# Basic Structures of Ideological Communication in Traditional Hollywood Feature Film Narratives

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The narrative feature film, particularly the Hollywood film, is chiefly known for spectacle and mass entertainment. However, even at its most commercial, narrative cinema remains – like all other art forms – a vehicle for ideological communication. Specifically, with its focus on character action, narrative cinema provides qualitative statements on the values, ideas, and beliefs that inform human thought and behavior. In other words, cinematic stories teach viewers how to best think or behave in relation to the norms of a particular culture.

These lessons typically are not given through didactic instruction. Rather, viewers receive messages on "right" or "wrong," "good" or "bad" by observing character actions and their consequences. At its simplest, this operates as a system of reward and punishment. Characters who demonstrate "correct" attitudes or behaviors are rewarded with positive outcomes. Those who demonstrate "incorrect" attitudes or behaviors are punished with negative outcomes. As this implies, a cinematic narrative's use of plot or character stands in no way separate from its thematic discourse. To the contrary, the structures of plot and character serve to manifest ideological arguments into physical forms so meaning may be absorbed through the guise of entertainment.

As I shall demonstrate, the thematic discourse of traditional Hollywood feature films follows a standardized structure composed of key interactions between plot and character. This paper will explain these interactions, and in doing so delineate four basic types of Hollywood narrative, each with distinctive ideological functions.

Yet first, to speak of "traditional" Hollywood narratives requires a definition. While often complex in execution, the structure of such narratives can be boiled

down to four elements: 1. a flawed protagonist, 2. a dramatic situation, 3. a Moment of Crucial Decision, and 4. the dramatic conclusion.

The traditional Hollywood protagonist (the character or characters whose actions serve as the focus of narrative development) always begins the story burdened by a "Fatal Flaw"—that is, some false or inaccurate perception or belief which causes the character to respond to certain situations in counter-productive ways.

Initial plot events then establish a dramatic situation, which the protagonist is compelled to resolve through physical action. Yet, as the protagonist takes actions, the flawed attitudes or behaviors impede his or her progress or complicate the situation through poor decisions. At a certain point, the consequences of these errors trap the protagonist in an escalated predicament, triggering an event that we shall call the Moment of Crucial Decision.

Here, the protagonist stands at a psychological crossroads, facing a decision that will determine his or her ultimate fate. On one hand, the necessity of the plot situation may force the protagonist to finally recognize the Fatal Flaw. The character then abandons the Flaw in favor of more beneficial qualities. If this route is taken, the protagonist grows capable of surmounting plot obstacles and achieves success at the story's conclusion. On the other hand, the protagonist may refuse such a change and respond to difficulties by intensifying his or her flawed behaviors. With this, the protagonist continues to act in counter-productive ways, inevitably leading to an ultimate defeat.

Here we see that the nature of the narrative conclusion depends upon two key factors: Choice and Outcome. At the Moment of Crucial Decision, the protagonist must choose between one set of behavioral values or another. Typically, the viewing audience will approve of one option as "positive" and disapprove of the other as "negative." After the protagonist makes this choice, the plot's climactic outcome proves whether the choice was correct or incorrect by either rewarding the protagonist with victory or punishing the character with

defeat. This provides the basic framework through which viewers comprehend a story's message. If a character chooses to act in a certain manner and is ultimately rewarded, the viewer concludes that these actions and the values they embody must be "correct." If on the other hand the character is ultimately punished, the viewer concludes that the chosen actions and embodied values must be "incorrect."

We, therefore, may conceive the thematic structure as an equation with two primary variables, both with two possible options: a "positive" choice or a "negative" choice; victory or defeat. However, Choice and Outcome exist as *independent* variables. What the viewer considers a "positive" choice may not always be followed by victory. Likewise, a "negative" choice may not always result in defeat. In other words, the viewers' assumptions regarding the Choice may be proven or disproven by the Outcome. This means a cinematic narrative may conclude in four potential ways: a positive choice with victory, a negative choice with defeat, a positive choice with defeat, and a negative choice with victory. We may use this criteria to define four distinct types of Hollywood narrative which I label: Celebratory, Cautionary, Tragic, and Cynical.

The majority of Hollywood films are Celebratory narratives, characterized by their "happy endings." Here the protagonist is initially impeded by attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs viewers judge as undesirable. The protagonist eventually recognizes these traits as harmful and chooses to become a "better" person by rejecting such attributes for those deemed more socially valuable. The transformed protagonist then achieves victory, proving the "truth" or efficacy of the adopted values. These narratives are "Celebratory" in that they celebrate socially-approved values, ideas, or beliefs by showing how they lead to happiness and success. Viewers receive ideological lessons through examples of ideal thought or behavior.

A reversal of this structure can be found in the Cautionary narrative. Here, the protagonist progressively grows into a "worse" person by refusing to abandon

socially-undesirable traits, inevitably leading to the character's defeat. Viewers approve of this defeat, as the protagonist receives his or her "just deserts." Again, we find a lesson on proper social thought and behavior, this time framed in a negative context. The story warns viewers away from certain attitudes or behaviors by showing how they lead to ruin.

Though Celebratory and Cautionary narratives appear structurally opposite, they achieve similar ideological ends. By rewarding what society considers "good," or punishing what society considers "bad," both types reinforce prevailing systems of social belief. Viewers are trained to recognize what is considered good or bad, right or wrong, proper or improper by simply observing what leads to reward or punishment. Thus, the Celebratory and Cautionary narratives both promote social growth along existing ideological lines by reminding viewers of important cultural values and ideal modes of thought or behavior.

This seems simple enough, and is indeed the point where many discussions on film thematics end. However, while works of art such as cinema may serve to reflect, promote, and even glorify current social values or beliefs, art may also be used to question or criticize values or beliefs to provoke social change. This second, ideologically-critical function is fulfilled by Hollywood's two less common narrative types: the Tragic and the Cynical.

Tragic and Cynical narratives both conclude in manners contrary to socio-moral expectations. The Tragic narrative features a protagonist who behaves in a way that viewers consider "good" or even heroic. Yet despite these supposed "virtues" – and often as a direct result of them – the story ends with the protagonist's defeat. The Cynical narrative further reverses expectations with protagonists who ultimately succeed by embracing values generally considered harmful or "wrong."

Thus, while in the Celebratory or Cautionary, the "good" are always rewarded and the "bad" are always punished, the opposite occurs in the Tragic

or Cynical, turning all supposed moral order on its head. At first glance, such stories might seem to contain highly irresponsible messages as their outcomes appear to support and even encourage socially-destructive values or beliefs. Yet, this is not the case. Most Tragic or Cynical narratives do contain a strong moral or ethical sentiment. Only their outcomes reveal instances where social realities run counter to such sentiments. Here we find the root of the Tragic and Cynical's critical function. By presenting situations where what should be rewarded is actually punished, or what should be punished is actually rewarded, Tragic or Cynical narratives point out how actual realities fail to operate by the principles endorsed by prevailing ideological systems. As a result, these narratives question or challenge socio-moral concepts, the ways they are implemented, or their underlying beliefs.

To grasp how this operates, it helps to clarify the relationship between individuals, social ideologies, and the reality within which they exist. In his 1968 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althussar defines an ideology as a "representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." (693) In Althussar's words, "it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men' 'represent to themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their relationship to these conditions." (694) By calling this relationship "imaginary," Althussar emphasizes that ideologies are socially constructed systems, valid only insofar as individuals are willing to accept them. Celebratory and Cautionary narratives actively endorse the terms of existing ideological relationships. By always rewarding those characters who conform to socio-moral expectations and punishing those who do not, these stories continually resolve situations as an ideology deems "correct." We can, therefore, say that Celebratory or Cautionary outcomes do not reflect the world as it actually operates, but as an ideology claims it *ought* to operate under ideal conditions.

Tragic and Cynical narratives on the other hand point out flaws and

shortcomings within ideological systems by exposing instances where imagined "truths" fail to match actual conditions. This is done by first setting up a situation that viewers assume will be resolved according to existing socio-moral expectations. Yet, the story concludes in a contrary manner, revealing a schism between the imagined and the actual. Thus, while the Celebratory and Cautionary promote the ideal as the actual, the Tragic and Cynical expose rifts between these two realities, asserting a need for change in social thought or behavior.

*Chinatown* (1974) provides a prime example of the Tragic narrative. In this film, Jack Nicholson plays Jake Gittes, a private detective driven by a belief in the supreme value of personal integrity. Gittes involves himself deeper and deeper into a web of corruption, assuming that he will be able to expose the story's evildoers and return his world to a just state as long as he sticks to this value of integrity. The viewing audience considers such actions heroic and shares Gittes' assumptions – due in no small part to previous encounters with films where men of integrity always keep the corrupt in check. However, *Chinatown*'s conclusion reveals this assumption to be a myth. Gittes' actions not only fail, but ironically allow the evildoers to succeed. With this end, *Chinatown* declares that despite what we have been led to believe, integrity rarely prevails in our society and reward, far more often, goes to the corrupt. In other words, an ideal we have been taught to hold as certain in theory does not match our world in practice.

Films like *Chinatown* declare that society has failed to live up to its ideals. Yet, Tragic narratives may also question the worth of an ideal in itself. In *Braveheart* (1995), protagonist William Wallace first appears to embody all our heroic ideals. This arises in part from Wallace's adamant refusal to accept any compromise in the pursuit of his ambitions. While viewers first are led to approve of this behavior, events reveal this supposed virtue to in fact be Wallace's Fatal Flaw. By continually refusing all compromise, Wallace creates divisions among his allies, leading to his betrayal and execution. As a result, viewers must question the virtue

of Wallace's attitudes. Perhaps what they took for "heroic" was in fact stubborn and foolish, and it is better to yield to compromise when necessary.

While Tragic narratives surprise audiences by demonstrating the failure of what is believed good or proper, Cynical narratives shock audiences by turning all moral expectations upside-down. As previously stated, the Cynical narrative features a protagonist who ultimately succeeds by adopting values or behaviors contrary to prevailing mores or beliefs. Yet in most cases, we cannot blame the protagonist too harshly for this decision, as the story places the character into a situation where traditionally-approved attitudes or beliefs prove illusionary or ineffective. Faced with a discrepancy between the ideal and the actual, the protagonist is forced to violate socio-moral norms as this is the only way to attain success or survival. *The Godfather* (1972) provides Hollywood's best-known example. Protagonist Michael Corleone begins the story as a moral idealist. Time spent in college and the military have instilled in him a code of ethics that sharply contrasts with his family's business in organized crime. Yet, when crisis strikes and Michael must protect his family, he soon learns that moral ideals mean nothing in the face of his real conditions of existence, as his enemies refuse to play by fair or ethical rules. Forced by the necessity of his situation, Michael abandons moral idealism in favor of a philosophy which considers any act acceptable – including murder – when absolutely necessary. This change leads Michael to victory, even though the viewing audience cannot fully condone the violent acts used to achieve it. Viewers thus feel unsettled by the terms of Michael's victory and must question whether the ethical rules preached by American society are indeed little more than illusions with no bearing on actual practice, as the Cynical outcome seems to claim.

In summary, we find the four basic types of Hollywood narrative split into two opposing camps defined by ideological function: one designed to reflect or endorse normative beliefs, the other to question or refute them. Yet shockingly, when compared side-by-side, we discover that there is virtually no difference

between the Celebratory/Cautionary and the Cynical/Tragic in terms of narrative structure. By this I mean, Tragic narratives are *structurally identical* to Cautionary narratives. Even more surprising, Cynical narratives prove structurally identical to Celebratory narratives.

In both the Tragic and Cautionary, the protagonist ultimately fails due to a refusal to recognize a fatal discrepancy between his or her personal modes of thought or behavior and the qualities found necessary to succeed within the confines of the particular story world. It matters not that viewers approve of the character's actions in one case and disapprove of them in the other. Both varieties of protagonist maintain the wrong course of action and thus doom themselves to failure.

Likewise, in both the Celebratory and Cynical, the protagonist ultimately succeeds through a process of recognition and self-transformation. The character is first burdened by inappropriate modes of thought or behavior, realizes this at the Moment of Crucial Decision, and then undergoes a psychological transformation through which he or she acquires a more beneficial mindset. While the viewer may see this transformation as being for the "better" or the "worse," in both cases a path of personal change results in victory.

Yet if the Celebratory and the Cynical—or the Cautionary and the Tragic— are structurally identical, how can the same narrative structure perform two contradictory ideological functions? This can be explained with a realization that these pairings bear a *photo-negative* relationship. Just as when a photograph is compared to its negative the same image is found but with all colors inverted, a comparison between Celebratory and Cynical narratives, or Cautionary and Tragic narratives, finds the same structure but with all *socio-moral polarities* reversed. That is, what the viewer perceives as good, right, or correct in one is seen as bad, wrong, or incorrect in the other and vice versa. This capacity for inversion is what allows the same narrative structure to fulfill two contradictory ideological functions. While one narrative type might reinforce or glorify social

beliefs, its photo-negative can use the same structure to challenge or condemn those beliefs.

Photo-negative inversion also explains why viewing audiences respond so differently to a Celebratory versus a Cynical resolution, or a Cautionary versus a Tragic resolution despite the fact that the outcomes are structurally the same. With this in mind, I must modify an earlier statement. The nature of a narrative conclusion depends not only on character Choice and plot Outcome, but also on the viewer's *opinion* of this choice and outcome.

This leads to my final point--the thematic discourse found in traditional Hollywood feature films does not reside entirely within a film's text. It rather forms through a combined interaction between two separate discursive planes: the *narrative plane* and the *viewer plane*. The narrative plane is a purely structural presentation of actions and outcomes. On this level, all notions of "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong" are irrelevant. All that matters is which actions lead to victory and which lead to defeat. In other words, there is no "good" or "bad," only "do" or "do not." All moral or ethical judgments are reserved for the viewer plane. While experiencing the story, viewers use personal systems of values, ideas, and beliefs to decide whether to approve or disapprove of character actions and plot outcomes. Since the viewer's internal discourse may at various moments coincide or conflict with the narrative discourse, a space of contention opens between viewer and narrative, creating tensions which must be resolved. In the search for meaning, the viewer reflects upon the story's events and the various opinions which have formed over the course of the film to locate an ideological conclusion, one that either reinforces previous ideas or beliefs, or provokes their reexamination.

Before concluding, I must state that the boundaries separating the Celebratory, Cautionary, Tragic, and Cynical need not always be clear or distinct. While storytellers can make clear-cut arguments by closely adhering to one of our four defined types, there exist methods to conclude narratives in thematically

ambiguous manners, if the storyteller wishes to encourage further debate. The most obvious area where this may occur is in the plot's climactic outcome. While many stories end in total victory or defeat, they may easily conclude in only partial victory or defeat—or an entirely mixed resolution—adding caveats or potential doubts to the film's final statement. Ambiguity also can take shape in the area of character choice. If a protagonist must choose between two values viewers find equally meaningful, find equally objectionable, or feel ambivalently about, the narrative conclusion will blur the lines between the Celebratory and the Cynical, or the Cautionary and the Tragic, as the viewer is left unsure whether to approve or disapprove of the final outcome. Alternatively, a story may omit a full resolution or provide a counter-argument within its closing sequence to throw its statements back into question. In any case, storytellers are not locked into only one of four thematic options. The cinematic narrative allows many opportunities to leave questions open-ended without violating the basic rules of thematic structure. Such flexibility has allowed Hollywood films to express an endless variety of ideological messages without sacrificing the principles of plot and character necessary to engage audience interests so communication may occur.

Works Cited

Althussar, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 693-702.