

Benedict Morrison

Merton College, Oxford

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Complicating Articulation in Narrative Film

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This thesis explores the relationship between film form and character expression, both of which are seen as articulated structures, that is utterances in which separable parts operate cooperatively to create meaning. The specific films examined present characters who struggle to express themselves. These inexpressive characters are combined in each case with a disrupted form which displays its own many-jointed structure. The thesis argues that the dynamic relationship between inarticulacies of character, narrative, and form generates an indeterminate dialectic. The unresolved relationship between parts and whole (reminiscent of a complex mosaic structure) complicates the process of reading for univocal meaning. The operation of this dual inarticulacy is discussed in Chapter One. Each subsequent chapter is devoted to a single film and a particular example of formal disjuncture: contrapuntal narrative levels, clashing styles, discontinuous editing, bricolage, the dislocation of genre signifiers from conventional meanings, and intermedia. The films discussed at length in connection with these theories are: *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951); *Germania anno zero* (1948); *Belle de Jour* (1967); *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988) and *The Long Day Closes* (1992); *Meek's Cutoff* (2010); *The Pillow Book* (1996).

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Introduction

Ever since the cinema began, aestheticians have sought to define ‘pure’ cinema, the ‘essence’ of cinema. In vain. The cinema’s only ‘purity’ is the way in which it combines diverse elements into its own ‘impure’ whole. Its ‘essence’ is that it makes them interact...

– Raymond Durgnat¹

Raymond Durgnat, in his essay ‘The Mongrel Muse’, discusses an aspect of form which has interested many works of film criticism and theory: film as a composite medium, consisting of a number of expressive chains. Some of these chains (including the combinations of styles, tones, and genre signifiers) may be said to characterise artistic expression more generally. Some (including the simultaneous combinations of different artistic forms, levels of narration, and – fundamentally – images and sounds in montage) may be seen as more quintessentially ‘cinematic’.² Criticism has regularly returned to a discussion of narrative film’s development of a series of conventions which collectively strive to overcome the risk of fragmentation implicit in this chain-structure by engendering, instead, a sense of continuity. This continuity allows character, narrative arc, perspective, style, tone, and physical space to appear coherent and consistent, and while a given film may allow disruption in any of these, these disruptions will typically be coordinated in

¹ Raymond Durgnat, ‘The Mongrel Muse’ in *Durgnat on Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 19.

² Durgnat, in ‘The Mongrel Muse’ (echoing Eisenstein’s discussion of the same topic in ‘Achievement’ in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), 179-194) draws parallels between cinema’s synthesis of arts, narrative levels, and juxtaposed images and that of certain theatrical forms, particularly opera and ‘total theatre’; however, these syntheses, Durgnat argues, risk becoming ‘rather absurd,’ and remain relatively minority interests.

such a way as to relieve the disorientating effect of a sudden breach. Raymond Durgnat describes how

Only the film synchronizes, interweaves, visual and musical shapes (picture and soundtrack)... It can also co-opt the various forms as a whole.³

This achievement of *expression* despite *partedness* resonates with the linguistic notion of *articulation*. Structural linguistics models *articulation* as the operation of several, separable parts of an utterance working together to create a text's meanings. By extrapolation, articulation may be seen as the ability to express clearly through a combinatory form of connected, expressive elements. Film, as Durgnat suggests, is an articulated form, consisting of a series of expressive chains, and a film which succeeds in maintaining predominantly smooth transitions between its expressive parts may be said to be articulate. Durgnat's critical vocabulary, in sympathy with much criticism on this dimension of film form, suggests this emphasis on smooth transition: 'interact,' 'synchronizes,' 'interweaves,' 'whole'.

This thesis, though, is concerned with an alternative type of achievement, one in which a film resists this synthesis and allows the various formal elements to announce their discreteness, with foregrounded and disorientating transitions. Such a film may be said to be formally *inarticulate*. This formal inarticulacy may apply to any of the expressive formal chains routinely used by films: the chains of (discordant) images linked in montage, the chains of (contrapuntal) sound and image, the chains of (clashing) styles, the chains of (chaotic) genre signifiers. Inarticulacy, then, is not the opposite of articulation; rather, it is its complication, its

³ Durgnat (1976), 18.

unconventional display. It is also, through this self-declaring mosaic form – the laying together of disparate, individually expressive strands – the complication of the films' signifying structures and a diminishment of the possibility of univocal communication. Far from corroborating each unit's sense, the articulated expressive units interrogate and perhaps even undermine each other. On occasions when, for example, the dialogue, image, and music could express a shared message, these simultaneous utterances in contrasting forms instead destabilise united meaning, the precise implication of each strand subtly (or, indeed, significantly) at odds with the others.

Films which have inarticulate structures are not uncommon, and, indeed, film criticism has substantially addressed them. This thesis, though, proposes that some films combine a formal inarticulacy with a narrative account of character inarticulacy. Narrative cinema, as a dramatic form invested in character, has throughout its history been concerned with the ability (or otherwise) of its characters to articulate themselves. Within the narratives, communication may be impeded by age, secret and shameful desire, sexuality, a lack of social status and authority, the threat of violence, poor linguistic fluency. This articulation concerns not only the *fact* of self-expression, but also the (articulated, chain-like) *means* of that expression. Effective self-expression, as a feature of character, may designate emotional equilibrium, education, authority, and any number of other traits that permit a substantial degree of self-control. Conversely, failed self-expression may indicate the alternative states of emotional distress, ignorance, disempowerment, and any other cause of an absence of self-control. In narratives structured around conflict and tension, such a lack of self-control is commonplace, and characters are

regularly inarticulate. The critical readings of films have, unsurprisingly, often addressed this fact, and found ways of speaking on behalf of the inarticulate figure, finding reasons for their inarticulacy and enunciating what goes unsaid or half-said in the film.

This approach – while offering many important insights into the narrative situations of the characters concerned – often omits to discuss the precise nature of the inarticulacy. Séverine in *Belle de Jour* is unable or unwilling to speak for herself, and so criticism diagnoses the causes of this inarticulacy (often seen as sexual abuse suffered as a child and a lack of fulfilment in the banality of her bourgeois life) and speaks on her behalf (discussing her anxieties and desires). This criticism is often illuminating and represents a dynamic response to the silent and stuttered expressions of characters. However, it also typically fails to acknowledge that inarticulacy does not only represent an absence, a space to be filled through the articulations of the critic (or any other viewer). Character inarticulacy (like its formal equivalent) also represents the presence of its own chain-like forms, combinations of expressive units that complicate communication. These expressive units may be verbal (as with a character who stutters, who is interrupted, or who repeats themselves). Alternatively, they may consist of non-linguistic utterances (screams, coughs), physical gestures (faltering hand signs or body language), or silence (when the silence suggests a thwarted desire to speak). These inarticulate structures, unlike their articulate equivalents, draw attention to their chain structures, declaring the laborious operation of the transitions between their component parts.

As a medium which is formed of a number of simultaneously articulating chains of dialectical units (synthesised or otherwise), film is an appropriate medium for the expression of character articulacy. This thesis explores a particular, critically-neglected complication of character and formal articulacy. This complication is in the form of a resonance set up between the two, in which the formal inarticulacy is not a straightforward function or demonstration of the character inarticulacy (or vice versa). Neither explains, or undoes, the other's difficulty in expression. This discrete but parallel dynamic is referred to in the thesis as dual inarticulacy, and marks a film's complicating display of a network of articulated expressions (both character and formal), challenging hermeneutic approaches to 'reading' the film for expressed meanings. While this kind of meaning remains important to the thesis' critical response to the films, it is balanced with an alternative effect, one in which characters' inarticulacy is not *answered for* with explanation but experienced as a resistance to any attempt to establish reductive readings to account for both characters and films.

As this account seeks to complicate *any* critical response which has offered a univocal explanatory meaning for the films selected, it considers criticism from a broad range of traditions. This freedom from a fixed critical or theoretical position allows for a more expansive discussion of the widespread interest in character and formal (in)articulacy in writing on film. Each chapter is structured as an engagement with the critical tradition around the film in question. Long-established critical and theoretical traditions are revisited, and their insights used in new ways, in each case to complicate the critical temptation to measure films' achievements in terms of efficiency of expression. In the case of films such as *Belle*

de Jour, a number of critical assumptions have diminished some past work on the film, as critics have striven for neat, totalising interpretations (concerning, for example, character psychology and thematic simplicity). This thesis seeks, instead, to see these films' various fragmented forms as fully in line with their wider concerns.

Each chapter is concerned predominantly with a particular type of formal inarticulacy as demonstrated in a single film (or, in the case of one chapter, two related films). (These achievements are not unique to the films selected, and parallels may be drawn with other works.) Due to the nature of my enquiry, there is a concentration on close reading, which engages with the minutiae of, for example, editing rhythms and shot composition. The chosen films represent different kinds of multivalency, in each case a specific formal response to the question of inarticulacy: the relationship between levels of narration, between styles of expression, between shots in an edited sequence, between quoted utterances in a complex bricolage, between genre signifiers in an expressive chain, and between intermedial frames. The thesis is in two main parts, symmetrically arranged to allow ideas and concerns to return in revised forms in later chapters. Part One addresses the achievements of three films which are recognised 'classics'; these discussions provide an opportunity for engagement with extensive critical traditions and to offer fresh readings, drawing, in each case, on elements of the film which have been relatively neglected. These readings interrogate critical assumptions which have been routinely made in the past. The remaining films are more recent and consequently have received less (though not insubstantial) critical attention. The selection of these films allows novel readings of important newer

works, and implicitly puts the case for arguing that inarticulacy (both character and formal) remains a central concern for film.

Chapter One presents a developed discussion of what is at stake in dual inarticulacy. It takes its starting point as a consideration of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic circle, a philosophical model which considers the possibility of meaning (the hermeneutically whole text) in terms of the interactions of its parts. It moves on, detailing a number of different relationships between the articulations of form and character, before offering a detailed account of dual inarticulacy and the particular operation at work in the films. It expands the idea of the signifying chain to allow for both horizontal forms (syntagmatic, occurring successively through time) and vertical forms (occurring simultaneously in the space of the frame). Moving through a broad theoretical survey, the chapter explores the ways in which the hermeneutic complication engendered by dual inarticulacy may produce a politically and ethically significant effect. It also establishes a theoretical vocabulary used throughout the thesis.

The thesis's first substantial part concerns itself with a series of critically celebrated films which represent the operation of dual inarticulacy. Chapter Two, which focuses on Robert Bresson's 1951 film *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, explores the ways in which character and formal inarticulacy may be seen as both independent and connected. The narrative focuses on a young priest rendered inexpressive, perhaps, by his youth, inexperience, instinctive mildness, and illness. The film presents – as though to relieve the character's difficulty in speaking – his diary, sometimes credited with offering privileged access to his univocal thoughts.

However, capitalising on the synthetic form of the medium, this diary is manifested as a series of competing levels of narration: a written document (as diegetic text in close-up), a voiceover, and an enacted drama. The content and significance of these three forms are often in contention with one another, foregrounding a proliferating form of expression that exceeds its fictional writer's apparent intention. Chapter Three shifts from this vertical axis to explore, instead, a horizontal articulation, namely chains of succeeding sequences in divergent styles. Roberto Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* (1948) presents the story of Edmund, a little boy unable to express himself in a historical moment of uncertain and incomplete meanings. The characters exist in a world of circumscribed movement through loosely expressive landscapes. These landscapes (exterior city spaces, interior domestic spaces) are realised through conflicting styles, their self-reflexive signifiers gesturing back to their own inexpressiveness in an effect of stuttered reiterations caught in flux. The horizontal axis remains defining for Chapter Four, where the full extent of the separation of form and character is explored through a close reading of *Belle de Jour* (Luis Buñuel, 1967) in which the opaque psychology of the inexpressive central character is not *explained* by the image and sound chains formed through montage and decoupage. Instead, the film's juxtaposition of irreconcilable images, in sympathy with surrealist *dépaysement*, opens up gaps in meaning which remain provocatively unfilled, corroding the cultural myths at play in the film's network of images.

The second part of the thesis symmetrically revisits the concerns of the earlier chapters, using more recent films to further the discussion. Chapter Five considers an alternative discordant horizontal chain to that seen in *Belle de Jour*, this time

looking at the bricolage in two early films by Terence Davies. In this bricolage, characters are spoken for by a proliferating series of cultural references. The inarticulate form, in which the elements – almost meaningful in themselves – are recontextualised and juxtaposed, highlights the contingent constructedness of the significances at the root of much character analysis. *Germania anno zero*'s horizontal operation of signifiers across a landscape becomes a central concern again in Chapter Six's discussion of genre in Kelly Reichardt's 2010 film, *Meek's Cutoff*. The signifiers of the Western genre are juxtaposed in innovative patterns, the usual meanings of each thrown into confusion by this recontextualisation. Genre is revealed as an epistemological structure, a means of cohering cultural thoughts and impressions into meaningful chains. *Meek's Cutoff* establishes an effective resonance between the mute characters of the emerging culture (settlers at the frontier) and the breakdown in significance of the film's genre. The final chapter, recalling *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, returns to a consideration of the vertical axis and to an account of a writer's attempt at self-expression. Here, in relation to Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* (1996), this simultaneity becomes a feature of film's expanding potential for intermedial expression, in which frames within frames condense the syntagmatic dynamic of montage into a single moment, literalising the critical metaphor of the mosaic in a screen which consists of concurrent and conflicting images and sounds. The chapter looks ahead to one emerging potential for film inarticulacy, in which the simultaneity of superpositioning proliferates expression, rhizome-like, to an extent which resists any hermeneutically tidy criticism.

Chapter 1

The Articulation of Inarticulacy: Towards a Synthesis?

Complicating Articulation

In his 1960 work *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer revised the hermeneutic model inherited from his teacher, Martin Heidegger. This dialectic hermeneutic circle is one in which, paradoxically, parts may only be understood in terms of wholes, and wholes in terms of parts. Understanding, at the level of utterance or whole text, must depend on this dynamic conceptual relationship between the fragment and the totality, the local and the global. A phrase may only be understood when its constitutive parts have been understood, but those constituent parts only acquire substantive meaning as they are seen within their wider context. Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne describe a flaw often identified in this circular theory: 'if we must understand the whole before we can understand the parts and yet the parts only derive meaning from the whole, then understanding can never begin.'¹ While this may appear to set up an irreconcilable tension, Gadamer extends the traditionally defined circle to incorporate not only a text's own parts and whole, but also the context in which it is being understood (including the reader themselves):

... the meaning of a concept depends on the context (or the horizon) within which it occurs; but this context is made up of the concepts to which it gives meaning. Any act of understanding language involves

¹ Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne, 'Is Designing Hermeneutical?' *Architectural Theory Review* 1, no.1 (1997): 72.

an interplay of text and context. The whole and the part give meaning to each other; understanding is circular.²

This hypothetical reader – who ‘projects before himself a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text’ – engages with the dialogic dynamic of the text, bound on a particular teleological path towards meaning.³

The hermeneutical experience is dialogical. The reader enters into a dialogue with a text, commences a to-and-fro give and take that proceeds until understanding is reached.⁴

Although Gadamer did not write expressly about film, his dialectic model of aesthetic understanding resonates with the film theories of Sergei Eisenstein, whose 1929 essay ‘A Dialectic Approach to Film Form’ developed the idea that film, both formally and diegetically, operates according to a tripartite Hegelian model. The objective of any film, the essay suggests, is to communicate meaning through the synthesis of conceptual units. Both ‘the collision of individual shots’ and ‘conflict’ within cause and effect narrative establish Abstracts in opposition with succeeding Negatives, resolved ultimately in conclusive conceptual Concretes.⁵ This dialectic structure – operating at the level of both form and narrative – shares the same teleological goal as Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle: the understanding of meaning. As Gilberto Perez expresses the point, ‘[f]ilm is an art of fragments, but of

² Snodgrass and Coyne, 72.

³ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. W. Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 236.

⁴ Snodgrass and Coyne, 78.

⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), 49 and 46. In all but one instance, Hegel uses this terminology, rather than the more common *thesis – synthesis – antithesis*. The advantage of the Hegelian vocabulary is that ‘abstract,’ by suggesting that it is conceptual only, also implies that the term contains its own negative.

fragments pieced together, parts put together to make a whole.’⁶ This putting together of fragments into a totality characterises the utopian dialectic hermeneutic act.

As a means of discussing the relationship between a text’s fragmentary parts and the contingent wholes to which they belong, the notion of *articulation* is conceptually useful. The abstractions of hermeneutic theory may be concretised through reference to the two contrasting everyday meanings of the word. *Articulation*, first, resonates with any hermeneutic process in its sense of *clear expression*. Beyond this, though, *articulation*’s sense of *connection by joints in a linked multi-partedness* sits comfortably with the operation of the hermeneutic circle. The relationship between contiguous units of meaning, connected but discrete, is at the heart also of Eisenstein’s notion of dialectic form. To be articulated is not merely to be uttered; it is ‘to be made up of elements which unite to form elements of a higher order.’⁷ This concern for the relationship between parts (‘elements’) and wholes (‘elements of a higher order’) defines *articulation* as part of the same project as Gadamer’s hermeneutics, as the ‘elements of a higher order’ are not merely whole texts, they are specifically whole *meaningful* texts. By extension, *articulacy* is the *ability to express clearly* through a combinatory form of *connected elements*.

The fragments which Perez (echoing Eisenstein and others) argues that film consists of may be said to belong to two broad classes. The first set consists of units whose connection is principally horizontal, predicated on sequential and

⁶ Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and the Medium* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 303.

⁷ Nicolas Meeùs, ‘Musical Articulation,’ *Music Analysis* 21, no.2 (July 2002), 161.

syntagmatic contiguity. They are experienced in time, and run consecutively. They include story development, shifts in mode or style, dialogue, intertitles, chains of genre signifiers, changing perspective or point of view, the use of documentary footage, and the cutting between shots. The second set consists of units whose connection is principally vertical, predicated on simultaneous contiguity.⁸ They are experienced in space, and occur concurrently. They include the relationship between image and sound, voiceover and narration, the frame and mise-en-scène, and diegesis and music. The two groups are not fixed or mutually exclusive, and split screen or superimposition techniques, for example, would allow documentary footage to be seen simultaneously with the fictional narrative. The notion of sets, though, does serve to reinforce the idea that articulation occurs both horizontally between fragments in succeeding frames and vertically within a single frame. The relationship between these elements has been of central concern in the historic development of both film practice and film theory. Most significantly, the effects of the joints (or transitions) between the elements, each of which could be an interruption of linear meaning, have been controlled by what Stephen Heath describes as a series of ‘compositional rules for spatial clarity and continuity,’ in which ‘continuity as smoothness in transitions [between fragmentary units] ... [is] fully continuous, reconstitutive.’⁹ Continuity of meaning is made possible by continuity of articulation (in which the horizontal and vertical transitions between fragmentary units of film expression are smooth). The hermeneutic relationship

⁸ The word ‘vertical’ has been employed, because the alternative term – ‘paradigmatic’ – relies, according to Roland Barthes, on the *absence* of the connoted terms. A simultaneity in which all parts are simultaneously *present*, therefore, is not, strictly speaking, paradigmatic. See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 58-9. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 7 of this thesis.

⁹ Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 16 and 17.

between the parts and the whole, leads from a developing understanding of smoothly articulated fragments to an awareness of meaning.

However, this utopian process is complicated by Gadamer's suggestion that totalising wholeness (the 'higher order' of meaning) remains elusive, regardless of the continuity between formal fragments. The shadow of this complication resides even in Perez's optimistic statement on the possibility of meaning in film: '[f]ilm is an art of fragments, but of fragments pieced together, parts put together to make a whole.'¹⁰ The very stuttering implicit in the utterance (direct repetition of 'fragments' and 'together') undermines the emerging meaning of the whole sentence. The meaning of the word 'fragments' varies on either side of the comma; the first occurrence suggests disorder and disunity, while the second use, embedded in a clause which allows for piecing together, suggests a more ordered mosaic structure. Similarly, the word 'together' shifts its sense from mere contiguity to a decisive pattern ('whole'). The 'whole,' the utopian hermeneutic space of possible meaning, is made complex by the constantly sense-shifting parts whose combination gives it definition. As Gadamer writes:

When we utter or read literary texts, we are thrown back on the meaning and sound relations that articulate the framework of the whole, not just once but each time. We leaf back through the text, begin anew, read anew, discover new dimensions of meaning. What stands at the end is not the secure consciousness of having understood the matter so that now one can leave the text behind, but rather just the opposite. One goes deeper into the text the more the charges of meaning and sound in it enter into consciousness.¹¹

¹⁰ Perez (1998), 303.

¹¹ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 48.

The continuity which Heath argues is central to the efforts of conventional narrative cinema is, according to Gadamer's characterisation of the hermeneutic process, unable to produce definitive meaning. The circular relationship between parts and whole can never reach a stable end point, as the parts will always be revisited in the light of the whole and the whole will always be revisited in the light of the parts, neither offering a definitive and stable point from which to comprehend the other. Rather than *articulacy*, the model which emerges is of *inarticulacy*, a model in which the parts stutter their way into a semblance of wholeness, but a wholeness which is contingent and prone to change. Inarticulacy, here, is not the opposite of articulacy, which may be seen as the smooth transitioning between complementary parts which, in turn, add up to a meaningful whole. Inarticulacy is, instead, the remainder when utopian articulacy *fails*, a dysfunctional articulation. It exists in narrative film at two potential levels of inscription: *form* (as the vertical or horizontal combination of fragmentary parts) and *character* (as a difficulty in speaking). Inarticulacy at either level contains a shade: its own mode of articulacy. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit describe a parallel process in which 'not being has certain modes of visibility.'¹² By extension, not (clearly) speaking has certain modes of audibility. Marie-Claire Ropars makes the relationship in this parallel between the visual and the audible explicit when she suggests that 'the [expressive] space beneath language' is 'coextensive with linguistic possibility.'¹³ Character inarticulacy is not the *opposite* of clear expression but, instead, its expressive failure; *something* is meant in the stuttered concatenation

¹² Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: BFI, 2004), 3.

¹³ Marie-Claire Ropars, 'On Filmic Rewriting: Contamination of the Arts or Destruction of Art's Identity,' *Porous Boundaries: Texts and Images in Twentieth-Century French Culture*, ed. Jérôme Game, trans. Malcolm Philips (Pieterlen: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2007), 77.

of fragments in an inarticulate film, even though those fragments are not adding up to a utopian whole.¹⁴

The idea of inarticulacy as expressive has been most frequently and comprehensively described as a quality of characterisation. The character content which may qualify as inarticulate need not satisfy the most common everyday application of the word, which implies a stuttering difficulty in speaking fluently. Inarticulacy, as an expressive failure in articulation, can contain a character's silence within its definition. Bersani and Dutoit develop a distinction between *silence* and *nothing* in relation to literary character:

... but the page on which nothing is written is... a less impressive testimony to the importance of certain forms of verbal failure in literature than all those pages on which *silence is written*, pages on which (as Beckett puts it), unable to speak, the speaker can't help but continue speaking, but in words that somehow contain the inability to find words, even the desire not to find them.¹⁵

This idea is shared with Theodor Adorno who, in relation to film, writes that '[t]he individual subject who remains silent speaks not less but more through silence than when speaking aloud.'¹⁶ In order to be inarticulate, such a speaking-silence must signify struggle and the resistance of parts to cohere. Susan Hayward suggests that the opposite of the 'seamlessness' between articulate parts in continuity narratives

¹⁴ An important dimension to these inarticulate character and formal structures should be added: the films which contain these elements remain enjoyable as virtuosic displays of technique. The performances of actors in the roles of inarticulate characters, or the deft employment of technical devices in, for example, discontinuous editing or swift stylistic shifts, may well prove impressive. However, this impression, while of interest and worth, remains wholly separate from the discussion of the possibility of a definitive meaning. In *Borderline* (Kenneth MacPherson, 1930), Astrid's inarticulate rage demonstrates H.D.'s impressive performance; in the same film, the use of clatter montage, in which non-consecutive images are violently juxtaposed without a sense of causation in a kind of formal stuttering, demonstrates MacPherson's mastery of editing techniques. This *demonstration*, though, is distinct from a univocal meaning for the film.

¹⁵ Bersani and Dutoit, 1.

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London; Routledge, 1991), 182-3.

is an inarticulacy that ‘draws attention to itself.’¹⁷ A character’s silence which is naturalised by the narrative (as is the case with a character who is silent simply because they are alone) does not suggest inarticulacy. However, when the silence is, as it were, a stuttering-silence, one which marks the failure of smooth articulation, it is transformed into an expression which is complex and elusive. In Paul de Man’s terms, at this point *silence* becomes *muteness*. For de Man, *silence* ‘implies the possible manifestation of sound at our will’; *muteness*, on the other hand, is something to which we are ‘condemned’ because ‘we are dependent on this language’ over which we have limited control and which must be inadequate to the job of expressing the extent of our experience.¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, in discussing the source of comedy and tragicomedy in film, describes ‘the mismatch... [of] the distance between the depth to which an ordinary human life requires expression, and the surface of ordinary means through which that life must, if it will, express itself.’¹⁹ A character’s inarticulacy may remain the expression of *something* – a something that ‘requires expression.’ However, as a consequence of inadequate means, it must ultimately remain incompletely described, a series of parts which will not cohere in a hermeneutic circle.

When accompanied by an inarticulacy of form (in which the joints – or transitions – are not disavowed according to the rules of continuity, but are instead declared), this inarticulacy of character may acquire a greater sense of coherence. In this fusion, the formal fragments are derivative from the character’s inarticulacy and may suggest something more substantial about inarticulate character (in the form,

¹⁷ Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 120.

¹⁸ Paul de Man, *Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: University of Colombia Press, 1984), 80.

¹⁹ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* Enlarged Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 180.

perhaps, of an evocation of confusion through expressionist form), while the character fragments may (by way of rationalising explanation) permit some comprehension of the inarticulate form. The relationship between form and character, in narratives which both portray and structurally manifest inarticulacy, is at the heart of this discussion. This *possibility* of coherence is difficult to position within an existing critical model which often sees *coherence* and *incoherence* as dichotomous and exclusive terms. The argument is not that inarticulate films are also necessarily *incoherent* films, even though they trouble the possibility of a totalising meaning through an unresolved hermeneutic circle. Instead, *coherence* will be seen as a spectrum, on which the inarticulate finds itself at a fluctuating point, both expressing and not expressing, the parts both transitional and disjunctive. This fluctuating point will be described as *combination*, a term which suggests both the contiguity of fragments in these mosaic-structure films, while also acknowledging the declaration (and not, as in the continuity style of much narrative cinema, the effacement) of the gaps and breaks which exist between those fragments. Combination embraces the sense of interruption which is necessarily central to a discussion of inarticulacy in character and form, while also permitting a sense of cumulative effect. Inarticulate films find an alternative to *univocal meaning* in this *combination*.

To this end, the films discussed in the following chapters each represent a commitment both to depicting inarticulate characters and to using inarticulate forms, two strands of separable parts combining in an unstable and fluctuating whole. They are linked by this shared paralleling of character and form, and not by country of production, period, personnel, or genre. Characters' utterances are

combined in a mosaic of half-saidness and sometimes-muteness, while the films' forms consist of combinations of formal units which dismantle the 'homogenously continuous space' and time which Stephen Heath identifies in the forms of conventional narrative cinema.²⁰ Each film represents these combinations in an exploration of different kinds of multivalency, troubling any reductive model of the hermeneutic circle. Each film is a unique response to the question of inarticulacy.

The Forms of Inarticulacy

Just as Ian Bent argues that a musical structure can be resolved 'into relatively simpler constitutive elements...', film form can be seen as the articulation of disparate formal elements.²¹ These formal elements have been discussed extensively throughout film's history, often in ontological accounts of the nature of the medium. Many subgroups within the litany of possible formal elements are examined through the chapters of this thesis. Fundamental examples, for now, may be demonstrative of general principles concerning their operation and analysis. One such example is montage, which Pudovkin sees as the restoration of wholeness to partedness through editing: 'the combination of those pieces' of cut celluloid.²² The sequence of successive shots, described by Christian Metz as 'the filmic chain,' forms 'a sort of articulation of the reality shown on the screen... It is well known that the nature of cinema is to transform the world into discourse.'²³

²⁰ Heath, 7.

²¹ Ian Bent, 'Analysis,' in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), 340.

²² Quoted in Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 103.

²³ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 106 & 115.

This discourse, in turn, according to Trevor Whittock, strives for intelligible totality:

Art aims to satisfy this need by offering us symbolic works in which comprehensive design reigns. For the artist the achievement of that comprehensive design is everything. This credo will often incorporate the view that art celebrates affinities and synchronicities, chords and correspondences beyond the grasp of logic, and in so doing answers to our deepest yearnings for and intimations of wholeness.²⁴

It is with montage that narrative film has conventionally constructed these satisfying wholes. In this explicit discussion of the dialectic between part and whole, between shot and chain, the developing discussion of montage resonates with Gadamer's notion of the hermeneutic circle; here, the 'intimations of wholeness' permit the understanding which the paradoxical circle ultimately seeks. The stable order of this understanding has been made possible by the series of rules and codes developed to avoid confusing a potential viewer. Noël Burch has outlined this history:

As the techniques for breaking down an action into shots and sequences were developed and refined, these continuity rules became more and more firmly fixed, methods ensuring that they would be respected were perfected, and their underlying aim, to make any transition between two shots that were spatially continuous or in close proximity *imperceptible*, became increasingly apparent... [This] soon resulted in what we might call the zero point of cinematic style.²⁵

Cinema, in its dominant narrative mode has sought to disavow its own articulations, making them '*imperceptible*,' by adopting rules designed to ensure that the medium succeeds in creating coherence despite its disparate parts. The disavowed syntagmatic articulations of montage – the contiguous arrangement of

²⁴ Trevor Whittock, *Metaphor and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 107.

²⁵ Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973), 11.

fragments in linear sequence, making a whole through a deliberate aesthetic of continuity – are a decisive model of *articulate form*, that is a form in which progress from one fragment to the next is defined by smoothness and continuity, and in which meaning appears immanent.

Eisenstein's famous system of montage runs counter to this emerging articulate model. Eisenstein concerned himself with those shots sequenced syntagmatically in order to create a cumulative, dialectic significance; this montage declares the transitions between the fragments of its chain through

... collision. By the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other. By conflict. By collision. I confronted him [Pudovkin] with my viewpoint on montage as a *collision*. A view that from the collision of two given factors *arises* a concept.²⁶

This collision is the mark of *inarticulate form*, that is a form in which progress from one fragment to the next is defined by interruption and discontinuity. Inarticulate form does not observe the rules of continuity which are designed to efface the possible and dangerous tensions of partedness. Even in formally discontinuous films, hermeneutic understanding may remain an inherent possibility; in Eisenstein's notion of intellectual montage, meaning is immanent; each montage sequence promises '*a unity of a higher order,*' namely '*an organic embodiment of a single idea conception, embracing all elements, parts, details of the film-work.*'²⁷ According to these theories, in the contrasting models of montage – the articulate and inarticulate – the dialectic operations of the hermeneutic circle appear equally efficient, in both cases totalising understanding a result of the immanently

²⁶ Eisenstein, 37.

²⁷ Eisenstein, 254.

meaningful relationship between parts. As Bordwell summarises Eisenstein's position, he sought to rediscover 'unity from a basis of fragmentation, but without concealing the fragmentation in doing so.'²⁸

This dialectic structure of totalising immanent meaning in chains of fragments functions beyond the horizontal, syntagmatic articulations of montage; vertical articulations may also be described in these terms.²⁹ Eisenstein, alongside his theory of montage, developed a notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in film, inheriting many ideas from nineteenth century aesthetic theories: 'the cinema is that genuine and ultimate synthesis of all artistic manifestations...'³⁰ Sculpture, painting, music, literature, and theatre contribute parts of expression, discrete expressive strands, which are combined in '*a genuinely synthetic art – an art of organic synthesis in its very essence, not a "concert" of co-existent, contiguous, "linked," but actually independent arts.*'³¹ Like montage, this synthetic form of harmonious arts may be *articulate* or *inarticulate*, defined either by smooth transitions (in which the music, design, script, and performances are in conventional harmony) or by an assertion of the signifying chain (with contrapuntal relations between the 'independent arts,' music and dramatic action, for example). Either way, though, the synthesis of diverse arts creates a 'real unity'; even Eisenstein's argument that the arts are not in 'concert' demands a sense of wholeness established through a dialectic synthesis.³²

²⁸ David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 88.

²⁹ Noël Carroll argues that a significant difference between film and natural languages is that film's minimum syntactic unit (the shot), unlike both the word and the sentence, does not consist of separate parts: 'Rather the shot of a man shows all his properties at once and nondetachably...' In fact, though, a shot consists of a range of simultaneously expressed elements (image, dialogue, music) which *are* detachable. See Carroll (2008), 104.

³⁰ Eisenstein, 181.

³¹ Eisenstein, 193-4.

³² Eisenstein, 182.

Both the articulate and Eisensteinian-inarticulate models depend on a utopian dialectic, which reductively insists on the possibility of synthesis. The increasingly combinatory relationship between the arts becomes the principal subject of Adorno's essay 'Art and the Arts,' an examination of how 'the boundaries between the different arts have become fluid, or more accurately [how] their demarcation lines have been eroded.'³³ The essay concludes with a consideration of 'the newest form, the film,' which

... inevitably feeds elements of meaning into the final product: through the script, the photographed images, the camera's point of view, the cutting – methods not unlike those adopted in music or painting...³⁴

Through the example of artistic combination, Adorno introduces to his discussion an element lacking from the more utopian theories of Eisenstein. His concept of 'erosion' between the arts is seen as 'something more than... the suspect synthesis [which appears] in the name of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.'³⁵ Adorno concludes with the dystopian projection of a cultural condition without images

in which art disappears because the utopia encoded in every work of art has been fulfilled. In itself art is not capable of such a demise. This is why the arts eat away at one another.³⁶

The striking image of the arts eating away at one another undoes the utopian synthesis modelled by Eisenstein, and replaces it with a model of discontinuous and carnivorous combination. Eisenstein's dialectic model of hypothesised whole meanings is 'the utopia encoded' in some art. However, according to Adorno,

³³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Bloomington: Stanford University Press, 2003), 368.

³⁴ Adorno (2003), 386.

³⁵ Adorno (2003), 369.

³⁶ Adorno (2003), 387.

Eisenstein's synthesised model misunderstands the nature of art. The complexity of any attempt at decoding, in Peter Wollen's words, stems from the inevitably and 'strikingly mixed and impure' semiotic system which must define any *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a synthesis whose composite parts work according to different principles: following Peirce's triadic system, the indexicality of photography is distinct from the iconicity of painting and the symbolism of music.³⁷

From a different philosophical perspective, Noël Burch presents a challenge to more hermeneutically secure models. He is, initially, in sympathy with Eisenstein's notion of fragmentary parts in a collisional dialectic from which a synthesised whole offers meaning, suggesting that the effect of this synthesis in syntagmatic arrangements is the creation of a kind of linear simultaneity. This cumulative meaning may be compared with the notes of a melody, or, according to Burch, with cubist painting. Meaning

... exists only in terms of the totality of shots included in the sequence; we no longer have any sense of the surrounding space endowed with independent existence from which a sequence of shots has somehow been excerpted. Rather we see a space that exists in the same many-faceted, complex way that Braque's billiard table exists; we see a setting that is the sum total of all the perspectives of it embodied in the successive shots.³⁸

Burch's analogy coincides with Eisenstein's preferred *inarticulate form*; his evocation of cubist painting reasserts the violence latent in Eisenstein's concept of collision. While 'classical cinema' seeks to disavow the disruptions of the chain's articulations (which 'seem to vanish – are disincarnated – because of the use of an enormous number of continuity devices'), Burch's discussion of cubism implies the

³⁷ Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1969), 153.

³⁸ Burch, 39.

reinstatement of the marks of discontinuity.³⁹ Burch argues that ‘the conscious perception of form is a liberating activity.’⁴⁰ He argues that it is ‘time to change our attitude toward the function and nature of cinematic articulation, both between individual shots and in the film overall...’⁴¹ This new conception of articulation would encourage discontinuity, ‘patterns of *mutual interference*,’ inarticulacy.⁴² While this formal inarticulacy defies the sense-ensuring rules of continuity favoured by classical cinema, Burch argues that

A more systematic, more structural use of the disorientation created by these [articulations] would depend on establishing some sort of dialectical relationship between such matches and others that are immediately comprehensible...⁴³

Understanding – the goal of the hermeneutic process – only remains a possibility in Burch’s dialectic schema if some comprehensibly smooth articulations are retained. In some films (represented for Burch by Alain Resnais’ 1961 film *L’Année dernière à Marienbad*), inarticulacy is so pronounced that the chain consists exclusively of disjointed fragments; in such cases, the films ‘would have this very ambiguity as their basis...’, paradoxically making unmeaning their meaning and eschewing any totalising possibility.⁴⁴ In such films, the hermeneutic circle clearly remains uncompleted, and there is no argument on behalf of immanent sense.

However, the contention of this thesis is that there is a further form of film inarticulacy which results neither in the ‘unity of a higher order’ predicted by

³⁹ Edward Branigan, ‘To Zero and Beyond: Noël Burch’s *Theory of Film Practice*,’ in *Defining Cinema*, ed. Peter Lehman (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 155.

⁴⁰ Burch, xix.

⁴¹ Burch, 11.

⁴² Burch, 12.

⁴³ Burch, 13.

⁴⁴ Burch, 14.

Eisenstein's dialectic model, nor in the ultimate ambiguity which Burch discovers in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. This third type is recognisably mosaic, and may use syntagmatic or vertical inarticulacies. These discontinuities are not as navigable as those of *Strike* (1925) – whose immanent meaning Eisenstein asserts through the 'associative link' of "butchering"; the syntheses set up by the discrete elements are legibly encoded. However, films of this third group are not representative of an avant-garde committed to a radical incoherence, a 'negative aesthetic [which] can produce an inversion of the meanings and pleasures it confronts, but... risks becoming locked in a dialogue with its adversary.'⁴⁵ Indeed, this third strand of inarticulate film resists any attempt to establish a dichotomy between the opposite notions of an avant-garde cinema of incoherence and a conventional narrative cinema of coherence, instead inhabiting a conceptual space defined by combination.⁴⁶

This type of formal inarticulacy may again operate syntagmatically or vertically, depending on the film. *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988) arranges its discrete blocks of story in a linear chain so as to disrupt linearity and complicate cause and effect motivation. The transitions between these narrative segments create a stuttering sense of incompleteness and tangent, each one engendering both inertia and new galvanism, accentuating the partedness and pointing on to a jigsaw-like whole. The confusions of the structure upset the story's momentum, and yet the form does not dispense with narrative. Meaning is not immanent in this syntagmatic inarticulacy, as Eisenstein's model would insist it should be, and

⁴⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 170.

⁴⁶ It should be noted that neither 'incoherent' nor 'coherent' are intended here as value judgements; they are merely observations concerning form.

yet the sense of calculated combination is not identical with incoherence. Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* (1996) creates an alternative inarticulacy through the stacking up of simultaneous but contrapuntal elements, intermedia used to transform the frame into a series of contrasting combinations. Film, video, text, and animation exist in a network of split screen multivalency. Again, though lacking the immanence of Eisenstein's theorised syntheses, the relational dynamic between elements in *The Pillow Book* is neither coherent nor incoherent; it declares its differences, but does not demand a polarising exile into meaninglessness. The mosaic structure of the films' forms – the laying together of disparate, individually expressive strands – results in a complication of the films' signifying structures and a diminishment of the possibility of univocal communication. Far from corroborating each unit's sense, the network of combined expressive units interrogate and perhaps even undermine each other. On occasions when, for example, the dialogue, image and music seem to be expressing a shared message, these simultaneous utterances in contrasting forms destabilise united meaning, the precise implication of each strand subtly (or, indeed, significantly) at odds with the others. Both vertically and syntagmatically, inarticulacy remains a function between sense and nonsense, one which declares the unnavigable space between parts but allows their expressive contiguity.

What's That You Say?

Even allowing for the rules of classical continuity, articulate film form faces the constant danger of slipping into inarticulacy. The transitions smoothed and

conventionalised in narrative cinema nevertheless stubbornly remain transitions; a cut, for example, even allowing for careful temporal and spatial matching, must remain an interruption in the linear movement of the film image. These interruptions may be compensated for, in part through the cooperative operation of the range of synthesised arts – coherently continuous sound may mask the potential trauma of the cut image, and vice versa. However, the impression of a utopian articulate structure has traditionally been as much a function of character as form. As Stephen Heath argues:

Classical continuity, in other words, is an order of the pregnancy of space in frame; one of the narrative acts of a film is the creation of space, but what gives the moving space its coherence in time, decides the metonymy as a “taking place,” is here “the narrative itself,” and above all as it crystallizes round character as look and point of view.⁴⁷

In Heath’s theory, in which a film’s drama depends upon the conceptual translation of space into place, of abstract movement into concrete coherence, consistency of character is crucial. A film’s inarticulacy (which may be defined, in Heath’s terms, as the persistent dominance of *space*) is compensated for by the assertion of distinctive and coherent character. The expression of a character’s point of view is not only a question of its more literal and obvious manifestation: the optical point of view shot. It covers also a range of shot types (including the suturing shot/reverse-shot formulation) and, of particular interest to this thesis, a character’s level of articulacy.

J.M. Bernstein discusses Modernism’s challenge to the ‘domination’ of this utopian view of character as a consistent and articulate phenomenon. He suggests that the

⁴⁷ Heath, 19.

early twentieth century, with the dramatic and narrative arts' commitment to 'fragmentary writing,' challenged this privileged model and instead explored character as inarticulate, offering 'a complex portrait of the phenomenon' in which discontinuity is more valuable; 'the multiplication of diverse perspectives' is less psychologically and political reductive than its continuity-based alternative.⁴⁸ Comparing her position with Heath's, Richard Rushton explores this dimension of character through the work of Miriam Hansen, who saw 'on the one hand, bourgeois forms of subjectivity that are identical, unified and illusionist, and, on the other hand, forms of counter-subjectivity that are "convulsive", mixed, disrupted and patently non-illusionistic.'⁴⁹ These inarticulate characters (that is, characters presented through repeatedly disrupted perception and expression) quickly become embroiled in a hermeneutic circle which will not resolve itself; the parts of their expression will not cohere into a whole, and the whole of their expression is so internally fractured that it cannot offer meaning to the parts. Bersani and Dutoit explore the ways in which characterisation can disturb the 'Law [meaning predicated on a notion of wholeness] that governs and stabilises the attributing of identities.'⁵⁰ In their exploration, they consider Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963) as a case in point. They discuss the film's treatment of Brigitte Bardot's character, Camille, as an 'enigmatic signifier,' a term borrowed from Laplanche which situates the character as an object of a desire which is felt but which the subject 'can't understand.'⁵¹ While the psychoanalytic grounding of this theory is outside the immediate concerns of this thesis, its relation to understanding

⁴⁸ J.M. Bernstein, 'Introduction,' in *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991), 8.

⁴⁹ Richard Rushton, *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 29.

⁵⁰ Bersani and Dutoit, 103.

⁵¹ Bersani and Dutoit, 37.

is central, and *Le Mépris* may be read profitably as a structure of characters' expression consisting of inarticulate combinations of elements.

This character inarticulacy manifests itself in the film through a range of fragmenting techniques. If character inarticulacy is seen as a failure in articulacy – not its absence, but its compromise – then struggles to speak generally may qualify. Within *Le Mépris*, these failures include stuttering, repetition, periphrasis, and immanent self-contradiction. In the case of each type, the inarticulacy does not seem to be rhetorical; rather, there is a lack of autonomy in the speaker, who is helpless before the challenge of articulating themselves. These inarticulacies occur across and between networks of utterances. One of the film's principal realisations of its interest in communicative struggle depends upon the diverse range of languages spoken by the characters: English, French, Italian, German. As Jeremy Prokosch (Jack Palance) delivers his stirring homage to Cinecittà, Francesca (Giorgia Moll) translates. Here, translation is not simply functional; without any observable agenda, Francesca's translations remain partial or imprecise, close enough to be experienced as the stuttering repetitions of points already made but different enough to transform repetition from consolidation into degradation of meaning through excess. These unstable repetitions create a dramatic world in which identity is flux, a world populated by characters who are made non-identical with themselves through immanent self-contradiction. Camille's declarations of love for Paul (Michel Piccoli) are openly contradicted by her declarations of contempt: 'I despise you... It's contempt.' Given Camille's somnambulatory persona, these contradictory utterances are not simply explicable as passionate changes of mood. Rather, they become inconsistent parts combining in a

compromised whole. Camille is introduced in a celebrated shot of her lying naked on the bed. Nudity suggests an exposed wholeness. However, in the opening dialogue, she atomises herself, asking Paul if he likes her various body parts. This physical dismantling is aided by the camera which tracks down her body, resisting the possibility of capturing her whole, and intimates the complete understanding which will be withheld from the viewer. The everydayness of the exchanges between Paul and Camille is startling:

Paul: Don't be like that.

Camille: Like what?

Paul: You know perfectly well.

Part of the success of this exchange lies in its resistance to understanding. The parts of the utterance sit in secure syntactic relation to each other, but the foundation of the exchange on an uncertain deictic pronoun ('that') and a question ('[l]ike what?') makes the explicit invocation of understanding ('[y]ou know perfectly well') ironic. Even if it is assumed that 'that' refers either to Camille's moodiness or sexual availability, Paul's negative imperative ('[d]on't be') remains perplexing. This scene represents a wider concern, which any periphrastic character utterances may contribute to. To use Noël Carroll's term, any character inarticulacy creates an erotetic structure, in which a series of questions demand to be answered: what prevents the character from speaking? and what is it that remains unsaid?⁵² Gadamer recognises questioning as an inevitable and essential part of the hermeneutic process:

It is obvious that in all experience the structure of questioning is presupposed. Experience is not to be had without questioning. The

⁵² Noël Carroll, 'Narrative Closure,' in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* (London: Routledge, 2009), 211.

realization that some matter is other than one had first thought presupposes the process of passing through questioning. The openness which lies in the nature of experience is, logically seen, as openness to thus or thus. It has the structure of a question.⁵³

The function of this erotetic interest in question-based structures is, according to Carroll, to make the story and character 'coherent' by connecting them with 'a skein of questions and answers.'⁵⁴ Erotetic narration not only imbues a motion picture with an aura of completeness and completion. The evolving network of questions and answers also holds the story together – renders it articulate – throughout the unified narrative. This is explicitly an attempt to make the characters (despite incidents of communicative difficulty) articulate, to render them coherent wholes that can be understood as the composites of their parts.

This model of totalising understanding depends upon the dialectic relationship between the emerging questions and their answers. To return to the questions which arise from the periphrastic exchange between Camille and Paul in *Le Mépris*, it can be said to be the case that films often make available an answer to the question of *what prevents a character from speaking*; inarticulacy may occur as a consequence, for example, of disempowerment due to age, social status, class, gender, sexuality, race. More generally, the inarticulacy is often psychologically attributable to fear of the consequences of articulation: punishment or loss of status. However, these answers do not address the more hermeneutically pressing question of *what has been left unsaid*, that is, what is meant beyond what is (inarticulately) said. Words are lost in stuttering struggles to speak, in mute silence,

⁵³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 66.

⁵⁴ Carroll (2009), 211.

in confused irony, in mistranslation, and no secure whole can be established from which these parts may be repaired. The question of meaning, which is most pressing, is unanswerable. The periphrastic scene in *Le Mépris* gains a compelling authenticity from this believably unprescribed exchange, but the inarticulacy of the characters' expressions diminishes the possibility of a hermeneutic totality. Carroll's predicted answer-based understanding is denied to the viewer; at the same time as demanding that these questions be asked (and implying that their answer will simultaneously be the totalising meaning of the film and the resolution of the dialectic hermeneutic circle) the character's state of inarticulacy (silent, immanently self-contradictory, periphrastic) also insists that no totalising meaning is possible. The violent swings in dynamic between the inarticulate characters of *Le Mépris* is both the film's meaning and its ultimate lack of meaning.

The films considered in detail in this thesis, like *Le Mépris*, do not contain characters who attain an ultimate state of articulacy. Character inarticulacy, in each case, is the result of some kind of disempowerment: age in *Germania anno zero*, age and sexuality in *The Long Day Closes*, sexual repression in *The Pillow Book*, social status in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, class and gender in *Belle de Jour*, gender and race in *Meek's Cutoff*. Because the inarticulacies do not resolve themselves into articulacies (that is, they remain unanswerable and cannot be fitted into a coherent total meaning which overcomes and effaces its transitions), inarticulacy marks both the absence of meaning and meaning's closest approximation. Certainly, the fractured characters (defined by contradiction and inconsistency) resist the possibility of a resolvable hermeneutic circle. The openness of the films' meanings is, in each case, a function of a delicate dialectic

between narrative closure and its compromised expression. In *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, the priest dies in a recognisably tragic structure, but his voice is both enduring and silenced as his words are quoted out of context, by someone else, and from an impersonally typed telegram, before the silent closing image of the cross. In *Germania anno zero*, the child Edmund dies in another recognisably tragic structure, but his silence reverberates through the ruins of a Berlin which is yet to find an ideology to replace the haunting voice of Hitler heard previously on a recording. In *Belle de Jour*, Séverine is reunited with Pierre, who has been restored to health, but this sequence may insinuate its status as a fantasy not to be believed. In *The Long Day Closes*, Bud is disciplined by the patriarchal world around him but, ultimately, is left silently and ambiguously in awe of the night sky. In *Meek's Cutoff*, Emily has arrived at the tree, symbol of water, but is unsure of what is to come as The Native American walks quietly into the distance. In *The Pillow Book*, Nagiko avenges her lover in a spectacular revenge narrative, but passes on to her own baby the unresolved and pressing anxieties which have dominated her own attempts at expression. Each film resolves its character inarticulacy in a mute silence which speaks of the defeat of expression. The final part of each inarticulate sequence is an inarticulacy which does not offer the answers which Carroll speaks of, and will not assist the characters' disparate parts to cohere into a retroactively understandable meaning. Translated into the libidinal terms of psychoanalysis, Allen S. Weiss explores the resistance that this kind of character complexity offers to stable meanings:

These sequestered, dark, unnarrated activities constitute a textual supplement, which, if determinable, would totalize the

erotic/combinatory system. But such totalization is impossible. No panopticon exists to reveal all the paths of the libido.⁵⁵

Despite this, the critical response to character in film has often been to find some psychologically totalising reading. Bersani and Dutoit tackle the dangers of such a response, when they comment that unfounded speculation should be avoided, as the answers we find are ‘not on the screen; the characters’ motivations, unarticulated by them and invented by us, are a substitute for our only legitimate activity: the activity of looking and of registering what we see.’⁵⁶ Critics are, they suggest, wrong to assume ‘always that some degree of knowledge might be possible’ about a character who is inarticulate, a stuttering combination of features.⁵⁷ In their assessment, this process makes ontology servant to epistemology; what *exists* on the screen is manipulated through interpretation in order to provide knowledge of a definitive and whole *meaning*. Character inarticulacy, which draws attention to its own irreconcilable partedness, to its own features combined in a negative dialectic, is the most extensive resistance to such epistemological psychological readings of character motivations. Narratives, according to Carroll, may be unified when ‘each part leads smoothly to the next’ as a result of a ‘logic of questions and answers’ which will ‘eventually [be] answered by... the characters...’⁵⁸ Prototypically, then, narrative may be seen as the coherent sequencing of events, this coherence granted by an articulate structure of a causation rooted firmly in character; because of a character’s intended actions (which may remain unclear until they are finally explained in the ‘logic of

⁵⁵ Allen S. Weiss, ‘The Rhetoric of Interruption,’ in *A Companion to Literature and Film*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 166.

⁵⁶ Bersani and Dutoit, 51.

⁵⁷ Bersani and Dutoit, 58.

⁵⁸ Carroll (2009), 208.

questions and answers') the narrative reaches its effects. However, this function breaks down when the characters are inarticulate about their own motivations, plans, or reactions. Such characters, who 'lack clear-cut traits, motives, and goals,' and whose 'character psychology often fluctuates from one scene to the next,' loosen 'the cause-and-effect relationship between story events.'⁵⁹

This loosened causation does not alter the dialogic hermeneutic process. While psychologically totalising readings are inadequate, nevertheless the interpretative discomfort of the unnavigable distances between a character's discontinuous utterances retains the shadow of an understanding which 'might cross or eliminate' that distance.⁶⁰ Films devoted to inarticulate characters often acquire much of their pathos from the attempts of the characters to express whatever cannot be expressed. Addressing the relationship between articulacy and ontology, Marie-Claire Ropars suggests that '[t]he difficulty of being comes hand in hand with the difficulty of expressing – for which there are two results, silence or song.'⁶¹ Silence (in De Man's sense of muteness) declares itself as a medium of inarticulacy, a failure in articulacy. Song, too, may comprise the disrupted articulations of a character defined by degrading repetition, contradiction, periphrasis: such an inarticulacy may 'seek [understanding] through words, constituting at once the instrument of their loss, and their last efforts to refind it.'⁶² Speech, then, is not 'the functional representation of a situation,' but the uttered and uncooperative parts of

⁵⁹ Todd Berliner, *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 7.

⁶⁰ Bersani and Dutoit, 39.

⁶¹ Marie-Claire Ropars, 'A Cinematic Language,' *Esprit* (June 1960), trans. Adrian Mitchell, accessed 12 February 2014, http://rouge.com.au/11/cinematic_language.html.

⁶² Ropars (1960) at http://rouge.com.au/11/cinematic_language.html.

a hermeneutic whole which cannot be made to cohere.⁶³ In the confusion of this character inarticulacy, the form may be looked to for coherence and clarification, but, when a film combines both character *and* formal inarticulacy, this will not necessarily provide the reassurances that it seems to promise.

The Elusive Delights of Totality

The critical reaction to inarticulacy of form and character has typically been either to address the two as entirely interdependent phenomena, or to separate them entirely. David Bordwell's much-referenced notion of the parametric mode (a challenge to the illusory coherence of classical cinema) has privileged discussions of style over character and narrative. *Syuzhet* (which is a function of both narrative and character, as structure is dependent upon the causal relations cemented by character motivation) is made subservient to style. A single stylistic principle or structure determines the logic of the film's overall compositional form, and the disparate formal elements cohere according to that principle, 'cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the fabula.'⁶⁴ Bordwell sees the parametric mode, then, despite declaring its own fragmented structure, as resolving its inarticulacy in an overarching logic of cues and channelled responses. The parametric film – exemplified by Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* – has an independently understandable mosaic form; it is a 'string of efforts to articulate the

⁶³ Ropars (1960) at http://rouge.com.au/11/cinematic_language.html.

⁶⁴ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 53.

features characterising the medium...'⁶⁵ While this marks a significant promotion of form from the 'decorative function of style' to 'become part of the whole film's organizing principles,' it ignores the dynamic between the formal (stylistic) inarticulacy and any character inarticulacy which may be running in parallel.⁶⁶ Marie-Claire Ropars, echoing Roland Barthes in a theory inflected by post-structuralism's account of the *aporia* at work in any text, shares this interest in contrasting the *film véhiculaire*, with its definite message grounded in prior reality, and the *film écriture*, in which meaning is set in play by disjunctive forms:

For cinematographic making, without which cinema is merely technology, can only subscribe to the combinatory method by a choice of editing: there can be no film without an investment in one mode of articulation that will bind the becoming-filmic of this heterogeneous plurality, from shot to shot, track to track. If continuity in the sequence of movements and convergence in the relation of sight and speech support narrative unification in hybrid cinema, another current, inverse and recurrent, has speculated on the power of temporal and spatial disjunction inherent in the initiation of a free montage: the clash between shots lacking the links that reduce discontinuity, the divergent simultaneity of visual and verbal sequences are at the heart of experimentation from Eisenstein to Resnais.⁶⁷

In line with the post-structuralist ideas that underpin it, Ropars' theory goes further than Bordwell's notion of parametrics in appreciating the implausibility of ultimate hermeneutic understanding in a film of discontinuous form. From a different theoretical perspective, Jonathan Rosenbaum's notion of 'open film' (developed, like Bordwell's idea of parametrics, from Noël Burch) imposes no meaning, and leaves sense-creation to the active interpreter.⁶⁸ Neither Ropars' bound articulation nor Rosenbaum's delimited interpretative possibilities, though, embrace the full

⁶⁵ Bordwell (1997), 86.

⁶⁶ Jakob Isak Nielson, 'Bordwell on Bordwell: Part IV – Levels of Engagement,' *16:9 in English* 3, no.10 (February 2005): 8.

⁶⁷ Ropars (2007), 5.

⁶⁸ See Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movies As Politics* (University of California Press, 1997), 37-9.

functions of meaning in inarticulate film. Part of the reason for this limited understanding of hermeneutic openness may be the failure to engage with the parallel (though not fully complementary) processes of formal and character inarticulacy. By engaging exclusively with formal structures, a key dialectic between form and character is overlooked.

In some films, this relationship is a contrastive one. Character inarticulacy can be balanced out or explained by articulate film form. This balancing out is a form of *compensation*. Classical Hollywood cinema, often concerned with stories in which characters are made inarticulate by secret desire or disempowerment, nevertheless retains 'stylistic transparency, perceptual inertia, lack of disorientation, and narrative closure,' these effects created through a stabilising form.⁶⁹ Stephen Heath's account of a scene in Hitchcock's *Suspicion* – in which Lina (Joan Fontaine) is told of her friend's death, an event which advances her non-articulate suspicion of her husband – suggests that 'on either side of what Lina is here given to see... a perfectly symmetrical patterning builds up and pieces together the space in which the action can take place, the space which is itself part of that action in its economy, its intelligibility...'⁷⁰ Heath's notion of intelligibility, then, is a function of formal articulations (structured on symmetry) in compensating movement around and through a character's slip into inarticulacy (incoherent and contradictory suspicion). Certain genres or styles have become renowned for narratives of inarticulate characters told in forms designed to express on their behalf; melodrama, for example, may be seen to have developed an ordered and expressive *mise-en-scène* which speaks for its characters. Conversely, in a film

⁶⁹ Branigan, 162.

⁷⁰ Heath, 2.

which seeks complex resistance to definite meanings, articulate character may be compensated for by inarticulate film form. Jean-Luc Godard's *Goodbye to Language* (2014) balances articulate characters (who are conducting investigations into Russian literature and conversations rich in detailed and esoteric allusion) with inarticulate form (inexplicable freeze framing, disconcerting angles, sudden cuts, use of white noise) not to undo the effects of the inarticulate form, but rather to neutralise the characters' articulacy. By interrupting their speech, or presenting it cryptically, a potentially coherent narrative is left without a solid meaning.

In a second type of film, character and formal inarticulacy work in tandem in a form of expressionism. This represents an alternative type of compensation, in which the subjective features of the expressionist form offer materialised insights into the mental experience of the character. This form-character correlation has resulted in a tradition of criticism which has viewed form as a kind of paradoxical articulation of the non-articulate and unconscious dimensions of a character. In its most sustained historical realisation, expressionist films in Weimar Germany represented 'an outward projection of psychological events...' in Siegfried Kracauer's phrase.⁷¹ Kracauer goes on to say that this style of 'expressionism seems to be nothing more than the adequate translation of a madman's fantasy into pictorial terms.'⁷² This critical insight sees form as speaking for a character unable to speak for themselves. Thomas Elsaesser, discussing Kracauer's criticism, comments that 'the frenzied body language and angst-ridden faces of its [*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*'s] protagonists symbolise a new subjectivity and

⁷¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 71.

⁷² Kracauer, 70.

inwardness.’⁷³ While differing on the socio-political significance of Weimar cinema, Lotte Eisner agrees with Kracauer that in these films ‘psychic events are exteriorized.’⁷⁴ In this evaluation, *character* (even though understood as a broad compendium of drives and desires in which precise motivations may remain oblique) *unifies* the proliferating *form*. Kristin Thompson also comments on this process, emphasising the unifying organisation of expressionist films:

Expressionism will here serve as a stylistic term applying to a general attempt to minimise the differences among the four aspects of mise-en-scène: lighting, costume, figure disposition and behaviour, and setting. The expressionist film makes, as much as possible, a single visual material of these aspects; the result is an emphasis on overall composition.⁷⁵

Eisner argues that ‘a lack of continuity... [and a] break in style is fatal’ in these films, and is clear that this process of making the films coherent is in the service of understanding of character.⁷⁶ Referencing Kasimir Edschmid, she suggests that “‘the chain of facts: factories, houses, illness, prostitutes, screams, hunger” does not exist; only the interior vision they provoke exists.’⁷⁷ A coherence offered by character-form synchronicity remains central to the perceived achievement of this type of expressionist film, even though the explanation offered by this formal articulation is less precise than in the alternative model of contrastive compensation.

⁷³ Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), 61.

⁷⁴ Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 15.

⁷⁵ Kristin Thompson, *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 173.

⁷⁶ Eisner, 25.

⁷⁷ Eisner, 10-11.

F.W. Murnau's *Der Letzte Mann* (1924) presents a hotel doorman who is unable to tell others (or admit to himself) that he has been demoted. This obsessive, inarticulate secrecy is matched by an expressionist account of his sensational state of mind. His drunkenness is realised in a mobile and unfocused image; his anxiety concerning his neighbours' contempt is translated into a split frame in which their multiplied faces become monstrous; his *idée fixe* – regaining his uniform and the correlating authority – and panic are manifested in a nightmarish image of the hotel which assumes monstrous proportions and seems to fall towards him. The inarticulacy of the character (his inarticulacy both a function of characterisation and the film's lack of synchronised sound) is causally linked with an inarticulate form (in which shifts between objective and subjective, authentic and fantastic, tragic and comic do not permit smooth transitions), and each answers questions raised by the other. What Eisner describes as the film's 'evolved Expressionism' is calculated to help audiences 'understand the despair of "the last of men"'.⁷⁸ The film's inarticulate character is spoken for by the formal incoherencies:

He dovetails his shots, leaves one direction for another in his montage, juggles with proportions until the hero's vertigo takes hold of us in our turn and we find ourselves being swept away in the movement. Never has the unconscious been evoked with such constructive violence.⁷⁹

The indeterminacy of the form ('one direction for another,' 'juggles with proportions') becomes a symbol for 'the unconscious,' allowing 'the hero's vertigo' to take 'hold of us...' Although Thomas Elsaesser complicates the model inherited from Kracauer and Eisner, arguing that 'the clash between style and story seems to violate the film's aesthetic "unity",' he also suggests that the obliqueness in

⁷⁸ Eisner, 217.

⁷⁹ Eisner, 217.

character is simply a deviation from ‘classical, character-centred causality’; the expressionist model ‘obliges one to think of the characters’ motivation in different terms’ and ‘the protagonists’ motives have to be guessed or otherwise presumed, which is another consequence of the priority given in Weimar films to the coherence of space...’⁸⁰ Character remains linked to coherent form. This complementary character-form dialectic is discussed by Burch in his reading of *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931), in which he suggests that the increasing articulacy of the characters during the kangaroo trial (including the trapped murderer, played by Peter Lorre) tames the discontinuous formal inarticulacy of the earlier film, introducing smooth temporal coherence. The hermeneutic model for such films may be seen as two concentric circles, either of which may provide a sense of wholeness from which the disjunctive parts of the other can be interpreted. An understanding of the confused whole of the form (a mix of styles and tones) sheds light on the difficult parts of the character (contradictions, uncertainties); the confused whole of the character, meanwhile, explains the otherwise chaotic formal decisions.

The films explored in this thesis represent a further possibility for the character-form dialectic. They do not share the stabilising explanatory relationship of the first model, in which articulate form compensates for the character’s difficulty in self-expression. While their achievements are nearer to the second model – as both character and form are inarticulate – there are nevertheless significant differences. Unlike the expressionism discussed by Kracauer and Eisner, the discontinuities of the form do not provide commentaries on the interior situation of the characters.

⁸⁰ Elsaesser (2000), 76, 77, 77, 89.

These films, which simultaneously present inarticulacy of form and character without this compensating sense of mutual derivation will be called films of *dual inarticulacy*. Here, the hermeneutic circles created are separate, juxtaposed rather than concentric. They operate simultaneously, but the dialectic dialogue of neither circle is helped so directly by the other. Interpretation may attempt to 'move from partial and disjointed insights to an understanding of the whole and back to the yet-to-be-understood portions of the text' in a process of 'to-and-fro reflection' from which 'the understanding of the whole gradually emerges.'⁸¹ However, the inarticulate parts of a character are not combined into a synthesisable whole from which those parts may be understood; the inarticulate parts of the films' own forms are not combined into a synthesisable whole from which the form may be understood; and, as two discretely dynamic circles, their parts cannot help decisively with an understanding of the other's wholes.

As Elsaesser explores, expressionist modes do not necessarily make the hermeneutic process as straightforward as criticism has often suggested.⁸² However, it remains productive to distinguish between a model of film in which form and character are equivalent (the former acting as a materialised insight into the latter), and a model in which the indeterminacies of form deny understanding of the muteness of character. These structures – referred to here as dual inarticulacy – when allowed the full extent of their formal and character inarticulacy, resist a sense of the completeness which Kristin Thompson identifies in expressionism; as one circle may seem to be nearing a hermeneutical end-point the other will strike a new kind of inarticulacy demanding such interpretative

⁸¹ Snodgrass and Coyne, 73.

⁸² See particularly Elsaesser (2000), 61-89.

attention that the other becomes confused again. The juggling of two hermeneutic processes is the fundamental experience of encountering these films. Character psychology is decentred as both an interpretative aid and goal, and the figures in the films remain stubbornly oblique. This interminable immanent process creates a crisis for interpretation, in which there is no explicating articulation, but rather a resonance established between two processes of inarticulacy. This crisis seems to be at the heart of the phenomenon described by Frederic Jameson, in which ‘pseudo-universal meanings’ must be “‘justified” by the critic’ in ‘totalizing theories for works.’⁸³ Such theories are openly resisted by dual inarticulacy:

Two distinct problems are therefore posed in the aesthetic appropriation of such material: it must not be impoverished to the point of “meaning something” in a transparent, abstract, or basely symbolic sense; but it must also avoid an aesthetic of personal expression... There exist, however, other ways of conveying these materials of daily life of which we have said about that they are something like the “blind spot” at the heart of our own present, of our own experience: an objective reality at which you cannot gaze directly without finding it dissolving into its elements, but which stubbornly reconstitutes itself in the corner of the eye when the latter officially fixes *something else*.⁸⁴

Despite Adorno’s conviction that art should ‘negatively express the false unity of the whole,’ much film criticism has sought to reinstate myths of wholeness into works of dual inarticulacy, even as those works undermine such myths.⁸⁵ The critical temptation seems to be to assert totalising and reductive articulations on behalf of the films, allowing for a kind of compensatory interpretative closure. This interpretative process may be seen at work in a staggering range of approaches to film, its determined assertion of meanings described by Carroll as ‘interpretive

⁸³ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1992), 141-3.

⁸⁴ Jameson, *Signatures*, 149.

⁸⁵ J.M. Bernstein, 10.

ascent.’⁸⁶ From this raised position, a film may be seen as a whole, salvageable from its fragmentary constitutive parts. Perez suggests that

A film is a piecing together. The pieces may come from different places and different times, but arranged into a whole they will be seen as parts of that whole, things in the world the film constructs on the screen. The context the films gives them, the whole of which it makes them part, completely takes over.⁸⁷

While Perez may seem to make a case for the autonomous expression of the film (‘film constructs on the screen’), it nevertheless remains the case that the wholeness encountered in a film’s meaning often arises from an interpretive act (‘will be seen as’) rather than as a result of the film’s own immanence. Despite film scholars’ statements that art ‘seeks to locate a totalising understanding of the world,’ dual inarticulacy resists such operations.⁸⁸ Though Perez claims to avoid ‘narrow conceptions of unity erected and imposed as the norm,’ he also says that critics ‘cannot do without unity.’⁸⁹ It seems almost the duty (and, perhaps, the delightful challenge) of the critic to interpret sense back into inarticulate works. Peter Wollen describes the process in which, despite obvious mismatches and *acousmètres*, he ‘began to formulate connections in [his] mind, which sketched out a way of linking the images to the sounds, to the spoken text.’⁹⁰ Tom Conley goes so far as to suggest that ‘the heterogeneity of film thresholds an activity – a pleasure – of analysis allowing spectators to rewrite and rework discourses of film into configurations that *need not be determined by what is immediately before the eyes*’ (my

⁸⁶ Carroll (2009), 214.

⁸⁷ Perez (1998), 310-11.

⁸⁸ Whittock, 106.

⁸⁹ Perez (1998), 424-5.

⁹⁰ Peter Wollen, *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film* (London: Verso, 2002), 242.

italics).⁹¹ These critical reductions typically structure themselves on Master Signifiers which do not adequately account for the combinatory meanings of inarticulate forms. These signifiers include: character Psychology; Truth; Story (as ‘a sum of events understood in a totality’);⁹² Reality (as the objective of inarticulate films which are interpreted to ‘contrive a rhythm more akin to the everyday flow of often directionless events...’);⁹³ Subjective Experience (as the ‘fragmented disruptiveness’ which is matched by inarticulate film);⁹⁴ Ideology (as the films of “manipulators” who create meaning by artificial interventions in the cinematic material’);⁹⁵ the Director (as the ‘central perpetrator’ from whom a scene ‘acquires meaning’).⁹⁶

This is not to argue that film criticism and analysis (or more general reception) has been a uniform process. Nor is it to say that there have not been real attempts to engage with films whose inarticulate structures of expression do not sit comfortably with totalising meanings around Master Signifiers. And yet, it is the case that many responses to the kinds of films explored in this thesis are scarred by a decisive and damaging dedication to a pre-established way of reading. Frederic Jameson,

⁹¹ Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xxxi.

⁹² Conley, viii.

⁹³ Carroll (2009), 214; written in reference to *Amarcord*, this amounts to a kind of formal expressionism, where an inarticulate form is simply labelled ‘realistic’ and, therefore, in no further need of interpretation.

⁹⁴ Rushton, 24; Rushton here is summarising ‘one of the central tenets of film studies and film theory,’ considering particularly Emma Wilson, Steven Shaviro, and Patricia Pisters.

⁹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 69.

⁹⁶ Jameson, *Signatures*, 164-5; this passage is on Hitchcock’s significance in the meaning of *Psycho*. The point is echoed by Carroll, who sees the possibility of the ‘picture maker articulating her intentions...’ (Carroll, 122) Seeking to avoid potential reductiveness, this thesis avoids any substantial engagement with directors’ intentions. Directors’ comments are, on occasion, used, but only to provide a further critical voice within which to contextualise discussion of the film in question. The director is pointedly not seen as a source of stabilising meaning.

himself suspicious of other totalising claims, defends History as a critical Master Signifier in the following terms:

Now, however, I want to reverse the problem and make a final – unavoidably dogmatic – reflexion on the interpretive operation... The observation will be dogmatic because it depends on a presupposition that cannot be defended in advance or a priori, namely that there exists for any given cultural artifact the possibility of something like a “concrete” analysis, or in other words an interpretation which rejoins the historical situation both of the text itself and of its interpreter, in such a way that it is finally capable of grounding or of justifying itself. Such a squaring of the interpretive or hermeneutic circle (sometimes called dialectical criticism) will however necessarily be different on the occasion of every text, so that it is impossible to furnish the operation as can be done for “methods” in general (this is not, in other words, a method).⁹⁷

This thesis sets out to discover an alternative means of approaching films of dual inarticulacy. These films, by throwing their own combinatory structures into particularly sharp focus, invite readings which take account of their internal dialectics between part and whole, allowing them to remain dynamic but contingent, debased neither by being made to *mean something* or *nothing*. The hermeneutic circles are not squared, but allowed to progress in their unending cycles of half-inferred significances. The response advocated is not simply in line with reader response theory; while the complex texts are sites of multiple meanings, they remain beyond the limits of even an approach which celebrates their multivalency. Instead, they offer a supplement to meaning – whether defined by author, text, or reader. Each chapter is devoted in part to interrogating some of the totalising claims made by critics about the film in question; once dismantled, parts of these theories can be allowed to resonate productively with the parts and half-glimpsed wholes of the films themselves. Jameson sees one of the traditional

⁹⁷ Jameson, *Signatures*, 174.

problems for interpretation as overcoming the gap between ‘part and whole, presence and totality, style and plot, in short, what Coleridge called fancy and imagination, and what I have preferred (following Deleuze and Guattari) to call molecular and molar.’⁹⁸ This thesis suggests that the parts and wholes of dual inarticulacy need not be synthesised (and, indeed, cannot be), and seeks to interrogate the assumption that ‘inventing ways to bridge this gap (or even worse, to conceal its existence) is one of the privileged arenas for interpretation as bravura gesture...’⁹⁹ The assertion here, instead, is that it is the interstices which exist between parts and wholes, and the resonance between formal and character modes of inarticulacy, which produce the texts’ significances.

Crucially, this does not lead to nihilistic readings in which the idea of meaning is entirely abandoned. The structure implicit in dual inarticulacy allows for an interrogation of existing mythic meanings (often reducible to the kind of Master Signifiers which have motivated criticism). This implicit interrogation is not the same as meaning, and may profitably be read, instead, in terms of *effect*. What is proposed is not *meaninglessness* (which may, perversely, become univocally significant: the meaning is that there is no meaning). Rather, dual inarticulacy represents a particular structure of concealed or eclipsed meaning. This concealment allows for the continued discussion of issues of politics, ethics, and faith; the simultaneous intimation of and concealment of meaning can, in particular films, effect an impression of implied and withheld sense that resonates with experience of exploitation, deception, and doubt. Monolithic notions of gender, sexuality, race, age, and social status can be called into question, these

⁹⁸ Jameson, *Signatures*, 136.

⁹⁹ Jameson, *Signatures*, 137.

interrogations often not voiced explicitly, lying instead in the complicated expressions of articulated forms. These are not necessarily apolitical films, but films with liquid politics whose indeterminacies implicitly – and silently – query the possibility of hegemonic structures.

Dual Inarticulacy

Dual inarticulacy, then, creates its own brand of hermeneutic impasse, which plays out both the desire for meaning and that desire's frustration as simultaneous effects of the same process. Quoting Giorgio Agamben, Laura Mulvey points out that '[c]inema... is a prolonged hesitation between image and meaning,' and it is precisely this hesitation that films of dual inarticulacy capitalise on.¹⁰⁰ The question remains, though, what the precise nature of this aesthetic capital is. If understanding is made possible by meaning, and meaning is the synthesis of a dialectic integration of parts and whole, and that dialectic is negative in form – then it is essential to consider what the films offer in place of understanding. What is lost is relatively easy to discern, namely the confident univocality which Roland Barthes describes as 'myth,' which

... abolishes the complexity of human acts, [and] gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back on what is immediately visible, it organises a world which is without contradiction because it is without depth, a world which is open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity: Cinema and the Mind's Eye* Second Edition (London: BFI, 2013), xvii.

¹⁰¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Cape, 1972), 143.

This resistance to mythic status, in turn, complicates the critical tendency to totalise. The mythologising process of interpretation finds a justification in David Bordwell's *Making Meaning*:

What of ordinary criticism, the application and extension of existing semantic fields, schemata, and heuristics? I think that it plays at least two roles. One is domestication, the taming of the new. The critic who finds a recent film to be a contradictory text is pulling that film into the field of the known. Domestication subsumes the unfamiliar to the familiar. Though avant-gardists may disparage this side of interpretation, it remains an institutionally necessary function. The unschematized film is the uninterpretable film.¹⁰²

The bias in this description is apparent: the mythologising tendency represents 'ordinary' criticism; the new is wild and dangerous, requiring 'taming'; even though there is violence ('pulling') in the process of conventional meaning-making, this is an 'institutionally necessary function.' Not only does this dismantle the uncanny possibilities of a text ('subsumes the unfamiliar to the familiar'), it also takes as axiomatic that the 'uninterpretable film' is a problematic film, presumably because the only alternative to *interpretable* is *chaotically meaningless*. Films of dual inarticulacy, though, offer a model, which resists this crude dichotomy. In her discussion of aesthetic synthesis, Marie-Claire Ropars employs a post-structuralist vocabulary to discuss this destabilising effect, in which 'totalisation disappears in the originary attraction of a shifting and multiple relation which replaces syncretic unification with an explosive *différance*.'¹⁰³ In a parallel tradition, stemming from Martin Heidegger's philosophy of *Dasein*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht offers a paradigm which is *outside* of hermeneutics, arguing against the institutional privileging of interpretation. Gumbrecht champions *presence* – the experienced

¹⁰² David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 256.

¹⁰³ Ropars (2007), 5.

significance immanent in the world which is not dependent on the interpretative activity of a Cartesian subject. Like Kristeva's semiotic, *presence* is a phenomenon often encountered in the semantic imprecisions of form, rhythm, tone, mood. In a presence effect, the aesthetic experience of encountering art is paramount, and totalising meaning is secondary.¹⁰⁴ These presence effects (equivalent to the locally disturbed patterns of fragmentary character and form) exist in interplay with meaning effects (equivalent to the semblance of meaning offered by the symmetrical arrangement of formal and character inarticulacies):

Whenever it presents itself to us, we may live this simultaneity as a tension or as an oscillation. Essential is the point that, within the specific constellation, meaning will not bracket, will not make the presence effects disappear, and that the – unbracketed – physical presence of things (of a text, of a voice, of a canvas with colours, of a play performed by a team) will not ultimately repress the meaning dimension. Nor is the relation between presence effects and meaning effects a relation of complementarity, in which a function assigned to each side in relation to the other would give the co-presence of the two sides the stability of a structural pattern. Rather, we can say that the tension/oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects endows the object of aesthetic experience with a component of provocative instability and unrest.¹⁰⁵

Gumbrecht's notion of oscillation is useful in the identification of the precise operation of dually inarticulate films. However, unlike Gumbrecht's described presence effect, these films do not necessarily result in feelings of serene synchronicity with the world. Invoking Heidegger, Gumbrecht argues that presence 'may be exactly what, from an existential point of view, the self-unconcealment of Being is all about' and that 'experiencing the things of the world

¹⁰⁴ It is conceivable that some film can move towards a position of totalised meaning, as with propaganda and pornography. However, this applies to the minority of film types, and can be interrogated even there – as in the reappraisal of both propaganda and pornography for their 'artistic' qualities.

¹⁰⁵ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 108.

in their preconceptual thingness will reactivate a feeling for the bodily and for the spatial dimension of our existence.¹⁰⁶ Here, presence – despite its eschewing of hermeneutic understanding – surrenders to a utopian desire for some sort of closure. Films of dual inarticulacy, although not endlessly and overwhelmingly open, offer no settled closure. Instead, they offer an oscillating relationship between character and form, an oscillation which creates a dynamic and significant resonance. In some ways this symbiotic relationship between form and character is reminiscent of Noël Burch's conviction that there should be a 'truly consistent relationship between a film's spatial and temporal articulations and its narrative content, formal structure determining narrative structure as much as vice versa.'¹⁰⁷ However, in the class of film considered in this thesis, the relationship between form and character, while productive and significant, is more opaque. Unlike expressionism (in which form *expresses* character), the nature of the link is indirect. Inarticulate form and inarticulate character are uncanny doubles rather than products of each other. Analogies with *echoes* and *shadows* are misplaced, as this would suggest a derivative relationship in which formal structures reinforce character, or vice versa. Instead, in these films, the dynamic between form and character content is one of separate achievements suspended in parallel. In *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*, the inarticulate form *proliferates* into an open sequence of uncircumscribed quotation, this diversity fracturing the film's structure into a shattered linearity. The characters, meanwhile, are not rendered inarticulate by an equivalently proliferating speech, but, rather by a muteness, a *lack* of autonomous expression. This dialectic between a *proliferation in form* and a *lack in character*

¹⁰⁶ Gumbrecht, 117-8.

¹⁰⁷ Burch, 15.

expression is a common dynamic in dual inarticulacy, creating inarticulacies which coincide but which do not simply imitate each other.

This twinning effect – which creates both parallels and mismatches – has a peculiar effect; talking about a different twinning effect (that between theatre and film), Bersani and Dutoit describe such effects as having ‘centrifugal as well as centripetal energies.’¹⁰⁸ Put in more concrete terms, the twinning of inarticulate form and inarticulate character resists being either meaningful or meaningless. It compounds the inarticulacy, as in *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, by doubling it; twice the inarticulacy creates twice the impression of inarticulacy, resisting interpretation, defying meaning, and emphatically declaring the fragmentations at work. However, at the same moment, paradoxically, this very fragmentation is balanced. Single inarticulacy can threaten imbalance by creating a sense of asymmetry; in *Goodbye to Language*, character articulacy is traumatically undermined by formal inarticulacy, as intended meaning is compromised by the means through which it must be expressed. Dual inarticulacy, on the other hand, even as it compounds the inarticulacy, offers a sense of structure, the sense of an organised artwork. Christian Metz defines sequence as ‘the concept of a single concatenation and the concept of discontinuity,’ stressing the idea of a sequence’s balance between order (‘single concatenation’) and disorder (‘discontinuity’); inarticulacy (‘concatenation’ in Metz’s term) is the marriage between the two. This effect is heightened tremendously by the simultaneous operations of two strands of inarticulacy (*dual concatenation*, as it were), allowing for both multiplied discontinuity and the possibility of asymmetrical order. This paradox becomes locked in a negative

¹⁰⁸ Bersani and Dutoit, 61.

dialectic. Films of dual inarticulacy break into a kind of 'fragmented disruptiveness' which may be likened to Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, the operation of an expressive system outside of the clearly regulated order of meaningful language, which have 'meaning but do not achieve the full sense of language.'¹⁰⁹ However, at the same moment, they suggest the imposition of artistic order, the balanced mechanisms of a carefully calculated piece of work, more in line with Kristeva's symbolic, the patterned meanings of culturally conventionalised speech. As Kristeva says that communication must be the irresolvable dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic, each the excess or negation of the other, so, in dually articulate films, form and character are poised in an unresolved dialectic which can neither abandon the possibility of meaning nor give itself over to meaning.

In this model, the interstices which are central to the base idea of inarticulacy become more than transitional points between fragments. Rather, they become the conceptual spaces in which meaning is suspended in a state of might-be-madness. As torturous networks of small-scale incoherence (the inarticulate contiguity of uneasy fragments), the films establish local interstices which interrupt meaning; in these spaces, the significance of a character's speech is confused in contradiction, periphrasis, or silence, and the significance of the film's form is confused in the unnavigable transition between shots, narrative strands, modes, styles, genres. In Marie-Claire Ropars' terms these are '[w]eak times, dead times; the important thing is 'between acts,' what is drawn out right across time and remains

¹⁰⁹ Mulvey (2009), 173.

incomplete.’¹¹⁰ These local interstices seem individually to defy meaning by challenging the possibility of a coherent whole from which to view the parts meaningfully. In films of dual inarticulacy, though, a sense of coherence is simultaneously created by the parallel presentation of discrete structures of formal and character inarticulacy, this asymmetry allowing the two structures to resonate globally with one another. This parallel organisation seems to consolidate the possibility of meaning by suggesting an underlying pattern to the fragmented utterances of the characters and expressions of the films. Local interstices are points of inertia, a deadening of interpretative progress, resisting explanation. Global resonance creates energy, generating a quickened sense of interpretative potential. The centrifugal confusions of the interpretative resistance are countered by the centripetal reassurances of the interpretative potential. This is a serious challenge to the utopian interpretative process described by David Bordwell:

Comprehension and interpretation thus involve the *construction* of meaning out of textual cues... In watching a film, the perceiver identifies certain cues which prompt her to execute many inferential activities – ranging from the mandatory and very fast activity of perceiving apparent motion, through the more “cognitively penetrable” process of constructing, say, links between scenes, to the still more open process of ascribing abstract meanings to the film.¹¹¹

In films of dual inarticulacy, the cues are confused within the local interstices. However, even as the cues are confused, global resonance insists that the artwork is an organised one and that the ‘search for occulted sense’ (in Frank Kermode’s memorable phrase) remains a possibly fruitful one.¹¹² As Bersani and Dutoit phrase it:

¹¹⁰ Ropars 1960), 2.

¹¹¹ Bordwell (1989), 3.

¹¹² Bordwell (1989), 2.

Whatever alternatives we struggle with, whatever arguments we engage in, the assumption is always that some degree of knowledge might be possible, that the (perhaps impossible) ideal would be “to get things right”.¹¹³

The implications of this double structure for the films’ hermeneutic operations may be understood as adjacent circles in which the fragmented parts (non-identical elements which announce their uncomfortable transitions) do not allow the closure of the individual circles, but whose twinned structures suspend the circles in the semblance of a total, coherent, understandable project. The effects of the films derive from the oscillation between these two fractured circles in a global resonance which insists on the possibility of order. It is this oscillation which resonates in the always-frustrated hope of meaning that operates in place of univocal, articulable meaning. In this way, the conventional critical dichotomy of coherence/incoherence is rendered inadequate. These films are both coherent *and* incoherent, functioning through a series of *combinations* which, across local interstices, undermine univocal meaning while, through global resonances, asserting it. At a local level, the films are confused and difficult to navigate. However, this does not detract from their simultaneous sense of structure. In this oscillating structure, the films’ lines of inarticulacy both possess and lack integrity. The dialectic which characterises the hermeneutic process involved in the interpretation of films of dual inarticulacy is incapable of resolution. Any synthesis must involve an impossible act of identity; conflicting character fragments or formal elements would have to be reconciled as being self-identical, a reading which the films resist with their acts of local incoherence; and even the balance established between character and form, elements which appear to be identically engaged in a

¹¹³ Bersani and Dutoit, 58.

shared project, is ultimately irreconcilable, because their local parts will not cohere in a meaning sufficiently stable for the shared project to be defined. Marie-Claire Ropars describes a ‘paradoxical movement of attraction without synthesis which establishes at once the principle of an aesthetic idea perpetuated solely by alteration and the principle of its disruption.’¹¹⁴ This attraction without synthesis finds its most significant manifestation in films of dual inarticulacy.

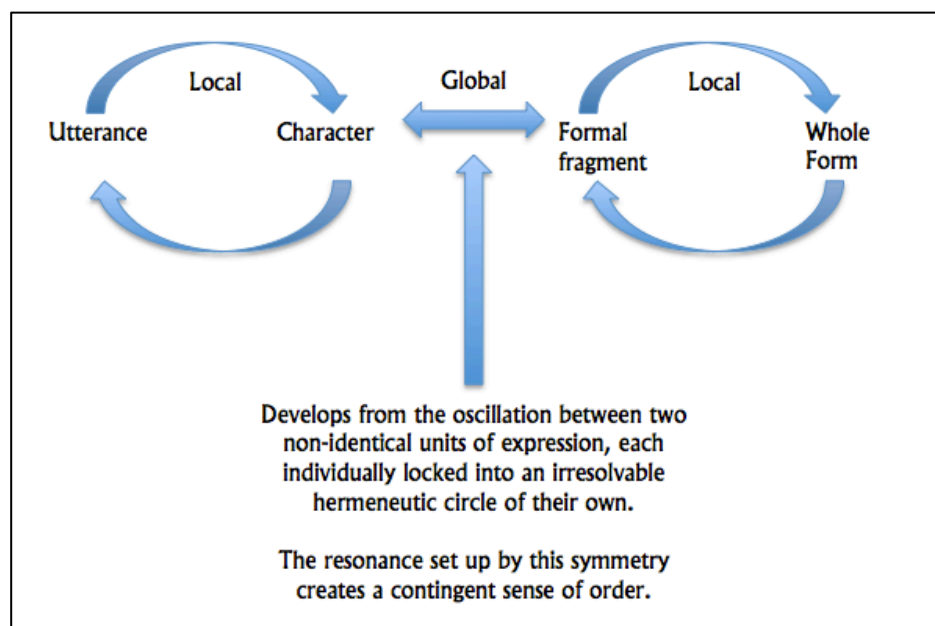


Fig.1.1
The hermeneutics of dual inarticulacy.

This provocative instability is the restlessness of films of dual inarticulacy. They offer a kind of absolute contingency born of paradox: they are synchronised with themselves, but only insofar as their global parts (character-content and form, diegesis and discourse, *fabula* and *sjuzhet*) are united in their paralleled local demonstrations of the implausibility of synchronisation. The model they offer, it may be said, inhabits the space at which, as Adorno describes it, ‘meaning and

¹¹⁴ Ropars (2007), 3.

nonmeaning become identical.’¹¹⁵ In this space, meaning endures, but must be encountered as a potential rather than a reachable *telos*. The films become inexhaustible because of their intimations of a presently-denied significance, which, in the case of *Journal d’un curé de campagne*, finds a significant parallel in spiritual faith, as the hope of salvation becomes a parallel for the hope for meaning. Indeed, the spiritual, intellectual, or emotional quest is a recurring element in the narratives of films of dual inarticulacy, a pertinent parallel for the resonating oscillations of the films’ hermeneutic activity. (This quest metaphor is literalised in *Meek’s Cutoff* in which the characters are in search of water and a new home.) Ultimately, this character and formal inarticulacy, placed centrally in the films and emphatically not resolved in or by coherent speech, is an epistemological complication; the fact that character-content and formal meaning remain both so demandingly central (speaking) and yet resistant to knowledge (not speaking) questions what is knowable. To appropriate the words of Laura Mulvey’s call for a challenge to ‘traditional film conventions,’ this dual inarticulacy is able to ‘free the look of the audience into dialectics...’¹¹⁶ The possibility of knowledge is necessarily present, but necessarily unrealised. As Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, engaging with the essential relationship between hermeneutic and non-hermeneutic readings, between meaning and ‘volume’:

But – can we really assume that the reading of such texts is a reading exclusively concentrated on meaning? Do we not sing these texts? Should the process in which a poem speaks only be carried by a meaning intention? Is there not, at the same time, a truth that lies in its performance? This, I think, is the task with which the poem confronts us.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Adorno (2003), 385.

¹¹⁶ Mulvey (2009), 27.

¹¹⁷ Translated and quoted in Gumbrecht, 64.

The ambition of this thesis is to allow the texts mutely to sing their oscillating almost-meaning.

Chapter 2

Competing Tales: Tension between Levels of Narration in *Journal d'un cure de campagne*

Spatial Articulation

In order to define the operations of dual inarticulacy, it is useful to explore how a film which initially appears to display only one strand of inarticulacy may, when analysed closely, reveal more complex resonances between character and form. Robert Bresson's 1951 film *Journal d'un curé de campagne* depicts the rural ministry of a shy and socially awkward young priest. His ministry is beset by a number of obstacles, many of which are crises of communication: arguments, traumatic consultations, interrupted exchanges, overheard and misconstrued conversations. The priest, finding himself in the middle of these crises, describes his experiences in a diary. The diary appears to be the priest's attempt to articulate himself, that is to express clearly his thoughts and emotions through the combinatory form of the elements of his writing. The calm and measured tones with which the journal is presented in voiceover represent a lucidity and fluency which is rarely heard in the priest's dialogue with other characters. When talking with his parishioners, the priest is often tongue-tied, seemingly overawed by the superior rhetoric or determination of his interlocutors. Even when speaking with children, especially the precocious Séraphita and the melancholy Chantal, the priest is unable to express himself with the calm that he achieves in his journal. The expressive forms

of the diary appear to be an escape from inarticulacy for both the priest and the film. Character inarticulacy seems to be compensated for by articulate form.

The nature of the priest's inarticulacy becomes evident through his engagements with other characters. Simultaneously, these engagements reveal what is at stake for the priest in his continued muteness and stuttering. The world in which the priest performs his ministry consists of places and people over which he struggles to have any authority. After a humiliating encounter with Fabregars, an acerbic elderly parishioner, the priest visits a colleague in Torcy. Fabregars has demanded that he be charged less for his wife's funeral. The priest's orderly and equitable system of charging is attacked and, despite a momentarily articulate defence of the clearly structured set of rules he is not ultimately able to dismiss Fabregars' claims. The subsequent meeting with Torcy introduces a number of notions which prove to be crucial in the priest's developing attitude towards his own vocation. Most notable of these is the pressing need for a priest to instil order in his parish, because with order comes system, authority, and control. While Torcy explains that order must be maintained, the frame concentrates its attention on the priest. The priest's head falls in silent acquiescence as Torcy metaphorically discusses this need for order, his figurative language referencing day and night and light and darkness, his words grounded in the authoritative scriptural rhetoric of the account of creation in *Genesis*. The priest is told that he must have order because otherwise disorder will win the day tomorrow, just as night will undo the day. The priest is convinced that this call for order is his political as well as his spiritual duty; both his social position and his professional responsibility for warding off wickedness and sin demand such discipline. The talk of night marks the scene's end, and is matched by a fade; the

darkness of the black screen undoes the final, composed image of the priest's face. The nocturnal imagery and the fade-out suggest the priest's potential defeat by disorder, further implied by his inarticulate attempts to speak. The film's form is in sympathy with the priest's crises of faith and expression.

In the scene's introduction of the narrative's epistemological quest for order, order and authority are related to confident self-expression and the verbal control of place. Torcy, with aggressive and fluent articulacy, argues that the priest should not have been so weak in his handling of the contentious Fabregars. The younger man should, according to his superior, 'have shown him the door,' a phrase emphatically repeated. This spatio-visual figure – showing someone the door – advocates authority through articulation; showing Fabregars the door signifies issuing an imperative to leave. In a local literalisation of this metaphor (control of doorways figuring as the power that comes with authoritative expression), thresholds become important spaces in the scene. The shot of the priest's arrival at Torcy's rectory dissolves before he is seen crossing through the doorway; the cut is unexpected and creates an ellipsis of a few moments only, excising just the image of the movement into the house. When the scene resumes inside, the conversation in which Torcy insistently demands that the priest should assume control is already underway. In a scene which begins with the omission of the priest's crossing of a threshold, hope for his articulate authority diminishes rapidly. It seems that he has difficulty both in showing people the door and, as Andrew Klevan observes, a 'restriction in moving between spaces.'¹ The connection between threshold and authority highlights the fact that articulation is a phenomenon which must occur

¹ Andrew Klevan, *Disclosure of the Everyday: Undramatic Achievement in Narrative Film* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), 79.

through and across space. James Quandt, implying an interest in inarticulacy, observes that Bresson's cinema concentrates on the 'interstice,' the 'spaces before, between and after,' liminal spaces which must be controlled ('show him the door') if articulacy is to be achieved.² The priest's failure with Fabregars lies in missing an opportunity to literalise the threshold-metaphor in an overt display of articulation, an opportunity lost because of his tongue-tied anxiety, his authority lost in meek muteness. The film's form – particularly its use of transitions at this point – *articulates* this character inarticulacy.

The central significance of the ordered authority that comes with confident expression is played out in the oppositional dynamic between the priest and Torcy. For the opening sections of the scene, in which Torcy accuses his visitor of weakness and of a youthful lack of determination, authority is clearly linked with the host through his greater height, his dominant vocal presence, his centrality in the frame. The priest, who is consistently marginalised within the scene's shots, cannot aspire to this kind of spatial dominance. The priest has already commented on the older man's greater 'health and mental balance.' The shot changes to incorporate the priest's full face only when he momentarily asserts himself in denying the charge that he will ultimately drop everything. The frame recognises moments of authoritative articulacy; the priest's clear denial seems to demand the camera's attention. However, even here, the *mise-en-scène* is prepared for the rapid decline of the priest's defiance. Although his face is bordered by the curtain and the square panes of the window, the church (symbol of his ministry) is kept at bay across an unnavigable distance (Fig. 2.1). The window is an unpassable threshold

² James Quandt, 'Introduction', in *Robert Bresson: Revised*, ed. James Quant (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival, 2011), 5.

as well as a frame, and the priest resumes his customary eye-dropping, head-hanging weariness as Torcy tells him to give up caring about whether he is loved. As Torcy commands the room and the conversation, demonstrating the control which he advocates, the priest's attempt at authoritative articulation subsides into a pathetic muteness.



Fig. 2.1 – 0.07.08
Framed submission.

The character's inarticulacy – a verbal stumbling in which the awkward transitions between the component parts of his speech are emphatically displayed – is materialised in the film's presentation of physical spaces. Many of the film's scenes of confused or disordered conversation revolve visually around difficult thresholds and impenetrable screens. Mastery of these dividing spaces does not come only with physical strength but with articulacy. For the priest, thresholds are difficult to cross, representing for Andrew Klevan 'characters' confinement and their difficulties in connecting with each other.'³ The gates of the chateau are heavy and forbidding, and seem to sap the priest's strength, delaying the charged and difficult interviews that await him. Doorways, as with the surgery threshold after the priest is diagnosed with cancer, are often sites of exclusion or expulsion, moments at which the priest is silenced. The confessional, which should offer the priest

³ Klevan, 79.

anonymous authority, remains impenetrable, and the priest hears Chantal's confession from outside. The window of the priest's room allows a frustrating half-encounter with the world, a screen through which the priest may hear but not communicate with his parishioners; as he stands at his window for the first time in the film, he says that he would do 'anything that morning for a word of kindness or compassion,' but he is cut off from the world, which becomes only a soundscape of cocks crowing and carts passing (Fig. 2.2). If, as Torcy's spatial metaphors suggest, articulacy may be symbolised by confident movement across space, the priest's stumbling physical wariness and distance from others mark his inarticulacy. The film's depiction of these spaces is through a form which acknowledges and communicates the complexity.



Fig. 2.2 – 0.09.18
An alienating threshold.

The Diary's Order Established

The view that the priest's ministry is complicated by his lack of articulacy (symbolised in part by physical weakness) is a common one in criticism on Bresson's film. Although this body of critical work may disagree about the film's precise achievements, it comments almost unanimously on the inadequacy,

contingency, or inefficacy of the priest's attempts to communicate. René Prédal highlights Bresson's exploration of the 'tragedy of the incommunicability of consciousness.'⁴ Keith Reader argues that 'the richest and most suggestive approach to Bresson seems... to be concerned with notions of the discontinuous, the unsayable.'⁵ The priest is trapped in a physical world across whose spaces he is unable to say what he means or wishes. This isolation seems at moments to be relieved by the codes of his chosen profession. If articulacy is expression through a coherent form of connected elements, the more secure the connections the more precise the expression; a rigorous system of doctrine, such as the rhetoric and ritual of ecclesiastical liturgy, should provide ideal support for articulacy. The priest's rare moments of successful communication seem to be those in which he is empowered by the authority of such a rhetoric: Chantal's confession, the catechism class in which Séraphita displays her remarkable knowledge, the blessing of the Countess. However, in these moments of apparent communion, the priest's endeavours to speak clearly are still hindered by misunderstanding and unforeseen consequence. Chantal accuses him of diabolic powers; Séraphita comments provocatively on the beauty of his eyes and then laughs at him; the Countess dies and the priest's strong words are held responsible. Even these formulaic articulations are no guarantee of order.

In this uncertain position, the priest's journal, privileged by its place in the title, becomes an opportunity for retrospective articulation. The centrality of the journal in the film, and its formal emphasis through voiceover, gives the sense that the

⁴ René Prédal, 'Robert Bresson: L'Aventure intérieure' (1992), in *Robert Bresson: Revised*, ed. James Quant (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival, 2011), 90.

⁵ Keith Reader, 'D'ou cela vient-il' (1986), in *Robert Bresson: Revised*, ed. James Quant (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival, 2011), 370.

film's central achievement is the meaningful articulation of the character's confusions and frustrations, a compensation for his inarticulacy. Many of the priest's interactions with other characters may be defined by his hesitant utterance or even evasive muteness. The diary, on the other hand, in its presentation in the voiceover, is clear and cogent, suggesting the possibility of a psychic space of order and discipline.⁶ In the early encounter with Fabregars, the scene is heralded with a peal of bells, a kind of summons which begins during the dissolve from the previous scene. This specifically ecclesiastical call, tethered to the authority which should but does not come with the priest's position, is reinforced by a spoken diary entry. In the diary entry, the character's introduction as *Old* Fabregars suggests a possible frailty and vulnerability. This impression is reinforced by the accompanying shot, a long shot of his arrival at the church, filmed from behind as he walks stiffly across the graveyard with a stick, his obvious infirmity, as well as the graves, connoting death. Further, the use of the epithet 'old' establishes an implicit opposition between Fabregars and the priest, whose youth is commented on extensively within the film. The diary establishes the scene as a contest in which strength and a sense of innovation are tacitly equated with the priest. And, early in the scene, the priest does display authority in the conversation. He is privileged in the foreground of the shot, enlarged within the frame, and is defiant in his attitude towards Fabregars. It is as though, within the scene as it is presented in the film, he is buoyed by the preceding confident articulations of a diary which has ordered events to his advantage.

⁶ The fact that the voiceover is presented predominantly in the past tense argues against the fact that it represents the priest's thought in the moment of the scene; rather, it implies that the voiceover is a representation of the diary, written retrospectively.

The priest's authority is not allowed to stand unchallenged within the scene, and the conversation between the two men becomes a fight for authority. The scene is largely static and not obviously dramatic; the authority they struggle for is rhetorical. The priest's authority is lost as the scene moves on, passing further and further from the reassuring encouragements of the introductory diary entry. Fabregars' eyes are increasingly targeted piercingly at his interlocutor, while the priest's eyes are cast down. The camera moves with the priest as he turns and walks slowly towards Fabregars, but this is not to indicate its subordination to his movement: when the priest stops, the camera continues, stopping only at his shoulder. The shifting shot ultimately marginalises the priest, placing Fabregars in the centre of the frame at the very moment in which he interrupts the priest and takes control of the discourse, demanding to know how much the cost of his wife's funeral should be (Fig. 2.3). As he argues that candles are expensive, the priest reclaims authority within the conversation, reflected in his return to the frame. Almost immediately, however, the frame moves back to Fabregars, privileging the old man as he begins a personal attack on the priest, accusing him of laziness, greed, and exploiting the poor. The priest's defence, timid and unconvincing, sees the rallying return of the reverse-shot, but this shot is fleeting, soon returning to Fabregars. The old man leans forward aggressively, heightening the sense of his presence within the frame, before slamming his fist down on the cabinet in a gesture of violence, turning and leaving. As he walks away, the camera moves with him slightly, evicting the priest from the frame altogether, withholding his reaction to Fabregars' parting accusation. This shot, with its small but significant readjustment of the camera's position in the final moments of the scene, speaks of Fabregars' conversational victory, his triumphant exit after the diminishment of the

priest. The priest's argument is lost, as is his presence in the frame. The decline in the priest's articulacy and authority within the scene is the consequence of the absence of the voiceover; the ordering commentary of the diary is replaced by the domination of disorder, inverted hierarchies, and even sin (Fabregars' false accusations and greed).



Fig. 2.3 – 0.05.20
Marginalised positions.

This relationship between uncomfortable, disordered narrative events and the retrospective ordering of the diary's statements is seen clearly at work in the priest's first encounter with the Countess. This is to be a relationship of especial significance in the priest's ministry; his most effective communications are with the Countess, and it is her death which ultimately precedes the disaster of his descent into scandal. The world of the chateau is a hostile one to the priest, a reality presented emphatically in this scene. The gates of the grounds are ornate and imposing, far taller than the priest and clearly designed to exclude. The priest must use the full extent of his meagre physical strength to wrestle them open, and even then he succeeds only in creating a gap just wide enough for him to slip through. His entrance, it seems, is hardly confident of welcome. Having passed through the gates, the scene's first oppressive threshold, the priest walks towards the house, watched by Louise through a window. The chateau's windows will be consistently

malign barriers for the priest; it is through one of them that Chantal will overhear the conversation between the priest and the Countess, a conversation which she will distort with effects that are disastrous for the priest. Louise is joined by the Count, and they watch the priest with an assured superiority, this vantage point giving them the chance to avoid the visitor. Windows are, as always in the film, seen as one-way; some characters are privileged with clear sight and the possibility of communication, while others are excluded from this.

To enter the chateau, a place in which the priest attempts to articulate his plans for the future of the parish, he must cross a number of thresholds, each revealing the place to be hostile to his ambitions. The camera traces the priest's walk up the garden path from a secure position within the house. The image is marginally distorted, a distortion which is only explained as the camera moves back in order to accommodate the priest's entrance, revealing that it has been recording him through the glass of a door. Despite his confident striding through the grounds, the reflected light in the glass and the heavy wooden frame of the door serve to distance the camera from its subject and to complicate the priest's easy access to the chateau. He is admitted after a brief delay, and he looks anxious. Once again, he hesitates when faced with thresholds. He and the servant who admits him say nothing, marking another potential communication that fails to develop. The servant departs, seemingly uninterested in the visitor's motives. The priest moves uneasily through the room, his unease paralleled in the camera's loss of fluidity as it moves falteringly after him. The servant does not fetch the Count, and the priest is left alone until he sees the Countess.

The scene reaches a climax of disordered space in the presentation of the distance between the priest and the Countess within the frame. She is revealed across a threshold, framed by several doors. This framing is uncomfortably asymmetrical. The two doors between the priest and Countess, and the one beyond her, along with the heavy, impassive window shutter, partially eclipse the room's features, notably the fireplace and the Countess's chair. The scene has the complex arrangement of an obstacle course. The spaces through which the priest must pass to reach the Countess seem alien and strange, with extreme foreshortening and asymmetrical framing creating the sense of a slice of the world which is difficult to reconcile with a broader, stable universe. The reverse-shot, used as the Countess wakes to give her disorientated view of the priest, is even more uncomfortably distorted (Fig. 2.4). The chandelier and ornate table are sliced in two, as are a chair and a picture in the foreground. Nothing is seen in its entirety. The priest is not central in his framing doorway. Whatever harmony could exist in the room is lost. This suggests not surprise but alarm, a sense of the disorder which Torcy told the priest to be wary of. The door in the foreground with the unfocused and enormous handle, is almost monstrous. In the light of this design, in which *mise-en-scène* seems to mirror character consciousness, the priest's question 'am I disturbing you?' seems almost absurd; he is not the disturber but the disturbed. As though intimidated by the mass of unnavigable space between them, defined by the asymmetrically framing doorways, the priest remains static. It is the older, weary Countess who reaches out to him, depositing the photograph of her dead son before she crosses the threshold, the photo a metonym for an event about which they are currently unable to communicate. *Mise-en-scène* here, with its distortions reflective of character uncertainty, seems to compensate for the priest's muteness.



Fig. 2.4 – 0.17.12
A disordered universe.

The mass of disorientating thresholds exposes the chateau as a place of failed communication. Beset by the obstacle of such unnavigable space, the priest's chances of successful articulation of his plans and attitudes are immediately restricted. Indeed, throughout the film, the priest never adequately expresses his point in the chateau. The diegetic soundtrack to the scenes in the chateau are more insistent than in much of the film. These sounds – of leaves being raked, dogs barking, animals crying – are the inarticulate noises of those without power, held in check by servitude or literal chains and cages. The chateau in part comes to represent hierarchy and the profound social limitation of the right to speak freely. As the priest enters the chateau for his first encounter with the Countess, the camera, in gazing upon the sleeping woman, momentarily privileges the viewpoint of the priest. However, as she wakes, this authority is lost, and the camera instead assumes her point of view. The close-up of the image of her dead child comes with disturbing emphasis in a scene consisting largely of longer shots. This close-up offers a view of the picture which the priest cannot share. The child remains the subject on which the priest will not speak, and instead they talk of the parish. Although the scene's central conversation, more than any other in the film, is structured around an extended sequence of shots and reverse-shots, the seeming

order and balance of the communication quickly breaks down. The shot/reverse-shot rhythm suggests perspectives returned to, but with each return the perspective has shifted somewhat. This repetition is evidence as much of inconsistency as consistency; the alternation marks both order and disorder, as both a model of classic continuity editing and a subtly shifting structure which is always already caught in its own process of decay. This formal not-quite-order articulates the characters' confusion. The Countess is disturbed emotionally, fixated on her dead son, and possibly suicidal. The priest is anxious and physically ill. The scene begins with the supine Countess in a state of collapse, and ends with the priest suffering an attack. It seems that this encounter's potential for communication is lost in the mass of disorder which Torcy has warned against.

The impossibility of communication suggested by the narrative arc of the scene is, through the *mise-en-scène* and the shot sequence, demonstrated by the film's form. The shot/reverse-shot rhythms become less consistent, as short takes are juxtaposed uncomfortably with longer takes, an indication of the priest's feared imbalance and disorder re-entering the scene. As the conversation strays onto the subject of his ministry and becomes adversarial, this rhythm becomes increasingly chaotic. The priest's collapse is heralded by the Countess's frantic cries of 'Monsieur le Curé?' This insistent repetition might be expected to corroborate his presence, his identity, and his authority, but its interrogative intonation serves only to question it. The priest remains unable to speak, and the chateau remains a place of aggressive suppression of his attempts to articulate his beliefs and opinions. The Countess even comments on this, saying that when she saw him approach she was sure that he had some purpose which she knew he would not discuss. Only on one

occasion does the priest succeed in speaking with authority in the chateau; on his next visit to the Countess he persuades her to cease blaming God for her son's death, and blesses her. Even on this occasion, his conversation is dangerously misconstrued and misreported, and the consequences are dire for him.

However, the priest has not abandoned his quest for understanding and control, and the diary intervenes in the scene to bring an alternative, retrospective order to events. As the priest enters the grounds, struggling with the gate, the diary announces in voiceover that this is a return visit. This acknowledgement of determined repetition counters the discomfort of the priest's difficulties with the gate. There is defiance and even authority in the articulation of his determination to *return* to the chateau, to continue his ministry there. Having been admitted by the servant, the priest hears a door indiscreetly closing. Within the scene, his head hangs and he fiddles with his hat uncomfortably. However, the reassuringly neutral tones of the diary say in voiceover: 'I was sure that I'd meet the Count.' The diary has an insistence, a clarity, and an optimism of expression entirely denied the priest in actual encounters with his parishioners. Indeed, even the admission 'But I met the Countess instead' suggests that he is able to discuss his intended plans and his worries about Chantal as easily with her as with the Count, that she is the Count's proxy. When the priest wakes her, the Countess's face is calm and the camera assumes her point of view, disempowering the priest. However, the diary reclaims his authority retrospectively with the assertion that he 'must have surprised her,' an insistent claim which is not supported by the visual evidence but which is offered as partial explanation for her aggressive interrogation of his ministry later in the scene.

The diary's retrospective powers of corroboration and explanation are most evident within the scene in two distinct moments. The first concerns the shot of the Countess's dead child. This view, which cannot be the priest's, coincides with the diary's statement that she was 'entirely absorbed in the memory of her dead child.' Although he says that he was aware of her obsession, he cannot have known that she was looking at the photograph at the time or that she was thinking of her child. The authoritative articulation in the diary of the Countess's fixation carries a certainty which could only stem from retrospection and remoteness; it is hard to imagine that he would have dared make so bold a statement in the present time of the scene, even if he drew the inference in the moment. The diary's past tense corroborates the unspoken inferences of the present tense scene. As the scene continues, the diary assumes an increasingly central role. No longer filling silences with corroborating or explanatory detail, the diary now interjects within dialogue. The catastrophe of the priest's physical attack, in which he suffers a collapse at the scene's conclusion, is accompanied by a typically calm and seemingly disinterested diary entry in the voiceover. The Countess's increasingly metaphysical words are drowned by the voiceover; her statement that we cannot understand what human life really is prompts the assertive articulations of the diary, in which the priest analyses his own physical and emotional reactions, as though in denial of the Countess's pessimistic claims. The experience of his illness is represented through the diary. It is also imitated; the way in which the attack of illness drowns out the Countess's words in the present moment of the scene, through dizziness and fatigue, is replicated by the voiceover. The diary is both past and present, retrospective and in the moment, serving as a 'tidier' and immediate version of the

chaotic and frightened interior monologue of the priest. The diary's text may be seen as a shadow text, calmly presenting an interior monologue which is unsayable across hostile spaces in the present of the narrative scene, but which becomes writable later. It is the priest's only opportunity to impose, retrospectively, the order which Torcy insists he must have. The diary, in this sense, is a retrospective signifier provided for a pre-existent, ineffable signified. Meaning is only given to events through this process of backward analysis, a process which provides a seal for the ruptures created by these silent and hostile spaces of inarticulacy.

The Diary's Order Challenged

From these scenes in the chateau, *Journal d'un curé de campagne* may be said to have a form which articulates on behalf of the priest at two levels. The first operates on the vertical visual axis of the mise-en-scène and the horizontal axis of shot sequence; while these are disordered, their disorder is consistent with the chaotic emotions of the young priest. The second exists in the form of the diary, presented as a voiceover, which brings a retrospective clarifying order to scenes. Both formal articulations seem to compensate for the priest's lack of eloquence, to speak on his behalf. If dual inarticulacy may be defined as a resonant asymmetry between inarticulate character and inarticulate form, which significantly compounds inarticulacy rather than dispelling or compensating for it, *Journal d'un curé de campagne* seems not to qualify.

However, the diary is not the utopian bringer of order which Torcy might have advocated. A careful account of the film's form insists on interrogating the notion of the diary as an instrument of retrospective order, offering the priest the opportunity, in privacy, to express his views and attitudes without fear of censure or disagreement. Throughout the film, there is a series of recurrent shots of the priest's hands writing the journal, made monumental in close-up (Fig. 2.5). These inserts are not typically made part of wider dramatic scenes, and exist in isolation. The awkwardness of the priest's hands in many dramatic scenes (anxiously fiddling with each other) is lost in these regular inserts of the writing process; the priest, through these enactments, appears to be taking a level of physical and intellectual control over events, albeit at a distance.

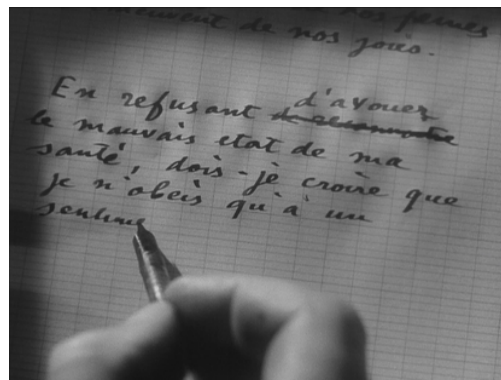


Fig. 2.5 – 0.04.01
The uncontextualised hand.

However, the effect of these inserted shots is not to confirm the priest's self-expressive ordering of events through his diary. On the contrary, the shots *splinter* the diary, opening up a set of local interstices which represent the film's most substantial inarticulate chains. Critically, there has often been an assumption that the diary is a text which may be understood as speaking for the priest; its whole, continuous like the neutral intonations of the voiceover, are used to help to bind together the parts of the priest's otherwise stuttered utterances. However, the

notion of *a* diary is reductive, and the text is in fact a combination of expressive units, playing out the disruptive local gaps between its parts with a proliferating inarticulacy.

The diary's two obvious forms – voiceover and legible close-ups of the written diaries – will be referred to as the *spoken diary* and the *written diary* respectively. Although the voiceovers occur more regularly, the presence of the shots of the priest's writing in the physical diaries is a startling visual component of the film. Most significantly, the tensions which exist between the spoken and written diaries accord with what James Quandt, offering defining elements of the director's films, describes as Bresson's 'cinema of paradox.'⁷ The model of an articulate diary designed to order the world retrospectively gives only a partial account of the film's complex presentation of the journal. The spoken diary and written diary are often presented simultaneously but to very different effect. The tonal neutrality, fluency, and completeness of the spoken diary operate in stark tension with the agitation, error and self-censorship of the written diary. The spoken diary emerges in a steady, unhurried flow while the written diary is replete with corrections and signs of frantic editing. The diary's two forms act in a kind of simultaneous repetition, a vertical chain, sharing material but at odds over how to present this material, an effect which is intensified as the priest's physical health and emotional well-being deteriorate.

James Quandt acknowledges a 'manifest, one might say obsessive repetition' in Bresson's style, but aligns this repetition with structures that are 'highly

⁷ Quandt (2011), 9.

symmetrical.’⁸ The diary’s combined elements, however, are not arranged symmetrically, and their asymmetry undermines their fluency. Successful articulation would require the smooth and cooperative movement of the utterance’s discrete parts; the priest’s diary is inarticulate, as its split delivery shows the joints and transitions in tension with each other, accentuating the failed attempt to order the continuous world. Far from being a clear, articulate reordering of the priest’s past, the diary is, in fact, an absence of clear significance. Susan Sontag is inaccurate when she suggests, in her essay on ‘The Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson,’ that the film’s recurring formal pattern is of ‘a notebook and a hand writing in it, followed by a voice on the soundtrack reading what has been written.’⁹ The voice does not simply read what has been written, and the spoken diary’s authority is not so straightforwardly parasitic on its pre-existent textual equivalent. In the film’s first depictions of the written diary, it is presented as a rigorously edited document, a kind of palimpsest in which words and sentences are crossed through and replaced, or eclipsed by the chaos of a sheet of blotting paper which, rendered appropriately uncanny in M.C. Zenner’s terms, is ‘as unreadable as the glyphics of an unknown world, contiguous with our own yet filled in a timeless slot, a pocket of invisibility’ (Figs. 2.6, 2.7).¹⁰ The spoken diary gives no suggestion of the written diary’s crossings out; the writing hand’s struggle for the *mot juste* and the resultant self-censorship are simply omitted in the balanced delivery of the voiceover. Both strands of the diary are articulating, but what they

⁸ Quandt (2011), 10-11.

⁹ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 194.

¹⁰ M.C. Zenner, ‘Bresson: Destinies Making Themselves in a Work of Hands: Part 2,’ *Senses of Cinema* 1 (January 2000): 16, accessed December 12, 2012, <http://sensesofcinema.com/1999/1/bresson-5/>

express is at odds: the struggles evident in the written diary's revisions are removed from the balanced poise of the spoken diary's calming voice.



Fig. 2.6 – 0.02.11
Blotted confusion.

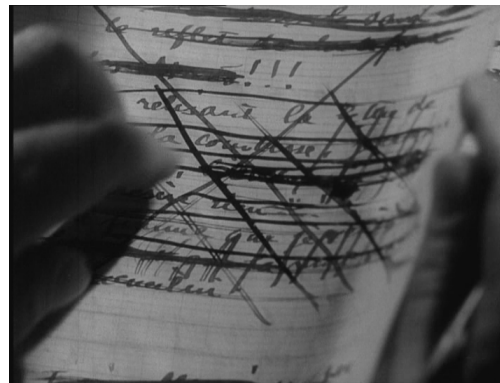


Fig. 2.7 – 1.04.50
Unspeakable crossings-out.

This confusion between the written and spoken manifestations of the diary may seem at first to be operating in the same way as the *mise-en-scène* and shot sequencing in the chateau scenes: as a confusing set of ordered disorder, designed to reflect the priest's confusion. However, far from diminishing the effect of the diary, the seemingly coherent project of the *mise-en-scène* and montage become a further complicating realisation of it. The argument that the events which are written and spoken about in the journal are drawn transparently from the action of the dramatic scenes is unconvincing. In fact, to the contrary, the structure and emphasis of the dramatic scenes are often dictated by the diary functioning

retroactively. Dudley Andrew describes the diary as ‘pulsing... beneath every image,’ the ‘heart of the film, circulating the images like blood.’¹¹ This analysis suggests the way in which no scene within the film is free from, or dominant over, the text of the diary. Andrew goes on to consider the ‘trebling [of] the signifiers of meditation,’ arguing that ‘what is represented is a reflection upon an event, not the event itself... [It is] a daring layering of all three modes of reflection [the spoken, the written, the performed] in a single moment.’¹² This account leads to the conclusion that the film is not merely *about* the diary of a country priest; rather, as the title suggests, the film *is* the diary of a country priest. Like the novel on which it is based, the film text consists entirely of the diary; the dramatic scenes which comprise most of the film may, therefore, be seen as a *performed diary*, an imaginative recreation of events. Unlike the novel, the film offers multiple accounts of the same diary (the heard, the read, the watched), a tripartite structure which allows Bresson to explore the tensions between the divergent parts of a multifaceted inarticulacy. Although he omits to discuss the additional contribution of the written diary, Nick Browne is right to argue that ‘disjunction, independence, interrogation, and even negation of the image, by the sense of the text [of the voiceover]’ is common in the film.¹³

This shaping of dramatic scenes by the rhythms and connections evident in the diary may be seen operating explicitly in the short sequence in which the priest receives a warning letter and some time afterwards discovers that it has been written by Louise. In the first scene of the sequence, the priest opens the letter, the

¹¹ Dudley Andrew, *Film in the Aura of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 121.

¹² Andrew, 122.

¹³ Nick Browne, ‘Film Form / Voice-Over: Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest*,’ in *Robert Bresson: Revised*, ed. James Quant (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival, 2011), 279-80.

action accompanied by the spoken diary's comment that 'this morning I received a letter written on cheap paper, unsigned.' The letter itself is read: 'a well-wisher advises you to seek a transfer to another parish. The sooner the better. You have my sympathy, but I repeat, get out of here!' The scene ends as the priest moves out of the frame and the image fades. The image dissolves into a new scene, accompanied by the calmly uttered words 'I made a strange discovery.' In the succeeding scene, the priest discovers Louise's prayer book which contains handwriting identical to the anonymous note, proof of her guilt. (The handwriting sample compared with the note consists of a biblical quotation, '[y]ou are the truth that does not deceive and cannot be deceived,' whose irony, given Louise's underhanded letter, is apparent.) This sequence, as it is dramatically presented, is structured around a retrospective consideration of the events. There is nothing to suggest that the scenes of the letter-opening and the discovery during mass are temporally linked; some time, and perhaps considerable time, must elapse between them. The link, as it is not based on chronological contiguity, must seemingly be either arbitrary or associative; as both scenes concern the letter, they may be said to be associative.

It is the diary's network of associations which propels the film onto a scene in which the discovery is made of the priest's correspondent. Only the spoken diary constructs a bridge between the letter-opening and the following scene in the church. Within the church, the identity of the prayer book owner is anticipated by the sound of footsteps but delayed until the priest is able to see the person advancing. The camera does not assume an objective position, but echoes the priest's subjective and interpretative one, revealing his concerns and acquired

knowledge. The clear anxiety on the priest's face, the suggestion of obsession through the ellipses of other scenes and characters, the sense of chaos implied by the ruptured prayer book abandoned on the floor whose contents are spilling out, and the tension created by the approaching footsteps all communicate a sense of fear engendered by the anonymous letter. However, the spoken diary – despite ostensibly being in the priest's voice – remains tonally neutral and simply avoids articulating the shock of the discovery itself; its detachment, perhaps perversely, suggests a lesser level of subjectivity than the performed diary's observations. The two diary forms (the spoken diary and the performed diary) operate in stark contrast with each other. And although the written diary is absent from this sequence, the heavily emphasised presence of other written texts (the letter and the prayer book which share both close-ups and long takes, notably as the still-anonymous Louise approaches) suggest that it has been eclipsed by images of other, more dramatically significant writing. The three forms of the diary, then, simultaneously suggest anxiety, *sangfroid*, and suppression, each expressive but, as a whole, a confusion of inarticulate joints. Bresson's cinematographic style may have a simplicity and even austerity (leading to Fredric Jameson's assertion that Bresson's films are a 'starving' of the eyes) but in conjunction with the competing and contradictory spoken and written forms of the diary, the dramatic scenes suggest surfeit more than starvation.¹⁴ The whole is a highly complex, self-contradictory sum of its parts.

The spoken, written, and performed diaries are never straight reiterations of one another. Tony Pipolo overlooks this central tension when he writes that

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 98.

... the spoken text is synonymous with the written text. Furthermore the action we witness is a virtual enactment of the words we hear and see, suggesting that the elaborated filmic text is, technically speaking, the equivalent of the spoken and written texts. [They anchor] everything within a specific consciousness.¹⁵

René Prédal argues the contrary when he notes that Bresson believes that 'one must never duplicate an image with a sound.'¹⁶ He discusses the insight further by arguing that image and sound are used by Bresson to present *different* events; in '*Au hasard Balthazar* the first car accident is seen, the second... only... heard.'¹⁷ The point, though, is as helpful in considering those moments when sound and image operate simultaneously and not alternatively; the spoken diary never duplicates the written diary which never duplicates the performed diary. They are simultaneous variations on the same narrative subject. Given this sublime over-expression, it is reductive to talk, as Pipolo does, of a specific consciousness, or even a specific character, to account for the inarticulacies of the diary. The priest's muteness is quiet and still, and the diary's paradoxes are not articulations of equivalent divergences in his personality. This inarticulacy, proliferating paradoxically as its parts combine fluency and disjuncture, exceeds the specific stumbling inarticulacy of the priest. While there is an undeniable resonance between the priest and the film's form, the sum of the diary's excesses is more than the lacking priest. Far from bringing the order and control which Torcy has insisted is essential, the diary's retrospective writing loses control through surfeit.

¹⁵ Tony Pipolo, *A Passion for Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 80.

¹⁶ Prédal, 100.

¹⁷ Prédal, 100.

This surfeit is seen operating as the priest arrives at Torcy for advice from his mentor, a sequence in which the possibility of grounding the priest's character in the inarticulacies of the diary is interrogated. The spoken diary comments that he is 'still distraught.' This admission appears to be a significant articulation of an emotional presence. However, the statement's clarity is undermined by the typically neutral delivery of the voiceover, whose detached tone does not match the extremity of the language. This tension is further complicated by the conflicting significations of the performed diary. The priest's arrival on his bicycle is linked to the previous scene (the traumatic encounter with Fabregars) by a dissolve. As a result of the slow dissolve, the solid verticals of the church and rectory in Torcy mix with the fading verticals of the sacristy's railings (Fig. 2.8). This mass of lines gives the psychogeographic suggestion of prison bars, a landscape of entrapment. The dissolve's momentary nightmare fades, and with it the heightened emotion which it has offered; the priest is now distant in the long shot, and there is no suggestion of his being 'distraught.' Not only is there tension between the diary's forms, but within both the spoken and performed diaries there is confusion and contradiction. As the diary's signification is splintered (spoken diary's lexis – spoken diary's tone – performed diary's image – performed diary's transitions), its apparently straightforward articulation of the priest's emotional state ('still distraught') is also splintered. The sequence resonates with the film's established oscillation between the terseness of its character's inarticulacy and the excess of its form's inarticulacy.



Fig. 2.8 – 0.05.56
Ensnaring recollections.

Perhaps the film's most startlingly metatextual highlighting of the diary's multiplicity occurs when the priest destroys his written diary. Having been accused by the Count of damaging the parish through his undefined but malign 'habits,' the priest says, in the spoken diary:

Though I thought I must destroy these pages, written in a moment of true delirium, yet I would bear witness against my own self that my difficult ordeal, the greatest disappointment of my poor life, for I couldn't imagine worse, found me lacking in both resignation and courage, and with a desire to...

As the voiceover articulates the words, the priest's hands tear through the pages of the heavily effaced written diary (Fig. 2.9). It is apparent that the diary's articulations are dangerous, even capable of bearing witness against the text and its writer. The spoken diary suggests that the destruction of the written diary is speculative only (*'though I thought I must...'*). However, the performed diary (intruding on the usually calm shots of the written diary's composition) clearly shows an actual destruction. The spoken diary's syntax is tortuous and difficult to follow, especially without the support of written text or supporting images. The multiple and meaninglessly repetitive subordinate clauses make the sentence disordered and difficult to navigate (*'difficult ordeal,' 'greatest disappointment,'*

‘poor life,’ ‘couldn’t imagine worse’). They also postpone a climactic infinitive, which is never supplied: ‘with a desire to...’ The straightforwardly expressive destruction of the pages of the written diary suggests a violence which is entirely unreflected in the spoken diary, whose words continue to form calmly. It would be overly simplistic to say that they represent not the spoken diary but the priest’s thought; he refers to ‘these pages,’ suggesting quite overtly that the words of the voiceover are part of the same text as the written diary. The diary-writing process is the writing of the unwritable (never reaching its climax), and the physically effaced text is uttered through an austere and unnervingly calm voiceover which does not comment on the violence of the sight of the torn pages. Although the priest feels the necessity of expressing his deficiencies (‘lacking in both resignation and courage’), he also declares his commitment to honesty (‘bear witness’). The different strands of the diary, however, do not permit any utopian and univocal truth-telling; they do not merely compete with each other, they deny each other.

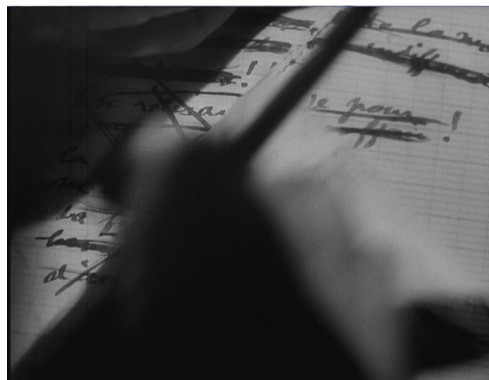


Fig. 2.9 – 1.04.53
Dangerous articulations.

The Diary's Withdrawal from Time and Place

The diary's strategy of simultaneously layering together paradoxical elements allows a re-mapping of both the time and spaces of the narrative, a technique which draws attention to the form's local interstices and further confuses the relation between form and character. Torcy's advice to the priest that he should introduce order, advice which prompts and explains the diary-writing, uses the metaphor of day and night, echoing the description of creation in *Genesis*. Torcy speaks in linear terms, night following day and disorder following order in his model. The diary's splintered form disrupts this linear scheme; instead, night and (recollected, reconceived) day coexist simultaneously, as do order and disorder. The diary operates not as the ordering of time, place, and event, but the collapse of such order. The diary is written in unspecified times of withdrawal from the world. The film, when showing the diary-writing process, typically shows the priest only as a synecdochic hand and metonymic pen; to include full shots of the priest would be to place the event of writing within a narrative moment. (While this does happen on a few occasions, it is always to show the priest's uneasy reintroduction to narrative time, as when the Count's shooting disturbs the priest's writing and initiates the scene of the Count's visit in which the gift of a rabbit becomes a struggle for power and the priest's resistance is driven back into the safety of the spoken diary.) The film's repeated shots of the priest's staring wistfully into a distance which is not shown in a reverse-shot (attributed by Pipolo to the priest's

doubt-troubled searching for God) provide a visual equivalent for the diary's lack of audience, the sense that it is written for no one.¹⁸

The film's narrative structure contributes to the atemporal nature of the diary. The film's *syuzhet* (which is mediated through the diary) is a radical complication of the *fabula*. The film abounds with the devices regularly associated with Bresson's work, each of which destabilises the narrative's claims to chronological form: ellipses, elisions, transitions, *hysteron proteron*, and an unnavigable series of analepses and prolepses. Nick Browne argues that the 'diary form calls of course for all events to be in the past.'¹⁹ The priest's diary, in fact, resists such clear chronological readings. At moments the diary predicts or pre-emptes scenes. Shortly after the encounter in the sacristy with Fabregars, the priest visits the chateau for the first time, and meets the Count. The scene is prefaced with a shot of the written diary, its words shared by the spoken diary (the latter, though, giving no suggestion of the former's crossings out and other revisions). Unlike many other diary entries, this entry is not retrospective: 'this visit to the chateau has me quite worried.' The futurity implicit in the diary questions the function of this diary entry, as it is not providing a retrospective order. Its existence becomes clearer when its subject matter is considered; the entry concerns the priest's future plans for the parish, which are seen to depend on making a good impression with the Count. At this moment, a rarity in the film, the diary entry is sanguine: 'a good first impression could spell success for my plans for a youth club and sports programme. The Count's influence and wealth could help me to achieve them.' The relative optimism of this

¹⁸ See Pipolo (2010), 84-5.

¹⁹ Browne, 280.

speculative entry is undermined by the performed diary's image of the priest (already established as weak) awkwardly opening the enormous chateau gates, an image which coincides with the final lines of the spoken entry. The priest is seen walking away from the camera; he is now on the other side of the bars and filmed by a stationary camera. He is like an animal entering a trap. The diary has a deliriously complicated tense. The written diary has corrections (the word 'patronage' crossed through and rewritten) suggesting revision, though whether those revisions occur before or after the events speculated on is indeterminable. The spoken diary at times has an optimistic speculative futurity. The performed diary, which follows the introduction by the spoken and written diaries, has both a present tense immediacy and communicates a proleptically ironic suggestion of inevitable failure, this inevitability implying hindsight.

Even when the diary is clearly retrospective, it is temporally highly complex. The diary is never merely retrospective but retroactive, restoring the past to the present in order to reshape it. Events are reshaped according to patterns and insights which come only with hindsight. Indeed, the performed diary depicts events (especially concerning Chantal) which cannot be known about at the time. As the priest walks towards the chateau for the first time, he is observed by Chantal. Later, when he is counselling the Countess, Chantal eavesdrops at the window. On both occasions, the girl's presence is reported through the performed diary, despite the priest's ignorance of that presence. It is impossible for him to know that he is overseen or overheard by the unseen, unheard Chantal. Her presence is either inferred from later knowledge or imagined. Either way, her presence in the performed diary at these moments marks the articulation of an impossible knowledge, retroactively

locating Chantal within the scene. Nick Browne is insightful when he speaks of how the spoken diary operates by 'neutralising to some extent the convention of the past tense and establishing a hierarchy of presence,' in which the past is restored to the present through retroactive recall, and this present moment is privileged.²⁰ However, his view does not go far enough. By maintaining (though complicating) the dichotomy of past/present, he ignores the film's assault on this simplistic divide; the diary will not entertain such easy definition of its tense. Further, the notion of hierarchy is ultimately unhelpful; his discussion of the 'authority... of the voice-over' overlooks the performed diary's regularly superior knowledge.²¹ The diary articulates the past (and future) as present, reanimating previous events (and anticipating events to come) in an attempt to understand (or avoid) the complexities of the present moment.

This complicated structure further suggests that the diary's function is not straightforwardly reducible to a character's attempt to locate meaningful order in the events of which he is a part. The performed diary (which is most of the film) is simultaneously immediate (a kind of visual present tense) and reshaped in hindsight. For fleeting moments, the diaries seem to succeed in introducing solid, ordered presence: the physical objects of the written diaries themselves, the power of the spoken diary to form a barrier to dialogue, and the performed diary's transitions which assertively interrupt and link scenes. However, the diary's re-evaluations, representations, and forecasts are embedded in such an inexplicably contradictory structure that a coherent character for the priest cannot explain the confusion. This is manifest in the profusion and confusion of competing other

²⁰ Browne, 283.

²¹ Browne, 283.

voices in his diary: the gossip of the parishioners, the unhelpful words of advice from Torcy, the statements from doctors concerning the illness inherited from his mother, the church litanies, the mockery of children, the accusations of Fabregars and Chantal. The words of others, typically uttered with univocal directness within the performed diary, become more monolithically present than the priest's own interpretations, which are confused through the polysemic utterances of his multi-form journal. If, as Torcy's spatial metaphors suggest, clear expression may be seen as forward movement across communicative thresholds, then the diary's inarticulacy is shown as cyclical and repetitive, tenselessly revolving around the painful, contingent centres of other people's words.

The priest is lost in this cacophony and, with him, the organising consciousness which at first seems to bind the film together. This loss of an articulated character is compounded by the film's use of dissolves and repeated images. Dissolves, the most common transition between scenes in the film, are thresholds (using Torcy's spatial metaphor) which confusingly 'elongate contiguous episodes and... condense widely separated ones.'²² The film's scenes are typically short, the fades or dissolves which bookend them disrupting both space (through the dissolution and unexpected juxtapositions of places) and time. These transitions' ellipses subvert notions of linear time or contiguous space, both ideas complicated through the fragmented structure of the diary.

²² P. Adams Sitney, 'The Rhetoric of Robert Bresson: from *Journal d'un curé de campagne* to *Une femme douce*,' in *Robert Bresson: Revised*, edited by James Quant (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival, 2011), 137.

In what Prédal describes as an avoidance of ‘homogenous duration’ and use of an ‘elliptical... geographical vision of the places’ a space of uncertainty is established and, working as a model of dual inarticulacy, significance in the film resonates between it and the character inarticulacy of the priest.²³ This significant uncertainty unsettles the narrative’s most invoked ordering principle: the inexorable working of destiny. The diary, a proliferating and paradoxical formal structure, is an intervention in the priest’s struggle with a fatalism which threatens to crush him. The film’s complex reiterations and reorderings resist the traditional structures of (film) narratives, especially tragedies. Many critics, following Susan Sontag, have argued that, in Bresson’s cinema, ‘[n]othing happens by chance; there are no alternatives, no fantasy; everything is inexorable.’²⁴ This sense of inexorability (both narrative and spiritual) in what Sontag sees as Bresson’s ‘strongly linear’ film finds explicit expression in the articulation (permitted by the spoken diary) of what he perceives to be his own fate: ‘by some premonition I can’t explain, I understood that God didn’t want me to die without knowing something of this risk [which comes with youth]. Just enough for my sacrifice to be complete when its time came.’²⁵ If the ending *is* inexorable, the priest’s sacrifice driven by a preordained fate, then the priest is in a significant sense dead before the already-written narrative of the film even begins. Against this interpretation, though, the splintered confusion of the diary implies a kind of freedom, its multiple forms articulating contrary to one another and exposing time, even past time, as non-linear, repeatable, rewritable – what Prédal describes as a ‘syncopated rhythm’ and ‘not a

²³ Prédal, 105.

²⁴ Sontag, 194.

²⁵ Sontag, 183.

fatal chain of events as in ancient tragedy.’²⁶ The very lack of foundation which comes with the disturbance of the solid underpinnings of linear time and navigable place resists the oppressive trajectory of fate.

The Diary as Consolation

In its paradoxical challenge to the workings of fate, the film’s dual inarticulacy implicitly questions the operation of a number of theological Master Signifiers. Bazin argues that the film ‘offers us a new dramatic form, that is specifically religious...’ and presents ‘the life of the spirit.’²⁷ However – like *fate* – *spirit*, *salvation*, *prayer*, *absolution*, and *God* cannot find clear definition in the dually inarticulate oscillations of the film. The priest’s flawed self-expression in conversation and writing is matched by the lack that is at the core of his attempts to pray, attempts which always end in failure. The film depicts the priest’s transition from unsuccessful prayer to unsuccessful diary-writing – a shift across a threshold of obscure meaning – through dissolves, visually linking these two instances of character inarticulacy (Fig. 2.10). This lack – in unstable relation with the forms used to present it – sets up an indeterminate set of meanings which the film does not allow to be prescribed. The film’s final shot, the shadow of an empty cross, delicately links this oscillation to the paradox of Christian iconography (Fig. 2.11). This iconography privileges a symbolic narrative that depends on images which communicate an undefined sense of omnipresence through emptiness (the uninhabited cross and the abandoned tomb signifying resurrection). (This final

²⁶ Prédal, 81.

²⁷ Bazin (1967), 136.

signifier in the film is also suspended in an additional layer of significance, as it echoes the village's cruciform sign from the opening scene (Fig. 2.12); the ending harks back to the beginning only in order to gesture towards their inarticulate state of difference: contrasting signs of the secular and religious, of the diegetic and extra-diegetic, of prosaic life and symbolic death.)

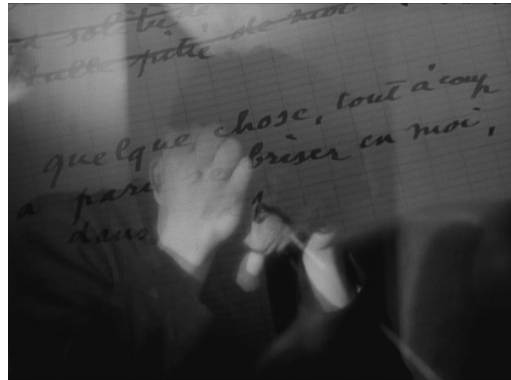


Fig. 2.10 – 0.29.10
Inarticulate oscillations.

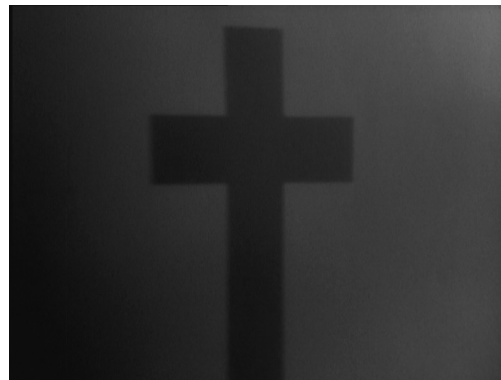


Fig. 2.11 – 1.49.04
A surfeit of significance.



Fig. 2.12 – 0.02.27
Sign as contrasting echo.

Keith Reader argues that the priest's inarticulacy arises from the 'silence of [his] God.'²⁸ Tony Pipolo, developing this point, comments on God's presentation as a persistently absent presence in the film:

The most powerful "exchanges" are not between the priest and another character but between the priest and his unseen God – the very essence of the critical act of faith central to the film. Technically, they are not exchanges at all in that they lack the counter-shot, indeed *must* lack it since no object can adequately embody this other. The very force of the priest's faith as he stares into off-screen space charges that absence with the traces of an internal dialogue. The look's effect is so strong that we feel and expect a counter-shot that never comes.²⁹

This optimistic account does not, however, take full account of the film's more subtle presentation of the priest's experience of God's silence. The absence is not charged by the force of the priest's faith but with the force of the absence. God should provide, in the logocentric universe of the priest's world, the structure against which the priest himself is defined. Without a clear Other against which to define the limits of his own personality, the priest also remains a structural absence, a paradox which resists resolution and which, ultimately, erodes itself (literally through the cancer and figuratively through his own inarticulacy). Faith fails to offer the temporal underpinnings of past (tradition), present (ministry), or future (salvation). Without these underpinnings, the priest's experience becomes uncertain. The tradition which might have supported him, does not: the catechism is mocked by children, the church's treasures are derided by Fabregars, and the nature of sin is confused by Torcy after Doctor Delbende's suicide. The ministry which should sustain him, does not: his plans for improvement are vetoed by the

²⁸ Reader, 372.

²⁹ Tony Pipolo, 'Au hazard, Balthazar: The Body in the Soul', in *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema*, ed. Ted Perry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 257.

Count, he is ignored by Séraphita's mother and other parishioners, and his services are regularly attended by Louise alone. The salvation which he should expect with confidence, he does not: the expressions of his fear at his imminent death after his diagnosis with cancer are amongst the film's most moving scenes. The clear order (teleological and authoritative) which faith would provide is replaced by the disordered surfeit and inexact reiterations of the diary, both alarming and comforting, both a confusion and a liberation.

This freedom from monolithic articulation – offered by the film's dual inarticulacy, in which the formal inarticulacy is not uncomplicatedly motivated by the priest's inarticulacy – has defied those critics who have sought to isolate the film's meaning in a single, univocal aspect. Nick Browne argues that the spoken diary provides 'a centre of "consciousness," and the mode of transcription of cinematic point of view.'³⁰ In its distinctly contrary relationship to its written and performed counterparts, the spoken diary does not offer so clear an access to the priest's consciousness. Tony Pipolo, instead, locates the meaningful centre of the film within the performed diary, in images of the priest's face. His theory that the 'face is the centre of the film' and that it gives an insight into the 'interior life of the character' is overly optimistic.³¹ The scene depicting the priest's visit to Torcy opens with a shot of the priest approaching the rectory door. As he does so, the camera moves towards him, stealthily, as though to observe surreptitiously the distress mentioned in the spoken diary. The viewpoint here is not the priest's, and the camera's surreptitious motion, low to the ground and slightly obscured behind low shrubbery, suggests an uncrossable distance between the camera and the priest.

³⁰ Browne, 279.

³¹ Pipolo (2010), 71.

His statements are likewise held off from full understanding. As the camera resolves its movement, the priest is a still-removed figure, anonymised by his black cape and hat, semi-obsured by a hedge, and lost in a dissolve. His face remains unclear. This moving shot is, in a sense, completed at the scene's conclusion, now within Torcy's house. The final shot of the scene slowly and slightly moves in on the priest's face. As the scene ends, the camera reveals the affect of the priest's expression in the detail of a close-up. The face, framed by the window behind, is clearly visible after its earlier omission as he stands on the threshold of the rectory. However, the expression remains inscrutable, and the priest's response to Torcy (gratitude, or shame, or determination, or resentment) remains undecided. Like the voice, the face is a threshold over which the camera will not and cannot pass.

Ultimately, the spoken diary, the performed diary, and the written diary (which is last seen dropped to the floor by the dying priest) cannot tolerate the burden of symbolic responsibility loaded onto them by Browne and Pipolo. In the absence of God for the priest, there is no grounding, originary centre for his expression. The articulations of the diary, as opposed to the univocal dreams of logocentric religious expression (which depend upon the notion of a singular Word of God), employ multiple parts. The diary, seen as a mosaic whole – and not reduced to the voice *or* the face *or* the pen – is the inarticulate expression of the reality that the priest does *not* have a clear centre of consciousness. One of the film's central plotlines, concerning the priest's illness, presents this search for a centrally grounded identity implicitly. Andrew Klevan persuasively reads the priest's consuming cancer as a suggestion that his 'self-conscious worry has eaten him

up.³² From the film's opening, the priest's most pressing worry has concerned his role as priest. Stomach cancer, the symbolic corruption of the priest's centre, is the symptom of a metaphysical loss of faith and identity. The Count, Torcy, Doctor Delbende, Chantal, and the parishioners all insist on defining the priest in terms which contribute to this feeling of inadequacy.

Despite his constitutive absences, the violent oscillations between lack (of expressible faith for the priest) and surfeit (of narrative strands) does not result in a nihilistic abyss in which the priest is wholly lost. Instead, the film's indeterminacies of both character and levels of narrative are plaited in delicately complex networks of interconnections which allow significant uncertainty. While it would risk being reductive to say simply that the fractured form either *explains* or *reflects* the fractured identity of the priest, it may be truer to argue that the 'inexpressiveness of face' (along with the tonal neutrality of voice and the fleeting and partial glimpses of the written diary) gesture towards 'the part of the individual that is never revealed.'³³ The priest's inner life, the articulation of his thoughts and beliefs, remains on the far side of uncrossable thresholds set up by the multidirectional diary. Susan Sontag argues that this is the purpose of the film: to reveal that 'all identification with characters, deeply conceived, is an impertinence – an affront to the mystery of human action and the human heart.'³⁴ As the priest, apparently gripped by pain and mortified by what he takes to be the Countess's criticisms on his second visit to the chateau, looks up towards her, his face is a portrait of saintly suffering (Fig. 2.13). The wonder of Claude Laydu's performance is that his face and voice

³² Klevan, 83.

³³ Prédal, 82.

³⁴ Sontag, 181.

combine to create a sense of serene character without reducing it to a simplistic, stark account of a transparent emotion. The face is simultaneously agonised (the laboured blinking, the sweat-pricked forehead), optimistic (the up-turned head, the radiant skin), imploring (the pleading look) and evasive (the wandering eyes). The mouth could as easily become a smile as a grimace. This image of the priest's face coincides with his use of the word '*rien*' to describe what is wrong with him, translated in the English subtitles as *nothing* but, in French, containing also the possibility of *anything*.



Fig. 2.13 – 0.18.39
Rien.

This gesture towards the importance of anythingness in the film recalls Gilles Deleuze's commentary on Bresson as one of his principal examples of a director who creates any-space-whatevers. Such a space is

... a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible. What in fact manifests the instability, the heterogeneity, the absence of link of such a space, is a richness in potentials or singularities which are, as it were, prior conditions of all actualisation, all determination.³⁵

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London: Continuum, 2005), 113.

Deleuze champions the crucial role of fragmentation as ‘the law of this space,’ and his comment that this is a ‘reality which is closed each time, but to infinity’ seems to place his analysis in sympathy with the model of dual inarticulacy.³⁶ Meaning remains ‘closed,’ but only by the remotest conceivable parameter. The film’s centrifugal thresholds, distorted mise-en-scène, and shifting perspectives transform physical place into ill-fitting parts. The diary, too, becomes a conceptual space of fragments which will not allow themselves to be assembled definitively. However, Deleuze’s ‘fragmented spaces’ are also ‘transformed through rhythmic continuity shots which correspond to the affect’ of the protagonist.³⁷ In *Journal d’un curé de campagne*, the affect of the priest perversely cannot correspond with the fragmented form of his diary (despite his apparent authorship) as his affect is too uncircumscribed to draw any correspondence, marked only by a lack, while his diary is inconsistent even with itself. While the priest’s disorientated consciousness resonates significantly with the form of the film, it can be neither articulated nor denied by the multivalent strands of the many-jointed diary.

³⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 112.

³⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 112.

Chapter 3

Articulation in Ruins: Discontinuous Style in *Germania anno zero*

At Point Zero: Mise-en-Scène and the Ruins of Meaning

Journal d'un curé de campagne reveals ways in which dual inarticulacy may operate in a film which initially seems to employ its formal devices to articulate on behalf of an inarticulate character. Roberto Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* – like Bresson's film – uses the disturbed spaces of its mise-en-scène to interrupt smooth communication at the same time that the film's structure sets up a parallel set of disjunctures. Like Bresson's film, much of the criticism around *Germania anno zero* has concentrated on seeking to explicate the central character – the child Edmund – rather than considering the resonant logics according to which the character and formal inarticulacies function. Inspired by the director's trip to Germany in March 1947, Rossellini's film documents the devastation of Berlin and its people after the fall of the Third Reich. In the film's story, life – made up of exhausting work parties, an endless struggle to find food, the hopeless endurance of illness and hunger – is shown as static and repetitive. The narrative is one of frustrated opportunity and restricted space.

Edmund lives in a small apartment with his father, sister, and brother, along with a number of other families. Edmund's father is on the verge of starvation. His brother, Karl-Heinz, has been a Nazi sympathiser and is now scared to report to the police for fear of arrest; without reporting to them he is unable to acquire an

identity card, essential in order to obtain work and food rations. The atmosphere in the apartment is conditioned by the presence of these weak figures, emasculated respectively by physical sickness and unemployment. The father rarely gets up, and Karl-Heinz is seen rather histrionically throwing himself down on his bed, these supine positions indicative of frustration and inertia; the household's masculine impotence is keenly felt, in stark contrast to the prolonged historical moment in which masculine violence and power were so emphatically fetishized under the Nazis. Inspired in some way by this decline, Edmund ultimately kills his father and then himself.

It is this impotence – marked by indecision and inarticulacy – which defines the year zero of the film's title. Year zero stands as a non-point, caught in a moment between the ideological dogma of the years under Nazi rule and the as-yet uncertain political era to come. This moment is predominantly silent, a quiet interrupted only by characters' frustrated outbursts or their parroting of often clichéd statements from the past, spoken without conviction in place of spontaneous and sincere utterance. The film presents communication as a desperate and insincere stringing-together of outmoded sentiments, thrown out into the spaces of a present which is without conviction, a cacophony of indecipherable insincerities. The Catholicism of Edmund's father, the Nazi attitudes of his former teacher, the pragmatism of his brother and sister: each of these attitudes is recited with an air of weary indifference, confused and imprecise. In this moment of political indeterminacy, Edmund's killing of his father seems to represent the attempt to realise some sort of ideological position. Year zero is defined by the

inarticulate stuttering of unmeant expressions, uttered in a moment after and before the possibility of full articulation.

As a correlative for the breakdown of year zero's intellectual landscape, the film is set within a *mise-en-scène* of ruins, an urban landscape of austere piles of rubble and the overcrowded shells of houses (Fig. 3.1). This post-war landscape was one to which Rossellini returned; Giuliana Muscio, commenting on *Paisà* (1946), writes that 'the film depicts familiar places in un-familiar ways, with a common, recurring element: ruins.'¹ These ruins are photographed with a documentary detachment; the voiceover which begins the film claims that the film's study of Berlin's collapse is an 'objective assessment.' In his writing on neorealism, Gilles Deleuze discusses the key importance of setting and the means of recording it. Film becomes the "'inventory" of a setting.'² Deleuze argues that, unlike films which interest themselves in sensory-motor situations, neorealism presents action which 'floats in the situation, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it,' linked by a 'dreamlike connection through the intermediary of the liberated sense organs.'³ These ruins, as well as being an evocative subject for contemporary documentary, provide a setting in which the film's action floats, the ruins the focus of the characters' returning gazes, optical elements which subordinate movement. He goes on to argue that:

In every day banality, the action-image and even the movement-image tend to disappear in favour of pure optical situations, but these revealed connections of the new type, which are no longer sensory-

¹ Giuliana Muscio, 'Paisà/Paisan,' In *The Cinema of Italy*, ed. Giorgio Bertellini (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 38.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: Continuum, 2005), 4.

³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 4; sensory-motor cinema is explored in Deleuze's first book on *Cinema* and is concerned with the movement-image.

motor and which bring the emancipated senses into direct relation with time and thought.⁴



Fig. 3.1 – 0.04.06
A ruined mise-en-scène.

The ruins in Rossellini's films make visible the temporal and intellectual betweenness of year zero. Berlin is now both potentially dynamic and static: the piled bricks are both promise of a new city that will rise and evidence of hopeless devastation, an even more traumatic threshold than those in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*.

This sense of disorder is developed in the interstices which open up in what Peter Brunette describes as 'the violent, undisguised clash, much more overt than that of *Open City*, between the film's real exteriors (shot in Germany) and its artificial interiors (shot in studios in Rome).'⁵ The film's mise-en-scène, both the pre-existent locations and fabricated interiors, is one of decay, surfaces marked with cracks and unsettling gaps, through one of which Edmund will ultimately jump to his death (Fig. 3.2). These cracks in the material world of the film are a shadow of the formal cracks between exterior and interior, real and artificial, a 'violent, undisguised clash' which the film will not allow to be sealed or sutured. The film's disjointed

⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 17.

⁵ Peter Brunette, 'Rossellini and Cinematic Realism,' *Cinema Journal* 25, no.1 (Autumn 1985): 39.

movement between settings is a tense articulation of non-continuous design elements, held together only by a narrative which ‘floats in the space.’⁶



Fig. 3.2 – 1.11.13
Unsettling gaps.

The mise-en-scène, then, represents a disjointed articulation, and the film suggests that a clearly and expressively articulate landscape has broken down and, with it, expressive communication. City space is no longer an index of ideology. Just six years after *Germania anno zero*, Ivan Chitchevlov wrote that ‘architecture is the simplest means of articulating time and space, of modulating reality, of engineering dreams.’⁷ The film’s documentation of urban space is a record of collapsed values. While the ruins are expressive, they ultimately express only ruination, one of a series of signs in the film which do signify, often emphatically, but only offer meanings approximate with their own inadequacy. Rather than a coherent syntax of linearly arranged signs, the film establishes a string of disconnected signs – objects, gestures, figures. This syntactic and semantic ruination becomes oppressive, the presence of each sign in need of a supplement to complete it, the trace of ‘its “incomplete” opposite’ required to give it any meaning.⁸ The ruined buildings are the site of the ruination of their absent opposites (the complete

⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 4.

⁷ Quoted in Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 69.

⁸ Brunette, 36.

buildings, institutions, and individuals destroyed by the war and the film). Now, the ruins – and communication more widely – are stuck, endlessly and unprofitably self-reflexive, unable to progress beyond reference to their own incompleteness in the unmeaningful moment of year zero. Inarticulacy is, in this sense, always communication in ruins. Sandro Bernardi, discussing Rossellini's earlier *Paisà*, sees precisely this 'lack of meaning [as] the film's meaning.'⁹

The ruins of Berlin's buildings function as an objective correlative for the demoralised ruins of the city's institutions; as the buildings which once housed Berlin's great political, educational, legal and cultural institutions lie in ruins, so, too, do the institutions themselves. The Establishment has become a set of processes without an articulate, foundational attitude. Karl-Heinz ultimately hands himself over to the police, and he is, according to appropriate procedure, taken in. However, he is released without charge, as there is no framework against which his past behaviour may be judged. Judgement, in the absence of conviction, proves to be impossible. Identity – according to which certain prohibitions concerning employment and status are meted out – is a matter of bureaucratic structure without underlying points of principle. Rossellini's Berlin is the echo of Kafka's earlier nightmarish dystopias, in which characters are only afforded identity by the documentation of a State so amorphous and nebulous that it cannot be defined. Berlin in year zero is a city of ruins, and Rossellini's provocative and alarming mise-en-scène encapsulates the specious communication at the heart of the city's contemporary life.

⁹ Sandro Bernardi, 'Rossellini's Landscapes: Nature, Myth, History,' in *Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real*, ed. David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: BFI. 2000), 54.

The possibility of individual truthfulness is simultaneously interrogated in this landscape of rhetorical contingency, in which value judgements remain ungrounded among the ruins. As Sandro Bernardi suggests, the ruins mark not only the fact that ‘desolation rules uncontested and absolute,’ but are also the evidence of ‘inner ruins,’ the crumbled remains and beginnings of human beliefs. Individuals are no longer defined by strong conviction; a necessary pragmatism has rendered consistency almost impossible, and the objectivity promised by the film’s early voiceover is exposed as a myth. Truth ceases to be a recognisable value, and characters throughout the film tell lies, often casually: Eva tells her father to lie in order to stay in the hospital for his own good. Not only is there the explicit lie here, but, in addition, it is likely that Eva is lying (or, at least, distorting the truth) when she claims that this is wholly for her father’s benefit; the advantage to her of her father’s protracted stay in the hospital is clear. These actual lies are inextricably interwoven with, and at times indistinguishable from, more honest statements which are read as lies. Edmund is accused by Mr Rademaker of stealing the 300 Marks when he returns from trying to sell the scales; later, his father accuses him of lying when he has been out all night. The world in which Edmund finds himself does not distinguish between truth and deception; honesty has lost its significance and there is no sense in which it is fundamentally different from lying. The speaking characters who gaze upon the ruins of their uncannily half-familiar city are in a kind of synchronicity with the space. Gilberto Perez writes that:

... when the boy protagonist, having killed his ailing father out of a misguided sense of duty, throws himself from one of the half-destroyed buildings down to his death amid the rubble, the raw power of graphically presented devastation has been transmuted into the enduring power of tragedy. This boy is a tragic hero of a kind foreign

to the theater, because he exists as a character only in relation to the observed particulars of an actual environment...¹⁰

The identification of Edmund with the *observed* setting is crucial. Perez goes on to suggest, rather optimistically, that because ‘the action [has Edmund] at its center... the particulars of Rossellini's film are aligned into meaning and made to embody a general statement.’¹¹ However, Edmund is, himself, an inarticulate hollow, unable to provide meaning to the landscape around him, as the priest was not entirely able to cohere the proliferating strands of Bresson’s film. Rather, in the cracks of the ruins – fissures between the past and the present, the artificial and the real – and in the characters whose ideological lives are also collapsed, there can be no clear statement and no definitive meaning.

Getting Nowhere: The Unchained Camera and Impotent Expression

The mise-en-scène of ruins and decaying interiors speaks to the film’s concern with year zero’s specious communication in strings of signs of collapsing significance. This unproductive signification, in which only the ruined absence of an opposite is gestured to, is inexhaustibly circular. This decisive confusion between stasis and an absent motion, between decay and absent growth, is emphatically played out by the film’s cinematography. The moving camera is not only a ‘tool for exploration’ as Tag Gallagher suggests; it also provides a restless gaze which seems to – but

¹⁰ Gilberto Perez, ‘Landscape and Fiction: Jean Renoir’s Country Excursion,’ *The Hudson Review* 42, no.2 (Summer 1989): 242.

¹¹ Perez (1989), 242.

does not – move forward.¹² Crucial to this effect is the film's calculated offset between the liberated camera and an enduring sense of stagnancy. The camera, as instrument of both free movement and inflexible entrapment, actively participates in the discussion of the possibility of expression from the opening credits, where an unnerving sense of stasis is created through the use of repeated footage; the short opening sequence makes use of the same tracking shots more than once, conjuring the image of a destitute cityscape of monotonously repetitive cycles of relentlessly unchanging piles of rubble. Germany, which the film claims at its outset it can document impartially, does not exist; it is ended and not yet begun, caught in a loop of repeated footage and the echoes of outmoded ideas. This suggestion of stillness is compounded by the insertion of a long intertitle discussing the tensions between eternal truths and ideology. The city explored and documented by Rossellini is caught in a moment outside of expressible history, neither wholly part of a past narrative of collapse or a future narrative of rebuilding; the resultant tension between forward movement and moribund stasis, a tension which is unresolved and irresolvable, finds articulation in the camera's impotent motion. As the narrative proper begins, in a scene appropriately set in a graveyard, the camera comes to rest, hesitantly focusing on ruins, markers of tragic ends fashioned from both stone and flesh. The uneasy relationship between aimless movement and calcifying stillness, between an unmentionable past and an inscrutable future, between life and death, marks the situation of year zero.

The camera's movement (whose repetitions deteriorate in value with each aimless reiteration) defines the interior scenes of domestic life as much as it does the

¹² Tag Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini* (New York: Da Capo, 1998), 244.

exterior scenes of a society in ruins. Peter Bondanella suggests that, in Rossellini's earlier film *Paisà*, the 'highly mobile camera is brilliantly used to convey the circumscribed world.'¹³ The domestic space in *Germania anno zero*, populated by impotent men and weary women, is just such a circumscribed world. The possibility of expansive movement or thought seems unimaginable here; progress is stifled by repetition, freedom by rule-abiding subservience. An early domestic scene begins with a close-up of Edmund's father, trapped in his own bed and entirely reliant on his children for information about the political situation. After he has asked what is going on, the camera pulls back to accommodate Edmund's leaning forward and kissing the old man, while Eva, Edmund's sister, gives banal information about the electricity meter. Eva takes Edmund's arm and pulls him towards her; the camera moves with them, settling for a two shot in which she comments on his dirtiness and asks if he has made any money that day, an aim in which he has failed because he is too young to register for work. Eva, frustrated, leaves the frame to the right, while the camera moves with Edmund back to his father's bed. The camera swings as it reaches the bed, and Karl-Heinz is revealed lying on a bed beyond, with Eva in the top right of the frame preparing dinner. As Edmund, an emotional and physical mediator between his father and brother, moves towards Karl-Heinz, the young man comes into focus, brought fully into the narrative by his younger brother's gesture of inclusion. The family forms a diagonal line: the father in the bottom left of the frame rendered impotent, or at least ineffectual, by old age and sickness, Edmund by youth, Karl-Heinz by fear, and Eva by gender (Fig. 3.3). This sustained shot lasts almost thirty seconds, the camera's movements perfectly etching the confines of the small domestic space

¹³ Peter Bondanella, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 80.

whose physical restrictions provide an analogue for the family's lack of socio-political freedom.¹⁴



Fig. 3.3 – 0.07.09
An impotent diagonal.

As the conversation between father and elder son becomes heated, structured around the discussion of whether Karl-Heinz should report to the authorities, the editing rhythm changes. The new rhythm is defined by far shorter takes and much closer shots, father and son separated by cuts. Once again, it is Edmund who introduces a level of reconciliation. Initially, Edmund edges into the periphery of the shots of Karl-Heinz (Fig. 3.4). He then moves forward to take a place in the shots of his father, his head only at first, heavily foregrounded and unfocused, almost monstrous, before moving further forward to sit beside his father's pillow (Fig. 3.5). This exchange ends with Karl-Heinz's melodramatic gesture of throwing himself down on the bed, a gesture timed to coincide with his histrionically despairing promise to hand himself in. Immediately the childish gesture has been performed, Edmund takes charge of the scene again and another long take follows, this shot lasting over forty seconds. The camera pans to follow Edmund as he moves quickly towards Karl-Heinz; he moves right to Eva, the camera's gaze following; Eva sends Edmund out and, the camera still watching her, moves left to

¹⁴ Gallagher (1998), 233.

the father's bed; having kissed her father, she moves, still followed by the panning camera, to Karl-Heinz, whom she takes to the door through which they leave, having checked that no one outside is watching. The camera's movements accommodate the characters' gestures and introduce the film's themes of restriction and surveillance; the camera, like the neighbours' and authorities' ever-watchful gaze, is unavoidable, and its ambling circumscribing pans define the edges of the characters' oppressively small world. Most emphatically, as the family rehearses a discussion that has been voiced time and time again, the camera's circular (or, strictly, triangular) motion marks the impossibility of progress; the characters are trapped by the impossibility of articulation. Like the camera which documents their futile gestures, they are not capable of decisive movement forward and are instead caught in the pattern of cycles which define the ideological void at the centre of Berlin in year zero.



Fig. 3.4 – 0.07.57
Silent Edmund mediates between Karl-Heinz...



Fig. 3.5 – 0.08.23
... and his father.

The camera, circumscribing action throughout the film, is an agent of ineffectual and not productive motion; like the ruins of the *mise-en-scène*, the camera's motion expresses its own inadequacy, condemned to repetitive circling and aimless wandering, movement which draws attention to itself but cannot make a definite communication. Some critics have perceived a more 'aggressive camera'¹⁵ which 'suffocatingly stalks the vulnerable Edmund, giving him no quarter, no room to breathe... in the threatening circle which encloses him.'¹⁶ However, the camera's circles do not hold characters in. Rather, they describe the space in and *out of* which the characters move, the movement defined by a wandering gaze and lack of fixity. Indeed, even in those moments when the calculated aimlessness or inertia of the camera is replaced by a more precisely expressive gesture, the gesture remains muted. When Edmund first bumps into Herr Enning, a paedophilic former Nazi teacher, the scene plays out against a backdrop of children playing around a fountain (Fig. 3.6). The documented tensions between movement and stasis (the children versus the dry fountain), as well as the possibility of movement within stasis (the hope that the dry fountain will one day flow again, a functionality a sign

¹⁵ Tag Gallagher, 'NR=MC²: Rossellini, "Neo-realism," and Croce,' *Film History* 2, no.1 (Winter 1988): 91.

¹⁶ Brunette, 43.

also of potential function) are restated by the *mise-en-scène* here, while the camera remains still. The children, like the camera earlier, run in circles; they are all movement, but their movement is futile and repetitive and does not permit substantive forward motion. While these qualities may be common elements of children's play, they become endowed with special significance ahead of Edmund's final restless game of exploring which will end in his death, paralleling also the equivalently futile behaviour of their adult counterparts (stripped of their erstwhile political motivation) and the camera. When the camera does move, it is with a halted, perverse non-moving movement. Throughout the film, the camera often moves sideways and, as here, backwards; as Edmund and Enning walk together, the latter's words recalling the frightening rhetoric of the Nazis, the camera retreats from the pair. Even when moving forward, the camera does not achieve a penetrating intervention in the action, any decisive gesture; rather it seems to amble slowly, suggesting indifference, weariness, or withdrawal rather than investigation.



Fig. 3.6 – 0.19.45
Afunctional landscapes.

This uneasy non-commitment of the camera has been linked to the film's startling ideological equivocation. Bert Cardullo, paraphrasing Bazin on the work of post-war Italian directors, suggests that this is a hallmark of neorealism generally;

reality should be presented without the distorting prism of 'ideological abstraction or self-aggrandizing technique.'¹⁷ Through the camera, this freedom from ideology becomes a function of composition; Tag Gallagher, quoting Velati, suggests that "the camera is always in movement, as though the author does not succeed in finding parameters he can trust enough to make judgements".¹⁸ However, while Gallagher and Velati are correct in the technical dimension of the film's achievement, there is no need to locate the originating source of the uncertainty so squarely with either 'author' or character. The ideological inarticulacy which besets the film is not reducible to the point of view of the single director; it is the inarticulacy of year zero, a moment of non-moving movement, of a camera which is unsettled (and unsettling) and which gets nowhere.

Consequently, when the camera momentarily serves as proxy for characters, its approximations of their views are always inadequate, incomplete. Building on Deleuze's sentiment that neorealism is 'a cinema of the seer,'¹⁹ Gian Piero Brunetta registers a defining feature of neorealism as the 'power of the gaze.'²⁰ However, *Germania anno zero* repeatedly disavows the notion that this gaze is empowering. The camera cannot fully present what Edmund sees and, instead, the aimlessness and circularity of their twin motions are evidence of passivity and enervation. Deleuze is insightful when he claims that the character now 'records rather than reacts,' registering but not able to control the situations which he or she encounters.²¹ Deleuze even goes so far as to view the neorealist gaze as toxic,

¹⁷ Bert Cardullo, 'Defining the Real: The Film Theory and Criticism of André Bazin,' in *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism*, edited by Bert Cardullo (New York: Continuum, 2011), 8.

¹⁸ Gallagher (1998), 249.

¹⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 2.

²⁰ Quoted in Muscio, 36.

²¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 3

claiming that Edmund ‘dies from what he sees.’²² Whatever that sight is – the ruins of his city, of his father’s health, of his brother’s masculinity, of his teacher’s morality, of his friends’ loyalty – is withheld. While the importance which Gallagher, after Aprà, affords subjective eyecuts (sutured shots which show what Edmund sees, as in the moment immediately before his suicide) and the diminishing possibility of camera-objectivity are critical, they omit a key element; the subjectivity of the revealed shot is partial, and the view presented of the ruined buildings which Edmund sees before he jumps is not an explanation for the jump. Rather, this nod to subjectivity is a reminder of the tantalising lack of explanation; the film reveals what he sees and yet it withholds an account of his motivation. Like the ruins of the buildings themselves, Edmund’s motivation is not clear enough to define.

This incomplete subjectivity offered by the camera resonates with the absence of fully realised characters in the film. Although Peter Bondanella argues that elsewhere Rossellini’s use of long takes creates a ‘cinema of psychological introspection’ through the concentration of ‘the entire force of the episode upon a single actress, her facial expressions, and her individual suffering,’ this is ultimately not the effect in *Germania anno zero*.²³ Rather, the use of long takes and subjective eyecuts – as well as what Bernardi calls ‘semi-subjective shots’ (in which the camera seems to be ‘not just looking but also fighting, escaping, searching, following’) – foreground the lack of individual identity for each character.²⁴ The concentration, instead, shifts to the landscape which they inhabit. The performance

²² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 2

²³ Bondanella, 15.

²⁴ Bernardi, 54.

style of the film does not permit the kind of identification which Bondanella sees elsewhere; characters become a function of histrionic gestures: Karl-Heinz is the performance of his own institutional anxiety (throwing himself down on his bed), Eva of domestic drudgery (with the repeated motif of anxiously running her hands through her hair), their father of guilt at his own burdensome existence (manifest in his heavily ironic dialogue). Their actions are performative rather than purposeful, mannered and never expressive of really individualised character. These movements, emphatic but expressive of futility, are matched by a camera which, while mobile, as Bazin points out, ‘makes no pretense at being psychologically subjective.’²⁵ Indeed, psychological subjectivity is inconceivable in year zero, a moment outside of history and ideology, when coherent character is in the ruins of social and ideological breakdown, meaning that the film must be invested in ‘the socioeconomic interaction of... man with his [ruined] environment, not the exploration of his psychological problems or complexities.’²⁶ In the final moments of the film, the camera makes its most emphatic statement on this collapse of character when it pulls back from the unknown woman’s despondent survey of Edmund’s dead body to the ruins beyond (Fig. 3.7). The camera is not solely conditioned by the characters or their narratives; like the narrative, it floats across the setting, marking the circumscribed limitations of the destroyed city itself.

²⁵ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?: Volume 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 36.

²⁶ Bert Cardullo, ‘What Is Neorealism?’ in *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism*, ed. Bert Cardullo (New York: Continuum, 2011), 25.



Fig. 3.7 – 1.12.52
Final ruins.

This lack of clearly defined character in the film resonates with Deleuze's arguments concerning the neorealist camera which constructs time-images rather than movement-images and 'stops following the movement of the characters' in order to 'carry out constant reframings as functions of thought.'²⁷ The achievement of the time-image, according to Deleuze, is to escape the 'habit-memory' of aesthetic response 'for a brain that has learned patterns of motor response' and to substitute new domains of the unthought or the not-yet thought.²⁸ Both the unthought and the not-yet thought may be seen as sources of the kind of stuttering, contingent utterances which fall under the terms of inarticulacy. Deleuze suggests that escape from the habitual qualities of the mental images associated with the movement-image requires new methods to explore thought on screen. Thought on screen, Deleuze argues, may manifest itself in *mise-en-scène* ('landscapes are mental states') or performance (through the use of the everydayness of attitude and the Brechtian social acts of *gest*).²⁹ As the camera – unconnected to the movement of characters – pulls back at the end of *Germania anno zero*, the reframing is, in this

²⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 23; in Deleuze's terms, these 'functions of thought' are 'noosigns', namely images which go 'beyond [themselves] towards something which can only be thought' (see Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 235).

²⁸ Claire Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze* (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 152.

²⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 199.

sense, the reframing of the unthought, of the impossibility of coherent, complete thought in the intellectual ruins of this moment in Berlin; Edmund's suicide is an ineffable act, which is looked away from by the camera with a gesture towards the ruins, the evidence of the collapse of habitual domains of thought on which new domains must be built before articulation is possible.

'These fragments I have shored against my ruins': The Ethics of Inarticulacy

The ruined *mise-en-scène* and the unfulfilled gestures of the camera are amongst the techniques which the film employs to link the units of its narrative in an inarticulate chain of disrupted linearity. André Bazin writes that Rossellini's cinema is one of 'enormous ellipses – or rather, great holes.'³⁰ Bazin suggests that Rossellini is a director who is not primarily concerned with conventional narrative arcs, but rather with creating strings of 'image-facts'; 'the unit of [his] cinematic narrative... is not the "shot"... but the "fact" [which is a] fragment of concrete reality...' ³¹ In his most famous metaphorical formulation for Rossellini's storytelling technique, Bazin likens the structural quality of the film to stepping stones, where 'the mind has to leap from one event to the other as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river' without clear causality, creating a formal equivalence of the ruined landscape he is documenting, and reinforcing the sense of the film as an articulated string of self-defining and discordant signs.³² This technique is consistent with Rossellini's earlier films, *Roma città aperta* and *Paisà*.

³⁰ Bazin (1971), 35.

³¹ Bazin (1971), 37.

³² Bazin (1971), 35.

The image-facts are connected, as Brunette expresses it, ‘*between* shots... (if such a space can be conceived)’ through ellipses which announce the fragmented structure of the film.³³ Such ellipses define the relationship between Edmund and former teacher, Enning; the fact that it is never wholly clear what the paedophilic teacher does to his former student (though it is implied by the suggestive touching) is not only disturbing because of its implications for this particular boy. It is also the marker of a space where shared principles and convictions cannot be enunciated; in the unspecified ethical space of year zero, such behaviour is unremarked upon, and Enning conducts his grooming of the children unchallenged in public spaces.

The implications of this space outside of ethical expression are profound for a discussion of inarticulacy within the film. P. Adams Sitney suggests that the elliptical structure creates ‘ambiguities of the narrative’ and a ‘mesh of misunderstanding.’³⁴ Ideology, as defined by Slavoj Žižek, is the ‘link between “words” and “deeds”,’ the ““foundation” of acts in “words”.’³⁵ This translation of word into action requires a kind of twofold articulation: the initial articulation of thought into language, and the equally significant articulation of language into action. Year zero, Germany’s point between, marks a rupture of the determining logic of that twofold articulation. Characters cannot speak clearly, their words echoing uncannily the lost rhetorics of a discredited past, and then cannot act, gripped by an ennui that leaves them restlessly impotent. That rupture certainly finds an objective correlative in the ruined *mise-en-scène* and the aimless camera,

³³ Brunette, 44.

³⁴ P. Adams Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema: Iconography, Stylistics, Politics*, 1st paperback edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45, 44.

³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2008), 40.

but it is most emphatically mirrored in the narrative structure of uncomfortably floating episodes, tethered together by shared characters and a broad narrative arc, but without a chronological or, more significantly, causal logic.

This lack of ideological certainty in *Germania anno zero* was seen by some contemporary Italian Marxist critics as evidence of ‘a certain “regression”’ in Rossellini’s work.³⁶ Aristarco, chief amongst these critics, viewed Rossellini as a ‘defector’ whose ‘films had come to content themselves with mere surface description, at the cost of their power to explain, through coherent narration, the wellsprings of human action in given circumstances.’³⁷ The ideological function of cinema (‘power to explain’) is undone by the formal inarticulacy of the loosely arranged image-facts, which defy ‘coherent narration.’ It is as a logical consequence of this assessment that Rossellini was dismissed as ‘an essentially apolitical figure.’³⁸ The apex of this condemnation, perhaps, is found in the critical evaluation of *Germania anno zero* by Hans Habe, a pioneer figure in the rebuilding of the German press after 1945:

No, a picture with no tendency at all... but full of frivolity, which is worse than anything intentional. Rossellini picks flowers from the grave of a nation... and vomits into the coffin... It’s more diabolical a swindle than Hollywood could have ever thought up.³⁹

However, the acausal narrative structure may instead be seen as an implicit and indeterminate comment on the political inarticulacy of post-Nazi Germany. The marriage of fragmented narrative and ideological argument is demonstrated in one

³⁶ Bazin (1971), 96.

³⁷ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ‘North and South, East and West: Rossellini and Politics,’ in *Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real*, ed. David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: BFI, 2000), 9.

³⁸ Nowell-Smith, 8.

³⁹ Quoted in Gallagher (1998), 245.

of the film's most startling scenes, when Edmund sells a record of Hitler's speeches to some British soldiers. The record, itself a document of a historical political moment and figure, is now meaningless, its words disembodied, uncanny, hollow like the shells of the buildings within which it is played. Even before the sale, the sequence has acquired an air of audio fakery. Bazin writes that post-synching results in a 'loss of realism.'⁴⁰ As the British soldiers speak together, their English sounds absurdly faked, the words pronounced with affected clarity and a strange, halting rhythm; the actors deliver their lines with their backs to the camera, perhaps to ease the difficulty of post-synchronisation (Fig. 3.8). It is emphatically clear that this dialogue is recorded separately and delivered over-deliberately, and cannot escape the impression of contrivance.



Fig. 3.8 – 0.26.58
A faked group.

This contrivance prepares the way for the playing of the record of Hitler's speech, an absurd evocation of the past. A man and child, walking without explanation hand in hand through the gutted skeleton of the building, are momentarily arrested by the spectral sound of Hitler's voice but betray no real emotion. The absurdity of the situation lies in the outmodedness of the expressed views; just as the jerky pan, while the speech plays, across the rooftops of destroyed buildings marks the site as

⁴⁰ Bazin (1971), 30.

the tomb of past glories, so the record is merely an evocation of the remotely-recent past, of antique value only, a literal souvenir for these soldiers of a vanished slice of history before year zero. The voice does nothing to illuminate or resurrect the ruins; rather, the ruins expose the dead, ghastly ghostliness of the (clearly recorded) voice. There is nothing live about it, a feature shared with the post-synchronised voices of the people walking through the city. Year zero has rendered the most emphatic identities (the Fuhrer) and views (Nazism) contingent and vacuous; they are now simply words echoing around the ruins of a collapsed city. The ideological barrenness of the recording is matched perfectly by the narratively gratuitous nature of the scene; nothing concrete is revealed about the characters or events. Rather, this scene is a floating narrative unit, an image-fact, taken out of causal or chronological relation with other narrative units, suggestive but not necessary. It is a fragment which, like the ruins and the moving camera, points only to its own form; a fragment which serves to highlight the film's fragmentary nature, caught in an inescapable formal mise-en-abyme.

The relationship between narrative discontinuity and semantic vacuity is most keenly felt in the film's twin climaxes: Edmund's acts of patricide and suicide. Criticism on the film has perhaps unsurprisingly addressed the film's most affecting narrative mystery: the boy's motivation. Definitive answers to this question, though, fail to account for the film's resistance to stable positions and its presentation of Edmund as mute. It would be too simplistic to suggest, with Tag Gallagher, that Edmund is '[t]he Third Reich's last soldier.'⁴¹ His motivation for the murder of his father is not straightforwardly driven by the echoes of Nazi

⁴¹ Gallagher (1998), 248.

ideology, but by a paradoxical conflation of a number of tired rhetorics, articulated consecutively. Edmund's actions represent a perversely united conclusion for these radically contrary ideologies. The three unrelated statements are made in three separate moments, linked by ellipses which mask each time an undisclosed passage of time. First, Eva expresses her views on her father's health. In a scene of almost unbroken takes, the camera moving with especial restriction in the claustrophobic confines of the kitchen, Eva accuses Karl-Heinz of making promises but never acting on them; he is, in Žižek's sense, unideological. Having lost her temper, particularly after Karl-Heinz's ironic mention of the Allied Officers with whom she has sex in order to get extra money, Eva rehearses the critical statement: 'As long as Papa is at the hospital, there's one less mouth to feed. But when he comes back we'll have nothing at home' (Fig. 3.9). This practical domestic concern, caught in a tone informed by her frustration at Karl-Heinz, takes on a magnitude which would not typically be afforded it.



Fig. 3.9 – 0.43.59
Eva tempted.

The scene cuts to Edmund visiting Enning in order to get some more black-market goods to sell for money for his family. The scene begins with Edmund's emphatic, repeated use of the verb *aspettare*, to wait for, a key signifier in year zero, a moment which is itself a liminal waiting space in which nothing is decisive or completed.

Enning is stopped on the steps of his home with a little boy, a literally liminal space between the public street and the unspecified pursuits of his private apartment. The former teacher, telling the boy to *wait for* him, goes with Edmund to discuss his father; as earlier, in an unbroken take, the camera recedes from the teacher and student, backing away as though in acknowledgement of the horror of the man's words. Enning's callous words concerning Edmund's father – 'if he dies, he dies' – are interrupted by the arrival of his landlord, who, seemingly sharing Enning's proclivities, strokes the boy on the steps and takes him inside (Fig. 3.10). Enning, angered by this disturbance of his own plans, watches the cracked and ruined outside of the building to see where the little boy is taken; it is while he is watching, distracted and uninterested in Edmund, that he expresses the view which coincidentally resonates with Eva's concerns: 'Learn from the natural world. The strong eliminate the weak. You need the courage to sacrifice the weak.' Despite the easy identification by many critics of Enning with Nazism, the film does not invite so glib a reading. Enning's obvious irritation and distraction result in a delivery which lacks any conviction; this is not ideology, that is words and actions in a causal relationship, but rather empty rhetoric, words thrown away in a distracted moment.



Fig. 3.10 – 0.45.19
Enning distracted.

In his essay on the film, Bazin writes that our knowledge of Edmund's motivations are 'inference and conjecture' and 'never because of signs that can be read directly on his face...'⁴² Making a similar point, Žižek describes how 'Edmund's radical "emptying" is displayed... with an inexpressive, tired, pale gaze, with no traces of fear, compassion, regret, or any other sentiment.'⁴³ Edmund's confused reading of the words of others and his ultimate tragedy lie in the fact that he, as a discrete identity, is never fully articulated by the film. As he walks between Enning's house (where he has listened to the former teacher's radical social Darwinist philosophy) and the hospital (where his father will claim to wish to be dead), Edmund is lost in shadow; he himself is a kind of transition between others, providing a bridge between the members of his family, and between the disparate quasi-ideologies he encounters (Fig. 3.11). The ruins of the city, full of holes and spaces that speak of Berlin's calamitous war, are as inarticulate as the ellipses of the film's fragmented structure and, within its confusion, as Edmund, who is himself a kind of ellipsis, a space in which something meaningful is implied but never stated. Deleuze comments that 'characters are swallowed up in' transition shots, motivation lost in abandoned continuity.'⁴⁴

⁴² André Bazin, *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 58.

⁴³ Žižek (2008), 41.

⁴⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 39.



Fig. 3.11 – 0.45.58
Edmund as transition.

Passing through the ellipsis, the narrative passes to the hospital where the father is being treated for malnutrition. In another fluid shot – this time tracing the limits of the hospital ward – the father describes himself as a burden to the family. He says, as the camera settles, ‘I’m of no use anymore. It would be better if I died. I’ve even considered killing myself, but I don’t have the courage.’ The potentially emotive quality of this scene is undercut by the rather mannered performance of the father. His statement that he ‘drag[s] this life around like a burden’ is mannered, excessive. As with Eva’s bad-tempered domestic frustration and Enning’s distracted recital of Nazi philosophy, the father does not commit to his self-pitying statement of futile existence. His Catholic-inspired guilt is performed rather than felt, and rhetoric once again passes for ideology. Edmund, his motivation still uncertain at this point, picks up and pockets the bottle of medicine with which he will later poison his father (Fig. 3.12).



Fig. 3.12 – 0.47.07
Hospitalised rhetoric.

Three consecutive statements – each deriving from different quasi-ideological positions – lead to the same conclusion. Whether born of Eva’s practicality, Enning’s cruel natural law, or the father’s request for compassion, that conclusion seems to be clear: the family would thrive without its father. However, it is also clear that these three, individually inarticulate, positions do not share a cause, nor do they cause each other. They seem to be a narrative sequence without system; the order is unmotivated, random, the fragments marking correlation and not causation. The correlation provides the film with a further kind of repetition; Eva, Enning, and the father echo each other’s conclusions, these conclusions formally articulated in a pattern of approximate repetition, a further structural match for the almost-unvaried *mise-en-scène* and the camera’s looping perambulations. Edmund’s acts – patricide and suicide – are not ideologically motivated, but the consequence of a cacophony of attitudes which are *made to mean* the same thing, namely that the father should die. As Žižek formulates the scenario, ‘Edmund’s suicide has therefore nothing whatsoever to do with remorse [or triumph, or any other definable sensation]: he just lets himself be drawn into the vertiginous abyss...’⁴⁵ This abyss opens up, and means that

⁴⁵ Žižek (2008), 43.

[Edmund's] act is therefore somehow indeterminable, it cannot be properly located, being at the same time an act of supreme cruelty and cold distance *and* an act of boundless love and tenderness, attesting that he is prepared to go to extremes to comply with his father's wishes. This coincidence of opposites (cold, methodical cruelty and boundless love) is *a point at which every "foundation" of acts in "words", in ideology, fails*: this "foundation" simply falls short of the abyss announced in it.⁴⁶

The indeterminable motivation for Edmund's act leaves an unresolved ethical issue for the film. The film's interest in ethically complex acts (exploitation, neglect, murder, suicide) without any position of principle from which to judge them raises again the challenges levelled by Aristarco and the Marxist critics upon its initial release. The abyss, identified by Žižek, is an ideological emptiness, and the inarticulacies of both Edmund and the film arguably render the ethical contingency intolerable. The documentation of a collapsed city and its fragmented ideologies through a ruined *mise-en-scène* and a fragmented form may suffice as 'surface description,' but, to Aristarco and his colleagues, this refusal 'to explain' is ethically irresponsible.⁴⁷ Edmund would be explained – and less unsettling – were he, in Gallagher's phrase, simply '[t]he Third Reich's last soldier.'⁴⁸ If the film could articulate that *meaning*, conclusions about how to judge the events of the climactic scenes would be more easily reached. Inarticulacy becomes a crisis of ethics, an abdication of the film's possible role in contributing to the emergence of a rigorous new way of thinking.

This frustration of the desire for an ordering principle amongst the ruins of continuity may help to explain the insistent critical attempts to reason out

⁴⁶ Žižek (2008), 40.

⁴⁷ Nowell-Smith, 9.

⁴⁸ Gallagher (1998), 248.

Edmund's motivation, despite their acceptance of the elusive nature of Edmund's character. Bazin claims that the child's inner conflict 'is not the filmmaker's concern' as it would have required 'projecting his own explanations onto the boy'; however, he also says that '[o]f course, the speech of the Nazi schoolmaster is the immediate source of the boy's murder of his sickly and "useless" father,' discounting entirely the clear impact of Eva's and, especially, the father's words.⁴⁹ Gallagher, quoting Adriano Aprà, acknowledges that 'Edmund is completely "other",' but also argues that the film spies 'on every minute reaction of consciousness'; he claims that the suicide is disturbingly 'calm,' and yet that it is triggered by a simple 'sense of guilt.'⁵⁰ Such attempts to uncover an articulate Edmund remain futile. The film resists stable meaning, and instead establishes a resonance between character and form, productive but not clearly meaningful; to embrace such a clarity would be to deny the realities of the ideological betweenness of post-Nazi Berlin.

Between Styles: The Synthesis of Realism and Expressionism?

The resonance between the inarticulacies of character and form finds its most arresting demonstration in the film's frictive articulation of two discordant styles, the expressionist and the realist.⁵¹ Gilberto Perez, writing on Rossellini and Renoir, suggests that this mixing of styles is a demonstration of

⁴⁹ Bazin (2011), 59, 58.

⁵⁰ Gallagher (1998), 248, 246, 246, 249.

⁵¹ This discordance is not to suggest that expressionism and realism are mutually exclusive styles; as Raymond Durgnat argues, 'There is more expressionism in realism than we usually realize' (Raymond Durgnat, *Durgnat on Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976) 87). Rather, it is to suggest that *Germania anno zero* establishes moments of stark contrast between the two styles.

... what Brecht called “complex seeing”: not a single focus but an eye-opening manifoldness, a putting forward of diverse aspects, discrepant perspectives, so as to invite from the audience active reflection rather than mere acquiescence. Mixing modes – styles of acting, uses of language, approaches to visual presentation, kinds of fiction – was for both Brecht and Renoir a principal method by which to achieve complex seeing. Breaking the consistency of any one mode they might have asked us to accept, they encourage us, instead, to compare this style of acting with that, that kind of fiction with this, this with that way of doing things, of regarding things. Such a mixture is difficult to bring off; it's always easier to maintain consistency than successfully to manage diversity.⁵²

Despite the invitation to reflection which Perez suggests such complex seeing presents, those of Rossellini's films which deviate most explicitly from the realism with which he was identified from *Roma città aperta* onwards, ‘have always been considered failures’ according to Peter Brunette.⁵³ After the lauded post-Fascist Italian cinema which introduced neorealism, these forays into inconsistent mixes of style were deemed to be compromises, and outraged critics with their display of what Bazin describes as ‘the expressionist heresy,’ in defiance of ‘the general trend of cinema... toward realism.’⁵⁴ Although Bazin confidently opposes realism and expressionism, the terms remain contentious. It is simple to see Rossellini as absolutely committed to realism given his repeated conviction that ‘[t]hings are there. Why manipulate them?’⁵⁵ Reduced to its most basic implications, this commitment allows for the compiling of neorealist cinema's defining features, each of which is grounded in a documenting of found situations, locations, and people. As Giuliana Muscio writes, neorealism may be defined by its ‘visual straightforwardness,’ use of ‘real spaces’ and non-professional performers found in

⁵² Perez (1989), 249.

⁵³ Brunette, 34; Brunette discusses particularly *Una voce umana* (1948) and *La macchina ammazzacattivi* (1951).

⁵⁴ Bazin (1971), 26.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Brunette, 35.

those spaces, and its 'laconic representation of the tragic brutality of the war.'⁵⁶ She goes on to say that:

The most prominent historian of Italian cinema, Gian Piero Brunetta, viewed *Paisan* as an exemplary neorealist text. Emphasising the socio-historical implications of the film's style, its use of outdoors and on-location shooting, Brunetta argues that the film instituted a new 'power of the gaze', capable of freely moving at 360 degrees and capturing languages and social spaces either erased or considered taboo by the cinema under fascism. The elevation of the man of the streets to a new protagonist and the use of dialects and plebeian social landscape answered a hunger for reality and produced a discovery of the visible.⁵⁷

Rossellini's neorealism, Bazin argues, 'lies not in the subject matter but in the style.'⁵⁸ Although the clean split of subject matter and style is more complex than this observation would suggest – location shooting for example, arguably concerns both – Bazin's emphasis on style did introduce to the emerging criticism on neorealism a concentration on the new aesthetic: the location shooting, the camera movement, the documentation of everyday life itemised by Muscio.⁵⁹ The voiceover in the film's opening moments speaks of creating an

... objective and true portrait... They [Berlin's inhabitants] live as if tragedy were natural. This is not an accusation, or even a defence of the German people. It is an objective assessment.

Such an objective assessment signals what Gallagher argues is the kind of 'judiciously weighed *documentary* everyone had expected...' from Rossellini.⁶⁰ This

⁵⁶ Muscio, 32-3.

⁵⁷ Muscio, 36.

⁵⁸ Bazin (2011), 60.

⁵⁹ Other critics have continued to find neorealist films' thematic subject matter of particular significance. Bert Cardullo, for example, sees 'The essential theme of the neorealist film' as 'the conflict between the common man and the immense societal forces that were completely external to him yet completely determined his existence'; Bert Cardullo, 'Forbidden Games,' *The Hudson Review* 46, no.3 (Autumn 1993): 544.

⁶⁰ Gallagher (1998), 245.

aspirational objectivity is well-realised by the film's neutral recording of the city's spaces and the people's hand-to-mouth existences. The shots of Berlin's great buildings destroyed retain their potency to shock. Even the characters' indeterminacy can be absorbed in this view of the film as a documentation of life in a post-Nazi Berlin devoid of definitive ideological position.

However, this documentary style is combined with an alternative, conflicting style that builds on an expressionist aesthetic. Raymond Durgnat, in 'Caligari Is Dead – Long Live Caligari,' quotes Peter and Linda Murray's definition of expressionism:

The search for expressiveness in style by means of exaggerations and distortions of line and colour; a deliberate abandonment of the naturalism implicit in Impressionism in favour of a simplified style which would carry far greater emotional impact.⁶¹

These distortions – despite their manipulation of things – are common in the film. The repeated motif of the child's walk through the ruined city becomes an expressionist play of light and dark, the boy moving as a shadow in an oppressively flat and silent landscape; longer realist arcs of documentary-style footage of the city are punctuated with episodes marked by intense lighting, in which realism is abandoned in favour of a more suggestive symbolism (Fig. 3.13). It is not simply that, as Peter Bondanella suggests, 'contemporary audiences' are less likely to be taken in by 'the realism of the photography in the Rossellini film.'⁶² Rather, in a way which is foregrounded and enounced, *Germania anno zero*'s achievement is

⁶¹ Durgnat (1976) 85.

⁶² Bondanella, 48.

simply at odds with the ‘reconstituted reportage’ and ‘extraordinary feeling of truth’ which Bazin claims as neorealist cinema’s hallmarks.⁶³



Fig. 3.13 – 1.00.19
Expressionist plays of light and dark.

The film establishes a series of shifts between the realist and expressionist poles, allowing these oppositions to coincide, to exist in parallel. The film’s achievement does not lie in either its realism or its expressionism, but in the almost-productive pattern of interactions between the two styles. The film’s plurality of styles means that, amidst the documentary footage of Berlin in ruins, testament to Rossellini’s practice of recording unmanipulated things as they are, the sense of crisis can find expression in contrived patterns of light and darkness. Giuliana Muscio comments that ‘[o]ver the years, Rossellini has shown a creative freedom with genres, media and subject matters, which has disoriented Italy’s highly politicised film critics, who have quickly attacked him for betraying, in their view, neorealism, and for his apparent political disengagement.’⁶⁴ The blending of styles in *Germania anno zero*, while disorientating, does not suggest regression or a lack of control. Rather, the alternating modes contribute to the film’s mosaic structure, a (dis)jointed form

⁶³ Bazin (1971), 20 and 24.

⁶⁴ Muscio, 35.

which, in sympathy with the fragmentary narrative structure, uses style to establish further cracks in the film's definite signification. Rossellini claims that:

My goal was the same as in any work I have done. I wanted to reproduce the truth exactly as the camera saw it for that audience throughout the world which has a heart capable of love and a brain capable of thought.⁶⁵

This seems to be at odds with the distortions of expressionism. It is, though, precisely this desire to appeal to a feeling and thinking audience that resonates with Perez's claims that complex combinations of modes ask for more 'active reflection rather than mere acquiescence' and allow 'us no settled response.'⁶⁶ The juxtapositions between fragments of contrasting styles, which do not allow for illusionistically gentle transitions, foreground the stylistic artifice of both realism and expressionism. The possibility of a comprehensive, truthful statement on the situation of Berlin in 1947 – the objectivity promised by the voiceover at the film's beginning – is exploded. No definitive statement is possible, and instead the film stutters through a series of half-formed utterances, no sooner begun than succeeded by a contrasting style. This struggle to speak is the film's great achievement and its political point; its narrative is an unsayable one, its conclusions unreachable. It is a series of contrasting parts whose asymmetrical balance with Edmund's inarticulacy suggests the possibility of a whole message, but one which can never be fully disclosed. Neither realism nor expressionism alone could suggest the extent of this indeterminacy. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith is right to query Peter Brunette's suggestion that 'Rossellini's project cannot be subsumed under a realist heading because of the

⁶⁵ Gallagher (1998), 245.

⁶⁶ Perez (1989), 249.

central role played by imagination and fantasy.’⁶⁷ It is not the case that *Germania anno zero* is not realist; it is, rather, that it is not *only* realist. Conversely, despite the poetic intensity of his description, Tag Gallagher (invoking Adriano Aprà) goes too far in his argument that *Germania anno zero* is

... an expressionist film: reality is deranged at a luministic level: light without sfumato, unreal, lunar, Martian. Light expresses Edmund's rapport with reality. Sharp, sourceless splotches of light when he crosses the street; light from an oven suggesting hell; crepuscular, asphyxiating light after murdering the father... a decision of life and death due to a luministic fact, as in Sternberg... This is a fantasy film that breaks completely with reality, so there's no need for verisimilitude, no obligation to follow some hypothetical consequentialness [logic], either narrational, psychological, or luminist.⁶⁸

The film is, in fact, a fluctuation between the realist and the expressionist, which renders its symbolism (hellish and otherwise) less transparently legible than Gallagher suggests.⁶⁹ It is critically reductive to insist that the film is either (or even predominantly) realist or expressionist. Nor is it productive to see the film as a realist film diminished by its expressionist elements (or vice versa). The film's dynamic arises from their interactions. Nowell-Smith, although he embraces the film's stylistic fusion, unconvincingly argues in response to Brunette that this use of the fantastic was at the service of a narrative ‘moment of revelation, of intuition, which revolved around communication.’⁷⁰ This is too simplistic, and Nowell-Smith does not seem to have *Germania anno zero* in mind when he writes that

In a world marked by non-communication, suddenly something would be communicated, a flash of insight enabling the audience to see what

⁶⁷ Nowell-Smith, 10.

⁶⁸ Gallagher (1998), 248.

⁶⁹ Durgnat suggests that ‘each style derives its meaning only from the implicit presence of the other’ (see Durgnat (1976), 88).

⁷⁰ Nowell-Smith, 11.

the characters themselves saw or maybe were too blind to see, or enabling the characters themselves to go forward from an impasse.⁷¹

An expectation of expressionism may be, as Durnat argues, that ‘the feelings portrayed invade, swallow up the “otherness” of the outside world.’⁷² This definition presupposes that the expressionism of *Germania anno zero* is tethered to the emotional and imaginative lives of its characters, source of the feelings portrayed. However, the dynamic at stake here is at odds with this definition. The tethering of the expressionism in the film is indeterminate. Edmund, the film’s central character, remains other to the world around him, and expressionism does not irrupt into the realist mode with the force of revelation. To the contrary, it establishes a discontinuity which unsettles the film’s hopes of conclusive meaning. The film’s expressionism is, as Deleuze suggests, ‘the violent struggle between light and darkness’: an erratic articulation of fragments, struggling with each other.⁷³ The documented authenticity of the ruins struggle against the discontinuous artificiality of the studio interiors; the narrative fragments struggle with each other across unnavigable ellipses; Edmund is caught in the natural lights of realism and the violent chiaroscuros of expressionism, the crowning achievement of the film’s formal struggling and its most emphatic realisation, the struggle between two presentational styles, each of which suggests a seeming shape. This seeming shape forms around Edmund, but never solidifies in clear outline.

The unsettling and discontinuous rhythms of these alternating styles reach their climax in the juxtaposition of the film’s two climactic narrative episodes:

⁷¹ Nowell-Smith, 11.

⁷² Durnat (1976) 85.

⁷³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London: Continuum, 2005), 46.

Edmund's killing of his father and subsequent taking of his own life. The patricide scene is marked by a densely expressionistic style, the atmosphere of danger and what Durnat describes as 'the full emotional surge' largely determined by the lighting effects created in the studio interior.⁷⁴ Light is scarce in the scene, and dark pools haunt the corners of the frame throughout, patches of uncertain shadow which suggest the film's many cracks and gaps in meaning. Faces are sliced, lost in shadow and then cut with beams of Rembrandt lighting; Edmund's eyes are lost in darkness as he listens to his father's monologue on the burdens of life. The scene begins with a disorientating ellipsis, marking an unspecified time between the father's stay in hospital and the present moment, back at home. The scene as it unfolds is simultaneously economic and dense. The austere aesthetic of the room, defined by large pools of impenetrable darkness and long takes, is explained diegetically as the consequence of the cutting off of the family's electricity supply (Fig. 3.14). A realist social fact is combined with expressionism; the resultant effect dramatically surpasses either style alone. The austerity gives the impression of an exhausted film made up of exhausted images and language. The scene contains no embellishments, and the lack of power and food are explicitly and wearily discussed. Even the camera's long takes are more static than usual. When the camera does move, its pans are sluggish and concentrate less than before on group shots, more focused now on isolated individuals. This is cinema of impoverishment, and the scene's heightened expressionism seeks explanation in the performance of the characters' emotional states. Central to the scene's stylistic achievement is the figure of Edmund.

⁷⁴ Durnat (1976), 89.

The boy's angelic beauty, commented upon earlier by the nurse in the hospital, is lost in the scene's sea of shadows. As he withdraws, lit only by a candle, to prepare the tea with which he will poison his father, the small kitchen area becomes frightening; the photos pinned up in front of him are indecipherable, their crookedness now only suggesting that something is awry (Fig. 3.15). As Edmund prepares the drink, the father's monologue continues, an endless stream of irrelevant words on God and Fascism and economic hardship, the understated *sotto voce* delivery transforming it into a kind of incantation, fitting for Edmund's simultaneous preparation of a kind of spell. The father's words only assert themselves when they take on an ironic significance; precisely as Edmund poisons the drink, matching a cut from the father's face to the kitchen, the father accuses his children of seeing war as 'child's play'; as Edmund presents him with the poisoned tea, his father says that he is a 'good boy' and that the tea is 'good' for him (Fig. 3.16). The heavy dramatic irony here is a pronounced contrivance, and rings false. The scene establishes a contingent framework for its own reading (drawing attention to clearly identifiable ironic dialogue, mannered performance styles, and heavily symbolic use of lighting), but at the same time resists that framework in the context of a film pledged to realism and 'objectivity'. The symbolic significance suggested by this over-determination is ultimately denied by the film.



Fig. 3.14 – 0.47.13
Justified austerity.



Fig. 3.15 – 0.50.02
Terrified mundanity.



Fig. 3.16 – 0.51.35
Ironical significance.

Edmund's face, even in a scene which seems to state its expressionist allegiance to the boy's troubled mental state, is inscrutable, resisting any final interpretation of emotion. He is boy-like and adult, blundering and capable, ignorant and knowing. His calm and measured behaviour, even as he prepares the poison in the kitchen, seems at odds with both the realist and expressionist styles. Durnat argues that

expressionistic acting requires ‘catching the *one* important stance or gesture – and then intensifying it.’⁷⁵ The performance of Edmund, on the other hand, is characterised by a non-expressivity, a kind of mechanical doing dislodged from the possibility of meaning between two styles which alternatively and oppositionally define his world. Expressionism typically allows form to articulate on behalf of character; expressionist style in *Germania anno zero* sets up a dynamic inarticulacy with realism, and does not offer clear expression for or of a character. Such an attempt to read Edmund through form would allow only for reductive references to *confusion*, *disorientation*, *distress*, a series of unnuanced speculations on the motivations behind his defining acts.

The scene is ultimately interrupted in a shocking act of bathetic narrative discontinuity. At the very moment in which the father drinks, the camera observes him closely in a two-shot with Edmund; the scene’s satisfaction looks to be based in the old man’s death, the climactic justification of the expressionistic darkness. Instead, however, there is a disturbance at the door and the camera pans, dizzyingly quickly, to investigate (Fig. 3.17). It is a neighbour: the police are here. Karl-Heinz rushes out. Edmund is left, but the film cuts to follow the new scene. The father is forgotten. The police are seen in the street below, an amorphous mass of shadow; they, too, are rendered expressionistically, disturbing the logic of the previous scene whose unnatural lighting was explained by the narrative significance of the event being chronicled. As the style is sustained for this juxtaposed scene, the less important completion of a subplot concerning Karl-Heinz’s hiding from the police because of an erstwhile affiliation with the Nazis,

⁷⁵ Durnat (1976), 89.

the contrivance of the dramatic presentation is foregrounded, and the father's murder seems only anticlimactic.



Fig. 3.17 – 0.52.09
Dizzying pan.

The scene's effectiveness lies in its juxtaposition with the later scene of Edmund's suicide. Their inarticulate struggle energises the indeterminacy which has haunted the film and reaches its climax now. Peter Brunette is correct when he comments that both realism and expressionism refuse 'with equal vigor to be subsumed in a tempting dialectical synthesis.'⁷⁶ It is true that the patricide marks a kind of resolution of every crisis presented in the film: Eva's fatigue at caring for the family; Karl-Heinz's emasculation; the parasitic leeching of the weak on the strong identified by Enning; the weighty responsibility of becoming a burden felt by the father. The film trumpets the moment of seeming synthesis in a scene of arch stylisation, but the synthesis is faulty and is non-productive. What follows, after the father's body is discovered, is the reversion to a pared down realism which cannot find meaning in the murder. What should have been the film's decisive and meaningful act (the killing of a father) does not satisfy, and a further climax is demanded. The twin acts of patricide and suicide are presented in different styles, as parts of different realities, the first act failing to relieve the need for the second.

⁷⁶ Brunette, 47.

Edmund's final walk in the film is, as Žižek puts it, the 'scene for which the entire film was shot.'⁷⁷ This is not a statement about the narrative or psychological importance of the suicide. As Tag Gallagher says, when shooting began 'the story itself was still only a rough outline.'⁷⁸ In the original conception, Edmund survives, rehabilitated after killing his father by a compassionate humanist, an ending which would have found meaning in hope for the boy after his father's death. If the suicide scene is not narratively necessary, it is, nevertheless, formally essential. The film's signs, which have throughout pointed at their own insufficient and limited meanings, reach a crisis in the patricide scene, where symbolic significance is promised by the expressionist mode and then denied. In the shadow of this scene, Edmund walks a meaningless walk. He is rejected without cause by playing children, their expressions unsuggestive of motive (Fig. 3.18). He hears an organ playing in a ruined church, and stands in bright light to listen, but there is no revelation (Fig. 3.19). Eva calls Edmund's name, but the sound echoes around the ruined buildings with no more weight of meaning than the record of Hitler's speech. The boy plays futile games, hopping and sliding in the ruined buildings, but gives no indication of pleasure. The sequence's non-diegetic elements also offer no semblance of meaning. A redundant dissolve passes inelegantly from one shot of Edmund walking to another shot of Edmund walking; discontinuity is now a pervasive reality (Fig. 3.20). The non-diegetic music is disjunctive, and sets up a vague counterpoint with the image, rising in a crescendo of seeming dramatic significance long before the decisive act; the music sets up an expectation which is unmet by the image.

⁷⁷ Žižek (2008), 40.

⁷⁸ Gallagher (1998), 240.



Fig. 3.18 – 1.04.11
Inscrutable children.



Fig. 3.19 – 1.05.31
Absent revelation.



Fig. 3.20 – 1.05.52
Pervasive discontinuity.

Embedded in this nullity, in which all elements of image and sound point only to the absence of meaning by implying its presence as a trace, the suicide stands as the ultimately inexplicable and outrageously meaningless act. The possible meaning of rehabilitation, continuation, and hope offered by the first plot outline collapses. Instead, the film ends in a shot of Edmund's broken body, held by a woman in a

senseless variation on the *pietà*, pulling up to a final gaze at the ruins with which the film began (Fig. 3.21). Even in the film's closing moments, no definite, fulfilled statement is offered. Despite the woman's cry of 'mio Dio,' an appeal to a compassionate authority, the act's full significance remains unclear. In a final, savage switch, the film presents Edmund's self-destruction as flowing directly from his play; as Bazin says, 'the signs of play and the signs of death may be the same on a child's face, at least for those of us who cannot penetrate its mystery.'⁷⁹ Edmund's suicide, like the other elements of the film, is a sign which signifies emphatically but not beyond itself. In reference to Cesare Zavattini's 1952 manifesto on neorealism, Bert Cardullo writes that:

the camera has a "hunger for reality," and... the invention of plots to make reality palatable or spectacular is a flight from the historical richness as well as the political importance of actual, everyday life.⁸⁰



Fig. 3.21 – 1.12.45
Pietà.

The everyday life of Berlin in year zero, a space of disorientatingly free play of expression, a city of self-reflexive signs pointing only to the ruination of their own meanings, is precisely the unnavigable, articulated struggle between a grim realism and irruptive fantasy, sense lurking in the fractures between these indeterminable

⁷⁹ Bazin (2011), 59.

⁸⁰ Cardullo, 'What Is Neorealism?', 22.

and unsynthesisable styles. Rossellini does not just, as Brunette suggests, use expressionism to ‘foreground [the film’s] status as represented fiction.’⁸¹ Rather, he documents a city in transition in a film made up of explicit though shadowy gaps, spaces between ‘uncoded elements’ which render the film illegible and ‘out of control.’⁸² These gaps contain the possibilities of expression which the present denies. *Germania anno zero* cannot describe what is before (the unmentionable past) or after (the unimaginable future), but its images of the present nevertheless contain a frightening intimation of both, buried in the ruins and cracks of the film. It is in this convulsive inarticulacy – and not in the unlikely narrative twist of Edmund’s planned rehabilitation – that the film intimates its political effect. Rossellini claims that *Germania anno zero*’s ending is the birth of the ‘new way of life, the new way of seeing, the accent of hope and faith in the future, in the future and in people.’⁸³ This dogmatic insistence on hope rings discordantly with the film’s final images of ruin; the ruins are not necessarily despairing, but they are resistant to definitive interpretation. More credible is his general discussion of his films’ endings:

That would be the beginning of another film... There is a turning point in every human experience in life – which isn’t the end of the experience or the man, but a turning point. My finale is our turning point. Then it begins again – but as for what it is that begins, I don’t know.⁸⁴

The meaninglessness of Edmund’s death remains meaningless, but the film also resists a full sense of eschatological inertia. The present which will succeed the film’s action is unknown because unarticulated, but its existence is implied by the succession of discontinuous atemporal presents throughout the film. The film, with

⁸¹ Brunette, 38.

⁸² Brunette, 41.

⁸³ Gallagher (1998), 250.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Žižek (2008), 49.

its inarticulate characters and form, implicitly interrogates the expressibility of history as discourse: that is, any notion of history as a discourse dependent upon the explanation of the acts of discrete individuals, or the ideological behaviour of peoples, or the navigation of a coherent narrative which links succeeding events. In its carefully choreographed dual inarticulacy, *Germania anno zero*, by implication, explodes the myth of those Master Signifiers which are able to ground meaning. Such Master Signifiers, Žižek argues, are precisely what is in operation in the Nazi hegemony which still haunts the Berlin of the film:

Think about anti-Semitism in 1920s Germany: people experienced themselves as disoriented, thrown into undeserved military defeat, an economic crisis which eroded away their life savings, political inefficiency, moral degradation... and the Nazis provided a single agent which accounted for it all – the Jew, the Jewish plot. Therein lies the magic of the Master: although there is nothing new at the level of positive content, ‘nothing is quite the same’ after he pronounces his Word.⁸⁵

Žižek posits the ‘free floating dispersion of signifiers’ as the alternative to this landscape of Master Signifiers.⁸⁶ It is according to this alternative inarticulate model that *Germania anno zero* operates. The film ‘shows’ Hitler’s voice dispersing, and Edmund and the other characters are unable to offer a fully realised, stabilising gaze in its place. Eva, Enning, Karl-Heinz, the father, even Edmund recite or enact slogans, crude Master Signifiers. The film’s form, however, resists such a uniform stance, and in its resistance to stable meaning the film implies a challenge to hegemonic and fascistic structures. Critics have not always been willing to concede the film’s subversive credentials. Colin MacCabe does credit it with a series of

⁸⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 37.

⁸⁶ Žižek (2008), 118.

‘strategies of subversion,’ systematic refusals to privilege any dominant discourse.⁸⁷ He identifies these strategies, echoing Deleuze, as including a narrative which does not provide ‘us with knowledge – it provides us with various settings,’ and which is made up of gratuitous and discontinuous scenes which ‘stretch outside the narrative of the film.’⁸⁸ MacCabe places the film outside the model of classical realist texts which he defines as those ‘in which there is a hierarchy amongst the discourses,’ with one discourse functioning as the ‘realist metalanguage,’ privileged with the authority to declare the truth status of the object languages of dialogue and other subjective discourses.⁸⁹ The degree to which a text may be seen as realist is determined by ‘the way the subject matter is ordered and articulated...’⁹⁰ A revolutionary text, conversely, is one which ‘does not provide... knowledge ready-made in a dominant discourse but in the contradictions offered...’⁹¹ Given the fragmented nature of the structural articulations which he identifies in *Germania anno zero*, MacCabe may be expected to cite *Germania anno zero* as a revolutionary film. However, subversive though it may be, he denies it revolutionary status, saying that it shows ‘the traditional realist weakness of being unable to deal with contradiction.’⁹² He goes on to argue that Rossellini’s notion of the objective camera will not permit a substantial deviance from the realist resistance to contradiction:

At this point the camera itself, as a neutral agent, would become impossible. For it would have to offer two present contradictory articulations of the world and thus reveal its own presence. This cannot happen within a Rossellini film where if we are continually

⁸⁷ Colin MacCabe, *Tracking the Signifier: Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 48.

⁸⁸ MacCabe, 48.

⁸⁹ MacCabe, 34.

⁹⁰ MacCabe 49.

⁹¹ MacCabe, 54-5.

⁹² MacCabe, 49.

aware of our presence in the cinema (particularly in his historical films) – that presence itself is not questioned in any way. We are not allowed any particular position to read the film but we are allowed the position of a reader – an unproblematic viewer – an eternally human nature working on the material provided by the camera.⁹³

MacCabe's analysis underestimates the complex labyrinth of contradiction which makes up *Germania anno zero*. The discordant interactions of a stylistic articulation which oscillates between expressionism and realism complete this mass of contradiction which offers no fixed interpretative position and trumpets the inevitable contingency of any reading. Whether the film is revolutionary is for another discussion. However, it is the case that its documentation of Germany's ideological confusion in the years immediately following Nazi control are experienced more keenly through the formal vacillations of the film's style than they could have been through more stylistically consistent, causally linear, and semantically clear expression. The abyss into which Edmund jumps is rendered by the film in a form outside of expressible history, in which only stuttering contradictory utterances are possible.

⁹³ MacCabe, 49-50.

Chapter 4

Irreducible Discontinuities: Editing in *Belle de Jour*

The Fantasy World of *Belle de Jour*

Germania anno zero's achievement in juxtaposing style-defined blocks in a horizontal sequence is a specific and even idiosyncratic one. A more universal concern in what Christian Metz describes as the 'articulation of the reality shown on the screen' relates to the syntagmatic arrangement of shots through editing.¹ Metz distinguishes sharply between this articulation and the articulation of natural languages, but nevertheless maintains that montage provides the basic 'filmic chain.'² Noël Burch argues that editing in narrative film has traditionally been committed to a kind of continuity which makes 'any transition between two shots that were spatially continuous or in close proximity *imperceptible*...'³ However, this seamless and smoothly imperceptible technique has also been subverted. Luis Buñuel's 1967 film *Belle de Jour* displays its surrealist heritage in an editing style which accentuates inherent discontinuities and complicates the film's expression. As with *Journal d'un curé de campagne* and *Germania anno zero*, criticism on the film has often focused on the central character, seeking to explain these complexities of form through an understanding of her psychology. Like the novel on which it is

¹ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 115.

² Metz, 106; Metz argues that André Martinet's notion of double articulation – that is, the composition of expressive chains from meaningful signs (morphemes) which can, in turn, be broken up into smaller non-meaningful units (phonemes) – cannot apply to cinema, because the smallest element remains a 'complete segment of reality' (Metz, 115).

³ Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973), 11.

based, *Belle de Jour* tells the story of Séverine, a bourgeois woman who works as a prostitute in a brothel in the hours between 2 and 5 each afternoon. Andrew Sarris records how the adaptation to film

... retained most of the characters [and events] of the novel. Séverine goes to work for Madame Anaïs in both novel and film, and Belle de Jour's colleagues are Charlotte and Mathilde in both versions.⁴

The film, Roger Ebert claims, is 'seen entirely through the eyes of Severine'; it is, he argues, the story of her quest for the satisfaction of her sexual passion, and the 'subject of Severine's passion is always Severine.'⁵ However, despite its largely linear narrative, recognisable settings, and the seemingly coherent structuring operation of Séverine's perspective, the film's structure remains disrupted. In much criticism of the film, this sense of discontinuity and disturbance has been attributed to an addition made by Buñuel and his co-writer, Jean-Claude Carrière: an account of the protagonist's fantasy life, which results in a tension between reality and unreality. Michael Wood goes so far as to say that the Séverine of the film, unlike her literary forebear and counterpart, has 'fantasies which displace her in time [and] break the narrative continuity of her story, [and] make us wonder which of her worlds is real.'⁶ This critical approach has a paradoxical effect: simultaneous with the disturbance caused by these fantastic episodes (the discontinuities between reality and dream often difficult to navigate with certainty) comes the settling effect of a psychological reading of events through reference to Séverine's character. Even as the film's structure jolts from one register to another, from reality to

⁴ Andrew Sarris, 'The Beauty of *Belle de Jour*,' in *The World of Luis Buñuel: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Joan Mellen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 291.

⁵ Roger Ebert, 'Great Movies: *Belle de Jour*,' accessed February 10, 2015, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-belle-de-jour-1967>.

⁶ Michael Wood, *Belle de Jour* (London: BFI, 2000), 29.

fantasy, those jolts are absorbed by a critical discussion of what Andrew Sarris describes as ‘surreal reveries of feminine masochism.’⁷ The potentially disturbing ‘switch between orders of reality which accounts for many of the film’s tensions,’ identified by Raymond Durgnat, is neutralised by characterising the film as a study in the disturbed psychology of a single woman.⁸ The apparent fantasies of ‘floggings..., binding of hands with ropes, ... sealings of mouths, ... splattering with mud’ which the film introduces to the narrative become, in their violence, explanatory justifications for the shifts in the film’s diegetic orders of reality.⁹

This critical neutralisation of the film’s discontinuities relies on two assumptions operating in sympathy with one another. The first of these is the clear distinction between an objective reality and a subjective imaginative or fantasy life; the second is that the fantasy sequences are unambiguously to be located in the sexual imagination of one character, Séverine. The first of these *a priori* assumptions allows critics, like Michael Wood, to say that ‘with two significant exceptions we know quite clearly when Séverine is living in clock time and when she is living in memory or fantasy...’¹⁰ Maurice Drouzy ‘says the film contains two flashbacks or memories, and five dreams or daydreams.’¹¹ Raymond Durgnat constructs a more intricate schema comprising reality, daydreams, dreams, and hypnagogic visions, into which structure he places each of the film’s sequences.¹² Margot S. Kernan’s argument that ‘there is no priority in the alternating fantasy and reality states’ is compelling, and it is the case, as Sarris points out, that even when ‘she is still

⁷ Sarris, 291.

⁸ Raymond Durgnat, *Luis Buñuel* (London: Movie Magazine, 1967), 140.

⁹ Sarris, 291.

¹⁰ Wood, 46.

¹¹ Wood, 46.

¹² Durgnat (1967), 140-1.

dreaming, ... who is to say that the dream is any less real or vivid than the reality it accompanies?’¹³ This admission – even though some critics acknowledge the film’s lack of ‘structural emphasis of modal shift between fantasy and reality’ – nonetheless retains a notion of clearly demarcated territory between the levels of reality, usually signalled diegetically (with absurd action neatly bracketed as dream).¹⁴

The relationship between reality and Séverine’s fantasy is established in the film’s opening sequence, and a close consideration of the initial jolt between diegetic registers can reveal the operation of the critical assumptions. The film opens with a long take of over a minute and a half; the camera is positioned adjacent to a road which runs from the bottom left of the frame into the distance of the upper right. Travelling down this road, towards the camera, is a horse-drawn carriage, driven by two men in livery, approaching at a measured trot. Both temporally and spatially, a modest sense of disorientation is established: the archaic period detail of the carriage, coming into clear view to coincide with the title ‘Belle de Jour’, poses a question about which day the film is concerned with, which era it represents; the diagonal arrangement of the frame simultaneously gives an impression of both not looking at things straight on and of careful composition. As the carriage approaches, it becomes possible to observe that one horse (the left) is taller than the other, and, mirroring this, one driver (the right) is taller than the other; this quasi-symmetry, like the diagonal formation of the frame, gives the impression of composed imbalance. Slightly before the carriage draws alongside

¹³ Margot S. Kernan, ‘Belle de Jour by Luis Buñuel,’ *Film Quarterly* 23, No. 1 (Autumn 1969): 41; Sarris, 295.

¹⁴ Kernan, 38.

the camera, the camera turns with it, revealing two further occupants, an attractive woman and man, both laughing together. As the carriage retreats down the road, the camera, without losing the momentum of its pan, begins to pull back for a rising shot of the surrounding trees. Further shots of the carriage in motion are followed by a dialogue between the young lovers, which deals openly in cliché ('I love you more every day') and gives an impression of contrivance and artifice. After a discussion of her coldness, Pierre, her husband, stops the carriage and attempts to drag Séverine out; her compelling expressionlessness is momentarily given over to fear as she resists. At Pierre's instruction, the two coachmen half carry Séverine into the undergrowth, where she is humiliated, dragged, whipped, stripped, and raped (by the coachmen at her husband's instruction). From the beginning of the sequence, the red of Séverine's dress clashes violently with the muted colours of the men's clothes and the soft greens of the wood; she seems to be a victim in waiting.

After the violence of this scene, which has not explicitly announced itself as a fantasy sequence, the narrative turns to an entirely contrasting scenario, one which is generally seen by critical readings of the film to mark the irruption of reality into Séverine's dream world. In a well-appointed bedroom and *en suite* bathroom, Pierre and Séverine are preparing for bed. Pierre asks her what she is thinking about, his line beginning before the cut (as she is still being kissed by one of the coachmen). The clinical sterility of the new space, as well as the emphatically single beds, speaks of the same cool detachment witnessed at first in the carriage. Here, though, in the ordered world of the bourgeois domestic space (as opposed to the relative wildness of the woods), physical violence is inconceivable. Séverine, already lying

in bed, tells Pierre that she is thinking of them riding in a coach together. He announces, having kissed her at her request, that she must get up early to pack her bags, as they are going on a surprise holiday to celebrate their first wedding anniversary. She says that she is happy and wants him with her, but as he tries to get into her bed, she pushes him away; in this neatly pyjamaed world, in which order is perfectly signalled by the symmetry of the twin beds, sex feels like an impossible disorder. He retreats to his own bed; she apologises; he tells her to sleep, cutting off her attempts to explain. Pierre lies in his bed, still, impotent.

These opening sequences, bound together aurally across a disjunctive cut, may appear to be a clear-cut demonstration of a structure of alternating fantasy and reality. The dream does not initially declare itself, but its strangenesses (the sudden rise to violence, Pierre's *sangfroid*, Séverine's plea that Pierre should not 'let the cats out,' the mannered dialogue, the period details) are explained through the stabilising shift to a recognisable contemporary space, in which the same sexual tensions are worked through in a more conventionally realist manner. The carriage scene performs its own constructedness, tying in with the nature of fantasy, and this sense of artifice and constructedness is redeemed by the reassertion of the real. Michael Wood says with confidence, and a certain relief: '[n]ow we know where we are.'¹⁵ However, there is such a desire to confirm the twin assumptions that the film marks its fantasy/reality divide and that the fantasies are Séverine's, that several complicating factors are left unexplained.

¹⁵ Wood, 26.

In the carriage sequence, there is an excess of detail which cannot be explained straightforwardly through reference to Séverine's subjectivity. Given the archaic quality of many of the fantasy's trappings, it seems inexplicable that there should be a car in the background and, more disconcertingly, that the sound of horns should punctuate the early stages of the sequence. These are signifiers of a real, independent world, contiguous with the specific world of the dramatic action. Even moments such as Séverine's cryptic request that 'the cats' not be allowed out are not necessarily fantastic; Séverine may be begging not to be punished, the cat (or cat o' nine tails) a term for the whip.

Nor does the shift in scene to the bedroom offer the reassurances which Michael Wood claims for it. The bedroom scene feels as constructed as the carriage scene. The dialogue feels stilted, written, and delivered rather than spontaneous. Catherine Deneuve's delivery of her lines (most startlingly when she says that she has been thinking 'About you. About us. We are driving in a coach') is robotic, said as though the lines are a formula which she recites on cue. Far from suggesting that the film is invested in her fantasy, in this moment she is wife as automaton, pandering to her husband's fantasy that he is always on her mind. The remainder of the dialogue is similarly contrived, with its heavy-handed references to anniversaries, holidays, happiness: mechanisms and indicators of an idealised bourgeois marriage. It is significant, also, that as the carriage sequence cuts to the bedroom, Pierre emphatically occupies the position of power. It is his voice which interrupts the earlier sequence and marks the transition, and it is his gaze which the camera initially privileges (Fig. 4.1). The camera watches Séverine, voyeuristically gazing at her in bed, over Pierre's shoulder as he puts on his pyjamas; he is

doubled in the mirror, allowing him to dominate both the left and the central portions of the frame, meaning that a reading of the shot from left to right presents Pierre's back (as proxy for the camera's gaze), Pierre's smiling, half-dressed front (as indicator of the scene's sexual dimension), and the small, remote, reflected image of Séverine (as object of sexual desire). In this reading, the fantasy is not Séverine's, but Pierre's. Even the sequence's conclusion, in which Séverine rejects her husband's advances, plays out as much as a depiction of male anxiety as it does female fantasy. The bedroom is no more 'real' than the carriage.

Gwynne Edwards is unreasonably reducing the film's irreducible complexities when she says that Séverine's progress through the narrative is towards 'finally ridding herself of the fantasies that in the past had been her only escape from her buttoned-up bourgeois existence.'¹⁶ The buttoned-up bourgeois existence is simply a fantasy of another kind, a fantasy enacted in many real, stifling domestic spaces. In both the family home and the brothel, Séverine is gazed upon and made to perform ritualistic and violently oppressive acts (whether being raped or made to recite, robot-like, declarations of fidelity). And ultimately, Elliot Stein's impression of a woman 'riding with Pierre in the magic lantern of her mind down a beautiful country lane, where at any moment he may stop the carriage and deal her the merely divinely human punishment which to her is another name for love' speaks at least of the possibility of a misogyny which underpins a male fantasy of power and female submissiveness.¹⁷ Within the world of *Belle de Jour*, fantasy is not so readily attributable to one character.

¹⁶ Gwynne Edwards, *A Companion to Luis Buñuel* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2005), 12.

¹⁷ Elliot Stein, 'Buñuel's Golden Bowl,' in *The World of Luis Buñuel: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Joan Mellen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 288.



Fig.4.1 – 0.05.35
Fantastic composition.

Séverine is undeniably central to the film's dramatic organisation. She is present in almost every scene, and is clearly the motivation behind Marcel's climactic shooting of Pierre. However, in both the stultifying atmosphere of her home and the brothel, with pointed avoidance of any statement concerning the reasons for her unusual double life, she remains a mute cipher. Like the Japanese client's box, she is full, but her fullness is not explained. As such, it would be reductive to argue that the film is concerned exclusively with a single subjective portrait of a masochistic woman. Its scope is far greater than this. It is concerned instead, perhaps, with the violent structures of bourgeois life, in which a patriarchal fantasy of domination is played out, masquerading as the desires of a woman who is, in fact, kept silent. On the subject of attributing the fantasy sequences, Andrew Sarris asks:

But whose desires and whose fantasies? Buñuel's? His heroine's?
Actually a bit of both.¹⁸

In fact, this answer is not broad enough. The desires which drive forward but fail to articulate themselves in *Belle de Jour* are the inadmissible desires of bourgeois life.

¹⁸ Sarris, 290.

Reference to Séverine's emotional and mental life does not explain away the film's playful, humorous, and subversive formal gestures. Nor does the form serve as a simple illustration of the character. Séverine is the non-speaking centre of a mass of contradictory definitions which are imposed on her: she is an impossible model of woman as virginal *and* promiscuous, loving *and* detached, beautiful *and* repellent. It is the fantasy of the brothel clients – themselves proxies for bourgeois masculinity more generally – to visit repeatedly 'the new girl', a woman who is both experienced and naïve. It is this story – the story of constructed femininity within a bourgeois model – that the film picks apart, disturbing it with a form that is unpredictable and discontinuous. As Hal Foster suggests, subversive acts should not be thought of 'as a rupture produced by a heroic marginality outside the symbolic order but as a fracture traced by a strategic marginality within the order.'¹⁹ Séverine's position in the film is a strategic marginality; she is forced out from the centre by the pressing concerns of the men around her: Pierre, Marcel, her clients in the brothel. Séverine cannot function as a comfortably explanatory centre for the film's incoherencies, but can contribute to a broader challenge to bourgeois master narratives. Indeed, one of these bourgeois narratives is Séverine herself: woman as perfect wife and/or harlot. The critical attempt to tame the film's incoherencies with reference to Séverine's psychology diminishes the efficacy of this critique.

This is not to say that the carriage and bedroom sequences are uncomplicatedly *not* the fantasies of Séverine, nor that they *are* uncomplicatedly the fantasies of Pierre. Rather, it is to trouble the assumptions that the film is clear in its delineation of

¹⁹ Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla, *Queering Buñuel* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2008), 6.

fantasy and reality, and that the clearly-marked fantasies are necessarily Séverine's. Early American prints of the film italicised the subtitles for the sections which the distributors took to be fantasy.²⁰ Ultimately, such a clear separation of the film into strands of differing diegetic status is a violence to the film, a smoothing out of the very discontinuities which make it an elusive and challenging text. The articulations of the film are not simply between fantasy and reality, Séverine and the world. 'In the end,' Buñuel himself writes, 'the real and the imaginary dissolve into each other. I myself couldn't say what is real and what is imaginary in the film.'²¹ If this troubling of the dynamic between the real and the unreal is accepted, the film's strategies of discontinuity must be explored through reference to an alternative set of achievements. Séverine's muteness is no longer a phenomenon *compensated for* by an articulate form (in which fantasy and reality sequences adhere to their own presiding logics and may be read coherently). Clearly demarcated fantasy sequences do not shed light on her difficulties in speaking within her stultifying bourgeois reality. Rather, the form, with its stuttering ellipses between registers, draws attention to its own cracks and gaps without ever resolving them by explanation.

Cuts in the Mind

Criticism on the film has often sought to smooth out the transitions between clearly definable realities and fantasies through reference to the main character; it has rendered this discontinuity continuous through interpretations that make reductive

²⁰ See Kernan, 38.

²¹ Wood, 45.

reference to Séverine's psychology. This process has at times coerced the film into straitjacketing conformity with the operations of the conventional narratives of classical cinema. Nowhere have these operations been more crudely applied to *Belle de Jour* than in the account of Séverine's abuse as a child. In the novel, the cause and effect structure is apparent; Séverine is abused as a little girl, the trauma of the event constructing in her a violent and self-destructive desire that allows sexual satisfaction only through domination:

To reach her mother's room from her own, Séverine who was eight had to go down a long hallway. She disliked the trip, and invariably ran all the way. But one morning Séverine was brought up short halfway down the corridor. A door leading to the bathroom had just opened. A plumber appeared: short, squat. From under spare reddish lashes his eyes contemplated the girl. Bold as she was, Séverine was scared, took a step back.

Her movement decided him. He glanced around sharply and grabbed Séverine with both hands. An odor of gas, of animal strength closed around her. Two ill shaven lips burned her neck. She fought back.

The workman laughed silently, sensually. Under her frock his hands slipped over the soft flesh. Suddenly Séverine stopped struggling. She was stiff, white. The man put her on the floor and left noiselessly.

Séverine's governess found her lying in the hallway. She thought the girl had slipped. So did Séverine.²²

The sexual nature of this episode is apparent ('his hands slipped over the soft flesh'), as is the moral (with the conventional pun on 'slipped'). Presented as a Preface to the novel, the potential shock of this episode's discontinuity from the remainder of the novel is neutralised; as the origin of Séverine's sexual development, the scene is presented first. The reader is told that she is eight and that she is at home. Habit is hinted at ('invariably') and character features are asserted ('bold'). Her abuser is not characterised, but his position and physical description are given (a 'plumber' who is 'short and squat'). *What* is being

²² Joseph Kessel, *Belle de Jour*, trans. Judith Thurman (London: Duckworth, 2007), 3-4.

expressed about the character may be shocking, but there is nothing shocking about the *form* of the novel's account of child abuse. This account marks, within the novel, the beginning of a detailed and compelling psychological account of a woman who finds herself bored by the 'well-to-do, measured, assured' nature of her life and who, driven by 'subtle and mysterious struggles of the instincts, those creatures of the dark,' works in a brothel where men satisfy 'themselves on her body... whose weight crushed hers, whose knotty limbs quartered her.'²³ The novel is the story of Séverine, who is beset by an 'unknown [inner] woman who had seemed part of her on the brink of death, and who had been slowly destroying, by a succession of strange, corrupt fantasies, her pure self.'²⁴ Séverine's psychological condition within the novel is clearly expressed through an articulation that registers the trauma of diegetic violence but disavows the possible contribution of a discontinuous form. Instead, the structure of the novel gives the illusion of continuous event, thought, and psychological development.

The account of the abuse in the film resists such a univocal statement on behalf of the character. Séverine, returning home one day, examines some flowers sent to her by her husband's friend. In a complicated moving shot which pointedly accommodates her every action, she carries the flowers to another point in the living room, drops them, leaves the room. There is no temporally continuous cut in synchronicity with the vase smashing, or to highlight the expression of Séverine, as may have been expected. After she has left the frame there *is* a cut, one which marks a temporal and spatial ellipsis; she is now dressed differently and in her bathroom. The implication is that the interval is not a substantial one, and that

²³ Kessel, 18, 33, 91.

²⁴ Kessel, 34.

probably only minutes have passed, but there is an uncomfortable non-specificity. The shot in the bathroom, formally paralleled with that in the living room, is a continuous take, and the editing does not punctuate the dropping of a bottle of perfume. This minimal editing – in both its use of spatial and temporal ellipses, and in its failure to remark upon the rhythms of the action – seems disconnected from the specifics of the diegesis. A woman's voice – whose diegetic status is unclear – calls 'Come here, Séverine,' after which the scene cuts to a shot of a little girl being kissed on the cheek by a man in overalls. The little girl shows no emotion, and her relationship with the man is unclear. The woman's voice cries again (though whether she is in the adult Séverine's present or the little girl's present is not specified). Finally, following another cut, a scene in Pierre's study begins.

The temptation to analyse these sequences psychologically and symbolically is pressing. The flowers are from Husson, the friend of Pierre who has already made advances on Séverine, and the breaking of the vase could be seen as foreshadowing the disruption which he will later represent. The colour of the flowers – a brilliant red – may symbolise the sex and danger of Séverine's desire. The way in which the maid is left to clear up signifies, perhaps, the bourgeois world of leisured *ennui* which Séverine feels that she must escape. The bathroom becomes a site of vanity, and the spilling of the perfume a symbol of waste and decadence. However, once again these readings are discouraged by the film's subtle interplay of continuity and discontinuity. This sequence of three shots (Séverine in the living room – Séverine in the bathroom – the little girl with the man) become increasingly illegible.

The possibility for symbolic reading in the first shot is evident and tempting: colour symbolism, the erotic suggestiveness of red flowers, the emphatic signification of breaking glass, the rigid hierarchies acting as social comment. The second shot permits less specificity of symbolic reading: the perfume is a more general bourgeois prop than the flowers, and its bottle, unlike the flowers' vase, does not break. The third shot is confused and confusing, and is more explicitly marked by its elliptical relationship with the preceding shot. Diegetically, it is unsatisfactory: who is the woman shouting? why does neither the little girl nor the man acknowledge the voice? is the little girl definitely Séverine? is this memory or fantasy? However, it is wholly successful as the third shot in a diminishing scale – getting shorter each time, punctuated by increasingly unnavigable spatial and temporal ellipses – each structured around a gesture of ambiguous violence. Edward Buscombe's insistence that 'clearly she's being molested' is to deny the film's own project of discontinuity, when the scene lacks any of the clarifying features of the novel's equivalent scene.²⁵ Childhood abuse as a motivating factor for Séverine's adult decision to enter the brothel is, in fact, imposed, a hangover from the novel and an attempt to tame the unruly operations of the discontinuous film. The film formally undercuts the seemingly explanatory nature of this sequence, and it becomes a function of discontinuous image and sound rather than continuity. This discontinuity is not explanatory, or formal disjuncture would have pointed out the other points of crisis in the scene. Rather, it is a purely rhythmic formal realisation of a more abstract complication. The discontinuity which is at the heart of the film is a function as much of editing as it is of diegetic structure and

²⁵ Edward Buscombe, 'Tied Up by Buñuel,' *Film Quarterly*, 65, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 59.

narrative event, and unlike diegetic concerns, Buñuel's use of editing is more resistant to reductive critical strategies.

This is not to deny the key importance of either Séverine, or Catherine Deneuve's performance. It is, instead, to complicate the relationship between the discontinuities of character and the discontinuities of form. In the film's opening sequence, there are stark disjunctures between the carriage sequence (rural, exterior, violent, with an archaic design) and the bedroom (urban, interior, repressed, with a contemporary design). Later in the film, there are marked differences between the principal settings of home and brothel, and between the (potentially) fantastic landscapes of beach, duelling field, pasture, ski resort. By responding to this narrative level of discontinuity as a function of Séverine's psychology, criticism has tended to analyse *her* rather than the film's textures. This conventional response has run counter to the signifiers of a more complex set of articulations suggested by Catherine Deneuve's icy performance, the difficulty of locating the subject of the fantasy, and the film's lack of resolution. Like the priest in *Journal d'un cure de campagne* and Edmund in *Germania anno zero*, Séverine is in one sense a functioning absence. She is unable to discuss her frustrations with anyone, and her afternoon life in the brothel cannot be described to her husband, nor her home life to her fellow prostitutes. In response to this absence and silence, criticism has often made sense of formal inarticulacy by transforming it into an articulation of Séverine's emotional and mental life. This has neglected a close consideration of Buñuel's technical style, and in particular the expressively discontinuous rhythms of his editing. Indeed, to return to the opening sequence, the revelation of such a scrutiny is that formal disruption both precedes and

outlasts the narrative jolts of Séverine's violation. Far from being disappointingly 'untidy... because their beauty has been bundled up too rapidly,' as Michael Wood claims, the systematic shocks of the unlinear editing represent a project of formal discontinuity which resonates with the discontinuities and gaps in the characterisation of Séverine.²⁶

The opening shot's extensive duration and careful composition give an initial sense of compulsion, the road's straightness and the carriage's slow-but-steady progress towards the camera hinting at an inevitability. However, the slight unsteadiness of the camera's left pan suggests an improvised, accommodating movement, throwing the shot's earlier sense of fatalism into doubt. The work of this pan, though, is furthered considerably by the climax of the shot. As the shot climbs, rising with the verticals of the trees, edging towards the sky (Fig. 4.2), a stark cut jolts the film with a sudden and shocking cut. Without an opportunity for reorientation, the camera is now facing the carriage, tracking forward, seeming to charge the horses, one of which is now cantering (Fig. 4.3). The danger and aggression of this moving shot intimate an equivalent violence to that which will soon be enacted. Across another cut, the camera is now tracking backwards, in front of the carriage, very close to the horses' shaking heads (Fig. 4.4). The full disjunctive, kinetic rhythm of this montage is a function of rapidly and arbitrarily changing direction (still, left pan, vertical tilt, forward track, backward track). The film's introduction does not permit a position from which to view the characters or their actions, as though in defiance of any attempt to draw an interpretation grounded in a clearly stated position. A fluctuating rhythm characterises the

²⁶ Wood, 12.

remainder of the carriage sequence, moving between long-duration, often moving shots and relatively staccato shots of isolated synecdochic details and actions (Séverine's bound hands, the whips, her back as it is struck). Between cuts, the sequence often suggests an ellipsis of sorts: Séverine is knocked to the ground, gagged, bound, in each case in the interval between shots. The discontinuity here is not spatial (as earlier in the sequence), but temporal; change of direction has been replaced by an indefinite ellipsis as the disconcerting principle.²⁷



Fig. 4.2 – 0.02.09
Sudden rupture.



Fig. 4.3 – 0.02.09
Spatial discontinuity.

²⁷ The notion of indefinite ellipsis is one of Noël Burch's categories of articulation between shots (see Burch, 3-16).



Fig. 4.4 – 0.02.18
Change in direction.

In order to justify any claim that the film's form may be reinforcing a diegetic structure of fantasy clearly marked from reality, the cut from forest to bedroom should be of a greater magnitude of discontinuity than these cuts within the forest. However, this is not the case. It *is* the case that the temporal and spatial shift across the cut (from the *then* of unspecified period to the *now* of chic, contemporary life, and from the *there* of outside to the *here* of familiar inside) is dramatic. It is eased, though, through the use of Pierre's voiceover, posing a question which could be asked either in the world of the wood or the bedroom. The familiarity of the characters helps to smooth the discontinuity, along with the association of the sex of the carriage scene with the bedroom of the married couple. Instead, as with the carriage scene, it is the internal editing of the scene which creates hiccup-like disjunctures. The initial exchange between Séverine and Pierre has the repetitive patterns of a shot/reverse-shot sequence, but the handling is not symmetrical, and the initial medium shot of Séverine clumsily tracks in a little, as though the shot is not quite ready to begin when the cut insists that it has to. The wider shot of the two beds which follows fails to bring full compositional order, as it is shot on a line perpendicular to the 180 degree line along which the shot/reverse-shots of the couple are filmed. The disconnections diegetically signalled by the tensions within

their relationship are manifested in the patterns of cutting within the scene: their first kiss is shot in a reasonably wide shot which is not affected by the intimacy; their second kiss, within the same shot, prompts a rapid tracking in; the third kiss, though, still within the same shot, prompts a jump cut. This cut, made uncomfortable by its movement of less than 30 degrees, is also an overlapping cut, inexplicably repeating the action and creating an alternative type of temporal discontinuity; Séverine's lips reach Pierre's twice, once on either side of the cut. Once again, in this sequence the formal discontinuities pre-empt the diegetic. More significantly, the continued use of spatial and temporal disjuncture (the former in direction change and jump cuts, the latter in ellipsis and repetition), as well as the auditory connector which smooths the transition between wood and bedroom, mark the two sequences as related. The 'broken logic' which Michael Wood detects in the carriage scene is, contrary to his claims, as much a feature of the bedroom scene.²⁸

Severance and Integrity

Editing, in the films of Buñuel, is a site of challenge to the existing hegemonic orders of conventional life. Robert Stam suggests that '[b]y opting for narrative logic and bourgeois decorum, Buñuel argued, conventional cinema had squandered its potential for creating an insurrectionary, convulsive, anti-canonical art which would visualise the "automatic writing of the world."' ²⁹ These convulsions are most readily to be found in an editing which eschews the reductive

²⁸ Wood, 26.

²⁹ Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 56-7.

logic of continuity editing. Buñuel identified ‘the four main pillars that support the great temple of Cinematics’ as ‘the detached shot,’ ‘camera angles,’ ‘lighting,’ and ‘editing and composition, the strongest and most definitive support.’³⁰ This marks a clear privileging of ‘editing – film’s golden key – that combines, comments on, and unifies all these elements.’³¹ This process of unification is not one of narrative or psychological continuity, but rather a process of unification into a complexly expressing inarticulate form:

The filmmaker conceives by means of images distributed in shots. His idea, once realized, is made up of disparate elements that have to be fitted, mixed, and woven together. In other words, the filmmaker is obliged to compose, to inject rhythm, and only then does cinema become art. For if cinema is movement above all, it must be rhythm in order to become cinematic... Through successive shots the lens presents, in abstracted form, the main elements... and the feelings created by it; thus we achieve the objective of a cinematic film. It does not simply describe a movement or a sensation – for we identify with the man running – but furthermore, in the harmony of light and shadow, its series of images with their unequal duration and varying spatial relations produces the same pure delight we find in the lines of a symphony or in the abstract forms and volumes of a modern still life. This is how we define the modern tendencies of cinema, which might be called photo cinema, psychological cinema, pure cinema.³²

The ‘necessary link between the images’ is not principally narrative, but rhythmic, a binding of abstract elements into a discontinuously articulated structure, where that discontinuity becomes the structure’s expressive feature.³³ Michael Wood’s comment that ‘one of the joys of cinema is that anything can happen between shots – centuries could pass, for example,’ represents some of the possibilities of Buñuel’s editing, but needlessly reduces the disorientating effect of the disjuncture to a

³⁰ Luis Buñuel, *An Unspeakable Betrayal*, trans. Garrett White (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 96.

³¹ Buñuel, 111.

³² Buñuel, 126-7.

³³ Buñuel, 97.

surprise at discontinuous time.³⁴ Buñuel's discontinuities of editing bridge, between cuts, a network of temporal, spatial, conceptual, diegetic, and modal difference.

The significance of editing in *Belle de Jour* has largely been neglected by a criticism which has remained more committed to a discussion of diegesis, and has argued for the simplicity or crudeness of Buñuel's style. Part of this stems from Buñuel's own claim 'that he had no film style...'³⁵ The experience of watching a Buñuel film makes it clear that he has no single style, and the settling into predictable rhythms (even unconventional ones) is antithetical to the strategy of *Belle de Jour*. This unpredictability results in a critical response of splendid inconsistency: Raymond Durgnat says that Buñuel's 'graceless' style 'permits the fastest possible flow of actions and reactions within a scene, while keeping that scene a unity in the spectator's mind'; Roger Ebert, conversely, claims that the film is 'languorous' in its pacing.³⁶ Sánchez Biosca argues that Buñuel's French films are freer and more given to 'the collage style,' suggesting an emphasis on cutting; Kernan, meanwhile, claims that the films are defined by 'neutral camera positions and simple editing' with 'no shock cuts, or differing shot lengths.'³⁷ This critical inconsistency is a function of the inconsistency of the film's achievement; the pacing is languorous *and* rapid, defined by both complex cutting *and* simple editing. While Samuels dismisses this inconsistency as evidence that Buñuel's 'mastery of technique... seems questionable,' the mastery lies in the combination of different styles of

³⁴ Wood, 63.

³⁵ Wood, 8.

³⁶ Durgnat (1967), 15; Ebert, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-belle-de-jour-1967>.

³⁷ Vicente Sánchez Biosca, 'Scenes of Liturgy and Perversion in Buñuel,' trans. John McCarthy, in *Luis Buñuel: New Readings*, ed. Peter William Evans and Isabel Santaolalla (London: BFI, 2004), 175; Kernan, 38, 39.

editing, each undermining the last before a clear order can be established.³⁸ Gwynne Edwards diminishes the effect of this discontinuity when she suggests that '[b]ecause of this [straightforward and consistent style], his films – certainly his best films – appear to be seamless and to move forward with absolute logic.'³⁹ The achievement of *Belle de Jour*'s editing – with its changes in tempo, and cut-defined spatial and temporal ellipses – is precisely to defy logic. And the logic which is defied is the restrictive logic of bourgeois values. As Pauline Kael writes, contrasting Buñuel's discontinuous style with prettiness:

And then there is the matter of style. Buñuel doesn't pour on the prettiness, he doesn't turn a movie into a catered affair. There is such a thing as mass bourgeois movie sentimentality; we are surrounded by it, inundated by it, sinking in it, and Buñuel pulls us out of this muck...⁴⁰

Belle de Jour represents a discontinuous and inarticulate series of discrete segments, edited in such a way as to challenge the narrative's legibility and logic. Motivation becomes clouded, and subjectivity unattributable, through a dynamic variation in edited rhythm. Despite the dangers of relying too heavily on Séverine's constructed character as a means of reading the film, her name may be a sign towards the film's significant interplay between continuity and discontinuity. While the name *Séverine* means *stern*, related etymologically to the English *severe*, it also carries connotations – via the French verb *sevrer* and the English verb *to sever* – of cutting. Severing, that is the imposition of a discontinuity to a structure's integrity through violent cutting, is at the heart of the rhythmic structure of *Belle de Jour*. Buñuel's editing style is neither devoted to the continuity style of classical Hollywood, nor is it wholly

³⁸ Charles T. Samuels, 'Cinema in the Sixties,' *American Libraries* 2, no. 5 (May 1971): 464.

³⁹ Edwards, 15.

⁴⁰ Pauline Kael, 'Saintliness,' in *The World of Luis Buñuel: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Joan Mellen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 277.

arbitrary or anarchic. Scenes remain recognisable units, even if the editing of sequences binds together scenes which seem diegetically discrete (as between the opening carriage scene and the bedroom scene which follows). *Belle de Jour* contains different styles of editing, representing different degrees of discontinuity, allowing an alternating commitment to both integrity and its disruption. These different styles may be described for convenience as *montage* and *découpage*. Bruce Kavin comments that

As soon as a film is made of more than one shot, editing comes into play. When one shot does not simply follow another, and their juxtaposition has dynamic significance, one speaks not about editing but about montage. The French term for simple continuity editing is *découpage*: it denotes “ordinary” sequential cutting, where one shot follows another in a linear, easy-to-follow manner. Montage – from the French verb *monter*, “to ascend, mount or assemble” – denotes the way one shot is mounted next to another, but it has the connotation of an ascending or heightened effect. Montage then is the art of assembling individual shots into a dynamic system.⁴¹

The dynamic system of montage can be seen clearly in the scene in which Séverine visits the brothel for the first time. As she climbs the stairs towards Madame Anaïs’s flat, she is shot from the landing above; her head is severed from her body by the complicated intersections of the various diagonals, verticals, and curves of the bannisters. A purely profilmic effect of disrupted space is created. As she climbs, approaching the camera’s elevated position, an unattributed voice is heard. As Séverine looks to her right, there is a sudden and inelegant zoom in to her face (Fig. 4.5). A cut, and the shot is now of a priest, flanked by acolytes, distributing Communion (Fig. 4.6). A second rapid zoom, this time in to the Host, mirrors the zoom moments before to Séverine. The diegetic shift remains unexplained at this point, though a spatial and temporal ellipsis may be presumed. The rhyming uses

⁴¹ Bruce F. Kavin, *How Movies Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 98.

of zoom draw a connection between Séverine, as she approaches the brothel, and the Host. There follows a further cut, this time to the little girl – clearly said to be Séverine – refusing to accept the proffered Host at her first Communion. A further cut returns to the staircase leading to the brothel. The voice of the priest continues to sound as Séverine steps forward to Madame Anaïs's door, where, following another cut, a third rapid, inelegant zoom focuses on the sign: 'Mmm Anaïs Modes'.



Fig. 4.5 – 0.20.21
Bracing herself for the cut.



Fig. 4.6 – 0.20.22
Discontinuous time.

The effect of this sequence is typically neutralised in discussions of the film through recourse to character psychology: Séverine, at a moment of transgression, recalls an earlier moment of transgression. However, this reading denies the uneasy sense of illogic created by the rhythms of cutting. The zooms (a technique used sparingly

through the film) rhyme and create an interpretative difficulty. The difficulty of the initial rhyme is not that it suggests no parallel between subjects but rather that possible parallels proliferate into a vertiginous array of possibilities: Séverine's visit to the brothel could be said to mirror the sacrifice, the ritual, the satisfaction, the transformation, or the sin associated with the Mass. The further link forged with the sign for the brothel adds another level of interpretative confusion: the link could be dishonesty and deception (Séverine, the Church, and the sign which claims to be for a fashion house all lie). What renders these rhymes ultimately and unstably polyvalent is the lack of explanation offered by the needlessly inserted shots of the Mass. Masquerading as contextualising glimpses of backstory, the sequence actually remains entirely unexplained, without any reason given for Séverine's refusal to accept the Host. Her transgression there, and her resistance to patriarchal authority, is precisely *not* a foreshadowing of her arrival at the brothel, which, while an act of independence, is also an admission of her desire to capitulate passively with the misogynistic fantasies of men (including the representatives of such patriarchal institutions as business and medicine). While it is true that the film '*articulates* through *montage*,' that articulation is the jointed structuring of successive segments and not clear expressiveness; it is an inarticulate articulation.⁴²

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, discussing Sergei Eisenstein's theories of montage, point out that an 'interpretation is not simply handed to the viewer;

⁴² Paul Sandro, 'Textuality of the Subject in *Belle de Jour*,' *SubStance* 9, no.1, issue 26 (1980): 46.

rather, the editing discontinuities force the viewer to work out implicit meanings.⁴³ In *Belle de Jour*, this dialectic process does not fully function, and even implicit meanings are obscure. The film characterises the discontinuous cut (that is, the cut which presents a spatial, temporal, or conceptual ellipsis) as an abyss which meaning cannot straightforwardly cross. Cuts are encountered as local discontinuities which destabilise the coherence of the text as a whole. The significance of the young Séverine's resistance is disturbingly unclear, an effect compounded by the fact that the cut back to her on the stairs of the brothel does not perfectly align with the previous shot of the staircase, and Séverine is no longer looking to the right, creating a discontinuity akin to a jump cut, the unease complicated by the insertion of the two temporally disjunctive shots of the Mass. There is no clear implicit meaning to be construed here. The film constructs a series of shots which demand to be read as a sequence, structured around an apparent cause and effect relationship, but what that relationship is remains obscure and ultimately there is a 'lack of linear, cause-effect narrative structure, which frustrates the spectator's desire for interpretation and foregrounds the constructedness of representation.'⁴⁴ It is in its use of montage with simultaneous insistence on and denial of relationship between articulated shots that *Belle de Jour* announces its surrealist operations; '[t]he result of these recombinations [in early Surrealist collages] was the famous *dépaysement* or disorientation so typical of Surrealist art.'⁴⁵ This disorientating absence of diegetic sense is emphasised by

⁴³ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 7th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2004), 343.

⁴⁴ Gutiérrez-Albilla, 5.

⁴⁵ Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 11.

Catherine Deneuve's performance, which exudes a controlled sense of distance, and which resists any definitive reading.

A Surfeit of Significance

The violence of the disjuncture between shots varies through the film. At times, the montage is overtly and aggressively irreducible to narrative. After her first day in the brothel, Séverine refuses to go out with Pierre, claiming that she has a headache. As the camera zooms in on Séverine holding her head, her expression illegible, the film cuts radically and without explanation to an expansive plain on which cowboys are herding cattle. Space and time jump, and, with them, genre, the emerging scene bearing some of the distinctive hallmarks of a Western. A further cut, to a pot of soup on a fire; the shot pulls back to show Pierre, dressed inappropriately in fashionable tweeds, tasting the soup. A further pull back reveals his picking up of a spade and leaning on it, while Husson, his companion, complains of the coldness of the meal. Pierre points towards the cattle and asks 'Are bulls given names like cats?' Husson replies, as though the answer is obvious, that 'Most of them are called Remorse, except the last one. He's called Expiation.' The two men stand, Pierre leaning on the spade and Husson's head dipped forward. At this point in the sequence, the superficial diegetic disturbance is extreme: the place is unclear, the sequence seems outside of time altogether, aesthetic clashes (between the cowboys' clothes and the urban chic of Pierre's wardrobe, for example) fill the frame. In addition to these clashes, further strangenesses mark the sequence out, most notably the fact that, while Pierre and

Husson speak, their mouths do not move, even though the dialogic lines give no suggestion of internalisation. The scene is mannered and stylised.

Despite this strangeness, the sequence seemingly remains readable. The segue from the earlier scene of Séverine in bed suggests that this could be her fantasy, which would justify much of the strangeness. The editing of the sequence (despite the initial confusion of the cut to the shot of cattle herding) focuses attention on continuity and composition. The context of the Western is a form of grounding, even though unanticipated, in recognisable generic terms. The arrangement of the two men at the mid-point of the sequence is an allusion to Jean-François Millet's painting *The Angelus* (Figs. 4.7, 4.8); even if the allusion is not recognised, the shot feels consciously composed and readable. The references to Remorse and Expiation speak to Séverine's situation as she deceives her husband, and the figures of the bulls suggest both masculinity and sacrifice, a seemingly sensible symbol for Pierre. Within the sequence, Pierre says that the soup 'is cold and I can't warm it,' a figure for the frigidity which he believes grips his wife, with whom he does not have a warm physical relationship. Even as the sequence cuts again, during the *Angelus* composition, it is merely to a low shot of Husson, his head dipped forward in a studied piety; these good, hard-working men are deceived by Séverine, whose guilt shows them at prayer after work, their mouths still as they are denied full, knowing voices by her dishonesty.



Fig. 4.7
Jean-François Millet, *The Angelus*.



Fig. 4.8 – 0.36.41
Allusive composition.

However, this reading will not suffice. If this is Séverine's guilt fantasy, there is no explanation for Husson's presence. She cannot feel the same disloyalty to him as she does to her husband, so there is no reason for them to be bracketed together in a composition of uncomfortably false piety. The scene abounds in too much meaning, the symbolism confused: the soup is both cold *and* eaten; the bulls are stupid and clumsy *as well as* masculine and sacrificial; the allusion to the painting suggests unimaginative imitation *as much as* calming composition; Remorse may be obviously related to Séverine's situation, but the reference to Expiation is harder to explain away. This excess of symbolism retains the possibility of legibility only through a denial of some of the scene's complexity. Michael Wood writes of the sequence:

The trouble is that the sequence makes too much symbolic sense, and is so elaborately and tritely orchestrated, so full of tacky images of piety, that it suggests both that Séverine is enjoying her guilt, perhaps finding in it a secondary source of pleasure, and that Buñuel is up to something. But what?⁴⁶

This reading, while acknowledging the symbolic complexity of the sequence, elects nonetheless to render it explicable through character: 'Séverine is enjoying her guilt.' Such clarity of reading does not take into account the discontinuities which follow, and which may loosely be defined as Buñuel being 'up to something.' After the shot of Husson at prayer, the film cuts across a non-specific temporal ellipsis to a shot of the two men shovelling mud into a bucket. The temporal jolt is signalled by Husson's asking what time it is. Pierre says that he will take Husson to his wife so that he can say 'hello.' A further cut shows Séverine, dressed in white, standing, bound to the frame of an open-sided wooden barn. Both mud and abuse are hurled at her, Husson shouting, 'How are you, piece of trash? Feeling all right, slut? Scum! Swill! Rubbish! Dung devourer! Sodomite! Spermentress! Bitch!' The symbolism here arguably remains explicable (the mud representing the moral stain on her erstwhile white, virginal purity). However, the editing of the sequence refuses to permit so continuous a reading. When Séverine is revealed, trussed up like a sacrifice, the camera tracks in to her for five seconds. For the next six seconds, Séverine is shown being incrementally covered in mud. During these six seconds, there are four unaccountable jump cuts, each with a momentary temporal ellipsis, the first two coinciding with the slap of the mud striking her, but the next two seemingly more arbitrarily timed. Previous cuts in the sequence serve as reminders of the elliptical nature of cuts, showing both temporal (the cut to the two men shovelling mud) and spatial (the cut to Séverine tied up) discontinuity. The

⁴⁶ Wood, 51.

jump cuts of Séverine tied and abused are striking for their *conceptual* discontinuity. The remorse and expiation, the sinful staining of virginal purity, the masochistic pleasure in discomfort: each of these possible instincts is stuttered by the film, in a disturbed, convulsive rhythm, each cut an abyss across which meaning hangs dangerously and uncertainly.

There has at times been a critical attempt to efface the impact of the violence of this editing, as to capitulate with it is to deny the possibility of diegetic explanation. Michael Wood insists that 'Buñuel doesn't "chop the world up into little fragments", which is Bazin's derogatory definition of montage.'⁴⁷ Edward Buscombe, Roger Ebert, and David Melville write about the scene in their respective reviews of the film with no acknowledgement of the jump cuts at all.⁴⁸ An effacing of this montage of jump cuts is a denial of the sequence's rhythmic instability, an instability which foregrounds the psychological impossibility of the whole scene. A cut to the men reveals that it is Husson throwing the mud, with no explanation as to why it is not Pierre, the betrayed husband. A further cut returns to Séverine, whose mouth does not move as she declares her love for Pierre, figuring as a suggestion of insincerity, shame, and impotence. The sequence concludes with a cut – covering an ellipsis of one week – to Séverine, in a black hat and coat, signs of both mourning and chic style, returning to the brothel. The possible narratives of remorse and expiation, of confession and punishment, have been lost in the abyss. The film presents a sequence with the appearance of

⁴⁷ Wood, 15.

⁴⁸ Buscombe, 59; Ebert at <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-belle-de-jour-1967>; David Melville, 'Who Let the Cats Out? Buñuel, Deneuve and *Belle de Jour*,' *Senses of Cinema* 70 (September 2013), accessed February 10, 2015 <http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/cteq/who-let-the-cats-out-bunuel-deneuve-and-belle-de-jour/>.

psychological legibility, a logic which is undone by the chasms of sense opened up by inarticulate editing into which are lost the very significances which allow the reading of the scene. The discontinuous parts jostle with each other, and perspective of the sequence as a whole is complicated. The violence of the narrative is overshadowed by the violence of the structure which cuts out the hope of consistent cause and effect meaning altogether. Paul Sandro acknowledges this when he writes that Buñuel, 'if he wants to challenge his viewers' assumptions about the world... must find ways to work against a cinematic style that constructs an image of the world as immanent, continuous, and ultimately knowable.'⁴⁹

A Polluted Logic

This discontinuous montage corresponds to a semantic flux which resists any definitive interpretation. In the terms of Marie-Claire Ropars – discussed by David Bordwell – this qualifies the film as an example of *film écriture*, a film in which univocal meaning is eschewed as restrictive and, in Buñuel's terms, bourgeois:

Against the communicative film (*film véhiculaire*), which transmits a definite message through the identification of a prior reality, she set the film of *écriture* ("writing"), in which disjunctive montage generates a dynamic play of meanings. Bazin had seen classical *découpage* as a step toward an integral realism of time and space; by contrast, Ropars held that new meanings were produced only when montage juxtaposed discrete fragments. This process was at work in *Hiroshima, 8½*, the films of Eisenstein and Bresson, even *Citizen Kane*. In a view that recalls Boulez's demand that each work find its own form, Ropars considered montage the means through which the film of *écriture* created a unique system, a singular interplay of representation and meaning.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Sandro (1980), 20.

⁵⁰ Bordwell (1997), 89.

The fragments juxtaposed through the film's montage may be overtly different (separated by substantial temporal or spatial ellipses) or implicitly different (a single image splintered through the disruption of jump cuts). What Bordwell describes as a 'singular interplay of representation and meaning' in 'dynamic play' may also be described in terms of surrealist *dépaysement*, in which the underlying paradox signals the inadequacy of any fixed conceptual system.

However, for much of the film the effect may reasonably be said to resemble the communicative realism of the *film véhiculaire*, a style defined by *découpage* editing. This alternation between the disruptions of montage and the logical integrity of *découpage* may account for the sense identified by Sabbadini that 'between Séverine's worlds of bourgeois comfort and sexual depravity there is both a schizoid split and a continuity'; adjacent to the disorientating network of surrealist collisions runs an alternative network of narratively coherent, formally stable scenes.⁵¹ The chasms of illegibility thrown up by disjunctive cuts are perhaps tempered by the plains of legibility laid down by a very different set of editing processes. The combination of these styles is not unusual, and Noël Burch writes extensively on the effect in Fritz Lang's *M* where

the dialectical play of parameters [is] "organic," sustaining or challenging the narrative action while also displaying rigorous abstract principles... [T]he most disjunctive cutting appears in the opening sequence, and the film gradually moves toward sequences built around temporal continuity. This movement not only supports the action taking place in each scene but also presents a broader survey of parametric options.'⁵²

⁵¹ Sabbadini, 124.

⁵² Bordwell (1997), 91.

A similar schema may be advanced to describe the structure of *Belle de Jour*, where the majority of the most discontinuously edited scenes are concentrated in the film's first half. However, the achievement here is not equivalent with that of Fritz Lang's film, where the capture and kangaroo trial of the child murderer introduces (or restores) order. In *Belle de Jour*, there is a more complex pollution, which ensures that the discontinuity of earlier scenes seeps into the only-apparent order of the film's more continuous narrative, resulting in a kind of disrupted *découpage*, a style which at first seems logical but which is, in fact, splintered by small assaults on its own coherence. Christian Metz has explored the possible similarities between montage and *découpage* styles; in his definition of *sequence*, he argues that it refers to 'the concept of a single concatenation and the concept of discontinuity,' and that '[c]ombinations [of shots] that avoid *collage*-juxtaposition (i.e. continuity shooting, long shots, sequence shots, use of the "wide" screen, and so on) are nonetheless *syntagmatic* constructions, examples of montage in a broad sense.'⁵³ Margot S Kernan uses the surrealist model of the *cadaver exquis* to explain this sense of disconnected connection in *Belle de Jour*; the film is a 'private collection of [Séverine's] image-feeling clusters,' a set of related but discrete units arranged in a linear fashion which acknowledges its own constructed articulation.⁵⁴

The polluted logic of this unconventional *découpage* is demonstrated in a sequence in which Séverine tries to conceal her guilt after her first day in the brothel. She showers, destroys her incriminatingly compromised underwear, and then takes to her bed. The narrative coherence of this scene seems clear, and the sequence is shot in long takes in which camera movement is carefully coordinated with character

⁵³ Metz, 131, 134.

⁵⁴ Kernan, 40.

movement. There is a concentration on *mise-en-scène* and Séverine is consistently contextualised by the reassuring bourgeois familiarity of her bathroom, living room, and bedroom. However, within the coherence of this *découpage*, the editing hints at the disruptive possibilities of montage. The sequence's opening shot shows Séverine showering, before panning from left to right, smoothly, across the surfaces of her bathroom (Fig. 4.9). The travelling shot, though, is interrupted by a reverse pan in the opposite direction, this time faster, less smooth (Fig. 4.10). The cut feels improvised, as though the incomplete first shot is interrupted by the untimely second. Some point in the bathroom – imaginary only – feels unreached by the searching first pan; knowledge is denied by the contingent and discontinuous violence of the change in direction, marked also by a jump cut.

While the use of this change in direction and jump cut is inherited from the opening scene, the effect is far less disorientating; indeed, it is possible almost to miss the shift, as the pan quickly reaches Séverine, now in a dressing-gown but clearly only just out of the shower, who applies her makeup, as though to conceal the severance of the cut moments earlier. Séverine picks up her bra and knickers, the latter from a stool, and leaves the frame; the knickers were not on the stool in the left-to-right pan but, again, the narrative impetus effaces the potential trauma of the cut. Discontinuity is eclipsed by the recognisability of the world in which Séverine is moving. The following cut, into the living room, is clearly temporally contiguous with the bathroom sequence; Séverine enters carrying the bra and knickers, crosses to the fire, and burns them. Pierre arrives home, calls out, and Séverine hurries from the room. A cut takes the action to the bedroom, where Séverine gets into bed, ready to simulate her headache. This shot, like others in the

sequence (Séverine in the shower through frosted glass, the reverse direction pan) begins with a moment's disorientation: a close-up of an unspecified bed at an unspecified time, suggesting the possibility of ellipsis. However, each time the camera quickly reveals a broader *mise-en-scène*, typically by pulling back to reveal the whole room. The coherent logic of the scene's narrative is allowed to remain almost intact. This *almost*, though, is key. Séverine, seemingly seeking to conceal the evidence of her own transgression, on hearing Pierre's voice inexplicably pulls her underwear *out* of the flames with the poker, leaving them where they will be found. The liminal disturbances at the points of cuts hint at this proliferation of meaning, an excess which leaves Séverine (and the scene) beyond full legibility, even in a sequence which appears to be straightforward.



Fig. 4.9 – 0.34.18
Smooth pan to the right.



Fig. 4.10 – 0.34.18
Rough pan to the left.

These rhythms of disruptive *découpage* – which hint at a surfeit of meanings characteristic of the film’s use of montage – define many of the brothel scenes. In these scenes, the emphasis is on an expressive *mise-en-scène*, and typically there are relatively few cuts. Peter William Evans describes the unchanging familiarity of the brothel as ‘a *mise-en-scène* of retardment,’ mirroring the fixed ‘relations between brothel madam and employees.’⁵⁵ Group formations allow for clear interactions; a dynamic of exchange (appropriate given the economic foundation of the relationships in the brothel) is made possible by the sustained, wider shots. Raymond Durgnat comments that ‘Buñuel’s preference for group-shots and long-shots (rather than intercutting close-ups) also helps to relate characters constantly to their backgrounds and to one another’ and this preference is emphatically more asserted in the brothel than elsewhere.⁵⁶ In these scenes, Buñuel displays a range of the devices and techniques which Paul Sandro associates most strongly with the integrated space of conventional continuity narrative:

Narrative space is constructed as a scenographic space in order to frame and articulate human action as event. This involves particular devices of *mise-en-scène* (e.g., three-point lighting, perspective sets, actors’ looks and gestures), camerawork (e.g. coordinated angles and scales of shots, narratively functional camera movements), editing (e.g. cross-cutting, “montage sequences,” and other fixed cutting patterns), and sound (e.g. background/foreground modulation, voice-over narration, sound bleeding over cut). In general, the space of a scene that is constructed is closed, balanced, layered, continuous, and observed from a limited number of vantage points. Moreover, it is often motivated from a character’s point of view.⁵⁷

Despite this expressive *mise-en-scène*, something remains unexpressed in the scenes, resisting clear legibility and shrouding Séverine’s point of view as much as

⁵⁵ Evans, 160.

⁵⁶ Durgnat (1967), 18.

⁵⁷ Sandro (1980), 9.

it reveals it. This deceptive legibility can be seen at play in the scene in which Séverine meets M. Adolphe, her first client. The highly mobile camera explores the constructed world of the brothel parlour, its fluid movements and rare cuts seeming to give a full sense of integrated, continuous space and time. However, the scene's established continuity is disrupted by an unexpected cut to a high shot; the characters are suddenly remote (Fig. 4.11). There is no movement from the camera, and limited movement within the frame. M. Adolphe opens a bottle of champagne, a cheap innuendo (along with the subsequent explosion of the jack in the box) on his anticipated ejaculation. Eliot Stein recognises the importance of the shot, but fails to acknowledge the subversive jolt that comes with its interruption of the sequence's rhythm:

When the bonbon magnate (Francis Blanche) invites the girls at the house to drink a bottle of champagne with him, the sequence is so superbly articulated, although unostentatiously edited, that its climax, as the cork pops (a miraculously "right" placed high-angle group shot), physically imposes itself as a major moment in the film, even though the scene itself is of relatively little importance. There is no precedent in Buñuel's work for such a purely formal "state of grace."⁵⁸



Fig. 4.11 – 0.29.22
Isolation from above.

The moment's importance lies in the ostentatious irruption of stillness and height across the cut. From this self-conscious vantage point, Séverine – who has been

⁵⁸ Stein, 285.

distant from the group through the scene, separated *within* the frame (Fig. 4.12) or *by* the frame (Fig. 4.13) – is emphatically withdrawn. Key to the effect of this separation is the fact that the other members of the group tend to activate mobility in the camera; their movement triggers a response from the panning or tracking camera, and any cuts to them are seamlessly continuous. Séverine, though, never initiates a movement in the camera. Cuts to her (the close-up and the aerial shot, whose purpose is principally to record her isolation) are the sequence's only moments of stasis. While Séverine is central to the scene (Deneuve drawing the eye), she is inscrutable, still, cut off. Before he rapes her, M. Adolphe instructs her not to lie to him, as he will be able to tell; the suggestion of the sequence's editing is that Séverine cannot tell the truth about herself, as Séverine is not a continuous character, at least not a character who can easily be subsumed into the logical coherence of this *mise-en-scène*. Her response to the final rape cannot be securely characterised, and remains ambivalent. The cuts in the scene speak of a residual excess of deathly stillness which resists attempts at definitive interpretation.



Fig. 4.12 – 0.27.39
Separated within the frame.



Fig. 4.13 – 0.27.48
Separated by the frame.

An Irruption of Order

Perhaps the film reaches a high point of diegetic surrealist illogicality in the return to the ski resort, which may or may not be a fantasy and, if it is, may or may not be Séverine's fantasy. The scene before has shown Husson's visit to Séverine; she has sent him away, audibly telling the maid to say that she is not in. The short sequence contains a cut, but it is one which demands temporal and spatial contiguity; the cut from the hallway as Husson leaves and the maid begins to close the door to the living room where Séverine sits and from which the maid can be seen closing the door must allow continuity, as it is the proximity of Séverine's churlish rejection of Husson which makes the gesture so gauche. This continuous cut is followed with a more troubling, subversive cut. The ski resort café, where Séverine has earlier expressed her dislike for Husson, is now the site of a close two-shot in which Husson and Séverine stare into each other's eyes like clichéd film lovers (Fig. 4.14). The camera pulls back, without cutting, to reveal Renée (Husson's girlfriend) and Pierre sitting at the same table. Husson smashes a bottle, offers Séverine a letter, and together they climb under the table. The table rocks.

Renée looks, and says that they have an envelope and lily seeds. The enigmatic sequence concludes. The unlikely contiguity of letter, broken glass, envelope, and lily seeds invites the same kind of unstable symbolic readings as the dropped flowers earlier. Once again, the symbolism is too pregnant to permit a stable reading; the broken bottle, for example, is open to so many interpretations (the phallic suggestiveness of the bottle, the violence of the shards of glass, the ejaculatory energy of the smashing, the decadence of the consumed wine) that it remains irreducible to a definitive reading. Even the seeds, which may be seen as a proxy for semen in this surrealist sex scene, are lily seeds, a flower more associated with death than life.



Fig. 4.14 – 0.56.34
Surrealist sex?

More suggestive than the collage of unrelated objects is the fact of the sequence's editing. The absence of cutting accomplishes two things within the scene. Firstly, the sequence's unusual continuity allows for the suggestively withheld shots to assert themselves, as they have throughout the film. V.F. Perkins suggests that 'the long take (in fact the duration of any shot) gains its effect in part from the continuous availability of the cut, just as the static camera works as, in part, a

refusal of mobility...'⁵⁹ A conceit which runs through the film concerns the boxes possessed by the men whom Séverine encounters: M. Adolphe's jack in the box, the gynaecologist's briefcase, and, most famously, the Japanese man's humming box. The precise significance of these boxes remains obscure: what will Mathilde do with this child's toy after it has sprung its trap, what further apparatus might the gynaecologist have in his case, and what is it that so appals the other prostitutes and so fascinates Séverine in the Japanese box? These questions are unanswerable, largely as a function of a series of withheld shots. Here, the scene under the table must remain mysterious (as the Duke's activities, presumably masturbatory, beneath the coffin in which he places Séverine remain mysterious) due to an absent explanatory shot.

Further, though, the absence of cuts in this sequence marks the film's most significant watershed in editing rhythm. The cut has, for the film's first two thirds, predominantly been an agent of discontinuity. Cuts have often marked ellipses, local discontinuities, spaces in which, from which, and across which linear logic and meaning will not operate. Cuts have marked the stumbling blocks to a fully coherent reading, and an interpretation which succeeded in finding a schema for Séverine's lucid psychology would have to overlook much of the startling montage and disruptive *découpage* from which *Belle de Jour* is composed. However, the film reaches a moment of crisis, a crisis of structure rather than narrative. The film's first act may be said to chronicle the introduction of Séverine into the brothel, the second act her progress there. The story, such as it is, has become repetitive, and Séverine's psychology remains elusive. At the point at which two scenes are elided

⁵⁹ V.F. Perkins, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (London: BFI, 1999), 65.

which show Séverine both at home and abroad, both sending Husson away and cavorting with him, the film becomes caught in a non-progressing structure of oppositions in play; it does not progress and, instead, reiterates itself in inverted and paradoxical retellings. Irrupting into the film at this point is a counter to this diegetic stalemate, and with this counter emerges a style of editing which has been unseen up to this point in the film. A new set of characters – the gangsters Marcel and Hippolyte – burst into the film, bringing with them coherently linear narrative, clear genre, backstory, and motivation. In this new diegetic domain, the cut acquires an unprecedented value in the film.

The cut which follows the surrealist sex scene presents a shot of a Parisian street, the landmark of the Arc de Triomphe imposing a sense of geographical specificity, historical significance, and cultural cachet (Fig. 4.15). The cry of ‘*Herald Tribune*’ invokes ‘the spectre of *A bout de souffle* and the New Wave.’⁶⁰ Marcel and Hippolyte, violent criminals, may appear to be agents of unrest and disturbance, but they are, in fact, the conventional straightening of the film’s hitherto disordered state. Their violence is *film* violence and the robbery that follows, narratively gratuitous to the film more generally, is a concise, perfectly constructed story, in which genre (the thriller or heist movie), character, and setting cohere to create a sense of logical, linear, intelligible, legible order. The sequence consists of eight shots (the starting points of which are shown in Figs. 4.15 – 4.22).

⁶⁰ Evans, 172.



Fig. 4.15 – 0.57.15-57.36
Beginning in the street.



Fig. 4.16 – 0.57.36-57.55
Crossing the lobby.



Fig. 4.17 – 0.57.55-58.26
Moving to the lift.



Fig. 4.18 – 0.58.26-58.29
Going up from the right.



Fig. 4.19 – 0.58.29-58.36
Going up – the pivot.



Fig. 4.20 – 0.58.36-58.38
Going up from the left.



Fig. 4.21 – 0.58.38-59.03
Leaving the lift and crossing the lobby.



Fig. 4.22 – 0.59.03-59.20
Ending in the street.

The robbery asserts its genre identity, and the complete narrative (with the exposition of the set-up, the complication of the robbery in the confined lift, and the resolution of the escape) speaks of a highly conventional pattern, with the motivation clearly the stealing of the guard's moneybox, the film's first rationally explained box. Most significantly, and in stark contrast to the editing strategies of the film up to this point, the cuts are uniformly continuous – with the contiguous relationships between spaces clearly established – and the shot sequence is perfectly symmetrical. Shots 1 to 4 are each defined by movement to the left; the pivotal fifth shot is straight on to the lift's grille; and shots 6 to 8 are each defined by movement to the right. Unlike the changes in direction earlier in the film, this shift passes through the centralised shot 5, allowing a smooth progression, explained by the

symmetrical narrative of arrival and escape. Strictly speaking, shot 3 is excessive to the symmetrical structure; however, it introduces the profilmic confusion of a shot through the lift grille, later echoed in shot 7's view through the curving bannisters. The sequence's continuity asserts a type of seamlessness which the film has, even in the *mise-en-scène* of the brothel, never shown before. And this seamlessness is an agent of a style which appears to be entirely at odds with the subversive surrealism of Buñuel's work. Susan Hayward states that seamlessness is

... a key effect of continuity editing and is used to refer to the Hollywood film style where – in the name of realism – the editing does not draw attention to itself. The spectator is presented with a narrative that is edited in such a way that it appears to have no breaks, no disconcerting unexplained transitions in time and space. Hence its seamlessness (with which lighting, sound and colour collude). It is the opposite of an editing style that draws attention to itself (e.g. through jump cuts and unmatched shots)...⁶¹

The gratuitous diegetic interruption of the robbery (at the point of the film's seeming surrender to the surrealist, anti-bourgeois free play of oppositions) is the introduction of narrative and symmetry into the film. It marks an emphatic irruption of coherence. The potential diegetic disruption of narrative violence is smoothed by genre (the violence is *film* violence, the resolution is predictable). Character disruption (the introduction of new characters who are defined by intimated trauma, violent emotion, and poverty) is smoothed by an invitation to fruitful psychological reading after the revelation of Marcel's backstory. And the structural disruption of a new style of film is smoothed by the extraordinarily symmetrical editing, with each cut dedicated to clarity and never to ellipsis. Much of the film, as it continues, bears the mark of this irruption, with the gangsters the

⁶¹ Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 120.

unlikely agents of continuity. It is the insertion of this clarity in the film which makes possible Raymond Durgnat's analysis of Marcel:

Marcel is the anti-gentleman. Not only is he a thug, with a concealed blade in his walking stick, but it is stressed that he utterly rejects not only honour among thieves but the most primitive duties of friendship. He is as outside any possible law as Jaibo in *Los Olvidados*, whom he physically resembles; he too dies like a dog. He also defiantly parodies the gentleman, with his gold-riddled upper gums, his dandy affectations, and a splendid gesture of extravagant fastidiousness: he makes the immaculate Séverine strip, then, on finding a birthmark, disappointedly requests her to dress. But Séverine satisfies, civilizes, and outwits him. He loves her, brings her flowers, and, intelligently, wants to force her hand by telling the truth and to free her. Even when she conquers him, sending him away, he is capable of a last savage gesture: he will kill the man she loves, and perhaps she will then come. If she doesn't, he has paid her back as Heathcliff did Cathy. The policeman shoots him so that only his negative purpose survives.⁶²

Such a character summary would be inconceivable for any of the film's other major characters. Unlike the attempts to summarise Séverine, which can never take account of the psychological inconsistencies which lurk on either side of the film's complex montage of abyssal cuts, Marcel is reducible to a paragraph of summary. In the scenes in which he features, cuts are generally eschewed in favour of a smoothly mobile camera, and where there *are* cuts they tend to mark no ellipsis. The gangsters bring with them smooth articulacy. Later, when Séverine and Pierre are together on a beach reminiscent of a Dalí landscape, the dynamic montage of the film's first half (in the form of uneven framing, changes in shot direction, unexpected and indeterminable low shots) threaten to reassert themselves, throwing Séverine's motivation into contradictory confusion (Fig 4.23). However, across a cut, the scene shifts to Marcel and Hippolyte together in a bar, awaiting a visit from two unsavoury associates. It is one of the film's few scenes not to feature

⁶² Durgnat (1967), 143-4.

Séverine; as the film's discontinuities threaten disorder, she is written out of the scene and, in their place, a series of complex, narratively motivated, movements are caught in only two shots. The choreography of this framing, as characters move to and from the bar and the focus of attention shifts, is more complex than in any of the brothel scenes, and there is no equivalent to the sudden stasis of a close-up or high shot which has remained the uncomfortable spectre of disorder in the brothel.



Fig. 4.23 – 1.07.29
Threatening Surrealist landscape.

The diminishment of the potency of cuts is matched with the assertion of readable signs (Marcel's holed socks, suggesting poverty and neglect), the dominance of psychological explanation (the gangsters' relationship is predicated on the fact that Marcel saved Hippolyte's life), and clear motivation (Marcel shoots Pierre because he is 'the obstacle'). No longer a network of abyssal divisions, the coherent *découpage* of the film's diegetically climactic scenes favours logic. Although the editing is relentless and fast in the sequence of Marcel's final attempt at escape, the cuts are predicated on a logic of sutured coherence, in which temporal and spatial continuity are assured through a series of reciprocal structures. Marcel shoots Pierre, tries to escape, and is gunned down by a policeman: the sequence is immaculately ordered, with a very clear sense of the 'cause-effect sequence' to which Bordwell and Thompson argue that 'the classical Hollywood mode of

narrative subordinates time...'⁶³ Each shot is the logical result of the shot before, with no temporal, spatial, or conceptual discontinuities. Inarticulacy is abandoned for the articulate transitions of continuity editing. This is the legible climax of the film's story. Marcel is a hero, an explicable character whose qualities and temperament are reinforced by coherent form.

The Box Bursts Open

The film's editing is in part a strategy of diegetic discontinuity which interrogates the processes of narrativisation that conventionally transform the irreducible (individual psychology, social structures) into manageable stories. The irruption of the gangster narrative and its dramatic climax seems to mark a strategy of control, a mechanism of self-regulation, in which the film is complicit in its own simplification. Marcel's death marks the high point of narrative order, and bears close formal resemblance to many other films: the high octane resolution in which the antagonist dies in a flurry of pacy editing. However, while this may mark the anticipated diegetic resolution, it does not end the film, and what remains, in the rhythm of its editing, bears the mark of the very collapse in narrative meaning which the symmetrical rhythms and continuity editing of the gangster plotline has seemed to eradicate. The remainder of the film, functioning as a kind of unruly proliferation that cannot be made to cohere, presents three discrete sequences in which attempts are made to tell the story of the film: first by the doctors in the hospital, secondly by Husson, and thirdly by no specific character. The operation

⁶³ Bordwell and Thompson (2004), 313.

of these retellings is one of a gradual decline in clarity, step by step regaining the subversive ground of the film's early assault on continuity. This self-reflexive strategy of self-telling marks the ultimate defeat of the conventional forces of articulate continuity which have striven to order the film.

After Pierre has been shot, two doctors discuss his case in the hospital. The scene, a looking back to the continuity *découpage* which has defined so much of the last third of the film, is shot in two long takes; the camera is wholly mobile, and there is no suggestion of ellipsis or structural illogicality. The doctors' dialogue explicitly seeks to make sense of part of the film's narrative:

Doctor 1: Any news?

Doctor 2: The assassin is dead. The police have no clues. Either he made a mistake or he went crazy.

Doctor 1: Was he identified?

Doctor 2: Yes. It seems he had a history.

Doctor 1: It's strange.

Doctor 2: And Sérizy, how is he?

Doctor 1: Too early to tell.

Doctor 2: His wife is in the waiting room.

The dialogue marks the closure of the narrative as crime drama ('the police have no clues'), and it acknowledges the psychological construction of Marcel through backstory ('it seems he had a history'). However, it also recognises the untellability of certain aspects of the story. Marcel's motivation is characterised as error *or* madness, neither of which possibility can wholly be dismissed (as, out of a kind of *amour fou*, he has mistaken Séverine's feelings for him). Recognising that 'it's strange,' the doctors also admit that they cannot yet tell how well Pierre will recover, an open prognosis which will reverberate in the film's final moments. The hospital scene, continuous though its editing is, cuts into a startling sixteen second

transition, in which the façade of Séverine's apartment block dissolves into the canopy of a forest. This dissolve – which links the setting of the film's opening with the urban context of most of its action – seems to cut too early, like the film's opening shot; here the transition is left incomplete, giving the impression more of superimposition than dissolve. The fact that the film cuts back to Séverine in her Paris flat further complicates this short transition, the only one of its kind in a film which otherwise uses straight cuts. Raymond Durgnat does not acknowledge the full subversive force of this transition when he writes that:

Buñuel's view of the mind is more sophisticated and scientifically more accurate than rationalism's summary division into the conscious and the unconscious. Between rationality and deep dream are many strata, each constantly irrupting into the interstices of the other. Such a merging is achieved with Buñuel's very, very slow dissolve, virtually a superimposition, between the streets and the forests, the stonily civilized and the dreamily organic. The presence of so conspicuous an optical at this one point only in the film suggests that a major breakthrough has been made in Séverine's mind – that contrarities are ceasing to be mutually exclusive.⁶⁴

Durgnat is persuasive in his identification of multiple strata and the irruption 'into the interstices of the other.' However, the linking of this complex structure with 'a major breakthrough in Séverine's mind' limits the reading of the film's ending. The interstices which are opening up formally between shots and sequences are not straightforwardly linked to Séverine. The disturbances in character are paralleled but not explained away by form. The film's anarchic conclusion does not reassure that contrarities are ceasing to be mutually exclusive. Rather, the insertion of this inexplicable, elliptical dissolve at this point in the film is a reassertion – in the wake of the gangster narrative – of the anarchic potential of transitions. Every transition – including, perhaps most emphatically, the cut – marks the abyssal site of

⁶⁴ Durgnat (1967), 140-2.

discontinuity, can never be explained, and is only made invisible by the mechanisms of narrative continuity. This inexplicable almost-dissolve restates the film's earlier commitment to disjuncture. There is no conciliation here, and the film commits itself to a resolution which suppresses the normative action of the gangster narrative beneath a widening discontinuity.

Following this moment of elliptical transition, the film's next sequence depicts Husson's disclosure of Séverine's secret to her husband. The sequence begins with Séverine administering the paralysed Pierre's medicine. The vocabulary of discontinuity editing reasserts itself: cuts into rapid zooms, temporal ellipses, withheld shots. Husson asks Séverine if she would like to witness this retelling; she simply does not answer. When Husson has gone into Pierre's room, a cut to a sofa marks an unspecified ellipsis. Cuts now become cavernous, markers of spatial and temporal disunity. The story Husson is telling must take some time, and the following shots of Séverine moving around the apartment feel timeless and, in their concentration on close-up, largely unplaced. Séverine is reduced to parts, severed from each other by cuts: she is a pair of feet, fetishized throughout the film (Fig. 4.24); she is a pair of hands playing with the surfaces of a marble table; she is a profiled head against a frosted glass panel, a frame which she restlessly moves through from right to left, the direction which has typically been associated with unrest in the film (Fig. 4.25). A cut to the hallway shows the gratuitous shot of Husson leaving, the camera as fidgety as Séverine has been, pacing needlessly forwards and backwards in its recording of Husson's movements. His departure concludes this second retelling, complicated by the withheld shots of Husson's narrating. Instead, Séverine has been fractured by the editing into a series of parts

which cannot be assembled into a straightforward reaction: grief (for Pierre and Marcel), despair, guilt, shame, anger, relief.



Fig. 4.24 – 1.32.19
Séverine severed into parts.



Fig. 4.25 – 1.32.35
The restless Séverine framed.

As Séverine returns to Pierre's room, the camera follows her. She crosses the room, and the camera's pan does not acknowledge him, as it might ignore any inanimate object. She watches him, before the camera pans back to the left to a close-up of Pierre, paralysed, blind, and possibly crying. This close-up is abandoned, and a cut flings the frame unexpectedly to a chair from which Séverine picks up her embroidery. She passes to the sofa, the camera moving right with her, continuing the alternating directions of the shots. When she is seated on the sofa, the camera tracks in on her, a sign read by many critics as marking the beginning of a fantasy. The rhythm changes, and the languid shots are replaced by rapid, starkly cut shots:

a two second reverse track from Pierre's face, a two second track down his body from a high angle, resting on his seemingly lifeless hands, a one second shot of Pierre's face from a disorientatingly low angle (Figs. 4.26, 4.27, 4.28). Pierre, in a rapid series of expressionistically angled shots, is complicated from diverse angles. Following a further cut, the shot returns to Séverine, lost in concentration for a moment, before she looks up, and smiles at what she sees. The cut which follows is to the shot which this sequence, and to an extent the film as a whole, has been preparing for: a three second shot of Pierre, restored, his glasses removed, smiling (Fig. 4.29). He asks, in an echo of his own question at the film's first starkly elliptical cut, 'What are you thinking about?' Séverine, echoing her earlier self, smiles enigmatically and says that she is thinking 'about you.' A wider shot follows, encompassing both Séverine and Pierre, in which he stands and, to the sound of cats and bells, walks to get himself a drink. Séverine and the camera follow. In a new shot, they toast each other silently. The camera moves in as they embrace with relief and without passion. The sound of bells crescendos, and Séverine goes to the window to investigate the sound. A shot of Séverine on the balcony, surrounded by trees, looking down (Fig. 4.30) cuts to a shot of a country avenue with the carriage from the film's beginning moving towards the camera (Fig. 4.31). This, the final cut of the film, is spatially impossible: the urban balcony is outrageously sutured to a rural carriage. The carriage comes towards the camera and passes; the camera does not turn to accommodate the movement. The shot ends with a leaf-strewn ground and a sudden drop in diegetic sound.



Fig. 4.26 – 1.33.54
The paralysed Pierre.



Fig. 4.27 – 1.33.56
Pierre's fall.



Fig. 4.28 – 1.33.58
Disorientating shifts.



Fig. 4.29 – 1.34.08
'What are you thinking about?'



Fig. 4.30 – 1.35.16
Séverine's looking forward and back.



Fig. 4.31 – 1.35.23
The outrageous carriage.

This conclusion, which has sometimes been dismissed as a final garbled surrealist gesture ('a disastrous finish for the movie – a finish of the careless kind that Buñuel is prone to,' in Pauline Kael's words) is actually the film's final retelling of itself: the repeated dialogue, the expertly performed gestures (embroidery, pouring

drinks), the sense of ennui, Pierre's impotence.⁶⁵ However, this retelling – like the doctors' imprecise speculations and Husson's unwitnessed revelation – is also an untelling, a dismantling of the securities which bolster the illusion of story's continuity. The film's narrative suggests that bourgeois life is a pattern of rituals, the endless succession of learned behaviours. Even the brothel works according to a timetable; Séverine will work only three hours each day. Buñuel writes that:

In everyday life we repeat ourselves every day. Every morning we get up, we brush our teeth with the same brush and with the same hand and movements, we sit at the same breakfast table, we go to the same office, meet the same people. [...] And how many times has it happened in a party when we say hello to someone and an hour later we again shake hands, say hello, and then exclaim, "Oh, what are we doing, we just said hello a minute ago."⁶⁶

This repetition is relentless, 'pure ritual, a kind of codified form of behaviour which, practised from generation to generation, has become the very essence of their [the bourgeoisie's] way of life.'⁶⁷ However, the illusion that this repetition is continuous is systematically unpicked by the discontinuity editing, which throws, between the articulated movements of this behaviour, abyssal spaces of timelessness, empty of meaning, illegible, irreducible. The empty carriage at the film's end is passing to collect Séverine and Pierre, to begin the film again. This is not simply a comment on Séverine's subjectivity, a suggestion that she wants to begin again. She is unable to articulate any such desire. Rather, this final disruption to linear narrative logic represents the culmination of a discontinuity editing which is married to a circular and impossible structure: endless *and* disruptive, deferred *and* repeated. Even the gangster narrative, itself an arch lesson

⁶⁵ Kael, 277.

⁶⁶ Edwards, 96.

⁶⁷ Edwards, 96.

in narrative continuity, becomes, in juxtaposition with the violent contingency of oppositions in play which precedes it, a form of disjuncture; in a discontinuous world, continuity is experienced as change. Buñuel uses coherence as incoherence in the film, offering a subversion of classic film structure. Local discontinuities in the film's form (and especially editing) are not straightforward representations of Séverine's state of mind; cuts, abyssal formal interruptions, do not unite discrete parts of a dichotomy (as they might in the Eisenstein model of montage as collision), but rather render the relationships between them illegible in their irreducible rhythm. For Séverine, Marcel, for example, presumably represents a disruptive adventure, while for the form he represents a conservative ordering.

The film does not *univocally mean* its critique of bourgeois order, as such a definable meaning would be to partake in the order critiqued. Rather, the *effect* of its dual inarticulacy is to challenge the articulate assumptions of the bourgeois thought that has brought Séverine and her marriage and the brothel and the film gangsters into existence. The hollow and inexpressive Séverine, sleepwalking through the performance of her bourgeois rituals, resonates with the proliferating significances of this formal complexity. Although the shifts in editing style amplify her failures in expression, they do not straightforwardly speak for her. *Belle de Jour's* ending is not reducible to a (fantasised) reconciliation between a husband and wife. It is, instead, ripped apart by transitions in a story whose secure box, riddled with aporia, is creaking open and exposing its inexplicable contents.

Chapter 5

Stifling Voices: Bricolage in *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*

The Articulation of Domestic Trauma

The early feature films of Terence Davies – notably *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* (1988) and *The Long Day Closes* (1992) – depict working-class family life in Liverpool in the 1950s, their narratives and atmosphere drawn largely from the experiences of Davies' own childhood. Wendy Everett, in her extensive volume on Davies' work, discusses the films as 'an autobiographical cycle' by a director 'closely connected with memory and autobiography' who seeks to detail the traumatic behaviour of a violent father and the corrosive impact it had historically on his family.¹ The precise effect of this corrosive impact is the muting of the family; a sequence from *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* of a Christmas dinner – in which the children, wearing festive hats, sit in a frightened silence – is a poignant demonstration of the restrictions to self-expression. As Tony Williams comments, 'the work documents the misery that the officially-sanctioned family institution has caused to human potential,' and the savagery of the paternal figure, whose unexplained rage terrorises his wife and children, colours both films.² Williams goes on to reflect

¹ Wendy Everett, *Terence Davies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 14.

² Tony Williams, 'The Masochistic Fix: Gender Oppression in the Films of Terence Davies,' in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism: Second Edition*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 253.

how the film's form, its 'tableau-like compositions, meticulously composed photographic shots, and camera movements' provide formal equivalents for 'characters' physical and emotional entrapment'; certainly the sense of stasis in the film is profound, with characters arranged in still groups (hence 'Still Lives'), explored in tracking shots which regularly return to their points of departure.³ It is within this atmosphere of oppressive restriction that the members of the family (including the taciturn father) attempt to articulate, to speak the truth about their trauma and to carve out vocabularies in which to couch their emotional experience.

The symbolic importance of the father's violence within the films cannot be overstated; his outbursts provide emotional and dramatic climaxes throughout the early stages of the first film, and, after his death, his presence in his family's memory remains fresh through the films' continued commentary on the domestic history of post-war England. Synopses are inevitably inadequate, as the films' effects are not primarily the result of their narrative structures, which are associative and enigmatic. A basic storyline is structured around certain central events in the lives of the family – weddings and a christening in *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, and the experiences of adolescence in *The Long Day Closes* – which in turn prompt a network of remembered or imagined scenes. Dramatically punctuating these broad narrative events are the overt acts of aggression by the patriarchal figure of the father, acts which become less common as the films progress, a development which has been critically read as a movement towards more liberated expression for the family. *Distant Voices*, which forms the first half of the earlier

³ Williams, 243.

feature, chronicles the immediate impact of this immanent and tyrannical domestic presence. *Still Lives*, the second half of the earlier feature, explores later moments in the family's life, after the father is dead, moments saturated by memories of him through which he remains present (symbolised by the sustained prominence of his parlour-wall photograph).⁴ In *The Long Day Closes* the father is even more remotely past and is not explicitly mentioned.

Critics of Davies' films have addressed this shift concerning the father's prominence at great length. Adam Barker in his review for *Monthly Film Bulletin* sees *Distant Voices* as 'the more fatalistic section,' and Guy Westwell comments that *Distant Voices* is 'anti-nostalgic, realist and traumatic [while] *Still Lives* addresses nostalgia, fantasy and the healing process.'⁵ Adrian Danks remarks that '*Still Lives* is much gentler, less mournful, and more dream-like,' and Jefferson Hunter argues that *The Long Day Closes*, going even further in the healing process, shows a 'family life more benign.'⁶ Raymond Durgnat credits the final film with handling 'the marginalization of any one big obvious threat [of violence in the form of the father] by more varied and subtle material [which] helps to soften Davies' gross miserabilism.'⁷ Seeing the films as having an (admittedly complex) continuous narrative arc, criticism has identified the trajectory as one of lessening

⁴ *Distant Voices*, completed in 1986, was originally produced as a stand-alone project, a film of forty-five minutes. Executive Producer Colin MacCabe, reflecting on the difficulty of finding an audience for a short film, suggested to Davies that he combine it with another film of comparable length to make a feature film. The resultant project, shot two years later and using the same actors and sets, was *Still Lives*.

⁵ Adam Barker, Review of *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*, in *Monthly Film Bulletin* 55, no.657 (October 1988): 293; Guy Westwell, Reviews, in *Screen* 38, no.1 (Spring 1997): 103.

⁶ Adrian Danks, 'The Art of Memory: Terence Davies' *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*,' *Senses of Cinema* 16 (September 2001). Accessed October 15, 2013, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/cteq/distant/>; Jefferson Hunter, *English Filming, English Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 246.

⁷ Raymond Durgnat, 'Review of *The Long Day Closes*,' *Sight and Sound* 2, no. 2 (June 1992): 44.

tension due to the diminishing presence and impact of the tyrannical father. Crucially, one of the markers of this development is increasing individual communication for the family members; without the thought- and language-control exercised by the father (resulting in protracted, painful silences and stuttered, mumbled responses in *Distant Voices*), the family seems to be talking with greater frankness.

However, this has been to simplify the trajectory of the films' development. One of the challenging features of the films is that the characters' expression of their own fear and repression does not become easier even after the father's death. The coal cellar (which features prominently within the films as both metonymic historic signifier of a domestic life revolving around menial grind and metaphorical suggestion of entrapment and repression) is visited by characters in crisis throughout the films. In the opening minutes of *Distant Voices*, Maisie, asking for some money to attend a dance, is viciously beaten by her father while she scrubs the cellar floor (Fig. 5.1). Later in the film, alone in the cellar and bathed in an ethereal light from above – signalling, perhaps, contact with the outside world and the illumination that comes with resolve and articulacy – she threatens that 'If anything happens to my Mam I'll bleedin' kill you!' (Fig. 5.2) While this does represent a greater level of individual eloquence than in many scenes, it also marks a lexical reiteration of the violence which defines her father's shocking gestures; Maisie inherits the terms of her threat from the very figure at whom the threat is levelled. Even so, this echoing retains greater communicative clarity than Bud is permitted in *The Long Day Closes* when, also in the cellar, alone and weeping for the only time in the film, he is quite unable to speak (Fig. 5.3). The explicit violence of

the early scenes is met with an articulation of defiance from Maisie; Bud, entrapped by a more subtle and insidious violence, has no vocabulary of resistance and is rendered mute. At the risk of reductive overstatement, the trajectory of the films may be seen more profitably from sound to silence, from the thunder of *Distant Voice*'s opening to the silent night sky at the close of *The Long Day Closes*, from defiance to resignation, with violent restriction a constant even after the easily-identifiable persecutions by the father are over.



Fig. 5.1 – *Distant Voices, Still Lives* – 0.7.10
Patriarchal violence.

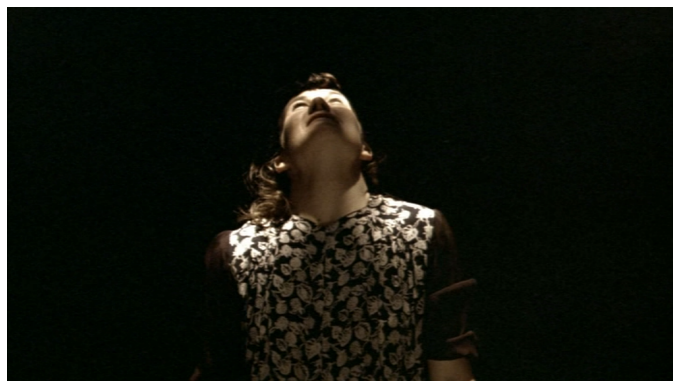


Fig. 5.2 – *Distant Voices, Still Lives* – 0.24.05
Inherited eloquence.



Fig. 5.3 – *The Long Day Closes* – 1.13.55
Bricolaged silence.

Bricolaged Echoes in the Silence

These cellar scenes expose more than a complex character arc. They reveal, also, the films' principal formal strategy, a strategy which resonates with the characters' muteness. In *Belle de Jour*, the syntagmatic arrangement of images linked by disorientating cuts creates a challenge to the articulate order of bourgeois ritual through discontinuous editing. In Davies' early films, an alternative horizontal inarticulacy is foregrounded, again drawing together succeeding expressive units in such a way as to amplify the dissonant effects of their joins. *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes* are, to an unusually explicit degree, composite pieces, containing quotations and allusions from a remarkable range of art forms, including popular song, mainstream cinema, classical music, theatre, and folktale. This building of an artistic work from an assemblage of pre-existing, inherited elements resonates with the concerns of Jacques Derrida's essay 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.' In the essay, Derrida asserts that all discourse consists of bricolage. Discourse, for Derrida, marks communication around a rupture, in which there is no fixed point of meaning (a

point de capiton in Lacanian terms) and all sense registers differentially in a play of meaning. This ruptured communication resonates with the discussion of inarticulacy in both its senses: (the challenge to) clear communication and the multi-parted movement without centre or uniform direction. The notion of bricolage allows post-structuralism one avenue for engagement with the concerns of articulation, describing the artistic process as a fundamentally mosaic one, the laying together of disparate elements taken from a broad and heterogeneous heritage. The dialectic implicit in bricolage echoes also Eisenstein's assertion that 'cinema is that genuine and ultimate synthesis of all artistic manifestations,' made up of textual, visual, and musical dimensions.⁸ Developed from the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Derrida's argument dispels as a myth the possibility of the artist as originary source of 'the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon.'⁹ The artist is, rather, a *bricoleur*, who

... uses "the means at hand," that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous – and so forth.¹⁰

Most bricolage is understated, made up of implicit echoes and shared terms; this results in what Roland Barthes describes as the work of art as a 'tissue of quotations'.¹¹ At other times, most evidently in the imitative modes of homage and pastiche, the 'borrowing [of] one's concepts from the text of a heritage' becomes

⁸ Sergei Eisenstein, 'Achievement', in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1949), 181.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 360.

¹⁰ Derrida, 360.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 146.

overt for reasons of celebration or send-up.¹² *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*, however, tread neither the implicit nor imitative path. Instead, quotations from heterogeneous cultural sources (particularly popular film and music from the 1950s) represent the interests and engagements of the characters, at the same time foregrounding the process of articulating bricolage which defines the relationship between individual works of art and the heritage from which they arise. The films become networks of densely interwoven references, and the works' complex significance becomes the function of the interactions of these disparate references. By making this mosaic structure explicit through what Michael Koresky describes as 'daring dissociative aesthetic choices', the films draw attention to their own inarticulate forms and to the relationship between character and cultural context.¹³

If, as is often claimed by criticism on the films, these are autobiographical works, the silence which endures at the core of the central characters poses a critical challenge. (Auto)biography may be seen as typically engaged with tracing an individual's life back to its chronological beginning and pushing it on to a climactic moment of achievement or culmination. In the terms of Derrida's 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences', the two directions of this dynamic may be described as, respectively, archaeological and teleological. These drives both privilege a centre of meaning (whose always-already-absent nature they deny) and suggest that origins and end points provide stable sources of meaning. Davies' autobiographical films, however, do not operate in this way. By foregrounding the effects of a complex cultural bricolage on the characters, time

¹² Derrida, 360.

¹³ Michael Koresky, *Terence Davies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 49.

loops in a complex dynamic of quotation and allusion, structured around repetition and not movement from or towards a discrete point.

This effect is amplified by the films' extensive lateral tracking shots, which Paul Farley suggests have 'become something of a signature style for Davies', during and between which the bricolaged elements are arranged in expressive chains; the shots become a visual motif marking the eschewal of the archaeological and teleological, moving neither backwards nor forwards.¹⁴ They do not simply 'traverse a threshold between... past and present' as Wendy Ellis suggests.¹⁵ Rather, they upset linear notions of time, resisting the apparent meanings which come with myths of origins or endings. This stylistic evasion of beginnings and endings is married to the films' diegetic content: the father's violence is never explained or justified; the women's inability to resist marriage to violent men is never interrogated; Bud is never able to speak his sexuality. Couched always in quoted terms, there are no beginnings and endings for the characters, and even death does not remove the impact of a character. Although Koresky argues that Bud in *The Long Day Closes* is 'unmistakably the director,' such a conclusion relies heavily on inference; the character's muteness interrogates the idea of the films as accessible statements of Davies' memory or attitude; intention remains inaccessible in silence.¹⁶

This bricolage can be seen at work as Bud stands alone in the coal cellar, abandoned by his best friend and desolate in his isolation, seemingly unable to

¹⁴ Paul Farley, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (London: BFI, 2006), 52.

¹⁵ Jim Ellis, 'Temporality and Queer Consciousness in *The House of Mirth*,' in *Screen* 47, no.2 (Summer 2006): 172.

¹⁶ Koresky, 28.

access any self-expression. Cultural elements – alien to the film – are once again bricolaged, but this time their discomfiting alien nature is made undeniable. The coalhole, Bud's place for quiet despair, is a mundane space transformed cinematically; its solid darkness is broken only by a single beam of light; recalling the projector beam from the earlier sequences set in the cinema, the scene bears the device of its own artificiality. As the scene opens, the mother sings the final lines of a popular song: 'if I had my life to live over again, I would still fall in love with you.' Buried in the psychically suggestive, oppressive darkness of the cellar, the scene seems haunted by the spectre of the father, which the mother can still not escape even as she sings trivial songs, their lyrics a reminder of their violent relationship. As the song ends, the film introduces one of its series of startling non-diegetic sound quotations from other films, unacknowledged by the characters and given no clear diegetic explanation. The quotation, from *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) does not, as an earlier quotation from Welles' film has, speak of celebration, but rather of how 'George Amberson Minafer got his comeuppance,' a fate which others had 'longed for.' The quotation is followed by another, this time from *The Long Day Closes* itself, in which Bud's teacher discusses wind erosion. As images of erosion flood the scene, Bud steps into a dark doorway and disappears. It is never explained where he has gone; he has simply been eroded from the frame, perhaps receiving the comeuppance of which the quotation speaks.

The sequence continues with a tracking shot across the dark contours of the cellar wall, accompanied by a quotation from David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946), in which Miss Havisham, played by Martita Hunt, speaks to Pip of her bridal cake, a gothic reminder of Bud's own developing homosexuality, a subject consistently

unspoken of and intimated only through images of sexualised violence and blasphemy. The images of erosion continue with Miss Havisham's macabre comment that 'sharper teeth than teeth of mice have gnawed at me,' suggesting the ravaging advance of loveless time spent in isolation. As the voice of Miss Havisham instructs Pip to 'play, play, play,' the camera pulls up through a spatially disorientating transition to a shot of Bud and Albie sitting beneath an enormous and beautiful night sky, the final shot of the film against which Arthur Sullivan's song 'The Long Day Closes' plays. Bud has followed the imperatives from Lean's film and dreams of a playful reunion with Albie and the end of his anxieties ('the long day closes'). Bud has no voice in this sequence at all; he is spoken to and for by the non-diegetic sounds of characters in other, earlier films.

The bricolage uses a range of different elements: explicit non-diegetic quotation (both vocal and musical); explicit diegetic quotation (as in the collective singing of well-known songs and the impersonations of movie stars); diegetic allusion (in the echoes of fairy tales); and references to the historical lives from Davies' past. These elements, between them, reveal a culture in which popular art forms are not straightforward escapes from trauma and tedium but rather substitutes for a more genuine self-expression, the frameworks and vocabularies in and through which individuals are compelled to speak. The quotations which surround Bud in the cellar do not depict cinema offering a distraction from problems. Rather, they seem to articulate his problems through the inarticulate combination of unrelated quotations. When Colin MacCabe suggests that '[y]ou could kind of psychologize it, and say that it's Bud's unconscious...', he fails to point out the inappropriateness and inadequacy of the voices with 'which he interprets his

reality.¹⁷ Across the divide of strange reappropriation (an adult American and an old woman of the nineteenth century speaking on behalf of a young British boy) and uncanny presence (it remains unclear whether the voices are located in Bud's memory or somehow independent), the words resonate with Bud's experience (just desserts, erosion, decay) and speak on his behalf. This complex bricolage demonstrates the phenomenon which defines Davies' early films: the power of popular culture to speak for individuals who may otherwise be silent. The film's form enacts Miss Havisham's imperative as it allows a play of meanings, denying any univocal, hegemonic sense. *The Long Day Closes'* concluding imagery of the infinite night sky suggests the impossibility of definitive statements and implies the dawn to come, part of a cyclical repetition. Even the film's title, which toys with ideas of end points, remains in the present tense, suggesting an on-going or habitual action and not a completed one. Despite the autobiographical status of the films, identity – along with the meanings it offers – is deferred in the film, and the characters end, as they begin, in a contingent, mute silence that marks the defeat of personal expression.

Cultural Articulations and Sung Lives

The family's collective life remains defined by domestic tyranny and violence throughout the films; in *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*, after the father's death, this effect is psychic and implied rather than explicit, the father remaining a constant through his imagined presence, as demonstrated in the shocking

¹⁷ Quoted in Koresky, 105.

nightmare which terrifies Bud in the later film in which two male hands seize his sleeping head. In this atmosphere, characters' individual articulacy is stifled and becomes a function of a set of shared cultural texts and artefacts. These shared texts have a double operation. They are, firstly, as Jefferson Hunter expresses it, 'period markers.'¹⁸ This is an idea supported by Paul Farley, who describes these bricolaged elements as 'pop-cultural tree rings [which indicate that] this is 1955,' a set of signifiers which 'situates and embalms the characters in a specific time and place.'¹⁹ Raymond Durgnat is correct in describing the films as 'a sort of "micro-realism,"' presenting both 'subjective remembrance and documentation.'²⁰ The bricolaged cultural elements form part of this micro-realist landscape, and from the specifics of a Liverpool family's remembered and carefully documented life can be extrapolated wider statements about post-war England.

However, like the coal cellar, they resonate both metonymically (with historical specificity) and metaphorically. Armond White makes the point that 'Davies refers to this pop material reverently, wondrously, and unironically as pure emotional phenomena – even though it also exists as the marker of a particular social period.'²¹ The Chanel No. 5 which Dave gives Eileen before their wedding is both a historical object and an emotional signifier. Eileen sits with her friends Monica and Jingles at the kitchen table (site and symbol of the restriction which comes with the film-world's enforced feminine domesticity), where they contemplate the bottle of perfume with rapt attention; their formation around the table and the central positioning of the bottle suggests a kind of religious devotion, while the

¹⁸ Hunter, 244.

¹⁹ Farley, 15.

²⁰ Durgnat (1992), 44.

²¹ Armond White, 'Remembrance of Songs Past,' *Film Comment* (May/June 1993): 12-13.

screenplay for the film describes the three women's reactions as 'unbelieving,' 'awestruck' and 'absolutely overcome' as they marvel at the '*dead* romantic' gesture (Fig. 5.4).²² The perfume's significance cannot be attributed to that of object alone; it is loaded with the metaphysical weight of a declaration of love, the central artefact in a material shrine to romance, before which the exclusively female worshippers contemplate the generosity of an absent man, a Prince Charming whose only declaration of affection has found its articulation in the form of a bottle of perfume whose connotations have been pre-established culturally. Like the films, Eileen's relationship is a bricolage, a series of borrowed utterances and gestures; the props of this bricolage are designed and marketed in such a way as to stand in for idiosyncratic utterance, to shortcut a complex emotion and speak it on her behalf.



Fig. 5.4 – *Distant Voices, Still Lives* – 0.11.40
A material shrine.

Distant Voices, Still Lives' most developed set of expressive shared cultural texts comes in the form of songs, many of which are diegetically sung by assembled groups of characters (particularly women). Hunter argues that this is indicative of

²² Terence Davies, *A Modest Pageant* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 81. While 'dead' here is in part a dialectal intensifier (meaning, approximately, 'very') it also suggests a moribund, clichéd romantic gesture that means less given its commonplace nature. It is important to note that neither the structure nor specific dialogue of Davies' published screenplays is identical to the films'. However, this moment of description encapsulates perfectly the achievement of the actors' performances in the realised scene.

the ways in which 'Davies's people make a larger and brighter world for themselves out of... [this] culture.'²³ The idea of these texts as escape or amelioration is developed by Amy Sargeant, who argues that 'the communal entertainments... serve as an idealised alternative commentary to the family's actual stark existence.'²⁴ Faced with the violence of the father and the almost intolerable pains and discomforts of their lives, articulation is most readily performed parasitically through the lyrics of the group songs that the characters sing together. Extrapolating out from this critical observation, Jim Ellis comments that the films seem to suggest that difficult lives are often lived 'vicariously through the arts' and how 'this investment in fantasy makes life tolerable.'²⁵ Scenes of entrapment and trauma are often succeeded by scenes in which shared experience of cultural texts offers some sort of liberation into expression. The film's structure, in which the scenes are ordered according to an associative logic closer to memory than chronology, allows for crescendos of aggression or tension to be undercut by moments of cultural expression through the shared vehicles of popular song.

These collective songs may be seen not merely as a distraction or subversion, but as a communal statement on the realities of the characters' lives. The songs provide a choric voice in the films, which reflects on the unfolding narrative. The exploration of the way in which these shared cultural texts allow characters to express identity is a recurrent feature of Wendy Everett's study of Davies' films. She argues that *Distant Voices, Still Lives* 'does recognise the emotional and sentimental power of music and images to transform our lives... [and to give characters] a voice to

²³ Hunter, 249.

²⁴ Amy Sargeant, *British Cinema: A Critical History* (London: BFI, 2005), 303.

²⁵ Jim Ellis, 'Terence Davies and the *Unheimlich* Home Movie', in *British Queer Cinema*, ed. Robin Griffiths (London: Routledge, 2006), 141.

express... identity.'²⁶ Similarly, she sees *The Long Day Closes* as a 'recognition of the centrality of popular culture... in the articulation of subjective identity' and that 'the rich fantasy world of cinema [the popular medium most extensively referenced in the later film]... a way of escaping the confines of everyday existence [and] a way of articulating the subjective identity.'²⁷ Jefferson Hunter argues that the nature of the expressed identities is one of 'good humour, stoic pride, resilience, and the solidarity of men with men or (especially) women with women.'²⁸ In his reading, '[m]usic gives inarticulacy a way to be eloquent.'²⁹ Most recently, Michael Koresky has suggested that '[t]he people *are* the music..., their profoundest unspoken emotions expressed only through melodies and lyrics...'³⁰

This strain of criticism, in which the shared cultural texts mark a liberation from inarticulacy for the characters, is commonplace in accounts of Davies' films. Davies himself describes such texts (especially musical and cinematic) as 'the poetry of the ordinary,' supported by Thomas Elsaesser who charts how 'the remnants of a bygone popular culture have become the icons of subjectivity.'³¹ Jim Ellis comments on the songs' role 'both as points of articulation between memories and as the rich carriers of emotion.'³² The phenomenon is perhaps most charmingly described by Derek Malcolm, who describes Davies' cinema as 'a musical version of *Coronation Street* directed by Robert Bresson, with additional

²⁶ Everett (2004), 80.

²⁷ Everett (2004), 102-3. Everett is especially invested in the films as expressions of Davies' own identity, but the cultural texts shared by the characters are as much an expression of their subjectivities as their author's.

²⁸ Hunter, 248-9.

²⁹ Hunter, 245.

³⁰ Koresky, 69.

³¹ Thomas Elsaesser, 'Games of Love and Death, or an Englishman's Guide to the Galaxy', *Monthly Film Bulletin* 55, no.657 (October 1988): 291.

³² Ellis, 'Temporality and Queer Consciousness,' (2006), 171.

dialogue by Sigmund Freud and Tommy Handley.’³³ Davies’ films may well be seen as the everyday observation of working-class life (*Coronation Street*, Tommy Handley) transformed through music (‘a musical version’) into a significant revelation of deeper psychic truths (Sigmund Freud).

Papering over the Cracks: Dishonest Bricolage in *Distant Voices, Still Lives*

The notion of the superficial benignity of a set of cultural texts which renders difficult lives tolerable and permits self-expression is not sufficient to explain the full operation of the films’ bricolage. The ‘cultural cohesion’ which Koresky argues underlies the use of these shared references is not the whole story.³⁴ Such a critical position can become sentimental, and ignores the incompleteness of the articulacy which the cultural texts offer characters. The way in which the quotations that fill the films speak on behalf of characters also robs them of self-expression – imposing a language, syntax, and lexicon, and limiting what is sayable. It is not just that Bud feels the difficulty of discussing his emergent homosexuality; he *does not have the language* with which to speak of his emergent homosexuality. The cultural communicative tools which have been given to him (largely in the forms of popular song and narrative cinema) do not allow for such an expression. Similarly, the frank discussion of domestic violence is made impossible by the sentimental attachment to the myth of stable marriage in the romantic films (represented, in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* by *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*) and song lyrics which they share. When Eileen threatens to challenge Jingles’ abusive husband, she

³³ Quoted in Tony Williams, 243.

³⁴ Koresky, 70.

speaks in the conditional ('for two pins I'd go over there and tell him') and the tentative ('I feel like going over there') without directly articulating her complaint. The mother – whose sympathetic line of concern in the original screenplay ('It's not right, you know') is significantly removed in the film – insists that the subject of domestic violence should not be spoken of and orders Micky 'to give us a song.' The shared cultural texts conspire in an elaborate cover-up through their intrusive ubiquity and relentless euphemism, not expressing the precise quality of the characters' mute misery or their fleeting delight, and only gesturing towards their unspoken lives.

The disingenuousness at play, and the kind of socio-political constraints (represented by the figures of violent and repressive male characters) which it suggests, is particularly poignant and significant in the depiction of the characters' attempts to articulate trauma. The criticism which sees the films' characters progressing from oppressed inarticulacy to a kind of eloquence, denies the complexity of these depictions. In a sequence in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* which indicates the emotional and structural complexity of the films, the full extent of the father's violence becomes apparent. The sequence begins, twenty minutes into the film, with a shot of the father lying in his hospital bed, dying. He is lit from above, and although he is clearly very ill (an effect concentrated by the pronounced bones of Pete Postlethwaite's face) he appears almost divine; the composition borrows liberally from clichéd scenes of deathbed redemptions (Fig. 5.5). This effect is compounded by the father's statement that 'I was wrong, lad,' a kind of secular riff on the deathbed conversion and the traditional narrative of the dying man's final search for forgiveness. The reverse shot of Tony, clearly troubled by the emotion of

the situation, shows him dipping his head, unable to look at his father, and mumbling ‘OK, dad, OK,’ more a means of ending the conversation than an absolution. The scene cuts to a party, the significance of which remains obscure. Aunty Nell sings raucously, filling the frame; the camera pans across to gran, the father’s mother, who sings a nonsense song about liking pickles. The scene cuts to a shot of Monica, Eileen, and Maisie (who provide regular choric observations through the film) who laugh at the old woman, Maisie commenting while smiling that ‘She’s just like me dad, and I bleedin’ hate her.’ Pointedly, the song here obscures emotion rather than facilitates it; the father’s emotional articulation in the hospital is evaded by the embarrassed Tony and openly undermined by the gran’s nonsense song, until the scene returns to the childish violence of Maisie’s expression of hatred. The scene’s structure suggests that violence is inescapable, embedded in shared popular texts which mask the frank expression of real emotion.



Fig. 5.5 – 0.19.23
The father’s confession

This complicated negotiation between narrative and the choric commentary provided by the shared cultural texts continues. The scene shifts again, this time to a shot of the child Maisie looking upwards. The shot follows her gaze and reveals the mother sitting on the ledge of an upstairs window, cleaning the outside of the

panes, simultaneously a startling representation of domestic drudgery and a dangerous moment of liberation, in which the mother finds a precarious site for herself (partially) outside of the home; here she can smile and, which is rare in *Distant Voices*, she appears to be happy (Fig. 5.6). The child Maisie, couching her emotional articulation in a petition, with all the intensity of a heartfelt prayer, says in voiceover: 'Don't fall, mam, please don't fall.' The shot cuts to Tony and Eileen as children, standing at the top of the stairs inside the house. A cut to a reverse shot reveals that they, too, are observing their mother. In voiceover, the adult Maisie asks her mother why she married her husband, to which the mother replies, 'He was nice, he was a good dancer.' The camera slowly tracks in towards the mother on the window ledge, as the non-diegetic sound of the romantic Ella Fitzgerald song 'Taking a Chance on Love' begins. As Fitzgerald sings the line 'All aglow with love', the mother, seen through the light-reflecting glass of the windows, is angelic; she appears to be almost floating as she sits on the ledge, and the polish on the windows creates a smeared halo around her face. As the song continues, the scene changes again, this time to a situation of harrowing violence: the father beats the mother around the head as she screams for him to stop (Fig. 5.7). The shot cuts as the couple move into the hall, and then tracks slowly in to follow their progress. The shot is held as the father continues to beat and kick his wife as she lies on the floor, now outside the frame. Silencing her attempts to express herself, he tells her to 'Shut up!' then leaves her, still out of the frame, to weep alone on the floor. The scene cuts to a single shot of the mother, in profile and horribly bruised, polishing a sideboard, and then to the short sequence of Maisie's anger in the coal cellar. A further cut removes the action to a party in which the mother leads a communal rendition of 'Barefoot Days' (Fig. 5.8).



Fig. 5.6 – *Distant Voices, Still Lives* – 0.22.20
Dangerous liberation.



Fig. 5.7 – *Distant Voices, Still Lives* – 0.21.50
Unprecedented violence.



Fig. 5.8 – *Distant Voices, Still Lives* – 0.24.30
Self-conscious performance.

The precise employment of the shared cultural texts in this sequence is highly complex. The signifiers at play here (the images of the mother being beaten and the sounds of her cries, as well as the non-diegetic jazz standard) seem to be in irreconcilable tension with each other. Consequently, the song has been discussed by some critics as an obviously ironic counterpoint to the action. However, its

interactions with the narrative of the scene are subtler than this. The opening lines of the song speak literally to the scene; the mother is 'aglow' as the song's lyrics state that she is. The exactness of the marriage between the song's description and the film's imagery is apparent, and warns against a too-simplistic ironic reading. The song is, in fact, not optimistic, recognising that this is not the first time that the speaker has taken a chance and that previous attempts have ended in a 'fall,' speaking figuratively to the mother's precarious position on the window ledge. The 'happy ending now' predicted by the song is only half-believed in, a myth told in order to escape the sad truth of 'taking a chance on love.' Following so closely on from Tony's visit to his ill father, and in the context of the film's prior acknowledgement that the father dies, the happy ending is not only an ironic counterpoint but also the partial expression of the mother's possible fantasy; the fantasised happy ending, echoed in the following threat by Maisie to kill her father, is for her husband's death, a wish predicated on complex feelings that find cheap expression in the lyrics of the song.

However, the suggestion that the relationship between the quoted texts and the imagery they accompany is not ironic is not to say that their articulation of inexpressible emotion and fantasy is necessarily benign. It is a horrifying moment of cultural observation that the marriage, which locks the mother and her children into a site of imprisoned muteness in fear of violence, is predicated on the father's erstwhile ability to dance: a shared cultural experience convinces the mother to marry him. If the song is seen as a choric commentary on the action and not only an ironic counterpoint, the music which permeates the characters' lives and seems to offer them some sort of liberation from inarticulacy is exposed as callous,

making light of their despair and pain by concealing it behind a barrier of sweet melody and euphemistic lyric. The emotional distance suggested by the song's euphemism is compounded by the frame which does not adjust to accommodate, or even acknowledge, the beaten mother as she lies on the floor; a reluctance to display the gratuitous sight of such horror may be understandable, but it remains periphrastic.

The inadequacy of the shared cultural texts reaches a climax in the final section of this sequence, as the mother leads a group in singing 'Barefoot Days.' The shot cuts from Maisie in the cellar to the mother's hand tapping on her knee, a gesture which emphasises monotonous rhythm (the repetitive cycles of her own domestic and emotional life) and her wedding ring (symbol of the permanence of her marriage contract). The song 'Barefoot Days' has a nostalgic lyric, reminiscing about a relationship's idyllic past, harking back to the days when father was 'nice.' The camera pulls up, and the mother shows a startling acknowledgement of it; the mother, through this metacinematic gesture, for a moment becomes a performance rather than a character (or a historical figure). The trite and dishonest lyrics are not an escape from inarticulacy or from violence through the eloquence of an inherited text. Rather, they are a means of avoiding expression, of inhabiting an alternative identity behind the mask offered by quotation. The mother, through her gaze into the camera, suggests an awareness of the constructedness of her situation, as she sings along like a ventriloquist dummy. The Brechtian gesture of the look into the camera marks a meeting point of the contrivance of the bricolage form and the aching unsaid of the character's situation. The rest of the group, explored in a slow pan from left to right, seems less aware, more distracted or even anaesthetised by

the immediate pleasures of collective singing, and no more honest or articulate than the mother. The song does permit a level of violent language which the female characters generally avoid ('the Goddamn fish'), but this is not cathartic and remains a misdirected and impotent gesture. The frame focuses for a moment on Eileen, Tony, and Maisie, before dissolving to a shot of the father chopping wood, a gesture both domestic and violent. He is fulfilling a folktale role – that of the woodcutter, an archetypal masculine hero – but he is a constant undoing of the romantic possibilities suggested by folktales. The final line of the song – 'What joy, what joy we had in barefoot days' is a ghastly distortion of the scene of the father, mother, and children, which is drably depressive.

In a startling reversal of their initial suggestion, these shared cultural texts within the films are exposed as dishonest impediments to articulacy. The shipping forecast, which opens the film, no longer appears to be only the benign 'recitative whose relative meaninglessness enables it to articulate an unfocused yearning for something lost' as Phil Powrie suggests.³⁵ As well as a nostalgic harking back to the lost, distant, soothing voices of childhood, it is, at the same time, a highly esoteric text which speaks of exclusion and the hollowness of mystical-seeming litanies, its familiarity masking these underlying aspects. The listeners from within the film are excluded on the grounds of distance (the spaces listed are in most cases far from them), economic background (the voice is distinguished by its middle-class, 'BBC' accent), gender (the voice's authority stems from a patriarchal masculinity), and technical knowledge (the meanings of the terminology remain opaque). The sound is no more meaningful or articulate than the thunder which accompanies it. As an

³⁵ Phil Powrie, 'On the Threshold between Past and Present: "Alternative Heritage",' in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, ed. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London: Routledge, 2000), 324.

opening to the film, the shipping forecast offers a context in which to read the myriad of quotations and allusions of which the film is composed; the forecast's contingent meaninglessness (a function of its esoteric form and historical specificity) foreshadows both the inarticulacies of the characters and the enduring mystery of the father's violence.

The film most clearly and pressingly reveals the inadequacy of the borrowed emotional utterances of shared cultural texts in its depiction of the role of cinema in the lives of the family. Following a scene with unsettling intimations of violence as Eileen and Dave walk home from the christening of Maisie's child, the scene changes to a momentarily unreadable canopy of black umbrellas; the contexts of place and time are withheld entirely (Fig. 5.9). The shot seems to signify self-consciously the 'cinematic', suggested by the artificiality of the rain ("“Hollywood”-style rain' as Davies calls it), and the allusion to screen musicals (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen's *Singin' in the Rain* particularly) and thrillers (especially Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent*, with its celebrated use of a canopy of umbrellas in an assassination scene).³⁶ The domes of the wet umbrellas throb with light; the scene is implausibly lit, giving the impression of a fantasy, of artificiality. The camera rises, craning up the red brick wall behind the umbrellas, until it passes two film posters, both pristine despite the weather, for *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* and *Guys and Dolls*. The shot is accompanied by the strains of the theme tune from the former. The shot passes up into darkness, dissolving into a tracking shot across the heads of the audience inside the cinema; the track is slow and deliberate, capturing the coiling smoke which hangs delicately in the air, expressing the

³⁶ Davies, quoted in Everett (2004), 100.

projector's light as an almost solid beam. The shot slowly reaches Eileen and Maisie, who are weeping to the music of the theme song (Fig. 5.10). The film and the song – the impact of the latter felt outside the cinema as well as inside, its music beginning with the umbrella shot – seem to be allowing Maisie and Eileen an outlet, an opportunity to weep for the romantic frustrations and disappointments of their own lives.



Fig. 5.9 – 1.08.00
'Cinematic' umbrellas.



Fig. 5.10 – *Distant Voices, Still Lives* – 1.09.12
Isolating emotion.

However, the emotion displayed by the two women is strangely uncanny; it is unmatched by anyone else in the cinema, and the sisters are intensely (and uniquely) lit from below. They are cut off from their surroundings; the emotional state and illumination offered by this shared cultural text is isolating. More significantly, the sequence which follows – in which Tony and George fall through

a glass ceiling – is translated out of any approximation of micro-realism and reimagined in a self-consciously artificial manner: set to music (the continuing ‘Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing’), choreographed in its graceful movement, accentuated in its slow-motion, and engaged with the patterns of light reflected in the shattering glass (Fig. 5.11). Reimagined in the light of the sisters’ cinema trip (the events linked by the propinquity of the scenes and the continuing soundtrack), the horror of the accident becomes exquisite. Even the potentially moving drama of Maisie’s running as she arrives at the hospital is rendered unreal by the Hollywood rain which continues to fall, and the emotion which she shows at George’s bedside is indistinguishable from that in the cinema. Her sentimental definition of love – along with everyone else’s in a film which constantly, and almost without exception, exposes marriage as a violent power-struggle predicated on antagonism – is set by cinema. The film’s reconstruction of the accident, and its eschewal of the presumably long and painful recovery process, reflect an avoidance of intense and complex familial emotions. This shared cultural text has not only failed to provide the means through which to articulate distress in the face of disaster, it has also substituted a distorted imaginative retroactive articulation of that disaster.



Fig. 5.11 – *Distant Voices, Still Lives* – 1.10.30
Transformed trauma.

Radical Recontextualisations in *The Long Day Closes*

These theories concerning the films' use of shared cultural texts have enormous significance in the discussion of their depiction of traumatic repression. The symbolic centre of this depiction is the father, whose violence is its most explicit and horrific manifestation. However, the criticism which has marked the physical absence of the father in *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes* as a movement towards the possibility of clearer emotional expression for the other characters has overlooked the films' implied thesis on the nature of repressive cultural bricolage. *The Long Day Closes* contains as much violence as *Distant Voices*, it is simply of a different order; it is not presented as the diegetically specific outbursts of one aggressive character but as the constant and inescapable ideological constraints of a patriarchy which dictates the articulations of the characters as certainly as the teacher dictates the writing of his students. Individuals are left inarticulate, their opportunities for expression plugged by pre-existent, shared, and inadequate cultural texts.

The stifling bricolage of this dense layering of allusions from heterogeneous sources is at play from the opening of *The Long Day Closes*. The opening credits show a flower arrangement, which passes from full bloom to decay (Fig. 5.12). This transition ties in with the film's overt theme of the passing of innocence, the protagonist's movement towards adulthood which comes with an awakened awareness of sexuality and a sense of corruption. The streak of directed diagonal lighting from the top left to the lower centre of the frame is reminiscent of the light

effects used in the Dutch interior painting of Rembrandt and Vermeer, whose compositions inform many of the tableaux used by Davies throughout the film. The painterly quality of the credits is further reinforced by the use of time-lapse photography, which reveals the flowers as a series of still lifes rather than objects in motion; no petals are seen falling. The connotations of Dutch painting, the creation of rich, autumnal colours through a bleach-bypass process, and the selection of an elaborate copperplate typeface all evoke a genteel cultural past. This is complemented by the use of Boccherini's String Quintet No. 17 in A major, a piece of music associated with Alexander Mackendrick's 1955 Ealing comedy *The Ladykillers*. The cultural past evoked through connections with that film is one of traditional values, an unshakeable form of mythic Englishness, tied up with a home full of stories of Britain's imperial past.



Fig. 5.12 – *The Long Day Closes* – 0.1.10
Evocative titling.

As *The Long Day Closes* continues, it seems to confirm its project of mythologizing English cultural history, using heterogeneous allusions to film and music to cement this effect, a litany of quotation which uncovers the romantic possibility in the squalor of an abandoned urban street. The film's elaborate opening moving shot reveals a street suffused with a kind of radiant dilapidation, a muted exquisiteness, the effect of the “‘Hollywood’-style rain’ and studio lighting, which lend a shabby

glamour to the street. The remembered past is made splendid. As a crane shot tracks down a brick wall, a gong is sounded, a sound associated with the opening of Rank Organisation film releases, linking *The Long Day Closes* with the films of the era which it chronicles, the British films which Bud, the central character, attends and professes to love. The gong sound is followed by Margaret Rutherford's censorious response to Joyce Grenfell's striking of a gong in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1950), a popular film comedy from the period in which the film is set: 'A tap, Gossage, I said a tap. You're not introducing a film.' As the camera continues its descent down the wall, the image is complemented by the familiar sound of the Twentieth Century Fox fanfare, before the frame takes in a poster for *The Robe* (1953), marking the kind of Hollywood releases which, along with British films, represent the films watched by Bud in the film.³⁷ The camera continues its movement, as in a dream, along a deserted street, shot through glimmering rainfall which sounds like applause as it falls, to the smooth accompaniment of Nat King Cole's 'Stardust.' As the shot enters the now-abandoned house of Bud's family, Alec Guinness is quoted from *The Ladykillers* (1955), asking whether there are rooms to let, completing the allusion begun with the choice of credits music. The opening to *The Long Day Closes* seems a montage of quotation designed to express film and music's capacity for acknowledging and celebrating the beautiful and thrilling in the most mundane of settings.

However, the film, even as it suggests a cosily nostalgic account of history, also employs bricolage to complicate its expression, creating a discordant and uncanny landscape in which reliable categories are collapsed. The film's urban landscape is

³⁷ This particular version of the Twentieth Century fanfare – complete with choral singing – was composed to coincide with the release of *The Robe*, the first film shown in CinemaScope.

rendered as a space which is both recognisably realist and clearly artificial, and the counterpoint prevents the harmonious synthesis of the combined quotations into a clear account of a character's remembering consciousness. (It is significant that, at this point in the film, Bud has not yet been introduced.) In this reading of the film, the past becomes frightening as well as reassuring, its surface romanticisation both unconvincing *and* convincing. Like *The Ladykillers*, this account of the past suggests both cosy gentility *and* the folly of attempts at progress. The opening minutes are a representative indication of how the film's parts do not cohere in a stable whole.

In the abandoned street of the opening shot, the studio artificiality is foregrounded and not concealed. The awareness of the film's status as both a form of auteurist autobiography and a self-aware construction which foregrounds its own artificiality results in a frame that is hard to read. The connotations of the quotations, read initially as an endorsement of the recalled glamour of this past time, become also complicated and confused, each one signifying with a destabilising multiplicity of meanings, these meanings clashing in discordant chords. The brick wall whose hard surface the camera follows initially is impassive, a sign of both solid endurance and restriction. The Rank Organisation's gong implies not only the films of the era but also the gently dangerous homoeroticism of the muscular athlete traditionally seen striking the gong, a signifier of the complex sexual identity which will alienate Bud later in the film, his later enforced silence on the subject foreshadowed by the suppression of the image. The quotation from *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, a farce set in a school, foreshadows ironically the persecution which Bud will himself endure at the hands of teachers and fellow students, an abject disavowal of the notion that school represents a period of

unique happiness. Given the context of the shabby street, the Fox fanfare seems overstated; the coincidence with the frame's momentary hesitation on the sign for Kensington Street conflates the grandeur of the music and its associations with the mundane drabness of the street in an absurd bathos. The poster for *The Robe*, inspired by the *Bible*, the central cultural lynchpin in 1950s Catholic Liverpool, implicates film in the kind of oppression which Bud later feels at the hands of the Church. The image of the poster retains a certain grandeur, leached from the fanfare and the foregrounded cinematographic conceit; however, in concert with the detritus which remains strewn around the set, its tears also seem corrupt and moribund.

The romantic significance lent to the street by the cultural texts (speech, music, song) is complex as these texts are also implicated in a conspiracy to deny the brutal reality of urban life and decline, including the domestic violence, poverty, and bullying seen in *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*. The deserted street, like Bud's imagination, is irresistibly haunted by the insidious memory of cultural texts which seek to dictate the characters' utterances into trite clichés (such as schooldays being the happiest of our lives) and to silence real self-expression. Univocally meaningful statements concerning individual experience and identity become impossible in this world in which so much expression is in the form of proliferating quoted cultural texts. In exposing this cultural curtailment of free articulation, *The Long Day Closes* itself becomes a tissue of quotations, highlighting the kind of network of second-hand utterances and clichéd ideas which the characters themselves are forced into using. For Bud, cinema and popular music, however seductive, must in part belong to the same series of influences as school and church, dictating his attitudes and his

ability to annunciate his own identity. His sexuality, his feelings for his family, his anxieties concerning the spectral figure of his remembered father, all must find inadequate expression in borrowed terms. His education as seen in the film consists of dictation, and Bud quotes at length from his teacher; family friends sing together in the shared lyrics of popular songs and Curly impersonates well-known Hollywood stars; sex becomes a question of disturbing quotation, and the shocking violence of Christ's crucifixion is reappropriated in the shadowy suggestion of Bud's excruciating desire for a local builder (Fig. 5.13). The imaginations of Bud and the other characters are not their own, but are, instead, conditioned by school, church, and culture; film and popular music offer limited and limiting vocabularies for expression, and *The Long Day Closes* exposes the violence of this process by showing the jarring disjunctures between the component parts in the articulation of this bricolage. This overt combination of quotations in the face of characters' silence presents the horror of an oppressive cultural puppetry; the violent words of the now-absent father, which have conditioned action and thought in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* now echo through words drawn from a cultural context which dictate the possibilities of action and thought.

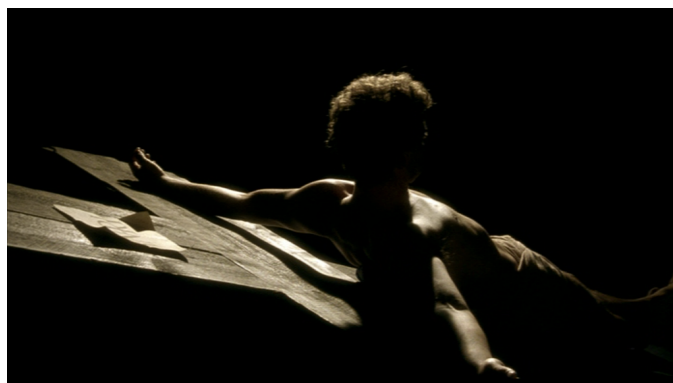


Fig. 5.13 – 0.58.03
Blasphemous eloquence.

This opening sequence not only reveals the ways in which characters are compelled to find voice through inherited terms; it also calls into question the very ontologies of film as a medium and the individuals presented within the drama. The early inclusion of the quotation from *The Happiest Days of Your Life* ('you're not introducing a film') at the very moment in which the film *is being introduced* calls into ironic doubt the film's ontological status; the line, recontextualised in this sequence, *is* introducing a film. However, the emphatic singularity of the quotation's noun ('a film') sits uncomfortably with the structure of *The Long Day Closes*, whose introduction consists almost exclusively of material from multiple other sources; this is not *a* film, but rather a compendium of many films. As the dense opening shot continues, it collapses the comic and the sinister, the nostalgic and the ruined, the city as opportunity and failure, all evoked through the jarring counterpoint between quotations, a bricolage of incompatible voices which spin in a vortex of connotation and significance that is both satisfying and disturbing. As the shot ultimately penetrates the family home, it dissolves into a shot of it as an inhabited space in the 1950s, quoting *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. Wendy Everett points out that '[o]nce you have seen *Distant Voices*, for example, the hallway in *The Long Day Closes* inevitably contains within its silent space the terrifying memory of the mother being beaten by the father, to the strains of 'Taking a Chance on Love'.³⁸ As this intertextuality evokes a comfortable familiarity, it also summons the memory of the father from the earlier film as the spectre of a traumatic past and an uneasy future. Coupled with this, the casting of new actors and the restructure of the family (from two daughters and a son in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* to three sons and a daughter in *The Long Day Closes*) make this an only-

³⁸ Everett (2004), 86.

almost familiar family. The films' repetitions of each other are structured on difference and opposition, and, as Everett says, 'meaning is no longer an attribute of plot or story' but rather is 'inherent in form,' most particularly a form in which quotation destabilises identities and fixed categories.

Quotations from Davies' own life complicate this further, links to what Everett describes as 'a "reality" which lies outside the normal parameters of film' including, as Farley points out, the 'photograph on the parlour wall in the funeral and wedding gatherings [which] is an *actual* photograph of Davies's father.'³⁹ The films perform these ontological proofs of life beyond themselves, questioning the status of their characters; despite the careful and brutal realism of Pete Postlethwaite's performance as the father, he exists only as a simulacrum, his inauthenticity asserted by the prominent photograph, which shows the 'real' father grooming a horse, a scene aped in the film itself. In this ontological confusion, in which the possibility of original utterance in film is called into question, with so many shots and lines quoted from other films or life beyond the film, the fragmented form resonates with the characters' silence, leaving the impression that they are as gutted as the abandoned houses and as bound to imitation as the film which quotes so heavily.

³⁹ Everett (2004), 74; Farley, 35.

Culture as Relief *and* Repression

These cultural texts, bricolaged densely throughout both films, offer a vocabulary for the expression of experience, but that vocabulary permits only a reductive approximation. This tension between release and frustration defines a sequence of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* in which the father's violence is juxtaposed with scenes of tenderness in a series of lateral tracking shots, much of the sequence underscored by the hymn 'In the Bleak Midwinter.' Powrie describes the release offered by the music, its contribution to this act of remembering and re-membering, both a recollection and a healing, a 'nostalgic but bittersweet memory ironically emphasised by the sound of the carol...' ⁴⁰ However, the operation of the hymn's lyric and melody here is not straightforwardly cathartic, neither nostalgic nor ironic.

The sequence, twelve minutes into the film, offers the first depiction of collective singing, at the reception for Eileen's wedding. Underscored by the sound of the group singing from the room next door, Eileen – in a two shot with her brother, Tony – is weeping, grieving for her dead father. Superficially, the scene appears to be the moving account of a young woman marrying in the absence of her recently deceased father. However, the scene's dynamics are more complicated than that, and the bricolage of texts adds further layers of suggestion. Expressions of strong emotion (Eileen's obvious grief) are relegated to private spaces; she is not permitted to perform this emotion in front of the guests at the wedding. In addition, with the perfectly symmetrical composition of the two shot and the backdrop of frosted

⁴⁰ Powrie, 320.

glass which glows celestially, the emotion seems posed, even staged; the composition asserts the camera's presence, as the subsequent elaborate tracking shot will, suggesting that this is another family portrait. Despite this sense of performance, the communication is stilted. Eileen manages to say 'I want me dad' twice, and Tony says nothing. Eileen's line is, in fact, a near repetition of her first line in the film ('I wish me dad was here'); she is trapped within a decaying repetition, in which there seems to be no emotional relief because there are no new means of personal articulation (unsurprising, perhaps, in a depiction of grief). Instead, as the film continues, the characters' articulations become increasingly bound up with the texts that they inherit from their culture. Eileen's egoistic 'I want me dad' echoes the emphatic first person singular of the song sung in the bar next door: 'If you knew Susie like I know Susie.' This imitated voice denies Tony a share in the emotion, and he remains silent through the scene. (In the original screenplay he is said to be weeping; in the film, he is denied even this gestural expression of grief.⁴¹) In addition, at the beginning of the two shot, Tony's face is obscured behind Eileen's head; when it is revealed that the male figure is not Eileen's husband, his absence resonates with the absence of the father, foreshadowing the never-articulated parallel between the two men's aggressive personalities.

As the music and lyric of 'In the Bleak Midwinter' begins, it provides a relief from these inexpressive repetitions and silences. At the same time, the father's presence is recalled by the remembered scenes and by Eileen's grief and her unhappy marriage, and the characters' emotional lives are condemned to the repetition of

⁴¹ Davies, 82.

revisited past trauma relieved by only inadequate articulation through culturally inherited texts. This psychic condition finds an equivalence in the languorous and laconic lateral tracking shot to the left – which may document the memories of Eileen or Tony – in which there is no movement forwards (towards cathartic progress) or backwards (towards honest confrontation with the past).⁴²

The shot passes through the pub, now unpopulated and almost ecclesiastical with its back-lit windows and ornately designed pillars; the pub has already been shown to be a place in which any attempt at personal expression is abandoned in favour of shared articulations, both comforting links and restrictive euphemisms. The shot moves through a transitional black space and then, maintaining its pace, into a church, where the family kneels and lights votive candles before a statue of the Virgin Mary. The family's conversation is whispered, inaudible, but it may be presumed that it follows the appropriate formula for the lighting of intercessional candles; like the pub, the church is a place in which personal expression is foregone for the collective identity of congregational liturgy. The family seems happy at this moment. The tracking shot continues, through a lap dissolve, to the street on which they live; the houses are effectively identical, each with a picket fence and a terrace front, and with wreaths on the doors and trees in the windows. The camera pauses outside the family's home to watch the father dressing the Christmas tree; the film then cuts to the same scene inside the house, and the father and the children are shown in a rare moment of affection. On the soundtrack, the solo voice is joined by a full choir, and the father's saccharine bidding good night to his

⁴² In the screenplay, this sequence is accompanied by a voiceover by Eileen, suggesting that what follows is her memory: "I know me Dad was bad – I know that – but I always try and think of the good times." This voiceover is entirely omitted in the finished film. See Davies, 82.

children is accompanied by a climax in the hymn on the words 'Jesus Christ.' A further cut reveals the children's bedroom in which the father delicately leaves a set of stockings for the children to open in the morning; he says 'God bless, kids' as he leaves.

Powrie's reading of this scene as nostalgic and ironic, suggesting a moving counterpoint between the hymn and images, explains part of its effectiveness. However, the layering of connotative imagery and sound at the same time as reinforcing this reading, also destabilises it. The use of the hymn, in particular, implicates ostensibly happy moments of family interaction in the violence which provides the sequence's climax. As the family kneels at the votive candles, the soundtrack offers an extremely long held note on the phrase 'long ago,' suggesting the remoteness of this memory of contentment, and even its status as myth. As the camera lingers outside the house, the scene resembles nothing so much as a conventional Christmas card displaying an implausibly idyllic family life. The father's interactions with the non-human (earlier the horse and now the tree) seem to be more delicate than any of his interactions with people. From the street, he seems kind, but a change in mood is evident shortly after the camera passes through the window to enter the house. The hanging of the stockings is made unnerving by the fact that the children are sleeping; up till this point, the tracking shot has had the implied associative logic of memory (albeit an ameliorated memory). This moment of stocking-hanging, however, is without perspective; the children sleep and the father is dead in the diegetic present of Eileen's wedding day. Without the foundation of an explaining perspective, the shot acquires an instability, leaving it not fully readable. In the light of his typical aggression, this

gentle act of tenderness seems a delusion, but whose delusion it is remains uncertain.

The possibility of violence, only implied so far by the interactions of the cultural texts (Christmas carol, prayer), is made explicit as the sequence ends. There is a further cut, this time to the dining table at which the family sits for Christmas dinner. The silence in the room is oppressive, masked but not wholly concealed by the climaxing hymn. The father features twice in the frame, reflected as he is by a strangely hung mirror behind him (Fig. 5.14). Like the ontological complication of the asymmetrical doublings in *The Long Day Closes* (film/not film, real/artificial, glamour/decay), this doubleness is unnerving, but apt given both the tenderness and the violence witnessed in the sequence; the father's ontological status is as a trauma/fond memory from the past resurfacing in the present. This two-sided figure presides over the children's terrible silence. Immediately the hymn has ended, his hands begin to tremble, becoming increasingly agitated, before he rips off the tablecloth. Standing, he shouts for his wife to 'Clean it up.' Without the repressive containment of the hymn (which has drowned out Eileen's grief at one end of the sequence and the father's viciousness at the other, and has accompanied the transitional scenes of seeming-contentment), the father's anger erupts in the film's most savage depiction of impotent masculine rage. He offers no expression beyond the patriarchal imperative from husband to wife to 'clean it up.' The hymn has not been an escape from the father's violence but only a deferral. Indeed, the hymn's insistence on bleakness (which conditions the reading of the seemingly idyllic family images) and fetishization of poverty (transforming it, as part of a Judaeo-Christian myth, into an ennobling state which allows for grace) the hymn

may be seen to contribute to the violence. The father enforces his children's muteness (children should be seen and not heard) and his wife's servile domesticity ('clean it up'). The hymn's presence in the film is not only ironically nostalgic. It is at the same time a statement on the conspiracy between the socio-psychic spaces of pub, church, and home in the trauma which leaves the characters unable to speak, caught in repetitive cycles of violently regulated expression through permitted clichés.



Fig. 5.14 – 0.17.20
The father doubled.

This violent regulation continues to haunt *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*, after the father is no longer physically present, through the oppressive bricolaged layers of cultural reference. In this model, the father is not simply the father; he is the agent of a much broader patriarchal force, the Lacanian Name of the Father, which dominates and manages the language and law of the Symbolic Order. Music and cinema in these films should not be read as offering only what Jim Ellis describes as an 'ironic commentary'; they are part of this paternalistic violence. Like the father himself, they silence and dismay, determine and coerce. They construct heteronormative models of romance (disavowing the realities of homosexuality and brutally unhappy matrimony), nostalgic accounts of history (disavowing the characters' painful pasts), and irresistible narratives of the

inevitability of institutions (justifying the harsh regimes of church, school, and home). Song lyrics and film narratives, as witnessed and quoted by the characters in the films, offer them the relief of expression at the same time as conspiring to drive their imaginations into orthodox positions.

By capitalising on the possibility for bricolage in film and constantly bearing its own devices, the form becomes a socio-political critique of the imposition of a culture-defining and -defending set of references. The films' inarticulacies pitch the oppressed Other (the woman, the working class, the queer) in resonance with the proliferating forms which offer them their only possibility for expression. The more that the bricolage speaks, the less the characters do, in a combative resonance of inverse proportions. Invested as they are in a critique of the composition of the cultural hegemonies which provide the materials for their characters' and their own expressions, the films are ideological. Those critics who have seen the films as 'sentimental, particularly in [their] retailing of certain stereotypes of working-class life' and who have argued that Davies is only interested in 'a kind of history', that is 'a memory realism', have underestimated the films.⁴³ It is the ideological operation of history, especially cultural history, which provides the films' central theme. Susannah Radstone argues that the films are apolitical and nostalgic/historic because they present 'versions of events as always-already there' and are not 'discursive enunciation [which] lays bare its partiality.'⁴⁴ Radstone's comment does not engage with the notion that the films' political comment is that everything through which and by which individuals may speak is 'always-already-there', and that this suggestion is not nostalgic in her apolitical sense, but in a new

⁴³ Ellis, 'The *Unheimlich* Home Movie,' (2006), 134.

⁴⁴ Susannah Radstone, 'Cinema/Memory/History', *Screen* 36, no.1 (Spring 1995): 42.

political sense which exposes nostalgia as a potential limitation of expressed thought and emotion, a violent scripting of lives in which only culturally endorsed euphemism is permitted. In this nostalgia the evils of homophobia and domestic violence are inscrutable, and the landscape is one of suffering, only relieved by moments of cultural access which are both relief and repression, both enchantment and indoctrinations. Cultural texts, within this world, fill the spaces where more individualised articulation might form. Lévi-Strauss writes that a myth's unity

... is a phenomenon of the imagination, resulting from the attempt at interpretation; and its function is to endow the myth with a synthetic form and to prevent its disintegration into a confusion of opposites.⁴⁵

The de-mythologizing impetus of Davies' films, by drawing attention to the use of music, image, and dialogue through overt quotation, *allows* a disintegration into opposites. This disintegration is not simply nihilistic; *The Long Day Closes* ends with an affirmative possibility, with the reunion of friends and the terrifying but inspiring scale of the night sky. Rather, the play of opposites is an exorcism of the haunting myth of presence and the dangers of dogmatic culture, a dogma which these repetitive, unresolved films eschew.

Silent Characters without Beginning and End

Bricolage, as envisaged by Derrida, is not an ideologically neutral process, a reality demonstrated by the political functioning of Davies' films. The characters within the films imagine that they write their own fates. Dave, Eileen's husband, tells her

⁴⁵ Quoted in Derrida, 362.

angrily: 'Don't you tell me what I think. No one knows what's going on inside my head.' In one sense, he is quite correct; the violence and aggression which he deals out to his wife are unexplained and his motivations remain opaque. However, in another sense he is quite wrong. He is following in the repeated cycle of domestic violence and cultural patriarchy which Eileen's father also represents; Dave's character arc is largely predefined and the references which he is able to make are conditioned by a tight nexus of cultural texts. He believes himself to be independent, to have his own mind and his own right to expression ('don't tell me...'). The mute characters struggle and fail to articulate their own desires and demands because theirs is a borrowed language. Even those characters who appear to find moments of honesty are operating within the proliferating chains of pre-set frameworks.

This intervention of a patriarchal discourse, of which popular film and music form a part, is seen at its most corrosive in the exploration of Bud's queer identity in *The Long Day Closes*. The culture in which the adolescent finds himself does not offer him a vocabulary for the free expression of this sexual identity, which must instead be mediated by an artificial fantasy world borrowed from the films he most loves. This restriction reaches its apex in the scene in which the object of Bud's desire is recontextualised in an alternative, inherited narrative, and crucified. Early in the film, in the scene in which he first becomes aware of this desirable young man, Bud asks his mother to give him the money to go to the cinema. She does not immediately agree, and instead sends him upstairs to fetch the net curtains for cleaning. He does this, passing to the window in order to reach them. As elsewhere in the film windows become screens for Bud, through which he watches the world

as though it were a film (a parallel made clear by his immediately preceding request to go to the cinema). Through the window, Bud watches a bare-chested bricklayer at work. The tableau is arranged carefully, drawing attention to its contrived mise-en-scène, resembling a scene from drama more than life (Fig. 5.15). This effect is reinforced by the arrangement of the sign for the garage, positioned in the foreground in such a way as to eschew straightforward naturalism and suggest its significance; with the final S of the proprietor's name eclipsed by the bricklayer's arm, the sign reads 'SMITTEN', a pun which signposts in rather trivial terms the eroticism that Bud is unable to articulate himself. The bricklayer's exposed torso lends the scene an overt sexual element.



Fig. 5.15 – *The Long Day Closes* – 0.7.30
Artificial homoeroticism.

This sexual fantasy is cruelly interrupted. Part of this interruption is implicit in the very artificiality of the scene. Gazed at through a screen (the window) and arranged as a sign-posted mise-en-scène, Bud's sexuality is mediated through imagery which self-consciously draws attention to its own filmic constructedness. Further, Bud's fantasy is disturbed by the sound of his mother, shot from above, calling for the net curtains. She is hanging up washing in a solid line of uninterrupted material between the house and the garage, a screen, this time opaque, between Bud and the object of his desire. Bud drops the curtains and they

fall slowly, accompanied by a tinkling sound that can have no possible cause in the narrative reality of the film world and suggests something mystical; the sound endows the gesture with a significance beyond the domestic. The net falls across the mother's head, and for a moment she becomes bridal (Fig. 5.16). Bud's burgeoning sexuality is complicated and forestalled by the assertion of a desire for matrimony and the maternal, reminiscent of the song lyric (heard in *Distant Voices, Still Lives*) 'I want a girl just like the girl that married dear old dad.'



Fig. 5.16 – *The Long Day Closes* – 0.07.13
The matrimonial maternal.

After a suspended pause, the mother looks up and (affectionately) calls Bud a 'little bugger,' an inadvertent reference to his supposed queerness; as though prompted by the phrase, Bud's gaze is redirected to the bricklayer. The bricklayer winks, provocatively. Bud, mortified by this rather theatrical communication, sinks down to hide on the floor beneath the window, and the sound of laughter can be heard from outside. Bud is no longer at the screen of the window. As though to assert her maternal, normalising presence further, the mother begins to sing 'If you were the only girl in the world, and I was the only boy'; this performance, while gesturing to Bud's confusion over sexual and gender certainties (as the mother assumes a masculine voice), nevertheless equates heteronormative monogamy ('the only') with paradise ('an Eden made for two'). Bud relocates, between shots, to the stairs

and sits watching his mother through the bannisters. Once again, he is a viewer, watching his mother in a domestic gesture, washing up. The shot is constructed like a Dutch interior painting, the domestic and the feminine, as in Vermeer, rendered non-trivial by the use of light. The sequence as a whole suggests the defining hegemonic order's resistance to the expression of Bud's emerging sexuality. As in *Belle de Jour*, the intimation of this resistance is not the film's meaning, but rather the effect of its form. The queerness of *The Long Day Closes* – that is, its challenge to the ideological defence of the exclusive legitimacy of existing patterns of normative behaviour – lies in this hermeneutic instability. The mother is domestic and wifely, asserting the values of traditional marriage, made an agent of perceived normative behaviour by the song she sings. Bud, in turn, seems only able to see and think in the conventionalised terms which he has learned from film and popular music, terms which both offer him consolation and hold him back from the possibility of self-expression. Neither the structures nor the characters of *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes* are united enough to *mean* either repression or freedom. In concert with a set of discrete references combined in a dispersing network of signifiers, the muted characters are quoting figures within which identity cannot develop. The films represent a form in which notions of self(-expression) are complicated by the bricolage called upon for their writing.

Chapter 6

The Indelible and the Indecipherable: The Significance of Genre in *Meek's Cutoff*

Lost Words and Lost Histories

Like Terence Davies' early films, *Meek's Cutoff*, directed by Kelly Reichardt and released in 2010, presents a historical moment populated by characters unable to give full voice to their experience. However, while Davies' bricolaged cultural allusions represent a range of genres and styles, *Meek's Cutoff* operates more consistently within the parameters of a single genre. As in Davies' films, historical and cultural signifiers operate as factual period markers *and* as instruments of myth-making. In *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*, these signifiers are arranged in such a way as to declare their combination, an effect which arises, in part, from their scattered sources. The strategy of selection is different in *Meek's Cutoff*, and its concentration on drawing from the Western initially implies continuity between signifiers.

While the form's commitment to a single genre may suggest smooth transitions, difficulties of expression are, nevertheless, an immediate concern in the film. The opening minutes present a narrative world in which character communication is fraught with difficulty. It is almost ten minutes before the film offers a spontaneous and sustained utterance. Up to that point, a series of strategies is employed to

foreground a communication defined by vacuity. The film opens with a prolonged sequence in which unnamed characters pass through a river. The plentifulness of water is made apparent as much by the film's soundtrack as by its images, and the possibility of dialogue, a competing diegetic sound, is diminished by the roar of the river. What scant conversation there is takes place between the male characters on the far side of the river from the gazing camera, and remains defiantly inaudible. The frame is more intimately concerned with the uses to which the water is put: a woman wrings out her laundry, a man fills buckets with fresh water for drinking, a second woman washes plates, and a third gives water to her pet canary. With its coherent generic underpinnings (landscape, costume, props) the film's form seems to articulate on the characters' behalf, to offer their muteness the eloquence of the myths which the history of the Western genre conjures. As a result of this formal articulation, the patterning of water-collecting becomes significant, swinging between those uses of water which involve dispensing with and those which involve storing, those which involve leaving the landscape replete and those which involve taking from it. This dialectic resonates with the film's (and genre's) implicit discussion of the wanderers' relationship with the natural landscape which they have elected to live within, an ideological tension between exploitation of that landscape and sympathetic existence within it. These arguments remain at the level of implication only, a matter of interpretation rather than statement, but are nevertheless invited by the immediate generic processes at work in the sequence.

The film's first – fleeting – commitment to eloquent character language is a shot of Thomas, still unnamed at this point, the youngest of the men, sitting beside a fallen tree trunk and scratching the word 'LOST' into the wood (Fig. 6.1). This, the film's

first completed act of linguistic communication, appears to have no intended audience within the narrative; there is no sense that the word is left for any character in particular. The notion of lostness haunts communication throughout the film as a generally inexpressible idea, the characters alarmed by its connotations.¹ This alarm stems, in part, from the term's lack of definition, as the word suggests far more than the geographical lostness of the characters. As the narrative develops, the debates held over the right to life of both Stephen Meek, their guide suspected of ineptitude, and the Native American, whom they later capture and do not trust, suggest a kind of ethical lostness. This lack of moral direction is echoed by the wildness of the landscapes through which they pass, marking a rejection of the societies from which they have come and a setting out into a new territory of uncertain custom and unspecified peril. Even these double meanings (geographical and ethical) will not contain the slippery word 'LOST.' The genre in which the film (uncomfortably, perhaps) sits – the Western – is, according to William Indick, concerned specifically with a kind of 'American creation myth' in which 'the pioneer Americans faced the same obstacles that the ancient Hebrews faced when entering the "promised land", the obstacles of a lost people finding their home.'² The word 'LOST', scratched into the barren landscape of the film's opening, marks the origin state of a people who are looking for their new home. This reading resonates with the film's final images of the group discovering a living tree, a sign of the proximity of water which contrasts sharply

¹ The film invites the use of the not-quite-a word 'lostness'; 'lost', the word inscribed into the trunk of the dead tree, functions as an epithet for the wanderers, retaining their centrality. 'Lostness,' on the other hand, not only suggests the difficulty which the characters face in expressing their situation, but also shifts the emphasis from the characters' state to the phenomenon of being lost, a reality imposed by the external world – the hostile landscape – and one which they have little control over.

² William Indick, *The Psychology of the Western* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2008), 13.

with the earlier dead trunk that marks the literalised sign of their dangerous lostness.



Fig. 6.1 – 0.04.37
A landscape strewn with signifiers.

This generic echo does not mark the limit of the word's significance, and the religious significance is itself doubled by the film's first audible speech. Sitting together, the White family reads aloud from the Bible. The passage which the boy Jimmy reads comes from *Genesis* 3:19, and highlights an explicit relationship between the nomadic people and their landscape: 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.' The passage goes on to discuss Adam's process of naming Eve (a patriarchal classification echoed by Meek's later naming of the mountains) and God's driving out of the couple from Eden for the sin of eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Thomas's scratched word marks not only a lost tribe on the threshold of a promised land, but also a tribe whose homes are lost and who are expelled into a wilderness of moral uncertainty, echoing the Western genre's alternative concern with lawlessness and the outsider. The film remains committed throughout to the tension between the possibility of salvation (the Promised Land) and of disaster (the lost Eden), until the moment of its resolutely ambivalent ending, in which an indecisive group

pledges a grudging commitment to the Native American whom they do not fully trust.³ The film's implicit concern, stretching out from its first inscribed word, is with lost people and a landscape which is forced to bear the marks of that people's uncertainty. 'LOST' remains both the most difficult word to articulate within the narrative, terrifying to the fearful wanderers, and the most implied, a word which is both sincerely meant and so plural in its possible significance as to be almost meaningless.

The Western's concerns with lostness extend beyond the narratives of particular characters either in search of prosperity or in exile; the genre has also been critiqued as one dense with omitted histories, of lost narratives. This sense of misarticulated history includes both fully marginalised historical narratives and the mistelling of specific histories, both the events which are not told and events which are retold with a partial disregard to historical truth. *Meek's Cutoff* lays legitimate claim to an origin within historical account. In its singular focus on historical specifics, the film, as Paul Julian Smith suggests, shows a lack of interest in 'huge events or processes (the overturning of a government in South America, the establishment of a new order in North America) [which] take place offscreen, invisible to characters and spectators alike.'⁴ The film's (and genre's) narrowness of interest may be recharacterised as a statement on the dialectical nature of history within the Western, between the films as documentation of pre-set historical narratives and as the creators of cultural myths which become the established articulations of history. This is seen at work from the film's opening credits, which

³ The choice of the term 'Native American', as opposed to 'Indian' – the term conventionally used in discussions of Westerns – is encouraged by the film, which endows the character with a depth of independent character often traditionally denied in the reductive accounts of 'Indian' enemies.

⁴ Paul Julian Smith, 'At the Edge of History,' *Film Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 12.

consist simply of the words 'Meek's Cutoff' printed onto an authentic-looking historical parchment, together with the date 1845 (Fig. 6.2). The words are accompanied by the appropriate image of a tree, which will become symbol of both exile and hope. Further, the tree suggests the film's wavering identity between historically pre-determined narrative and creative fiction. It is a pictorial foreshadowing of the film's ending, a reminder that the events are already inscribed, set in a historical pattern which cannot be altered. At the same time, this foreshadowed ending is also entirely unresolved, an ending in which everything remains possible. The image of the tree is a mark on an authentic-looking historical parchment, but one which has been constructed for the purposes of the film. The parchment is both an evocation of a pre-existent account, and, as all opening credits are, a calling into being of the film's story.



Fig. 6.2 – 0.00.44
A foreshadowed openness.

This dialectic between historical fact and historico-inflected mythic fiction is a fundamental element of the Western genre. Susan Hayward suggests the two-directional operation of this relationship when she says that '[h]istory and culture inform myth but, equally, myth serves as a way by which history and culture are

“explained” as a natural process.’⁵ Myth, in this formulation, is an ironing out of the discontinuities inherent in history, an explanation which makes the disjunctive past into a ‘process.’ Those Westerns which have followed this model of myth-making, present a history – both personal and national – with relatively stable moral, political, and cultural ideas. Their shared generic features have governed expectation and interpretation to allow for reductive ideological positions.

Janet Walker, using a semiotic vocabulary, identifies an alternative category of Western (which she calls the ‘traumatic Western’) which features ‘past events [which] elude the realist register to suggest another way of knowing, one marked by ellipsis, uncertainty, and repetition. The past is often... a trail of signifiers strewn across the landscape, or a structuring absence.’⁶ In these films, retelling the past does not create myth, a ‘world which is without contradiction... without depth, ... wallowing in the evident’ in which ‘things appear to mean something by themselves’ as described by Roland Barthes.⁷ *Meek’s Cutoff*, despite its traditional Western underpinnings, shares the traumatic Western’s suspicion of ideologically certain histories. Like the word ‘LOST’, literally etched into the landscape, these signifiers are so replete with possible meanings that they can have no secure meaning. The principal lostness in *Meek’s Cutoff* is the loss of mythic meaning, the loss of the possibility of expression and identity. This unmeaningful, and possibly hostile, world reaches its zenith with the arrival of the Native American, both captive and controller, both salvation and danger, both known and unknown, his

⁵ Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 267.

⁶ Janet Walker, ‘Captive Images in the Traumatic Western: *The Searchers*, *Pursued*, *Once upon a Time in the West*, and *Lone Star*,’ in *Westerns: Films through History*, ed. Janet Walker (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 220.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Cape, 1972), 143.

language incomprehensible and his customs inscrutable. *Meek's Cutoff* plays out the arbitrariness of the traditional meanings of its own genre.

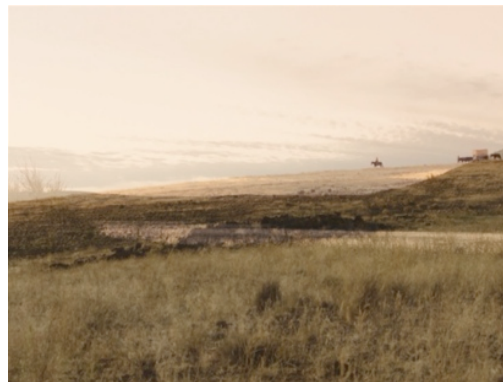
The highly ambiguous content of the characters' speech (and silence) resonates with a form that consists of a sequence of austerely beautiful but illegible gestures. In the film's opening minutes, the landscape is divided into a series of literal strewn signifiers ('LOST'). It is also broken up by the film's first unstable transitions, which are indifferent to time and space, working according to a different, more opaque logic. As the characters leave the sanctuary of the riverside, departing at the bottom left of the frame, a lingering final shot of the water is held, a glance at what the wanderers are leaving behind. The shot dissolves slowly in such a way that the wanderers appear again in the upper right of the screen, appearing for some moments to be walking on clouds (Figs. 6.3, 6.4, 6.5). Even as the shot dissolves fully and reveals that they are in fact on solid ground, the effect remains disturbing, hallucinogenic, difficult to make sense of. The character's disappearance in the left lower foreground and reappearance in the right upper background makes the composition of the frame momentarily impossible. Leaving the security of water is a step into dangerously unknown and unknowable territory. This is a landscape whose deviance from conventional mapping leaves it pregnant with possibility and difficult to read.



Fig. 6.3 – 0.05.34



Fig. 6.4 – 0.05.51

Fig. 6.5 – 0.06.00
Hallucinogenic dissolves.

While the narrative is one of rising distress in the wanderers, *Meek's Cutoff's* use of signifiers and its resistance to the mythologisation of the past is different from the traumatic Western as defined by Walker. In the traumatic Western, the personal history of the hero asserts itself as a motivation for both his mute revenge and the film's form (of 'ellipsis, uncertainty, and repetition'), which approximates his

psychic landscape.⁸ Unlike this subgroup of Westerns, the history in *Meek's Cutoff* is not a distressing, character-defining past for which revenge is being sought. *Meek's Cutoff* introduces its formal discontinuities *before* the trauma of possible dehydration and terror grip the wanderers.

Unstable Language

In order to understand the film's handling of its generic elements, it is essential first to consider how it regards the communicative possibilities of language. From the initial inscription of the word 'LOST', words' meanings in the film are contingent, the result of the operation of an unstable dialectic between signifiers and what they signify. *Meek's Cutoff* characterises the world of uncertain frontiers and physical and psychic lack as one in which chains of signifiers are not securely moored by signifieds. Water represents life, but also danger (the alkaline lake) and despair (in its absence); possessions represent an emotional connection with past lives, but also unnecessary weight, physical and emotional 'baggage' (as in the scene when the Tetherows discard Solomon's mother's old furniture); the tree which concludes the film is a symbol of life, of separation (as it interrupts Emily's view of the Native American), of hope, of error (resonating with the proverbial wisdom that one can't see the wood for the trees), of madness, of family and inheritance, and of the exile from and return to Eden (the forbidden tree, a danger, a temptation, and the key to knowledge). As though in sympathy with a strange landscape in which the characters find an illegible series of signifiers, the principal failure of those

⁸ Walker, 220.

characters is in failing to find a language that has stable meaning. As Laura Mulvey asserts, echoing Lacan, ‘while signifiers form links sustaining slippages of meaning, pure reference constantly gets lost under an excess of signification.’⁹ This excess is the characters’ greatest terror, and their work consequently becomes to instil a clearly codified and concise linguistic control over the wilderness.

In *Meek’s Cutoff* this dual inarticulacy between terse character expression and a form of proliferating meanings is further complicated by the sparseness of the film’s aesthetic. Richard Combs describes this feature in terms of the film’s ‘minimalist epic’ qualities; he locates the seemingly paradoxical status in the ‘way her [Reichardt’s] films close so fastidiously, in enveloping coils of detail, around subjects that persistently defy definition, and whose final state is obscurity and mystery.’¹⁰ Far from limiting the film’s sense of semantic density (‘obscurity and mystery’), the minimalist focus on barren spaces intensifies it. An object, made significant by virtue of its isolation in such a landscape, buckles under the weight of that significance and becomes unstable (‘defy definition’). The minimalist speech of the wanderers assumes an equivalent obscurity, with conversations typically blunt, half-heard, or misconstrued. At almost twelve minutes into the narrative, one of the film’s first conversations is between Emily and Glory:

Glory: What are they [the men] talking about? Were you told?
 Emily: Your husband didn’t say?
 Glory: Not this time.
 Emily: They’re talking about whether to hang Stephen Meek.

⁹ Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity: Cinema and the Mind’s Eye*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan and BFI, 2013), 202.

¹⁰ Richard Combs, ‘Kelly Reichardt Explores a Weightless Future,’ *Film Comment* 47, no.2 (March/April 2011): 32.

The conversation marks a kind of terseness which suggests an inability to speak. The scene begins and ends in silence; there are clearly things that could be discussed (including the mundane domestic concerns that occupy them) but instead there is silence. The first half of the exchange constitutes a series of questions, question answering question in a *mise-en-abyme* which occludes the possibility of clear response. Glory's answer that she has not been told 'this time' suggests that customarily she is told, a suggestion which the rest of the film does not reinforce. Her later chastisement of her son for exaggerating, which is 'the neighbour of a lie,' retroactively condemns the hyperbolic suggestion of her remark. Emily's final comment, which, appears to be the scene's 'answer', is speculative, based on a reading of the situation which is uncertain. This exclusion from a conversation of crucial dramatic significance, raises further questions as to the men's motivation for excluding the women and for hanging Stephen Meek. Even when Solomon later speaks to Emily about the men's conversation, both his words and the sequence's composition contribute to an enduring sense of slippery language: the couple is walking in the dark, the scene so lowly lit that even clear delineation of shape is difficult, rendering identity, at least initially, hard to fathom; the conversation is reported after the event, an approximate re-telling through the prism of Solomon's clear distaste for violence; Solomon critiques the other men's 'broken logic' that Meek has deliberately led them off course, rendering this discussion of a man's life as a question of indeterminately persuasive rhetoric (Fig. 6.6). The film repeatedly stages recalled conversations and narrated past events, each of which has a significance which remains ultimately undetermined.

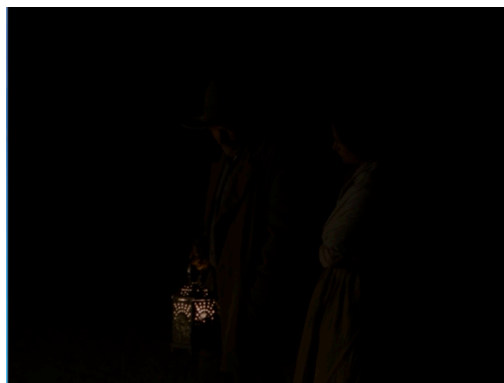


Fig. 6.6 – 0.13.45
Fathomless identities.

In this way, signification within *Meek's Cutoff* is exposed as imprecise within the socially undefined space of the Western plains. Without the grounding reality of prescribed society (complete with shared customs, values, and laws) language ceases to hold its conventional stability. Unlike the notion of a logocentric series of signs which contain their meanings, a system of communication (such as language) depends upon the articulation of signifiers and signifieds in relation.¹¹ On the frontiers of society, a point at which, as in the Eden story recited earlier, convention is lost and nothing is named, there is a divorce between the phenomenological world, its signifieds, and the signifiers with which the wanderers are equipped to discuss that world. The film's great lack, that which is 'LOST,' is language's ability to contain these unanticipated realities and unprecedented emotions.

Initially, the film's characters respond to this inadequacy of language to contain phenomenological experience by attempting to defy it. A scene in which Meek speaks to Jimmy and the women demonstrates this determined stance. The scene,

¹¹ Julia Kristeva distinguishes between *language*, which is doubly articulated (that is, is structured around signifiers and signifieds), and *codes*. See Julia Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Colombia University Press, 1997), 52.

mirroring the earlier account from *Genesis*, concerns the naming and valuation – that is, definition – of things, including both the landscape and human beings. As the scene begins, Meek joins Jimmy and the women. He points across at a range of mountains and comments that they are nameless. In an act which appears to be generous to the young boy, he says that they should be called Jimmy's Mountains. The arrogance of this gesture is implicit initially. Glory asks, as though speculating herself on Meek's masculine assertion of his own domination, whether he has ever 'womaned.' Although Glory uses the verb as an equivalent for 'married,' Meek offers a sexualised reading, invited by the domineeringly sexist connotations of the word. Glory, apparently shocked and embarrassed, is silenced by Meek's crudity. Meek's response, clarifying and confirming the impression of his patriarchal dominance initiated by the naming of the mountains, says that he has womaned many times, and that Indian women begin to look white after twenty years. Racial identity, along with uncolonised landscapes and women's bodies, are determined by the perception and naming of the dominant group. Emily's reaction of distaste prompts Meek to suggest that she does not like him, which she denies, saying that she has no feelings one way or the other. He accuses this of being euphemism, that is (in terms which are admittedly alien to Meek's own rhetoric) a verbal strategy which separates signifiers from their customary signifieds. Emily, in a defensive strategy against the conversational authority of the ironically named Meek, employs – in its most overt and subversive use in the film – the word 'lost.' Meek, employing the very euphemistic mode which he has just condemned, says that they are not lost but, rather, 'finding their way.' He continues with an account of the difference between men and women: women created on the principle of 'the chaos of creation, disorder, bringin' new things into the world,' while men are created on

the principle of 'cleansing, ordering destruction.' The sequence ends with Jimmy's discovery of gold, a fortune which they have to leave behind; as Meek reminds them, 'you can't drink gold.' A scene which has been so concerned with values and identities (around topography, gender, and race), concludes with the radical devaluation of the precious, marking significance as culturally set and not inherent. Meek's attempts to firm up the relationship between things and their names (mountains renamed, men and women classified) come to nothing, as established scales of value are abandoned.

Simultaneous with the scene's interrogation of language, the film's form provides a subversive commentary. The scene's opening is confused and complicated by the disorientating absence of an establishing shot. Meek, Jimmy, and Millie are seen in relation to one another, and Emily and Glory in relation to one another, but the relative positioning of the two groups is difficult to read (Figs. 6.7, 6.8). The scene feels staged; the Meek-Jimmy-Millie shots place them almost symmetrically within the frame beneath a canopy, the landscape beyond a kind of backdrop, a great distance away and caught in bright natural lighting; the shots of Glory and Emily place them symmetrically within the frame, sitting on the steps of one of the wagons, an alternative backdrop which connotes their domestic concerns. The camera setups throughout the scene are static, introducing a fixedness that, by disallowing a wider shot of the whole group, accentuates distance between the interlocutors, an effect amplified by the momentary difficulty Emily has in locating Meek when she looks up from her work.



Fig. 6.7 – 0.37.57
Staging.



Fig. 6.8 – 0.38.08
Separation.

This effect is heightened during the discussion of whether they are lost; Meek's refusal to embrace the word and his replacing it with the more reassuring formulation of 'finding our way,' is undercut by the film's insistent use of close-ups; Emily and Meek are cut off from each other, and their situation remains undefined in a rhetorical chasm between Emily's barbed directness ('lost') and Meek's self-protecting periphrasis. They do not share a language, and the film's form gently echoes this with its alternating close-ups. These repeated close-ups also serve to privilege Emily and Meek, the former rendered powerful by natural leadership, the latter by gender and position. The frame disavows Jimmy, the boy, and Millie, the youngest woman, almost entirely; their roles in the scene are diminished, rendering them silent, incapable even of the approximate

communications of the euphemistic and uncertain Meek and Emily. Shots of the landscape remain short and fragmented until the scene's end, when the disappointed wanderers walk away from the gold. Millie looks back, with an expression which resists clear interpretation, at the spot which Thomas has marked with a wooden symbol reminiscent of a gravestone. The camera, mobile for the first time in the sequence, follows her. The shot is, unusually for the film, handheld and unsteady. The world in which they now walk – in which gold is worthless, Native Americans can be mistaken for white people, women are both chaotic and creative, and mountains may be renamed arbitrarily – is unstable, shaking under the reeling blow of this new conceptualisation.

The Threat of the Meaningless

Meek's Cutoff's linguistic and formal preoccupations with the instability of the signifier/signified relationship finds its most emphatic demonstration in the presentation of the Native American, captured by Meek and Solomon Tetherow almost exactly halfway through the film. The Native American speaks no English, and the wanderers are unable to communicate in his language.¹² In the Native American's monologues, unsupported by subtitles or explanation, the words 'mean' nothing precise for the other characters (or the viewer). The effect of this is intensified by the Native American's practice of marking, indelibly but illegibly, the rocks of the landscape through which the group passes (Figs. 6.9, 6.10). Both his

¹² This is not simply a narrative device, but a deliberate conceit of the film; the language spoken by the actor, Rod Rondeaux, is a mixture of Nez Perce (the language of the Cayuse) and Crow (one of the actor's own languages). This hybrid language makes the notion of smooth understanding for any listener almost inconceivable.

speech and writing may be presumed to mean something within his own contingent culture, but for the other characters these signs are signifiers only, stripped of any readable sense; signifieds are experienced only as their lack, and meaning is consistently evaded.¹³ The response of the other characters to the inscrutable Native American and the landscape is increasingly panicked; meaninglessness is met by a stifled articulacy, in which segregation within the dominant group becomes increasingly definitive, women separated from men, family from family, pessimists from optimists. (This breakdown in social cohesion is a function of ratio as well as narrative; the academy ratio selected by Reichardt suits the vertical form of the isolated figure rather than the horizontal form of the scattered group, the extended caravan, within a sprawling landscape.)



Fig. 6.9 – 0.56.40
The Native American at one with the landscape.

¹³ This is a different type of inarticulacy from that seen in the inscrutable silences of the priest, Edmund, or Séverine. (While the Native American does also have long periods of unreadable silence, these are diegetically explained by his status as captive and his linguistic isolation.) It is also – despite its cultural specificities – distinct from the achievements of Davies' films. Here, (presumed) articulacy is encountered as inarticulacy due to cultural difference; understood meaning cannot help the elements of the Native American's utterances to cohere, and they are encountered as *series* of inscriptions and sounds.



Fig. 6.10 – 0.58.47
Indelible markings.

The film's depiction of language – in its arbitrariness and contingent (in)comprehensibility – as a chain of variously (mis)understood signifiers, privileges its non-denotative expressive elements, namely rhythm, tone, tenor. The film does not present the Native American's utterances as nonsensical; they are, rather, illegible and incomprehensible within the wanderers' language conventions. It is the tantalising presence of an inscrutable meaning – a meaning which may be clear to others, namely the Native American's allies – which results in the hysterical anxiety of Millie and Thomas. The Native American's utterances, with their incantatory inflections and musical rhythms, eschew easily defined meaning and, instead, suggest a manifestation of drives and uncodifiable emotion. The film initially establishes a series of binary oppositions between the language of the wanderers and the language of the Native American: clear/ambiguous; fixed/evasive; rational/mystical; denotative/connotative; literal/figurative. (This is not to say that either language represents exclusively one term within each dichotomy; rather, the wanderers' failure to understand the Native American renders his language ambiguous and evasive *from their perspective*, and their defensive stance which seeks to impose some reassuring order *relies on emphasising*

the clear, fixed elements of their own language.)¹⁴ These binary oppositions quickly begin to collapse and, with an ever-increasing reliance on faltering repetition and vague sounds (cries, whimpers, groans), the language of the more anxious wanderers becomes less and less clear. Fear and hatred are suggested – though never stipulated – by these utterances; intense emotion remains, but the certainty of rational explanation dissipates. By employing language which, however incomprehensible, sounds authentic, the character of the Native American's speech cannot be satisfactorily analysed. It stands in unison with the wild landscape as a site which the wanderers wish to legislate; its disruption of the relationship between what is *said* and what is *meant* carries disturbing implications for the system of understanding that underlies all their communication. And it is in the face of this disruption that communication becomes increasingly difficult, as the Native American's language unwittingly but decisively dismantles the confidence of the wanderers, until Millie and her husband are crying out that every gesture of the Native American is a sign to his tribe which will result in disaster.

While concentrated in the depiction of the Native American, the film explores more generally speech that eludes meaning, allowing an expressive but non-signifying rhythmic composition and movement that suggests the dominance of ambiguity. Early in the film, before any character has spoken or described their circumstances, a static long take shows them travelling across a barren, dry land,

¹⁴ As summarised by Augustine Perumalil in *The History of Women in Philosophy*, (New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2008) the terms of Julia Kristeva's theory of the semiotic resonate with the film's handling of the Native American's language. Kristeva defines the semiotic as the linguistic manifestation of the drives 'which dwells in the fissures and prosody of language rather than in the denotative meanings of words.' The Native American's language, spoken and written, compels the wanderers to engage with it only in terms of 'tones, rhythms, colors, figures,' marking a 'primary seizure of drives always in excess in relation to the represented and the signified' (quoted in Frances Restuccia, *The Blue Box: Kristevan/Lacanian Readings of Contemporary Cinema* [London: Continuum, 2012], 111).

the mud cracked in a beautiful though abstract pattern reminiscent of unreadable glyphs on a page. The academy ratio, unable to show the whole caravan of wagons, stresses the distance between the individuals as they cross the plain, a sense of isolation confirmed by the unexplained absence of dialogue. Rather, it is the rhythmic sound of hooves on impacted clay, the squeal of an unoiled axel, and the rumbling sigh of overloaded wagons which express the aching repetitiveness of the wanderers' situation. A cut leads to another shot, continuous from the first, in which the camera begins to move; the previous shot has shown the wanderers moving right to left, while this shot moves in sympathy with Glory, who runs from left to right, counter-directional, against the flow (Fig. 6.11). She chases a cotton handkerchief across the hard soil, the camera pulling back as she runs away. The cloth retrieved, she touches her pregnant belly and then runs back to the group, repeating 'William' as an incantation stripped of precise significance: is she asking him to stop, blaming him for the loss of the handkerchief, calling for help? The camera again mirrors her movement, moving forwards. As she leaves the frame to the left, the camera continues to move, tracing the lines etched in the earth. The unreadable landscape, the sympathetically balanced movements of camera and woman, the gentle significance of the maternal touch of the pregnant belly, the incanted name 'William': these rhythmic elements of communication remain expressive but resist definitive meaning.



Fig. 6.11 – 0.09.07
Unreadable glyphs.

Ultimately, even Emily and Solomon, the most clearly and calmly articulate characters in the wanderers' group, begin to lose the precision of speech which they have earlier enjoyed. They, too, seem to be influenced by the Native American's language. After the disaster of losing the wagon and almost the last of the water supply, Emily and Solomon discuss their situation:

Emily: What do you see out there?
 Solomon: Hard to say.
 Emily: No, there's no saying, is there?
 Solomon: Do you think he's trustworthy?
 Emily: The Indian? I can't... say as I do. I trust you is all.
 Solomon: But you're putting your trust in him.
 Emily: You're doubtful?
 Solomon: I have my doubts.
 Emily: What are you thinking, Solomon?
 Solomon: Hmm. I just hope Meek hasn't twisted you up, is all.

The conversation is circular, repetitive and, at moments, contradictory: Emily, who does not trust the Native American, is also said to be putting her trust in him. Each of Emily's lines contains a question, which share the same concepts as the answers. By the end of the short exchange, the words 'trust' and 'doubt' have been set up in a tension of opposition. Conversation is now a retarded process, a string of signifiers which – emphasised by the heavy use of question – is not able to make a clear statement. The only progress within the conversation is between parts of

speech: verb to noun ('trust') and from adjective to noun ('doubtful' to 'doubts'). The image marks this decline in meaningful exchange with almost total darkness, the scene lit only by the faintest of lanterns. A single shot of Emily persists until her line 'I can't say as I do.' The vapid communication of the conversation is complemented by the withholding of a two shot. As Richard Combs writes, '[n]ighttime obscurity and illumination by lantern or campfire can serve as another kind of minimalism' in which meaning is jeopardised.¹⁵ As Emily says that she trusts Solomon, a cut brings Solomon into frame, a possible movement towards connection between the two. However, as he responds with the contradictory statement that she is putting her trust in the Native American, there is a cut back to Emily. The image becomes increasingly dark throughout the remainder of the scene, making clear sight and understanding almost impossible. The characters, even less able to speak clearly than before, can share no two shot; the shared language maintains the tender bond between them, but this is threatened by the encroaching sense of alienation as they recycle each other's indeterminate signifiers in the dark.

The Language of Exchange

The consequences of this indeterminacy stretch far beyond the specifics of the film's narrative, and threaten the prevailing social structure. Before the breakdown in clearly definable communication, language is understood by the wanderers in very different terms. It is not only functional; mastery of it becomes a marker of

¹⁵ Combs, 32.

social authority. The patriarchal hierarchies in play within the narrative (women excluded from important decision making, husbands issuing instructions) are determined through a language which names clearly and perpetuates the myth of transparent meanings. The initial threat to this from signs made unstable by an illegible landscape (the word LOST, the tree, water) is intensified by the indecipherable language of the Native American and Millie's hysteria. The indeterminate-expressivity of these utterances is in violent counterpoint to Meek's emphatic language, and what is at stake is precisely his power. The series of dichotomies within which the languages define themselves oppositionally (clear/ambiguous) have political equivalences: socially ordered/wild; hierarchical/anarchic.¹⁶ The wanderers reference the apparently denotative operations of a seemingly clear language as they quote from the Bible and refer to what they claim to be authoritative documentation that proves that Native Americans are qualitatively different from themselves and deserving of no rights. However, under the strain of the illegible landscape (in which water cannot be found) and the presence of the Native American (whose language they do not understand) they are also drawn into inarticulate hysteria, muteness, and morally questionable lawlessness (debating whether to hang both Meek and the Native American).¹⁷ The film becomes a 'dialectic of two heterogeneous operations' of

¹⁶ This is not to say that the film proffers a view of Native American society in which there is no hierarchical power dynamic. Rather, the Native American – in his incomprehensible role within the film – comes to signify a disruptive lack of order for the wanderers. Indeed, this becomes a comment on the genre; Westerns have often been more concerned with constructing a symbol for lawless wickedness than in presenting a historically accurate depiction of life in a Native American tribe.

¹⁷ Again, Paul de Man's distinction between muteness and silence is useful here. Silence, in de Man's scheme, 'implies the possible manifestation of sound at our will'; the characters in *Meek's Cutoff* do not give the impression of having such autonomy of language: Paul de Man, *Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: University of Colombia Press), 1984, 80.

(mythically) clear language and the drive-manifesting, ambiguous expression which slowly consumes the wanderers' language.¹⁸

In an attempt to strengthen the hierarchies which privilege them, the wanderers reinforce their allegiance to clear language, an allegiance to what Jon Cook describes as 'the domain of articulate language, discriminating between subjects and objects, signifiers and signifieds, and concerned with propositions and judgments.'¹⁹ This elusive clarity of subject and position is bolstered by a rhetoric in which communication is regarded as a matter of economic exchange. Meek seems to echo the American Transcendentalist notion of a sympathetic return to nature when he says: 'I live *with* this world. I'm not just in it, is what I'm sayin'.' However, the conversation quickly moves on to demonstrate the economics which underlie the statement: a discussion of what the area holds by way of money-making resources (including beavers) and who will own it (the Americans, English, or Indians). Negotiating the landscape is an economic process, and economics is a business of precise, calculable expression predicated on established relative values.

Economics becomes explicitly a question of communication when the Native American is captured. While the women stand apart, speculating again on what is being said, the men seemingly interrogate the Native American, who is forced to sit in a position of abject submission. Meek, frustrated by the Native American's inability to understand the word 'water' (destabilising one of the narrative's key signifiers), kicks him across the face, a strike accentuated by a violent sound and an accompanying cut to the recoiling women. The Native American responds by

¹⁸ Kristeva, 52-3.

¹⁹ Jon Cook, *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology, 1900-2000* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 437.

speaking for the first time (and not by attempting violence, as Meek may have predicted). There are no subtitles and the language is not a natural one; his words are not designed to be understood. Rather, their rhythm, tone, and repetitive structure communicate something before or beyond precise meaning. Meek, riled by this irruption of inscrutable language, threatens further violence, but he is stopped by Solomon. Meek, highlighting the Native American's language's threat to stable social meanings, says that the wanderers do not know what they are dealing with, and that this is 'not the village green.' In a final attempt to tame uncertainty and restore the predictable order of clear communication, Thomas mimes a process of exchange, in which the Native American may receive blankets in return for taking them to water. Communication becomes a gesture-based exchange; Thomas calls barter 'the law of the land.' This seems to be a reassertion of the certain in the face of the vague.

Adhering to the rhythm of exchange, the sequence follows a shot/reverse-shot pattern, alternating between a medium shot of the Native American and a shot across the Native American's shoulder to the group of men. This compositional pattern, however, finally complicates the rhythm of exchange. In the group shot, the Native American (despite having his back to the camera) is privileged in a position in the centre of the frame; despite the ropes which bind him, he is empowered because, in this economy, he can do without the commodity offered him (the blankets), while the wanderers cannot do without the commodity they require (water). In the group shot, Thomas squats awkwardly, to the right of the frame, partly eclipsed by the Native American, balanced by Jimmy, the child, who sits to the left of the frame (Fig. 6.12). The equivalence between the two suggests

the childish naivety of Thomas's strategy, undermining his assurance that he is successfully engaging in the law of the land (a quintessential example of clear, unambiguous communication). More emphatically, the other men are cut off at the waist by the frame; their faces are out of shot and their reactions are indeterminate. The shared space inhabited by these bartering parties is inhabited comfortably by no one, a quality amplified by the use of academy ratio. Dangerously ambiguous language (represented by the Native American's language and Meek's slip into violence) is not tamed by rigorous clarity, despite Thomas's confidence.



Fig. 6.12 – 0.49.39
Bartering parties.

The tension between the ambiguous and the clear is played out across the entire narrative arc of the film, the former revealing the myth of the latter, and the latter exposing the dangerous subversiveness of the former. In an attempt to gain leverage over the Native American, Emily fixes his torn shoe. She says, engaging herself in the economic model of exchange, that she wants him to owe her something. The Native American communicates his fascination with her needle, to which Emily replies that he 'can't even imagine what we've done. The cities we've built.' The terseness of the line does not diminish the metonymic project here, in which the needle becomes a synecdoche for the whole of modern American

civilization, the society in which hierarchy and law dominates. It is, following this, precisely these metonymic accoutrements of the wanderers' culture which the Native American accumulates. In the final shot of the film, he is seen carrying a blanket, a pan, and a basket, the implication being that he has entered this economic system of exchange on which authoritative communication – with its insistence on clear differentiation between subject and object, signifier and signified – relies. Meek seems to acknowledge this absorption of the Native American into their language with his final statement, the last words of the film:

I'm taking my orders from you now, Mr Tetherow. Mrs Tetherow. And we're all taking our orders from him, I'd say. We're all just playing our parts now. This was written long before we got here. I'm at your command.

The Native American is now part of the chain of command. This is not a failure on the part of the wanderers, but an apparent triumph; the wildness of the unclear has been bartered with and has been dialectically synthesised with Meek's more ordered language. The surety which comes with the providential notion of written fates is a comfort within such an order. However, Meek's effort is, like his claims to be 'finding his way' and to understand Indians, only rhetorical. The Native American does not give orders, but simply walks away into the distance (Fig. 6.13). This existential ending, in which the wanderers stand beneath a complexly signifying tree and wait for orders which do not come, speaks to the characters' horror of meaninglessness. This is neither the triumph of ambiguity nor of meaning; this is an unresolved dialectic which will not allow a clear narrative conclusion. Communication in the film functions as the articulation of that dialectic, and as a result is always contingent and uncertain. It is the case that Emily's needle is the product of an ordered civilization, but that civilization is

invisible within the austere emptiness of the landscape; looking for an ordered language is like searching for a needle in a desert.



Fig. 6.13 – 1.33.15
Fadeout.

The Undoing of Genre

The film's most sustained formal achievement is the playing out of this narrative and linguistic struggle between meaning and meaninglessness as a broader comment on the nature and function of genre. Through the demonstration of a number of the central elements of the genre, *Meek's Cutoff* proclaims definitely its status as a Western. As Jim Kitses argues it should be, it is a 'journey narrative and morality play' and 'is a vehicle for the exploration... of masculinity.'²⁰ It has, as Andre Bazin predicts, 'horses, fights, strong and brave men in a wildly austere landscape'²¹ as well as the suggestion of the 'great epic Manicheism which sets the force of evil over against the knight of the true cause.'²² The white man, the hero, represents the coming of justice and law through his commitment to a

²⁰ Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (London: BFI, 2004), 3.

²¹ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?: Volume 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 142.

²² Bazin (1971), 145-6.

recognisable, definable social order. William Indick argues that the genre exists as a manifestation of the American Dream: 'the dream of economic independence, cultural self-determination, and freedom of individual expression are what... lured frontiersmen and settlers out west.'²³ It is the dream of owning property, safeguarding the family, raising sons to inherit, and securing fortune which presumably motivates the wanderers in *Meek's Cutoff*.

Genre may be said to consist of a lexicon of recognisable signifiers, a number of which any film must display in order to belong to that genre. Jim Kitses argues that 'genre works as a means of meeting audience expectations and of organising their experience and comprehension of the film.'²⁴ It is, thus, an attempt to communicate ('meeting audience expectations') and to permit understanding ('comprehension'). To those ends, 'genre has been seen as a common system of signification, with a fixed semiotic field [that is, a fixed set of signs and symbols].'²⁵ The Western, specifically, has been seen as a common language, a medium of mass culture, offering directors the 'challenge of articulating its codes, characters, and settings.'²⁶ Containing at its core, then, the notion of articulable signifiers, fixed signifieds, clear communication, and a common language, genre seems to be characterised by the same linguistic impulses as Meek's clear language of precise naming. When Kitses argues that the Western is 'America's defining myth,' this is not simply the myth of modern America's beginnings, as he suggests, but the myth of meaning.²⁷

²³ Indick, 22.

²⁴ Kitses, 3.

²⁵ Kitses, 13.

²⁶ Kitses, 9.

²⁷ Kitses, 9.

Through the irruption of ambiguity, which destabilises its generic underpinnings, *Meek's Cutoff* interrogates this defining American myth. The 'meaning-laden conventions' which Kitses speaks of become meaningless, or at least contingently meaningful.²⁸ This challenge to the conventions which define the genre is not unique to *Meek's Cutoff*. Revisionist or Postmodern Westerns have reappropriated many of these conventions, and have interrogated assumptions concerning the presentation of women (including Robert Altman's 1971 *McCabe and Mrs Miller*) and Native Americans (such as 1995's *Dead Man* directed by Jim Jarmusch). However, *Meek's Cutoff* remains a revealing and unusual exploration of a particular pattern of dual inarticulacy, in which *both* character expression and genre itself are performed as chains of signifiers which have been stripped of their usual significances. This process is apparent throughout the film, but is most evident, perhaps, in the film's equivalent of the traditional shootout. Quoting Michael Wilmington, Janet Walker lists 'virtually every Western structural motif and archetype' which includes 'Hunt-the-Man-Down to Cleaning-Up-the-Town, from holster-slapping six-gun duels to a climactic Gatling Gun holocaust...'²⁹ The central mythic significance of the shootout for the Western, equivalent of the mediaeval tournament and demonstrative of the key concept of masculine honour, is apparent in Wilmington's list. This sense of climax is duly represented in *Meek's Cutoff*, when Emily takes arms against Meek. The fact that the guns in *Meek's Cutoff* are lacking both in number (not the six guns that Wilmington suggests are characteristic) and speed (represented by the efficient Gatling Gun) is central to the film's effect. The sequence, far from reaching a climax, provocatively undermines

²⁸ Kitses, 15.

²⁹ Walker, 38.

the audience's expectation. In an equation opposite to that offered by Kitses, this failure to meet expectation throws comprehension into disarray.

A set of fundamental signifiers is present, as may be regarded as generically essential. Opposing forces, which have been locked in a tense struggle through the film (Meek, Emily, by extension the Native American), take arms against each other, with the threat of absolute violence. An impotent crowd, aware of what is at stake but unable to intervene, watches passively. The wickedness of the Native American and the security of the white community are the motivating elements in the struggle. The film privileges close shots of the determined gazes of the protagonists, locked in their Manichean struggle. However, typically within the genre these signifiers function through a conventional association with culturally specified signifieds. The violence marks a narratively climactic demonstration of masculine potency, the suppression of disruptive forces, the triumph of a clearly-signalled right. In *Meek's Cutoff*, on the other hand, one of the guns is held by a woman, robbing it of its masculine significance; the formation is not bipartite (as Manichaeism would suggest it should be), but triangular, with Meek's gun aimed at the Native American and Emily's at Meek. The Native American here is neither wicked nor good, but is a disputed signifier, meaning both salvation and perdition. The society being defended is so nascent as to be without form or value; as a phenomenon worth defending it is difficult to evaluate. The close-ups, as conventionally for the genre, mark a distance (physical and attitudinal) between the competing parties, but also a fundamental uncertainty in the discourse, and one which may be mapped in terms of the competing models of communication (clear and ambiguous). This uncertainty is realised ultimately in the fact that no shot is

fired; this is not simply a signification of Meek's emasculated impotence, but of the failure of the characters – and the film – to commit to a definitive resolution. There can be no definitive climax in a landscape of such contingent values, a quality which is at odds with the greater ethical-assurance of many conventional Westerns. Meek claims that his anger at the Native American concerns theft and 'the principle of the matter,' but Emily's response – 'What does it matter?' – makes clear that social values around property do not apply universally.

The dialectic rhythm between close-ups and wider shots is crucial to the unspoken dynamic of the scene (Figs. 6.14 – 6.17). The wider shots, offering an image of the three protagonists in this unconventional triangular standoff, coincide with the moments in which Meek makes his most concerted rhetorical attempts to establish order and meaning: his statement that he is defending the principles of private property; his claim that he has vastly superior knowledge about the dangers posed by Native Americans; his appeal to Solomon, and his claim that Emily has Indian blood in her; Emily's admission that there could be an army of heathens over the hill; Meek's defeated claim that Emily is mad, that the Native American is lucky to have a guardian angel (a reference to Christian discourse which unites them), and that things will be resolved 'all in good time.' These clear statements that there is order and that it will be imposed are balanced by Emily's defiant challenge, and this dialectic is matched formally by the rhythmic pattern of wide shots to close-ups. Bazin claims that 'the Western has virtually no use for the close-up, even for the medium shot, preferring by contrast the travelling shot and the pan which

refuse to be limited by the frameline and which restore to space its fullness.’³⁰ The emphasis on close-up in *Meek’s Cutoff* succeeds in robbing both space and its signifiers of their fullness. Meek is shot in close-up in his fleeting moments of doubt and defeat: his sudden sigh-inducing acknowledgement that the Native American has ‘some feeling’ in him; his uncertainty as he invites Emily to wager on what lies over the hill. Emily, uncertainly stepping outside of the bounds of social etiquette, is filmed more often in close-up as she cocks her gun (the initial unspoken statement of defiance), and as she refuses to take Meek’s wager, saying that she will leave wagering to men like Meek. The notion of wagering, resonant with the film’s proposal that the wanderers’ (mythic) ideal of communication is an economy of exchange, marks an assertion on Emily’s part that imponderables are treated as certainties by men like Meek. Her most outspoken challenge – ‘Well, neither do you [know what’s over the hill], Mr Meek. You’ve proved that amply by now’ – is filmed in a tight close-up, marking her distance from Meek and her fellow wanderers; she is alone within the frame, cut off from the guidance of conventional attitudes and behaviours. The position within the close-up is not one of strength, but one of disunity and confusion; as Emily lays down the gun, having temporarily silenced Meek, the camera shakes, in a manifestation of the uncomfortable lack of fixed values that her new world represents. Gone are the decisive climaxes of the traditional standoff, replaced by the anti-climactic speculations of ethically ambivalent individuals, a serious doubt over where sympathy should lie, and no shooting at all.

³⁰ Bazin (1971), 147. It is worth noting that other Westerns have made great use of the close-up as, for example, with Sergio Leone’s use of synecdochic shots of eyes. However, the particular achievement of the close-ups in *Meek’s Cutoff* – in dialectic with the wider shots – remains unusual.



Fig. 6.14 – 1.18.56
Towards a coherent group.



Fig. 6.15 – 1.19.03
An expressive meaninglessness.



Fig. 6.16 – 1.19.09
White law and language.



Fig. 6.17 – 1.19.19
Caught in an irresolvable dialectic.

The third point in this standoff, the Native American, represents the very signification-outside-of-meaning which has thrown the operation of clear order into disarray. The generic signifiers – masculine hero with gun vanquishing the Indian threat – are in place, but are rendered disorientating by the latter's inscrutability. The Native American resolutely does not make manifest Meek's normalising anecdotal depiction of him; he does not respond with violence or rage. The cuts between close-ups make eyelines difficult to match, especially in the case of the Native American's wandering gaze and unreadable-reaction, marking his refusal to respond to the insistence on the wanderers' (arbitrary) social rules, a radical diffusion of Meek's conventionally heroic gestures.³¹ The Native American, who shows no fear or anger and is linked at the sequence's beginning and end with a small magnifying glass suggesting insight, is absolutely outside his captors' social order. Meek's attempts to make him operate within white law and language (through instruction, and threats of violence and execution) are met with a

³¹ The Native American's resistance to these rules may suggestively be read in terms of psychoanalytic theory concerning the semiotic stage of a child's development as he or she passes into the Symbolic Order at the thetic moment in which the law represented by the Name of the Father asserts itself and brings the child into law and signifying language. As Ruth Robbins expresses it, 'The child inserts him/herself into culture by submitting to the father's 'no,' by conforming to the linguistic rules of grammar, syntax and propriety in vocabulary, and in this process is related to the child's insertion into social rules' (Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 128).

disarming indifference. The Native American persists in being an expressive-meaninglessness; Meek represents the myth of hierarchical, meaningful order; Emily – along with the rhythm of the shots – stands at the irresolvable intersection of the two. The impotent, unrealised shootout in *Meek's Cutoff* offers what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as 'generic memory': 'the continuing existence of an earlier generic paradigm in the narrative sediment of a later one.'³² The scene offers a sequence – the armed standoff – made up of conventional genre signifiers, but isolates them from conventional signifieds, leaving the sequence imperfectly legible.

The Unknowing of Genre

The significance of this unresolved dialectic between meaning and meaninglessness is profound for genre theory. The functioning of genre relies on an accepted relationship between signifiers and signifieds. The ways in which genres 'set audience expectations and thereby drive interpretation' come to dictate how 'truth in fiction' is established.³³ Brian Laetz and Dominic McIver Lopes formulate how truth is determined by genre:

Genre principle: a story belonging to genre *K* represents that *q* if it explicitly represents that $p_1 \dots p_n$ and it is a feature of *K* that it would be the case that *q*, were it the case that $p_1 \dots p_n$.³⁴

³² Quoted in Walker, 222.

³³ Brian Laetz and Dominic McIver Lopes, 'Genre,' in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. Paisley Livingstone and Carl Plantinga (London: Routledge, 2009), 152.

³⁴ Laetz and McIver Lopes, 153.

This acknowledgment that truth, as it operates within a work of narrative art, is dependent on an understanding of genre renders genre an epistemological concern. Jim Kitses defines the Western as 'America's defining myth,' a 'morality play,' and first and foremost 'a vehicle for the exploration and validation of masculinity'; this suggests that the Western's 'truths' inform ethical and social debates and have an immediate political application in everyday life.³⁵ Despite many films which have troubled the conventions of the genre, the morality and politics of the Western have been, traditionally, conservative and reductive. Bazin talks extensively of the genre's 'epic Manicheism which sets the force of evil over against the knights of the true cause.'³⁶ The Western hero, chief among the genre's signifiers, has traditionally represented the coming of justice. The genre's 'homegrown heroes, glorified ancestors, and archetypal figures,' as well as demonised Indians and disempowered women, have offered signs to aid an understanding of the world; western society has been read in light of Western society, and its crude distinctions between races, sexes, and politics have been mapped onto real world situations.³⁷ This has ultimately contributed to the establishment of social norms structured around myths of legitimacy and goodness. Janet Walker writes that '[g]enres are formally familiar ways to transmit certain widely held – sometimes widely contested – cultural meanings, which coalesce as myths.'³⁸ Social 'truths' are known because their relative 'truths' are understood within the stable, interpretable worlds of their genre.

³⁵ Kitses, 9, 3, 3.

³⁶ Bazin (1971), 145.

³⁷ Indick, 13.

³⁸ Walker, 27.

Genre, then, may be defined as an articulation of a series of conventional, legible signifiers, each of which has an established truth-value within the genre and with application beyond it. *Meek's Cutoff*, in the light of this definition, stands as a re-articulation of those signifiers. Janet Walker suggests that subversive contributions to the genre begin 'from the more Brechtian assumptions that form and content have a frictive, unstable relationship, and that the proposal that their relationship is unproblematic is one of the most powerful rhetorical manoeuvres of traditional westerns.'³⁹ As a naturalistic drama with a minimalist aesthetic, which both resists and invites the symbolic reading of a series of signs which have become untethered, *Meek's Cutoff* does not perpetuate the myth of smooth articulation between form and content. And, as the form-content and signifier-signified dialectics are unresolved, so too is the relationship between conventional truth and a more complex, nuanced understanding. What is known by and through the genre becomes unknown. The genre's defining myths, moralities, and gendered politics are no longer stable, rendering equally unstable any extra-filmic understanding of the same issues. The film's 'knight' (Meek) is an ignorant man whose inarticulacy lies in a kind of vapid garrulousness and who ultimately declares his submissiveness to the traditional enemy (now an inscrutable figure, quite possibly innocent) and a woman. The film, through the operation of its rhythmic shot sequences and the character of the Native American, both resistant to categorical interpretation, diminishes the prevailing myths of its wider culture. Ethics become more fluid and contingent than in the traditional Western, in which, according to André Bazin:

³⁹ Walker, 30.

It is the morality of a world in which social good and evil, in their simplicity and necessity, exist like two primary and basic elements. But good in its natal state engenders law in all its primitive rigor; epic becomes tragedy, on the appearance of the first conflict between the transcendence of social justice and the individual character of moral justice, between the categorical imperative of the law which guarantees the order of the future city, and the no less unshakeable order of the individual conscience.⁴⁰

The ethical world of *Meek's Cutoff* allows for no unshakeables at all. In place of the 'categorical imperative of the law' stands the anecdotal wisdom of Stephen Meek which, whether it is addressing the subject of bears or Native Americans, ends with the absurd quasi-theological claim that 'hell is full of' the offending creature. The stories are defined by a kind of hyperbole that undermines entirely their credibility. These laws, which seek to define other races, women, the landscape, claim an inappropriate authority predicated on a mythic notion of logocentric language and the possibility of clear utterance. It is this misplaced confidence in truths that are falsely thought unshakeable which leads Meek to call repeatedly for the execution of the Native American, and for the wanderers' discussions about whether to hang Meek. Individual conscience is no more unshakeable; the characters wander in a maze of indecision, uncertain whether to go forward or turn back, to follow Meek or execute him, to defend the Native American or mistrust him. With this ethical contingency, *Meek's Cutoff* offers a reappropriation of the Western genre which complicates the assumptions that underlie many contemporary attitudes. It does not follow a trend, identified by Susan Hayward, of other 'recent Westerns [in which] there is a completely inverted set of [political and ethical] oppositions.'⁴¹ Instead, it becomes a film in which 'spoken [and formal] ruptures... incite a bifocal

⁴⁰ Bazin (1971), 147.

⁴¹ Hayward, 186

vision in the viewer...' and reveal both conventional meaning and its opposite.⁴² The effect of this simultaneity of convention and its undoing disavows a smooth complementarity between form and character. The form relies on its generic underpinnings, but also complicates the usual meanings of many of these elements, including the characters themselves. The presence of the traditional generic roles of confident frontiersman, subordinate women, threatening Native American contains the promise of reliable generic expression. However, this promise is undermined through the unsettling – and not the straight inversion – of its conventional assumptions; the frontiersman's confidence is also garrulous arrogance, the women's subordination allows moments of resistance, and the nature (and extent) of the threat is clouded in the Native American's oblique utterances.

This unsettling of generic signifiers has a socio-cultural significance. William Indick suggests that the Western has been 'a medium that reframed and represented the topical social issues of its time.'⁴³ He identifies a translation of World War horror into narrative honour, and of nationalism and empire into racial superiority and the fulfilment of God's will. Janet Walker comments that:

In its 1990s resurgence... the Western reemerged under distinctly different conditions, specifically those of postmodernism. Two significant marks of postmodernism are generic destabilization and the questioning of myths and master narratives.⁴⁴

Meek's Cutoff, in Walker's sense a postmodern Western, does not allow the myths of racial superiority, masculine supremacy, or any other master narratives to stand.

⁴² Walker, 42.

⁴³ Indick, 12-13.

⁴⁴ Walker, 28.

A clarity of significance is unimaginable in the unhomely landscapes of *Meek's Cutoff*. Things in this frontier world do not mean something by themselves; rather, like Emily's needle, they mean something only in relation to a complex system of significances, a system which is cultural and contingent. The topical America refracted through the prism of the film's form and narratives is one of crisis, one of illegible signs and free-floating genre signifiers: the film offers a deferred captivity narrative, in which the massacre does not come, the standoff is triangulated, language is incomprehensible and illegible. The film is told in a 'future preterite,' in which there is an overwhelming sense that 'it's already too late, even though it hasn't happened yet.'⁴⁵ The trauma (massacre, dehydration, bereavement, lynching, murder) has not yet happened, and it remains entirely uncertain what the trauma will be, and yet it always-already haunts the narrative as a future possibility. As Meek says at the film's end, 'this was written long before we got here,' but the message of that inherited, mythic writing is definitively unclear. The depiction of a world in which there is no clear meaning takes on a great theological significance:

If there is no God, then there is no Truth, at least not one with a capital T: "To acknowledge untruth as a condition of life: this clearly means resisting the usual value feelings in a dangerous manner; and a philosophy that risks such a thing would by that gesture alone place itself beyond good and evil."

Nietzsche refers to this new state of affairs as "dangerous," because without God, or without an agreed-upon set of moral standards such as those established by Christianity, values, or truths in the lowercase, derive from the individual alone, opening up any number of possibilities: "The dangerous and uncanny point has been reached when the greatest, most diverse, most comprehensive life lives past the old morality. The 'individual' is left standing there, forced to give himself laws, forced to rely on his own arts and wiles of self-preservation, self-enhancement, self-redemption. There is nothing but new whys and

⁴⁵ Walker, 223.

hows; there are no longer any shared formulas.”⁴⁶

The wilderness of the wanderers is a godless world, in which God has abandoned those who have been expelled from Eden. The academy ratio, privileging the vertical form of an individual figure; the use of close-up; the incoherent, repetitive, non-signifying conversation; the failed economies of exchange between enemies; the narrative of disagreement and panic; the individual signs which resonate with splintered, uncontrollable, unverifiable meanings: these features of the film not only depict a world of self-legislating individuals but also strip away the ‘shared formulas’ of genre. The Western is no longer decisively readable in the terms established by its own genre. The film productively avoids the American exceptionalisms which have historically been evident in many Westerns. The Indian is now also a Native American, his inscrutability not the source of his sinister wickedness but rather a consequence of linguistic instability and difference; he is not the alien representative of pre-linguistic emotion, but of feelings expressed in an unknown language. Women are now both submissive and defiant, their fluctuation between submission and defiance born of uncertainty and not conviction. Stripped of its guiding myths, America – and the Western/western world – must negotiate a new frontier.

⁴⁶ Richard Gaughran, ‘The Search for Meaning in *The Wild Bunch*,’ in *The Philosophy of the Western*, ed. Jennifer L. McMahon and B. Steve Csaki (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 206.

Chapter 7

Collapsing Frames: Inarticulate Intermedia in *The Pillow Book*

Losing Your Voice: Revenge in Place of Character

Peter Greenaway's 1996 *The Pillow Book*, like Davies' early feature films, is concerned with ideas of cultural heritage, and allusion and homage become defining modes of expression for its principal character. Like *Meek's Cutoff*, it is also heavily interested in its own generic status, in this case as revenge tragedy. While *The Pillow Book* shares these concerns, however, its experimentation in intermedia finds a formal means of demonstrating the links between elements unseen in the other films. The film chronicles the extraordinary attempts of Nagiko, a young Japanese woman, to realise her literary ambitions. These ambitions are unconventional; stimulated by evocative memories of her father's habit of writing on her face and body each birthday, Nagiko seeks to emulate the 10th Century *Pillow Book* of Sei Shōnagon, using her own and others' skin as the pages for her text. Sex and writing become paired activities, and her obsession with writing becomes an intensely eroticised homage to her father, also a writer, whom she has discovered, in one of her earliest remembered moments, gripped in post-coital embarrassment with his unscrupulous publisher. Nagiko remains unable to articulate this memory throughout the film. Despite the film's generally explicit treatment of the human body (commonplace in Greenaway's works), this originary scene of half-understood and unstated intimacy between her father and his

publisher is modestly ambiguous, the evidence of sex (or what Nagiko later describes once as 'violation') vague: the publisher is simply seen fastening his belt.

Nagiko's Oedipal quest for self-expression begins in this distortion of Freud's hypothesized primal scene in which a child sees his or her parents having sex; here, the absent mother is replaced by the publisher, who will, through his distribution of Nagiko's later writings, occupy a grotesquely parodic parental role. Her writing, as the film progresses, leads only to frustration. Writing about the tendency in many of Greenaway's protagonists to structure their expression through systems and taxonomies, Vernon Gras writes that '[t]he recurring allegory, metaphor, or subtext in all his films, underlying their more immediate and superficial action, is the inevitable failure of whatever ordering principles his protagonists engage in.'¹ Nagiko's system of writing on skin (a technique inherited from her father) in a numbered series of 'books' (a structure inherited from Sei Shōnagon's original *Pillow Book*) marks 'the tragic failure... of [her] signifying effort to classify or endow with meaning... the presented world.'² Despite the startling drama of her revenge, Nagiko is no nearer meaning at the end of the film than at the beginning, and the final shots are of her marking the skin of her baby, reopening the very same conduits of expression which have led to her own confusion and grief.

However, even this account of Nagiko's progress as a writer falls too far into the trap of attributing definite significance to the character. Nagiko's lack of expression – an effect compounded by Vivian Wu's flatly monotonous delivery – leaves the

¹ Vernon Gras, 'Dramatizing the Failure to Jump the Culture/Nature Gap: The Films of Peter Greenaway,' *New Literary History* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 124.

² Gras, 126.

impression of an incomplete character. This incompleteness is a function not of psychological comment (which would see her as the damaged product of childhood trauma) but rather of style; Michael Walsh suggests that Greenaway's characters are not 'simply affectless (as critics tend to say) but determinedly distanced from affect.'³ It is suggestive that Nagiko is first seen as a child being written on, and, as an adult, shortly after, modelling in a fashion show; in both cases, she is a vehicle for the expression of others rather than an articulating character in her own right. She remains what Greenaway tantalisingly calls a 'cipher,' a code or esoteric form of writing, one which here ultimately has no clear meaning.⁴ Even as she develops as a writer, the writing is predicated on a channelling rather than original utterance, and most of her writing remains untranslated for the western viewer, occupying screen space as a series of calligraphs without signifieds. She is, herself, encoded, and all she produces is further code. Greenaway, through the flattening of the character into a series of unrevealing and monotonous oral utterances and untranslated and oblique written texts, avoids what he describes as 'that pseudo-supermarket Freudian analysis of character which becomes so boring' and which characterises much contemporary cinema.⁵ In the opinion of Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy, the critical effect of this eschewal of autonomous psychological expression 'has tended to alienate those critics who define depth in terms of psychological identification.'⁶ Instead, Nagiko becomes an encoded cipher producing encoded ciphers in a relentless mise-

³ Michael Walsh, 'Allegories of Thatcherism: The Films of Peter Greenaway in the 1980s,' in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* 2nd edition, ed. Lester D. Friedman (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 294.

⁴ Marlene Rodgers and Peter Greenaway, "'Prospero's Books' – Word and Spectacle: An Interview with Peter Greenaway,' *Film Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 14.

⁵ Rodgers and Greenaway, 13.

⁶ Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy, 'Skin Deep: Fins-de-Siècle and New Beginnings in Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book*,' in *Peter Greenaway's Postmodern/Poststructuralist Cinema*, ed. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi and Mary Alemany-Galway (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 247.

en-abyme; the hope of character is lost in an expressively inarticulate space, occupied instead by the non-autonomous drives for sex and revenge, both of which form narratives in which personal expression is surrendered in favour of articulating on another's behalf. In her ceaseless acts of homage (to her father, to Sei Shōnagon, and later to her lover Jerome), Nagiko is subordinated to the imitated voice, any new expression lost in echoes of the old. Although David Pascoe goes too far in his psychological reading of 'fetish and oedipal complexity,' his argument that '[t]he substance of these two actions, writing [by her father on her body] and reading [of the original *Pillow Book*], body and text, provides the substance of her life...' is persuasive.⁷

The principal volta in the film occurs when Jerome suggests that, instead of being written upon, Nagiko should write on others. Before this, her quest has been exclusively for the expressions of others, intended to compensate for her father's lost texts and to fill the void left by her own inexpressiveness. Although her criticisms remain imprecise (she accuses Jerome of being a 'scribbler' rather than a writer), her constant dissatisfaction with the expressions of others suggests the existence of a conceptual text, one which exists only in her unformed imagination, which succeeds in expressing her emptiness.⁸ Nagiko is an ambitious page, seeking articulation through the words of others. Lawrence Chua is utopian when he argues that her development from this point is a passing 'into agency through

⁷ David Pascoe, *Peter Greenaway: Museums and Moving Images* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 163.

⁸ It is both suggestive and amusing that Jerome was not named after Saint Jerome, the great Christian scholar and writer, but rather, as his mother recalls, after a Jesuit priest who was his father's confessor, that is, a listener to other people's stories. Both the publisher – who, in his grief, looks at paintings of Saint Jerome – and Nagiko try to make him a writer, but this in the end is futile; like Nagiko – named after Sei Shōnagon – Jerome cannot live up to his name.

writing.’⁹ Nagiko’s route through the narrative is not into autonomy, independence, or agency. She remains defined by her childhood encounters with the texts of others, an echo chamber for these utterances from outside herself. Even when the film is most sensually fluid and depicts her writing as effortlessly continuous, there remains the hint of struggle. As she begins her career as a writer, it is in the liquid environment of her bathroom, writing on the steamed mirror before committing the text to her own body in ink. The sequence’s dissolves replicate the unimpeded flowing of both the water and the ink, and offer almost-seamless cuts between gestures; as the pen falls in one shot it dissolves to an almost precisely coordinated shot of the pen beginning to write on flesh (Fig. 7.1). However, the almostness of this seamlessness is significant; even here, away from the disturbing presence of other – and male – bodies, writing flows, and yet the flow announces its articulation through the not quite exact cuts. Ultimately, the sequence dissolves – along with the text – into a shot of water and ink flowing freely together down the plughole (Fig. 7.2). In the monochromatic effect of black ink on white bathtub, the image recalls the scenes from Nagiko’s childhood, which are presented in black and white. As she becomes a writer, Nagiko is still unable to make her own sense of her father’s calligraphy, and it is lost in the beautiful, reforming patterns of ink down a drain.

⁹ Lawrence Chua and Peter Greenaway, ‘Peter Greenaway,’ *BOMB* 60 (Summer 1997): 27.



Fig. 7.1 – 0.44.05
Dissolving into almostness.



Fig. 7.2 – 0.44.43
Reforming patterns.

Ultimately, all of Nagiko's attempts at expression are defined by their ephemerality. Their status as complete, fixed expression is no more convincing than that of Nagiko herself. Like their scribe, they are lost in a motion of always-already decay. Water, rain, sweat, porous skin: these corrupt the texts into a collapse which is part of their composition (Fig. 7.3). Transcribing does not satisfactorily fasten them; when the texts are copied out – reimagining the calligraphs' careful interactions with the contours of a human being on the dead flatness of paper – they lose their 'association with the ephemerality of the body, the ephemerality of the flesh – connections between the mortality of paper and flesh and writing.'¹⁰ As a cipher, Nagiko can leave no authorial trace, a quality

¹⁰ Alan Woods, *Being Naked, Playing Dead: The Art of Peter Greenaway* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 268.

perfectly implied by the essentially fluid texts she creates. The publisher, Nagiko's sworn enemy, is ultimately destroyed by his unconquerable desire to set text in an unchanging form. When Jerome – reappropriating the death scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, with alternatively tragic consequences – kills himself, Nagiko writes on his corpse. The publisher, unable to endure the idea of this text's decay, exhumes Jerome and flays him, transforming the inked skin into a pillow book of his own. This text is an abomination, not only because of its macabre medium but because Nagiko's texts cannot endure without absolute disfigurement.



Fig. 7.3 – 0.18.42
Running texts.

Nagiko's story, then, is not one of a journey towards self-expression. Rather, it is the endlessly non-satisfying production of self-destroying texts in the name of revenge for two men (her father and lover) who have written themselves on her. Jim Ridley accuses Greenaway of not creating 'believable emotions or people,' with characters who 'have no interior life or independence.'¹¹ This assessment seems accurate, though the implied critique may be unfair. Nagiko's interior life is diminished by her inability to find self-expression. She is able, instead, only to articulate and rearticulate inarticulately discordant parts made up of her father, her

¹¹ Jim Ridley, 'Book of the Deadly,' *Nashville Scene* (21 August, 1997): accessed 18 March, 2015, <http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/book-of-the-deadly/Content?oid=1181523>.

aunt, her lover, her desire, and Sei Shōnagon's originary text. The bonsai tree under which the text of Jerome's flayed skin is finally buried is, like Nagiko, a living thing unable to develop into meaningful expression (Fig. 7.4). Like Nagiko, it is a cipher, also linked to the baby born at the film's end, who is written upon by Nagiko and unable to develop. As a cipher in search of expression, Nagiko remains encoded.



Fig. 7.4 – 2.00.53
A cipher that won't grow.

Dismembered Forms and the Inarticulate Body

With the flaying of Jerome's corpse, the film invests in one of the recurring metaphors of Greenaway's films: the dismembered body.¹² Dismemberment (a prominent feature of *The Draughtsman's Contract* [1982], *A Zed and Two Noughts* [1985], *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* [1989], and *Goltzius and the Pelican Company* [2012]) symbolises the preeminent collapse of meaning in the films. In these films, it is a narrative gesture which both claims a climactic level of sense, and in each case has also an unquantifiable superabundance of meaning which deranges the drama's logic. (In *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Neville's loss of

¹² See Woods, 29 for a discussion of images of dismemberment in Greenaway's painting.

his eyes explodes the possibility of a solution to the film's central mystery; in *A Zed and Two Noughts*, Alba's second amputation seeks to restore symmetry, but leaves her unable even to understand who the father of her children is; in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*, Albert's cannibalistic carving of Michael's roasted body throws the revenge narrative into a chaos of confusion in which the literal and metaphorical are no longer distinguishable; and in *Goltzius and the Pelican Company*, Thomas's decapitation is an hysterical gesture in which Old Testament violence purposelessly reasserts itself.) The book formed from Jerome's flayed skin represents the publisher's attempt to derive meaning from his death; the text, though, resists this function, and is, ultimately, buried beneath a tree which is made to carry substantial symbolic weight, marking both growth and, as a bonsai, limitation.

More than this general concern, though, *The Pillow Book* offers an original approach to a correlation between the dismembered body and film form observed by Eisenstein in *Montage 1937*, as described by Yuri Tsivian:

Eisenstein had observed that, by its very technical nature, film-making involves two operations that mirror each other: at the stage of production the director fragments 'reality' into shots only to reassemble them, in a different manner, on the editing table – the break-and-make process which he liked to compare to the way the Japanese juggle with simple pictures to form compound hieroglyphs... Viewed in the perspective of these books, the underlying site of a true tragedy, regardless of its setting, is the human body...; while its ultimate action – the act of dismemberment and subsequent welding – is montage... From ancient times, says *Montage 1937*, art has known the secret of the 'Osiris method' (here Eisenstein evokes the Egyptian god deemed to relive, seasonally, dismemberment and resurrection) – the precarious equilibrium (or, better, the dynamic tension) between unity and disunity, the centrifugal and centripetal.¹³

¹³ Yuri Tsivian, *Ivan the Terrible* (London: BFI, 2002), 49-50.

The link drawn by Eisenstein between the ‘break-and-make process’ of filming and editing on one hand and Japanese hieroglyphs on the other takes on a special significance in relation to *The Pillow Book*. Throughout, the film Greenaway layers calligraphic Japanese and Chinese text on the dramatic action, sometimes translated in additional English subtitles. This layering introduces the crucial dimension of the film’s stylistic response to the challenges of articulacy. Just as the Japanese hieroglyph is fashioned in a dialectic process of combination, so *The Pillow Book* consists of a series of combinatory gestures: images combined with other images (and text-as-images) to form compound meanings. *The Pillow Book*, though, deviates from Eisenstein’s description of linear montage, and uncovers new possibilities of combination through an extensive and technologically groundbreaking use of intermedia. Dick Higgins defines intermedia as differing

... from mixed media; an opera is a mixed medium, inasmuch as we know what is the music, what is the text, and what is the mise-en-scène. In an intermedium, on the other hand, there is a conceptual fusion.¹⁴

In *The Pillow Book*, clear division between images and text becomes disturbed. (Text – especially in the form of Chinese calligraphs – operates as pictogram, that is part of an iconic glyphic system in which physical resemblance between text-signifier and its referent plays a part.) There is some correlation between Greenaway’s narratives of dismemberment and his fragmented, fractured forms; just as the body ceases to be readable as a linear structure of prescribed order, so the film image splinters into a confusion of parts which would have been more conventionally readable diachronically. However, Eisenstein’s reference to ‘the

¹⁴ Dick Higgins, *Horizons, the Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 16.

precarious equilibrium (or, better, the dynamic tension) between unity and disunity, the centrifugal and centripetal' haunts this correlation and marks it also as a site of difference.¹⁵ (Given that, as Keesey argues, Greenaway's style is engaged with broad themes, 'rather than being organically attached to character or plot,' the limitations of this correlation should not be surprising.¹⁶) While the narrative bodies are disunited and dispersed through a centrifugally violent gesture, the formal components are united and layered by a centripetal force. Simultaneously within the frame, the film uses photographs, stylised postcard images, animations, drawings, and a wide variety of film styles to create a series of saturated intermedial images, which enact the interstices between component parts synchronically. The film's edited body has its limbs (its black and white images of Nagiko's childhood, yellow-tinted images of her marriage, colour images of her adult life in Hong Kong, high intensity colour images of Sei Shōnagon's 10th century court life, its photographs and postcards, its texts of different languages, all presented in a dizzying array of aspect ratios) reassembled out of order and piled up, like bones in a charnel house, in a confused synchronicity within a shared frame. In both cases – the centrifugal diegetic dismemberment and the centripetal formal dismemberment within the frame – coherence is undermined; all parts are present, tantalisingly close to coherence, but the densely reordered patterns make the articulated relations between component parts partially illegible. These parts, stemming from different narrative times and points of view, will not be seamlessly sutured through recourse to character; as Greenaway says '[t]he camera is stuck with perspective, but cinema no longer is; it can use frames within frames, or use

¹⁵ Tsivian, 49-50.

¹⁶ Douglas Keesey, *The Films of Peter Greenaway: Sex, Death and Provocation* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2006), 15.

special effects to shrink characters to proportions fitting to their status.’¹⁷ The film, which Greenaway ironically says ‘embodies all of our contemporary anxieties about the idea of severance of body and text,’ also disembodies this anxiety, making the issue whole only to dismantle it into parts again.¹⁸ *The Pillow Book* is a network of intricate negotiations between whole and parts, between integral body and constituent parts.

Piles of Old Bones

The Pillow Book uses superimposition at moments, but far more commonly it layers images and text on top of each other, the upper parts eclipsing the lower. Despite some apparent logic to the film’s composition (as with the various uses of colour linked to stages in Nagiko’s life), the relationship within the frame between the layered images is less prescribed. Serge Gruzinski and Deke Dusinberre try to insist that there is a predictable and predictably expressive pattern to the film’s use of varied styles and formats:

Greenaway employed various techniques to achieve this end. He selected and combined three distinct screens: a CinemaScope format, in color, when relating Nagiko’s life in Tokyo (the camera is placed at ground level, as in Ozu’s films); a smaller screen that recounts – in black and white – Nagiko’s earlier life and subsequent end; and finally, even smaller incrustated images of highly refined color, which illustrate passages from Sei Shonagon’s original Pillow Book like so many animated miniatures from that distant period. Instead of melding into the primary image, these precious scenes exist alongside it; the interconnections produce a series of visual effects that transfigure the action. This juxtaposition of periods sheds light on and validates

¹⁷ Paul Melia and Alan Woods, *Peter Greenaway: Artworks 63-98* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 29-30.

¹⁸ Chua and Greenaway, 28.

Nagiko's plans, while the refined colors of the past underscore or counteract the grayness of modernity.¹⁹

Even a cursory survey of *The Pillow Book* reveals the inadequacy of this analysis. The representation of none of the periods discussed has the consistency of style suggested, and exceptions to these putative rules are as common as adherence to them. Instead, the film adapts its own formats endlessly, failing to provide the stable insights into Nagiko's intentions which Gruzinski and Dusinberre identify. The idiosyncratic film syntax is, as it were, descriptive rather than prescriptive, and the demands of an individual scene or frame will outweigh the importance of any overarching consistent system. Often, the layering presents two discrete moments, separated in time but linked conceptually or aesthetically, revealing film's ease, as described by Gene Youngblood, in showing 'past or future... synthesized in the present.'²⁰ Greenaway himself, in relation to the new digital technologies which make *The Pillow Book*'s manipulations of the synchronic frame possible, says that:

Since the information was undifferentiated, "objective" and infinitely maneuverable backwards, forwards, together, apart, segmented, chronology became irrelevant. Does the past have to come before the present? Does the future have to be ahead of the present?²¹

When Nagiko as an adult waits to speak to the publisher, an inserted frame in the lower portion of the screen recalls the time when Nagiko as a child sat and waited for her father who was visiting the same publisher (Fig. 7.5). In both frames – past and present – the office door opens at the same moment and the publisher is

¹⁹ Serge Gruzinski and Deke Dusinbere, *The Mestizo Mind* (London: Routledge, 2002), 81-2.

²⁰ Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: P. Dutton and Co., 1970), 81.

²¹ Chua and Greenaway, 29. However, it should be understood that time is not made manipulable by digital technologies, only more easily manipulable. Greenaway goes on to say that '[Abel] Gance certainly knew what he was doing, considering all sorts of very expansive vocabulary, treating the past, present and future all in one plane, considering the notion of the close up, the wide shot, the portrait, the still life, all in one frame.'

framed emerging with, respectively, Nagiko's father and Jerome. The logic of this insert seems clear: Jerome is the successor to Nagiko's father (both write on her and receive her love in return, and both are in sexual relations with the publisher), and the past, as the front layer within the frame, will always cover, eclipse, even obliterate the present. However, the logic does not hold. The childhood memory should, according to the system established elsewhere in the film, be black and white, but is in full colour. The past here may cover the present, but the film, as it often does, inverts this order and the present colours the past, with no discernible narrative explanation. Despite the insistence on layering, the order does not reveal an emerging hierarchy; the past and present seem arbitrarily related. The synchronic form of the frame insists upon a comparison of the two moments, but this insistence is futile. The comparison of Nagiko's father and Jerome (an example of Greenaway's supermarket Freud) is ultimately unhelpful: the former is seemingly coerced into sexual relations with the publisher while the latter welcomes them, and while the father's destruction is attributed by Nagiko to the publisher, in the case of Jerome, her jealousy is a primary cause of his death. The simultaneity of the images invites interpretation – coincidence suggests correlation and even causation – but this interpretation is caught in a dynamic between parts (the two insert frames) and whole (the overall frame) which continues to oscillate in defiance of definitive sense. The screen is a *mise-en-abyme* in which meaning is unstably contingent, caught between the distorted reflections of one frame in its neighbour.



Fig. 7.5 – 0.52.26
Distorted reflections.

Beyond this, the relative stability of these indicative past images is not matched by the majority of the film's inserts, which wander into a more subjunctive mood. The sense of concreteness in the personal pasts from Nagiko's life is diminished by the more approximate reconstructions of the cultural past of Sei Shōnagon's life in the 10th century court. These pasts, framed alongside, behind, within the present day action, also demand comparison, revelling in the far-fetchedness of the comparisons, speaking indeterminately of Nagiko's desire for her childhood when she heard the stories, her intellectual pretensions, the assertion of ancient Chinese culture in contemporary life in Japan and Hong Kong, the unchanging social position of women in patriarchal cultures, the place of erotic confession in literature, the physical similarity between the two women, the recurring interest in certain colours and textures in (a perhaps exoticised) oriental aesthetic. This fetishized history overwhelms the frame with duplicated images, whose difference-in-sameness creates a confused impression of a mosaic in which the pieces are in harmony and yet do not quite fit. As Sei Shōnagon's List of Splendid Things is quoted in voiceover, the items listed are layered with themselves, in both back layer and inserted top layer, separate frames and yet identical shots. This mise-en-abyme resists reading, shifts in colouration and scale making the items in the list

non-identical with themselves. The uniquely praised indigo papers become a visual cacophony, an abstraction of colour and line; the relationship between the image and its inserted self is both fluid and disjunctive, the top line of the calligrapher's arm consistent between the frames while the lower line of the arm is interrupted (Fig. 7.6).



Fig. 7.6 – 0.12.50
Fluid disjunctions.

Coexistence of constituent parts within the frame is not defined by the logic of meaning. The indigo papers are not made to mean more *clearly* (or, in the language of the original *Pillow Book*, to be more *splendid*) by duplication. Rather, the repetition – in which the frames are consistent *and* disjunctive, the same *and* different – shatters their consolidated meaning. (This shattering will be significant later when Jerome's body is wrapped in indigo paper; whether this is a *splendid* gesture remains ambiguous.) Throughout the film, the yoking of image and text-as-image (the 'edifice of language') compromises the stability of the coherent sense of either.²² As Amy Lawrence writes, 'letters are literally signs, and... signs are separable from what they signify.'²³ This separation is felt most keenly when, as Alan Woods suggests, text is 'fixed with an ambiguous life: it is word as image,

²² Amy Lawrence, *The Films of Peter Greenaway* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 55.

²³ Lawrence, 79.

with a meaning modified by its visual intonation – is it scrawled, or collaged, or in Letraset? – and by its relation to the image as a whole, a new meaning that does not proceed, but expands with viewing.’²⁴

In the substantial sequence charting Nagiko and Jerome’s developing passion, set to the French pop song *Blonde*, the pinnacle of the film’s combinatory style is reached as inserts flood the screen and written text scrolls in gratuitous repetition of the (non-English) sung lyrics. Nagiko’s voiceover includes the sentiment that ‘his writing in so many languages made me a signpost pointing east, west, north, and south.’ This suggestion that signs are made multi-directional by the proliferation of languages and alphabets resonates with the experience of encountering text in the sequence. Two English language texts feature, and, despite their (very different) cultural significances, both transcend their typical significations. Nagiko has written ‘THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG’ on Jerome’s naked body (Fig. 7.7), while Jerome has written ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ on Nagiko’s arms and torso (Fig. 7.8). Both stand as invitations to interpretation: the quick brown fox (a reference to both Nagiko’s race and sexuality) has indeed jumped on the lazy dog (the sleeping Jerome), and every piece of writing for Nagiko is dedicated to her father. However, Nagiko is far from jumping *over* Jerome, and she has been neither quick nor sly. She has also declared no conviction elsewhere in her father’s continued life after death. Rather, both texts are simply calligraphic exercises in the Roman alphabet. Indeed, the pangram is used most frequently to test typing skills, a task indifferent to its meaning. Even the recital by rote of the prayer may, for many people, take on a mechanical quality

²⁴ Woods, 189.

separate from its meaning. Text here is, instead, a series of lines and curves which engages with the contours of buttocks and breasts to become a series of familiar signs estranged from their usual significances. As Roger Ebert writes on *The Pillow Book*, '[t]he talkies chained pictures to words; Greenaway finds a way out by using words as pictures.'²⁵



Fig. 7.7 – 0.56.46
The Quick Brown Fox.

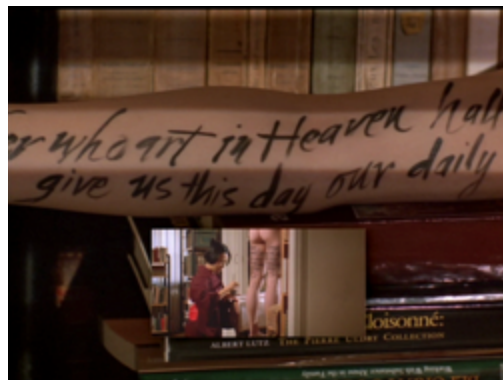


Fig. 7.8 – 0.58.37
Our Father.

In this reappropriation of text as image, the film intimates a wider project which may be linked to Eisenstein's notions of film as a synthetic art. James Tweedie sees the structure of Greenaway's intermedial films as demonstrating 'how films are "put together"'.²⁶ In the catalogue for his exhibition *The Stairs* (1995), Greenaway

²⁵ Roger Ebert, *The Chicago Sun-Times* (July 4 1997): accessed 19 March, 2015, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-pillow-book-1997>.

²⁶ James Tweedie, 'Caliban's Books: The Hybrid Text in Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*,'

discusses the emerging possibility of a 'mega-cinema.'²⁷ This emerging cinema would capitalise intermedially on film's diverse lineage and form:

The cinema, they say, is the medium for all seasons. Perhaps it is not a single medium at all, but a plethora of possible ways to communicate hoping for synthesis. It is writing illustrated, theatre recorded, the talking novel, painting on the move, image serviced to music.²⁸

The Pillow Book suggests the aesthetic possibilities which such a synthesis allows, and, as Alan Woods comments, 'the different arts and media shadow and illuminate each other: the very movement is a critical movement, self-aware and aware of difference, and the possibilities of difference.'²⁹ The densely layered frames – in which text and painting and photography and film and music exist in a simultaneity reminiscent of some intermedial cubism – does not allow hierarchies; the different media are held in a shared space which acknowledges fragment and insists on wholeness, but in the irresolvable relation between these parts and this conceptual whole, there is a suspension of traditional interpretative meaning, replaced by a sensation of the sublime. This is what James Tweedie describes as 'the both/and or neither/nor status of his [Greenaway's] medium in relation to its constituent arts.'³⁰ The utterances of the different media are identical and irreconcilably different, these differences often beyond simple explanation but undeniable.

This dialectic structured around comparison despite unlikeness transforms the screen into an elaborate metaphorical space. At moments the divided frame

Cinema Journal 40, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 111.

²⁷ Peter Greenaway, *The Stairs: Munich Projection* (London: Merrell Holberton, 1995), 11.

²⁸ Greenaway (1995), 13.

²⁹ Melia and Woods, 22.

³⁰ Tweedie, 113.

explicitly enacts metaphors, as in the list of similes in which an Englishman's body is figuratively dismembered and each constituent part likened to a domestic object. To critics like Jim Ridley from *The Nashville Scene*, this is 'just laughably literal-minded. If someone mentions a child eating strawberries, then, by God, Greenaway's going to flash you a child eating strawberries.'³¹ This fails to recognise the complicating strategies at work within these metaphors. Tenor and vehicle are presented simultaneously, not manifested within one diegetic scene, but with the latter clearly occupying a separate space as an insert. Unlike the textual metaphor, in which the conceptual statuses of the tenor and vehicle are discrete, the film metaphor is ontologically confused. The tenor (the naked man) is of no greater status than the vehicle (the upturned bowls likened to his belly, for example) (Fig.7.9). In metaphor, the vehicle cannot be manifested; this is literalisation, and cancels out the figurative dimension of the metaphor. In *The Pillow Book*, the frame groans under the presence of the should-be-absent vehicle, and meaning becomes oblique in the yawning interstice between constituent parts of the figurative utterance. Nothing is being said, other than a superficial comment on the shape of the man's belly.



Fig. 7.9 – 0.45.16
Vehicle and tenor.

³¹ Ridley, <http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/book-of-the-deadly/Content?oid=1181523>.

Spinning Axes

The principal effect of this simultaneity is to confuse the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of the film's expression. In his essay on 'Painting and Cinema,' André Bazin suggests that 'the sequence of a film gives it a unity in time that is horizontal and, so to speak, geographical, whereas time in a painting, so far as the notion applies, develops geologically and in depth.'³² The horizontal geography of conventional film syntax sees articulation occur principally as a result of *successive* shots, held together in montage. *The Pillow Book*, unconventionally, creates a vertical geology through reimagining montage as the relationship between *simultaneous* shots in a shared frame, in an 'oddly vertical text.'³³ The upturned bowls and the belly of the Englishman are not, as Jim Ridley suggests, merely duplicating work; they are – with the added complication of a quotation from Sei Shōnagon's original *Pillow Book* in voiceover – held in a vertical montage, and their juxtaposition exceeds the limited meanings of its constituent parts; upturned bowls bring with them, for example, connotations of afunctionality, necessary emptiness, perverse misuse, additional sense traces which contribute to the impression of the Englishman's body. The denseness of the frame has been condemned by some critics in what Greenaway describes as 'shrill and indignant cries of "visual indigestion",' as they experience only an uncomfortable and discomfiting fullness.³⁴ However, it is precisely this plenitude – and, more particularly, the

³² André Bazin, *What is Cinema?: Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 165.

³³ Tweedie, 105.

³⁴ Greenaway (1995), 21.

sublime articulation of the parts that comprise the fullness – which allows *The Pillow Book* to reimagine film form.

This altered axis – horizontal succession as vertical simultaneity – changes the direction of montage. In his idiosyncratic 1970 work on *Expanded Cinema*, Gene Youngblood predicts the coming of a new, technologically-permitted cinema, which he describes variously as expanded, synaesthetic, and syncretic. The emerging video technology which was redefining experimental film for Youngblood allowed for a ‘multi-dimensional simulsensory network of information sources,’ fitting for the ‘nonuniform, nonlinear, nonconnected electronic atmosphere’ of the contemporary world.³⁵ This ‘simulsensory’ form is even more flexibly realised in the film-video-hdTV-digital worlds of Greenaway’s films: digital technologies make complex collage (or layered, vertical montage) possible, with unprecedented flexibility of colour, ratio, movement, and stillness. In Youngblood’s vision, ‘synaesthetic syncretism replaces montage with collage...’³⁶ This reconception of montage as collage resonates throughout much critical work on Greenaway: Paul Melia sees ‘collage’ as Greenaway’s central ‘aesthetic of conjoining’; Alan Woods sees the use of ‘collage space’ as a reference to ‘folk art’; Peter Wollen suggests that, ‘[a]t heart, Greenaway... is a collagist, juxtaposing images drawn from some fantastic archive’; and Yvonne Spielmann locates in Greenaway’s work an ‘electronic collage’ or ‘cluster,’ namely ‘a type of image that is widely used in electronic media through the multiple layerings of different images or image elements, resulting in a spatial density.’³⁷ However, the

³⁵ Youngblood, 77.

³⁶ Youngblood, 85.

³⁷ Melia and Woods, 8; Melia and Woods, 28; Peter Wollen, ‘The Last New Wave: Modernism in

simple identification of this phenomenon in Greenaway's work does not resolve the question of how such an aesthetic may contribute to new possibilities in inarticulate cinema. In his theory of synaesthetic collage, Youngblood goes on to say that it 'subsumes Eisenstein's theory of montage-as-collision and Pudovkin's view of montage-as-linkage.'³⁸ If neither collision nor linkage is able to account for the new dynamic between discrete frame-inserts in this collage, an alternative vocabulary must be found.

It is the case that the discrete frame-inserts, while dialectic, are not synthesised into a coherent meaning. Greenaway, discussing the effect in comparison with the calligraphic synthesis of image and text, says that 'collage never fused two or more ideas together.'³⁹ Early in the film, the young Nagiko observes the construction of books at the publisher's office. Each stage of the complex process is laid on top of the previous stage, layering as the component parts are layered together to make the book (Fig. 7.10). Here, linear process is disrupted, a concentrated instance of 'the linear structure of film [being] disrupted by multiple layers.'⁴⁰ This is not simply recognition of the notion that 'events in reality do not move in linear fashion.'⁴¹ It is, rather, a confusion of emphasis, in which a single event may be both back layer *and* top layer, the back layer both prioritised (as the largest single image) and effaced (by the images in front of it). There is simultaneity and yet absolute separation, the rigidly demarcated frames keeping separate elements of the process together *and* apart, co-present on the screen but impossible to concentrate

the British Films of the Thatcher Era,' in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* 2nd edition, edited by Lester D. Friedman (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 38; Yvonne Spielmann, 'Intermedia in Electronic Images' in *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (2001): 55 and 57.

³⁸ Youngblood, 85.

³⁹ Woods, 266.

⁴⁰ Spielmann (2001), 58.

⁴¹ Youngblood, 97.

on in the same moment. The whole image operates as an elaborate and unpredictable repetition, both monotonous and erratic, and depth is only a function of this destabilising iterability, a mise-en-abyme in which, Escher-like, the image uses simultaneity to make linearity impossible and absurd. This simultaneity is also repression, images lost from the frame as they are overtaken or eclipsed by others; every demonstration is also a cancellation. Gilles Deleuze writes that ‘by this dovetailing of frames... the parts of the set or of the closed system are separated, but also converge and are reunited.’⁴² Like the Hegelian notion of sublation, this delinearising of process sees elements both preserved and abandoned in a dialectic process through which they remain the same and are changed. With the dynamic tilting of the horizontal axis, this vertical depiction of book-making holds together and collapses, as it must later when the same process (and form) is used to depict the making of the macabre pillow book from Jerome’s skin.



Fig. 7.10 – 0.13.17
Montage as collage.

In his *Elements of Semiology*, Roland Barthes offers a definition of the horizontal and vertical axes of articulation, which he calls the *syntagm* and the *system* respectively. (The latter is more typically referred to as the paradigm.) The syntagm is

⁴² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London: Continuum, 2005), 15.

... a combination of signs, which has space as a support. In the articulated language, this space is linear and irreversible (it is the 'spoken chain'): two elements cannot be pronounced at the same time (*re-enter, against all, human life*): each term here derives its value from its opposition to what precedes and what follows; in the chain of speech, the terms are really united *in praesentia*...

The second plane is that of the *associations*... Each group forms a potential mnemonic series, a 'mnemonic treasure'; in each series, unlike what happens at the syntagmatic level, the terms are united *in absentia*; the analytic activity which applies to the associations is that of classification.⁴³

While there are limitations to the usefulness of applying to film a semiotics which is primarily concerned with linguistic signs, this model nevertheless presents some revealing parallels. The syntagmatic axis – a horizontal, linear, and irreversible chain of present signifiers – has an apparent resemblance to montage, in which value, according to Eisenstein's model, is derived from oppositional relations between the units. The paradigmatic axis, meanwhile, operates at the level of association, of connoted thought, of the absent images which form an unseen vertical context to what is presented. *The Pillow Book* does more than simply rearrange syntagms (montage) paradigmatically. It corrodes the linearity of syntagmatic articulation, while abandoning the paradigm's dependence on absence; it abandons irreversibility, but does not replace it with the unrestricted mnemonic play of association; value remains a function of the relationship between units, but this is not an accretional value in which image adds to image, but rather a highly unstable sense which must be improvised in the face of multiple and diverse images occurring within the same frame at the same moment. As Nagiko recalls being written on and slept with by a writer while his wife sings in the next room, the linear consecutiveness of writing and sex is lost and the two

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 58-9.

events occur together in the frame, while his wife, in a small insert, hovers in the top right corner (Fig. 7.11). Syntagm (the linear narrative of present signifiers of writing *then* sex *while* his wife sings) and paradigm (both the association of intimate penmanship with penetrative sex and of the singing wife with the narrative of infidelity) are combined in a complex frame which resists the prescriptions of Barthes' two-axis semiotic model. Once again, the frame denies any hierarchy; sex dominates as the largest single image, but writing – layered above it – obscures it, obliterating any image of penetration. The back-layered action is sublated by that of the top layer, while the top-layered action – an act which narratively culminates in the sexual activity of the back layer – feels incomplete.



Fig. 7.11 – 0.37.15
The sublational frame.

The articulation here is multidirectional, the signifying units put together in vertical space and horizontal time. The confusion of axes and density of the frame leads to an inarticulacy in which the parts centripetally hold together and centrifugally pull apart. These are precisely the terms which Bazin uses to discuss the frame in 'Painting and Cinema':

The picture frame polarises space inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe. The frame is centripetal, the screen centrifugal.⁴⁴

Through an intimation of an off-screen world (beyond the ‘piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality’), the film screen pushes outwards.⁴⁵ This unidirectional energy, Bazin argues, contributes to film’s intimate connection with reality, a connection from which the images’ value may be derived. In *The Pillow Book*, the inserted frames – often highly composed, stylised, contrived, and isolated from the masking of the screen edge – attain a kind of centripetal force, severed from any reality beyond. The larger, back layers, meanwhile, often retain the sense of centrifugal force identified by Bazin, pulling out and apart from the hermetically sealed inserts which eclipse parts of them. The saturated frame becomes both centripetal and centrifugal, bound together and plural, a stuttering complex of inconclusive utterances – ‘that hybridization, mestizaje, dialectic, whatever you want to name the process that makes language’ – enounced as a torrent of sounds and images.⁴⁶ And, in this inarticulate cacography, borderlines open up between the constitutive parts, and meaning remains suspended across them, oscillating in an unrealisable potential. As Alan Woods writes, ‘always there is what is missing, there is always the gap between two frames, the fragment between two fragments.’⁴⁷ Nowhere is this more profoundly felt than in Jerome’s suicide. With its shifting aspect ratios, the film has before this point frequently deployed black bars at the top or sides of the frame. The eye, used to, for example, seeing CinemaScope films on televisions, is accustomed to this phenomenon, and the

⁴⁴ Bazin (1967), 166.

⁴⁵ Bazin (1967), 166.

⁴⁶ Chua and Greenaway, 28.

⁴⁷ Melia and Woods, 20.

black spaces are hardly read as ellipses. However, in the suicide sequence, the inexpressive black regions of the frame become dominant (Fig. 7.12). For full emotional resonance, the sequence would rely on a centrifugal dramatic force, pointing out to a world beyond itself. Instead, the stark framing forces the images inwards, requiring a reading which must leap the literally realised interstice of the black expanse, struggling to make sense of the inserts depicting numbering.⁴⁸ What is missing is motivation and meaning, the act so risibly absurd as to be implausible. (Even Jerome laughs when Hoki suggests the suicide plan.) The additional histrionic flourish of downing the pills with black ink is another improbable gesture. In a suicide which is both imitative (referencing explicitly *Romeo and Juliet*) and original, both fake and real, the indeterminate reading insisted on by the black back frame is the only possible one.

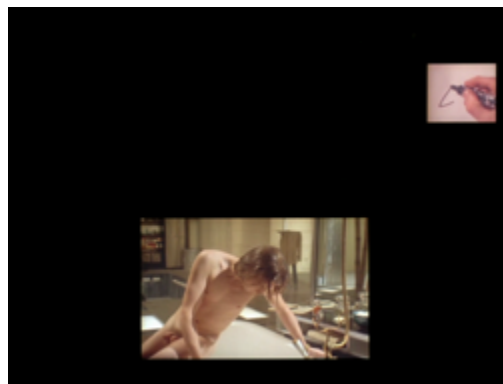


Fig. 7.12 – 1.22.36
Indeterminate space.

⁴⁸ The screenplay suggests that Jerome is numbering the pills he takes. This is far from clear in the film itself, and the act of taking a pill is at no point matched with the inserted act of scoring a number. Peter Greenaway, *The Pillow Book* (Paris: Dis Voir, 19960, 84.

Skin Deep

As concurrent images, the multiple frames exist not only in a lateral relationship with each other, but also in a relationship in depth. However, rather than a suggestion of three-dimensionality, the actions within the diverse frames occupy discrete planes and the superpositioning creates a sense of determined flatness. (The film occasionally uses superimposition, which creates a greater sense of depth through the suggestion of background and foreground, but the elliptical superpositional layering is more typical.) As Nagiko and her husband engage in their final argument, the dramatic action is recorded in a yellow-tinted inserted frame, a top layer which gets bigger by stages as the argument proceeds (Figs. 7.12 – 7.16). With the first two enlargements, the aspect ratio remains constant, a fixed 16:9 widescreen format. However, at the third enlargement, a disorientating change of ratio throws the action into a ratio almost reminiscent of CinemaScope's 2.35:1. While the significance of this shifting frame size and aspect ratio cannot be cemented in a clear explanatory meaning, an indeterminate sense is created through the suggestive interaction between the front and back layers of the master frame. As it begins, the argument is contextualised by the hellish image of a whirling red fan flanked by two red cones (Fig. 7.13). These items are remnants of the previous frame, street-lining articles from a monochromatic car ride made by Nagiko and her husband. Suddenly vibrantly coloured, they are almost abstract, as much theatrical curtains and spotlight as roadside objects; they frame the argument, making it performative, both dramatic and artificial. This artificiality resonates with the performances of the film's international cast, the members of which throughout the film never convincingly inhabit its dramatic spaces, marking

the defeat of the 3-dimensional fictionality of the narrative world. It is this artificiality which Kenneth Turan, in sympathy with many of Greenaway's critics, identifies as a 'dramatic weakness.'⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it is this superficiality, this lack of depth, which marks *The Pillow Book*'s central formal conceit. The red frame subsides, replaced by a full screen frame of Nagiko's writing, the text which the argument is about (Figs. 7.14 – 7.17). However, far from offering explanation for the argument, it seems gratuitous; it would be enough for Nagiko and her husband to say that the argument concerns her writing. The principal effect of the text, instead, is to flatten the images of the argument; the resolute two-dimensionality of the blue written page resists any illusion of depth, a flattening effect enhanced by the centripetalism of the isolated front layer. *The Pillow Book* is concerned with skin and page, and its images are consistently prevented from going any deeper.

However, the dialectic between front and back layers in the sequence is not constant, and a redefinition of the relationship occurs as the aspect ratio of the front layer changes (Fig. 7.17). Suddenly (with a shift to a CinemaScope ratio, suitable only for filming 'snakes and coffins' according to Fritz Lang in *Le Mépris*) the front layer makes contact with the overall frame's left and right edges. From there, with a centrifugal energy, it can bleed out to the world beyond. Without the flattening context of the back layer, the scene has the potential for depth. This potential seems to be within grasp as the back layer is lost altogether (Figs. 7.18, 7.19). Superposition is abandoned and, instead, the flames of the fire are superimpositioned over the continuing argument. Superimposition allows the

⁴⁹ Kenneth Turan, 'Greenaway's *Pillow Book* Is Another Exercise in Style,' *The Los Angeles Times* (6 June, 1997), accessed 19 March 2015, http://articles.latimes.com/1997-06-06/entertainment/ca-467_1_pillow-book.

impression of depth, and the dramatically necessary qualities of background and foreground are seen for a moment. However, this is an impression only, a fleeting and tantalising taste of possible meaning. Almost immediately, a new superpositioned front layer is introduced, an image of the flat (and flattening) book, now burning (Fig. 7.20). The back layer (Nagiko's diary) has simply swapped places with the front layer (the argument), even swapping aspect ratios. The burning book now seems flattened by the argument, whose staged and artificial quality continues to resist a reading of depth.

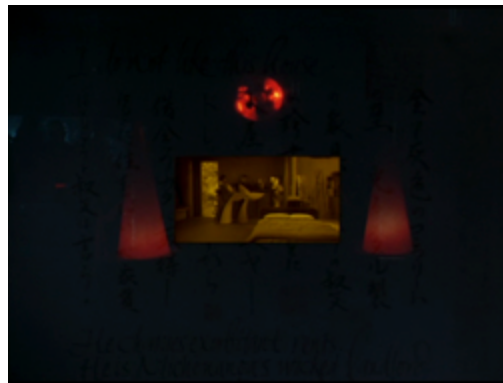


Fig. 7.13 – 0.27.15
Theatre.

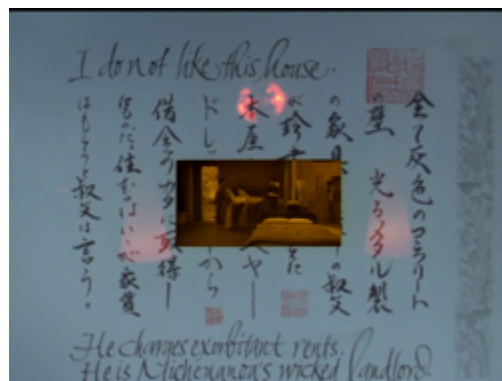


Fig. 7.14 – 0.27.17
The flattening text.



Fig. 7.15 – 0.27.21
The front layer grows.



Fig. 7.16 – 0.27.43
The front layer grows.



Fig. 7.17 – 0.27.57
The front layer bleeds.



Fig. 7.18 – 0.28.05
Superimposition.

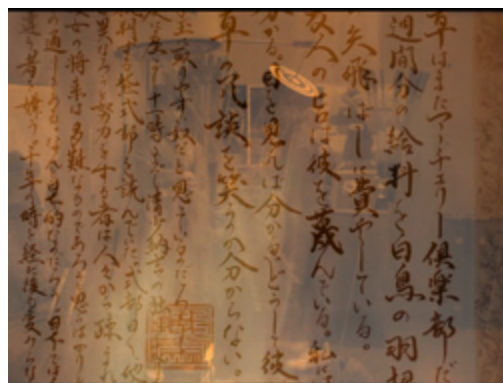


Fig. 7.19 – 0.28.09
The possibility of dramatic depth.



Fig. 7.20 – 0.28.16
Superposition returns.

The utopian association of layering with depth, then, is exploded by the film's flattening superpositions. The narrative's suggestion of depth (as the past colours the present, as personal trauma informs behaviour, as memory resonates with experience) is compromised, and the possibility of meaningful character is withered. *The Pillow Book* is concerned with a central character who quests for the

expressive freedom of writing but is frustrated in her quest. The possibility of synthesis between and within signs is repeatedly interrogated: the calligraph is a partial concentration of image and text; characters point both to their own memories and, through those memories, to the lives of others which must be avenged; and the overall frame is an inarticulate mass of mutually-flattening frames. The word, the self, and the frame are all divided, and the process of sublation underlying the dialectic between the divided parts routinely loses as much as it retains. Text, character, and image cannot be brought to life by film, and are destined to remain as flat as the pages of a book; they can, however, assume a kind of vitality in the way that their constituent parts provoke each other and, while flat, they may, like the pages of a book, turn and transform.⁵⁰ As Barthes suggests in *The Pleasure of the Text*, '[p]leasure [is] in pieces; language in pieces; culture in pieces. Such texts are perverse in that they are outside any imaginable finality.'⁵¹ The changing aspect ratios of the engorged front layer in the argument sequence are both meaningless and suggestive, flat and mobile, indefinable and sensational. They are a model of inarticulacy.

This technologically-enhanced inarticulacy offers shallow but multiple frames within frames which operate neither wholly centripetally nor centrifugally, neither syntagmatically nor paradigmatically, interfering with both time and space as they are typically experienced in narrative film. It is a laying bare of the components of film narrative, the parts rearranged to demonstrate the contingency of classical film

⁵⁰ The structure of conversing parts is reminiscent of the rhizomatic structures discussed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (trans. Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press], 1987). The complex network of interactions avoids the arborescent, dualist structures denounced as quintessential to so much culture, and instead allows the assemblage of images to create connections between its multiplicities, resulting in indeterminacy.

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 51.

illusion. This process begins with the film's introduction of Nagiko as an adult, post-Oedipal and self-less. The film's opening minutes are a riot of stylistic clashes: monochrome and (varied) colour, changing aspect ratios, antilinear inserts of narratively foreshadowing front layers, and the inclusion of the recreated 10th century court of Sei Shōnagon, a recreation which will haunt the film (Figs. 7.21, 7.22). Text – Roman alphabetic and Chinese calligraphic – floods the screen, made image more than language sign, largely unreadable, half-signifying context to the diverging action. Everything is as ephemeral as the fashion show in which the adult Nagiko is first seen. Even Sei Shōnagon's ancient texts are celebrated for their fragmentary transience.⁵² Superposition dominates, complete with elliptical layering and obscuration. Like the argument sequence, this opening concludes with a suggestion of the possibility of depth; for a moment, superposition is replaced by superimposition, and Nagiko and Sei Shōnagon combine (Fig. 7.23). This combination suggests that Nagiko may be a new Sei Shōnagon, finding lasting satisfaction in both sex and literature. However, even here, the overall frame is disturbed by a small, square insert of untranslated calligraphic text; this small frame distracts from the uncomplicated link between the two women, and the superimposition passes with the rapidity of a dissolve, a moment of possible relationship which the film will not rediscover.

⁵² This may be interestingly compared with the earlier *Prospero's Books* (Peter Greenaway, 1991), another technologically inarticulate literary adaptation. Shakespeare, though, occupies a cultural position unlike Sei Shōnagon: public rather than private, lasting rather than fleeting, masculine rather than feminine.



Fig. 7.21 – 0.04.59
Clashes in the frame.



Fig. 22 – 0.05.21
Fragmentary transience.



Fig. 7.23 – 0.06.01
Unrealised possibility of relationship.

Super(im)positions

If there is a paradigmatic quality to the composition of *The Pillow Book*'s frame, it is important to qualify how this associative paradigm is operating. In his work on

Elements of Semiology, Barthes explains that paradigms often operate through an affinity of *sound* (his basic examples being *education* and *saturation*). A clear equivalent in film would be affinity of image (colour, line, texture, shape). It is clear that, while there are some moments of striking colour coordination or continuation of line in *The Pillow Book*, this is not the dominant explanation for the film's compositions. Barthes' alternative is an affinity of *meaning* (*education* and *upbringing*). This insistence on meaning would seem to disavow the argument that *The Pillow Book* is an inarticulate text whose effects rely more on sensation than meaning. However, if the paradigmatic structures at work here are reimagined as present, that is as syntagmatic operations, the saturated frame offers so much stimulation that the possibility of clear, univocal meaning is starkly diminished. Paradigms depend on systematic taxonomies, within which associations can be forged. Greenaway offers instead what Amy Lawrence describes as a 'fluidity of signifiers whose meaning is due entirely to the instability, the permeability, of categories.'⁵³ This instability makes the forging of additional paradigmatic associations (predicated on either meaning or image-similarity) challenging. While Lawrence's analysis retains the notion of meaning, the idea of pregnable categories permits the more radical readings of Yvonne Spielmann, who argues that:

The coherent image makes invisible the techniques of merging and layering. In opposition, Greenaway's incoherent image is categorized as intermedial essentially based on the differences that can be recognized.⁵⁴

This argument for a differential set of values that depend for their effect on incoherence resonates with Gene Youngblood's prophecy for the emerging

⁵³ Lawrence, 80.

⁵⁴ Spielmann (2001), 59.

synaesthetic cinema. In such a cinema, formed of syncretically aligned parts, '[w]e are not asked to interpret or find "meaning" in these combinations' but rather to 'experience our own involuntary and inarticulate associations.'⁵⁵ These films offer, he argues, 'an *experience* rather than a meaning.'⁵⁶ This position beyond interpretation marks a key point in a line of experimentation in superposition.⁵⁷ Youngblood argues that 'because we're enculturated, to perceive is to interpret,' and to interpret is to assign values which must limit the indeterminacy of a text.⁵⁸ The linear states of *The Pillow Book* operate both synchronically and diachronically, both paradigmatically and syntagmatically, both vertically and horizontally, both integrally and disruptedly, and by occupying multiple conceivable positions simultaneously permit a tremendous degree of indeterminacy. This indeterminacy results in what Tweedie sees as an 'explosion of the sign into the manifold aspects elided in the moment of inscription.'⁵⁹ This explosion is both threatened by and a threat to the cultural codes which Youngblood fears enculturate us. As Paul Melia writes:

... direct access to material reality outside of representation is not possible: cultural codes allow us to observe not so much nature as nature which has been exposed to our method of questioning, classifying and ordering. Once again, Greenaway is parodying the assumption that the world can be completely represented in language. These issues are developed in his films, in which a gross proliferation of lists, taxonomies and statistics is called into being... by forces which not only lie outside our comprehension... reminding us that our representations of the world and the world itself are not continuous. Here Greenaway denounces the Enlightenment's faith – which, for many, has survived the twentieth century's catalogue of disasters – in

⁵⁵ Youngblood, 87-8.

⁵⁶ Youngblood, 126.

⁵⁷ Superposition, in Quantum Theory, is not simply the placing of one thing over another. Rather, it is the existence of linear structures in indeterminate states, the simultaneous existence of one structure in multiple conceivable positions. This paradoxical indeterminacy is only resolved into a static position at the moment of measuring.

⁵⁸ Youngblood, 76.

⁵⁹ Tweedie, 107.

the possibility of both progress and a total, finite and rational domain of knowledge. In its place he offers us an epistemological nihilism: any act of understanding or representation is necessarily provisional, contingent, temporary, relative, incomplete, and will be marked by accident, chance and randomness.⁶⁰

While Melia is right that categories are dismantled in *The Pillow Book*, exposed as only the limiting and determining evidence of 'questioning, classifying and ordering,' he is, nevertheless, too emphatic in his alignment of the films with 'accident, chance and randomness.' Both the insistent revenge pattern underlying the narrative and the beautifully composed overall frame insist that *The Pillow Book* is not the product of randomness. Rather, the film is the continual interplay of order and disorder, an inarticulacy which retains its sense of jointed form but allows those joints to be seen in their creaking, spasmodic action. Indeterminacy is not the same as 'epistemological nihilism'; *The Pillow Book* is a proliferation of unmeasurable and concurrent states, linear knowledge reimagined non-consecutively, and simultaneity reimagined as fragmentation.

At the core of this project in *The Pillow Book* is the deployment of a series of fetishized technologies, fetishized because in many cases they become a stand-in for meaning, objects of desire which take the place of significance. Thomas Elsaesser sees this development as leading to 'post-films' in which the 'concerns are neither narrative nor iconic-photographic,' a cinema which is '[i]n keeping with the new technologies it deploys, ... graphic, concerned with trace and body, with surface, rather than space...' ⁶¹ Yvonne Spielmann is emphatic in her conviction that 'the incorporation of digital effects into the technical means of photography

⁶⁰ Melia and Woods, 16.

⁶¹ Thomas Elsaesser, 'Peter Greenaway' in *Spellbound: Art and Film*, ed. Philip Dodd with Ian Christie (London: Hayward Gallery and BFI, 1996), 78.

and film enriches and expands the languages of these media.’⁶² This is not a dilution, still less a dissolution, but an enrichment, allowing new pinnacles of indeterminacy as the frame becomes an increasingly flexible space. Greenaway himself has frequently discussed the visual and intellectual possibilities opened up by this emerging technology:

So the film itself is very much a palimpsest of what’s happening now at the end of the 20th century with the fragmentation of the relationship between cinema and all the post-televisual medium: the CD-Rom, the Internet . . . French intellectuals have criticized the film, saying *The Pillow Book* is not a film, it is a CD-Rom. I could think of no higher compliment. There is a way that our contemporary vernacular in the business of making images has become television. Godard suggested that there is a disastrous cultural snobbism about television. Indeed, we physically and metaphorically look up to cinema but look down at television. But in terms of what MTV has to offer with the video clip, with the use of the talking head, that continual change of perspective of time, event, idea, action and intended use of tense, there is a brand new vernacular language which is being developed day by day almost incidentally and accidentally, much as I suspect in the way that the early Japanese language was created by Sei Shōnagon. She was often accused, certainly by her contemporaries, for her excessive use of Chinese quotation. Television certainly recreates or reprises or “quotes” the celebrated so-called *fossilized* forms of cinema. Television, shall we say, takes cinema as the Japanese vernacular did the Chinese language of the 10th century. We have new languages that are attempting both to erode the old languages, but also to deliver like a phoenix, knowing that the new languages have to be a combination of the old and the new.⁶³

This combination is the sublation seen at work in the frame in *The Pillow Book*, in which the combination of parts both preserves and discards their differences. Even as they contribute to a greater indeterminacy, though, these technologies also seem to conspire to a greater measurability. Evaluation is now predicated on the ability to pause, to rewind, to replay. Kristen Daly argues that ‘[o]nce movies exist in a

⁶² Yvonne Spielmann, ‘Video: From Technology to Medium’ in *Art Journal* 65, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 60.

⁶³ Chua and Greenaway, 28.

mode of replay and are part of online discursive space, the narrative can be more complicated and intertextual.⁶⁴ André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion in *The End of Cinema?*, their account of emerging digital technologies in film, argue that ‘the digital puts within reach of every viewer [because they can start and stop images] the singular prosody and rhythm of Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962).’⁶⁵ Their theory of homochronic and heterochronic cinema (the former unfolding in a time set by the film and filmmaker, and the latter unfolding in a time set by the empowered viewer) concludes that a new, ‘polychronic’ cinema both contains its own time ‘incorporated into its utterances’ but can also be stopped and replayed.⁶⁶ However, the effect of this interactive control is not, as Daly insists, a more straightforwardly interpretable film. Rather, the complexity of the indeterminacy keeps meaning elusive. As Jerome is skinned (Fig. 7.24), the single-frame image is split diegetically (with the reflected image of the pseudo-surgeons, flipped ninety degrees along the left edge of the frame) and non-diegetically (with overlaid text). This is a splitting which, even with repeat viewing and freeze-framing, will not permit total decipherment: who are the masked figures? what does the full text on Jerome’s body say? is the lover of the title Jerome (the page), Nagiko (the scribe), or the publisher?

⁶⁴ Kristen Daly, ‘Cinema 3.0: The Interactive-Image’ *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 85.

⁶⁵ André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 78.

⁶⁶ Gaudreault and Marion, 78.



Fig. 7.24 – 1.33.12
Split screen.

This more conventionally-framed ambiguity is the prelude to a *tour de force* dismembered sequence, in which the pillow book is made from the flayed Jerome (Fig. 7.25). In lurid colour, with a key emphasis on reds, the process is made synchronic, remembering the earlier sequence from Nagiko's childhood. Even stilled or replayed, the sequence does not lose its momentum, its corner-placed front layers pulling apart from one another, resisting a collective reading. Not only is this a grotesque sequence and the unacknowledged partner of an earlier (and then-innocent) sequence, it is also made impossible by concurrency; process must be indeterminate if its linearity is amended to permit paradoxically simultaneous discrete positions. Jerome's skin exists in an impossible state if it is being cut, cleansed, folded, glued, stitched, marked, and etched in the same moment. Daly argues that the use of combinative digital technologies 'together... create a full experience.'⁶⁷ In *The Pillow Book*, however, fullness is excess, the effect being of fullness *and* disorientating fragmentation, of order *and* confusion, a cacography. Despite embodying so many of Gene Youngblood's prophecies for an emerging expanded cinema, *The Pillow Book* reveals the impossible utopia at the heart of that theory:

⁶⁷ Daly, 85.

There's no conflict in harmonic opposites. Nor is there anything that might be called linkage. There is only a space-time continuum, a mosaic simultaneity. Although composed of discrete elements it is conceived and edited as one continuous perceptual experience. A synaesthetic film is, in effect, one image continually transforming into other images: metamorphosis. It is the one unifying force in all of synaesthetic cinema. The notion of universal unity and cosmic simultaneity is a logical result of the psychological effects of the global communications network.⁶⁸

The sequence ends with the disposal of Jerome's waste flesh (Fig. 7.26). It is a fleeting shot, shown in an unlayered frame. The depths of Jerome are shown in a form which allows a sense of depth. No sooner are they presented, though, they are gone, and the screen once again becomes a site of the very conflict in harmony which Youngblood denies.



Fig. 7.25 – 1.34.04
The centrifugal frame.



Fig. 7.26 – 1.34.20
The fleeting depths of Jerome.

⁶⁸ Youngblood, 86.

The Pillow Book represents a new kind of inarticulacy, in which digital technologies allow a sublational layering that erodes the distinctions between the axes of expression. An indeterminacy, resulting from superposition, stimulates sensation until the moment it is measured and evaluated, at which point its flatness permits only supermarket Freudian interpretations of characters and their unlikely activities. As Barthes writes, ‘meaning can arise only from an articulation,’ the stringing together of separate and contiguous signs; this articulation, though, must also be ‘at the same time continuous’ in a process which tries to compensate for the fact that ‘for instance the continuous spectrum of the colours is verbally reduced to a series of discontinuous terms.’⁶⁹ All linguistic expression, then, is the relationship between continuity and discontinuity, a relationship which Barthes finds less evidence for in ‘iconic syntagms, which are founded on a more or less analogical representation of a real scene, [and which] are infinitely more difficult to divide.’⁷⁰ His conclusion is that such image-based media ‘are almost always duplicated by articulated speech...’⁷¹ The achievement of *The Pillow Book*, and its valuable contribution to any on-going discussion of inarticulacy, is to reveal a new way to divide the *image* into syntagmatic discontinuity, an articulation which is an explicit function of simultaneous image-based forms. After Jerome’s funeral, a beautiful layering of superpositioned frames, each moving independently, creates an extraordinary almost-sense (Fig. 7.27). The voiceover explains that the burning front layer is an effigy – that is, a fake with direct signifying links to the original – of Jerome’s car. The shot is still. The middle and back layers, moving

⁶⁹ Barthes (1967), 64.

⁷⁰ Barthes (1967), 64.

⁷¹ Barthes (1967), 64.

independently, remain unexplained, and it is difficult to account for them; they are, perhaps, pages from Nagiko's diary and the publisher's bookshelves respectively. Before any of them can be explained or meaningfully combined, they fade. This lack of determined meaning does nothing to diminish the effect of the sequence. The articulated frame is discontinuous, certainly, and yet the layers form an aesthetic continuity with each other which brings harmony to the frame at the same time as discord.



Fig. 7.27 – 1.29.38
Almost-sense.

The vertiginous simultaneity of the saturated frame – a frame in harmony *and* at war with itself – insists on indeterminacy, teetering on ‘the verge of “countercommunication”’.⁷² Amy Lawrence sees this as ‘Greenaway’s taste for “sending out many messages simultaneously” to ensure “a diversity of multiple meanings”...’⁷³ It should be seen as more than a question of taste, though. Bazin argues that ‘[i]t is in pulling the work apart, in breaking up its component parts, in making an assault on its very essence that the film compels it to deliver up some of its hidden powers.’⁷⁴ *The Pillow Book* ends with a return to Sei Shōnagon’s original text and the coupling of images. ‘Being kissed by a lover in the Matsuo Tiasa

⁷² Tweedie, 108.

⁷³ Lawrence, 92.

⁷⁴ Bazin (1967), 169.

garden' is realisable only as two images, one drawn from within Nagiko's experience and one from outside (Fig. 7.28). Similarly, 'Quiet water and loud water' relies on two yoked images (Fig. 7.29). The film is a constant yoking of disparate terms in a vertical montage which, without the binding of narrative linearity, exposes the joints which both sever and suture the image. As the narrative ends, Nagiko writes on her own baby's face, while the inserted front layer of her father (now in colour, both striking and jarring) hovers suspended, occupying every conceivable position on a spectrum between Guardian Angel and vengeful obsession, between cathartic moving on and the relentless return of the traumatic repressed (Fig. 7.30). The father does not mean; he is felt. The frame does not mean; it is a series of smaller frames in relation whose combination is felt.



Fig. 7.28 – 1.56.39
Incomplete experience.



Fig. 7.29 – 1.57.01
Yoked images.

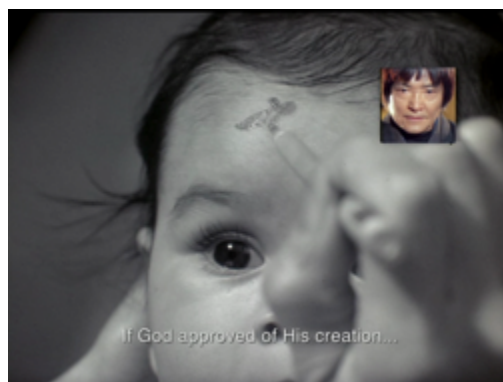


Fig. 7.30 – 1.57.45
The felt frame.

Conclusion

Articulating Complication

The central claim of this thesis is that narrative film has often concerned itself with complicating the articulations of its own form. In the films examined, this formal inarticulacy has been paralleled with narratives in which characters struggle to express themselves fluently. In these instances, the characters are not agents of continuity, as Stephen Heath suggests that they often are in narrative film.¹ Instead, they become a further complication in the process of interpreting the film. The critical challenge posed by this parallel between form and character, this twofold inarticulacy, has often been resolved through a notion of compensation. The proliferating multivalences of formal inarticulacy are stabilised by seeing them as explanations for – as speaking on behalf of – the characters. The first chapter of this thesis distinguishes two models which demonstrate this strategy. The first sees a character, despite their struggle for self-expression, as given some explanation by a more articulate form; in the case of classic Hollywood melodrama, it has been argued, a character muted by overwhelming emotion is in part explained by the organisation of the film's *mise-en-scène*. The second model sees a character, despite their struggle for self-expression, as reflected in an expressionistically disjunctive form, typically materialising a disturbed mental state through these fragments. This thesis argues that for a substantial set of films (extending considerably beyond those discussed in detail here), these models will not

¹ Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 19.

adequately describe the relationship between form and character. Neither explanatory nor reflective, this relationship has been described here as resonant.

The implications of this shift may be observed through an account of critical interpretations of Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour*. The film has been variously explored through both the explanatory and the reflective models. Peter William Evans explores the expressivity of the '*mise-en-scène* of retardment' which mirrors the fixed 'relations between brothel madam and employees,' identifying an explanation for character (here, in the economic terms of a bourgeois hegemony) in the film's form.² In an explanatory reading, the challenges of the film's discontinuous form may be dismissed as merely 'untidy.'³ Contrastingly, other critics have approached the film according to the reflective model. The unruly interactions of reality and fantasy, and the resultant shifts in style and mood, are tamed by the critical insistence that they reflect the mute Séverine; her splintered mind, torn between the irreconcilable pulls of the security of bourgeois routine and the exhilarating chaos of her own sexual desire, is made manifest in the fractured structures of the film.

Chapter Four, which addresses *Belle de Jour* in depth, seeks to reveal the potential limitations of these approaches. Criticism's response to the perceived complexities of the character of Séverine has often been sensitive and subtle. However, arguing for a determined correlation between this characterisation and the film's form has sometimes resulted in generalised assessments: the *mise-en-scène* is organised and explains the character, or the structure is fragmented and reflects her fragmentation. Either account quickly becomes circular: character explains or

² Peter William Evans, *The Films of Luis Buñuel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 160.

³ Michael Wood, *Belle de Jour* (London: BFI, 2000), 12.

mirrors form, which explains or mirrors character, which explains or mirrors form. This neglects the precise achievements of the form, simplifying them in order to contribute to a coherent character portrait. In reality, the inarticulate forms of the films explored in this thesis create unstable, proliferating chains of signification. If the use of montage in *Belle de Jour* is explored in exact detail, its organisation is revealed as inexactly synched with the character; certain moments of particular formal disturbance coincide with character stability, while the neat editing symmetries of the gangster plotline represent a moment of particular crisis for Séverine. This close reading does not result in an impression of better-understood characters.

This is not to argue that there is no relationship between character and form. Both character expression and film form are shown to be mosaic structures, and this correlation should not be ignored. However, the correlation is not an indicator of a determining link to the subjectivity of character. Instead, the notion of semi-subjectivity, discussed by Sandro Bernardi in relation to Rossellini's *Germania anno zero*, is useful.⁴ The films resist offering a univocal meaning, and neither deny formal disruption, seeing it as an articulate expression for character, nor see it as a straightforward function of character. A character's frustrated self-expression is not a direct cause of a splintered or stuttering form, or vice versa. Instead, this thesis offers the idea of dual inarticulacy, in which the paralleled inarticulacies of form and character resonate, amplifying one another's indeterminacies. Characters, in these films, remain enigmatic, marked by a complex interaction of parts that will not cohere in a stable pattern; muteness leaves a lack of clarity at the characters'

⁴ Sandro Bernardi, 'Rossellini's Landscapes: Nature, Myth, History,' in *Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real*, ed. David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: BFI. 2000), 54.

centres. Form, in these films, declares its complexity through an abundance of expression. Chapter Three considers Roberto Rossellini's *Germania anno zero*, in which contrasting styles create startling collisions of realist and expressionist scenes. Chapter Five's account of Terence Davies' early feature films identifies a vertiginous array of references and allusions which make up the films, ranging from popular music and film to fairy tales and advertising. In each of these cases, form sets up a proliferation of meanings in chains of untethered signifiers in tension with each other.

Dual inarticulacy in films works according to a rhizomatic structure – as theorised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – in which ‘any point... can be connected to anything other, and must be.’⁵ The resultant networks of resonance, unstable and unpredictable, ensure that ‘There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object,’ marking the resistance of such structures to the kind of reading which has sought to find a unifying mechanism to marry character and form in a hierarchical (or ‘arborescent’) structure of clear significances:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and... and... and...”⁶

In the thesis, the idea of resonance refers to the quality and achievements of this alliance between form and character. Resonance has an important double function. Firstly, it retains distinction between a film's manifold inarticulate chains, insisting on their difference. These chains are both individually *and collectively* indeterminate,

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, 8 & 27.

resisting straightforward interpretation. Gene Youngblood argues that ‘because we’re enculturated, to perceive is to interpret,’ but the kind of assigning of meanings that interpretation requires sits uncomfortably with the multiple indeterminacies of the films explored in this thesis.⁷ At the same time, though, resonance’s second function prevents a slippage into meaninglessness. While inarticulate expression at the level of character and form creates centrifugal momentum pushing away from any notional stable, defining centre for a text, the paralleled patterning simultaneously creates a centripetal motion, an irresistible sense of order which holds the films and their characters together in a fluctuating outline. This thesis argues that it is the dynamic between the centrifugal and the centripetal which defines dual inarticulacy and which offers the possibility of insight into the effects of the films explored. Character is not explained by form, nor vice versa. However, they do each amplify the effect of the other’s indeterminacy, and place it within a context that is not arbitrary. The thesis argues for a means of interpreting film in which the objective is not univocal meaning but an appreciation of the *effects* of ordered indeterminacy.

In the Beginning Was the Word (and the Writer)

Chapters Two and Seven both concern films in which dual inarticulacy sets up resonance between a character seeking to express themselves through writing and a form which establishes vertical structures of simultaneous utterances. Both *Journal d’un curé de campagne* and *The Pillow Book* fragment a character’s attempts at direct

⁷ Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: P. Dutton and Co., 1970), 76.

personal communication. The relationship here between character and form seems to transcend correlation and suggest causation. The characters *produce* the text which is fragmented. However, this thesis argues that in neither case is the expression so easily assigned to the character – despite the substantial body of criticism which suggests that it is.

The priest in Robert Bresson's *Journal d'un curé de campagne* seeks respite from the complex political situations in which he is muted by the forceful eloquence of others. This respite is seemingly to be found in the writing of his diary. The material of the diary – presented as voiceover, written text, and performed dramatic scenes – fractures, however, and its different versions will not comfortably align. Clearly, there is a correlation between the priest and his words. However, the words – as they proliferate and clash with their own alternative versions – exceed the priest. His confusion will not simply account for the extent of the form's proliferation. Rather, the centrifugal energy of dual inarticulacy exposes the indeterminable lack at the centre of the character, a lack which is simultaneously given outline by the centripetal sense of reflective order in the film. It is perhaps his failure to come into meaningful expression that makes the film so sad.

The words of Nagiko in Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* also escape and exceed their author. Committed to a project of paying homage to the twin influences of her father and the 10th century writer Sei Shōnagon, she composes her own pillow book, inscribing her words in a cacography of languages on the unstable and decaying material of the human body. Made forty-five years after *Journal d'un curé*

de campagne, *The Pillow Book* amplifies the disorientating layering of narrative voice through the possibilities of digital technologies. Voiceover and written text remain key components in a vertical, simulsensory montage. Added to this is a proliferating frame, in which numerous images are layered on top of each other, competing for attention as their significance is clouded by eclipse, ellipsis, disrupted temporal linearity, the coincidence of figurative and literal imagery. Nagiko's words are lost in translation, splintered into an overwhelming assortment, overwhelming her attempts at communication, and ultimately unable to explain her. Neither the priest nor Nagiko – despite their function as the authors of the narratives in which they find themselves – can be known through the films.

Landscapes and Other Contexts

As interiority remains inadequately expressed by the language in which characters choose to express themselves, so it remains unstable in its inscription in the physical worlds of the films. Unlike melodrama (whose *mise-en-scène* has conventionally been seen as an expression on behalf of its tongue-tied characters), the films explored here present landscapes which remain indeterminate. In *Germania anno zero*, Chapter Three argues, the tension between the realist ruins of the Berlin exteriors and the expressionist shadows of the studio interiors create irreconcilable aporia, fractures in the text which set up expectations of explanation only to frustrate them. The realist *mise-en-scène* of the ruins is not itself coherent enough to be fully explanatory, and their documentary and contingent qualities gesture beyond the narrative world of a single set of characters. On the other hand,

the mannered expressionist domestic spaces do not simply reflect the expressionless Edmund; Susan Hayward argues that, in expressionism, ‘set design, lighting and the body are all interrelated squeezings-out of a psychology,’ but this interrelatedness is undermined by the protagonist’s muted performance.⁸ Critical attempts to lock down the meaning of the film have typically relied on reductive comments about the character (that he is, for example, ‘[t]he Third Reich’s last soldier’).⁹ The film’s tension between explanatory and reflective styles troubles such decisive and determined readings of the silent character.

Chapter Six returns to the central significance of landscapes in its account of *Meek’s Cutoff*, a neo-Western by Kelly Reichardt in which frontier wanderers drift through an unreadable and unaccommodating landscape. Here, signifiers are not defunct as in *Germania anno zero* (in which the exterior ruins and chiaroscuro spaces of the interiors signify their own emptiness) but unstable and illegible. The Native American etches his non-signifying marks into rocks and transforms the landscape into an encoded and unintelligible text. This transformation of the landscape, as with *Germania anno zero*, gestures towards a further complication of expression inherent in the film’s wider contexts. Genre is neither adhered to nor abandoned, both acknowledged and troubled; its signifiers are arranged in chains which lose their binding relationship with conventional signifieds. The characters – as genre signifiers themselves – are figures which are both part of and at odds with the film’s cultural landscape.

⁸ Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 193.

⁹ Tag Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini* (New York: Da Capo, 1998), 248.

The Fine Detail

Chapter Four brings the discussion of the role of character in criticism to a point. Catherine Deneuve as Séverine in *Belle de Jour* – as in the cases of Claude Laydu in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, Edmund Moeschke in *Germania anno zero*, Rod Rondeaux in *Meek's Cutoff*, and Vivian Wu in *The Pillow Book* – gives an enigmatic, sometimes somnambular performance. This precise avoidance of affect establishes a tantalising vacuum at the centre of the narrative; character functions as a kind of ellipsis, in which motivation and attitude remain elusive. She is a set of behaviours, defined externally by the culture in which she lives. Form, through the operation of dual inarticulacy, does not explain character, but complicates it further, fragmenting it to a point beyond the possibility of reconstitution. Montage in the film is irregular, working according to several conflicting logics, creating an alternative narrative in which the confusions of Séverine's unmotivated behaviour, indistinguishable orders of reality, and unexpressed desires are suppressed by the irruption of order represented by the symmetrical editing of the gangster narrative. Ultimately, the film returns to illegible formal proliferations, as editing abandons continuity and returns to its earlier disjunctive patterns.

The issue of enculturated character is also at stake in Terence Davies' early films. Here, the discussion takes on an additional dimension, as the films are ostensibly autobiographical, chronicling the director's own domestic experience of childhood. Criticism on the films has often concentrated on this area, seeing the films as the expression of the director, characterising this expression as a celebration of the redemptive possibilities of popular culture. However, Chapter Five argues that the

films' bricolaged forms transform their characters into mouthpieces for a ventriloquist culture that speaks on their behalf; character expression is replaced by a series of always-approximately-related formal gestures. Character does not cohere, and does not provide a readable account of a historical moment. Rather, like *Meek's Cutoff*, it reimagines history as a discourse which cannot tell itself as readily as it would like.

Myths

This interest in character gestures towards a more general issue at stake. The thesis is wary of a critical strategy of making character a unifying point around which interpretation makes sense of formal complexity. Character, in order to be refashioned as such a unifying point, has typically been tethered to a wider idea, such as Faith and God, History, Gender, individual Experience, the Father. While these ideas have been profitably discussed, and are germane to the films in question, they nevertheless represent a subset of a wider category which, to employ a Lacanian term, may be referred to as Master Signifiers. These Master Signifiers have provided a kind of interpretative anchor, a stabilising core around which the films can be held in stasis. The contention of this thesis is that films of proliferating dual inarticulacy resist such anchoring, and that the repeated reference to such simplifying analytic strategies has overlooked the extent of the films' challenges to univocal meaning.

Related to the idea of Master Signifiers, each of the chapters concerns itself with a discussion of the film's challenge to a prevailing myth. The term *myth* is used in the sense that Roland Barthes gives it in *Mythologies*:

[Myth] abolishes the complexity of human acts, [and] gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back on what is immediately visible, it organises a world which is without contradiction because it is without depth, a world which is open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.¹⁰

The effect (rather than the meaning) of these films is to present a world in which things do not mean something by themselves, in which there is no blissful clarity, and in which contradiction is a dominant mode. The thesis offers readings of the films which do not collapse into records of disordered arbitrariness, but nor do they commit to a stable interpretation. Although always amorphous, this instability is not without ethical significance. Authority is imagined as a Master Signifier, and definite utterance becomes a myth. The characters of Torcy (and the absent God) in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, of Enning and the father in *Germania anno zero*, of Pierre and Marcel in *Belle de Jour*, of the tyrannical father in *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, of Meek in *Meek's Cutoff*, of the father and the publisher in *The Pillow Book*: each of these is aligned with a shallow rhetoric insisting on essential truths which will not hold. The films, by declaring their resistance to univocal meaning, effect a challenge to processes (including criticism) which invoke such authority. For this reason, while the directors of the films discussed have typically written substantially on the subject of their own work, this material has been used sparingly and interrogatively. Directors (even in the case of Terence Davies,

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Cape, 1972), 143.

producing autobiographical work) cannot be the unifying centres for these films any more than character.

The hope of this thesis has been to combine traditional interpretation with another strategy for appreciation. Through close reading, the thesis has sought to give fuller space to the complicated effects of the films, challenging accusations of deficiency or mistake (in which, for example, Buñuel's challenging editing is explained away as 'untidy').¹¹ These complicated articulations are the points at which univocal meaning becomes impossible. The implications of this complication of meaning are potentially wide-ranging; the 'mongrel' nature of film – born of the fact that 'cinema is a *potpourri* of art forms' as Raymond Durnat phrases it – suggests that many films may represent inarticulate form.¹² The interruptions of formal coherence which define this inarticulacy are markers of superposition, to use Chapter Seven's term; they highlight the paradoxical indeterminacy of one element in multiple simultaneous positions. Many films may benefit from readings which resist the temptation to explain away their indeterminacies. The priest's diary is more multiple than the priest, and it is only through insensitive measuring that this rhizomatic multiplicity is resolved into a static position. This thesis has aimed at registering the mobility and multiplicity of character, form, and significance in films which represent particularly vivid exemplars. It has attempted to record this disorientation – or *dépaysement* in the vocabulary of Buñuel and the surrealists – without compromising it, seeing it as the achievement of the films, and not as a riddle in need of a definitive answer.

¹¹ Wood, 12.

¹² Raymond Durnat, *Durnat on Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 17.

Filmography

Primary texts

Journal d'un curé de campagne (Diary of a Country Priest)

1951, France, bw, 115 mins

d Robert Bresson *cast* Claude Laydu, Jean Riveyre, André Guibert

Studio Canal DVD

Germania anno zero (Germany, Year Zero)

1948, Italy, bw, 78 mins

d Roberto Rossellini *cast* Edmund Moeschke, Ernst Pittschau, Ingetraud Hinze

Criterion Collection DVD

Belle de jour

1967, France/Italy, colour, 101 mins

d Luis Buñuel *cast* Catherine Deneuve, Jean Sorel, Michel Piccoli, Genevieve Page

Studio Canal DVD

Distant Voices, Still Lives

1988, UK, 85 mins

d Terence Davies *cast* Pete Postlethwaite, Freda Dowie, Lorraine Ashbourne, Angela Walsh, Dean Williams

BFI DVD

The Long Day Closes

1992, UK, 85 mins

d Terence Davies *cast* Marjorie Yates, Leigh McCormack, Anthony Watson

BFI DVD

Meek's Cutoff

2010, US, 104 mins

d Kelly Reichardt *cast* Michelle Williams, Bruce Greenwood, Rod Rondeaux

Soda Pictures DVD

The Pillow Book

1996, UK/France/Netherlands, 126 mins

d Peter Greenaway *cast* Vivian Wu, Ewan McGregor, Ken Ogata

Park Circus DVD

Other Films Referenced

Adieu au Langage (Goodbye to Language)

2014, France/Switzerland, 69 mins

d Jean Luc Godard *cast* Héloïse Godet, Kamel Abdeli

Amarcord

1973, Italy, 124 mins

d Federico Fellini *cast* Bruno Zanin, Magali Noël, Pupella Maggio

L'Année dernière à Marienbad (Last Year at Marienbad)

1961, France, 94 mins

d Alain Resnais *cast* Delphine Seyrig, Giorgio Albertazzi, Sacha Pitoëff

Au hasard Balthazar

1966, France, 95 mins

d Robert Bresson *cast* Anne Wiazemsky, François Lafarge

Borderline

1930, UK, 63 mins

d Kenneth Macpherson *cast* H.D., Paul Robeson, Bryher

Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr Caligari)

1920, Germany, 71 mins

d Robert Wiene *cast* Werner Krauss, Conrad Veidt, Lil Dagover

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover

1989, UK, 124 mins

d Peter Greenaway *cast* Michael Gambon, Helen Mirren, Alan Howard

Dead Man

1995, US, 120 mins

d Jim Jarmusch *cast* Johnny Depp, Gary Farmer

The Draughtsman's Contract

1982, UK, 103 mins

d Peter Greenaway *cast* Anthony Higgins, Janet Suzman

Foreign Correspondent

1940, US, 120 mins

d Alfred Hitchcock *cast* Joel McCrea, Laraine Day

Goltzius and the Pelican Company

2012, UK/Netherlands/France, 128 mins

d Peter Greenaway *cast* Ramsey Nasr, F. Murray Abraham, Giulio Berruti

Great Expectations

1946, UK, 113 mins

d David Lean *cast* John Mills, Martita Hunt*Guys and Dolls*

1955, US, 150 mins

d Joseph L. Mankiewicz *cast* Marlon Brando, Jean Simmons, Frank Sinatra*The Happiest Days of Your Life*

1950, UK, 81 mins

d Frank Launder *cast* Alastair Sim, Margaret Rutherford, Joyce Grenfell*The Ladykillers*

1955, UK, 97 mins

d Alexander Mackendrick *cast* Katie Johnson, Alec Guinness*Der Letzte Mann (The Last Laugh)*

1924, Germany, 91 mins

d F.W. Murnau *cast* Emil Jannings*Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*

1955, US, 102 mins

d Henry King *cast* Jennifer Jones, William Holden*M*

1931, Germany, 111 mins

d Fritz Lang *cast* Peter Lorre*The Magnificent Ambersons*

1942, US, 148 mins

d Orson Welles *cast* Joseph Cotton, Dolores Costello*McCabe and Mrs Miller*

1971, US, 121 mins

d Robert Altman *cast* Warren Beatty, Julie Christie*Le Mépris (Contempt)*

1963, France, 101 mins

d Jean-Luc Goddard *cast* Brigitte Bardot, Michel Piccoli, Jack Palance, Fritz Lang*Paisà (Paisan)*

1946, Italy, 134 mins

d Roberto Rossellini *cast* Carmela Sazio, Robert Van Loon, Alfonsino*Pickpocket*

1959, France, 75 mins

d Robert Bresson *cast* Martin LaSalle

Prospero's Books

1991, UK, 129 mins

d Peter Greenaway *cast* John Gielgud, Michael Clark*The Robe*

1953, US, 135 mins

d Henry Koster *cast* Richard Burton, Jean Simmons*Roma città aperta (Rome, Open City)*

1945, Italy, 105 mins

d Roberto Rossellini *cast* Aldo Fabrizi, Anna Magnani*Singin' in the Rain*

1952, US, 103 mins

d Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen *cast* Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, Debbie Reynolds*Strike*

1925, USSR, 82 mins

d Sergei Eisenstein*A Zed and Two Noughts*

1985, UK, 115 mins

d Peter Greenaway *cast* Andréa Ferréol, Brian Deacon, Eric Deacon

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