"The epic style ... is not concerned with change and solution but with the presentation of invariable existence."

In this provocative note on the difference between two general types of film, Rudolf Arnheim quotes from an essay by Goethe: "The epic poem preferably describes man as he acts outwardly: battles, travels, any kind of enterprise that requires some sensuous breadth; tragedy shows man led toward the inside," He suggests that the dramatic film undertakes the solution of a particular problem, which may succeed or fail whereas "the epic style of narration has a preference for stringing episodes in sequences."

Like all dichotomies, this one probably cannot be made to cover all, or even most, cases, but film spectacles, documentaries, and biographies might deserve further study in the light of such a definition. Arnheim further urges that "there is no documentary theatre, but there are documentary films, and they are epic," and adds that biography is often in epic form. "Here the central figure does not journey through space, as does Ulysses, but through time." Professor Arnheim is a member of the psychology faculty at Sarah Lawrence College and is the author of Film as Art and Art and Visual Perception.

There are essentially three properties of film as an artistic medium that need to be considered when it comes to deciding which kinds of narrative subject matter are suitable and how they should be presented. First of all, film is a visual art which tells its stories to the eyes—even when sound is also used. Second, the pictures that tell the story are obtained mechanically by photography, that is, they can portray reality


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with documentary faithfulness. Third, these pictures can be made to follow each other in an uninterrupted sequence even though they may show the most different settings and actions taken at different times. As an additional and more practical condition the film maker is expected to remember that on the average the telling of the story should not take longer than an hour and fifteen minutes.

Two concepts that have proved to be useful in literary criticism can be applied fruitfully also to the film. In an essay "On Epic and Dramatic Poetry," written in 1797, Goethe asserts: "The epic poem preferably describes man as he acts outwardly: battles, travels, any kind of enterprise that requires some sensuous breadth; tragedy shows man led toward the inside, therefore the plot of a genuine tragedy requires little space." For Goethe this distinction coincided with that between an action told in the form of a poem or novel (epic) and one performed on the stage (dramatic). Indeed, the broad descriptions of varying settings and extensive happenings, which are characteristically epic, hardly suit the theatre. The stage no more than alludes to the setting of the action; it is limited to narrow space and can move from one location to the other only by means of clumsy devices. We may say of the film that it has put the epos on the stage. In fact, this is one of the main characteristics of the film medium.

When the two concepts are applied to film, they no longer designate the difference between outwardly and inwardly directed action. What distinguishes the "dramatic" film is rather that it undertakes the solution of a particular problem: it ties the knot by presenting the problem, describes the conflict caused by it, then attempts to find a solution, and finally the catastrophe of the hero wrecked by his failure to solve the insoluble. Dramatic film, just as the dramatic stage play, is dynamic. It presents a plot that proceeds from step to step, one of its most characteristic effects is "suspense." Also it rigorously limits the presentation to what is needed to explain the motives of the characters and to make the events progress. There is no time for broad description in dramatic film. As much as possible it cuts down on references to what happened before the beginning of the actual story, and it does not linger on the aftermath of the catastrophe. Also, secondary plots are kept in the background of the main conflict.

The epic film, on the other hand, neither deals with a prob-
lem nor offers a solution. True, it also can seize upon the
great discords of life, which create human suffering, but,
unlike dramatic film, it limits itself to describing their
manifestations. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a typically dramatic
film poses a problem. A man gravely clashes with his
environment because the good and the bad aspects of his
nature has produced two independent personalities. The
film develops the problem, creates suspense, and finally shows
the protagonist killed by his environment, thus indicating
that the conflict was insoluble. Compare this kind of treatment
with Don Quixote, where again a man clashes with his
world—this one impelled by ideals of human perfection, nobility,
and beauty. But the problem is neither analyzed nor
solved. The one permanent and unchanging conflict is shown
in a sequence of examples, which, however, do not represent
steps toward solution. More or less accidentally, the story
comes to an end—or rather fails to continue—at some point.
Epic film is static.

Epic tasks may naturally be expressed through the film
because of its capacity to describe reality in all its detail and
to ignore the impediments of time and space. There is no
documentary theatre, but there are documentary films, and
they are epic. On the other hand, the film, just as the theatre,
can develop a plot in the dramatic manner and create
suspense. Almost invariably, however, the dramatic film will
be found also to have epic, descriptive aspects. Even kind of
intimate film play that limits itself strictly to a little space, a
few characters, and a minimum of external action will seem
descriptive when compared to similar plays on the stage
because the camera inevitably captures with a single sweep
so many details of the setting that the stage looks bare and
abstract in comparison.

Film describes, but it describes swiftly. It leaps from one
place to the other, from small objects seen at close quarters to
the encompassing survey of the whole, and thus in seconds
records hundreds of things which the epic poet could not
enumerate in pages. It is for this reason that film can treat an
epic subject in little more than an hour.

The epic style of narration has a preference for stringing
episodes in sequences. Such chainlike composition stresses
the static character of the tale. Don Quixote passes through a
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A series of adventures, so does Ulysses. Sometimes the central allure is a mere pretext, which provides a common denomination for a series of descriptions, or he is a sharply drawn type whose conflicts with his surroundings are shown in ever new examples. The films of Chaplin and Buster Keaton are prototypes of the epic form. These films have been accused of lacking structure, of being episodes patched together. Of course, an epic work needs unity and structure; but the basic shape of these films merely applies the ancient principle of epic narration. To some extent, the episodes that constitute them are mutually exchangeable, and even the famous endings (Chaplin walks away and disappears on the horizon without having married the pretty girl) are not only a personal expression of resignation but first of all a necessary feature of the epic style, which is not concerned with change but with the presentation of invariable existence.

Occasionally three or four of Chaplin's short films have been combined into a full-sized "feature" film. The result seemed satisfactory because the epic film invites such enumeration whereas dramatic films that deserve the name would be expected to resist the same treatment.

Attempts have also been made to go beyond the narrow span of the movie theatre program and to create larger epic The films of Chaplin or those of Buster Keaton or Mickey Mouse form together a kind of continuing narrative, which can be presented in installments because each episode is self-contained. This is less true for the continuing adventures of some hero that used to keep the attention of the audiences from chapter to chapter over long stretches of time. The chase after a criminal, for instance, was presented, and the fans would wait for the next chapter as avidly as they were looking forward to the daily installment of a current novel in the newspaper.

A noteworthy variety of the epic film is the biography. There the central figure does not journey through space as does Ulysses, but through time. We watch a man maintaining himself against afflictions that turn up through the years but maintaining basically the same person in spite of the changes time imposes upon him. Externally, a man's entanglement with time appears as dynamic or dramatic because the passing of time suggests a progression; but basically it is static and epic. Therefore, biography suits the film medium well and, so does the historical presentation of several generations as in Cavalcade. Here not a single person but a central group of people serves as the nucleus around which a panorama of changing periods, mores, and fashions evolves. In such films the fundamental task of the epic style is clearly revealed: it insists on the unchangeable nature of man.