

CHAPTER I

THE SPECTRE OF NARRATIVE



A specter is haunting the cinema: the specter of narrative. If that apparition is an Angel, we must embrace it; and if it is a Devil, then we must cast it out. But we cannot know what it is until we have met it face to face.

— Hollis Frampton, 'A Pentagram on Conjuring the Narrative'.

'The rejection of linear narrative', according to P. Adams Sitney, is '*nearly* a defining feature' of the avant-garde (1978: vii [italics added]). His provisional commitment to the importance of the rejection or displacement of narrative speaks of other elements that come into play when defining avant-garde film. Commercial motivations, production processes and means of financing and distribution may also have a bearing on a film's status as avant-garde (Smith, 1998: 395). Evidently, the avant-garde is not defined solely by its use, rejection or renegotiation of narrative. But as Sitney suggests, the manner in which narrative is negotiated is a central topic, albeit a contentious one. If there is a lack of unity amongst filmmakers and scholars about how the avant-garde negotiates or should negotiate narrative, it is because both 'narrative' and 'the avant-garde' are equally elusive terms, and while theories have been proposed, there is no definitive consensus about what constitutes a narrative, or an avant-garde work of art.

This chapter will begin by suggesting that narrative and avant-garde film are sometimes assumed to be alien to one another, without mutual significance. The goal, then, will be to challenge this assumption by demonstrating how narrative is sometimes present in avant-garde films, albeit in unconventional ways. After explaining in detail some of the ways in which avant-garde films can work obliquely with narrative, this chapter will propose two types of strictly non-

narrative form in avant-garde film that call upon alternative methods of engagement to narrative comprehension.

This discussion fits into the broader themes of the book in two principal ways. First of all, the subject of narrative is one of several recurring themes in discourse about avant-garde film that has also been widely discussed in the field of cognitive science.¹ In addition, the model of avant-garde filmmakers working as practical psychologists is also pertinent here. Commercial filmmakers utilize the audience's ability to follow an ordinary narrative, and the viewer will typically follow the storyteller's lead without conscious effort. The filmmaker might still challenge the viewers – withholding information, surprising or misleading them – but they will rarely compel the audience to pay attention to their own habits of mind, or risk confounding them without an eventual reinstatement of coherence. Some experimental filmmakers, by contrast, oftentimes subvert the pervasiveness of traditional narrative as a mode of engagement in cinema, and also compel the viewer to appeal to other sense-making skills that are less widely exercised in film-going experiences.

Thus, instead of providing an experience whereby the viewer is called upon to exercise their previously well-rehearsed skills in following a narrative, the avant-garde filmmaker provides a novel experience in a variety of ways that will be detailed in this chapter. In short, the viewer might need to make bolder inferences in order to discern the story that is being presented obliquely onscreen. They might also need to adapt their viewing habits and learn to let go of expectations of a conventional story, even though narrative expectations are cued. Allegorical messages might be identified, even if they are not couched in a conventional story. The film might also call upon the viewer to pay closer attention to the feelings evoked by the film, instead of attempting to 'understand' it in a conventional sense. When narrative comprehension is challenged, the avant-garde may reveal experiences and pleasures un- or under-rehearsed in cinema that expand the viewer's sensitivities and range of engagement skills.

To begin with, this chapter will provide an overview that surveys contrasting attitudes on the relationship between narrative and avant-garde film amongst scholars and artists. Following this, aspects of the cognitive position on narrative will be detailed; the concept of narrative as a mode of thought (as opposed to a text-structure) will be considered, an explanation for the pervasiveness of narrative will be outlined, and so will David Bordwell's model of narrative comprehension (which is informed by cognitive theories of mind). Following this, four studies will explore some of the ways in which narrative norms have been challenged and subverted by avant-garde films. Finally, two alternative systems of organization to narrative will be proposed: catalogue form, and the meditative film. The implications of these alternative systems of organization on the viewer's comprehension skills will be explored.

Perspectives on Avant-Garde Film and Narrative

The resistance to narrative amongst artists in theoretical writing stretches back to the 1920s. Dziga Vertov declared in 1923: 'As of today cinema needs no psychological, no detective dramas. As of today – no theatrical productions shot on film . . . Into the confusion of life, hereby decisively enter' (Vertov 1978 [1923]: 7). In the 1940s, Maya Deren compared cinema's dependence on narrative to airborne planes flying above and along earth-bound highway routes and train lines. She comments:

What has been most responsible for the lack of development of the cinematic idiom is the emphatic literacy of our age. So accustomed are we to thinking in terms of the continuity-logic of the literary narrative that the narrative pattern has come to completely dominate cinematic expression in spite of the fact that it is, basically, a visual form. (Deren 2005 [1959]: 27)

In a branch of cinema that polemically defines itself as liberated from traditional conventions, narrative form is sometimes referred to as a 'constraint'. Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, for instance, state:

The American experimental filmmakers [were inspired] to abandon the constraints of narrative and to create something more ambitious. . . [Man Ray, Kirsanov, Léger and others] heralded the birth of a new freedom in the cinema, wherein narrative became secondary to visual poetry. (Dixon and Foster 2002: 3)

Similarly, Michael O'Pray characterizes avant-garde work as 'unburdened by narrative' (O'Pray 2003b: 56) and refers to 'the avant-garde's predilection for disjointed forms and structures in which "narrative" played no part' (O'Pray 2003a: 14). Peter Gidal does not just refer to his film work as 'non-narrative', but as 'anti-narrative' in a more defined act of expulsion (Gidal 1979). From Gidal's perspective, surrealists and post-World War I American filmmakers such as Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger would have undermined their oppositional status by incorporating 'dramatic' elements into their films.

For Malcolm Le Grice, the use of cinematic forms that do not conform to narrative conventions is the avant-garde's major claim to intervention on an aesthetic, ideological and political level. His objection to narrative form lies in the ideology hidden beneath the unproblematic 'linearity' of presentation that is made invisible and validated in dominant culture.

This linearity of causal sequence is by definition authoritarian. Even if the content is transgressive or anarchic, the form locks the audience into a consequence that unifies the subject impotently with and within the narrative. It is the linear coherence of the narrative and its conclusion that repress the subject

(viewer) by implicitly suppressing the complexity of the viewer's own construction of meaning. Transmitted as a culturally validated convention, narrative subsequently becomes a model by which experience is interpreted – that is, becomes a filter for the life experience outside the cinematic (Le Grice 2001 [1997]: 292).

Not all theoretical texts on avant-garde film assume that narrative is or should be entirely removed. Annette Michelson, an advocate of the avant-garde, claims that the crux of cinematic development lies 'in the evolution and redefinition of the nature and role of narrative structure' (1978 [1970]: 410). The avant-garde would be the place for this development to occur. Murray Smith comments that 'narrative has been displaced, deformed, and reformed [in the avant-garde], rather than simply expunged altogether' (Smith 1998: 397). Similarly, Edward Small comments that 'when experimental film/ video does deal with narrative . . . it typically presents fragmented narratives that tend to confound the conventions of classical continuity' (Small 2005: 21).

Writing in the late 1980s, Tom Gunning referred to what he termed the 'submerged narratives', found in the work of Phil Solomon, Lewis Klahr and other members of a tendency he dubs 'minor cinema'. He comments that in their works, 'plots stir just beneath the threshold of perceptibility. The sea swells of these subliminal stories align images into meaningful but often indecipherable configurations' (Gunning 1989–90: 4). In the passage quoted from Sitney at the beginning of this essay, he took care to comment that linear narratives are rejected, implying that non-linear narratives sometimes take their place (one would assume that, like Le Grice, linearity refers to a causally linked chain of events, although this is not made explicit).

This chapter assumes a moderate position on the relationship between avant-garde film and narrative, echoing and refining the claims made by Michelson, Smith, Small and Sitney by suggesting that while narrative reigns supreme in commercial cinema, it has been productively renegotiated within the avant-garde on some occasions, and outright rejected on others. As such, it may be understood as a starting point of creative intervention if it is productively reformulated. This chapter will consider how this is achieved. Before considering the use of narrative in avant-garde film in a series of case studies, however, we can form a conceptual framework of narrative by exploring it in a cognitive context.

Cognitive Narratology

Thus far, it has been established that writers and artists are divided on the function and presence of narrative in avant-garde film. All agree, however, that it is not used in a conventional sense. If avant-garde films are designed to exercise the mind in ways that are unfamiliar in commercial forms of filmmaking, why

did narrative become the dominant organizational form in cinema to begin with? This is a question that cognitive researchers have addressed.

According to cognitive theories of mind, narrative form is as pervasive as it is because the ability to think within a narrative framework is an important tool for making sense of the natural world. General audiences appear to have a preference for the clarity of linear narrative in cinema and literature because mentally organizing the varied and tangential array of events in our daily activities into a causally linked chain of events creates clarity and our lives become manageable. As such, developing narrative comprehension as a mode of thought is a fundamental part of human cognitive development. Studies in artificial intelligence have shown that acquiring this skill requires detailed linguistic and cognitive operations (Mateas and Sengers 1999; Herman and Young 2000), so if it is not innate, this otherwise complex process is readily learned. We are hardwired to develop this ability, because it is one of the most powerful mechanisms the mind possesses for making sense out of the complicated events of the world.

In *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, Brian Boyd comments that in order to manage our lives as efficiently as we do, our minds must have been prepared before birth to learn the information specifically relevant to human problems (Boyd 2010: 39). Through evolution, the mind has been tailored towards seeking meaningful patterns (including narrative patterns) from birth, even if this skill is only fully developed later. Evolutionary psychologist Henry Plotkin explains that the world can be partitioned, described and learned about in an infinitely large number of ways. As such, if a truly general-purpose learning device was let loose in the world without constraint, it could begin acquiring information about the world in an infinitely large number of search paths. In turn, the device would be unlikely to learn anything that is biologically useful within a single lifetime. Through evolution, we address this problem in the following way:

[Evolution gains] knowledge of the world across countless generations of organisms, it conserves it selectively relative to criteria of need, and that collective knowledge is then held within pools of species. Such collective knowledge is doled out to individuals, who come into the world with innate ideas and predispositions to learn only certain things in specific ways. Every human, every learner of any species, begins its life knowing what it has to learn and be intelligent about – we all come into the world with the search space that we have to work in quite narrowly defined. (Plotkin 1997: 173, quoted in Boyd 2010: 40)

Generating narratives is also central in the transmission of knowledge. Soon after toddlers develop the ability to speak, they begin creating narratives out of their own experience and they also become interested in the stories around them. There is ecological value in understanding events in narrative terms then – it is adaptive to pass on your experience to others. Most forms of personal

experience² cannot be transmitted from one generation to the next genetically, but change and adaptation are crucial for survival. In narratives, meanings are stabilized and lessons are learned from one's own experiences that can be applied to future situations (Anderson 1996: 144).

It is the very pervasiveness of narrative for reasons explained by Boyd, Plotkin and Anderson that may underscore the impulse of avant-garde artists to challenge or reject linear storytelling, as well as the desire to create work that calls upon the spectator to generate meaning independently, rather than having it served to them. If avant-garde filmmakers aim to provide mental activities for their spectators that are generally unrehearsed in the cinema, abandoning narrative comprehension (or creating challenges in doing so) would be a fertile creative starting point. The viewer is left to find other avenues with which to engage with the work.

Up to this point, it has been established that there is a disparity amongst artists, critics and theorists as to what role narrative should serve avant-garde film. We have also considered why narrative is so widespread, and why avant-garde artists are compelled to challenge its application. But what is the nature of narrative? Within a cognitive context, narrative is understood as a mode of thought, rather than as a text structure. Both of these ways of looking at narrative enable and give form to the other; however, if a film is organized by a narrative structure, it will accordingly facilitate a narrative mode of engagement.

In 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', for instance, Jerome Bruner (1991) argues that narrative operates as a mental instrument in the construction of reality. While describing some of its properties, he moves throughout the article between mental 'powers' used to navigate the natural world, and the elements of narrative discourse that trigger these powers when engaging with a fictional story. For Bruner, a narrative will feature a chain of causally linked events taking place over time, while equilibrium is disrupted and reinstated through intentional agents. This definition is a commonplace list of characteristics for those who think of narrative as a text structure, yet for Bruner these textual elements serve as *cues* for the spectator's mental activity. The focus is on the viewer's activity rather than the text itself, but both can be understood as different 'faces' of the same phenomenon. While the different emphases of the two traditions should be understood, they also share an underlying connection.

David Bordwell provides a general model for the ways in which spectators respond to narrative film in a long-standing theory first introduced in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985) and later developed in *Poetics of Cinema* (2008). Central to his model is the assumption that the spectator draws on real-world knowledge and awareness of narrative conventions in order to go beyond the information given directly in the film. Previous theories of narrative, Bordwell suggests, downplayed the viewer's role or characterized them as passive victims of narrational illusion who are 'positioned' by narrative. In Bordwell's theory, a nar-

rative film cues the spectator to execute a variety of operations, and so his central line of enquiry asks what the spectator does when comprehending a narrative film, and what features of the film solicit narrative comprehension.

Bordwell's model operates on the assumption that perceiving and thinking are active, goal-oriented processes, and so a spectator constructs a perceptual judgement on the basis of non-conscious inferences. Not everything that is relevant to the story is directly declared in the film itself, so the narrative is tailored to encourage the spectator to execute story-constructing activities, going beyond the information given to flesh out the story.³ This is done with the use of schemata – organized clusters of knowledge that guide our thought processes. Cues, patterns and gaps are presented that shape the viewer's application of schemata and the testing of hypotheses. When information is missing, perceivers will make inferences or guesses about it. If events are presented out of order, perceivers will mentally reorder them. Spectators will also seek causal connections between events, both in anticipation and also in retrospect. Bordwell summarizes his model in the following way:

the perceiver of a narrative film comes armed and active to the task. She or he takes as a central goal the carving out of an intelligible story. To do this, the perceiver applies narrative schemata which define narrative events and unify them by principles of causality, time, and space. Prototypical story components and the structural schema of the 'canonical story' assist in this effort to organize the material presented. In the course of constructing the story the perceiver uses schemata and incoming cues to make assumptions, draw inferences about current story events, and frame and test hypotheses about prior and upcoming events. (Bordwell 1985: 38–39)

When discussing the events depicted and the psychological elaborations spectators create, Bordwell distinguishes between the plot (all of the events directly perceived), and the story (the sum total of the events that take place in the tale, both perceived and inferred). The story is the product of inferential elaboration that the spectator constructs while engaging with the plot. Style interacts with plot to create the story. While plot refers to the information that is imparted, style refers to the way that the information is framed within the use of cinematic techniques – *mise en scène*, cinematography, editing and sound (ibid.: 49–53).

Narration, then, can be understood as the process by which the film prompts the viewer to construct the ongoing story on the basis of the plot as it is presented, while interacting with style. Plot guides our comprehension of the story; it can juggle the order of story events with a flashback or flash forward, and a retardation in the plot can delay the revelation of information, postponing complete construction of the story in order to arouse curiosity, suspense and surprise. The plot can provide an omniscient range of knowledge, but it can also restrict the flow of information to what a single character knows. Since the spectator's drive to anticipate narrative information is ongoing and insistent, hypotheses are

continually validated and disqualified. Exploiting the tentative, probabilistic nature of mental activity, narrative film both triggers and constrains the formation of hypotheses and inferences. Expectations are strategically aroused and then validated, undermined or left open.

With all of this in mind, we can consider the ways in which a series of avant-garde films cue or challenge the spectator's ability to psychologically elaborate on the plot – the representational information presented by a film – in order to build a coherent story. Do these films facilitate these activities? Do they restrict the flow of knowledge as traditional narratives do? Do they prompt hypotheses, and are these hypotheses then validated or undermined?

One additional element of Bordwell's model – his consideration of protagonists – will be outlined before the case studies are considered. A typical narrative will feature an array of characters, and the spectator will intuitively grasp a hierarchy of characters with a central protagonist at the core. The central protagonist will typically be given the most screen time, and we will see most of the action from their point of view. Their value system will most likely give the film its moral compass, and they will undergo an internal change during the course of the story (i.e. learn a life lesson). The central protagonist is usually the one with whom we sympathize most keenly, and they will mobilize the thrust of the story. To simplify the process of characterization, filmmakers will use archetypes when introducing a narrative agent, allowing spectators to project a whole cluster of personality traits onto him or her (ibid.: 115). When dealing with archetypes, spectators can quickly infer the gist of their personality – the obnoxious lawyer, the cop who does not play by the rules, the mischievous boy, and so on. Narratives usually give strong first impressions of characters that establish the conceptual ground rules.

Facial expressions are an important tool when using characters in a narrative film. Following Smith (1995: 98–106) and Carl Plantinga (1999: 239–55), Bordwell comments that aside from revealing mental states, facial expressions can also invoke 'emotional contagion' and 'affective mimicry' (2012: 116) when the viewer copies the expressions or gestures they are watching (usually in weakened form). When this occurs, the spectator might 'catch' the emotion they see on-screen, increasing their empathetic response.

These issues will be considered in the forthcoming case studies. Are protagonists employed in the same way in avant-garde films? Are there easily identifiable central protagonists? Are psychological shortcuts employed through archetypes to simplify characterization? Are spectators equally prone to emotional contagion and affective mimicry in avant-garde films? What variations among different types of avant-garde films do we find in relation to these questions? In the next section, we will consider whether avant-garde films cue the spectator to execute the same set of operations as narrative films. If they are different, we will consider *how* they are different.

Renegotiating Narrative in Avant-Garde Film

To restate a central goal established in the introductory chapter, one of the broad purposes of this book is to examine how avant-garde films guide the spectator's mental activities in ways that are unfamiliar in commercial cinema. Now that a general model for narrative comprehension has been outlined, we can consider some of the ways in which specific avant-garde films challenge familiar skills that spectators typically exercise when watching conventional narrative films. Note that the purpose of these case studies is not to explain precisely how spectators will respond to each film, since there will always be an element of subjectivity and some variation in response between individuals. Rather, we can consider the ways in which the films themselves present challenges to some of the spectator's basic skills of narrative comprehension.

While avant-garde films do not consistently abandon *all* of the traditional cues to narrative convention, such cues are typically altered in avant-garde filmmaking. The field of avant-garde film is too broad to be definitively schematized, but possible 'renegotiations' of our mental powers in the construction of narrative could include the following:

- A chain of events may feature, but would not necessarily be linked according to dramatic consequence. They might instead be connected 'thematically', or according to graphic interest.
- Shot-to-shot relations may mark a coherent passage of time, but they might instead be framed within a neutral temporal grid, in which there is no linear temporal progression, flashback or flashforward.
- Agents often feature, but not prototypical character types. They may be psychologically opaque, with unclear motivations, intentions and thoughts.
- The film will not typically be motivated by a disruption and subsequent reinstatement of equilibrium.
- The spectator's ability to elaborate on the events represented and infer other events that took place may be more restricted than in the case of traditional narrative films.

These elements will be considered across a series of case studies that have been previously categorized as avant-garde films. The first, *The Life and Death of 9413: A Hollywood Extra* (1928) solicits relatively conventional activities for narrative comprehension, but incorporates stylistic idiosyncrasies. The second and third case studies, *Lucifer Rising* (1980) and *Valse Triste* (1977) both contain what will be termed 'veiled' narratives. Failure to discern the appropriate strategy for narrative engagement (in the case of *Valse Triste*) or lacking the suitable specialist knowledge (in the case of *Lucifer Rising*) will prevent the spectator from inferring the story (sum total of events seen and inferred) from the plot (events depicted

onscreen). In both of these case studies, the embedded narratives will be outlined, but closer attention will be paid to the way in which these films tell their stories and their effect on the spectators. The fourth case study, *At Land* (1944), cues narrative expectations by presenting a central protagonist on a quest, but without adhering to spatial, temporal or causal logic. Instead, the viewer is invited to draw out an allegorical reading of the film, even if this interpretation is not couched in a conventional story.

Collectively, the case studies demonstrate that narrative need not be understood as a 'demon' of cinema – to return to Frampton's imagery in the opening quotation to this chapter – that is, an oppressive and constraining force that the avant-garde filmmaker must exorcise. Narrative can instead be thought of as a system of mental cues that has, at times, been productively renegotiated by avant-garde artists to provide novel aesthetic experiences. Above all, before we cast narrative as either 'angel' or 'devil' or something else again, we must meet it 'face to face' – that is, carefully examine just how it works in a range of avant-garde films.

Self-reflexivity, Absurdist Humour and Style-Centred Narrative in *The Life and Death of 9413: A Hollywood Extra* (1928)

Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich's *Hollywood Extra* demonstrates that a film that cues an unambiguous narrative mode of comprehension is not necessarily excluded from the avant-garde as long as other stylistic, institutional and ideological factors are in place. The ease with which the narrative may be understood speaks of Florey and Vorkapich's creative goal as film artists to influence commercial practice rather than inspire an avant-garde outside it. Instead of risking cultural and commercial marginalization, the film was domestically produced and circulated as an experimental art film, and found industrial recognition (James 2005: 43). It tells the story of an actor, seduced by the glamour of Hollywood, who attempts to develop a career in the film industry. By the end, he is dehumanized and destroyed by his failure to achieve stardom. Poverty stricken, he dies and ascends to heaven where he regains his individuality and finds solace and fulfilment as a 'star' in the heavens. The allegorical statement is unmissable: Hollywood chews up hopeful actors and then spits them out, but there are greater goals we can aspire to than being a movie star.

Stylized with expressionistic lighting, bold compositional lines and angles, and a static camera, the film is punctuated with handheld, on-location footage of Hollywood with natural lighting. The actors perform with deliberately hammed, exaggerated gestures and simple props, and the editing patterns shift from brief continuity-based scenes to montage sequences. We begin by seeing the protagonist (henceforth 9413) bedazzled by Hollywood's city lights, prompting viewers to infer that he has just arrived. In the next scene, he appears in a casting agent's office. Assuming a causal chain of events and linear passage of time, viewers are

cued to infer that 9413 most likely moved into a rented flat, researched for locations of casting agents, and prepared a portfolio before travelling to the office. Viewers are already cued to infer the story from the plot.

While 9413 attempts to succeed in Hollywood, the spectator is presented with images of money being handled, the word 'dreams', shoes being shined and a barber's pole. Seeking a narrative salience, viewers are cued to infer that 9413 is spending his money in search of his dreams in an effort to look presentable while seeking work. Suffering repeated rejections from casting agents and overwhelmed by bills he is unable to pay, 9413 lays his head down, defeated. The next image reveals his gravestone. Again, viewers are cued to mentally elaborate, this time by inferring that 9413 died alone, his body was discovered and he was buried in a pauper's grave.

In addition to its use of commonplace narrative cues to prompt the spectator into making narrative elaborations, the use of a protagonist in *Hollywood Extra* is conventional as well. A protagonist is one of the first things we look for in a narrative, and 9413 is unambiguously signposted as such. He has the most screen time, and we sympathize with him more than anyone else. He also experiences the greatest internal changes in the story (learning the hardships of life in Hollywood, and that it is better to be an angel in heaven than a Hollywood star). His face also lends itself vividly to emotional contagion and affective mimicry – quite gratuitously on occasion, with exaggerated expressions. To a degree, the film's performance style can be explained by the norms of mainstream silent film acting, which are more overtly expressive than modern-day acting norms, but *Hollywood Extra* self-consciously overplays this. In one sequence pictured on the following page, 9413 suffers another rejection from the casting agent over the phone. After looking dejected for a moment, he then recoils in dread as bills that he is unable to pay fall through his letter box (Figure 1.1). In this narrative context, the actor's performance can evoke a vivid empathetic reaction, and the viewer might copy the gesture or expression of the character in muted form.

Hollywood Extra may prove to be an exception to the rule that avant-garde films disrupt narrative norms, and it is also an exception to the broader claim set forth in this chapter that avant-garde films provide cognitive challenges that are not typically rehearsed in other cinematic traditions. Minimal challenges are made to the viewer's comprehension skills in this case study. This may be understood in light of the fact that Florey and Vorkapich sought to influence Hollywood by working within it, rather than risking cultural marginalization.

Why is it canonized as an avant-garde film, then? David James comments that *Hollywood Extra* anticipates the post-war minority cinemas in which disempowered social groups on the edge of the industry sought to represent themselves and articulate their own resentments about the financial hardships they faced and the poor treatment they received at the hands of studio executives (2005: 47). In acknowledging the seductive power of Hollywood while simultaneously

Fig. 1.1



Fig. 1.2

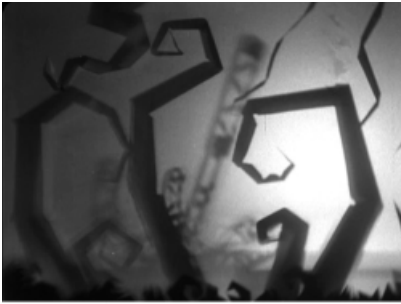
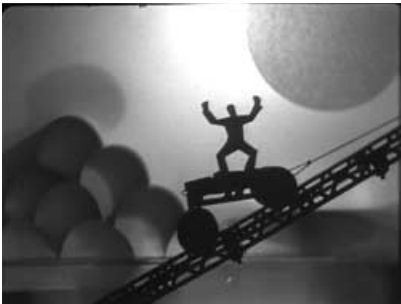


Fig. 1.3



Fig. 1.4



Figures 1.1–1.4. Stills from *The Life and Death of 9413: A Hollywood Extra* (1928). Screen captures by the author.

inhabiting an equivocal undercurrent, the film serves as a precursor to the work of Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, George Kuchar and Andy Warhol, all of whom also developed their own ambivalent relationships with Hollywood. James comments that this particular film, by virtue of its chosen subject matter, is the ‘prototypical twentieth century avant-garde film’ and that ‘often what we have come to call avant-garde films [that] should be understood as the realization of dissenting impulses and counter movements on the margins of the dominant mode of film production’ (ibid.). In making this argument, James implies that the narrative status of a film is immaterial as to whether it is avant-garde or not. Rather, the spirit of dissent is at the core of the avant-garde, while the formal design operates flexibly as in relation to that independent spirit. Narrative is arguably one formal resource among many available to the avant-garde filmmaker – a claim that stands in direct opposition to those cited earlier by Wheeler Winston Dixon, Michael O’Pray and Malcolm Le Grice.

It should be noted, however, that the ‘spirit of dissent’ is not within the sole province of the avant-garde. Michael Moore’s documentaries, for example, also feature a dissenting impulse but it is manifest in a different way. However, in addition to James’ dissenting impulse as being indicative of *Hollywood Extra*’s status as an avant-garde film, and issues of funding and circulation, there are other elements that lend the film oppositional credibility without placing great challenges on the spectator’s comprehension skills.

Some of the stylistic flourishes in *Hollywood Extra* evoke the expressionistic style of films of the 1920s, as found in the work of F.W. Murnau, Fritz Lang and Robert Wiene. Like *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), for instance, visual form is used in the scenery to denote psychic states. As 9413 fails to gain recognition as an actor, Hollywood becomes a cruel and threatening environment with scorpion-like claws looming overhead (Figure 1.2).

Some of the *mise en scène* and cinematography, such as the closing image of heaven (Figure 1.3), bears a visceral, graphic quality comparable to that of abstract films of the time with the use of soft focus, rotating light sources, superimpositions and cardboard models – as found in Mary Ellen Bute's *Rhythm in Light* (1936), for example. But a superficial similarity to contemporaneous avant-garde films in sequences that are couched in clear narratives, as we also find in the stargate sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), does not on its own station a film within the avant-garde.

One element that contributes to the 'radicalization' of *Hollywood Extra* is that it is self-reflexive, drawing attention to its own artifice. At the beginning, 9413 is supposedly bedazzled by the bright lights of Hollywood. As the film cuts between his face and the artificial city, he is clearly in a darkened studio. He shifts his head in short, abrupt movements with hammed wide-eyed wonderment, mouthing 'ooh!' 'aah!' as he pretends to gaze. In over-playing his performance (even by the performance norms of the time), the actor provides an implicit 'wink' to the audience, implying that he is not, in reality, staring at a city. Rather, he is inside a studio. In addition to this, any dialogue spoken by the actors is visibly mouthed as 'ba-ba-ba' rather than anything that could plausibly relate to ordinary speech. Attention is also drawn to the artifice of the film towards the end when 9413 ascends to heaven in a string-pulled cart. No effort is made to hide the fact the character, at this moment, is a paper cut-out (Figure 1.4).

The very title of the film is a cue to understand it as an allegory. On occasion in *Hollywood Extra*, events and scenarios are so comically absurd that they should be taken as allegorical rather than literal. For instance, a letter written to a studio director is addressed to 'Mr Almighty' – evidently a joke about the excessively esteemed social level that casting directors are bestowed in the film industry. In another scene, each aspiring actor's new status as a 'product' upon their arrival in Hollywood is marked by their assigned number being written on their forehead. To demonstrate that each actor sheds their individual identity in order to bend to the generic demands of movie stardom, they all perform in simple face masks. In another sequence, the protagonist metaphorically struggles to 'climb the stairway of success' and keeps reappearing at the bottom of a literal stairway in a series of jump-cuts as he tries to progress to the top. When human behaviour in *Hollywood Extra* seems excessively improbable, it may be interpreted allegorically.

Finally, *Hollywood Extra* is stylistically flamboyant and disjunctive. The film is, at times, filmed with actors in a controlled studio environment; at other times,

it features misframed (by commercial standards), handheld documentary footage of Hollywood; at other times, cityscapes are made from cardboard cut-outs with studio-controlled lighting. This inconsistency, from highly controlled artificial sets to handheld location shooting, is not couched in the service of the narrative. Instead, the stylistic eclecticism can be understood as a creative synthesis of the expressive options available to the filmmakers. Rather than being motivated by the narrative (e.g. a dream, or flashback) the shifts in style are tailored to be an independent object of attention in themselves.⁴

According to Bordwell, typically the plot (information presented) controls the stylistic system (mise en scène, cinematography, editing and sound) when constructing the story. In a film like *Hollywood Extra*, stylistic techniques can be applied that are not justified by the plot's manipulation of story information. Since the bold alternations in style possess no clear link to the developing plot and story, it may be that in *Hollywood Extra* the style has come forward to claim our attention independently from the story that is being told. Stylistic flourishes can be made and attended to for their sheer visceral appeal. Bordwell's idea of a stylistic flourish here bears similarity with Roland Barthes' notion of a film's 'third meaning', lying beyond denotation and connotation: the realm in which stylistic elements become 'fellow travellers' of the story (Barthes 1977: 64, cited in Bordwell 1985: 53).

It is the stylistic flourishes, self-reflexivity and comic absurdity of the characters' behaviour that tells us that Florey and Vorkapich did not just set out to tell a simple story. To fully appreciate the intentions of the filmmakers, attention must be paid to elements that are not essential to the construction of the story. In this instance, then, a canonical avant-garde movie broadly fulfils the criteria of a traditional narrative-dramatic film – albeit with an idiosyncratic style.

Released today, *Hollywood Extra* with its easily discernible narrative and stylistic flourishes might sooner be considered an independent film, closer in spirit to a filmmaker like Michel Gondry or Wes Anderson rather than Robert Beavers or Ben Rivers. However, distinctions between commercial filmmaking and narrative cinema, which sits stylistically on the fringes, did not exist at the time of *Hollywood Extra's* release. In the 1920s, films with a relatively unambiguous narrative line of action like *Hollywood Extra*, such as *La Glace à Trois Faces* (1927) and *Soul of the Cypress* (1921) fell within the avant-garde's extension, alongside non-linear character-based films such as *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928), *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) – all of which worked with a less clearly defined chain of causally linked events. Avant-garde film may have strayed further from the routine of cueing narrative comprehension as a mode of engagement, as the difference between commercial filmmaking and the 'prestige' movies such as Italian neorealism became more defined from the 1940s onwards. I would suggest that as 'art cinema' crystallized as a separate branch of filmmaking practice, avant-garde film became more radicalized as an 'alternative' cinema.

Narrative and Allusion in *Lucifer Rising* (1980)

Hollywood Extra demonstrates how, in the 1920s, an avant-garde film could tell a linear story and put relatively few demands on the spectator's comprehension skills. Instead, it was self-reflexive, absurdist, stylistically disjunctive and 'oppositional' in its critique of Hollywood. The following case study demonstrates one of the possible ways in which a filmmaker can challenge the spectator's skills of narrative comprehension without abandoning them entirely.

While Kenneth Anger considered *Lucifer Rising* to be the culmination of his life's work during production (Cott 1970: 16), it is not widely considered his best film. Over thirty years since the completion of the *Magick Lantern Cycle*, *Scorpio Rising* is perhaps the film best remembered as his chef-d'oeuvre. But while *Lucifer Rising* is arguably his most elaborate, ambitious and formally sophisticated work, it is also perhaps his most elusive. This, it will be argued, is because of the unusual way in which he arranges the plot so as to challenge the construction of a coherent story if the spectator lacks prior, specialist knowledge. He has commented in an interview (1972):

my films are, even though it may be a surprise to hear this, I consider them narrative films. In other words I have characters – I don't necessarily say 'this is Tom, and this is Dick and this is Harry' . . . but my [films] do have human characters in them. They follow through a progression and development. . . . In visual terms, you're introduced to a character.

By leaving out an explanation of who Tom, Dick and Harry are in his narratives, Anger refrains from contextualizing characters and scenarios. The gaps in narration that occur in *Lucifer Rising* are not comparable to the concept of 'retardation' – salient pieces of information that are omitted to arouse curiosity. Basic contextual information is omitted that would enable the spectator to understand the motivations of each character, elaborate in detail beyond the information presented, and mentally construct a coherent story. This is not to suggest that Anger assumes a spectator with highly specialized knowledge. Rather, viewers who are familiar with the relevant mythology may appreciate the film on one level, but another response to the film is accommodated for the majority of viewers who are not already familiar with the relevant specialist knowledge.

The way in which Anger tells his story may be loosely comparable to the allusion of stories in paintings. Consider Sandro Botticelli's iconic *Primavera* (1482) (Figure 1.5). Without contextual knowledge, the painting looks like a pastoral scene with an assortment of subjects engaged in personal activities. Three women dance, a man picks an apple, a cherub fires an arrow and other events take place. Viewers with the relevant specialist knowledge will recognize that the painting is an allegory for the lush growth of spring, inspired by the poem 'De Rerum Natura' by Lucretius. Various mythological characters are depicted. For instance, Venus, the Goddess of love, stands in the middle within an arch. The



Figure 1.5. Botticelli's *La Primavera* (1481). Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Three Graces, companions of Venus standing on the left, dance at the onset of spring. Mercury (on the far left) inspects the orange grove, and Amor (the blind-folded cherub) fires an arrow of love (Montresor 2010: 18–21).

The painting can be enjoyed with or without this contextual knowledge – for the atmosphere that it evokes, or its formal use of colour or compositional balance, for instance. But contextual knowledge alters the experience of the painting, since the surrounding myths that inspired the scene cannot be discerned from the work alone. Nor can the painting be fully interpreted without this contextual knowledge – we cannot understand the significance of the physical gestures or the activities of the various characters. *Primavera* may still be appreciated without contextual knowledge, even if the various references are not recognized.

Lucifer Rising operates on a similar basis. Anger's unique contribution in renegotiating narrative form is that he fashioned the plot in *Lucifer Rising* in such a way as to render the story indiscernible to viewers who are not familiar with the relevant mythologies. For the unfamiliar, the film feels like a series of arcane and mysterious allusions (like *Primavera*), presented sequentially, rather than consequentially. For viewers familiar with the relevant mythologies, the film features a series of causally linked events, with intentional agents and a linear trajectory.

The film is scored with a prog rock soundtrack, and the camera remains largely static. Like *Hollywood Extra*, continuity edits are used sparingly and much of the film is edited in montage sequences. There is no dialogue or use of intertitles, and a series of events occur without contextualization that will be perplexing to the

uninitiated. For example, a man and woman in ornate Egyptian clothes signal to one another with staffs. Another man waves a wand at a statue of a hawk, and a woman dressed in grey worships at the face of a Sphinx. Later, a man stands under Stonehenge and performs a ritual, while a woman climbs an ancient pillar. A priest performs a ritual around a circle, and another man appears shortly afterwards with 'Lucifer' written on his jacket. Other similarly mysterious events take place. The film appears to contain the ingredients of a narrative – motivated agents shifting between a series of scenarios – but it is not clear what story motivates these various sequences. Presented with the visual events alone, the viewer is limited in their capacity to develop predictions that will be validated or undermined, because the contextual information that underpins the various events is never made clear. The viewer is also restricted in their ability to make inferential elaborations, join events causally or construct a coherent story.

All narrative-dramatic film relies implicitly on contextual background knowledge, which is typically used unconsciously and effortlessly. *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), for instance, can be contextualized with prior knowledge about World War II. Likewise, *Brassed Off* (1996) is enriched by prior knowledge about British mining communities in the 1980s. *Lucifer Rising* draws from a radically different culture – a set of esoteric myths rather than a historical context. In addition to this, prior knowledge does not just enrich and contextualize the film, it is needed for basic coherence when drawing meaningful connections between the events that take place. As such, the unconscious use of contextual knowledge when engaging with a film becomes more explicitly apparent in *Lucifer Rising*.

Anger draws from lore that was synthesized by Aleister Crowley (b.1875–d.1947), an English occultist who developed his own belief system, Thelema, which fused Egyptian, Judaic, Babylonian and Hindu mythologies. Drawing from astrology, Crowley believed that 'aeons' (lasting approximately 2,150 years each) correlate to the rise and fall of civilizations and cultural tendencies. Recent cultural changes were thought by Crowley to indicate that the human race was shifting from the Piscean Age of Christian rule, characterized by self-sacrifice and submission to God, into the Aquarian Age under Lucifer's rule, which is characterized by free-spirit and rebellion (Bills 1993: 362). The central trajectory of *Lucifer Rising*, then, features a dramatization of the shift from the Piscean Age to the Aquarian Age.

To examine the way in which a sequence could be experienced in light of specialist knowledge, we can consider a scene towards the end of the film. A man stands in an open field, summoning lightning, while rocks burst from the earth. A coil briefly appears, and we see a human silhouette surrounded by dazzling lights. For the unfamiliar, this sequence would look like a series of dissociated images in an already puzzling film. For the informed, each image possesses an individual salience that can be causally connected to the images following and preceding it. They will recognize that a high priest is standing in Avebury (a

Fig. 1.6



Fig. 1.7



Fig. 1.8



Fig. 1.9



Fig. 1.10



Figures 1.6–1.10. Characters in *Lucifer Rising* (1980): Isis (1.6), Osiris (1.7), Lilith (1.8), The Adept (1.9) and Lucifer (1.10). Screen captures by the author.

Neolithic henge) summoning the new world in a transition from the Piscean Age to the Aquarian Age, leading to rocks bursting from the earth. The coil represents completion and perfection in a new world – a reference to the ‘universe’ tarot card, denoting that the transition to the Aquarian Age has concluded. Finally, we see Lucifer, the angel of light and new overlord, in his true form bathed in shimmering, dazzling light.

In addition to the seemingly disconnected chain of events in *Lucifer Rising*, there is no clear central protagonist, nor is anyone’s perspective privileged. Since the characters are so psychologically opaque, there are no character archetypes that attach themselves readily to the various agents. We are limited in our ability to sympathize with them, share their values or gauge their internal change. Since their faces are relatively inexpressive, emotional contagion and affective mimicry is muted. When faces are expressive (e.g. when Lucifer smiles, or Lilith weeps), it is unclear what motivates these expressions – unlike 9413, for example, whose face expressions are placed in a clear context. In traditional narratives, the spectator may know more story information than any individual character. In other narratives, we may be restricted to what certain characters know. In *Lucifer Rising*, viewers without specialist knowledge will know significantly less than the on-screen characters.

According to Anger’s discussion of the film, the figures in *Lucifer Rising* are to be understood as spiritual forces of nature, rather than individuals with personal motivations (Mekas 1973: 16). Those who are already familiar with the mythological figures will already know their names and understand the forces that they represent. Isis (Figure 1.6), for instance, is the Egyptian goddess of birth and motherhood, who is benign, joyful and married to Osiris (the lord of death and resurrection) (Figure 1.7). Lilith (Figure 1.8) is the Babylonian spirit of discontent in female form,

the rejected would-be consort to Lucifer. The Adept (Figure 1.9) is a high priest who serves as an intermediary between mortals and deities, and heralds the Age of Aquarius. Lucifer (Figure 1.10), capricious and rebellious by nature, is the angel of light and ruler of the Aquarian Age. Anna Powell suggests that by removing audience identification with psychologically rounded characters, Anger 'draws us more directly into the forces they represent' (Powell 2002: 92). This leads to a very different form of character engagement to traditional story telling. In *Lucifer Rising*, the characters are not imbued with coherent individual agency, they are not empathized in an ordinary manner, they do not undergo a clear internal change, and they do not easily fit into familiar archetypes.

For those unfamiliar with the relevant myths, the nature and motivations of each character will remain unclear, since their behaviour in the film does not grant us clear access. Ed Small comments that 'Narrative depends on characterisation, and mere appearance of people in a painting or film or lyric poem lacks any adequate psychological scope for genuine characterization' (Small 2005: 25). Anger characterizes his protagonists, yet he does so through esoteric symbolism and metaphor.

The Adept, for instance, is characterized as being in possession of a high level of self-confidence. Not by way of his actions, but through the appearance of the unicursal hexagram – an empowering insignia used by Aleister Crowley. It appears once on his bedsheets, and another time overlaid on top of the red wall in his sacred chamber. Similarly, Lilith's walk through a forest is intercut with images of a forest fire, a tornado and falling rocks, signposting her as an apocalyptic and destructive deity. One might not interpret the fire and falling rocks as something that is literally occurring in the sequence, but rather it serves as visual rhetoric, telling us that 'Lilith is trouble'.

What, ultimately, is at stake when discussing Anger's renegotiation of narrative? Beyond commenting that it is alienating for viewers who lack the specialist knowledge needed to draw meaningful connections between the events, how might the film provide an unfamiliar and enriching experience for the viewer? What novel thought processes might spectators undergo that they do not typically exercise when viewing conventional narrative cinema?

A speculative proposal would be that for some, *Lucifer Rising* is still an evocative and resonant film, even when the story cannot be discerned. They may still 'feel a sense of authority, a will, the guiding light of intent, and you have to trust that [the filmmaker] knows what he's doing even if you can't decode the film shot for shot'⁵ (Solomon, quoted in MacDonald 2006: 211). When a film creates a powerful mood that cannot be coherently ascribed a specific meaning, according to Torben Grodal the film generates a 'saturated' quality. He comments:

There is no clear goal that might provide an outlet to such feelings through narrative action. The saturated emotional charge of the associative networks . . . pro-

vides feelings of deep meaning, for instance when we are watching some art films. The feeling of deep ungraspable meaning need not correspond to deep, buried meaning in the film. Sometimes, indeed, the opposite is true. (Grodal 2009: 149)

Of course, there *is* meaning embodied in *Lucifer Rising*, but it is not necessarily profound. Anger commented on one of the cast members who persistently asked what the film meant:

Everything had to mean something to him in his logical mind, and I told him it doesn't matter what it means, that it matters to me, not to you . . . if you're an initiate [of Thelema]; it's almost like a childish fairytale.⁶

As such, the veiled narrative serves as an embedded yet obscure structure that motivates the progression of the film. However profound we may find the meaning of the film, an important function of the imagery is that it evokes a vivid atmosphere. This distinctive mood, for Anger, is best accomplished by way of his unique allusion-based renegotiation of narrative form.

The neurologist Vilayanur Ramachandran discusses a comparable experience of unspecified profundity in which some of his patients, following a stroke, experienced a disruption in the 'salience pathways' in their brains. As a result, they believed themselves to be sensing a profound significance in all objects that surrounded them ('seeing the universe in a grain of sand'), and invariably accounted for this as a religious experience (Ramachandran 1999: 179). Since Anger framed the experience of his films as spiritual invocations (Rowe 1974: 26), this implies a further parallel between this profound yet diffuse sense of salience in his film and the mental activities that Ramachandran and Grodal discuss.

This mode of engaging with cinema will be generally unfamiliar, at least to viewers accustomed only to mainstream narrative-dramatic films. Paying closer attention to the atmosphere evoked by the film, without needing to couch it in terms of full narrative coherence, would require a bold adaptation in viewing habits for most, which might be enriching if the viewer can adapt to the film's aesthetic demands. Bordwell has commented that it would be 'odd' to say that you were deeply moved by a film, when the story was incomprehensible (2008: 94). Yet *Lucifer Rising* demonstrates, along with films like *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) and *Inland Empire* (2006) that a spectator can respond emotionally to a film and sense an unspecified profundity that lacks full narrative coherence, as long as an authority or a guiding light of intent is sensed, rather than being a poorly told, incoherent story. As the aforementioned examples and reference to Grodal suggests, this effect is quite common in art cinema.

This case study considered the use of allusion-based plotting as a method to 'veil' a hidden story. The next case study will turn to the way in which metonymy and metaphors can be used in the plot to create a similar effect. Again, a linear

narrative will motivate the progression of the film, but challenges will be applied, which makes the story difficult to discern.

Metaphor and Metonymy in *Valse Triste* (1979)

In a traditional narrative, the plot is arranged to facilitate the spectator's ability to detect causal connections between scenes, make inferential elaborations and coherently construct the story. The previous case study demonstrated that the plot can also be arranged so as to block or complicate the construction of a coherent story. With *Lucifer Rising*, the viewer requires a specialist body of esoteric knowledge in order to place the events within a coherent narrative framework. In *Valse Triste*, the plot also playfully obstructs the spectator's sense-making skills and 'veils' the narrative, but it does so by telling its story through metaphor and metonymy. While a narrative line motivates the construction of the film, it is nonetheless hard to discern.

The basis of this case study is indebted to James Peterson, who refers to films built entirely from found footage as 'compilation narratives'. Some have stories that are easy to discern, such as Charles Levine's *Horse Opera* (1970), which condenses several films into a single archetypal cowboy tale. More recently, 'mashup' films have appeared online such as Antonio Maria Da Silva's *Hell's Club* (2015), which applies a similar technique, drawing together a range of popular movies into the same imaginary space through editing and cunning use of layering. On other occasions, metaphor and metonymy carry the primary responsibility for representing the basic story events. Inventive viewers can discern a story in them, and enjoy novel psychological experience by inferring the story from the plot through creative leaps of the imagination.

Metonymy can be understood as a form or process of substitution, where an event or concept is not directly represented, but is instead replaced by something intimately associated with it. A linguistic example would be referring to a business executive as a 'suit'. In cinema, a kidnapped child in a fairground could be represented by a balloon floating away, or hard labour could be represented by hands toiling in a field. In a film like *Valse Triste*, then, the viewer must make a creative inference in decoding the metonymic substitution. For instance, as a boy lies down to sleep, the planet earth recedes into the darkness, 'leaving the world behind' as he dreams.

In addition to metonymy, Peterson also suggests that *Valse Triste* relies heavily on metaphors. One of the accounts of metaphor that has been particularly prominent in cognitive studies is referred to by Patrick Colm Hogan as the 'feature matching' theory. He explains that a metaphorical statement calls on the perceiver to understand the target by reference to the source. For example, if one says 'Smith was a real lion in the board meeting', Smith is the target, and lion is the source. The subject then scans their lexical entry for lion in order to find

the right properties that might be appropriately applied. 'Four-legged' and 'eats raw meat' will be eliminated, while 'fierce' and 'merciless' might be usefully employed. If, however, we know that Smith was not fierce or merciless, but rather he was eating ravenously during the meeting, this is more likely to be the relevant constituent between the target and the source. Hogan comments that 'metaphor is not a matter of transferring constituents per se, but of transferring salience or, more simply, bringing previously known information into greater prominence' (Hogan 2003: 90).

In *Valse Triste*, Bruce Conner marshals a series of disparate movie clips into an original narrative. However, each image provides a prompt to narrative inference through metaphor or metonymy, rather than a literal depiction of the action. With the possible exception of the very opening, there is no action or object depicted in the film that should be interpreted as directly representing the line of events. Peterson states:

Since [compilation narratives] are highly elliptical, the viewer must be more prepared than usual to make bold inferences about spatial and causal relationships of the sort demanded by the rhetorical figure of metonymy. Since metaphors are so prevalent, viewers must look for even very tenuous conceptual links between images. This is the strategy the viewer must adopt in comprehending narrative in the avant-garde compilation: to readily infer metonymic replacements along the story line, and search for often wildly exotic metaphors. (Peterson 1994: 168)

Valse Triste tells the story (for those who can discern it) of a boy's first wet dream, and the ensuing sense of guilt and exposure that he feels. We are initially presented with a boy turning out his bedroom lamp and resting his head; this is the one case where a shot 'directly' represents the action of the implied narrative. We see a troupe of young women exercise in synchronization, waving their arms and legs in the air. Viewers primed to search for narrative cues might infer that this is a metonymic substitution for the boy's dream in which young women are flaunting their bodies. In perhaps the film's most blunt metaphor, a hose squirts water. The music shifts in tone from serene to grave as the boy imagines the consequences of his unintentional actions. The viewer is then cued to make another metonymic leap when they see a mother, father and sister congregate in their front yard, with the mother pointing to something she has just seen. In this instance, viewers who discern the narrative are cued to imagine that it is a paranoid fantasy, in which the boy imagines his whole family saw what he did and passed judgement.

The degree to which the spectator experiences the film as a narrative depends on whether they unearth the hidden story by appropriately recognizing its metonymic and metaphorical substitutions. While a metaphor such as the squirting hose is fairly unambiguous when considered outside the context of the film as a whole, the narrative is still easily missed. This is accountable in part by virtue

of the fact that there is no literal base of action in the film. In *Hollywood Extra*, for instance, the image of 9413's metaphoric struggle to 'climb the stairway of success' is depicted by showing the character struggle to climb an actual flight of stairs. In this example, the metaphor is set within a literal line of action in which the images can be taken at face value, and so the metaphor is easier to discern. In *Valse Triste*, with the possible exception of the opening image of a boy turning out his bedside lamp, there is no literal line of action that the metaphors are replacing. As such, viewers who are primed to interpret the given images as a series of substitutions will understand that the function of the opening image is very different to that of the rest of the images, in spite of the fact that it looks like the rest of the film – a sepia-toned found footage clip. It still feels one step up from the original baseline of literal events.

One of the reasons the story and in turn the metaphors and metonymic substitutions in *Valse Triste* are difficult to interpret is because they shift from physical events (i.e. the hose squirting) to other forms of representation. In one image, a boy brings his father firewood for kindling, metonymically implying that the father and son have a practical relationship, rather than an emotionally intimate one. Paranoid fantasies also feature through metaphor, such as a stone cracking in two, perhaps representing the son's fear that his family will 'break apart' following his unintentional actions. In one instance, then, the target of the substitution is a commentary on the relationship between the father and his son. In the second example, the target is a paranoid fantasy (i.e. the fear that his family will break apart). The shifting status of each image is not clearly signposted.

For those who discern the narrative, a story is told with a linear temporal progression, an intentional agent and a disruption of equilibrium. Without recognizing the implied story, however, they do not identify these elements of narrative. Instead, the film will be experienced as a loosely bound montage of images based around America of yesteryear that are unified visually by sepia colour tones. While a narrative interpretation is available, then, it is not forced upon the viewer.

The elusive quality of the film and the lack of a clear protagonist allow the images to possess a free-floating relevance, and the viewer may mentally elaborate on the images as freely as they are inspired to. Early in the film, we encounter sepia-toned clouds, wheat fields, wind turbines and a herd of sheep. To some, it may simply represent a nostalgic depiction of Kansas in the 1940s. To offer another reading laden with hidden meanings, the landscape may be understood as wholesome and 'sexless', an interpretation suggested by the forbidding image of a wire fence. The flock of sheep might represent a simple agricultural scene, or it might represent the boy 'counting sheep' as he falls asleep. It could also represent a flow of semen that is stirring as he dreams. The power of the film is that it accommodates all possible readings.

Appreciation of the film does not hinge on detecting the narrative, then. The juxtaposition of Jean Sibelius' evocative and appealingly incongruous music (entitled 'Valse Triste', which means 'Sad Waltz') with rural Kansas gives the film an enigmatic and bewitching mood. Peterson comments that if viewers are unable to discover a narrative or thematic level by which to engage with the film, 'they can still make a general appraisal of its overall mood or atmosphere' (Peterson 1994: 161). Viewers can engage with the film by simply appreciating the peculiar atmosphere conjured. Found footage films frequently use material for the use of irony and camp, as found in early Bruce Conner films such as *A Movie* (1958). In his later work such as *Valse Triste* and *5:10 to Dream Land* (1976), by contrast, the films evoke an atmosphere of sincerity and foreboding through the use of found footage and music. For those who do detect the story, it also provides a novel path towards narrative comprehension.

If the narrative is discerned, it is a slender and simple story. The revelation of information is not retained to arouse curiosity, expectations are not provoked in order to be validated or left open, and the events are not reordered with flashbacks or flashforwards. Instead, a simple series of events follow one another from a central protagonist's point of view. The reward for the viewer lies in discerning the narrative, rather than engaging with a story that features a complex structure. *Valse Triste*, then, exemplifies a way to renegotiate narrative comprehension through the use of metaphor and metonymy. In the following case study, we can consider another method for renegotiating narrative without abandoning it entirely.

Allegorical Inference and Narrative Cues in *At Land*

The previous two case studies may be understood as containing 'veiled narratives' – coherent stories that guided the construction of the work, but where the ultimate form of the plot (information presented) is arranged such that the story (events seen and inferred) is, for many, indiscernible. In *At Land*, a different method is employed. Story information remains unhidden, but events are not guided by familiar principles of causal logic. Yet, it triggers our narrative instincts and expectations through elements that are characteristic of traditional narrative films – distinct characters feature in a staged enactment, and these characters are filmed through conventional means with long, medium and close-up shots. Lines of action are coherently represented through conventional editing. Events are rendered ambiguous because the film relies heavily on symbolism and allegory, and while the central character appears to be intentional and active, her underlying motivation remains obscure. Space and time are sometimes deliberately disorientated through spatial elisions and temporal ellipses.

Maya Deren comments that if cinema is to take its place beside the other art forms,

it must relinquish the narrative disciplines it has borrowed from literature and its timid imitation of the causal logic of narrative plots, a form which flowered as a celebration of the earthbound, step-by-step concept of time, space and relationship which was part of the primitive materialism of the nineteenth century. (Deren 2005 [1960]: 128)

While this sounds like a call for an expulsion of narrative, she refers to her own work as 'still based on a strong literary-dramatic line as a core' (Deren 1965, quoted in Sitney 2002: 9). Sitney calls her style 'open-ended narrative form' (2002: 21) and Al Rees refers to her early film works as 'narrative film-poem' (Rees 2011: 58). Thus, in spite of Deren's call for a cinematic art that does not depend on narrative, her own work is still closely aligned with it. This seeming paradox is negotiated by way of altering (without fully rejecting) the terms by which narrative is to be experienced.

The ambiguity with which *At Land* renegotiates narrative form is characteristic of 'trance film', or the 'psychodrama' – a branch of American avant-garde film explored further by works such as Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), James Broughton's *The Potted Psalm* (1946), Sidney Peterson's *The Lead Shoes* (1949) and Stan Brakhage's *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1954). The trance film and psychodrama are broadly understood as synonymous – although the 'trance film' (coined by Parker Tyler) draws attention to the protagonist as a somnambulist or entranced figure, and is suggestive of the protagonist's interior quest. Sitney's 'psychodrama' highlights the work as a 'drama' (i.e. an emotionally charged human plight), while the word 'psycho' bears three plausible implications: first, it emphasizes the psychological and subjective rather than the material and objective; secondly, a psychotic, disturbed state of consciousness; finally, it alludes to psychoanalysis and Freudian symbolism – although Deren resisted psychoanalytic readings of her work (see Rees 2011: 59).

In psychodramas, the protagonist (typically the filmmaker her- or himself who is in the process of coming of age) progresses towards a scene of self-realization, and they are marked by what they see rather than what they do. The protagonist typically remains isolated from their environment and the other characters. Al Rees defines it in the follow way:

The 'psychodrama' (or 'trance-film') was modelled on dream, lyric verse and contemporary dance. Typically, it enacts the personal conflicts of a central subject or protagonist. A scenario of desire and loss, seen from the point of view of a single guiding consciousness, ends either in redemption or death. Against the grain of realism, montage-editing evokes swift transitions in space and time. (Rees 2011: 58)

In *At Land*, swift transitions in time and space occur early in the film. At the beginning, Deren's character (henceforth 'the Dreamer') washes up on the shore as though she emerged from the sea. She begins her journey by climbing a piece of driftwood that has materialized next to her. Edited as though it was a single fluid motion, the Dreamer pulls herself up the driftwood and finds herself peering into a dinner party (Figure 1.11). She goes unnoticed by the guests as she crawls along the table. The camera fragments her body with close up photography. Through strategic editing, successive shots situate parts of her figure in different locations – alternating between the dinner party and a jungle (Figure 1.12).

Already, the viewer is called upon to amend several viewing strategies associated with orthodox narrative comprehension. In a typical narrative film, viewers are presented with a coherent space and passage of time. Even if the plot reorders the chronological events with a flashback or flash forward, the viewer is normally able to mentally reorder events into a chronological timeline. In *At Land*, the spatial organization and passage of time is more flexible and undefined. If the film was organized like a traditional narrative, the spatial leap from the beach to the dinner party may have been accounted for by establishing that the Dreamer possesses supernatural powers and can teleport between spaces. Or, it may have been cutting between two different occasions in a flashback/flashforward sequence. In *At Land*, instead of establishing a coherent transition in space (even in a fantasy context) or temporal relations, the shift in space is motivated by the desire to undermine the surface realism of cinematography. Rees comments that 'the manipulation of time and space was equally a property of film form, so that editing could undermine the surface realism of cinematography to create a new language that was film's alone' (Rees 2011: 59).

Destabilizing basic comprehension skills related to causal logic and spatio-temporal continuity for the purpose of creating an expressive language unique to cinema creates a unique set of demands on the viewer's comprehension skills. In conventional narratives, the spectator is able to draw on real-world knowledge

Fig. 1.11



Fig. 1.12



Figures 1.11–1.12. The Dreamer journeys through a dinner party (1.11) and jungle (1.12) in *At Land* (1944). Screen captures by the author.

and narrative conventions in order to make inferences beyond the information given. In *At Land*, the spectator's ability to do this is limited. Instead, the viewer is invited to seek out allegorical or thematic inferences, some of which may require a more effortful, imaginative leap. For instance, instead of seeking a narrative explanation as to why the Dreamer's body seemed to inhabit a jungle and a dinner party simultaneously, the viewer might instead consider the contrast between the untamed wilderness and civilization with social order. One could infer that the Dreamer explores both spaces with the same curiosity, since to an outsider they are both landscapes with their own set of mysteries.

As such, events need not occur or follow one another according to dramatic consequence in Deren's psychodrama. Instead of cueing the spectator to effortlessly and unconsciously apply narrative skills of comprehension, Deren invites the viewer to reflect on their own skills of comprehension, and make a more conscious effort to generate allegorical readings of the events. Broadly speaking, the film may be understood as featuring a woman of the sea who is 'at land', investigating human civilization. After losing a chess piece, she undergoes a series of encounters, learning about the suppression of women's rights before retrieving the piece and fleeing back to the sea. But the meaning of the chess piece, as with every other event, is left to the viewer to interpret.

Maria Pramaggiore suggests that *At Land* materializes the hidden dynamics of the external world by literalizing social structures that underpin male and female relations. She also suggests that the central metaphor of the film is built around the game of chess, which operates through binary oppositions (Pramaggiore 2001: 248). The Dreamer resists the oppositional categories that we live by – winning or losing, male and female, mobile and immobile, nature and civilization, and the black and white of the chess pieces.

Rather than wholly rejecting narrative, *At Land* cues narrative expectations because they are, in some ways, facilitated in a conventional sense. Up to a point, the viewer's relationship to the Dreamer is similar to traditional character engagement. She features in every sequence and can be easily identified as the central protagonist. Her actions mobilize the events of the story, and the plot is restricted to the events that she encounters (as is sometimes characteristic of traditional narrative). But she is difficult to read psychologically, since her motivations, values, origins and thought processes are never made explicit. In turn, like Anger's deities in *Lucifer Rising*, there is no character archetype to liken her with in order to simplify characterization.

As is often the case with conventional narratives, the central character is also motivated by a goal that is established early in the film (the retrieval of her chess piece). Following her climb through the jungle, the Dreamer reaches the far end of the dinner table, having gone unnoticed at the dinner party. Here, she observes chess pieces on a board playing a game of their own accord, without a guiding hand. A black queen knocks a white pawn off the table, and the pawn

miraculously falls into a pool of water at the beach. The Dreamer also reappears on the beach and pursues the piece as it drifts along a stream. Establishing the Dreamer as a lone agent on a quest sets up a conventionalized, goal-driven structure that will be familiar to most viewers. Yet the salience of the emblematic chess piece remains a mystery throughout the film.

Other events take place that require imaginative interpretation, since they appear disconnected and incoherent according to narrative logic. Set on a detour, the Dreamer follows an amorphous, shape-shifting man into a house and peers around the living room, observing chairs and furniture draped with white sheets. As her eyes scan the room, she eventually settles on the man (who has changed form once more), now immobile and bedridden, also draped with a white sheet. They exchange an ominous look, without speaking. The highly mobile woman is rendered static by the immobile man. Again, in the absence of causal coherence, the viewer is invited to make another imaginative leap and find an allegorical meaning. One might interpret that the film suggests women are mobile by nature, but are rendered immobile by men when they enter a domestic space. The chess metaphor can also be extended, in which the bedridden and immobile man is comparable to the largely immobile King in a chess game, while the highly mobile Queen (the Dreamer) typically sacrifices herself for him. In this film, she does not sacrifice herself, and instead leaves the house. Again, this interpretation requires an imaginative stretch that viewers might not make.

To detail one final scene, the Dreamer finally returns to the beach and encounters two women playing chess. Like the scene at the dinner party, her presence goes unnoticed as she observes them. The two women seemingly speak cordially, without acknowledging that they are aggressively knocking off one another's pieces from the chess board. The Dreamer coaxes the adversaries onto the same side of the board, and they go into an ecstatic trance as she sensually strokes their hair. In this instance, the scene may be imaginatively interpreted as a call for women to joyfully unite, instead of being cordial but thinly veiled adversaries.

Unlike a traditional narrative, little emphasis is placed on strategically arousing expectations that are subsequently validated, undermined or left open. There is little reference to previous events that took place as the film progresses, and it is unclear what to anticipate. Instead, the spectator is perpetually in the present, with minimal hypotheses about what might happen next, or any ability to infer events that are not represented. The viewer must adapt their viewing strategies to engage with the film – letting go of full narrative cohesion, even though it may be cued by the presence of a lone, goal-oriented agent who passes through a series of scenarios. Seeking an allegorical relevance for the peculiar sequences also exercises the imagination of the viewer in uncommon ways.

In summary, *Lucifer Rising*, *Valse Triste* and *At Land* each present the viewer with a particular set of challenges related to narrative comprehension. In the case

of *Lucifer Rising* and *Valse Triste*, the primary challenge lies in discerning the story from the plot. In *At Land*, the challenge lies in interpreting the onscreen events in a creative and meaningful way. In each example, transtextual reference to other works by the same artist or relevant literature will prime the viewer to understand the 'rules of the game' before engaging with the film. For instance, in *Lucifer Rising* the viewer may already be aware that they can focus on the atmosphere evoked by the film and think of it as an invocation if they are not aware of the extra-textual knowledge that frames the story. For *Valse Triste*, suitably primed viewers will know that they need to search for exotic metaphors and metonymic substitutions. In *At Land*, viewers can seek allegorical inferences, and let go of the expectation for linear stories in spite of the fact that narrative cues feature in the film.

The elements that have been detailed – imaginative inferences, metaphors, metonymy and saturation – all bleed into one another across the case studies to some extent. All of these characteristics are generally under-rehearsed in conventional narrative-dramatic cinematic experience. Saturation (a diffuse sense of 'deep' meaning) may be sensed in *Valse Triste* and *At Land*, for instance. Both *Hollywood Extra* and *At Land* feature absurd events that can be interpreted allegorically (actors in *Hollywood Extra* perform in face masks, two women in *At Land* enter a blissful trance after an unseen woman strokes their hair). Visual metaphors also feature in *Lucifer Rising* as well as *Valse Triste*. Transgressive subject matter features in *Hollywood Extra* (sharing the under-represented plight of the Hollywood actor), and it features in the other films too – *At Land* resists categories and boundaries imposed by social standards of the time, *Lucifer Rising* draws from esoteric religion, and *Valse Triste* addresses the taboo subject of burgeoning pubescent sexuality.

Unlike *Hollywood Extra*, which offers a more traditional narrative, the other three films are non-prescriptive and do not offer univalent messages. Rather than being called upon to make unconscious narrative-building inferences, the viewer instead needs to provide their own more conscious and effortful interpretations of the films, and the richness of their experience will be defined to some extent by their own imagination. Anger, Conner and Deren, then, can be understood as filmmakers who intuitively sought to renegotiate the native, pervasive sense-making skill of narrative comprehension, providing cognitive activities that are unrehearsed in other contexts, and inviting spectators to reflect on their own minds by challenging habitual sense-making skills, which are ordinarily applied in commercial cinema without conscious effort. Other experimental filmmakers can be considered in the same context.

While the focus has been on the subversion of traditional narrative comprehension, the next subsection will offer two subcategories that reject narrative more fully. We can consider how they exercise the mind in ways viewers might not otherwise have the opportunity to when working with traditional narrative or quasi-narrative forms.

Alternatives to Narrative

Rather than renegotiating narrative structure (as the previous case studies did), two alternative organizing systems will be proposed here that require alternative methods of engagement to narrative. The first is called catalogue form and the second is meditative film. While these types of film more wholly deny narrative as a system of organization (which in turn prohibits narrative skills of comprehension), they are not necessarily more difficult to engage with. There are many familiar non-narrative ways of organizing information that are easy to understand; for instance, Edward Branigan comments that essays, chronologies, inventories, prayers, instruction manuals and recipes do not prompt narrative skills of comprehension (Branigan 1992: 1). None of these systems of organization Branigan lists feature intentional agents progressing through a series of causally linked events; they do not call upon the spectator to infer events that are not represented, nor do they withhold information to create suspense. In these instances, the information is organized for different purposes to narrative – to present an argument, help mentally organize information or to be instructive. In addition, essays, inventories and recipes do not typically fall within the realm of the aesthetic, while narratives do. It is also generally considered to be the case that stories solicit a wider range of emotional responses and, when effective, they are compelling for extended periods of time – at least there is a widespread assumption that this is the case. Avant-garde filmmakers, however, have demonstrated that alternative systems to narrative organization can also be used for aesthetic purposes.

Form and structure is a central concern for filmmakers working within the avant-garde. Nicky Hamlyn comments that in narrative movies, form is predetermined to a major extent by ‘a combination of the demands of the screenplay, genre and grammatical conventions. Film and video artists do not have this convenience (which in any case they would see as a hindrance)’ (Hamlyn 2003: viii). Instead, experimental filmmakers create new structures – whether in relation to narrative, as we have seen, or moving entirely away from and beyond it – which becomes a principal theme of their work. Le Grice suggests that in the avant-garde, rather than being connected according to dramatic consequence, sequences might instead be placed together according to ‘mathematical systems, randomness, musical analogy, [or] unconstrained subjectivity, creating conditions of montage, all of which counteract and create alternatives to narrative structure’ (Le Grice 2001 [1997]: 294).

Two possible alternatives to narrative construction will be detailed. These categories are not to be understood as alternatives to given terms such as psychodrama, structuralist film or visual music. Rather, they represent two possible ways of categorizing films that group works together that are mentally engaged in similar ways.

Theme in Catalogue Form

The concept of the catalogue film draws from educational psychologist Arthur Applebee, who claims that when we are confronted with a complex set of information it is handled through the imposition of structure (Applebee 1978: 56). Narrative comprehension is one possible structure, but others are available. He suggests that a series of alternatives are developed prior to the acquisition of narrative skills during infancy that remain available into adulthood. For example, a heap is a random collection of data assembled by chance – objects are linked together only through an immediacy of perception. An episode is an isolated incident that depicts a cause and effect. An unfocused chain is a series of cause and effects with no continuing centre. A catalogue is created by collecting items of information that are similarly related to a ‘centre’ or core. So a list of personality traits of an individual or a sequential list such as consecutive numbers, or the alphabet, both constitute catalogues.

While a catalogue is a structure in the mind, a film can be arranged in such a way so as to prompt this method of engagement (in the same way a film arranged as a narrative prompts narrative engagement). Exercising the mind in this way for aesthetic effect will be generally unfamiliar, even if recognizing a catalogue is a commonplace skill. A catalogue film, then, is created by collecting shots (often found footage), each of which is related to a ‘centre’ or core, and organizing them according to a guiding principle that does not feature a traditional line of dramatic consequence or linear passage of time. In Kurt Kren’s *2/60 48 Köpfe Aus Dem Szondi-Test* (1960), for example, there is a catalogue of faces taken from newspapers (Figure 1.13).

In spite of the absence of narrative, such films may still invite thematic interpretations, even if it is not by way of a traditional story. For instance, Lenka Clayton’s catalogue film *Qaeda, Quality, Question, Quickly, Quickly, Quiet* (2002) isolates the words from George Bush’s ‘Axis of Evil’ speech in 2002 and reorders them alphabetically. The rigid and impersonal structure of the film invites the viewer to consider Bush’s use of language, rhetoric and recurring preoccupations by arranging his words into a dispassionate, alphabetic form instead of providing a more prescriptive commentary.

Hollis Frampton is perhaps one of the most explicitly and self-consciously informed examples of an experimental filmmaker acting as a practical psychologist, who touches on issues in his art that converge with the field of psychology more generally. Exploring the human search for order and comprehension, the middle section of Frampton’s iconic structuralist film *Zorns Lemma* (1970) contains multiple sets of information that relate to a core. The viewer is challenged into seeing if they can detect the embedded orders and patterns – some of which are easy to identify and others that are more difficult to discern. At the beginning, the alphabet is plainly and unambiguously established as the initial governing

pattern, with each shot appearing for twenty-four frames – one second. Since it is the Elizabethan alphabet, the letters J and U are absent. After its first cycle the Elizabethan alphabet repeats itself, this time on letters found in and around Manhattan – creating a contrast between the ‘old’ alphabet and modern civilization. Typically, our intuitive search for order draws attention to the first letter of each word.

Once the alphabet is complete, it begins again. Over time, each letter is replaced by a picture until they have all been replaced. Every letter substitution contains an image that belongs in a specified catalogue. For instance, sensitive viewers will notice that four of the letter substitutions (X, Z, Y and Q) reference the four elements: fire, water, earth and air. In addition, a number of the substitutions contain people doing manual tasks with their hands (Macdonald 1993: 70). For the viewer, then, the challenge becomes that of grouping a series of images into a set of categories. Sitney comments that the substitution process ‘sets in action a guessing game’ (Sitney 2002: 367). We eventually understand the nature of the film, that with each cycle, a letter will be substituted. But we cannot predict which letter it will be, or what the nature of the substitution will be when it arrives. The film, in turn, sets the mind in motion in ways that are different to narrative storytelling.

The catalogue film, as it is defined here, does not take sequential ordering as a necessary condition. In addition to the Elizabethan alphabet, *Zorns Lemma* features thematic groupings as well as sequential ordering, and this has been explored by other filmmakers as well. Marco Brambilla’s *Sync* (2005) organizes a series of images into a catalogue, although it is not organized in a linear sequence with a beginning and an end. A wide range of pornographic films and sex scenes are compiled together into a series of two-frame rapid fire clips, in which the sequences are organized schematically. Kissing shots, various sexual positions and camera angles are clustered together, accompanied by a military snare drum (Figure 1.14).

The dynamic film densely categorizes the shared, commonplace visual tropes, demonstrating the pervasiveness of generic conventions. More broadly, the viewer is invited to consider how often they experience carbon copies of the same images (and narrative structures) from movie to movie without noticing that the differences are only cosmetic. In addition to this, the viewer may also pay attention to their own speed of perception, since each image lasts for about two frames (i.e. a twelfth of a second) and yet spectators are still able to mentally compartmentalize each group of images, even if each visual group lasts for a few seconds each.

Some films may fall in between the categories that have been proposed. Matthias Müller’s *Home Stories* (1990) can be understood as a catalogue film, but it begins to resemble another renegotiation of narrative form by continually allud-



Fig. 1.13



Fig. 1.14



Fig. 1.15

Figures 1.13–1.15. Successive images in the catalogue films *2/60 48 Köpfe Aus Dem Szondi-Test* (1960; 1.13), *Sync* (2005; 1.14) and *Home Stories* (1990; 1.15). Screen captures by the author.

ing to narrative scenarios. It features a collage of Hollywood melodramas from the 1950s and 60s, filmed directly from the artist's television set. Categories of activity have been lifted from their original contexts, and placed alongside one another. Every shot features a female star (e.g. Lana Turner, Tippi Hedren, Grace Kelly and Kim Novak) in a domestic setting. The clips fluidly intercut one another, as if they had been choreographed to do so. Seemingly mimicking one another's actions, they anxiously rise from their beds, switch lights on and off, listen at the door, peer out of windows, run through empty hallways, turn their heads, and other similar activities (Figure 1.15).

With their original narratives stripped away, the fragments of film remain charged with suspense and each woman appears to express a single, unified emotion. Shots are edited together so as to create the impression that they occupy the same space and look back and forth at one another. Women seemingly become domestic victims of the voyeuristic cinematic gaze. Michael Hoolboom (1997) suggests that the home is used as an architecture to 'contain female desire' with women being framed within doorways, headboards and windows, creating a sense of 'visual enclosure'. In 1950s and 60s melodramas, as the title suggests, a woman's place is in the home.

Home Stories depicts active agents, whose larger motivations and intentions are undisclosed. As such, spectators might empathize with them by reading their anxious faces, but we will not know what prompted them. Equilibrium is not disrupted or reinstated, nor is there any clear goal motivating the progression of the film. The chain of events we see are not causally connected, nor are they

situated within a coherent, unified space or linear passage of time. Rather, the clips are compiled categorically, and the viewer is left to generate their own interpretation of the film. The use of generic narrative situations invokes narrative expectations, in a sense, but it does so only to do something very different from traditional storytelling.

More recently, a similar organizing system to the catalogue film has become widespread on YouTube in the form of ‘supercuts’, which catalogue a variety of movies together for comic effect. Titles include *Every Jason Statham Punch. Ever* (2015) and *Things Owen Wilson Says* (2015), which marshals together every time Owen Wilson reuses recurring turns of phrase like ‘come on’, ‘God damn it’ and ‘what are you talking about?’ in various movies. Films produced that are intended to be viewed on YouTube and other streaming sites have developed an aesthetic of their own, distinct to that of television. In the case of the supercut, while they do not explicitly identify as experimental films, they nonetheless tap into a system of organization that was first pioneered in the realm of the avant-garde.

What is at stake when viewers attend to catalogue films instead of narrative films? Like the three prior case studies, the catalogue films do not offer clear ‘messages’ with singular meanings, although they invite interpretations as illustrated in this discussion. Viewers do not exercise familiar sense-making skills they typically make use of when watching narrative films. Patterns, orders and similarities may be identified (sometimes easily and sometimes less so). Although generating ‘clusters’ of information is a widely exercised skill in everyday life (e.g. identifying friends from different social groups or remembering recipes), it is not typically used for aesthetic interest. Identifying themes that the films address (e.g. political rhetoric, formulaic cinematic tropes, or female representation) also becomes a challenging and expansive activity, since they are negotiated in an uncommon and non-prescriptive way.

The Meditative Film

Another category of avant-garde film that offers an alternative to narrative organization will be named ‘meditative film’, although it connects directly to Scott MacDonald’s already established term avant-garde ‘ecocinema’ (2013: 20). In essence, they are the same kind of film, but the word ‘meditative’ emphasizes the way in which the mind is exercised when engaging with this type of work, and it downplays the significance of providing ‘alternative film experiences that may help nurture an environmentally progressive mindset’ (ibid.). These films typically feature rural landscapes, industrial landscapes or cityscapes – commonplace sights, and yet they are visually rendered in such a way that the environment’s sensual beauty is revealed to the viewer anew. The camera will typically remain static, and there is a minimal level of action onscreen, allowing objects and landscapes to be contemplated in detail with minimal intervention from the artist

(aside from meticulous framing). Duration plays a more active role than motion, and the films are either silent, or feature ambient sounds. A meditative film may consist of a single extended shot, or it might include several lengthy shots. MacDonald suggests that this type of film encourages ‘patience and mindfulness – qualities of consciousness crucial for a deep appreciation of and an ongoing commitment to the natural environment’ (ibid.: 19). Evoking the Lumière Brothers’ formative films, the meditative film is committed to the individual shot as a photograph in motion.

Peter Hutton and Nathaniel Dorsky are two of the most consistently committed filmmakers to this tendency within the avant-garde. Other examples of this approach would include Henwar Rodakiewicz’s *Portrait of a Young Man* (1925–31) (Figure 1.16), Ralph Steiner’s *H2O* (1929) (Figure 1.17), Andy Warhol’s *Empire* (1964) (Figure 1.18), James Benning’s *Ten Skies* (2004) (Figure 1.19) and *13 Lakes* (2004), and Abbas Kiarostami’s *Five Dedicated to Ozu* (2003). These films are still divergent, in spite of their similarities. Hutton and Dorsky, for example, were motivated by spiritual impulses, while Steiner and Warhol were not. Some were intended to be screened in galleries (Warhol), others in film festivals (Benning, Hutton) or art cinemas (Kiarostami). In addition, each individual film engages themes that move beyond the issue discussed here, dealing with particular histories, landscapes or industrial growth, for example. Yet all exercise the mind in a comparable way.

The meditative film does not take a narrative form or rework narrative principles, yet it finds an alternative without the aggression that is sometimes implied by avant-



Fig. 1.16

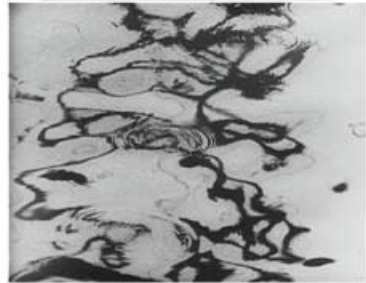


Fig. 1.17



Fig. 1.18



Fig. 1.19

Figures 1.16–1.19. Individual shots as photographs-in-motion in the ‘meditative films’ *Portrait of a Young Man* (1925–31; 1.16), *H2O* (1929; 1.17), *Empire* (1964; 1.18) and *Ten Skies* (2004; 1.19). Screen captures by the author.

garde polemics. Agents may pass through the landscapes, but they are not furnished with any detailed depiction of human intention. The temporal relation between each shot is undetermined and, in any case, immaterial. There is no conflict and no resolution, and equilibrium remains in balance for the duration of the film. The feeling of balance experienced while engaging with these works might be compared to mindfulness meditation, where the spectator feels 'present', instead of reflecting on the past or anticipating the future.

While narratives typically feature a change of affairs (e.g. good fortune to bad, and vice versa), the meditative film features change only in the most minimal and gradual sense – a leaf may sway, a boat will drift along a river. Events occur in time, but a change of affairs in the traditional sense does not take place. Where everyday life is negotiated with a series of tasks, the meditative film (like meditation itself) provides a spiritual cleansing. Rather than offering an informational 'hit' or an emotional thrill, these works provide a 'reprieve in the midst of the hysteria of contemporary life' (MacDonald 2006: 244).⁷ Where cinematic images are typically 'fraught with information' (ibid.: 243), the meditative film allows the viewer to escape from daily business in order to find stillness, rather than excitement.

Peter Hutton comments that his work is designed to draw the viewer back to a time when there was not a sophisticated history of cinema. The Lumière Brothers' films, he suggests, feel revelatory today because there is an innocence to their work – instead of attempting to provide the viewer with a larger idea that results from the accumulation of images in narrative form, spaces are explored without the baggage of cinematic history or a sense of overriding intent. Objects are responded to as they occur, and spectators are drawn back to the time when the simple impression of photographs in motion were a source of delight (ibid.: 246). Hutton's films are contemplative, and they conjure a quiet, yet attentive level of awareness in the viewer that evokes quiet revelations.

Skagafjörður (2004), by Hutton, documents a region in northern Iceland, from which its title is derived. Each of the thirty-six shots serves as an independent tableau, lasting about fifty seconds, separated by brief episodes of black leader that cleanse the visual palate. The film begins in rich black and white tonalities, which are later interspersed with colour imagery. Rolling hills, open skies and calm waters feature, sometimes in a haze of mist, sometimes clear, and sometimes with clouds. There is an occasional hint of civilization in the landscapes depicted such as a telephone line, a lone fisherman, a bird, a window from a room framing the image. But these elements feature as bit-part inhabitants of the landscape, rather than motivating the film.

Like many of Hutton's works, *Skagafjörður* is a contemplative, carefully composed film that draws from traditions of nineteenth-century landscape painting and still photography. Sitney characterizes Hutton as an artist on a persistent quest to transform the feeling of quietude and loneliness into pictorial beauty,

commenting: 'The persona of the filmmaker looming within Hutton's work seems to go looking for loneliness, all over the world, in fact, as if convinced that beauty reveals itself most poignantly within the modalities of alienation' (Sitney 2008a).

How, then, does the meditative film exercise the mind in ways distinct from narrative film? One possibility is that the spectator must adjust their viewing habits so as to operate at an uncommonly low level of psychological arousal from external stimuli. Joseph Anderson suggests that human activity is, in part, an effort to maintain optimal (not maximal, but optimal) arousal.

Increasing the level of arousal increases performance to a point, up to some optimal level, after which performance falls off (inverted U function), and humans will typically attempt to act to change the level of arousal to maintain an optimal level: they will doodle or hum when they are bored (under-stimulated), and they will 'escape' from a situation of over-stimulation or attend only to parts of the incoming stimulation if they find themselves in a situation from which they cannot escape (Anderson 1996: 117).

An arousal-level theory of motivation was developed after studies in sensory deprivation. Subjects were deprived of stimulation in a variety of ways, and the effects were noted. In sensory deprivation tanks, following an initial sleep, several subjects maintained deprivation until they hallucinated. For some, their behaviour was disturbed up to several weeks later (Ellis 1973: 87). When given stimulation, the viewer needs to detect meaningful patterns. While hissing or white noise generates information to attend to, the elimination of form, pattern and meaning from the input to the subject results in under-stimulation, even though outside information has not been wholly eliminated. As such, optimally arousing stimuli in cinema typically provides the spectator with a narrative, which offers a familiar route to pattern, form and meaning.

Movies that are designed to elicit high and medium levels of arousal are abundant in popular cinema, such as action movies, horror, thrillers, dramas, rom-coms and comedies. In these examples, the filmmakers aim to provide optimal arousal levels in the viewers. Films can also provoke lower levels of arousal, which will test the patience of some viewers, as found in the 'slow cinema' (De Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016) films of Robert Bresson or Bela Tarr, for instance. With the meditative film, arousal levels may be lower still. There is no dialogue, minimal screen motion, and narrative comprehension skills such as inferring events that are not depicted are not required. If the viewer can adapt their viewing habits, attend to small visual details and work at a lower level of arousal for an extended period of time, they will learn to engage with the meditative without feeling under-stimulated. Narrative films, then, can evoke a wide array of emotions and moods, but not the full spectrum of states that are available to human consciousness. The meditative film points to and aims to elicit one such alternative type of mental state.

Aside from the novelty of experiencing meditative film in a state of low arousal, one may speculate that it helps cultivate a psychological discipline comparable to actual meditation. Research suggests there are benefits to meditation, such as helping reduce anxiety and depression (Zeidan et al. 2013) and improving concentration (Mrazek et al. 2013). The challenge when meditating, like that of engaging with the films discussed, is that of overcoming boredom. When turning one's attention to a single point of reference like focusing on the breath, bodily sensations or a single word (mantra), the purpose is to turn one's attention away from distracting thoughts and focus on the present moment. This can lead to feelings of restlessness, however. According to John Eastwood et al. (2012), we need a certain amount of psychological energy or arousal to experience boredom. When we are in a state of low arousal and little is happening, we feel relaxed. In a state of high arousal, we have energy that we would like to devote to something, but cannot find anything engaging. When one is able to slow the mind down into a state of low arousal, we are ready to both meditate, and engage with meditative film.

Artists like Hutton, Dorsky, Benning and Rodakiewicz can be understood as filmmakers who made intuitions about the mind and its possible threshold for arousal levels, offering viewers occasion to attend to their perceptions in a way they would not in other contexts, and providing viewers occasion to contemplate their cognitive and perceptual facilities.

Conclusion

The challenge of the avant-garde film tradition, it has been argued, lies not in the wholesale rejection of narrative. Rather, some works wholly reject narrative as an organizing system, while others employ elements of traditional storytelling to prompt the viewer into a narrative mode of comprehension, without providing full narrative cohesion. If narrative skills of comprehension are challenged or rejected, viewers are called upon to exercise other mental skills such as seeking out radical metaphors and metonymy, paying attention to diffuse feelings of significance, generating creative allegorical interpretations, clustering units of information into thematic groups, and operating at an uncommonly low level of arousal for the duration of the film. In turn, the avant-garde reveals experiences and pleasures that were previously under-rehearsed or absent in cinema, expanding our aesthetic sensitivities, media literacy and skills of engagement. Narrative engagement might be the most pervasive method of comprehension we apply when viewing a film – but if it is denied, the patient and persistent will find a second port of call.

As it has been argued earlier in this chapter, according to cognitive theories of mind, narrative comprehension is an essential tool for negotiating everyday life.

In cinema (and storytelling in general) causally linked chains of events are fashioned and streamlined through shifting points of view, temporal ellipses and spatial changes, in order to enable the process of comprehension. Why, then, might an artist frustrate the audience's desire to draw a coherent narrative interpretation of its events? For some, the absence of a narrative structure in avant-garde art forces the viewer into actively participating in interpreting the film rather than passively receiving meaning (Carroll 1996; Le Grice 2001 [1997]). It also reflexively encourages the viewers to be constantly aware that they are watching a film, stripping away the illusion central to mainstream cinema (Hersey 2002). Another explanation has been proposed here, which is that the filmmakers provide an experience for the viewer, in which they are called upon to apply their minds in ways that are under-rehearsed in mainstream narrative-dramatic cinema.

What has been explored in this chapter is a set of exemplary films, some canonical and others less well known, in an attempt to clarify some of the possible relationships between narrative and avant-garde film. Rather than arguing that the avant-garde broke free from the restrictions of narrative, it has been suggested that some avant-garde films productively separate narrative as a mode of cognition and a text structure by 'veiling' the story through substitutions or allusions (as in the work of Conner and Anger). Maya Deren's trance film, by contrast, contains some elements of narrative (such as a central character on a quest), while denying others (disorientating spatial/temporal relations, and employing ambiguous symbolism), cueing narrative expectations without fully indulging them. In *Hollywood Extra*, we see that some films are placed in the avant-garde canon that cue all the familiar narrative modes of engagement, yet the film challenges the audience in other ways by being self-reflexive, stylistically disjunctive, and employing absurdist symbolism. By considering catalogue form and the meditative film, two possible alternatives to narrative have been considered that draw viewers towards developing thematic readings of mental categories, and operate at an uncommonly low level of arousal.

The historical pervasiveness of narrative as an organizing system in cinema, literature and theatre suggests that its dominance in popular cinema is not arbitrary, but rather we possess a natural instinct to engage in those terms. Simultaneously, it is possible that the dominance of narrative only served to compound its status as the 'only dish on the menu' in popular cinema, compelling avant-garde filmmakers to find alternatives. Yvonne Rainer refers to the 'tyranny' of narrative, commenting:

The tyranny of a form that creates the expectation of a continuous answer to 'what will happen next?' fanatically pursuing an inexorable resolution . . . in space and time . . . seemed more ripe for resistance . . . Can specific states of mind be conveyed without being attached to particularities of place, time, person, and relationship? Can an audience learn to abandon its narrative expectation? Can subject matter dealing with perceptual and photographic phenomena be sequentially – rather

than narratively – linked to material that has already been invested with ‘story-ness?’ (Rainer 1999 [1978]: 12)

Rainer, along with Laura Mulvey and Chantal Akerman possessed a suspicion of conventional narrative, an attitude also widespread amongst structural filmmakers in the 1970s. As the influence of structural film diminished, however, narrative became a major concern for both feminists and others within the avant-garde (Smith 1998: 408). A discussion of the more narratively engaged strains of filmmaking that emerged – such as the ‘Menippean satire’ (Sitney 2002: 410) and the ‘new talkies’ (Peterson 1994: 180) – would be an avenue for further discussion.

Other theories of narrative within avant-garde film could also be considered. For instance, Hollis Frampton and Stan Brakhage are two filmmakers who saw their work as being inextricably tied to narrative, even if their films themselves do not contain narratives. This is because there is still a narrative explanation for the creation of their films, and each work is also placed within the narrative of film history. In 1980, Frampton published the book *Circles of Confusion*, which opens with an essay entitled ‘A Pentagram for Conjuring the Narrative’,⁸ a five-part article that argues that even for a work that is decidedly non-narrative, there is still the ‘story’ of the film’s production. For all the elements of a film, there is an explanation of how it got there that can be couched in narrative terms. Frampton called the postulation of the inevitability of narrative ‘Brakhage’s Theorem’, claiming that Brakhage had proposed it to him. He summarized it in the following way:

For any finite series of shots . . . there exists in a real time a rational narrative, such that every term in the series, together with its position, duration, partition, and reference, shall be perfectly and entirely accounted for. (Frampton 2009 [1980]: 140)

In his late-career painted abstractions (discussed in chapter three), Brakhage seemingly strayed as far from narrative as any film artist has done. Echoing ‘Brakhage’s Theorem’, in 1993 he commented that he underestimated the level to which dramatic narrative infiltrated his own life and that of his family through radio, TV, newspapers and mainstream cinema. In turn, his children acted out dramatic narratives in their games, and Brakhage created a situation for himself in his home that was itself like a narrative. Operating as an intentional agent, Brakhage would shift between a series of causally linked events in the household, creating art, tending to his children and assisting with household chores. He went on to state that ‘my work was tied to the whole history of cinema when I thought that wasn’t the case. The films weren’t free to grow aesthetically but dragged down by their subject matter. Despite all the evolutions of my film grammar . . . , they were still tied to the more traditional dramatic-narrative framework’ (Ganguly 2002: 141).⁹

Michael Snow's widely discussed *Wavelength* (1967) also challenges conventions of narrative form and comprehension. The film seemingly contains fragments of a narrative that strays into the film, but the fragments of narrative have no direct bearing on the form of the film. It begins as a wide shot of a loft space, and four events take place: two men place a bookcase against the left wall of the room; two women listen to The Beatles' song 'Strawberry Fields Forever' on the radio; a man walks into the frame and drops dead; and a young woman comes into the room and makes a phone call to report the dead man. These events are widely dispersed across the 45-minute film, as the camera intermittently zooms towards a photograph of the sea, which is at the opposite end of the room. The film ends on a close-up of the photograph.

The events contained in the film make no impression on the progression of the zoom or the form of the film more generally. The camera does not follow the plight of any of the characters, or contextualize the circumstances in which the various events took place. A film that appears to be about a zoom across a loft is seemingly interrupted by a story that strays into the space. Murray Smith comments that 'the narrative and non-narrative elements co-exist in the film, like oil and water, rather than merging or binding together' (Smith 2009: 7).

This rigid separation of form and narrative can be understood as another exemplar of the freedoms claimed and won by avant-garde filmmakers in their renegotiations of narrative as an organizing system.

Notes

1. For example, see anthologies: G. Fireman, T. McVay Jr and O. Flanagan *Narrative and Consciousness* (2003); D. Herman, *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences* (2004).

2. While a lengthier discussion of this would be tangential to the larger issue, it should be noted that some kinds of experience can be transmitted genetically in the form of epigenetic inheritance.

3. Bordwell's widespread and influential assertion that the viewer 'constructs meaning' from films has been critiqued by Berys Gaut (2010: 164–79), who claims that while there is a limited role for construction in some films, Bordwell's position fails to prove that genuine construction lies at the core of the comprehension and interpretation of films. Bordwell's position is contrasted with the detectivist view of interpretation, which claims that meaning is determined independently of the viewer's opinion about it – audiences are directed towards meaning, which is determined by the film's intrinsic features. While that debate will not be addressed in detail, I will comment that Bordwell's key insights can be restated in 'detectivist' terms. That is to say, films do direct spectators towards their meaning, but spectators then have to pick up these cues and do something with them – that is, use their perceptual and cognitive capacities, including relevant background knowledge, to detect the meaning. The viewer can be understood as 'constructive' in this sense.

4. This is not to be mistaken with Bordwell's concept of 'parametric narration'. While style-centred narration can sometimes be considered parametric, Bordwell comments 'any film might contain an aesthetically motivated flourish – a gratuitous camera movement, an unexpected or unjustified color shift or sound bridge . . . In parametric narration, style is organized across the film according to distinctive principles' (Bordwell 1985: 281). Parametric narration features a small set of devices that

recur frequently and systematically and that are subtly decorative (as found in the work of Yasujiro Ozu, for instance) – rather than a narrative that flaunts its style. *Hollywood Extra* is not quite as systematic as this.

5. Originally stated in reference to Stan Brakhage's work, but it is useful in this context as well.

6. Quoted in BFI edition of the Kenneth Anger DVD *Magic Lantern Cycle* (2011).

7. Scott MacDonald's discussion of Peter Hutton was, along with ecocinema more generally, the inspiration for this film type. See also 'It's About Time: Slow Aesthetics in Experimental Ecocinema and Nature Cam Videos' by Stephanie Lam in the edited collection *Slow Cinema* (2016), edited by Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge.

8. Now available in the book *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters* (Frampton 2009).

9. A number of Brakhage's claims, which he asserted with conviction, were difficult to accept for some – such as his refusal to distinguish between the abstract and the figurative, or his criticism of Sitney and others for labelling him as an 'imaginative film maker, as an inventor of fantasies or metaphors' rather than being 'the most thorough documentary film maker in the world'. See Victor Grauer's article, 'Brakhage and the Theory of Montage' (1998).