

4.

Cognition and Comprehension

Viewing and Forgetting in Mildred Pierce

By and large, audiences understand the films they see. They can answer questions about a movie's plot, imagine alternative outcomes ("What if the monster hadn't found the couple. . . ?"), and discuss the film with someone else who has seen it. This brute fact of comprehension, Christian Metz asserted in the mid-1960s, could ground semiotic film theory: "The fact that must be understood is that films are understood."¹

As semiotic research expanded in France, Britain, and the United States, the search for explanations of filmic intelligibility took theorists toward comparisons with language, toward methodological analogies with linguistic inquiry, and across several disciplines. At the same time, though, theorists increasingly abandoned the search for principles governing intelligibility. They turned their attention to understanding the sources of cinematic pleasure, chiefly by defining "spectatorship" within theories of ideology and psychoanalysis. The conceptual weaknesses and empirical shortcomings of the latter doctrines have become increasingly evident in recent years.² It seems fair to say that interest in them has waned considerably, and most French partisans of

psychoanalysis have returned to the “classic” structuralist semiotics of the 1960s and early 1970s, or even to traditional film aesthetics.³

The current “cognitivist” trend in film studies has gone back to Metz’s point of departure, asking, What enables films—particularly narrative films—to be understood? But the hypotheses that have been proposed recently differ sharply from those involved in semiotic research. The emerging cognitivist paradigm suggests that it’s unlikely that spectators apply a set of “codes” to a film in order to make sense of it. Rather, spectators participate in a complex process of actively elaborating what the film sets forth. They “go beyond the information given,” in Jerome Bruner’s phrase.⁴ This doesn’t entail that each spectator’s understanding of the film becomes utterly unique, for several patterns of elaboration are shared by many spectators.⁵

For example, you are driving down the highway. You spot a car with a flat tire; a man is just opening up the car’s trunk. Wholly without conscious deliberation, you expect that he is the driver, and that he will draw out a tool or a spare tire or both. How we’re able to grasp such a prosaic action is still largely a mystery, but it seems unlikely that it happens by virtue of a code.

In a strict sense, a code is an arbitrary system of alternatives. It’s governed by rules of succession or substitution, and it’s learned more or less explicitly. The system of traffic lights is a code: Red, green, and amber are correlated with distinct meanings (stop, go, and proceed with caution), and drivers must learn them through a mixture of exposure and tutelage. Yet there’s no code for understanding tire-changing behavior.

Now imagine a film scene showing our man opening up the trunk of his car. When you see the action onscreen, and in the absence of prior information to the contrary (say, an earlier scene showing the driver depositing a corpse in the trunk), you would conjure up the same expectation as in real life: In opening the trunk, he’s looking for a tool or a spare or both. In real life or in a movie, no appeal to a code seems necessary.

This example suggests that the process of understanding many things in films is likely to draw upon ordinary, informal reasoning procedures. Contrary to much film theory of the 1970s and 1980s, we need not ascribe this activity to the Freudian or Lacanian unconscious. Just as you did not learn a code for tire changing, so is there no reason for your expectation to be ascribed to repressed childhood memories purportedly harbored in your unconscious. Presented with a set of circumstances (flat tire, man opening trunk), you categorize it (*driver changing flat tire*) and draw an informal, probabilistic conclusion, based on a structured piece of knowledge about what is normally involved in the activity. You aren’t aware of doing so—it’s a *nonconscious* activity—but there seems no need to invoke the drive-and-defense model of the *unconscious*.

This isn’t to say that only real-world knowledge is relevant to understanding films. Obviously in real life it would be unlikely that a space alien would pop out of the car’s trunk, but if the film is in a certain genre, and a prior scene had shown said alien creeping around the man’s garage, that might be an alternative. Likewise, certain technical choices, such as slow motion or fragmentary editing, require experience of movies in order to be intelligible to viewers. But the point would be that even genre-based or stylistic conventions are learned and applied through processes exercised

in ordinary thinking. No special instruction, parallel to that of learning a code like language or even semaphore, is necessary to pick up the conventions of horror films or slow-motion violence.

Looked at from this perspective, understanding narrative films can be seen as largely a matter of “cognizing.” Going beyond the information given involves categorizing; drawing on prior knowledge; making informal, provisional inferences; and hypothesizing what is likely to happen next. To be a skilled spectator is to know how to execute these tacit but determining acts. The goal, as story comprehension researchers have indicated, is at least partly the extraction of “gist.”⁶ When confronted with a narrative, perceivers seek to grasp the crux or fundamental features of the event. Transforming a scene into gist—the basic action that occurs, and its consequences for the characters and the ensuing action—becomes a basis for more complex inferential elaboration.

This perspective has implications for how we look at the films as well. Rather than searching for a “language” of film, we ought to look for the ways in which films are designed to elicit the sorts of cognizing activities that will lead to comprehension (as well as other effects). Put another way: Not all spectators are filmmakers, but all filmmakers are spectators. It’s not implausible to posit that they have gained an intuitive, hands-on knowledge of how to elicit the sort of activities that will create the experience they want the spectator to have. True, the design may misfire, or spectators may choose to pursue alternative strategies of sense making. But as a first step in a research program, it makes sense to postulate that filmmakers—scriptwriters, producers, directors, editors, and other artisans of the screen—build their films in ways that will coax most of their spectators to follow the same inferential pathways.

How, then, can a cognitive perspective help us analyze a film’s narrative design? Before tackling a particular example, I need to spell out my theoretical frame of reference a little more.

Narrative Norms

Let’s assume that a film displays systematic patterns of narrative, themes, style, and the like. The patterns can be located historically with respect to wider sets of customary practices, which I’ll call *norms*. For example, it’s a norm of Hollywood studio filmmaking since the mid-1910s that dramatic action takes place in a coherently unified space—such as a bedroom, a street, or the deck of an ocean liner. That space is portrayed through such means as continuity editing, constancy of items of setting, roughly consistent sound ambience, and so on.

We can think of norm-driven subsystems as supplying *cues* to the spectator. The cues initiate the process of elaboration, resulting eventually in inferences and hypotheses. The spectator brings to the cues various bodies of relevant knowledge, most notably the sort known to cognitive theorists as *schema-based knowledge*. A schema is a knowledge structure that enables the perceiver to extrapolate beyond the information given.⁷ Our schema for car breakdowns enables us to fill in what is not immediately evident in the flat-tire situation; we go beyond the immediate picture of a breakdown to extrapolate the driver’s plan for getting going again.

Understanding a film calls upon cues and schemas constantly. For example, a series of shots showing characters positioned and framed in particular ways usually cues the viewer to infer that these characters are located in a particular locale. A scene that begins with a detail shot of a table lamp may prompt the spectator to frame hypotheses to the effect that the scene will take place in a living room or parlor. These inferences and hypotheses couldn't get off the ground without schemas. The spectator of a Hollywood film is able to understand that a space is coherent because at some level of mental activity, she or he possesses a schema for typical locales, such as living rooms or pool halls.

Similarly, in the spectator's search for gist, she or he must possess some rudimentary notion of narrative structure that permits certain information to be taken for granted and other information to be understood as, say, exposition or an important revelation. When we see a character leave one locale and enter another, we effortlessly assume that the second scene follows the first chronologically and that what happened in the suppressed interval isn't of consequence for the story action. (In some films, such as Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* [1937] and Otto Preminger's *Fallen Angel* [1945], such ellipses are later revisited and reveal that the narration skipped over important information.) Finally, I suggest that all these factors vary historically and culturally. We ought to expect that different filmmaking traditions, in various times and places, will develop particular norms, schemas, and cues. Correspondingly, the inferences and hypotheses available to spectators will vary as well.

My outline is very skeletal, so I'll try to put some flesh on the bones by considering a concrete case. My specimen is *Mildred Pierce*, an instantiation of that vast body of norms known as the classical Hollywood cinema.⁸ I'll be concentrating on its system of narration, which involves not only its construction of a plot and a diegetic world, but also its use of film technique.

First, I'll try to show that the film utilizes norms of narration so as to encourage not one but two avenues of inference and hypothesis testing; both of these would seem to have been available to contemporary audiences. Second, I want to show that the film assumes that in the viewer's effort after gist, she or he will ignore or forget certain *stylistic* norms. That is, Hollywood norms posit a hierarchy of importance, with narrative gist at the top and local stylistic manipulations subordinate to that. In *Mildred Pierce*, this hierarchy allows the filmmakers to conceal crucial narrational deceptions.

Two Methods of Murder

Because *Mildred Pierce* opens with a murder, it's profitable to start our inquiry with a norm-based question. What kinds of options were open to filmmakers in the 1940s who wished to launch their plot with such a scene?

In the early 1940s, the options were essentially two. One is exemplified by the second scene of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Here, the murder of Sam Spade's partner, Miles Archer, is rendered in a way that conceals the killer's identity (Figure 4.1). We see the victim from over the killer's shoulder, but a reverse-shot view of the murderer



Figure 4.1 *The Maltese Falcon* (1941): the unseen killer.



Figure 4.2 *The Letter* (1940): the unseen victim.

isn't supplied. The film thus poses the question of who killed Archer, and this creates one strand in the overall mystery plot.

A second normative option is exemplified at the very start of *The Letter* (1940). Here the shooting of a colonialist is plainly committed by the Bette Davis character (Figure 4.2). The question posed is now that of why she killed him. What, if any, circumstances justify the crime?

The first two scenes of *Mildred Pierce*, however, offer a more complex case. In a lonely beach house at night, with a car idling outside, a man is shot by an unseen assailant. As he dies, he murmurs, "Mildred." We glimpse a woman driving off in the car. In the next scene, our protagonist, Mildred Pierce, is seen wandering along a deserted pier.

We couldn't ask for a better example of a film that lures us down inferential pathways. In a remarkably brief time—the murder scene lasts only 40 seconds—the spectator has accomplished a great deal. She has perceptually constructed a diegetic world—a beach house at night, peopled by two characters. Further, she infers that a homicide has taken place; that gist is central to understanding this narrative. Only a little less probable is the inference that the killer has fled by car. And the viewer may also have inferred that the murderer is the woman named in the film's title.

Yet such inferences are not one-time-only products. They form the basis of hypotheses, which lead in turn to further inference making. As Meir Sternberg points out, narrative ineluctably leads us to frame hypotheses about the past (what he calls *curiosity hypotheses*) and about the future (*suspense hypotheses*).⁹ Here, the spectator will expect that there are prior reasons for the murder of Monte and that the film will reveal them in its progressive unfolding. As a mystery film, *Mildred Pierce* will, so to speak, create suspense hypotheses about how curiosity hypotheses will be confirmed.

We can specify two primary inference chains that this opening prompts. One is that Mildred is the killer. Most critics have assumed that the average spectator comes to this conclusion, and they characteristically take the opening as carefully directing us to form this inference. First, like the *Maltese Falcon* sequence, the scene does not show who fires at Monte; this poses the question of the murderer's identity. Moreover,

Mildred is implied to be the killer on the basis of certain cues: the word *Mildred*, which Monte murmurs before he dies; the smooth transition from the murder to Mildred walking along the pier; the next scene, in which she tries to frame Wally for the crime; and the still later scene in which her ex-husband, Bert, steps forward to claim, implausibly, that he committed the murder, presumably to protect Mildred.

But at the film's climax, we'll learn that Mildred is not the killer. The film's opening narration has misdirected us. By suppressing the identity of the killer, and by using tight linkages between scenes, the narration leads the spectator to false curiosity hypotheses. One critic puts the point this way: The film shifts from asking, "Who killed Monte?" to asking, "Why did Mildred kill him?"¹⁰ Indeed, the film couldn't mislead us if we weren't undertaking a process of hypothesis formation and revision.

Still, a second line of inference is available. The blatant suppression of the murderer's identity might lead the viewer to ask, If Mildred did it, why does the film not show her in the act, as the opening of *The Letter* shows its heroine killing her victim? One plausible reason for the film's equivocation was offered by a contemporary critic:

We are tempted to suspect the murderer is the woman on the bridge, especially when we learn her name is Mildred.

But naturally, being familiar with the conventions of mystery stories that appearances deceive and circumstantial evidence is not all, we are wary; indeed we feel that somehow we had better not assume that Mildred Pierce Berargon [sic] has just killed the man we duly learn is her second husband.¹¹

Under this construal, all the narrative feints I itemized above, the tight scene linkages and the strategic actions taken by Mildred and her ex-husband, will be seen as so many red herrings, tricky but "fair" in the way that misdirection is in, say, an Agatha Christie novel.

We commonly believe that not all spectators make exactly the same inferences, but this film builds such divergences into its structure by creating a pair of alternative pathways for the viewer. One path is signposted for the "trusting" spectator, who assumes that Mildred is the killer and who will watch what follows looking for answers to why she did it. There is also a pathway for the "skeptical" viewer, who will not take her guilt for granted. This spectator will scan the ensuing film for other factors that could plausibly account for the circumstances of the killing. And needless to say, it would be possible for a particular viewer to switch between these alternative hypotheses, or to rank one as more probable than the other. If the goal of the inferential process is that extraction of gist, the ongoing construction of the story, then the filmmakers set for themselves the task of building a system of cues that can be used in both frameworks, the trusting one and the skeptical one.

Across the whole film, hypothesis forming and testing will be guided by cues of various sorts and subordinated to various sorts of schemas. As a first approximation, let's distinguish between two principal varieties of schemas. Some schemas will enable the spectator to assimilate and order cues on the basis of patterns of action; call these *action-based schemas*. The story comprehension research literature offers

many particular instances, such as the canonical macrostructure proposed by Jean Mandler and her colleagues. She proposes that a traditional story opens by defining a setting and then presenting a series of episodes. Each episode shows a character responding to an initial condition, and the response is often that of forming a goal to do something about that condition. The result is a goal path that informs future episodes, whereby the character tries to reach the goal and either succeeds or fails.¹²

This is a very general account, but that doesn't make it hopelessly vague. In our film, it seems clear that both the trusting and the skeptical spectator will test hypotheses according to the ways that events fill various slots in Mandler's macrostructure. For example, the viewer could take the scene that follows the murder as Mildred's complex reaction to having committed the crime: She attempts suicide. Thwarted in that, she formulates a new goal: to implicate the lubricious Wally in the crime. Luring him to the beach house and locking him in can be seen as serving this larger purpose. Each episode can be seen as springing from a reaction to prior events and leading to a formulation of goals that initiate further action. Each one offers further support for the trusting construal, but none definitively disconfirms the skeptical construal. So the potential uncertainty about the murderer is maintained across the film.

Another general collection of schemas is relevant as well, one that we can label *agent-based schemas*. It is significant, I think, that Mandler's canonical story reduces character identity and activity to plot functions (reaction, goal formation, and so on). In this respect, it resembles structuralist work in narratology, such as the studies by Propp, Greimas, and Barthes. Yet one can recognize that characters are constructs without acknowledging that they are wholly reducible to more fundamental semantic or structural features.

This would seem a necessary move to make if you're studying cinema, because here, as opposed to literature, characters are usually embodied. A novel's character may be, as Roland Barthes puts it, no more than a collection of semes, or semantic features, gathered under a proper name.¹³ In cinema, however, the character has a palpable body, and actions seem naturally to flow from it. A reaction or a goal is attached to a face and frame. Thus the fact that Monte is not only a victim in the murder scene but also a concrete individual, likely to be important in the narrative to come, must count for a good deal if we are to execute the process of inference and hypothesis casting. Similarly, that Mildred happens to occupy Joan Crawford's body—rather than that of, say, Lucille Ball or even Bette Davis—is not a matter of indifference. More generally, it seems clear that in understanding any film, our hypotheses involve not only courses of action but also the qualities of the characters, not only action-based schemas but also agent-based ones.

Simplifying things, I'd suggest that in any narrative in any medium, characters are built up by the perceiver by virtue of two sorts of agent-based schemas. One sort comprises a set of institutional *roles* (e.g., teacher, father, or boss). Another sort of agent-based schema is that afforded by the concept of the *person*, a prototype possessing a cluster of several default features: a human body, perceptual activity, thoughts, feelings, traits, and a capacity to plan and execute action.¹⁴ Roughly, then, a character consists of some person-like features plus the social roles that she or he fills. This

distinction would seem to be constant across cultures, even if the substantive conceptions of agent and role vary.¹⁵

Aided by role schemas and the person schema, the spectator can build up the narrative's agents to various degrees of individuality. Mildred can be taken as a self-sacrificing mother, as a heedless wife, as a ruthless business owner, and so on. At various points, each of these conceptual constructions is important in making sense of the plot, which in turn reveals new aspects of Mildred's character. (At the climax, we'll learn that she's a *very* self-sacrificing mother.) And each conception of Mildred can coexist with the trusting construal (the reasons why Mildred would kill Monte are rooted in her personality and motives) and with the skeptical construal (even if such characterizations are accurate, they may not actually lead to the murder we more or less witness). And we should note that this construction of Mildred as a character—person plus roles—constitutes no less an effort after *gist* than does the construal of the action around the murder scene. The viewer plays down or omits concrete details of character action in order to construct a psychic identity and agency of broad import, capable of being integrated into hypotheses about upcoming or past action.

Such hypotheses are, of course, constrained in the overall course of the film. After Mildred has lured Wally into being found at the scene of the murder, she is taken in for questioning. As she tells her story to the police in a series of flashbacks, the film breaks into two large-scale portions, and both action- and agent-based schemas are involved in each. The first part consists of the lengthy flashback showing us Mildred's rise to business success. One purpose of this is to establish that her former husband, Bert, has a motive for killing Monte. This long flashback ends with Bert's granting Mildred a divorce and insultingly knocking the whiskey out of Monte's hand. In the framing story, the police inspector argues that this confirms Bert's guilt. And indeed Bert's willingness to take the blame initially confirms that he is shielding Mildred. Once again, though, this permits two alternative readings of the action. Our trusting viewer takes Bert's confession as confirming that Mildred is guilty. The more suspicious viewer, aware of genre conventions that manipulate this sort of information, is likely to suspect that such an obvious foil for Mildred may conceal more than this. That is, just as Mildred has been a red herring for the real culprit, Bert is a red herring once removed, delaying the revelation of the real killer.

At the end of this framing portion in the police station, Mildred confesses to the crime. This switches attention away from Bert and back to her. But her confession creates a problem in motivation. At the end of the first flashback, Mildred is portrayed as being completely in love with Monte. The task of the next long flashback is to show how she could become capable of murdering him.

The flashback traces her gradual realization that Monte is deeply immoral. He's lazy, evasive, and not above seducing his stepdaughter. The flashback also reveals that Mildred is capable of murder. Here the crucial scene is her high-pitched quarrel with Veda, in which Mildred orders her to leave: "Get out before I kill you." The crisis of this stretch of the film comes when Mildred learns that Monte has destroyed her business on the very night of Veda's birthday. Mildred takes out a revolver and goes to Monte's beach house. This puts her firmly on the scene of the crime.

Confirming that Mildred committed the murder would clinch the trusting viewer's long-range hypothesis, based on action-driven schemas. Killing Monte becomes Mildred's means to the goal of protecting her daughter, a goal she has held throughout her life. The resolution would also invoke person-plus-role schemas: Mildred remains the self-sacrificing mother to the end. But this resolution is invoked only to be dispelled.

Once more we return to the present, and the inspector announces that the police have captured the real murderer. Veda is brought in and, believing that Mildred has implicated her, blurts out a confession. And Mildred's recitation of the events now leads to the final flashback, which we enter with knowledge of the killer's identity. As in *The Letter*, the interest now falls upon what circumstances triggered the murder and how those vary from our initial impression.

The final flashback, recounted by Mildred, shows her arrival at the beach house and her discovery that Monte and Veda are lovers. She pulls the pistol, but Monte dissuades her and she drops it. Mildred walks outside, and Veda learns from Monte that he no longer loves her. As Mildred is about to drive away, Veda shoots Monte. Mildred hurries in and discovers the crime, but through a mixture of lies and cajoling, Veda convinces her not to call the police.

This flashback, the real climax, confirms skepticism about Mildred's culpability, and we learn the reason why the narration withheld the killer's identity. Moreover, all of Mildred's subsequent behavior—trying to frame Wally and later confessing to the crime—is consistent with the fact that Veda killed Monte. Veda's act of fury triggers the same motherly sacrifice that has defined Mildred as agent throughout. Everything that we saw at the start of the film is retrospectively justified by Mildred's acting as Veda's accomplice.

Again, to arrive at this concluding set of inferences is to continue our effort after gist. This ending reminds us that the filmmakers are practical cognitive psychologists. They know, for instance, the importance of default assumptions. One purpose of the murder scene is to make us assume that only one person is in or around the cottage when Monte is killed. This premise is crucial because even if we were not shown who pulls the trigger, the viewer must not suspect Veda at all. If her presence is even hinted at, the redundant and obvious clues pointing to Mildred will be seen immediately for the red herrings they are.

The Partial Replay

Reading, notes Barthes in *S/z*, involves forgetting.¹⁶ So does viewing. The ending of *Mildred Pierce* is instructive partly because the film is so made as to exploit our likely inability to remember anything but the material made salient by our ongoing inference making and hypothesis testing. As practical psychologists, our filmmakers know that we'll construct a diegetic world chiefly through landmarks, not fine details of setting. They know that we'll move rapidly from items of appearance and behavior to inferences about character beliefs and traits. And they know that under pressure of

TABLE 4.1 *Mildred Pierce*: The Opening Scene and Its Replay

Opening Shots (A)	Replay Shots (B)
1. 5 sec: (extreme long shot) Beach house at night, car visible alongside (Fig. 4.3). Dissolve to:	1. 12 sec: (medium shot) Mildred goes to the car and tries to start engine (Fig. 4.12).
2. 4 sec: (long shot) House and car. Two pistol shots heard (Fig. 4.4).	2. 4 sec: (medium close-up): Mildred slumped over steering wheel. Two shots heard (Fig. 4.13).
3. 8 sec: (medium-long shot) Monte facing camera, looking off left (Fig. 4.5). Third and fourth pistol shots hit mirror.	3. 5 sec: (medium shot) Veda fires four times (Fig. 4.14).
Monte is hit, staggers forward (Fig. 4.6), and falls to the floor. A pistol is tossed into the frame (Fig. 4.7).	4. 6 sec: (medium shot) Monte is staggering forward and falls to the floor (Fig. 4.15). A pistol is tossed into the frame (Fig. 4.16).
4. 13 sec: (medium shot) Monte wobbles his head, opens his eyes, and says, "Mildred" (Figure 4.8).	Monte wobbles his head, eyes open, and says, "Mildred" (Fig. 4.17).
Pan up to mirror; sound of door slamming (Fig. 4.9).	5. (long shot) Pan with Mildred coming in; sound of door slamming (Fig. 4.18). She meets Veda in the parlor (Fig. 4.19).
6–10. In the parlor, Veda tells Mildred lies about shooting Monte. Near the doorway, she begs Mildred to protect her (Fig. 4.20).	
5. (long shot) Empty parlor, with Monte's corpse in the firelight. Doorway empty (Fig. 4.10).	
6. (long shot) Car outside pulls off (Fig. 4.11).	

the clock, we're likely to overlook *stylistic* features. This last aspect is especially critical in *Mildred Pierce*.

I compared the film to a mystery novel in its use of red herrings, but the film compels us to recognize that certain features of cinema as a medium shape our inferential activity too. Although few mystery readers may dutifully page back to check a fact or appreciate how they were misled, they all have the option of doing so. A book is in hand all at once, and you may scan, skim, or skip back at will. This isn't an option for the ordinary film viewer (at least, until the arrival of home video, and even with DVD the exact pairwise comparison of passages is difficult). The classical Hollywood cinema paced its narration for maximum legibility during projection. Accordingly, filmmakers have learned that, for perceivers who can't stop and go back, cues must be highly redundant. But in learning this, filmmakers have also learned how to prompt *misremembering*. Given our effort after gist and our inability to turn back to check a point (especially one made 90 minutes earlier), the film can introduce both redundant cues and highly nonredundant, even contradictory, ones.

Table 4.1 aligns the two sequences, the opening murder (labeled A) and the climactic replay of the shooting (B).



Figure 4.3 *Mildred Pierce* (1947): the opening scene, shot 1.



Figure 4.4 *Mildred Pierce*: the opening scene, shot 2.



Figure 4.5 *Mildred Pierce*: the opening scene, shot 3.



Figure 4.6 *Mildred Pierce*: the opening scene, shot 3 (continued).



Figure 4.7 *Mildred Pierce*: the opening scene, shot 3 (concluded).



Figure 4.8 *Mildred Pierce*: the opening scene, shot 4.

Many actions are reiterated in the second version, and the redundancies suggest that we are seeing a straight replay. In the opening scene, over the second long shot of the beach house (A2, Figure 4.4), we hear two gunshots. The cut inside to Monte facing the killer (A3, Figure 4.5) comes right on the third pistol shot. In the flashback version, the cut from Mildred in the car (B2, Figure 4.13) comes at exactly the same point. The next shot (B3, Figure 4.14) replaces the image of Monte with that of Veda firing the revolver. No time can be said to be omitted here. More subtly, the screen time



Figure 4.9 *Mildred Pierce*: the opening scene, shot 4 (concluded).



Figure 4.10 *Mildred Pierce*: the opening scene, shot 5.



Figure 4.11 *Mildred Pierce*: the opening scene, shot 6.



Figure 4.12 *Mildred Pierce*: the final flashback, shot 1.



Figure 4.13 *Mildred Pierce*: the final flashback, shot 2.



Figure 4.14 *Mildred Pierce*: the final flashback, shot 3.

that elapses between the third gunshot and Monte's dying word is virtually identical in both versions (9 seconds and 10 seconds respectively). Finally, the slamming door we hear in the opening scene (A4, over Figure 4.9) is revealed to be not the killer leaving, as we initially inferred, but rather the sound of Mildred entering to find Veda in the living room (B5, Figure 4.18). These are what the mystery novelist might consider fair misdirections of the spectator's attention. They suggest that the second version is identical with the first, except that the former fills in certain details of the latter.

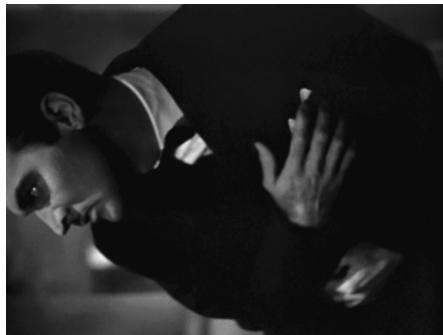


Figure 4.15 *Mildred Pierce*: the final flashback, shot 4.



Figure 4.16 *Mildred Pierce*: the final flashback, shot 4 (continued).

It would seem, however, that the narration profits from so many redundancies in order to introduce some significant disparities. True, some are just minor. In the initial scene (A1 and A2), there is no sound of the car ignition cranking as Mildred tries to start it. (Perhaps Max Steiner's score smothers it.) There is, furthermore, no indication that Mildred is in the car in the first scene (Figures 4.3–4.4). (True, she is slumped over the steering wheel in the later version, but scrutiny of the first scene shows that the driver's seat is empty.)¹⁷ These tiny disparities show again the perceptual saliency of causal, event-centered information, especially as prepared by prior knowledge. On our first view of the first scene, the apparent emptiness of the car suggests that the important action occurs inside the house. If anyone should recall that scene 100 minutes later, the later shot of Mildred bent over the steering wheel (B2, Figure 4.13) suffices as a rough explanation of why the car looked empty. In the absence of a chance to go back and compare, the spectator can easily accept the later scene as consistent with the earlier one.

Other variations in the two scenes reveal that the filmmakers are exploiting the viewer's inability to recall certain details. In the first version, when Monte is shot (A3), he falls to the floor and rolls over on his back as the gun is tossed into the shot (Figures 4.5–4.7). There is a pause. Cut to a closer view of his face (A4, Figure 4.8). As his head wobbles, he opens his eyes, looking left as he murmurs, "Mildred," and expires. The close-up emphasizes his expression and the word he utters, marking the event for us to notice and recall. It may also suggest that he dies looking at his killer and speaking her name.

But in the second version, the event is treated differently; or rather, it is no longer the same event. Monte is shot and tumbles to the floor (B4, Figures 4.15–4.16). But now he utters Mildred's name just as he starts to roll onto his back (Figure 4.17). There is no close-up, and no pause either. He says *nothing* when he is in the position he assumed in the earlier scene (just as earlier, he said nothing when he rolled over). The second version produces a different effect. By speaking when he is not looking toward his killer, he no longer seems to be naming the culprit but rather *recalling* Mildred. In this flashback, she no longer seems guilty. The narration gets two distinct cues out of the two versions, and it is able to do so because it counts on our remembering only



Figure 4.17 *Mildred Pierce*: the final flashback, shot 4 (concluded).



Figure 4.18 *Mildred Pierce*: the final flashback, shot 5.



Figure 4.19 *Mildred Pierce*: the final flashback, shot 5 (concluded).



Figure 4.20 *Mildred Pierce*: the final flashback, shot 10

that Monte said, "Mildred," not exactly when and how he said it. We recall the salient features marked out for us earlier, but not the details of each situation.¹⁸

Even more striking than the reconstitution of Monte's dying word is the disparity in the handling of the murder's aftermath. In the first scene (A4, Figures 4.8–4.9), a camera movement carries us from Monte's face to the bullet-pocked mirror, which shows a doorway opening onto the hall. We hear footsteps and a slamming door. Cut to a long shot (A5, Figure 4.10) of Monte lying in the empty parlor. Cut outside to the car pulling away, the driver dimly visible (A6, Figure 4.11). But the second version follows Monte's death and the slamming door by Mildred's lengthy and intense confrontation with Veda (B5–B9, Figures 4.18–4.20). And this encounter is played out exactly in the doorway that is shown empty in the first version's fifth shot of the empty parlor (Figure 4.10)! Moreover, because the second version never completes the scene between Mildred and Veda, there is no depiction of either one driving off after their interchange. (Indeed, we never learn their arrangements about leaving. If Veda took the car, how did Mildred get to the pier?)

If we try to make the two versions compatible, we must posit that in the first version, there is an ellipsis of several minutes between the end of the mirror shot (A4, Figure 4.9) and the beginning of A5 (Figure 4.10), which presumably depicts Monte lying dead in the room after Mildred and Veda have gone their ways. This

ellipsis is, of course, not marked at all. Indeed, one overriding default assumption of the classical film is that a cut within a defined locale is taken to convey continuous duration unless there are technical or contextual indications to the contrary (e.g., a dissolve or some drastic change of costume or furnishings). Alternatively, it is possible in retrospect to construe shot A5, the long-shot framing of Monte's corpse stretched out (Figure 4.10), as simply a false image, provided to mislead us. Either way, the opening scene's narration has concealed the crucial point that two women were present, and it has cued the viewer to infer the gist of the situation—a man was killed, and a woman fled the scene—in such a fashion that the details can't be recalled.

We can be fairly confident that this memory lapse is widespread. First-time spectators seem not to notice the disparities between the two versions, and critics who have written on the film have not mentioned them. Indeed, critics have proven especially vulnerable to remembering gist and forgetting detail. One writer, describing the first scene shot by shot, omits the crucially misleading shot of Monte's corpse by the fire (A5, Figure 4.10).¹⁹ Another critic claims that in the second murder scene, the shot of Veda firing the pistol (Figure 4.14) follows the shot of Monte (Figure 4.15).²⁰ If critics who have the luxury of reexamining the film can err in such ways, should we be surprised that a writer in 1947, relying on mere memory, fleshed out what he saw in unsupportable ways? He cites “the sequence of camera shots in which we see the outside of the house, the woman’s figure (or was it two figures separately?) leaving it, her ride in the auto.”²¹ And if you feel a need to check my claims to confirm your own recollections, you realize that I’m not condemning these critics. They’re doing what we all do, “making sense,” and they are making it along the lines laid down by a very powerful system of norms and cues. It’s not just that the film encourages us to deceive ourselves. It deceives us blatantly but helps us overlook the deception. It accomplishes this because narrative comprehension demands that we go beyond the data, jump to conclusions—in short, make inferences and frame hypotheses.

Secrets and Lies, and Narration

A lone example can’t prove a case, but I hope that this examination of *Mildred Pierce* has illustrated how the cognitive perspective might tie together assumptions about comprehension with concrete observations about a film’s structure and style. The result is a significantly new picture of a film and its viewer.

Instead of a “pure” text, understandable “in itself,” we have a text that gains its effects only in relation to a body of norms, a set of schemas, and the processes that the spectator initiates. Instead of a communication model, which treats meaning as dropped in upstream to be fished out by the spectator, we have a constructive model that treats meaning as an expanding elaboration of cues located in the text. This shift implies as well that, armed with certain schemas and knowledge of certain norms, the spectator could “go beyond the information given” in ways unforeseen by the filmmakers. What makes a film understandable is not necessarily exhausted by what the filmmakers deliberately put in to be understood. But, then, this is true of all human activities; every action has unintended consequences, and so it’s hardly surprising

that viewers appropriate movies in idiosyncratic ways. But the process of that appropriation is also a matter of inferential elaboration, based on fresh schemas the spectator brings to bear on the film's discriminable features.

In isolating comprehension as a central viewing activity, the cognitive perspective is open to the charge that it ignores other aspects of the experience and of the film itself. What, for instance, about emotion, surely a prime ingredient of the filmgoing experience? And what about interpretation, which seems to go even farther beyond the information given and involve very high-level constructs?

These are important questions, and the cognitive frame of reference needs to respond to them. Up to a point, setting emotion aside is a useful methodological idealization: In principle, you can understand a film without discernibly having an emotional reaction to it. More positively, studies by Noël Carroll, Murray Smith, Ed Tan, and others suggest that a cognitive perspective can enrich our understanding of emotive qualities.²² This research boldly proposes that many emotional responses ride upon cognitive judgments.

As for interpretation, elsewhere I've tried to show that, as an intuitive but principled activity, it's highly amenable to a cognitive explanation. When a critic posits Mildred as the Castrating Mother or a symbol of the contradictions of entrepreneurial capitalism, the critic is still seeking out cues, categorizing, applying schemas, and making inferences that carry weight among a particular social group.²³ To interpret is to cognize.

Finally, as a murder mystery, *Mildred Pierce* may play too much into my hands. Not every film poses a mystery at its start; is the cognitive perspective at risk of turning every film into a detective story? It's true that mystery films show the process of hypothesis formation quite clearly, but the cognitive framework doesn't favor them. In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, I try to show that the activity of inferential elaboration is prompted by melodramas (*In This Our Life*, *Say It With Songs*), Westerns (*Wild and Woolly*), comedies (*His Girl Friday*), and straight dramas (*Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*). Every narrative of any complexity withholds some story information from both viewers and characters. This creates gaps in our knowledge, disparities among various characters' states of knowledge, and mismatches between a character's knowledge and the viewer's knowledge, all the while generating Meir Sternberg's response trio of curiosity, suspense, and surprise. Every film's narration depends upon regulating the flow of information, and we don't have perfect information until the end (if then). In this respect, every narrative harbors secrets.

There is much more to understand about how viewers understand films. The line of inquiry sketched here puts a priority on studying particular films in the light of how narrational and stylistic processes are designed to elicit certain spectatorial effects. In this research program, *Mildred Pierce* exemplifies key features of the classical Hollywood film. There are, of course, other traditions that call on different sorts of narrational cues, schemas, and norms.²⁴ Comparative inquiry into these traditions can contribute to that research program I've called a film poetics. By avoiding misplaced conceptions of codes or slippery analogies between film and language, the cognitive perspective offers a robust account of the viewer's activity, one that can guide a historical poetics of cinema.

Chapter 4

1. Christian Metz, “Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film,” in his *Film Language*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 145.
2. Apart from the many critiques of poststructuralism in literature and philosophy, see David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, eds., *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996). Interestingly, this remains the only anthology to mount such a critique within film studies, as Carroll’s *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) is the only monograph to take this position. Film scholars have been remarkably reluctant to criticize the foundations of this paradigm, preferring to quietly switch over to a rival framework, that of cultural studies.
3. For a discussion, see my essay “Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory,” in Bordwell and Carroll, *Post-Theory*, 3–36. An example of the return to 1960s Metzian themes is Roger Odin’s *Cinéma et production de sens* (Paris: Colin, 1991).
4. See the collection of Jerome Bruner’s papers, *Beyond the Information Given: Studies in the Psychology of Knowing* (New York: Norton, 1973).
5. I outline the emerging paradigm in my “A Case for Cognitivism.” *Iris*, no. 9 (Spring 1989): 11–40. See also my “A Case for Cognitivism: Further Reflections,” *Iris*, no. 11 (Summer 1990): 107–12.
6. On “gist,” see Carol Fleisher Feldman, Jerome Bruner, Bobbi Renderer, and Sally Spitzer, “Narrative Comprehension,” in *Narrative Thought and Narrative Language*, ed. Bruce K. Britton and Anthony D. Pellegrini (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1990), 1–78.
7. The classic source of the concept of schema is F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1932. Useful orientations to later conceptions of schemas can be found in Reid Hastie, “Schematic Principles in Human Memory,” in *Social Cognition: The Ontario Symposium*, vol. 1, ed. E. Tony Higgins, C. Peter Herman, and Mark P. Zanna (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1981), 39–88; and Ronald W. Casson, “Schemas in Cognitive Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 12 (1983): 429–62.

8. For information on the film, as well as an edition of the shooting script, see Albert J. LaValley, *Mildred Pierce* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980). Production background can be found in Rudy Behlmer, *Inside Warner Bros. (1935–1951)* (New York: Viking, 1985), 254–64.
9. Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 45–55. See also Sternberg's trio of essays: "Telling in Time (I): Chronology and Narrative Theory," *Poetics Today* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 901–48; "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity," *Poetics Today* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 463–541; and "Telling in Time (III): Chronology, Estrangement, and Stories of Literary History," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 125–235.
10. Joyce Nelson, "Mildred Pierce Reconsidered," *Film Reader* 2 (1977): 67.
11. Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), 214–15.
12. Jean Mandler, *Stories, Scripts, and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1984), 22.
13. Roland Barthes, *S/z*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 67, 191.
14. A rich set of reflections along these lines can be found in the essays collected in Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, eds., *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Concrete work supplementing this line of thinking is exemplified by Roy G. D'Andrade, "Character Terms and Cultural Models," in *Directions in Cognitive Anthropology*, ed. Janet W. D. Dougherty (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 321–43; and Roy G. D'Andrade, "A Folk Model of the Mind," in *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*, ed. Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 112–48. With respect to cinema, see Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 21.
15. "The existence of an office," writes an anthropologist, "logically entails a distinction between the powers and responsibilities pertaining to it and their exercise by different incumbents. Hence some concept of the individual as distinct from the office is established" (J. S. La Fontaine, "Person and Individual: Some Anthropological Reflections," in Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes, *The Category of the Person*, 138).
16. Barthes, *S/z*, 11.
17. The odd thing is that in shot 2 of the first scene, a figure can be glimpsed ducking out of sight in the passenger seat. This is a good example of what is not perceivable under normal protocols of viewing.
18. It's been suggested to me that the filmmakers were simply sloppy; although they intended both versions of Monte's death to be identical, they were unable to duplicate the details of performance exactly. Even if that were so, when confronted with two versions of Zachary Scott's delivery of the line "Mildred," the filmmakers put the version most likely to throw suspicion on the heroine in the opening and used the nonincriminating version in the revelatory flashback. The published version of the screenplay doesn't call for the reenactment of Monte's final words, so evidently the replay of the murder was devised in the course of shooting and postproduction. See LaValley, *Mildred Pierce*, 233.
19. Pam Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 78.
20. Nelson, "Mildred Pierce Reconsidered," 65.
21. Tyler, *Magic and Myth*, 214.

22. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Methuen, 1990), 59–96; Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 81–86; Ed Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as Emotion Machine* (Teaneck, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1996); Carl R. Plantinga and Greg R. Smith, eds., *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1999); and Greg R. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also Joseph Anderson, *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory* (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1997).
23. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).
24. See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).