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From primitive to classical

The cinema knows so well how to tell a story that perhaps there is an impression that it has always known how.[1]

<div align="right">André Gaudreault, 1980</div>

In looking back to the silent cinema, it is all too easy to consider the period as remote, alien, and crude. The addition of sound, color, widescreen, and a panoply of recent developments seems to have hopelessly outdistanced the achievements of the early films. Yet it is remarkable that one must go back very far to find films which are so fundamentally different as to be incomprehensible today.

Historians have called these very early years of film production the 'primitive' period. This period is generally assumed to have begun with the cinema's commercial origins in 1894 and lasted until somewhere between 1906 and 1908. During most of the primitive period, films appealed to audiences primarily through simple comedy or melodrama, topical subjects, exotic scenery, trick effects, and the sheer novelty of photographed movement. Non-fiction films outnumbered narratives, at first, and the latter were usually imitations of popular theatrical forms of the day. According to the traditional account, the primitive style began to disappear as individual innovators like Edwin S.Porter and D.W.Griffith introduced devices such as crosscutting, the closeup, and so on. These devices are said to have influenced other filmmakers.[2*]

Most historians would agree that between the primitive period and the sophisticated studio production of the twenties, the US cinema moved from a narrative model derived largely from vaudeville into a filmmaking formula drawing upon aspects of the novel, the popular legitimate theater, and the visual arts, and combined with specifically cinematic devices. I do not propose here to challenge that general notion. Clearly there was a profound shift in both narrative and stylistic practices. But this shift did not come about because a few prominent filmmakers happened to decide to move their camera in or to break their scenes into more shots. When they did such things, these men and women were not creating isolated strokes of genius, but were responding to larger changes within a developing system. Not all of the many experiments that were tried in the early teens became part of Hollywood's paradigm. Only those solutions which held promise to serve a specific type of narrative structure caught on and became widely used. The predominance of narrative structure over the systems of time and space within the classical film can thus be seen as one result of early attempts to harness cinematic time and space to a storytelling function. Filmmakers quickly came to share certain assumptions about films, narratives, techniques, and audiences that guided them in their experiments.

I shall be suggesting that the formulation of the classical mode began quite early, in the period around 1909–11, and that by 1917, the system was complete in its basic narrative and stylistic premises. During the

early and mid-teens, older devices lingered, but classical norms began to coalesce. The stylistic patterns which characterized the primitive period eventually disappeared. This was in part due to the fact that innovation was not simply a matter of a few daring filmmakers influencing others. It occurred within a set of institutions which were capable of controlling new ideas, fitting them into an existing model, and making them into normative principles. As Part Two has shown, trade journals, handbooks, and reviews disseminated and developed the norms of the classical model, while standardized studio organization was putting those norms into effect. Individual innovations were certainly important, but people like Griffith and Maurice Tourneur changed production practices and filmic techniques in limited ways, governed by the overall production system.

Nor was the shift from the primitive to the classical cinema a matter of either a growing sophistication or a discovery of a natural 'grammar' of the medium. The term 'primitive' is in many ways an unfortunate one, for it may imply that these films were crude attempts at what would later become classical filmmaking. While I use the word because of its widespread acceptance, I would prefer to think of primitive films more in the sense that one speaks of primitive art, either produced by native cultures (e.g., Eskimo ivory carving) or untrained individuals (e.g., Henri Rousseau). That is, such primitive art is a system apart, whose simplicity can be of a value equal to more formal aesthetic traditions. The classical cinema, then, was not a development directly out of the early primitive approach; the primitive cinema, as André Gaudreault puts it, cannot be considered 'the humus and the soil of which the sole virtue was to allow the germination of the other form.'[3] Rather, the classical cinema resulted from a major shift in assumptions about the relation of spectator to film and the relation of a film's form to its style.

As many historians have noted, the primitive cinema largely assumed that the spectator was equivalent to an audience member in a theater. Mise-en-scene often imitated theatrical settings, and actors behaved as if they were on an actual stage. The framing and staging of scenes in constructed sets placed the spectator at a distance from the space of the action, looking into it. Devices like crosscutting, montage sequences, and dissolves for elliding or compressing time were not in general use. The spectator witnessed either a continuous stretch of time over a whole film or discrete blocks of time in one-shot scenes with ellipses or overlaps between. Filmmakers provided few cues to guide the spectator through the action; there was little of the redundancy of narrative information which the classical cinema would habitually provide.

The classical cinema, on the other hand, assumes that the narration places a spectator within or on the edge of the narrative space. As we shall see, a variety of stylistic devices combined to extend that space out toward the plane of the camera, as well as to move the spectator's viewpoint periodically into the narrative space. This increasing depth of the playing area, in combination with greater three-dimensionality in the sets themselves, promoted that specific conception of verisimilitude which, as Chapter 9 has shown, was valued in the early classical period. While presenting to the spectator a more three-dimensional narrative space, however, the film now contained a set of cues to underscore the story action at all times. These two demands, a verisimilitude and narrative clarity, helped create the classical style of Hollywood filmmaking. Part One has already presented this system in its complete form. In this part, I shall be dealing with the early formulation of the classical system and its refinements in the late teens and twenties. This will not be a history of the 'first times' that given devices appear in the cinema. So many films from the silent period are lost or inaccessible that such a project would be doomed. But more importantly, an emphasis on first usages does not inform us about the wider impact of a device. To understand the classical cinema, we need to know when its techniques became normalized on a wide scale.

Even more importantly, we cannot look at devices in isolation from their typical functions. Techniques contribute to the creation of systems of causality, time, and space. A device already in use during the primitive period may continue to be used in the classical system, but may change its function.

In a study of standard practice, a concentration on filmmakers traditionally considered major— Griffith, Tourneur, Thomas H.Ince—would create a skewed impression of the norms. Rather, a variety of genres, filmmakers, and studios should contribute to create a broad picture. I have included films of the early teens from many studios—from the larger Patents Co. members, like Essanay, Vitagraph, and Edison, to the major independents, like Imp, Bison 101, and Thanhouser, to the smaller independents, like Crystal, Rex, Solax, Reliance, and Yankee. (Unfortunately some studios' outputs have virtually disappeared, so a complete sampling is impossible.)

A study that focused entirely on the most famous filmmakers and studios would run the risk of giving undue prominence to certain devices which might in fact have been limited or idiosyncratic. For example, most historians who study the early history of crosscutting devote their attention to the last-minute rescue situation, since they derive most of their examples from Griffith. Yet I shall be claiming that once crosscutting became standardized, it gained several other equally important functions. A cross-sectional survey of the type attempted here provides a tool for judging the actual importance of any given technique in the history of the American cinema.

An important question throughout will be the degree to which filmmakers and critics of the period were aware of newly formulated film techniques. We cannot always be sure that a device's appearance in a number of films implies that filmmakers were beginning to consider it a standard way of doing things. Fortunately, there exists a set of evidence paralleling the films themselves—contemporary discussions of filmmaking practice in how-to columns and books and in various theoretical and critical writings. These materials reveal that filmmakers and critics at the time recognized many of the changes in the continuity system, in acting style, in lighting practice, indeed in most of the areas we are exploring in this book.

With these sources—films and contemporary accounts—we should be able to survey the formulation of norms of narrative and stylistic structure in American filmmaking during the transitional years 1909 to 1917. The primitive and classical periods were not, of course, entirely different from each other nor unchanging within themselves. We may find at least two distinct phases within the primitive period itself: the earlier (1895–1902) includes primarily one-shot films, with documentaries more numerous than fiction films; after about 1902, multiple-shot films and the increasing use of staged narratives created a more complex approach to filmmaking. Then, from about 1909 to 1916, the transitory phase toward the classical cinema occurred, with the classical paradigm in place by 1917. From that point on, silent cinema history became mainly a matter of adjustments, not basic changes.

The primitive film's relation to vaudeville

The early film's economic dependence on vaudeville, discussed in Chapter 10, helped determine the genres and formal norms of the primitive cinema. Exhibition circumstances, short length, and small-scale production facilities dictated the creation of films which modeled themselves largely on types of stage acts: the variety act, the fictional narrative, the scenic (views of interesting locales), the topical (presentations of current events), and the trick film.

These genres were recognized as such in the primitive period; they reflect the type of appeal the producers and exhibitors exploited in selling them—the trick film's technical novelty, the variety acts' presentation of famous vaudevillians to farflung audiences. In practice, however, many trick films and variety acts contained brief fictional narratives, so the categories overlap somewhat. For my purposes here, the most important groupings are general ones: documentary films versus fictional narratives.

Before 1903, most films shown on early vaudeville programs were documentaries. The early views were usually a single shot, taken from a static tripod or involving a pan or track from a moving vehicle. Brief, in

black and white, and with little explanatory material, they seem of minimal interest today. The apparent crudity of these early documentaries has helped foster the myth that films were used to drive patrons out at the ends of vaudeville programs, or the notion that audience demand spurred the shift to narratives.

Before 1903, the typical film resembled a very simple vaudeville skit. The stage skit usually involved a couple of comics performing verbal and sight gags in a relatively static situation.[4] Early films are even simpler; while the vaudeville skit usually leads to a pay-off, the brief, single-shot film usually employs a more static narrative situation—a potential cause which never leads to an effect. For example, *The Old Maid in a Drawing Room* (1900, Edison) consists entirely of a medium shot of an elderly woman in evening dress seated and talking animatedly, facing a space off front; the film's entire interest arises from her comic appearance and gestures. There is no development. Some of these skit-like films are difficult to distinguish from motion-picture records of actual vaudeville comedy performances —a circumstance that reflects the indebtedness of the early narrative film to its stage mode.

Beginning about 1903, the film's single action became part of a brief series of causally linked events. This resulted in part from the increasing length of each film; there was also a greater complexity of production methods, which might mix interior and exterior shots within the same film. But greater lengths and heterogeneous material did not fundamentally change the narrative model derived from the skit. Films still depended upon an initial, often accidental event, rather than upon character motivation. In 1903 and 1904, the chase film, staged in a series of exterior locations, was becoming one of the most popular narrative genres.[5] Rather than confining itself to a simple, brief slapstick fight, the film might prolong its action by having one combatant flee, with the other chasing and passersby joining in. A relatively complicated film, like *The Life of an American Fireman* (Edwin S.Porter, 1903, Edison) or *The Runaway Match* (1903, AM&B) would incorporate a chase as part of a larger series of events. Through the period 1903 to 1908, simple narratives that follow one action—a chase, a rescue, a fight—in linear fashion dominate narrative filmmaking.

The second major vaudeville form from which film derived narrative principles was the playlet. When writers on this period assume that film imitated full-length nineteenth-century legitimate drama, they overlook the fact that there was this more accessible form closer at hand. Vaudeville initially adopted the playlet during a period of intense competition among entrepreneurs in New York in 1893–4. Wishing to book famous attractions to enhance drawing power, a few producers hired stars from the legitimate theater, who performed in condensed, twenty-minute versions of their original dramatic successes. This practice eventually brought such stars as Sarah Bernhardt and Ethel Barrymore to the vaudeville stage in the early teens.[6] Authors began writing original playlets, and the form developed into one specific to vaudeville. At the beginning, however, when film was most closely linked to vaudeville, the condensed plays were highly episodic series of highlights from existing works. They were in a sense the opposite of the skit, since instead of prolonging the effects of one initial cause, the playlet packed a great deal of causal material into a short playing time.

When film producers began basing films upon lengthy literary works, they also tended to structure them as series of selected scenes from the originals. Porter's 1903 version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Edison) no doubt imitated the popular stage productions of the novel, which had toured the country during the last decades of the nineteenth century.[7] But the condensation of the narrative into an episodic set of fourteen tableaux suggests as well the playlet form. A series of tableaux, often with explanatory phrases between, became a standard way of presenting a narrative in the later portion of the primitive period (e.g., *The Unwritten Law, c.* 1907, Lubin).

The playlets and the plays upon which they were based were frequently melodramas, and familiar melodramatic subject matter appears in primitive-period films. *The 100 to One Shot* deals with a man who

wins on a long-shot bet at the track to save his fiancee and her father from eviction. Other popular motifs in primitive films were gypsies who steal a child and the father who disapproves of his son or daughter's choice of a marriage partner. Moreover, the episodic quality of the stage melodrama continues in films of the primitive period (and into the teens as well). Coincidence was permissible at virtually any point in the narrative, either to keep the story going or to provide a resolution at the end.

Neither the skit nor the playlet fosters the weave of causes from scene to scene which Part One has shown to be typical of the classical narrative. The primitive scene does not usually begin by closing off dangling causes or continue by creating new ones for scenes to come. Rather, the same cause lingers on, resulting in more and more effects (the skit), or each scene sets up a new set of premises to be worked out in one relatively self-contained stretch of action (the episodic playlet). As we shall see in the next chapter, this difference is a crucial one for distinguishing the classical from the primitive cinema.

Between 1906 and 1908, the sudden nickelodeon boom made film in many cases vaudeville's rival for audiences. The enormous success and quick spread of nickelodeons, combined with vaudeville's continued use of films, created a demand for more releases from the producers. Robert C.Allen has shown that the producers responded, increasing their output from 10,000 feet weekly in November of 1906, to 28,000 feet by March, 1907; even this did not meet the demand.[8] As a result, filmmaking followed a trend which had begun about 1901–3: the production of larger proportions of narrative films in relation to documentaries.[9*] Initially comedies formed the greater part of the fiction output. Allen has persuasively shown that this increase was *not* in response to public demands—that in fact audiences regretted to some extent the replacement of scenics and topicals by narratives. Indeed, Allen found that sales in magic lantern slides showing exotic locales surged in 1908, at the point when producers went over decisively to narrative.[10] But with a steady demand established first by vaudeville theaters and later by nickelodeons as well, producers had to find some way of guaranteeing a regular flow of releases. This, as Chapter 10 has explained, resulted in a mass production of staged, narrative films.

The move to narrative was a key factor in encouraging a shift from primitive cinema to classical filmmaking. Certainly the early vaudeville structures held on for some years, partly because filmmakers had been trained under them, partly because films were still shown in vaudeville situations, and partly because the classical paradigm took several years to be formulated and to be widely accepted as a norm. But why was there a shift away from the approach to narrative prevalent in the primitive period?

The rise of the classical model

> With the considerable elevation of public taste in the past two years and the still greater desire
> to do better things on the part of the film manufacturers, the 'trick' film, and the merely
> farcical, or horse play, pictures have taken a secondary place.[11]
>
> <div align="right">Walter Prichard Eaton, 1909</div>

One of the main causes in the shift from primitive to classical cinema involves a change in influences from the other arts, from an initial close imitation of vaudeville, to a greater dependence on short fiction, novels, and legitimate drama. But film narrative and style were not simply the sum of several inter-arts influences. However directly film may have imitated existing devices from theater or fiction, we must always ask how the device and its function changed when incorporated into works in the film medium.

Only in the first phase of the primitive cinema, when films were one shot long, were they nearly direct imitations of existing forms. Topicals and scenics were very similar to magic lantern slides and photographs. Records of vaudeville acts made little attempt to change the act for the screen. The abstracting functions

which films performed— reducing their subjects to black and white, rendering them for the most part silently on a two-dimensional surface—were already familiar to audiences from other photographic media.

But with the steady demands by vaudeville and later by nickelodeons for more product came a tendency for the manufacturers to increase the length of the films, usually by adding shots. This greater length had two vital implications for the types of narratives used in the films.

On the one hand, greater length, whether in longer takes or in multiple shots, would allow more time for characterization and the development of psychological traits. The filmmaker could have simply added more characters and physical action to expand a skit-like situation, but this would tend to provide little change in the course of the film—the longer the film, the more apparent would be the static quality of the situation. Providing traits for the characters could motivate a changing situation; then it would be the characters, rather than the situation, which remained stable, unifying the string of events. A few simple traits could motivate a whole variety of circumstances, while at the same time providing a narrational thread to guide the spectator.

On the other hand, while characters could be a unifying force, cutting could be potentially disunifying. Yet technological restrictions like limited camera-magazine capacities and production circumstances like the lack of a written script, might tend to discourage lengthy one-shot films. In fact, during the rise of the narrative film, from 1902 to 1908, the multiple-shot film gradually became the norm, although film lengths varied considerably during these years. At first, the association of shots with whole films was strong: 'Above all, the inventors of the cinema invented the shot, and this shot was at the time the alpha and omega of cinematographic expression.'[12] Indeed, sometimes producers would copyright every shot of a multiple-shot narrative as a separate film. In this way the title of each film/shot could serve as an explanatory inter-title, and the separate shots became self-contained tableaux. Producers also began to make series of scenic views of a single locale, each of which could be copyrighted separately; these could be exhibited individually or as a set.[13*] The initial reluctance to put several shots into a single film suggests a recognition of the potentially disruptive qualities of the cut. Unless the filmmaker finds cues for conveying the spatio-temporal relationship between shots, the effect of the cut is a perceptible break between bits of subject matter.

We have seen that the manufacturers realized how suitable fictional narrative films were for profitable mass production. Because of film's success, more footage was needed, and it proved more predictable to manufacture staged films than documentaries. In addition, all other things being equal, a longer narrative film was proportionately cheaper than a short one, since the same sets and personnel could be used to create a greater amount of footage.[14*] So the trend toward longer narratives continued throughout the silent period.

The spatio-temporal problems innate in the construction of the multiple-shot film helped guide the filmmakers' formulation of a classical narrative model. This is in one way a somewhat traditional view of film history—that the discovery and increasing use of cutting brought cinema from its initial dependence on theater into a more independent, 'cinematic' period. Yet historians have usually treated this change as an untroubled evolution—with editing freeing Porter, Griffith, and their followers to explore the 'grammar' of film. What I am suggesting here is that cutting was not entirely a liberation; it posed tremendous problems of how to maintain a clear narrative as the central interest of the film, while juxtaposing disparate times and spaces. The continuity rules that filmmakers devised were not natural outgrowths of cutting, but means of taming and unifying it. In a sense, what the psychological character was in the unification of the longer narrative, the continuity rules were in the unification of time and space.

Filmmakers found themselves dealing with an increasingly disruptive set of devices as their films became longer and their narratives more complicated. When no standard way of conveying narrative information existed, experimentation was necessary. In the primitive period, films sometimes display anomalous devices. The famous repeated action in the last two shots of Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* (made in

late 1902, Edison) has caused debate among historians, as to whether Porter's film indeed could have been released with such a problematic repetition of an entire scene. To argue that the repetition could not have been in the original assumes that the later norm of smooth story-telling was in existence by 1902 and that Porter must have known that overlapping time would disturb an audience. But in fact such repetitions of actions from different vantage points occur in other films of the period. These include *A Policeman's Love Affair* (1904, Lubin)—where the maid's greeting to the policeman is seen both from the street and from inside the house—and *The Tunnel Workers* (1906, AM&B)—where the foreman and the protagonist both go through a door and are seen repeating this action from the other side of the door.[15] The point here is that disruptive devices abound during the late primitive period and occasionally crop up in the early teens.[16*]

Time, space, and logic did not fit together unproblematically at this early point. The relationships among these systems were probably the same in the primitive period as in the classical—that is, narrative was the dominant consideration, with time and space subordinate to it. And many of the same techniques were in use during both periods—cut-ins, characters, inter-titles, linear causality, and the like. The main changes that occurred in the shift from primitive to classical cinema took place *within* the individual systems of causality, time, and space.

The main vehicle for the change was a radically different conception of narration. During the primitive period, the narration usually remained omniscient, with actions placed in a block before the viewer—played out in long-shot view for the most part. (Even dreams, visions, and memories were seen in superimposition over only part of the frame, with the character still visible in the long shot, thus minimizing the subjective effect and keeping the narration omniscient.) As Gaudreault suggests, 'The narrator was not *conscious* of being a narrator.'[17] Inter-titles of neutral, non-self-conscious tone summarized action and introduced characters. But the narration seldom attempted to guide the spectator actively. The rare early cutins or camera movements which occurred stand out in this context as moments of more self-conscious narration aimed at shaping the onlooker's perception. (Later, when such moments became part of the norm, they would call considerably less attention to the process of narration, with continuity principles foregrounding narrative flow and making cutting unobtrusive.) In short, classical narration tailored every detail to the spectator's attention; the primitive cinema's narration had done this only sporadically.

In the shift away from primitive cinema, filmmakers found ways to control the disruptive spatio-temporal effects of multiple shots and locales; they accomplished this by constructing a totalized model, making a unified narrative the top priority, and using guidelines within the model to control the spatial and temporal problems created by the film medium. With such a unified structure as the grounding for the entire film, cutting, ellipses, repetitions of events, could all come to serve a clear function. Such a film would not be difficult for a spectator to grasp.

Directly or indirectly, the cinema found models of unified narrative in other arts—the unities of drama, the single strong impression created by the classical short story, and the well-made play. But because the film medium had its own demands as well, not one influence came through unchanged, and classical film narrative was more than the sum total of the devices it borrowed.

Novel, short story, drama

The conditions for influence

As films grew longer, the status of the individual film on a program changed. Initially, eight or so short films might fill a twenty-minute slot in a vaudeville program of several hours. The overall emphasis was on variety, and the disparate films formed an act. As a consequence, no individual film was expected to stand

by itself. But with the advent of the nickelodeon and the standardized 1,000-foot reel, a program would typically consist of only three or four films; each occupied a distinct place within the complete show, separated by song-slide presentations and possibly other live acts. Internal coherence became a more central issue. And when the feature film came to occupy virtually an entire evening's program (with overture and other entertainment often tailored to the film), it had to carry the burden of sustaining audience interest. Expanded length and the change in viewing circumstances undoubtedly played a large part in turning filmmakers away from a vaudeville model of narrative toward fiction and the drama.

In the early years, films had competed only with other vaudeville acts for a place on a program in an art form that had an established audience. But with the phenomenal growth of the film industry, its product began to vie with other entertainment commodities for customers. By the first half of the teens, films were competing with inexpensive popular fiction—short-story magazines and novels, *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's,* for instance, offered 'one or two nights' enjoyment of the best serials and short stories for five cents.'[18] To lure those readers in at a similar price for a shorter period, film producers felt they had to raise the quality of their offerings. Thus, for the short film at least, the popular short story offered an existing model to be emulated.

The feature film, on the other hand, offered a more expensive, often lengthier evening's entertainment, one directly comparable to that offered by a play, and entrepreneurs showed early features in legitimate theaters with prices based upon live-drama admissions. The situation in the theater industry of the early teens gave film a competitive advantage and probably fostered the industry's move into features during that period. That advantage derived from the organization of the theatrical business around the turn of the century.

The legitimate theater in the early years of this century operated as a cluster of touring troupes, controlled by a small number of entrepreneurs centralized in New York. This centralized touring system had replaced the country's earlier theatrical organization, the individual local professional repertory company, around 1870. Theater historian Jack Poggi sums up the changes in the theater industry:[19]

> What happened to the American theater after 1870 was not very different from what happened to many other industries. First, a centralized production system replaced many local, isolated units. Second, there was a division of labor, as theater managing became separate from play producing. Third, there was a standardization of product, as each play was represented by only one company or by a number of duplicate companies. Fourth, there was a growth of control by big business.

The characteristics which Poggi lists have obvious parallels to the development of the film industry as described in Part Two. Film was able to compete successfully with legitimate drama because it provided a more efficient, more centralized system for staging a performance only once, recording it, and reproducing it for the mass audience with minimal transportation costs.[20*] Because of its success in competing with the drama, the film industry was able to standardize the multiple-reel feature, which in turn encouraged the move to a classical continuity system. But again, in order to compete with the drama for its audience, filmmakers realized the necessity of raising the quality of their offerings.

To a considerable extent, raising the quality of films to attract consumers of short fiction, novels, and plays required drawing directly or indirectly upon these other arts. Chapter 12 has shown that the film companies did this by adapting plays, stories, and novels. So for sources of subject matter, films turned definitively away from vaudeville skits. Producers also wanted to lure personnel, particularly established stars, away from the theater; adaptations of drama and literature, plus a general elevation of film's status among the arts, helped accomplish this.

But film drew upon these other arts in ways other than the direct appropriation of stories and personnel. The original scenarios used by the companies, whether done by their own staff writers or by freelancers, already felt the indirect impact of existing literary models. The film industry was fortunate in being able to tap a huge marketplace for popular fiction and drama. The writers working in this marketplace were often trained in popularized versions of traditional rules, and they could apply these rules to film scenarios as well.

The large freelance market for novels and short fiction had arisen only a few years before the invention of film. The development of a widespread native fiction had been discouraged by the lack of an international copyright law. Publishers tended to bring out editions of European novels and stories, which they could obtain without payment, rather than to pay American authors to write for them. Before 1891, when an international copyright law took effect, there had been only a very limited output of American short stories.[21] From about 1824 into the 1840s, literary annuals, ladies' magazines, and later gentlemen's magazines, fostered a brief flowering of the tale or sketch; these were generally considered hack work, although at their best such periodicals brought out the works of Hawthorne, Irving, and Poe. The 1850s were a fallow period for short fiction, but the tremendous commercial successes in America of Dickens's novels and of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) marked the rise of the popular novel in America. With the founding during the 1860s of *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Nation,* short fiction became increasingly respectable, and by the mid-1880s, the writing of short stories was becoming lucrative. The number of writers increased steadily.[22]

After the new international copyright law of 1891, popular fiction underwent a huge growth. Brander Matthews, a leading critic of the period, commented in 1898: 'This is perhaps the most striking fact in the history of the literature of the nineteenth century—this immense vogue of the novel and of the short story. Fiction fills our monthly magazines, and it is piled high on the counters of our bookstores.'[23] Novels were relatively easy to sell but took more time to write. Also, short stories were so popular at the time that a payment for a single story often was as great as the total royalties on a novel. For the vast number of part-time or casual writers, the short story proved attractive. By the late 1890s, there were so many weekly magazines and newspaper supplements that the writing of short stories could be considered an industry. And by 1900, syndicates existed to write, buy, and sell stories.[24]

There were also freelance playwrights, although this market was much smaller. A writer could not sell a play nearly so easily as a piece of fiction; the financial rewards, however, were potentially greater:[25]

> Although there is far more pecuniary profit to the author from a successful play than from the average successful novel, and although in some countries, notably in France, the authorship of a play brings more instant personal recognition, playwriting demands a long and arduous period of apprenticeship. Even after years of familiarity with technical stagecraft, it is far more difficult to get a manuscript play accepted than it is to secure publication for a manuscript novel. Most authors choose, or are forced to follow, the easier path.

Authors could mail plays directly to managers or to stars, but many worked through agents. Chances of a sale were relatively slim. One 1915 playwriting manual described how an author could expect to wait while his or her manuscript languished for months on a manager's shelf.[26] Once a playwright succeeded in getting one play produced, however, she or he usually would be considered a professional, receiving reasonably high, regular royalties. There was also a small market for freelance writers of vaudeville playlets.[27] Again, the procedure involved royalties rather than outright sales.

The film industry entered the literary market in part by hiring established writers and in part by inviting submissions of synopses and scenarios. Staff writers and scenario editors came to the studios from a variety of backgrounds, but the most common previous occupations were journalism and popular-fiction writing. Journalists were presumably well-suited to the task because they had professional experience in writing and editing synoptic narratives. A trade journal noted in 1916: 'The best school for the would-be photoplay writer is the newspaper office. Many who were formerly newspaper men are now successful as writers for the silent drama. They know life, a good story, and the value of a gripping situation.'[28] Edward Azlant's examination of screenwriting before 1920 discusses several dozen prominent scenarists at the studios.[29] The largest number of this group came from journalism, followed by magazine-fiction writing, novel writing, and playwriting. These divisions are not hard and fast, however. Many writers worked in several or all of these fields. Given the huge, lucrative freelance story market, few writers of any type failed to submit something to the magazines. Reporters, copy readers, and editors working for magazines and newspapers wrote short stories. (Stephen Crane, Edna Ferber, Willa Gather, James Cabell, Irwin Cobb, and Sinclair Lewis were among those who got their starts this way.)[30] Writers who worked at the studios or sent in their freelance efforts would usually have some experience with the popular fiction forms of the period.

Historians have dealt extensively with the impact of the drama and the novel on film form and style.[31] The concomitant influence of the short story, however, has been largely overlooked. An examination of the close relations between the freelance short story and scenario markets will demonstrate some of the conditions which encouraged narrative principles from all of these arts to enter the cinema.

In order to make narrative films on a regular, efficient basis, producers began to use the detailed division of labor described in Part Two. Narrative filmmaking necessitated a steady source of stories, a need which eventually resulted in the scenario staff. These workers performed specialized tasks: among other things, they wrote many of the original stories used and read the freelance synopses or scenario-scripts submitted to the studio. Chapter 12 has suggested that the heyday of the amateur scenarist was actually brief (from about 1907 to 1914), but these were important years in the transition from primitive to classical filmmaking. Vast changes took place in ideas about how a narrative film should be constructed. The backgrounds of both studio and freelance writers, as well as the normative advice they received, helped shape those ideas.

By 1910, the methods of obtaining stories for filmmaking purposes resembled those of the popular fiction magazines, which, as we have seen, had become popular in the 1890s. The prominent *Black Cat* magazine, for instance, started a trend toward using contests to encourage submissions of short stories. Motion-picture companies followed this strategy, and there were scenario contests conducted through the trade journals in the early teens.

Whether encouraged by prizes or by flat-fee purchases, amateur and professional freelance writers flooded the studios with scenarios. Usual estimates in the trade journals and scenario guides suggest that only about one in a hundred scripts was actually accepted, and scenario editors frequently complained about the poor quality of the material they had to plow through. Very quickly, the studios' dependence on such submissions declined. By 1912, copyright problems and the expanding production of multiple-reel films made unsolicited stories less attractive; contract writers in scenario departments proved a more reliable, efficient source, and the most promising freelancers could be hired. Amateur scenarios were used almost exclusively for one- or two-reel films, the production of which declined as the feature became the standard basis for production in the mid-teens.

Little direct evidence indicates what proportion of the freelance material came from writers who had also tried their hand at short stories. Few films of this period credited their scenarists. But some indirect evidence suggests the importance of popular short fiction as a model for film narrative. For one thing, some of the books on how to write scenarios of the period came from authors who also provided advice on short-story

writing.[32] In addition, a few major scenarists of the time have recalled their beginnings as short-story freelancers. Frances Marion wrote fiction until requests for the screen rights to her stories led her to try doing scenarios; she eventually became a staff writer for several West Coast companies. Clifford Howard, who later became scenario editor for the Balboa and the American companies, wrote of having turned his outlines for short-story plots into scenarios when he heard how easy they were to sell. Others who had written short stories (usually in addition to work in other prose or dramatic forms) include: Roy L.McCardell, Lloyd Lonergan, Emmett Campbell Hall, Epes Winthrop Sargent, James Oliver Curwood, Eustace Hale Ball, Mary H.O'Connor, Beulah Marie Dix, and Clare Beranger.[33] There were undoubtedly others, but most freelancers remained anonymous, and their backgrounds are now untraceable. At least some scenarists, however, had learned their craft from magazine freelancing, rather than from the stage.

Most explicitly, trade journals recognized a parallel between the scenario and popular short-story markets. These comparisons tend to come a little later in the period, during the middle and late teens, but they indicate an awareness that writers were often working for both markets. By about 1915 the industry began to realize that it was competing with the popular fiction magazines for good stories. *Motography* noted in early 1915: 'An able and recognized short story writer can command from five to ten cents a word for his manuscript. To such a writer an average short story of three thousand words brings a check for one hundred to three hundred dollars.' The article contrasted this with the average payment for a scenario, which ranged well below $100, and pointed out that 'at present the short story writer is only tempted to submit something made over from an oft-rejected story manuscript.' The author concluded: 'The film producers can afford to pay better prices than the magazines. Encourage the writer to try his ideas in scenario form first; he can make over his rejected scenarios into magazine articles as easily as he can do the opposite.'[34] A *Motion Picture News* editorial pointed out that fiction magazines attracted a large middle-class audience and educated it to appreciate good stories:[35]

> They are sharp critics, these readers. They want pictures up to their established fiction standards.
>
> It is regrettable, but it is a fact, that up to a few years ago, the large percentage of pictures released were of the same ordinary adventurous, or sentimental or funny character of the fiction in our popular publications of *thirty years* ago.
>
> What is to be done then to get good stories?
>
> Simply this: Pay the price….
>
> Go directly to the best magazine writers and get their work by *paying at least what the magazine will pay*.

Throughout 1915 and into 1916, similar articles in the trade press called for the producers to raise their fees for scenarios, to attract something beyond the leavings of the fiction magazines.[36]

The possibility for influence from the short story, then, came in part from the contact with writers who sold stories in both the magazine and film markets. In addition, many of the writers who were employed as permanent staff members came from a similar background. Along with the novel and the drama, the short story provided classical models upon which the early film could draw.

Narrative principles

The length of a text has a great deal to do with how critics and writers perceive that a specific literary mode —a novel, a short story, a play— should be treated. The modern short story in a sense gained a distinct identity when Poe pointed out that its basic difference from the novel was that the short story could be read

at a single sitting, and thus should convey a unified impression quite different from the principles of unity governing the longer form. Ever since, theorists have repeated the idea that the short story is not simply a story which is short.

In the same sense, the feature film was not simply an expanded one-reeler. The lengthier films —initially 1,000 feet, then two or three reels, then five—demanded new structural principles. In the other arts, full-blown sets of classical dicta on formal matters already existed. By drawing upon drama and literature for stories, the film industry also drew upon these dicta.

The short story, novel, and drama all had something to offer film. Like the short story and the drama, films (excepting serials) were consumed in a single stretch of time; hence filmmakers could use ideas of unity of impression, of a continuity of action rising to climax and falling, and so on. Yet films tended to move about in space more than most dramas or short stories; they dealt with more characters and lines of action in many cases, compressing a great deal of material into the brief span of two hours or less. Ideas of how to organize this material were available from theories of novel construction.

Cinema emerged in the middle of a reformulation of classical notions of unity in the literary arts. The very definition of the short story as Poe originated it (and as it has continued to the present day) was based upon unity. In the nineteenth century, the novel began to be considered a set of carefully interwoven lines of action. The drama, having passed through an emphasis on perfect structure in the nineteenth century, was now adjusting this notion to accommodate the character psychology of new 'realistic' trends.

These issues might well have remained concepts only for scholarly discussion, had it not been for the sudden rise in the 1880s and especially the 1890s of the huge literary market. With so many authors or potential authors trying to sell their works, there began a dissemination of simple guidelines for literary creation. We have seen already how in film, the freelance market of the teens gave rise to dozens of writing manuals. The same was true in other literary arts. The biggest boom in manual-publishing was for the short story, for here the market was largest. According to one literary historian, lesser critics seized upon the most important discussions of short fiction and quickly made them into a set of rules for the novice writer: 'These laws they proceeded to codify and promulgate. The first decade of the new century was the era of the short-story handbook.' The first appeared in 1898, and many others followed.[37] A number of other guides covered fiction in general, and a few concentrated on the novel; there were also manuals of playwriting. Such works reveal the popularization of classical aesthetic principles, many of which coincide with the traits of the developing classical paradigm in film.

The handbooks' discussions of drama and fiction invariably assume that 'Of course the prime structural necessity in narrative, as indeed in every method of discourse, is unity.'[38] Unity was most stringently demanded in the short story. The short story gained its modern definition in 1842, in Poe's famous review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales;* in a passage universally quoted by aestheticians and manual-writers alike, Poe declared that the good short story, being designed to be read at one sitting, should be characterized by 'the unity of effect or impression.'[39] Although Poe's discussion had little impact in America at the time, it was revived in 1885 by Brander Matthews, a Columbia drama professor, whose writings on literature contributed greatly to popularizing Aristotelian canons of classical structure.[40] Thereafter writers, whether scholarly or popular, referred to the Poe/Matthews view as the ideal.

In order to achieve a unified short story, the general assumption went, the writer arranged every element of plot and character around the single strong impression which the story should create on its reader: 'The plot should revolve around a single, central, dominant incident, which in many cases will be the nucleus (in the mind of the author) from which the story originally developed.'[41] In 1904, another major critic, Clayton Hamilton, refined the Poe/ Matthews formula: 'The aim of a short-story is to produce a single narrative effect with the greatest economy of means that is consistent with the utmost emphasis.'[42] Everything in the

narrative must function to build up toward the climax, which comes close to the end and creates the strong effect. This idea fed directly into the film scenario manuals; compare the following instructions, one from the Home Correspondence School's 1913 manual on short stories, the other from Phillips's scenario guide (1914):[43]

> Steps: (1) Determine at the outstart [sic] what tone you wish to strike, what effect you wish to produce. (2) Do not put into your story a single word, or action, or bit of description, or character, or *anything* that does not in some direct or indirect way help to produce the effect you desire. (3) Do not omit anything that may help to bring about the same result.
>
> The climax resolves itself into a definite purpose to guide the playwright; for he writes every scene with a view to its influence on the climax; if it has no influence on the climax, that is sufficient evidence that it is not necessary for his play purposes.

Virtually any manual on story writing offered a variant of this same advice. This was particularly applicable to the one- or two-reel films, and, as we shall see in the next chapter, short films tended to follow the short story's pattern of a steadily rising action leading to a climax late in the plot.

The short story was supposed to be unified in the extreme. Critics and theorists realized that the length of the novel tended to preclude its having such rigorous coherence; yet they still assumed that this trait was applicable and desirable in the longer form. 'Unlike the short-story, the novel aims to produce a series of effects—a cumulative combination of the elements of narrative—and acknowledges no restriction to economy of means.'[44] This does not mean, however, that the novel should be episodic, for unity implied threads running through the whole that connected every part. Although the novelist might use more characters, more incidents, and more lines of action than the story-writer, all these still had to bear upon the entire plot. The novel should not fall into distinct episodes with separate climaxes, but should rise and fall with an overall ascent toward a final major climax. Again, no extraneous material was permitted, such as the stories interpolated into episodic novels (e.g., *Don Quixote, Humphrey Clinker, Pickwick Papers*).

These ideas about the novel were never as simply and distinctly codified as were the 'rules' for the short story, and hence their influence on film was perhaps less direct. But as scenarists adapted lengthy novels into feature films, they undoubtedly learned ways of sustaining multiple lines of action throughout an extended story. And indeed the episodic feature-length film is rare, outside the particular mode of the continuing serial. Films which deal with many characters and which cover lengthy time spans still manage to keep a core of causal lines which bind the elements together.

In the field of drama, practitioners and critics alike were still strongly under the influence of the 'well-made play' of the nineteenth century. The major French plays by Scribe, Sardou, Dumas *fils,* and others had been translated and were frequently performed in the United States around the turn of the century.[45] Dumas *fils* and especially the leading German proponent of the well-made play, Gustav Freytag, were to the drama of this period what Poe was to the short story; Freytag's *Technik des Dramas* was translated in 1894, but was quoted frequently before that by drama critics and theorists. Many of the most popular English-language playwrights of the day—Pinero, Shaw, Wilde—had been influenced by the well-made play, as had Ibsen. In the 1890s, books on dramatic structure typically reiterated Freytag's rigid, pyramidal schema (rising action, climax, falling action, catastrophe), which would guarantee a perfectly unified play.[46] This schema would produce a symmetrical play with the traditional five acts forming mirror-image parallels across the whole; *Othello* and *Macbeth* were considered excellent examples.

Critics of this period did not agree with the traditional French interpretation of the three 'Aristotelian' unities; the unities of time and space, in which the play's story was supposed to take place within twenty-four hours and in one locale, were dismissed. Instead, these writers focused on the unity of action:[47]

> This has been variously interpreted, but the most sensible view is, that all the incidents of the story must be made to cluster about a single central animating idea. One purpose must be seen to run throughout the whole series of incidents. If there are two series of incidents, they must be so woven together that, at the end of the story, it will be evident that one could not have taken place without the other. This constitutes the *unity of action*.

This passage suggests that unity in the drama was conceived in terms somewhat similar to Poe's 'unity of impression' for the short story. But here 'a single central animating *idea*' is the basis for the whole; as we shall see shortly, this 'central idea' became codified as the 'theme.'

After the turn of the century, the rigid structure derived from Freytag was dropped by critics, and there was a general reaction against the well-made play (and perhaps a tendency to underplay its continuing influence). The well-made play was derided as shallow, with empty structure overriding considerations of character psychology, realism, or social comment. One prominent expert on playwriting, William Archer, refused to use the standard term *dénouement* ('untying'): 'The play of intrigue being no longer the dominant dramatic form, the image of disentangling has lost some of its special fitness.' Archer also poked fun at Sardou for his overly complex exposition and situations.[48] Archer and his contemporaries abandoned the placement of the climax at the center of a play with a long falling action, or denouement, leading to a 'catastrophe.' Instead, for them the climax should come near the end, with all action rising generally in stages toward this moment—a model much closer to the literary structure assumed for the short story and novel of the period. Critics jettisoned the 'catastrophe' altogether. A 1915 playwriting manual gives the typical listing of parts of a play: exposition, development and complication of the intrigue rising toward the climax, the climax itself, and ending.[49] Critics of this period go directly back to Aristotle's requirement that every play's action must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.[50]

Like the unified novel, the play should not be episodic. Archer commented on the play without unity: 'No part of it is necessarily involved in any other part. If the play were found too long or too short, an act might be cut or written in without necessitating any considerable readjustments in the other acts. The play is really a series of episodes.'[51] Here, as with the other literary forms, unity implies that all elements are necessary, and no necessary ones are missing; all the elements pertain to the main line(s) of action, rather than to separate incidents. Poe's 'unity of impression' is not, however, the basis for the play's coherence. Instead, critics considered the core of a play to be its 'theme': 'It appears reasonable that a play that is actually developed from a definite theme is most likely to possess both the unity and the simplicity, to say nothing of the freshness, which good drama requires.'[52] But this thematic center served the same unifying function as the single impression in short fiction. Everything in the play related to it, and hence could not be superfluous.

Theories of playwriting stressed one additional aspect of unity which was relevant to the cinema: thorough motivation and a resulting continuity of action. Plays, like films, occur in a steady temporal progression. The reader of a short story or novel can go back or can pause to ponder causes and effects, but the audience in a theater must understand the drama as it proceeds. Hence the importance of motivation. Archer quotes Dumas *fils:* '"The art of the theatre is the art of preparations,"' and advises dramatists to[53]

Place the requisite finger-posts on the road he would have us follow.… It is in nowise to the author's interest that we should say, 'Ah, if we had only known this, or foreseen that, in time, the effect of such-and-such a scene would have been entirely different!' We have no use for finger-posts that point backwards.

This passage invites comparison with the classical cinema's tendency to direct audience attention forward by frequent 'priming' of future events in the plot.

The careful preparation for events throughout the plot would help eliminate coincidence. Coincidence had been a staple of melodrama and the popular nineteenth-century theater in general; but with the growing emphasis on realism around the turn of the century, coincidence became passé. A 1915 playwriting manual stated:[54]

Time was when important coincidence was accepted in the theatre as a matter of course, or even of preference. To-day, however, it has been for the most part consigned to that limbo of antiquated devices and conventions which, for the present at least, has swallowed up the soliloquy, the 'apart,' and the 'aside,' along with eavesdropping behind portieres and letters fortuitously left lying about.

The elimination wherever possible of 'important coincidences'—especially coincidences to resolve plots— was desirable in the classical cinema as well.

Chapter 6 examined the scene-by-scene structure of the classical film, as causes are left dangling and picked up in alternation; this effect guarantees that the action never slackens between scenes. This, too, was noted as a desirable trait in drama; in 1912 Archer discussed how to maintain interest from act to act:[55]

The problem is, not to cut short the spectator's interest, or to leave it fluttering at a loose end, but to provide it either with a clearly-foreseen point in the next act towards which it can reach onwards, or with a definite enigma, the solution of which is impatiently awaited. In general terms, a bridge should be provided between one act and another, along which the spectator's mind cannot but travel with eager anticipation.

The 'clearly foreseen point' or the 'definite enigma' are comparable to the dangling cause; by setting these in place at the ends of acts, the playwright avoided the episodic structure inimical to a unified whole.

Although conceptions of unity differed somewhat for the short story, novel, and drama, they boiled down to a similar notion. The artwork was to be organized around a single central factor— an intended impression, a theme. No unrelated elements were admissible, and the elements that were present should be motivated. Such ideas were common currency by the time that studios began hiring professional writers from other fields, buying the rights to literary works, and soliciting freelance scenarios from the public.

The same was true of the classical cinema's concept of character; it derived in part from a growing interest in the other arts during the same period in character psychology. Influenced by European Positivism in the second half of the nineteenth century, and especially by studies of human behavior, writers were increasingly interested in portraying realistic characters and their environments. Few were willing to go to the extremes of Zola's theory and approach their characters with a strictly scientific attitude, but critics and theorists were certainly aware of the French naturalist's work. In popularized form, they were willing to apply it. A concentration on character psychology could provide the motivational material necessary to a unified work. The two main issues concerning character revolved around character *development* and *psychology*.

In the short story, both were considered necessarily limited. The short story dealt with fewer characters than the novel or drama. To gain the maximum effect, one or two central characters were held to be ideal.[56] Since the story-writer had a limited time to create characters, they must be immediately striking and colorful, developing swiftly if at all, and 'that development must be hastened by striking circumstances.'[57] Such strictures could be of use to the film, particularly the one- or two-reeler, and even a feature film had far less time than a novel to develop character. In the classical cinema, our first impressions tend to be lasting ones, and the characters seldom have a complex set of traits.

In the novel, on the other hand, character development was considered paramount; it, rather than theme or impression, was often the major source of unity. Over the course of hundreds of pages, the author could slowly acquaint the reader with a whole set of central figures and could change their traits in a leisurely fashion. Character became the wellspring of the action, rather than an agent reacting to a series of incidents. Zola's naturalistic theory can be detected in Brander Matthews's 1898 summary:[58]

> The best fiction of the nineteenth century is far less artificial and less arbitrary than the best fiction of the eighteenth century. Serious novelists now seek for the interest of their narratives not in the accidents that befall the hero, nor in the external perils from which he chances to escape, but rather in the man himself, in his character with its balance of good and evil, in his struggle against his conscience, in his reaction against his heredity and his environment.

The novels of George Eliot, and in particular *Middlemarch* (1872), were considered exemplars of the complex portrayal of developing characters.

Given an average feature length of five reels, the early classical film could hardly hope to create characters as complex as those of the Victorian novel. At most, an epic film could bring together large numbers of characters and events and suggest character development: Ben Cameron's change in *The Birth of a Nation* from a simple Southern gentleman to an avenging leader as a result of the war; Trina's gradual deterioration under the effects of her desire for money in *Greed*. On the whole, however, the quick, relatively simple characterizations of the classical film resemble more closely those of the period's drama.

The drama provided less time for character development than most novels would, and simplicity was necessary: 'Our people should be sufficiently rounded to appear human. Yet if they be developed with anything like the completeness of a George Eliot treatment, no time will be left for the fable. Therefore the need of economy. Character must be shown in swift and telling strokes.' A 'roundness' in the characters implied some complexity; characters with single traits were appropriate only to the broadest comedy or melodrama.[59] In general, then, the characters of a play frequently resembled those in a short story: established quickly with a few clear traits, changing minimally in the course of the action.

Dramatists and critics realized by the 1890s, however, that by covering only a brief span of time in a plot, the playwright could concentrate on character more closely and at the same time could promote unity: 'The greater emphasis…on the inner rather than the outer aspect of the dramatic situation may have something to do with the simplification of setting and compactness of treatment that marks the work of at least some groups of modern dramatists [e.g., Sudermann, Hauptmann, Ibsen].'[60] Ibsen was perhaps the most extreme instance of a severe compression of time-span and locale for the sake of character revelation; to some critics, especially Archer, he was the ideal to which the playwright should aspire. (Here we find perhaps a greater lingering influence of the well-made play, modified by contemporary conceptions of realism, than some critics at the time would acknowledge.)

But again, the narrational means of the film did not encourage an imitation of such complex characterization methods as Ibsen's. Without spoken dialogue, detailed character revelation was difficult. Instead, the film stuck to simpler classical features of dramatic characterization:[61]

1 The characters must be suited to the story— the story to the characters.
2 The characters must be clearly distinguished from one another.
3 The characters must be self-consistent.
4 The characters must be so selected and arranged that each one may serve as a foil to another.

(The last dictum reflects the strong influence of Brunetière, whose views were universally quoted in the turn-of-the-century period. He had proclaimed that all dramatic conflict should result from a clash of wills.) All four of these statements could be used unchanged to describe characterization in the classical cinema. They indicate a complete balance between action and psychological delineation, with neither taking precedence.

Besides unity and characterization, several other elements familiar in popular contemporary fiction and drama reappear in the classical cinema's paradigm. In both fiction and the drama toward the end of the nineteenth century, an unobtrusive narration was increasingly considered desirable. Critics insisted upon a distinction between direct and indirect character presentation, preferring the latter:[62]

The modern writer no longer makes pages of statements about his characters, but he much more cleverly leads his reader to form his own opinions of them.

Characters in fiction may be made to reveal themselves in this more forcible and convincing, but less direct fashion, by telling what they say and what they do, by disclosing their thoughts and describing their acts and gestures.

What held for characterization was also true of other stylistic aspects of fiction: 'In the art of the story-teller, as in any other art, the less the mere form is flaunted in the eyes of the beholder the better.'[63] In the drama as well, stage effects would seem like mere tricks if not 'intimately related to the main theme of the play'; they should not 'distract attention to themselves.'[64] Unobtrusive technique tending toward the suppression of the narration began to be a trait of the early classical cinema; as we shall see, this principle guided changes in inter-titles, editing, and other devices.

In addition, beginning *in medias res* was a trait of both plays and short stories. The novel, with its more expansive period for development, could use this device or not. But for those arts consumed in Poe's 'single sitting'—the story, drama, and film —the quick opening allowed economy of means and created an immediate strong impression. A 1913 story manual suggests that Poe's tactic of beginning in the middle of the action's crisis was a strong one: 'In whatever part of the plot the story opens, the first and chief commandment for the short-story writer of today is to waste no time in beginning.'[65] In a play, the opening in the middle of events might provide a way of concentrating intensely on a complex psychological situation: 'The method of attacking the crisis in the middle or towards the end is really a device for relaxing, in some measure, the narrow bounds of theatrical representation, and enabling the playwright to deal with a larger segment of human experience.'[66] A film, too, by launching in at a point well into the story events, could engage the spectator's attention quickly, with the attendant benefits of concentrating and developing a few characters and events extensively.

In sum, models for structuring a film came, not from drama and fiction in general, but specifically from late nineteenth-century norms of those forms —norms which lingered on in popular stories, plays, and

novels of this century. The cinema tended to avoid the more innovative, contemporary forms of drama and fiction. Strindberg, Ibsen, and Shaw, or Hardy, Conrad, and James figure very little in the formation of the classical cinema, either as narrative models or as direct sources for scenarios.

But while the film took principles of unity, of characterization, and of narration from the other literary arts, these principles were modified in actual usage by specific qualities of the medium. The film's classicism, while traditional, was unique.

For example, where prose fiction could provide a written narration to reveal internal states of the characters, the Hollywood film showed mostly gestures and facial expressions. Inter-titles might briefly characterize the figures, but the bulk of the action occurred in pantomime. As a result, the film created an objective, omniscient narration, moving occasionally toward the points-of-view of the characters; this type of narration is equivalent only to that portion of short-story narration which confines itself to descriptions of appearances.

Again, the expansion into features stimulated the creation of more leisurely scenes that linger over character traits. Some early features simply expanded the structure of the short film by adding more story material. *The Scarlet Road* (1916, Edison), for example, covers many years of an inventor's life as he strays with a nightclub singer, reforms, and finally makes good. Yet the individual scenes are nearly as brief and condensed as if the film were a one-reeler; the characters are still the stock figures of melodrama. (The protagonist's fiancée is characterized at the beginning with a brief scene of her hugging some tame rabbits, and we learn nothing more about her; we see her at intervals waiting patiently for her lover to return.) But some films display what Chapter 2 calls a 'balance between the fixed types of the melodrama and the dense complexity of the realist novel.' *The Wishing Ring* (Maurice Tourneur, 1914, World) and *The Eagle's Mate* (James Kirkwood, 1914, Famous Players) both linger over their characterizations. The first sequence of *The Wishing Ring* shows the comic details of the hero's drunken carousing with his fellow students—the neighbors waking up, the heroine appalled at the group's bad singing, a donkey braying along with the song, and finally the arrival of the local constabulary. A one-reeler would be likely to show the carousing in one shot, followed by a scene at the father's home as he receives the letter expelling the son from school. *The Wishing Ring* even finds time for tiny subplots among the villagers, helping to establish the quaint Victorian atmosphere that realistically motivates the central story line. These are no doubt rare among mid-teens films, but by 1917, many features were using stories with fewer, longer scenes and with fewer lengthy gaps of time between scenes.

Aspects of the mode of production helped mediate the effects the literary arts had upon unity and characterization in film plotting. The scenario script, and later the continuity script, with their accompanying scene plot, encouraged the use of multiple locations; the filmmaker could make several shots in one setting, then cut these in at intervals in the final film, at reasonable shooting costs. Hence throughout the teens, films contained increasing numbers of shots and moved about freely among locations. Since individual shots provided minimal chance for the various kinds of narration available to the fiction writer, one assumes that the filmmaker would want to provide variety by cutting away from the static take. Analytical editing and crosscutting could create an omnipresent narration, constantly guiding the spectator's attention to story events. In keeping with their compression of long time spans into a brief plot, one- and two-reelers tended to move around more in space than a unified short story might. Increasingly, a combination of circumstances—feature-length films, the star system, the ability of the script format to allow this stylistic complexity— encouraged more cutting within and between scenes. This in turn gave rise to the continuity editing system, explicitly formulated in the period 1909–17; we shall examine this system in Chapter 16.

With the rise of the feature, producers turned increasingly to staff writers experienced in adapting all sorts of material into film scripts. The scripts they turned out followed a standardized narrative form specific to cinema. One would be hard put to look at *The Eagle's Mate* (Kirkwood, 1914, Famous Players) next to *The Girl of the Golden West* (Cecil B.DeMille, 1915, Lasky) and tell from internal evidence which came from a novel and which from a play. The script format in itself would not guarantee such similarity, of course; it basically broke the existing work into shots. But the adaptation process would help iron out the differences in narratives taken from disparate sources in the other arts. Working from a synopsis rather than from the original play or book would tend to rearrange events and isolate them from their dramatic or fictional forms, while the devices of cutting and framing would create a specifically filmic mode of narration.

Ultimately, the film medium used the influence from the literary arts for its own purposes. In spite of a growing dependence on dialogue inter-titles, films presented most of the action visually. This meant not only pantomime, but the transmission of information through objects, figure placement, lighting, and camera techniques. The classical system increasingly relied on editing, so that, by 1917, films often used separate shots for virtually every item of narrative information. This rapid juxtaposition of views differed significantly from either fiction or the drama; the film's narration could constantly shift in relation to the action, as in the novel, but the action could be visual, as in the drama. The resulting omniscient, omnipresent narration differed from all other art forms, for none could assemble disparate moving images. And as a result, the material that needed unifying was different for film than it was for other media. Based originally upon nineteenth-century conceptions of unity, the classical system remained consistent— answering on the one hand the need for efficient large-scale production and on the other the desire for a set of norms easily assimilable to a broad audience.