

This extract from Cook's Cinema Book summarises some of the major characteristics of what she calls the Classical Narrative System. By this is meant the dominant model of filmic narrative exemplified by most Hollywood films, most other films and some television fiction, where the key aesthetic principles are of narrative continuity and transparency.

Extract from R. Cook, The Cinema Book (New York, Pantheon, 1985).

### The classic narrative system

By the early to middle 1930s, the modes of representation now held to be characteristic of 'classic' narrative cinema were more or less consolidated and had already attained a large degree of dominance, certainly in Hollywood, but also in varying degrees in film industries elsewhere. By this time, of course, sound cinema was also established. The era of classic cinema may be regarded as a period in which the cinematic image remained largely subservient to the requirements of a specific type of narrative structure. This structure is that of the classic, sometimes also called the 'realist', narrative which calls forth certain modes of narration which are then put into effect by a limited set of cinematic codes (→NARRATIVE AND STRUCTURALISM: *The classic realist text*, p. 242).

#### The classic narrative structure

In the classic narrative, events in the story are organised around a basic structure of enigma and resolution. At the beginning of the story, an event may take place which disrupts a pre-existing equilibrium in the fictional world. It is then the task of the narrative to resolve that disruption and set up a new equilibrium (see Barthes, 1977). The classic narrative may thus be regarded as a process whereby problems are solved so that order may be restored to the world of the fiction. But the process of the narrative - everything that takes place between the initial disruption and the final resolution - is also subject to a certain ordering. Events in the story are typically organised in a relationship of cause and effect, so that there is a logic whereby each event of the narrative is linked with the next. The classic narrative proceeds step-by-step in a more-or-less linear fashion, towards an apparently inevitable resolution. The 'realist' aspects of the classic narrative are overlaid on this basic enigma-resolution structure, and typically operates on two levels: firstly, through the verisimilitude of the fictional world set up by the narrative and secondly through the inscription of human agency within the process of the narrative.

The world of the classic narrative is governed by verisimilitude, then, rather than by documentary-style realism (←AUTHORSHIP: *Documentary*, p. 190). The narration ensures that a fictional world, understandable and believable to the recipient of the story, is set up. Verisimilitude may be a feature of the representation of either, or preferably both, the spatial location of events in the narrative and the temporal order in which they occur. Temporal and spatial coherence are in fact preconditions of the cause-effect logic of events in the classic narrative (see Burch, 1973). In classic narrative, moreover, events are propelled forward through the agency of fictional individuals or characters. Although this is true also of other types of narrative, the specificity of the classic narrative lies in the nature of the human agency it inscribes, and also in the function of such agency within the narrative as a whole. The central agents of classic narrative are typically represented as fully-rounded individuals with certain traits of personality, motivations, desires and so on. The chain of events constituting the story is then governed by the motivations and actions of these characters. An important defining feature of the classic narrative is its constitution of a central character as a 'hero', through whose actions narrative resolution is finally brought about. These actions are rendered credible largely in terms of the kind of person the hero is represented to be (→NARRATIVE AND STRUCTURALISM: *Propp*, p. 234).

Finally, classic narrative may be defined by the high degree of closure which typically marks its resolution. The ideal classic narrative is a story with a beginning, a middle and an end (in that order), in which every one of the questions raised in the course of the story is answered by the time the narration is complete (see Barthes, 1975).

#### Classic codes of narrative cinema

Narratives may be communicated through various modes of expression, that is, stories can be told through a variety of media. The classic narrative is perhaps

most often considered in its literary form, as a certain type of novel. However, stories may also be transmitted by word of mouth, in live theatre, on the radio, and in comic strips. Film is simply one narrative medium among many but the distinguishing features of film are its mode of production and consumption, and the specifically cinematic codes by which film narratives are constructed. Cinematic codes constitute a distinct set of expressive resources which can be drawn on for, among other things, telling stories (→NARRATIVE AND STRUCTURALISM: *Metz*, p. 229).

The classic narrative system would appear to make certain basic demands of these resources. Firstly, it demands that cinematic codes function to propel the narrative from its beginning through to its resolution, keeping the story moving along. Secondly, it is important that in the narration of fictional events the causal link between each event be clear. Thirdly, the narration called for would encompass the construction of a location, a credible fictional world, for the events of the story. Finally, it should be capable of constructing the individuated characters pivotal to the classic narrative, and of establishing and sustaining their agency in the narrative process.

Perhaps the foremost of the specifically cinematic codes is that of editing. Although editing is simply the juxtaposition of individual shots, this juxtaposition can take place according to a variety of principles. Editing in classic cinema works in conjunction with the basic demands of the classic narrative structure in highly circumscribed ways. First, the individual shots are ordered according to the temporal sequence of events making up the story. In this way, editing functions both to move the story along and also, through the precise juxtapositions of shots, to constitute the causal logic of narrative events (→*Stagecoach*). The specificity of classic editing lies in its capability to set up a coherent and credible fictional space, and often also to orchestrate quite complex relationships of narrative space and time.

The principles of classical editing have been codified in a set of editing techniques whose objective is to maintain an appearance of 'continuity' of space and time in the finished film; all learning film-makers have to master the rules of continuity editing. Continuity editing establishes spatial and temporal relationships between shots in such a way as to permit the spectator to 'read' a film without any conscious effort, precisely because the editing is 'invisible'. Despite the fact that every new shot constitutes a potential spatial disruption, and each gap of years, months, days and even minutes between narrated events a potential temporal disjuncture, an appearance of continuity in narrative space and time can be set up (→ *Mildred Pierce*). The function of continuity editing is to 'bridge' spatial and temporal ellipses in cinematic narration, through the operation of such conventions as match on action, consistency of screen direction, and the 30° rule (see Burch, 1973). Coherence of fictional space is ensured by adherence to the 180° rule, whereby 'the line' is never crossed in the editing of shots taken from different set-ups in a single location. Since the 180° rule, in particular, depends on the hypothesis that screen direction signified direction in three-dimensional space, the credibility of the fiction is maintained through a form of editing which signifies verisimilitude (see Bordwell and Thompson, 1979).

In the classic narrative system editing is governed by the requirements of verisimilitude, hence the characteristic pattern in any one film sequence of establishing shot, closer shots which direct the gaze of the spectator to elements of the action to be read as significant, followed by further long-shots to re-establish spatial relations (→ *His Girl Friday*). Since the classic narrative sets up fictional characters as primary agents of the story, it is not surprising that characters' bodies, or parts of their bodies, notably faces, figure so frequently in close shots. Close shots of this kind function also in relation to characterisation: per-

sonality traits are represented through costume, gesture, facial expression and speech (→ *Klute*). At the same time, relationships between fictional protagonists are typically narrated through certain configurations of close shots, particularly those where an exchange of looks between characters is implied (→ *Marnie*). Here, editing is organised on the principle of the eyeline match, according to the direction of characters' gaze. The eyeline match also governs point-of-view in the shot/reverse-shot figure, which in fact reached the peak of its exploitation during the 1940s, at the height of the classic era of cinema. This method of organising the looks of protagonists, through a combination of *mise en scène* and editing, is a crucial defining characteristic of classic narrative cinema (see Browne, 1975/76).

The conventions of classical editing constitute a particular mode of address to the spectator. In accepting a certain kind of verisimilitude in the spatial and temporal organisation of the film narrative the spectator becomes witness to a complete world, a world which seems even to exceed the bounds of the film frame. In looking at the faces of characters in close-up, and in identifying with characters in the text through taking on their implied point-of-view, the spectator identifies with the fictional world and its inhabitants, and so is drawn into the narration itself. Consequently, a resolution of the narrative in which all the ends are tied up is in certain ways pleasurable for the spectator.

Although classic narrative cinema moves towards the regulation of cinematic codes according to the requirements of a particular narrative structure, it is arguable that this objective can never be completely attained (see Guzzetti, 1975). Narrative and image in film are never entirely reducible to one another, if only because the demands of the classic narrative could in fact be met by a range of conventions of cinematic narration, of which the classic system is but one. Conventions,

by their nature, are subject to change. Even if the classic narrative retains its dominance as a *structure*, its basic requirements could conceivably be met by *cinematic codes* different from those of classic cinema. And indeed, since the 1950s it appears that a rather wider range of cinematic codes has entered circulation in forms of cinema which still on the whole rely on a classic approach to narrative structure. This trend is exemplified by modes of narration characteristic of films on wide-screen formats (→ *River of No Return*) and by the recent development of a New Hollywood cinema (→ *Klute*).

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