

## CHAPTER 1

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MULTI-PROTAGONIST FILM



#### *Early Multi-Protagonist Films*

Under a variety of shapes and names – ensemble and mosaic films (Tröhler 2000, 2007), sequential and tandem narratives (Aronson 2001), polyphonic, parallel, and daisy-chain plots (Ramírez Berg 2006), or network narratives (Bordwell 2006) – multi-protagonist movies have emerged as one of the most visible and recurrent trends in contemporary cinema. However, the multi-protagonist film as a narrative structure is not a recent invention and it cannot be solely explained as an attempt on the part of certain sectors of the industry to tell stories in new, original ways (Murphy 2007). Its antecedents can be traced back to silent films such as D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) and, later on, to the early days of the classical period, when Metro Goldwyn Mayer, the studio that boasted of having “more stars than there are in heaven,” decided to gather some of them under a single roof in *Grand Hotel* (1932). Following its success, another star-laden narrative reunited most of the earlier film's performers in *Dinner at Eight* (1933). The formula was then transferred to a post-World War II hotel in New York in *Weekend at the Waldorf* (1945), to one in the Berlin of the same period in *Hotel Berlin* (1945), to a stylish New Orleans hotel in *Hotel* (1967) and, recently, to the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles in *Bobby*.

Gregory La Cava's *Stage Door* (1937), with its boarding house full of aspiring actresses, and George Cukor's *The Women* (1939), with its

all-women cast, are another two early examples of Hollywood films that make use of big ensembles. Though Cukor's film features a main narrative line centered on the discovery by Mrs Haynes (Norma Shearer) of her husband's affair with Crystal Allen (Joan Crawford), and her trip to Reno to get a divorce – "to get reno-vated" – the film's central concern is the relationships – and the circulation of gossip – among the many different women who appear in its narrative and the relationships of these women with the men who never appear on screen. *The Women* is one of the first multi-protagonist films to rely on the notion of stereotyping in order both to announce the comic undertone of its narrative – the female world as a jungle where only the fittest survive – and, at the same time, to make it easier for spectators to follow the different narrative threads, a convention that would become a staple of the multi-protagonist disaster movies of the 1970s. *The Women's* stereotyping of its multiple characters is carried out by linking each of the ten women who appear in the initial credits with an animal which, in popular tradition, has long been associated with a particular set of characteristics. The credits show, first, the name of the actress and the head of the animal with which the character is going to be associated, in what may be seen as a throwback to a similar strategy employed, for very different purposes, in Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1924). Then, as the name of the character appears, the head of the animal transforms itself into the face of the actress/character. Therefore, Crystal Allen is associated with the sexual voracity of the tigress that precedes the image of her face, while the wisdom and sensible counseling of Mrs Moorehead (Lucille Watson) is evoked by relating her with the owl.

*Stage Door* stars Katharine Hepburn, Ginger Rogers, Adolphe Menjou, Lucille Ball, Eve Arden, and Ann Miller and follows the lives of a group of aspiring actresses trying to make it to the top on Broadway. Its narrative, which replaces the impressive art deco hotel of MGM's 1932 film by the more modest Footlights Club, is framed by the arrival of a new aspiring actress at the boarding house both at the beginning and at the end of the film, the circular structure suggesting the endless repetition of the stories of broken dreams and heartless ambition that the film chronicles. A different but related sense of inconclusiveness emerges at the end of *The Women*. The last shot of the film, one of former Mrs Haynes running towards her ex-husband and determined to forgive him, closes her narrative line but leaves some of the others wide open. Countess De Lave (Mary Boland), for instance, is left heartbroken after having discovered that her fifth husband is having an affair with Crystal Allen. In this sense, the Countess's previous words – "Isn't it wonderful to see all our lives so settled . . . temporarily?" – are a clear echo of the contingency of the intimate arrangements reached at the end of the film.

World War II brought about a renewed interest on the part of the Hollywood studios in ensemble casts and multi-stranded stories. This structure was frequently used in musicals like *Ziegfeld Girl* (1941), *The Gang's All Here* (1943), and *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944), and reached an apogee of sorts with the extreme popularity of William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), a melodrama that tells the story of three returning veterans and their difficult process of adaptation to civilian life. Although the three soldiers have individual lines of action, their lives after returning become increasingly intertwined. This allows the film to explore the crisscrossing structure that already characterized earlier instances of this narrative form and would later become a salient convention of the genre. Wyler did not return to the form after the success of *Best Years*, but his contemporary Howard Hawks did, once and again. *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), *Ball of Fire* (1941), *Air Force* (1943), *Rio Bravo* (1959), *Hatari!* (1962), *Red Line 7000* (1965), and *El Dorado* (1966) are less concerned with their protagonist heroes than with the dynamics of the all-important group. It is easy to discern the multi-protagonist nature of the group of racing-car drivers and girlfriends in *Red Line 7000* and the Mary Ann crew in *Air Force*, but the casting of Cary Grant in *Only Angels*, Gary Cooper in *Ball of Fire*, and John Wayne in both *Rio Bravo* and *Hatari!* may make the multi-protagonist nature of these narratives much more questionable. However, the presence of a leading star does not efface either the narrative centrality or the idiosyncrasies of the wide variety of characters surrounding them. For Robin Wood and Robert Ray, for example, what is special about Hawks's groups is that they are collections of individuals who, while belonging to a specific group, retain their individuality first and foremost (Wood 1981: 90; Ray 1996: 190–1). Wood establishes a contrast between Hawks's groups and those in some of John Ford's westerns such as *My Darling Clementine* (1946) or *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949). While Ford's movies are about the assimilation of individual identity by group identity and tradition, Hawks's films, on the contrary, promote the preservation of individual identity within the group (Wood 1981: 90). Wood's disagreement with Hawks's view of *Rio Bravo* as a John Wayne picture, and his positing of Dean Martin as the real protagonist, carries with itself a measure of acknowledgement of the film's multi-protagonist nature. As he says, the significance of *Rio Bravo* arises from the ensemble, not from any individual character in isolation (1981: 44), a statement which could be applied to most of Hawks's group movies.

Hawks's ensemble films depict almost exclusively male groups, isolated, usually for work reasons, from the rest of society – in Africa, on an island,



**PLATE 1** The single protagonist enjoys the company of the group in *Hatari!*

or secluded in a house. However, the internal dynamics of these groups are never identical. The relationship between their members ranges from intense male friendship and admiration in *Only Angels*, *Rio Bravo*, and *Hatari!* to near antagonism in *Red Line 7000*. In spite of these differences, most of Hawks's group narratives share an interest in characterization to the detriment of plot, a tendency that the director himself regarded as a constant throughout his career even if he also admitted to only having turned consciously to it just before the making of *Rio Bravo* (Bogdanovich 1996: 64). This lack of concern with the development of a tight narrative plot may sometimes lead to an almost episodic narrative, as is the case in *Hatari!*, where a series of vignettes of a hunting season crisscross with the personal interactions between the characters at the camp in the evening, or *Red Line 7000*, which uses a similar structure by intertwining sequences from the different races and the development of the relationships between the manager, the racing-drivers, and their girlfriends. Although in most of Hawks's group movies matters are more or less settled at the end, a definite sense of closure is lacking in some of them. *Red Line 7000*, for instance, ends with a race in which the three drivers are able to overcome the difficulties they encounter. However, the film ends on a note of anxiety: the three women looking in horror at a car in flames. The car does not belong to any of the protagonists but, as Wood puts it, the image fixes in our minds the sense that "it might have been any of them . . . and may be, in the next race" (1981: 148–9). The same feeling of provisionality emerges in *Only Angels Have Wings* when Geoff Carter (Cary Grant) rushes to a dangerous new flight in the final scene. Hawks's group films also reveal the versatility of the structure in that they mix it with generic conventions as different as those of the romantic comedy/gangster movie in *Ball of Fire*, the western in *Rio Bravo*, or the war movie in *Air Force*.

The ensemble movies of the 1930s and Hawks's group films are all classical Hollywood movies which already incorporate some of the features which would later become central in the genre: an inclination towards open endings (although not in the case of the musicals), a concern with the (love, sexual, or friendship) relationships between the characters rather than with a strong cause-and-effect line of action, and a special amenability to combine with a multiplicity of genres. Outside Hollywood, two of Jean Renoir's masterpieces, *La grande illusion* (1937) and *La règle du jeu* (1939), were also a crucial influence on later multi-protagonist films because of their concern with the portrayal of a cross-section of society. *La règle du jeu* takes place in a country house that belongs to an aristocrat, Robert de la Chesnaye (Marcel Dalio), and his wife Christine (Nora Gregor), and develops along several narrative lines which show the intrigues, affairs, and infidelities of masters and servants. When asked in a series of interviews, Renoir offered an explanation of the use of a multi-stranded narrative pattern by saying that the film – which was a flop at the time of its original release but has routinely appeared, since then, at the top of critics' top-ten polls – was about a world, not a plot: "I wanted to make a good film but one that, at the same time, would criticize a society that I considered to be rotten" (1990: 237). Describing *La grande illusion* as a multi-protagonist film is much more problematic, though, since the number of central characters decreases as the story develops. The array of male characters in the German prisoner-of-war camp of the beginning is reduced to just four in the castle prison – Von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim), Captain de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay), Lt Marechal (Jean Gabin), and Lt Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio) – and to three – Marechal, Rosenthal, and the German woman – in the last part of the film. Yet, even at the end, when only two of the protagonists cross the Swiss border, the film's central concern remains with relationships and group dynamics rather than with the individual participants. In a sense, even Marechal is more important as a representative of a social group and of a certain type of class awareness than as a classical individual hero. *La grande illusion* is a war film with no heroes and no villains, which makes it even more difficult for spectators to choose and side with a single protagonist. On the other hand, the section that takes place in the first German camp is a preliminary example of a formula that will be used in later multi-protagonist films dealing with prisoner-of-war camps or jails, such as *Brute Force* (1947), *Stalag 17* (1953), *Le trou* (1960), and *The Great Escape* (1963).

Like *La règle du jeu*, later works such as *Los olvidados* (1950) and *The Seven Samurai* (1954) use a multi-protagonist narrative pattern to portray a cross-section of a society: the slums of Mexico City and the collapse of the

samurai class, respectively. John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), a remake of Kurosawa's film, employs a similar pattern but transfers the action to the US West. Following the example of *La grande illusion*, other multi-protagonist films restrict their representation of a cross-section of society to an ensemble of people who happen to be together in the same place at a specific moment. Some of these films also add new functions to the multi-protagonist structure. *Stalag 17*, for instance, gathers several US soldiers in a German prisoner-of-war camp. After a carefully planned attempt to escape results in the death of two inmates, the rest suspect the existence of a traitor among them. The multi-protagonist pattern is in this case a way of producing and preserving suspense since, apart from Cookie (Jill Straton) – the film's internal narrator – everybody else is a suspect and neither the audience nor the prisoners discover who the spy is until the very end. *The Great Escape* – like other war films such as *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), and big-caper movies such as *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *The Killing* (1956), *Ocean's 11* (1960), *Seven Thieves* (1960), and *The Italian Job* (1969), among many others – adds another dimension to the format. Unlike most of the movies that have been mentioned so far, these combine a multiplicity of characters with a strong and clear line of action: to escape from the camp in *The Great Escape*, to assault a French chateau full of German officers in *The Dirty Dozen*, or to perform a brilliantly planned criminal scheme in any of the big-caper movies. In these examples, each character is assigned a very specific task, which is crucial for the successful outcome of



**PLATE 2** A traitor in the barracks: Multiple protagonists and suspense in *Stalag 17*

the plan, thus, proving the importance of each and every of the members of the ensemble while, at the same time, providing a fertile ground for the exploration of group dynamics.

While the relatively isolated or generically specialized groups of multi-protagonist movies discussed so far had already started to shape some of the contours of the future genre, the disaster film cycle of the 1970s became, in its narrative and thematic consistency, a definitive step in its consolidation. Films such as *Airport* (1970) – and the sequels that followed it, *Airport 1975* (1974) and *Airport '77* (1977) – *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *The Towering Inferno* (1974), *Earthquake* (1974), and *Meteor* (1979) are the best-known examples of the long list of disaster movies that were released in the 1970s (see Keane 2001: 19). The narrative structure of this prolific trend is repeated from one film to the next. They all revolve around a life/death situation caused by either a natural disaster or a human action in which the efforts to escape and/or control the catastrophe feature as the strong line of action that unifies their multi-protagonist casts.

Like *Grand Hotel* and the films that followed its lead in the 1930s and 1940s, disaster movies depended to a great extent on the star power of their ensemble casts. *Airport*, for instance, was advertised in the trailers as “the biggest all-star cast ever assembled for a single Universal motion picture.” The trailers left no doubt about the multi-plot nature of the film either: “seven stories tied into one.” The convention soon became a suspense-preserving strategy, as the tagline of some of the posters of *The Poseidon Adventure* shows: “At midnight on New Year’s Eve, the S.S. Poseidon was struck by a 90 foot tidal wave and capsized. Who will survive – in one of the greatest escape adventures ever!” The inclusion of the boxed-in photographs of the all-star cast – as happens in the promotional posters of *The Towering Inferno*, *Earthquake*, and *Meteor*, among others – became a staple of the cycle, as was its use of stereotyped characters (Keane 2001: 23). The poster of *The Towering Inferno* even assigns character types to the faces in the poster – the architect, the fire chief, the builder, the girlfriend, the con man, the wife, the son-in-law, the widower, the security man, the senator, and the publicity man – in a controversial use of labeling which characterizes male characters in terms of their professional roles and female ones in terms of relationships (Keane 2001: 44), and which could be seen as further evidence of Ryan and Kellner’s criticism of the conservativeness of the cycle. For these two critics, catastrophes in early 1970s disaster films clearly stand for the “immoralities and disorders” brought about by the 1960s radical and liberal movements. Therefore, the overcoming of the films’ crises through strong male action called for a return to a paternalistic male order as the only way of doing away with the catastrophic legacy of the 1960s (1990: 51).



**PLATE 3** Blending in and standing out: Stars aid characterization in *The Towering Inferno*

Yet, the use of an all-star cast in disaster movies does not only provide rapid recognition of the characters in the narrative – since spectators are already familiar with the actors and actresses playing the characters, it is easier for them to make sense of who is who in the filmic tapestry – but also endows these characters with certain connotations conjured up by the stars’ personae behind them. As Roddick has argued, what spectators respond to on the screen is not a character called Stuart Graff – in *Earthquake* – or Alan Murdock – in *Airport 1975* – but the star-persona of Charlton Heston (in Keane 2001: 43). Similarly, as Keane suggests in relation to Paul Newman’s and Steve McQueen’s roles in *The Towering Inferno*, their respective parts in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) and *The Great Escape* – where McQueen plays “the cooler king” – show that these two stars are the “kings of cool united in a film full of heat” (47). The amount of information brought about by the stars’ previous roles partly compensates for their lack of characterization and the stereotypical nature of their characters. Richard Dyer also offers an analysis of the use of stars in *The Towering Inferno* and discusses the implications of the twilight romance between Fred Astaire and Jennifer Jones, and of the sensuality and strength taken from Faye Dunaway’s previous roles in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968) (1975: 31). When comparing the 1970s disaster movies with the non multi-protagonist *Titanic* (1997), José Arroyo points out the necessity of star casting in the former to make characterization easier. However, he also refers to the suspense-preserving function, arguing that part of the pleasure of the early disaster films “was anticipating which stars would live and how the others met their grisly fates (doing Shelley Winters in *The Poseidon Adventure* is still a popular party piece). We need to care – or rather, to judge how well or badly these stars behaved in the crisis – in order that affect be generated” (1998: 18).

Consequently, the employment of a multi-protagonist narrative structure in the 1970s disaster movies is clearly multifunctional. On the one hand, the films use an all-star cast as part of their marketing strategies to get as many spectators as possible in the movie theater. At the same time, the use of stars facilitates characterization in a series of filmic texts which include an ensemble of players of similar narrative relevance. Since the number of characters in a movie reduces the amount of time that the movie can devote to any single character, the films may indulge in a tendency towards stereotyping, while the use of stars may, somehow, counteract this process with the amount of information that the star-personae bring with them. In addition, it is also a suspense-preserving mechanism. As some of the promotional posters and Arroyo's comment show, part of the appeal of multi-protagonist movies was to try to guess which stars would live and which would not. Though it may seem that among the large group of stars the leading ones will be those that will survive the catastrophe, this is not always the case – take, for instance, Gene Hackman's death in *The Poseidon Adventure*. Apart from all these functions, disaster movies also make the most of their use of a large number of characters in order to display and dwell on relationships between them. Thus, these texts seem to constitute the perfect scenario to explore class conflicts – by including both working-class people and the people whom they work for – and gender relationships. At the same time as the characters handle the crisis, they have to deal with their personal lives and the tensions arising out of the group dynamics. The films are usually as much about the relationships between the characters as they are about the disaster, to the point that they may be seen to articulate microcosms of US society (Ryan and Kellner 1990: 52–5; Keane 2001: 23–31).

The success and popularity of disaster movies in the 1970s may be related to the gradual appearance of other films with larger casts. More specifically, a tendency consolidated itself within the genre of comedy that shifted the emphasis from individual protagonists or couples to groups of people brought together by some common activity or location. William Paul has analyzed this cycle and has focused on what he calls “animal comedies” (2002: 118). Since animal comedies constitute a crucial step in the combination of the multi-protagonist genre and the teenpic, greater attention to this trend and to Paul's theory will be paid later in Chapter 5. This critic traces the genesis of these movies to the mid-1960s and films like Richard Lester's Beatles vehicles *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965) and to some of Blake Edwards' movies of the decade, and relates the animal comedies to examples like *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970) and *American Graffiti* (1973). These narratives all have in common their ambling

episodic nature and a relative disregard for the individual predicaments of their protagonists. A further link between *American Graffiti* and *M\*A\*S\*H*, but not shared by the animal comedies, is the category of *auteurs* that was later conferred by critics on their directors – respectively, George Lucas and Robert Altman – at a time when a shift in the historical paradigm was taking place that would position the director at the center of the film industry. While Lucas did not pursue the narrative form in his later blockbusters – although his *Star Wars* saga (1977, 1980, 1983, 1999, 2002, 2005) could be considered a succession of episodes in the adventures of a group of heroes – Altman became a central figure in the history and consolidation of the multi-protagonist film as a genre. For this reason, Chapter 4 of this book will be devoted to his *oeuvre*.

These two filmmakers, along with others brought together under the label “New American Cinema,” inherited from their European models the sustained use of self-consciousness as part of the type of relationship established between the work of art and reality. A film’s self-consciousness, those moments in which the narration calls attention to its own status as a construction, is one of the formal features which Bordwell associates with art cinema (1985: 209). Although not every art film makes spectators aware of the filmmaking process *à la* Godard, art cinema’s complex narrative structures tend to highlight the act of narration and the process of narrative comprehension and make the spectator wonder why the film is constructing the story in such a way. If the single protagonist is usually regarded as one of the cornerstones of conventional/classical cinema, it is not surprising that art cinema, in its search for alternative ways of narration, has sometimes resorted to the use of a multi-protagonist narrative structure. Illustrative examples of art films using a multi-protagonist narrative structure for reasons similar to those that have already been mentioned here are François Truffaut’s *L’argent de poche* (1976), a film that offers a wide portrait of childhood by interlocking the different stories of children of different ages and showing some of the pains and pleasures of growing up; Federico Fellini’s *I vitelloni* (1953), which deals with the story of five male friends living in a small town on the Adriatic who are trapped in a situation, common to many later multi-protagonist films, where they have to take a step towards maturity and leave the group; and *Amarcord* (1973), by the same director, which makes use of a multi-protagonist narrative structure to evoke nostalgically life in an Italian seaside town in an imagined past. However, a certain degree of self-consciousness is not the only feature that the form has inherited from art cinema: such devices as the substitution of tenuous narrative links for classical Hollywood’s tight causal links, the importance of chance and

coincidence, the episodic nature of the narrative, and a tendency towards open endings are also typical art cinema features which can be found in multi-protagonist films.

The selection of multi-protagonist films from before the 1980s included in this brief historical overview suggests that the reasons for the use of a multi-protagonist narrative structure are varied, and have to be analyzed in every particular case and in relation to the rest of elements at play. Nevertheless, the versatility of the multi-protagonist narrative does not mean that a common denominator cannot be found. These films reveal an interest in the representation of the relationships between the characters. Even in the cases in which there is a strong and clear line of action, as happens in the disaster cycle and especially in some of the big-caper movies, relationships are usually brought to the fore. As a recent review of a big-caper movie puts it, the focus of *Ocean's Twelve* is “not on the logistics of the heist but on the droll interlocking relationships between characters, A-list cast and audience” (Spencer 2005: 64). This concern of multi-protagonist movies with the depiction of relationships among a multiplicity of characters will become one of the central tenets of the group of multi-protagonist movies that proliferated at the end of the twentieth century.

### ***Ensemble and Mosaic Films***

The 1980s saw an unprecedented rise in the number of films with an assortment of protagonists and/or plot-lines. *The Return of the Secaucus Seven*, *Fame* (1980), *Diner*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982), *The Big Chill*, *Choose Me* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *St Elmo's Fire*, *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *Matewan* (1987), *Radio Days* (1987), *September* (1987), *Eight Men Out* (1988), *The Moderns* (1988), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Parenthood* (1989), and *Steel Magnolias* (1989), among many others, illustrate the beginning of a new stage in the history of the multi-protagonist film. During this decade, a certain degree of formal and thematic consistency began to emerge, paving the road for the development and consideration of the multi-protagonist film as a genre. In her book on the multi-protagonist phenomenon, Margrit Tröhler uses the term “ensemble” or “group” to refer to films, like those mentioned above, featuring large groups of people linked spatially to a central meeting place. The characters are involved in different plot-lines but the connections between them proliferate as the plot develops (2000: 85–6).



**PLATE 4** *The Big Chill*: Assorted groups begin to gather in multi-protagonist films of the 1980s

Yet, a closer look at a random sample of ensemble films reveals the very different nature of the so-called “groups” in these movies. They range from already established ensembles that stay as such after the story is over – the families in *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Parenthood*, or the friends in *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, *The Big Chill*, *Diner*, and *St Elmo’s Fire* – to a group which comes together haphazardly at the beginning of the narrative and which may not have any future as such once the story is over – the five students having to go through Saturday detention in *The Breakfast Club*, for instance. Accordingly, the relationship among the members of the ensemble also varies from one text to the next. While in some of them characters are tightly linked by friendship or family ties, in others they are no more than mere acquaintances, and, in some cases, like *Choose Me*, the gathering of characters in a common space even resists definition as a “group.” Two of the elements that Tröhler considers key features of ensemble films – the central meeting place and the location of the action in a clearly bounded and short temporal interval such as a weekend or a national or religious holiday (2007: 209–13) – can also vary from text to text. The central meeting place may play a key role in the narrative – *The Breakfast Club*, *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, or *September* – or it may be just a structural element which confers unity to otherwise disconnected narrative lines – as happens, for example, with Eve’s Lounge, Hannah’s parents’ house, and the high school premises in *Choose Me*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, respectively. Similarly, the action may take place over a short temporal interval, as is the case, for instance, in *A Midsummer’s Night Sex Comedy*, or expand over longer periods of time – two years in *Hannah and Her Sisters* and even a longer time span in *Steel Magnolias*.

The release of movies about groups of people continued all through the following decade with, among many others, *Queens Logic* (1991), *Singles* (1992), *Home for the Holidays* (1995), *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995), *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *Beautiful Girls* (1996), *The Daytrippers* (1996), *SubUrbia* (1996), *Clockwatchers* (1997), *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1997), *The Ice Storm* (1997), *The Myth of Fingerprints* (1997), *Soul Food* (1997), *Happiness* (1998), *The Last Days of Disco* (1998), *Cookie's Fortune* (1999), and *American Pie*. Group films made outside the USA, including *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *Peter's Friends* (1992), *Festen* (1998), *Lawless Heart* (2001), *Los lunes al sol* (2002), and *En la ciudad* (2003), provide some evidence that the interest in films about groups was taking hold on a global scale as well.

As group narratives continued to be produced and released in the 1990s, a different variation on the format started to become noticeable. Films like *City of Hope* (1991) and *Short Cuts* use a multi-protagonist pattern but resist ascription to Tröhler's category of ensemble films. Instead of featuring the interactions among a group of people related to a central meeting place, these texts deal with much more isolated characters with apparently no connection to each other, even if, in the course of the story, most of them cross paths and their storylines become enmeshed, mainly through coincidence. This new trend, which Tröhler has labeled mosaic films, includes, among many others, *Grand Canyon* (1991), *Slacker* (1991), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *Short Cuts*, *Prêt à Porter* (1994), *Boogie Nights* (1997), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Go* (1999), *Magnolia*, *Summer of Sam* (1999), *200 Cigarettes* (1999), *Fast Food*, *Fast Women* (2000), *Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her* (2000), *Traffic*, and *What's Cooking?*

Because of the absence of a narrative center and the fact that characters belonging to apparently separate storylines are randomly linked, Tröhler (2007: 391) considers Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the rhizome – an acentered structure without a hierarchical organization in which any point can be arbitrarily connected to any other (Deleuze and Guattari 2004) – as the structure that best reflects mosaic films. Since these two theorists regard the rhizome as the only alternative to traditional tree-models and the structures of power and dominance systems that they inevitably bring about, we should take into consideration the potential of mosaic multi-protagonist movies to overcome the hierarchical organization reflected in conventional movies' privileging of one character over the rest and the monolithic point of view that usually goes with it.

A close look at some of the mosaic films mentioned in this section shows that, as happened with the ensemble movies, any attempt at traditional ways of classification reveals the heterogeneity of the elements being categorized and, therefore, reproduces the problem intrinsic in much

categorization. The range of narrative patterns that can be found under the label mosaic films is remarkable. A mosaic film like Robert Altman's *Prêt à Porter*, for instance, follows several apparently disconnected characters and storylines set simultaneously in the annual Prêt-à-porter Fashion Week in Paris. As the narrative progresses, the characters crisscross and some of their storylines become enmeshed, mainly through random connections, offering an intricate tapestry which shows the absurdity of the fashion world and its manipulative power. *Slacker*, on the other hand, à la Max Ophüls's *La ronde* (1950), follows the paths of a considerable number of characters, focusing on one at a time only to veer off and pick up a new passer-by after a while. In accordance with the theory of alternate realities and parallel universes laid out at the beginning by a character played by the film director, Richard Linklater, this film's narrative structure tries to explain how every moment may branch into an infinite number of scenarios. Whenever a path is chosen it is always at the expense of a countless number of alternative possibilities. In a similar way, *Go* suggests that, whenever a story is told, it is only one side of the story that is presented since there is always a privileged point of view. In order to offer the "full" picture, the film replays at three different points the scene in which two characters working in a supermarket swap their work shifts. With each replay, we are allowed to follow a different character and, therefore, to see the different sides of a series of related events on a long Christmas Eve.

Unlike these three films, *Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her* could resist classification as a multi-protagonist movie since it is made up of five almost independent stories separated by intertitles. However, it does bear traces of the mosaic film since the different characters portrayed share the same space-time diegesis and, although very tangentially, manage to step into one another's storylines and to affect each other's lives. Dr Keener (Glenn Close), the main character in the story "This is Dr Keener," calls a tarot reader who happens to be Christine (Calista Flockhart) from the story "Good Night Lilly, Good Night Christine" and steps into the story "Fantasies about Rebecca" in order to perform an abortion on the main character of that story. The variety of ways in which multi-protagonist movies may organize the same space-time diegesis has led Linda Aronson to establish a classification that constitutes a further breakdown of mosaic films. Depending on whether the different stories are told simultaneously – through the use of parallel editing and crosscutting – or consecutively, Aronson (2001: 185) distinguishes between tandem narrative, which presents interconnected stories running in parallel – *City of Hope*, *Magnolia*, *Short Cuts*, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) – and sequential narrative – *Pulp Fiction* (1994),

*Amores Perros* (2000), and *Go* – where simultaneous stories are told in sequence and a final section ties them together.

Some multi-protagonist movies further resist Tröhler's taxonomy because of the blurry boundaries between the categories that she herself is aware of when she claims that a film like *The Group* (1966) starts as an ensemble and becomes more and more mosaic-like in the course of the narrative (2007: 344). *Playing by Heart* (1998) follows just the opposite trajectory in order to subvert spectators' expectations. It features eleven different characters of similar narrative importance arranged in six different storylines which are told simultaneously and which, at first sight, do not seem to have anything to do with one another. Thus far, it would perfectly fit the category of mosaic films. However, at the end, we realize that some of the characters are members of the same family – they have been talking to one another on the phone without spectators' being aware of it – and they are all made to converge on the occasion of the parents' wedding anniversary. In this sense, since there is a central meeting place, the film could also be considered an ensemble. A similar strategy is used in *What's Cooking?*, a movie that revolves around four families of different ethnic origins and offers a multicultural view of Thanksgiving. This film could be easily labeled as mosaic. The different stories are told simultaneously and, since it shows characters from the different families who cross paths occasionally, it can be assumed that the characters reside in the same Los Angeles neighborhood. However, the very last scene reveals that these four families are even closer than the spectators may have thought since they live on the four corners of a crossroads – thus reinforcing the idea that, in spite of cultural and racial differences, a closer look at the four households reveals more similarities than differences among them. Spectatorial expectations are also partly subverted in *Denise Calls Up* (1995), since the final gathering of the group of friends who have spent the whole temporal



**PLATE 5** Ensemble or mosaic? *Playing by Heart* challenges critical classifications

span of the narrative talking to one another on the phone never happens. Therefore, though the film features a group of friends and could accordingly be labeled as an ensemble, it lacks the central meeting place that characterizes this type of movie.

The difficulties that arise when trying to classify multi-protagonist movies necessitate a different way of thinking about them. As their number has increased exponentially over the last three decades, historical groupings have become murkier. Labels such as ensemble and mosaic go some way towards clarifying the differences between the eighties and the nineties but ultimately become too rigid. The aim of the next chapter, therefore, is to move from history to theory and present a more flexible view of multi-protagonist movies in accordance with those theories of genre which see individual texts not as belonging to one or another genre but, rather, as meeting places of various types of elements and conventions from different genres. As the twentieth century drew to an end, various combinations of ensemble and mosaic, as well as different types of multi-protagonist and multi-story arrangements, continued to appear. As generic discourse started to solidify around the texts, narrative and stylistic conventions became more visible. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, certain generic mixtures became more popular than others: multi-protagonist movies found the thriller and the melodrama particularly conducive to their take on contemporary cultural phenomena and the impact of globalization and transnationalism on individual lives, as can be seen in such popular examples as *Crash*, *Syriana*, *Babel*, or *Fast Food Nation*. The diversification of romantic options and the fragmentation of contemporary experience in intimate matters continued to find a powerful cinematic space in multi-protagonist comedies like *Sidewalks of New York*, *Love Actually*, or *Friends with Money*, but melodrama also constituted an appropriate partner for such representations in *Lantana* (2001), *21 Grams* (2003), *The Dead Girl*, and many others. Outside Hollywood and its satellites the multi-protagonist genre acquired equal momentum, and in countries such as France it became a powerful way of representing the intricacies of contemporary life, as can be seen in the films of Agnès Jaoui, *Le goût des autres* (2000), *Comme une image* (2004), and *Parlez-moi de la pluie* (2008), but also in many other recent offerings, including *Embrassez qui vous voudrez* (2002), *La graine et le mulet* (2007), *L'heure d'été* (2008), and *Paris* (2008). The textual analyses offered in later chapters cover some of the most relevant stages of this recent phenomenon as well as suggesting the richness and variety of forms that it has developed and its continuing significance as a generic form.