**Stroheim's
Tactics of Comparison**

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I had graduated from the D. W. Griffith school of film making and intended to go the Master one better as regards film realism ... I was not going to compromise.

Erich von Stroheim (undated)[1]

I saw a wonderful picture the other day – that no one else will ever see. It was the unslaughtered version of Erich von Stroheim's GREED. It was a magnificent piece of work, but it was forty-five reels long. We went into the projecting-room at 10:30 in the morning; we staggered out at 8:00 that night. I can't imagine what they are to do with it. It is like *Les Misérables*. Episodes come along that you think have no bearing on the story, then twelve or fourteen reels later, it hits you with a crash. For stark, terrible realism and marvelous artistry, it is the greatest picture I have ever seen. But I don't know what it will be like when it shrinks from forty-five to eight reels. Von Stroheim is imploring the Goldwyn people to make two installments of it and run it on two different nights.

Could any other director in the world have gotten away with this? One of the best love scenes in the picture is played with the lovers sitting on an outfall sewer pipe down which the body of a dead cat has just drifted. And I give you my word, it is a tender, beautiful and romantic love scene ...

Harry Carr (1924)[2]

Another person I care about is Stroheim. If he feels about me the same way he might add his photo as well. Before seeing Hollywood, during, and after he remains in my opinion *the* director

Sergei Eisenstein (1932)[3]

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[1] Undated. From an unpublished article of Stroheim's excerpted as part of the prefaces to the published screenplay of *GREED: a film by Erich von Stroheim*, edited by Joel W. Finler (London, England: Lorrimer Publishing, 1972) [a volume in the 'Classic Film Scripts' series]), page 7. I shall refer hereafter to this edition of the screenplay as Stroheim [1923].

[2] Excerpted from "On the Camera Coast with Harry Carr", *Motion Picture Magazine* (Volume 27, Number 3, April, 1924), page 76. Carr may have misremembered the forty-two reels as forty-five; it no doubt *seemed* like forty-five!

[3] From a letter written from Laredo, Texas to Jean Hersholt, 15 March (Moussinac says "probably 1932"), quoted in Léon Moussinac, *Sergei Eisenstein: an Investigation into his Films and Philosophy – Editions Seghers' Cinéma d'Aujourd'hui in English*, translated by D. Sandy Petry (New

As Griffith's team rushed to complete INTOLERANCE in 1916, Erich von Stroheim (the 'von' apocryphal) worked, watched and learned as one of eight assistants to the director, having earlier appeared briefly as an actor in blackface in THE BIRTH OF A NATION. In 1917 he was again assistant director and military advisor to Griffith on HEARTS OF THE WORLD. By 1923 Stroheim had completed three films of his own, two of which had been cut by the studio prior to release, had been removed as director from a fourth midway in production and was shooting a fifth – a film that was to become one of the legendary debacles of Hollywood filmmaking.

Stroheim intended his fifth film to be a line-by-line transcription of Frank Norris's gritty novel *McTeague*, prefaced by an hour-long prologue. Norris, a student of Zola,[4] had told step-by-step a story of the degradation and disintegration of a common man driven to despair, brutality, murder and death by greed. But even Norris had not been thorough enough: the prologue was to fill in the early background of McTeague only sketched in the novel. And that is how Stroheim shot it from his own script in nine months on location, spending half-a-million dollars to do it.

Stroheim edited the footage into a forty-two reel "final cut" and presented the ten-hour epic to the Goldwyn studio for distribution. Forced to recut it, he halved it. Forced yet again, he prevailed on a friend, director Rex Ingram, to reduce it further. Ingram, who had seen the original version and had remarked to friends that the film was "the greatest translation of life to the screen ever produced", managed to trim it to 18 reels and then sent a telegram to Stroheim saying "If you cut one more foot I shall never speak to you again". Stroheim would cut no more, but others did.[5]

In the interim, the Goldwyn studio had been incorporated into MGM with production under the control of Louis B. Mayer. Mayer gave the 18 reels to be further cut to his assistant, Irving Thalberg, an old adversary of Stroheim's who had savagely trimmed an

York: Crown Publishers Incorporated, 1970 [original French edition, 1964]), page 88. (Moussinac adds: "Courtesy Herman G. Weinberg".)

[4] The phrase "a student of Zola" is Stroheim's own, as quoted from an introductory talk before a screening of THE MERRY WIDOW in Brussels, 28 November 1955, reproduced in *Film Makers on Film Making*, edited by Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967 [my version 1969]), page 75.

[5] The first line quoted is from "My Estimate of Erich von Stroheim", James R. Quirk, *Photoplay Magazine* (Volume 27, Number 2, January, 1925), page 27, reprinted in Pratt; and the second on page 28 of Stroheim [1923] from a letter of Stroheim's to Peter Noble, author of *Hollywood Scapegoat: The Biography of Erich von Stroheim*, a part of which appears as one of the prefaces, pages 27-30, to the volume.

earlier film of his, THE FOOLISH WIVES. Thalberg, in turn, gave the film to an MGM title editor, Joseph Farnham, who cut it to ten reels having neither read the story nor the shooting script. The film was released in 1924 as cut and the cut footage destroyed (or so it appears).

Years later, James Card, then Curator of Film at the Eastman Archives in Rochester and possessor of one of the few remaining 35mm prints of the released version of GREED, noting my insistence on reviewing frame-by-frame some of Stroheim's later work, advised me that Stroheim was "the biggest charlatan Hollywood ever saw". Pausing thoughtfully, however, he continued, "But I must admit, whenever I go anywhere to show our films, it's GREED everyone remembers." Card was but affirming an almost universally acknowledged sentiment noted earlier by Lewis Jacobs, the eminent historian of American filmmaking to whom we owe so much.

> Whatever else GREED may have been, it had the virtue of being unforgettable
> down to the last moment ... .[6]

No filmmaker of my acquaintance has ever viewed the cut version of GREED without admiration, and a panel of international critics in 1958 rated it among the dozen best films of all time. But surely the puzzle is obvious. One may make a good ten-hour film that cannot easily be cut, much less by 75%, or a bad ten-hour film that cannot easily be improved, even when cut by 75%. But how is it possible to make a ten-hour film, cut it by 75% and have a masterpiece remain?

Only a sadist could cherish the contortions of commentators who have attempted to explain this. A single example must here suffice. Lewis Jacobs, sympathetic to Stroheim yet well-connected to the industry in Hollywood, tied himself in conceptual knots over it. After affirming that GREED, though "a complete box office failure", was nevertheless "one of the shining achievements in American film history",[7] he then echoes the common consensus that the movie had somehow managed to be so despite its "many faults and weaknesses of form".

> Not so important in structure as THE BIRTH OF A NATION or INTOLERANCE, this
> film takes its place beside them because of its honesty and profundity. Those
> qualities compensated for the many faults and weaknesses of form.[8]

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[6] Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: a Critical History* (New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), page 349.

[7] Ibid., page 346.

[8] Ibid., page 347.

The elimination of 75% of GREED by other editors, Jacobs concludes, "did not vitally affect it", for Stroheim had simply been "incompetent in editing".

> Significantly enough this depletion and editing of von Stroheim's work by another mind did not vitally affect it. His films are not based on the editing principle but on the piling up of detail within the scenes. In the scenes he did everything that another director would do by cutting: his continuity and story were within the scene itself, and did not depend for meaning upon a particular combination and organization of shots. Details, action, and comment were selected and brought into the camera's scope without any changing of shot. Hence someone else could edit von Stroheim's films without destroying the essential von Stroheim: the edited version was not so effective as the original, but it was still powerful.[9]

> Von Stroheim's lack of knowledge and power in editing account for his films faults and high expense. His ability to see a scene only in terms of its independent existence gave his work an elephantine and blundering quality. Partly for this reason his films all lacked variety. GREED, for instance, had the inevitable weaknesses of monotony – an unchanging level of dramatic intensity that made it a tiring and exhaustive work to witness.[10]

> Von Stroheim' very incompetence in editing forced him to enrich the scene.[11]

Does it strike you as marvelous that an ofttimes careful historian would venture to compare the cut and uncut versions of a film *having never seen the latter*? And then conclude that the edited version, though "still powerful", was "not as effective as the original" – an original that, in his own terms, was faulty, weak, elephantine, blundering, monotonous, tiring, and exhaustive?

Jacobs, unable otherwise to fathom how GREED could have been reducible by 75%, responded by suggesting that the studio had found GREED so easy to condense because there is only a single way to edit a scene, namely according to "the editing principle" [read: the tactics of causal continuity]. Stroheim, ignorant of this principle and thus lacking a criterion of selection, had simply "piled up details within the scenes", photographing them in long takes. Others could consequently and easily reduce the size of the film thereafter "without destroying the essential von Stroheim" not only by eliminating subplots or less nuanced events here and there, but by eliminating entire

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[9] Ibid., page 350.
[10] Ibid., page 351
[11] Ibid., page 351.

blocks of detail uniformly throughout – especially by trimming the excesses off the beginnings and endings of his interminable shots.

So convinced was Jacobs that Stroheim must have been an incompetent editor, and hence director, that he was compelled to deny as clear a counterexample as the history of film has ever provided. Stroheim, angry at the shredding of his film, was hired immediately thereafter by the same studio to direct Mae Murray in THE MERRY WIDOW, a film with princes and princesses, sex scenes, duels, exotic settings and a happy ending, completing the film on schedule and under budget and earning for the studio $4.5 million immediately upon release – the highest grossing film of 1925!

To Jacobs, Stroheim had simply learned unreasonably quickly how to make films: THE MERRY WIDOW "revealed a growth in his own ability and skill".[12] Unfortunately for Jacobs, the evidence to the contrary is unequivocal. When making GREED, Stroheim must have been identically competent, knowing well how to sequence a film in the studio way, for otherwise his success with THE MERRY WIDOW would be miraculous.

Stroheim was under no illusions about what he had tried to do when making GREED or had done with THE MERRY WIDOW. To a contemporary interviewer, he said

> When I saw how the censors mutilated my picture GREED, which I did really
> with my entire heart, I abandoned all my ideals to create real art pictures and
> made pictures to order from now on. My film THE MERRY WIDOW proved that
> this kind of picture is liked by the public, but I am far from being proud of it and
> I do not want to be identified at all with the so-called box-office attractions. So I
> have to quit realism entirely ... When you ask me why do I do such pictures I am
> not ashamed to tell you the true reason: only because I do not want my family
> to starve.[13]

His opinion of the relative merits of the two endeavours never changed. And, years later, he claimed explicitly to have known exactly what he was doing when sequencing and editing GREED.

> So, the company hired a man who had never read Norris's book, did not know
> anything about my editing ideas, and was ordered to edit it. ... When, ten years
> later, I saw the film myself for the first time, it was like seeing a corpse in a
> graveyard. I found it in its narrow casket among plenty of dust and a terrible

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[12] Ibid., page 351.

[13] Ibid., page 351. Jacob's affirms in a footnote that he is quoting Stroheim from an 'interview' reprinted within *Film Daily* from *Film Kurrier* – but Jacobs gives no dates either for the interview, its original publication or the reprint of it.

stink. I found a thin part of the backbone and a little bone of the shoulder. And, naturally, I became sick, it made me very sick, because I had worked on the film for two years of my life without any salary. Try to play this on your piano – two years with a sick woman, with a sick child, very sick, with polio – and me, working without a salary on this film for two years![14] At the end of the two years, I thought: if this film comes out the way I made it, I will be the greatest film director living. But when it was edited like this. And after all this fiasco, imagine, a producer coming to me and asking me to direct for him a film called THE MERRY WIDOW![15]

What could Stroheim have meant by "my editing ideas"? Or, more generally, what editing ideas could anyone have had for a narrative film that would permit a cutting of 75% without incurring irremediable discontinuities?

To answer, we must focus on Stroheim's use of close-ups, for therein lies the clue to understanding his "editing ideas" and two other related and distinguishing aspects of his filmmaking as well, namely his "fetish for detail" and his persistent use of starkly contrasting characters.

Stroheim's Close-ups

The working screenplay of GREED was a shot-by-shot description of it. Within it, Stroheim distinguished by name sizes of shots ranging from extreme long shots to extreme close-ups and often but not always noted the detailed actions that one would see thereby. He always did so for the long and medium shots; the puzzle comes with the close-ups.

Griffith had insisted that close-ups ought only to be used sparingly. They should serve only to culminate sequences of medium and long shots that would precede and establish them causally. When one canvases the screenplay of GREED, however, one is astounded, for the film was designed to consist in larger part of sequences of close-ups, one after the other, and frequently with little or no action occurring within them – sequences of shots, that is, of which over 80% are to be photographed in close-up and within which people interact with one another little if at all.

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[14] Stroheim had been paid while on location directing the film, but received nothing during the periods of preparation, editing or postproduction.

[15] From pages 75 and 76 of *Film Makers on Film Making: Statements on Their Art by Thirty Directors*, edited by Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1969 [1967]). I have edited the text slightly to remove indications of Stroheim's pauses while speaking, the laughter of the audience and so forth.

The ABA structure of the wedding scene of GREED is justly famous. As McTeague puts the ring on Trina's finger while both kneel before the minister, we see through the window behind them a funeral hearse passing by, dissolve to a medium shot of the procession and then dissolve back again to continue the wedding.

> What few viewers notice, however, is that the 'A' sequences of the wedding before and after the 'B' sequence of the passing of the funeral hearse consist almost exclusively of close-ups.

From the close-up of the minister as he begins to recite the service to the high-angled medium shot of the couple kneeling with the hearse seen through the window, we have 15 shots – all but one in close-up. From the close-up of Marcus (McTeague's friend and former boyfriend of Trina), eyebrows knitted, staring at the floor in response to the joining of the couple's hands in the shot to which we dissolve back following the external shot of the funeral procession to the close-up of McTeague's dumbfounded face as he shakes the minister's hand at the close of the service, we have 17 shots – all but two in close-up.[16]

> Of the 35 shots of the full scene, including the three shots of the passing funeral procession, 28 of them, or 80%, are close-ups!

> Of the 32 interior shots of the scene, excluding the passing funeral procession, 88% are close-ups!

Frequently, as well, Stroheim gives little or no description within the screenplay of what the people within the scene are to be seen to be doing within the shots. Immediately prior to the end of the wedding scene, for example, we find

> Close-up of Mr. Sieppe.
> Close-up of the Minister.
>   Medium shot of the couple.
> Close-up of Marcus's hands clenched angrily behind his fact.
> Close-up of Mrs. Sieppe.
> Close-up of the Minister.[17]

Or, if he does, as in the following sequence of shots of the banquet after the wedding, a causal connection is neither given nor implied.

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[16] The sequence occurs on pages 177-178 of Stroheim [1923].
[17] Stroheim [1923], page 178.

Close-up of Mr. Heise eating. He stops for a second to belch, then goes on
    eating.
Close-up of little Uncle Oelbermann eating in a tiny space, cramped by
    the arms of his large neighbours.
Close-up of the hunchbacked photographer eating a sticky piece of cake,
    then liking his fingers and taking a drink.
Close-up of the Minister, nibbling on chicken bones, but with his fingers
    poised in a very refined and dignified manner.
Close-up of the massive back of Mr. Heise and his tiny wife beside him.[18]

Close-ups for Stroheim, unlike Griffith, were clearly means within scenes rather than
ends of them. But means to what?

Shannon's Suggestion

In the late 1940s Claude Shannon of Bell Telephone Laboratories published the results
of his key investigations into the foundations of what came to be known as 'information
theory'. Shannon wished to derive a means of measuring the amount of information
that could be derived from messages sent over telephone wires, but his suggestions
proved general enough to encompass much more than that. Indeed, many are still
working to determine the scope and limits of their application.

Shannon soon noticed that the degree to which one could be informed by a message
was relatively independent of its sense but directly proportional to one's ability to
identify it as a member of the grouping of possible mutually-exclusive messages that
could have been sent in its place.

Thus, if two people whose spouses are prisoners of war each receive a Christmas
message saying "I am well", they can look up the common sense of the phrase, if
puzzled, in any dictionary. If, however, one of them knows that the message received
was the only one the spouse would have been permitted to send (that is, was compelled
to send), while the other knows that the spouse could have sent any of four
alternatives,

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[18] Stroheim [1923], pages 182-183.

> I am well.
> I am ill.
> I am very ill.
> (no message at all) ,

the message received by the latter clearly carries more information than the message of identical sense received by the former. Indeed, the former hardly conveys any information at all.[19]

It was soon noticed that Shannon's distinction could be applied to non-linguistical situations as well. Suppose, for example, I were to attend a concert of indigenous music in a foreign country, knowing nothing of its musical histories or traditions, while at my side sits an eminent musicologist knowledgeable of both. Or suppose I were to peer at a one of a collection of Minoan coins in a cabinet on display in a local museum, knowing little if anything about the histories of their creation or use, while beside me stands the curator of a comparable collection in another museum invited to assess it as a possible forgery. The scope, range, quantity and definition of the relevant possible alternative events known to me that I could have encountered in place of the one to which I was attending, compared to that brought conceptually to their encounter by the experts beside me, would be so sparse that I would hardly be informed at all whereas the experts might well have their lives changed by their encounters, if the amount of information derived from the encounters was sufficiently startling.

Simply put, I, unlike the experts, wouldn't know enough to be informed by the encounters. Or, more exactly, I would be unable to identify what I was seeing because I could bring to the encounters no adequate context of alternatives. Simply put,

> To be informed by anything is to identify it, and to identify
> anything is to measure it against alternatives.

Stroheim's Tactics of Comparison

Prodded by Shannon, we can now comprehend what Stroheim was about in his use of close-ups, both in particular and in general, and hence begin to understand something fundamental about comparative structures. Consider again the sequence of close-ups noted above that viewers encounter near the end of the wedding scene of GREED.

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[19] My example is adapted from one given by W. Ross Ashby in his *An Introduction to Cybernetics* (New York, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1966), pages 123 and 124.

> Close-up of Mr. Sieppe.
> Close-up of the Minister.
>   Medium shot of the couple.
> Close-up of Marcus's hands clenched angrily behind his fact.
> Close-up of Mrs. Sieppe.
> Close-up of the Minister.[20]

We encounter the Minister twice by means of close-ups. Our second encounter, however, is subtly but necessarily different from the first, for we are now not simply re-seeing the Minister but *re-seeing* him after having seen other things! We can now compare how he looks with how the couple, Marcus's hands and Mrs. Sieppe looked immediately before. If Stroheim has done well, then our understanding of the Minister ought subtly to have deepened. Our ability to identify how he *is* ought thereby to have been enhanced – our ability to determine, that is, who he is, what is on his mind, what is he doing and what is he thinking in comparison to the other people we have seen before.

As Stroheim sensed, if the purpose of such a sequence was to enable us to identify better the people shown, then it was unnecessary to describe in the screenplay exactly what they were to be doing. As long as they were not shown doing anything requiring our causal attention, but were responding naturally to the events in which they were participating, the comparative context would work, for we would be able to attend to their identities rather than to any causal effects deriving from them.

The difference between how we perceive things when free to attend to their identities, and how we perceive them, identities presumed, when trying to track the intricacies of their causal interactions, can be wonderful. The clearest and, for me, most astonishing example of this occurs repeatedly during the seduction scene between the lovers, Prince Nicki and Mitzi (played by Stroheim and Faye Wray), and later between Mitzi and her loathsome fiancé, Schani, in the first part of Stroheim's next film, THE WEDDING MARCH.

As every director knows and justifiably so, whenever we encounter two people interacting by means of a movie, attending to the causes and effects of their interaction, the camera ought to be positioned shot-after-shot to maintain screen direction in our perception of the events as they unfold. Otherwise, our spatial sense of the scene evaporates and with it our sense of causal continuity, for the latter derives from the former.

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[20] Stroheim [1923], page 178.

Whenever two people are engaged in conversation, for example, and we must track what they are doing to one another thereby, the camera may initially be positioned anywhere on either side of the line of interaction between the two people, but it must never thereafter cross the line in subsequent shots or our sense of a uniform direction of causal interaction disappears. The customary manner of sequencing a brace of close-ups to cover part of a conversation between two people, therefore, is to alternate the position of the camera between positions (1) and (2) below to enable us to follow the direction of the causes and effects (often called "reverse angle positioning").
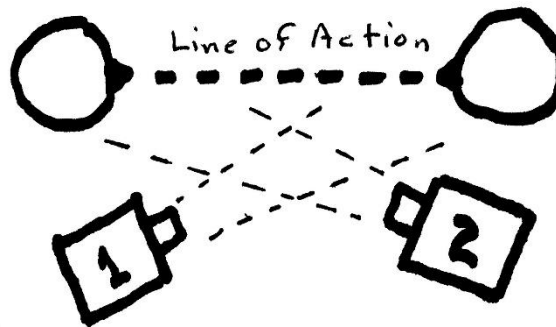
As one would expect, therefore, Stroheim (and his cameraman, Hal Mohr) adhere strictly to the above procedure as we follow the causal unfolding of the story within the opening sequences of THE WEDDING MARCH, and the practice continues through the first encounter between Prince Nicki and Mitzi and the comparable encounter between Mitzi and Shani.

When we come to the seduction scene between Prince Nicki and Mitzi, however, followed again by a comparative encounter between Mitzi and her butcher of a fiancé, Schani, the practice is inverted! More exactly, when we come to the second set of paired encounters wherein our attention is directed almost exclusively toward fathoming the subtly changing identities of the Prince and Mitzi (he, in particular, failing unaccountably in love with a commoner in what he intended to be a common seduction, and she agreeing to it despite having been warned by her mother of the consequences), and the comparative encounter with her fiancé that follows it, we see paired close-ups photographed from *opposite sides of the line of interaction*!
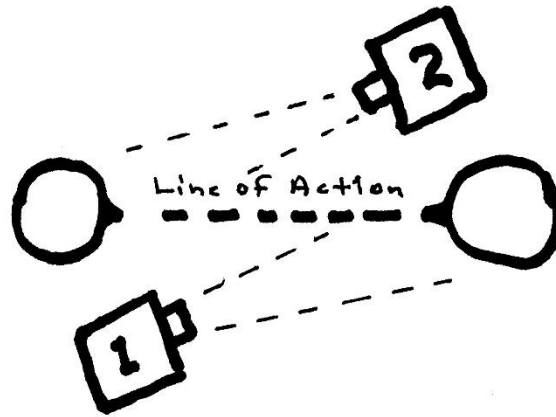
The film then proceeds to its causal conclusion in strict accordance with the common practices with which it began.

I cannot be certain that the inversion was intended by Stroheim (or Hal Mohr), though it would have been odd otherwise, given the common practices for ensuring continuity and the fact that such a contravention never to my knowledge occurs again within any of the movies that Stroheim directed. Stroheim may for compelling reasons have acquiesced momentarily to the contravention of practice as a lesser of evils (to achieve a better profile on the actors, for example, or to accommodate poor set design), or it may have been an unintended flaw that Stroheim would have corrected had he noticed it.

Be that as it may be, however, the awesome fact is that, when viewing the film,

No one notices the transgression!

I have indeed often shown these sequences in context to seasoned filmmakers accustomed to denigrating those incompetent in preserving spatial continuity, only to shake my head in wonder as they observe these fascinating encounters between Prince Nikki and Mitzi, and Mitzi and Schani, her fiancé, without registering that they are being compelled to observe the face of a person appearing on the right side of the screen looking leftward, followed by the face of the person to whom the first is speaking appearing (again) on the right side of the screen looking leftward – the faces of the two

persons occupying in sequence the same place on the screen and looking in the same direction, despite the two of them supposedly facing one another.[21]

But how is this possible? How can a violation of practice that would in other contexts destroy at a glance the spatial continuity between shots of the persons being observed pass unnoticed? I know of only one plausible answer.

> Viewers are so engaged in the unfolding of the story – they are so intent, that is, on discerning how the comparative *identities* of the two individuals are developing – that the violation of spatial continuity goes unattended!

Had Stroheim been permitted to re-shoot the scenes in post-production, I suspect that he might have opted rather to conform with common practice, for had done so, we should have been able to attend to the comparative identities of the persons that we encounter as facing one another as easily as otherwise. Nevertheless, the simple fact that the inversions pass unnoticed here but would fail to do so within sequences of causal import reaffirms that Stroheim had sensed the possibilities of a kind of tactical continuity contrary to the norm – the tactics of comparative *identity*.

And if, by chance, he intended the uncommon camera positionings when photographing these scenes of THE WEDDING MARCH as a test of the independence of the tactics of identity from the prevailing norm, then he sensed much more than even I have credited him.

The Practice Reconstrued

Stroheim's use of close-ups carries a deeper lesson as well. Many of us have been trained to describe events that unfold reflexively, like the sequence with the Minister noted above, as being of 'ABA' form (or, as musicians commonly put it, as having an 'arch' structure with complex variations of it easily conceived).

One must keep firmly in mind, however, that the A's, sandwiched about the B, are asymmetrically experienced! We do not encounter the second A as we do the first, for the second, unlike the first, is measurable against the B. Our symbols are here misleading, for our reading of them differs temporally from how the events themselves

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[21] I have spoken here of the faces 'appearing on the right side of the screen looking leftward' to conform with the camera positions [1] and [2] as sketched on page 12 above. Within the movie, the faces may have appeared on the 'left' looking 'rightward'. If so, the inversion of cinematographical practice would be of identical consequence.

would appear to us. A more accurate rendering of the sequence as experienced would therefore be:

> A
> B measured against A
> A measured against both B and A's former state.

If we forget this when using the common symbol 'ABA' or its derivatives, we shall reinforce within ourselves a misunderstanding of why the structure is valuable, namely that it builds a context against which to measure the *identity* of A. (We thereby measure the identity of B as well, but less accurately, for we encounter B only once. Had we wished with priority to measure the identity of B, we ought rather to have encountered the sequence BAB rather than ABA .)

Stroheim's use of close-ups within ABA structures, therefore, was hardly an example of "piling up detail within the scene", unless one is speaking elliptically.[22] Exactly the opposite.

> He was enabling viewers to construct for themselves a cumulative context of memorable alternatives against which to measure the identities of the things being seen – and seen again and again.

We may now understand, as well, Stroheim's supposed "fetish for detail" and other time-consuming practices for which he was repeatedly castigated and misunderstood. Details, whether seen in close-up or not, were means rather than ends for Stroheim – tools to be used in the cumulative struggle to identify things better.

Contrasting Characters

Every film Stroheim ever made was classically causal in its strategies. Like Griffith, his "Master", he established his climaxes by means of crises already well-established. It never occurred to him that one might make a film whose overall strategical structure would be comparative rather than causal – a film, that is, whose strategies would have mirrored his sometime tactical use of close-ups.

In only one way did Stroheim ever solve a problem of film design by using a technique of strategical comparison. By so doing, however, he brought into focus yet another variant

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[22] The phrase is Lewis Jacob's. See page 4 above.

of the fundamental problem of how to better enable viewers to identify things seen by means of film.

Suppose I wished to make you aware of an aspect of an event to which we are both attending – the whiteness, for example, of newly washed sheets hanging from a clothes line. I would simply commend it to you vocally. What, however, if I was prohibited from either writing or speaking to you? How then could I draw your attention to the whiteness of the washing? Or, as a second example, suppose that I could again neither write nor speak to you but wished to make you aware that my elderly neighbour, seen across the back fence, is a woman of uncommon integrity. How could I do it?

> I should have to figure out a way to have you attend to the washing on the line, or to my neighbor, within a context of occurrences that would not only contrast with the aspect of the event to which I wish you to attend, but that would so *exemplify* the contrast that they in context would compel you to measure the washing on the line, or my neighbor, against them.

Stroheim, wishing to make films about people, faced this problem head-on and solved it extravagantly. At work in the silent era and wishing wisely to avoid titles, he needed nonetheless to provoke viewers to identity the people that they were seeing – to fathom, that is, the bundle of motivations that made each of them the person that they were.[23] How was he to do this?

Stroheim solved the problem by insisting – in every film but GREED! – that each of his principal people have counterexamples from whom they diverged as sharply as possible. In both his earlier and later films, every principal person had dominant traits as contrary as possible from those possessed by at least one other principal person. Throughout the films we encounter

> healthy people versus sick;
> innocent versus depraved;
> athletic versus crippled;
> religious versus pagan;
> immaculate versus disgusting;

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[23] To the best of my knowledge, it was William Archer who first suggested that dramatists must learn to construe the characters in a play as creatures of habit. "What is character? For the practical purposes of the dramatist, it may be defined as a complex of intellectual, emotional, and nervous habits." William Archer, *Playmaking: A Manual of Craftsmanship* (Boston, Massachusetts: Small, Maynard and Company, 1912), page 372.

> rational versus psychotic;
> attractive versus revolting;
> wealthy versus impoverished;
> etc..

And, of course, the contrasts pervaded the events themselves. While an orgy occurs in the foreground, a gigantic crucifix hangs on the wall at the rear. As a handsome young prince seduces a beautiful girl of lower class with whom he is enamoured, her betrothed butchers pigs as he stuffs sausages into his mouth – while the prince's crippled fiancé prays on her knees in her bedroom. Even in GREED, the murder of Trina by McTeague occurs amidst the Christmas tinsel and the festive tree.

Stroheim's point in all this, of course, was to enable us to *identify* better the things that we are encountering by means of the movie – complex things like integral versus corrupted people or the innocent versus the depraved – using the visual means available to him as elegantly as possible. A greedy man in the company of greedy people might never be seen as greedy; a greedy man in the company of a saint, however, will enough soon be distinguished.

When sound came to the cinema and with it the quick fix of the human voice for expressing motivations, many filmmakers were to forget how filmmakers like Stroheim had done this in silence, and after them were to come generations of filmmakers who never knew. The result was the devastating impoverishment of the expressiveness of images against which so many railed in vain at the conclusion of the silent era – the denigration of the visual richness of things as encountered by means of movies. The age of noise was upon us, for better or worse.

The Problems with the Practices

The strategies and tactics of comparison, glimpsed by Griffith and confirmed by Stroheim, were soon to become the core of documentary practice around the world – the central techniques for sequencing films that would enable us to encounter and identity events noncausally. Soon, as well, some filmmakers would embark upon the long journey of beginning to learn how to superimpose causal and comparative continuities within either documentary or fictional films.

To do so, three problems had to be solved, two of them practical (one strategical, the other tactical), the third conceptual – and the solution to the practical would come only after the conceptual had been solved.

The Strategical Problem:

Stroheim had attempted within a causal film to encompass sequences of shots that were exclusively comparative. Being exclusively so, they contributed nothing to the causal continuity of the film and could thus be eliminated while preserving the core causal continuities of the film – which is what the studio did when cutting GREED by 75% before releasing it.

Could movies be made, however, that encompassed sequences of events serving at one and the same time as means to both causal and comparative ends? If so, the problem could be solved.

It would take time, however, for filmmakers to learn how to do it, for though filmmakers, like their audiences, could easily visualise tactical continuities and thus bring to bear all sorts of natural intuitions when constructing them, they had to train themselves to envisage strategic ones – to imagine, that is, over-arching continuities whose consequences would be experienced only cumulatively. We are accustomed in everyday life to experiencing and reflecting upon the effects of long-term causal continuities, but we seldom notice, much less attend to, our long-term *identifying* experiences – as Freud was among the first to suggest. Artists in other arts had strategic models to emulate. As filmmakers were to learn the hard way, however, strategies borrowed from other arts would require careful reforming to be of use.

Nevertheless, the promise of a solution was enticing. What would a movie look like that derived its cumulative power from the extended sequences of simultaneously causal and comparative events? The answer was unobvious, and it would take a long time before exemplars of even modest merit would be constructible.

The Tactical Problem:

The tactical problem was more pressing and became overwhelming with the advent of synchronous sound.

By the time of the making of GREED, filmmakers had learned from Griffith how to shoot the shots of a scene to establish and maintain a sense of *causal* continuity between them, and the general precept constraining the practice was about to be articulated by Pudovkin. If, however, filmmakers attempted to cut together shots of *comparative* events having no causal connection between them, they often found themselves engendering jolting discontinuities of perception. Jump-cuts (as they were later to be

aptly named) were common, unpredictable and devastating, for they drew an audience's attention away from the events being seen to the accidental aspects of their presentation.

How to avoid jump-cuts when intercutting shots of noncausal events was a persistent but solvable problem during the silent era – but only by sacrificing elegance. Editors would sequence shots until a bad cut appeared between two shots, inserting a title between them to cover the gap. The same technique served many a poor editor of causal continuities as well.[24]

As Robert Flaherty among others was to discover later, however, this was simply an ersatz solution. When Flaherty, internationally known for NANOOK OF THE NORTH and MOANA, came to make MAN OF ARAN, his first sound film wherein continuities had to

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[24] As Kristin Thompson noted, the practice of using titles within causal films (then called "leaders" or "sub-titles") to sustain continuity over cuts between events occurring at different times was an established practice before 1910, and as early as 1911 published manuals on screenwriting were explicitly recommending the practice to cover the "jump" resulting from such cutting.

> "It may happen that two scenes are to be played in the same setting with an interval between. Without the leader the two scenes would follow with nothing to show the lapse of time. The action would appear continuous and the characters would either leave the stage to reappear immediately or another set of characters would fairly jump into the scene. A leader stating that it is 'the Next Day. The quarrel is renewed.' serves as a drop curtain to separate the scenes."

> > Epes Einthrop Sargent, "Technique of the photoplay", *Moving Picture World/Motion Picture World*, Volume 9, Number 5 (12 August 1911), page 363 (as quoted and cited by Thompson)

Contrary to a following comment of Thompson's, however, the term "jump-cut", as later used by filmmakers, encompassed perceptual "jumps" of any kind caused by cutting, whether or not accompanied by temporal discontinuities as well. For as filmmakers were discovering, perceptual "jumps" could as easily be caused by cuts between temporally contiguous events as otherwise. See "The formulation of the classical style", Chapter 15 of Part Three: 'The Formulation of the classical style, 1908-28' by Kristin Thompson within David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), page184.

be established without titles, he was compelled for the first time to take on an editor, for he had acquired no ability to cut for continuity.[25]

Any fool could create jump-cuts. (Pick a random sample of shots, cut them together randomly and you can almost take your choice.) How rather to avoid jump-cuts was the problem, and even seasoned editors of causal continuities were to discover gaps in the techniques derived from the practices of the silent era.

The answer did not come from the practices of a single grouping of people. Rules of thumb were developed in editing rooms all over the world, and key insights had been commonly articulated within the major studios on both sides of the Atlantic by the time sound arrived. Nevertheless, it was the makers of documentary films – especially those struggling with the problems of how to cut together footage of causally unconnected events found by others (newsreel editors, military propagandists) – who were eventually to comprehend how to put them to their most elegant use, but only after the coming of synchronous sound forced them to do so.

The Conceptual Problem

By the mid-1920s filmmakers could make films far superior to those of a decade before. Practices were being refined and rules-of-thumb were being passed from master to apprentice. Behind the innovations, however, lurked unanswered questions of surpassing importance.

> Why did the newer practices work better than the old?

> Why were the practices derived from those of Griffith superior to known alternatives?

> Why had GREED seemed to promise so much of a differing kind to so many?

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[25] See "Growing Things - the Rural Patience of Robert Flaherty" within the 'Screenwriting, 1905-1930B Uncoupling Movies from Paintings & Photographs' sub-section of the 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, the 'Institutional Repository' of the Library of York University. [https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/36201]

Crucially,

> What constraint, if any, linked them together, separating them from less workable precedents?
>
> What precept of practice, that is, could distinguish the better from the worse?

The answer was to be given by Vsevolod Pudovkin in 1926, a novice Soviet filmmaker making his first feature film. While working upon it, he wrote a text within which he advanced the precept that was to prove to be central to our understanding of how powerful movies are made and thus to the evolution of film design itself.

But that is an achievement worthy of discussion on its own.[26]

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[26] See the lectures on Pudovkin within the 'Screenwriting 1905-1930A Griffith & His Students' sub-section of the 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, the 'Institutional Repository' of the Library of York University.
[https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/35754