The Functions of Dialogue
in Narrative Film

The first questions to be asked when analyzing a segment of film dialogue may be: "Why are these lines here?" or "What purpose do they serve in the text as a whole?" Such inquiries might imply that one is attempting to uncover the *intentions* of the screenwriters and director, and, indeed, a large degree of overlap might be anticipated between what the filmmakers consciously had in mind and the ultimate effects of dialogue. Some overlap, but not total; for through "accidents" (psychological or practical) and through the unpredictable nuances of performance, filming, editing, scoring, exhibition, reception, and so on, the reverberations of a segment of dialogue may exceed or confound the intentions of its authors. I am interested here, not in the craft of screenwriting,[1] but in the finished film, which takes on a life of its own.

The functions discussed below fall into two groupings. First, those functions I believe to be fundamental because they are centrally involved in the communication of the narrative:

1. anchorage of the diegesis and characters
2. communication of narrative causality
3. enactment of narrative events
4. character revelation
5. adherence to the code of realism
6. control of viewer evaluation and emotions

The second grouping involves functions that go beyond narrative communication into the realms of aesthetic effect, ideological persuasion, and commercial appeal:

7. exploitation of the resources of language
8. thematic messages/authorial commentary/allegory
9. opportunities for "star turns"

Dialogue is commonly employed to serve the ends of this second grouping, but these ends may not be integral to every American film.*

A given instance of dialogue will inevitably fulfill several functions simultaneously. The examples that I offer below are—for demonstration purposes—the least ambiguous I could find. More casual selection would pull out instances of dialogue working in several directions at once.

CREATION OF THE DIEGESIS
AND ANCHORAGE OF IDENTITIES

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It* 2.4, Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone enter a vacant stage. However, all it takes is Rosalind's assertion, "Well, this is the forest of Arden," for the audience to understand that the travelers have reached their destination; a thicket of noble trees, dappled sun, and birdsong bursts from these seven words.

On the most basic level, dialogue is responsible for "creating" the theatrical diegesis, the fictional world of the narrative. Ericka Fisher-Lichte has pointed out how plays use dialogue to delineate their surroundings:

> If the stage is an empty space that the actor states is a forest and subsequently refers to as a palace, a room, or a dungeon, then this empty space becomes the forest, palace, room, or dungeon in the eyes of the audience. If the actor's words refer to nonexistent objects as if these nevertheless existed, then they do in fact exist for the audience. If, in the actor's words, dusk draws in and the sound of the nightingale and the songs of farmers returning from the fields are to be heard, then all of this can still be seen and heard by the audience.[2]

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* For better or ill, these categories are my own, derived from a witches' brew of numerous influences. The principal ingredient is narrative theory, particularly the works of Roland Barthes, David Bordwell, Seymour Chatman, and Gérard Genette. I've also profited from the work of drama theorists such as Manfred Pfister and Ericka Fisher-Lichte.

Because of their ability to photograph the physical world, films rarely need to rely upon dialogue to the same extent; why use "verbal" scenery when the camera can take you to any natural setting, or the Hollywood Dream Factory can sumptuously fabricate any locale? The catch is that although the camera can take us anywhere, *identifying* the location is trickier. As Roland Barthes argues, all visual images are polysemous; their meaning must be *anchored* by resort to verbal signs[3] (which is why paintings are given titles, photographs, captions, and tourist postcards, geographical labels). One city skyline, one mountain region, one medieval castle looks very much like another unless its specificity is identified by some means. One popular cinematic strategy is to resort to the language of familiar iconography: the Golden Gate Bridge *means* "San Francisco," the Eiffel Tower, "Paris." Other methods include utilizing superimposed printed captions—"Phoenix, Arizona" in *Psycho* (1960)—or conveniently placed diegetic signs. (Julie Salamon's record of the filming of *Bonfire of the Vanities* [1990] reveals Brian De Palma's insistence upon the size of a street sign reading "Alternate Route Manhattan.")[4]

Yet, in addition to such methods, films use dialogue to identify the diegetic world. That flat farmland could have been anywhere—Oklahoma, Texas, Nebraska—but when Dorothy says, "Toto, I don't think that we're in Kansas anymore," it becomes Kansas. Moreover, this process of verbal identification works, not only for major locations, but for all the characters' movements in time and space throughout a film—the dialogue continually reorients the viewer through what David Bordwell calls "dialogue hooks" (e.g., "Shall we go to lunch?" followed by a long shot of a cafe).[5] For instance, in Dorothy Arzner's *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940), a reporter calls Elena Harris with the news about Tiger Lily's marriage to Jimmy Harris and the brawl with Judy:

> ELENA: Mr. Harris's marriage has nothing whatever to do with me.
> REPORTER: They're in the Night Court now. Don't you want to make a statement?
> ELENA: I'm not interested. I don't care who's where and I'm not making any statements. *(Slams down the phone, then picks it up again.)* Where in the blazes is the Night Court?

The next shot is a wipe to a courtroom scene, which the viewer "naturally" infers is the Night Court just discussed.

Using dialogue for "re-anchorage" is especially important if a film is departing from linear chronology. In Andrew Davis's *The Fugitive* (1993), the television reporter outside Kimble's apartment notes: "We do know this: that he and his wife Helen were at a fund-raiser at the Four Seasons Hotel earlier this evening, a fund-raiser for the Children's Research Fund." The screen goes white with the bulb of an exploding flash; cut to a large party scene, now identified for us in both time and space.

Exactly where simple anchorage (identifying of existing, but un-specified, time and space) leaves off and literal verbal fabrication of the diegesis (painting in the viewer's imagination a locale that does not physically exist) begins, is difficult to define in film. Production practices always allow for one location to substitute for another: Canadian cities can double for New York, Morocco can be Kafiristan, the Philippines can be Vietnam, the back lot can be anywhere at any point in history. What is important to me here is how implicated the dialogue always is in defining the fictional space. In a real sense, "naming" constitutes "creation." Or, as Tzvetan Todorov puts it, "One cannot verbalize with impunity; to name things is to change them."[6]

Narrative films need not only to identify and create their time and space but also to name the most important elements of that diege-sis—the characters. Dialogue, replacing those title cards in silent films that baldly introduced each new person, frequently manages to introduce characters to the viewer via on-screen greetings and meet-ings. Bordwell has pointed out how often verbal repetition is used to drive home a character's name and identity, so that, for instance, in Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942), when Captain Renault meets Major Strasser at the airport, Strasser's name is repeated three times.[7]

As an example of dialogue's ability to anchor a narrative, let us take an exchange from an early scene in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939). The stagecoach driver has just directed a well-dressed lady passenger to the hotel for a cup of coffee. As she starts toward the hotel porch, she is addressed by another young woman:

> GIRL: Why, Lucy Mallory!
> LUCY: Nancy! How are you, Captain Whitney?
> CAPTAIN WHITNEY: Fine, thanks, Mrs. Mallory.

NANCY: Why, whatever are you doing in Arizona?
LUCY: I'm joining Richard in Lordsburg. He's there with his troops.
CAPTAIN WHITNEY: *(off-screen)* He's a lot nearer than that, Mrs. Mallory. He's been ordered to Dry Fork.
NANCY: Why, that's the next stop for the stagecoach. You'll be with your husband in a few hours.

This interchange tells us who Lucy is, what state she is in, where she is going, why she is going there, what her husband does, where her husband is, where the stage stops next, and how long it should take until the couple are reunited. A few moments later Nancy again proves her usefulness as narrator-substitute by identifying Hatfield as a "notorious gambler." The Whitneys are not important to the plot (they never appear again), and they are not individualized as rounded characters. They serve to give us this information, and also, by their friendliness and concern, to highlight Lucy's forlorn state.

Bordwell argues that in classical Hollywood film, narrative exposition is concentrated in the beginnings of texts. Certainly, one will find a great deal of identification of characters and anchorage of locations in the opening minutes of a film, when the dialogue is so casually making up for our lack of an omniscient narrator or a detailed dramatic playbill. But it would be a mistake to think that this function is confined to any one section of the text. Witness, from late in *Stagecoach:*

CURLY: Well, folks, we're coming into East Ferry now.
BUCK: Lordsburg, next stop.

Movement through space, flashbacks to previous events, ellipses forward in time, and the introduction of new characters will call for dialogue anchorage.

NARRATIVE CAUSALITY

Although it is tempting to use the catch-all category "exposition" to cover both, a theoretical distinction can be drawn between anchorage and the communication of narrative causality, what Roland Barthes calls the "proairetic code."[8] Narratives unfold through a series of events, linked together by succession and causality: "Classical narration communicates what it 'knows' by making the characters

haul the causal chain through the film."[9] Dialogue is the tractor the characters use to haul their heavy load.

The ulterior motive of much of film dialogue is to communicate "why?" and "how?" and "what next?" to the viewer. The "what next" may be a simple anticipation of a plot development, such as takes place during one of Devlin's meetings with Alicia in Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946):

> DEVLIN: Look. Why don't you persuade your husband to throw a large shindig so that he can introduce his bride to Rio society, say sometime next week?
> ALICIA: Why?
> DEVLIN: Consider me invited. Then I'll try and find out about that wine cellar business.

This exchange, which sets up the ensuing party and the search of the wine cellar, is filmed in an unflamboyant two-shot of Devlin and Alicia sitting facing forward on a park bench. The party sequence, however, will be remembered as bravura visual filmmaking. From the spectacular crane shot down to the key in Alicia's hand, to the crosscutting of Alex Sebastian's jealous glances, to the repeated shots of the steadily decreasing champagne supply, to the pointed emphasis on the assiduous waiters passing more drinks, the camera movement, framing, and editing make the action unmistakable. Every viewer will recall Devlin's silent investigation of the wine cellar and the excruciating close-ups of the bottle teetering on the shelf's edge. One's memory of the two scenes may imply that all the information was received from self-sufficient visuals. (The screenwriter, Charles Bennett, testifies that Hitchcock had "[n]o interest in dialogue whatsoever.")[10] What may be repressed, however, is how much—even here—the dialogue carries the narrative chain, as the following snippets indicate:

> DEVLIN: He's [Alex's] quite sensitive about you. He's gonna watch us like a hawk. . . .
> DEVLIN: Let's hope the liquor doesn't run out and start him down the cellar for more. . . .
> ALICIA: We'd better hurry. . . . Joseph might have to ask Alex for more wine. He's running out faster than he thought. . . .
> ALICIA: You'd better go out in the garden alone and wait around back of the house for me and I'll show you the wine cellar door. . . .

ALICIA: I'll keep the garden door open and I'll tell you if anything happens. . . .
DEVLIN: We've got to leave things as we found them. Help me find a bottle of wine with the same label as these others. . . .
ALICIA: It isn't really sand, is it?
DEVLIN: Some kind of metal ore. . . .
ALICIA: Someone is coming. It's Alex! He's seen us.
DEVLIN: Wait a minute. I'm going to kiss you.
ALICIA: No! He'd only think we—
DEVLIN: —That's what I want him to think.

We only understand the significance of the shots of the dwindling liquor supply because we've been primed by the dialogue. Similarly, Alex's glances assume narrative importance because we have been informed that they are an obstacle to Devlin's mobility. The viewer sees the black granular material that was hidden in the wine bottle, but we need Devlin to identify it for us. And the climactic action of the scene, the passionate kiss, must—rather incredibly—wait until Devlin has explained, purportedly to Alicia, but really to us, that the kiss is a ruse to allay suspicion. The dialogue paves the way for us to understand the visuals, repeats their information for emphasis, interprets what is shown, and explains what cannot be communicated visually. Together the dialogue and the visual track work to forge each link of the causal chain.

Further evidence of the fact that dialogue is designed to communicate causality *to the viewer* can be drawn from those scenes in which dialogue is omitted because although characters need certain information, the viewers already have it. Famous instances occur in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), when the airplane noise drowns out the Professor telling Thornhill all about the mythical George Kaplan, and in Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954), when foghorns and music replace Terry's confession to Edie that he participated in her brother's murder. In such cases, films go out of their way not to bore filmgoers by repeating information they already know.

Moreover, dialogue is the preeminent means of communicating to the viewer story events that took place before the time period pictured on screen. It is always through snippets of "accidentally" dropped dialogue that viewers construct a film's "backstory"— Roger Thornhill's earlier failed marriages; Terry Malloy's throwing of the crucial prize fight. Since these background events are never

depicted, it is only through the characters' words that filmgoers learn about them.

Expositional dialogue that seems clumsy fails adequately to cloak the fact that this information is for us, not the characters. Generally, there is something forced about the amount of specific detail crammed into presumably incidental conversation, as in Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* (1941), when Roy Earle, played by Humphrey Bogart, stops at a gas station, and the station attendant practically waylays him with identification of the scenery:

> ATTENDANT: You're looking at the prize of the Sierry's, brother. Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the United States. 14,501 feet above sea level.

Similarly, in the same scene, another car pulls up and the driver introduces himself and his family to Earle and without prompting launches into a capsule backstory:

> PA: Well, I'm going to Los Angeles. I lost my farm back home. But Velma's mother married again and she sort of invited us out.

We do need to know that the action is set in the grandeur of the Sierras and we also need knowledge of the Goodhughs' background. But getting the information across could have been done with a lighter, more indirect touch, as is exemplified by the lines that acquaint us with Roger Thornhill's past in *North by Northwest* :

> ROGER: I've got a job, a secretary, a mother, two-ex-wives, and several bartenders dependent upon me, and I don't intend to disappoint them all by getting myself slightly killed.

David Bordwell argues that one of the hallmarks of Hollywood narrative is that it manufactures a sense of urgency about the unfolding action through the creation of a "deadline," an upcoming point in time by which something important is going to happen— shore leave is going to be over, the airplane is leaving to take the hero to college, the Death Star is going to vaporize the rebel base. Orienting narrative action toward such deadlines lends Hollywood films their characteristic pace and excitement. Because deadlines as entities are nontangible and nonvisual, they have to be communicated verbally one way or another. Dialogue is the simplest tool: it is used

to set up the champagne supply crisis in *Notorious;* to communicate the train's arrival time in *High Noon* (1952); to alert us to the dangerously rising levels of carbon dioxide in *Apollo 13* (1995). Another example, this time from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939):

> WICKED WITCH: *(turning over hourglass)* You see that? That's how much longer you've got to be alive. And it isn't long, my pretty, it isn't long! I can't wait forever to get those shoes!

The hourglass is a compelling visual image, and the suspense of Dorothy's rescue by her friends is intensified by the repeated shots of the sand slipping away. But it is the Witch's *dialogue* that links each grain of sand to the supposed remaining seconds of Dorothy's life.

VERBAL EVENTS

Speech-act theory, first promulgated by J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle in the 1960s, has taught us that all conversation can be thought of as events, as *actions.* When one talks, one is *doing something*—promising, informing, questioning, threatening, apologizing. Searle calls these "illocutionary" acts.

In point of fact, Stanislavskian acting theory has long recognized the same phenomenon, and actors have long been taught that in each "beat" of dialogue, a character is performing an action: X is trying to persuade Y to do Z. In James Ivory's *Remains of the Day* (1993), when Mrs. Kenton teases Mr. Stevens about pretty maids, she is trying to spark him into some acknowledgment of his attraction to herself—she is trying to goad him into flirting with her.

From the spectator's perspective, however, some of these speech acts are themselves pivotal links of the narrative chain (what Seymour Chatman would call "kernels");[11] they are major events that would be mentioned in an accurate summary of the story. Some narrative acts are physical—searching a wine cellar, throwing water on a witch, firing a gun—but at times the key narrative event is a verbal act.

As we shall see later, which speech acts assume prominence in which films depends to a large degree on genre conventions. But as a general rule, the most common event is the disclosure of a secret or of crucial information, information vital to the plot, whose revelation poses some risk or jeopardy. These revelations often occur toward

the end of the film, and they may ultimately be relinquished only under threat or intimidation. The plot is structured so that the viewer aches for the missing information. A paradigmatic example may be found in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), when J. J. Gittes finally forces Evelyn Mulwray into disclosing the secret of the young girl's identity and thus the history of Evelyn's past relationship with her father. Gittes's frustration and brutality increase the impact of the confrontation—he shakes her, yells at her, and slaps her repeatedly—but the key event is *not* his physical action, but Evelyn's verbal act—her reluctant, defiant shout: "She's my daughter *and* my sister!"

The second most important verbal event in Hollywood film is the declaration of love. (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson have noted that heterosexual romance was the major or secondary plot line in 95 percent of their sampling of pre-1960 American films.)[12] Just as the revelation of the secret helps solve the mystery/crime plot, the declaration of love "solves" the romance plot. The declaration indicates that the private, secret feeling can no longer be kept hidden; by verbalizing the emotion, the speaker implies commitment and puts the bond into the social realm. As Bonnie tells Geoff in Hawks's *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), "I'm hard to get—all you've got to do is ask." For the lovers, but especially for the viewers, the words must be spoken: we wait with bated breath (inwardly screaming, "Tell her—you fool!") for Devlin's long-awaited admission of love to Alicia in *Notorious,* for the marriage proposal at the end of *Gigi* (1958), for the avowal under the umbrella that closes *Little Women* (1994). Moreover, these words speak louder than the action, the embrace that customarily follows; a kiss may connote sexual desire, but a declaration implies commitment.[13] Eschewing a verbal declaration can only be compensated for by extravagant physical actions—such as sailing a ship down Fifth Avenue in Robert Zemeckis's *Romancing the Stone* (1984)—which also make a public spectacle of the lover's devotion.

Other common verbal events are those that transpire in courtrooms, such as closing arguments, witnesses breaking down on the stand, and verdicts. Alternatively, key speech acts draw on the power of religion, such as the prayer in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), the granting of absolution in *I Confess* (1953), or the exorcism in *The Exorcist* (1973).

James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) is undeniably an "action-oriented" film, with exciting chase scenes, explosions, and shootings. Yet even here many of the key events are verbal, such as Sarah Connor's inadvertent betrayal of her location when the Terminator impersonates her mother on the phone, or Reese's declaration of a lifetime of devotion to a woman he hasn't yet met: "I came across time for you, Sarah. I love you. I always have." Verbal events are a major component of every Hollywood film.

CHARACTER REVELATION

"A character's personality in a film is seldom something given in a single shot," writes Richard Dyer. "Rather it has to be built up, by film-makers and audience alike, across the whole film. A character is a construct from the very many different signs deployed by a film."[14] Even those who seek to keep dialogue "in its place" acknowledge its usefulness in characterization. "Great dialogue flashes the light on characters as lightning illumines the dark earth—in flashes," Rachel Crothers says. "It conveys so much in a few words that the actor holds a great instrument in his hand, and with it can make the audience know the depths of his being."[15]

On the most mundane level, dialogue helps us distinguish one person from another.[16] Just as Dickens differentiates his multiple characters by assigning them idiosyncratic phrases and dialects, so cinematic figures may be given a distinctive verbal mannerism partly just to be funny and partly to help spectators keep them straight. Thus, the girlfriend Kit in *Pretty Woman* (1990) speaks with a broad New York accent, and the deputy sheriff in *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962) echoes every command with a rising inflection, and tacks on a "riiight."

But the more significant use of dialogue is to make characters substantial, to hint at their inner life. As Norman Page remarks: "It is probably no exaggeration to say that the speech of any individual is as unique (though not as unchangeable) as his fingerprints."[17] Each time a character opens his mouth, filmgoers learn more about him—is his accent "upper class" or "hillbilly"? Is he or she polite? brusque? thoughtful? quick? lazy? Does the voice carry calm resonant authority (Alec Guinness as Obi Wan Kenobi) or a brittle nervousness (Anthony Daniels as C-3PO)? As will be discussed in a later

chapter, the character's psychology is partially determined once the actor is cast—that actor's natural vocal qualities, combined with his or her vocal skills, greatly influence the viewer's perception of the character's personality.

But over and above what we can discern from the way a character speaks, dialogue lines are explicitly designed to reveal character. When Samuel Gerard (Tommy Lee Jones) and his team arrive at the site of the bus/train wreck in *The Fugitive,* they are stopped by a uniformed policeman.

> GERARD: Hi. Who's in charge?
> COP: Sheriff Rawlins.
> GERARD: Rawlins.
> COP: Just follow the TV lights.

"Just follow the TV lights." Even before we meet Rawlins we know he's a vainglorious blowhard, more interested in publicity than in doing his job.

To stick with this text for a moment: Dr. Richard Kimble (Harrison Ford) is *The Fugitive*'s central focus. However, being primarily engaged in a solitary flight and investigation, Kimble talks relatively little, so we are forced to judge him by his actions—his courage in saving the injured guard; his resourcefulness in assuming disguises; his intelligence in tracking down the one-armed murderer through the records of the hospital that adjusted his artificial limb. But it is interesting that *The Fugitive* also finds it necessary to supplement what we *see* Kimble doing with dialogue scenes of Gerard interviewing Kimble's associates, during which the associates speak of Kimble's innocence, self-reliance, and brilliance.

The motif of having secondary characters comment upon a central figure hardly originated with *The Fugitive.* Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) may be inimitable, but the pattern of slightly baffled admirers commenting on an enigmatic central character is part and parcel of the Hollywood star system because such comments keep our attention focused on the central figure and reinforce his or her special qualities, exalted status, or air of mystery. Secondary characters spend a lot of words talking *about* Margo Channing (Bette Davis), Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh), Shane (Alan Ladd), Hank Quinlan

(Orson Welles), Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck), Tristan Ludlow (Brad Pitt). Through their comments we learn about the protagonists' past history, community standing, notorious personality, and so on.

Of course, dialogue is also employed for self-revelation. At one point in *Casablanca*, Rick is invited over to Major Strasser's table, where he learns that the Gestapo major has been keeping a dossier on him. Rick borrows the notebook, glances at it, and quips, "Are my eyes really brown?" Such a statement shows his refusal to be intimidated and his satirical view of Germanic efficiency. This is important in the context of a conversation in which the major is warning Rick not to involve himself in the pursuit of the resistance leader Victor Lazlo, and Rick seems to be agreeing not to interfere. Only Rick's irreverence shows that he is uncowed.

Admittedly, dialogue used for character revelation can be trite or obvious. The flaw here stems, however, not from the fact that dialogue has been used, but from the fact that the conception of the character's psychology is shallow. Sidney Lumet has written,

> In the early days of television when the "kitchen sink" school of realism held sway, we always reached a point where we "explained" the character. Around two-thirds of the way through, someone articulated the psychological truth that made the character the person he was. Chayefsky and I used to call this the "rubber-ducky" school of drama: "Someone once took his rubber ducky away from him, and that's why he's a deranged killer."[18]

And yet, in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)—written by Thornton Wilder—dialogue is successfully used to take us right into the mind of a deranged killer. Uncle Charlie's (Joseph Cotten's) dinner table speech is placed at the time in the plot when viewers know that he is the "Merry Widow Murderer," but we have no clue as to motive, no understanding of why this charming man is a merciless serial killer.

CHARLES: Women keep busy in towns like this. The cities it's different. The cities are full of women, middle-aged widows, husbands dead, husbands who've spent their lives making fortunes, working and working. Then they die and leave their money to their wives. Their silly wives. And what do the wives do, these useless women? You see them in the hotels, the best hotels, every day by the thousands. Drinking the money, eating

> the money, losing the money at bridge, playing all day and
> all night. Smelling of money. Proud of their jewelry but of
> nothing else. Horrible, faded, fat greedy women.
>
> CHARLIE: But they're alive. They're human beings!
>
> CHARLES: Are they? Are they, Charlie? Are they human? Or are they
> fat, wheezing animals? Hmm? And what happens to ani-
> mals when they get too fat and too old?

The speech reveals a misogyny intense enough to justify murdering
vulnerable widows as the putting down of "fat, wheezing animals."

Most scenes reveal character neither in one-line quips ("Follow
the TV lights") nor in extended long turns like Uncle Charlie's. It
is more common for conversations to combine a character's self-
revelations with the insights of his dialogue partner. An early scene
in Sydney Pollack's *Tootsie* (1982) between Michael (Dustin Hoff-
man), an out-of-work actor, and his exasperated agent George (Pol-
lack) begins with Michael rudely bursting into George's office, angry
that he has not been sent to audition for a plum role. George tries to
reason with him but gradually loses his temper:

> GEORGE: They can't all be idiots, Michael. You argue with everyone.
> You've got one of the worst reputations in town, Michael.
> No one will hire you.
>
> MICHAEL: Are you saying that nobody in New York will work
> with me?
>
> GEORGE: Oh no, that's too limiting. Nobody in Hollywood wants to
> work with you either. I can't even send you up for a com-
> mercial. You played a tomato for 30 seconds, they went a
> half a day over schedule 'cause you wouldn't sit down.
>
> MICHAEL: Yes, it wasn't logical.
>
> GEORGE: (*shouting*) You were a tomato! A tomato doesn't have logic!
> A tomato can't move!
>
> MICHAEL: That's what *I* said. So if he can't move, how's he gonna sit
> down, George. I was a stand-up tomato.

Note that this confrontation does more than paint a thorough por-
trait of just what a (clever) pain-in-the-ass Michael is. It reveals the
relationship between the two characters. George starts by trying to
be diplomatic, even kind, and finally gets fed up, and Michael leaves
determined to prove George and everybody else wrong. Dialogue
serves as character revelation because it navigates the relationship
between two people.[19] As Elizabeth Traugott and Mary Louise Pratt

note, "Like international relations, interpersonal ones are defined, maintained, and modified chiefly through language."[20]

ADHERENCE TO EXPECTATIONS
CONCERNING REALISM

We know that "realism" is a cultural construct, that when a text is referred to as "realistic," one is actually saying that it adheres to a complex code of what a culture at a given time agrees to accept as plausible, everyday, authentic. These conventions change through history—what strikes one generation as incredibly realistic may strike another as highly mannered. Although mainstream American filmmaking rarely has documentary or even neorealist ambitions, our movies have traditionally aimed toward a surface plausibility. Most American films work hard to encourage the suspension of disbelief; they sustain the illusion that the viewer is observing the action as a fly on the wall. Furthermore, just as some films may deliberately emphasize character portrayals, others choose to emphasize their realistic flavor. The distinctive sound of certain films of the 1970s discussed previously—*McCabe and Mrs. Miller, Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*—comes from these texts' emphasis on furthering the spectator's belief in their casualness, as if the camera and sound recording apparatus had haphazardly caught life in the act.

But a proportion of dialogue in every film serves primarily as a representation of ordinary conversational activities, or "verbal wallpaper." Recall all those moments of ordering food in restaurants or interchanges with servants and functionaries. In film after film, a principal character will walk into a restaurant or workplace and exchange greetings with extras we never see again. One might argue that these exchanges exist to show that the character is well-liked, but they primarily function to replicate everyday encounters. The same is true of background pages in hospitals and airports, of echoed commands in submarine films, of party chatter, reporters' shouted questions, and crowd murmurs.

Sometimes a film will foreground everyday banalities. In *The Fugitive*, while Kimble is being transported on the prison bus, we hear a conversation between the guards and the driver about being hungry and tired. The line "Twenty miles from Minard" is pure anchorage, but the rest serves a different function.

BLACK COP: I'm tired.

WHITE COP: Twenty miles from Minard. We should be there in about forty minutes. Yea, I'll be glad to get rid of this load. Let Mackenzie take care of 'em.

BLACK COP: Always got somthin'good to eat there man, I'm starving.

WHITE COP: Awww, me too. Had enough of that prison junk.

BLACK COP: Awww, man.

BUS DRIVER: Old Eddie here, he don't care, his old lady's got him on a diet. Right, Ed?

This conversation has no intrinsic meaning to the narrative, other than to serve as a representation of what prison guards might really talk about on a boring ride. It is intercut, however, with shots of two prisoners silently readying their escape attempt, while Richard Kimble notices their plans. The juxtaposition of this dialogue with this mimed action communicates to the viewer that the guards are distracted by their chatting from paying full attention to their impending peril.

In describing something as realistic, we are often judging that it is an accurate representation of a cultural milieu. I was reminded of realism's pseudo-anthropological ambitions while watching what may initially appear to be the least realistic of films—Steven Spielberg's *E. T.* (1982). The film balances its fantastic sci-fi plot with a careful portrayal of a middle-class Californian family. Thus, the first morning that Elliot has E. T. in his room, he shows the alien his "stuff," including a Coke can, toy plastic figures, an aquarium, a plastic shark on a stick, and a Planter's Peanut bank (fig. 3).

ELLIOT: Come on. It's all right. Come on. Come on. Come on. Come on. Come on. Come on. Do you talk? You know . . . talk. Me human. Boy. Elliot. Ell-i-ot. Elliot. Coke, see. We drink it. It's, uh, it's a drink. You know, food. These are toys. These are little men. This is Greedo. And then this is Hammerhead. See, this is Walrusman. And then this is Snaggletooth. And this is Lando Calrissian. See. And this is Boba Fett. And look, they can even have wars. Look at this. *(Makes war noises as he manipulates the plastic figures fighting each other.)* And look, fish. Fish eat the fish food and the shark eats the fish. But nobody eats the shark. See, this is Pez. Candy. See, you eat it. You put the candy in here and then when you lift up the head, candy comes out and you can eat it. You want some? This is a peanut, you eat it. But you can't eat this one, 'cause this is fake. This is money. See, we put the money in the peanut. You see, bank. See. And then, this is a car.

3.   *E. T.* Elliot showing the alien his stuff.

> This is what we get around in. See, car. (*E. T. starts to chew on the Matchbox car.*) Hey! Hey! Wait a second. No. You don't eat 'em. Are you hungry? I'm hungry. Stay. Stay. I'll be right here.

This speech does not advance the plot; instead (in casual, boy-appropriate diction), it skewers the commercialism of Elliot's culture, the movie toys, the Coke, the Peanut bank, the emphasis on money and cars, fighting, and a Darwinian food chain. These values will be counterpoised by the loyalty and love Elliot experiences through his relationship with E. T.

CONTROL OF VIEWER'S EVALUATION/EMOTIONS

As with every element of a film, dialogue is useful in guiding the responses of the spectator. Often dialogue is a tool for controlling pacing; it may, for instance, distract the filmgoer, or set us up for some visual surprise. In other cases, dialogue is used to elongate a moment, to stretch out a suspenseful climax. This is clearly the case in Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry* (1971). Once Detective Callahan has the drop on his prey, he toys with both the criminal and the viewer:

HARRY: Uh-huh, I know what you're thinkin'. Did he fire six shots or only five? Well to tell you the truth in all this excitement I've kinda lost track myself. But being this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself one question: "Do I feel lucky?" Well, do ya, punk?

Such a speech works not only to reveal Harry's disgust and sadism, and not only to inform us of the possibility that he is out of ammunition, but also—crucially—to force a suspenseful pause in the stream of physical action.

In addition to controlling the viewer's sense of pace, sometimes dialogue is used merely to draw our attention to someone or something. Mary Devereaux points out that in *His Girl Friday*, Walter's line, "Do you always carry an umbrella, Bruce?" forces us to see that the hyper-cautious Bruce is indeed equipped with raingear;[21] similarly, "That plane's dustin'crops where there ain't no crops" turns the audience's attention to the airplane in *North by Northwest.*

Moreover, dialogue guides our interpretation of what we are seeing. Early in William Wyler's *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), the stationmaster, Mr. Ballard, invites Mrs. Miniver into his office to see the rose he has cultivated and wants to name after her. We are shown one brief close-up of the rose; the focus is placed instead on the characters' response to the flower:

MRS. MINIVER: Oh, Mr. Ballard!
MR. BALLARD: It's my masterpiece.
MRS. MINIVER: How lovely!
MR. BALLARD: You like it ma'am?
MRS. MINIVER: I think it's the most beautiful rose I've ever seen. The shape . . .
MR. BALLARD: And the scent.
MRS. MINIVER: Oh, divine. And the color. I adore red roses.

It is through the dialogue that we "smell" the rose and learn that it is red (the film is in black and white).* Moreover, it is through the dialogue that we learn of the rose's magnificence. The camera is per-

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* I don't know what color this rose actually is. In Wyler's *Jezebel* (1938), great dialogue stress is placed on Julie's wearing a red dress to the ball but in actuality the dress was black velvet.

fectly capable of showing us a pretty flower, but it is not able to compare that flower to all others.

Another case where dialogue explicitly works on the viewer's emotional state occurs in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). Two-thirds of the way through the film, Captain Dallas is trying to chase the loathsome creature through the space ship's air ducts with a flame-thrower. A female crew member, Lambert, is coaching Dallas over a walkie-talkie as she watches a motion detector. We see shots of the motion detector's screen showing two dots converging; we see shots of Dallas frantically peering through the dark around him. We *hear* Lambert, increasingly agitated, then hysterically screaming: "Oh God, it's moving right towards you! . . . Move! Get out of there! [Inaudible] Move, Dallas! Move, Dallas! Move Dallas! Get out!" Such lines are not particularly informative. Their main function is to frighten the viewer, to increase the scene's tension. In this case, dialogue is accomplishing the task often taken by evocative extradiegetic music—it's working straight on the viewer's guts. This is manifestly also the purpose of "rabble-rousing" lines—all those variants of "Take *that*, you bastard!" with which the hero finally creams the villain and elicits audience cheers, in movies such as *Jaws* (1975), *Die Hard* (1988), and *Independence Day* (1996).

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Certainly one can find American films—Brian De Palma's *Mission: Impossible* (1996) is one example—that are ruthlessly "functional" in their dialogue, where dialogue is used as little as possible, only as absolutely required for narrative communicability, and where one could go through the script assigning each line to the above six categories with hardly a scrap of a phrase left over unaccounted for. However, in other cases, dialogue is clearly being utilized more expansively, for additional, and perhaps more nuanced, aims.

EXPLOITATION OF THE RESOURCES
OF LANGUAGE

This category is subdivided into four sections. The unifying concept is that the cinematic text defies the strictures of only using language

minimally and has chosen to include, perhaps even to revel in, "unnecessary" verbal embroidery.*

Firstly, language is often used poetically. Rouben Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight* (1932) foregrounds rhyming dialogue, and Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948) approaches blank verse. David Mamet's screenplays are famous for the way in which the dialogue falls into a heavily patterned rhythm. Joe Mantegna compares Mamet's lines to "poetry written in iambic pentameter."[22] And as Anne Dean comments,

> Even [Mamet's] celebrated use of "obscene" language is subjected to close scrutiny. "A line's got to scan," he says. "I'm very concerned with the metric scansion of everything I write, including the rhythmic emphasis of the word 'fucking.' In rehearsal, I've been known to be caught counting the beats on my fingers."[23]

Mamet may represent an extreme, but most scripts will occasionally smuggle in instances when a turn of phrase is offered for its intrinsic appeal. Take the Wizard's challenge to the Tin Man and the Scarecrow when they come to ask him for help:

> WIZARD: Step forward, Tin Man. You dare to come to me for a heart, do you? You clinking clanking, clattering collection of collagenous junk? . . . And you, Scarecrow, have the effrontery to ask for a brain, you billowing bale of bovine fodder?

The Wizard's ostentatious alliteration adds to his majesty. In Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930), Marlene Dietrich as Amy Jolly talks

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* I have in mind here something analogous to Roman Jakobson's "poetic function," which he defines as "focus on the message for its own sake" ("Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in id., *Style in Language,* ed. Thomas A. Sebeok [Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology; New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960], 356.) One could make other connections between my schema and Jacobson's famous six factors in verbal communication:

  addresser/context/message/contact/code/addressee,

and his six corresponding functions:

  emotive/referential/poetic/phatic/metalingual/conative.

For instance, in self-revelation by characters, the emotive function dominates; in exhortations to the audience, the conative function comes to the fore. However, I cannot claim a tight homology with Jakobson; his schema is designed neither for those who are "overhearing" a communicative exchange nor for exchanges that are part of a carefully designed narrative edifice.

about a Foreign Legion of Women: "But we have no uniforms, no flags. And no medals when we are brave. No wound stripes when we are hurt." This is an lovely extended metaphor, and the structuring of parallel clauses adds to the effect. In a like manner, Terence Mann's climactic speech at the end of Phil Alden Robinson's *Field of Dreams* (1989) about the importance of baseball moves from one poetic image to another: American history has moved by "like an army of steamrollers," but the fans at Ray's Iowa field will be "innocent as children"; they'll be dipped "in magic waters" and "[t]he memories will be so thick they'll have to brush them away from their faces." James Earl Jones's delivery makes the speech unforgettable.

Or a poetic touch may be limited to a single phrase. In *The Fugitive*, speaking of Kimble's foolhardy dive from a great height into the reservoir, Gerard casually tosses off that Kimble "Did a Peter Pan." Such a little comment, but it resonates when one realizes that, like Peter Pan, Kimble is fleeing from grown-up authority figures and fighting an evil one-armed man.

Not only do screenwriters write poetically; fairly often they literally insert poetry into their films. *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947) recites Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"; *All I Desire* (1953) includes a performance of Browning; *Sophie's Choice* (1982) highlights Emily Dickinson; *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) showcases W. H. Auden; *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) quotes Shakespearean sonnets. *Peter Pan* is read aloud in *E. T.*, and the Bible is read aloud in *How Green Was My Valley* (1941). The quoted passages highlight emotional moments with their familiarity and special eloquence.

Secondly, many films use their dialogue for jokes and humor.* Even the most intense thriller includes lighter, humorous moments to change the mood, or to relax the viewer before the next frenetic sequence. James Bond's ironic savoir faire illustrates both his bravery and unflappability.[24] Action heroes such as Mel Gibson in the *Lethal Weapon* films, or Bruce Willis in the *Die Hard* series, and Eddie Murphy in the *Beverly Hills Cop* movies not only get to perform heroically, they also get to mouth off constantly. The jokes themselves

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* Timothy Paul Garrand subdivides humorous dialogue into discreet categories, which he labels "epigrams," "non sequiturs," "misunderstandings," "understatements," "sarcasm," and "wordplay" ("The Comedy Screenwriting of Preston Sturges: An Analysis of Seven Paramount Auteurist Screenplays" [Diss., University of Southern California, 1984], 243).

have a hard, aggressive edge; the heroes' dismissive "deadly wit" is another means of illustrating their power.[25]

In sound comedies, dialogue moves to the fore as the comic engine of the text. Here is a small sampling:

From Leo McCarey's *Duck Soup* (1933):

> FIREFLY: I suggest that we give him ten years in Leavenworth or eleven years in Twelveworth.
> CHICOLINI: I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll take five and ten in Woolworth.

From Mark Sandrich's *The Gay Divorcée* (1934):

> TONETTI: Your wife is safe with Tonetti—he prefers spaghetti.

From Stanley Donen's *Singin' in the Rain* (1952):

> DON: Hey Cos—do something—call me a cab!
> COSMO: Okay. You're a cab.

From Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker's *Airplane!* (1980):

> DOCTOR: Can you fly this plane and land it?
> TED: Surely you can't be serious.
> DOCTOR: I am serious. And don't call me Shirley.

Note that dialogue humor can cut two ways. It can be offered as the deliberate joking of a witty character—Groucho Marx, 007. On the other hand, many of the lines that make us laugh stem from our position of superior knowledge over a character. We don't laugh with Lena Lamont in *Singin' in the Rain*, we laugh *at* her when she says, "What's wrong with the way I talk? What'sa big idea—am I dumb or somethin'?"

This leads us to what I see as the third major use of the resources of language: irony. Although it is possible to convey irony solely through visual images, language greatly expands film's ironic capabilities. Irony is created by the divergence between two levels of knowledge, between, for instance, what the characters know and what the audience knows. In many films, because we are "omnisciently" privileged to observe more than any single character, we

are often in the position of seeing through their self-deceits or deliberate falsehoods. In Wyler's *Roman Holiday* (1953), Anna doesn't want Joe Bradley to know that she is a runaway princess, while Joe doesn't want her to know that he has recognized her and is documenting her day for a newspaper scoop. The characters thus mislead or outright lie to one another constantly. In our position of superior knowledge, we constantly "see through" the surface statements to the truth—Anna talks about the "anniversary of her father's job," and we understand she is referring to a celebration of his coronation; Joe tells Anna that he is in the fertilizer business and we recognize that he is giving her a load of bull. Our interpretation of every line is changed because of our superior knowledge.

Similarly, in Joseph Mankiewicz's *All about Eve,* Margo responds to Karen's apology for the stranded car:

> MARGO: Don't give it a thought. One of Destiny's many pranks. After all, you didn't personally drain the gas tank yourself.

However, the words reverberate because the audience knows that Karen did exactly that.

Finally, another, slightly rarer function of on-screen dialogue is to tell stories verbally.* For the most part, on-screen verbal storytelling might be categorized under narrative causality as discussed above. That is, a character will tell a story to explain some key gap in the plot, as in Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) when Maxim de Winter finally explains Rebecca's death. However, with some frequency, films lapse into storytelling that is basically tangential to the plot, although relevant to the film's subtexts.

In Steven Spielberg's *Jaws,* the "action" of the film pauses as the men sit around the *Orca*'s cabin table. Captain Quint (Robert Ryan) tells a harrowing story of the sinking of the USS *Indianapolis* during World War II, when he and eleven hundred other sailors were cast adrift in shark-infested seas. Certainly, the relatively quiet scene of sharing stories around the table is structurally important to the film; by bonding the men together and by allowing the audience to unwind, it sets us up for the heart-stopping attack to come. Quint's

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* I am excluding here voice-over storytelling, which I have examined in another study.

story might have been motivated by concerns for character revelation, in that it "explains" his fixed hatred of sharks, a hatred so intense that, like Captain Ahab, he is willing to die as long as he kills his nemesis. But both goals—change of tempo and character revelation—could have been accomplished by other means. The story is included because it is compelling *as a story,* because of the intrinsic gratifications of storytelling.

In addition, every filmgoer must recall Bernstein's story in *Citizen Kane* about seeing the girl on the ferry:

> BERNSTEIN: You're pretty young, Mr.—Mr. Thompson. A fellow will remember a lot of things you wouldn't think he'd remember. You take me. One day, back in 1896, I was crossing over to Jersey on the ferry and as we pulled out there was another ferry pulling in—and on it there was a girl waiting to get off. A white dress she had on—and she was carrying a white parasol—and I only saw her for one second. She didn't see me at all—but I'll bet a month hasn't gone by since that I haven't thought of that girl.

Bernstein's past romantic life is totally tangential to the film—we learn nothing whatsoever on the subject. Yet this story captures such a delicate moment of the personal experience: a second that reverberates through a lifetime. It also relates to the Rosebud theme, in that it points to the lingering importance to someone of a moment that may seem trivial to others.

By including poetic effects, jokes, irony, or storytelling, films defy the strictures against cinematic speech, and bring into the medium the vast resources of an older Muse.

THEMATIC MESSAGES/AUTHORIAL COMMENTARY/ALLEGORY AND INTERPRETATION

In the history of criticism of film dialogue, no other function of dialogue has been criticized so much. Possibly, this is because "preachy" passages tend to date quickly if their topic is of the moment, or because such passages have frequently been poorly written, couched in vague generalities so as to offend as few as possible. But I suspect that this aversion is at least partially prompted by the fact that overt

moralizing breaks the illusion that viewers are merely overhearing characters talking to one another; it makes plain that the dialogue is addressed to the audience. This both violates the suspension of disbelief and "catches" the viewer in the act of eavesdropping.

This widespread aversion, however, hasn't stopped the prevalence of dialogue such as the following speech given by Jefferson Smith on the Senate floor in Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939):

JEFFERSON SMITH: And it seemed like a pretty good idea—getting boys from all over the country, boys of all nationalities and ways of living—getting them together. Let them find out what makes different people tick the way they do. Because I wouldn't give ya two cents for all your fancy rules if behind them they didn't have a little bit of plain, ordinary, everyday kindness and a little lookin' out for the other fella too. That's pretty important, all that. It's just the blood and bone and sinew of this democracy that some great men handed down to the human race, that's all! But of course, if you've got to build a dam where that boy's camp ought to be, to get some graft or pay off some political army or something, well that's a different thing. Oh no.

Lest one think that this use of dialogue is confined to Capra, consider Ted Kramer's response on the witness stand during the custody trial in Robert Benton's *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979):

TED KRAMER: My wife used to always say to me, "Why can't a woman have the same ambitions as a man?" *(to Johanna)* I think you're right. And maybe I've learned that much. But, by the same token, I'd like to know what law is it that says a woman is a better parent simply by virtue of her sex? You know, I've had a lot of time to think about what is it that makes somebody a good parent: you know it has to do with constancy; it has to do with—with—with patience; it has to do with listening to 'em; it has to do with pretending to listen to 'em, when you can't even listen anymore. It has to do with love like—like—like—like she was saying. And I don't know where it's written that says that a woman has—has a corner on that

market that—that a man has any less of those emotions
than—than—than a woman does.

In each case, the speech is spoken by the hero or an authority fig-
ure in a setting (the U.S. Senate, family court, criminal court) that
calls for honesty and that "realistically" allows for substantive re-
flection on serious issues. The viewer recognizes such statements as
the moral of the text because of their value-laden content and be-
cause of their relation to the film as a whole: *Kramer vs. Kramer* is in-
deed devoted to showing the father's fitness as a parent and to con-
demning a system that would deprive him of his son. In addition,
such "authorial commentary" tends to fall in the film's last quarter,
when the thematic stakes have been made abundantly clear, and
may be expressed in a single, long climactic speech.

Which brings us to the point that, as a general rule, dialogue in a
film's last scenes carries particular thematic burdens, either reinforc-
ing the film's ostensible moral or resisting closure. "In resolutions,
narratives can attempt ideological solutions to the contradictions
that fuel them. But the traces of conflict and contradiction may re-
main," Jackie Byars argues. She continues by quoting Rachel Blau
DuPlessis: "Subtexts and repressed discourses can throw up one last
flare of meaning."[26] "Flare" is a visual image; our perspective here
suggests that these repressed discourses may break through and find
voice in some last closing line(s) . . . as in the highly disturbing end of
Psycho (1960), where the mother's voice subverts the tidy explana-
tions just offered by the psychiatrist about the causes and meaning of
Norman's insanity.

In the case of films motivated by propagandistic goals, character
dialogue will even directly exhort the viewer to action. At the end of
Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent,* filmed in 1940, the hero warns of
the Nazi threat and urges the viewer to join in the fight:

JOHNNY JONES: I can't read the rest of the speech I had because the
lights have gone out so I'll just have to talk off the cuff.
All that noise you hear isn't static, it's death coming to
London. Yes, they're coming here now, you can hear the
bombs falling on the streets and the homes. It's as if the
lights were all out everywhere, except in America. Keep
those lights burning. Cover them with steel, ring them

> with guns. Build a canopy of battleships and bombing
> planes around them. Hello America! Hang on to your
> lights. They're the only lights left in the world.

Thematic messages are fairly bald, and the character, of course, is aware of what he or she is saying and what it means—the character has assumed the mantle of conscious spokesperson for the ideals ratified by the rest of the movie. An alternate method of conveying social/moral/political themes is by the use of allegory. M. H. Abrams defines allegory as "a narrative fiction in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived to make coherent sense on the 'literal,' or primary, level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events."[27] Many films offer such dual levels of signification—their stories cohere as self-contained narratives, while at the same time the viewer is guided to read an allegory of political or social events. In such cases, as with ironical dialogue, the viewer brings to the dialogue a level of knowledge and interpretation superior to that of the characters; the broader, thematic significance of their words is unavailable to the characters. Allegorical dialogue, however, is less overt than ironical dialogue, because instead of entailing a concrete lie or misunderstanding, the viewer's recognition of the doubled meaning depends upon a systematized interpretation of the total text, an ability to draw the connections between the on-screen diegesis, characters, and events and the wider political/social/moral significance.

For example, only if one is alert to the fact that Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948) is an allegory about the evils of capitalism will one catch all the overtones of the dialogue.

> SAM MORSE: It's a normal operation. "776" will hit tomorrow because
> Taylor makes it hit. Tomorrow night every [numbers]
> bank in the city is broken. Then we step in and lend
> money to those we want while we let the rest go to the
> wall. We're normal financiers.

Force of Evil is not the only film with a comprehensive allegorical subtext; consider *High Noon* (1952) and *Johnny Guitar* (1954) with their anti-McCarthyism parables, or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

(1956) with its—disputed[28]—anti-Communism. In films like these, almost as with Spenser's *The Faërie Queene*, a viewer who "misses" the allegorical significance may be said to have missed half the text.

However, more commonly, American films offer what might be called "allegory-lite," that is, an intermittent or vague constellation of references between the fictional diegesis and a second, or wider, significance. Frequently, one recognizes a double-layering only in certain scenes. For instance, to return to Mrs. Miniver and her rose: the rose, which Mr. Ballard explicitly names after her, is a surrogate for the character. The reason that we have more glamour close-ups of Greer Garson than of the flower during this interchange is that the loveliness so stressed is really *her* loveliness. The viewer is led to appreciate her beauty by Mr. Ballard's admiration, the stress on her namesake's transcendence, and the visual evidence of Garson's appealing looks. To the extent that Mrs. Miniver is herself a symbol of traditional British refinement under attack by the Nazis, and to the extent that the rose is often a symbol of England, the seemingly banal dialogue serves to hammer home to the viewer that culture's refinement and worth.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR STAR TURNS

Clearly, this final category is primarily pertinent to a certain category of films, those designed as showcases for stars with unique histrionic talents. In such cases, dialogue sequences may be included to keep our attention focused upon that star, and to give the star a chance to "show off." Such sequences may involve a longer "turn" where the star gets to speak without interruption.

Take the opening of Franklin Schaffner's *Patton* (1970), in which George C. Scott mounts a flag-draped stage and delivers a speech to an unseen audience. The camera stays focused on Scott throughout—there are no cutaways to the troops—and he delivers a speech astounding in its mixture of patriotism, crudity, and cruelty. Scott gives a riveting reading, mostly bombastic, but at times tinged with cynical resignation. The speech is important to the character study of General Patton, but it is mostly a tour de force for Scott.

A comic example can be seen in Chris Columbus's *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), when Robin Williams is being interviewed by a court officer adjudicating his children's custody arrangements. Williams tells her

that his profession is to dub voices of cartoon characters; her blank look is an excuse for Williams to go off on a riff of thirteen impressions, ranging from Ronald Reagan to Porky Pig. These impressions have nothing whatsoever to do with the narrative—they exist solely to give Williams a chance to do his shtick.

In general, "star turns" can be identified by their length, by the fact that the speeches call for a wider or out of the ordinary range of emotional expression, and showcase vocal skill. As James Naremore notes:

> [F]ilms often call attention to performing skill by means of long speeches: notice Edward G. Robinson's lightning-fast recitation of actuarial statistics in *Double Indemnity* (1944), Brando's famous soliloquy about being a "contender" in *On the Waterfront* (1954), or James Woods's frantic, dizzy talk on the telephone at the beginning of *Salvador* (1986).[29]

All Naremore's examples in this passage, and in another where he discusses James Earl Jones, Olivier, Gielgud, and Welles highlighting their verbal skills, are of male actors. I, too, can only think of examples featuring male performers. It is not that female performers don't have distinctive voices—think of Jean Arthur or Judy Holliday—or consummate verbal skill. But they have been less likely to be given the stage to talk for an extended period, to take a verbal star turn. Naremore reports that vocal power has traditionally been considered an "important sign of 'phallic' performing skill."[30] Perhaps bucking the prejudices against film dialogue may be dared for a male star, but is less likely to be done for actresses, who, particularly in recent years, have generally ranked lower in box office power and salaries.

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The preceding discussion has shown how integral dialogue is to the creation of the narrative—how it anchors and identifies the place, time, and participants; how it establishes and conveys causal relationships; how it enacts major events. We have studied how it is used to create and reveal character; to influence audience reactions to these fictional personages; to illuminate the characters' changing interrelationships. I have shown how dialogue communicates thematic or authorial commentary through irony, allegory, embedded

storytelling. Moreover, I have demonstrated how filmic speech contributes to the viewing experience through eloquence or humor, how it controls pacing, mood, emotion, and interpretation.

One of the benefits of this exercise in classification is that it enables us to notice parts of films, or entire texts, that don't fall into these categories, that are "transgressive" to a greater or lesser degree. Some movies present only one-dimensional characters and never use dialogue to deepen their psychological portraits. Some films delay anchoring their time and space or clarifying relationships between characters in order to purposefully disorient a viewer. Moreover, some dialogue practices escape my schema altogether. Philosophical discussion for its own sake is atypical in American film—although it may be the meat of a film such as Eric Rohmer's *Ma nuit chez Maude* (1970)—American films do not spend much time in conversation discussing non-plot-related issues. What is precisely so fresh and interesting about Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) are the digressive conversations: the discussion of tipping in the former and the long conversation about the erotic meanings of a foot massage in the latter.

I trust this chapter serves as further defense of film dialogue, as if this evidence of all the things that dialogue does for a filmic text will finally refute the anti-dialogue critics such as Sergei Eisenstein, V. I. Pudovkin, Rudolf Arnheim, Paul Rotha, and Siegfried Kracauer. But even if they could read this, I doubt they would be swayed. Silent films, after all, used intertitles to anchor time and place, to explain narrative causality, and to provide authorial commentary; they substituted embraces for verbal love declarations; revealed character through gesture and expression; relied on slapstick as opposed to verbal jokes. In other words, showing that dialogue fulfills my nine functions does not prove that dialogue is the *only* means of accomplishing these ends; nor, for that matter, have I even attempted to prove that these ends are requisite for a narrative film.

Perhaps it is pointless to say to devotees of string quartets that they are missing the contributions of bassoons and French horns and piccolos, because such instruments do not belong in string quartets. One can claim that brass and woodwind instruments are essential to Beethoven's symphonies (and that Sousa's marches are literally unthinkable without them). You can reasonably argue that the full symphony orchestra has a broader tonal range than a string quartet and

that it has more varied means at its disposal for affecting its audience. Without denigrating the continued importance of the string section, you can seek to understand the roles played by the added instruments.

You *can* say to devotees of string quartets that the music they enshrine is not the only music that can or should be played.