

Cinematics Cinematics

21st Century Style

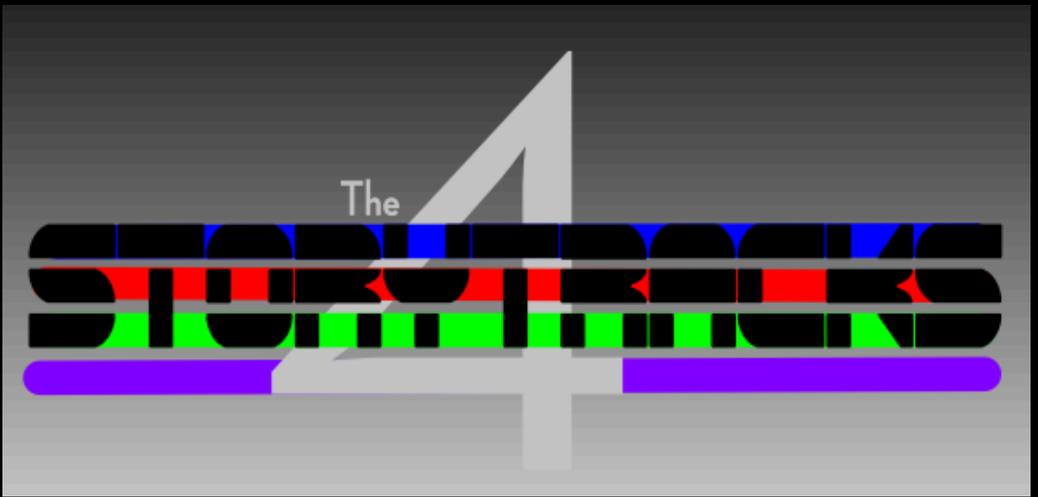
— = work in progress —

Cinematics is a series of succinct statements of aesthetic principles intended to be used as tools through successive stages of the movie-making process. By offering fresh criteria on which to make choices it aims to move creative thinking about cinema beyond tired adages and open up the game to new perspectives, new possibilities.

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#8 Storytracks

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A one-track linear plot is not enough to make a cinematic screenplay. The forward progression of the main storyline needs to be seen in interaction with its developing inner and outer context. This involves a four-way braiding.

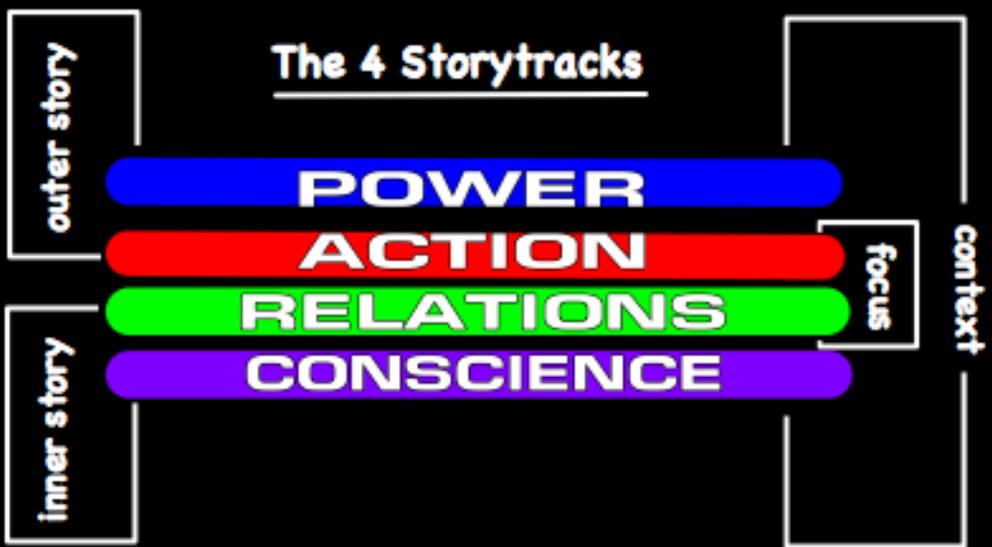
What we will call the **Focus Story** can be broken down into two strands. These are what Hollywood calls the A-story and the B-story. We will call them the **Action Track**, and the **Relationship Track**. The former delineates the *Protagonist's* pursuit of the outer goal, along with his *Sidekick*, against opposition from the *Antagonist*. The former will often be a love story between the *Main-Character*, and the *Romance* — but not always. It may portray any intimate relationship or dilemma that reflects the emotional turmoil the main character suffers through the course of the story.

The **Contextual Story** can also be broken down into two strands. The *outer context*, or **Power Track**, concerns the highest authorities or ultimate power within the scope of the drama, or, as James Bonnet puts it, *The Entity to be Transformed*. Where this track has its own internal conflict in parallel to the focus story Hollywood on occasion refers to it as *The Greater Conflict*. This could be between gods, kings, generals, gang leaders or divorced parents. It could also be ruled by abstract forces, like the weather, or the law. In some guise, however, there will normally be a *Boss* and his *Enforcer*, and a *Contender* and his *Henchman*. It is often the case that the *Antagonist* has access to the reigning power but the *Protagonist* does not.

The fourth **storytrack**, the *inner context*, combines two throughlines which Hollywood refers to as the *character arc*, and the *theme*, or *moral argument*. How and why these are combined in, what we will call, the **Conscience Track**, will be examined later. It is the domain of the *mentor*, the *dark mentor*, the *guardian* and the *contagonist*, and frequently will have recourse to a *confidant* or *mirror character*. While the **Power Track** decrees the way things will

be, the **Conscience Track** follows the *Main Character* as s/he wrestles with whether to comply or rebel against this. The contextual story, of course, has far greater scope than the focus story both in duration and spread, and, in one form or another the conflict would likely persist in it's absence.

It maybe sometimes be useful to divide these four **storytracks** into another pair; that of the **Inner Story**, and the **Outer Story**. The inner story will always follow the Main Character through his personal struggle; while *the outer story* will deal with the changes that make a difference in the story world at large. As a rough indication of domains we may think of the four **storytracks** as *private/personal/professional/public*.



The Dramatica Throughlines

Dramatica, story development software and the theory on which it is based, by Melanie Anne Phillips & Chris Huntley, introduced a four-strand division of the screenplay for which they employed the indicators *I / You / We / They*. While, this may, at first glance, seem similar to the four storytracks discussed, in practice it is very different.

The "They" indicates what *Dramatica* calls *The Overall Storyline*:

"Imagine the argument of a story as the battle between two armies. The Overall Story view is like that of the general overlooking the battle."

This then would comprise the whole of the Outer Story,

both the Power and Action Storytracks; while the other three Dramatica divisions would represent the Inner Story. These are *The Main Character Throughline* (indicated by “I”), *The Obstacle Character Throughline*, indicated by “You”), and *The Subjective Storyline* (indicated by “We”), wherein *the Main Character* and the *Obstacle Character* engage in “passionate battle”.

So, through a very complex reformulation, we are really back to the old “A & B-stories”. In it’s first iteration Dramatica’s “Overall Story” was known as *The Objective Storyline*. As all major characters, or *entities*, may well have their own throughline, (including the general on the hill), the four strands really come down to two: an opposition between an objective story view and a subjective story view.

This highlights the real problem with the Dramatica Throughlines: by the authors own admission, the throughlines each come from a different perspective. However, “perspectives” are about narration — the *telling* of the story and, not the story itself; *syuzhet*, not *fabula*. It is not necessarily so that the Overall Throughline represents the author’s view or that this is in any sense “objective”. Likewise, there is no guarantee that the Main Character’s story will be told subjectively. Narrative, in fact, is a whole other ballgame.

The 4 **Storytracks** are very clearly set out in the first act of *Casablanca*:

1/ **The Power Track**: this concerns the progress of the Second World War which is the context of the story, the status of Casablanca as a free zone, and the arrival of the new **Boss**, Major Strasser and his meeting with his local *Enforcer*, Renault.

2/ **The Action Track**: this concerns *Letters of Transit*; the theft of them by Ungarte, how Rick gains possession of them, and the news that a great hero of The Resistance, Victor Lazlo, the main *Protagonist* is en route to Casablanca, and his need to obtain the letters as a means of escape.

3/ **The Relationship Track**: this concerns the *Main Character*, Rick’s self-serving on-going relationship with Yvonne, Renault’s suspicion that he was once a sentimentalist, the signature tune, *As Time Goes By*, and the devastating reappearance of the *Romance*, Ilsa Lund, with whom he fell in love in Paris. Rick’s relationship with Yvonne

represents his cynical side, and his relationship with Ilsa, his idealistic side.

4/ **The Conscience Track:** this concerns Rick's *Opening Values*, "I stick my neck out for no man." at the same time as his insisting on his independence, and Renault's knowledge that he was once a freedom fighter. Rick's *modus vivendi* is severely challenged when Ilsa turns up on the arm of Lazlo.

Another well-known film in which the 4 storytracks can clearly be seen is ***The Godfather***:



1/ **The Power Track:** this concerns the struggle between the dominant New York mafia family, the Corleones headed by their *Boss*, Don Vito, the *Godfather*, and the *Contender*, Bruno, head of the rival Tattaglia family who want to move into narcotics, and their *Enforcer*, Sollozzo. This soon boils down to who will be the *Godfather*.

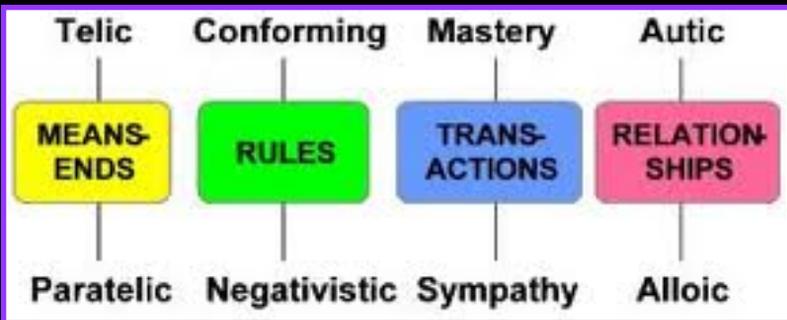
2/ **The Action Track:** this follows moves in the war that breaks out between the two families after Don Vito turns down the Tattaglias' proposal. On one side is their enforcer, Sollozzo, who is the *Antagonist*, and, on the other, after Don Vito is shot, Sonny Corleone — and, after he is shot, Michael Corleone — who, each in turn, take on the function of *Protagonist*. Running throughout is Tom Hagen, the Corleones' *consigliere*, and, significantly, not a member of the family, who acts as a *Sidekick* to each in turn.

3/ **The Relationship Track:** this follows the fluctuations of romance between Michael, the *Main Character*, with Kay, who is the main representative of W.A.S.P. family values, and Apollonia who symbolises Michael's Sicilian roots. After Michael marries Kay it is a quite different relationship from their open and innocent love affair at the start.

4/ **The Conscience Track:** Michael appears as a decorated war hero with a middle-class girlfriend, but when his family comes under threat he is forced to either do as his father says, or do as his father does; to determine his true identity by choosing between W.A.S.P. values and the Sicilian code of honour.

The Domains of Reversal Theory

The salience of this longitudinal narrative division into 4 storytracks finds surprising confirmation from a group of psychologists working in the field of motivation. Michael J. Apter & associates in developing *Reversal Theory* found that arousal alternated between opposed states in four meta-motivational “domains”.



The names which they assigned to these domains are at first confusing. Let's examine each in turn and see how they align with the 4 Storytracks:

Means-Ends (Action): in this domain motivation moves between the two poles, *Telic* and *Paratelic*. The *Telic* is focused on achieving a goal - “ends” ; the *Paratelic* on the process involved - “means”. In movies this is often seen as developing a plan, training, or raising spirits. While the *Telic* is deadly serious, the *Paratelic* is full of playfulness, passion and a sense of fun, and may well result in the protagonist making quips in the heat of battle.

Rules (Power): Michael J. Apter explains this domain as follows.

“The second domain relates to *rules*, where “rule” is to be understood very generally as any kind of constraint, expectation, convention or routine that directs a person and delineates what he or she should do in a given situation.”

Motivation in this domain moves between the poles of

Conforming and the *Negativistic* (or *Rebellious*). However, it is clear that *Reversal Theory* is designed from the perspective of someone subject to the rules without fully acknowledging that all rules are held in place by a power behind them — even if that is only a need to belong, or a felt obligation. Stories are frequently involved in contesting that power and the “negativistic” is more often the positive value espoused by the hero.

Transactions (Relationship): this was originally known as the domain of “Interactions” which seems more appropriate from our perspective. Here motivation moves between the poles of *Mastery* and *Sympathy* — and, in each, there is a feeling opposition. In the *Mastery* state we have: (+) I take (*I am strong*) / (-) I yield up (*I am weak*). And, in the *Sympathy* state: (+) I am given (*I am liked*) / (-) I am not given (*I am not liked*). At base this comes down to the question that underlies the vast majority of movie relationships — “*Is this true love or am I being used for some other end?*”

Relationships (Conscience): *Reversal Theory* chooses to call its fourth domain “*Relationships*” but, in fact, this deals with general moral predisposition, rather than the individual and personal. Again Apter’s original name (“*Orientations*”) has been changed by others for the worse. Here motivation moves between the poles of the *Autic* and the *Alloic* — or concern for the *self* and concern for *others*. On the *Autic* side we have all those questions of *identity* which are pertinent to the *character arc*; and, on the other, the awakening to the well-being of others which is often referred to as the *moral revelation* or *redemption*. Setting the *Autic* and *Alloic* together as poles of the same domain brings their interdependence to the forefront.

We can now see how *Reversal Theory* illuminates our example movie, *Casablanca*, and plays out through the 4 Storytracks.

Power/Rules: set during the latter days of World War II, the on-going contest of power is evident. France is occupied by the Germans, however, the *Casablanca* of the title is a curious anomaly, being an unoccupied colony with a nominal neutral status. It therefore operates under a finely balanced set of rules. While it is clear the the Nazi, Major Strasser, is the *Boss* who wields the power,



and Laszlo the potential *Contender*, others like Rick and Renault attempt to play the rules for their own ends. The question soon becomes whether Rick will knuckle under and continue to conform or rebel against them.

Action/Means-Ends: Rick does not become the protagonist until Act 3. Up to the point the function is taken by Laszlo. For the most part he is deadly serious with the clear aim of obtaining the stolen Letters of Transit in order to escape the Nazis and continue the fight against them. However, there is one moment when his telic drive swings to the paratelic in dramatic fashion. In response to a group of

Nazi soldiers singing a patriotic German song in Rick's bar, Laszlo takes it upon himself to lead the remaining customers in a rousing rendition of a song of the French resistance. Whereas the *telic* seeks to lower excitement



less it should distract from the focus on achieving the goal, the paratelic seeks to raise spirits. And this is exactly what happens here, while, at the same time, increasing the danger of his failing.

Relationship/Transactions: Rick has an on-going relationship of *mastery* with the barmaid, Yvonne. It is a relationship of convenience in which he is emotionally uninvolved. In Renault's words, "Rick is completely neutral about everything. And that takes in the field of women, too." However, when Ilsa arrives it soon becomes clear that his past relationship with her was very different: it was a relationship of *sympathy*, or what we would commonly call, *love*. But, now, when he pursues her again, it is in the mode of *mastery*, "I'm settled now, above a saloon, it's true. But — walk up a flight, I'll be expecting



you.” And, when Ilsa does walk up that flight it is also in *mastery mode* — she goes with a gun in her bag. It is not until they both surrender to each other at the second turning-point that their relationship again becomes one of *mutual sympathy*.

Conscience/Relationships: Rick at first appears as a virtual exemplar for the *autic* state with quips such as, “I stick my neck out for nobody.” But Renault is soon casting doubt on his true identity; “I suspect that under that cynical shell you’re at heart a sentimentalist.” Rick was once a freedom fighter — very much *alloic* motivated — but now he is a man haunted by the *ghost* of a failed love affair. He believes that he was once duped by a girl in Paris, Ilsa, and when she turns up in his bar all his bitterness is reawakened. He believes that she was as cynical (*autic*) then, as he is now. She confesses to him that at the time they met she was already married, but to a man she thought was dead. That was the man who now accompanies her, a hero of the French Resistance. When Rick realises that she had acted from *alloic* and not *autic* motives he has a moral revelation; “... it doesn’t take much to see that the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill o’ beans in this crazy world.” And that changes the whole course of his life.



In *The Godfather* we will see how the 4 storytracks and their associated domains work in combination:

The Outer Story (Power + Action): while the real power lies with Don Vito, the Godfather, he, himself does not carry out the action required to enforce his decisions. This is left to a series of lieutenants



and henchmen. As each protagonist is lost in the war a new one must take over. The contending family, the Tattaglias, leave action to their enforcer, Sollozzo, who is the antagonist. After garrotting the Corleone's henchman, Luca, they immediately make an attempt to assassinate Don Vito, and those remaining begin manoeuvring like pieces on a chessboard to protect their king. The the strategy of using Michael to protect the Corleone family honour is, in fact, in defiance of the Don's wishes. Michael has been brought up to be part of the straight world, and now must go through a training process before he can enter the domain of *Action* as a new *means* to achieve the same *ends*. But this is already a sign of the Godfather's declining power. The war will only end when a stronger man can assume that position and command the respect of all the Cosa Nostra.





The Inner Story (Relationship + Conscience): the moral dilemma of the Main Character is often reflected by his choice of a significant other, or romantic partner. This is frequently referred to as a *love triangle*. When Michael first appears he is in a serious relationship with Kay, who reflects the white, middle-class values which, under his father's tutelage, he has been brought up to espouse. After his assassination of the corrupt cop, McCluskey, he takes refuge in Sicily, and there falls in love with a local girl, Apollonia, which reflects his new-found acceptance of his roots and a quite different code of honour. After Apollonia's revenge killing he returns to Kay, but it is no longer the open and innocent (*sympathy*) relationship of before. Michael proposes marriage but, as it is revealed at the end, the way he now treats her is very much in the *mastery mode*.



The Focus Story (Action + Relationship): this follows the immediate concerns of the Main Character, and the demands of the plot. It combines what Hollywood has called the A & B stories, and allows for the creation of a rhythm of alternation between the high tension of the action and the deeper emotional involvement of the relationship story. In *The Godfather*, the pursuits of the Main Character, Michael, is to a significant extent separated from the conflict between the Protagonist and Antagonist in the Action Story; for a large part of Act 1 (Sg2) he is in New Hampshire, and a large part of Act 2 (Sg5) he is in Sicily, while the Action Story remains centred in New York. So the crossing over between Inner Story and Outer story here is more marked than in movies where the Main Character and the Protagonist are one. If the Action story is a test of spirit, the relationship story is revelatory of soul, and this marked division is one of the reasons why this film has such an unusual depth. As noted, the changes within Michael are seen in his drifting away from Kay; it is the subsequent assassination of Apollonia that gives Michael the deep bitterness to assert his will as the new Godfather.



The Contextual Story (Power + Conscience): a man's identity can only be determined in relationship to the world in which he finds himself — whether he will accept the status quo and find his place within it; or whether he is compelled to rebel against the powers that hold sway. One can well imagine that the conflicts of the Power Storytrack, and the conflicts of the Conscience Storytrack would still be on-going in the absence of the specifics of the Focus Story. If not this narrative, then another. In *The Godfather* Michael's problems of conscience hinge entirely on events of The Power Storytrack. His father has decreed that he be brought up as a legitimate All-American member of straight society, and, at the beginning of the movie, he

appears to be happy and at ease with this role. But, when Don Vito's rule as the Godfather comes under threat it is Michael's love for his father that leads him to question the identity he has assumed and the moral outlook that is all a part of it. When it comes to the crunch his *alloic* feelings stretch only as far as his own family. In order to fulfil their intense need for honour and vindication his own morality must undergo revision and with it his whole sense of identity.

If Act Structure can be seen as latitudinal division then **Storytracks** can be seen as longitudinal division. It is only when all four tracks and their interplay throughout the length of the screenplay is given due recognition that a sense of wholeness can be achieved.



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