the global hypothesis, the global hypothesis itself is also a part of his model for the beginning (the global instability is a “textual dynamic,” or a formal property, while the global hypothesis is a “readerly dynamic,” or a cognitive process). Therefore, if Phelan’s model implies that the establishment of a global instability and the formation of a global hypothesis occur simultaneously, then we can still say that the beginning ends with the formation of the global hypothesis; it just also happens simultaneously with the establishment of a global instability. On the other hand, if Phelan’s model implies that a global hypothesis forms *after* and as a *result* of a global instability, then despite Phelan’s identification of the global instability as the end of the beginning, it is the global hypothesis that actually marks the end, because the “readerly dynamic” of the global hypothesis is still a part of the beginning. Phelan does not specify which of these possibilities he thinks likely, but either way, despite Phelan’s estimation, it seems as though the formation of the global hypothesis concludes the beginning, rather than the establishment of the global instability.

⁶⁰ Carroll, “Narrative Closure,” 212. Asking questions and forming hypotheses are essentially different ways of describing the same process: Hypotheses are answers to questions we ask (implicitly or explicitly) about the narrative. However, Carroll’s presiding macroquestion differs from Phelan’s global hypothesis in that Carroll suggests that presiding macroquestions last for the entirety of the narrative, rather than being developed over the course of the narrative’s beginning. While Carroll raises the possibility that macroquestions might not last the entirety of the narrative, he does so by arguing that one macroquestion can be replaced by another, implying that a macroquestion is still always present from the start.

⁶¹ While narratives sometimes offer the possibility for multiple directions, and thus multiple global hypotheses, in classical narration these multiple directions often are causally related to one another, if not inextricably linked. See David Bordwell’s remarks on the causal relations of dual plot lines in classically narrated films in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 157-158.

of the beginning and the global hypothesis; once a character has formed a goal, we might then expect the rest of the narrative to be about its achievement. Each model has advantages. Thompson's model for a setup highlights the work that classical beginnings typically perform, such as the establishment of causality as an organizing principle, and characters' roles as the principal causal agents. Her model also grants narratives some flexibility in acknowledging that goals (and the direction of the narrative) can change, and her division of a film into acts substantiates the idea of beginnings as large-scale units. In Phelan's model, using a cognitive process such as the formation of a global hypothesis to identify the end of the beginning grants the beginning temporal flexibility. As Phelan notes, setting the beginning's boundary as the revelation of the first global instability and the formation of the first global hypothesis allows beginnings to be of telescoping rather than fixed length. A beginning becomes "a unit whose length will vary considerably from narrative to narrative, since some beginnings will include more exposition than others, and some will take longer to establish the first set of global instabilities or tensions."⁶² Phelan also allows viewers to be tentative and to make mistakes. Identifying the end of the beginning as the moment when we can establish a global instability and hypothesis about the rest of the narrative means that "from a first-time reader's perspective, the identification will initially be a tentative one, something for which the reader will seek confirmation or disconfirmation in the [narrative's] subsequent progression."⁶³ That is, what matters is where viewers *think* the narrative is headed. Even if the direction of the narrative changes, and the global hypothesis ultimately proves incorrect, we can still say the beginning has ended because viewers have made a global hypothesis.

⁶² Phelan, 198.

⁶³ Ibid. For similar sentiments regarding viewer hypotheses during the beginning of a text, see Perry, 46.

While Thompson's model offers important insights into the formal properties of beginnings in classical narration, its rigidity shows why it is useful to incorporate a cognitive component into an attempt to separate the beginning from subsequent portions of a narrative. Likewise, while Phelan's use of comprehension processes in the identification of the end of the beginning is extremely insightful, it can be clarified and improved by refining the idea of the global hypothesis, and by more explicitly incorporating actual narrative materials, such as characters, causally necessary conditions, and exposition into the means of determining where the beginning ends.

A serious drawback to Thompson's model is that while the end of most beginnings in films with classical narration often correspond to the establishment of character goals (through their formation or their revelation), they needn't always do so. As Thompson herself points out, it is possible (although rare) for a classically narrated film to have a protagonist without goals, and it is possible for a character's goals to remain consistent throughout the course of the entire narrative, and thus offer no opportunity for turning points.⁶⁴ Her example is *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* (1963), where "the premise of the hunt for missing bank-robbery loot is set up in the opening of this 154-minute film and pursued in doggedly episodic fashion until the final revelation."⁶⁵ Therefore, the formation of a global hypothesis does not always correspond to changes in character goals (including their formation), and we should hesitate before equating the setup with the beginning in general, because even in classically narrated films without turning points, or without characters whose goals change, we should still say that the beginning

⁶⁴ Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

ends. Beginnings must end somewhere, even if in the course of the narrative no new turning points arise to distinguish Thompson's acts from one another.

The flexibility of Phelan's model is a double-edged sword. One potential problem with identifying the end of the beginning as the establishment of the first global hypothesis is that viewers are capable of recognizing a global instability and making a global hypothesis extremely early, either through the information revealed by narration itself, or through extratextual or paratextual material such as titles, publicity material, or reviews. Films with introductory voiceovers or title cards at the start of the *syuzhet*, or films that begin *ab fine* are particularly conducive to the immediate formation of a global hypothesis. For example, *Sunset Blvd.* both begins *ab fine* and has an introductory voiceover that introduces a global instability, giving a strong indication of the course of the narrative. Joe Gillis's (William Holden) voiceover describes the setting, the circumstances of his death, and after a flashback, his voiceover gives important expositional information about his work as a struggling screenwriter. Thus it seems that within the first four minutes of the film (the length of Joe's introductory voiceover) viewers are able to form a global hypothesis: The narrative will be about the events leading up to Joe's murder, even though (outside of Joe's passing mention of an "old-time movie star") none of the other principal characters has been introduced, and we know nothing of the specific circumstances (or instabilities, in Phelan's terms) that will lead to his death. An example of a narrative with paratextual material that pretty clearly allows for the creation of a global hypothesis is the 2007 film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*. Here, the title alone seems to indicate clearly what the narrative is about.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ While all titles have the potential to inform global hypotheses, rarely are they this explicit. This example conforms nicely to Edward Branigan's concept of titles' function as an "abstract" or summary of the situation to follow. See

While beginnings might be of telescoping (or variable) length, it seems counterintuitive and narratologically unproductive to collapse the beginning to the first few minutes of a feature length film, as with *Sunset Blvd.*, or to the title, as with *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*. Relying only on Phelan's model for global hypotheses, it even would be possible to say that the beginning of the latter film has concluded upon reading the title, which can happen even before the film has begun! In those cases, Phelan's implied requirement for a global hypothesis (the establishment of a global instability) seems insufficient for describing the end of the beginning because it does not distinguish between the different properties of global hypotheses, properties that are affected by a viewer's accumulation and of actual narrative materials and their incorporation into global hypotheses. Phelan certainly is right to imply that the establishment of the first global instability solicits the formation of a global hypothesis, because the very act of recognizing an instability as "global" is a matter of hypothesizing that it will be the subject of much of the rest of the narrative. However, even though recognizing a global instability always solicits the formation of a global hypothesis, such hypotheses do not always mark the end of the beginning in classical narratives, because they do not always possess two of the most important properties for a beginning-ending global hypothesis.

The End of the Beginning: The Properties of Global Hypotheses

Global hypotheses can mark the end of the beginning in classically narrated films when they become both *probable* and *exclusive*. Probability and exclusivity are two properties that Meir Sternberg and David Bordwell attribute to the hypotheses we make while engaging with a

Branigan, 18. Additionally, *Jesse James* does not actually feature the film's title in any form of on-screen text during the film's beginning, and thus it is truly paratextual.

narrative. Bordwell writes that hypotheses may be “more or less *probable*, ranging from the highly likely to the flatly improbable, and more or less *exclusive*, ranging from either/or choices to mixed sets.”⁶⁷ These are useful terms for describing what Bordwell calls “microscopic,” or short-term, local hypotheses because they provide a great deal of explanatory power for the moment-to-moment processing of a narrative, but they can also be used to describe global hypotheses. Bordwell hints at where global hypotheses tend to fall on the scales of probability and exclusivity when he writes that “indefinite” but “highly significant arc[s] of ‘macroexpectation’ may extend across a whole film,” and that “hypotheses tend to vary in precision according to their placement in the text: They tend to be more ‘open’ at the start of a text.”⁶⁸ That is, the viewer goes from thinking that many different kind of things can happen at the start of a film to hypothesizing about a specific set of options near the film’s end, which nicely describes why probability and exclusivity differentiate beginning-ending global hypotheses from the global hypotheses viewers are capable of making over the course of the entire beginning: The global hypothesis that marks the end of the beginning is the result of viewers being able to significantly narrow their expectations for the direction of the narrative.

⁶⁷ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 37. See also Sternberg, 245-246. Bordwell and Sternberg also identify two more properties: simultaneity, which is the degree to which hypotheses are simultaneous with other hypotheses, and whether hypotheses concern future events (suspense hypotheses) or past events (curiosity hypotheses). Global hypotheses always are suspense hypotheses, since they are about a story that has yet to be narrated. Simultaneity is a less important property for a discussion of beginning-ending global hypotheses, since a global hypothesis solicited by classical narration often has bound within it other interrelated hypotheses. For example, the global hypothesis that *Casablanca* will concern what Rick does with the letters implies a series of related hypotheses: that the film also will involve Victor’s attempts to escape the Nazis; that Rick’s neutrality will be tested; that the woman traveling with Victor will play a pivotal role, and so on.

⁶⁸ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 37. Rabinowitz also touches on the notion that our expectations about a story range between expecting something to happen, but also expecting that not *anything* can happen. See Rabinowitz, 117-118. However, Bordwell’s theory offers more explanatory power because he delineates how our expectations change as the narrative progresses, whereas Rabinowitz simply assumes both of these expectations (something will happen, but not *anything*) are present from the start, and because he provides no means distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable expectations.

However, as implied by Bordwell's characterization of arcs of macroexpectation as "indefinite," it is important to note that a global hypothesis is not the same as a prediction. Carroll describes the distinction well when he writes that anticipation of a narrative's direction is a matter of viewers "having a broad sense of where it is headed... rather than having a definite sense of what will happen next (as would be the case with prediction)."⁶⁹ The more information (or causally necessary conditions) viewers accumulate, the less free the range of subsequent narrative possibilities, because later events need to be a result of antecedent causally necessary conditions (otherwise the narrative becomes incoherent and unintelligible). In other words, a beginning-ending global hypothesis is not a definite prediction about the direction of the rest of the narrative, but instead is a set of expectations that have been narrowed by the information that has been narrated over the course of the beginning. Carroll gives an apt hypothetical example, writing: "Presented with a boy and a girl, we entertain the possibility that they may or may not subsequently become lovers, but we do not, without the addition of more information, anticipate that Mars will explode."⁷⁰

This distinction between prediction and a narrowed range of expectations becomes evident by describing the probability of a global hypothesis. Probability is the degree to which a global hypothesis seems likely to be correct, but it concerns the *direction* of the narrative, not the outcome of the actual *events* within the narrative. In a situation where a protagonist explicitly declares his goals, the resulting global hypothesis would likely be "this film will probably be about the protagonist's attempts to achieve those goals," not, "the protagonist will or will not achieve his goals." In other words, the probability of a global hypothesis involves the likelihood

⁶⁹ Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 130.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

of a narrative being about a subject (like a character's goals), not the actual outcome of the subject (like whether the goals will be achieved). The latter strays into prediction, while the former allows for a range of possibilities based on antecedent information. Beginning-ending global hypotheses are distinctly probable hypotheses; given the information narrated over the course of the beginning, it appears highly probable that the rest of the narrative will be about a specific subject.

The exclusivity of a global hypothesis involves its content: It's the extent to which we have a specific idea of what the narrative is "about." Viewers are able to make a global hypothesis exclusive by incorporating into it the specific information narrated over the course of the beginning. The more narrative information we accumulate over the course of the beginning, the more precise our hypothesis about the narrative's direction will be, and the less reliant the global hypothesis will be on schemata and general knowledge of narrational norms and other intertextual or extratextual information. That is, a global hypothesis becomes exclusive when it can be tailored to the specific narrative materials introduced over the course of the beginning. For example, it is not enough to hypothesize that Jesse James (Brad Pitt) will be assassinated by the cowardly Robert Ford (Casey Affleck) for the beginning of *Jesse James* to have concluded; instead we must also anticipate that the film will be about how Ford's relationship with James changes from one of reverence and admiration -- which we learn over the course of the beginning as we watch the two become accomplices -- to one where Ford finds it necessary to kill his former friend. Similarly, Victor and Ilsa's arrival at Rick's café solicits a probable and exclusive global hypothesis that the rest of *Casablanca* will concern Rick's decision over what to do with the letters of transit because much of the beginning's narrative information pertains either to the conflicts between those who wish to leave Casablanca and those who wish to

prevent people from leaving, or to Rick's self-interested neutrality and his substantial, yet seldom-exercised ability to grant others' wishes. This information is especially evident in the three scenes immediately preceding Victor and Ilsa's arrival, where both Captain Renault (Claude Rains) and Major Strasser (Conrad Veidt) impress upon Rick that Victor is not to receive an exit visa should he come to Rick's café, and where Rick declines to help Ugarte (Peter Lorre) avoid arrest by the Vichy police, even stating at that scene's conclusion, "I stick my neck out for nobody."

While global hypotheses may form suddenly, they acquire exclusivity gradually; we recast and refine our global hypotheses as more information (or causally necessary conditions) is introduced and certain directions for a narrative appear increasingly likely.⁷¹ Thus exclusivity is the property that ensures that classical narrative beginnings -- while of flexible duration -- take some amount of time to develop before they conclude, even in films that establish a global instability almost immediately, as in *Jesse James* and *Sunset Blvd.* Within the first four minutes of *Sunset Blvd.*, the voiceover narration makes it extremely probable that the film will involve the events leading up to Joe's death. However, this global hypothesis still lacks the exclusivity supplied by the specific information doled out over the course of the beginning, which includes the dire state of Joe's finances, his chance encounter with Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), and his agreeing to work on her script and stay at her mansion, all of which allow viewers to fill in their probable global hypothesis with specific details. As David Bordwell writes of anomalous suspense, "We know the outcome, but how do we get there?"⁷² The same could be asked of films

⁷¹ As Edward Branigan writes, "story comprehension involves the continuous generation of better-specified and more complicated expectations about what might be coming next and its place in a pattern." Branigan, 15.

⁷² David Bordwell, "Slumdogged by the Past," <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2009/02/01/slumdogged-by-the-past/>, accessed 27 June 2011.

that reveal a global instability shortly after the start of the diegesis, and the exclusivity of the global hypothesis becomes an answer to that question. That is, the beginnings of films like *Sunset Blvd.* and *Jesse James* do not end within the first four minutes of the film, or within the time it takes to read the title, because the films have not yet introduced the details that would allow us to outfit our probable global hypotheses with the specific details of the story.

By implying that a narrative must establish global instabilities for viewers to form global hypotheses, Phelan hints at both probability and exclusivity: recognizing an instability as global implies that it is probable that the rest of the narrative will concern its resolution, and stating that narrative information (characters, settings, and events) is an important part of the beginning in general implies the importance of the specific narrative information that makes a global hypothesis exclusive. However, a stronger, more precise definition of the end of the beginning would be one that incorporates these properties explicitly: a classical narrative beginning concludes *when the narration has introduced enough information* for viewers to form a *probable* and *exclusive* global hypothesis about the direction of the rest of the narrative. That is, a global hypothesis that marks the end of the beginning does so through its incorporation of the specific information the narration introduces over the course of the beginning's length, be it characters, causally necessary conditions for later events, or exposition.

Identifying the end of the beginning by specifying that the global hypothesis that marks it is both probable and exclusive guards against the possibility of a beginning that ends before it has had time to develop (and before it could be described as a "large-scale" narrative segment), while at the same time providing more flexibility than the 20-30 minute window Thompson allows. Even the viewer who enters the theater with a pre-existing probable global hypothesis still experiences the beginning while the narration introduces information. However, without the

accumulation of the actual narrative materials narrated over the course of the beginning, most viewers, even those with moderate or considerable prior knowledge, are unable to invest their global hypotheses with the exclusivity that marks a beginning-ending global hypothesis in classically narrated films.⁷³ Specifying that the global hypothesis must be both probable and exclusive allows viewers to have significant prior knowledge without making a cognitive processes-based attempt to define the end of the beginning an antiseptic, exclusively hypothetical affair. After all, almost no one approaches a film as a blank slate. Usually we know something about a film before we see it -- at the very least the title, but also stars or other creative personnel, and perhaps even some of the plot (film trailers often provide precisely this information). Such paratextual knowledge is often strong motivation for seeing a film in the first place. At the same time that these considerations strengthen the cognitive basis of this model, the model still prioritizes the actual mechanics of the narration, as well as the way that viewers process and use narrative information, which as Thompson points out, in classical narration often involves character goals. As Mary Edelstein writes about Nabokov's paratextual material in *Lolita* (which includes a fictional foreword),

⁷³ There can be extreme cases in which a viewer has total or near total knowledge of the narrative prior to the start of the *syuzhet*. Such viewers might include a film's maker(s), those who read detailed spoilers, and perhaps people who are familiar with the source of an adapted work. Theoretically, such viewers would have no need to hypothesize because they already know everything, in which case the beginning's end would be determined primarily by the narration's formal properties (a change in character goals, for example). However, it is possible that even viewers with the utmost familiarity with a narrative still can engage in hypothesis formation, simply because they are following the narrational cues that tend to solicit them. Such hypothesis formation would be akin to anomalous suspense, wherein a viewer already knows the outcome of a suspenseful situation, but still feels suspense because the narration focuses their attention on factors that are designed to encourage thoughts that can generate suspense. As David Bordwell writes: "If you merely *entertain the thought* that the story situation is uncertain, then you can feel suspense just as easily as if you entertained the thought that you were falling off [a] mountain top." David Bordwell, "This Is Your Brain on Movies, Maybe," <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2007/03/07/this-is-your-brain-on-movies-maybe/>, accessed 27 June 2011. Likewise, merely entertaining the thought of other possible story outcomes might prompt viewers with total or nearly total prior knowledge to engage in hypothesis formation nonetheless. Regardless, extreme-case film viewers do not describe the majority of viewers, not even causal repeat viewers, because humans do not recall narratives with perfect clarity, especially after a long time. See Bordwell, "Common Sense + Film Theory -- Common-Sense Film Theory?"

Although readers' expectations of a text they are about to begin reading are shaped by a host of extratextual and paratextual elements that precede their picking up the book -- such as knowledge of the author's other works or biography and of the historical, social and cultural contexts in which the work was written -- few such elements have as much immediate power to shape the reading experience as a preface or afterword that is part of physical text itself.⁷⁴

Likewise, the narration of the beginning itself also has the most immediate power to shape the viewer's understanding of a film's narrative.

Probability and exclusivity are also the reasons for why this model focuses on classical narration. Classically narrated films are conducive to viewers forming probable and exclusive global hypotheses about the direction of the narrative because such films accord with many viewers' preexisting schemata for "canonical" narratives.⁷⁵ Such a schema can be roughly described as a template in which a goal-oriented protagonist sets right a violation of an initial state of affairs, and where the representation of space and time support narrative causality, which in turn is often organized through character psychology.⁷⁶ However, such a schema isn't necessarily applicable to other storytelling traditions or modes of narration, because other modes and traditions adhere to different norms that can make it difficult to anticipate a narrative's direction, and that are best understood through different schemata than those that are applicable to classical narration. For instance, the psychologically ambiguous characters and loose causal relations between events in art cinema narration are norms that make it difficult to anticipate the direction of the narrative.⁷⁷ The schemata viewers develop to cope with these norms are aimed

⁷⁴ Mary Edelstein, "Before the Beginning: Nabokov and the Rhetoric of the Preface," in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 40.

⁷⁵ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 35.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 157. Chapter 2 will discuss further the norms of classical narration.

⁷⁷ David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Film Criticism* 4.1. (Fall 1979), 57.

less at encouraging the formation of expectations and hypotheses about story developments, and more at enabling viewers to simply motivate and understand the events of the *syuzhet* or the film's formal design. In other words, the model for the end of the beginning proposed here focuses on classical narration because the norms of classical narration and the schemata that aid our processing of it make it possible for viewers to form probable and exclusive global hypotheses about the direction of such narratives. In a classical film, we can be reasonably sure that the representation of space and time will support narrative causality, particularly unambiguous character psychology, and that early events will come to bear on later story developments; however, art cinema and other modes of narration don't necessarily harbor such norms, and therefore forming probable hypotheses for the direction of the narrative is often difficult, and sometimes impossible.⁷⁸ Thus one would have to use other means besides the formation of probable and exclusive global hypotheses for the direction of the rest of the narrative to determine the end of the beginning in films with non-classical narration.

Overview of Subsequent Chapters

Chapter 2 will lay the groundwork for the cognitive and formal model of narrative beginnings proposed in this dissertation, focusing primarily on schemata and the primacy effect, two concepts from cognitive and social psychology that play important roles in the comprehension of narrative beginnings. It will also discuss narrative causality, both in terms of the way viewers think about causality in narrative beginnings, as well as the ways in which classical beginnings draw attention to causally relevant information. The chapter will also

⁷⁸ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 157. *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), for example, lacks coherent characters and causality, and there is little basis for forming even local hypotheses, let alone global ones.

discuss the concept of norms in general, their importance for defining classical narration, and some of the general normative narrational characteristics of classical beginnings, such as their degree of knowledgeability, communicativeness, and self-consciousness. It will conclude with a basic overview of the cognitive and narrational model outlined in the chapter.

Chapter 3 will explore the importance of exposition for classical beginnings. It will address how exposition is defined in literature, whether or not that definition is applicable to other media such as film, ways in which exposition might be conveyed through imagery rather than text, and how one can identify exposition in stories in which story order is rearranged, such as in stories with flashbacks. It will also propose reasons for why exposition is an important component in the narration of beginnings, and address the cognitive effects it can have based on its location and concentration in the *syuzhet*, how it is normatively used, and the degree to which this use varies in classical narration.

Chapter 4 will address additional cognitive concepts useful for describing how viewers process characters in the beginning, such as typing and folk psychology, and how they contribute to our first impressions of characters. It will also examine how our conception of characters develops as the narrative progresses, the role star personae can have in our understanding of characters, and how psychologically rich situations develop out of narrative beginnings. Finally, it will also address the norms for character introduction in classical narratives, as well as the way in which classical narration individuates characters and expedite viewers' formation of complex inferences about characters' mental states.

Chapter 5 will explore the beginnings of films where the narration deliberately misleads viewers into an unknowingly and largely inaccurate understanding of significant characters, events, or actions, only to surprise viewers at the end of the film when the extent of the

narration's duplicity is finally revealed. Such films are useful to examine not only because they push the boundaries of classical beginnings, but also because they demonstrate both the importance of narrative beginnings for viewers' understanding of subsequent events, as well as the analytical utility of many of the norms and concepts set forth in the previous chapters. Chapter 5 will discuss why narrative beginnings are particularly conducive to misleading viewers, as well as various ways in which a duplicitous narration can achieve its effects by deviating from the norms and manipulate the cognitive processes discussed in previous chapters, including soliciting inaccurate first impressions of characters, de-emphasizing or obscuring causally relevant information in a film's beginning, soliciting schemata that influence or limit the ways in which viewers use the information presented in the beginning, and establishing intrinsic norms from which the narration later deviates.

Chapter 2

Classical Beginnings and Fundamental Concepts in Cognition and Narration

If beginnings end when we've made probable and exclusive global hypotheses, then the next step in inquiring into the cognitive processes and formal properties of narrative beginnings is to determine just how we process and make judgments about the information narrated in the beginning, as well as how the norms of classical narration are organized to assist with this process. Accordingly, much of this chapter will specify some of the cognitive concepts underlying narrative comprehension in general, concepts which will serve as the basis for a discussion of viewer mental activity over the course of the beginning. As Chapter 1 implies, such concepts include the use of schemata to organize information and solicit hypotheses and inferences, as well as the primacy effect, or the effect first impressions have on the comprehension of subsequent narrative material. This chapter can be roughly divided into two halves, the first of which will address the importance of these and other concepts from cognitive psychology, and discusses how they operate in narrative beginnings. The second half of the chapter will address general issues and concepts related to narrational form, including the concept of norms, classical narration as a mode of storytelling in film, and some of the normative properties of classical narrative beginnings. It will conclude with a summary of the model for the comprehension and narration of beginnings outlined throughout the chapter.

Schemata

As stated above, hypotheses -- global or otherwise -- are based on the schemata we use to comprehend narrative information. As we shall see, schemata play a very important role in viewer comprehension of narrative beginnings. A schema (plural, schemas or schemata) is an

abstract, mental construct for categorical knowledge of the properties of an object, event, or process, derived from lived experience, including experience with narratives. In Edward Branigan's words, it can be thought of as "a graded set of expectations about experience in a given domain."¹ Schemata assist comprehension by allowing us to quickly assign incoming information to general categories, knowledge of which then informs our understanding of the specific information being perceived. In narratives, schemata help us take the specific information presented by the narration and categorize it with other, general knowledge we *already* possess that pertains to that information, giving us some context about the specific information. For example, if a film were to show a couple ordering a meal at a restaurant, this information can activate an event schema, or script (not to be confused with screenplay) for dining at a restaurant. While such a script can vary from person to person, it would usually include being seated, looking at a menu, ordering a meal, eating, paying the bill, and leaving.² Knowledge of this script, then, places any of these events in the context of the other events that surround it. Once such a schema is activated, it can serve as the basis for subsequent cognitive activity related to narrative comprehension, including inference-making and hypothesis-casting; schemata are often the way through which we think about narrative situations (rather than the object of our thoughts per se). There are many different kinds of schemata aside from scripts, and

¹ Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 13.

² In an experiment conducted by G. H. Bower, J. B. Black, and T.J. Turner, 73 percent of test subjects included these events as parts of a script for dining at a restaurant. See G. H. Bower, J. B. Black and T. J. Turner, "Scripts in Memory for Text." *Cognitive Psychology*, 11 1979, 177-220. Of course, such a script includes many other details which might be considered "sub-schematic." As Jean Matter Mandler points out, embedded within a restaurant script are actions like bending one's knees in order to sit down and opening one's mouth in order to eat, but these details fall below the "basic level" of the script events, unless there is another schema active that would make such details important for our comprehension. See Jean Matter Mandler, *Stories, Scripts, and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984), 102.

just as many different ways of categorizing various schemata. Three useful distinctions are between prototype, template, and procedural schemata.

Prototype schemata (also called central tendency schemata), as David Bordwell describe them, “involve identifying individual members of a class according to some posited norm.” In narratives, they are useful for “identifying individual agents, actions, goals, and locales.”³ In other words, prototype schemata categorize static structures like people or objects; they help us quickly recognize something as belonging to a category, members of which share attributes. Murray Smith provides a useful example of one prototype schema particularly important for narratives, a “person schema,” which he describes as having the following properties:

1. a discrete human body, individuated and continuous through time and space;
2. perceptual activity, including self-awareness;
3. intentional states, such as beliefs and desires;
4. emotions;
5. the ability to use and understand a natural language;
6. the capacity for self-impelled actions and self-interpretation
7. the potential for traits, or persisting attributes.⁴

When we encounter people in the world, we don’t run through this checklist in our minds, but instead we generally assume a person to have these prototypical properties (unless we are informed otherwise). This schema in turn helps us understand people’s behavior and attributes, and helps us easily engage with them. The same can be said for our encounters with the narrative counterpart of people: characters. When we encounter a character in a narrative, we categorize information we learn of him or her according to this schema, and assume that they have these prototypical properties, even if all of them are not in evidence in the actual narrative.

³ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 35.

⁴ Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 21.

Oftentimes, information pertaining to the first part of Smith's person schema is enough to activate it: if we see a discrete human body that is individuated and continuous though space and time, we will most likely assume the rest of the properties of the person schema apply as well, even if there is no evidence of them. In other words, just seeing a person or character is enough to activate a person schema. At the same time, the schema can be activated even if the person is not visible. For example, in *Casablanca*, the narration introduces Rick by first having other characters talk about him. A patron asks the waiter, Carl (S. Z. Sakall), if Rick would have a drink with her and her friends. This question activates the person schema by implying that Rick possesses properties five and six: Rick can be asked questions and thus has the ability to understand language, and he can initiate actions (and thus "Rick's Café Americain" refers to more than just the name of an establishment). Carl responds that Rick never drinks with customers, implying property seven: Rick has persisting attributes or traits. Another character obliquely implies property three (intentional states) when he asks if Rick would change his mind if Rick knew the patron ran the second largest bank in Amsterdam. The person schema is a relatively obvious instance of a prototype schema; it is so ingrained in our social behavior that we intuitively rely on it to inform us about character interiority (especially when combined with folk psychology, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4).⁵ As this example demonstrates, it is very easy to solicit a prototype schema from viewers, which in turn implies their usefulness in our comprehension processes.

⁵ Per Persson describes folk psychology as "a schema for the individual to use in attributing mental states of others." Persson, *Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 163. Persson's model provides a compelling and powerful tool for analyzing how we infer the mental states and dispositions of characters in a film.

Template schemata, as social psychologist Reid Hastie describes them, are filing systems “for classifying, retaining, and coordinating incoming sensory data.”⁶ They are larger structures in which prototype schemata and scripts operate, and are useful for describing our mental models for dynamic procedures, like processes or event sequences. A particularly important template schema for narrative comprehension is what Jean Matter Mandler refers to as a “story schema,” which is a “mental structure consisting of sets of expectations about the way in which stories proceed.”⁷ As both David Bordwell and Edward Branigan have pointed out, nearly all story comprehension research agrees that a narrative template schema has a canonical or traditional format.⁸ Branigan describes such a format as including the following properties:

1. introduction of setting and characters;
2. explanation of a state of affairs;
3. initiating event;
4. emotional response or statement of a goal by the protagonist;
5. complicating actions;
6. outcome;
7. reactions to outcome.⁹

At a glance, this canonical narrative template narrative schema resembles the narrative formulae developed by structuralist narratologists such as Tzvetan Todorov, or the dramatic pyramid of novelist Gustav Freytag.¹⁰ However, there is an important distinction between structuralist formulae and template schemata: a schema is a *mental structure*, and a canonical narrative

⁶ Reid Hastie, “Schematic Principles in Human Memory,” in *Social Cognition: The Ontario Symposium, Volume 1*, ed. Higgins, E. Tory, C. Peter Herman, and Mark P. Zanna (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981), 40.

⁷ Mandler, 18.

⁸ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 35, Branigan, 14. See also Nancy L. Stein, “Story Comprehension and Appreciation,” in *The Arts, Cognition, and Basic Skills*, ed. Stanley S. Madeja (St. Louis: Cemrel, 1978), 233.

⁹ Branigan, 14. Branigan adapts and modifies Stein’s canonical template schema.

¹⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 52, and Gustav Freytag, *Freytag’s Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, trans. Elias J. MacEwan (Chicago: S. C. Griggs & Company, 1895).

template schema claims to describe in general how *people* think about the structure of a typical narrative. On the other hand, structuralist emphasis is on formal properties: A narrative formula or a story grammar claims to describe actual narratives.¹¹ Thus while a story grammar might be criticized as prescriptive, a narrative schema does not fall prey to such criticisms because it makes no claims on the structure of *actual* narratives (although it is derived from prior experience with narratives). Although story comprehension researchers have proposed alternative models for a canonical narrative template schema, the models' differences reside mostly in the degree to which the elements might repeat, their precise division, and the maximum complexity the model can have while still remaining valid.¹² Overall, the resemblances among various template schemata outweigh the differences, and Branigan's description is exemplary. No matter the exact model, the important point is that a canonical narrative template schema underlies and organizes an individual's comprehension of stories, including, as Nancy L. Stein puts it, "the expectations people have concerning the parts that should occur in stories and the relationships that should occur among the parts."¹³

When engaging with a narrative, unless we are informed otherwise, we assume that the information provided by the narration can be categorized in relation to this template schema, even if the *syuzhet* rearranges the order of the *fabula* (in which case we reconstruct the *fabula* according to the order of this template).¹⁴ In other words, a canonical narrative template schema

¹¹ See Mandler, 18 for further discussion of the distinction between "story grammar" and a story schema.

¹² For examples, see Mandler, 24. See also Perry W. Thorndyke, "Cognitive Structures in Comprehension and Memory of Narrative Discourse," *Cognitive Psychology* 9:1 (1977), 79.

¹³ Stein, 233. Subsequent references to a narrative template schema will refer to this canonical format.

¹⁴ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 35. While story *content* varies widely from culture to culture, as does knowledge required to understand character goals and motivation, Mandler finds that "the human mind and its limitations on memory are such that certain forms of storytelling regularly emerged in various cultures around the world," and that while cultural differences certainly exist in the content and in the kinds of stories told, there is

provides a context for how to understand, make assumptions, and form expectations about how the information presented by the narration will pertain to the narrative in general. For instance, viewers of a film will assume that characters heavily favored by the narration in the beginning will play significant roles over the course of the narrative, that the initial state of affairs will not remain unchanged throughout the narrative's length, and that the outcome will likely depend upon the actions of its characters, and so on. In addition to containing general knowledge about a given domain, schemata also specify the relationships among their attributes, and thus one implicit, yet important facet of this schema is that it relies on causality to achieve coherence, even though the events it contains need not be strictly causal in themselves.¹⁵ As Jean Matter Mandler writes, a narrative template schema "provides such a strong basis for coherence that one can leave out all explicit reference to causal and temporal connections from the surface structure, yet leave the narrative comprehensible; the schema itself provides the connectives missing from the surface."¹⁶

A narrative template schema also can direct our attention by making some information more relevant for filling in the schema than other information, which in turn helps us process information quickly by focusing and narrowing our perceptual activity. In other words, by guiding our overall expectations about the story's information, a narrative template schema can

ample evidence to suggest that different cultures not only share schematic processes in general, but very often they also share particular schemata, one of which is a canonical narrative template schema. See Mandler, 51-53.

¹⁵ Shelley E. Taylor and Jennifer Crocker, "Schematic Bases of Social Information Processing," in *Social Cognition: The Ontario Symposium, Volume 1*, ed. Higgins, E. Tory, C. Peter Herman, and Mark P. Zanna (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981), 91. See also Branigan, 26-29.

¹⁶ Mandler, 26. See also Branigan, 29: "We discover and justify connections among narrative elements with respect to such schematic functions as goal, reaction, resolution, epilogue, and narration."

help to determine what we pay attention to.¹⁷ As Abraham Tesser describes it, a template schema “tells us what to attend to. Like a scientific theory, it makes some attributes relevant, that is salient, while allowing others to be ignored.”¹⁸ For example, in *Rear Window* (1954), when Lisa (Grace Kelly) is caught by Thorwald (Raymond Burr) in Thorwald’s apartment, the narrative template schema makes Thorwald’s reaction to Lisa’s presence much more salient than the color of Thorwald’s clothing or the ambient noise of the dinner party coming from the apartment across the courtyard. Such details could be considered “schema-irrelevant,” as Mandler puts it, because the narrative template schema makes them seem unlikely to serve as a causally necessary condition for later events.¹⁹ Instead, the template schema encourages the formation of hypotheses about what Thorwald will do to Lisa now that he’s caught her, and whether or not Lisa will be able to escape. Thus one of the important features of a narrative template schema is that by guiding expectations, it usually acts as an efficient arbiter of any given information’s causal relevance to the overall narrative, and thus also influences the likelihood of information being noticed or remembered (especially in narrative beginnings, although it can still be difficult to understand how information in the beginning might prove causally relevant). In other words,

¹⁷ This is not to deny the importance of specific narrative information or film style, which can also guide our attention, but that schemata further organize such material regardless of its specific properties.

¹⁸ Abraham Tesser, “A Self-generated attitude change,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol 11), ed. Leonard Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1978), 290, quoted in Hastie, 40. See also cognitive psychologist Neil A. Stillings, who writes that cognitive psychological experiments have repeatedly demonstrated that a schema “exerts effects on the allocation of attention and working-memory resources, serving as a filter that discards irrelevant information and focuses processing on what is relevant.” See Stillings, *et al. Cognitive Science: An Introduction -- 2nd Edition* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 87.

¹⁹ Mandler, 102.

the template schemata we use to organize information influences what we pay attention to and are later able to recall.²⁰

Scripts are a subset of template schemata, which as Mandler describes, “characterize our knowledge of familiar event sequences,” and are “stereotypical knowledge structures that people have acquired about common routines.”²¹ The difference between a template and a script is that a template schema is more abstract, whereas a script is a specific list of prototypical events in a process. As Mandler describes the differences, “A script differs from a story [template] schema in being more concretely tied to specific content.”²² That is, a template schema is a list of abstract *traits* for a process, rather than a list of particular *events* that could take place within that process. A script could not describe a canonical narrative the way a template schema can -- a script could only apply to the specific events of a particular narrative. Dining in a restaurant, for instance, is a script that could categorize one possible event series in a particular narrative, but our expectations for narratives themselves are better categorized by a more abstract template schema. Moreover, some scripts do not have a canonical order to them. Mandler provides a pointed example: “Although one may have an idiosyncratic order for cleaning one’s house, in general the script consists of a list of activities that must be performed but does not specify which must come first.”²³ This is not the case with a narrative template schema, where the order

²⁰ Ibid., 34, 103. Below the level of a narrative template schema, the prototype schemata and scripts activated in the beginning of a narrative are also very important for comprehension because they too can act as a filter for our attention.

²¹ Ibid., 75.

²² Ibid.

²³ Mandler, 94.

is predetermined (insofar as it describes the *fabula* and our investing the schema with causality; obviously, the *syuzhet* can reorder the events).

Procedural schemata differ from prototype and template schemata in that rather than categorizing static structures or dynamic processes, a procedural schema is a schema for *how* to fill in template schemata; it is the means through which we acquire or attend to the information that a template schema signals as important. In cinema, this usually means looking at certain parts of a figure on screen or listening to certain sounds. For example, if a template schema signals that a character's emotional reaction is important, our prototype schemata tell us that typically, people display emotions on their faces, so one of the properties of our procedural schema for scanning for emotion is to check faces (along with perhaps tone of voice or body language).²⁴ In other words, procedural schemata employ prototype and template schemata in order to direct our perceptual activities. Reid Hastie describes the hierarchy of these three kinds of schemata for story comprehension as follows:

At the most elementary level in our schematic hierarchy would be central tendency schemata to characterize the individual actors, locations, goals, and actions. At the next level of complexity these central tendency schemata would be linked together into template structures [such as scripts] to organize information episodes, scenes, or events. Finally, template schemata would provide direction for more active procedural schemata that would make and store inferences, initiate information search in the environment or memory, and even create new template schemata.²⁵

In the restaurant dining example, prototype schemata assist with recognizing and processing various objects and actions: restaurants are places people go to eat, and they contain certain objects like tables and chairs, and so on. A script for dining out helps us understand the

²⁴ Of course, viewers rarely rely on procedural schemata alone; the narration often assists in the direction of our perceptual activities through its causal organization, and through various perceptual-level stylistic techniques, such as shot scale, depth of focus, staging, lighting, framing, and editing pace.

²⁵ Hastie, 43.

event “ordering a meal” by placing it in the context of other events in the script. Knowledge of the script directs us to anticipate subsequent events (eating the meal, paying the bill, etc.), and to infer that previous events have also likely taken place (being seated, looking at a menu). Were this script event placed in a narrative, our narrative template schema would then further determine what we attend to by making some information more causally pertinent than other information: perhaps the content of the conversation becomes more important than what food is ordered. In other words, schemata make it easier for viewers to understand the information provided by the narration, both by providing models that create expectations and allow us to make inferences and hypotheses, and by acting as filters that enable us to easily identify what is likely causally pertinent information (if not *how* it will ultimately prove pertinent).

Were the narration to elide any of the events in the script for dining at a restaurant, we could fill in the missing events with schematic knowledge of what usually happens when dining out. Usually, we do this without even realizing it; experiments have shown that subjects often retrospectively misrecognize *unstated* script events as having been *included* in the script with which they were presented.²⁶ As Patrick Colm Hogan writes, “We fill in a great deal of real-world information without ever becoming aware that anything is missing from the text.”²⁷ This is the way much schema use operates: schemata sort the incoming information that makes up conscious experience, but they are largely automatic processes -- we don’t think about schemata as we use them, although they are accessible retrospectively. As Smith writes, schemata are “the

²⁶ Mandler, 48. The same could be said for other schemata as well, such as a schema for spaces (a “scene” schema): we assume a room has a doorway, even if an image of a particular room does not feature the doorway.

²⁷ Patrick Colm Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 117. Our schemata are a large part of the reason that ellipses in narratives are so effective: we don’t need to see intervening events in particular scripts in order to understand what has transpired, because we can usually rely on our schematic knowledge to fill in these sorts of contextually implicit gaps.

vehicle rather than the object of thought.”²⁸ In much the same way as we fill in our understanding of a series of actions with unstated script events, our schemata also allow us to more easily deal with narrations that rearrange the order of events: when retelling stories, we often order them according to a canonical narrative template schema, even if that is not the order in which they were narrated.²⁹ A schema’s ability to provide viewers with context gives a narration remarkable flexibility. As David Bordwell writes,

As often happens, the movie summons up a familiar schema from ordinary life... but revises it for artistic purposes. The film draws on certain features of reality but deletes others, retaining just enough salient bits to prompt our understanding. Filmmakers can assemble, in the manner of collage, pieces of standard social interactions for particular effects. Our response depends on the patterns that are formed, not on the reality status of the bits or of what is left out. We concentrate on the effect, not the means used to trigger it.³⁰

Bordwell proposes one additional type of schema especially relevant to cinema: stylistic schemata, which are patterns of film style that viewers can notice, such as shot/reverse shot sequences or increasingly closer views of the action in scenes. Bordwell questions whether or not style is always actively noticed in film, but says that this doesn’t mean viewers don’t have stylistic schemata: “The perceiver need be no more aware of applying an aesthetic convention

²⁸ Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 50. Different theorists have different ways of describing the relation between conscious thought processes and automatic thought processes. Murray Smith describes a schema as an automatic process, and contrasts it with non-conscious and unconscious processes. For Smith, a non-conscious process is like a reflex, such as the phi phenomenon, where we perceive movement from a series of still images. An unconscious process is one that is supposedly repressed, but which affects conscious behavior (ala psychoanalysis). See Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 67, note 30. Per Persson, in describing what he calls a “disposition” (Persson’s catch-all term for many different mental processes we use to understand the world, including schemata), also distinguishes schemata from the Freudian unconscious, but rather than describing a schema as an automatic process, instead he calls it a part of the cognitive unconscious or preconscious. See Persson, 15. A part of the reason for Persson’s difference from Smith resides in the broader range of processes Persson’s “disposition” is meant to describe, but otherwise, the differences are largely semantic; the point is to locate schematic processing in an intermediate zone between consciousness and unconsciousness, because schematic processing can be tested for and analyzed by observing its products, which in this case is narrative comprehension. See also Mandler, 34.

²⁹ Mandler, 48.

³⁰ David Bordwell, “Puppetry and ventriloquism,” August 7, 2011. <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2011/08/07/puppetry-and-ventriloquism/>, accessed 23 February 2012.

than of any other cognitive operation. Perhaps owing to the stylistic uniformity of mainstream cinema, applying stylistic schemata is a top-down process that has become so practiced as to operate automatically.”³¹ Branigan agrees with Bordwell that stylistic schemata exist, writing, “One can apply the schema at many different levels -- to a camera movement, composition, shot, sequence of shots, scene, sequence of scenes, etc. -- depending on the size of the units that have been chosen for analysis.”³² Such schemata integrate with our narrative template schemata most crucially by directing attention: depth of field, staging, camera movement, editing pace, and sound design can powerfully impact what we pay attention to when watching a film. Generally, our stylistic schemata function like procedural schemata made manifest in the audiovisual organization of the film: they tell us that if information is important to narrative comprehension, it will be in focus, clearly visible in the frame (not too distant or too close, not cut off by the edge of the frame), held on screen long enough for the information to register, and/or audible (especially in classical narration).³³

Generic schemata are also important to mention. Generic schemata assist comprehension by preparing viewers to expect the introduction of a particular genre’s conventions. In the case of a science fiction film, for example, a futuristic setting (or paratextual material) might activate the schema for the genre, and indicate that we should expect advanced technology to play a role in the narrative. In general, generic schemata function for beginnings much like a narrative template schema, in that they facilitate the efficient comprehension of information and direct viewers to notice information that is likely causally relevant. They differ, however, in their

³¹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 36.

³² Branigan, 18.

³³ Such stylistic schemata do not preclude restricted narration or the delay or withholding of narrative information; important information can of course be withheld from viewers in order to achieve particular effects.

specificity, as generic schemata solicit a narrower range of expectations from viewers, expectations based on the genre's conventions, be they narrative conventions, character conventions, iconographic, stylistic, thematic, emotive, or any other kind of convention a particular genre might employ.

Two additional points are important to address in this discussion of schemata. The first is that schemata are subject to change, depending on culture or historical period. Over time, norms, societies, cultures, and technologies change, and some schemata that are readily available in certain historical periods or cultural contexts might change significantly, or be less readily available in others.³⁴ Such change can significantly alter the way in which viewers comprehend not only the events of some narratives, but the implicit interpretations they might make about the film. However, many of the schemata discussed above (particularly a narrative template schema), at least insofar as classical narration is concerned, are significantly more stable since they correspond to narrational norms which have changed either very little or very gradually within Western culture throughout many historical periods (the norms of classical narration will be discussed further later in the chapter). Thus many of the schemata under consideration in this dissertation are those that are available across many different historical periods.³⁵ Nevertheless, an example of the former possibility -- where cultural or historical changes have altered various social schemata -- is in order.

³⁴ Taylor and Crocker, writing in 1981, inadvertently provide an example of how changing norms can alter social schemata. In an attempt to demonstrate how a schema enables one to identify relationships and attribute meaning to behavior, they give an example of an equal number of men and women talking in a room. They write that if one is informed that the men and women are attending an office party, our schema for offices would have us assume that the men are executives and the women secretaries. Such an assumption is no longer universally true of our schema for offices in Western culture because of the changing role of women in the workplace over the past 30-plus years (indeed, such a schema would now seem remarkably sexist for being so out-of-date). See Taylor and Crocker, 94.

³⁵ For a discussion of the cultural specificity of schemata, as well as schemata's relation to ideology, see Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 49-50.

Near the end of *Woman of the Year* (1942), when Tess (Katharine Hepburn) prepares breakfast for Sam (Spencer Tracy), much of the comedy of the scene is derived from Tess's demonstrated ignorance of both how to use 1942-era kitchen appliances such as a coffee maker, and how to complete basic cooking tasks such as separating eggs. Aside from the film itself, ample evidence that the comedy in this scene is meant to be derived from Tess's ignorance can be found in reviews of the film upon its initial release, which applaud this scene for its hilarity. For instance, in *The New York Times*, Bosley Crowther wrote that this is Hepburn's "best scene," one of many "farce hoops" her character must go through.³⁶ Referring to this same scene, Nelson B. Bell wrote for *The Washington Post* that Hepburn "has never had so amusing a scene as the one in which she betrays the futility of her first experience as a cook," while Edwin Schallert of *The Los Angeles Times* wrote that the scene is "riotous," and his enthusiasm for it evident in his detailed description of many of the scene's gags.³⁷

While Hepburn's confused, belabored performance and the kitchen disasters her character sets in motion make her failures as a cook unmistakable, modern audiences might lack the necessary scripts and prototype schemata to fully understand the errors Tess makes in her preparation of the meal (or perhaps even the nature of some of the tasks she sets out to complete). Granted, the comedy isn't lost entirely. For instance, even if one lacks a script for how to use a 1940s-era coffee maker, it is clear (both evidentially, and through Hepburn and Tracy's performances) that the coffee is not supposed to bubble over onto the stovetop.

However, lacking a prototype schema for this 1940s coffee maker, or a script for how such tasks

³⁶ Bosley Crowther, "'Woman of Year,' With Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, at Music Hall -- 'Design for Scandal' Opens at Capitol." *The New York Times* 6 February 1942.

³⁷ See, respectively, Nelson B. Bell, "'Woman of the Year' Is a Film of the Ditto," *The Washington Post* 13 February, 1942, and Edwin Schallert, "'Woman of the Year' Glowing Romantic-Comedy Event," *The Los Angeles Times* 24 April 1942.

are normally performed in 1942, alters the tenor of the response solicited by this scene from solely that of humor over Tess's ignorance, to humor mixed with sympathy and curiosity. That is, contemporary audiences lacking the proper schemata are just as baffled as Tess. Additionally, it is likely that this scene was also considered humorous because Tess's ignorance violated gender norms of the period, norms which are organized into prototype schemata.³⁸ For many in Western culture, contemporary prototype schemata regarding gender norms have changed such that it is no longer considered comically absurd if a woman does not know how to cook.³⁹ Rather than humorous, in some contemporary Western contexts, the scene's attempt to derive humor from Tess's ignorance is potentially viewed as sexist, and the scene becomes remarkable not for its humor, but because it inadvertently draws explicit attention to the ways in which certain prototype schemata have changed since 1942.

As this example from *Woman of the Year* implies, the older the film, the more likely it is that various prototypes or scripts will differ from those of contemporary audiences, and the more likely it is for contemporary audiences to respond differently from the precise responses classical films are usually designed to solicit. However, *Woman of the Year* is somewhat non-normative in that it makes one's implicit knowledge of certain scripts and prototypes central to the interest (the humor) of the scene. More normatively, lacking a historically-specific script or prototype schema is not a terrible impediment to comprehension because rarely are such schemata the focal point of a scene -- narrative interest does not typically turn upon one's knowledge of, say, how to pump gas in 1937, or more concretely, airport security protocol in 1946 (as in the beginning of

³⁸ Crowther writes that the kitchen scene is one "over which the ladies are going to gloat," while Schallert writes that "for women audiences, the whole [scene] is tremendous."

³⁹ For a discussion of the depiction of women's domestic labor in classical Hollywood melodrama, see Kathleen McHugh, *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

The Best Years of Our Lives, where a character freely walks underneath a plane being boarded on the tarmac), or the kinds of entertainment on hand in a Moroccan nightclub in 1943 (as in *Casablanca*). In classical narration, narrative interest is dependent upon understanding the behavior of characters and their interactions, thus it is often easy to simply ignore or make a best guess about ancillary information made confusing from a lack of a particular schema (as we shall see in Chapter 4, understanding character behavior itself relies on more stable and more broadly accessible person and social schemata, as well as on a film's facilitation of our innate abilities both to make inferences about characters' mental states, and to attribute knowledge, emotions, and goals to characters). Moreover, in classical narration, if the narrative turns on viewers possessing such schemata, then the film itself quite often provides the necessary information to make the action comprehensible. Classical narration is, after all, in the business of making stories easy to grasp.

In addition to a given schema's potential for historical variability, the second additional point to address is that schemata are also hierarchically organized, and can be embedded inside one another. For example, a schema for the space of a kitchen would include objects like a stove, sink, or refrigerator, and each of these objects in turn has its own prototype schema. However, all of these schemata are not necessarily active simultaneously. Some information comes to the fore and other information recedes into the background depending on the dominant schema used to organize the information; information important in one schema might become irrelevant if another schema is more salient.⁴⁰ At the same time, no schema stands alone; one will bring along associations with others, either because the schemata are linked, or because they are both a part

⁴⁰ Chapter 5 will discuss in more detail the hierarchical organization of schemata in relation to character types, as well as the factors that influence the salience of particular schemata when characters are first introduced.

of a superordinate schema.⁴¹ Mandler gives an apt example pertaining to a restaurant dining scenario, writing that, “my schema for restaurants does not specify the waiter’s height, but my schema for men does; a ten foot tall waiter won’t disrupt my restaurant schema but he would clearly violate my expectations about the person schema that is embedded in the waiter variable.”⁴² Likewise, the timeliness of the restaurant’s service might be irrelevant if the dominant schema being used to understand the situation is one of a couple going on a second date, but the timeliness of the service would become much more relevant if one of the characters is a food critic reviewing the restaurant.

Schemata and Narrative Beginnings

Schemata are crucial components of our comprehension processes during the beginning of a narrative because they serve as the basis for our quickly inferring or hypothesizing the attributes of objects or events that are not immediately or directly observable (including the surrounding parts of any active script events). As Shelley E. Taylor and Jennifer Crocker write, schemata are time-saving mechanisms for processes that would be “prohibitively time-consuming” otherwise.⁴³ Schemata help us to quickly gather our bearings and make assumptions and expectations about the information provided by the narration. While we use schemata to comprehend a narrative throughout its entire length, we are particularly reliant upon them in the beginning, especially at the very start of the *syuzhet*, because in the beginning we have the least amount of contextual information readily available to us (outside of schemata that can be

⁴¹ David Hamilton, “Cognitive Representations of Persons,” in *Social Cognition: The Ontario Symposium Volume 1*, ed. E. Tory Higgins, C. Peter Herman, and Mark P. Zanna (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981), 155.

⁴² Mandler, 103.

⁴³ Taylor and Crocker, 94.

activated prior to the start of the film through paratextual material such as titles, advertising, knowledge of a film's genre, or knowledge the personnel involved in its creation). Prototype schemata allow us to quickly categorize figures in the image, and scripts provide a degree of context about whatever localized activities the figures are currently engaged in. In other words, we rely particularly heavily on schemata in the beginning to give us some understanding of the basic circumstances of whatever information is initially introduced by the narration, and as the narration gradually introduces more information, our schemata gradually become less abstract and more refined, and our expectations narrower. Exposition, for instance, is often quite useful for refining schemata and narrowing expectations because it is extremely efficient at presenting information (exposition's importance for schema use will be discussed more in Chapter 3). The gradual filling in of abstract schemata with specific details contributes greatly to the sensation that the beginning is the *start* of the story, rather than the middle or the end. By the middle and end of a narrative, many of our schemata have been filled in and refined, such that our range of expectations has narrowed.

A narrative template schema is particularly important in this regard, both because it is the principal means through which we start to categorize the information presented in the beginning, and because it immediately acts as a filter that selects for our conscious attention the information that seems likely to fill in the template, thus preventing us from being overwhelmed by the potential deluge of new audiovisual information. We can't notice every single detail when scanning the images and sounds in a film because there are limits to human perception, attention, and memory, thus a narrative template schema provides the selectivity necessary to distinguish

likely important information, storing it for later retrieval.⁴⁴ In other words, a narrative template schema is instrumental in our estimation of any given piece of information's causal relevance: the more likely it is that particular information will fill in a slot in the schema, the higher are our estimations of that information's causal relevance.⁴⁵

For example, the first shot of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) is an extreme long shot of travelers walking through a concourse, the floor of which is painted with a flight map. On the soundtrack, a loudspeaker announces departure information for an American Airlines flight. This information is enough to activate a prototypical scene schema for an airport. We can infer that this first scene is set in an airport, and that other parts of this scene schema are also present even though we haven't seen them: planes, a tarmac, baggage, people arriving and departing, and so on. Subsequent actions in this opening scene can then be understood by categorizing them as "actions that take place in an airport." Simultaneously, our narrative template schema ensures that this setting information is the most salient for our attention because it fills in a slot in the schema. That is, the narrative template schema makes identifying the setting the most salient use of the information in the shot (at least initially) because the template dictates that knowing the setting will likely contribute to our comprehension of the narrative (and indeed it does -- the first five and half minutes of the film involves military servicemen trying to find flights out of this airport). An alternative template schema could categorize the information in this first shot differently, and prompt us to attend to other aspects of the image. A puzzle template, for

⁴⁴ Ibid., 90. See also Branigan, 13. For a discussion of how prototype schemata function along similar lines, see Nancy Cantor and Walter Mischel, "Prototypes in Person Perception," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* Vol 12, ed. Leonard Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 6.

⁴⁵ It should be emphasized that these schemata-based estimations of causal relevance are only *probabilities* -- it is difficult to tell how important any given piece of information will be the moment it is introduced. Causality's importance for narrative beginnings will be discussed in greater detail below.

instance, might have us search the image for matching objects, or for one particular object (as in the *Where's Waldo?* books) -- were a viewer to use such a template, the setting would become less pertinent for attention because it would not be salient for that particular schema.

Near the middle of this first shot, Fred (Dana Andrews), dressed in military uniform, picks up some luggage and crosses the length of the concourse toward the camera, and the camera tilts down to follow his progress. The film then dissolves to a shot where Fred asks a ticket agent about getting a flight home to Boone City, and provides a bit of exposition about his having just returned from overseas. Fred's interaction with the ticket agent activates a number of schemata, notably scripts for air travel and military service, and provides a lot of additional information that further fills in the narrative template schema.⁴⁶ Here we see that knowing the setting does indeed contribute to comprehension of the narrative, in that it makes Fred's exchange with the ticket agent make sense. While the exchange might still make sense even without prior knowledge of the setting (Fred's exchange with the ticket agent is itself enough to activate the schema for an airport), the film happened to activate this airport schema first, independent of Fred's dialogue, possibly to make the setting especially clear (as we shall see, classical narration often makes such information extremely hard to miss).

Fred already appears a likely candidate for being a prominent (i.e., causally relevant) character in the film: Not only does he state a preliminary goal (wanting to return home), but also the dissolve between shots one and two suggests an ellipsis, thus indicating that for the moment, Fred is the causal element dictating the narration's trajectory (since he appears in both shots thus

⁴⁶ Additionally, for many audiences, especially those watching the film when it was first released in 1946, Fred's having just returned from overseas activates additional schemata involving World War II. Although he doesn't state it directly at this point in the film, it would be obvious to 1946 audiences (and to many contemporary audiences as well) that Fred is returning from fighting in the war, rather than from just serving abroad in the military during peacetime.

far). Moreover, the style of both the first and second shots each favors him. In the first shot, the downward tilt singles out Fred from the other travelers surrounding him and suggests his importance. In the second shot, Fred is facing the camera (unlike the ticket agent), allowing us to see his face, and unlike another traveler that approaches the ticket agent midway through the shot, Fred is framed more or less in the shot's center.⁴⁷ Therefore, our stylistic and template schemata indicate that Fred will be an important character, at least for the time being, and that the other information contained in these first two shots of the film is not as important for viewers to pay attention to; schemata guide our attention by narrowing the range of information that will be important for us to understand and recall.

Fred is told he should inquire about a flight home at the Air Transport Command, and once there, he puts his name on a list, waits, meets returning veteran Homer (Harold Russell), boards a military plane, meets returning veteran Al (Fredric March), and flies home to Boone City. In this part of the film, the narration contains many ellipses between shots, but our scripts help fill in what few gaps exist, and our prototype schemata help indicate which part of the script the narration is showing. For example, we don't see the characters' plane land, but we can use a script for air travel to infer the actions that took place between the shot of the three characters

⁴⁷ And of course, Fred is played by actor Dana Andrews, one of the film's four most prominent stars. While this certainly contributes to many viewers' estimations of Fred's potential prominence in the narrative, this factor is an extratextual one that *compliments* the other factors listed above. Modern audiences (and even some 1946 audiences) may or may not know who Dana Andrews is or what he looks like, thus the stylistic details described above should be considered just as important for filling in a narrative template schema as is extratextual knowledge of a star persona. In this particular case, whether or not a viewer relies more on knowledge of Dana Andrews or on narrational cues that help them fill in the narrative template schema likely depends on the individual viewer. As mentioned previously, the main concern here is with cognitive processes and narrational norms that do not require particular or historically situated extratextual knowledge outside of a more general familiarity with narrational norms and narrative form, which tends to be more stable than star personae, which are discussed in further detail below, and in Chapter 5.

preparing for landing and the next shot of them in a taxi: the plane landed, they disembarked, and hailed a taxi.⁴⁸

The narrative template schema is filled in further when Fred meets Homer and Al. The film spends significant time with these three characters during their flight (nearly ten minutes of screen time), with each of them becoming just as stylistically prominent as Fred, and with each of them providing information that fills in slots in a narrative template schema: Fred and Homer provide important exposition when they describe their experiences in the war; all three provide information about settings and states of affairs as they fly into Boone City (Fred: “There’s the golf course. People playing golf, just as if nothing had ever happened.”); and in the course of expressing trepidation over the challenges they will face upon returning home, all three articulate their more long-term goals. Fred must get acquainted with his wife (whom he met and married while in basic training), Al worries about people trying to rehabilitate him, and Homer is concerned over his girlfriend’s ability to cope with the loss of both of his hands, an injury Homer suffered during the war. By the flight’s end, the narrative template schema helps make it remarkably clear that these three will be prominent characters in the narrative, and that much of the rest of the narrative will concern the challenges they face in their readjustment to civilian life, and the changes wrought on them by the war.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Despite many shots being connected through small-scale ellipses over the course of the beginning of this film, very few events are actually elided in a script for air travel, and many dialogue hooks further connect the shots. For example, after boarding the plane and meeting Al, Fred suggests, “Come on, let’s sit up in the radio compartment until after takeoff, then we’ll get in the nose and get a nice view of the good old U.S. of A.” There follows a dissolve to a shot of a plane taking off, which then dissolves to a shot of the three characters looking out of the nose of the plane. A script for air travel, combined with Fred’s dialogue hook and a dissolve (an edit which has already been used to indicate the passage of time in seven previous shot transitions), arguably makes the intervening shot of the plane taking off unnecessary. However, as will be discussed in greater detail below, such redundancy is a norm of classical narration.

⁴⁹ However, the film’s beginning most likely ends not with the conclusion of their flight, but after all three characters have completed their homecomings. Homer is accepted by his family and girlfriend, but faces his own internal emotional barriers: as Al points out to Fred after they’ve seen Homer home, Homer does not return his

Like many other films, the beginning of *The Best Years of Our Lives* relies on schematic processing in order to make sense of the information it presents: its effectiveness stems in part from our ability to organize the information it provides into categories we already possess, based on lived experience and experience with other narratives. Sometimes, however, a film's beginning goes further than this in relating the information to the schemata that will organize it. Viewers approach a narrative with a narrative template schema in mind, but it is not uncommon for the narration's beginning to explicitly guide viewers to fill in slots in a narrative template schema, rather than relying on viewers to fill in schemata on their own. This is a possibility I will return to in greater detail when discussing the norms of classical beginnings later in this chapter.

The schemata activated in the beginning of a narrative are also important because they can control and limit the ways in which we use narrative information. Branigan describes this possibility when he writes that "the classifications which a person imposes on the material at the time of its processing will limit the ways in which the material can be subsequently accessed and used."⁵⁰ If one particular schema is dominant, we can sometimes ignore some information that is actually relevant to narrative comprehension, but that is irrelevant to the schema at hand.⁵¹ Schemata can also alter our perception of information to fit within a schema already in use. As we shall see in Chapter 5, one of the means through which a narration can mislead viewers is by encouraging a dominant schema in the beginning that places what will ultimately be important

girlfriend's embrace. When Al returns home, he notices the changes that have gone on during his absence and has trouble feeling comfortable around his wife and grown children, and Fred returns to his parents' dingy hovel and receives his first inkling that he'll have a difficult time with his wife when he learns she's moved out. This information augments the probable global hypothesis that the film will concern these veterans' readjustment to civilian life with exclusive details of the specific challenges they'll face.

⁵⁰ Branigan, 13.

⁵¹ Stillings, *et al.*, 87.

information at a sub-schematic level, thereby making that information difficult to notice and remember. Beginnings are particularly susceptible to schematic misdirection because despite the organizing power of a narrative template schema, it is in the beginning where our estimations of casual relevance are at their most tentative, because we have the least amount of context for understanding the plot. Our reliance on schematic processing in the beginning makes it easier for some details to pass by, lost in the shuffle of other important information.

Below the level of a template schema, prototype schemata and scripts can also influence the way in which we attend to and use information. Once a particular prototype schema or script is activated, we pay less attention to the stimuli we expect to see, and more attention to that which is *unexpected*.⁵² As Branigan explains, “The ‘value’ of information increases according to its *improbability* so that typical and probable elements... carry the least amount of information. The more typical the information is for a perceiver, the less well it is recalled for it is already implicit in a guiding schema.”⁵³ For instance, were the first shot of *The Best Years of Our Lives* to contain nudists, or people walking on their hands with their feet in the air, such figures would immediately become the most salient information in the image, simply because they are so unexpected. While a scene schema for an airport doesn’t necessarily specify the dress or gait of travelers, such figures would be considered highly improbable because they do not fit within the expectations generated by the tangential schemata associated with a schema for an airport, such

⁵² As Mandler writes, “typical occurrences... are not always consciously noticed and counted. What is consciously noticed is a discrepancy from the normal values, the violation of an expectation.” See Mandler, 35.

⁵³ Branigan, 15. See also Mandler on the “typicality effect”: “the more expected something is in a situation, that is, the more typical it is of the situation, the less well it is encoded or recognized, and in some circumstances, recalled.” Mandler, 101.

as a schema for public behavior, including dress and gait.⁵⁴ This is not to say that viewers would stop paying attention to the setting entirely -- atypical or improbable information would not completely blot out our awareness of the more typical aspects of such a hypothetical airport scene -- but that the more typical setting information would receive lower priority for viewer attention since such information is already accounted for by the airport schema.⁵⁵ As we shall see, a schema's tendency to prioritize atypical or distinctive information for our attention becomes important in a discussion of narrative beginnings, because it can affect the way in which viewers register first impressions of characters or other information.

A contradiction would seem to arise, then, between a narrative template schema on the one hand, which directs our attention to information based on what we *expect* will fill in slots in the template (i.e., what will be causally relevant to the narrative and important for comprehension), and prototype schemata and scripts on the other hand, which direct our attention toward *unexpected* (or schema inconsistent) information.⁵⁶ Do schemata focus our attention on expected or unexpected information? One response to this seeming contradiction is to further describe the range of expectations viewers have for the information meant to fill in slots in each kind of schema. Prototype schemata and scripts have a relatively narrow range of expectations for the information that can be considered typical for the schema. For example, if

⁵⁴ In the absence of such highly improbable figures, the setting is much more likely to become the most immediately salient information at the start of the first shot because there is no other outstanding information that draws attention to itself through improbability.

⁵⁵ Of course, an audience's airport scene schema, or a script for various airport activities, is susceptible to change depending on historical circumstances; while the first two shots of *The Best Years of Our Lives* still accord with many people's airport scene schema and a script for catching a flight home, the next shot does not. It shows Fred nonchalantly walking across the tarmac underneath a plane being boarded by passengers. Tighter airport security in America now makes such an act stand out as atypical from schematic norms, even for military personnel.

⁵⁶ Although prototype schemata and scripts have other functions, namely expediting comprehension and helping us to gather our bearings.

two characters are dining at a restaurant, we expect that the waiter will bring them food, not car parts, and that the characters will leave after eating, rather than staying to do the dishes. A narrative template schema, on the other hand, has a wider range of expectations about the information that can fit within the schema, and thus typicality and probability are less well-defined. That is, there is a higher threshold for something to be atypical or unexpected in a narrative template schema because the parameters of the schema are less distinct. A narrative can be set anywhere, feature any type (or number) of character, who can have any kind of goal, and so on. Therefore, because a template schema has more loosely defined expectations, the information that fills it in will always be “unexpected” to a certain extent, and thus salient for our attention.⁵⁷

The Primacy Effect

Schemata are also important for beginnings because they help to describe the power of first impressions. Cognitive psychology refers to the effect of first impressions upon cognition as the “primacy effect.” The primacy effect describes how initial information sets up a frame of reference (or a first impression) which colors the processing of subsequent information.⁵⁸ In other words, the primacy effect is the influence a first impression can have on how we understand subsequent information. Of course, “first impression” is itself a somewhat vague

⁵⁷ Leslie Zebrowitz McArthur also explores the issue of whether schemata direct attention to expected or unexpected information in relation to the impressions we form of people, but focuses on the quality of the stimulus information rather than the quality of the expectations. McArthur finds that when stimuli are ambiguous, “perceivers selectively attend to those behaviors that they expect to find,” whereas when stimuli are unambiguous, “those that deviate markedly from expectations draw more attention.” As we shall see, this has important implications for the primacy effect. See Leslie Zebrowitz McArthur, “What Grabs You? The Role of Attention and Impression Formation in Causal Attribution,” in *Social Cognition: The Ontario Symposium, Volume 1*, ed. Higgins, E. Tory, C. Peter Herman, and Mark P. Zanna (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981), 226.

⁵⁸ Information is judged to be “initial” based upon the recognition that it is new, as well as the assumption that more follows; we harbor such assumptions based both on paratextual and schematic information.

term, because it refers to the preliminary aggregate of the different cognitive processes we bring to bear upon our first encounter with new stimulus information, including our initial categorization of the information, our preliminary inferences about it, and the traits we initially attribute to it. In other words, insofar as people and/or characters are concerned, a first impression involves the schemata we initially use to categorize them (their “type”), the initial folk psychological inferences we make about their intentional states, and the correspondent preliminary dispositional attributions that follow from them.⁵⁹ Chapter 4 will deal extensively with these cognitive processes as they pertain to the formation of first impressions of characters; here, the focus will be on how initial information influences the comprehension of subsequent information (i.e., how the primacy effect functions). While schema solicitation, the inference of intentional states, and dispositional attribution are clearly a central component in our formation of first impressions, the following discussion of the primacy effect is concerned not with how these processes first take place, but with how a first impression, once formed, influences subsequent comprehension.⁶⁰ The primacy effect is essentially a product of two factors: the order in which a narration introduces information, and our cognitive tendencies to elaborate on information by using it as the basis for schema activation, inference-making, and hypothesis

⁵⁹ For a general discussion of the processes involved in impressions in general, see David L. Hamilton, *et al.*, “Organizational Processes in Impression Formation,” in *Person Memory: Cognitive Basis of Social Perception*, eds. Reid Hastie *et al.* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980), 123-125.

⁶⁰ The following discussion is also largely unconcerned with the extent to which a first impression might refer to how sympathetic or antipathetic the character is. We can distinguish between the idea one has of what type of character a person is and the traits they possess, and the degree to which we might like or dislike a character. While notions of what kind of person a character is certainly inform whether or not we like them, the two are distinct mental processes, and while the latter will occasionally crop up, the following discussion of the primacy effect is largely concerned with the former. This is not to say that our likings and disliking cannot also influence our beliefs about the world, including impressions of characters; certainly they can. It’s just that before we can like or dislike a character, we must first know something about that character to like or dislike. For more on this point, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 103. For a compelling theory of how narratives generate sympathy or antipathy for characters, see Smith, *Engaging Characters*.

casting. As such, the primacy effect is emblematic of the dual concerns of this dissertation: form and cognition.

The primacy effect has been studied in a wide range of psychological disciplines, especially as it pertains to impression formation of persons.⁶¹ First mention of it is often traced back to an experiment by Solomon E. Asch, who found that when subjects are presented with a list of traits in reference to a person, the order in which the traits are presented influences the impression the subjects form of the person to whom the traits refer.⁶² Abraham S. Luchins built upon Asch's work by conducting an experiment that has more direct application to narrative comprehension. In Luchins's experiment, subjects read a block of text about the activities of a fictional character in which two opposing character traits (extroversion and introversion) are attributed to the character in the first and second halves of the text, respectively. Luchins found that descriptions of the character after the fact, as well as predictions of his behavior in given situations, favored the first half traits, regardless of which was presented first. That is, no matter which section came first, the character-as-extrovert or the character-as-introvert, the first section of the narrative was always weighted most heavily in determining the character's personality.⁶³ As Meir Sternberg describes the results of the study, "the leading block established a perceptual set, serving as a frame of reference to which subsequent information was subordinated as far as

⁶¹ For an overview, see Samuel D. Bond, *et al.*, "Information Distortion in the Evaluation of a Single Option," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 102:2 (March 2007), 241.

⁶² Solomon E. Asch, "Forming Impressions of Personality," *Journal of Abnormal Social Psychology* 41 (1946): 258-290. The primacy effect also influences recall rates of entries in a serial list. See Ronald T. Kellogg, *Cognitive Psychology* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1995), 103. As Asch notes, the primacy effect should not be confused with recall of information; the impressions we form about information and our memory for the actual information itself involve different cognitive processes.

⁶³ Abraham S. Luchins, "Primacy-Recency in Impression Formation," in *The Order of Presentation in Persuasion*, ed. Carl I. Hovland. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 33-61.

possible.”⁶⁴ That is, in order to account for the conflicting information about the character’s personality, subjects tended to weight the earlier information more heavily, and reconciled the later, conflicting information either by paying less attention to it, changing its meaning, or, as Menakhem Perry describes, by considering it as a particular instance unrepresentative of the character.⁶⁵

The primacy effect has wide-ranging implications for narrative comprehension. In addition to characters, it can also apply to states of affairs, situations, and even objects. As a hypothetical example of the latter, think of the first impression one might form of a used car: if the fenders are rusted and one of the windows is broken, it would be easy to form a negative first impression of the car’s ability to function, one that would persist even if the car’s brakes are good and it has good gas mileage. David Bordwell describes the primacy effect’s relevance to narrative information aside from characters when he writes, “All the devices of ‘planting’ and foreshadowing motifs -- objects, conditions, deadlines -- gain their saliency from the primacy effect.”⁶⁶ Indeed, evidence of the primacy effect exists even for basic perceptual information, including the presentation of objects and spatial locations.⁶⁷ Moreover, there can also be a primacy effect for the qualities of the narration itself, insofar as a narration can establish intrinsic

⁶⁴ Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 94.

⁶⁵ Menakhem Perry, “Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings,” *Poetics Today* 1:1/2 (Autumn 1979), 55. Perry continues, “A considerable number of the subjects were totally unaware that the information before them was made up of incompatible parts.” In Sternberg’s terms, this speaks to the great degree to which the subsequent information was “subordinated.”

⁶⁶ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema, Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 37.

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the primacy effect and objects, see Gregory J. DiGirolamo and Douglas L. Hintzman, “First Impressions Are Lasting Impressions: A Primacy Effect in Memory for Repetitions,” *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 4:1 (1997) 121-124. For a discussion of the primacy effect and spatial location, see L. Elizabeth Crawford and Sean Duffy, “Sequence Effects in Estimating Spatial Location,” *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 17:5 (2010) 725-730.

norms, such as restricted or unrestricted narration, where we might continue to assume the narration is granting access to a wide range of information simply because it has done so previously (this possibility is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5). Emma Kafalenos even proposes a primacy effect for our general comprehension of events: if we initially understand events one way, then that understanding might persist even if later events challenge it (Kafalenos argues this persistence is especially evident in later recollections of the *fabula*).⁶⁸ However, the primacy effect is probably most salient for our first impressions of characters, considering their centrality to narratives. Indeed, a lot of the psychological research on (and related to) the primacy effect has focused on how first impressions influence one's understanding of people and/or characters (thus much of the following discussion of the primacy effect will concern its relation to characters).⁶⁹

The Primacy Effect in Film Narratives

There is some debate over whether the primacy effect only pertains to written material, or if it also pertains to other media such as film. Paul S. Cowan attempted to discern if primacy effects resulted when test subjects watched silent films based on Luchins's written descriptions, rather than reading descriptive paragraphs of a character's behavior. After performing a series of experiments, Cowan concluded that there was no primacy effect for film, based on the

⁶⁸ Emma Kafalenos, "Not (Yet) Knowing: Epistemological Effects of Deferred and Suppressed Information in Narrative," in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 57-59.

⁶⁹ Of course, actual people and fictional characters are different from one another, but there are compelling theoretical models suggesting that the way in which viewers understand characters in narratives involves the same kind of folk psychology they employ to understand people. See Persson, 143-246, and Michael Newman, "Characterization in American Independent Cinema." (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005), 116-162. The relation between characters and people will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

introverted film sequence failing to solicit a primacy effect when placed before the extroverted film sequence. However, there are many reasons to question the validity of this conclusion, most stemming from the design of the introverted film sequence, which contains a rather strange portrayal of introversion.⁷⁰ Rather than resembling introverted behavior, the character in the introverted film sequence instead behaves as though he lacks social protocols. For example, the character doesn't acknowledge someone who speaks with him, an event which does not occur in Luchins's introverted paragraph. Additionally, other characters in the film behave as if they do not expect the principal character to be introverted; Cowan describes the inclusion of multiple shots of other characters looking confused in reaction to the introvert's behavior, reactions which are also absent from Luchins's experiment. These moments are extremely relevant, because test subjects seemed to have based their impressions not just on the introverted character's behavior, but on *all* of the information available in the film, including the reactions of other characters. As Cowan himself acknowledges,

A number of subjects... commented that Jim [the character] couldn't really be so unfriendly, unsociable, or introverted as he appeared in the [introverted] sequence because so many people in that very sequence seemed to know him and make friendly gestures to him, which he declined. A number of subjects felt that if Jim were really an introvert, or unfriendly, people would not approach him that way at all.⁷¹

In other words, since other characters interact with the introvert as if they expected him to be an extrovert, the test subjects assumed he was an extrovert and discounted the introvert's behavior as a particular instance unrepresentative of the character. Rather than disproving the hypothesis that the primacy effect pertains to characters in film, Cowan's work instead seems to show that

⁷⁰ For a description of the filmed sequences Cowan used in the experiment, see the second appendix in Paul S. Cowan, "A Comparison of Film and Written Communications with Regard to Order Effects in Personality Impression Formation," (Ph.D. diss. State University of New York at Albany, 1973), 266-270.

⁷¹ Ibid., 177-178.

viewers take into account diverse sources of information (such the reactions of other characters) when forming an impression, rather than making judgments based solely on a single source (the behavior of the introvert). Accordingly, Cowan managed to show that the strength of the introverted sequence was disproportionately less than that of the extroverted sequence, rather than that film lacks primacy effects. Cowan himself acknowledges this possibility, suggesting that there could be problems with the design of his films that skewed the results. He writes, “It is not impossible that there were peculiar, idiosyncratic aspects to the particular films made for this experiment, and that another film made by another experimenter using other actors, still based on Luchins’ paragraphs, would produce different results.”⁷²

Such is the case in experiments performed by Roland Reboussin, who did not design filmed sequences based on Luchins’s specific experiment, but who nevertheless inadvertently found evidence of primacy when he tested for assimilation and contrast effects in filmed sequences. In his experiments, a set of seven episodes depicted either positive or negative behavior in terms of the degree to which a character was considerate, helpful, and principled. This set of episodes was then paired with a fixed set of seven episodes that showed positive, negative, or neutral behavior. In all cases, the impression created by the first set of episodes influenced how subjects perceived the second set, regardless of whether or not the behavior in the second set was positive or negative.⁷³ Moreover, in response to Cowan, Luchins and Luchins performed an experiment in which they tested Cowan’s results, and also found the introverted

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Sometimes the primacy effect was so small as to be statistically insignificant, but it is possible this result was created through the conditions of Reboussin’s method, where he had subjects fill out a questionnaire after every episode. As Luchins and others have shown, interrupting a sequence to have subjects register their response diminishes primacy effects, and instead increases recency effects. Such a viewing scenario does not resemble the continuousness of cinematic narration. See Roland Reboussin, “The Interaction of First Impressions and New Information in Person Perception,” (Ph.D. diss. University of Kansas, 1965), 96. See also Cowan, 12, 46-47.

sequence less effective than the extroverted sequence. However, rather than concluding that this was evidence for a lack of primacy in film, instead they suggest that

it may be inappropriate to apply such terms [like primacy or recency] when the communications are of uneven strength... [extroverted] responses were more predominant than [introverted] responses when [the filmed extroverted sequence] was used, regardless of whether it preceded or followed [the filmed introverted sequence]. To speak of one result as primacy and the other as recency would be to attribute more significance to the order of presentation than is warranted.⁷⁴

In sum, there is still reason to hypothesize that the primacy effect is not exclusive to our engagement with written text, and that it can be just as applicable to other media, including film.

A Preliminary Example: *Fort Apache*

The primacy effect demonstrates the importance of how information is introduced to a narrative. After all, as “intuitive psychologists,” filmmakers are aware of the importance of first impressions and design their narratives to capitalize on the primacy effect.⁷⁵ Before proceeding, it will be useful to provide in-depth analysis of a straightforward example of how the primacy effect can offer insights into the order in which a narration introduces information. *Fort Apache* (1948) is one such film. Much of the film’s plot concerns the conflict generated by the poor leadership of the commander of Fort Apache, Lieutenant-Colonel Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda), both in terms of his conduct toward the Apache Indians, and in terms of his command of daily life at the Fort. Thursday is fastidious, bitter, elitist, racist, and an arrogant martinet. He is a rigid disciplinarian who feels shamed for being assigned to command Fort Apache, which he views as a “tenpenny post” unworthy of his record, and where he’ll have little opportunity for

⁷⁴ Abraham S. Luchins and Edith H. Luchins, “Primacy Effects and Nature of Communications: Movie Pictures,” *Journal of General Psychology* 110 (January 1984), 21.

⁷⁵ David Bordwell, “Minding movies,” <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2008/03/05/minding-movies/>, 2008, accessed 10 January 2012.

“glory or advancement.” Thursday spends much of the film trying to achieve that glory, and ultimately finds it by needlessly sacrificing the lives of most of the regiment in a Custer-like battle with the Apache. Tag Gallagher describes Thursday as the film’s “archdemon,” and Joseph McBride agrees with an assessment offered by another character in the film (played by Ward Bond), writing that Thursday is “aptly described by Sergeant-Major O’Rourke as ‘the madman.’”⁷⁶ Based solely on his role in the narrative, Thursday can be considered one of the film’s antagonists (or at best a deeply-flawed protagonist).

Thursday’s negative qualities are thrown into even greater relief when they are considered in the context of director John Ford’s authorial tendencies. Thursday embodies many qualities and values that are anathema to the protagonists in other Ford films: duty to one’s country is merely an afterthought for Thursday, far behind his selfish aspirations for glory. Moreover, contrary to the importance Ford usually places on family unification, Thursday’s elitism leads him to deliberately try to break up the romantic union between his daughter and the son of an enlisted man. As McBride describes it, “Destroying a potential family, and particularly one’s own lineage, is a violation of all that Ford holds most sacred.”⁷⁷ Many of Thursday’s negative dispositions are made salient immediately both in the scene in which he is introduced and in subsequent scenes in the beginning, and these dispositions contribute strongly to our first impression of his character (and given his role in the narrative, they also help to ensure viewers see him as an antagonistic force).⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 253, and Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 457.

⁷⁷ McBride, 453.

⁷⁸ Thursday can also be categorized as a particular character “type” -- a middle-aged, career military officer -- which can also influence first impressions of him by setting up certain expectations about his dispositions, such as his

The film begins with Thursday and his daughter Philadelphia (Shirley Temple) traveling by stagecoach through Monument Valley to his new command at Fort Apache. Thursday is introduced sticking his head out of the stagecoach window, asking the driver when they'll arrive at their destination, and criticizing their being an hour behind schedule. After returning to his seat, Thursday disdainfully describes their journey's itinerary as a series of "mud holes," Fort Apache among them, and then curses the War Department for sending someone with a career as distinguished as his to such a desolate and inconsequential place. Based on his physical attributes (like his uniform) and his behavior, Thursday's first appearance both solicits a prototype schema for a military officer, and makes readily available a number of inferences about his dispositions: he is punctilious in his concern about the stagecoach's schedule (a disposition which will soon prove to be a part of his overall fastidiousness); he displays arrogance when he implies that Fort Apache is unworthy of his record, and his bitterness is evident when he lets his shame over being assigned to command Fort Apache affect his perception of his surroundings. How else could he describe a journey that takes him through the majestic Monument Valley (on display during the film's opening shots) as offering nothing but a series of mud holes? These inferences combine to form a relatively negative first impression of the character, and the primacy effect ensures that this first impression carries over into subsequent scenes, where both his actions and the severe, perpetually dissatisfied demeanor conveyed by his tone of voice continually reinforce it.

In the film's second scene, Thursday's stagecoach reaches a way station, and crosses paths with an escort sent from Fort Apache to pick up Second Lieutenant Michael O'Rourke (John Agar). Thursday's arrogance is reinforced when he seems personally affronted that the

being rigid and authoritarian. In Thursday, these expectations are met in his authoritarianism and fastidiousness. Typing will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Fort would send an escort for an incoming Second Lieutenant but not arrange any sort of accommodation for their incoming commanding officer (even though Thursday is told that Fort Apache was unaware of his approach because of a downed telegraph line). In the film's third scene, Thursday's arrival at Fort Apache interrupts a dance in honor of George Washington's birthday, and his punctiliousness and bitterness are again reinforced when he demands an explanation for why the telegraph line had not been repaired earlier, and corrects Captain York's (John Wayne) addressing him as General Thursday, responding, "I'm not a General, Captain. A man is what he is paid for. I'm paid for in the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel." Overall, not only does this negative impression of Thursday provide cause for viewers to sympathize with his troops' dislike of him, but it also allows for the formation of a relatively open/nonexclusive hypothesis: we can anticipate that he will not be well received when he addresses the other commanding officers in his next appearance three scenes later (a hypothesis confirmed by York's semi-exasperated reaction just after that scene's conclusion, where he mocks Thursday by imitating Thursday's overuse of the word "gentlemen," when addressing the other officers).⁷⁹

Much like in Luchins's experiments, the primacy effect is strong enough here that it colors occasional behavior that could indicate that Thursday has other, more positive traits to balance the negative. At the way station in the second scene, Thursday shares a drink with the stagecoach drivers in a display of sympathetic weariness, and then later buys a round of drinks for the escort sent to pick up Lieutenant O'Rourke. In the third scene, once Thursday learns of

⁷⁹ A similar hypothesis could be made about Thursday's arrival at the fort in scene three. When he interrupts the dance, a ready hypothesis is that his presence will immediately be a sobering one (his arrival silences the dance hall as the men stand at attention), and perhaps a discordant one as well, given his dispositions thus far (prototype schemata and folk psychology help with this hypothesis: it is reasonable to assume that anyone as dissatisfied with their current lot in life as is Thursday will adversely affect others' contentment). And indeed, here he pursues a line of accusatory questioning about why his arrival was not better prepared for, before reluctantly acquiescing to the continuance of the dance.

the occasion for the dance, it briefly seems as though he is ready to relax before he is interrupted by the resumption of the dance. However, the primacy effect places these actions in the context of the first impression solicited by the first scene. Combined with behavior that would seem to support this impression (his reaction to O'Rourke's escort, his arrival at the dance), these additional, positive traits are weighted less heavily as a result (however, unlike in the Luchins experiment, they are not *inconsistent* with his previous demeanor, but are simply additional facets of his personality -- he likes the occasional drink and understands his troops' desire for the same). Thursday's subsequent appearances over the course of the film's beginning support and reinforce the primacy effect, and viewers form a distinct impression (or schema) of his character as, in McBride's words, a "vainglorious martinet," and an "arrogant, self-centered bigot and warmonger."⁸⁰

The narration creates such a strong first impression of Thursday not only because it helps to establish him as an antagonistic force, but also because it contributes to the ways in which we comprehend and respond to later narrative events. Because the primacy effect has disposed us to focus on the character traits that make Thursday an ill fit for command of Fort Apache, it is somewhat surprising when these traits serve him well in his planning of an ambush of a band of Mescalero Apaches. The scene where Thursday plans the ambush is deliberately structured to make use of the impression we've already formed, with his actions and behavior initially seeming to fall in line with what we already know about the character. He is rigid, authoritarian, and arrogant, refusing to divulge the extent of his plans or to receive council, and seems to underestimate the strength of the Mescalero, first when he countermands and reduces Captain York's specifications for how many men to bring and how much ammunition they are to have,

⁸⁰ McBride, 450, 452.

and again when he denies both Captain York and Sergeant-Major O'Rourke permission to lead the assignment. However, after issuing orders, he reveals that he intends to use the first detail to lure the Mescalero out, and then to ambush them with an entire platoon, which he then orders Captain York to assemble. The pleasant surprise of this scene stems from Thursday's dispositions actually facilitating a positive outcome: the ambush is successful. Later, Thursday's severity and rigidity are also put to similar use when he mercilessly (and humorously) exposes a corrupt trader stationed at the Apache reservation.

However, our first impression of Thursday also makes it unsurprising that his dispositions will lead to a series of events that will doom the regiment near the end of the film. Thursday hatches a plan to have Captain York convince the Apaches to come back from Mexico to America for a negotiation, fantasizing about himself as "the man who brought Cochise back." However, the strength of the primacy effect in this film makes us weary. Despite his deft handling of the Mescalero, Thursday's previously-established arrogance, racism, and disdain for Fort Apache's lack of luster makes it seem unlikely that he has a peaceful negotiation in mind. In other words, the primacy effect leads viewers to the probable hypothesis that Thursday is being disingenuous in his plan to lure Cochise back to the reservation. We brace for the worst, and indeed, Thursday's negative dispositions prevail when he betrays the Apaches' good faith in Captain York and sets up an ambush. Similarly, when the ambush fails and Thursday is maneuvered into actually negotiating with the Apaches, Thursday's arrogance and racism make the hypothesis that the negotiations will go poorly seem likely. Finally, on the verge of battle, Thursday's rigid discipline and arrogance unsurprisingly seals the fate of the regiment.

Ultimately, the way in which viewers comprehend and respond to all of these events, from Thursday's surprisingly deft handling of the Mescalero to his fatally obtuse confrontation

with Cochise's Apache, are predicated on viewers' first impressions of the character, which are in turn conditioned by the primacy effect. Had the narration introduced Thursday in a context where his dispositions were put to good use (like in the Mescalero and trader scenes), or where other dispositions -- such as his love for his daughter -- were displayed more prominently, it is likely that his troops' dislike for him would not garner our sympathy as effectively, and that our dismay would be more surprising when he blunders into a suicidal confrontation with the Apaches. However, by beginning with three scenes where Thursday prominently displays his negative dispositions, instead the primacy effect encourages viewers to brace for the worst throughout the film: any action taken by another character is a chance for Thursday to take offense, and every action on Thursday's part is a chance for disaster to befall the regiment.

The Primacy Effect: Why and How

The primacy effect can be active at any point in the narrative because it pertains to the effect of our first impressions of information. Thus any point where new information -- such as a new character, object, event, or motif -- is introduced to the narrative has the potential to solicit primacy effects from viewers. However, the primacy effect is particularly important for the *beginnings* of narratives for at least three reasons. First, the beginning often has the highest concentration of *new* information, and thus the greatest opportunity for the formation of first impressions. Second, the first impressions formed in the beginning also have the most opportunity to impact the comprehension of subsequent information precisely *because* they occur early in the narrative. That is, the earlier the first impression is formed, the more subsequent narrative information there is for the primacy effect to potentially act upon. As Michael Newman writes of the primacy effect and characterization, "It is not merely that the

mind emphasizes the things we encounter first, but that we view the latter traits through the impression we have already formed on the basis of the first ones encountered.”⁸¹ Third, the primacy effect is important for beginnings because it informs how other comprehension processes function. Viewers are particularly likely to weigh heavily the information provided in the beginning of the narrative because it is the only *specific* information to which they yet have access, and there is little else upon which to base an understanding of the narrative besides generic expectations and preexisting schemata such as a canonical narrative template schema or star personae.⁸² The primacy effect is what allows initial information to act, in David Bordwell’s words, as a “firm foothold” for the schemata we use to understand and organize narrative information, schemata which in turn are the basis for our hypothesis and inference activity. In other words, the primacy effect describes the priority we assign to the specific schemata, inferences, and trait attributions solicited by the initial information.

Once the primacy effect has taken hold, it can be difficult to overturn. As David Bordwell writes, “we tend to take the first appearance of a motif as the ‘true’ one, which can withstand severe testing by contrary information.”⁸³ Indeed, much empirical social psychological research has shown, in the words of social psychologists Nancy Cantor and Walter Mischel, that

when perceivers who have formed a trait impression observe subsequent behaviors which are consistent with their initial impression of the stimulus person’s dispositions, they attribute them to the stimulus person’s ‘real self,’

⁸¹ Newman, 275.

⁸² Of course, viewers can pick up specific narrative information through sources other than the film itself, such as trailers or other promotional material. While such information doubtlessly plays a role in the formation of many typical viewers’ expectations, such expectations are likely tentative and subordinate to the information the film’s narrative *actually* provides in the course of its narration. As with the formation of a specific and probable global hypothesis (which is not just a matter of knowing where the narrative will end up, but a matter of having an idea of *how* it will get there), the actual narrative information itself is the most pertinent for the formation of first impressions.

⁸³ Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 37.

whereas inconsistent subsequent behaviors are attributed to superficial and transient factors.... These strategies help observers to maintain their impressions of trait consistency even in the face of observed behavioral inconsistency.⁸⁴

Considering the primacy effect's potential to influence subsequent cognitive processing, it is worth considering at length why the primacy effect is often so durable. The primacy effect's durability is not merely a product of an impression being "first," but is also a result of this first impression seeming to fit the information at hand. Efraim Fischbein puts this notion in slightly stronger terms, writing, "Initial conceptions survive for a very long time not merely because they represent a first experience but because they were chosen from the beginning so that their stability would be guaranteed."⁸⁵ While guarantees are hard to come by when making inferences and hypotheses about story information, in terms of the model for comprehension outlined thus far, first impressions are durable because they seem like good candidates for getting the most use out of the initial information presented by the narration, especially in terms of the schemata we use to categorize the action. However, we can go further in accounting for the primacy effect's durability by investigating some cognitive mechanisms through which the primacy effect persists.

Menakhem Perry offers a lucid account of three different possible explanations psychologists have devised to account for the primacy effect and its stability in the face of inconsistent information.⁸⁶ One is that the primacy effect is a result of "passive attention decrement," where we simply pay more attention to the initial information we learn about a

⁸⁴ Cantor and Mischel, 7-8.

⁸⁵ Efraim Fischbein, *Intuition in Science and Mathematics: An Educational Approach* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), 198.

⁸⁶ For a summary of the various authors who initially proposed these explanations, see also Philip Bossart and Francis J. Di Vesta, "Effects of Context, Frequency, and Order of Presentation of Evaluative Assertions on Impression Formation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4:5 (1966), 543.

subject “when first attempting to form some impression,” but once a first impression has been formed, we pay less attention to the rest of the information.⁸⁷ Perry dismisses this hypothesis as more applicable to serial lists than to narrative texts, the latter of which encourage continued attention by fostering the expectation that subsequent information will “enrich, modify, surprise and pose difficulties” for the impressions formed by the initial information.⁸⁸

Perry prefers two other hypotheses in which the first impression becomes qualified by inconsistent information, neither of which is mutually exclusive. The first is “assimilative change of meaning,” where the later information *changes its meaning* as a “function” of the initial information.⁸⁹ That is, the primacy effect functions by bringing out shades of meaning in later information that correspond to the initial information. For example, if our first impression of a character emphasizes positive traits, but subsequently the character exhibits stubbornness, then the primacy effect changes the meaning of stubbornness to something more positive, such as “determined perseverance.” However, if the first impression is negative, then subsequent stubbornness is also seen negatively, along the lines of “dull obstinacy.”⁹⁰ This hypothesis suggests that in the Luchins experiment, for example, if the character is first introduced as an

⁸⁷ Perry, 56.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 57. Perry also observes that passive attention decrement suggests that there is no interaction between the initial and subsequent information, which is plainly not the case in narratives. While the subsequent two hypotheses Perry describes seem more compelling for narrative information than the attention decrement hypothesis, psychological researchers have found some evidence indicating that attention decrement is a factor in the comprehension of narrative-like information, at least when “attention” is quantified as the amount of processing of stimulus information by a subject. See Susan M. Belmore, “Determinants of Attention During Impression Formation,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition* 13:3 (1987), 480-489.

⁸⁹ Perry, 55.

⁹⁰ This example comes from Norman H. Anderson, “Cognitive Algebra: Integration Theory Applied to Social Attribution,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 7, ed. Leonard Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 70. Another example might be if a first impression of someone is that they are organized, an assumption one might then make is that their subsequent disorganization is actually an inscrutable form of organization, as when someone keeps a messy desk, but knows exactly where everything is on it.

extrovert, we change the meaning of his introverted behavior in subsequent portions of the text so that it accords with his already-established extroversion: as in, he's being contemplative or cautious.⁹¹ With this hypothesis, the meaning of the usual implication of the character's (unexpected) behavior is changed.⁹²

The second hypothesis Perry prefers is an "active discounting process," where the later information is weighted as less important if it is inconsistent with the initial information "without new meanings being activated in [it]."⁹³ That is, if later information is inconsistent with initial information, we come up with ways to dismiss the inconsistent behavior in order to maintain the first impression.⁹⁴ This hypothesis suggests that in the Luchins experiment, we assume the first descriptions of the character are accurate, but something (about which we are unaware or do not understand, and about which we might hypothesize) has caused the character's behavior to change since then: as in, he's extroverted, but is avoiding others now in order to play a joke on them; he's had a bad day, or he's tired. It also suggests that we don't find the later descriptions of

⁹¹ As Luchins describes this possibility, "The first block [of text] introduced Jim to the subject. While he was reading the second block he was already under the influence of what he had read before, and this may have interfered with his learning of, or colored his interpretation of, the second block." Luchins, "Primacy-Recency in Impression Formation," 56.

⁹² Insofar as the primacy effect is a means of soliciting a schema for a particular character type, "assimilative change in meaning" is very similar to what Murray Smith calls "accommodation," which is "the process of adaptation whereby a schema develops by incorporating new experience; either the default hierarchy becomes more elaborated, or an entirely new schema is developed." In other words, Smith's accommodation is the process by which incorporating new information into our conception of a character requires us to revise or reject our original schema for that character (which itself is based on a first impression). See Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 121.

⁹³ Perry, 56. Evidence of both assimilative change in meaning and active discounting were found in Cowan's experimentation. See Cowan, 158 for some vivid examples.

⁹⁴ Smith also provides an equivalent of active discounting, which he calls (somewhat confusingly, given Perry's terms) "assimilation," where "the existing schema overrides the recalcitrant experience by processing what it can of the sense-data and effectively 'ignoring' (not noticing) the rest." While Smith's assimilation might seem similar to passive attention decrement, considering Smith indicates that viewers "ignore" the inconsistent information, assimilation is actually more similar to Perry's active discounting, since the inconsistent information is being overridden by the original schema. See Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 121.

the character credible unless somehow we're able to understand *why* they are inconsistent with the initial information. Luchins describes this possibility as the first block of text putting readers in a position "to be more critical of the second part."⁹⁵ Why discount the subsequent information rather than the initial information? As social psychologists Clyde Hendrick and Arthur F. Costanti write, earlier information is considered more important for organizing an impression because a viewer "starts with a base line of zero information," and it takes less effort to discard later information to resolve the inconsistency than to discard early information. "Discounting earlier information would require reorganizing the entire impression. The developing initial impression or organization would inhibit such a tendency. Therefore, the most likely version of the discounting hypothesis would predict a primacy effect in the impression task."⁹⁶

Roos Vonk has elaborated on four specific strategies viewers have at their disposal for changing the meaning or actively discounting inconsistent behavior to maintain a first impression, which, when taken together, provide compelling account of why the primacy effect is difficult to overturn. First, viewers can infer that the inconsistent behavior is *unintentional*, as would likely be the case were a kind character to trip someone walking beside them. Second, viewers can attribute the inconsistent behavior to *third party mediation*. This is an attractive strategy for accounting for inconsistent character behavior in moments of subjective narration, such as a flashback or dream sequence, or in unreliable narrations. This strategy also seems applicable to information aside from character behavior. For example, a small room might appear large if shot with a wide-angle lens. Third, viewers can attribute the inconsistent behavior to the character's *momentary* intentions, as when a normally slovenly character dresses nicely in

⁹⁵ Luchins, "Primacy-Recency in Impression Formation," 57.

⁹⁶ Clyde Hendrick and Arthur F. Costanti, "The Effects of Varying Trait Inconsistency and Response Requirements on the Primacy Effect in Impression Formation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 15:2 (1970), 159.

order to impress the parents of their romantic interest. Fourth, viewers can attribute the inconsistent behavior to *situational causes*, or the particular context in which a character is placed, as might be the case were a normally calm-and-collected character to behave nervously when interviewing for an important job. Even in situations where we might not know what the situational cause is, it is often easier to assume one exists and to hypothesize about what it might be than to overturn entirely our first impression of the character. While the third and the fourth strategies both involve momentary circumstances that will pass, they differ in that the third is one intentionally caused by the character, while the fourth is one which originates in outside factors and is not necessarily intentional (although both draw upon folk psychological mental attributions). All of these strategies effectively indicate that the primacy effect is difficult to overturn because we have so many *different* means of manipulating the information at hand in order to uphold our first impressions.

The explanatory strength of assimilative change in meaning and active discounting is further bolstered by these concepts' accordance with other cognitive processes that assist viewer engagement with stories. In the Luchins experiment, for example, viewers assimilate or discount the inconsistent information because it is the best (or easiest) way for the character to accord with our schemata for persons (and by extension, characters).⁹⁷ Based on learned experience, our prototypical person schema stipulates a unified rather than split personality (what Murray Smith calls the "potential for traits, or persisting attributes"), thus we assimilate or discount information inconsistent with our first impression of the character because to do otherwise would deviate

⁹⁷ Daniel Kahneman's research supports the notion that assimilation and discounting are easy ways to account for the primacy effect: He attributes one of the causes of the primacy effect (which he calls the "halo effect") to the laziness of our "effortful" system of consciousness. That is, it is cognitively easier to let our first impressions guide our processing of information than it is to consciously doubt information, which requires the effort of "maintaining incompatible interpretations in mind at the same time." See Kahneman, 79-85.

significantly from the person schema (which we use to categorize people unless we're given a reason not to, as with those diagnosed with manic-depression or dissociative identity disorder).⁹⁸ As Meir Sternberg puts it, in determining the character's personality, "equal weight" could not be given to both sections of the narrative; if both sections were equally weighted, then this "would inevitably have led to the conclusion that [the character's] personality was dual or split."⁹⁹ Additionally, Vonk's strategies can be described as the application of alternative schemata that can fit the information at hand; we can call upon many schemata (derived from everyday life and from our experience with narratives) to explain inconsistent behavior and uphold a first impression.¹⁰⁰ Thus assimilative change in meaning and active discounting are good explanations for the primacy effect because the schemata we use to understand narrative information reinforce these kinds of interpretations of information.¹⁰¹

Of course, while the primacy effect is powerful, it is not so powerful that it entirely prohibits retrospection or revision. It does not become an impediment to comprehension, locking viewers into a particular understanding of the narrative wherein they can *only* understand information in the context of their first impressions. First impressions can be revised or even

⁹⁸ Once again, ignoring the inconsistent information, as with the passive decrement explanation, seems unlikely because it would necessitate ignoring parts of the narrative. For further consideration of the effect of a unified person schema on the primacy effect in the Luchins experiment, see Abraham S. Luchins, "Experimental Attempts to Minimize the Impact of First Impressions," in *The Order of Presentation in Persuasion*, ed. Carl I. Hovland (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 72. The notion of a unified personality is a fundamental postulate of much social psychological literature, as described by David L. Hamilton and Steven J. Sherman, "Perceiving Persons and Groups," *Psychological Review* 103:2 (1996), 337.

⁹⁹ Sternberg, 95. This is not to say that we can never arrive at the conclusion that a character has a split personality, but that such a conclusion is rarely the product of a first impression, because it is not a schema we readily call upon to explain behavior.

¹⁰⁰ Eugene Burnstein and Yaacov Schul, "The Informational Basis of Social Judgments: Operations in Forming an Impression of Another Person," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 18:3 (1982), 220.

¹⁰¹ See Cowan, 50-75, especially 72-75, for comparisons of various hypotheses for the cause of the primacy effect, and for various experiments that can be considered tests of these hypotheses.

overturned in the face of strong enough contradictory information.¹⁰² The possibility of retrospective revision is one of the reasons that the primacy effect can be powerful; more often than not the primacy effect is a useful aid to comprehension (especially in classical narration), but it is okay if it leads viewers astray, because erroneous judgments can be corrected after the fact. Indeed, some narrations rely on the primacy effect, as well as on its potential to be qualified or overturned, by intentionally misleading viewers into forming an erroneous first impression. One such film is *Stage Fright* (1950), which will be discussed in greater detail both below and in Chapter 5.¹⁰³ As Perry writes, “The primacy effect never works in isolation.” Narratives are based on a “*tension*” between first impressions the subsequent material, even if first impressions are never contradicted; in such cases, subsequent material must keep reinforcing first impressions.¹⁰⁴

Meir Sternberg’s Four Strategies

Meir Sternberg has examined closely ways in which narrations can manipulate the tension Perry writes about. He has categorized four different strategies for how narratives can use the primacy effect, which can be arranged on a scale that measures the degree to which

¹⁰² Additionally, the object of a viewer’s first impressions can change. Characters, for instance, often undergo change over the course of a narrative, and viewers don’t necessarily expect a character to remain unchanged for its duration. Narratives frequently incorporate character change by making it integral to the resolution of the plot, as in *Casablanca*, where Rick learns to let go of the past and stick his neck out for Ilsa and Victor. However, such character change is often motivated causally, and is explicitly narrated to viewers, thus it does not necessarily pose a challenge to the primacy effect. See Newman, 310-324 for a discussion of character change in classical Hollywood cinema and independent American cinema.

¹⁰³ *Stage Fright* and other classically narrated films often mislead viewers through a series of redundant and emphatic narrational cues. Classical Hollywood cinema is “excessively obvious” even in deceit. Only the subtlest of films rely chiefly on erroneous, non-redundant primacy effects in order to achieve misdirection. Such is the case with some of the films of Jean-Pierre Melville, such as *Le Deuxième Souffle* (1966) and *Un Flic* (1972).

¹⁰⁴ Perry, 57.

subsequent information *accords with* or *deviates from* first impressions. His categories are useful not only for discussing how the narration can make use of the primacy effect, but also for illustrating the importance the primacy effect can have for a viewer's understanding of the narrative. Regardless of whether first impressions are sustained, overturned, held in suspicion, or qualified, Sternberg's discussion of the primacy effect shows how the first impressions formed in the beginning are often used by the narration to solicit specific cognitive responses from viewers in later portions of the story.

The first strategy is when there is no tension between first and subsequent impressions; the first impressions are correct, and the primacy effect reigns supreme. This is the "basic norm," as Sternberg calls it, and *Fort Apache* can serve as a good cinematic example of it, not only in terms of a viewer's impression of Thursday, but also for the film's other characters.¹⁰⁵

Diametrically opposed to the basic norm is what Sternberg calls the "rise and fall of first impressions," which maximizes the tension between first and subsequent impressions by completely overturning the first impression at some point in the narrative; the primacy effect is "demolished" when the first impression is shown to be entirely incorrect. An exemplary film is *Stage Fright*, where a first impression of Jonathan (Richard Todd) as a well-intentioned but somewhat naïve victim of wrongful accusation is overturned completely at the end of the film, when he reveals himself to be a manipulative and impulsive murderer (this and other such films will be discussed further in Chapter 5).

Between the basic norm and rise and fall of first impressions are two additional strategies, the first of which Sternberg calls "the rhetoric of anticipatory caution." This strategy involves a degree of tension between first and subsequent impressions, where the narration hints

¹⁰⁵ Sternberg, 98.

that first impressions are not to be trusted entirely.¹⁰⁶ A narration can most easily achieve this strategy through suggesting that it is not entirely reliable, or by framing the primacy effect through the impressions formed by characters *within* the story: a character forms a first impression, and viewers are invited to follow suit, but might be given cause to hold some reservations (or more straightforwardly, one character is suspicious of another, and viewers likewise become suspicious). Sternberg's literary example is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, where the reader's first impression of Darcy is colored by Elizabeth's impression of him, an impression Sternberg argues is so prejudiced that readers become suspicious of it. A more straightforward example from film occurs in the opening of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), where Jo McKenna's (Doris Day) suspicion of Louis Bernard (Daniel Gélin) gives viewers cause to find Louis suspicious, despite his initially friendly demeanor. Louis asks many questions of Jo and her husband, Ben McKenna (James Stewart), but Louis offers very little information about himself, and repeatedly deflects Jo's questions. As Murray Smith describes the scene, "the effect is to force a suspension of the primacy effect: we do not assume that the first information we receive about Louis Bernard... is accurate or reliable."¹⁰⁷

The second of the two strategies falling between the basic norm and the rise and fall of first impressions is what Sternberg calls "the primacy effect complicated and qualified."¹⁰⁸ Like the rhetoric of anticipatory caution, this strategy also relies on tension between first and subsequent impressions, except rather than creating suspicion of a first impression, here the primacy effect leads viewers to a first impression that is not wrong, but that is only partly

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 129.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 144.

¹⁰⁸ Sternberg, 226.

representative. The information the narration provides is incomplete, thus the first impression, while not necessarily erroneous, is later qualified by subsequent information. It might best be considered manipulation through temporary omission. A good example of this strategy -- one worth analyzing at length -- occurs in *The Descendants* (2011), which strongly encourages a particular first impression of one of its characters, Sid (Nick Krause), only to later reveal that he is more complex than the narration initially lets on.

In the process of arranging for his coma-stricken wife, Elizabeth (Patricia Hastie), to be taken off life support, Matt (George Clooney) brings his oldest daughter, Alex (Shailene Woodley), home from boarding school. Alex calls upon her close friend Sid to accompany her as she helps her dad, and over the course of the film, the three make arrangements for Elizabeth, and attempt to track down the man with whom Elizabeth was having an affair. Sid makes a very strong first impression. When he first appears, he's dressed in a t-shirt and surfer shorts, and he greets Matt by asking, "Sup bro?" and pulling Matt's offer of a handshake into a hug, much to Matt's chagrin. Immediately, Sid exudes carefree facetiousness, and his demeanor, dress, and tone of voice come across as equal parts surfer-dude and pothead.¹⁰⁹ In the next scene, Sid further substantiates this first impression. After Matt and Alex inform Elizabeth's father, Scott (Robert Forster), that Elizabeth is going to die, Scott tries to tell Elizabeth's dementia-impaired mother, Alice (Barbara Lee Southern), that they need to go see Elizabeth in Queen's hospital. When Alice misunderstands their task, thinking that they are going to meet Queen Elizabeth, Sid laughs repeatedly and asks, "Is she serious?" When confronted angrily by Scott, Sid displays a

¹⁰⁹ Moreover, even before Sid appears in the film, we have cause to view his character with a jaundiced eye. Alex is something of a wild child; she's unruly enough that she has been sent off to boarding school, and when Matt goes to retrieve her, he catches her drunk, out of her dorm past curfew, and unconcerned about the consequences of getting caught. Thus our first impressions of Sid are likely influenced by hypotheses about the kind of boys with whom Alex might choose to be friends: they are likely unruly or socially transgressive in some fashion.

disrespectfully facile understanding of the situation, saying, “I’m sorry man, I was just laughing. It’s funny. I mean, I think she knows she’s being funny.” While Sid does apologize, he further reveals his immaturity both through his amused incredulity over Alice’s cognitive debilitation, and through his amusement taking precedence over his mild awareness of the discomfort it causes the others. In a cathartic moment, the scene concludes with Scott punching Sid in the face.

The next scene reiterates Sid’s facetiousness. Sid presses a bag of frozen vegetables against his bruised face, and Matt becomes uncomfortable when Alex innocently inspects Sid’s black-eye, prompting Matt to request that they not touch each other when he’s around. Sid takes offense at Matt’s (over)reaction, and somewhat maliciously suggests Elizabeth cheated on Matt because Matt dislikes touching. Matt vaguely threatens to punch Sid, and then tells Alex that Sid is “completely retarded.” Sid responds, “Hey man, my little brother’s retarded. Don’t use that word in derogatory fashion.” Sid pauses to let Matt feel bad for a moment, and then continues, laughing, “Psych! I don’t have a retarded brother!” Combined with his behavior in the previous two scenes, Sid’s malicious playfulness thoroughly establishes a very stereotypical impression as an immature teen with little regard for how others might react to his behavior (even Alex expresses her distaste for Sid’s joke at her dad’s expense, exclaiming, “Sid, you suck.”). However, while this impression of Sid as immature is accurate, it is also incomplete. The narration selectively reveals these immature aspects of Sid’s personality at first, but later will reveal that even though he displays immature behavior, he can also be sensitive others’ emotions, and is a more complex character than is initially evident.

Sid’s emotional sensitivity is on full display in two scenes near the end of the film. In the first, Elizabeth’s parents and brother visit her in the hospital one last time, and Scott harshly

blames Matt for her imminent death, concluding, “She was a faithful, devoted wife. She deserved more.” Matt holds his tongue, refusing to tell Scott about Elizabeth’s infidelity because he doesn’t want to sully Scott’s conception of Elizabeth just when Scott is about to say goodbye to her. Sid witnesses this exchange, and responds to Scott, stating, “For Christ’s sake, take it easy on the man.” In defending Matt, Sid displays sensitivity to Matt’s desire to keep Elizabeth’s affair a secret from her parents, as well as sensitivity to how difficult it must be for Matt to hold his tongue. Alex also comes to her father’s defense, and Matt looks at both Sid and Alex with a mixture of pride and gratification. Shortly after this scene, Sid again displays his emotional sensitivity when the wife of the man with whom Elizabeth had an affair comes to see Elizabeth in the hospital. Sensing that she needs to be alone with Matt, Sid keenly suggests that he and Matt’s daughters take a trip to the cafeteria.

This sensitivity does not emerge out of nowhere to contradict our earlier impressions of Sid’s character (as would be the case with the rise and fall of first impressions), but is motivated by a scene near the middle of the film, when Matt has a late-night conversation with Sid. Matt is concerned about his daughters’ psychological hang-ups, and Sid knowingly replies that it will get worse once Matt’s wife dies. Most importantly, Sid reveals that he knows what Alex is going through because his dad was killed by a drunk driver a few months earlier, and Sid displays self-awareness when he describes how he helps Alex: “We don’t really talk about our issues. We deal with our shit by talking about other stuff and having a good time.” Additionally, over the course of the conversation, Sid also lists other positive qualities he possesses: “I’m smart and, you know, I have good hygiene. I’m a decent guitar player. I’m a good cook. I mean, I cook food all the time. I’m vice president of the Punahou chess club.” Both Sid and Matt warm to each other in this scene: Matt respects the pain Sid is going through, while Sid displays a vulnerability that

makes him more sympathetic, and he also becomes more complex by expanding the range of our (and Matt's) knowledge of him. At the same time, Sid still displays the same immaturity that characterized him earlier. When Matt asks him what he would do in Matt's situation -- chasing after the man with whom Elizabeth was having an affair -- Sid gleefully replies, "I told you man, I'd put his nuts on the dresser and I'd beat them with a spiked bat." Additionally, Sid happily concludes the list of things in which he prides himself by stating, "And I always have weed."

While Sid's emotional sensitivity is more prominent in later scenes, his immaturity also remains consistent. After Matt and Alex have told Sid about the outcome of Matt's confrontation with the man with whom Elizabeth had an affair, Sid manages to display both his immaturity and his sensitivity simultaneously when he asks, "Was he sorry? I hope he was sorry, man. I mean, you could have told his wife, and you didn't. I would have told her everything. That guy doesn't know how lucky he is. She deserves to know, too. She's just going to be a dumb bitch for the rest of her life."

In short, Sid is both behaviorally immature, but also somewhat sensitive to others' emotions. These dispositions are consistent across all of the scenes in which he is featured prominently, but his first few scenes are designed to feature his immaturity rather than his emotional sensitivity.¹¹⁰ Our first impressions are complicated and qualified by subsequent information in later scenes. In a film that is as much about Matt discovering new things about his family as it is about Matt becoming a better parent and growing closer to his daughters through grief, the change in our (and Matt's) impression of Sid creates an uplifting contrast to the unhappy discoveries Matt makes about his wife's infidelity, and serves as yet another way in

¹¹⁰ Retrospectively, we can also hypothesize about why Sid did not display this emotional sensitivity in his early scenes: He likely laughs at Alice's dementia because he's genuinely surprised by it, or simply doesn't understand it, and the barb he directs toward Matt in the next scene is a reaction to Matt's aggression toward him.

which grief can draw people closer (even to people who initially loathe one another). The narration of *The Descendants* takes advantage of the power of the primacy effect by creating an impression of Sid that seems complete, but that actually only is only partially representative.

In sum, Sternberg's categories are useful not only for describing how narratives can make use of the primacy effect (and as all of the above examples indicate, all four strategies can be employed in classical narration, although some of them are more normative than others), but are also useful for illustrating why the primacy effect is an important factor to account for when inquiring after the form and function of narrative beginnings: viewers will have a very different understanding and experience of the narrative depending on the way in which the narration makes use of the first impressions it creates. For instance, the rise and fall of first impressions creates strong surprise; such duplicitous and fundamentally misleading narration causes viewers to recast their understanding of a character, and oftentimes much of the narrative as well. On the other hand, rather than reversing our understanding, the primacy effect, when complicated and qualified, creates a strong sense of diegetic depth by complicating what at first seems relatively straightforward, and also shows how our understanding of a character can change depending on context (context that is often provided by exposition; as will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3, Sternberg shows that manipulating the location of exposition often contributes significantly to the use of these strategies).¹¹¹ Contrastingly, the rhetoric of anticipatory caution

¹¹¹ The distinguishing characteristic of this strategy (the primacy effect complicated and qualified), insofar as it can be applied to characters, might be thought of in terms of E. M. Forster's distinction between "flat" and "round" characters. Complicating and qualifying a simplistic (or flat) first impression of a character is a way of making them "round," or more complex, although as Sternberg points out, the matter is better conceived less as a dichotomy and more as a continuum. Sternberg, 138. See also E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), 103-104. This strategy does not map onto the flat/round distinction perfectly, however, considering that a character needn't be "flat" in order to be complicated or qualified later. Sternberg's principal literary example of a complicated and qualified character is Homer's Odysseus, who is far from flat. Chapter 5 will discuss the flat/round distinction in greater detail.

turns the narrative into a guessing game by self-consciously drawing attention to gaps in information, with the narration encouraging viewers to form hypotheses about the withheld information. However, we can obtain additional insights and further refine the narration's manipulation of the primacy effect in narrative beginnings by specifying how or why some first impressions might be stronger than others, and how narrational variables might influence the strength of the primacy effect.

The Strength of First Impressions and the Primacy Effect

If the primacy effect is the effect of first impressions upon the comprehension of subsequent information, then it is pertinent to ask how long it takes for first impressions to form in the first place. That is, how can we delimit what counts as a part of a “first” impression? While this question does not address the strength of first impressions directly, it is an important question to answer, because if a first impression provides the basis for the primacy effect, then we need some non-arbitrary means at our disposal for identifying and delimiting the information that can contribute to a first impression. As described above, impression formation is a dynamic process, one that includes the kinds of schemata a character initially solicits upon their introduction (i.e., their “type”), as well as the salience of the information stimulating the impression, and the ease with which we can make inferences about a character's mental states. Chapter 4 will address each of these contributing factors in detail, but it is enough to say here that there is some leeway when determining what contributes to the first impression upon which we base our comprehension of subsequent information, both because some of these cognitive processes take time, and because some of this information takes time for the narration to introduce. While first impressions can sometimes form very quickly, there are other times when

they form more gradually, as a result of the dynamic integration of multiple instances of behavior or information. Such is the case with Ben (Dustin Hoffman) in *The Graduate* (1967), for instance. Ben is first seen arriving on a plane to Los Angeles, and over the film's opening credits, he moves through the airport, collects his baggage, and exits, and does not readily solicit specific schemata about who he is beyond his broad physical traits (such as his being a white male, short of stature, in his early twenties), and he affords little opportunity for making inferences about his mental states or dispositions (at best, one might infer he is patient because he stops walking once he steps onto a moving walkway).¹¹² Accordingly, our first impression of Ben takes some time to form; it is only when Ben expresses trepidation about his future and appears anxious and uncomfortable in the next scene (a party his parents throw in honor of his graduation) that our impressions of Ben gradually become more particular and substantial.

The same might also be said of Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft), albeit for slightly different reasons; unlike with Ben, we can readily use a social prototype schema to categorize her (she appears to be another party guest, an upper-middle class friend of Ben's parents), and we can also make basic inferences about her mental states in her first scene. However, her dispositions only become evident gradually, as it becomes increasingly clear that she is trying to seduce Ben, and she reveals herself to be tenacious, aggressive, and manipulative. To a certain extent, some of these traits cannot help but manifest gradually: a part of the definition of tenacity, for example, is persistence, which more or less requires time to become evident. Mrs. Robinson is first seen near the middle of a tracking shot that follows Ben through his graduation

¹¹² One might infer that the non-diegetic music playing over this scene, Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence," is an indication of Ben's mental state. One could also construe later non-diegetic music along these lines, considering that the music often refers explicitly to the events of the film (particularly "Mrs. Robinson" and "April, Come She Will"), but at this point in the film -- the very beginning -- there is little indication for viewers to conceive of the music this way. At best, one might reason that the music is indicative of a thematic motif (which could also be said of later musical accompaniment).

party. As he pauses to talk with a guest, the shot rack focuses to Mrs. Robinson in the middle ground, who watches Ben while idly smoking a cigarette. Once Ben flees the party to his room, he has a few moments to himself before Mrs. Robinson opens his door under the pretense of looking for the bathroom. In the following exchange, Mrs. Robinson exhibits a series of behaviors: she admires Ben's room; inquires about an ashtray for her cigarette; asks Ben what's upsetting him; congratulates him on his graduation, and then asks for him to drive her home. Ben is resistant, but Mrs. Robinson insists, and he drives her home, where (much to Ben's protestation) she manipulates him into her house, having a drink, and then entering a bedroom, eventually coming to stand naked before him, offering him sex any time he wants. Insofar as dispositions contribute to first impressions, only gradually over the course of this behavior do our impressions of Mrs. Robinson as manipulative, aggressive, and tenacious become firmly solidified (and considering that she is married, we might also go further and say that she is also immoral, or at least socially transgressive). In general, then, these examples demonstrate that the point at which we can say that a first impression has "formed" is somewhat flexible and will change on a case by case basis, because there are multiple cognitive processes and kinds of information that can contribute to first impressions (although both instantaneous and gradual first impressions can each be powerful in their own right).

The strength of the primacy effect involves (and is partially contingent upon) the strength of a first impression: the stronger the first impression, the greater basis there is for maintaining it over the course of the rest of the narrative, especially in the face of later inconsistent information. Therefore, a discussion of the primacy effect's strength also benefits from a discussion of the strength of first impressions. One factor that affects the strength of a first impression is the degree to which initial information accords with or deviates from schematic norms. Numerous

social psychologists have found that information that deviates from schematic expectations tends to leave a stronger impression than information which adheres to schematic expectations.¹¹³ To a certain extent, this is unsurprising; unexpected or schematically atypical information tends to be more salient than information schemata prime us to expect. For example, all other things being equal, Western culture's (schematically derived) expectations for social behavior are for people to exhibit positive rather than negative behavior, in part because positive behavior is more common.¹¹⁴ Therefore, as psychologist Leslie McArthur describes, "negative behaviors draw more attention than positive ones... What's more, they exert a greater impact upon impressions of the person manifesting them than do the person's less salient behavior."¹¹⁵ In *first* impressions during narrative beginnings, the strength of schematically atypical information is compounded by the primacy effect; all other things *are* closest to being equal in the beginning, because (potentially) the least amount of contextual information is available. Therefore, should a first impression be of a person exhibiting negative or otherwise atypical social behavior, that first impression will be especially influential in our estimations of subsequent behavior. Indeed, in an experiment designed to test the primacy effect in situations where a character's behavior varied from moral to immoral (rather than extroverted to introverted), Luchins and Luchins found that it is harder to counter an *unfavorable* first impression with a later favorable one than vice versa. As Luchins and Luchins describe, this can impact our judgment significantly: "If a person has a bad reputation, others may persist in regarding him or her as bad despite the good that he or she does

¹¹³ See McArthur, 218. See also Abraham S. Luchins and Edith H. Luchins, "Primacy and Recency Effects With Descriptions of Moral and Immoral Behavior," *The Journal of General Psychology* 113 (2), 173. See also Mandler, 35.

¹¹⁴ Mary E. Briscoe, Howard D. Woodyard, and Marvin E. Shaw, "Personality Impression Change as a Function of the Favorableness of First Impressions," *Journal of Personality* 35:2 (1967), 351-352, 354-355. See also Cowan, 17.

¹¹⁵ McArthur, 218.

later. In such situations, the primacy effect can have insidious influences on judgments.”¹¹⁶ Other psychologists such as Mary Briscoe and Howard Woodward have found similar results, and have proposed similar explanatory hypotheses: the power and relative stability of unfavorable first impressions stem from such impressions’ inconsistencies from social norms or schemata (behavioral or otherwise).¹¹⁷

Fort Apache’s Owen Thursday is a prime example: he displays many negative dispositions and social behavior over the beginning of the film, including in the very first scene. While these dispositions might be normative for Thursday’s character, or for someone who feels unappreciated, they still differ significantly from the kinds of social behavior our schemata prime us to expect (even for military officers, who can be strict, but who also often respect their troops and their command). The negativity of Thursday’s first impression is one of the reasons why he serves as an excellent example of the primacy effect in general, especially as it pertains to the jaundiced eye with which we view his occasional displays of good leadership toward the middle of the film, such as when he successfully ambushes the Mescalero Apaches.

Thursday’s character creates a strong first impression for another reason as well, one that also relates to his character’s deviance from schematic expectations. Rather than a schema for social behavior, however, Thursday deviates instead from another kind of intertextual and extratextual schema viewers often bring to bear on films with famous actors: a star persona. Strictly in terms of narrative comprehension, a star persona works similarly to that of any other pre-existing information we bring to bear upon the film prior to starting it: it is a semi-reliable

¹¹⁶ Luchins and Luchins, “Primacy and Recency Effects With Descriptions of Moral and Immoral Behavior,” 173.

¹¹⁷ Briscoe, *et al.*, 355. See also Cowan, 14-17. There is some debate over whether the novelty or intensity of atypical behavior is more likely to attract attention. See McArthur, 215.

basis for organizing information about an actual character.¹¹⁸ A star persona is a kind of schema that can guide us at the outset, but gets filled in and becomes subordinate to the actual information specific to the particular narrative.¹¹⁹ For example, one can draw from John Wayne's star persona to infer a number of dispositions about the character he plays in a given film: he'll adhere closely to a moral code, likely one emphasizing duty and honor; he'll be brave, tough, easy-going, and paternalistic; he'll be courteous toward women, and so on.¹²⁰ However, just as with forming a global hypothesis, the actual narrative information weighs most heavily in our conception of a character, and when it deviates from a star persona, it can create a powerful first impression. Such is the case with Henry Fonda's Owen Thursday. Fonda plays against type in this role: his mild-mannered, all-Americanness and liberalism are nowhere to be found in Thursday, thus for the viewer well-versed in Fonda's star persona, the strength of the first impression created by Thursday is further compounded because Thursday is so far afield from the kinds of characters Fonda usually plays.

While the salience of information and its accordance with schematic norms -- as they have been described here -- are principally cognitive-based variables that can impact the primacy effect, there are at least two other variables which can also have an impact, and are based more in narrative form and narration: the consistency and redundancy of information. In a preliminary

¹¹⁸ For a discussion of the different media texts that contribute to the formation of a star persona, see Richard Dyer, *Stars*, new ed. (London, BFI Publishing, 1998), 60-63.

¹¹⁹ However, a star persona differs significantly from the other schemata dealt with extensively thus far in at least one respect: it is much more unstable or transient. It is transient both because a star persona can change radically over the course of the career of an actor, and because common knowledge of a star persona is significantly less persistent over time than a canonical narrative template schema, or even some common scripts or prototypes. Knowledge of star personae wax and wane along with actors' careers, and some have more lasting power than others, but a script for dining at a restaurant, for instance, has remained largely the same for hundreds of years. Star personae will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

¹²⁰ One of the reasons Wayne's performance in *The Searchers* (1956) is so distinctive is because Ethan Edwards' overt racism deviates somewhat from this persona.

experiment designed to minimize the impact of the primacy effect, Luchins alternated introverted and extroverted descriptions of the character's behavior with every other sentence, rather than placing extroversion and introversion in two different halves of the text (as in his initial experiment). He found that while the primacy effect still prevailed, its strength was lessened than in the experiment where extroversion and introversion were relegated to two separate halves of the text. As Perry indicates in his observation that the primacy effect never works in isolation, these results suggest that while first impressions can be relatively instantaneous, the strength of the primacy effect can vary based on the qualities of *subsequent* narrative information.¹²¹

As Luchins' findings indicate, and as Luchins himself suggests, the relative *consistency* of subsequent information is likely at least one factor that can influence the primacy effect's strength.¹²² A relatively intuitive hypothesis is that the more consistent subsequent information is with a first impression, the stronger the impression in general, and the stronger the primacy effect. Conversely, if subsequent information is inconsistent, then it becomes more difficult to form a definitive impression, and the primacy effect is diminished. This hypothesis seems intuitive because consistent information can serve as confirmation of a first impression, especially when related to an impression of a character.¹²³ Indeed, experimentation with trait

¹²¹ Luchins, "Experimental Attempts to Minimize the Impact of First Impressions," 74. These results were confirmed in another experiment where the descriptions of the character alternated between extrovert and introvert, and where the behavior either descended or ascended along a continuum from extreme introversion to extreme extroversion. See Abraham S. Luchins and Edith H. Luchins on the neutral groups responses in "Anchorage and Ordering Effects of Information on Personality Impression," *Journal of Social Psychology* 66:1 (June 1965), 4.

¹²² Luchins, "Experimental Attempts to Minimize the Impact of First Impressions," 60.

¹²³ While it pertains to impression formation in general rather than to order effects, and while it uses adjective lists rather than narrative passages, Leon H. Levy's remarks on the confidence of judgments when comparing consistent and inconsistent personality traits would seem to support this point. See Leon H. Levy, "The Effects of Variance on Personality Impression Formation," *Journal of Personality* 35:2 (1967), 179-193. For findings which seem to indicate the opposite, see Hendrick and Costanti, 158-162. It should be noted, however, that like Levy, Hendrick and Costanti's findings resulted from experiments with lists of trait adjectives, not narratives, and thus at best, the results of both studies should be considered only tentatively related to the hypothesis proposed here.

adjectives suggests both that consistency increases the strength of an impression, and that people use consistency as a means of determining information's validity, such that later information is more readily accepted when it is consistent with earlier information.¹²⁴ In some narratives, then, the primacy effect can be thought of as a coping mechanism for inconsistency, preventing confusion by supporting a first impression.¹²⁵

Redundancy refers to the degree to which information is repeated, such as an implied character trait or a state of affairs. We can hypothesize that the more redundant the narrative information is over the course of the beginning, the stronger the primacy effect, because each repetition acts as a confirming instance of the first impression, and because redundancy makes information easier to retain and recall.¹²⁶ While redundancy is an important variable to consider in discussing the strength of the primacy effect, it is also important for cinematic narration more

¹²⁴ Ralph H. Stewart, "Effect of Continuous Responding on the Order Effect in Personality Impression Formation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1:2) 1965, 162-163. See also Cowan, 49. These studies also suggest evidence of the active discounting explanation for the primacy effect. For the results of an experiment testing for assimilation and contrast effects when the set of the initial (consistent) stimulus information is increased or decreased, see Reboussin, 70-77.

¹²⁵ Even though we may be logically aware that inconsistent behavior only appears to be inconsistent because we have limited information at our disposal when forming an impression, we still use first impressions as the basis for our judgments.

¹²⁶ There is slight psychological experimentation on the impact of redundancy on the primacy effect, and what literature exists is at best provisional, given the constraints of the experiments. For example, Douglas K. Chalmers found that repetition increases the certainty of subjects' impressions of a person when the information on which their impressions are based is a list of unfavorable trait adjectives, but not when the list of adjectives consists of favorable traits. Douglas K. Chalmers, "Repetition and Order Effects in Attitude Formation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 17:2 (1971), 219-228. However, Chalmers's experiment asked subjects to rate the certainty of their impression only in terms of its degree of favorableness, not in terms of their certainty of the qualities the traits were meant to imply. That is, if a trait list describing a person consisted of "adventurous, adventurous, adventurous, educated, loyal, outgoing," subjects were not asked to rate their certainty of the person's adventurousness, but their certainty of how favorable they found the person. Therefore, Chalmers's findings, while revelatory for judging the effects of repetition on favorableness of first impressions, do not seem to apply to more impartial first impressions concerning the actual information at hand, such as the degree to which the adjectives do or do not describe the person. Add to this caveat others concerning the applicability of trait list experimentation to narrative information (such as narratives presenting far more information about a person than trait lists, and doing so while simultaneously providing much other information), and there is strong reason to consider the redundancy hypothesis a probable one for narrative information.

generally. As David Bordwell writes “Any narrative text must repeat important story information, and in the cinema, repetition takes on a special necessity; since the conditions of presentation mean that one cannot stop and go back, most films reiterate information again and again.”¹²⁷ In other words, redundancy helps to ensure that important information is noticed, which is, of course, a prerequisite for comprehension, both in the beginning and elsewhere.¹²⁸

In addition to producing strong primacy effects, another reason classical narration tends to repeat information about characters is that redundancy makes trait inferences less ambiguous than they might otherwise be, especially in the beginning. Some actions can have multiple, mutually exclusive implications for the kinds of dispositions we could infer about a character. For example, if an employee compliments their boss on a bad decision, we could make a number of inferences about the employee’s dispositions to help explain their behavior: they could be kind or polite, but they might also be manipulative, ambitious, dishonest, or unintelligent. Psychological research into attribution theory suggests that when many possible dispositions are available as explanations for behavior, we become more tentative about making trait inferences, and that the only way to learn about a character is to make a snap judgment that narrows the range of possible dispositions to whichever seems the most likely.¹²⁹ Redundancy, then, helps to

¹²⁷ Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 31.

¹²⁸ Bordwell’s prioritization of redundancy is meant to describe theatrical viewing experiences rather than watching a film in a private setting such as a home, but the principle still applies in both viewing contexts, since the same narrative is being presented in both exhibition venues. That is, when film narratives move from theaters to home exhibition venues, they aren’t recreated with less redundancy for private viewing simply because the home viewer has more control over starting and stopping the narrative. While some contemporary films might be designed with greater viewer control in mind (as with films that reward viewers who scour the image for ancillary jokes or references), classically narrated films still make use of redundancy to emphasize crucial story information.

¹²⁹ Edward E. Jones and Keith E. Davis, “From acts to dispositions: The attribution process in person perception,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 2), ed. L. Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1965). See also Donal E. Carlston, “Events, Inferences, and Impressions,” in *Person Memory: Cognitive Basis of Social Perception*, eds. Reid Hastie et al. (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980), 104.

ensure that we make the correct inferences about character dispositions by providing varied opportunities for characters to repeatedly display behavior that corresponds to their particular dispositions. If the character is simply being kind when they compliment the boss on a bad decision, then this kindness can be reinforced if the character repeatedly displays behavior that corresponds to it. After complimenting the boss on a bad decision, the character might then congratulate a coworker on their recent accomplishments, and then help another coworker pick up a pile of spilled papers from off the floor. Kindness would seem to be the disposition common to all three actions, and the redundant display of behavior that corresponds with this trait increases the probability that viewers ultimately make the correct inference.

Redundancy's capacity for soliciting precise trait inferences is especially pertinent for narrative beginnings, because the beginning is usually where characters are first introduced, and is thus where viewers have the largest dearth of contexts that might otherwise inform judgments about character dispositions. That is, absent other contexts about a character, the beginning is where we are most likely to be tentative in understanding the dispositions that motivate character behavior. Thus classical beginnings provide redundant information about character traits as we first get to know characters, in order to make it more likely that viewers make the "correct" trait inferences (or, as with the case in misleading narrations, the particular inference the narration is designed to solicit, regardless of whether or not it is correct). Character introductions will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.

The beginning of *Casablanca* provides an example of consistency and redundancy, as well as of the primacy effect's application to a state of affairs. The voiceover that immediately follows the opening titles describes a state of affairs: many people fleeing Europe during World War II are stuck in Casablanca. This state of affairs is repeated at least five more times within the

first eight and half minutes of the film. Shortly after a montage of policemen rounding up suspects in the theft of the letters of transit, the state of affairs is reiterated when a pickpocket distracts a vacationing couple from his actions by explaining to them the commotion generated by the arrests. He says, “Unfortunately, along with these unhappy refugees, the scum of Europe has gravitated to Casablanca. Some of them have been waiting years for a visa.” This exchange is immediately followed by a series of five shots in which a crowd of people gaze longingly at a plane as it flies over the city and lands at the airport. Annina (Joy Page) and her fiancé are amongst them, and she fantasizes, “Perhaps tomorrow we’ll be on the plane.” After a brief scene in which Strasser meets Renault, the state of affairs is reiterated again, during the introduction to Rick’s café, where the film cuts amongst various patrons: one expresses great relief at finally closing a deal to escape Casablanca, while another laments, “Waiting, waiting, waiting. I’ll never get out of here. I’ll die in Casablanca.” All of this redundancy likely strengthens the first impression of the state of affairs in Casablanca: the city is full of people who would like to leave (to escape the looming threat of the Nazis), but who cannot. The same can be said of the information’s consistency: with the possible exception of the pickpocket’s victims (who seem to be vacationers), the narration does not emphasize any refugees relaxing contentedly or who appear happy to be in Casablanca (and even the vacationers are about to realize they’ve been victimized just when the film cuts away from them).

It is important that the film emphasize that European refugees are stuck in Casablanca because this state of affairs provides the context necessary to understand the significance of the letters of transit, and subsequently the main action of the rest of the narrative. Thus not only is this state of affairs important information for viewers to remember, but it also influences our impressions of certain characters in terms of how they react to and exist within the city,

including the general malaise of the refugees, but more specifically, Renault's corrupt opportunism and Rick's disinterested self-preservation. Any number of factors could lead to a viewer missing one or more of the reiterations of this state of affairs in *Casablanca*, but the redundancy helps to ensure the unlikelihood of their missing all of them, and taken together, they contribute to a firm first impression, and accordingly, a strong primacy effect.¹³⁰

Redundancy is similar to consistency, in that both involve the sequential introduction of information; however, consistency refers to the extent to which subsequent information *conflicts* with the initial information, regardless of how often that initial information (or any conflicting information) appears, whereas redundancy just refers to whether or not the initial information is *repeated* in some form, regardless of whether or not other information that conflicts with it. In other words, redundancy concerns the repetition of particular information, whereas consistency concerns the degree to which subsequent information corresponds with the initial information. In Luchins's experiments, for example, there is a lot of redundancy of information about the character's traits, but little consistency. We can imagine a scenario in which these terms are reversed, where a character's behavior is very consistent, but not very redundant. Such a scenario would be one in which a character exhibits a particular trait like extroversion infrequently, or where the narration provides such a large quantity of additional, unrelated information that the effect of any redundant information is diluted, or where a character's extroversion leads to the demonstration of other associated traits that are consistent with it; perhaps the extroverted character is impulsive or excitable. In the *Casablanca* example, higher consistency but lower redundancy might involve not as much repetition of refugees' desire to leave, but rather, more

¹³⁰ For an apt description of some of the factors that necessitate repetition, including not hearing or seeing the information the first time, or just not understanding the plot, see Eugene Vale, *The Technique of Screenplay Writing* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1972), 37, quoted in Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 16-17.

emphasis on the possible qualities of life in Casablanca that would make them want to leave: it is hot; they live in tiny hovels; they have neither income nor profession; there is crime and corruption; the Nazi threat looms, and so on. All of this would be consistent with characters' desire to leave (and indeed, could act as motivation for that desire), but it is not very redundant; each piece of information is unique. Nevertheless, redundancy and consistency often go hand in hand because implicit in the concept of redundancy is the notion of consistency: repeated factual information is bound to be consistent, thus one of the easiest ways to ensure a strong primacy effect is to simply repeat information.

Narrational Norms

Much like with consistency and redundancy in the primacy effect, schemata are conditioned by narrational factors. Schemata are not created from scratch; they are based on knowledge already possessed and are derived from prior experience. Therefore, implicit in the above discussion of a narrative template schema is the assumption that there is some regularity to viewers' prior experience with narratives. Narratives and narrations have *norms*, sets of standards established by practice or by dictum, to which individual stories can be seen to adhere or deviate. Narrational norms are best considered aesthetic norms, which involve collective expectations of the characteristics of a work (and to a lesser extent, collective evaluations of what the work ought to be like), but which are not necessarily "sanctioned" when violated (unlike many social norms).¹³¹ As David Bordwell writes, "the only goal of the aesthetic norm is

¹³¹ For further descriptions of collective evaluations, collective expectations, and reactions to behavior (three characteristics of norms), See Jack P. Gibbs, "Norms: The Problem of Definition and Classification," *American Journal of Psychology* 70:5 (March 1965), 589-590. Gibbs also provides a useful list of other definitions of norms, on pages 586-587. For a discussion of the distinction between aesthetic norms and other kinds of norms, including the mutability of aesthetic norms, their tendency to be violated, and the different kinds of aesthetic norms in artworks (such as material, technical, practical, and traditional norms), see Jan Mukařovský, "The Aesthetic Norm,"

to permit art works to come into existence. This has important consequences: disobeying the aesthetic norm is not necessarily a negative act (may, indeed, be quite productive).”¹³² A narrational norm is not a rigid rule, but a compositional option, the use of which is selected from a broader paradigm. Viewer familiarity with the norms of classical narration is what shapes the format of the canonical narrative template schema.

Just as there are different kinds of schemata, there are also different ways of classifying norms. One distinction Bordwell discusses is between the different levels of abstraction on which norms can operate.¹³³ There are norms for individual stylistic devices, the systems into which those devices are organized, such as spatial or temporal continuity, and the relationships between those systems, as in the subordination of space and time to narrative causality.¹³⁴ Even though all of these kinds of norms contribute to the classical paradigm (as Bordwell describes it), the norms emphasized in the following discussion are those that occur chiefly on the levels of systems and relationships between systems, as these levels are where we can find the narrational principles that are either specific to the narration of beginnings, or whose functions are especially important for beginnings because of their ramifications for a viewer’s understanding of the narrative. While stylistic norms are certainly important, here their discussion will be limited mostly to their direction of perceptual attention through devices such as focus, staging and framing, and sound

in *Structure, Sign, and Function*, ed. and trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 49-56. Mukařovský also argues very convincingly that we should not abandon the concept of aesthetic norms for complete relativism because aesthetic norms are based on “the anthropological organization of man,” or concrete human perception of qualities such as rhythm, perspective, and balance.

¹³² Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 4.

¹³³ For other ways of classifying norms, see Gibbs. See also Richard T. Morris, “A Typology of Norms,” *American Sociological Review*, 21:5 (October 1956), 610-613. The following discussion of norms is derived mostly from Bordwell, who provides an excellent account of the concept of norms and their use for analyzing classical narration.

¹³⁴ Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 6-7.

design, rather than in terms of how these qualities may or may not be normative for classical beginnings (although stylistic norms will arise in the discussions of both causally necessary conditions, and misleading narration).¹³⁵

Another important distinction is between extrinsic and intrinsic norms. Extrinsic norms are norms common to many narratives; these are the norms from which a narrative template schema is derived. Intrinsic norms are those that are established by an individual narration, and that are not necessarily common to other narratives, such as a peculiarly ordered pattern of *syuzhet* events, or an idiosyncratic use of stylistic devices. Both intrinsic and extrinsic norms serve viewer cognitive processes by establishing expectations and soliciting schema use. As Bordwell describes, “both intrinsic and extrinsic norms set up paradigms, or rough sets of alternatives which form the basis of spectators’ schemata, assumptions, inferences, and hypotheses.”¹³⁶ Each kind of norm is important for the narration of beginnings. Extrinsic norms can describe the ways in which classically narrated beginnings function across many films, both in terms of the kind of narrative information they typically contain and in terms of the kind of narrational principles that govern the presentation of that information. Much of the following discussion of the norms of classical beginnings will concern extrinsic norms.

However, it’s worth spending a moment on intrinsic norms as well, because when a narration establishes its own set of intrinsic norms, it typically does so over the course of the beginning. Once again, Bordwell provides lucid insight: “Intrinsic narrational norms obviously

¹³⁵ For some remarks on stylistic norms of classical beginnings, see David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 94-95. See also David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 46-47. Bordwell also suggests many different bodies of data through which norms can be constructed, including the observation of films, a viewer’s recognition of difference, the technical discourse surrounding films, and critical writing, all of which have been important for the identification of the norms of classical beginnings discussed in this dissertation. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 154.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

constitute a central source for our stable and ongoing expectations as we move through a particular film. Because of the primacy effect and the durational control that the viewing situation exercises, the viewer tends to base conclusions about the narrational norm upon the earliest portions of the *syuzhet*.¹³⁷ Recognizing an intrinsic norm is a matter of forming a schema for understanding the principles through which the narration is operating. The earlier such norms are introduced, the sooner viewers are likely to recognize them, and the more influential such norms will be for subsequent narrative comprehension. That is, an intrinsic norm is like a schema for a narration's patterns, which viewers can learn over the course of the beginning. Once recognized, it can organize the perception and categorization of incoming information, select the information for attention, and influence our estimations of causal probability and the hypotheses and inferences we form about the narrative.

Classical Narration

Before discussing the extrinsic norms of classically narrated beginnings, first it is important to clarify the term "classical narration," and the range of films much of this dissertation is meant to characterize. Classical narration is both a historical and an aesthetic term. Historically, it's considered to characterize many of the formal qualities of the "classical Hollywood cinema," which itself is a larger term for the complex interrelation of aesthetic, industrial, economic, ideological, and cultural factors that contributed to the films made in Hollywood between roughly 1917 and 1960.¹³⁸ Aesthetically, classical narration characterizes what can be considered the dominant, mainstream mode of narration in film. As Bordwell

¹³⁷ Ibid., 150-151.

¹³⁸ Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 9, 155-240.

describes it, a mode of narration is “a particular configuration of normalized options for representing the *fabula* and for manipulating the possibilities of the *syuzhet* and style.”¹³⁹ In other words, a mode of narration is a paradigm in which certain sets of normalized options are available. Classical narration, then, is one such paradigm. It is a mode of narration where the representation of space and time usually supports and is subordinated to narrative causality, which in turn is often organized through goal-oriented character psychology, and which is intended to facilitate narrative comprehension and solicit relatively precise cognitive responses from viewers.

It is this aesthetic characterization of classical narration with which this dissertation is principally concerned, even though the historical and the aesthetic uses of the term are not entirely separable. Aesthetic norms, and the narrational modes into which they are organized, are not divorced from historical concerns because they are partly derived from particular craft practices and historical circumstances, which can and do change over time, and which make certain options within the paradigm more likely than others.¹⁴⁰ As Bordwell notes, this is most obviously the case with the normative stylistic or technological devices of classical narration, which have undergone considerable expansion and contraction throughout different historical periods. Some particularly obvious examples include color, aspect ratio, and average shot length, all norms which have undergone changes because of economic, industrial, cultural or other circumstances.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 156.

¹⁴⁰ Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 7. For Bordwell’s account of the change stylistic norms have undergone in contemporary Hollywood cinema, see his discussion of intensified continuity in part two of *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 115-189.

¹⁴¹ Scott Higgins gives an account of the use of Technicolor in classical Hollywood in *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007). For an account of various aspect

Nevertheless, while *stylistic* norms have undergone considerable change over time, many of the normative systems into which those stylistic norms are organized (such as spatiotemporal continuity), and the relations between those systems have remained relatively more stable since 1917. For instance, in contemporary mainstream films, space and time are still typically organized through continuity editing and are subordinate to character-derived psychological causality; characters typically still have goals, and plots usually resolve by the end of the film. Moreover, many of the principal tenets of classicism itself have remained remarkably consistent throughout mainstream American industrial contexts, both from 1917 to 1960 and in the time since. These tenets include, as Bordwell writes, “notions of decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver’s response.”¹⁴² This is not to say that *every* classically narrated film inhabits these characteristics, or that these qualities have undergone *no* change across different historical periods, but that these tenets tend to hold true for most mainstream films. Classically narrated films consistently strive for ease of comprehension and the concealment of artifice, and attempt to solicit easily accessible and precise aesthetic, cognitive, and emotional responses from viewers, both in the period of the classical Hollywood cinema, but also in contemporary cinema, and in films industries all over the world.¹⁴³

ratios and widescreen formats, see John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). For discussions of average shot length, see Barry Salt, “Statistical Style Analysis of Motion Pictures,” *Film Quarterly* 28:1 (Fall 1974), as well as Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (London: Starword, 1983). See also Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, as well as various articles hosted on Yuri Tsivian’s Cinemetrics website, www.cinemetrics.lv, accessed 10 October 2012.

¹⁴² Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 3-4.

¹⁴³ This is not to say that emotional responses are not cognitive responses, but simply to distinguish between the process of understanding the story and the process of emotionally engaging with it.

At the same time, classical narration is not a rigidly classified mode of narration into which individual films either do or do not fall. Instead, classical narration should be thought of as a matter of degree; some films are more or less classical than other films, depending on the way in which they make use of norms and exemplify the above tenets. As Murray Smith writes, “the classical mode... should not be thought of as a pigeon-hole, a rigid category with necessary and sufficient conditions. Categories like ‘classical fiction film’... are rather defined by prototypes or ‘central’ examples, with diffuse boundary zones shading into one another, enabling a degree of flexibility on the spectator’s part in the way that particular films are apprehended.”¹⁴⁴ Much like how a norm is not a rigid rule, but a compositional option, so too is classical narration is not a rigid mode, but a paradigm comprised of various groups of norms that can each contribute to the degree to which a film might be considered “classical.”

If the normative systems and relations between systems underpinning classical narration have changed since the 1960s, they’ve done so less through drastic alteration, but through the diversification of the range of options considered normative within the classical paradigm.¹⁴⁵

This diversification can likely be attributed to at least two related causes. The first, as Bordwell

¹⁴⁴ Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 11.

¹⁴⁵ Some scholars argue that contemporary mainstream cinema is better described as “postclassical” rather than classical. For arguments in favor of a postclassical cinema in general (including but not limited to narration) see Elizabeth Cowie, “Storytelling: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Classical Narrative,” in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 178-190. See also Thomas Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hillary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), 8-36. See also Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). For counterarguments maintaining that classical narration is alive and well in contemporary cinema, see Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 1-18. See also Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 1-10. See also Murray Smith, “Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History,” in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 3-20, and Warren Buckland “A Close Encounter with *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: Notes on Narrative Aspects of the New Hollywood Blockbuster,” in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 166-177. For an excellent summary of the debate in general, both in popular and academic criticism, see Peter Kramer, “Post-classical Hollywood,” in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 289-309.

argues, is classical narration's selective incorporation or assimilation of various norms from other modes of narration, such as art cinema narration.¹⁴⁶ For instance, it is now a more normative option for an otherwise classically narrated film to have moments of ambiguity, an alternative organizational structure aside from causality (or at the very least, a loosely causal structure), or goal-less, ineffectual, or conflicted protagonists.¹⁴⁷ It should be noted, however, that there are limits to classical narration's ability to assimilate norms. Classical narration is robust enough that it can incorporate norms of other modes only when, as Bordwell describes, those norms "extend and elaborate its principles without challenging them."¹⁴⁸ Any given classically narrated film cannot fully incorporate *all* of the norms of an art cinema film, for instance, because then it would cease to be a classical film. A classically narrated film that deviates from an extrinsic norm (either by establishing intrinsic norms, or just by violating extrinsic norms) is still classically narrated in other (perhaps most) respects, as we shall see in some of the films examined in later chapters. Again, Bordwell puts it well when he writes that "Even the most deviant Hollywood films... must ground themselves in the external norms of group style."¹⁴⁹ This is an important caveat, because it preserves the specificity and use value of

¹⁴⁶ For more on classical narration's assimilation of other modes of narration in the period after 1960, see Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 372-377. For a similar account of classical Hollywood's assimilation of European influences, see 72-74.

¹⁴⁷ Moments of ambiguity seem most likely to occur near the ends of contemporary classically narrated films. Examples include *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Lost in Translation* (2003), and *Inception* (2010). Examples of largely classically narrated films with ineffectual or conflicted protagonists include *The Graduate* (1967) and *The Conversation* (1974). Classically narrated films with alternative organizational structures include films such as *13 Conversations About One Thing* (2001) and *11:14* (2003), the first of which is organized through analogy, where scenes are connected through analogies between their actions, and the second of which is organized by chronology, where a series of more or less individual, simultaneous stories are presented sequentially, with each subsequent story beginning further and further back in time, and in turn explaining more thoroughly the seemingly chance events of previously-narrated stories.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

the term “classical narration.” Even though a classically narrated film can absorb some of the norms of other modes of narration, and can deviate from extrinsic norms in some respects, it can still be described as “classical” by adhering to other norms within the paradigm.¹⁵⁰ Classically narrated films can both affirm or violate narrational norms, or do both simultaneously, and films which may deviate from one norm or set of norms may still conform to other norms typical of the beginnings of classically narrated films (such is the case with some films that have misleading narration, as discussed in Chapter 5).

The second likely cause of the diversification of the classical paradigm is filmmakers’ desires to extend, amplify, and enrich the narrational principles that inform earlier works (including both those of classical Hollywood, but also other modes of narration).¹⁵¹ For instance, classical narration’s normative options for systems of cinematic time, space, and narrative logic have expanded to include multiple-protagonist films, organizational structures that do not prioritize causality, and small-scale, localized deviations from continuity editing. This is not to say that these options did not exist or were not implemented in previous historical periods, but that they are less deviant now than they might have been considered in the past. Both of these causes for change within the classical paradigm can be explained through arguments that trace the history of various economic, industrial, and ideological changes within and across film industries. It is even possible that subtle patterns of change in the narration of beginnings might emerge within the classical paradigm across different historical periods. However, rather than

¹⁵⁰ Arguments that equate classical narration’s capacity to assimilate with a loss of the term’s specificity seem to lose sight of how other modes of narration systematically adhere to their own sets of norms, and of how these sets of norms are distinctly different from those of classical narration (in addition to classical narration only being able to selectively incorporate the norms of other modes of narration). Such restrictions further mitigate classical narration from being an all-encompassing narrational mode.

¹⁵¹ Bordwell calls this the problem of “belatedness,” and sees it as the principal reason behind contemporary mainstream cinema’s formal innovation. See *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 21-26.

making definitive historical claims or answering questions about any particular historical circumstances that influence the principles through which narrative beginnings have been constructed, instead this dissertation seeks to answer questions regarding the ways in which viewer comprehension and the narration of classical beginnings are mutually influential upon one another. Therefore, while acknowledging that norms can have multiple causes, some of which are rooted in history, this dissertation will seek first and foremost to explain the norms of classical narration in terms of the cognitive processes viewers bring to films.

Norms of Classical Narration

Classical narration strives for ease of comprehension. David Bordwell has described classical Hollywood cinema as “excessively obvious,” and this is born out in the various organizational principles and norms classical narration makes use of in order to ensure relatively smooth narrative comprehension for viewers, beginnings included.¹⁵² This is not to say that classically narrated films are uniformly simple, but that they are *understandable*. Classical narration is quite capable of storytelling as complex as that of other modes of narration like art cinema; it just tends to be easier to understand without much concerted effort. This effortlessness is partly a product of classical narration’s routine manipulation of the cognitive processes that describe viewer comprehension, but it is also a mark of complex craftsmanship. As Kristin Thompson writes, “The glory of the Hollywood system lies in its ability to allow... creators to weave an intricate web of character, event, time, and space that can seem transparently obvious.”¹⁵³ Apparent effortlessness in fact can be effortful.

¹⁵² Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 3.

¹⁵³ Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 11.

The extrinsic norms of classical narrative beginnings *are* norms precisely because they facilitate comprehension. This is the case both for the norms that characterize the *kind* of information presented in the beginning, which come closest to what Bordwell calls the norms for “the system of narrative logic,” as well as for the norms that characterize the quality of the narration itself, and the way in which it organizes information.¹⁵⁴ When a film begins, we want to know various things about the story that will help us to make sense of it. As Noël Carroll writes, “We want implicitly to know where the action is set and when, who these people are, what do they want, and why are they acting like this.”¹⁵⁵ The extrinsic norms of classical narrative beginnings function as answers these kinds of questions. Three of these prominent norms include: the use of exposition to signal important *fabula* events that preceded the start of the *syuzhet*, informing the contexts through which the beginning is understood; the establishment of goal-oriented, individuated (but also easily recognizable) character types, and the use of causality -- especially character-centered psychological causality -- as the narration’s primary organizing principle (which in turn effects viewer estimations of probability about subsequent narrative events).¹⁵⁶ This is not to say that this information is itself normative -- for example, there can be much variation in the kinds of characters a beginning establishes, or the setting in which the story takes place -- but that the classical beginnings normatively include some form of this information.

¹⁵⁴ Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 6.

¹⁵⁵ Carroll, “Narrative Closure,” 211. For more on conceiving of narrative texts as soliciting questions from readers, see Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

¹⁵⁶ For a discussion of the importance of causal logic, character psychology and goals, and exposition as norms inherent to the classical Hollywood cinema, see Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 8, 14-16, and 28. See also Persson, 217-220 for additional discussion of psychological causality.

It should come as no surprise that these norms adhere fairly closely to the expectations established by the narrative template schema laid out by Edward Branigan, given that a narrative template schema itself is derived from our experiences with narratives. All of these norms are present in the beginning of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, for instance. The film accords with the narrative template schema by introducing characters and their goals, exposition about the characters' war experiences, and information about the film's setting (post-war Boone City). The causal organization of the film is also well established by a series of ellipses and dialogue hooks. These norms are designed to quickly answer any immediate questions we might have that pertain to the initial situation, eliminating impediments to comprehension and understanding while simultaneously setting up causally necessary conditions for later events, and engaging viewer interest in the rest of the forthcoming story. Additionally, the function of these norms also fit comfortably within the bounds of the epistemology of narrative beginnings, as discussed in Chapter 1: these norms eliminate the need to reason back from effect to cause, because most causes that would impede comprehension are provided in short order. Causally necessary conditions will be described in greater detail below, while the importance and use of exposition and character establishment in classical beginnings will be discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4.

Classical narrative beginnings normatively include this kind of information because it thoroughly fills in the schemata through which we understand the action, schemata which in turn provide the basis for the hypothesis-casting and inference-making that help to make narrative comprehension so engaging. In other words, given our cognitive processes, these norms provide the most seamless path both to understanding the narrative and the to fostering of expectations about it going forward. This ease of understanding is also evident in the way in which classical

narration typically makes use of the variables that can influence the strength of the primacy effect. Classical narration is both highly redundant and consistent, thus classical beginnings often have strong primacy effects. Repetition stresses important information, better ensuring viewers notice it (thus the Hollywood dictum that important information should be repeated at least three times), and consistency reinforces first impressions.¹⁵⁷ Correspondingly, strong first impressions make narrative comprehension easier because they provide a solid basis both for filling in the schemata through which we understand narrative information, and for fostering expectations about how that information will figure into subsequent developments. That is, a strong first impression provides a secure point of departure from which we can safely make well-reasoned inferences, form probable hypotheses, and readily make sense of the way the *syuzhet* has organized the *fabula*, all of which are activities that facilitate narrative comprehension. In a classically narrated film, viewers often have little reason to doubt or hold in abeyance the impressions they form based on the information presented in the beginning because classically narrated films are predicated on ease of understanding and relative efficiency. It is important to note that a *strong* primacy effect does not necessarily mean an *accurate* first impression. None of Meir Sternberg's strategies for the use of the primacy effect dictate its strength, thus all of them can be (and have been) employed in classical narration, even the rise and fall of first impressions, where the primacy effect is overturned completely (although this strategy is certainly less normative than the "basic norm"). Strong, yet inaccurate first impressions, and the erroneous primacy effects that result, are important strategies for films that attempt to mislead viewers (as discussed in Chapter 5).

¹⁵⁷ Vale, 37. See also, Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 17, and Lewis Herman, *A Practical Manual of Screen Playwriting for Theater and Television Films* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1952), 71-73.

Nevertheless, classical narration often boasts both a strong *and* accurate primacy effect; what Sternberg identifies as the “basic norm” in literature is also normative for classical narration in film. The accuracy of the primacy effect in classical narration is further bolstered by what Edward Branigan calls classical narration’s “chameleon effect.” The chameleon effect describes how classical narration is often designed to accommodate the different inferences viewers might make about a narrative. Branigan writes,

The text sustains a reading which is generally compatible with whatever we *first* believe and does not usually demand a unique or counterintuitive explication. Normally, the classical narrative does not give the appearance of ambiguity, nor does it encourage multiple interpretations, but rather, like the chameleon, it is adaptable, resilient and accommodating. It will try to be whatever the spectator believes it to be.¹⁵⁸

Essentially, the chameleon effect is another way in which classical narration is “excessively obvious”: it encourages the implicit meanings we read out of a narrative to be compatible with the narrative’s explicit meanings, especially in those moments where the narrative is ambiguous. In such moments, the chameleon effect ensures that if those implicit meanings are not validated outright, they at least tend to go unchallenged. Richard Maltby has identified one such moment in *Casablanca*: the ellipsis that occurs in the scene where Ilsa confronts Rick in his apartment at night in an attempt to get the letters of transit from him. Two implicit meanings are available: Rick and Ilsa either did or did not sleep together during the ellipsis. The chameleon-like nature of the narration neither confirms nor denies either meaning.¹⁵⁹ As this example indicates, the chameleon effect applies to classical narratives in general, but it is especially pertinent for the beginning and the primacy effect: first impressions certainly include “whatever we first believe”

¹⁵⁸ Branigan, 97-98.

¹⁵⁹ Richard Maltby, “‘A Brief Romantic Interlude’: Dick and Jane Go to 3½ Seconds of the Classical Hollywood Cinema,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 434-459.

about the narrative, and thus independent of the degree of a narrative beginning's redundancy and consistency of information, the chameleon effect further reinforces the apparent accuracy of our first impressions, and the subsequent strength of the primacy effect.¹⁶⁰

Causality and Classical Beginnings: Causally Necessary Conditions

Narrative theorists have debated at length the extent to which causality is inherent to narratives. In discussing the epistemology of narrative beginnings, Chapter 1 argued that narratives must have some causal component, because otherwise there would be little basis for understanding a narrative beginning as a beginning: categorizing an initial event as a narrative beginning presupposes that the initial event provides a causal basis for subsequent events.¹⁶¹ However, causality is a matter of degree, as some events are more directly related to each other than others. Noël Carroll has proposed a definition of the kind of causality necessary for narrativity, one that is extremely useful for its flexibility. Carroll argues that while causality is one of the defining characteristics of narrative, strict causality itself is too strong; some narratives get by without it. As Carroll writes, "In most narratives, earlier events in a sequence of events underdetermine later events."¹⁶² Things that occur later in narratives don't always rely *only* on what has come before in the narrative. If they did, it is likely narratives would be unable to surprise. He identifies *causally necessary conditions* as the minimum causal requirement for a

¹⁶⁰ Incidentally, the chameleon effect also helps explain one of the ways in which some classical narratives generate surprise. Some narratives take advantage of the norm of "excessive obviousness" by making incorrect what initially appears to be obvious. Exemplary films include *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947), *Stage Fright*, and *Psycho* (1960).

¹⁶¹ For a more minimalist definition of narrative that does not require causation, see Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative -- Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 13, 42-44. Abbott also compares his definition with that of other scholars. For a diagrammatic account of different possible definitions of narrative (one that ranks them on a scale ranging from least to most requirements), see Paisley Livingston, "Narrativity and Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009), 28.

¹⁶² Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 122.

text to be designated as narrative. Causally necessary conditions are conditions established early in the text that are *necessary* for later events, but conditions that by themselves are not *sufficient* to entirely explain the later events. A causally necessary condition is only relevant to a later event or informs it in some way, whereby a reader (or viewer) might come up with causal explanations on their own. To take one of Carroll's examples, if a robber robs a bank, and later is arrested by the police, the robber's theft is a necessary condition for his later arrest (it makes his arrest possible), but the robbery does not guarantee the arrest (bank robberies do not always cause arrests). As Carroll writes, "earlier events merely function to make later events causally possible," not casually determined.¹⁶³ Indeed, causally necessary conditions are helpful for thinking about causation in narratives because much of the information we receive during a narrative is background information that can help to establish settings and contribute to causally necessary conditions, but is not actually fully causal in the strictest sense. In short, identifying causally necessary conditions as the minimal causal requirement for narrativity is useful because it leaves room for stronger causality in narratives, but doesn't require it in every instance.

Causally necessary conditions are especially useful for thinking about how we comprehend the narration of a film while the film is underway (i.e., they're especially useful for thinking about narrative comprehension). First time viewers cannot really know if the actions or events they observe over the course of a narrative are causally relevant until the narrative ends, when the extent of their relevance has been proven by the role they ended up playing (or not) in the story, especially in the beginning, where all information is new and potentially relevant.¹⁶⁴ We can only speak in terms of causal probabilities, based on information thus far made available

¹⁶³ Ibid., 124.

¹⁶⁴ See also Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 54, for similar comments on information's pertinence.

by the narration, and on our experience with other narratives (i.e., the schemata we use to categorize the action). Causally necessary conditions capture the potential that all actions, events, or other information have for causal relevance as the narrative progresses: any item of information is a potential condition necessary for subsequent events.

Moreover, causally necessary conditions are also useful for describing how beginnings differ from later parts of a narrative. In the beginning, not only can it be difficult to anticipate *which* information is causally relevant (especially considering the potential wealth of new information), but it is also difficult to determine precisely *how* any particular information will prove causally relevant. That is, even if it is evident that an action or event is causally relevant, in the beginning it can still be difficult to know how it will figure into the narrative. If we observe Jack and Jill climbing a hill to fetch a pail of water, is it more important that Jack and Jill are male and female, that they go together, that they are fetching water, or that they are climbing a hill? All of these observations contain seeds of possible causally necessary conditions. After the beginning, however, often the causal relevance of a given item of information is at least partially determined by previously established conditions. As described in Chapter 1, as a narrative proceeds, the narrative's accumulation of causally necessary conditions reduces the range of subsequent possibilities more and more; our expectations or hypotheses about what can happen become increasingly constrained, such that as the end of the narrative approaches, we have relatively narrow expectations about the possible outcome of all of the previously established conditions (otherwise, the narrative would become unintelligible).¹⁶⁵ When Jack falls down and breaks his crown, retrospectively, it becomes evident that his climbing

¹⁶⁵ For more on how causality necessary conditions shrink the range of subsequent directions for the narrative, see Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics*, 130-131.

the hill is the most causally relevant part of our earlier observations, and when Jill tumbles after him, these previous events indicate that the causal relevance of her fall rests in her potential to break her crown too. Likewise, by the time Rick, Ilsa, Victor, and Renault finally arrive at the airport in *Casablanca*, our range of expectations for what will happen is relatively limited by the conditions that have been causally necessary for the narrative to build to this point: most prominently, we might hypothesize that either Rick or Victor will leave with Ilsa, or that Strasser will arrive in time to complicate the departure of the plane, but we are unlikely to hypothesize that the airport will be overrun with locusts, that a time-traveling Renault will arrive from the future to interrupt the proceedings, or that Rick will turn into a vampire, because the narration has not established the previous conditions that would be necessary for these developments to make sense. In short, causally necessary conditions are a useful means of describing causality in classical narration because they best describe both the multiple ways in which information in the beginning has the potential to become causally relevant, as well as how the accumulation of conditions constrain the way in which we think about subsequent events.¹⁶⁶

Of course, even in the beginning, not all information appears equally likely to be causally necessary conditions, partly because our various schemata often provide a good basis for estimating or hypothesizing about any given information's causal relevance. As described above, a narrative template schema acts as a filter, selecting for conscious attention the information that seems likely to fill in the template, and thus preventing us from being overwhelmed by the potential deluge of new audiovisual information in a beginning. In other words, we have mental

¹⁶⁶ As we shall see in Chapter 6, thinking of narrative causality in terms of causally necessary conditions is especially useful for describing films with misleading narrations.

models for the kinds of information that is usually important in stories, and we can use these models to determine the potential relevance of new information in a new story.

However, a narrative template schema does not work alone in this regard; classical narration also normatively helps to filter information by regulating its prominence. While prominence is sometimes accorded to information by virtue of its narrative contexts, more often prominence is a matter of *redundancy*, *stylistic emphasis*, and the overall *quantity* of information, especially in the beginning of a film, where there is the least amount of narrative contexts available. Redundancy has already been discussed at length in relation to the primacy effect, and its application to the prominence of causally necessary conditions is rather self-evident: classical narration often repeats causally necessary conditions in order to ensure that viewers recognize and understand them, as they are necessary for understanding later developments. In *Casablanca*, for instance, refugees' difficulty in leaving the city for America is emphasized repeatedly in the beginning because it is a causally necessary condition for the major characters' goals regarding the letters of transit. Likewise, film style can also regulate prominence: mise en scène, cinematography, editing, and sound design determine the visibility and legibility of information on screen, as well as the amount time the narration devotes to any one item of information, and can strongly direct a viewer's attention toward or away from certain information, all of which contribute to the prominence of information. Accordingly, classical narration normatively makes stylistically prominent that information which will prove causally relevant; the more significant a causally necessary condition is for subsequent events, the more stylistic prominence it is accorded.¹⁶⁷ This norm of according stylistic prominence to causally

¹⁶⁷ This norm can also be rephrased as a heuristic for viewers: information accorded with stylistic prominence increases the likelihood of its causal relevance; the more prominent the information, the more likely it will serve as a causally necessary condition for subsequent events. This heuristic is a corollary to schemata for film style.

relevant information is one of classical narration's surest ways of achieving the ease of comprehension and the solicitation of precise viewer responses toward which classically narrated films strive (and is also contrasted in other modes of narration, such as art cinema). As we saw in the beginning of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Fred is made very prominent through the use of film style, which in turn makes him seem especially likely to be causally relevant to later events.

Classical narration can also make causally necessary conditions more or less prominent by regulating the quantity of information presented by the narration. Quantity of information is one of the parameters David Bordwell uses to describe the way through which the *syuzhet* constructs the *fabula* over the course of a narrative's entire length. It refers simply to the amount of "fabula information to which we have access."¹⁶⁸ A narration can present just the right amount of information for the coherent and steady construction of the *fabula* from the *syuzhet*, more information than is necessary, or less information than is necessary, although the amount can fluctuate at any given moment. When the narration presents a large quantity of information, more than is necessary for the coherent and steady construction of the *fabula*, it can become difficult to anticipate which parts of the information will prove more causally relevant than others, because the large quantity reduces the prominence (and potential significance) of any individual detail. In other words, the more information there is, the harder it is to distinguish pertinent from less pertinent information. This is especially true of those situations in which the narration presents a large quantity of information that is seemingly causally *unrelated*.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. Bordwell also identifies two other parameters in the *syuzhet*'s construction of the *fabula*: pertinence, and correspondence between "syuzhet presentation and fabula data." The former is essentially synonymous with causal relevance; it refers to the degree to which the information supplied by the *syuzhet* is "relevant to the construction of a coherent fabula." The latter refers to the degree to which the *syuzhet* conforms to or deviates from the "logical, temporal, and spatial nature of the fabula," especially in terms of temporal gaps, retardation of information, exposition, and redundancy of information. See Ibid., 54-57.

For example, at the start of *Amélie* (2001), a voiceover narrator provides a very large quantity of information about a series of simultaneous, unrelated events that play out on screen: a bluebottle fly lands in a road and is squished by a passing car; a tablecloth flaps in the breeze in a nearby restaurant; a man returns from the funeral of his best friend and erases his friend's name from his address book, and Amélie (Audrey Tautou) is conceived by her parents. After a credit sequence, the narrator continues the deluge of information, this time about Amélie's parents, including their professions and lists of their respective likes and dislikes, and then goes on to narrate various episodes from Amélie's childhood. The large quantity of seemingly unrelated information makes it rather difficult to anticipate which information will prove causally relevant (if any). Ultimately, the only items of information that will become causally relevant are Amélie's conception and her father misdiagnosing her as having a heart defect, which in turn causes her to be homeschooled and to develop an active imagination; the former is rather easy to anticipate, given the film's title, but the latter is somewhat more difficult to pick out from the rest of the information (indeed, initially, the fact that Amélie witnesses her mother's sudden and violent death seems a much more likely candidate for a causally necessary condition, given the trauma of the event).

Of course, *Amélie* is quite atypical in providing such a large quantity of causally unrelated information in such a short screen time. Even though the film resembles classical narration in some respects, it might best be considered only a marginally classically narrated film, precisely because it tends to indulge at length in causally irrelevant tangents through the informative glimpses it provides into the lives of various minor characters. Around thirteen minutes into the film, the large quantity of information will subside as the narration focuses on Amélie's adult life, and correspondingly, it becomes easier to anticipate which conditions will

prove causally necessary for later events (even though much of the information still appears causally unrelated), especially once the voiceover narrator identifies a particular event as one that will “change her life forever.”¹⁶⁹

Conversely, if the narration provides a very small quantity of information -- less than is necessary for the construction of the *fabula* -- then it can become somewhat easier to anticipate *if* it will somehow prove causally relevant, but it becomes more difficult to anticipate *how* it will prove causally relevant. That is, if the narration severely restricts the quantity of information presented in the beginning, then it can become somewhat easier to anticipate that the information will become a causally necessary condition for later events (or at the very least, somehow relevant to the narrative, if not a causally necessary condition per se), because it is the only information to which we have access. However, with our knowledge restricted to whatever small quantity of information the narration makes available, it becomes more difficult to anticipate *how* the information will become relevant to the story (at least, this is true if we’re working with a canonical narrative template schema, where unimportant information is typically elided; other template schemata might not necessarily solicit the assumption that whatever information is presented will become relevant).

For instance, after a pair of titles indicating the film’s provenance (“Some of this actually happened.”) and its setting (April 28, 1978, Plaza Hotel, New York), *American Hustle* (2013), begins by showing Irving (Christian Bale) painstakingly adjusting his comb over hairdo and affixing a toupee to his head. The scene lasts for just over a minute and a half, and presents a rather small quantity of information to viewers: Irving is meticulous about his appearance and

¹⁶⁹ *Amélie* is also not a Hollywood film, but a French film, thus further mitigating the extent to which one might describe it as “classical,” even though classical narration is by no means limited solely to Hollywood cinema.

prefers to hide his male pattern baldness with cosmetic tricks, and those tricks involve a lengthy preparation process. This is the only information presented to viewers, but the potential causal relevance of this scene is rather indeterminate. It seems somewhat likely that Irving's preparation of his comb over will somehow be relevant to the story, and could perhaps even serve as a causally necessary condition for later events, because it is the only information to which we have access. For instance, his hairstyle could become crucial for impressing a third party, or the time he spends adjusting his hair could make him late to a meeting, or the flammable hairspray he uses to fix his hair in place could later put him in danger. Alternatively, it is also possible that the scene of Irving preparing his hair is merely meant to suggest Irving's character traits (e.g., vanity), rather than to provide a strictly causally necessary condition for later events.

Ultimately, it is the latter of these possibilities that proves correct: Irving's hairstyling is more background information than it is a casually necessary condition for later events. At the most, it provides a necessary condition for when Richie (Bradley Cooper) later becomes frustrated with Irving's complaints, and attempts to get under Irving's skin by mussing his hair (i.e., it is necessary for Irving to have spent time styling his hair in order for Richie to be able to upset him by mussing it). However, this is a very minor action without any real causal relevance to the overall plot, one of many transgressive acts that take place in the course of Irving and Richie's antagonistic relationship (although the transgression of this particular act is heightened by the narration's prior emphasis on the time and effort Irving puts into his hairstyle). Instead, the relevance of the scene where Irving styles his hair rests in the trait information it provides about Irving; he's a small-time confidence man, and his meticulous styling of his comb over underscores both his penchant for (attempted) deception, as well as the careful attention to detail he will later exhibit in his confidence schemes. However, it is difficult to anticipate that this is

the way in which the scene will become relevant when first viewing it, because the narration does not provide more causally related information to contextualize it.

Of course, what is considered too little or too much information might change for any given narrative, especially for different genres, which can have different norms for the amount of information provided to viewers. A melodrama, for instance, tends to provide a large quantity of information in order to maximize the emotional impact of the story's development (particularly suspense over how characters will react to information viewers already possess), whereas a detective film normatively provides less information, creating curiosity about the past as well as suspense over the detective's solution to the mystery.¹⁷⁰ Likewise, as Bordwell writes, because the quantity of information can fluctuate at any given moment, "At local points, 'ordinary' films can indulge in either overload or rarefaction tactics, and extraordinary films can indulge in either, or both, consistently and throughout."¹⁷¹ Generally, however, classical beginnings normatively provide just the right amount of information for the development of the particular story, such that viewers can easily distinguish what is likely to be causally relevant, and can also anticipate to some degree how the information might prove causally necessary for later events (especially when combined with a stylistically prominent treatment of the causally relevant information, which helps to draw attention to it). Moreover, the information provided by classical beginnings also tends to be causally related; even if the narration provides a large quantity, usually it is about the same subject, which in turn helps to distinguish the relevance of any individual item.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ See *Ibid.*, 63-73 for more on the narration of melodramas and detective films.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁷² Of course, the content of the information also matters. Exposition is quite useful in this regard, as discussed further in Chapter 4.

In *Casablanca*, for instance, the voiceover narration that describes the refugee trail from Europe to Casablanca provides neither too much nor too little information; the narration does not go into micro-detail about the difficulties of the trail, the time it takes to travel, or the exact distances the refugees must traverse, nor does the voiceover elide important details, like the reasons for the refugees' flight or the difficulty they have leaving Casablanca once they arrive.¹⁷³ At the same time, the information provided by the voiceover is causally related, bolstering our ability to anticipate its causal relevance for later events: World War II has caused Europe to be "imprisoned," which has caused people to try to flee to America, in turn causing them to end up in Casablanca, where they must try to obtain exit visas. As discussed previously, this information will prove casually relevant because it provides the conditions necessary for understanding the significance of the letters of transit, and subsequently, the main action of the rest of the narrative. The narration's presentation of a moderate quantity of causally related information about the refugees in Casablanca strongly suggests both that it is the presence of the refugees (rather than the particular route they take to Casablanca or their means of arriving there) that will act as a

¹⁷³ One might argue that the voiceover tends toward too much information, considering that it spells out the course of the refugee trail (Paris to Marseilles to Oran to Casablanca) even though this information is largely irrelevant to the main action of the plot (all of which takes place in Casablanca). However, by listing the different stops along the trail, the voiceover implies that they are relatively equivalent, and that they are less significant than the trail's final destination. Likewise, one might also argue that the voiceover's list of different means of transportation (train, auto, foot) is excessive, but by emphasizing their equivalence, the voiceover is implicitly stressing that it is the refugees' *presence* in Casablanca that is causally relevant, rather than their means of arriving there. Moreover, even though the course of the trail is causally irrelevant, it is still important information, since it orients those (American) viewers who might not know where Casablanca is in relation to more familiar Europe locations, and because it also emphasizes that the action of the plot is taking place in *French* Morocco, which in turn implies that the Nazis, while capable of exerting influence in Casablanca, will not be able to act there with impunity (an important point of order for understanding Strasser, Renault, and Victor's subsequent relations). Thus the quantity of information in the voiceover is ultimately just the right amount for facilitating understanding of the initial narrative situation as well as subsequent situations.

condition necessary for later events, as well as *how* the refugees will prove causally relevant: the story will likely involve people attempting to leave the city for America.¹⁷⁴

In sum, classical beginnings assist viewers in determining the likely causal relevance of information by manipulating the redundancy, stylistic emphasis, and quantity of information in order to make causally necessary conditions stand out from the other information presented the beginning, and to provide viewers with some means of anticipating how that information might later figure into the narrative. However, as the next section will detail, the narration has additional means of making important information stand out, means that involve broader narrational strategies for the organization of information.

Knowledgeability, Communicativeness, Self-consciousness, and Classical Beginnings

There are additional norms aside from those outlined thus far which can further characterize how classical beginnings organize narrative information. Working with concepts discussed by Meir Sternberg, David Bordwell has outlined three broad, variable strategies through which a narration can manipulate the *syuzhet*'s representation of the *fabula*: *knowledgeability*, *communicativeness*, and *self-consciousness*.¹⁷⁵ While these strategies refer to organization of information throughout a narrative's length, they are also useful for a discussion of narrative beginnings, because they can help to describe some of the normative functions of classical beginnings, as well as the way in which beginnings engage with the cognitive processes discussed thus far. Knowledgeability refers to the range and depth of access the narration grants

¹⁷⁴ In addition to providing a moderate quantity of information, the voiceover also employs redundancy in order to stress how European refugees must wait in Casablanca, concluding by literally repeating the most causally relevant information: "But the others wait in Casablanca, and wait, and wait, and wait."

¹⁷⁵ Sternberg used these categories to describe narrators or conscious agents, and Bordwell abstracts them to general narrational concepts. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 57.

to story information, the range referring to the degree of freedom across space, time, and number of characters, and the depth referring to the degree of access viewers are given to the subjective or objective experiences of characters. Communicativeness refers to the degree to which information that the narration has access (established by its knowledgeability) is communicated to viewers. As Bordwell puts it, “Although a narration has a particular range of knowledge available, the narration may or may not communicate all that information.... The degree of communicativeness can be judged by considering how willingly the narration shares the information to which its degree of knowledge entitles it.”¹⁷⁶ Self-consciousness is the extent to which the narration displays “recognition that it is addressing an audience.”¹⁷⁷ Anything that draws attention to the film’s mediation (or narration) of story information is an instance of some degree of self-consciousness. Simple examples can be found in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), which begins with an image of a book opening as a narrator begins to tell the story, or *Stage Fright*, which begins with the image of a safety curtain being raised (and over which the opening credits play), revealing a view of St. Paul’s cathedral and the surrounding area in London.¹⁷⁸ Beyond such devices, other narrational tactics that exhibit varying degrees of self-consciousness include voiceover commentary, direct address to the viewer, jumbled temporal schemes, redundancy of information, the staging of characters in positions favorable for the viewer (the latter two of which were discussed in the previous section of the chapter).

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 59.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷⁸ Kristin Thompson writes that one of the effects of this device in *Stage Fright* is to establish the film’s diegesis as “the ‘stage’ upon which the action of the film will take place.” See Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 151-152.

As Bordwell notes, these strategies “fluctuate” across the entirety of a film, but that “Typically, the opening and closing moments of the film are the most self-conscious, omniscient, and communicative passages.”¹⁷⁹ Classical beginnings tend to make available and communicate a wide range of information to viewers in the beginning. Of course, different genres can vary these qualities. As mentioned previously, detective films have a restricted range of knowledge and are uncommunicative in the beginning, suppressing information about the mystery the detective sets out to solve.¹⁸⁰ Nonetheless, a beginning can’t help but be somewhat communicative, because it must provide us with *some* information, even if it is only communicating information about how restricted it is being with respect to its knowledgeability, and that it knows more than it is telling. Beginnings are always at least somewhat communicative, because to be otherwise would be to have an absence of a narrative.¹⁸¹

While the knowledgeability and communicativeness of classical beginnings can fluctuate depending on genre, the self-consciousness of beginnings tends to be consistent across classical narration. As Bordwell writes, “Classical narration tends to be overt early on -- in opening titles, at the start of the film’s action -- before gliding into a less explicit mode.”¹⁸² While any of the self-conscious tactics listed above can come at any point in the narration, they are especially common in classical beginnings. Even if the degree of self-consciousness is minimal in a given beginning (in the *Best Years of Our Lives* the beginning is self-conscious only in its ellipses and

¹⁷⁹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 160

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ At the same time, as Bordwell notes, all films are at least also somewhat uncommunicative, lest we know everything that will happen from the start. Ibid., 59.

¹⁸² Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 48.

shot compositions), relative to the *rest* of a given classical narrative, self-consciousness is far more normative in the beginning than in other parts of the narrative.¹⁸³

For instance, although a classically narrated *syuzhet* might rearrange the order of the *fabula* at any point, one of the places where temporal manipulation is most common and most narrationally self-conscious is in the beginning of the *syuzhet*, through ellipses or flashbacks. The degree to which such temporal distortions are self-conscious depends partly upon the length of *fabula* time the distortion encompasses. The more *fabula* time contained within an ellipsis, or the farther back in time the flashback takes us, the greater the likelihood that viewers will perceive disparities between the different parts of the *fabula*. For example, a flashback to a time in the distant past or an ellipsis to a time in the distant future might radically change the ages of the characters, introduce an entirely new setting, or even a new set of characters. Such changes make the narration self-conscious because they are obvious indications that the narration is manipulating the organization of *fabula* information.¹⁸⁴ While ellipses and flashbacks can occur at any point throughout classically narrated films, they are often of relatively short *fabula* duration: the narration skips over the time it takes for a character to travel from point A to point B, or flashes back to a point previously elided by the *syuzhet*. However, lengthy temporal manipulations (i.e., flashbacks that encompass long periods of *fabula* time) are much more

¹⁸³ Endings also tend to be rather self-conscious, although often less so than beginnings.

¹⁸⁴ There are, of course, other ways of increasing the degree to which ellipses and flashbacks are self-conscious. Flashbacks, for instance, can be motivated by other self-conscious devices such as voiceover narration (as in *Sunset Blvd.*), making the manipulation of temporal order even more apparent. In the case of ellipses, jump cuts call attention to elided time through film style, and montage sequences string a large number of ellipses together in quick succession. However, neither jump cuts nor montage sequences are terribly normative for classical beginnings, because in classical narration these techniques are typically motivated by *previous* narrative information, which takes time to establish. In classical narration, jump cuts, for instance, are typically motivated as a representation of character subjectivity (as with a character experiencing confusion, altered states, or mental debilitation), while montage sequences typically depict a lengthy process motivated by previously established information, particularly character goals or the need to explain elaborate processes.

normative in classical beginnings, so much so that they have been given special narratological terms: In the case of flashbacks, the device is often referred to as a *framing* or *embedded* narrative, while films with a lengthy ellipsis shortly after the start of the *syuzhet* (or framing narratives that never return to the frame) could be described as having *prologues*.¹⁸⁵ In fact, lengthy ellipses and flashbacks encompassing long periods of time are so common to beginnings -- not only in classically narrated films but also in many other media and narrative traditions -- that Gérard Genette refers to such manipulations of temporal order as “the difficulty of beginning.”¹⁸⁶

Another common means through which classical beginnings are self-conscious is through direct address to viewers. Direct address might include anything from characters looking into the camera and talking to the viewer to voiceover narration that addresses the viewer, and to opening titles and credit sequences. As Bordwell notes, both in silent and sound era classical narration, it

¹⁸⁵ The meaning of the term “prologue” is somewhat amorphous, as it has changed significantly over the course of the history of narrative. Prologues have been defined both through where they occur in the text, and through the functions they perform for the narrative. Boris Tomashevsky describes the formal attributes of a prologue as anything which precedes even the exposition, although his precise means of distinguishing the prologue from the exposition are unclear. See Tomashevsky, 72. Gérard Genette traces the term’s historical development through Greek tragedy and comedy, medieval epic and romance, and modern literature, and finds two common threads: the prologue is often incorporated into the start of the narrative text, and it “accounts, truthfully or not, for the circumstances in which the work was written.” See Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 166-171. While neither of these definitions stipulates a prologue’s temporal relation to the rest of the narrative, Tomashevsky’s parameters leave room for the possibility that prologues consist of distant *fabula* material, while Genette’s literary history emphasizes prologues’ self-consciousness through their providing comment on the story’s provenance.

¹⁸⁶ Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980), 46. As with any narratological device, framing or embedded narratives can occur anywhere within the course of the *syuzhet*. *Citizen Kane* (1941) is perhaps the most famous example of this possibility: the majority of the film consists of a series of various characters’ lengthy flashbacks. *The Locket* (1946) is another slightly different example, where the film’s flashbacks are embedded within one another like a series of Russian nesting dolls. However, such prominent self-consciousness throughout a film is not particularly normative for classical narration. It is more normative for the frame to appear only at the beginnings and ends of a framing narrative, as with *Wuthering Heights* (1939), *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), and *Pursued* (1947), among many other examples. For more on framing narratives, see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 84-95. See also Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, Second Edition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 52-56.

is normative for beginnings to contain self-conscious titles and opening credit sequences. Opening credit sequences inform narrative comprehension by providing viewers with knowledge of the creative personnel who worked on the film. If viewers have acquired schemata for the actors' star personae, or even for other prominent creative personnel, such as a director or writer, then they might be better able to anticipate what certain characters will be like, or the general tenor of the narrative. Opening credit sequences also can be "discretely informative," as Bordwell writes, "setting a tone and sowing motifs to sprout in the story."¹⁸⁷

In his thorough analysis of the beginning of *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932), Thierry Kuntzel has provided one example of how credits can "sow" motifs. The film's credit sequence appears over a series of images of a door with a grotesque knocker (a beast with an arrow protruding from its chest, carrying a human figure). After a series of knocks, it eventually opens to reveal (through a wipe/dissolve) an image of two candles burning in front of a curtain. Kuntzel makes many arguments for how the images, sounds, and actions of this credit sequence contain motifs that run throughout the film. For instance, he describes how doors serve to reveal, conceal, and divide events from one another over the film's length, and how the music played during the credits is reminiscent of the sound of the hunting horn used to call the dogs later in the film.¹⁸⁸ However, while this analysis is certainly revealing, it does not shed much light on narrative comprehension or a first-time viewer's engagement with the narrative. As Kuntzel himself acknowledges, "Only on second reading do the credits appear as the condensation of the elements to come."¹⁸⁹ At most, credit sequences like those of *The Most Dangerous Game* can

¹⁸⁷ Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 47.

¹⁸⁸ Thierry Kuntzel, "The Film-Work, 2," *Camera Obscura* 5 (1980-1981), 8, 10, 17.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

influence narrative comprehension by soliciting the use of transtextual or generic schemata: the ominous music indicates that film likely will be suspenseful, while the door knocker suggests whomever owns the house will be antagonistic to the person knocking at the door.

Normative devices such as voiceover narration directly addressed to viewers and *non-credit* titles have more direct bearing on the comprehension of classical beginnings, as they often directly supply narrative information, usually about spatial location and temporal setting, and sometimes about characters (character-narrated voiceovers, or what Genette calls “homodiegetic” narrators, often increase the depth of knowledgeability as well, providing direct access to a character’s subjective thoughts).¹⁹⁰ Many of the films discussed previously can serve as examples, including *Casablanca*, *Sunset Blvd.*, and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, all of which begin with a voiceover that provides such information (the latter two also provide substantial information about the lead characters as well). *The Terminator* (1984) is an example of a film which provides information through titles. It begins with the title, “Los Angeles 2029 A.D.” superimposed over a shot of an apocalyptic wasteland patrolled by airborne vehicles. This shot is followed by eight other shots depicting a futuristic, post-apocalyptic war: a large, tank-like machine fires lasers at a soldier running for cover; the landscape is littered with industrial debris and human remains, and tank treads crush piles of blackened human skulls. Over the ninth such image, a second title reads, “The machines rose from the ashes of the nuclear fire. Their war to exterminate mankind had raged for decades, but the final battle would not be fought in the future. It would be fought here, in our present. Tonight...” These titles allow us to understand this opening as a prologue, and provide motivation for the narration’s subsequent, abrupt manipulation of temporal order: a lengthy

¹⁹⁰ Genette, 244-245.

credit sequence follows the second title, and the next diegetic material is an image of a garbage truck working at night. In other words, the second title helps us to understand that the post-credits material takes place in present-day 1984 (even though the shot of the garbage truck seems designed to emphasize the similarities it shares with those of the prologue's machines).

Regardless of the particular self-conscious tactics used in a given film, the prevalence of self-consciousness in beginnings begs the question: Why is it normative for classically narrated beginnings to be so self-conscious? A compelling answer rests with the cognitive model outlined thus far: self-consciousness is a way for the narration to overtly assist viewers in filling out a narrative template schema, making extremely salient the information that will be causally relevant for narrative comprehension. In other words, just as with the norms both for the kinds of information included in classical beginnings (characters, exposition), as well for the prominence and quantity of information, self-consciousness is another way for the narration to make important information stand out right from the start of the *syuzhet*, better enabling viewers to immediately understand what's happening in the story. For instance, *Casablanca*'s self-conscious voiceover fulfills this function nicely, describing the refugee trail leading from Europe to Casablanca during World War II.¹⁹¹

Additionally, narrational self-consciousness also assists viewers by explicitly soliciting narrower schemata that will likely prove useful. Recall that a narrative template schema is rather abstract; self-consciousness is a way for the film to explicitly solicit more specific schemata that will apply in a particular story, or even a particular narrative situation. In *The Terminator*, the

¹⁹¹ Of course, there are *other* ways in which a narration could be self-conscious, ways that wouldn't necessarily facilitate narrative comprehension. If a film were to cut to a title reading "You are watching a film" every fifteen seconds, the narration would be very self-conscious, but the narrative would not be any easier to understand. In fact, such self-consciousness could significantly frustrate narrative comprehension. However, this is not the case for the particular self-conscious tactics found in the beginnings of the classical narratives, which function to facilitate understanding.

titles not only provide crucial spatial and temporal information and an introduction to a state of affairs, thereby helping us assign what might otherwise be confusing information to a narrative template schema, but they also activate a generic schema for science fiction (which includes conventions like futuristic technology), and a script for nuclear war. The same could be said of the knowledgeability and communicativeness of classical beginnings: omniscience and communicativeness are relatively easy ways for beginnings to satisfy the questions we implicitly ask about narratives in the beginning (as described by Carroll).

To a certain extent, such voiceovers and titles are redundant with other diegetic material. In *Sunset Blvd.*, we see “Sunset blvd.” painted on the curb of the street’s sidewalk, and then the voiceover confirms, “Yes, this is Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles California.” As a series of police vehicles drive by, the voiceover continues, “That’s the homicide squad.” Moments later, outside of a run-down mansion, the camera pans to the pool, in which we see a figure floating face down in extreme long shot, and at which point the voiceover redundantly states, “You see, the body of a young man was found floating in the pool of her mansion.” In *The Terminator*, we see the futuristic technology of the film’s version of 2029 and the post-apocalyptic rubble, and then the titles repeat this information by explicitly telling us what we are looking at. However, the voiceover in *Sunset Blvd.* and the titles in *The Terminator* also simultaneously introduce information that is *not* redundant: the police are going to the house of an old movie star; the man in the pool was a B-film writer, and was killed by three gunshot wounds; the war is between machines and humans, has lasted for a long time, and involves action taking place in earlier present-day 1984. Thus while titles and voiceovers can be redundant with some information, often they also provide contexts which otherwise would be unapparent initially, contexts that facilitate schema use. Moreover, since redundancy is a characteristic of classical narration in

general, voiceovers and titles can also be considered another way in which classical narration can implement such repetition.

Conclusion: an Overview of the Model Outlined thus Far

In sum, we approach a narrative film with certain expectations that stem from our previous experience with other narratives and with life in general. These expectations take the form of various schemata, which assist narrative comprehension by categorizing and organizing the incoming information. One important schema is a canonical narrative template schema, which serves as the basis for many expectations about both the kind of information narratives generally provide, and the way that information is organized. We fill in the narrative template schema with the new information introduced in the beginning while also forming first impressions, which the primacy effect ensures are weighted heavily in subsequent comprehension. The information and our impressions of it also activate narrower prototype schemata and scripts to help us understand figures and events. Taken together, all of these schemata and impressions solicit inferences and hypotheses about narrative information, most importantly by helping to identify probable, causally necessary conditions for later events, which in turn allow for the formation of increasingly probable and exclusive global hypotheses (as well as smaller-scale inferences and hypotheses about more immediate information). All of these cognitive processes focus viewer attention, and provide the foundations both for understanding the information with which narratives begin, and for the expectations viewers form about the narrative.

Correspondingly, the beginning of a classically narrated film is often organized to engage with these cognitive processes according to certain norms: the quantity of information is neither

too little nor too much; causally necessary conditions are made to stand out from other information through stylistic emphasis, repetition stresses important information and consistency reinforces it, and other self-conscious narrational tactics assist viewers in filling out schemata. All of these norms ensure that viewers have a firm basis for their cognitive processes, and that narrative comprehension proceeds efficiently and clearly. Some of the most important information to which these narrational norms pertain are the use of exposition to signal important *fabula* events that preceded the start of the *syuzhet* (and that inform the contexts in which the beginning can be understood), and the introduction easily-categorized and quickly individuated characters. Chapters 3 and 4 will explore each of these norms in greater detail.

Chapter 3

Exposition and Classical Beginnings in Cinema

This chapter focuses on exposition. First, drawing on the work of Meir Sternberg, it will address four issues involved in distinguishing expositional from non-expositional material: the literary means of creating such a distinction; the extent to which this means of differentiating exposition is applicable to film; ways in which exposition might be conveyed through imagery, as opposed to written or spoken text, and how one can identify exposition in stories in which the *syuzhet* rearranges the order of the *fabula*, such as stories with flashbacks. Second, this chapter will explain why exposition is an important component in the narration of beginnings, examining how exposition is normatively used in classical narration, and the role it plays in the cognitive model outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, especially in terms of the different functions it can perform based on its location and concentration in the *syuzhet*. Finally, I will conclude by investigating the degree to which classical narration's normative use of exposition varies.

For the purposes of this dissertation, “exposition” refers not to the mode of rhetoric, but to Russian formalist Boris Tomashevsky's use of the term to indicate a narration's presentation of story events that antedate the start of the film's plot. As Tomashevsky writes, the exposition consists of “the presentation of circumstances determining the initial cast of characters and their interrelationships.”¹ Narratological studies have typically adopted Tomashevsky's use of the term, defining it, in Gerald Prince's words, as “the presentation of the circumstances obtaining before the beginning of the action.”² In other words, exposition consists of the presentation of

¹ Boris Tomashevsky, “Thematics,” *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 72.

² Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology, Revised Edition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 28. This definition is opposed to the less precise use of the term that can be found in various screenwriting manuals and even in some narratological works, such as Gustav Freytag's use of the term, where it is often synonymous with

any *fabula* material that antedates the start of first scene of the *syuzhet*. This does not mean, however, that exposition is located only in the beginning of the *syuzhet*. As we shall see, exposition can surface anywhere throughout the *syuzhet*, even outside of the beginning, and its location at different points in the *syuzhet* is often calculated to solicit particular cognitive responses from viewers. Nevertheless, exposition often refers to *a* beginning -- earlier events in the *fabula* -- if not the beginning with which the *syuzhet* starts. No matter where it occurs, most narratives delegate at least some information to exposition. Thus a discussion of exposition is both crucial to a discussion of narration in general, and the narration of beginnings in particular. As Meir Sternberg eloquently states exposition's significance,

The various aspects of exposition are always worth inquiring into because they are highly indicative of and integral to the structure and compositional principles of the work as a whole. It is always instructive to inquire why an author has chosen to make the beginning of the *sujet* [sic] coincide with that of the *fabula*, or why he has decided to make temporal shifts, why he presents the expositional material (or parts of it) in independent solid blocks of fictive past or why he weaves it into the scenic present.³

As we shall see, much of this statement applies to cinematic beginnings as well.

Defining Exposition

Exposition is an important component of narration in general because of its function, which, as Sternberg succinctly describes, is to provide the reader (or viewer) with “the general and specific antecedents indispensable to the understanding of what happens” in the story world. In other words, exposition's most basic purpose is to provide causally relevant contexts through

“introduction.” See Gustav Freytag, *Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, trans. Elias J. MacEwan (Chicago: S. C. Griggs & Company, 1895). For a discussion of problems with Freytag's definition of exposition, see Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 5-7.

³ Sternberg, 33.

which viewers can understand the *syuzhet*. Sternberg has thoroughly outlined the wide array of information that can make up these contexts, writing that exposition can consist of “the time and place of the action; of the nature of the fictive world peculiar to the work or, in other words, of the canons of probability operating in it; of the history, appearance, traits and habitual behavior of the *dramatis personae*; and of the relations between them.”⁴ Given the function of exposition and the information it conveys, it is not difficult to see why exposition is a particularly useful and common component of narrative beginnings: it provides contexts through which viewers can understand the action that starts the *syuzhet* at precisely the point where viewers otherwise have the least amount of contextual information available.

However, before describing further how exposition’s location and concentration in the *syuzhet* can serve different functions and create different effects, first it is necessary to clearly distinguish expositional from non-expositional material since such a distinction is not always intuitively obvious. At first glance, it might seem that the distinction is simply a matter of identifying where the *syuzhet* begins, and classifying any *fabula* material that antedates it as exposition. However, this distinction is complicated significantly in narratives where the *syuzhet* rearranges the order of the *fabula*. For instance, how are we to distinguish expositional from non-expositional material in narratives that begin *ab fine*, where the *syuzhet* begins near the end of the *fabula*, and then flashes back to a point earlier in the *fabula*? *Sunset Blvd.* is one such film: the *syuzhet* begins with the end of the *fabula*, with the police rushing to Norma Desmond’s (Gloria Swanson) home to arrest her for the murder of Joe Gillis (William Holden). After presenting viewers with the image of Joe floating face down in Norma’s pool, the narration flashes back to a point much earlier in the *fabula* and proceeds from there chronologically. Are

⁴ Sternberg, 1.

we to conceive of most of the entirety of the narrative as exposition, simply because it comes after the “beginning of the action” at the start of the *syuzhet*?⁵ This would seem a gross overstatement, one that renders the term “exposition” so broad as to be nearly meaningless, and thus the need for a more fine-grained distinction between expositional and non-expositional material.

Boris Tomashevsky provides the basis for such a distinction when he describes exposition as the *presentation* of the circumstances prior to start of the story, and not just the actual circumstances themselves. In other words, exposition is defined not only in terms of *where* it occurs in relation to the story events in the first scene of the film’s plot, but also in relation to the *way* in which those events are narrated. Just because a *syuzhet* might narrate a *fabula* event out of chronological order does not make the reordered event exposition. Exposition has further characteristics that distinguish it from non-expositional narrative material. However, Tomashevsky does not specify what those characteristics might be.

Meir Sternberg has done just that, devising nuanced and flexible means of differentiating expositional from non-expositional material. While his distinctions are meant to describe literary exposition, they are still useful for thinking about exposition in film and are worth discussing in detail, both because they point in productive directions, and because they can describe many forms of filmic exposition, especially when exposition is narrated through language (as it often is in classical narration). Sternberg realizes that while distinguishing between expositional and non-expositional material by identifying the beginning of the action is a useful heuristic, it is also

⁵ The same could be asked of stories that are told primarily through flashback, but that periodically return to the present before flashing back to the past, such as *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1953). Gérard Genette calls stories structured this way “dispatching” narratives. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980), 45.

insufficient. Therefore, he further distinguishes expositional from non-expositional material through *quantitative* and *qualitative* indicators.

Quantitatively, Sternberg identifies exposition through the intrinsic norm a given narration establishes for the pace of the communication of information. At any given moment in a literary narrative, there is a ratio of “*represented time* (i.e., the duration of a projected period in the life of the characters)” to that of “*representational time* (i.e., the time that it takes the reader, by the clock, to peruse that part of the text projecting this fictive period).”⁶ This ratio fluctuates across the course of the narrative, but invariably, the narration will establish an intrinsic norm for the pace at which most scenes unfold, which Sternberg calls the “scenic norm.” Usually, this normative pace is close to “real” time, or close to the point where represented and representational time are approximate with one another, which Sternberg calls the “fictive present.” Literary exposition is often indicated when this ratio is uneven, when represented time is greater than representational time. In other words, quantitatively, literary exposition can be described as summary, or more specifically, summary of information located in the beginning of the *fabula*.⁷ When exposition is presented at the very start of the *syuzhet*, the exposition ends whenever in the course of the *syuzhet* the narration first transitions into the fictive present. As Sternberg puts it, “The point marking the end of the exposition in the *fabula*... coincides with the point that marks the beginning of the fictive present in the *sujet* [sic],” a point which Sternberg refers to as the first “discriminated occasion.”⁸ That is, quantitatively, expositional material is

⁶ Sternberg, 14. Represented time is roughly equivalent to story or diegetic time, while representational time can be considered discourse or narrational time.

⁷ For more on duration in literature, see Genette, 86-112.

⁸ Sternberg, 19-21.

anything in the *fabula* antedating the first discriminated occasion in the *syuzhet*, in which the ratio of represented time is greater than that of representational time.

For example, the first discriminated occasion in Marge Piercy's novel *He, She and It* coincides with the beginning of the *syuzhet*: two parents are about to learn the results of their custody battle for their son. After a few sentences describing one of the parent's observations about the scene, the narration goes on to summarize events that antedate it, largely involving the dissolution of the parents' marriage. This antedating material is expositional because it is a summary of events that occurred in the *fabula* before the first discriminated occasion (i.e., the moment in the *syuzhet* just prior to the verdict in the parents' custody battle). Throughout the book, any summarized *fabula* events that antedate the moment just prior to the verdict can be identified as exposition. Therefore, the quantitative indicator solves part of the problem of identifying exposition in *ab fine* narratives; rather than identifying as exposition all *fabula* material that occurs before the first discriminated occasion, instead only that material which is *summarized* should be considered expositional.

However, sometimes this quantitative indicator is not enough to identify material as exposition. Summary can vary widely in its pace; sometimes, the difference between represented and representational time is great, but sometimes it is small. Were a passage of expositional summary to slow down to the point where it closely resembles the pace of the fictive present (which itself is only an approximation), it would be difficult to distinguish expositional from non-expositional material judging solely by the quantitative indicator. Sternberg's example is the beginning of *The Book of Job*, which begins with five verses of summarized, preliminary expositional material, the last two lines of which slow the pace considerably, enough so that it begins to resemble a scene. As Sternberg writes, "The time-ratio of this brief complex of

incidents [verses 4 and 5]... sufficiently diverges from the preceding ratio of three verses to four decades and sufficiently approximates the first scenic occasion to prove troublesome to the reader who attempts to determine whether it is expositional or not by the blind application of the quantitative criterion itself.”⁹

Moreover, even though the quantitative indicator solves the problem of identifying as exposition *all* material that antecedes the first discriminated occasion in narratives that begin *ab fine*, it still has difficulty resolving the distinction between expositional and non-expositional *summary* in such narratives. Judging solely by the quantitative indicator, all summary in *ab fine* narratives would count as exposition: any portion of the text in which represented time is greater than representational time -- that is, any summary, even of an event that doesn't occur in the beginning of the *fabula* -- would count as exposition because it occurs in the *fabula* before the discriminated occasion with which the narrative began (the part of the narrative that begins the *syuzhet*).¹⁰ To take an example from film, in *Sunset Blvd.*, as Joe describes in voiceover his first experience of reading Norma's script, he states, "It sure was a cozy setup: that bundle of raw nerves [Norma], Max, that dead monkey upstairs, and the wind wheezing through that organ every once in a while." This statement is a summarized account of the setting as Joe reads Norma's script, one that should not count as exposition, since it describes a scene in the course

⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰ Sternberg could have eliminated this shortcoming were he to limit the quantitative indicator's applicability only to those passages that summarize material located in the *beginning* of the *fabula*, rather than insisting that the quantitative indicator categorizes *anything* as exposition if it occurs in the *fabula* before the first discriminated occasion. However, such a limit would have created its own problems, considering that the *fabula* size can change as the narrative progresses, and more and more antecedents are revealed. In any case, it is rather clear that he does not mean to impose such a limit on the quantitative indicator. In addition to the above quote declaring that the end of the exposition in the *fabula* coincides with the beginning of the fictive present in the *syuzhet*, he also states that, "The quantitative indicator is...an indispensable factor in the delimitation of the exposition, especially in determining the precise temporal point in the *fabula* which marks the end of the exposition." Ibid., 19. In other words, Sternberg is committed to identifying as exposition any summarized information in the *fabula* that occurs before the first discriminated occasion in the *syuzhet*, and not just those events occurring in the beginning of the *fabula*.

of the film's *syuzhet*. However, judging solely by the quantitative indicator, it would also count as exposition because of this film's *ab fine* beginning: it is a summarized account of a length of time that occurs in the *fabula* before the scene that started the *syuzhet* (Joe dead in the pool). As this example indicates, by itself, the quantitative indicator is still too broad for determining what counts as exposition. Therefore, Sternberg also identifies a number of *qualitative* expositional indicators, which account for *how* exposition conveys information differently from non-exposition.

Sternberg's three qualitative indicators of exposition are *specificity*, *concreteness*, and *actional dynamics*. Specificity refers to how much detail a passage contains. The less specific the passage, the less detailed it is, and the more expositional it becomes. As Sternberg writes, expositional material "cannot afford to go into the details of whatever existed or took place in the course of the represented time, but is compelled to resort to very broad, generalized strokes of summary." Concreteness refers to the degree to which the events described are habitual or reoccurring. The more habitual or reoccurring the events or actions of a passage, the less concrete it is, and the more expositional it becomes. In Sternberg's words, expositional material does not consist of "incidents that existed once in time and space: having to telescope a long fictive period into a confined space, [the narration] is constantly forced to summarize the fixed or recurrent traits of characters, events, or situations."¹¹ Actional dynamics refers to the degree to which a passage develops and advances the action of the narrative. Expositional passages do not actively advance the narrative, but portray "a state of affairs that is essentially static or stable."¹² In other words, non-expositional material is specific, concrete, and dynamic: it contains material

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

¹² Ibid., 26.

details of actions and events (specificity); these actions and events are also singular and nonrecurring (concreteness), and are also “essentially dynamic or developmental, introducing into the once-stable state of affairs the first disturbing, destabilizing element... which causally leads, by necessary or probable sequence, to the next states of the action.”¹³ Lacking these qualitative indicators, narrative material shades more toward exposition: it summarizes, describes recurring events, and describes stable states of affairs. Actional dynamics are what save non-expositional summary from counting as exposition in *ab fine* literary narratives: typically the summarized portions of the text contain some sort of action that advances the plot, even if it’s just a summary that speeds along a transition from one location to another. In the previous *Sunset Blvd.* example, the actional dynamics of the summary is Joe’s implied progress through Norma’s script.

Just as with the quantitative indicator, individually, the qualitative indicators are also insufficient for distinguishing expositional from non-expositional material. For example, there are many instances in a literary work where the text might lack specificity, but not all such instances are expositional, since they might come well after the first discriminated occasion. The same might be said of concreteness or actional dynamics. However, unlike with the quantitative indicator, expositional material need not demonstrate all of these indicators simultaneously; it is possible for some exposition to be unspecific, but concrete, while other exposition can be non-concrete, but specific. For example, if one character were to describe to another character a singular, antedating event, their description might qualify as unspecific, but it is also concrete, because it happened only once. *The Descendants* (2011) provides many examples as Matt gradually learns details about his wife’s love affair, which took place before her coma-inducing

¹³ Ibid.

accident at the start of the *syuzhet*. For instance, over the course of the scene where Matt's daughter Alex first reveals to him that his wife was having an affair, Alex describes the concrete event that led her to discover the affair in the first place. She tells Matt, "When I was home at Christmas, I caught her with a guy.... I was on my way to swim in the Black Point pool with Brandy, and suddenly I see mom and some douche bag walking into a house.... He had his hand on her ass." This description is concrete because it occurred only once, yet unspecific relative to the level of detail in the scene taking place in the present. Nevertheless, despite these conflicting qualitative indicators, the description is certainly expositional, as it describes antecedent contexts indispensable to understanding the story. Sternberg's example of the opposite possibility -- non-concrete, but specific exposition -- is again *The Book of Job*, where the narration provides a level of detail that approaches the scenic norm for certain events, but also describes those events as reoccurring and habitual.¹⁴ The filmic equivalent might be a montage sequence of repeated activities which become non-concrete when considered collectively (the relation between montage sequence and exposition will be discussed further below).

In general, Sternberg's indicators are matters of degree rather than absolutes, and context is crucial, because sometimes his indicators might be at odds with one another. As Sternberg writes, "It may sometimes be convenient to start with the quantitative criterion and sometimes with the more qualitative criteria." Even though the various indicators are "usually concomitant and interdependent," the context of the narrative material will determine the use value of each of the indicators.¹⁵ In other words, there is a reason he refers to them as "indicators": they merely indicate that certain material is probably exposition, rather than functioning as hard and fast

¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹⁵ Ibid.

rules. This gives them some flexibility, which is beneficial both because they make his theory more robust, and because it also allows for their use in other media.

Exposition in Film

Sternberg's qualitative and quantitative indicators of expositional material work very well in film when exposition is conveyed through voiceovers or titles, which also rely on spoken and written language, and which are thus subject to variations in represented and representational time, specificity, and concreteness. For example, the voiceover that begins *Casablanca* is purely expositional, and conforms to all of Sternberg's qualitative and quantitative indicators. The voiceover states:

With the coming of the Second World War, many eyes in imprisoned Europe turned hopefully, or desperately, toward the freedom of the Americas. Lisbon became the great embarkation point. But not everybody could get to Lisbon directly, so a tortuous, roundabout refugee trail sprang up: Paris to Marseille; across the Mediterranean to Oran; then by train, or auto, or foot across the rim of Africa to Casablanca in French Morocco. Here, the fortunate ones through money, or influence, or luck might obtain exit visas and scurry to Lisbon, and from Lisbon to the new world. But the others wait in Casablanca, and wait, and wait, and wait.

Quantitatively, represented time is clearly greater than representational time: the voiceover describes actions and events that take anywhere from days to months to complete, but which takes the voiceover only a minute and fifteen seconds to describe. Qualitatively, the voiceover lacks specificity: there are no details that describe anyone's particular journey over this refugee trail, or what life on the trail is like. Instead, it reads as a summary of what refugees do. It also lacks concreteness: all of the actions it describes refer to the reoccurring actions many people have undertaken and continue to undertake during this period. Finally, the voiceover also lacks

actional dynamics: it describes the stable state of the refugee trail at the onset of World War II, which is the background against which actionally dynamic events will take place.

The same thing could be said of exposition conveyed through dialogue between characters in a film. For example, all of the exposition in *Groundhog Day* (1993) is delivered through dialogue: we learn, amongst other things, that this is the fourth year in a row Phil (Bill Murray) is going to Punxsutawney; that Phil hasn't worked with Rita (Andie MacDowell) before, and that Rita is a nice person and a new television producer.¹⁶ This information is clearly expository, and accords with Sternberg's indicators: quantitatively, it summarizes events that occurred before the first "discriminated occasion" (Phil's February 1st weather forecast on the 5:00 PM news), while qualitatively, it describes reoccurring actions (Phil's trips to Punxsutawney), and engrained character traits (Rita is nice), and is thus non-concrete. This exposition is also unspecific, especially relative to the scene in which it is contained: we don't receive any details about Phil's trips, or any details regarding how Rita is nice (other than by being pretty and somewhat playful, as indicated by her experimenting with the newsroom's blue screen). The same is true of the specificity in the exposition conveyed through dialogue in *The Descendants*.

If specificity can be thought of as relative to an intrinsic norm -- where the degree of specificity accorded to individual elements is determined by whether or not a given element is more or less specific than the norm for the narration -- then exposition conveyed through dialogue, voiceover, or titles in film will almost always *lack* specificity, because relative to most imagery, such exposition cannot help but be unspecific. That is, compared to the imagery of a

¹⁶ This is not the only exposition in the film -- later, Phil will divulge further exposition about his and Rita's lives -- however, regardless of whether it is preliminary or delayed, it is always conveyed through dialogue.

film, any exposition conveyed only through written or spoken text will seem to lack the specificity of the images, no matter how detailed the exposition, since it likely cannot match the innumerable details with which images are naturally imbued (even sparse images). One picture can be worth a thousand words, as the adage goes.¹⁷

Essentially, these examples show that filmic exposition can be accurately described by Sternberg's indicators when the exposition is conveyed through language. This applicability is not terribly surprising, given that Sternberg's indicators are meant to describe literary texts, but it also makes his indicators useful for describing exposition in classically narrated films, because this mode of narration typically delivers exposition through dialogue, titles, and voiceover narration. Many of the films discussed at length throughout this dissertation are exemplary: *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Fort Apache*, *The Graduate*, and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* convey exposition entirely through dialogue, while *Sunset Blvd.*, *The Descendants*, and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* all have lengthy expositional voiceovers at the start of the *syuzhet*, as well as exposition conveyed through dialogue. Other films serve as further examples: for instance, *Twentieth Century* (1934), *Psycho* (1960), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Star Wars* (1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) all convey either the majority or the entirety of the exposition through language. As this wide assortment of classically narrated films from different periods, genres, directors, and studios demonstrate, Sternberg's indicators are useful for describing exposition in classically narrated films because it is quite normative for exposition in such films to be conveyed through language.

¹⁷ At least, this is the case in classical narration. Some experimental or animated film narratives might be so visually simple as to be less detailed than whatever specificity might be contained in written or spoken text. Additionally, conceiving of specificity as relative to an intrinsic norm is essentially analogous to Sternberg's scenic norm for time ratios, whereby the narration establishes a norm, and deviations from that norm can indicate exposition.

Visual Exposition

However, a film's image track is not idle during moments of auditory exposition. When exposition is conveyed through conversation between characters, we could say that the audio is expositional but the image is non-expositional. Voiceovers are another matter, however, because they raise more directly the possibility of visual exposition. In *Casablanca*, the voiceover is accompanied by imagery that acts as illustration of the voiceover's exposition. Visually, the sequence begins with a globe rotating against an indistinct backdrop. As the voiceover starts to describe the refugee trail, the image dissolves to a map of Europe, onto which the trail is animated. Superimposed over this map are a series of images of people (presumably refugees) travelling by foot, on bicycles, and in cars, and images of boats at sea. After the animated map arrives at Casablanca, the image dissolves to a cityscape, and then cranes down to a busy Casablanca street, full of traders, travelers, merchants, performers, and animals. All of these images should also be considered expositional -- from the globe to the Casablanca street -- because even though they may pass for specific and concrete, the voiceover provides them with expositional contexts. Much of the imagery illustrates the non-concrete and general things the voiceover describes, thereby ascribing to them the same non-concreteness as the voiceover's exposition.

However, what of the possibility of visual exposition itself -- that is, when there is no voiceover to provide the proper expositional context? Do Sternberg's indicators suffice for describing such exposition? In order to preserve the possibility that exposition can be conveyed through imagery in film -- more than as mere illustrations of auditory exposition -- then it is

necessary to find visual equivalents for Sternberg's literary indicators, and to expand the ways in which exposition can be indicated through context.

At a glance it might seem as though the quantitative indicator is not useful for identifying visually narrated exposition, because most imagery in film would be considered "discriminated occasions." Most imagery is shot at 24 frames per second (FPS), an internationally recognized industrial standard for shooting scenes in "real time," and a convention that has been normalized throughout narrative cinema since the transition from silent to synchronized sound film.¹⁸ In other words, the pace of any given scene in a film is most often fixed at a one to one ratio, and thus it seems to be difficult to identify exposition on quantitative grounds.

However, it's possible to use the quantitative indicator for visual exposition in film. Film narratives are no less capable than literary narratives of manipulating the ratio of represented to representational time (or, as they are better described in film, *fabula* duration and screen duration).¹⁹ David Bordwell succinctly outlines two means through which the narration can reduce the ratio of *fabula* duration to screen duration: ellipsis and compression.²⁰ With ellipsis,

¹⁸ Prior to the incorporation of synchronized sound, FPS was more varied, ranging anywhere from 16 to 20 FPS. See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction, Ninth Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 172. However, no matter the frame rate, individual films likely stick with one FPS ratio throughout most of a film. I.e., 16 FPS could be a film's scenic norm just as easily as 24 FPS or 48 FPS.

¹⁹ For more on *fabula* and screen duration, see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 80-81. There are at least two reasons it is preferable to refer to represented time as *fabula* duration and representational time as screen duration when discussing the quantitative indicator in film. The first is that, unlike in literature, representational/screen duration can be accurately measured because of the way in which cinematic stories are mediated: they take a time to tell, a projection or screen duration. "Screen duration" implies this increased accuracy. The second reason is that using the terms *fabula* and screen duration sidesteps the ontological implications of the term "representational." Film's ontological status, while certainly a worthwhile topic, is different from the one being pursued here.

²⁰ Ibid., 81-82. Bordwell also describes a third kind of duration in film: *syuzhet* duration, or the length of time that passes in the story between the earliest and latest narrated segments of the *syuzhet*. This is distinct from the *fabula* duration, which encompasses the *syuzhet* duration and adds to it the duration of any other events that take place outside of what is narrated by the *syuzhet*. However, in describing cinema's recourse to quantitatively expositional imagery, it is not terribly useful, because visual exposition will always equal either the *fabula* duration or screen duration.

fabula duration is hastened through its omission; the screen duration elides part of the *fabula* duration. With compression, rather than eliding moments in the *fabula*, instead the screen duration *condenses* the duration of the *fabula*. As Bordwell writes, “screen time presents a series of actions in such a way that no missing time can be detected.”²¹ This can be accomplished most obviously through fast-motion or even time-lapse cinematography, such as in *Blade* (1998), where the film occasionally uses time-lapse cinematography to show day turning into night. Compression can also be achieved through other devices, such as the display of a title to indicate time has passed, or through scenes where *fabula* and screen duration appear equivalent, but where a larger amount of *fabula* time passes than screen time. Bordwell’s example is from *Play Time* (1967), where the scene set at the Royal Garden restaurant takes place from dinner time to dawn and contains no noticeable ellipses, but lasts for only 45 minutes of screen time.²²

Initially, ellipses would not seem to be the equivalent of literary summary, because summary still conveys a general sense of the action being summarized (if not the details), whereas with ellipses, the only sense of the action available comes from the inferences viewers can make about the elided portion of the action. In other words, ellipses might be better characterized as elimination rather than reduction, since part of the *fabula* is skipped over entirely. Indeed, many ellipses function precisely this way.

However, ellipses can convey the equivalent of literary summary when many ellipses are strung together in quick succession, as in montage sequences. A montage sequence can summarize *fabula* information just as readily as can literary summary, because the device makes the imagery become representative of a larger swathe of *fabula* duration. That is, even though the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

individual moments that comprise the montage sequence each have durational relationships where *fabula* and screen duration are equal, and where the actions appear to take place at a particular time, taken together, these individual moments can become representative of lengthier and more detailed processes or events. Montage sequences' similarity to literary summary is suggested by Bordwell's description of them: "portions of a process are rendered through emblematic images linked by dissolves or other forms of punctuation. The spectator is to take this as a brief summary of a longer string of events."²³

For example, midway through *Casablanca*, there is a flashback to Rick and Ilsa's Parisian romance, the beginning of which is conveyed through a montage sequence. A shot of the Arc de Triomphe dissolves into a shot of Rick and Ilsa riding away from the Arc in a convertible. Rick and Ilsa remain in the foreground and smile at one another as the background dissolves to a country road. They snuggle contentedly, and the shot dissolves to another in which they enjoy a boat ride down the Seine, and then dissolves again to a brief, three-shot scene in which Rick and Ilsa drink champagne. This scene then dissolves to one consisting of three shots (all joined through dissolves) in which Rick and Ilsa dance together, which itself dissolves to another scene in either Rick or Ilsa's apartment, where Rick asks Ilsa about her romantic history (itself an expositional inquiry).²⁴ This montage sequence is clearly meant to summarize the portion of the *fabula* concerning Rick and Ilsa's romantic history, and since it concerns events

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ After a series of shots depicting the advance of the German army, another shot shows Rick and Ilsa learning of Paris's impending occupation. This shot, and the two scenes that follow it -- one in La Belle Aurore café, and the other at a train station -- conclude the flashback, but should not be considered a part of the montage sequence that begins it, considering that they are not emblematic images, but distinct scenes that reveal precisely the sour note on which Rick and Ilsa's Parisian romance concluded. Nevertheless, as we shall see, these parts of the flashback remain expositional because they explain a specific gap in knowledge, namely, the cause of Rick's complex reaction to Ilsa's presence in Casablanca.

that occur before the start of *Casablanca*'s first "discriminated occasion," it should be considered expositional.²⁵ Moreover, all of this material also adheres to at least one of Sternberg's qualitative indicators: it can be considered non-concrete because many of these events appear to be representative of repeated processes or habitual activities. This is especially true of the two parts of the montage sequence where dissolves join shots *within* scenes, including the car ride, where the background dissolve seems to indicate that they often enjoyed car rides together, as well as the dancing scene, where all three shots have no dialogue and are joined through dissolves.²⁶ As the *Casablanca* flashback indicates, the quantitative indicator is not totally inapplicable to film imagery, because ellipsis -- when conveyed through montage sequences -- can imbue the imagery with the reduced ratio of screen to *fabula* duration that the quantitative indicator is meant to identify.

Compression's usefulness for indicating summary is increased when we realize that compression can occur even when *fabula* and screen duration are equivalent with one another (rather than only when *fabula* duration is sped up to fit into a brief screen duration). Such is the case when objects or still imagery provide "compressed" accounts of other events. The beginning of *Rear Window* (1954) provides an excellent example. In the film's fourth shot, the camera cranes around Jeff's (James Stewart) apartment, and lingers over various objects, soliciting inferences from viewers about previous events. After surveying the space of the courtyard and the activities of some of the neighbors outside of Jeff's rear window, the shot drifts into Jeff's

²⁵ *Casablanca*'s first discriminated occasion is the point when a Vichy officer reads out a notice regarding the murder of two German couriers, and calling for the arrest of suspicious characters. This announcement is the first actionally dynamic piece of information.

²⁶ Of course, the dissolve during the car ride could also indicate that this particular car ride is extremely long. However, conventionally such a meaning would be implied by the entire image dissolving, rather than just the background.

apartment and reveals that Jeff is temporarily wheelchair-bound, his left leg in a cast. The shot then cranes left and pauses on a shattered still camera, and then cranes up, rack focuses, and pauses once more, revealing a harrowing photo of a racetrack crash, in which crash debris flies directly toward the viewer. The combination of Jeff's cast, the shattered camera, and the crash photo, as well as the camera movement's deliberate emphasis of each of these objects' revelation, solicits an inference about an antecedent event: Jeff broke his leg and camera in the process of photographing the crash. *Fabula* and screen duration are equivalent in this shot, yet the information it reveals about antecedent events is "compressed," because the "duration" of the antecedent event lasts only as long as it takes for a viewer to infer the cause of Jeff's injury. Essentially, the imagery of this scene functions identically to that of exposition conveyed through dialogue, titles, or voiceover: in all such cases, the narration solicits inferences from viewers about events that antedate the first discriminated occasion, compressing the duration of the events into the time it takes to listen to the dialogue, read the title, or view the imagery, even though *fabula* and screen duration are equivalent throughout the scene.

Moreover, the crash photo and ruined camera also conform to Sternberg's qualitative indicators. As we saw when comparing the specificity of language to the specificity of images, even though imagery automatically demonstrates *some* degree of specificity, specificity is always relative to an intrinsic norm. Therefore, it's possible for the events depicted by various images to be considered unspecific relative the degree of detail available in the scene in which they appear. That is, the *fabula* events viewers are able to infer from the objects in Jeff's apartment are themselves unspecific -- few details are available beyond the most basic causal implications -- especially when compared with the degree of detail available in the rest of the scene that opens *Rear Window*. We infer that Jeff broke his leg taking a photo of a crash on a racetrack, but this is

as specific as the inference can be; we don't know how the crash happened or what it sounded like, the severity of Jeff's initial injury and how Jeff reacted to it, or the decisions that led him to be in a position to be injured in the first place, all of which are details that presumably would have been more readily available had the injury been presented as a scene in the film.²⁷ It is precisely these sorts of details that *are* available in the scene where the photos and objects appear: a thermometer and the sweat beading on Jeff's forehead tell us about the temperature in the apartment; the numerous activities of the neighbors allow us to infer that the scene takes place in the morning, and the camera movement gives us a sense of the layout of both the courtyard and the placement of objects in Jeff's apartment, as well as his vantage point for observing the activities of his neighbors (among many other details). Much like how exposition conveyed through dialogue, voiceover, or titles will typically *lack* specificity relative to most visual imagery, exposition conveyed through objects such as those found in the beginning of *Rear Window* also cannot help but be unspecific, since they furnish many fewer details about the scenes to which they *refer* than does the scene in which those objects *appear*.

Additionally, other objects in Jeff's apartment provide viewers with non-concrete or general information. After pausing on the crash photo, the shot continues to roam about Jeff's apartment, craning pasting a series of additional photos (including a fiery explosion, a war scene, and the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb), as well as additional photography equipment, before pausing over two final objects: a printed and framed negative headshot, and then a

²⁷ The availability of such details would of course depend on the way in which this hypothetical scene would be shot, but it likely would include *some* degree of increased detail relative to the way in which the event is presented in the finished film. Moreover, even if more specific details were unavailable in the hypothetical injury scene, the scene would *still* be more specific than the way in which it is presented in the actual film, simply by virtue of the finished film conveying the scene through stationary objects and still imagery rather than moving imagery. Other stylistic choices could also potentially influence imagery's specificity, obfuscating details through devices like distant framing, obstructive staging, low-key lighting, fast-paced editing, distorted sound design, or blurred focus.

positive of the same photo printed on the cover of a magazine. Individually, these objects and photos show concrete events -- they consist of particular actions that have taken place at a particular time -- however, much like in a montage sequence, taken together, they provide non-concrete, expository information about Jeff -- he appears to be a photographer -- and to a certain extent, they inform us of the kind of photography assignments he takes on, which appear to be ones involving some risk of danger. This information is non-concrete because it describes Jeff's habitual or reoccurring professional activities.

Finally, most of these objects in Jeff's apartment are actionally static. The broken camera and racetrack crash photo might be considered exceptions, since they explain the cause of Jeff's broken leg, and thus introduce a "destabilizing element" into a previously stable state of affairs (Jeff's good health). However, considering that Jeff's broken leg is *also* a stable state of affairs in the *fabula* and sets up the conditions for the rest of the *entire* narrative (much like how the voiceover description of the refugee trail in *Casablanca* describes the background against which that film's actionally dynamic events will take place), one might consider the actional dynamism of the photo and camera to be severely constrained. Regardless, judging by the quantitative indicator and by specificity, these objects are clearly expository.

Of course, ellipsis and compression do not always indicate visual exposition; in fact, in classical narration, most often these means of reducing *fabula* duration occur well after the first discriminated occasion, and are used simply as a means of skipping over or condensing unnecessary or irrelevant *fabula* information. For instance, in *Back to the Future* (1985), Doc (Christopher Lloyd) calls Marty (Michael J. Fox) to remind him about their meeting at the Twin Pines Mall. After Marty responds that he is on his way, the film cuts from a shot of Marty hanging up the telephone to a shot of him arriving at the Twin Pines Mall, eliding the time it

takes him to travel there. The same is also true of montage sequences; quite often they occur well after the point of attack, and rather than indicating exposition, instead they condense long processes into a series of representative moments. Such is the case in *Major League* (1989), where a large portion of the Cleveland Indians' rise from American League cellar-dwellers to pennant contenders is conveyed through a montage sequence of their improved play, increased fan recognition, and winning games.²⁸ Likewise, in classical narration, the conventional uses of stylistic devices that can obfuscate the details of figures within the story world often have little to do with depicting exposition visually. However, these devices' versatility should not prohibit them from being used to indicate exposition. Instead, if they are to be used as indicators of exposition in film, they must be used in concert with other contextual cues, such as intrinsic norms for *fabula* duration and specificity, and the location of the narrated material in the *fabula*.

Exposition through Flashback: Explanatory and Illustrative Flashbacks

As the example from *Rear Window* shows, when the exposition is a *part* of a scene taking place in the present -- that is, when the exposition is narrated *through* a scene which itself is not technically exposition -- Sternberg's indicators are just as useful for indicating visual exposition as they are for exposition narrated through language. However, there still remains the knotty issue of flashbacks. With the exception of flashbacks that employ montage sequences (which conform to Sternberg's quantitative indicator), such as in the earlier example from *Casablanca*,

²⁸ Additionally, compression can be used for other purposes aside from condensing *fabula* antecedents. For instance, in *Speed Racer* (2008), compression is used for comedic effect in scenes at Royalton Industries, where the movement of background figures in the hallways is exaggerated through increased speed. Compression can also be used to accentuate the abilities of a character, as in fight scenes where the FPS is increased slightly to make the fighters seem especially fast. David Bordwell has commented on this practice in Hong Kong action cinema in particular. David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment, Second Edition* (Madison: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2011), 132, 147.

flashbacks to narrative material that antedate the first discriminated occasion would seem to pose a problem for the usefulness of Sternberg's indicators in film, since flashbacks often convey exposition, but seem to demonstrate none of Sternberg's indicators: *fabula* and screen duration are often equivalent in flashbacks; they appear specific and concrete because they consist of particular actions or events that take place at a particular times, and they are often actionally dynamic, revealing information that destabilizes states of affairs. Such flashbacks would seem to resemble any other scene in a film, as well as the flashbacks that follow shortly after the start of *ab fine* narratives such as *Sunset Blvd.*, and that take up the majority of the *syuzhet*'s duration.

In fact, the latter half of the *Casablanca* flashback conforms to this description: in the flashback's lengthiest scene, Rick, Ilsa, and Sam close down La Belle Aurore café and plan their escape from Paris, and in the flashback's final scene, Rick discovers Ilsa has abruptly and inexplicably ended their romance and left him to flee on his own. These scenes are not really a part of the montage sequence that comprises the first half of this flashback because they are not summaries of lengthier processes or events, nor are they representative of greater swathes of *fabula* time, but instead they reveal the specific, concrete, and actionally dynamic circumstances of Rick and Ilsa's parting. Yet these scenes are just as expositional as the first half of the flashback, for despite not conforming to Sternberg's indicators, they still fulfill exposition's basic function: providing the antecedents necessary to fully understand the action taking place in the story. How, then, can we account for such flashbacks within the parameters defined thus far, and in a way that differentiates them from the flashbacks that comprise the majority of *ab fine* narratives?

Just as in instances such as the scene in *The Descendants* where Sternberg's indicators are at odds with one another (the expositional dialogue is unspecific but concrete), context is

crucial for accounting for flashbacks to events which antedate the first discriminated occasion, but which do not accord with either the qualitative or quantitative indicators. In instances such as those of the latter half of the *Casablanca* flashback, the crucial contextual factor is that the flashback fills a *specific* gap in our knowledge of the past. Such flashbacks might be called *explanatory* flashbacks, because they explain a specific knowledge gap in the *syuzhet*. In other words, the explanatory flashback is expositional because it provides a previously missing cause for events or character behavior already narrated by the *syuzhet*. In *Casablanca*, the second half of the flashback is just as expositional as the first half because it provides the specific cause for Rick's complex reaction to Ilsa's appearance at his café in Casablanca: they were lovers, and she abandoned him. The *ab fine* flashback, on the other hand, rather than providing specific information to fill in a particular gap in knowledge, instead does the work of establishing the various figures and relationships of the story in the first place. In other words, unlike the explanatory flashback, the flashback near the beginning of an *ab fine* narrative does not provide a *specific* cause of already-narrated information, but instead provides a multitude of casually necessary conditions for the later events that will *eventually* lead to those events that open the *syuzhet*.

The difference can be thought of in terms of the kinds of questions to which the flashback information provides answers. *Ab fine* beginnings solicit very specific questions about the situation that opens the *syuzhet*. *Double Indemnity* (1944), for example, solicits many specific questions about the circumstances of the *syuzhet* prior to the flashback: Why is Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) driving so frantically? Why is he going to his office at night? Why does he appear to be unsettled? Why isn't he using his left arm? Who is Keyes? What is the Dietrichson case about? However, rather than immediately answer specific questions like these, *ab fine*

flashbacks instead provide answers to a broader set of questions along the lines of those Noël Carroll claims viewers ask in the beginning: “where the action is set and when, who these people are, what do they want, and why are they acting like this.”²⁹ These are the kinds of broader questions the *ab fine* flashback of *Double Indemnity* answers: as Walter narrates his story to the Dictaphone, the narration flashes back and he describes where and when the action is taking place, and we learn more about Walter, how he met Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), and his immediate attraction to her. We must wait until much later in the narrative to receive answers to the specific questions solicited by the start of the film.

In contrast to the *ab fine* flashback, the explanatory flashback immediately answers more localized questions regarding knowledge gaps in the *fabula*.³⁰ For example, *The Quiet Man* (1952) begins with Sean Thornton (John Wayne) arriving in Castletown, Ireland, on his way to Innisfree, where he intends to live after having left his life in America. A few scenes later, Sean explains his reasons for moving to Innisfree: it is his ancestral home, and his deceased mother spoke highly of it. However, Sean has an ulterior motive, one concerning his past profession, but this exposition is delayed until the film’s second half, and is only alluded to at three points throughout its first half: once, when talking about his past, Sean stops himself from finishing the

²⁹ Noël Carroll, “Narrative Closure,” in *The Routledge Companion to Film and Philosophy*, eds. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (New York: Routledge, 2009), 211. To a certain extent, there is some overlap between the specific questions solicited by the pre-flashback portion of the *ab fine* film and the broader questions we ask of beginnings more generally: many of the questions solicited by the scene(s) preceding *ab fine* flashbacks could be described by Carroll’s question, “Why are they [the characters] acting like this?” Nevertheless, the flashbacks themselves still differ markedly in the kinds of answers they provide viewers. The specific questions of *ab fine* beginnings seek much narrower responses than those which are provided by *ab fine* flashbacks.

³⁰ Conceiving of the difference between *ab fine* and explanatory flashbacks in term of questions and answers is an imperfect analogy, because explanatory flashbacks are expositional regardless of whether or not viewers actually formulate specific questions. That is, all that matters in distinguishing an explanatory flashback from an *ab fine* flashback is the specificity of the gap that the flashback fills in, independent of whether or not viewers are actually curious about the *fabulaic* past, or the degree to which they formulate specific questions. Nevertheless, thinking in terms of questions and answers is still a useful heuristic for distinguishing between the two kinds of flashback.

phrase, “When I quit the ring”; later, he is unwilling to fight Will (Victor McLaglen) when Will accuses Sean of having inappropriate intentions towards Will’s sister Mary Kate (Maureen O’Hara), and finally, Reverend Cyril (Arthur Shields) recognizes Sean from his career, calling Sean by what appears to be a stage name, “Trooper Thorn.” This last encounter makes the delayed exposition particularly explicit, as Sean tells Cyril that he wishes Cyril would forget that he’s recognized Sean, and Cyril replies, “I understand. It’ll be our secret.” These allusions to Sean’s past raise specific questions about his history: What work did Sean once do that a reverend in a small Irish town is able to recognize him? What is Sean ashamed of, and why does he want Cyril to keep it a secret? Why is Cyril so understanding about Sean’s wishes? An explanatory flashback in the film’s second half answers these specific questions: Sean was a boxer, and he accidentally killed his last opponent in the ring. The flashback shows Sean reacting in horror as his opponent lays motionless on the mat, a doctor entering the ring to pronounce the man dead, and the press reacting by photographing the proceedings. Accordingly, the flashback is expositional because it fills in a specific gap in the *syuzhet*: viewers can infer that Sean quit his boxing career and moved to Ireland not only to return to his roots, but also escape his shame.³¹

As these examples demonstrate, the *ab fine* flashback establishes the story world and the major figures and conditions of the narrative to come (much like any classical beginning),

³¹ Initially, Sean’s history appears only ancillary to the film’s plot, which is more focused on Sean’s needing to adjust to Irish customs, his courting of Mary Kate, and Will’s incremental resistance to their courtship. Accordingly, one might argue that viewers are not overly curious about Sean’s past or any questions this delayed exposition might raise, since so much of the narrative interest is generated by the film’s exploration of Irish culture and the question of whether or not Sean and Mary Kate will successfully form a romantic couple. However, Sean’s past will become extremely causally relevant toward the film’s end, both when his resistance to fighting Will for Mary Kate’s dowry (which Will spitefully withholds) creates conflict in Sean and Mary Kate’s marriage, and then again when Sean and Will actually end up fighting one another. Accordingly, once Sean’s unwillingness to fight becomes more causally relevant, the exposition about Sean’s past is reiterated in a scene where he discusses with Cyril both how he vowed not to fight again after the fatal knockout, and whether or not Sean’s love for Mary Kate is a worthy enough cause for him to break his vow. In any case, regardless of whether or not the flashback answers questions in which viewers are particularly interested at the moment it is introduced, the flashback *does* fill in a specific gap in knowledge in the *syuzhet*, and is thus still an explanatory flashback.

whereas the *explanatory* flashback fills in a specific gap in our knowledge of the story. This difference explains why the explanatory flashback is expositional and the *ab fine* flashback is non-expositional (despite neither according with Sternberg's qualitative or quantitative indicators): the former fulfills exposition's basic purpose -- assisting viewers with more fully understanding non-expositional story events -- while the latter does the work of establishing the various figures and relationships of the story in the first place. It's a difference between providing a small piece of information that can be plugged into our larger knowledge of the narrative, and providing the basic components of the entire narrative in the first place.

In addition to the explanatory flashback, there is at least one other contextual means through which flashbacks to material antedating the first discriminated occasion can count as exposition, a means that relies on the flashback being made non-concrete. Although he is not referring to imagery, Sternberg accounts for this possibility in his description of the ways in which narratives can convey non-concreteness. He writes that it is possible for stories to delve into scenes in the past that "may pass for concrete," but which are "purely expositional" because of the "wider narrative framework in which they are set." These passages are "concrete in themselves," but they become "deconcretized" by ultimately conveying non-concrete information, such as illuminating "an habitual state of affairs" or reinforcing "an engrained trait."³² Sternberg's example of this possibility is Dostoyevsky's *The Devils*, where the narrator "stops the flow of exposition to in order to enact two incidents" that occurred before the first discriminated occasion.³³ However, while these scenes qualify as discriminated occasions, they

³²Sternberg, 30.

³³ Ibid. Tomashevsky also allows for the possibility of characterizing episodes to count as a part of the exposition, writing, "Sometimes... actions at the beginning are irrelevant to the story but are necessary for the characterization. Because these actions are unrelated to the story, they seem to be part of the exposition." Tomashevsky, 88.

are actually expositional because taken in context, they serve a de-concretizing function: they illustrate one character's central trait and their relationship with another character. In film, we might call such exposition *illustrative flashbacks*: seemingly concretized episodes are made expositional because they serve as illustrations of habitual states of affairs or engrained traits.³⁴ The illustrative flashback is thus one more means through which flashbacks to seemingly concrete scenes that occurred before the first discriminated occasion can count as exposition.

For example, in *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011), Arjun (Hrithik Roshan) is on a vacation celebrating his friend's impending marriage, but is having trouble enjoying himself because of his demanding job; he is in constant contact with the office, and must frequently interrupt their vacation activities for work. Midway through the film, just as Arjun is beginning to loosen up a little, a flashback reveals the dissolution of Arjun's most recent romantic relationship. In the flashback, Arjun fights with his (now ex-) girlfriend because he canceled the vacation they had planned for her birthday when it conflicted with a sudden work opportunity. The flashback can be classified as exposition because it illustrates the extent to which Arjun prioritizes his professional life over his personal life. That is, what otherwise would appear to be a specific and concrete scene can be classified as exposition because it is "de-concretized" by its context: it shows that Arjun's workaholic behavior is a trait engrained so deeply that he inadvertently lets it destroy a serious romantic relationship. Placing the exposition at the point in the *syuzhet* where Arjun is just starting to loosen up serves to emphasize his introspective questioning of his long-held priorities.

³⁴ Such flashbacks are much like the imagery accompanying expositional voiceover at the start of *Casablanca*, but without a voiceover to contextualize them. Instead, the narrative situation provides the context that makes such flashbacks expositional.

For conceptual clarity, the explanatory and illustrative flashback have been described thus far as discrete means of classifying flashbacks as exposition. However, in practice, explanatory and illustrative flashbacks are not mutually exclusive. They can sometimes be combined: an explanatory flashback, for instance, can have moments where it fills a specific gap in knowledge through illustrative means. For example, the flashback near the start of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) is explanatory, in that it answers the specific question Don (Gene Kelly) is asked prior to the flashback, about how his career in show business began.³⁵ However, a part of this flashback can be described more along the lines of an illustrative flashback, where the tenor of the somewhat hostile relationship between Don and Lina is illustrated through the scene of their first exchange. Likewise, illustrative flashbacks might sometimes also include specific information that could answer implicit (if minor) questions viewers might have had. Such is the case with *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*: it's not terribly pertinent to the plot, but some viewers might wonder about the history of Arjun and his ex-girlfriend when the two run into each other early in the film; the flashback then provides a specific answer to the question of what went wrong between them. Therefore, rather than identifying flashbacks as either explanatory or illustrative, it might be more accurate to simply state that flashbacks can have explanatory or illustrative aspects to them, aspects which in turn can each help make the flashback expositional.

In fact, quite often many of the above means of conveying exposition in film are combined within a single flashback, even the quantitative indicator: flashbacks become

³⁵ This flashback somewhat resembles an *ab fine* flashback, in that it purports to narrate Don's story "from the beginning," but this is only because the specific question Don is asked -- and that this flashback is meant to explain -- is the story of Don's life and career thus far. Moreover, the flashback itself does not last the length of the film, and the questions we ask of beginnings (as described by Carroll) are satisfactorily answered in the scene *prior* to the flashback, where Dora (Madge Blake) describes the action as taking place in 1927 Hollywood, and identifies many of the major characters and their relations to one another, including Don and Lina (Jean Hagen) as movie stars attending their latest premiere, and Cosmo (Donald O'Connor) as Don's best friend and musical accompanist.

expositional not only through explanatory or illustrative means, but also through the incorporation of montage sequences (as with the first half of *Casablanca*'s explanatory flashback), or voiceovers providing expositional contexts. Such is the case with *Singin' in the Rain*, which employs many of the various recourses film has to conveying exposition discussed thus far. In addition to the illustrative scene between Don and Lina, a part of the flashback gives a specific, concrete, and actionally dynamic account Don's first big break as a stuntman (similar to the explanatory flashback in *The Quiet Man*, or the latter half of the *Casablanca* flashback). Elsewhere, a montage sequence shows the various dangerous stunts Don performed as a stuntman prior to his becoming a leading man, and in still other parts of the flashback, Don's voiceover provides non-concrete (and ironic) contexts for some of the imagery, such as when he describes his being sent to dancing school and "performing for all of mom and dad's society friends," while the imagery shows Don as a child, dancing for strangers in a smoke-filled pool hall.

In sum, it is necessary to distinguish between expositional and non-expositional material because order alone does not dictate whether or not something can count as exposition. Sternberg's qualitative and quantitative indicators are useful for identifying exposition in film because filmic exposition often accords with them, especially when narrated through language, as in dialogue, voiceovers, or titles. Such exposition is often unspecific relative to the scene in which it appears, non-concrete, and actionally static. When exposition is narrated visually, Sternberg's indicators remain useful because they have filmic equivalents such as ellipsis and compression, and because film has available various stylistic recourses for conveying specificity and concreteness. Even when a film employs flashbacks, there are contextual means through which expositional and non-expositional flashbacks can be differentiated, based on whether or

not the flashback is explanatory of a specific gap in knowledge, and whether or not it is illustrative of engrained traits or habitual or reoccurring activities.

Concentration and Location of Exposition

Given these means of distinguishing expositional from non-expositional material in film, it now becomes much easier to describe some of the variables pertaining to exposition's use in narratives. Once again, Meir Sternberg provides useful categories for some of the most significant variables, particularly exposition's concentration and location within the *syuzhet*. When a large amount of exposition is conveyed all at once, it can be described as *concentrated*. Conversely, it can also be spread throughout the *syuzhet*, in which case it is *distributed*. As for its location, if exposition is narrated near the beginning of the *syuzhet*, it is *preliminary*, and if it occurs later in the *syuzhet*, it is *delayed*.³⁶

These variables result in four possible combinations. When exposition is preliminary and concentrated, it is presented in large amounts near the beginning of the *syuzhet*, as in the voiceover that begins *Casablanca*. When exposition is delayed and concentrated, a large portion of it is withheld from viewers and presented later in the *syuzhet*, as in detective fiction, where the mystery is solved through the revelation of expositional information, such as the identity, motive, or means of the criminal. For example, in *The Long Goodbye* (1973), Philip Marlowe (Elliot Gould) tracks down Terry Lennox (Jim Bouton) at the end of the film, and Terry admits to killing his wife, faking his own death, and reveals his motives, all exposition that retroactively explains many of the events of the film. When exposition is preliminary and distributed, it is related piecemeal over a large swathe of the beginning of the *syuzhet*. Examples of preliminary,

³⁶ For a summary, see Sternberg, 236. See also Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 56.

distributed exposition can be found in stories where the exposition is conveyed through character conversation over the course of scenes containing other actions and events. For example, much exposition in *Gosford Park* (2001) is distributed throughout approximately the first forty minutes of the film, as the servants and their masters gossip about the affairs of other characters.

Sternberg's example of delayed and distributed exposition is the investigation in a detective story, where the detective gradually learns more about the circumstances of the crime or mystery over the course of the investigation (and this occurs prior to the larger, concentrated revelation at the end of the plot, where the fruits of the detective's labor are revealed).³⁷ Ultimately, the extent to which distributed exposition can be considered preliminary or delayed is relative: since the exposition is *dispersed* throughout the *syuzhet*, it can be difficult to assign it a particular location.

While these categories are distinct, they are not mutually exclusive. A story can contain both preliminary and delayed exposition, or have some exposition distributed throughout the length of the narration, while other exposition is concentrated in one place. For example, in *Casablanca*, not only is there preliminary, concentrated exposition in the voiceover that begins the film, but there is additional, preliminary exposition distributed throughout much of the film's beginning, including the murder of two German couriers, an implied love affair between Rick and Yvonne, Victor Lazlo's history of Nazi resistance and his imminent arrival in Casablanca, and a good deal of information about Rick, including his birth in New York City, his involvement in various Mediterranean military conflicts, and his arrival in Casablanca during the German occupation of Paris. The same thing could be said of many detective stories, which not only include concentrated, delayed exposition at the denouement, but which also can include preliminary exposition (either concentrated or distributed) about the nature of the detective's

³⁷ Sternberg, 182.

business or other circumstances surrounding the crime. As Bordwell puts it, “exposition about the investigation itself tends to be concentrated in preliminary portions of the *syuzhet*, while information about the motive, agent, and circumstances of the crime will be distributed and finally summed up in later portions.”³⁸ For instance shortly after the start of *The Big Sleep* (1946), the *syuzhet* presents a considerable amount of concentrated, preliminary exposition about Philip Marlowe’s (Humphrey Bogart) background (particularly his employment history), the Sternwood family history, General Sternwood’s (Charles Waldron) latest blackmail predicament, and his history with Sean Regan.

Bordwell appears to conceive of concentrated exposition in slightly broader terms than Sternberg. Sternberg uses concentrated exposition to describe only that exposition which is presented in a “single, continuous block,” while distributed exposition is presented in “smaller, discontinuous units.”³⁹ However, for Bordwell, exposition can still be considered concentrated even if it is not entirely continuous, as indicated by his description of *Rear Window*’s preliminary exposition as being concentrated “in its first two scenes.”⁴⁰ While the first two scenes of the film certainly contain a lot of exposition, it is interspersed with non-expositional information as well: Jeff is getting out of his cast next Wednesday; Jeff’s cast prevents him from covering a story in Kashmir; Jeff discusses the type of woman he wants to marry, and we observe the general routines of Jeff’s neighbors, and Jeff’s interest in the same.

Both the broader and narrower conceptions of concentrated exposition have merits. Sternberg’s use of the categories allows for fine-grained descriptions of precisely how the

³⁸ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 64.

³⁹ Sternberg, 35.

⁴⁰ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 56.

narration employs exposition on a nearly moment-to-moment basis. On the other hand, by mapping Sternberg's categories onto broader portions of the *syuzhet*, Bordwell sidesteps the relativism of distinguishing between concentrated and distributed exposition: deciding how much continuous exposition is enough for the exposition to be considered "concentrated" matters less than that, in a given part of the *syuzhet*, there happens to be a lot of it. For the purposes of discussing *entire* narratives, Bordwell's broader distinction between concentrated and distributed exposition is more practical, since it prioritizes large-scale formal patterns. It is also especially useful for film narratives because unlike literature, film has recourse to convey both expositional and non-expositional information simultaneously through both audio and visual information channels. At the same time as *Rear Window* narration provides exposition through Jeff's dialogue, so too does it provide non-expositional material as he watches his neighbors. Likewise, in *Casablanca*, as the Nazis attempt to intimidate Rick by reviewing his (expositional) political and personal history, Rick's (non-expositional) demeanor simultaneously indicates that he is not intimidated.

However, when discussing only the beginnings of narratives, Sternberg's finer-grained distinction also becomes useful, since it is better able to parse precisely how the exposition is organized within smaller subsections of the overall narrative. What might be considered concentrated exposition relative to the entire narrative can become distributed when it is examined solely in the context of the location of information in smaller narrative subsections, such as the beginning. Sternberg alludes to this possibility when he describes various ways in which otherwise concentrated exposition might be broken up and presented through rote segmentation, where "the distributed exposition is discontinuous only in the sense that it does not

constitute a solid block but a succession of smaller units thinly separated by a variety of interpositions.”⁴¹

For instance, relative to the entire narrative, *The Best Years of Our Lives* has a lot of exposition concentrated in its first few scenes, especially on the plane flight where Fred meets Homer and Al, and then in Fred and Al’s homecomings. However, while the exposition in these scenes is fairly concentrated, it is also segmented by other material. Fred reveals that he’s returning from the war in a brief exchange with a ticket agent near the very beginning of the *syuzhet*, but there is no more exposition until nearly four minutes later, when he meets Homer and asks if Boone City is Homer’s hometown. Likewise, while Fred, Homer, and Al’s plane flight is heavily expositional, the concentrated exposition is broken up by interceding material. Homer, for instance, provides lengthy exposition about his service record, the loss of his hands, his training with his hooks, and his family and girlfriend. This exposition is followed by a non-expositional conversation between Fred and Al about their anxieties over returning home before they resume the discussion of expositional topics, namely their respective marriages. The scene concludes with the two speculating over Homer’s future with his girlfriend. As this example shows, while preliminary exposition can be concentrated in scenes located in the film’s beginning, *within* the beginning, the exposition is distributed into more discrete chunks.

Therefore, generally speaking, the distinction between concentrated and distributed exposition in film should be considered relative. On one end of the spectrum is a film that limits all of its expositional material to a single, concentrated point in the *syuzhet*. On the other end is a film where any individual piece of expositional information is separated from other exposition

⁴¹ Sternberg, 172. Such interpositions include exposition passed off as dialogue, longer portions of action taking place in the scenic present, and formal devices that separate text, such as paragraphs, chapters, or books (the filmic equivalent of which might be various editing devices such as fades or dissolves, among other possibilities).

through intervening material, distributed evenly throughout the narrative. Most films fall somewhere between these two extremes, concentrating or distributing expositional information in fits and starts -- in some places, a lot of exposition is presented all at once, while in others, the exposition is divided into smaller chunks, or more thinly spread throughout portions of the *syuzhet*. Ultimately, whether or not the exposition should be considered concentrated or distributed must be decided on a case-by-case basis, relative to three factors: the degree of non-expositional information contained in a particular scene or portion of the *syuzhet*; the dispersal of exposition in other parts of the narration, and the scope of the analysis. Sometimes it might be useful to treat the distinction between concentrated and distributed exposition the way Bordwell does, while other times it might be more useful to think of the distinction in Sternberg's finer-grained terms. Both conceptions of the distinction will prove useful in subsequent analyses.

Despite all of these qualifying considerations, the distinctions between concentrated, distributed, preliminary, and delayed exposition remain useful because they specify different ways in which a narration can manipulate exposition, and because the variables have different effects for viewer cognitive processes, particularly in relation to the distinction between preliminary and delayed exposition.⁴² As Sternberg convincingly argues, the location of exposition is very important for the generation and maintenance of one's interest in a narrative, both in terms of curiosity and suspense. He writes,

Both suspense and curiosity... derive from a lack of information; both thus draw the reader's attention forward in the hope that the information that will resolve or allay them lies ahead. They differ, however, in that suspense derives from a lack of desired information concerning the outcome of a conflict that is to take place in

⁴² The distinction between concentrated and the distributed exposition also affects viewer cognitive processes, but in a less pronounced way, as discussed below in section detailing the distinction between immediate and postponed preliminary exposition.

the narrative future...; whereas curiosity is produced by a lack of information that relates to the narrative past.⁴³

In other words, curiosity is the result of wondering about what happened in the past, whereas suspense is the result of wondering what will happen in the future. Construed this way, most narratives have some degree of suspense, as the narration tends to withhold information about the resolution of future events until the narrative's conclusion. Curiosity, however, can be solicited only by withholding information about events that precede the start of the *syuzhet*, or to put it in the terms discussed above, curiosity is a product of *delaying* the exposition until later in the *syuzhet*. In stories with delayed exposition, not only do viewers form hypotheses and inferences about what will happen later in the narrative, but they also hypothesize and infer about what has *already* happened to produce the state of affairs with which the narrative began.⁴⁴ Delaying the exposition and making viewers curious about it is a means of generating interest in the exposition, which Sternberg argues would otherwise be “the most boring part of the whole narrative.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁴ Sternberg claims that for delayed exposition to successfully hold a reader's interest, their curiosity about the past must be brought into “equilibrium” with the suspense they feel over the narrative future, lest their patience be exhausted. Ideally, the narration will leave the reader being pulled equally in both directions, so that it will be able to “appease his pressing need for exposition only at the expense of heightening his retardatory suspense, and vice versa.” Ibid., 165, 167.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 46. One can see how delaying the exposition easily generates viewer interest in some horror and science fiction films. For instance, the most concentrated expositional passages of *The Matrix* (1999) are delayed 37 minutes into the film, but last for 26 minutes, with only intermittent breaks for fight scenes and snippets of non-expositional information. Delaying this concentrated exposition generates interest in it, not only because doing so makes viewers wonder how and why the events that began the *syuzhet* came to pass, but also because only the exposition can fully make sense of the many otherwise inexplicable actions and events in the first 37 minutes of the film, such as characters who can leap impossible distances, disappear when answering a telephone, or who seem to be able to predict the near future. Sternberg's argument stipulates that if the long sequence of concentrated exposition that explains these actions and events in *The Matrix* were to appear at the start of the *syuzhet*, then it would bore viewers because they would have had no opportunity to become curious about how it affects the events of the film's plot in the first place.

The location of exposition can also influence the way in which the narration makes use of the primacy effect. As David Bordwell notes, preliminary exposition “supplies a strong primacy effect, solid grounds for confident hypothesis formation.”⁴⁶ While first impressions are based on *any* information provided by the narration, preliminary exposition strengthens the primacy effect by providing contexts for understanding the action, which in turn provides a solid basis for filling in schemata and fostering hypotheses about the direction of the narrative. These contexts can act either as the principal means of impression formation, or as a redundancy measure, reinforcing the impressions solicited from other information, such as character behavior.

For example, a readily available first impression of Riggs’s (Mel Gibson) dispositions in *Lethal Weapon* (1987) is that he is depressed and unstable; he is first seen waking up in his messy trailer home, nude and smoking a cigarette, and he proceeds to drink a beer and pee into the toilet simultaneously. Later, as he’s preparing to leave the trailer for work, an annoying commercial causes him to fly into a rage and smash his television with a beer bottle, at which point the narration provides expositional contexts for his miserable state: the smashing of the television knocks over photos of Riggs’ wedding and his wife, and before he leaves, Riggs gently rights the photos and promises to buy a new television. The photos help to reinforce a first impression of Riggs as depressed and unstable by providing expositional context for his misery: the absence of his wife has broken him.

Later, as impressions of Riggs become more refined, they will be substantiated by additional exposition, further clarifying the cause of Riggs’ mental state. Riggs’ depression has made him not only reckless in his police work, but suicidal as well, as is amply demonstrated both when he places himself in danger during two police actions, and when he later holds a photo

⁴⁶ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 56.

of his wife, cries, and puts a gun to his head, but can't pull the trigger. In the scene following his near-suicide, further exposition reveals why Riggs is so devastated over the loss of his wife: she recently died in a car accident. Here, the exposition provides firm grounds both for understanding Riggs' mental state (in turn reinforcing first impressions of him), and for anticipating subsequent narrative developments, such as his finding redemption through his partnership with Murtaugh (Danny Glover, who is established as a caring family man in early scenes crosscut with those of Riggs), and the resolution of the case they are assigned.

On the other hand, delaying or withholding exposition can make first impressions take longer to form, or can even lead to the formation of erroneous first impressions (as with Sternberg's "rise and fall of first impressions"). *The Graduate*'s introduction of Mrs. Robinson is an example of the former possibility. Recall from Chapter 2 that Mrs. Robinson's dispositions (tenacity, aggression, manipulateness) are not immediately salient, but take time to manifest, partly because of the nature of her dispositions (tenacity requires successive information to become evident). However, first impressions of her also take time to form because initially we lack the (expositional) contexts to understand her motivation. Had the narration provided preliminary exposition regarding Mrs. Robinson's dissatisfaction with her marriage and her callous demeanor, it would be much easier to immediately regard her behavior in the beginning of *The Graduate* as an attempt to use Ben for her own selfish ends. Lacking such exposition, however, this impression takes time to form.⁴⁷ Delaying exposition can contribute to the "rise and fall of first impressions" by providing new contexts that completely upend our conceptions of who characters are or why they behave the way they do (although in such cases, the narration

⁴⁷ Exposition about Mrs. Robinson's marriage is delayed until 47 minutes into the film, where her reticence to discuss it strongly suggests her marital dissatisfaction.

must downplay the delayed exposition, either by leading viewers to assume it is not important, or by not letting on that the viewer is missing information). Such is the case in some films with misleading narration, where a character's expositional history is delayed until the end of a film, and motivates otherwise surprising revelations about the character's behavior (as when a protagonist is revealed to be an antagonist).⁴⁸

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt (1956) is one such film; the narrative concerns newspaper editor Austin (Sidney Blackmer) and his friend and soon-to-be son-in-law Tom (Dana Andrews) in their efforts to frame Tom for murder in order to prove the dangers of using only circumstantial evidence to sentence someone to capital punishment. The narration misleads viewers by leading them to believe Tom is innocent, but the end of the film reveals that he in fact committed the murder for which he and Austin frame him. While the elided murder is itself not expositional, as it occurs well after the first discriminated occasion, Tom's motivation for the murder is partly expositional: the murder victim is Tom's estranged wife, whom Tom foolishly married in his youth (and who he wanted to kill because she was trying to blackmail him).⁴⁹ Delaying this exposition until the end of the film contributes considerably to the narration's duplicity, or the "rise and fall of first impressions," as it completely eliminates any reason viewers might have to become suspicious of Tom.

⁴⁸ Of course, the "rise and fall of first impressions" is not completely dependent on the location of exposition; films can solicit from viewers erroneous first impressions through presenting unreliable *preliminary* exposition (as is the case in misleading films like *Stage Fright*), or by delaying *non-expositional* information (such delays are better described as ellipses). The latter possibility is demonstrated by *The Sixth Sense* (1999), which elides Crowe's (Bruce Willis) death from a gunshot wound he receives early in the film.

⁴⁹ Tom's marriage to the murder victim is expositional, but the blackmail is not, at least according to director Fritz Lang's handwritten note pertaining to the plot, where he outlines the differences between what he describes as, "What the audience sees and knows," and, "What happens -- but we don't show." In this outline, the blackmail and murder both take place well after the film's first discriminated occasion. See Phillipe Arnaud, "Beyond a Reasonable Story," in *Fritz Lang: La mise en scène*, eds. Bernard Eisenschitz and Paolo Bertetto (Paris: Cinémathèque Française, 1993), 429.

Delayed exposition can also qualify the primacy effect, as with Sternberg's two intermediary strategies for the narration's use of the primacy effect: "the rhetoric of anticipatory caution," (which fosters suspicion of first impressions) and "the primacy effect complicated and qualified" (where the first impression is partly accurate, but unrepresentative of all facets of the subject). As discussed in Chapter 2, Sid from *The Descendants* is an example of the latter: first impressions of Sid are that he's an immature, facetious, surfer-dude, but both the revelation of exposition about Sid's recently deceased father, and the establishment of some of Sid's other persisting attributes (like his emotional sensitivity) complicate and qualify first impressions of him. Characters from *A Perfect Getaway* (2009) provide examples of the former possibility (suspicion of first impressions). The film concerns a newlywed couple, Cliff (Steve Zahn) and Cydney (Milla Jovovich), honeymooning in Hawaii at the same time that a pair of romantically-linked killers is also loose in the island chain. Much of the narrative interest in the first hour of the film derives from hypothesizing about whether other romantic couples with whom Cliff and Cydney cross paths are the killers, especially another suspicious romantic couple with whom they end up spending a lot of time.⁵⁰

Classical Narration and Exposition

Regardless of whether or not a particular narration delays or distributes exposition in later portions of a narrative, classical narration, as David Bordwell has observed, almost invariably employs preliminary exposition.⁵¹ That is, it is normative for a classically narrated film to

⁵⁰ This example is similar to the "whodunit" mystery subgenre, where a seemingly impossible murder is committed in a secluded location (like an estate in the country), and our impressions of the various characters are qualified by the suspicion that one of them has committed murder. See Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 64.

⁵¹ Ibid., 164-165. See also Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 28.

include some exposition either at the very start of the *syuzhet* or within the first few scenes, no matter where else additional expositional information might be located.⁵² Classical narration normatively employs (often concentrated) preliminary exposition because such exposition is extremely conducive to facilitating narrative comprehension and soliciting relatively precise cognitive and emotional responses from viewers. Not only does preliminary exposition strengthen the primacy effect by explicitly providing contexts through which the action can be understood, but it also reinforces the notion of beginnings as causally self-sufficient, and is of great assistance both in triggering schemata through which the scene at the start of the film can be understood, and in filling in a narrative template schema (i.e., guiding our attention to causally relevant information and forming general expectations about the narrative, and then gradually narrowing their range). After all, the second property of the canonical narrative template schema discussed in Chapter 2 is the explanation of a state of affairs; in classical narration, this explanation is often achieved through preliminary exposition.

Recall from the Chapter 1 that one of the purposes of a narrative beginning is to relieve viewers of the effort of reasoning back from effects to causes. Even though no event is truly free of causal relations to previous events, identifying an event or series of events as a beginning allows viewers to assume that prior states of affairs do not contribute significantly to the initial cause that starts the story. Preliminary exposition strengthens the use value of the concept of a narrative beginning because it reinforces the notion that beginnings are separate from antecedent material. Preliminary exposition provides just enough information about previous events or states of affairs to make it seem as though the beginning is causally self-sufficient, and not missing any

⁵² The concentration of preliminary exposition in classical beginnings can vary considerably; quite often it is fairly concentrated, but it can also be broken up into more discrete chunks. No matter its concentration, however, classical beginnings usually contain *some* exposition (even if only a small amount).

information from earlier in the story. In other words, by satisfying the most basic curiosity we might have about the past, preliminary exposition is often one of the narrative components that allows a beginning to seem like the *start* of a story, rather than the middle. For classical narration -- a mode of narration invested in smoothly facilitating narrative comprehension -- preliminary exposition is extremely useful for reassuring viewers that they aren't missing anything that would inhibit their understanding of the plot.

For example, the concentrated, preliminary exposition of *Network* (1976) provides context about antecedent events, which satisfy any basic curiosity viewers have about the past, and which makes the event that starts the *syuzhet* seem causally self-sufficient. The film begins with an omniscient, expositional voiceover that introduces Howard Beale (Peter Finch), the network news anchorman for UBS TV, and explains that while he had once been a widely watched and successful news anchor, in the past 5 years his popularity has waned, and he has suffered personal tragedy that has led him to depression, isolation, and alcoholism. It concludes, "On September 22nd, 1975, he was fired, effective in two weeks. The news was broken to him by Max Schumacher [William Holden], who was the president of the News Division at UBS. The two old friends got properly pissed." This concentrated, preliminary exposition helps to explain why Howard and Max are drunk and reminiscing about their careers in the scene that picks up at the voiceover's conclusion. Were the film to lack this preliminary exposition at the start of the *syuzhet*, not only would viewers become curious about the past -- about who these men are, why they are drunk, and why they are reminiscing -- but the beginning of the film would also seem much more like the middle of a series of larger events, rather than the start of the story.

Another reason classical narration normatively employs preliminary exposition is that exposition is a very efficient means of communicating information. As we have already seen in

the discussion of specificity as a qualitative indicator of exposition, one reason for exposition's efficiency is that it lacks detail; often it is simply stated outright, rather than demonstrated through the course of the scene. Relegating some information to exposition spares the narration the work of presenting it as a scene, and is a means for the narration to quickly dispense with causally relevant background information and to expediently arrive at the main plot. *Network's* voiceover exposition, for instance, sums up over a decade of time in the space of a minute. Another reason for exposition's efficiency is that in classical narration it is frequently narrated self-consciously. Recall from Chapter 2 that beginnings tend to employ devices such as voiceovers, titles, or other means of direct address, and that the causal relevance of information presented this way becomes extremely salient. Frequently, the self-conscious information in the beginning is expositional: it pertains to *fabula* events that take place before the first scene of the *syuzhet*, or stable states of affairs. In many instances, self-consciousness and lack of detail are related to one another: the exposition needn't be detailed because its relevance to the action is indicated directly.

Of course, the degree to which exposition is presented self-consciously can vary greatly; it is just as normative for it to be stated directly to viewers through voiceover or titles as it is for it to be incorporated relatively seamlessly into a scene through dialogue between characters. However, even when conveyed through dialogue, often it will be made at least somewhat self-conscious, either through its being told in high concentration to a character who is a surrogate for the viewer, or through redundancy. *Mean Girls* (2004) provides an example of self-consciousness through viewer surrogacy: Cady (Lindsay Lohan) is a new high school student, and when she cuts class with her two new friends Damian (Daniel Franzese) and Janis (Lizzy Caplan), the three observe a gym class attended by the school's three most popular girls,

collectively known as the “plastics.” Damian and Janis then provide Cady with concentrated exposition about the plastics’ backgrounds and personality traits. This exposition is couched in a dialogue between characters, thus it has a diegetic pretense, but it is self-conscious in that it is for the viewer’s benefit just as much as Cady’s; effectively, Cady is a surrogate for the viewer.⁵³

His Girl Friday (1940) provides an example of self-consciousness through redundancy. Hildy’s (Rosalind Russell) first words to Walter (Cary Grant) are expositional: “Your ex-wife is here. Do you want to see her?” The line of dialogue itself is somewhat self-conscious because it seems designed as much for the benefit of viewers as it is for Walter; Walter is well-aware of his and Hildy’s relationship status, but viewers are not. More self-conscious, however, is how redundant their status as divorcees will quickly become. The former couple’s ensuing conversation in both this scene and the next repeats their marital status at least five times in one form or another, often in the course of illuminating other expositional aspects of their relationship: the two rehash parts of their romance, their divorce, Walter’s failings as a husband, and the circumstances of Hildy’s engagement to her new fiancée, Bruce (Ralph Bellamy). In *His Girl Friday*, then, the exposition is made slightly self-conscious through its redundancy, even though it might be less self-conscious relative to other devices like voiceovers or titles.

Regardless, the exposition remains relatively efficient because it is still less detailed than a lot of the other non-expositional information provided by the narration. For instance, Hildy and Bruce’s exchange (prior to Hildy’s visit with Walter) is rife with detail about the tenor of their relationship and their characters’ attributes: Bruce is sweet-natured and protective of Hildy, who

⁵³ When Damian and Janis describe Regina (Rachel McAdams), the leader of the plastics, the exposition’s self-consciousness increases significantly, as the narration cuts to a series of brief shots in which various minor characters directly address the camera with tales of Regina’s notoriety. Presumably, these shots are meant to represent the optical point-of-view of a character (likely Cady) asking others about Regina, but we never see a reverse shot of Cady listening or reacting to the others’ stories. It is as if the minor characters are speaking directly to the audience.

in turn is tough, but appreciates Bruce's gentle nature. Details such as these are mostly absent in the expositional content of Hildy and Walter's exchange (although the tenor of their past relationship can likely be inferred from the way in which they interact in the present). Self-consciousness is simply a means through which exposition's efficiency can be magnified; exposition's other inherent qualities ensure that it is always efficient to some degree.

Given its efficiency, exposition is well-suited to classically narrated beginnings because it is ideal for quickly filling in parts of a narrative template schema. As discussed in Chapter 2, *any* information is capable of filling in a narrative template schema; as soon as the narration provides information, viewers immediately start to categorize it in terms of this schema.⁵⁴ However, exposition is particularly suited to filling in a narrative template schema because of its efficiency: its relative lack of detail allows for the exposition to be dispensed with quickly, and its relative self-consciousness is a rather direct indication not only that it will likely be important (i.e., causally relevant) for the development of the narrative, but often *how* it will be important as well. Both of these qualities make exposition easy to categorize in terms of a narrative template schema, in turn facilitating narrative comprehension. Such is the case with the preliminary exposition that begins *The Descendants*, for instance, as will be discussed in detail below.

Of course, while preliminary exposition is well-suited to filling in a narrative template schema, quite often classical narration will relegate information pertinent to a narrative template schema to *both* the expositional and non-expositional parts of the narrative. Such is the case with *Network*: both the exposition *and* the non-expositional material narrated over the course of the beginning provide information that is causally relevant for a narrative template schema. In

⁵⁴ For instance, it is easy to hypothesize that a character prominently featured by the narration will likely figure into the development of the narrative, that the state of affairs at the start of the story will likely change significantly by its end, and that the narrative will be set in motion by an event or series of events that prompt a response from characters, and so on.

addition to the voiceover, the beginning also gradually distributes other preliminary expositional information: UBS News Division has an annual 33 million dollar deficit; the News Division is not held responsible to the network's corporate parent company (CCA); the ecumenical liberation army has been filming their acts of terrorism; a concept analysis report has concluded that Americans want someone to articulate their rage for them, and Susan (Faye Dunaway) started her job in programming six months ago. While all of this expositional information certainly provides important contexts for understanding the plot, just as relevant for filling in a narrative template schema is other *non-expositional* information presented in the beginning, such as Susan's strongly stated goal of producing exclamatory, counter-cultural programming, the conflict between Max and CCA representative Frank (Robert Duvall) over the News Division's need to turn a profit, and the dramatically increased ratings for Howard's unscripted, angry outbursts during his live news broadcasts. The point is that exposition's efficiency makes it ideal for quickly filling in parts of a narrative template schema, even if other information might ultimately be just as important for such a schema.⁵⁵

Regardless of whether or not the preliminary exposition of a particular narrative is especially useful for filling in a narrative template schema, preliminary exposition *is* almost always useful for soliciting narrower, more local schemata through which the scene that starts the *syuzhet* can be understood. That is, regardless of the extent to which it helps viewers quickly figure out how characters, actions, and events will pertain to the *overall* narrative, preliminary exposition normatively (and explicitly) suggests prototype schemata and scripts through which the *immediate* actions at the start of the film can be categorized. Thus preliminary exposition is

⁵⁵ It's not as though viewers consciously pick and choose information that contributes to a narrative template schema; schema use is an automatic process. Moreover, as discussed in previous chapters, ultimately causal relevance can only be determined retrospectively.

extremely useful for classical narration, because the contexts it provides can quickly help viewers get their bearings and more fully and easily grasp the actions, events, and relationships between characters at the very start of the *syuzhet*. Essentially, preliminary exposition acts as a schema calibration device -- it directly solicits particular schemata through which we can understand the beginning of the *syuzhet*, and contributes significantly to the expediency with which we can start making inferences and narrowing our hypotheses about the story.

For example, in the beginning of *Network*, not only does the preliminary exposition make the beginning of the *syuzhet* seem like the start of the story by informing viewers of antecedent events, but it also provides a prototype schema for Howard and Max's relationship, and a script for their actions (especially in its last line: "The two old friends got properly pissed"). Knowing that they have a shared history and that Howard has been fired better contextualizes Max's reminiscing, and their somewhat manic state can be categorized as an effect of their drunkenness. The script provided by this preliminary exposition also makes the otherwise abrupt transition between the film's first two scenes more comprehensible. In the first scene, Max tells a particularly riotous anecdote about his early days in the television news business (which itself is exposition that establishes the longevity of their careers up to this point, further underscoring the centrality of the news business in their lives and providing further context for Howard's despair over his firing). As the two embrace at the conclusion of Max's anecdote, the film cuts to the pair -- now somber and introspective -- drinking at a bar, where Howard despairingly contemplates committing suicide on the nightly news, and Max attempts to uplift Howard's spirits by musing that his suicide would get good ratings.

The preliminary exposition makes this abrupt transition between locations intelligible because it provides the contexts (a script, in this case) to infer that getting "properly pissed"

involves drinking in bars (even when one is already drunk), and it also provides the contexts to understand the change in the characters' mood: nostalgia for the past has given way to despair over the future. Lacking the schemata triggered by the exposition, viewers would be at a loss to understand why the pair wind up in a bar after they embrace at the conclusion of Max's anecdote in the previous scene, why their moods shift so violently, and why one of them idly considers suicide, which in turn would make viewers very curious about the exposition, and unsure of the proper schemata through which to categorize the characters' actions (other than their evidential drunkenness). Considering that *Network* is a satire of television news, such curiosity and uncertainty would be counterproductive because viewers would be less well-prepared to recognize the extent to which the events and characters in the film are exaggerations of real life, effectively dampening the satire and blunting the relatively precise responses this classically narrated film is designed to solicit from viewers.

The lengthy expositional voiceover that appears throughout the beginning of *The Descendants* is a good example of how all of these ways in which exposition is efficient can come together, as the exposition at the start of the *syuzhet* provides an un-detailed, self-conscious presentation of information that efficiently fills in a narrative template schema while also activating local schemata through which scenes throughout the beginning of the *syuzhet* can be understood. Over a series of images of the hustle and bustle of life in Hawaii, Matt's voiceover sarcastically describes how life in Hawaii is not the paradise mainlanders think it is, and then reveals the source of his current anguish: his wife, Elizabeth, was in a boating accident, and has been in a coma for over three weeks. Matt is in his wife's hospital room, going over some paperwork, and his voiceover continues to describe the state of their marriage prior to the coma: "When I heard about the accident, and about the coma, I wasn't even in town. I was on Maui, on

business, and we hadn't spoken in three days. In a way, we hadn't really spoken in months." Immediately, this exposition sets up expectations about the narrative, which we categorize in terms of a narrative template schema: the film is set in Hawaii and will concern the state of Matt's marriage and the repercussions of his wife's accident. At the same time, the exposition about the uncommunicative state of their marriage prior to the accident triggers a prototype schema of a couple who has a hit a rough patch in their relationship. This schema, in turn, will provide insight into Matt's character psychology in the specific scene that takes place in the hospital room.

Matt subsequently reveals that he believes he hasn't been a "real husband and a real father" thus far, but that the accident has made him ready to be a better one now. This exposition further specifies both the narrative template schema and the schemata through which we can understand the dynamics of this hospital room scene. It seems immediately evident that one of the repercussions of his wife's accident -- one which will be a narrative concern -- is that Matt will attempt to better his marriage (if given the chance) as well as his parenting.⁵⁶ At the same time, this exposition also helps viewers further understand the scene in which it is presented. As Matt narrates this voiceover, he looks up from his paperwork, stares at his wife, sits back, and sighs. The preliminary exposition assists viewers in better understanding his facial expression and his sigh as a mixture both of concern *and* remorse, rather than just one of concern (or boredom).

⁵⁶ Considering that Matt's statement about his willingness to be a better husband and father is immediately followed by Matt pleading with his wife to wake up, one might consider his pledge of self-improvement as an empty promise, one made in the wake of tragedy. However, even if it is an empty promise, this does not mean that his pledge will not be a central concern of the narrative. Moreover, considering that viewers have only just been introduced to Matt, and considering that he seems genuinely remorseful, there is no reason not to take him at his word.

Throughout the beginning, the exposition provided by Matt's voiceover continues to serve both of these functions, efficiently filling in the template schema and reinforcing the categorizations viewers have already started making, while also soliciting narrower schemata through which specific scenes can be understood. After a brief scene in which Matt picks up his younger daughter Scottie (Amara Miller) from grade school (where she landed in trouble for sharing a scrapbook filled with images of her mother in the hospital), Matt's voiceover returns, stating, "The last time I took care of Scottie by myself was when she was three. Now she's ten, and I have no idea what to do with her. And with Elizabeth in the hospital, she's testing me. I'm the backup parent, the understudy." By giving viewers a better understanding of the parenting challenges Matt will face over the course of the film, this voiceover more squarely centers our expectations regarding the overall narrative on Matt's parenting rather than his marriage.⁵⁷ Simultaneously, this exposition also helps us to understand Scottie's outbursts, and Matt's stiff reaction to her. Scottie resists being scolded for bringing her scrapbook to school, and then whines to Matt about going out to eat. After returning home, Matt talks on the phone inside the house, and he observes Scottie through a window as she angrily throws deck chairs into the pool in the backyard. Rather than viewing these outbursts as the whining tantrums of a spoiled child, the exposition provides the context to allow for a fuller understanding of Scottie's actions as those of a child testing the boundaries of a parent not used to dealing with her outbursts. The efficiency of all of this voiceover exposition is clear, considering that the alternative would have been to show all of it in actual scenes or montage sequences, and then rely on viewers to infer how such scenes/sequences are relevant to both Matt's visit in the hospital room and his picking

⁵⁷ Matt will soon discover that there is little he can do about the state of his marriage: his wife's coma is permanent, and her wishes were to be disconnected from the machines keeping her alive. This revelation will further narrow viewer expectations for the overall narrative to the challenges Matt faces in improving his parenting.

up his daughter up from school. In other words, by relegating this information to Matt's expositional voiceover and indicating directly how it will be relevant to the narrative, the narration efficiently does this inferential work for us.

Nowhere is the exposition's efficiency more apparent than when Matt's voiceover describes the film's major subplot: a land sale Matt and his extended family are near to closing, which will yield the extended family hundreds of millions of dollars. Here, the exposition is quite concentrated. It details: Matt's family history; the circumstances under which he has inherited land; his role as sole trustee; his reasons for dissolving the trust and selling the land; his occupation as a real-estate lawyer; the various bids he and his cousins are considering; the state of Matt's finances versus that of his cousins, and his philosophy regarding giving money to his children. This exposition is concentrated into a nearly three-minute-long voiceover and accompanied by a handful of illustrative images. While this exposition does provide more insight into Matt's parenting, the land deal is relatively ancillary to the main plot, and the exposition allows both for it to be dispensed with efficiently, and folded into a narrative template schema: we expect the narrative to concern both Matt's attempts to be a better father and heal his family, as well as the decision he'll make regarding the land deal (and in normative classical narration fashion, eventually both plot strands will causally intertwine with one another: one of the reasons Matt decides not to sell the land because he wants to use it to bond with his daughters).

In sum, classical narration normatively employs preliminary exposition because it is conducive to easy narrative comprehension: it satisfies our curiosity about the past and makes the beginning seem causally self-sufficient, and it efficiently facilitates schema use, both by providing strong indications for filling in a narrative template schema, and by straightforwardly helping viewers to understand the immediate situations and actions that begin the *syuzhet*. All of

these qualities assist viewer cognition in the beginning, and help classical narration achieve the ease of understanding and the solicitation of relatively precise viewer responses toward which many of its norms strive.

Further Distinctions: Immediate and Postponed Preliminary Exposition

While many of the aforementioned films discussed at length (including *The Quiet Man*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *A Perfect Getaway*, *The Descendants*, *Casablanca*, *Sunset Blvd.* and *Network*) begin with *concentrated* preliminary exposition, the effects described above remain largely the same for *distributed* preliminary exposition as well, so long as some item of exposition is presented immediately near the start of the *syuzhet*. That is, even if the preliminary exhibition is distributed throughout the beginning, it will create much the same effect as that of concentrated preliminary exposition (satisfying some curiosity about the past and assisting with the schematization of the initial information), provided at least one piece of expositional information occurs near the very start of the *syuzhet*. For instance, in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the preliminary exposition is interspersed with non-expositional information, yet very near the start of the *syuzhet* Fred tells a ticket agent that he has just returned from overseas. This information satisfies some of our curiosity over who Fred is and what he's doing in the airport, and facilitates both long and short term schema use.⁵⁸ This brief exposition is enough for viewers to categorize Fred's other actions throughout the first few scenes, and it can easily be extrapolated to apply to nearly all of the other characters he encounters, including Al and Homer,

⁵⁸ Once again, recall that while the exposition in this film is fairly concentrated in the beginning overall, *within* the beginning it is often actually broken up through intervening material.

as well as the many unnamed servicemen waiting at the ATC for flights to their destinations.⁵⁹ In terms of its effect on viewer cognitive processes, the most significant difference between concentrated and distributed preliminary exposition is a matter of scale: the more concentrated the preliminary exposition, the more thoroughly it can satisfy curiosity and contribute to schemata. In other words, the basic effect remains the same for distributed, preliminary exposition as for concentrated, preliminary exposition; the only difference is in the degree of the exposition's effectiveness.

Regardless of the degree of concentration, then, the preliminary exposition still assists with schema use and satisfies curiosity when the start of the *syuzhet* more or less coincides with the presentation of exposition. However, there is some leeway in the precise location of preliminary exposition in classical narration. In most of the above examples, the preliminary exposition is more or less *immediate*, appearing right at the start of the *syuzhet* -- a location that is extremely normative for classical narration. Sometimes, however, the preliminary exposition is *postponed* slightly, appearing later in the beginning, after the narration introduces other non-expositional information. Such exposition is still preliminary relative to the entire narrative, but relative to the location of other information in the beginning, it is slightly postponed.⁶⁰

Postponed preliminary exposition is distinct from Sternberg's category of delayed exposition. Sternberg conceives of delayed exposition as a large-scale organizing principle where the exposition is delayed *extensively*, creating curiosity about the past, and accordingly, sustained

⁵⁹ As Chapter 4 will argue, this exposition provides the parameters necessary for enriching the psychology of the situation Fred finds himself in at the beginning of the film. The more concentrated the exposition, the more potential parameters it can provide.

⁶⁰ The distinction is much like the previous caveat regarding the difference between concentrated and distributed exposition. When focusing on a smaller segment of the narrative (such as the beginning), it can be productive to create fine-grained distinctions to account for variation in the way the narration manipulates information.

interest in the narrative (and heightened interest in the exposition) until that past is revealed much later in the narrative, possibly even in the denouement (as in mysteries or detective films).⁶¹ Contrastingly, postponed preliminary exposition is not a large-scale organizational principle; it pertains only to the precise location of *preliminary* exposition in the beginning, and the postponement can be relatively minor, as indicated in some of the examples below. While slightly postponing the preliminary exposition certainly solicits curiosity about the past -- much like Sternberg's larger-scale delayed exposition -- any curiosity generated by postponed preliminary exposition is fleeting, and should be considered an ancillary byproduct of its principal effects.⁶²

And just what are the effects of postponed preliminary exposition? They differ depending on the degree to which the opening of the *syuzhet* is easily categorized by schemata. If the action that starts the *syuzhet* can be very easily described by a single, highly probable schema or a series of similar, mutually inclusive schemata, then the action remains nearly as easily understandable as it would were the *syuzhet* to have begun with immediate preliminary exposition, because the

⁶¹ To a certain extent, delayed exposition is the explicit subject of such films' narratives, and the narrative template schema is filled in with the knowledge that the detective will spend the film actively seeking out the details of events that occurred prior to the start of the *syuzhet*. As Sternberg makes clear, in such narratives, the expositional gaps are salient immediately: "The reader's mind is drawn to the suppression of antecedents and to the centrality of the expositional gaps already at the outset." Sternberg, 180. Postponed exposition is not so immediately salient, both because it is not the subject of the narrative (it is ultimately revealed later in the beginning), and because there isn't necessarily a character actively seeking to discover it.

⁶² Technically, the preliminary exposition in *The Descendants* is preceded by a brief shot of Matt's wife, Elizabeth, enjoying the boat ride moments before her accident. This shot solicits a flood of questions similar to those we might ask of the beginning of a film in which the preliminary exposition is slightly postponed: Who is this woman? Where is she? What is she doing? However, these questions are answered almost immediately by Matt's expositional voiceover, thus *The Descendants* is still best described as containing (nearly) immediate preliminary exposition. Films with postponed preliminary exposition deliberately provide such questions more room to breathe before answering them, even if it's just a minute's worth of screen time, as we shall see in some of the examples discussed below. Rather than a postponement designed to hamstring a viewer's understanding of the start of the *syuzhet*, instead, the postponement of the preliminary exposition in *The Descendants* seems much more a byproduct of the film providing a brief glimpse of Elizabeth as a living, breathing person, so as to better emphasize the tragedy of her coma and its effect on her family.

schema provides firm grounds for casting hypotheses and making inferences. Essentially, the schema substitutes for the context normally provided by immediate preliminary exposition, performing some of the same bearing-gathering functions (although it might still leave us curious about the past). However, if the action that starts the *syuzhet* is underdetermined and does *not* easily lend itself to schematization -- if, for instance, the beginning of the *syuzhet* could be categorized by equally probable but widely divergent and mutually exclusive schemata -- then without the context provided by exposition, our hypotheses and inferences about the first scene are more tentative than they would be otherwise, and it can be more difficult to use the initial information in a narrative template schema.

In other words, postponing the preliminary exposition will require viewers to rely heavily on the best available schema for understanding the action, however, the ease of doing so will vary based on whether the action at the start of the *syuzhet* lends itself to a particular schema or group of related schemata, or whether it is underdetermined and does not appear to fit well into a particular schema (either because there does not seem to be any particular schema to which the action conforms, or because the action lends itself equally to be multiple, conflicting schemata). This variance will make it more or less difficult to confidently assess the action at the start of the *syuzhet*, to determine what is happening and why, and how it might prove causally relevant, both in the long term and short term. In both cases, we still form expectations and make hypotheses and inferences, but in the former case, we can be reasonably confident in our assessments (since the schema which describes the situation appears highly probable), while in the latter case, we become more likely to hold our assessments in abeyance until they can be confirmed (or not) by exposition, or by the accumulation of enough other non-expositional information (either because

the action does not lend itself to schematization, or because there appear to be competing schemata for describing the situation).

Postponed preliminary exposition is common enough that it should be considered somewhat normative for classical narration, although immediate preliminary exposition is far more normative. However, of the two sets of effects of postponed preliminary exposition described above, the former is more normative than the latter. That is, should the narration postpone the preliminary exposition, it is far more normative for the action that begins the *syuzhet* to be unambiguous and easily categorized by a schema than it is for the action to be difficult to categorize schematically. The reasons for these norms are evident in the above discussions of the effects of postponed preliminary exposition and the benefits of immediate preliminary exposition. Classical narration attempts to facilitate smooth narrative comprehension by soliciting relatively specific cognitive responses from viewers, and thus complicating the beginning by making the initial action that starts the *syuzhet* difficult to categorize is not conducive to that end. Nevertheless, some classically narrated films do postpone the preliminary exposition.

The Descent (2005), for instance, offers an example of the former possibility, where the postponement of the preliminary exposition does *not* make tentative one's understanding of the action that starts the *syuzhet*, because the first scene consists of action that readily activates a group of related schemata through which to categorize it. The first scene consists of a trio of women happily whitewater rafting together as the husband and daughter of one of the women, Sarah (Shauna Macdonald), cheer them on from shore. These activities can be easily categorized, readily soliciting an event schema for "friends and family on vacation," "whitewater rafting," or simply, "recreational activity." Such schemata seem highly probable, and can compensate for the

postponement of the preliminary exposition, because they straightforwardly solicit hypotheses and inferences that viewers can make with confidence: the women are friends (or are at the very least friendly); they are enjoying their experience; they want to navigate the rapids without capsizing; the husband and daughter are proud of the mother, and so on. A further, likely hypothesis seems to be that the film's plot will involve these women's adventurous nature. As this example shows, when the *syuzhet* opens with events that can so readily be described by a specific schema (or group of related schemata), then the lack of expositional contexts is not so pronounced, and does not pose a significant impediment to viewers' confidently assessing much of the action in the scene.

The opposite is the case with the latter possibility, where the action that starts the *syuzhet* does not appear to fit well into a particular schema, and the postponement of the exposition makes our understanding of the beginning of the *syuzhet* more tentative or fluctuating. This possibility represents the strongest departure from the normative use of preliminary exposition, and it is clearest in instances where the interpersonal relationships between characters provide equally probable but widely divergent schemata for understanding the action. For example, even though *Mutual Appreciation* (2005) only postpones its causally relevant preliminary exposition for the first minute and a half of the film (hardly a postponement), it is enough to make the first exchange between characters difficult to assess. The film opens in the middle of a vaguely flirtatious, meandering conversation between Alan (Justin Rice) and Ellie (Rachel Clift). The two are lying on a bed some distance apart from one another, laughing together and (apparently) hypothesizing about why Ellie is feeling tired, but their relationship remains difficult to

categorize immediately.⁶³ They seem to be getting acquainted (Alan asks Ellie if she's a vegetarian, which allows for the inference that they do not know one another very well), and given Ellie's body language, her amused responses to Alan's conversation, and their lying on a bed, one possible schema is that they are on a date together, and have come back to Ellie's apartment (at one point she apologizes for not being a good hostess). However, given the trivial nature of the conversation, the awkwardness of their flirtation, and the considerable physical distance between them on the bed, other schemata are also equally viable; perhaps the two are just new friends, or are acquaintances who are getting to know one another. Essentially, the film postpones the exposition that would allow for the immediate categorization of their interaction and provide firmer grounds for understanding who they are, their exact relation to each other, what they have been talking about, and why they are on a bed.⁶⁴

Only when Ellie's boyfriend Lawrence (Andrew Bujalski) enters the apartment does the film offer exposition that makes the relationships clearer: We learn Alan has been in town only for an hour, is staying at the apartment of another friend, and is a musician in search of a drummer. Most importantly, it is also strongly implied that Alan is Lawrence's friend, and that Ellie and Lawrence are a romantic couple, information that provides a schema for understanding Alan and Ellie's previous (and subsequent) interaction as that of illicit attraction, where the vaguely flirtatious tone of their banter is offset by their connections to Lawrence. Eventually,

⁶³ The start of the film also interrupts their conversation, which further contributes to the abruptness of its beginning: Ellie chuckles at something Alan has just said, and the first line of dialogue is Alan replying that it's okay to laugh.

⁶⁴ While the characters do discuss other events that happen before the start of *syuzhet* in this opening conversation -- Ellie talks about feeling tired lately, and Alan relates a story of one of his iron-deficient friends -- these events are causally irrelevant, and thus while their topics of conversation conform to Sternberg's indicators, they should not be considered expositional since they are not "indispensable to the understanding of what happens in [the story]," as Sternberg puts it. See Sternberg, 1. While it is not possible for viewers to truly know the extent of the relevance of their conversation until the film has ended (as discussed in Chapter 1), it is strongly implied that their conversation is causally irrelevant because it does little to provide contexts for the immediate situation that opens the *syuzhet*.

Alan and Ellie's mutual attraction will comprise a significant portion of the film's plot, but because their first exchange is not preceded by preliminary exposition, initially viewers are left without a firm basis for understanding why they seem somewhat tentative *and* interested in one another in the scene that starts the *syuzhet*. Moreover, given its trivial nature, it is also difficult to ascertain how or if their repartee will contribute significantly to a narrative template schema. Had the narration provided preliminary exposition immediately at the start of the *syuzhet*, viewers would be better prepared to understand both the dynamics between Alan and Ellie in their initial conversation, as well as how their exchange will figure into the story more generally. Ultimately, the slightly postponed exposition in *Mutual Appreciation* underscores one of the larger conflicts of the film's narrative: the uncertainty these characters feel at being attracted to someone with whom they cannot become romantically involved without damaging their existing relationships or their sense of their own morality. Just as Alan and Ellie are uncertain over what to do or how they feel, so too are viewers initially uncertain of the dynamics of the interaction between the characters, an uncertainty that is the product of the postponed preliminary exposition.

Of course, *Mutual Appreciation* might be considered on the margins of classical narration; it is a part of what has been loosely (and sometimes derogatively) referred to as the American independent "mumblecore" film movement of the late 2000s, which can be characterized by small-scale, everyday stories involving young adults who have difficulty communicating and/or finding direction or self-definition for their lives.⁶⁵ As such, the plots of

⁶⁵ For more on mumblecore, see Alicia Van Couvering, "What I Meant to Say," *Filmmaker Magazine* Spring 2007. <http://filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/spring2007/features/mumblecore.php>, accessed 23 June 2013. See also J. Hoberman, "It's Mumblecore!" *The Village Voice* 14 August 2007. See also Michael Koresky, "DVD RE-RUN Interview: The Mumblecore Movement? Andrew Bujalski On His 'Funny Ha Ha,'" *Indiewire* 22 August 2005 http://www.indiewire.com/article/dvd_re-run_interview_the_mumblecore_movement_andrew_bujalski_on_his_funny_h Accessed 23 June 2013. See also

these films tend not to be as tightly casual as that of many classically narrated films, and the characters' goals tend to be somewhat vague. Nevertheless, *Mutual Appreciation* still obeys many of the principle tenets of classical narration: for instance, characters *do* still have goals; character psychology motivates much of the action; space and time are still subordinate to causality (even if there are more episodic events than normal), and the tension between Alan, Ellie, and Lawrence is resolved at the film's end. As Michael Newman writes of the relationship between independent and classical cinema, "Independent cinema allows for open endings, episodic structures, ambiguous characters, and many other deviations from orthodox classicism associated with art cinema narration while still retaining certain basic features such as character goal-orientation, redundancy, and the narrative motivation of cinematic techniques such as camera movements."⁶⁶ In other words, while *Mutual Appreciation* exhibits some tendencies of art cinema narration, it still has one foot firmly planted in classical narration as well (such is often the case in independent cinema, which Newman argues is a narrational mode unto itself).⁶⁷

A more strictly classical film with a somewhat similar beginning is *Deception* (1946). The film begins with Christine (Betty Davis) arriving late to an orchestral performance. She rushes into the theater and takes a seat in the back of the balcony section, and once the cello soloist, Karel (Paul Henreid) begins to play, she's overcome with an unclearly specified emotion: tears stream down her cheeks as she listens to the music with rapt attention. As Murray Smith describes her in his analysis of this film's beginning, her expression appears to be one of both

Matt Brenna, "Now and Then: Five Reasons 'Mumblecore' and 'Millennial' Don't Mean the Same Thing," *Indiewire* 13 June 2013 <http://blogs.indiewire.com/thompsononhollywood/now-and-then-how-mumblecore-became-the-genre-of-the-millennial-generation>, accessed 23 June 2013.

⁶⁶ Michael Newman, "Characterization in American Independent Cinema." (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005), 264.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 34-68.

“anticipation and anxiety.”⁶⁸ However, much like in *Mutual Appreciation*, the postponement of the preliminary exposition makes our understanding of the start of the *syuzhet* somewhat tentative because the first scene lends itself equally to widely divergent and mutually exclusive schemata. Not only is it difficult to determine which emotions are causing Christine’s expression, but it is also difficult to determine what is *causing* those emotions in the first place. In arguing that the expression on her face is unspecified, Smith proposes a number of different hypotheses for Christine’s reaction:

Perhaps she has arrived late to the performance of a loved one, and is experiencing relief and joy that she has not missed what is clearly to be regarded as an impassioned performance. Perhaps this is the expression of an admiring but jealous rival musician. Perhaps the Davis character is a music critic, arriving late to the performance of a musician known and not highly regarded by her, and surprised by the quality of this performance.⁶⁹

Only once Christine meets Karel backstage does the narration reveal the exposition that retrospectively allows us to understand her behavior in the previous scene: the two were lovers who were separated during the war, and Christine had thought Karel had been killed. Thus the emotion on her face during Karel’s performance is a mixture of joy, relief, and disbelief. However, without knowledge of such exposition, viewers’ understanding of Christine’s behavior remains tentative because of the widely divergent but equally probable schemata through which this opening scene could be categorized.

In a very small way, the opening of *The Descent* is similar to that of *Mutual Appreciation* and *Deception*. While *The Descent* does begin with action that is easily categorized into a highly probable schema, the lack of immediate preliminary exposition also puts viewers at a loss to

⁶⁸ Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 97.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

understand some of the interpersonal relationships between characters at the tail end of its first scene. The difference, however, is that in *The Descent*, the interpersonal character relations in this first scene are not crucial for understanding the scene's main action, and are ultimately redundant with other causal information in the film, thus the lack of immediate preliminary exposition does not make our understanding as tentative as it does in *Mutual Appreciation* and *Deception*.

In *The Descent*, after successfully navigating the rapids, one of the women in the raft, Juno (Natalie Mendoza), is playfully pushed overboard after she stands up and raises her arms in celebration. Juno seems as amused by her plunge as the others -- she smiles and laughs as she swims toward shore -- however, when Sarah's husband helps pull her from the water, and then helps her remove her helmet, she becomes somewhat somber. Viewers lack the expositional contexts to understand Juno's sudden change from exuberance to subtle reticence, which could be explained by any number of tentative, mutually exclusive hypotheses: perhaps Sarah's family reminds Juno of a dark episode in Juno's past; perhaps Juno is jealous of Sarah's happiness, or perhaps Juno is simply sad their rafting trip is at an end. Only later is it suggested that Juno and Sarah's husband had been having an affair.⁷⁰ Retrospectively, then Juno's close proximity to both Sarah and Sarah's family arouses a mixture of emotions in Juno, including guilt, desire, and jealousy, emotions which explain her sudden reticence. However, given that the exposition that would explain Juno's behavior is withheld, viewers are at a loss to explain it, and must either remain tentative about the reasons for her behavior, or simply ignore it until it becomes relevant

⁷⁰ The affair is never revealed explicitly over the course of the film, but is strongly hinted at by Juno's reaction to various events, her exchanges with other characters, and a pendant she wears around her neck, on which is engraved the credo of Sarah's husband, "Love each day." Accordingly, the exposition about her affair with Sarah's husband is perhaps better described as "withheld" rather than postponed.

(or not) later.⁷¹ The latter is particularly easy to do, since her reticence is a relatively minor part of the scene, and since the high probability of the “family and friends on vacation” schema makes very strong the hypothesis that the three women are friends.⁷² Thus the opening of *The Descent* is still distinctly different from *Mutual Appreciation* and *Deception* in terms of the relative ease with which each can be categorized by schemata: the schema “friends and family on vacation” is unable to account for Juno’s behavior at the end of the first scene in *The Descent*, but this shortcoming is not enough to offset the high probability of that schema, given all of the other information that accords with it. In *Mutual Appreciation* and *Deception*, however, multiple competing schemata seem equally probable, and our understanding of the action that starts the *syuzhet* becomes much more tentative.

Generic Schemata and Postponed Preliminary Exposition

As described above, when the action at the start of the *syuzhet* can be easily categorized by a specific schema, then the postponement of preliminary exposition does not make our understanding of the action as tentative as when the action is not easily categorized. This begs the question: when the preliminary exposition is postponed, what makes the action that starts the *syuzhet* more or less difficult to categorize with a schema? Attempting to answer this question by looking for qualities in the action itself is a Sisyphean task because of the near-infinite diversity

⁷¹ Ignoring the information is essentially akin to what Murray Smith calls “assimilation,” where we “fail to register certain information altogether, due to the implementation of a rigid schema in which we believe strongly.... The strength of our schematic preconceptions actually ‘blinds us’ to certain data.” Smith, 121.

⁷² Additionally, withholding exposition about the affair does not prove to be an impediment to understanding the plot because the affair is never the most causally necessary condition for later events. In the film’s climax, Sarah will betray Juno, and one could construe this betrayal as being motivated by Juno’s affair with Sarah’s husband, but the betrayal is also more explicitly motivated by other non-expositional events, namely Juno’s accidentally mortally wounding one of their companions, and then intentionally leaving her to die. Therefore, Sarah’s betrayal of Juno is doubly (or redundantly) motivated, making the inference of the affair unnecessary for viewer comprehension.

of possible actions, especially when combined with the stylistic variables that could be used to portray them, and which in turn could make schematization and narrative comprehension tentative. A much more fruitful approach to answering the question is to think about the schemata that are particularly well-suited to providing contexts for the action that starts the *syuzhet*. One type of schema that rather consistently compensates for the tentative comprehension that would otherwise result from postponed preliminary exposition is a generic schema.⁷³

Recall from Chapter 2 that generic schemata prepare viewers to expect the introduction of a particular genre's conventions; they function similarly to a narrative template schema, but differ in their specificity, soliciting a narrower range of expectations from viewers. Some highly codified genres have both easily-solicited and specific schemata that make it relatively easy to understand the initial situation that starts the *syuzhet*, regardless of whether or not a given film opens with immediate preliminary exposition. "Highly codified" genres are those whose conventions are easily identified by viewers, either because of the conventions' ubiquity or specificity to a particular genre, and which in turn provide firm grounds for viewer expectations. Such conventions can involve either "semantic" or "syntactic" elements of the genre, as Rick Altman describes them: "semantic" elements like settings, actions, character types, objects, or sounds, and the "syntactic" relationships amongst those elements.⁷⁴ In other words, narrow

⁷³ Other schemata aside from generic schemata can also compensate for postponed preliminary exposition, such as easily identified event schemata (or scripts), as in *The Descent*. Generic schemata and scripts are often closely related to one another, as various scripts are frequently bound up within a generic schema, as demonstrated by subsequent examples.

⁷⁴ For more on the semantic and syntactic approach to genre, see Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 26-40. For a modification and revisiting of these ideas, see Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), especially chapters 6, 7, 9, and the conclusion.

generic schemata can substitute for the context normally provided by immediate preliminary exposition, performing some of the same bearing-gathering functions, provided that elements of a genre are evident in the scene that starts the *syuzhet*.⁷⁵ For example, the schema associated with the “spy thriller” or “espionage” genre is relatively narrow, thus a spy thriller film that postpones the preliminary exposition might not provoke only tentative understandings of the start of the *syuzhet* because the generic schema makes it is easy to categorize the information at the beginning of such films.⁷⁶ A spy thriller schema likely includes conventions such as spies working in secret to accomplish goals related to matters of life and death and (inter)national security, and involves prototypical objects, actions, and events, such as secret identities, technological gadgets, double-crosses, femmes fatales, and last-minute derring-do or other suspenseful situations, to name but a few typical conventions.

For example, *Mission: Impossible* (1996) provides a title indicating that the first scene takes place in Kiev, but offers no other immediate preliminary exposition to facilitate viewers’ understanding of the situation that opens the *syuzhet*. As in *Mutual Appreciation* and *Deception*, in order to understand the first scene, viewers must rely on the inferences and hypotheses encouraged by various schemata that seem to categorize it. However, unlike in *Mutual Appreciation* or *Deception*, the scene that opens *Mission: Impossible* more easily lends itself to

⁷⁵ The following discussion of the spy thriller genre attempts to deal with conventions that could be considered prototypical of the genre, but just like norms and social schemata, genres can and do change over time, and are thus subject to changing historical contexts, including the way in which genre films are marketed and promoted, the critical discourse surrounding films, and their reception by diverse audiences groups. For a compelling theory on how genres form, change, and are used, see Altman, *Film/Genre*, especially chapters 3-5 and 11. For an alternative, ritualistic approach to the evolution of genres, see Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), especially pages 36-41.

⁷⁶ This is not to say that it is normative for narrowly-schematized genre films to do away with immediate preliminary exposition; quite often films with heavily codified genres also contain such exposition. It simply means that even when they don’t contain immediate preliminary exposition, such genre films tend to lessen (or dispel entirely) the effects described above in *Mutual Appreciation* and *Deception*, both of which are films that are perhaps best classified by the “drama” genre, a relatively broad category.

schematization because it can be readily categorized by a spy thriller schema.⁷⁷ This generic schema will in turn provide contexts that make the action perfectly intelligible, despite the film's postponement of the preliminary exposition. The film begins with Jack (Emilio Estevez) watching surveillance footage of a distraught man pacing about a hotel room in which a woman lies immobile on the bed. A second, calmer man checks the woman, who is covered in blood. Our minds set to work immediately, calling up a script that can help to make sense of the situation: the scene seems to show a covert operation, which itself is a convention of the spy thriller genre. Such a script seems the best fit because it explains Jack's behavior, and provides the basis for some initial hypothesizing: Jack is trying to gain some information from his surveillance; the woman on the bed is dead or severely injured; the distraught man is somehow complicit in her state (hence his distraught behavior), and is thus on the verge of revealing the information Jack seeks. Even though the film has provided no expositional contexts to confirm this script or these hypotheses and inferences (it is possible, albeit unlikely, that Jack is watching a video rental, for example), they seem rather probable because they so readily accord with a schema for spy thriller films.

Given a generic schema's ability to fulfill the function of immediate preliminary exposition, it is pertinent to ask whether a viewer enters into a film with a generic schema already in mind, or whether they arrive at the generic schema by deducing it from the action that starts the film. The answer is that it likely changes on a case by case basis. Some viewers might

⁷⁷ Of course, *Mission: Impossible* is also a film adaptation of a well-known 1960s television show, thus depending on a viewer's familiarity with the show, one might be able to call upon a subset of even more highly codified schemata specific to the show in order to understand the opening of the film. Any particularly narrow schema could serve this same function just as well as a generic schema: the schema for a particular series of films, like James Bond films or Harry Potter films, for instance, can provide contexts for understanding a beginning that lacks immediate preliminary exposition. In a Bond film, for example, the schematic subset of the spy thriller genre likely includes Bond completing a mission, taking time off, being briefed on a new mission, receiving technological gadgets, and infiltrating the antagonist's domain (often through the use of said gadgets and the seduction of woman).

go into a film with knowledge of the film's genre, courtesy of promotional material like trailers or posters, familiarity with the personae of the film's stars, or any source material on which a film might be based. Other viewers might lack such knowledge, and arrive at the genre only after observing the actions that begin the film. However, in the case of films that can be categorized by highly codified genres, often the difference is negligible, precisely because the genre is so codified; the conventions are so normative that the events of the film solicit a generic schema just as readily as if the viewer went into the film knowing the genre already. Sometimes this is as easy as recognizing various generic iconography, as in a western, where the setting and costumes readily indicate the genre, whose schema involves, at the very least (albeit somewhat abstractly), a conflict between civilization and wilderness. In *Mission: Impossible*'s case, the action that begins the film readily lends itself to being categorized by a script for a covert operation, which itself is such a strongly normative convention for spy thrillers that the generic schema is likely activated more or less immediately, even for viewers with little-to-no prior knowledge about the film or the television show.

Of course, some films that can be categorized by highly-codified generic schemata only incorporate their telltale conventions incrementally, making the genre harder to identify at the start of the film. When such films also postpone the preliminary exposition and contain no other information that can easily be categorized by a generic schema, then the ease with which we can understand the action at the start of the *syuzhet* is dependent upon whether or not there are any other schemata that appear highly likely for describing the action taking place, just as in *The Descent*, as described above. *The Descent*, for instance, is a horror film, but its horrific elements are not immediately evident at the start of the film, and are only introduced gradually, thus the

postponement of the preliminary exposition makes viewers rely on other schemata the beginning solicits, such as “friends and family on vacation.”⁷⁸

While generic schemata can compensate for postponed preliminary exposition by providing the contexts to better understand the scene that starts the *syuzhet*, beginnings with readily identifiable genres and postponed exposition still leave viewers extremely susceptible to surprise, because viewers still lack the context for understanding the particular way in which the generic conventions are being deployed (or “syntactically” arranged, in Altman’s terms).

Double-crosses and secret identities are a common feature of spy thrillers, for instance, but without expositional contexts, it is difficult to anticipate which character(s) might be duplicitous or concealing their identity. *Mission: Impossible* takes advantage of the potential for surprise afforded by the postponed preliminary exposition, introducing a series of surprises and reversals throughout its opening scene, surprises that would be much more difficult to achieve were the film to have begun with immediate, preliminary exposition.

First, Jack expresses concern that the woman on the bed has “been under for too long,” a mild surprise which requires viewers to revise their previous understanding of the situation: we can infer that she is not dead but is at risk of dying, and that Jack is concerned for her health. After the distraught man provides the information Jack has been waiting for (a name), the distraught man is incapacitated, and the extent of the covert operation is revealed in a series of

⁷⁸ As with *Mission: Impossible*, it’s possible that extratextual materials could inform viewers of *The Descent*’s genre prior to watching the film, in which case viewers might watch the whitewater rafting scene with a horror schema in mind, cuing viewers to expect various conventions of the horror genre, and narrowing the range of expectations viewers have for how this first scene might contribute to a narrative template schema. At the very least, a horror schema likely involves a malevolent force -- supernatural or otherwise -- threatening the life of a character or group of characters, in turn soliciting fear and disgust from viewers. Thus in *The Descent*, the rafting scene might solicit hypotheses from viewers about which of the women’s lives will be threatened first, if any of them will survive the film, or if their seemingly adventurous natures will be casually relevant to the threats they will eventually face. For more on horror as a fear-soliciting genre, see Noël Carroll, “Film, Emotion, and Genre,” in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, eds. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 38-42.

larger surprises: the second man in the room removes a mask (he is actually Ethan Hunt, played by Tom Cruise) and interacts with Jack, revealing that he has been working with Jack to extract information from the distraught man. Then the walls of the room part, revealing that the operation is taking place not in a hotel, but in a warehouse or soundstage with a set designed specifically to entrap the distraught man (and which in turn is surrounded by a team of operatives). Finally, Ethan rushes to the side of the woman in the bed and injects her with a reviving serum. She wakes, and asks if they got the information, revealing that she too is a part of the covert ops team.

By postponing the preliminary exposition and leaving us to rely on generic and other schemata to understand the scene that opens the narrative, the narration deliberately creates a series of surprises that require viewers to repeatedly revise their understanding and expectations: initially, it appears as though Jack is surveying from a remote location, rather than from the next room; that he is aided only by an assistant standing next to him, rather than a large team of operatives, and that none of the people in the surveillance video know they are being watched, rather than only one of them lacking this knowledge. These surprises are all a product of our generic schema providing seemingly firm grounds for making inferences and casting hypotheses about the events of this first scene, even though there is no immediate preliminary exposition to provide further supporting contexts. In other words, the high probability that the scene accords with a schema for a spy thriller (a probability deduced either through recognition of the covert ops script or through knowledge of extratextual material) significantly reduces the tentativeness that would otherwise result from postponed, preliminary exposition, while at the same time increases the potential for surprise. Were viewers uncertain of the schemata through which to categorize this scene, then it would be much harder for the narration to create surprise, because

viewers' understanding of the situation would be relatively tentative, and would likely result in viewers simply thinking that the schema through which they are categorizing the scene is incorrect.

One might argue that the surprises generated in this scene are not a product of the narration postponing the preliminary exposition, but are instead a product of the narration's overall restriction: the narration does not provide a wide range of knowledge, and thus it is capable of repeatedly surprising viewers. However, in the beginning of a classically narrated film, range of knowledge is at least partly determined by its degree of preliminary exposition; including exposition increases the range of knowledge and lessens the restriction, and vice versa. Such is the case with the beginning of *Mission: Impossible*, where postponing the preliminary exposition momentarily restricts the narration's range of knowledge (accordingly, detective stories are based on delaying exposition on a much larger scale).⁷⁹

Moreover, postponing the preliminary exposition creates the potential for surprise even in genres which do not conventionally employ surprise. For example, surprise is not typically thought of as a convention of the western, yet postponing the exposition in a western can create just as much potential for surprise in this genre as it does in the spy thriller, even though surprise is much more conventional in spy thrillers. For example, *Rio Bravo* (1959) postpones its preliminary exposition, and begins with the alcoholic Dude (Dean Martin) about to fish a coin out of a saloon spittoon in order to buy himself a drink (Dude's alcoholism is evident not only in his disheveled appearance and the longing looks he directs toward those drinking whisky at the

⁷⁹ Of course, even if the narration provides immediate preliminary exposition, the narration can still remain restricted by withholding other non-expositional information. Exposition, then, can be useful for misleading narrations because it is one means through which a narration can widen its range of knowledge and create the impression that no information is missing, even if important story information has been (or will be) left out. Such films will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

saloon bar, but also in his willingness to reach into a spittoon for a coin). However, just as he's about to reach into the spittoon, sheriff Chance (John Wayne) kicks the spittoon away and gives Dude a pitying look. Dude retaliates by braining Chance with a large stick. In the altercation that ensues, another saloon patron, Joe (Claude Akins), shoots a man dead. None of these actions are terribly surprising: it is unsurprising that the town sheriff would pity an alcoholic and prevent him from demeaning himself, that the alcoholic would take offense (either at the pity or at being denied the money, or both), or that a saloon brawl would result in a shooting. However, what follows *is* surprising: Dude comes to Chance's aid when Chance subsequently attempts to arrest Joe for murder, only mere moments after Dude attacked Chance. Moreover, Dude also proves himself to be an expert shot, shooting a pistol out of the hand of another man who has trained his pistol on Chance. Despite the readily apparent generic schema (the film is clearly a western), both Dude's assisting Chance and Dude's marksmanship are surprising developments because viewers lack the expositional contexts that would explain them, namely, that Dude is Chance's former deputy.

Just as the generic schema for a spy thriller provides some contexts for understanding the scene which opens the film, so too can it assist viewers with filling in a narrative template schema. The generic schema cues viewers to expect a group of conventions associated with the genre, and those conventions can then serve as signposts pointing to information that is likely casually relevant. For instance, in *Mission: Impossible*, the generic schema provides grounds for hypothesizing that the covert ops team wants the name provided by the distraught man for use in their broader intelligence efforts (although the name itself is never heard again and does not end up playing a role in the story), that those efforts will involve either the extraction or protection of other secrets/intelligence information, and more generally, that the film's major complications

will involve espionage and covert operations, some risk of life and death, and that Ethan Hunt will be prominently involved, as he's played by the film's biggest star, Tom Cruise.⁸⁰ Genre conventions also suggest that the restrictive quality of the narration in the film's first scene is representative of the narration in general. Over the course of the film's length, the narration will routinely create surprises by withholding or providing false information about characters' identities and motives, thus the generic schema solicited by this first scene also hints at narrational patterns the film will continue to develop throughout its length (accordingly, this first scene seems to solicit a narrational primacy effect, falling into Sternberg's "rhetoric of anticipatory caution" category).⁸¹ In general, then, when the narration postpones the preliminary exposition, a generic schema not only provides contexts for understanding the scene that starts the *syuzhet*, but it can also narrow the range of information viewers expect to find in subsequent

⁸⁰ Although, the narration will later toy with this hypothesis that the film will prominently feature its stars. While the filmmakers are not so invested in surprising their audience that they are willing to remove the film's biggest star from the story, they do quickly remove from the film the second biggest star present in the opening scene: Jack (Emilio Estevez) will suffer a gruesome death and be written out of the film only 19 minutes into its 110 minute running length. Similar fates are in store for most of the rest of Ethan's initial team of operatives, including the next two biggest stars present in the beginning of the film, Kristin Scott Thomas and Jon Voight (although Voight's character only fakes his death). The deaths of so many characters which initially appear likely to be important for a narrative template schema somewhat exacerbate schema use in this film.

⁸¹ Despite the patterns of restriction, withheld information, and surprise that characterize *Mission: Impossible*'s narration, the film is distinctly different from films with largely misleading or duplicitous narration. Even though the film misleads viewers, its misdirection never fundamentally influences one's understanding of the story or leads viewers to construct a *fabula* with glaring inaccuracies (as is the case with Sternberg's "rise and fall of first impressions"). For one, the many surprises in the beginning draw attention to the great extent of the narration's restriction, which keeps viewers on their toes by fostering suspicion of first impressions, as with Sternberg's "rhetoric of anticipatory caution." Like Ethan Hunt, anyone could be wearing a mask, literally or figuratively. Just as importantly, the narration's misdirection also does not continually affect story comprehension. Jim Phelps fakes his death near the beginning of the film (and later reveals himself to be the mole that sabotaged the operation that resulted in the death of most of Ethan's team), but misleading viewers into thinking Jim is dead does not lead viewers into constructing a fundamentally inaccurate *fabula*. The main thrust of the story concerns Ethan's attempts to clear his name once he becomes the CIA's prime mole suspect, regardless of whether or not Jim is alive or dead, or the identity of the actual mole. The film would be much more characteristic of those with misleading narration if, for instance, the end of the film revealed that Ethan really was the mole all along, or that Ethan was never actually the CIA's prime suspect, and that their pursuit of him was an elaborate ploy meant to lure out the real mole (although admittedly, this last surprise would make much of the narrative's suspenseful set-pieces nonsensical). The beginnings of such films are the subject of Chapter 5.

parts of the narrative, and can cue them to more easily recognize subsequent causally relevant information.

Despite *Mission: Impossible*'s postponement of the preliminary exposition, like *Mutual Appreciation* and *Deception*, the film is still classically narrated, and is still ultimately interested in facilitating rather than impeding narrative comprehension. Thus *Mutual Appreciation* only delays its preliminary exposition for a minute and half, *Deception*'s first exposition occurs just over six minutes in, and *Mission: Impossible* conforms to the norm shortly after its opening scene. As if to compensate for its lack of immediate preliminary exposition, *Mission: Impossible* provides *extensive* concentrated exposition after a flashy opening credit sequence: Jim Phelps (Jon Voight) listens to a pre-recorded mission briefing which literally lists the identities of the participants in the previous scene, the roles they typically play in carrying out their covert operations, and further expositional information about their next mission, which Jim and the rest of the team begin to plan in the subsequent scene.⁸²

Overall, beginnings that postpone the preliminary exposition are not incomprehensible tangles of information because the schemata viewers use to understand narrative beginnings are

⁸² Despite the generic schema's use in making sense of the first scene of *Mission: Impossible*, many popular critics were nonetheless confused by the plot in general, describing it as "confusing," "headache-inducing," "studiously labyrinthine," "incoherent," an "impenetrable labyrinth," "bewildering, ludicrous," not making "a shred of sense," "cloudy and overcomplicated," and "convoluted and complicated." However, it is unclear from these reviews the extent to which the postponement of the preliminary exposition exacerbated their confusion. Had the film not solicited a generic schema immediately, the film likely would be even more confusing than it otherwise is. See, respectively, "Review: Mission: Impossible," *Variety* 31 December 1995; Rob Gonsalves, "Hectic, incomprehensible; De Palma sells out," eFilmCritic.com. <http://www.efilmcritic.com/review.php?movie=580&reviewer=416>, accessed 28 June 2013; Owen Gleiberman "Movie Review," *Entertainment Weekly* 31 May 1996; Robin Clifford, "Mission: Impossible," *ReelingViews.com*. <http://www.reelingreviews.com/reel129.htm#missionimpossible>, accessed 28 June 2013; Roger Ebert, "Mission: Impossible," *Chicago Sun-Times* 31 May 1996; "Mission: Impossible," *Time Out* <http://www.timeout.com/london/film/mission-impossible>, accessed 28 June 2013; Stephen Holden, "Mission Accepted: Tom Cruise as Superhero," *The New York Times* 22 May 1996; Kevin Lally, "Mission: Impossible," *Buying & Booking Guide* 1 July 1996, 56; Jeffrey M. Anderson, "Short Fuse," *CombustibleCelluloid.com*. <http://www.combustiblecelluloid.com/archive/missimp.shtml>, accessed 28 June 2013, and Mick LaSalle, "'Mission': Implausible," *San Francisco Chronicle* 22 May 1996.

robust: the hypotheses and inferences they encourage still make sense of the initial information in the very beginning, even when lacking expositional contexts for understanding it. For films that can't be categorized into highly codified genres, the absence of expositional contexts can make it difficult to tell which schema is the best one for categorizing the information at hand, but because schemata are abstract constructs for categorical knowledge, they are flexible; schemata can be adapted on the fly, and hypotheses and inferences can be adjusted and readjusted to incorporate new information. We use the schemata that seem to fit best, and narrow or broaden our hypotheses and inferences as we acquire new information. Thus in *Mutual Appreciation*, a schema for "couple on a date," "awkward flirtation," or "new acquaintances" is good enough for tentatively categorizing and making comprehensible Alan and Ellie's interaction until the narration reveals exposition that can further specify their relationship, while "woman moved by music" is good enough to make some sense of Christine's behavior at the start of *Deception*. Likewise, films that can readily be categorized into generic schemata, or whose beginnings have a clearly identifiable script, such as the covert ops script in the beginning of *Mission: Impossible*, also make beginnings without immediate preliminary exposition readily comprehensible, even if such films can ultimately upend the inferences and hypotheses viewers make. However, beginnings with postponed preliminary exposition are still somewhat disorienting, and do run the risk of confusing the inattentive viewer, given their lack of context, their decreased self-consciousness, their potential for surprise, and their deficiency for reinforcing the notion that beginnings are causally self-sufficient and separate from antecedent material (even when the action can be unambiguously categorized by a schema). Thus immediate preliminary exposition remains more normative for classical narration than postponed preliminary exposition. In order to prevent potential confusion or misunderstanding, classical narration normatively assists

viewers by quickly providing immediate, preliminary exposition that can be used to understand the first scene, and that can easily contribute to a narrative template schema.

Chapter 4

Character and Classical Beginnings

While this dissertation has focused on the various norms, conventions, and devices that contribute to the narration of classical beginnings, it has used rather vague terms like “narrative material” or “information” when discussing the plots and stories that are shaped by those norms, conventions, and devices. Quite often, this material or information concerns *characters* and their establishment by the narration. Character establishment is an absolutely crucial component of the narration of beginnings because characters occupy a central place in narratives and in narrative comprehension. As Murray Smith argues, “our ‘entry into’ narrative structures is mediated by character.” Characters are “outstanding” elements of the structure of the film; we privilege them with attention and significance and, considering that they are the sources of the psychological causality that organizes much of classical narration, they are an important means through which we engage with narratives and make them intelligible.¹ Accordingly, this chapter will examine the following topics: the cognitive concepts useful for describing how viewers initially process characters, including typing, folk psychology, and dispositional attribution; how these processes contribute to our first impressions of characters, and how our conceptions of characters develop as we learn more about them; the influence star personae can have on our impressions of characters; how situations rich with folk psychological inferences develop out of narrative beginnings, and how characters are normatively introduced and individuated in classical narratives. As with other topics under discussion in this dissertation, schematic processing and

¹ Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 18. This argument for the importance of character has been made forcefully and convincingly by Smith, but it is also evident in other cognitive scholarship on character in narrative, including that of Michael Newman and Per Persson, whose work will be discussed further below. See also David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema, Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 13.

contextual information strongly influence our engagement with characters in the beginning of a film, and help to explain why our understanding of characters changes as the narrative develops. Ultimately, we shall see how the cognitive processes we use to understand and engage with characters help to explain the function of many of the norms of character establishment in classical beginnings.

First, however, some brief words on what constitutes “character,” and the methodological approach to character used in this dissertation. In *Reading People, Reading Plots*, James Phelan identifies three components to characters and their interpretation in narratives: their “synthetic” component, their “mimetic” component, and their “thematic” component. The synthetic component refers to how characters are artificial constructs; the mimetic component refers to how characters (while artificial constructs) correspond to our notions of real people, and the thematic component refers to whatever interpretive significance or “point” a given character might have.² Phelan demonstrates the usefulness of these categories in his analyses of specific characters in literary works, showing how the different components of character advance to the foreground or recede to the background as the narrative progresses. However, as Phelan himself recognizes, his taxonomy is also useful for describing different methodological approaches to character within narratology. Many early narrative theorists view characters synthetically and thematically, analyzing them as an assemblage of various traits, motifs, or themes which are differentiated only in relation to those of other characters, and which exist only to perform particular functions for the narrative. Aristotle is the earliest proponent of this view of character, but it also includes Russian formalists such as Boris Tomashevsky and Vladímir Propp, as well

² James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 2-3. For an alternative categorization of theoretical approaches to character that intersects with Phelan’s, see Uri Margolin, “Character,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 66-79.

as the structuralists who build off their work, including A.J. Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, and Seymour Chatman, among many others.³ Tomashevsky is exemplary when he describes characters as “the living embodiment of a given collection of motifs.”⁴ These scholars tend to subordinate the importance of character to that of plot, and are chiefly concerned with characters as textual constructs, largely independent of any psychological processes viewers might attribute to characters.⁵

The subordination of character to plot is in sharp contrast to more recent narrative scholarship, which has begun to explore the mimetic component of characters. Such scholarship involves examining how viewers or readers engage with characters, the effects characters have on their audiences, and the mental processes audiences use to process characters. Such inquiries often involve a more social psychologically-based approach to character, as exemplified in the works of Murray Smith, Uri Margolin, Michael Newman, and Per Persson, among other scholars.⁶ While characters are not people -- they are not autonomous, free-standing beings that

³ Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 37. As Stephen Halliwell notes in his commentary, Aristotle’s conception of character is very different from modern notions of character. Rather than “diffuse, pervasive and strongly psychological,” Aristotle conceived of characters more along the lines of ethical dispositions and rhetorical statements of purpose. See page 94. See also Boris Tomashevsky, “Thematics,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 87-90. See also Vladímir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 21. See also Roland Barthes, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” *Communications* 8 (1966); reprint, trans. Lionel Durst, *New Literary History* 6:2 (Winter 1975), 256-258. Later, Barthes re-conceives of characters as the product of a combination of semes, with characters seeming to exist outside of them. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 67, 191. See also Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1978).

⁴ Tomashevsky, 87-88.

⁵ Chatman, for his part, takes a more measured approach, arguing instead that characters and plot are both equally important parts of narrative. Todorov also allows for the possibility of a “psychological” narrative where character is of principle importance.

⁶ The psychological approaches advocated by these theorists differ greatly from other psychological approaches in that they eschew vague concepts like “identification” (common to psychoanalytical approaches) for the more precise and robust concepts of cognitive psychology, folk psychology, and attribution theory. Smith, for instance, provides an excellent foundation for the basis of viewers’ emotional engagement with characters by distinguishing between

exist independently from the narrative -- as Smith notes, characters are still “analogues of persons,” and many of the ways in which film viewers engage with and think about film characters are analogous with how viewers think about persons.⁷ In Smith’s words, while we recognize that characters are representations of people, “in comprehending such representations we must employ, at least initially, the same schemata through which we understand reality.”⁸

Therefore, for a dissertation concerned as much with how viewers think through and understand narrative beginnings as it is with how narrative beginnings are formally designed, it is necessary to acknowledge that while characters are artificial constructs, their mimetic qualities are just as important as their synthetic qualities, especially in terms of the kind of responses they solicit from viewers. It is much more useful to see characters as (artificially constructed) analogues of people, as Smith does, than as purely artificial constructs, because doing so can better account both for how viewers actually engage with characters, and for the function characters perform in the narration of beginnings.⁹ Michael Newman iterates similar sentiments when he writes that

An understanding of character based on social cognition research is implicitly opposed to a conception of narrative in film studies and related disciplines as working entirely on the basis of arbitrary conventions or codes of representation.

central and acentral imagining (or empathy and sympathy) and elaborating on the cognitive and emotional structures inherent to each of these means of engagement. For compelling arguments about the problems with the term “identification,” see Smith, 1-5, 77-80.

⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁸ Ibid., 53. Smith elaborates on this point, writing, “The perception of representations can be deemed a mimetic process in the sense that in the act of comprehension the spectator or reader must appeal not only to knowledge of textual and artistic conventions (genre conventions, editing conventions, and so forth) but also to knowledge of the real world, in whatever way that is defined for particular audiences.” The mimetic reading strategy Smith advocates is of course subject to modification, pending the rules of the world in which the fiction is set.

⁹ See Ibid., 17-20, for a compelling argument for why conceiving of characters only synthetically is inadequate for describing viewers’ experience of them: characters are not just a collection of motifs defined through the way a text differentiates them from other characters, and abstracting characters into thematic motifs downplays their *human* agency, which Smith argues is central to our engagement with narratives.

This semiotic, structuralist, or post-structuralist conception of narrative is assumed by scholars who speak of characters in terms only of intertextual connection to genre norms, star images, or discourses of identity. Of course characters are products of characterization, many of which are culturally and historically specific. But they are also products of natural processes of social cognition, or of non-arbitrary conventions, and to discount this is to miss a significant part of the story.¹⁰

As we shall see, some of the norms and conventions of character introduction in classical narratives are designed specifically to make use of particular viewer cognitive processes (such as redundancy, obvious character types, and moderate character individuation, among others), thus understanding how characters are introduced also necessitates an understanding of those cognitive processes.

Accordingly, as with other subjects discussed throughout this dissertation, this chapter will emphasize both the “mimetic” and “synthetic” components of characters, the latter of which will become very important when discussing the norms of character establishment in classical narration. Just as it is insightful to look at the narration of beginnings from both a formal and cognitive perspective, so too is it productive to investigate the role of characters in narrative beginnings through both formal and cognitive psychological frameworks. Newman states this methodological approach eloquently, writing that when “considering the interaction of text and spectator, we must keep in mind each one’s contribution to comprehension: the patterning of narrative data in combination with the structures of thought produce the character. In order to account for character comprehension, we need to know about both sides of the story, the cognitive side and the textual side.”¹¹

¹⁰ Michael Newman, “Characterization in American Independent Cinema.” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005), 117-118.

¹¹ Ibid., 120. While my methodology is similar to Newman’s, the subject of his analysis differs considerably (American independent cinema).

Basic Concepts in Character Comprehension: Typing, Traits, and Folk Psychology

At the root of the way in which viewers think about characters is what Smith calls the “person schema.” Recall from Chapter 2 that a person schema has the following properties:

1. a discrete human body, individuated and continuous through time and space;
2. perceptual activity, including self-awareness;
3. intentional states, such as beliefs and desires;
4. emotions;
5. the ability to use and understand a natural language;
6. the capacity for self-impelled actions and self-interpretation
7. the potential for traits, or persisting attributes.¹²

The person schema is the bedrock from which stems our conception and engagement with other people, and by extension, characters. The person schema is universal; it is the most basic, abstract way of categorizing the characters we encounter in narratives, and unless we are informed otherwise, we assume any character has these prototypical properties, regardless of sex, race, class, gender orientation, nationality, religion, occupation, time period, and to a certain extent, age.¹³ Much like how narrative information fills in a narrative template schema, so too does character information fill in the persona schema. However, the person schema is not the only schema we use to understand characters; more culturally specific notions of persons are embedded within in. That is, in the course of engaging with characters, we almost always have

¹² Smith, 21. While there is some debate over what constitutes a “person,” this schema is sufficient for describing what might count as a person for the purposes of the following discussion of character. Following James Phelan, I take it as given that story creators have “some working notion of what a person is,” that they believe that characters can represent persons (at least to a certain extent), and that “as readers and critics we can discern these ideas in the work.” Phelan, 11. In other words, the precise nature of the person schema is less important than the notion that both storytellers and viewers/readers use such a schema when thinking about characters.

¹³ This person schema may or may not apply universally to all ages because newborn infants do not yet possess the ability to use and understand natural language (property five of the person schema), and because it is unclear of the extent to which they are self-aware (property two). In other words, infants are not necessarily described by this person schema. However, this is one of the few major exceptions; unless we are informed otherwise, we assume this person schema (or a variation of it) applies to others over the age of nine to twelve months.

recourse to more specific schemata that further narrow the range of categories through which we understand the characters, be they schemata relating to sex, race, nationality, or whatever culturally- or historically-specific subdivision of “person” might describe a character (even though the person schema underlies all of these more specific schemata).¹⁴

Accordingly, when we’re first introduced to a character, not only do they solicit a person schema, but we also begin to sort them into narrower subsets of schemata in order to better categorize them. Michael Newman calls the process “typing,” and it is a means of categorizing characters immediately based on whatever recognizable traits the characters appear to have. It is an intermediary step between recognizing a character as a human agent analogous to a person, and a more specific cognitive representation we might develop for a character with which we are very familiar. Typing is crucial to the formation of first impressions, as it assists us in efficiently making a range of quick associations, expectations, and assumptions about characters; it’s a way of filling in parts of the person schema with probable estimations about things like physical traits, intentional states, beliefs, emotions, persisting attributes, and (in narrative contexts) even their potential causal relevance.¹⁵ As Murray Smith describes the process, “on the basis of the very first attributes of the character made available to us, we will appeal to schemata of person-types, drawn from our store of cultural conceptions, which enable us to produce hypothetically fuller versions of the character than the text, taken as an object, actually puts before us.”¹⁶

Indeed, typing is so useful that it is automatic; as Newman rightly claims, “it is virtually

¹⁴ As Smith writes, information concerning a particular character “is itself likely to elicit culturally specific imagery concerning particular social roles, stereotypes, and so forth. But the framework provided by the person schema undergirds the process as a whole.” *Ibid.*, 22. See also 31.

¹⁵ Susan M. Andersen and Roberta L. Klatzky, “Traits and Social Stereotypes: Levels of Categorization in Person Perception,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53:2 (1987), 235.

¹⁶ Smith, 120-121.

impossible to represent a person in cinema absent some typing information.”¹⁷ There are many different ways of categorizing people, and accordingly, many different kinds of types, including types based on physical features (*age, race, sex, attractiveness*, etc.), occupations (*politician, teacher, salesman*, etc.), family roles (*father, sister, uncle*, etc.), belief systems (*religious, liberal, humanist*, etc.), romantic status (*single, boyfriend/girlfriend, married*, etc.), or typical overt behavior (*do-gooder, bully, temptress*, etc.), among other possibilities. While some types might be more descriptive or have more associations than other types, in general, a type refers to a social role or a large social group with shared attributes.¹⁸

Personality traits can also serve as the basis for types; narcissism, for example, is a trait that can easily be used as a type, as can traits such as introversion, extraversion, and a host of other possibilities (the “jealous type,” a perfectionist, a maverick, etc.). However, social psychologists have found that these trait-based types tend to be less useful for social cognition than types based on social roles because, as social psychologists Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor describe, trait-based types are less richly associative, worse-articulated, and more redundant across a range of “psychological, physical, behavioral, and demographic dimensions.”¹⁹ For instance, labeling a person as a narcissist is descriptive of one dimension of their character: they are excessively vain. However, a social role type like *movie star* is much more richly associative: not only is the type associated with traits like narcissism, but it also solicits associations with other psychological, physical, behavioral, and demographic attributes.

¹⁷ Newman, 100. It’s even possible to type characters that never appear on screen, on the basis of whatever is said about them.

¹⁸ See Andersen and Klatzky, 235-246. See also Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 143.

¹⁹ Fiske and Taylor, 143.

Movies stars are also likely talented, physically attractive, famous, charismatic, rich, attention-seeking, neurotic, and self-important (of course, not all movie stars possess all of these traits, but they are associations that readily come to mind at the mention of the type, especially in terms of the type's representation in narratives).

Thus even though social role types are based on trait information, social role types are more useful for our first impression of a character because they provide a hypothetically fuller idea of who the character is and what they are like than do traits alone. Not only is this true of personality traits, but it even extends to individual physical traits. "You don't first see that a person is short, dressed for school, speaking in a high pitch, and calling an adult 'mom,' then reason that he must be a child," writes Newman. "Rather, you see the traits and the type all at once, and [initially] the type offers you more useful information than the traits."²⁰ In other words, while typing and trait perception are simultaneous, initially typing is more salient. This is not to say that trait information is not also a part of a first impression -- it certainly is -- but that individual traits are simply not the most useful kind of information in the first few moments of a character's introduction. Trait-based types (or, more simply, traits) are much more likely to compliment our initial social role typing of a character than to serve as initial types themselves (although in narratives, sometimes characters might be explicitly labeled with a personality trait upon their introduction). Once we've inferred that a character possesses a certain personality trait, usually this trait can then reinforce our initial social role categorization, or, in instances where a character's traits are not specified by an initial typing, their traits can refine, revise, or augment that initial categorization. As Fiske and Taylor explain, "people tend to use role

²⁰ Newman, 78.

schemas first, then person schemas such as traits to specify particular versions of the role.”²¹ As we shall see, this is one means through which character individuation proceeds.

Like other prototype schemata, character types are organized hierarchically, according to their level of abstraction, with abstract types including many specific sub-categories within them. For example, *athlete* is an abstract, high-level type, which includes under it many basic or mid-level types, such as *baseball player*, *basketball player*, *sprinter*, or *boxer*. Each of these types then also contains subordinate types at even lower levels of abstraction: baseball players can be third basemen, outfielders, catchers, pitchers, and so on. While different levels of abstraction are useful for different purposes, social cognition research has shown that generally we prefer to think in mid-level types because, as Newman writes, they “offer a combination of rich, vivid, concrete, and distinct associations that come quickly to mind.”²² *Athlete* might solicit a general type for a character who is physically fit, but *baseball player* provides a more vivid and distinct idea of a character because it immediately solicits many attributes specific to baseball players, such as good hand-eye coordination, patience, and upper body strength, versus, say, the ability to run fast or jump high, which might better characterize other athletes like sprinters or basketball players.²³ Likewise, while *third baseman* might provide more detail than *baseball player*, this low-level, subordinate type shares many attributes with other position players on a baseball team (like a shortstop or an outfielder), and thus its increased specificity does not substantially

²¹ Ibid., 177.

²² Ibid., 78. See also Nancy Cantor and Walter Mischel, “Prototypes in Person Perception,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* Vol 12, ed. Leonard Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 12-13.

²³ “Vividness” can be considered the extent to which a given stimulus is “(a) emotionally interesting, (b) concrete and imagery-provoking, and (c) proximate in a sensory, temporal or spatial way.” Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 45, quoted in Fiske and Taylor, 254.

increase the usefulness of the type designation (at least, not in terms of a first impression). As social psychologists Nancy Cantor and Walter Mischel write, when dealing with subordinate categories, “it becomes difficult to find distinguishing or special attributes that serve to differentiate the members of the one category from those in the other category. Since one of the purposes of categorization is to highlight the differences between one ‘kind’ (category) of person from another, the large amount of overlap at the subordinate level makes this level less than ideal.”²⁴ Thus while high-, mid-, and low-level types might all simultaneously be available when a character is first introduced, initially, the mid-level type will be most salient, as it offers the best blend of distinct, rich, and vivid attributes that sets the type apart from other possible types.²⁵

Of course, in films, sometimes mid-level types might not be available immediately because the introduction of a character provides very few traits on which to base a categorization. In such cases, we resort to broader, more general types until the narration provides information that can better specify the character. In *Die Hard* (1988), for example, John McClane (Bruce Willis) is a police officer, but this character type is not immediately evident when he first appears, as he is not in uniform or engaged in any police-related activities, but is on a flight inbound to Los Angeles. Initially, McClane can only be typed by more abstract categories, such as his race, sex, and age, or his nervousness over air travel (evident in an

²⁴ Cantor and Mischel, 23.

²⁵ Some social psychological research suggests that social categories are less stringently hierarchical than object categories, and that we type people (and by extension, characters) in a messier, tangled web of associations. Nevertheless, the utility of mid-level categories remains. See Fiske and Taylor, 110-111 for a summary of this research.

exchange with a fellow passenger).²⁶ His being a white male in his mid-thirties provides significantly less vivid, distinct, or concrete associations than other types through which he will later be categorized (such as a police officer).

Newman classifies types in narratives into two different categories, social and genre types, the former being those that originate from reality and the latter those that originate from particular kinds of stories.²⁷ For instance, we might use genre types such as *femme fatale*, *mad scientist*, *slasher killer*, or *love interest* for categorizing characters in narratives. While these types are based on various social types, they aren't types we usually use to categorize actual people, but are instead types that better describe characters in certain genres (film noir, horror/science fiction, slasher horror, and romance, respectively).²⁸ Genre types are a sort of intertextual type, ones we develop based on experience with narratives, and are one way in which we can develop expectations about a character's causal relevance: *slasher killers* and *femmes fatales* are types that tend to figure into stories in particular ways, and a narration's solicitation of these kinds of types helps solicit expectations about the character's causal relevance for the story (and can contribute to the formation of global hypotheses). That is, when we engage with a narrative, we don't just type characters based on their social roles or personalities, but we also type characters based on (genre-specific) hypotheses for how the character will figure into the overall plot. For example, *femmes fatales* are usually romantically

²⁶ While race, sex, and age are powerful categories, they are actually broad, high-level categories rather than mid-level, basic ones. Ibid., 143-144.

²⁷ Newman, 93-99.

²⁸ As Newman acknowledges, there is some bleed between social and genre types. Not only are genre types often based on social types, but experience with narratives can encourage us to view the people in our lives in terms of genre types. For instance, if we think about our own lives in narrative terms, one might categorize a potential romantic partner as a *love interest*.

or sexually linked to the protagonist, whom they attempt to manipulate toward their own ends, often leading the protagonist into dangerous or compromising situations and betraying them. *Slasher killers* methodically murder the various characters in a film, often one at a time, until they are confronted and defeated by the last remaining character (often a woman). Typing a character as a *femme fatale* or *slasher killer*, then, is a means of forming these sorts of hypotheses about their role in the narrative.²⁹

Characters can also possess varying degrees of typicality. Types are categories with fuzzy rather than absolute boundaries. They are probabilistic determinations we make based on the information at hand and on our estimations of how the character information compares with a prototype or an exemplar: the more features a character shares with the prototype or exemplar, the more likely that the character belongs in the category (the difference between a prototype and an exemplar being that a prototype is an abstract or hypothetical instance of the category, while an exemplar is a particular, known instance of the category).³⁰ For example, Superman is an exemplary *superhero*, exhibiting many of the attributes we might abstractly consider prototypical for such a character type: he has superpowers granting him physical capabilities greater than an ordinary person, fights for good against evil (or more specifically, upholds a common moral code and defends the public), wears a costume, and has a secret identity. Less exemplary is The Punisher, who wears a costume and fights for good against evil, but who possess no superpowers, no secret identity, and whose moral code accommodates murder and torture.

²⁹ Much like social role types, genre types are also hierarchically organized. *Femme fatale*, *slasher killer*, *mad scientist*, and *love interest* are likely all mid-level types, whereas high-level genre types might include *protagonist* and *antagonist*, while low-level genre types might include *star-crossed lover* and *supernatural slasher killer*.

³⁰ Ibid., 80. The notion of fuzzy category boundaries has a long tradition in linguistics, philosophy, and psychology. For a summary of this tradition, and its application to persons, see Cantor and Mischel, 8-13. See also 29-30 for close description of the prototype approach to typing. See Fiske and Taylor, 112-115 for a discussion of the exemplar approach to typing.

Deciding whether or not The Punisher is a superhero is a matter of determining whether or not he shares enough of the category's prototypical attributes.³¹ The fuzzy boundaries of character types might best be thought of as a series of concentric circles, at the center of which lies a prototype or exemplar. The further away from the center a particular character is located, the less prototypical or exemplary they are, and the more questionable is their inclusion in the category.³² Superman might be at the center of the *superhero* circle and The Punisher on its farthestmost edge, while Batman -- who has no superpowers -- is somewhere between the two, perhaps slightly removed from the circle's center.

While typing is central to the way in which viewers comprehend characters, much like other schemata, it is also subject to historical and cultural variation. Not only can different cultures or historical periods have different categories for people, but there can also be different prototypes or exemplars even within categories *shared* by multiple cultures. The *superhero* type is a twentieth century creation, and while Superman is an exemplary superhero in Western

³¹ Another way of determining typicality besides similarity comparisons is by applying a causal theory about the relations between things. Typing a character as a *mother*, for example, is usually not determined by comparing the character to a prototypical or exemplary mother, but is more commonly determined by a causal criterion: whether or not she has a child. However, it is also possible to type a character as a *mother* based on similarity comparisons: some characters might exhibit "motherly" or maternal attributes. The same might also be said of types like *thief* or *murderer*. See Newman, 81-82. One reason for why typing is so robust is that we have multiple recourses for categorizing characters, depending on the situation. The discussion of *Stage Fright* in Chapter 5 will provide an example of typing via causal theory.

³² The concept is essentially that of the core/periphery categorization model David Bordwell adapts from philosopher Mark Johnson and cognitive scientist George Lakoff to describe genre categories. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 148.

culture, he may be less exemplary in other cultures.³³ Shared by all, however, is the *process* of typing, regardless of the mutability, instability, or looseness of a given category.³⁴

Traits are the basic properties of characters. They explain characters, and are, in Newman's words, "the language through which we understand them."³⁵ They are the stable, persisting attributes of a character, and are often distinguished from more transient psychological phenomena, such as emotions, thoughts, goals, or attitudes.³⁶ A trait can be a physical attribute, or a matter of group membership (as in, this character is Jewish, or that character is Canadian -- such traits are essentially synonymous with types), but primarily, traits refer to personality. Social psychologists refer to personality traits as *dispositions*. In cinema, physical traits and group membership are attributed to characters on the basis of either imagery or description, but dispositions are most often inferred, since they don't necessarily correspond to physical characteristics, and since they are often derived from the observation of behavior, rather than from their being stated outright.³⁷ Dispositions are important for our construction of character psychology because we often use the dispositional attributions we make to explain the causes of character behavior.

In social psychology, the body of research associated with the inference of dispositions is known as "attribution theory," which is broadly concerned with how we use information to

³³ Etymologically, "super-hero" dates back to 1899, and likely does not become a common cultural character type until it is popularized by Superman in the 1930s. "superhero, n." OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/304574?redirectedFrom=superhero>, accessed October 8, 2013.

³⁴ Newman, 94.

³⁵ Ibid., 136.

³⁶ Chatman, 126. See also Per Persson, *Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 153.

³⁷ Dispositions can also be inferred through description, as when one character describes another, but in (sound) cinema, this is less common and sometimes less reliable than inferring character dispositions through observation.

arrive at causal explanations for events.³⁸ It is chiefly concerned with the many circumstances that can influence whether people attribute behavior to an individual's dispositions, or to the situations in which individuals find themselves.³⁹ One branch of attribution theory is "folk psychology," which is not directly concerned with inferring dispositions, but is still an important part of the attribution process. Folk psychology, as Newman describes it, is the "everyday psychology of ordinary people. It is an inferential system for predicting and explaining the behavior of others."⁴⁰ Based on our observations of a person's behavior and informed by prior knowledge, folk psychology is a way of describing the inferences we make about other people's *intentions, goals, and beliefs* in order to explain and predict their actions.⁴¹ Folk psychology is crucial to narrative comprehension because it is the means through which we make sense of the moment-to-moment actions of characters, independent of whatever dispositions they might possess. That is, if attribution theory generally concerns how we understand the stable traits and dispositions of others, then folk psychology concerns how we understand the dynamic

³⁸ Fiske and Taylor, 23.

³⁹ Social psychological research has shown that in many cases, people are biased to attribute causes of behavior to dispositions rather than to situational causes. That is, when searching for an explanation for someone's actions, we are more likely to attribute their behavior to stable personality traits than we are to any conditional circumstances that might have caused the behavior. This bias is known as the *fundamental attribution error*. For a summary, along with various hypotheses explaining its cause, see Ibid., 67-72. As Newman notes, the fundamental attribution error is a boon to storytellers, because it "predisposes us to see the heroes of stories as causal agents." Newman, 139.

⁴⁰ Newman, 122. See also Persson, 163, who describes folk psychology as "a naïve, common-sense 'theory' about the constituents and common processes of the psyche and how these are related to actions and behavior." Persson also adds that while "it's fair to assume that all cultures have some form of folk psychology and that some of its constituents and causal relations are universal," the structure and organization of folk psychology can vary between cultures. Accordingly, the following discussion of folk psychology should be considered limited to Western culture.

⁴¹ According to Persson, the major difference between intentions and goals is that "the latter include some form of *decision* to take action." One can have a goal or desire without deciding to take action toward achieving it, but an intention implies some sort of action is taken in order to achieve the goal. John's goal might be to exercise more, but his busy schedule doesn't allow him the time, so he does not have the *intention* of acting on the goal. As Persson writes, "Even if a person does not have the *intention* to do X, that person can still have the *desire*." Persson, 166. Nevertheless, the distinction is more academic than practical, as desires and intentions are often mixed with one another.

fluctuation of characters' mental states within and across scenes. Folk psychology is a continually updating mental model of others' intentions, goals, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. If I see a man hailing a taxi on the street, I infer that he *perceives* a taxi approaching, *believes* the taxi will stop to pick him up, and that he *intends* to ride somewhere. These kinds of inferences make up much of what we do when we try to understand moment-to-moment character behavior in films.⁴²

For example, two-thirds of the way through *Casablanca*, Annina's fiancé, Jan (Helmut Dantine) tries playing roulette in order to win money for his and Annina's exit visas. When he begins to lose money, Annina asks Rick whether or not she can trust Renault to assist her and Jan with escaping Casablanca. Renault had previously offered to help the couple, but when Annina asks Rick about Renault's trustworthiness, she strongly implies that the price of Renault's help is her sleeping with him. In a subsequent scene, when Rick tells Jan to bet on 22 in a game of roulette, we can make a number of folk psychological inferences about the characters' mental states. We can infer that Rick *intends* for Jan to win by betting on 22, and that Rick *believes* the croupier, Emil (Marcel Dalio), will pick up on his signals to rig the spin of the wheel so the ball lands on 22. Accordingly, we can also infer that Annina's plight has won Rick's sympathy. When Jan wins, Renault reacts with a dismayed expression, and we infer that he is dismayed because he *believes* his intention to sleep with Annina has been foiled by Rick. Moreover, we can further hypothesize that Renault will confront Rick about his interference. Folk psychology (and prior knowledge of the narrative situation) is what makes these interactions comprehensible

⁴² Of course, as Persson notes, sometimes characters also simply state their intentions, goals, and beliefs outright through dialogue or voiceover narration, leaving viewers with little folk psychological work to perform. More common, however, is for dialogue to function as a cue for folk psychological inferences. As Persson writes, most of the time "dialogue merely *hints* at possible mental attributions that often require sophisticated FP [folk psychological] reasonings." Ibid., 229. Moreover, even when characters explicitly state intentions, goals, or beliefs, sometimes viewers must still use folk psychology in order to understand *why* the character harbors these thoughts.

-- we attribute the characters' actions to various intentional states, goals, and beliefs that explain their behavior.⁴³

While intentions, goals, beliefs, and actions form the core of folk psychology, emotion appraisal is also relevant; how a character feels about something can certainly influence their behavior, and thus on the surface it appears as though it is possible to arrive at inferences about a character's emotions based on the observation of their external physical behavior, such as vocal intonations, facial expressions, bodily gestures and movements, and personal-space behavior (in addition to inferences about their intentions, goals, and beliefs). However, most inferences we might make about a character's emotions -- even whether an emotion is positive or negative -- are themselves dependent upon prior knowledge of these other mental states (or at least, hypotheses about these other mental states). That is, our ability to appraise the emotions of others is contingent upon knowledge of their intentions, goals, and beliefs about the stimulus that is causing the emotion.⁴⁴ For example, appraising the emotional reaction of the subject of a surprise birthday party is contingent upon knowledge of their goals and beliefs, regardless of their emotional expression; if we know that the person had wanted more people to wish him or her a happy birthday, our appraisal of their emotions would be very different than if we know the person just wants to celebrate privately with a quiet evening at home, no matter if they smile, frown, cry, or laugh upon being surprised at the party. As Persson writes, "acting and physical behavior are not *expressions* correlating with a mental state: they are *cues*, which the spectators

⁴³ See Ibid., 161-163, 188, and 221 for elaboration on the necessity of goals for making emotional attributions.

⁴⁴ While emotions are internal, they tend to be caused, as Persson writes, "by events and actions outside the individual. Fear, hope, relief, joy, anger, and frustration are all reactions to something happening in the environment." Ibid., 169.

must expand on and reason about.”⁴⁵ Physical behavior can only take on nuanced and precise meaning when complemented by folk psychological inferences about intentions, goals, and beliefs.

Returning to the *Casablanca* example, a close-up of Annina smiling as Jan wins at roulette can be understood precisely as an expression of gratitude and relief only because of our previous knowledge of her goals and our inferences about her beliefs: her gratitude and relief are products of her *belief* that Rick’s actions caused Jan to win at roulette, which allows her to accomplish her twin *goals* of escaping from Casablanca with her husband and her dignity intact. Without the folk psychological inferences about her goals and beliefs, her smile cannot be understood with such specificity. As Persson aptly observes, on its own, a smile “warrants only a very abstract -- and for the narrative virtually useless -- attribution”; we might infer from it a vaguely “positive emotion,” but we can’t reason how it arose.⁴⁶ To arrive at a more precise and nuanced understanding, we must have context; lacking such contexts, her smile might just as easily be a polite smile, one meant to conceal annoyance at her husband’s gambling, rather than relief and gratitude. Thus while emotional appraisal is an important component in our comprehension of characters’ mental states, it is most useful when it is combined with folk psychological reasoning. Considering how closely emotional appraisal and folk psychological inferences are tied together, Persson refers to them both collectively as “mental attributions,” a term which I will use interchangeably with “folk psychological inference” to refer to intentions, goals, and beliefs, as well as emotions (although in some places, “folk psychological inference” will be preferable in order to avoid confusion with dispositional attributions).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 221.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Folk psychology is related to attribution theory in that the inferences we make about momentary intentional states are often then used as evidence for additional inferences about a person's dispositions, or their persisting attributes. That is, we attribute dispositions to a person by making folk psychological inferences about the perceived causes -- the underlying intentions - of the person's behavior, and by assuming that those intentions correspond to some stable quality of their personality, i.e., their dispositions. When Rick helps Jan win at roulette, we can infer that beneath Rick's self-interest and his jaded, world-weary cynicism, he is still sympathetic to the suffering of those around him and that he possesses somewhat sentimental and generous dispositions (as Renault repeatedly accuses him of over the course of the film), even if they are seldom displayed.⁴⁷ Inferring dispositions from intentional states is known as the theory of "correspondent inferences"; an inferred intentional state *corresponds* with an inference about what dispositions a person might possess that would cause them to exhibit the observed behavior. The theory was developed by Edward Jones and Keith Davis, and is the standard framework of attribution theory; inferences about intention are used as evidence for inferences about dispositions.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Of course, it is also possible to attribute Rick's actions here to situational causes rather than to his dispositions. Perhaps Rick is simply tired of Annina and wants to be rid of her and Jan's problems, or perhaps Rick wants to upset Renault's plans more than he wants to help the couple. After all, his helping Jan and Annina runs counter to his previously observed behavior throughout much of the film, and as we saw in Chapter 2, situational causes look more appealing as explanations for character behavior when the behavior is inconsistent with an impression we've already formed. That is, if we have *already* accumulated a group of dispositions that we attribute to a character, behavior inconsistent with those dispositions is more likely to be attributed to situational causes than if we had not yet attributed any dispositions to the character. See Cantor and Mischel, 7. However, two factors work against our use of situational causes to explain Rick's behavior in this scene: the first is that by this point in the film we've learned exposition which reveals Rick is capable of love, as well as what caused him to be bitter and cynical, thus we know he has it in him to be sympathetic to Annina; the second is Humphrey Bogart's star persona, which tells us about the kinds of characters Bogart usually plays. Both of these factors (exposition and star personae) will be discussed in further detail below.

⁴⁸ Newman, 137-138; Fiske and Taylor, 26-27; Edward E. Jones and Keith E. Davis, "From Acts to Dispositions; The Attribution Process in Person Perception," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* Vol. 2, ed. Leonard Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1965), 220-266. This discussion of folk psychology and attribution theory relates to the discussion in Chapter 2 of the strength of impression formation. There, the strength of an impression

In fact, folk psychological inferences and dispositional attributions are so correspondent that in practice it can be difficult to separate the two from one another, especially because such inferences are often rapid and implicit. For example, *The Fly* (1986) begins with Seth (Jeff Goldblum) talking with Veronica (Geena Davis) at a party, where Seth tells Veronica he is working on a scientific breakthrough that will change the world, and convinces Veronica to accompany him to his lab to see his work, despite Veronica's initial resistance to his entreaties. In the course of their initial 70-second conversation, their dispositions seem to become apparent almost immediately: Seth appears to be an excitable, (over)confident idealist, while Veronica seems to be a jaded skeptic and pragmatist. However, these dispositional inferences are themselves based on the folk psychological inferences we make about the characters as they converse: Seth is excited and idealistic because he *believes* that his scientific discovery is world-changing, and *wants* to impress Veronica with it, possibly because he *believes* she is pretty. His inviting her to his lab is then explained by these goals and beliefs, which correspond to the aforementioned dispositions. Veronica, in turn, *believes* Seth is exaggerating his claims and *wants* to interview someone else with a more realistic outlook. It is also possible to explain Veronica's behavior through the folk psychological inferences that *her character* seems to make about Seth (and that viewers in turn can attribute to her): it is possible that Veronica resists Seth's entreaties not (only) because his claims seem exaggerated, but also because she infers that he is attracted to her, and she does not reciprocate the attraction (at least initially). That is, viewers can explain Veronica's behavior by attributing to her character some beliefs about Seth's mental state, namely that he is either exaggerating in order to bolster his work, or to flirt with

was attributed to the salience of the information on which the impression is based (as well as the redundancy and consistency of subsequent information). Now, however, we can put this observation in terms of attribution theory and folk psychology: the strength of a first impression of a character also depends upon whether a character's initial behavior is conducive to making folk psychological inferences that correspond to dispositions.

Veronica (or both), and viewers can then infer that her subsequent behavior is a product of her *wanting* to discourage Seth. As this example shows, even though dispositional attributions are the more salient products of our comprehension of characters, we arrive at these attributions by making correspondent (albeit implicit) folk psychological inferences about characters' intentions, goals and beliefs.

In practice, typing, folk psychology, and dispositional attribution are not entirely separate cognitive processes. Typing, for instance, can be used for making folk psychological inferences about characters' mental states, because we assume some types have implicit intentions and goals inherent to them, ones we automatically attribute to the characters as soon as we recognize the type.⁴⁹ Thus typing a character can serve as a quick (albeit rudimentary) means of starting to understand a character's psychology and behavior when they are first introduced in the beginning of a film (even without contextual knowledge that might further specify their mental states). As Persson states,

Event schemas, occupancy roles, family roles, traits, social types, social stereotypes, and the aggregation of all of these into fictional character types deal with 'default' goals of specific characters.... The film needs only to trigger the correct recognition of a given character type. Then the mentally represented, sociocultural dispositions of the spectator take over and attribute implicit goals to the character.... Fictional traditions and everyday social experience have equipped the spectator with sophisticated assumptions about such people or characters.⁵⁰

Superheroes want to defend the public and uphold a moral code; parents want to raise and protect their children; baseball players want to win games and perform well, and students want to arrive to class on time and pass tests. For example, in *Twentieth Century* (1934), Lily Garland (Carole

⁴⁹ See Persson, 244 for a discussion of how trait-based types can be described in folk psychological terms.

⁵⁰ Persson, 191. See also Newman, 99.

Lombard) is first introduced rehearsing a performance for a play. We can immediately type her as an actress, and accordingly, we can infer that one of her goals is to give a good performance. This goal, in turn, provides some insight into her behavior; she demonstrates that she's studied the script well when she eagerly interjects stage directions during an informal walkthrough with an assistant director, and the implicit inference that she wants to give a good performance explains this behavior. A moment later, exposition about her character will specify her type and her behavior further; she's an ingénue, a former lingerie model, and this is her first big role. Her eagerness can then be seen not only as a product of her goal of giving a good performance, but also as a product of nervousness and her desire to prove herself. In classical narration, typing often provides implicit folk psychological information (intentions, goals, beliefs), and then the narration further specifies that information or its contexts, enabling viewers to make more sophisticated and nuanced inferences (the development of mental attributions will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter).

Of course, sometimes type-derived goals are not clear immediately, for various reasons. Sometimes a character's predominant, mid-level type might not be clear, as in the previous *Die Hard* example, where McClane's mid-level type (police officer) is not immediately evident based on his appearance or behavior. Other times, the intentions or goals associated with a type might not pertain to the situation in which the character is first introduced, and thus while their type-derived goals might be a part of our mental model of the character, these goals do not provide immediate insight into the mental state of the character or help us to explain or predict their behavior. Instead, their type-derived goals and intentions merely serve as background information that has the potential to become relevant. McClane can serve as an example again: he reveals that he's a cop at the conclusion of a brief exchange with a fellow plane passenger,

and we can assume that he wants to protect the public and uphold and enforce the law, but these goals do not pertain to the situation at hand (and won't become relevant until he finds himself in the middle of a heist near the end of the film's beginning). Moreover, some types do not necessarily have implicit goals associated with them, especially higher-level abstract types associated with gender, race, age, or nationality.⁵¹ Our ability to make type-based folk psychological inferences about goals is often dependent upon the situation in which the character is introduced, including how readily those goals apply to the situation and how specific our initial typing is. In general, most folk psychological inferences about characters rely on the observation of behavior more than they do on type categorizations, but typing can serve as an initial entry point into making such inferences.

In addition to soliciting various folk psychological inferences, typing can also solicit dispositional associations. While many traits serve individuating functions, differentiating a character from their type by bestowing upon them attributes not specified by the type (as in, a tall waiter or a financially irresponsible do-gooder), many types also have implicit trait associations.⁵² A *femme fatale*, for example, is a genre type that has particular dispositional

⁵¹ Generally, using types to infer mental states, dispositions, or other traits is known as stereotyping. Colloquially, stereotyping has negative connotations, and certainly, prejudiced simplifications or distortions about entire groups of people based on race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other social groups are bigoted falsehoods. However, in terms of social cognition, stereotyping is a more neutral term, simply referring to when "a perceiver makes inferences about a person because of that person's membership in some group." David L. Hamilton, "A Cognitive-Attributional Analysis of Stereotyping," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* Vol 12, ed. Leonard Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 54. In other words, stereotyping is a matter of inferring traits or mental states based on probability. Quite often, these inferences are relatively benign cognitive shortcuts that assist us with rapidly understanding others, as described in the above examples. Following Newman, I'll reserve the term "typing" to describe the way in which viewers categorize characters in an attempt to understand them, leaving "stereotyping" to refer to prejudiced simplifications or distortions. For a lengthier discussion of how typing relates to stereotyping, see Newman, 85-93.

⁵² Newman claims that typing can solicit "emotion inferences" rather than dispositional inferences, but his examples suggest that he is referring to persistent emotional states associated with various (stereo)types, as in the *emotional woman* or the *depressed drunk*, rather than to moment-to-moment emotions a character might feel in various situations. Thus it seems more accurate to claim that certain types are associated with particular dispositions rather than emotions, especially considering that Newman often associates types with dispositions in other examples, as

associations (in addition to genre-derived narrative expectations): she is typically manipulative and duplicitous. Likewise, a private eye is often tough, inquisitive, and intuitive. Typing, then, is another means viewers have of arriving at character dispositions aside from making correspondent inferences about character behavior, and is yet another reason for why dispositions are often salient very quickly: our initial typing of a character may very well solicit dispositional associations just as readily as the attributions we infer from intentions, goals, and beliefs. Thus in *The Fly*, for example, once we learn enough information to type Seth as an inventor or scientist and Veronica as a journalist, these types then also contribute to our behavioral- and folk psychological-based dispositional attributions: inventors can be eccentric idealists, while journalists can be critical, “seen-it-all” skeptics.⁵³ In other words, character typing can contribute to the immediate saliency of dispositions just as readily as do the folk psychological inferences we make as they interact with one another. The two mental processes mutually reinforce one another and contribute to our rapid understanding of their character psychology and dispositions (and vivid first impressions).

The only difference between dispositions inferred from folk psychology and dispositions associated with social role types is that those associated with social roles remain *potential* dispositions until a character actually exhibits them. That is, the dispositions solicited by social role types are *associations* before they are actual attributions. A social role type merely primes us

when he describes the “Black authority figure” type as “typically reasonable and intelligent, but also tough and uncompromising.” 97, 99-100.

⁵³ Seth can be typed almost immediately as an inventor or scientist, given that his first line of dialogue is, “What am I working on? I’m working on something that will change the world and human life as we know it.” It is not immediately clear that Veronica is a journalist, since it is unclear that she is interviewing Seth until later, when she says she still has three more interviews to conduct before the end of the party. However, we still type her upon first seeing her: she is a young, pretty, white woman, seemingly upper-middle class, and her somewhat blasé indifference toward Seth suggests she is the type of woman who is used to being hit on by men. In other words, we still categorize her using high-level types. Veronica also implicitly types Seth when she tells him, “Somehow I get the feeling you don’t get out much,” suggesting that his eccentricities are a product of his being a hermit.

to expect particular traits; in order to confidently attribute them to a character, viewers usually must be given cause to do so (either through a character's exhibiting an intentional state that corresponds with the disposition, or through having that intentional state strongly implied).⁵⁴

In general, impression formation is a dynamic process, one that is contingent on a host of variables, including not only the kinds of types a character initially solicits, but also the salience of the information stimulating the impression, as well as the ease with which we can make inferences about a character's mental states. The model of character comprehension outlined thus far stipulates that we start with typing, categorizing the characters based on whatever traits are immediately available, and then begin to make folk psychological inferences (about intentions, goals, beliefs, and emotions) derived either from the categories through which we type the characters, or from our observation of character behavior. Both the type and the folk psychological inferences in turn can contribute to our dispositional associations and attributions. Ultimately, typing, folk psychological inferences, and disposition attribution mutually reinforce one another; they are different ways of understanding characters, the combination of which provide as rapid and full an idea as possible of who characters are and why they are behaving the way they do, all of which can contribute to our first impressions of characters.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, these processes are dependent upon the accumulation of information over time. Characterization is a *process*, one which happens somewhat gradually. As Newman defines

⁵⁴ Of course, it is possible that some viewers might skip intentional states and simply attribute a disposition to a character on the basis of a social role type without any corroborating behavioral evidence. Such cognitive shortcuts are probably best characterized as assumptions.

⁵⁵ For a more complex model that integrates typing and trait attribution -- one that sees piecemeal trait attribution as a sort of last-ditch effort at understanding a character when an initial categorization cannot be confirmed and recategorization efforts also fail -- see Susan T. Fiske and Steven L. Neuberg, "Continuum of Impression Formation, from Category-Based to Individuating Processes: Influences of Information and Motivation on Attention and Interpretation," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* Vol. 23, ed. Mark P. Zanna (New York: Academic Press, 1990), 4-9.

it, characterization is “the process by which [a character] is represented onscreen as a part of the unfolding events in the narrative world, and in the minds of the people in the audience taking them in and making sense of them.”⁵⁶ When we are first introduced to a character in the beginning, our understanding of characters is at its most basic, but as the narration introduces more information about characters, our understanding of them (and our *ability* to understand them) develops significantly. Accordingly, the development of character over the course of the beginning is the subject of many subsequent sections of this chapter.

The Location of Character Introduction in Classical Narration

Before beginning to address how characters are developed over the course of the beginning, however, it is important to consider the extent to which character comprehension is integral to narrative beginnings. To a certain degree, the cognitive processes involved in character establishment are not particular to *beginnings* per se, but are processes that we engage in whenever we are first introduced to characters, be it in the beginning or elsewhere in the narrative. If a character is first introduced halfway through a film, we go through the same process of typing, folk psychological inference making, and disposition attribution as we would for the characters that *are* introduced in the beginning. For example, Cousin Ben (Jason Schwartzman) is first mentioned 60 minutes into the 94-minute *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), and is described as a capable but potentially untrustworthy senior Khaki Scout in charge of the supply and resource outpost at a large Khaki Scout camp. When he first appears shortly thereafter, he is in the process of arrogantly denying junior Khaki Scouts supplies and resources unless they have money. Immediately, he can be typed as fastidious Khaki Scout, much like

⁵⁶ Newman, 22.

many of the other Khaki Scouts (a type analogous to a Boy Scout, and one with which viewers have become very familiar over the course of the film thus far). Subsequently, he will agree to help the film's runaway protagonists in exchange for a fee, exhibiting behavior about which we can make many folk psychological inferences and dispositional attributions: he believes he is capable, and intends to profit from his skills; accordingly, he appears to be self-interested and shrewd. Thus the cognitive processes under discussion here are not necessarily inherent to narrative beginnings.

However, in classical narration, the distinction between the cognitive processes involved in character establishment and narrative beginnings is rather arbitrary; characters are so central to classical narratives that it is normative for most of the important ones to be introduced somewhere over the course of the beginning (Cousin Ben is a relatively minor character in *Moonrise Kingdom*, disappearing from the film after he unofficially marries the runaways and helps them carry out an aborted escape). Thus the cognitive processes of character establishment are just as important for understanding classical beginnings as are any of the other processes discussed throughout this dissertation, because these processes are the principal means through which we understand the characters, who are the main subjects of the story and the source of the psychological causality through which the narration is organized.

Quite often, this norm of introducing principal characters in the beginning remains true even for characters who do not *physically* appear during the beginning of the film (or who appear only briefly). Such characters can still be considered “introduced” so long as the narration conveys information about them, as when two characters discuss an absent third character. This absent character can be considered introduced through the conversation of the two present characters, even though the absent character has yet to appear in the film. “Character

introduction,” in other words, refers to the narration’s first presentation of information about a character, regardless of whether or not the character appears in a scene. Even if an important character never appears during a film’s beginning, quite often information about them is introduced through other means, which allows us to engage somewhat in the character comprehension processes described thus far.

Casablanca’s Victor Lazlo is a good example: as described in Chapter 2, his and Ilsa’s entrance to Rick’s café marks the end of the film’s beginning, but because the narration has already introduced a considerable amount of information about him, the narration has already engaged our typing and folk psychological processes regarding his character: he is an intellectual resistance fighter, and will want an exit visa for himself and the woman travelling with him. Given his type, his past, and his intentions, a number of correspondent dispositions become likely: he is likely resourceful, idealistic, tough, eloquent, sophisticated, and well-moneyed. Considering that many of the causally relevant actions that characters undertake during the beginning concern Victor and his intentions, understanding Victor’s character is as integral to the beginning as is understanding the other characters who actually appear over the course of its length (such as Rick, Renault, Strasser, and Ugarte).

At first glance, Ilsa might appear to be an exception to this norm, as she is a major character in the film, but one about whom we learn almost nothing during the beginning, other than that she is a lady with whom Victor is travelling. Nevertheless, this is still *an* introduction, and one that allows for some rudimentary hypothesizing about her type, based both on Renault’s comments about her and on what we know about Victor (and the kind of woman with whom he might be romantically linked): she’s likely a beautiful, devoted idealist. Moreover, for much of the film (and for all of the beginning), her intentions, goals, and many of her beliefs are

somewhat redundant in relation to Victor's. Thus, in a sense, she *is* introduced in the beginning, via Victor, and the dearth of information about her character in the beginning can be considered a matter of narrative efficiency. Specific information that will characterize her further is introduced the moment she begins to differ from Victor in these regards (i.e., the moment she recognizes Sam playing the piano and realizes that she's likely to encounter Rick again).

Solicitation of Initial Types

Typing has clear implications for the study of characters in beginnings; the less we know about a character's individual traits, the more useful typing becomes. "Typing often functions to establish a situation," Newman writes, "and the other aspects of social cognition generally often proceed with some type attribution already in mind." Because typing is an automatic cognitive process, it "generally (though not always) precedes all of the other aspects of characterization temporally in the comprehension of narrative."⁵⁷ In other words, when we are first introduced to a character, the first thing we do in an attempt to understand them is to type them, rather than, say, making inferences about intentional states. As we've seen, folk psychological inferences and the correspondent dispositional attributions that follow from them are usually derived from observing character behavior. While such inferences can be instantaneous, behavior itself takes time to observe, and inferences about intentional states are somewhat dependent on prior knowledge of narrative contexts and situations in a way that typing is not. As discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, even though some types are automatically associated with certain goals, many intentional states require knowledge about the specific contexts of the observed behavior if the intentional states are to be readily inferred. Typing, on the other hand,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 100. See also Fiske and Neuberg, 4. See also Fiske and Taylor, 122.

calls upon schemata acquired from life experience and from general familiarity with narratives. Thus typing is very useful for character comprehension in the beginning because while intentional states and dispositions are not necessarily immediately available, types almost always are.

Typing preceding dispositional attribution helps to explain why dispositions are often less useful for initial categorizations than social roles: not only are dispositions less richly associative (as described above), but they often take some amount of time to infer, as they are often based on the observation of character behavior. Moreover, as we've seen, while social role types often have dispositional associations, until a character exhibits them, such dispositions merely remain potential attributions. Thus when Thursday first appears in *Fort Apache*, based on his appearance, our first recourse to understanding him is to type him as a military officer, rather than to type him based on the dispositions that will soon be inferable from his behavior, such as punctiliousness, arrogance, and bitterness. Ultimately, these traits will prove more useful and be more descriptive of Thursday's character than his being a military officer, both because a lot of the film's causal action hinges on his dispositions, and because so many of the film's other characters are also military officers that their dispositions (and their ranks) do most of the work of individuating the characters. However, our first recourse to understanding Thursday is to type him based on his appearance in uniform, even if his dispositions quickly become his most salient characteristics.

Typing is extremely useful for filmmakers because it is an efficient means of creating characterizations.⁵⁸ We don't need a lot of trait information to type characters, thus typing allows

⁵⁸ For more on typing's efficiency, see C. Neil Macrae, Alan B. Milne, Galen V. Bodenhausen, "Stereotypes as Energy-Saving Devices: A Peek Inside the Cognitive Toolbox," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 66:1 (1994), 37-47.

filmmakers to create fuller versions of characters with minimal effort simply by evoking a particular type. Sid from *The Descendants* provides a convenient example. As discussed in Chapter 2, first impressions of Sid are very strong, and we are now in a better position to understand why: his character is very easily typed as a surfer-dude or pothead (or some amalgamation thereof). His tone of voice, dialogue, mannerisms, hairstyle and dress are all prototypical for these character types.

Typing's efficiency is particularly useful for narrative beginnings, where viewers must sort through a dense concentration of new information. Just as with other schemata, typing helps to make such density of information more manageable. As Fiske and Neuberg describe, typing allows us to simplify the social environment of the characters:

We have neither the cognitive capacity nor the time to deal with all the interpersonal information we have available to us.... Given our limited cognitive resources, it is both simpler (requires less effort) and more efficient (requires less time) for a perceiver to use stereotypic information to make inferences about individuals belonging to a group than it is to analyze each person on an individual basis without benefit of this integrated, prior information.⁵⁹

In other words, initially it is easier and more efficient to categorize characters by type than it is to form an impression of a character based on an analysis of their various attributes. For instance, shortly into the beginning of *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), eight different characters (including five main characters) are introduced in the space of only a few minutes. Initially, it is much more efficient to organize our understanding of these characters based on their types rather than on an analysis of the traits they exhibit. This typing in turn provides a basis for attributing some preliminary dispositions and mental states to the characters (the beginning of this film will be discussed further in Chapter 5).

⁵⁹ Fiske and Neuberg, 14.

However, characters belong to more than one category, and thus can be typed in multiple ways. What determines the categories we use when we initially type a character? There is no hard and fast answer to this question because there are many different parameters that contribute to our initial categorization of characters, pertaining both to the way in which humans tend to organize information, and to the manner and contexts of a character's introduction. As described above, we tend to use *mid-level* social types to categorize characters when possible, as these basic types offer the best blend of distinct, rich, and vivid attributes that sets the type apart from other possible types, in turn providing us with useful associations for the character. For instance, in *Mr. Baseball* (1992), Jack (Tom Selleck) is first introduced stepping up to the plate in a baseball stadium, and while we can type him according to race, age, or gender (he is a white, adult male), instead we are much more likely to initially type him as a professional baseball player; this mid-level category does much more to distinguish his character from other possible types than do the broader categories. In other words, *baseball player* is more richly associative than those broader types: Jack likely possesses good upper body strength, hand-eye coordination, powers of concentration, discipline, and comfort with routine, among additional possible attributes.

As for the manner and contexts of a character's introduction, social psychologists Susan T. Fiske and Steven L. Neuberg have outlined three textual factors that can contribute to the way in which we initially type characters, including *physical manifestation*, *contextual novelty*, and *relative accessibility*.⁶⁰ *Physical manifestation* refers to the influence a character's physical features have on typing. Physical cues are possibly the strongest determinants of initial typing, at

⁶⁰ Ibid., 10. Fiske and Neuberg also list the perceiver's mood as an additional determining factor, as in someone in a good mood will be more likely to associate characters with positive features. However, this is a minor cognitive determinant rather than a textual parameter.

least when characters are introduced visually, because unlike dispositions, belief systems, or even behavior, physical features are immediately salient (hence typage is central to film as a medium, as Sergei Eisenstein realized). Additionally, in Western culture many social types are often determined from easily perceived physical features such as race, gender, age, manner of dress, and personal artifacts.⁶¹ Such is the case in *Mr. Baseball*; we type Jack as a baseball player based on the aggregate of his physical traits, especially his age, his gender, his physical build, his wearing a baseball uniform, and his holding a bat.

Contextual novelty refers to how different or similar to the surrounding environment a character's traits might be. The more novel or salient the trait is in relation to the character's environment, the stronger its influence on our categorization. For instance, we will be more likely to categorize a white male as a "male" if he is first seen standing in the midst of a group of women, and more likely to categorize him as "white" if he is first seen standing in the midst of a group of black men. To take an actual example from a film, in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, we initially categorize Homer as a sailor and a veteran; he first appears wearing a pea coat and sailor's cap, and is addressed repeatedly as "sailor." However, when he signs his name in order to board a flight to Boone City, he reveals that both of his hands have been replaced by hooks. The contextual novelty of this trait information makes *disabled person* a much more predominant type through which to categorize Homer because it sharply distinguishes him from all of the other characters introduced thus far (which can be variously typed as military personnel and civilians). Indeed, much of Homer's story will concern his coming to terms with his newfound social type; while his disability is not much of an impediment to his daily existence,

⁶¹ Ibid., 11. See also Fiske and Taylor, 144. These studies also corroborate Richard Dyer's observation that some physical features and the types they solicit also have certain dispositional or behavioral associations. See Richard Dyer, *Stars*, new ed. (London, BFI Publishing, 1998), 110.

he must still deal with its emotional ramifications, especially as it pertains to his feeling comfortable around his family and girlfriend, and worthy of their love.

Relative accessibility refers to how easy or difficult it is to call to mind a particular type. One large determinant of ease of accessibility is the degree to which a category has been “primed.” As Fiske and Taylor describe it, “Priming is... a name for the fact that recently and frequently activated ideas come to mind more easily than ideas that have been not been activated.”⁶² Applied to character types, priming suggests that if we have been thinking about a certain type recently, or if we do so habitually, then we are more likely to view new characters in relation to that type. The beginning of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954) offers a rather explicit (albeit sexist) example. Adam (Howard Keel) comes to town with two goals: trading goods from his farm for various provisions, and finding a woman to be his wife (a role which he seems to construe as a stereotyped combination of housemaid, cook, and pretty ornamentation, akin to the other farm provisions he’s trading). Adam’s goal effectively primes the category *wife* (or at least, Adam’s sexist stereotype of this category), such that each of the women Adam encounters is considered in relation to the *wife* (stereo)type. That is, Adam’s goal of finding a wife makes the *wife* type extremely accessible, predisposing viewers to assess new female characters in terms of their typicality for this category (rather than other possible categories). This accessibility is further bolstered by the song Adam sings about the qualities he is looking for in a wife, (“pretty and prim,” “heavenly eyes,” etc.) as he searches for the right woman.

The beginning of the sports comedy *Major League* (1989) provides a slightly more complex example of priming and relative accessibility, as some of the humor in the beginning of the film derives from the contrast between the *baseball player* type the film primes viewers to

⁶² Fiske and Taylor, 257.

expect, and the wildly different types actually solicited by various characters' initial appearances. The widow of the former owner of the Cleveland Indians, Rachel (Margaret Whitton), has taken over the team, and wants to move it to Miami. In order to escape the team's lease with Cleveland, she must lower the yearly ballgame attendance to below 800,000, which she intends to do by filling the team's roster with a mix of nobodies and players well past their prime, whose dismal performance Rachel hopes will discourage attendance. However, the introduction of many of the film's main characters is humorous because each character readily solicits drastically different types from those of *baseball player*, *athlete*, or even *has-been*. Jake (Tom Beringer) can be most readily typed as a drunkard, as he first appears trying to sleep off a hangover, surrounded by the detritus of a wild night in Mexico. Lou (James Gammon) is initially described as the manager of a minor league team, but he first appears answering phones in a tire shop, and can be more easily typed as the owner of a small business, rather than a baseball manager. Perhaps most far afield from the *baseball player* type is Ricky (Charlie Sheen), who is most easily typed as a punk, based on his first appearance in close-up sporting a jagged haircut. Subsequently, a cut to a wider shot reveals that he is also in jail, unequivocally soliciting the type for *prisoner*. Even the characters don't seem to categorize themselves as baseball players, as they respond to phone calls from the Indians' general manager with a mix of incredulity, sarcasm, and indifference. In other words, by priming us to expect *baseball player* character types, the film creates humor by instead soliciting wildly (and contrasting) alternative types (both through their physical traits and their behavior) when the characters actually make their initial appearances.

In sum, our initial typing of a character is dependent on a number of cognitive, textual, and contextual parameters: if possible, we tend to use mid-level types rather than broad and

abstract types; physical cues also strongly influence our initial typing of a character, as does the contextual novelty and the relative accessibility of a type.

Typing and Star Personae

However, there is also another significant kind of character type that routinely influences how we initially categorize characters: this is a star persona. Chapter 2 described a star persona as an intertextual and extratextual schema that provides a semi-reliable basis for organizing information about an actual character, one that gets filled in and becomes both subordinate to and overlays the actual information specific to the particular character played by the star. Strictly in terms of narrative comprehension, we can now see that star personae are simply additional types through which characters can be categorized.⁶³ Just like other mid-level types, star personae solicit a range of expectations and associations -- particularly about a character's physical traits and dispositions -- that create hypothetically fuller versions of characters than might otherwise be evident in the text.

The only major difference between a star persona and other mid-level character types is that star personae are solicited by extratextual and intertextual knowledge (which, as Richard Dyer describes, can include knowledge of promotional and publicity materials, actual films, and criticism and commentary), whereas other character types are instead solicited by actual *narrative* information (such as characters' physical appearance and behavior), and the contexts in which characters are introduced (i.e., the contextual novelty and the relative accessibility of the

⁶³ This is not to say that stardom itself is a simple concept. The following discussion is concerned only with how star personae influence the comprehension of the characters played by stars, rather than with the host of other issues stars raise, such as how they are constructed, their potential range of meanings, and their appropriation by diverse audiences, among other issues. While the traits of some star personae might fluctuate depending on the audience, the use of star personae in narrative comprehension still accords with the principles of the following discussion.

type).⁶⁴ In other words, types based on social roles must be solicited by the narration of *diegetic* information. There's no way of telling whether a given character is a priest, a mother, a politician, or a nerd unless the narration provides viewers with cause and cues to make these specific categorizations. Star personae, however, have no such diegetic basis; merely recognizing the star's face, body, or voice solicits the persona, independent of whatever diegetic and narrational contexts in which the character is introduced (provided that the viewer possesses knowledge of the persona, and that the star is not rendered unrecognizable through makeup, vocal distortion, or special effects). In *Rear Window*, Jeff is typed by James Stewart's star persona, associating Jeff with traits like honesty, morality, and homespun charm, whereas the actual narrative information initially types him simply as an adventurous photographer and an injured person.⁶⁵

This difference between the extratextual and intertextual basis of star personae and the textual basis of other mid-level character types has a variety of consequences for narrative beginnings. One is that star personae are especially potent upon a character's introduction in the beginning of a narrative, because a star persona provides various associations and expectations

⁶⁴ Dyer, 60-63. Insofar as stars might serve as *examples* of specific social types, their star personae imbue the type with a certain degree of individuation, because, as Richard Dyer describes them, the personae themselves are based on various social types, but with added idiosyncrasies that help to individuate the personae from the types on which they are based. John Wayne's star personae might be used as an example of a cowboy type, for instance, but it is more individuated than the general associations solicited by a cowboy type: in addition to ruggedness and individualism (traits associated with a typical cowboy), Wayne is also dutiful, easy-going, conservative, and paternalistic. However, when star personae are used to describe *characters* (rather than general social types), star personae are no more individualizing than any other mid-level type. That is, when trying to understand Wayne's characters in say, *They Were Expendable* (1945) or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962), Wayne's star persona provides the same degree of individuation as do the other mid-level types through which the characters can be categorized (such as a navy lieutenant and a cowboy). In short, while star personae might be used as *examples* of social types (as Dyer uses them when discussing certain types), in terms of narrative comprehension, star personae should be thought of simply as types that create associations about *characters* (rather than particular instances of social roles).

⁶⁵ A star's name in the opening credits also solicits their persona, but without necessarily assigning it to a specific character. *Rear Window*'s opening credits prime us to expect Stewart's star persona to be useful for one of the film's characters, but until Stewart appears in the film, it is unclear *which* character he might play.

viewers can bring to bear upon a character alongside or even *prior* to the firm establishment of other mid-level types through which the character might be categorized (and whatever folk psychological, dispositional or other trait associations those other mid-level types might also solicit). That is, a star persona is a way of jumpstarting the characterization process, as it provides a series of ready-made (i.e., extratextual and intertextual) trait associations that can be used to categorize a character either immediately upon their introduction (regardless of whatever other types might also be available), or even before the character has been introduced (as when reading the actor's name in the opening credits solicits the persona). As Murray Smith describes it, a star persona serves as a "firm anchor," helping viewers familiarize themselves with the both the world of the story, as well as some of the characters inhabiting it.⁶⁶ Cathy Klaprat puts it even more simply: in films with stars, "characterization *precedes* narrative actions."⁶⁷

Many of Bette Davis' characters provide strong examples. Davis has a vivid star persona as that of a sexually aggressive, controlling, and man-destroying vamp. Viewers who possess knowledge of Davis' persona can use it to categorize the characters she plays, alongside or even prior to whatever other types her character initially solicits. In *Beyond the Forest* (1949), for example, Davis plays Rosa, whom an introductory voiceover describes at the start of the film:

Each day Rosa used to walk down to the [train] station, moving easily, freely, every man's admiring eye upon her. Rosa Moline. She'd stand looking at the train, which seemed to say to her, "Come, Rosa. Come away before it's too late...." At the very end of the street... is her house, the finest house in Loyalton. If you knew Rosa you know she'd have the best house in town.... Rosa isn't home. Rosa's in the courthouse facing a coroner's inquest. A man has been killed by Rosa Moline.

⁶⁶ Smith, 119.

⁶⁷ Cathy Klaprat, "The Star as Marketing Strategy: Bette Davis in Another Light," in *The American Film Industry*, revised ed., ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 370-371.

This voiceover is followed by a shot of Rosa protesting her innocence in the town courtroom. Without knowledge of Davis' star persona, the revelation that Rosa is a murderer is likely somewhat surprising, given that the prior description would likely only solicit from viewers a type for that of an attractive, wealthy, and restless woman, one who is perhaps slightly spoiled, given the voiceover's condescending tone of voice. However, for those viewers who possess knowledge of Davis' star persona, the revelation that Rosa killed a man simply accords with a type that Davis' mere presence in the film has already solicited, and with which the other details of the voiceover also accord: despite her protest, Rosa is likely guilty (Davis' characters often destroy men), her restlessness is likely the product of her desire to have better control over her life (Davis' characters are often controlling), and her attractiveness is likely intertwined with sexual aggressiveness. In other words, rather than simply typing Davis' character based solely on the information provided by the introductory voiceover and her first appearance, Rosa is also typed by Davis' star persona, which creates a fuller idea of her character by contextualizing the information we learn about her.

As this example demonstrates, the potency of star personae in beginnings derives from their elaborating our conception of a character beyond the initial information provided by the narration. Davis' star persona combines with the other types solicited by the narration to make Rosa's character rather vivid almost immediately.⁶⁸ However, despite the potency of a star persona for immediately soliciting trait associations, there are compelling reasons to make star personae a peripheral rather than central component in the theorization of character typing a film's beginning, a component that is subordinate to parameters such as physical appearance,

⁶⁸ The potency of star personae can also derive from a character's inconsistency with the traits of the persona. As discussed in Chapter 2, when a character deviates strongly from the traits we normally associate with a star, the impression we form of the character can be especially powerful.

contextual novelty, and relative accessibility. One of the simplest reasons is that not all characters are played by stars; while star personae are often a prominent factor in our initial typing of principal characters, quite often films also feature secondary characters that are initially typed based on the manner and contexts of their introductions, as discussed above. Such is the case with Homer's girlfriend and Al's son in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Annina in *Casablanca*, Sid in *The Descendants*, and Rachel in *Major League*. Moreover, some films (even those which are classically narrated) simply do not feature stars, or do not feature them in principal roles; such is the case with many B-films of the classical studio era, some contemporary American independent films, and even some contemporary blockbusters, such as *Super 8* (2011) *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012), and *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* (2013).

Another reason that star personae should be peripheral to our understanding of character typing in films (one that again stems from their intertextual and extratextual basis) is that star personae are potentially less *reliable* means of categorizing specific characters than are other possible character types. Depending on the star, knowledge of their persona has the potential to be much less ubiquitous or accessible for a given audience than other mid-level types. It is entirely plausible that a given audience might not know Bette Davis' star persona, for instance (especially contemporary audiences), but much less plausible that they won't know mid-level types such as *father*, *bully*, *detective*, or *cheerleader*. Thus while star personae are a potentially potent means of typing a character, (classical) films do not rely too heavily on star personae to ensure that viewers initially categorize the characters into accurately representative types

because star personae are composed of much more specialized extratextual and intertextual knowledge than that of other more widely accessible character types.⁶⁹

Finally, not only might viewers not possess knowledge of a star's persona, but even if they possess such knowledge, there is no guarantee that a given character accords with the persona of the star. That is, another consequence of star persona being derived from extratextual and intertextual information is that the star personae have a more *ambivalent* relationship with characters than do types solicited by the narration itself. Types solicited by the narration often accord with the character's personality -- the point of soliciting the type is to give a quick and (usually) accurate idea of what the character is like -- but types based on intertextual and extratextual knowledge are much less assured. This ambivalence is indicated in Richard Dyer's typology for the ways in which films can use star personae to "construct" character: star persona can be used selectively to "bring out certain features of the star's image and ignore others"; there can also be a "perfect fit" between character and star persona, where the two are in total accord, or films can create a "problematic fit" between character and star persona, where some contradictions arise between the traits of the character and the associations of the star persona.⁷⁰

It is because all three of these uses of a star persona are available in any given film that star

⁶⁹ The potential unreliability of audiences possessing knowledge of a star's persona is compounded when one also considers a star personae's potential for change, both in terms of the change the persona itself can undergo over the course of a star's career (Frank Sinatra's star persona is a good example), and in terms of its relative accessibility in a given historical era. Not only can a star's persona change over the course of their career, thus retroactively complicating the use of their persona as a character type (see Dyer, 64), but depending on the star, the relative accessibility of a star's persona is subject to considerable temporal volatility (at least, in comparison with other character types). That is, knowledge of star personae likely wax and wane along with stars' careers, and some have more lasting power than others, but types such as *lover*, *thief*, *farmer*, and a host of other possible types -- while likely undergoing some degree of change -- have nevertheless been both accessible and consistent for hundreds of years. While it is unlikely that the historical transience of a star's persona influences the way in which films are designed -- regardless of the era, filmmakers are more likely to consider how a star's persona will influence *contemporary* rather than *future* audiences' understanding of the character -- it does further mitigate the use of star personae as a fundamental component in the theorization of character typing in narrative beginnings.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 126-131.

personae should be considered only semi-reliable types for categorizing actual characters; they function well enough in the beginning, before other mid-level types have been solicited or before viewers have had much of a chance of observe the character's behavior and infer their correspondent dispositions, but unless the persona is in perfect accord with the character, star personae ultimately become subordinated to the other types actually solicited by a character, along with the traits they exhibit.⁷¹

For example, as much as Bette Davis was often cast in roles that accorded with her vamp star persona, including not only *Beyond the Forest*, but also *Of Human Bondage* (1934), *Dangerous* (1935), *Jezebel* (1938), *The Letter* (1940), *In This Our Life* (1942), and *Deception* (1946), she also played *against* type in films such as *All This and Heaven Too* (1940), *The Great Lie* (1941), and *Now, Voyager* (1942). In the latter film, Davis' character, Charlotte, is a depressed and neurotic hermit whose life is dominated by her belittling mother. Charlotte's type and traits supplant Davis' vamp star persona as the narration reveals information about Charlotte's character. Davis' playing against type in this film does not prove problematic for viewer comprehension because the types and traits solicited by the character in the film ultimately trump the associations solicited by the star's persona. As this example demonstrates, the applicability of star personae are less assured than types solicited by the narration because until the character can be typed through actual narrative information, the star persona only serves

⁷¹ Dyer proposes four interpretive strategies viewers have for reconciling the potential incoherence generated by a problematic fit between star persona and character (strategies which are strikingly similar to those that scholars have proposed for how viewers account for inconsistent character information, as discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to the primacy effect): acknowledging the irreconcilability of the character and star persona by faulting the producers of the film for miscasting; altering the meaning of the traits of either the character or the star persona to lessen the contradiction between the two; ignoring the star persona entirely, or ignoring the character's apparent dispositions entirely. Ibid., 131. Subordination of the star persona to the types and traits solicited by the character comes closest to the third of these strategies (ignoring the star persona); it seems the most likely strategy for a viewer to adopt, considering both that star personae are particularly transient schemata, and that most *typical* viewers are likely more interested in following the narrative than in, say, using the narrative as means of judging the casting or observing the star. Dyer's other reconciliatory strategies seem better suited for critical analysis or appraisals of films or actors.

as a potentially useful shorthand for assessing the character, one which can be discarded if or when other types and/or traits become evident.

In sum, despite their potential potency for soliciting initial types, star persona should be considered peripheral rather than central types in an account of how viewers initially type characters in the beginnings of films, not only because not all characters are played by stars, but also because some films do not feature stars, some audiences do not possess knowledge of star personae, and not all characters played by stars accord with star personae. As we shall see, although stars are quite prevalent in classically narrated films, classical beginnings often rely on other means of soliciting initial types aside from star personae. Accordingly, while norms for classical narration's use of star personae will be addressed in further detail later in the chapter, generally, star personae do not figure prominently into the following discussion of character comprehension.

Character Individuation: Differentiation from Type

Of course, regardless of whether or not a character is initially typed through a star persona or through the manner and contexts of their introduction, in classical narration, principal characters are seldom all type; they do not consist merely of the traits that make them easy to categorize, but usually they are also distinguished from their types to some degree as well, diverging from type in some respects while according with type in others.⁷² As Newman writes, “The typing process is one of both confirming and disconfirming judgments. It is often quite likely, especially in the highly artificial environment of a narrative, that a person will defy some

⁷² Minor characters, on the other hand, are much more likely to be undifferentiated from type; the smaller the role of the character, the less likely they are to be individuated. The following discussion of character individuation, as well as the later discussion of the classical norms pertaining to character individuation, concern major characters in a narrative rather than minor characters.

expectations as well as meet most of them.”⁷³ Typing often serves its purpose relatively quickly by establishing a baseline of expectations and associations that can guide subsequent comprehension of a character’s behavior. However, once a character’s initial mid-level type has been established, quite often the narration introduces complicating information that helps to distinguish the character from type, individuating them in some regard.⁷⁴

In *The Fly*, for instance, both Seth and Veronica are distinguished from type rather quickly when they leave the party for Seth’s lab: Seth diverges from type-derived expectations by successfully convincing Veronica to accompany him (even getting her to drive him there), while Veronica does the same by being more open to Seth’s advances than she initially appeared to be (although in both cases, the distinction from type is minor -- Seth still hits on her clumsily by trying to impress her with his work, while Veronica is still skeptical and standoffish, despite her willingness to accompany him home).⁷⁵ Later, toward the end of the film’s beginning, they will form a romantic couple, further developing the characters beyond their initial types. As Seth struggles with the failure of his machines to successfully teleport living tissue, he displays a vulnerability that is not necessarily specified by the scientist or inventor type, and it is this

⁷³ Newman, 93.

⁷⁴ Physical traits also help distinguish characters from type, in that people tend to look different from one another, even if they are the same type of person. However, possessing unique physical features is a relatively ubiquitous trait, thus noting that a character looks different from all other characters is not terribly individuating, since the same observation can be made about most other characters as well. Indeed, distinctive physical appearance is so ubiquitous a trait that it is more individuating for a character to *share* a physical appearance with another character -- as with identical siblings -- than it is for a character to appear physically distinct. That is, identical twins, triplets, and so on are individuated precisely through their sharing nearly identical physical similarities with their siblings.

⁷⁵ Seth and Veronica also can likely be typed as mutual *love interests*, genre types which further mitigate the individuation that results from their leaving the party together for Seth’s lab. If the two are typed as potential lovers, then it is somewhat unsurprising that they would end up spending more time with one another. Essentially, their dispositions and genre types create conflicting, preliminary expectations about the course of their relationship.

vulnerability that attracts Veronica, who in her attraction displays a tenderness not specified by her steely journalist type.⁷⁶

Narrative theorists have dealt at length with the different means through which characters can become distinguished from type, although in narratology, the distinction is often discussed in terms of flat and round characters, where the flat character is the equivalent of a character type, while the round character is individuated along one or more metrics through which a character can be measured. The distinction between flat and round characters was first theorized by E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*. As Forster describes the difference, flat characters are those “constructed round a single idea or quality,” whereas round characters “cannot be summed up in a single phrase” and are “capable of surprising in a convincing way.”⁷⁷ In *The Fly*, Seth and Veronica become rounder through their unexpected trip to Seth’s lab, and rounder still when they display their respective vulnerable and tender dispositions, neither of which is specified by their initial types.⁷⁸

Other narrative theorists have significantly complicated and expanded on Forster’s initial distinction. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan points out three complications: flat characters can still create an impression of depth; flatness and roundness are matters of degree rather than absolutes, and sometimes flat characters can change and develop (albeit minimally), just as sometimes round characters do not change or develop. Rather than relying on a single flat/round opposition,

⁷⁶ This is not to say that their romance is itself atypical -- it’s normative for two opposite-gendered principal characters to form romantic relationships in classical narratives, especially if they are initially combative with one another (such lovers are normative classical convention). It’s just that their dispositions -- Seth’s vulnerability, Veronica’s tenderness -- are not specified by the initial types we use to categorize them.

⁷⁷ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), 103-104, 106, 118.

⁷⁸ Insofar as Forster’s distinction pertains to genre types, a genre typed-character becomes rounder if they end up figuring into the plot differently than how such types usually figure into the plot (i.e., they surprise us); a love interest becomes an antagonist, or a mad scientist mentors a protagonist.

Rimmon-Kenan, citing Joseph Ewen, accounts for these complications by proposing a typology of three independent variables through which characters can be measured: complexity (the number of traits a character has), development (the degree to which the character changes), and “penetration into the ‘inner life’” (the degree to which the character’s “conscious is presented from within” or “outside”).⁷⁹ According to Rimmon-Kenan’s model, in *The Fly*, Seth’s vulnerability and Veronica’s tenderness are additional traits that contribute to their roundness, and their romance shows them undergoing some change (at least in terms of their interpersonal relationship). Later, Seth will undergo further change, both literally and figuratively: after a teleporter mishap, Seth will begin to slowly transform into a human-fly hybrid, exhibiting many new traits, both physically (his body first strengthens and then deteriorates as he metamorphoses) and psychologically (he becomes impulsive and irritable). Of course, character development can refer not only to changes in a character’s traits, but also the degree to which their long-term goals change. As discussed in Chapter 1, Kristin Thompson calls such changes (along with the introduction of major new premises) “turning points,” and uses them as the basis for her argument about classical narratives being divided into four distinct segments. Thus throughout *The Fly*, Seth’s long-term goals will also change from developing his teleportation technology, to convincing others about its rejuvenating effect, to trying to figure out what went wrong with his teleportation, to attempting to remedy the transformation he continues to undergo.

⁷⁹ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 40-42. The last of these variables seems better suited to literary narrative than film, considering that it is more normative for classical literary narratives to routinely and explicitly present characters’ consciousness than it is for classical films to do so. See Gérard Genette’s discussion of focalization in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980), 189-190. As Newman writes, in film, “the construction of a character’s mental states is often more a matter of social-cognition inferences than it is of direct subjective representation.” Newman, 278.

Like Rimmon-Kenan, Murray Smith also criticizes Forster's distinction between flat and round as too simplistic, and proposes an even larger typology of seven dimensions through which characters might be measured: degree of complexity, fixity, stereotypicality, plausibility, artificiality, attachment, and subjective transparency. Smith sees this typology as accommodating Forster's distinction between flat and round characters, but in a way that attributes the distinction to both the textual qualities of the character *as well as* the viewer's comprehension of the character. Smith argues that in his typology, a flat character is one that "never challenges the stereotype schema it invokes on its first appearance," whereas a round character is one where "the initial schema is subject to considerable revision."⁸⁰ According to Smith's model, in *The Fly*, Seth and Veronica become rounder not only through their possessing many traits (complexity) and undergoing change (fixity), but also through the considerable spatiotemporal attachment we have to them (one or both are present throughout much of the film), and most importantly, through their departing from the (stereo)typicality of their initial types. Characters become rounder the more they challenge (without overturning) their initial typing.⁸¹

Yet another model that can be used to articulate the difference between flat and round characters comes not from the field of narratology, but from social psychology. Social psychologist David Hamilton proposes a hypothetical model for how our conception of a given person becomes more complex over time, one which has clear implications for the flat/round

⁸⁰ Smith, 116-117. Smith goes on to criticize all typologies in general because they "hypostasize" what is actually a *dynamic* process of character construction: flat characters always have the potential to become round -- for viewers to have their "stereotype schema" challenged -- so long as the text continues, while "the representation of the round character relies on the same storehouse of person-types, the same process of character construction, as the flat character." For a concise summary of other narratologists who have also complicated or elaborated upon Forster, see Newman, 268-269.

⁸¹ Smith's other dimensions do not map as neatly onto the flat/round distinction, which is why he designates them as independent variables in the first place: plausibility, artificiality, and subjective transparency might contribute to the roundness of a character in some instances, and flatness in others.

distinction, even though he puts it in terms of differentiation from type. Much like with Smith's dimensions of stereotypicality and plausibility, Hamilton's model is also based on differences in how we conceive of people. However, where Smith suggests that the difference between flat and round characters is determined by the degree to which a given character *challenges* an initial typing and forces the viewer to make revisions, instead, Hamilton's model suggests that the flat/round distinction (or, in his terms, the relative complexity of our cognitive representation of a person) is based on the degree to which the character solicits *additional* types through which the character can be categorized. That is, after our initial categorization of a character into either broad or preferably mid-level types (based on whatever information is immediately evident about their physical features or social roles), we can subsequently categorize them through additional mid-level types, provided the narration continues to develop the character further. As Hamilton hypothesizes,

At least during the early stages of impression development, the cognitive representations of a person will contain far fewer categories than the total number of schemas the perceiver has available for construing person-related information. As the perceiver gets to know the target person better and more diverse kinds of information are acquired about the person, more and more schemas will, in time, become instantiated and those schemas will then be represented within the perceiver's impression of that person.⁸²

According to Hamilton's model, then, over the course of the beginning of a film, our cognitive representation of a character becomes more and more individuated (or round) as we learn more

⁸² David L. Hamilton, "Cognitive Representations of Persons," in *Social Cognition: The Ontario Symposium, Volume 1*, ed. Higgins, E. Tory, C. Peter Herman, and Mark P. Zanna (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981), 154. Smith's distinction between flat and round characters could conceivably encapsulate Hamilton's differentiation from type: "considerably revising" our initial typing might just as easily mean 'soliciting entirely new types that coexist with previous ones' as it does 'augmenting an initial type with new information' or 'replacing an initial type with an alternative one that better accommodates new character information.' However, Smith does not appear to conceive of type revision this way, instead seeing it as a means of accommodating new data: "a schema [for a character] develops by incorporating new experience; either the default hierarchy becomes more elaborated, or an entirely new schema is developed" (my emphasis). Smith, 121.

and more types that can describe them. As Hamilton writes, “the more varied the stimulus information available about a stimulus person, the more numerous the schematic categories that will be instantiated, and hence the more differentiated and complex will be the cognitive representation of that person.”⁸³ In other words, as it becomes possible to categorize a character by more and more types, they become increasingly complex and individuated, to the point where our concept for a particular character is rather specific and unique. In *The Fly*, Seth and Veronica become rounder when they begin their romance, and can be typed as each others’ lovers, in addition to a scientist/inventor and a journalist. Seth will undergo even greater individuation over the course of the entire film, when his gradual transformation into a human-fly hybrid solicits many additional mid-level types: he becomes a womanizer and a brute, and then a victim and monster, all while remaining a scientist and still frequently exhibiting many of the dispositions he possessed before his metamorphosis (such as his inquisitiveness, excitability, and vulnerability).⁸⁴

Al from *The Best Years of Our Lives* provides a less anomalous example: When Fred and Homer first meet him upon boarding their plane to Boone City, Fred identifies Al as a sergeant, and we can immediately type Al as both a soldier and a veteran, much like Fred and the other nameless soldiers waiting for flights at the ATC. During the flight, Al reveals that he’s been married for twenty years, allowing us to type him as a longtime husband, a type associated with dispositions such as commitment and stability (and a type which further distinguishes him from

⁸³ Hamilton, 154.

⁸⁴ To a certain extent, Seth’s transformation does more than simply solicit new types, since he literally metamorphoses into a monster -- he even takes to calling himself “Brundlefly,” a composite between his family name and the insect with which he has fused. Thus Seth’s transformation from human to hybrid is perhaps a qualified example of a character soliciting additional types, since he literally changes into a different creature, one to which the person schema may or may not apply, given the combination of some of his former traits and dispositions with new ones (like impulsiveness, aggressiveness, and a host of bodily transformations).

both Fred and Homer, the former of whom met his wife while in basic training and married only twenty days before shipping off to war, and the latter of whom has a girlfriend from high school). When Fred and Al's taxi arrives at Al's home, Fred comments on the impressive high-rise apartment building in which Al's family lives, and Fred reveals that he's also a banker, a type with trait associations regarding social class (he's likely rich and upper class) and political ideology (he's likely conservative). When Al finally enters his family's apartment, he is greeted by his nearly-grown son and young adult daughter Peggy (Teresa Wright), allowing us to also type him as a father as well as a husband, and to associate him with fatherly traits such as protectiveness and responsibility. All of these types combine to give a rather round idea of Al's character, distinguishing him somewhat from any simple type (as well as from Fred and Homer) and providing a host of trait associations through which to understand his subsequent actions, such as his later warning off Fred from continuing his love affair with his daughter.

It is through Hamilton's model of multiple types that star personae can contribute to character individuation. While star personae are themselves types, using them to organize our understanding of a character individuates that character somewhat because the star persona is used alongside whatever other types the character also solicits. That is, star personae, insofar as they solicit dispositional and other trait associations, can serve as a compliment to any social role type that a character's initial appearance or description might solicit, and thus star personae are a means through which it's possible to categorize characters using multiple types rather quickly. For example, in *Casablanca*, Rick is first mentioned by Renault and Strasser as the owner of Rick's café, and subsequent discussion of him by Carl the waiter and other café patrons solicits the type of a powerful and standoffish Casablanca nightlife fixture. Humphrey Bogart's star persona in turn complements these types with additional associations: not only does Rick share

Bogart's physical features, but he also shares the dispositions associated with Bogart's persona, such as world-weary cynicism, toughness, and individualism, all of which mask an underlying morality and sentimentalism.⁸⁵

Ultimately, all of these means of differentiating character from type are complementary rather than mutually exclusive: a given character can be individuated through their exhibiting many different traits; through change; through challenging or revising an initial typing; through being typed in multiple ways, or through any of the other metrics discussed thus far. Indeed, one of the primary ways through which an initial typing can be revised or challenged is *through* incorporating into it additional traits that are not specified by the type. That is, if characters can become individuated by exhibiting additional traits not specified by their type, then to accommodate such traits, our schema we have been using to categorize and understand the character is "revised."⁸⁶

For instance, in addition to the many different types Al solicits over the course of the beginning of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Al will also demonstrate a series of other dispositions not necessarily associated with his being typed as a veteran, husband, father, or banker. He also displays a wry sense of humor, has a penchant for heavy drinking, and a risk-inclined attitude toward administering bank loans to veterans. These dispositions make him rounder according to various metrics: his sense of humor and drinking broaden the range of traits we associate with him, and our schema for his character is revised through their incorporation; likewise, his liberal administration of loans to veterans challenges the politically conservative banker type. At the

⁸⁵ Of course, if no mid-level social role types are immediately apparent, sometimes a star persona functions as the most prominent type through which a character can be categorized.

⁸⁶ See Smith, 119-122 for a discussion of how we determine which traits are central to a character and which are periphery; central traits are much more likely to be incorporated into a character schema than are peripheral traits.

same time, these traits are still plausible for someone with Al's history: his drinking and humor are his coping mechanisms for the awkwardness he feels over returning to his pre-war life after having been away for so long, while his liberal banking practices are motivated by his sympathy for fellow veterans, even though risk-taking is both inconsistent with the conservative banker type and not necessarily specified by the veteran type.

Regardless of the simplicity or the complexity of the typologies employed to describe the differences between flat and round characters, and regardless of the extent to which the distinction is located in the text or in the minds of viewers, this discussion shows that narratologists who have worked on the flat/round distinction imply equivalency between flat characters and character types. Forster suggests as much when he writes that flat characters "are sometimes called types," and it's an equivalence Rimmon-Kenan, Smith, Mieke Bal, and to a certain extent Seymour Chatman and Michael Newman all agree on.⁸⁷ The flatter the character, the more they are understood mainly through the category type they initially solicit from viewers (regardless of the different dimensions of character that flatness might describe), whereas the round character goes beyond the initial typing in one way or another, be it through the number of traits a character has, the degree to which the character changes, the degree of access provided to a character's interiority, the degree to which we need to revise our initial typing of the character,

⁸⁷ Forster, 103. See also Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 117. See also Newman, 270ff. Chatman, 132 argues that flat characters need not correspond with a type, but that they frequently do. Newman offers a more complex distinction between flat and round characters, one that ascribes flatness and roundness to both the characters and to their characterization by the narration, and arguing that "there are qualities of flatness and roundness that describe characters but not characterization and vice versa." Newman, 270.

the number of types through which the character can be categorized, or whatever other metrics through which difference from type might be measured.⁸⁸

This discussion of the different metrics through which characters become individuated has two general implications for narrative beginnings. The first is that initially, *all* characters appear to be relatively flat characters, because our first, automatic step in understanding a character is to categorize them by type. That is, no matter how differentiated from type a character (or our cognitive representation of a character) might ultimately become, at first they will appear to be relatively flat or simplistic (even if only briefly), because categorizing any given character according to type is our first recourse toward understanding them. Therefore, beginnings cannot help but present characters that appear flat at first, even if they will ultimately become rounder. As Forster acknowledges, this initial flatness is advantageous for a narration, because it makes the character easily recognizable.⁸⁹ In the terms of the model outlined here, a character's initial flatness makes typing easier, and thus provides a solid -- albeit preliminary -- foundation upon which to mount initial expectations and inferential associations.

A second and more important implication follows: no matter what metrics we use to describe the degree to which a character becomes individuated, distinction from type is a *process*, one that occurs as we learn more and more about a character, and develop deeper and more complex cognitive representations of them. Newman states it well, writing that as the narrative unfolds, "a cumulative effect occurs as we learn more and more traits and arrange them

⁸⁸ Persson, 216-217 describes yet another dimension through which flat and round characters can be distinguished, one that compliments Smith's: the degree of ease or difficulty of making mental attributions about a given character. A flat character is one that "defies or makes difficult mental attribution processes," while a round character is one that "not only allows mental attributions, but also presents a wide range of cues and appraisal parameters with which to reason and 'play around with.'"

⁸⁹ Forster, 105. Forster also argues that another advantage of flat characters is that they are more easily remembered.

in our character schema, which allows us to probe the character's inner life and to work out the interrelation of the many traits we have learned about."⁹⁰ Accordingly, it takes some amount of time for characters to become individuated; often there is a correlation between how much time the narration spends following a character around (or being "spatiotemporally attached" to them, to use Murray Smith's term) and their potential for individuation, especially in film, where character individuation often takes place through the observation of character behavior rather than through voiceover or other description.⁹¹ Often, some measure of individuation (if it occurs) takes place somewhere over the course of the beginning, as we become spatiotemporally attached to a character or set of characters (this is especially true of principal characters, although as we shall see, not all of the metrics described above are normative for classical beginnings).

However, before describing how classical beginnings normatively individuate principal characters and the reasons for why individuation is normative for beginnings, first it will be useful to examine at length how folk psychological inferences about characters' mental states *also* become richer and more complex with increased spatiotemporal attachment. Such an examination is useful not only because it further develops the model of character comprehension and beginnings set forth in this chapter, but also because doing so provides insight into the norms of classical beginnings. Just as our cognitive representation of a character has increasingly

⁹⁰ Newman, 318.

⁹¹ Smith, 142. Of course, there are exceptions. Sometimes films will provide a wealth of character information in a concentrated (and often expository) description, moderately individuating the character relatively quickly. In *Network*, for instance, Howard Beale immediately solicits a type for *television news anchor* when he first appears giving a news broadcast, but he is quickly individuated from this type when a voiceover describes other types through which he can be categorized (he is a widower and a drinker), other traits not specified by his anchorman type (he is morose and isolated), and how his character has changed over time (he was once a popular news anchor - and presumably happy -- but his popularity has steadily declined). Thus Howard is individuated very quickly at the start of the film. Nevertheless, this individuation is moderate; Howard will become much *more* individuated as the beginning progresses: he idly contemplates suicide while drunk, calmly goes about his work day, and then soberly announces his intention to commit suicide during his nightly news broadcast. Thus spatiotemporal attachment remains a useful heuristic for measuring a character's potential for individuation.

greater potential for individuation as we learn more information about them, so too do our inferences about characters' mental states have increasingly greater potential for certainty, precision, nuance, and sophistication.

Psychologically Rich Situations and Situational Parameters

Per Persson has studied folk psychological processes in-depth as they relate to our comprehension of characters in cinema, and his work provides a fertile basis for inquiries into how these processes are at work in narrative beginnings. While folk psychology is crucial for our ability to understand the moment-to-moment behavior of characters, the clarity and precision of our folk psychological inferences (or mental attributions, as Persson calls such inferences) is not constant throughout the course of a narrative. Some situations are more “psychologically rich” than others.⁹² Persson describes a psychologically rich situation as one about which viewers are able to confidently make many sophisticated, nuanced, and precise inferences about characters' mental states. Conversely, a psychologically poor situation would be one in which such inferences are simple, broad, imprecise, uncertain, and fewer in number, although the distinction between psychologically rich and poor situations is graduated rather than absolute; that is, there are different degrees of psychological richness.

Both psychologically rich and poor situations solicit inferences about characters' mental states from viewers based on the observation of behavior or typing, but for a situation to be psychologically rich, viewers must possess additional *contextual* knowledge about the situation. Persson calls these contexts “situational parameters.” A situational parameter can consist of

⁹² Degree of psychological richness shares a lot in common with what Newman calls “depth of characterization,” one of his three variables meant to describe the differences between flat and round characters. See Newman, 277-294.

specific, *previous* knowledge of characters that we can bring to bear upon a situation in order to understand characters' mental states in a given scene. One prominent situational parameter Persson identifies is knowledge of character traits (especially dispositions); the more familiar we are with the traits of characters, the better we are able to confidently make sophisticated, nuanced, and precise inferences about their mental states (the same can be said of hypotheses as well; the more familiar we are with a character's traits, the better we can anticipate their actions and responses to events).⁹³

A second situational parameter that Persson identifies -- one more important than dispositions for enriching the psychology of situations -- is *previous* mental attributions. As Persson explains, "previous attributions are crucial in the mental attribution process: The more cues available, and the richer a situation is, the more precise and certain the attributions can be. Attributions must be remembered for future situations, in which they may become central to *those* attribution processes.... Such attributions are often crucial for making sense of a scene."⁹⁴ If, for example, I infer that a student wants to receive a good grade on an exam, this mental attribution can then explain their behavior when I later see them studying in the library, attending my office hours, or emailing me questions about class materials. Persson rightly privileges previous mental attributions as the most important situational parameter, because folk psychology is a cumulative, dynamic process; it is a continually updating mental model for character interiority, and those updates make the most sense (and sometimes *only* make sense) in the context of previous inferences about mental states (regardless of whatever dispositional

⁹³ Persson, 162.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

knowledge one might also have). As Persson writes, “mental attribution primarily relies on earlier mental attributions to a given character.”⁹⁵

The scene from *Casablanca* where Rick helps Jan win at roulette provides an excellent example of how psychologically rich situations depend on our having knowledge of situational parameters, especially previous mental attributions. The situation is undoubtedly psychologically rich, since we can confidently make many sophisticated, nuanced, and precise inferences about characters’ mental states throughout the scene: when Rick asks Jan if he’s tried betting on 22, we must infer that Rick is actually *telling* Jan to bet on 22, and that Rick does so (rather than outright telling Jan) because he does not want to make the other gamblers suspicious of the honesty of the roulette wheel; Rick believes Emil will rig the spin of the wheel when Emil observes Rick talking to Jan; Rick prompts Jan to bet on 22 because he wants Jan to win; Annina smiles as Jan wins because she is relieved and grateful, and Renault appears dismayed because he does not want Jan to win.

The psychological richness of these inferences is in turn dependent on our having prior knowledge of situational parameters. Some of these parameters simply involve knowledge of character traits: Rick does not want to make the other gamblers suspicious of the honesty of the roulette wheel because he owns and runs the café, and Rick believes Emil will rig the spin of the wheel because Emil is Rick’s obedient employee. However, most of our inferences are dependent on our knowledge of previous mental attributions. Rick wants Jan to win because Jan

⁹⁵ Ibid., 223. Persson identifies a third situational parameter as well: our assessment of whether or not characters are manipulating their behavioral cues to mislead or conceal from others their mental states. However, this parameter seems largely redundant with knowledge of previous mental attributions, because we have no reason to suspect characters of being misleading unless we also have knowledge of their intentions, goals, and beliefs. That is, we tend to assume people are being honest unless we are given reason to suspect otherwise, and those reasons typically come in the form of previous inferences about folk psychology, as in “This character is lying because they want X,” or “they believe Y.”

and Annina's plight has won Rick's sympathy, but we can only make this inference because we've made a *previous* mental attribution about Annina in scenes leading up to this one, namely, that she does not want to sleep with Renault in order to obtain exit visas for her and Jan. In other words, we would be at a loss to explain *why* Rick wants Jan to win without knowledge of previous mental attributions. Likewise, the richness of our inferences about Annina's and Renault's reactions to Rick helping Jan win at roulette is a product of our previous mental attributions about each character. We can make the nuanced inference that Annina reacts with relief and gratitude (as opposed to other emotions her smiles could indicate) because she believes Rick is letting Jan win, which allows her to achieve her previous (long-term) goal of escaping Casablanca without having to submit to Renault. We can infer precisely that Renault is dismayed at Jan's winning not because he wants to prevent anyone from cheating at Rick's café, nor because he wants to monopolize the ability to cheat at Rick's café (both possibilities, absent any situational parameters), but because he believes Jan's winning has foiled his intention to sleep with Annina. Moreover, the generosity and altruism Rick shows Annina and Jan is itself enriched through its contrast both with Rick's dispositions (he is self-interested, world-weary, and cynical) and with his previously-stated goal of remaining neutral and not sticking his neck out for anybody. *Without* knowledge of these situational parameters, Rick's decision to help the couple would simply seem to be a surprising and possibly incomprehensible act of sympathy; however, *with* knowledge of these situational parameters, Rick's act of sympathy becomes a significant moment of revelation in the complexity of his character, one in which he overcomes his usual dispositions.⁹⁶ As this example shows, in order to confidently make nuanced,

⁹⁶ Knowledge of Rick's dispositions also contributes to the psychological richness of other parts of this situation, as with Carl the waiter's reaction to Rick letting Jan win. Carl appears to be proud of Rick for helping Annina and Jan, but we can only make this precise inference because we know that Rick is usually self-interested, world-weary, and

sophisticated, and precise inferences about character behavior in this situation (that is, in order to appreciate its psychological richness), it is first necessary to have knowledge of situational parameters, especially previous inferences about characters' intentions, goals, and beliefs.⁹⁷

If the scene where Rick helps Jan win at roulette is an example of a psychologically rich situation, then the scene where Ilsa first encounters Rick in Casablanca is an example of a relatively psychologically poor situation. The situation is psychologically poor because we lack the situational parameters -- especially previous mental attributions -- that would allow us to confidently make sophisticated, nuanced, and precise inferences about characters' mental states. We don't know Ilsa's romantic history with Rick when they first meet in Casablanca, particularly Rick's belief that Ilsa loved him, his desire to escape Paris with her, and her subsequently abandoning him; thus when Rick and Ilsa reunite, our inferences about their mental states are relatively simple, broad, imprecise, and uncertain. When Rick enters the scene, he begins to scold Sam for playing "As Time Goes By," then spots Ilsa and stares at her. We can infer that Rick is shocked to see her, and the discordant non-diegetic music also suggests he is mildly upset, but this is as rich as our inference can get. Because we lack situational parameters - particularly previous mental attributions -- we cannot infer with precision, nuance, or certainty

cynical. Without knowledge of Rick's dispositions, it would be more difficult to infer that Carl is reacting with pride in Rick, as opposed to some other emotion. Indeed, without previous knowledge of Rick's dispositions, we might even hypothesize that Carl's reaction means he has a vested interest in Annina or Jan's welfare, even though there is no evidence to suggest so (he never interacts with them as he does with other patrons). The same could be said of bartender Sascha's (Curt Bois) kissing Rick on both cheeks once Carl tells Sascha the news.

⁹⁷ In fact, the indispensability of situational parameters is demonstrated by the way in which specific examples from films are often introduced in film analysis. For instance, it was necessary to provide narrative contexts about the *Casablanca* roulette scene prior to its first use earlier in this chapter. That is, in order for the initial analysis of the folk psychological inferences viewers make about characters in this scene to make sense, it was first necessary to list off various situational parameters, most of which pertained to previous attributions. Beginning a film in the middle of the *syuzhet* (i.e., arriving at a screening late, or starting a video copy in the middle) often makes the narrative somewhat confusing precisely because we lack the previous mental attributions to make precise sense of the characters' folk psychology.

either the reason or the extent to which he is shocked and upset at seeing her. We cannot, for instance, infer that he is shocked because he *believed* he would never see her again, nor can we discern that he is upset because seeing her dredges up memories and feelings he had *intended* to forget or move beyond (bitterness, resentment, hope, loneliness, etc.). Likewise, when Rick subsequently breaks precedence by having a drink with Ilsa and Victor, it is difficult to infer Rick or Ilsa's intentions, goals, and beliefs because we lack the previous mental attributions that would explain their behavior. In other words, it is difficult to know precisely what Rick or Ilsa is thinking or feeling when they first meet again in Casablanca because the film has not yet provided enough situational parameters to make this situation psychologically rich for viewers.

Granted, Rick and Ilsa's meeting is not entirely bereft of situational parameters; some are established via the mental attributions we make about Sam and Ilsa as they speak in the scene before Rick arrives (namely, that Ilsa knows Rick, and that Sam is attempting to protect Rick from her). However, even these attributions are psychologically poor. When Ilsa asks Sam about Rick, we can easily infer that Ilsa and Rick must know each other, but the lack of situational parameters prevents us from specifying *why* Ilsa is inquiring after Rick. That is, we can't specify her intention; she might want to see him, but she might also want to avoid him. Moreover, at this point in the film, Ilsa has scarcely had the opportunity to display much behavior that might correspond with her dispositions, and thus we also lack the dispositional information that could provide a basis for making complex inferences about her; at best we can infer that she is somewhat cautious, inquisitive, and intuitive, based on the concern she shows for Victor in a previous scene and the questions she asks Sam about Rick. When Sam deflects Ilsa's inquiries, lies about where Rick is, and gently suggests she leave Rick alone, we can infer that he is attempting to protect Rick from Ilsa, but as before, we lack the parameters to make a more

precise inference about Sam's motivation. Likewise, after Sam begins to play "As Time Goes By" at Ilsa's request, she appears contemplative as she listens, and we can infer the song means something to her (and even hypothesize that it reminds her of Rick), but this inference is simple, imprecise, and uncertain. Our ability to read her behavioral cues is impaired by our lack of situational parameters; the look on her face as she listens could be one of remorse, arousal, wistfulness, longing, recollection, or simply distraction.⁹⁸

Situational parameters, then, are instrumental in enriching the folk psychological inferences we make about characters' mental states. We automatically assume situations are psychologically rich, but our ability to *understand* their richness -- to make complex inferences and refined distinctions between mental states -- is dependent upon our having knowledge of situational parameters. The more parameters we can bring to bear upon a situation, the more psychologically rich that situation is. As Persson puts it, "the more parameters present at the time of mental attribution, the more sophisticated and nuanced the FP reasoning can be and the more specific and nuanced the attribution."⁹⁹

Overall, psychologically rich situations are an important component of classical narration because they are a powerful means of constructing the character-derived psychological causality through which classical narration is organized. As Persson writes, "Causality is not a textual feature, but fundamentally involves the inferential activities by the spectator on the basis of

⁹⁸ Classical narration is invested in soliciting relatively specific cognitive responses from viewers, folk psychological inferences included, thus it rarely offers excessively poor psychological situations. Greater extremes of psychologically poor situations are more characteristic of Soviet montage cinema (what David Bordwell calls historical-materialist narration) and art cinema. As Persson observes, in Soviet montage cinema, the narration generally does not provide the prolonged spatiotemporal attachment necessary for viewers to form sophisticated or nuanced mental attributions. In art cinema, character behavior is often kept deliberately ambiguous by withholding folk psychological information or impeding it through the manipulation of space, time, and subjectivity (as in *Last Year at Marienbad*), or by featuring characters who simply do not adhere to the principles of folk psychology (as in 1967's *Weekend*). See Persson, 223-229 for a discussion of these other narrational modes.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

textual cues and models of causality. Folk psychology... is one such model, specifying and supporting causal inference processes in narrative discourse understanding.”¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, the more sophisticated, nuanced, and precise the inferences we are able to make about characters’ mental states, the more robust are our means of constructing or inferring the causes of the characters’ actions, and the better we are able to comprehend the story. Ultimately, psychologically rich situations are effective means of soliciting the relatively specific cognitive responses from viewers toward which classical narration strives, helping to ensure narrative comprehension by providing viewers with a reliable means of understanding not only what Persson describes as “the complex and blended emotion of a character in a particular situation,” but also the intentions, goals, and beliefs that motivate their actions.¹⁰¹

This is not to say that psychologically poor situations are confusing or incomprehensible; certainly, viewers are capable of making inferences about characters’ mental states and their corresponding dispositions even without situational parameters. Our inferences just tend to be simpler, broader, and more imprecise and uncertain than they might otherwise be. After all, viewers who start a film midway through are not at a *total* loss for understanding the action or the mental states of characters. If one were to begin viewing *Casablanca* with the roulette scene, it would likely still be clear that Rick wants Jan to win, and that this seems to make Annina happy. However, one’s understanding of the situation simply cannot be as psychologically rich as it would be with the benefit of the situational parameters presented earlier in the film; viewers would be unable to infer *why* the characters behave the way they do (i.e., the psychological causality would be rather opaque). Psychologically rich situations are not a necessity for basic

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 218.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 231.

narrative comprehension, but they go a long way toward explaining one of the main reasons for why classically narrated films are so engrossing.

Psychologically Rich Situations and Narrative Beginnings

Implicit in this description of psychologically rich situations is that they take *time* to establish; situational parameters take time to introduce into the narrative (particularly previous mental attributions). As Persson puts it,

If we assume that mental attribution is heavily based on many parameters, and even on previous mental attributions then we may conclude that establishing psychologically rich situations takes time. The viewer must follow a character over time, picking up aspects of situations, before beginning to differentiate between different mental states. From the perspective of narration, presenting those situational parameters takes screen time (or page space). Even though this is a straightforward observation, it is fundamental.¹⁰²

It follows, then, that even though dispositional attribution is often rapid (as described above), generally narrative beginnings are less likely to present situations as psychologically rich as do later parts of the narrative, simply because in the beginning viewers have fewer situational parameters at their disposal than they do in later parts of the narrative. That is, our understanding of character behavior is less likely to be confident, sophisticated, nuanced, and precise in the beginning than later in a narrative because the narration has not yet had the opportunity to develop the contexts (previous mental attributions, traits) that would allow for complex inferences.¹⁰³ While extratextual material such as trailers and advertising might provide viewers

¹⁰² Ibid., 223. While spatiotemporal attachment is by far the most predominant technique for introducing the situational parameters necessary for psychologically rich situations, Persson also argues that subjective imagery (dreams, hallucinations, flashbacks, and so on) can perform the same function: "Such images are useful because they can be seen as external representations of what occurs in the psyche of the character." Ibid., 227.

¹⁰³ Indeed, Persson argues that very early silent cinema is extremely unlikely to develop psychologically rich situations because there simply isn't enough time for the narration to introduce the necessary situational parameters: "In a one- or two-minute format, character psychology runs the risk of being superficial, as there are few appraisal

with some contexts involving narrative events, setting information, or even character dispositions, viewers typically do not come to a film *already* having made folk psychological inferences about characters' momentary mental states, because such inferences are the product of our being spatiotemporally attached-to them. Rather, such inferences are accumulated over the course of the beginning.¹⁰⁴

For example, in *The Fly*, we are able to make folk psychological inferences about Seth and Veronica in the beginning, but this situation is less psychologically rich than it might be were viewers to have knowledge of more situational parameters going into it. Specifically, it is difficult to infer the specific nature of Seth's intentions toward Veronica, as well as the specific reason for Veronica's initial disinterest in Seth. In Seth's case, it is unclear whether he's talking to her because she's a journalist and he wants to interest her in his work, and/or because she's pretty and he wants to flirt with her. As for Veronica, it is unclear whether she is initially disinterested because she doesn't believe Seth's claims about his work, and/or because she's not interested in him romantically. When Veronica accompanies Seth back to his lab and he eventually impresses her with his teleportation pods, she becomes serious about doing an

parameters from which a spectator can attribute complex, blended, and deep mental states." Ibid., 237. Much the same might be said about the start of the *syuzhet* in many longer format films, although as we shall see, some of the norms of classical beginnings compensate somewhat for this increased potential for superficiality.

¹⁰⁴ To a certain degree, the constraints of folk psychological processes themselves might seem to further diminish the likelihood of psychologically rich situations in the beginning. Even though viewers can rapidly attribute dispositions to characters, making complex mental attributions is time-consuming; just as the narration takes time to introduce situational parameters, viewers also need time to process complex inferences about characters' mental states. As Persson writes, "pondering the consequences of a given situation for the characters involved -- and perhaps even revisiting earlier attributions -- are time-consuming activities. For those processes to work properly, the narration must allow them time, by presenting little new story information." Persson, 223. However, it is unlikely that the time it takes viewers to process complex mental attributions significantly reduces beginnings' capacity for psychologically rich situations, one reason being that this processing time is miniscule in comparison with the overall length of a (classical) beginning. The kind of pauses Persson describe last mere seconds, and as we've seen, the beginnings of classically narrated feature films tend to take considerably more time to develop. Thus hypothetically, narrative beginnings are just as easily able to accommodate the pauses necessary for complex inferences as are later parts of the narrative.

interview with him and takes out a voice recorder, at which point Seth becomes dismayed. He tells Veronica that he doesn't want to do an interview because his work is not yet ready to share with the public. Retrospectively, then, it becomes clear that he wanted to talk with her primarily to flirt with her, rather than to get her interested in his work, and that he used his work as a means to that end. However, when first viewing the scene at the start of the film, we cannot make this inference with certainty because we lack the situational parameters that would make it clear. That is, the situation that opens the *syuzhet* is not as psychologically rich as it might be were we to have more contextual knowledge (or parameters) about Seth's folk psychology at the outset.

Additionally, psychologically rich situations are less likely in the beginning because viewers have limited ability to infer mental states for more than one character at a time. In most situations, character behavior is individualized (rather than collective, as in the behavior of a mob or crowd), and thus we make mental attributions about characters consecutively rather than simultaneously. As Persson argues, when a situation prominently features more than one character, we likely "shift our mental attribution efforts between them in a back-and-forth movement."¹⁰⁵ In *The Fly*, we make mental attributions about Seth and Veronica consecutively, as we see each of them act and react to one another. When Seth invites her back to his lab for an espresso and a demonstration of his work, we make an inference about him: he's serious about impressing her (regardless of his purpose). When Veronica initially rejects his entreaty, we switch our attribution efforts over to her: she does not believe Seth's claims and does not want to share an espresso with him. Situations become increasingly psychologically rich the more characters there are for whom we have had the opportunity to accumulate a cache of previous

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 224.

mental attributions, and because we make attributions *consecutively*, this accumulation takes time, and further contributes to the diminished likelihood of psychologically rich situations forming in beginnings (especially in films with a large cast of equally prominent characters).¹⁰⁶

Sometimes a large number of characters might all exhibit the same behavior (as in a crowd's reaction to an action or event); in such cases, it is possible to make mental attributions about multiple characters simultaneously because we can attribute a (more or less) similar mental state to each of the characters. For example, near the conclusion of *The Thin Man* (1934), Nick (William Powell) has gathered together nearly all of the film's characters and forces them to sit at a dinner table and listen to his near-solution of the murder upon which the film's plot is based. At the conclusion of his story, the murderer reveals himself by drawing a gun and firing, but Nick punches him before he can take aim. All of the other characters initially react by standing up from the dinner table (some of the women also scream), and we can attribute to all of them the same mental state (at least initially): they are shocked. However, even here, after the characters' initial collective shock has worn off, the film cuts to a series of three brief close-ups displaying the individual reactions of different characters, who respectively express disbelief, relief, and a combination of relief and concern. These reactions are presented consecutively to allow for viewers to process them; were the film to present them simultaneously, viewers would be forced to choose which to pay attention to.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Of course, it's also possible that some viewers might fixate on one particular character and interpret the entire situation in terms their folk psychology, regardless of which character the narration seems to emphasize in a given moment, especially if they've been spatiotemporally attached to a particular character for long periods of time, or have a heightened interest in one of the characters. However, it seems much more normative for viewers to focus their attribution efforts on multiple characters consecutively.

¹⁰⁷ As Persson elaborates, various stylistic factors contribute greatly to determining which character we are most likely to make mental attributions about at any given moment. Generally, we tend to make inferences about the mental states of whichever character is featured most prominently within a shot. For example, in a shot/reverse-shot sequence between John and Jane, we are likely to make attributions about John in shots of him, and attributions about Jane in reverse shots of her. Other stylistic variables can also affect our attributions, however, such as shot scale; were the shot of John a close-up, and the shot of Jane a long shot, we'd be likely to make attributions about

Of course, just because beginnings are less likely to contain psychologically rich situations does not mean that it is impossible; some beginnings do indeed have relatively psychologically rich situations because the narration goes out of its way to provide situational parameters. Indeed, as discussed below, many norms of classical beginnings work *against* the tendency for beginnings to be psychologically poor by actively encouraging the swift development of psychologically rich situations. Additionally, the relative degree of psychological richness is not constant throughout a beginning, but increases as the beginning progresses. We begin to make mental attributions as soon as we start to observe character behavior, thus each subsequent situation that follows from the very start of the *syuzhet* has increasingly greater potential for psychological richness, provided subsequent situations continue to feature the same sets of characters, and that those characters adhere to the principles of folk psychology. This is even true *within* scenes; the more parameters we acquire over the course of a scene, the more potential the scene has for complexity or richness.

John even during shots of Jane. That is, shot scale influences attribution in that the closer the scale of a particular shot, the more intensely our mental attribution efforts will be focused on the character featured in the shot. Likewise with screen time; the longer a shot is held, the more attribution efforts we expend. When multiple characters are given equal prominence within a shot, viewers must choose for themselves the character for which they want to make mental attributions at any given moment. See Persson, 223-226. For example, when Don first meets Cathy in *Singin' in the Rain*, much of the scene takes place in a medium two-shot of the characters as they sit in the front seat of Cathy's car. When Don begins to flirt with Cathy, he snakes his arm around her shoulders, and viewers must choose whether to observe Cathy's amused and annoyed reaction, or the bravado and mock-self-pity Don uses in an attempt to win Cathy's sympathy and affection. We can go back and forth between the two of them, but we must make our mental attributions one at a time (in fact, it is easy to miss some of the subtle gestures and expressions that reveal their psychology, such as Don's eyes flicking toward Cathy to see if his ploy is working, or Cathy's subtle glance at Don's arm around her shoulder, indicating that she can't quite believe his audacity). Indeed, our limited ability to make simultaneous mental attributions helps to explain one of film theorist André Bazin's reasons for admiring those directors who stage their shots with multiple points of interest (independent of the arguments Bazin makes about the place of such imagery in the ontology of film or the history of film style). Bazin writes that imagery with multiple points of interest implies "a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress," and Persson's work on folk psychology helps us to understand why this is the case: not only must we choose where to look at a given moment, but our choices also determine the mental attributions we end up making, and accordingly, our understanding of the characters' behavior. See André Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 35-36.

For example, in *Twentieth Century*, we initially type Lily as an actress and infer that her goal is to give a good performance, but when other characters introduce more of her traits and types -- like her being an ingénue and former lingerie model -- the situation becomes psychologically richer *while* it is still underway; her eagerness can now be understood as the product of both her nervousness and her desire to prove herself. These character traits then enrich our understanding of her subsequent behavior, like her willingness to change her name from Mildred Plotka to Lily Garland, and her tolerance for her director's psychological abuse. Thus while beginnings are most likely to have psychologically poor situations, the potential for psychological richness continually increases as the narrative progresses from the start of the *syuzhet*: this potential is lowest at the beginning of the *syuzhet*, higher by the end of the beginning, and higher still after the beginning has concluded (by which point characters have usually acquired a long-term goal).

At the same time, the reverse is also possible: just because a scene occurs later in a narrative does not mean it is necessarily psychologically rich. Any part of a narrative that lacks many situational parameters has the potential to be psychologically poor; such is the case of the scene where Rick and Ilsa first reunite in *Casablanca*. The scene occurs after the beginning has ended, and even after we've had time to learn Rick's character traits and make many mental attributions about him, but the situation is still relatively psychology poor because there are few situational parameters that would help to explain Rick and Ilsa's behavior when they first encounter one another, particularly previous mental attributions about Rick and Ilsa's respective beliefs and intentions toward one another. The beginning is simply where we are *most likely* to lack the situational parameters for psychologically rich situations, for all of the reasons discussed here: Mental attributions are accumulated over time because we only start to make them as the

story unfolds, and we make mental attributions consecutively rather than simultaneously (although as we shall see, some of the norms of classical narration are designed to overcome this unlikelihood by explicitly providing situational parameters in the beginning).

Situational Parameters and Exposition

Thus far, this discussion of situational parameters might seem to be largely redundant with some of the contexts that Meir Sternberg lists as comprising of exposition, specifically, “the history, appearance, traits and habitual behavior of the *dramatis personae*,” and “the relations between them.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, situational parameters and exposition are very similar, as both can provide contexts for understanding the action and the mental states of characters. Chapter 3 argued that immediate, preliminary exposition is extremely useful for classically narrated beginnings because of the assistance it provides viewers in grasping the scene that starts the *syuzhet*. In the context of that argument, situational parameters can best be thought of as a way of specifying in greater detail precisely *why* such exposition can be so useful: when the exposition provides viewers with Persson’s situational parameters, the psychology of the situation is enriched considerably. That is, when the immediate, preliminary exposition consists of situational parameters, our *initial* inferences about character’s mental states are more confident, sophisticated, and nuanced than they would be otherwise (and accordingly, the more concentrated the preliminary exposition, the greater is the potential for the situation at the start of the *syuzhet* to be psychologically rich). In *The Descendants*, for instance, the exposition provides viewers with information about some of Matt’s dispositions, types, and mental states, such that

¹⁰⁸ Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 1.

our mental attributions about Matt's behavior in the film's initial scenes are richer than they would be otherwise (accordingly, immediate preliminary exposition is one classical norm that works *against* narrative beginnings' tendency toward psychologically poor situations).

However, "situational parameters" is not just a synonym for exposition; there are at least three significant differences between the two concepts. The first is that expositional contexts are much broader than situational parameters. Situational parameters concern only character traits and folk psychological inferences about characters' mental states, but exposition encompasses a much broader spectrum of information, including not only previous narrative events and stable states of affairs, but also, as Sternberg writes, "the time and place of the action," and "the nature of the fictive world peculiar to the work or, in other words, of the canons of probability operating in it."¹⁰⁹ Therefore, exposition does not always concern situational parameters. For instance, the titles at the start of *The Terminator* are expositional, but they do not provide situational parameters; they identify the time and place of the action, and briefly describe the war between humankind and machines. While this information provides some contexts for understanding subsequent events, those contexts do not directly involve the traits or mental states of various characters.

A second major difference is that unlike exposition, situational parameters do not have any *fabula* location constraints; exposition consists exclusively of *fabula* information that antedates the start of the *syuzhet*, whereas situational parameters can include information from *anywhere* in the *fabula*; viewers constantly make mental attributions throughout a film, any of which can serve as parameters for future situations. Thus while situational parameters and exposition might be indistinguishable at the very start of the *syuzhet* (since at the start of the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

syuzhet viewers can only learn of previous mental attributions if they are presented by exposition), the difference between the two becomes more pronounced after viewers have had time to accumulate parameters from observing character behavior.

Related to this ubiquity of situational parameters is a third major difference from exposition: the accumulation of situational parameters happens relatively *automatically*, provided the narration is spatiotemporally attached to the same sets of characters throughout the narrative, and that those characters adhere to the principles of folk psychology (as is the case in classical cinema). That is, viewers accumulate mental attributions and knowledge of character traits whenever they have the opportunity to observe character behavior (and this knowledge can then serve as parameters for enriching our understanding of subsequent situations). Expository context, on the other hand, is information that can only be *told* to us; it's not something we can acquire without at least some degree of narrational self-consciousness. To put it another way, the narration can withhold or delay exposition indefinitely; a narration is perfectly capable of never revealing the events that preceded the start of the *syuzhet*. However, the narration cannot very well continually withhold or delay all situational parameters (at least, not if the film features the same sets of characters throughout its entirety, and those characters adhere to the principles of folk psychology), because viewers acquire situational parameters simply by observing character behavior. The difference is in *how* we acquire contexts for understanding characters' mental states: we can only acquire expository information through some form of self-conscious summary or illustration of previous events or stable states of affairs, whereas we can acquire situational parameters simply by making inferences about the observable action itself.

This last quality of situational parameters -- our ability to infer them simply by observing character behavior -- is especially significant for narrative beginnings, because even if we don't

approach a situation with parameters that can enrich our understanding of the characters' psychology (as is most likely for the first scene that features a given character), any mental attributions or character traits we *do* infer about the character can then be used to enrich the psychology of *subsequent* situations in which that character appears. Such is often the case in the beginning, where we are most likely to be introduced to characters for which we have accumulated no situational parameters. Thus one of the functions of narrative beginnings in general, and the introduction of characters in particular, is to provide viewers with the parameters necessary to enrich the psychology of subsequent narrative situations; the initial mental attributions we make about characters and our inferences about their correspondent dispositions might be psychologically poor (broad, simple, imprecise, and somewhat uncertain), but they can still provide the means for enriching *later* situations. As we shall see, it is quite normative for classical beginnings to introduce many situational parameters.

Beginnings and Psychologically Poor Situations

If beginnings are more likely to contain psychologically poor situations than other parts of the narrative, then it is worth examining how viewers cope with such situations. Beginnings with psychologically poor situations are not a detriment to narrative comprehension; as stated above, psychological richness is not a narrative necessity. There are at least three reasons why it is easy for viewers to be unconcerned with the imprecision, simplicity, and broadness of their inferences in beginnings with psychologically poor situations. The first is rather self-explanatory; psychologically poor situations are not detrimental to narrative comprehension in the beginning because the beginning provides us with the first opportunity to make inferences, thus *any* mental

attributions -- no matter how simple, broad, imprecise, or uncertain -- help to facilitate rather than impede comprehension.

The second reason that psychologically poor situations are not terribly detrimental to the narrative comprehension of beginnings is that the schemata which viewers use to categorize and understand the action help to mitigate some of the uncertainty of such situations. As discussed above, character typing can often provide some rudimentary folk psychological information. The same is true of event schemata, or scripts. Scripts can provide viewers with models that explain character behavior in given situations, even if those explanations are simple, broad, and imprecise. If a film begins with two characters dining in a restaurant, our script for such a situation provides for rudimentary inferences about the characters' mental states: they intend to eat a meal (a simple inference); there is some sort of social connection between the characters -- i.e., they are not total strangers who decided to sit at the same table without any additional prompting (an imprecise inference), and it is likely that at least one of the characters wants the company of the other (a broad and imprecise inference). In other words, a script can dispel uncertainty by providing viewers with a relatively safe ballpark estimate for mental attributions that are *good enough* for making at least rudimentary sense of a lot of character behavior (at least in classical narration).

For example, *Haywire* (2011) begins with Mallory (Gina Carano) approaching a secluded diner. She takes a seat in a booth and orders tea, and Aaron (Channing Tatum) will soon join her and order coffee. Even before the two speak with one another, our script for dining in a restaurant helps to explain their behavior, and we can make some broad and imprecise inferences. Mallory curses when she spots Aaron through a window as he approaches the diner, allowing us to infer both that Mallory knows Aaron, that she was likely not expecting him to

appear at the diner, and that she is displeased to see him. When Aaron approaches Mallory directly and sits at her booth (rather than, say, being surprised to see her or asking to join her), we can make further imprecise (albeit slightly more nuanced) inferences, namely that Aaron expected to meet Mallory at the diner, but that Mallory expected someone else instead of Aaron. While these inferences are broad and imprecise, they are better than nothing, and our script for dining at a restaurant helps us make sense of their behavior by providing a framework both for their rudimentary actions (ordering tea and coffee), and for their more complex reactions to one another: people meeting each other at a diner usually sit together, even if Mallory neither expected Aaron nor is pleased to see him.¹¹⁰

Generally, situational parameters (especially previous mental attributions) are closely related to schemata, since both provide contexts for understanding character behavior. Indeed, sometimes the two are redundant, since intentions, goals, and beliefs are integral to some schemata. For instance, if I observe John in the process of stealing a car, this observation solicits both a schema and various intentional states simultaneously, since the script for stealing a car

¹¹⁰ Soon, the restaurant dining script will prove woefully inadequate: as they begin to speak with one another, Aaron reveals he's been sent by a third party to pick up Mallory, but when she refuses to go with him, Aaron assaults her. The two have a vicious and elaborately choreographed fight, with Mallory eventually defeating Aaron and fleeing with the assistance of another diner patron. The fight is somewhat of a surprise, considering that just prior to it, Mallory asks Aaron a series of questions alluding to previous events, and Aaron has no idea what she's talking about. A narrative template schema sets up the expectation that after Aaron expresses his ignorance, Mallory will then explain to Aaron (and to viewers) the series of events that led to the situation between her and Aaron, either through exposition, flashback, or both (as discussed in Chapter 2, the explanation of a state of affairs is the second property of a narrative template schema). Indeed, she appears to be on the verge of doing so when Aaron attacks her, and their fight delays this explanation until the next scene, where Mallory explains what's happening to the diner patron who assisted her as the two flee together in the patron's car. The insertion of an action sequence between the initial situation and the explanation for the state of affairs is a matter of establishing genre conventions: *Haywire* is an action film, and such films conventionally provide an action sequence somewhere close to the start of the *syuzhet* (sometimes even before an explanation of the state of affairs). The surprise, then, stems from this particular action sequence momentarily disrupting the narrative template schema; more conventional would have been for the action sequence to occur either before Mallory seems on the verge of explaining the state of affairs that begins the film, or after the start of the flashback she eventually narrates, rather than for the fight to seemingly interrupt the explanation of the situation. Considering that *Haywire* might best be considered an independent film, such play with narrative conventions is exemplary of how such films can split the difference between classical and art cinema narration.

consists mainly of a series of intentional states: finding a desirable car; approaching it unobserved; successfully bypassing its security measures, and turning over its ignition. However, not all schemata involve intentional states, and thus schemata should still be considered theoretically distinct from situational parameters. As Persson implies, situational parameters involve previous knowledge of characters, rather than previous knowledge of all possible contextual information.

Regardless of where they might occur in a narrative, a third reason that psychologically poor situations are not detrimental to narrative comprehension is that when the situation is poor enough -- when there are not enough situational parameters or behavioral cues to warrant inference-making about characters' intentions, goals, and beliefs -- viewers are capable of *suspending* mental attribution until later.¹¹¹ Such is the case with Juno in the beginning of *The Descent*, as discussed in Chapter 3: when Juno appears reticent after Sarah's husband returns to Sarah after helping Juno with her helmet, we lack the contexts (or situational parameters) to understand Juno's behavior, and must either remain tentative about it, or simply suspend our mental attributions until later. The suspension of attribution can also work on a larger scale, where we suspend making inferences about many actions and behaviors of multiple characters over longer periods of time until the narration provides enough cues to attribute intentions, goals, and beliefs to the characters. Persson provides a good example from *Die Hard* (1988), where even though we see Hans Gruber's (Alan Rickman) gang "execute a number of well-prepared actions at the beginning... it is not until the brutal interrogation of Mr. Takagi [(James Shigeta)]

¹¹¹ Persson, 214.

that the (first time) spectator grasps their goal of opening the vault. It is only at that moment that those former scenes and actions make sense.”¹¹²

Both of these examples from *The Decent* and *Die Hard* illustrate yet one more reason for why it is particularly easy to suspend mental attribution in the beginning of a film, one involving the apparent causal relevance of the indeterminate behavior. In *The Descent*, it is unclear of the extent to which the ambiguous character behavior will become relevant. That is, it is easier to gloss over any behavior we might not understand if the causal relevance of the behavior is indeterminate, especially when it is not featured prominently by the narration. The shot of Juno appearing reticent is brief, and appears to have little to do with the surrounding action, thus suspending mental attributions about its meaning is not detrimental to narrative comprehension, since we can still follow the events of the scene without necessarily understanding the look on Juno’s face, or the purpose served by such a shot. However, the same cannot be said of the gang’s execution of their plan in *Die Hard*; it is shown in too much detail, and given too much prominence by the narration, for it to not seem causally relevant. Nevertheless, here it is still easy to suspend our attribution about the characters’ behavior because we can implicitly hypothesize that whatever we do not understand right away will become clearer later in the film (at least in classical narration). That is, the actions of Gruber’s gang are clearly causally relevant, and thus we can expect to be provided with an explanation for them which will make the characters’ behavior understandable retrospectively (the same is also true of the psychologically poor situation that begins *Haywire*). In short, suspending mental attribution until later is a viable option for viewers of classically narrated films because viewers can rely on a pair of dual assumptions about the indeterminate behavior: if the indeterminate behavior seems irrelevant,

¹¹² Ibid.

then viewers can assume it won't matter if they can't make mental attributions that would explain it, whereas if the indeterminate behavior *does* seem relevant, then viewers can assume that the narration will eventually provide them with the parameters to explain it retrospectively.

Normatively, classical narration trades on the second of these two assumptions; classical narration strives for relative efficiency, and thus tends not to emphasize causally irrelevant material. Accordingly, it is easy to assume attributions can be suspended until later, and that the previous character behavior will be explained retrospectively, once the narration has provided the parameters to make more precise, sophisticated, and nuanced folk psychological inferences.¹¹³ For instance, retrospectively, the psychological richness of Rick and Ilsa's meeting in *Casablanca* increases considerably once we learn of their love affair. Knowledge of their romantic history provides viewers with the contexts (or a schema) to retrospectively make their meeting incredibly rich with mental attribution: Rick wants to see Ilsa because he is still in love with her, but simultaneously (and more emphatically) doesn't want to see her because she broke his heart. Moreover, seeing Ilsa with Victor leads Rick to believe she betrayed him for Victor (whereas previously, Rick simply believed Ilsa had abandoned their love). As for Ilsa, she still harbors romantic feelings for Rick, but suppresses them because she is committed to Victor and his political goals. Accordingly, she behaves as if she and Rick were merely casual acquaintances rather than former lovers.¹¹⁴ The suspension of mental attributions and the

¹¹³ The same is also true of inaccurate mental attributions, which we can subsequently revise with the aid of additional parameters. *Ibid.*, 215.

¹¹⁴ Here we can easily see the redundancy of Persson's third situational parameter concerning the degree to which characters manipulate their behavioral cues to mislead others. It is clear that Ilsa is doing so, given how her casualness with Rick seems to contradict both the questions she asked Sam, as well as Rick's intense reaction to her, but determining that Ilsa is manipulating her behavioral cues is a product of our inference that she *wants* to conceal her past from Victor. In other words, the only way in which we can tell Ilsa is attempting to mislead Victor is by making an inference about her desires, which amounts to a previous mental attribution (i.e., the equivalent of Persson's other situational parameter).

retrospective significance they eventually bestow on previous character behavior helps to explain one of the reasons for why repeated film viewings can be such rewarding experiences: the psychological richness of various situations can be increased significantly when viewers can confidently make precise, sophisticated, nuanced mental attributions from the very beginning.

Norms for Typing in Classical Beginnings

Now that the cognitive processes involving character comprehension have been laid out, it is possible to examine how classical narration is normatively designed to engage with them. While typing is a cognitive process, a narration can strongly influence it by soliciting particular types upon a character's introduction. Classical narration normatively provides rather explicit mid-level types through which characters can be categorized initially, either immediately upon the character's introduction, or relatively soon afterwards, as has been the case in nearly all of the examples used throughout the chapter thus far, including John McClane from *Die Hard*, Victor and Rick from *Casablanca*, Sid from *The Descendants*, Seth and Veronica from *The Fly*, Lily from *Twentieth Century*, Cousin Ben from *Moonrise Kingdom*, Jack from *Mr. Baseball*, Homer and Al from *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Jake, Lou, and Ricky from *Major League*, Rosa from *Beyond the Forest*, and Charlotte from *Now, Voyager*.¹¹⁵ In instances where mid-level social types are unavailable, quite often mid-level genre types will instead take their place. In *Singin' in the Rain*, Cathy (Debbie Reynolds) does not appear to be categorized by any mid-level social types upon her introduction (at least, not until she identifies herself as an aspiring stage actress two minutes after she first appears), but she *does* nearly immediately solicit a mid-level

¹¹⁵ Mallory and Aaron from *Haywire* are two of the more glaring exceptions; their mid-level types -- private contractors for government espionage (i.e., mercenaries) -- become clearer as the beginning progresses. These exceptions are once again indicative of *Haywire*'s independent cinema narration, which often takes greater liberties with the norms of classical narration than does more mainstream cinema.

genre type. Based both on the playfully antagonistic banter between her and Don, as well as on the improbable way in which the two of them meet (he leaps from the roof of a trolley into the passenger seat of her convertible car in the course of escaping from a mob of fans), she quite readily solicits the *love interest* mid-level genre type.

Providing explicit mid-level types through which characters can be categorized is a norm designed to capitalize on the blend of rich, distinct, and vivid associations that mid-level types offer, quickly and efficiently creating a clear representation of the character and providing a basis for some preliminary expectations. Lily, for instance, can be immediately typed as an actress, and we can infer that one of her goals is to give a good performance. Typing Cathy as Don's love interest creates expectations about how her character will figure into the overall plot, while typing Veronica as a journalist solicits various likely trait associations about her character, including inquisitiveness, skepticism, toughness, and pragmatism. In other words, providing explicit mid-level types right away can help us to better understand the behavior of the character, the role they might play in the narrative, or the traits they likely possess, or some combination thereof.

This norm of having a mid-level type made obvious either immediately or soon after the character is introduced sheds further light on David Bordwell's observation that classically narrated films, drawing on the conventions of theatrical and literary narrative, commonly solicit types concerning characters' occupations, age, gender, and ethnic identity.¹¹⁶ We can now see that occupations (and other mid-level types concerning social roles) are commonly solicited because they offer rich, distinct, and vivid associations, and that lacking an immediately recognizable mid-level type, our recourse is to then type a character based on the more abstract,

¹¹⁶ Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 14.

high-level types Bordwell lists (the relatively saliency of which can be influenced by their contextual novelty and relative accessibility). That is, the hierarchical organization of types and their relative use value helps to explain why these character types are so commonly solicited by characters' introductions in classical beginnings.

Classical narration often makes mid-level types obvious through at least one of three means: introducing the character in contexts that make the mid-level type obvious (such contexts often consist of a character engaging in easily-typed behavior); presenting physical attributes that immediately solicit a type, or simply explicitly labeling a character as a certain type (either through conversation between characters, voiceover, intertitle, or other such self-conscious means). The beginning of *Rear Window* provides many excellent examples of all three means of type-solicitation as Jeff observes the activities of the neighbors with whom he shares a courtyard. Most of these characters are minor and never become differentiated from type over the course of the narrative, thus making them especially clear examples. Directly across from Jeff's apartment, Miss Torso (Georgine Darcy) can be very quickly typed as a dancer, based both on her physical attributes and her behavior: she is physically fit, and frequently dances and stretches while prancing about her apartment. To the left of Jeff's apartment lives a couple who are very easily typed as newlyweds, based on their appearance and behavior: they are physically intimate, the woman is wearing white, and after being escorted into their new apartment by a landlord (himself a character we quickly type based on his behavior), they exit and re-enter their apartment, the wife being carried in the arms of the husband as they cross the threshold. The woman living below Thorwald (and his soon-to-be-murdered wife) can be typed as a lonely, near-spinster, based both on her apparent age, her behavior (she is introduced pretending to have a romantic dinner for two), and on Jeff explicitly labeling her as "Miss Lonelyhearts" (Judith

Evelyn). Jeff will also explicitly categorize Miss Torso, describing her as a “ballet dancer,” and likening her to a “queen bee with her pick of the drones” (although this label comes well after her behavior has solicited the dancer type). In the case of Miss Lonelyhearts, however, the type literally serves as the character name.

As the examples from *Rear Window* demonstrate, in classical narration, the various means of soliciting types are often used in conjunction with one another, reinforcing the precise type through which viewers initially categorize characters. Regardless of the means through which the initial mid-level type is solicited, usually the character will subsequently exhibit the traits associated with the type, further reinforcing it. Bordwell makes a similar observation about the introduction of character traits, writing that “the character’s salient traits are indicated -- by an expository title, by other characters’ description -- and the initial appearance of the character confirms these traits as salient. In such ways, the spectator forms clear first impressions about the characters as homogenous identities.”¹¹⁷ Typing works in a similar manner (insofar as types have various traits associated with them). For instance, Renault is introduced as “Captain Renault” in *Casablanca*, and when he appears, his uniform and salute reinforces the type label.¹¹⁸ Likewise, in *Sunset Blvd.*, Max (Erich von Stroheim) first appears dressed as a butler, and his behavior then corroborates the type: he beckons Joe inside and instructs him to attend to Norma, whom Max refers to as “madam.” Subsequently, Max will repeatedly demonstrate traits like subservience, severity, and protectiveness, all dispositions typically associated with butlers. Making a character

¹¹⁷ Ibid. See also Smith, 123. In the course of describing prototypical character introductions in classical cinema, Smith comments that the beginning shots of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, “produce an emphatic cross-referencing and redundancy of visual and verbal cues, both of a designatory (names and bodies) and predicated order (names, bodies, behavior, dialogue).”

¹¹⁸ Technically, Renault appears in two shots before he is labeled as the police captain, but both are extreme long shots in which he is facing away from the camera and blends in with other officers.

appear to be physically representative of the type, and then having them exhibit type-appropriate behavior, or labeling a character with a mid-level type and then having them appear physically or behaviorally representative of it firmly establishes the initial type, helping to ensure that viewers categorize the character with the precision that is a hallmark of classical narration.

Of course, just because classical narration solicits precise types does not mean those types are always accurate. As discussed at length in Chapter 2, two of Meir Sternberg's four strategies for how a narration can make use of the primacy effect show how classical narration can deliberately mislead viewers in their first impressions of characters, soliciting impressions that are either wholly inaccurate ("the rise and fall of first impressions") or only partly representative ("the primacy effect complicated and qualified"). The initial type a character solicits plays a large part in the execution of these strategies. *Sunset Blvd.*'s Max, for instance, is a good example of how an initial character type can be only partly representative; while he is indeed Norma's servant, much later the narration will reveal that he was also once her film director and first husband, types which significantly complicate and qualify our understanding of his character, changing our conception of him from that of a typical butler to a man who has been broken by his love for Norma. Moreover, Chapter 2 described how unrepresentative first impressions (Sternberg's "the primacy effect complicated and qualified") can create a strong sense of diegetic depth by complicating our initial understanding of seemingly straightforward characters. We can now see that -- insofar as character typing contributes to the primacy effect -- this sense of depth is achieved through characters becoming differentiated from type, which is the subject of the following section.

Norms for Character Individuation in Classical Beginnings

If classical narration normatively solicits unambiguous mid-level character types very quickly and reinforces them through character behavior, labeling, or appearance (regardless of the ultimate accuracy of the initial type), then how long does it take for the narration to start differentiating characters from their type? That is, when is it normative for characters to become more individuated (as is typical for principal characters in classically narrated films): in the beginning, or later in the narrative? The answer changes depending on the metric through which one is measuring character individuation. As discussed above, these metrics can include a character's quantity of traits, the degree of development the character undergoes, the degree to which the initial typing is revised or challenged, and the number of mid-level types that can describe them.

When judging by the quantity of traits a character possesses, principal characters in classical narration tend to be somewhat individuated in the course of the beginning. That is, in addition to explicitly reinforcing an initial mid-level typing, the principal characters in classical narration will *also* usually exhibit at least a handful of traits that are *not* specified by type, and that perform an individuating function. As Bordwell writes, after characters are typed, "To these types individualized traits are added. Most important, a character is made a consistent bundle of a few salient traits, which usually depend upon the character's narrative function."¹¹⁹ Usually, these individuating traits are exhibited during the beginning, alongside the type-consistent traits. In other words, while it is normative for characters in classical beginnings to reinforce an initial typing by having a character exhibit traits that corroborate it, it is also normative for characters to simultaneously exhibit a "bundle" of other salient traits that are *not* specified by that initial typing, and that individuate the character in some regard.

¹¹⁹ Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 14.

For instance, over the course of Renault's second appearance in the beginning of *Casablanca* (and his first extensive screen time), he exhibits dispositions that accord with the police captain type: he is somewhat authoritarian, ordering Rick not to interfere with Ugarte's impending arrest, and warning Rick not to provide Victor with an exit visa. He is also competent and politically savvy, successfully orchestrating Ugarte's arrest, and cautiously navigating a neutral path between accommodating the Nazis and maintaining a patina of Free French autonomy. However, he also exhibits dispositions that are not specified by his police captain type, including cheerful charm, clever wit, and most significantly, self-interested corruption, as exemplified in his allowing gambling and other illegal activities at Rick's café, his implied assistance to needy women in exchange for sexual favors, and his betting with Rick over whether or not Victor will escape from Casablanca.¹²⁰ These traits are made salient -- and the character individuated -- by their not being specified by Renault's police captain type, and are established over the course of the film's beginning (recall from Chapter 2 that once a particular schema is activated, we pay more attention to unexpected stimuli than expected stimuli; Renault's competence and authority are rather expected, given his type, in comparison with these other traits).

Much the same can be said of the quantity of types metric: principal characters in classical narration tend to be somewhat individuated through their soliciting multiple mid-level types over the course of the beginning. Typically, we'll be able to categorize characters based not only according to their occupation, but also according to their family role, their romantic status, and even their dispositions (to the extent that dispositions can also become types). For

¹²⁰ One might argue that Renault's corruption is itself enough to solicit a *policeman* sub-type, the *crooked cop*, but Renault's wartime opportunism is distinctly different from the traits normatively associated with the crooked cop, who is typically repulsive rather than charming, smug rather than cautious, and greedy rather than sporting.

example, Al from *The Best Years of Our Lives* solicits types for veteran, husband, father, and banker over the course of the beginning of the film, while Thursday from *Fort Apache* solicits types for military officer, father, and martinet, as well as exhibiting arrogance and bitterness.

Of course, both the exhibition of additional traits and the categorization of characters into multiple types can occur elsewhere in a narrative aside from the beginning. As we've seen, Sid from *The Descendants* and Al from *The Best Years of Our Lives* each exhibit additional traits not specified by their initial types after the beginning of their respective films. Sid's emotional sensitivity is made apparent only in the middle of *The Descendants*, while Al's sense of humor and penchant for drinking are exhibited shortly after the beginning of *The Best Years of Our Lives* has concluded, and his liberalism does not become evident until much later. Likewise, in *Sunset Blvd.*, Max is differentiated from the servant type very late in the narrative when he reveals exposition that categorizes him as Norma's former director and first husband. Nevertheless, these means of individuation most normatively occur in the beginning rather than later in the narrative, especially for principal characters, because it is a way of providing viewers with more robust parameters for making mental attributions and expediting the formation of psychologically rich situations, which can in turn provide viewers with better means of constructing the psychological causality that organizes the narration (this function of individuation will be discussed further below).

What of the other metrics by which character individuation can be measured? Degree of character development and degree of type revision are related to one another, in that each is a means of measuring change, but the object of that change differs for each metric; with character development, it is the *character* that changes (either through changes to their traits or their long-term goals), while type revision entails changes in *viewers'* categorization of the characters. The

latter does not mean being able to categorize a character through additional types, but *altering* -- to varying degrees -- the categorizations that have already been solicited.

Insofar as revising an initial typing is achieved through the incorporation of traits that are not specified by the initial type, moderate type revision is also a normative means of character individuation in classical narrative beginnings. That is, if a character exhibits traits not specified by an initial type (as principal characters tend to do over the course of the beginning), then the character's type is revised as those traits are incorporated into our schema for the character. Thursday, for instance, is individuated through his exhibiting dispositions that are not specified by his initial typing, and accordingly, our schema for his character is revised as these dispositions are incorporated into it: he is an elitist and arrogant military officer.

However, things get more complicated when a character's traits *contrast* with the associations or attributes of the prototype category solicited by a character. In such cases, type revision entails not simply augmenting or refining an initial typing, but questioning the extent to which the character is still described by the category. Here we encounter both the primacy effect and the fuzzy boundaries of character types. In classical narration, it is normative for relatively minor challenges to a character's initial typing to crop up over the course of the beginning. These challenges can either be smoothed over by the primacy effect (i.e., explained away through active discounting, or having their meaning changed), or, if the contrasting trait is simply too salient for it to be actively discounted or have its meaning changed, then the character becomes a more marginal instance of the category (provided the contrast is minor). In terms of the concentric circle analogy described earlier in the chapter, the contrasting trait(s) simply places the character at a farther remove from the category's central prototype or exemplar. In classical beginnings, it is normative for characters to be only somewhat removed from the prototypical

center of the categories that type them (even if they will ultimately end up closer to the fuzzy boundary of the category later in the narrative). For instance, Renault's corruption contrasts with at least one attribute of a prototypical police captain, namely that police captains uphold rather than exploit the law. However, his corruption is only a minor challenge to his police captain typing, one that moves him slightly away from the center of the prototype. Such minor contrasts are quite normative for classical beginnings -- characters often become individuated from type by exhibiting contrasting traits that place them at some remove from the prototypical center of the categories to which they belong.

Much less normative for classical beginnings is for a character to become individuated by exhibiting traits or behavior that present a *major* contrast to their initial typing, requiring such extensive type revision that the initial type must be discarded entirely, and replaced with one more suitable. If we were to observe Renault taking orders from his subordinates, robbing a bank, or wantonly shooting into the crowd of patrons at Rick's café without provocation, then our initial typing would face a major challenge. Rather than a police captain, Renault's behavior would seem much more readily characteristic of a junior policeman, a thief, or a mass murderer, respectively, all types which conflict strongly with the police captain type. Such radical challenges to a character's type are much more normative for the middle or end of a classical narrative, rather than the beginning. Such is the case in many films with misleading narration, where the film's climax reveals characters to be of different types than those solicited upon their introduction. *Stage Fright*'s Jonathan, for instance, initially solicits the inaccurate type for a *wrong man* -- he appears to be an innocent victim, suspected for a murder he didn't commit because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time -- when he is actually a murderer on the run from the police.

In sum, revisions to an initial typing only go so far in classical beginnings; while minor revisions to a character's schema are fairly normative, it is not terribly normative for a classical beginning to solicit a particular type for a character, only to invalidate that typing and replace it with another *while* the beginning is still underway. While classical narration might solicit both accurate and inaccurate types through which to categorize characters, in most cases, the narration doesn't individuate its characters from type by revealing a type to be inaccurate during the beginning; if a narration deliberately solicits an inaccurate character type, often the inaccuracy is revealed (and the initial typing overturned) only much later in plot.

Given the previous discussions of first impressions, the primacy effect, and its normative use in classical narration, the reasons for this norm are quite evident: overturning a character's initial typing during the beginning would provide viewers with very little firm basis for casting hypotheses and making inferences. Instead, viewers would be more inclined to be suspicious of the information provided by the narration, and accordingly, the schemata that might categorize the characters. Sometimes this is indeed the case, as with those narrations which make use of Sternberg's "rhetoric of anticipatory caution," where we become suspicious of our first impression of a character (including their apparent type). However, even in narratives that provide reason to doubt the particular type solicited by a character's introduction, quite often this strategy only applies to a minority of the characters. Most characters in classical narration seem to be relatively straightforwardly typed, even in genres that encourage suspicion of first impressions of some characters, like mysteries and thrillers. Such is the case in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *Mission Impossible*, for instance. As Murray Smith writes, "The prototypical classical film... quickly makes the central characters salient and legible.... Most of the expectations formed at the beginning of the film with regard to these characters will be

reinforced, rather than undermined.”¹²¹ While we might be unsure of the accuracy of *some* characters’ types over the course of the beginning, *most* characters in these films do not provide viewers any reason to become suspicious of their apparent types (even if those types are ultimately inaccurate); instead, the narration provides viewers with seemingly firm bases for understanding its characters and forming expectations about the narrative.

One other exception to the stability of initial types during the beginning is when an overturned typed yields only minor changes in character’s categorization, or when the inaccurate type is much less central to the narrative than in films with misleading narration. These kinds of exceptions are commonplace in comedies, where the inaccurate type functions more to create a joke than it does to individuate characters. For example, in the beginning of *Singin’ in the Rain*, in order to deflate Don’s overbearing self-confidence, Cathy claims to be a stage actress near the conclusion of their first scene together, an occupation which she argues is more refined and dignified than that of a screen actor. Thus it is amusing when she next appears at the premiere party for Don’s latest film, popping out of the top of a cake in a skimpy outfit: her self-assigned type is revealed to be rather inaccurate, as she is actually a burlesque showgirl. While overturning Cathy’s initial stage actress typing and replacing it with a showgirl type individuates her character somewhat (at the very least by making it evident that she’s embarrassed to be caught in a lie about her occupation), she is much more individuated in her earlier scene with Don, when she resists Don’s charms and becomes angry at his patronization of her career aspirations. In fact, she quite literally differentiates herself from other ingénues and fan girls when she yells at Don, “You expect every girl to fall at a dead faint at your feet. Well don’t you touch me!” Thus her inaccurate initial typing (stage actress) is not the primary means through

¹²¹ Smith, 125.

which she is individuated; the inaccurate typing serves as more of a joke than a destabilization of a schema for her character.

Aside from strongly challenging an initial typing, the only other character individuation metric that is clearly non-normative for classical narrative beginnings is character change. That is, just like large changes in a character's type, changes in a character's traits or long-term goals - if they occur -- normatively take place after the beginning. As discussed in Chapter 1, Kristin Thompson has persuasively argued that over the course of the setup (the first act of her four-part segmentation of classical narratives), a character usually "conceives of one or more goals," and that the end of the setup, along with the other segments she identifies, are all marked by "turning points," which typically consist of changes in a character's goals (or the introduction of a major new premise).¹²² Even though turning points or goal changes are insufficient for determining where a narrative beginning ends (as discussed in Chapter 1), they *are* still useful for describing the norms of character establishment in the beginning. As Thompson argues, characters normatively develop long-term goals over the course of the setup, and the subsequent segments of the narrative are about characters' attempts to achieve them (at least until a new turning point comes along, potentially introducing changes to their long-term goal).

Accordingly, a character's long-term goals typically don't change *during* the beginning, but are instead *formed* over its duration (typically through the establishment of the conditions that necessitate the formation of the long-term goal in the first place).¹²³ The character undergoes "change" at the point where they conceive of the long-term goal, which often, although not

¹²² Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 28, 29.

¹²³ There are exceptions, of course; some classically narrated films have characters work toward goals that organize even the film's beginning. One such film is *Alien* (1979), where, as Thompson describes, the characters work toward the goal of identifying the source of a distress call, although even here, this goal is not formulated until around 11 minutes into the film. See Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 29, 289.

always, coincides with the end of the beginning (as elaborated in Chapter 1, the end of the beginning is better described by the formation of a probable and exclusive global hypothesis, which may or may not incorporate such goals). In *Back to the Future*, for instance, Marty has many short-term goals over the course of the beginning (experimenting with Doc's gigantic amplifier, avoiding being even later to school than he already is, sneaking into class without getting caught, performing with his band at the school dance, taking his girlfriend to the lake for the weekend, and so on), but only forms a long-term goal of returning to the present after he accidentally travels to the past.¹²⁴

Classically narrated films usually introduce a long-term goal near the end of the beginning because the long-term goal is often best understood in the context of the information that led to its formation in the first place. In other words, as discussed throughout this dissertation, narrative beginnings function to establish various casually necessary conditions for later developments, such as exposition, characters, and setting information. A character's long-term goal, then, can be conceived as one of those later developments for which a beginning prepares viewers; it emerges from the conditions established over the course of the beginning.

¹²⁴ This example is complicated slightly because *Back to the Future* is a film where the end of the beginning is quite clearly *not* coincident with the end of the setup (which itself is not coincident with the formation of a long-term goal). The probable and exclusive global hypothesis marking the end of the beginning is that the film will concern Marty's attempt to travel back from 1955 to 1985, but it can only be made either when Marty has actually traveled to the past, or when he is on the cusp of doing so (during Marty's escape from the Libyan terrorists, the film strongly suggests he will soon travel to the past by repeatedly cutting to a close-up of the DeLorean's speedometer as Marty approaches the 88 miles per hour necessary for time travel). However, according to Thompson, the end of the film's setup occurs not when Marty travels to the past, but during a brief ellipsis just before the Libyans attack, after Doc explains how he stole the plutonium, but before he and Marty make the final preparations for Doc's soon-to-be aborted trip. Moreover, Marty does not form the goal of returning from the past to the future until he fully realizes he has traveled to the past, which, as Thompson points out, does not occur until he's had a chance to wander around 1955 Hill Valley for some time. Thus in *Back to the Future*, the first turning point is not coincident with the end of the beginning or the formation of a long-term goal. *Ibid.*, 29-30, 85-86. Nevertheless, the film still serves as a useful example of how long-term goals typically don't develop until near the end of the beginning.

Similarly, if a character is individuated through a change in dispositions, it is much more normative for the change to occur much later in the narrative than over the course of the beginning. Character dispositions often do not change during the beginning because in the beginning there would be little basis for understanding the character as having undergone change. We need to spend some time with a character, observing their behavior and inferring their correspondent dispositions in order for change to register *as* change.¹²⁵ As Newman writes, “change is a temporally dynamic variable of character. It requires narrative unfolding and must be analyzed in narrative context.”¹²⁶ Changes to a character’s dispositions are typically a product of the events of the entire narrative, rather than just those events that occur over the course of the beginning. Indeed, Newman persuasively argues that it is difficult to make drastic character transformations credible over the course of an entire film, let alone the beginning. Thus dispositional change -- when it occurs -- tends to develop over the length of the *entire* narrative. Such is the case in various genres that Newman identifies where the change a character undergoes is a central component in the development of the story, like coming-of-age stories and “go-for-it” sports films: in both genres, the characters acquire new traits in the process of maturing or developing their competitive skills (be those traits physical or psychological). Newman offers two apt examples:

Michael Corleone’s youthful idealism at the beginning of *The Godfather* has turned into Machiavellian ruthlessness by the end, but this has been motivated very well by considerable growth of other kinds over the course of a long narrative and by significant changes in his character’s external situation. Go-for-it sports movies like *Rocky* and other narratives of apprenticeship and education often require a character who begins as a novice lacking confidence, but who by

¹²⁵ See Ibid., 50, on how characters in classical Hollywood films rarely undergo rapid change.

¹²⁶ Newman, 314.

the end has triumphed to the point that she has gained a new, stronger sense of self.¹²⁷

Accordingly, if an entire narrative is effectively about the change a character undergoes, typically that change does not take place in the beginning, but happens gradually over the course of its entire length.

Were a character's dispositions to change over the course of the beginning, rather than registering as change, instead it would seem as though our initial dispositional attributions are merely incorrect, or that the character is implausibly malleable, resembling an artificial construct more than an analogue of a person (provided, of course, that the film makes it clear that the character's dispositions have indeed changed, rather than there being situational causes influencing the character's behavior. Considering the power of the primacy effect, the dispositional changes would have to be emphatic, to say the least). Clearly, undermining dispositional attribution or making a character appear implausibly malleable is unproductive for a mode of narration that is organized through psychological causation; the characters must appear to adhere to the person schema and the structure of folk psychology if progression of the narrative is to be sustained by the characters' psychology. As Bordwell puts it, "If a character must act as the prime causal agent, he or she must be defined as a bundle of qualities, or traits," traits which are in turn consistent with one another.¹²⁸ Much like how overturning an initial character type during the beginning can destabilize hypothesis casting and inference making, introducing changes to a character's dispositions over the course of the beginning can also undermine the schemata we use to understand the character.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 315-316.

¹²⁸ Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 13.

In sum, classical narratives generally chart a middle path between character types and individuated characters. As Newman writes, “Characters are rarely -- if ever -- nothing but type. Nor are they unique creations unlike anyone you have ever met.”¹²⁹ Instead, principal characters in classical narratives fall somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. This middle path is in turn evident in narrative beginnings, both in terms of the beginning normatively balancing between reinforcing an initial type and simultaneously differentiating characters from it, and in terms of beginnings’ selective use of the various metrics through which individuation can be achieved. One important question remains regarding character individuation and narrative beginnings: Why is some degree of character individuation normative for classical beginnings? That is, what functions does character individuation serve in the beginning of a film?

Generally, character individuation helps to make viewers more invested in characters, preventing the characters from appearing boring or predictable. As Newman writes, “People who always act as predicted may appear boring, and characters who always act as predicted may seem much more so.”¹³⁰ While undifferentiated characters are useful and have a place in narratives (especially with regards to minor characters), characters who are somewhat differentiated from type are much more suitable for generating and holding viewer interest, one of the most significant reasons being that it is much easier to generate a larger quantity of sophisticated, nuanced, and precise folk psychological inferences about characters which are moderately differentiated from type than it is for undifferentiated characters.¹³¹ That is, moderately

¹²⁹ Newman, 93.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ This is not to say that undifferentiated characters are completely uninteresting and inferior to individuated characters. Indeed, much of Forster’s discussion of the distinction between flat and round characters is in defense of the virtues of flat characters.

individuated characters (or rounder characters) are more conducive to psychologically rich situations than are characters which are not differentiated from type (or flatter characters), because they have more traits and types through which they can be understood. As Per Persson describes it, differentiating characters from type “presents a wide range of cues and appraisal parameters with which to reason and ‘play around with,’” yielding more sophisticated mental attributions than do simple, type-derived inferences.¹³² Of course, in order for a character’s traits or multiple types to contribute to a psychologically rich situation, viewers must first become aware of them, thus the incentive for a narration to individuate characters over the course of the beginning: the sooner the character becomes individuated, the sooner their individuation can contribute to the establishment of psychologically rich situations, and the sooner the narrative becomes more engaging for viewers. In other words, character individuation is one of the normative means through which classical beginnings work to establish psychologically rich situations.¹³³

For example, in *Jerry Maguire*, Jerry (Tom Cruise) is moderately individuated over the course of the beginning. When he first appears, he labels himself as a sports agent, and a fast-paced montage sequence features him exhibiting slick behavior that accords with this type: he glad-hands various athletes and coaches; he forcefully negotiates a contract for one of his players, and he uses his bravado and swagger to sign athletes as new clients. However, his voiceover narration also individuates him over the course of this sequence, both when he expresses genuine admiration for the skills of his athletes, and when he begins to have doubts

¹³² Persson, 216-217.

¹³³ Of course, providing a character with many traits and types only goes so far in creating psychologically rich situations; as we’ve seen, previous mental attributions are also a crucial component, one that requires spatiotemporal attachment and a character’s adherence to the principals of folk psychology more than it requires characters which are differentiated from type. Nevertheless, character individuation also contributes to psychologically rich situations.

about the morality of his work. Jerry's idealistic love of sportsmanship is evident when he implores us to "Check out what pure joy looks like" as a potential client hits a home run, but moments later, his voiceover also begins to express doubt, stating, "In the quest for the big dollars, a lot of the little things were going wrong." This statement is followed by a scene of Jerry defending to the press an athlete who has been accused of statutory rape, another scene where an athlete turns down an autograph request from a child because the child doesn't have the brand of card the athlete is authorized to sign, and then a more protracted scene where Jerry tries to reassure the family of a hockey player who has just suffered his fourth concussion. In the latter scene, the player's child implores Jerry to get his dad to stop playing, but Jerry only offers him halfhearted platitudes about the dad's toughness. When the child responds by cursing out Jerry, Jerry's voiceover wonders in dismay, "Who have I become? Just another shark in a suit?" Overall, then, the narration provides a rather individuated schema for Jerry: he's somewhat of callous sports agent, a "shark in a suit," as he puts it, but he also genuinely loves sportsmanship, and is conflicted about the moral compromises he's had to make to excel at his job. As David Bordwell describes Jerry in his analysis of the film, there are "two sides of Jerry's character, slick professionalism and earnest idealism," and both of these sides of his character are made evident very early in the film's beginning.¹³⁴

This individuation then provides the basis for situations that shade toward psychological richness. After wondering about who he has become, Jerry has a late-night crisis of conscience, his voiceover stating that he "hated his place in the world." In order to remedy his guilt and self-loathing, he spends the entire night writing a "mission statement" for his vision of a better sports

¹³⁴ David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 64.

agency, one that emphasizes fewer clients and less money in favor of more client care and personal attention, and he distributes it to his colleagues' hotel mailboxes at a corporate conference.¹³⁵ The psychological richness of this scene and those of the montage sequence that precedes it are bolstered by Jerry's nearly continuous voiceover narration, where he often explicitly tells viewers his intentions, goals, beliefs, and feelings. However, his voiceover largely subsides for the rest of the film, and subsequent scenes in the beginning of the film are moderately enriched by his conflicting professionalism and idealism. The next morning, Jerry begins to have second thoughts about having distributed his mission statement. When he calls the hotel lobby to see if they've gone out, we can infer that he *intends* to take back the copies he's distributed. When he learns they've already been distributed, and we can infer from his strained reaction that despite his belief in his ideals, and his intentions the previous evening, he now *believes* his impulse to share his thoughts with his colleagues was a mistake. These seemingly contrasting beliefs and intentions are made comprehensible by the individuation his character has undergone over the course of the previous scenes and sequences, and our knowledge of them yields a moderately rich psychological situation. In other words, Jerry is both a slick professional who *believes* the sports agency business operates through an emphasis on profit margins rather than empathy for clients, as well as an idealistic sports enthusiast who *wants* his representation of his clients to match those ideals, and this individuation helps us to make somewhat nuanced

¹³⁵ One might argue that Jerry's crisis of conscience offers a degree of character change. Indeed, Bordwell describes the opening sequence of the film as "practically a movie unto itself" or a "minimovie," partially because Jerry seems to change from a shark in a suit to someone who rediscovers their ideals in a moment of despair. *Ibid.*, 68, 71. However, given that Jerry's idealism, professionalism, and his moral uncertainty are fairly intertwined throughout the entire opening sequence (both in the imagery and the voiceover), it is perhaps more accurate to say that both of these aspects of his personality -- the slick sports agent and the idealistic enthusiast -- are each present from the start, and are simply emphasized at different moments.

mental attributions about his behavior when he calls down to the hotel lobby to check on his mission statements.

The moderate psychological richness enabled by Jerry's individuation continues into the next scene, as Jerry reluctantly enters the hotel lobby. He hesitates after exiting the elevator to the lobby, and appears to momentarily consider going back up to his room before pressing on, where -- much to his relief -- he receives a round of applause from his colleagues. Once again, we can make nuanced inferences about his mental state because his character has been individuated: his slick professionalism makes him doubt his colleagues' openness to his idealistic mission statement, and his relief is a product of his belief that his colleagues indeed accepted it.¹³⁶

In addition to facilitating psychologically rich situations, character individuation during the beginning also helps to create causally necessary conditions for later events. If the causal structure of a classical narrative is sustained by the characters' psychological motivation, then attributing to characters a large quantity of traits and/or types in the beginning provides many possible trait-based conditions that can affect later narrative developments. In other words, character individuation is a means of motivating a character's actions later in the narrative. The traits revealed in the beginning of a film often prove themselves to be causally necessary conditions for addressing later narrative developments. Accordingly, character individuation is also a way of making characters central to the development of the narrative.

For instance, in the beginning of *Back to the Future*, Marty is individuated through his possessing a large quantity of traits and types: he is predominantly typed as a high school

¹³⁶ A moment of unrestricted narration reveals that Jerry was right to be concerned, as two of his colleagues speculate that Jerry has only "about a week" before he'll lose his job, allowing us to infer that some (perhaps most) of the applause is facetious.

student, but he is also skilled at skateboarding and guitar-playing, and has a girlfriend. These types and traits combine to individuate his character, but they also serve as causally necessary conditions for later events. His skateboarding skills, for instance, become causally relevant when he uses them to escape from Biff (Thomas F. Wilson) and his gang midway through the film (further inciting Marty's mother's attraction and imperiling Marty's existence), while his guitar playing becomes causally relevant when he saves the school dance by taking the place of the band's injured guitarist, thus ensuring his parents have the opportunity to kiss for the first time, initiating the romance that will lead to their marriage, and eventually, Marty's birth. Likewise, Marty's motivation for keeping the flyer with information about the exact date and time lightning struck the Hill Valley clock tower (information which will prove crucial to his ability to return from the past to the present) is provided by his girlfriend, who writes the phone number of her grandma's house on it. As this example shows, Marty's diverse types and traits provide the motivation for later events in the film, and make Marty's actions central to its development.

Thus while classical beginnings normatively reinforce familiar types in order to provide a basis for understanding the character (including making simple folk psychological inferences), principal characters are also simultaneously differentiated from type in order to both expedite the creation of psychologically richer situations (be it through the a character's possessing at least a handful of salient traits not specified by their type, through their being categorized through multiple types, or through their initial typing being revised or through the incorporation of additional traits), and to provide causally necessary conditions for later events.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ This is not to say that undifferentiated characters are incapable of creating psychologically rich situations, but that given identical narrative situations, the individuated character solicits richer, more sophisticated, and more nuanced folk psychological inferences from viewers than does the undifferentiated character.

Norms for Star Personae and Classical Beginnings

Earlier in the chapter, star personae were discussed both in terms of their typing function, where they provide an initial type through which to categorize a character, and in terms of their differentiating function, where the star's persona individuates the character somewhat by providing a series of additional associations aside from whatever social role types the narration initially solicits for that character. Both of these functions of star personae are particularly normative for classical narrative beginnings. Star personae are a normative means through which characters can be initially typed in classically narrated films because such films very often feature stars in the lead roles (especially classical Hollywood films). As Murray Smith argues, while any social role can be used as the basis for an initial character typing, "in the prototypical classical film, the star system provides an especially well-developed set of character models" on which to base an initial typing.¹³⁸

As with any other type, classical narration normatively employs star personae to efficiently solicit a rich blend of trait associations, preliminary expectations, and in some cases rudimentary folk psychological inferences. As described above, in *Casablanca*, the narration hints at Rick's dispositions when he is discussed by Carl and various patrons, and when the narration reveals that Rick is played by Humphrey Bogart, a series of other associations immediately becomes available: he is likely tough, cynical, world-weary, and individualist, but also moral and sentimental. Cathy Klaprat provides an alternative example in Bette Davis' character from *The Letter*, one in which there is even less preparatory information leading up to her appearance: "In *The Letter*, Davis' mere presence in the picture establishes a certain probability [about her character type]. As the film opens, Davis empties a gun into a man at close

¹³⁸ Smith, 119.

range as he staggers down the veranda stairs. No motivation is provided, but we presume that the audience is familiar with the Davis persona and can accept her killing a man outright.”¹³⁹ Here, the star persona provides not only dispositional associations, but also some preliminary expectations and hypotheses (however broad they may be): the murder will likely end up playing a prominent role in the story, and Davis’ character likely killed the man because he interfered with her plans (versus, say, the murder being a crime of passion or self-defense).

At the same time, star personae are also useful for classical narration because they can serve an individuating function when they are solicited alongside whatever other mid-level social role type a character first solicits. Rick is not only a Humphrey Bogart-type, but he is also a powerful nightclub owner, and these two types work together to individuate the character (the latter being solicited before the former). Of course, star personae also can be solicited prior to a mid-level type. Such is the case in *Rear Window*, where Jeff first appears in close-up, soliciting James Stewart’s star persona prior to any other mid-level social role types (such as *photographer* or *injured person*). Likewise, the narration can also solicit a star persona and a social role type simultaneously, where a character first appears engaged in behavior or dressed in a way that solicits an obvious mid-level social role type, while simultaneously being recognizable as the star, and soliciting their persona. Such is the case in *Gravity* (2013), where Matt Kowalski (George Clooney) immediately solicits a type for *astronaut* upon his introduction, as he first appears in orbit around earth, responding to transmissions from ground control in Houston.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Klaprat, 371.

¹⁴⁰ Some might question the extent to which *Gravity* is actually a classical film, considering its spare narrative, but Kristin Thompson mounts a convincing argument that the film is indeed classical, albeit minimalist and unconventional. As she writes, “The film’s story is certainly simpler and more unconventional than other mainstream Hollywood films, but as we shall see, it contains goals, motifs, character traits, careful setups of upcoming action, and other traits of classical narratives.” Kristin Thompson, “Gravity, Part 1: Two characters adrift

Even though Kowalski is initially physically indistinguishable (he first appears as a tiny dot while the image of the space shuttle and the astronauts working around it grows larger), as soon as his voice becomes audible, his dialogue and its contexts makes it immediately clear that he is in space, while simultaneously the sound of his voice makes it evident that he is played by George Clooney, which in turn solicits Clooney's persona (something like suave, self-assured, handsome, sophisticated, and capable).¹⁴¹ However, the precise order in which star personae or social role types are solicited is largely arbitrary, considering both that in a typical classical film, each kind of type can serve an individuating function, depending on whichever is solicited first. No matter which type is solicited first, the second type tends to follow relative quickly on the heels of the first.

However, despite both star personae's usefulness and classical films frequently featuring stars in principal roles, classical beginnings seldom rely exclusively on star personae, either for initially typing characters or for individuating them. Classical beginnings avoid relying on star personae for some of the same reasons that star personae are a peripheral rather than central component in the model of character comprehension outlined earlier in this chapter. For one, the availability of star personae is contingent on potentially unstable cultural and historical extratextual and intertextual knowledge (i.e., not everyone knows a star's persona). Classically narrated films strive to facilitate understanding, and accordingly, they are designed to accommodate even those viewers who have no idea who the stars might be, and thus classical films cannot afford to rely too heavily on star personae for characterization, even when a star's

in an experimental film." November 7, 2013. <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2013/11/07/gravity-part-1-two-characters-adrift-in-an-experimental-film/>, accessed 26 January 2014.

¹⁴¹ In short order, Kowalski will be individuated further: once it is clear that he is the astronaut performing the intricate swoops and whorls in the Manned Maneuvering Unit during the spacewalk that begins the film, he can also be typed as a *veteran* astronaut.

persona accords with the character they play.¹⁴² Instead, classical narration reinforces whatever associations a star persona might provide by having the character explicitly exhibit traits that accord with the star's persona, thereby providing insurance against those viewers who might be unfamiliar with a given star. In other words, classical narration often reinforces whatever associations a star persona might solicit by providing similar associations through *diegetic* information; the character displays the traits associated with the star in the course of their introduction.

For example, rather than relying on a viewer's awareness of George Clooney's star persona to characterize Matt Kowalski, *Gravity* has Kowalski exhibit some of the same traits associated with Clooney's persona: he is self-assured in his nonchalant attitude toward spaceflight; he is suave in his efforts to soothe the anxiety of his fellow astronaut, Ryan (Sandra Bullock), and he proves himself capable in his response to the orbital disaster that sets off the film's plot. Thus even if viewers are unaware of Clooney's star persona, his character still exhibits traits very closely aligned with those of the star (although as Kristin Thompson points out, the characterization in the film is minimal, and tends to rely somewhat on the charisma of its stars).¹⁴³ Similarly, the narration might also solicit mid-level types that share many of the associations of a star's persona; in the opening of the *The Letter*, Davis immediately solicits a type for *murderer*, a type which shares some associations with Davis' persona, such as maliciousness and amorality.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² One exception might include star cameos, where the impact of the character relies on viewers having knowledge of the film's star. See Dyer, 126.

¹⁴³ Thompson, "Gravity, Part 1: Two characters adrift in an experimental film."

¹⁴⁴ It is also likely that a star's performance favorably influences the degree to which their persona agrees with the types or traits solicited by the narration; aspects of a star's performance such as speech cadence, pronunciation, body language, gestures, and the routine expressions a star uses to convey thoughts and emotions can contribute

Another reason that classical beginnings do not rely exclusively on star personae for typing or individuating characters is that sometimes the star persona is not a perfect fit with the character. When a star's persona differs radically from their character (i.e., when the star plays against type), classical beginnings rapidly and emphatically solicit (and then reinforce) either an alternate typing, or highly contrasting traits that dispel the star persona through the means described earlier: introducing the character in contexts that make a suitable mid-level type obvious; presenting physical attributes that immediately solicit a type, or simply explicitly labeling the character with a type. In *Fort Apache*, Thursday is immediately typed as a military officer, but his traits contrast so greatly with Henry Fonda's star persona that his persona is quickly subordinated to the types and traits actually solicited by Thursday's behavior.

In sum, while star personae can and often do serve as useful shorthand for typing and individuating characters in classical beginnings, rather than relying on star personae too heavily, classical beginnings normatively provide a means of categorizing and individuating characters based on diegetic information, either by having the character exhibit particular traits or by soliciting various social role types. Doing so both ensures that viewers unfamiliar with a star's persona are still able to accurately type the character, and provides a firm basis for understanding those characters whose traits and types do not accord with the personae of the stars that play them.

Norms for Psychologically Rich Situations and Classical Beginnings

significantly to the inference of a character's traits or types. For instance, Clooney's performance of Kowalski solicits inferences about Kowalski's dispositions, which in turn correspond to Clooney's persona, but the performance of the same dialogue by a different star (or perhaps even a different performance from Clooney) might solicit somewhat different correspondent inferences about Kowalski's dispositions. What's suave, self-assured, and capable for Clooney might become lecherous, distracted, and arrogant for other stars such as Steve Buscemi, Alan Rickman or Jim Carrey.

Previously this chapter argued that psychologically rich situations are less probable at the start of the *syuzhet* than in later parts of a film because it takes time for the narration to introduce situational parameters, and because viewers have limited capacity for inferring mental states for more than one character at a time. At least one norm of classical narration further contributes to the difficulty of psychologically rich situations in narrative beginnings, namely that characters form long-term goals near the end of the beginning. While any previous mental attribution can enrich the psychology of subsequent situations, long-term goals are particularly effective at doing so, because they generate many additional, subordinate, short-term goals through which a character's behavior can be understood (in addition to providing a psychological through-line that organizes segments of the narration, as in Kristin Thompson's four-act segmentation). Accordingly, when a character has formed a long-term goal, both it and the short-term goals they subsequently form in the course of achieving it each contribute to a viewer's mental attributions at a given moment, creating richer and more complex intentional states for viewers to infer. However, as discussed above, characters do not usually formulate long-term goals until near the end of the beginning, and thus beginnings have at least one fewer means of generating psychologically rich situations than do later parts of the narrative.

For instance, in addition to his goal of returning from 1955 to 1985, another of Marty's long-term goals in *Back to the Future* is to get his teenage parents romantically involved with one another (thereby ensuring his future birth) after he inadvertently alters the story of how they first met. In order to achieve this long-term goal, Marty must accomplish a series of subordinate goals, such as dissuading his teenage mother's romantic interest in him, coaxing his shy and awkward teenage father into pursuing his mother, and deterring Biff from bullying Marty's father and harassing his mother. These subordinate goals work in tandem with his long-term goal

to provide viewers with a means of making rich, sophisticated, and nuanced mental attributions about Marty's behavior in a given scene.¹⁴⁵ However, neither this long-term goal of initiating his parents' romance nor his goal of returning to the present can enrich the psychology of the situations in the beginning because Marty does not formulate these goals until after the beginning has concluded. In other words, we can only attribute long-term goals to characters once a character has actually formulated them, and this formulation normatively occurs near the end of the beginning.

Of course, as discussed above, this norm of characters forming long-term goals near the end of the beginning is not designed to diminish the opportunity for psychologically rich situations in the beginning, but is instead designed to assist viewers in understanding the circumstances that have led a character to form long-term goals in the first place. One of the byproducts of this norm just happens to be that it reduces the opportunity for psychologically rich situations to be derived from the confluence of both long-term and short-term goals. However, this does not mean that classical beginnings are completely incapable of any degree of psychological richness.

In general, classical beginnings are designed to provide situational parameters that enrich mental attributions *later* in the narrative; classically narrated films gradually become more psychologically complex and engaging as they progress because the beginning establishes the parameters necessary for such complexity. Thus while classical beginnings are likely to be less psychologically rich than other parts of the narrative, their relative degree of psychological richness gradually *increases* the further the narrative progresses from the start of the *syuzhet*. As

¹⁴⁵ Incidentally, this example also shows how individuated characters are more conducive to psychologically rich situations. Marty's long-term goals help to differentiate him from other characters like Biff, who do not possess such clearly articulated goals, and who accordingly have less richly realized folk psychology.

discussed above, a part of this gradual increase can be attributed to viewer cognitive processes, such as the automatic accumulation of folk psychological inferences and dispositional attributions while observing a character's behavior. However, despite long-term character goals normatively forming at the end of the beginning, many other norms of classical narration actually *expedite* the formation of psychologically rich situations, such that the beginning becomes psychologically richer than it would be otherwise. These norms include characters adhering to the principles of folk psychology, spatiotemporal attachment to a limited number of characters, and the use of preliminary exposition, character individuation, and self-conscious narrational devices.

The norm of characters adhering to the principles of folk psychology is relatively self-explanatory: characters in classical films tend to behave like the people we encounter in our real lives. We assume that characters' sensations, perceptions, and physiology inform their thinking and beliefs, and that those beliefs -- as well as their desires and emotions -- motivate their actions.¹⁴⁶ Thus just as in life, where the more time we spend with someone, the better we get to know them, in films, the more we observe a character, the more precise, sophisticated, nuanced, and complex our inferences about their behavior become.

As we've seen, situations can become increasingly psychologically rich the more spatiotemporally attached we are to a character, because we acquire situational parameters as a given scene or situation progresses and we observe the character's behavior and make inferences about its causes. Thus the classical norm of following only a handful of characters -- or sometimes even a single character -- through a film facilitates increasingly psychologically rich situations right from the start of the *syuzhet*. As Persson writes, "The narration in mainstream

¹⁴⁶ See Persson, 164 for an elaboration on this model of folk psychology.

cinema... tends to restrict itself to a small gallery of characters and to follow them for an extensive period of screen time. This makes it possible for the spectator to speculate about their mental states and appraise the emotional importance of the events taking place.”¹⁴⁷ In other words, classical narration’s normative focus on a limited number of characters contributes to the psychological richness of a film increasing as it progresses from the start of the *syuzhet* because it allows us to make use of the previous mental attributions we have already accumulated.¹⁴⁸

Character individuation and immediate preliminary exposition are two other norms that also contribute to the psychological richness of narrative situations increasing as a film progresses, even during the beginning. As discussed above, characters that are individuated over the course of the beginning enrich the psychology of situations by providing additional dispositions and types through which to understand their behavior, allowing for more complex mental attributions. In *Singin’ in the Rain*, for instance, Lina (Jean Hagen) is individuated over the course of the beginning: she’s initially typed as a glamorous movie star, but is individuated when she reveals herself to also be petty, unintelligent, and uncouth. The combination of her type and these dispositions then provide the basis for at least one nuanced and precise inference about her behavior relatively early in the film, namely that her attraction to Don is superficial, more of a transparently calculated pretense than genuine affection (later, the psychological richness of scenes involving Lina will increase significantly when she acquires additional intentions, goals, and beliefs, such as her desire to manipulate Cathy into serving as her voice double in perpetuity).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 223.

¹⁴⁸ The furthest classical narration likely gets from this norm is in what David Bordwell calls “network narratives,” where the narration follows a series of unrelated or only loosely related characters over the course of the film. See Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 99-103 for a discussion of network narratives and classical narration.

Likewise, while preliminary exposition has many functions (including, as discussed in Chapter 3, reinforcing beginnings' causal self-sufficiency, efficiently communicating information through self-conscious means, and filling in a narrative template schema), it can also expedite psychologically richer situations by explicitly conveying a character's intentional states, in turn providing preliminary mental attributions that can then enrich subsequent situations.¹⁴⁹

For example, in the beginning of *Rear Window*, Jeff's conversation with his nurse, Stella (Thelma Ritter), provides preliminary exposition about his relationship with Lisa: Lisa wants Jeff to marry her, but Jeff is concerned that they aren't a good match because Lisa is a sophisticated high society woman and Jeff is a spontaneous, rugged, and adventurous photographer. This exposition provides the parameters for making sophisticated, nuanced, and precise mental attributions about Jeff and Lisa in their first scene together. When Lisa tells Jeff about her busy day, Jeff patronizes her with a question he doesn't care about, and the exposition provides us with the parameters to understand his motivation: he's trying to draw attention to their incompatibility by asking her a question to which he has no interest in hearing the answer. Moments later, Lisa suggests to Jeff that he leave his current position at his magazine and set up his own fashion photography studio in New York in order to be closer to her. Jeff dismisses her idea as "nonsense," and once again the exposition assists us in understanding why: even though he's been confined to his wheelchair for the entire film, Jeff sees himself as a type that doesn't mix well with Lisa's high society crowd.¹⁵⁰ Finally, when Lisa fishes for a compliment about her

¹⁴⁹ Of course, as discussed above, even though it is normative for classically narrated films to begin with preliminary exposition, that exposition does not always consist of situational parameters, and thus preliminary exposition alone is no guarantee of any degree of psychological richness.

¹⁵⁰ Granted, the exposition-derived mental attributions are not the only parameters that enrich this part of Jeff and Lisa's conversation. Jeff implicitly reiterates his belief in their being a poor match when he sarcastically asks Lisa, "Can you imagine me driving down to the fashion salon in a jeep, wearing combat boots and a three day beard?"

preparation of the fancy dinner she's had brought to Jeff's apartment, the exposition about Jeff's concern over his and Lisa's relationship also adds nuanced meaning to the exasperation in his voice when he replies, "Lisa, it's perfect. As always." Here, the exposition allows us to understand that Jeff is sincere in his belief that the dinner is perfect, but that he finds its perfection disheartening because it is further evidence of their incompatibility. The exposition has made it clear that Jeff finds his and Lisa's respective ways of life problematic because of their incompatibility, enriching the mental attributions we can make about their characters in this scene.

One other norm of classical beginnings also expedites the creation of psychologically rich situations: the various self-conscious narrational devices normatively employed in the beginnings of films. Chapter 2 argued that classical beginnings are normatively self-conscious both because it makes salient the information that will be causally relevant for understanding the narrative, and because it enables viewers to immediately understand what's happening by soliciting specific schemata that can apply to a particular narrative situation. We can now posit a more specific explanation for the latter of these two functions: the specific schemata solicited by self-conscious narrational devices (especially voiceover narration or other means of directly addressing viewers, like titles or characters talking to the camera) explicitly provide viewers with a means of making a greater quantity of precise, sophisticated, nuanced, and certain mental attributions faster than might otherwise be possible. In other words, another way of explaining the purpose of the self-conscious devices normatively employed in classical beginnings is through their facilitation of psychologically rich situations early in the film.

Such is the case in films like *The Descendants* and *Jerry Maguire*. In the latter film, for instance, Jerry's voiceover explicitly narrates some of his thoughts and feelings as we see him

interact with others, effectively providing viewers with the kind of sophisticated, nuanced, and precise mental attributions that are characteristic of psychologically rich situations, but that would be somewhat difficult to make with as much precision and certainty were viewers left to infer them without the aid of his voiceover. The voiceover creates a psychologically rich situation by providing direct cues for many complex mental attributions, relieving viewers of the effort of making those mental attributions in the first place. Of course, as we've seen, Jerry's voiceover also strongly individuates his character by providing many dispositions through which to understand his behavior, and it also conveys expositional information, summarizing Jerry's habitual activities and reoccurring behavior. While self-conscious devices, exposition, and character individuation are three different ways in which a narrative beginning can facilitate psychologically rich situations (and can each be employed independently of one another, as the examples from *Singin' in the Rain* and *Rear Window* indicate), the three often accompany one another in classical narration; a self-conscious device will narrate preliminary exposition and individuate characters while also providing explicit intentional states, and all three of these norms working together to enrich the psychology of the beginning more than would otherwise be the case.¹⁵¹

Overall, regardless of the means, it is normative for classical beginnings to expedite the formation of psychologically rich situations because, as described above, it is a means of giving viewers powerful tools for understanding the character-derived psychological causality that organizes the narrative. The richer the situation (i.e., the more precise, sophisticated, and

¹⁵¹ Indeed, it is not terribly normative for a self-conscious device located in the beginning to be devoid of both exposition and individuating information, as in a voiceover that narrated the thoughts of a character but provided no expositional or individuating information. More common is for titles, voiceover, or direct address in the beginning of a film to deal with either exposition, or information that differentiates characters from type, as in the examples described throughout this chapter.

nuanced our inferences about intentions, goals, and beliefs, and emotions), the better we can understand the motivation of the characters' actions, and the more thoroughly we are able to construct the causality that propels the narrative. Thus it is in the narration's interest to enrich viewers' folk psychological inferences as quickly as possible, because doing so better ensures the kind of precise comprehension that classical narration is designed to solicit.

In sum, narrative beginnings are less likely to be as psychologically rich as later parts of the narrative, for many of the reasons discussed above: situational parameters are cumulative and it takes time to introduce them; viewers have limited ability to make multiple inferences simultaneously, and a character's long-term goals usually form near the end of the beginning. However, this does not mean that classical beginnings are consigned exclusively to psychologically poor situations. Even though later parts of a narrative benefit from viewers having accumulated situational parameters as the narrative progresses, normatively, the psychological richness of classical beginnings gradually increases from the moment the *syuzhet* begins, both because we automatically accumulate situational parameters simply by observing character behavior, and because the norms of classical beginnings expedite the introduction of situational parameters. Thus while beginnings are designed to facilitate psychologically rich situations later in the narrative, they also tend to become psychologically richer while they are under way as well. Classical beginnings normatively try to grab viewers right away, organizing information so that viewers can start to make more sophisticated, nuanced, and precise mental attributions relatively quickly, through a combination of preliminary exposition, character individuation, self-conscious narrational techniques, and restricting spatiotemporal attachment to a limited number of characters. While all of these norms serve many functions in the beginning, they also hasten the development of psychologically rich situations by providing viewers with

the kinds of information necessary for making more complex folk psychological inferences about characters' mental states, in turn helping viewers construct the psychological causality through which classical films are organized.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can now see how both our understanding of characters and our ability to understand them develops as the beginning progresses from the start of the *syuzhet*. Initially, our understanding of characters is relatively flat and simplistic, as it is often based on a handful of abstract or mid-level types and traits, and we can make only broad, imprecise, and uncertain inferences about their mental states. While these initial types provide some preliminary expectations and a useful blend of associations, and while our initial mental attributions make some degree of sense out of characters' behavior, as the beginning progresses, our comprehension of characters can become much more complex. They can become differentiated from the initial mid-level types we've used to categorize them, displaying additional traits not specified by their type, and can often be described by multiple types, encouraging viewers to create a rich, distinctive, and vivid cognitive representation of the character. As we acquire more and more situational parameters, the mental attributions we make about the characters also become richer, more precise, nuanced, and sophisticated. This development from type to individuality and simplicity to complexity is especially normative in classically narrated beginnings. Classical beginnings are designed both to solicit and reinforce explicit types through which to categorize characters (either immediately upon their introduction or soon afterwards), as well as to differentiate characters from type, especially principal characters, because doing so can provide both causally necessary conditions for later events, and a means of encouraging

psychologically rich situations. While narrative beginnings might be predisposed to psychologically poor situations, many of the norms of classical beginnings actually expedite psychologically rich situations, which in turn help to construct the psychological causality that organizes classical narration. Accordingly, the model outlined here contributes significantly toward understanding the characters' place in narrative beginnings.

Chapter 5

Classical Beginnings in Films with Misleading Narration

This chapter examines the beginnings of classical films that have misleading or even duplicitous narration. Such films strive for a precarious balance between comprehension and deception; rather than giving viewers a transparent understanding of characters, actions, and events, these films delay, withhold, or falsify information in order to manipulate viewers into an unknowingly and fundamentally inaccurate or unrepresentative understanding of much of the narrative, often with the purpose of creating surprise when the extent of the misdirection is finally revealed. In other words, films with misleading narration conceal from viewers their withholding or manipulation of information -- be it through lying outright, stylistic effacement, distracting viewers from important information, or introducing that information in contexts that alter its meaning or the way viewers use it -- and this duplicity leads viewers to construct a *fabula* with glaring inaccuracies that fundamentally alter their understanding of the story.

There are at least three reasons for why it is useful to examine the beginnings of films with misleading narration. For one, such films demonstrate the versatility of classical narration. Films with misleading narration deviate from classical norms in some respects, but adhere to them in others, and in doing so, they seem to push the boundaries of the normative classical beginning, falling somewhere within what Murray Smith calls the “diffuse boundary zones” that make up categories like classical narration.¹ Even though such films often manipulate, or even violate certain norms of classical beginnings in order to mislead viewers, they can still be described by the classical paradigm because they often make use of the basic tenets of classical narration: not only are they predicated on soliciting easily accessible and precise aesthetic,

¹ Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 11.

cognitive, and emotional responses from viewers, but they also still accord with a canonical narrative template schema through their subordination of space and time to the psychological causality of goal-oriented characters. Classically narrated films that mislead viewers still function like mainstream narratives even though they lead viewers to construct a significantly inaccurate *fabula*.

More importantly, examining films with misleading narration is also useful because such films powerfully illustrate the importance of narrative *beginnings* for soliciting precise cognitive responses from viewers. As we shall see, films with misleading narration often set up their misdirection somewhere over the course of the beginning, and thus the beginnings of such films are carefully designed in order to effectively achieve their misdirection. Indeed, the precision of viewers' responses and the carefully designed beginnings that solicit them are strong reasons for considering films with misleading narration as classically narrated.

Finally, examining films with misdealing narration is also fruitful because the beginnings of such films test various facets of the cognitive processes and aesthetic norms this dissertation has advocated as explanations for why and how beginnings are designed. Films with misleading narration can set up their surprises by manipulating the norms discussed in previous chapters, and thus such films serve as a good demonstration of the analytical utility of many of the concepts set forth previously.² We should be able to account for the ways in which classical

² One could achieve a similar goal by examining groups of films that also fall within the classical paradigm but that vary in their use of norms, such as the films of a particular auteur, or a particular genre. As David Bordwell writes of the benefits of studying auteur films, such films allow us to “see the norm afresh, understand its functions better, recognize previously untapped possibilities in it, and – on a few occasions – reflect upon how our trust in the norm can mislead us.” David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema, Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 82. Films with misdealing narration are particularly suitable test cases for the utility of the cognitive process and aesthetic norms of previous chapters both because they have a robust and varied history within classical Hollywood cinema, and because they can be identified primarily through their narrational form and viewer response, rather than through a combination of provenance and criticism (as with auteur films), or a combination of marketing, critical discourse, and audience reception (as with particular genres).

beginnings can mislead viewers by examining how such films manipulate such concepts. As Jan Mukařovský writes of aesthetic norms in general, “every norm... makes felt its activity and hence its existence precisely at the moment when its violation occurs.”³ Examining films with misleading beginnings is another way of appreciating the familiarized standards the norms of classical beginnings create.

Accordingly, this chapter will be organized somewhat differently from the preceding chapters. Rather than starting by sketching out cognitive processes that bear on some aspect of narrative comprehension and then showing how the norms of classical beginnings are designed to engage with these processes, instead this chapter will first describe why beginnings are conducive to misdirection in general, and then will account for how classical beginnings can mislead viewers by taking advantage of many of the cognitive processes and aesthetic norms discussed in earlier chapters.⁴ Such processes and norms include: soliciting inaccurate or unrepresentative first impressions of characters; de-emphasizing or eliding the conditions necessary for accurately understanding the causes of later events; soliciting schemata that limit the ways in which we are likely to use information, and establishing an intrinsic norm for the narration’s knowledgeability and then later deviating from this norm.

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³ Jan Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm,” in *Structure, Sign, and Function*, ed. and trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 54.

⁴ Straying from the norms of classical beginnings does not always yield misleading narration, thus this chapter will focus primarily on those norms that, when manipulated, are especially conducive to leading viewers astray (and that haven’t already been addressed in preceding chapters).

Generally, any film that misleads viewers does so by withholding information, and then *concealing* the fact of withholding it to some degree. That is, a misleading narration entirely or partially hides that it is presenting an inaccurate account of events. We might call such duplicitous narration *unself-consciously* unreliable, because the narration does not overtly indicate its duplicity. Rather than self-consciously arousing viewer's suspicions (as in 1950's *Rashomon*, where viewers are warned ahead of time of the unreliability of film's character narrators), unself-conscious unreliability is discrete; viewers are unaware that there is anything unreliable about the narration because the film does not indicate to viewers that they are being misled. David Bordwell articulates such a distinction when he writes that we can either "spot 'unreliable' narration as it is occurring or recognize it only after the fact."⁵ Misleading narration refers to the latter possibility.

A narration can mislead viewers at any point: the narration is *always* capable of concealing that some information is being withheld, partially obscured, or falsified. However, it is especially easy and particularly effective for a misleading narration to do so in a narrative beginning. One reason for this ease is that in the beginning, viewers focus their cognitive efforts on whatever new information the narration *actually* presents, slotting actions and events into the narrative template schema, typing characters, casting hypotheses, making folk psychological inferences, and so on. That is, it is easy to slip something past viewers in the beginning because that is when the narration is still in the midst of introducing the new contexts through which subsequent actions are primarily understood; we are more likely to focus on whatever

⁵ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 60. A common narratological point of reference for self-conscious unreliability is the narrator of Ring Lardner's 1926 short story, "Haircut." The narrator is a character in the story he is telling, but he clearly has the wrong impression of another character about whom he tells a story. See Wayne C. Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 7, 274, and James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character Progression and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 15-20.

information is presented than on whatever information is deemphasized through omission or partial obstruction.

Another reason beginnings are particularly effective at misleading viewers is that generally, viewers do not approach a narrative expecting the narration to deceive or mislead, but instead have a credulous mindset: we're inclined to assume the narration is being more or less straightforward. This mindset is partly a product of our experience with classical narratives, in which misdirection is less normative than a more straightforward approach. As Kristin Thompson writes, "Undoubtedly, in both literature and the cinema, the likelihood is that the narration will not use the techniques of the medium overtly to deceive the reader or spectator but will signal the status of any given passage."⁶ However, this credulous mindset is also a product of the limited knowledge viewers possess when beginning a story, which itself is a third reason beginnings are particularly conducive to misdirection. Viewers have little recourse for being suspicious of the veracity or forthrightness of the narration in the beginning because they have the fewest alternative points of reference for harboring such doubts; in the beginning, we have just started the story, and thus even if the narration is unreliable or duplicitous, we have little basis for suspecting it, and few means of detecting it.

Stage Fright provides a particularly compelling example of a narration's capacity for misdirection in the beginning. David Bordwell describes the film as "probably the canonic case

⁶ Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 139. Of course, there are exceptions. Some filmmakers known for duplicitous narration (such as Fritz Lang, M. Knight Shyamalan, Alfred Hitchcock, or Jean-Pierre Melville) might foster such suspicion in viewers from the outset, as might a film's advertising campaign. As Thompson writes, "In certain kinds of cinema... we expect the narration to mislead or confuse us, and such an approach is acceptable, even conventional." Ibid., 140-141. In other words, viewers can develop a schema for the way in which some storytellers tell their stories, one which can keep them wary of the narration. Nevertheless, even with such a schema in mind, films with duplicitous narration can still successfully mislead viewers, since viewers unfamiliar with the story cannot know precisely how the narration is misleading. That is, even approaching a film armed with the knowledge that the narration will try to mislead the viewer, viewers can still be misled because they do not know which information is being withheld and concealed.

of unreliable narration in classical cinema.”⁷ The film misleads viewers by presenting a deceptive flashback almost immediately at the start of the *syuzhet*, but presents the flashback as though it were the objective truth. Accordingly, it creates an inaccurate first impression of one the central characters, as well as an inaccurate understanding of the events the flashback describes. Jonathan is on the run from the police, and explains the cause of his predicament to his friend, Eve (Jane Wyman), from whom Jonathan has solicited help in effecting his escape. As he begins to describe to Eve what’s happened to him, the film transitions into a lengthy and detailed flashback showing the events Jonathan talks about. However, parts of Jonathan’s flashback are lies; he claims that the police are pursuing him because they suspect him of a murder he did not commit, when in fact he is actually the murderer they seek.

As others have noted, one of the main reasons that *Stage Fright*’s flashback is misleading is because it violates some of the conventions that govern flashbacks in classical narration. In classical films, flashbacks are often motivated by the subjectivity of a character, but are treated *objectively* by the narration. For instance, flashbacks usually present scenes from no particular character’s optical or aural perspective, even if the flashback is purportedly motivated by the experiences of a particular character. Moreover, the assumption of a flashback’s objectivity is often bolstered by its containing a wider range of knowledge than that which is accessible to the character motivating the flashback: a character recalls events, and the film transitions into flashback, but the character motivating the flashback is not necessarily present in all of the flashback scenes. Both of these norms seem to be in effect in *Stage Fright*’s flashback. As Kristin Thompson observes in her analysis of the film, the camera is frequently placed in positions that not only differ from Jonathan’s optical perspective, but are in fact opposite him

⁷ Bordwell, 61.

relative to the other action in the scene (and indeed, the flashback eventually even shows Eve's optical point-of-view). Likewise, the flashback also provides information about actions for which Jonathan is not present and which he would not be able to describe to Eve in as much detail as is presented in the film, such as the police stopping outside a theater Jonathan has entered after spotting the cracked window of his car.⁸ Thus the flashback seems to adhere to the norms that govern flashbacks in classical narration, in turn encouraging viewers to assume that the flashback is an objective presentation of the events Jonathan describes when in fact it violates these norms by mingling the truth with lies. We can see just how significant this misleading flashback is for misleading viewers by imagining how much easier it would be to doubt Jonathan's story if the narration did not corroborate it through flashback. As Thompson puts it, "Without the reassuring 'evidence' of the apparent flashback, the spectator would not necessarily accept his [Jonathan's] account and might still suspect that he had been involved in the murder."⁹

However, Jonathan's flashback is particularly misleading not only because of its apparent objectivity, but also because it occurs in the beginning of the film. Viewers have little recourse for doubting the veracity of the flashback because aside from the setup leading up to it (a brief 40 second scene in which Eve and Jonathan drive away from the police), the flashback is nearly the only information to which viewers have access, and our limited range of knowledge provides a poor basis for detecting the narration's misdirection. *Stage Fright's* deceptive flashback would be less thoroughly misleading if viewers had more information at their disposal against which to judge it. If, for instance, the narration were spatiotemporally attached to Jonathan for a longer period of time before the film transitioned into a flashback, then viewers would have more

⁸ Thompson, 146-148. For more on why this flashback is convincing, see also Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 165-168.

⁹ Ibid., 144.

opportunity to develop an impression of his character, which in turn could provide contexts against which to judge both Jonathan's potential capacity for murder, as well as his professions of innocence, regardless of whether or not the narration corroborates Jonathan's story in the flashback. While lies are of course misleading in their own right, they are particularly effective when there are no other points of reference against which to measure them.¹⁰

Regardless of whether or not the flashback conforms to the conventions governing objectivity in flashbacks, by placing it so early in the film, viewers are given neither a cause to develop strong reasons to doubt the flashback's objectivity, nor even the chance to do so. Our impressions of both Jonathan and Eve in their brief exchange prior to the flashback are simplistic at best, and must be taken at face value: they can be categorized only by broad types such as those derived from gender, age, race, and their relationship status (they appear to be friends). It is also possible to type them as some sort of criminals, considering that Eve expresses relief that the police aren't following them, and Jonathan observes that it "looks like we're getting away with it." However, *criminal* is also a relatively broad level type (basic types subordinated to this category include *murderer*, *thief*, *rapist*, etc.), and one that provides no more cause to suspect the truth of Jonathan's flashback than any of the other types he solicits, especially considering that Eve seems to be Jonathan's accomplice.

The misleading flashback's effectiveness is also bolstered by being located in the beginning of the film because it solicits a particular character type for Jonathan, one which the primacy effect then encourages viewers to use as a point of reference when motivating

¹⁰ Of course, the flashback itself provides information about the moments leading up to the 40 second scene that starts the film, but the narration still could have provided additional spatiotemporally attachment to Jonathan prior to the transition into flashback by including another (objective) scene that antedates even those events of the flashback. However, such a scene would have been counterproductive, since the narration turns on the misdirection set up in the beginning.

Jonathan's subsequent behavior. As discussed in briefly in Chapter 4, the flashback makes Jonathan out to be a good-intentioned if somewhat naïve paramour of a *femme fatale*, Charlotte (Marlene Dietrich). Jonathan appears to be easily coerced into helping Charlotte cover up her murder of her husband, and while planting evidence in Charlotte's house to make it look like the murder was the result of a botched home invasion, Jonathan is spotted by Charlotte's maid. Accordingly, rather than being typed as a *murderer*, Jonathan appears to be easily typed as a *wrong man*, someone who is wrongly suspected of a crime, and who must fight to clear his name (in addition to being typed as Charlotte's paramour). Jonathan's behavior is consistent with the *wrong man* type until late in the film (i.e., the behavior that solicits this type is exhibited repeatedly and consistently throughout much of the film), and thus the primacy effect encourages us to continue to view him as representative of this initial categorization.

However, Jonathan's behavior is *also* consistent with another type, one that is *not* solicited by the misleading flashback: a murderer on the run from the police. Indeed, Jonathan's behavior needs to be consistent with *both* of these types in order for the story to maintain the surprise of Jonathan's revelation near the end, when he tells Eve that he's actually the murderer. As Thompson puts it, "The whole film needs to show us events that will keep us believing Johnny's story. Yet it must also provide us with information that, while not contradicting that belief, will allow us to understand the true series of past fabula events without too much difficulty... later in the film."¹¹ However, even though his behavior is consistent with both the

¹¹ Thompson, 142. The same is true of some of the folk psychological inferences we make about Jonathan's behavior, even though the different inferences lead to very different corresponding dispositions. Jonathan's behavior toward Eve is consistent both with the inference that he turns to her in his time of need because he respects her cleverness and trusts her unwavering faith in him, but it is also consistent with the inference that believes he can manipulate Eve into becoming his accomplice by leveraging her affection for him. With the former inference, Jonathan appears to be earnest, affectionate, and trusting, but the latter inference makes Jonathan appear to be manipulative, selfish, and immoral.

murderer and *wrong man* types, we are highly unlikely to consider that he might be a murderer both because we initially type Jonathan as a wrong man, and because his behavior is consistent with this type until near the very end of the film. In other words, as is the case with those stories that employ Meir Sternberg's "rise and fall of first impressions," the primacy effect ensures that we continue to view Jonathan as wrongfully accused, even though his behavior is also consistent with that of a murderer on the run from the police; we assume our first impression is correct until it is overthrown by Jonathan's confession near the end of the film.¹²

Casually Necessary Conditions and Misleading Beginnings

Of course, a narration can mislead viewers through other means aside from lying outright (through flashback or otherwise). A narration can also partially or entirely conceal that it is withholding information from viewers. Such duplicity is especially misleading when the withheld information consists of casually necessary conditions. Chapter 2 argued that all things being equal, in a narrative beginning it can be difficult to anticipate both if and how any given information will become causally necessary conditions for later events, but that viewers' schemata and the narration's regulation of the prominence of information (via redundancy, stylistic emphasis, and the overall quantity of information, along with other self-conscious narrational devices) help to mitigate this difficulty -- especially in classical beginnings -- by making the causally relevant information more prominent for attention than the causally irrelevant information. Accordingly, one of the means through which a narration can mislead viewers is by violating this norm, encouraging viewers to construct an inaccurate *fabula* by

¹² Likewise, the narration can also mislead viewers by manipulating the order in which information is introduced to the narration. Such possibilities were discussed in relation to exposition in Chapter 3, especially in regards to *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, and on a much smaller scale, *Mission: Impossible* (even though the latter film is not very well characterized as a misleading narration in the terms under discussion here).

reducing the narration's self-consciousness and selectively deemphasizing, obstructing, or eliding entirely certain causally necessary conditions for later events.

Classical beginnings can mislead viewers by presenting only once (or not at all) a crucial piece of information, by using film style to obscure or deemphasize something that provides a causally necessary condition for later events, or by introducing a large quantity of *fabula* information in short period of the *syuzhet*. While any of these techniques for obscuring the prominence of causally necessary conditions can contribute to a narration's misdirection, failing to repeat information is a relatively weak form of misdirection, since unlike the other two techniques, it doesn't actively draw attention away from potential causally necessary conditions; it simply makes it easier for viewers to either miss or forget them (thus when it is employed, it is in the company of these other techniques).

Stylistic obstruction and quantity of information are slightly stronger means of reducing the prominence of causally necessary conditions. As discussed in Chapter 2, stylistic schemata can be used as a heuristic for estimating the causal relevance of various information, but these schemata can also be used to mislead viewers: placing figures in the corner of the frame, blurring their focus, staging them distantly in the far background, or allotting limited screen time to particular information can all be used to deemphasize or obstruct causally relevant information, encouraging viewers to either miss it or accord it little significance, which can in turn cause viewers to construct an inaccurate *fabula*.

Likewise, Chapter 2 also argued that the more information there is, the harder it is to distinguish pertinent from less pertinent information. A large quantity of information can dilute or draw attention away from the causally necessary conditions and toward less relevant information, effectively masking the causal relevance of any particular item. Roland Barthes

acknowledges as much when writing about enigmas in *S/Z*, stating that “a powerful enigma is a dense one, so that provided certain precautions are taken [against revealing the solution to the enigma], the more signs there are, the more the truth will be obscured.”¹³ In addition to diminishing the potential causal relevance of any individual item of information, a large quantity of information can also make it less obvious (or self-conscious, in Bordwell’s terms) when the narration entirely *withholds* causally relevant information. That is, by presenting a lot of information in a short period of time, the narration can make it less apparent that something important is missing. This is perhaps an even more powerful means of misleading viewers, as it not only eliminates the chance for viewers to notice the causally necessary condition, but it also reduces the chances that they’ll notice it is missing.

Misleading viewers by manipulating the prominence of information is especially potent in the beginning of a film, not only because we rely on our schemata for how narratives usually function, but also because our ability to estimate what is and is not a causally necessary condition is less well-developed in the beginning than later in a film, when we have the benefit of previous contexts to inform our estimations of causal relevance. As discussed in Chapter 2, actions and events that occur *later* in a classically narrated film are the result of the causally necessary conditions that preceded them, thus we are more sensitive to causal relevance later in a narrative because we have formed (relatively) narrowed expectations about the range of events that could result from earlier narrative conditions. In the beginning, however, we are more susceptible to misdirection because our range of expectations has not yet been significantly narrowed, and it can be less obvious that the narration has withheld causally necessary conditions. In other words, in the beginning, the narrative can still be about any subject, and thus

¹³ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 62.

despite our schemata, it can be hard to notice if the narration has withheld or concealed important information, since we are less capable of identifying *which* information is necessary for accurately understanding subsequent developments, especially when the narration manipulates the prominence of information in order to conceal causally necessary conditions (be those conditions actions, events, character motivation, or exposition). Indeed, if it was easy to detect when a misleading narration withholds or conceals information (in the beginning or elsewhere), then the narration could not in fact be described as misleading.

Of course, misleading narrations cannot obscure or obstruct *all* causally relevant information, because even though the narration is duplicitous, it is still predicated on viewers constructing a coherent *fabula*. Were a film to obscure all (or even most) causally necessary conditions, viewers would find the *fabula* incredibly difficult to comprehend; such a film would better resemble *Last Year at Marienbad* or other films with art cinema narration more than they would classical narration (indeed, such a film might be best described as an annal rather than a narrative).¹⁴ Rather, films that mislead viewers by deemphasizing causally necessary conditions do so *selectively*, such that viewers are still able to construct a coherent *fabula*, but one that is *inaccurate*.

A Perfect Getaway provides an example of a film where the beginning misleads viewers both by stylistically obscuring a causally necessary condition for later events, and by presenting a large quantity of information in a short period of time, effectively hiding that an important piece of information is being withheld. The film begins with a montage of video camera footage from Cliff and Cydney's wedding reception. The montage shows their friends and family

¹⁴ Noël Carroll defines an annal as a subset of narrative in which states of affairs are temporally ordered but contain no unified subject. See Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 123.

addressing the camera and congratulating the couple, as well as various wedding reception activities, such as Cydney throwing her bouquet to a group of women and smearing wedding cake into Cliff's face. However, this wedding reception video also misleads viewers by stylistically obscuring a causally necessary condition for later events, namely, the appearance of Cliff and Cydney's faces. The couple is never shown clearly in the video: Not only does the handheld camerawork often make it difficult to see their faces in the brief moments when the couple appears, but the staging repeatedly blocks their faces from clear view. For instance, Cliff's face is obscured both when his older brother places him in a headlock and when Cydney shoves cake into his face, while Cydney regularly has her back turned to the camera, both when she tosses her bouquet into the crowd, and again when she performs the dollar dance. This stylistic obstruction is easy to miss, however, since the montage presents such a large quantity of other information to viewers, much of which could easily serve as casually necessary conditions (and some of which actually does): Cliff is an aspiring filmmaker who just sold a pitch to a studio; Cliff and Cydney will honeymoon in Kauai; one of the bridesmaids is jealous of Cydney; Cliff's older brother is a bit of a bully; one of the wedding guests is cheap, and so on. In other words, we're less likely to notice that we never get a clear view of Cliff and Cydney's faces because there's so much other information about which we *do* see and learn.

Stylistically obscuring a clear view of Cliff and Cydney's faces -- and then distracting viewers from that effacement by providing a large quantity of *other* information -- is misleading because the likeness of their faces is actually a causally necessary condition for later events: as a major plot twist will later reveal, the Cliff and Cydney of the wedding reception video are not the same people as the couple who claim to be Cliff and Cydney throughout the rest of the film. The "Cliff" and "Cydney" to whom the narration spatiotemporally attaches for most of the film are

actually imposters who killed the real Cliff and Cydney and assumed their identities shortly after the events of the wedding reception. Recall from Chapter 3 that much of the narrative interest in the first hour of *A Perfect Getaway* derives from suspense over whether other romantic couples with whom “Cliff” and “Cydney” cross paths are actually the pair of romantically-linked killers loose in Hawaii. By beginning the film with a video montage from Cliff and Cydney’s wedding reception, the narration makes it seem unlikely that “Cliff” and “Cydney” are the killers because we assume that the happy, well-adjusted newlyweds from the video is the same couple to whom the narration spatiotemporally attaches throughout the film. It would be very inconsistent with Western cultural folk psychology for happy, well-adjusted newlyweds to suddenly become vicious killers, thus it is causally necessary for the imposter “Cliff” and “Cydney” to differ from the real Cliff and Cydney in order for the plot twist to make sense.¹⁵ By obscuring the faces of the real Cliff and Cydney in the video, and then concealing that restriction by providing a large quantity of other information, the narration obscures the condition necessary to distinguish the two couples from one another (at least for the first hour of the film): the appearance of the real Cliff and Cydney’s faces.¹⁶ Moreover, because this effacement occurs in the beginning, viewers

¹⁵ Of course, obscuring Cliff and Cydney’s faces in the wedding video (and then hiding that effacement by providing a large quantity of other information) is not the only way in which the narration misleads viewers. Throughout the first hour of the film, the imposter “Cliff” and “Cydney” also appear to be openly concerned about whether or not the other couples with whom they cross paths are the killers, further contributing to the seeming unlikelihood of “Cliff” and “Cydney” being the killers. However, once the narration reveals that “Cliff” and “Cydney” are actually the killers (and have simply been impersonating the real Cliff and Cydney), retrospectively it appears as though their concern is over whether or not the other couples they encounter are suspicious of “Cliff” and “Cydney” being imposters, rather than over whether or not the other couples the imposters encounter are the killers.

¹⁶ The wedding video also employs somewhat of a falsification: when Cliff’s brother places him in a headlock, Cliff jokingly complains about the smell of his brother’s armpit. Cliff’s voice is clearly that of actor Steve Zahn, who plays the imposter “Cliff” (not the real Cliff). Thus one might argue that the wedding video not only misleads viewers through stylistic obstruction, but by unreliably representing the sound of Cliff’s voice (somewhat akin to the deceptive flashback of *Stage Fright*). However, the narrative motivates the similarity of Cliff and the imposter’s voices when it reveals that the imposter carefully studied the real Cliff’s mannerisms and personal history, thus regardless of its provenance, it is not much of a stretch to say that the sound of Cliff’s voice in the wedding video sounds indistinguishable from the imposter “Cliff’s” voice throughout much of the film, because the imposter is deliberately mimicking the sound of the real Cliff’s voice.

have little recourse to notice it or become suspicious of it, since it is difficult to know that the faces of the real Cliff and Cydney will later prove causally relevant. Accordingly, by obstructing this causally necessary condition, the narration (mis)leads viewers to construct a glaringly inaccurate *fabula*, one in which the Cliff and Cydney seen in the wedding video are the same couple to which the narration is spatiotemporally attached.

Misdirection through Schema Solicitation

A narration can also mislead viewers through the kinds of schemata it solicits, and how those schemata contextualize the causally relevant narrative information. Chapter 2 argued that schemata can greatly influence the ways in which we use and make sense of the information provided by the narration: information important in one schema might become less relevant or ignored entirely if another schema is more salient, and even our perception of information can be altered to fit within an already-active schema. Accordingly, a narration can mislead viewers by soliciting a dominant schema in the beginning that places what will ultimately be important information into contexts that make it either difficult to notice and remember (by placing that information at a sub-schematic level), or difficult to accurately anticipate how it might prove causally relevant for later events. That is, the narration can mislead by encouraging the use of information in particular contexts, when it will actually figure into the narrative in an entirely different manner.

The Blue Gardenia is exemplary of this means of misdirection. The film concerns a telephone operator, Norah (Anne Baxter), who thinks she accidentally murdered a calendar artist, Harry (Raymond Burr), while drunkenly fending off his aggressive sexual advances a third of the

way through the film, as well as the subsequent investigation by a newspaper columnist, Casey (Richard Conte), into the murder. The narration misleads viewers by strongly suggesting that Norah is indeed Harry's killer: the film does not readily offer up alternative suspects, and even though Norah cannot remember the details of her evening with Harry (whose altercation with Norah is stylistically obscured), she assumes that she must have killed him, spending much of the film alternating between feeling guilty about her actions and trying to cover up the considerable amount of evidence that points to her guilt. As Janet Bergstrom writes in her analysis of the film, "with no information to the contrary, we are encouraged to believe, along with Norah and on the basis of... circumstantial evidence, that she is guilty."¹⁷ However, the end of the film reveals that rather than Norah, another character killed Harry, one who appears only briefly during the beginning: Rose (Ruth Storey), one of Harry's former lovers. Not only does the narration reduce Rose's prominence in order to discourage viewers from considering her as a candidate for Harry's killer (or from later recalling that she even exists), but the narration also introduces her in a context that makes her seem like a means of providing additional, expository information about the characters that have *already* been introduced. That is, her appearance in the beginning of the film is contextualized by an already-active schema which strongly influences the way in which we think about her character's potential causal relevance to the plot, such that she seems an unlikely source for causally necessary conditions for later events.¹⁸

¹⁷ Janet Bergstrom, "The Mystery of *The Blue Gardenia*," in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993), 105. See also Douglas Pye, "Seeing by Glimpses: Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*," *CineAction!* (Summer 1988), 80.

¹⁸ Of course, were viewers to approach the film having in mind a schema for the mystery genre or a schema for the misleading narration Fritz Lang's American films tend to employ, then they would be more likely accord Rose – or any detail included in the beginning – with greater potential for causal relevance, because such schemata stipulate that seemingly innocuous details often end up figuring into the story later. As Peter Rabinowitz writes, in mysteries,

In most respects, the beginning of *The Blue Gardenia* is quite normative. Over the course of its first few scenes, all of the principal characters are introduced. Their mid-level types are easily recognizable (and sometimes labeled outright), and they have easily attributable dispositions and even state some preliminary goals. The narration also emphasizes conditions that seem likely to be causally necessary for later events, either through stylistic emphasis or repetition, and the first few scenes contain considerable preliminary exposition. The film begins with Casey approaching a telephone company to conduct research for a newspaper article. As he enters the premises, he passes a newsstand, and the camera tracks in on a newspaper advertisement prominently featuring his photo, immediately soliciting a type for *newspaper reporter*. After a dissolve, he is next seen flirting with Crystal (Ann Sothorn) while Harry sketches Crystal's portrait. Crystal gives Casey her phone number, which is repeated three times (twice aloud, and then again in a close-up insert as Harry writes it down). Harry's knowledge of the phone number is repeated because it will later prove to be a causally necessary condition, as he will use it to set up a date with Crystal's roommate, Norah. Harry also addresses Casey as a "newspaper" man, firmly reinforcing Casey's mid-level type. Likewise, Crystal can easily be typed as a telephone operator, as she first appears seated at a switchboard and wearing a headset, and Harry can be typed as an artist, as he is in the process of sketching Crystal. Over the course of this scene, Harry's behavior towards Crystal (and later Norah) also readily solicits and reinforces a type based on his dispositions: he is an aggressive and incorrigible flirt.

readers know that "virtually any detail can turn out to be important." See Peter Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 178. See also Douglas Pye, "Film Noir and Suppressive Narration: *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*," in *The Book of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Cameron (New York: Continuum, 1992), 99, who writes, "recognition of genre plays a determining role in producing expectations both of narrative and strategies of narration."

Near the end of the scene, after all of the other characters have exited, Harry receives a phone call. On the phone is Rose, who insists on meeting Harry in person, begging him for his help with an undisclosed matter, and bemoaning his inaccessibility (he has changed his phone number and won't give her his new one). Harry callously brushes her off, angrily telling her not to call him at work, and then claims to be busy and unable to talk before finally hanging up on her. The tenor of their brief conversation implies that Harry and Rose were formerly lovers, and that Harry has since broken off their relationship, but that Rose is still attached to him and distraught over his treatment of her.

The way in which Rose is introduced makes it seem as though her plight will not be a particularly likely source of causally necessary conditions for later events, one reason being that her exchange with Harry is extremely brief. The entire conversation lasts only 38 seconds, and Rose only appears in two shots lasting a combined total of 14 seconds, much less screen time than any of the other major characters introduced over the course of the first two scenes. Thus the narration reduces Rose's prominence both through the brevity of her conversation with Harry, and by minimizing her time on screen, in turn helping to make it seem unlikely that her plight will play a prominent role in the story.¹⁹ Indeed, Rose's prominence is so reduced that it is easy for viewers to forget she exists. Douglas Pye somewhat anecdotally points out that in twelve years of teaching the film to students, "it is extremely rare to find anyone who had not completely forgotten about Rose's early appearance by the time she reappears" at the end of the

¹⁹ Although, strictly in terms of prominence, her miniscule screen time is counterbalanced somewhat by her introduction coming at a remove from that of the other characters. Rose is introduced after all of the other characters have exited the scene, and unlike any of the other characters, she is the main point of interest in the shots in which she appears (most of the other shots in preceding scene feature either two or more characters).

film.²⁰ More relevant to the narration's misdirection than Rose's miniscule emphasis, however, is that the schemata the narration has solicited and emphasized thus far shape the ways in which we use information about her: we can contextualize her presence in terms of information the narration has already introduced. Rather than seeming like she will act as a source of causally necessary conditions for later events, instead her introduction seems designed to serve two *other* narrative functions related to the previous scene, namely, individuating Harry's character, and providing a basis for casting narrower hypotheses concerning Crystal and Norah's interaction with Harry.

Harry becomes individuated in his conversation with Rose because his callous treatment of her makes him appear to be a womanizer rather than simply an aggressive flirt. Thus far, the most prominent schema established by the narration has been Harry's personality type. His aggressive flirtatiousness is made redundant both in his behavior, as well as in the way others describe him: in the space of four minutes, he says he has been trying to get Crystal's number for a week; he says he'll try Crystal's number "with pleasure"; once Norah enters the scene, he flirts with her after getting brushed off by Crystal, suggestively asking Norah if she'd like to see more of his artwork and trying to hold her hand; he jokes with Casey that he has more numbers than the phone company, and near the scene's conclusion, Casey will explicitly label him as a "wolf," reconfirming the character type. However, his breezy and mildly lecherous behavior in the previous scene is further contextualized by his poor treatment of Rose. As Douglas Pye writes, their phone conversation "defines [Harry] Prebble's involvement with women as essentially

²⁰ Pye, 79. See also the following contemporary reviews of the film, all of which describe the film's resolution as surprising: *Box Office* 14 March 1953; Tom Coffey, "Anne Has a Scare in 'Gardenia'," *Mirror* 28 March 1953; *The Independent Film Journal* 21 March 1953; *Hollywood Citizen-News* 31 March 1953; Archer Winsten, "Blue Gardenia' at the Palace," *New York Post* 28 April 1953, and *Kinematograph Weekly* 11 May 1953.

callous and irresponsible.”²¹ That is, in speaking with Rose, it becomes evident that Harry’s interest in Crystal and/or Norah is likely motivated by a purely selfish sexual desire, rather than stemming from any sort of genuine affection for either of the women.

Moreover, viewers also have no way of typing Rose other than through her relation to Harry. That is, unlike all of the other characters introduced thus far, we get no mid-level typing information about her outside of her desperate reaction to Harry’s callousness. Other characters have already begun to be individuated in some regard: Casey is a *charming* newspaper columnist, while Harry is a flirt *and* an artist. Crystal, Norah, and their third roommate Sally (Jeff Donnell) are all telephone operators, and can be typed as working girls, but they are each individuated as well: Crystal is world-wise and sarcastic; Norah has a boyfriend stationed in Korea, and Sally is something of a bookworm. Rose, however, can only be typed as a scorned woman or wounded lover, both types that are solicited by Harry’s treatment of her. Accordingly, we are left with a rather weak idea of who she is and why she needs Harry’s help, which in turn makes her seem like a minor character and an unlikely source of subsequent narrative developments.²² As discussed in Chapter 4, classical narration usually provides some means of individuating important characters, at least to some degree, thus the undifferentiated, mid-level type Rose solicits in the brief screen time allotted to her seems to suggest that her character is a minor one, and that her plight is unlikely to be significant.²³ Rather than an important character

²¹ Pye, 78.

²² As we shall see, the film’s shooting script had a slightly longer interaction between Harry and Rose, one that provided her character with more detail that would have altered somewhat our estimations of her causal relevance.

²³ Granted, just because the narration does not individuate Rose here does not mean that it might not do so subsequently. However, initially Rose appears to be about as relevant to subsequent narrative developments as the supervisor guiding Casey around the telephone company’s offices, or nearly as relevant as the many sales clerks, restaurant waiters, taxi drivers, bartenders, gas station attendants, and other service industry characters featured in the margins of many classically narrated films, and who interact with the principal characters briefly and then disappear from the story.

in her own right, instead, Rose seems to provide further individuation for Harry, who thus far seems the most prominent character in the story (although that will change at the conclusion of this phone conversation, when the narration becomes spatiotemporally attached to Norah).

The second narrative function Rose performs -- and that detracts from her appearing to be a source of causally necessary conditions for later events -- is to provide a basis for narrower hypotheses concerning the information introduced in the previous scene. Rose's appearance can be easily understood as an analogue to possible events featuring slightly more developed characters like Crystal or Norah. That is, Rose seems to exist in order to demonstrate the effect Harry has on women who become involved with him. Rather than soliciting hypotheses about how Rose's distress might eventually prove causally relevant, instead, viewers can account for her appearance through the hypotheses it solicits about what might happen to Crystal or Norah should *they* be seduced by Harry. That is, the previous scene between Norah, Crystal, and Harry has established a schema (one roughly corresponding to the behavior of those in the initial stages of courtship) which influences the way in which we use information about Rose: her plight becomes a way of narrowing the hypotheses we might make about potential subsequent interactions between Harry and Crystal/Norah. It's as if Harry's phone conversation with Rose is telling viewers: "This is what Harry does to women," or, "This is what Harry has done to Rose," or perhaps most fittingly, "This is what Harry could do to Norah or Crystal," rather than, "This is what Rose is like," or, "This woman's distress could be important for later in the story."

Rose's seeming like an analogue for possible developments with other characters is further bolstered by the amount of information presented about Harry and Rose's relationship, and the accordant effort viewers must make to fill in a schema about Harry and Rose's

relationship. By restricting the narration's communicativeness regarding what has transpired between Harry and Rose, viewers' cognitive efforts must focus on inferring and hypothesizing about the narrative *past* at least as much (if not more so) than the narrative *future*. In order to hypothesize about what Rose's distress might lead her to do, first it is necessary for viewers to also infer the nature of her and Harry's relationship, and hypothesize not only about the events that have led both to Rose's state of distress and Harry's state of callous indifference, but also the problem with which Rose needs help. We can easily infer that Harry and Rose are best categorized by a schema for former lovers, but the relative indeterminacy of what has led to their respective attitudes toward each other, as well as why Rose wants Harry's help, is somewhat prohibitive for the formation of forward-looking hypotheses about Rose's potential relevance to future events. That is, it would be much easier to anticipate that Rose's plight will be a causally necessary condition for later events if we knew more details about her and Harry's history; such details would aid viewers in focusing more of their cognitive efforts on how Rose might later figure into the narrative.

In sum, while viewers certainly *can* hypothesize about how Rose's distress might eventually prove causally relevant, the narration discourages this possibility and misleads viewers by offering up clear alternative means through which to contextualize her appearance in relation to previous information: she provides further individuating information about Harry's character type, and her distress narrows our hypotheses about what might happen should Crystal or Norah be seduced by Harry. Because we can account for Rose and her plight in terms of the

information previously introduced by the narration, we become less likely to anticipate how it might *also* prove relevant to subsequent information.²⁴

Differences between the finished film and final shooting script provide a useful means of comparison that help to demonstrate the degree to which the narration misleads viewers, as it contains a slightly longer exchange between Harry and Rose. Were it included in the finished film, this longer exchange would have provided more details about their relationship and a better basis for making narrower, forward-looking hypotheses, which in turn would have likely significantly altered estimations of Rose's causal relevance, and in turn, significantly decreased the degree to which the narration is misleading. In the following transcription, dialogue in plaintext is included in the finished film, while dialogue in *italics* is omitted scripted material.

Harry: (*extremely friendly*) Hello, honey... (changes tone) I've told you not to call me here. (after listening) I was busy last night. Working.

Rose: I don't believe you, Harry. You haven't worked three nights in a row in your life! (rushes on) I have to see you and talk to you. *I've just been to the doctor and he --*

Harry: *All quacks! Don't believe any of 'em.* (listens, bored, then:) Rose, I'm tied up now. Call me later. At home.

Rose: How can I? You changed the number. And I can't get it from the operator. (pleading) You have to help me Harry. *You promised! You told me that if anything happened --*

Harry: *Suresuresure. But you're too smart to believe what a guy tells you -- aren't you? I just can't talk now. Take it easy. I'll be seeing you.*²⁵

²⁴ Nevertheless, despite the narration's attempts to mislead viewers about Rose, at least two contemporary reviews still claimed that the film was ineffective at doing so: Edwin Schallert, "Cast, Lang Give Bloom to Thriller," *Los Angeles Times* 28 March 1953, and Otis L. Guernsey Jr., "'The Blue Gardenia'," *Herald Tribune* 8 April 1953. Schallert writes that the climax is "banal and quite-to-be-expected... you know pretty much all the way who killed the artist if you are experienced in this type of subject." Guernsey Jr. writes, "There is, of course, a trick ending -- you can see it coming a mile away -- but there is not much suspense and no mystery in the affair." However, the claims of these critics seem laden with the hindsight of retrospection, for it is impossible to hypothesize that Rose is Harry's killer before Harry has even been killed, which happens a third of the way through the film (hardly "all the way" or "a mile away" from the film's end). Nevertheless, even if we take these reviewers at face value, they are in the extreme minority.

²⁵ Charles Hoffman, "Final Shooting Script," 16 November 1954, page 9, *The Blue Gardenia* Production Files, USC Warner Bros. Archive.

As Janet Bergstrom notes in her analysis of the film, the implication of this additional dialogue seems to be that Rose is pregnant, and indeed, an undated synopsis of the film included in the film's Production Code Administration file makes this implication explicit.²⁶ It reads, "Rose Miller, whom [Harry's] trying to jilt, is hysterical as she tells him she is going to have a baby."²⁷ Bergstrom describes the importance that these deletions have for the film, writing, "the dialogue was edited in a way that did more than improve pace: it served the interests of censorship. In [making these cuts], Rose's motive for killing [Harry] dropped out of the film." Instead, Rose is reduced to the "cliché of the hysterical woman."²⁸ Bergstrom makes the logical assumption that the film's producers eliminated Rose's pregnancy out of concern that negative reactions to it could upset local censors and hurt profits. In Bergstrom's words, the result is that "Rose is reduced to a negative female stereotype ('a woman scorned'). This sanitizing procedure weakened the script: Rose looked like a *deus ex machina* to contemporary reviewers."²⁹

In terms of misleading narration, Rose ends up looking *deus ex machina* because by eliminating her motive, the film also eliminates the most important reason for seeing her distress as a possible causally necessary condition for later events. Had the film included the scripted parts of this conversation between Harry and Rose, especially the reference to the doctor, the scene would be much more likely to solicit hypotheses about how Rose and the events to which she alludes (particularly her line of dialogue, "if anything happened") would become causally

²⁶ Bergstrom, 106.

²⁷ See *The Blue Gardenia* Production Code Administration file located in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Margaret Herrick Library Special Collections. This same undated synopsis also appears in the production files located at the USC Warner Bros. Archive.

²⁸ Bergstrom, 105.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

relevant to the narrative. That is, the additional dialogue would type Rose as a pregnant woman in addition to a woman scorned, which in turn would provide a better basis for hypothesizing about the narrative future, specifically, what Rose will do about the pregnancy (Bear the child? Have an abortion? Take Harry to court?). Accordingly, Rose would have become a more likely source of causally necessary for later events. However, with this dialogue eliminated, instead she simply seems to function as means of individuating Harry's character type, and as an analogue for Crystal and/or Norah, one that can provide a basis for casting narrower hypotheses about how Harry's previous interactions with Crystal and Norah will prove causally relevant.³⁰

The final shooting script also contains an additional shot in this scene. After Harry hangs up on Rose, the script indicates a cut *back* to Rose. It reads: "CLOSE SHOT -- ROSE IN PHONE BOOTH as the connection is broken. Rose: (into phone, frantically) Harry! She flicks the phone desperately, then collapses against the phone as she realizes he's hung up on her."³¹ This shot would have been significant; returning to see Rose's reaction, in close-up, to Harry's dismissal would not only have increased her prominence by giving her more screen time (perhaps making her easier to recall later), but it would have also placed greater emphasis on the mental attributions we make about her character throughout this scene. As described in Chapter 4, we tend to make mental attributions about characters when they are featured in a shot; the more shots featuring a character, the more opportunity we have to make mental attributions about them, and the more attribution efforts we expend. By returning to Rose as described in the

³⁰ After Harry is eventually murdered, the lack of resolution over what the doctor told Rose, and how it might have impacted Harry, seems as though it might have been enough of a dangling cause to keep Rose in the back of viewers' minds when contemplating Harry's murder (although considering the staggering circumstantial evidence pointing to Norah, even better recall of Rose would be hard pressed to derail seemingly likely hypotheses about Norah's guilt).

³¹ Hoffman, 9.

script, the film would have emphasized more the effects of Harry's dismissal of her, and would have given viewers more impetus for hypothesizing about what she might do about it. Indeed, in discussing the inferences viewers make as a result of point-of-view editing (a shot of a character looking, followed by a shot of what they see, followed by a shot of them reacting to what they saw), Per Persson argues that reaction shots are important precisely because they provide the psychological motivation for a character's ensuing actions.³² As Edward Branigan writes about viewers' justification of the spaces presented by the narration, in general, "the viewer will project a sequence of hypotheses to justify the continuing presentation of space. There must be some explanation for the shift from what we see now to what we see next."³³ It is not much of a leap to suggest that reaction shots provide a similar function in shot/reverse-shot editing patterns; cutting back to Rose's reaction would have better prepared viewers to anticipate that Rose would take *some* form of subsequent action in her pursuit of Harry (regardless of what that action might be) because it would have placed slightly greater emphasis on the attributions we make about Rose's mental states, independent of any application that might have to Harry, Crystal, or Norah. In other words, a reaction shot of Rose not only would have made her slightly more memorable by increasing her screen time, but it also would have emphasized her distress more, in turn increasing its potential to seem causally relevant, and accordingly, lessening the extent to which her first appearance is misleading.

Knowledgeability, Communicativeness and Misleading Beginnings

³² Per Persson, *Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 81.

³³ Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 61.

As discussed in Chapter 2, classical beginnings are normatively knowledgeable, communicative, and self-conscious. Classical beginnings tend to communicate a wide range of knowledge to viewers, and they do so self-consciously, deliberately emphasizing the information that will be important for understanding the story. As the above discussion of casually necessary conditions and misleading narration makes clear, the narration can mislead viewers by manipulating the self-consciousness of information, using various devices to de-emphasize causally relevant information and in turn leading viewers to construct an inaccurate *fabula*. Like self-consciousness, knowledgeability and communicativeness can also be manipulated to mislead viewers. A narration can establish intrinsic norms for its degree of knowledgeability and communicativeness, where a wide range of information is presented to viewers in the beginning in order to make it less apparent when the film later deviates from these previously established norms. That is, presenting a wide range of knowledge early in the film can make it seem as though the narration is consistently knowledgeable and communicative, in turn helping to conceal later moments when the narration actually withholds information and becomes more restricted and uncommunicative.³⁴

The Blue Gardenia is once again exemplary of this means of misdirection, as the wealth of information provided in the beginning establishes unrestricted narration as an intrinsic norm, effectively making less apparent the film's later restriction at a crucial moment. The beginning of the film is extremely knowledgeable and communicative. As Douglas Pye describes it, "The narrative of *The Blue Gardenia* seems fairly open; that is, we appear to have quite free access to

³⁴ Of course, in practice, films rarely limit themselves to a single pattern for the dispersal of information, but instead modulate the range and depth of their knowledgeability over the course of their length. Nevertheless, a narration can still establish patterns for how the film presents information to viewers, which, as Bordwell writes, "constitute a central source for our stable and ongoing expectations as we move through a particular film." Bordwell, 150. Accordingly, films with misleading narration can achieve their duplicity by deviating from intrinsic norms based on these qualities.

events, locations, and characters -- the narration does not confine us to the movements of a single character.”³⁵ The beginning introduces and individuates its five main characters within the space of its first four minutes (not including Rose, the photographer waiting for Casey outside the phone company, or the woman giving Casey a tour of the facilities), and within its first ten minutes, it also becomes spatiotemporally attached to three different characters: first Casey, then Harry, and then finally Norah (but only after a lengthy scene that also features Sally, Crystal, and Crystal’s ex-husband). It also provides a considerable amount of exposition, especially concerning the romantic history of most of the characters.³⁶

The wide range of knowledgeability established in the first ten minutes (and over the course of the beginning more generally) seems to set a precedent for the rest of the film: it becomes easy to assume that subsequent information will be presented in a similarly unrestricted manner. Indeed, much of the rest of the film also seems to adhere to this precedent, as it regularly alternates between scenes where Casey conducts his investigation into Harry’s murder and attempts to locate his killer, and scenes where Norah destroys evidence and deals with her guilt and anxiety. Such highly communicative and fairly unrestricted access to a wide range of information creates a rather “melodramatic” narration, a term David Bordwell uses to describe films where viewers tend to have more information than any single character, which, as Bordwell writes, effectively creates “a firm primacy effect, plays down curiosity about the past, and

³⁵ Pye, “Seeing by Glimpses,” 76.

³⁶ The narration also provides some subjective depth as the beginning progresses: the film cuts to Norah’s point-of-view when she reads a letter from her boyfriend, during which we also hear the boyfriend’s voice as Norah imagines him speaking the letter. The narration will also provide access to Norah’s subjectivity near the end of the beginning: Norah has gotten drunk on her date with Harry, and when she passes out in Harry’s apartment, images of a whirlpool, black waves, and spirals are superimposed over Norah as she lays on the floor, indicating her state of intoxication. The same is also true of a series of distorted point-of-view shots after she awakes. Such subjectivity also increases the narration’s knowledgeability, even though the wide range of information is more important for misleading viewers in this film than the depth of information.

maximizes our urge to know what will happen next.”³⁷ These qualities certainly describe the narration of *The Blue Gardenia*.³⁸ Both leading up to Harry’s murder and after it has taken place, the significant hypotheses the film encourages mostly concern future events: Harry will or will not get a date; Norah will react poorly when her boyfriend breaks up with her in his letter, and something bad will or will not happen after Norah accepts Harry’s date invitation. After Harry has been murdered, such hypotheses involve whether Norah will get caught or turn herself in, the likelihood of Casey and Norah meeting and become lovers, and so on. However, the film actually deviates from the melodramatic narration’s high degree of knowledgeability and communicativeness quite drastically approximately a third of the way through, during the scene of Harry and Norah’s altercation, where Norah supposedly murders Harry.³⁹

Norah’s attack on Harry is presented in three shots. The first is a close-up of Norah raising a fire poker over her head to strike at Harry, shattering the mirror over Harry’s fireplace in the process. The second shot is of Norah swinging the poker down at Harry. The third shot is the first moment in which the film elides crucial information: it is of Harry’s reflection in one of the shattered panes of glass. He screams and raises his arms to protect himself as the mirror shard

³⁷ Bordwell, 70. Of course, as a genre, “melodrama” has a wealth of associations aside from that of a type of narration, associations which have fluctuated historically. For discussions of historical variation in the use of the term and the kinds of films it has described, see Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 72-82. See also Smith, 166, 205-206. Following both Bordwell and Smith, here the term’s use will be limited to describing narrational qualities.

³⁸ Indeed, contemporary reviews frequently described *The Blue Gardenia* as a melodrama (even though it is not always clear what classifying criteria they are using). See *Variety* 12 March 1953. See also “Trite Story Mars Murder Melodrama,” *The Hollywood Reporter* 12 March 1953. See also David Bongard, “‘The Blue Gardenia’ Murderess Turns Out to Be only a Fair Thriller,” *Los Angeles Daily News* 29 March 1953. See also *The Independent Film Journal*. See also *The Film Daily* 23 March 1953. See also *Hollywood Citizen-News*. See also “‘The Blue Gardenia’ (Weak).. Obj. in part,” *Tidings* 27 March 1953. See also, “‘Blue Gardenia’ Top Melodrama,” *Daily Mirror* 28 April 1953. See also *Kinematograph Weekly* 5 November 1953.

³⁹ Either this scene or the one that follows it (which confirms that Harry has in fact been murdered, rather than merely injured by Norah) marks the end of the film’s beginning, as we can easily form a probable and exclusive global hypothesis that the remainder of the film will be about the consequences Harry’s murder has for Norah.

falls forward, but before Norah lands a blow, the mirror shard falls away, obstructing a clear view of the poker actually striking him. We are left to infer that Norah struck and harmed Harry. This seems an especially likely inference, since for the remainder of this scene -- which consists of Norah passing out, waking, and fleeing the apartment -- Norah remains undisturbed, and no shot shows Harry's fallen body. In the subsequent scene, the narration reveals that Harry is dead, and it retrospectively appears as though Norah murdered Harry, rather than merely harming him.

As Pye writes of this scene, "What we see is designed to be misleading."⁴⁰ The scene's duplicity is similar to that of *The Perfect Getaway*: a causally necessary condition for later events (Harry's death) is deemphasized stylistically, and viewers are encouraged to make an erroneous inference about the information being withheld, in turn constructing an inaccurate *fabula*. However, unlike in *The Perfect Getaway*, the stylistic effacement in *The Blue Gardenia* occurs well after the narration has set ample precedent for its relative openness (which in turn helps to compensate for the more self-conscious elision in *The Blue Gardenia*; it is slightly easier to notice that we never see the poker strike Harry than it is to notice that we never see the faces of Cydney and Cliff in the beginning of *The Perfect Getaway*). The narration misleads viewers not simply by eliding the killing blow, but by deviating wildly from the intrinsic norm it has already established regarding the narration's knowledgeability and communicativeness. That is, we're led to assume that the narration has not withheld any causally relevant information (even though we never see Norah strike Harry) because the pattern established over the course of the film thus far indicates that the narration is knowledgeable and communicative. Rather than suspecting the narration of duplicity, it is easier to simply assume some other reason for why a shot of the killing blow has been substituted in favor of the shot of Harry screaming as the mirror shard

⁴⁰ Pye, "Seeing by Glimpses," 80.

falls: perhaps it is to spare viewers graphic content; perhaps it is merely an aesthetic flourish; perhaps it is moralistic symbolism about what comes of Harry's predatory treatment of women. Considering how open the narration has been thus far, all of these motivations seem likelier than the narration's misleading viewers by withholding important information. We are given such unrestricted access to information in the beginning (and throughout the rest of the film) that we tend to assume we know everything; we have no reason to suspect the narration of eliding important information because it has so readily communicated its other information, and because we can easily infer the implied action that has been kept just barely off-screen.

Moreover, the film's melodramatic narration continually encourages the formation of forward-looking hypotheses about the narrative future, rather than inviting speculation about the events that have already occurred. Thus even if viewers happen to spot that the film elides the killing blow, the narration's otherwise unrestricted access to information (both before and after the murder) encourages viewers to put aside any doubts and to focus on the repercussions of the murder, rather than on who actually committed it. Indeed, much of the dramatic interest in the middle and end of the film stems from whether or not Norah will be caught, and whether or not she can withstand her own guilty feelings, rather than over whether or not she or Casey will strike upon an alternative murder suspect.⁴¹

⁴¹ Some might argue that the "murder" scene in *The Blue Gardenia* is too self-conscious in its effacement of the actual murder, and that its stylization of the action actually fosters suspicion of Norah's apparent guilt. Certainly, it is possible that some viewers might become instantly suspicious about what actually happened to Harry (despite the large number of previously-cited film reviews which found the ending surprising). However, such viewers are likely in the minority; in addition to both the intrinsic norms for knowledgeability and communicativeness established over the beginning of the film, as well as the melodramatic narration that encourages forward-looking hypotheses, the narration makes it easy to simply assume Norah killed Harry because the film does not actively offer alternative suspects. By the time of Norah's attack on Harry, Rose has been absent from the film for over 25 minutes, and it is easy to forget her entirely. Thus while it is possible that *some* viewers might find the film's treatment of the murder suspicious, the absence of alternative murder suspects and the otherwise unrestricted, communicative, and forward-looking momentum of the melodramatic narration make it seem especially likely that Norah is the killer. As Menakhem Perry writes "a reader does not abandon one organizing hypothesis even when it poses difficulties, as long as he has no alternate candidate that would be more suitable." Menakhem Perry, "Literary Dynamics: How the

In addition to obstructing a clear view of Norah striking Harry, there is one more moment in this scene where the narration appears to be unrestricted and communicative, but is actually withholding an important piece of information, one that is even subtler than the shot of Norah's attack on Harry. When Rose confesses to the murder near the end of the film, we learn Norah didn't even hurt Harry. Presumably, Harry simply grabbed the poker from Norah, who then passed out. Rose reveals through flashback that she entered soon after, talked with Harry, and then killed him with the poker, dropping it near the entrance to the apartment as she fled the scene.⁴² When Norah wakes up, she exits the apartment in long shot, but the shot is deliberately framed so that the poker Rose discarded is just barely off-screen right. The only difference between the shot of Norah fleeing and the shot of Rose fleeing is a slight readjustment of the camera, which is panned slightly to the left in the shot showing Norah's exit. As both of these moments of withheld information indicate (both the shot where Norah strikes at Harry, and the shot of Norah fleeing the apartment), *The Blue Gardenia* takes advantage of the melodramatic narrational patterns it has established and the assumptions such patterns foster in order to mislead viewers into constructing an inaccurate *fabula*.⁴³

Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings," *Poetics Today* 1:1/2 (Autumn 1979), 57. Far from posing difficulties, the narration of *The Blue Gardenia* actively supports the hypothesis that Norah is the killer, both through the presentation of circumstantial evidence and by withholding a view of her striking Harry.

⁴² Attentive viewers will notice a discrepancy between the location where Norah presumably kills Harry, and the location where the police eventually remove Harry's corpse from the apartment: Norah attacks Harry in the den, and his corpse is removed from the adjacent art studio. This discrepancy is craftily concealed through ambiguous dialogue and intricate staging and framing tactics during the police's investigation of the crime scene.

⁴³ In *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: BFI, 2000), 406, Tom Gunning argues that it is unclear whether Rose's visit to Harry's apartment occurs before or after Norah has fled the scene, and that ultimately the ambiguity is insignificant. However, the order of events is actually very important, not only for making sense of the story, but also for describing the way in which the film is designed to be misleading. In suggesting that the order of events is irrelevant, Gunning seems to ignore two obvious questions raised by the possibility of Norah waking and fleeing before Rose arrives: why would Harry have just left Norah on the floor, and why wouldn't Harry have tried to impede her flight from the apartment when she awakes? Rose interrupting Harry's date with Norah explains why Norah remains undisturbed, and why no one is there to stop Norah's flight: Harry is already dead by the time she awakes (excised material from the film's shooting script also clearly corroborates

Of course, intrinsic norms' potential for misdirection is not restricted solely to the manipulation of the narration's *range* of knowledgeability, but can also stem from the *depth* of knowledge provided in the beginning as well. Such is the case in *Laura* (1944), for instance, where viewers are misled into assuming that Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) is unlikely to be responsible for the murder at the center of the film's plot because the narration provides a great deal of access to his subjective depth at the start of the film. The *syuzhet* begins with Waldo's voiceover describing the loneliness and devastation he felt when Laura (Gene Tierney) died, and later transitions into a lengthy flashback detailing the history of his relationship with her. Thus it is somewhat surprising when the end of the film reveals that Waldo is actually the film's murderer, as our early access to his subjectivity betrays none of the guilt one might expect from a murderer who knew his victim so well. As Kristin Thompson writes, "the very beginning of *Laura* initiates the process of distracting us from the truth by introducing the story through Lydecker's POV [point of view]." ⁴⁴ In the terms discussed here, the narration establishes a primacy effect both for Waldo's character (an upper-class, elitist newspaper columnist), as well as an intrinsic norm for the depth of access granted to his subjectivity, both of which make him appear an unlikely to be the murderer.

However, the extent to which the film misleads viewers is mitigated somewhat by the film's restricted narration. *Laura* is a detective film, and thus much like the film's detective, Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews), viewers are also searching for clues that would indicate the

Norah's presence during Rose's visit). Moreover, the timing of Rose's visit to Harry's apartment is crucial in describing the film's misleading narration, because if Norah leaves before Rose arrives, then the motivation disappears for the nearly identical framing of the shots of each woman exiting Harry's apartment. These shots become mere happenstance rather than an instance of a duplicitously restricted narration.

⁴⁴ Thompson, 170. Later, Thompson states more specifically that "The use of voice-over at the beginning... helps set up Lydecker's apparent innocence.... Lydecker seems to be the protagonist, and hence an unlikely suspect." Ibid., 182.

killer's identity, thus it is difficult to rule out *any* characters, even those to which the narration has granted considerable subjective depth, and which the primacy effect makes appear to be unlikely candidates.⁴⁵ Moreover, as Thompson indicates, the narration stops granting access to Waldo's subjectivity midway through the film, once the narration becomes spatiotemporally attached to Mark.⁴⁶ The considerable distance between the last time the narration grants access to Waldo's subjectivity and the revelation that Waldo is the killer makes the narration less misleading (and the revelation of his guilt somewhat less surprising) than it would be had the narration continually provided subjective access to the character. Nevertheless, the extent of the misdirection the film *does* achieve is predicated on the access provided to Waldo's subjectivity in the beginning of the film: lacking other contexts, the primacy effect makes viewers inclined to suspect alternative characters as more likely culprits.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The means through which a narration can mislead viewers discussed throughout this chapter by no means exhausts *all* of the ways in which classical narration can mislead; duplicity can be the result of any tactic a narration employs in order to withhold information from viewers

⁴⁵ For more on the narration of detective films, see Bordwell, 64-70.

⁴⁶ Thompson, 171.

⁴⁷ One might also describe *Laura* as misleading because Waldo did not actually kill Laura, but another woman; thus it is surprising when Laura re-appears halfway through film, unharmed and oblivious to the news of her supposed death. However, this is less a case of the narration deliberately misleading viewers as it is a case of *everyone* in the film having an inaccurate understanding of events. Even Waldo himself is shocked by Laura's return, since he was under the impression he had killed her (rather than another woman whom everyone assumed was Laura). The narration could be better described as misleading if, as Thompson suggests, Laura's return is actually Mark's dream: midway through the film, the narration provides ambiguous cues potentially indicating that the latter half of the film (including Laura's return) is Mark's subjectivity. Thompson, 162-168. However, even if Laura's return is a dream, it is one that Mark does not emerge from over the course of the rest of the film, thus it is still difficult to describe *Laura's* narration as misleading, because its duplicity is so total that it never reveals itself as duplicitous.

without making it seem too obvious that information has been withheld. However, this chapter has provided a thorough discussion of the reasons for why classical *beginnings* are particularly conducive to misdirection, as well as a discussion of the ways in which a misleading narration can manipulate some of the norms of classical beginnings in order to achieve their duplicity. Beginnings can be so effective at misdirection not only because we are inclined to focus our cognitive efforts on the information presented rather than information that is withheld, but also because our experience with classical narratives leads us to expect straightforward narratives, and because our limited range of knowledge in the beginning provides a poor basis for detecting misdirection. Correspondingly, while we rely on our schemata to make important information salient, the narration can work at cross-purposes to these schemata by effacing the prominence of certain causally relevant information. The narration can also solicit particular schemata in the beginning that influence the ways in which we use the information it presents, discouraging viewers from considering its potential to impact the narrative later. Finally, the narration can also establish intrinsic norms about the openness of the narration, in turn leading viewers to make assumptions about the narration's openness in later parts of the film, and helping to conceal moments when information is actually withheld. All of these are means of misleading viewers into an unknowingly and fundamentally inaccurate understanding of much of the narrative that are established during narrative beginnings.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to answer two primary questions: What sorts of storytelling principles are normative for the beginnings of classically narrated films, and what sorts of cognitive processes do viewers bring to films that make the beginning important for understanding entire narratives? Answering these questions has involved the exploration of a host of subordinate topics and questions, not only about narrative form and cognitive processes, but also about the nature of narrative beginnings in general. Such questions included: what the concept of a beginning entails; where narrative beginnings start and where they end; how a narration draws attention to information that will be important for later; how people perceive of causal relations between events; how exposition can be identified in film, and how it is normatively incorporated into the narrative; how characters are introduced; how some of these norms can be manipulated in order to mislead viewers; how viewers use various schemata to organize and categorize narrative information; how the primacy effect influences first impressions of narrative information; how viewers type characters, and how viewers make dispositional attributions and develop increasingly richly nuanced folk psychological inferences about characters' mental states. As we've seen, ultimately, the answers to most of these questions are interrelated: a beginning's form strongly influences how viewers understand the narrative, while simultaneously, the cognitive processes viewers use to process narratives inform why classical beginnings are designed the way they are. Films manipulate and distribute information *to* viewers, but viewers simultaneously perform mental activities *on* narratives. By combining both formal properties and cognitive processes to answer these questions, this dissertation has both illuminated the beginning's importance for storytelling and narrative

comprehension, and provided a fuller understanding of how cinematic narration functions, which are important subjects for cognitive scientists, narratologists, and film scholars alike.

Of course, while we are now in a much better position to understand classical narrative beginnings in cinema, answering the above questions has by no means exhausted the range of potential topics concerning narrative beginnings. By illuminating classical beginnings in film, this dissertation has laid the theoretical groundwork for mounting a wide range of other related inquiries about narrative beginnings, including narrative beginnings in other modes of narration, in other national-cultural or industrial contexts aside from American cinema, or even other new media. For instance, how do the norms discussed here compare with those of art cinema narration, historical-materialist narration, parametric narration, or the narration of independent cinema? How might the norms for the beginnings of films produced in Bollywood or Hong Kong compare with those discussed in this dissertation, and what kinds of schemata might inform non-Western viewers' categorization and organization of the information in beginnings? How might we define what constitutes a "beginning" in a television series or video game, and how do the considerably different aesthetic norms and formal constraints of these media affect the design of their narrative beginnings? As we've seen, classical beginnings are designed to facilitate narrative comprehension, but the beginnings of narratives in other narrational modes, other national-cultural and industrial contexts, or other media are not necessarily designed to fulfill such a function, thus the answers to questions about narrative beginnings in these other areas of inquiry (and even the questions themselves) would likely differ considerably from the explanations (and questions) proposed here. Likewise, while this dissertation has sought to explain the relatively stable norms of classical beginnings in terms of viewers' cognitive processes, it could also be productive to inquire after the degree to which there emerge divergent

patterns in the use of these norms across different historical periods, and to investigate the various economic, industrial, cultural, or other historical circumstances that might have caused such patterns. These areas of inquiry could shed new light on narrative beginnings by throwing into relief the insights this dissertation has sought to achieve, and could expand upon our understanding not only of classical beginnings in cinema, but of narrative beginnings in general.

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