VIRVIDAKI AIKATERINI

ST ANNE'S COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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TESTING COHERENCE IN NARRATIVE FILM

THESIS SUMMARY / ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to explore how narrative films that are marked by crucial obscurities and explanatory gaps in their development manage to become coherent. More specifically, the thesis is interested in examining how these obscurities and explanatory gaps can be understood as meaningful aspects of the films' organisation.

Since the function of coherence in film has rarely been examined directly, the thesis first attempts to illuminate it by drawing on the work of two aestheticians who have examined it more systematically. Thus, the first part of the thesis discusses the work of Victor F. Perkins and George Wilson, while attempting to explore aspects of the work of these two aestheticians through the analysis of specific films. The writings of Perkins and Wilson provide a good starting point for the thesis because they raise crucial questions regarding the ways through which narrative films manage to deal with significant tensions in their organisation and intelligibility.

The main body of the thesis (the second part of the thesis) then examines four narrative films, each of which is marked by a significant aspect of apparent incoherence. In each case, the thesis attempts to show that this aspect of apparent incoherence – rather than merely obstructing the film's intelligibility – essentially contributes to the creation of the film's idiosyncratic internal logic. In order to understand how this becomes possible, the thesis pays close attention to the ways in which the various components of each examined film relate to each other, observing and analysing the aesthetic strategies which enable each examined film ultimately to come together.

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Testing Coherence in Narrative Film:

Introduction

This thesis aims to explore the possibility of coherence of narrative films that crucially challenge the ways in which we can understand them. These films make us wonder about how they manage to construct their own logic and intelligibility. Are they just to be dismissed as unruly or out of joint, or are there ways through which one could unlock the mechanisms through which these films become joined together? How can one understand and assess the function of the puzzling or *prima facie* obscure aspects of these films? In order to answer these questions, the main corpus of the thesis (Part 2) examines four narrative films, each of which is characterised by a striking and pervasive aspect of apparent incoherence. What the thesis attempts to do is to understand the ways through which this aspect of apparent incoherence can actually function *meaningfully* within the context of the film it characterises, *enriching*, rather than merely obstructing, the film's intelligibility. The thesis focuses specifically on 'narrative' films because their storylines, however unusually rendered, can provide some framework for coherence, which the particular organisation of the films can then challenge.

Since the aim of the thesis is to unpack the perplexing and idiosyncratic coherence of certain narrative films, it is essential for the thesis to uncover and figure out the internal logic that ties these films together. In order to figure out this logic, the thesis pays close attention to the intricate ways in which the various components of each film become connected to each other: how can the function of a specific element in a given film be justified in relation to another element in this film, and how can this

relation be understood as contributing to the film's overall organisation? Accounting for the particular kind of *relationality* between the components of each examined film becomes a guiding principle of the thesis' method.

Because the thesis aims to understand films with an especially intricate relationality, it attempts to analyse these films in detail. The thesis focuses on the close reading and analysis of the examined films, rather than on biographical information about the film's director or the history of the film's production, in order to hone in very closely on the relationship between the components of each film, on the one hand, and the film's internal organisation, on the other.

The thesis' emphasis on the function of relationality within a film, as it will become evident in the first chapter of the thesis ('Interrogating problems of Coherence in Narrative Film'), derives from the work of the film critic Victor F. Perkins. Perkins is the main aesthetician in film studies who has consistently tried to demonstrate how understanding a film through the relations between its elements (a 'synthetic' approach to film, as Perkins calls it) can allow us to comprehend and assess the coherence of a film's intricate formal organisation. More specifically, Perkins' conception of coherence accentuates the significance of a *tight* relationality between the function of a film's formal devices, on the one hand, and the meaning of the film's action, on the other. In other words, the more intimate and precise the connection between the function of these devices and the meaning of the action they portray is, the more coherent a film becomes, according to Perkins.

Perkins' work constitutes the main critical approach which foregrounds and thematises the significance of the critical concept of coherence in film studies. Thus, although the main body of the thesis examines films with a more malleable type of

coherence than the one Perkins analyses, the thesis begins with the latter's analyses, in order to systematically explore the function of the concept of coherence in film. The concept of coherence, although frequently used in the language of film studies, has rarely been considered as a straightforward reference point in this discipline, so the first chapter of the thesis attempts to consider it in a direct and sustained way.

The first chapter initially examines Perkins' particular understanding of coherence, analysing the ramifications of a film's tight relationality through specific examples. The chapter then proceeds by exploring how we can understand the function of coherence in less tightly unified films. Since the main corpus of the thesis examines films with significant strains in their organisation or apparent gaps in their intelligibility, the first chapter examines how we can relationally, 'synthetically' understand films whose aspects of formal intricacy stand out of the seamlessness of the films' 'reality', unsettling our understanding of the films' action. In other words, the chapter examines films whose intricate formal organisation calls rather for a re-adjustable and shifting understanding of 'what is going on' in them (a kind of understanding that will become *even more drastic* in the main corpus of the thesis). In order to analyse the function of coherence in this kind of films, the chapter draws on the work of the philosopher and film theorist George Wilson, who shows how the intricate formal organisation of certain films can allow the latter to cohere, to come together, but in diverse and pliable ways (apart from Perkins' work, Wilson's work is also one of the rare critical approaches to film that confronts the problem of coherence directly).¹

¹ In Perkins' work, the function of coherence is a predominant concern, whereas in Wilson's work it is discussed in the context of an interrogation of the function of point of view shifts in certain narrative films. See the discussion of these works in chapter 1. Perkins V.F., *Film As Film*, New York: Penguin

As it will become further evident throughout the first chapter of the thesis, Perkins' and Wilson's analyses of film coherence, despite focusing on different ways in which a film can be organised, are both geared towards understanding the ways in which a film manages to control the *tensions* that frequently mark its organisation. Tensions, such as stylistic disparities or narrative inconsistencies, unsettle the meaning of a film's organisation by complicating the way in which a film's action is presented. This kind of complexity can arise in apparently coherent films (films which carefully assimilate their strains in a clear organisation), but it can become particularly significant when it comes to films with a perplexing intelligibility (like the films examined in the main corpus of the thesis).

Before exploring the complexity of films with an apparently incoherent logic, the thesis discusses in detail the case of a film which, despite containing significant aspects of complexity, manages to remain clear and tightly organised. The second chapter of the first part of the thesis ('The Elusive') thus analyses *Madame De...* (1953) by Max Ophüls. Ophüls is a director whose work, according to Perkins, characteristically demonstrates the function of a tight relationality. Given that Perkins has not examined *Madame De...* specifically, the chapter attempts to test Perkins' understanding on a film that the latter has not analysed. The chapter explores how the film is able to tie together a lucid and well ordered narrative design with significant elements of elusiveness and ambiguity in the meaning of its dramatic action (for example, the intimacy of the protagonists being both forged *and* undermined, and the heroine's character being depicted both as stereotypical *and* as opaque or elusive).

The discussion of *Madame De...* is included in the first part of the thesis because *Madame De...* is a film that provides a liminal, transitional case for the thesis' discussion of coherence, since the aspects of the film's apparent incoherence become less obvious due to the film's tight structure. The discussion of this film, nevertheless, provides the point of departure for the thesis' main body (Part 2), which examines more overt and striking examples of apparent incoherence.

Thus, chapter 3 of the thesis ('The Unbelievable') – the first chapter of the main body of the thesis – examines Carl-Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955), a film apparently characterised by striking contradictions and inner frictions. The film remains embedded in a realistic context but ends up with representing an 'unrealistic' and incredible incident, that is, the resurrection of a woman. Moreover, the miracle of the resurrection is followed by a sensuous kiss, an occurrence that seemingly disturbs the pious mood of the scene of the resurrection. Are these elements really factors of disjunction or can they somehow be justified by the film's internal organisation?

Although the miracle is a metaphysical event, apparently disruptive of the workings of physical, empirical reality in the film, the chapter attempts to explain how the sense of the metaphysical realm evoked by this event ultimately blends with the film's naturalistic style. More specifically, the chapter examines the strategies through which the film's style draws together the unearthly and spiritual aspects of its dramatic action (not only the miracle per se but also the characters' faith in this miracle) with the physical and corporeal aspects of the film's images. The chapter observes the patterns through which the film's physical environment collaborates with elements of an expressionistic and theatrical style which conveys the transcendental impulses of its characters and an otherworldly image of death. Finally, it attempts to show that the

film portrays the physical interaction of the characters with the space surrounding them in such a way as to weave together the fugitive inner lives of the characters and the material elements around them.

Whereas chapter 3 of the thesis demonstrates how *Ordet* ultimately manages to harmonise its apparently conflictual aspects,² chapter 4 of the thesis ('The Fragmented') attempts to account for the coherence of a film which eschews harmony altogether, elaborating an extremely disruptive visual style. The chapter examines a drastically disorienting and discontinuous film, Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion* (1982). More specifically, it looks at how *Passion* breaks the causal and motivational continuity of its action while creating instead unusual modes of relationality between the various parts of this action. The film's focus is constantly *split* between the exploration of the multifarious manifestations of the character of Isabelle (Isabelle Huppert) and the exploration of another cluster of manifestations constituted by the images constructed in a film studio. What is the meaning of the film's split of focus? Does this apparent disorganisation of the film's perceptual field merely create a disorderly assemblage of images that cannot be interrelated? And, if not, what are the different modes of relationality that manage to bring together the various parts of the film (whether these parts refer to the elements of the same shot, the shots themselves, the scenes or the sequences of the film)? The chapter explores how the unusual analogies, parallelisms and contrasts that the film creates become strategies through

² Despite the fact that the tensions of *Ordet* are more pronounced than the tensions of *Madame De...*, for example, chapter 3 shows how some aspects of the *Ordet*'s style can be considered to be woven together as tightly as Perkins' criterion above would require. See the analysis of the function of *fusion* and *cohesion* in the sections 'Fusing the Physical with the Spiritual' (1, 2) in chapter 3 ('The Unbelievable'). The difference between the two films is that, in *Ordet*, despite the tight bond between the film's conflictual aspects, the intelligibility of the film is still crucially at stake. *Madame De...*, however, maintains a predominantly clear dramatic action.

which the film attempts to expand our understanding of how its various parts are associated.

Chapter 5 ('The Digressive') of the thesis examines another strikingly disorienting film, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which uses its unusual and baffling connections for a purpose that is different from *Passion*'s. *Pulp Fiction*'s overall narrative structure, rather than revolving around a central storyline, follows various storylines that grow out of disparate dramatic incidents. The film's distinct storylines become abruptly intertwined in unexpected ways, either because of the sudden intersection of the characters' trajectories or because of the occurrence of a sudden anomaly in the established state of affairs (i.e. the accidental killing of a character). In each case, the film reorients and deflects the progression of the dramatic action towards an unforeseen direction. This strategy of deflection becomes predominant as the film also suddenly protracts or distends seemingly peripheral aspects of a dramatic situation. The chapter attempts to show that the flexibility and the digressiveness of the film's narrative structure does not just amount to a kind of random narrative meandering but rather manages to consistently create a sense of dramatic surprise, as well as a sense of profusion of narrative possibilities. The chapter argues that the film breaks the overall unity of its action and consistently uses the function of narrative digression, in order to repeatedly shift and reframe the dramatic stakes of the situations it presents.

Finally, chapter 6 of the thesis ('The Inexpressible') examines Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), a film whose apparent loss of coherence does not only lie in the film's disorderly organisation but also – and crucially – in the indeterminate and opaque connection between its parts. The chapter explores whether and how the strikingly abstract philosophical musings of the film's voice-over can be understood

in more concrete terms, that is, in relation to various aspects of the film's action. Do these musings arbitrarily attach to the film an atmospheric discourse of the 'ineffable' or can they acquire a more specific dramatic purpose? The chapter observes that the musings of the voice-over do indeed become dissociated from various aspects of the action and, most importantly, from the agency of specific characters, but not for no reason. This dissociation, rather than merely amounting to an indefinite connection between the voice-over and its dramatic context, actually manages consistently to produce a plane of personalised but 'de-subjectivised' meaning that traverses the film's action. The difficulty of attributing the voice-over to particular characters, as well as the conflation and variability of different known and unknown voices, create an unstable point of view that joins various characters in a collective experience detached from any specific perceptual coordinates. The elliptical, oblique and slippery ways in which this point of view relates to the film's characters generate an evocative logic that permeates the organisation of the film.

The thesis does not aim to be exhaustive by precluding other routes into understanding the examined films' apparent incoherence. The aspects of apparent incoherence found in the examined films could possibly be resolved in other ways, ways that are not limited to the method of this thesis.

As mentioned above, this thesis predominantly attempts to account for the intricate relationality between the components of each examined film. So, as will become evident, it strives to trace, as much as possible, the variety, the tightness or the richness of this relationality. Because of this particular orientation of the thesis, the analyses that follow are geared towards exploring the, apparently, 'internal'

organisation of the examined films, in order to illuminate the interaction and the interrelatedness of the elements of each film.

The boundary between what is ‘internal’ and what is ‘external’ to a film may not be clear. The question of the viability of this boundary is shortly addressed in chapter 3 on *Ordet* that considers how the film’s own allusions to other texts (i.e. the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard) could contribute to our understanding of the film’s coherence (Chapter 5 on *Pulp Fiction* also considers the issue of the film’s allusion to the genre of ‘pulp’).

Now, the thesis does not intend to simply find *any* way of explaining the problem of a film’s apparent incoherence. It rather intends to show how such a problem can actually be resolved through the formal *complexity* and the formal *peculiarity* of a particular film. And, more specifically, the thesis is interested in showing how this complexity and this peculiarity manage to lead to a profound aesthetic accomplishment on the part of the film.

As will become further evident, throughout its main body, the thesis attempts to bring to the viewer’s attention narrative films that expand their intelligibility by turning their aspects of apparent incoherence into meaningful aesthetic strategies. The thesis argues that the examined films acquire a more complex intelligibility by simultaneously sustaining and controlling their tensions and areas of obscurity.

The thesis does not aim to be exhaustive by suggesting that the examined films are the only ones that manage to accomplish this task. Rather, it aims to show that the examined films are *exemplary* (in the double sense of being characteristic *and* exceptional) in terms of accomplishing this task. In other words, they are exemplary

in terms of being able to convert an apparent problem of coherence into a means of aesthetic achievement.

PART ONE

Chapter 1 - Interrogating Problems of Coherence in Narrative Film

Introduction

The motivation and the springboard for this thesis has been the problem of how to account for and appreciate narrative films that are characterised by striking obscurities and explanatory gaps in their development. Do these obscurities and explanatory gaps merely inhibit our understanding of a narrative film or could they somehow be suggesting less than obvious routes towards the film's intelligibility? In other words, do they simply bring forth flaws of the film or could they somehow be understood as functioning meaningfully within the context of the film? The issue that is at stake for the thesis is whether the apparent disruption of a film's straightforward intelligibility could be *compensated for* by the emergence of a different or more complicated kind of intelligibility.

In order to explore this issue, the main corpus of the thesis (Part 2) examines four narrative films, each of which is characterised by a striking aspect of apparent incoherence.³ As the thesis attempts to show, the incoherence characterising each examined film does not just arise locally, at a particular moment of the film, but stems from particular *patterns* and *strategies* recurring throughout the film.⁴ In other words, it is the *formal organisation* of the film as a whole which ascribes to the presence of

³ For the somewhat different status of the film *Madame De...*, examined in the chapter 'The Elusive' (Part 1 of the thesis), see the Introduction of the thesis.

⁴ The miracle in *Ordet* may be local as an event, but the question of the chapter on 'The Unbelievable' is how this usually incredible event becomes credible within the context of the realistic style of film. In other words, it is again here a matter of understanding the formal patterns and strategies that manage to render the miracle convincing within the context of the film's particular style.

the incoherence a remarkable weight. And, it is exactly this organisation which – however perplexing or obscure – manages to make the crucial claim upon our understanding, giving rise to the question of *whether* and *how* it matters.

So, could a film's baffling formal organisation – rather than merely be obstructing the film's capacity to make sense – actually function as a *mechanism* that nourishes and *expands* this capacity? Since the analysis in each chapter of the main corpus of the thesis revolves around this particular question, the critical problem that underlies the thesis' method is how the *intricacy* of a film's formal organisation can affect a film's *intelligibility*. It is, therefore, the aim of the present introductory chapter of the thesis to investigate how elaborate, peculiar and puzzling aspects of a film's formal organisation can contribute to the various ways in which we can understand a film. In other words, if we are not to understand such aspects simply as confusing or 'out of place', in what ways are we to understand them as coherently shaping the meaning of a film?

In order to examine this question, I turned to the work of film critic V. F. Perkins. Perkins's general concern is to understand how a (narrative) film manages to become coherent and, in what ways, the coherence of the film can be said to constitute an integral part of its aesthetic achievement. Although (as it will become subsequently evident) Perkins ultimately tends to favor films exhibiting less striking and less disruptive kinds of formal intricacy than the ones examined in this thesis, the present chapter will initially draw on his work because it is the main work in film studies that foregrounds and thematises the relation between coherence and formal intricacy. From his book, *Film as Film*,⁵ to many of his articles on specific films,⁶ Perkins has repeatedly raised the question

⁵ Perkins V.F., *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*, Da Capo Press (reprinted), 1993

of how we can comprehend and, in fact, *assess* the coherent function of intricate formal devices within a film. The first criterion Perkins offers us is that of a film's *credibility*. In what follows, I will try to delineate Perkins' understanding of this criterion, while testing this understanding on specific film examples.

V.F. Perkins: Intricate Form and the Credibility of the Film's Fictional World

According to Perkins, any aspect of a film's form is to be appreciated, primarily, in terms of its contribution to the credibility of the film's fictional world. By 'credibility' Perkins does not refer to some principle of verisimilitude or realistic authenticity, that is, to some principle of correspondence between the workings of the film's fictional world and the workings of the actual world outside the film.⁷ He rather refers to the 'inner consistency' of the film's fictional world, the internal 'order' and 'logic' that manages to hold the 'reality' of this world together.⁸ In other words, Perkins' criterion of credibility arises as a principle immanent to a film. As Perkins remarks:

The most 'realistic' films are the ones which convey the most complete illusion...There is no actuality against which we can check the images...But the image[s] must be credibly *derived* [my emphasis] from the created world in order to maintain its reality.⁹

⁶ See characteristically Perkins V.F., 'Letter from an Unknown Woman' [on the Linz sequence] in *Movie*, no.29/30, Summer 1982, "Same Tune Again!" – Repetition and Framing in *Letter From an Unknown Woman* in *CineAction*, No 52, September 2000 and 'Where is the World? The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction' in Gibbs J. and Pye D. (eds.), *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005

⁷ For example, for Perkins, the unrealistic and unlikely character of the birds' attack in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) does not obstruct the film's credibility. Perkins, *Film as Film*, pp. 121-122

⁸ Perkins, *Film as Film*, pp. 121-122

⁹ Ibid. p. 121

But how does a film exactly manage to ‘maintain’ its reality when it comes to the use of peculiar, elaborate or puzzling formal devices that could unsettle or disrupt the seamless workings of this reality? In other words, how does the use of such devices by a film preserve the film’s credibility? Perkins analyses the use of red colour in Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *Red Desert* (1964) as a paradigmatic instance of a peculiar formal device that comes forth as incredible. As Perkins remarks, ‘we have reasons to question’ the credibility of the use of red in the film because this use encourages our ‘purely cerebral recognition’.¹⁰ More specifically, he writes:

In Antonioni’s *Red Desert*, red is used to represent the threat which the heroine [Gulianna (Monica Vitti)] fears from an alienated, hostile and disintegrating world. Towards the end of the film, the heroine is made love to while on the verge of a complete mental collapse...From shot to shot the bedpost becomes an ever more threateningly glaring red. We observe that colour is being used to create an effect. Intellectually we can identify the effect required. But of the effect itself we feel no symptom. We are so busy *noticing* that we respond rather to our awareness of the device than to the state of mind it sets out to evoke.¹¹ (Figures 1-3)

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Perkins suggests that the use of red is incredible because of the excessive attention that the device draws to itself. This excessive attention that the device draws to itself seems to be, according to Perkins, the product of a disproportional relation between the effect of the device, on the one hand, and the experience (‘the state of mind’) which the device ‘sets out to evoke’, on the other. Since this experience actually

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 85

¹¹ Ibid. p. 85

constitutes our understanding of the meaning of the device, we could initially say that, for Perkins, the credibility of a device is measured by the proportionality, or, rather, the *balance* between the effect of the device and the device's meaning.¹²

Now, one could argue that Perkins' requirement of a device's credibility limits our understanding of the workings of the device. Film critic Robin Wood, for example, has argued that, even though the presence of the red colour in *Red Desert* is felt as somehow obtrusive, this obtrusiveness can be partly understood as a stylistic convention of 'art' cinema. According to this stylistic convention, Wood observes, the attention that the red colour draws to itself can be perceived as signaling the director's subjectivity, as this imbues the film and as this becomes expressively aligned with the protagonist's subjectivity.¹³ By referring to the film's capacity to signal the director's subjectivity, Wood refers to the capacity of the film's style to expose, or rather, foreground the director's 'touch', as it were, that is, the director's intervention on the

¹² The particular moment from the *Red Desert* is mentioned here simply as Perkins' example of the incredible function of a formal device in film. As will become evident throughout the thesis and, characteristically, in chapter 4 on Godard's *Passion*, there are *many* of the devices used by the examined films that could be described as clearly noticeable, even conspicuous and, therefore, as 'incredible', in Perkins' terms (see, for example the portrait shots of Isabelle or the creation of the 'tableaux vivants' in the analysis of *Passion* in chapter 4 that will follow). Thus, I would like to clarify that the 'credible' or 'incredible' function of a device, in Perkins' terms, does not serve as a nodal point or an ultimate criterion of the thesis' understanding of what constitutes an even (idiosyncratically) coherent film. What does become more important to the thesis, as will become evident (and is derived from Perkins' argument with regard to the 'credibility' of a formal device), is something slightly different. It is the requirement that the workings of an – even conspicuous – formal device should avoid, as much as possible, a solely 'formal-istic' understanding (that is, an understanding of the device as devoid of any specific significance related to the dramatic situations developed in a given film). Thus, what the thesis draws from Perkins' analysis of 'credibility' is the avoidance of an 'excess' of a device, as it were, *over* significance. The thesis will attempt to demonstrate that, even in cases such as *Passion* – which *prima facie* lend themselves to a more 'formalistic' understanding of their devices – there is still a kind of balanced relation between the workings of these devices and their significance, as described above. This relation is indeed frequently obscure, very dynamic (and different) in each examined film, but, it does manage to avoid the formalistic reading just mentioned (for a more thorough elaboration of the function of 'significance' in the examined films, see the conclusion of the thesis).

¹³ Wood R., *Personal Views*, Wayne State University Press (Revised edition), London, 1976, pp. 34-35

filmed material. According to Wood, the convention of foregrounding the director's 'touch' constitutes a usual aspect of 'art' cinema, a kind of cinema (mostly European) which tends to highlight the fact that it constitutes 'art' as a form of personal expression (that is, as a form of expression of the director/artist).¹⁴

This may be so but, for Perkins, merely the function of a stylistic convention would not suffice to justify the failure of a device's credibility. When 'the director's guiding hand' is 'too heavy', then 'the spectator's belief in the action will decrease or disappear', he writes.¹⁵ I will come back to Perkins' appreciation of the obviousness of 'the director's hand' later on, when I will examine a moment from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). For now, though, I would like to note that the mere fact that the use of red in *Red Desert* belongs to a stylistic convention may indeed attribute to the device a certain kind of intelligibility (see Wood's interpretation just above), but this kind of intelligibility would have to be considered, according to Perkins, more 'attached to' and less 'contained in'¹⁶ the *specific* film that uses the device. Perkins uses the terms 'attached to' and 'contained in' in order to demarcate the origin of a device's intelligibility, that is, the context from which a device derives its meaning. Since the meaning of the red colour in *Red Desert* (partly) derives from the convention of a certain stylistic tradition, this meaning is (partly) independent from the internal logic of the film that uses the device. But, since the credibility of a device depends exactly on this internal logic, the quest for the latter should not be abandoned.

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 35-42

¹⁵ Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 77

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 117

Perkins recognises that a film ‘cannot be both absolutely self-contained and meaningful’, since it needs to *draw on* meanings external to it, or rather, as he calls them, ‘given’ meanings (Perkins refers to general ‘symbolic’ meanings, like the general symbolic connotations of an image of ‘the sea’, for example, as instances of ‘given’ meanings).¹⁷ Nevertheless, as Perkins further suggests, if a film just ‘asserts’ these meanings, without tightly and precisely integrating them with the workings of the action they refer to, it will allow them to appear both as ‘blatant and unclear’, like ‘slogans’ or ‘over-amplified noises’ coming from a ‘faulty loudspeaker’.¹⁸ In what follows, I will try to explain Perkins’ suggestion.

Refining Perkins’ Notion of Credibility:

The Embeddedness of Significance

As noted above, according to Perkins, the ‘images’ of a film must ‘credibly be derived from the created world in order to maintain its reality’.¹⁹ But what does this formulation exactly suggest? We could say that what appears to become of primary importance for Perkins’ notion of credibility is the way in which the presentation of a film’s world relates to the workings of this world. For Perkins, this relation has to be especially intimate. He qualifies this relation by observing that a film image ‘must be made to act both as recording, to show us what happens, and as expressive device, to heighten the effect and the significance of what we see’.²⁰ In other words, a film image has to simultaneously depict an action and convey its significance. It should be

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 117

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 119

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 121

²⁰ Ibid. p. 78

formed in such a way as to embody, as to incorporate the significance of the action it presents. So, how does this become possible?

Let us for a moment go back to the example from *Red Desert*. One could say that the significance of the red colour is not exactly incorporated in the scene of the protagonists' lovemaking for the following reason. The film, apart from pointing to the general significance of red as an expression of the heroine's disturbed, neurotic psyche, does not provide us with a more concrete justification of the physical presence of a red bedpost during the scene. Although red as a colour is frequently used throughout the film, accompanying various of Gulianna's activities, the function of red in each specific context of action, remains vague and even obscure. For example, the walls of the boathouse in which Gulianna hangs out with some of her friends are also painted red. Similarly, the red-ness of the bedpost is not sufficiently and precisely explained by the context of the scene of the lovemaking. In a way, we get the sense that the bedpost just happens to be red. We could, thus, say that the significance of the red bedpost does not appear to be intrinsically related to, or rather, embedded in the content of the scene.

It is, in this way, according to Perkins' account of the film, that the image of the red bedpost, rather than coming forth seamlessly, as an integral part of the film's action, assumed a quite separate status. By being perceived more as a device designed to create a certain expressive effect, it heightened our awareness of the director's 'touch' or, rather, our awareness of the director's 'control'²¹ over the presentation of the film's action. By heightening this awareness, it introduced a rift between the

²¹ This is a term Perkins uses frequently in *Film as Film* (pp. 84, 124, 128, for example).

presentation of the film's action and our understanding of this action and, thus, ultimately disrupted the credibility of the film.

However, Perkins, in *Film as Film*, does provide us with examples of films that illustrate how the image of a formal device, despite suggesting the director's 'control' over a film's action, can still remain credibly integrated with the content of the depicted action. A characteristic moment Perkins analyses is the use of lighting during the 'chicken run' scene in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Perkins writes:

The hero [Jim (James Dean)] is challenged to a chicken run by the leader of a delinquent gang. The chicken run is a trial of nerves in which the contestants drive two cars at top speed over the edge of a cliff – the first to jump before reaching the edge being declared as 'chicken'. The lighting in this scene stresses the self-enclosed, artificial, excitements of the game. The use of spot – and flood – lights helps to give the scene a feeling of theatre and draws attention to the deliberation with which the event is stage-managed, so that we see it as something very close to a tribal rite, at once gratuitous and intense. The lighting effect is essential to the feeling and significance of the scene, as a channeling of our response, so that we see the events 'in the same light' as the director. But it is not...obviously controlled from behind the camera. The illumination is traced to a credible source: the headlamps of the cars which other gang members, spectators have drawn up along the sides of the course. Indeed, Ray is able to profit from the necessity of motivating his spotlights: the ritual nature of the action is emphasised by the manner in which, at word of command, all the headlights are directed to the arena. To make the desirable look unavoidable, to take what is available and make it meaningful, that is a large part of the great director's secret.²²

(Figures 4-8)

²² Ibid. p. 84

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

As Perkins' account suggests, the use of lighting in this scene does not become disruptive of the scene's credibility because the meaning of the device is firmly contained, ingrained rather, into the workings of the scene's action. Despite being used to create an 'effect', the lighting here does not stand out as an overt directorial 'touch', but it is rather motivated by the particularity of the scene's action. Thus, our understanding of the function of the device merges with our understanding of the action. The function of the device is effective not because it is prominent but because it is fitting. Because the attention the device draws to itself is crucial to highlighting the artificial nature of what is going on in the scene, the significance of the device emerges as inextricably bound with the meaning of the scene.

From Perkins' Notion of Credibility to his Synthetic Understanding of Film

As it becomes evident, for Perkins, the notion of a film's credibility is ultimately posed in terms of a fusion between the phenomenal and the meaningful. In order to achieve this fusion, a film has to use its formal devices in such a way as to make them contribute – as precisely as possible – to the meaning of the action they portray.

The term 'contribute' here is key in order for us to underline that the lighting device in the 'chicken run' scene from *Rebel Without a Cause* cannot be considered *in isolation*, but rather derives its significance from its participation in the meaningful configuration of the scene. In other words, the function of the lighting is necessarily understood in relation to the content of this scene. The idea of this relationality has a fundamental place in Perkins' thought throughout *Film as Film*.

Perkins suggests that, if we try to understand a moment in a film (i.e. a scene or sequence) through the relations of the elements contained in it, we do not only become able to assess the credibility of the formal devices used at this moment (as we did above) but we also become able to enrich the way we make sense of the moment. Even if a moment does not signal its significance through the use of an overtly symbolic device (i.e. like the red colour in *Red Desert*), the moment will ultimately reveal its significance, if we pay attention to it as a 'synthesis'²³ of elements interacting with each other. More specifically, if we respond to a moment's style as a kind of synthetic form, Perkins suggests, we will be able to extend our understanding of the moment. In *Film as Film*, Perkins analyses a short scene from Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones* (1954) that exemplifies how this

²³ Ibid. p. 131

becomes possible. In this section, I will present Perkins' analysis of this scene in order to delineate Perkins' synthetic approach to film, as this focuses more on local aspects of a film's style. In the section that follows, I will try to trace further ramifications of Perkins' synthetic approach to film, ramifications that go beyond the local level of a moment and bring about ways of understanding the relation between the style of a particular moment and the style of a film as a whole.

Carmen Jones:

How Synthetic Form Enhances Significance

The scene from *Carmen Jones* that Perkins considers consists in just two shots during which the soldier, Joe (Harry Belafonte), drives his jeep down a country road, with his prisoner, Carmen (Dorothy Dandridge), beside him. Joe has been ordered to deliver Carmen to the authorities in a nearby town. The first shot of the scene registers Carmen and Joe frontally (from outside the jeep's windscreen), showing them sitting side by side (Figures 9-11). Carmen makes an advance to Joe, moving towards him and inviting him – through her singing – to join her at that 'café on the corner'. As Joe does not respond to her advances, she moves to the back seat, and the film, in a second shot (Figures 12-13), registers both Carmen and Joe from the side of the jeep (the camera moving parallel to the car's movement).

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

‘In synopsis’, Perkins observes, the scene portrays ‘a rather familiar situation: brassy dame makes unsuccessful play for disapproving male’.²⁴ But, as Perkins suggests, if we attend to the style of the scene as a ‘synthesis’ of elements interacting with each other, we will be able to appreciate that this style is productive of a plenitude of meanings that enhance the significance of the scene. More specifically, Perkins pays particular attention to the relation between the presence of the characters and the composition of the shots, as well as to the relation between the different angles of the shots. He describes the scene as follows:

A metal strut at the centre of the windscreen divides the image [of the first shot] so as to isolate and confine each character. But Carmen’s movements shatter the rigid symmetry of the image. First she wriggles to Joe’s side of the jeep, thrusting herself across the barrier into his cage. Then, her advances rejected, she transfers to the back seat to gain greater freedom of movement in a less restricted space. Preminger stresses the significance of her movement by changing the camera’s viewpoint and making the image share in Carmen’s liberation. The image achieves a new openness now that the action is seen from alongside the jeep, with the frame of the windscreen no longer enclosing our view. The fresh angle conveys also a much stronger feeling of movement since it brings into play what the previous shot had suppressed, the background scenery...The first shot began as a graphic expression of Joe’s personality, showing us the world as he wishes to see it – a world of order and

²⁴ Ibid. p. 81

stability. [In the second shot]...we are offered a picture of her [Carmen's] world, in direct contradiction to the previous image. This world is open, vigorous, fluid...²⁵

As it becomes evident, through the developing contrasts (i.e. the contrast between Carmen's unrestrained movement and Joe's fixity, as well as the contrast between the sense of the second shot's mobility and the initially rigid composition of the first shot), the components of the scene come together in a dynamic cooperation. Through this cooperation, what *prima facie* appears as a straightforward rendition of the action is discreetly transformed into an eloquent image able to 'extend our awareness of the characters and of the ways of life they represent' (in Perkins' terms).²⁶ Thus, through the synthetic form of the scene's style, the film manages to evoke possibilities of the action that would not emerge had we only paid attention to those parts of meaning that are present in a summary-like approach to the scene.

Letter from an Unknown Woman:

Integrating Stylistic Difference

Apart from enriching our understanding of a particular moment, Perkins' synthetic approach to film style allows us to investigate the presence of meaningful relationships between stylistic elements throughout a film as a whole. Perkins prompts us to 'comprehend the nature and assess the quality of the created relationships' by paying attention 'to the whole content of a shot, sequence or film'.²⁷ He also observes that 'the extent to which a film manages to reward such *complete* attention is an index

²⁵ Ibid. p. 80

²⁶ Ibid. p. 81

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 79, 118

of a film's achievement'.²⁸ But what exactly does Perkins' 'complete attention' entail, and how does a film manage to 'reward' it?

As I will argue in this section, Perkins provides an answer to these questions in his article on Max Ophuls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948).²⁹ In this article, he tries to show that the more developed and pervasive the relationships among the various aspects of a film's style are, the more unified a film's total visual organisation can be said to be. In order to examine the degree to which a film can be understood as a kind of synthetic form, Perkins explores the mechanisms through which the style of an apparently atypical sequence from *Letter from an Unknown Woman* manages to cohere with the style of the rest of the film.

The sequence Perkins discusses shows the protagonist, Lisa (Joan Fontaine), staying in the town of Linz, after having left Vienna, where she secretly fell in love with the musician Stefan (Louis Jourdan). Lisa flees Vienna shattered after having furtively seen Stefan courting another woman. At Linz, she is introduced to a young Lieutenant Leopold (John Good) who asks her to marry him. The proposal has been arranged by both Lisa's and Leopold's parents.

Before discussing the sequence's style, Perkins points out that the presence of the sequence poses a significant challenge to the workings of the film's dramatic structure. Although the whole film revolves around Lisa's voice-over recounting moments of longed for, fulfilled or suspended intimacy *with* Stefan, the Linz sequence, as Perkins suggests, breaks with this pattern.³⁰ In other words, although the

²⁸ Ibid. p. 79

²⁹ Perkins V.F., 'Letter from an Unknown Woman' (on the Linz sequence) in *Movie*, no. 29/30, Summer 1982, pp. 61-72

³⁰ Ibid. p. 62

film's narrative is constructed around Stefan's presence (Lisa's voice-over also asserts that her life can be 'measured' by her moments together with Stefan), the Linz episode is defined by his absence.

This discrepancy between the Linz sequence and the rest of the film calls for an interrogation of the coherent placement of the sequence within the film. Since the workings of the sequence cannot be immediately related to the workings of the film's general dramatic structure, the insertion of the sequence amounts to an increase of the film's complexity that has to be somehow accounted for. One has to be reminded at this point that, according to Perkins' synthetic understanding, any aspect of a film cannot be considered significant in itself, but should rather be considered as deriving its significance from its relation to other aspects of the film. Thus, the absence of Stefan from Linz has to be justified as a lack, or rather, as a sense of presence missing from Lisa's life.

As Perkins argues, it is exactly this absence of Stefan from Lisa's life that can be apprehended through the sequence's style. The stylistic strategies employed by the film during the Linz sequence deviate from the film's predominant stylistic strategies, in order to convey 'the distinct character' of the sequence and to 'evoke Lisa's sense of the absolute separateness of her existence without Stefan'.³¹

In order to evoke the difference between Lisa's life in Linz and Lisa's life in Vienna, the film initially portrays Linz as a 'non-Vienna', Perkins observes.³² Linz is seen as an exterior and public setting 'with none of the delicate (and delicately erotic) play

³¹ Ibid. p. 63

³² Ibid. p. 65

between public and private spaces that characterises Vienna'.³³ It is 'an entirely daylight world and a summer world', contrasted to Vienna, which is 'mainly nocturnal'³⁴ (Figures 14-19).

Figure 14 (Vienna)

Figure 15 (Linz)

Figure 16 (Vienna)

Figure 17 (Linz)

Figure 18 (Vienna)

Figure 19 (Linz)

But the distinctness of the sequence is not exhausted in these general contrasts. It becomes more intricate and multifaceted, being worked through various other aspects of the sequence's stylistic composition. As Perkins suggests, for example, the presentation of Lisa's face during the Linz episode is very different from its presentation during the Vienna sequences. During the Vienna sequences, Lisa's face radiates, shines – as it were – standing out of and being contrasted to the surrounding

³³ Ibid. p. 63

³⁴ Ibid. p. 63

nocturnal environment. However, during the Linz episode, this contrast is suppressed, as Lisa is dressed in white and as the film allows the sun to cast light evenly across the figures and the objects around Lisa³⁵ (Figures 20-21).

Figure 20

Figure 21

And, finally, the differentiation of the Linz sequence becomes even more thorough. As Perkins observes, there is a contrasting relation between two patterns of staging Lisa. In Vienna, Lisa usually ‘detaches herself from society, and hastens to an isolated spot where, as a silent, still and solitary figure, she can wait for Stefan’s approach’³⁶ (Figures 22-23). In Linz, however, Lisa’s presence is more integrated with the surrounding social environment. The meeting with Leopold ‘is presided over by parents and society’ and ‘its movement is into, rather than away from, the flow of surrounding life’.³⁷ Lisa ‘is conducted to the appointed place, flanked by her parents, at a regulated pace’³⁸ and, as soon as she meets Leopold, the camera follows them both in a tracking shot, as they arrive in the town square, mingling with the crowd that moves into the cathedral³⁹ (Figures 24-27).

³⁵ Ibid. p. 65

³⁶ Ibid. p. 63

³⁷ Ibid. p. 63

³⁸ Ibid. p. 63

³⁹ Ibid. pp. 64-65

Figure 22

Figure 23

Figure 24

Figure 25

Figure 26

Figure 27

Since the differences between Linz and Vienna become manifest simultaneously at the planes of setting, lighting, staging, character appearance and character behaviour, we could say that the film's style presents these differences in a manner that is both dense and elaborate. As the contrasts between Linz and Vienna are forged into various dimensions of the film's style, the *interrelation* between the different ways of portraying Lisa (and Lisa's life) is deepened and refined. Perkins' analyses capture exactly the fine-grained character of this interrelation. Through Perkins' analyses, the film is shown not to be limited to the presentation of a merely 'diagrammatic',⁴⁰ opposition between Linz and Vienna but it is rather shown to hone in very closely on

⁴⁰ A term Perkins uses in his work to capture a schematic, unrefined type of relationality. See Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 118

the stylistic *details* that mold this opposition. It is because of the film's elaboration of these details, that the Linz and the Vienna patterns become tightly knit together. Because of the high degree of their relatedness and the extent of their interaction, these patterns are interwoven in such way as to *sustain* the film's unity, despite the fact that they are juxtaposed to one another.

Thus, although the film's unity is *prima facie* put at stake by the aspect of complexity introduced by the Linz sequence, the film's synthetic style manages to temper and, ultimately, integrate this aspect of complexity. One could say that the achievement of the film's synthetic style lies exactly in the fact that it manages to unify the film by *internalising* the aspect of complexity introduced by the Linz sequence. Let me explain this process a bit further.

I would first like to note that, when it comes to assessing the relationship between a film's 'unity' and a film's 'complexity', the function of the latter is usually considered as being set over against the function of the former. The relationship between the workings of these two critical concepts has been examined by philosopher Monroe Beardsley in his work, *Aesthetics – Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*.⁴¹ In this work, Beardsley has systematically tried to shed light on the language of art criticism, setting out to clarify the meaning of concepts used by art critics. As Beardsley observes in his chapter on 'Artistic Form', the concepts of 'unity' and 'complexity' frequently compete with each other, as it were.⁴² An artwork's unity is understood as being increased by the 'similarities' of the parts of the artwork,⁴³ whereas an

⁴¹ Beardsley M., *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Hartcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1981 (first print: 1958)

⁴² Ibid. p. 208

⁴³ Ibid. p. 195

artwork's complexity is understood as being increased by the 'differences' of its parts (as well as by 'the increase of the parts' per se).⁴⁴

Now, this general understanding the two critical concepts does not quite capture our final account of their relation in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. As Perkins shows, although the presence of the Linz sequence adds a 'difference' to the film, the latter ultimately manages to maintain its unity, by *incorporating* this difference within a coherent stylistic form.

So, unity and complexity can actually cooperate with each other through the function of this incorporation (or, 'internalisation', as I mentioned above). In order to illuminate this function, we can turn to another useful conceptual distinction that Beardsley provides us with. He distinguishes between an artwork's 'extensional' and 'internal' complexity.⁴⁵ Whereas the first kind of complexity refers to the quantity of an artwork's discernible parts, as well as to the range and scope of its content (i.e. 'the number of characters and events', 'the range of human experience encompassed' or 'the spatial and temporal scope of the action'),⁴⁶ the second kind of complexity refers to qualities of the artwork's form that derive from the artwork's careful organisation (i.e. 'subtlety of discrimination', 'sharpness of detail' or 'precision of meaning').⁴⁷ It is exactly the function of the second kind of complexity which Perkins praises in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and which comes forth as an achievement of the film's synthetic style.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 205

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 253

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 253

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 253

Letter from an Unknown Woman:

Stretching the Tensions Even Further

As it becomes evident from the analysis above, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is a film that remains unified because its *prima facie* discrepant stylistic aspects finally turn out to be intimately related to each another, very closely and carefully woven together. We could thus say that is through the high degree of its synthesis or, rather, the *tightness of its relationality* that the film manages to transform its tensions into elements that enhance its internal organisation.

The tensions characterising the film are not exhausted in the apparent stylistic inconsistencies just examined, however. In a later article on the same film, ‘Same Tune Again! – Repetition and Framing from in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*’,⁴⁸ Perkins remarks that these tensions become more radical. More specifically, they touch upon the fundamental *logic* of the relationship between the narration of Lisa’s letter (that is, Lisa’s voice-over) and the flashbacks that this narration accompanies. Perkins observes that the film ‘systematically displays a mismatch between conflicting narrative assumptions’⁴⁹ because its flashbacks systematically depict incidents from which Lisa was absent or to which Lisa was oblivious. This ‘impossible continuity’⁵⁰ between the letter’s narration and the content of the flashbacks becomes an aspect of apparent incoherence that is more extreme, more drastic than the stylistic discrepancy of the Linz sequence. As a kind of empirical and logical impossibility, this ‘impossible continuity’ makes a claim upon our general understanding of rational plausibility and, consequently, seems to crucially upset

⁴⁸ Perkins V.F., “‘Same Tune Again!’ – Repetition and Framing in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*” in *CineAction*, no. 52, September 2000, pp. 40-48

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 41

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 43

the film's basic intelligibility: if it is not to be considered simply as a flaw, as a defect of the film, how are we to understand its function?

According to Perkins, the most characteristic manifestation of this impossibility is an instance of the voice-over that betrays Lisa's awareness of a conversation between her employer Madame Spitzer (Sonya Briden) and an officer, in the clothing store in Vienna where Lisa works as a model. As Perkins shows, the film presents the conversation in manner that stresses its furtive and private nature: the camera follows the officer as he moves away from his wife and talks intimately to Madame Spitzer, who is seated at her desk, at the other side of the railing at the level below Lisa's stage. Madame Spitzer tells him that – unfortunately for him – ‘...Lisa is not like that...She is not like the others...Every evening, as soon as the shutters are closed, off she goes, straight home’. And, although Madame Spitzer utters these words away from Lisa, Lisa's voice-over seems to pick them up in the next scene, commenting: ‘Madame Spitzer spoke the truth. I was not like the others...’ (Figures 28-34).

Figure 28

Figure 29

Figure 30

Figure 31

Figure 32

Figure 33

Figure 34

As Perkins notes, Lisa's voice-over response disturbs our understanding, prompting us to interrogate the context of Lisa's utterance. But, there is no context, there are no real co-ordinates, no spatiotemporal parameters that the film provides us with. Lisa's words are manifestly suspended within a realm of 'fictionality' (in Perkins' terms)⁵¹ that remains bracketed from the workings of the actual world. By foregrounding its own 'fictionality', the film brings us back to the question of how a film can credibly sustain the function of device which seems to overtly unsettle the seamlessness of its reality. The film, in other words, brings us back to the question of a device's credibility, a question that has been concerning Perkins throughout *Film as Film*.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 42

As Perkins suggests, although the device does indeed pronounce its presence (given that Madame Spitzer's words were overtly withheld from Lisa), the film ultimately manages to integrate it, by subduing its effect.⁵² Madame Spitzer and Lisa's words are linked by a simple dissolve through time (Figure 32) which brings forth a new action. The dissolve gives way to a shot of women departing from work (Madame Spitzer's store) and moving into the snowy evening. It is then when we hear Lisa's comment. In this way, the film, rather than forcibly alerting us to the impossibility of Lisa's response, it allows the latter to be absorbed into a smooth progression of time. Rather than blatantly asserting the impossibility of the response, it allows it to become assimilated by the film's temporal continuity. Thus, as Perkins notes, the film 'ensures', through its 'pacing', that the effect of the device is not to 'explode the narrative into absurdity with a gag' but to '*subtly* [my emphasis] position it beyond any real time and space'.⁵³ 'Boldness is balanced with delicacy in the achievement of this impossible continuity',⁵⁴ Perkins writes.

It is through the restraint and the balance of its formal design that the film manages to preserve the illusion of Lisa's 'impossible presence'.⁵⁵ Once again, as was the case in *Film as Film*, the credible function of a peculiar device is not measured by any kind of correspondence of the device to our naturalistic understanding (i.e. how the actual world works) but it is rather measured by the fitting and, hence, persuasive presentation of the device.

The film, by refraining from any heavy-handed emphasis and by keeping Lisa's impossible presence *built into* the progression of its action, ultimately avoids the

⁵² Ibid. pp. 42-43

⁵³ Ibid. p. 43

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 43

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 43

effect of a kind of artificiality that would be jolting and, hence, disruptive of its credibility. Perkins' analysis of the moment above from *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is based on the principles analysed in *Film as Film* but also shows how these principles can be even applied on an example that overtly puts to the test the limits of our naturalistic understanding.

Thus, without falling into an 'impoverishing neatness', *Letter from an Unknown Woman* manages to arrive at 'order and comprehensibility' (in Perkins' terms).⁵⁶ By integrating the empirical and logical impossibility of Lisa's words, the film manages to *sustain* its own, autonomous, fictional logic. Since, as Perkins suggests, the main stake of the film is to consolidate our sense that 'there is no real world'⁵⁷ where Lisa's writing of the letter and Stefan's reading it ever meet, the film uses the 'fictionality' of the voice-over in order to establish a plane of suspended reality where Lisa's 'impossible presence' relives Lisa's life as Stefan reads about it.

Establishing and Interrogating the Reality of the Film's Fictional World

So, does our awareness of a peculiar formal device used by a film necessarily disrupt the reality of the film's fictional world?

As it became evident above, it is through the absorption of the voice-over's peculiarity into the flow of the film's action that the film managed, according to Perkins, to sustain its credibility. But, what about peculiar devices which are not so firmly contained in the workings of a film's action? In what follows, I would like to examine a moment from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) that seems to expand Perkins' notion of credibility, while remaining consistent with its basic

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 41

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 42

construal. More specifically, I would like to examine the camera movement during the opening of the film in order to explore how the presence of a peculiar formal device can both forge and maintain the reality of a film's fictional world *and* stand out from this reality.

The film opens with a long take of the camera moving head on towards an open window looking towards the rear side of an apartment building (Figure 35). The moment the frame of the shot coincides with the window frame, the film cuts (Figure 36), and the long take is picked up again, from apparently beyond the window frame. The camera tilts downwards and surveys the courtyard in a long shot (Figures 37-38). It then turns backwards, tilting towards the inside of the room where it began its movement and recording in an extreme close up the face of a man lying asleep just beside the window, with his back turned to it (Figures 39-40). After a couple of long takes recording the people waking up and moving around inside the apartments across the window (Figures 41-42), the camera turns to the inside of the room again, moves along the body of the sleeping man and focuses on a phrase written on a plaster wrapped around the man's leg: 'Here lie the broken bones of L.B. Jefferies' (James Stewart) (Figures 43-45). As the camera keeps moving inside the room, it registers various objects surrounding the incapacitated Jefferies: a photographic camera lying on a table, pictures of a car crash hanging on the wall, a woman's cover picture and its photographic 'negative' (Figures 46-50).

Figure 35

Figure 36

Figure 37

Figure 38

Figure 39

Figure 40

Figure 41

Figure 42

Figure 43

Figure 44

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Figure 46

Figure 47

Figure 48

Figure 49

Figure 50

As it becomes evident, a basic function of the camera movement in the film's opening is to supply information about Jefferies, the character the film introduces, and, more specifically, information about Jefferies' *situation*. Stuck in the everyday life of an urban environment, Jefferies is most probably a photographer who, among other things, had been taking on risky tasks (see the photograph of the car crash) which he is now physically unable to pursue. By giving away these clues, the camera movement appears to suggest certain facts about Jefferies' situation, thus beginning to forge the reality of the film's fictional world.

Nevertheless, the function of the camera movement is not exhausted by the camera's capacity to suggest these facts. It goes rather further. Why does the camera initially move away from the inside of Jefferies' room if it is only to go back to it in order to

reveal the character sleeping? In other words, what is the significance of this apparent deviation, this detour? And, even if we could say (as we did) that the function of this detour is indeed to disclose the setting (the urban environment) which Jefferies finds himself in, wouldn't it hypothetically suffice for the film to introduce this setting just as a background of a shot that reveals Jefferies? The pressing question, in other words, is: in what way does the particular organisation of the moment matter?

When the camera begins to move from the inside of the room and towards the window, it seems to enact the power of looking of an invisible agency inside the room. This agency, though, rather than referring to a particular character, acquires a distinct status that is liberated from any subjective point of view. The camera's distinct status becomes characteristically evident when the camera, after having surveyed the view outside the window, tilts *towards* the window, revealing Jefferies sleeping. The character who could have been the agency looking out the window is instead sleeping with his back turned to window, and the camera is the one that *watches him* sleeping. This is a moment when the camera's act of watching declares the independence of the camera's presence. It is a moment when the initial indeterminacy regarding the agency of the viewing recedes in favor of the assertion of the camera's autonomy. The use of the device here is not delicate, as was the case with the peculiar voice-over in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, but rather appears to be more exclamatory. The sense of the camera's autonomy is reinforced by the cut that introduced the camera's surveillance of the space outside the window. This cut seemed to separate the act of the camera's surveillance from the act of viewing coming from inside the room. Through this formal arrangement, the film seems to display its fictional status.

Nevertheless, this display *co-exists* with the film's concrete, descriptive function. The direction of the camera's surveillance (looking towards the opposite apartment

building) is aligned with the direction of the initial viewing from the inside of the room. The momentary jolt of the cut is overcome by the directional alignment of the two initial shots of the film. So, the viewing of the camera, although disengaged from any particular agency, maintains an ambivalent status: it appears to both derive from the space of the room *and* remain independent from it.⁵⁸ In this way, when it re-enters the room and reveals the objects surrounding Jefferies, the camera appears to both occupy the reality of the fictional world and remain separate from it. In other words, by recording the reality of the fictional world, the camera both *discloses* this reality and *announces* its constructed-ness, its artificiality.

The peculiarity the camera movement is striking but it cannot be seen as obtrusive, as was the case with the red bedpost in *Red Desert*. Although the ‘director’s hand’ is explicit here, the credibility of the film is maintained because the effect of the autonomous camera movement is tied with the camera’s descriptive function.

The Intelligibility of the Film’s Fictional World:

Developing Patterns of Coherence

The issue of whether a formal device manages to maintain or disrupt the solidity of a film’s fictional world brings to the fore, once again, the more general question of *how the particular presentation of a film’s fictional world affects our perception of this*

⁵⁸ For a further analysis of the ramifications of this double function of the camera throughout the film see Toles G., ‘Rear Window as Critical Allegory’ in *A House Made of Light: Essays on the Art of Film*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001, pp.159-182. Toles draws on the double function of the camera in order to show how the film as a whole functions both straightforwardly as a simple murder mystery *and* as an allegory commenting on the dynamics of viewing and being viewed.

world. Now, this question does not only arise when we seek to assess the credibility of a peculiar formal device. It also crucially arises when we seek to figure out how a certain peculiarity in the presentation of a film's fictional world affects the intelligibility of this world as a whole: for example, it was the peculiarity of the Linz sequence's style in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* which allowed us to re-examine our understanding of the film as a whole and which activated our effort to make sense of the film in way that could account for the coherent placement of the Linz sequence. It was the break in the consistency of the film's style that allowed us to re-appraise and expand the intelligibility of the film by making us understand the absence of Stefan from Linz as a lack motivating the 'distinct' character of the episode (as Perkins suggested).

In order to discover this expanded intelligibility of the film, we resorted to our synthetic understanding. It was through this kind of understanding that we managed to appreciate how the film's style, through the tightness of its relationality, managed to ultimately internalise the peculiarity introduced by the Linz sequence, integrating the tension(s) between the latter and the rest of the film.

In what follows, I will examine films which do not integrate their tensions as tightly as *Letter from an Unknown Woman* does. The films that are going to be examined allow their tensions to acquire a considerable weight that renders the intelligibility of the films quite ambivalent. Instead of harmonising their divergent or conflicting aspects into a solidly unified whole, these films form certain *patterns* that give way to diverse strands of intelligibility. These patterns prompt us to find different ways in which the films cohere, thus inviting our shifting and variable understanding. In what

follows, our synthetic understanding will still be at work *but* it will be geared towards our effort to discern the different ways in which the examined films cohere.

The films I will analyse are *You only Live Once* by Fritz Lang (1937) and *Bigger Than Life* by Nicholas Ray (1956). My analysis will draw on the work of George Wilson, a philosopher and film theorist who has shown exactly how these two films use their visual organisation to orient and re-orient our understanding towards different directions. In the case of *You Only Live Once*, I will show how the film, according to Wilson, creates a pattern that manages to destabilise the central line of the film's intelligibility. In the case of *Bigger Than Life*, I will show how the film, according to Wilson again, creates a pattern that allows us to interrogate an essential ambiguity at the core of the dramatic action.

Before proceeding to my analysis, I would like to examine a film example from Perkins' work that will allow us to illuminate how a film's capacity to form a pattern contributes to our understanding of the film. The example is Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950).

The film revolves around the life of Dix Steele (Humphrey Bogart), a Hollywood screenwriter of an impulsive and sometimes explosive temper who has been professionally inactive for a long while but who finally finds work again. Unfortunately, at the time Dix is offered a chance to work again, he also becomes the suspect of a murder, as a girl who offers to discuss the plot of a book with him is found dead after the evening she spends with him. Although Dix is exculpated in the end, the suspicion of the murder burdens Dix throughout the film and ultimately does not allow his girlfriend Laurel (Gloria Grahame) to trust him and marry him, despite being in love with him. Dix's behaviour remains ambiguous throughout the film,

since Dix appears to be both kind and aggressive, not only towards Laurel but generally towards the people surrounding him. In a characteristic phrase that encapsulates the basic drama of the film, Perkins writes that ‘neither hero nor heroine is sure whether the man’s embrace is protective and loving or threatening, murderous’.⁵⁹

Since what seems to be dramatically at stake in the film is the uncertain understanding of human behaviour, Perkins wonders how the film can introduce us to this kind of uncertainty. In other words, the film has to find a way to establish the unstable legibility of human behaviour.

In a Lonely Place thus begins with three encounters (between Dix and other characters) that revolve around three different manifestations of the same type of behaviour. More specifically, as Perkins suggests, each of the encounters presents a different kind of ‘grasping’. By creating a pattern around grasping, the film ‘dramatises the ambiguity of gesture’⁶⁰ and allows us to interrogate the variable ways in which we can read the latter. Each time, a character approaches another character from behind and grasps his shoulders with both hands. The first time – when a successful director grasps Dix’s shoulders outside the nightclub – the grasping is a kind of ‘perfunctory and patronising greeting whose pretense of warmth is a bare cover for the assertion of superiority’⁶¹ (Figure 51), Perkins writes. The second time – when Dix grasps the shoulders of an old friend – ‘it conveys intimacy and genuine regard’⁶² (Figure 52). Finally, the third time, ‘when a large-mouthed producer uses the

⁵⁹ Perkins V.F., ‘Moments of Choice’, *The Movie*, 58, p. 1144

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 1144

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 1144

⁶² Ibid. p. 1144

shoulders of Dix himself as a rostrum from which to publicise his later triumph, it is seen as oppressive and openly slighting'⁶³ (Figure 53).

Figure 51

Figure 52

Figure 53

Through the repetition of the gesture of grasping and the variation of its meaning, our attention is directed towards a view of the action that becomes pertinent to the central dramatic stake of the film. Although the importance of the moments above is not highlighted in any way (as these moments appear very ordinary and are carried along in the dramatic flow of the film), the connection between them can organise and inform the way we experience the film, providing us with a way to access its intelligibility. Perkins' example shows us how a film can reorient our viewing towards

⁶³ Ibid. p. 1144

a pattern that is not immediately evident when we watch the film. Through the formation of this pattern, the film *shapes* the phenomenal and renders it revelatory, while *focalising* our viewing experience around specific areas of significance.

You Only Live Once:

Shifting the Centre of Intelligibility

In his work *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View*,⁶⁴ George Wilson draws on Perkins' idea of observing how a pattern can organise our understanding. Instead of showing, though, how this organisation can contribute to our unified understanding of a film, Wilson emphasises how this organisation can diversify our understanding. In his examination of *You Only Live Once*, specifically, Wilson analyses how the film manages to arrange and re-arrange the relation between its salient and its less salient aspects so as to prompt the audience to reconsider its assumptions about what is actually going on in the film. Before examining how this becomes possible, let me first delineate the dominant dramatic dynamic of the film.

You Only Live Once revolves around the life of Eddie Taylor (Henry Fonda), an ex-convict who is accused of a bank robbery which he claims he was not involved in. The progression of the film as a whole construes Eddie as an innocent victim of circumstances, trying to find his way through life. Helped by his girlfriend Joan (Sylvia Sidney) and morally supported by his friend father Dolan (William Gargan),

⁶⁴ Wilson G., *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View*, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1986

the prison priest, Eddie manages to leave prison on probation and find a job as a truck driver. However, he is treated by his boss with disrespect because of his past prison time and, ultimately, gets unfairly fired because of a minor fault. During that time, a bank robbery takes place and Eddie's initialed hat is found in the crime scene. Eddie, who has already married Joan and promised her that he is going to build a good life for them both, steadfastly maintains that he has been trapped, repeatedly proclaiming his innocence. The court, though, finds him guilty and sentences him to death.

Just before his sentence is carried out, Eddie tries to escape prison. But, during the crucial time of his escape, Father Dolan learns that he has been given a last minute pardon. He rushes towards Eddie and informs him that *the body of the guilty bank robber Monk (Walter De Palma), as well as the getaway vehicle with the stolen money, have just been recovered from a lake*. Unfortunately, the good news does not stop a – by now – distrustful, hurt and scared Eddie from shooting the priest in order to escape. At last, while driving with his wife towards the country borders, his wife gets shot by the police that are after them. While carrying his wounded wife inside the woods, Eddie is also shot. Just before he dies, he stares towards the sky when a voice declares: 'You are free now Eddie...Free...'. After Eddie loses his loved ones, and as he is about to die, his sufferings seem to finally come to a halt within a tragic and redemptive vision.

Wilson argues that, although the conclusion of the film suggests that Eddie was wrongfully accused of the bank robbery, various aspects of the film do not allow this suggestion to be ultimately convincing. Wilson initially reminds us that the film presents the bank robbery scene in such a way as to make it impossible for the audience to see the robber. The film presents a sequence of actions leading to the

robbery, but conceals the identity of the agent of these actions (Figures 54-56). When the submerged car is found with the body of Eddie's friend, Monk, inside, Monk is presumed to be the perpetrator of the robbery, but nothing excludes the possibility of Monk having had a partner during the crime, Wilson notes. That is also because, during the bank robbery, a man wearing a gas mask bombards the street with grenades and clouds the scene, making it impossible to tell whether any other person is collaborating with the man we see (Figures 57-58).⁶⁵

Figure 54

Figure 55

Figure 56

Figure 57

Figure 58

As it becomes evident, the film begins to play with our understanding of who perpetrated the crime. But, as Wilson suggests, the aim of the film is not just to create

⁶⁵ Ibid. pp. 19-20

‘certain effects of irony or suspense’⁶⁶ in terms of this kind of information. The aim of the film is rather to interrogate the incompleteness and the partiality of visual perception per se.

In order to do this, the film resorts to a lateral strategy. Without upsetting the main progression of the action, the film subtly undermines the assumptions that the content of this action creates. More specifically, the film creates a specific framing pattern, according to which, shots are framed in such a way as to momentarily lead the audience into making ‘a *mistake* [my emphasis] of perceptual judgment’,⁶⁷ a mistake that is subsequently corrected when the film reveals a wider context of the scene that is shot. Through this pattern of re-contextualisation, the film investigates ‘the difficulty of seeing or seeing clearly’⁶⁸ and creates areas of significance that re-configure and re-adjust our understanding of the film. The scene in Eddie’s hotel room, as well as the scene in the office of a newspaper during Eddie’s trial, are the most characteristic examples.

In the first case, the scene opens with a tracking shot in close up that reveals a series of objects that the audience already identifies with Eddie. The camera records Eddie’s initialed hat and a picture of Joan, until it completes its movement and records a person lying on a bed (Figures 59-61). As Wilson observes, ‘because of the overall resemblance to Eddie and the associations with the objects’⁶⁹ we initially think that this person is Eddie. However, the person is actually Eddie’s partner Monk, and we realise this as the film cuts to a shot of Eddie looking out the window, and then, to a wider shot revealing the whole room and Eddie standing by the window (Figures 62-63).

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 19

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 18

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 21

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 18

Figure 59

Figure 60

Figure 61

Figure 62

Figure 63

In the second case, as Wilson observes, the scene opens with a close up of a newspaper whose headlines announce that Eddie has been found innocent (Figure 64). As the camera pans slowly to the left, it shows another front page announcing that the jury cannot reach a decision (Figure 65). Finally, as the film cuts to a wider shot, a third front page is revealed next to the other two, announcing that Eddie is guilty (Figure 66). The phone rings, the newspaper editor picks it up and, while listening silently, he picks out the ‘guilty’ front page (Figure 67-68).⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 18

Figure 64

Figure 65

Figure 66

Figure 67

Figure 68

The momentary conflation between Eddie and Monk, as well as the apparently faulty emphasis on the ‘innocent’ front page, reveal the film’s capacity to stress the slippery nature of visual perception. By attributing different levels of prominence to its visual content⁷¹ and by making room for the possibility of our *misreading* this content, the film calls for our malleable and pliant understanding. Given the lack of actual evidence exculpating Eddie, the film seems to be prompting us to rethink what it is

⁷¹ The creation of different levels of prominence of the visible (or rather the ‘phenomenal’ more broadly) is construed by Karl Aschenbrenner as a crucial aspect of how artworks work and make sense. See Aschenbrenner K., *The Concept of Coherence in Art*, Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985, pp. 13-15. Aschenbrenner highlights and analyses the significance of ‘emergent’ and ‘recedent’ features in artworks in general (the differentiation between figure and ground in a painting, for example), although the particular function of such features in *You Only Live Once* is to sabotage subtly the basic line of the film’s intelligibility.

that we see, asking us to take a moment to interrogate what we actually know about Eddie.

Crucially, the ambiguity of the visual configuration of the two instances above (in the hotel room and in the newsroom) is reinforced by the obscure rendition of the bank robbery sequence, during which we are not able to tell who the perpetrator of the robbery is. More specifically, as Wilson suggests, during this sequence, the film focuses on a blurry shot of a pair of eyes, *resembling* Eddie's eyes, but does not subsequently reveal the person to whom these eyes really belong. The film also shows Eddie's initialed hat lying next to the bank robber, but the face of the robber is still not revealed (Figures 69-71).⁷² In these cases too, we cannot be sure to trust *our* eyes because, as the visual pattern of the film suggests, what we see can be a mistake, which may be corrected later on (as when the film allowed us to mistake Monk for Eddie), or, at least, one possibility situated within multiple other possibilities (as when the film revealed the two other newspaper headlines next to the one declaring Eddie innocent). The film keeps forging the pattern of mistaken or questionable inferences.

Figure 69

⁷² Wilson, *Narration in Light*, p. 20

Figure 70

Figure 71

The uncertainty produced by this pattern makes us question who Eddie really is and what he has done, allowing us *not* to take for granted the predominant line of the film's intelligibility. Although, overall, *You Only Live Once* goes to lengths to portray Eddie as an innocent victim of the social and judicial system, the moments of misrecognition and uncertainty above prompt us to reconsider our trust in the *prima facie* appearance of the film's action. And, although the ending of the film, that is, the revelation of the guilty robber inside the car, seems to be a vibrant affirmation of the predominant portrayal of Eddie as an innocent man, we could say that instances as the ones above manage to unsettle this affirmation, while shifting the meaning of the film.

As Wilson observes:

There are narrative films in which central aspects of their significance bear only an oblique relationship to the forms of dramatic closure they employ...That is, various factors that appear on the screen...peripheral to the strict development of the basic tale may be assigned a weight in the narration in such a way that the chief issues raised by the drama come to be modified, displaced or otherwise reappraised....When this counter-narrative weighting is apprehended, the whole gestalt⁷³ of the film seems to shift...It is quite

⁷³ Wilson uses the term 'gestalt' in order to describe the film's form as a whole. The term derives from German, meaning 'shape' or 'form'. It has been used by a theory in psychology ('Gestalt theory') which tries to explain the tendency of human perception to apprehend visual phenomena holistically and relationally, that is, to understand them as organised wholes, structures or patterns (as opposed to just regarding them as arrays of disconnected elements). In his work *Film as Art*, psychologist and art theorist Rudolf Arnheim has applied Gestalt theory principles to the study of film. One of the basic implications of the holistic, relational understanding of Gestalt theory is the principle of 'good continuation', that is, our propensity to *fill in the gaps* in order to make sense of a visual configuration that seems to be missing, or rather, not showing an element. In *Film as Art*, Arnheim shows how films can make use of the viewer's propensity to 'fill in the gaps', in the service of creative effects. A

probable that the subtly weighted patterns of visual content which ought to qualify or subvert the linear dynamics of plot will be experienced in a fragmentary way...The problem for the viewer of such a film is to locate a 'centred position' from which the oblique strands of narrational strategy can come together in a configuration that reorganises his or her perception and comprehension of the fictional events.⁷⁴

As it becomes evident, the aim of the film is to discretely construct an 'unreliable'⁷⁵ form of narration (as Wilson calls the film's strategy of opening up a gap in our inferences about what is going on in the film) that can accommodate different perspectives on the film's action. The question of whether and how these different perspectives 'fit or fail to fit together'⁷⁶ undercuts a straightforward and monolithic intelligibility of the film, by increasing the ways in which we can understand the latter.

Bigger Than Life:

Turning a Gap of Intelligibility into a Source of Significance:

As Wilson suggested, the way in which *You Only Live Once* presented the gap in its intelligibility bore only 'an oblique relationship' to the central dynamic of the film's

characteristic example Arnheim considers refers to a shot from *The Immigrant* (1917), where Charlie Chaplin is shown hanging over the side of a boat *with his back turned* to the audience. As Arnheim writes, the audience first thinks that 'the poor devil is paying his toll to the sea' but, then, suddenly, when Chaplin turns around, the audience realises that he has just hooked a large fish with his stick. The initial concealment of the shot is essential to the shot's comic effect, according to Arnheim. See Arnheim R. *Film as Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006 (first print 1957) p.36. Throughout *Film as Art*, Arnheim tends to favour modes of visual narration which are – as in the case of the moment just mentioned – indirect or oblique. See also Dhir M., 'A Gestalt Approach to Film Analysis' in Higgins S. (ed.), *Arnheim for Film and Media Studies*, New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. 90-106. Now, George Wilson is not a proponent of Gestalt theory (nor is he a proponent of its application in art or film theory in particular). His central concern in *Narration in Light* is just to examine the lateral patterns through which specific films unsettle and diversify their overall coherence. However, Wilson's use of the term 'gestalt' can be seen as his way of conveying and emphasising how our understanding of a film's form as a whole can be affected by a gap in the film's intelligibility.

⁷⁴ Wilson, *Narration in Light*, p. 10

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 40

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 40

dramatic progression. I would now like to examine the case of a film which creates a similar gap but in a more striking way.

As noted above, the film that I will examine is *Bigger Than Life*. In his article ‘On Film Narrative and Narrative Meaning’,⁷⁷ Wilson shows that, during a critical moment – when the protagonist Ed (James Mason) is about to kill his son – *Bigger Than Life* becomes noticeably obscure and crucially *disrupts* our understanding. It is through this disruption, though, that the film manages to gather our focus on the issue of its intelligibility. And the question that is raised is: does the obscurity that we encounter merely constitute an obstacle to the film’s intelligibility or can it also function as a potentially revelatory locus of significance that can make us re-examine the film as a whole?

Before analysing how Wilson’s suggestions help us tackle this question, I will delineate how the film leads up to the moment in question.

Ed Avery (James Mason) is a seemingly happily married schoolteacher who is, nevertheless, under serious stress to meet the financial demands of his family life. When he goes to the hospital struck by severe seizures of pain, he is diagnosed with a potentially fatal disease. Although having allowed for a connection between the stressful conditions of Ed’s life and Ed’s seizures, the film suddenly attributes the seizures to biological causes. Ed is submitted to cortisone treatment and, as a result of this treatment, his seizures stop, and he feels well and strong. While being heavily overdosed on cortisone, though, he starts growing delusions of intellectual and moral

⁷⁷ Wilson G., ‘On Film Narrative and Narrative Meaning’ in Allen R., Smith M. (eds.), *Film Theory and Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 221-238

superiority, criticising the moral disintegration of contemporary life. In a culmination of these delusions, he declares that he has been told by God – as Abraham was told by God – to sacrifice his son. When he rushes off to kill his son, and while standing at the door of his bedroom, an unexpected paralysing seizure (Figures 72-73), resembling his earlier ones (Figure 74), overtakes him.

Figure 72

Figure 73

Figure 74

But what is it that caused Ed's last seizure? Since the cortisone has apparently treated his earlier seizures, why does Ed's condition seem to reappear – that is – *after* Ed has been shown to be cured from it by the cortisone? And, if this seizure is *not* an instance of reappearance of his old condition, why does it have a similarly paralysing effect as before? The moment becomes increasingly intricate as it blurs the distinction between the physical and the mental causes of Ed's condition, making the film's initial ambiguity about the true causes of Ed's condition resurface in an arresting way.

The scene is likely to seem inscrutable, putting the film's internal consistency at stake. And, it remains enigmatic until the end of the film, since there is nothing in the rest of

the film to explain the attack of pain. As soon as Ed is taken to the hospital again, he recovers and becomes happily reunited with his family.

Nevertheless, as Wilson suggests, when we are faced with an apparent narrative anomaly, as the one above, we should take ‘a wider look’⁷⁸ at the film in order to find ways that could illuminate its meaning. What allows us to get this ‘wider look’ at the film in this case is the observation of a particular detail during the moment in question: Ed’s attack seems to be induced by the fact that Ed’s son stretches his hand towards Ed and presents him with a football (Figures 75-76). This football, as Wilson suggests, has acquired a ‘loaded psychological significance’⁷⁹ for Ed throughout the film. When the enfeebled Ed is about to go off to the hospital at the beginning of the film, he first takes a look at the ball (Figure 77). The latter has been sitting on the mantel, deflated and unused, as a weak reminder of Ed’s past athletic accomplishments, his ‘minor heroics’⁸⁰ during high school football. Ed asks his son to bring a pump, and they reinflate the ball (Figure 78), exactly like Ed himself is about to be ‘artificially reinflated’⁸¹ by the cortisone therapy that will make him stronger. And, after Ed’s therapy, he and his son repeatedly play with the ball but, now, the latter seems to have become an ‘emblem’, a ‘grotesque counterpart’⁸² of what Ed has become. By being overdosed with cortisone, Ed has been turned into a domineering and tyrannical father (Figures 79-84). The fact that his son points to him the object mirroring what he has become seems to make him finally collapse at the moment in question.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 229

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 228

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 228

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 228

⁸² Ibid. p. 228

Figure 75

Figure 76

Figure 77

Figure 78

Figure 79

Figure 80

Figure 81

Figure 82

Figure 83

Figure 84

Although the scene of Ed's last seizure remains ambiguously related to the scenes of Ed's earlier seizures, Wilson's analysis provides us with a nodal point (the presence of the football) through which we can access the scene's intelligibility. By observing the modulations of this nodal point throughout the film, we have worked through the film and found a 'surveyable pattern of explanatory connections'⁸³ that can elucidate the meaning of the scene, Wilson suggests. The film does not actually provide us with an answer to the equivocation around the true cause of Ed's last seizure (or around the true cause of the rest of the seizures, for that matter) but it does open up another route towards the understanding of Ed's behaviour.

What becomes evident from the analysis above is how a tension, a strain in a film's logic, although not ultimately straightened out, can nevertheless become the impetus for our discovering different ways in which a film can cohere. Throughout the thesis, I aim to examine how similar and even more striking tensions and strains in a film's logic can render this discovery possible.

Conclusion

By drawing on the work of film aestheticians Victor F. Perkins and George Wilson, this chapter has attempted to show how various tensions and aspects of formal intricacy in a film can function as meaningful aspects of the film's organisation. Perkins' understanding of the 'credibility' of a formal device allows us to assess the coherent function of peculiar formal devices in a film (i.e. the emphatic use of the red bedpost in *Red Desert* or the emphatic use of lights in *Rebel Without a Cause*), while

⁸³ Ibid. p. 230

his ‘synthetic’ approach to film form allows us not only to enhance our understanding of the coherence of film form (i.e. in the scene from *Carmen Jones*) but also – crucially – to test the coherent function of puzzling tensions within a film’s organisation (i.e. in the case of the Linz sequence or Lisa’s ‘impossible presence’ in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*).

Perkins’ synthetic understanding shows how these tensions, despite just increasing a film’s complexity, can also be incorporated in a film’s organisation through the latter’s tight relationality. This incorporation can be further understood in light of the work of aesthetician Monroe Beardsley and, specifically, in light of his notion of ‘internal’ complexity.

Now, the chapter, after having examined films that manage to internalise their tensions through their tightly unified organisation, further proceeds by examining films that are not as tightly integrated (as Perkins suggests). By drawing on Wilson’s work, the chapter explores how these films, instead of harmonising their tensions, develop patterns of coherence that produce the films’ diversified and more malleable intelligibility (i.e. the pattern of visual shifts in *You Only Live Once* and the pattern of the football’s use in *Bigger Than Life*).

Chapter 2 - The Elusive: Max Ophuls' *Madame De...*

Introduction

As it became evident in the first chapter of the thesis, a film's capacity to control the various tensions in its organisation becomes an essential contributor to the film's coherence. Now, before focusing on films characterised by apparently disruptive tensions, I would like to examine a film which manages to assimilate its tensions in a well ordered and tightly knit organisation. The present chapter will, therefore, analyse *Madame De...* (1953) by Max Ophuls, in order to show how the film manages to integrate its conflictual aspects. More specifically, the chapter will attempt to unravel the ways through which the film manages to incorporate compelling aspects of elusiveness and ambiguity⁸⁴ within an otherwise straightforward intelligibility.

As I tried to show in the first chapter, according to V.F. Perkins, a film becomes coherently tied together as it manages to find a compromise between the need to represent a clear dramatic action, on the one hand, and the need to construct expressive significance and emphasis, on the other. In other words, the close intertwining between clarity of representation and expressive suggestiveness becomes, for Perkins, a crucial aspect of a film's coherence. But what happens when the expressive, suggestive function of the film image becomes particularly slippery and uncertain? How can a film still make sense while maintaining this kind of elusive suggestiveness? It is this question that I will attempt to answer in this chapter.

⁸⁴ In the first chapter, I have already examined films that contain the function of ambiguity as an aspect of their organisation (i.e. *In a Lonely Place*, *You Only Live Once* or *Bigger than Life*). In this chapter, though, I am especially interested in a particular mode of ambiguity, namely, the tension between precision and elusiveness, as it will become subsequently evident.

As Perkins has observed (in his analysis of the peculiar voice-over *Letter from an Unknown Woman*), even when the meaning of certain aspects of a film's action eschews a neat or literal understanding, the film can still develop its own particular intelligibility, growing out of the balanced and unified interaction of its formal elements. In line with Perkins' understanding, I will attempt to trace this balance and this unity in *Madame De...*and, specifically, in the two main areas of the film's dramatic focus, that is, the representation of the protagonists' love affair – the love affair between Louise (Danielle Darrieux) and Baron Donati (Vittorio De Sica) – as well as the portrayal of Louise, whose actions incite the drama of the film (see below).

As I will attempt to show, in both cases, the film manages to construct a tight and balanced interplay between a more precise and more elusive stylistic tendency. In the first case, although the film's style seems to gradually forge the intimacy of the two lovers, at the same time, it seems to fleetingly infuse each of their encounters with the perspective of its disintegration. In the second case, although the film seems to insist on a clear-cut and stereotypical rendition of Louise's character, at the same time, it evokes fugitive and more subtle aspects of her subjectivity. In both cases, the elements of elusiveness which mark the film cultivate an 'openness'⁸⁵ of dramatic possibilities that unsettles and destabilises the film's obvious meaning. The film manages to contain and control this 'openness', though, through its closely knit organisation.

⁸⁵ The term 'openness to possibility' is used by V.F. Perkins to describe a characteristic feature of Ophüls' work in Perkins V.F., "'Same Tune Again!' – Repetition and Framing in *Letter from An Unknown Woman*" in *CineAction*, No 52, September 2000, p. 45

The Film's Overall Structure:

Evading Probability while Maintaining Unity

Before analysing the specific stylistic strategies through which the film develops (and controls) this 'openness', I would like to situate the latter within the film's wider arrangement. In order to do so, I will attempt to trace how this 'openness' operates within the film's overall structure, while comparing the latter with the structure of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, the other Ophuls' film examined by the thesis.

As we saw in the first chapter of the thesis, V.F. Perkins has found in Max Ophuls' work an ideal example of the ways in which a film can coherently sustain fictional possibilities without resorting to an obvious or rational logic in its development. As mentioned in the first chapter, the careful handling of the voice-over in *Letter From an Unknown Woman* allowed the film to establish a pragmatically 'impossible continuity' between conflicting narrative assumptions (that is, between the content of Lisa's letter and the content of the film's flashbacks which the reading of the letter gives way to). The film's cohesive stylistic design, as Perkins suggested, managed to render possible, as it were, this 'impossible continuity', allowing the film to convincingly elaborate and maintain its autonomous fictional logic.

Similarly, *Madame De...* creates – if not a strictly 'impossible' continuity – a highly improbable one, between the events that it brings together. The film contrives an emphatically accidental trajectory of a pair of earrings, so as to provide a framework for the emergence and the growth of the intimacy between Louise and Donati. More specifically, the film, instead of pursuing the neat credibility of its connections, pronounces the coincidental character of the latter, and uses the effect of this

‘coincidence’, in order to elaborate a distinctly suggestive narrative design. To cover her expenses, Louise, wife of a general (Charles Boyer) decides to sell a pair of earrings despite the fact that they were a wedding gift by her husband. She lets her husband believe that she has lost them. When the general finds out about the transaction, he secretly buys them back and gives them to his mistress who in turn sells them to a merchant in Constantinople to raise some money in order to gamble. After the earrings are placed in the show window of the merchant’s shop, *they suddenly appear in the suitcase of the diplomat, Baron Donati, who is having his bags checked at a train station in Paris.* During the check, Donati seems to try to catch the attention of a woman who has incited his interest. *The woman is Louise.* Donati runs to introduce himself to her but Louise’s train is already gone. From that moment on, Louise and Donati start meeting accidentally and, after having introduced each other during a crash of their coaches and having met at a series of balls, finally fall in love. When Louise decides to leave Paris for a while, Donati unknowingly gifts her back her earrings, so that she can think of him.

It is by chance – it seems – that *Louise’s* earrings appeared in Donati’s suitcase. And, it is apparently by chance again, that the presence of the earrings resurfaces when Louise is about to leave Paris, and Donati asks her to hold on to their complicity. Through these coincidences, the film defies the logic of plausibility, explicitly pulverising any rational system of cause and effect.

Nevertheless, it is exactly the film’s irrational design that forges the film’s peculiar logic. Rather than merely exposing the film’s fictional status, the film’s coincidences become decisive contributors to the film’s central dynamic, determining the key developments of the film’s story. When Louise returns from Paris, she wears the

earrings at a night out at the opera with her husband, claiming that she has found them. The general, who had already been growing suspicious of Louise's fondness of Donati, thus discovers the affair. He confronts Donati at a ball, and only then does the latter find out that they had been a wedding gift for Louise. Disappointed with Louise's concealment, he grows distant and leaves her. *It is the betrayal of the secret of the earrings that triggers the loss of the lovers' complicity.* In a display of relentlessness, the general gifts the earrings to a cousin, but Louise manages to get them back as soon as she finds out that their cousin has sold them back to the jeweler to cover her debts. When the general finds out that Louise has bought back the earrings, he challenges Donati to a fatal duel and Louise, overwhelmed, succumbs to her weak heart.

The parallelism between the trajectory of the earrings and the progression of the lovers' desire for each other becomes the nodal point of the film's organisation. Through this parallelism, the apparently contingent events that triggered the love affair do *not* appear as *random* but rather acquire a constitutive and pivotal role in the film, becoming catalysts of the film's plot. Thus, despite the unlikely and apparently far-fetched⁸⁶ character of the film's progression, the function of the latter is not disruptive of the film's coherence but rather integral to it.

In a way, we could say that the function of contingency in the film is not incidental and unqualified but rather eloquently *knowing*, since it manages to provide, or more accurately, to convey the rationale of the film's love story. As I will argue, it is this

⁸⁶ The drastic presence of chance in the film – as this is unapologetically reflected in the reversal of the earrings' trajectory (that is, their apparently accidental return to Louise) – has a considerably comic effect. In this respect, the film is different from *Letter from an Unknown Woman* which, according to Perkins' account, avoids the effect of a 'gag'. Nevertheless, the gag of *Madame De...* does not distort the film's logic but rather remains persuasive as an aspect of the latter's 'knowingness' (see just below in text).

eloquently knowing contingency that simultaneously moulds *and* unsettles the progression of the lovers' encounters. It propels and shapes the love affair, while, at the same time, imbuing the latter with a crucial aspect of uncertainty. In the following section, I will attempt to explain how this double effect is reflected in the stylistic organisation of the affair.

Patterning Uncertainty:

Louise and Donati's Love Affair

During the scenes of the lovers' 'togetherness', the film consistently forges an interrogative relation between what is shown and the way of showing it. More specifically, the film constructs these scenes in such a way as to pose the question of whether the lovers are or can actually be together. The depiction of the lovers' intimacy is always accompanied by an intimation of a loss of this intimacy. The disturbing possibility of the lovers' separation tinges each encounter between Louise and Donati with the suggestion of its undoing and the haunting perspective of its extinction. The film never specifies whether the lovers are brought together or kept apart. The pattern of this balanced oscillation between the two perceptions of the lovers' 'togetherness' becomes an essential element of the film's method that unifies the film's style. Through this pattern, the film simultaneously establishes and undermines the dramatic continuity of the love affair's progression.

A suitcase opens at a noisy train station and the pair of earrings that has just been sold to a merchant in Constantinople appears in a close up (Figure 1). The owner of the suitcase anxiously urges the officer at the station to ask him where he found these

earrings. He is stalling because he wants a lady to notice him. In the next shot, the camera has moved backwards and to the left (long shot), registering Louise in the background of the shot (Figure 2). The camera pans as Louise moves towards the man. However, Louise, unaware of the man's efforts, swiftly glances at him and rushes off towards the train (Figures 3-4). When Louise moves away, the man and the camera stay firm (Figure 5). The film cuts to an enigmatic medium close up of Louise's face – as Louise looks towards the direction of the man – and, then, cuts to a long shot of the man from behind Louise (Figures 6-7). The man runs towards Louise, but the officer does not allow him to proceed without checking his passport. The man's remark that he is a diplomat does not help. When he finally finds his passport, it is too late – Louise is already gone (Figures 8-9)

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Apparently, one could say, Louise and the ‘man’ (Donati, as we find out in the next scene of the film, the scene of the carriage crash) had ‘a moment’. A little less apparently, though, that moment may not have existed at all. What distinguishes the construction of this scene is not only the film’s attempt to represent the lovers’ first intimate moment but also its attempt to make us wonder whether that moment actually took place. The construction of the scene revolves around a fundamental equivocation. Did an intimate moment between them take place or not? Was the accidental encounter between Louise and the ‘man’ crucial or trivial? No reaction of

the characters, even when – during their subsequent meetings – they acknowledge that they may ‘have met before’, can give an answer.

Although the scene centralises on the physical proximity of the characters, a careful choreography of glances maintains the scene’s equivocation. Louise and Donati never straightforwardly look at each other. When Louise first glances at Donati during the circular pan that follows her rushing movement around him, her glance is fleeting and seemingly perfunctory, as she is absorbed in a discussion. Donati’s look, which has triggered the camera’s pan, tries to incite a response but remains suspended. Although it tries to attract and keep Louise’s look in its orbit, the latter resists.

The elusiveness of Louise’s gaze is reinforced by the elusiveness of her presence. Through the camera’s pan, Louise is drawn first towards and then away from Donati. As Louise is drawn towards him, she also comes closer to the camera, thus appearing larger on the screen. As she rushes off, her presence shrinks while the camera stands firm and observes her from a distance. Within the sweeping movement of the camera’s pan, the film manages to simultaneously portray the emergent proximity of Louise’s presence (both to the camera and Donati) *and* convey Louise’s light hearted elusiveness. The intensity of Donati’s anticipation is first excited and then arrested. Through the asymmetrical affective character of the shot, the film introduces a gap between the emotional perspectives of Louise and Donati, a gap that is sustained until the end of the scene.

The asymmetry of the characters’ perspectives is obliquely sustained by the film’s subsequent medium close up of Louise’s face. Although the direction of Louise’s look, as well as the frontality of the shot, emphatically suggest that Louise is looking towards Donati, the film does not complement the shot with an equivalent reverse

shot, so as to encourage the possibility characters' reciprocal interaction. Instead of juxtaposing two confrontational close ups, the film chooses to focus only on a shot of Louise's opaque and inaccessible look. The medium close up of Louise also punctuates the panning camera movement that reflects the momentum of Donati's longing. Whether this punctuation constitutes an interruption of this momentum or a response to this momentum remains unclear. The unusual visual configuration of the scene both points to and conceals the possibility of the characters' mutual responsiveness.

The film further deflects our understanding of the characters' encounter by cutting to a long shot of Donati from behind Louise's head. The shot does not simply record Donati's presence from the direction of Louise's point of view but rather accentuates the problem of Louise's point of view. *Does she really relate to him? Does she really respond to his desire?* Once again, in a more pronounced denial of the straightforward shot-reverse-shot pattern, the film insists on questioning what actually happens between the characters. Instead of revealing a mutual responsiveness between them, it presents their interaction indirectly and preserves its opacity. By refusing to be assimilated in the clear-cut logic of the shot-reverse-shot pattern, the shot of Donati from behind Louise eschews assertion, while allowing for an intimate *in-between*, an intertwining of the characters' perspectives, in which the always fugitive spark of an intimate 'first sight' may have arisen. It seems that the encounter between Louise and Donati contains both the power and the frailty of a spark. The film protects its power but also acknowledges its frailty, dramatising both a possibility and its elusiveness. The ambiguity of the visual configuration of the scene emerges as a tension between an obvious meaning of the scene and a more destabilised one.

The film keeps bringing Louise and Donati together only to emphasise that their intimacy may be bound to the fate of its loss. The vulnerability of the intimate moment reappears when Louise and Donati accidentally meet for a second time during the crash of their coaches. Although, this time, they clearly confront each other, their encounter is instantaneous and succumbs to the hustle and haste of their coachmen. Instead of presenting this meeting as a juncture in the lives of the characters, the film playfully places it in a context of fast-paced action and socially befitting dialogue. Louise and Donati joke about the fact that they have met before in the station and the exchange of jokes is interrupted when Louise's coach begins to leave and Donati's nervous coachman urges him to come back to his coach. More importantly, the film's rapid cutting *across the axis* during the shot-reverse-shot pattern of the scene disturbs the continuity of the action and breaks the space of Louise and Donati's interaction into two separate spheres. (Figures 10-11) This unusual inflection of the shot-reverse-shot pattern has a slightly disorienting effect, conveying the agitation of the scene, while keeping each of the two characters fixed and isolated in discreet segments of space. The camera seems to spin around the characters but in a broken circle, and the film uses the spatial fragmentation in order to reinforce the sense of a moment becoming brittle in its fleetingness. The tension between the apparent actualisation of the moment and the latter's elusiveness troubles the straightforward intelligibility of the scene.

Figure 10

Figure 11

Although the represented action joins the characters again, the structure of scene suggests their separateness. This separateness is further emphasised by the fact that although Donati has stepped off his carriage, Louise remains inside hers, waiting to depart. Their attempt to communicate is dismantled by the urgency of their departure and the ‘broken’ editing style. Their interaction thus appears cracked and incomplete.

The fleetingness of the characters’ interaction is finally reflected at the end of the scene, when Louise’s coach disappears in the distance, and Donati stares at it, while the latter moves away, shrinking (Figure 12). The shot recalls the ending shot of the train station scene when Donati stared towards the train leaving. The sparseness of the shot now reflects Donati’s drained disposition once again. His solitary and immobile figure delineates a feeling of suspended expectation, nourished by Louise’s constant departures. The image of Donati’s waiting encapsulates once again the affective asymmetry with which the film infuses the interaction of the characters. Through the structural similarity between the ending of this scene and the ending of the preceding scene at the train station, the film both suggests and bypasses the possibility of the characters’ intimacy.

Figure 12

The third accidental meeting of Louise and Donati seems to be a nodal point in their relation as it is presented as the beginning of an affair. They meet at a ball in Paris, they are by chance placed side by side at the table and, when they start waltzing together, it seems that they cannot stop. They keep seeing each other in subsequent balls and always dance together. Although at the beginning of the sequence the couple's talks are effortlessly limited to an exchange of trivialities – 'Do you have any news from your husband?' Donati asks Louise – at the end, this conventional exchange acquires the tired and unsatisfied tone of an unfulfilled feeling: the characters have fallen in love.

The narrative 'point' of the sequence seems to be the growing intimacy of the couple. However, the film manages to subtly place this intimacy within the context of its undoing and defeat. Although the sequence represents an unfolding and even an apotheosis of a growing mutual desire, it simultaneously unsettles the idea of an absolute romantic fusion of the lovers. It is built on three parts, each constituting a field on which the 'togetherness' of the couple is challenged.

The first part of the sequence presents Louise and Donati sitting together at the large table of the ballroom and takes place during one of the rare static shots of the film. Although the image of the characters' 'togetherness' seems to constitute the focus of this static medium shot, it is constantly upset by the intrusion of surrounding

movement. Friends of the two characters repeatedly enter and leave the frame, greeting the two characters and disrupting their mutual flirtation. A struggle grows between the couple's longing for privacy and the demand for social courtesy (Figures 13-14).

Figure 13

Figure 14

A tension is further orchestrated between focus and distraction: two candlesticks almost form a second frame around Louise and Donati, formally designating a closed off space that seems to protect their privacy. However, the swaying of Louise's fan breaks and destabilises the self-sufficiency of the couple's framed isolation. This isolation is never firmly established. It seems that Louise's swaying of the fan does not only encapsulate her flirtatious nervousness but also mechanically reassures the social propriety of her behavior. In a way, it does not only convey the intensity of an impending intimate moment with Donati but also creates a distraction that assimilates this intensity in a socially coded conduct. By subtly condensing divergent meanings within a single gesture, the film poignantly interrogates the nature of the characters' interaction.

The tension between focus and distraction is further reinforced by the movement of the dancers reflected in the mirror behind the couple. The dancing couples spin around themselves but soon each partner lets go of the other and moves forward to another one. The alternation of centripetal and centrifugal movement of the dancers is

characterised by the motion of drawing together and drawing apart, thus allowing the film to create a visual aside encapsulating the ambivalent dynamic that also permeates Louise and Donati's interaction. The film incisively but elusively (the mirror being in the background of the shot) puts the clear-cut intelligibility of Louise and Donati's encounter to the test.

In the next part of the sequence, Louise and Donati leave their table and begin to dance the long waltz that conveys the gradual build-up of their affair. The tension of the first part of the sequence – just analysed above – gives way to the gradual culmination of the couple's desire, stirred by the constant whirling of the waltz. This whirling partly reminds us of the dance that was reflected in the mirror behind the couple, but, now, dancing has shifted from the background to the foreground. What was then only a reflection has entered the proscenium of the sequence. Contrary to the dance reflected in the mirror, in this dance, the partners are never separated from each other but turn repeatedly around themselves (Figures 15-17). Louise and Donati spin around themselves, and it is this spinning that sucks them in their mutual fantasy. Through the circular motion of the dance, the film seems to *consolidate* Louise's and Donati growing intimacy, allowing the couple to become increasingly absorbed in the potentiality of their mutual desire.

Figure 15

Figure 16

Figure 17

However, it is only this potentiality that feeds the couple's intimacy: although the momentum of the dance sequence is launched to a climax of vertiginous whirling, it finally tapers off. Its progression marks both the unfolding of a promise and its gradual attenuation. In the final part of the sequence, the couple appears waltzing in an empty ballroom. Dancing has now shifted back to the background because the image of the waltzing couple has become a reflection in the mirror (Figure 18). As the camera follows the departure of one musician, it provides successive glimpses of the couple through different mirrors hanging on the walls of the ballroom (Figures 19-20). And, when the camera reaches the couple, it shortly passes it by. The pace of the waltz has been slowed down. The image of the couple's 'togetherness', although seemingly affirmed in the preceding shots, appears distanced and only fragmentarily accessible, as it eludes the constant movement of the camera. The dense frontality of the first shots of the dance sequence (Figures 21-22) is now replaced by a series of oblique views of the couple. Through the attenuation of the waltz's momentum, the film manages to situate the intimacy of the couple within an orbit of transience, undermining the salience of this intimacy.

Figure 18

Figure 19

Figure 20

Figure 21

Figure 22

Even during the climax of the waltz sequence, the film interrogates the predominant dream-like dynamic of the dramatic action by establishing a tension between the aspirations of fantasy and the weight of reality. Although the smoothly flowing camera movement lends to the sequence the pace and the affective tonality of the couple's fantasy, it is sometimes interrupted by the presence of objects and people intervening between the camera and the couple. Louise and Donati appear and disappear amidst tableaux, sculptures, plants and other dancing couples. The camera's movement becomes momentarily arrested by these interferences, while also managing

to bypass them (Figures 23-26), following the couple. The point of view of the film acquires an elusive legibility by being both attuned to and detached from the affective momentum of the characters (see the next section for a further analysis of the film's elusive point of view).

Figure 23

Figure 24

Figure 25

Figure 26

The predominant dream-like dynamic of the sequence is reinforced by recurrent cross-fades that join a series of successive dances. Although Louise and Donati dance together at a series of balls, their dances appear as one continuous dance. The successive cross-fades unify the sequence and enhance the fluency of the couple's dancing movement. By following this movement, the camera conveys the life of the couple's fantasy, streaming along with it. Apparently, all that exists for the couple are their dancing moments together.

Suddenly, though, a cross-fade gives way to a close up of a tableau that fills the screen (Figure 27). The movement of the characters and the softness of the cross-fade meet with the rigidity of the tableau (Figures 27-28). The film's focus on the

impervious surface of the tableau allows the materiality of décor to disrupt the hallucinatory mobility of the dance, disengaging the viewer momentarily from his immersion in the couple's growing fantasy. Moreover, the syncopated, almost mechanical movement of an old couple traversing the foreground of a subsequent shot introduces another interpolation of materiality (Figures 29). These interpolations of materiality unsettle the graceful mobility of the camera movement and the Louise and Donati's dance, unhinging the sequence from its prevalent ethereal aesthetic. The ambivalence of the sequence's texture collaborates with the ambivalence of the sequence's point of view, so as to undercut the sequence's prominent intelligibility.

Figure 27

Figure 28

Figure 29

At last, when Louise and Donati appear dancing in the deserted ballroom, the film conveys the feel of a performance that has just ended. In a long take, the camera focuses on the musicians of the ballroom band, who prepare to leave, one by one. The music gradually and wistfully fades away, and the lights are extinguished. In a medium long shot, the camera then focuses on a harp, observing the black cover that

ceremonially falls on it (Figures 30-31). In the manner of an ‘ending’ ritual, the film concludes the dance sequence, leaving, thus, the couple’s growing fantasy suspended in its potentiality. By evoking the end of a performance, the film’s style undermines the reality of the couple’s affair, containing the latter in a realm of virtuality.

Figure 30

Figure 31

And, even when the feelings of Louise and Donati become finally manifested outside this realm (when Donati visits Louise’s home to give her the earrings, just before Louise leaves for the Italian lakes), the film still imbues this manifestation with a melancholic tone of undoing. The dialogue of the scene in Louise’s home expresses the characters’ longing for each other, but this expression actually evokes the separation of the two characters (i.e. ‘Without me?’, asks Donati when Louise tells him of her departure. ‘I’ll wonder about that myself when I get there’, Louise replies). A painting of the Waterloo battle hanging between the characters in Louise’s living room tinges the characters’ encounter with an allusion to a final defeat, while also demarcating the distance between the characters. Louise and Donati appear immobile in a long shot (Figure 32), standing on opposite sides of the painting, facing each other. This distance between the characters seems to ambiguously contain both the intensity and the elegy of the characters’ yearning, foregrounding the elusive affective orientation of the moment. The film stresses the ambiguity of the moment, in order to forge the uncertain status of the scene’s meaning.

Figure 32

Moreover, the melancholy of the non-diegetic tune that accompanies the scene reinforces the elegiac tone of the characters' encounter. The tune continues even when Louise and Donati come closer to each other, each of their bodies tenderly leaning on the other (Figure 33). The somber melody of the tune accompanies the moment of the characters' direct physical contact, thus undercutting the actualisation of the couple's intimacy with the suggestion of the couple's separation. The evocative capacity of the scene's style as a whole eludes the explicit content of the film image, consistently unsettling the solidity of the couple's intimacy.

Figure 33

Forging a Tension between the Overt and the Evocative:

The Presentation of Louise

The portrayal of Louise is another crucial field on which the film carefully unfolds and controls an oscillation between the conveyance of a seemingly overt meaning and the conveyance of another kind of meaning that remains open ended and elusive. On the one hand, Louise's character seems to be presented as a type of character – the type of the frivolous, socially privileged wife who makes 'mysteries out of trifles'⁸⁷ and falls in love only to entertain her idleness. On the other hand, the film's style keeps evading this typification, evoking aspects of Louise's subjectivity that hint at the possibility of an unexpected and suggestive intensity. The obviousness of 'Madame de...' as a stereotypical figure is put to question as the film begins to show how Louise's desire starts to break through the capricious inertia of Louise's life and begins to suggest the complexity of her pulsating inner life. The film balances a tension between the presentation of the clearly demarcated identity of 'Madame de...', and the suggestion of the intractable potentiality of Louise's desire. Although the film elaborates Louise's portrayal through actions that explicitly place her in the orbit of a world of trivialities, at the same time, it subtly brings forth the creeping potency of Louise's desire, a desire which transforms the 'obvious' into a field of penetrating ambiguity that unsettles any simplified understanding of Louise.

The first scene of the film exhibits the superficiality and opulence of Louise's lifestyle and poignantly portrays her as a kind of lighthearted woman conspicuously enjoying her social privileges and playfully trying to escape the routine of a good marriage. However, as I will attempt to show, despite the scene's insistence on Louise's

⁸⁷ As Louise's husband mentions about her in the film.

satisfied frivolity, the stereotypical portrayal of Louise is undercut by the scene's polysemically melancholic tone.

The scene begins with a typified characterisation of Louise, as the following words appear on the screen:

Madame de... was a most elegant lady, distinguished, received everywhere. She seemed destined to a delightful, untroubled existence. Doubtless nothing would have happened but for the jewels...⁸⁸

These opening words are followed by a close up of a female hand opening and searching inside a box of jewels. The close up follows the hand as it keeps searching for something in a wardrobe full of furs and hats (Figures 34-36). It is Louise's hand – as we find out immediately after (see below) – looking for an item to sell. The gliding movement of Louise's hand is distinctly purposeful as it is being geared and guided by Louise's off screen voice speculating on the best choice: 'What should I do...? The trouble is they were his nuptial gift...Oh, not my furs, I'm too fond of them...*This* one...'. The camera's unhurried but directed mobility, reflecting the movement of Louise's hand, conveys a relaxed, yet controlling vantage point that has the material world at its disposal. Playful pauses punctuate this mobility, as Louise's hand intermittently stops to examine a particular item, its fingers lingering on the objects that it touches. The material world seems to be a playground for Louise's mind, a tame and safe field on which her capacity of choice is enacted. When Louise finally decides to give away the pair of earrings that her husband gifted her, her fiddly gestures culminate in her performing the gesture of wearing the earrings in front of

⁸⁸ Translation by the DVD. *Madame de...* [DVD] 2009 Second Sight Films Ltd. (Catalogue number: 2NDVD 3106)

her mirror (Figure 37). The style of the film's opening scene underlines the sense of Louise's idle self-theatricalisation, pronouncing the detached ease with which Louise defines her relation to her life, encapsulating her carefree nonchalance.

Figure 34

Figure 35

Figure 36

Figure 37

At the same time, however, the film envelops Louise's lifestyle with a subtle, simmering melancholy, conveyed through the wistful tune that accompanies Louise's gestures. The melancholy of this tune becomes evocative of dramatic possibilities not yet revealed within the present scene: the film will use the same tune again during its ending (over a shot of the earrings that Louise dedicates to the Madonna in the church), when Louise and Donati will be already dead. Through this repetition, the tune becomes an ambiguous leitmotif that joins tonally a moment of apparent frivolity and a moment of tragedy. The tonal unity of these moments suggests a bond or, rather, a continuum between Louise's lightheartedness and the fatal consequences of Louise's desire, obliquely counteracting the pronounced nonchalance of the opening scene. Although the actual reason for this tension between melancholy and

nonchalance is not yet clear during the beginning of the film (the film's opening has just hinted at it through the words 'doubtless nothing would have happened but for the jewels...'), it is precisely this lack of clarity, this obscurity that becomes suggestive of a disturbing and rather haunting foreboding. The film uses the ambiguity of its tone in order to produce its elusive suggestiveness. As it also became evident in the section above – during the scene of Louise and Donati's meeting in Louise's living room – the tonal configuration of the film becomes a characteristic strategy through which the latter establishes its elusive orientation.

The film further interrogates the clear-cut understanding of Louise's situation in the opening scene, by lending to the scene's sound an especially indeterminate status. Just after the melancholic tune mentioned above is introduced, it starts to be hummed by a woman, but, since Louise's face is off screen, we are not able to figure out whose voice it is that hums. Is it a non-diegetic voice or is it Louise's voice? When Louise starts talking to herself ('*What should I do?*'), just after the humming stops and just before it starts again, the mystery of the voice is not dispelled but is rather reinforced exactly because the hue of her talking voice cannot be distinguished from the hue of the humming voice. Is it Louise's voice that is crooning or is it a voice similar to hers? The voice maintains an elusive relation to Louise actual presence, evoking it but not clearly pointing to it. The film seems to play with the status of Louise's voice as an 'acousmètre', that is, the voice of a character who, according to Michel Chion, remains off screen but is still implicated in a film's action. As Chion observes:

The acousmètre is neither inside nor outside the image. It is not inside, because the image of the voice's source – the body, the mouth – is not included in what we see. It is neither outside, though, since its source is not

clearly and firmly positioned off screen, because it is constantly on the verge of appearing on screen.⁸⁹

The humming voice suggests a disturbing and ambiguous continuity with Louise's actual presence. The conflation of the humming voice and Louise's voice tinges Louise's existence with a sense of ghostly duality that makes Louise appear as being both present to and absent from her own action. Is Louise just the carefree Madame de... humming a tune to pass her time or is Louise an unknown voice of melancholy, evoking the presence of a lack, otherwise concealed by the clutter of an extravagant lifestyle? Through the ghostly duality of the humming voice, the melancholy of the tune ambiguously alludes not only to the actual death of the lovers that is about to take place but also to a broader sense of privation permeating Louise's apparently untroubled activity.

The ghostly duality of the humming voice is reinforced by the configuration of the camera's point of view. As the camera is placed *slightly* to the right of Louise's assumed presence, reflecting Louise's movements, it seems to be both attuned to and removed from Louise's subjectivity. Many of Ophuls' critics have observed that Ophuls' work is marked by an intricate relation between the point of view of the camera and the subjective point of view of the character(s). Characteristically, as Robin Wood has shown,⁹⁰ the camerawork in Ophuls' work can be described as producing 'a sense of closeness without identification' (in relation to the character(s)'

⁸⁹ Chion M., *Audio-vision – Sound on Screen*, Gorbman C. ed & trans., Columbia University Press 1994, pp.129. In this study, among many other aspects of the use of sound in film, Chion analyses the function of the particular use of voice in film, which he dubs the 'acousmètre' (from 'acousmatic' and the French être [being]): 'The acousmètre is a kind of voice-character specific to cinema that in most instances of cinematic narratives derives mysterious powers from being heard but not seen'. (p.221)

⁹⁰ Wood R., *Personal Views*, Wayne State University Press (Revised edition), London, 1976, p.156

point of view). As Wood suggests,⁹¹ this kind of ambiguous relation between the two points of view implies their slight separation, but, as the opening scene suggests, it also implies a disturbing and ambivalent continuity between them. As the shots of Louise's hand become attuned to the momentum of the Louise's movement, they assimilate and disseminate this momentum, extending it beyond the spatial coordinates of Louise's actual presence. The film seems to construct an intricate and *diffuse* sense of agency that seems to accommodate Louise's subjectivity, while also unhinging the latter from its embeddedness in its apparent coordinates. In this way, the film interrogates the fixed demarcation of Louise's subjectivity, attributing to the latter a rather indefinite potency. As the opening scene suggests, it is the ambivalent point of view of the camera that gears and expands the portrayal of Louise's subjectivity towards a more elusive potentiality.⁹²

The film elaborates the elusive potentiality of Louise's subjectivity by also using Louise's relation to the mirror in order to convey the sense of Louise's displaced presence. The first time Louise's face appears on screen is through its reflection in the mirror, in front of which Louise tries the earrings she is about to sell (Figures 37-38).

⁹¹ Ibid. p157

⁹² My understanding of the ambiguous relation between the film's and Louise's point of view – by focusing on the continuity between the two points of view, as well as on the effect of the 'potentiality' of Louise's subjectivity – specifically underlines the *possibility* of Louise's freedom. However, in his article 'Max Ophuls and the Limits of Virtuosity: On the Aesthetics and Ethics of Camera Movement', Daniel Morgan stresses the discontinuous aspect between the film's and Louise's point of view, in order to show that the film is (also) responsive to the *limitations* of Louise's point of view. According to Morgan's understanding, the film, while being attuned to Louise's interiority, also displays the limits of her freedom. The two understandings are not necessarily mutually exclusive, since the possibility of Louise's freedom, as the film's elusive style shows – and as Morgan also suggests – remains fleeting, fugitive.

See Morgan D., 'Max Ophuls and the Limits of Virtuosity: On the Aesthetics and Ethics of Camera Movement' [online], *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 2011, pp. 127-163. http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/uploads/pdf/Morgan,_Ophuls.pdf [Accessed 10 July 2014], especially pp.131,140-141.

Figure 38

By introducing Louise in this way, the film does not simply portray her as a woman defined by her appearance but it also portrays her *as* an appearance dissociated from Louise's actual presence. Since Louise's actual face remains off screen, its reflection remains detached, disconnected from it, referring to it as only as an absent presence. By placing Louise's look within the mirror, the film situates Louise's subjectivity in a place that is *different* from the one it actually finds itself in, dislocating it, as it were. Thus, the film's focus on the gesture of mirroring does not only allow Louise to affirm her look – a look that remains hermetically sealed within its elegant appearance – but, crucially, it also allows this look to free itself from the actual context from which it derives and appear from the depth of the (virtual) space behind the mirror glass. Through the film's focus on the gesture of mirroring, Louise is felt to be (again) not only present to but also absent from her action. By pointing to this unfixed and indefinite locus of Louise's subjectivity, the film eludes the predominant presentation of Louise without, however, overtly disrupting it.

The film keeps utilising the workings of mirrors beyond the opening scene, in order to elusively unsettle the predominant presentation of Louise. The camera lingers on an empty mirror inside the jeweler's office, just after the jeweler fetches some water to wake up Louise, who pretends to pass out so as to convince the jeweler of the urgency

of her need to sell her earrings (Figures 39-42). The mirror hangs on the wall just opposite Louise but, because of its placement at a higher level than Louise, is not able to reflect her 'performance'. The camera's lingering on this empty mirror fleetingly introduces the image of an unsettling vacancy to the scene, disturbing momentarily the frivolity of Louise's 'harmless', trick performance. The film's passing focus on the surface of the mirror, by recalling the virtual space of Louise's presence during the film's opening, becomes a vaguely allusive gesture through which the film destabilises its intelligibility.

Figure 39

Figure 40

Figure 41

Figure 42

Structuring Suggestiveness: Rhyming Sequences

The film constructs a tight interplay between the more obvious and the oblique aspects of Louise not only through the suggestive arrangement of a particular scene but also through the meticulous concern with relating scenes by pairing them stylistically. The stylistic pairing and subtle variation of these scenes creates a mutual

permeability of their meaning and thus allows for the emergence of complexity and ambiguity. Pairing scenes – as Ophuls does⁹³ – is the most overt stylistic example of a rhyme and, therefore, an overt kind of similarity that can render intelligible a particular variation (as a straightforward result of repetition). However, it is precisely this strategy of pairing scenes that produces not only variation but also ambiguity. I will attempt to show how the film uses this strategy to actually undermine clarity rather than securing it.

The pair of the two scenes of Louise in the church exemplifies this strategy. In both scenes Louise goes to the church to pray but for two different reasons: in the first scene she prays because she wants the jeweler to buy her earrings back, whereas in the second she prays for the life of Donati who is provoked to duel with her husband.

Her first visit to the church is emphatically presented as part of her lifestyle, whereas her second visit suggests a deviation from it. In both scenes, Louise's movement inside the church is rendered by the use of tracking shots (long and medium shots) that allow us to observe its purpose and character. In the first case, Louise's pace is hasty and brisk, indicating that she is there to perform a task or rather execute a transaction. The camera follows her from a distance, observing her display of reverence: she remembers that she has to light a candle and returns to buy it from a lady standing by. The tracking shot in the church directly follows the tracking shots in Louise's home (registering Louise's cursory mobility, as she prepares to leave), thus

⁹³ Many commentators of Ophuls' work have observed the director's fondness of echoes, See Gibbs J., *Mise-en-scene / Film Style and Interpretation*, Wallflower Press, London 2002, pp. 77-82, Wilson G. 'Letter From an Unknown Woman' in *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View*, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1986, pp. 103-104 and Wood R., *Personal Views*, London 1976, Wayne State University Press (Revised edition), pp.148-149

connecting the comic earnestness that Louise displays in the church, to her usual comportment (Figures 43-45). In the case of the second scene in the church, however, the film inflects the function of the tracking shot. Preceded by a static shot outside the church, it now seems to draw Louise inside the dark church (Figures 46-47). The film follows Louise's contained and worried pace from the same distance as before, and then cuts to a shot closer to her face (medium close up), when Louise begins to pray (Figure 48). During the first time in the church, the film had also cut to a shot closer to Louise (medium shot), when the latter began to pray, but it had then only registered Louise from the side, registering the ritualistic formality of her prayer (Figure 49). Now, although the direction of Louise's look is the same as the direction of her look in the first scene in the church (she stares away from the camera and towards the Madonna), the frontality of the shot reveals her frail and somber expression. Her bare look of sorrow and longing is refracted upon her face, conveying a profound sense of sadness that deflects our understanding of her subjectivity.

Figure 43

Figure 44

Figure 45

Figure 46

Figure 47

Figure 48

Figure 49

Despite the similarities in the visual structure of the two scenes in the church, the film complicates our understanding of Louise. By focusing on Louise's look the second time (Figures 50-51), the film evokes another frontal shot of Louise (medium shot), registering the mute, dignified solemnity of her facial expression, when Louise sits in her bedroom, after having been humiliated by her husband who has uncovered her affair (Figure 52).

Figure 50

Figure 51

Figure 52

The rhyming of these two shots constitutes one more instance of the film's strategy to 'pair' shots and scenes, creating an oblique visual pattern in the presentation of Louise that eludes the latter's blithe and trivialised portrayal. The second shot of Louise praying in the church can be compared both to the first shot of Louise praying in the church and to the shot of her in the bedroom. In this way, the film creates an unstable connectivity of Louise's portraits that nourishes the ambiguity of the latter's image.

Furthermore, the two frontal shots of Louise (in the church and in her bedroom) become particularly significant in terms of the elusiveness of Louise's subjectivity because they allow the invisible and indeterminate presence of off screen space to capture Louise's look in such a way as to strip it off its fixed determinations. In both shots (in the bedroom and in the church), Louise's bare look surrenders to the off screen, as it were, staring towards it in a manner of overwhelmed passivity. By collaborating with the off screen space in such a way, the vacancy of Louise's look conveys a sense of relinquishment receptive of the realm of absence which it gazes at.

This particular manifestation of Louise's look is contrasted to the workings of Louise's look throughout the rest of the film. Repeatedly in the film, Louise's look asserts its own power over the restraining presence of the frame. It is constantly aware of the frame's own possessive power and cooperates with it by creating focused and closed off portraits. Her face is rigid and authoritative, even when solitary. It usually

appears firmly contained either within the actual film frame or within virtual frames such as bedposts, candlesticks or mirrors, while, at the same time, trying to take control of the off screen space demarcated by each frame (Figures 53-54). Even when Louise meets Donati at the train station for the first time, her look seems to try to impose its visibility on the off screen, fixing it within its focus (Figure 54).

Figure 53

Figure 54

However, the two rhyming frontal shots of Louise above undermine this pattern. Louise's look there abandons its egocentric consciousness, and the off screen becomes 'a place of uncertainty and anguish'⁹⁴ that is reflected on Louise's look.

By varying the relation between Louise's look and the off screen, the film seems to also trigger an oscillation between a more obvious and a more ambiguous function of the frame. The frame of a shot can function both as a delimiting, possessive border *and* as a locus where what is external and what is internal to the frame meet.⁹⁵ While examining the affective dynamics of 'inclusion and exclusion' developed by various uses of the frame in film, Charles Affron uses examples from Renaissance painting in order to discuss this double function of the frame. More specifically, Affron brings to our attention the fact this double function is exhibited in representations of the theme

⁹⁴ I use here the terms that Pascal Bonitzer uses to describe one of the functions of the film frame. Bonitzer P., *Le Regard et la Voix: Essais sur le Cinema* Paris 10/18, 1976 (my translation)

⁹⁵ For this function of the frame in general see also Derrida J., *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Bennington G. & McLeod I., University of Chicago Press, Chicago; London, 1987

of the ‘Annunciation’ that ‘invariably capture an event of transcendent knowing in the frame of a window, a door or a portal’. As Affron observes,

[T]he frame becomes the hinge of an extended or a double universe, focusing the plenitude of heaven on the capturable wholeness of Mary’s room...It gives access to an angel, the image of a miraculous presence apprehended only through the painter’s framed vision.⁹⁶

Madame De utilises this double function of the frame in order to further unsettle a clear-cut understanding of Louise. Specifically during the two rhyming frontal shots of Louise mentioned above, the film seems to use the more ambiguous function of the frame, so as to present Louise’s look towards the off screen both as an *opening towards* and as a *reflection of* another kind of ‘transcendent knowing’. The equivocal dynamics of the frame are mirrored on Louise’s look, inscribing on the latter the elusive feel of a search for an ecstatic beyond. The elusiveness of Louise’s look encapsulates a consciousness of absence and loss (Louise has just realised the impossibility of her love for Donati), striving to surpass the impasse in Louise’s circumstance.⁹⁷

The film, by parallelising Louise’s void stare in the bedroom to the way Louise stares towards the Madonna in the church, further qualifies Louise’s melancholy not as a mere extension of her lassitude but – possibly, suggestively – as an affective gesture towards a metaphysical commitment. A look of vacancy subtly reveals a similarity

⁹⁶ Affron C., *Cinema and Sentiment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1982, pp. 24-25

⁹⁷ In his work ‘Metaphor and Mimesis in *Madame De...*’ Andrew Britton observes that Louise’s ‘moment of transcendence’ is ironically just ‘a final act’ in ‘the circuit of (the earrings’) exchange’. According to Britton, Louise is not capable ‘for a positive transgression’, since her desire (encapsulated in the movement of the earrings) is ultimately ‘a determinate product of the reality that fails to contain it.’ Britton’s account, like Daniel Morgan’s account above (see footnote 9), stresses the limits of Louise’s freedom, whereas my analysis suggests, once again, the (elusive) possibility of Louise’s freedom (i.e. ‘striving to surpass’ above). Britton’s account seems to be more attentive to the film’s overall narrative progression, whereas my account seems to be more attuned to the oblique strategies through which the film’s style interrogates the predominant dynamic of the film’s progression. For Britton see Britton A., ‘Metaphor and Mimesis in *Madame De*’, *Movie* 29/30, Summer 1982, pp.323-333

with a look of religious intensity. The film insists on evoking a connection between Louise's longing and the experience of a kind of holiness, by structuring her movement into the church and her movement towards Donati's carriage in the same way. In both cases, Louise disappears in the background of a shot, furtively escaping the daylight world (Figures 55-56). Though these stylistic rhymes, the film manages to evade an obvious intelligibility, obliquely interrogating and unsettling our understanding of Louise's portrayal.

Figure 55

Figure 56

Conclusion

I have attempted to show that *Madame De...* is tied together through a careful ambivalence between the more straightforward and the more elusive aspects of its intelligibility. The heightened suggestiveness of certain aspects of the film's style does not merely add complexity to the film's meaning but rather enters into a productive tension with the more obvious aspects of the film's meaning, in order to (subtly) destabilise the film's intelligibility. Through particular stylistic strategies – such as the unusual use of conventional devices (i.e. the shot-reverse-shot pattern), the ambiguous configuration of tone and point of view, or, the varied repetition of scenes – the film meticulously elaborates an evocative yet cogent dynamic that unsettles the clarity of the film's representations.

PART TWO

Chapter 3 - The Unbelievable: Carl-Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet*

Introduction

Carl-Theodor Dreyer's work – and *Ordet* (1955) in particular – has been regarded by critics as 'spiritual' par excellence not only in terms of its thematic concerns but also in terms of its formal approach to its subject matter. In his work, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, David Bordwell has written characteristically:

Ordet is not an allegory in the strict sense, but its unity becomes intelligible only as a retelling of the Gospel. For the film to cohere, the viewer must *accept* [my emphasis] a narrative causality premised upon Christian precept: Inger must die so that others may be reborn; but then she must be reborn. The resolution of this Christian narrative requires a miracle...Christianity becomes Dreyer's most overpowering formal device.⁹⁸

As I will argue, this account of the film's 'spirituality' – as a type of Christian narrative causality – does not seem sufficient in order to capture the way the film is tied together. Although this Christian interpretation of the film may provide us with a way to read the progression of the film's narration, it cannot account for the film's full dramatic potential and effect, since it is only an explanation of the story, of what goes on within the film (the synopsis rather) and not an attempt to figure out the mechanisms through which the film itself succeeds in rendering a miracle convincing. Although Bordwell gives an account of how the film is formally constructed (an issue I will subsequently address), he insists that the 'text' of the film, that is, its narrative content must be considered 'as existing prior to the film'.⁹⁹ Thus, according to this view, the drama of faith that the film revolves around would remain ultimately unresolved because the explanation of the film's coherence could be reduced to a

⁹⁸ Bordwell D., *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981, p. 147

⁹⁹ Ibid. p.149

mere 'because the Gospel says so'. But does this suffice in order to explain how the film is meaningfully integrated? If the miracle of the resurrection in *Ordet* is a clearly paradoxical event, it seems to me that Bordwell's account simply reproduces the fact that this miracle is indeed such an event and, if one is able to believe in it *independently* of the film, the film will only consequently and secondarily seem convincing to him.

Now, it can be argued that it is possible to understand *Ordet*'s coherence through certain explicit references of the film *itself* to other texts, that is, through certain indications, suggestions of the film's rationale, which remain internal to the film, despite alluding to evidence external to the film. Characteristic is the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. As Morten (Henrik Malberg) mentions in the film, his son Johannes (Preben Lerdorff Rye) acquired his intense and peculiar spirituality through his study of the philosopher. And, another example would be the workings of the notion of the 'Divine Word', as the title of the film suggests. The translation of the Danish '*Ordet*' refers to the Greek 'Logos', that is, the 'Word of God', according to the Gospel. According to the Gospel, it is Jesus Christ who, with his incarnation, not only gives God's Word to humans but also *is* God's Word, that is (in a more general sense), God's active presence in creation.

Indeed, such references *may* offer routes into understanding aspects of the film's coherence. A Kierkegaardian analysis of the significance of the activity of faith, as a kind of 'leap' and a capacity of radical inner transformation of the believer, could explain Johannes' apparently mad behaviour. Or, the notion of the 'Divine Word', by referring to the incarnation of God in a person (Jesus Christ), could be understood as a pointer towards an analogous intelligibility of Johannes, who implies in his preaching

that the people around him cannot believe because they actually do not believe *in him*, because they actually cannot see who he might be (Johannes says that the Judgement Day has arrived, thus alluding to the second coming of Jesus Christ).

As it becomes evident, these aspects of *Ordet*'s intelligibility (neither clearly internal, nor clearly external to the film) may be read as ways of understanding the performance of the miracle by Johannes, thus providing explanations for the main problem of the film's coherence.

Nevertheless, this chapter is not simply interested in tracing an explanation for the film's coherence. Allusions to texts, as the ones mentioned above, may provide an answer to the questions a film raises, but this kind of answer may not be identical to the kind of answer that the film's *methods* and *mechanisms* elaborate, in order to tackle the questions the film raises. An allusion to an explanatory text may be a part of a film's methods and mechanisms and may, therefore, be conducive to the intelligibility of the film's *particular* way of responding to its own questions, but it does not necessarily exhaust the latter.

Now, the extent to which a film *incorporates*, within its own logic, elements of the logic of the other 'texts' that offer the explanations mentioned above, could constitute an interesting topic of research, in relation to the examination of coherence. For example, according to the logic of Kierkegaard's thought, there is a move, a shift from an understanding of faith as a mere metaphysical belief towards an understanding of faith as a kind of human capacity.¹⁰⁰ As will become evident immediately below, this

¹⁰⁰ Hannay A., Marino G.D., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, New York, 1998. See, for example, Mooney E.F., *Repetition: Getting the World Back*, pp. 282-308

shift constitutes also an integral aspect of *Ordet*'s logic. The thesis recognises this issue and acknowledges the possibility of such structural similarities or 'organic' analogies, as it were, between a film and its explanatory texts.¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, as became evident in the introduction, the thesis aims to focus more on how a film's own, complex and peculiar 'logic' manages to be *convincing*. Thus, the thesis aims to reveal, or rather, demonstrate how a film's organisation and internal relations *work* and become persuasive, and, hence, how they ultimately *succeed* in elaborating their own (complex and peculiar) 'logic'.

So, how does *Ordet* succeed in rendering the miracle convincing?

The chapter suggests a specific route into understanding what the film does. It will attempt to show that the film is not a simple retelling of the story of a paradox. *It rather probes the question of whether belief in this paradox can exist.* The workings of the film carefully posit faith not just as a thematic or narrative concern but as a challenge to the viewer, who is invited to attend to the film's devices and, through this attention, manage to experience and to be taken in by the possibility of a paradoxical – that is, a seemingly unrealistic – occurrence.

As the chapter will argue, the kind of faith invoked and posited by the film does not refer to an abstract belief in a divine power that can alter the norms of nature. It rather consists in the question of the concrete capacity of both the viewers and the characters

¹⁰¹ I would like to add an observation here, referring not strictly to a film's reference to an (explanatory) 'text' but to its (more general) reference to another medium: as will become evident subsequently, in chapter 4 on Godard's *Passion*, the film comes into dialogue with the 'logic' of the paintings that it transforms into 'tableaux vivants'. What acquires significance there is how the film actually mobilises, interrogates and changes the structure and the 'internal' order of the paintings, incorporating them within its own organisation of form and meaning.

of the film, to reconsider and connect with what lies in front of their eyes, what appears as ‘obvious’ to them. More specifically, the film becomes dramatically tied together by constructing the process through which faith can be understood in such a way. In other words, it becomes coherent by formally elaborating the ways that enable both its characters and its viewers to move away from an understanding of faith as an abstract ‘belief in God’ and towards an understanding of faith as the capacity to (re)discover and activate the meaningfulness of what is in front of their eyes.

Paradoxically, what seems as self-evident and totally subject to one’s appropriation is actually in danger of being lost because of the very fact of its closeness and constant presence. The significance of what is considered present and straightforwardly apparent cannot be frequently *sensed*, exactly because of one’s strong sense of familiarity with it. The film captures this problem and becomes tied together by constructing a meticulously articulated interplay between its apparent, overtly present and ‘seen’ aspects, on one hand, and the hint of presence of an insidious ‘unseen’ aspect, on the other. As it will become evident in the analysis that follows, it is the sensed presence of this ‘unseen’ aspect of the film that constitutes its ‘spiritual’ element. This ‘spiritual’ element takes on different meanings throughout the film but is consistently felt as a sensed but not affirmed presence that interacts with the film’s physical, material dimensions.

In fact, at the beginning of the film, the interaction between its physical and its spiritual element takes the form of a tension between two opposed dramatic forces. It is this tension at the beginning of the film that conveys the precarious state in which the ‘obvious’ finds itself. More specifically, as I will show, it is the concrete physical presence of Inger Borgen (Brigitte Federspiel) that finds itself in such a precarious

state: although Inger is constantly around the other members of her family, the significance of her presence does not seem to be recognised in such a way as to act as a vital bond with the life of everyday reality because the rest of her family seem to remain caught up in their spiritual ‘flights’. These spiritual ‘flights’ express the fugitive inner lives and religious commitments of the men surrounding Inger. The film, by observing the antithesis between Inger’s concrete physicality and the men’s spiritual ‘flights’, creates a field of dramatic tension that manages to involve the viewer in the need of Inger’s *re-emergence*: the significance of Inger’s seemingly familiar physical presence actually turns out to be in need of disclosure.

As I will try to further explain, this disclosure first takes place through the gradual but drastic modification of the spirituality that characterises Johannes, the troubled son. More specifically, as the film keeps emphatically returning to the question of Johannes’ drama of faith, it gradually stops portraying Johannes’ spirituality as a kind of stereotypical ‘religious madness’ and starts to render it as Johannes’ capacity to realise and respond to the precariousness of Inger’s state. It is the actual prospect of Inger’s corporeal loss that triggers this responsiveness. The film manages to adumbrate this responsiveness by pulling the spiritual element that characterises Johannes towards the material and the concrete: the spirituality characterising Johannes stops appearing as his ‘flight’ from the tangible everyday reality and starts to take the form of a pervasive intensity that infuses the actual lived space that he occupies. As Johannes keeps returning to his home, the actual lived space of his home becomes imbued with this pervasive spiritual intensity, while Johannes himself starts to become more firmly integrated into his home. Through the gradual *fusion* of the spiritual and the material element that characterise Johannes’ ‘territory’ of action, the

film not only undermines a stereotypical reading of Johannes' drama of faith but also manages to inflect this drama towards another understanding of it, namely, an understanding of it as the awakening of Johannes' capacity to relate with the reality and the life of his home and the real presence of a loved one.

In his work, *The Cinema of Carl Dreyer*, Tom Milne has argued that *Ordet* is only 'outwardly concerned with spiritual faith' and that 'its inward secret mainspring is fleshly love'.¹⁰² According to Milne, this 'secret mainspring' of the film is ultimately revealed, as the latter gradually unfolds the importance of *Inger's* physical presence in the family. However, as this chapter shows, this 'secret mainspring' of the film is *also* revealed through the gradual change of Johannes' role. The film emphasises the dynamic *process* through which 'spiritual faith' is transformed into a belief in 'fleshly love', and the progression of Johannes' portrayal exemplifies exactly this process: through the continuous fusion of the spiritual element that characterises Johannes with the concrete element of reality that surrounds him, Johannes' faith moves away from being understood as Johannes' metaphysical yearning and is gradually understood as Johannes' capacity to re-affirm the meaningfulness of corporeal reality and human relationality.

Tragically, as soon as Johannes acquires the capacity to rediscover the meaningfulness of the already existent, corporeal presence of Inger, the latter dies.

The film, nevertheless, interrogates the eerie, otherworldly stasis of the image of Inger's death, by steadily interpolating tinges of an animate corporeality during the

¹⁰² Milne T., *The Cinema of Carl Dreyer*, London: Zwemmer, 1971, p.164

sequence of Inger's funeral. These tinges of corporeality spring from various aspects of the film's content, as, for example, the physical sounds of animals, and puncture the stillness of Inger's death. And, although similar sounds have existed throughout the film, during the funeral sequence, they acquire a distinctive presence. As I will attempt to show, through the interpolation of these sounds, the film manages to build up an affective *momentum* of hints of physicality that will gradually lead to Inger's physical re-emergence. Thus, during the sequence of Inger's funeral, the stake of the film moves away from being the literal credibility of Inger's resurrection or Johannes' mystical power, and becomes the culmination of this affective momentum. The sensuous kiss between Inger and her husband at the end of the film and after Inger's resurrection becomes the final point of this momentum.

In his work *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Paul Schrader has observed that a predominant concern of Dreyer's work is the search of a place for 'spirituality *within* (my emphasis) corporeality'.¹⁰³ The 'spiritual', or rather, 'transcendental' aspects of Dreyer's style (as, for example the eternal 'stasis' and the 'frozen image' of death) are never absolute and complete, according to Schrader.¹⁰⁴ They are always related with aspects of worldly experience, thus producing a continuous, unresolved 'struggle' and an 'unstable equilibrium of world-denying' and world-affirming impulses'¹⁰⁵ in Dreyer's films. It is this unresolved 'struggle' and this 'unstable equilibrium', that I will try to trace in what follows.

¹⁰³ Schrader P., *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 1988, p.118

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. pp. 119, 121

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p.141

Forging a Tension between Realistic Representation and Fugitive Spirituality:

Inger and the Family

For the first part of the film until Inger is taken ill, Inger's presence appears as a kernel of corporeality and physical intimacy that tries to draw the community of Borgenstaadt together but repeatedly fails to do so. Inger appears as a gravitational force that loses its power to pull the people that surround it towards it. Until she is taken ill, although the men of the family seem to interact with her in a routinely and unproblematic fashion, they do not seem to fully sense the significance of her corporeal presence. The men of the family seem to be ultimately oblivious to her intensely expressive physical presence and, thus, their actions remain dispersed and dislocated. Although Inger's vibrant physical presence constitutes a worldly anchor for the family, the rest of the family turns out to be actually unresponsive to the labor of her love, being caught up in metaphysical commitments – as Johannes or Morten are – in despair – as Morten (again) is – or even in self-punishment – as Mikkel (Emil Hass Christensen) is. As Raymond Carney has observed, their actions seem to be driven by 'imaginative energies that seem too intense and too mercurial'¹⁰⁶ to be incorporated into the practical interaction of everyday reality. Carney has identified as a constant concern in Dreyer's work the potential and the limits of his characters' ability to express themselves in terms of their physical and social relations with others. He has noted that in Dreyer's work 'realistic representation'¹⁰⁷ reaches its limits exactly because the inner lives of many of his characters' remain fugitive,

¹⁰⁶ Carney R., *Speaking the Language of Desire: The Films of Carl Dreyer*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 92

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. pp. 65-106

reaching for a realm that lies beyond tangible reality and experience. As I will argue, this central concern becomes the canvas on which *Ordet* starts to build its drama. As I will try to show, for the first part of the film, the family's routinely placidity is undermined by an ambivalent stylistic organisation that expresses a struggle between the men's transcendental and world denying inclinations and Inger's embodied world affirming impulse. The film becomes coherent by elaborating and shaping this struggle.

From the opening sequence of the film until the moment she is taken ill, Inger appears as the corporeal centre of the Borgen family that is in danger of being lost. The film manages to convey this characteristic of her presence through its meticulous handling of camera movement and editing along with the careful organisation of performance.

The camerawork during the first sequence introduces the tension between the men's fleeing inclinations and Inger's earthly solidity. Even before the characters of the film are introduced, this tension is foreshadowed by the establishing shots of the Borgen farm. These shots are surprisingly mobile. The first is a long shot that captures the farm from a distance and seems to slide by it in a rightward movement and the second one is a close up that keeps moving to the right, this time sliding over the name of the farm (Figures 1-4). Although the camera moves closer in the second shot, it keeps moving away through the same rightward movement. Instead of using two static shots in order to establish its setting, the film seems to simultaneously reveal its setting and try to flee from it. It records it but at the same time tries to move past it.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

After a cut to the interior of the house, the Borgen family wakes up unsettled in the early morning because Johannes seems to be missing. The first interior shot is of the little brother Anders (Kay Kristiansen) who realises that his brother Johannes is not in his bed. The realisation is captured as the camera pans to the right (Figures 5-6), a pan that rhymes with the first two panning shots of the exterior of the house.

Figure 5

Figure 6

The 'fleeing' movement of these two first shots seems to underline Johannes' 'flight': because of the movement of the two establishing shots, the camera has gathered a

disquieting momentum of rightward movement that underpins and matches with the direction of Anders' look at Johannes' empty bed (rightward pan), at first, and outside his window, immediately after, when he watches Johannes' leaving the house (Figures 7-8).

Figure 7

Figure 8

Johannes' religious wandering on the dunes outside seems to have triggered the restlessness of the family, a restlessness that is further reflected in the way in which the camera moves around and in the house: after the rightward pan that has revealed Johannes' empty bed, the camera moves backwards and then follows Anders from a distance as he walks out of his bedroom to wake up his father so that they can both look for Johannes (Figure 9).

Figure 9

As soon as Anders is about to leave the house, however, the camera leaves him behind and pans mysteriously to the left (Figure 10) until it is arrested by Inger's presence the exact moment she steps out of her room and appears in the frame (Figure 11). Inger realises that something is wrong and moves back to her room to look outside her

window Figure 12). This is the first time the camera seems to pause on a character and linger on her reaction. The camera's movement is not continued and the shot remains static. A few seconds later this shot is followed by a cut to a shot of Anders running on the dunes outside the house (Figure 13), a shot that will a bit later rhyme with two other shots of the same exterior as this is observed by Inger (Figures 14-17). The camera's movement up to this point has been geared by Johannes' absence and has adumbrated the search for the latter. It has been following Anders, who realises that his brother is missing and then wakes up his father who, in his turn, gets up to search for Johannes too. Now, however, as the camera turns to the left and *finally stops* in front of Inger, this search is interrupted and continues only through the cut to the exterior, showing Anders running after Johannes. This interruption functions as a punctuation that suspends the search from inside the house, and establishes a clear distinction between the interior and the exterior. This distinction is reinforced as the film cuts two times from an exterior to an interior shot, with each interior shot showing Inger standing still at the window of her room looking outside, and each exterior shot showing successively old Morten and Inger's husband Mikkil running after Johannes.

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 16

Figure 17

The insertion of this editing sequence has a triple function: firstly, it provides a sharp contrast to the sliding, ‘searching’ camera movement that preceded it. Secondly, it provides a directional counterpoint to the rightward camera movement of the two opening shots since the direction of Inger’s look that it captures is to the left and, finally, it concentrates on Inger’s point of view which works as the only stable subjective point of reference throughout the sequence. Inger is the only character to which the film assigns a subjective point view that has the capacity to function as the source of a specific spatial construction. It is only her stillness and her firm position that emphasise the corporeal and territorial embeddedness of the action and act as a

counterpoint to the camera's (and the men's) almost deterritorialised mobility. The camera's pause on Inger is consolidated through the editing sequence as a kind of focus *on her*, as the character that roots the family in reality, remaining a constant, a home.

Tom Milne has observed that the tension between this rootedness in reality and 'a sense of *depaysement*'¹⁰⁸ (a sense of a kind of deterritorialisation) in the opening sequence can be seen as a function of the juxtaposition between the exterior and the interior of the house, given the striking opposition between 'the sense of the warmly observed detail of relationships'¹⁰⁹ of the interior, on one hand, and the 'sense of void'¹¹⁰ rendered by the sparseness of the exterior, on the other. Indeed, as Milne notes, the exterior space surrounding the house resembles a kind of 'limbo space where sheep bleat but none are seen and where there is no sign of human habitation'¹¹¹ whereas the interior seems to present a picture of communal life. As the analysis above shows, however, the sense of deterritorialisation to which Milne refers, penetrates insidiously but crucially the interior of the house too through the camera's disquieting movement. Thus, it is not only the juxtaposition of the two kinds of setting that expresses the tension to which Milne refers. This tension is also the result of the specific camerawork inside the house, which at the beginning expresses the restlessness brought about by Johannes' 'flight' but then arrests its seemingly unappeasable wandering movement and surrenders to Inger's solidity.

Through the surrender to Inger's point of view, the film seems to introduce a shift of its own point of view: although at first it renders the restlessness of the family that is

¹⁰⁸ Milne, *The Cinema of Carl Dreyer*, p. 158

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p.158

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p.158

¹¹¹ Ibid. p.158

triggered by the fleeing impulse of Johannes, it finally expresses Inger's earthly gravitational power. This shift, rather than appearing as an inconsistency, structures the dramatic discontinuity between Inger's perspective and the men's realm of behaviour and, thus, establishes the condition for their struggle.

This struggle is developed in the next interior scene when the family has dinner in the living room after Johannes is found. Inger and Morten appear together by the table while Inger tries to calm him down and comfort him. As Morten moves to the right towards the living room door, the camera follows him, then leaves him behind and captures Johannes, who is just entering the living room from that door (Figures 18-21).

Figure 18

Figure 19

Figure 20

Figure 21

The camera follows Johannes as he does not go to join Inger at the table but, instead, lights up two candles standing on the cupboard, picks them up and places them at the window plane. The camera follows him in a rightward pan as he walks slowly and ceremoniously. In an eerie, high-pitched and protracted tone of voice, Johannes proclaims that 'his light shall shine in the darkness' (Figures 22-25).

Figure 22

Figure 23

Figure 24

Figure 25

Having left the candles on the window plane, he retreats from the door he came in while the camera follows him (Figures 26-27). As soon as he steps out, however, the camera leaves him behind and pans back towards the window plane (Figure 28). As soon as it reaches it, Inger enters from the foreground of the shot, blows out the candles and brings them back to the cupboard. The camera follows her in a leftward pan while she places the candles on the cupboard and as she goes back to the table (Figures 29-34).

Figure 26

Figure 27

Figure 28

Figure 29

Figure 30

Figure 31

Figure 32

Figure 33

Figure 34

The way the camera moves in this scene echoes directionally the way it moved in the previous sequence. Whereas the two consecutive pans following Morten first and then Johannes slide rightwards towards the window from which Johannes looks outside, the pans that find and follow Inger are directed backwards and then forward and to the left, thus reacting once more against the pans that follow the men. The camera vacillates: on one hand, it glides towards and with Johannes as he drifts to the window, the opening that seduces him and stimulates his metaphysical agony. On the other, it follows Inger who *draws* the scene *away* from the window and *back to* the centre of the house. Moreover, the pan back to the window that ‘finds’ Inger picking up and blowing out the candles recalls the earlier pan from Anders to Inger in the previous sequence. But what is the reason for the patterning of this strange, seemingly

redundant or initially ‘empty’ panning movement that ultimately reveals Inger? At first sight, the device does not seem to be clearly generated by the reaction of Inger but seems to look for and discover it as this takes place. The fact that it does not seem to be strictly *motivated* by a character reaction has led critics such as David Bordwell to maintain that this device is merely transitional, constituting a ‘dramatically meaningless interval’¹¹² necessary for the movement from one group of characters or a character to another. However, in this case, the careful patterning of the device becomes especially revelatory in terms of qualifying the relation between the men’s and Inger’s behavior. In both the first sequence and this scene, it seems that a shift, a passage from the realm of the men’s behavior to Inger’s becomes necessary because these two realms *are not continuous*. In this scene, Morten remains caught up in his despair about Johannes because Johannes remains caught up in his religious obsession, so both fail to acknowledge and engage with Inger’s tangible, already there and always present compassionate serenity. As the camera leaves Johannes behind (the moment his look turns away and he moves out the door exactly like Anders did in the previous sequence while searching for him), he fails to wait and respond to Inger’s concrete and sheltering availability, so the camera has ‘to measure’¹¹³ (Carney’s term) the empty space that separates them and that adumbrates this failure of responsiveness. By encapsulating the absence of responsiveness through the emptiness of the pan, the camera *actualises the dramatic void* between Johannes’ turning away and Inger’s pulling back movements.

¹¹² Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, p. 151

¹¹³ Carney, *Speaking the Language of Desire: The Films of Carl Dreyer*, p. 216

The device of the ‘empty’ pan is neither ‘meaningless’, as Bordwell purports, nor indicative of a distanced ‘director dominated’¹¹⁴ approach to *Ordet*’s camerawork, as critic Robin Wood has suggested. Wood has maintained that such a device can only imply ‘a rigorously detached observing (directorial) eye...that deprives the action and the characters of all spontaneous, individual life’.¹¹⁵ However, such a ‘rigorously detached observing eye’ would suggest that the observation of the characters’ actions would remain clearly dissociated and cut off from the involvement in these actions (interestingly, Wood’s point – and Bordwell’s point, for that matter – touch upon the issue of the device’s coherence, or rather, the device’s apparent *incoherence*). This doesn’t seem to be the case here though. It is only through the meticulous observation (‘measuring’) of the distance between the characters that the camera manages to involve the viewer in this distance that separates them and, thus, further involve the viewer in the dramatic distance that separates the two competing impulses that these characters express.

Moreover, what is particularly noticeable in relation to the device of the pan is also the camera’s movement over an area that it had already passed. The ‘empty’ backward pan is followed by the forward and to the left pan as soon as Inger enters the frame: it is the same space that Johannes left behind which Inger is about to occupy as soon as she enters the frame and picks up the candles. However, Inger does not abandon this space but utilises it in order to reestablish not its order but its peaceful sufficiency: in the manner of a silent counter ceremony, she crosses through it while blowing out the candles and taking them back to their proper place. This is the first time Inger’s caring disposition is emphatically unfolded. Johannes’ elusive

¹¹⁴ Wood R., ‘Carl Dreyer’, *Film Comment* 10 (March-April), 1974, p. 16

¹¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 11, 16-17

wandering gives way to the constancy and readiness of her kindness. This care and this kindness seem to be intimately bound with her *physical* relation to the surrounding space. As she calmly blows out the candles and places them on the cupboard, her patient gestures reveal her knowing ease and physical familiarity with her home. The moment she comes on screen during the scene – from the direction of the camera's position – her body appears in the foreground of the shot and begins to lead the movement of the camera. It is the weight of her material presence that pulls the camera back to the table. If Johannes has become a furtive, seemingly weightless and almost ghostly figure by drifting in and out of the frame, Inger remains a body that retains a pivotal relation to the camera and ultimately anchors it in the space that it inhabits.

Her slow walking pace almost mimics Johannes' walking pace but is steadier and more confident. She does not want to impose her concern by abruptly interrupting the rhythm of Johannes' pace. Rather, she tactfully absorbs the rhythm of his pace but transfigures this pace into a practical and useful kind of movement: as if picking up from where he left off, she seems to be completing his ritual but at the same time transforming it into the tangible reality of her gentleness. Johannes, however, having left, remains oblivious to Inger's attentive counter ritual and Inger remains alone in the frame. Still, she insists on manifesting her gentle disposition. This is not only expressed in an abstract way, through her general concern about Johannes, but is also expressed through a series of material gestures that encapsulate the silent exuberance of her physicality: her moving and blowing out the candles is the first of a series of gestures that convey her active and tactile interaction with her home and with the people she loves. By blowing out the candles she does not so much inhibit Johannes'

imaginative aspirations but rather protects the tactile life of her home: a flame can inspire but it cannot be touched. As soon as this ritual is over and Inger goes back to the table, she pours coffee into her husband's cup. Although her gesture seems prosaic at first glance, it is contrasted to the perfunctory way in which the men have their coffee (Figures 35-36).

Figure 35

Figure 36

The ordinariness of the gesture, rather than neutralising its expressive power, becomes a manifestation of Inger's capacity to endure Johannes' misfortune through actively keeping the family's daily routine alive. Her tenacity and her fragility become visible when she pours the coffee and utters 'It is sad'. As such a simple material action becomes acutely expressive, Inger's physical behaviour becomes a crucial counterpoint to the men's lifeless comportment. Although the men discuss Johannes' problem, the mechanical way in which they have coffee conveys their absentmindedness and their failure to actually engage with their everyday reality and with Inger's care.

However, Inger retains the capacity to enliven common material actions, such as rolling out dough or preparing the table (Figures 37-38). These actions become essential gestures that animate her home, but the men seem to still strive to flee.

Figure 37

Figure 38

When Inger tries to persuade Morten to accept and participate in Anders' love for Anne by accepting Anne as part of their family, she asks him at the same time to help her roll her knitting string by keeping the string steady. In a gesture of womanly deftness, she wraps the string around Morten's hands in order to roll it, while she insists that he should allow Anders and Anne to be together (Figures 39-41). However, Morten soon gets angry, unties his hands and moves away (Figures 42-44) and, although Inger follows him around the room trying to appease him, he keeps escaping until he finally leaves.

Figure 39

Figure 40

Figure 41

Figure 42

Figure 43

Figure 44

Moreover, Inger consistently expresses her care through acts of physical tenderness, and her protective affection becomes palpable through the patterning of her soft, caressing wrappings. Despite her efforts, though, the men's comportment remains disjointed and their gaze distracted. When Morten stays alone after dinner, desolate about Johannes' madness (or when he gets disappointed with Anders' decision to marry Anne), when Mikkel confesses his guilt about his lack of faith and his discomfort with his father's attitude towards him and when Anders returns home distraught because Anne's father has rejected him, Inger is still there, constantly behind them, embracing, holding or standing by them (Figures 45-49). Like the pan in the living room that worked as a gravitational pull trying to keep the family tied together, Inger's firm touch tries to keep each man collected and focused on the possibilities of their communal life.

Figure 45

Figure 46

Figure 47

Figure 48

Figure 49

Although Inger's touch remains contained, its fleshly warmth becomes a felt sensation. Even when Inger does not touch the men, the protective solidity of her presence accompanies them, as, for example, when Morten sits in the pigsty angry with Anders and with Inger's decision to support his marriage with Anne. Inger leans over him, firmly grasps the fence behind him and does not forget to bring a coat for him (Figures 50-53).

Figure 50

Figure 51

Figure 52

Figure 53

The way she leans and spreads her hands over the men, each time, reminds one of an image in which an angel bends over a human in order to protect or bless him. This similarity, though, does not simply illuminate Inger's 'saintly' disposition. It rather emphasises the fact that Inger, like an angel, looks at each man, but the man *does not*

look back at her. And although, unlike an angel, she is materially there in her full corporeality, this doesn't seem sufficient for the men. Inger *can* be perceived through her physical presence, but it is exactly this presence that seems to have become the lost centre of the Borgen family.

The men rarely look at Inger directly and they also don't look at each other (Figure 54). Even Mikkel – who is the only one who looks directly at Inger's face when he kisses her – remains fixed in his guilt most of the time and his gaze remains withdrawn (Figure 55). Morten's eyes seem to perform a kind of blindness since his gaze is not addressed to another character but remains opaque and absorbed in an inward movement (Figure 56). Johannes' eyes seem blind in the same way or are in search for their beyond (Figure 57).

Figure 54

Figure 55

Figure 56

Figure 57

This mismatch of the men's eyelines weaves a sense of disorientation that echoes, expands and reinforces the sense of deterritorialisation conveyed through the camera's restless pans during the first sequence of the film and at the beginning of the dinner scene. Their estrangement and their fleeing disposition is reflected in the decentered sense of space created by their divergent eyelines. This space of vision, abstracted from its physical surroundings and composed by the 'flights' of the men's gaze antagonises the actual space demarcated by Inger's corporeal behaviour. The shaping of this antagonism constitutes a significant parameter of the film's coherence.

Fusing the Physical with the Spiritual (1):

Johannes Outside the House

The strange and rather excessive spirituality of the character of Johannes constitutes a significant peculiarity of the film that needs to be accounted for. Indeed, as analysed above, for a significant part of the film, Johannes appears as Morten's troubled son who remains entangled in his quest for spiritual faith, a quest that has apparently made him mad. He seems obviously mad for the viewer, as well as for the rest of the film's characters, who worry about him and try to protect him from himself. The obviousness of Johannes' madness seems to be conveyed by the film through the explicit, almost caricaturing crudity of Johannes' behaviour. This crudity seems to

have concerned critics such as Tom Milne, who has argued that Johannes' role as a true bearer of faith either remains unconvincing or can only be interpreted within the assumption of a Christian orthodox belief, as the role of a Christ figure who, by believing himself, makes the rest believe 'in the glory of God'¹¹⁶. As I will try to show, however, the dilemma suggested by Milne does not quite stand. It is possible for the viewer to become affected by and involved in Johannes' drama of faith, not by adopting a Christian point of view but by carefully observing the ways in which the film gradually starts to undermine the crude representation of Johannes' madness: the film insidiously suggests a seriousness in Johannes' pathos. The film renders Johannes' drama of faith more persuasive not by subverting the image of the troubled son but by creating a crucial sense of bewilderment to the viewer regarding the presence and function of the spirituality that characterises Johannes: this spirituality gradually stops appearing as an odd projection of Johannes' mind and becomes actualised as an aspect of the environment that surrounds him. More specifically, although the film seems to introduce the image of Johannes through an overtly artificial expressionistic aesthetic, it manages to simultaneously interrogate the artificiality of this aesthetic and break through it by meshing it with the film's naturalistic context. The film manages to gradually trigger the viewer's bewilderment and, consequently, his wonder not by distorting its naturalistic context but by producing a creeping and unsettling sense of mystery *through the concrete physical dimensions of the space* that Johannes occupies. In this way, this 'objectivised' sense of mystery, rather than expressing Johannes' madness, puts the very fact of his madness into question. Whether or not Johannes actually possesses the power to foresee Inger's death remains an unanswered question but it is constantly and

¹¹⁶ Milne, *The Cinema of Carl Dreyer*, p.164

consistently raised as a question. Whether or not Johannes is mad or capable of faith also remains ultimately unresolved but this is too raised consistently as a question. It is the persistence of these questions that springs from a fusion of the concrete and the spiritual element that characterises Johannes' 'territory' of action. This bewildering fusion constitutes a significant parameter of the film's coherence since the stake of the film, as mentioned in the introduction, is to challenge what is regarded as obvious and make it re-emerge under a new light. The stake of the film is not merely to suggest Johannes' supernatural powers but to show that there are reasons not to dismiss the character of Johannes as stereotypically 'mad'. In other words, the film becomes coherent as it manages to show that Johannes' faith is something worth wondering about and not merely a psychological symptom of religious dogma.

At the beginning of the film – as it became evident in the previous section – Johannes' spiritual agony takes the form of 'flights', that is, escapes from the reality of his home and his family. His spiritual agony renders him a character that is perceived as an absence at first (the absence that triggered the restlessness of his family in the early morning) and then as a ghostly ethereal figure drifting in and out of the living room while the rest of his family has dinner. The first impression of Johannes' spirituality seems indeed as that of a kind of madness that blocks his ability to communicate with his loved ones, and is posited as a force that draws him away from reality, that is, the tangible reality of everyday life. However, as Johannes keeps appearing inside the house throughout the film and even when he first appears on the hill outside his house, the dichotomy between the life of tangible reality and the life of Johannes' spirituality becomes gradually blurred, and the physical reality that surrounds him

becomes itself infused with a simmering intensity that seeps through it and seems to animate it.

The first time Johannes appears in the film, he is outdoors, standing on a hill and preaching in the manner of a biblical prophet about the arrival of the Judgement Day. Although the expressionistic frontality and low angle of the medium long shots that introduce him (Figures 58-59), as well as the pomposity of his speech almost immediately typify him as a troubled megalomaniac and tempt us to dismiss his conviction, the work of a smoldering ambiguity has already begun: throughout Johannes' speech, the sound of Johannes' voice is constantly accompanied by the sound of the wind. The constant and dynamic presence of this wind emphatically introduces an abstract intensity that accompanies Johannes' voice. Out of context, this sound would only increase the sense of pomposity conveyed by Johannes' words. However, the presence and sound of the wind have already been naturalistically established in previous shots at the opening of the film and independently from Johannes. During the establishing shots of the Borgen farm (Figure 60), the wind has appeared in a realistic and literal context and its presence has also been 'materialised' through the puffing sound of the white sheets hanging outside the house. It has also been felt in its sheer physical dimension as merely irritating the men who went out in the morning looking for Johannes in the previous scene (Figures 61-62).

Figure 58

Figure 59

Figure 60

Figure 61

Figure 62

Even within its naturalistic context, however, the meaning of the wind is characterised by an unsettling indeterminacy: on one hand, being effortlessly assimilated in the natural environment of the setting, the wind remains embedded in concrete reality, refusing to be associated with any symbolic meaning. On the other, being deprived of any natural and perceptible reference point – in the sense of being deprived of a visible origin or source – it is felt as an uncontrollable outburst of contingency and a peculiarly emphatic intrusion of motion that affects and even upsets a wholly rational and naturalistic understanding of the action. The presence of the wind is at the same time perceived as a part of the phenomenal – or rather as a force that renders visible the transparency of the phenomenal – *and* as a force that is able to ‘shake’ the phenomenal and render it evanescent. This unresolved and abstract ambiguity generated by the double function of the wind during the opening of the film functions as an initiation into the mystery of the phenomenal: the explicit artificiality of Johannes’ first appearance cracks exactly because of the indeterminacy of the wind’s meaning. The discomfort of indeterminacy unsettles a dismissive consideration of Johannes’ outburst and activates the actual drama of Johannes’ faith.

The presence of the wind would not be able to sustain this unsettling effect had it only been part of the rhetoric of grandiosity that accompanies Johannes during his preaching. The wind is an aspect of the outdoors sequence that *unifies* the natural setting with the expressionistic aesthetic. The fact that it has been established by the film as a part of brute physical reality is indeed indispensable to its discomforting power.

The function of physical reality in film has been a recurrent concern in the discussions of realism in film theory and criticism and a predominant concern of film critic André Bazin, who has stressed ‘the importance of discerning those elements in film which confirm our sense of natural reality and those that destroy that feeling’.¹¹⁷ In his essay ‘Theatre and Cinema’, he has remarked that, even within the context of an expressionistic aesthetic where the constructedness of the film image remains conspicuous and destroys the sense of physical reality, the presence of a material detail can still maintain the crucial function of ‘guaranteeing’¹¹⁸ the presence of physical reality.

The function of this detail becomes essential for Bazin because, through the presence of this detail, a film can evoke reality’s ‘indifference to the action’.¹¹⁹ As some of Bazin’s critics have argued, this ‘indifference’, captured by film, does not necessarily delineate the status of physical reality as somehow ‘neutral’ and devoid of meaning, but can actually describe the capacity of physical reality to affect meaningfully characters and viewers *by and through* its ‘indifference’. As Philip Rosen has noted characteristically, this indifference does not simply refer to the evocation of the ‘pre-

¹¹⁷ Bazin A., ‘Theatre and Cinema’ in *What Is Cinema?* (vol.1), ed. & trans. Gray. H., Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005, p. 110

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 111

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p. 111

givenness of the concrete, objective real'¹²⁰ but can also involve the way the sense of the 'pre-given' real interacts with the represented action, as well as the way in which it is experienced by human perception.¹²¹

In other words, it seems that the 'indifference' of reality or 'Nature' ('Nature' is the term Bazin uses to describe not just physical reality but material reality as a whole)¹²² captured by film does not necessarily refer to a kind of neutral 'absence' of meaning but it can also refer to the way film manages to convey the meaning of an 'absence', as it were, through the presence of nature. In the case of the opening sequence of the *Ordet*, it is exactly the sense of an absence that seems to be expressed and somehow 'present-ified' through the constant motion of the wind: as the motion of the wind becomes perceptible through its blowing sound and through the waving of the spikes in the foreground of Johannes' frontal shots, an absence seems to come forth as a sensed but not affirmed presence. It is this double status of the wind that lends to the scene of Johannes' preaching the authenticity of a mystery. The emphatic simultaneity of the visible and of a sensed animate 'unseen' suggested by the continuous dynamic motion of the wind upsets an easy understanding of the sequence. By unleashing the indeterminacy of the wind, the film does not prompt a specific reading of Johannes' character ('He might have a true visionary power') but rather constructs the aporia of Johannes' pathos.

Paul Schrader has identified as one of the essential elements of *Ordet's* 'transcendental' style, the function of 'disparity'¹²³ introduced by the presence of

¹²⁰ Rosen P., 'History of Image, Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin', *Wide Angle* 9 (no.4), 1988, p. 9

¹²¹ Ibid. p. 9, 31

¹²² Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* (vol.1), p.110

¹²³ Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, p.119-120

Johannes' character. Schrader has argued that the odd presence of Johannes brings an element of 'disparity' to the film because the character manages to 'disturb natural perceptible reality' by evoking the sense of the 'Other within the physical'.¹²⁴

As analysed above, this element of 'disparity' is reinforced by the collaboration of Johannes' character with the physical environment that surrounds him. The film, by de-familiarising physical reality itself, introduces a sense of 'other-ness' within and through the function of physical reality. This sense of 'other-ness' is not produced by the typification of Johannes as God's fool but is rather encapsulated in the ambiguous double status of the wind that surrounds Johannes. By stirring the placidity of the 'apparent' through the emphatic presence of the wind, the film constructs a peculiar effect: it seems to activate not a sense of life that transcends nature but the sense of life within nature. Consequently, the film suggests that Johannes' pathos is not merely that of an idiosyncratic religious spirituality but the strain of someone who is attuned to the vicissitudes of *this* life.

Fusing the Physical with the Spiritual (2):

Johannes Inside the House

The fusion of material reality with the sense of an animated and active absence is accentuated as Johannes keeps appearing inside the house. This fusion takes place through two simultaneous processes: as Johannes' body gradually abandons its elusive drifting and becomes more firmly integrated in the material and social environment of his home, this environment becomes itself charged with the intensity of a realm of absence. More specifically, the sense of mystery that accompanies

¹²⁴ Ibid. p.120

Johannes stops relying on the element of incongruity that he introduces and becomes pervasive. It stops relying on his idiosyncratic presence – the mere oddity of his outlandish behavior – and becomes inextricably bound with the already existent environment of his home. The film becomes gradually tied together as the amalgamation of Johannes’ ‘materialisation’ with his home’s ‘spiritualisation’ takes place. This ‘spiritualisation’, in its turn, gradually suggests that Johannes’ faith may give him the ability to recognise the significance and even sacredness not of a transcendental realm but of the real presence of his loved ones.

Johannes’ ‘materialisation’ is primarily conveyed by the progressive modification of the film’s framings. At the beginning of the film, Johannes remained locked within his own space never appearing in the same frame as the rest of his family. The camera’s basic strategy of separating Johannes’s framings from the framings of the rest of the family has been the pan that demarcated the empty space between him and the others. The pan between him and Inger during the dinner scene was followed by another one during the following scene when the camera left Inger and Morten (who were having coffee together) and moved towards Johannes entering the room and announcing that there is ‘a corpse in the parlour’ (Figures 63-65).

Figure 63

Figure 64

Figure 65

Figure 66

Figure 67

Figure 68

In the latter scene, the pan was followed by a pan back to the family (Figures 66-68) and a cut to a shot of Johannes (Figure 69). That cut recalled a previous cut from the men to Johannes on the hill and, thus, further reinforced his isolation (Figures 70-71).

Figure 69

Figure 70

Figure 71

However, from the time Inger is taken ill, Johannes' framings become more inclusive, presenting him as part of his home, and his home as a mould of his comportment. Johannes stops appearing transiently – suddenly entering alone from a door and then

exiting – and is usually already inside a room or next to a character: in the scene when Morten comes back from Peter the tailor (Enjar Federspiel) as soon as he learns about the problem with Inger’s birth, Johannes is revealed to be standing near him as soon as he sits at the living room table (Figure 72).

Figure 72

In the next scene (Figure 73), Johannes appears already seated in a room and framed together with Maren, Inger’s daughter (Ann Elisabeth Rud).

Figure 73

Finally, in the long shot outside Inger’s room after the doctor leaves, although Johannes does not immediately appear with the other men, he moves towards them, entering from the foreground of the shot (Figures 74-76). Although he does not appear in the shot from the beginning, he doesn’t appear entering from a door, coming from elsewhere. His entrance from the direction of the camera’s position rhymes and recalls Inger’s entrance (Figure 77) in the first dinner scene (see previous section).

Figure 74

Figure 75

Figure 76

Figure 77

Juxtaposed to his prior entrances and echoing Inger's entrance in the dinner scene, this shot makes Johannes appear as someone who has already been in the room for a while. Like Inger's body, his body now comes to the foreground of the shot. The camera does not need to follow him because it is already positioned in such a way as to include all of the men within the same shot. For the first time, Johannes *joins* the rest of his family. An 'empty' camera movement does not seem necessary anymore as Johannes *moves towards* the others and becomes incorporated in his home. This incorporation, rendered through the progression and differentiation of the framing structure starts to reveal Johannes' 'materialisation'. Johannes' territory seems no longer as his own private 'privileged zone' but merges with the tangible space of his family and his home.

The sense of Johannes' corporeal presence is further reinforced by the extension of the duration of his appearances. Although each of his appearances in the house before Inger is taken ill lasted around a minute and a half, from that point onwards the duration of his appearances is almost doubled. The scene in which he appears with Morten waiting outside Inger's room and the long take in which he appears embracing Maren in another room last three minutes each. The prolonged duration of his appearances consolidates and dilates the sense of his corporeal presence since it is juxtaposed to his prior stealthy ethereal wandering in and out of the living room.

At the same time, the hint of absence that has been accompanying Johannes' drifting inside and out of the house up to this point starts to now steadily emerge through the interior space of the house within which Johannes acts. At first, it is evoked by the fading sound of Inger's off screen moaning voice permeating the living room where Johannes and Morten wait for Inger's precarious childbirth. In fact, the presence of Inger's voice is rendered as a form (or rather a hint) of a creeping absence that seems to make Johannes realise the terror of her loss: the vibrations of Inger's voice perforate the placid muteness of the walls but they almost immediately vanish. Although the sound of her voice is absolutely present and reverberates through the walls of the living room, it is, at the same time, rendered evanescent by its dispersal in the hollow stillness of this room. *The voice seems to exist only in the manner of its fading.* As the predominant stillness of the shot diffuses the voice through the ambience of the living room, the voice seems to revert into silence. The voice is apparently extended inside the living room but is actually perceived as an intensity of silence, or rather, as an intensity within silence. It is silence itself that seems to vibrate through the sound of Inger's pain.

As Inger's moaning voice becomes diluted within the stillness of the room, a movement of withering unfolds. This withering emerges as the meaning of Inger's moaning and is captured by what Jacques Derrida has called the 'diaphaneity' of the voice.¹²⁵ 'Diaphaneity' is a term used by Derrida to describe the liminal state in which the perceived, empirical presence of a voice is joined with the 'apparent transcendence'¹²⁶, or rather, the 'ideality'¹²⁷ of its meaning. We could say that this is not simply a state of connection but that it is rather a state of 'unlocatable' and 'passagelike adjacency' between the two elements (I use here the terms used by Charles Affron to explain Derrida's conception).¹²⁸ Derrida's notion of a voice's 'diaphaneity' becomes especially illuminating here, in terms of the film's particular mode of coherence (that is, the fusion of the physical and the spiritual element). It suggests the existence of an intermediary point – *a point of continuity and near fusion* – between the sensible and the intelligible: Inger's pain is 'spiritualised' as Inger's voice unfolds through its vanishing and, conversely, Inger's 'perishability' is actualised through the evanescence of Inger's voice. The simultaneous presence of the physical and the spiritual is encapsulated in the withering pulsation of Inger's voice.

The function of 'diaphaneity' (according to Derrida) refers to a general aspect of the voice, but we could say that a suffering, moaning voice becomes a characteristic, an acute example of this function. In the case of such a voice, the utterance of the voice is not a word or a fixed sign but the outpouring of pain. As Inger's voice is heard, the

¹²⁵ Derrida J., *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. Allison D. B., Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 76

¹²⁶ Ibid. p. 76

¹²⁷ Ibid. p.76

¹²⁸ Affron C., 'Voice and Space' in *Cinema and Sentiment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 105

meaning, ‘the ideality’ of her pain becomes identical to the mere fact of its perception. As the expression and the perception of pain meet (Derrida refers to the ‘absolute proximity’¹²⁹ of the uttered voice and the heard voice), the distinction between the ‘wordly opacity’¹³⁰ of the voice and the ‘ideality’ of its meaning ultimately and utterly disappears. It is within the presence of pain that the spiritual is not simply *evoked* by the physical but *appears through* it.

It seems that the ‘diaphaneity’ of Inger’s voice has acquired the capacity to stir Johannes’ body. Just after Inger’s voice is heard, the camera begins to barely follow Johannes’ slight movements from a distance (Figures 78-79), allowing them to stand out too as mild vibrations within the predominant stillness of the shot (This stillness is reinforced by Morten’s immobile weighty figure that remains seated near Johannes).

Figure 78

Figure 79

The vibrations of Johannes’ movement follow the vibrations of Inger’s voice, as Johannes exclaims: ‘See, there he is...The man with the scythe is coming to fetch Inger’. Johannes, who appears for the first time more firmly integrated in his material environment, seems to be struck by this sudden realisation. Is this only the delirious prophecy of a madman or the sudden realisation of Inger’s perishability? Is this a magically recognised portent or an awareness of the danger of Inger’s loss? Or could these two options unexpectedly merge? Having already placed Johannes within the

¹²⁹ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 76

¹³⁰ Affron, *Cinema and Sentiment*, p.105

more naturalistic context of his home, the film conflates again a seemingly metaphysical understanding of the scene with a naturalistic understanding of it. Exactly because the intensely spiritual aspect the ambience surrounding Johannes has emerged *as continuous with and arising through* the mere physical presence of Inger's voice, the film has managed to unsettle the clarity of the scene's meaning. The dichotomy between the sensed and what lies beyond the sensed evaporates. The spirituality of the scene – the presence of an animate 'invisibility' – is not rendered as an artificial, supernatural power possessed by Johannes, but begins to insidiously appear as Johannes' capacity to be influenced and affected by the material fact of Inger's pain. In other words, this spirituality does not appear as a power that transcends reality but as the very real undulation or stirring of a human mind and the very real possibility of the ostensibly invisible interaction between human bodies and human lives. The film simultaneously constructs and de-constructs the mystery of this interaction. By suggesting that Johannes' exclamation may be simply a manifestation of genuine human agony, it poses the question of whether it is this very human agony that the scene's spirituality ultimately conveys. Thus, the film manages to dissociate the mystery of the spiritual from the realm of the supernatural, utilising it as a dramatic device. This passage from the supernatural to the drama of human relationality does not diminish the mystery of spirituality but rather inflects it: it suggests that this mystery may be inextricably bound with the life of a tangible reality, a life within this world.

The achievement of this scene's coherence lies in the degree to which the scene's physical and spiritual aspects become intertwined. These two elements do not simply coexist but mesh and become indissolubly tied together to the point of appearing as

undifferentiated in an irresolvable unity. This ‘irresolvability’, however, does not amount to an unintelligible complexity but becomes the mechanism through which the film manages to produce a particular (and powerful) dramatic effect. Moreover, the intertwining between the physical and the seemingly meta-physical element – in this case – is not produced by a specific *patterning* of their relationship, such as the repeated intrusion of an otherworldly motif within an otherwise naturalistic reality.¹³¹ This patterning has partly taken place in the first half of the film (until Inger is taken ill) through the recurrent eerie appearances of Johannes. This kind of patterning, though, would not be able to render the mystery and the drama of Johannes’ faith convincing, since it would only have outlined – and typified – Johannes as ‘God’s fool’. As mentioned in the former section, even at this earlier stage, the actual ‘disparity’ in the film has not been simply introduced by the repetition of Johannes’ appearances but by the bewildering simultaneity of the physicality and the spirituality of his surrounding environment. *Thus, the function of motif (Johannes’ recurring presence) seems to give way to tightness and density of internal relationship.* It is exactly this tightness and this density that has been accentuated by V.F. Perkins as a valuable criterion of a film’s coherence (see Chapter 1 of the thesis). As Perkins has noted, the coherence between divergent components of a film can be measured by the ‘value and degree of their interaction’ and not simply by their ‘diagrammatic’ relationship.¹³² Thus, Perkins’ view underlines the crucial function of *cohesion*¹³³ as an aspect of a film’s coherence. It is exactly this cohesion that constitutes the accomplishment of the film in this scene and captures a type of ‘vertical’ coherence,

¹³¹ An example of such a motif would be the recurrence of red colour as a signal of a supernatural occurrence in M.N. Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* (1999).

¹³² Perkins, *Film as Film*, pp. 116,118

¹³³ Ibid., p.133

which characterises the fusion of elements within a particular moment, rather than their linear ('horizontal') connection throughout the film.¹³⁴

This fusion culminates in the two following scenes, at first when Johannes appears with little Maren inside a dark room and, finally, when he joins Morten and Anders waiting outside Inger's room immediately after the doctor (Henry Skjaer) has left them reassured that Inger has escaped the danger of the precarious childbirth.

In the first of these two scenes, the power of cohesion cooperates with an already created pattern in the film and further intensifies the amalgamation between Johannes' 'materialisation' and his home's 'spiritualisation'.

In this scene, Johannes is introduced by a static long shot sitting alone in the middle of an empty room (Figure 80). He is almost immediately joined by Maren (Figure 81). The film cuts to a medium shot of them together, with Maren standing behind Johannes on his chair, over his shoulder, holding him (Figure 82). For the first time in the film, a cut closer to Johannes does not isolate him from his social environment but reveals his closeness to another person. The camera begins to slowly but steadily arc and pan around them both insisting and giving time to their togetherness (Figures 82-88). It is the time when Maren shares with Johannes her concern about her mother's precarious state, asking him if her mother is going to die and if he is going to bring her back to life. Indeed, it is the time when the state of Inger still seems precarious, since the doctor hasn't come out of her room yet. As Maren and Johannes talk, the camera moves around them and produces a twofold effect: on the one hand, the

¹³⁴ This distinction is coined by Noel Carroll in Carroll, N. *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 237-238. I would like to clarify that a kind of 'horizontal' coherence is part of *Ordet's* achievement too, and I refer specifically to the patterning of the film's framings of Johannes analysed above in the chapter. The point of my making the distinction of the two types of coherence is to emphasise which type of coherence is at work here, in this scene.

continuous re-angling of the shot makes the static figures of Johannes and Maren appear more sculptural, embedding their material fixity. On the other hand, the movement of the camera appears to be rather uncanny, emphatically acting as a moving immaterial presence growing out of Johannes and Maren's togetherness.

Figure 80

Figure 81

Figure 82

Figure 83

Figure 84

Figure 85

Figure 86

Figure 87

Figure 88

This double function of the camera becomes salient through the reversal of the dominant pattern of relating camera movement and figure movement in the film. Up to this scene, when the camera moved, it moved in two ways: it either moved with a figure from a fixed distance (usually in a long or medium long shot), maintaining a constant scale between figure and frame and, thus, creating the effect of a painterly, tableau flatness, or it left a figure behind and moved towards another through the ‘empty’ pan or an ‘empty’ long take analysed above. In other words, the *independent* presence of the camera has only been associated with delineating the ‘empty’ in-between of the characters. Contrasted to similarly independent long takes and pans that predominate in another film, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948), *Ordet*’s long takes and pans have not just served as transitional movements of the camera (that connected groups of characters or that geared the viewer’s attention towards an emphatic close up, for example), but have rather repeatedly rendered the intensity of the dramatic *void* marking the characters’ relationality.

This time, although the movement of the camera appears to be again independent from human movement, it does not adumbrate the distance between two characters but, rather, a firm immobile togetherness. However, because the figures are still, the movement of the camera emphatically stands out and, by standing out, it becomes able to recall the independent camera movement of the ‘empty’ long pans and long takes. Exactly because the independence of the camera movement has only been

associated up to this point with the sense of void conveyed by the former pans, this independence becomes now able to evoke this void and ‘presentify’ an absence. By rigorously employing a specific stylistic device, the film now self-reflectively foregrounds an inflected version of it, in order to reveal an inflected meaning. The sense of void of the former pans and long takes seems to linger on and move around Maren and Johannes. It is within the surrounding void that the intimacy between Maren and Johannes starts to be gradually formed. Since the two characters have never appeared together before, the camera’s rotation around them does not proclaim a melodramatic culmination of their togetherness, such as the rotation around Scottie and Judy at the end of *Vertigo* (1958), but only suggests the frail beginning of their relationality. It is this frail beginning that demarcates the *still vague and indeterminate* in-between of Johannes and Maren. And, it is in this frail beginning that the remains of absence reside.

Johannes’ gaze is registered as a kind of blind stare and reinforces the sense of the surrounding absence. This time, however, the absence surrounding him is not merely his own ‘portable limbo’,¹³⁵ a projection of his own fugitive and isolating idiosyncrasy, but determines an actual and fixed space, the space of his togetherness with Maren, inside his home. The extraordinary effect of this rotating shot is that, as it imbues the milieu of Maren’s and Johannes’ union with the sense of a lingering and encircling absence, at the same time, it seems to reveal the tangibility and three-dimensional reality of the two characters. In fact, the process of ‘materialisation’ of the shot’s content seems to emerge almost *through* the surrounding absence. It is this *process of emergence* that becomes visible. By rendering the subtle moments of this

¹³⁵ Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, p. 155

emergence, the shot simultaneously brings into relief the birth of the characters' intimacy. As in the former scene with Inger's voice, it seems that a sensed absence becomes able to animate Johannes' care for another person's real existence. In other words, the 'spiritualisation' of the milieu seems to capture again nothing but the miracle of human relationality. Within and through this spiritual milieu, intimacy begins to be realised.

In his essay 'The Camera Searching in the World',¹³⁶ Dudley Andrew explores the function of the camera in film. He argues that the presence and motion of the camera does not just make the real world appear but, crucially, it lends to the world 'the qualities and status of an *apparition*'.¹³⁷ Andrew makes this distinction in order to criticise what he calls a 'naïve'¹³⁸ conception of André Bazin's realist argument, according to which the 'real' that is captured by the camera is equated with what is *already visible*, that is, what is re-presented in the filmic image. In order to explain his point, Andrew draws upon the photographic base of film (referring to Bazin's notes) and argues that, as Bazin had noted, the photographic image and, therefore, the film image has the capacity to evoke a ghostly effect and function as an apparition, because its status can be perceived as a 'transparent nothing', as a plane of an absent thing, and not just as a 'a black and white something'.¹³⁹ This ghostly effect becomes acute, according to Andrew, in the case of shaky¹⁴⁰ film images (such as those in horror films or those shot in moments of crisis or danger), that is, when the status of the film image is revealed as a kind of fissure or gap in the representation of the

¹³⁶ Andrew D., 'The Camera Searching in the World' in *What Cinema Is!*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2010, pp. 1-28

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 9

¹³⁸ Ibid. p. 10

¹³⁹ Ibid. p. 13

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. p.13

visible, rather than as a clear re-production of it. Andrew's view becomes particularly revealing, however, not only when such a gap in the representation of what is visible becomes apparent but also in cases when this representation seems clear and continuous, as in the case of the rotating camera above. In this case, the film image acquires the status of an apparition because it becomes able to capture the *movement* and the *duration of appearing*: it seems that as the camera revolves around Maren and Johannes, it doesn't only capture and reproduce what is already visible but it also seems to render the visible *as the latter is being formed and in the process of happening*. This is exactly the effect of the 'materialisation' of Maren and Johannes' togetherness taking form through an emphatic surrounding absence. In other words, the ghostly effect of the shot lies in the capacity of the shot to render the emergence of the visible as an unsettling continuum between absence and presence. It is also through this continuum that the *realisation* of the two characters' intimacy comes forth.

Because what comes forth as 'real' in this shot springs from the shot's ghostly effect, 'the real' in this case cannot be merely equated with *what* appears through the camera but also includes *the way* in which this appears through it. Therefore, what is (or rather becomes) 'real' seems to be here the product of the cohesive organisation of the shot rather than simply what is represented in it.

In this sense, the effect of the 'apparition' does not need to be exclusively traced back to the photographic nature of the shot (as Dudley Andrew would argue) but is also produced by the *arrangement* of the film. Consequently, we could say that the effect of the 'apparition' is not merely a matter of medium ontology but crucially a matter of the film's *achievement*.

In fact, only if the viewer is attentive to the cohesive organisation of the shot will he become able to recognise that this shot is able to capture the realisation of an intimate moment and is not just another moment of Johannes' religious proclamations. At the end of the shot, Johannes tells Maren that he 'will send one of his father's angels' to watch over her and tenderly takes her in his arms while saying: 'He took them in his arms and blessed them as they would join him in the Kingdom of Heaven'. Without considering the organisation of the shot, the viewer could perceive these last remarks merely as citations from the Bible referring to the moment Jesus encountered the children in Jerusalem. Indeed, these *are* citations from the Bible but are they *only* that? Since the cohesion of the shot has been able to render the moment of intimacy between Johannes and Maren, these remarks do not just sound as a repetition of the biblical text but also take on the meaning of Johannes' effort to express his care for Maren in the only way possible for him at the moment. Johannes may seem indeed still overwhelmed by his studies in theology but this does not preclude his awakening to the capacity of responding to and relating with another human being. The moment becomes crucial because it captures the possibility of this awakening. It is the cohesive organisation of the shot that manages to extend its meaningful possibilities and, thus, manages to interrogate the seemingly explicit reading of this last moment: the dismissive certainty and 'obviousness' of Johannes' isolating madness is unsettled once more.

The film has started to suggest Johannes' responsiveness to the pain and fear of his loved ones. Thus, through Johannes' gradual realisation of the danger of Inger's loss, Johannes' own drama of faith becomes inextricably intertwined with the drama of Inger's loss. In reverse, the agony of Inger's loss stops constituting a dramatic plotline

independent of Johannes' agony but merges with it. The 'spiritualisation' of the Borgen home has managed to render the danger of an absence, a loss, a void, and, *simultaneously* trigger Johannes' responsiveness to this danger. In the next scene, when the doctor leaves the house having reassured the family that Inger is out of danger, Johannes joins Morten and Anders sitting outside Inger's room. The scene is rendered through a long shot of the living room adjacent to Inger's room. It is the scene in which, as mentioned above, Johannes enters from the foreground of the shot and moves towards the rest of the men. The fixity of the shot anchors the action within the fixity of real space and is contrasted to the former shots of Johannes in the living room that have been following him as he moved. The camera stays still, behind Johannes, as the latter approaches the two men. Suddenly, as the lights of the doctor's car fall on the wall in front of him, he points to the wall while saying: 'There he is again, the man with the hourglass. He has come back for Inger. Look, now he is going through the wall' (Figures 89-91).

Figure 89

Figure 90

Figure 91

Morten and Anders urge him to calm down reassuring him that Inger is out of danger and that these lights only come from the doctor's car backing up. The sound of the

engine of the doctor's car pervades the room and Johannes repeats his concern. As Johannes leaves the frame, Mikkel enters the room from the door of Inger's room, uneasily walks towards the men and tells them that Inger finally died.

The film does not allow for much time to pass between Johannes' proclamation and Mikkel's announcement. In fact, the announcement immediately follows the proclamation. The accidental presence of the lights on the wall at which Johannes points is a perfectly 'realistic' occurrence that, nonetheless, turns out to be a dreadful foreboding. The *astonishing* function of the lights lies in the fact that although their presence is accidental, the horror they cause to Johannes turns out to be justified.

Even as Johannes points to the lights on the wall, his proclamation sounds as a *discomfortingly real concern*. The film, through its meticulous strategy of gearing the understanding of Johannes' spirituality away from a kind metaphysical yearning and towards the agony of corporeal loss, the film now dramatises Johannes' sheer horror. In other words, the impression of Johannes' discomfortingly real concern is produced by the cumulative effect of Johannes' insidious dread. Thus, the question of the mere credibility of Johannes' words subsides and gives way to the dramatic effect of his horrific realisation. The film, again, simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the mystery of Johannes' agony by managing to daze the viewer: Johannes' dread is not something unknown, elusive and transcendent but it is the actual, very human horror in the face of death.

The device of the lights falling accidentally on the wall in this scene does not convey a culmination of melodramatic energy (such as the similar device at the end of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, for example), but rather appears *just as another* 'apparition' in a series of 'apparitions', just as another manifestation of the film's already established

stylistic practice of merging its material environment with the sense of a 'present absence'. It is this 'present absence' that has been pervading the Borgen home that now turns out to be the coming of death. It seems that the lights that fall on the wall only re-affirm the already hinted at arrival of death. As the doctor's car moves away, its lights slide away on the wall, and, through this sliding movement, the film seems to visualise the departure of Inger's spirit. The muteness of the wall's materiality and the strange, amorphous visual distortion produced by the sliding quality of the lights' movement, enact the presence of death. The film manages to manifest the face of death by attributing to a plain, realistic occurrence a crucially mysterious quality. The moment becomes a paradigmatic instance of integration of the film's realistic and spiritual aspect.

Establishing and Compromising the Style of Abstraction

By the time Inger dies, the film has managed to simultaneously demystify the drama of Johannes' spiritual faith and dramatise the sheer human horror of death through this demystification. If the 'spiritualisation' of the Borgen home ultimately conveyed the prospect of death and the agony in the face of it, then the final sequence of the film (Inger's funeral) becomes par excellence 'spiritualised'. Within the heightened abstraction of the sequence's imagery, the void of death prevails.

However, although the film seems to render the presence of death prominent through the predominant style of the sequence, it simultaneously undermines this style by introducing in it hints of a lively physicality that counteract the dominion of death. Once more, the film interrogates the prevalence of death's image through the interplay of its spiritual and its physical aspect. The finality, the certainty of death, as I will show, is further interrogated through the manifestation of the *artificial* status of its

image. As the image of death is rendered artificial, it gives way to the re-emergence of corporeal life. Inger's resurrection is thus not presented merely as the outcome of Johannes' final cue, but becomes the result of the film's strategy of undermining and finally subverting the apparent image of death.

During the funeral sequence, the abstraction of the film's style becomes conspicuous. Firstly, the sequence is characterised by a stark white and black color contrast since the part of the sequence that takes place in the death room is imbued with a white light, and the shots interpolated between the shots of the death room are predominantly registered in black. This contrast is reproduced inside the space of the death room since the blackness of Inger's coffin, the chairs and the costumes of the figures around Inger's coffin are contrasted to the predominant whiteness of the room and the whiteness of Inger's clothes (Figures 92-94).

Figure 92

Figure 93

Figure 94

Moreover, as the camera is firmly placed at some distance from the bottom of Inger's coffin, the coffin appears in the middle of the shot, placed perpendicularly to the axis of the screen and splitting the shot into two symmetrical parts. The symmetry of the

sequence's introductory shot is reinforced by the two identical candlesticks placed on each side of the coffin (Figure 92 again). Furthermore, the verticality of Inger's coffin is juxtaposed to the direction of movement captured by the shots of the sequence that are interpolated between the shots inside the death room. The first shot is a shot of an empty coach that moves to the left, parallel to the axis of the screen. It is the coach that will carry the coffin (Figure 95).

Figure 95

The second shot is a rightward and then leftward pan that scans the static crowd of guests singing a song of mourning in the living room. In this shot, the camera starts recording from the door outside the death room, moves to the right, stops at a point, and retraces its way back to the door of the death room (Figures 96-101).

Figure 96

Figure 97

Figure 98

Figure 99

Figure 100

Figure 101

The final shot outside the death room is again a shot of the leftward moving coach that arrives at the house (Figure 102).

Figure 102

The direction of movement captured in the third shot echoes the leftward pan that returns to the door of the death room and like this leftward pan seems to draw the sequence back to its centre. Movement *inside* the death room is minimised, since most of the shots inside the death room capture still figures around Inger's coffin. Finally, the space of the death room is conspicuously sparse, reinforcing the centrality of Inger's coffin (Figure 92).

Through the abstraction of the sequence, the film reduces the perplexity and the polymorphous look of real space, in order to convey the austerity and irrefragability of death. The stark black and white color contrast is juxtaposed to the predominant malleable grey tones of the film, conveying the rigidity of the fact of death. Inside the death room, the predominant whiteness accentuates the blankness of death. The structure of mobility outside the death room (the moving coach and the scanning pan) reduces the three dimensionality of space to a plane of 'back and forth' movement that finally returns to the centre of the sequence which is nothing but the death room, the coffin, Inger's body. The geometrical opposition between verticality and horizontality reinforces the centrality of Inger's body as it forms a cross whose juncture is again the coffin. Finally, the sparse imagery of the shots inside the death

room renders them almost devoid of any concrete and realistic manifestations of corporeality.

However, although the film seems to convey the stasis of death through this process of pictorial abstraction, it simultaneously manages to re-introduce signs of corporeality within it. These signs are first introduced through the use of sound. Although the predominant pictorial arrangement of the sequence seems at first sight to *de-materialise* the latter, the use of sound at crucial moments of the sequence pulls the latter back to the tangibility of physical reality. The melancholy of the melodic tune that accompanies the sequence is rhythmically penetrated and, sometimes, even arrested by the intrusion of sounds whose pronounced texture evokes their material origin. The film seems to insert these sounds after each moment in which it re-affirms or emphasises the picture of death. In this way, every sound is perceived as a kind of resistance to this picture: it is immediately after the close up on the leaflet which notifies of the death of 'Inger Borgen' that the film cuts to the shot of the coach moving towards Borgenstaadt, carefully rendering the sound of the spikes *rustling* around the coach (Figures 103-104). It is immediately after Mikkel enters the death room and walks distraught in front of the coffin that the film cuts to the shot of the coach arriving, rendering *the percussive sound* of the horses' hoofs knocking on the graveled ground (Figures 105-106). It is immediately after the vertical image of Inger's body that the film cuts to an outside shot rendering the *even louder percussive* sound of the heels of the ladies that follow Peter Skraedder entering Borgenstaadt, as well as the *screeching* sound of the hens that surround them (Figures 107-108).

Figure 103

Figure 104

Figure 105

Figure 106

Figure 107

Figure 108

Two significant characteristics of each of these sounds is that most of the times they follow an interval of silence and that when they are heard, they are heard *over* the melodic funeral tune, even as the volume of this tune increases. As the volume of the ‘materialising’ sounds also increases, the latter become sharper. The simultaneous escalation of these two kinds of sound conveys a powerful *antagonism* between the acknowledgment of death expressed by the melodic tune and the resistance of a lively physicality. The rhythmic interjection of these sounds (rustle, percussion, screech) acquires a puncturing quality, amounting to a vibrant manifestation of physicality that counteracts the ethereal and static face of death.

Death becomes indeed a mere ‘face’. The film *displays* the constructedness of the image of death through a marked and heightened ‘theatricalisation’ of the initial shot

in the death room. Through this ‘theatricalisation’, the film manages to render overt the artificiality of the image of death: the shot that introduces the death room is a track back from a medium long shot to a long shot of the death room. As if unfolding the ‘to-be-seen-ness’ of the image, this movement back reveals the space of the room and the figures of Morten and Anders standing on each side of the coffin (Figures 109-110).

Figure 109

Figure 110

As this movement back widens this image, it seems to be ‘*opening the stage*’ for the sequence. The use of the track back seems to become a film equivalent of ‘opening the curtain’ in a play. As soon as the camera is stabilised, it reveals Morten’s protracted immobility as he stares over the coffin. This awkwardly protracted immobility recalls the ‘unnatural’, preparatory stillness of a stage actor waiting for the play to start in order to move. It thus reinforces the look of an *already staged* image which is about to be performed. As soon as Anders sits on a chair beside the coffin, Morten sits on another chair across him, and the camera keeps lingering on the stillness of the men. The wall behind the coffin and the off screen singing sound that is heard from outside the room, while the camera stands still, render a sense of confined space. The deep focus of the shot reinforces the sculptural stillness of the figures and the fixity of a stage-space (Figure 111).

Figure 111

David Bordwell remarks that the whole film has been characterised by a kind of ‘theatricalisation’.¹⁴¹ He maintains that the film has already been ‘theatricalised’ because it has mostly adhered to the stable framing scale of a long or medium long shot and has predominantly registered its figures through the long take, without altering the distance between camera and character. The film has indeed frequently used these formal devices – as mentioned in the sections above – and has been indeed recalling the theatrical form through the use of them. However, these devices have only been registered as a vague allusion to theatrical form and not as an explicit ‘*signal*’ of this form (as Bordwell suggests).¹⁴² In other words, the film has been playing with a theatrical look but has also been maintaining *the enigma of this play*. It is only now that the film explicitly ‘signals’ the theatrical form of its image, through the opening shot of the funeral sequence. What seemed as an unresolved ambiguity of the film becomes highlighted, overstated and predominant. In keeping with the film’s ‘theatricalisation’ strategy, the funeral’s initial shot now *discloses* the theatrical form. And, through this disclosure, the film unsettles the ‘reality’ of the image of Inger’s death.

The film has by now undermined the image of death but has not yet subverted it. It finally subverts this image by steadily unfolding a *continuum* between the animate

¹⁴¹ Bordwell D., *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, pp. 148-164. I would like to mention here that the film is also based on a theatrical play, Kaj Munk’s *Ordet* (1925).

¹⁴² Ibid. p. 149

and the inanimate sides of the room in which Inger's coffin lies. This continuum emerges gradually out of the way the film breaks through an already established *split* between these two sides of the room: throughout the arrivals of the priest, the doctor and Peter, the film dichotomises the space of the room. When a person enters the room, walks around it and greets Morten, the camera is placed in such a way as to only reveal what is happening in front of the coffin, keeping the coffin itself concealed from view or just capturing its edge (Figures 112-115). Respectively, when the camera reveals the coffin, it registers it from the space in front of the coffin in such a way as to conceal this space (Figure 116).

Figure 112

Figure 113

Figure 114

Figure 115

Figure 116

Nevertheless, the film unsettles this split through several arc and pan shots taken by the space between the two sides. The recurrence of these arc and pan shots unifies the living and the dead side of the room by creating a momentum of camera and figure

movement striving to merge these two sides. This momentum is momentarily disrupted by shots that restore the spatial split but it finally grows as it resists these disruptions: the thrust is given by the arc and pan shot that follows Mikkel as he moves from one side to the other and reaches for the top of the coffin. The camera is positioned near the bottom of the coffin and towards its centre (Figures 117-118). As Mikkel bursts into tears, the camera tracks backwards and restores the vertical view of the coffin (Figure 119).

Figure 117

Figure 118

Figure 119

During the second arc and pan shot, however, the camera follows Johannes from one part of the room to the other, lingering on this shot without restoring the vertical view of the coffin. The camera is positioned around the centre of the coffin's length so as to render the coffin horizontally to the axis of the screen: *the 'in-between-ness' of the two sides of the room is for the first time rendered conspicuous* (Figures 120-121).

Figure 120

Figure 121

After a while, the camera follows Johannes as he returns in front of the coffin asking for Inger's resurrection (Figures 122-124). A medium shot of Inger subtly reveals her slow revival. Inger's fingers start to move (Figures 125-126).

Figure 122

Figure 123

Figure 124

Figure 125

Figure 126

As Johannes walks towards the revived Inger, the camera follows him again. The film suddenly cuts *but then continues* with a match on action shot of Mikkel, who seems to complete Johannes' movement, embracing Inger (Figures 127-132). This match on action structure surpasses the dichotomy of the space recalled through the cut,

reaffirms the continuum between the two sides of the room and augments the life momentum even after the resurrection.

Figure 127

Figure 128

Figure 129

Figure 130

Figure 131

Figure 132

As the camera moves closer to the couple (Figure 133), Inger gives Mikkel a sensuous kiss (Figures 133-135). Thus, the culmination of the sequence turns out not to be the performance of the miracle but this final kiss Inger gives to her husband during their embrace. The sensuousness of the kiss becomes the triumph of the already built up life momentum. It is this sensuousness that seems to ultimately complete Inger's physical re-emergence.

Figure 133

Figure 134

Figure 135

The dramatic weight of the miracle is not produced by its magical performance but by the increasing temperament of corporeal life produced by the arrangement of the sequence. Inger's awakening is not perceived as a sudden rupture but rather as an expression, an affirmation of this temperament. The film does not proclaim the supernatural power of Johannes' faith and does not even ask the viewer to believe in Johannes but, rather, to be attentive to the film's own mechanisms. *Ordet* manages to shift the dramatic focus of the final sequence away from the mere credibility of Johannes' performance and towards the vigilant presence of a physical vitality. It is the consistently tight interplay between the corporeal and the abstract or spiritual aspects of the film that manages to subvert the finality of death and, in this way, render the miracle dramatically convincing.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how *Ordet*'s style manages to render intelligible and convincing the interaction between its otherworldly, spiritual aspects, on the one hand, and its physical aspects, on the other. The film is marked by the co-existence of these strikingly conflictual and apparently incongruous stylistic tendencies, which ultimately manage to come together coherently. The function of the film's spirituality is manifested through multiple idiosyncratic and peculiar stylistic

devices, such as the highly elusive behaviour of metaphysically minded characters, the eerie, apparently ‘unmotivated’ camera movements between the characters, the odd performance of the character of Johannes or the ‘unrealistic’, artificial abstraction of image of death within the otherwise naturalistic context of the film. As it became evident through the chapter’s analysis, these devices can be explained by being *related* meaningfully to the more realistic aspects of the film. Either in the form of a fusion (as, for example, in the case of the tight collaboration between Johannes’ performance with the material environment surrounding Johannes) or in the form of a tension (as, for example, the tension forged between Inger’s corporeal presence and the men’s elusive, fleeing movements, manifested characteristically in the function of the eerie, apparently ‘unmotivated’ camera movements that separate the characters), the film manages to intelligibly synthesise its opposing stylistic elements.

Chapter 4 - The Fragmented: Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion*

Introduction

There is one predominant characteristic of Jean-Luc Godard's work that has been repeatedly highlighted by its critics: the deliberate and blatant *difficulty* this work presents to the viewer who attempts to make sense out of a – sometimes drastically – discontinuous and disorienting film style. Susan Sontag has emphasised Godard's 'rhetoric of disorientation'¹⁴³ and Richard Roud has analysed this rhetoric more specifically by accentuating the 'abrupt alternation' and 'contradiction'¹⁴⁴ between the various elements in the director's films. Godard's affinity for these techniques becomes most explicit through the juxtaposition of contrasting stylistic elements in the director's earlier films during the sixties. This juxtaposition results in what is frequently referred to as a 'collage'¹⁴⁵ technique of film making, as, for example, the combination of highly stylised visual compositions and the look of spontaneous 'real life' improvisation in *Contempt* (1963) or *Pierrot Le Fou* (1965). Although Godard's later work – since the eighties – seems to have abandoned this technique of stylistic 'collage', the impression of the 'rhetoric of disorientation' lingers on. This time, this impression derives from a more general characteristic of the director's work, namely,

¹⁴³ Sontag S., 'Godard' in *Styles of Radical Will*, Penguin Classics, reprinted 2009, first edition 1966, p. 165

¹⁴⁴ Roud R., *Jean-Luc Godard*, London: Secker & Warburg in association with the British Film Institute, 1968, p. 7 (see also Roud R., *Jean-Luc Godard*, London Palgrave Macmillan, 3rd edition, 2010)

¹⁴⁵ See Thompson K., *Breaking the Glass Armor: neoformalist film analysis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, p.287, Bordwell D., *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London: Routledge, 1985, p. 317, Burch N., *Theory of Film Practice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 60

from what David Bordwell has called a ‘sensory overload’¹⁴⁶ of his films. This ‘sensory overload’ refers, according to Bordwell, to the density, accumulation and proximity of multiple fragmented stimuli and distinct sensory situations within each film (i.e. the co-existence of two simultaneous dialogues, interrupting each other, within a scene). In a hyperbolic proclamation of irritation, Luc Mullet reaches the point of purporting that the startling multiplication and variety of distinct sensory situations in a late Godard film makes it almost ‘impossible’ for the viewer to ‘retain anything’.¹⁴⁷ In a far less outraged and rather reverent manner, Alain Bergala notes that the late Godard seems to ‘know more than anyone’ that he has to ‘fail’ somewhere between the ‘chaotic singularity of things’ and the ‘calculation’¹⁴⁸ involved in making sense of them. Whether in the form of a momentary exclamation of discomfort, such as in Mullet’s remark, or in the form of a kind of surrender to the director’s special wisdom, such as in Bergala’s remark, the response to Godard’s late work seems to include a continuing reaction to the difficulty of its intelligibility and, specifically, to the difficulty arising from the proliferation of and close interaction between disparate sensory units.

As I will attempt to show, *Passion* (1982) is a film that uses this difficulty relentlessly and strategically in order to reveal and construct a rigorous drama out of what I would call the activity of attention: through a boisterous and fragmented arrangement of characters, actions and gestures, the film sets up the question of what it means to be able to focus or fail to focus on them. It is crucial to emphasise that the film does not

¹⁴⁶ Bordwell D., *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London: Routledge, 1985, p. 321

¹⁴⁷ As mentioned and translated by Morrey D., *Jean-Luc Godard*, Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 152

¹⁴⁸ My translation. See Bergala A., *Nul mieux que Godard*, Collection Essais, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1999, p. 40

merely examine the activity of attention as a technical exercise. It does not just experiment with the way specific formal devices (i.e. a close up or a complex shot composition) mimic and display the activity of drawing or hindering attention on a particular detail or action. Rather, it foregrounds this activity in order to dissect and analyse the function and complexity of specific dramatic situations. An understanding of these dramatic situations, the film suggests, cannot be reduced to an understanding of their motivational and causal continuity but rather requires another kind of understanding. This understanding is based on different modes of relationality growing out of the fragmentation of the film's world into areas of focus and the interaction between them. Thus, although *Passion* explicitly undermines a linear type of understanding its dramatic coherence (one sequence leading to another in an explanatory continuity), it does not completely dismantle this dramatic coherence. On the contrary, it brings about a different principle of ordering it.

This different principle becomes initially evident in the way in which the film shapes the dramatic role of one of Jerzy's (Jerzy Radziwilowicz) girlfriends, Isabelle (Isabelle Huppert). By *breaking* the naturalistic continuity of Isabelle's behaviour, the film manages to bring to the fore and accentuate certain crucially ambiguous points of this behaviour in order to present Isabelle as an unattainable being who drastically upsets fixed determinations. Her perpetually elusive being will function as her key aspect that will ultimately allow the film to render her as a longed for but impenetrable object of love.

Moreover, the film triggers a more extensive *disorganisation* of its perceptual field by observing and reenacting certain instances of film making during the sequences in the film studio where Jerzy shoots his film. During the sequences in the film studio, the

film creates a series of ‘tableaux vivants’, mobilising, rearranging and destabilising the representations of the paintings which the latter are drawn from. By recreating these representations, the film not only fragments the perceptual field of the studio into distinct images, distinct visual areas (each corresponding to the visual content of a different ‘tableau vivant’) but also repeatedly associates the latter in unexpected ways. The film thus constructs a continuously self-transforming perceptual field and construes the film making process in Jerzy’s studio as a crucially dynamic process characterised by an extraordinary propensity for constant mobility and variation. In this way, as I will attempt to show, the film dramatises a kind of vision that refuses to be stabilised in a totalising and all inclusive understanding of the film image.

The scrutiny of the film image during the studio sequences is paralleled with the scrutiny of Isabelle’s image, allowing the film to draw an analogy between the work of love and the work of artistic creation. Both love and work are reduced to a series of representational gestures that interrogate the workings of visual representation.

Passion, however, also creates a tension between love and artistic creation, by examining the relation between Jerzy and Hanna (Hanna Schygulla), the other girl to whom Jerzy is attracted to. The film suggests that the interaction between the two characters is not limited to Jerzy’s rigid directorial scrutiny of Hanna’s behaviour but can be extended to a different, more intimate kind interaction between them. The film portrays this kind of interaction through a tension between the characters’ focus on work and their distraction from it.

By investigating the activity of attention in order to portray the dramatic instances mentioned above, the film breaks the linear progression of its development but interrogates, instead, a process of understanding which allows the viewer to access the

film through divergent points of entry. In this way, a certain loss of the film's intelligibility produces a gain in terms of the breadth and the multi-dimensionality of its meaningful possibilities.

Scrutinising Behaviour while Suspending Signification:

Depicting Isabelle's Unattainability

The film foregrounds the activity of attention in order to forge a crucial ambivalence lying at the heart of its portrayal of Jerzy's girlfriend, Isabelle: on one hand, the film gradually focuses on Isabelle in such a way as to cultivate a vivid sensuous intimacy with her, inciting an immersion in the perception of her physical, corporeal presence. On the other hand, the film disorients the progress of this immersion by puncturing or halting it. Through these punctures and halts, the film varies the degrees and points of its focus on Isabelle's actions, thus loosening the viewer's understanding of the continuity of Isabelle's behavior. Although this continuity is never entirely obscure, the film always dissociates the workings of Isabelle's behaviour from its situational and motivational determinations. The film, thus, divests Isabelle's behaviour – and ultimately Isabelle's being – from any fixed meaning, withdrawing from an elaboration of Isabelle's status as a transparent and fully demarcated subjectivity. There is always a clue missing about her or a clue that upsets an already established understanding of her. In this way, the film ascribes to Isabelle only a potential being. The comprehension of this being is repeatedly and poignantly unsettled and postponed as the film recurrently disorganises its focus on Isabelle's behaviour. This ambivalent portrayal of Isabelle renders her initially accessible and familiar but ultimately remote

and opaque. The tension between the sensuous absorption in the perception of Isabelle's corporeality, on one hand, and the suspension of a grasp of her subjectivity, on the other, brings forth the being of Isabelle as perpetually and stimulatingly out of reach. Through the fluctuation of its attention on Isabelle, the film manages to trigger a dynamic of constant *deferral* that fuels a profound fascination with Isabelle and inspires a never-ending, almost erotic longing for the comprehension of her. This meticulous rendition of Isabelle's unattainability becomes a crucial axis of the film's dramatic coherence.

The first extended appearance of Isabelle takes place during a chance meeting between her and Jerzy, who has just reached a crucial professional decision. Isabelle's appearance first draws Jerzy's attention away from his individual concerns, then establishes its own special impact and, finally, fades away.

During the opening sequence of the film, Jerzy decides to quit the film he has been directing. His angry voice proclaiming his resignation is heard over a mobile shot registering the sunlight piercing through the tree branches (Figure 1). The shot becomes brighter as the camera tilts towards the sky (Figure 2). The great speed of the camera's movement, the resplendent light radiating from the sky and through the tree branches and the bombastic exalting music heard over Jerzy's superimposed words seem to declare a moment of an absolute liberation. The camera seems to be fixed inside a car racing on the road, a car that is about to be revealed to be driven by Jerzy. The momentum of the shot encapsulates and glorifies the vehement desperation of a tough and deeply solitary resolution that renounces an important professional commitment. An acute sense of solitude is established by the dissociation of the soundtrack – on which Jerzy's words are recorded – from the image of the shot.

Jerzy's words seem secluded from the real world surrounding him, as if uttered in the manner of an interior monologue.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Suddenly, however, the solitude of the moment is disrupted by another superimposed voice, that of Isabelle, whose stuttering words announce: 'I...I...was fired...I am going to appeal ' (Figures 3-4). This initial disruption is followed by a lowering of the music's volume and a downward tilt of the camera, towards the ground.

Figure 3

Figure 4

The sudden intrusion of Isabelle's voice and the voice's overlap with the gradual hushing of the music start to dislocate the focus of the moment. Jerzy's fleeing is interrupted by a wordly interference. Isabelle's stuttering inflects the moment's focus by pulling it away from the orbit of Jerzy's exalted flight and towards the earthly particularity of another person. The pauses of the stutter prolong the effect of the intrusion and intensify its disruptive function: fragmented blocks of utterances impose their own staccato structure and, thus, arrest the melodious flow of the music that has been nourishing the momentum of Jerzy's flight.

In the next shot, the thrust of the camera's movement is also arrested as Jerzy's car slows down and the camera pans slightly backwards and lingers on the figure of Isabelle who is leaning forward over the half open car window (Figure 5).

Figure 5

The slowing down of the car's speed and the camera's backward pan halt Jerzy's one-way flight and anchor him in this chance meeting on the road. Isabelle, who has only swiftly appeared up to this point of the film in two brief shots of her working in the factory – shots interpolated within longer sequences inside and outside the film studio – becomes now the centre of the moment.

This focus on Isabelle is consolidated through the arrangement of the shot and, particularly, through the vivid pronouncement of framing. The layout of the shot is determined by the borders of multiple frames within which Isabelle's figure is enclosed. The proximity and intertwining of these frames present various aspects of Isabelle's figure, creating a tight cluster of oblique images of her: the frame of the camera's medium shot on Isabelle is split in two different frames created by the parting of the car separating the frontal from the side window. As Isabelle runs parallel to the car, her figure constantly shifts back and forth, appearing once through the side and once through the frontal window. At the same time, her gesticulating hand – though remaining hidden while her upper body leans through the side window – is reflected on the car's side mirror (Figures 6-8).

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Isabelle is presented through a refracted perspective that remains contained within the frame of the camera's medium shot. The distance between the camera and Isabelle keeps varying slightly – given the difference between the speed of Isabelle's running and the speed of the car – while the impression of a wider, encompassing angle remains. Through the controlled refraction of Isabelle's image, the film brings out a crucial tension that conjures Jerzy's attraction to Isabelle: although the multiple aspects of Isabelle seem to diverge, they are also being pulled together towards the point of the camera's steady angle (the point of this convergence is created by the movement of the car which maintains this steady angle). The prismatic emphasis on Isabelle's image and the accentuated centre towards which this image is pulled build the capturing of Isabelle by Jerzy's look. Jerzy's look seizes (and is seized) by Isabelle's appearance.

Moreover, although Isabelle is heard talking, her speech does not come from the shot but is rather superimposed over it. Isabelle's dialogue with Jerzy (concerning the

meeting that she organises in order to fight her dismissal), along with the sounds of cars passing by, are dissociated from the image of the shot. Strikingly, the movement of Isabelle's lips seems to be asynchronous to the sound of her speech. This disjunction between the sight and the sound of her articulations becomes a perceptual difficulty that the viewer faces but it is exactly this difficulty that incites the viewer's effort to attend to the visual part of the scene: through the asynchronicity of image and sound, the film *makes the viewer notice* the visual aspects of Isabelle's behaviour as separate from the natural flow of her speech. Every time a certain articulation is heard, the viewer *is forced to observe* that it does not accord to the movement of Isabelle's lips. By imposing this difficulty to the viewer, the film signals and enacts the work of drawing attention to the image of Isabelle.

The film interjects an aura – or rather just a layer – of muteness between the perceptual realm of the dialogue and the perceptual realm of the image. This layer of muteness also accompanies and emphasises the – already visually – separated depiction of Isabelle's gesticulating hand in the car window. Due to the asynchronicity of sound and image, the distinct gesticulation of the hand displays a sense of urgency that becomes perceptually detached from the sound of Isabelle's words referring to the imminence of the workers' meeting. The perceptual break introduced by the dissociation of the image from the sound allows the visual sensation of urgency to emerge somewhat independently from the information that produces it. As this sensation becomes detached from its actual cause, it is presented more clearly and more vividly as an aspect of Isabelle's visual expression. The perception of this expression is, thus, intensified. The distinct appearance of Isabelle's hand in the mirror introduces a point of visual abstraction that allows the film to suggest an

expansion, a broadening of the meaningful potential of Isabelle's gesticulation. The film, in this way, kindles and unfolds the richness of a *prima facie* graceless gesticulation, allowing it to emerge not only as the expression of the anxiety of a worker but also as the possible expression of a young woman's congenial spontaneity, conviction, nerve, sensitivity and even charming awkwardness. The perceptual emancipation of the gesticulation from its motivation stirs and unsettles any definite demarcation of the significance of this gesticulation and, thus, *opens up* its meaningful potential.

By breaking the perceptual continuity of the scene, the film strives to extract and isolate Isabelle's behaviour from the unfolding of the scene. This portrayal of Isabelle's behaviour does not completely uproot it from the ongoing action but rather manages to increase and potentialise its meaning through the process of de-situating and re-situating it. The emphatic dissonance between Isabelle's visual expression and her speech, as well as the protracted duration of this dissonance, do not turn Isabelle into an abstract aggregate of her sensory aspects but *rather simply – but crucially – enhances the suggestiveness of Isabelle's particularity*. It is the invigorated spontaneity of her gestures and the warmth and unassuming zest of her voice that are underlined by the perceptual break of the scene. By making the viewer notice these personal traits, the film deepens the viewer's sensuous awareness of the specificity of Isabelle. By soliciting the work and strain of the viewer's attention, the film gradually sculpts an alluring sensuous proximity with Isabelle, an initiation into the life of her physical presence.

Suddenly, though, Isabelle blows a harmonica (Figure 9) and the image and sound of her action become synchronised. The sound of a passing car almost fills the

soundtrack, and the sound of Jerzy's voice is heightened as he declares: 'It is me who will leave, not them who will make me leave'. The film then cuts to a medium close up of Jerzy inside the car (Figure 10). Jerzy's voice becomes lower, deeper, somewhat hollow and gradually less responsive, reminding his interior monologue before his meeting with Isabelle. His sentences become more and more disorganised mingling articulations such as: 'I need you' and 'It is difficult to have to record everything' with some murmur in the polish language. His voice gradually disappears from the soundtrack. As Isabelle's voice carries on – complaining about how Jerzy has never attended the workers' meetings – Jerzy turns his face towards the road and he looks straight ahead, away from the direction Isabelle is standing. His look becomes pensive and turns in on itself as a contemplative melody meshes with Isabelle's complaining voice. He jots something down in his notebook (Figure 11). In the next scene, Jerzy goes back to the film studio where he meets with his producer and his assistants (Figure 12).

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Through the incident on the road, the film has deepened and encapsulated the intensity of a moment of acute attention on Isabelle. Through the gradual emphasis on a plethora of aspects of Isabelle's corporeal presence and through the distillation of these aspects from the surrounding action, the film has painstakingly enacted a sudden *magnetisation by the emergence of Isabelle*. The dynamic of Jerzy's attraction to Isabelle becomes just an initial mold through which the film establishes a profusion of physical intimacy with Isabelle. The sudden disruption of the moment – caused by the abrupt intrusion of the sound of the harmonica – and the subsequent shift of the action's focus on Jerzy's gradual detachment from the sight of Isabelle, suspend the moment's meaningful progression. The significance of the moment on the road is left uncrystallised and indeterminate, and the film does not try to resolve this indeterminacy. The film does not try to explain whether it was the intervention of Isabelle that made Jerzy return to the film studio. The film rather uses the indeterminacy of the moment's significance in order to sustain and nourish the moment's affective charge: the spell of the moment is not exactly broken but is rather preserved as a striking question mark. It is, again, potentialised. Like the layer of muteness surrounding Isabelle's image, the indeterminacy of the moment's significance seems to guard the potential of the moment, keeping it *intact* and *unspoiled* by the exegetical imposition of a final meaning. Within the heightened aporia of the moment's suspension, the film encloses a pocket of affect, a pocket of de-territorialised feeling.

Isabelle keeps returning intermittently throughout the film, charged with the haze of an uncrystallised significance, haunting the viewer like a luring promise. The film keeps interjecting echoes of 'observing Isabelle' throughout its progression, refusing a

clear explanation of their motivation. Although it exposes the general story coordinates within which these echoes are situated, it keeps striving to extract the latter from the former. Through the recurrence of these echoes, Isabelle acquires a central function throughout the film, gradually becoming an icon of a sought after but unreachable object of love. This rendition of Isabelle underlines her function as an icon of virginity driving Jerzy's desire (during the sex scene at the end of the film Jerzy wants to penetrate her only anally in order to maintain her virginity and 'not leave a trace'). And, could it also be the case that a similar quest for a kind of virginally pure images also becomes the impetus for the film's own creative gestures? The film seems to construe virginity not just as a particular trait of Isabelle but also as the capacity of the film image to guard and retain the potentiality of its significance and its imaginative being, while resisting definitive explications.

The attempt of the film to construct this kind of image becomes evident during the sequence of the workers' meeting in Isabelle's house where the film sets out to place the image of Isabelle at the centre of the sequence's arrangement amidst a milieu of political agitation. The film presents an anarchic cluster of workers' voices and faces, while at the same time intermittently returning to shots of Isabelle sitting or standing in the room. The clutter of the workers' faces and voices is steadily punctuated by these shots that linger on Isabelle's figure and Isabelle's face. These shots are characterised by Isabelle's pensive stillness, a stillness accentuated by the pronouncement of frames containing her. Isabelle's figure appears leaning on the kitchen's door frame, and her face appears in front of a window frame and under the horizontal side of a lamp hanging over a table (Figures 13-15).

Figure 13

Figure 14

Figure 15

The pronounced use of framing this time cooperates with a meticulous organisation of lighting that reveals the many facets of Isabelle's countenance. Sometimes diffused and sometimes in the form of chiaroscuro contrast, the light that falls on Isabelle constantly varies in its direction and intensity, as if intending to investigate and scrutinise *her* melancholic poise amidst all the faces: although the lighting on the other workers' faces is uniformly distributed, creating an overall subdued effect that unites the sequence, the vivid play of light during Isabelle's shots announces a differentiation. The configuration of the lighting of Isabelle's shots does not only change from one shot to another but varies even within each shot. Modulations of light become distinct in the shot where Isabelle, while sitting at the table beside the lamp, unlocks the lamp from its post, bringing it closer and further away from her face (Figures 16-17). Modulations of light also fill close ups of Isabelle's face in which Isabelle appears looking downwards in a profile (Figures 18-19) or in which she appears opening and closing her tired eyes, while massaging them with her hands

(Figures 20-21). The light fluctuates on Isabelle's face, covering a wide range of intensities. The close ups are bright, dim, then almost completely dark, bright again, and, finally, almost blindingly bright.

Figure 16

Figure 17

Figure 18

Figure 19

Figure 20

Figure 21

The contour of Isabelle's face, its lines and curves undulate softly from one fluctuation to another. These undulations make Isabelle's face pulsate under the scrutiny of the camera and the varied illumination of her close ups. In the following close up of her, Isabelle's luminous face turns to the camera and looks straight at it (Figure 22).

Figure 22

Apart from the last close up in which Isabelle faces the camera, the rest of her close ups register her face looking away from the camera, not directed on a specific object but rather remaining inwardly focused (Figures 23-24). The oblique directions of her inwardly focused looks suggest a gentle secret in her composure and exude a remote but profound honesty. The close ups of Isabelle become portrait studies inspecting – but also wondering about and contemplating on – the sincere and introvert tranquility of her face.¹⁴⁹

Figure 23

Figure 24

Through the interpolation of these portrait studies, Isabelle's image becomes picked out from the flow of the sequence. The camera's persistent lingering on Isabelle's face and the lighting during this lingering both reaffirm the film's gesture of *isolating* the observation of Isabelle from the surrounding action. The enraptured attention to Isabelle's image re-enacts and enriches the magnetisation effect of the scene on the road and recalls the attraction Isabelle exerted on Jerzy's gaze.

¹⁴⁹ Harun Farocki has also observed the interpolation of portrait like shots within the flow of this sequence. Commenting on this sequence, he observes that 'Godard is developing an art of cinematic portraiture, akin to that developed for painting by a painter like Vermeer.' See Farocki H., Silverman K., *Speaking about Godard*, New York University Press: New York, London, 1998, p. 176

In the next shots of Isabelle, Isabelle's look is turned away from the camera, as Isabelle remains pensively absorbed in the workings of the meeting, while the discussion of the workers unfolds around her. The film, however, goes back to a close up of Isabelle, and Isabelle looks straight at the camera once more (Figure 25).

Figure 25

The interplay between Isabelle's oblique looks, on one hand, and her responsive looks towards the camera, on the other, radically disorganises the viewer's effort to make sense of the motivation of Isabelle's behaviour. The indeterminacy of Isabelle's response to the camera further extracts her from the ongoing action and points to her status as an image being recorded.

As Isabelle responds to the close up of the camera, she draws attention to the film. In this way, the film does not only break the shot's motivational continuity but seems to flaunt the activity of representation per se by exhibiting the pointing act of the camera and Isabelle Huppert's performance. As Isabelle Huppert comes forth, the being of Isabelle opens up to the possibility of being something else. The film seems to let what seems as another identity – that of the actress – intrude upon Isabelle's identity and, thus, unsettles another definite demarcation: her identity as a character in the film.

As the close ups of Isabelle alternate between being responsive and being unresponsive to the camera, the film seems to produce not just an indeterminacy but also an explicit contradiction. Isabelle becomes identified both with the character in the film and with the actress portraying the character. This alternation between the two different kinds of close up trigger moments of perceptual awkwardness, moments of frisson that excite the viewer's mind and ripple her imagination but deprive both of a definite resolution. This privation possesses and dispossesses the viewer, calling forth a *lack* that affects her.

Nevertheless, the alternation between the two different kinds of close up does not remain an abstract formal function of the film, merely drawing attention to itself. By generating the momentary contradiction between the identities of Isabelle, it manages to problematise another fixed understanding of Isabelle's being: is Isabelle a fictional or a real being? As Kaja Silverman has observed in her discussion of *Passion*, contradiction or rather 'oxymoron' becomes a 'rhetorical trope' of the film. As Silverman notes, the film seems 'to put opposed terms in communication with each other'.¹⁵⁰ More accurately, I would suggest, the film, does not simply affirm two opposed terms but rather manages to reveal that what seems as a momentary contradiction or oxymoron only unfurls the movement of a transformation, a passage from one term to another. It is the break in the naturalistic continuity of Isabelle's behaviour *that is able to bring forth* this sense of passage.

As Silverman notes in her discussion, 'transferral' (or 'transposition')¹⁵¹ becomes another distinct trope of the film. I would suggest, though, that, in this case,

¹⁵⁰ Farocki H., Silverman K., *Speaking about Godard*, New York University Press: New York, London, 1998, p.172

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p.172

‘transferral’ does not become a separate trope but becomes the trope through which the oxymoron is dissolved. By exposing and then screening its pointing act towards Isabelle, the film may not finally solve the momentary contradiction between the real and the fictional being of Isabelle but, instead, manages to establish both as possibilities. Through the function of this device, the film creates a strategy through which it portrays the being of Isabelle/Huppert not as already naturalistically established and fully predetermined but as existing in a dynamic state of ‘in-between-ness’. The being of the character and the being of the actress seem to merge and split simultaneously. This simultaneity has the crucial effect *of concealing the being of Isabelle while revealing and preserving its potentiality*. The inconclusive understanding of Isabelle’s being re-activates Isabelle’s secret and animates the possibility of its meaning. It is through the alternation of Isabelle’s identities as a character and as an actress that the being of Isabelle acquires again the status of possibility: it is waiting to be.¹⁵²

By revealing this status of Isabelle’s being as ‘waiting to be’, as ‘not yet’, the film seems to ignite what Gilberto Perez has called the ‘imagination of love’.¹⁵³ According to Perez, this kind of imagination is a capacity of seeing in the present, actual being of a person not a sealed subjectivity but only an appearance, a trace of a potential being that always eludes its final appropriation. In his article ‘The Signifiers of Tenderness’,¹⁵⁴ Perez examines how this kind of imagination is enacted by the

¹⁵²Through the break in the continuity of a character’s behaviour, *Passion* renders more pronounced the *elusiveness* of a character. The elusiveness of a character has also been observed as a test of a film’s coherence in chapter 2 of the thesis (see Louise’s elusiveness in the film *Madame De...*). This elusiveness becomes more drastic and more vivid in *Passion*.

¹⁵³ Perez G., *The Material Ghost: Films and their Medium*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998, p. 353

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. pp. 337-366

perceived discordance between an actor's and a character's being in a Godard film. Through this discordance, according to Perez, a Godard film renders an actor a plain 'signifier' that only 'evokes' but does not 'actualise' the actor's being. By triggering this process of an un-realised evocation, a Godard film thus construes a 'possessive yet deferring camera' that 'points' to the 'humanity' of the actor but never definitely captures it. The unmotivated reciprocity between the camera and the actor's responsive performance constitutes, as Perez continues, a 'pointer in the direction [of this humanity] sought, calling it into mind but never to be equated with its actual attainment'.¹⁵⁵ In this way, the meaning and 'affecting power' of the actor's humanity is rescued from being sealed and pinned down through a final demarcation.

Passion enacts this imagination of love by modifying the general strategy of an un-realised evocation. It establishes the potentiality of Isabelle's being not just by foregrounding the camera's pointing act towards Isabelle (during the shots in which Isabelle reciprocates her look to the camera) but by intermittently disclosing and concealing this foregrounding (as Isabelle's look turns once towards and once away from the camera). The two aspects of Isabelle's being come forth and withdraw interchangeably. By unfurling the permutations of Isabelle's being, the film circumscribes and exemplifies exactly the 'affecting power' of Isabelle's humanity. Rather than merely exposing the arbitrary fragmentariness of these moments, the film seeks to analyse and retrieve the origin of their meaningful potential by showing that this origin is inextricably bound with a kind of seeing that does not *usurp* the seen¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ It is this kind of seeing that manages to take the viewer, as Perez suggests, '*through the process of signification* [my emphasis] without arriving at an end product'. Ibid. p. 353

¹⁵⁶ *Passion* forms a kind of intelligibility that is not based on sealed identities and dichotomies but on the workings of *appearances*. The mode of the film's intelligibility suggests that it is appearances rather than identities that function as determinations of being. This aspect of the function of

but rather releases it from its fixed determinations. The work of attention produces this release.

Finally, the function of sound during this scene also extends the meaningful perspectives of Isabelle's being by exhibiting an ambivalent focus on Isabelle. On one hand, Mozart's Requiem emerges over the shots of Isabelle, insidiously penetrating the clutter of the workers' voices, hinting solemnly and ceremonially at Isabelle's private being and underlining the melancholic sobriety of her gazes and her stillness. On the other hand, the sound of this musical piece is intermittently hushed as the soundtrack becomes recurrently dominated by the conversation of the workers, a conversation in which Isabelle's voice repeatedly takes part. In this way, the film, on one hand, reinforces the visual strategy of extracting Isabelle from its strict situational coordinates (the workings of the meeting) and, on the other hand, it places her within them.

When the music comes forward in the auditory foreground, it begins by accompanying the close ups of Isabelle and sporadically continues over certain close ups of the rest of the workers. In this way, the ceremonial musical elaboration of Isabelle's privacy underpins the condition of each worker's privacy. The film thus draws attention to Isabelle's privacy not only as a recognition of an individual condition that separates Isabelle from her fellowmen but also as a recognition of a condition that might unite Isabelle with them. The music becomes a force that pulls the weight of attention at once towards and away from Isabelle's individual privacy.

appearances is also observed by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit in another film by Godard, *Contempt* (1963) in Bersani L., Dutoit U., *Forms of Being*, London: BFI, 2008, pp. 19-69

Moreover, the sound of the workers' conversation, dissociated by and superimposed over the muted shots of each individual worker speaking, seems to reinforce the collective and public character of the scene. Nevertheless, Isabelle's voice is the only voice that is occasionally synchronised with the image of her utterances, thus emerging once distinctively and once meshed with the other voices. Her voice is thus not lost in an undifferentiated collectivity but stands out ambiguously. This time, the film seems to hint at the individuality of Isabelle's public aspect, exposing and multiplying again the facets of Isabelle's being in an almost celebratory manner.

Finally, the film multiplies and distinguishes the facets of Isabelle not only by de-situating and re-situating the disparate aspects of her physical behaviour but also by de-situating and re-situating her physical behaviour as a whole. By establishing a pattern between two motivationally discontinuous shots of Isabelle, the film brings into focus a connection between them that makes Isabelle's physical behaviour fluctuate enigmatically between the abstract and the concrete: the first shot depicts Isabelle walking alone amidst tree branches along a river, whereas the second shot depicts her standing in front of a window inside her kitchen, talking to Jerzy (Figures 26-27).

Figure 26

Figure 27

The first shot is abruptly interjected between two sequences depicting Jerzy at work and follows Isabelle from a distance as she walks aimlessly and somewhat idly amidst

the trees. Isabelle's peaceful wandering is emphatically dissociated from any clear motivation. The shot does not seem to simply de-territorialise Isabelle's sudden appearance in the forest but almost etherealises it. As Isabelle holds on to one of the trees' branches, she closes her eyes and lets her body hang from the branch for a long time (Figure 28).

Figure 28

Despite her weight, she seems to be in a condition of weightlessness because her body appears to be lifted by the sloping plane of the ground. Isabelle remains stretched for a long time, in a display of a protracted indifference and passivity. The distention and the highly elusive serenity of the instance renders Isabelle's naturalness somewhat mannered, almost artificial.

In the second shot, however, Isabelle's behaviour remains embedded in the domestic environment of her home and anchored in an agitated discussion with Jerzy who has just announced to her that he is about to leave her. This is also the first time that the sound of her voice derives continuously from the shot itself and is not wholly or intermittently superimposed over it. Isabelle is presented in her full particular corporeality, naturalistically engaged in the moment. Whereas the abstract serenity of Isabelle in the forest almost de-personalises and de-realises her, this shot meticulously exposes Isabelle's actual concerns by elaborating her intentions and suggestions

towards Jerzy (she wants to follow him to Poland and give him the money of her indemnity).

Although these two shots produce two conflicting renditions of Isabelle, both exhibit a subtle but significant resemblance in terms of Isabelle's placement within their composition. Both shots seem to *pictorialise* Isabelle's presence by pronouncing (once more) the film's framing gesture towards her: in the first case, Isabelle's body is constantly shown framed by the trees' overlapping entangled branches and, in the second case, Isabelle appears simultaneously contained within multiple layers of frames around her consisting of the window frame, the kitchen door frame and the static camera's frame. The picture of Isabelle as a sensory unit is accentuated: in both shots, the pictorialisation effect refers to a proliferation of framing interpolated within a given situational framework and delimiting a picture of Isabelle that stands out from the sequential continuity of the film world. This effect echoes and inflects the portraiture of Isabelle in the scene of the workers' meeting and also modifies and intensifies the refraction of Isabelle's image in the scene on the road. More importantly, it now manages to suggest a parallel emphasis on two opposed renditions of Isabelle.

This parallel emphasis contains the ambiguity of Isabelle's being. It contains this ambiguity in the sense that it guards it, keeping it from being dissolved. Isabelle's being is sensed but remains caught between an abstract image and a tangible particular reality, hovering and suspended between the impersonal and the personal. As the film consolidates its ambivalent focus on Isabelle, it weaves a thread of differences that evade and defer a total grasp of Isabelle's being but amplify the suggestiveness of this being exactly through this evasion and this deferral. The film's

persistent exploration of Isabelle becomes an almost amorous scrutiny, a devotional quest, a never ending infatuation that postpones its fulfillment.

Fragmenting the Film's Focus:

From the Observation of Isabelle to the Observation of the Filming Process

Parallel to the observation of Isabelle's behaviour, the film focuses on another, equally gripping quest: it investigates the workings of the filming process within Jerzy's studio. The film's focus is *split* between the exploration of the multifarious manifestations of Isabelle and the exploration of another cluster of manifestations constituted by the images (the 'tableaux vivants') constructed in the film studio. Through the multifaceted images of Isabelle, as well as through the versatile images of the film shooting, the film investigates the workings of fractured and apparently disorderly appearances that refuse to be pinned down to the finality of a fixed meaning.

Decentralising the Intelligibility of a Sequence

During the first studio sequence, the film disorganises its perceptual field by upsetting the idea that a film sequence can be understood exclusively as an arrangement of elements revolving around a central issue or a central story. Although the film initially outlines a leading theme and line of action for the sequence, it gradually disrupts this initial outline, by forging divergent areas of emphasis throughout the sequence's

development. By *dispersing* and *altering* its areas of focus, the film destabilises the relation between what gains and what loses visual prominence within its perceptual field, thus construing a decentralised kind of vision that negates the possibility of unlocking the intelligibility of the sequence through a principal and fixed point of reference.

More specifically, the film uses the device of pointing to the presence and being of its actors (a device also used in relation to the presentation of Isabelle, as analysed above), in order to shift the dramatic weight of the sequence away from an overarching subject matter and towards a fragmented interrogation of the visual life of human behaviour on screen. In this way, the unity of the sequence appears as a constantly explorative enterprise that is hinged upon and guided by the intricacy of human presence on screen.

The initial shot of the sequence recreates the visual content of Rembrandt's painting *Nightwatch* (1642), presenting a group of actors in Jerzy's studio impersonating a company of musketeers (Figures 29-30).

Figure 29

Figure 30

As in the painting, the actors/musketeers appear to be participating in some kind of stately or official mission (probably a shooting contest, a hunt or a parade, according to analyses of the painting). The film, by reproducing and focalising on the content of

the painting, seems to suggest that the central thematic and narrative axis of the sequence will revolve around the representation of the activity depicted in the painting, that is, the preparation or the celebration of the collective enterprise of the musketeers.

However, this initial suggestion is misleading. The film actually uses the representation of the painting in order to foreground its own efforts to recreate the latter. In other words, by trying to imitate various aspects of the painting, the film gradually shifts its attention away from the painting's subject and towards its own activity of representation.

The film attempts to imitate the painting's static mode of being through the rigid frontality and central perspective of the initial shot of the sequence, as well as through the unchanging distance of the camera from the figures during this shot. Crucially, it also attempts to capture the painterly stillness of the musketeers' figures through the posing fixity of the actors' presence.

The film's attempt at evoking a kind of representation arrested in time seems to fail, though, since the *prima facie* inert visual integrity of the figures' composition (in the film) is *undermined* by an aspect of the composition that triggers a more delicate and more mobile viewing the scene. The posture and expression of each actor/figure is not exhausted in the display of the actor's ceremonial position (whether that is holding a spear, a gun or a flag in the most appropriate way) but also manifests the *effort* and *work* of each actor to properly perform the role assigned to him. The unnatural fixity of each actor wavers through the manifest tentativeness and uncertainty of his gestures (Figure 31). The 'trial' gestures of the actor render visible how his individual corporeality confronts and accommodates the predicate of an artificial countenance.

The film exposes the discrepancy between the two orders of the actors'/figures' visibility – the actual/natural and the performed/artificial – in order to turn the meaning of the scene away from the represented content of the scene and towards the intimate physicality of the persons that comprise it.

Figure 31

By manifesting each actor's performance, the film points to this indeterminate in-between that both separates and brings together the actual being of the actor and the being of his role. The evocation of this in-between recalls the effect of the film's pointing to an actor's un-realised humanity, analysed above in relation to Isabelle. The effect of this pointing act here is differentiated though. It does not embed an already forged fascination towards a single person but rather incites an attitude of acknowledgement towards the inchoate yet vividly present idiosyncrasy of each person on screen. The film keeps the effect of the device rudimentary but broadens its scope in order to initiate a consideration of the amplex and the malleability of human sensibility and not allow the overall perception of the scene to suppress or bypass this sensibility.

Instead of merely subjecting the sensibility of each actor to the workings of a 'main issue' – as the one suggested by the represented content of the painting above – the film unleashes a free contemplation of the possible facets of this sensibility: the agility or the constraint of a movement, the diffident or assertive self-consciousness of a

gesture, the inconstancy or resilience of a posture all deflect *and* grab the viewer's attention by introducing a factor of disorder in the legibility of the scene. The film manages to reorient the viewer's attention by suppressing the significance of the scene's 'subject' and focalising more on the variegated physical behaviour of the persons on screen. This shift of focus enacted by the film displaces the 'crux' of the scene, creating a centrifugal way of understanding the latter, that is, a way of understanding it through the multifarious inflections of the actors' bodily movements and facial expressions.

The voice of one of Jerzy's assistants speaking over the shot explains that the 'story' here is 'something made up that is neither exactly the truth nor is it its opposite but something separated from the actual world *by profoundly calculated, approximations of verisimilitude*'. It is these multiple 'approximations of verisimilitude' that reside in the constantly adjusting and readjusting micro-movements of the actors in the shot. These 'approximations', these micro-movements that are not '*exactly*' true nor '*exactly*' its opposite, insidiously fragment the visual surface of the shot, making it appear in a state of unstable, flickering intensity that disseminates the viewer's attention, attaching and reattaching it to the comportment of each individual actor. The 'story' or rather the crux of the sequence is redefined in terms of the work of human gesture and expression and, specifically, in terms of the active capacity of human gesture and expression to constantly – and maybe unpredictably – reconfigure the limits separating what is real and what is not real. Through a multiplicity of micro scale reconfigurations, the film turns a static re-presentation into an animated cluster of presences capable of fictionalising actuality and actualising fiction. These slight re-configurations, these 'approximations' introduce the active openness of form into an

image otherwise laden with a fixed content. The image and its intelligibility exist in a state of porosity.

The film observes this porosity by further fragmenting the frontality of the initial tableau shot into a prismatic arrangement of multiple close ups that capture and closely examine the intimate visual life of the actors' micro-movements (Figures 32-33). This visual life has now come to the proscenium, rendering salient what before seemed to be fleeting and peripheral. The film constantly varies the camera's distance from the actors, as well as the angle and the scope of the close ups, in order to explore the presence, the face and the performance of each actor. Like glimpses that strive to be extended in a time of a lingering affectionate curiosity, these close ups slow down the viewer's perception, 'bending over'¹⁵⁷ the physiognomy and the performance of each actor. What previously appeared merely as a dry stillness now emerges as a more comprehensive affective and corporeal attitude enveloping and developing diverse dimensions of meaning: alertness, introspection, complacency and patience become possible meaningful directions of the predominant stillness. They become pointers to intimate stories that are tangential to the initial story of the ceremony. They introduce digressions that are able to unsettle the general and the conspicuous and divert it into a synthesis of sidelong flights of particularities. These flights do not completely decompose the general direction of the sequence but refuse the monopoly of a totalising way of understanding it.

¹⁵⁷ I borrow this phrase from Bela Balazs who uses it in order to describe the function of the close up. Balazs considers the close up not only able of giving 'the impression of a naturalist preoccupation with detail' but also able of 'radiating a tender human attitude...a delicate solicitude, a gentle bending over the intimacies of life-in-the-miniature, a warm sensibility' (See Balazs B., *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, New York: Arno Press & the New York Times, 1972, p. 56). Balazs' observation becomes particularly pertinent in the case of these close ups in *Passion* because it captures their lyrical tone: the lingering close ups of the still actors here are accompanied by the sound of a lyrical melody. The fragmentation of the film's perceptual field seems to be accompanied by a tonal shift in the film. The stiff rigidity of the tableau has been softened, tempered.

Figure 32

Figure 33

In a bolder move, the film interpolates amidst the close ups of the actors various medium close ups of Isabelle working at the factory (Figures 34-37). In this way, the thematic and narrative axis of the sequence is further disrupted as the film not only fragments and restructures the content of the initial tableau shot but also explicitly shifts the contextual coordinates introduced by it. This radical shift interrogates the boundaries of the sequence itself and poses the question of what can be ultimately considered as a factor of its unity.

Figure 34

Figure 35

Figure 36

Figure 37

The alternating juxtaposition of Isabelle and the actors allows the film to point to a similarity in their countenance produced by their involvement in their respective work

tasks. Although Isabelle's face is mostly turned away from the camera while the faces of the actors are registered more closely, both Isabelle and the actors exhibit the same kind of focused containment and precision demanded by their respective work tasks. Although Isabelle's work grapples with a prosaic actuality while the actors' work aspires to portray a fictional loftiness, both kinds of work adumbrate the gravity and humility of human labour. The image of this labour becomes not so much a unifying theme of the sequence but another point of the sequence's accessibility¹⁵⁸ that triggers a consideration of human sensibility.

The repetitiveness and the monotonous appearance of Isabelle's work, as well as the protraction of the actors' posing, allow the viewer to notice not only the assimilation of their bodily movements by the process of work but also the endurance and the resistance of these movements against their mechanisation: the field of work becomes the canvas on which the film manages to expose both the submission and the perseverance of a person in the face of an external determination. The image of work thus manifests and encapsulates a continuity between an acutely passive and an acutely active mode of a person's connection to the world and shows that it is

¹⁵⁸By juxtaposing shots of the actors to shots of Isabelle, the editing of the sequence establishes a connection between these shots that arises unexpectedly from the similarities between the actors' and Isabelle's labour. This kind of unexpected connection creates a mode of relationality captured by Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's notion of the 'rhizome'. The notion of the rhizome is used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe a configuration of elements that can be connected at any point. More specifically, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome describes a configuration 'that connects any point to any other point so that it is not a linear form' [as in the way 'a root is connected to the tree'] but 'has multiple points of entry'. This configuration can belong to the natural environment (formations of rat groups, networks of burrows) or to the realm of human activity (i.e. a text that proceeds by 'mapping out', 'surveying' and bringing together diverse thematic territories, rather than by developing a core idea). Even though the rhizome is not used by Deleuze and Guattari particularly in relation to film, the mode of relationality it establishes becomes particularly pertinent as a description of the way *Passion's* sequence here forms its intelligibility. See Deleuze G., Guattari F., *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Massumi B., London: Continuum 2004. pp. 3-28

somewhere between this activity and this passivity that human sensibility lies. The visibility of human sensibility emerges as a realm of solitude residing in this in-between.

The visibility of human sensibility constitutes a unifying factor of the sequence but it is *perpetually broadened, increased and diversified* so as to never reach a point of conclusive transparency. It remains a skein that is never completely unfolded, a region of understanding that is never firmly established.

Adumbrating the Pliability of Contraries

During the next studio sequence, the film fragments its perceptual field in order to further disorganise the latter. On one hand, it creates vivid oppositions between distinct parts of the film studio that it brings into view, and, on the other hand, it sets up a spatial realm that interrogates the antithetical poles of these oppositions, exploring the different aspects of their relationality and ultimately joining them in an irresolvable intertwining. By meticulously observing the oppositions that it brings into view, the film manages to simultaneously develop *and* assault them, forming *and* deforming them into an amalgamation of present but suspended tensions. *Passion* suggests that the kind of observation that the filming process entails becomes able to bend (although not eliminate) contraries, thus creating a mode of intelligibility that is based on their mutual involvement and permeability. Kaja Silverman has noted that a predominant strategy of the film consists in its consistent effort to ‘defeat the order of the binary’, ‘making contraries meet either in time or space’.¹⁵⁹ I will attempt to show

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. Farocki, Silverman p. 176

how this effort can be analysed and understood in terms of the film's act of drawing attention to particular details of the perceptual field it constructs. By enacting and by foregrounding an extremely close examination of the process of shot composition, the film manages to demonstrate the plasticity and pliability of contraries, rather than their rigid juxtaposition.

The first opposition is set up through the use of two competing light sources during the first shot of the sequence. The antagonistic relation between the two light sources is established by their opposite placement. One is placed high above the scene that is being filmed in the studio and the other one is placed on the ground, on the same vertical axis: the shot begins as the camera closely follows the downward movement of a studio light projector while this is lowered towards a set of posing figures. As if registering the movement of the light as the latter abandons its source, the camera keeps moving downwards, leaving the movement of the studio projector behind and revealing four figures that begin to emerge within a dark background (Figures 38-41). The figures stand out from this background, presumably being illuminated by the light that has been approaching them (Figure 42). As the camera reaches ground level, though, it records a large lantern that fills the screen (Figure 43). After a small pause on the lantern, the camera moves backwards on the horizontal axis parallel to the ground, revealing in a medium long shot the whole composition of posing figures surrounding the lantern. The figures now appear to be also illuminated from within the scene by the lantern itself (Figures 44-45). Although the light of the scene derives from two opposite projections, these projections become fused on the presence of the figures.

Figure 38

Figure 39

Figure 40

Figure 41

Figure 42

Figure 43

Figure 44

Figure 45

On one hand, the movement of the camera points to the juxtaposition between the two light projections but, on the other, it never embeds this juxtaposition, unsettling the antithesis posed by their contrasting directions. Initially, the movement of the camera demarcates the directionality of the two light projections: when the camera moves downwards, it reflects the direction of the studio light and, when it goes backwards on the horizontal axis of the ground, it amplifies the visual field of the shot in order to reveal the dissemination and upward expansion of the projection of the lantern lying on the ground. However, the movement of the camera is finally arrested and does not continue back upwards since the space constituted by the two clashing and merging projections *has now become a space devoid of directionality*. The ambiguity created by the *diffusion* of both lights radically blurs the sense of directionality, creating a

space constituted by multiple regions of brightness and obscurity, regions that cannot be analysed in terms of ‘coming from’ and ‘going towards’: as light falls on light and expands through light, it forms a spread of intensities, a vicinity of variations of luminosity and shade produced solely by degrees of radiance and refusing to be pinned down to the binary ‘from/to’. In this way, the movement of the camera remains suspended, ultimately failing to construct a space delimited by the two contrasting directions of the light projections.

The diffusion of the light within the recorded space does not only upset the directionality of this space but also initiates a far more pervasive upheaval of the logic of fixed opposites. As the camera observes the function of the light, it calls forth a perceptual investigation of this function that interrogates the distinction between light and darkness, as well as the distinction between the process and the end product of visual creation.

The two light projections form an area of chiaroscuro contrasts between them. These contrasts unfurl amidst the curves of the posing figures and the mutual interpenetration of the two light projections. They shape dark folds that are not the opposite of light but rather derive from it: they grow out of the ongoing struggle between light and matter. The opacity of matter bends the diffusion of the light, constantly veiling and unveiling it. But, if the foreground of the shot presents light as the origin of darkness, the background of the shot seems to remain completely obscure and separate from the chiaroscuro workings of the foreground. Does the distinction between the two planes of the shot reintroduce the dichotomy between light and darkness? Or can the obscurity of the background be perceived as a residue of the foreground’s illumination, as another – liminal – gradation of light? Through

the intense perceptual scrutiny that the arrangement of the shot invites at this point, the shot does not only suggest a continuity of opposites but also reveals that the apprehension of this continuity necessarily implies the viewer's ongoing reconfiguration and reappraisal of the shot's perceptual field. This ongoing reconfiguration and reappraisal further unsettles the distinction of what is already there in the shot and what invades this already there: is the obscurity of the background something that pre-exists the invasion of the light or is it actually produced by this invasion? The film refuses to answer this question in terms of an antithetical polarity and stirs up instead a fluctuation of emphases that destabilise the viewer's perceptual assumptions.

The light in the shot has now become a nodal point through which the shot can be understood. This nodal point pushes the viewer's ordering capacity to its limits by ultimately making the recorded image appear not as a finalised and wholly constituted object of perception but as an entity that lies in a constant state of creation and recreation: the downward movement of the camera has initially demarcated two consecutive areas of the film studio. The first area is revealed when the studio light projector appears and moves towards the staged set of posing figures and the second area is revealed after the moving camera leaves the studio light projector off screen and presents the staged set of posing figures per se. The first area announces itself as the site of a creative process at work, whereas the second one announces itself as the final image of the scene that is being created. In this way, the movement of the camera delineates a sequential relation between the act of an image's formation and the image itself as the end product of this act. However, the function of the light within the shot does not distinguish between these two stages, suggesting a different

configuration. Even when the actual source of the studio light remains off screen, the transmitted light itself remains on screen, actively present in a continuous and ongoing self-renewal: it is not simply inscribed in the shot but it is constantly being projected and transferred by the screen towards the viewer, undifferentiated from the light deriving from the lantern. Whereas the movement of the camera suggests a linear juxtaposition between the work of visual creation and the image that is produced by this work, the active presence of the light ties these two together, rendering a kind of work *within* the image. The permeation of the shot by the studio light produces a visibility in the making, a visibility in motion, wavering between the phenomenon and the becoming of the phenomenon. As the image is simultaneously permeated and constituted by the light, it opens up to the present continuous of being constantly produced and stops being perceived as the final outcome of a process. By construing an image *as light in action*, the film activates and enacts a kind of vision that sees within phenomenality *a state of emergence*. Consequently, it construes seeing as a kind of perspicacity that is able to observe and *discern* in the visible active expanses of formation rather than clear cut distinctions.

The film unfolds another dynamic aspect of the visible by interrogating a contrast created by the rest of the elements of the shot's composition. This contrast is set up by the juxtaposition between the trajectory of the camera that films Godard's film (whose function has been analysed up to this point and which will be referred to as 'the film's camera') and the camera that films Jerzy's film and appears within Godard's film (which will be referred to as 'the camera of Jerzy's film'). The contrast is established by the opposed axes on which these cameras move. As the film's camera moves downwards on the vertical axis of the shot, the camera of Jerzy's film moves

horizontally across this axis, once to the right and once to the left (Figures 46-49). The film's camera records in the foreground of the shot the posing figures mentioned above. These figures represent four men standing fixed in front of a firing squad of soldiers, in a position of fixed and anguished alertness. Behind this set of figures, the camera of Jerzy's film records the peaceful stroll of a young woman holding a parasol.

Figure 46

Figure 47

Figure 48

Figure 49

By setting up these two lines of action, the film lays out a distinction between the critical and the casual and exposes the split between them. The differentiation and heterogeneity of the two cameras' trajectories form two separate and detached zones within the shot. The first zone presents the petrifying desperation of four people becoming witnesses of a public execution, whereas the second zone presents the carefree nonchalance of a woman indulging in a private moment. The two zones remain disconnected – one unfolding in the foreground, the other one in the background – as well as unrelated in terms of subject matter. The dramatic temper of the scene within each zone is only in abstracto contrasted to the other but doesn't seem to be further associated with it. However, the film manages to animate, develop and undulate the hitherto schematic relation between the two scenes by reshaping their juxtaposed dramatic tempers and, specifically, by allowing certain details to bring these two tempers together in a culmination of mutual interaction.

As the woman moves horizontally behind the men, she furtively glances at them (Figure 50). The woman's glance is unruffled and serene, remaining consistent with the nonchalance of the stroll.

Figure 50

However, the glance disrupts the vertical / horizontal split of the shot by inserting an oblique, diagonal direction into its arrangement. In addition, in the next shot, the woman glances briefly at the men once again (Figure 51) and, in the following shot,

takes up the direction of her second glance, moving diagonally towards the set of the men (Figures 52-53). At that moment, the camera of Jerzy's film also breaks its horizontal movement slightly, tilting downwards and diagonally to the right, registering the movement of the woman (Figure 52). The film's camera breaks its course too, slightly tilting diagonally, downwards and to the left. It reveals two men lying on the ground, posing as the dead victims of the executioners (Figures 53-54).

Figure 51

Figure 52

Figure 53

Figure 54

As it moves in this way, its direction converges with that of the tilt of the camera of Jerzy's film, which remains visible for a few moments at the top left of the shot and is then left off screen. The shot finally shows the woman approaching the corpses, focusing on the woman's dress falling on the bodies in passing, as well as on the dog sniffing the bodies just before the woman moves away from them off screen.

As the woman's dress passes over the dead bodies, its casual shuffle overlaps with the bodies' fixity, simultaneously *exposing* and *transcending* the limit separating the petrifying facticity of death from the light hearted frivolity of life. This limit is

underlined while it is transgressed, becoming affirmed yet being surpassed. The unvarnished brutality of an especially violent death is reinforced by the unconcerned and blithe placidity of the woman, turning the aloofness of the woman into an ironic mirror of the indifference of mortality. The formerly abstract juxtaposition of the two zones of action becomes in the moment of their tangential contact a vibrant collision that conjures the power of their intertwining.

The two zones of action constitute two separate scenes that are finally joined despite being – prima facie – thematically and narratively unrelated. The film, by bringing the two scenes together, disrupts their normal intelligibility and establishes a mode of relationality between them.

The visual content of the two scenes is drawn from Francisco Goya's *Madrid, 3rd May 1808: Executions at the Mountain of Prince Pious* (1814) and *The Parasol* (1777) respectively (Figures 55-56). Although, in the case of *Madrid, 3rd May 1808: Executions at the Mountain of Prince Pious*, the film retains the stillness of the figures of the painting (the actors remain still), it mobilises the figure from *The Parasol* (the woman walks and is not seated, as she is in the painting), in order to allow the tangential meeting of the two scenes and, thus, activate their interaction.

As it has already been implied in the chapter's introduction, and as it has become evident by now, the visual content of a painting seems to serve as a fixed and demarcated 'unit' of representation that the film can draw upon and reconfigure, in

order to ‘exercise’ its strategies of fragmentation, that is, in order to proceed with its analysis, fragmentation, composition and re-composition of its perceptual field.¹⁶⁰

Figure 55

Figure 56

Now, going back to the case at hand, the film, instead of sketching out a mere disjunction between the two zones of representation (the woman with the parasol and the execution scene), the film sets forth their cooperation in order to reveal the intransigence of human suffering: as the woman glances at the bodies, her look remains coldly intact, while the death of the men remains unresponsive to the look of the woman. The look of death and the look of the woman reflect each other in a reciprocal absence of responsiveness. This reciprocity is registered by the film’s camera as the outline of a present void, as the outline of a blank and profane space within which affliction coexists with joy in the terror of their contradiction. In fact, the terror of this contradiction brings together the two scenes under the perspective of

¹⁶⁰ For a thorough analysis of the film’s ‘dialogue’ with paintings and, more specifically, an analysis of the film’s various uses of the ‘tableaux vivants’ see Jacobs S., *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, pp. 91-117.

another kind of suffering that is now not juxtaposed to pleasure but is rather revealed to be the awareness within which pain and pleasure coexist in a realm of a non redemptive understanding. This kind of suffering – another word for pathos or passion – is enacted by the film's camera that strives to unite the two zones of action. The tangential convergence of these zones reveals in their reciprocal absence of responsiveness the ground of a common and unfathomably cruel impenetrability.

As the camera of Jerzy's film moves and tilts towards the direction of the film's camera, the two cameras tend to align themselves. However, right when each camera is about to stand symmetrically against the other, the film's camera leaves the camera of Jerzy's film off screen. In this way, the convergence of the two camera directions is not completed and only gives way to their divergence. This divergence dramatises the fact that the pointing act of each camera fails to join the other in a coordinated collaborative 'pointing' towards the meeting of the two zones of action. The two pointing acts fail to jointly encompass this meeting, remaining only fragmentary renditions of the latter. The two camera directions are just about to converge but not quite. Like the glance of the woman and the shuffle of her dress, the tangential contact of the camera directions activates this blank but not vacuous moment within which the absence of a reconciliatory or conclusive meaning lies. By upsetting the schematic arrangement of the two scenes and trying to make them meet in time and space, the film displays how their contact can bring about a vital suspension of meaning that encapsulates the intractability of one's sense of human suffering. By foregrounding the act of composing and recomposing the details of its shot, the film upsets the static conceptual categories of the critical and the casual, engaging them in a crucial confrontation.

Interrogating the Limits of Visual Representation:

Pointing to the Naked Female Body

The upheaval of the film's perceptual field is further embedded as the latter becomes recurrently divided by the pointing acts of the film's camera and the camera of Jerzy's film. This time, these two cameras become involved in a restless interplay that interrogates the workings of a naked female body on screen. Through this interplay, the cameras cooperate and compete with each other in order to interrogate the visibility of female flesh. Either in the form of a cooperation or in the form of a competition, the intertwining of the two cameras' pointing acts propels a struggle for power over the visibility of the naked female body. However, the effort of the cameras is constantly suspended as the naked female body resists its complete appropriation by the pointing acts of the cameras. As much as the naked female body gathers attention around it, at the same time, it manages to maintain a condition of fundamental defiance against this attention. The presence of the naked female body provides the impetus for the film's representational gestures, while, at the same time, reacting at every attempt at its representation, leaving the latter partial and fragmented.

Even when the naked female body is apparently 'completely' exposed in its bare frontality, it manages to maintain a kind of recalcitrance. During the studio sequence mentioned above, the film brings into view a naked woman observed by one of the cameras of Jerzy's film. The naked woman is lying down and is captured from its left by the camera of Jerzy's film (Figure 57) and frontally by the film's camera, which moves backwards, amplifying the frontality of the shot and 'pulling' it towards the

viewer (Figure 58). The two cameras collaborate in such a way as to surround the body of the naked woman from different directions.

Figure 57

Figure 58

However, the mobile frontal view of the film's camera is *countered* by the firm immobility of the woman's body. The juxtaposition of the camera's movement to the fixity of the woman's body pronounces the latter's lack of responsiveness to the film's 'look', underlining the recoiling solidity of the body's corporeal weight. Also, the fact that the woman obstinately refuses to look at Jerzy's camera to the left, further underlines this lack of responsiveness of the woman's presence to the space surrounding it. The woman's body appears to remain *separate* in its fixity, detached from both cameras' inspection.

More importantly, as the frontality of the shot is amplified, the image of the naked woman recedes in the background, and parts of her body become concealed by the movement of other cameras passing in front of her. The interpolation of camera movement in front of the woman clutters the shot, disrupting the visibility of the woman's body (Figures 59-60).

Figure 59

Figure 60

The image of the woman's nudity is drawn from one of the most famously inviting and straightforward 'nudes' in the history of painting, Goya's *The Nude Maya* (1800). The image of the naked woman in the film retains its inviting quality but also reacts against its observation: the recalcitrant corporeality of the body in the film (highlighted by the juxtaposition of the body's immobility and the observer's/film's mobility, not capable of being rendered on a painting), as well as the intrusion of movement in front of the naked body, disrupts the evocation of the painting, distancing and fracturing the image of the body (Figures 61-62).

Figure 61

Figure 62

The recalcitrant presence of the naked female body seems to further trigger the mobility of the two cameras, in the next studio sequence. The studio is arranged as an oriental bath with a pool in the middle and half naked women sitting around the pool, indulging in erotically charged gestures of bodily treatment. As the space is registered by the static shot of the film's camera, the camera of Jerzy's film moves backwards and towards the position of the film's camera, delimiting and inspecting the scene of the bath (Figures 63-64).

Figure 63

Figure 64

As soon as the camera of Jerzy's film reaches the film's camera, the latter begins to move laterally to the right, leaving the camera of Jerzy's film off screen (Figures 65-67). The film's camera seems to pick up and continue the movement of the camera of Jerzy's film, extending it to another direction. It carries on from where the first camera stops, widening the visual perspective and making it more inclusive. However, the movement of the film's camera also *conceals* the first camera's perspective. The opening up of the shot's perceptual field seems to necessitate a closure. The two cameras cooperate, but only in a *broken* continuity. In this way, even though they strive to encompass the scene of the women's pleasure, they fail to fully circumscribe it. By allowing only a fragmented continuity between the two cameras, the film seems to interrogate the limit of its own representational gestures.

Figure 65

Figure 66

Figure 67

Now, the film's camera continues to move, following the movement of one particular woman, as the latter is being undressed by one of Jerzy's assistants and until she sits with her naked back right in front of the camera (Figures 68-71) . When the camera

finally stops, the film reproduces the visual content of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' painting *The Small Bather* (1826), allowing the painterly stillness of the reproduced figure of the woman in the foreground to determine the film's own composition (Figures 71-72).

Figure 68

Figure 69

Figure 70

Figure 71

Figure 72

During this time, the camera of Jerzy's film reappears on a crane, in the left side of the background of the shot, in reverse movement, reclaiming the flexibility of its vantage point (Figures 68-70). The camera goes backwards, recording the pool from the side opposite to the film's camera. A monitor in the background of the shot that projects the recording of the camera of Jerzy's film shows that the latter is now preoccupied with the half naked women in the background of the shot (Figure 73).

The monitor only reproduces what is already visible through the film's camera and, thus, the frontal nudity of the woman with her back to this camera remains hidden.

Figure 73

The pointing act of the film's camera and the pointing act of the camera of Jerzy's film (as the latter appears in the monitor) only reflect each other, as if turning in on themselves, when faced with the unyielding presence of female nudity. The film's camera has given an oblique glimpse of this nudity, while the woman in the foreground was getting undressed, but finally allows this nudity to remain intact behind the refractory conspicuousness of the woman's back. The blatant exposure of the woman's naked back ironically conceals an aspect of nudity, in order to reveal another, obstructing and fragmenting the shot's view, splitting the latter into two distinct parts (the foreground and the background). The film's attempts at representing female nudity remain fractured.

During the next studio sequence, as the camera of Jerzy's film records the movement of a group of victims of a siege,¹⁶¹ one of the women (performing the role of one of the victims) suddenly escapes the trajectory of the rest of the people and runs around the studio. The woman escapes as the pointing acts of Jerzy's camera and the film's

¹⁶¹ Tableau vivant of Eugene Delacroix's *Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople* (1840).

camera face each other (once again, as they did above), closing in on her (Figures 74-76). As the woman runs wildly around the studio trying to evade the figures of guards coming from Jerzy's film, the woman's dress falls off. In a frenzy, the now half naked woman runs across the cameras' trajectories (Figure 77).

Figure 74

Figure 75

Figure 76

Figure 77

Although the anguished mobility of the woman reflects the precariousness of the fictional situation within which the woman/victim lies, at the same time, the woman's

body exerts its own power over the pointing acts of the cameras. It manages to trigger the frenetic intertwining of the two camera trajectories, joining and dissociating them in a paroxysmal interplay of attacks and withdrawals (Figures 78-79). The movement of the cameras has become erratic and the speed of this movement increases.

Figure 78

Figure 79

However, the cameras capture the woman only fleetingly and never permanently. The woman's naked body appears as an unruly force of contingency and ataxia that is always ahead of the pointing act of each camera. It always slips away. Its wayward and volatile potency recalls the image of Isabelle running in the factory, fleeing from her employer (Figures 80-81). The volatility of the naked female body meets the elusiveness of Isabelle's presence, exemplifying the transience of appearances in front of the pointing act of a camera.

Figure 80

Figure 81

Thus, the naked female body (as well as Isabelle's body in the scene above) manages to destabilise and disrupt the film's attempts at its representation. The film's perspective remains incomplete and its perceptual field elliptical and upset.

Between Focus and Distraction: Tension and Intertwining

Jerzy's Moment with Hanna

The frantic commotion of the studio sequences is abruptly interrupted by a scene presenting an intimate moment between Jerzy and Hanna, the other woman to which Jerzy is attracted. The scene unfolds as the two characters watch a video recording in which Hanna performs an operatic song. Hanna's performance is being scrutinised by the characters because Jerzy wants to use Hanna as an actress in his film. However, the scrutiny of Hanna's performance repeatedly collapses, as the two characters plunge into momentary exchanges of looks and caresses that distract them, drawing their attention away from their work. The film suggests that the characters' physical interaction becomes capable of rendering their attention vulnerable, while introducing a realm of human association that cannot be assimilated in the process of work. At the same time, the growing physical interaction between Hanna and Jerzy becomes itself a force that absorbs the characters' gestures of work.

In a medium shot, the film presents the two characters sitting across three monitor screens (Figure 82). The shot begins with a sound overlap from the former shot, registering the superimposed lingering noise of the studio commotion. Jerzy's body is off screen and only his hands are visible. The protracted superimposition of the studio noise outlines the shot as a continuation of the process of work (instead of just suggesting spatial contiguity between the studio and the room where the characters find themselves). Also, the emphasis on Jerzy's hands embeds the scene's focus on the gestural labour of directing.

Figure 82

As Jerzy switches on one of the monitor screens, a close up of Hanna's face appears on it. As if violently startled by her own image, Hanna looks away from it (Figure 83). Jerzy forces her to look at it, grabbing and directing her face towards it (Figure 84).

Figure 83

Figure 84

Reluctantly but permissively, Hanna looks at it but gently turns her head away again. Her involvement becomes more and more fragile and is turned into a swaying and diluted curiosity. Her look starts oscillating back and forth, hovering between concentration and distraction. It is guided by a current of inertia seeking an interest outside work (Figures 85-88).

Figure 85

Figure 86

Figure 87

Figure 88

The oscillation of Hanna's look is reflected in the melodic fluctuations and sentimental loops of the operatic piece that enters the soundtrack of the shot and interrupts the lingering sound of studio work. It is this piece which also appears to be sung by Hanna on the screen monitor. However, it does not come from the screen monitor (which remains muted) but is superimposed over the shot. Thus, the music is not identified merely as the object of the characters' work but it rather evokes an affective realm that underlines the dilution and the dislocation of Hanna's attention.

Jerzy has come closer to Hanna, sitting behind her and probing her to examine her performance. As the two characters appear together both in the film's shot and in the monitor screen, Jerzy's actual physical closeness to Hanna and his physical closeness to her on the monitor screen are restrictive and oppressive. Jerzy strives to mold and contain Hanna's comportment (Figures 89-90).

Figure 89

Figure 90

However, the instability of Hanna's attention slowly takes over the temper of the scene, undulating both her and Jerzy's preoccupation with the screen monitor. Although the characters' gestures initially seem to be reflecting their gestures of work

– appearing in the monitor screen – repeating, modifying and improving them, they gradually become conflated with the characters’ actual gestures of physical intimacy (Figures 91-92). When Jerzy sits across Hanna, once again, he firmly grasps her head, pulling her hair violently. Although the way he grasps Hanna’s head is similar to the way he grasps it on the monitor screen, his actual gesture is loosened, being left unfinished and abstract, succumbing to the openness of a searching, intimate fumble. Also, the vacillating movements of Hanna’s head (reproducing similar movements on the monitor screen) wane too, as Hanna takes Jerzy’s hands in her palms, lowering her head. Hanna hesitantly gives in to Jerzy’s caresses, allowing her head to ‘drop’ under his hands (Figures 93-94). When she looks directly at Jerzy afterwards, her professional rigour seems to evaporate, as she slithers into an absorption that dwells in the pleasure of her nearness to Jerzy (Figure 95).

Figure 91

Figure 92

Figure 93

Figure 94

Figure 95

The characters' otherwise regulated and self-conscious behaviour slackens, succumbing to the characters' physical and affective self-relinquishment. The intimate gestures of the characters appear both as a protraction and as a transformation of their gestures of work. Their 'gestures of love' appear both as a break and as a continuation of their 'gestures of work'. When the character of Isabelle had reflected on the relation between love and work while walking in the factory, she had mentioned that 'work' and 'love' exhibit 'the same gestures', although these gestures may 'differ in speed'. The slow and protracted fading of Jerzy's grasps, as well as the slowing down of Hanna's vacillating movements, produce exactly this 'difference in speed' between the 'gestures of work' and the 'gestures of love'.

Finally, during the scene with Hanna, the phone rings, Jerzy picks it up and responds to the other side of the line: 'I am working... To love, to work – show me the difference?'. The disruption of the phone and Jerzy's question arrest the characters' ambivalent caresses, but this arrest only nourishes their renewal.

The 'difference' between love and work, which Jerzy wants to know with his question on the phone, appears as the opening up of the characters to an affective and not strictly professional behaviour towards each other. The interplay between the characters' focus and distraction wavers between the characters' professional alertness and their surrender to this kind of affective behaviour.

Suspending and Opening Up Understanding:

Rendering a Levitation between Fall and Uplift

Through the intensive observation and meticulous arrangement of its ‘fragments’, *Passion* has expanded the intelligibility of its perceptual field and has adumbrated open modes of relationality characterising the interaction of its characters and the connection between its various parts. Whether in the form of a refusal to designate a fixed comprehension of the being and the relations of its characters, or in the form of an interrogation of the limits and the possibilities of the filming process, the film has managed to produce a crucial experience of both *incompleteness* and *potentiality* lying at the heart of its artistic gestures. In a way, the film has managed to incite a kind of understanding that remains *suspended* between this incompleteness and this potentiality.

Passion ultimately dramatises this state of ‘suspension’ by fragmentarily inserting specific shots into its progression which visualise an actual, physical state of suspension. This state of suspension is rendered as an ambiguous form of levitation deriving from the conflation of an upward and a downward movement of the elements of these shots (a particular example of the function of this conflation is encapsulated in the movement of the two light projections during the studio shot analysed above).

The film, by having managed to establish unusual ‘points of entry’ into the meaning of its fragmented perceptual field, and by having prompted the viewer to exercise the activity of attention in order to find these points, now allows the viewer to *notice* a series of images that recur at various different parts of the film. These images are joined by the

fact that they reveal a perceptual uncertainty between a rise and a fall, an elevation and a downward pull, becoming rather *emblematic* of this perceptual uncertainty.

The film opens with a series of sky shots filmed from the ground. The camera observes the upward movement of a plane, and it moves slightly upwards too. The camera movement is not continuous, as it is intermittently arrested by pauses that allow the movement of the plane to escape its orbit (Figures 96-97). The film cuts to a shot of Isabelle in the factory pushing a heavy cart forward towards the camera. The high angle of the shot makes the cart appear as moving downwards (Figure 98). When the film cuts back to a sky shot again, the camera movement is still unsteady, plunging downwards and then being raised again. The film cuts to a shot of Hanna getting dressed while standing straight in a vertical position and pushing her blouse downwards, inside her skirt (Figures 99-100). Finally, the film cuts back to a shot of the sky, registering the upwardly skewed trail of the plane (Figure 101).

Figure 96

Figure 97

Figure 98

Figure 99

Figure 100

Figure 101

The orchestrated graphic juxtaposition of an upward and a downward directionality joins the earth and the sky in an ambivalent – and, sometimes, skewed – verticality captured by the camera: the trail of the plane is extended upwards eluding the boundaries of the frame, and the sky, as a site of an infinite uplift is pointed at but never reached. Then the earth pulls the camera down, thrusts it back up and brings it back down. The precarious balance between weight and elevation situates the film in a perpetual in-between, a perpetual limbo between the vastness of the sky and the pull of the earth.

This precarious balance is recalled at various instances of the film. It reappears in the condition of Isabelle's weightlessness while Isabelle hangs from the tree near the river (Figure 102), as well as at a moment in the film studio when Jerzy stands unstably on an upward sloping platform, struggling with an actor impersonating an angel (Figure 103).¹⁶²

¹⁶² Tableau vivant representing 'Jacob wrestling with the angel', a religious subject captured by many painters such as Eugene Delacroix (1861), Alexandre Louis Leloir (1864) or Leon Bonnat (1876).

Figure 102

Figure 103

Finally, it becomes evident in the sequence at the end of the film, during which, the shots of Isabelle's sexual encounter with Jerzy are juxtaposed to the shots in the film studio rendering a tableau vivant drawn from El Greco's painting *The Assumption of the Virgin* (1608-1613), (Figure 104). The camera movements during the shooting are characterised by a constantly culminating interplay between exalted ascents and plunging descents (Figures 105-112) and are intermittently arrested by shots of the naked Isabelle sitting on her bed under a dim light (Figures 113-114).

Figure 104

Figure 105

Figure 106

Figure 107

Figure 108

Figure 109

Figure 110

Figure 111

Figure 112

Figure 113

Figure 114

The vertical fixity of Isabelle's torso, as well as the downward direction of her gaze, create a gravitational pull that contradicts the resurgence of the camera movements in

the studio. At the same time, however, the light in Isabelle's room is diffused in an ethereal lightness behind Isabelle's obscure torso. Through the ambivalent verticality of the sequence, a carnal moment meshes inextricably with a sacred moment in a realm where understanding remains suspended and ecstatic.

Conclusion

As I have attempted to show, *Passion* disorganises its perceptual field by elaborating a particularly fragmented and disruptive visual style. The film breaks the continuity of its progression in order to extract certain aspects of its dramatic action from their contextual coordinates (i.e. the representation of Isabelle) and examine these aspects of the action as autonomous and distinct appearances within the film. Moreover, the film uses its strategy of fragmentation in order to allow both its viewers and its characters to become intensely involved in the activity of attention and discover the significance of the latter within the film's dramatic action (i.e. the fragmented interplay between focus and distraction during the intimate moment which Jerzy and Hanna share). Finally, and crucially, the film uses its strategy of fragmentation in order to break its perceptual field into various parts (i.e. the 'tableaux vivants' in the film studio), rearrange the latter in unexpected ways and, ultimately, establish unusual connections between them (i.e. the conjunction of the woman with the parasol with the scene of the execution). By establishing unusual connections between its various 'fragments', *Passion* destabilises and expands our understanding of its perceptual field, drastically multiplying the ways of accessing the latter's intelligibility.

Chapter 5 - The Digressive: Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*

Introduction

A striking aspect of the complexity of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is the film's digressive story structure. Rather than revolving around a central storyline, the film orients and reorients the viewer's attention towards various episodes in the lives of its characters. Instead of following the linear progression of a main plot, the film implicates its characters in disparate storylines that converge only in order to bring about a new dramatic situation. In this way, *Pulp Fiction* proceeds by a continuous multiplication and diversification of the dramatic situations in which its characters become involved.

Even when the film sets up a principal dramatic situation, it suddenly distends apparently peripheral aspects of this situation, thus displacing the stakes of the action. Characteristic in this respect is the fight sequence between the gangster, Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames) and the veteran boxer, Butch (Bruce Willis). Although the sequence initially focuses on the story *between* Marsellus and Butch (Marsellus tries to kill Butch because the latter broke a 'business'¹⁶³ deal he had with Marsellus), it suddenly shifts its attention to a random, hitherto unknown character, who just happens to be observing Marsellus and Butch's fight. More specifically, while Marsellus and Butch are wrestling inside a pawnshop, the film shifts its attention to the pawnshop owner, who begins to threaten both characters with a gun (Figures 1-3).

¹⁶³ Butch is offered a sum of money by Marsellus in order to let his opponent win in an upcoming boxing match.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

The pawnshop owner is revealed to be a delinquent hillbilly who imprisons and tortures Marsellus and Butch on a sadistic whim, along with a friend of his. In an unexpected turn of the action, the crux of the sequence shifts, and the dramatic urgency of the sequence now revolves around how Marsellus and Butch are going to end their torture and escape the sadists. Butch managing to release himself first, helps Marsellus escape, and Marsellus, acknowledging Butch's magnanimity, lets him go.

As it becomes evident, by contriving an unexpected anomaly in the narrative progression of a dramatic situation, the film not only reorients the action towards a different direction, but also manages to *reframe* and *reconfigure* the significance of various aspects of the action (i.e. the kind of relationship between Butch and Marsellus).

Another instance that encapsulates this strategy of the film becomes evident when the same event is repeated under different circumstances, acquiring a different significance in each case. A characteristic example refers to the joke Mia, Marsellus' wife (Uma Thurman) wants to tell Vincent (John Travolta) during their date (Vincent

is working for Marsellus, who has asked Vincent to take Mia out while he is away). Mia mentions the joke twice during the date, once before and once after her overdose.

The first time Mia is about to tell the joke occurs as she is getting acquainted with Vincent, while talking to him about her participation in a TV series. Mia flirtatiously brags about the fact that she managed to tell a joke on air, at the end of the pilot episode of the series. When Vincent presses her repeatedly to tell him the joke, however, Mia, fearing that the joke is not going to sound very funny, replies teasingly that she is ‘definitely not going to tell it now because it has been built up too much’ (Figures 4-7).

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

When Mia mentions the joke again, after her overdose, she does tell it to Vincent, however. By now, the characters appear to have grown closer to each other. They have developed a sense of complicity since neither wants Marsellus to know about the critical and unexpected event of the overdose that jeopardised the smooth progression of the date. Having agreed not to tell Marsellus about the overdose, and keep it secret, they are now bound together by their mutual trust. Thus, Mia, feeling at ease around

Vincent, abandons her inhibitions and takes the initiative in telling him the joke (Figures 8-13).

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Whereas, the first time, the film builds up the joke telling prospect as Mia's passive aggressive trick of flirtation, the second time, it allows Mia to tell the joke in an honest, almost confessional manner, as a proof of her trust towards Vincent. The first time, the interaction between Vincent and Mia is playfully tense and climactic, but, the second time, it is just friendly, intimate and anticlimactic. The interpolation of the violent event of Mia's overdose functioned as a catalyst that changed the significance of the joke telling instance by changing the tenor of Mia and Vincent's interaction.

The film allows the contingency of a dramatic situation to recontextualise and vary the significance of a certain dramatic element. In this way, the film manages to

explore how the variable structure of its action re-arranges and changes what is dramatically important. Thus, as I will try to show in this chapter, the film's narrative versatility and disorder do not merely amount to a random narrative meandering but rather come forth as the means through which the film explores how its variable structure affects the construction of significance.

This chapter suggests that the dynamic relation between structure and significance constitutes the basic principle of the film's method. However, I would like to remind one here, once again, that – as mentioned in the thesis' introduction and the introduction of the chapter on *Ordet* – there may be other possible ways of understanding the film, ways that *derive* from the film's workings, and may explain aspects of the latter.

For example, one could take into account the film's explicit mention of 'pulp' (both in the film's title and its opening definition of the term), in order to attempt to explain the coherence of the film through its relation to this fictional genre or, more generally, this fictional universe (a universe usually revolving around crime, detective and love stories that are marked by the graphic, sensationalised rendition of violent events and erotic charged moments). The thematic (and textural) affinities between the film and this kind of 'hard-boiled' fiction, as well as possible patterns of divergence of the film from this kind of fiction, may indeed unlock aspects of *Pulp Fiction*'s logic.

Another way of approaching the film, deriving from the workings of the film, would be to interrogate the characteristically moral, or existential, rationale of the main characters' trajectories. For example, a striking aspect of Vincent and Jules' (Samuel L. Jackson) trajectories is the characters' different response to the 'miracle' of their avoiding the bullets at the boys' apartment. This different response becomes morally

and existentially charged, not only because of the subsequent divergence of the characters' course of action (Jules, recognising the miraculousness of the incident, decides to quit the killings, whereas Vincent keeps on being an assassin, attributing the incident to sheer chance) but also because, whereas Jules seems apparently 'redeemed' by his conversion, Vincent is ultimately killed.

As becomes evident, these approaches do *elucidate* – and in a rather straightforward way, for that matter – some ways in which the film coheres. The moral/existential charge of the characters' trajectories – characteristically – attributes its own kind of necessity, its own kind of 'causal order' to the succession of events in the film. And, it is exactly this order which is then reconfigured and subverted by the film's structure. That is, we may understand the film's structure (or at least some *aspects* of it, like Vincent's resurrection, for example) as a form of divergence from or resistance to this kind of morally/existentially charged causal order.

However, the aim of the thesis is not just to explicate certain aspects of a film's coherence (as mentioned before) but to demonstrate how the complexity of a film's formal organisation and the intricacy of a film's formal strategies allow the film to elaborate its own 'principle' of coherence, as it were. It is the thorough elaboration of this principle that essentially contributes to the film's aesthetic achievement.

Manipulating the Relation between Structure and Significance

In order to investigate the dynamic relation between structure and significance, the film humorously upsets the ‘proper’, usual function of a certain element within a particular narrative framework. A characteristic example refers to the apparently key narrative function of the *briefcase* which Vincent and Jules (Marsellus’ professional gunmen) must retrieve on Marsellus’ behalf.

Strangely, during the characters’ normal course of action (that is, while the characters are in the process of executing the job for Marsellus), the briefcase remains only of *lateral* concern to the characters. The briefcase is portrayed as a mere motivator of the characters’ activity, remaining devoid of any further significance. During the characters’ long transition to work, the film focuses on their preoccupation with different matters (see the section on ‘Retarding and Diverting Narrative Momentum’ below), and, when Vincent and Jules enter the apartment of the boys who stole Marsellus’ briefcase, the stake of the briefcase’s acquisition is not focalised. The film, instead of constructing a typical action packed scene during which the boys and the two characters struggle over the briefcase, centralises its focus on Jules’ sadistic speech during the execution of the boys. Only in passing, the film allows two swift shots of Vincent opening and checking the briefcase. Jules asks Vincent if they are ‘happy’ with the briefcase and resumes his sadistic performance. And, although the two shots of the briefcase present the latter in an emphatic way (an extreme close up of the unlocking of the briefcase and a medium close up of Vincent’s lit up face, as Vincent stares at the luminous content of the briefcase), this emphatic presentation remains humorously vacuous since the briefcase’s apparently important content is pointed to but never revealed (Figures 14-19).

Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 16

Figure 17

Figure 18

Figure 19

Although the briefcase is supposed to represent the main goal of the characters' activities, its significance re-emerges only during a *random* incident. When Vincent and Jules enter a diner to have breakfast (after having retrieved the briefcase), they accidentally fall onto an angry couple trying to rob the diner and the possessions of its customers. When the robbers try to steal the briefcase, both Vincent and Jules try to protect their possession by confronting the robbers in the manner of a Western 'standoff' (Figure 20). The confrontational intensity of the 'standoff' between Vincent and Jules and the robbers foregrounds the significance of the briefcase, and is juxtaposed to the lateral presentation of the briefcase during the scene in the boys' apartment. As the possession of the briefcase comes and stays in the focus of the characters' action during the event of the diner robbery, the film's digressive narration

humorously allows an apparently key narrative element to acquire significance during an accidental event.

Figure 20

The humour of the film's digressive narration becomes evident finally through the fact that the film repeatedly defers the revelation of the briefcase's content by turning the action towards a different direction. The film repeatedly entertains and then upsets the revelation of the briefcase's luminous content, thus manipulating the sense of the briefcase's significance. When one of the robbers stares at the opened briefcase, captivated by the luminous sight (like Vincent did before in the boys' apartment), the film withholds the briefcase's content from our view. And, when the robber's girlfriend, intrigued, asks 'What is it?', the robber does not have time to reply, as Jules swiftly manages to close the briefcase and point his gun at him¹⁶⁴ (Figures 21-25).

¹⁶⁴ I would like to add a comment here on the function of the briefcase in the film. The presence of the briefcase and, especially, the emphasis on the luminosity of its content, seem to constitute a humorous reference to another film, Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). In Aldrich's film, the protagonist, detective Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) becomes involved in the pursuit of a mysterious black briefcase with a luminous content. The luminosity of the briefcase's content generates the fascination of the characters that come into contact with the briefcase, pronouncing the latter's significance. In this respect, *Pulp Fiction* is similar to *Kiss Me Deadly*. However, in Aldrich's film, the luminosity and the significance of the briefcase's content are ultimately explained by the suggestion (articulated by characters in the film) that this content consists in some kind of reactive nuclear material (and, the tremendous explosion of the briefcase at the end of the film confirms this suggestion). Jokingly, in the case of *Pulp Fiction*'s briefcase, the film retains the characters' fascination with the briefcase without ever explaining this fascination, though.

Figure 21

Figure 22

Figure 23

Figure 24

Figure 25

By upsetting the relation between the focus on the briefcase's presence and the significance of this presence, the film presents another occasion through which it manages to interrogate the relation between a particular structure of its action and the significance of a certain element of this action.

Working against Narrative Closure:

Breaking and Rearranging the Temporal Order of the Action

The film's digressive narration is further developed through the film's striking temporal elasticity. The film abruptly ends an episode before its expected conclusion and picks it up later on, or replays an instance from a previous episode, so as to tie it in with a following episode. Through this elasticity, the film acquires a markedly shifting and malleable structure, creating a profusion of narrative possibilities, and working against the concept of finality and the function of narrative closure.

The episode of Vincent and Jules' long ride to work is abruptly halted, just after the retrieval of Marsellus' briefcase and before its return to Marsellus. The episode is picked up again later on, in the final episode of the film ('The Bonnie Situation'), when the diner sequence above takes place. Through this temporal arrangement, the film allows the character of Vincent to reappear in the last episode of the film, although, in the meantime, this character has been *killed* during another episode.

Vincent is killed by Butch around the middle of the film, when Vincent and Butch's trajectories suddenly intersect in the latter's house. While Butch is trying to flee from Marsellus after having broken their deal, he accidentally sees Vincent there, waiting for him, and kills him (Figures 26-29). Chronologically, this event occurs *after* Vincent and Jules have returned the briefcase to Marsellus (and stopped at the diner just before), but, the film presents it before that. By *first* presenting Vincent's death and *then* completing Vincent and Jules' course of action, the film manages to render the reappearance of Vincent as the character's resurrection (Figures 30-31). Vincent's

resurrection acts as a comic surprise that increases the narrative possibilities of the film, expanding the latter's narrative flexibility.

Figure 26

Figure 27

Figure 28

Figure 29

Figure 30

Figure 31

Moreover, the film upsets the progressive and teleologically oriented unfolding of the action through the *reprise* of Vincent and Jules' activities during 'The Bonnie Situation'. At the beginning of 'The Bonnie Situation', the film, rather than advancing the episode's storyline, presents Jules' solitary delirium in the boys' apartment, for a second time, only from a different perceptual angle than it did the first time. Through this reprise, the film appears to move (temporally) backwards, in order to unfold the variability of the present.

The first time in the boys' apartment, the film registers Jules' delirium visually, from inside the room where Jules was standing (Figure 32), and, the second time, it allows Jules' voice to be heard as off screen sound (Figure 33), as the camera is placed behind a wall where one of the boys is hiding and listening, ready to shoot at Vincent and Jules. By reiterating and reconfiguring the 'same' action, the film seems to refuse to draw the latter to a close, insisting on creating the sense of a diversifiable present.

Figure 32

Figure 33

Finally, by upsetting the chronological order in which the *diner incident* takes place, the film also interrogates the function of narrative closure. In the hypothetical, logical chronological order of the film, the end of the diner incident, that is, Vincent and Jules' successful retrieval of the briefcase from the robbers would simply constitute one part of the characters' course of action. Through the film's temporal rearrangement, though, the successful retrieval of the briefcase temporally coincides with the end of the film (Figures 34-37).

Figure 34

Figure 35

Figure 36

Figure 37

Through this coincidence, the film seems to create a kind of narrative gag, since the resolution of the diner incident does not seem to constitute an actual *ending*. The successful retrieval of the briefcase does not take the form of a denouement, that is, a final resolution of a conflict that has been built up throughout the film, but it is only the resolution of a localised conflict that arose suddenly and accidentally.

By contrast, an actual ending does seem to exist in the film, but it takes place *before* the film comes to a close. Namely, the predicament of *Butch* (having been built up throughout the film) is brought to a conclusion in the middle of the film, before ‘The Bonnie Situation’ episode and after Butch has been let go by Marsellus. It is in the middle of the film that Butch picks up his girlfriend and, finally, manages to leave town. The image of Butch departing with his girlfriend on a motorcycle is evocative of the image of a denouement (Figures 38-39), but it is just interpolated in the film’s progression.

Figure 38

Figure 39

By placing a denouement in the middle of its progression and a ‘faux’ ending at the end of its progression, the film, once again, upsets the typical way in which the

significance of a certain dramatic element relates to a particular structure. As it becomes evident, the film's unusual temporal arrangement becomes conducive to the film's predominant concern.

The Film's Overall Organisation: General Comment

Through its continuous temporal and structural rearrangement, the film seems to acquire the potency of a flux.

Despite the fact that the film does not congeal into a fixed and finalised structure, though, it is not ultimately devoid of any organisational principles: the episodes of the film are marked by a striking narrative *permeability* which becomes evident through the *intersection* of the characters' trajectories (i.e. the episode in Marsellus' restaurant, discussed below, or Vincent and Butch's encounter in Butch's house, mentioned above) and the *reappearance* of the same characters under different circumstances (i.e. Vincent's presence in different episodes). The episodes of the film are neither disjointed (in the sense of being craftlessly yoked together) nor distinct (like in a portmanteau film, for example),¹⁶⁵ but rather idiosyncratically connected through this permeability.

Apart from this structural principle, the film is also characterised by a tonal consistency. Namely, an episode of the film may appear narratively discontinuous or incomplete (see Mia and Vincent's date episode below), narratively decentralised (see Marsellus' restaurant episode below) or eccentric (see 'The Bonnie Situation' episode below), but it is this narrative incompleteness, decentralisation and eccentricity, as I

¹⁶⁵ An anthology film consisting of several different and self-contained short films often linked by a common theme, like Max Ophüls' *Le Plaisir* (1952).

will try to show, that are able to produce a kind of humour that is integral to each episode's tonal effect.

Exploring the Function of Surprise and Incongruity in the Presentation of Character:

Vincent and Jules in T-Shirts

The film's digressive structure is hinted at when the film suddenly presents two of its main characters, Vincent and Jules, in a way that is surprisingly different from the way these characters have hitherto been presented. The first time Vincent and Jules appear in the film they are presented as Marsellus' professional gunmen, wearing their identical black suits and heading towards the apartment of the boys to retrieve Marsellus' briefcase (Figures 40-41). The second time the two characters appear in the film, though, their appearance has been strikingly changed. The characters arrive at Marsellus' restaurant and they are both dressed in entirely different clothes than when they went to retrieve the briefcase. Although the characters carry Marsellus' briefcase with them, their identical black suits have been replaced by T-shirts and bathing suits (Figures 42-43). The film seems to unsettle Vincent's and Jules rigorous professional image by suggesting that the characters have possibly been involved in a kind of (leisurely?) activity that deviated from the orbit of their strict professional duties. The characters' incongruous outfit hints at a mysterious occurrence that has apparently diverted the – otherwise focused – course of action of the characters as Marsellus' employees. But, what is exactly this activity that has diverted the characters' course of action?

Figure 40

Figure 41

Figure 42

Figure 43

The film complicates the suggestion of Vincent and Jules' mysterious activity by presenting the characters dressed in a strikingly similar way. When Vincent and Jules enter the restaurant, the camera follows them from the opposite side along which they walk, capturing them both together, thus rendering salient the comic uniformity in the way they are dressed. Although the characters' summery apparition disrupts the characters' professional image, the uniformity of their apparel actually echoes this image. By rhyming with the uniformity of the characters' professional suits, the uniformity of the characters' casual apparel jokingly reproduces – rather than subverting – the disciplined image of the characters as Marsellus' men. So, the question is posed again: what kind of event is it that caused the characters' change of clothes but retained the characters' disciplined image?

Although the film allows this question to be emphatic, it does not further elaborate on its significance. When Paul, the barman, greets the characters, asking them: 'What's up with these clothes?', Jules replies: 'You don't want know', bypassing the question. The hint of the characters' mysterious deviation remains suspended, quickly

becoming absorbed by the flow of events that subsequently take place. The reason of the change of clothes is hushed, as the characters casually proceed to a conversation with Paul about Vincent's upcoming date with Mia.

Although the T-shirt moment, as an event, is unexpected and intriguing, its implications are not developed. The sudden emergence of the new information about Vincent and Jules does not acquire any dramatic weight. The hint of the characters' mysterious deviation becomes immediately suppressed, remaining devoid any of any further suggestion regarding the characters' obscure activities. The film thus seems to *flatten out* the importance of an event with an apparently striking effect, creating a crucial asymmetry in the way in which this event is presented. The asymmetry between the striking effect of the event, on the one hand, and the casual and swift bypassing of its explanation, on the other, creates a narrative gag through which the significance of the event is simultaneously pronounced *and* diminished.

The change of the characters' clothes is explained only later on, during the last episode of the film ('The Bonnie Situation'). During this episode, Vincent and Jules try to contain the damage of Vincent's accidental murder of Marvin, before returning the briefcase they retrieved from the group of boys to Marsellus. It is because the characters' clothes become heavily stained with Marvin's blood that the characters decide to change into the new clothes. The T-shirts and bathing suits are provided by Jules' friend, Jimmie (Quentin Tarantino), who helps the characters when they come to his house (Figures 44-47).

Figure 44

Figure 45

Figure 46

Figure 47

The film, because of its characteristic temporal elasticity ('The Bonnie Situation' chronologically precedes the episode in the restaurant) *first* presents the clothes changing event as a startling narrative oddity and *then* as the possible (though eccentric) result of a sticky situation. During 'The Bonnie Situation', the appearance of the two characters is still strange – since the particular choice of clothes seems to be far-fetched¹⁶⁶ – but it is divested of the narratively puzzling quality that is attached to it in the restaurant episode.

The puzzle of the T-shirt moment is thus resolved in a different narrative context from the one in which it was introduced. In this way, the film manages to reframe and re-determine our understanding of the event, as well as inflecting the manner in which the latter is comic.

¹⁶⁶ The characters could have changed into clothes less incongruous to their usual professional outfit (i.e. long trousers) but the particular change takes place in order to underline the comic contrast between the characters' tough and vulnerable image. This contrast finds its apotheosis in 'The Bonnie Situation' episode, as I will argue in the last section of this chapter.

Narrative Disunity and Stylistic Connectivity:

Inside Marsellus' Restaurant

Vincent and Jules' arrival at the restaurant during Marsellus and Butch's meeting takes the form of a sudden deflection of the action towards an unforeseen direction. While the episode begins by centering its focus on the meeting between Butch and Marsellus (Figure 48), it suddenly shifts its focus on the arrival of the other two characters (Figures 49-51). The arrival of Vincent and Jules takes place unexpectedly, after a close up of Butch's face, while Butch agrees to let his opponent win in the upcoming match, as Marsellus has just asked him to do. The surprise of the characters' summery apparition appears as the sudden interpolation of an odd new piece of information about two characters who have hitherto not appeared in any way connected to the storyline of Butch and Marsellus' relationship.

Figure 48

Figure 49

Figure 50

Figure 51

As the film destabilises the focal points of the episode, it humorously upsets the viewer's sense of *what the episode is about*. The episode keeps focusing on Vincent and Jules, as they talk with Paul at the bar for a while. The content of Vincent and

Jules' conversation with Paul introduces one more storyline to the episode – that of Vincent's date with Mia. The episode's title refers to this particular storyline ('Vincent Vega & Marsellus Wallace's Wife'), but the episode's establishing shot is a medium shot of Butch listening to Marsellus' voice (Figures 52-53). By rendering the episode's establishing shot incongruous to the episode's title, the film jokingly unsettles the linear comprehensibility of its progression.

Figure 52

Figure 53

Thus, the episode in the restaurant appears to wobble between three disparate and self-contained storylines that are joined just because they happen to bring their protagonists to the same place at the same time. The meeting of Butch with Marsellus, Jules and Vincent's arrival¹⁶⁷ and their conversation about Vincent's date with Mia appear to become intertwined only because the characters' trajectories randomly intersect in Marsellus' restaurant. But what is the function of this apparently random intersection?

As I will try to show, the intersection of the characters' trajectories is not rendered merely as the outcome of the characters' spatial contiguity. It rather comes forth as a coincidence able to expose the various facets of the characters' relation to Marsellus' authority. More specifically, as I will try to show, the film uses the presence of

¹⁶⁷ Vincent's and Jules' activities seem to constitute one storyline since the characters appear together in the former episode, in pursuit of Marsellus' briefcase.

Marsellus as a common reference point of the characters' trajectories, in order to establish a stylistic environment through which it can compare and contrast the attitudes of three different characters' towards Marsellus' authority. The apparently decentralised action of the characters in the restaurant can be ultimately related to a specific stylistic structure that forms the significance of each character's behaviour.

Although the meeting between Butch and Marsellus and Vincent and Jules' arrival at the restaurant constitute two apparently disconnected narrative parts of the restaurant episode, the film joins them through the presence of the long take that records Vincent's and Jules walk towards the bar. The camera slides parallel to the men, from the right to the left, surveying the characters' walk from a fixed distance (Figures 54-55). The fixed distance between camera and men allows the camera to scan the men's movement, encompass and integrate the latter within the expanse of the restaurant's interior. The camera doesn't simply move along with Vincent and Jules or merely reflect their own movement but also seems to observe and register this movement, situating it within the space.

Figure 54

Figure 55

The angle of the camera and the distanced view of the restaurant's interior echo and evoke Marsellus' vantage point, as the latter has been established during the meeting with Butch. During this meeting, a medium close up has registered the back side of the big, bald head of Marsellus, who has been looking at Butch and towards the

restaurant's interior (Figure 56). The gross emphasis on Marsellus' head has anchored the view of the restaurant's interior within Marsellus' firm vantage point, solidifying Marsellus' supremacy over whatever is going on in the restaurant.

Figure 56

Through the long take that captures Vincent and Jules' walk towards the bar, the resonance of Marsellus' presence and vantage point over the restaurant's interior is turned into an abstract and suffused sense of inspection of the men's behaviour. The camera doesn't simply follow the two characters but rather monitors an incoming action. Although the characters entrance seems to be casual and rather tangential to the main action of the episode, the long take installs the feel of Marsellus look over the characters, rendering the characters' entrance stylistically continuous with the action that preceded it.

Indeed, the conversation between Marsellus and Butch – which has just preceded the entrance of the characters – is characterised by a style that pronounces the oppressive and despotic tenor of Marsellus' attitude. This attitude is reflected on Butch's emphatically restrained behaviour. In a frontal medium shot, Butch, sitting still, faces towards the direction of the camera, while listening to Marsellus' heavy off screen voice (Figure 57). The voice, coming from the side of the camera, is urging Butch to accept the limits of his potential as a boxer and refrain from listening to the unrealistic demands of his sense of pride. The fixity of the shot, as well as Butch's immobility,

encapsulate the sense of Butch's confinement imposed by Marsellus' speech. Exactly as Marsellus' words purport to define and delimit Butch's ability, the rigidity of the shot frames and contains Butch. The meeting between Marsellus and Butch is not rendered as a usual conversation (i.e. by a shot reverse shot pattern or a shot in which the two characters appear together) but as the unilateral delivery of Marsellus' decision on Butch's merit. Marsellus' voice seems to tie Butch down, shaping and circumscribing his being. The contrast between the rough toughness of Bruce Willis' face and the heavily restricted image of Butch, humorously underlines the sense of Butch's incapacitation.

Figure 57

Now, the oppressive weightiness of Marsellus' presence does not only link Butch's predicament with Vincent and Jules' behaviour, but also allows the film to compare and distinguish *between* Vincent and Jules' behaviour.

Like Butch, *Vincent* seems to be stifled by the sense of Marsellus' presence. In a medium long shot from behind Vincent's back, as the character sits at the bar (next to Jules), the camera records Vincent, slouching over the bar, as if ducking at the sense of Marsellus' presence behind him (Figure 58).

Figure 58

The film cuts to a frontal medium shot of Vincent bending over the bar and explaining himself to Paul, who mockingly and suggestively asks Vincent if he has already met (the temptingly beautiful) Mia. ‘Look I’m not an idiot. It’s the big man’s wife...’, Vincent replies. Marsellus’ figure is discerned in the background of the shot, lurking behind Vincent’s back. Vincent bends his body, as if being weighed down by the fear of Marsellus watching or listening (Figure 59).

Figure 59

Contrastingly, *Jules* has his back to the bar and stares at Marsellus straight ahead, with an unruffled look (Figures 60-61). He drinks his beer, while sitting in an upright but relaxed position. His calm is juxtaposed to Vincent’s uncomfortable self-constraint and self-conscious unease.

Figure 60

Figure 61

Finally, the film's style keeps portraying the behaviour of different characters in relation to Marsellus when it brings Vincent's and Butch's disparate, unrelated dramatic predicaments together in the apparently random confrontation of the characters at the bar. Although the confrontation between the characters appears to take place accidentally, its organisation becomes reflective of the effect of Marsellus' authority on the characters.

When Butch sits next to Vincent at the bar (after having completed his meeting with Marsellus), both he and Vincent appear together in a frontal medium shot, with Marsellus' figure lurking once again in the background and in the middle of the shot (Figure 62). The understated centrality of Marsellus' figure disrupts the men's apparent predominance within the shot, and renders them both symmetrical adjuncts to Marsellus' position. Butch and Vincent face each other when they both realise that they have failed to claim the independence of their own being against Marsellus' power. Butch (who has just succumbed to Marsellus' offer) and Vincent (whose loyalty to Marsellus has just been tacitly doubted by Paul's nosy questioning about Mia) face each other with aggressive looks.

Figure 62

Despite this similarity in the presentation of the characters, when Vincent's and Butch's trajectories separate after the confrontation of the characters, the film's style also establishes a contrast between the characters. The last shot of Vincent is a long shot of him hugging Marsellus and allowing the latter to inspect his clothes (Figure 63), whereas the last shot of Butch is a close up of his irritated facial expression (Figure 64). Vincent's figure becomes enfolded by Marsellus, whereas Butch's face remains detached from the latter's presence. The medium close up of Butch's irritated look betrays a hitherto stifled subjectivity that may be about to burst. The intensity of Butch's aggravation hints at a rebellious convulsion that is starkly juxtaposed to Vincent's placid conformity.

Figure 63

Figure 64

The episode's digressive narrative structure has provided the impetus for the comparative portrayal of the characters in relation to Marsellus' authority. The significance of the characters' comparative portrayal is not exhausted in this episode, though, but rather bears essential consequences for the characters' wider field of action.

Butch's ambiguous submissiveness will ultimately lead to his decision not to comply with the terms of his deal with Marsellus', killing his opponent and taking Marsellus' money. Vincent's docile disposition will be manifested later on in his strong efforts to retain his self-discipline and not give into the temptation of having sex with Mia during their date. Finally, Jules' assured tranquility will be in retrospect understood as an outcome of his decision not to be an assassin (and hence, Marsellus' employee) anymore, after he is accidentally not hit by bullets aimed right at him.¹⁶⁸ It is this life saving event (this 'miracle', as Jules calls it) that makes him decide to stop being an assassin, providing him with an independent state of mind in relation to Marsellus.

As it becomes evident, the film draws upon each character's particular relation to Marsellus' authority in order to adumbrate the characters' divergent lines of action as diverse ramifications of this relation.

Retarding and Diverting Narrative Momentum:

Vincent and Jules Heading to Work

A characteristic manifestation of the film's digressive structure, as mentioned in the introduction, grows out of the film's tendency to dwell on apparently peripheral aspects of a situation. During the sequence of Vincent and Jules' transition to work (while the characters are on their way towards the apartment from which they are about to retrieve Marsellus' briefcase), the film lingers on the characters' dialogue about trivialities, thus retarding the progression of the sequence, and diverting the activity of the characters from its strict orientation towards work.

¹⁶⁸ After the execution of the boys that stole Marsellus' briefcase, one of the boys remains alive and shoots at Vincent and Jules.

The retardation of the film's narrative momentum becomes evident through the heavy emphasis which the film places on the details of the characters' car ride towards the boys' apartment. Vincent and Jules become wrapped up in a vivid conversation about the free trade of hash in Amsterdam (from where Vincent has just returned), *scrutinising* subtle legal distinctions between buying, owning and distributing hash. They keep *delving* into the details of European cultural practices by meticulously distinguishing between the terminologies of MacDonald burgers in Europe and the US. This exchange of miscellaneous information becomes a catalyst that mobilises the characters' exorbitant dialogical perambulations. Vincent and Jules become immersed in a persistent and keen dissection of minutiae. Through the extended focus on the characters vibrant and convivial dialogue, the film displays the characters' availability to their present activity (Figures 65-69).

Figure 65

Figure 66

Figure 67

Figure 68

Figure 69

Although the film visually portrays the two characters as heading to work, the temporal extension of the characters' car ride further embeds the characters' presentation in the present. The camera records Vincent and Jules seated in a car, dressed in their identical black suits. The camera is fastened on Vincent's side of the car, registering the characters' faces in profile (Figure 70). Vincent and Jules look straight ahead while ceaselessly talking to each other. The alignment between the direction of the camera movement, the direction of the car movement and the direction of the characters' look accentuates the forward momentum of the car ride but the *protraction* of the shot *dilutes and undercuts* this momentum. The apparent purposefulness of the car ride is undermined by the length of the shot, which deflects the viewer's attention from the ride's objective and channels it towards the duration of the ride. Moreover, the scale of the shots in the car (close ups of the characters' faces), further anchor the viewer's attention in the activity taking place inside the space of the car (Figures 71-72).

Figure 70

Figure 71

Figure 72

When Vincent and Jules reach the building to which they have been sent to execute their job, the film keeps focusing on their *transition*, rather than directly bringing forward the outcome of their pursuit. As the two characters walk inside the building, the camera precedes them, recording them frontally, while moving backwards itself. The pivotal movement of the camera stresses the characters' advance towards a certain goal, while also pronouncing the characters' steady and resolute pace. However, the structure of the setting disorganises the teleological dynamic of the characters' progression: Vincent and Jules veer from one corridor to another, winding and turning around flights of stairs and through dark pathways. As their walk becomes entangled in the maze of the building's interior, the continuum of their movement becomes constantly unfolded and extended by the intricate configuration of the space. The labyrinthine setting absorbs the characters' movement within it, *stretching out* the time of the characters' walk and delaying the characters' arrival to the boys' apartment. The arrangement of the building's interior draws the two characters inside a longwinded 'on and on', thus pulling the sequence – once again – within its present duration (Figures 73-78).

Figure 73

Figure 74

Figure 75

Figure 76

Figure 77

Figure 78

Because of this pull, the forward narrative momentum of the action becomes heavily undulated, and the sequence becomes lodged, *installed*, as it were, within the spatial intricacy of the building's interior. This particular way of manipulating, shaping the sequence's temporal progression brings to the fore a strategy which David Bordwell calls 'spatialisation'¹⁶⁹ of a film's narration. According to Bordwell, this strategy takes place when 'the temporal thrust' of a film's narration '*is checked to some extent*'¹⁷⁰ [my emphasis] by moments which pronounce their local character. Bordwell refers to films of directors such as Jean-Luc Godard as exemplary cases of this strategy – since these films are marked by an emphasis on a kind of 'vertical', localised action, because of their discontinuous arrangement (see also my example of

¹⁶⁹ Bordwell D., *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London: Routledge, 1985, p. 317

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.p. 317

the various portrait shots of Isabelle in *Passion*). One could further say, though, that the strategy of ‘spatialisation’ becomes also evident during the sequence of *Pulp Fiction* being analysed – only in a different way than it becomes evident in Godard’s films. Although moments in a Godard film become ‘spatialised’ because the film breaks its action into several distinct localised units, the particular sequence in *Pulp Fiction* becomes ‘spatialised’ because the film temporally dwells on an action that keeps going on and on within the same space.

In this way, the ‘spatialised’ moments in a Godard film appear to be extracted from their dramatic context, because of their ‘fragmented’ character. The ‘spatialised’ sequence of Vincent and Jules’ transition to work, however, remains embedded in this context.

Thus, as the temporal extension of the characters’ transition to work dilates the characters’ transition to work, it further propels the characters’ dialogical perambulations. A random piece of information divulged by Jules to Vincent, as they walk together, incites another *excursus* in the characters’ discussions. As the two characters ramble about Marsellus’ wife Mia, Jules mentions in passing that Marsellus punished a former associate of his – Antwan Rockamora – when he found out that the latter had given Mia a foot massage. The severity with which Marsellus punished Antwan (he threw him over a balcony, and the fall caused him a permanent speech impediment) becomes the impetus for the characters’ moral debate. As casual chatter is turned into an intense and long argument, the significance of the foot massage becomes distended, drawing Vincent and Jules’ attention away from their work once again. Jules’ parenthetical remark acquires a distinct gravity, triggering the characters’ concern and monopolising their discussion. The scene reveals how an aleatoric

diversion (the gossip about Mia) – a pastime rather – is gradually turned into the characters' predominant preoccupation (Figures 79-82).

Figure 79

Figure 80

Figure 81

Figure 82

Rhythmical and Dramatic Discontinuity:

Mia's Overdose

Mia and Vincent's return to Mia's house after Jack Rabbit Slim's is also characterised by a crucial irregularity in the narrative progression of the action. Although, initially, the film is slowly working towards the prospect of a – possibly¹⁷¹ – erotic confrontation between Mia and Vincent, an unexpected event, that is, Mia's drug overdose, suddenly subverts this prospect. Mia's overdose disrupts the relaxed flow of the date sequence, suddenly turning the latter into an action packed sequence during which Vincent tries to find a way to resuscitate Mia. Whereas, in the case of Vincent and Jules' transition to work, the film heavily prolonged a trivial and rather casual

¹⁷¹ See an analysis of this possibility below, in the section 'Mia and Vincent's Date: Establishing Dramatic Undecidability'.

happening (Vincent's and Jules chat), in the case of Mia's overdose, the film introduces a *critical* event in a *remarkably abrupt* way. By interpolating the event of Mia's overdose in the date sequence, the film interrogates how a sudden anomaly in its progression creates an essential discontinuity in the rhythm and the stakes of the action.

The film initially juxtaposes the abruptness of the overdose event to the *slowness* of the date's pace, after Mia and Vincent return to Mia's house. The film breaks down the characters' arrival at the house into several *stages* that slow down the movement of the characters. These stages are marked by the characters' repeated stops during their entrance into the house. Vincent first stops in the doorway to catch the keys Mia throws at him. He then embraces Mia, and, while they enter the house together, they momentarily suspend their tango-like entrance to disarm the house alarm. Finally, the two characters stand still inside the living room, across each other, sharing a moment of silence (Figures 83-87).

Figure 83

Figure 84

Figure 85

Figure 86

Figure 87

The film then focuses on the time that passes while Mia is waiting for Vincent who has gone to the bathroom. In a long take, the camera prolongs its attention on Mia, slowly gliding along with her, as she dances across her living room to the melody of Urge Overkill's version of Neil Diamond's 'Girl, 'You'll Be a Woman Soon'. The camera follows Mia repeatedly, once to the right and once to the left, observing her nonchalant dance moves (Figures 88-89).

Figure 88

Figure 89

The film further prolongs Mia's waiting by steadily interpolating medium and medium long shots of Vincent standing in front of the bathroom mirror and prompting himself not to give into the temptation of having sex with Mia. The cross cut between the living room and the bathroom takes place three times, thus stretching out the period of Mia and Vincent's separation, while building up the question of what is going to happen when the characters find themselves face to face again (Figures 90-95). The ironic contrast between the *firminess* of Vincent's bathroom declarations ('One drink and that's it.' or "So, you gonna go out there and say: 'Goodnight, I've had a very lovely evening', walk out the door, get in the car...and that's all you gonna

do.”), and the frequent repetition of these declarations, creates a joke out of the difficulty Vincent has to restrain himself. And, this difficulty, in order to be dealt with by Vincent, allows even more time to pass until the latter is able to face Mia again.

Figure 90

Figure 91

Figure 92

Figure 93

Figure 94

Figure 95

The possibility of the characters erotic confrontation is violently overturned, however, the moment Mia, tired of dancing around, sits on the couch, finds the heroin and overdoses. Mia's fingers, having delicately and titillatingly played with the heroin sachet just a few seconds before the overdose, are now anxiously pressed against the nose of Mia who strives to suppress a painful irritation. Mia's eyes begin to roll back and her nose starts to bleed. Through two extreme close ups, the film registers Mia's unconscious look, her blood and saliva spread all over her face. The contiguity

between the graceful and the gruesome portrayal of Mia creates a striking tension that dislocates the dramatic momentum of the film (Figures 96-99).

Figure 96

Figure 97

Figure 98

Figure 99

The stakes of the film radically shift, as any inclination of the sequence towards the erotic evaporates in the face of the sudden gravity of the situation. The subversive character of the moment resides in the unsubtle and rather *blunt* way in which the film replaces the lighthearted erotic potential of the date sequence with a graphic and brutal exposition of the overdose's severe consequences. The immediate and striking effect of the overdose is startlingly juxtaposed to the smooth unfolding of the date sequence until that point.

During the remaining part of the 'date' sequence (apparently not a date sequence anymore), the film accelerates the pace of the action, forging the sense that Vincent is 'running out of time' to save Mia. Vincent hurriedly calls his drug dealer friend Lance (Eric Stoltz) to help him, while speeding with his car. The anxious, piercing sound of the car's screeching tires gives way to Vincent's agonised shouts while Lance is not answering the phone. When Vincent finally brings Mia to Lance's house (Vincent's

drug dealer friend who helps him deal with the situation), the rapid exchange of screams between Vincent, Lance, and the latter's wife, Jody (Rosanna Arquette) come forth as frenzied responses to the danger of losing Mia, and build up the urgency of the situation (Figures 100-103).

Figure 100

Figure 101

Figure 102

Figure 103

Despite accelerating its pace and pointing to the urgency of the situation, the film also interpolates some short delays in the progression of the action after the overdose. The unevenness of the film's pace creates a humorous temporal tension between the feeling of 'running out of time' and the temporal suspension of the action. When the agonised Vincent calls Lance, the film lingers on the slackness of Lance, who is idly watching TV and not picking up his phone. Also, the film allows time for Lance to look – but not ultimately find – the 'little black book' with the instructions of how to give an adrenaline shot (Figures 104-107).

Figure 104

Figure 105

Figure 106

Figure 107

And, when everything is finally in place (the adrenaline shot is ready, and Vincent has lifted his hand over Mia and is about to press the needle into her chest), the film lingers on several close ups of Mia's chest and of the characters' anxious faces before Vincent completes his move (Figures 108-110). Despite having cultivated the sense that time is of utmost importance, the film keeps jokingly prolonging the suspense of what is going to happen with the adrenaline shot.

Figure 108

Figure 109

Figure 110

The temporal imbalance of the film, as well as the dislocation of the film's dramatic momentum (caused the abruptness of the overdose), create a humorous irregularity in the rhythm and the stakes of the film, undermining the idea of a steady progressive unfolding of the action.

Establishing Dramatic Undecidability:

Mia and Vincent's Date

During the episode of Vincent and Mia's date, the film unsettles the viewer's sense of *what is going on* between the characters, by establishing a tension between the significance and the inconsequentiality of the moments between them. The dramatic weight of each moment between the characters remains indeterminate and unstable as the film repeatedly suspends and reframes the course of the characters' interaction, reorienting it towards different directions. The episode's constant *deviations* obfuscate the dramatic purpose of the characters' interaction and impede the viewer's effort to pinpoint the crux of what is happening or what is going to happen between the two characters. The progression of the episode cannot be moulded according to a singular continuity, dissolving instead into the fluidity of situation. Dramatic economy gives way to a kind of dramatic undecidability that unleashes the potentiality of the characters' interaction.

Obscuring Central Dramatic Moments (The Date)

The fickleness of the sequence's logic is reflected in the overall structure of the sequence. The sequence revolves around a set of vignettes that focalise on certain manifestations of the characters' shared activities, while withholding others from view. A cut or a fade into black circumscribes the focalised moments of the date, while concealing the in-between moments that the characters share. The film's vacillation between focus and concealment clouds the logic of the date's development but not only because it disrupts the chronological continuity of the date's progression. The points at which the film interrupts the presented moments of the date constitute *seminal* dramatic moments, containing the potential of revealing an erotic tension between Mia and Vincent. Characteristically, during the first scene of the date at Mia's house, the film cuts right at the point when the first physical encounter between Mia and Vincent is about to take place. Thus, the first encounter between the characters is not shown (the film cuts right after a shot of Mia's feet – just when Mia and Vincent are about to meet for the first time – and it then shows the characters in Vincent's car after a while) (Figures 111-112). Also, the dance scene between the two characters remains unfinished as the film fades into black *during* the dance (Figures 113-114).

Figure 111

Figure 112

Figure 113

Figure 114

Central confrontational moments between the characters remain arrested in time, producing essential hiatuses that disrupt the sequence's dramatic flow. The sequence comes forth as an aggregate of spatial and temporal deflections hovering over submerged centres.

The film disrupts the flow of the date sequence by also *overtly bypassing* crucial confrontational moments between the characters. Characteristically, the lengthy silent moment between the two characters at Jack Rabbit Slim's table is deftly evaded by Mia as she decides to go to the bathroom 'to powder her nose'. Moreover, the characters' interplay at Mia's house after the dance (as became evident above) takes an unexpected turn when Mia overdoses, and Vincent has to find a way to resuscitate her. In this way, the progression of Mia and Vincent's intimate engagement remains indefinite and pliable. Through the film's detours, the confrontations between Mia and Vincent only manage to hint at the erotic tension between the characters, without ever rendering this tension salient. The film remains ambivalent about the workings of the erotic tension between Mia and Vincent, cultivating it but also repeatedly deferring it. More specifically, the characters' interaction does not simply take the form of flirtation – the kind of interaction between a man and a woman that usually harbours and defers the prospect of an erotic encounter between them. What becomes crucial in the film is that the latter suspends or defers exactly these flirtatious moments that contain the prospect of an erotic encounter between the two characters.

Dissociating Stylistic from Narrative Intelligibility (The Date)

The film's cut right at the moment when Mia is about to physically encounter Vincent startlingly interrupts the progression of the first scene at Mia's house. As I will try to show, the cut at that exact point is perplexing, not only because of the narrative significance of the moment per se, but also because the film seems to have hitherto cultivated a stylistic momentum *leading towards* and *preparing* the characters' first meeting. This momentum has been fomented through the film's emphasis on Mia's attractiveness and through the gradual way in which Vincent physically approaches Mia. Although Mia's enticing comportment and Vincent's approach tend to converge into the characters' first physical contact, this physical contact is never shown. The style of the scene creates a dramatic environment in which the characters' gestures and movements function as signs, as indications pointing to a particular narrative development that is finally concealed. *A proliferation of stylistic signification gives way to a gap of narrative intelligibility.* This imbalanced relationship between stylistic signification and narrative intelligibility forges the humour of the scene. The film creates a joke by dissociating the meaning of the scene's stylistic design from the narrative relevance of this design.

The protracted duration of Vincent's wait for Mia cultivates the prospect of the characters' meeting by poignantly delaying this meeting. The film dwells on Vincent approaching Mia, lingering on the successive phases of his trajectory towards her. Through consecutive lengthy shots, the film portrays Vincent's arriving at the house, stopping in front of the door (to read a note stuck on the latter), searching for Mia ('Hello?'), and, finally, waiting for her in the living room for a while (Figures 115-118).

Figure 115

Figure 116

Figure 117

Figure 118

Vincent's pauses during the phases of his approach mark the degrees of Vincent's closeness to Mia, as well as punctuating and analysing the duration of Vincent's wait. Punctuation and analysis become the means through which the film accentuates the fact of Vincent's waiting for Mia. Through Vincent's extended waiting, the film inflates the prospect of an event that is ultimately screened from us.

Moreover, in relation to Mia, the film goes to great lengths to demonstrate her *lure* by only accessing her presence in oblique or fragmented ways. The shots of Mia only capture partial views of her image, never showing Mia's face (Figure 119). Extreme close ups focusing solely on Mia's mouth talking over the microphone, underline the voluptuousness of Mia's lips (Figures 120-121). As the film emphasises these partial views of Mia's image, it creates an exaggeration of ellipses that urge to be completed.

Figure 119

Figure 120

Figure 121

At the end of the scene, when Mia enters the living room, and is about to meet Vincent, the film insists on capturing Mia's image partially. In a close up, it just shows Mia's feet, without revealing her face (Figures 122-123). The close up poignantly conjures a transgressive erotic sensation by alluding to the story of the foot massage which almost killed Antwan Rockamora. The feet's allusion to the story of Antwan adds to the build up of the partial views of Mia a layer of suspense that remains general and abstract, as Vincent's reaction to the feet is never seen. The image of Mia's feet is construed by the film as an indefinite temptation, floating teasingly around Mia's exclamation: 'Let's go'.

Figure 122

Figure 123

When the film cuts to the next scene, the frontal shot of Mia and Vincent sitting in Vincent's car, suddenly reveals Mia's face in a matter-of-fact way. The revelation of

Mia's face at that point seems to take place merely circumstantially, within the fundamentally different dramatic context of the characters' casually chatting about where they are going to eat. The revelation of Mia's face is not portrayed as the outcome of Mia's lure but simply as a random occurrence. The escalation of the film's emphasis on Mia's lure collapses through the film's contextual shift (Figures 124-125).

Figure 124

Figure 125

The film keeps underlining Mia's seductiveness by evoking and simultaneously withholding her physical proximity to Vincent. The tension between Mia's closeness to Vincent and her distance from him is achieved by the film's careful patterning of Mia's voice. Already from the beginning of the scene, Mia's voice starts to encircle Vincent's image. When the latter reads the letter Mia has stuck on the living room door, the sound of Mia's voice – superimposed over a close up of the letter – delivers the content of the letter (Figure 126). The artificial immediacy of Mia's address to Vincent is then followed by Mia's actual address to him from inside the house, through her microphone. The tension between the artificial immediacy and the mediated actuality of Mia's voice conflates Mia's spatial relation to Vincent, thus nourishing the prospect of the characters' physical contact. The film diffuses the shots of Vincent with manifestations of Mia's voice calling Vincent inside the house, enfolding his presence and guiding his movements in the living room. 'Warm...

warmer...’, Mia prompts, as Vincent approaches the speaker through which he can speak to her (Figures 127-129). Once again, the degrees of Vincent’s closeness to Mia are measured, but this measuring is presented by the film simply as Mia’s game, without leading to the characters’ direct physical contact.

Figure 126

Figure 127

Figure 128

Figure 129

Finally, the film plays with the spatial arrangement of the scene in order to create a dramatic milieu in which the prospect of the characters’ physical contact is entertained. Initially, the film’s cross cut between the shots of Mia watching Vincent through a TV screen and the shots of Vincent waiting in the living room, pronounces the spatial separation between the two characters (Figures 130-131). Gradually, though, the image of the characters’ distinct spaces recedes, as the film begins to capture Vincent and Mia’s physical gestures solely through close ups. Vincent pours a drink and Mia cuts cocaine. Vincent has his drink and Mia sniffs her cocaine, and the sense of the characters’ spatial separation becomes submerged, as they both indulge in pleasing sensations apropos of their meeting (Figures 132-135).

Figure 130

Figure 131

Figure 132

Figure 133

Figure 134

Figure 135

The accumulation of clues pointing to the characters' encounter tinges the scene with a thrilling tone. This tone, though, gives way to the flat and familiar tone of the characters' interaction in the next scene outside Jack Rabbit's Slim's. The jarring effect produced by the juxtaposition of the scene's *increasing suggestiveness* and the scene's sudden interruption comes forth as a jest that interrogates the gravity of the concealed moment. Through this interrogation, the moment is not deflated but it is rather transposed to the order of a vibrant possibility. The stylistic manipulation of the scene is not merely reduced to a red herring stylistic play but can be understood as a humorous celebration of the scene's potentiality.¹⁷²

¹⁷² In his book *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell remarks that an integral aspect of our comprehension of a film's narration is our understanding of the 'compositional motivation' of the material presented by the film. More specifically, Bordwell uses the term 'compositional motivation' in order to describe the 'relevance' of the presented material 'to story necessity', referring to the

Conflating the Central and the Incidental: Mia and Vincent's Dance

The film's dramatic undecidability is epitomised in the scene of the dance between the characters at Jack Rabbit's Silm's. The dramatic status of Mia and Vincent's dance remains ambivalent. The moment is construed both as a random *and* as a cardinal dramatic instance. Although it is presented as emerging incidentally (while the characters are talking over dinner), the dance scene acquires a distinct resonance by exposing the workings of the characters' physical relationality. The film manages to turn a moment of serendipity into a pivotal point of the date scene.

The dance scene emerges unexpectedly, in the middle of Mia and Vincent's long conversation about the story of the foot massage. When Mia denies that the incident of the foot massage ever took place, teasingly reprimanding Vincent about his nosiness ('the only part of my body that Antwan ever touched is my hand...when he shook it...at my wedding – when you little scamps get together you're worse than a sewing circle'), the film suddenly cuts to a frontal long shot of the stage in the middle of the restaurant. The manager of the restaurant proclaims: 'Ladies and gentlemen, now the moment you've all been waiting for...it's the world famous Jack Rabbit Slim's twist contest...' (Figures 136-137).

justification of the presented material in relation to the events that take place in a film. In the scene analysed above, *Pulp Fiction* interrogates exactly the function of this justification, though. The joke of a stylistic overstatement without a corresponding narrative outcome *works* because of this interrogation. The apparent stylistic redundancy becomes the strategy of the film's comedy. For Bordwell see Bordwell D., *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 1985, p. 36. See also another mention of the same notion of 'compositional motivation' in Thompson K., *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 16

Figure 136

Figure 137

When the manager asks for the first two contestants, the film cuts to a medium close up of Mia's face. Mia's intrigued look is directed away from Vincent and towards the stage where the announcement is taking place. A medium close up of Vincent shows him looking down and remaining indifferent to the dance contest announcement (Figures 138-139).

Figure 138

Figure 139

By shifting the focus of the sequence from the characters' conversation to the announcement of the dance contest, the film curves and reorients the progression of the scene. The flat revelation of the truth about the foot massage halts the flow of the characters' dialogue. Although the mystery about the foot massage has been built up by the film three times,¹⁷³ its solution is not presented as a critical dramatic breakthrough, but becomes rather neutralised. The film focalises instead on the restaurant manager's proclamation. The stark contrast between the bombastic character of this proclamation and the shattered gravity of the foot massage incident

¹⁷³ The first time, it is discussed as a rumor by Vincent and Jules; the second time, it is alluded to through the film's close up on Mia's feet; the third time, it is explicitly discussed by Vincent and Mia during their conversation at the restaurant.

becomes the locus of a vibrant comic asymmetry. The film downplays the hitherto cultivated significance of a dramatic instance, while underlining the significance of a seemingly peripheral moment taking place at the same time. The film punctures the intelligibility of the scene by foregrounding the question of what is important and what not at that exact point in the film.

Whether the announcement of the twist contest interjects an incident within the already established course of events or whether it shifts this course of events towards another direction, is a question that remains momentarily unresolved. The simultaneous presence of two different narrative possibilities within the same shot becomes ambiguous, marking a moment of narrative unpredictability. The shot may be just interpolating the view of an event happening somewhere around Vincent and Mia's table *or* it may be introducing the proscenium for the spectacle that is about to take place.

Immediately after the shot that registers the dance announcement, the film cuts back to Mia in another medium close up. The graphic alignment between Mia's look and the position of the stage allows the film to register the spontaneity of Mia's reaction to what is happening on the stage. It is the registration of the arousal of Mia's interest in the dance contest that ultimately adumbrates the shift in the dramatic progression of the scene. Mia shouts: 'Right here', in response to the call for contestants (Figure 140). She urges Vincent to follow her, telling him that she wants the dance prize. Vincent's initial hesitation gives way to his willing submission to Mia's wish. A long shot shows the characters moving towards the stage (Figure 141).

Figure 140

Figure 141

The centralisation of the film's attention on the characters' dance comes forth through the film's dissection of the dance's growing momentum. The first long shot of Vincent and Mia on stage presents the characters swaying calmly to the sound of twist music reverberating in the room. The genre of the dance (it is a twist contest) provides an initial mould that shapes, and thereby, contains the characters' movements (Figure 142). Nevertheless, the poise of Mia's moves starts to break when Mia's arms suddenly burst into a rapid jerky movement, swinging abruptly back and forth, in front of her face (Figure 143). Meanwhile, the increasing mobility of the camera reflects the escalating volatility of the characters' moves. Mia constantly varies the pattern of her moves. She jokingly performs swimming movements with her arms, holding her nose and pretending to be sinking. She bends her shoulders ostentatiously towards Vincent and waves her arms behind her back. Vincent gradually responds to Mia's imaginative transformations, mimicking her moves. The synchronised mirroring of the characters' moves enlivens the reciprocation of the characters and, thus, boosts the momentum of the dance. Vincent, while indulging in his mimicking, decides to vary the pattern of his moves, swiping his arms in front of his face and encircling his eyes with his two middle fingers.¹⁷⁴ Mia reciprocates, swiping her arms in front of her face too (Figures 144-149).

¹⁷⁴ Apart from the growing momentum of the dance scene, the fact that John Travolta is a dance star (see *Saturday Night Fever* [1977] or *Grease* [1978]) also becomes conducive to the centralisation of

Figure 142

Figure 143

Figure 144

Figure 145

Figure 146

Figure 147

Figure 148

Figure 149

By focusing on the couple's idiosyncratic physical congruence, the dance scene reflects the character of the couple's overall engagement. Given the impending prohibition of their emotional and sexual involvement (Mia is Marsellus' wife), the characters are forced to devise a kind of *manoeuvring* through which they can approach each other. The characters' dance reflects exactly this manoeuvring. Vincent and Mia's dance moves are both flexible and restricted. The characters' mutual

the dance. And, the apparently incidental way in which the dance takes place is jokingly opposed to the audience's awareness that Travolta is a dance star.

mirroring brings the characters together, while preserving their distance. It becomes their game of controlled reciprocation, reflecting their evasive ‘flirtation’ throughout the date as a whole.

The film establishes the distinctive resonance of the dance scene, but this resonance suddenly starts to wane. The final shot of the dance lingers on until it fades into black (Figures 150-151). The insertion of the fade during the characters’ dance both obscures and suggests the continuation of the dance. The suppleness of the fade evokes a sense of flux within which the image of the dance is both lost and preserved. As the frame of the shot tapers off, it allows the film to capture both the moment and its expiration. Although the dance scene seems to have brought to the fore a crucial confrontational moment between the characters, this moment vanishes as fleetingly as it began.

Figure 150

Figure 151

Shifting the Hierarchy of Dramatic Stakes: The Bonnie Situation

In its final episode, the film comes back to the story of Vincent and Jules. During the characters’ car ride – after the boys’ execution – Vincent accidentally shoots Marvin, as mentioned above. Forced to find a hiding place for Marvin’s dead body, Vincent and Jules ask a friend of Jules, Jimmie, to keep temporarily the car with the body in his house. In Jimmie’s house, the episode gears its attention towards the action of

three new characters: Jimmie, his wife Bonnie (Vanessia Valentino) and Mr. Wolf (Harvey Keitel). Jimmie is Jules' friend, whose garage functions as the hiding place for Marvin's body. Jimmie is anxious that Bonnie will come home while Marvin's body still lies in the garage. Mr. Wolf is one of Marsellus' employers who is sent by Marsellus to Jimmie's house in order to help Vincent and Jules to permanently get rid of Marvin's body. Jimmie urges Vincent and Jules to get rid of the body as quickly as they can, because he doesn't want Bonnie to get upset with this sticky situation. Jules calls Marsellus, asking him to help, and the latter sends Wolf over. Although Wolf is attending a party when Marsellus calls him, he abandons it and immediately takes action. He goes to Jimmie's house and, determined to get the assigned job done, sets up a rigid plan for Vincent and Jules to follow.

The unexpected intersection of the lives of known and hitherto unknown characters in the final episode of the film ('The Bonnie Situation') introduces a shift in the hierarchy of the film's dramatic considerations. The story about 'how Vincent and Jules are going to get rid of Marvin's dead body' seems to become a story about 'how quickly the dead body is going to be disposed of, so that Bonnie doesn't get upset with Jimmie'. As I will try to show, this shift in what is ultimately at stake in the episode, crucially affects the dramatic character of the episode. 'The Bonnie Situation' doesn't constitute a mere unfolding of an unexpected change in Vincent and Jules' course of action. It rather becomes a comic exploration of what can happen when the blunt professionalism of two assassins invades the relaxed domesticity of people uninvolved in the assassins' enterprises. The odd narrative conjunction between Vincent and Jules' predicament, on the one hand, and Jimmie's life, on the other, displaces the focus of the episode's dramatic urgency. It renders Vincent and

Jules' predicament a mere catalyst for domestic turmoil. The shift in the in the focus of the episode's dramatic urgency encapsulates the essence of the episode's humour.

The humour of the episode is initially manifested in the exaggeration of the gravity of Bonnie's reaction to the dead body. The centrality of the Bonnie character is not only explicitly thematised in the episode's title (it is the *Bonnie* situation) but it is also rendered through a style that heightens the suspense of Bonnie's arrival. It is Bonnie's conspicuous absence throughout the episode that bloats the prospect of her arrival. Even when Bonnie momentarily appears in the episode, it is in a suspenseful manner. The only image of Bonnie presented by the film is a long take from behind Bonnie's back, following Bonnie as she arrives home and enters the kitchen, finding the men carrying the dead body. The shot constitutes a visualisation of Bonnie's *hypothetical*, imagined arrival, and is interpolated in the phone conversation between Jules and Marsellus. It functions as a visual bracket that illustrates Jules' worried words: 'You have to appreciate what an explosive element this Bonnie situation is...I mean, she comes home from a hard day's work, finds a bunch of gangsters in her kitchen doing a bunch of gangster shit...'. The visual repetition of what Jules articulates verbally becomes a device of emphasis that intensifies the viewer's anticipation of Bonnie's reaction. However, this reaction is finally concealed as the film cuts back to Jules' conversation with Marsellus the moment Bonnie comes face to face with the men. Exactly as it did in the beginning of the date sequence of Vincent and Mia, the film brings forth a stylistic overstatement without a corresponding narrative outcome. By excluding Bonnie's reaction from view, the film creates an effect of jokey suspense that fosters the mystery of Bonnie's response to the sight of the men carrying the body (Figures 152-155).

Figure 152

Figure 153

Figure 154

Figure 155

The humour of the episode does not only lie in the distention of the implications of Bonnie's arrival. It also lies in the way the episode undercuts Vincent and Jules' capacity to control the situation. The two characters find themselves suddenly situated in an environment in which their professional toughness cannot be of much use. They seem to handle with considerable difficulty the domestic tasks with which they are presented. The scene in Jimmie's bathroom is characteristic. The film presents the two characters in their bloodstained suits, washing their hands in the sink and drying them with the towels hanging next to the sink. The two characters are arguing because Vincent has left blood stains on Jimmie's towel, and Jules doesn't want Jimmie to get upset. Vincent claims that it is very hard to get the blood off his hands (and that is why he stained the towel), but Jules is very nervous about Jimmie's reaction, telling Vincent that they both have to be really 'delicate' with this 'Jimmie situation' (Figures 156-159).

Figure 156

Figure 157

Figure 158

Figure 159

Vincent's clumsiness and Jules' agitation make the characters appear quite at a loss. The film undermines the seriousness of the characters' professional image by portraying it as a mere façade of competence devoid of any effectiveness. The film has already been using occasions to interrogate the rigidity of the two characters' professional image (i.e. the T-shirt moment), but, this time, the interrogation becomes sharper. The dissonance between the characters' hitherto cultivated bravado (i.e. during the boys' execution), on the one hand, and their present vulnerability, on the other, is essential to the tone of the scene. The scene of Vincent and Jules in the bathroom offsets the characters' vigorous apparition with the characters' inability to maintain the order of a bathroom. The contradictory apparition of the characters proclaims the ineptitude of the characters and enhances the discordant tonal effect of the moment.

The scene of Vincent and Jules in the bathroom emphasises the clash between the world of assassin professionalism and the world of domesticity. This clash is further rendered by the film's blatant conjunction of images deriving respectively from each world. The shot of Vincent and Jules enjoying a cup of gourmet coffee in their blood

stained suits, as well as the reverse shot of Jimmie confronting them in his robe, poignantly bring together two dramatic worlds that are normally not joined¹⁷⁵ (Figures 160-161).

Figure 160

Figure 161

The film seems to be probing not just unlikely, but rather *eccentric* narrative possibilities in order to examine the collision of disparate dramatic worlds. The upheaval of narrative plausibility in the episode becomes vital for the episode's comic effect. The comedy of the two clashing dramatic worlds is enhanced by another eccentric narrative choice of the film, that is, the introduction of Mr. Wolf's character. The film portrays the intervention of Mr. Wolf through a gross overstatement of Mr. Wolf's professional adroitness. This adroitness is demonstrated by Mr. Wolf's pronounced punctuality (He says: 'The house is thirty minutes away but I will be there in ten'), his slick name and appearance, his use of technical jargon ('Now, you got a corpse in a car, minus a head, in a garage') and his notable efficiency (an extreme close up focuses on the notebook in which he writes the names of the people involved in the situation) (Figures 162-165).

¹⁷⁵ Like the episode in Marsellus' restaurant, 'The Bonnie Situation' examines what kind of a dramatic situation is produced when the narrative trajectories of known and hitherto unknown characters become unexpectedly intertwined. There is, however, a significant difference between the two episodes. The episode in Marsellus' restaurant is more *compound* than 'The Bonnie Situation' because it is stylistically unified by the presence of Marsellus. Hence, the effect of the momentary *disruption* when Vincent and Jules arrive at the restaurant. 'The Bonnie Situation' remains more *polarised* because it brings together two disparate spheres of action constantly obtruding upon each other. The narrative conjunction of different character trajectories in each case has different structural implications.

Figure 162

Figure 163

Figure 164

Figure 165

The overstatement of Mr. Wolf's professional adroitness adds an element of absurdity to the situation, since it is unreasonably disproportional to Mr. Wolf's actual contribution. Mr. Wolf's directions to the rest of the men are ultimately exhausted in his giving orders to Vincent and Jules about how to clean the car and asking Jimmie to bring extra blankets to cover the car seats (Figures 166-167).

Figure 166

Figure 167

The blatant redundancy of Mr. Wolf's actual contribution heralds the irrationality of the dramatic situation, becoming essential to the forcefulness of the film's comic tone. By jokingly rendering important the presence of a character not actually necessary in the particular narrative situation, the film interrogates, once again, how the significance of a certain dramatic element relates to a particular dramatic context.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to show how the film's strikingly unusual narrative combinations, detours and diversions manage humorously to manipulate our sense of what is actually important in the film. The film's humorous manipulation of the construction of significance – produced by the digressiveness of the film's narrative structure – is manifested in different ways. It is manifested in the way in which the film suddenly shifts the dramatic stakes of the action, as it does during 'The Bonnie Situation' or Mia's overdose. It is also manifested in the way in which the film remains unclear about the orientation of its progression, as it does during Mia and Vincent's date or during Vincent's and Jules walk to work. Finally, it is manifested in the way in which the film allows apparently random and incidental occurrences to determine or reconfigure the dramatic weight of a certain aspect of the action. This strategy becomes evident when the significance of Mia's joke telling moment changes after Mia's overdose, for example, or when the importance of Marsellus' briefcase is emphasised during the diner robbery, although it has hitherto been of lateral interest to the characters.

Chapter 6 - The Inexpressible: Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*

Introduction

Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) is characterised by a pervasive obscurity surrounding the function of the film's voice-over.¹⁷⁶ Through various whispering male voices, the film's voice-over explicitly addresses apparently inscrutable metaphysical questions, such as the origin of evil, or the possible existence of a spiritual reality that underlies empirical reality. Questions such as 'How did this evil steal into the world?', 'Why does nature vie with itself' or 'Who are you who live among these many forms?' are straightforwardly articulated throughout the film but always remain suspended. The voice-over's insistence on the overt, head on posing of these questions acquires the character of a philosophical quest that never reaches a verbal resolution. As the interrogative mode of the voice-over subsists, the film keeps instigating and enacting a philosophical kind of thinking which appears to be constantly nourished and regenerated by its own inability to provide verbal answers to the questions it raises: the voice-over simultaneously invites the possibility of a verbal answer to the questions it raises *and* pushes the actualisation of this possibility further away. If the content of the voice-over thematises particular metaphysical questions, the implacable interrogative mode of the voice-over seems to dramatise the difficulty of accessing a way to answer these questions. Thus, even more than a simple manifestation of philosophical speculation, the voice-over seems to become a

¹⁷⁶ In this chapter I discuss the predominant mode of the film's voice-over, that is, the mode that imbues and, ultimately, unifies the multiple instances of the film's voice-over-s. That is why I use here the singular 'voice-over' instead of the plural 'voice-overs'.

demonstration of the apparent impenetrability of the metaphysical realm that it points to.

So, why does the film construct such an emphasis on this metaphysical discourse, if it is going to leave it pending in the end? Can the voice-over be reduced to a kind of vacuous ‘metaphysical posturing’ or a ‘metaphysical hoax’, as critic Tom Whalen has suggested?¹⁷⁷ Does the voice-over merely display the ineffability of a realm ‘beyond understanding’ or can it be understood in more concrete terms, *in relation* to the organisation of other aspects of the film? In what follows, I will attempt to explore how the metaphysical discourse of the film becomes pertinent within the film.

The enigma of the film’s metaphysical discourse is further complicated because the voice-over is only loosely connected to the visual moment it accompanies. The opening sequence is characteristic: a whispering male voice suddenly pronounces, ‘What is this war in the heart of nature?’ over a low angle shot of shafts of light coming through branches (Figure 1). Is there a war then necessarily and intrinsically connected with nature in general, and how is this kind of war related to the actual instance of war dramatised in the film? The connection between the dramatic moment and the voice-over remains vague.

¹⁷⁷ Whalen T., “‘Maybe All Men Got One Big Soul’: The Hoax within the Metaphysics of Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*’ in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol.27, no.3, 1999, p. 165

Figure 1

The Americans' assault on a Japanese bivouac begins to illuminate the kind of connection that the film constructs between voice-over and dramatic context. A whispering male voice accompanies shots of suffering and dying Japanese soldiers during the American raid. The voice wonders how 'this great evil' came into the world and asks, 'What seed, what root did it grow from?' (Figures 2-3). The voice seems to *react* to the sight of the kill, remaining thematically anchored in the image, conceptualising an awareness (and an evaluation – 'evil') of the ruthless massacre during a war. However, even if it may strike us as obvious that 'war is evil', it is far from obvious why an action-packed sequence, geared to portray combat between men, should be accompanied by the sound of a tranquil, ponderous voice contemplating philosophically on the subject of evil. Can the conjunction of these two apparently heterogeneous dramatic registers (of the voice-over and the image) be somehow justified or is this conjunction to be considered offhand or even dissonant? What is actually conveyed by the transferral of the significance of the action to the order of reflective thought?

Figure 2

Figure 3

If one looks more closely at the sequence, one notices that the diegetic voices have been muted, while the non-diegetic voice-over is dubbed over this muteness. Action and reflection are joined through the mediation of this muteness. The visualisation of extreme human pain and the voice-over's questions remain suspended within this muteness. 'Who is doing this?' – 'Who is killing us?' – 'Does our ruin benefit the earth?' – 'Does it help the grass to grow, the sun to shine?' The pauses between these questions don't just punctuate the progression of the voice-over but contain silences that absorb the sight of excruciating human pain (its suffering and its cause). These silences become able to *evoke* what is common at the level of both action and thought, that is, the *intensity of the unspeakable*. This intensity encapsulates the sensation of petrified stupor experienced at the harrowing sight of the wanton loss of human lives.

Through the evocative process of the sequence, the question of evil is not posed in a detached, theoretical manner but rather *grows out* of the workings of the affective charge of the moment. Thus, the question of evil does not just refer to some ineffable metaphysical truth but rather articulates an affective response to the sight of the intentional destruction of human lives and the agonising pain that ensues. It is this sight of destruction and of pain *in extremis* which seems intractable, somehow always in excess of itself – hence, so hard to make sense of.

This understanding of the way the voice-over works is echoed in Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's reading of the film. Bersani and Dutoit question the strictly philosophical character of the voice-over:

These are very large – one might also say naïve – questions and reflections. The first thing to be said about them is that while Malick's film takes them very seriously, it doesn't treat them as philosophical issues. They are crucial to the film's sense but they have very little philosophical weight.¹⁷⁸

Before analysing how exactly the film treats these questions, I would like to subscribe to Bersani's and Dutoit's point. I would like to argue that the voice-over does not seek a discursive, conceptual explanation to the questions it poses but rather collaborates with the dramatic context in which it is placed in order to produce the kind of evocative process suggested above. I will show that even in cases such as the opening sequence, where the connection between dramatic moment and voice-over seems strikingly indeterminate, the film's evocative process is still at work.

Unsettling the Agency of the Voice-Over

Usually, a film's voice-over can be attributed to a clearly identified character's point of view. In *The Thin Red Line*, however, it is strikingly difficult to attribute the voice-over to specific characters. This difficulty becomes a crucial dimension of the intricate relationship between the voice-over and the dramatic moment (for example, in the case of the Japanese bivouac invasion sequence, who is the agent experiencing the sensation of stupor?). The majority of the film's critics seem to have bypassed this

¹⁷⁸ Bersani L., Dutoit U., 'One Big Soul (*The Thin Red Line*)' in *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics Subjectivity*, London: BFI, 2004, p. 132

difficulty by assuming that voice-over instances which cannot be clearly attributed to a specific character belong to Witt (Jim Caviezel).¹⁷⁹ Such a blanket characterisation of the film's voice-over instances seems wrong, though, since it fails to acknowledge that the voice-over can be attributed to various *different* characters. Gilberto Perez (one of the few critics recognising the variability of the voice-over's speakers) has suggested that the voice-over can be understood as a 'play of consciousnesses' that connects the soldiers' disparate experiences of war into one collective experience.¹⁸⁰ In line with Perez's suggestion, I will argue that the film consistently creates a kind of perplexity, a kind of confusion between the soldiers' voices, in order to conflate the identities of the speakers uttering the voice-over.

But, how exactly is this confusion created? *How does it actually become possible?* As I will attempt to show, the film creates this confusion through the slight yet perceptible variations in the timbre and the accent of the voices heard, as well as through its idiosyncratic use of conventional voice-over devices (such as the interior monologue or the third person commentary).

Through the lack of clarity characterising the voice-over attribution, the voices of the speakers become merged *and* differentiated simultaneously – 'de-individuated' *and*

¹⁷⁹ Bersani L., Dutoit U., 'One Big Soul (*The Thin Red Line*)' in *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics Subjectivity*, London: BFI, 2004, pp. 124-179 Mottram R., 'All Things Shining; The Struggle for Wholeness, Redemption and Transcendence in the Films of Terrence Malick' in Patterson H. (ed.), *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, London: Wallflower (2nd edition), 2007, pp. 14-26 Dreyfus H. and Salazar Prince C., 'Dying Without Demise, Demise Without Dying' in Davies D. (ed.), *The Thin Red Line*, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 29-44, Davies D., 'Vision Touch and Embodiment in *The Thin Red Line*' in Davies (ed.), *The Thin Red Line*, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 45-65.

¹⁸⁰ Perez G., 'How We Remember' in *London Review of Books*, vol. 35, no. 17, 2013 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n17/gilberto-perez/how-we-remember>, pp. 4-5

‘particularised’¹⁸¹ at the same time. In this way, the voices do not express distinct and fully demarcated subjectivities (or ‘consciousnesses’) but only fleetingly relate to specific soldiers. The voices ultimately amalgamate, joined by the effort, or rather the pathos, of trying to make sense of an intransigent and unresponsive world. It is this pathos of understanding, this drama of incomprehension that remains indefinitely subjectivised, always fluctuating between the subjective and the de-subjectivised. The film brings forth the feel *of an uncertain and ever-changing point of view* which, despite being personalised, does not remain firmly attached to a specific character.

Establishing and Undermining Conventional Point of View Attribution

The critical attention to the character of Witt as the speaker of the voice-over can be explained by the way the film begins: Witt is presented as the maverick soldier who is separated from his battalion because he has gone AWOL. The film not only focuses on Witt visually, but also associates Witt with a voice-over instance in a straightforward way.

While relishing the peaceful Melanesian communal life, he suddenly recollects his mother’s death. The film lingers on a medium long shot of a Melanesian mother bathing her baby in a lake (Figure 4), as Caviezel’s voice begins to narrate:

I remember my mother when she was dying – all shrunk up and grey ... I asked her if she was afraid ... She just shook her head. I was afraid to touch

¹⁸¹ I borrow these words from James Morrison and Thomas Schur who use them in order to describe what happens to soldiers/men more generally during battle Morrison J., Schur T., *The Films of Terrence Malick*, London: Praeger, 2003, p. 25

the death I'd seen in her ... I couldn't find anything beautiful or uplifting about her going back to God ... I heard people talk about immortality but I've not seen it...

Figure 4

The voice's narration lingers over two subjective shots of Witt staring at the Melanesian mother (Figures 5-6). The change of scale in the two shots (from long to medium shot) pronounces, by way of a structural convention, the film's increasing focus on Witt's interiority. The set-up of the sequence, as well as the distinctness of Caviezel's voice, anchor the sequence within the subjective experience of Witt. The film signals a direct continuum between character interiority and voice-over.

Figure 5

Figure 6

This pronounced focus – right at its beginning – on the interiority of one specific soldier recalls the similar narrative structure of war films such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). Both establish a protagonist soldier whose subjective experience filters the dramatic action of the film. This filtering is reflected in the interior monologue that accompanies pensive silent shots of Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) in the opening sequence of *Apocalypse*

Now (Figures 7-8) and moments of Chris' (Charlie Sheen) activity in *Platoon* (Chris' letter to his grandmother is delivered as an interior monologue accompanying shots of him digging a hole [Figures 9-10]).

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Nevertheless, *The Thin Red Line* interrogates the conventional reading that it initially suggests. The film draws on the conventional interior monologue device only in order to complicate its use. Even though Witt is evidently the speaker,¹⁸² the film manages to disrupt the strictly subjective character of the experience he narrates. More specifically, the film establishes a discontinuity between the content and the tone of Witt's discursive account, on the one hand, and the content and tone of the memory sequence that Witt's account gives rise to, on the other.

¹⁸² Although the voice-over starts as an interior monologue (and, therefore, begins as a disembodied form of speech), a soundbridge and dissolve lead into a shot of Witt speaking to a friend, so that the disembodied voice-over becomes dialogue.

The memory sequence of the dying moments of Witt's mother is introduced by a close up of Witt's pensive face (Figure 11). The sequence is accompanied only by a bleak minimalist melody constituted by a sparse progression of piano chords over a background of a continuous, subdued electronic chord. By evoking the hollowness of the upcoming death, this melody initially echoes Witt's assertion that he 'couldn't find anything beautiful or uplifting' about his mother 'going back to God'. *Nevertheless*, the depiction of Witt's mother's dying moments becomes unhinged from the sombre tone suggested by the music and Witt's voice-over: the visual sequence is constituted by a series of shots accentuating moments of serenity and vivid physical tenderness between an old woman, a person who remains off screen and a little girl. The first shot of the sequence is a close up lingering on the old woman's hand slowly and lovingly caressing the hand of the person who remains off screen (Figure 12). Witt's confessed fear ('I was afraid to touch the death I'd seen in her') seems to be laid aside by the physical gentleness of the woman's caress. The tonal tension between the dryness of Witt's words and the welcoming tranquility of the woman's caress suggests a significant affective shift. The steady, knowing pace of the old woman's caress seems to become able to appease the fear of death and absolve it.

Figure 11

Figure 12

Instead of *illustrating* the meaning of Witt's words, the close up of the woman's caress constitutes a *reaction* to it. As Bersani and Dutoit have suggested:

The film...does not exactly answer Witt's questions and yet takes them all into account...The film's verbal questions are responded to visually. Or, more exactly, questions about the world are coupled with different ways of *looking at* the world...Looking at the world doesn't erase questions about the world but it does inaccurately replicate those questions as a viable relation to the world.¹⁸³

Through this 'inaccurate replication' that Bersani and Dutoit suggest, the memory sequence overrides the stagnancy of Witt's words by exuding a generosity of affect able to overpower the fear of death through its benevolence. Through the emphasis on the woman's caress, the film runs ahead of Witt's impasse, acting preemptively, as it were. While 'taking into account' the meaning of Witt's words, the affective logic of the memory sequence *also manages to transform this meaning*. In this way, the film dissociates the experience of the mother's death from Witt's point of view as discursively expressed.

The rift between Witt's voice-over and the memory sequence is reinforced by the fact that the memory sequence withholds Witt from view, stressing the unfolding of the old woman's gesture in isolation. The conventional reading of the moment prompts the viewer to assume that the person off screen is Witt. This might well be so but, contrary to other similar memory sequences in the film, such as those between Bell (Ben Chaplin) and his wife (Miranda Otto), this sequence becomes visually disengaged from the bearer of the memory. In this way, the film injects a crucial ellipsis into the sequence and construes the status of the sequence as only vaguely identifiable (the old woman and the little girl appear only once – this time – and the

¹⁸³ Bersani, Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, p.143

girl remains unidentified throughout the film). The fact that Witt's voice-over has stopped before the introduction of the memory sequence (again contrary to Bell's memory sequences) reinforces the separate status of the sequence. The presence of Witt seems to become downplayed, suppressed in a way, in favour of the sequence's anonymity. Through the tension between the personal and the de-personalised quality of the sequence, the film creates an instance of this ethereal realm of de-subjectivised affective meaning that will re-emerge repeatedly. Although the sequence is not cut off from Witt's subjectivity (given its placement right after Witt's interior monologue), it does become extracted from it, hovering over it, as it were.

Moreover, the focus of the sequence does not lie exclusively on the recollection of Witt's personal moment with his mother but becomes *refracted* in various directions. In the second shot of the sequence, the unseen person is now a shadowy figure sitting still in the foreground, observing the actions of the others: the old woman raises herself in bed and slowly stretches her body towards the little girl in a white lace dress standing by; the little girl reciprocates by stretching her hand towards the woman. The shot is followed by a close up of two little birds chirping in their cage. A close up of the girl's torso, registering the girl's heartbeat follows. It then gives way to one more close up recording the girl's hand touching the woman's chest just before the girl places her smiling face on the woman's torso while tightly embracing it (Figures 13-17). As the focus of the sequence becomes spread out, the sequence becomes further abstracted from Witt's subjectivity.

Figure 13

Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 16

Figure 17

The presence of the camera *behind* the shadowy figure's back destabilises the viewpoint of the sequence. The film simultaneously expands and restricts the limits of Witt's subjective perception: Witt sees or becomes conscious of his former self; but the figure in the foreground remains pronouncedly obscure. More importantly, the interrogation of Witt's subjective perception is gradually turned into a more general interrogation of the potential of subjective perception per se: the heightened sound of the girl's heartbeat evokes the physical closeness of an absent agent listening to this heartbeat. The agent of this physical closeness is not shown to be Witt, although it could be, at a different time. It could also be the old woman listening to the girl's heartbeat while embracing the little girl. Through these indeterminate evocations, the spatio-temporal limits of subjective perception undergo an upheaval. The evoked

instances fluctuate between the affective order of subjective impressions and the affective order of dispersed, uncentred sensations dissociated from their concrete perceptual coordinates. Through its elliptical and diffusive character, this imagery transfigures Witt's memory into a distillation of feeling that does not remain firmly embedded within Witt's point of view.

Through the configuration of these uncentred sensations, the film calls forth a point of view that transcends the limits of empirical, naturalistic understanding. So, the 'metaphysical' that the film grapples with seems to refer not only to the thematic content of the voice-over's questions but also to the presence and the workings of this kind of point of view.

Dissociating a film's point of view from a character's point of view is not *generally* something uncommon for a film, and, also, does not necessarily affect the intelligibility of a film in a particularly striking way. However, as it just became evident, and as it will become clearer in the sections that follow, *The Thin Red Line* uses this dissociation in such a strikingly ambiguous way as to forge a more and more unstable legibility of point of view.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Another example of how a film can render ambiguous the dissociation of a character's point of view from the film's point of view refers to two – frequently discussed – 'rhyming' shots in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, a film analysed in the first chapter of the thesis. The first shot is taken from behind Lisa's head and is 'looking' down the staircase, at Stefan arriving with a lady, and the second shot is 'looking' down the staircase, in the same way as the first one (the position and the angle of the camera is the same), only now it is 'looking' directly (without the interpolation of a character looking), and 'looking' at Lisa, as she is arriving with Stefan. Whether (in the second shot) it is the *film* which is 'looking' at and commenting on Lisa becoming part of Stefan's conquests, or the *older, voice-over Lisa* who remembers the instance, is a question that complicates the film's intelligibility. The ambiguous point of view of these two shots has been first discussed by Robin Wood in Wood R., *Personal Views*, London: Gordon Fraser, 1976, pp. 128-129 and, more recently, by George Wilson, among others (see characteristically Wilson, *Narration in Light*, pp.103-104 or Perez G., *The Material Ghost*, pp.76-79 and Gibbs J., *Mise-en-scene: Film Style and Interpretation*, London: Wallflower Press, 2002, pp. 78-79). In *The Thin Red Line*, as this chapter attempts to show, similar ambiguities of point of view become more consistent, more pervasive and more striking, crucially upsetting the coherence of the film.

Now, the memory sequence ends with a smooth camera tilt (medium shot) moving upwards and to the right, from the inside of the bedroom towards the sky (Figure 18). The tilt, revealing the sky over a room with no ceiling, gently unearths the sequence from any realistic coordinates. In his voice-over, Witt had uttered that he couldn't see anything 'beautiful or uplifting' about his mother going back to God, but the gracefulness of the tilt seems to contradict his words. The film, once again, produces a sensation that contradicts the sensation expressed by Witt's voice-over. And, even if Witt had denied having seen the 'immortality' people talk about, it is the sense of this immortality which is momentarily – if only inchoately – made present through the camera's final movement. The final moments of a life are *stretched* towards the sky and continued, within their fading. Immortality is not lost through this fading, the sequence suggests. In fact, the memory sequence as a whole has managed to render immortality not as the permanence of life but, rather, as the preciousness of life: the mother's last moments are moments characterised by sensations of physical delicacy and vulnerability, and it is exactly these sensations that are retrieved and reanimated by being remembered and cherished.

Figure 18

Forging a Plane of Trans-Subjective Experience

The destabilisation of point of view in the Melanesia sequence does not merely introduce narrative indeterminacy into the film. Rather, it becomes the springboard for

a more radical disorganisation of the function of point of view in the film. During the soldiers' arrival on the island of Guadalcanal, the voice-over appears to come from an indeterminate character, encapsulating *multiple* subjective points of view *simultaneously*. Through these utterings, the film manages to render an experience of wonder that *evokes* the various responses of the soldiers to the mysterious landscape of Guadalcanal. As the soldiers' responses to the alienness of Guadalcanal shade into each other, they amalgamate into a more generalised affect of marvelling at an unreachable 'other-ness'.

The soldiers' responses are initially conjured up through the visual configuration of the sequence. Just after disembarking, the soldiers enter a tropical forest. In a long shot of the forest's interior, the soldiers walk warily among entangled roots, under the tall trees (Figure 19). The next shot is a rightward moving shot that reveals an ancient stone statuette, entangled among the tree roots (Figure 20). The camera has come closer to the tree roots, as the statuette appears right in front of it. The guarded pace of the rightward moving shot enacts the intrigued cautiousness of a look that has just gazed upon an unexpected apparition. Although the shot cannot be attributed to the point of view of a particular soldier, it nevertheless seems to allude to this kind of point of view. Exactly like any random soldier walking in the forest, the camera gazes in passing at the stone statuette that just happened to be there in front of it. The camera is then directed upwards, recording the top of the forest's tall trees through a low angle shot (Figure 21), which again pronounces the workings of a look, staring upwards from the ground. The workings of the camera enact a form of human like behaviour, which although disembodied, appears to be present inside the forest.

Figure 19

Figure 20

Figure 21

The whispering voice emerges, appearing exactly as an expression of this behaviour and posing the question: ‘Who are you to live in all these many forms?’ (Figure 21 again).¹⁸⁵ The camera pans rightwards, scanning the plants and the tree branches puncturing the sunlight, echoing the rightward moving shot that discovered the ancient statuette in the forest, while extending the camera’s movement upwards. The upward perspective of the shot charges the voice with a sense of awe that seeks for an absent (divine?) interlocutor beyond the trees’ reach, beyond what a look can capture. The presence of the ancient statuette, that is, the presence of a *personal form* that just happened to be there on the ground, seems to have triggered the voice’s quest for an invisible ‘you’.

¹⁸⁵ The DVD subtitles (Figure 21) attribute this voice-over to Train (John Dee Smith) although *it is not clear* whether the voice strictly belongs to him or to other characters too (see analysis below in text). *The Thin Red Line* [DVD], Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment 2000, Catalogue No. VFC 14059

Although the voice is dubbed *over* the sequence, it seems to arise spontaneously as a reaction to the sight of the statuette. In this way, the voice-over acquires a strikingly ambivalent status. It does not merely interrogate what the camera records, in the manner of a commentary hovering above the action, but it also appears to be *physically engaged* in its surrounding space. Rather than coming forth as external to the image of the forest, its resonance intermingles with sounds coming from the forest, like the chirping of birds or the sound of soldiers' footsteps cracking the leaves on the ground. As the voice-over blends with these sounds, it appears to physically interact with the space of the forest. The sense of this interaction also affects the temporal status of the voice. Although, in a technical sense, the time of the voice's question runs separately to the dramatic action of the sequence, it is as if the time of the question arises directly from the time of the action. The voice seems to emerge not simply while the action unfolds, but, in a way, *during* the action.

The idiosyncratic spatial and temporal status of the voice's presence begs the question of the point of view that the voice embodies. If the voice represents the point of view of a narrator somehow internal to the action, then whose point of view is this?

The film appears to forge an indirect bond between the voice-over and the character of Doll (Dash Mikok). Aspects of Doll's physical behaviour evoke the state of amazed curiosity encapsulated in the voice-over's question. The medium close ups of Doll walking through the reeds (Figures 22-23) reveal Doll's facial reactions to the unexplored exotic territory encountered. Doll's face is absorbed in an expression of stunned aporia. Fear suspended within awe carves a tense stillness on Doll's face. This expression on Doll's face becomes sharper (Figures 24-26) when a short unknown Melanesian passes by, without even looking at him. Again, an unknown

personal form just happens to appear suddenly in front of a gaze. The question ‘*Who are you to live in all these forms?*’ silently reverberates through the surface of Doll’s face. The physiognomy of Doll epitomises a sense of astonishment *analogous* to the astonishment encapsulated in the voice-over’s discourse. Through this analogy, the voice-over becomes obliquely connected to Doll’s subjectivity.

Figure 22

Figure 23

Figure 24

Figure 25

Figure 26

The film transposes the affective intensity of Doll’s facial expression to the order of the voice-over but breaks the connection between Doll’s visual presence and Doll’s voice. Although the timbre and the depth of the voice-over recall Doll’s voice, the connection between the two voices does not take the form of a clear and firm correspondence. This connection remains loose since the film does not provide us

with a recognisable device of voice-over attribution, such as an interior monologue type of correspondence between image and voice. Finally, the sequence does not actually focus on the dramatic significance of Doll as a character. The actions of Doll do not stand out during the sequence because he appears as just one of the soldiers scouting the island (Figures 27-28). Thus, the correspondence between the voice-over and Doll's subjectivity is not *established* by the film, in any strict sense, but it is rather just *alluded* to.

Figure 27

Figure 28

The experience evoked by the voice-over co-exists with Doll's subjective experience only in a fractured continuity. The tension between the subjective and the de-subjectivised – initially evident in the Melanesia sequence – now re-appears. This time, the film uses this tension not only to dissociate the rendition of an experience from the subject of this experience but also to forge a plane of trans-subjective experience.

If the voice-over could be said to reflect Doll's subjectivity, it does not however remain anchored in it. The voice-over is characterised by a distinct Southern United States accent. Throughout the film, the voices of various characters possess this characteristic. Doll may be one of these characters, although it is not exactly clear, when he actually speaks, what kind of accent he has. Given that the Southern accent of characters like Bell (Ben Chaplin) and Train (John Dee Smith) is much more

pronounced in the film than Doll's, it may be that the voice-over belongs to them. Thus, although the voice-over's texture alludes to Doll's voice, its accent may allude to Train's or Bell's voice. The film uses this uncertainty in order to establish a dramatically crucial equivocation regarding the identity of the voice-over's speaker. This speaker is indeed a character who, nevertheless, remains indefinite. The voices of Train, Bell and Doll blend into one another, and, through this fusion of phonetic allusions, the state of wonder expressed by the voice reflects a *wider* – personalised – experience, indeterminately inclusive of many subjective experiences

The voice re-emerges over shots of various soldiers exploring the forest. In a mobile long take, the camera records Welsh (Sean Penn), Doll and other unknown soldiers interchangeably, when the voice-over utters: 'Your death that captures all...You too are the source of all that's gonna be born...'. The camera does not centre on any soldier specifically, so the film avoids, once again, a conventional interior monologue attribution. When the voice-over's words are heard, the camera is felt roaming *among* the soldiers, surrounding them unevenly, moving closer to some of them, then withdrawing, and moving away (Figures 29-33).

Figure 29 (Welsh)

Figure 30 (Doll)

Figure 31 (unknown soldiers)

Figure 32 (unknown soldier)

Figure 33 (unknown soldiers)

Because of the distinctness of the camera's movement and because of the agile ubiquity of the voice, both camera and voice acquire a separate status, independent from a particular soldier's subjectivity. Thus, when the voice is heard over a shot closing in on a soldier, the personal address of the voice seems to be more *directed* towards the image of the soldier, rather than coming from it. The subject of the address and the addressee become conflated – the distinction between the 'I' and the 'you' of the voice becomes unsettled. The reversibility of these two agents crucially affects the status of the voice-over. If the voice-over initially conjured up a human agency seeking for a divine absence in the sky, the divine absence is now seeking for a human presence on the ground: 'You *too* are the source of all that's gonna be born,' utters the voice. As the camera points towards the soldiers, the sublime becomes the human and the human becomes the sublime. A manifestation is turned into a question and a question is transformed into a manifestation. They interpenetrate, both looking for each other, tracing each other.

‘Your glory...Mercy...Peace... Truth...’ the voice continues. But *whose* glory, *whose* truth does the voice summon now? Who is the one ‘*your* glory’ refers to? A long take records the various groups of soldiers proceeding outside the forest and over the hills (Figures 34-39). Soldiers like Storm (John C. Reilly) or Bell – as well as an unknown Melanesian – all enter and leave the frame. The fluidity of framing that accompanies the voice allows the latter to point both to characters (soldiers) and to anonymous extras – both to recognisable and non-recognisable persons. Although the words of the voice-over could be understood simply as addressing God (terms like ‘peace’, ‘mercy’ or ‘truth’ resonate a Christian conception of God), they could also be understood as addressing each person that passes in front of the camera. The voice-over’s address, in a way, becomes continuously expansive. As Bersani and Dutoit suggest: “The ‘you’ of the voice-over is ultimately more of a trap than an enigma. It leads us to pinpoint ‘who’ it is, whereas the connectedness...[that the film brings about]...dissolves the separate identity that a ‘who’ falsely presupposes”.¹⁸⁶ The film does not seek to identify a singular ‘you’, but rather seeks to point to an ever-extendible ‘you’. This extendibility becomes paradigmatically evident when the film cuts to a muted medium shot of an unidentified Melanesian talking to the soldiers (Figure 40), and the voice-over utters ‘truth’. An unknown and, *prima facie*, random human presence is turned into a bearer of this non-verbal, metaphysical truth that the film sets out to grasp.

¹⁸⁶ Bersani, Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, p. 170

Figure 34 (Storm, the Melanesian and unknown soldiers)

Figure 35 (the Melanesian and unknown soldiers)

Figure 36 (Bell)

Figure 37 (Bell)

Figure 38 (Bell)

Figure 39 (Bell and unknown soldier)

Figure 40 (the Melanesian speaking)

Over a medium close up of the Melanesian and a medium close up of Bell listening pensively to the Melanesian's speech, the voice-over utters: 'You give calm a spirit... understanding...courage. The contented heart.' The final words accompany the image of Bell and linger over the sequence of his wife caressing him (Figures 41-45). They now resemble Bell's interior monologue, addressed first to the Melanesian and then to his wife. Through the shifting meaning of the voice-over's 'you', the film brings together a soldier's encounter with the people of Guadalcanal with this soldier's intimate recollection of his beloved one.

Figure 41

Figure 42

Figure 43

Figure 44

Figure 45

As the film centres on the image of the tender embraces *between* Bell and his wife, the voice-over's 'you' gradually vanishes ('courage... understanding. The contented heart...'). The tone of the voice-over releases an affect of loving togetherness in which the 'I' and the 'you' amalgamate into an unstable union. The voice's quest to relate to the 'other-ness' it addresses reaches its climax. An extreme close up allows Bell's and his wife's heads to intertwine (Figure 46). From fondling each other's hands to pressing them together (Figure 47), the characters enact the vivid choreography of their entanglement (Figures 48-49). The affection between Bell and his wife, rather than merely constituting a mutual expression of emotion, is transformed into a mode of receptivity that dissolves the otherness of the 'other', depolarising and synthesising the conceptual categories of the 'I' and the 'you'.

Figure 46

Figure 47

Figure 48

Figure 49

Constructing an Inter-Subjective Interiority

I would now like to call attention to the peculiarity characterising the relation of the voice-over of the sequence to Bell's interiority. The voice-over of the sequence is not simply construed as a means of expressing Bell's interiority (that is, the character's personal memory) but it is rather construed as a means of *connecting* the workings of this interiority to the workings of a wider, trans-subjective experience. In this way, when the voice is finally heard over the image of Bell, the film does not produce a conventional and straightforward interior monologue effect. It rather produces the effect of an interior monologue that is able to transcend its private origin by coming forth *as a part* of a cluster of subjective experiences. Exactly because of this peculiar status of Bell's interior monologue, Bell's interiority appears to communicate with what lies outside of it, beyond it. In a counter-intuitive way, Bell's interiority thus acquires a dimension of openness, an inclination towards a broader realm of experience that contains it, encompasses it.

As I will try to show now, it is not only Bell's interiority but also the interiority of most of the characters that is construed in such a way, throughout the film. As I will argue, the film uses particularly idiosyncratic versions of the interior monologue device in order to *open up* the realm of a character's interiority and *connect* it to the presence of the other characters' experiences or thoughts.

The first characteristic instance of this function of the film takes place immediately after the American troops seize the Japanese bunker on the top of a Guadalcanal hill. Although the visual structure of this instance seems to suggest an interior monologue of Witt, the sound of the voice uttering this monologue upsets this attribution.

In a medium close up, the film records Witt's face staring intensely towards the bottom of the shot, at something lying off screen. The film cuts to a close up of the ground, revealing the head of a dead Japanese soldier buried in it. The pensive intensity of Witt's gaze appears to initiate the reflections that are superimposed over the sight of the buried Japanese. A tranquil male voice-over utters: 'Are you righteous, kind? Does your confidence lie in this? Are you loved by all? Know that I was, too... Do you imagine your sufferings will be less because you loved goodness... truth?'. As the voice is silenced, the film cuts back to a medium close up of Witt still staring again towards the bottom of the shot (Figures 50-53).

Figure 50

Figure 51

Figure 52

Figure 53

Both the initial and the final medium close up of Witt's face signal the film's focus on Witt's interior life, while also recalling the similar visual structure in the Melanesia sequence that accompanied Witt's first interior monologue about his mother. The visual structure of the scene would thus suggest that it is the sight of the buried Japanese's head that arrests Witt's attention, instigating Witt's musings about the impotence of goodness to prevent suffering and death: Witt, who has by now been presented as a caring person (he has been shown looking after his fellow soldiers but also thoughtfully listening to people he did not know, such as the Melanesian mother) seems to be doubting the capacity of good intentions to prevent evil actions. Ultimately, Witt is one of the soldiers who participated in the siege of the Japanese bunker. The uttered 'you' of the voice could be either a form of oblique self-address (Witt doubts a self that is both good and catastrophic) or a form of muted address to the anonymous dead Japanese soldier whom Witt stares at.

But does the voice clearly *belong* to Witt, in the sense of the voice physically corresponding the character's voice? Although the voice does possess a delicacy and softness of tone that recalls Witt's voice, its timbre evokes the voice of another character, Staros (Elias Koteas). Even more curiously, its accent sometimes evokes the accent of a Japanese voice speaking in English. So, what is the relation between the perceptual qualities of the voice and the visual logic of the scene? Why is Staros' character evoked at this point and why does the voice also vaguely allude to the voice of an anonymous Japanese person?

The function of Witt's interior monologue would be less confusing if this monologue constituted a recollection of the questions posed. Witt could, for example, be recalling Staros' voice talking *to* him (hence the 'you' of the uttered by voice). However, such an instance of conversation between Staros and Witt has not occurred in the film. So, the film does not seek to provide a narrative or pragmatic justification for the function of this voice-over. It rather appears to aim at creating the effect of a character's thinking being *mediated* by another character's thinking. And, if the questions posed do indeed belong to Staros, they are, nevertheless, stripped off any concrete contextual coordinates, thus being turned into sheer reverberations of Staros' voice resonating in Witt's interiority. By releasing Staros' like voice from its contextual coordinates, the film distills only what remains: the feel of Staros' thought.

The film seems to suggest that the sensation of Staros' thought is *channeled* through the sensation of Witt's thought. Witt's and Staros' thoughts appear to overlap, infusing each other, being absorbed into one another: the gentleness of the voice's tone encapsulates this *osmosis*, since it constitutes a characteristic possessed by both characters' voices. At the same time, this gentleness also constitutes a manifestation

and a point of contact of the caring and ethical sensibility of both men. Throughout the film, Staros and Witt are shown to possess an equally attentive attitude towards the suffering of their fellow men. One is not only reminded of Witt's gestures mentioned above but also of Staros' uncompromised protection of his soldiers' lives when he refused to proceed into combat, even against Tall's orders. Staros and Witt have both had men die in their hands and, despite their head on confrontation with this evil, they have both courageously maintained a capacity to believe in some kind of goodness, some kind of providence. Staros repeatedly prays for his men before combat, while Witt decides to take on the task of providence himself when he sacrifices his life to protect his fellow soldiers at the end of the film. Despite their different backgrounds (Staros is an educated lawyer and Witt appears to be a person with a raw, instinctual intellect, believing in the existence of 'another world'), they both persistently, steadfastly believe in acts of kindness. 'Do you imagine your sufferings will be less because you loved goodness...?', utters the voice. This kind of 'imagination' – which could sound as a form of naivety – is only the ingenuous insistence, the ingenuous tenaciousness of the characters' belief in goodness. It reflects the characters' difficulty of coming to terms with the existence of wanton deaths. It is this difficulty that makes both Witt and Staros wonder if it could be otherwise.

However, it is Witt's belief in the potential of his kindness that becomes momentarily arrested by the sight of the dead Japanese's head buried in the ground. The blank, lifeless look on the Japanese's face acts as a melancholically ironic counterpoint to the capacity of Witt's imagination. It petrifies Witt's look, fixing it on the consequences of cruelty. It is maybe because a terrifying realisation begins to seep into young Witt's

interiority that the film summons the affective presence of the older, more experienced Staros to mitigate this awakening of agony (Staros is frequently portrayed as a fatherly figure, looking after his soldiers, for example, when he tells Bell to put his helmet on before their debarkation on Guadalcanal). Thus, apart from bringing forth the osmosis of the characters' sensibilities, the function of the interior monologue forges another possible relation between the characters (even though the characters have never interacted visually).

'Know that I was, *too...*', utters the voice, superimposed over the dead face. Exactly because the voice evokes not only Witt's and Staros' voices but also the Japanese like voice, its address now acquires a bilateral direction (a familiar effect of the voice-over, as analysed above). What comes characteristically to the foreground now, is the sense of a discursive interaction, a discursive relation between distinct agencies. It seems that it is not only Witt (or Staros) who is silently addressing the mute Japanese face but it also the mute Japanese face, which somehow addresses Witt (and Staros). The order of the voice-over appears to contradict the irrevocable silence of death that the image presents, uncannily animating a voice that may have belonged to the dead Japanese, or another Japanese, like him (the use of the past tense ['*was*'] signals the split between the present of the voice and a time that does exist anymore).

All these apparently distinct agencies ultimately blend within Witt's interior monologue, while also maintaining their differentiation. In this way, Witt's interiority acquires simultaneously a centripetal and centrifugal dynamic, drawing the thoughts of other characters towards it, while also being drawn towards them.

The slippery relation between interiority and thought becomes finally striking during the scene of Welsh's wandering around the fields after the battle. In this case,

although the film *gears* its progression towards the initiation of an interior monologue, it subsequently disrupts this progression by introducing a voice-over that could also be a third person commentary.

Initially, the dramatic context of the scene points to Welsh as the bearer of the voice's speculations. The scene takes place right at the end of a lingering medium shot of Welsh in the Copra plantation (Figure 54). Welsh seems concerned, his look is troubled. It seems that his thought has just been *stirred* by a discussion with Witt. Welsh has just confided to Witt that he feels unable to maintain his faith in the possibility of meaning, in a world plagued by suffering and death. He feels unable to see 'the beautiful light', as Witt does.

As if taking up a cue from Welsh's disquiet, a male voice-over utters: 'One man looks at a dying bird and sees nothing but unanswered pain...But death has got the final word...It's is laughing at him...'. The words accompany the solitary walk of Welsh amidst the soldiers that night. Welsh is smoking – for quite a while – quietly and pensively observing various soldiers around him (Figures 55-57). The film seems to construe the voice-over as Welsh's reflection.

Figure 54

Figure 55

Figure 56

Figure 57

However, this construal is undermined by the apparently detached third person narrative mode ('One man...') of the voice, as well as by the occasionally Southern accent of the voice (Welsh does *not* possess such an accent). These aspects of the voice-over unsettle the initial connection to Welsh, so that the voice-over acquires an ambivalent quality, representing an activity of thinking that could be both *internal* and *external* to Welsh's subjectivity.

The film further extracts the voice-over from Welsh's subjectivity by dubbing the words 'But death has got the final word...It's is laughing at him...' over a medium close up from *behind* Welsh's head (Figure 58). Because of the position of the camera, the voice-over seems to be *commenting on* Welsh's thoughts, rather than expressing them. If 'the man' who sees nothing but 'unanswered pain' in the dying bird is indeed Welsh (as has been suggested by the characters' discussion prior to this scene), then this man *can neither see* that it is only death that, ultimately, has 'the final word' about this 'unanswered pain'.

Figure 58

And, what kind of 'word', what kind of utterance is that? The film, apparently just dissociated from Welsh's subjective point of view, cuts to a long shot of the landscape (Figure 59). The voice-over pauses. Through the silent pause of the voice-over, the film enacts the unspeakable nature of death which seems unfathomable by Welsh's consciousness and un-interpretable by any sort of answer this consciousness could give.

Figure 59

Finally, the film cuts to a medium close up of Witt sleeping, taken from right above Witt's body (Figure 60), and the voice-over concludes: 'Another man sees the same bird...and feels the glory'. As the film then cuts once more, this time to a shot of Welsh staring straight towards the ground (Figure 61), the direction of the camera's gaze and the direction of Welsh's gaze appear to now echo each other. Through this visual parallelism, the uttered words (pointedly referring to Witt) emerge as obliquely reflecting Welsh's thought again. Still, they do not clearly *express* Welsh's interiority, as their source remains obscure.

Figure 60

Figure 61

So, who utters ultimately this voice-over? Although the latter ambivalently detaches itself from the subjectivity of Welsh, it still remains vaguely personalised. The voice is male, American, with a Southern accent. It reappears in various occasions throughout the film, such as when Witt goes back to the Melanesian village, after the battle (Figures 62-65) or when Doll is staring at the sea from the deck of the battleship leaving Guadalcanal (Figures 66-68). In both these cases (like in the case of Welsh above), the voice becomes dissociated from the character visually present but,

nevertheless, appears to allude to the *same* indeterminate person. In fact, although this person remains obscure, the timbre of the voice does repeatedly recall the timbre of Train's voice (the DVD subtitles sometimes mention Train as the speaker and sometimes not).¹⁸⁷ So, why does the film repeatedly pick out this timbre in order to vaguely personalise the – otherwise, hardly identifiable – bearer of the voice-over?

Figure 62

Figure 63

Figure 64

Figure 65

Figure 66

Figure 67

Figure 68

¹⁸⁷ For a critic claiming that Train is most frequently the speaker of the voice see Millington J., Critical Voices, 'Points of View in and on *The Thin Red Line*' in *Cineaction*, no. 81, 2010 pp. 28-28

The film does not seem to construe Train as a significant character, since it shows him only once at the beginning (Figure 69) and once at the end (Figure 70).

Figure 69

Figure 70

Train only minimally and fragmentarily participates in the film's action. When he first appears, it is in the sequence in the battleship's dungeon-like interior, while the soldiers prepare themselves for their attack on Guadalcanal. During this sequence, the film does not focus on him exclusively, as it introduces other, more significant characters.

In a platoon film, sequences in which the whole platoon appears together usually function as a way to introduce the main characters. This function of the sequence becomes evident not just through the film's emphasis on an actor's recognisability – actors such as Elias Koteas (Staros), Ben Chaplin (Bell) and Dash Mihok (Doll) appear in the sequence – but also through the identification of a character's role in the platoon (for example, Staros is identified as the captain by one soldier), through the elaboration of a character's personal history (Bell talks to another soldier about his wife), or through the emphasis on a character's particular predicament (Doll wants to get one more gun, apart from his firearm, to protect himself).

The sequence moves back and forth, from these main characters, to characters played by less known actors (Figures 71-75). The distribution of the film's focus remains unstable and becomes strikingly ambivalent the moment Train appears. The film

initially seems to linger on the actions of Sean Penn (Welsh), who is shaving in front of a mirror. Penn, being an easily recognisable actor, first captures our attention. However, the film also shows him *listening* to the story of another – much less recognisable – actor, John Dee Smith (Figures 76-77). The character of Smith recalls how afraid he was when his father beat him when he was little, confessing that now that their platoon is about to attack, he is even more afraid because he does not want to die. When Penn/Welsh asks him for his name, he replies: ‘Edward B. Train, sir’. The moment could be both about Penn/Welsh *and* Smith/Train. The film seems to focus on Smith/Train (as he elaborates on his personal history) but it equally seems to focus on the Penn/Welsh (as the medium close up of the two characters foregrounds the image of his recognisable face in the mirror). In this way, even when Train is introduced, the film does not clearly focus on him.

Figure 71 (Doll)

Figure 72 (unidentified actor)

Figure 73 (Staros)

Figure 74 (unidentified actor)

Figure 75 (Bell)

Figure 76 (Welsh)

Figure 77 (Train and Welsh)

Although the film names Train, it does not further develop the character's relation to the action. Train is thus identified *only as one of the soldiers* who confront the possibility of dying. Through this identification, he becomes representative of any – otherwise anonymous – soldier.

Instead of concretising Train as a character, by providing further access to his behaviour, the film renders him a sheer signifier of a scared soldier. The sense of such a presence, *like his*, and the residue of such fragility, *like his*, indiscriminately accompanies the other soldiers' solitary moments. As Train's voice also intermingles with other voices, it acquires a chameleon-like affective presence, joining the subjectivities of the various soldiers. In this way, the timbre of his voice, rather than merely alluding to a particular subjectivity, becomes the way through which the film unifies the soldiers' thoughts. The timbre of Train's voice becomes a recurring evocation of the soldiers' *common* predicament.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Rarely, the voice-over seems to be clearly attributed to the character portrayed as thinking, for example, when Tall, while walking enraged towards Staros, who has just disobeyed his brutal orders, thinks: 'Can't lift the lid...', or when Welsh, while listening disappointed to the patronising speech of

'Where is it that we were together?' asks a voice at the end of the film (Figure 78). The voice's timbre evokes Train's voice. The question is dubbed over a scene that echoes the one in the interior of the battleship. This time, though, the soldiers are gathered around the battleship about to leave Guadalcanal. The film's focus is dispersed, once again, capturing both recognisable (Welsh) and anonymous soldiers (Figures 79-81). *'Who were you that I lived with...walked with?'* continues the voice. By asking these questions, the voice suggests that the realm of this interconnectedness forged between the soldiers existed only transitorily, ethereally – fading away as soon as each soldier returns to his private life.

Figure 78

Figure 79 (unknown soldiers)

Figure 80 (Welsh)

Figure 81 (unknown soldier)

Captain Bosche (George Clooney), Staros' replacement, thinks: 'You are in a box, a moving box. They want you dead or in their lie...'. Both these moments exemplify instances in which a character remains enclosed within his own way of thinking – either by refusing to listen to another person (as Tall does in relation to Staros) or by remaining 'frozen' (as Welsh admits about himself) in order to protect himself from the cynical workings of authoritarian power. During these moments, the characters remain insulated within their interiority, so the change in the predominant mode of the voice-over manages to convey instances of a character's inability to escape the solitude of his own mind, his own consciousness.

Still, the last voice-over of the film, uttered by the same voice again, may suggest otherwise: ‘Oh my soul ... let me be in you now ... look out through my eyes ... look at all the things you’ve made ... all things shining’. The ‘soul’ that the voice mentions seems to refer to a more *inclusive* soul, since it *contains* the uttering ‘I’. And, the ‘eyes’ that it mentions seem to refer to eyes capturing the expanse of a luminous *wholeness*, since they are able to see ‘*all* things shining’.

As these words are heard, the effervescent trail of the ship on the sea (Figures 82-83), extends backwards towards the horizon, and forwards following the ship, inscribing on the water the ephemeral trace of a line without an ending. A flowing line of water reappears in the next shot as the latter captures a little boat streaming through a river (Figure 84). The movement of the water, suggesting the promise of a never ending encompassing, is finally punctuated by a shot of a solitary plant standing still in the middle of the sea (Figure 85). Solitude is surrounded, embraced by the promise of the water.

The film seems to use the images of water as images of its own gesture of encompassing the multiple solitary ‘I’s of the soldiers within a unified experience. These final images of water become a visual analogy of this ‘soul’ which the voice-over has been forging throughout the film.

Figure 82

Figure 83

Figure 84

Figure 85

Conclusion

The strikingly abstract and idiosyncratic voice-over of *The Thin Red Line* constitutes a predominant aspect of the film, so, as this chapter attempts to show, its significance and dramatic relevance has to be unraveled, in order for the film to make sense. The chapter argues that the voice-over does not need to be understood merely as a vague metaphysical discourse, only loosely related to the workings of the film, but can be rather understood as a discourse that is evocative of the various soldiers' experiences of the war at Guadalcanal. This function of the voice-over remains peculiar, though, since the latter does not confine itself to evoking each soldier's separate experience, but rather brings the soldiers' subjective experiences together into a broader, more encompassing point of view. The film makes this possible through the conflation of the voice-over's speakers (because of the conflation of the voices' perceptual characteristics), through the collaboration of the voice-over with the image (for example, its collaboration with the indeterminate and unstable point of view of the image during the soldiers' arrival at Guadalcanal), as well as through the unusual inflections of the 'interior monologue' type of voice-over (characteristically, during the instances when Witt, Bell or Welsh appear as thinking). Through these strategies, the film manages to produce a plane of de-subjectivised but personalised meaning that unifies its understanding.

Testing Coherence in Narrative Film

Conclusion

The thesis has aimed to explore the function of coherence in narrative films that are characterised by strikingly baffling or opaque organisational principles. The thesis has aimed to unravel the mechanisms through which these films become coherent, in order to show, more specifically, how apparent disruptions in a narrative film's intelligibility can ultimately be understood as productive of crucial aspects of a film's meaning. As mentioned in the introduction, the films examined by the thesis have been chosen exactly because they have been deemed exemplary in terms of achieving this task.

Since the notion of coherence has rarely been examined as a straightforward reference point in film studies, the thesis has initially attempted to explore its usefulness as a critical concept. Thus, chapter 1 of the thesis has interrogated issues directly pertaining to the function of the concept in the analysis of film, such as our understanding of a film's relationality, as well as the way in which this understanding can help us appreciate the intelligibility of a film's action. In order to discuss these issues, the chapter draws on the work of film critic V.F. Perkins, as well as that of film theorist and philosopher G. Wilson. Perkins' and Wilson's writings have been important for the thesis, not only because they are the principal critical approaches to film that have tackled the function of coherence in a more systematic manner but also because they elucidate aspects of the function of coherence that provide the basic parameters for the analyses of the thesis. More specifically, Perkins' emphasis on the relational, 'synthetic' understanding of film allows the thesis to assess the

persuasiveness of the connection between a film's formal devices and the meaning of the film's action, and Wilson's exploration of a film's 'unreliable' narration helps the thesis explore how certain gaps in a film's intelligibility can produce a film's malleable and diversified coherence.

As it becomes evident in the first chapter, Perkins' late work also addresses how a film can sustain certain gaps in its intelligibility, like, for example, the 'impossible continuity' between the content of Lisa's flashbacks and the content of the shots that these flashbacks accompany in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*). Such gaps, as Perkins shows, are not necessarily disruptive of a film's coherence, but rather manage to remain integrated in a unified understanding of the film they characterise.

The second chapter of the thesis investigates how such a unified understanding is rendered possible in the case of *Madame De...*, a film which presents challenges similar to *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. More specifically, the chapter explores how the film manages to persuasively tie together a clear narrative design with crucial elements of elusiveness in the meaning of its dramatic action.

The degree to which a film manages to integrate its disparate aspects is further tested in chapter 3, which examines the intricate interplay between *Ordet*'s realistic style with the spiritual aspects of the film's action. As the chapter shows, one of the various manifestations of this interplay is the *cohesion* between the film's physical and more abstract elements. Characteristically, the film uses an element already embedded in the film's physical or material environment – like the wind blowing outside the Borgen home or Inger's withering, dying voice – and then fuses the naturalistic function of this element with the latter's capacity to evoke an uncanny, invisible presence permeating the film.

Despite using this technique of fusion, *Ordet* still raises crucial questions regarding the intelligibility of its challenging style. Crucial aspects of this style, pertaining to the actors' performance (i.e. the odd crudity of Johannes' performance as 'God's fool'), the movement of the camera (i.e. the film's repeated use of apparently redundant or 'unmotivated' pans from one character to the other) or the particular configuration of the film's setting (i.e. its theatricalised look) constitute peculiar and puzzling formal devices that remain 'out of place' – as it were – requiring justification.

Thus, one could say that, despite the fact that *Ordet* develops a particularly tight relationality ('cohesion') – a criterion of coherence highly valued by Perkins – it remains rather 'incredible', in Perkins' terms, because the presentation of the film's world retains overt and jolting peculiarities. Indeed, *prima facie*, these peculiarities could be understood as 'obtrusive' and eccentric or as conveying the 'heavy hand' of the director (see, for example, Robin Wood's argument in relation to the film's apparently 'unmotivated' pans).

Despite the eccentric presence of these devices, however, as chapter 3 shows, their function does acquire a specific significance within the context of the film's idiosyncratic coherence. Through Johannes' increasing interaction with the life of the Borgen home (forged, for example, through the film's pattern of framing Johannes *with* other characters), the film gradually conflates Johannes' 'mad' behaviour with a kind of automatic and spontaneous responsiveness to the very concrete predicaments of the rest of the characters (for example, Inger's pain). Moreover, the apparently redundant pans of the camera acquire a variable significance in the film, on some occasions dramatising the spatial dispersal and dislocation of the characters caught up in their metaphysical flights, while, on other occasions, surrounding these characters,

emphatically registering their physical presence. Finally, the film's theatricalised style is not arbitrary but rather essential in order for the film to convey a sense of artificial, staged stasis that encapsulates the eerie stillness of Inger's (temporary) death. It is in the context of this stasis that the film interpolates tinges of a lively physicality (i.e. vibrant natural sounds) that gradually prepare the event of Inger's corporeal re-emergence (that is, Inger's resurrection).

As it becomes evident, although *Ordet*'s devices remain noticeable and rather conspicuous as stylistic peculiarities, they still manage to become intelligibly incorporated by the film's organisation. In other words, despite the fact that these devices are not smoothly assimilated by the film at the level of the latter's *stylistic effect* (as Perkins' understanding of a tight relationality would ideally require), they are in fact integrated by the film, but at the level of the latter's 'logic' and 'inner consistency'. In other words, the function of these devices becomes carefully arranged by the film, thus managing to create an organised relation between the physical and the spiritual in the film. In this way, although, contra Perkins' aesthetics, the peculiarities of *Ordet* retain a somehow disturbing effect, in line with Perkins' requirement of an internal order that holds the world of the film together,¹⁸⁹ these peculiarities consistently – and rather precisely – serve the solidity of the film's logic.

Thus, far from being arbitrary or impertinent, the various tensions between physicality and spirituality in *Ordet* are rather turned into potent forms of cooperation of these two elements, re-constituting the film's apparently confusing intelligibility.

The thesis proceeds with the examination of a film with an even more strikingly challenging style, *Passion* (chapter 4). *Passion*'s style of fragmentation dismantles the

¹⁸⁹ Perkins, *Film as Film*, pp.121-122

linear progression of the film's action, systematically creating gaps in the film's intelligibility. To the extent that these gaps produce discontinuities in the presentation of the film's action and disrupt the integration of the film's world, they create a significant challenge to Perkins' understanding of coherence.

As it became evident in the chapter 1 of the thesis, the 'impossible continuity' between the voice-over and the action in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, did not actually *appear as a dis-continuity*, since the effect of the particular arrangement of the film became subdued and absorbed by the flow and the pace of the film's action, thus remaining subtle and delicate. It is exactly this kind of arrangement and this kind of effect that Perkins appreciated as an aspect of the film's tight coherence.

Passion, now, constitutes an overt deviation from this kind of coherence. But, in what sense exactly?

As Perkins had observed in the case of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, because of the subtlety of the effect of the formal device in question, the film managed to *preserve* the illusion of an impossible continuity and not 'explode the narrative into a gag'. So, the device in *Letter...*, by being absorbed in the temporal continuity of Lisa's voice-over narration, remained contained and controlled by the progression of Lisa's 'story'. And, by remaining thus contained and controlled, the device further managed to maintain its 'credible' (in Perkins' terms), descriptive function, as it were, that is, its function serving the unfolding, the development of Lisa's 'story'. Consequently, the fact that the device pronounced the 'fictionality' of the film did not ultimately prevent the device from appearing to be closely tied to the situational content of the film.

It is exactly this tightness that *Passion* overtly and systematically challenges. The formal devices of *Passion*, rather than just describing the film's action (i.e. the situation of the characters), also consistently analyse and – more importantly – *re-order* the various aspects of the film's situational content. Because of this constant reordering, as chapter 4 shows, *Passion*'s formal devices manage to convey and render salient the creative processes through which the film's world is constituted. Thus, *Passion*, by exposing the activity of its creation, does not 'preserve the illusion' of its fictional world, countering Perkins' notion of the action's 'credibility', while focusing instead on interrogating and diversifying the ways of presenting the action.

Characteristically, the actions of the character of Isabelle are presented as a synthesis of distinct and perceptually fractured manifestations of Isabelle's behaviour (see, for example, the dissociation of the image of Isabelle from the sound of Isabelle's voice, or, the portrait shots of Isabelle, isolating her from her surroundings). This particularly disrupted presentation of Isabelle, as the chapter shows, is not devoid of significance, however. It becomes a strategy through which the film manages to extract the presentation of Isabelle from its fixed situational and motivational coordinates, divesting Isabelle's behaviour of its stable determinations and, thus, underlining the drastic variability and potentiality of Isabelle's being.

The film's discontinuous and fragmented portrayal of Isabelle also becomes the means through which the film upsets our understanding of its perceptual field as a whole. Characteristically, portrait shots of Isabelle working in a factory are interpolated throughout the progression of the sequences in Jerzy's film studio. Through these interpolations, *Passion* interrupts the sequences in the film studio in order to establish comparisons and analogies between the work of Isabelle's and the

work of Jerzy's actors. Thus, the film, instead of just focusing on the action within the studio, decentralises the legibility of this action, enriching and multiplying the modes of its intelligibility.

The strategies just mentioned are indicative of the film's attempt to forge a continuously expansive intelligibility that grows out of the film's variable focus on diverse areas of the action. This variable focus is finally manifested *during* the sequences within the film studio. Through the ceaseless movement of the camera and the repeated variation of the film's visual content (based on the film's composition and re-composition of specific 'tableaux vivants'), the film creates changeable visual configurations and establishes unusual connections between them. It is the establishment of these unusual connections that becomes the mechanism through which the film foregrounds and explores the general function of relationality, thus interrogating and 'thematizing' – as it were – the function of a basic concept used by the thesis.

In this way, *Passion*, although overtly challenging Perkins' notion of the action's 'credibility', it does lend itself more broadly – but crucially – to a relational and compositional kind of understanding that expands, increases and reconfigures the possibilities of Perkins' notion of 'synthesis'.

If the basic principle of Perkins' prioritisation of 'synthesis' has been that the relations between the elements of a film are essential to the creation of significance, *Passion* retains this principle but incisively dissociates it from Perkins' further requirement of the 'tightness' and the 'integration' of these relations. Thus, the film gives way to a more exploratory and searching kind of relationality as a generator of significance.

Chapter 5 explores a particular aspect of changeable relationality in narrative film. More specifically, the chapter examines how the function of narrative digression in *Pulp Fiction* manages to alter consistently the connection between significance and narrative context in the film. Through detours and diversions in its narrative progression, *Pulp Fiction* multiplies and diversifies the dramatic situations it presents, in order to reframe and redetermine the significance of various elements of these situations. Characteristically, the film stretches out apparently peripheral aspects of a dramatic situation, in order to distend the significance of an element that is of lateral interest to the characters (see, for example, Vincent's and Jules' conversation about the foot massage, just before the characters are about to execute a group of boys). Or, the film unexpectedly injects an apparently random event in its narrative progression, in order to reconfigure the stakes of the action (see, for example, Mia's overdose or Marvin's death leading to 'The Bonnie Situation'). These techniques become indicative of the film's consistent and humorous manipulation of the construction of significance, which constitutes the basic principle of the film's intelligibility.

Both *Pulp Fiction*'s strategies of digressiveness and *Passion*'s strategies of fragmentation (i.e. the portrait shots of Isabelle) interrogate Perkins' notion of significance being built into, being ingrained in the workings of a film's action, crucially destabilising the relation between the latter (action) and the former (significance).

In *Passion*, because of this destabilisation, the intelligibility and the rationale of the action's organisation remains crucially at stake at every point of the film, making it very hard for the viewer to make sense of the progression of the film's storyline

(hence, the idea of the overt ‘difficulty’ of Godard’s work, presented in the introduction of chapter 4).

In *Pulp Fiction*, though, this destabilisation works in a somewhat different way. The film establishes more ‘usual’, apparently clear micro-structures (that is, a kind of ‘micro-storylines’), which initially seem to work as linearly intelligible frameworks for the action. Within each framework, the film seems to establish the significance of a certain dramatic element, but then, this significance is *subverted* and *changed*, as the action follows an unexpected direction.

When different conditions of the action attribute different kinds of significance to a certain element of the action (i.e. Mia’s two joke telling instances), one could say that significance does remain *locally* embedded within a dramatic situation (in Perkins’ terms), but it is then dislocated and re-situated.

At other times, though, the film creates a characteristic imbalance and disjunction between the attribution of dramatic weight to a particular element of the action, on the one hand, and the actual manifestation and elaboration of the significance of this element, on the other. The suddenly puzzling look of Vincent and Jules in the episode at Marsellus’ restaurant becomes characteristic. Even though of the changed look of the two characters creates a vibrant question mark, its significance is casually bypassed, being revealed in a wholly different context. Also, a similar structure of humour is created in the case of the briefcase that Vincent and Jules retrieve from the boys’ apartment. When the presence of the briefcase is apparently emphasised (during its retrieval), the briefcase actually remains of lateral concern to the characters. Its significance is then centralised in a wholly different context again, that is, during the diner stand-off.

As it becomes evident, in these cases, *Pulp Fiction* – because of its digressiveness – establishes a pattern through which it dissociates temporally the assertion of significance from the actual elaboration of significance, thus thematising *and* upsetting humorously Perkins' requirement of an integration of these two functions.

Whether in the form of an asynchrony between the assertion and the revelation of significance or in the form of a multiplication of significance, as it were, the film's method is produced by contextual shifts that readjust the relation between the more prominent and the less prominent aspects of the action (see also, characteristically, the centralisation of the twist contest).

In the film's method, one can discern an analogy with the method of *You Only Live Once*, as George Wilson described it. That film, as Wilson observed, prompted the viewer to re-consider and re-appraise 'what was going on' in it, by repeatedly re-arranging the focus of its visual configurations. But, if *You Only Live Once* changed the relation between what was *visually* prominent and less prominent, *Pulp Fiction* is not limited to its strictly visual aspects, but alters its *situational context as a whole*.

Moreover, *Pulp Fiction*'s method is more pronounced than the method of *You Only Live Once* (which is rather oblique), while also diversifying *multiple* 'centres of intelligibility' (the term is introduced in chapter 1), since *Pulp Fiction* revolves around multiple storylines.

Finally, Wilson's 'unreliable narration' is produced (in *You Only Live Once*) by the contextual shifts that ultimately conceal 'what actually happens' in the film. The point of *Pulp Fiction*'s method does not seem to be its 'unreliability', since the disclosure of the moment which reveals the significance of an aspect of the action sometimes does

take place (i.e. the reason of Vincent's and Jules change of clothes) and sometimes not (i.e. the revelation of the briefcase's content). The film's communicativeness, or lack thereof, in terms of 'what happens' or 'what has happened', is important (in *Pulp Fiction*) to the extent that it contributes to the construction of the film's humour. Thus, it is important more locally (again), when, for example, the film creates a joke out of the viewer's not knowing what made Vincent and Jules change their clothes or, correspondingly, when the film creates a joke when this piece of information is suddenly revealed in a wholly different context, apparently randomly.

In *Pulp Fiction*, the relation between the context of the action and the elements of this action is, thus, humorously, destabilised. In *The Thin Red Line*, the final film examined by the thesis (chapter 6), this relation is also slippery, but in a different way. Namely, the film's metaphysical voice-over appears to be abstractly and loosely connected to the context of the action, pressing the question of its coherent placement within the film.

The apparently vague workings of the voice-over in *The Thin Red Line* could have reminded one of the vague workings of the use of red colour in Antonioni's *Red Desert* (Perkins' example). Because of the unclear meaning of the use of red in the *Red Desert*, according to Perkins, the device remained *disembedded* from the film's action, and its effect rather obtrusive and 'incredible'.

However, in the case of the voice-over in *The Thin Red Line*, as chapter 6 of the thesis attempts to show, although the crucially unclear meaning (as well as the inherently and pronouncedly fictional status) of the device *also* disembed the latter from the action, it is *this very disembeddedness* that acquires a specific significance and a consistent function within the film. Thus, despite the fact that, in a strict sense, the

‘credibility’ of the voice-over (in Perkins’ terms) is unsettled (since the device becomes untied from its situational context),¹⁹⁰ the device essentially contributes to the strength and the efficacy of a film’s ‘internal logic’, and so remains aligned with Perkins’ requirement of the ‘inner consistency’ of a film’s fictional world (the relation of *The Thin Red Line* to Perkins’ conception of coherence is, thus, structured in a way that is similar to *Ordet*’s relation to Perkins’ conception of coherence).

As chapter 6 attempts to demonstrate, the voice-over’s apparently inscrutable metaphysical questions about ‘war’ or ‘evil’ do not need to be understood as pompous or ‘faux’ intellectual questions only abstractly related to basic themes of the film. Rather, these questions can be understood as stupefied and overwhelmed responses to the intransigent experience of war. The affective and expressive character of the voice-over’s contemplation, though, is to be understood as particularly idiosyncratic. The voice-over does not express the subjective experience of war of particular characters but rather alludes to an amalgamation of multiple subjective experiences. In other words, the voice-over forges a plane of inter-subjective experience that synthesises the characters’ diverse experiences into an unstable and ever more inclusive point of view. This is achieved through the perceptual characteristics of the voice-over (the variable or indeterminable texture of the voices), through the film’s strategies of inflecting and unsettling the ‘typical’ functions of the voice-over (for example, Witt’s oblique and ‘de-subjectivised’ interior monologues) and, finally, through the close collaboration of the voice-over with the film’s image (for example, the indeterminate point of view of the image or the fluid framing during the soldiers’

¹⁹⁰ By referring to the ‘strict sense’ of ‘credibility’, I mean here the more ‘descriptive’ aspect of Perkins’ notion of ‘credibility’. As has become evident, Perkins construes his notion of credibility in terms of a balance between the more ‘descriptive’, ‘informational’ and the more ‘formal’ function of a device in a given film.

walk in the forest, encompassing the presence of many different characters and, thus, functioning analogously to the voice-over).

The indefinitely expansive and uncertain point of view of the film ultimately creates an ‘unreliable’ form of narration – to use Wilson’s terms – that consistently challenges the intelligibility of the film. The film’s ‘unreliability’ is sometimes geared towards challenging an apparently predominant line of the film’s intelligibility (as it does in the case of the supposed ‘Witt’s’ voice-overs which, against the usual understanding of the film, do not belong to Witt exclusively). But, this ‘unreliability’ also becomes more pervasive. It can be described, crucially, as possessing a more diffuse and penetrating effect, creating a radical confusion in the film, unsettling any clear line of intelligibility, as far as the point of view of the film is concerned. And, this uncrystallised and obscure point of view meticulously forged throughout *The Thin Red Line*, ultimately becomes pivotal in terms of introducing the affective, ‘pre-reflective’ understanding of the film analysed in chapter 6.

The discussion of the individual films above has allowed the thesis to investigate how each of these films has managed to transform its obscurities, tensions or explanatory gaps into crucial aspects of a pliable, expansive or variegated coherence. The thesis has attempted to analyse, more specifically, the structural principles, as well as the variety of formal strategies, through which each film has rendered this possible. It has attempted to show that, despite the fact that each film exposes and renders salient its obscurities, tensions or explanatory gaps, it still manages to identify (unusual) forms of relatedness and interactions between its parts that allow us to discover the film’s complex patterns of intelligibility. Throughout its analyses, the thesis has tried to appreciate the multifaceted and versatile organisation characterising each examined

film, while, at the same time, repeatedly acknowledging and underlining the importance of matters pertaining to the coherence of this organisation.

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