

CHAPTER 2

GHOST FILMS OF THE AVANT-GARDE



I am not greedy. I do not seek to possess the major portion of your days. I am content if, on those rare occasions whose truth can be stated only by poetry, you will, perhaps, recall an image, even only the aura of my films. And what more could I possibly ask, as an artist, than that your most precious visions, however rare, assume, sometimes, the forms of my images.

—Maya Deren, 'Cinema as an Art Form'.

Maya Deren's declaration acknowledges a generally overlooked, yet crucial fact about art – once our immediate experience is over, the work spends its life nestling in our memories, returning intermittently outside aesthetic contexts. Deren shows a particular sensitivity to the way in which art is subjectively rendered in the mind, which may be characteristic of the avant-garde. We can ask: what is it that the artist aims to create – a vivid experience, or a persistent memory? The answer might be given that they try to provide both. A central claim advanced in this chapter, however, is that the rewards of some avant-garde films sometimes lie more in their long-term resonance rather than in their immediate impact. This is not to suggest that avant-garde films are easy to remember, on the contrary, the claim will also be made that formal characteristics that pertain to the avant-garde make them difficult to recall. However, there are dimensions to the creation and retention of our memories following an encounter with avant-garde films that may encourage a vivid memory.

A film transforms when it is revisited as a memory. While cinema is durational, a memory – a network of associations, emotional responses and arresting images – returns in an instant. Responses that are initially provoked may transform into something else when revisited at a later time. A work of art may haunt the viewer with feelings that were not experienced during the initial encounter after a period of digestion. In this sense, the long-term pay-off contrasts with the

assumed instant gratifications of popular mainstream movies. When a film resonates, then, it returns to the viewer intermittently, perhaps because they liked it in the immediate, or because it ages well as a memory. It might leave the viewer with an 'itch', a feeling that there is something about the work that has not been fully grasped yet, which makes it persist in the mind.

Why is remembering an avant-garde film after the fact an aesthetic, rather than a psychological issue? The claim will be advanced in this chapter that the difficulty viewers can find in remembering avant-garde films may be an aesthetic virtue. Avant-garde films are notably polyvalent, in the sense that they are more open-ended in the range of interpretations they seem to invite than most narrative-dramatic films. Viewers may subjectively alter and embellish the films over time, as if they serve as an imagining board with which the viewer is able to free-associate with, long after the film has been directly encountered. The way we remember works of art directly informs our overall relationship with them, after our immediate experience is over.

The subject of memory is also relevant to a discussion of the cognitive dimensions of avant-garde film because it has provided filmmakers with a fertile starting point for formal experimentation, and it has also been researched by cognitive psychologists. Since there is a largely unexplored convergence in interest between this particular subset of artists and psychologists on the subject of memory, it will be productive to consider observations from both groups in light of the other. This discussion, then, relates to the broader theme of this book by drawing together shared interests between cognitive scientists and avant-garde filmmakers. We can consider the intuitions of filmmakers Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren and Larry Jordan within the context of research from the field of cognitive psychology.

Like chapter one, avant-garde film will be discussed as a broad phenomenon rather than focusing on a specific artist or movement. Since this discussion is not limited to the work of a specific filmmaker or category of filmmakers, there will inevitably be counter-examples to the broader argument, since avant-garde film is such a diverse field; however, an argument will be offered that relates to general patterns relating to experimental film.

The discussion will begin by outlining the ways in which memory is a recurring theme in avant-garde film. Following this, some of the main concepts behind cognitive theories of memory will be detailed. Some of the formal details that relate to narrative organization and that have a bearing on human memory skills will be considered, and these details will be related back to a series of case studies. Then, the spectator's personal responses (e.g. emotional reaction, level of analysis, pre-existing specialist knowledge) will be examined, and how they have a bearing on their recollection of the work. It will finally be suggested that an unstable memory can be an aesthetic virtue in relation to experimental films. Broadly speaking, this discussion attempts to illuminate another way in which avant-garde filmmakers take 'sense as muse', drawing creative inspiration

from the nature of the mind. The chapter will also demonstrate how their films challenge commonplace cognitive routines; if viewers expansively adapt to the mental habits called upon to engage with avant-garde films, they may remember the works they encountered with greater clarity, recalling surface details, isolated images, their own personal interpretations and the atmospheres evoked without recourse to a narrative thread.

Avant-Garde Film and Memory

The fluid, transitory field of memory that is shaped by subjective concerns, biases and interests has served as an inspiration in both avant-garde film and other instances of cinema's more enigmatic texts. It appears during the early stages of the French New Wave – Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) explores the unreliability of memory, while Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) tells the story of a man haunted by an image from his childhood. More recently, David Lynch's loose trilogy of films *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Inland Empire* (2006) all explore the biases and embellishments that the mind retrospectively creates to cope with overwhelming guilt.

Within the field of experimental film, Jeff Scher has produced a trilogy of animations entitled *You Won't Remember This* (2007), *You Won't Remember This Either* (2009), and *You Might Remember This* (2011). These films deal with a phenomenon known as childhood amnesia, where the parent is able to remember what their child will ultimately forget (*Husbands* 2014). The treated found-footage films of Phil Solomon, such as *The Emblazoned Apparitions* (2013), address collective memory, and resemble the liminal quality of experiences that have dissolved into memories. Drawing the viewer's attention to their own mental skills, Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*) (1971) and Malcolm Le Grice's *Blackbird Descending (Tense Alignment)* (1977) both compel the spectator to reflect on their own short-term memories while engaging with their films.

Drawing from her own intuitions about the mind, filmmaker and theorist Maya Deren proposes two organizational axes for memory – the horizontal and the vertical. She suggests that a vertical progression – that is, chronological and causally linked – is the method generally used in popular storytelling; however, it is only one possible method for mentally organizing events. The horizontal axis, by contrast, provides non-chronological, associational links, which can be replicated in cinema. She comments:

By 'horizontal' I mean that the memory of man is not committed to the natural chronology of his experience On the contrary, he has access to all his experience simultaneously . . . he can compare similar portions of events widely disparate in time and place. (Deren 2001 [1946]: 11)

In *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*, Deren suggests that exploring the horizontal axis of memory in filmmaking will create an imaginative environment that cinema lends itself to in a manner distinct from other art forms. She comments that the filmmaker ‘can place together, in immediate temporal sequence, events actually distant, and achieve, through such relationship a peculiarly filmic reality’ (ibid.: 42).

Stan Brakhage also reflected on memory, but not by attempting to emulate its non-chronological form through cinema. Rather, he noticed that occasionally he made films that most viewers would not remember seeing, even immediately following the programme in which it was screened amongst other works. These films would not be mentioned except in the vaguest terms, and would not be critiqued in print. Brakhage said the following:

My natural supposition was that these films were ‘weak’ in some way, perhaps even defective; but then I did begin to notice also that defects in more memorable films of my making, even works . . . quite crippled by error, were thoroughly critiqued, immediately and ever after. I finally came to the sense that there were some films which just naturally seemed to slip past any easy consciousness of most viewers and to, thereby, lodge (perhaps ‘hide’ is a better word) in the (dare I say ‘collective?’) unconscious. I too would tend to forget them, or if I did remember them it was very much as one would make special effort to protect or to socially mature a neglected child. (Brakhage 2003 [1996]: 83)

Dubbing these forgettable works ‘ghost films’, Brakhage suggested that they have a quality that defies language description, and in turn defy normal routes to ‘memorable-ness’. Where an unmemorable film would ordinarily be considered a failure, then, Brakhage speculated that these ghost films might be his greatest successes, in the sense that they cast off all references to language and become pure works of ‘moving visual thinking’ (a concept that will be explored in chapter three). Brakhage concluded ‘Only a ghost film could possibly break thought-bonds of language and exist as, say, movement haunt, tone-texture haunt, ineffable-haunt. The sense of such a film might naturally exist within the spectator, very like the kind of passing image which prompts dreams that *cannot* be verbalized’ (ibid.: 86). Although this chapter is not a direct defence of Brakhage’s postulation, it will explore some of the unique ways in which avant-garde films may serve as memories that distinguishes them from commercial cinema.

The focus of this chapter is not about the way that the spectator’s memory skills are exploited *during* the film, as in the case of *Blackbird Descending* (*Tense Alignment*) or (*nostalgia*). Nor is the focus on films whose forms are inspired by the liminality of memory (such as *La Jetée*, *Lost Highway* or Maya Deren’s psychodramas). Rather, the way in which avant-garde films are recalled after they have been directly experienced will be considered, in a manner that is distinct from commercial films.¹ The chapter will expand on the idea suggested by Brakhage

that films that are difficult to remember (as many avant-garde films are, it will be proposed) possess a peculiar resonance and this can be understood as an aesthetic virtue, rather than a failure.

Setting the Ground Work

So far, the suggestion has been made that memory is a recurring topic in avant-garde film that can be productively enlightened by research from the field of cognitive science. The next step is to establish some of the central principles of memory as it is understood within cognitive science, before returning to a series of case studies. Within the cognitive theory of mind, memory is understood as consisting of three broad stages: encoding, storage and retrieval. Encoding takes place when the experience initially registers in our perceptions. Following that, it is retained in the 'memory stores', meaning that specialized memories are preserved in particular areas, such as episodic memories (e.g. recalling an anecdote) or procedural memories (e.g. physical routines like how to tie one's shoe laces, or ride a bike) (Eysenck and Keane 2000: 205–7). However, memories can undergo trace decay if they are not vividly encoded or revisited once they have been stored, disappearing over time (*ibid.*: 170). During storage, interference might also occur. This is when prior or future knowledge interferes with existing memories and they are distorted. Retrieval takes place when a memory is recalled from storage and returned to the subject's conscious attention. This may occur spontaneously and involuntarily, or it may occur through conscious effort. On occasion, a memory might be retained in the memory stores but still be difficult to retrieve – when one says it is 'on the tip of my tongue' for example, the memory is present but is difficult to access.

To reiterate a maxim commonly cited during cognitive discussions of art, we engage with aesthetic experiences with the same mental equipment developed for interacting with the natural world. The capacity to remember our experiences in life and art is no exception to this rule. Unlike everyday experience, however, the artist can control the form of the film, which will have a bearing on the accuracy with which a film is encoded, and is subsequently stored and retrieved.

In the first of three primary subsections entitled 'Narrative Organization and Memory', it will be argued that certain typical features that pertain to the avant-garde discourage clear long-term recollection – particularly if they are not organized in a way that prompts a narrative mode of engagement. Broadly speaking, it will be suggested that events in avant-garde films are more commonly linked sequentially, rather than being connected according to dramatic consequence. The viewer may also be drawn towards mentally attending to moment-by-moment details, rather than binding the work together into a coherent whole. The surface details (i.e. retinal impressions) are oftentimes emphasized over the

semantic details (the ‘meaning’). Finally, the trajectory of an avant-garde film is not typically motivated by clearly defined goals. This discussion relates to and builds on the discussion of narrative in the previous chapter. Implicit within the overview of cues that prompt a narrative mode of engagement is the understanding that narrative films connect events consequentially, with a clear global structure (i.e. a narrative arc). In addition to this, a narrative will feature events that are motivated towards a goal, and the viewer will largely need to pay attention to the semantic details, rather than the surface details. Table 2.1 summarizes the principal claims advanced in the first subsection.

Table 2.1 ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Memory: Formal Features of Conventional and Avant-Garde Film

Good memory	Trace decay/ Distortion
Consequential series of events	Sequential series of events
Clear global structure	Emphasizes local details
Semantic details	Surface details
Drive-to-a-goal	No clearly defined goal

According to existing research conducted on memory, then, we appear to be ill-equipped to remember the central details of avant-garde films; since they frequently emphasize surface details, events are often sequentially linked rather than causally connected, and they lack a dramatic goal. These claims largely draw from David Bordwell’s discussion of memory in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (henceforth *NiFF*), along with Joseph Anderson’s *The Reality of Illusion* and James Peterson’s *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order*. Materials drawn directly from the field of cognitive science will also be used.

In the second subsection entitled ‘Personal Responses’, the ways in which avant-garde films imprint themselves differently to narrative-dramatic films will be considered. While the first subsection focuses on the details of the film itself, the second subsection will consider the personal responses of the individual spectator – their emotional reactions, interpretations, the level of detail with which they analyse the work they encounter, and the unique body of knowledge that each viewer brings to their own experience. It will be suggested that the larger affective tone of the work will be more readily retained rather than moment-by-moment emotional reactions. The general ‘gist’ of the film is more easily recalled than individual incidents. If the spectator responds vividly to a film, rather than with indifference, they may mentally revisit it and strengthen their memory of the work. If the viewer possesses prior, specialist knowledge that informs the film, or if they analyse it in closer detail, the clarity with which they recall the work will be enhanced. This subsection can be summarized in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Memory: Subjective Features of Conventional and Avant-Garde Film

Good memory	Trace Decay/ Distortion
Mood	Emotion
Gist	Local details
Deep processing	Shallow processing
Flashbulb	Generic events

In the third subsection entitled ‘Interference in Action’, there will be a consideration of the ways in which a distorted memory may serve as a creative springboard for films that invite multiple interpretations, like those in the avant-garde. This will be explored in relation to Larry Jordan’s *Hamfat Asar* (1965).

Since memory is a highly subjective capacity, there is no exact science for predicting what the spectator will retain – different viewers will hold onto their own unique configuration of elements within a film. But while the subjective dimension of memory is crucial, we can nevertheless gain insight about our experience of films and how they might be recalled through scientific investigation that has already been conducted.

Narrative Organization and Memory

In the following subsection, the claim that films that cue a traditional narrative mode of comprehension are easier to remember in the long-term than avant-garde works will be expanded on. In a sense, this builds on the previous chapter, but the goals are different. When conventional stories are told in movies, they cue operations in the spectator that facilitate a familiar, well-rehearsed narrative mode of thought, which in turn allows the spectator to make inferences beyond the information given. Here, the suggestion will be made that a narrative structure also aids the encoding, storage and retrieval of films as memories.

Aside from the exceptionally gifted, people do not retain their experiences with photographic accuracy. The psychologist Donald Spence (1984) argues that the episode as remembered will instead have ‘narrative truth’, in which the most salient features of the event are retained. As such, surface details are more likely to be forgotten, and so are elements that do not carry any relevance to the experience. For instance, if you get a bus to town, you are unlikely to remember the price of the fare or the faces encountered unless they have some kind of salience (e.g. you are 20p short, or you see a friend). Narrative truth is accurate in some respects, but not what we might consider ‘historically faithful’, since the entire set of details in an experience is too rich to be accurately preserved (Spence, quoted in Anderson 1996: 157).

While our lives are complicated by tangential experiences, pulling us in a series of digressions, we normally choose a consistent thread from our past and synopsise it as a memory: stable agents are tracked, events causally lead to one another, and irrelevant details are filtered out when recounting an anecdote to ourselves and other people. Psychologists David Rubin and Daniel Greenberg comment:

Narrative structure . . . establishes a major form of organization in autobiographical memory, providing temporal and goal structure. Autobiographical memories are usually recorded as narrative; they are told to another person and to oneself. (Rubin and Greenberg 2003: 61)

Just as our autobiographical memories are easier to remember if they are organized like narratives, an unambiguous narrative in a film also facilitates a clearer memory. Encoding is easier, which in turn increases the amount of detail that is stored, and makes retrieval more efficient. Accordingly, a memory is more likely to be subject to distortion (in which additional knowledge alters memories) or trace decay (in which memories deteriorate over time) if the information is not structured in narrative form. Some of the characteristics of narrative that have a bearing on our memories will be considered, and their implication for the retention and recollection of avant-garde films. The discussion of narrative organization and memory will be divided into a series of subsections that consider details emphasized by the various films that have an influence on our encoding, storage and retrieval of the works.

Global Structure and Local Details

What perceivers remember and what they forget in the long-term is in part dictated by the governing structure of a work of art. Clear recollection favours the global structure, rather than the local details. Joseph Anderson explains:

both superordinate and subordinate events can be remembered. But long-term memory seems to favor the superordinate units, the larger event, the overall structure. Put another way, all levels of memory are subject to forgetting. The lower levels of the hierarchy are more vulnerable than the higher ones. . . . the whole is more memorable than the parts. This seems to be true of biographical memory, or recall of a story, and of what we take away from the viewing of a film. (Anderson 1996: 155)

Narrative organization provides the viewer with a clear global framework with which to comprehend a film (Branigan 1992: 13), which in turn will also shape the details of the memory. But it is not the only possible form of global organization. Many structural films with their simplified, sometimes predetermined

shapes marking a move away from the more subjective, passionate and complex forms of filmmaking practised by Stan Brakhage and other poetic filmmakers² feature eminently simple governing shapes, which make the work easier to recall. Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970), for instance, is governed by an exceptionally plain and simple governing pattern that makes the 'larger event' of the film easy to remember. It features the empty corridor of a university building. The frame looks like a shiny green field, with patterns added by fluorescent lights on the ceiling, which reflect on the other three sides of the corridor. In a series of fast, rhythmical edits, the zoom lens alternates back and forth every four frames. Initially, the shift in composition is minor, but as the 23-minute film progresses, the spatial interval between each shot becomes wider and wider.

The governing pattern is straightforward and easy to remember – spatial intervals between shots become progressively wider as the film progresses. If the whole is more memorable than the parts, the 'whole' is very easy to discern, and is thus easy to remember. Sitney describes the larger structure by commenting that 'In its overall shape *Serene Velocity* moves from a vibrating pulse within an optical depth to an accordion-like slamming and stretching of the visual field' (Sitney 2002: 401). In this instance, then, the global structure of an avant-garde film is eminently clear and easy to recall. Viewers are likely to remember it accordingly.

More commonly, particularly outside the structural tradition, avant-garde films do not contain an easily discernible governing shape, which in turn encourages the viewer to pay closer attention to the parts rather than the whole – the 'subordinate' events rather than the 'superordinate' – which are more difficult to encode and store as memories. Robert Breer's *Rubber Cement* (1975) is one such example of a film whose global structure is unclear, and this will impair the viewer's recollection of the work at a later time. Ute Holl comments:

Every time we see a film by Robert Breer, it looks different. Some images disappear; other images are carved deeply into the memory and stay with us. We never jump into the same stream of images twice. (Holl 2011: 48)

This is in part attributable to the fact that the range of seemingly dissociated objects cannot be bound into a unified global structure. There is no developing pattern like the expanding and contracting visual field in *Serene Velocity*, no chronological cycle like the alphabet in *Zorns Lemma* (discussed in chapter one), and no narrative arc to bind the chain of events together. Instead, viewers are encouraged to attend to the local details without integrating them into a larger structure. *Rubber Cement* features a collage of disparate artefacts from Breer's life and intercuts them: rotoscoped family footage of a dog and a woman at play in a park; domestic life – a plate, a cup, newspaper clippings; and Breer's own artistic heritage – the anarchic Felix the Cat, and the abstraction of Hans Richter's *Rhythmus 21* (1921) (evoked by expanding and receding rectangles); rubber ce-

ment (which Breer uses to make his films); and abstract shapes. The film, then, is unstable in the sense that the content is unpredictable, and also in the sense that the objects are rendered in unpredictable ways – some are drawn in realistic proportions, while others are in cartoon-like proportions. Some images are abstract, while others are figurative; there is rotoscope, collage, crayons and paint continually intercutting with one another.

A series of title cards appear intermittently, dividing the film into four subsections (Amos Chases a Stick/ Frannie's Plate and Cup/ Julie Plays Basketball/ Rubber Cement), yet a clear global structure is difficult to discern, as the various visual motifs intercut alongside one another, irrespective of the title cards. As such, remembering the film depends on recalling the local details (i.e. the various items featured), which are more complex, dissociated and difficult to retain – particularly since they cannot be integrated into the larger shape of the work. A traditional narrative possesses a clear global structure, which is easier to remember. *Serene Velocity* is also governed by a radically simple global structure. *Rubber Cement*, like many avant-garde works, is more loose and associative in shape.

Surface Details and Semantic Content

So far, the claim has been advanced that avant-garde films are difficult to remember if they are not governed by a clear global structure. The broad shape of the work might be eminently simple (in the case of *Serene Velocity*) but it might also be far more complex, or unclear. Here, the suggestion will be made that avant-garde films also often emphasize the surface details over the semantic content, and this also makes them difficult to remember. Philosopher Jerry Fodor distinguishes between the two by commenting that when checking a clock, we are much more likely to recall the time (i.e. the semantic content) rather than the shape of the numerals (surface details) – even though both must have registered at some stage of perception (Fodor 1983: 56–57). In his discussion of 'ghost films', Brakhage made comparable intuitions about the mind, commenting that our ability to recall details of motion is limited by our descriptive vocabularies.

The capacity to remember *any* imagery from the flowing-river experience of motion pictures is exactly dependent upon one's capacity to name what has been seen. A picture is (as I define it) a collection of nameable shapes framed (i.e. in interrelated composition). But it is almost impossible to name the motions of these shapes-as-things in other than the most general way ('fast', 'slow', 'up', 'down', 'jerky', 'smooth', 'right', 'left' and so forth) (Brakhage 2003 [1996]: 85–86).

Outside the avant-garde, surface details of cinema are intended to be appreciated – from Ingmar Bergman's elegantly composed dramas to Michael Bay's action spectacles. In narrative film, however, the function of the surface detail is typically subordinated to the story that it serves, and it may be forgotten once it has been integrated into the larger, more 'meaningful' structure of an overarching

narrative. The sensuous appeal of some avant-garde films by contrast – the colour luminance, film grain quality, motion, composition and camera movement – more fully comprises the film's central concerns. James Peterson comments:

to disregard the plastic qualities of the images [of poetic film³] is to disregard a major part of the experience of the film. Thus, we are faced with a contradiction: human discourse processing seems designed to discard central features of the work. (Peterson 1994: 50)

In addition to Peterson's poetic strain (which is abstracted from more specific terms, identified by earlier critics), other categories of avant-garde film such as visual music, abstract film (Rees 2011: 28) and lyric film (Sitney 2002: 160) also draw the spectator's attention to the surface detail.

Peterson comments that surface patterning is also central to poetry, in which the readers do not just decode its meaning; rather, they pay attention to the ways in which the semantic features are patterned with rhyme, rhythm and alliteration (Peterson 1994: 23). This comparison might be extended by thinking of the pure abstraction of Len Lye's *A Colour Box* (1935), for example, as being analogous to non-referential, phonetic poems such as Hugo Ball's 'Karawane' or Isidore Isou's lettrism poems. Other films such as Marie Menken's *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957) and Richard Serra's *Railroad Turnbridge* (1976) 'use real objects and . . . isolate them from their everyday context in such a way that their abstract qualities come forward' (Bordwell and Thompson 2003 150). This is loosely comparable to Gertrude Stein's poems in which the 'referents' (i.e. the words) are familiar but are similarly isolated from traditional contexts so as to bring forward their abstract qualities.

Training viewers to pay closer attention to the abstract qualities of their visual surroundings rather than their functional context may be understood as an activity that expands our range of aesthetic sensitivities. While we generally assess our visual surroundings for the purpose of gauging their semantic relevance, in these films we pay closer attention to their surface details. We typically use our ability to recognize shapes and colours for practical reasons (e.g. interpreting traffic lights). In abstract films, we attend to the abstract quality of our visual field for non-utilitarian purposes. Bordwell and Thompson comment:

This impractical interest has led some critics and viewers to think of abstract films as frivolous. Critics may call them 'art for art's sake', since all they seem to do is present us with a series of interesting patterns. Yet in doing so, such films often make us more aware of such patterns, and we may be better able to notice them in the everyday world as well. No-one who has watched *Railroad Turnbridge* can see bridges in quite the same way afterward. In talking about abstract films, we might amend the phrase to 'art for life's sake' – for such films enhance our lives as much as do the films of other formal types. (ibid.: 150)

Abstract films, then, sensitize the viewer to the graphic details we encounter in everyday life. Returning to Fodor's example of the clock being registered for its semantic detail (i.e. the time) rather than the surface details (the design), one might imagine a catalogue film (as defined in chapter one) featuring a collage of clocks. If each image of a clock face lingers for a sufficient amount of time, the viewer may eventually pay closer attention to the surface details of the clocks to retain interest, rather than the time they tell. In turn, the sensitized viewer attends to their visual field in an uncommon manner. This idea has been expressed by modernist writing. Malcolm Turvey details the 'automation of perception' theory, which suggests that viewers might be trained into possessing greater visual sensitivity after engaging with modernist works of art that escape the way reality ordinarily appears to us:

Art . . . compensates for a supposed inherent limitation of everyday sight – its tendency to habituate – by impeding this tendency and making people attend to things that they usually overlook. Needless to say, for modernists who subscribe to this theory, it is very important that at least some of the time people be made conscious of what they normally miss due to habituation, even though modernists differ over why this is important. The crucial point here is the distrust of everyday sight that this widely used justification for modernist art is premised on. Normal vision misses a lot; art helps us see more and better. (Turvey 2008: 102–3)

To reiterate, avant-garde films often emphasize the surface over the semantic, and according to existing research on memory, this poses a particular challenge to our memory skills, since the human mind is more prone to recall semantic details.

Consequential/Sequential Events

It has been suggested that an indiscernible global structure and an emphasis on surface details – both characteristics commonplace in avant-garde film – present a challenge to their encoding and storage in memory. The relationship between the events as they occur will also have a bearing on the way in which they are remembered. During recollection, viewers are more likely to mix the ordering of the events up if they were ordered sequentially ('and then . . .') rather than consequentially ('as a result . . .') when encountered. In other words, causal connections best facilitate the retention of events that took place, and the order in which they occurred.⁴ This has a clear implication for avant-garde films, since events seldom follow one another according to dramatic consequence. In the case of *Rubber Cement*, for example, the spectator may struggle to remember whether they saw Felix the Cat or the newspaper clippings first. In that example, however, there is a heavy emphasis on the surface details over the semantic content. When a film draws the viewer's attentions primarily towards the surface de-

tails, causal connections or events occurring according to dramatic consequence will be uncommon.

In some instances, films that do not emphasize the surface details still present events sequentially rather than consequentially. Sidney Peterson's *The Petrified Dog* (1948), for example, puts a greater emphasis on the semantic over the surface, featuring distinct characters in a staged enactment, filmed through relatively conventional means. Yet events are not, for the most part, ordered according to dramatic consequence. We encounter a series of sequences that are continually intercut, whose significance to one another is never made explicitly clear. Several characters are tracked, and their paths occasionally cross. Goals are never established and scenarios are never contextualized. The spectator remains perpetually in the present – unable to infer what the characters are doing when they are off-screen, and largely unable to predict what is likely to happen next. As such, events occur sequentially rather than consequentially, and the immediate experience of the film will discourage a clear and unambiguous memory that can be returned to at a later time.

Characters in *The Petrified Dog* include a 'loony' who runs across a city and jumps on a public monument of Abraham Lincoln; a woman who applies lipstick and then starts eating it; and a photographer who takes pictures of himself standing next to a statue of a lion (the petrified dog). Later in the film, the photographer gets knocked over by the loony, who is running through the park. The film also features a musician who sits on a wall with a flower between his toes strumming a guitar, and an artist who pretends to paint onto an empty canvas in a park and who is joined by another man. They talk, and the artist gives a cup of water to the man, who throws it on the ground and walks away.

All of these lines of action (amongst others) are intercut with one another. Each event in *The Petrified Dog* lacks a causal connection with the preceding event. The various lines of action are self-contained, simple, peculiar, and do not appear to be connected according to a clear chain of dramatic consequence with the other lines of action. Viewers need to create their own imaginative interpretations of the various scenarios, rather than being provided with a straightforward story with rational character motivations. *The Petrified Dog* seems to depict a hermetically sealed universe with its own rules of behaviour.

Since the various scenarios that intercut with one another do not appear to be causally connected, this encourages free interpretation and multiple-meaning interpretations on the part of the viewer.⁵ James Peterson calls this 'free interpretation sets', 'sets of potential meanings that fit some of the details, but leave many others unexplained. Faced with an apparently loosely organized discourse, readers try out these possible meanings, perhaps settling on one that seems to fit best, perhaps entertaining a number of them indefinitely' (Peterson 1994: 25). Discourse that encourages play with free interpretation sets, however, generally

puts greater demands on the spectator if they are to try and remember the ordering in which the events occurred.

Drive-to-a-Goal

Aside from an indiscernible global structure, an emphasis on surface details and a sequential (rather than consequential) arrangement of events, the absence of a clearly established goal also makes a film difficult to encode, store and retrieve. Bordwell comments:

One researcher found that comprehension and memory are best when the story conformed to the drive-to-a-goal pattern. When the goal was stated at the end of the tale, comprehension and recall were significantly poorer, but still not so poor as when the goal of the action was never stated. (Bordwell 1985: 35)⁶

If the goal is made clear near the beginning of a tale (as it normally is in traditional narrative films), comprehension and recall is best facilitated. If the goal is stated at the end of a tale, recall is poorer. If a goal is never made clear, recall is poorer still. *Rubber Cement* and *The Petrified Dog*, for instance, lack clearly established goals. Dramatic goals are generally absent from most avant-garde films.

In the case of structural films, it is sometimes apparent to the viewer where the film is heading – even if a ‘goal’ in the traditional sense is not made clear. In *Serene Velocity*, a viewer might reasonably hypothesize that the spatial interval between the shots will get progressively wider until it is as wide as the camera allows. The middle section of Hollis Frampton’s *Zorns Lemma* (1970) works towards the completion of a cycle (every letter of the alphabet is to be replaced by a picture) instead of progressing towards a goal. Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967) works towards the completion of a zoom across a loft space into a photograph on the opposite wall, rather than a ‘goal’ in the traditional dramatic sense.

If a film is motivated by a clearly established goal, the salience of each element will be placed into a hierarchy. Where important plot points will be retained, minor details are more likely to be filtered out. Many avant-garde films (particularly those that emphasize surface details) ‘flatten’ the various elements – making it unclear which elements are more salient and need to be retained. One such film that flattens the various events, without establishing a goal or ascribing importance to any given moment, is Ron Rice’s *Chumlum* (1964).

In the amorphous world conjured by Rice’s film, we encounter a collage of faces and limbs, frequently and abruptly superimposed over one another, often in a number of layers that are difficult to discern. There is a progression of events only in the loosest sense – we begin with an exterior of a building, and then cut to the interior, seeing Jack Smith swinging back and forth in a room. He is joined by a group of ambiguously gendered members of Andy Warhol’s ‘factory’ entourage assembled in fancy dress, evocative of harem dancers in a kitsch *Arabian*

Nights production. In a loft space, they smoke opium, sway on a hammock, dance and caress one another. They appear to be entranced and passive, with Jack as a 'grand wizard' who has cast a spell on them. After lounging and playing in the loft space, they later continue dancing and swaying together in a forest, and then a beach. The camera movements are loose and relaxed, the pace is leisurely, and the dissonant music (made with a hammered dulcimer) is a free-flowing drone, which never leads to an eventual tonal resolution. There is no dialogue and there are no intertitles. A goal of any kind is never made explicit, there is no conflict, and no resolution or completion of a cycle. As such, this will restrict the viewer's ability to place events in a hierarchy of importance, or remember in what order they took place.

Aside from progressing without a clearly established goal, *Chumlum* serves as a prototypical avant-garde film whose formal characteristics discourage a clear memory according to all the factors outlined so far. In addition to the absence of a dramatic goal, the ordering of events is largely sequential rather than consequential. *Chumlum* also draws the viewer's attentions closer to the local moment-by-moment incidents rather than placing each one in a broader context. The spectator is perpetually in the present when viewing the film, and little is done to recall back to the previous events in order to understand the present, or make inferences beyond the information given. The imagery invites spectators to pay more attention to the surface detail than traditional narrative films, which favour semantic details – with the superimpositions, the textural properties become particularly apparent. Figures and environments fuse to create an array of colours, movements and bursts of light. Viewers also discern a semantic gist as well (since the film is not entirely abstract), but the surface details do more of the expressive work than is commonplace in a traditional narrative film.

The viewer is alerted to pay close attention to the surface details and consider the evocations of the film rather than the 'meaning' early on. Near the beginning, we see Jack Smith sitting alone, swaying back and forth. He is abruptly superimposed with an image of fur and also a woman skating in circles (Figure 2.1). This combination of images contains no easily discernible meaning (beyond 'his thoughts move in circles'), and so the viewer may instead attend to the abstract quality of the textures and motions as they interplay with one another. The circular movements of the skater counterpoint the fur and Jack, both of which sway back and forth towards the camera at different speeds.

While the viewer may remember having seen the film itself, most specific visual impressions will likely be forgotten. Speaking from personal experience after having rewatched *Chumlum*, I noticed on one occasion an image I felt I had never seen before (Figure 2.2). The unremarkable shot featured an underexposed loft space with a few decorations, and the camera slowly rotates. While that moment is decidedly forgettable, it contributes to the atmosphere of the film

more generally. Since *Chumlum* evokes more than it tells, few images contain important information in the conventional sense. But the atmospheric effect of the images (along with the atonal music, which never resolves) is cumulative. What is known holds less fascination than what is imagined, and the seemingly virtual, private and fleeting character of the film has the quality of an internal experience such as a memory or a dream. In other words, one retains a diffuse, generalized memory of the film's atmosphere, sound and imagery rather than something more specific.

The central theme of this section has been the distinction between cues that prompt a narrative and a non-narrative mode of engagement. Cues that facilitate a narrative mode of engagement feature the establishment of a clear goal, ordering events consequentially, providing a discernible global structure, and placing each incident within a broader dramatic context. Films that challenge or discard this mode of engagement, by contrast, lack a clear goal, feature sequentially ordered events, emphasize local events without referring to the wider context, and they emphasize the salience of the surface details over the semantic details. All of these characteristics that discourage clear recollection in the long-term, it has been suggested, are more commonplace in avant-garde films – although this tendency is not without exception. Films that fall within the structural strain may prove less challenging in relation to long-term memory than abstract or lyric films, for instance, since their global structure is apparent, and they do not always emphasize the surface over the semantic.

While certain details may be forgotten, others will still be remembered. However, if the ordering of events, semantic details, surface details and global structure are forgotten, what is retained? The next section will address this question.

Personal Responses

Up to this point, it has been proposed that formal tendencies that pertain to avant-garde films pose particular challenges to our long-term memory skills. Here, it will be suggested that in spite of this, they may still resonate vividly – leaving the viewer with recurring mental images that might be accompanied by a sense that there was something in the film that has not been fully grasped yet, even if they cannot fully place what it is they perceived. The theories of memory that have been discussed so far have referred to the form of the films themselves, saying little about the subjective interpretations or emotional responses of viewers. It may be these elements that make some films resonate in the long-term.

While a narrative structure enhances the spectator's ability to retain certain details of a film, narrative films are not impervious to being forgotten. A narrative structure may help recall certain features within a film; viewers do not ordinarily remember the entire work wholesale. We might only remember an

isolated element – a sound, an arresting image, or a feeling detached from the chain of events that precede and follow it (Rubin and Greenberg 2003: 62). The story may sometimes dissolve from memory through trace decay, particularly if it is not revisited and strengthened over time. Evoking Deren's non-chronological, associative 'horizontal axis', Victor Burgin describes his experience of a narrative movie fragmenting from its original context and intermingling with other memories:

What was once a film in a movie theatre, then a fragment of broadcast television, is now a kernel of physical representations, a fleeting association of discrete elements . . . The more the film is distanced in memory, the more the binding effect of the narrative is loosened. The sequence breaks apart. The fragments go adrift and enter into new combinations, more or less transitory, in the eddies of memory: memories of other films, and memories of real events. (Burgin 2006: 16)

Non-narrative films, already fragmentary, can be remembered in a similar way. Next, a discussion will be made addressing the emotional responses and subjective reactions to avant-garde films that can lead to enduring non-linear memories.

Mood and Emotion

Whether or not images and events are retained, the spectator's affective response to a film may endure long after it has finished. Greg Smith makes a distinction between mood and emotion, arguing that the primary emotive effect of commercial cinema is to create mood. An emotion refers to a feeling that is immediate and more intense and focused if it is directed at a specific object ('I'm so mad at my boss right now'), while mood refers to one's broad affective state (e.g. 'I'm just cheerful today'). A mood is more diffuse and longer lasting than an emotion, orientating the subject towards a particular frame of mind and encouraging them to pay particular attention to certain emotions. Smith explains:

Moods are expectancies that we are about to have a particular emotion, that we will encounter cues that will elicit particular emotions. These expectancies orient us toward our situation, encouraging us to evaluate the environment in mood-congruent fashion. A cheerful mood leads one to privilege those portions of one's environment that are consistent with that mood. Moods act as the emotion system's equivalent of attention, focusing us on certain stimuli and not others. (Smith 2003: 38)

A mood is more easily recalled than an emotion, and the two can be confused. Memories of emotions are suspect sources of evidence about actual emotions. Humans are bad at remembering the specifics of their emotional experiences be-

cause it is more efficient and easier to remember a condensed version with a clear label instead of storing all the details. If a prototypical script labelled 'happy' covers much experience during a particular episode, we label that memory as a 'happy' episode, even if it does not capture all the ups and downs that were actually experienced. Doing so leads the subject to misguidedly believe that they were continually cheerful for an entire weekend, for example, when this is unlikely to be the case (ibid.: 36).

In cinema, the mood refers to the global affect of the film, while emotions constitute the more local, moment-by-moment experiences. The James Bond movie *Skyfall* (2012) may be remembered as 'thrilling', even though it is, at times, comical, sad, pensive and horrific. There are a range of emotions the viewer will experience during the film, even if the global mood dominates the affective memory. Some avant-garde films may leave the spectator with particularly evocative and distinctive moods they will remember that are not typically encountered in mainstream narrative-dramatic films. Even if we do not retain the order of events or specific images, the global mood may still be consolidated while other elements undergo trace decay.

In gauging moods, consider Rice's *Chumlum* in comparison to Peter Tscherkassky's *Dream Work* (2002), a black and white film made with footage from the Hollywood thriller *The Entity* (1981), in which a woman is tormented and abused by an unseen demon. Film is treated directly to produce an agitated, flickering visual impression, which is matched by dissonant sonic articulations that are sampled from the original movie. Both *Chumlum* and *Dream Work* challenge our long-term memory skills in a similar manner – emphasizing surface details and local events without presenting a dramatic goal, or providing a clear global structure. Yet, both films evoke distinctive moods through filmic cues – facial expression, figure movement, music, lighting, mise en scène, set design, editing and camera movement. All of these elements contribute to the emotional tone of the two films. Neither one orientates the spectator in a clear narrative, but the particular character of both films might, by nature, create an atmosphere that is only expressible by way of disorienting the spectator. Broadly speaking, *Chumlum* (Figure 2.3) evokes the feeling of serene intoxication, while *Dream Work* (Figure 2.4) creates a more threatening, disoriented mood.

As such, the trajectory of both films, and most of the imagery, may be forgotten over time. Yet the atmosphere that they create may linger in the mind. Returning to Maya Deren's expression of hope that 'during those rare occasions whose truth can be stated only by poetry, you will, perhaps, recall an image, even only the aura of my films' she acknowledges the difference between the external impression of her images, and the internal aura created by her films – what might be understood as the 'mood'. Once stored as memories, both the image and the aura can be detached from their original contexts and enjoyed in isolation. The feeling of a film – the *mood* – might endure more than any singular image.

Fig. 2.1



Fig. 2.2



Fig. 2.3



Fig. 2.4

Figures 2.1–2.4. Evocations of mood in *Chumlum* (1964; 2.1–2.3) and *Dream Work* (2002; 2.4). Screen captures by the author.

Gist

Aside from the mood of a film, what else might the viewer remember? Bordwell comments that ‘When confronted with a narrative, perceivers seek to grasp the crux or fundamental features of the event’ (Bordwell 2008: 137).⁷ In other words, part of the goal of story comprehension is the extraction of the ‘gist’. The gist of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), for instance, might be framed as ‘Dorothy is trapped in the Land of Oz, and she needs to get back to Kansas’. The narrative trajectory is summarized. However, what takes place when the perceiver is not confronted with a narrative? How might the film be mentally summarized or recounted to another person? The fundamental features of the events that are detected and retained are no longer defined by dramatic consequence. In *Rubber Cement*, the gist may be difficult to identify, and the viewer may need to resort to arrested images (e.g. Felix the Cat, abstract shapes) rather than defining any ‘crux or set of fundamental features’. When the thematic gist can be identified, this will be more readily retained. *The Petrified Dog* might be summarized as something as simple as ‘people in the 1940s doing peculiar things’. *Chumlum* might be summarized as ‘New York artists cavorting in a loft space’.

When the ‘gist’ of an avant-garde film is identified, it might refer to the structure of the film or a single event rather than a narrative conflict. It might be eminently simple and clear, for instance, the gist of *Serene Velocity* (1970) is that the spatial interval between each shot of a corridor gets progressively wider. The gist of Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* (1963) is that a man lies in bed and sleeps. In Larry Gottheim’s *Fog Line* (1970), the gist is that a cloud of fog clears across a forest.

We are more likely to remember the semantic, rather than the surface details when recalling ‘gist’ – even when a film emphasizes the surface over the semantic. By way of separating the semantic gist from the surface details, consider Kurt Kren’s *ASYL* (1975). In producing the film, Kren set up a camera in a country house, and over a period of twenty-one non-consecutive days in late autumn, he fed the same film strip through a camera. Each time, a masking board was placed over the lens with holes in new places so that different parts of the terrain were exposed on different days. Within a single frame, the same landscape appears to reveal itself in multiple seasons. A snow bank leads into a grassy meadow, and raining portions of the frame lead into sunny portions. Seasons run seamlessly into one another. Surface details of the film are difficult to retain, yet the gist of this film is remembered effortlessly – the same landscape is exposed in multiple conditions and overlaps itself. In short, even though some films in the avant-garde emphasize surface details, the fundamental semantic features – the gist – remains.

Distinctiveness and Depth of Processing

In addition to the global mood and the semantic gist of a film being memorable, the memory of a film is more likely to endure in the long term if it is distinctive, and if the work is psychologically processed by the spectator in some level of depth. Hans Eysenck (1979) argued that memory traces that are unique will be more readily retrieved than those resembling other memory traces. Similar memories are prone to fusing with one another. If one has a mundane and repetitive job, for instance, most days will blend into one another in memory. However, if employees come to work in fancy dress one day, this occasion will be more memorable because it is distinctive. Likewise, a film will be memorable if it is idiosyncratic. The avant-garde typically favours the novel and unfamiliar, even within its own broad variety of forms. Viewers who are unaccustomed to the norms and conventions within experimental film will particularly find this to be the case, whether they love the film or hate it.

While unique films are less likely to blend with memories of other films, they may also provoke detailed contemplation. Craik and Lockhart (1972) suggested that depth and elaboration of processing are key determinants in building more intricate, longer lasting and stronger memories. According to their ‘levels of processing’ model, a perceiver’s depth of processing falls on a continuum from shallow to deep. Shallow processing, such as attending to sensory characteristics like surface details and phonetic sounds, leads to a fragile memory trace that is prone to rapid decay.⁸

An intermediate level of processing relates to the recognition and labelling of objects. Deep processing refers to engagement with semantic details, relating objects to other memories in a network of associations, and assessing meaning

and importance. These 'deeper' processes lead to a more elaborate and durable memory trace by activating several layers of the object's or the event's meaning and linking it to pre-existing networks of semantic associations.

All viewers will access the same perceptual array when viewing a film, yet the depth and elaboration of processing will vary from viewer to viewer. It can be very detailed or it can also be shallow, depending on the way the viewer is mentally equipped, in addition to their mood when they encounter the work. The literate viewer, who is sensitized to the specialist viewing habits required by avant-garde film, is more likely to process works in a greater level of depth – identifying possible thematic interpretations, discerning graphic patterns with the use of colour, motion and visual depth, or considering techniques that the filmmaker employed. A less sensitive viewer is unlikely to contemplate a film in the same level of detail. Viewers might lower their threshold for the level of meaningfulness extracted and simply pay attention to the surface details of the film, allowing the imagery to wash over them, and bathe in the feelings evoked, or they might subject a film to a deeper level of analysis.

Some avant-garde works (particularly those from the poetic or lyrical strains) accommodate both deep and shallow levels of processing. Bruce Baillie's *Castro Street* (1966), for example, accommodates both experiences, depending on the interpretation of the viewer. For some, it can be appreciated purely as a sensorial experience. Lucy Fisher, on the other hand, offers a 'meaningful' interpretation that would lead to deeper processing, paying closer attention to the graphic patterning and suggesting that the film reflects the influence of Eastern philosophy on Baillie's work:

It is precisely this sense of unity revealed in disunity, of resolution in opposition that reigns supreme on all levels of *Castro Street* – on the level of shot-to-shot superimposition, directionality of movement, tonal composition, sound-image relation, and spiritual sensibility. (Fisher 1976: 21)

One might also contemplate Scott MacDonald's comment that the film depicts the industrial landscape in the context of growth and productivity (as it was considered in the 1950s) rather than as an invasive blemish on the natural world, as it was thought of by the time the film was made in the 1960s (MacDonald 2001: 193). An engaging response to *Castro Street* does not hinge on these thematic interpretations. The viewer might equally appreciate the sensorial dimension of the images, even if their semantic content is discerned, enjoying the fluid textures, rhythms and movements that Baillie creates from the industrial landscape, without considering any deeper thematic dimensions or recurring graphic patterns and motifs that feature. Both deep and shallow responses are facilitated.

Some images in avant-garde film are simply rich with evocative implications that invite detailed contemplation. Deren's iconic mirror-faced cloaked figure from *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) is suggestive of a myriad of possibilities that

are never explained. Who, or what, is the cloaked figure, and what are its intentions? It looks like death with a mirror for a face. Is that it? If so, what is being suggested? Such a figure may serve to haunt the viewer, since it remains both evocative and elusive.

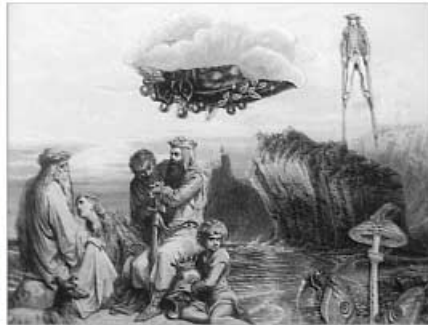
In this author's own subjective recollection of *Chumlum*, the most persistent and enduring image appears early on. Jack Smith stares directly into the camera, making 'mystical' gestures with his hands, and he is superimposed with a river flowing into the distance (Figure 2.5). It looks as though he is casting a spell on the viewer. The fast motion of the water coupled with Jack's stillness, the intensity of his gaze and his peculiar hand gestures created an evocative atmosphere, and the image imprinted itself vividly into my memory – prompting more detailed contemplation than any other image in the film. Revisiting this image whenever I remember the film consolidated it as a memory in my own subjective experience.

If the viewer encounters a film already possessing the relevant, specialist knowledge to appreciate it fully, this will provoke more detailed processing and strengthen the memory, since recognition (i.e. 'that's Mario Montez' rather than 'that's a person') alone prompts an intermediate level of processing, irrespective of detailed contemplation. This may come in the form of contextual knowledge. *Chumlum*, for instance, has ties with other films, which will serve as elements in the associative network evoked by the film for some spectators. If you are already familiar with Jack Smith and the New York underground milieu of the 1960s, you will recognize the cast of the *Chumlum*, and this in turn will elicit more meaningful processing. It was shot while Jack Smith's *Normal Love* (1963) was in production and the cast lounged about. The costumes worn in the film are also reminiscent of Federico Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965) and *Satyricon* (1969), which might also serve as associative cues.⁹ For unfamiliar viewers, the film will look like a collage of unfamiliar faces and they will not be able to associate the various characters to their ties with the New York underground.

Fig. 2.5



Fig. 2.6



Figures 2.5–2.6. Images that persist: *Chumlum* (1964; 2.5) and *Hamfat Asar* (1965; 2.6). Screen captures by the author.

Specialist knowledge may also come in the form of aesthetic sensitivities. Some of us have a greater sensitivity for surface detail, for instance. If you have specialist knowledge on fonts, numerals and clocks, for example, you are more likely to remember surface details of the clock than those without specialist knowledge. Those with specialist knowledge are more likely to remember the movement of the film or the colour. What may endure as a memory in Peter Tscherkassky's *Dream Work* is the way in which objects within the frame move. Since they are so distinctive, jump-cuts, jittering movements and speckles flashing across the screen might govern one's memory of the film rather than any specific nameable image.

Flashbulb Memories

In addressing the subjective dimension to a viewer's memory of a film, we have so far considered the mood, the 'gist' of a work, and the detail with which the viewer analyses the film through associative cues and prior specialist knowledge. Here, I suggest that moments with a high level of emotional charge are also encoded, stored and retrieved more readily.

A memory that is rehearsed frequently will be more stable. Put simply, if the viewer has a strong reaction to the film (whether they love it or hate it), they are more likely to revisit it as a memory later or discuss it with others. In turn, it will be less susceptible to trace decay. Brown and Kulick coined the term 'flashbulb memories' and suggested that memories that are produced by very important, dramatic and surprising public or personal incidents, such as learning about the events of 9/11 or the birth of one's child, are generally very accurate and immune from being forgotten (Brown and Kulick 1977: 73–99). While this original idea has faced criticism, there is empirical evidence to support the view that shocking events can lead to enduring and persistent memories (see Pillemer 1990; Conway 1994).

While sequences in movies are not personal events, they nonetheless aim to produce emotionally charged responses through novelty, surprise and rarity. Plot twists from narrative films might produce dramatic revelations or startling sequences, such as the iconic shower scene in *Psycho* (1960). Since avant-garde films do not tend to tell traditional stories, plot twists are less likely to occur; however, there might still be images that arouse intense emotional responses, particularly since some filmmakers are interested in the depiction or provocation of extreme psychic states. For instance, the iconic eye-slicing scene from *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) continues to startle viewers today. The dissected corpses in Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971) can also provoke vivid feelings of disgust or horror. Sexually charged imagery from Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967), Paul McCarthy's images of young women hacking at a human leg in *WGG Test* (2003), and Matthew Barney's disquieting vision

of the male body in *Hoist* (2006) all might imprint themselves on the viewer by virtue of their emotional charge, provoking flashbulb memories.

Interference in Action

The claim has been made that avant-garde films present a distinct set of challenges to our memory skills. Aesthetic elements that draw the viewer away from a narrative mode of comprehension (surface details emphasized over the semantic, a sequential chain of events, an unclear global structure and no clearly defined goal) discourage clear encoding and long-term storage and retrieval. Other elements relating to subjective responses, such as deep processing, the ‘mood’, the ‘gist’ and flashbulb memories, are more likely to facilitate long-term recollection. In turn, one’s memory of an avant-garde film may be heavily shaped by subjective responses. What is the implication of this discussion, however? To restate a question posed at the beginning of this chapter, how is the recollection of avant-garde films an aesthetic rather than a psychological concern?

In the final section of this discussion, it will be suggested that when engaging with avant-garde films, the viewer is left with space to subjectively alter and embellish the work in memory in a way that may enrich or inform their original experience. Since avant-garde films do not always lock into a singular meaning; some works can be understood as an imagining board that the viewer might free-associate with at a later time. A distorted memory, in turn, may serve as an aesthetic virtue in films as polyvalent and fluid as many of those in the avant-garde. Larry Jordan’s experience with *Hamfat Asar* (1965) will be taken as a case study that demonstrates this.

Jordan explained in an interview that one critic wrote an article describing images from *Hamfat Asar* that were not there. In turn, this helped Jordan identify that his intuitive creative goal for the film was to create an unreliable memory:

she described in detail a sequence I would love to have filmed, but I hadn’t. It wasn’t in the film. There were things like that, but this was so specific that I knew that she’d seen the scene in her mind and put it together from the film in general, but I hadn’t made that sequence . . . [T]hat was the first time I realized that that’s what I was trying to do. I wasn’t trying to pass what was in my mind to somebody else’s mind. I was trying to put up a Rorschach inkblot kind of imagery on the screen that other people would then take and combine with their own, I call pre-dispositions, and make meaning, their own meaning, not my meaning out of it. (Jordan 1995–1996)

Hamfat Asar is animated with cut-out Victorian illustrations, in the spirit of Max Ernst’s surrealist collages. The background remains static, and there is a tight-

rope across the middle of the screen and peculiar hybrid objects move across the frame. Some walk on the tightrope, others float across the screen. Some objects pass from one side of the frame to the other, while others appear and disappear in jump-cuts or dissolves (Figure 2.6).

Why might the critic have created the memory of a sequence that never occurred? True to the avant-garde prototype, *Hamfat Asar* contains no clear global structure, no clearly defined goal, and events are sequentially rather than causally linked. In this instance, the spectator's memory was distorted, and the artist welcomed these subjective alterations.

Yet the question remains: why might she have created scenes in her mind instead of simply forgetting what she saw? Memory should be understood as an act of reconstruction, guided by pre-existing assumptions, rather than complete recovery of prior perceptions. Some details will be retained, while others will be filtered out, altered or embellished.¹⁰ Frederic Bartlett explored the nature of reconstructive memory in 1932. In one of his investigations, he presented a Native American folk tale entitled 'The War of the Ghosts' to a group of participants who were unfamiliar with the storytelling conventions of Native Americans. They were asked to recall it several times over the course of a year. All the participants altered details of the story in ways that reflected their cultural norms and expectations. The further in time the participants were from their initial reading, the more the details changed. Participants omitted details that they considered irrelevant, changed the order of events, and 'rationalized' details by padding them out and making them more comprehensible to someone from their own cultural background (Bartlett 1995 [1932]: 71). Elements that were of marginal relevance to the story were particularly prone to being forgotten, such as the fact that the young men in the tale hid behind a log, or that they heard the sound of a boat being paddled in a river.

By presenting the participants with details and storytelling conventions that were unfamiliar to their own cultural background, and by monitoring how it was later recalled, Bartlett demonstrated how an individual's existing assumptions influence the way in which information is recalled over time. He also demonstrated that long-term memories are not fixed, but rather they alter over extended periods. As such, the accuracy with which a spectator recalls a film will depend on their own cultural background and personal assumptions.

The critic Jordan cites (but does not name) who wrote about *Hamfat Asar* unwittingly altered it, in a similar manner to the participants in Bartlett's experiment, who adjusted and embellished the Native American folk tale. Jordan explains that the journalist described sequences that did not feature in the film, but she did not 'rationalize' it into a narrative. When she mentally reconstructed the movie, sequences she saw became distorted and intermingled with other images stored in her mind. She lost track of which were seen in *Hamfat Asar* and which were imagined or encountered elsewhere.

Just as Larry Jordan cheerfully accommodated the critic's subjective embellishments to *Hamfat Asar*, other avant-garde films might be similarly enriched as they nestle in the mind, since they do not typically attempt to tell a clear story or put across a specific message. Instead, they create an imaginative space within which the spectator is free – to a point – to respond with their own subjective reactions. As commented in the introduction, the temporality of a film compresses during recollection. Cinema is durational, but a memory comes to us in a snapshot. In a frozen moment, one recalls a network of associations, internal responses, arresting images, memorable lines and global moods. Lacking clear episodic memory after it has been mentally encoded, a film may be compressed into a neutral temporal grid once it is stored, and its character changes. Where a film is external, a memory is internal; where a film is physical and recordable, a memory is virtual and reportable; where a film is public and permanent, a memory is private and fleeting (Jahn 2003: 199).

Weeks, months or even years after viewing a film, it might be remembered in a different light. The feelings initially provoked can miraculously mutate into something different. In the transformative space of memory, some works of art that are initially bewildering feel complete and unified after a period of digestion, haunting the viewer with feelings that were not experienced in their immediate encounter. This long-term pay-off stands in contrast to the assumed instant gratifications provided by Hollywood blockbusters. The rewards of a film might cash themselves out in the form of long-term resonance, rather than short-term impact. Paying attention to one's subjective embellishments when recalling an avant-garde film and taking them seriously, instead of thinking of them as distortions or mistakes, may be another expansive habit to cultivate when engaging with avant-garde films. Embellishing or altering an avant-garde film that is stored as a memory, then, need not be understood as a neutral contingent fact, or an error. It can instead be understood as a legitimate way with which to interact with the work once it is nestling in memory stores. The 'aura' of a film may still be retained and will return to us intermittently, even when the rest of the film dissolves through trace decay.

Conclusion

As Brakhage suggests, films that are hard to remember are not necessarily aesthetic failures; they may nestle in the mind or alter in unique and novel ways. The ghost film, as he calls it, exists in the mind as 'movement haunt, tone-texture haunt, ineffable-haunt' (Brakhage 2003 [1996]: 86).

This chapter has illustrated how avant-garde films can become ghost films in memory. In part, this is because elements of narrative organization are often-times absent in avant-garde films – events are sequential instead of consequen-

tial, local details are emphasized over the global structure, surface features are emphasized over semantic features, and there is seldom a clearly defined goal. All of these elements, according to cognitive theories of memory, make them difficult to remember. There are, however, subjective dimensions to the viewer's response that may make some works particularly memorable according to other existing theories. Viewers may remember the global mood of a film; they may also recall the 'gist' or fundamental semantic features even if the surface details are a more central concern; an avant-garde film may prompt detailed analysis and contemplation in the viewer; and 'flashbulb' memories might be generated if the film emotionally startles the viewer. All of these subjective elements, according to existing theories, may make the films more memorable in the long term.

The purpose of this chapter was to explore another one of the distinctive ways in which avant-garde filmmakers challenge our cognitive capacities. Existing theories of memory suggest that the details of formal elements that pertain to avant-garde films are, broadly speaking, more difficult to encode and store as memories than conventional, narrative-dramatic movies. The subjective details that each viewer will pick out and remember in their own unique way – particular moments, personal interpretations, elements that may even be embellished or altered retrospectively – are more likely to endure in the long-term. As such, the proposal has been made that memories of avant-garde films are oftentimes highly subjective, more so than conventional narrative-dramatic movies.

One habit that viewers can employ when thinking about experimental films, then, may be that they can pay closer attention to the way in which these works refine, alter or are embellished in the mind and appreciate these alterations as part of the experience of the work, rather than thinking of them as mistakes. Since avant-garde films are generally more open-ended in their meaning and evoke more than they tell, subjective rendering may be a productive habit to cultivate. As we learned from Bartlett's experiment, memory is not a stable field, and the film as remembered might reveal new insights into the work once it is revisited as a memory. In turn, ease of comprehension and recall is not the only aesthetic virtue when engaging with a film – complexity and ambiguity during recollection can also add to the value of the work.

Notes

1. For discussions of mainstream and arthouse cinematic representations of memory, see: A. Sinha and T. McSweeney *Millennial Cinema: Memory in Global Film* (2012); and R. Kilbourn's *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema* (2012).

2. See Sitney (2002: 347–70) for a more detailed definition of the structural film.

3. See introduction for a discussion of the poetic strain.

4. Discussed by Bordwell in *NiFF* (1985). See: P.W. Thorndyke, 'Cognitive Structures in Comprehension and Memory of Narrative Discourse' (1977: 77–110). Later discussed in Allan Paivio's *Mental Representations: A Dual Coding Approach* (1990).

5. For example, Stan Brakhage interprets the man who throws water at the ground as a metaphor for the art critic in *Film at Wit's End* (Brakhage 1989: 58), while P. Adams Sitney interprets the same character as a beggar (Sitney 2002: 59).

6. See also E. Lichtenstein and W. Brewer, 'Memory for Goal-Directed Events' (1980: 412–45). Later discussed in Phillippe Baumard's *Tacit Knowledge in Organizations* (1999).

7. For more on 'gist' see Feldman et al. 'Narrative Comprehension' (1990: 1–78).

8. In this context, the word 'shallow' is being used for descriptive purposes. I am not using it to make a value judgement. It is not, in this instance, synonymous with 'superficial', 'facile' or 'oversimplified'.

9. In Mary Jordan's *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis* (2006), it is suggested that after Fellini received a copy of Smith's *Normal Love* and *Flaming Creatures* (1963) from Jonas Mekas, some of Fellini's costumes emulated Smith's style.

10. For a discussion of how this process may be exploited in narrative-dramatic filmmaking, see Daniel Barratt's "'Twist Blindness": The Role of Primacy, Priming, Schemas, and Reconstructive Memory in a First-Time Viewing of *The Sixth Sense*' (2009). He argues that M. Night Shyamalan guides the audience into making false assumptions, and in turn they misremember events depicted in the film.