# THE ONGOING PARADE OF FORM:
# A POETICS OF THE ONE-SHOT FILM

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# ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers the first sustained historical and theoretical account of the one-shot film: a film that presents, or appears to present, its entire duration in a single uninterrupted shot. Despite the increasing prominence of one-shot filmmaking in contemporary cinema, the form has remained surprisingly under-examined within film scholarship. Taking the one-shot film as a distinct cinematic category, this dissertation investigates the aesthetic, philosophical, and historical consequences of refusing one of cinema's defining formal operations: cutting. Drawing upon David Bordwell's historical poetics and cognitive film theory, this dissertation combines extensive viewing with close formal analysis to develop a poetics of one-shot filmmaking grounded in recurring stylistic tendencies across more than one hundred films.

This dissertation is organised around four interconnected lines of inquiry. Following an introductory chapter that historicises one-shot filmmaking from early cinema to the digital present, Chapter Two examines the formal specificity of the one-shot film, identifying its characteristic expressive tendencies, constraints, and formal affordances. Chapter Three explores the spatiotemporal continuum produced by uninterrupted duration, proposing a distinction between centripetal and centrifugal one-shot films to explain how they organise cinematic space and offscreen action. Chapter Four considers the role of chance, arguing that one-shot films provide a privileged site for the appearance of contingency, risk, error, and other forms of cinematic excess. It examines how these films balance openness to the accidental with the extensive planning demanded by their production. Chapter Five addresses the reflexive dimensions of one-shot filmmaking, examining how the visibility of technical virtuosity encourages viewers to attend simultaneously to narrative and production process. Extending beyond the films themselves, it also analyses the paratexts surrounding one-shot

films, arguing that their unusual production methods have become a significant source of cultural value within contemporary digital film culture.

Ultimately, this dissertation establishes one-shot filmmaking as a coherent object of study and argues for its significance within broader debates surrounding cinematic duration, spectatorship, narrative, and film style.

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# CHAPTER ONE:
# INTRODUCTION TO ONE-SHOT FILMS

A one-shot film is a film that presents, or at least has the appearance of presenting, the entirety of its content in a single long take, without any cuts. Throughout cinema history, this form has arisen in different guises: in early cinema, as the norm prior to the development of editing; as a tool used by experimental filmmakers in an affront to mainstream filmmaking practices; as a form of cinematic sleight-of-hand, with cleverly concealed cuts giving the false appearance of genuine continuity; and, most recently, as an authentically audacious form of cinematic showmanship, aided by digital technology. In the past two decades, a surge of feature-length, narrative one-shot films have been produced around the globe. Despite the increasing prevalence and widespread theoretical implications of the one-shot film, it has never been subject to extended scholarly examination. The one-shot film is an area in cinema studies that will likely grow, with more examples being produced each year.

My interest in one-shot films grows out of my master's degree research, which analyses the works of pre-revolutionary Iranian filmmaker Sohrab Shahid Saless in relation to the contemporary critical category of slow cinema. Having this interest in recent research on durational cinema, I assumed there was active work being conducted on one-shot films. However, when I first approached the topic in early-2021, I was struck by the remarkable absence of scholarship on the subject, and this surprise has only deepened over the five years spent writing this dissertation. My project does, however, follow recent books bringing new focus to extreme cinematic duration, including two on the long take (Gibbs and Pye, 2017; Koepnick 2017) and three on slow cinema (Jaffe 2014; Barradas & De Luca 2016; Çağlayan 2018). The recent appearance of these works makes it even more unusual that a similar book on one-shot films has not yet been published.

This introduction establishes a robust account of the precursors to the modern phenomenon of one-shot filmmaking. Beyond introducing and defining the topic, it traces a historical genealogy of its various manifestations leading into the contemporary moment. It also delineates a range of audiovisual forms that might technically be classified as one-shot films but fall outside the central scope of this study. My dissertation approaches one-shot filmmaking from multiple, interrelated perspectives, each chapter offering a distinct angle on an object that remains too expansive to be exhaustively treated within a single study yet demands a more sustained analysis than it has thus far received. The corpus itself—comprising over one hundred and fifty films (listed in my appendix)—exhibits enough formal regularities, along with notable deviations, to sustain far broader inquiry.

This dissertation is organised around four central topics that structure the following chapters: the formal specificity and stylistic potential of the form; the audiovisual continuum it produces; the role of chance and risk; and the reflexive qualities of one-shot filmmaking. While each chapter addresses a specific dimension of one-shot filmmaking, they remain tightly interconnected, frequently relying upon and reframing one another's claims.

Chapter Two examines whether contemporary one-shot films carry the ethical and moral valence historically associated with cinematic duration in movements such as neorealism and slow cinema. Through a series of case studies, the chapter explores the formal specificities of the one-shot form, identifying both the expressive tendencies already realised and those that remain latent within the format. In doing so, it begins the task of cataloguing the aesthetic potentials of the form while assessing the extent to which filmmakers can fully explore these possibilities within the framework of dominant cinematic style.

Chapter Three investigates the spatiotemporal continuum created by one-shot films. Because each one-shot film constitutes a single navigation of space and time, I analyse the

variations that emerge within this continuous structure, proposing a preliminary categorisation of recurring spatial strategies. The chapter distinguishes between two broad tendencies within one-shot spatial design—centripetal and centrifugal—each with its own stylistic genealogy in cinema and related media. From there, it discusses the function of offscreen space in one-shot films.

Chapter Four explores the multifaceted role of chance within one-shot films, considering the form as a privileged site for the appearance of cinematic excess, risk, and error. I situate this phenomenon within a longer history in which contingency has been valued as an aesthetic resource in various strands of filmmaking. It then examines how contemporary one-shot films negotiate a tension between openness to chance and the countervailing forces of control required by the form's technical demands. The absence of cuts allows contingent phenomena to unfold with unusual durational clarity, enabling the visual development of accidents, mistakes, and spontaneous events in ways less common in conventionally edited cinema.

Chapter Five addresses the reflexive dimension of one-shot filmmaking. Because these films foreground the virtuosity and difficulty of their production process, they often draw attention to themselves as cinematic artefacts. The chapter explores how this reflexivity operates both within the films themselves and within their reception. Viewers frequently develop a parallel curiosity about the filmmaking process alongside narrative engagement. Extending beyond the films proper, the chapter also examines the surrounding paratexts through which one-shot films circulate, showing how their unusual production methods become a central source of value and differentiation within a digitally saturated cinematic landscape.

## DEFINING ONE-SHOT FILMS

Several different terms are used to refer to one-shot films.[1] I sometimes refer to collective "one-shot films," and sometimes the singular "one-shot film," while "the one-shot film" is used when making more general claims about the form. The terms "one-shot film," "one-take film," and "single-take film" are all essentially the same. Other adjacent terms, if not totally synonymous, include "continuous film" and "oner." The term "long take" also requires parsing; one-shot films are long takes, but this formulation only tells half the story. Inspecting a durational shot without further context, they would appear identical: an extended slice of duration. A one-shot film is a long take stretched to its logical extreme, such that it becomes qualitatively different. Long takes are defined in the context of multi-shot films, where their length contrasts to surrounding shots of regular duration. Barry Salt defines long takes as follows: "A film shot that is appreciably longer than the longest shots which are usually found in the period in question."[2] However, one-shot films are not defined by other shots, possessing a self-contained quality.

One-shot film analysis inevitably engages with the most fundamental concepts of cinematic study.[3] As both practice and concept, it touches on multiple areas within cinema

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[1] The dissertation title borrows the phrase "the ongoing parade of form" from Rick Jarow's discussion of the classical Sanskrit poem by Kālidāsa, the *Meghadūta* (c. 4th–5th century CE). The original passage is as follows: "Hence, although the theme of separation and loss is in the foreground of the *Meghadūta*, it is backed up by the ongoing parade of form, both natural and cultural." The phrase is adopted here solely for its evocative description of the one-shot film's continuous unfolding of cinematic form, rather than for its original interpretive context. Rick Jarow, *The Cloud of Longing: A New Translation and Eco-Aesthetic Study of Kalidasa's Meghadūta* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 122.

[2] Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, Third Edition (Starword, 2009), 415.

[3] Given that my dissertation interrogates foundational principles of film analysis, I am inspired by the ethos of classical film theory, its "sense of inquiry and curiosity about the future of the emerging medium," within a "similarly open media landscape" to contemporary times. Certain passages from classical film theorists remain evergreen in their honest and curious investigation into fundamental qualities of cinema, often in piecemeal, easily-transferable expressions. Figures such as Bazin, Kracauer, Panofsky, and Arnheim appear throughout my dissertation, due to my belief that they "shed a certain strange light, light that comes at a slant but that illuminates something differently than any other thing might." Dudley Andrew, Anton Kaes, Sarah Keller, Stuart Liebman, Annette Michelson, Malcolm Turvey, "Roundtable on the Return to Classical Film Theory," *October* 148 (Spring 2014): 5-26.

and media studies. At times, understanding one-shot films feels like attempting to understand all of cinema: they exist within so many conceptual niches that their very ubiquity threatens unity. Their generative power lies in the simplicity of removing cuts—a device central to cinema even when used sparingly—which reshapes the scaffolding of cinematic meaning-making. Some traditions and concepts (such as Soviet montage theory) are instantly bracketed, while others are diverted from their usual paths, producing fundamental reconfigurations of film form. Topics associated with one-shot films have a heteroclite kinship; because their categorisation depends on form rather than content, what they depict varies wildly, stretching conventional parameters. Despite my efforts in the upcoming chapters to impose order through theory, vast territories remain open for exploration.[4] One-shot films demonstrate an overflowing, unrestrained relevance to formal issues in cinema and moving image media, appearing across diverse media, styles, and exhibition contexts. Their appearance cannot always be contained or predicted, but regardless of medium or style, texts appearing to contain one shot should all be recognised as one-shot films.

Throughout this dissertation, I constantly refer to "traditionally edited cinema" to make my points regarding one-shot films. The phrase as I use it has two related meanings. Firstly, it denotes any films that use cutting, i.e., any films not within the bracket of one-shot films. It therefore designates the vastly proportional, dominant category—the almost universal mode of filmmaking, against which one-shot films develop their unique identity. The fundamental offerings of one-shot cinema gain traction and value through contrast to this dominant category of "traditionally edited films." I also use the term "multi-shot films" to convey this grouping. However, a more specific meaning of "traditionally edited cinema" refers to the mainstream style: classical Hollywood editing and other films aligning with mainstream conventions. As Colin McArthur writes, "Hollywood has operated both an

[4] A conference or edited collection on one-shot filmmaking in the upcoming years is highly desirable.

economic and aesthetic hegemony over world cinema."[5] In the next chapter, I analyse the equivocal relationship that one-shot films have with classical Hollywood cinema. Editing-based conventions developed by filmmakers throughout the history of cinema serve as necessary context for the aesthetic specificities of one-shot films.

I take an intentionally inclusive attitude towards one-shot films, given that my dissertation is the first extended analysis of the topic. Under the umbrella of "one-shot films," I include films of any length and style, as well as both "authentic" and "simulated" examples, as long as they present as one-shot films. As I analyse in Chapter Five, mainstream discourse about one-shot films often spends much of its energy on breaking down the so-called "authenticity" or "trickery" of one-shot films: whether the shot was actually filmed continuously, or whether it stitches together many different shots using techniques to hide the cuts. While these details are vital in certain contexts, I try to avoid getting bogged down in this quagmire of production process epistemology. In a foundational analysis of one-shot films, which I see my dissertation as constituting, ontological authenticity must be included alongside the simulated trickery. Rejecting the inclusion of simulated one-shot films threatens to devolve into the banal undertaking of determining and categorising which films are truly one shot, and which are feigned. The precise production process of each one-shot film is not always readily available knowledge, nor is it even germane to certain discussions of narrative patterns and spectator reactions. In including simulated examples, I try to maintain as broad a field as possible to explicate the broader aesthetic phenomenon of one-shot films. Throughout my dissertation, whenever I knowingly use simulated one-shot films as examples, I label them as such, while still valuing their explanatory potential in given areas. For example, *1917* (Sam Mendes, 2019) is simulated, containing both hidden and

[5] Colin McArthur, "Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls: Tracking the Elusive Cinematic City," in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David Clarke (Routledge, 1997), 32.

unhidden cuts, yet it is arguably the most popular and influential one-shot film in recent years. In Chapter Five, I use it as a case study when discussing one-shot paratexts because its behind-the-scenes documentaries perfectly dilute the tendencies of these ancillary materials. The doubtful or disprovable continuity of certain films does not automatically disqualify them from offering aesthetic wisdom.

One-shot films do not always display a clear division between fiction and documentary; indeed, they are a fruitful site for observing the hybrid tensions between them. As Nico Baumbach writes of documentary, echoing a famous Jean-Luc Godard aphorism, "a dialectic is at work: the documentary condition of cinema could be wrested from the residual traces of melodramatic narrative or a story of universal importance could emerge from an investigation of a specific time and place."[6] This dialectic is particularly true of one-shot films, offering expansive spatiotemporal experiences that do not always remain cloistered in a studio set, breaching the border to the outside world. I cover this potential of one-shot films in some capacity in every upcoming chapter. For example, the Brazilian film *Still Orangutans* (Gustavo Spolidoro, 2008), which I cover in the next chapter, stations its fictional actors amidst the bustling flux of Porto Alegre, constantly surrounded by unknowing citizens of the city. Thus, even the ostensible fictionalisation of certain one-shot films does not preclude them from being replete with documentary interest. Conversely, the one-shot form can make documentaries appear more fictionalised, imbuing documentary subjects with a degree of aesthetic predestination and hyperrealism not found in films with normative cutting styles. In Chapter Four, I analyse this fictional capacity of one-shot documentaries through a case study of *People's Park* (J. P. Sniadecki and Libbie Dina Cohn, 2012), a work of the Sensory Ethnography Lab that glides smoothly around the eponymous park in China.

[6] Nico Baumbach, "Jacques Rancière and the fictional capacity of documentary," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8, no. 1 (March 2010): 62. Godard is purported to have said that "every fictional film is a documentary of its actors."

The film's painstaking production process results in a mobile camera itinerary that occasionally seems too comfortable and pre-planned to be authentic. Thus, in one-shot filmmaking, fiction and documentary function asymptotically, each perpetually approaching the other's aesthetic terrain without ever fully coinciding.

## METHODOLOGY

David Bordwell's work to reorient cinema studies in the 1980s informs both the conceptual grounding and methodological structure of my dissertation. Firstly, cognitive film theory provides a rigorous foundation for analysing aspects of one-shot filmmaking, foregrounding the spectator's mental activity as an irreducible component of cinematic meaning-making.[7] Throughout, I draw upon cognitive concepts to account for how one-shot films function in practice—for instance, in discussions of character alignment in Chapter Three and artefact emotions in Chapter Five. Even when not explicitly invoking cognitive terminology, my analysis proceeds from an implicit model of the viewer as an active, inferential agent, whose responses are continually solicited and shaped by a film's unfolding duration.

This emphasis on spectator activity is methodologically complemented by Bordwell's project of historical poetics, the fruit of his neoformalist programme. Accordingly, I approach one-shot films heuristically, directly pursuing the questions that arise from their formal operations. As Bordwell notes, this method "self-consciously constructs its analytical

[7] Developing in the 1980s as part of the wider 'cognitive turn' within the humanities, this research has created a paradigm shift within film studies. These factors of spectator activity (processes such as recognition, comprehension, interpretation, inference-making, imagination, judgment, and memory) are organizable into knowledge structures known as schema, countering the top-down, 'Big Theory of Everything' film analysis associated with psychoanalytic apparatus theorists with a more pragmatic, bottom-up, constructivist framework that assumes that empirical data can serve as the basis for film inquiry.

categories while also referring to a range of data by which the arguments can be assessed."[8] In this spirit, the four upcoming chapters propose categories for understanding one-shot filmmaking, based on reciprocal movements between top-down conceptualisation and bottom-up close analysis. Balancing the *a priori* coherence of the concept with the *a posteriori* messiness of its examples is an ongoing methodological tension. One-shot films themselves embody this duality: the form reconciles abstract structural principles with contingent narrative and stylistic variation. My project connects the recurring patterns within individual films to broader theoretical frameworks. I adopt what Bordwell calls a method of "intensive scrutiny with extensive viewing"; I have viewed over one hundred one-shot films, identifying recurring tendencies while remaining attentive to anomalies.[9] Each chapter situates one-shot cinema from a particular angle, necessarily dipping into adjacent theoretical domains when required. In establishing a poetics of one-shot films, one can distinguish between what Bordwell calls "precompositional factors … compositional ones … and postcompositional ones."[10] My dissertation topics embody this multi-pronged analysis: risk management in Chapter Four is a precompositional factor; spatial navigation in Chapter Three is a compositional factor; and one-shot paratexts in Chapter Five is a postcompositional factor. Although my dissertation focuses primarily on formal and stylistic analysis, thematic concerns are not excluded. As Bordwell argues, "Neo-formalist poetics … does not exclude thematic interpretations. It absorbs them into a dynamic system."[11] One-shot films constitute a heterogeneous grouping, and I acknowledge the strangeness of what sits beneath the heading, but surface variability coexists with core formal stability: "A concept or category … is conceptually stable, but the constructive principles that utilize it are

[8] David Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema" in *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (AMS Press, 1989), 372.
[9] Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," 373.
[10] Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," 376.
[11] Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," 385.

so historically variable that they constitute empirical generalizations or tendencies."[12] The category of one-shot films is conceptually clear, even though assembling its diverse manifestations remains methodologically untidy.

I analyse techniques pragmatically, assuming that, within the constrained form of one-shot films, a filmmaker "chooses an option in order to achieve some end."[13] The collective result from these individual filmmaking choices is a set of one-shot film conventions. This approach involves investigating "the sorts of material that can be used in a film and the possible ways in which it can be formed."[14] In one-shot films, definitional restrictions contribute to the available materials and their usages. By adopting a poetics-based approach, I am not putting forward an all-encompassing theory of one-shot films, instead wielding "a set of assumptions, an angle of heuristic approach, and a way of asking questions," leading to "the discovery of facts about films."[15] When more research is conducted into one-shot films by a broader range of scholars, competing approaches and theories can interact to form consensus; for a foundational excursion into the topic such as this dissertation, an even-handed, poetics-based approach best reveals the primary aesthetic questions associated with the form.

One-shot films generally have a simplified structure due to their central constraint. P. Adams Sitney's baseline definition of structural films remains instructive for thinking about one-shot films: "The shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape that is the primal expression of the film."[16] This description clearly applies to the most minimal and durational one-shot works, in which the governing constraint transparently

[12] Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," 374.
[13] Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," 373.
[14] Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," 373.
[15] Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," 379.
[16] P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film" in *Film Culture Reader,* ed. P. Adams Sitney (Praeger Publishers, 1970), 327.

determines crucial elements of the film's overall form. However, many feature-length narrative one-shot films (which I soon discuss) exceed this template. Sitney's definition threatens to funnel *all* meaning to the shape/form, even though the "expression" of a film may be multi-faceted. Chapter Three traces this tension: the warping of a predetermined structure by the plenitude it must accommodate. In what I term "centrifugal one-shot films," the structural premise remains primary—refusing to cut determines the film's global shape—but narrative events and camera mobility complicate its simplicity. The preformed outline strains under the material. Sitney writes that in structural films "what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline."[17] That claim no longer holds for contemporary one-shot cinema, as narrative content presses against the constraint that organises it.

One-shot films are a form of parametric cinema, a concept initiated by Noël Burch and extended by David Bordwell, describing a mode of narration associated with "isolated filmmakers and fugitive films."[18] By definition, one-shot films are governed by a parameter—the refusal to cut—yet they do not fit neatly within Burch's original formulation.[19] His account of parametric cinema emphasises dialectical relationships among multiple formal parameters, typically operating across a succession of shots. In one-shot films, however, such interactions occur not between shots but within a single, continuous shot. The unbroken take becomes the site of internal variation. As Bordwell observes, "Parameters cannot all be varied simultaneously … several must be held constant if repetition and variation are to be apparent."[20] In one-shot films, the constancy of duration foregrounds variation elsewhere—performance, camera movement, and contingency. Burch acknowledges duration as a parameter, noting that "attempts have been made to organise the

[17] Sitney, "Structural Film," 327.
[18] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 274.
[19] Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Princeton University Press, 1981).
[20] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film,* 286.

durations of shots in patterns independently of their content."[21] This formulation presumes alternation among discrete shots, "the organisation of perceptible durations."[22] It is unlikely that Burch anticipated the possibility of an entirely unbroken feature-length film. Contemporary one-shot films represent an extreme case of parametric duration, stretching Burch's category beyond its initial scope. They constitute parametric filmmaking organised around a single dominant constraint: not cutting.

Parametric approaches lead directly to unique arrangements of cinematic material. As David Bordwell writes, "purely stylistic features can create patterns independent of immediate narrative needs."[23] In one-shot films, such redundancies arise from the inability to excise dead time; stylistic patterns emerge because duration must be sustained. Throughout this dissertation—particularly in Chapter Three—I trace these recurring formal compensations. Parametric cinema, influenced by musical serialism, helps connect local devices to global structure in one-shot filmmaking. As Bordwell notes, "large-scale structure may be determined by fundamental stylistic choices."[24] The single constraint of refusing to cut generates cascading consequences: scenes must be manually transitioned into, temporal gaps cannot be elided, and narrative material is forced to pass through the same durational filter. What in classical film form appears balanced and economical becomes, under this constraint, structurally unstable or excessive. Bordwell characterises parametric cinema as especially applicable to films foregrounding style for its own sake. As I unravel in Chapter Five, one-shot films often appear as stylistic wagers or gimmicks, where dynamic technique accompanies attenuated narrative development: "Representational meaning may be played down or withheld, and sheer perceptual order may be strongly profiled."[25] This stylistic

[21] Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, 52.
[22] Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, 52.
[23] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 275.
[24] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 276.
[25] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 283.

dominance grants the category coherence; however heterogeneous the films analysed throughout my dissertation may seem, they can be grouped by the categorical force of their shared constraint—"virtually pre-existent stylistic systems which can reduce almost any subject to their own terms."[26] The one-shot technique thus functions as a baseline precondition through which all events are processed, "a powerful intrinsic norm which 'processes' each syuzhet event according to a recognizably 'preformed' style."[27] In the next section, I distinguish between different sub-types of one-shot films. However, the baseline parameter of "one shot, one film" is an important groundwork fact for this dissertation, the essential reasoning behind a heterogenous set of works being coherently grouped together under one heading.

## VARIETIES OF THE ONE-SHOT FILM

While it is often useful to refer to "one-shot films" as a general category, I will frequently split one-shot films into different types to avoid any confusion between general aesthetic claims about the form and characteristics of a subtype. However, wishing to tackle the phenomenon of one-shot films according to fundamental concepts, I do not allow these divisions to fully determine the scope and structure of my dissertation, agreeing with John Gibbs and Douglas Pye that "typology and classification, when applied to artistic practices, can be generalising and reductive."[28] Nonetheless, there remains clear scope for more comprehensive taxonomic work in future scholarship. The following section outlines four recurrent axes of categorisation, the combination of which helps to differentiate the historical clusters of one-shot filmmaking to which I return throughout this chapter.

[26] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film,* 285.
[27] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film,* 285.
[28] John Gibbs and Douglas Pye, *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 5.

Certain baseline questions can be asked of any one-shot film. I have already introduced two of these distinctions: documentary versus fiction and simulated versus non-simulated. In practice, neither distinction is absolute. A one-shot film may occupy an intermediate position between documentary and fiction, and while simulation might initially appear binary, it too admits degrees. Some films rely more heavily on concealed edits, resulting in a higher degree of simulation, even if this remains difficult to verify without recourse to paratextual materials (discussed further in Chapter Five). Nevertheless, it makes sense to say that some one-shot films are "overtly simulated" whereas others are just "simulated." For example, *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948), discussed later in this chapter, or *Hardcore Henry* (Ilya Naishuller, 2015), both display conspicuous cut transition points, barely even trying to hide the reality that a new shot has begun—they are overtly simulated. Most other simulated films stitch together the disparate takes in more seamless and undetectable fashion, to the point where specific production knowledge may be required to notice them—and are therefore just simulated.

A third axis of categorisation concerns the lengths of one-shot films. This falls along another spectrum: the spectrum of runtime. A one-shot film can be any length. There has never been any limitation on how short a one-shot film can be; anything beyond a photograph or film still—any motion picture as such—technically qualifies if it does not include any more shots. In this regard, *Roundhay Garden Scene* (Louis Le Prince, 1888), though only a few seconds long, can be considered the first one-shot film. In recent years, technology has essentially removed the upper limit on the potential length of authentically captured one-shot films. Long one-shot films have traditionally only been achievable through visual trickery. As the rest of this chapter demonstrates, runtimes are a key factor separating different historical clusters of one-shot works.

Finally, the fourth main way to distinguish between one-shot films is their level of mobility. I distinguish between "centrifugal one-shot films," defined by constant movement through new spaces, and "centripetal one-shot films," which remain within a limited space. This duality is a primary focus of Chapter Three. It can again be described as a spectrum upon which a given one-shot film falls, with many films combining both centrifugal and centripetal qualities. Each historical grouping or tendency of one-shot films constitutes some combination of these four baseline factors.

## NARRATIVE ONE-SHOT FEATURE FILMS

In the past two decades, and particularly in the past decade, an unprecedented proliferation of narrative feature-length one-shot films has occurred.[29] In my appendix, I identify roughly thirty-one feature-length narrative one-shot films released in the 2020s so far, with a further thirty-eight in the 2010s. Such feature-length narratives are a primary focus of my dissertation, constituting a recent major wave of one-shot cinema. I do not deal exclusively with such films, nor are they aesthetically uniform by any means, but it is helpful to slightly narrow my focus to narrative feature-length one-shot works, as they are a contemporary phenomenon and offer a host of novel dynamics to explore. In terms of my previous taxonomizing features, these films are primarily defined by being both long—feature length—and fictional. Runtime can become a positive means of differentiation within narrative one-shot filmmaking: some just barely reach feature-length, which stands as a baseline certificate of achievement (as I note in Chapter Four), while others attempt to stretch

[29] Unusually for an academic topic, one of the most comprehensive sources of information available on one-shot films is its Wikipedia page. While the main article is sparse, its strength resides in the most complete list of one-shot films available anywhere: a constant reference for me when seeking new one-shot films to watch. The "talk" section of the Wikipedia is a fascinating source of information related to the definition of one-shot films. Anonymous users debate about the parameters of the topic. They debate what constitutes a one-shot film, citing individual film examples in favour of or opposing some argument.

the single take for as long as possible, extending the high-wire trick. For example, the aura of achievement surrounding *Victoria* (Sebastian Schipper, 2015) is heightened because the film runs for two hours and twenty minutes. Narrative one-shot films can be both simulated or unsimulated and depending on the film are either primarily centrifugal or centripetal.

Narrative one-shot films invite comparison with real time narratives.[30] In narrative cinema, "real time" refers to works whose story duration matches their screen duration: an event unfolding over ninety minutes is represented in a ninety-minute film. Classical examples such as *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) demonstrate this equivalence without relying on a single take. One-shot films form a subset of such real-time cinema, presenting a continuous causal chain unfolding across the full span of the runtime. The real time nature of a one-shot narrative is assured by its uncut form, not relying on the artificial manufacturing of continuity within the diegesis.

One-shot films can be separated into different groups with different styles through categorisation into national or regional cinema. Japan offers an instructive, self-contained example of a nationally specific one-shot film culture, even spawning its own name: *nagamawashi*. This neologism emerged based on the strength of two films: *One Cut of the Dead* (Shinichiro Ueda, 2017) and *Beyond the Infinite Two Minutes* (Junta Yamaguchi, 2020). Neither of these films are authentically composed of one shot. Ueda's film revolves around the travails of characters attempting to achieve a film in one shot, while Yamaguchi's features a group of characters caught in a two-minute time loop. Ueda and Yamaguchi

[30] "Real time" also carries a technological meaning. As Janine Marchessault explains, "real time" derives from informatics, where it designates the simultaneous capture and display of data—time experienced as media time. In this context, real time is less a narrative strategy than a procedural condition, often associated with video art and conceptual practices rather than tightly structured storytelling. As technology has evolved, so too has the meaning of real time, expanding from narrative equivalence to encompass the live processing and transmission of duration itself. One-shot films sit between these definitions, inheriting the narrative logic of real-time cinema while also foregrounding the technological fact of uninterrupted temporal capture—a claim to real time both representational and infrastructural. Janine Marchessault, "Real Time Zidane," *Cinémas* 28, no. 2-3 (2018), 71-91.

replace the technical intrigue lost from obvious editing (a dynamic I cover in Chapter Five) with playful, conceptual, and temporal ideas. In my upcoming chapters, I touch upon nationality-inflected strains of one-shot films on a few occasions. In the next chapter, I identify a wave of low-budget South American films released in the 2000s, spurred on by the new mobility, flexibility, and durational capacity of digital capture, which together traced aesthetic possibilities for the form. In Chapter Five, I cover an energetic crop of recent South Asian one-shot films, analysing how their bombastic paratexts complement their formal boldness.

Tentative moves towards the development of auteurism within the one-shot form can also be observed. Given that shooting a film in one take remains niche, a lower threshold exists for the status of auteur: doing so multiple times immediately establishes a filmmaker as an auteur, or at least a specialist, within the form. Iranian filmmakers Mehdi Fard Ghaderi (*Alternation, Reversing Circles, Immortality*) and Shahram Mokri (*Fish & Cat, Invasion*) have both made multiple one-shot works, while British director Philip Barantini has recently made three high profile examples: *Boiling Point* (2021), *One Shot With Ed Sheeran* (2025), and *Adolescence* (2025), the last of which I discuss more in my dissertation conclusion. For high-profile one-shot productions in Britain, Barantini has established himself as the go-to auteur. Within the realm of feature-length narrative one-shot filmmaking, the usual means of deeper categorisation—such as national cinema or auteurism—thus still apply as usual.

## ONE-SHOT FILMS IN POPULAR CULTURE

Despite little academic work on one-shot films, they are already culturally recognizable enough to be subject to parody. They are conceptually easy to understand and

imitate, especially with the ease and flexibility afforded by modern digital cameras.[31] I have already mentioned *One Cut of the Dead*, which, though not a one-shot film itself, features the travails of achieving these films as a central plot point. It begins with a thirty-seven minute long take: the one-shot film made by the directors within the film. This film-within-a-film is difficult to categorise, working on its own yet nevertheless contained within a traditionally edited film. A slew of one-shot parodies arose in the wake of *1917* (Sam Mendes, 2019), such as *2020: A 1917 Parody* (Stephen Ford, 2020), a short applying the narrative style of Mendes's film to COVID-19 lockdowns. This parodic treatment is common for any film that achieves the level of mainstream recognition of *1917*; it is essentially no different to *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) inspiring imitations, yet it nevertheless adds to the cultural visibility of one-shot films.

In 1995, over forty directors worldwide took part in the film *Lumière and Company* to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of cinema. This compilation film required each director to contribute a one-minute-long film made in one take, as an homage to the Lumières' foundational works. It contains reflections on the experience of crafting a film without cutting from numerous prominent directors. Essentially a making-of film, it focuses more on the process of making the films than the finished products, with many films even incorporating the production process into the shot. This method of filmmaking, conducive to creativity under constraints, is now a pedagogical tool in film courses.[32] One-shot film

[31] The term "one shot" also appears in various online locations. *MUBI Notebook* has a series of short reviews called "One Shot," while a popular Twitter film appreciation page is named "One Perfect Shot."

[32] In the first year of my undergraduate degree in film studies, making a film in the Lumière style was my first ever assignment in film production. *Le Cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse*, a collective dedicated to cinema education, describes on its website the rules of creating a "Lumière Minute": "Each student chooses the location and subject of his shot, choosing exactly the right moment to start recording his film. The camera records from one position without panning, although it can be placed on or in a moving object (car, lift, train or underground train amongst others), and sound is recorded directly at source. Then 60 seconds later with watch in hand, he has to stop the shot, as if the reel had finished, just like a Lumière operator of old." "Lumière Minutes," *Le Cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse*, accessed April 2, 2026, https://www.cinemacentansdejeunesse.org/en/lumiere-minutes.html.

festivals have also appeared, with the self-explanatory criteria that each submission must consist of one shot only. The Spanish city of Terrassa has held a one-shot competition since 1967. Initially known as the Rotllo festival, centred upon the submission of a three-minute long super 8mm film, the competition rebranded in 2004 to the "Concurs del Pla Seqüència," catering to the novel affordances of digital video. The "One Shot Film Festival" has taken place in Yerevan, Armenia since 2003. Its main competition is called "One Minute One Shot," with a set of criteria like the Lumière project.[33] These film festivals provide a shared institutional space for one-shot filmmaking creations.

But even with all these activities, the most culturally recognizable type of one-shot films are music videos. While music videos clearly differ from narrative features in terms of length, they still represent a high-concept statement of intent from an artist. Enough examples of one-shot music videos have been produced to sustain an entire other dissertation, with hundreds made since the 1980s.[34] Concepts and trends from one-shot music videos often mirror those in feature-length one-shot films.[35] Videos such as "Hideaway" by Kiesza (filmed by Blayre Ellestad) replicate the complex choreography and centrifugal movements, while "No Surprises" by Radiohead (directed by Grant Gee) is more static, centripetal, and cerebral. Some music videos simulate a single shot through hidden cuts, such as Kevin Godley's video for U2's "The Sweetest Thing," depicting a carnivalesque carriage ride

[33] The rules listed are: "1. The film presented must be one minute long: 10sec. titles + 60seconds film. 2. The titles must be 10 seconds long at the beginning of one minute film. English subtitles are required. 3. Film must be shot in one frame. Shots cannot be cut, combined or mixed into one (chroma key is not allowed). 4. Multiplication in animation is not against the rules as it is a production technique. However direct editing, cuts in different scenes (close up - middle, etc) are not allowed. 5. The author is free to express his/her ideas and views in any form and genre." "One Shot Film Festival," *Film Freeway*, accessed April 2, 2026, https://filmfreeway.com/OneShotFilmFestival.

[34] Like narrative one-shots, these music videos are easily listed on journalistic websites. An example is Rachel Campbell, "18 impressive one-shot music videos," *Alternative Press*, April 26, 2017, https://www.altpress.com/18_impressive_one_shot_music_videos/.

[35] Several feature-length concert films consist of one take. A recent example is *Powder Blue: Live at Club Regent* (2024), directed by Winnipeg-based filmmaker Ryan Steel. This concert film uses a continuous handheld style to capture a live show from artist Begonia. Steel was partially inspired to use this technique by his familiarity with this dissertation that I was in the process of writing while we were housemates in Toronto.

through Dublin. Several directors have made tentative moves towards establishing themselves as auteurs of the one-shot music video, such as Michel Gondry. Thus, though still a marginalised method of filmmaking, one-shot films are sneaking into mainstream film discourse from many directions.

## EARLY CINEMATIC ONE-SHOT FILMS

With my main object of study outlined, I now provide a non-exhaustive historical genealogy of one-shot films throughout cinematic history, spreading across early cinema, experimental cinema, the early digital area, as well as mainstream long take developments between and alongside these periods. While these instances are all essential precursors, it is important to distinguish them from contemporary one-shot narratives in terms of institutional context and aesthetic motivations and qualities. One-shot films embody fundamental capacities of the medium by presenting uncut duration, possessing an obvious conceptual affinity with early cinematic works that emerged prior to the development of editing. As Thomas Elsaesser describes, "Early Cinema can open up illuminating perspectives and surprising parallels, especially when viewed from the present situation of equally rapid changes in the overall media-scape."[36] This early period represents the first wave of one-shot films; the conscious reduction of filmic language in contemporary one-shot cinema echoes the unconscious and automatic tendencies of these origins. Early cinema marks the only period in film history in which unbroken duration functioned as a necessary norm rather than a conscious stylistic choice. In terms of my earlier four categories, early one-shot films are defined by being short, unsimulated, centripetal, and a mixture between fictional and

[36] Thomas Elsaesser, "Media Archaeology as Symptom," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 14, no.2 (2016): 183.

documentary.[37] The root gestures of cinema return to duration as their primary condition, with scholars continuing to mine early single-shot films for inchoate energies, in a manner analogous to theoretical physicists approaching the big bang.

From the late-1970s onwards, scholars closely re-investigated the formal structures of early cinema; that most unfold in one span of space and time, no matter how brief, could not be ignored. The notion of one-shot films therefore predates their contemporary manifestation, having already been identified and, to some extent, theorised within studies of early cinema. Discussing genres in early cinema, Tom Gunning prioritizes not only content, but also the "actualization as expression through the specific stylistic devices of film."[38] He notes that early cinema developed through successive periods in which different stylistic forms dominated output, enacting changes in "the articulation between shots in terms of space and time."[39] As expected, Gunning's first genre is those earliest works prior to the use of editing: "The first genre consists of narratives completed within a single shot."[40] Single-shot films lost their dominant status amongst filmic output by 1902/3, but were still common until 1905 at certain studios such as Pathé and Biograph.[41] These films are undoubtedly one-shot films, though Gunning notes it is unclear whether they were recognised as such by early audiences—whether they prompted viewers to measure temporal extension in a conscious way. Early films were rarely exhibited in isolation, instead forming part of heterogeneous programmes. These works were autonomous yet seldom experienced as such, a condition

[37] Regarding early cinematic films, Eileen Bowser observes "the difficulty of separating fiction from nonfiction in this period." Eileen Bowser, "The Brighton Project: An introduction*," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 4, no. 4 (1979): 510.
[38] Tom Gunning, "Non-Continuity, Continuity, Discontinuity: A Theory of Genres in Early Film" in *Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (British Film Institute, 1990), 104.
[39] Gunning, "Non-Continuity, Continuity, Discontinuity," 105. Elsewhere, Bart Testa refers to them as "form-genres." Bart Testa, *Back and Forth: Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 126.
[40] Gunning, "Non-Continuity, Continuity, Discontinuity," 105.
[41] "Even after the development of multi-shot films in 1902, therefore, films are often shaped by a single demonstration of the camera's capacity." Testa, *Back and Forth*, 129.

comparable to the exhibition contexts of one-shot experimental films that I discuss next. In this regard, early one-shot films and experimental one-shot films challenge my earlier point about one-shot films possessing a self-contained quality, a key feature separating them from feature-length narrative one-shot films.

André Gaudreault terms single-shot films as "punctiliar," distinguishing them from "pluri-punctiliar works," and identifies three concurrent modes of early practice: films consisting of a single autonomous shot, dominant until 1902; films composed of several semi-autonomous, discontinuous shots; and films composed of many continuous shots.[42] Consistent with their theatrical and vaudevillian origins, the first cinematic creations did not yet conceive of montage and multiplicity, with each shot serving "an autonomous and self-sufficient tableau."[43] No reason at this early stage develops for the impulse towards adding shots.[44] These shots were "not really required to communicate with other shots," which is still largely true of today's one-shot works.[45] Within this earliest punctiliar period can be found the germ of narrative that today sustains complex feature films, with Gaudreault identifying "a sort of innate and spontaneous narrative, that of the articulation of frames, or photograms, within a single shot."[46] *L'Arroseur Arrosé* (Louis Lumière, 1895) is often cited to demonstrate the inherent potential narrativity of early single-shot works. The simple narrative of a young boy pranking a gardener by standing on his water hose before getting duly punished fits into a cramped and static frame, demonstrating economy of action and "the

[42] André Gaudreault, *From Plato to Lumière: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema*, trans. Timothy Barnard (University of Toronto Press, 2009), 13.
[43] Gaudreault, *From Plato to Lumière*, 12.
[44] In the notes at the end of his book, Gaudreault provides more context on his terminology: "'Punctiliar' is a little-used and almost-forgotten English word meaning a single point in time (the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives its sole meaning as 'Of or pertaining to a point in time' – ultimately from the Latin *punctum*, point)." Gaudreault, *From Plato to Lumière*, 168.
[45] Gaudreault, *From Plato to Lumière*, 13.
[46] Tom Gunning Preface, Gaudreault, *From Plato to Lumière*, xiv.

strictly centripetal specificity of the self-sufficient unit."[47] Eventually, the single-shot vessel could not contain the polycentric activity of the frame, and additional shots were required to contain the visual and narrative excess.

Among early cinematic forms, phantom rides align especially closely with contemporary one-shot films. The desire for pleasure in traversing a continuum of space has existed since the earliest days of cinema. The most famous examples, such as *Hale's Tours of the World*, involved cameras mounted on moving vehicles—often trains—offering viewers the sensation of journeying through space. "Conquering space not only with the gaze," writes Lauren Rabinowitz, "such spectacles foreground the body itself as a site for sensory experience within a three-dimensionally contained space."[48] These films foreground duration, movement, and perceptual immersion over narrative organisation. Gunning and Gaudreault famously characterise many of the earliest films as constituting a "cinema of attractions." Modern one-shot films are predicated on the notion, established early on, that "the simple act of movement was in itself an attraction."[49]

Cinema's history can thus be understood as originating in duration, moving away from it through increasing fragmentation, and periodically returning to it. Unity gives way to heterogeneity until continuity is forgotten, before shots begin to coagulate once again, embracing their progenitors' wholeness. Later cinematic artists could thereby reclaim early cinematic temporalities as models for later interventions.

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[47] Gaudreault, *From Plato to Lumière*, 17.
[48] Lauren Rabinowitz, "From Hale's Tours to Star Tours: Virtual Voyages, Travel Ride Films, and the Delirium of the Hyper-Real" in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, ed. Jeffrey Ruoff (Duke University Press, 2006), 45.
[49] Gaudreault, *From Plato to Lumière*, 16.

## EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA AND THE RECLAMATION OF DURATION

After its prominence in early cinema, one-shot films largely receded from dominant practice before being reclaimed by experimental filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s. This avant-garde revival constitutes the second major wave of one-shot filmmaking. Although not all early films were single takes, nor all experimental works unbroken, the long take became a privileged option in both periods. The link between them forms part of the broader influence of early cinema on postwar experimental practice.[50] Contemporary one-shot films are stylistically equivocal, deriving partially from experimental traditions and partially from classical mainstream cinema—a tension that reappears across my chapters.[51]

Tom Gunning describes this relationship as "pseudomorphic": an aesthetic continuity spanning a historical rupture, "a relation traced over an abyss."[52] Early one-shot films emerged when the cinematic apparatus itself was new; their formal simplicity was often technologically or commercially motivated rather than programmatically aesthetic. By contrast, avant-garde filmmakers returned to the unbroken shot self-consciously, as a corrective to what they perceived as the exhaustion of classical editing and narrative form. As Gunning notes, "early filmmakers envisioned no aesthetic project like that of the avant-garde filmmaker."[53] The question of intentionality marks the decisive difference between the two

[50] In the medium of painting, the concept of 'one-shot' has its own history, with obvious differences yet also some instructive parallels. I refer to one-shot painting, associated primarily with Kenneth Noland, a strategy whereby the entire painting is executed in one throw, one gesture, with confidence in the resulting image and no revising. This method has obvious similarities to one-shot film, executed in one shot that cannot be later corrected through editing. Alex J. Taylor specifically invokes Orson Welles's famous long take in *Touch of Evil* in characterising this type of painting: "The foregrounding of control and coordination in Noland's 'one-shot' procedure speaks of an equivalent virtuosic faith in the inherent rightness of the ambitious, unrepeatable gesture in Noland's artwork." Alex J. Taylor, 'One-Shot Painting', in *Gift* 1961–2 by Kenneth Noland, Tate Research Publication, 2017, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/gift-kenneth-noland/one-shot-painting, accessed 4 February 2026.

[51] Dead time during one-shot transition scenes is a quality from experimental and artisanal strains of cinematic history, here finding its way into linear narrative cinema.

[52] Tom Gunning, "An Unseen Energy Swallows Space: The Space in Early Film and its Relation to American Avant Garde Film" in *Film Before Griffith*, ed. John L. Fell (University of California Press, 1983), 355.

[53] Gunning, "An Unseen Energy Swallows Space," 365.

moments.[54] Several critics caution against unduly romanticising early cinema. Noël Burch warns against "the modernist fantasy of the primitive as a kind of Prelapsarian Lost Paradise," noting that while early films offer enlightening roads not taken, it is "absurd to overvalue them."[55] As Regina Cornwell observes, the avant-garde's return to duration was primarily oppositional, seeking aesthetic reduction and purification as a counter to mainstream cinema. Experimental filmmakers stripped away accumulated "conventions and trappings" to recover a mode of attention in which, as early cinema once promised, "anything on film is bound to engage."[56] Such gestures toward simplicity reactivate duration as an aesthetic capacity rather than a technical limitation.

This durational revival was not merely formal imitation; experimental filmmakers such as Ken Jacobs (in 1969's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*) and Ernie Gehr (in 1974's *Eureka*) re-presented and re-interrogated early cinema, contributing to the broader scholarly reassessment of the period. In Bart Testa's formulation, such work "frees the early works from the ghetto of primitive babbling to which the progress-oriented model of film history has assigned them."[57] Avant-garde practice becomes, in Testa's phrase, a kind of "metalanguage of early cinema," enabling the past to be seen anew.[58] Unbroken duration was a central facet of this metalanguage. Several experimental filmmakers specialised in the one-shot format. Andy Warhol is responsible for beginning this trend, with his monolithic "furniture films" of the mid-1960s such as *Eat* (1964) and *Empire* (1965)—static, minimal

[54] Into this century, filmmakers continue to take conceptual inspiration from the earliest cinematic works, particularly the Lumière Brothers. As I have already mentioned, in 1995, forty filmmakers took on the Lumière challenge. Also, Harun Farocki undertook his "Labour in a Single Shot" project. As Grundmann writes, "the formal directive "one shot, single subject, one-to-two minutes" tethers the project symbolically to 1895, a moment preceding cinema's fall into what film scholars call narrative integration." Roy Grundmann, Peter Schwartz, Gregory Williams *Labour in a Single Shot: Critical Perspectives on Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki's Global Video Project* (Routledge, 2022), 34.
[55] Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, trans. Ben Brewster (University of California Press, 1990), 3-4.
[56] Regina Cornwell. "Progress—Discontinuous," *Artforum*, April 1980.
[57] Testa, *Back and Forth*, 18.
[58] Testa, *Back and Forth*, 19.

works with artificially added duration through slow motion.[59] Larry Gottheim made several short, fixed-camera one-shot films as the sixties transitioned into the seventies, such as *Blues* (1969), *Corn* (1970), and *Fog Line* (1970). *Harmonica* from 1971 is a more dynamic one-shot film from Gottheim, capturing the spontaneous sounds of a harmonica held out the window of a moving car. Morgan Fisher is another filmmaker who made a series of one-shot works, such as *The Wilkinson Household Fire Alarm* (1973), *Cue Rolls* (1974), and *Standard Gauge* (1984). Fisher often used the one-shot form to reflexively interrogate the mechanisms of the cinematic apparatus—similar to the concepts I discuss in Chapter Five. Short avant-garde works and aspects of longer narrative features often share a connection of energies, a "mutual emphasis on the rich suggestiveness of isolatable techniques or forms."[60] While ostensibly incomparable, they become conceptually similar through some common gesture, an exaggeration or condensation. Though avant-garde one-shot films are alien in terms of length and intention to later narrative one-shot films, they nevertheless represent formative experiments in the usages of the form.

Several key developments and discourses in one-shot filmmaking (and wider durational filmmaking) occurred between and alongside the early cinema to experimental cinema connection. One-shot films, in whatever artistic or cultural context, are inextricably tied to ever-evolving technological capabilities; technological limitations have served as an ever-receding delimiter of pure time on screen. The explosion of durational practices in this century comes when the gap between imaginative concept and means of achieving it has decreased considerably. Unbroken filmmaking is a logical result of one of cinema's fundamental aspects finally being unleashed.

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[59] Justin Remes, *Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 31-58.
[60] Testa, *Back and Forth*, 8.

Prior to one-shot films becoming a realistic possibility, numerous figures prophesied their appearance. Although technological limits often delimit cinematic ambitions, they have not constrained the imaginative reach of cinematic thinkers throughout time. In the analogue era—the twentieth century—filmmakers and scholars articulated in writing or interviews the longing for a cinematic form resembling today's one-shot films. These statements range from concrete production concerns to abstract philosophical reflections and taken together suggest a quasi-teleological trajectory of cinematic yearning that has only recently become technically feasible. Deborah Tudor notes that digital cinema is frequently framed as part of an "oft-assumed teleological movement toward the perfection of perceptual reality."[61] The realist approach championed by theorists such as Cesare Zavattini and André Bazin—which I cover in the next chapter during my discussion of one-shot potentials—may not have been achievable in practice but remained valuable as an aspirational horizon. The comments collected here illustrate how such aspirations circulated long before their full technical realisation.

Lutz Bacher's book *The Mobile Mise en Scene* (1978) provides an historical overview of long-take practices in Hollywood and further afield, scouring through trade publications and director interviews for direct comments and insights into the use of long takes. Within Bacher's cache, comments about the hypothetical existence of one-shot films appear with notable regularity. These comments provide a practical and industry-based shade to these yearnings, complemented by the more philosophical contemporaneous writings of theorists. While some filmmakers desire to forgo cutting on a local level, others wish for whole films without cuts, in one fluid articulation of time and space. The earliest expression of such a

[61] Deborah Tudor, "The Eye of the Frog: Questions of Space in Films Using Digital Processes," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 1 (2008): 94.

wish comes from F. W Murnau, among cinema's greatest long take innovators. Murnau imagined:

> a camera that could move freely in space. What I mean is one that could go anywhere, at any speed. A camera that outstrips present film technique and fulfils the cinema's ultimate artistic goal. Only with this essential instrument shall we be able to realise new possibilities … a symphony made up of the harmonies of bodies and the rhythm of space; the play of pure movement, vigorous and abundant.[62]

While Murnau does not explicitly describe a one-shot film, this passage prefigures Bazin's "total cinema" (discussed in the next chapter) in its teleological slant: the claim that unmitigated durational movement is the summit of cinema's capabilities—a totalizing diegesis of ceaseless movement, wresting cinema away from the fracturing ethos of the cut.

Later filmmakers articulate similar ideas in more explicit terms. Otto Preminger, a prominent practitioner of the classical long take, remarks that "if it were possible I would do the whole of the film in one shot, because I believe that every cut, no matter how carefully it is done, is disturbing."[63] Again framed by its current impossibility, this comment notably uses the term "one-shot." Similarly, Bernardo Bertolucci claims in 1971 that "I am against editing. I would like to make a film of one long take. I feel that editing renders all films alike, gives them a brushing of conventionality."[64] Max Ophuls expressed a similar discomfort with cuts, observing that "I feel a jolt with every cut and for that reason I try to avoid it as much as

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[62] Lutz Bacher, *The Mobile Mise en Scene: A Critical Analysis of the Theory and Practice of Long-take Camera Movement in the Narrative Film* (Arno Press, 1978), 9.
[63] Bacher, *Mobile Mise en Scene,* 62.
[64] Bertolucci also states that "the moment of imperialism is the editing of film." Bacher, *Mobile Mise en Scene,* 101.

possible."[65] These comments demonstrate that the notion of a feature-length one-shot film beckoned like an oasis in the imaginations of some of narrative cinema's greatest innovators.

Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1968 essay "Observations on the Long Take" makes a *sui generis* comparison between cinematic duration and human consciousness. He likens a long take to waking life—with death coming at the moment of the cut: "The substance of cinema is … an endless long take, as is reality to our senses for as long as we are able to see and feel."[66] Rather than describing a simple binary relationship, Pasolini suggests that death, like a cut, retrospectively renders experience comprehensible and describable by imposing closure upon it. Extended shots, by contrast, remain active and unresolved while they continue unfolding, and therefore resist fixed or definitive meaning. Pasolini compares continual waking existence to the maintained long take; if extended until the end, one shot only, then the structural terminus of the film provides a cathartic spark of meaning. The final cut is not usually so influential in the overall structure of most films. In one-shot films, it is a conclusive gesture, redefining what comes before it. A one-shot's concluding cut travels backwards without any stoppages in the cinematic flow, like lightning striking metal and travelling straight to the origin, through the same section of duration. The stop is definitional, rhyming with Pasolini's schema. In the next chapter, I continue this discussion of durational theorising as I outline the potentials and formal specificity of the one-shot form. The preceding comments by filmmakers are important historical precursors for contemporary one-shot films, serving almost as *avant la lettre* yearnings for a form that has only recently become a realistic possibility.

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[65] Bacher, *Mobile Mise en Scene*, 250.

[66] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Observations on the Long Take," trans. Norman MacAfee and Craig Owens, *October* 13 (1980): 5.

Looking at the twentieth century, the first signs of fully unbroken films being a possibility after early cinema is seen in the increased prominence of long take capabilities in mainstream and arthouse filmmaking.[67] Barry Salt traces developments in long take filmmaking in mainstream cinemas taking place in between early cinema and 1960s experimental cinema. Through a staggering amount of research on Average Shot Length (ASL), Salt demonstrates a trajectory whereby long take filmmaking develops in the 1930s, peaks in the forties and fifties, before declining in the 1960s—coexisting with "the persistence of the majority of the directors in shooting films in the same manner as always."[68] This propensity for longer takes was propulsed by developments in camera mobility and manoeuvrability, such as the invention of the Houston crab dolly in 1946 and the Selznick crab dolly in 1948. Similarly, wide-angle lens staging in the forties and Cinemascope in the fifties also facilitated longer takes. From the 1940s onwards, cameras "would now take 1000-foot rolls of film in the circular cassettes," allowing for uninterrupted takes of 10-11 minutes in length.[69] This increased cassette capacity would enable the first historical glimpse of a feature-length one-shot film.

A seminal release in the popular history of one-shot films is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* in 1948. One of Hitchcock's limited setting films, *Rope* falls squarely into what in Chapter Three I call the centripetal strain of one-shot films, taking place in one location and stylistically derived from the medium of theatre (it is adapted from the 1929 play by Patrick Hamilton). It follows two young men who murder a classmate and conceal his body in their

[67] In his historical account of cinematic staging, David Bordwell mentions an intriguing historical instance of one-shot film practice, used by Sergei Eisenstein as a film school exercise, where achieving the shot is blatantly framed as a challenge of blocking, performance, or patience: "Of particular interest to us is Eisenstein's 1933 discussion of staging in depth. He required his pupils at the USSR Film School to stage the scene from *Crime and Punishment* in which Raskolnikov murders the old pawnbroker. He added a crucial proviso: it had to be filmed in one shot and from a fixed camera position." David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (University of California Press, 2005), 17-18.
[68] Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 266.
[69] Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 227.

Manhattan apartment, hosting a dinner party for the victim's friends and family while their former prep school housemaster grows increasingly suspicious of the circumstances. Until contemporary times, *Rope* was the go-to reference point for one-shot films, generating a wealth of responses. In recent years, Neil Badmington has written an entire book on the film—*Perpetual Movement: Alfred Hitchcock's Rope*—though his book is structured according to the film's eleven shots, directly exposing its overtly simulated nature.[70] Apropos his genealogy of film technology, Barry Salt writes that *Rope* (and 1949's *Under Capricorn*) are "not isolated instances that appeared from nowhere, but the culmination of a trend to which Hitchcock did not contribute at first."[71] D. A. Miller, in his creative analysis of *Rope*, notes that critics have had "surprisingly little good to say of this technique."[72] From this mainstream origin point of one-shot film discourse, the notion that the technique has been nothing more than a gimmick—which I explore in Chapter Five—has been prominent, with Miller criticizing "mass culture's tendency to degrade formal experimentation to the status of a gimmick."[73] Though *Rope* is historically groundbreaking, Hitchcock himself never saw it as such, remarking that his approach "was quite nonsensical because I was breaking with my own theories on the importance of cutting and montage for the visual narration of a story."[74] Nevertheless, such an experiment in mainstream one-shot filmmaking was not again attempted for many decades.

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[70] Neil Badmington, *Perpetual Movement: Alfred Hitchcock's Rope* (SUNY Press, 2021).
[71] Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, 257.
[72] Miller crafts an ingenious critique whereby the film's technique serves as an ongoing flashy diversion of its homosexual themes, which remain unexpressed: "Technique acquires all the transgressive fascination of homosexuality, while homosexuality is consigned to the status of a dry technical detail." D. A. Miller, "Anal Rope," *Representations*, no. 32 (Autumn, 1990): 117.
[73] Miller, "Anal Rope," 114.
[74] François Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock, *Truffaut/Hitchcock*, trans. Helen G. Scott, revised edition (Simon & Schuster, 1985), 180.

## THE EARLY DIGITAL ERA (1980s-2000s)

While my dissertation is the first full-length analysis of the topic, there has appeared a previous essay on one-shot films: Scott MacDonald's "Putting All Your Eggs in One Basket: The Single Shot Film," originally written in 1989 and revised before being collected in a 2009 book of essays.[75] That MacDonald has written (almost[76]) the sole essay on this topic prior to contemporary developments is typical of his comprehensive overview style with respect to experimental cinema.[77] MacDonald's essay is perched between two eras of one-shot films, originally only covering short experimental films prior to the advent of digital media. Overall film length is the key difference between MacDonald's focus and my own. Nevertheless, MacDonald articulates many fundamental qualities of one-shot films, providing valuable context on how filmmakers utilised the form in the analogue era and early digital era.[78]

Similar to my own introduction, MacDonald both links one-shot films to early cinema and describes their resurgence primarily as an alternative to the visual shocks of mainstream cinema. Throughout his essay, he takes one-shot examples in turn and uses them to ascribe various virtues to the form, such as encouraging "a more fully meditative film experience," creating images of "dense conceptual suggestiveness," or allowing the apparatus to "take

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[75] Scott MacDonald, "Putting All Your Eggs in One Basket: The Single-Shot Film" in *Adventures of Perception: Cinema as Exploration: Essays/Interviews*, ed. Scott MacDonald (University of California Press, 2009), 240-254.

[76] In 1968, Wim Wenders wrote a capsule review of the "EXPRMNTL 4" festival in Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium. The title of his short review is "Filming in One Shot Only – Thoughts on Exprmntl 4." This essay can perhaps be considered the first piece of writing specifically on one-shot films. However, it contains little detail, mainly just giving an overview of *Railroad* (Lutz Mommartz, 1967) and *Wavelength* (Michael Snow, 1967), which played at the festival. If not directly useful to one-shot film theorisation, Wenders's essay is at least a curio of the form's history. Wim Wenders, *Emotion Pictures: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Michael Hofmann and Sean Whiteside (Faber & Faber, 1989), 1-3.

[77] Filmmaker Leonard Retel Helmrich developed a filmmaking philosophy he terms the Single Shot Cinema (SSC) approach, published as a conference proceeding after Avanca 2013. Despite the name, his approach relates more to shooting individual scenes rather than entire films.

[78] True to his style, MacDonald also introduces several intriguing one-shot films that have faded in popularity since their release.

over and generate its own imagery and sound."[79] This method of focusing on the potential strengths of the one-shot constraint is a direct precursor to my next chapter. On multiple occasions, MacDonald notes the inherent finitude of the analogue single take, capped at roughly ten minutes, as a defining aspect of pre-digital one-shot films—culminating in the claim that "during the past ten years, the new digital technologies have, in a certain sense, rendered the form obsolete."[80] Given the explosion of digital one-shot filmmaking, this point of MacDonald's almost risks echoing Louis Lumière's famous supposed remark one hundred years earlier that cinema is "an invention without a future." Instead, one can agree with MacDonald that digital technology has brought a particular ethos of one-shot filmmaking to an end, one concerned not with pushing representation to its breaking point, but rather with creating an engaging experience within predefined limitations.

Like earlier moments in cinema history, technological developments at the end of the twentieth century had a profound impact on durational possibility. The emergence of consumer video formats and portable camcorders in the 1970s and 1980s enabled, for the first time, the production of mobile, feature-length recordings. While this did not immediately transform one-shot filmmaking, it produced a gradual emergence of extended duration works. In Hungary, Béla Tarr's *Macbeth* (1982), made for television using analogue video, consists of a brief opening shot followed by a fifty-seven-minute continuous take. By 1990, feature-length one-shot works begin to appear more clearly, including Jonas Mekas's *A Walk* and Robert Frank's *C'est Vrai (One Hour)*, both coincidentally structured around ambulatory movement through Manhattan.

The widespread adoption of digital video in the 1990s marks a decisive shift in durational recording, removing the material constraints imposed by both film reels and

[79] MacDonald, "Putting All Your Eggs in One Basket," 245-249.
[80] MacDonald, "Putting All Your Eggs in One Basket," 242.

videotape. As Gibbs and Pye observe, "freed from the limitations imposed by the length of film a camera could hold, in principle shots can become endless."[81] This technological transformation finds an important precursor in the Scandinavian Dogme 95 movement, whose emphasis on immediacy, mobility, and formal constraints foregrounded the creative possibilities of lightweight digital cameras. It was only a matter of time before these conditions were mobilised toward an explicitly one-shot narrative form. This early digital moment reaches an aesthetic culmination in *Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov, 2002), a feature-length film composed of a single unbroken take. Over fifty years after *Rope*, Sokurov's film takes the mantle as the model one-shot film of its time. The film is a slow, unfurling whirlwind of Russian history occurring over the course of a ninety-six-minute shot in the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg. I touch upon the film in multiple chapters but discuss it extensively in Chapter Five as a case study on one-shot paratexts. Speaking more generally, however, *Russian Ark* is most important for setting a new benchmark in the public consciousness for high aesthetic achievement within the unbroken form. As Nicholas Rombes suggests, "the cuts in digital and HD cinema will evolve into a new grammar at least partially motivated by the fact that, literally, a film can be shot in one take with no cuts."[82] This set of developments lays the groundwork for the proliferation of narrative one-shot films in the past two decades.

## ADJACENT BUT DISTINCT FORMS

This section covers historical manifestations of one-shot films that are not the main focus of my dissertation, though I include them as one-shot films in their own right, or at least as aesthetically adjacent forms, rather than just ephemeral oddities to be glossed over

[81] John Gibbs and Douglas Pye, *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 9.
[82] Nicholas Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age*, revised edition (Wallflower Press, 2017), 45.

cursorily. I describe three such adjacent but distinct forms—surveillance, video games, and smaller-screen mobile works—outlining their one-shot *bona fides* whilst also acknowledging how they diverge from cinematic one-shot films. This sampling is not exhaustive: many other visual phenomena could technically fall under the umbrella of one-shot films.[83]

***1: Surveillance:*** The differences between surveillance footage and narrative one-shot films are obvious. However, a segment extracted from a continuous surveillance recording and re-presented is, technically, a one-shot film. Dietmar Kammerer notes that there are "a multitude of possible connections" between surveillance and cinema, while Catherine Zimmer observes that "practices of surveillance become representational and representational practices become surveillant."[84] Both rely on the unbroken presentation of time and space. The similarity is formal rather than institutional, and the analogy should not be overstretched. Surveillance and one-shot cinema diverge sharply in purpose and context. As Clive Norris argues, surveillance "concerns the reproduction of order … focused on the maintenance of the status quo."[85] Its durational continuity serves regulation. While the aesthetics of surveillance have intersected with cinema at least since the 1990s, most contemporary one-shot films do not adopt surveillance's institutional logic. Narrative one-shot films have a more ambivalent relationship with reproducing the status quo, as I explore in the next chapter. Formally, surveillance represents a centripetal extreme of the one-shot principle: static camera, minimal event, prolonged duration. At its core lies an expanse of actionless and usually unseen time. Even austere experimental one-shot films—such as *Wavelength* (Michael Snow, 1967)—retain a tincture of narrative or perceptual progression. Narrative

[83] Examples include livestreams, performance documentation, theatre recordings, dashcam or bodycam footage, screens within screens (e.g., 2014's *Unfriended*), screensavers, fireplace streams, and music videos.
[84] Dietmar Kammerer, "Surveillance in Literature, Film and Television" in *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies,* ed. Kirstie Ball, Kevin Haggerty and David Lyon (Routledge, 2012), 101. Catherine Zimmer. *Surveillance Cinema* (New York University Press, 2015), 2.
[85] Clive Norris, "The Success of Failure: Accounting for the Global Growth of CCTV" in *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies,* ed. Kirstie Ball, Kevin Haggerty and David Lyon (Routledge, 2012), 258.

one-shot films, by contrast, are typically predicated on mobility and/or dramatic escalation. The durational affinity nevertheless remains significant. Thomas Levin describes a shift from thematic to structural engagements with surveillance, arguing that "the politics of surveillance are currently being negotiated" within cultural production.[86] From this perspective, one-shot films participate in the broader "rhetorics of surveillance" through their commitment to real-time continuity, even when their narratives are far removed from monitoring or control.[87] Levin further links surveillance aesthetics to the digital era's crisis of indexicality: the real-time surveillant image functions as a form of "semiotic compensation," preserving temporal continuity once guaranteed by photochemical processes.[88] The "temporal indexicality" of real-time recording thus inherits the authority of the pre-digital image.[89] Levin explicitly cites *Timecode* (Mike Figgis, 2000)—a *sui generis* one-shot film that splits the frame into quadrants, each of which is a feature-length continuous take—as exemplary of this convergence between cinematic and surveillant rhetorics. Extending his insight, contemporary narrative one-shot films offer a similar promise: the "unprecedented temporal coherence" of events unfolding without interruption.[90] Their politics differ from surveillance, but their durational rhetoric cannot be disentangled from it.

***2: Video Games:*** Video games exert a significant influence on contemporary cinema. Durational cinema, such as one-shot films, are a privileged site for monitoring this dynamic. As Lutz Koepnick observes, "any writing on the long take today cannot afford to ignore work done for mobile viewing platforms and even video games."[91] One-shot films occupy a transitional space between traditional screen media and emerging immersive forms. Though I

[86] Thomas Levin, "Rhetoric of the Temporal Index: Surveillant Narration and the Cinema of 'Real Time,'" in *CTRL[SPACE]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. Thomas Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel (MIT Press, 2002), 581.
[87] Levin, "Rhetoric of the Temporal Index," 581.
[88] Levin, "Rhetoric of the Temporal Index," 585.
[89] Levin, "Rhetoric of the Temporal Index," 592.
[90] Levin, "Rhetoric of the Temporal Index," 593.
[91] Lutz Koepnick, *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 32.

focus on videogames here, one-shot films also share aesthetic similarities with virtual reality. Kath Dooley notes that 360-degree virtual reality narratives frequently unfold as a single long take, where "the sequencing of action cues is of the utmost importance."[92] Both VR and one-shot films confront a similar problem: how to impose narrative legibility within expanded spatial and temporal fields. While one-shot films remain non-interactive and frame-bound, they share with immersive media the challenge of shaping excess—guiding attention without recourse to the cut. Chapter Three analyses the techniques through which aesthetic balance is restored within this abundance of duration.

Narrative one-shot films have a structural affinity with videogames.[93] In three-dimensional videogames, each play unfolds as a continuous traversal of space, terminating only with failure or completion. D. N. Rodowick describes first-person gaming as a "single continuous trajectory through an apparently three-dimensional space."[94] When such gameplay is recorded, re-presented, and circulated online the resemblance to one-shot films becomes further pronounced: a bounded, legible continuum of time and space. Machinima embodies this convergence. As Genevieve Yue notes, machinima is "a portmanteau of machine and cinema used to refer to movies constructed within videogame environments."[95] Here a virtual camera, rather than a physical one, refrains from cutting, yet the resulting work presents continuous duration comparable to real-world long takes. Works such as Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* (2002), which crops a Super Mario scroller so that only the usually incidental clouds above the character are framed, and Phil Solomon's *Empire* (2008),

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[92] Kath Dooley, "Storytelling with virtual reality in 360-degrees: a new screen grammar," *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 11, no. 3 (2017): 169.

[93] Sam Mendes' *1917* (2019) draws comparisons to videogames because of its blatantly objective-driven narrative. A popular negative review on Letterboxd by critic Esther Rosenfield reflects how one-shot films are watched through a videogame lens. She describes the plot as a list of sequential "achievements" the main character completes, mirroring how videogames structure storylines. Esther Rosenfield, "*1917* Review," *Letterboxd*, January 10th, 2020, https://letterboxd.com/estheronfilm/film/1917/.

[94] D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 171.

[95] Genevieve Yue, "Cinema immemorial: "EMPIRE" and the experimental machinima of Phil Solomon," *Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 3, no. 1 (2014): 11.

which replicates Warhol's fixed view of a skyscraper within the engine of *Grand Theft Auto,* demonstrate how videogame-based images approximate the aesthetics of one-shot films. Defining the category of one-shot films purely by the formal properties of the finished text rather than by production method, certain machinima would sit comfortably within its expanded canon.

Beyond form, gaming culture also offers a procedural analogue.[96] Ludification, as Lasse Juel Larsen argues, has increasingly re-shaped the narrative logic of modern cinema.[97] He writes that ludification, as a wider dispersed cultural logic, impacts the "general imagination and manifestation of imagery," creating semantical and structural influences upon modern cinema.[98] One-shot filmmaking shares with gameplay a process-oriented structure: attempts unfold in real time, mistakes necessitate restarting, and success depends upon sustained execution under temporal pressure. This comparison is imperfect—cinematic failure carries financial and logistical consequences rather than lost progress—but the experiential resemblance is striking. Speedrunning culture sharpens the analogy further: repeated rehearsals culminate in a high stakes attempt whose tension intensifies as completion nears. In this respect, one-shot films resonate with broader ludic structures privileging duration, risk, and virtuosity—which I unravel in my fourth and fifth chapters.

***3: Smaller Screen Works:*** Finally, a preponderance of amateur or consumer-produced audiovisual works consist of a single shot. As John McGrath describes, "an

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[96] *Iravin Nizhal's* behind-the-scenes documentary, which I analyse in Chapter Five, systematically displays the numerous mistakes triggering a restart.

[97] *Hardcore Henry* (Ilya Naishuller, 2015) would be a perfect case study for one-shot films and videogames—but it does not even pretend to be done in one shot. It is aesthetically like first-person videogames, based on long takes/continuous camera and real time. However, it clearly cuts consistently. It is a stretch even to refer to it as a simulated one-shot film, but it does represent the experience that some genuine one-shot films aim for. *Hardcore Henry* represents a midpoint between traditional narratives divided by cuts, and one-shot films that travel between scenes.

[98] "Five traits of such influence have been identified, (1) play worlds, (2) ludified quests, (3) controller and interfaces, (4) play experience, and (5) game structure." Lasse Juel Larsen, "Play and Gameful Movies: The Ludification of Modern Cinema," *Games and Culture* 14, no. 5 (2019): 466.

extraordinary amount of public and private activity is recorded, uploaded, and shared online."[99] The affordances of personal digital cameras encourage short, uncut recordings; a surprisingly large proportion of short videos take this form. While such works are not exclusively one-shot films, the conditions of their production strongly favour continuous recording. Across shooting contexts and subject matters, the one-shot emerges as the most intuitive mode of capture and presentation. Home videos, accidental recordings, and long takes captured for other purposes frequently default to continuity. These films tend to be short, unsimulated, documentary, and a mixture of centrifugal and centripetal. If someone observes, say, unidentified flying objects in the sky and wishes to share the footage quickly on YouTube, there is little incentive to gather multiple shots and assemble them through editing. Speed and immediacy favour the uncut take, further signalling authenticity and truth possibly undermined by visible editing.

This category of amateur one-shot footage is so broad as to risk appearing analytically useless, yet its sheer scale signals its importance. Attempts to comprehensively list or categorise media that could be defined as a one-shot film quickly becomes impossible, as the quantity of short, obscure, and tonally heterogeneous examples exceeds the capacity of any single person to view. Paola Voci and Roger Odin describe this overlooked sphere of filmmaking: private, obscure clips made on mobile phones and camcorders, circulating outside the established structures of film and television.[100] Referring to such works as "smaller-screen realities," Voci develops a poetics of private and obscure audiovisual

[99] John McGrath, "Performing Surveillance" in *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, ed. Kirstie Ball, Kevin Haggerty and David Lyon (Routledge, 2012), 83.
[100] My first adjacent form, surveillance, connects to my third, smaller-screen works, through the idea of what Zimmer refers to as "self-surveillance," or "peer-to-peer surveillance." As John McGrath summarizes, "The story of surveillance has turned out, it could be argued, to be less one of technology, government, law or rights, than one of cultural practice. It is the way in which we have come to produce and exchange surveillance of ourselves that is defining the experience of surveillance going into the second decade of the twenty-first century." John McGrath, "Performing Surveillance" in *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, ed. Kirstie Ball, Kevin Haggerty and David Lyon (Routledge, 2012), 83.

production.[101] She emphasises that theorising these works involves breaking boundaries and challenging genre divisions. In smaller-screen one-shot works, the range of content resists containment within traditional categories. Voci stresses the close relationship between the reality depicted onscreen and the context of its production.

These practices primarily centre on mobile phone technologies, though they also connect to earlier forms of digital and analogue video. Across these formats, they share gestural aesthetics and casual modes of circulation. As Roger Odin observes, "The mobile functions like a prosthesis … the viewer sees what the hand sees … images reflecting the immediacy and … the impulsiveness of the act of filming … there is no time to think or even to frame; what matters is that people understand the things and events that are around you."[102] A dissertation solely on such films would veer closer to anthropology, addressing an updated digital facet of spontaneous human expression. This domain is less an area of film production than the sphere of film as a language of the everyday: "The mobile has achieved the dream of immediate communication with the moving image."[103] This sphere carries distinct production and spectatorial expectations. Though ostensibly throwaway, they embody an ethos of freedom and flexibility. As Odin notes, they "possess 'insignificant' weight in terms of production costs, distribution scale, profit, and artistic ambition, while nevertheless holding deep significance in articulating alternative ways of seeing and understanding the world."[104]

No gate of exclusivity governs the production or circulation of these images. Creators do not preserve them in a formal filmography, retaining or nourishing them over time. Instead, they are discarded once attention drifts elsewhere. To examine these images rescues

[101] Paolo Voci, *China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities* (Routledge, 2010), 1.
[102] Roger Odin, "Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone" in *Audiences: Defining and Researching Screen Entertainment Reception,* trans. and ed. Ian Christie (Routledge, 2025), 165-66.
[103] Odin, "Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone," 168.
[104] Odin, "Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone," 161.

them through attention—countless one-shot fragments have never been seen by anyone. Because this category risks appearing vague, I will briefly describe an example. “Leitrim rap battle RAW” (sic) is an extremely obscure Irish YouTube video depicting in one shot a rap battle amongst friends in the Irish county of Leitrim. The choice of “Leitrim rap battle RAW″ is purposely arbitrary: a near-unknown YouTube video that I happen to be familiar with. Its function here is illustrative, demonstrating the ubiquity of such one-shot films floating through digital culture, made on mobile devices and eluding any manageable categorisation. The video has accumulated thirty-five views over nine years—presumably primarily from those who appear in the video. Uploaded by user “thairish,” it runs for twelve minutes and twenty-two seconds.

The one-shot recording captures the period before the rap battle, the battle itself, and its aftermath. It begins pointed at the ground, adopting a subjective and private mode of address. Its low resolution and chaotic soundscape foreground spontaneity and contingency (the subject of Chapter Four). We hear, “Sorry, my battery—tell me when you want me to record … now, I think.” The camera scans a home filled with people drinking alcohol at a house party, where everyone appears to know one another. The video circulates for this group alone, for whom the event already holds meaning, evincing what Odin terms “personal value.”[105] The cameraman occupies a position within the inner social circle of the event, both literally and figuratively. A circle forms as the competing rappers emerge one by one to cheers. Continuous volleys of jokes, laughter, and applause create an intimate atmosphere; the footage conveys what Carole Rivière describes as “the pleasure of expressing something in the immediate present.”[106]

[105] Odin, “Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone,” 168.
[106] Quoted in Odin, “Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone,” 169.

The video unfolds as a continuous tapestry of human interaction, uncensored and unprogrammed toward any external audience or taste. While spontaneous, the rap battle proceeds in an orderly fashion according to its own rules, balancing contingency with process. Applause, celebrations, evaluations, and closing speeches follow: "Cheers to everybody for coming down here for the weekend." The video fades into overlapping conversations, casual gestures, and a thumbs-up to the camera before cutting abruptly. The video records a moment of particular people at a particular time, with no pretensions to strive beyond this limited situation. As Odin notes, "the mobile gives its images their deictic value, conveying the sense of 'here' and 'now.'"[107] One-shot works such as "Leitrim rap battle RAW," though a far cry from expensive blockbusters such as *1917*, must nevertheless be given their place within the broader one-shot canon—even if they are not my main focus in this dissertation.

## CONCLUSION

This introduction has established the contours of one-shot filmmaking as a distinct cinematic phenomenon, tracing a genealogy of the form's practical and theoretical development from early cinema to the present day. In doing so, it has necessarily remained broad in scope, providing the historical and conceptual foundations for the more focused analyses in upcoming chapters. By defining the form, tracing its historical developments, surveying the limited body of existing scholarship, and distinguishing it from adjacent durational practices, it has provided the historical and conceptual foundation for the analyses that follow. The sections in this chapter come together to suggest a form simultaneously

[107] Odin, "Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone," 168.

familiar and under-theorised: culturally recognizable, historically persistent, yet lacking a sustained account of its distinctive aesthetic properties.

One-shot films have emerged repeatedly under drastically differing historical circumstances, suggesting that the form's appeal is not reducible to any single movement, ideology, or technological innovation. One-shot films cannot be adequately understood through theories developed for neighbouring durational forms, even though important continuities exist, as I continue to show in the next chapter. Indeed, single takes may overlap with traditions of realism, experimental films, and even mainstream film, but it remains a formal constraint with its own possibilities and pressures. Assuming that one-shot films constitute a distinct cinematic form, their defining constraint should produce characteristic aesthetic tendencies. The next chapter therefore turns from historical overview to questions of formal specificity, examining what aesthetic consequences arise from shooting a film in one continuous take.

# CHAPTER TWO:
# THE FORMAL SPECIFICITY OF ONE-SHOT FILMS

Operating at the extremity of cinematic duration, one-shot films can present life in its untampered form and thereby possess the potential to expand the expressive capacities of cinema. Drawing from the principle of medium specificity, this chapter interrogates which concepts and experiences the materiality of an aesthetic form is most capable of articulating, though focusing on the specialised form of one-shot films. While the "medium-specificity thesis" has received strong criticism, most convincingly by Noël Carroll, it remains prevalent in writing about cinema, with scholars defining and assessing the purview of the newest major art form in all its manifestations.[108] My use of the term is not so all-encompassing, however; I view one-shot films as a form of filmmaking rather than a medium in itself—though a form capable of unique cinematic expressions. I am not assuming, *qua* Clement Greenberg, any hierarchy of forms that one-shot films participate in.[109] This chapter is an investigation of the *formal specificity* of one-shot films.

I begin with an abstract consideration: what are the qualities of those one-shot films that achieve comfort in the one-shot form as the appropriate vessel for meaningful treatment of their subject matter? Next, I outline a history of durational style, tracing the moral and political messages durational works contain, and considering one-shot films in relation to this reception. I discuss how the one-shot form is inherently positioned to subvert many longstanding strictures of control in art, culture, and society, but also susceptible to reifying and imprisoning itself to these same strictures. In the second half of this chapter, I examine several case studies that (non-exhaustively) demonstrate certain strengths of the one-shot

[108] Noël Carroll, "The Specificity of Media in the Arts," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19, no. 4 (Winter, 1985), 5-20.
[109] Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," *Partisan Review* 7, no. 4 (July-August 1940), 296-310.

form. As per Bordwell's outline of historical poetics, comprehensiveness is elusive concerning formal potentials, which may have not yet fully developed; analytical categories are further actualised each year as new one-shot films are produced and released. I select three cinematic experiences that one-shot films are proficient in: navigating an urban environment, which I show using *A Walk* (1990); the experience of impatient waiting, which I demonstrate with *Blind Spot* (2018) and *PVC-1* (2007); and finally, the carnivalesque, appearing in *Still Orangutans* (2007), *Sábado* (2003), *The Wedding Party* (2016) and *Airport 2013* (2013). Together, these case studies begin the process of cataloguing the novel aesthetic potentials of the one-shot form, a process continued by later chapters, which build upon this groundwork of potentials. Parts of my upcoming discussions of mobility in Chapter Three, and chance in Chapter Four, are extensions of the baseline potentials that I outline in this chapter.

## DESIDERATA OF ONE-SHOT FILMS

When one-shot films emphasize sustained temporal continuity, what viewing experiences do they produce? By collating scattered theoretical concepts on the virtues of durational cinema, one can offer desiderata for the one-shot form. I am inspired to use desiderata at the beginning of this chapter by Greg M. Smith, who lists desiderata for his ideal theory of film emotion.[110] Referring to qualities that are desired or wanted, desiderata allow us to approach the one-shot form from the vantage point of pre-existing durational discourse, speculating on how one-shot films can ideally enhance and expand this cinematic terrain. In other words, given what we already know and admire about durational cinema,

[110] "What would a good combination theory-approach to analyzing filmic emotion look like? How might someone determine if one approach were better than another? To evaluate the approach to filmic emotions in this book, we should agree on some desiderata for an approach." Greg Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

what should we *require* and *desire* in this prospective realm of unprecedentedly lengthy and complete long takes? This question involves considering one-shot films in abstraction, drawing not from existent examples but rather *a priori* potentials.

As I mentioned in my introduction, the tension between bottom-up and top-down approaches to knowledge and experience reappears across many artistic and intellectual domains. One-shot films inherently discover cinematic meaning from bottom-up means, shunning the didacticism of editing, drawing representational strength from the gradual material exploration of everyday continuity. Siegfried Kracauer advances this cinematic philosophy, famously writing in *Theory of Film* that films guide us "through the thicket of material life from which they emerge."[111] Erwin Panofsky similarly sketches a bottom-up model of cinema; whereas other art forms "start with an idea to be projected into shapeless matter and not with the objects that constitute the physical world," cinema proceeds "not so much by an interpretation in the artist's mind as by the actual manipulation of physical objects and recording machinery."[112] André Bazin (whom I deal with in more detail later) concurrently develops his celebrated realist film theory, foregrounding long takes and deep focus as the key to preserving authentic cinematic realism. Realist film theorists celebrate cinema's capacity to capture the teeming surface of the visible world; one-shot films allow for the unprecedented flow of cinematic duration, testing the limits of these twentieth-century theoretical frameworks. Are the apparent virtues of a bottom-up approach to filmic realism augmented with increased duration?

Scholars assess the gains of durational filmmaking over traditional cutting styles. David MacDougall, in his 1992 essay "When Less Is Less: The Long Take in Documentary,"

[111] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton University Press, 1960), 48.
[112] Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (MIT Press, 1995), 120-22.

lists several representational virtues lost in the process of editing long takes. Assuming the single shot restores some of these qualities, I use MacDougall's list to assess the strengths of the form. In his short essay, he creates an extensive list of qualities sacrificed through cutting, with subheadings like "Qualities Sacrificed to the Film," "The World Within the Shot," and "Long-Take Prospects." MacDougall's essay, written before the era of digital duration, can be read as a dense condensation of this chapter's concerns, expressed there as "losses," but reconfigured here as gains, given the transformations in cinematic technology since 1992.

Going through MacDougall's list of "Qualities Sacrificed to the Film" individually, one can note the restorative aesthetic qualities of one-shot cinema. Again, these are qualities that MacDougall claims are lost when the long take is cut, so our task is to note how one-shot films avail themselves of these qualities. First, *excess*: as Chapter Four demonstrates, one-shot films are replete with elements that exist in excess of the strictly functional quality of the shot, such as mistakes, natural phenomena, and unknowing extras. Second, MacDougall mentions *interpretive space*: it is a running theme of my dissertation that one-shot films involve the viewer's interpretive input more than traditional films, using a wandering camera in place of the shocks of editing, which usually interpret a scene for viewers. Third, the *sense of encounter*: the sheer length of filming required for a one-shot film, and the lack of ability to reset the scene, produces a situation in which subjects and locations are encountered through a fresh lens. Furthermore, a sense of *internal context*: one-shot films possess an abundance of internal context at any given point of their runtime, given that viewers have followed along with the camera step-by-step on the entire narrative journey. Keeping MacDougall's durational dirge in mind, one can uncover a mirror-image of potentiality in the one-shot form.

Duration proffers its own virtues, which remain powerful despite editing. Among Andrei Tarkovsky's guiding principles in *Sculpting in Time* is that filmmaking decisions

should come from inner impulses—associative and affective—rather than the imposition of abstract or symbolic ideas. Such impositions, coming from editing, allow less creative reciprocity between film and viewer, approaching life and art with unsuitable schematization: "Time courses through the picture despite editing rather than because of it."[113] Montage stymies the true expression of time, rendering spiritual or moral ideas in intellectual terms. While it is difficult to speak with surety given Tarkovsky's early death, certain passages indicate his appreciation for the one-shot form, suggesting that he may have ventured in that direction had he lived longer (duration was always a core part of his cinema). He declares future one-shot pioneer Alexander Sokurov to be a cinematic genius at an early point of Sokurov's career, and devotes a paragraph of praise to Pascal Aubier's nine-minute-long single take work, *Le Dormeur* (1974), writing that it "shows the life of nature, majestic and unhurried, indifferent to human bustle and passions."[114] Aubier's film spends its first seven minutes gliding serenely through nature—along a forest floor, through the trees and out across a plain, curving through rocks and grasses—until finally coming upon a quiet, sleeping man. In its patience, its willingness to become the cinematic voice of nature itself, Aubier's film embodies Tarkovsky's spiritual and moral ideals. Tarkovsky evaluates this success in terms of Aubier's lack of editing: "You will remember that the film has no editing, no acting and no decor. But the rhythm of the movement of time is there within the frame, as the sole organising force of the—quite complex— dramatic development."[115] As an influential long take director, Tarkovsky's cinematic impulses, nurtured by duration, inform meaningful one-shot works.

[113] Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema,* trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (University of Texas Press, 1989), 117.
[114] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 76-114.
[115] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 114.

Slow cinema scholarship is an essential precursor to one-shot film analysis.[116] While I cover slow cinema as a historical stage in durational cinema in more detail soon, here I discuss its purported aesthetic virtues as contributing to one-shot film desiderata. Slow cinema scholarship continues in the revelationist strain of film theory, traced by Malcolm Turvey, whereby the cinematic apparatus prompts viewers to see the world around them with finer clarity.[117] This mode of thinking positions duration as an epistemological tool, heightening perception and demanding attentiveness. Peppered throughout slow cinema literature are claims that aesthetic benefits come from extended duration. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge write that slow cinema investigates "what is worthy of being shown," and "for how long it is worth being shown."[118] Subjects and societal dynamics overlooked in everyday life are charged with newfound vitality through extended focus. One-shot films are structurally defined by their length—how long they continue to show a spatiotemporally limited event. De Luca and Jorge further celebrate duration, claiming it can "illuminate given realities through aesthetic interventions that may refresh the affects and perceptions of such realities."[119] Asbjørn Grønstad steers these inherent durational qualities towards an empathetic and ethical worldview: "While duration as a temporal mode and experiential frame might not be necessary in and of itself, it nevertheless provides a condition of possibility for intrinsically ethical acts."[120] Lutz Koepnick claims that durational works enable a sense of wonder, writing that contemporary long takes are "reconstructing spaces for

[116] Slow cinema is the academic term given to a global strain of art cinema based upon long takes and sparse narratives that developed in the twenty-first century. Its exact features remain up for debate.
[117] Malcolm Turvey, *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2008).
[118] Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 14. This collection brings together a diverse range of analyses of the historical development and contemporary implications of slow cinema. The authors trace a deep and complex genealogy of slow works, assessing their political and ethical implications.
[119] De Luca and Jorge, *Slow Cinema,* 14.
[120] Asbjørn Grønstad, "Slow Cinema and the Ethics of Duration" in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 274.

wondrous looking in the face of its ever-increasing disappearance."[121] One-shot films stretch the nascent dynamics of contemporary durational styles, logically extending them and concretely testing their potentials. While often geared towards action and spectacle, one-shot films demonstrate, sometimes seemingly as a by-product, the historical extension of unbroken cinematic time. Though they can appear very different on the surface to previous durational styles, one-shot films nevertheless must be considered as part of the historical lineage of cinematic duration.

## FROM ZAVATTINI TO SLOW CINEMA

Do one-shot films possess the ethical and moral valence of filmic duration as theorised of neorealism and slow cinema? Post-war Italian neorealism provides a logical starting point for tracing the origins of durational, ethical cinema. Duration is often invested with a high degree of political, ethical, and moral import—arising from the people, for the benefit of the people. It rejects the manipulative potential of the cut, which is said to approach reality from a place of falsity and distance. Influential Italian screenwriter and theorist Cesare Zavattini argues against the classical Hollywood style, which is "unnaturally filtered, purified, and comes out at one or two removes" from reality.[122] For Zavattini, each cut that distorts the temporal continuum drags a film further from verisimilitude. He instead praises cinema's "original and innate capacity for showing that we believe things worth showing, in their longest and truest duration."[123] One-shot films appear to embrace and extend this inherent quality of the cinematic apparatus.

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[121] Lutz Koepnick, *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 10.
[122] Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema" in *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Steven Snyder and Howard Curle (University of Toronto Press, 2000), 51.
[123] Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," 50-61.

Neorealist aesthetics inaugurate forms of cinematic mobility that I link to one-shot films later in this chapter and dissertation, particularly those with a centrifugal itinerary. The neorealist commitment to duration embodies a special way of navigating the world. Zavattini's preference for urban nomads, for wandering authentically, prefigures the kinetic clarity of centrifugal one-shot films. Asli Özgen describes this flâneurial impulse: "Italian Neorealism, in its resistance to the cultural and aesthetic production of fascism, used wandering as a tool to encounter and represent the everyday life of the oppressed."[124] Urban navigation is similarly central to one-shot films, some of which treat city spaces as ethical arenas. Contemporaneously to Zavattini, André Bazin develops a complementary ontology, imagining a "total cinema" that would provide a "complete illusion of life."[125] Bazin's ideal—existing and evolving on a trajectory that sometimes converges with cinematic history and sometimes diverges—is a visual artform embodying "an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image" through an all-surrounding, self-effacing space and time.[126] Contemporary narrative one-shot films also derive from 1960s European modernist art films in their wandering, decentred ethos.[127] Noël Carroll observes that art films do not "rush us forward along an arc of expectations" but invite us to "live in" and savour the milieu they represent."[128] This temporal disposition becomes structural in one-shot films: the camera must travel manually from location to location, dwelling in the environment. Salient narrative events cannot be inserted at will but must be patiently travelled to step by step, producing

[124] Asli Özgen, *The Aesthetics and Politics of Cinematic Pedestrianism: Walking in Films* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 167.
[125] André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema" in *What Is Cinema? Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (University of California Press, 2004), 20.
[126] Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," 21.
[127] As Ginette Vincendeau describes, modernist art films are characterized by "loose, ambiguous narratives, characters in search of meaning rather than action, overt directorial expression, a heightened sense of realism (including depictions of sexuality), and a slower pace—and therefore require a different viewing context.'' Ginette Vincendeau, "Issues in European Cinema" in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford University Press, 1998), 441.
[128] Noël Carroll, *Mystifying Movies: Fads & Fallacies In Contemporary Film Theory* (Columbia University Press, 1989), 75.

alternative narrative rhythms (and expectations) in place of the instant gratification supplied by continuity editing.

As I have already mentioned, most one-shot feature films exist alongside, and in the wake of, contemporary slow cinema. As a critical category, slow cinema emerges in the twenty-first century as a response to the "homogenizing effects" of globalization, mass media, and speed culture.[129] Slow films distend duration, weaken narrative momentum, and privilege quotidian micro-events. Their socio-political critiques are inscribed within form rather than declared didactically. Often centred on working-class subjects, slow films provide loose and uneventful narratives that elevate time in its pure form. Rather than merely depicting drudgery, they mimic it, facilitating spectators' vicarious confrontation with the dullness of the characters' existence.[130] Asbjørn Grønstad describes slow cinema as a "stylistic means by which to trigger an empathetic investment in the world depicted on screen."[131] Though repetitive scenes may induce dread, the slowly ticking seconds produce spectatorial insight through humanistic empathy.

Cinematic slowness is rarely a neutral gesture; given cinema's representational history, slowness gains discursive weight, whether intentional or not. As Grønstad posits, "the concept of slow might thus be said to be inherently political," and "cannot be properly comprehended without reference to its opposite."[132] As noted in my introduction, traditionally edited cinema is the dominant temporal paradigm against which one-shot films also repeatedly define themselves. Slow cinema aesthetics function as an ascetic strategy

[129] Emre Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema: Nostalgia, Absurdism, Boredom* (Palgrave, 2018), 35.
[130] Song Hwee Lim writes that durational works question what constitutes a legitimate narratorial subject. Song Hwee Lim, "Tsai Ming-Liang and a Cinema of Slowness" in *Slow Cinema,* ed. Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 90.
[131] Grønstad, "Slow Cinema and the Ethics of Duration," 279.
[132] Grønstad, "Slow Cinema and the Ethics of Duration," 277.

opposed to commercial cinema and modernization, phenomena defined by speed.[133] In *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism,* Enda Duffy describes speed as "technology's tangible pleasure," "modernism's greatest shock," and a conquering of time.[134] This hegemony of speed dominates the globe's perception of time. In the twentieth century, he argues, speed "was thoroughly politicized and became a symptom of access or the lack of it to political and economic power."[135] As I will show, classical Hollywood cinema remains a conditional and oppositional presence in the aesthetic development of one-shot films, though its impact is less totalizing than in slow cinema, operating more as a shadow in the fabric of one-shot narratives.

## CLASSICAL CINEMA AS IRON CAGE

Though contemporary one-shot films offer new representational possibilities in cinema, they are not immune to aesthetic influence from the dominant cultural paradigm. While they extend the duration of neorealism and slow cinema, existent examples do not often fall within the familiar arthouse mode. Instead, as I outlined in my introduction, they mimic classical Hollywood genres, such as action movies and thrillers. I list numerous examples of genre-based one-shot films in the appendix at the end of my dissertation. For example, Sam Mendes's *1917*, the most popular and successful one-shot film in recent years, precisely follows the Hollywood war film template of a linear, mission-based narrative, with its two main characters travelling through various obstacles to deliver an important message to the frontlines of World War I. Within the continually ongoing shot, the spatial organisation

[133] As Karl Schoonover describes, it forecloses on "the continuity system's prized narrative economy, replacing eventfulness with an unproductive episodic meandering." Karl Schoonover, "Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Labouring Body, The Political Spectator, and the Queer" in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 153.
[134] Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Duke University Press, 2009), 10-19.
[135] Duffy, *The Speed Handbook*, 46.

and framing of the classic continuity editing style persist—rearticulated in a form that might appear aesthetically opposed to them. The classical style remains the dominant framework through which alternative practices are shaped and understood, inevitably permeating even those forms that seek to depart from it.

Editing shares many characteristics with wider systems of control in modernity. As already mentioned in reference to Kracauer and Panofsky, the distinction between ideas immanent in the filmic material and those applied in a top-down manner reoccurs frequently in discussions of cinematic time. Writings in film as well as art criticism, philosophy, political science, and historiography distinguish between the raw materials of experience and second-degree systems of control or interpretation that shape or render legible these phenomena. Systems of bureaucracy become manifest in the treatment of cinematic imagery; one-shot films bring this relationship between control and freedom into sustained visibility. Henri Bergson famously distinguishes between clock time and durée.[136] Clock time, which spatializes and homogenises time, structures many commonplace traditions in film production and narrative structure. Classical Hollywood narratives arise from this paradigm, where time is standardised and rationalized, dead time is vanquished, and ambiguous multiplicities are linearized. This standardisation of time creates an ever-widening gap between everyday experience and its representations.[137] In cinematic representation, no

[136] Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L Pogson (Dover Publications, 2001).

[137] Bliss Cua Lim critiques cinema's homogenizing tendencies as temporal elitism: unethical, superficial, and teleological—a weapon of sociopolitical and economical control. The mainstream trajectory of cinema is, she claims, exclusionary of the developing world, whose practices and forms of knowledge are unassimilable to modern, standardized time. Bliss Lim overcomes the common roadblock to applying Bergson to cinema—the French philosopher's 1908 critique of the cinematograph—by updating his visualist ideas to fit contemporary cinematic narrative. She argues that Bergson's dismissal of the medium occurred before visual language developed that was more suited to his philosophical worldview. Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Duke University Press, 2009).

standardised aesthetic formula can be calculated and applied to any and all subjects, though this does not stop filmmakers who embrace the classical Hollywood style from trying.

This quantification of filmic duration stems from Taylorist ideas of control and efficiency that were concurrent with the precinematic and early cinema eras. Frederick Taylor, the engineer behind this system of management, summarises with the credo: "In the past, the man has been first. In the future, the system must be first."[138] With the advent of Taylorism and Fordism, an increased sense of rationalist bureaucracy pervades society. In a Taylorist regimentation of society, efficiency and progress take precedence over human initiative and well-being. Shortly after the advent of Taylorism, Soviet writer Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We* (1924) was published, dramatizing the tensions between automation and freedom that I observe regarding cinematic development. Zamyatin explicitly satirizes Taylorism, with the brainwashed narrator writing that "Taylor was *the* genius of antiquity," creating a world in which "you see yourself as part of an immense, powerful, single thing. And such a precise beauty it is; not a wasted, gesture, bend, turn."[139] The novel charts the main character's mental escape from this world of imposed rationality, realising the humanistic freedom within: "Through the glass walls of my algebraic world there was again that eyelash."[140] Likewise, one-shot films offer an escape from aggressive imposition, allowing aesthetic and moral experiences to develop freely in time, ducking under the rhetorical dictates of cutting styles.

The forces of social domination are strong and all-encompassing, continually attempting to quash any individual actions. This dynamic links to sociologist Max Weber's "iron cage" of modernity, in which the free reign of activity is constrained by societal

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[138] Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1919), 7.
[139] Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Clarence Brown (Penguin Books, 2022), 29.
[140] Zamyatin, *We*, 30.

systems which account for all potential energy, operating with the utmost efficiency—described by Weber as "the fate imposed on us" and "the historically given world."[141] Spontaneity and renewal are neutralised, smothered in a blanket of mundane homogeneity. The spirit is stifled because "unified experience lies beyond the grasp of the modern self."[142] In a grim prognosis, Weber deems this framework inescapable, "determin(ing) with irresistible force the lifestyle (*Lebensstil*) of all individuals born into this mechanism."[143] The iron cage strictly determines the horizons of discourse, guiding participants along a predetermined track and functioning as an invisible prison that impedes novel forms of expressive agency. Left unchecked, this state of affairs leads to social, economic, and artistic stagnation.

This social domination does not occur in a vacuum; attempts at control are always met with resistant ingenuity. Lawrence Scaff observes that this sense of enclosure leads to "critical and adaptive responses" in the "search for alternatives to the iron cage," wresting back inventive agency amidst the "petrifaction and homogenization of external conditions of life."[144] One-shot films are an example of "attempts from inside modern culture to overcome the problem posed by that culture"—yet not always able to escape the presence of the classical film style system.[145] This lack of effectiveness is predicted by Weber, viewing attempts at escaping given socio-cultural strictures as "paradoxical and questionable, whether they are deemed to be authentic or not."[146] In a microcosmic reflection of the wider societal actor, one-shot filmmakers seek "in opposition, to recreate the world as an 'organic and

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[141] Lawrence A. Scaff, "Fleeing the Iron Cage: Politics and Culture in the Thought of Max Weber," *The American Political Science Review* 81, no. 3 (1987): 737-739.
[142] Scaff, "Fleeing the Iron Cage," 738.
[143] Max Weber, quoted and translated in Scaff, "Fleeing the Iron Cage," 741.
[144] Scaff, "Fleeing the Iron Cage," 737-41.
[145] Scaff, "Fleeing the Iron Cage," 742.
[146] Scaff, "Fleeing the Iron Cage," 742.

natural whole.'"[147] Unplanned occurrences (which I cover in Chapter Four), usually anathema in the classical system, embody this oppositional approach, functioning as "inner-worldly powers of life" whose fundamental essences are "arational or anti-rational" and which are therefore opposed … to the rationalization of the world through intellectualism, technical "progress," or any of the various forces aligned with modern capitalism."[148]

In cinema, the tenets of classical Hollywood cinema mimic this rationalising framework present in wider society. The system is designed according to a guiding set of practices geared towards visual efficiency. As Carl Plantinga notes, the fruit of this system is a "hypercoherent" account of the world, where variable framing techniques ensure the viewer's attention is guided in a satisfying and automatic way towards germane events and information.[149] Editing is the most crucial element of this cinematic system, granting control over shaping and guiding material, allowing for precision, interpretability, discipline, and control.[150] This abiding system of shooting and editing mirrors capitalist development, the "working out of purposive-rational or instrumental orientations toward action, with the standardization and routinization of life activity, and with control of the conditions of existence through calculation."[151] In this sense, cinematic form becomes an index of modernity's own temporal and organizational logics.

The cinema reproduces, through its form, the same rationalized order that structures the modern social world. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's two types of space—smooth and striated—provide a theoretical framework to concretize these formal dynamics of one-

[147] The second part of this quote comes from Leo Tolstoy. Scaff, "Fleeing the Iron Cage," 745.
[148] The quotes within this quote are from Max Weber. Scaff, "Fleeing the Iron Cage," 748.
[149] "Movies are hypercoherent; they streamline reality, including in their narratives only what is needed to generate their desired effect." Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (University of California Press, 2009), 44.
[150] Helen Powell writes that editing provides a "cinematic shorthand to move the spectator through space and time." Helen Powell, *Stop the Clocks!: Time and Narrative in Cinema* (I. B. Tauris, 2012), 20.
[151] Scaff, "Fleeing the Iron Cage," 745.

shot films. Deleuze, via Bergson, is characteristically instructive regarding dialectical relationships between pure substance and overlaying systems of regimentation and control. Throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*, specific examples from various fields build towards broader philosophical notions; I posit that one-shot filmmaking can be considered one more arena. Smooth space resembles cinema's raw recording capabilities, the unbroken continuum of time and space that constitutes the material stuff of the cinematic image, while striation resembles editing and montage fragmentation. This application to cinema is an intuitive conceptual translation: smooth space is "the continuous variation, continuous development of form," easily related to spatiotemporal continuities that cinema offers.[152] Meanwhile, striated space, described as "a drive to order or intelligence," exemplifies the Eisensteinian notion of having mastery over the image.[153] How opposing elements combine in one-shot films—the onrush of phenomena and the mechanisms that shape it—mirrors the dynamic between smooth and striated space.

In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, smooth space permits processes of qualitative becoming, leading to affective and kinetic experiences. The nomadic mode of existence occurs in smooth space, tending to move off established paths, resist regimentation, and embrace chance. One-shot films are compelling examples of nomadic art. By avoiding traditional cinematic editing, they link disparate elements through proximity and affect rather than rigid imposition. Capturing the flow of life in its immediacy, they mirror the open indeterminacy of smooth space. Paths are vectors rather than rigid demarcations of route or distance. The camera, a wandering vector, accumulates intensities and proximities, rather than following predetermined trajectories—a tendency anticipating the centrifugal mode of spatial organisation examined in the following chapter, while also foregrounding the role of

[152] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 478.
[153] Elizabeth Grosz, "Deleuze, Theory, And Space" *Log*, no. 1 (2003): 83.

chance encounters and contingent events that will be developed further in Chapter Four. The emphasis is on fluidity, variation, and continuous becoming. Resisting the metrication of variables, smooth space embodies a dynamic field of possibilities, mirroring the aesthetic novelty gleaned by allowing duration to take its own course.

However, smooth spaces are not immune to striation; they can paradoxically be used to enforce forms of control, inscribing striated structures within their own form. Striated space is defined by lines that structure and divide space, imposing order and facilitating control. It manages complexity by breaking it into measurable and specific units. By quantifying and disciplining actions, striated space transforms free, qualitative multiplicities into structured, quantitative frameworks—erasing the openness of smooth space. Metrication enables the control and standardization of time, space, and effort, allowing activities to be organized and optimized. It operates through mechanisms of control and channelling, resulting in subtle but pervasive systems of domination. It exists in constant tension with smooth space, as every instance of smooth space is impure, inevitably containing elements of striation. Fully striated or fully smooth spaces are impossible because there is always "some furtherance of one through the other."[154] An example in one-shot films are the various acts of framing that necessarily take place. As Edward Branigan summarizes, "historically the act of framing in film has, for analytical purposes, been conceived as two distinct operations: selection and organization."[155] He also notes that "framing sets a boundary; if there were no boundaries, then the system would be totally open."[156] These functions of framing persist in one-shot films, introducing a tincture of striation into their otherwise smooth potential. This baseline segmentation exists even before considering other types of segmentation within the

[154] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 477.
[155] Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Subjectivity in Classical Film* (Mouton, 1984), 65.
[156] Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema,* 65.

shot, which I soon examine. Smooth and striated spaces are thus not fixed opposites but can transform into one another, depending on the context and interactions involved. Despite theoretical distinctions between smooth and striated spaces, empirical examples are always mixed, revealing the constant negotiation between freedom and control in human experience. Within the extended duration of a one-shot film, this abstract philosophical struggle becomes visually manifest.

Although this chapter concerns the formal specificity of one-shot films, the experience of duration is not determined by form alone. Narrative context, viewer expectations, and representational content combine to mediate the effects of continuous takes, tempering the autonomy of the form's distinctive qualities. Long takes are always necessarily wedded to content they present, not existing in a Platonic world of formal purity. The camera may record with mathematically pure perfection, but the visual material can nevertheless contain rough contingencies. Long takes are difficult to analyse *a priori*, the experience of them always qualified by the nature of the content. In their introduction to *The Long Take: Critical Approaches*, John Gibbs and Douglas Pye continually stress the relative way that long takes are perceived and experienced by viewers, describing it as an "inherently relative concept and phenomenon."[157] In a cognitive vein, a split occurs between a shot's 'objective' qualities, such as its length in minutes and seconds, and its 'subjective' qualities, or viewer reception. They write that "basic properties of the long take have been inflected in different contexts and in the service of contrasting filmmaking objectives" that "shape expectations in viewers."[158] Virtually every aspect of a shot other than its status as being longer than usual can temper or amplify its experiential qualities: "The weight, the feeling, of duration, can be as significant as literal time."[159] Matilda Mroz discusses how the situation of reception guides

[157] John Gibbs and Douglas Pye, *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 6.
[158] Gibbs and Pye, *The Long Take*, 5.
[159] Gibbs and Pye, *The Long Take*, 6.

a long take experience, considering "the multiple temporalities of film viewing and attendant possibilities, where each screening for each individual is unique."[160] She claims that "what for one viewer might seem too long for another might offer a moment of elongated rapture."[161] *Utøya: July 22* (Erik Poppe, 2018), a case study in the next chapter, provides solid examples of scenes where the durational experience may vary depending on the outlook of the viewer. The film depicts the 2011 Norwegian terrorist attack from the perspective of one of its victims, and though it includes many scenes that are mobile and dynamic, it also contains several extended scenes in which the main character is hiding in a single location. Given that little ostensibly occurs onscreen during these static scenes, some viewers may experience them impatiently as a chore. However, for viewers that are locked into the horror of the broader narrative, these scenes will be tempered by a harrowing tension, and the length will seem wholly justified. This notion of durational relativity is thus an important contextual precursor for discussing how one-shot films feel for viewers.

The formal specificity of one-shot films is often described in terms of continuity and wholeness, but the absence of cutting does not eliminate segmentation altogether. Many one-shot films develop alternative methods of structuring experience and managing attention, preserving forms traditionally associated with editing within the uninterrupted take itself. One-shot films are segmented in ways other than cutting in both purposeful and non-purposeful ways. Leo Charney, in his study of cinematic drift, describes how the fleeting and wandering qualities of contemporary cinema are channelled into discrete structures—highs and lows, peaks and valleys—spaced across the filmic continuum.[162] In the absence of ordinary segmentation achieved by cutting, "fluid segmentation" instead occurs within a shot. I borrow this phrase from experimental filmmaker Larry Gottheim, who describes it as a

[160] Matilda Mroz, *Temporality and Film Analysis* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 10.
[161] Mroz, *Temporality and Film Analysis*, 41.
[162] Leo Charney, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift* (Duke University Press, 1998).

"division within a span of space/time uninterrupted by a cut … as opposed to the sharp segmentation of a cut."[163] Indeed, writers on experimental film identify this capability of durational works to imitate montage from within the image, rather than without. Scott MacDonald notes that a single shot can portray a series of discrete objects and events, contrary to its usual connotations. He refers to *Standard Gauge* (Morgan Fisher, 1984), technically a one-shot film, but appearing as a presentational show-and-tell in which new images continually appear before a stationery camera—producing a totally discontinuous experience even while remaining technically continuous. Against a continuity of white space, Fisher presents selections from his collection of 35-milimetre film rolls, calmly narrating how he came to own each. Even though the imagery onscreen and his narration continually change, jumping arbitrarily between topics as each new roll appears, the entire work is nevertheless presented in one continuous shot, which serves as a stable vessel for the heterogenous information. Camera movement and staging can thus segment a shot into blocs that feel distinctive, rather than providing an amorphous mass.

Continuous films undergo visual segmentation in several ways as filmmakers compensate for the expressive limitations of a non-cutting style. One would have to get granular to be exhaustive, as such segmentation exists on a spectrum and is perceived differently by each viewer. One way that a shot can be separated within itself is through high speed.[164] A camera moving continuously through a location at high speed decreases the legibility of the space, coming to mimic montage in its discontinuous flashes, segmenting the

[163] Gottheim refers to his one-shot short, *Blues* (1970). Larry Gottheim and Scott MacDonald, "Larry Gottheim – Fog Line," DVD booklet (Re:Voir, 2020).

[164] Considering a contained example, Paul Krumholz writes of *C'était un Rendez-vous* (Claude Lelouch, 1976) that "its speed overcomes the scalar limitations written into the city by its planners. We navigate 25 minutes' worth of Paris in only eight, evoking a filmic logic of montage without ever breaking the shot." Paul Krumholz, "Orienting Design, Discourse and Perception in *C'était Un Rendez-Vous*," *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & The Arts*, no. 10 (2010): 8.

experience of the shot.[165] Another factor dividing the shot is when the camera's view is partially blocked by something in the frame. For example, in *A Walk* (Jonas Mekas, 1990), which I examine in more detail soon, raindrops block the view for a few seconds until Mekas wipes the lens with his fingers. Occasionally, changes of location are simulated by simply changing direction swiftly and continuing as if the setting has changed, encouraging a suspension of disbelief akin to a theatrical setting: one stage embodies many locations, and the audience accepts them as being different. Swish pans are the usual signifier of this technique, notably occurring in *Fish & Cat* (Shahram Mokri, 2013), an Iranian one-shot film taking place across a large forest and lake setting, with multiple intersecting plotlines and jumps forwards and backwards in time. These swish pans become a practical necessity, allowing Mokri to change focus and direction without having to manually travel to new locations across the broad expanse of the film's setting. Another way to spatialize time is through a diegetic countdown device, such as the bomb strapped to a character's neck in the one-shot crime film *PVC-1* (Spiros Stathoulopoulos, 2007), adding structured tension to the film's narrative—examined in more detail later in this chapter. Such methods break the continuity of space in one-shot films into smaller segments, demonstrating that they are not approached by filmmakers, nor experienced by viewers, as a shapeless block of duration. Instead, like traditionally edited films, they can be coherently broken down into discrete scenes and locations.

So far I have discussed the potential for one-shot films to escape the homogenising strictures of editing, leading to novel forms of creative expression. I have positioned mainstream cinematic editing as another element of control and striation that has developed in the increasingly rationalised contemporary world. However, one-shot films cannot totally

[165] Some films (such as *Jaalo* and *Somebody Marry Me*) resort to speed ramping certain sequences to eliminate dead time, artificially achieving the same result as Lelouch's film.

escape this situation, given that patterns from the dominant discourse become reified within their own form. To demonstrate this, I have discussed specific ways that the pure duration of a single take becomes segmented, putting a leash around the potential for one-shot films to develop their own singular form of expression. For now, however, I leave this analysis of countervailing forces and continue my exploration of the potentials and stylistic specificities of one-shot films.

## CASE STUDIES

The one-shot form possesses a particular affinity with certain subjects and experiential states. The three extended case studies that follow isolate several of these affinities, each demonstrating a specific formal or experiential capacity of the continuous shot. Taken together, they show that the one-shot constraint is a generative aesthetic principle, heightening certain cinematic qualities while diminishing others, thereby predisposing the form towards specific genres and experiential states that filmmakers, though their creative intuitions, must realise, activate, and develop.

## *A WALK* AND THE NAVIGATION OF URBAN SPACE

Mobility is an important aspect of one-shot films, with many examples moving continuously from beginning to end. It is a leitmotif throughout my dissertation, spread across chapters, and I here introduce the topic as a major area of potential for the form. In the next chapter, I distinguish between more mobile, or centrifugal, one-shot films and more static, or centripetal, one-shot films. This section is a precursor to my discussion of centrifugal one-shot films, analysing mobility insofar as it is a latent potential of the form, prior to my discussing it as a solid tendency across a broader swathe of films in the next

chapter. One-shot films bring the intersection of cinema and urban space into renewed focus. Fluid movement through an urban environment is a commonality amongst numerous one-shot narratives, contributing towards their overall formal specificity. Vivid depictions of urban space and architectural sites are a rich strength for one-shot films, connecting their aesthetic potentials to aesthetic theory more generally, which is often bound up with urban environments.

Kevin Lynch is a foundational scholar on the imaging of the city, outlining the two-way process between urban environments and users/observers that determines whether the space is "legible"—whether it resides strongly and distinctly in the mind.[166] Lynch considers the overall orchestration of space as it evolves, the passage of time inscribed in its structure. "Paths" are the central way through a city, like the continuous path through space in a one-shot film. Lynch defines paths as "the channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves … people observe the city while moving through it, and along these paths the other environmental elements are arranged and related."[167] Some one-shot films slot neatly into this account of spatial consumption.[168] Anne Friedberg, discussing nineteenth-century "flânerie" as well as precinema and early cinema, writes that cinema enacts a "mobilised virtual gaze," the spectator engaging with a prearranged series of narrative sights.[169] Giuliana Bruno also covers the juncture between filmic mobility and

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[166] Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 20th ed. (MIT Press, 1990), 2.

[167] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 47.

[168] Pelle Snickars and Richard Koeck link cinema to the aesthetic practices of architecture. Snickars names architecture as an ancestor of cinema, experienced by exploratory spatial movement in time: "unfolding space as a sequence of spatial frames." Pelle Snickars, "Architectonics of Seeing: Architecture as Moving Images" in *Moving Images: From Edison to the Webcam*, ed. John Fullerton and Astrid Söderbergh Widding (Indiana University Press, John Libbey Publishing, 2016), 115. Koeck applies filmic concepts to architecture, both mediums creating a moving experience in time. Engaging in "urban cinemantics," Koeck applies montage, continuity, and dissolves to city traversal, positing our movements through urban space as a site of creation. Richard Koeck, "Cine-Montage: The Spatial Editing of Cities" in *The City and the Moving Image: Urban Projections*, ed. Richard Koeck and Les Roberts (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 213.

[169] Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, First Paperback Printing (University of California Press, 1994), 3.

architectural exploration, similarly claiming that viewer and walker both affectively plunge into urban spaces, absorbing and connecting spaces through movement.[170] The city compares to cinema in containing and displaying the teeming flux of social life: varied temporalities, transient impressions, and clashing intersubjectivities. These authors—analysing the intersections of image, space, time, and movement—illuminate the spatiotemporal characteristics and expressive capabilities of one-shot films.

Some one-shot films offer a smooth and holistic overlap between cinema space and architectural navigation. The pedestrian ethos of *A Walk* (Jonas Mekas, 1990) recalls the everyday spatial practices theorized by Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City," a chapter from his influential *The Practice of Everyday Life*. *A Walk* serves as the template one-shot film experience whenever I run a theory or concept through my mind. It is so pure an example of the unbroken form that its clarity and familiarity establish it as the default platform of my imagination. On his website, Mekas writes, "I begin my walk on 80 Wooster Street and continue towards the Williamsburg bridge, where, 58 minutes later, still raining, my walk ends … this video was my early exercise in the one-shot video form. There are no cuts in this video."[171] Although preceding Mekas's film and containing zero references to cinema, de Certeau's ideas pair perfectly with *A Walk*, inadvertently articulating some unique qualities of the film, and the one-shot form.[172] De Certeau establishes a theoretical framework for the engagement between users and the inescapable system in which they operate, whereby the user employs opportunistic "tactics" to take advantage within the established rules to achieve autonomy and creativity.[173] Walking through the city is a typical example: the

[170] Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (Verso, 2002).
[171] Jonas Mekas, "Online Materials," JonasMekasFilms.com, accessed July 18, 2025, https://jonasmekasfilms.com/onlinematerials/.
[172] Conveniently for this pairing, de Certeau makes numerous references to New York City.
[173] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, First Paperback edition (University of California Press, 1988), 94.

individualised route taken by each user is spatial practice—stretching and manipulating the pre-ordained schemes of city planners. His framework applies to one-shot films, which take their own route through space, away from the controlling impulses of editing. De Certeau describes differences between the city of an urban planner—the city on paper—and the quotidian city as experienced by its inhabitants. The difference between these two urban ideals mirrors other binaries covered thus far of "order versus chaos." The planned city is elevated and distant, "no longer clasped by the streets."[174] These views from above are a few dimensions removed from reality.[175] One thinks of Eisensteinian graphic montage when reading de Certeau's descriptions of the city from above: "texturology in which extremes coincide" or "paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs."[176] As the distance from the authentic street level increases, the complexity of everyday experience devolves into broad, stereotypical shapes. Mekas refuses any additions to his subjective viewpoint, with the uncut camera extending and strengthening this ethos. One-shot films are, by necessity, "bottom up."

The highly controlled perspective of city planners minimises—like cinematic editing—any excessive or misunderstood elements; in de Certeau's words, it serves in "surmounting and articulating the contradictions arising from urban agglomeration."[177] In opposition is the population "down below, below the thresholds at which visibility begins"—the sphere Mekas traverses.[178] *A Walk* exemplifies a literal and metaphorical resistance to the tyranny of controlling frameworks or structures. The simple act of walking around his neighbourhood grants Mekas a degree of control over his surroundings; it becomes language,

[174] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92.
[175] Redolent of Elisabeth Grosz's remark regarding Deleuze and Guattari that "the striation misses out on much of the terrain of the smooth." Elizabeth Grosz, "Deleuze, Theory, And Space," *Log*, no. 1 (2003): 83.
[176] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 91.
[177] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.
[178] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

expression, a "rhetoric of walking."[179] Unfolding in unbroken duration, "each unit has a qualitative character," opposed to the quantitative properties of cutting and combining shots.[180] While walking, Mekas muses about various topics: some scripted, some prompted by his encounters. He meditates on the fundamentality of walking, consciously assuming the role of flâneur. His statements reinforce the idea of gaining expression and identity through walking, often through the prism of immigration. In his immigrant days, he was "walking, always walking"—depicted in his diary films such as *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976): "I walked these streets in 1950, I did not know any window, any street, nothing responded to me." The control gained by physical walking works in conjunction with the metaphorical process of coping with displacement. Though sometimes pessimistic, Mekas develops acceptance, a recognition that there is now "something in these miserable streets that speaks back to me." His mind jumps from the snow on New York's streets to the snow in his native Lithuania. Mekas gives life to the space, firmly placing himself in his own understanding of his neighbourhood—personalised knowledge, absent from the urban planner's lines and graphs: "I buy my bread here." He sometimes announces his current location and relates a story from his life that took place there, beginning his walk at a tree that he planted in 1967. Multiple temporalities often stack in one location, as his memory infuses his present walk: "Every street talks back with memories." His wandering leads to reflections on the past states of the area: "I have seen Allen Street in all seasons." The city evolves and changes on a path separate but sometimes concurrent to his own development: "Here are the trees, tall by now." Individually personalising space through words combines with the inherent mastery of the space gained through the process of an unbroken journey.

[179] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 99.
[180] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97.

Unlike the ocularcentric and totalizing perspective achieved by controlling regimes, Mekas remains open to the unexpected, to excess, advancing with what de Certeau calls "an *opaque* and *blind* mobility."[181] Mekas urges viewers to "keep looking for something where there is nothing." Mekas's ambling emphasizes both the fixed and ephemeral elements of New York, the permanent and the transitory. Chance versus planning is a continual dynamic in Mekas's film. He shows the chance coming together of random collisions, every presence spinning into non-presence. De Certeau writes that, in the street level of a city, "bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' … intertwining, unrecognised poems … shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces."[182] One grasps this statement watching *A Walk*, noticing the flickering figures and vehicles that pass by; we ponder whether anyone in the background died later in the day of filming, whether the company name on a passing vehicle is still in business, whether graffiti on the walls is still present. Serving as a frozen Ur-text for numerous authentic and dynamic stories, the single trajectory of the camera samples the buzzing complexity of New York City.

Visual unpredictability can transform the viewing experience, imbuing it with complex subjectivity. As I discuss in Chapter Four, any unplanned moment opens itself to experiences that spectators bring to the viewing. Siegfried Kracauer celebrates cinema's potential to trigger "psychophysical correspondences" in the viewing mind, the "fluid interrelations between the physical world and the psychological dimension" evoked by the materiality of filmic representation.[183] In Kracauer's conception, films open a memory wormhole, temporarily voiding their meaning while the mind is otherwise occupied by recalling memories from the real world. The urban stroll of *A Walk* opens this mental

[181] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.
[182] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.
[183] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton University Press, 1960), 69.

wormhole also, resulting in a filmic effect that echoes what de Certeau calls a "surface of order that is punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, leaks … things *extra* and *other* … insert themselves into the accepted framework."[184] Filming whilst walking is a perfect combination, allowing film to enshrine that which usually resides only in attenuated form in memory. While it cannot perfectly preserve the walk (because as I noted earlier cinematic framing manipulates reality by default even when cutting is avoided), cinema concretizes that quality distinguishing a lateral stroll from top-down maps and grids, what de Certeau calls "the act itself of passing by."[185] Slicing through the diegesis in one stroke ties together the chaotic phenomena of the city into one continuous experience. With any passing human figure, one can ponder where they were and what they were doing when Mekas first switched on his camera (and where they will be when he switches it off). De Certeau's walking and Mekas's *A Walk* converge: the city is read not as a static plan but as a living, time-extended itinerary.

Lending coherence to fragmented chaos is a persistent concern of Mekas's oeuvre.[186] By portraying his walk in one shot, Mekas, in de Certeau's words, embodies an "individual mode of reappropriation" of the space that the rigidly planned city seeks to suppress.[187] He continually stresses the arbitrariness of his walk: "100 blocks one way or another, it doesn't really matter." He is leisurely, whistling casually and continually stressing that he is in no hurry. At one point he directs the camera down a street, then the opposite way, and seems to decide which way to go in the moment—redolent of my Chapter One discussion of the mobile one-shot camera, whether camcorder or mobile phone, operating with a prosthetic

[184] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 107.
[185] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97.
[186] For Mekas, a single filmmaker and his camera can sensibly chart a path through life's vicissitudes, redolent of Wallace Stevens's proclamation in his poem "The Auroras of Autumn" that "this is nothing until in a single man contained." Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems: The Corrected Edition,* ed. John N. Serio and Chris Beyers (Vintage, 2015), 440.
[187] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 96.

function. He approaches a burning fire can and then takes distance from it again. At another point, he wonders to himself whether he should buy an espresso, verbalising the uncertainty of his route. His actions and non-actions are dictated by the pace and energy of the city he encounters: "The city and me: we are inseparable." Mekas demonstrates the capacity for one-shot films to facilitate the fusion of filmmaker, camera, and diegesis into one agential entity. *A Walk* stands as a lucid demonstration of the one-shot form's unique capacity to represent mobility, strategically positioned here as a foundational articulation of a potential that will reverberate throughout the chapters to come.

## THE REPRESENTATIONAL VIRTUE OF WAITING

In one-shot films, waiting becomes a central expressive force: a means of spatializing time, foregrounding negative emotion, and confronting viewers with pure duration. Waiting reveals one of the fundamental specificities of the form: by refusing the temporal elision afforded by editing, one-shot films are unusually susceptible to periods in which duration must be endured rather than narratively condensed. This decision transforms waiting from its usually peripheral place in the cinematic experience into a primary aesthetic resource. Except in the most action-driven examples, these films are laden with dead time—periods of inaction between narrative events. While dead time appears across many cinematic traditions that interrogate temporality, the extreme formal constraints of one-shot films render it in-built and irreducible. Even films that emulate mainstream genre conventions contain unavoidable pockets of stasis, forcing viewers to wait for spectacle to emerge. This perceptual continuity conditions spectacle itself, heightening adjacent moments of inactivity. Richard Misek argues that cinematic boredom can be ethically productive, distinguishing between objective and

subjective, situational and profound boredom—categories applicable to dead time.[188] Boredom is not inherently negative; it may foster creativity or clarity. However, Misek emphasizes that discomfiting boredom arises from imposed duration.[189] One-shot films intensify this imposed duration, making them particularly suited to generating so-called negative emotions. From a cognitive perspective, Carl Plantinga observes that "negative emotions are genuinely painful, but … in successful sympathetic narratives, various techniques are used both to control the pain and transform it into pleasure."[190] One-shot films heighten a key aspect of such emotions: their seeming unendingness. By following protagonists in real time as they move from comfort to discomfort, these films stretch and intensify the emotional experience of the viewer. As "sympathetic narratives," they encourage "closeness to central characters and (putting) those characters into unpleasant and sometimes catastrophic situations."[191] The unbroken shot intensifies this proximity, producing what Plantinga calls "the paradox of negative emotions," an empathetic working-through akin to slow cinema's durational focus on marginalised subjects.[192] In this way, the one-shot form sustains emotional proximity, inviting viewers to inhabit discomfort as an ethical mode of recognition and care.

A particular strength of one-shot films is their ability to make palpable the agony of waiting. Situations of panic or distress are often defined by an unbearable awareness of passing time, in which no action can accelerate events or provide relief; unlike cinema, lived experience cannot be edited. This domain of experience ought to ideally suit the one-shot form. *Blind Spot* (Tuva Novotny, 2018) capitalizes upon this potential, dramatizing the story

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[188] Richard Misek, "Dead Time: Cinema, Heidegger, and Boredom," *Continuum* 24, no. 5 (2010): 777-785.
[189] Misek, "Dead Time," 778.
[190] Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (University of California Press, 2009), 169.
[191] Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 170-71.
[192] Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 173.

of teenager Thea's suicide attempt and the reaction by her distraught mother, Marie. The film initially proceeds with deliberate banality. Following a school handball game, the camera accompanies Thea through changing rooms, the walk home, and routine domestic exchanges, establishing rhythms akin to contemporaneous slow cinema works. Conversations about homework and dinner unfold with stilted naturalism and little narrative economy. The extended duration gradually normalises dead time, lulling the audience into the rhythms of everyday life before catastrophe abruptly ruptures them. Nearly twenty-five minutes pass before Marie realises that one of her routine questions has gone unanswered and discovers that Thea has fallen from the apartment window.

She rushes down the stairs that Thea had slowly climbed a few minutes earlier. As I detail in the next chapter, repeating locations allows for comparison between two moments within the same shot, demonstrating the capability of one-shot films to effortlessly combine varied temporalities. The restricted narration of one-shot films (which I also cover in more detail in the next chapter) captures the disorientation of such a situation; adding shots, the traditional approach, leads to additional clarity, perspective, and knowledge—a hypercoherent account of proceedings. This tactic, however, would be anathema to the experience of Marie, whose world is a panicked muddle as she tries to save her daughter. Restricted narration is used sparingly in traditional films, threaded through a narrative, but one-shot films stretch its usage to an uncomfortable extent. Marie's fragility and lack of perspective are aped by the film form, vividly following the repetitions and dead ends of her experience. In the hospital, she repeatedly asks questions about Thea's breathing, not receiving any satisfying answers but having no other option but to continue asking. Nearly every line is repeated multiple times, charting the frustrating path of panic and stunted progress. On two occasions a nurse tries to comfort Marie by saying: "All we can do is wait. I'll be with you the whole time." This line shows a hint of reflexivity, as the audience realises

that we too are forced to patiently wait. By immersing us in an unthinkable situation, the film finds a formal and emotional rhythm that many one-shot works lack. Pain and grief do not unfold through reflective distance, but instead through immediate experience that the audience endures in real time alongside the characters. In this way, *Blind Spot* suggests that suffering is an experience that is uniquely aligned with the one-shot form.

*PVC-1* (Spiros Stathoulopoulos, 2007) also demonstrates how one-shot films achieve a uniquely agonising tension. *PVC-1* is essentially a feature-length adaptation of Alfred Hitchcock's "bomb under the table" explanation of cinematic suspense.[193] Inspired by a real event in Colombia, it portrays a heist situation in which a collar bomb with a timer is forcibly strapped to a character's neck. The film, like *Utøya: July 22* (Erik Poppe, 2018), a case study in the next chapter, utilizes the one-shot's potential for adapting and portraying real-world negative emotions: an inescapable, traumatic situation, where every continuously ticking second is life or death. The characters are trapped in this painful situation, not having the option to leave and go elsewhere; their path is determined by their condition, by the ticking parameter of the bomb. As with *Blind Spot*, the liberatory qualities of an unbroken shot are reconfigured as a representational prison. The film opens in the back of a car, focused on the package containing the bomb materials. Over the ensuing runtime, the bomb functions as a loose, menacing threat within the diegesis, creating a zone of danger that asserts influence even without the usual rhetorical charge afforded by editing procedures. The camera itself feels in danger of obliteration in proximity to the bomb radius: a unique capitalization upon the one-shot form, introducing a timed deadline, threatening destruction within the wider

[193] "Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, "Boom!" There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it … In these conditions this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the secret. "In the first case, we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed." François Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock, *Truffaut/Hitchcock*, trans. Helen G. Scott, revised edition (Simon & Schuster, 1985), 73.

filmic world. The passing of time is represented within the diegesis, not just by the runtime, demonstrating the potential for props to act as untethered agents of contingency.

The one-shot format foregrounds a vivid representation of space, rhythm, and movement. The film tracks through rural Colombian terrain, navigating undergrowth, water, and other natural obstacles, reflecting the stubbornness of reality and grounding the story in its environment. Within this continuous flow, the film oscillates between moments of bombastic violence and startling stillness, creating an internal rhythm that accentuates the tension. An example is the momentary focus on a baby chick, offering a fleeting contrast to the surrounding chaos—a visceral interplay between stillness and urgency. The acting is raw and expressive, characterized by frequent shouting and conflict. The continuous take lends itself to large, primal gestures reminiscent of silent cinema, though at the cost of nuanced close-ups or more personalized character portrayals. The handheld camera mirrors the nature of the unfolding events, often moving tangentially to the action, contributing a hyperactive, semi-participatory energy. By sacrificing the structure and precision of conventional editing, *PVC-1* aligns its form with the chaos and immediacy of its content, producing an intense, unrelenting cinematic experience. Complexly staged, it balances numerous contingent moving parts: child actors, animals, and pivotal props like firearms and the bomb itself. This technical medley creates a sense of precarious precision as the action unfolds seamlessly in real-time. Dialogue further reinforces the stakes: a character angrily protests another's bathroom break, exclaiming, “As if I had a second to spare! I don’t have seconds!" This remark emphasizes the critical value of time, making each moment palpably weighted. Near the conclusion, the tension crescendos with depictions of prayer, introducing a counterpoint to the bomb's relentless ticking, juxtaposing divine supplication with the inexorable situation. The ultimate detonation of the bomb occurs offscreen, leaving the narrative to close with chaos, destruction, and the cries of a child—a bleak culmination of the film’s themes.

Friction between the inevitability of the explosion and the hope of prayer complicates the film's treatment of predestination and hope.

*PVC-1* expertly illustrates how, with a suitably ripe premise, a continuous take can be transformed into a pressure cooker that affects every second of runtime. The narrative content is held hostage by its form, with viewers as onlookers whose only escape comes with the end credits. These films ultimately demonstrate that extended duration amplifies whatever emotional atmosphere underpins the narrative. When that underlying atmosphere is marked by discomfort, claustrophobia, or anxiety, the one-shot form intensifies and prolongs these sensations, forcing the spectator to endure them in real time.

## THE REVIVAL OF THE CARNIVALESQUE IN ONE-SHOT FILMS

The carnivalesque is a frequently recurring style in the domain of one-shot films. It is a distinct strain within the form, a capability arising from the formal conditions of the continuous take, with the single shot becoming a vessel for ribaldry, heightened emotion, and escape from the usual societal confines. In contrast to the previous section, in which the inherent form of the continuous take traps and imprisons its characters in uncomfortable situations, carnivalesque one-shot films mobilise the same formal properties towards levity and adventure. The continuity of space and time lends itself to a carnival atmosphere; an open, loose, and flowing sense of imagery develops within a bounded frame where festive mischief can occur. This potential does not merely apply to narrative material; instead, the overriding refusal to fragment space through editing allows crowds, digressions, and spontaneity to accumulate within a shared continuum of time and space, suggesting a sense of abundance and possibility. The carnivalesque thus demonstrates that the formal constraint of one-shot films does not produce fixed and static outcomes, but rather generates distinctive

modes of experience whose exact characteristics emerge from the unbounded and uninterrupted presentation of time and space. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his foundational explications of the carnivalesque, notes that the carnival is "a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, communing in the carnival act."[194] This ethos dissolves normal hierarchies, leading to a democratisation of discourse: an "atmosphere of *joyful relativity* characteristic of a carnival sense of the world."[195] One-shot films replicate these conditions in the cinematic domain. Scholars argue that long take practices can enable a more reciprocal relationship between film and viewer. Viewers contribute meaning to the experience through sustained vision and wandering thoughts, rather than having their responses dictated by editing (though, as already mentioned, framing can compensate for these expressive losses). Lutz Koepnick claims that long takes create spaces for the experience of wonder, while Margulies writes that the "refusal to mediate," to speak for others, fosters openness, collectivity, and democracy of reception.[196] In carnivalesque examples, the one-shot form is subservient to the narrative content it enables. One-shot films meshing well with the carnival sense of the world reflects its potential to escape the strictures of editing. Bakhtin writes that in the carnival "there is a weakening of … rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism."[197] These elements mirror the attributes I associate with systematised editing.

Several South American films in the 2000s establish tendencies of the carnivalesque one-shot form. These films of the early digital era embody Nicholas Rombes's idea of "DV Humanism," where the loose and imperfect aesthetic of early digital works are imbued with

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[194] M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122.
[195] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 107.
[196] Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Duke University Press, 1996), 59.
[197] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 107.

playfulness and warmth: they reveal and flaunt the seams that bind together reality and representations of reality, asserting "a human presence in the face of smooth, invisible digital data."[198] The rough style of *PVC-1* embodies this ethos, but other films from the continent pair their DV humanist aesthetic with a sprawling and carnivalesque storyline.

These South American one-shot films also include lighter examples. *Sábado* (Matías Bize, 2003), a Chilean film, follows two friends, Gabriel and Victor, as they attempt to resolve the fallout from Victor's infidelity. Beginning *in media res* with a found footage aesthetic, Victor casually asks Gabriel, who holds the camera, "will you lend me that camera?" From that moment, Gabriel is drawn into the unfolding situation in impromptu fashion. The point-of-view becomes another contingent element—something that simply happens to be present. Gabriel, as cameraman, flits in and out of visibility, merging with the camera's observational neutrality while retaining his sycophantic persona within the diegesis, which justifies the camera's presence. Structured as a day of unforeseen events, it privileges flow over psychological development. Its looseness—imperfect framing and theatrical performances—aligns with this aesthetic of happenstance. Emotional depth is secondary to continual movement. During a car ride, Victor asks, "Can I put a tape on?" While music plays, the camera lingers on the tape, filling dead time (as outlined earlier, dead time is present within dynamic, centrifugal one-shot films). By the end, characters accept events casually; Gabriel remarks, "this is my weirdest Saturday ever." *Sábado* contains its impact within the bounds of the single take, suggesting no weight lingering beyond the viewing experience.

The Brazilian film *Still Orangutans* (Gustavo Spolidoro, 2008) similarly adopts an itinerant urban ethos. Shot with actors and extras positioned throughout Porto Alegre among

[198] Nicholas Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age*, revised edition (Wallflower Press, 2017), 28.

unwitting passersby, it unfolds as a network narrative: each scene follows a character until another assumes focus. I analyse one-shot network narratives in more detail in the next chapter. A carnivalesque tone governs these transitions, as the camera appears magnetically drawn to eccentric figures, weaving through private and public spaces from daylight into darkness. The film opens on a train—paragon of urban movement—before shifting to travel by foot and bus, reflecting the city's varied temporalities. Like *Sábado*, its title card is embedded within the diegesis, appearing as graffiti on a wall. The embrace of contingency is evident in background traffic, unruly crowds, and a passerby who looks directly into the camera. Episodes of drunkenness, a wedding, and even a brief immersion into a schizophrenic man's mind accumulate into an ode to urban excess, suggesting more variety than representation can contain.

The next two films take place in locations outside the normal temporal regime: a wedding party and an airport, respectively. Both films are centripetal yet have some essential centrifugal qualities.[199] Their stories are comprised of one ludicrous idea after another, casually strung together along a predetermined path. The acting and characterisation are heightened and theatrical, scoffing at realism as every line becomes a wisecrack, every character a stereotype, and every relationship a site of conflict. *Airport 2013* (Kōki Mitani, 2013) is a wordy, breathless farce, a typical example of the carnivalesque mode of one-shot films. For Bakhtin, carnival is a temporary suspension of ordinary social hierarchies and conventions, characterised by collective participation, spontaneity, and a joyful sense of freedom. In this film, the airport becomes an arena for carnivalesque mayhem and revelation.[200] We gain a clear idea of the space, with multiple organic stop-offs at locations

[199] I define and develop these terms in another chapter on the diegetic world of one-shot films. Centrifugal one-shot films are characterised by extensive traversal through diegetic space, whereas centripetal one-shot films remain largely confined to a single location.

[200] Airports are among the locations that Marc Augé famously designates as a 'non-place.' Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (Verso, 1995), 79.

like smoking areas and observation decks. Airport procedures transform into narrative devices. In real life, airports ideally operate as smoothly as possible, becoming an automatic and unnoteworthy procedure, allowing the mind to drift to other things. A pleasurable airport experience is defined by its processes not becoming issues that require attention. When they do, the airport's bureaucratic strictures come into sharp relief. Airport issues unfolding one after another begin to resemble the structure of a classical narrative. The tension between patience and impatience is inherent to one-shot films; an airport perfectly stages this conflict. The departure time is announced early on, an hour away, installing a natural deadline within the diegesis, like *PVC-1*. Similarly, a flight cancellation is announced later in the film, immediately creating anarchy amongst the cast of characters. The mechanisms of film narrative are spread throughout the take and matched to its airport setting, organically amplifying the momentum of the story.

*The Wedding Party* (Thane Economou, 2016) also takes place in a zone outside normal time: a zone of celebration. Like *Airport 2013*, it is centripetal, taking place within the bounded space of the wedding party, but centrifugally meandering within this space—gliding and following, interweaving threads and characters. The stages of the wedding keep things moving, creating organic, process-based dialogue and activities. Like other films, a contrived deadline is introduced: seventy minutes for the bride and groom to catch their honeymoon flight. This deadline is reinforced many times: "now 68 minutes." In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin claims that images and motifs of lower bodily humour—sex and food—continually reappear.[201] *The Wedding Party* is fuelled by such base elements. Classically carnivalesque, the film engages in a festive process of coupling and recoupling, departing and rejoining. The warring couples are introduced immediately, like a theatrical list

[201] See chapter four and five of Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984).

of players: attractive with suitably shallow personalities. The actors hop and jump with grand physical gestures to deliver their lines in a screwball rhythm. Without the means to craft comedic scenes through cuts, the film develops the habit of departing from a situation with comedic effect: a comedic camera move-on in lieu of a cut.

*Airport 2013* has the same theatrical acting and heightened behaviour as later *nagamawashi* films: melodramatic, silly, and screwball.[202] Every character immediately endorses the antics, ignoring the social anxiety that inhibits this ethos in real life. Bakhtin writes that the carnival similarly encourages "free and familiar contact among people."[203] The main character, Chigusa, is the chauffeur through the space: the consistent, mature, and sensible thread that allows the storm of absurdity to develop around her. The typical 'straight' character of comedy, Chigusa exhibits an instant familiarity with each absurd event; the problems that come and go reinforce her poise. Her solidity plays a role in the narrative construction. She is privy to the secrets of others in this narrative of eavesdropping and unsolicited confessions: "Everyone has their own secrets," one character says. Like the cinematic frame itself, the camera's alignment with Chigusa is the solid frame through which the surrounding mayhem is delimited, made narratively coherent.

Contrived crises pervade *The Wedding Party*, embodying the logic of "everything that can go wrong, will go wrong." Every piece of wedding iconography gets funnelled into the carnivalesque maelstrom: the fish goes bad, the wrong wedding cake arrives, the groom disappears, the wedding ring gets swallowed, and the kitchen staff go on strike. The characters embody every type of dysfunction—guided by sexual desire, substance abuse, and cuckoldry; it is improbable they would associate with each other in a realistic situation. Numerous arguments are all swiftly forgotten. One bridesmaid is perpetually intoxicated after

[202] A subgenre of low-budget Japanese one-shot films discussed in Chapter One.
[203] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 123.

indulging in Xanax, allowing for a two-way chaotic interchange to unfold between character and world. Other characters are also out of control: Skyler is hapless in every undertaking, unusually obsessed with sex yet always coming up short, and revealed to be wearing a toupee; Colt, the best man, is an amalgam of every issue, an embodied juggler of chaos within the narrative. Lest the audience lose track of the disparate crises, set pieces reiterate the issues. During a scene on a tennis court, each character appears one-by-one, propelled by their woes—a gathering of the various players. As the narrative actions multiply, the disparate elements are brought close to hand, ensuring the audience holds the entire cast's hijinks in recent memory.

In both films, the contrived scenarios are as dense with narrative event as possible. The timespan of the single take becomes a neutral base in which to cram as much carnivalesque mayhem as resources allow. The script revolves around proliferating and solving as many issues as possible in one breath. A rising and falling pattern establishes the problems in the film's first half and solves them in the second. The time limit necessitates that these problems cannot develop organically, as in the real world, which requires extended time and patience. These narratives are thus artificially hastened, imbuing the scenarios with convoluted contrivances. The characters do not merely confront the present; within this spatiotemporal chamber, they also reflect on their entire lives, attempting to resolve the past and anticipate the future. Using the Russian Formalist terminology employed by Bordwell, the syuzhet—the narrative arrangement of events—is constrained to a single uninterrupted shot and timespan, while the fabula—the underlying chronology of those events—extends across a far broader temporal span. In both *Airport 2013* and *The Wedding Party,* old companions of the characters improbably appear during the mayhem. In the latter, main character Alex's ex-boyfriend appears at the wedding party on cue as he is being discussed, complicating her romance with Jim. He becomes one more agent of chaos in the absurd

mixture. At one point, he ends up co-carrying a large cake with his enemy, Jim, which drops on the ground. Despite the mayhem, these films ultimately conclude with a characteristic coolness. At the end of *Airport 2013*, Chigusa casually asks, "what was all that?" Life moves on, and the carnivalesque flurry is forgotten as quickly as it came. The slapstick action of these narratives arbitrarily dissipates, reinforcing the narrative space as a heightened, out-of-time occurrence.

Although the one-shot form appears, from the perspective of its overall technical inventory, to impose significant restrictions upon filmmakers, this section has demonstrated that directors nevertheless repeatedly associate it with freedom, openness, and wandering. The absence of cuts weakens hierarchical control over perception, allowing peripheral characters and events to compete for attention simultaneously. Despite its formal constraints, the one-shot film continually gravitates toward narratives and spatial experiences that evoke the expansive, unstable energies of the carnivalesque, producing worlds that glimmer with possibility, improvisation, and joyful openness.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the stylistic specificities—both those already actualised and those with the potential to arise—of one-shot films. Ultimately, a definitive answer as to whether new forms of one-shot cinematic expression will spring forth is unanswerable until concrete examples catch up with theorizing (and vice-versa). The future scope of one-shot expression remains open, dependent not only upon further filmmaking practice but upon continued critical attention to a body of work far larger than existing scholarship acknowledges. While this chapter has begun cataloguing the aesthetic possibilities of the form, its theoretical horizons remain only partially mapped. Central to this discussion has

been the question of aesthetic freedom within one-shot filmmaking: Can the form genuinely depart from dominant cinematic conventions, or does it merely reproduce them without cuts? As Chapter Four on chance argues, the liberatory potential of one-shot cinema depends upon its willingness to embrace the unpredictability of duration and the instability of the cinematic image. The one-shot film achieves its greatest formal distinctiveness not when it imports the organisational logic of conventional editing, but when it allows meaning and structure to emerge from the contingencies of uninterrupted time and space.

The next chapter reframes duration as spatially mediated. As I have already mentioned, duration is never pure, but rather qualified through movement and space: the true architecture of one-shot films. The claims developed in this chapter therefore depend upon the spatial organisation of duration itself. The next chapter continues from my analysis of *A Walk*, detailing how duration is organised through routes and proximities. This chapter has not yet expanded on how durational potentials are formalised moment-to-moment, how perception is guided continuously. One-shot films navigate duration rather than just structurally presenting it, with the viewer's experience dynamically structured through alignment, networks, wandering, and following. Having identified recurring tendencies that suggest potentials, I next try to systematise them into recurring spatial logics. The constraint inherent to the form conditions how filmmakers choose to continuously navigate space.

# CHAPTER THREE:
# THE DIEGETIC WORLD OF ONE-SHOT FILMS

This chapter explores the spatiotemporal continuum created by a one-shot film, a diegetic world unique in cinema. Unlike traditionally edited films, which, when examined holistically, amount to a discrete collection of image fragments, one-shot films ostensibly offer viewers a smooth continuum of diegetic space, beginning from the first moment and maintained until the final cut. Though continuums may suggest homogeneity, an array of spatial patterns are possible. I wish to explore how being limited to the presentation of a single slice of space and time impacts a film's structure and content, identifying common patterns and positing methods to group and read these cinematic texts. I draw on scholars of cinematic space as well as space more broadly, paying necessary attention to the unique affordances of continuous spaces.[204] This chapter revolves around the formal solutions devised in response to the central constraint of the form.

This chapter is about the shape of one-shot films—the shape as it is perceived by viewers. I discuss the typical shapes created by different tendencies in one-shot films. Shape is a spatial term, but the temporal dimension of one-shot films "fills out" standard cinematic space. Extended duration causes traditionally static narrative forms to expand and overflow, generating a variety of continuous shapes to form perceptually as viewers continue to watch. One-shot films nevertheless operate under inherent spatial limitations, making it necessary to utilize tricks and techniques to create a rich spatial field. For example, they are limited in distance coverable; the entire story world must take place in a bounded field, determined by

[204] I use the term affordances on several occasions during this chapter. I take this term from J. J Gibson's influential *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979). The concept of affordances refers to what an environment intrinsically puts forward to the perceiving animal, "The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill" (emphases in original). James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception: Classic Edition* (Psychology Press, 2015), 119.

how far the camera travels during the runtime.[205] One-shot films usually have more than one location—as in a traditionally edited film—but these locations must be placed within proximity to each other and visited one by one.[206] Unlike traditionally edited films, which can traverse continents or galaxies in the instant of a cut, one-shot films possess a localised, parochial quality, as locations and objects must remain within a bounded field. Several techniques and tendencies arise from this limitation—ways to skirt around it.[207]

I identify the common spatial patterns that recur in one-shot films. One-shot shapes are determined by the amount of space covered, which I use to distinguish what I call centrifugal one-shot films from centripetal one-shot films. Character arrangements are also a key factor contributing to the overall spatial trajectory of a one-shot film. Finally, I discuss the significance of offscreen space and telephonic communication in one-shot films. This chapter is more 'bottom up' than 'top down,' fuelled from my analysis of patterns in existent examples rather than abstract theorisation about the form. Together, these topics and case studies demonstrate why and how spatiotemporal continuums arise and evolve in the contemporary visual world, pinpointing one-shot films as a key site for understanding these spaces.

Where digital aesthetics stand in relation to cinematic continuity is a topic of debate. Digital media show a notable proclivity towards seamless continuums of space, effected by

[205] The first rule of the Dogme 95 movement also relates to inherent diegetic spatial limitations: "Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found)." Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. 1995, "Dogme 95 Manifesto," *Dogme 95: The Vow of Chastity*, https://www.dogme95.dk/the-vow-of-chastity/.

[206] Some patterns primarily apply to centrifugal examples, with only occasional applicability to centripetal, because more movement has more scope for distinctive patterns.

[207] Some techniques to utilize more visual space could be accused of betraying the one-shot limitation by introducing secondary shots. For example, several one-shot films insert stills or moving images in a frame within the unbroken moving image. While the continuous shot remains unbroken, it could be described as a multi-shot film due to these overlaying images.

media convergence and compositing's ability to smooth over fractures.[208] D. N. Rodowick writes that the shallowness and fragmentation of the contemporary visual world creates an opposing "yearning for duration and uninterrupted time, for perceptual depth, and for sensuous connection to physical reality."[209] Digital technology enables duration, both ontologically and phenomenologically.[210] William Brown, in a book germane to one-shot films, argues that a digital "supercinema" has developed through newfound abilities to capture unbroken space and time.[211] He describes the implications of these continuous digital spaces. The environment is more prominent in such films; there is interconnectedness—and thereby potential democratization—of space and time presented throughout the diegesis, all its points coexisting simultaneously. In Brown's terms, the viewer's mind is "enworlded" by supercinematic spaces.[212] Similarly, Lev Manovich writes that an aesthetics of continuity pervades digital and computerised media, overdetermined by various factors: smoothness, blending, and erasure of boundaries. Time is spatialized, and diegetic space becomes a navigable path. Referring to "spatial montage," Manovich claims that digital compositing, drawing discrete layers together in one space, relocates the act of montage to within the shot.[213] This aesthetics of spatial navigation is partly governed by the broader cultural popularity of navigable space: environments structured around exploration, movement, and continuous traversal. Immersive spatial worlds have become a desirable contemporary aesthetic, a fact immediately evident in the prevalence of simulated one-shot films. Even when filmmakers are not committed to shooting an entire work in a single take, they

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[208] Discussing the "array aesthetics" of digital technology, Deborah Tudor writes that "this aesthetic confuses or blurs shot transition points and requires us to rethink how the shot as the basic cinematic unit is defined." Deborah Tudor, "The Eye of the Frog: Questions of Space in Films Using Digital Processes," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 1 (2008): 90.

[209] D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 158.

[210] Of contemporary Hollywood films, Nick Jones describes a "cultural imperative to produce digital milieus for their own sake" Nick Jones, *Hollywood Action Films and Spatial Theory* (Routledge, 2015), 140.

[211] William Brown, *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age* (Berghahn, 2013).

[212] Brown, "*Supercinema*," 179.

[213] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press, 2001), 158.

frequently seek to reproduce the experiential qualities associated with continuous spatial environments. One-shot films represent a nexus of these navigable continuums and their expressive possibilities. They are uniquely capable of extending this sense of spatial autonomy into action-oriented narratives, genres that would otherwise condense or elide portions of non-action. By preserving continuity through movement and navigation, one-shot films encourage a heightened sense of diegetic coherence, allowing the cinematic world to emerge as a continuous spatial continuum rather than a succession of discrete fragments.

## CENTRIFUGAL AND CENTRIPETAL ONE-SHOT FILMS

One-shot films possess macro-rhythms and kinetic designs that unfold within rather than between shots, producing specific patterns of movement experienced in continuity. This continuity also allows viewers to accurately gauge the extent of diegetic space traversed over the course of the film. Some one-shot films are movement-heavy, while others are movement-averse.[214] I distinguish between centrifugal and centripetal one-shot films, according to the amount of diegetic traversal throughout the runtime, with most of this chapter focusing on the continuum between these spatial regimes. Most modern examples are centrifugal: linear and ever moving through space via various modes of travel. In centrifugal one-shot films, the camera's alignment with one or more characters is the most common method for chauffeuring viewers sensibly through the spatial continuum. A common variation of this method is the network narrative, which I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, whereby centrifugal one-shot narratives are constructed through a continuous chain of linkages between characters. Centripetal one-shot films take place in a single location.

[214] Discussing navigable digital space, Lev Manovich describes the need to develop a poetics of these spaces, considering the rhythmic, expressive, not strictly functional qualities on display. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press, 2001), 259-268.

Most films throughout cinema history do not present space such that viewers can legibly gauge the distance traversed; the narrative space covered must be inferred from the contents of the edit-abridged images.[215]

Various writers describe film narrative as a combination of centripetal and centrifugal forces; they are terms long used in geography and applications of geography to film space.[216] For example, in Edward Dimendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, he dedicates a chapter to both centripetal and centrifugal film spaces, arguing that cinematic film noirs that take place in modern urban centres combine elements of both.[217] My usage of the terms departs from Dimendberg's in a few ways, largely related to what type of phenomena I allocate to each. For example, while Dimendberg discusses the dense interactions of urban crowds as a factor of centripetal space—the coming together of moving bodies in a dense centre—I would view this as more likely to be depicted in centrifugal one-shot films. This difference occurs because I define these trajectories from the perspective of the single moving camera itself, rather than the actual geographical layout of the spaces it moves through. While Dimendberg describes large conglomerations of geographical spatial energy such as New York (centripetal) or Los Angeles (centrifugal), I approach the terms in relation to a single mobile entity: the camera that captures a one-shot film.

Even if scholars do not always use the same terminology, they often appear to gesture towards the same divergent tendencies in filmic spatial organisation. Tim Cresswell describes two distinctive worldviews related to understandings of space: a sedentarist metaphysics and

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[215] Nevertheless, it is still sensible to describe traditionally edited films as being either nomadic or sedentary (or: circular and linear, centrifugal or centripetal). There can still be stark visuo-spatial differences—vastly differing spatial regimes—even with cutting involved.
[216] Mikhail Bakhtin famously uses centrifugal and centripetal but regarding language formation rather than visual phenomena. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1981).
[217] Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

a nomadic metaphysics. These mirror the characteristics of centripetal and centrifugal one-shot films. Cresswell writes that the nomadic worldview "has little time for notions of attachment to place, and revels in notions of flow, flux, and dynamism."[218] Meanwhile, from a sedentarist worldview, "mobility is often the assumed threat to the rooted, moral, authentic existence of place."[219] Chilean Filmmaker Raúl Ruiz uses the terms as part of a complex, quasi-mathematical description of narrative's rhizomatic development. His terminology relates primarily to the dynamics between shots, rather than within one shot. However, the terms themselves, centrifugal and centripetal, apply to shapes regardless of their continuity or lack thereof. His centrifugal function resembles a centrifugal one-shot film, concerning "the dynamic organisation of the elements inside each shot, such that each element of the shot searches for its most proximate element in order to meet its death and thus activate the next element."[220] Conversely, the centripetal film "demands that we thoroughly absorb the shot and remain within it."[221] Dimitris Eleftheriotis analyses cinematic movement, distinguishing between linear and circular diegetic journeys. A circular journey, for Eleftheriotis, is a "circular type of movement around specific objects of interest," while linear is a "continuous movement of more-or-less linear direction choreographed with a process of visual exploration and often linked to the accumulation of incremental and progressive knowledge."[222] For Cresswell, Ruiz, and Eleftheriotis, a dense, contained idea of space coexists with a stretched and attenuated conception of space.

Leo Braudy provides the most specific encapsulation of these opposing sets of one-shot films, distinguishing between open and closed films. Braudy, though not referring

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[218] Timothy Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (Routledge, 2006), 26.
[219] Cresswell, *On the Move*, 30.
[220] Raúl Ruiz, "The Six Functions of the Shot", trans. Carlos Morreo, *Screening the Past* 35, December 2012, https://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-35-classics-re-runs/the-six-functions-of-the-shot/.
[221] Ruiz, "The Six Functions of the Shot."
[222] Dimitris Eleftheriotis, *Cinematic Journeys: Film and Movement* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 31.

directly to this topic, precisely characterises the two main spatial tendencies of one-shot filmmaking, defined by "the attitude of a film towards the objects it contains" and how it "impose(s) structures of perception."[223] His elucidation contains the seed of central dynamics later to emerge in one-shot filmmaking.[224] Closed is applied to theatrical and centripetal one-shot films, which stay in one area of space. Open applies to those characterised by continual spatial creation. Braudy states that "in a closed film the world of the film is the only thing that exists."[225] This description applies to one-shot films where we are never encouraged to consider what is taking place outside the cloistered setting. We undergo "the merging of the inside of the film with the inside of our own minds," circling around the space as its fixity hardens with each camera sweep: "Everything is totally sufficient in a closed film; everything fits in."[226] In contrast, open films evince itinerance and lack of fixity. As Braudy says, here "the world of the film is a momentary frame around an ongoing reality."[227] This observation is unerringly accurate of centrifugal one-shot films, breathlessly passing through spaces en route to others, leaving a trailing continuum of discarded space in their wake. Braudy hints at the connectedness between onscreen and offscreen, between the past and future of a film engendered by this ethos: "The objects and characters in the film existed before the camera focused on them and they will exist after the film is over."[228] Open films teem with a sense of life that exists and endures independently of the camera's presence *in situ*.

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[223] Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (Anchor Press, 1976), 45-46.

[224] The control or lack of control over the image also informs Braudy's schema: "The closed director is much more autocratic, controlling every aspect of production, while the open director is more interested in the possibilities of the filmmaking situation itself and the discoveries that can be made from it." Braudy, *The World in a Frame*, 48.

[225] Braudy, *The World in a Frame*, 46.

[226] Braudy, *The World in a Frame*, 47-48.

[227] Braudy, *The World in a Frame*, 46-47. Similarly, in their analysis of long takes, John Gibbs and Douglas Pye describe "the potential of the long take to constrain our view, but also to foreground the extent to which any view is partial and can take on meaning in relation to what is outside its scope." John Gibbs and Douglas Pye, *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 15.

[228] Braudy, *The World in a Frame*, 46-47.

Not strictly oppositional, centrifugal and centripetal are better conceptualised as forces or tendencies—distributed in ratios. Their distribution creates the actual and virtual shape of one-shot films. Some films are split down the middle between centripetal and centrifugal. *A Date in Minsk* (Nikita Lavretski, 2019) begins with a centripetal structure, with the two central characters playing a game of pool in a bar, the camera momentum centred on the table, allowing the audience to focus on their conversation. However, after fifty minutes, they leave the bar and go for a walk, with the film shifting towards a centrifugal shape. *Rendez-vous* (Pablo Olmos Arrayales, 2019) has the opposite pattern, starting out as centrifugal before settling into a centripetal shape. The two main characters, also on a first date, walk home for the first thirty minutes. Once they reach home, the film's shape changes in line with a tone change, as a crime thriller plays out in a single domestic location. Many one-shot films are similarly made from a combination of movement and stasis, arranged in various patterns. I will first cover centripetal one-shot films, before moving into a more extended section on centrifugal one-shot films.

## CENTRIPETAL ONE-SHOT FILMS

Centripetal one-shot films move not at all or around a small area. Throughout cinema history, certain films have thrived in limitations, purposely restricting narrative information in accordance with spatial restriction. One-shot films practice restricted narration on a more rigorous and ongoing level than traditional films. In outlawing channels of information other than those activated by the ongoing shot, one-shot films justify characters not being aware of something at a narratively salient time, creating further scope for creative story

development—as I noted in the previous chapter in relation to *Blind Spot* and *PVC-1*.[229] We follow them in a state of shared unawareness, possessing no epistemic advantage, implicitly trusting and sharing in their level of knowledge. Edward Branigan describes restricted narration in his account of cinematic point-of-view.[230] He stresses that a given narration strategy is not just a neutral decision, but rather a definitional constraint in the film text: "What is at stake in point of view is the recognition of an epistemological boundary inscribed within the text."[231] He goes on to further separate such choices from mere aesthetic decisions: "They map not just a viewer's pictorial competence but are categories of thought which mark the very limits of what can be thought about character in that representational system."[232] Therefore, restricted narration contributes strongly to the specificity of one-shot films as a narrative form, strictly delimiting the scope of story and character development, as well as the viewer's perceptual and intellectual access to this information.

Experimental structural films like *Empire* (Andy Warhol, 1964) and *Wavelength* (Michael Snow, 1967), which I touched on in my introduction, are clear forebearers. Containing fixed or near-fixed views, structural films are logical endpoints of centripetal duration. The Weimar *kammerspielfilm*, described by David Bordwell as "a kind of cinema turned resolutely inward," refers to a style of chamber drama characterised by small-scale

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[229] As Bordwell writes, "You can exploit the spatial restrictiveness by confining us to what the inhabitants of the space know. Limiting story information can build curiosity, suspense, and surprise." David Bordwell, "Stuck inside these four walls: Chamber cinema for a plague year", davidbordwell.net, April 1, 2020, https://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2020/04/01/stuck-inside-these-four-walls-chamber-cinema-for-a-plague-year/.

[230] A more comprehensive account, in Branigan's linguistics-derived terminology: "A given narration is a systematic restriction of meaning — the 'object' which appears within a level always depends upon the conditions of the seeing of that object, namely upon an origin, vision, time, frame, and mind. A level is a limitation on the very existence of meaning. Thus point of view as a system of the text functions to control (expand, restrict, change) the viewer's access, not to a real object (through a 'camera'), nor to psychological states and attitudes, but to signification. Points of view are epistemological boundaries inscribed within the text. By rationalizing its method for knowing the world — a 'point of view' — the text confronts a spectator in the most profound and subtle way with a representation of what that world is or might be." Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Subjectivity in Classical Film* (Mouton, 1984), 178.

[231] Branigan, *Point of View*, 178.

[232] Branigan, *Point of View*, 179.

stories and psychological focus that arose in Germany in the 1920s.[233] In both forms, the filmmaker tasks themselves with storytelling constraints. Movement *and* editing restrictions threaten a double burden, but focus on one space simplifies staging, allowing for deeper articulation of mise-en-scène and character, creating a "mundane superrealism that charges everyday objects with new force."[234] Rather than lightly skimming a preponderance of space, they closely read a smaller segment, creating "a sense of wraparound space."[235] Space is condensed and deepened rather than spread and attenuated: viewers dwell in the small, continuously habituated space. Rather than the large gestures and loose targets of mobile one-shot films, camerawork is more precise and planned. Limited space combines with a preponderance of time to create strongly defined and consistent mise-en-scène.

There are conspicuous connections between one-shot films and theatre.[236] Cinema and theatre have had an agonistic relationship, especially in early film history as cinema both emulated and sought to differentiate itself from its precursor.[237] Numerous writers describe the relationship between theatre and cinema. Erwin Panofsky describes theatre as "the *genus proximum* to a narrative film in that it consists of a narrative enacted by persons that move."[238] Susan Sontag notes a tendency to dispense with theatrical influence in advancing the potentials of cinema; it is anathema to invoke theatricality in describing a filmmaking form that desires to be taken seriously: "Movies are regarded as advancing from theatrical stasis to cinematic fluidity, from theatrical artificiality to cinematic naturalness and

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[233] Bordwell, "Stuck inside these four walls."
[234] Bordwell, "Stuck inside these four walls."
[235] Bordwell, "Stuck inside these four walls."
[236] The trajectory of *Anino Sa Likod ng Buwan* (Jun Robles Lana, 2015) demonstrates the interconnectedness of one-shot films and theatre, showing that they can express the same story, with the same dialogue and dramatic rhythms. It was originally made as a one-shot film in 2015, before being adapted to the stage in 2025. It is among the most theatrical one-shot films, focusing on just three characters in a spatially limited environment.
[237] Films were initially referred to as "photoplays."
[238] Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (MIT Press, 1995), 94. Soviet filmmakers started in theatre before eventually concluding that "cinema is today's level of theater. That theater in its older form has died and continues to exist only by inertia." Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (Harcourt, Brace, & World), 20.

immediacy."[239] One-shot films both advance and rebuke Sontag's point. Many one-shot films exhibit the utmost anti-theatrical fluidity, while others retreat into the comforting and contained theatrical domain. An intuitive similarity connects one-shot films with theatre. With narrative one-shot films, the separation, or convergence, of these two art forms can be re-examined, reinstating the necessity of achieving the work from beginning to end without stoppages. One can re-examine previous declarations about the relationship between these two art forms that no longer hold weight regarding one-shot films. To take one, Panofsky writes that "stage work is continuous but transitory; film work is discontinuous but permanent."[240] While this general influence lingers, many centripetal one-shot films more aesthetically resemble a theatrical set-up, with a fixed location and dialogical load.[241] For example, *Fourplay* (Dean Matthew Ronalds, 2018) is a simple, interior, continuous set-up, featuring the arguments between two couples in an apartment. The character-centred narrative and use of a single location in films such as *Fourplay* return cinema to the notion of 'canned theatre' (a pejorative label for films conceived as little more than audiovisual recordings of theatrical performance, rather than as works exploiting cinema's own aesthetic capacities), discussed in the first few decades of the medium.

While one-shot films lack a live audience and stage-bound performances, the continuous real-time execution of dialogue, acting, and choreography nevertheless brings theatre and one-shot cinema into conceptual alignment. This intuitive connection applies to one-shot films in an abstract sense, because films must be pre-visualised and memorised akin to theatre. This comparison is an analogical similarity, not denying the ontological

[239] Susan Sontag, "Film and Theatre" in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (Oxford University Press, 1979), 362.
[240] Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, 118.
[241] Bordwell mentions "a cross-media tradition that explored what you could express through purified interiors." David Bordwell, "Stuck inside these four walls."

differences between the two mediums.[242] However, Sontag questions the absoluteness of this dichotomy: "Whether objects (like films or paintings) or performances (like music or theatre), all art is first a mental act, a fact of consciousness."[243] Sontag's claim collapses the rigid separation between time-bound and object-bound arts, suggesting that what unites them is not their material form but their origin in intentionality and attention. This idea reframes the continuous take as the externalisation of a sustained mental act—the collective concentration of director, actor, and camera. The temporal unity of performance thus becomes analogous to the unity of consciousness, blurring distinctions between the reproducible image and the ephemeral event.

Centripetal one-shot films are not necessarily homogenous; the ability to trace around a space at length allows for depth and variation, despite the unchanging, static nature of the narrative space.[244] *Eight* (Paul Blackburn, 2016) embodies the centripetal strain, drawing on theatrical and chamber film traditions as well as slow cinema. Anchored by Libby Munro's lead performance, it traces the painstaking indoor movements of a woman suffering from extreme obsessive-compulsive disorder. Unfolding in real-time, we observe her repetitive daily rituals as if they are hard labour. What emerges is a routine of misery, an excruciating endurance test staged through duration. As time accumulates, viewers become increasingly attuned to the exhaustion of her movements: the strain of her scrubbing, the weight of her breathing, the Sisyphean rhythm of her tasks. The camera remains watchful, the colour palette muted and grey. Cresswell, in his account of sedentary metaphysics, discusses the virtues of a personal, contained place, describing "an achievement of dwelling, constructed

[242] Peggy Phelan notes the anathema of performance to reproduction. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1993), 147-152.
[243] Sontag, "Film and Theatre," 368.
[244] This combination of stasis and fluidity points towards cinema's architectural influence. As Sergei Eisenstein pointedly affirms, "Film's undoubted ancestor … is—architecture." Quoted in Giuliana Bruno, "Visual Studies: Four Takes on Spatial Turns," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, no. 1 (2006): 23.

through the intricate, repeated, and habitual movements of people performing "place-ballets"—the collective effect of individual bodies moving through space."[245] Place is deemed as comfortable—necessary for culture and reason to develop. Movements in space lead to mastery and comfort. *Eight* is a nightmarish critique of this notion, creating domestic space that serves as a painful prison for its protagonist. The familiar repetitions of her day bring not comfort and wisdom but grinding anxiety. Despite repetitions and restarts, viewers eventually gain a stable spatial map of her home, strengthened with each new sighting—rather than continually perceiving fresh phenomena. The story content conspires such that viewers gain familiarity with the surroundings. She painfully forces herself to have two showers, therefore forcing viewers to become familiar with the shower routine. The drudgery of her daily routine is slowly and stubbornly etched, through duration, into the viewer's psyche. This film exaggerates the negative connotations of existing in a contained space, fitting into the original Weimar template of spatial distress.

*Rati Chakravyuh* (Ashish Avikunthak, 2014) is at the extreme, experimental end of the centripetal strain. This film is centred on the pure expression of sacred poetry, finding a religious form for religious discourse: oneness—pure, parametric form. Six newlywed couples and a priestess sit in a circle, taking turns chanting lines from a group poem. The continuous camera wheels around the group 360-degrees as they deliver their lines one-by-one. Their many voices transmute into one voice, speaking both as themselves and as a larger collective. The storyline is iterative and dialectical, tracing the lineaments of the discourse over the runtime. Each line functions as an addition or subtraction, questioning and interrogative. Much pressure rests on the performers, with the discipline required to execute their literary load approaching experimental theatre. The thirteen performers continuously hit their marks, speaking lines correctly and on time. This production process requires intense

[245] Timothy Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (Routledge, 2006), 45-46.

focus, memory, and patience.[246] This circle of people defines the film's rigidly circular shape; indeed, the titular word "Chakravyuh" refers to a circular military formation from the ancient Indian poem, the *Mahabharata*. The camera wheels around in accordance with their seating arrangement. The participants look only at each other. The film's thrust is quintessentially centripetal, turned resolutely inward towards the centre of gravity: their group expression. The rotation quickens as the film progresses, though the process is similar at all speeds. *Rati Chakravyuh* shows the strengths of one-shot films in portraying deep, contained, and minimalistic stories.

## CENTRIFUGAL ONE-SHOT FILMS

Centrifugal one-shot films are characterised by nonstop travelling and structured wandering, beginning from point A and ending at point B, continually creating new space throughout the runtime. Several fictional mainstream films show continuous camera movement and possess a linear, explorative drive. Character is a hermeneutic key in one-shot films. David Bordwell identifies "person schema" as a key conceptual schema in film interpretations.[247] Viewer comprehension is assisted by character constancy. Centrifugal one-shot films often follow one character—the chauffeur through the filmic continuum—operating similarly to a playable character in a 3-D videogame (aesthetically, not functionally). More than the camera lends continuity to proceedings; personhood has a persistent presence. This anthropomorphic approach pragmatically ties together the viewing experience of one-shot films, which otherwise risk being loose or decentred. Either single character alignment or collaborative multi-person alignment emerges, joined together with

[246] Indeed, *Rati Chakravyuh* relates to Chapter Five on reflexivity, stimulating artefact emotions and creating many questions about how the film was achieved.
[247] David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 152.

the camera-baton. Spatiotemporal alignment with a protagonist appears in most narrative one-shot films. To name some well-known examples, *Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov) follows a guide through the Hermitage Museum; *Victoria* (Sebastian Schipper, 2015) tightly follows a barista as she unwittingly gets sucked into the world of nocturnal crime; and *Lost in London* (Woody Harrelson, 2017) follows the Hollywood actor as he weaves haphazardly around London over the course of a night. The camera moving in unison with some onscreen figure(s) is among the most common techniques of narrative one-shot films.

Murray Smith pinpoints how entry into narrative is mediated by character engagement, arriving at logical explanations for viewer identification. Central to the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of a film text, we identify with characters through three different means: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. Regarding one-shot films, alignment is of particular interest, concerning "the way a film gives us access to the actions, thoughts, and feelings of characters."[248] Two types of alignment relate to narrational range and depth: spatiotemporal alignment, germane to one-shot films, and perceptual alignment. Spatiotemporal alignment is often a default in one-shot films, to a more extreme degree than traditionally edited films: "Attachment concerns the way in which the narration restricts itself to the actions of a single character, or moves more freely among the spatiotemporal paths of two or more characters."[249] There are few options to cut away from a central character: they must be followed from point to point as a film moves along its continuous path. The protagonist becomes our epistemological ground, the eyes through which we sensibly take in

[248] Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 6. Smith also writes, "Spectators are also provided with visual and aural information more or less congruent with that available to characters, and so are placed in a certain structure of alignment with characters." Smith, *Engaging Characters,* 75.
[249] Smith, *Engaging Characters,* 83.

the narrative. This tendency to follow a character serves as the default basis for more complex spatial patterns that emerge in one-shot narratives.

The pleasures of fluid travel are engaged by the one-shot film. One-shot films display the "drift" of modernity, described by Leo Charney as the evacuation of the present, a "mercurial, variable flow."[250] Editing lends quantifiable structure to a film, whereas its absence engenders an ethos of wandering and uncertainty. In one-shot films, this fluid, undifferentiated drift pulls along the image, emphasizing ephemerality. Centrifugal one-shot films, engaged in ceaseless movement, unravel the balance of contained cinematic shape, creating unwieldy and convoluted spatial experiences. Without the closing, quantifiable, action of the cut, one-shot films appear perpetually open—in a constant state of becoming.[251] They bring different spaces into contact with each other in a manner to which viewers may be unaccustomed.

An overriding sense of connectedness binds together locations in one-shot films: spaces already traversed and spaces to come are active, in flux, for the whole runtime—an invisible thread fluidly tying together successive scenes. One-shot films have a start and end point that remain as such in a uniquely constant and tethered fashion. With these points as bookends, the entire film world is connected. With each passing second the continuous space balloons in size and when looked back over in memory appears as a continuum.[252] This monolithic spatial continuity creates a situation where tenses are legibly enjoined; present,

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[250] Leo Charney, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift* (Duke University Press, 1998), 8. Song Hwee Lim builds upon Charney's idea in his analysis of contemporary slow cinema—writing that Tsai Ming-Liang's films are guided by a "temporal aesthetics of drifting" films. Song Hwee Lim. *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness* (University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 111.

[251] Becoming, a concept developed by Bergson and elaborated by Deleuze, describes the continual process of transformation through which entities are never entirely fixed or stable.

[252] As William Brown writes in relation to digital spaces, "showing space and all that fills it as a single continuum, as opposed to a space fragmented by objects, digital technology suggests the inherently connected nature of those objects and their surroundings." William Brown, *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age* (Berghahn, 2013), 13.

past and future are muddled when trying to describe the processual nature of continuous shots. One may switch tenses mid-sentence when describing the shot's progression. Once the shot begins, the story world comes alive. Everything that lies along the camera's route is already loosed from controlling shackles. A countdown governs all remaining preparation, leaving no room for further adjustment—only readiness for the moment of onscreen arrival. Actors and crew wait in a state of patient anticipation, their performances beginning before they appear onscreen. This dynamic shows offscreen space at play in one-shot films: the ongoing awareness that onscreen actors are joined offscreen by actors preparing for their entrance. This work is a negative mirror image of onscreen acting, conducted patiently in silence and invisibility rather than the stage of spectacle. Though not the immediate focus, they are as susceptible to disruptive errors as their onscreen counterparts, who they are to replace during the ongoing shot. The making-of film for *Birdman* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2014) refers to this state of thespian affairs, with one performer noting that "everybody waits for their section and we all jump out at the right moment. We are hiding behind doors and walls. Come out and have our part in the scene and then we have to fuck off and make sure we don't get caught by the camera again, and sometimes the camera comes back around and you are standing in the wrong stairwell. You cannot mess up." The intensive choreography of one-shot films is therefore not just contained to the onscreen performances but diffused across the entire production offscreen also.

It is especially resonant in one-shot films when the camera returns to a location that it has passed through previously. Gilles Deleuze suggestively remarks regarding his time-image that "the past does not follow the present that it is no longer, it coexists with the present it was."[253] One-shot films clearly visualise this temporal situation when they travel to a single

[253] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 79.

location multiple times. If the whole film is a continuous line of movement, these moments of return to the already seen resemble a knot. The continuum and dimensions of space are foregrounded, suggesting a sense of dwelling. They bring the film back face-to-face with a past memory nevertheless still durationally attached to the present moment. The space has remained active offscreen while also being non-active. It is not unusual for films to return to familiar locations, but we do not usually follow a spatially circuitous path in the interim. The distance in time and space between the two appearances of a location creates a feeling of disjunction. A proximal location is sometimes re-treaded after an absent period. *Victoria*'s opening club location is re-penetrated after the successful heist an hour later, efficaciously framing the bravado of the meantime events. *Airport 2013* (Kōki Mitani, 2013) demonstrates the subtle interest related to the production process, staging, and use of extras created by returning to previous locations. A grandfather character sits waiting in a central lobby area. When the camera returns to him an hour later, the audience is spurred to wonder whether the elderly actor has remained sitting there in the meanwhile, or taken a break in another behind-the-scenes location. Later, the camera returns to a busy restaurant with numerous extras. Similarly, we question: Did all these extras stay seated during the interim period when they were offscreen? In these ways, the diegetic continuums created by one-shot narratives automatically generate questions related to staging, as I discuss in my section on artefact emotions in Chapter Five.

Proceeding in an unbroken and discernible journey assists viewers in forming memories in a more unified and vivid way—akin to real-world experiences such as remembering a day walking and sightseeing while on holiday in a new location, or the route home in a car journey. Certain filming strategies encourage viewers to reflect on the journey taken. *Roaring 20's* and *C'était un Rendez-vous* (Claude Lelouch 1976), both set in Paris,

climax on the Montmartre hills, looking back over the city.[254] *C'était un Rendez-vous* is the logical extreme of the centrifugal strain.[255] It endeavours to cover as much centrifugal space in one shot as technically and humanly possible by placing a camera on the front of a race car and speeding around the quiet (though by no means deserted) streets of early morning Paris. The camera-car refuses to dwell within any places, prioritising the purity of passage and thereby transforming passage into a sort of place. There is nothing centripetal about the film, not repeating any locations as it continually surges towards the horizon, swallowing up its visual path—transforming future into present into past with near-ungraspable velocity. The visual phenomena, whether iconic Parisian landmarks or anonymous pedestrian vehicles, whirr by briefly, left in the dust by the camera's perceptual motion. Viewers are perceptually unable to take in every detail. The drama of squeezing through tight spaces at high speed for the sake of pure momentum precludes any ability to feel grounded, to linger. As the film progresses, slightly upward movement is discernible, as the car scales the Parisian hills without sacrificing any speed. Vehicular scenes provide the basic cartographic function of expanding the inherently limited diegesis.[256] With enough speed and movement, one-shot films can even overcome their spatial limitations. Paul Krumholz lucidly outlines the sensory and kinaesthetic properties of a car-camera hybrid. He writes that *C'était un rendez-vous*'s aggression evokes "a filmic logic of montage without ever breaking the shot."[257] The greater the distance covered, the stronger the impression that events unfold in the real world as opposed to the sanitized cloister of the studio. This expanding spatial field also heightens the viewers' respect for the offscreen coordination of the production, inviting them to

[254] *Ana Arabia* (Amos Gitai, 2013) similarly concludes with a cityscape.
[255] For 1976, it is very prescient of racing-based videogames.
[256] While not a one-shot film, *Kaili Blues* (Bi Gab, 2015) features a 40-minute long shot that features an abundance of vehicular travel: three motorcycle scenes, one car ride, and one boat ride. There is also a bridge crossing, a haircut, and a musical performance: process-based tasks that I discuss in Chapter Four.
[257] Paul Krumholz, "Orienting Design, Discourse and Perception in C'était un rendez-vous," *Forum* 10 (2010): 8.

contemplate the logistical complexity of the continuously mobile shot. At the same time, each newly revealed space implies more space beyond the frame, enlarging the scope of the offscreen space concurrently with the visible space. Centrifugal one-shot films therefore derive much of their expressive force from continual outward expansion, transforming movement through space into an aesthetic principle in its own right.

## NETWORK NARRATIVES/CASE STUDY: *THE ROARING 20'S*[258]

Another common visual trope of centrifugal one-shot films features characters leading the camera along from one person to another. This system of narrative development is based on more simple units of spatiotemporal character alignment. For cinematic precursors, Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991) comes to mind.[259] Though edited with cuts, *Slacker* conspicuously constructs its narrative as a continuous chain of temporary characters. As the title of Linklater's film suggests, this type of narrative construction leads to a wandering, decentred ethos, partial to the marginal and random—network narratives are more prone to being centrifugal. Though not always narratively justified, this technique proves too attractive an option for one-shot filmmakers, providing a sensible rationale for the continuous form—an inkling of the butterfly effect, the rough winds of change. Network narratives are embraced to varying degrees; some films pursue it from beginning to end—the whole film as one chain of characters—while others use it sporadically.[260]

David Bordwell identifies and catalogues this niche narrative structure, which he terms "network narratives": "The narration gradually reveals the array to us, attaching us to

**258** Network narratives bear an aesthetic resemblance to the films discussed in the carnivalesque section of Chapter Two.

259 *Slacker* serves as an instructive archetype here of one-shot wisdom deriving from other areas of cinema.

260 *Big Monday* (Michael Rehfield, 1998), *Still Orangutans* (Gustavo Spolidoro, 2007) and *Roaring 20's* (Elisabeth Vogler, 2021) are films that develop wholly through character connections.

one character, then another."[261] His account is comprehensive, but cannot foresee the subsequent narrative one-shot film boom, wherein network narratives are displayed with a unique fluidity. One-shot films literalise the idea of network structures. The characters are not only socially networked but spatially networked; we see the formation of the network happen in real time. Moments when the camera detaches itself from one character and locks on to another are focal points in one-shot network narratives. They are the closest thing to conventional scene transitions that one-shot films can offer, weakly mimicking editing-based tasks using the affordances of staging, dividing scenes in accordance with inherent divisions within the mise-en-scène and between character focus. These intra-shot divisions are how one-shot films mimic or incorporate editing's effects using their own unique capabilities. If network narratives can be abstractly visualized through lines connecting characters, these relay points are nodes where lines join and depart. Affect has gravitational pull before and after these linkages—the departing emotional currents of one character flow into the arrival of another.

Elisabeth Vogler's one-shot film *Roaring 20's* is an exemplary case study that provides an aesthetic response to Walter Benjamin's question, "couldn't one make a film from the map of Paris?"[262] Bordwell notes that network narratives get "specified in local circumstances … trading on a cluster of cross-cultural norms."[263] In this film, the tenets of network narratives are adapted to Parisian affordances. An overriding intelligence seems to guide the focus of the camera, possessing keen foresight into proximal profundity.[264] Special

[261] David Bordwell, "Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance" in *Poetics of Cinema*, ed. David Bordwell (Routledge, 2008), 190-91.
[262] Paul Krumholz, "Orienting Design, Discourse and Perception in *C'était Un Rendez-Vous*," *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & The Arts*, no. 10 (2010): 1.
[263] Bordwell, "Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance," 191.
[264] In undertaking this task of capturing a well-known and iconic city, it follows the approach of James Joyce in the chapter of *Ulysses* (1922) entitled "Wandering Rocks," crisscrossing between numerous characters to form a mosaic image of Dublin's happenings. Richard Brown, "Time, Space, and the City in "Wandering Rocks""

moments are caught on a whim and threaded together into a social tapestry, highlighting the tenuousness of the linkages between characters. It is worth describing the film from beginning to end, noting how character transitions occur. A description of the transitions is a description of the film; they are its most conspicuous moments, where the narrative system is most self-aware. Bordwell observes that, in network narratives, "the narration tends toward omniscience … frankly expos(ing) the act of narration."[265] The narrative switches between sets of characters like a relay. The names of the characters matter little in recounting this anonymous mosaic.

The film begins following a man on a mobile phone, finding his way to a woman he is picking up. She states, "we might never see each other again," before taking off running. The first transitional juncture is an entirely random switch to fleeting passersby—two off, two on. They chat whilst holding a statue together, initiating a sequence of three pairs of characters walking along the riverbank. The camera suddenly swish pans to two sitting characters, another repeated "two off, two on" gesture. They in turn come across another duo that stops them for a hug and handshake, whom we then follow. These two descend to the Métro, interacting with a woman on the subway back and forth, whom we then follow off the subway. Another sudden swish pans to a running young girl, reconvening with another girl she has just stolen merchandise with. A woman dressed as a bride intrudes upon their conversation, assuming the narrative focus. She receives a cigarette from someone nearby, talks to an unattended baby, then gets on the back of a motorcycle. She gets off the bike to look for more cigarettes, walking past three people playing chess. A long-haired man amongst this group gets on a bike, reciting a poem as he cycles along the road. He cycles past

*European Joyce Studies* 12 (2002): 57-72. Hans Walter Gabler. "Structures of Memory and Orientation: Steering a Course Through Wandering Rocks" in *Genetic Inroads Into the Art of James Joyce*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (Open Book Publishers, 2024).

[265] Bordwell, "Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance," 200.

a man on the phone, who is informing his friend that he has just spotted a celebrity actor. He hangs up the phone and runs to the actor and his friend, who refuse his request for a selfie. We follow them, but the previous man comes back and tries again for a picture. We keep following the actor and his friend, before the actor eventually begins philosophising about the virtues of wearing a mask. He dons a mask and saunters off, leading to two other men, who we follow as they have a breathless conversation. They lead us to a park, where occurs the first sequence in which the camera travels unattached to any character, leading to a woman on a bench. She performs a tarot ritual directly to the camera, which then wheels around to reveal another woman. These characters then walk along, as all the previously appearing characters crowd around them and walk together. Every character then sings a collective song on the hilltop overlooking the city, eventually leaving the frame one by one. The camera does not cut on any occasion—this whirl of activity unrolls in a seamless network.

The complexity of the narrative generates artefact-related queries. *Roaring 20's* is conducted amidst thousands of presumably unknowing Parisian extras, conveying the flow of life, the hustle and bustle of a major metropolis. The cast members and extras condition each other's identities in subtle ways. When the narrative focus switches to another character, we sometimes see the previous subjects fading into the background, morphing into the surrounding populace. We may ponder how far away previous or future onscreen participants are at any given moment—mentally broadening the film set. Throughout the film, the exact location is sometimes named and analysed by the characters: dialogue tailored to the specific location. For example, two characters have an energetic conversation about the neighbourhood of Belleville as they charge through it hurriedly. These real locations allow the film to jump out of the screen, momentarily shedding its fictional veneer and appearing as the real city of Paris. Indeed, amidst the flux of motion and personhood that takes place

throughout *Roaring 20's*, Paris is its ultimate, essential subject. It is the city that endures through the frenetic sieve of the network narrative.

Every sound and spectacle from the city pull characters (and viewers) in different directions. Since the individual narratives never progress for long, the character switches are essentially arbitrary. The film dramatizes the effects of chance, encouraging viewers to consider the random connectedness of everyone in society. Several modes of transport are dramatized; as well as walking, the film utilizes bicycles, motorcycles, and subway travel.[266] Cars are also ever-present on the streets: the real-world chaos of traffic introduces a tincture of danger to the itinerant actors. These sequences taking place on different vehicles are purposely among the most affective, encouraging reflection on the poetry of cinematic motion. A character literalises this contemplative attitude by reading a poem while cycling. The section where the bride rides along on the back of a motorcycle is also aesthetically heightened, taking place at sunset and accompanied by a choral soundtrack. Highlighting the portrayal of multiple modes of transport demonstrates that the city is a patchwork of varied temporalities, enriching the network narrative of *Roaring 20's*.

One-shot film tenets are explicit themes of the film. Bordwell notes that network narratives evince "privileged themes … plausible materials for these norms of story world, plot structure, and narration … degrees-of-separation films should hang together thematically."[267] It advocates for a Whitmanesque equality of focus, based on intersecting subjectivities. *Roaring 20's* was filmed during the COVID-19 lockdown, and the pandemic provides an overarching impetus for the musings of many characters.[268] Dialogical themes of

[266] These different modes of transport also evoke artefact queries. What if the Metro had been delayed? Would the film have stalled, forcing it to restart? At another point, a character shouts, "come on, move!" to a passing bus. We question whether this remark was planned, or improvised like the famous scene from *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969).
[267] Bordwell, "Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance," 200.
[268] We see "2020" on a flashing green sign, while one character describes the philosophical beauty of wearing a mask.

connectiveness are developed gradually: spoken and unspoken themes of wandering. While monologuing about their insignificance in the world, a character states, "I'm just a drop of water," highlighting the collectedness of the characters.[269] The film continually operates in the present tense, with the focus reset afresh every few minutes during character transitions. The conversation topics amongst the characters are philosophical in tone yet easily understandable by design, easy to hop on board with immediately and dispense unceremoniously. They are about the passing of time, the nature of life, and the pandemic experience. The concluding song reinforces spoken and unspoken themes, with lyrics including, "we accept that we are part of a collective mockery and none of this makes any sense." Like other network narratives, the storyline of *Roaring 20's* is inspired by affect associated with its cinematic form.

## OFFSCREEN SPACE IN ONE-SHOT FILMS

Having covered centripetal and centrifugal tendencies, this section discusses the function of non-visible space in one-shot filmmaking. At any given time in a one-shot film, the space onscreen is complemented by surrounding offscreen space. As they are constrained in the amount of space they can traverse within their runtime, filmmakers mitigate these limitations using offscreen space, expanding the narrative scope and reducing the need for continuous physical movement between locations. The temporal continuity of one-shot films stimulates dialectical energy, but rather than patterns occurring between shots, they take place within one shot.[270] This ongoing relationship between the rectangular frame and the wider diegesis is an example of a fluid dialectic at play in one-shot films. In traditional films,

[269] Another character states: "I saw you from the bridge, and thought, it's a sign, I must talk to her."
[270] This notion connects to Sergei Eisenstein's classic essay on film form, in which he also discusses dialectical montage occurring in the shot and across shots

constant cuts and perspectival changes do not allow a sustained unity between frame and diegesis—or, at least, not a spatially literal one—to develop. Alexander Sesonske notes a "pervasive duality" between two-dimensional screen space and three-dimensional action space. This spatial dynamic occurs between mise-en-scène and mise-en-space—the frame and the circumambient diegesis it moves through. It is worth reading Sesonske's entire description of this dialectic:

> we experience it as unlimited though it is contained within a frame, and it is a dual space. That is, it presents two aspects which we apprehend together. One aspect is what I call screen space, the two-dimensional rectangle on the surface of the screen. The other is action-space, the three-dimensional space within which characters live and die.[271]

The 2-D rectangle of the frame and 3-D cuboid of the diegesis, usually not interacting in a sustained manner, now subtend each other. One-shot films enact an ongoing movement of the frame through the cuboid. This dyad remains consistent, unlike traditionally edited films.[272] As the single take progresses along its runtime, the screen space cuts through the implied continuum of the story space, sharpening the division between what is on and off screen at any time. Much of what we have seen is offscreen at any given moment. This relationship between frame and diegesis occurs in traditional films, but one-shot films display and sustain it with unique constancy.

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[271] Alexander Sesonske, "Time and Tense in Cinema," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38, no. 4 (1980): 420.

[272] Brian Henderson suggests this extended relationship between cinematic duration and diegetic spatial creation, claiming the long take is the "a priori of mise-en-scène, the time necessary for mise-en-scène space" Brian Henderson, "The Long Take," *Film Comment* 7, no. 2 (1971): 6.

Noël Burch is the foundational theorist of offscreen space.[273] Burch claims that "offscreen space has only an intermittent or fluctuating existence during any film, and structuring this fluctuation can become a powerful tool."[274] That which is seen is inseparably yoked to that which is not seen. Burch articulates six areas of offscreen space (up, down, left, right, behind the camera and just beyond the border of the onscreen frame). These areas can be concrete—i.e., visually seen at some point; or imaginary—i.e., implied but never shown onscreen. Offscreen space can be conceptualized in a more all-encompassing way than Burch's preliminary sketch, which only deals with offscreen space insofar as it is proximal to the onscreen action; his analysis mainly concerns how it comes into direct contact with story action. Audiences implicitly accept the framed image onscreen as a chosen sliver of a fictional world as sprawling as our own.[275] Thus, the term "offscreen space" also describes the presence of the entire story-world not currently shown. Describing offscreen space involves considering how we experience cinematic places or things *a priori*, through the imaginative faculties alone.

As I discussed earlier in relation to centrifugal one-shot films, each newly revealed space simultaneously enlarges the offscreen realm. Thus, although one-shot films consist of a single movement through space, they continually suggest space extending beyond the frame, granting the offscreen dimension a considerable expressive role. As Thomas Harrison writes, "The classical cinematic shot is figured as penetrating the spaces around it; a richly signifying mise-en-scène enhances precisely those actions, statements and gestures, turning

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[273] "Nana, or the Two Kinds of Space"—the second chapter of Burch's *Theory of Film Practice*, wherein he uses a Jean Renoir silent film to articulate the nature of unseen space. Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Princeton University Press, 1981), 17-31.

[274] Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, 21.

[275] André Bazin claims that "The outer edges of the screen are not, as the technical jargon would seem to imply, the frame of the film image. They are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality." André Bazin, "Painting and Cinema," in *What Is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. and ed. Hugh Gray (University of California Press, 2004), 166.

the cuboid-impression of the screen into the synecdoche of a larger, living cuboid."[276] One-shot continuity deepens this impression. Imaginary offscreen space in one-shot films broadens the story world in the absence of instant location changes. The effect of concrete offscreen space is slightly different. Viewers possess mental schema that draw upon prior experience in their lives with unbroken journeys, remembering at any given time the trajectory taken thus far. Offscreen space is not usually well-defined; traditional editing chops the continuity, preventing the accurate memory of space-time already covered with the same precise backwards directionality of everyday life. However, one-shot films allow for memory coherence; offscreen space behind the camera takes on an extra burden in the viewer's mind, mentally carrying the total space traversed since the beginning of the shot/film.[277] Because of its indivisible fixedness and consistency, this traversed space lingers as a mental after-image in less attenuated fashion than the norm, whereby editing does the mind's work for it. This lingering image of the trodden path widens the offscreen baggage in the spectator's mind—an ever-present, ever-evolving offscreen. The sheer number of spaces, of shots, when cutting takes up viewer bandwidth. Regardless of specific content, each shot adds to the mental load, rectangle by rectangle. Viewers are given more to reckon with, more impetus to refresh their focus and move along with the narrative. One-shot films are not characterised by this constant shock of stimulus and fresh locations, encouraging dwelling in a continuous location. They offer a precise and verisimilar facsimile of the phenomenological act of travelling, facilitating backwards spatial memory with coherent linearity eluding the classically edited film.[278] This added spatial coherence is not permanently persisting, though.

[276] Thomas Harrison, "Offscreen Space, From Cinema and Sculpture to Photography, Poetry and Narrative," *California Italian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2017): 7.
[277] Tim Smith brings in studies which examine whether a spatiotemporal world lingers in a spectator's working memory, suggesting that "complete and coherent representations are not maintained" Tim J. Smith, "The Attentional Theory of Cinematic Continuity," *Projections* 6, no. 1 (May 2012): 30.
[278] An empirical trial asking subjects to relate the path taken in one-shot films versus traditionally edited films would perhaps yield data to support this more holistic spatial short-term memory.

The excessive strain upon spatial memory means that even one-shot film space eventually drops out of working memory.[279] In this way, the one-shot form mirrors the limits of human perception itself, promising unbroken continuity yet inevitably succumbing to the mind's own lapses.

Telephones play a key role in making offscreen space feel tangible in one-shot films. Scholars note the importance of telephones in narrative, yet they are easily overlooked due to their prosaic quality.[280] A ubiquitous device in one-shot narratives, they broaden the scope of the diegesis in the absence of cutting. They provide a way to cut away without cutting, reflecting modernity's collapse of space and time, but still taking place within a continuity of space and time. In both centripetal and centrifugal one-shot films, phone calls provide a virtual, offscreen centrifugality working in tandem with the concrete spatial movement of the film/shot. Filmmakers shape and emphasize imaginary or virtual space to compensate for the limits inherent to the one-shot constraint (i.e., each event or object needing to be found within travelling distance of the starting point), adding centrifugal degrees using an external audio referent. For example, the Nepalese film *Jaalo* (Araaj Keshav Giri, 2018), which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Five, portrays a criminal businessman secluded in his mansion alongside a group of associates whose peace is repeatedly disrupted by mysterious and

[279] In an admittedly extreme example, Kyle Stine claims the thirty-six-day long *Logistics* (2012) is remembered as an abstraction only. "*Logistics* can in a certain sense be held in memory, but it is only the schematic idea that we hold. We cannot sync up with it." Kyle Stine, "Nonhuman Cinema and the Logistical Sublime," *October* 177 (2021): 121. Some memory abstraction takes place in traditional one-shot films too.

[280] Claude Fischer, in his social history of telephones, devotes a chapter to the subtle process of the telephone becoming a commonplace object. He invokes Sigfried Gideon's "anonymous history" to characterize this "achievement of ordinariness," transforming phones from "an option to a requirement." Claude S. Fischer, *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940* (University of California Press, 1992), 175. Siegfried Giedion. *Mechanization Takes Command.* Oxford University Press, 1948. Tom Gunning also describes the "the wonderfully cinematic, yet disarmingly unspectacular, technology of the telephone." Tom Gunning, "Fritz Lang Calling: The Telephone and the Circuits of Modernity," in *Allegories of Communication: Intermedial Concerns from Cinema to Digital*, ed. John Fullerton and Jan Olsson (John Libbey, 2004), 21. Marcel Proust also captures this process: "The telephone, a supernatural instrument before whose miracles we used to stand amazed, and which we now employ without giving it a thought, to summon our tailor or to order an ice cream." Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume V: The Captive & The Fugitive*, trans. C. K Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright (Modern Library Paperback Edition, 2003), 32.

threatening phone calls from an apparently omnipotent entity that has seemingly breached the confines of their compound. Even as the unbroken camera movement remains fixed on this group of characters, the mansion's telephone becomes the cynosure of large portions of the film, paranoically opening the narrative onto a swirling and indeterminate world of threats that are half real and half imagined. The use of phones expands the spatial scope of the film and broadens the range of narrative possibilities while still allowing filmmakers to continue the unbroken take with ease.

Though one-shot films follow in the long tradition of cinematic telephony, they depart from the historical norms of representing the call: They depict only one-sided phone calls. Foundational accounts of cinematic telephony cover its conditioning influence upon the language of parallel cutting. Ned Schantz asks us to "consider how rarely in film we share the limited vision of a character on the phone, and how often we see what the character cannot see."[281] In one-shot films, this situation is reversed wholesale, proving that telephones are equally indispensable in warding off the need for cutting.[282] In James Cutting's description of how phone scenes are edited, he provides a brief account of these situations before moving on: "In one-sided calls, the viewer sees only one character on the phone in one location. This case is unproblematic for the notion of the spatial wholeness of a scene."[283] One-shot telephone scenes are less visually fulsome than normative, two-sided examples, but doubly as important in terms of function. Telephone scenes are catalysts for sensory imagination, inviting mental visualizations.[284] Cinematic narration in one-shot films is directly affected by

[281] Ned Schantz, "The Telephonic Film," *Film Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2003): 23.
[282] *Last Call* (Gavin Michael Booth, 2019). A unique "one-shot film," deserving of parentheses because it is composed of two continuous shots that are synchronised together. It focuses on a female character talking with a suicidal stranger on the phone. It is the ultimate phone one-shot film; phones are essential to the film, even its name. The two compositions subtly play off each other, creating a sustained, minimalist form of montage.
[283] James E. Cutting, "Evolution of the Depiction of Telephone Calls in Popular Movies," *Projections* 16, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 4.
[284] As Ned Schantz notes, "the phone accommodates an old and deep cinematic desire to be in two or more places at once, to transcend the limits of our individuality." Schantz, "The Telephonic Film," 23.

sound mixing, whether viewers hear both voices or just one. The telephone portals to the unseen, a conduit through which voices traverse space and time, creating a virtual realm within the confines of the frame.[285] In this sense, telephones become both a narrative hinge and a phenomenological device, extending the film's spatial field beyond what is visible and reminding viewers that cinema's continuity is both acoustic and visual.

Tom Gunning describes cinema's "particular affinity" for representing telephony.[286] He explicates filmic telephony regarding its broad, ontological kinship with cinema and its specific pragmatic usages.[287] In Bordwellian fashion, he explains the prevalence of phones in any domain of film as tied to developments in film style: "there are specific historical periods, genres, or directors which most brilliantly exploit cinema's affinity with modern technology."[288] This observation suggests that phone scenes have a direct, traceable explanation in a given case. Telephones appear in one-shot films because the technology for achieving truly continuous takes has come about concurrently to an era of complex, multi-location plotting, requiring more locations than can be reasonably travelled to. As an "extension of the power to command over space," phones allow for the complex development of character and plot, whose powers are dulled without cuts.[289] With other aspects of staging out of control, telephone scenes allow one-shot filmmakers to cede the action to a virtual plane and thus wrest back control; as Ned Schantz notes, "telephone conversations seem more subject to control, and more capable of perfection, than exchanges that depend on our

[285] This dynamic recalls Michel Chion's concept of "acousmatic voices," "a situation wherein one hears the sound without seeing its cause." Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (Columbia University Press, 1994), 32.
[286] Gunning, "Fritz Lang Calling," 20.
[287] Gunning, "Fritz Lang Calling," 23.
[288] Gunning, "Fritz Lang Calling," 21.
[289] Gunning, "Fritz Lang Calling," 24.

whole bodies."[290] Rather than having to continually sculpt the scene out of the hard rock of physical reality, filmmakers can fluidly maintain narratives through audio.

*Utøya: July 22* (Erik Poppe, 2018) demonstrates how expansive and palpable offscreen space can become within one-shot filmmaking. Although the camera remains anchored to a restricted visual field, the world beyond the frame develops with a richness and complexity equal to that of the visible image. It depicts the 2011 Norway attacks from the viewpoint of its victims. Viewers are forced to imagine a world of violence that remains only partially accessible, producing a pervasive sense of dread that extends far beyond what the camera directly shows. Regardless of whether onscreen mobility is centrifugal or centripetal, the offscreen dimension can, with suitable subject matter, acquire an intensity that surpasses the visible spaces through which the camera moves.

Beginning in the empty woods, protagonist Kaja walks before the camera. In a confrontational device, she seemingly introduces herself directly to the audience through the film's sole fourth wall break: "You'll never understand. Just listen to me, okay?" With this gesture, she establishes herself as the primary focus—the viewer's key to access this tragedy. This fourth wall break is subsequently redacted, however, as she turns her head to reveal that she has been talking to her mother on the phone using an earpiece. It is a visual trick to symbolically break the diegesis. From here, the film embodies a typical case of one-shot film character alignment.

This phone conversation provides backstory while establishing the presence of risk and worry, with Kaja's mother informing her about the bombing in Oslo earlier that day. The worrying presence of this information is further dramatized: just prior to the attack, Kaja and other youths have a minor spat about the Oslo attack, speculating as to the nature of the

[290] Schantz, "The Telephonic Film," 26.

incident based on the scant rumours available. These snatches of information loom as premonitions over the first seventeen minutes of *Utøya: July 22* before the depicted attack begins. These harbingers reinforce the restricted narration, highlighting the fragility of these characters who could not know, as only the attacker could, the full extent of the situation. This ignorance is shared by everyone, but these characters are destined to encounter the ongoing threat. Red herrings and false signs of relief arise from this lack of information: the early dialogue is designed to become a tragic ironic prelude. Kaja's mother assures her that the "island is safe." This statement is inverted completely, as islands become a trap once danger breaches their borders.[291] The single shot possesses this dualistic quality: suggesting freedom and openness, but capable of transforming into a limiting prison in certain circumstances.

Once the attack begins, this restricted knowledge continues to proffer narrative dividends. We witness the onset of terror and confusion in real time. People run hurriedly in the background, gunshots are mistaken for firecrackers, and Kaja unknowingly assures others that "it's okay." Later, whilst hiding, several students debate whether the situation is a panic drill, whether the sounds are actual gunfire, and whether police are the perpetrators. Amidst the objective terror unfolding, Kaja undertakes the contained, subjective task of finding her sister, Emilie—a split between subjective affect and societal affect in the narrative, created by character alignment and restricted narration. Kaja's personality is important for the narrative: we follow an active rather than passive character in the situation, as hiding scenes would not be as dramatic (though there are still hiding scenes). The camera itself occasionally appears to assume the role of another agent experiencing the situation, functioning as a vassal

[291] A line later in the film: "The island is way too small. There are no places to hide."

organism following Kaja and sharing her experience, sometimes appearing to duck and crouch in hiding just like the characters.[292]

Offscreen space is constantly active and continuously developed in *Utøya: July 22*. While it has lengthy waiting periods that are centripetal, it generally operates as open and centrifugal, traversing around the island setting, delegating part of the narrative expression to offscreen space. As Leo Braudy writes, "the open film likes to explore the tension between offstage and onstage."[293] The offscreen swells in scope, directly creating anxiety onscreen in a combination of concrete and imaginary space in Burch's terminology. The volleys of noise from the attacker's gunshots create incessant offscreen momentum. Extras run frantically from the direction of the gunshots, further personifying the offscreen. An unseen antagonist wreaks havoc in seen spaces, reaching a pitch at the film's conclusion. The attacker only appears twice onscreen—vaguely, and from a distance.[294] The camera makes motions to try and get glimpses of the unknown assailant(s). Offscreen gunshots come from different sides of the frame, leading to visible shudders and audible screams. Part of the viewing mind is always allocated towards the offscreen dimension in *Utøya: July 22*.

Like many one-shot films, telephones enable *Utøya: July 22* to gain extra narrative dimensions despite spatial limitations.[295] Throughout the film, Kaja repeatedly tries to call her sister. The call is never answered, which increases the isolation and panic of the situation. Furthermore, in later quiet hiding scenes, a character orders that another turns off their phone, as it could alert the attacker, thus increasing the sense of frustration and unease associated

[292] The film switches between first and third person, akin to videogames. Videogames frequently employ highly restricted narration.
[293] Braudy, *The World in a Frame*, 50.
[294] In Béla Tarr's *Macbeth* (1982), Banquo's ghost is left entirely offscreen, an example of offscreen space being used both for dramatic purposes and as a potential money-saver.
[295] Jan Olsson writes that telephones are an "important tool for the tuning and demarcating of area codes." Jan Olsson, "Framing Silent Calls: Coming to Cinematographic Terms with Telephony" in *Allegories of Communication: Intermedial Concerns from Cinema to Digital*, ed. John Fullerton and Jan Olsson (John Libbey, 2004), 158.

with the phone. Finally, a lengthy sequence depicting the tragic final moments of a victim is underscored by her mother trying to call her after her death, visible on the phone screen. After this litany of frustration, the film ends on another cruelly ironic twist, as Kaja is killed and her presumed-dead sister is revealed to be on an escape boat. This final gesture highlights the arbitrariness of the character alignment, which in turn is a gesture symbolising universal empathy for the victims.

Poppe's film demonstrates the unique narratives that arise when exploiting the inherent limitations of the one-shot form in a sustained manner. The unbroken take acquires its own sense of agency, plunging viewers into the horror of the situation in a totalizing way. The killer's presence is established through adept sound design and restrained glimpses, creating a sustained sense of fear without glorifying or legitimizing his hateful actions. This film specifically demonstrates how the overall perceptual impact of one-shot films resides not just in the visible space, but in the overall continuum of space—actual and virtual, onscreen and offscreen—that is implied through its camera movements. The ongoing restricted narration inherent to the form, in addition to the filmmakers' shrewd use of sound design and mediating devices such as telephones, repositions much of the narrative heft to an offscreen location. Working in tandem with both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies, this wider circumambient diegesis plays a substantial role in many one-shot works.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined how diegetic space exists and evolves in one-shot films, discussing both common variations of continuity and more complex spatial dynamics and filmmaking strategies. Each one-shot film consists of a singular navigation of space, opening rich possibilities for variation and categorisation. This chapter has undertaken a non-

exhaustive categorisation of these forms while also situating them within a broader contextual framework, drawing on film theory and related fields to sketch the genealogy of different cinematic narrative shapes.

While this chapter has adopted a relatively formal and systematic approach in describing spatially centripetal and centrifugal tendencies, Chapter Four introduces an opposing tendency characterised by chance, accident, and contingency. Chance does not emerge from nowhere, but rather from pressures immanent within the spatial systems outlined here. Although this chapter has organised one-shot films into patterns and structures, these systems are never entirely closed or deterministic. Chance can emerge from within structure itself, not simply from outside it. In aiming toward a predetermined path, continuous navigation through space always risks disruption, remaining vulnerable to deviation, interruption, and error.

The guiding structures of alignment undertaken by the camera expose the shot to contingency precisely because the camera cannot cut away, instead enduring whatever unfolds along its path. Any deviation therefore becomes visible and durationally extended; the durational alignment of one-shot films becomes the condition under which chance can appear. Both centripetal and centrifugal one-shot films are calibrated, in their own ways, toward encounters with chance, contingency, and accident. This chapter has shown how one-shot films organise space, but it has also pointed toward the limits of that organisation. The absence of cuts imposes the need for control, yet that same absence removes cinema's primary mechanism for correcting or concealing accidents. We have already seen how navigation through time and space produces continuity in the one-shot film. However, as we shall see in the next chapter, continuity can also function as a sustained exposure to cinematic excess.

# CHAPTER FOUR:
# CHANCE IN ONE-SHOT FILMS

In the twentieth century, artists began to consciously incorporate chance elements into their work. As Rudolf Arnheim summarises, "the phenomenal chaos of accident from which man seeks refuge in art, has invaded art itself."[296] Every major art form dealt with the discursive blows of chance.[297] Certain filmmakers explicitly advanced mistakes and imperfections as stylistic traits, a gesture common in other art forms.[298] Robert Bresson continually invoked chance as central to his process, including in his *Notes on Cinematography* the self-command: "Wonderful chances, those that act with precision … to reserve for them, in advance, a place in your composition."[299] Filipino filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik embraced "cups-of-gas filmmaking," a filmmaking approach shot through with imperfections, inconsistencies, and improvisation, reflecting his lack of institutional funding.[300] This circuitous approach to filmic creation infuses the process with serendipity and organic creation. Each of these filmmakers employing contingency subtly prefigures the ethos of one-shot filmmaking.

One-shot films are explicitly open to unpredictability, becoming a privileged site for exploring the role of chance, excess, risk, and dead time in cinema. Their unbroken form creates conditions where unforeseen events can exert a structural influence upon the work.

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[296] Rudolf Arnheim, "Accident and the Necessity of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16, no. 1 (1957): 24.

[297] The recent two-part edited collection, *Figures of Chance*, comprehensively catalogues the role of chance across arts and disciplines over the past five centuries. Anne Duprat, Fiona McIntosh Varjabédian, and Anne-Gaëlle Weber (editors). *Figures of Chance I: Chance in Literature and the Arts (16th–21st Centuries)* (Routledge, 2023). Anne Duprat and Alison James (editors). *Figures of Chance II: Chance in Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2024).

[298] Poet J.V. Cunningham writes of a friend's poetry that "chance with craft combines, in the predestined space, to lend his damaged lines, redeeming grace." J.V. Cunningham, *The Collected Poems and Epigrams of J.V. Cunningham* (Swallow Press, 1971), 59.

[299] Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (Urizen Books, 1977), 18.

[300] Kidlat Tahimik, "Cups-of-Gas Filmmaking vs. Full Tank-cum-Credit Card Fillmaking," *Discourse* 11, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1989): 80-86.

Given the vast intellectual history of chance, my discussion is limited to its relevance for film studies and, more specifically, for one-shot films. As David Wylot aphoristically remarks, "chance means different things in different contexts."[301] Here, I understand chance in relation to cinema's automatic reproduction of reality and its susceptibility to capturing unforeseen elements. While this potential lingers in all cinematic representation, it is especially pronounced in one-shot films. My concern therefore is not with chance as the universal force that it is, but how contingency shapes and illuminates the aesthetic qualities of one-shot films.

Chance widely permeates human affairs, operating at every depth of experience, reaching to the core of art and science. It is central to the human organism, as Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory reveals in the nineteenth century, and physical reality, as quantum research reveals in the twentieth. This phenomenon operates across countless other fields and subfields. This prominence proliferates the terms and concepts associated with chance from all directions. Despite this existent theoretical depth, chance is consciously only one chapter of my dissertation—one perspective on one-shot films.

One-shot filmmaking is structured around an inherent aporia: the irreconcilable pull between authorial control and the contingent flow of real time in real space. Chance is central to the ontology of the image, the nature of profilmic events, and their fusion *qua* the viewing experience. A defining attribute of one-shot films, concepts of contingency intuitively apply to this filmmaking form that definitionally lacks cuts. The singular audiovisual shot becomes an arena of dualistic battle: the more time afforded, the greater span for unforeseen elements to arise, and the more elaborate the techniques required to regulate and contain this unruly force. This unique production process, balancing chance and control, creates rhythms and

[301] David Wylot, *Reading Contingency: The Accident in Contemporary Fiction* (Routledge, 2020), 3.

affinities for particular contingent phenomena. Some of these affinities are distinctive to one-shot filmmaking, while others continue cinema's longstanding attraction to unpredictable aspects of material reality.

## THEORIZING CHANCE

There is terminological slippage when discussing chance. Words take on different valences according to different fields of study. Loyal to its nature, the concept itself is unpredictable at every definitional juncture. I will quickly define some terms as I employ them. The precise definitions of these terms should not take precedence over the theorisations of one-shot films they are in service of. They are terminological tools to understand common dynamics of one-shot films. Chance, contingency, accident, and risk are some terms I use in this chapter.[302] I use "chance" when referencing individual moments. I use the term "accident" when referring to events that were specifically not intended to occur, incidents that were designed to be screened out of a film. I use "risk" when referring to the general state or attitude assumed by filmmakers that renders the film-in-progress more open to unintended elements. I use "contingency" when referring to a film's broad sweep, its extended trajectory. Contingency is something that could have happened differently, applying to films in both a micro and macro sense. Incidental contingency is different from structural contingency: the former covers the singularity of, for example, a passing facial expression, while the latter refers to a film's entire itinerary being arbitrary. Structural contingency is more kindred with documentary films, with freer rein to change direction in search of story. *Flight of a Bullet* (Beata Bubenets, 2017) is a one-shot film structurally defined by

[302] David Wylot discusses the interrelationship between key chance-related concepts: "Accidents are actualisations of contingency and chance, but contingency and chance are qualities of existential possibility." Wylot, *Reading Contingency*, 7.

contingency, with unplanned events shaped by the vicissitudes of ongoing warfare in Eastern Ukraine, where certainty of movement is impossible. The act of filming generates drama—filmmakers argue onscreen over direction, negotiate their right to film, and are directed by soldiers—binding the camera to the real-time fog of war. In the second half, the camera follows an off-duty soldier speaking to his girlfriend, producing a bifurcated structure between military and personal strategy.[303] The film thus narrativizes the protean capacities of the one-shot form, demonstrating a structural attunement to contingency largely absent from fictional one-shot films.

Chance enters the cinematic viewing experience through many gaps. At each moment of runtime, unforeseen events either occur or do not occur. Furthermore, viewers either perceive or do not perceive these events as unplanned. Already there are four different results:

1. A chance event occurs and the viewer perceives it as such,
2. A chance event occurs and the viewer does not perceive it as chance,
3. Nothing by chance occurs yet the viewer perceives it as having occurred by chance,
4. Nothing by chance occurs and the viewer does not perceive it as being by chance.

This loose taxonomy comes before interrogating the intentions of the filmmakers—whether they encourage or discourage unplanned elements. It is important to distinguish between films that narratively represent chance and films that are formally and ontologically determined by contingency. This chapter is geared towards the latter. Chance is narratively depicted with aplomb in certain one-shot films, such as the network narratives that I covered

[303] This film also embodies my observation in Chapter Three that certain one-shot films are split down the middle between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies.

in the previous chapter, but consciously depicting chance is different from contingency determining the film in some manner. My focus is the fundamental affinity that one-shot films have with unexpected elements—both events being recorded during production and during the viewing experience.

One must carefully distinguish between production process and finished, exhibited film when discussing chance in one-shot films. Conceptualizing one-shot films, one imagines the fragility and risk of a live performance occurring in real time. However, unlike live performances, which are still open and volatile, one-shot films are a past event re-presented. Through narrative logic, chance is transformed from the contingent into the necessary, as the homogeneous thread of runtime gathers disparate events into structure, effecting "the creative transformation of the indeterminate into the determinate."[304] Regardless of how difficult a profilmic event was to capture, it is unchangeably altered once presented to audiences, differing ontologically. It is a framed, past occurrence rather than an ongoing process—something that happened rather than something happening.[305] With this subtle difference, one-shot films are shorn of genuine ontological risk—yet nevertheless remain associated with this ethos.

Peggy Phelan examines this difference between performance and recording: "Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."[306] Production of one-shot films involves a performance, but this

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[304] Thomas C. Hilde, "Intelligence, Accident, and Art as a Practice," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 36, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 559.

[305] D. W. Theobald points out that 'chance' and 'accident' are not terms of description, but interpretation. As Theobald describes, "to talk about chance events is often to talk about the future." The ongoing production process still has future uncertainty, whereas the exhibited film no longer does. Any chance event becomes an accident, as Theobald continues, referring to a past event that has already happened. D. W. Theobald, "Accident and Chance," *Philosophy* 45, no. 172 (1970): 113.

[306] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1993), 146.

performance is grouped and capsuled in a way that contains and neutralises the risk during exhibition. One-shot films display a paradox of risk: a form shot through with production risks nevertheless possesses the same exhibition risks as any film.[307] As I examine in detail in the next chapter, the norms surrounding the labelling of one-shot films assume a more prominent role than in traditionally edited cinema. Paratexts amplify the perception of risk, carrying it from the moment of production into the moment of consumption. As Phelan says, when "performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology."[308] The performance becomes controllable and replicable but stripped of any risk. One-shot films enter this economy of reproduction, buoyed by the association of risk, yet are unable to feel its influence anymore once completed and edited.

Perceptions of chance events are subjective to the viewer. Viewers question their own judgement as to whether onscreen phenomena are intended as they appear, or whether impressive feats were genuinely executed in profilmic space. Thomas C. Hilde hints towards this indeterminacy of intention: "Much remains concealed in a work, especially the existence of accident in the process of its production," only recognizable "insofar as the constructed object represents or traces that history within its own representation."[309] Chance in a finished and edited film resides in the viewer's individual perception, akin to the "psychophysical correspondences" outlined by Siegfried Kracauer that I mentioned in Chapter Two. In an evergreen passage from *Theory of Film*, Kracauer applies the term to the process whereby any filmic image, regardless of its place in a broader sequence, evokes myriad unique

[307] A notable exception is *Lost in London* (Woody Harrelson, 2017), a one-shot film, the first ever film to screen live in theatres as it was produced. In this case, genuine risk infiltrates the exhibition stage, as a major mistake could fundamentally alter the experience. However, the film was made without a hitch and is quite aesthetically run-of-the-mill. Similar is Blast Theory's live filmed work *My One Demand* (2015), streamed live as a one-shot in Toronto: an interesting exception to the performance/recording paradigm.
[308] Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.
[309] Hilde, "Intelligence, Accident, and Art as a Practice," 553

thoughts and sensations in the mind of each viewer.[310] More akin to a surreal encounter, the spectator is continuously prompted to travel down mental passages, the meanings of the imagery adhering to the singular whims of the viewing mind and thereby capable of proliferation at every juncture. Psychophysical correspondences are more prevalent in one-shot films, due to the inherent wandering openness of the form. Cognitive completion is required by viewers, operating within a crevice of indeterminacy—not, as usual, determined by constant cutting. This window of perceptual incompletion is where uncertainty is designated to operate in one-shot films. Viewers are more primed to query about chance, fuelling the process of its interpretation. They may perceive an intentional element as accidental because they were looking out for accidents. However, their lack of full production knowledge means that this perception of chance renders it chance nonetheless—perceived as chance, by chance.

Henry Bacon describes how viewers fill the perceptual gaps inherent to the cinematic experience, claiming that diegetic worlds are constructed through incomplete brushstrokes, made whole by the viewing mind and viewer memories. Like real world perception, phenomena require filling in: "On all levels with a varying balance between conscious and unconscious mental processes we either fill in or do not fill in incomplete data according to the cognitive and affective demands of the situation we are facing."[311] Like other cognitivists, Bacon claims that character motivations are central to this process of spatial construction.[312] Jimmy Billingham claims that every film contains irreducible indeterminacy.[313] Therefore,

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[310] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton University Press, 1960), 69.

[311] Henry Bacon, "The Extent of Mental Completion in Films," *Projections* 5, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 33.

[312] Similarly, Tim Smith claims that human visual attention is essential to continuity editing and the overall perceptual construction of a film. Smith notes that visual continuity is *a priori* in the world and therefore the expectation of continuity is brought to the viewing experience and completes the effect of continuity editing. Tim J. Smith, "The Attentional Theory of Cinematic Continuity," *Projections* 6, no. 1 (May 2012).

[313] Billingham challenges David Bordwell's distinction between implicit and explicit film meanings. Jimmy Billingham, "Indeterminate Film-thinking and Interpretation," *Networking Knowledge* 2, no. 1 (2009): 1-14.

comprehension alone represents a form of interpretation from viewers; the "act of filmic comprehension inevitably shades into interpretation as indeterminacy increases."[314] This interpretation takes place at the plot level, as viewers fill in information to complete the fabula. Certain films and film styles contain more indeterminate structures, which "make possible a multitude of potential meanings."[315] Classical films minimize indeterminate qualities through editing, mise-en-scène, and narrative formulas. One-shot films, not containing edits, have greater indeterminacy to be interpreted by viewers. Moments of excess or transition that are traditionally elided stimulate this interpretive, completing response of the viewer, giving reign to a true sense of interpretive contingency. Viewers are freer to "supply the causal connections between events" and determine what is a significant narrative event in the first place.[316]

One-shot films invite chance-infused readings by eschewing the traditional guardrail against unintended elements entering the frame: the cut. As Mary Ann Doane writes, "the cut aborts the problem of an excess of the random, of chance in time."[317] Inversely, not cutting leads directly to excess within the shot—which exceeds normal proportions; in the words of Doane, the "sheer duration of filmic time allows for the random event, the surprise of the unexpected wave."[318] The image is saturated with more material than noticeable or necessary to the shot's conventional narrative function, which crowds around the intentional story material during interpretation. The unexpected provides both an exciting frisson and an anxious threat. There are two reasons to intuitively associate one-shot films with chance: the lack of usual control over framing and imagery, and the extended risk of mistakes that stems

[314] Billingham, "Indeterminate Film-thinking," 5.
[315] Billingham, "Indeterminate Film-thinking," 3.
[316] Billingham, "Indeterminate Film-thinking," 11.
[317] Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 137.
[318] Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time,* 137.

from the duration of complex staging. Being prohibited to cut also means being prohibited to reset and try a scene (or scenes) again—at least without organisational and economical cost.[319] When impressively staged events occur in one-shot films, their aesthetic impact is intensified by being achieved without a recent reset, as well as the labour/time/cost intensive risk of failing in execution. The fragility of ongoing events sharpens viewers' attention to the fine points of staging, dispersed across a film yet periodically crystallising in moments of heightened dynamism. This existential engagement with chance lends one-shot films a persistent sense of freshness; even during ostensibly mundane sequences, viewers remain attentive, convinced, like Sylvia Plath, that "A certain minor light may still/Leap incandescent/Out of kitchen table or chair."[320] The refusal to cut thus produces a diffused sense of intrigue, unfolding through the spectator's ongoing negotiation with the temporal and spatial fabric of the one-shot film.

The desire for control over the image is the default in most filmmaking practices. The rapid cutting of Soviet formalists and classic Hollywood continuity editing both command viewer attention while allowing for greater control over mise-en-scène, as shorter shot duration allows less room for mistakes or contingency. Sergei Eisenstein foundationally articulates this directorial philosophy, whereby the "organizing logic" of the filmmaker (and/or editor) forcefully transforms the "inert logic" of the filmed object.[321] It is assumed that more runtime—the longer a shot is held—allows more room for contingency. Unbroken duration and space have ramifications regarding control over what gets captured in the cinematic image. Adam Ganz and Lina Khatib observe vagueness and looseness in digital

[319] This point mostly applies to non-simulated one-shot films, which are authentically composed of just one shot. Simulated one-shot films, which rely on hidden transitions such as swish pans or digital compositing to stitch together shorter scenes, lose the frisson of chance.
[320] This line comes from the poem "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (Harper & Row, 1981), 57.
[321] Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (Harcourt, 1977), 40.

planning and framing of space due to reduced physical limitations: "Actors are freer to move in space, and lines of action are no longer so defined by what lighting is possible … the zone of action can be pre-lit and the stock is sufficiently sensitive to operate under all kinds of conditions."[322] One-shot films depend upon this newfound expressive freedom in the actor and cameraperson's movements. Actors are no longer cramped into tight boxes—they are not forced to perform with studious perfection, but free to wander. In this way, imperfection is baked into the film form itself. Several minor mistakes inevitably arise from shooting from the cinematic hip in this manner. Imperfections are either cleaned in postproduction, or left in the film, possibly to the scorn of certain audience members. Either way, one-shot films have a different attitude towards traditional filmmaking control.[323]

The fundamental porosity of one-shot films to chance is a unique strength and selling point. While chance can register as anxiety or a threat to order, it also generates positive affect and creativity, injecting serendipitous elements that may artistically supersede the results of planning. Scholarship consistently frames chance as a positive creative force occurring in time.[324] Thomas Hilde describes it as "allowing one's temporary ends or ends-in-view to be reconstituted," signalling a brave "ability to come to terms with and rejoice in resistances and redirections."[325] Matilda Mroz argues that excess material in the durational image, operating counter-narratively, resonates with affect, contributing to richly stratified time.[326] These "unlocalizable intensities" are haptic or aesthetic in nature.[327] Yvette Bíro

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[322] Adam Ganz and Lina Khatib, "Digital Cinema: The Transformation of Film Practice and Aesthetics," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 4, no. 1 (May 2006): 22.
[323] Nicholas Rombes writes that digital technology "encourages a new way of seeing, one that is open to the capturing of mistakes, errors, and randomness of the reality being filmed." Nicholas Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age*, revised edition (Wallflower Press, 2017), 46.
[324] Lutz Koepnick describes "the fundamental productivity and openness of time." Lutz Koepnick, *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 13.
[325] Hilde, "Intelligence, Accident, and Art as a Practice," 557.
[326] Ivone Margulies also discusses the structure of filmic excess. Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Duke University Press, 1996).
[327] Matilda Mroz, *Temporality and Film Analysis* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 138.

describes how accumulating contingencies, digressions, and ruptures generate filmic affect, celebrating "the warmth of haphazard events."[328] An affective imperative to include the unintended thus influences one-shot filmmakers.

One-shot filmmakers differ in how faithfully they pursue their pre-vision; some strive for Platonic perfection, others embrace looseness. Digital technology expands durational capacity and camera mobility, enabling spontaneity. Gilles Mouëllic identifies a new "aesthetics of improvisation" made possible by lightweight digital cameras, producing "other forms of inventiveness and other forms of virtuosity."[329] Unlike analogue cameras, digital tools allow filmmakers "to recreate conditions on set that (mirror) real life as closely as possible."[330] Against technological determinism, the digital world is vitiated by "an element of indeterminacy and subjectivity (that) will continue to prevail as a force of resistance."[331] Excess is a virtue of digital duration—an antidote to sterile perfection, renewing a work's perceptual freshness. The unbounded shot adeptly portrays "those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces."[332] Coining the term "DV humanism," Nicholas Rombes celebrates the crude and imperfect early digital aesthetic, allowing for "the uncontrolled emergence of the real into the frame."[333] Though irrational, such excess retains a warmth often presumed lost in the shift from celluloid. Many one-shot films thrive in this patchwork world of digital representation.

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[328] Yvette Bíro, *Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design* (Indiana University Press, 2008), 54.
[329] Gilles Mouëllic, "Improvisation, Machines, Cinema" in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts*, ed. Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta (Routledge, 2021), 552-53.
[330] Mouëllic. "Improvisation, Machines, Cinema," 551.
[331] Mouëllic. "Improvisation, Machines, Cinema," 554. Bruce Isaacs states that the opposing paths of digital are perfection or fallibility: "Digitality at the low end of production promises … a humanistic engagement with flaws, degradation and decomposition." Bruce Isaacs, *The Orientation of Future Cinema: Technology, Aesthetics, Spectacle* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 255.
[332] Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess." *Ciné-Tracts* 1, no. 2 (1977): 54.
[333] Rombes. *Cinema in the Digital Age*, 46.

Although one-shot films share definitional constraints, they do not converge on a single aesthetic. For some, undertaking the challenge outweighs the finished result; their work humbly seeks to "circumscribe a realm in which accident may play itself out,"[334] acknowledging irreducible contingency and human limitations. For others, the goal is external: simply reaching feature length. Runtime itself becomes a basic certificate of achievement, regardless of the quality contained within. Like a makeshift theatrical troupe whose sole goal is to serve a dollop of executed entertainment, they are partially immune to criticism; harshly criticizing their dramatic failings applies an erroneous criterion of quality to their goals. In such cases, recurrent structures signify this 'making up' of time, limping toward the final cut, visual symptoms of spacing narrative and affective beats without reset. Classical Hollywood editing persists here as a reference point, surfacing through imperfect gestures.[335]

One-shot films thrive in capturing, taming, and displaying events in space and time, drawing attention to incidental patterns. A rudimentary action of one-shot films is circumscribing a section of reality. For example, *Lunch Break* (Sharon Lockhart, 2008) takes place entirely in a long corridor in a shipyard, with the camera gliding in slow motion past workers eating their lunch. With no other scenes, locations, or context, Lockhart's film finds its aesthetic justification entirely on its own terms, framing and slowly perusing a single setting. This simple act renders the shot pleasurable and worthwhile. Framed sections of duration are appreciated for their own sake, generating their own aesthetic appeals. In *The Open Work,* Umberto Eco claims that "if I draw a square around a crack in a wall with a piece of chalk, I automatically imply that I have chosen that crack over others and now

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[334] Hilde, "Intelligence, Accident, and Art as a Practice," 558.

[335] As Samuel Johnson once wrote of the necessary compromises that come with undertaking a large and unwieldy work: "nor can it be expected, that the stones which form the stone of a temple, should be squared and polished like the diamond of a ring." Samuel Johnson, "Preface to the Dictionary" in *Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1952), 233.

propose it as a particularly suggestive form."[336] Translating this notion to cinema, Matilda Mroz describes the aesthetic pleasure arising from cinema's ability to "seize the ephemeral."[337] This epiphany is a baseline pleasure resulting from one-shot films, amplified further when an actual *event* occurs, or when there appears some cosmic ballet in the mise-en-scène. Jordan Schonig repositions the appeal of cinematic contingency from capturing unplanned events to capturing "unplannable events": not the contingent existence of phenomena, but the contingent way they move, and the aesthetic effects that arise from grasping and framing them.[338]

The risk of incurring mistakes hovers over one-shot filmmaking, especially fictional centrifugal narratives that aim for a set path. In many ways, the technical and logistical risks faced by one-shot filmmakers are no different to those faced in traditional film productions. However, in one-shot films, risk is deliberately exposed; it is no longer minimised or concealed, instead becoming a structuring principle in a film's aesthetic. The commitment to planning and executing everything in one shot functions as a cinematic wager: a daring gesture and statement of intent that goes beyond mere technique. Risk is associated primarily with the preproduction stage—the real possibility that a mistake may scupper the plans and attempts. However, as I earlier mentioned with reference to Peggy Phelan, this risk is a mirage. While the risk of a mistake forcing filmmakers to restart hovers as a potentiality, the existence of the film itself means that such an accident did not and will not occur. If a real accident were to end the film, we would not be watching the film. If one were to characterise genuine accidents that could befall one-shot films—with real, destructive consequences—it would be something like sending the wrong cut to distributors, or an actor dying through

[336] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Harvard University Press, 1989), 99.
[337] Mroz, *Temporality and Film Analysis*, 14.
[338] Jordan Schonig, "Contingent Motion: Rethinking the "Wind in the Trees" in Early Cinema and CGI," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 40, no. 1 (2018): 32.

negligence on set. Any other invocation of accident with respect to these films is diluted: a contained accoutrement of danger rather than an actual existential risk for the film. As David Wylot writes, "the chance of an accidental event is intimately troubled when the events of a narrative, no matter how seemingly chanceful, are destined to occur and unfold within the terms of a fictional future that is already in place."[339] Everything has gone smoothly once at the exhibition stage; the film's course is set in place once viewers sit down to watch it.

Risk and uncertainty are always an alluring part of filmmaking, no matter how traditional. Mette Hjort's edited collection *Film and Risk* outlines the manifold ways that "risk determines cinematic style."[340] One-shot filmmaking develops this influence to an extreme. Traditional films face the risk of imperfect execution, but not the collapse of the whole film with a single error. Risk is also in the evaluative toolkit that viewers bring to one-shot films.[341] A parallel intrigue is at play regarding the potential failure of the take and the accompanying risk factor that blooms as the denouement approaches. In other words, the artefactual status of these films is more pronounced.[342] In my next chapter, I discuss the artefact emotions in one-shot films in more detail; risk is fundamental to this discussion, compelling viewers to consider films beyond just narrative immersion. Filmmakers may employ risk-management strategies to temper the destabilising influence of unruly forces; choices about setting, props, and filmmaking techniques are often made to safeguard against contingent elements. Each dramaturgical decision is made not just in view to the creation of an exciting narrative, but also with the added goal of lessening, or occasionally increasing,

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[339] Wylot, *Reading Contingency,* 1.

[340] Mette Hjort, *Film and Risk* (Wayne State University Press, 2012), 9. Risk is the central topic of two other recent cinema books. James Lyons, *Documentary, Performance, and Risk* (Routledge, 2020). and Michael Franklin, *Risk in the Film Business: Known Unknowns* (Routledge, 2023).

[341] Among the first declarations of one-shot intent invokes risk. Alfred Hitchcock, in his famous conversation with François Truffaut, declares that "I undertook *Rope* as a stunt." François Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock, *Truffaut/Hitchcock*, trans. Helen G. Scott, revised edition (Simon & Schuster, 1985), 179.

[342] This relates to my discussion of artefact emotions in Chapter Five, on reflexivity.

the level of risk (or at least the impression of risk). There is incentive to inflate these artefact emotions—to embrace risk and allow chance to intervene as creative agent. Hjort identifies "forms of risk taking that correlate with status, authority, and control" as well as "strong links between a highly valued phenomenon like creativity and risk taking."[343] The sport of figure skating provides an analogy: skaters receive more points when they perform complex jumps late in their routine, which is impressive because they are considered to be more tired. The technique of "backloading" refers to purposely attempting these late, risky jumps to boost points. This strategy is very similar to one-shot films, where impressive feats executed later in the shot are riskier yet promise greater artistic dividends. Thus, technically complex scenes taking place near the end—such as the magnificent climactic ballroom sequence in *Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov, 2002)—rightly stand out as transcendent moments in the form. Scenes preventing this virtuosic encounter from occurring are risk averse, putting a ceiling on their own expressive potential.

Sometimes, risk transcends the cloistered boundaries of cinema, potentially incurring real world consequences by filming the shot. One-shot films contain both production risk and real-world risk. Production risk relates to the practical and economic completion of a film. Production risk undergoes qualitative change under certain conditions, becoming risky in some broader social context. This potential reflects the hybridity of one-shot film productions, taking place partially on sets and partially in the real world.

An example is the social risk of filming in authoritarian countries. *A Date in Minsk* (Nikita Lavretski, 2019) takes place in a bar and on the streets of Minsk, Belarus. The characters make references in the dialogue to the danger of saying certain things aloud in this environment. The female character says, "to be honest, I'm kinda freaked out by this

[343] Hjort, *Film and Risk*, 22.

atmosphere." They then have a conversation about police presence and persecution, which looms as a risk in the city. Being out and about and speaking freely in Minsk brings forth a genuine political risk. As they voice these concerns, the very film they are producing makes them more likely to encounter this risk.

Risk also manifests as danger to filmmakers and others during production, infiltrating both short and long one-shot films. *C'était un rendez-vous* (Claude Lelouch, 1976) is a stunningly dangerous exercise in one-shot filmmaking. Driving a race car at breakneck speed around a major city—a highly illegal activity—has myriad real-world risks. An opening note ensures the audience of its authenticity, as viewers may doubt that such a risk was taken to produce a film. Numerous civilian vehicles and walking pedestrians are threatened by the swerving intensity of the camera-car. Though these figures have anonymous qualities, some linger and gain presence. For example, the car slows down slightly to squeeze between a woman with a dog and a garbage truck. Later, a man dashes across the car's path with little time to spare, as if misjudging its velocity. The camera's speed and spatial affordances are in constant negotiation. This speed breaches the normal ceiling of contained cinematic risk, bringing real-world legal and danger risks into contention.

## CASE STUDY: VEHICULAR TRAVEL IN ONE-SHOT FILMS[344]

In this section, I unravel a central affinity of one-shot films: the automobile journey.[345] While vehicles may seem an odd fit for this chapter's themes, I here discuss their paradoxically stabilising qualities in many one-shot films, whereby their usage functions as a

[344] This section was previously published as Jack O'Dwyer, "Hitching A Ride: Vehicular Travel In One-Take Films," *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture* 8, no. 3 (September 2023).
[345] This case study on the ambiguous role of vehicular travel is my second discussion of vehicles in this dissertation, having mentioned them briefly in the previous chapter in the context of centrifugal motion.

conservative strategy for managing the inherent risks of the form. I read and engage with narrative one-shot films on their own terms, reading vehicular scenes as symptomatic of the unique treatments of risk, contingency, dead time, and emotion that continuous films offer. There are noteworthy scenes throughout cinema history that use long takes to depict vehicular travel, including the notoriously slow highway scene near the beginning of Andrey Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), the static and observational vignettes of Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002), and the dazzling choreography of the ambush scene in *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006). The scenes I discuss are of essential difference, however; unlike the examples from traditionally edited films, they are not standalone, self-contained sequences. Instead, they function as transitions or bridges connecting more purposeful scenes in the film's unbroken narrative. They are not anchored by resetting cuts before the car journey begins, but more free-floating in presentation. While the mise-en-scène resembles these precursors, their embeddedness within the overall film—the link between part and whole—is quite different. My interest, then, is in vehicular scenes that are interspersed with yet durationally attached to the film's non-vehicular action. While there are similarities amongst my chosen film examples—all are dramas with a serious tone—the one-shot form serves varying genres with an itinerant ethos. The more action-oriented *PVC-1* (Spiros Stathoulopoulos, 2007) and *Victoria* (Sebastian Schipper, 2015), or comedic *Somebody Marry Me* (John Asher, 2013) and *Lost in London* (Woody Harrelson, 2017) contain comparable vehicle scenes. As I noted in my introduction chapter in relation to parametric cinema, one-shot films possess a baseline similarity from their shared technique. Vehicular scenes indicate this uniformity rising to the surface, revealing the common tissue binding together disparate genres, narratives, and national cinemas.

I proceed from the general assumption that, even before considering car scenes specifically, one-shot films and car journeys are conceptually alike.[346] Both are bounded events unfolding over a particular span of space and time. Lynne Pearce, in her essay "Driving-as-Event," proposes that "each and every car journey may be thought of as a unique and non-reproducible event in the lives of the drivers and passengers concerned on account of the variable psychological and situational factors involved."[347] Eric Laurier et al. write that "analysable, recognisable and quite mundane features of the journey provide an organisational structure."[348] Vehicular itineraries may be rigorous or loose, but must ultimately contend with the complex, singular, and non-repeatable circumstances of both participants and the outer world. Owing to these similarities, observations and concepts from automobility studies apply neatly to one-shot films (specifically those that undertake a centrifugal narrative journey). I draw concepts freely from sociological works insofar as they explain some aspect of vehicles in one-shot films.

In one-shot films, vehicles are privileged items, whose very motion and materiality snag upon the form, inflecting it with friction. Following Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, unravelling the intricacies of car travel (both in the real world and in cinema) is a way of reading everyday life, a way to "re-familiarise us with the centrality of the unremarkable and indispensable."[349] The multifaceted role played by automobiles in one-shot films is not always immediately clear because driving has become a mundane aspect of existence in the contemporary world: "a shadow activity,"[350] or "almost the background to

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[346] Anne Friedberg connects automobility and spectatorship, comparing windshields to frames. Anne Friedberg, "Urban Mobility and Cinematic Visuality: The Screens of Los Angeles: Endless Cinema or Private Telematics," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (August 2002): 183-204.
[347] Lynne Pearce, "'Driving-as-Event': Re-thinking the Car Journey," *Mobilities* 12, no. 4 (2017): 585.
[348] Eric Laurier et al., "Driving and 'Passengering': Notes on the Ordinary Organization of Car Travel," *Mobilities* 3, no. 1 (2008): 18.
[349] Laurier et al., "Driving and 'Passengering'," 4.
[350] Jörg Beckmann, "Mobility and Safety," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, nos. 4/5 (2004): 90.

the background."[351] The inconspicuous stability of vehicular journeys in everyday life allows these journeys to stabilize, in inconspicuous fashion, the one-shot production process.

A truism of contemporary automobility scholarship stresses the ambiguity and interdependence of all factors involved in car travel: the multivalent fusions and interconnections beyond immediate sight. Nigel Thrift points to the "extraordinarily complex everyday ecology of driving," characterized by "consistently high levels of ambiguity"[352] while Jörg Beckmann summarizes that "the car simultaneously enables and disables, individualizes and reintegrates, liberates its users from one auto-centred spatio-temporality and coerces them into another."[353] Numerous conceptual frameworks attempt to characterize the identity of the moving vehicle.[354] If consensus exists, it is that the combination of driver and car is a hybrid, an intertwining of identities. Yet adding a continuous camera to this concatenation, with cinema's attendant paradoxes and indeterminacies—of absence and presence, subject and object, onscreen and offscreen—only compounds this idea of "automobility as a never-ending spiral, fuelled by its own contradictions."[355] Not only a knotty hybrid of human and machinic components, audiovisual automobility is also a strange amalgamation of mobility and immobility. Those travelling in vehicles are safe from the surrounding phenomena outside, whilst also travelling at high speed (in certain contexts, like freeways at least). While car scenes shuttle characters through diegetic space faster than any other points in a one-shot film, the characters onscreen and working conditions offscreen are never more stabilized and centred. In paradoxical fashion, the most risk averse moments in one-shot films often occur at the highest speed. The concealed dynamism of car journeys

[351] Nigel Thrift, "Driving in the City," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, nos. 4/5 (2004): 46.
[352] Thrift, "Driving in the City," 48.
[353] Beckmann, "Mobility and Safety," 83.
[354] Tim Dant, for example, runs through affordances, assemblages, and actor-network theory in turn, assessing the explanatory strengths of each. Tim Dant, "The Driver-car," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, nos. 4/5 (2004): 61-79.
[355] Beckmann, 83.

mirrors one-shot films; both, like a swan, are accustomed to glide along the surface, repressing the moving parts beneath. I see vehicular travel in one-shot films as friction between form and content, taking inspiration from Paul Krumholz's assertion that *C'était un rendez-vous* "begins as an immersive experience and grows into a textual practice, mobilising, at the site of cognition, a glut of emergent ideas."[356]

Cars provide mastery over one's environment. John Urry writes that "the environment beyond that windscreen is an alien other, kept at bay through the diverse privatizing technologies incorporated within the car."[357] Vehicles similarly afford greater control over sound, lighting, and movement in one-shot filmmaking. As a result, their appearance often refers beyond narrative content, signalling insight into the film's production conditions, the strategies by which it was achieved, and the confidence of its execution. Automobiles frequently appear at the end of one-shot films, indicative of a conservative approach—a crutch to prevent nerves or exhaustion from spoiling the film at the precipice. Noël Burch, discussing cinematic chance, describes film styles that "banish the genuinely contingent and replace it with a semblance of sheer chance."[358] Given the criterion of risk, one-shot filmmakers desire to give the impression that their films unfold in the real world of uncertainty. Burch describes how this neutralised contingency is absorbed; when "sheer chance erupts on screen, a process of integration begins … as soon as a fragment from the uncontrolled world enters the scene, bidden or unbidden, it remains a foreign body for only a few seconds, losing all its strangeness."[359] Vehicles assist in this process of managing cinematic contingency.

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[356] Paul Krumholz, "Orienting Design, Discourse and Perception in C'était un rendez-vous," *Forum* 10 (2010): 12.
[357] John Urry, "Inhabiting the Car," *The Sociological Review* 54, no. 1 (2006): 23.
[358] Noël Burch and Helen Lane, *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 113.
[359] Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, 119.

Despite the general risk aversion of vehicular scenes, the mise-en-scène nevertheless contains unplanned elements—an illusionary aesthetic of contingency. Car windows—as quasi-cinematic screen doubles—frame, contain, and neutralise contingency. A sustained example occurs in *Joyful Mystery* (Don Palathara), a 2021 Malayalam-language one-shot film taking place entirely within a vehicle. A static camera, fixed to the dashboard, faces backwards, framing the two protagonists in the front seat, whose dialogue moves the narrative along. The vehicle's back window—a clipped rectangle stretching across the middle of the frame between protagonists—offers a constant portal onto the outside world, supplemented by two smaller slivers of window on either side. These sections of the frame combine such that the traffic and general environs are always in view. The divisions of film space, usually determined by montage, transform into a permanent internal frame—telescoped contingency, a frame for flux. Contingency is thus kept at bay, comparable to any number of other vehicular-based forms of control over the environment, from *Hale's Tours* to a safari trip. Cars connote a desire to safeguard the production from true unpredictability.

Beckmann describes how the whole enterprise of mobility is similarly predicated upon denying any accident that interrupts usual proceedings.[360] He addresses the paradoxical coexistence of mobility and immobility by distinguishing between real (Euclidean) space and network space: mobility in real space allows for stability and immutability within the wider network of people and actions contributing to the properly maintained system of automobility. Any deviation within this network stability—from a crash or other unforeseen stoppage—becomes an abject hazard that must be swiftly removed from view. When one-shot films glide along in vehicle space, the filmmakers trust that the network provides this stable consistency, assimilating the film-in-process into the network. In other words, vehicle scenes contribute to risk management. Like accidents in Beckmann's essay, failed one-shot

[360] Beckmann, "Mobility and Safety," 94.

efforts are not public. If seen, they are relegated to secondary locations such as "making-of" featurettes. While one-shot films ostensibly flirt with disaster, they avoid or escape from truly destructive mistakes.

Pearce notes a historical evolution in the subjective experience of driving from "being centred on the experience of driving/passengering in and of itself to the thought-processes occasioned by it."[361] As already mentioned, the dependability of automobility in one-shot films is conditioned by car journeys being prosaic and comfortable. With the proverbial ship steadied, vehicular scenes are conduits for 'dead time' or overt emotional displays. Since the camera manually moves between locations, these transitions are when narrative downtime occurs. Lengthy one-shot narratives uniquely embed dead time and excess whilst remaining uncut and mobile. Such moments give over to 'quiescence,' which David Bissell paints as a potentiality of contemporary travel—the "more sedate regularities and habitualities that are perhaps more characteristic of today's mobile experience.[362] *The Sad Smell of Flesh* (Cristóbal Arteaga, 2013)—a destitute drama set after the Great Recession—is punctured throughout with static and uneventful travel scenes. The first such scene occurs early, when the protagonist boards a bus before wordlessly looking around, framed with a glazed expression in a medium close-up, for six minutes. Later, when he enters a taxi, an aesthetically identical scene stretches over nine minutes, followed shortly thereafter by another three minutes. These scenes are darkly lit, quiet, and inexpressive, resembling the 'dead time' of arthouse cinema and slow cinema, where excessive time is afforded to minimal narrative action. One can question whether such periods in one-shot films are aesthetically designed as such or merely a consequence of requiring such an unhurried and

[361] Pearce, "'Driving-as-Event'," 587.
[362] David Bissell, "Travelling Vulnerabilities: Mobile Timespaces of Quiescence," *Cultural Geographies* 16, no. 4 (2009): 429.

gradual transition, left without a cut's ability to, *qua* Dziga Vertov, instantly put "together any given points in the universe."[363]

Arising from this (dubiously intentional) dead time is the treatment of emotion and affect in these films, also facilitated by vehicles. As Bissell notes, "quiescence is immanent to a series of very disparate experiences that can serve to both intensify and diminish affective capacities whilst on the move."[364] With little else of direct narrative consequence occurring in these scenes, the films fall back upon the overt expression of emotion. In other words, with the source of artefact emotions being stymied, fiction emotions become the exhaustive focus, whether narratively required or not. There are certainly occasions when such scenes are justified. The Norwegian one-shot film *Blind Spot* (Tuva Novotny, 2018) features a six-minute-long car scene just prior to its conclusion. With a fixed camera and shadowed lighting, the central character—a mother whose daughter has attempted suicide—alternates between crying and holding back tears as she is driven home, achieving emotional catharsis. However, these scenes generally result in misemphasized emotion, dramatic limpidity, and momentum cessation. The Australian one-shot drama *Watch the Sunset* (Tristan Barr and Michael Gosden, 2017) tells the classic story of an ex-convict turning his life around, succumbing to common one-shot dramatic issues. A late scene focusing on a child in the backseat demonstrates how music shapes and guides material without editing's visual particularizing. Dialogue and diegetic sounds are drowned out by an ambient post-rock soundtrack, conveying the inner world of the shocked and stunned little girl.

This section has probed the expressive and functional role of vehicular travel in one-shot films. A trope so prosaic as to be overlooked, vehicular travel—in its ambivalence—

[363] Dziga Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (University of California Press, 1984), 18.
[364] Bissell, "Travelling Vulnerabilities," 443.

relates directly to key areas in one-shot filmmaking. Not just passive transit, these films demonstrate that urban experiences are created from a delicate balance of temporal ambivalence and practical considerations, with duration as a force of fragility and disruption.

## ONE-SHOT FILM AFFINITIES

One-shot films foster a heightened awareness of familiar ephemeral objects and events. Many of these correspond to what Kracauer terms cinema's "inherent affinities."[365] This term denotes aspects of physical reality that the cinematic medium is uniquely capable of revealing and preserving, "which can be assumed to be as constant as the properties of the medium to which they belong."[366] Some are perennial affinities of cinematic chance, while others acquire renewed prominence within the one-shot form itself. These include process-based tasks, extras, cigarettes, weather, and wildlife. Such phenomena inherently introduce contingency into cinematic recording, but as noted at the end of the previous chapter, they become especially visible and durationally extended within one-shot films. I then explore how these dynamics materialize in this chapter's second case study, on the Sensory Ethnography Lab's documentary, *People's Park* (J. P Sniadecki and Libbie Dina Cohen, 2012).

The untethered take affects every object, creating prop precarity—a cinema of floating objects. As Kracauer observes, cinema is materialistically minded: "Its imagery permits us … to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of

[365] Kracauer discusses five such inherent affinities of film—the unstaged, the fortuitous, endlessness, the indeterminate, and the "flow of life"—in a short but theoretically dense chapter of his book. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton University Press, 1960), 60-74.
[366] Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 18.

material life."[367] This attraction to the transient details of physical reality is an oft-noted cinematic affinity. Lesley Stern, inspired by Kracauer, identifies objects that "seem cinematically destined," discussing props or devices taking on heightened expressive or functional roles in certain genres or modes of film.[368] In continuous films, objects are afforded a unique opportunity to develop in time, without cuts or rearrangements, emphasizing their ephemerality as well as their fixedness. Virtually any detail of mise-en-scène becomes a potential source of interest, untethered from editing's controlling logic. Stern describes the ambiguity of the cinematic thing: "The more you try to grasp the cinematic thing, to describe and classify it, the more its formula escapes you, the more certainty dissolves into immateriality."[369] The phenomena discussed in this section are contingent aspects of material reality that cinema has historically gravitated towards, made especially visible by one-shot films through their sustained attention to unfolding events. This section discusses various figures and phenomena in the theoretical history of cinematic chance, assessing how one-shot films continue this cinematic affinity by capturing their presence.

**EXTRAS/HUMAN FIGURES**

Centrifugal one-shot films filmed on location can capture the ephemeral flux of society in motion—the web of unique figures and phenomena entering and exiting the frame from innumerable directions. They possess a revelatory capacity to grasp and frame the chaotic surge of social dynamics. The linear, continuous camera acts as an ongoing tapestry for the weaving trajectories of unplanned, indeterminate elements: people, vehicles, and

[367] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton University Press, 1960), 300.
[368] Lesley Stern, "Paths That Wind through the Thicket of Things," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 334.
[369] Stern, "Paths That Wind," 331.

processes. One-shot films have one consistent track—the camera's path—yet are porous to the crisscrossing patterns passing through the frame.[370] Matilda Mroz, in *Temporality and Film Analysis,* acknowledges an irreducible duration when isolating moments for film analysis.[371] Rather than breaking down a film into manageable segments, Mroz advocates engaging with "temporal flow in cinema, rhythms in time, developments in duration, unfolding, flux and change."[372] One-shot films cry out for this durational analysis, defining themselves through flow and change. Contemplating the cross-section of extras and their dynamic intermingling in one-shot films brings this method of film engagement to the fore.

Happenstance encounters and dense rhythms of interaction are central to one-shot films. They provide a constant and continuous frame against which the various velocities of its intermingling objects and bodies can be measured.[373] Amongst these moving bodies, one of them, namely the camera, has a continuous perspective and the ability to record these moments that otherwise dissipate into the ether, enabling them to be enshrined and contained.[374] The chance arrangement of figures and objects in each one-shot film is a stamp of its singular identity: an arrangement almost guaranteed to never happen again. The disruptive forces of contingency create a mise-en-scène of peopled happenstance. In our schematized world, filmmakers signal resistance by sprinkling the film text with a visibly once-in-a-lifetime constellation of ephemeral extras. Seizing the ephemeral entails bringing

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[370] Lutz Koepnick notes the long take's capacity to portray the "heterogenous co-presence of multiple temporalities in space." Lutz Kopenick, *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 4.

[371] "At times, film theory discusses cinematic images as though they were static and still." Mroz, *Temporality and Film Analysis*, 1.

[372] Mroz, *Temporality and Film Analysis*, 34.

[373] A writing tradition prefigures this subject, exemplified by Kracauer's discussion of "the street" in cinema's medium specificity. Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 72.

[374] Early in Barry Hines's novel *A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968), Billy Caspar, the protagonist, heads to work early in the morning. Written from his fixed perspective, this passage captures the random fleeting entanglements that one-shot films can show: "Billy passed two miners returning silently from the night shift. A man in overalls cycled by, treading the pedals slowly. The four of them converged, and parted, pursuing their various directions at various speeds." Barry Hines, *A Kestrel for a Knave* (Penguin Books, 2000), 5.

together a variety of otherwise unconnected people, whilst retaining a duration—a tangling together of various bodies at various speeds: "loose throngs of sketchy, completely indeterminate figures," in Kracauer's phrase.[375]

Centrifugal one-shot films embody the tenets of John Koenig's popular concept, *sonder*, published on his website *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* in 2012.[376] Sonder has not been formulated in an academic manner, characterised by rhetorical flair rather than theoretical fixity, though it has gained internet traction in the past decade, conceptually inspiring several films and pieces of music.[377] Koenig's definition states that sonder is "the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own … an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background."[378] One-shot films assist in the realisation of sonder, providing a deep and sustained viewpoint of background and marginal details, mirroring real life.[379] While this concept is inapplicable to spatially limited centripetal one-shot films, centrifugal one-shot films induce sonder by introducing viewers to an overwhelming number of new persons before swiftly whisking them away, leaving a series of faint ephemeral glimpses—lucidly elusive. One-shot films taking place amidst the wider public are perfect vessels to accommodate this profound yet

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[375] Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, 72.

[376] The full definition is as follows: "The realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk" John Koenig, "Sonder: The Awareness That Everyone Has a Story," *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, accessed April 2, 2026, https://www.thedictionaryofobscuresorrows.com/concept/sonder.

[377] For example, the films *Sonder* (Neth Nom, 2018), *Sonder* (Natalie Giorgetti, 2025), and *Sonder* (Bertram Hardy, 2023) and the 2022 album *Sonder* by Irish musician Dermot Kennedy.

[378] Koenig, "Sonder."

[379] Phenomena such as "half-glimpsed hallways, partially darkened corners of rooms, slightly out-of-focus backgrounds … may all tend to draw the eye." Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," *Ciné-Tracts* 1, no. 2 (1977): 61.

unsettling emotion, deflating the ego yet creating collective empathy. These are the seeds of countless stories that we are not privy to—perceived only in vague, metonymic glimpses. We ponder the fate of random passersby and consider our own membership amongst the societal anonymous.

**PROCESS-BASED TASKS**

Processes and procedures are well-represented by one-shot films because the form can be used to show events playing out *in their entirety*. This capacity means that chance elements are captured alongside process. The completion of a process provides narrative direction while simultaneously exposing the film to contingency, since every successive moment remains susceptible to unforeseen variation. Process therefore gives chance a structured framework within which to emerge. For example, the short experimental one-shot film *The Awful Backlash* (Robert Nelson, 1967) shows a fishing wire being satisfyingly disentangled over the film's exact fourteen-minute course.[380] Uncut cinematic time and process-based tasks have an obvious kinship—event and representation co-ordinating in real time. Modern one-shot films expand upon early cinema actualities yet still embed these types of activities within their narrative. Procedure keeps time moving justifiably and sensibly onwards. Depending on overall narrative coherence, viewers see processes as militating towards authenticity, or as time-killing exercises—excuses to make up the moments in comfortable fashion. Certain tasks allow actors to enter autopilot, take a break, or lose

[380] The wire is untangled using a casual, dedicated approach, turning disorder to order before our eyes. The theme is of innocent disorder that must be fixed but not unduly sweated over. It is intricate but unthinking; once the untangling process gets going, we become assured by the experienced finger work on display. A sense of sequential inevitability guides the image. It is not a challenge to complete; it just requires time. The film is perforated with incidental details: small talk and background noise. He tells a story about an accidental collection of rolled-up newspapers at the neighbours' house. He gets the line fully untangled and then begins to crank the rig and straighten it. He ties and tightens the string at the end, holding on the finished result, revelling in its neat completion, before slowly fading out.

themselves in the role—easier than remembering lines or choreographing with the camera. Actors mentally prepare with compartmentalised ease, focusing on the singular task rather than performing before the scrutinising camera eye.

Both overt and subtle examples of process-based tasks occur throughout one-shot narratives. As an overt example, *PVC-1* (Spiros Stathopoulos, 2007) dramatizes numerous attempts to deactivate the bomb strapped to a character's head. This crisis is the focal point of the narrative. As various characters attempt to cut or rewire the bomb, it takes up the entire focus, as if the film's existence itself is inculcated in and dependent on the process. Durational tasks become coextensive with the film itself, melting into the film, temporarily sharing its runtime. They either pad the film or give it new impetus. The task's continuance gives a helping hand to the film's continuance. It distracts from—yet justifies and metaphorizes—the process of time passing. The time stops and lingers, providing a break from nonstop motion. Like vehicles, which functionally mirror process-based tasks, this durational padding can also provide a crutch for filmmakers. Process-based tasks are the internal gears of one-shot films—syncing form and content together in time.

Cigarettes are common in one-shot films—nothing unusual, given that cigarettes link iconographically with cinema throughout its aesthetic history, thus representing another strong cinematic affinity. David Lehman believes simply that "cigarettes are the single greatest prop of all time,"[381] while Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece observes "cigarettes' long-standing erotic, cultural, and durational resonances with film." [382] They conceal a revealing affinity with cinematic chance; like other process-based tasks, smoking unfolds according to its own temporal logic, introducing a stubbornly material activity that develops independently

[381] David Lehman, *The Mysterious Romance of Murder* (Cornell University Press, 2022), 105.
[382] Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece. "Smoke and Mirrors: Cigarettes, Cinephilia, and Reverie in the American Movie Theater." *Film History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 90.

of narrative necessity. Regarding cinematic continuity, cigarettes are a constant concern, with script supervisors scrambling to ensure the smoked amount matches between shots. One-shot films avoid this problem: cigarettes are smoked visibly from beginning to end within the shot. Smoking provides visual pleasure and becomes a signifier of time passing.[383] Rather than being cloistered, it is attached to the rest of the film's happenings. Cigarettes lay down a marker amidst the duration, punctuating the continuum; their gradual consumption creates a miniature clock within a film's larger temporal structure, making the passage of time materially perceptible. Szczepaniak-Gillece notes that "the trope of the cigarette" involves a "manifold signifying power."[384] Its non-insistent presence, its arbitrariness, attracts the eye, existing "alongside rather than being complementary to efficiency."[385] Cigarettes exemplify cinema's longstanding relationship with incidental details of physical reality, *qua* Kracauer's affinities. It reasserts a measured pace and equanimous attitude. Rather than contributing to narrative momentum, smoking is instead suggestive of observation or rest. As well as promoting "relaxation, self-reflection, and pause," it offers the "potential of insubordinate expenditure."[386] In *Ana Arabia* (Amos Gitai, 2013), a reporter named Yael wanders around a village impacted by the Arab-Israeli conflict, approaching residents and inquiring about their lived experience. The one-shot aesthetic contributes to the film's patient narrative, facilitating the real-time transfer of information. Yael's repeated acts of rolling and smoking cigarettes fuses with the narrative mode itself, making palpable the ethos of attentive duration encouraged by the form itself. Smoking is a minor but persistent articulation of duration and contingency in one-shot films, transforming an incidental gesture into a concrete process.

[383] The inherent interest of cinematic cigarette smoking is demonstrated by James Benning's *Twenty Cigarettes* (2011), in which the director stitches together twenty shots of his friends smoking one entire cigarette each.
[384] Szczepaniak-Gillece, "Smoke and Mirrors," 87-89.
[385] Szczepaniak-Gillece, "Smoke and Mirrors," 90.
[386] Szczepaniak-Gillece, "Smoke and Mirrors," 91-92.

## WEATHER AND WILDLIFE

Weather is a constant presence in everyday life and, by extension, in cinema. At once pervasive and capable of overt, overwhelming displays, it shares an affinity with the durational logic of one-shot films.[387] Moreover, it is an element that is subject to chance and cannot be controlled by the filmmaker. Because weather unfolds continuously, one-shot films capture it with finer articulation than traditionally edited cinema, which fragments and compresses temporal processes. Weather's inherent duration and constancy form a natural kinship with extended cinematic representations. Some experimental one-shot films are substantively inspired by their attention to weather patterns, such as *Fog Line* (Larry Gottheim, 1970) and *BNSF* (James Benning, 2013). Kristi McKim's *Cinema as Weather* conceptualises the reciprocal relationship between cinema and meteorology, noting the "vast appropriateness" of weather-based film scholarship.[388] Weather functions as a metaphorical canvas of mood and desire while mirroring cinema's fundamental properties: space, time, movement, and stasis. Both weather and cinema exhibit readable yet mysterious patterns, oscillating between distraction and fascination. One-shot films clarify this kinship by "showing time as the difference between this moment in the landscape and the next,"[389] presenting a durational slice of atmosphere, permanently enshrined. Filmic weather is timeless once captured. Certain films "honor weather's inherent dynamism," valuing its revelations of natural change.[390] However, weather also represents an obstacle for filmmakers, an uncontrollable force to be reckoned with before the take begins, demanding patience and resolve. Harnessing it is a stylistic risk. Studio filmmaking often "tames" weather through technological control, but the one-shot form cannot so easily dominate it.

[387] In this way, cinematic weather compares to digital effects, existing in the most prosaic cinematic sequences while sometimes spectacularly dominating the narrative focus.
[388] Kristi McKim, *Cinema as Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change* (Routledge, 2013), 7.
[389] McKim, *Cinema as Weather*, 19.
[390] McKim, *Cinema as Weather*, 25.

The transition between night and day, for instance, acquires force in a continuous take. Traditionally edited films cannot allow the true duration of such transformation to unfold; in a one-shot film, sunrise or sunset occurs irrespective of production demands, and the filmmaker must incorporate it. In *Victoria* (Sebastian Schipper, 2015), the titular character, an unassuming café worker, gets drawn into a daring nighttime heist in Berlin. By the conclusion, the morning sun has risen, mirroring the strange, unfamiliar affect felt by Victoria, automatically enriching the tonal shifts of the narrative.

The presence of animals is another privileged feature possessing heightened resonance for chance occurrences in one-shot films.[391] This consideration is evident in documentary films, but even more so in fictions, since animals do not participate in the crew's tacit agreement of fictionality. If their appearance is planned, they must be wrangled offscreen, released on cue, and removed without incident. As Tiago de Luca writes, "non-human creatures … have come to embody one of the strongest markers of contingency in the filmic image."[392] Extended duration promotes a worldview that decentres the anthropomorphic, allowing animals to establish an irreducible presence within the frame, an affront to the usual dictates of mise-en-scène patterning. Following from my earlier discussion of risk—and presaging my discussion of artefact emotions in the next chapter—the presence of animals can yoke spectators from the immersive film experience and into the surrounding real world, as viewers contemplate how such volatility is synchronised with the

[391] Child actors offer similar intrigue. While more in control (and controllable) than animals in their movements, they can stumble and spoil the take. Unlike animals, they have the destructive power to say something that could spoil things. Moments occur when a child's identity as child supersedes their identity as actor. Not traditionally prepared, child appearances in one-shot films are like their appearance in a documentary. Stella Bruzzi discusses the child in documentary: "Their appearances commonly seem spontaneous and uncontrolled and convey an authenticity that the 'performances' by adults in similar situations appear to lack." Stella Bruzzi, "Children in Documentaries: Or, The Camera Never Lies" in *The Child in Cinema,* ed. Karen Lury (BFI Publishing, 2022), 137. Child actors appear in *PVC-1* and *The Sad Smell of Flesh.*

[392] Tiago de Luca, "Natural Views: Animals, Contingency and Death in Carlos Reygadas's *Japón* and Lisandro Alonso's *Los Muertos*," in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 220.

roving camera. What aberrant gesture might jeopardise the entire take? In an addendum to André Bazin's famous reflection on animals in cinema, Serge Daney describes the ontological rupture that occurs when dangerous animals are onscreen with people: real peril bursts through the filmic veneer.[393] The cast and crew—and likewise the animals—can be in genuine danger. *C'était un rendez-vous* (Claude Lelouch, 1976), covered in the previous chapter, exposes reciprocal danger between moving camera and wildlife: the speeding vehicle repeatedly nearly collides with flocks of pigeons, their startled flight integral to the mise-en-scène. Though the danger is greater for the birds, the scene carries a trace of the ontological rupture Daney describes.

One-shot films typically provide a more sustained meditation on animals in film, joining the camera in wandering free in the environment. Their precise movements cannot be planned beforehand; in Jordan Schonig's terms, they are unplannable rather than unplanned.[394] Each movement of animals across the frame is a singular and non-repeatable expression of presence. In *Rendez-vous* (Pablo Olmos Arrayales, 2019), the two main characters saunter down a vivacious Mexican street on a first date, encountering a man who informs them about an ancient Mexican tradition, the lucky canary, in which a canary selects a fortune based on the participant's name. The canary calmly exits its cage and fulfils its narrative function, yet the take seems contingent upon its compliance: what if it had flown away? Again, looking forward to the next chapter, wildlife scenes make viewers question whether creatures have been digitally added in postproduction. In *Utøya: July 22*, a mosquito

[393] Serge Daney, "The Screen of Fantasy (Bazin and Animals)," trans. Mark A. Cohen, in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Duke University Press, 2003), 32-42.
[394] Schonig, "Contingent Motion," 32.

lands on protagonist Kaja's arm while she is hiding, briefly walking along it. The mosquito is well-framed and in focus, appearing too perfect to have arisen spontaneously.[395]

Taken together, these motifs demonstrate that one-shot films repeatedly gravitate towards situations in which contingency is heightened, revealing an underlying affinity between the one-shot form and moments of uncertainty, where the continuous recording of time leaves room for the unplanned to emerge. Having now covered extras, cigarettes, weather, and animals as recurring affinities of chance in one-shot films, I now turn to a case study in which contingency is the governing condition of the film's world.

## CASE STUDY: *PEOPLE'S PARK*

*People's Park* embodies many of this chapter's chance-related concepts. A product of the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL), it is directed and filmed by J. P Sniadecki and Libbie Dina Cohen. It was filmed in the eponymous park in Chengdu, China in summer 2011, after many months of practice runs. Chengdu's citizens are famously laidback, making the park a perfect venue to capture the vivacity of the location in unbroken focus. Phenomena mentioned in this chapter are present within *People's Park*; it stuffs many enduring affinities of cinematic chance within its shot, echoing aesthetic observations I have made throughout this chapter. While my previous case study covered broad patterns across multiple fictional texts to examine how chance is managed, this case study concentrates on a single documentary film to demonstrate how chance may be embraced.[396] In turn, I cover spontaneity and predestination, rhythm and affect, process-based tasks, human figures,

[395] Similarly, *Roaring 20's* (Elisabeth Vogler, 2021) begins focused on a bird that then crashes into the camera, the execution of which appears suspiciously perfect.

[396] This distinction, however, is not intended to suggest an absolute divide between fiction and documentary in their respective relations to chance. Many fiction films embrace contingency, just as many documentaries attempt to regulate and manage it.

ephemeral phenomena, and weather. The shot begins pointing upwards at a canopy, literalising the famous film-aesthetic notion of "wind in the trees."[397] This upward tree view returns as a rhythmic and poetic leitmotif midway through the film, a stylistic trait that stresses the surrounding englobement of the diegesis while also functioning as a scene change.[398] *People's Park* is aesthetically comparable to previous one-shot films like *A Walk* and *Eureka*, but unique in its smooth, immersive focus—as per the SEL's remit.[399]

In this film, contingent events are purified, rhyming with how experience feels. In a manner of speaking, the film is what it is. Its overwhelming detail is too much to notice in one viewing. It evokes memories of similar situations in viewers, whether from real experience or videogames/virtual reality. The filmmakers made thirty-five shot attempts over the course of months, ultimately choosing the most dynamic take as the film. Regular park attendees established familiarity with the filmmakers, becoming casual collaborators.[400] This production process subtly and gradually grooves away at reality, conditioning it towards fictionality—making the specific take that we see, the film itself, seem destined to happen. The spontaneity of the moment is subtly transformed into predestination. A certain

[397] This idea originates from a quote by D.W Griffith, "What the modern movie lacks is beauty—the beauty of moving wind in the trees, the little movement in a beautiful blowing on the blossoms in the trees." Ezra Goodman, *The Fifty-Year Decline and Fall of Hollywood* (Simon and Shuster, 1961), 11. Christian Keathley uses this phrase as the title of his book summarising such cinephilic phenomena. Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Indiana University Press, 2005).

[398] The filmmakers discuss the influence of traditional Chinese scroll painting on their approach: "We did think of analogies to the traditional Chinese scroll." Like these scrolls, an overwhelming abundance of human figures coexists with constant perspective changes. Recurring views of trees function like patches of mist in the scrolls, organically breaking up the continuous scene into different sections. Scott MacDonald, *The Sublimity of Document: Cinema as Diorama* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 475.

[399] "Sensory Ethnography Lab," https://sel.fas.harvard.edu/

[400] "Entering the park seemed almost like entering a zone of creative expression separate from the city. This was embodied most obviously by the dancers at the end of the film, who welcomed us into their circle and offered us a home base at the park." MacDonald, *The Sublimity of Document*, 475.

effortlessness is on display, despite all the practice—and this grace is by design. Viewers may find themselves questioning whether life is indeed as perfect as it seems in this film.[401]

The slow, careful camera imbues the park's proceedings with an affect of grandeur and synchronicity. There is an unerring sense of good timing; reality speaks back to the camera in rhythmic language. As David Redmon writes, "SEL's methodological strength is to create an aesthetic experience by mediating or evoking a designated lived experience within a distinct environment or ecology of sights and sounds."[402] The camera follows the park's preexisting paths, fusing this filmic traversal with the experience of traversal in real life. The park's paths have rhythmic affordances, guiding viewers naturally through hectic areas and zones of reprieve. Astounding tableaux are captured in the camera's passing: coming upon a garbage canister just in time to frame the fluid motion of it being emptied; a perfectly timed pour from a liquid receptacle in passing; and a boy strikingly fiddling with multiple water bottles in his hands. These moments of unforeseen synchronicity singlehandedly justify the one-shot method.

The camera gets caught up in the park's visual pleasures, displaying numerous process-based tasks.[403] The camera's itinerary is drawn to eventful nodes of action occurring in the park. The numerous performances taking place are embedded amidst the flux: naturally occurring points of focus. Coming across a performance, camera and passersby alike temporarily join in collective attention. The camera gazes and is gazed at in return, switching between subject and object, embodying shifting identities of performance. The camera goes

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401 "SEL cinema's aesthetic creates distancing effects, estrangement, and dissonance, using defamiliarization in ways that permit new perceptions and openness to encounters with lived experience." David Redmon, *Video Ethnography: Theory, Methods, and Ethics* (Routledge, 2019), 44.

402 Redmon, *Video Ethnography*, 56.

403 As the filmmakers describe in an interview with Scott MacDonald: "All we could do was step into the park and be absorbed, losing ourselves to the whims of the place, moving from one pocket of performance to another, from one architectural space to another, from one crush of humanity to another, as if swept up by an irresistible wave of sensation and perception." MacDonald, *The Sublimity of Document,* 476.

from outside to inside the scene, balancing different observational modes in time. Musical and dance performances temporarily offload the risk of anything spoiling the take. The filmmakers can take a slight break and revel in the performers who take the reins. Performances prefigure and outlast the camera's gaze, occurring in the park regardless, thereby guaranteed to fit in smoothly. Transitioning between different performances with poise is the primary task. Sound assists in joining together the separate performances, liquefying the transitions, becoming aurally present offscreen before springing into visualisation. Sounds come from many directions, creating a fluid symphony of random noise and music. Offscreen space perpetually buzzes with aural ambiance, occasionally rising to a cacophony that swarms over even the onscreen action.[404]

In terms of its human figures, the film presents a continuous tapestry of existence. Every ephemeral figure adds to the collective rhythm, each contributing their presence in the crowd. A series of temporary focal characters are framed statuesquely as passing icons, but equality emerges as the dominant quality. No single figure dominates the focus for any extended period of time. The name of the park (and the film) suggest this collectiveness, which is consummated by the film form. Redmon writes that SEL films "are bodily immersed inside encounters rather than verbally distanced by a narrator."[405] The height of the wheelchair used to film *People's Park* contributes to this immersive flux of human figures: the camera's low position produces greater immersion, as the lens is assailed by bodies rather than enjoying the freer gaze available at eye level. No division separates performer and audience, joining together in the carnivalesque mode. Children add to the spontaneity,

[404] David Redmon observes that "in SEL films, sound is given equal, or greater, emphasis than visual or perceptual fields of experience." Redmon, *Video Ethnography*, 52.
[405] Redmon, *Video Ethnography*, 54.

showing less inhibitions before the camera's gaze. Many children look, wave at, and greet the camera, creating a connection between filmer and filmed.

*People's Park* captures a broad range of ephemeral phenomena, incidental forms of contingency. The camera passes a man writing poetic Chinese characters on the ground with a water-soaked brush. Common in China, this practice is defined by immaterial ephemerality—the characters fading as the water evaporates—yet is here captured and preserved within the shot. Passing scenes of food preparation capture the alchemical transformation from raw to cooked. During the climactic dance scene, visible ripples of dance spread throughout the crowd—a diffused form of incidental occurrence. Incidental dialogue, heard in passing, also contributes to this ephemeral aura. Structural and ongoing contingencies pervade the film. Weather is a subtle and dynamic presence; automatic mood changes occur due to alterations between light and dark, outside and inside, directly inscribing the day's weather into the mise-en-scène. A visual tapestry of affect develops, with gradual, unplanned mood changes occurring over time, guided by chance. The film was shot mid-summer, and we observe people holding hand fans, an indication of the hot weather. *People's Park* provides a contained and contextualised vessel through which the concepts discussed throughout this chapter are brought into focus.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the multifaceted role of chance in one-shot films, moving beyond the simple cataloguing of phenomena toward a deeper engagement with its structural and ontological implications. The unforeseen elements discussed here become grist for the paratextual mill outlined in the next chapter, where contingency is funnelled into the intended and unintended reflexivity of the form: chance becomes something legible and marketable.

Chapter Five examines what happens when chance and excess become visible and absorbed into circulation. Reflexivity is not an added layer but emerges from this chapter's analysis of the form's openness to unpredictability.

In Chapter Four, chance operates as an event within the shot—accidents, deviations, and unforeseen occurrences—often recognisable as such by the viewer. These individual moments expose the contingent nature of the film's broader trajectory, and it is through the viewer's awareness of this contingency that a reflexive awareness begins to emerge, marking the first step toward the reflexivity developed in the following chapter. The one-shot form encourages unforeseen occurrences because it cannot cut away, with this durational exposure simultaneously functioning as a display of difficulty and virtuosity. The conditions allowing accidents to appear also enable their avoidance to be read as skilful and heroic. Risk thus becomes the ground upon which virtuosity is staged. The viewer follows narrative events while also tracking how the film manages and survives its own conditions, producing a parallel intrigue: an awareness of production that coexists with immersion in the diegesis. Filmmakers perform this tension between control and contingency, shifting the question from how films manage chance to how they stage that management for the viewer.

Between this chapter and the next, the visibility of risk and difficulty spills into the paratextual realm. Chance thereby originates as an aesthetic phenomenon that subsequently becomes a source of value and differentiation, as contingency and risk within the image are converted into currency outside it through the activity of viewers.

# CHAPTER FIVE:
# REFLEXIVITY IN ONE-SHOT FILMS

This chapter positions one-shot films at the intersection of formal experimentation and cultural discourse, examining how reflexivity manifests in the one-shot aesthetic and how it reframes audience engagement by foregrounding the artifice and labour behind one-shot creations. Reflexivity refers to a work's internal awareness of its own processes, structures, or conditions of production. While reflexivity is structurally inherent to artmaking, self-reflexivity is a more conscious and performative employment of self-awareness. Complex, causal dynamics link one-shot film texts themselves to the ecosystem of secondary content surrounding them, including websites, lists, popular journalism, and making-of featurettes. I first outline the singular nature and function of reflexivity in one-shot films, before discussing how these ancillary materials have a conditioning and completing effect upon the primary film text. I end with three case studies of one-shot making-of featurettes.

A history of scholarship informs both long takes and cinematic reflexivity—respectively, as well as together. These writings are multifaceted; Robert Stam describes the "swirling galaxy of satellite terms pointing to specific dimensions of reflexivity."[406] Garrett Stewart, in an essay on metacinema, poses questions that I take up in the case of one-shot films, asking, "what about the movies—in such metacinematic recognition—is being noted or negotiated?"[407] He seeks to pinpoint reflexivity in an ongoing cinematic work, offering "the techniques of visual generation, the arcs of plot, or some third term of socioeconomic context" as sites of investigation.[408] Indeed, I aim to show that one-shot reflexivity is bound

[406] Quoted in Daniel Yacavone, "Recursive Reflections: Types, Modes, and Forms of Cinematic Reflexivity," in *Metacinema: The Form and Content of Filmic Reference and Reflexivity*, ed. David LaRocca (Oxford University Press, 2021), 86.
[407] Garrett Stewart, "A Metacinematic Spectrum: Technique through Text to Context," in *Metacinema: The Form and Content of Filmic Reference and Reflexivity*, ed. David LaRocca (Oxford University Press, 2021), 66.
[408] Stewart, "A Metacinematic Spectrum," 66.

up in plotting and visual generation. I first outline the formal aspects of one-shot films that offer a reflexive inference, before mapping the purposes and targets of this reflexivity.

Determining the exact scope of cinematic reflexivity is challenging. At a baseline level, David LaRocca notes that "anything filmed … is inherently reflexive" in that it signals an audience.[409] Film is an inherently philosophical medium, capable of interrogating its own ontological mediation and wider philosophical queries.[410] One-shot films, by rejecting some basic tenets of filmmaking, are a type of cinematic self-referentiality, a reflection on the canonical practices of filmmaking. By revealing the mechanics of their production, they destabilize the illusion of narrative seamlessness, prompting critical engagement with the medium itself. Durational works often "do" philosophy through cinema—engage with its essence, its traditions, and its fundamental relation to space, time, and art. This philosophising is certainly not exclusive to durational works, as traditionally edited films clearly also engage in aesthetic and ontological theorization. However, durational works pursue such questions in their own distinctive manner, grounding their inquiry in cinema's raw recording of unfolding time and space rather than the construction of montage. As Lee Carruthers writes, films "know about time, and can teach us something about it."[411] One task in this chapter is to outline why one-shot films are often more reflexive than traditionally edited cinema.

[409] David LaRocca, *Metacinema: The Form and Content of Filmic Reference and Reflexivity* (Oxford University Press, 2021), vii.
[410] "We face—and are faced with— an indication of our existence, and so thinking itself finds a new dimension. Cinema— as the art of reflection and, indeed, the reflexive— created a material basis for the on going artistic and philosophical exploration of these indelible facts." LaRocca, *Metacinema,* 20.
[411] Lee Carruthers, *Doing Time: Temporality, Hermeneutics, and Contemporary Cinema* (State University of New York Press, 2016), 2.

## LOCATING ONE-SHOT REFLEXIVITY

The uncut duration of one-shot films is the primary source of their reflexive potential. Extended takes allow one to clearly isolate and examine the cinematic oscillation between immersion and spectacle—balancing these two modes without the usual cutting. David MacDougall observes that "a shot discharges most of its meaning at once," inducing viewer reactions such as "a sudden adherence to something happening within the shot, or a kind of coasting perusal."[412] Regardless of how action-packed and momentum-filled a one-shot film, the viewer's mind occasionally moves to contemplate the ongoing dynamics of presentation. While situated as extensions of realism, it is not self-evident that more uncut time lends itself to more reality. Nicholas Rombes identifies this as "the paradox of real time cinema."[413] The ostensible naturalism of real time simultaneously makes us aware of the staginess and theatricality that coexist there. The digital era's enabling of excessive duration has exacerbated this paradox. The archetypal example of this paradox is, again, the sumptuous and expansive ballroom dance which concludes *Russian Ark* (a film covered in greater detail later in this chapter). Alexander Sokurov employs hundreds of extras and dazzling choreography to summon Russia's high society from a bygone era, achieving what is arguably the aesthetic high point of the one-shot form. Every conceivable effort is made to immerse viewers in the spectacle, and yet such an overwhelming feat of ingenuity and manpower induces curiosity and technical appreciation for the craftmanship involved, paradoxically working against immersion. Ivone Margulies scrupulously unpacks this paradox, detailing how corporeality, gesture, naturalism, and theatricality alter the valence of cinematic time. Duration possesses the power to alter or heighten the represented phenomena,

[412] David MacDougall, "When Less Is Less: The Long Take in Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1992): 37.
[413] Nicholas Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age*, revised edition (Wallflower Press, 2017), 25.

enabling the "passage between abstraction and figuration."[414] The ongoing presence of persons, processes, or objects accrues stubborn materiality, snagging on the form from "the excess produced in it by hyperbole and redundance."[415] Cognitively speaking, these dynamics occur within the viewer's mind, often involuntarily, inducing a shift in perception. The duration of spectatorial experience does not unfold homogeneously, instead fluctuating organically in the absence of cutting.

The precise reflexive effect of certain filmmaking decisions cannot be described *a priori.* Jean-Marc Limoges writes that identical reflexive techniques are capable of either breaking or maintaining the filmic illusion. He outlines several factors contributing to determining the degree of reflexivity a device possesses in a specific film. His list of criteria goes some way to explaining why one-shot films are viewed reflexively in an ongoing manner.[416] At its most fundamental, Limoges writes that a device must be perceived as reflexive for it to break the illusion; a device not even intended as reflexive can become activated as reflexive if the viewer perceives it as such—similar to my point in the previous chapter about an element being perceived as "chanceful" even if it was by design. With both chance and reflexivity, then, the viewer's perception has primacy over the artistic intentions. In one-shot films, due to the ongoing nature of the shot, the fragility of its continuance, viewers are primed to see any device as reflexive, if indeed it reminds them of the unusual production conditions. As I have discussed repeatedly, many one-shot films mimic the mainstream narrative style in all ways other than their definitional deviation in shooting style. Therefore, executing rudimentary movements becomes charged with unintended reflexivity:

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[414] Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Duke University Press, 1996), 3.
[415] Margulies, *Nothing Happens,* 20.
[416] Limoges also lists contexts of reception, genre, chronological placement, and arbitrariness as factors. Jean-Marc Limoges, "The Gradable Effects of Self- Reflexivity on Aesthetic Illusion in Cinema," in *Metareference across Media,* ed. Werner Wolf (Rodopi, 2009), 389-407.

going through a door may be intended as just going through a door, but viewers' attention may be taken off the action and towards the mental image of the crew and camera manoeuvring through in continuous motion—thus breaking the wholeness of the diegetic illusion. In other words, one-shot films are, in general, riper for their techniques to be perceived in a reflexive way, whether intended or not.[417] In my Chapter Three case study of *Roaring 20's*, I mentioned that characters travel on the Paris Metro. While such journeys are everyday tasks for Paris residents, in a one-shot context, they gain a reflexive dimension, as viewers may wonder what would happen to the take if the train was delayed or the actors were to miss their stop.[418] Duration thus transforms an otherwise unnoteworthy portion of the film into a moment of unintended intrigue. Defined by intensive and ongoing choreography and resultant viewer intrigue, one-shot films activate this potential for reflexivity to relate to the entire filmic event. The recognition of this ongoing feat of co-ordination leads viewers to oscillate between diegetic immersion and awareness of the film as a manufactured object. This latter form of awareness leads to what Ed Tan calls "artefact emotions."[419]

## ARTEFACT EMOTIONS

"Artefact emotions" are important to understanding one-shot films. This term refers to how a film flaunts its status as a particular filmic artefact, and to what degree a viewer recognizing this status as artefact is important to the film's impact, or the overall interpretive

[417] Daniel Yacavone similarly expands the range of cinematic reflexivity, writing that there are various reflexive forms with "complex configurations of elements." Three key factors—referential content, reception, and communicative structure—combine to reveal that myriad cinematic elements have latent reflexive potential. Daniel Yacavone, "Recursive Reflections: Types, Modes, and Forms of Cinematic Reflexivity," in *Metacinema: The Form and Content of Filmic Reference and Reflexivity*, ed. David LaRocca (Oxford University Press, 2021), 106.

[418] However, as I noted earlier in the dissertation, the audience is possibly aware that the take would not exist for them to watch in the first place if a truly destructive mistake were to occur during production—because the shot would need to be restarted—perhaps lessening their curiosity about such matters.

[419] Ed Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film As An Emotion Machine* (Routledge, 1995).

evaluation that viewers respond with. One-shot films display awareness as "artefacts" through a self-conscious narrational style drawing attention to their irregular, virtuosic production process. Models from cognitive film theory are instructive because the field foregrounds viewer responses.[420] Ed Tan develops artefact emotions as a concept. In the "emotion machine" of film, these emotions exist in tandem with "fiction emotions."[421] Attentive viewers undergo "a pleasant involvement with the artefact, a kind of identification with the film that is experienced in place of or alongside the viewer's identification with fictional characters."[422] Artefact emotions sometimes rise in prominence to such an extent that the viewer's thoughts and emotions respond primarily to the film's status as artefact. This relocation in cinematic meaning-making is important for one-shot films, which often have a high degree of expressivity regarding their continuous nature. In their marketing and the displays of virtuosity within the films themselves, extra-diegetic circumstances are stressed by the filmmakers; often the concern is not with illusionism and immersion, but with flaunting their technical qualities. As examples, Tan suggests that viewers "may admire the narrative technique, the ingenuity, and wiliness of the filmmaker. Or during a particularly gruesome scene the viewers may find themselves wondering how the event was staged or indeed if it was staged."[423] Thus, much of the appeal of one-shot films resides in this parallel intrigue developing in the viewer's mind as more time elapses and different events occur.

In certain strains of experimental film, James Peterson writes that the "art-process schema" is a primary viewing tool, directing attention away from screen events and towards

[420] An early version of this concept appears in Bordwell's foundational *Narration in the Fiction Film*; he refers to it as the level of "self-consciousness" that a work displays—as opposed to the normally invisible style subordinate to narrative in mainstream film. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 58.
[421] Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film*, 119.
[422] Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film*, 49.
[423] Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film*, 64-65.

the production process—a visual style provoking the question, "how did they do this?"[424] This increased "cognizance of the film's facture" is instructive regarding viewing schema applied to one-shot films, whereby technique positions a film as both a finished artefact and a present-tense performance.[425] Thus, in cognitive film terminology, viewers are cued by the film to reconstruct, retrace, or relive the succession of procedures that occurred during production. These operative procedures are resituated as the seat of a film's value, "affixing aesthetic value to the process that produces" a film.[426] Noël Carroll writes that classical films have an erotetic narrative structure, posing questions about the storyline that are then answered sequentially.[427] One-shot films are erotetic in that they pose questions about their own construction. Viewers may attempt to answer these, coming to their own conclusions, or they may consult secondary sources (discussed later) for confirmation.

As a one-shot film progresses, with no cuts forthcoming, the collective artefact emotions build in momentum, leading to an ever-increasing burden of time approaching the denouement. This momentum creates a distinct spectrum of artefact emotions. According to Limoges, one factor influencing whether audiences perceive a given device as reflexive is the point at which it appears along a film's runtime: "The modalities of the occurrence of a self-reflexive device—i.e., whether it occurs at the beginning, in the course of the film or at the end of a work—will render otherwise stylistically similar devices more or less anti-illusionist." In other words, the same device occurring in the tenth minute or the eightieth minute may have different degrees of reflexivity. I have already discussed the reasons for this

[424] This viewing schema comes from his cognitive examination of experimental film, identifying the common interpretive schemata that viewers wield in understanding abstruse films. James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (Wayne State University Press, 1994), 80. Robert Stam earlier defines reflexivity in film as being demystificatory and deconstructive, exposing the work's "factitiousness as textual constructs." Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature,* xi.
[425] Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order,* 81.
[426] Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order,* 83.
[427] Noël Carroll, *Mystifying Movies: Fads & Fallacies In Contemporary Film Theory* (Columbia University Press, 1989), 171.

waxing and waning viewer response in my section on risk in the last chapter. The figure skating analogy holds true here: performing certain actions later in a routine is more charged with risk and reward—and thereby with reflexivity. The tension building within a shot embodies Andrei Tarkovsky's concept of "time-pressure" from *Sculpting in Time*. He writes that time becomes tangible "when you sense something significant, truthful, going on beyond the events on the screen; when you realise, quite consciously, that what you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction, but is a pointer to something stretching out beyond the frame and to infinity."[428] In one-shot films, time-pressure resonates less on a Tarkovskyan philosophical level, and more on an admirably pragmatic level: that all these events, all this passing time, has occurred without a cut—the further along, the more tantalizing. One-shot making-of featurettes (discussed later in this chapter) suggest that the final minutes of shooting are particularly tense, imbued with time-pressure. A crew member of *Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov, 2002) reveals that at "minute 84, 85, our nerves were like *this* … the temperature was growing and growing."[429] Like the proverbial snowball, one-shot films gain affective weight as their runtime elapses.

Once filmmakers decide upon duration as the representational strategy, they partially forfeit control over the viewer's precise experience. Though they work to intentionally plot a film's emotional course, extended duration inherently encourages the spectator's mind to wander and contemplate virtual phenomena. An element that unintentionally triggers negative artefact emotions in one-shot films is the perception—real or not—of a hidden cut. If noticed, this can burst the bubble of time-pressure, ceasing the momentum of ongoing performance. Everything else can remain the same, yet a few dubious stitches spoil viewer

[428] Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (University of Texas Press, 1989), 117.
[429] This quote is taken from the making-of featurette *In One Breath* (Knut Elstermann, 2003), analysed later in this chapter.

appeal—dashed in the realisation that the onscreen choreography has not been realised in an unbroken sweep. A basic example occurs in *Causality* (Marcelo Politano, 2021): the deflation of aura centres on a repeated transitional device. The film begins with smooth centrifugal movement, establishing the plot mechanics while also creating an attractive nighttime circumambience. Once the camera enters its central hospital setting, the adept use of space continues, gliding to and from different nodes of action. The diegesis remains firmly in the viewer's mind, the slow-moving plot developing apace. However, at the twenty-nine-minute mark, the camera passes through windows on a door in a manner that appears too smooth, raising suspicion of a hidden cut and transition. This may be just a suspicion at first, an uncertain blip in the continuum. However, a few minutes later, the camera goes through the same window, accompanied by a conspicuous swooshing sound that explicitly signals a transition. Such moments deal blows to the film's artefact intrigue, with only a limp drama remaining once the prospect of a continuous take has been dampened. In the second half of *Sábado*, the recording camcorder pauses for a few seconds. The intentionality of this moment is unclear, and one questions whether the film is indeed in one take or not. A similar unclear pause occurs in *Commute* (Bruce Baillie, 1995). Such moments have heightened import in one-shot films, and if deemed too conspicuous may induce a waning of viewer engagement. The viewer's experience shifts from narrative immersion to an awareness of the one-shot as a conspicuous—and potentially superficial—formal device.

## GIMMICKS AND VIRTUOSITY

Other concepts in cinema studies and beyond illuminate one-shot consumption and discourse regarding reflexivity. The gimmick, found across media culture, has a long lineage in cinema. That one-shot films have achieved sparse academic attention thus far could be

because they are perceived as another *cinematic gimmick*—whereby some surface technique is flaunted for its own sake—which have a notorious reputation in mainstream cinema, devalued due to the art-cinema bias in cinema studies. Those who dismiss one-shot films out of hand view them as a vacuous gimmick—an attitude captured by Mike D'Angelo's review of *Victoria* (Sebastian Schipper, 2015), remarking it to be a perpetually "dumb idea."[430] However, gimmicks possess a certain attractiveness.[431] As Sianne Ngai observes, "our very concept of the gimmick implies awareness that, in capitalism, misprized things are bought and sold continuously. Its flagrantly unworthy form can be found virtually anywhere."[432] In one-shot film reception, pure evaluation plays an outsized role, because such formal excess requires artistic justification. Binary reactions such as 'this works' or 'this does not work' are more common in reaction to this make-or-break production choice. This tendency flattens critical discourse into assessments of success or failure, often sidelining deeper interpretive or affective analysis. As a result, discussions of one-shot films frequently hinge on technical execution rather than thematic complexity or emotional texture. Having watched numerous one-shot films of varying quality, I can say for certain that the one-shot form is sometimes used cheaply to enliven otherwise unextraordinary material; in such cases, it could aptly be described as a gimmick.[433]

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[430] "Shooting an entire feature film continuously, without a single cut, is a dumb idea. It was a dumb idea 67 years ago when Alfred Hitchcock attempted to create the illusion of having done so in *Rope*, and it's still a dumb idea." Mike D'Angelo, "Victoria Demonstrates Why It's a Bad Idea to Shoot a Movie in One Take," *AV Club*, October 8, 2015.

[431] Gimmicks are like Dwight Macdonald's concept of "midcult," a bastardized form of high culture nevertheless able, through its form, to pass itself off as authentic. Certain one-shot films, which lean into their extraordinary technique yet rest on their laurels elsewhere in terms of compelling narrative, may fall into midcult. Dwight Macdonald, *Against the American Grain: Essays on the Effects of Mass* Culture (Random House, 1962).

[432] Sianne Ngai, *Theory of The Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 2.

[433] Listing out such examples would naturally be an evaluative expression of my own taste, but as mentioned such evaluations bear more weight in these films.

Another way of seeing these films is through the lens of virtuosity, most often associated with amazing technical feats in music. An example of virtuosic music is the *24 Caprices for Solo Violin* by Niccolò Paganini (1802-17). Virtuosity is usually viewed as a positive attribute; the boastful rhetoric of secondary material discussed later appraises the achievements of one-shot films to be something akin to virtuosic. Extremely long takes are comparable to virtuosic playing in that (as Antoine Hennion writes of virtuosity) they both try "to give voice to a sense of instability and the fleeting moment."[434] They are both assailed by difficulties in execution, both internal and external—the overcoming of which is deemed as impressive. However, virtuosity is not always received with praise. For several music authors it is, for one reason or another, hollowed of its charm.[435] Marc Pincherle observes in 1949 that "a considerable number of writers, critics, and composers … seem to see in it a kind of growing malady … inevitably resulting in debasement of taste."[436] If this viewpoint is accepted, virtuosity resembles the gimmick, but it is often a fine line. Though gimmicks and virtuosity inspire a totally different set of imagistic associations—dingy theatres hosting smell-o-vison versus ostentatious concert halls—one-shot films can dissolve this boundary.

The cultural reception of virtuosity exists in a state of ambivalence. Pincherle's descriptions of virtuosity—its pleasures and flaws—reflect the mixed reactions to one-shot filmmaking. While decrying the "many inconsequential baubles intended only to divert the listener," he acknowledges that certain practitioners advance beyond mere technique, producing meaningful work.[437] This situation holds true in one-shot filmmaking. Though the

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[434] Antoine Hennion, "'As Fast as One Possibly Can ...': Virtuosity, a Truth of Musical Performance?" in *Critical Musicological Reflections. Essays in Honour of Derek B. Scott*, ed. Stan Hawkins (Routledge, 2012), 126.

[435] J. N. Burk concludes a 1918 essay by claiming that the "beginning and end of musical development is not technique but natural impulse, and if you have not the impulse at the start, technical training will never bring it to you." J. N. Burk, "The Fetish of Virtuosity," *The Musical Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1918): 292.

[436] Marc Pincherle, "Virtuosity," trans. Willis Wager, *The Musical Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1949): 226.

[437] Pincherle, "Virtuosity," 233.

virtuosic impulse can be excessive, Pincherle wisely cautions against declaring the practice to be a wasteland of artistic potential, which is elitist and unhelpful: "One who condemns virtuosity as a whole, irrevocably and unqualifiedly, is perhaps being too obedient to the tyrannical mania for establishing hierarchies."[438] Moreover, it is not wholly the fault of the performing artist, with partial blame for "adroit but limited" artistry going to the whims of public demand.[439] In popular reviews of these films, usage of the term 'virtuosity' is often couched within a discussion of gimmicks, as if the two terms are in symbiotic union. In the earlier quoted review by Mike D'Angelo, the author states that *Russian Ark* is "still fundamentally a gimmick, calling undue attention to its own virtuosity." However, this does not accurately describe the goals of each one-shot film. Not every one-shot film concerns itself with ostentatious visuals. Gibbs and Pye mention "other kinds of long take practices, no less skilful, in which technical virtuosity (and the concomitant dangers of showiness and ostentation) is a less prominent part of the experience."[440] A distinct strain of one-shot films, which I have termed "centripetal," focus more upon the extensive portrayal of a single location, not requiring ostentatious visual gestures to achieve their cinematic depth. For these films, virtuosity is not a valid conceptual criterion in the evaluative process.

## EXPLICIT SELF-REFERENCE IN ONE-SHOT FILMS

By foregrounding their unusual or exceptional production processes, one-shot films direct attention toward themselves as crafted artefacts rather than transparent narrative vehicles. Some films extend this tendency further, incorporating self-consciousness into the diegesis itself through explicit acts of self-reference. Most one-shot films prioritize

[438] Pincherle, "Virtuosity," 237.
[439] Pincherle, "Virtuosity," 226.
[440] John Gibbs and Douglas Pye, *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 20.

maintaining the diegetic illusion. However, these playful and high-concept examples explicitly thematize and make palpable the presence of time, via storytelling devices such as clocks or deadlines, extended scenes of waiting, linear and goal-based plot construction, or dialogical references to time and continuity.[441] These films strive for a more cerebral and lackadaisical atmosphere rather than sweating over their high-octane techniques; a tincture of self-awareness is suggestive of this ease. A fine line separates films that make references to the uncut nature of the filming situations for reasons justified by the storyline and those that are more explicitly self-reflexive about the form. One-shot documentaries are more likely to evince self-awareness, with no requirement to maintain a fictional diegetic illusion. Thus, in *A Walk* (Jonas Mekas, 1990), Mekas frequently announces his persona and signposts his precise location in New York, while in *People's Park* (J.P. Sniadecki and Libbie Dina Cohn, 2012), parkgoers frequently look and wave at the camera, a self-reflexive gesture that would lead to a restart in a fictional case. In several films, self-aware dialogue is used not as a wink to the audience, but as an explanation of why the camera is present in a particular situation. The camera's point-of-view is personified and lent agency to explain its meanderings. *Sábado* (Matias Bize, 2003) makes several dialogical references that suggest awareness of the filming situation, rationalising the presence of the camera in these private situations.[442] *21 Brothers* (Michael McGuire, 2011), set in a World War I trench, provides an in-world explanation for the cameraman by having characters turn and remind him that he is a private who is under strict orders not to speak or interact: "You are to merely record, and we are to go about our business as usual." At other points, characters make brief jokes reiterating this situation: "Hey look, we're in the movies"; and "you just going to stand there and point that

[441] Creating a one-shot film with a level of self-awareness also changes how characters and camera navigate space, which I covered in Chapter Three.

[442] These lines of dialogue include: "Got enough batteries? Yeah, about 90 minutes"; "I told him to tape the whole thing, to have a record"; "I need to see this later so I won't forget it"; "It's a personal record."; "What plans do you have for the tape?"; and finally, to end the film, "just turn it off."

thing at us all day?" Apart from these occasional remarks, the supposedly agential cameraman remains a totally silent observer, indistinguishable from situations where zero explanation for the camera is provided. The sole reason for these dialogues is to justify the presence of the camera in this private trench setting.

One-shot films frequently contain moments of self-reflexive commentary, in which characters or scenarios draw attention to the very form, constraints, or ambitions of the one-shot structure itself. The most on-the-nose example occurs in *Timecode* (Mike Figgis, 2000). Set in Los Angeles and revolving around a film production, it includes the familiar "film-about-filmmaking" discourse. Early on, a camera quadrant focuses for an extended period on a clock, alluding to the film's temporal investigation. Towards the end, the film reaches a higher level of self-awareness, as a character pitches an idea for a one-shot film to a group of producers, delivering a rambling, verbose monologue that essentially describes *Timecode* itself. An executive responds with uncontrollable laughter, remarking that the idea is "the most pretentious crap I've ever heard"—a moment of gentle, self-deprecating self-awareness. *A Date in Minsk* (Nikita Lavretsky, 2022) takes one-shot films into the hyper self-aware, postmodern world of internet culture. The film is a thinly veiled fiction, with Lavretsky and his real-life partner re-enacting and improvising their first date. The loquacious film contains much self-aware dialogue. A few minutes in, Lavretsky, speaking as himself, begins describing his filmmaking ethos—a self-aware justification of the one-shot film we are currently watching: "I make films on a phone, I'm a no-budget filmmaker … I have few resources, that frees me." Later, discussing another one-shot film made in Minsk (*Minsk* by Boris Guts), he declares "it's me who should make a film called Minsk!" In the final moments, he strips the film of its attenuated fictionalisation, looking into the camera and saying "cut!" *Somebody Marry Me* (John Asher, 2013) features a self-aware reference to the history of cinematic long takes: the famous opening shot of *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles,

1958). The main character asks, "*Touch of Evil*, how'd they do that?"[443] *The Wedding Party* (Thane Economou, 2016) also contains a playful dialogical reference to its form. In a film containing no other references to filmmaking, protagonist Jim is an editor who works in Hollywood. He extols the virtues of editing in the filmmaking process; viewers may note the irony of these sentiments being expressed in an "editless" film. Later, during a climactic sequence, his profession is again invoked, even more explicitly rhyming with the film's form: "I can't go back and edit life. It just keeps moving forward, no parsing." This line is clearly designed to transport viewers from the film itself to its production process.[444] Similarly, a character in *Fish & Cat* (Shahram Mokri, 2013) describes the nature of the film they appear in, musing that "things turn and turn and come together at some point. This is how a story is sometimes completed." Across these examples, such moments of meta-awareness foreground the films' formal conceit, blurring the line between narrative and production, fiction and commentary.

## ONE-SHOT FILM PARATEXTS

This reflexive tendency in one-shot films does not end at the boundary of the film text itself. From internal self-awareness, it extends outward into the realm of paratexts, where the one-shot conceit is rhetorically articulated through materials that accompany and amplify the self-conscious identity of the primary text. Paratexts are often classified by their spatial or temporal relationship to the main text, and in the case of one-shot films, they usually function as *in medias res* supplements—emerging in response to the act of viewing itself. Gerard Genette describes paratextual distinctions as a spatial relationship, "a paratextual element …

[443] This line of dialogue is doubly intertextual, given that another famous long take, the opening shot of T*he Player* (Robert Altman, 1992), also explicitly invokes Welles' precursor.
[444] This notion of an editor whose profession grinds against his personal life is also an intertextual allusion to *Modern Romance* (Albert Brooks, 1981).

necessarily has a location that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance."[445] A basic offering of his foundational work is an equation, "peritext + epitext = paratext." Here, peritext refers to elements that are spatially adjacent to the text itself, while epitexts are those that are floating in a spatial elsewhere. Similarly, Jonathan Gray distinguishes between "entryway paratexts," conditioning audience entry into a work; and "*in media res* paratexts," consulted or found after the initial contact.[446] These theoretical constructs from Genette and Gray map out the paratexts associated with one-shot films, which inflect the viewing experience at different times, in different ways. The majority of one-shot paratexts fall within the latter category of *in media res* paratexts, moving "between the gaps of textual exhibition … working to police certain reading strategies in medias res."[447] The act of viewing a one-shot film in the first place is what leads to curiosity about its execution.

Engaging deeply with the artefactual qualities of one-shot films, to the point of seeking further knowledge, requires moving from the film text itself to secondary locations. Chuck Tryon connects self-reflexive techniques within the primary film text and supplemental material such as DVD bonus features, online blogs, and making-of videos.[448] The complex camera movements of one-shot films likewise encourage intrigue about the travails of the production process. Given this "vast expansion of what constitutes a cinematic text," the finished product—the successfully completed one-shot film—is incomplete in its

[445] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.
[446] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (NYU Press, 2010), 23.
[447] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 23
[448] Chuck Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Digital Convergence* (Rutgers University Press, 2009).

overall effect if viewers remain unfamiliar with these technical achievements.[449] The entire film experience is tied together through the joining activity of the spectator, as Barbara Klinger notes, "Fans represent a crucial, but normative, part of the circuit of exchange between producing and consuming cultures."[450] One-shot films are incomplete in that they cannot make the embattled production process the subject of the film proper. Packaging and re-presenting footage of the making-of process remedies this situation.

It is this curiosity about staging, choreography, authenticity, and production methods that causes viewers to seek out additional information about the craft and gives rise to demand for secondary content. These dynamics open what Michele Pierson calls a "discourse of connoisseurship," which Tryon claims is "meant to sustain the sense that a given film is worthy of further attention or investigation primarily on the basis of the artistic craft."[451] Moments when the one-shot film emerges as an artefact—a product—are intimately linked to their later online objectification. Online resources and DVD and Blu-Ray items such as making-of featurettes are the primary venues for this connoisseurship. These types of content risk encouraging a superficial engagement with the technical achievements of a film. Tryon writes that "DVDs typically place emphasis on aesthetic appreciation rather than critical engagement," privileging "certain modes of reading at the expense of others."[452] These interpretive norms explain why one-shot films fit neatly into this framework, with many filmmakers also often prioritising the cultivation of technical appreciation.

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[449] Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema,* 3.

[450] Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (University of California Press, 2006), 13. Nicholas Rombes's catalogue of digital concepts includes both "incompleteness" and the "remainder"—items that are left over—found both on a formal level and extra-textually in the digital age. Nicholas Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age*, revised edition (Wallflower Press, 2017), 50-128.

[451] Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema,* 18. Michele Pierson, *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder* (Columbia University Press, 2002), 106.

[452] Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema,* 18.

What resources are available for viewers to satiate their curiosity regarding one-shot films? In other words, what are the epitexts that crop up externally to one-shot films texts? These can be found in the institutional frameworks around these films. Broadly speaking, Emre Çağlayan stresses the importance of institutional frameworks in explaining the development of a filmmaking form, particularly forms based on duration.[453] He writes that slow cinema is guided as much by "a set of institutional and critical conditions" than it is by the films themselves.[454] Çağlayan claims that "slow cinema is not only a historical style but a historical (and critical) set of practices, debates and ideas. In other words, the economic and institutional contexts behind the production, exhibition and reception of these films are a significant part of their nature."[455] While one-shot films do not emerge from an art cinema context in quite the same way as slow cinema, their reception context is similarly a significant part of their nature. Çağlayan hints towards the discursive spaces that remain relevant for one-shot films by describing how "various official and unofficial national institutions … were involved in slow cinema's development and its rise to global prominence."[456] One-shot paratexts, characterised by popular journalistic websites and lists, as well as making-of documentaries, are a variation on this slow cinema reception context. While less centralised than slow cinema's institutional contexts, diffused across the online media and home video landscape, they nevertheless condition how viewers approach one-shot film texts.

A distinct strain of secondary content conditions (and is conditioned by) one-shot films: popular journalistic websites. These outlets are the primary epitextual venue associated with one-shot films, providing additional information about the production processes of the

[453] This focus reflects Çağlayan's conscious adoption of David Bordwell's historical poetics.
[454] Emre Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema: Nostalgia, Absurdism, Boredom* (Palgrave, 2018), x.
[455] Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema,* 16-17.
[456] "such as cine-clubs, film journals, state funds, cultural magazines, film festivals, intellectual circles and educational institutions." Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema,* 25.

films. Due to a lack of academic scholarship, journalistic writing represents the bulk of written material on one-shot films thus far. An ecosystem of popular journalism and criticism, primarily occurring online, has proliferated around one-shot films in the past decade. From my analysis of dozens of sources, I observe two types of articles about one-shot films that continuously appear and reappear, regurgitated in largely identical ways. The first type arises from the fundamental ease with which one-shot films are listed and categorised as a particular film product, defined by an easy-to-understand filmmaking parameter. These articles are variations of "Ten Films That Were Actually Filmed In One Take." These pieces demonstrate that deciding to make a one-shot film facilitates its entry into an exclusive category, instantly differentiating itself from the masses of traditional films, large and small, that are produced each year. Despite the increasing regularity of one-shot films coming out each year, the label still bespeaks of novelty—a selling point—by these outlets and their readers.

The second type of online article about one-shot films advertises the travails of the production process. Popular one-shot films are accompanied by a phalanx of articles unravelling their technical prestidigitations, taking readers inside the intricate planning and technical excellence used to execute the shot without any major mistakes. This focus reflects the intuition that viewers are primarily curious about the risk and drama involved in achieving the shot—the contingent set of physical circumstances and their accompanying heroism, precise timing, and tight margins. Jean-Pierre Geuens describes the importance of difficulty in the filmmaking process, noting that artists have always been spurred on by challenges "as if they were all measuring their professional worth by going up against these obstacles, learning to overcome them only through meticulous preparations followed by a continuous exercise of exacting craftsmanship."[457] However, these heroics are traditionally

[457] Jean-Pierre Geuens, "The Digital World Picture," *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 18.

occluded from the viewer's immediate attention, due to the knowledge that each cut allows for a reset, for an additional opportunity to prepare and execute the scene. The knowledge that one-shot films do not allow for this normative practice incites curiosity.

Reading many one-shot film articles, one notices common patterns, reflecting the baseline information about one-shot films that gets cycled and recycled throughout mainstream culture. These articles usually provide a skeleton history of one-shot films, beginning with a line or two on Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948). It is usually qualified with a brief mention of its hidden cut technique. This brief history is often rounded out with a cursory mention of *Russian Ark* and *Birdman.* Articles frequently mention the ostensible similarities between one-shot films and the medium of theatre. The authenticity of a one-shot film, or the methods of its trickery, are constant concerns. One article is simply called "*1917*: All 34 Hidden Cuts We Spotted In The Movie."[458] Predictably, as with making-of featurettes, the difficulties in execution, the irregularity of the approach, are the primary topic.

Another type of one-shot paratext is the written published interview with a director or practitioner. Such paratexts are discussed by Genette. Interviews are a prime example of an epitext, being necessarily located away from the main text; he places them within the specific category of "public epitext."[459] He discusses why practitioners engage with public interviews, primarily to reach a broader public, including those unfamiliar with the original text. In interviews about one-shot films, the readership skews towards those already familiar with the film, lured by the promise of production information revealing how the shot was executed. An early notable one-shot interview is the section of François Truffaut's famous interview with Alfred Hitchcock that covers *Rope.* The objects of discussion between Truffaut and

[458] Brad Curran, "1917: All 34 Hidden Cuts We Spotted In The Movie," *ScreenRant*, Updated June 1, 2024, https://screenrant.com/1917-movie-secret-cuts-one-shot-trick-scenes-where/.
[459] Genette, *Paratexts*, 344-370.

Hitchcock are like contemporary examples, focusing exclusively on the singular challenges of execution. Truffaut's line of questioning reflects the perennial viewer curiosity related to the form: "That raises a point I'm curious about. How many takes were there for each reel that was completed? In other words, how many takes were interrupted and how many did you complete?"[460] Ultimately, the published interviews on one-shot films are as varied as the interviewees. Amir Ganjavie's interview with *Fish & Cat* director Shahram Mokri is philosophical in tone, with the director musing about the potentials of cinema, the desire for new expressions of temporality.[461] On the contrary, Louis Menashe's interview with *Russian Ark* cinematographer Tilman Büttner is much more pragmatic, detailing how the vision was achieved in practical terms.[462]

**PERITEXTUAL ELEMENTS**

Genette's paratextual elements broaden the scope of secondary materials attached to one-shot films. While this chapter primarily concerns epitexts (elements not necessarily spatially adjacent to the text), relevant peritextual elements also surround one-shot films. While trivial to mention, one-shot feature films generally adhere to the normal conventions of opening and closing credits. This observation cannot be considered wholly irrelevant in this case, given that, as a parametric form, one-shot films are defined by the formal element of having one shot only. Are there purists who argue that title or credit sequences disqualify a film from this definition? Titles are a peritextual element that Genette devotes much attention

[460] François Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock, *Truffaut/Hitchcock*, trans. Helen G. Scott, revised edition (Simon & Schuster, 1985), 184.
[461] Shahram Mokri, "Interview with Shahram Mokri about Fish & Cat," interview by Amir Ganjavie, *Offscreen* 19, no. 3 (2015).
[462] Tilman Buttner, "Filming Sokurov's Russian Ark: An Interview with Tilman Buttner," interview by Louis Menashe, *Cinéaste* 28, no. 3 (2003).

to.[463] In literature, they are more important, owing to the volume and physical size of books. However, a small number of one-shot films signal their uncut nature via their titles. A bombastic example is *One Shot: Fear Without Cut* (Haroon Rashid, 2017), a film whose raison d'etre is to proclaim its uncut nature. *One Cut of the Dead*, from the same year, has a similarly phrased title, yet this makes sense because one-shot films are an explicit topic of its narrative. Another example is the British action film *One Shot* (James Nunn, 2021) and its sequel *One More Shot* (James Nunn, 2024). The titles play on the dual meaning of "one shot," referring both to firearms—a fitting allusion for a gun-heavy action film centred on Navy SEALs—and to the cinematic one-shot. Though these films are only loosely one shot, quite clearly containing cuts, they nevertheless leverage this pun, subtly encouraging a particular viewer response. Other titles allude more obliquely to the form, such as the earlier-mentioned *Causality*, a title suggestive of the cause-and-effect continuity of its narrative.

One type of filmic peritext is unique to one-shot films: an opening shot serving as a paratextual element. Several films commonly grouped as one-shots, indeed featuring an extremely long take, nevertheless technically contain multiple shots. It is a simple fact, acknowledged with a view to comprehensiveness, that several one-shot films are not strictly composed of one shot. For example, *Macbeth* (Béla Tarr, 1982), often listed as an early example, is quite unambiguously composed of two shots: a five-minute opening shot followed by a fifty-seven minute long shot. *Sábado* (Matias Bize, 2003) begins with an image montage, while the one-hour shot of *Commute* (Bruce Baillie, 1995) is preceded by a short introductory comedy skit. In such cases, the main long take dwarfs the significance of the shots that bookend it, transforming them into orbital paratexts rather than primary sites of filmic meaning. Genette stresses the vague boundaries, internal and external, that separate

[463] Genette, *Paratexts*, 55-103.

paratext from text; this specialised case exemplifies his point.[464] It is instead wise to recategorize these bookending shots as functioning similarly to an already established paratextual element. Thus, in *Crazy Samurai Musashi* (Yuji Shimomura, 2020) shots on either side of the extended one serve as prologue and epilogue (or cutscenes, given its game-like aesthetics). Other one-shot films have a more traditional written prologue, such as *Infection* (Albert Pyun, 2005), which presents its single shot as an unedited piece of police dashcam footage: "A high-definition dash camera mounted in a Lawton patrol car captured the following video evidence … the following provides 63 minutes of continuous Video Documentation." *Flight of a Bullet* (Beata Bubenets, 2017) begins with a philosophical epigraph: "Life only kept going while the camera is going on, so I kept filming." This epigraph functions in the classical sense defined by Genette, which "consists of commenting on the text, whose meaning it indirectly specifies or emphasizes."[465] This philosophical epigraph is fitting for Bubenets's film, whose events are energised and determined by the act of filming itself, by the presence of the camera.

**BONUS FEATURES AND MAKING-OF FEATURETTES**

As I mentioned earlier, making-of featurettes are the other major paratext associated with one-shot films alongside secondary journalistic articles. As the forthcoming case studies will soon show, these featurettes fill an interpretive gap left open by the one-shot form, proudly revealing the production processes that the primary text necessarily conceals. Filmmakers and studios are incentivised to find their own way to leverage their efforts behind-the-scenes: Why not utilize footage of a compelling undertaking, especially when it augments and valorises the main text? These making-of documentaries function like a literary

[464] Genette, *Paratexts*, 1-2.
[465] Genette, *Paratexts*, 157.

footnote, allowing filmmakers to show and contextualise their impressive work without interrupting the narrative flow. New media expand the film text, with bonus features becoming necessary to the total experience.[466] Chuck Tryon notes that "the very definition of what counts as a film text is subject to reinterpretation," while viewers are now "experts on movie culture with new access to studio-sanctioned forms of cinematic knowledge."[467] One-shot films as a form are conducive to this contemporary diffusion of the cinematic experience, suggestive of more intrigue beyond the primary film text.

Making-of featurettes have a deceptively long history, particularly within mainstream cinema.[468] Due to this temporal evolution, the behind-the-scenes format has ripened to such an extent that noticeable clichés have emerged. Paul Arthur observes that an enduring trope of the behind-the-scenes form is when the storyline or genre of the primary text becomes a structuring motif of the ancillary film, stamped like a trademark by the work they orbit: "A recurring tactic is to seize on an integral trope for the filmmaking process that mirrors the typology of the original narrative."[469] This trend has a pragmatic basis, quickly solving the problem of how to arrange the ancillary material, some of which may be edited concurrently to the main film. Conjuring a novel tone for presenting this material is an unnecessary creative chore when it can slot into readymade narratives or other structures. The musical score functions as a reliable lasso for this material, imbuing the making-of film with familiarity. This musical groundwork acts in service of similar themes to the main film. Jonathan Gray analyses the bonus boxset for *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter

[466] Nicholas Rombes observes that bonus features give audiences the perception that movies are infinitely malleable and expandable.
[467] Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema,* 4-24.
[468] Michele Pierson traces these discourses back to precinematic times. Michele Pierson, *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder* (Columbia University Press, 2002). Daniel Steinhart details developments in the studio era. Daniel Steinhart, "The Making of Hollywood Production," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 4 (Summer 2018): 96-119.
[469] Paul Arthur, "(In)dispensable Cinema: Confessions of a 'Making-of' Addict," *Film Comment* 40, no. 4 (2004): 41.

Jackson, 2002), wherein the primary film's quest narrative encourages an overriding motif of "making a great film despite all adversity."[470] Gray provides a detailed blueprint for analysing the hyperbolic displays of one-shot film paratexts. The recurring themes he identifies in Jackson's series also characterise audiovisual one-shot paratexts. Certain pre-existing dynamics in cinematic paratexts find their ultimate expressive comfort in the one-shot experience.

Paratexts ultimately represent the process of a huge industry—mainstream cinema—attempting to know and to properly advertise itself. John Caldwell, in his book *Production Culture*, details the obsessive "industrial self-analysis" taking place in the contemporary cinematic landscape.[471] He covers paratexts from the inside, revealing the self-identifications these coded and managed cultural performances contain.[472] They are shot through with pre-theorizing rhetoric, arguments encouraging certain viewer responses. One manifestation of this rhetoric is the tendency to simplify the knotty complications of production through archaic framing devices, such as 'movie magic.'[473] We see these types of reductive explanations in one-shot film making-of featurettes, with the figure of the visionary director that glides above established practice. The bonus features accompanying Sam Mendes's *1917* (2019), discussed later in this chapter, exemplify this tendency. Rather than simply documenting production, they frame the film as an unprecedented technical achievement, repeatedly celebrating Mendes's vision, Roger Deakins's cinematography, and the collaborative ingenuity required to realise the apparent single take. Difficulties of production are transformed into a narrative of innovation and virtuosity, directing viewers to admire not

[470] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 92.
[471] John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Duke University Press, 2008), 1.
[472] Caldwell's book is comparable to Bordwell's inductive, 'middle-level' approach to filmic knowledge.
[473] Examples of level-headed, commonsensical film talk exist in dialectical union with these more hyperbolic offerings.

only the finished film but also the exceptional labour behind it. Indeed, Caldwell suggests that 'behind-the-scenes' is now an outdated term, given that the production process is becoming increasingly visible, albeit with a particular spin, and becoming a primary form of entertainment.[474] These featurettes accommodate expressions and ideas outside the continuous linearity of the main work, offloading durational heft and fracturing the discourse. This seamless intermixing of production process and finished product is characteristic of one-shot films. Positioned at the candid end of a spectrum between openness and occlusion, one-shot films with accompanying featurettes invite engagement and foreground their own technical virtuosity, often seeking recognition for it. They shine a light on the successes of their innovations rather than attempting to hide away an inferior facsimile.

## PRODUCTION PROCESS AURA AND PARATEXTS

In one-shot films, the production process gains an aura: an indissoluble presence in a specific place and time. André Gaudreault and Phillipe Marion, in a quote especially suited to the production process of one-shot films, claim making-of documentaries "attest that there truly was … before the epiphany of the filmic world, performance labor that was duly recorded, duly captured—at times laboriously, dangerously, or playfully."[475] This "attestation" is the virtuosic gesture undergirding much one-shot activity. In his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin describes how modernist works, especially cinema, lack presence in space and time—formerly a precondition for enduring works of art. In other words, their aura has shrivelled. Film scholars have been measuring the implications of Benjamin's proclamations ever since.

[474] Caldwell, *Production Culture,* 5.
[475] André Gaudreault and Phillippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age,* trans. Timothy Barnard (Columbia University Press, 2015), 100.

It could be argued that the Bordwellian "intensified continuity"—the dwindling Average Shot Lengths in contemporary mainstream cinema—threaten to permanently extinguish cinematic aura.[476] As the number of shots required to create a film increases, the plurality of copies of the world threatens to swarm any semblance of a unique, authentic experience. The meaning of an image is no longer found internally, but rather "prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones."[477] Benjamin discusses traditional film acting as a concrete example, being "composed of many separate performances," rather than one extended performance: not easily locatable as a permanent whole, but rather fleeting and fragmented.[478]

One-shot filmmaking circumvents this situation, predicated upon the existence of a single location in space captured temporally during the single movement of the camera that constitutes the film. One-shot films offer a sense of location—a real place that is locatable and legible—where the filmmaking occurred. Some one-shot films (such as *Eight* or *Fourplay*) remain entirely interior: the location is a studio set, built specifically for the shoot. While such films do not contain strong spatiotemporal aura in the vein of, say, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508-12) in the Vatican City, a limited impression of aura endures: this location existed as a unified whole for the duration of the shoot. In traditionally edited films, viewers are scarcely able to locate these filmed events in a unified way, with fragments of numerous locations stitched together into the tapestry of the work.

Because one-shot films magnify the raw recording capabilities of the cinematic apparatus, they can be likened to the default substratum of the medium—another conflation between production process and finished text. The cinematic apparatus holds within it the

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[476] David Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film," *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2002): 16-28. Average Shot Length (ASL) is first outlined by Barry Salt and notably adopted by David Bordwell. Barry Salt, "Statistical Style Analysis of Motion Pictures," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1974): 13-22.
[477] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Schocken Books, 2007), 226.
[478] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 230.

inherent capacity for uncut duration—it is an automatism of the medium, to use Stanley Cavell's term—yet this capacity is seldom explored.[479] It is one of the options for filmmakers that has arisen in the technical and aesthetic history of cinema. However, as I detail in my introduction, one-shot film styles have only cropped up in certain patches of the film-historical tapestry. One-shot films reflexively gesture towards this innate capacity of the medium, regardless of their specific content.[480] David MacDougall claims every edited documentary is haunted by the extended takes in the rushes that are necessarily fractured: a "notional film" that resides underneath the edit.[481] In these cases, the one-shot form is likened to something else, positioned as a conscious reproduction of qualities that are otherwise automatic or accidental.

The shrivelled aura of a film text (or the medium of film in general) is restored through paratexts: behind-the-scenes featurettes. Jonathan Gray describes how "paratextually constructed" material bathes a text in aura, usually overlooked when viewing the primary text alone.[482] Certain films possess an excess of meaning, overflowing the borders of the primary text. Too much effort has been put into the production process, plus material in the image itself, to be processed and appreciated during a single viewing. Multiple sites are now necessary for filmmakers and producers to present the full meaning of a text to consumers.

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[479] The concept is abstract and multifaceted, exacerbated by the unwavering succinctness of Cavell's style. This in-built complexity and adaptability contribute to its theoretical richness even decades after the publication of *A World Viewed*, with Rodowick labelling it as "the most challenging reconsideration of the concept of medium in relation to film and photography." D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 42. Cavell introduces the concept in the context of modern art, wherein the finished artwork is routinely untethered from the forms and traditions historically characterizing that medium's products, such that its precise form could not have been subject to an *a priori* description. Thus, Cavell claims, artists in this context do not create new artworks within the canon of a given medium, but rather a new medium entirely in their chosen artistic direction, and through this process so-called automatisms arise. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Harvard University Press, 1979), 101-107.

[480] Lutz Koepnick writes that long takes re-engage the primordial essence of cinema, repressed since early cinema, "cinema's quasi-primordial ability to reproduce the sheer passing of time in all its void of meaning and finitude." Lutz Koepnick, *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 44.

[481] David MacDougall, "When Less Is Less: The Long Take in Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1992): 36.

[482] Gray, *Show Sold Separately,* 97.

This fact, plus the wider cultural trend of digital convergence, creates a situation where the borders between texts are no longer clearly defined. Indeed, Jonathan Gray notes that paratexts operate within these vague demarcations, the "threshold between the inside and the outside of the text," filling and negotiating the space between text, audience, and industry.[483] Signalling authorship behind the text works in tandem with aura creation. Paratexts highlight distinctive and non-repeatable production process: the choreography of a once-in-a-lifetime group of actors performing their singular interpretation.

In the shadow of post-1960s auteurism, in most narrative feature film discourse, the director is constantly reinforced as the key creative force, the sun around which other crew members orbit. Small portions of paratexts are dedicated to the work of sub-authors. Aura and auteurism militate against charges of crass consumerism, the suspicion of milking a product for all its worth. Imbuing paratexts with aura provides the counterargument that too much craftsmanship is on display behind the works, that only one viewing is a disservice to this artful abundance. The expected degree of cynical reactions amongst the public towards ancillary works contributes to the overall paratextual dynamic. Gauche filmmakers who do not heed the warning of a backlash fall into the trap of fulfilling audience expectations with a tone of hyperbolic grandeur. For those who, on the other hand, heed Genette's warning to use a light paratextual touch, a dash of tonal subtlety is apparent, with aura and auteurism relocating the focus away from illocutionary salesmanship and towards high craft and trailblazing technique. If (as Cornelia Klecker suggests) the paratext is itself interpretable as a text, possessing its own readability and textuality, this inherent expectation of audience cynicism contributes to explaining its textual formation.[484] The choice of what to include in a

[483] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 25.
[484] Cornelia Klecker, "The Other Kinds of Film Frames: A Research Report on Paratexts in Films," *Word & Image* 31, no. 4 (2015): 402-413.

making-of featurette is determined by what message about their work the filmmakers want to transmit to their expected audience.

### *IN ONE BREATH*

In the final three sections of this chapter, I cover three case studies to demonstrate the specificities of tone and focus in one-shot paratextual productions across world cinema. An early one-shot making-of featurette is *In One Breath*: *Alexander Sokurov's Russian Ark* (Knut Elstermann, 2003), a 45-minute accompaniment to Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002). This featurette takes every opportunity to emphasise the looming deadlines, potential hazards, and audacious choreography that were overcome by the Herculean efforts of Sokurov and his crew. The limited time available to film in the Hermitage Museum, the meticulous preparation, and the exhaustion of the crew after finishing, are continually lauded by the voice-over, making claims like "this is a unique film experiment" and "nobody has ever tried to make a film like this before." This rhetorical strategy, persuasive and illocutionary, characterises almost all supplementary features of one-shot films.

The tone of *In One Breath* attempts to stylise *Russian Ark* as high art, forged within circumstances akin to canonical achievements in art history. The documentary places the film in kinship with the enduring artworks featured in its museum tour, comparing its epochal cinematic achievements to those works it displays. One crew member describes it as an ambitious condensation of this preceding cultural history, claiming the crew were guided by an "aesthetic principle of three hundred years in ninety minutes." The primary actor, Sergey Dreyden, who plays the European, is an experienced and celebrated theatre actor, with his presence leveraging the aura of theatre in the film's artistic pursuits. Even the title, *In One Breath*, is grandiose in nature, repeated as a mission statement by conductor Valery Gergiev:

"to make a film in one breath"—positioning it as a heralded goal. The exact date the shot was achieved is given—the twenty-third of December 2001—signposting the aura of the occasion, like a commemorative plaque of achievement.

The setting of the Hermitage Museum is key to these efforts, emerging as a primary protagonist in the film. The famous museum has a double function as both the diegetic setting and the arena in which the epic production struggle takes place. Its lustre is not just contained to itself; the museum stands as a key cultural centre in St. Petersburg and Russia as a whole: "the absolute living history of Russia and European culture, a world of its own." One-shot films are particularly suited to creating film spaces that possess their own distinct and developed character. The fluidity of the camera transforms the museum into organic architecture, a living landscape. Sokurov not only takes on the stress of completing the film, but also as custodian of the museum, requiring a special style of working to ensure its protection. The mixture between history and the film production is reinforced at the final cut. Sokurov mentions the emotion of departing the historical stage in real time, witnessing the historical personages clapping to celebrate the successful shoot.

Jonathan Gray writes that auteurism creates the perception that making-of featurettes are worthy of attention rather than being dismissed as a marketing ploy.[485] In *In One Breath*, both director Alexander Sokurov and cinematographer Tilman Buttner are put forth as pioneering auteurs, representative of, respectively, inspired creative vision and virtuosic physical performance—an idea master and a technical master working in coordination. Buttner positions himself as the practical translator of Sokurov's lofty, if at times impractical, vision: "I tried to understand his conception, and make suggestions on lighting and camera

[485] Gray, *Show Sold Separately,* 104-5.

movement in order to come closer to his meaning."[486] Though both already command respect within the industry, these artists had to, like Picasso, unlearn previous rules and habits, beginning from scratch. Sokurov is portrayed as a visionary who possesses the patience and foresight to fit his longstanding Bazinian dream—finally enabled by technology—within a stringent set of parameters. Sokurov muses about his artistic goals: "A new approach to making films means nothing to me. Something can only be ascribed revolutionary status if the artistic result merits it." He distances himself from the label of experimentation, rephrasing his filmic desires in logical terms: "I don't want to experiment with time. I need real time, to keep it as is." This favouring of results rather than process itself is refreshing for one-shot films. Buttner, on the other hand, is shown to possess outstanding physical and mental fortitude. Memory, a key theme in the film itself, gains a pragmatic presence in the shooting process, with Buttner having to learn the entire film beforehand to achieve Sokurov's vision: "I had to learn everything by heart. I didn't have a diagram on the camera." In addition to mental agility, great stamina is required, with Buttner confessing that he was at a point of total exhaustion going into the climactic ballroom scene—yet persevered. Such an admission puts a human face to the technical wizardry, transforming the calcified calculations of film production into a breathtaking, quasi-Olympian victory.

The filmmakers outline the sheer difficulty of the task at hand with rhetorical aplomb. They scorn the arrogance of their pre-shoot selves, who naively figured that "this is easy … we were very wrong." The imposing numbers begin to stack up. Four years to develop, with only thirty-six hours to complete. Eight hundred and sixty-seven trained actors, sixty-five costume designers, fifty make-up artists, thirty-six electricians, and a route of a kilometre and a half. In their race to preserve a sense of cinematic time, time itself, akin to a mainstream

[486] Tilman Buttner, "Filming Sokurov's Russian Ark: An Interview with Tilman Buttner," interview by Louis Menashe, *Cinéaste* 28, no. 3, (2003): 22.

thriller like *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994), becomes their biggest enemy. The rapid countdown, the years of effort, the impossibility of postponement—this featurette's narrative pleasures are of a wholly different sort to *Russian Ark* itself. Buttner reports that he was unable to eat due to nerves. Several failed takes also heighten the tension, with enough time for only a few attempts at the film. It is a production truly imbued with a sense of jeopardy. With the fourth attempt, a tone of genuine concern creeps into the proceedings: "It will not be possible to edit out mistakes and technical mishaps afterwards. We had to get it the fourth time. If we hadn't got it the fourth time, we would be fucked." Though the film takes place almost entirely indoors, the uncertainty of the weather still comes into play right at the end for a short exterior scene, becoming a final source of consternation. With the temperature in St. Petersburg at -24 degrees Celsius, the risk of frost short-circuiting the camera was a genuine concern. Like other one-shot making-of featurettes, religion is invoked, as Sokurov says that they "lit a candle and prayed." The ultimate moment of the final cut frequently becomes a celebratory nexus in these documentaries: "Most people just fell down at 'cut.'"

The featurette is replete with production insights, not concerned with keeping the magic a secret but rather revelling in the reveal, covering several practical matters that curious viewers might wonder about. Practical considerations regarding risk management need to be worked out behind the scenes but not disclosed to viewers: for example, the threshold of imperfection during the shot when a restart is deemed necessary. *In One Breath* provides insight into this question, with Sokurov remarking "if anything went wrong in the first 20 minutes, we would start again." The documentary similarly reveals what exactly happens behind the camera during filming: silent motions and directions from Sokurov throughout the process, and eight of the twenty-two assistant directors moving along with the camera. These details demonstrate that important decision-making must be executed during the shoot, regardless of careful planning. It is also revealed that they followed the route and

filmed with a mini-DV camera in preparation. A lightweight Canadian Steadicam was specially made, beginning a trend continued by *1917* whereby cinematic technology is developed in the specific realisation of a one-shot film.

## *1917* BONUS FEATURES

The audiovisual bonus features on the *1917* Blu-ray function similarly to *In One Breath*. Both inflate the prestige of their work by framing it as a kindred continuation of the history depicted; both confirm the auteurist spark of their director while also acknowledging the cinematographer as a primary creative force; and both herald the unprecedented cinematic techniques concocted in the forging of their vision. Unlike *In One Breath*, which is one work, the *1917* bonus features are split into multiple packages, allowing us to pinpoint the studio-sanctioned themes—the prepackaged messages about the text—that are offered to viewers. The implicit themes in other paratextual works are proffered as explicit nodes of meaning. Throughout the featurettes, *1917*'s musical score, composed by Thomas Newman, lends celebratory gravitas to the proceedings—an enduring trope of the making-of form.

The first of these mini featurettes predictably covers the central figure: director Sam Mendes. It begins with Mendes gathering and rousing his crew prior to the beginning of shooting. Depicting the crew gathering provides a natural way to begin or end a one-shot featurette, showing up often. Jonathan Gray notes of the *Lord of the Rings* DVD featurettes that effusive praise for director Peter Jackson is repeated almost like a religious incantation, with such reverence garlanding Mendes also, "seeing him make it one shot. I thought he should donate his brain to science. He's very smart. They should study him. He's just a genius. He really is. The key was his inspiration, and the willingness to do something like

this."[487] His pioneering mentality is channelled into *1917,* whose artistic goals are traced in reverent tones. Crew members laud every aspect of production as unprecedented, "I don't think there will have been another film with this much detail in the one-shot nature of it, and that's what sets it apart from what we see on screen today." They mention the suitedness of the one-shot form to the storyline, as if anticipating the need to provide artistic justification: "Breathing every step with them was integral to the message." The featurettes act as a rhetorical justification for one-shot films—an ode to the values of the challenge undertaken. Even a cinematographer as vaunted as Roger Deakins admits to the undertaking as a valuable learning experience: "How that technique draws you into it, you don't even notice it's one take, which surprised me." Like *In One Breath,* an overriding concern for keeping the end goal in mind becomes apparent, amplifying the quality of results rather than getting lost in process: "Put all your resources where the camera will see it."

The collaborative nature of the project is continually emphasised. The title of one of the featurettes is "Allied Forces: Making 1917." This likening of the production to the historical wartime alliance is the most explicit example of a primary text being used as a guiding metaphor for the behind-the-scenes presentation. It is the same as "the bonus materials (insisting) on the cast becoming their own Fellowship, united by compassion, respect, and dedication, and determined to succeed in their own gruelling quest" in Gray's case study.[488] The crew are depicted as moving parts working in harmony, using every specialised skill they have to illuminate the gargantuan task. Ample time is given to appraising the achievements of various semi-auteurs. Roger Deakins is established as the key creative collaborator, playing a very similar role to Tilman Buttner in *Russian Ark.* An entire mini featurette is dedicated to Thomas Newman's score, claimed to be "the fabric of the

[487] Gray, *Show Sold Separately,* 99.
[488] Gray, *Show Sold Separately,* 93.

film." One-shot films tend to have issues of musical spacing, often forgoing variation in favour of an ongoing ambient soundtrack. Newman therefore articulates the challenges of this assignment, and the reasons to get it right: "It has to mark the moments. In a normal movie, you do not have to know what the rhythm of the scene is … but here, you have to know on the day." Another segment celebrates the unique achievements of the central actors. The production is often portrayed, quite literally, as a shared dream. They speak of the work as a real creation that they briefly inhabited through their collaboration, displaying emotion about the process of constructing a lost world and then tearing it down.

With Deakins as the conduit, the technologies needing invention to execute the film are discussed in detail, reinforcing the linkage between one-shot filmmaking and technological development: "It was groundbreaking technology really, things that haven't been done before." The cameras alone required months of research: a dragonfly rig was specially developed, as was an enhanced Steadicam to allow for easier running. Technological invention under time constraints is another drama during the shoot. Speaking about the main camera, the LF Mini, Deakins recalls "we pushed them to get the camera available for this shoot. We are the first film to use it." Deakins receives the most praise of all collaborators: "The camerawork just blew my mind; things I didn't even realise were possible." It is continually stressed that the technological plenitude is designed to replicate reality as strongly as possible, rather than be a conspicuous focus in itself. They were developed to fit into a pre-arranged scheme, rather than to function as creatively generative elements: "We do not get to play with those tools yet … we still have to do all of those things and design it into our one-shot film." The featurette provides insight into how Deakins constructed the plan for the shoot. A 40-page document was created that contained a map of the entire film, detailing how the camera "can move from A to B to C to D to E to F without

cutting." The challenges of one-shot films therefore turn cinematographers into cartographers.

Despite the influx of technology, the *1917* bonus features are replete with the manifold challenges of the shoot—typical of the form. The filmmakers stress the unknown quantities of the shoot despite the preparation: "a voyage of discovery for everybody, both meticulously prepped and detailed and at the same time totally unknown." The sheer length of the set leads to the most issues. Composed of non-repeating locations—described as a "normal movie times five"—every onscreen moment must be visually accounted for. The burden of this responsibility falls onto the art department, required to include an excess of detail to counterbalance the expressive losses of the form: "We are used to using coverage and camera placement to tell a story. It is the language of film." Timing and measurement instead become crucial, as every step needs to be calculated: "The land cannot be longer than the scene, and the scene cannot be longer than the land." This timing is a baseline challenge of the shoot, affecting every moment, with compounding problems at specific junctures. For example, having built over a mile of trenches, trekking through the mud became exhausting. The unpredictability of the weather created endless continuity and lighting challenges.[489] The fact that many scenes are portrayed in 360-view meant that artificial lighting sources could not alleviate these issues, as they would be spotted by the camera. As I detailed in length in the previous chapter, the challenges of one-shot filmmaking, and the resultant risk thereby accompanying its undertaking, becomes a primary avenue for accessing *1917*, dictating its paratextual communications.

[489] I discussed weather in one-shot films in my previous chapter on chance.

## SOUTH ASIAN ONE-SHOT FILMMAKING PARATEXTS

South Asian paratextual materials resemble those associated with Hollywood, sharing a hyperbolic focus on the extraordinary achievements of their filmmaking. However, their more forthright and exaggerated rhetorical style and penchant for spurious claims renders them ripe for analysis. They emphatically disregard Genette's advice to "use a light touch" in paratexts, thereby clearly revealing the underlying messaging of one-shot paratexts.[490]

Two Tamil-language Indian films, *Yuddha Kaandam* (Anantharajan, 2022) and *Iravin Nazhal* (Radhakrishnan Parthiban, 2022) attach their making-of featurettes contiguously to the film itself. *Yuddha Kaandam* is described as "India's First One-Shot Action Movie." This self-description exemplifies the South Asian one-shot film tradition, whereby crafting a singular tagline is a marketing priority. When collected across films and displayed side by side, these claims of uniqueness nullify each other. As I noted in my introduction, cultural specificities inflect one-shot practices: the bombastic expressive qualities of Bollywood and other South Asian cinemas transfer to their outlook on one-shot filmmaking, determining their paratextual tone. *Yuddha Kaandam* has a runtime of ninety minutes, yet its narrative proper ends at seventy-five, at which point a fast-paced and self-congratulatory making-of segment begins. In Genette's terms, this segment is a "postface," appearing after a text.[491] Meaning is thus reached through multiple angles, though it is difficult to say whether this featurette is a paratext or part of the text proper (such ambiguities are rampant in the paratextual realm). While the diegetic presentation has limited rhetorical tools, this late semi-textual flourish uses quick montage to astound viewers with the proof of achievement, even running through the entire film again on fast forward. The production difficulties are exaggerated and leveraged, the operative currency within this practice. Twenty-five actors,

[490] Genette, *Paratexts*, 410.
[491] Genette, *Paratexts*, 237-239.

twenty-five days of rehearsal, one hundred technicians—the numbers alone have rhetorical power. A cast picture at the end immortalises the personnel who have struggled together to overcome the chaos.

*Iravin Nazhal* leans heavily into its supposed identity as the "The World's First Non-Linear Single Shot Film"—the title of the featurette preceding the film.[492] Boastful claims of novelty are taken to an even higher rhetorical plane than usual: the film is said to have created a new style, thus having "taken cinema to a new level." Even if we grant the claim partial validity, the rhetoric is unique and extraordinary. Early on, someone says that "we have never seen a film like this." It is an achievement worthy of reverence, they claim, for its symbolic role in portraying the overcoming of chaos by man. They laud every aspect of *Iravin Nazhal* as unprecedented and virtuosic, sometimes repeatedly in quasi-propagandistic fashion. The filmmakers are very concerned with assuring the audience that no compromises were made, that it was indeed completed in one take. They explicitly deny the familiar method of hiding cuts during transitions. They also recount their achievements with numerical data: the script took ten years; research on a suitable gimbal took two years; production design took four years; rehearsals took ninety days.

Risk and the possibility of accidents are a focal point within this filmmaking approach. These featurettes follow in the footsteps of works like *Burden of Dreams* (Les Blank, 1982) and *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (Eleanor Coppola, 1991) in chronicling the travails of an embattled, improbable film production. Crew members paranoically recount the numerous ways that error can creep into the process: "Accidents were inevitable." Every conceivable difficulty in pulling off a one-shot film—fatigue, failure, weather, spoilt food, or COVID-19—becomes fuel for this self-aggrandizing rhetoric. Just

[492] This featurette preceded the film during its screening on television.

like the spacing of emotion within a fictional three act-structure action film, these making-of featurettes carefully thread in their difficult failures to amplify the Herculean undertones. A failed take seems to dip the featurette's tone into a depression. It depicts each of the twenty-three unsuccessful takes in sequence, creating the sense of a grinding, Sisyphean struggle. At one point the narration simply repeats "one more, one more, one more…" This interplay of failure and success dictates the featurette's rhythm. With each mistake, the music ceases abruptly, and the screen transforms from colour to grey, mimicking the style of a video game death screen. Indeed, the filmmaking process becomes akin to the experience of playing a difficult videogame such as *Dark Souls* (2011); one must become comfortable with failure, incorporating it into the process. Teamwork and forgiveness are expressed when recounting one crew member making a costly mistake: "Poor girl. It wasn't her fault." Finally, they achieve the desired take, and celebration ensues. The crew laud Partiban as a one-shot auteur whose audacity is central to the film's successful execution.

The title of this 31-minute long making-of documentary (*Documenting the World's First Non-Linear Single Shot Film*) is convoluted; in reading it, one hears the filmmakers straining to differentiate their product.[493] It seems diluted: one-shot filmmaking has reached a saturation point such that it is now necessary to tout positive distinctions from within the category. Merely creating a one-shot film is no longer impressive nor exciting enough: other characteristics such as non-linearity or excessive length become the new selling point. One hears specific claims such as "numerous sets were built back-to-back for the first time." It is not just "the first" or "India's first," it is "the world's first." It is framed as an achievement that the entire filmmaking world is actively competing towards. Such an achievement needs

[493] This tendency is not unique to South Asian one-shot films. One finds this claim in *Variety*: "Directed by Alex Kahuam ("Forgiveness"), "Failure!" is believed to be the first time a Mexican filmmaker has made a feature film without cuts in the U.S" Naman Ramachandran, "Ted Raimi Thriller 'Failure!' Snapped Up for North American Distribution at Cannes Market by Red Water Entertainment (EXCLUSIVE)," *Variety*, May 16, 2024, https://variety.com/2024/film/global/ted-raimi-failure-cannes-red-water-entertainment-1236006105/.

to be "documented." If it were not, perhaps it is thought that no one would believe it. Such discourse clearly exemplifies how the production process, the act of filmic creation, possesses an outsized aura within the sphere of one-shot filmmaking. We read during the featurette that it is "touted as India's first non-linear single shot film." After the grand universal claims of the title, this claim inversely appears almost as not enough. Is it the world's first or India's first? Are they both the same thing, two sides of the same claim? Whether the claims are even true is not clear; a cursory check reveals that other films use non-linear time within a single shot, such as *Still Orangutans* (Gustavo Spolidoro, 2007) and (in simulated fashion) *King Dave* (Daniel Grou, 2016). Of preceding one-shot films, Partiban claims that "all move towards the next moment in chronology," which is certainly untrue. He even mentions *Russian Ark* when making this claim, which clearly glides non-linearly between different historical periods within its single take. The locations do not entirely change visually in imitation of a scene transition like *Iravin Nizhal*, but the characters and viewer's reality certainly do. A distinct strain of sophistry thus presents itself within one-shot paratexts.

Several films have even solidified their achievements through official records—an insightful and pervasive example of the hyperbole surrounding South Asian one-shot filmmaking. A film seeking out and utilising its status as a 'record' exemplifies the artificial charms that infect this filmmaking movement. In *Iravin Nizhal*, the *Asia Book of Records* and *India Book of Records* insignias appear, bestowing legitimacy through respective certificates of achievement. A film being considered record-worthy for formal properties is novel, beckoning a new fusion between filmmaking endeavours and the sporting (or e-sports) world. Such claims are reasonable if applied to accidental achievements—such as having the largest film set—yet striking when sought out and embedded within a marketing strategy. The obscure Indian film *One-Shot: Fear Without Cut* (Haroon Rashid, 2010) holds an official

record from Guinness[494] for "Longest Uncut Film," appearing on the company's official site.[495] This film is difficult to source today; even finding any information about it is challenging. Its official Facebook page is dedicated to reposting articles proclaiming it as a Guinness World Record holder. One sees the laurels that come from the mere fact of producing a one-shot film, regardless of aesthetic virtues: a near-unknown film, immortalised by Guinness. Bizarrely, though one assumes that a Guinness World Record is awarded exclusively to one holder, multiple films claim the honour. Two different articles in *The Hindu Times* (by Nikhil Raghavan[496] and Sudhish Kamath, respectively) celebrate the crowning of a different one-shot film, *Agadam* (Mohamad Issack, 2014), with the honour. Kamath's article writes, "In one go ... Tamil film *Agadam* has been shot from start to finish in a single take — from 'action' to 'cut,' a Guinness World Record!"[497] These journalistic writers position the label of "world record" as the raison d'être for one-shot filmmaking.

The lure of a Guinness World Record also hangs over the Nepalese film *Jaalo* (Araaj Keshav Giri, 2018), surrounded by repeated claims that record-breaking was central to its production, with this aspiration functioning as a prime mover of inspiration. One crew member states bluntly, "The main thing that attracted me is, it's an attempt for a Guinness

[494] Guinness World Records is not always the most ethical or discerning of organisations.

[495] "The longest uncut film is "One Shot Fear Without Cut" which has a running time of 3 hr 28 min 4 sec (excluding opening and end credits), directed by Haroon Rashid (India), and was filmed on location in Mumbai, India, on 30 September 2010. The film went on general release in 2014." "Longest uncut film," *Guinness World Records*, accessed April 2, 2026, https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/longest-film-shot-on-a-single-camera.

[496] Raghavan writes, "Director Mohamad Issac's first venture, Agadam, has entered the Guinness World Records. "The certification says, 'Longest Uncut Film." The entire shoot was done in two hours 30 minutes and 30 seconds continuously, without any cut or retake. Agadam has beaten the record held by Russian Ark (a Russian film) which was shot in one hour and 30 minutes. "Agadam, a horror film, was shot completely at night with a hand-held camera, which is also a first," says Issack." Nikhil Raghavan, "Shotcuts: One for the record," *The Hindu*, May 07, 2013, https://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/shotcuts-one-for-the-record/article4689139.ece.

[497] South Asian films are not alone in such spurious proclamations, however; an IMDb trivia page note for the Canadian film *21 Brothers* (Michael McGuire, 2011) states: "The film is considered as "The Longest Single Shot Film in History" by the Guinness Book of World Records." "*21 Brothers* Trivia," *IMDb*, accessed April 2, 2026, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1949106/trivia/?ref_=tt_dyk_trv.

world record … one shot movie. I wish the God places its name on Guinness, I hope, and I wish." The task of achieving the record is framed as an additional burden layered onto an already arduous production: "To do the work which no one in this world has even attempted, to make a good commercial movie along with creating a new record: we can guess how difficult and hard it is." Throughout the short making-of featurette, the Guinness aspiration remains a constant reference point, regarding not just this single film but Nepalese cinema more broadly: "Sometimes Nepali cinema has been able to make records in the world through its creative experimental films … *Jaalo* and *Jaalo Returns* has set a new world record: longest one shot movie, and the other record is two movies filmed in a single shot."[498] This aspiration toward record-breaking persists beyond production itself, becoming central to the film's paratextual afterlife. The featurette concludes with an advertisement for the film, claiming that it has created new records but now requires an audience. In this way, *Jaalo*'s rhetorical claims about itself solidify into a gesture positioning the film as deserving of material support.

The *Jaalo* making-of featurette begins with two unattributed quotes that signal its singularity.[499] Given *Jaalo*'s epigraphs are not attributable to a specific author, they primarily create connotative associations, aligning *Jaalo* with the vaunted works that deploy an epigraph. Genette writes that "the most powerful oblique effect of the epigraph is perhaps due simply to its presence, whatever the epigraph itself may be: this is the epigraph-effect."[500] As the featurette progresses, further grandiose quotations pass by: "Along with time, filmmaking has changed"—suggesting that *Jaalo* follows in the path of groundbreaking precursors. A crew member asks, "What more difference is needed? It's totally different." Another

[498] "Continuously it was filmed for 3hr 53m, two different movies filmed in a single shot."
[499] These unattributed quotations are: "If Everybody Can Do It Than You Also Can Do It, If No One Can Do It, You Must Do It" followed by "If People Don't Laugh At Your Dream, Maybe Your Dream Is Too Small."
[500] Genette, *Paratexts*, 160.

colleague catalogues his initial disbelief upon hearing the project details: “I didn’t know about (any) one-shot movie in Hollywood or any other film industry. For me it was like a tale.” Much of the featurette is directed towards *Jaalo*’s technical achievements. The visuals are dense and hyperactive, a flurry of activities whizzing by in each shot, while inspirational music drenches the soundtrack.

The resilience of those involved is sometimes tempered by a lowness of mood: “The huge crew of fifty-five artists and sixty technicians were sad and in despair sometimes.” As with other making-of featurettes, the difficulties involved are front and centre, with crew members questioning whether such a film is even possible under the circumstances. This uncertainty is framed so hyperbolically that failure to execute the film—despite our knowledge that the production was ultimately completed—is presented as a genuine possibility. Following one expression of doubt regarding the film’s feasibility, a large red question mark appears onscreen, heightening the suspense. For some, the director’s demands verge on the excessive, overlooking the limits of ordinary human endurance: “The director may have taken a year to write it, but how can we memorise so fast? It’s a torture.” Ultimately, their resilience wins the day, with the difficulties allowing them to enter a flow state: “We have limited time, so we must be sincere to finish this fast.” Extraordinary teamwork, spiritual inspiration, and the director’s force of personality bring the film to completion. Araaj Keshav Giri is portrayed as a confident and ambitious artist, using his cinematic abilities on behalf of Nepali cinema and the wider world of cinema. One crew member says of Giri and his cinematographer Hari Ghale Lama that “the dream of these two youths has given the Nepali cinema industry a new height … we’ve won, we’ve made our country proud.” The teamwork endures also, with a dramatic depiction of the crew celebrating in hysterics at the final cut: “Really a proud moment.” The final shot of the featurette is a group photograph of the crew, emphasizing their unity and connectedness. The

director compares the crew to Gorkhali, Nepalese soldiers praised for their bravery and togetherness. Finally, spiritual forces are shown to be necessary in the process. During the rehearsals, the crew engage in superstitious rituals, lighting incense and summoning positive energy. *Jaalo*'s making-of featurette, both hyperbolic and deeply sincere, mythologizes the heroic aspirations underlying the one-shot form.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the unique structures of reception surrounding one-shot filmmaking, a form whose constraints continually provoke curiosity regarding its own conditions of production. Drawing upon Ed Tan's concept of artefact emotions, I argued that the experience of one-shot films unfolds through a parallel intrigue: diegetic immersion alongside a sustained awareness of the film as a constructed durational performance. As the take continues, time pressure accumulates. The continuation of the shot itself becomes a source of tension, peaking during moments of complex staging or at the approach of the denouement, where the possibility of the shot's collapse is latent in the experience.

The reflexive qualities of one-shot filmmaking do not remain confined to the cinematic image, spilling outward into broader cultural circuits such as interviews and behind-the-scenes featurettes, sought out by the curious viewer. I had initially planned to use interviews with practitioners of one-shot films to unmask the travails and secrets of the production process—before learning that filmmakers are pre-empting the curious viewer, providing in published interviews a curated and rhetorically charged selection of details to accompany the main text. One-shot films arrive accompanied by their own explanatory discourse, rhetorically framing how their achievement should be perceived. This chapter has thus completed the thematic trajectory of my dissertation, moving from elements within one-

shot film texts to the surrounding cultural landscape in which they are couched. The one-shot form cannot be cleanly separated from its reception, which is not external to the work but constitutive of it, with curiosity being integral to the overall experience.

# CONCLUSION:
# THE FUTURE OF ONE-SHOT FILMS

As I finish this dissertation, it is summer 2026. I began researching one-shot films in early 2021. Across these five years, I have had the persistent awareness that I have been documenting a still-emerging form, tracing its contours before its full consolidation within mainstream audiovisual culture. Even during the writing of this dissertation, the one-shot form has continued its rapid ascent from specialised formal experiment to mass-cultural spectacle. In 2025, Netflix reported that *Adolescence*—a limited series composed of four continuous hour-long takes—was its most watched show of the year, accumulating 145 million views.[501] The series won nine Emmy Awards and became a major point of cultural conversation, demonstrating the extent to which the one-shot form now circulates at the centre of contemporary popular media rather than at its margins. At the same ceremony, *The Studio* episode "The Oner" received awards for both direction and cinematography. Like *One Cut of the Dead*, discussed throughout this dissertation, the episode folds the one-shot form back upon itself, dramatizing the chaotic attempt to successfully execute a continuous take. The labour behind, and risk surrounding, the one-shot film have themselves become spectacles of attraction.

Contemporary one-shot films emerge amidst profound transformations in viewers' trust in the veracity of cinematic images, owing to the mutable quality of digital imagery and broader processes of media convergence. The one-shot form has thus become a privileged site of the post-truth visual world, in which the ontological certainty of the cinematic image is increasingly unsettled. Phenomena and imitations of phenomena intermix within simulated one-shot films, producing an unstable interplay between illusion and truth. Cuts and

[501] "What We Watched the First Half of 2025," *Netflix*, accessed May 27, 2026, https://about.netflix.com/en/news/what-we-watched-the-first-half-of-2025.

transitions may now be seamlessly joined together, no longer visually signalling the initiation of a new slice of duration. A longstanding contract between film and viewer—the legibility of the cut—is thereby disrupted by digital capabilities. Cinema increasingly captures not simply reality, but retouched visions of reality, situated both through and beyond realism.

One-shot films therefore reflect wider digital transformations in the boundary between truth and deception. More broadly, the one-shot may also function methodologically as a way of understanding new forms of engagement with unbroken space and time emerging across expanded cinema and the wider new media landscape. The one-shot aesthetic becomes a key point of entry for understanding how digital and virtual spaces are co-ordinated, navigated, and traversed by users and audiences in continuous time. With each passing year of the twenty-first century, the atmosphere of distrust permeating image cultures deepens further. Given that the one-shot form attracts such intense speculation regarding whether it upholds notions of "authenticity," the illusionistic nature of digital cinema continually frustrates any attempt at stable ontological categorisation. The ability to visually alter even the most prosaic contents of the cinematic image means that continuity itself no longer guarantees evidentiary truth.

Artificial intelligence intensifies this instability further, raising uncertain questions regarding the future fate of one-shot films. AI-generated video frequently drifts toward continuous movement, blending disparate spaces into smooth and uninterrupted streams of simulated duration. The future of cinematic continuity may therefore consist not in the preservation of authenticity, but in its growing irrelevance. One-shot cinema has always existed within an unstable interplay of reality and illusion; digital compositing made this uncertainty newly visible. AI imagery radicalises this tendency further, producing forms of continuity whose authenticity may be impossible to determine and, increasingly, unnecessary or futile to investigate.

However, one-shot filmmaking has never derived its appeal solely from what appears onscreen. It is also a cinema of human achievement and ingenuity, a form that celebrates the discipline, coordination, and endurance required to sustain a take against the possibility of failure. If images continue to become more difficult to verify, the cultural appetite for visible human accomplishment—an appetite that finds a particularly compelling outlet in the one-shot form—may only intensify. It is, after all, one of the few cinematic forms that openly foregrounds labour and virtuosity as central aesthetic values, making them perceptible during the viewing experience. In a cultural landscape increasingly overrun by dubious and frictionless images, the difficulty and risk involved in one-shot filmmaking may acquire renewed value and admiration.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: LIST OF ONE-SHOT FILMS

*1917*. Dir. Sam Mendes. UK, 2019.

*2020: A 1917 Parody*. Dir. Stephen Ford. USA, 2020.

*21 Brothers*. Dir. Michael McGuire. Canada, 2011.

*9–1–75*. Dir. James Benning. USA, 1975.

*A Boy. A Girl. A Dream: Love on Election Night*. Dir. Qasim Basir. USA, 2018.

*A Date in Minsk*. Dir. Nikita Lavretski. Belarus, 2022.

*A Walk*. Dir. Jonas Mekas. USA, 1990.

*Adieu Bohème*. Dir. Jeanne Frenkel and Cosme Castro. France, 2017.

*Adolescence*. Dir. Philip Barantini. UK, 2025.

*Agadam*. Dir. Mohamad Issack. India, 2014.

*Airport 2013*. Dir. Koki Mitani. Japan, 2013.

*Alternation*. Dir. Mehdi Fard Ghaderi. Iran, 2007.

*An Order from the Sky*. Dir. Karthi Radhakrishnan. India, 2024.

*Ana Arabia*. Dir Amos Gitai. Israel, 2013.

*Anino sa likod ng buwan*. Dir. Jun Lana. Philippines, 2015.

*Apotheosis*. Dir. John Lennon & Yoko Ono. UK, 1970.

*Assemblage*. Dir. Sofiene Mamdi. France, 2024.

*Behind the Scenes*. Dir. Ernie Gehr. USA, 1975.

*Beyond the Infinite Two Minutes*. Dir. Junta Yamaguchi. Japan, 2020.

*Big Monday*. Dir. Michael Rehfield. USA, 1998.

*Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*. Dir. Alejandro G. Iñárritu. USA, 2014.

*Black and White Film*. Dir. Robert Huot. USA, 1969.

*Blind Spot*. Dir. Tuva Novotny. Norway, 2018.

*Block B*. Dir. Chris Chong Chan Fui. Malaysia, 2008.

*Blue*. Dir. Derek Jarman. UK, 1993.

*Blues*. Dir. Larry Gottheim. USA, 1969.

*Boiling Point*. Dir. Philip Barantini. UK, 2021.

*Bushwick*. Dir. Cary Murnion and Jonathan Milott. USA, 2017.

*C'est Vrai (One Hour)*. Dir. Robert Frank. France, 1990.

Carter. Dir. Jung Byung-gil. South Korea, 2022.

*Causalidad*. Dir. Who (Marcelo Politano). Argentina, 2021.

*C'était un rendez-vous*. Dir. Claude Lelouch. France, 1976.

*City Lights*. Dir. Malte Wirtz. Germany, 2020.

*Commute*. Dir. Bruce Baillie. USA, 1995.

*Corn*. Dir. Larry Gottheim. USA, 1970.

*Corona*. Dir. Mostafa Keshvari. Canada, 2020.

*Crazy Samurai Musashi*. Dir. Yuji Shimomura. Japan, 2020.

*Cue Rolls*. Dir. Morgan Fisher. USA, 1974.

*Daksha*. Dir. S. Narayan. India, 2015.

*Disappearing Music for Face*. Dir. Mieko Shiomi. USA, 1966.

*Documentary Footage*. Dir. Morgan Fisher. USA, 1968.

*Doorway*. Dir. Larry Gottheim. USA, 1971.

*Dripping Water*. Dir. Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland. Canada, 1969.

*Eat*. Dir. Andy Warhol. USA, 1963.

*Eight*. Dir. Peter Blackburn. Australia, 2016.

*Eisenbahn*. Dir. Lutz Mommartz. West Germany, 1967.

*El Amor No Puede Esperar (Love Can't Wait)*. Dir. Juan Carlos Carrasco. Mexico, 2019.

*Empire*. Dir. Andy Warhol. USA, 1965.

*Empire*. Dir. Phil Solomon. USA, 2008.

*Eureka*. Dir. Ernie Gehr. USA, 1974.

*Failure!* Dir. Alex Kahuam. Mexico–USA, 2023.

*Fish & Cat*. Dir. Shahram Mokri. Iran, 2013.

*Flatland*. Dir. Alireza Keymanesh and Amir Poosti. Iran, 2017.

*Flight of a Bullet*. Dir. Beata Bubenets. Russia, 2017.

*Fog Line*. Dir. Larry Gottheim. Canada, 1970.

*Fourplay*. Dir. Dean Ronalds. USA, 2017.

*Gunman*. Dir. Cristian Tapia Marchiori. Argentina, 2025.

*Hardcore Henry*. Dir. Ilya Naishuller. Russia, 2015.

*Harmonica*. Dir. Larry Gottheim, USA, 1971.

*Heegondhu Dina*. Dir. Vikram Yoganand. India, 2018.

*Oi, Dazai*. Dir. Koki Mitani. Japan, 2025.

*Highway Landscape*. Dir. J. J. Murphy. USA, 1972.

*Ice Cream and the Sound of Raindrops.* Dir. Daigo Matsui. Japan, 2017.

*Immortality*. Dir. Mehdi Fard Ghaderi. Iran, 2016.

*Infection*. Dir. Albert Pyun. USA, 2005.

*Invasion*. Dir. Shahram Mokri. Iran, 2017.

*Iravin Nizhal*. Dir. R. Parthiban. India, 2022.

*Jaalo*. Dir. Araaj Keshav Giri. Nepal, 2018.

*Joyful Mystery*. Dir. Don Palathara. India, 2021.

*King Dave*. Dir. Podz. Canada, 2016.

*Kiri (Mist)*. Dir. Sakumi Hagiwara. Japan, 1972.

*L'Arroseur Arrosé*. Dir. Louis Lumière. France, 1895.

*Last Call*. Dir. Gavin Michael Booth. Canada, 2019.

*Late Summer*. Dir. Yi Cui. China, 2017.

*Le Dormeur*. Dir. Pascal Aubier. France, 1974.

*Lemon*. Dir. Hollis Frampton. USA, 1969.

*Let's Scare Julie*. Dir. Jud Cremata. USA, 2020.

*Limbo*. Dir. Tim Dünschede. Germany, 2020.

*Lost in London*. Dir. Woody Harrelson. UK, 2017.

*Lunch Break*. Dir. Sharon Lockhart. USA, 2008.

*Macbeth*. Dir. Béla Tarr. Hungary, 1982.

*MadS*. Dir. David Moreau. France, 2024.

*Martha Brook Falls*. Dir. Ashley McKenzie. Canada, 2017.

*Medusa Deluxe*. Dir. Thomas Hardiman. UK, 2022.

*Melting*. Dir. Thom Andersen. USA, 1965.

*Minsk*. Dir. Boris Guts. Belarus, 2022.

*Model*. Dir. Kostas Sfikas. Greece, 1974.

*Necrology*. Dir. Standish D. Lawder. USA, 1970.

*Nightride*. Dir. Stephen Fingleton. Northern Ireland, 2021.

*One Cut of the Dead*. Dir. Shin'ichirō Ueda. Japan, 2017.

*One More Shot*. Dir, James Nunn. UK, USA, 2024.

*One Shot with Ed Sheeran*. Dir. Philip Barantini. UK, 2025.

*One Shot*. Dir. James Nunn. UK, USA, 2021.

*One Shot: Fear Without Cut*. Dir. Haroon Rashid. India, 2017.

*Paint Drying*. Dir. Charlie Shackleton. UK, 2016.

*Patent Pending*. Dir. Alan Berliner. USA, 1975.

*People's Park*. Dir. J. P. Sniadecki and Libbie Dina Cohen. USA, China, 2012.

*Phi Phenomenon*. Dir. Morgan Fisher. USA, 1968.

*Powder Blue: Live at Club Regent*. Dir. Ryan Steel. Canada, 2024.

*Production Stills*. Dir. Morgan Fisher. USA, 1970.

*PVC-1*. Dir. Spiros Stathoulopoulos. Colombia, 2007.

*Rati Chakravyuh*. Dir. Ashish Avikunthak. India, 2013.

*Rendez-Vous*. Dir. Pablo Olmos Arrayales. Mexico, 2021.

*Reversing Circles*. Dir. Mehdi Fard Ghaderi. Iran, 2011.

*Roaring 20's*. Dir. Elisabeth Vogler. France, 2021.

*Rope*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. USA, 1948.

*Running Time*. Dir. Josh Becker. USA, 1997.

*Russian Ark*. Dir. Aleksandr Sokurov. Russia, 2002.

*Sábado*. Dir. Matías Bize. Chile, 2003.

*Saturday Morning*. Dir. Dan Curry. USA, 1978.

*Say Nothing*. Dir. Andrew Noren. USA, 1965.

*Shonibar Bikel*. Dir. Mostofa Sarwar Farooki. Bangladesh, 2019.

*Silent House*. Dir. Chris Kentis and Laura Lau. USA, 2011.

*Sky Blue Water Light Sign*. Dir. J. J. Murphy. USA, 1972.

*Snow*. Dir. Robert Huot. USA, 1971.

*Soft & Quiet*. Dir. Beth de Araújo. USA, 2022.

*Somebody Marry Me*. Dir. John Asher. USA, 2013.

*Standard Gauge*. Dir. Morgan Fisher. USA, 1986.

*Still Life*. Dir. Bruce Baillie. USA, 1966.

*Still Orangutans.* Dir. Gustavo Spolidoro. Brazil, 2008.

*Stream Line*. Dir. Chris Welsby. UK, 1976.

*Super Mario Clouds*. Dir. Cory Arcangel. USA, 2002.

*Tales from the Neighborhood Café*. Dir. Al Hallak. USA, 2023.

*Tatort: Die Musik stirbt zuletzt*. Dir. Dani Levy. Switzerland, 2018.

*The Body Remembers When The World Broke Open.* Dir. Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Kathleen Hepburn. Canada, 2019.

*The Circle*. Dir. Yuri Zeltser. USA, 2005.

*The Deadline*. Dir. Tong Hui. China, 2025.

*The Magicians*. Dir. Song Il-gon. South Korea, 2005.

*The Night Inside*. Dir. Antonio Cuesta. Spain, 2023.

*The Punishment*. Dir. Matías Bize. Chile, 2022.

*The Resistance*. Dir. Soner Caner. Turkey, 2022.

*The Sad Smell of Flesh*. Dir. Cristóbal Arteaga. Spain, 2013.

*The Silent House*. Dir. Gustavo Hernández. Uruguay, 2010.

*The Silent Pasture of Sparrows*. Dir. Qmars Mootab. USA, 2018.

*The Text*. Dir. Joel Haver. Canada, 2024.

*The Third Day: Autumn*. Dir. Marc Munden and Felix Barrett. USA, UK, 2020.

*The Wedding Party*. Dir. Thane Economou. USA, 2017.

*The Wilkinson Household Fire Alarm*. Dir. Morgan Fisher. USA, 1973.

*Timecode*. Dir. Mike Figgis. USA, 2000.

*Tosca*. Dir. Dominique Noguez. France, 1978.

*Unfriended*. Dir. Levan Gabriadze. USA, 2014.

*Untitled*. Dir. Ernie Gehr. USA, 1977.

*Utøya: July 22*. Dir. Erik Poppe. Norway, 2018.

*Victoria*. Dir. Sebastian Schipper. Germany, 2015.

*Watch the Sunset*. Dir. Tristan Barr & Michael Gosden. Australia, 2017.

*Wavelength*. Dir. Michael Snow. Canada/USA, 1967.

*Yuddha Kaandam*. Dir. Bose Venkat. India, 2022.

*Zen for Film*. Dir. Nam June Paik. USA, 1964.