

3. The Obvious and the Code ■ (on *The Big Sleep*)

Let us take as an example twelve shots from *The Big Sleep*. They are inscribed between two major "scenes." The first, in Eddy Mars's garage—where Vivian enters the action on Marlowe's side for the first time—culminates in the death of Canino; the second, in Geiger's house, is the end of the film—Eddy Mars's death brings the open series of enigma and peripeteia to a close and sets the seal on the emergence of a couple. In between the two there are twelve shots showing Vivian and Marlowe in the car on the way from the garage to the house.

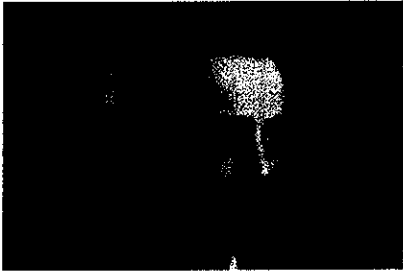
As a specific unit of code, they correspond exactly to what Christian Metz, in his *grande syntagmatique*, calls a "scene," that is, an autonomous segment, characterized by a chronological coincidence between "the unique consecutiveness of the signifier (deployment on the screen) and the unique consecutiveness of the signified (= the time of the fiction)."¹ On the other hand, as a specifically textual unit, they also constitute what I have chosen to call, in work toward a description of the classical narrative film, a *segment*,² that is, a moment in the filmic chain that is delimited both by an elusive but powerful sense of dramatic or fictional unity and by the more rigorous notion of identity of setting and characters of the narrative. (When, as is most often the case, the two pertinences do not overlap completely, i.e., when a significant variation in location or character appears within one and the same segment, the segment divides into sub-segments.) In this case the dramatic unity is obvious—a pause between two strong times marked by the deaths of Canino and Eddy Mars, respectively, and a resumption of verbal relations between Vivian and Marlowe. Identity of characters and location is absolute—throughout the segment we have a car and the two main characters in intimate conversation. Finally, the segmental nature of the shots is reinforced by an element which, for all that it is not inherent in its definition, is often consubstantial with it in the classic narrative; the twelve shots open and close on lap dissolves—a punctuation that here functions as a (redundant) sign of demarcation.³



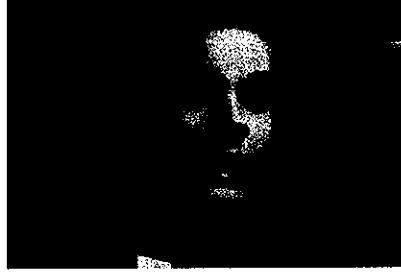
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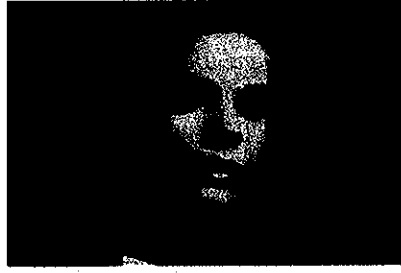
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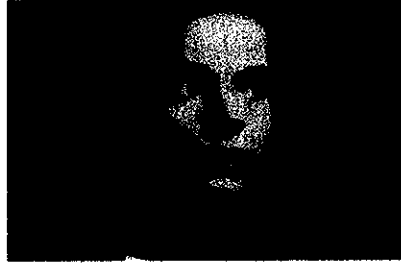
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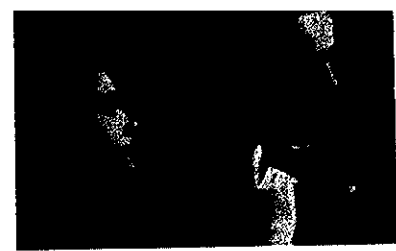
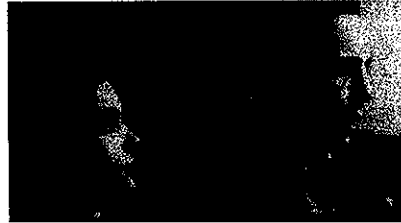
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8



	Framing	S/M	Angle	Characters	Speech	Time	Elements of Narration
1	MS → MCS	M	↗	VM	-	+	
2	CS	S	↗	VM	+VM	+	
3	CU	S	↗	M	+M	-	
4	CU	S	↑	V	+VM	-	
5	CU	S	↗	M	+M	-	
6	CU	S	↑	V	+MV	-	V: "I guess I am in love with you."
7	CS	S	↗	VM	+VM	++	Marlowe's movement as he takes a corner
8	CU	S	↑	V	+M	-	
9	CU	S	↗	M	+M	-	
10	CS	S	↗	VM	+VM	+	M: "I guess I am in love with you."
11	CU	S	↑	V	-	-	
12	CS	S	↗	VM	-	+	Vivian puts her hand on Marlowe's arm.
	a	b	c	d	e	f	

The interest of this segment lies in its relative poverty. Even an attentive viewer will not retain anything with certainty except the impression of a certain amount of vague unity. Questioned, he will very likely hazard the view that the segment consists of a long take supported by dialogue, or at best, of two or three shots. But Hawks needed twelve shots to secure the economy of this segment. Undoubtedly, that economy was designed so as not to be perceived, which is in fact one of the determining features of the American cinema. But it exists, and from it the classical mode of narration draws a part of its power. It is true, as Metz has observed, that "(that mode) is geared toward the sequence, and it is the sequence (and not the shot) that is its preoccupation, its constant problem."⁴ But the organic material of this preoccupation is the prior set of formal, hierarchically ordered relations between the shots. What I want to show here is how the simplest narrative fact imaginable—two characters talking in a car—can come to set into play a series of elementary but subtle operations that ensure its integration into the development of a narration. It is on this level that the—relative—poverty of this segment is exemplary.

According to Rivette's famous formula, "obviousness is the mark of Howard Hawks's genius."⁵ No doubt—provided we recognize the extent to which that obviousness only comes to the fore insofar as it is coded.

The text of the segment is constituted by the concerted action of six codes, listed from (a) to (f) in the accompanying recapitulatory table. The first three concern variations in scale between the shots, whether they are static or moving, and camera angle (symbolized by the arrow). These are three specific codes that manifest the potentialities of one of the five materials of expression proper to all sound film, that is, the image track.⁶ The three others are non-specific codes; the presence or absence of this or that character or characters from the units considered (and note the lack of extension of this code here—there is no shot without a character), whether they express themselves in dialogue or not, and finally whether these units are of greater or lesser duration, does not depend on cinema. In the case of the last code, a relative imprecision will be noted—the times of each shot are brought into clear opposition, and this is just one of the multiple abstractions to which the codes subject the text. As for those elements consigned to the seventh column, they do, of course, fall within a code; but its extension differs radically from that of the remaining six. It differs in two senses: as a code of narrative actions it is of itself broader than the rest, pluri-codic from the outset through the different levels on which its elements are located; in addition, it only takes on its specific value as code in the light of the body of the text (e.g., the film), for which it determines one of the principal semantic axes. It is a reflection of this extension that it figures here in only a restricted number of elements capable of entering into combination with the action of the other six codes in the circumscribed space of twelve shots.

The most direct oppositions of the segment emerge between shots 1 and 2. Shot 1 is the only moving shot; it tracks in to frame the front right window of the car, and (from medium shot to medium-close shot) delimits two frames that are to have no equivalent in the remainder of the segment. I should stress (something which does not seem to have constituted a distinct code but might have done so) that it is the

only shot taken outside the car. A fourth—correlative—opposition is marked in the transition between presence and absence of dialogue. But from shot 1 to 2 the narration is at pains to soften any excessive difference, ensuring continuity on three levels: through the relative identity of duration of the shots; the combined presence of the two main characters in both shots; and above all by maintaining the initial camera angle (from left to right), which is the simplest way of ensuring a sense that one is watching one and the same shot (see stills 1–12).

Shot 3 starts from an unevenly graduated transition (it is static like shot 2, and preserves the same camera angle as shots 1 and 2) to introduce another series of differences. The two characters/one character (Marlowe) change has its three correlates: passage from medium-close shot to close-up, from long take to short take, and the centering of the dialogue on one character.

Shot 4 refines this beginning of a system. We pass naturally from one character to the other, from Marlowe to Vivian, as if shot 2 had been divided to show us in turn the hero and the heroine, giving each of them the same reduction in framing and duration. But this comes only at the cost of a double difference: Vivian does not speak alone in shot 4 as Marlowe did in shot 3. Instead, they both talk. And above all, the angle changes completely to show Vivian full face, enclosed by the space of the car interior—the reverse of Marlowe, beside whose face the night landscape continues to flow, discernible through the left front window of the car.

Thereafter the segment organizes itself on this twofold opposition, alternating between two characters and one character, and between each of the two characters. But while the static nature of the shot, the distribution of the scale of framing, and the camera angle remain invariable, the other pertinences undergo notable changes.

a. First, the distribution of the characters. The shots that show the characters alone follow a very precisely graded pattern that complicates the initial 2/1-1 alternation. This pattern may be broken down as follows: four alternating shots (3–6), then two (8–9), then one (11). Inevitably, within the gradual contraction that marks the curve of the segment and ensures its internal acceleration (what might be called its "suspense"), a privileged status is assigned to Vivian, who figures in shot 11. Note that this privilege is secured by a delicate transition that inverts the initial data of the alternation—the M/V/M/V order that succeeds shot 2 becomes V/M after shot 7, as if to pave the way for the absence of Marlowe in the last occurrence.

b. But the privilege conceded within one code (presence in the image) is overthrown in another (presence in the dialogue belonging to each shot). We have already noted that while Marlowe alone speaks in shot 3, where he is in the image, Marlowe and Vivian both talk in shot 4, which shows Vivian alone, an opposition that is continued in shots 5 and 6. The shots that follow accentuate this imbalance in accordance with a progression which is at the same time inverse, similar to and different from that of the image-presence progression. For Marlowe alone speaks in shots 8 and 9, which show the two characters alternately; and while he does not speak in shot 11, where Vivian marks her privilege in the image, she—far from speaking—is quite silent.⁷

This silence, which opposes this shot of Vivian to the whole anterior series of shots showing one character, is followed by another silence. Shot 12, which shows both Vivian and Marlowe again, is silent, thereby giving the other end of the segment a symmetry with shot 1, whose singularity in relation to those that follow has

been noted. A folding effect that clearly demonstrates the way in which the narration, even down to its details, proceeds through a differential integration of its constituent elements.

c. Third, time. While the two characters—long take/one character—short take equivalence is respected throughout the segment, the first term of the opposition undergoes profound internal variation. Shot 7 is in fact much longer than corresponding shots 1, 2, 10, and 12, to the point where it is almost as long as the set of the remaining eleven shots. The strategic placement of this shot will be noted—it occurs in the middle of the segment, thus delimiting a beginning that makes it possible and an end that it motivates and which echoes the beginning through a multiple process, a process simultaneously of equivalence through symmetry, of resolution through repetition and variation, and of acceleration in balancing.

The arrangement shown by the work of the codes is the same one that shapes the meaning of the fiction. From the mass of narrative elements ebbing and flowing throughout the segment (conversations, turning on a deepening of the relations of the enigma, and the more or less continuous-discontinuous field of the characters' actions and reactions) I have isolated only two phrases and two gestures. "I guess I am in love with you." This phrase, which occurs twice, uttered first by Vivian and then by Marlowe, clearly shows the extent to which the reduplication effect—in this instance a simple mirror effect linked to the avowal of love—is constitutive of the narrative. But this is so at the cost of an inversion that underscores the fact that repetition is constitutive only inasmuch as it takes its starting point from the difference circumscribing it, within a movement of bi-motivation that is in fact the specific necessity of this type of narrative. It is in shot 6 in which she appears alone that Vivian makes the first avowal of love, whose effect carries over onto shot 7, thereby justifying, among other things, its exceptional length. Inversely, it is in shot 10, in which Vivian and Marlowe appear together, that he reiterates the avowal whose effect will focus on shot 11, which shows Vivian alone and silent.

The two gestures, on the contrary, are relatively heterogeneous. They are nevertheless of interest, the first, which shows Marlowe, gripping the steering wheel in a difficult curve, by specifying him as he is throughout the film, on the side of action; the second, Vivian's tender gesture, is an explicit and conclusive response to the mutual avowal of love, permits us to place her clearly on the side of a feeling that she recognizes and expresses only when she has committed herself to the action on Marlowe's side.

This double narrative inflection has its effect, moreover, on at least two of the codic implications of the narrative whose articulation appears that much more strongly motivated as a result: on the one hand the divergence between presence in the dialogue and presence in the image, which privilege Marlowe and Vivian, respectively; on the other, the difference in camera angle, concentrated on Vivian and abstracting her face on the surface of the screen. Easily recognizable here is a double sign of the mythologization of the woman. Hawks, we might note, is one of the Hollywood directors who has most profoundly re-orientated the Hollywood tradition of the woman-object. The well-known independence and initiative of his

heroines brings to certain of his couples—and to none more than that of *The Big Sleep*—the slightly legendary character of a relationship of adult reciprocity. But this is only achieved through the codified marks which, in this instance, make it the woman whose magnified face simultaneously and wholly expresses and receives the avowal of love.

Nevertheless, it would be overly simple to move to a neat conclusion and find something like the "secret" of the text in this correspondence, to see it as the rationale of the text, discovered in its meaning, or even in a meaning. On the other hand, if there is nothing but meaning, and if it has a meaning in the sense that one might say it has a direction, this must, I think, be expressed in quite a different way. In these films, let us say in the classical American cinema, meaning is constituted by a correspondence in the balances achieved—as a law of the text in development—throughout its numerous codic and pluri-codic levels, in other words, its systems. Multiple in both nature and extension, these cannot be reduced to any truly unitary structure or semantic relationship.

But, to confine ourselves to what has been produced by this analytical description of twelve shots isolated from a film that can justifiably figure as one of the models of American high classicism, we note:

a. the number of shots, which is relatively high given the exigencies of the action. This allows for a discontinuity capable of ensuring a certain degree of variation of the filmic space within the given time.

b. This variation, which the narrative adopts as one of its basic options, is, on the other hand, limited by a profound tendency toward repetition. Repetition essentially takes the upper hand through a number of strictly similar shots: on the one hand shots 3, 5, and 9 of Marlowe, and on the other, shots 4 and 6 of Vivian. (The similarity in question is, of course, on the level of the codes that constrain the constitutive variation of dialogues, actors' comportment, etc.)

c. This tendency toward repetition, which, as we saw, also expresses itself clearly through numerous relationships of partial similarity between shots (and beyond that between codes) carries with it a natural after-effect. It underscores the codic differences that give effectiveness to the basic variation constituted by the successive plurality of the shots. These differences are powerful and discrete in their distribution and transitions, having as their primary object to ensure the natural continuity of the narrative—that is, to sustain its artifice but without ever making it too obvious. A balance that in its own specific mode echoes that inscribed in the playing of the actors and the style of the photography.⁸

d. This balance thus reveals a constant relationship from shot to shot between symmetry and dissymmetry, which is, moreover reinforced by a general arrangement in the segment as a whole. In this respect we might recall the unequal deployment of the shots alternating between Vivian and Marlowe around the central axis represented by shot 7, which is itself inscribed into the alternation on another level. It is not surprising, therefore, that it should be the regulated opposition between the closing off of symmetries and the opening up of dissymmetries that gives rise to the narrative, to the very fact that there is a narrative.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is a particular arrangement that seems to me not specific to, but profoundly characteristic of, the American cinema. The progressive relationship (in the literal sense) outlined above seems more or less to resolve itself within each unit of narration—in this case within a short segment of twelve shots that might be taken for a secondary transition—by means of a suspension and folding effect, as if to allow the segment to close back on itself more effectively and leave to the new fold the problem of unrolling its new elements. Take the final shot, for example. It is conclusive and synthetic undoubtedly, by virtue of Vivian's tender gesture, which closes off the dialogue marked by their double avowal. But it is so in another way as well: by the silence between the characters, which has its equivalent only in shot 1, it ensures a kind of overall symmetry; but it is tipped over into dissymmetry, so to speak, because it is opposed to the shot it recalls through the identity it sustains with shots 2, 7, and 10, the final silence being the distinguishing mark.

1973

TRANSLATED BY DIANA MATIAS

4. Symbolic Blockage

■ (on *North by Northwest*)

For Dominique

We are all precious-little-me at the theater, watching Oedipus and crying out, "Now there's my type of guy! There's my type of guy!"

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

The death of the Father will deprive literature of many of its pleasures. If there is no more Father, what's the use of telling stories? Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn't storytelling always a search for origins, an account of one's entanglements with the Law, an entry into the dialectic of tenderness and hate? Today Oedipus and the narrative are dismissed in one stroke: we no longer love; we no longer fear; we no longer tell stories. As fiction, Oedipus served at least one purpose: it helped write good novels, it helped tell stories well (written after seeing Murnau's City Girl).

—Roland Barthes

I. THE FILM

North by Northwest illustrates in precise terms the Hitchcockian dialectic of the ordeal that leads the hero—the heroes—from the enigma to its resolution, from error to recognition. That this dialectic, inaugurated by the mistake that defines the reality of the ordeal, turns out to involve the common destiny of a man and a woman, implies no more than that this is the driving force behind the oeuvre, its origin and its vanishing point. That Hitchcock here yields to the seduction, to the ironic glamour of the implausible in order to give a more radical turn of the screw to the logic of the everyday is in my view only an intensification of the abstraction in which the pleasure proper to the glittering play of meaning gives rise to a more deliberate acknowledgment of the ruling principle of the Hitchcockian fable—morality and perversion linked.

This abstraction, in *North by Northwest*, lies in the controlled and pointed distance Hitchcock maintains toward a genre whose system he uses and perverts the more clearly to define his own. Note that this genre—the spy movie, more precisely, the spy movie as chase—constitutes for Hitchcock himself a sort of tradition whose effects he already experimented with many times in his best English period and in his first American films: in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, to which *North by Northwest* is in