Emotional Curves and Linear Narratives

I
n Fred Niblo’s 1921 version of The Three Musketeers D’Artagnan, played by Douglas Fairbanks, first joins forces with the title characters during an extended fight scene. The scene is packed with gags and stunts as Fairbanks leaps around the set with knife and sword in hand. At one point he even throws his sword like a harpoon. While such moments of spectacle are common in Hollywood films, ranging from the gags of comedian comedy to the musical numbers of Busby Berkeley, historians have long argued about the best way to theorize Hollywood’s strategies for combining narrative and other attractions.

We can usefully group the various theoretical models into three categories: a Classical model, which argues that a certain type of narrative operates as a dominant in relation to various subordinate systems; an Alternation model, which argues that the dominance of narrative alternates with the dominance of other systems; and an Affective model, which argues that linear narrative is itself subordinate to a more important goal, the production of emotion. After surveying these alternatives, I will propose my own version of the Affective model—a version that will, I hope, draw important insights from the other two models. My argument is that metaphors of “dominance” are not always helpful in understanding the relationship between narrative and other systems. Instead, narrative and other attractions can work together to produce an intensified emotional response. We can call this the Cooperation model, since the model explains how narrative and attractions can support each other. Part 1 offers a brief summary of three existing models. Part 2 explains my proposal for a Cooperation model. Part 3 applies the model to a set of films that have long played a central role in debates about the status of narrative in Hollywood: the musicals of Busby Berkeley.

I. Three Models

The most complete presentation of the Classical model appears in The Classical Hollywood Cinema by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. The book places particular emphasis on the importance of linear narrative. Bordwell writes, “Here in brief is the premise of Hollywood story construction: causality, consequence, psychological motivations, the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. Character-centered—i.e., personal or psychological—causality is the armature of the classical story” (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 13). This argument is supported by a mountain of evidence, from trade journals, how-to manuals, and one hundred randomly selected films, showing that these principles were operating in film after film.

Bordwell uses the Russian Formalist notion of the dominant to explain the relationship between the narrative and other systems. He writes, “This integrity deserves to be seen as a dynamic one, with the subordinated factors constantly pulling against the sway of the dominant . . . . These systems do not always rest quietly under the sway of narrative logic, but in general the causal dominant creates a marked hierarchy of systems in the classical film” (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 12). If given the example from The Three Musketeers, Bordwell might agree that the gags and stunts have an appeal all their own while arguing that their appeal is ultimately subordinated to a larger system—the system of causal logic, in which a goal-oriented character (D’Artagnan) overcomes obstacles as the story takes another step toward closure.

While acknowledging the book’s accomplishment, many theorists have criticized its arguments, including the argument that linear narrative operates as the dominant in the Hollywood system. Donald Crafton argues that the
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Classical model does not apply to slapstick films, even when the films contain a certain amount of narrative integration. In “Pie and Chase” he writes:

I contend that it was never the aim of comic filmmakers to “integrate” the gag elements of their movies. I also doubt that viewers subordinated gags to narrative. In fact, the separation between the vertical domain of slapstick (the arena of spectacle) I will represent by the metaphor of the thrown pie) and the horizontal domain of the story (the arena of the chase) was a calculated rupture, designed to keep the two elements antagonistically apart. (Crafton 107)

In a slapstick film the forward progress of the linear narrative is constantly being interrupted by gags that do nothing to help the protagonist achieve his or her goal. Crafton describes the structure of the slapstick film as a “complex system of alternation of spectacle and diegesis” (113). For this reason we might call this approach an Alternation model. Hollywood films do have causality, deadlines, and goals, but in some genres these linear components alternate with nonlinear moments of spectacle.2

In Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction Richard Maltby proposes a similar model. He writes, “Hollywood narration must negotiate the pleasurable interruptions of performance or spectacle, before reasserting itself in order to bring them (and consumption) to an end. The two elements of story-telling and spectacle are held in an essential tension, and the movie exists as a series of minor victories of one logic over the other” (Maltby 339). Whereas Crafton’s argument is restricted to one genre, Maltby argues that all Hollywood films alternate between moments of narrative dominance and moments when narrative is subordinated to other appeals. Maltby supports this view with a compelling argument that Hollywood films practice a “commercial aesthetic.” The argument is powerful because it rests on a simple yet persuasive appeal to economic common sense. Suppose there are three spectators: Sam likes detective stories, Susie likes stunts, and Sally likes both. If you make a movie with a tight detective story (but no stunts), you may get money from Sam and Sally but not Susie. If you make a movie with stunts (but no story), you may get money from Sally and Susie but not Sam. If you make a movie that offers both stunts and a story, you have a good chance of getting all three spectators to give you their money. Given that Hollywood made films to make money, it would seem that Hollywood had every reason to include as many different attractions (both narrative and non-narrative) as possible.3 If presented with the scene from The Three Musketeers, Maltby might point out that the scene goes on far longer than the causal chain requires. Every time Fairbanks performs an unnecessary stunt the commercial aesthetic is allowing attractions to overturn the dominance of narrative.

Maltby argues that one of the major reasons people go see movies is the desire to experience strong emotions in a safe context (35). Here Maltby anticipates a third model, which I call the Affective model. The Classical model emphasizes the dominance of linear narrative, while the Alternation model grants that classical narration is sometimes (but only sometimes) dominant. The Affective model goes one step farther, firmly placing the features of classical narration in a subordinate position. In “Comedy and Classicism” Dirk Eitzen writes:

[O]ne can make a movie that has all the elements that Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson attribute to classical Hollywood fiction—goal-oriented characters, a self-effacing style, a coherent fabula, and all the rest—that is still as dry as sand. Yet, strikingly, this is not what evolved in Hollywood. What evolved are stories that are full of sex, violence, melodrama, fast action, suspense and surprise, fantasy and horror, and, as I have been pointing out here, comedy. The transparent style evolved because, in most instances, that style gives the most emotional bang for the buck. But where another kind of emotional bang could be obtained by sacrificing narrative transparency, as in the case of comedy, there was evidently little hesitation in putting transparency aside. (404)

Eitzen concedes the point that most Hollywood films have the features that the Classical model says they do. However, he argues that this is only a “second-order explanation” (Eitzen 403), since narrative is only one way that Hollywood achieves its true aim: the production of emotion.

In “Melodrama Revised” Linda Williams also places classical narrative (in particular, classical realist narrative) in a subordinate position. She argues that “supposedly realist cinematic effects—whether of setting, action, acting or narrative motivation—most often operate in the service of melodramatic affects” (Williams 42). The typical melodramatic narrative encourages us to feel sympathy for an innocent victim. In pathos-driven melodramas the narrative builds up to a high point of tragic suffering. In action-driven melodramas the victimized protagonist fights and often defeats the evil forces. Either way, the melodrama is characterized by its appeal to moral feeling. The Three Musketeers fits neatly into Williams’s action-driven
category. The childlike D’Artagnan has been slighted by the Cardinal’s arrogant guards, and his status as an innocent victim gives his victory a powerful emotional charge.

Like Eitzen, Williams acknowledges the presence of certain classical features, such as deadlines. Similarly, Williams argues that the presence of these classical features does not establish the correctness of the Classical model, since those features are ultimately subordinated to a larger, emotion-based strategy. While Williams’s complex theory of melodrama covers many issues besides emotion, her argument that “we go to the movies not to think but to be moved” (61) suggests that her model can also be classed as an Affective model. 4

Many of these arguments rely on terms like “linearity” and “forward progress.” It might be useful to clarify what these terms might mean. First, we might say that a narrative is linear when the protagonist takes a step closer to achieving a goal. Although some of the models do use the term in this sense, it should be noted that this is a fairly limited conception of “linearity.” Any time a character encountered an obstacle, forward progress would come to a halt, and we would have a break in linearity. Since Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson include obstacles in their model, they are probably not using the notion of linearity in this narrow sense. A second sense refers to the linearity of the causal chain (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 64). A typical scene starts with an effect (i.e., something caused by a previous scene) and then introduces a new cause (which produces an effect in a later scene). In this sense, obstacles are indeed part of the linear structure, since they are typically caused by previous events while motivating future events. For critics of the Classical model, many of the best counterexamples are details that make no obvious contribution to the causal chain and are therefore nonlinear in this sense. The “causal chain” account of linearity is related to a third version, which stresses the spectator’s forward-looking activity. For Bordwell, the classical spectator is constantly forming hypotheses about what happens next. For Bordwell’s critics, musical numbers and gags serve as counterexamples to the Classical model precisely because they do not encourage spectators to wonder what happens next. Instead, they depart from linearity by encouraging spectators to focus on the present. 5 In formulating a new model we must keep these different senses of linearity in mind.

These quick summaries cannot do justice to the nuances of these arguments, but they serve to clarify a range of options for theorizing Hollywood narrative. Each model has its strengths. The Classical model is grounded in an impressive array of empirical evidence. 6 The Alternation model is supported by the highly persuasive logic of the “commercial aesthetic” argument. The Affective model is built on the highly plausible claim that people go to movies to experience emotion. My own alternative (which I call the Cooperation model) is a contribution to the Affective model. Specifically, I want to look at some of the most “classical” features of Hollywood narrative (such as goal orientation and closure) and show that they function to produce emotion just as much as they function to produce coherence. This should be a valuable contribution for two reasons. First, narrative is often studied as a system that organizes emotion-generating attractions rather than as a system that produces emotion in its own right. 7 Second, an emotion–centered analysis of Hollywood narrative will allow us to approach the issue of the dominant in a new way by recognizing that narrative and attractions can, in some cases, mutually intensify one another.

2. Anticipation, Culmination, and Emotion

In How to Write Photoplays (1920) John Emerson and Anita Loos offer the following advice to the aspiring screenwriter:

Many amateurs are prone to cheat their audience by ending the story without some bit of action which spectators have been led to expect and are hoping to see. Let us suppose that after your hero has triumphantly rescued the heroine, you end the story with a subtitle, “And So They Lived Happily Ever After.” That is too abrupt. You must add just a few scenes to satisfy the very understandable craving to see the hero reaping the rewards of heroism as the girl comes to his arms.

“But this is the same old ending,” you protest. True enough. But it is essential if your audience is to feel satisfied. In the same way, if the villain is finally defeated, you must gratify your audience’s desire to see him dragged off to jail. Don’t leave this sort of thing to the imagination. (104)

As Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson have pointed out, Emerson and Loos spend many pages in their book encouraging their students to strive for causal coherence. However, I suggest that “causal coherence” is not the defining value in this passage. If spectators were only interested in learning what happens at the end, they would be satisfied with the subtitle. The fact that they are not suggests that they want something more than coherence. They want to see the culmination take place. They want to experience an emotional response to the event itself.
In the happy ending we get to celebrate an event that we have been hoping to see. This seems like an innocuous claim, but a closer look reveals hidden complications. Notice that there are two kinds of emotions working here. First, we have an anticipatory emotion: hope. A Hollywood narrative typically encourages us to anticipate future events and revelations. If these anticipated outcomes are emotionally weighted (generally, by sympathy for the protagonist), we experience hope: hope that the protagonist achieves his or her goals. By throwing obstacles in the way of the protagonist the narrative can generate another anticipatory emotion: fear that the protagonist will fail. Anticipatory emotions can be called “linear” in the sense that they are directed at future events and revelations.

By contrast, when a character actually conquers an obstacle we are expected to feel immediate delight. When a line of action culminates in a scene of success or failure we experience feelings of celebration or commiseration. We might call these “culminating emotions.” These emotions are related to the linear structure in a different way. If hope and fear are directed toward the future, then celebration and commiseration are directed toward the present. Emerson and Loos acknowledge that Hollywood offers more than just the anticipatory emotions of hope and fear. Audiences expect to experience the culminating emotions generated by experiencing the scene of the villain being dragged off to jail.

A Hollywood narrative is not a long series of anticipatory scenes followed by a single culminating scene. Typically, the protagonist has dozens of minor victories and defeats along the way. In An American in Paris (Vincente Minnelli, 1951) we delight when Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron first realize their love for each other. In Murder, My Sweet (Edward Dmytryk, 1944) we despair when Dick Powell has been captured and drugged against his will. In North by Northwest (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959) we delight when Cary Grant defeats the murderous crop-duster. In My Best Girl (Sam Taylor, 1927) we despair when the young lovers are separated. Each one of these scenes occurs well before the ending of the respective film, but these scenes provide for moments of celebration and commiseration. The metaphor of “linearity” is only partially helpful here. From the standpoint of cognitive comprehension it can indeed be useful to see the Hollywood narrative as an unbroken linear chain with a relentless forward progress. However, from the standpoint of emotional experience, it might be more useful to see it as a complex weaving together of anticipation/culmination structures in which our emotional reactions to present events are just as important as our anticipatory reactions to future events. Rather than use the term linearity to describe this complex pattern, we might do well to make a few more distinctions. The anticipation/culmination structures can run simultaneously (as when a film contains both an action plot and a romance plot); they can run successively (as when a comedian solves one problem only to be faced by another, unrelated problem); they can run consequentially (as when the solution to a mystery produces the new problem of apprehending the criminal); or they can be nested (as when the solution to a minor problem helps the protagonist solve a major problem). These simple distinctions should help us describe the emotional structure of Hollywood narrative with more precision than the linearity metaphor will allow.

The crop-duster sequence from North by Northwest is only moderately important for the overall causal chain. It encourages Roger to suspect Eve, but this narrational function could be accomplished more efficiently with a shorter scene. Why does this minor link in a larger chain have so much emotional power? My suggestion is that the scene develops its own anticipation/culmination structure, nested within the larger narrative. By having the plane attack Roger, Hitchcock generates the fear that Roger will be killed. Then he produces a culminating moment when Roger manages to escape. North by Northwest, like most Hollywood narratives, can be described as a system for manipulating our feelings of hope and fear, delight and despair. From this point of view, the crop-duster sequence is not a minor addition to the causal chain but an excellent example of Hollywood narrative doing its work: manipulating our feelings by placing a character we care about in a situation of danger. Once the larger narrative has made us care about a character, a film can give us a series of different problems, like the “nested” crop-duster problem, to play on those feelings.

This proposal is similar to Noël Carroll’s proposal concerning film suspense. Carroll argues that the causal links in a narrative are not as tight as we often suppose. Instead, he suggests that Hollywood narratives produce coherence by raising emotionally charged questions and then answering them. A narrative typically involves a few macroquestions, structuring the entire film, and several microquestions, structuring scenes and sequences. We can find similar proposals in less theoretical sources. For instance, contemporary screenwriting manuals, such as The Tools of
Screenwriting, often discuss narrative in terms of questions, answers, hopes, and fears. As the quotation from Emerson and Loos suggests, Hollywood filmmakers of the classical period may have thought of narrative in similar terms.

Does this mean that Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson are wrong to argue that Hollywood filmmakers valued causality and coherence? No. There is far too much evidence on their side to make such a claim. Rather than dispute that evidence, I would simply propose an additional, emotion-centered explanation for the features that are highlighted in their account. As Bordwell would point out, a commitment to causality allows us to anticipate what will come next. This helps clarify the narrative, but I would add that anticipation is also a necessary condition for the experience of hope and fear. Clearly defined endings do indeed provide closure, but I would add that they provide the opportunity for celebration or commiseration. When the lovers kiss at the end of a romance, we are not happy simply because the narrative has achieved maximum coherence; we are happy because we can celebrate the culmination of a long process of hopeful anticipation. The narrative has produced a hope and then fulfilled it.

The sympathetic, goal-oriented protagonist is another common feature of Hollywood storytelling. Goal orientation clarifies problems by producing mutually exclusive alternatives (either the protagonist will succeed or the protagonist will fail). Making the protagonist sympathetic allows us to emotionally weight those alternatives. Once the film has established this basic structure it can play on our emotions with obstacles, successes, and failures. Obstacles intensify our anticipatory feelings of hope and fear. When a protagonist overcomes an obstacle we feel a fulfilling emotion: delight. When a protagonist gives up in the face of an obstacle we feel another culminating emotion: despair. Obstacles are not simply breaks in the forward progress of the story. They are essential tools of Hollywood narrative as a system for producing emotions.

While conventions like goal orientation are means toward the end of coherence, they are also means toward the end of emotional experience. Since they are only means to an end, it should not surprise us to learn that Hollywood filmmakers will use variations when they can achieve the same end more efficiently. For instance, Frank Capra’s movies offer numerous variations on the norm of goal orientation. In Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) neither Jimmy Stewart nor Jean Arthur ever seems to tackle the goal of winning the love of the other. Nevertheless, the spectator is encouraged to hope that they will fall in love with each other before the end of the movie—a hope that is eventually realized. It Happened One Night (1934) provides another variation on the norm of goal orientation. Clark Gable tackles a goal: to help Claudette Colbert meet with her fiancé. However, even though Gable plays a sympathetic protagonist, we hope that he fails completely, because the narrative has posed a more important problem, encouraging us to hope that Gable and Colbert fall in love with each other. We might call Gable’s stated goal a “false problem”—he tackles it, but spectators are supposed to know that it is not his true problem. These counterexamples do not destroy the model; rather, they encourage us to move up one level of abstraction. The emotionally weighted problem with clearly defined alternatives is the center of Hollywood dramatic structure. Goal orientation is a common way to achieve clearly defined alternatives, and the sympathetic protagonist is a common way to produce emotional weighting. This explains why they are such common features, but acknowledging that they are merely means allows ample room for exceptions and variations.

At this point it might be objected that this model, with half of its focus on hope and fear, places too much emphasis on uncertainty. Don’t we often know how a film is going to end? Perhaps, given the genre, it is simply inconceivable that the boy and girl will not fall in love by the end of the film. Perhaps we have an even better reason to be certain: we have seen the film before. How can we experience hope or fear for an event that we know is going to happen? To meet this objection we can note that some anticipatory emotions are based on uncertainty. For instance, suppose I have a daughter in school, and I have been told ahead of time that she is going to win an award at tonight’s award ceremony. My emotion is one of “eager anticipation”—I await the ceremony with delight precisely because I am 100 percent certain that she will win. Alternatively, I might feel dread when I know for a fact that something terrible is going to happen. There is no reason why narrative cannot play on these kinds of anticipatory emotions. Indeed, Emerson and Loos seem to assume as much: they note that spectators have been “led to expect” a kiss and would feel cheated without one. When we feel certain that the two lovers will kiss at the end of the film we can eagerly anticipate the scene. This anticipation will intensify our feelings of joy when the culminating scene of the kiss finally occurs.9

I am not the first person to discuss the relevance of emotions for an analysis of Hollywood narrative. In addition to
Williams, Eitzen, and Carroll we might mention writers as diverse as Marilyn Fabe and Ed S. Tan. Fabe’s close analyses carefully describe Hollywood’s manipulation of hope and fear, while Tan has explained our emotional response to goal-oriented narratives in psychological terms. So far I have contributed to the discussion by proposing some useful distinctions, such as the distinctions between anticipatory and culminating emotions and the distinctions between emotions of certainty and emotions of uncertainty. Next, I want to make a more ambitious contribution. Shifting our attention from comprehension to emotion can give us new insights into the ways that Hollywood integrates narrative and other attractions. Specifically, I want to argue that the notion of “dominance,” which plays a crucial role in all three of the models analyzed in part 1, is only appropriate in certain contexts. The problem is that “dominance” carries unavoidable connotations of struggle, as one system seeks to control another. If narrative is seen as a rational system of organization and containment while the attraction is seen as a momentary appeal to the senses, then it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that the systems are locked in struggle. However, if narrative and attractions are both theorized as systems for producing strong emotions, then it seems much more reasonable to conclude that they can coexist peacefully. Indeed, they might even be able to mutually intensify one another.

Returning to the example of *The Three Musketeers*, it is not enough to say that the causal chain has led us to expect a display of D’Artagnan’s skill. The narrative has also led us to hope for such a display. This scene is a culmination of those hopes. It is true that the gags and stunts have a value independent of the narrative. They would be enjoyable if we saw them performed in, say, a variety show. However, we are supposed to take an extra joy here because the stunts are being performed by this character—D’Artagnan, a sympathetic character who has become the vehicle for our hopes and fears. The more successfully the narrative has manipulated our hopes and fears with regard to D’Artagnan, the more delight we take in the audacious stunts. Meanwhile, the more spectacular the stunts, the more we admire D’Artagnan and the more delight we will take in his future successes. We can only speak of “dominance” and “struggle” when we have competing interests. Here, the interests of narrative and the interests of spectacle are not in competition. They are not even in an uneasy truce. They are working together to produce an intensified emotional response.

As another example, consider the dance scenes in the Astaire-Rogers musicals. Often cited as examples of the “integrated” musical, these films integrate the numbers into the emotional curve as much as they integrate them into the causal chain. As *Top Hat* screenwriter Allan Scott once said, “It wasn’t just mechanical. There were points where we knew we had to have it. You came to an intimate scene of some kind, whether it was flirting or what not, and that was the time for music” (quoted in Server 190). The narrative encourages us to hope that these two characters will dance together as part of the romance. In other words, we don’t want to see just any romantic dance. We want to see a romantic dance with the two characters the narrative has encouraged us to care about. Meanwhile, the dances themselves, as marvelous moments of spectacle, can intensify our experience of the romantic narrative. The more perfectly coordinated the dance, the more graceful the movement, the more we delight in our sense of satisfaction that these two characters are right for each other.

An emotional curve can be created by manipulating goals, obstacles, and solutions to produce feelings like sympathy, antipathy, hope, fear, delight, and despair. These components can be coordinated with many different attractions. For instance, the attraction of a particular star can generate instant sympathy for a character. An act of spectacular violence can generate instant hatred for a villain. A sad song can intensify the emotions we feel when lovers are separated. A dangerous stunt can increase our fears concerning the safety of the hero. A sight gag can allow the protagonist to overcome an obstacle in an unexpected way. In such cases the spectator who likes attractions can enjoy the film just as much as the spectator who likes narrative, while the spectator who likes both can enjoy the film for multiple reasons.

Here, my argument draws on Maltby’s arguments concerning the commercial aesthetic. Because Hollywood made films to make money we should expect Hollywood to include as many different appeals as possible. It is not hard to find evidence for this claim. For instance, consider the Warner Bros. film *Fashions of 1934*, directed by William Dieterle, with a musical number by Busby Berkeley. In a memo to Hal Wallis producer Henry Blanke writes, “I hope you realize that in the picture, *King of Fashion* [the film’s original title], we have the making of a really excellent picture . . . and I know that the women will just eat it up—not only on account of its story but on account of its interesting background of fashions” (Oct. 10, 1933).
When the picture was released the next year returns were disappointing. In a memo to Jack Warner, Wallis blames both the ad campaign and the new title for placing too much emphasis on fashion, a strategy that he claims “excludes men entirely.” Instead, he writes, “A sales campaign aimed along the lines of 42nd Street, Footlight Parade, etc., of beautiful girls, music, comedy, and so forth, certainly should have great appeal” (Jan. 27, 1934). It is clear that Blanke and Wallis both believe that multiple attractions should increase a film’s drawing power. It is also clear that they do not expect a monolithic audience. Guided by a few obvious stereotypes, they assume that different spectators want to see different things. Their aesthetic decisions are guided by commercial considerations.

I would take Maltby’s argument one step farther. Suppose we make a detective film that constantly interrupts the narrative for a series of stunts. The spectators who enjoy the emotional power of the narrative may get bored during these interruptions, no matter how pleasurable the interruptions are for the spectators who enjoy stunts. Now suppose we make a detective film in which the stunts are coordinated with the narrative in such a way that the generation of narrative-based pleasures is not suspended. For instance, a dangerous stunt might intensify our fears regarding the detective’s safety. The stunt fan still gets to see some stunts, while the devotee of detective stories need not suspend his or her pleasure while waiting for the stunts to conclude. Wouldn’t the latter film be more appealing than the first film, burdened as it is with so many interruptions? Once we assume that narrative has some emotional rewards to offer, Maltby’s argument about the commercial aesthetic turns out to be an argument in favor of fewer interruptions, not more. Ideally, the narrative and attractions produce emotions at the same time. This is why I call my model the Cooperation model. It is possible for narrative and attractions to work together.

Does this mean that all this talk about dominance has been misguided? Not necessarily. As the example from Fashions of 1934 suggests, Hollywood did not have a magic formula for getting the balance just right. A dominance model can still help us understand certain films, since narrative and attractions do sometimes compete for dominance. My proposal is that we should expect a spectrum of possibilities. On one side of the spectrum there are mutually intensifying examples where narrative and attractions work together, as when a sad song expresses the mood of a sad moment or when a dangerous stunt increases our fears. On the other side of the spectrum there are mutually limiting examples where narrative and attractions do indeed struggle for dominance, as when a flashy musical number appears in the middle of a suspenseful detective story or when a silly sight gag appears in the middle of a tear-jerking drama. Given the commercial aesthetic, any given film may contain a range of combinations from any side of the spectrum.

In part 3 I would like to demonstrate what such a mixture might look like using a set of films that are often invoked as evidence for Hollywood’s willingness to use narrative as a mere excuse for spectacle: the Busby Berkeley musicals of the 1930s. Drawing on archival research, I would like to show that the relationship between narrative and spectacle is much more complex. In some cases they do struggle for dominance. In other cases the emotional power of the spectacle is integrated more tightly with the emotional curve of the narrative.

3. Narrative and Spectacle in the Films of Busby Berkeley

At first glance, a Busby Berkeley musical might seem like the perfect example of a Hollywood film that resorts to the more extreme solution of switching back and forth between narrative and nonnarrative elements (as in the Alternation model). For instance, Footlight Parade (Lloyd Bacon, 1933) contains about seventy minutes of fast-paced narrative action, followed by three consecutive Berkeley numbers. A glance at the screenplays to these films also suggests that the numbers were conceived independently of the narrative. For instance, consider this passage from Delmer Daves’s final continuity script of Dames (Ray Enright, 1934):

183. INT. THEATRE—(FROM AUDIENCE ANGLE)
The curtains open on the:
184. FIRST NUMBER OF SHOW . . . MUSIC SPOT 7
185. MED. CLOSE SHOT—EZRA’S BOX
As number is completed—applause. (Daves 111)

Daves does not bother to give any details about the number itself. Instead, he treats the number as an independent module, the content of which is to be determined by Berkeley. In some cases, this modular construction allowed the order of numbers to be changed in editing; the final continuity of Gold Diggers of 1933 (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933) has the “Forgotten Man” number in the middle of the script, but...
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it appears at the end of the finished film. The nonnarrative quality of these numbers seems so obvious that it can even be parodied in the films, as in Dames, when Dick Powell sings to a group of middle-aged businessmen:

But who cares if there’s a plot or not
When they’ve got a lot of dames?
What do you go for? Go see a show for?
Tell the truth. You go to see those beautiful dames.

These lyrics would seem to prove the oft-made suggestion that musicals use the plot as a mere excuse. In his insightful book on Busby Berkeley, Martin Rubin does a good job explaining the ways that Berkeley draws on a spectacle-oriented tradition.

On the other hand, as Bordwell might point out, narrative still plays an important role. On the most basic level the numbers are motivated by the theatrical setting. Of course, this motivation does not extend to the details of the numbers, since we could hardly expect the theatrical audience to see Berkeley’s overhead kaleidoscopes. Nevertheless, the numbers are undeniable integrated into the causal chain, since it is the success of the numbers that provides closure to that causal chain. Furthermore, the numbers themselves often include mininarratives, such as the story about the “Honeymoon Hotel” in Footlight Parade. Alternatively, a number could introduce or develop themes and motifs from the “story” portion of the film. One famous example is the ironic “We’re in the Money” number that introduces us to the topical Depression-era setting of Gold Diggers of 1933.

But we must not stop there. As I have argued throughout this essay, it is useful to think of narrative not simply as a tool for the production of coherence but also as a tool for the creation of emotions like hope, fear, delight, and despair. Rather than break the narrative down into unity-producing causes and effects, we can break it down into emotion-producing components, relating to the success or failure of the protagonists. In the Berkeley musicals the components might include “apparent failures” (which produce feelings of despair, even as the possibility of a reversal is left open), “doubt generators” (which play on our fears that the protagonist will fail), “stakes reminders” (which encourage us to remember why we are hoping the protagonist will succeed), and “nested successes” (which allow us to feel moments of delight, even as the larger problem remains to be solved).

Let us take the final half-hour of 42nd Street (Lloyd Bacon, 1932) as an example, using these terms to demon-
depend upon. It’s the lives of all these people who have worked with you. You’ve got to go on, and you have to give and give and give. They’ve got to like you, they’ve got to. Do you understand? You can’t fall down. You can’t because, because your future’s in it, my future, and everything all of us have is staked on you.” What is the purpose of this speech? It works causally, to be sure, since Marsh’s directorial skill helps to motivate Peggy’s success. But its primary purpose, I suggest, is to prepare us emotionally for the film’s climactic culmination. The speech reminds us that all of our emotionally weighted questions about the success or failure of the protagonists will soon be answered; either our hopes or our fears will soon be decisively realized. The actual culmination is the performance itself. This means that the numbers are integrated into the anticipation/culmination structure as tightly as they could possibly be—the entire structure revolves around the success or failure of the numbers themselves.

The narrative structure of anticipation has been coordinated with a nonnarrative structure of anticipation. Just as we hope that the numbers are as good as the sympathetic protagonists need them to be, we hope that the spectacular numbers are as dazzling as they have been advertised to be. Similarly, the narrative culmination is coordinated with the nonnarrative culmination: our delight at our protagonists’ success merges with our astonishment at Berkeley’s numbers.

In the Busby Berkeley musical narrative is not just an excuse for the numbers; it intensifies our emotional response to the numbers. Meanwhile, the numbers are much more than mere components in a causal chain. Rather than struggle for dominance, narrative and nonnarrative elements work together to produce an intensified emotional curve. This principle of emotional coordination is even hinted at in an early draft of the script for Footlight Parade. The screenwriters, James Seymour and Manuel Seff, write, “If any scene lacks incident or drags it must be cut. The picture must have the pace of a production dance number punched up with a minimum of dialogue” (1). This passage illustrates the problems with opposing the “forward progress” of narrative to the “static spectacle” of narrative interruptions. Footlight Parade has a famously fast-paced causal chain, but this is not to observe the dictates of classical coherence, it is to duplicate the feel of a Busby Berkeley musical number.

So far I have argued that the Warner Bros. musicals follow a mutual intensification principle. The numbers are integrated into the anticipation/culmination structure, and the emotional curve is intensified by emotional coordination. But is there no truth to the notion that the narrative is in some way sacrificed during the numbers themselves? Although it may be true that mutual intensification is an ideal, maximizing emotion may require certain sacrifices along the way. At times, narrative and attractions will indeed struggle for dominance.

Again, 42nd Street provides an example. Perhaps because Berkeley’s working methods had not yet been fully established, the writers of the first draft continuity (Whitney Bolton and James Seymour) made a strong effort to integrate the numbers on a moment-by-moment basis. For instance, Dick Powell’s main number is described in detail:

433. CLOSE SHOT—BILLY
singing number.
434. CLOSE SHOT—PEGGY IN DRESSING ROOM
sitting relaxed—eyes closed. At distant sound of Billy’s number, Peggy opens her eyes, sits up straight, listens[,] smiling happily.
435. CLOSE SHOT—BILLY
singing his heart out.
436. CLOSE SHOT—GRIM BESPECTACLED CRITIC
in aisle seat, nodding with pleased smile as Billy sings, whispers to neighbor and looks at program.
CRITIC
(whispering)
Good kid—youth, personality—who is he?
Critic studies program.
437. FULL SHOT—STAGE
Billy finishes verse and girl chorus enters.

The number in the finished film does not follow the script. Most important, there are no cutaways, neither to Peggy nor to the grim bespectacled critic. Why did the screenwriters include the cutaways in the first place? The cutaway to Peggy suggests that Billy is singing the song to her. This allows the number to become a celebration of the successful resolution of the Peggy/Billy storyline. The cutaway to the critic increases our hope that the successful numbers will contribute to the success of the show. In other words, the writers were attempting to play on anticipatory and culminating emotions. Why does the finished film eliminate the cutaways? Both these cutaways intensify our emotional response to the narrative, but they do so at a cost. Every time we cut away from the number we miss out on the spectacle of the performance. Even worse, both cutaways make it more difficult to hear Billy’s
singing. Presumably, the filmmakers decided that the cost was too great, and the cutaways were eliminated. Instead, a compromise has been reached. Considered as a unit, each number is tightly integrated into the emotional curve, since the success of the number is integral to the solution of the problem. Considered on a more local level, the moment-by-moment play of the anticipation/culmination structure has been sacrificed, since it might threaten the number’s independent power to astonish and delight. When the leads give way to anonymous chorus girls, the anticipation/culmination structure is virtually abandoned.

Later films employ more efficient solutions. For instance, the anticipation/culmination structure is more fully integrated into Footlight Parade’s notorious “Shanghai Lil” number because protagonist Chester Kent (James Cagney) has unexpectedly been forced to perform the lead role without any rehearsal at all. Of course, Kent manages to pull it off, and our delight in Cagney’s talent merges with our delight in the protagonist’s success. Still, Berkeley does not foreground the moment-by-moment play of the narrative’s emotional curve as much as he might. A director who was solely concerned with the narrative might have used more close-ups of Cagney’s face during the performance to play upon our anxieties, reminding us at each moment that Cagney might not pull it off. This strategy might have aided the narrative, but it would have ruined the spectacle.

In short, there is some struggle for dominance, but the notion of struggle does not capture the entire relationship. Narrative continues to do its emotion-generating work, even during a Busby Berkeley musical number. The film balances narrative and nonnarrative elements to produce intensified emotions, although the compromise solution must ultimately work within mutually limiting factors. The balance leans toward mutual intensification when a character we care about (such as Ruby Keeler) is doing a dazzling dance. The balance leads toward a struggle for dominance when kaleidoscopic patterns are formed by anonymous dancers.

Conclusion

In this essay I have suggested that a Cooperation model can clarify some of the details of the Affective model. The Affective approach suggests that Hollywood uses both narrative and attractions to create emotion. This essay explains how that combination works in practice. Rather than look at narrative as an organizational system designed to produce comprehension, we can look at narrative as an emotional system designed to produce feelings of hope, fear, delight, and despair. Rather than emphasize the ways that narrative causes us to look ahead to unknown events, we can recognize that narrative also encourages us to enjoy culminating emotions “in the present” and even to eagerly anticipate some events that we know for certain are going to happen. Rather than see narrative structure as a linear chain of causes and effects, we can see narrative as a complex weave of anticipation/culmination structures, including simultaneous, successive, consequential, and nested structures. Finally, rather than theorizing the relationship between narrative and attractions as one of struggle, we can recognize that narrative and attractions can often cooperate to create an intensified emotional response. At the same time, we need not sacrifice the strengths of the other two models. The Classical model is right to insist on the importance of goal orientation and closure. I would add that these devices were valued in part because they perform affective functions. The Alternation model is right to insist on the importance of the commercial aesthetic. I would add that the commercial aesthetic gave Hollywood filmmakers every reason to look for ways of combining narrative and attractions. Attractions are more than just interruptions. Narrative is more than just an organizing structure. They are both systems with the tremendous power to influence emotion. From the action films of Douglas Fairbanks to the musical films of Busby Berkeley, Hollywood has developed a range of strategies for allowing these two systems to work together.

Notes

I would like to thank Lisa Jasinski, David Bordwell, the Warner Bros. Archives, the editors of the Velvet Light Trap, and the anonymous reader for their help with this article. The late Frank Daniel, who taught screenwriting at USC for many years, inspired much of my thinking about narrative and emotion.

1. Thanks to the anonymous reader for suggesting that I give my model this name.

2. In his “Response to ‘Pie and Chase’” Tom Gunning argues that Crafton underestimates the degree to which slapstick comedies employ narrative integration. Gunning’s model of the “cinema of narrative integration” is a variant of the Classical model, but Gunning places particular emphasis on the struggle between attractions and the narrative dominant.

3. The Sam, Susie, and Sally example is my own, but I think it captures the point of Maltby’s argument (see Maltby 24–35). For
another argument that questions the dominance of narrative in the face of economic pressures see Cowie. Cowie also offers a subtle critique of the way The Classical Hollywood Cinema employs the notion of “motivation.”

4. These five arguments are but a few of the many arguments that prominent scholars have made concerning the structure of the Hollywood film. I do not have the space to cover them all, but one influential article demands acknowledgment: Rick Altman’s “Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today.” By granting the existence of classical features while insisting that they may coexist with other, equally important systems (such as the system of melodrama), Altman strongly influenced the development of what I am calling the Affective model.

5. In “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions” Tom Gunning contrasts the temporality of the cinema of narrative integration, in which moments are absorbed into a complex pattern, with the temporality of the cinema of attractions, in which spectators experience “an intense form of the present tense” (44). While my essay focuses on Hollywood cinema of the studio period, it is important to note that studies of early cinema have inspired much of the interest in the relationship between narrative and other attractions. At the other end of the historical spectrum, many scholars compare the “classical” Hollywood cinema with a “postclassical” Hollywood cinema. See Smith for a discussion of this scholarship.

6. Many of the critics of the Classical model attempt to problematize the model by pointing out examples of scenes that do nothing to advance the causal chain. However, with their wealth of evidence, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson can happily grant the existence of exceptions while pointing to hundreds of films that support their theory. Indeed, they insist that subordinate elements can be seen struggling against the dominant principle. Bordwell has also argued that many of these counterexamples do, in fact, serve the causal chain, albeit in subtle ways (see Planet Hong Kong 179).

7. Bordwell has excellent insights about the ways narration shapes cognitive comprehension, but he openly acknowledges that he is less interested in emotion (Narration 39). Maltby argues that narrative serves to generate emotion, but he is more interested in the ways that narrative organizes the pleasures of performance and spectacle (339). Similarly, Rick Altman argues that narrative serves to give Hollywood’s list of appeals the appearance of internal motivation (26), while Tom Gunning argues that narrative is usefully understood as a system of containment (“Response” 121). The point is that Hollywood narrative is usually studied as a system of organization and not as a system for the production of emotion. Even Etizen stops short of explaining how narrative itself can generate emotion. The essays by Linda Williams and Noël Carroll represent important exceptions to this trend.

8. Ed Tan’s phrase “film as an emotion machine” fits nicely here (see Tan 251).

9. Would any of the authors discussed in part 1 disagree with the analysis offered so far? Not necessarily. This model may spell out details that are implicit in their theories. For instance, Bordwell does not deny the existence of emotion; he is just more interested in comprehension.

10. It might clarify my project to say that I am not offering a psychological theory of the emotions in the manner of Tan. Rather, I am making the historical argument that Hollywood filmmakers systematically designed their films to appeal to emotions as they are understood in ordinary language. In other words, my argument does not rest on evidence about the psychology of spectators. It rests on evidence about Hollywood filmmakers and the construction of films.  

11. For a careful analysis of the ways that gags are integrated with narrative in the films of Buster Keaton see Noël Carroll’s two essays on The General in his book Interpreting the Moving Image.

Works Cited


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