



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

# SYDNEY STUDIES in ENGLISH

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
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Volume 42, 2016

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*Sydney Studies in English* is published annually, concentrating on criticism and scholarship in English literature, drama and cinema. It aims to provide a forum for critical, scholarly and applied theoretical analysis of text, and seeks to balance the complexities of the discipline with the need to remain accessible to the wide audience of teachers and students of English both inside and outside the university.

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## **Camera Stylo: Intersections in Literature and Cinema**

In 2015 the first Camera Stylo: Intersections in Literature and Cinema conference was held at Sydney University. The title comes from Alexandre Astruc's seminal 1947 essay on the scriptive powers of the movie camera and invites consideration of the theoretical and critical possibilities generated by speculating upon the intersections between literature and the literary imagination and film and the cinematic imagination.

The conference brought together scholars from around the world to share their ideas and perspectives on this area of growing critical interest. *Sydney Studies in English* was a sponsor of the conference and this volume offers a selection of work presented at or arising from it. Future volumes of *Sydney Studies in English* will be planned around future Camera Stylo conferences, to be held on a biannual basis, and also around events sponsored by the Sydney Literature and Cinema Research Network, a cross-institutional association of interested scholars organised in response to the success of the first conference.

If you would like to know more about the Sydney Literature and Cinema Research Network please visit our website at <http://www.sydneyliteraturecinemanetwork.org/>, where you can also find information about the second Camera Stylo: Intersections in Literature and Cinema conference, which will be held in July 2017.

David Kelly

# *The Silences*: Process, Structure and the Development of a Personal Essay Documentary

MARGOT NASH

## **Introduction**

*The Silences* (Nash, 2015) is a feature-length personal essay documentary about the tangled bonds, secret histories and unspoken traumas of family life that stretches from New Zealand to the Australian suburbs. It is an exploration of early childhood and the ‘silences’ of the past that resonate in the present. It is a film about family secrets and the ties of love, loss and kinship between a mother and daughter. The literary tradition of the family memoir is well established and, according to Jonathan Letham, ‘One can easily argue that works of literature, which have focused the memory of the individual in subjective ways, are sufficient in number and quality to compose a genre in its own.’<sup>1</sup> In the cinema the essay documentary, whose origins lie in the literary essay, is both well established and a genre in its own, but essay films are not necessarily subjective individual works of memory. Michael Renov argues the subjective was in fact shunned in documentary cinema until the 1970s when a ‘new subjectivity’ emerged out of the social movements of the time, giving rise to ‘work by women and men of diverse cultural backgrounds in which the representation of the historical world is inextricably bound up with self-inscription.’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Letham *The Vintage Book of Amnesia* (Vintage Books, 2000), as quoted in Memory Studies '16 / Interdisciplinary Conference on Memory and the Past ‘Call for Papers’ September 2-3, 2016 Istanbul

<http://www.dakamconferences.org/#!memory/oy7tf> viewed July 18, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Renov, ‘New subjectivities: Documentary and Self-Representation in the Post-Verite Age,’ in *Feminism and Documentary* ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.88.

This article explores the creative development of a personal essay family memoir. I have taken *The Silences* as a case study because it investigates the gaps and silences in my own family history and because, when constructing it, I decided to put ideas about creativity that I had been researching into practice. In 2013 I wrote an article called *Unknown Spaces and Uncertainty in Film Development*.<sup>3</sup> In this article I advocated a discovery-driven creative development process as opposed to a market-driven one. I argued that many creative writers and artists advocate an uncertain exploration of the unknown when developing new work. Yet this approach is at odds with the risk-averse film development agencies and their quest for formulas and certainty in an uncertain marketplace. In developing *The Silences* I chose to work outside the conventional film funding systems and engage in a long, slow, discovery-driven process. I wanted to investigate the repressed narratives of mental illness and abandonment in my family, explore the power of subjectivity in challenging fixed notions of history and test my argument that it is within the 'interplay of discipline and spontaneity, of the known and the unknown, of logic and intuition, that creativity lies'.<sup>4</sup> It was an experiment, made possible during early development by a 14-week Filmmaker Residency at Zürich University of the Arts in 2012.

In unfolding my process, I share the challenge of a story that resisted a linear chronological structure and instead required a non-linear elliptical structure in order to break chronology and create subtext, mystery and suspense. I argue that searching for the key that might unlock the story meant experimenting with form and cinematic language; 'writing' with images, as well as words, in order to find new ways to speak into the silences lying hidden within history. Adrian Martin argues that 'Film and TV profoundly complicate the literary genre of the family memoir. Because film demands things to be seen, that can be recorded...'<sup>5</sup> How do filmmakers represent the past if the gaps and silences in history have been buried so deeply they leave little trace behind?

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<sup>3</sup> Margot Nash, 'Unknown spaces and uncertainty in film development,' *Journal of Screenwriting* 4: 2, (2013), 149–162.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Call Her Mum: Margot Nash's *The Silences*,' *The Lifted Brow* 28 April 2016, <http://theliftedbrow.com/post/143500197415/call-her-mum-margot-nashs-the-silences-by>

## Questioning

*What is the past? If it happened, does it still live anywhere? Is it gone after it happens? Does anything keep it? Was memory stored in the underspace?*

Sophie Laguna<sup>6</sup>

How can I speak about the past? I could talk for hours about what happened, but how can I 'speak' so my story might dislodge discarded memories still crouching in dark cupboards, in silences that threaten to explode and in half-heard whispers as family stories skip like stones across the truth. For what is truth to a child? And how does a child remember, so that later, when it is old, these spectral traces might rise up and help make sense of the chaos? And if they do, how can we trust them? Can you trust my story? Does it matter if you don't? I am sure it will be my truth, or a good attempt at it, but will it dislodge your truth and loosen your tongue? Or will you shut the door again and be sensible and get on with your life?

## Exploring

A creative exploration of the gaps and silences in my family history meant questioning the known, tracing elusive shadows back through the fragile archives, sifting the detritus that survived culling and downsizing as old age approached, and valuing the memories however unreliable (for they also tell a story).

*What does the past tell us? In and of itself it tells us nothing. We have to be listening first before it says a word, and even then listening means telling and retelling.*

Margaret Atwood<sup>7</sup>

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* Walter Benjamin suggests:

where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions [...] A historical materialist recognizes the sign of a

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<sup>6</sup> Sophie Laguna, *The Eye of the Sheep* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction,' *American Historical Review* 103, no. 5 (1998), 15.

Messianic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance to fight for the oppressed past.<sup>8</sup>

Feminist documentary filmmakers have excavated the oppressed past telling and retelling history to include rather than exclude women. They have 'shown the unshown' by portraying the lives of ordinary women.<sup>9</sup> At times personal and self-referential, these films have spoken 'the lives and desires of the many who have lived outside "the boundaries of cultural knowledge,"' and in so doing have 'challenged the "symptomatic silence of the empowered" where self reference was shunned'.<sup>10</sup> Feminist filmmaker and academic Michelle Citron argues that autobiography bears witness to the untidy and contradictory nature of our lives and, in so doing, 'risks exposing that which culture wants silenced'.<sup>11</sup> Could this silencing of 'other' narratives so at odds with the desires and needs of power stem not just from a profound lack of interest on the part of those who hold power, but also from a deep-seated fear (and hatred) of the unknown and the uncertain?

Embarking on a discovery-driven process meant embracing what Keats called 'Negative Capability', that is, when one 'is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'<sup>12</sup> It means what Susan Dermody calls the ability to 'brood' which is an 'inward process and a feminine term of thought.'<sup>13</sup> If you are 'brooding' she suggests:

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations*, ed Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (London: Fontana Press, 1973), p.263.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Lesage, *The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film*, reprinted in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), referenced in introduction to 'Innovative (Auto)biographies' in *Feminism and Documentary* ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.269.

<sup>10</sup> Renov, 'New Subjectivities,' p.94.

<sup>11</sup> Citron, M. 'Fleeing from Documentary: Autobiographical Film/Video and the "Ethics of Responsibility"' in *Feminism and Documentary* ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp.271, 273.

<sup>12</sup> John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p.72.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Dermody, 'The Pressure of the Unconscious upon the Image: the subjective voice in documentary,' in *Fields of Vision: essays in film studies, visual anthropology and photography*, ed Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.292.

you are sitting with something, suspending thought, and letting something not really in your grasp come to its time. [...] Writing is a brooding process, a suspended thinking towards, and it often eludes the active will.<sup>14</sup>

Taking time to solve problems means giving space for the unconscious to do its work. For the brain wrestles with seemingly unsolvable problems when we are asleep or half awake. Faced with implacable rigidity it will crawl away and hide or return with a vengeance to disturb us with dreams and accidents and slips of the tongue. How can we embrace this uncertain space, which is so unconditional in its demands?

The alchemical space where ideas are dismembered and allowed to ferment is full of putrescence, darkness and fear. It is a space that those who engage in creative practice know well, for it is a space where the repressed return—where our most forbidden and destructive desires are given space to break-down and re-form—where new connections and patterns are discovered. It is from this dark place that new ideas emerge fully formed and enter the light of day.<sup>15</sup>

Surfacing from this 'dark place' requires the ability to grasp ideas before they fade, to value them and work critically with them, to question, listen, edit, restructure and if necessary abandon. This is the dance.

## Writing

*Only writing is stronger than the mother.*

Marguerite Duras<sup>16</sup>

*The Silences* is a film about an 'ordinary woman' who took her secrets to the grave, but who left behind clues, whose 'grief lay unspoken in the silences in the house where it festered and became bitter and cold,'<sup>17</sup> who 'couldn't think about her life.'<sup>18</sup> It is a film about my mother. It was

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<sup>14</sup> Dermody, 'The Pressure of the Unconscious,' p.293.

<sup>15</sup> Nash, 'Unknown Spaces,' 160.

<sup>16</sup> Marguerite Duras, 'Entretien avec Bernard Pivot' *Apostrophes*, *Antenne 2*: 28 September 1984.

<sup>17</sup> Margot Nash, *The Silences*, 'Narration' (2014).

<sup>18</sup> Diana Nash, *The Silences*, soundtrack (Oral history interview 6 July 2011).

constructed in the editing room over a two-and-a-half year period without a written script as map or guide. It was 'written' with images and words, which cross-referenced and informed each other. The first-person narration, which I wrote and performed, was written and rewritten, recorded and rerecorded, as the film was structured and restructured. While it is not unusual for a documentary to be constructed in the editing room, few filmmakers have the luxury of embarking on a long, slow, discovery-driven process like this without a script. Based on his track record of delivering distinctive films on modest budgets and taking into account the exigencies of working with Indigenous people from remote areas, Dutch/Australian filmmaker Rolf de Heer has managed to finance some films on the basis of slim treatments, but he is the exception not the rule.<sup>19</sup> Investors want a script that promises certainty before committing funds.

In 2003 I received script development funding from the then New South Wales Film and Television Office<sup>20</sup> to write a fictional feature film screenplay called *My Mother Eve*. It was inspired by my conflicted relationship with my mother and also by my life as a young actress in Melbourne in the 1970s. It was a big budget period drama and while I had directed two feature dramas, which had been critically acclaimed, they were independent art house films and raising the money for the new film proved difficult. I also had a full-time job at the university and it was hard to find time to focus on a project of this size. I tried to put it aside, but the story wouldn't leave me alone. I began to wonder if it could be reimagined as a low-budget compilation documentary. I had a background as a film editor and digital editing software was now making it possible to edit on a laptop at home without having to pay for expensive facilities, but I wasn't sure if I had enough materials to make a film. There were no home movies although there was a wealth of family photographs, as my father had been a keen photographer and my mother had kept a number of photograph albums of her early life. I also had some documentary video footage I had shot over a seven-year period on various small cameras, a three hour oral history I had recorded with my sister while researching a chapter for a book on memory and suburbia,<sup>21</sup> an audio cassette I had recorded with my mother in the 1980s and a large plastic bag full of my parent's letters, which my sister kept somewhere in the back of a cupboard. I also had

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<sup>19</sup> *The Tracker* (De Heer, 2002) was financed on the basis of a 10 page treatment.

<sup>20</sup> The New South Wales Film and Television Office is now known as Screen NSW.

<sup>21</sup> Margot Nash 'The First House and The Hop Farm' in *Locating suburbia: memory, place creativity*, ed Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton (UTS e Press, 2013), pp.31—50, <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/books/locating-suburbia>.

family photographs that I had taken and a few taken by professional photographers.



Fig 1. *The Silences* Ethel and Margot (detail) from *Our mums and us* series. 1976. Photograph: Ponch Hawkes.

Then I remembered my films and how I had drawn on my childhood experiences to create images to tell other kinds of stories; how I had, at times, based fictional characters on family members and literally recreated images from my childhood. This was the turning point, when I realised I might have a film after all, for these images and sounds (which were of a high quality) could now be repurposed as archival material to help tell a repressed family story that had been sitting under the surface of the original films all along.

Perhaps constructing these images had been a way to keep the past alive, drawing me back into memory so I could chew over its repetitions and desires.

*We are our stories. We tell them to stay alive or keep alive  
those who only live now in the telling.*

Niall Williams<sup>22</sup>

In 2012 I successfully applied for a 14-week Filmmaker Residency at Zürich University of the Arts. The residency offered a clear space to work on a creative project without the pressure to produce a completed work at the end. I embraced it as an opportunity to put my ideas about creative uncertainty into practice and step into the unknown. Gathering everything I thought I might need, I made digital scans of key family photographs, digitized most of my films, packed books and articles and set off to the other side of the world without a script as map or guide. Once there I immersed myself in the materials, drawing inspiration from literature, cinema, film theory, memory studies and psychoanalytic theory.



Fig 2. *The Silences* Ethel, Margot and Bill Nash c 1961  
(Nash family collection)

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<sup>22</sup> Niall Williams, *History of the Rain* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.3.

I was inspired by Australian avant garde filmmaker Corinne Cantrill's 1986 *In This Life's Body*, which is constructed almost entirely from family photographs and traces the life of the filmmaker as she faces a cancer diagnosis; Canadian filmmaker Claire Poirier's 1997 personal essay documentary *Tu as crié Let Me Go*, about her search for answers after her daughter's violent murder; and Australian filmmaker and academic Jeni Thornley's 1978 personal essay documentary *Maidens*, which traces the historical narrative of her maternal family and juxtaposes this with her embrace of feminism. I taught myself Final Cut ProX editing software, drew a deep breath and jumped in.

In his book *The Secret Language of Film* French screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière claims 'In the early days, cinema wrote before it knew how to write, before it even knew it was writing.'<sup>23</sup> However,

[a]n authentically new language did not emerge until filmmakers started to break the film up into successive scenes, until the birth of montage, of editing. [...] In the heat of its own implementation, this seemingly simple technique generated a vocabulary and grammar of unbelievable diversity. No other medium can boast such a process.<sup>24</sup>

Carrière gives a simple example. A man looks out of a window followed by a shot of a woman and a man embracing on the street below. This juxtaposition of shots tells us that this is what the man is seeing, but this was not immediately apparent in the early days of cinema where a man with a stick, called The Explicator, would point at the screen and tell the audience what was happening. If the shot of the lovers is followed by the man's angry face, could this be his wife with another man? If instead we cut to him crying could this be a memory of him with his wife, who has just died? These simple juxtapositions of images utilise the secret language of film, offering audiences opportunities to become active, making spatial connections and participating in the 'writing' of the film through testing their opinions in the gaps between the frames.

I started to work with the materials I had gathered, searching for openings where Carrière's 'secret language' might lead me in different directions to those I might have imagined writing a script. There is a short

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<sup>23</sup> Jean Claude Carrière *The Secret Language of Film*, trans. Jeremy Leggart (New York: Pantheon, 1994) p.22.

<sup>24</sup> Carrière *The Secret Language*, pp.8,9.

trailer for *The Silences*, which can be viewed on Vimeo,<sup>25</sup> where a woman picks up a postcard from the detritus she has discovered in her mother's kitchen drawer and gazes at it. This is followed by an image of a little girl on a tricycle in a dreamlike wasteland. The two images are from different films, yet cinema's 'secret language' connects them and the little girl becomes what the character is 'seeing' in her mind's eye. Is this her memory or is it an imagination: a dreamlike metaphor for what she experienced in the past?

I found myself excited by new visual connections that were starting to emerge in the editing room and by the 'voice' that was emerging as I wrote the narration and constructed visual sequences. I started weaving still photographs, actuality footage and archival clips from films where I had drawn on my childhood memories to create images, but I soon realised there were other images in the films; less obvious images that had an unconscious element that could now be reclaimed and reimagined. During the process of editing I went back through my films again and again, often at the urging of others, listening and searching my own creative history for moments that could be understood in new ways and reused in the service of the new story. It was surprising how many I found. I wanted to evoke the experiences of early childhood and had constructed a number of images from a child's point of view. I had even created a character called 'The Child' in my short experimental film *Shadow Panic* (Nash 1989). In creating this character I believed she was a facet of myself, but as I began to use images of her in *The Silences* I slowly realised she had also been standing in for another little girl. Back in 1989 my unconscious had created a character that may well have been based on my childhood memories, but she didn't look anything like me. This little girl was a tragic family secret, rarely discussed when I was growing up. Her story and the story of my father's mental illness were the two secrets I wanted to 'speak' in *The Silences*.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://vimeo.com/108751599>



Fig 3. *The Silences*: Elizabeth Cook as The Child from *Shadow Panic* (Nash, 1989). Photograph: Corrie Ancone.

In my feature drama *Vacant Possession* (Nash 1994) I made the character of the father a paranoid scientist like my own father was. I recreated scenes from my childhood and constructed images that spoke to the fear I had experienced as a child when my father was ill. Using these images, intercut with family photographs, I constructed a sequence for the new film that seemed to fall out, almost fully formed. I called it 'The Nightmare'.



Fig 4. *The Silences*: John Stanton as The Father from *Vacant Possession* (Nash, 1994). Photograph: Corrie Ancone.

Working quickly and intuitively it was as if the films were ‘speaking’ to each other. For example, I suddenly noticed that I had used the same earrings in two different films. In *The Silences* we see a close shot of a woman’s hand (from *Vacant Possession*) picking up an earring from a jewellery box and there is a seamless transition to a shot where The Mother in *Shadow Panic* puts the same earring on. It was surprising how easily these two films could be edited together even though they were shot by different cinematographers and were made five years apart. I cannot

imagine finding connections like this sitting at the computer writing a script. These cinematic connections were tremendously exciting to discover and I constructed a number of sequences during this early anarchic phase that have barely changed over the years. They have been polished and moved around, but they became solid building blocks that I continued to work with.

The structure that emerged from this phase was, however, problematic and proved to be a major challenge. The first 'rough cut', produced in Zurich, was overly influenced by the pattern of telling history as events following one after another: this happens and then that happens, rather than cause and effect. I had researched my ancestors looking for patterns, but the film had sections that were starting to feel like the television series '*Who do you think you are*'. Showing this early 'rough cut' to colleagues and family on my return, and hearing their comments, I could clearly see the dead hand of chronology, but didn't know how to fix it. Searching my family history had been fascinating, but my colleagues had no interest in great Uncle Frank who had sailed the seven seas or my ancestor Thomas Watson who erected a number of statues of Captain Cook around Sydney. It also became apparent that the narratives of men, in particular my father's experiences during World War 2, were dominating the fragile traces of the maternal narrative during the same period. Here was a silence, a gap in the records that gave pause for thought. Here was Benjamin's 'configuration pregnant with tensions' where the untidy and contradictory story of my mother's life during World War 2 had been repressed and had fallen outside 'the boundaries of cultural knowledge.'<sup>26</sup> Here was the heart of the story lying hidden in the silences. I remembered the plastic bag, which contained letters my father had written to my mother during World War 2. I resolved to ask my sister for them and read them.

I kept working on the film and showed it to other colleagues at key moments for feedback. A number of people commented on how absent I was from the story, even though my voice narrated the film in the first person. They wanted to know how the story had affected me and why I wanted to tell it. I had chosen to make a personal, subjective essay documentary, but I was giving away very little of myself. Had I internalised the narrative of the 'empowered where 'self-reference was shunned'? Would I be shunned if I spoke? How much could I tell and still feel safe? How hard it is to break the patterns of silence that sustain power,

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<sup>26</sup> Renov, 'New Subjectivities,' pp.84, 94.

to challenge the narratives of history and speak the mess that lies beneath. Renov argues that the subjective is 'the filter through which the Real enters discourse as well as a kind of experiential compass guiding the work towards its goal as embodied knowledge.'<sup>27</sup> I needed to speak the subjective mess if I wanted the Real to enter. I also needed to find a new structure. My intuition had delivered, but it had not offered up a coherent structure, nor had it alerted me to how much I had internalised the narratives of power. I needed to move into a more analytical phase in order to balance the free fall into the unknown I had allowed myself. I now wanted to find the balance between discipline and spontaneity, the known and the unknown, passion and reason where, I had argued, creativity lies.

Although screenwriting is my field, up until this point I had ignored the classic three act structural paradigm. I realized I had to go back and lay it across the film as a template and see if it could help. Clearly there was a first and a third act, but it was the pesky second act that was causing me grief. In his book *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach*,<sup>28</sup> Paul Gulino argues that most feature length films are made up of eight sequences: two in the first act, four in the second and two in the third. I broke the film into eight sequences, which showed me exactly where the second act problems were, but it didn't help me to fix them. The film lacked suspense and while I had experimented with moving backwards and forwards in time, parts of the second act were still driven by the dead hand of chronology. I knew the film needed shaking up, but how?

I employed a script consultant who immediately suggested I straighten the whole thing out and tell the story chronologically. My heart sank. I had always wanted the audience to discover the secret of The Child when I did, which was when I was about five. Telling the story chronologically meant the audience would find out before I did. It would also mean letting go of some of the cinematic and thematic transitions I had had such pleasure in crafting. I knew I was attached and needed to let go of attachment, so I gave it a go. It was a disaster. The film became slow and plodding and devoid of any suspense or subtext. I went back to the drawing board, but rather than jumping in again I put the film aside and 'brooded'.

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<sup>27</sup> Renov, 'New Subjectivities,' p.88.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Joseph Gulino, *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach: the hidden structure of successful screenplays* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p.2.

## Brooding and Photography

The film contains well over a hundred still photographs. The majority are family photographs. Each one had to be selected, digitised and in some cases Photoshopped in order to remove the marks of age and neglect that were threatening to overshadow the original image. Like housework, this cleaning process can take many hours and, as I worked, I found myself meditating on the nature of photography and 'brooding' about structure, history and death, for so often the photographs were of the dead. This close reworking of an historical artefact draws the eye to the minutiae, which are so often missed, particularly as some of the photographs were very small. Digital technology allows for high-resolution copies to be made, capable of being projected onto a large cinema screen. So, while revealing details hidden for years, they can also reveal the hand of the filmmaker if the work is not skilled enough. I worked on some of the photographs many times until I was satisfied. New worlds opened up and time stopped still. But how much should be cleaned off in order to be able to see the photograph clearly and how much should be left so they still retained the patina of history? At times I cleaned the photographs up too much and had to discard them. Although photographs are usually only on screen for a short period of time, I began experimenting with allowing some to remain for extended periods of time, allowing the audience to brood. I also began using the editing software to move across the photographs, to create motion and draw the eye to details.

In his book *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes discusses the idea of the 'punctum' in photography.

It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me. [...] this wound this prick this mark [...] also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely these marks, these wounds are so many *points*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), pp.26, 27.

'Punctum' from the Latin also means: sting, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. For Barthes 'A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.<sup>30</sup>



Fig 5. Original photograph Ethel and Diana Nash 1946 (Nash family collection).

I initially overlooked this fragile photograph of my mother holding my newly born sister Diana because of its poor quality, but one day I picked it up and looked at it again. There was something so translucent and wounded in it that it reached out and touched me, so I Photoshopped the distracting marks out, but deliberately left many of the marks still on it. My mother had always said that she had prepared to die when she went into hospital to have my sister, but as soon as they put Diana in her arms it gave her a reason to live. The *punctum* in this photograph is the curve, the touch of the baby's soft cheek against my mother's re-connecting her to life.

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<sup>30</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.27.



Fig 6. *The Silences* Ethel and Diana Nash 1946 Photoshopped (Nash family collection).

In her article 'A Journey Through Memory', Annette Kuhn claims 'Images are just as much productions of meanings as words, even if the 'language' is different'.<sup>31</sup>

photographs may 'speak' silence, absence and contradiction as much as, indeed more than, presence, truth or authenticity; and ... while in the production of memory they might often repress this knowledge, photographs can also be used as a means of questioning identities and memories and generating new ones.<sup>32</sup>

This studio portrait of my father in his New Zealand air force uniform, taken just before he went to WW2, is literally punctuated and speckled with wounds. I spent hours Photoshopping it, cleaning away the mould and

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<sup>31</sup> Annette Kuhn, 'A Journey Through Memory,' in *Memory and Methodology*, ed Susannah Radstone (Oxford ; New York : Berg, 2000), p.182.

<sup>32</sup> Kuhn A 'Journey Through Memory,' p.184.

decay, reconstructing what I could and meditating on my father's war story and his illness.



Fig 7. Original photograph Bill Nash c 1941 (Nash family collection).



Fig 8. *The Silences* Bill Nash c 1942 Photoshopped (Nash family collection).

The *punctum* in this photograph is the outline around my father's lips, which looks like make up. I have the same cupid's bow mouth he had and at first I thought I must have drawn on the photograph in pencil as a child as I often did things like this, but it doesn't rub off. Perhaps it was make up, but it is more likely to be the childish outline of my pen or pencil, tracing my father's lips, making my connection to him indelible, tracing my lineage back through what my mother called the Nash mouth.

These two photographs of my parents, taken before I was born, testify to the performative nature of photography; testify to the 'face' or mask that is put on for the camera as if by smiling or putting on a uniform a record might be left that erases the shock of the Real.

Although the photograph registers the 'real' which is in front of the camera, the Real which punctuates the picture (the punctum) is always seen through the screen of the

Imaginary...In many ways the *punctum* is like the trauma of the Lacanian Real.<sup>33</sup>

Like Barthes' personal narrative in *Camera Lucida* where he 'searches for a particular essence or uniqueness in a photograph of his recently deceased mother,'<sup>34</sup> *The Silences* is a mourning project which engages with the loss associated with the (Lacanian) 'mirror phase whilst exploring the disappearance of the subject of the gaze.'<sup>35</sup>

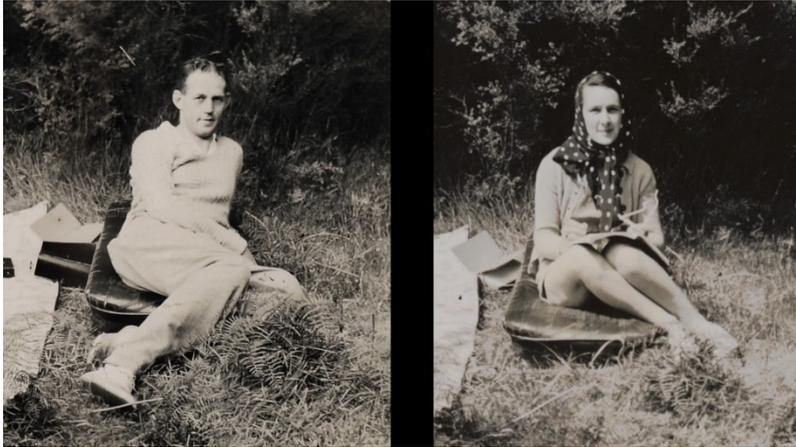


Fig 9. *The Silences* (screen shot) my parents: Bill and Ethel Nash c 1937 (Nash family collection).

*'I search their faces. What can photographs tell us about the heart, about desire, about longing?'*

Margot Nash, *The Silences*<sup>36</sup>

Then I read the letters, or some of them. My mother's letters sent to her father while she was travelling in Europe and India as a young woman told the story of the dashing British army officer, stationed in India during the Raj, who had broken her heart. We had grown up on this romantic story,

<sup>33</sup> Anne Marsh, *The Dark Room: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 2003), pp.94, 95.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p.95.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p.95.

<sup>36</sup> Nash, *The Silences*, 'Narration' (2014).

but then we found a draft of a letter she had written to him that exploded the myths of grandeur she had perpetuated. It carried the 'shock of the Real' as did my father's letters to my mother, sent from London not long after I was born, which told another side of the narrative I had grown up with about my birth.

*'His letters had an emotional intelligence my mother couldn't respond to at the time, yet she kept these letters. Perhaps she went back and read them again when she was older. He threw hers away.'*

Margot Nash, *The Silences* <sup>37</sup>

## Restructuring

In 2014 I went to the Screenwriting Research Network conference in Wisconsin where the American Screenwriter, Larry Gross, gave a Keynote address called *The Watergate Theory of Screenwriting*. The title was inspired by the 1970s Watergate scandal that brought down President Nixon and refers to the key questions that were asked at the time: 'What did the president know and when did he know it?' Translated into screenwriting: 'what do the characters know—about narrative context, about themselves, and about each other, and when do they know it?' <sup>38</sup> Gross argues 'cinematic language works as a question of information, a confidence game played with and for the audience...deploying information.' <sup>39</sup> He used Kurosawa's 1952 film *Ikiru* (To Live) as a case study. In the opening sequence we see an x-ray showing the cancer that will eventually take the protagonist's, Mr. Watanabe's, life, but when we meet Mr. Watanabe, he is unaware that he is terminally ill. This knowledge that we, the audience, hold but he doesn't draws us in, engaging us and creating suspense. But Kurosawa also 'wants to demonstrate that his interests are located elsewhere. He and his team are also saying that the story of the man's death isn't the whole story.' <sup>40</sup>

I went back to the structure of the film and decided to experiment with letting the audience in on the secret of my father's mental illness in the opening sequence. Up until this point the audience had discovered his

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<sup>37</sup> Nash, *The Silences*, 'Narration' (2014).

<sup>38</sup> Larry Gross, 'The Watergate Theory of Screenwriting,' in *Journal of Screenwriting*, Volume 5, Number 3, 1 September 2014, 313.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 314.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 317.

illness when my mother did, after they were married. This new structure meant the audience knew what was in store for her before she even met my father. This strategy gave the audience privileged knowledge, foreshadowed future events and created suspense. It opened up a space for audiences to become active, to wonder what might happen. But it wasn't the whole story. I still wanted the second secret of *The Child* to be a surprise so I went back to my original plan of the audience finding out when I did around the age of five. In the finished film there is an elision in the chronology at the end of the first act that is thematically linked to the history of mental illness in my father's family. A hand breaks the surface of a rock pool and the narration says: 'Of course as children we knew nothing of all this.' At this point the film jumps forward in time to tell the story of our relocation to Australia from New Zealand in 1950 and the entire narrative of WW2 is skipped over. Later this narrative is told in detail through moving backwards in time. At this point, unfolding the story prisms open a 'silence' where the mess of life had been repressed and, in so doing, answers crucial questions for the audience.

Australian screenwriter Laura Jones talks about searching for the key that might unlock the story.<sup>41</sup> For me the structural decision to disclose the secret of my father's mental illness in the opening of the film unlocked the story, for it foregrounded *theme* rather than chronology as a structuring device. Once this convention was in place the foundations of the film were set and the film could move forwards and backwards thematically, rather than being a slave to the dead hand of chronology with its dull 'this happened and then that happened'.

Later, when I had to break the film into eight chapters for the DVD menus, I thought the chapters would easily align to the eight major sequences, but the exercise proved much more difficult. Exact entry and exit points were necessary and there was a limit of one image and one or two words to describe each chapter. This exercise in brevity revealed the spine or structure of the film as well as its 'bones'.

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<sup>41</sup> Laura Jones, e-mail message to author March 24, 2009, Sydney.

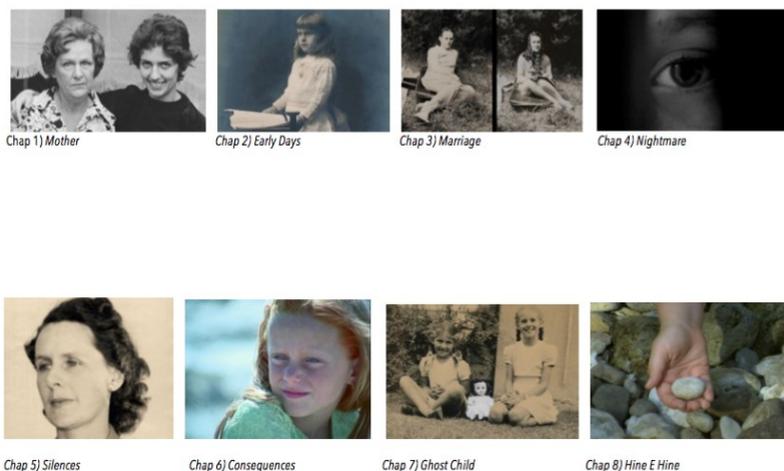


Fig 10. Chapter design for *The Silences* DVD and Bluray menus.

Of the eight images, five are still photographs, two are screen-shots from my previous films and the remaining one is a screen-shot from documentary footage I shot for the film. Of the five still photographs, the first is a detail from a larger photograph by a professional photographer and the other four are family photographs. Two of these have undergone a considerable amount of Photoshopping. The Chapter 2 image of my mother as a little girl, like the war picture of my father, had to be cleaned, as it was so old and damaged. The Chapter 7 image was a Photoshop experiment produced in Zurich during my free fall phase. I still have no idea how I did it.

## Conclusion

The decision to repurpose images from my own cinema as auto-ethnography—images produced to tell different stories—resulted in a subtextual layer where the psychological context in which the earlier films were produced was rendered apparent, allowing the viewer to understand the relationship of creativity to experience. The decision to put a discovery-driven theory of creative development into practice created an initial space to free-fall, allowing new ideas and new connections to form. This process exercised a part of my brain that had been neglected in the above-ground world of knowledge and facts. It revealed things that could not have been

imagined, and written into a script, without physically engaging with the materials. But the tools of script analysis and structure were necessary to discover the film's unique shape, as was the time to 'brood' to open up spaces to question, listen, imagine and wait. What finally emerged was an elliptical, non-chronological thematic structure where the repressed narratives of abandonment and mental illness in my family history were excavated and finally allowed to speak. Here in the elusive interplay of discipline and spontaneity, the known and the unknown, logic and intuition, passion and reason, the real work of creativity occurred. Here, also, in this slow subjective space old memories were challenged and new memories were produced.

### Postscript

*The Silences* was released in selected cinemas nationally in Australia in 2016. It has been nominated for an Australian Writer's Guild AWGIE Award for the screenplay, was a finalist in the 2016 Australian Directors Guild Awards Feature Documentary and the 2015 Australian Teachers of Media Awards Documentary Biography and in 2016 was awarded the Jury Prize for Best Feature at the Reel Sydney Festival of World Cinema. It has screened nationally and internationally at film festivals including the Melbourne International Film Festival, the New Zealand International Film Festival, the American Documentary Film Festival (Amdocs), Adelaide Film Festival, Canberra Film Festival and the Queensland Film Festival. In 2016 the Melbourne Cinémathèque screened *The Silences* as part of a retrospective of Margot Nash's work called *Between Past and Present: the films of Margot Nash*. *The Silences* is distributed by Ronin Films [www.roninfilms.com](http://www.roninfilms.com) See: [www.margotnash.com](http://www.margotnash.com) for further information.

Margot Nash is a practising filmmaker and a Senior Lecturer in the School of Communications at the University of Technology Sydney where she teaches screenwriting. Her research areas are the theory and practice of screenwriting, subtext and the gaps and silences in history. Her film credits include the experimental shorts *We Aim To Please* (1976 co-filmmaker) and *Shadow Panic* (1989), the feature documentary *For Love Or Money* (1983 co-filmmaker) and the feature dramas *Vacant Possession* (1994) and *Call Me Mum* (2005). In 2012 she was the Filmmaker in Residence at

*Sydney Studies*

*'The Silences' and Personal Essay Documentary*

Zürich University of the Arts where she began developing *The Silences*.  
See: <http://www.margotnash.com>

# ‘It Is An Art That Cannot Live By Looking Back’: *Dont Look Back*, Performance, and the Revision of Direct Cinema

KEITH BEATTIE

Alexandre Astruc, in his brief manifesto ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Grade: The Camera Stylo’, emphasized the development of the portable 16mm camera as the essential element of his formulation of the ‘camera as pen’ and the emergent individual filmmaking that he envisioned would blossom from this development.<sup>1</sup> Echoing Astruc’s emphasis on the mobile camera, portable camera and sound recording equipment occupy a privileged place in histories of direct cinema, the mode of observational filmmaking deployed in the US in the late 1950s. Interestingly, a crude technological determinism functions in many such histories, one that argues, in effect, that new portable camera technology created the new form of documentary. Notably in this relation Richard Leacock, one of the founding practitioners of direct cinema and an inventor of the portable camera technology used by many direct cinema practitioners, refused to reduce the development of the form to the new equipment. While he acknowledged that the new camera technology made possible a new mobility in filming, Leacock also recognised that ‘far more was involved [in the development of direct cinema] than the technology of portable equipment.’<sup>2</sup> In this relation, as the film theorist Stella Bruzzi has astutely suggested, ‘perhaps it is the ground-breaking performances in these films and not merely the arrival of

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Astruc, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra Stylo*’, in P. Graham and G. Vincendeau (eds.), *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks* (BFI/Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2009), pp.31-38.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Richard Leacock Remembers the Origins of Direct Cinema’, in *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, K. Macdonald and M. Cousins (eds.) (Faber and Faber: London, rev. ed 2006), p.253.

lightweight cameras that revolutionised documentary.<sup>3</sup> This paper is concerned with the relationship of performance and direct cinema, and the ways in which the foundational premises and extant styles of direct cinema are revised within and through performances within D.A. Pennebaker's landmark direct cinema work *Dont Look Back* (1967), a record of Bob Dylan's concert tour of England in May 1965. The analysis also makes reference to a number of works other than, though in varying ways associated with, *Dont Look Back*.

Significantly, handheld camerawork and varieties of performances align direct cinema and the New American Cinema, an alignment often overlooked within histories of both forms. However, Jonas Mekas, the chief polemicist of the burgeoning 1960s avant-gardist New American Cinema, noted on a number of occasions similarities between the styles and practices of direct cinema and the New American Cinema. Of the range of practices shared by the two cinemas Mekas emphasized the 'shakiness' of handheld cameras and, notably, for Mekas much of the utility of the handheld camera is its ability to effectively capture, if not provoke, improvised performances.<sup>4</sup> The practical emphasis within the New American Cinema on improvised performance was also exploited within nonfictional direct cinema portraits produced during the 1960s. Exemplifying the intersections of direct cinema and the New American Cinema at the point of portraiture are two statements—one by direct cinema's Richard Leacock and one by a filmmaker whom Mekas included within the New American Cinema. In 1963 Leacock proposed a working definition for the kind of documentaries he wanted to make:

A film about a person who is interesting, who is involved in a situation he cares deeply about, which comes to a conclusion within a limited period of time, where we have access to what goes on.<sup>5</sup>

At nearly the exact moment that direct cinema portraits were appearing, another portraitist—Any Warhol—was engaged in a different approach,

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<sup>3</sup> Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge: London, 2000), p.132.

<sup>4</sup> Jonas Mekas, 'A Note on the Shaky Camera', *Film Culture*, issues 24-27, 1962, p.40.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2005), p.29.

though one informed by a similar purpose. In explaining his approach Warhol commented:

I only want to find great people and let them be themselves and talk about what they usually talked about and I'd film them for a certain length of time and that would be the movie.<sup>6</sup>

One context in which Warhol applied his assessment of his film portraits was the so-called Screen Tests: three-minute, black and white, tightly-framed static shots of various subjects. According to one commentator Warhol's portrait films 'turn the performance [of the sitter] into the only event available for recording.' Further, according to this commentator, the Screen Tests 'show a nearly static subject looking at the camera... We have no choice but to look back and confront the performance for what it is—a pose'.<sup>7</sup> *Dont Look Back* partakes of this 'look back', but in this case the viewer has a choice. In *Dont Look Back* we not only look back at a pose, we are also offered certain pleasures associated with watching and hearing a fascinating human subject. In effect, *Dont Look Back* makes available the fun (a word not routinely associated with documentary representation) associated with knowing that the sitter's pose confounds the emphasis on the authentic in theories of documentary performance. As Thomas Waugh points out, documentary film

implies in everyday common-sense parlance the absence of elements of performance, acting, staging, directing, and so forth, criteria that presumably distinguish the documentary form from the narrative fiction film.<sup>8</sup>

However, the documentary tradition from Grierson onwards includes a focus on real people—'social actors' as the film theorist Bill Nichols would have it<sup>9</sup>—who enact themselves and their social roles in front of the camera. This form of performance within documentary film has been summarised in the paradoxical phrase 'acting naturally', and the artificial

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Vinicius Novarro, 'Nonfictional Performance from Portrait Films to the Internet', *Cinema Journal*, no. 3, spring 2012, pp.137, 138.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Waugh, *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2011), p.75.

<sup>9</sup> Nichols uses the term throughout his book *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1991).

code is elaborated in the phrase 'acting to play oneself'.<sup>10</sup> Such a formulation—'acting to play oneself' or performing selfhood—is majorly recast within *Dont Look Back*, a film in which the central subject performatively projects a persona.

A persona has been described as a

public image which derives from the performances and utterances of [a particular] person and is constructed over time in specific ways. There may be only a tenuous connection between the person and the persona.<sup>11</sup>

The tenuous and attenuated link between self and persona and the work involved in constructing a public image and social façade is underlined in the perception by Gilles Deleuze that

[i]ndividuals find a real name for themselves...only through the harshest exercise in depersonalisation, by opening themselves up to the multiplicities everywhere within them, to the intensities running through them.<sup>12</sup>

Pennebaker has said in this relation that Dylan in 1965 was interesting (a favoured word in his discussions of his filmmaking) precisely because of the mystery that attends his charisma.<sup>13</sup> In conceiving his approach to filming his subject Pennebaker attempted to ground Dylan's mystery in a recognisable identity, specifically that of the poet Byron. 'I saw Dylan as a Byronesque pop figure, a guy who was inventing a whole new kind of mood in popular music', Pennebaker has recalled.

Here's this middle-class kid who goes out on the road, hangs out with people, and he becomes or he decides to become a kind of hobo-type character, and with all the romance that

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase 'acting to play oneself' is used as a heading to Chapter Four of Waugh, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Thumim, 'Miss Hepburn is Humanized': The Star Persona of Katherine Hepburn', *Feminist Review*, no. 24, October 1986, p.71.

<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. M. Joughin, (Columbia University Press: New York, 1995), p.6.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (revised and updated by E. Thomson and P. Humphries, Backbeat Books: Milwaukie, 2011), p.208.

carries...and once he's made it, he looks out at everybody and says, 'Fuck you!'.<sup>14</sup>

The disruptive and expressive persona evoked here is one that prominently incorporates the emergent Dylan of rock music. *Dont Look Back* captures Dylan on the cusp of change, at a moment of reinvention when he was leaving folk to adopt rock—the self-styled ‘musical expeditionary’ moving from one genre to another.<sup>15</sup> Dylan further invested the public image informing his new persona with a composure that was demonstrably hip. Pennebaker called the young Dylan ‘very hip, very hip’<sup>16</sup>, and the singer Marianne Faithfull, who appears briefly in *Dont Look Back*, has referred to Dylan at the time of his appearance in the film as the ‘hippest person on earth.’<sup>17</sup> Throughout the film Dylan invests his expression of hip with wit and wile, features that are aligned with a projection of ‘cool’ exhibited in the form of a supercilious nonchalance. By assembling and mixing these and other components of his public image Dylan constructed a shifting changeable persona. The unstable connection between the person and the various guises of the persona is underlined by Pennebaker in his description of *Dont Look Back* as a film about Dylan, ‘whoever that is.’<sup>18</sup> The suggestion here that the persona is rehearsed, as opposed to a revelation of a natural or authentic selfhood, is reinforced in the fact that the action in the film’s prologue in which Dylan performatively projects the persona was staged three times. One version was filmed on the Thames Embankment behind the Savoy Hotel that Dylan used as his base during the 1965 tour and another version was shot the same day on the roof of the Savoy. The selected version was filmed in a cul-de-sac between the Savoy—which appears in the background and to the left of the frame, where it is partially obscured by scaffolding—and the Queen’s Chapel of the Savoy, the brick wall of which appears on the right side of the frame.

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in David Hajdu, *Positively 4<sup>th</sup> Street: The Life and Times of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Mimi Fariña and Richard Fariña* (Bloomsbury: London, 2002), p.249.

<sup>15</sup> Dylan in Martin Scorsese’s televisual biography of Dylan, *No Direction Home* (2005).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Daniel Mark Epstein, *The Ballad of Bob Dylan: A Portrait* (Harper Collins Publishers: New York, 2011), p.142.

<sup>17</sup> Marianne Faithfull, with David Dalton, *Faithfull: An Autobiography* (Cooper Square Press: New York, 1994), p.40.

<sup>18</sup> In the voiceover commentary to his film *65 Revisited*, which was issued on DVD together with *Dont Look Back* as part of the ‘65 Tour Deluxe Edition’ box set released by Sony/BMG in 2006.

The French photographer Tony Frank, who was on assignment for the journal *Salut les Copains*, took a number of shots that day of the location and the action while lying on the ground in front of Dylan during the filming of the sequence. (It is partial measure of Dylan's insouciance that he is able to ignore Frank's presence during filming).



In the sequence Dylan flips through pieces of white cardboard on which are written single words from the lyrics of his song 'Subterranean Homesick Blues', which accompanies the scene. According to many commentators, the mixture of staged action and musical accompaniment in the cue-card sequence constitutes the first music 'clip'. However, the form was not without precedent. The intersection of popular music and visual imagery within tableau-like segments can be traced to the short films that accompanied songs on Scopitones. Dylan had such works firmly in mind when he considered the action that forms the so-called cue-card sequence.<sup>19</sup> Invented in France in the late 1950s, Scopitone jukeboxes permitted a user to watch and hear one of up to thirty-six 16mm short musical films. The films depicted singers or bands performing their latest release, and often

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2008), p.150.

while doing so male musicians were surrounded by bikini-clad female dancers. The tacky attempt at titillation of many Scopitone films led Susan Sontag to include them within the canon of works that she identified in her 1964 essay 'Notes on Camp'.<sup>20</sup> One Scopitone film of this type was that produced to support the song 'I Cried for You', as sung in 1959 by Sonny King, a crooner associated with the Sinatra-led Rat Pack. In the brief Technicolor film made by Harman-ee Productions of Los Angeles, King sings of the women he now rejects and as he does so they 'strip to reveal the song's lyrics stencilled on their bodies.'<sup>21</sup> The (strip) teasing revelation of the lyrics to King's song can be compared to the teasing, piecemeal disclosure of the lyrics to Dylan's song, and the 'materialisation of language'<sup>22</sup> in the Scopitone film functions as a precursor of the manifestation of the lyrics in the prologue to *Dont Look Back*.

Further, in its ironic commentary on the scopic and tonal associations of Scopitone films the prologue rewrites and resists the packaging of identity associated with the form. Dylan is not a pawn in the music industry's game, and his performance in the cue-card segment and throughout *Dont Look Back* outstrips any expectations by the industry that he would continue to replicate the folk music that constituted the original basis of his success. Accordingly, the prologue depicts Dylan unleashing a refashioned identity accompanying his rock music before famously unveiling them for a live audience later in 1965 at the Newport Folk Festival. The result is a portrait of a complex persona that submerges and subsumes subjectivity.

Such a process is in line with the film's method, which does not seek in the manner of an exposé to 'get behind the mask' of the public image or to uncover essential truths, or truths about the essential selfhood of the 'real person'. *Dont Look Back* is, then, grounded in a form of portraiture that implicates both a subject's awareness of, and performance for, the camera. Within this approach the film evokes the pleasures of watching and listening to a fascinating persona. In this way, Dylan's changes—notably his move from folk to rock, and the performative presence through which the transformation in musical genres is actualised and expressed—demanded and resulted in significant changes to the codes and conventions

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp' in *Against Interpretation* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1966).

<sup>21</sup> David James, 'L.A.'s Hipster Cinema', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 1, Fall 2009, p.57.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

of the form of representation known as direct cinema, a filmic practice that Pennebaker had helped to establish.

Among the revisions of direct cinema undertaken by Pennebaker in *Dont Look Back* was his abandonment of the 'crisis structure' that was prominent in the television programs produced by Robert Drew, with whom Pennebaker collaborated for a few years in the early 1960s. Implicit within the so-called crisis structure is the notion that a subject, when confronted with a pressing or critical situation will, due to the demands of the situation, fail to register the presence of a camera. As a result the camera is able to record what are, within the terms of such an assumption, a subject's 'real feelings' and 'true nature'. Attending this theory is the associated assumption that faced with a critical situation a subject has no time for pretence or performance. In this way, as the assumptions and arguments of the crisis structure would have it, a denial of performance is a central component of the revelation of a so-called true or essential self.

Notably, with the cessation of his collaboration with Drew Pennebaker abandoned the crisis structure—and with it the restraints of Drew's televisual, journalistic direct cinema. Nevertheless, in *Dont Look Back* Pennebaker maintained the practice of celebrity portraiture, a common focus of Drew's programs. Portraits of celebrities served a dual function: people in the media spotlight were able to negotiate the demands of being continually filmed, and a well-known subject such as Dylan held the potential to attract a sizeable audience to a work of documentary. However, Pennebaker's portraiture differed from Drew's practice, and the aims of documentary generally, in that Pennebaker did not seek in *Dont Look Back* to provide biographical information about Dylan. In this way Pennebaker shunned the label 'documentary' with its connotations of a tedious informationalism, and in this relation he has said of his work during his association with Drew that 'the idea of a documentary...was anathema.' According to Pennebaker,

[m]ost people look at [*Dont Look Back*] and say it's documentary. It is not documentary at all by my standards. It throws away almost all its information... I broke my neck trying not to be informational... [I was interested in] the mood...not the information.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Keith Beattie and Trent Griffiths (eds.) *D.A. Pennebaker: Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2014), p.33.

In place of a dry documentary informationalism Pennebaker, within a process that turned *Dont Look Back* into a richly entertaining spectacle, acknowledged and accepted that Dylan was performing for the camera. Notably, in this way *Dont Look Back* is not organised around, or intended to pursue putative revelations of the 'essence' of a person, as in the case of the programs produced by Drew. In place of a search for the authenticity of selfhood *Dont Look Back* presents a subject who is, according to Pennebaker, 'enacting his life as he wishes to enact it. Not necessarily as it is, and not necessarily as he wishes it were, but just as he wants to act it.'<sup>24</sup> The outcome of this approach, notes Pennebaker, is a film that is a 'kind of fiction, but its Dylan's fiction, not mine. He makes it up as he goes along.'<sup>25</sup>

Among its other important functions the presence of such a performance within the form of portraiture undertaken in *Dont Look Back* recasts the role of observation as it was defined in Drew's direct cinema. For Drew and his team of direct cinema practitioners in the early 1960s 'observational' filmmaking involved the conceit that the practice of filming does not interfere with or intrude upon the scene being filmed. According to this assumption a cameraperson is, in effect, an all-seeing microscopic presence—a position summarised in the pervasive characterisation of the observational filmmaker as a 'fly-on-the-wall'. In turn, as the theory of unobtrusive observation has it, a result of this practice is (as with the implications of the crisis structure) that a subject does not recognise the presence of the camera that thereby records a subject's unfeigned, 'natural' action.

Pennebaker's filmic practice in *Dont Look Back* is not that of a fly-on-the-wall. (Pennebaker has drawn attention to what is a pejorative assessment of a filmmaker's skill in his comment, 'I never wanted to be a fly on the wall, it's a kind of disgusting idea'.<sup>26</sup>) In fact, the fly-on-the-wall is swatted in *Dont Look Back*. Dylan is, contrary to the theory of the invisible insect, fully aware of the camera. In this way observation is deployed as a style that suggests close physical proximity to subjects, though as Pennebaker's comments on Dylan's performance make clear any sense of intimacy that may accrue to proximity is deferred or rejected

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.103.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Richard Phillips, 'Pennebaker and Hegedus: Seminal Figures in American Documentary Film', *World Socialist Website*, [www.wsws.org](http://www.wsws.org)

within and through a persona projected before the acknowledged presence of the camera. Differences between Pennebaker's practice and the theory of the fly are further indicated in the fact that conspiracy, collusion and collaboration, as opposed to an assumed observational non-interference, characterise the relationship of filmmaker and subject in *Dont Look Back*. In this relation Pennebaker has said that during his first meeting with Dylan and Bob Neuwirth (Dylan's sidekick at the time) 'I recognised instantly that they had the same sense about what they were up to as we did about what we were up to, which was a kind of conspiracy.'<sup>27</sup>

Two specific moments, both of which occur within the context of 'hanging out', exemplify the variety of Dylan's collusively-endorsed performances in the film. 'Hanging out' encompasses everyday experiences on the tour, a process that finds its form in scenes of talking, relaxing, and waiting to perform on stage. As such, hanging out implicates minimal action; it is akin in certain ways to a slice of mid-1970s Altmanesque casual pacing. Interestingly in this regard, in her 1967 film *Portrait of Jason*, a film she interpreted as a reaction to the crisis structure of the Drew-era films of Pennebaker and Leacock, Shirley Clarke deliberately sought to include what she called the 'boring parts.'<sup>28</sup> Ironically, in terms of Clarke's critique, action in *Dont Look Back* is largely eschewed within a focus on hanging out. In certain ways hanging out is comparable to the operation of 'backstage' in Hollywood musicals, a space in which characters relax and interact away from the often fraught moments associated with stage performances. Frequently the narrative function of backstage exchanges and interactions is to reveal intimate insights into characters' experiences and emotions. Various music documentaries have adopted and adapted the conventions of 'backstage', in particular by replaying the notion that the space is one in which subjects, away from the spotlight of the stage, openly and unguardedly reflect on otherwise personal and private matters, thereby, in effect, revealing their essential selves.<sup>29</sup> This process, and the understandings that attend it, does not apply in *Dont Look Back*. Dylan's projection of persona is conducted both on- and off-stage.

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in William Rothman, *Documentary Film Classics* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1997), p.146.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Irene Gustafson, 'Putting Things to the Test: Reconsidering *Portrait of Jason*', *Camera Obscura*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2011, p.12.

<sup>29</sup> Interpretations of 'backstage' in music documentaries have relied heavily on Erving Goffman's interpretation of the concept. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Anchor Books: New York, 1959).

Hanging out between concerts in *Dont Look Back* is downtime, to be filled with various activities, among them a party. The drama of the party scene disrupts, to an extent, the minimal action of hanging out, though the action in the scene remains relatively low key. The party scene in Dylan's suite at the Savoy begins abruptly with Dylan demanding 'who threw the glass in the street?' Assembled guests, unaware that Dylan's question refers to glass shelves that have been thrown out of the bathroom window, are startled by Dylan's outburst. An older bearded man (Derroll Adams, a folksinger and an acquaintance of Jack Kerouac) looks especially anxious and is calmed by a tall, long-haired woman (Anthea Joseph, whom Dylan first met in 1963 at London's Troubadour folk club). Dylan accuses a drunken man of smashing the glass, a charge that leads to a heated argument with the man. Eventually Dylan defuses the argument by shaking hands with the drunk, saying as he does so, 'I didn't want the glass to hurt anybody.' The scene ends and the issue of the broken glass is forgotten as the camera shifts its attention to a conversation between Dylan and Derroll Adams. Finally the question 'who threw the glass?' is not as pertinent as questions regarding the impact on the so-called fight scene of the presence of the camera.

The fact that subjects recognised the camera's presence is exemplified in the case of the folk singer Tom Paxton who was in the room during the altercation. Paxton, wary of the ways in which a camera has the potential to distort events, refused to be filmed. Similarly, members of the Beatles also elected not to be filmed during their visits to Dylan's suite at the Savoy. Like Paxton and the Beatles, Dylan was clearly aware of the camera. Within this context—the ever-present camera, subjects who acknowledge its presence, and the potential of this situation to affect action—the question becomes: does the 'fight' scene depict Dylan losing his otherwise well-maintained cool, or does it reveal, yet again, a consummate performance by Dylan?

That Dylan, during a screening of a rough cut of the near-complete film, asked Pennebaker to remove the scene (a request he subsequently withdrew) might suggest that Dylan had lost his cool during the altercation with the drunk, and that the camera has at this moment captured the unguarded, 'real' Dylan, shorn of pretence, with his defences down. Alternatively, Dylan's request to cut the scene might have referred to his awareness that his performance here—raw and excessive as it is—is not as subtle as his performances in other scenes. Given the proliferation of

Dylan's performative projections of persona within *Dont Look Back* the question concerning the 'fight' scene brings into focus the matter of observation at the core of Pennebaker's filmmaking. Observation in *Dont Look Back* is not a neutral form of recording, but an active process in which subjects respond in varying ways to the presence of the camera—including absenting themselves from the frame, and performing for the camera.

Another scene that highlights issues of performance is one which Pennebaker interprets as an 'incredible scene' that is crucial to the film.<sup>30</sup> The scene takes place in the back seat of a cab that is taking Dylan to his final concert performance. Also in the cab is Fred Perry, who managed both Dylan's tour and a contemporaneous tour by the folk singer Donovan, with whom Dylan maintained a friendly rivalry at the time. Dylan asks how the Donovan tour is going and Perry answers, 'Not so good.' Perry mentions that an agent had asked him,

'What do you think if I book a theatre in Scarborough for a Sunday concert and put on just Donovan...? I said, well, you know, I can't see it for two hours... He said, do you think we should book one other act? I said, I think you should book about four other acts.'

Perry finishes his account by laughing snidely at this situation. After listening to these comments Dylan lights a cigarette, looks out the window and says nothing. According to an effusive Pennebaker this is

'one of the perfect scenes that you fall on... [G]oing in the cab to the Albert Hall, when Fred starts talking about his 'other' folksinger, Donovan,...and then Fred does the trashing of Donovan. And Dylan never cracks. He just looks out the window. Fantastic! It's just fantastic! Just one shot. You didn't have to edit anything; it told you everything.'<sup>31</sup>

William Rothman notes that

Pennebaker is quite shrewd, as usual, in judging this deceptively simple [scene] to be a fantastic triumph of

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Beattie and Griffiths, p.84.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

filmmaking. When Dylan looks out the window without 'cracking'...it does indeed tell us everything. But it tells us everything by telling us nothing. We do not know, cannot say, what this man is thinking or wondering or feeling. Absolutely nothing is being asserted about, or by, the world on film. But absolutely nothing is being denied. Everything is revealed.<sup>32</sup>

The core of the scene for Pennebaker is Dylan's response to Perry's 'trashing' of Donovan. As Pennebaker comments, 'Dylan never cracks. He just looks out the window' and for Pennebaker this moment tells everything. By seemingly not reacting to the conversation about Donovan the persona remained in place. The scene may reveal or show all, though, as Rothman points out, questions remain about what Dylan is 'really' experiencing. If everything is revealed in this scene it is everything about Dylan's persona.

Within and through its focus on the performative projection of persona *Dont Look Back* revises the tradition of direct cinema from which it emerged. Further, via such revisions the film connects with other works in which performance and the inflections of direct cinema and New American cinema intersect. One example of this connection is the films of Norman Mailer. His films—*Wild 90* (1968), *Beyond the Law* (1968), and *Maidstone* (1970)—were almost universally derided on their release. However, his films have since been reappraised, and recently the Harvard Film Archive, for example, referred to them as 'essential [components] of the canon of 1960s American independent cinema.'<sup>33</sup> Mailer was informed by the films of Warhol and John Cassavetes, the latter another director centrally associated by Jonas Mekas with the New American Cinema. Further, Mekas endorsed all of Mailer's films, thereby aligning them with the low-budget, independent cinema he championed. In addition the links between Mailer's films and direct cinema are profound, notably in the fact that Pennebaker shot each of Mailer's films, and in his essay 'A Course on Film-Making' Mailer explicitly equated his films to the aesthetics of direct cinema.<sup>34</sup> Working without a script, Mailer—in his most elaborate film, *Maidstone*—devised a scenario for the film's improvised action centred on

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<sup>32</sup> William Rothman, *Documentary Film Classics* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1997), pp.188-89.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Cinematic Life of Norman Mailer', The Harvard Film Archive, at <http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2007fall/mailer.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Norman Mailer, 'A Course in Film-Making', *New American Review*, no. 12, 1971, pp.200-241.

the character of Norman T. Kingsley (played by Mailer), a film director who is casting a film inspired by Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967). Kingsley is also considering whether to run for President, though he senses a threat of assassination.

Though unlikely, indeed implausible, the scenario reflects the political hysteria of 1968, in particular the assassinations of King and Kennedy. Appearing in almost every scene Mailer plays various characters or personae: Mailer as Kingsley, a thinly-disguised version of the blustering Mailer of public life, and Mailer as himself, in scenes in which he discusses the film with the assembled cast. Questions of reality implicated in each of these performances are underlined in the final scene during which, seemingly, the real interrupts the narrative fiction of the improvised plot. In this scene Rip Torn, playing Kingsley's half-brother, steps out of character and attacks Mailer with a hammer. Mailer referred to *Maidstone* as a 'commando raid on the nature of reality'<sup>35</sup> though the hammer scene, rather than demonstrating the aggressive force of reality, offers another context for Mailer—the well-known author, aspiring New York politician, television personality, film director—to perform.

In a different vein the films of Robert Kramer reconfigure connections apparent in *Dont Look Back* between the New American Cinema, direct cinema, portraiture, and performance. Often overlooked in analyses of US independent cinema, Kramer's films—notably *Ice* (1970) and *Milestones* (1975)—were identified and substantially analyzed in the early 1970s by French theorists and critics as works of the New American Cinema.<sup>36</sup> In another way, the actress and filmmaker Jackie Raynal made the point— one not widely appreciated—that Kramer was a link between French *cinéma vérité* and the New American Cinema, and Kramer's early films for the New Left Newsreel Collective were informed by a handheld, direct cinema aesthetic.<sup>37</sup> Informing these connections, a number of Kramer's later films combined direct cinema and New American Cinema

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Pascal Bonitzer et al, 'Milestones et nous: table-ronde', *Cahiers du Cinema*, no. 258-9, July-August 1975. Reprinted in English in *Cahiers Du Cinema: Volume 4, 1973-1978*, D. Wilson (ed.) (Routledge/BFI: London, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> Pierre Léon, in collaboration with Fernando Ganzo, 'A Conversation with Jackie Raynal', *Cinema Comparative Cinema*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2013, p.32, at [http://www.ocec.eu/cinemascomparativecinema/pdf/cc02\\_eng\\_interview\\_raynal.pdf](http://www.ocec.eu/cinemascomparativecinema/pdf/cc02_eng_interview_raynal.pdf)

styles within works of self-portraiture. While his 1990 video work *Berlin 10/90*, for example, openly incorporates autobiographical reflections, it is in the documentary-based films *Doc's Kingdom* (1988), *Route 1 USA* (1989), and *Dear Doc* (1990) that Kramer fully deploys autobiography, aligning it with portraiture through the character of 'Doc'. In these films the figure of Doc is played by Kramer's Newsreel associate Paul McIsaac, though the figure of Doc combined, as McIsaac has explained, autobiographical elements drawn from the experiences of Kramer, McIsaac, and 'others of our generation.'<sup>38</sup> Doc, then, is the combination of various autobiographies—an idealistic figure that in a series of films personifies aspects of Kramer's past and the collective history of a generation—becoming in the process a complex persona expressive of the Left/liberal '60s' and its legacies.

Found in Kramer's typewriter at the time of his death in Paris was an unfinished letter to Bob Dylan in which Kramer proposed a joint film project:

Not a movie about you, not a documentary or a report, but the two of us, make a movie together over a period of time: pieces of this and that, scenes you imagine... To try to assemble something that is rich and varied. A movie that works like a dream or a vision.<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly, the film Kramer proposed had in effect already been made in the form of *Eat the Document* (1972), the outcome of a collaboration between Dylan and Pennebaker, which was loosely based on Dylan's 1966 world concert tour. Like *Dont Look Back*, the film it echoes, *Eat the Document* is not, as Kramer proposed, a film about Dylan. Like *Dont Look Back*, *Eat the Document* concerns Dylan's persona, in a form that is not a documentary or a report—more a dream or a vision. Dylan further complicated the persona and his association with direct cinema in his film *Renaldo and Clara* (1978), an extension of *Eat the Document* based around Dylan's 1975 Rolling Thunder Review concert tour. Within the film masks, stand-ins, and enacted scenes are continually deployed to evoke questions of 'real' and constructed identities. The complexities of the resultant persona baffled Jonathan Cott during an interview with Dylan for *Rolling Stone* magazine soon after the film's completion. In response to the

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<sup>38</sup> Paul McIsaac, 'Creating Doc', at [http://www.windwalk.net/writing/rk\\_mci.htm](http://www.windwalk.net/writing/rk_mci.htm)

<sup>39</sup> Robert Kramer, 'Letter to Bob Dylan', *Rouge*, at [http://www.rouge.com.au/4/letter\\_dylan.html](http://www.rouge.com.au/4/letter_dylan.html)

question put to Dylan by Cott, 'Who is Bob Dylan, who is Renaldo—and what is the relationship between them?' Dylan replies that

[t]here's Renaldo... There's a guy in whiteface singing on the stage and then there's Ronnie Hawkins playing Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan is listed in the credits as playing Renaldo, yet Ronnie Hawkins is listed as playing Bob Dylan.

When Cott adds that Bob Dylan made the film, Dylan responds, 'Bob Dylan didn't make it. I made it.'<sup>40</sup>

Reference to the examples cited here is not intended to suggest the existence of a canon of films in this vein. Rather, as with Astruc's analysis of the camera-stylo, what is referred to here is a tendency. Specifically, an under-recognised and under-analysed tendency within nonfictional texts in which direct cinema, the New American Cinema, and performances coalesce in varying ways. Astruc aligned the emergent tendency he identified with the avant-garde, a force that, as he said, does not look back. In a similar way Bob Neuwirth, Dylan's friend, described *Dont Look Back* as 'avant garde filmmaking applied to avant garde music.'<sup>41</sup> If we include within this description the performative presence of the film's subject, and the ramifications of that performance for documentary representation, we have informed, exceeded, and revised numerous assumptions concerning the practices of direct cinema, and (perhaps) nonfiction more generally.

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<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Cott, 'Bob Dylan as Filmmaker: "I'm Sure of My Dream Self. I Live in My Dreams"', *Rolling Stone*, January 26, 1978, at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/bob-dylan-as-filmmaker-im-sure-of-my-dream-self-i-live-in-my-dreams-19780126?page=4>

<sup>41</sup> Voiceover commentary to the DVD version of *Dont Look Back* released in 2006 by Sony/BMG.

# The Mirror Shapes the Hand: Re-thinking the Representation of the Auteur in Campion's *Bright Star*

HELEN GORITSAS

Throughout human history the discomfort experienced from the fear of the unknown, an inability to embrace rather than choose between opposites, has been grappled with in storytelling. Ancient Greek tragedies pioneered the use of the 'Ἀπὸ Μηχανῆς θεός' plot device (also commonly referred to as *deus ex machina*, in Latin) for this precise reason. The solution to an unresolvable problem would be addressed by the introduction of a God figure ('θεός', in Greek) either from above the stage via a crane mechanism (the 'machine', 'Μηχανῆ' in Greek) or raised from below the stage via a stage floor opening.<sup>1</sup> Since the ancient Greek tragedies of Euripides, this unexpected plot resolution technique has been employed extensively not only in theatre but also in literature and in film, providing both a false sense of security and a resolution of the inexplicable.

Interestingly, in traversing this very dilemma in a letter to his brothers dated 22nd December 1817, following a discussion between friends, the Romantic poet John Keats committed to writing what he believed to be the origin and nature of artistic creativity:

At once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.<sup>2</sup>

Art, Shakespeare tells us in *Hamlet*, holds a mirror up to nature—human nature—and somehow, through the mysterious alchemy of art, we

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<sup>1</sup> Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p.72.

look at characters like Hamlet and see ourselves.<sup>3</sup> Keats believed that it was precisely this ability to tolerate the burden of mystery which enabled a dialogue between life and art; that behind Shakespeare's genius lay an extraordinary fluidity of being, indistinguishable from the subject he was describing—an ability to somehow obliterate himself and meld empathetically into another form.

This can be further defined as a capacity to free oneself from one's own subjectivity, to suspend judgment and enter the abyss, to become a vessel, permitting of ambiguity, an openness for the paradoxical and incomprehensible depths, accepting of contradictory aspects without the need for certainty. Highlighting the transformative presence of receptivity in great works of art and attuned to changing sensations, Keats intuitively concurred with Heraclitus on the ontological precedence of temporality over permanence.

Developing this inquiry into the importance of passivity, receptivity and the deferment of certainty, in a letter dated October 27, 1818 to his friend Richard Woodhouse, Keats distinguished between what he termed 'poetic character' springing from a state of negative capability and the Wordsworthian or 'egotistical sublime'. He viewed the latter critically as a stand-alone categorical construct of an independent and unalterable private vision, a vision bounded within one's own thoughts, shielding the imagination from all that is. The 'poetic character', by contrast,

is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—it has no character—it enjoys light and shade... It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in[forming]—and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea [;] and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. If then he has no self,

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<sup>3</sup> Claudia Johnson, *Crafting Short Screenplays That Connect*, 2nd ed. (Burlington, Mass: Focal Press, 2005), p.14.

and if I am a Poet, where is the wonder that I should say I would write no more? ... It is a wretched thing to confess; but it is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with people if I am ever free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated—not only among men; it would be the same in a nursery of children.<sup>4</sup>

Keats believed that the mark of all great poetry rested upon a welcome encounter between subjects, that working in opposites intensifies an experience and that an openness of mind involving the negation of one's ego and the cultivation of a state of flow without hindrance points to the mystery and ambiguity of existence. In this outpouring Keats makes the extraordinary confession that not only is knowledge of oneself linked to knowledge of others, but that there can be no such thing as a self without thoughts arising from interactions with others since the self, rather like a projected film, is a result of identification with these thoughts which have been manufactured by the mind. Thus we participate in the world, we are unable to stand outside at a distance, because in experiencing a phenomenon the distinction between subject and object is disrupted, pointing instead to a relationship between the two. In fully accepting the present and entering into relation with one's entire being, duality is extinguished. Such a meeting absorbs and transforms, changing the person in the process. The famous line 'I am Heathcliff'<sup>5</sup>—uttered by Emily Bronte's heroine Cathy in the novel and subsequent film adaptations of the work *Wuthering Heights*—exemplifies such an encounter, reminding the reader that in order to reinstate the dignity of a person we must shatter the illusionary construct of independence.

If negative capability calls for a devastating acknowledgement that one is not and yet at the same time one is, how then can the artist be the creator of a work? In this admission Keats recognises a paradox of creativity: that art is a manifestation of the disappearance of the self in the process of creation. In Keats' estimation a true artist acts as a passage without doing, mirroring reality from moment to moment. He was critical

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (Philadelphia: Courage Books, 1991), p.78.

of a sense of personal identity that was dependent on a preconceived certainty based on duality; rather he encouraged the strengthening of the intellect through a practice of absorbing incongruities and avoiding making up one's mind prematurely, opting instead to let the mind act as 'a thoroughfare for all thoughts and not a select party.'<sup>6</sup> By letting go and emptying the mind of any expectations, agendas, desires and thoughts, being utterly absorbed and in harmony with nature's rhythm, creativity may then take place.

One of the most famous moments in the history of cinema is the camera zoom to freeze frame of the face of Antoine Doinel that ends the debut feature film *The 400 Blows* (1959), written and directed by Francois Truffaut. Truffaut was the filmmaker responsible for originating the *auteur* wedge within the French film industry and *The 400 Blows* is, as Annette Insdorf suggests, reminiscent of the association of opposites which pervades the romantic poetry of John Keats.<sup>7</sup> As Antoine makes his escape, running beyond the confines of the barbed wire fence of his detention toward the wide expanse of the sea, the viewer is simultaneously invigorated and enlarged, revelling with Antoine in the unrestrained liberty of a simple human pleasure, the joy of movement and the rousing eagerness with which he embraces his first contact with the majesty of the sea.<sup>8</sup>



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<sup>6</sup> Forman, *The Letters of John Keats*, p.426.

<sup>7</sup> Annette Insdorf, *François Truffaut*, Rev. and updated ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.176.

<sup>8</sup> John Conomos, 'Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, or the Sea, Antoine, the Sea...', *Senses of Cinema* no. 62 (2000), <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2000/6/francois-truffaut/blows>.

As he hastily turns around his expression is suddenly frozen in motion and he is struck dumb in consummation of this epiphany, activating a sense of self-awareness in the viewer.



The recognition of the strength of a work of art is perhaps its ability to instil such a manifestation in the mind of the spectator, for the work to open doors for us in the same way as Antoine experienced, and similar to Keats' imagining of the character of Cortez in 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer':

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
 When a new planet swims into his ken;  
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
 He stared at the Pacific and all his men  
 Looked at each other with a wild surmise  
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.<sup>9</sup>

This unexpected collision in the juxtaposition of a swift zoom 'motion' and the turning toward action of a close-up of Antoine's face recorded by the camera and braced by the silence of a stilled image forces the viewer into a sudden comprehension. The play of this poetic dialectic sets in motion a catalytic effect, the meaning of which is petrified in something found in his eyes, suggestive of the last piece of the puzzle for Antoine, a turning point in his rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood.

In embracing Keats' principle of negative capability as a compass and charm embodied in the film *Bright Star* (2009), I would argue director Jane Campion moves beyond the constraints of the *auteur* paradigm familiar to much film theory and practice. An illustration of negation of the self, Campion's aesthetic choices point toward an intensified sensuous engagement without prescription, a relational lived experience, in which the notion of the director's signature becomes blurred. Keats' concept of negative capability as a pathway to the uncharted and unexplored was an important principle that was engaged by Campion and encouraged and communicated to the entire cast and crew employed in the film's production. 'What Keats wrote about negative capability was very helpful,' she notes,

it explained the way I work, staying in the mystery, not intellectualising. That's where I found the answer; he said he

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<sup>9</sup> John Keats, *Bright Star, The Complete Poems & Selected Letters of John Keats* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), p.43.

wanted a life of sensations, not thoughts, and I understood that I was trying to photograph sensations.<sup>10</sup>

The process enables the director to move back and forth balancing certainty and uncertainty open and responsive to change as Campion muses, 'daunting but if you can stand in new and uncharted waters long enough a door will open.'<sup>11</sup> By allowing for the emergence of new and different perceptions without being overwhelmed by the anxiety to merely react, Campion nourished an environment amenable to the toleration of doubt,<sup>12</sup> standing as Martin Buber described on 'the narrow ridge' outside of one's comfort zone in order to encounter that which remains undisclosed.<sup>13</sup>

In the direction of this film Campion refuses to raise formalistic concerns above the subject matter of the work. Instead of imposing a distinct and overarching style upon the film she opens herself up to others and engages in a dialogue with her characters, the spectator and members of the cast and crew involved in the film's production. Campion's availability and receptivity to others in the direction of this film clearly reveals a limitation of the *auteur* concept to adequately articulate the role of the director in the art of filmmaking. In the direction of the screen performances during the rehearsal period, in particular, and in the spirit of experimentation, a dialogue was entered into between the director and actors with negative capability acting as a guide and philosophical foundation which helped to unite all the cast in a relaxed and synchronised manner. Campion strove for a 'humanness', an authenticity and presence, in the nature of the performances, mindfully discouraging any interpretation that would act to plaster a veneer over the 'being' of the actor to achieve a preconceived generalisation of a period type. Negative capability was also employed in an attempt to subdue any form of insecurity and over-compensating nervous reaction from the actors.<sup>14</sup> Of this Campion claimed:

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Fenton, 'Campion Champions Case for Poetry,' *The Advertiser*, December 16, 2009, <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/campion-champions-case-for-poetry/story-e6frec8c-1225810682526>, accessed April 17, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Scott Tobias, 'Interview with Jane Campion,' *A.V. Club*, September 22, 2009, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/jane-campion,33148>, accessed April 17, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Eisold, 'The Rediscovery of the Unknown: An Inquiry into Psychoanalytic Praxis,' *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 36, no. 1 (2000), 65.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber*, 1st ed. (New York: Paragon House, 1993), p.10.

<sup>14</sup> Tobias, 'Interview with Jane Campion'.

I really wanted to find a way for the actors to reach a different level of intimacy with their characters, with themselves, with each other. I wanted to have a sense of their 'being'—the hallmark seemed to be that they had to feel unmotivated, just true—you weren't pushing anything, there was no apparent effort. All I knew was that when people made efforts to make scenes work it felt repellent.<sup>15</sup>

When in doubt the actors were encouraged to follow and trust in their own instincts and to feel comfortable in their own character and in what they felt was true for them in any given situation, with a liberty not confined to rigid continuity or the repetition of a specific performance for each take. To simply be, receptive and open to the experience unfolding, in contrast to their behaviour being controlled in an attempt to achieve an outcome.<sup>16</sup>

In this, Campion's directional approach in the filming of *Bright Star* was very much entwined with that of Keats' own sensibilities in the creative process and suggests an alertness and responsiveness that is harmonious with the moment, representing a capacity of the director to surpass the self. 'For me, being a director is about watching, not about telling people what to do,' she explained. 'Or maybe it's like being a mirror; if they didn't have me to look at they wouldn't be able to put the make-up on.'<sup>17</sup> In this way Campion permitted a loss of self, a non-defensive engagement with the continuum of change, thereby demonstrating a flexibility of disposition with a preference for passive witnessing and indicative of a conscious empathy, alert to the sense that the moment something becomes forced or unnatural the thing is changed. It is a process that is receptive, like a mirror reflecting rather than an act of pushing for something to happen, of being, in the words of Keats, a 'through fare'—a passage allowing the whole to flow through the part.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Paola Morabito, *Working with Jane (Documentary, DVD)*, *Bright Star* directed by Jane Campion (2010; Culver City, California: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Conrad, 'Jane Campion: "I Make Films so I Can Have Fun With the Characters"', *The Guardian*, October 18, 2009), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/oct/18/jane-campion-interview-peter-conrad>, accessed April 17, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Osho, *Creativity : Unleashing the Forces Within*, volume 1, *Insights for a New Way of Living* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), p.152.

Acutely aware of the inherent power of the raw image and trusting in the material prior to its contextualisation, Campion artistically reveals the importance of sensation in the unadorned image<sup>19</sup> in her directional choices. This is evident on numerous occasions in the film, such as the Brawne family cat evocatively nuzzling, turning the page of Keats' book of poetry while Fanny is reading it, Keats climbing barefoot to soak up the warmth of the sun's morning rays aloft a tree in spring flower,



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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Dudley, *The Major Film Theories : An Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p.169.

or Fanny dropping to her knees completely absorbed in a letter from Keats in a field abloom with purple wild flowers.<sup>20</sup>

In a moving scene brimming with a playful youthful innocence and animated with magnetic affection which wins the viewer's heart and contagiously spills over like the spring flowers in Campion's mural, following the blossoming of first love, after having shared their first kiss Fanny and Keats are playing freeze tag with Fanny's little sister. The landscape is a composition in deep focus, a countryside in spring pulsating with life and heightened by a transition—the transformative juxtaposition of the figures moving, then becoming frozen, then moving again, the camera capturing within the spontaneity of play the revelation of a human's being. These brief moments convey the purity and simplicity of the characters' tender attachment and the exhilaration of being in the world beyond the mere appearance of representation.<sup>21</sup>



The scene serves as a reminder of the lovers in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', frozen in time and poised forever on the exhilarating brink of romantic union—

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
 Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;  
 She cannot fade, though has not thy bliss,  
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

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<sup>21</sup> Didier Maleuvre, 'Art and the Teaching of Love,' *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 1 (2005), 85.

The brevity and holiness of such moments of joyful connection in the continual flow of life evoke an eternal present when cinema becomes art. 'I was thinking of Monet's haystacks,' said *Campion*. 'They're just lumps, but they have the sun inside them, they vibrate. Images like that can't help but be moving; they're pictures of life and you can feel it palpitating!'<sup>22</sup>

A significant piece of music on the original soundtrack to *Bright Star* pertains to a meeting without preconception and premature closure that is indicative of a capacity to resign oneself to incongruity and accept ambiguity and paradox. This is track four of the soundtrack, titled *Human Orchestra*, an adaptation of Mozart's wind serenade, arranged for human voices and listed in the film credits as *Mozart's Serenade No 10 in B Flat Major K 361 III Adagio*. What is particularly interesting about this piece is the creative materialisation of the principle of negative capability in which there is a willingness on the part of the director in collaboration with the film's composer to take a risk in the unexpected use of the male voice in a way that is exposed, open and vulnerable.

A combination of polarities, the composition brings together tenor and countertenor voices, the latter being a male singing voice equivalent to a contralto or mezzo-soprano in which falsetto is generally used to achieve pitch. A true tenor is capable of singing in an even higher range, with or without falsetto, and a light tenor is capable of producing a very high register. Both ranges offer a style in which the male singer is permitted to demonstrate their sensitivity. Although associated with an early music repertoire, it is a growing modern phenomenon, most visible in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the countertenor revival by English singer Alfred Deller, who was well-versed in authentic early Renaissance and Baroque music,<sup>23</sup> and in the hugely popular music of vocalists such as the Bee Gees and Freddie Mercury. It is a vocal category that exemplifies a delicate, tender-hearted and soft human expression that defies convenient categorisation and is perhaps more readily exposed to prejudice and social stigma due to its perception as a quality of femininity rather than masculinity.<sup>24</sup>

Track one of the film's score, composed by Mark Bradshaw, is titled *Negative Capability*. This is a musical piece underpinned by an exchange of dialogue between Fanny Brawne and John Keats in a scene in which

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<sup>22</sup> Fenton, 'Campion Champions Case for Poetry'.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Giles and David Mallinder, *The Counter Tenor* (London: Muller, 1982).

<sup>24</sup> *Working with Jane*.

Fanny, during her poetry classes with Keats, states that she still doesn't know how to derive meaning from poetry. Keats' response is not at all what one would customarily expect from teacher to pupil in a poetry lesson. There is no mention of poetic terminology, such as metre, rhyme, or personification, and this forms a stark contrast with a heated scene triggered by jealousy in which Charles Browne attempts to discredit Fanny in Keats' eyes by scoffing at the idea that she had read any of Milton's poetry, as she would have recognised that there is no rhyming in his work. Unlike an arithmetic equation with parameters and a known solution, poetry is a subjective experience, and the character of Keats speaks of poetry as an effortless and consummate receptivity to experience:

A poem needs understanding through the senses. The point of diving in a lake is not immediately to swim to the shore, but to be in the lake, to luxuriate in the sensation of the water. You do not work the lake out. It is an experience beyond thought. Poetry soothes and emboldens the soul to accept mystery.

Keats points to the simplicity of unmotivated participation in the delight and celebration that may be garnered in the sheer fullness of the living moment, of an appreciation of poetry with an intrinsic value all its own, and of a dignity of experience without goal to smother the sensation of pure being. Rejecting the singularity and confinement of a theoretical construct produced by reason alone, Keats cultivated a non-insular and immediate understanding encountered in the fullness and inclusivity of the five corporeal senses—touch, hearing, taste, smell and sight. As Campion insightfully commented: 'I don't look in terms of things being good or bad, I say that is what I see.'<sup>25</sup>

Keats worked in terms of an acknowledgement of the coexistence of two contraries, the ambiguity of which need not be resolved but which can be better understood through negative capability. This is exemplified in his sonnet 'Bright Star', in which he wishes for the impossibility of the eternal 'steadfast' and 'unchangeable' characteristics of the far-off bright star which can only be preserved in 'lone splendour', and yet also to be close to his beloved, 'pillowed' on her ripening breast and condemned to a tireless but 'sweet unrest.'<sup>26</sup>The source and inspiration of this poem is the true story of a love encountered and echoed in the musings of Keats' letters to

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<sup>25</sup> Virginia Wright Wexman, ed., *Jane Campion: Interviews*, Conversations with Filmmakers series. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p.12.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Motion, *Keats* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p.475.

his betrothed,<sup>27</sup> and represented here in the final scene of the film which is critical to the integrity of the entire work, the importance of which is indicated by Campion's decision to shoot this scene first and to bring to life on-screen the intensity of the union of the lovers' souls embodied in this sonnet. It is a scene of loving remembrance in which Fanny, on hearing of Keats' death and therefore in mourning, a widow by any other name, paces the heath at dawn reciting 'Bright Star', the poem written for her with such reverent devotion. It recalls their shared intimacy and eternalises the memory of their touch, forever confirming the truth of Keats claim in *Endymion* that:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:  
It's loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness.<sup>28</sup>

During a period of time away from filmmaking and before writing the screenplay for *Bright Star*, Campion began exploring and enjoying earlier cinematic works. She discovered the works of French film director Robert Bresson, such as *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), *A Condemned Man Escapes* (1956) and *Mouchette* (1967), films which she adored. Campion fell in love with Bresson's sense of classicism to the extent that she recreated herself as a modern classicist, welcoming the formal elegance, symmetry and restraint of the ideas of classicism and allowing these to inform and shape the aesthetic choices within her own work.<sup>29</sup> She was attracted to the dignity of proportion in the body of Bresson's work and to the classical simplicity and poised sublimity embodied in the life, love and poetry of Keats.<sup>30</sup> Refraining from the temptation to indulge in manufacturing sensation artificially by manipulating the viewer, Campion shot simply using depth of field and a locked frame which, rather than directing the spectator's eye, allows the viewer to receive the image as one would a mural, thus enabling them to engage more actively with the film and trust in their own emotional response. Open to the possibility of the incomprehensible, the incomplete and contradictory, Campion permits the work to discover its own harmon—a practice greatly influenced by Bresson's rigorous simplicity and stylistic trust in the content, and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.472.

<sup>28</sup> Keats, *Bright Star, The Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*, p.63.

<sup>29</sup> Livia Bloom, 'Jane Campion's *Bright Star*,' *Filmmaker Magazine*, September 11, 2009, <http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2009/09/jane-campions-bright-star-by-livia-bloom>, accessed April 17, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Aske, *Keats and Hellenism: An Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

emanating all the stronger for the apparent absence of the director:<sup>31</sup> 'The presence of the dancer will be a disturbance in the dance.'<sup>32</sup>

Keats meditated on the practice of negative capability as a way of arriving at the truth, a truth that cannot be arrived at by actively pursuing it but rather is achieved by surrendering, by disappearing, in the belief that the less the artist is evident in the work the more beautiful and true the work will be as a reflection of truth in accordance with reality, a harmony synchronously experienced as beauty:

Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.<sup>33</sup>

In the service of the work Campion correlated Keats' 'Beauty is truth, truth Beauty' with a balance of form and content in the art of filmmaking, mindful and vigilant that the style should not override the content, but that it should work hand in hand.<sup>34</sup>

During a Festival screening in Toronto of *Bright Star* (2009), Campion discussed her dislike of an overbearing directing style which tampered with and dominated the material. She was strongly opposed to an unbalanced over-emphasis upon technique which overshadows the content of the work to the extent that it runs the risk of becoming identified as the content. Such interference distorts meaning from the subject and dehumanises the characters represented in the work, and by implication shows a lack of respect for the audience. As Campion reflected:

I also think I got pretty sick of director's signatures, fancy shots and the director leading the thinking or the ideas. For *Bright Star* I wanted to experiment; to forget any branded look and find another way of looking at things. This story is so gentle and simple that I didn't want you to feel any overreaching style. I wanted to disappear, really; that's what I tried to do. What I cared about was the presence of those

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<sup>31</sup> Bloom, 'Jane Campion's *Bright Star*.'

<sup>32</sup> Osho, *Creativity : Unleashing the Forces Within*, p.74.

<sup>33</sup> Keats, *Bright Star, The Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*, p.240.

<sup>34</sup> Jane Campion, 'Directing Master Class' (Australian Film Television and Radio School, March 6, 2010).

people, and any signature look would have been threatening to the more serious endeavour.<sup>35</sup>

Balancing the form with the sanctity of the content—the life, poetry, letters and in particular the surviving love letters and notes which John Keats had written to Fanny Brawne and which bear testament to the depth of their enraptured feelings and connection—Campion concentrated on refining and developing the interplay of conflicting elements which had fuelled the emotional intensity between them.



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<sup>35</sup> Bloom, 'Jane Campion's *Bright Star*.'

The threads of an unconsummated love and the restrictions they encountered and which were placed around their hearts paradoxically heightened the ardour between them and consequently heightens the tension in the mind of the film viewer. The circumstances of the times—having to write letters and notes that they passed under the door to each other, the need for Fanny to be chaperoned by her younger brother Samuel and not being able to touch in public, the paradox of a nearness and an intervening space—all are broached exquisitely by Campion, particularly in a sensuous scene in which the lovers are touching the opposite sides of the wall that divides their sleeping quarters. Keats' lack of means with which to marry and ultimately his tragic illness drew so many lines around their feelings that those feelings became all the more erotically consecrated, tender, beautiful and pure. It is a true story in which Campion, by placing herself in the service of the content of the work, honoured the making of these two souls in the sense in which Keats himself conceived of souls in his 'Vale of Soul-Making', in which he explores the idea that a human heart is ripened by the hardships and sufferings encountered in this world, creating one's soul.<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, this essay confirms the value of expanding the auteur concept beyond the singularity of a director's personal vision to include what has been described as an acceptance of mystery by director Jane Campion in the film *Bright Star* (2009). Campion's aesthetic experimentation in this work indicates the creative possibilities open to directors who are receptive to a toleration of doubt in accord with the present moment and which can be better understood through the cultivation of Negative Capability. Receptive to that which is becoming and attuned to changing sensations through a paradoxical process of 'presence' and 'disappearance', Campion placed herself in the service of the work. Negative Capability in filmmaking invites an awareness of that which is becoming, without which the sensation of living itself will be forfeited in art and replaced by the construction of artifice, at best representing what was once alive with participation.

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<sup>36</sup>Keats, *Bright Star, The Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*, p.505.

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‘This, please, cannot be that’:  
The Constructed World of  
P.T Anderson’s *Magnolia*

KIM WILKINS

All cinematic narratives, those filmed on location or on a set, artificially configure their sense of ‘place.’ In the Hollywood tradition the constructed nature of film worlds are consciously and rigorously effaced—conventions of style and structure prescribe the presentation of film worlds to be believable or coherent locations in which immersive or affecting narratives play out. This paper investigates the tension between naturalism and fictionality in P.T. Anderson’s *Magnolia* as a film that employs a conventional style that promotes character alignment and narrative engagement while simultaneously interjecting text and forms associated with literary traditions that highlight its artificiality. This aesthetic and formal structure—the insertion of scriptive elements—both serves to highlight the film’s construction as a text developed from a written form, the screenplay, and amplifies its overall reflexivity. Together these tactics create a recognisable, yet impossible, film world that facilitates *Magnolia*’s narrative, aesthetic, and affective strategies. These strategies work to promote the viewer’s access and alignment with the film’s thematic concerns—the breakdown of interpersonal connection, a sense of failure, and emotional isolation—while simultaneously positioning her at a safe distance, mediated by the recognition of the film’s artifice.

*Magnolia* encourages the spectator to align herself with the characters and react to the film’s deeply affective qualities through the employment of what David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, describe as ‘an excessively obvious cinema’—that is, narrative formed by three-act structures with action following cause and effect linkages that play out in unified, linear, and continuous space and time and are presented through the strictures of

continuity editing.<sup>1</sup> And yet, in contention with these formal conventions, at times *Magnolia* exposes its formal construction by highlighting the presence of a screenplay within the film's diegesis through the appurtenances of scriptive elements that function both to structure the film and amplify its reflexive qualities. While there are scholarly debates around the autonomy and literary status of the screenplay,<sup>2</sup> the dominant approach to the screenplay's role as an interstitial literary form in film is,<sup>3</sup> as Steven Price suggests, that of a 'structuring document that demands concentration on the shape of the story and succession of events'.<sup>4</sup> Narrative cinema relies on the arrangement of images in specific sequences that enable a film's story to be discerned.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in mainstream cinema traditions, the screenplay is often viewed as a blueprint that facilitates the construction of coherent and realistic film worlds and as such once the film is produced the screenplay becomes a 'frozen entity'.<sup>6</sup> With the completion of its audio-visual realisation the screenplay is removed from its position as an autonomous text and enshrined within the finished film product. In conventional cinema, the audio-visual realisation of the screenplay aims to erase the written text's materiality in order to create an illusion of presence in the film that, in turn, promotes affective narrative immersion.<sup>7</sup> *Magnolia*, on the other hand, inserts the written form into its diegesis through prologues, epilogues, and inter-titles. By utilising tactics from literary and dramatic traditions, *Magnolia* negotiates a film space that at once adheres to Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's excessively obvious cinema, yet, through the intercession of text, re-asserts the role of the screenplay in its final audio-visual format. The integration of theatrical devices, such as the

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<sup>1</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. (London: Routledge, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> See Ted Nannicelli, 'Why Can't Screenplays Be Artworks?' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, no. 4 (2011), pp. 405-14, and Ted Nannicelli, 'The Ontology and Literary Status of the Screenplay: The Case of "Scriptfic,"' *Journal of Literary Theory* 7, no. 1 (2013), pp.135-53.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Alexander Boon. 'The Screenplay, Imagism, and Modern Aesthetics.' *Literature/Film Quarterly* XXXVI, no. 4 (2008), p.259.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Price, 'Character in the Screenplay Text.' Chap. 12 In *Analysing the Screenplay*, edited by J. Nelmes, 201-16, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010), p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Alexander Boon, *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), p.38.

<sup>6</sup> Mark O'Thomas, 'Analysing the Screenplay: A Comparative Approach.' Chap. 14 In *Analysing the Screenplay*, ed. Jill Nelmes, pp. 237-50. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010) p.237.

<sup>7</sup> Boon, *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*, p.29.

Greek chorus and monologue, gesture to the early development period of the screenplay form while allusions to the book of Exodus and paraphrased refrains from Bergen Evans' *The Natural History of Nonsense* indicates the film's (thematic, aesthetic, and structural) connection to literary traditions. These scriptive elements alert the spectator to the reflexivity of the film and encourage her to view its absurd occurrences and excessive degree of coincidence as tightly designed contrivances that highlight the film's fictive nature without disavowing its affective qualities. *Magnolia* presents its narrative world in a manner that both reveals its nature as a construct and facilitates deeply moving narrative trajectories.

In this sense, *Magnolia* employs textual strategies that approximate Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekte*. *Magnolia* echoes the *V-effekt* in that metacinematic and reflexive techniques are used to remind and reinforce the spectator's awareness of the film as a construct; however these techniques are employed for different purposes. Where Brecht's *V-effekt* seeks to intellectually challenge the spectator, to shake them from their perception of reality in the theatre in order to promote critical socio-political reflection, the referential game-play tactics employed in *Magnolia* remind the spectator of the parameters of the film's diegesis as written within a formal, structured document, in order to facilitate temporary emotional investment in the film's narrative elements and thematic concerns. The recognition of the screenplay through literary interjections within the realised film disrupts the spectator's immersion in the narrative and provides her with moments of emotional respite. By reassuring the spectator of the limits, confines, and artificiality of the film world, the film encourages her to engage with its narrative intricacies, and align herself with the characters and their emotionally devastating plights, at a safe, mediated distance. Thus, rather than depicting Los Angeles as a naturalistic, recognisable, inhabitable, and familiar space, *Magnolia*'s Los Angeles is an overtly artificial assemblage that serves to facilitate the film's narrative action; it is a virtual version of a real location.

In the introduction to the published shooting script for *Magnolia* Anderson writes, 'I hope this is a true Los Angeles Movie. In particular, I have aimed to make the Mother Of All Movies About The San Fernando Valley'.<sup>8</sup> Anderson's assertion highlights the significance of place within the film. As John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel write:

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<sup>8</sup> P.T. Anderson, *Magnolia: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000), p.vii.

films are shot either on location or in the studio. In the first case, films take actual place—take images of places, record impressions of the world's surfaces on celluloid...place and cinema share an intriguing and morphologically consonant doubleness: both are felt and have been understood to be simultaneously natural *and* constructed, to be the effects of both ontology and the articulations of a code or codes. Cinema as a photographic medium has been notoriously and controversially appealed to as a medium of “truth” in which the natural world (often the landscape—place—*itself*) lays its impress on the physical material of the filmstrip. This same understanding has been revised, and even abjured, by an understanding of cinema as depending less on its debt to the world it photographs and more on its operations as text, or as an instance of speech, language act, or code. Place, meanwhile, as we have seen, can be experienced or understood both as the ultimate, entirely natural *a priori* (‘to be at all—to exist in any way’) and a fabrication—a product of human artifice, cultural construction, and ideology (‘landscapes, like written texts, encode powerful social, cultural, and political messages that are interpreted by their viewers’).<sup>9</sup>

This statement suggests that all films ‘take place’—that is, all films present their narratives as occurring *somewhere*. Los Angeles is a recognisable site of cinematic representation—not only as the real site of production in Hollywood, but also as a film setting. *Magnolia*'s film world begins with a semi-translucent magnolia bulb bursting open to the rhythm of Aimee Mann singing Harry Nilsson's ‘One’ over a road map of Los Angeles.

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<sup>9</sup> John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel, *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) pp. viii-x.



The title sequence of *Magnolia*

From this opening, *Magnolia* creates a relationship to the city of Los Angeles as a real location, a pre-existing filmic site, and the location prescribed in the screenplay for this particular film's diegesis. Los Angeles is a city that is deeply tied to the film industry through its reality as the geographic site of production in Hollywood and its representation on-film since the early 1920s. Colin McArthur writes 'with regard solely to the representation of cities, there must hardly be a major city in the world which...is not known primarily by way of Hollywood'.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Los Angeles is what Nezar AlSayyad refers to as a cinematic city; a city that is 'not only that which appears on screen, but also the mental city made by the medium of cinema, and subsequently re-experienced in the real private and public spaces of the city'.<sup>11</sup> This notion is further articulated by David B. Clarke's assertion that the American cityscape can be conceptualised as a *screenscape*.<sup>12</sup> Films like *Pretty Woman* and *Clueless* have presented the wealthy, upmarket Beverly Hills locations, while *Echo Park*, *Boyz n the*

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<sup>10</sup> Colin McArthur, 'Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls: Tracking the Elusive Cinematic City.' Chap. 1 In *The Cinematic City*, ed. David Clarke, pp. 19-45 (London: Psychology Press, 1997) p.34.

<sup>11</sup> Nezar AlSayyad, *Cinematic Urbanism: A History of the Modern from Reel to Real* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.2.

AlSayyad argues that the boundaries between the real city and the reel city are, in postmodern films and the time of postmodernity, no longer useful to maintain—rather he sees the line between the real and reel as now fundamentally eroded, with the two notions mutually constitutive pp.3-4.

<sup>12</sup> David B. Clarke, 'Introduction.' In *The Cinematic City*, ed. David Clarke, (London: Psychology Press, 1997), p.1. emphasis in original. Clarke argues that 'cinematic space cannot be simply equated with a perspectival representation of (another) space, its dynamism contained by its narrative form' p.9.

*Hood*, and *Mi Vida Loca* have depicted low socio-economic locations. The city's long, wide, desolate 'mean' streets where underhanded business dealings take place between Victorian homes and run-down boarding houses are readily associated with films noir of the 1940s and 1950s such as *Double Indemnity* and *Kiss Me Deadly*, later *Chinatown*, and more recently *Drive*. Conversely, the glamour—the illusion and reality—of Hollywood (as both place and as lifestyle) has been reflected in Backstudio<sup>13</sup> films such as *A Star is Born*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *The Player*. Through its tapestry ensemble structure *Magnolia*'s Los Angeles is a recognisable media-centric and celebrity-consumed location. Its plotlines feature the secrets of wealthy television personalities and executives—one with an unfaithful, guilt-ridden (second) wife and an estranged son who has become a misogynistic self-help guru, the other an adulterer who molested his now drug addicted daughter—two lonely and emotionally exploited (ex and current) child-stars, a struggling actor, a bumbling and incompetent policeman, and a hardworking palliative carer. This Los Angeles is comprised of upscale mansions, middle-class homes, dingy apartment complexes, bars and diners, studio sets and backlots, lawyers' and doctors' offices, and wide streets lined with Googie-inspired structures<sup>14</sup> and palm trees seen from secluded spaces of car interiors. P.T. Anderson presents this Los Angeles naturalistically in terms of colour palette and *mise-en-scène*. Claudia Wilson's (Melora Walters) small apartment is modest, homely, and imperfect; the backstage green room of the *Quiz Kid Challenge* is a sparse, unglamorous space inhabited by exploitative guardians; Earl Partridge's (Jason Robards) 'Contemporary style' villa is an example of 1950s-1970s Angeleno luxury architecture;<sup>15</sup> and the film's title refers to the east-west Magnolia Boulevard in North Hollywood's San Fernando Valley.

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<sup>13</sup> I borrow this term from Steven Cohan, and use it as he described: 'movies about movie-making' in his conference paper 'Another Hollywood Picture?: *A Star Is Born* (1937) and the Generic Continuity of the Backstudio Film' presented at Society of Cinema and Media Studies, Chicago, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Googie architecture refers to a style that incorporated space-age and futuristic elements with neon lights, and geometric shapes. A notable example of this style is the 'Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas, Nevada' sign designed by Betty Willis. For more information on Googie architecture see Alan Hess' *Googie Redux: Ultramodern Roadside Architecture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> See the City of Los Angeles: Architectural Styles (2009) edited by Los Angeles Department of City Planning.



Earl Partridge's home



A San Fernando Valley street



Claudia's apartment

Indeed, Anderson specifies various actual Los Angeles locations as sites of narrative action in his screenplay. The embodiment of these

specificities on screen creates a sense of place that recalls the external, tangible city of Los Angeles. The written text designates that Quizkid Donnie (Willaim H. Macy) does not crash his car into 'a 7Eleven' but a 7Eleven in *North Hollywood*, Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly) is not 'a police officer', but a police officer in *Van Nuys*, and the misogynist self-help guru Frank Mackey (Tom Cruise) isn't 'giving a seminar', but a seminar at the *Burbank Holiday Inn*. These precise locations are presented in order to be recognisable as naturalistic, inhabited, and familiar spaces and as such the world presented is conceivable as one recognisable city depicted via a series of simultaneously occurring events through multiple interconnected, yet disparate characters. Indeed, the vast majority of the screenplay's scene headings state that each action occurs 'that moment' (or very occasionally 'moments later')—creating a sense of simultaneity that is an assumed actuality in metropolises such as Los Angeles, yet rarely presented on-screen with such defined and concise linkages.

Anderson's *Magnolia* in part employs cinematic realism, while at other times effaces the realist illusion through open acknowledgement of the world's constructed nature. In his introduction to *The Question of Realism*, Robert Stam writes:

the most conventional definitions of realism make claims about verisimilitude, the putative adequation of a fiction to the brute facticity of the world. These definitions assume that realism is not only possible (and empirically verifiable) but also desirable... Another psychoanalytically inclined definition of realism involves spectatorial belief; a realism of subjective response, rooted less in a mimetic accuracy than in spectatorial credence. A purely formalist definition of realism, finally, emphasizes the conventional nature of all fictional codes, seeing realism simply as a constellation of stylistic devices, a set of conventions that at a given moment in the history of an art, manages, through the fine-tuning of illusionistic technique, to crystallize a strong *feeling* of authenticity.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Stam, 'The Question of Realism.' In *Film Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller, pp. 223-28. (Massachusetts: Backwell Publishers, 2000) p.244. Stam also writes 'definitions acknowledge a certain conventionality within realism, seeing realism as having to do with a text's degree of conformity to widely disseminated cultural models of "believable stories" and "coherent characters."' Plausibility also correlates with *generic* codes. The crusty conservative father who resists his show-crazed daughter's entrance into show-business, can

Considered in Colin McArthur's terms, cinematic realism is not an actuality, but rather a discourse or convention of representation better described as 'the realist effect'.<sup>17</sup> *Magnolia's* film world—a cinematic representation of a night in Los Angeles—could be seen to conform to the 'realist effect' present in mainstream Hollywood cinema. The events presented are recognisable character plights portrayed by known actors. These plights centre on universal themes of familial breakdown, distrust, death, and the (im)possibility of redemption. Anderson does not break with continuity editing or the classical style outlined by David Bordwell. The classical style can be described as a narrative-dominant form—in particular, writes Bordwell:

cause-effect logic and narrative parallelism generate a narrative which projects its action through psychologically-defined, goal oriented characters. Narrative time and space are constructed to present the cause-effect chain. To this end, cinematic representation has recourse to fixed figures of cutting (e.g., 180° continuity, crosscutting, "montage sequences"), mise-en-scène (e.g., three-point lighting, perspective sets), and sound (e.g., modulation, voiceover narration). More important than these devices themselves are their functions in advancing the narrative. The viewer makes sense of the classical film through the criteria of verisimilitude (is x plausible?), or generic appropriateness (is x characteristic of this sort of film?) and of compositional unity (does x advance the story?).<sup>18</sup>

Within *Magnolia's* incorporation of the realism effect, the condensed time frame of the *fabula* functions such that coincidence, chance, and fate are taken as thematic preoccupations rather than elements of narrative construction.<sup>19</sup> Yet the constructed on-screen world of *Magnolia* does not conform to what John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel describe as mainstream film spectatorship. Rhodes and Gorfinkel write:

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"realistically" be expected, in a backstage musical, to applaud her on-stage apotheosis at the end of the film' p.224., emphasis in original.

<sup>17</sup> McArthur, 'Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls' p.35.

<sup>18</sup> David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (Taylor & Francis, 2012) p.152.

<sup>19</sup> David Bordwell incorporates the terms *syuzhet* and *fabula* from Russian Formalism to refer to narrative construction. Loosely defined, the *syuzhet* is the narrative or story, and the *fabula* is the chronological arrangement of narrative events—or the plot.

When we watch a film, its world and its images of a world become our own: we are impinged on, pressed on and by places that consume—however temporarily—our attention and push other places out of our minds. We do not lose the other places to which we belong and that belong to us, but we do forget them, however briefly. Our experience of moving in and out of a moving image's geographic, emplaced particularity and our ability, through the image, to know places we can/not ever know grant us a model for an engagement with the world, which is both a world and worlds. The moving image offers us a means of placing ourselves in others' places, not to annihilate their specificity or ours, or the specificity of these places, but rather so that we find a way of finding in the world's manifold particularity a universality worth sharing—everywhere.<sup>20</sup>

Where the intrusion of the written form through intertitles and use of the prologue and epilogue as framing devices overtly emphasise the artifice and textuality of the film, Anderson's deployment of self-reflexive cinematic allusions and pop-culture references work to both locate the film's diegesis as a recognisable and relatable place and simultaneously remove it from any completely comprehensible and immersive reality. Throughout *Magnolia*, footage from existing television programs *Entertainment Tonight*, *Cops*, and *Quiz Kids Challenge* present a verisimilitude that is incongruous with other allusions—the stylistic quotation of Martin Scorsese's tracking shots and focus on the problem of masculinity in father-child relationships,<sup>21</sup> Robert Altman's ensemble narratives, a literal rain of frogs, and the bizarre and arresting use of Aimee Mann's music as a Greek chorus. This collision of allusions works against the formation of verisimilitude that is usually associated with mainstream American cinema, and instead positions the spectator to recognise that the affective narrative unfolding is a machination that emerges from a written

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<sup>20</sup> Rhodes and Gorfinkel, *Taking Place*, p.xxi.

<sup>21</sup> As many reviewers noted, Anderson's cinematic style is notably influenced by Scorsese and Altman. Throughout Anderson's work, there is a focus on maleness, on underlying male violence, male solitude and a focus on relationships between male characters. Anderson's focus on masculine anxiety directly recalls Scorsese's recurring DeNiro characters Johnny Boy (*Mean Streets*), Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*), and Jake LaMotta (*Raging Bull*) as clear examples of masculinity as a thematic preoccupation. In Anderson's work the problem of masculinity is often manifested in father/son tensions, be they surrogate or biological.

page. The tension between affective immersion and reflexive mediation in *Magnolia* occurs because, as Kevin Alexander Boon states, 'the film proper—the light and sound show experience—creates an illusion of presence that the screenplay does not'.<sup>22</sup> Thus the intrusions of written text and the film's reflexivity function as the reinstatement of the screenplay within 'the film proper', in an otherwise conventional narrative form, which performs a dramatic function that distances the immediacy of the affective film experience.

The tension between narrative immersion and reflexive distanciation is established from the outset of *Magnolia*. The film begins with a prologue that details three separate cases of bizarre deaths through a voiceover narration. The first is an account of the murder of Sir Edmund William Godfrey in 1911 by three men whose surnames Green, Berry, and Hill combine to form the name of Godfrey's hometown, Greenberry Hill in London. The second is the accidental death of a scuba diver named Delmer Darian in 1983, who died after he was scooped up from a lake during an aerial firefighting mission (with the subsequent suicide of Craig Hansen, the troubled pilot of the water bombing plane). The third is the unsuccessful suicide turned successful homicide of Sydney Barringer in Los Angeles in 1958, who would have survived jumping off a building had he not been shot by his mother as he passed her window on the sixth floor. Following these bizarre stories of coincidence the voiceover states:

... in the humble opinion of this narrator this is not just "Something That Happened." This cannot be "One of those things..." This, please, cannot be that. And for what I would like to say, I can't. This Was Not Just A Matter Of Chance.

Taken at face value, *Magnolia* presents a fairly conventional narrative structure from which the viewer is seemingly able to determine an intelligible story that takes place within a particular time and location.<sup>23</sup> The film centres on an ensemble plot spatio-temporally determined by simultaneous events occurring during one night. The nine central characters are loosely connected to one another. In this context, the voiceover prologue could be assumed to function in a fairly conventional manner as

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<sup>22</sup> Boon, *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*, p.29.

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed explanation of conventional narrative structure and the construction of intelligible time and space see David Bordwell's 'Narrative Comprehension' section in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1985) pp.33-40.

an introductory exposition to orient the spectator in what may otherwise be a confusing story world,<sup>24</sup> as in the case of films like *Sunset Boulevard*, or *Casablanca*. However, on second glance, this opening narration is more telling than that. The self-identified narrator's pleas for 'this not to be that' (Not Just A Matter Of Chance) are, of course, answered within his calm, measured delivery. This is not that; the events cited did not occur. The newsreel appearance of the events depicting the Edmund Berry Godfrey murder,<sup>25</sup> the naming of the Reno Gazette in the publication of the Delmer Darion/Craig Hansen case in June, 1983 (alongside the men's detailed personal histories),<sup>26</sup> and the contextualisation of the suicide/murder of 'Sydney Barringer' as an account relayed by Dr Donald Harper (the president of the American Association of Forensic Science at the 1961 awards dinner)<sup>27</sup> encourage the viewer to engage, as the narrator suggests, in the belief that 'These strange things happen all the time'. However, as none of these reported 'facts' occurred in the manner depicted, the fictionalisation and subversion of real world referents into a cinematic prologue figures as the establishment of Anderson's formal world—an artificial assemblage—in which notions of simultaneity, chance, plausibility, and actuality are intertwined with practices of deliberate temporal contrivance and narrative manipulation for both thematic effect

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<sup>24</sup> Price, 'Character in the Screenplay Text.' p.204.

<sup>25</sup> The actual murder of Edmund Berry Godfrey in 1678 has been the subject of many books due to its unsolved nature, with the event sparking widespread anti-Catholic sentiment in England at the time. Anderson's use of the actual murder is secondary to his playful re-enactment of its apparent reportage in 'The New York Herald, November 26<sup>th</sup>, year 1911'. See *The Strange Death of Edmund Godfrey: Plots and Politics in Restoration London* (1999), by Alan Marshall for more information.

<sup>26</sup> The Darion/Hansen deaths portrayed in *Magnolia* is the retelling of an urban legend (sometimes referred to as the Char-Broiled Scuba Diver or The Scuba Diver in the Tree) in which a scuba diver is accidentally scooped up from a lake (or the ocean depending on the reiteration of the tale) by a water bombing plane during forest firefighting, and thus found dead, hanging from a tree in full scuba diving suit, and with equipment. There is no evidence that this event has ever occurred. The myth has been investigated by *MythBusters*, and the online fact-checker *Snopes.com*.

<sup>27</sup> Like the Edmund Berry Godfrey murder, Anderson here combines fact and fiction. The story of 'Sydney Barringer' is based on a fictional account told by Dr Donald Harper Mills in a speech at an American Academy of Forensic Sciences function in 1987. Mills told the illustrative story of 'Ronald Opus' in order to demonstrate the complexities of legal practice in relation to homicide investigations. The speech has since gained the status of an urban legend.

and narrative construction. *Magnolia* foregrounds its spatio-temporal construction in relation to narrative structure and characterisation in order to momentarily disrupt the affective nature of the drama that is otherwise presented in accordance with mainstream cinema conventions. As Jill Nelmes notes, mainstream cinema directs a contract of verisimilitude between the audience and film text through narrative immersion and affective characterisation. The organisation and design of narrative elements, such as dialogue and plot, within the screenplay heighten the appearance of cinematic realism as they guide the audience's comprehension of film story. Cinematic realism, in mainstream cinema, is an artificial construct that film audiences have, over time, learned to read as conventional representations of 'lifelike' worlds on screen.<sup>28</sup>

Anderson's creation of an intricate convergence of internal narrative and formal cinematic spaces climaxes in a montage sequence in which the film's nine interrelated, yet narratively and physically isolated, protagonists sing Aimee Mann's 'Wise Up' from various states of consciousness and disparate locations throughout the city. The opening piano chords begin softly as Phil Parma (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a palliative care nurse, prepares to euthanize the terminally ill patriarch, Earl Partridge. Anderson then systematically cuts between the nine ensemble characters, establishing a linkage between their plights through Mann's lyrics and the affective tenor of the melancholic music. This linkage is not only created through the mechanisms of conventional narrative montage, but rather interacts with the internal cinematic space and temporality of the narrative world, and the viewer's position. As the screenplay reads:

INT. EARL'S HOUSE - THAT MOMENT/NIGHT

CAMERA CU on the bottle of liquid morphine. Phil's hand comes into FRAME and takes it....TILT up to his face.

Phil is in tears....he dips the baby dropper in the bottle.....

Earl is out of breath, painfully....Phil hesitates, then:

CU - The liquid morphine is dropped into Earl's mouth.

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<sup>28</sup> Jill Nelmes, 'Realism and Screenplay Dialogue.' Chap. 13 In *Analysing the Screenplay*, ed. Jill Nelmes, pp. 217-36. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010) p.217

CUT TO:

INT. CLAUDIA'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT/NIGHT

She looks at the coke in front of her. She hesitates. Her stereo is playing a song....it plays softly, then gets a bit louder.... She looks at the coke in front of her. She hesitates. Her stereo is playing a song....it plays softly, then gets a bit louder.... She leans down and SNORTS the fat line of COKE. HOLD on her....she starts to sing along with the song....

CLAUDIA

"..it's not what you thought when you first began it...you got what you want.... now you can hardly stand it though by now you know, it's not going to stop....."

The SONG continues. The following has each of the principals half singing along with the song, who's lead vocal will stay constant throughout.

CUT TO:

INT. JIM KURRING'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA PUSHES in slowly on Jim Kurring. He sits on the bed, dressed up and ready to go. He starts to sing along to the song as well.

JIM KURRING

...it's not going to stop...it's not going to stop 'till you wise up..."

CUT TO:

INT. JIMMY'S HOUSE - OFFICE - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA moves in towards Jimmy, alone, sitting in his office, singing.

JIMMY GATOR

"You're sure there's a cure and you  
have finally found it"

CUT TO:

INT. DONNIE'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA pushes in on Donnie smith as he starts to sing.

DONNIE SMITH

"You think....one drink...will shrink  
'till you're underground and living down,  
but it's not going to stop..."

CUT TO:

INT. EARL'S HOUSE - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA DOLLIES in on Phil, holding back his tears and singing along to the song...as he sits over Earl....

PHIL

"It's not going to stop...it's not  
going to stop...."

CAMERA moves over to Earl, eyes closed, starts to sing as well...

EARL

"...it's not going to stop 'till  
you wise up..."

CUT TO:

INT. EMPTY PARKING LOT - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA DOLLIES in on LINDA. She's passed out in her car, head pressed against the glass, but she starts to sing along....

LINDA

"...prepare a list of what you need  
before you sign away the deed, 'cause  
it's not going to stop..."

CUT TO:

INT. FRANK'S CAR - PARKED - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA pushes in a bit on Frank, singing along.

FRANK

"...it's not going to stop...it's not  
going to stop....it's not gonna  
stop 'till you wise up, no it's not  
gonna stop..."

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL LIBRARY - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA pushes in, (light coming up from the book he reads)  
optical, glimpse what he reads....then pulls back from  
STANLEY.

STANLEY

"..till you wise up, no it's not  
going to stop, so just....give up."

PULL BACK.<sup>29</sup>

Despite Anderson's careful indications that the events of *Magnolia* are occurring concurrently within Los Angeles, until this moment in the film there is no suggestion that the characters are aware of one another's existence (although their personal histories intertwine) or immediate actions. The chorus problematizes the previously assumed naturalism in regard to cinematic space, as the characters appear to react to each other within the film's diegetic world and beyond that world's construction in the actor's performed roles. In this moment it becomes clear that unlike other

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<sup>29</sup> Anderson, *Magnolia*, pp.153-155.

films which stress 'the interconnectedness of places within the city via networks of transportation, communication, circulation and exchange',<sup>30</sup> such as *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis*, Ruttman, 1927), or Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991), *Magnolia* does not present Los Angeles as a protagonist itself, but as a series of pre-formed frames and scenes within which characters and action may be placed. Rather than being connected by an organic, living city which forces characters to interact with one another, these disparate characters are connected by Anderson's placing them within the frame as indicated by the screenplay. *Magnolia*'s Los Angeles is a spatio-temporal location that is constructed around character connections, rather than a city that contains and perpetuates connections by virtue of its urban networks.

During this sequence, Mann's music simultaneously functions both diegetically, and extra-diegetically. The relationship between the diegetic and extra-diegetic sound creates a complex conversion of internal narrative space and formal cinematic space. What is important in this formulation, as Stephen Heath writes, is that all

space constructed in film is exactly a *filmic construction*... The filmic construction of space is recognized in its difference but that difference is the term of an ultimate similarity (indeed, a final 'illusion'); the space is 'unlike' but at the same time 'reconstitutes', using the elements lifted from real space. In fact, we are back in the realm of 'composition', where composition is now the laying out of a succession of images in order to give the picture, to produce the implication of a coherent ('real') space; in short, to create continuity.<sup>31</sup>

Although the formation of a chorus of nine disconnected, damaged protagonists in their isolated states (and from various states of consciousness), in response to one another as well as to Mann's song, is impossible, *Magnolia*'s 'Wise-Up' scene does not break with Heath's notion of continuity. Rather, what is confronting about this sequence is its over-fulfilment of these criteria. As Bordwell notes, rather than rejecting the continuity techniques of conventional cinema in order to depict incoherent or fragmentary narratives, many contemporary films employ an

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<sup>30</sup> AlSayyad, *Cinematic Urbanism*, p.39.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) pp.40-41. emphasis in original

intensification of continuity techniques.<sup>32</sup> *Magnolia* in part signals its film world's artifice by fulfilling continuity expectations to excess. The contrivance of a chain of action between these spatially isolated characters is created by cutting between what would normally function as eye-line matches. Each character is seen, alone, singing a line from the song that seemingly speaks for their personal (and collective) situation. As the individual lines of the lyrics sung by each character follow on from one another (rather than accumulate or build to an actual chorus), they are framed as they are written—as though they could be in dialogue with one another. The visual and lyrical matches spill over a naturalistic diegesis and the sequence serves as an aberration that exists, like Mann's music, neither wholly in or out of frame.

Gorfinkel describes the deeply affecting nature of Mann's 'Wise Up' in *Magnolia* as a 'sing-along effect' that:

invites the audience towards a measure of self-reflexivity but also back into a mode of affective absorption, almost as a function of their incredulity...This performed synchronicity between characters paradoxically threatens to disrupt narrative cohesion and continuity, as the overarching melodramatic realism of the film is suddenly made 'implausible'.<sup>33</sup>

In the tradition of the Greek chorus, Mann's lyrics are used to reveal and comment on the problems and themes of the film—the unresolved isolation and unspoken guilt experienced by the characters, and their yearning for redemption and reconciliation. This moment encourages the viewer to recognise her relationship to popular cultural memory and film construction through its noted 'implausibility'. The contrivance of this sequence promotes a re-evaluation of the accepted conventions of cause and effect, and continuity, in mainstream cinema. However, as Gorfinkel suggests, this contrived moment of unification is simultaneously affecting and cathartic. The affective quality of *Magnolia* is always intertwined with reflexivity and artifice in order to demonstrate to the audience the construction of the film's world and, within it, the narrative and characters.

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<sup>32</sup> David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. (California: University of California Press, 2006) p.120.

<sup>33</sup> Elena Gorfinkel, 'The Future of Anachronism: Todd Haynes and the Magnificent Andersons.' In *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, ed, Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, pp. 153-68. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005) p.162.

The reflexivity of the narration in *Magnolia* is apparent at a number of instances. The film's strongest moment of visual absurdity within its predominantly naturalistic *mise-en-scène* comes at its climax—a literal rain of frogs, which while serving the film's preoccupation with change and implausible events noted through the film's references to the anomalous phenomenologist, Charles Hay Fort, undoubtedly serves as a reference to the Plagues of Egypt in the book of Exodus (Ex 8:1-15).<sup>34</sup> Exodus 8:2 reads 'But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all your territory with frogs.' The Biblical allusion speaks to the characters' inability to excise their emotional and interpersonal paralysis. The rain of frogs occurs shortly after the deeply affective 'Wise Up' sequence when each character experiences their deepest moment of despair. Phil Pharma has aided the euthanasia of Earl. Earl's adulterous wife, Linda (Julianne Moore) has attempted to commit suicide. Claudia has denied herself the chance of genuine connection with Jim after he has revealed his embarrassment at his inadequacies as a policeman. Quiz kid Donnie (William H. Macy) embarks on a larcenous act against his ex-employer in a bid for financial gain that he hopes will result in a romantic connection. And Jimmy Gator prepares to shoot himself for his sins against Claudia.

*Magnolia's* rain of frogs is a deluge that provides revelation for its characters. Most obviously, a falling frog knocks Jimmy Gator's gun from his hand just as he reaches for the trigger. Another frog collides with Donnie as he scales a wall in order to commit his crime, knocking him to the ground. With Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly) witness to Donnie's attempted felony, he is able to aid the injured Donnie and reinstate his own position as a competent and compassionate officer of the law. Rather than these revelations emerging from a passage of reconciliation between characters, or self-growth, the rain of frogs enables the characters in *Magnolia* to move beyond their individual states of alienation and devastation. Redemption here is not the result of human endeavour or compassion, it is contingent on external factors. This notion is solidified

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<sup>34</sup> The anomalous phenomenologist, Charles Hay Fort, is referenced throughout the film and thanked in the credit sequence.

The Plagues of Egypt are detailed in the book of Exodus. In this book God inflicts ten plagues (water into blood, frogs, gnats, flies, death of animals, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and death of the firstborn) on Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to free the Israelites and liberate these enslaved people so that they could form a faithful nation for the future.

later in the film when, by an act of grace, Officer Kurring's lost firearm, the manifestation of his personal failure, is returned to him from the sky on Magnolia Blvd, where frogs had previously fallen.



The rain of frogs

Thus, this reference to the Plagues of Egypt is inverted—the plague of frogs is not presented as a punishment, but an overt *deus-ex-machina* in that it functions to enable redemption that can only be imagined on-screen within this particular narrative. The narrative importance of this intrusion into *Magnolia's* film world is reflexively noted by Quiz kid Stanley (Jeremy Blackman) who, in lieu of a home, is framed studying in his school library. Looking up from his books, Stanley informs the audience, 'This happens. This is something that actually happens.'



Stanley explains to the spectator, 'This is something that actually happens.'

This line foregrounds Anderson's narrative structure as one that is not simply thematically concerned with chance, purpose, and fate, but one that has these elements written into the diegesis in order to highlight the sincere concerns about death, family, obligation, guilt, and forgiveness. However, the hope for redemption and interpersonal connection that results from the 'Wise-Up' sequence and the rain of frogs is anchored in overt artifice, contrivance, and intertextuality. As the film's structure is inscribed with referential textuality, Anderson employs an ironic self-consciousness that David Foster Wallace noted had become the default tone of expression in late postmodern American culture. The pervasiveness of irony and cynicism in American cultural expression led to concerns that sincere expression would be taken as naïve or lacking sophistication. For Wallace, this self-conscious mode of address incorporates a paralysing problem in regard to conveying meaning in texts—irony has become an end in itself. *Magnolia's* structure, on the other hand, negotiates a narrative and tonal strategy whereby irony is deployed *with* sincerity. This narrative strategy and its effect on thematic concerns are perhaps most evident in a telephone conversation in which Phil Parma attempts to reconnect Frank Mackey with his estranged, dying father Earl. In that scene, Phil pleads with Frank's employee to aid him in this undertaking:

CAMERA pushes in on Earl, asleep in the bed, breathing becomes a bit irregular. HOLD on him. 30fps.

PHIL

I know this all seems silly. I know that maybe I sound ridiculous, like maybe this is the scene of the movie where the guy is trying to get a hold of the long-lost son, but this is that

scene. Y'know? I think they have those scenes in movies because they're true, because they really happen. And you gotta believe me: This is really happening. I mean, I can give you my phone number and you can call me back if you wanna check with whoever you can check this with, but don't leave me hanging on this—please—please. See: See: See this is the scene of the movie where you help me out—<sup>35</sup>

If, as Jill Nelmes asserts, dialogue functions in the screenplay 'first to make the storyworld more believable, to create a world in which the characters talk, have voices, real people; and second, to provide narrative information as the film characters express themselves in their fictional world',<sup>36</sup> then articulations such as this must serve to highlight the presence of the screenplay within the film world that has been constructed to house the genuinely affective narrative presented. The address of this statement engages the audience in an interplay between cinematic imagining and plausible representation without requisite emotional detachment. Phil's acknowledgement of the scene's position within the family drama tradition at once notes the film's artifice, while simultaneously functioning as a deeply moving portrayal of human desperation. Michael Chabon writes that universal themes of grief are 'at full scale, too big for us to take it in; they literally cannot be comprehended'.<sup>37</sup> In foregrounding its formal, written construction in these reflexive moments, *Magnolia* provides a moment of respite for the spectator by creating a distance without disconnection or withdrawal from affective alignment. This distance, in Chabon's words 'can increase our understanding of grief, allowing us to see it whole'.<sup>38</sup> This scene may indeed be happening, the affective qualities of this film are real, however, it is 'that scene'—it has been sculpted by the screenplay and is only taking place on-screen.

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<sup>35</sup> Anderson, *Magnolia*, p.94.

<sup>36</sup> Nelmes, 'Realism and Screenplay Dialogue.' p.217.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Chabon, 'Wes Anderson's Worlds.' NYR Daily (2013).

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*



The three deaths that bookend *Magnolia*

Gesturing to its literary antecedents and again reasserting the fictive nature of the film, *Magnolia* signals its denouement with an intertitle. This intertitle reads: 'So Now Then'. The shot cuts back to the three separate events that commenced the film. We are again presented with impossible

footage—the newsreel, the shot of the scuba diver in a tree, and the suicide while the narrator begins, ‘and there is the account of the hanging of three men; and the scuba-diver; and the suicide’. The narration is then layered over a montage sequence of Earl’s dead body being removed from his home after the deluge—

there are stories of coincidence, and chance, and intersections in strange things told, and which is which, and who only knows. And we generally say, “well, if that was in a movie I wouldn’t believe it. Someone’s so-and-so met someone else’s so-and-so, and so on.” And, it is in the humble opinion of this narrator that strange things happen all the time. So it goes, and so it goes, and the book says “we may be through with the past, but the past ain’t through with us.”

The reflexive irony of this narration is clear—the events presented *within the movie* were, indeed, *unbelievable*, yet their occurrences are, nonetheless, moving. The role of intertextuality and reflexivity in creating poignant moments is again highlighted here, through the apparent quotation of ‘the book’. Importantly, the book loosely quoted is not a spiritual or philosophical text, but *The Natural History of Nonsense*, by the prominent sceptic, Bergen Evans. Evan’s book is a wry and witty criticism of the human capacity to believe, and perpetuate, preposterous stories in the form of myth or legend. The ironic inclusion of this text signals that the film’s sincerity with regard to emotional alienation and human connection is present, while simultaneously acknowledging its position in the tradition of myth-making and storytelling—its fictivity. As O’Thomas writes of the screenplay form, the function of this ironic concluding narration enhances ‘a sense of the film *as constructed* as well as the film that *has been constructed* to which the screenplay is an unavoidable referent’.<sup>39</sup> Only *Magnolia*’s screenplay is not simply a referent, but an element of the film’s form and narrative structure that performs a dramatic function. In *Magnolia* the screenplay does not relinquish its structural constraints in order to enable the ‘film to project itself onto our lives and the lives of others’,<sup>40</sup> but rather it reinstates its position in the final product through intertextuality and reflexivity amplified by the visual intercession of the written word, such that the spectator may experience emotional alignment and investment

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<sup>39</sup> O’Thomas, ‘Analysing the Screenplay’, pp.247. emphasis in original.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, p.247.

with the narrative arcs of characters, but with the knowledge these plights have been scripted.

The tension between the affective qualities of the film and its reflexive iterations of artifice is played out in the denouement. The revelatory rain of frogs has finished and the protagonists are shown in a state of emotional reconciliation, understanding, and recognition. On-screen we see Jim first consoling Quiz kid Donnie, then escorting him to return his stolen goods. In the place of Jim's diegetic dialogue with Donnie,<sup>41</sup> we hear his voiceover narration 'summing up' the film's thematic concerns, through his personal reaffirmation of purpose in his role as a police officer. Anderson, however, again combines the diegetic and extra-diegetic planes of *Magnolia* by cutting back to Jim, who, having rectified Donnie's situation, is shot sitting in his car reflecting on the narrative's events in the manner of a *Cops* direct-to-camera monologue. Jim's diegetic dialogue in this moment is no longer inaudible but becomes that which is heard as a voiceover. He continues, his monologue lifted from action to a more theatrical mode, reflecting on the themes of the film's narrative, 'if you can forgive someone, well, that's the tough part. What can we forgive? Tough part of the job. Tough part of walking down the street.' The convergence of diegetic and extra-diegetic planes in this final thematic summation signifies the affective function of the film world's contrived spatio-temporal organisation. These lines are spoken with sincere intent and carry a poignant, affective charge. Jim's monologue concludes with slow, piquant guitar strumming of Aimee Mann's 'Save Me' as he resolves to connect with Claudia.

In Claudia's apartment Jim's dialogue is heard faintly below Mann's music, explaining his desire to be with her. The camera is fixed on Claudia, with Jim largely positioned out of frame. Claudia's distraught face shifts to an expression of relief, as the song's lyrics—'You look like a perfect fit / For a girl in need...of a tourniquet / But can you save me? / Come on and save me.../ If you could save me / From the ranks of the freaks / Who suspect they could never love anyone'—play in the background. This moment of romantic connection would appear to provide a cathartic, hopeful resolution to Anderson's film. While the plights of the other ensemble characters are not displayed, hope is reinstated with the traditional connection of a romantic union. However, Anderson's film does

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<sup>41</sup> This dialogue is heard faintly below the voiceover, however the words are indistinguishable.

not 'come to an end' in the manner of the classical Hollywood narrative. Rather, Melora Waters steps out of her role as Claudia as she faces the camera and smiles. The screenplay reads:

INT. CLAUDIA'S APARTMENT - THAT MOMENT

CAMERA holds on Claudia. She's sitting up in bed, covers around her, staring into space....a SONG plays....for a very, very long time she doesn't move until she looks up and sees someone enter her bedroom....a FIGURE from the back enters FRAME and walks in and sits on the edge of the bed....from the back it is clear that it's Jim Kurring. She tears a bit and looks at him...HOLD....

She turns her eyes from him and looks INTO THE CAMERA and smiles.

CUT TO BLACK.

END.

In dialogue with the literary and dramatic traditions the film acknowledges throughout, *Magnolia* employs an epilogue format<sup>42</sup>—in the denouement each narrative strain is revisited, and the characters are presented as though they have begun the process of resolving their individual crises. This conventional strategy provides the spectator with the impression of narrative and emotional closure. However, in *Magnolia* resolutions are *too* neat; they are unified to the point of reflexive contrivance. The reflexivity of the film's epilogue signals to the spectator that the world is an insular cinematic construction and as such, it is not that the narrative crises are resolved in the epilogue—but rather that the entire diegesis is contained between the film's first and final frames. The insularity of these diegeses reminds the spectator of the disconnection between the film world and the pro-filmic space, which in turn enables her to 'close off' any emotional engagement with the characters and their narrative plights. Yet this reflexive 'closing off' in the narrative ending does not actually resolve thematic problems presented within the film. The individual damages and interpersonal difficulties presented are not, and cannot be, reconciled with

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<sup>42</sup> See Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* p.157-159.

the film's conclusion. Thus, in signalling the film worlds' insularity, the safe, mediated access to the film's thematic preoccupations is reinforced. The spectator is reminded that the affecting forces of the narrative are contained. Claudia's smile is not a signal that 'everything will be alright' in the form of a classical Hollywood resolution, but rather an acknowledgement that the classical Hollywood narrative structure has been enacted to ensure that everything *appears* 'alright'; that despite the numerous unresolved issues (including Claudia's anxieties) the film must conclude, and so performs its resolution reflexively. *Magnolia's* final frame reinforces the artificiality of its world, and in doing so signals that this world has emerged from the written page. This affirmation of the constructed nature of the film's world through its structure, aesthetic strategy, and frequent intertextual references does not preclude the emotional attachment or investment that may have been elicited by its contents. *Magnolia* provides the illusion of an emotionally satisfying ending—but this ending is winking back at the spectator and reassuring her of its knowing construction.



Claudia's reflexive smile

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# Sequences, Dreams and Cinema

IAN DAVID

## Bridge of Dreams

In an average lifespan, we will dream for six years. That works out at two hours a night. Jaak Panksepp, in *Affective Neuroscience*, sounded a little in awe when he wrote, ‘What a strange thing, this dreaming process, that has now been the focus of more scientific inquiry than any other intrinsic mechanism of the brain.’<sup>1</sup> He went on to suggest that the ‘REM state was the original form of waking consciousness in early brain evolution, when emotionality was more important than reason in the competition for resources.’<sup>2</sup> After he proposed his ‘new theory of dreaming’, Panksepp tossed it on the pile with all the other theories. Perhaps it was the source of his restrained sense of awe that something so universal, so familiar, has generated so many explanations and so little to hold on to. It’s almost like a recurring dream.

Mammals, birds, even bearded dragons, dream. Their experience of REM sleep looks like ours on an EEG machine. Recent studies show REM sleep is closely linked with memory and learning. Deep sleep (Slow Wave Sleep) replays the previous day’s events. REM sleep, however, is more involved with considerations of future planning.

REM sleep particularly influences the processing of ‘procedural-implicit’ memory and also of memories acquired under emotionally charged conditions.<sup>3</sup> If we are prevented from completing a sequence of REM sleep, if given the opportunity the following night, we will make up

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<sup>1</sup> Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.128.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> P. Maquet, J.M. Péters, J. Aerts, G. Delfiore, C. Degueldre, A. Luxen and G. Franck, ‘Functional Neuroanatomy of Human Rapid-Eye-Movement Sleep and Dreaming,’ *Nature*, Vol. 383, 12 Sept. (1996), 164.

for the lost time. However, many studies have shown that the loss of REM sleep does not necessarily adversely affect behaviour, except for a tendency to impair the learning of complex tasks. It is thought, therefore, that REM sleep is an essential part of learning, involving memory and play. The evidence is strong that we dream by necessity to aid in learning new skills and accommodating new experiences. In fact, we tend to enter into REM sleep and dream for longer periods when we have been exposed to stress or unfamiliar situations.<sup>4</sup> Dreaming occurs in sequences containing four phases, through a cycle of 90-120 minutes. Each sequence is repeated four or five times during a night's sleep. Each phase within the sequence is identified by its signature brainwave configuration. Phases Two and Three are slow wave, theta and beta waves. REM sleep, the vivid dreaming phase, produces alpha waves, almost the same wavelength as waking. The phases, although recurring in the same order in a particular cycle, change in their duration, with REM sleep increasing in duration with each sequence. By the last sequence, REM sleep can take up to two thirds of the 90 minute cycle. What are we to make of the undoubted build in tension of dreaming, the increasing length of duration and the accompanying increase in brain wave frequency? What are we to think about this lengthening of each successive sequence of REM sleep as a night's dreaming progresses? We know that REM sleep accompanies a strengthening of memory and assists learning new tasks. However, we also know that some dreams, particularly those in Phase Two, can be terrifying and recurring.

Most of us have experienced profound changes in our attitudes after we've gone through a catharsis such as a death in the family, or a bout of life-threatening sickness, or a divorce. These changes, over many months, occur without our conscious thought. It is as though we are going through some form of emotional healing while we sleep. How else can we explain that calming sense of deep relief, or acceptance, after many months of grief? To say that time heals doesn't do justice to the process. Such a sentiment isn't very informative. Perhaps it's the action of dreams over time, running various scenes from memory back and forth like a piece of film on a Moviola editing machine, or a Steenbeck, that assists our emotional healing. Mark Blechner in *The Dream Frontier*<sup>5</sup> describes a process he calls Oneiric Darwinism, where REM sleep takes place as a sequence of dream episodes, each offering up selected scenarios to palliate

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<sup>4</sup> W. Fishbein, *Sleep, Dreams, and Memory: Advances in Sleep Research* (New York: Aperture, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Mark Blechner, *The Dream Frontier* (New Jersey: The Analytic Press, 2001), p.77.

our social anxiety. Similarly, Richard Coutts proposes a theory where a given sequence of REM sleep eventually produces a selected schema which encourages social and personal wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> While we sleep, we're accessing memories, rocking and rolling over scenes, picking over and shaping feelings that advantage our wellbeing by offering a path to acceptance, mitigating our sense of grief. It is as though we have taken the original footage of our memories and added music and a new ending to help us through the shock and pain of loss.

The filmic allusion applies to dreams in several ways. Cinema, like dreaming, is substantially composed of image and emotion. Perhaps it's no coincidence that the dreams cycle lasts for 90 minutes and so does a feature film. Each cycle is made of up three or four major phases or acts, akin to acts in a feature narrative. Similarly, the experience of dreaming and film is broken up by decisions, which mark the end of each act. Narratives run through many dreams, narratives comprised of emotion and image. Is it any wonder that we so quickly 'understood' cinema without needing to learn the language?

Before we look more closely at the possible connections between dreams and cinema, it would be worthwhile to discuss narrative, since it figures prominently in both.

### **Narrative—Rehearsing Life**

An engaging narrative suspends time, when the act of imagining the story takes us away from the immediate present. Yet, the experience of the narrative depends very much on the form in which it is offered to us. Reading a novel is obviously very different from the experience of watching a play or a film. John Steinbeck's *Of Mice And Men* first appeared as a novel in 1937, within a year it became a very successful play and in 1939 a critically acclaimed film, a box office hit nominated for four Oscars. The characters, setting, theme and dialogue are very similar in each 'version', yet there is a progression toward visual 'fixing' from novel to theatre to cinema. In the novel we are free to imagine what the lead characters, George and Lenny, look like and the world in which their tragedy unfolds. With each of *Of Mice And Men's* successive theatre

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Coutts, 'Dreams as Modifiers and Tests of Mental Schemas: An Emotional Selection Hypothesis,' *Psychological Reports*, 102 (2008), 561-574.

productions the characters and set reference the original stage play. However, the cinema freezes the film actors Burgess Meredith and Lon Chaney Jr. forever in images and sound. If you have seen the film before reading the novel, it may well be impossible to ignore referring to the film cast in your imaginative construction of the narrative.

This fixed nature of film is an important part of the narrative experience. Every image we see in a film has been chosen for us, in the same way that we seem to have no control over the images in a dream. Yet, we feel some unique sense of intangible connection. From the earliest days of cinema, references to film remarked upon its ability to approximate the experience of dreaming. This may have been due to a night at the movies inducing a certain ‘starry-eyed tranquillity’, but I would suggest it is due more to the critical role dreaming plays in our wellbeing. We know that dreams overwhelmingly are concerned with, or spring from, the same source—anxiety.<sup>7</sup> The alleviation of that anxiety occurs through narrative’s revelations by way of transition, decision and action, and cinema’s use of narrative taps into the dream experience with a potency other creative forms can rarely match.

We know that Aristotle’s construction of the narrative, where pity and fear conspire to find their way to a catharsis, is the bedrock of drama. Perhaps it’s my too literal interpretation, but I suspect that fear isn’t the precise state of the audience. It’s anxiety. Fear arises from a real, perceived threat, but anxiety is a manifestation of some unrealised danger; that feeling of unease about the possibility of a bad outcome in the future is a constant human companion. Without it, we’re happy. However, anxiety delivers a strong desire to prepare for untoward events, to act, and that requires a decision.

## Decision Making

Consciousness is made up of discrete moments of decision—a decision is a step, an interval, an instant of locating a point in our own mental time when a consciousness affirms should a particular set of circumstances arise I will perform this response—it is a way of saying, ‘I will recognise this state, and when it occurs I will act in a specific way.’ A

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<sup>7</sup> C. Hall, R. Van de Castle, *The Content Analysis of Dreams* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966).

decision is the moment of awareness that predicates action. An action isn't caused by a stimulus—it is caused by or comes of a decision.

That chain of discrete moments—from stimulus to decision to action—often defines the quality of any life. One of the markers of consciousness is to be aware of that moment that predicates action—to sense or experience the making of a decision.

In *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, Lajos Egri asserts:

There is no beginning and no end. Everything in nature goes on and on. And so, in a play, the opening is not the beginning of a conflict, but the culmination of one. A decision was made, and the character experienced an inner climax. He acts upon his decision, starting a conflict which rises, changing as it goes, becoming a crisis and a climax.

I accept the process Egri describes and agree that narrative is grounded in nature, however the later claim that 'since there is no jump in nature there cannot be one on the stage either'<sup>8</sup> is difficult to swallow. We know, in fact, nature is replete with jumps, quantum leaps and boiling points. Electrons don't jump to the next shell without a precise amount of energy. Light looks to be made up of waves, but the waves are made of photons. The Buddhist abbot, Venerable Ajahn Brahm, wrote that during meditation he has deduced that consciousness is like a stretch of sand on a beach:

Superficially, the sand looks continuous... but after you investigate it closely, you discover that it is made up of discrete, isolated particles... contemplating consciousness in this way—seeing it as a series of discrete, isolated events, undermines the illusion that there is a knower, constantly present, which is always there to receive the experience of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Despite his belief that there is 'no jump in nature', Egri seems to accept that narratives do progress through turning points or decisions, when he

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<sup>8</sup> Lajos Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretations of Human Motives* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1946), p.228.

<sup>9</sup> Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009), p.114.

describes a crisis as ‘a state of things in which a decisive change one way or the other is impending.’<sup>10</sup>

We know the core of every narrative is conflict, with the expectation of catharsis and resolution. The story elements that drive the narrative—transition, decision and action—also inform us about the workings of the human mind. Consciousness, weighing, feeling, gathering, making decisions, is the means by which the mind holds up a mirror to itself. Our days are assembled from thousands of small decisions. Brains are composed of multiple, competing networks, each of which has its own goals and desires. We are complex creatures because we are composed of many drives, all of which want to be in control.<sup>11</sup>

When we humans, so keen to survive the vicissitudes of life, run from danger it is emotion that cracks the whip behind us. Then, our cognitive processes catch up, they arise from internal conflict and they aren’t always instant. It’s a system in the brain that makes a decision, which goes on to influence other systems. The process of cognitive thought sets up a debate, questioning the emotions and setting in train a transition to decision, without which there would be no action. Our minds have a tendency to crush ambiguity into choices. Who we are emerges from the competition to dominate that runs in our brains every moment of our life. When the emotion systems are shut down no choice is tangibly different from another and we struggle to settle an issue or reach a conclusion. Without emotion no decisions can be made, no actions can be executed—every day is trapped in stasis.<sup>12</sup>

A narrative approximates the dream experience—since dreamers do not think or at least they’re not aware of it. They are not aware of making decisions to act. The process of placing emotionally charged images into a specific order is akin to constructing a narrative—to what end? Perhaps to come up with a series of events, connected through causality to enhance our survival and wellbeing. The imperative is that dreams are driven by something and that imperative is anxiety. Not the nail-biting sort, but anxiety as a constant pressure to assess the future for trouble or failure—a means by which we can test possible outcomes and rehearse responses.

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<sup>10</sup> Egri, op. cit. p.224.

<sup>11</sup> M. Daniel Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 2000).

Recent studies indicate that dreaming has some part in ‘deciding’ how we should act or modify our actions to assist our social survival or wellbeing.

Panksepp’s theory that the dreaming state could be a ‘proto form’ of consciousness suggests memories of early childhood where stimulus and arousal play like zephyrs across the mind. It is the state of the wandering mind where decisions drift by and dreams keep trying to make order of the world from the back room. The impression one has of the phenomena of dreaming is that no decisions are being made to act: things just happen and you are there, and these things are happening to you. You believe this because you are profoundly aware of emotional responses to the events you are involved in. This is akin to the experience of hypnosis, where one is aware of the events and the surroundings, but unaware of the decision-making process. As Dylan put it, ‘*Something is happening and you don’t what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?*’ Perhaps in this state, all stories are products of the unconscious, answers to questions we have yet to ask.

If David Hume is right and causality is an illusion, then the making of a narrative would be a stubborn process of defying logic, albeit a necessary one. Decisions arising from dreams and narratives would seem to be grounded in the testing of various causal combinations. This implies we’re looking for a particular answer, some discrete decision we can apply to the future. Daniel Wegner relates this to the human need for agency and identity:

The intuitive appeal of the idea of conscious will can be traced in part to the embedding of the experience of will, and of the notion that will has a force, in the larger conception of causal agency. People appear to be goal-seeking agents who have the special ability to envision their goals consciously in advance of action. The experience of conscious will feels like being a causal agent.<sup>13</sup>

In cinema, I suggest we have found a means of projecting our anxiety into a narrative through a state which approximates dreaming while retaining the authority to make decisions and direct our attention. It feels like second nature.

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<sup>13</sup> Wegner, op. cit. p.20

## Cinema—Mechanical Illusion

The Lumiere Brothers were technicians, camera makers. They were not artists in the usual sense. In 1894 they bought the patent to a machine that could shoot and project film, invented and made by Léon Bouly. In 1895, they patented their improved *cinématographe*, a wooden box with a lens at one end and a handle on the side. Once it was loaded with film, they closed it tight, pointed it at the female workers draining out of their father's factory and turned the handle. Cinema was born.

Audiences soon accepted the mechanical chatter and uncertain nature of the moving image. From turning wheels and hot lamps faces and actions gradually took on greater sophistication in the leap from industrial light to a dependable magic.

The technology of cinema was unique and stringent. Unless all the settings were rigorously adhered to the results were disastrous. The box had to be perfectly sealed. The handle had to be turned at the right speed to allow the film to travel through the gate at between 17 to 20 frames per second. The lens had to be clean, the gate had to be clear of debris. Any tiny scratches in the emulsion would render themselves as gigantic cracks on projection. This application of precise technology to make art, or at least an entertaining diversion, had to be mercilessly sustained. Light meters, lens caps, sealed containers and absolute cleanliness were the way to defeat Murphy's Law.

The materials for making films bred many variations in film stock and camera construction. However, Edison's association with Eastman Kodak established 35mm as the gauge for the burgeoning film industry, and he established that 46 frames per second was optimal for viewing the moving image. Once these matters were settled, the issue for filmmakers and audiences alike was the duration of a film shot and projection. Joining film was a very tricky business. Film stock was extremely flammable and it could only be joined by cementing pieces together in a darkroom. Over the first decade of film production, Eastman Kodak settled on 35mm stock lengths of 200ft with a running time of just over two minutes. By 1909, Kodak and Blair in Europe had standardised 35mm film stock in 400ft lengths, then 1000ft lengths. Handcranked cameras were operated at between 20 and 26 frames per second. With 35mm stock there are 16 frames per foot, giving a running time of a little over ten minutes, or 11.111111minutes to be exact. This became the standard duration for

hundreds of films before the film splicers. Films were simply edited in the camera. Continuity screenplays blocked out every scene, with every shot, and then were filmed in sequence. Ten minutes became second nature to filmmakers.

Technology has had an enormous influence on the development of narrative in film. Edison's film production company, the result more of his entrepreneurial genius than individual invention, finally got into theatre projection by the turn of the century and cinema began to standardise film stock, frame speed and running time. The very size of the canister which held the film stock limited a roll of film to 1000ft, or ten minutes of running time. By 1905, the Cinema of Attraction was on its way out and the narrative one reeler had become the standard fare for film-goers.

The first feature film, made in Australia in 1906, had to be screened in ten minute segments, with an interval of several minutes while the reels were changed over. Nordisk, in Denmark, devised a system of synchronising two projectors such that a small white dot in the top right of the frame would indicate the transfer from one projector to another, allowing for films to run endlessly. Despite all these obstacles, by 1912, feature films were being made around the world with duration times over 40 minutes.

The advent of sound in 1926 finally brought an end to the cavalier attitude of projectionists when it came to screening films outside a very strict number of frames per second. Any variations in speed and the sound would suffer. Sound, although delivered in an analogue strip down the edge of the film, forced the standardisation of the film frame rate at 24 fps. It also improved the image because projectors using twin or triple blade shutters could multiply numbers of frames per second and so remove the jerky motion that so plagued many early silent films.

For the next twenty years, film dominated all other creative endeavours in its ability to travel to every culture at an affordable cost and with a means of appealing to all ages. In a little over fifty years, film had pushed aside every other form of narrative. 90 minutes in the dark was an experience practically everyone on earth was familiar with. Dreaming and cinema. Why was this length deemed satisfactory? It is worth noting that the entire sleep cycle takes 90 to 120minutes, the duration of a feature film.

The Czech filmmaker and theorist Frank Daniel spent many years teaching his sequence paradigm to screenwriters. From the early days of cinema, films were despatched to exhibitors on 1000ft rolls, each with a screening time of around ten minutes. A feature film would comprise eight or nine reels. This meant that in a one projector theatre the audience would have to endure a sequence of at least seven small intervals while the projectionist changed reels. As a consequence, production companies insisted that screenwriters include a dramatic break at the end of each reel to keep the audience hanging on. In the 1950s, Daniel used this structure, a sequence of eight or nine 10 minute segments, to teach screenwriting to his students in Prague. In his book *The Path To Film Drama* (1956), Daniel recognised that this sequence, lasting 90 minutes, had become engrained in the audience's appreciation of the cinema narrative.

### **Dreaming While Awake**

The powerful association between the visual language and emotion of cinema and that of dreaming often produces the erroneous notion that cinema is akin to watching a dream. I would argue that the kinship between the two is much more complex. It is true, cinema progresses a narrative in discrete elements of image and emotion that has a strong correlation with REM sleep and that process is understood by us because it is something we experience every night of our lives. However, the sequences of transition or information-gathering, leading to decision, in a film narrative are followed by intervals to integrate the information and allow for its projection into possible outcomes. We replay these imaginary outcomes, running over the salient details, refining their influence, divining their meaning. In a dream these ruminations occur beneath our consciousness. We awake to discover a destination with scant memory of the journey. In a film we travel the journey, and we remember it.

In a dream, the intent and function of the narrative journey is second nature, but it is 'controlled' by another system in our brain. Sequences of narrative, free of restraint, with strange and unlikely associations, are played out in our dreams, followed by an interval of rest. The next sequence takes a parcel from the previous sequence, Coutts calls it a 'schema', and uses it as the seed for the next sequence. This process emulates the process of experiencing a narrative; gathering information until the moment of decision, then allowing it to settle before gathering again to the next moment of decision, and so building to the climax, the

ultimate delivery of some fundamental truth or realisation, a mark of enlightenment.

In dreams, we are often searching for relief from a vexing problem or emotional unease. Jaak Panksepp suggests that dreaming may well provide 'an endless variety of ideas, especially when life is stressful and we need to entertain new alternatives.' He goes on to say that, 'dreaming sleep goes up when organisms are confronted by stressful, emotionally challenging situations.'<sup>14</sup> We know dreams can possess a narrative logic. The feeling of causality, unfolding in streams of sequences, suggests some form of exposition. Dreamers often recount complex, interlocking progressions of action and response in chases, climaxes and scenarios that powerfully convey a series of events resembling a narrative. Freud reported extensively that most dreamers have a very strong sense of the events in their oneiric travels involving them. They are present to observe and register an affective response. Often they feel almost passive in their presence at the scene, impotent to act, but these events are happening to them.

There is another aspect of dreams that strongly suggests they exhibit the structure and intent of narrative. On those occasions when the 'outside world' breaks through the thick folds of sleep, it is often sifted into the dreamer's experience. Not only is the source of the stimulus explained, it is given a role in the story. It is wrapped within the cloak of causality, legitimised with narrative logic. This is not the experience we have as members of a cinema audience, engaged with a narrative. We are awake, engaged in 'reverie or interior monologue'. Through this 'conscious fantasy' we watch characters in the narrative make decisions. Since we also possess the illusion of conscious will, we are constantly comparing the decisions made by the characters with the decisions we imagine we would make given the same circumstances. Sometimes, we concur with a given character's decision, aligning ourselves with them, bonding with them. At other times, we disagree, perhaps even taking vicarious pleasure in their discomfit or demise. Still at other times we sit and watch a character blown about like a leaf in the wind and realise that is us as well, knocked and pushed around by the forces of nature, fate and destiny. The critical aspect is that everything we see and hear is presented to us, we cannot choose what we will see, yet, we are able to direct our attention and make

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<sup>14</sup> Panksepp, *op. cit.* p.128

decisions. This state obviously cannot be a dream, but it has the quality of a dream.<sup>15</sup>

In a film, the duration of each narrative sequence, the build in dramatic tension toward an outcome or revelation, is constant and we are aware of it. Obviously, the nature of the cinema narrative experience departs from dreaming in a critical way. We are not dreaming, but we are not completely awake. Jerome L. Singer would say we are daydreaming. The phenomenon is one we are all familiar with. Singer would claim it takes place when ‘the emergent awareness of one’s own spontaneous inner activity produces a feedback effect which can generate a new pattern of action, affect, or fantasy.’<sup>16</sup> He has suggested the primary content of daydreaming is ‘reflecting attempts at exploring the future’, as Freud suggested, through ‘trial actions’ or through ‘positing a variety of alternatives not specifically involving satisfactory outcomes’.<sup>17</sup> We are familiar with the feeling of will, of possessing causal agency, described by Daniel Wegner in *The Illusion of Conscious Will*. When we daydream, we retain that feeling of will, although he we are not fully alert to our surroundings.

The technological sophistication of film has obvious parallels with dreaming, such as sequencing, primary and secondary processing and duration. The 90 minutes sleep cycle is equivalent to a feature film, which in turn is made up of a number of sequences. Daydreaming involves pictures, ‘visual imagery is the predominant modality for fantasy’, and so it is for film, obviously. It involves anxiety, and is ‘strongly orientated towards future interpersonal behaviour’.<sup>18</sup> We enter into that state to dissolve or relieve anxiety because it is a problem dealing with the emotions. We rehearse our decisions and actions in order to dissipate the threat that being unprepared will impair our ability to respond appropriately. In other words, the process is an introspective form of learning.

While the nature of film, comprising shots, scenes and sequences, mimics the structure of REM sleep, the spectator’s passive daydreaming

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<sup>15</sup> Branson Stowell, *Cinema And The Unconscious: Filmic Representations of Dreams* (University of Colorado, Boulder 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Jerome S. Singer, *Daydreaming: An Introduction to the Experimental Study of Inner Experience* (New York: Random House, 1966) p.34.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.58.

<sup>18</sup> Singer, op.cit.

state could well be the portal we use to experience narrative in cinema and in this way diminish our anxiety by rehearsing for life. Daydreaming, or wandering mind, would seem to be an essential activity for human beings. It involves play and problem solving. It can occur at any time, but is often a prelude to sleep. It is known to seed REM sleep with ideas, affects and images. It allows us to explore the store of memories and images, proposing scenarios and outcomes. Since daydreaming involves 'trial actions' it seems reasonable to suggest that engaging with a narrative in a film could be a natural outcome for the theatre-going daydreamer.

Jerome L. Singer in *Daydreaming and Fantasy* describes daydreaming as 'the unrolling of a sequence of events, memories or creatively constructed images of future events which have varying degrees of probability of taking place.'<sup>19</sup> Such a definition would also adequately describe the state of those who create narratives. The creation of 'trial actions' is very the much the province of the storyteller. Slipping into a reverie, in a communion with the imaginary construct of a narrative, is the avowed territory of writers and children. In order to make a connection with the audience the bridge begins and ends in conscious fantasy.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle wrote: 'Most important of all is the structure of the incidents, not of man, but of action and life.' Why the great philosopher should push character off stage to make way for action is a mystery. Perhaps he felt that temperament was of little consequence against fate. Our longing to understand the minds of others, including our own, will always concern us much more than actions alone. Perhaps to fully comprehend the workings of another's mind, solve problems or enhance our social wellbeing we have to enter an 'imaginative' state. However, daydreaming seems to be more than a functional necessity. It can be playful. It can entertain us, running feelings and ideas around in a simple chase of idle speculations. Perhaps we just daydream because we can.

However, there is another explanation for the phenomenon of daydreaming or conscious fantasy that is redolent of a dream, yet allows us to make decisions. In *The Archeology of Mind* (2012), Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven use affective neuroscience to explore our primary emotional systems. In their study of play, they discuss the unusual structure of mammalian brains, where the executive mechanisms for REM sleep are

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<sup>19</sup> Jerome L. Singer, *Daydreaming and Fantasy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975) p.3.

situated deep in the ancient regions of the brain. They suggest an early form of consciousness, one where ‘in ancient evolutionary history, raw primary-process consciousness might have initially existed exclusively as a kind of dreaming-type wakefulness—one that was full of emotional arousals.’<sup>20</sup> They propose a theory that dreaming and play are related in that they ‘seem to be experience-expectant functions of the brain designed to evaluate past events as sources for creative and useful future behaviours.’<sup>21</sup> This is another way of addressing the function of anxiety as a stimulus for rehearsing responses. Panksepp and Biven go on to suggest that dreaming and play ‘may help organise information in the brain in ways that promote higher-order affective responses to future life events, in other words, maybe both play and dreaming allow animals to wrest solutions to complex problems that they confront in real life.’<sup>22</sup>

It is important to appreciate that evolution does not start anew but adapts and amends, recycling the old to better cope with the new world. To that end, our modified brain with its ‘emotionally-rich dream-life is a residue of the progressive evolution of the kind of dual mentality... (that) may facilitate complex problem solving.’<sup>23</sup> This new consciousness is no accident although it may be the result of a billion spins of a billion roulette wheels. We feel and think and impose a specific kind of meaning on the world because evolution has left us to do our best with these wondrous, imperfect mental tools.

The crux of Panksepp and Biven’s interpretation is that ‘when a highly affective, non-reflective, dream-type consciousness first evolved’, it was subject to gradual evolutionary influences to inhibit and restrict its primary emotional systems in favour of the development of higher, more complex brain regions, particularly in mammals. These evolving regions were able to carry out sustained reasoning in response to the sensations arriving from the outside world. This development saw the evolution of neural networks in the brain allowing higher, more cognitive forms of consciousness to develop:

the more ancient brain arousal mechanisms (were) remoulded as ones that controlled the arousal of REM sleep. In this way,

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<sup>20</sup> Jaak Panksepp, *The Archeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2012), p.377.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.374.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p.375.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p.377.

dreams may still be controlled primarily by ancient emotional arousal states but by ones that in more modern animals allow cognitive information to be better integrated with emotionally stressful arousals. This could be a way to allow ancient frames of mind to still regulate higher information processing in more recently evolved animals.<sup>24</sup>

In effect, a balance of sorts was achieved between ‘ancient affective and more modern cognitive processes.’

## **Summary**

Cinema possesses a dream-like quality because like a dream, it presents us with images we have no control over—and when they are presented to us we try to make sense of them as a narrative. We do this as a function of alleviating anxiety. Unlike the state of dreaming or hypnosis, we experience cinema through a form of daydreaming, exercising our attention and decision-making processes in an active engagement with the narrative.

Panksepp and Biven propose that what we experience as human consciousness is a state many thousands of years in the making. This interpretation has fascinating implications. If applied to our universal predisposition for storytelling, it would seem to suggest that the phenomenon of narrative is a beautiful synthesis which we access as the resolution to different ways of seeing and engaging with the world. In effect, we are presented with an intriguing notion: the way we access narrative—and cinematic narrative in particular—is due to an evolutionary necessity, offering adaptations conferred upon the human brain as a means of resolving the conflict between two distinct forms of consciousness. This capacity for conflict resolution through profound cognitive abstraction when engaging with narrative in turn contributes to our ongoing ability to resolve the innumerable conflicts we encounter as individuals in a complex, confronting society.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.378.

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# Fidelity and Adultery at the Movies: From F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* to David Lean's *Brief Encounter*

DAVID KELLY

## 1

In *Adultery and the Novel: Contract and Transgression* Tony Tanner argued that as the literary form of the novel emerged and evolved concurrently with the bourgeois construction of modern European society it came to concern itself with the contractual character of bourgeois life, exploring and testing this through elements of theme, character and narrative form. In particular, the novel increasingly came to focus upon the marriage contract and, as the title of his study implies, infractions of that contract. 'It is my contention,' writes Tanner,

that whereas the ideal belief of bourgeois society was that it had effected a harmonious interrelationship of patterns of property and patterns of passion and feeling, and that it was in possession of a language that could both effectively mediate those patterns and stabilize the environment, the knowledge about that society as it began to emerge in the explorations of the novel was that in fact these patterns were all awry. With this knowledge the novel began to lose its innocence and realised that its own patternings were not simply reflections of social patterns but existed in a very problematical relationship to those patterns. I am suggesting in general that bourgeois society, more than any other, sought to establish its own stability within history ... But as the novelists began to scrutinize this self-created, self-stabilizing, self-mythologizing society, they discovered a series of discontinuities and

instabilities that effectively gave the lie to the bourgeois's image of his own society.<sup>1</sup>

What chiefly 'gave the lie' to this image was the dissonance that emerged between passion and propriety, human relations and social relations, in the act of adultery. In this paper I would like to speculate on the role of film in the continuing evolution of this kind of cultural reflection and consider the degree to which narrative cinema—often seen as an inheritor of the novelistic tradition—took up similar themes and issues to the classic realist novel as it began to establish itself as the bourgeois, and indeed proletarian, entertainment medium *par excellence*. I would also like to take the opportunity this provides to offer a view on the 'fidelity debate' in literature and cinema studies by considering how cinema has dealt with, and perhaps thereby reflected on, the question of fidelity.<sup>2</sup>

Tanner's main concern in his study is the nineteenth century novel, and it is appropriate to note that cinema emerged as a mass entertainment just as, in his view, the (bourgeois) novel began to lose interest in the binding constraints of marriage. Indeed, he goes as far as to suggest that:

The bourgeois novel is coeval and coterminous with the power concentrated in the central structure of marriage. As bourgeois marriage loses its absoluteness, its unquestioned finality, its 'essentiality', so does the bourgeois novel. On another level we may say that as the contract between man and wife loses its sense of necessity and binding power, so does the contract between novelist and reader. This contract is still binding in Goethe; it is abrogated in certain calculated ways by Flaubert (for example); it becomes extremely problematical in the work of the late James; and of Lawrence (and Joyce) we may say that the old contracts no longer have any force at all.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p.52.

<sup>2</sup> I take this up in my discussion of *Brief Encounter*, below. With its attendant moralistic vocabulary of impropriety and cultural scandal, as Robert Stam has pointed out, it would perhaps be improper in a discussion of adultery in the cinema not to raise the question of fidelity in all of its senses. See Robert Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,' in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp.54-78.

<sup>3</sup> *Adultery in the Novel*, p.15.

Certainly it is the case that by the time of Joyce the ‘contract between novelist and reader’ was unravelling as the modernist novel was leaving its mass reading public behind, but this was just at the time the cinema was picking up its audience. For this reason the period of most interest for me runs from the mature silent period (after 1922 and the publication of *Ulysses*) up to the 1950s and early 1960s, when attitudes towards adultery are profoundly changed in the wake of advances in contraception and the sexual revolution these helped to bring about, and as divorce laws relaxed towards more easily accessible no-fault arrangements. If film was in one way or another to take the place of the novel as an aesthetic medium within society at large, it is at this time that the cultural contour of that role—at least in the matter of sexual morality—will be most clearly delineated.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the view that the old bourgeois contracts were losing their force in the early twentieth century it is worth pointing out that novelistic interest in adultery was not necessarily on the wane at this time, although there is evidence to suggest that its focus was shifting from earlier points of interest. Indeed, one of the more fascinating inclinations of the modernist novel of adultery is its movement away from central agents like Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina towards an interest in injured third party figures like John Dowell in *The Good Soldier* and Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*,<sup>5</sup> or even in bystander figures like Nick Carraway (*The Great Gatsby*) or Jake Barnes (*The Sun Also Rises*), both of whom feel implicated in and troubled by their role as effective pimps to adulterous liaisons. Something about the decentred status of these characters within the narrative (although not the narration) becomes of interest to the novelist, who writes not about the passion of adultery but rather of its oblique repercussions within the bystanding consciousness—what Maisie knew, and not the ‘knowing’ itself, to speak with biblical ellipsis. And Maisie

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<sup>4</sup> As Nicholas White observes:

In societies where unwanted pregnancies and births from illegitimate couplings can often be avoided (and the division of sex for pleasure and sex for reproduction thereby asserted), the issue of legitimacy no longer functions in quite the same way as in those nineteenth century texts which belong to what we have termed the High Age of Adultery.

‘Introduction: The Present State of Affairs,’ in Naomi Segal and Nicholas White (eds.), *Scarlet Letters: Fictions of Adultery from Antiquity to the 1990s* (London: MacMillan, 1997), p.3.

<sup>5</sup> In this they are rather like Eliot’s ‘attendant lord’ Prufrock, who find himself unaccountably in the glare that should be Hamlet’s.

aside, it is noteworthy that in each of the cases just referred to the masculine point of view is dramatized, either through direct first person narration or through stream of consciousness, in keeping with a general modernist interest in the problematics of narration and narrative point of view—an issue I will return to later.

In the case of the nineteenth century, however, the most celebrated novels of adultery tended not to concern themselves with a male protagonist and a male perspective. This may have been because men did not suffer from the ennui of bourgeois domestic life—they were, rather, fulfilled by it. This was certainly not the case for women like Emma Bovary, however, who found married life with her husband Charles as ‘cold as a garret whose dormer window looks on the north, and ennui, the silent spider, was weaving its web in the darkness of every corner of her heart.’<sup>6</sup> Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (who, as the name ‘Edna’ indicates, combines something of the condition of both Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina), suffers from a similar sense of spiritual lassitude, which becomes for her, as it did for Emma, the impulse to an adulterous inclination:

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul’s summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken.<sup>7</sup>

And yet Edna *could* have inwardly upbraided her husband, Léonce, for he is both free of the effect of this nameless heaviness of spirit and yet somehow implicated in her experience of it, as it is in one way or another the condition of married life with him. The consequence of this is a feminine yearning for fulfilment beyond the confines of that life, and inevitably adulterous passion seems to promise just that. In this way, as Naomi Segal has argued, oppressed by the consciousness of marital responsibility and drawn by longings for personal autonomy, the adulteress is the woman who places desire where maternity belongs, in her ‘inside

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<sup>6</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (London: 1993), p.26.

<sup>7</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (Norton: 1993), p.8.

body', thus incarnating 'the scandal of [her] own, never autonomous desire and its relation to a never quite subordinate other.'<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, unlike women, men are not objectified by bourgeois marriage, rendered as material property and sexual possession in a scheme of bartering which might alienate affection—quite the opposite. The uxorious character of husbands like Charles Bovary or Alexei Alexandrovich Karenina partakes in part of this proprietorial pleasure, which Chopin makes explicit when Léonce Pontellier voices his displeasure at his wife staying too much in the sun: 'You are burnt beyond recognition,' he complains, and the narrator continues: 'looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.'<sup>9</sup> Thus the weight of narrative interest in the matter of adultery in the nineteenth century novel falls inevitably upon the woman in the case: in Tolstoy's contrapuntal narrative of *Anna Karenina*, the female Anna's is the story of adultery, while the male Levin's is the story of marriage triumphant. And this is so because it is in and through the woman's capacity for sex and reproduction that there lies the greatest threat to property rights and the bourgeois ordering of capital and social relations—a point perhaps best exemplified in Emma Bovary's adultery leading to her securing Charles's power of attorney in order to covertly sell his property to maintain her illicit liaison.

The moral attitude at play in these texts, however, is more complicated than the simple gender division of its narrative concerns. And it is precisely here, at the intersection of moral complexity and ideological simplicity, that these texts interrogate most searchingly the emotional insufficiencies of bourgeois life and the deceit of its self-affirming romance narrative of marital fulfilment. The ennui which impels these women towards adulterous passion is not treated as mere wilfulness but, in one way or another, rather as the outcome of their social and existential circumstance. Even Emma Bovary, who is treated with the greatest irony as a specimen of bourgeois life, is nevertheless a pitiable creature in her lost aspirations:

Before marriage she thought herself in love; but the happiness that should have followed this love not having come, she must, she thought, have been mistaken. And Emma tried to find out

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<sup>8</sup> Naomi Segal, *The Adulteress's Child: Authorship and Desire in the Nineteenth century Novel* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p.26.

<sup>9</sup> *The Awakening*, p.4.

what one meant exactly in life by the words felicity, passion, rapture, that had seemed to her so beautiful in books.<sup>10</sup>

In a more compelling way, Edna Pontellier awakens to a sense of the fundamental wretchedness of her condition, an apprehension that is also communicated here with irony by the narrator, but an irony that is itself shaded by the image of the fatal sea to which Edna will ultimately commit herself in an effort of existential emancipation:

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman.

But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.<sup>11</sup>

If Flaubert's irony allows him to dramatize the movement of Emma's mind through a mode of free indirect discourse which Joyce, among many others, would greatly admire, here we are deeply inside the mind of Edna through a narrative mode that recalls Flaubert but also strongly prefigures the stream of consciousness that Joyce would employ to allow his readers to access a profoundly sympathetic understanding of his characters. But the point is that here the pitiability of Emma and the depth of feeling for Edna are at the service of a sympathy that cuts across and threatens to subvert the socio-moral and, indeed, legal conventions in which they and presumably their readers found themselves. It is this that Tanner highlights as one of the most fascinating aspects of the bourgeois novel—perhaps at once the

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<sup>10</sup> *Madame Bovary*, p.21.

<sup>11</sup> *The Awakening*, p.14.

triumph of the form and the cause of its demise in the unfolding history of sexual morality: 'it is arguable that it is just such a tension between law and sympathy that holds the great bourgeois novel together,' he writes, 'and a severe imbalance in either direction must destroy the form.'<sup>12</sup>

## 2

While the question of property hovers over the middle class form of the novel, the question of propriety tended to supervise the narrative of mass entertainment forms such as cinema. This already suggests precisely that imbalance of moral forces of the kind to which Tanner refers above—here, an imbalance in favour of the law—and thus indicates the sort of problem cinema will encounter should it attempt to attain the kind of moral sophistication achieved by the nineteenth century novel when dealing with this theme. While it is true that the authorities sought to ban *Madame Bovary*, they were unsuccessful and, indeed, the effect of the court case was to increase sales of the now notorious book. In the case of popular cinema, however, a heavier weight would be given to its cultural role as a 'family entertainment' and a more sternly conservative moral prohibition would govern the production of film narratives and the nature of the characters and themes represented. The first general principle offered as the basis for the Hays Code regulations governing the production of movie narratives reads:

I. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.<sup>13</sup>

Given this, it is unsurprising that the first commandment of Section II of the Code, dealing with matters of sex, reads:

### II. Sex

The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Awakening*, p.14.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (Hays Code),'

<http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html>, accessed 20/8/2016.

1. Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively.<sup>14</sup>

Even before the introduction of the Code, however, makers of popular films were aware of the need to satisfy conventional moral expectations, even if they wished to explore aspects of modern living that might confront that morality. Thus the movie of adultery was obliged to configure character according to certain constrained moral types, which allowed little of the nuanced sympathy achieved in the novel. What this meant in practice was that adultery came to be seen as related to elemental carnal appetites rather than social circumstances, and therefore—as the moral logic of the times demanded—a problem for men rather than women.

F.W.Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) is perhaps the exemplary movie of adultery of the 1920s. Based on the 1917 short story 'The Trip to Tilset' by Lithuanian writer Herman Sudermann, *Sunrise* is an allegory of elemental passion centring on three figures identified only as The Man, The Woman, and The Woman from the City. In the grip of adulterous desire for The Woman from the City—a dark, highly sensualised vamp associated with the high life of 1920s urban excess—The

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<sup>14</sup> The framers of the code also published the rationale for their regulations in a statement of 'Reasons Underlying the General Principles':

I. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.

This is done:

1. When evil is made to appear attractive and alluring, and good is made to appear unattractive.
2. When the sympathy of the audience is thrown on the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, sin. The same is true of a film that would throw sympathy against goodness, honor, innocence, purity or honesty.

Note: Sympathy with a person who sins is not the same as sympathy with the sin or crime of which he is guilty. We may feel sorry for the plight of the murderer or even understand the circumstances which led him to his crime: we may not feel sympathy with the wrong which he has done. The presentation of evil is often essential for art or fiction or drama. This in itself is not wrong provided:

- a. That evil is not presented alluringly. Even if later in the film the evil is condemned or punished, it must not be allowed to appear so attractive that the audience's emotions are drawn to desire or approve so strongly that later the condemnation is forgotten and only the apparent joy of sin is remembered.
- b. That throughout, the audience feels sure that evil is wrong and good is right.

Man abjures his roles as father, husband and protector, which are explicitly defined as obligatory marital roles in the film in a marriage service that The Man and his wife witness. The Woman from the City urges The Man to murder his wife—a fair, meek, dutiful and loving mother—to sell his farm, and to come with her to the city, suggesting to him a plan of drowning her on the lake. Here the narrative strongly recalls the central incident and other elements of Theodore Dreiser's 1925 novel *An American Tragedy*, in which the protagonist Clyde Griffiths—not married but affianced to the naive young Roberta Alden who has become pregnant to him—comes to desire the more sophisticated and glamorous Sondra Finchley.<sup>15</sup> In the circumstances this is effectively an adulterous passion, and Clyde plans to murder his fiancée by drowning her in an apparent boating accident. His nerve fails at the critical moment but Roberta does drown, with Dreiser purposely blurring Clyde's role in her death. In *Sunrise*, however, as The Man's nerve fails him, too, the wife manages to escape, although a later set of events will make it appear that she has indeed drowned. The Man is consequently thrown into a state of grief and guilt, causing him to finally renounce The Woman from the City and to fully realise the extent of his love for his wife, with whom he is ultimately reunited.

Contrary to the narrative logic of the novels of female adultery of the nineteenth century, then, this movie of adultery does not engage with the widening tear in the socio-moral fabric through the opposition of stifling marital duty and individual desire in the figure of the female,<sup>16</sup> but deals rather with the stitching up of the lives of domesticity, passion, and social responsibility in the singular masculine figure. Rather than interrogating the order of things as the nineteenth century narrative of adultery had done, the story of *Sunrise* fundamentally affirms it; little wonder the same story was later filmed in the self-congratulatory atmosphere of Hitler's Reich in

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<sup>15</sup> Murnau's film was certainly based on the Sudermann story but the similarities with Dreiser's then famous novel—itsself based on a notorious incident from 1906—could hardly fail to be recognized by audiences and filmmakers alike. In the same way, it is difficult not to suspect a reference to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, published only one year previously, not only in the title but more forcefully in the opening prologue, which reads:

This song of the Man and his Wife is of no place and every place; you might hear it anywhere at any time. Wherever the sun rises and sets in the cities turmoil or under the open sky on the farm life is much the same; sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet.

<sup>16</sup> And which indeed Dreiser also explores but in the character of Clyde and against a background of the stifling pressures of capitalism.

1939 as a tribute to the wholesome and dutiful Aryan woman, typified by the wife threatened by her adulterous husband. Veit Harlan, director of the 1939 version (and, incidentally, of *Jud Süß*), claimed his was a realist work, as opposed to Murnau's earlier adaptation which, he scoffed, was 'only a poem', a comment that throws some light on Murnau's extraordinary achievement in producing an artistically engaging film from what is little more than a sentimental story.<sup>17</sup>

Two things in particular stand out in this regard—the structural character of the aesthetic conception of the film and Murnau's use of a psychologically charged screen imagery. Of the former, Molly Haskell comments:

The oppositions in *Sunrise* (and it is dialectical on every level) are between sunrise and sunset, the country and the city, good and evil, salvation and sin, divine grace and black magic, natural and unnatural acts, and finally the blonde, beatific wife and the dark sultry city woman in their struggle for the man's soul.<sup>18</sup>

Divided thus between starkly dichotomised images of womanhood the film focuses upon the psychological torment The Man endures as masculine desire struggles with moral responsibility, and it is in this that the film achieves some of its most cinematically innovative and dramatic effects. Brad Prager has argued that these effects—such as the dramatic superimposition of vampish images of The Woman from the City over an agonising Man—are cued directly to his psychological state:

The moments in *Sunrise* that contradict its otherwise naturalistic representations are associated with motifs of 'untamed' sex drives and the unconscious. The film plays with form only when it renders visible its protagonist's psychological consternation. The distortion of space is not treated in *Sunrise* as part of the unavoidable pathology of

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<sup>17</sup> George Sadoul and Peter Morris (eds.), *Dictionary of Films* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), p.362.

<sup>18</sup> Molly Haskell, 'Review Article of *Sunrise*' in *Film Comment*, Summer 1971, quoted in Richard Dyer MacCann, *American Movies: The First Thirty Years—Films of the 1920s* (London: 1996), p.107.

everyday life, as it is in German silent cinema; the appearances of Ansa's fantasies are therefore taken as aberrations.<sup>19</sup>

Yet it is fair to say that these 'aberrations' are nevertheless frequently set against a background of allegorical minimalism in which the imagery gains an iconic power beyond naturalism and manages to suggest a universality of significance: this is not a social condition, it is the human condition. This is particularly the case in the scenes in the countryside, on the lake, and among the marshes as *The Woman from the City* seductively 'vamps' *The Man*, provoking imaginings of the sensual high life in the city.



The image is pared down to fundamental masculine and feminine elements, composed in high contrast, both formally and cinematographically. In this

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<sup>19</sup> Brad Prager, 'Taming Impulses: Murnau's *Sunrise* and the Exorcism of Expressionism,' *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28.4 (Oct 2000), 289. Note that Ansa is the name of the male figure in 'The Trip to Tilstet'; Prager chooses to call the film's protagonist by the same name, but I suspect Murnau had his reasons for preferring the more allegorical titles.

way the film identifies an elemental masculine propensity for a purely libidinal fall from grace, against which it figures two diametrically opposed states of womanhood, and between which masculine desire appears destined to agonise, as visions of the Woman from the City plague the Man's waking mind, leaving him with tormenting and domestically destructive desires.



And this is where Murnau's adaptation gets especially interesting, because I would suggest that it is his insistent focus on male sexual torment that leads to the necessity to reductively portray women in this way, and it was this that presumably required changing *The Woman from the City* from a simple cleaning woman, as she was in Sudermann's story, to a lascivious and paganistic city vamp. No wonder he chose to jettison the character names from Sudermann's original tale, opting instead for the portentous titles of *The Man* and *The Woman*, to say nothing of the universalising prologue which claims this as an eternally recurrent story. And indeed it is a recurrent story—or at least it set the pattern for what was to become a recurrent cinematic story, because from Phyllis Dietrichson to *The Lady*

from Shanghai, it is *the* story of film noir, to which the theme of adultery was soon to be co-opted in its most memorable filmic forms.

### 3

The drama of adultery is clearly as much a psychological as a physical one, and indeed it is the unfolding of consciousness in and around the act of adultery that can prove the most profoundly unsettling in socio-moral terms, and at times the most liberating for the person involved. We know nothing of Hester Prynne's original dalliance with Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*; but we are privy to her most secret and anguished thoughts as she deals with its consequences, symbolised in all of their complexity by the scarlet letter itself:

For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread.<sup>20</sup>

Adultery works in mysterious ways: for Hester it is strangely emancipatory, which is certainly not the case for The Man in *Sunrise*. Nevertheless Murnau, quite as much as Hawthorne, recognised the interiority of the drama he was dealing with and his film is noteworthy for its innovative attempts to cinematically dramatise the turbulence of mind of The Man as he grapples with adulterous desire. Masculine in focus and psychological in interest, in this way Murnau's approach shares something with those contemporary developments in the novel I mentioned earlier—where men like John Dowell or Leopold Bloom dwell upon the event of adultery in their lives—even if here the male is the adulterous figure. My point is that in the case of novels like *The Good Soldier* and *Ulysses* and films like *Sunrise*, the psychological condition of the man bears upon the narrational mode of the story in a compelling way, and it was to this in particular that Murnau bent his most significant stylistic efforts,

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<sup>20</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), ed. Thomas E. Connolly, p.174.

exteriorizing the mental torment of *The Man* in expressionistic displays of desire and guilt. Moreover, he knew the significance of what he had achieved in this, stating in 1928: ‘I think films of the future will use more and more of these “camera angles”, or, as I prefer to call them, these “dramatic angles”. They help photograph thought.’<sup>21</sup> To ‘photograph thought’, or to dramatise consciousness—from Flaubert to Chopin and beyond, is this not what the novel was moving towards in its absorption with adulterous women in the 19th century, and is it not an essential concern of the modernist novel? Few topics have given greater food for thought than the matter of adultery, in novel and film, but the thoughts of women and men appear to diverge, as do the thematic implications of adultery, across the two mediums. If the novel invokes the place of women and the social contract, with the thoughts of women like Hester Prynne opening onto new vistas of social formation and gender equality,<sup>22</sup> film appears to resolve the problem of women in dichotomised stereotypy while it universalises the problem of men as that of ‘Human Desire’ itself (in the words of Fritz Lang’s 1954 noir meditation on the subject).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Graham Petrie, *Hollywood Destinies: European Directors in America, 1922-1931* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p.74.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *The Scarlet Letter*:

Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled. A tendency to speculation, though it may keep women quiet, as it does man, yet makes her sad. She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change, in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost, they vanish. Thus Hester Prynne, whose heart had lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clue in the dark labyrinth of mind; now turned aside by an insurmountable precipice; now starting back from a deep chasm. (p.184)

<sup>23</sup> Lang’s erotically charged noir of adulterous passion adapts Renoir’s similarly universalized sense of masculine desire in *La Bête Humaine* (1938).

That, at least, is the preliminary conclusion one might draw from Murnau's great film. But it may be that the form and meaning of this film had something to do with the historical circumstances of cinema in the 1920s. At this time, in fact, could cinema undertake at a technical level the kind of sophisticated exploration of an individual's moral and existential circumstance with the kind of reach and subtlety that the novel had managed? What the novel had shown is that the more one gets inside the mind of the character, the more complex and sophisticated a sense of that character's reality can emerge, and so the greater the understanding, and often sympathy, that can be elicited, even in the morally challenging matter of adultery. On the other hand, and despite the sophistication of narrational styles silent filmmakers like Murnau managed to achieve, I would argue that a truly nuanced filmic narration of the kind novelists developed to explore their worlds would only emerge with the introduction of sound cinema, and even then it would be a full ten years before filmmakers began to explore the subtleties of perception and subjectivity in filmic narration that would give psychological vividness and complexity to cinematic narrative in this way. Murnau certainly gets inside the mind of his male protagonist, but only insofar as he is able to expressionistically dramatise a sense of heightened desire coupled with a profound guilt. It is the advent of sound that makes available a fuller and more searching dramatic rendering of consciousness because it allows for a greater use of language, partly as a revelatory expression of personality in dialogue but also as a mechanism permitting the dramatising of point of view through a more adventurous use of techniques such as voiceover narration. And yet it is one of the ironies of the medium that at the very moment it arrived at a technical maturity that would potentially enable it to deal in a more sophisticated and complex way with the great novelistic themes, it found itself under an obligation to treat these with a delicacy that bordered on the sophomoric, as the moral expectations to which a film like *Sunrise* played would be crystallised within a few years into the regulatory Code of the Hayes Office. Adultery was consigned to mere wickedness, and the effect of this was to bring about a kind of congealing of the morally simplistic stereotypy at play in *Sunrise* within popular cinematic narrative, thereby pre-empting its capacity to play that questioning and subversive role within culture that may be charted in novelistic tales of adulterous women.

One might summarise these developments in this way: as the focal point of adultery shifts from the female in the novel to the male in cinema, the mainspring of marital transgression moves from the social to the biological, and the mode of the narrative moves from the situational and

morally exploratory to the allegorical and didactic. While the novelistic figure of the adulterous wife metaphorises social discontent, and illicit sex for her is an expression of (rather than a satisfaction of) yearning, the re-centring of the narrative upon the adulterous male allows for these feelings to be removed from the domestic sphere and exteriorised in a feminine figure represented as decadent, threatening, and, in a word, sinful. This is crucial, effectively pointing to the adulterous woman transmuting into something else in a change so powerful that it is signalled here in the use of the allegorical mode in the representation of *The Woman from the City*, who appears as the prototype for the kind of sexually transgressive woman who would dominate film screens within a decade—the *femme fatale*. The principal difference between *The Woman from the City* and the adulterous *femme fatale* of film noir, as the *Woman's* lurid dance among the marshes suggests, appears to be that she desires pleasure for its own sake—a pleasure that can only be provided by the sensual excitements of modern, decadent city life. The *femme fatales* of film noir, on the other hand, are realists, and they aim beyond the pleasure principle. For them, sex is merely a means to that end, as Elisabeth Bronfen notes:

the classic *femme fatale* has enjoyed such popularity because she is not only sexually uninhibited, but also unabashedly independent and ruthlessly ambitious, using her seductive charms and her intelligence to liberate herself from the imprisonment of an unfulfilling marriage. Furthermore, though she gains power over the noir hero by nourishing his sexual fantasies, her own interest is only superficially erotic. She entertains a narcissistic pleasure at the deployment of her own ability to dupe the men who fall for her, even as she is merciless in manipulating them for her own ends.<sup>24</sup>

Thus the vexed brooding of Hester Prynne that issues in visions of a revolutionary social transformation in which men and women become equal partners and equal citizens,<sup>25</sup> shrinks in the dark, masculine, libidinous world of film noir to a wicked feminine desire for mere material gain: she will take what she can, and whenever she can she will take what belongs to the male.

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<sup>24</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire,' *New Literary History*, Vol. 35, No. 1, *Rethinking Tragedy* (Winter, 2004), 106.

<sup>25</sup> See note 22 above.

Or this is the way the men see it—and this brings me to the second point regarding the historical development of film at this time. I mentioned that the narrational limitations of silent era cinema weighed upon the sophisticated management of this kind of narrative, limitations which become clear when one considers that within a decade of the introduction of sound, filmmakers were actively engaging with the novelistic propensities of the medium in startlingly inventive ways. By 1940 a film like Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* can be seen to have been influenced by as challenging and adventurous a text as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, published only four years earlier, with its complex play of diffracted narratives from various and even conflicting points of view assembled into a precarious but ultimately elusive whole, centring on an ambiguous figure whose epic story reflects and refracts in some way the story of the nation itself. While this film is rightly seen as a turning point in the history of cinematic form, its indebtedness to the prior narrative medium of the novel can often be overlooked amid the bravura of its cinematic style. But this is only the most evident instance of a general wave of formal exploration in narrative cinema, propelled in large part by the greater access to voice and tense that sound appears to have made available. As the example of *Citizen Kane* indicates, chief among these innovations was a particular interest in first-person forms of narrative that began to emerge in the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>26</sup> Bruce Kawin has provided an insightful reading of *Citizen Kane* in these terms in *Mindscreen*, and he goes on to identify a drift of first-person narration in cinema towards *nouvelle vague* modes on the continent in the 1950s and 1960s, but prior to this development more conventional filmmakers in Hollywood had shown a fascination for the possibilities of a linguistically enriched medium that offered the opportunity for narrational explorations similar in kind—and possibly depth—to the great narrational experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century novel.

Kawin identifies voiceover as the first cinematic mode of 'signifying subjectivity within the first-person narrative field,'<sup>27</sup> and, as the name implies, it is a device that only takes its place within the repertoire of cinematic narrative styles with the coming of sound. When combined with the flashback, a mode of narration was created which was, and probably still is, the most convenient and insistent cinematic device for cueing

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<sup>26</sup> Famously, Wells had originally planned an adaptation of Conrad's first-person modernist masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* as his first Hollywood project.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Kawin, *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-person Film* (Princeton University Press, 1978), p.10.

extended point of view, and in all the grammatical repertoire of cinema the voiceover-flashback comes closest to novelistic first person narration. This mode of narration in a literary text is very familiar, and from its earliest days in novels such as *Moll Flanders* through the high Victorian era with texts like *Great Expectations* and on into the modernist period, literary narrative has used it as a resource for the dramatic exploration of personality in tandem with the memorial unfolding of story. Punctuated by a reiterative 'I', narratives of this kind easily bear multiple significance in terms of the character who tells and the action that is told (two novels of adultery mentioned earlier, *The Great Gatsby* and *The Good Soldier*, are perhaps highpoints of the form). In the case of cinema the flashback was a common enough device from the silent days, but it took the addition of voiceover for filmmakers to find they could manage narrative fluidity and cinematic style in such a way as to maintain a subjective focus without overburdening the frame with its insistence.<sup>28</sup> Naturalising this mode for cinema quickly led to its use in stories involving confession, testimony and so on, and so it became a staple for the mystery and thriller where the matter at hand, as it happened, frequently involved criminal adultery. Maureen Turim notes of this development:

While thirties flashback films did introduce the bleeding voiceover transition, it is only in certain forties psychological melodramas, and certainly in film noir, that this disjunct voice attains a strong narrative motivation and continues beyond transitional moments.<sup>29</sup>

The conjoining of voiceover and flashback in this way in turn naturalised the increasingly expressionistic character of the *mise-en-scène*, as the screen image was understood as dramatically rendering a central, often disturbed psyche as it recounts its traumatic story in a situation of high stress—a dying Walter Neff speaking into the dictaphone in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), a distraught Frank Chambers confessing to the prison priest moments before entering the gas chamber in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), to take only the two most notorious examples.

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<sup>28</sup> As was the case in Robert Montgomery's experimental effort *The Lady in the Lake* (1947), shot entirely, but ultimately distractingly, in point of view.

<sup>29</sup> Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1989), p.171.

The stories these men have to tell take us back to the fundamental elements at play in *Sunrise*, but now the femme fatale has manoeuvred her way into the domestic sphere, and the men are the intruders. This does not change the way in which women come to be represented in the narrative, however, because this is now the way that men imagine them—with the voiceover-flashback, cinema has arrived at a convenient and unobtrusive way of ‘photographing thought’, as Murnau might have put it. But unlike in *Sunrise*, where The Man’s visions are demarcated from the rest of the narrative as ‘aberrations’, as Prager notes, the screenspace in films like *Double Indemnity* operates as a mindscreen, blurring the distinction between the real and the imagined.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, in American cinema at this time the masculine voice takes control of the narrative either through direct on-screen narration (*Double Indemnity*, *Murder My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and so on) or through free indirect discourse (as in, say, John Huston’s use of the over-the-shoulder camera in his 1941 adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon*) and the masculine view came to dominate screen conceptions of womanhood, with tales of adultery centring on the figures of the hormonal male and the femme fatale.<sup>31</sup> On the rare occasions that women assume narratorial command in these situations they tend to do so by writing letters, as in *A*

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<sup>30</sup> It is true that this use of voiceover-flashback can bring to the screen the potential operation of an even more complex kind of irony with which the literary mind has long been familiar from forms such as the dramatic monologue, whereby the given reality of the narrative can only be accepted as one person’s view of the matter. In these instances the insistence of the speaking voice, the first-person perspective, evokes the possibility of competing counter-narratives contesting the truth or plausibility of the narration, and I will deal with this in greater detail below. In this respect Bronfen has argued with great subtlety from a study of specific shots in *Double Indemnity* that Billy Wilder implies just such a counter-narrative and counter-fantasy to the overt confession of Walter Neff, a fantasy narrative of the femme fatale enveloping the male speaker, culminating in a transcendence of female desire in an ultimately tragic gesture of anagnorisis and fatalistic acceptance as Phyllis Dietrichson bows to the inevitability of her film noir fate. But, even apart from the shots Bronfen specifies, I would argue that the narrational mode of voiceover-flashback puts this possibility into play in the first place through the complex levels of narrational irony it generates, and with this development cinematic narrative has moved exponentially forward from the ‘photographed thoughts’ of *Sunrise*.

<sup>31</sup> In general, of course, these films adopt the masculine point of view uncritically, but some of the more thoughtful excursions in the genre acknowledge that at some level the figure of the lustful and manipulative woman should be understood as fundamentally a male projection—an idea Fritz Lang plays with brilliantly in *The Woman in the Window* (1944).

*Letter to Three Wives* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1949), which explores the fragility of the suburban American marriage under the threat of adultery, and the sublime *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948), which reverses the moral polarity entirely as the cad replaces the femme fatale as the agent of wickedness, and a female voice reveals the catastrophic effect of predatory masculine sexuality to a man who has never taken responsibility for his actions. But these are the exception, and even feminine epistles can be co-opted to the dominant stereotype, as in *The Letter* (William Wyler, 1940), where Bette Davis's eponymous correspondence only serves to confirm her lethal wickedness. Meanwhile, when Vincente Minelli came to make his handsome adaptation of *Madame Bovary* in 1949, after a decade of film noir gender figurations, it was felt necessary to *instruct* the audience on how to respond positively to an adulterous woman: the story is framed within the legal proceedings caused by the book, and in a manoeuvre that represents the very antithesis of Flaubert's novelistic approach the author is enlisted on-screen as defendant-narrator with a firm didactic purpose, instructing the audience—both at the trial and in the theatre—that they are not to precipitately condemn Emma, but rather that they should find a measure of sympathy for her. It all concludes with a gravely thoughtful James Mason as Flaubert staring off to the right of screen in an elegant profile of puzzled contemplation, thereby licensing whatever feelings of bewilderment Minelli's audience might well be sharing at the time.

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Four years after appearing as Madame Bovary in Minelli's film, Jennifer Jones was teamed with Montgomery Clift in Vittorio De Sica's neo-realist study of adulterous passion in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the Rome railway in *Terminal Station* (1953). Montgomery Clift had only recently appeared as Clyde Griffiths in George Marshall's 1951 adaptation of *An American Tragedy*, so each star brought to the movie an evocative background regarding the theme of adulterous passion and its dark consequences. Added to this, Jones's husband at the time, producer David O. Selznick, objected vociferously to another man's directorial handling of his wife and what he no doubt regarded as her star vehicle, and so the tale of adultery was itself adulterated when Selznick produced a re-edited version for American audiences, known as *Indiscretion of an American Wife* (1953). One can only wonder at the emotional dynamics of this increasingly fraught situation, in which Clift sided passionately with

director De Sica's aesthetic vision against producer Selznick's interference, while resisting the misplaced but apparently earnest romantic interest of his co-star, and yet still producing an on-screen performance of irresistible desire for her amid the stark and unpromising surrounds of the Rome railway station. There are significant differences of emphasis between De Sica's and Selznick's films but what is most striking is that in each case the film's centre of consciousness rests with the Jennifer Jones character, a housewife from Philadelphia whose European journey has unhinged her close and uneventful suburban world, releasing feelings of passion which she finds irrepressible and which lead to her indiscretion in an abandoned railway car on a siding in the station. Perhaps the filmmakers were counting on a residual sense of understanding of Jones's adulterous character due to the actress's earlier appearance as Emma Bovary, when, as I mentioned, audiences were instructed to find some sympathy for her. Or perhaps they were hoping that the narrative itself would conduct audiences to a higher level of empathy, for the couple are arrested in the indiscreet act and forced to submit to the judgement of the Station Security Chief, who turns out to be an indulgent figure willing to wink at this evidence of a pardonable vice, possibly because the station at which he works had only recently been rebuilt after the ravages of true human viciousness had reduced it to rubble during the war. Whatever the case, however, the film failed to find an appreciative audience.

One is tempted to think, though, that it was the railway setting that encouraged De Sica and Selznick to think that they could get away with it. A place of heightened opportunity for the chance encounter and the recent scene of so many emotional welcomes and tortured partings against a general background of human misfortune in wartime, the railway station presents a setting that readily metaphorises the complexity and random contingency of individual romantic fulfilment. It is almost as if the normal rules of social behaviour might be momentarily suspended in and around the railway—a view that appears to have been taken by the Clift and Jones characters in *Indiscretion of an American Wife*. It had figured this way already in the novel of adultery—most notably in Tolstoy as the venue for Anna's meeting with Vronsky and as the site and means of her tragic end<sup>32</sup>—and of course it had been successfully employed, and indeed raised

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<sup>32</sup> Not only did Anna meet Vronsky, and ultimately her tragic fate, at the railway station but it was on a train, after a carriage conversation on the emergent rights of women and the changing role and obligations for women in marriage, that the outraged Podsnicheff told of how he murdered his wife on the presumption of

to its highest metaphorical pitch, not so long before by David Lean in *Brief Encounter* (1954). He used it again for near-tragic effect in *The Passionate Friends* (1949), transforming the train station into a London tube station as the distraught Mary Justin seeks a blessed release from an impossible marital situation that has been exacerbated by her prior adultery. In the H.G.Wells novel from which it was adapted, Mary took poison—like Emma Bovary and Florence Dowell before her—but here Lean appears keen to accent the romantic abandon of her act by alluding to Anna's suicide, although he spares Mary a full tragic fate by having her rescued at the last moment by a repentant husband. He used it with a lighter touch in *Summertime* (1955), opening with an aerial view of Santa Lucia station in Venice as the train pulls in, delivering Jane Hudson (Katherine Hepburn) to her unexpected romantic rendezvous with the married Renato de Rossi (Rossano Brazzi). Jane is morally outraged when she discovers the truth, but circumstances are such that her strict spinsterish moral sense comes undone in the exotic Venetian night. When the train takes her away in the film's final moments it is with the audience's approval of her morally questionable but enlarging romantic adventure, as her adulterous lover waves fondly to her, so very unlike the character of Clift who finds himself sprawled on the gravel of the Rome Terminal Station, a picture of undignified injury as Jones's train departs.

Audiences clearly made allowances for Katherine Hepburn's character in *Summertime* in a way they did not for Jones's in *Indiscretion*, and perhaps this was because David Lean approaches the matter of adultery—perhaps his most prominent theme—without any of the sensationalism that appears in its other cinematic uses that I have been considering. In Lean's films all of the associated tropes of adultery return with novelistic subtlety. In *Brief Encounter*, for example, in an episode that could never have occurred in the play (in which the action is confined to the train station) Laura and Alec go boating, but he turns out to be a poor oarsman and they get caught up with the bridge fencing, at which point Alec is obliged to suffer the indignity of stepping out of the boat into the shallow water to redirect it.

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adultery in *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Cf Tanner's discussion of the importance of the railway setting in this context—pp.72-73.



It is an engaging and naturalistic image of romantic escape colliding somewhat shamefacedly with social restriction, but in its modest way it recalls similar episodes of drifting lovers and loosening morality from the novelistic past, such as Maggie Tulliver's ill-fated boat trip with Stephen in *The Mill on the Floss*, of which Tanner observes:

Maggie temporarily yields to this abdication of responsibility and allows herself to drift with the river, to succumb almost entirely to the 'fatal intoxication' of the moment, almost deprived of the right to make any choices. But the abandonment is not complete. 'All yielding is attended with a less vivid consciousness than resistance; it is the partial sleep of thought; it is the submergence of our own personality by another. Every influence tended to lull her into acquiescence....'<sup>33</sup>

It is precisely this conflict George Eliot delineates between the yearning desire for easeful acquiescence and the peripheral but shameful awareness of moral requirement that Lean evokes effectively but unobtrusively here in

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<sup>33</sup> Tanner, *The Novel of Adultery*, p.69.

his own suburban-scaled boating scene, as he does in so many other ways throughout this film.

Similarly, when he came to make *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), his adaptation of *Madame Bovary* which he relocated to western Ireland, Lean makes a point of associating Rosy Ryan with a parasol, which she carries about with her in her wanderings around the rugged Irish coastline.



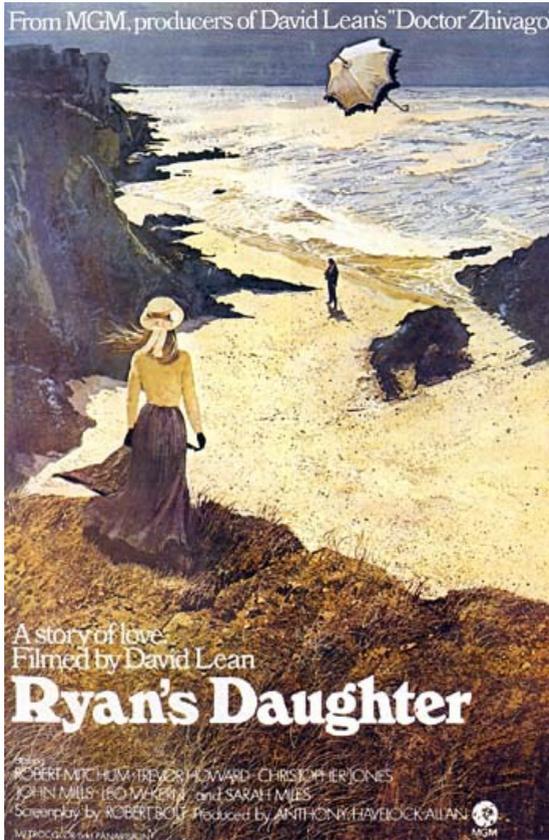
The opening shot of the film, however, shows that parasol drifting down through the air off a cliff and landing in the water, where it is retrieved by the parish priest who sees that it is returned to Rosy. Was it lost or was it thrown? The question arises because of the generic significance of the item—the same significance that attached to the parasol under which Edna Pontellier is first glimpsed by her husband at the opening of *The Awakening*.<sup>34</sup> The parasol is there to protect male property from the harsh effects of the sun—which Léonce Pontellier would afterwards complain of to his wife—so its loss, whether wilful or torn from Rosy by an irresistible force of nature, is significant. Audiences at the time may have been cued to this significance by the parasol having already figured in this way in the

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<sup>34</sup> See *The Awakening*, p. 4:

Mr. Pontellier finally lit a cigar and began to smoke, letting the paper drag idly from his hand. He fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at snail's pace from the beach. He could see it plainly between the gaunt trunks of the water-oaks and across the stretch of yellow camomile. The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun.

advertising for the film, where its free, windblown form can be seen to be drawing her to what turns out to be a moral precipice.



In a film which identifies women as the property of men in its title, the casting aside of this fashion accessory is the first sign of an emancipatory moral abandonment that will climax in Rosy's flight into the rainswept night in nothing but her shift to meet her lover. As with Edna Pontellier, whose ambiguously tragic and triumphant destiny climaxes in a naked swim, this symbolic pattern of divestiture underscores an existential struggle to throw off the trappings of the troubled and constrained place of women in a world of masculine order. Significantly, the lost parasol is returned to Rosy by the village priest, a well-meaning, celibate representative of that order who will later instruct her in her conjugal

duties, providing an ironic perspective on her relations with men which the film will then tease out in various other situations, including her marriage to her caring but effete teacher-husband and her unconscious involvement in the machinations of Anglo-Irish politics through her traitorous merchant-father and her psychologically damaged soldier-lover. Surrounded by images of male authority in a fractious world from which she yearns to escape, seduced by an unfulfilling adulterous romance narrative and dragooned into a mystifying political conspiracy, Rosy is ultimately divested of her social identity, literally shorn of it, in a scene of communal shaming that is every bit as traumatic as, and considerably more violent than, Hester Prynne's vigil on the scaffold. Unprotected by the cossetting niceties of patriarchal order symbolised by the parasol, Rosy is ultimately left brutally exposed as her hair is violently cut by the mob.

But above all it is David Lean's railway stations in his stories of adulterous women that reach back into the novelistic past and evoke a sense of crossing paths, of the random chances of romance and the wages of social sin. Nowhere is this more powerfully managed than in *Brief Encounter*, where rail timetables announce a suburban but still urgent warning of *carpe diem* as express trains thunder through the station with that juggernaut force of desire to which Laura Jesson momentarily threatens to sacrifice herself, either in physical love with Alec or physical destruction like Anna. 'I want to die,' she tells Alec at their final meeting at the train station, and it is significant that her fatality is inward and personal, the very antithesis of those impulses that were driving the murderous femme fatales of American cinema at the time. The vacuity of bourgeois life appears to have instilled in her the same blurred yearnings for romantic escape or final release that bedevilled Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, and Edna Pontellier. And like those heroines from another time and another medium, Laura's plight is told in such a way as to profoundly interrogate the nature of her social circumstance. Or, rather—and this is the point—Laura *tells* her story in voiceover flashback in such a way as to pose questions of her situation, without ever knowing that that is what she is doing.

The film camouflages many of its own subversive impulses under a narrative that ostensibly resolves in commitment to moral and social duty, and in doing so it appears to remain faithful to the Noel Coward drama from which it was adapted. For Coward there was a nobility to middle class sacrifice, a theme that is evident from his very first collaboration with Lean, *In Which We Serve* (1942), in which Coward himself plays the self-

sacrificing upper middle class naval captain with a fully patrician air. Even in this, his first collaboration with Coward and his debut as director, however, Lean's cinematic interests can be seen to be at odds with Coward's thematic inclinations. Lean is keen to focalize narrative through a series of individualised points of view, and although for the most part this is managed in the interests of narrative progression rather than psychological exploration it nevertheless serves to inflect each narrative episode with a particular subjective sense that engages the viewer's emotional response through the use of flashbacks from the perspectives of various characters. The wave-like dissolves into and out of these flashbacks blend actuality and memory into poignant moments of a reality heightened by individual perception. This is most marked in the scene in which Celia Johnson is called upon to toast the ship that will carry her husband (Coward) and crew into the perils of war. It is a very affecting moment, beautifully managed by Johnson's delivery which communicates the required sense of nobility under pressure but more intensely projects a keen feeling for the torment of individual sacrifice and the helpless frustrations of those women who must stand and wait. It is a scene that momentarily tips the film off thematic balance, and the tension it generates between social requirement and individual desire—particularly in the case of women—came to absorb Lean in many of his later films, and perhaps explains why he chose Johnson for his Laura when it came to adapting Coward's drama of adultery, *Still Life*, to the screen.

It is likely that Coward conceived of *Still Life* as a kind of modern pastoral with the aristocratic characters transposed to the upper bourgeoisie, meeting by chance in a railway station as they once might have met in the forests of Arden, momentarily relieved of courtly burdens and seemingly free to indulge in the kind of rustic sensuality that civic morality frowns upon and sense of duty should forbid. Here the rustic clowns of theatrical tradition have been modernized to working class station attendants and teashop ladies, whose freer morality and bawdy antics counterpoint the romantic agonies of Laura and Alec (Trevor Howard). And as her name implies, Laura is a Petrarchan figure who finds herself in a modern world, but one in which the old courtly notion that true romantic fulfilment can only be attained outside the bonds of marriage still functions. Yet *Brief Encounter* is not a film of adultery—the illicit liaison is never consummated. It is, however, in the play, and the two most important infidelities of the film with respect to the play, it seems to me, are this decision never to allow Laura's passion to find sexual release, binding her all the more intensely within her feelings of moral and social

constriction, and the decision to give the point of view of the film totally over to her in flashback voiceover. In the first instance this allows Lean to explore the emotional impact of Laura's deep sense of shame without counterbalancing this with an act of guilt to which it could answer, and without ever providing her with a sensual experience that might provide some sense of emotional release. The tension around Laura is raised to such a high pitch that it exceeds the capacity of the narrative to provide any sense of satisfactory resolution: the story simply concludes, it does not resolve, and there is no promise that next week's trip to Milford won't bring her another episode of adulterous desire and emotional torment. And in the second instance, Laura's flashback voiceover allows Lean to dramatise her consciousness with that ironic play of meaning which I noted earlier in relation to the masculine narrators of film noir. Thus it is not just that we are enjoined to comprehend this situation compassionately from Laura's point of view, but we are also given the opportunity to understand what weighs upon that point of view in a way Laura cannot. She can't say why, but Laura experiences adulterous desire as an emancipatory passion: she is unable to understand why she might unconsciously desire liberation from a situation which she knows to be the normal and approved mode of life for women like her, just as she is unable to get past her own sense of her husband, Fred, as wise and caring, a view she reminds herself of at various points through the film. But there are aspects to her telling of her tale—her confession, to herself if to no other—which ironically are revealing to others, but not to her.

None of this is in Coward's play, and all of it is managed with considerable cinematic art. The cumulative effect of Lean's approach here is to bring into play the dangerously subversive implications arising from the sympathetic psychological explorations of the plight of women in the novel of adultery, because although Coward's theme of the nobility of middle class commitment to duty is acknowledged, it is also simultaneously recognised by Lean as a fundamentally manipulative principle of civic life, and it is the tension between these two forces—played out so vibrantly in Laura's sensibility<sup>35</sup>—that gives the film much

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<sup>35</sup> And in Johnson's extraordinary performance, of which Richard Dyer—in his excellent study of this film—observes:

The effect (of Celia being Laura) is reinforced by Johnson's great ease before the camera . . . I have emphasized this perception of her, because it suggests the degree to which her voice and presence (Celia Johnson's, Laura Jesson's) in the film could invite the audience in, not treating her as a symptom or spectacle but rather as a place from which to view this kind of life. Thus the inflections she

of its extraordinary power. All too vividly, all too ashamedly aware of her duty, Laura is unable to recognise that manipulation, but this plays itself out in the mindscreen of her memories of the brief encounter because it structures her consciousness and determines her apprehensions of her world. In this, Lean seems to have taken the lesson of the master—not Coward but rather Henry James, the great novelist of adultery, who, as he approached the writing of *The Portrait of a Lady*, recalled that he cautioned himself in this way:

‘Place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness,’ I said to myself, ‘and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish. Stick to THAT—for the centre; put the heaviest weight into THAT scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself.’

It is the scale of Laura’s relation to herself that is dramatised in this film, and despite an air of naturalism that at times borders on the gritty, it is only Laura’s sense of self and her world that is on display, not an objective sense of the reality of the matter. In this sense *Brief Encounter* is not about adultery, as the play was—it doesn’t even contain the act of adultery—but it is a searching examination of the adulterous mind under the pressures of bourgeois moral stricture, and in this way it takes its place among those other great modernist works that take as their point of interest the psychic repercussions of adultery—*What Maisie Knew* or *The Good Soldier*—with this twist: that here, the psychic intensity is ratcheted up to an almost intolerable pitch because the person puzzling over the moral outrage of adultery is not a bystander but rather the same one beset by unrealised but irrepressible adulterous impulses. And adultery does not even occur! But then, as Tanner notes, according to biblical injunction adultery need only happen in the mind, and that is why Laura’s mind is simultaneously adulterous and the censorious voice of introjected social order, and her sense of guilt refines to a perfect extremity the admonitory perspective of social morality, rendering hers a Gothic world of her own imagining.

There are times when this imaginary element of memory is cued to the audience, as when Laura recalls her romantic fantasy of a prospect of

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gives to the script, especially the way common sense and yearning, amusement and despair, eddy across her face, voice and body, come to suggest an inwardness with this situation, a sort of running commentary on it, that is different from her formal presentation of guilt to male authority.

Richard Dyer, *Brief Encounter* (London: BFI, 1993) p.33.

life with Alec, studded with clichés reminiscent of movie trailers like *Flames of Passion*—the movie which she and Alec find risible—but this only gives an added pathos to the quality of her desire, since this is the only way in which she can frame her sense of yearning, and thus she finds her own emotional life here both compelling and simultaneously rather inauthentic and confectioned. But this overt signalling of Laura's awareness of the mediated character of her sense of self at this point distracts us from the fact that it is *always* mediated in this way. This comes out in particular in scenes such as the framing of her sense of shame as she sits under the war memorial, physically and morally diminished both by the honour it symbolises and the high angle at which she is shot, which does not express the film's judgement of her so much as her own sense of self.



Similarly, the screen is frequently inflected by expressionistic imagery of this kind which serves to externalise her fraught inner life, as when the staircase to her children's room momentarily takes on a look of Gothic chiaroscuro as she is assailed by disembodied male voices (her husband's downstairs, her son's peremptory commands from upstairs) after her first encounter with Alec, when the first glimmerings of a liberating passion collide with the dreary realities of a life determined by the same social

conventions and biological patterns that Edna Pontellier ultimately found intolerable.



Thus, where Coward's play makes educated reference to prior genres of romantic narrative, Lean's film gathers these into the furniture of Laura's mind. In this way the imagery of the film can be seen to be shaped by the movies Laura sees every Thursday and the books she borrows from Boots.<sup>36</sup> Her personal drama of renunciation is saturated with suburban renderings of Gothic, pastoral, and courtly romance—they are all at play here, the pastoral setting of the working class cafe, the triadic relationship between courtly lovers and the Lord at home in the Castle, and the suicidal impulses from the heroines of nineteenth century fiction. The difference from the play is stark: there, the text compliments the audience with these seemingly high-brow associations; here, they are the very fabric of Laura's tormenting imaginings, adding a psychological dimension totally absent from the play, but one that was increasingly becoming of interest to

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the sorts of books these would be and how they may have influenced the narrative see Dyer pp.37-41.

filmmakers as they explored the narrational and expressionistic capacities of film in the early 1940s, as I have argued.

But Lean's most interesting and adventurous use of this mode of narration occurs in its most camouflaged moments, when the screen presents a scene at which Laura could not have been present. There are only two of these—first when she calls Mary Norton to back up her story about lunch, and next when she rushes out of the flat when Alec is confronted by Stephen after he arrives home unexpectedly during Laura and Alec's tryst. In the first scene Laura remembers sitting at her dressing table as she tells her first lie to Fred; here she is surrounded by the appurtenances of female vanity, her face reflecting duplicitously in a number of mirrors as she fashions herself in memory as an image of cosmetic deceit (Fred observes that she is 'beautifying' herself).



When she telephones Mary, she pictures her in precisely the same attitude, preening herself and even plucking an eyebrow as she studies herself in the mirror while conspiring with Laura's deception.



This, then, is how Laura comes to imagine women—an image which conforms to a masculinist stereotypy of feminine duplicity and sensuality, and which informs her own self-reflections. In the later scene, however, we see how she imagines men. In the play we cannot know what occurs between Alec and Stephen when he interrupts the tryst—Laura guesses that it becomes a diminishing masculine conversation about sexual conquest, but Alec assures her it wasn't that way. In the film, we see—or it seems we see—precisely what happens: Stephen morally reprehends Alec, with particularly heavy sarcasm, in a scene which has the dual effect of morally excoriating Laura for her part in the affair, but simultaneously giving Alec a further nobility insofar as he is now seen to be shielding her from the moral censure he received but will not visit on her when he later speaks slightly of the event. But I think this scene must be read as constructed from Laura's sense of Alec's nobility, projected back into the unknown scene in the bedroom; and if this scene is merely Laura's imagining of what happened it is profoundly revealing, for it not only gives one male figure moral authority (Stephen), it also gives another male figure, Alec, a nobility from which she is necessarily precluded (she can shield no-one, and her honour now is understood by her as being in Alec's chivalrous gift), which can only serve to accentuate her own ignoble sense of self.

Alec is not a figment, as some modern viewers have speculated,<sup>37</sup> but he is fashioned from Laura's imaginings all the same, and he embodies both romantic and patriarchal aspects of the male which dramatize the schizophrenized nature of her social position as woman in which she can figure and comprehend herself only as deceitful adulteress and idealized mistress of the chivalric hero upon whom her honour depends (the Petrarchan Laura), or as domestic possession of a dull, neglectful and affectionless lord of the manor and inadequate and sinful mother (as when she blames herself for her son Bobby's accident).



It all adds up to a state of wretchedness, of quiet desperation, to which Laura apparently re-dedicates herself at the end, having survived her suicidal impulse at the train station. I would argue, however, that this sentimental conclusion simply papers over the issues raised by this film, allowing it to apparently conform to the general cinematic morality regarding the matter of adultery that had been evolving over the previous 15 years. Against this sentimental view, Lean's narrative gambit of voiceover flashback and the ironies it generates has put this wretchedness

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<sup>37</sup> Cf Dyer p.19.

into play, and the audience cannot simply dismiss it: it lingers beyond the ending as part of the fundamental experience of the film even if Laura tries nobly to disavow it. Not that she can, because it is her sense of the wretchedness of the world that is on screen, not the world as it is, objectively speaking. This, too, is where the dramatic intensity of this film comes from: this fundamental contradiction between its espoused objective morality—traditional, communitarian, socially idealistic—and its subjective narrative conduct and empathetic mode of narration, which is of a piece with the ‘immoral’ conduct and consciousness of Laura, who cannot help finding that morality claustrophobic and stifling even as she judges herself harshly by it. And the tension here arises from the fact that although this ‘nobility’ eclipses and subjugates personal desire in its appeal to a supposed collective good, the deeper implication of the film is that this subjugation actually works in the interests of a masculine status quo and against the interests of women like Laura—a perception which the film dramatises but which Laura’s deep sense of guilt prevents her from recognising.

The audience, then, briefly encounters a dark and troubling irony in this film which has the effect of subverting the comfortably familiar moral sentiment it appears ultimately to espouse. Prior to the war, in Coward’s play, that was not the case—the sentiment was indeed espoused, but here it is adulterated in the filmic experience as Lean appeared to find the process of adaptation drawing him towards different perspectives, different conclusions. Perhaps the war changed things, making it impossible to ignore the fact that noble sacrifice in a class-based society generally benefited those not required to make it, and was generally made by those who did not enjoy the privileges of nobility—a perspective which this film applies to the gender divide.<sup>38</sup> One wonders, though, whether for Lean it

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<sup>38</sup> This discounts Alec’s noble sacrifice in part—his decision to go to Johannesburg on his idealistic medical mission—but then we really don’t know anything about Alec, other than Laura’s idealized memory of him. We certainly don’t know what he was telling his own wife during this period, for example, or whether he was enduring the same kind of agony as Laura, since it’s not his film. Nor do we know what impels him in the first place. It is interesting, however, that Alec comes across as a much less chivalrous figure in the play, where his arguments have a rather specious air, and sound very much like pompous and self-serving persuasions to love:

Alec: Everything’s against us—all the circumstances of our lives—those have got to go on unaltered. We’re nice people, you and I, and we’ve got to go on being nice. Let’s enclose this love of ours with real strength, and let that strength be that no-one is hurt by it except ourselves.

was a case of fidelity to the medium taking precedence over fidelity to the source, as his exploration of the narrational potentialities of cinema served to open up possibilities of interpretative meaning that transformed Coward's theatrical study into a very different experience for cinema audiences. For—in Laura's weekly trip to the cinema at Milford, which opens briefly onto something so much larger—at the heart of this film about adultery is a connection between the seductions of the screen and the seductions of life. Faithful in narrative structure to a morality it may have been obliged to follow, the film's aesthetic effect, moment by moment, is nevertheless to dramatize the pull of a scandalous departure from the settled existence of suburban life, and when it does so it may be a secret admission that film is a medium that seduces us from and adulterates the precarious reality of our lives whenever it is most faithful to its own aesthetic desires, to the genius of its own forms.<sup>39</sup>

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Laura: Must we be hurt by it?

Alec: Yes—when the time comes.

Laura: Very well.

Alec: All the furtiveness and the secrecy and the hole-in-corner cheapness can be justified if only we're strong enough—strong enough to keep it to ourselves, clean and untouched by anybody else's knowledge or even suspicions—something of our own forever—to be remembered --

Laura: Very well.

Alec: We won't speak of it anymore—I'm going now—back to Stephen's flat. I'll wait for you.... —Noel Coward, *Still Life* (London: Samuel French, 1966), p.30.

Laura is persuaded, and she does go to the flat on this night in October, and continues to do so until December, when Stephen eventually interrupts their liaison.<sup>39</sup> In this the film is like the Rachmaninov concerto Laura absorbs herself in, or the Chopin prelude that Edna Pontellier finds awakens her sensibility, or the Kreutzer Sonata that Podsnicheff finds so troubling, to the extent that he is carried away by suspicions of his wife's adultery and murders her, because, as he says, 'music provokes an excitement which it does not bring to a conclusion.' (*The Kreutzer Sonata*, ch. 23—<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/tolstoy/leo/t65kr/chapter23.html>, accessed 1/7/2016.) In this respect Tanner observes:

music—particularly romantic nineteenth century music, which in various ways extols the projection of an individual's subjective mood—is dangerous to the extent that it suggests the possibility of new and exciting mergings and a sense of 'agitation' and discontent with one's established position and habitual range of feelings... From one point of view music can be seen as an adulteration of ordinary consciousness—a new and exciting relationship with the mood of another, which, however, can find no realization in the realm of society... From this point of view, both music and adultery, within the rigid confines of bourgeois society, offer

'My heart is black with rebellion against my lot and against the lot of woman,' writes Mary Justin in her letter to Stephen, with whom she had had her adulterous and defiantly liberated affair in H.G. Wells's *The Passionate Friends*.<sup>40</sup> When he came to adapt that novel David Lean took the narrative from Stephen—Wells's male narrator who was in fact in the process of writing his autobiography in a patriarchal epistle to his young son—and turned it inside out, bringing it to the screen as Mary's story, which she tells in flashback-voiceover narration. Just as his passion for cinema represented for him a means of 'getting out of Croydon', as he famously claimed, Lean appeared to recognise the emancipatory force of any passion that had the effect of revealing the stifling existential conditions imposed by an unquestioned propriety. This analysis of his sources and adaptative approach suggests that in doing so he was drawn to explore modes of feminine consciousness in conjunction with exploratory modes of cinematic expression which yielded challenging perspectives upon each. In the matter of adultery he returned to a novelistic sympathy with the adulterous heroine, thereby reversing the prevailing paradigm of the femme fatale, who had become necessary to a mass entertainment morality and thus central to the cinematic depiction of adultery. And by giving the woman the narratorial point of view he explored with great subtlety modes of cinematic dramatization of consciousness—in particular, female consciousness beset by bourgeois constriction—which both deepened the expressive reach of the medium and brought into view aspects of social existence commonly occluded by prevailing cinematic and cultural mores. Like Murnau before him, it was fidelity to the medium itself that led him to an interest in exploring the possibilities of 'filming thought', and like Hester Prynne, cinematically speaking anyway, the scarlet letter was his passport into regions where others dared not tread.

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the possibility of an extrasocial excitation that cannot be translated back into a way of life within society... This is an apt formulation for what the novel of adultery sets out to explore—not this or that illicit coupling, but the fate of awakened energy 'unsuited both to the time and the place'.

(p.79)

<sup>40</sup> H.G.Wells, *The Passionate Friends* (New York: Harper Bros., 1913), p.303.