

## Cognition and Comprehension: Viewing and Forgetting in *Mildred Pierce*

David Bordwell

By and large, audiences understand the films they see. They can answer questions about a movie's plot, imagine alternative scenes ("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."<sup>1</sup>

As semiotic research expanded in France, Britain, and the US, the search for explanations of filmic intelligibility took theorists toward comparisons with language, toward methodological analogies with linguistic inquiry, and across several disciplines. Yet these developments increasingly left abandoned the search for principles governing intelligibility. Theorists turned their attention to understanding the sources of cinematic pleasure 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; it seems fair to say that interest in them has waned considerably, and several French partisans of psychoanalysis have returned to the "classic" structuralist semiotics of the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

The current "cognitivist" trend in film studies has gone back to Metz's point of departure, asking: What enables films--at least, 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 is 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. This does not entail that each

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David Bordwell is Jacques Ledoux Professor of Film Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author of several books, most recently *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Harvard University Press).

spectator's understanding of the film becomes completely idiosyncratic, for there are grounds for believing that the patterns of elaboration are shared by many spectators.<sup>3</sup>

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 understand such a prosaic action is still largely a mystery, but it seems terribly unlikely that understanding is achieved by virtue of a code. In a strict sense, a code is an arbitrary system of alternatives, governed by rules of succession or substitution and learned more or less explicitly. It seems unlikely that there is a code for understanding tire-changing behavior. Now imagine filming the very same activity. 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 the real-life instance, no appeal to a code seems necessary.

This example suggests that the process of understanding many things in films is more 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 changing a tire.

This is not 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, that might be a very likely alternative that the spectator would have to consider. And 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 still 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 the cognitive 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."<sup>4</sup> 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, its consequences for the characters and the ensuing action--becomes a basis for higher-level, more complex reactions.

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 which will lead to comprehension. Put another way: Not all spectators are filmmakers, but all filmmakers are spectators. It is 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 which will coax most of their spectators to follow similar elaborational pathways.

This paper, then, is an attempt to show how the cognitive perspective can help us examine a film's narrative design. Before tackling a particular example, though, I need to spell out my theoretical frame of reference a little more.

## I

Let us take a film to be a complex system made up of sub-systems: narrative processes, thematic relations, stylistic patterns, and perhaps others. The film's subsystems can be located historically with respect to wider sets of customary practices, which I shall call *norms*. To take a straightforward example, it is a norm of Hollywood studio filmmaking since the mid-teens that dramatic action takes place in a coherently unified space. That space portrayed through such devices as continuity editing, constancy of landmarks, 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.<sup>5</sup> Our schema for car breakdowns enables us to fill in what is not given to perception in the flat-tire situation.

Understanding a film calls upon cues and schemata constantly. For example, a series of shots showing characters positioned and framed in particular ways usually cue the viewer to infer that these characters are located

in a particular locale. A scene which 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 could not get off the ground without schemata. 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. Similarly, in the spectator's search for gist, s/he must possess some rudimentary notion of narrative structure which permits certain information to be taken for granted and other information to be understood as, say, exposition or an important revelation. Finally, I suggest that all these factors vary historically. We ought to expect that different filmmaking traditions, in various times and places, will develop particular norms, schemata, and cues. Correspondingly, the inferences and hypotheses available to spectators will vary as well.

My outline is very skeletal, so I shall 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.<sup>6</sup> I shall 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 shall 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. Secondly, 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 subordinated to that. This hierarchy allows the filmmakers to conceal crucial narrational deceptions.

## II

Since *Mildred Pierce* opens with a murder, it is 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. In this case, a reverse-shot view of the murderer has been suppressed. 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 in *The Letter* (1940). Here the opening murder of a colonialist is plainly committed by the Bette Davis

character. 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.

If one wanted a straightforward illustration of the inferential basis of cinema, one could do worse than to study these opening few moments. In a remarkably brief time--the murder scene lasts only forty seconds--the spectator has accomplished a great deal. S/he has perceptually constructed a diegetic world--a beach house at night--peopled by two characters. This seems simple enough, but we are very far from understanding how it takes place. In any event, spectators infer that a murder has taken place; that "gist" would seem to be central to comprehension of this narrative. Only a little less probable is the inference that the killer has fled by car. And the spectator 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 (so-called "curiosity" hypotheses) and about the future (so-called "suspense" hypotheses).<sup>7</sup> Here, the spectator will expect that there are prior reasons for the murder of Monty, 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 principal inference-chains which this opening encourages. 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 Monty; 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 Monty murmurs before he dies; the smooth transition from the murder to Mildred walking along the pier; the consequent scene in which she tries to frame Wally for the crime; the still later scene in which the police accuse her ex-husband Bert of the murder.

At the film's climax we will 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 Monty?" to asking, "Why did Mildred kill

him?"<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the film could not mislead us were we not involved in a process of hypothesis-formation and revision.

Yet 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 doing so (as the opening of *The Letter* acknowledges its heroine's guilt)?

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.<sup>9</sup>

Under this construal, the cohesion devices will be seen, at the moment or in retrospect, 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 an empirical 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 that I have been calling "story construction," then the filmmakers set for themselves the task of building a system of cues that can be used in both frameworks, "trusting" and "skeptical."

Across the whole film, hypothesis-forming and -testing will be guided by cues of various sorts and subordinated to various sorts of schemata. As a first approximation, let us distinguish between two principal varieties of schemata. Some schemata will enable the spectator to assimilate and order cues on the basis of patterns of action; let us call these *action*-based schemata. The story-comprehension research literature offers many particular instances; the canonical macrostructure proposed by Jean Mandler and her colleagues is a salient case. Here both the trusting and the skeptical spectator will test hypotheses according to the ways in which events fill various slots in the

macrostructure: the definition of "setting," or expository information; the formation of goals; the emergence of complex reactions; and so on.<sup>10</sup>

In *Mildred Pierce*, for instance, the spectator could be said to 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. Her luring him to the beach house and locking him in thus follows as a subgoal to this larger purpose. Each episode will spring from a reaction to prior events and lead to a formulation of subgoals that initiate further action, and each one offers further evidence for the trusting construal while not definitively disconfirming the skeptical one. Thus the potential uncertainty about the murderer--the basis of the skeptical viewer's curiosity hypotheses--is maintained across the film.

Another general collection of schemata is relevant as well, one that we can label *agent-based* schemata. 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 reducible to more fundamental structural features. This would seem a particularly necessary move to make if you are studying cinema, since here, as opposed to literature, characters are usually specifically embodied. They are part of the process of filmic perception. A reaction or a goal is almost always attached to a face and frame. Barthes may be content to consider a novel's character no more than a collection of semes, or semantic features, gathered under a proper name<sup>11</sup>; but in cinema the character has a palpable autonomy that seems to make action subordinate to his/her prior existence. Thus the fact that Monty is not only a victim in the murder scene but also a specific individual, sure to be important in the narrative to come, must count for a good deal if we are to follow the process of inference and hypothesis-casting. Similarly, that Mildred happens to occupy Joan Crawford's body--rather than that, say, of Lucille Ball or even Bette Davis--is not a matter of indifference.

How spectators construct character, of course, remains quite mysterious to us. Without elaborating much on it here, I would simply suggest that in any narrative in any medium, characters are built up by the perceiver by virtue of two sorts of agent-based schemata. One sort comprises a set of institutional *roles* (e.g., teacher, father, boss, etc.). 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.<sup>12</sup> Roughly, then, a character consists of some person-like features plus the social roles which s/he fills.

This distinction would seem to be constant across cultures, even if the substantive conceptions of agent and role vary.<sup>13</sup>

Aided by role schemata and the person schema, the spectator can build up the narrative's agents to various degrees of individuality. Thus in the course of the film we are considering, Mildred can be taken as "excessively self-sacrificing mother," as "heedless wife," as "vindictive business manager," and so on. Each of these constructions can coexist with the trusting construal (the reasons why Mildred would kill Monty 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 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 schemata 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 Monty. This long flashback ends with Bert's granting Mildred a divorce and insultingly knocking the whiskey out of Monty'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, who believes Mildred guilty, takes this as confirming that conviction. The more suspicious viewer, aware of the manipulations of the genre conventions, 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 Monty. 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 Monty is deeply immoral. In addition, she must be shown to be 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 portion comes when Mildred learns that Monty has destroyed her business on the very night of Veda's birthday. Mildred takes out a revolver and goes to Monty'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 on the basis of action-based schemata. Killing Monty 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 schemata: 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 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.

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

This, the real climax, constitutes a confirmation of the skeptical frame of reference, since now we learn the reason that the killer's identity was withheld. Moreover, all of Mildred's subsequent behavior is consistent with the fact that Veda killed Monty. This action triggers the same motherly sacrifice, the same set of goals, that have defined Mildred as agent. Everything that we saw at the start of the film is retrospectively justified by Mildred's acting as Veda's accomplice.

Again, however, to arrive at this concluding set of inferences is to continue our effort after gist. This ending reveals 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 present when Monty is killed. This 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.

## III

Reading involves forgetting, notes Barthes in *S/z*<sup>14</sup>; 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. Our filmmakers are practical psychologists, and they know that we will construct a diegetic world chiefly through landmarks. We will move rapidly from items of appearance and behavior to characterization. Above all, we are likely to overlook *stylistic* features under pressure of the clock. This last aspect is especially critical in *Mildred Pierce*.

Above 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 the film medium govern the maker's calculations regarding our inferential activity. For although few readers may dutifully page back to check a fact or appreciate how they were misled, every reader has the option of doing so. A book is in hand all at once, and one may scan, skim, or skip back at will. Such is not an option for the ordinary film viewer (at least, until the arrival of the videocassette). The Hollywood cinema paces its narration for maximum legibility; filmmakers have learned that, for perceivers who can not 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 ninety minutes earlier), the film can introduce both redundant cues and highly non-redundant, even contradictory, ones.

The following chart "lines up" the two sequences, the opening murder (labeled A) and the climactic replay of the shooting (B).

*Mildred Pierce*

## The opening scene and its replay

## Opening shots (A)

1. (5 sec: extreme long shot) Beach house at night, car visible alongside.

Dissolve to:

2. (4 sec: long shot) House and car. Two shots heard.

3. (8 sec: medium long shot) Monty facing camera, looking off left. Third and fourth shots hit mirror.

Monty is hit, staggers forward, and falls to floor. A pistol is tossed into the frame.

4. (13 sec: ms): Monty wobbles his head, opens his eyes, and says: "Mildred."

Pan up to mirror; sound of door slamming.

5. (1s) Empty parlor, with Monty's corpse in the firelight. Doorway empty.

6. (1s) Car outside pulls off.

## Replay shots (B)

1. (12 sec: medium shot) Mildred in car, trying to start engine.

2. (4 sec: medium close-up): Mildred slumped over steering wheel. Two shots heard.

3. (5 sec: ms) Veda fires four times.

4. (6 sec: ms) Monty is staggering forward and falls to floor. A pistol is tossed into the frame.

Monty wobbles his head, eyes open, and says: "Mildred."

5. (1s) Pan with Mildred coming in; sound of door slamming.

She meets Veda in the parlor doorway.

6. - 9. In the parlor, the two women talk about covering up the crime.

The obvious redundancies serve to reassure us that we are seeing a straight replay. "In essence," we might say, the two presentations of the murder are similar. The scene reinforces this notion of exact repetition in more detailed ways. In the opening, over the second long-shot of the beach house (A2) we hear two revolver shots. The cut inside to Monty facing the killer comes right on the third shot. In the flashback version, the cut from Mildred in the car comes at exactly the same point; on the third shot (B3), Veda is revealed firing the pistol. No time can be said to be omitted here. More subtly, the screen time that elapses between the third shot and Monty's dying word is virtually identical in both versions (9 seconds and 10 seconds respectively). Again, there is no significant stretch of time left out. Finally, the slamming door we hear in the opening scene (A4) 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). 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 explains certain obscure details of the latter.

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's starter 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. (True, she is presumably slumped over the wheel, but scrutiny shows that the driver's seat is empty.<sup>15</sup>) These "trivial" cases 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 a hundred minutes later, the later shot of Mildred bent over the steering wheel (B2) suffices as a rough explanation of why the car appeared empty. In the absence of a chance to go back and compare, the spectator can take the earlier scene as consistent with the later one.

Other variations in handling reveal that the filmmakers are exploiting the viewer's inability to recall certain details. In the first scene, when Monty is shot (A3), he falls to the floor and rolls over on his back as the gun is tossed into the shot. There is a pause. Cut to a closer view of his face (A4). 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 says, 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*. Monty is shot and tumbles to the floor (B4), but

now he utters Mildred's name just as he starts to roll on his back. 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 at his killer, he no longer seems to be naming the culprit but rather *recalling* Mildred. 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 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.

Even more striking than the reconstitution of Monty's dying word is the disparity in the handling of the murder's aftermath. In the first scene (A4), a camera movement carries us from Monte's face to the bullet-pocked mirror, which shows a doorway giving onto the hall. We hear footsteps and a slamming door. Cut to a long shot (A5) of Monty lying in the empty parlor. Cut outside to the car pulling away, the driver dimly visible (A6). But the second version follows Monty's death and the slamming door by Mildred's lengthy and intense confrontation with Veda (B5-B9). 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! Moreover, since 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, or how, if Veda took the car, Mildred got 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) and the beginning of A5, which presumably depicts Monty lying dead in the room after Mildred and Veda have gone their ways. Such an 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 of Monty's corpse stretched out, as purely and simply a false image, present solely 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 a fashion whose details cannot be recalled.

We can be fairly confident about this memory lapse. Untutored, 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 Monty's corpse by the fire (A5).<sup>16</sup> Another claims that in

the second murder scene, the shot of Veda firing the pistol follows the shot of Monty.<sup>17</sup> In fact, I know of no critic who has discussed the disparities between versions. If critics who have the luxury of "paging back" through the film can err in such ways, should we be surprised that a writer in 1947, relying on mere memory, fleshes out what he saw: 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. . . ."<sup>18</sup> And if you feel a need to check my claims to confirm your own recollections, you realize that I am not condemning these critics. They are merely doing what we all do, "making sense," and they are making it along the lines laid down by a very powerful system of norms. It is not just that the film encourages us to deceive ourselves; it deceives us blatantly, but helps us forget its own operations. And it accomplishes this by its tacit knowledge of how narrative comprehension involves going beyond the data, jumping to conclusions--in short, of making inferences and hypotheses.

#### IV

A lone example cannot prove a case, but I hope that this examination of *Mildred Pierce* has illustrated how one version of the cognitive perspective can tie together assumptions about spectatorial 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 schemata, and the processes which 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 which treats meaning as an expanding elaboration of cues located in the text. This shift implies that, armed with certain schemata 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.

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, recent studies by Noël Carroll, Murray Smith, and Ed Tan suggest that a cognitive perspective can enrich our understanding of emotive and identificatory qualities.<sup>19</sup> This research boldly proposes that many emotional responses ride upon cognitive judgments.

As for interpretation, elsewhere I have tried to show that, as an intuitive but principled activity, it is 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 schemata, and making inferences that carry weight among a particular social group.<sup>20</sup> To interpret is to cognize, albeit in a certain way.

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, I argue elsewhere, other traditions which call on different sorts of cues, schemata, and norms.<sup>21</sup> Such research is usefully considered part of a broader research program I have called a film "poetics."<sup>22</sup> By avoiding misplaced conceptions of codes or treacherous analogies between film and language, the cognitive perspective allows us to oppose a narrow semiotics with a wide-ranging, theoretically informed historical poetics of cinema.

*Madison, Wisconsin*

## Notes

1. "Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film," in *Film Language*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford UP, 1974) 145.

2. The most comprehensive critique of poststructuralist film theory is Noël Carroll, *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Film Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988). Roger Odin's *Cinéma et production de sens* (Paris: Colin, 1991) instantiates the return to 1960s Metzian themes.

3. See the collection of Bruner's papers, *Beyond the Information Given: Studies in the Psychology of Knowing* (New York: Norton, 1973). I outline the emerging paradigm in "A Case for Cognitivism." *Iris* 9 (Spring 1989): 11-40. See also "A Case for Cognitivism: Further Reflections," *Iris* 11 (Summer 1990): 107-112.

4. On "gist," see Carol Fleisher Feldman, Jerome Bruner, Bobbi Renderer, and Sally Spitzer, "Narrative Comprehension," in Bruce K. Britton and Anthony D. Pellegrini, eds., *Narrative Thought and Narrative Language* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1990) 1-78.

5. On the concept of the schema the classic source is F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1932). Useful orientations to contemporary conceptions of schemata can be found in Reid Hastie, "Schematic Principles in Human Memory," in E. Tony Higgins, C. Peter Herman, and Mark P. Zanna, eds., *Social Cognition: The Ontario Symposium*, vol. I (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1981) 39-88; and Ronald W. Casson, "Schemata in Cognitive Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 12 (1983): 429-462.
6. For information on the film, as well as an edition of the shooting script, see Albert J. LaValley, *Mildred Pierce* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1980). Production background can be found in Rudy Behlmer, *Inside Warner Bros. (1935-1951)* (New York: Viking, 1985) 254-264.
7. Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 45-55.
8. Joyce Nelson, "Mildred Pierce Reconsidered," *Film Reader* 2 (1977): 67.
9. Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947) 214-215.
10. Jean Mandler, *Stories, Scripts, and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1984).
11. Barthes, *S/z*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 67, 191.
12. 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 UP, 1985). Concrete work supplementing this line of thinking is exemplified by Roy G. D'Andrade, "Character Terms and Cultural Models," in Janet W. D. Dougherty, ed., *Directions in Cognitive Anthropology* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1985) 321-343, and Roy G. D'Andrade, "A Folk Model of the Mind," in Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn, eds., *Cultural Models in Language and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP) 112-148.
13. "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 et al., *Category of the Person*, p. 138.
14. Barthes 11.
15. 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.
16. Pam Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1978) 78.
17. Nelson 65.
18. Tyler 214.
19. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Methuen, 1990) 59-96; Murray Stuart Smith, "Character Engagement: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema," diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1991; Ed Tan, "Film als Emotiemachine: De affectstructuur van de traditionele speelfilm," diss., University of Amsterdam, 1991.
20. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989).
21. See my *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985).
22. See my "Historical Poetics of Cinema," in R. Barton Palmer, ed., *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches* (New York: AMS Press, 1989) 369-398.