

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

June '01

Center for the Study of The Great Ideas

137

The *Odyssey* with all its impossible adventures on sea and land is a good story because of Homer's great gift in telling lies, a much better story as a work of art than an accurate historical narrative of just what actually did take place in the voyage of Odysseus from Troy to Ithaca.

—Mortimer Adler



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EDITOR'S NOTE

On the lighter side: Mortimer Adler in Hollywood?

In 1937, Mortimer Adler published a book entitled *Art and Prudence: A Study in Practical Philosophy*. A major part of that book was devoted to “Cinematics”, wherein Dr. Adler adapted the principles of Aristotle's *Poetics* to the art of the motion picture.

Several years later, this came to the attention of Will Hays, then President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. He summoned Dr. Adler to Hollywood to serve as a consultant on an annual retainer that was more than half his salary as Professor at the University of Chicago. He served for five years until Mr. Hays retired. Eric Johnston, who succeeded Hays, asked Dr. Adler to stay on for another year to draft his first annual report. When it was released to the press, it was hailed [to Dr. Adler's astonishment] as “the sounding of a new voice in the movie industry.”

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CRITICISM AND TASTE *

As applicable to motion pictures, in 5 parts.

by Mortimer Adler

Part 3

(2) *Unity of plot.* Since we are concerned with the motion picture, we shall henceforth ignore narratives, such as the psychological novel, in which plot is not primary. The unity of the plot depends upon the unity of the action. This can be understood negatively. A plot is not properly unified if it depends upon the unity of its hero or the unity of a problem or the unity of a period. In all of these cases, the plot development is bad because episodic. If its unity

depends upon the singleness of its hero, any incidents are admitted into its structure so long as they are incidents in which the hero is an agent and whether or not they are causally related as the parts of a single action. Such narratives are like biographies, the unity of which is the life of a single person. The psychological novel may be like a biography, but the drama and the cinema should not be. [1] The same can be said for the other types of inappropriate unity, illustrated by stories in which a number of different individuals and actions are put together because they are parallel instances of the same human problem, such as intolerance or ingratitude, or by stories in which the only unity is that all the events and persons occur at a certain time or at a certain place or somehow cross each other's paths in space and time.

Positively, unity of plot can be understood in terms of the way in which the parts of a single action are organized into a whole. Unity of plot involves a unity in time, but not a unity of time: the action need not occur at one time, but the parts of it must be ordered sequentially in time. The principle of this ordering defines the unity of plot. The plot is divisible in two ways. First, it can be divided into a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning is constituted by the problem of the action, and by the choice among alternative courses of action which is made by the protagonist. The middle is constituted by the complications which follow upon this choice: the further choices which the protagonist makes because of the consequences of his first choice, and the consequences in turn of each of these choices. It is in this part that most of the incidents and episodes of the action occur, that character is gradually revealed in greater detail and thought is more fully expressed. The inner complications of the action become interwoven with extraneous events in the outer world, which can be summarized as the good or bad fortune attending the career of the protagonist. This is what Aristotle means by saying that "incidents extraneous to the action are frequently combined with a portion of the action proper to form the complication." The progressive

complication finally reaches a climax, a turning point in the story. After this point is the end, constituted by the denouement, a catastrophe or a benign resolution according as the story is tragic, comic or melodramatic, and an aftermath. This division of the parts of a single action indicates that the unity of the plot depends upon causality in the ordering of the incidents—not all the incidents because the extraneous ones happen as if by chance or fortune, but those incidents which proceed from the character and thought of the protagonist. Furthermore, the unity is emphasized by the fact that the denouement is the ultimate consequence of the original choice made with respect to the initial problem. It is this which binds the beginning, middle and end of a story together into a single whole.

The other division of the plot is into two parts: the complication and the unraveling, the former including everything from the beginning to the turning point of the action, the latter being what happens thereafter. This division shows the unity in terms of the crucial turning point, which must be the consequence of what precedes and the cause of what follows. The significance of this second division will be seen later in the point about the magnitude of the plot: it must be large enough to include a turning point that is intelligible in the light of what has gone before and is illuminated by what follows. The first division indicates another necessary feature of the plot structure: the middle part should always be the largest part. A story cannot be well told if too large a part of it is involved in getting the problem stated and the first choice made. The beginning is *too large* if it is larger than the middle. The same is true of the end.

(3) *The probability of the plot.* This point follows in part from the rule that the incidents of the action must be causally related. A causal consequence is that which either happens necessarily as the result of some prior happening or that which happens for the most part. The incidents are probable, therefore, if they occur as normally they would in terms of human nature and the nature of the physical

world. In other words, the sequence and conjunction of events which constitute the unified action of the plot must be such that the story is a likely or probable one. The rule of probability thus applies not only to the action of the protagonist, but to the portraiture of character and the expression of thought. Even if the character is inconsistent or the thought irrational, it must be consistently inconsistent and irrational. "A person of a given character should speak or act in a given way, by the rule of necessity or probability, just as this event should follow that by necessary or probable sequence." The rule further applies even to the extraneous events that enter into the complication. Though they appear to the protagonist to happen as if by chance and as signs of good or bad fortune because they are not foreseen or ordained by him, they must nevertheless be probable incidents. It is the violation of this rule of probability which makes episodic plot development bad, and similarly plots in which character and thought are inconsistent.

While it is generally recognized in criticism that a good story must be a likely story, the rule of probability to be followed in good plot construction is misunderstood whenever it is supposed that the criteria of probability in a poem are the same as in science. Poetic truth is not logical truth. What Aristotle says of tragedy, that "the element of the wonderful is required," applies to a fiction. The good story-teller is always one like Homer, gifted in telling lies skillfully. "Accordingly, the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities." This indicates that the rule of probability is not the same in fiction as in science. For knowledge, the impossible can never be probable. The probability of a story does not depend on the nature of things alone as does the probability of knowledge. It depends upon the art of the story-teller. The rule of probability is, therefore, the requirement that he make his story *appear to be a likely one*, whether or not its separate elements, viewed from the standpoint of science, are impossible or absurd or slightly probable. The impossible and the absurd are intolerable in fiction only if the narrator

fails to veil them with poetic charm, which is another way of saying that he fails to make them seem probable. “Once the irrational has been introduced and an air of likelihood has been imparted to it, we must accept it in spite of its absurdity.” Aristotle goes so far as to approve of Agathon’s dictum that in story-telling even an improbable event can be made to appear probable because, as he says, “it is probable that many things should happen contrary to probability.”

The importance of this insight into the nature of probability in fiction cannot be overemphasized in the light of the tendency of current criticism to misunderstand the point. Much of the criticism of motion pictures uses the canon of probability as if the likelihood of a story depended upon its being life-like in the simple-minded sense of conforming to reality as it is. [2] There is probably no greater error which the artist or critic can make than this simple-minded realism or naturalism. If the rule of probability be interpreted as a requirement that art be realistic or naturalistic, it falsifies the nature of art as imitation involving both similitude and difference. Far from being better because it is highly probable—in the sense of realistic—such a story is bad as a work of art. A highly fanciful tale, a tale that the realists would despise, is much better fiction if it satisfies the sole condition of being invested with poetic likelihood by narrative skill. In short, the principle of probability in artistic imitation differing from the principle of probability in science, determines two extremes which are bad: improbable fantasy, on the one hand, and “scientific” realism, on the other. The story must be probable, but it must also be a story, and not a piece of faithful reporting. In other words, fiction is *like* history, but it is not history. The difference resides in the different conditions of probability that apply in each case. The *Odyssey* with all its impossible adventures on sea and land is a good story because of Homer’s great gift in telling lies, a much better story as a work of art than an accurate historical narrative of just what actually did take place in the voyage of Odysseus from Troy to Ithaca. There is, of course, one further paradox involved. Even the historian or

the realistic novelist at his worst extreme cannot avoid being an artist in fiction. He is always telling a story whether or not he is willing to acknowledge that the conditions of good story-telling are not the conditions of science. In a sense, realism and fantasy are impossible extremes. They are never really reached. There is no story which is totally devoid of probability nor one which is not a work of the imagination. The limits therefore, merely indicate that a good story combines in proper proportion the factors of the wonderful and the probable. The artist who tries to be realistic never succeeds, but in trying so hard to go in one direction, he may fail to achieve a good proportion of these factors.

It is evidence of the essential rightness of Pudovkin's understanding of the technique of the cinema that he always recognizes the pitfalls of naturalism. The tendency toward simple minded naturalism is more insidious in film-making than in writing, because of the superficially realistic character of photographs. It is this which makes *montage* crucially important, for it is by *montage* that naturalism can be most effectively avoided. But the basic principle of *montage* requires that film sequences be composed in a probable order, not the kind of probability which consists in fidelity to the way things actually appear, but the imaginative probability of the way in which things might appear to an ideal observer. We shall return to this point later in a discussion of filmic style. Here it is important only to note the way in which the rule of probability relates narrative and filmic style in the making of a motion picture. To be good, a motion picture, like any other work of fiction, must avoid the extremes of reportorial realism and the improbably fantastic. Criticism which fails to understand this principle is as bad as art which futilely seeks to reach either extreme.

NOTES

1. This does not mean that the film cannot be used as a medium for biography. Recently it has been well used in this way. But biography and fiction in the medium of language must be guided by different

principles and subject to different standards of judgment. Similarly in the case of the film.

2. Dr. Edgar Dale, *How to Appreciate Motion Pictures*, New York, 1935: “One of the most important things the motion picture can do is to show truthfully the consequences that come from making certain choices in life” (p. 96). See also pp. 206-208.

* Excerpted and edited from his book *Art and Prudence*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hi Max:

The recent two Ideas Online related to Dr. Adler’s comments on theories of the narrative which will be most helpful in my courses which include the idea of “Poetry”—which includes all of storytelling.

Thanks so much for your help.

Teddy Handfield

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Byron Harris

Jordan Rosenberg

We welcome your comments.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
is published weekly for its members, by the
Center for the Study of The Great Ideas
Founded by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com
Homepage: TheGreatIdeas.org
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) organization.

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