

# THE MULTI- PROTAGONIST FILM

*María del Mar Azcona*

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# **THE MULTI- PROTAGONIST FILM**

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For my family



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## INTRODUCTION



What do *Short Cuts* (1993), *American Pie* (1999), *Love Actually* (2003), and *Syriana* (2005) have in common? If we think of them respectively as an auteur film, a gross-out movie for and about teenagers, a romantic comedy, and a political thriller, the first answer that comes to mind is, “not much; at least, not at first sight.” In this book, however, I claim that, together with many other filmic texts, these four movies partake of a contemporary tendency to

abandon the single-protagonist structure on which most film narratives have traditionally relied and replace it by a wider assortment of characters with more or less independent narrative lines. This storytelling pattern, which from now on will be referred to as multi-protagonist, is anything but new in the history of cinema. Yet, it was not until the last two decades of the twentieth century that it started to make a significant impact. Since this time, multi-protagonist movies have developed a versatile and multifaceted narrative structure, as a wide array of recent and not so recent examples demonstrate. When in the course of this process the films began to accrue a number of common narrative and stylistic characteristics, attached to a specific perspective on certain contemporary social issues, what started as a narrative structure gradually acquired the status of a genre. A crucial factor in this transformation was the growing visibility of the term as a generic label in critical discourse.

This book originates from an awareness of the large amount of US films with multiple protagonists that have appeared in recent decades, as has recently been noticed, among others, by David Bordwell, who claims that nearly 150 films using this type of narrative structure have been released since 1990 (2008: 191). The beginning of this trend can be placed in the early 1980s, with the release of films like *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980), *Diner* (1982), *The Big Chill* (1983), or *St Elmo's Fire* (1985). It escalated through the 1990s and it has continued to grow during the first decade of the twenty-first century, as can be seen in the following more or less random selection of films: *Traffic* (2000), *What's Cooking?* (2000), *Gosford Park* (2001), *The Safety of Objects* (2001), *Sidewalks of New York* (2001), *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing* (2001), *Love in the Time of Money* (2002), *Casa de los Babys* (2003), *Cape of Good Hope* (2004), *Crash* (2004), *Heights* (2004), *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005), *Babel* (2006), *Bobby* (2006), *The Dead Girl* (2006), *Fast Food Nation* (2006), *Friends with Money* (2006), *The Groomsmen* (2006), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *Shortbus* (2006), *Southland Tales* (2006), *Lions for Lambs* (2007), *My Blueberry Nights* (2007), *Vantage Point* (2008), *The Women* (2008), and *Crossing Over* (2009). The trend has not been restricted to the USA. The Australian *Look Both Ways* (2005), the Spanish *Tapas* (2005), the Italian *Manuale d'amore* (2005), the French–British *Chromophobia* (2005), the British *Festival* (2005), the Israeli *What a Wonderful Place* (2005), the Spanish–Argentinian *Tocar el cielo* (2007), the French–Lebanese *Caramel* (2007), and the Mexican *Cosas Insignificantes* (2008), among many others, amply confirm Margrit Tröhler's view of the genre as a transcultural phenomenon (2007). This is not to say that the multi-protagonist movie is the dominant narrative paradigm in contemporary cinema, but its increasing popularity in recent years has turned it into a phenomenon worthy of careful examination.

### ***What is a Multi-Protagonist Film?***

As the term indicates, “multi-protagonist movies” are films with a multiplicity of characters of similar narrative relevance. While most movies tend to structure their plots around the trajectory, goals, and desires of a single protagonist – or, in the case of some genres like the musical and the romantic comedy, of a couple – multi-protagonist films feature a wider group of characters without establishing a strict narrative hierarchy among them. The single central protagonist is such a given of film narrative that it features as a compulsory ingredient in the most popular screenwriting manuals, like those written by Syd Field (2005),

Robert McKee (1997), and Linda Aronson (2000). Although both McKee and Aronson acknowledge the existence of what they call “alternative” ways of narration (McKee 1997: 49; Aronson 2000: 103), they maintain that stories with a single protagonist are and have always been the norm. For Field there is always a main character: “[I]f your story is about three guys preparing to steal moon rocks, which one of the three is the *main character*?” (2005: 47; Field’s emphasis). He goes to great pains to justify the existence of a protagonist in every single film. In a buddy film like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), he regards Butch as the main character because he is the one making the decisions. Sundance is “a *major* character, not the *main* character” (48; Field’s emphasis). He then struggles to find a main character even in movies like the three parts of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003), settling for Frodo (Elijah Wood) and discarding Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) (and everybody else). Significantly, when two pages later he alludes to *Magnolia* (1999) in order to explain how characters are constructed, Field avoids mentioning who the main character is (2006: 49–50). In contrast to Field, the aim of this book is the study of those films that feature an assortment of main characters at the heart of the telling. Therefore, I cannot but disagree with Field about the exclusivity of narratives with single main characters, yet there is no doubt that this is still indisputably the device that most movies use to structure their storylines.

The use of a central character as a way of structuring the narrative began very early in the history of cinema. Though primitive cinema, with its emphasis on the novelty of the technological medium, did not show much concern with issues of narrative development and characterization, the increasing demand for films brought about by the nickelodeon boom in 1906 is usually regarded as having played a crucial role in the movement from the early cinema of attractions to the cinema of narrative integration that followed (see Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1994: 114; Pearson 1996: 29; Gunning 1998: 259). Together with this general movement towards narrative, a tendency appeared for filmmakers to increase the length of films, usually by adding shots (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1994: 161). In the process of making stories longer, filmmakers could have simply added more characters and physical action to expand a skit-like situation. However, this would have produced little change in the course of the narrative and would have resulted in an excessively static story. If, instead, the existing character was endowed with a few traits, this figure could motivate a whole variety of situations while providing a narrational thread to guide the spectator. This gradual reinforcement of characterization was also favored because of the disruptive qualities of the

cut, as the character became one of the unifying forces that helped early filmmakers provide a sense of suture and to maintain a clear narrative line while juxtaposing disparate times and spaces. The psychological character was to the development of the longer narrative what the continuity system was to the unification of time and space (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1994: 162). At the same time, this movement towards longer fictional films brought about a shift in influence from the other arts, from an initial close imitation of vaudeville to a greater dependence on short fiction, novels, and legitimate drama. It also laid the basis for what Burch (1981) called the “institutional mode of representation” and came to be widely known as the classical Hollywood narrative system.

The dependence on a central character in order to tell a story is based on a very old storytelling device: a journey and a quest. This pattern, in Pam Cook’s words, usually goes as follows:

A hero sets out to accomplish a task; en route he encounters a series of obstacles; in overcoming them, he finds his slotted place in the world and usually gets “the girl”. There are as many variations on this basic pattern as there are storytellers. The hero may be a woman, and the reward can be a man, or a woman; or he may be a child, and the reward a parent, or vice versa; he may be a dog, or even a pig. The journey motif is also the narrative mainspring of myth – from Oedipus’s travels from Athens to Thebes to Demeter’s descent into the Underworld to rescue her daughter Persephone. (2002: 21)

Not surprisingly, then, the predication of any narrative around the figure of a hero has received a great deal of critical attention. At the same time, however, it is a pattern that most theoretical frameworks have tended to take for granted. Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, for instance, is precisely founded on the persistence of the hero’s quest in a myriad of world myths that originate in different times and places. He finds the roots of this individual mythological adventure in anthropology and relates it to the processes undergone by individuals in certain rites of passage (1968: 30). The hero is also the concept around which Vladimir Propp’s (1988) structural analysis of fairy tales is organized. Roland Barthes, on the other hand, questions the centrality of the hero and blames the novel for it. Yet, while he believes that this privileging of a character over the rest does not apply to the whole of the history of narrative literature (1977: 108), his acknowledgement of other types of narrative structure is little more than a passing comment on which he does not elaborate. For Sigmund Freud, the hero is a constant element in all the creations of story-writers because he is