

2

The Significance of Film Form



You are a filmmaker. How might you start your movie? With an exciting bit of action that grabs the viewer's interest? Or with something more slowly paced that gradually builds up involvement?

Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* follows option one. Park workers nervously surround a shipping container housing an unseen, thrashing, roaring beast. Workers train their weapons on the case as it's opened to release the creature into the park. The gate slides open, but the heaving cage knocks a worker to the ground. Suddenly he's seized and dragged into the container (2.1). The guards fire at the creature, but the man slides into darkness.

The film doesn't present another dinosaur attack for an hour. In the meantime, we get background information about the park, its genetically bred inhabitants, and the characters who have been brought there. Conflicts build and schemes emerge. Yet before all this development of the drama, Spielberg and his screenwriters Michael Crichton and David Koepp have given us a taste of the suspense and physical action coming up later. Since the opening doesn't show us the velociraptor, we look forward to seeing the beast fully, and in action. The filmmakers' creative decisions have shaped our experience—teasing us with the promise of thrills but making us wait while the plot is filled in. Primed by this opening, we'll be vigilant for anything that would put the characters at risk. And of course the violence of the first scene gives the lie to the bland cuteness of the park's publicity rolled out in later scenes. We know, as the visiting scientists don't, that behind the family-friendly surface this is a dangerous place.

Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* begins in a far less aggressive way. During a desert sandstorm, men in goggles and protective suits meet a French scientist. They exchange greetings before pressing forward to check a fleet of vintage airplanes, reported missing in 1945. The man serving as a translator raises a flurry of questions: "Where's the crew? How did they get here?" (2.2) The investigative team finds an old man nearby. Although his face is badly sunburned, he's smiling. "He says the sun came out last night. He says it sang to him."

Instead of shocking us with violence, *Close Encounters'* opening poses a series of mysteries. Those will deepen in the scenes to come: a UFO swerves near a commercial jet, a little boy follows unseen home invaders into the night. The calmness of the opening, the friendly professionalism of the scientists, and the joyous reaction of the old man to what he's seen indicate that the film will be gentle, slow-moving, and concerned with characters trying to understand what is making extraordinary things happen. This will be an interplanetary mystery story, not a horror-action-adventure like *Jurassic Park*.



2.1



2.2

2.1–2.2 Hard and soft openings. Grabbing the audience in *Jurassic Park* (2.1) versus enticing the audience in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (2.2).

Either strategy for starting a movie, abrupt or gradual, can have a strong effect on the viewer. The choices come down to a matter of *form*—the way parts work together to create an overall effect. If you are a director or screenwriter, you face perpetual choices about form. As a viewer, you are responding to it at every moment.

The Concept of Form in Film

Form as Pattern

The arts offer us intensely involving experiences. We say that movies draw us in or immerse us. We can lose track of time when listening to music, and when we enjoy a novel, we may say, “I really got into it.” All these ways of talking suggest that artworks involve us by engaging our senses, feelings, and mind in a *process*. That process sharpens our interest, focuses our attention, urges us forward. How does this happen?

Because the artist has created a pattern. Artists design their works—they give them form—so that we can have a structured experience. For this reason, form is of central importance in film.

“I believe in soft openings for movies. . . . I think it’s almost impossible to lose an audience in the first ten minutes. . . . It’s not television. You don’t have to grab them. In a movie with a very fast opening, you end up paying for it somewhere along the way—usually by having to explain what happened in the fast and furious action.”

—Robert Towne, screenwriter, *Chinatown*

“Screenplays are structure.”

—William Goldman, screenwriter, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*

Our minds are very good at finding patterns in things—faces in the clouds, a drumbeat in a downpour. Artworks rely on this dynamic, unifying effort of the human mind. Novels present a pattern of events that create suspense or surprise, while paintings expect that we’ll be sensitive to composition and color. Artworks in all media ask us to pay attention, to anticipate upcoming events, to construct a whole out of parts, and to feel an emotional response to the pattern that we help create.

In similar ways, a film coaxes us to connect sequences into a larger whole. The savage attack at the start of *Jurassic Park* establishes the park’s raptors as a force to be reckoned with later. We’d be disappointed if they never reappeared in the plot. Similarly, *Close Encounters* promises to reveal the fates of the missing World War II pilots and the runaway boy.

Even small details get linked in a pattern. Early in *Collateral*, the taxi driver Max is shown wiping down his cab’s dashboard and steering wheel before setting out on his night shift. He then carefully clips a snapshot to his sun visor. For a moment, he simply gazes at the postcard view of a tropical island (2.3). These gestures prompt us to see Max’s personality as neat and orderly. They also suggest that in the city’s turmoil, he clears a quiet mental space for himself. The next scene’s cues reinforce our judgment of Max’s character (2.4–2.5). Small or large, local or far-ranging, the patterns we find engage our interest, our minds, and our emotions.

These instances suggest that a film is not simply a random batch of elements. Like all artworks, a film has **form**. By form, in its broadest sense, we mean the overall set of relationships among a film’s parts.

This description of form is still very abstract, so let’s draw some examples from one movie you’ve probably seen. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the viewer is expected to follow a story—that is, a pattern of *narrative* elements. These are events that involve the characters. Dorothy dreams that a tornado blows her to Oz. There she encounters other characters, and together they have adventures. Eventually Dorothy awakens from her dream to find herself home in Kansas. Alongside the story, we can also notice *stylistic* elements: the way the camera moves, the arrangements of color in the frame, the use of music, and other devices. Stylistic elements utilize the various film techniques we’ll be considering in later chapters.

Because *The Wizard of Oz* is designed to give us a particular experience, we actively relate the elements within each set to one another. We know that the narrative elements form a pattern, a story. We see the tornado as causing Dorothy’s trip to Oz, and her adventures there result from her desire to get home. Likewise, we identify the characters in Oz as similar to characters in Dorothy’s Kansas life. Various stylistic elements also form patterns. We recognize the “We’re Off to See the Wizard” tune whenever Dorothy picks up a new companion. Our experience of the film depends on our recognizing and anticipating how these broad patterns will develop.

Moreover, our minds tie these two sorts of patterning together. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the narrative development can be linked to the stylistic patterning. Colors identify story landmarks, such as Kansas (in black and white) and the Yellow Brick Road. Movements of the camera call our attention to story action. And the music serves to describe certain characters and situations. The relationships among all these elements make up the overall form of *The Wizard of Oz*.

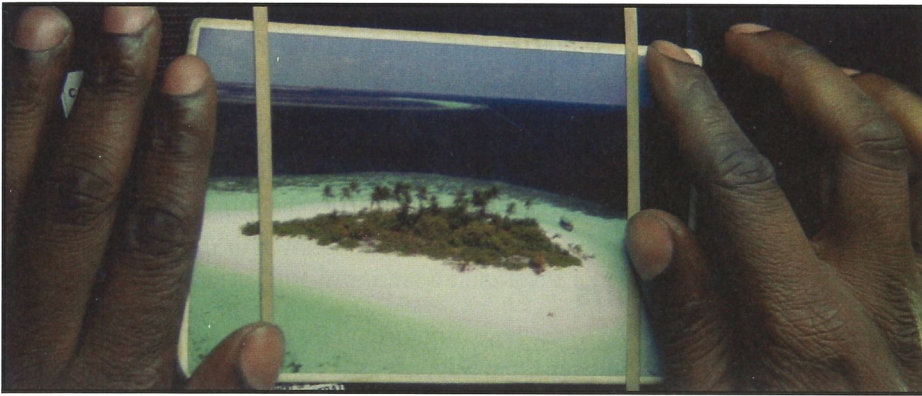
“Form” Versus “Content”

Very often people think of “form” as the opposite of something called “content.” This implies that a poem or a musical piece or a film is like a jug. An external shape, the jug, *contains* a liquid that could just as easily be held in a cup or a pail. Under this assumption, form becomes less important than whatever it’s presumed to contain.

We don’t accept this assumption. We think that every component functions as part of a pattern, big or small, that engages the viewer. So we’ll treat as formal elements many things that some people consider content. From our standpoint, subject matter and abstract ideas all enter into the total form of the artwork. They may cue

“Because of my character, I have always been interested in the engineering of direction. I loved hearing about how [director] Mark Sandrich would draw charts of Fred Astaire’s musicals to work out where to put the dance numbers. What do you want the audience to understand? How do you make things clear? How do you structure sequences within a film? Afterwards—what have you got away with?”

—Stephen Frears, director, *The Grifters*



2.3



2.4



2.5

2.3–2.5 Patterns create character. Max is introduced as able to tune out his environment, thanks to the island on his postcard (2.3). We're reminded of this when in the next scene, as the passengers quarrel, he tips down the visor and stares at the postcard, as if to shut out the unpleasantness in his back seat (2.4–2.5).

us to frame certain expectations or imagine certain possibilities. The viewer relates these elements to one another dynamically. Consequently, subject matter and ideas become somewhat different from what they might be outside the artwork.

Consider extraterrestrials and UFOs. In popular thinking, aliens can be either peaceful or hostile, but if you were going to make a film about UFOs, you'd have to decide how to treat the subject. That would be a decision about form. In *Independence Day*, presenting the aliens as an invading horde fits well with a story of Americans

of all classes uniting to conquer a threat. By contrast, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* treats alien visitors as spiritual teachers, creatures who restore people's sense of wonder and promise a better life. The aliens of *Mars Attacks!* pretend to be peaceful but then turn treacherous, and their cunning reveals the ineptitude of the people in power. This treatment suits the film's satire of modern politics and media. In each case, the filmmakers' choices about form have repurposed the basic subject matter of aliens. What we might call the content is governed by the film's formal context.

Formal Expectations

We're now in a better position to see how film form grabs and holds us. It creates expectations and sustains them over time. Suppose that *Jurassic Park* never revealed the raptors, or *Close Encounters* never explained its puzzles. We'd think that something important had been left out, to say the least. Once we're caught up in following the interrelations among elements, we want the patterns to develop and conclude.

Expectations color our everyday experiences. Psychological experiments have shown that if people are told that a cheap wine is expensive, they rate it as tasting better than if they're told its true price. Creating expectations is central to advertising any product. A film's title, its poster, its online promotion, and its trailers aim to set up particular expectations. You would not go to a film called *Eat Pray Love* anticipating a raunchy teen comedy.

Expectation pervades our experience of artworks. In reading a mystery, we expect that a solution will be offered at some point, usually the end. In listening to a piece of music, we expect repetition of a melody or a motif. In looking at a painting, we search for what we expect to be the most significant areas, then scan the less prominent portions. From beginning to end, our involvement with a work of art depends largely on expectations.

We can illustrate this with a little experiment. Assume that "A" is the first letter of a series. What follows?

AB

After seeing A, you probably thought that the next letters would run in alphabetical order. Your expectation was confirmed. What follows AB? Most people would say "C." But form doesn't always follow our initial expectation.

ABA

Here form takes us a little by surprise. If we are puzzled by a formal development, we readjust our expectations and try again. What follows ABA?

ABAC

Here the main possibilities were either ABAB or ABAC. (Note that your expectations limit possibilities as well as select them.) If you expected ABAC, your expectation was fulfilled, and you can confidently predict the next letter. If you expected ABAB, you still should be able to make a strong guess at the next letter:

ABACA

Simple as this game is, it illustrates the involving power of form. As a viewer or listener you don't simply let the parts parade past you. You enter into an active participation with them, creating and readjusting expectations as the pattern develops over time.

If you're a filmmaker, you want to arouse and shape viewers' expectations. This is what happens in the opening scenes of *Jurassic Park* and *Close Encounters*. Similarly, *The Wizard of Oz* begins with Dorothy running down a road with her dog Toto (2.6). Immediately, we form expectations. She seems to be fleeing from someone; will she be caught? Perhaps she will meet another character or arrive at her destination. Even such a simple action asks us to participate in the story's development by



CONNECT TO THE BLOG
www.davidbordwell.net/blog

Even at the very beginning of a film, the title can give us clues to its subjects, themes, and form—or baffle us. We consider various options in "Title wave."



2.6 What does the audience expect? Dorothy pauses while fleeing with Toto at the beginning of *The Wizard of Oz*.

adjusting our expectations about what may happen. Much later in the film, we come to expect that Dorothy will get her wish to return to Kansas. Indeed, the settings of the film give *The Wizard of Oz* a large-scale ABA form: Kansas-Oz-Kansas.

You probably noticed that the formal development of *The Wizard of Oz* didn't satisfy our expectations immediately, as our alphabet exercise did. What we normally call *suspense* involves a delay in fulfilling an established expectation. As the term implies, suspense leaves something suspended—not only the next element in a pattern but also our urge for completion. Both the opening raptor attack in *Jurassic Park* and the mysteries in *Close Encounters* leave a pattern uncompleted, and as a result they keep us in suspense.

Expectations may also be cheated, as when we expect ABC but get ABA. In general, *surprise* is a result of an expectation that is revealed to be incorrect. We don't expect that a gangster in 1930s Chicago will find a rocket ship in his garage; if he does, our reaction may require us to readjust our assumptions about what can happen in this story. This example suggests that comedy often depends on cheating expectations and creating surprise.

One more pattern of our expectations needs tracing. Sometimes an artwork will cue us to think about what might have come *before* a certain point. When Dorothy runs down the road at the beginning of *The Wizard of Oz*, we wonder not only where she is going but where she's been and what she's fleeing from. In other words, filmmakers can arouse *curiosity* about earlier events. As Chapter 3 will show, curiosity is an important factor in narrative form.

Already we have several possible ways in which filmmakers' creative decisions about form can engage us. The filmmaker can cue us to make expectations and then gratify them. The expectations may be gratified quickly, as when we soon learn why Dorothy is running down the road. Or the filmmaker may wait quite a while before fulfilling our expectations, as with the raptors' eventual reappearance in *Jurassic Park*. And the filmmaker may set up expectations only to undercut them, creating surprise.

At a limit, the filmmaker may choose to disturb our expectations. We often associate art with pleasure, but many artworks offer us conflict, tension, and shock. An artwork's form may even strike us as unpleasant because of its imbalances or contradictions. For example, experimental films may jar rather than soothe us. Viewers frequently feel puzzled or shocked by *Eat, Scorpio Rising*, and other avant-garde works (pp. 369–386). We'll encounter similar challenges when we examine the editing of Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (Chapter 6) and the style of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (Chapter 11).

Yet even when they disturb us, filmmakers still arouse and shape formal expectations. For example, on the basis of our experience of most movie stories, we expect that the main characters introduced in the first half of a film will be present in the second half. Yet Wong Kar-wai punctures this expectation in *Chungking Express* (pp. 425–429). When our expectations are thwarted, we may feel disoriented, but then we adjust them to look for other, more appropriate, ways of engaging with the film's form.

If we can adjust our expectations to a disorienting work, we may find it satisfying in a new way. Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*, for example, slowly trains the viewer to associate a series of images with the letters of the alphabet. Viewers often become quite absorbed in watching the series take shape as a cinematic picture puzzle. As *Chungking Express* and *Zorns Lemma* also suggest, a disturbing work can reveal to us our normal expectations about form. Such films can coax us to reflect on our taken-for-granted assumptions about how a movie must behave.

There is no limit to the number of ways in which a film can be organized. Some filmmakers will ask us to recast our expectations in drastic ways. Still, our enjoyment can increase if we welcome the unfamiliar experiences offered by formally challenging films.

“The idea of suspense is closely bound up with the idea of fiction. This is as it should be: to tell a story is to create suspense, and the art of the storyteller resides in this ability to make dull subjects sound entertaining and plots whose solution everyone knows in advance, exciting.”

—Thomas Mann



CONNECT TO THE BLOG
www.davidbordwell.net/blog

Why is it that we feel suspense even if we're rewatching a film and know the outcome? We talk about how that happens in “This is your brain on movies, maybe.”

“Now, if you're going to do action films, a certain amount of repetition, which certainly is a kind of straitjacket, is inevitable. You are going to have to deal with gunfights and chases. . . .

So it becomes a kind of game. The audience knows what the conclusion will be, but you still have to entertain them. So you are always walking on the edge of a precipice—trying to juggle the genre expectations. . . .”

—Walter Hill, director, *The Driver* and *The Warriors*

Conventions and Experience

Our ABAC example illustrates still another point. One guide to your expectations is your *prior experience*. Your knowledge of the English alphabet makes ABA an unlikely sequence. This fact suggests that artistic form is not a pure activity isolated from other experiences.

Artworks are human creations, and the artist lives in history and society. As a result, the artwork will relate, in some way, to other works and to aspects of the world. A tradition, a dominant style, a popular form—elements like these will be common to several different artworks. These common traits are usually called *conventions*.

For example, the first few scenes of a film often explain background information about the characters and the action; this sort of exposition is a narrative convention. *Genres*, as we will see in Chapter 9, depend heavily on conventions. Urban thrillers tend to feature spectacular car crashes, so Michael Mann's use of the device in *Collateral* (p. 000) accords with that genre convention. It's a convention of the musical film that characters sing and dance, as in *The Wizard of Oz*. It's one convention of narrative form that the conclusion solves the problems that the characters confront, and *Wizard* likewise accepts this convention by letting Dorothy return to Kansas.

If the filmmaker can't avoid connecting to both art and the larger world, neither can the audience. When we respond to cues in the film, we call on our experiences of life and other artworks. You were able to play the ABAC game because you had learned the alphabet. You may have learned it in everyday life (in a classroom or from your parents) or from an artwork (perhaps from a rhyming song or TV cartoons). Similarly, we're able to recognize the journey structure in *The Wizard of Oz* because we've taken trips ourselves. We've also read such books as Homer's *Odyssey* and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and we've seen other films organized around the journey pattern.

In recognizing film form, then, the audience must be prepared to understand formal cues through knowledge of life and of other artworks. But what if the two principles come into conflict? In ordinary life, people don't simply start to sing and dance, as they do in *The Wizard of Oz*. Very often conventions demarcate art from life, saying implicitly, "In artworks of this sort, the laws of everyday reality don't operate. By the rules of *this* game, something 'unreal' *can* happen." All stylized art, from opera, ballet, and pantomime to slapstick comedy, depends on the audience's willingness to suspend the laws of ordinary experience and to accept particular conventions. Why do characters in musicals sing to one another? Why doesn't Buster Keaton smile? It's beside the point to ask such questions. Filmmakers assume that we're familiar with conventions and are willing to go along with the game. You probably haven't met a contract killer in real life, but the cues in the early scenes of *Collateral* prompt you to take Vincent as a movie version of a hit man.

Further, conventions can change. Very brief flashbacks to earlier events in the story are common in today's films, but they would have been considered unusual in the 1930s and 1940s. Similarly, conventions of earlier periods of film history can seem odd to us today. Filmmakers rely on existing conventions, but they also may try to create new ones. For example, some modern directors have deliberately made films that lack the quick turns of events we associate with Hollywood movies. Films like Béla Tarr's *Satan's Tango* move at a solemn pace and ask us to concentrate on details of setting and sound. In other words, we're being asked to summon up an unusual set of expectations. As Tarr's sort of filmmaking attracted interest, other filmmakers explored the approach, so that this trend created its own set of conventions.

Form and Feeling

Emotion plays a large role in our experience of form. To understand this role, let's distinguish between *emotions represented* in the artwork and an *emotional response* felt by the spectator. If an actor grimaces in agony, the emotion of pain is represented



CONNECT TO THE BLOG
www.davidbordwell.net/blog

Slumdog Millionaire uses some conventions in novel ways, as we show in "Slumdogged by the past."

“To a story-teller a journey is a marvelous device. It provides a strong thread on which a multitude of things that he has in mind may be strung to make a new thing, various, unpredictable, and yet coherent. My chief reason for using this form was technical.”

—J. R. R. Tolkien

within the film. But that emotion might not be felt by us in the audience; if the movie is a comedy, we might laugh. Both types of emotion have formal implications.

Emotions represented within the film play particular roles in the film's overall form. The dinosaur wranglers in the opening of *Jurassic Park* are grim and tense; their emotional attitude fits Spielberg's effort to show the park as a dangerous place. But the little boy in the opening of *Close Encounters* reacts to the offscreen aliens ransacking the kitchen with a smile of delight. This prepares us to expect that in later scenes the visitors will be shown as benevolent.

Form shapes the spectator's emotional response, too. We have just seen how cues in the artwork interact with our prior experience, especially our experience of artistic conventions. Often form in artworks appeals to our ready-made emotional responses. All other things being equal, we tend to smile at a gurgling baby and recoil from acts of torture.

But form can create new responses instead of harping on old ones. An artwork may lead us to override or suspend our everyday emotional responses. No one wants to meet Freddy Kruger or Hannibal Lecter in real life, but as film characters they may become spellbinding. In the abstract, we might find the land of Oz a child's paradise. But because the film's developing plot leads us to sympathize with Dorothy in her desire to go home, we feel satisfaction when she finally returns to Kansas.

The dynamic aspect of form also engages our feelings. Expectation, for instance, spurs emotion. To wonder what will happen next is to invest some emotion in the situation. Delayed fulfillment of an expectation—suspense—may produce anxiety or sympathy. (Will the detective find the criminal? Will boy get girl? Will the melody return?) Gratified expectations may produce a feeling of satisfaction or relief. (The detective solves the mystery; boy does get girl; the melody returns one more time.) Cheated expectations and curiosity about past material may produce puzzlement or keener interest. (So he isn't the detective? This isn't a romance story? Has a second melody replaced the first one?)

Note that all of these possibilities *may* occur. No recipe can guarantee that the filmmaker will achieve a specific emotional response. It is all a matter of context—that is, of each artwork's overall form. All we can say for certain is that the emotion felt by the spectator will emerge from formal patterns that she or he perceives in the work. This is one reason why we should try to notice as many formal relations as possible in a film. The richer our perception, the deeper and more complex our response may become.

The death of a child is perhaps the most sorrowful event that can occur in people's lives. Most films would use this event to summon up the sadness we would also feel in life. But artistic form can alter the emotional tenor of even this unhappy situation. In Jean Renoir's *The Crime of M. Lange*, the cynical publisher Batala rapes and abandons Estelle, a young laundress. After Batala disappears, Estelle becomes integrated into the neighborhood and returns to her former fiancé. But Estelle is pregnant by Batala and bears his child.

The scene when Estelle's employer, Valentine, announces that the child was born dead is one of the most emotionally complex in cinema. The first reactions expressed by the characters are gravity and sorrow (2.7). Suddenly, Batala's cousin remarks, "Too bad. It was a relative." In the film's context, this is taken as a joke (2.8). The shift in the emotion represented in the film catches us off guard. Since these characters are not heartless, we must readjust our reaction to the death and respond as they do—with relief. Estelle's survival is far more important than the death of Batala's child. This is a daring, extreme example, but it dramatically illustrates how the emotions presented onscreen and aroused in us depend on the context created by form.

Form and Meaning

Like emotion, **meaning** is important to our experience of artworks. As viewers we are constantly testing the work for larger significance, for what it says or suggests.

“If my film makes one more person feel miserable, I'll feel I've done my job.”

—Woody Allen, director, *Hannah and Her Sisters*



CONNECT TO THE BLOG
www.davidbordwell.net/blog

Scholars have studied the ways in which we respond emotionally to movies. We discuss their lines of argument in “Now you see it, now you can't.”



2.7



2.8

2.7–2.8 Context reshaping emotion.

In *The Crime of M. Lange*, the neighbors initially display grief at the news of Batala and Estelle's baby (2.7). But in reaction to Batala's cousin's remark, everyone breaks out into smiles (2.8). The film's formal development has rendered appropriate a reaction that might be perverse in ordinary life.

And filmmakers often create movies to convey their ideas and opinions. They want us to grasp the meanings they've offered.

What sorts of things might filmmakers and spectators think of as meaningful? Let's look at four remarks we might make about the meaning of *The Wizard of Oz*.

1. **Referential meaning.** *During the Depression, a tornado takes a girl from her family's Kansas farm to the mythical land of Oz. After a series of adventures, she returns home.*

This is very concrete, close to a bare-bones plot summary. Here the meaning depends on the spectator's ability to identify specific items: the hard times of America in the 1930s and features of midwestern climate. A viewer unacquainted with such information would miss some of the meanings cued by the film. We can call such tangible meanings *referential*, since the film refers to things or places already invested with significance in the real world.

A film's subject matter—in *The Wizard of Oz*, American farm life in the 1930s—is often established through referential meaning. And, as you might expect, referential meaning plays a role within the film's overall form. Suppose that instead of having Dorothy live in flat, spare, rural Kansas, the film made Dorothy a child living in a posh section of Beverly Hills. When she got to Oz (transported there, perhaps, by a hillside flash flood), the contrast between the crowded opulence of Oz and her home would not have been nearly as sharp. Here the referential meanings of Kansas and the Great Depression play a definite role in the overall contrast of settings that the film's form creates.

2. **Explicit meaning.** *A girl dreams of leaving home to escape her troubles. Only after she leaves does she realize how much she loves her family and friends. Nothing she finds elsewhere can replace them.*

This assertion is still fairly concrete in the meaning it attributes to the film. If someone were to ask you the *point* of the film—what it seems to be trying to get across—you might answer with something like this. Perhaps you would also mention Dorothy's closing line, "There's no place like home," as a summary of what she has learned. Let's call this sort of openly asserted meaning an *explicit meaning*.

Like referential meanings, explicit meanings function within the film's overall form. They are controlled by context. For instance, we might want to take "There's no place like home" as a statement of the meaning of the entire film. But, first, *why* do we take that as a strongly meaningful line? In ordinary conversation, it's a cliché. In context, however, the line gains great force. It's uttered in close-up, it comes at the end of the film (a formally privileged moment), and it refers back to all of Dorothy's desires and ordeals, recalling the film's narrative movement toward her goal. It is the *form* of the film that gives the homily an unfamiliar weight.

This example suggests that we must examine how explicit meanings in a film interact with other elements of the overall form. Usually, we can't isolate a particularly significant moment and declare it to be *the* meaning of the whole film. Dorothy's "There's no place like home" does capture one meaningful element in *The Wizard of Oz*. But her remark is counterbalanced by the entire beguiling Oz fantasy. Oz is attractive but dangerous; home is drab but safe and loving.

In trying to see the meaningful parts within a larger whole, it's useful to set significant moments against one another. Thus Dorothy's final line could be juxtaposed to the scene of the characters getting spruced up after their arrival at the Emerald City. We can try to see the film as about not only Oz or only Kansas, but rather the relation of the two—the delight and risk of a fantasy world versus the comfort and stability of home. Thus the film's total system is larger than any one explicit meaning we can find in it. Instead of asking, "What is this film's meaning?" we can ask, "How do the various meanings relate to one another?"

3. Implicit meaning. *An adolescent who must soon face the adult world yearns for a return to the simplicity of childhood, but she eventually accepts the demands of growing up.*

This is more abstract than the first two remarks we've mentioned. This one suggests that *The Wizard of Oz* is about something general, the passage from childhood to adulthood. On this view, the film implies that, as they grow up, people may desire to return to the apparently uncomplicated world of childhood. Dorothy's frustration with her aunt and uncle and her urge to flee to a place "over the rainbow" become examples of a general conception of adolescence. Unlike the "no place like home" line, this meaning isn't stated directly. We can call this suggestion an *implicit meaning*. When perceivers ascribe implicit meanings to an artwork, they're usually said to be *interpreting* it.

Clearly, **interpretations** vary. One viewer might propose that *The Wizard of Oz* is really about adolescence. Another might suggest that it is really about courage and persistence, or that it is a satire on the adult world. One of the appeals of artworks is that they ask us to interpret them in several ways at once. Again, the filmmaker invites us to perform certain activities—here, building up implicit meanings, guided by the film's overall form.

Some filmmakers claim to avoid implicit meanings altogether. They leave them to viewers and critics. Of *There Will Be Blood*, director Paul Thomas Anderson said, "It's a slippery slope when you start thinking about something other than just a good battle between two guys. . . . Tell a nasty story and let the rest take care of itself." But other filmmakers try to steer viewers toward implicit meanings, sometimes called *subtexts*. Robert Zemeckis described his *Forrest Gump* as "a movie about grieving." Director Greg Mottola describes the friends' separation at the end of *Superbad* as having several possible subtexts: "It's homosexual panic or it's bravado or it's all these shades of what young men go through to try to appear a certain way to women and to their peers."

Once we identify a film's meaning, either explicit or implicit, we're often tempted to split up the film into the content portion (the meaning) and the form (the vehicle for the content). Explicit and implicit meanings suggest very broad concepts, often called *themes*. A film may have as its theme courage or the power of faithful love. Such descriptions have some value, but they are very general; hundreds of films fit them. To summarize *The Wizard of Oz* as being simply about the problems of adolescence does not do justice to the specific qualities of the film as an experience. We suggest that the search for implicit meanings should not leave behind the *particular* and *concrete* features of a film.

This isn't to say that we should avoid interpreting films. But we should strive to make our interpretations precise by seeing how each film's thematic meanings are suggested by the film's form. In a narrative film, both explicit and implicit meanings depend on the relations between story and style. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the Yellow Brick Road has no meaning in and of itself. But if we examine the functions it fulfills in relation to the narrative, the music, the colors, and so on, we can argue that the Yellow Brick Road does suggest meanings. Dorothy's strong desire to go home makes the road represent that desire. At the same time, because it's made of yellow bricks—rare in our everyday world—it partakes of some of the magical qualities of Oz. In a way, the road encapsulates the tension between Oz and Kansas that we see throughout the movie. We want Dorothy to be successful in getting to Oz and going back to Kansas. So the road can suggest the themes of Oz's attraction and the desirability of getting home.

Interpretation need not be an end in itself. It also helps in understanding the overall form of the film. Once we've noticed the Yellow Brick Road as a thematic element, we could analyze its functions in larger patterns. We could see that it gains narrative importance because Dorothy's indecision at a crossroads allows her to

“Critics enable us to see how parts of an artwork serve larger designs. Often this requires that the critics offer interpretations or explications of the larger aims of the work, but these overviews are often introduced, in large measure, in order to explain why the works have the parts they do.”

—Noël Carroll, philosopher of art

meet the Scarecrow. We could work out a color scheme for the film, contrasting the yellow road, the red slippers, the green Emerald City, and so forth. In such ways, when we interpret a film we should try to harmonize the meanings we detect with the film's overall formal development.

- 4. Symptomatic meaning.** *In a society in which human worth is measured by money, the home and the family may seem to be the last refuge of human values. This belief is especially strong in times of economic crisis, such as that in the United States in the 1930s.*

Like statement 3, this is abstract and general. It situates the film within a trend of thought that is assumed to be characteristic of American society during the 1930s. The claim could apply equally well to many other films, as well as to many novels, plays, poems, paintings, advertisements, radio shows, political speeches, and a host of cultural products of the period.

But something else is worth noticing about the statement. It treats an explicit meaning in *The Wizard of Oz* ("There's no place like home") as displaying a set of values characteristic of a whole society. We could treat implicit meanings the same way. If we say the film implies something about adolescence as a crucial time of transition, we could suggest that emphasis on adolescence as a special period of life is also a recurrent concern of American society. So, it's possible to understand a film's explicit or implicit meanings as bearing traces of a particular set of social values. We can call this *symptomatic meaning*, and the set of values that get revealed can be considered a social **ideology**.

Symptomatic meanings remind us that meaning of all sorts is largely a social phenomenon. Many meanings of films are ultimately ideological; that is, they spring from systems of culturally specific beliefs about the world. Religious beliefs, political opinions, conceptions of race or gender or social class, even our most deeply seated notions of life's values—all these constitute our ideological frame of reference. We're tempted to think that our beliefs are the best explanations of how the world is. But if we compare our own ideology with that of another culture or era we see how historically and socially shaped many of those views are. In other times and places, *home* and *adolescence* don't carry the meanings they carried in 1930s America. Some cultures don't have the idea of adolescence at all.

Films, like other artworks, can be examined for their symptomatic meanings. Again, however, the abstract and general quality of such meanings can lead us away from the film's concrete form. As in analyzing implicit meanings, we should ground symptomatic meanings in the film's specific aspects. A film *enacts* ideological meanings through its form. We'll see in Chapter 11 how the narrative and stylistic system of *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Raging Bull* can be analyzed for ideological implications.

To sum up: Films have meaning because we attribute meanings to them. Sometimes the filmmaker guides us toward certain meanings; sometimes we find meanings the filmmaker didn't intend. If we're engaged by a film, we'll search for referential, explicit, implicit, and symptomatic meanings. But a film is a film, not a collection of themes. The filmmaker who wants to make a general statement or suggest implicit meanings will still have to work out the film in concrete terms, through particular choices about form and style. When we look closely at a film, we should keep the same balance in mind, not letting our urge for wider significance outweigh our focus on the film as a dynamic whole.

Evaluation: Good, Bad, or Indifferent?

In talking about an artwork, people often *evaluate* it. They make claims about its goodness or badness. Reviews in print media and on the Internet exist almost solely to tell us whether a film is worth seeing, and our friends often urge us to go to their

latest favorite. But often we discover that a much-praised film seems mediocre to us. How, then, are we to evaluate films with any degree of objectivity?

We can start by realizing that there is a difference between *personal taste* and *evaluative judgment*. To say "I liked this film" or "I hated it" is not equal to saying, "It's a good film" or "It's wretched." Very few of us limit our enjoyment to the greatest works. Most people can enjoy a film they know is not particularly good. What critics call "guilty pleasures" are movies that are enjoyable despite being bad in some respects.

All this suggests that personal preference need not be the basis for judging a film's quality. Instead, the critic who wishes to make a relatively objective evaluation will use specific *criteria*. A criterion is a standard that can be applied in the judgment of many works. By using a criterion, the critic gains a basis for comparing films for relative quality.

There are many different criteria. Some people evaluate films on *realistic* criteria. Aficionados of military history might judge a film entirely on whether the battle scenes use historically accurate weaponry. Other people condemn films because they don't find the action plausible. They dismiss a scene by saying, "Who'd really believe that X would meet Y just at the right moment?" We have already seen, though, that artworks often violate laws of reality and operate by their own conventions and internal rules. Coincidental encounters, usually at embarrassing moments, are a convention of genres like comedy. So realism, then, isn't a criterion that we can apply in every case.

Viewers can also use *moral* criteria to evaluate films. Most narrowly, aspects of the film can be judged outside their context in the film. Some viewers might feel that any film with nudity or profanity or violence is bad, while other viewers might find just these aspects valuable because they provoke strong reactions. Likewise, some viewers might condemn Renoir's slightly humorous handling of the baby's death in *The Crime of M. Lange*, regardless of the scene's context. More broadly, viewers and critics may employ moral criteria to evaluate a film's overall significance, and here the film's complete formal system becomes pertinent. We can judge a film good because of its overall view of life, its willingness to show opposing points of view, or its emotional range.

While realistic and moral criteria are well suited to particular purposes, we should also recognize that there are criteria that assess films as artistic wholes. Such criteria allow us to take each film's form into account as much as possible. *Coherence* is one such criterion. This quality, often referred to as *unity*, has traditionally been held to be a positive feature of artworks. So, too, has *intensity of effect*. If an artwork is vivid, striking, and emotionally engaging, it may be considered more valuable.

Another criterion is *complexity*. We can argue that, all other things being equal, complex films are good. A complex film engages our interest on many levels, creates a multiplicity of relations among many separate formal elements, and tends to create intriguing patterns of feelings and meanings.

Yet another formal criterion is *originality*. Originality for its own sake is pointless, of course. Just because something is different doesn't mean that it is good. But if an artist takes a familiar convention and uses it in a way that gives viewers a fresh experience, then (all other things being equal) the resulting work may be considered good from an aesthetic standpoint.

Note that all these criteria are matters of degree. One film may be more complex than another. Moreover, there is often a give-and-take among the criteria. A film might be complex but lack coherence or intensity. Ninety minutes of a black screen would make for an original film but not a very complex one. A slasher movie may create great intensity in certain scenes but may be wholly unoriginal, as well as disorganized and simplistic. In applying the criteria, the analyst often must weigh one against another.

Evaluation can serve many useful ends. It can call attention to neglected artworks or make us rethink our attitudes toward accepted classics. But just as the discovery of meanings is not the only purpose of formal analysis, we suggest that evaluation is most fruitful when it is backed up by a close examination of the film. General statements (“*The Wizard of Oz* is a masterpiece”) seldom enlighten us very much. Usually, an evaluation is helpful insofar as it points to aspects of the film and shows us relations and qualities we have missed. “*The Wizard of Oz* is more coherent than it looks at first. Look at all the parallels! Miss Gulch’s written order to take Toto is echoed by the Wicked Witch’s fiery skywriting addressed to the citizens of the Emerald City, ‘Surrender Dorothy.’” Like interpretation, evaluation can usefully drive us back to the film’s particular formal strategies, helping us to understand them better.

In reading this book, you’ll find that we have generally minimized evaluation. We think that most of the films and sequences we analyze are good based on the artistic criteria we mentioned, but the purpose of this book is not to persuade you to accept a list of masterpieces. Instead, by considering how films create our experiences through form and style, you will have an informed basis for whatever evaluations you want to make.

Principles of Film Form

Form doesn’t equal formula. Scientists discover powerful laws governing the physical world, but in the arts there are no laws of form that all artists must follow. Artists create within culture, so many principles of artistic form are matters of convention. An outer-space adventure such as Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* isn’t faulty because it doesn’t follow the conventions at work in *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope*. Still, there are some broad principles that artists, filmmakers included, draw on. These are ideas of function, similarity and repetition, difference and variation, development, and unity and disunity. We’ll draw on *The Wizard of Oz* for our main examples.

Function

If form is a pattern of elements, we would expect that those elements fulfill functions. They *do* something in the larger whole. Of any element in a film we can ask, *What are its functions?*

We say “functions” in the plural, because most elements serve several purposes. Perhaps for some MGM executives, the song “Over the Rainbow” had the primary purpose of letting Judy Garland launch a hit tune. Still, the song fits the film because it fulfills certain narrative and stylistic functions. The lyrics establish Dorothy’s desire to leave home, and the opening line’s reference to the rainbow foreshadows her trip through the sky to colorful Oz. In fact, the “where” in the word “Somewhere” leaps a full octave, creating a musical equivalent of a trip to a distant land. In asking about formal function, therefore, we typically ask not, “How did this element get there?” but rather, “What is this element *doing* there?” and “How does it cue us to respond?”

In *The Wizard of Oz*, every major character fulfills several functions. For instance, Miss Gulch, the woman who wants to take Toto from Dorothy, frightens Dorothy into running away from home. In Oz she reappears as the wicked Witch who tries to seize the ruby slippers and keep Dorothy from going to the Emerald City and returning home. Even an element as apparently minor as the dog Toto serves many purposes. The dispute over Toto causes Dorothy to run away from home and to return too late to take shelter from the tornado. Later, when Dorothy is about to leave Oz, Toto’s pursuit of a cat makes Dorothy jump out of the ascending balloon. Toto’s gray color, set off against the brightness of Oz, recalls the black and white of the Kansas episodes at the film’s beginning.

The story goes that when the actress Ingrid Bergman asked Alfred Hitchcock about her motivation in a particular scene, Hitchcock replied: “Your paycheck.” But Hitchcock’s joke deliberately confused the *actress’s* reason for being in the movie (doing her job for pay) with the *character’s* reason for doing what she does. Bergman’s question can guide us in thinking about the functions of anything in a movie.

For Bergman, as for most actors, the word “motivation” applies the purposes of a character’s actions. But the term doesn’t apply only to performance matters. When we speak of *motivation* more generally, we’re asking about what justifies anything being in the movie or taking the shape it does. If we see a man in beggar’s clothes in the middle of an elegant society ball, we will ask why he’s dressed in this way. Is he the victim of practical jokers who have told him that it’s a masquerade party? Is he an eccentric millionaire? Such a scene does occur in *My Man Godfrey*, in which the young society people have been assigned to bring back a homeless man as part of a scavenger hunt (2.9). The game motivates the presence of an inappropriately dressed character.

Motivation points to functions. Throughout *The Wizard of Oz*, one function Toto fulfills is to get Dorothy into scrapes. Since the plot requires that Dorothy run away from home, the screenwriters used her love of Toto to motivate her flight. When Toto jumps from the balloon to chase a cat, we motivate his action by appealing to notions of how dogs are likely to act when cats are around.

Motivation is so common in films that spectators take it for granted, but filmmakers must think about it often. A director may decide to let a character’s wandering around a room motivate a camera movement. A cinematographer may have to choose between motivated and unmotivated lighting. Gabriel Beristain, who shot *Ring Two*, faced two options in shooting night scenes:

You could go the straight route and motivate some sort of light through windows, which is the only logical source in play. Or you could decide not to worry about motivation and create chiaroscuro lighting that simulates darkness.

When we study principles of narrative form (Chapter 3) and various types of films (Chapters 9 and 10), we’ll look more closely at how motivation gives elements specific functions.

Similarity and Repetition

In our example of the ABACA pattern, we saw how we were able to predict the next steps in the series. One reason for this was a regular pattern of repeated elements. Like beats in music or meter in poetry, the repetition of the A’s in our pattern established and satisfied formal expectations. Similarity and repetition, then, constitute an important principle of film form.

If you were to make a film, you would rely on repetition constantly. You’d make sure that your main character reappeared often enough for him or her to be seen as central to the plot, and you’d probably have dialogue that reiterated main points about goals, conflicts, and themes. More subtly, you’d probably utilize what are called **motifs**. A motif is *any significant repeated element that contributes to the overall form*.

It may be an object, a color, a place, a person, a sound, or even a character trait. Max’s tropical postcard is a motif signaled early in *Collateral*. In *Jurassic Park*, Dr. Alan Grant’s dislike of children reappears as a motif—one that alters in the course of the adventure. A lighting scheme or camera position can become a motif. (See “A Closer Look,” pp. 66–67.) Motifs often reappear at climaxes or highly emotional moments, as happens with the famous line from *Jerry Maguire*, “You complete me.”

Motifs are fairly exact repetitions, but a film can chart broader similarities between its ingredients. To understand *The Wizard of Oz*, we must notice that the three Kansas farmhands have counterparts in the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion. We must notice additional echoes between characters in the frame



2.9 Motivation for formal elements.

The heroine of *My Man Godfrey* studies her prize while the well-off crowd urges the unemployed Godfrey to make a speech. A scavenger hunt is the motivation for the homeless man’s presence at the elegant society ball.



CONNECT TO THE BLOG
www.davidbordwell.net/blog

We discuss George Smiley’s eye-glasses as a motif in “*Tinker Tailor*: A guide for the perplexed.”



A CLOSER LOOK

Creative Decisions: Picking Out Patterns

In studying film as an art, you might sometimes wonder: Are all the patterns of form and style we notice really in the film? Do filmmakers actually put them there, or are we just reading them in?

When asked, filmmakers often say that their formal and stylistic choices aim to create specific effects. Hitchcock, a director who had an engineering bent, planned his stories carefully and chose techniques in full awareness of their possibilities. His film *Rope* confines the action to a single apartment and presents it in only eleven shots. *Rear Window* limits the action to what the hero can see from his apartment. In these and other films, Hitchcock deliberately set up constraints for himself, inviting his audience to enjoy the way he worked within them.

Filmmakers may work more intuitively than Hitchcock, but they still must choose one story development or another, one technique or another. The finished film can have an overall unity because the choices tend to mesh. Joel and Ethan Coen, the brothers who created *The Big Lebowski*, *Fargo*, and *True Grit*, don't set out with a particular style in mind. As Ethan puts it, "At the point of making the movie, it's just about making individual choices." Joel picks up the thread:

... about the best way to tell the story, scene by scene. You make specific choices that you think are appropriate or compelling or interesting for that particular scene. Then, at the end of the day, you put it all together and somebody looks at it and, if there's some consistency to it, they say, "Well, that's their style."

Even if the Coens don't map out every option in advance, their films display distinctive patterns of form and style, and those definitely affect our response (2.10–2.11).

Professionals pay attention to other filmmakers' creative decisions about form and style. While watching Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, Nicole Kidman pointed out how the composition of one shot had both an immediate point and a long-range story purpose (2.12):

Here, in this scene, look at how there is this rack of knives hanging in the background over the boy's head. . . . It's important because it not only shows that the boy is in danger, but one of those very knives is used later in the story when Wendy takes it to protect herself from her husband [2.13].

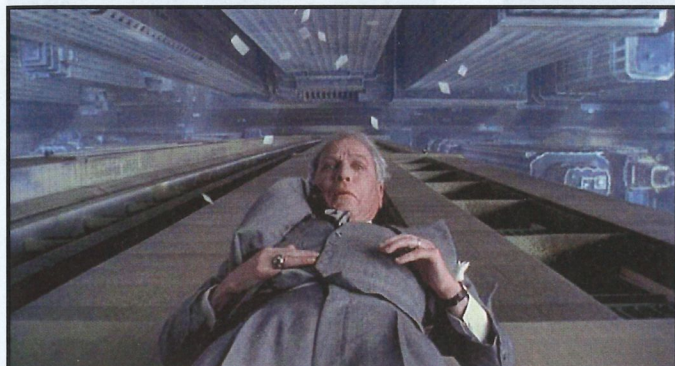
"You can take a movie, for example, like *Angels with Dirty Faces*, where James Cagney is a child and says to his pal Pat O'Brien, 'What do you hear, what do you say?'—cocky kid—and then as a young rough on the way up when things are going great for him he says, 'What do you hear, what do you say?' Then when he is about to be executed in the electric chair and Pat O'Brien is there to hear his confession, he says, 'What do you hear, what do you say?' and the simple repetition of the last line of dialogue in three different places with the same characters brings home the dramatically changed circumstances much more than any extensive diatribe would."

—Robert Towne, screenwriter, *Chinatown*

Kubrick told Kidman that a director had to repeat story information so that the audience could keep up. The knife pattern shaped viewers' experience, although they may not have been aware of it.

Kubrick's comment points up another reason we can have some confidence when we pick out patterns. A filmmaker doesn't create a movie from scratch. All films borrow ideas and storytelling strategies from other movies and other art forms. As we've seen, a lot that happens in films is governed by conventions. When Kubrick shows us the knives behind Danny, he's following a very old storytelling convention: prepare the audience for action that will come later. Similarly, *The Hudsucker Proxy* is a satirical comedy, and the steep perspective in 2.10 and 2.11 follows a convention of using exaggeration to create humor.

Very often, patterns in one film resemble patterns we've seen in other films. Even when filmmakers operate intuitively and don't tell us their trade secrets, we can notice how they treat familiar conventions of form and technique.



2.10



2.11

2.10–2.11 Creating a film's style through compositional motifs. In the *Hush* Proxy, the boss dangles above the street in a very steep, centered-perspective composition (2.10). The same sort of composition is used to show the impersonal layout of desks in the Hush company (2.11).



2.12

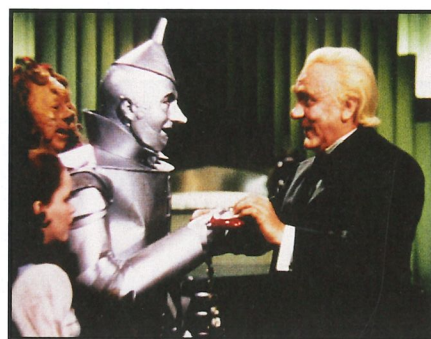


2.13

2.12–2.13 Motifs anticipate action. In *The Shining*, an early scene in the Hotel Overlook kitchen displays the telepathic rapport between Halloran and Danny, whose parents are caretaking the hotel for the winter. The knives are a natural part of the kitchen set but are aligned above Danny (2.12). Later Danny's mother, Wendy, goes to the same knife rack, seen from a different angle, to grab a weapon (2.13).



2.14



2.15



2.16



2.17

2.14–2.17 Parallels between frame story and fantasy. The itinerant Kansas fortune-teller, Professor Marvel (2.14), bears a striking resemblance to the old charlatan known as the Wizard of Oz (2.15). Miss Gulch's bicycle in the opening section (2.16) becomes the Witch's broom in Oz (2.17).



2.18



2.19

2.18–2.19 Parallel compositions. As the Lion describes his timidity, the characters are lined up (2.18) to form a mirror reversal of the earlier scene in which the others teased Zeke for being afraid of pigs (2.19).

story and in the fantasy (2.14–2.17). Such similarities are usually called *parallels*. Parallels cue us to compare two or more distinct elements by highlighting some similarity. For example, Dorothy says she feels that she has known the Scarecrow and the Tin Man before. At another point, the staging of a shot reinforces the parallels (2.18, 2.19).

Motifs can help create parallels among characters and situations. The viewer will notice, and even come to expect, that every time Dorothy meets a character in Oz, the scene will end with the song “We’re Off to See the Wizard.” This motif accentuates the broader similarities among Dorothy’s encounters. Our recognition of parallelism provides part of our pleasure in watching a film, much as rhymes contribute to the power of poetry.

Difference and Variation

A filmmaker is unlikely to rely only on repetitions. AAAAAA is rather boring. There should also be some changes, or *variations*, however small. So difference, or variation, is another fundamental principle of film form. We’ve seen this principle at work already, when composer James Newton Howard provided three “movements” for the music accompanying the final scene of *Collateral* (pp. 7–8).

Differences among the elements are most apparent when characters clash. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy’s desires are opposed, at various points, by the differing desires of Aunt Em, Miss Gulch, the Wicked Witch, and the Wizard, so that our experience of the film is engaged through dramatic conflict. But character conflict isn’t the only way the formal principle of difference may appear.

If you were making a film, you’d seek out ways to contrast your characters and their environments. Perhaps you’d situate one character in nature and another in busy



2.20



2.21

2.20–2.21 Contrasting settings. Centered in the upper half of the frame, the Emerald City (2.20) creates a striking contrast to the similar composition showing the castle of the Wicked Witch of the West (2.21).

urban surroundings. You might stress contrasts of costume, or hairstyles, or color. *The Wizard of Oz* presents stark color oppositions: black-and-white Kansas versus colorful Oz; Dorothy in red, white, and blue versus the Witch in black. Settings are opposed as well—not only Oz versus Kansas but also the various locales within Oz (2.20, 2.21). Voice quality, musical tunes, and a host of other elements play off against one another, demonstrating that any motif may be opposed by any other motif.

Motifs will be repeated, but often not exactly. Variation will appear. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the three Kansas hands aren't identical to their counterparts in Oz. Parallelism thus requires a degree of difference as well as striking similarity. When Professor Marvel pretends to read Dorothy's future in a small crystal ball, we see no images in it (2.14). Dorothy's dream transforms the crystal into a large globe in the Witch's castle, where it displays frightening scenes (2.22). Similarly, Toto's disruption of a situation is a constant action motif, but it changes its function. In Kansas, he disturbs Miss Gulch and induces Dorothy to take Toto away from home, but in Oz, his disruption prevents Dorothy from returning home.

Not all differences come down to this-versus-that dualities. Dorothy's three Oz friends—the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Lion—are distinguished by three things they lack (a brain, a heart, courage). Other films may rely on less sharp differences, suggesting a scale of gradations among the characters, as in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*. At the extreme, an abstract film may create minimal variations among its parts, such as in the slight changes that accompany each return of the same footage in J. J. Murphy's *Print Generation* (p. 376).

Repetition and variation are two sides of the same coin. To notice one is to be alert to the other. In thinking about films, we ought to look for similarities and differences. Shuttling between the two, we can point out motifs and contrast the changes they undergo, recognize parallelisms as repetition, and still spot crucial variations.

Development

One way to notice how similarity and difference operate in film form is to look for principles of *development* from part to part. Development places similar and different elements within a pattern of change. Our pattern ABACA is based not only on repetition (the recurring motif of A) and difference (the insertion of B and C) but also on a principle of *progression* that we could state as a rule: alternate A with successive letters in alphabetical order. Though simple, this is a principle of development, governing the form of the whole series.

Filmmakers often treat formal development as a *progression moving from beginning through middle to end*. The story of *The Wizard of Oz* shows development in many ways. It is, for one thing, a *journey*: from Kansas through Oz to Kansas.



CONNECT TO THE BLOG

www.davidbordwell.net/blog

One distinctive type of film form comes in the anthology film, combining short segments by several directors. It's a theme-and-variations approach that we discuss in "Can you spot all the auteurs in this picture?"



2.22 Similarity and difference.

Through her crystal ball, the Wicked Witch mocks Dorothy. Contrast it with the earlier scene (2.14) in which the Kansas fortune-teller uses a smaller crystal ball.



2.23 Narrative development:
Starting a journey. Dorothy puts her feet on the literal beginning of the Yellow Brick Road, as it widens out from a single point.

The good witch Glinda emphasizes this formal pattern by telling Dorothy that “It’s always best to start at the beginning” (2.23). Many films possess such a journey plot. *The Wizard of Oz* is also a *search*, beginning with an initial separation from home, tracing a series of efforts to find a way home, and ending with home being found. Within the film, there is also a pattern of *mystery*, which usually has the same beginning-middle-end pattern. We begin with a question (Who is the Wizard of Oz?), pass through attempts to answer it, and conclude with the question answered. (The Wizard is a fraud.) *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* combines the patterns of journey, search, and mystery, adding the psychological change that occurs in protagonist Roy Neary. As these examples suggest, feature-length films often depend on several developmental patterns.

At some point in making a film, the filmmakers usually prepare a breakdown of its parts. This traces, in sketchy form, the film’s pattern of development. When we want to analyze a finished film, we do the same thing. We make what’s usually called a *segmentation*. A segmentation is simply a written outline of the film that breaks it into its major and minor parts, with the parts marked by consecutive numbers or letters. If a narrative film has 40 *scenes*, then we can label each scene with a number running from 1 to 40. It may be useful to divide some parts further (for example, scenes 6a and 6b). Segmenting a film enables us not only to notice similarities and differences among parts but also to plot the overall development. Following is a segmentation for *The Wizard of Oz* using an outline format. (In segmenting films, we label the opening credits with a “C,” the end title with an “E,” and all other segments with numbers.)

The Wizard of Oz: Plot Segmentation

C. Credits

1. Kansas

- a. Dorothy is at home, worried about Miss Gulch’s threat to Toto.
- b. Running away, Dorothy meets Professor Marvel, who induces her to return home.
- c. A tornado lifts the house, with Dorothy and Toto, into the sky.

2. Munchkin City

- a. After Dorothy’s house crashes to earth, she meets Glinda, and the Munchkins celebrate the death of the Wicked Witch of the East.
- b. The Wicked Witch of the West threatens Dorothy over the Ruby Slippers.
- c. Glinda sends Dorothy to seek the Wizard’s help.

3. The Yellow Brick Road

- a. Dorothy meets the Scarecrow.
- b. Dorothy meets the Tin Man.
- c. Dorothy meets the Cowardly Lion.

4. The Emerald City

- a. The Witch creates a poppy field near the city, but Glinda rescues the travelers.
- b. The group is welcomed by the city’s citizens.
- c. As they wait to see the Wizard, the Lion sings of being king.
- d. The terrifying Wizard agrees to help the group if they obtain the Wicked Witch’s broomstick.

5. The Witch’s castle and nearby woods

- a. In the woods, flying monkeys carry off Dorothy and Toto.
- b. The Witch realizes that she must kill Dorothy to get the ruby slippers.
- c. The Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion sneak into the Castle; in the ensuing chase, Dorothy kills the Witch.

6. The Emerald City

- a. Although revealed as a humbug, the Wizard grants the wishes of the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion.

- b. Dorothy fails to leave in the Wizard's hot-air balloon but is transported home by the ruby slippers.

7. Kansas—Dorothy describes Oz to her family and friends

E. End credits

Preparing a segmentation may look a little fussy, but in the course of this book, we'll try to convince you that it can shed a lot of light on films. For now, just consider this comparison.

As you walk into a building, your experience develops over time. In many cathedrals, for example, the entryway is fairly narrow. But as you emerge into the open area inside (the nave), space expands outward and upward, your sense of your body seems to shrink, and your attention is directed toward the altar, centrally located in the distance. The somewhat cramped entryway makes you feel a contrast when you enter the broad and soaring space. Your experience has been as carefully planned as any theme park ride. Only by thinking back on it can you realize that the planned progression of the building's different areas shaped your experience. If you could study the builder's blueprints, you'd see the whole layout at a glance. It would be very different from your moment-by-moment experience of it, but it would shed light on how your experience was shaped.

A film works in a similar way. As we watch the film, we're in the thick of it. We follow the formal development moment by moment, and we may get more and more involved. But if we want to study the overall form, we need to stand back a bit. Films don't come with blueprints, but by creating a plot segmentation, we can get a comparable sense of the film's basic design. In a way, we're recovering the architecture of the movie. A segmentation lets us see the patterning that the filmmakers laid out and that we felt intuitively while watching the film. In Chapters 3 and 10, we consider how to segment different types of films, and several of our sample analyses in Chapter 11 use segmentations to show how the films work.

A quick way to size up how a film develops formally is to *compare the beginning with the ending*. By looking at the similarities and the differences between the beginning and the ending, we can start to understand the overall pattern of the film. We can test this advice on *The Wizard of Oz*. A comparison of the beginning and the ending reveals that Dorothy's journey ends with her return home; the journey, a search for an ideal place "over the rainbow," has turned into a search for a way back to Kansas. The final scene repeats and develops the narrative elements of the opening. Stylistically, the beginning and ending are the only parts that use black-and-white film stock. This repetition supports the contrast the narrative creates between the dreamland of Oz and the bleak landscape of Kansas.

At the film's end, Professor Marvel comes to visit Dorothy (2.24), reversing the situation of her visit to him when she had tried to run away. At the beginning, he had convinced her to return home; then, as the Wizard in the Oz section, he had also represented her hopes of returning home. Finally, when she recognizes Professor Marvel and the farmhands as the basis of the characters in her dream, she remembers how much she had wanted to come home from Oz.

Earlier, we suggested that film form engages our emotions and expectations in a dynamic way. Now we're in a better position to see why. The constant interplay between similarity and difference, and repetition and variation, leads the viewer to an active engagement with the film's developing system. It may be handy to visualize a movie's development in static terms by segmenting it, but we ought not to forget that formal development is a *process*. Form shapes our experience of the film.

Unity and Disunity

When all the relationships we perceive within a film are clear and economically interwoven, we say that the film has *unity*. We often call a unified film "tight," because there seem to be no gaps in its overall form. We feel that every element fulfills



CONNECT TO THE BLOG
www.davidbordwell.net/blog

If beginnings are important, then the very beginning is even more important, as "First shots" demonstrates.



2.24 Comparing beginning and ending. The visits of the final scene in *The Wizard of Oz* reverse events at the start of the film; Professor Marvel comes to visit Dorothy at her home, but at the start Dorothy met him after leaving home.

particular functions, that we understand the similarities and differences among elements, that the form develops logically, and that no element is superfluous. The film's overall unity can give our experience a sense of completeness and fulfillment.

But unity is a matter of degree. Very few films are perfectly tight. For example, at one point in *The Wizard of Oz*, the Witch refers to her having attacked Dorothy and her friends with insects, yet we have never seen them. What is the Witch referring to? In fact, a bee attack was originally shot but then cut from the finished film. The Witch's line about the insect attack now lacks motivation. More striking is a dangling element at the film's end: we never find out what happens to Miss Gulch. Presumably, she still has her legal order to take Toto away, but no one refers to this in the last scene. The viewer may be inclined to overlook this disunity, however, because Miss Gulch's parallel character, the Witch, has been killed off in the Oz fantasy, and we don't expect to see her alive again. Since perfect unity is scarcely ever achieved, we ought to expect that even a unified film may still contain a few unintegrated elements or unanswered questions.

If we look at unity as a criterion for evaluation, we may judge a film containing several unmotivated elements as a failure. But unity and disunity may be looked at nonevaluatively as well, as the results of particular formal conventions. For example, *Pulp Fiction* lacks a bit of closure in that it never reveals what is inside the briefcase that is at the center of the gangster plot. The contents, however, give off a golden glow, suggesting that they are of very great value (as well as evoking the "whatsit" in *Kiss Me Deadly*, a classic film noir). By not specifying the goods, the film invites us to compare characters' reactions to them—most notably, in the last scene in the diner, when Pumpkin gazes at it lustfully and the newly spiritual hit man Jules calmly insists that he will deliver it to his boss. In such ways, momentary disunities can fulfill particular purposes or suggest thematic meanings.



SUMMARY

A filmmaker designs an experience for an audience by shaping the film's form, the overall pattern of parts. Things that are normally considered content—subject matter, or abstract ideas—take on particular functions within the overall form.

Our experience as viewers is shaped by the filmmaker's formal choices. Through the creative decisions they make, filmmakers nudge or thrust us in certain directions. Picking up cues in the work, we frame specific expectations that are aroused, guided, delayed, cheated, satisfied, or disturbed. We feel curiosity, suspense, and surprise. We compare the particular aspects of the artwork with things that we know from life and with conventions found in art.

The concrete context of the artwork expresses and stimulates emotions. It enables us to construct many types of meanings. And even when we apply general criteria in evaluating artworks, we ought to use those criteria to help us discriminate more, to probe more deeply into the particular aspects of the artwork. The rest of this book is devoted to studying these properties of artistic form in cinema.

We can summarize the principles of film form as a set of questions that you can ask about any film:

1. For any element in the film, what are its functions in the overall form? How is it motivated?
2. Are elements or patterns repeated throughout the film? If so, how and at what points? Are motifs and parallelisms asking us to compare elements?
3. How are elements contrasted and differentiated from one another? How are different elements opposed to one another?
4. What principles of progression or development are at work through the form of the film? Does a comparison of the beginning and ending point toward the film's overall form?
5. What degree of unity is present in the film's overall form?

In this chapter, we examined some major ways in which films as artworks can engage us as spectators. We also reviewed some broad principles of film form. Armed with these general principles, we can press on to distinguish more specific *types* of form that are central to understanding film art.



RECOMMENDED DVD AND BLU-RAY SUPPLEMENTS

The Warner Bros. two-disc special edition of *The Wizard of Oz* contains supplements documenting the film's production. See also Aljean Harmetz, *The Making of the Wizard of Oz* (New York: Limelight, 1984), and John Fricke, Jay Scarfone, and William Stillman, *The Wizard of Oz: The Official 50th Anniversary Pictorial History* (New York: Warner Books, 1989).

While the film was in postproduction, MGM executives quarreled about whether the song "Over the Rainbow" should be dropped. Some thought it was too long and slowed the pace; others suggested that singing in a barnyard was undignified. Producer Arthur Freed argued passionately for retaining the ballad, and he won. His reasoning was expressed in an early memo, and its wording shows that he was conscious of the song's role in motivating Dorothy's journey:

The whole love story in *Snow White* is motivated by the song "Some Day My Prince Will Come" as Snow White is looking into the well. Dialogue could not have accomplished this half as well. I make this illustration for the purpose that we plant our *Wizard of Oz* script in a similar way through a musical sequence on the farm. Doing it musically takes all the triteness out of a straight plot scene. (Quoted in Fricke, Scarfone, and Stillman, *The Wizard of Oz*, p. 30)

DVD supplements tend to focus on behind-the-scenes production information and on exposing how techniques

such as special effects and music were accomplished. Sometimes, though, such descriptions analyze formal aspects of the film. In "Sweet Sounds," the supplement on the music in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, composer Danny Elfman discusses how the musical numbers that follow the disappearance of each of the obnoxious children created parallels among them and yet achieved variety by being derived from different styles of music.

"Their Production Will Be Second to None," on the *Hard Day's Night* DVD, includes an intelligent interview with director Richard Lester in which he talks about the overall form of the film. He remarks, for example, that in the first third, he deliberately used confined spaces and low ceilings to prepare for the extreme contrast of the open spaces into which the Beatles escape.

The "Production Design" supplement for *The Golden Compass* discusses motifs: circular elements in the sets and props associated with the heroine Lyra and the Oxford setting opposed to oval elements associated with the villainous Mrs. Coulter and the Magisterium. In portions of the director's and editor's commentary track for *Cold Mountain*, Anthony Minghella and Walter Murch discuss the structure of the film, including pacing and the adaptation of the novel.