

**SIGNS OF GENESIS:
A STUDY OF AMBIGUITY IN
CONTEMPORARY EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA**

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Abstract

This thesis conducts a synoptic study of experimental cinema using the central notion of *cinematic ambiguity*, here defined as any means of probing cinema's boundaries of intelligibility, thereby thematizing the process by which the medium becomes intelligible in the first place. Using largely contemporary film examples, it identifies three main types of ambiguity, each intended to clarify established but sometimes ill-defined traditions, namely: the lyrical and structural film (ambiguities of sound and sense), the "experimental documentary" (ambiguities of description), and the "political avant-garde" (ambiguities of myth). Building on this discussion, it then uses Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "genetic sign" to forward a *genetic definition* of experimental cinema, attempting to give consistency to the term "experimental." The animating conviction is that a more explicit specification of our terms, far from restricting our recognition of artistic possibilities, might in fact expand our notions of what an "experimental" work can be.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Images	v
 Introduction.....	 1
 Chapter One: Ambiguities of Sound and Sense.....	 12
1.1 Charm and Lyric	14
1.2 Riddle and Structure	26
 Chapter Two: Ambiguities of Description.....	 39
2.1 The Four Forms of Non-Fiction Cinema	41
2.1.1 Chronicle and Portrait Forms	42
2.1.2 Organic and Crystalline Description	47
2.1.3 Diary and Anatomy Forms	49
2.2 From Documentary to Description	55
2.3 Types of Descriptive Ambiguity.....	59
2.3.1 Ambiguities of Recognition	59
2.3.2 Ambiguities of Identification	64
2.3.3 Ambiguities of Relation	70
 Chapter Three: Ambiguities of Myth.....	 76
 Chapter Four: From Ambiguity to Genesis	 87
4.1 Deleuze's Non-Linguistic Semiotics of Film	88
4.2 Cinema 1 and the Affection-Image.....	91
4.3 Genetic Signs and the Any-Space-Whatever.....	96
4.4 Deleuze and Experimental Cinema.....	100
4.5 Toward a Genetic Definition of Experimental Cinema	102
 Conclusion	 106
 Bibliography	 109

List of Images

Image 1: Still from <i>Journey to the West</i> (2014, Tsai Ming-liang).....	27
Image 2: Two organic forms of non-fiction cinema.	49
Image 3: The four forms of non-fiction cinema.....	56

Introduction

The tradition variously known as “experimental cinema,” “artists’ cinema,” “experimental film and media,” and “avant-garde film,” among other non-synonymous monikers, constitutes a wide range of artistic activity. In 1974 P. Adams Sitney published *Visionary Film*, his foundational study of the “visionary” strain of the American avant-garde film starting from 1943 onwards. A second edition updated the period covered to 1978, and a third followed over two decades later, bringing the timeline up to 2000. For the updated chapter of that third edition, Sitney made the decision *not* to discuss individual films and filmmakers from the intervening period (1979–2000), but rather to “delineate the most important historical and morphological changes within the field.”¹ Explaining his decision, Sitney lists a number of practical reasons: not just the issues of publication space and the difficulty of covering “the great numbers of film-makers who continue to work in its inherited genres, to transform them, and to invent new ones,” but also the fact that he can no longer claim sufficient knowledge of the wider field.² He observes that it is not scholars and critics, but “programmers and curators, virtually full-time viewers, of avant-garde showcases and museums in a few metropolitan centers,” who tend to be most familiar with contemporary experimental production.³ Indeed, when one considers the sheer proliferation of contemporary work, which now has a far more international scope than the “visionary” strain that Sitney discusses, the task of surveying the experimental field becomes even more daunting. The volume of production alone makes a study in the manner of *Visionary Film*, which interweaves theoretical analysis, historical genealogy, and extended commentary on individual films, extremely difficult, if not completely impracticable.

¹ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, 3rd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), vii.

² Sitney, *Visionary Film*, vii.

³ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, viii.

Confronted with such difficulties, it is understandable that scholars and critics have sometimes preferred to produce either detailed commentaries on individual artists or strategically delimited historical surveys.⁴ While understanding the value of such studies, I have chosen in this thesis to take an alternative—ideally complementary—approach, conducting a synoptic, mainly non-historical survey of contemporary experimental cinema. Rather than produce detailed commentary of individuals works and filmmakers, I have chosen to view the experimental field from a middle distance, so to speak, attempting to identify recurring patterns and stylistic commonalities, draw out relations between artists and films, and develop a framework through which these relations may be seen. In the present thesis, the starting notion for constructing such a critical framework is that of *ambiguity*.

The term ambiguity is intended to recall William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, a classic literary study, and a landmark of New Criticism. That said, this thesis does not seek to use Empson's literary analyses as a direct foundation for building up a framework of cinematic ambiguity. Indeed, it is difficult to see how one could, in the context of a cinematic study, use Empson's definition of ambiguity as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."⁵ The desired resonances with Empson's project, then—and the reason for choosing the term "ambiguity"—are more general but no less important. The first is the book's intrepid attempt to view a wide, virtually unlimited field of artistic production from a consistent perspective. The second is its pragmatic goal of increasing the usefulness of a ubiquitous term such as "ambiguity" by multiplying and developing distinctions. Empson's study understands that though the usage of a term in a particular field (the

⁴ For an example of the former, see Fred Camper, *Seeing Brakhage* (San Francisco: Eyewash Books, 2022). For the latter, see Erika Balsom, *After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

⁵ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 2nd ed. (New York: New Directions, 1966), 1.

term “ambiguity” in literary theory, in his case) can be vague, there may be good underlying reasons for its being so. Thus, rather than do away with the term, we should render it with more precision, attempting to distinguish where we cannot divide. As I cannot carry over more than this critical conviction, however, this introduction will outline how I am using the term “ambiguity” in relation to the field of experimental cinema, while also providing some reasons for adopting it.

One immediate (and not irrelevant) conjunction between experimental cinema and the notion of ambiguity is that they are both rather amorphous concepts. Explicitly recalling the difficulties of circumscribing experimental traditions, Erika Balsom, for instance, writes of moving-image works in their “artistic–independent–experimental–non-industrial–non-commercial–artisanal–expanded–oppositional–avant-garde incarnations.”⁶ This intentional overload of descriptors indicates the historical challenges of naming, much less defining, the experimental field. For a time, perhaps the most typical way of addressing—or circumventing—such problems was through an analogy to poetry. Maya Deren does this in a 1953 symposium titled “Poetry and the Film,” attempting to distinguish between a “horizontal” development of causal, progressive, dramatic action and a “vertical” investigation which arrests the action, “probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth,” the latter being how she defines the poetic construct.⁷ Reflecting on such comparisons, Sitney writes how in 1960 “the terms *cine-poem* and *film-poem* were still being used to identify the avant-garde cinema. *Film-poem* was nearly interchangeable with *experimental film*.”⁸ Indeed, the relationship between poetry and cinema has been central to nearly all Sitney’s books, including

⁶ Balsom, *After Uniqueness*, 18.

⁷ “Poetry and the Film: A Symposium,” in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 174.

⁸ P. Adams Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1 (emphasis in original).

Visionary Film, which makes frequent references to Romantic and modernist poets. At present, I am not concerned with the broader theoretical value of these individual statements. Rather, I simply want to account for *why* theorists and film writers have continually drawn comparisons between poetry and the cinema—especially experimental or avant-garde cinema—and how this may motivate our use of the term “ambiguity.”

To do so, I will revisit Pier Paolo Pasolini’s scintillating “Il ‘cinema di poesia’” or “The ‘Cinema of Poetry’.”⁹ Originally delivered as part of a round-table discussion in 1965, Pasolini’s essay has since become the most studied of the filmmaker’s writings on the cinema. In his *Cinema of Poetry*, which derives its title from the essay, Sitney recapitulates the reception of Pasolini’s ideas, listing several initial detractors (Christian Metz, Umberto Eco, Stephen Heath, Pio Baldelli, Emilio Garroni, Gianfranco Bettitini, and Antonio Costa) and later defenders (Teresa De Lauretis, Gian Pier Brunetta, Sam Rodhie, Roberto Turigliatto, Christopher Wagstaff, and Giuliana Bruno).¹⁰ He also singles out “a detailed reading” by John David Rhodes, as well as Gilles Deleuze’s engagement with Pasolini’s ideas in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Pasolini’s text also serves as the starting point for Sitney’s central argument. A full historiographic evaluation of these engagements, which could constitute a thesis on its own, is of course out of the question. Here we must be content with revisiting the essay’s main theoretical tenets. Unlike most treatments of the text, however, I will leave aside Pasolini’s discussion of “free indirect discourse” and “free indirect subjective.” My focus will remain on the first part of the essay, which deals explicitly with the terminology of semiotics and explores the question of whether (and to what extent, or in what ways) cinema can be considered a language.

⁹ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “The ‘Cinema of Poetry’,” in *Heretical Empiricism*, tr. and ed. by Louise K. Barnett (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 167–186.

¹⁰ See Chapter 1, “Pier Paolo Pasolini and “The ‘Cinema of Poetry’,” in Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 15–34.

Pasolini starts “The ‘Cinema of Poetry’” by stating an ostensible paradox: the curious fact that in contrast to poetic language, which has an instrumental basis in institutionalized language, the cinema does not seem to possess an analogous foundation. “Quite simply,” he writes, “the problem is this: while literary languages base their poetry on the institutionalized premise of usable instrumentalized languages, the common possession of all speakers, cinematographic languages seem to be founded on nothing at all: they do not have as a real premise any communicative language.”¹¹ How, then, is the cinema possible at all? How is it not just a mass of unintelligible material? That the cinema *does* communicate, Pasolini argues, means that it in fact possesses some communicative basis. He argues that the intelligibility of the cinema is based upon “a patrimony of common signs,” a “hypothetical system of visual signs,” image-signs, or what he simply calls “im-signs,” which present themselves in everything from gestures and facial expressions to billboards and signposts. The totality of these im-signs, which “appear charged with multiple meanings and thus ‘speak’ brutally with their very presence,” constitutes a “pre-grammatical” background in which we constantly move and operate.¹²

Poetry and other literary forms, which are made up of linguistic signs or “lin-signs,” also have a “pre-grammatical” quality in the coincidences of sound-pattern: assonances, rhymes, consonances, and all the elements that constitute what is termed verbal “texture.” Spoken and written languages, however, have a firmly established and highly developed *instrumental* use, meaning that one can, within limits, make distinctions between literary and non-literary forms. With spoken and written language, we can distinguish between concrete uses of words and more abstract, conceptual, or instrumental usage, allowing us to clearly mark out the differences

¹¹ Pasolini, “The ‘Cinema of Poetry’,” 167.

¹² Pasolini, “The ‘Cinema of Poetry’,” 168.

between, say, a poem and an instruction manual. Pasolini argues that the system of im-signs is, by contrast, “extremely crude, almost animal-like,” of “*an irrational type*”; because of “the elementary nature of its archetypes” and the “prevalence of the pregrammatical qualities of objects as symbols of the visual language,” this system has a “concreteness...which is both absolute and impossible to overlook.”¹³ This fundamental concreteness, Pasolini argues, is the reason that the “cinema is an artistic and not a philosophic language...never a directly conceptual expression.”¹⁴ It is true that in the case of spoken and written language, we see how words, over the course of their history, can and do develop from concrete to abstract. And, since Pasolini sees filmmakers as adding to the *historicity* of im-signs, he acknowledges that we may speculate about a time when im-signs, too, might take on a conceptual, even philosophical meaning. Nonetheless, the idea that cinema can become a *directly* conceptual expression remains, for Pasolini, a yet unrealized possibility. Thus, he concludes that the cinema is “fundamentally a language of poetry.”¹⁵

Pasolini’s thesis is in general well-founded. It uses a linguistic analogy without falling into linguistic reduction. And in forwarding the premise of a “pre-grammatical” background of im-signs, he raises an important question, namely: How might we account for the links and connections that form *between* im-signs? Having accepted that meaning does arise from this pre-grammatical background of im-signs, how do we account for its *genesis*, for how meaning comes about? How do we account for this pre-grammatical background becoming intelligible to us? Studies based on words historically divide into the classical “trivium” of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, each of which have long, well-established histories; and the twentieth century saw

¹³ Pasolini, “The ‘Cinema of Poetry’,” 167–168.

¹⁴ Pasolini, “The ‘Cinema of Poetry’,” 172.

¹⁵ Pasolini, “The ‘Cinema of Poetry’,” 172.

enormous strides in the fields of linguistics and semantics.¹⁶ Can there be something analogous in the study of cinema, which after all is a relatively young art-form? In the 1960s when Pasolini was writing, many thinkers, such as Christian Metz with *Film Language*, sought to answer the question by developing a semiotics of the cinema. The fundamental flaw with such theories, some confusions of which persist today, was that their notions of semiotics were, implicitly or explicitly, based on a fundamentally linguistic paradigm, one which assumed meaning in terms of *lin-signs*. Pasolini's essay, in exploring a pre-grammatical background of im-signs, points to an alternative. It raises the possibility of a *non-linguistic* semiotics of the image.

The development of a non-linguistic semiotics of the image is not the main concern of this thesis. Not because it is unimportant—indeed, it may be *the* fundamental problem for film theory—but because it is too large a question to directly confront. In Chapter Four, I will explicitly situate this thesis within the context of a non-linguistic semiotics. The point of raising the issue here is to outline the scope of the present study, which concerns those films that explore all the implications of, this pre-grammatical background. The region of cinematic activity this thesis will explore, the region of cinematic ambiguity, comprises those films which get “closest” to this pre-grammatical background, so to speak. Films which are “ambiguous,” in our sense, are those that, in probing the very limits of intelligibility, ask *how* it is that the cinema becomes intelligible to us to begin with.

For the purposes of this thesis, then, cinematic ambiguity specifies any means of probing cinema's boundaries of intelligibility, thereby thematizing the process by which the medium becomes intelligible in the first place. The region of cinematic ambiguity thus comprises those works which, in exploring the pre-grammatical background of im-signs, ask about the medium's

¹⁶ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 244.

conditions of possibility. The task of this thesis will be to specify different *types* of ambiguity within this region—an attempt, in the spirit of Empson’s study, to distinguish where we cannot divide.

This definition of ambiguity does not directly address the issues of defining experimental cinema, but it does resonate with existing scholarship and theory, which likewise sees experimental films as probing the medium’s conditions of possibility. Scott MacDonald’s well-known conception of a “critical cinema” is one example.¹⁷ Edward Small and Timothy Johnson’s less familiar notion of “direct theory” is another.¹⁸ It also fits in with the colloquial notion that an experimental work is one that “teaches you how to watch it,” so to speak.

The definition of ambiguity, and its conjunction with the so-called “pre-grammatical” background of *im-signs*, should also help us see why experimental cinema theorists, especially, have had recourse to poetic analogies—why they often emphasize the “irrational,” “oneiric,” and “expressive” aspects of filmmaking. Poetic creation, the literary critic Northrop Frye tells us, is conventionally seen as “an associative rhetorical process, most of it below the threshold of consciousness, a chaos of paronomasia, sound-links, ambiguous sense-links, and memory-links very like that of the dream.”¹⁹ Those literary works which make most concerted use of this poetic process—those works which most fully explore a pre-grammatical background of *lin-signs*—may be said to probe the limits of intelligibility within literature, and thereby ask how it is that meaning arises at all. Experimental films may be seen as exploring an analogous “poetic process” in relation to a pre-grammatical background of *im-signs*, rather than *lin-signs*. With

¹⁷ Scott MacDonald, “Introduction,” in *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Edward Small and Timothy Johnson, *Direct Theory: Experimental Motion Pictures as Major Genre*, 2nd ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Frye, *Anatomy*, 271.

their self-contained structures of interlocking motifs, and their emphasis on “texture” over explicit statement, experimental films present a rhetorical undecidability, ‘saying’ nothing except, “It is what it is.” They are, in a word, ambiguous.

Accordingly, this thesis will proceed by identifying types of ambiguity and discussing a range of artists and films in relation to each. Such a procedure entails, of course, that one be selective with examples, and while considerable effort has been made to ensure that the selections are illustrative, some sense of arbitrariness in the choices will no doubt remain. Without claiming that such objections are irrelevant, it may be said that the project’s non-historical purview should at least mitigate the potential pitfalls of selectivity. This thesis is not an attempt—even an indirect one—to trace the historical genealogy of contemporary experimental production and distribution, but rather to balance the claims of general theory with inductive procedures. Of course, the project remains subject to the vagaries of film festival programming, theatrical distribution, and even online circulation: the thesis is necessarily limited to works that I have been able to see and study. Still, the hope is that its theoretical observations will prove useful beyond the works discussed within it.

The first chapter, “Ambiguities of Sound and Sense,” will deal with two established traditions of experimental cinema: the lyrical film, associated chiefly with Stan Brakhage, and the structural film, associated with filmmakers like Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton. It will deal with both traditions as articulated by Sitney in *Visionary Film*, and as modified and criticized by subsequent theorists. The chapter will see lyrical and structural films as a potential counterpart to what in literature are known as charms and riddles. Frye identifies the latter pair as exemplifying two contrasting tendencies of the lyric genre most closely associated with the

poetic process as described above.²⁰ Similarly, this chapter will see lyrical and structural works as exemplifying two cardinal types of cinematic ambiguity.

The second chapter, “Ambiguities of Description,” will engage with the tradition of non-fiction or documentary cinema. Prompted by the vagueness of the so-called “experimental documentary,” the chapter will first develop a classification of non-fiction forms, which will be used to define a “descriptive” region of cinema. It will then look at specific films that explore how it is that descriptive meaning arises, identifying three sub-types of *descriptive* ambiguity. Some films treated at length in the discussion of descriptive ambiguity include *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2022), *MANAKAMANA* (Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, 2013), and *Zum Vergleich (In Comparison)*, (Harun Farocki, 2009).

The third chapter, “Ambiguities of Myth” will address what Peter Wollen called “political” avant-garde.²¹ Rather than survey a range of contemporary work, however, this chapter will use the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet to develop an understanding of a type of ambiguity that both accounts for, and gives consistency to, the long-standing characterizations of their films as “political.” As the existing literature on Straub-Huillet is considerable, and as the ambiguity of myth, as we will define it, is a more restricted type, this chapter will be briefer than the others.

Finally, the fourth chapter, “From Ambiguity to Genesis,” will raise the question of how the notion of ambiguity may fit into the development of a non-linguistic semiotics. Using Gilles Deleuze’s notion of a “genetic sign” from *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, it will confront the

²⁰ Frye, *Anatomy*, 278. It is worth noting that Sitney’s account of the lyrical film has some analogies to, but is not directly comparable with, Frye’s exploration of the lyric as a literary genre.

²¹ Peter Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes,” in *The British Avant-Garde Film, 1926-1995: an Anthology of Writings*, 133–144, ed. Michael O’Pray (Luton, Bedfordshire: University of Luton, 1996).

problem of defining what exactly experimental cinema *is* and forward a *genetic* definition of experimental cinema.²² In so doing, it will lay out a direction of inquiry that may be used to extend the present study.

²² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, tr. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 83.

Chapter One: Ambiguities of Sound and Sense

Of the categories and distinctions Sitney develops across *Visionary Film*, two of the most prominent, having gained currency beyond experimental circles, are the lyrical film and the structural film. Derived from an analogy to lyric poetry, the former Sitney chiefly associates with the work of Stan Brakhage. Indeed, Sitney dates the birth of the lyrical film rather precisely, citing *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) as the first such work—though as he also observes, “the pervasiveness of the lyric voice in cinema among the works of neophytes in the late 1960s...was so great that it seemed that that way of film-making was completely natural and must have existed *ab origine*.”²³ First introduced in Sitney’s 1970 essay “Structural Film,” the latter term was applied in *Visionary Film* to such filmmakers as Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, George Landow, Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad, Ernie Gehr, and Joyce Wieland. Since its introduction, it has generated several significant theoretical engagements that either attack the term, modify it, or develop it in other directions.²⁴

With the currency of such terms came a certain resistance to their use, attributable to the not unwarranted sense that those who use the terms are pigeon-holing or “boxing in” a work, restricting its range of possible meaning. The danger is a kind of half-knowledge, by which viewers might slap a label on a given work and move on, shirking any further responsibility for proper engagement. Understanding the pitfalls of categorization, some scholars have challenged the traditional terms.²⁵ And it’s in a similar spirit, one might wager, that many experimental

²³ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 155. For an alternative account of the lyrical film, see Chapter 2, “Stan Brakhage: The Filmmaker as Poet,” in David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

²⁴ Sitney, “Structural Film,” in *Film Culture Reader*, 326–348. For a list of such essays, see Sitney’s own footnotes to the chapter. For a related account of the structural film, see Chapter 6, “Pure Film,” in James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 237–279.

²⁵ See Nicky Hamlyn, “Structuralist Traces,” in *The British Avant-Garde Film: 1926-1995*, 219–238.

filmmakers tend to avoid such labels in discussing their work. A contemporary filmmaker such as Simon Liu, who explicitly nods to tradition in his stated desire “to build a *lyrical* catalogue of the rapidly evolving psychogeography of his place of origin in Hong Kong,” is more the exception than the rule.²⁶

In this chapter, I would like to shed some light on these critical debates—not by tracing specific lines of argument, but by seeing how lyrical and structural films exemplify, respectively, *ambiguities of sound and sense*. This chapter will explore the lyrical and structural film traditions not as discrete categories, but rather as tendencies or potentialities of expression. To explore these tendencies, this chapter will survey a range of films old and new, exploring a possible analogy to what in literature are known as charms and riddles. In an influential essay, Frye describes charm and riddle as “generic seeds or kernels, possibilities of expression sprouting and exfoliating into new literary phenomena.”²⁷ Sitney’s remark that the lyric way of filmmaking “must have existed *ab origine*” suggests something of this view of the lyric as a generic “seed” in the manner of the charm; and as we shall see, the structural film provides a reciprocal view in relation to the riddle. In this way, we might see the lyrical and structural labels not so much as opposed generic categories with fixed, impermeable boundaries, but as distinguishable, complementary tendencies.

Charms and riddles are considerably older than the cinema. They are in many respects “pre-artistic” forms, both related to a kind of word magic, and thus still bound up in ritual functions of the sort discussed in Benjamin’s famous “Work of Art” essay.²⁸ So apart from

²⁶ Simon Liu, “About,” accessed on February 9, 2023, <https://www.liufilmsliu.com/about>. Emphasis mine.

²⁷ Northrop Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” in *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth and Society*, 123–147 (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1983), 71.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn, 166–195 (Boston: Mariner Books, 2019).

helping to (indirectly) shed some light on debates around terminology and categorization, there are two further reasons for linking them to the lyrical and structural cinema traditions. First, the comparison helps us make more vivid the original (ritual) context for and purpose of such techniques, allowing us to explain certain recurring features, themes, and modes of expression. Second, this approach also accounts for recurring features in the theory and criticism of such films. In particular, the tendency of critical commentary to reconstruct—or at least point toward—a mythological or conceptual universe embodied by the work is one that we shall see again and again.

1.1 Charm and Lyric

As mentioned above, charm and riddle are both rooted in word magic, which is “primarily expressed in the fact that all verbal structures appear as *also* mythical entities, endowed with certain mythical powers.”²⁹ The difference between the two is in imaginative direction. The primary associations of charm, which comes from *carmen* (“song” or “incantation”), are musical and aural.³⁰ The main affinities of riddle, by contrast, are pictorial and visual. Coming from the same root as “read,” it is connected not to sound but sight, and therefore to ciphers, acrostics, calligrams, and other puzzle-like forms. Charm and riddle thus polarize the aural and visual aspects of artistic experience commonly known as sound and sense, rhyme and reason.³¹ The former suggests a temporal movement, a progression in time, the latter a simultaneous apprehension or understanding, a structure spread out in space. The prologue of Hollis Frampton’s *Zorns Lemma* (1970), in which a voice reads out the *Bay State Primer*, designed to

²⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, tr. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover Publications, 1946), 44. Original emphasis.

³⁰ Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” 124.

³¹ Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” 124.

teach children the alphabet, illustrates the distinction clearly. Faced with a completely black screen, we first “hear” the fixed metre and strong rhyme of the couplets, but at the very end, when a succession of letters flash on screen, we “see” the acrostic arrangement of the poem, in which the first letters of each line correspond to a letter of the Latin alphabet. Partly inspired by *Zorns Lemma*, Su Friedrich’s *Sink or Swim* (1990) expands on this basic dynamic. The film is divided into “chapters” whose title cards proceed in reverse-alphabetical order (from “Zygote” to “Athena”), suggesting both a child’s education and the direction of recollection, with each chapter comprising personal narration laid over ambiguously related images. Again, we first “hear” the story being told, but later we “see” the total image of a woman’s coming of age and painful separation from her father. In these examples, the reciprocity of charm and riddle is clear. The charm operates as a riddle in motion, progressing in time; the riddle works as a charm in stasis, simultaneously grasped and spread out in space. Having established this reciprocity, we may now draw them out as contrasting tendencies.

The basis of charm, which we will treat first, is “the overwhelming of sense by sound.”³² The word charm connects to “spell,” which is related to magic, but also to “the other meaning of spell in the sense of reading letter by letter, or sound by sound.”³³ In the coda of *Zorns Lemma*, for example, voices alternate in reading the medieval document “On Light, or the Ingression of Forms” at a rate of one word per second, and we notice how the fixed metrical beat destroys the text’s semantic or prose rhythm, transforming the theoretical text into babble. Listening to it, one feels the immense effort required to reconstruct the sense of individual phrases and sentences, let

³² Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” 124.

³³ Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” 124.

alone the text's overall thesis. Conversely, one becomes highly attuned to the repetition of specific words ("first," "form," "ten"), which are given the force of an incantation.

Since the traditional associations of both charm and the lyric are with music, sound, and rhythm, we should expect to find some relation between the former and the cinematic tradition of lyrical film, which is derived from the latter.³⁴ Brakhage, for one, has continually stressed his musical affinities: He has said that *Anticipation* was inspired by Bach and Webern, and also written that "ironically, the more silently-oriented my creative philosophies have become, the more inspired-by-music have my photographic aesthetics and my actual editing orders become."³⁵ The charm-like affinities of his work emerge clearly in such films as *Stellar* (1993) and *Black Ice* (1994), with their intense concentration of hand-painted imagery; in *Seasons...* (2002), his collaboration with Phil Solomon, where similar techniques are elaborated into discrete "movements" and a musical pattern of repetition; and in his *Songs* cycle, which in both form and title exemplifies the musical analogy. Bruce Baillie's *All My Life* (1966), another famous lyrical film, likewise functions as pure charm: the unity of its panning camera movement, its pastoral imagery, and Ella Fitzgerald's "All My Life" on the soundtrack together create a forceful concentration of sound and image that approaches the oracular. The presence of actual music connects it clearly to charm techniques, but the fact that a film is silent, as so many of Brakhage's films are, need not diminish its affinities with the charm.

The point of emphasizing sound over sense in the charm is not to say that there is no structure to be grasped, but that whatever structure exists is subordinate to the present-tense rhythm. Relevant here is Sitney's observation that Peter Kubelka's films "move so fast and are

³⁴ "The Greeks spoke of lyrics as *ta mele*, usually translated as 'poems to be sung'; in the Renaissance, lyric was constantly associated with the lyre and the lute, and Poe's essay [The Poetic Principle] lays an emphasis on the importance of music in poetry which makes up in strength what it lacks in precision." Frye, *Anatomy*, 273.

³⁵ Brakhage, "Letter to Ronna Page (On Music) (1966)," in *The Avant-Garde Film*, 135.

so complex that the viewer perceives their order without being aware of the laws behind them” and are thus “on the formal level not fundamentally different from that of a Brakhage film, even though the principles governing Kubelka’s editing are rational and Brakhage’s intuitive.”³⁶ That Sitney thus excludes Kubelka’s *Arnulf Rainer* (1960) from being a “structural” film is a point we will pick up in the discussion of riddle. For now, what is significant is that his emphasis on the film’s speed overwhelming our grasp of its structure puts it fully within our discussion of charm.

In the first half of the twentieth century, various experiments emphasized the purely rhythmic dimension of film. Hans Richter defined film as “visual rhythm, realised photographically; imaginative material coming from the elementary laws of sensory perception” and offered *Rhythmus 21* (1921) and *Rhythmus 23* (1923) as veritable demonstrations of his thesis, showing how even silent manipulations of space in time could create a musical rhythm.³⁷ *Rhythm in Light* (Mary Ellen Bute, Ted Nemeth, and Melville Webber, 1934) offers a variation on this by setting its kaleidoscopic forms to Edvard Grieg’s “Peer Gynt Suite,” thereby creating a visual correspondence to the music. Bute, one of *Rhythm in Light*’s directors, later articulated a theory of the Absolute Film—a cinema based upon visual and aural abstraction—and drew explicitly upon developments in painting, observing how the Cubists “tried to produce on a static surface a sensation to the eye, analogous to the sensation of sound to the ear.”³⁸ Such statements, which draw relations to the other arts, show up also in the theoretical works of Eisenstein: His conception of “overtone montage” employs a musical conception, and his analyses of poets such as Milton and Pushkin, and even an artist like Leonardo Da Vinci, stress the musical rhythms of

³⁶ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 285.

³⁷ Hans Richter, “The Badly Trained Sensibility (1924),” in *The Avant-Garde Film*, 22.

³⁸ Mary Ellen Bute, “LIGHT*FORM*MOVEMENT*SOUND,” in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Scott Mackenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 48.

their work.³⁹ Eisenstein's interest in synaesthesia, which emerges in his writings on Noh Theatre, are significant for a variety of reasons; but alongside the writings of Richter and Bute, what they make clear is the multitude of ways by which one can elaborate charm techniques.

The musical emphasis in the charm, which has its roots in magic, has to do with its traditional use in compelling a certain course of action—as in the folk-tale theme of the fiddle that causes its hearers to dance.⁴⁰ Films like *A Colour Box* (Len Lye, 1935), *An Optical Poem* (Oskar Fischinger, 1938), and *Begone Dull Care* (Norman McLaren, 1949) may not employ actual charms, but their infectious rhythms demonstrate very clearly the compulsive aspect of the form. The focus in such films is on getting the image in harmony with sound, using their force of rhythm to establish a movement that the target of the charm—the cinema audience in this case—will be forced to imitate. Len Lye, who made *A Colour Box*, was highly interested in this power of identification via movement and sought in his films to put “the feeling of a figure of motion outside of myself.”⁴¹ Thus the riotous, ever-shifting, hand-scratched forms of *Free Radicals* (1958), coupled with the drumming beats of the Bagirmi Tribe, invoke an almost involuntary physical response in the viewer.

The charm is thus meant to get past one's normative waking defenses by creating associations just beneath the threshold of consciousness. The wild, rapid-fire collisions of imagery in Bruce Conner's *Cosmic Ray* (1962), set to Ray Charles's “What'd I Say,” create sound-image links so complex and concentrated that the effect is almost subliminal, as if short-circuiting our conscious responses—and perhaps those of actual censors, too. Conner's influence

³⁹ Sergei Eisenstein, “Word and Image,” in *The Film Sense*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 3–68.

⁴⁰ Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” 126.

⁴¹ Len Lye, “The Art That Moves,” in *Figures of Motion*, eds. Wystan Curnow and Roger Horrocks (New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 1984), 74.

on the development of music videos has often been noted, and this may be connected to the compulsion inherent in charm techniques, which would in this case be directed at getting television viewers to stay on the channel. Related to this conception of the charm is the incantatory rhetoric present in commercials and advertising, where products are presented as magical objects, and where a bevy of audiovisual tools are used to get the hypothetical consumer to buy them. The films of Sara Cwynar, such as *Rose Gold* (2017) and *Cover Girl* (2018), use similar techniques of incantatory, dissociative repetition to explore these associative processes within the realm of contemporary image culture.

The incantatory nature of the charm may also be used to lull someone to sleep. The goal is to break down and confuse the conscious will, achieved in such famous instances as *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren, 1943), and the slow-motion scenes of *La Chute de la maison Usher* (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, Jean Epstein, 1928). No less exemplary are perceptual experiments that depend on intense repetition akin to a visual hypnosis. Scott Stark's *Speechless* (2008) interleaves 3-D photographs of human vulvae with surfaces and textures in natural environments, playing on their visual similarities (and perhaps a pun on "Mother Earth") to create complex plays with surface, depth, and "false" movement. Ken Jacobs's patented "Eternalisms" use rapid alternations between views to create depth perceived without the aid of specialized glasses and perceivable by a single eye.

The drowsy, narcotic repetitions of the charm traditionally relate it to an Ovidian world of metamorphosis, a world of echoic associations operating beneath the threshold of waking consciousness. Frye identifies sinister charms intended to thrust an enemy or evil spirit back into this world, and charms designed to call something back up from it, such as the rite to bring back

a lost lover.⁴² The latter relate to the tradition of elegiac poetry since they create a mournful mood commensurate to talk of death, loss, absence, and the transitory nature of existence. These aspects emerge clearly in Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), with its all-enveloping field of colour, its mode of personal address, its refrain-like constructions, and its mournful tone. (The recitation of names in the film is also characteristic of the charm, where powerful names are traditionally invoked to consecrate a space.) More recent films with a connection to elegy include Sofia Bohdanowicz's *Point and Line to Plane* (2020), where the abrupt death of a friend and the dislocation of foreign travel criss-cross in a complex set of synaesthetic visual-aural associations, and Mary Helena Clark's *Figure Minus Fact* (2020), in which an amorphous feeling of absence and loss emerges from a series of sensuous, tactile, and ambiguous sound- and sense-links harmonized in a dominant wash of blue colour.

In his early essay "Sorcery and Cinema," Antonin Artaud writes that "the cinema is essentially the revealer of a whole occult life with which it puts us into direct contact."⁴³ I argue that Artaud is explicitly thinking of the cinema in terms of charm. In particular, he is thinking of the charm's connection to a mythological, perhaps occult world inaccessible to waking thought. The conception of the charm involved here is what Frye calls "analogical": The recitation or performance of the charm on some ritual occasion—a film screening, say—becomes the manifestation of a mythological world of mysterious names and beings. The word "engram" in the title *Engram of Returning* (2015), Daïchi Saitō's extraordinary collaboration with experimental saxophonist Jason Sharp, is a technical term in psychology for a unit of cognitive information imprinted in a physical substance—or simply a "memory-trace." But the term is also

⁴² Frye, "Charms and Riddles," 130–131.

⁴³ Antonin Artaud, "Sorcery and the Cinema," in *The Avant-Garde Film*, 50.

used in Scientology to refer to traumatic mental images from the past which prohibit us from moving into higher levels of enlightenment, and one need not be a follower of L. Ron Hubbard to appreciate that this latter usage, with its reference to an archetypal myth, is arguably more commensurate to how the film takes us to a kind of primordial past—an originary world of swirling colours, indistinct forms, and pulsing shadows, accompanied by rhythmic droning, thundering warbles, and circular breathing that suggests hypnosis. This is not at all to say that Saïto is a practicing Scientologist; still less that *Engram* is concerned with elaborating the tenets of Dianetics. Just as a filmmaker employing a charm technique need not be an actual magician, so an artist need not profess belief in any particular myth or cosmology to make use of it. Nevertheless, inherent in the charm is a connection, however latent, to a mythological world whose power it calls up.

The more the magical aspect of charm is emphasized, of course, the more clearly its mythological aspect shows forth. The films of Kenneth Anger's Magick Lantern Cycle, especially *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), make explicit the aspects of initiation, consecration, and spell-binding inherent in the charm. That his films all make notable—and, in the case of *Scorpio Rising* (1963), highly influential—use of music is not incidental, either. In general, Anger's incantatory style, with its density of symbolic reference, makes clear how the charm is dependent on setting up a mythological construct assumed to be so powerful that it will manifest in reality. In Nathaniel Dorsky's *Devotional Cinema*, this emphasis on ritual shades into an emphasis on the communal experience of theatre-going—a tendency that finds its apotheosis in Gregory J. Markopoulos's *Eniaios* cycle, a single, eighty-hour film screened in segments every four years at an open-air theater near the Greek village of Lyssaraia. That the theatre is named Temenos, which refers to a sacred precinct, literally “cut off,” indicates very clearly the

ritual aspect of the charm involved, and the way it draws a magic circle around its participants. Similarly, the film's title, which means both "unity" and "uniqueness," points to a separate mythological world possessing a wholeness of its own.

In Brakhage, too, we find a strong tendency to elaborate a cosmogony or myth: His *Dog Star Man* (1964–66) presents the familiar mythological theme of ascent, following as a man, himself, climbs up a snowy mountain; his various "series" based upon alphabet and numeral systems (Persian, Egyptian, Chinese, and Arabic), with their pulsing forms just beyond identification, all point to an ancient world of power; and even his theoretical text *Metaphors on Vision*, with its density of textual reference and conspicuous use of puns and verse techniques, builds up a mythological construct in the manner of a charm. This tendency is present in many filmmakers of the "visionary strain" identified by Sitney, but it is not exclusive to them. In Sylvia Schedelbauer's *Sea of Vapors* (2014), a hypnotic series of strobing, frame-by-frame metamorphoses elaborate a lunar mythology, making use of the moon's conventional associations with occult power. In general, Schedelbauer's style, which Michael Sicinski describes as "Vorticist" ("multiple images toggling back and forth while expanding and receding, creating a disorienting tranche of visual material"), pushes the legibility and recognizability of individual objects, and exploits the associative properties of any image.⁴⁴

In his most recent work, Simon Liu manages similar effects—albeit in a very different context, centered around his personal experience of Hong Kong, and the tides of transformation that have rocked the area in recent years. The title *Signal 8* (2019) comes from Hong Kong's tropical storm warning system, and it well captures the sense of impending disaster that Liu

⁴⁴ Michael Sicinski, "New York Film Festival 2020: An Eventful Year," Notebook, September 23, 2020, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/new-york-film-festival-2020-an-eventful-year>.

maintains throughout the film's 14-minute runtime. Arguably the most impressive aspect of *Signal 8* is Liu's complex use of visual match cuts and aural repetitions, often associated with motifs of bursting (e.g., fountains, sprinklers, showers of sparks from a welding torch), which create the impression of pressure building across different areas of Hong Kong. Liu continually exploits the ambiguity of the imagery he presents: the sound of a boiling kettle, repeated in a different context, sounds like people screaming; the image of a neon-lit amusement park ride, filmed afar, from within a construction site, looks more like a swinging hammer; and the film's closing scene, a fireworks display set to "Be My Baby," spectacularly conveys a commingled exuberance and anxiety about the future.

Liu is concerned less with giving a big-picture view of the changes in Hong Kong, than with capturing something of what it feels like to be on the ground in the moment—less concerned with "documenting" events as a journalist would, than with evoking a unity of mood. *Signal 8* is no doubt informed by its political context, but the final impact it makes on the viewer is what Frye would call incantatory, "a harmony of sounds and the sense of a growing richness of meaning unlimited by denotation."⁴⁵ Brakhage's statement that his practice involves "sharing a sight" rather than "showing sights" is instructive in this regard.⁴⁶ *Happy Valley* (2020) and *Devil's Peak* (2021) do not so much "show" us Hong Kong as "share" Liu's vision of the place, and he is, in this sense, a lyrical artist *par excellence*.

It is because of such statements that Brakhage's practice is sometimes seen as offering a "direct" experience, with the first line of *Metaphors on Vision* typically cited in support.⁴⁷ And,

⁴⁵ Frye, *Anatomy*, 81.

⁴⁶ Brakhage, *Scrapbook: Collected Writings 1964–80* (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1982), 188.

⁴⁷ James Peterson associates Brakhage with what he calls the "total liberation theory of the avant-garde," which would see the artist as an "inspired genius who forcefully rejects an oppressive tradition and transcends petty rules and conventions," implying also that all the viewer needs to do is be completely open to the work. Peterson,

despite the fact that he goes to write that “one can never go back, not even in imagination,” the rhetoric of a “direct” experience has had a considerable influence in experimental circles, particularly in the tradition of direct animation, whose practitioners and advocates place considerable emphasis on materiality, embodiment, and presence.⁴⁸ Whatever the philosophical difficulties in the notion of a “direct” vision, there is a clear link between such rhetoric and the charm’s presumed ability to harness an archetypal world of power locked up in things. That world may be seen as contained in nature, as in Charlotte Pryce’s *A Study in Natural Magic* (2013) and *Prima Materia* (2015), or David Gatten’s *What the Water Said, Nos. 1–3* (1998) and *What the Water Said, Nos. 4–6* (2007). But one could look as well to many other films attuned to the aspect and texture of physical matter, such as David Rimmer’s *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1970), and Lillian F. Schwartz’s riotous use of computer imagery in *UFOs* (1971) and *Googolplex* (1972). The entire practice of Jodie Mack, from her early *Yard Work Is Hard Work* (2008) to her feature-length *The Grand Bizarre* (2018), has been built on examining the textures and properties of various objects, in works frequently characterized by thrilling cadences and dancing stop-motion forms.

The above examples demonstrate how the charm’s forceful concentration of rhythm tends to make an image’s potential descriptive function secondary to its sensory, textural qualities.

Ballet Mécanique (Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, 1924), a Busby Berkeley dance sequence, Sharon Lockhart’s *Goshogaoka* (1998): these otherwise disparate examples show how a marked emphasis on harmony and pattern defamiliarizes the objects being presented. In *Light*

Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 4.

⁴⁸ For a useful account of this rhetoric, see Tess Takahashi, “‘Meticulously, Recklessly, Worked Upon’: Direct animation, the auratic and the index,” in *Experimental Animation: From Analogue to Digital*, eds. Miriam Harris, Lilly Husbands, and Paul Taberham (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 102–113.

Is Waiting (2007), Michael Robinson uses a range of video effects (stroboscopic flashing, axis mirroring, looping, uncanny slow-motion) to transform an episode of “Full House” and other American pop-culture kitsch into a hypnotic cult ritual as spectacular and terrifying as anything in Anger’s oeuvre. Both Malena Szlam’s *ALTIPLANO* (2018) and Saïto’s *eartheartearth* (2021), despite being shot on the same trip near the border of Chile and Argentina, all but destroy the impression that we are seeing landscapes, using color manipulation, optical printing, and hand-processing, among other techniques, to transform the visible space, often flattening out the image so we simply confront pure values of line, colour, grain, and noise. Saïto’s title comes from Ronald Johnson’s long poem *ARK* (1996), and the poet’s charm-like formula of deriving “form from form from form from form” well describes the methods of the films just mentioned, and of the lyrical tendency in general.

In Brakhage’s *Eye Myth* (1969), which concentrates an entire cosmogony into nine seconds, we reach the outer limit of this approach, and return to the charm’s identification with some archetypal world of power. The cosmic abstractions of Jordan Belson’s *Re-Entry* (1964) draws inspiration from the concept of the *Bardo*, as set forth in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, while Jack Chambers’s *The Hart of London* (1970), a film greatly admired by Brakhage, builds up a complex mythology concentrated on the pun contained in the title (“hart”/“heart”), and a cumulative sense of a city birthed in blood and butchery. Everywhere we turn in the charm, Frye observes, “we seem to be led back to some kind of mythological universe, a world of interlocking names of mysterious powers and potencies which are above, but not wholly beyond reach of, the world of time and space.”⁴⁹ It is no coincidence that an emphasis on cosmogonies and mythopoeia routinely turns up in critical and scholarly accounts of lyrical films as well. The

⁴⁹ Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” 136.

implications of such accounts we will address once we have dealt with the riddle and the structural film.

1.2 Riddle and Structure

The ritual aspect of charm inevitably suggests a kind of uncritical identification. The charm is designed to absorb the listener: to establish a particular mood and to exclude everything that might disturb it. As Frye observes, though, “there is a point at which emotional involvement may suddenly reverse itself and become intellectual detachment, the typical expression of which is laughter.”⁵⁰ He cites a conventional dialogue form in Zen Buddhism, in which an earnest disciple asks a deeply serious question of a master, expecting an oracular response, but instead gets “a brush-off answer which is designed to push him into this mental reversal.”⁵¹ The digital period of Tsai Ming-liang has a great example of this. In his *Walker* series, where the actor Lee Kang-sheng, dressed as a Buddhist monk, moves through various locations around the world at an extremely slow pace, captured in an invariably static frame held for minutes at a time, we find ourselves being lulled into a meditative mood. Yet the films contain visual jokes and actual punchlines, as in *Walker* (2012), where after some twenty minutes of watching Lee inch across the streets of Hong Kong, we see him pull out and take a bite of a McDonald’s cheeseburger.

⁵⁰ Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” 137.

⁵¹ Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” 137.



Image 1: Still from *Journey to the West* (2014, Tsai Ming-liang)

The example of *Walker* demonstrates that “the riddle is essentially a charm in reverse”: It represents the revolt of the intelligence against the compulsive power of words and images. In contrast to the charm’s ambiguities of sound, the riddle presents an ambiguity of *sense*. In *Xi You* (*Journey to the West*, 2014), another film in the *Walker* series, Tsai gives us the uniquely discombobulating image pictured above, and while one can simply admire the sheer beauty of the composition, most viewers will attempt to discern the spatial arrangement that makes it possible and figure out how the image was achieved. This brings us into the region of the trick film or Buster Keaton gag, where the sheer spectacle of a movement is accompanied by a potential leap in understanding. Indeed, many of Keaton’s films show us how the context of the riddle is usually some enmity-situation, where the hero may lose their life if they are unable to guess the “answer,” as in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (Charles Reisner, 1928), where Keaton realizes that

he can avoid being crushed by a falling house not by running away, but by simply opening a door.

Their riddle-like forms notwithstanding, Tsai's *Walker* films do not fit into the structural tradition as laid out by Sitney in his "Structural Film" essay. Nevertheless, Sitney's emphasis on a structural film's spatial and conceptual dimensions, his emphasis on its overall "shape," his stress on the "static" over the "kinetic": these all make clear that the category has strong affinities with the riddle.⁵² We may even say that structural films place the viewer in a position analogous to that of the Keaton hero, faced with a puzzle-like situation that they are meant to work out—not at the risk of death, but of incomprehension. In Frampton's *(nostalgia)* (1971), the images and narration initially have a charm-like hold over us; but once we work out its structuring principle and "break" the charm, as it were, our viewing is transformed. Our sense of the film's total arrangement reverberates back to our entire experience in time.

Riddles, at least in their Old English variants, are of two main types: one where the object is described by the poet, the other where the object itself speaks and challenges the reader to guess its name.⁵³ Because the titling conventions in the cinema are more or less fixed, the title thus becomes a crucial part of films which make use of riddle techniques. Indeed, it may even be possible to classify such films based on their use of title cards. In Michael Snow's *One Second in Montreal* (1969), the challenge is to unify the film under the title: to figure out how a series of still photographs of snowy cityscapes, presented over roughly twenty minutes, could add up to "one second in Montreal." There may ultimately be no "answer," meaning that Snow's is an unguessable riddle. Nonetheless, it is the implied or incited movement to a conceptual unity that

⁵² Sitney, "Structural Film," in *Film Culture Reader*, 326–348.

⁵³ Frye, "Charms and Riddles," 140.

is significant. To take another example: Tomonari Nishikawa's *Ten Mornings Ten Evenings and One Horizon* (2016) turns on a crucial ambiguity in its title. Rather than present discrete iterations of the same landscape, as one might expect, Nishikawa shot several landscapes at two times of day, first in the morning and second in the evening, exposing one-sixth of the frame at a time, so each landscape is seen as if through vertical shutters, with six different temporalities collapsed into each frame. Thus, a few minutes into the film, we are treated to the uniquely discombobulating experience of seeing a car zip in and out of existence in one of the vertical sections, an effect that is repeated in increasingly conspicuous variations afterwards. The explanation of Nishikawa's process is nowhere in the film, but an integral part of the viewing experience is puzzling out what exactly we are looking at.

The pictorial aspects of the riddle emerge clearly in the cipher-like titles of many classic structural films, such as *S:TREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTIONED* (Paul Sharits, 1971), \longleftrightarrow (Snow, 1969), and $()$ (Morgan Fisher, 2003). In these films, the movement is from work to title, and we see how the totality of the film's movements become unified and concentrated on a structural concept suggested by it: the variations of camera speed and set-up contained in the panning movements of \longleftrightarrow ; the ways by which the various "streams" of *S:S:S:S:S* (the looping soundtrack, the overlapping water in the image, the scratches running parallel to the film) are "sectioned"; the spaces of pure possibility offered by $()$, which presents insert-shots torn from their original context. In these films, movement crystallizes into concept—hence again Sitney's emphasis on the "static" element of structural film and the corresponding stress on sense over sound, reason over rhyme.

As some scholars have felt, however, this conceptual emphasis risks reducing structural films to an "answer," often at the expense of their haptic, textural, charm-like qualities. Balsom

points out that in revisionist readings of Sharits, such as those of Ara Osterweil, the filmmaker “engages less in the dry axioms of structural film than in orchestrating embodied encounters with light and motion.”⁵⁴ No one would deny that part of the pleasure of *S:S:S:S:S* derives from seeing its structure completed; but once one has discerned its overall “shape,” there remains the incantatory repetition of “exochorion” ringing in our ears and the overlapping streams of water pulsing before our eyes. Related to this is Sharits’s own emphasis on the “musical” aspects of his films, as well as his claim that his flicker films, such as *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* (1968) and *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1969), are “filled with attempts to allow vision to function in ways usually particular to hearing.”⁵⁵ Hence they are, perhaps like other flicker films, such as Tony Conrad’s *The Flicker* (1966), also connected to our previous discussion of lyric and charm. As we saw earlier, it is by emphasizing *Arnulf Rainer*’s ambiguities of sound that Sitney argued for the film’s exclusion from the “structural” category. But even if the viewer is ultimately unable to grasp the total order of *Arnulf Rainer*, the fact that the film incites an attempt to “solve” it makes it a riddle for our purposes. At the very least, we may say that seeing film strips of *Arnulf Rainer* laid out side by side would be revealing of its “sense” and structure in a way that seeing the film strips of *Mothlight* (1963), say, would not be.

A film like *Arnulf Rainer* shows that lyrical and structural tendencies are, like charms and riddles, “psychologically very close together.”⁵⁶ *Anémic Cinéma* (Marcel Duchamp, 1926), to

⁵⁴ Erika Balsom, “Parallax Plurality: 3-D Cinema Beyond the Feature Film,” *Artforum* 54, no. 1 (September 2015): 354. <https://www.artforum.com/print/201507/parallax-plurality-3-d-cinema-beyond-the-feature-film-54497>

See also Ara Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2014) and Catherine Russell, “Framing People: Structural Film Revisited,” in *Experimental Ethnography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

⁵⁵ Paul Sharits, “Hearing: Seeing,” in *The Avant-Garde Film*, 256.

⁵⁶ Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” 138.

take a famous example, all but forces the viewer to alternate between one of two positions: either reading the calligrams for their “sense” or appreciating their spiraling movements for their “sound.” In Sky Hopinka’s *Fainting Spells* (2018), an imagined myth for the Xawiska, a Ho-Chunk plant that takes on human properties, part protector and part trickster, we find an analogous dynamic: the sensuous filming of movement and landscape and their colourful visual manipulation lull the viewer into a meditative mood, but the intermittent use of written text (e.g., “Xawiska, you’ve fainted again...”), scrolling from right to left, reasserts the flatness of the frame and creates a sense of being jolted awake. Peter Tscherkassky’s *Train Again* (2021), which takes its title from Kurt Kren’s *37/78: Tree Again* (1978), works the opposite way, going from structure to lyric. Effectively collapsing the (vehicular) history of cinema onto itself, the film uses rapid montage, graphic matches, and intricate plays with directionality to link—again and again—the visual film strip with the sight of trains going off the rails. As in the flicker-films mentioned earlier, it creates an itch to make sense of its structural elements and directional manipulation—though as one is watching it, the sheer kinesthetic excitement and (charm-like) control of rhythm become impossible to ignore, and “sound” eventually overwhelms “sense.”

Perhaps the greatest example of the interplay of lyrical and structural tendencies is *Zorns Lemma* (mentioned a few times already), a film whose astonishing design bears out a complex interpenetration of charm and riddle. As we saw earlier, the opening *Bay State Primer* passage moves from charm to riddle, the black screen and rhyming couplets giving way to a total sense of the acrostic and a visual succession of letters. In the film’s main section, where the substitutions of individual “units” occur, we find a thrilling tension between two positions: While we initially “see” the film diagrammatically, as a riddle, taking individual units in terms of their “sense,” and thinking in terms of a table being filled out, we eventually start to “hear” the film instead. As

more and more substitutions are made, we become unable to process a new one by means of a mental table and end up focusing on the “sound” of the film, allowing our muscle-memory and intuition to take over, and identifying with the movements and textural qualities of the various substitutions (rather than reasoning out each substitution step by step). Thus, the film moves from a riddle-like conceptual construct to a charm-like mythological identification. (That the first four substitutions correspond to the four classical elements, fire, water, earth, and air, further underscores this movement.) Reinforcing this trajectory are those substitutions which explicitly challenge our conceptual sorting processes: For example, what happens to the label “man walking along sidewalk” when the man changes direction or, in one iteration, goes off screen? Can it still “stand for” the same letter in our mental table? Conversely, there are also witty moments which prevent our total absorption into the charm, such as the recognition that the image of a rhinoceros, forcefully associated with “R,” is being substituted for “S.” Following this main section, the coda, already dealt with, sees the one-word-per-second beat dissolve the semantic rhythm of the theoretical text, as if completing the movement from riddle to charm, sense to sound, reason to rhyme. Then again, when the words fade out, and the silence of a snowy country field gives way to a blank white screen, we “read” the image in a way that we did not “read” the black leader at the film’s start, and Frampton perhaps leaves us with one final riddle.

The difference between charm and riddle, and thus between lyrical and structural tendencies, is “mainly in imaginative direction.”⁵⁷ The forty-five-minute zoom in *Wavelength* (1967), arguably the most well-known structural film, may be taken as a kind of charm-like hypnosis, as plunging the viewer into an awe-inducing space of pure potential. But it equally

⁵⁷ Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” 141.

functions as a riddle whose “solution” is given in the title, with the runtime gradually bringing out its myriad associations: the general notion of periodicity, the sine wave on the soundtrack, the frequency of the zoom adjustments, the cycle of the day as seen through the windows, the frozen waves on the photograph at the end of the room, the ringing of the phone call, the narrative incident implying an entire rhythm of action beyond the scope of the film, and so on. Such a comprehensive conception as Snow’s creates an image of the filmmaker piling up a mass of erudition about his theme, and thus enacting a kind of performance—an element foregrounded in his brilliantly funny *So Is This* (1982), a quasi-lecture which plays on the paradoxical universality and particularly of the word “this,” eventually exhausting the word’s comic possibilities before looping in on itself like an ouroboros.

The shock of recognition induced by *So Is This*, which detaches the viewer by means of laughter, is a product of wit. It is conventional to speak negatively of being “taken out of” a film. But riddle techniques are often designed to detach us from a total absorption in the viewing experience. Morgan Fisher’s *Screening Room* (1968–), a tracking shot of the theatre in which the film is to be exhibited, demonstrates this perfectly; as does Tsai’s conceptually similar *Sand* (2018), another iteration of the *Walker* series, in which Lee’s impossibly slow journey ends up at the Visitor Center of the Zhuangwei Dune Park in Yilan where the film-installation was first exhibited. Here again, meditative absorption gives way to intellectual detachment. Along similar lines, one might look at how structural filmmakers all but reverse the conventional associations of familiar imagery to create veritable anti-charms. In *Twelve Tales Told* (2014) Johann Lurf exploits the Pavlovian anticipation created by studio logos, intercutting thirteen (not twelve) of them into a stuttering, maximalist symphony of unfulfillment and anti-climax. In so doing, the film becomes, as Balsom writes: “a spectacular performance of the double falsity of its own title:

Thirteen logos appear and together weave not twelve tales, but a single story of corporate consolidation and false differentiation.”⁵⁸ In a similar way, *Reconnaissance* (2012) and *Embargo* (2014) play with the hushed, conspiratorial associations of specific locations, such as the Morris Reservoir near the Californian city of Azusa where the former was filmed, and which long served as a testing site for torpedoes. In both works, Lurf employs subtle motion, visual distortion, plays with light, and “false” movement to create the impression of an optical illusion, challenging our ability to reassemble the locations according to coherent spatial rules. Wryly pointing up to the conspiratorial opacity of state secrecy, every frame is subtly “off,” suggesting a hidden order or rule set that remains just out of reach.

Whether or not Lurf himself would call these works “structural films,” they exhibit all the tendencies we have been considering. Indeed, the fact that they suggest a hidden rule set makes them especially comparable to the riddle form. As in the case of Sharits’s films, however, this raises the issue of a work’s relation to its underlying conceptual or methodological structure—its “answer,” as it were. For if we continue with the analogy of the structural film and the riddle, then surely getting to the “solution” is the entire point. With qualification, Scott MacDonald takes this view of J. J. Murphy’s *Sky Blue Water Light Sign* (1972), which looks to be a continuous, single-shot, eight-and-a-half minute pan across an uncannily still, glowing natural landscape. Only later, when the image loops, do we realize that we are seeing a scrolling Scene-o-Rama light sign. Only at the end of the film do we realize that we had been given the “solution” in the film’s title. MacDonald accordingly writes that the film is “best seen in total innocence. My guess is that if one knows what he or she is looking at before seeing this little

⁵⁸ Balsom, “Parallax Plurality,” *Artforum* 354.

film, half of its excitement and a good deal of its meaning disappear. Seen in total innocence, though (and maybe I'm exaggerating the importance of this), *Sky Blue Water* is a wonder."⁵⁹

Certainly, there is something to that initial moment of recognition, the moment that “sense” takes over “sound.” As MacDonald himself acknowledges in a parenthetical, however, it is possible to exaggerate the importance of the “solution.” After all, just knowing that we are “really” seeing a light sign advertising Hamm’s Beer (advertised as being “from the land of sky blue waters”) does not quite do justice to the film, which also tells of a culture of consumerism and kitsch, of the specifically American affinities with the wilderness we find in Twain and Thoreau, of the early cinema traditions of the Actuality and the trick film, as well as of the 19th-century “moving panoramas” which predate the invention of the cinema, all of which are recalled and distilled in *Sky Blue Water Light Sign*. Its “meaning” can hardly be contained in a single answer, which suggests that the “solution” as such is of restricted importance. The crucial point here is that its ambiguities of sense should not be seen as reducible to a solution, but rather as pushing us to ask what makes this solution possible in the first place.

In *AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN* (2016), Manuela De Laborde presents the audience with a set of small, sculptural objects made from plaster, sometimes with colour pigment but mainly dipped in watercolour. Crucially, however, De Laborde composes and edits in such a way that these sculptures are often partially lit, at other times flattened out on the frame, always just out of definition. What we get is a tremendous energy of movement—ever-shifting values of shape, shadow, colour, static, and noise—around objects whose forms we struggle to grasp and which

⁵⁹ Scott MacDonald, “Sky Blue Water Light Sign, 1972,” The Filmmakers Co-op, accessed on February 10, 2023, <https://film-makerscoop.com/catalogue/jj-murphy-sky-blue-water-light-sign>.

we are unable to even name. As Blake Williams observes: “We, the audience, become agents in producing [the sculptures], but, crucially, they never become a production for us.”⁶⁰

The lyrical tendency, as we saw, refers to a mythological universe with which it is identified, and from which it draws its commanding power. The structural tendency, by contrast, is an attempt to control the world through mental constructs and conceptual schemata. The latter tendency emerges in dazzlingly concentrated form in the recent films of Godard, with their non-stop onslaught of puns, quotations, references, and citations, and their encyclopedic tendency to sort and categorize. In such films as *Film Socialisme* (2010) and *Le Livre d'image* (*The Image Book*, 2018), what we get is not just the impression of the entirety of human knowledge—or Godard’s version of it, at any rate—spread out before us, but also, crucially, an ironic, self-conscious sense of the relation of the mind to nature. Godard’s considerable wit and Joycean taste for verbal play place a humorous twist on metaphysical, categorical, and conceptual tendencies, acknowledging the desperation involved in attempting to control the world via mental constructs. *Adieu au langage* (*Goodbye to Language*, 2014), with its dazzling *coups de cinéma*, does this by presenting several paradoxes: It asks us to do away with language while simultaneously forcing us to work through a deluge of information; it attacks semiotic and symbolic structures while acknowledging their necessity; and finally it presents various forms of abstraction (e.g., Impressionism and Fauvism, 3-D image-making) as approximations of reality. It is of no small significance that the film is divided into two chapters “1/Nature” and “2/Metaphor,” each uncannily mirrored with each other.⁶¹ For if the lyrical tendency gives us a

⁶⁰ Blake Williams, “Something, Everything: Manuela De Laborde on *AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN*,” *Cinema Scope* 69, Fall 2016.

⁶¹ For a detailed account of the symmetries between the two sections see David Bordwell, “ADIEU AU LANGUAGE: 2 + 2 x 3D,” *Observations on film art*, September 7, 2014, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2014/09/07/adieu-au-langage-2-2-x-3d/>.

mythological universe where nature and metaphor are identified, then Godard's riddle leaves us with "nature" and "metaphor" as conceptual categories.

Godard's title, then, suggests that maybe the only way of getting past the deadlock of the structural tendency is by renouncing—by bidding *adieu* to—the answer or guess. In his Structuralist/Materialist polemics, Peter Gidal proposed something similar, positioning the audience so that they would be always approaching, but never quite reaching, an image or meaning.⁶² That he enclosed this anti-representational polemic in a dogmatic political framework is in many respects limiting, but he is absolutely clear that trying to answer the riddle is a way of getting control of things. His revolt is against a conceptual determinism: the reduction of any and all phenomena to articulable forms of thought. The structural tendency we have been examining here, and its associations with the riddle, does not simply point to a fixed meaning or answer, but through its ambiguities of sense, asks how this conceptual meaning is possible in the first place.

In the lyrical film, which we examined in the previous section, there was little danger of conceptual reduction. The danger there, as we saw, was not conceptual, but *mythological* reduction: the risk of seeing the films as little more than the cosmogonies they represent, and from which they draw their power. In the cinema, polemics against mythological identification have been less common than anti-conceptual statements: The filmmaker is not often thought of as practicing actual magic, and those artists such as Anger who occasionally claim to be doing so are typically treated with ironic distance. Still, from the perspective of commentary, there is the analogous danger of a kind of mythopoetic determinism: the impulse to identify all lyric phenomena with a mysterious world of beings which commentary would try to reconstruct. But

⁶² See Peter Gidal, "Theory and Definition of Structuralist/Materialist Film," in *The British Avant-Garde Film, 1926–1995*, 145–170.

as with the structural film's reduction to an answer, this would also be to see the ultimate meaning of a lyrical film in something outside itself, which would be a mistake of an analogous sort, in the opposite imaginative direction. Accordingly, the lyrical films we looked at in the previous section, and its associations with charm, should not be seen as harnessing an archetypal world of beings and things. Rather, through their ambiguities of sound, we should see them as exploring how we can recognize such a world to begin with, how it becomes intelligible to us.

In sum, neither lyrical nor structural tendencies should be taken as pointing to something "outside" the cinema—whether to a mythological universe with which a work is identified, or to a conceptual construct implied in its form. Such a response, a vestige of the "pre-artistic" origins of charm and riddle techniques, of what Cassirer calls "word magic," would simply reify their original ritual contexts. And if the films we have discussed in this chapter are to be studied as artistic phenomena, related not to some external context but to cinema in its totality, then neither mythological nor conceptual reductions can be accepted.

Chapter Two: Ambiguities of Description

In scholarship on non-fiction cinema, one eventually collides with the term “experimental documentary,” an amalgam of two already ill-defined terms. The terminological vagueness of the former we have dealt with already; the definitional confusions of the latter, rooted in John Grierson’s famous definition of documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality,” have an even longer history. In the introduction to a special issue of *Millennium Film Journal* dedicated to “an explosion of moving image works that hybridize documentary and experimental, video art and essay modes,” Lucas Hilderbrand acknowledges that the term “experimental documentary” is both “ugly and vague.”⁶³ Rather than attempt to clarify or define, however, Hilderbrand prefers to “suggest and revel in the field’s possibilities,” thereby “clinging to the porosity of the concept of experimental documentary.”⁶⁴ Attempting to “encapsulate the essence of these works without reducing them to a taxonomy,” Hilderbrand later offers the phrases “the aesthetics of ambiguity” or “the aesthetics of ambivalence,” which “both seem to suggest the work’s non-fixity,” before deciding that, after all, neither phrase really captures what he means, and finally identifying in experimental documentaries a “pervasive aesthetic of uncertainty.”⁶⁵

The vagueness of Hilderbrand’s account, which is not so much strategic as half-asleep in tautology, is indicative of much scholarship on so-called “experimental documentary.” And the same goes for his apparent resistance to anything that might be termed schematization or classification. The tacit assumption is that a taxonomic structure dictates the perspective one can take on it; that this perspective is invariably restrictive; and that the only function of a taxonomy

⁶³ Lucas Hilderbrand, “Experiments in Documentary: Contradiction, Uncertainty, Change,” *Millennium Film Journal* no. 51 (Spring 2009): 4.

⁶⁴ Hilderbrand, “Experiments in Documentary,” 5.

⁶⁵ Hilderbrand, “Experiments in Documentary,” 10.

is to pigeon-hole. That this assumption is usually not extended to *existing* terminology, in this case the terms “experimental” and “documentary,” is also characteristic: Even for Hilderbrand, to revel in the possibilities of a field called “movies” would likely be a bridge too far.

The presupposition at work here is what Alfred North Whitehead terms The Fallacy of the Perfect Dictionary: “the belief, the very natural belief, that mankind has consciously entertained all the fundamental ideas which are applicable to its experience. Further it is held that human language, in single words or in phrases, explicitly expresses these ideas.”⁶⁶ The terminological history of documentary film is a case in point. “Reality” and “actuality” are such question-begging terms that one may reasonably ask whether Grierson’s original remark on documentary counts as a definition at all: Discussions of reality very quickly converge onto discussions of meaning, and any proper definition should develop a practical context in which to be understood. In other words, if we cannot do without the term “documentary,” we would do well to develop new critical terminology—again, to distinguish where we cannot divide. Hilderbrand’s desire to identify aesthetics of “ambivalence,” “ambiguity,” and “uncertainty” in his discussion of “experimental documentary” is, in some sense, a revolt against the intellectual fixation that critical terms undoubtedly risk. But, as this thesis has assumed from the beginning, an identification of ambiguity is only as good as the specificity of how that ambiguity is figured. The distinctions created by a taxonomy should not diminish but strengthen the force of a claim to ambiguity. This chapter will therefore proceed by first developing a classification of non-fiction forms, essaying the possibility of defining a region of cinematic *description*. Following this, we may then—and only then—proceed to identify various types of descriptive ambiguity.

⁶⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 235.

2.1 The Four Forms of Non-Fiction Cinema

The question “What is documentary?” has persisted for well over a century now. In *The Documentary Film Reader*, Jonathan Kahana begins with just this query, citing the protean elusiveness of the term, and then proposing to “back into a definition, over the next thousand pages of critical history.”⁶⁷ The usefulness of this history is not in doubt: The sheer volume of that authoritative anthology, representing roughly a century of critical engagement, suggests that the question “What is documentary?” is of major importance. But if we stay with the question a while longer, we may notice how efforts to answer it, often by opposing fiction and reality, lead very quickly back to statements about truth, beauty, and justice—or in other words back to Plato. This is not entirely coincidence. It is after all to Plato and Socrates whom we might trace the habit of formulating questions of essence in the form “What is...?” In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates asks questions such as “What is truth?” and “What is beauty?”, and when his interlocutors respond with examples or instances of truth or beauty, Socrates prevails by pointing out how their answers are incapable of dealing with the problem of essence.

For all its persistence, however, the Platonic form of the question has not gone unchallenged. In place of the form “What is...?” the sophists of Plato’s day asked the question “Which one...?” As Deleuze writes, this was for them “the best kind of question, the most suitable one for determining essence,” and thus a forceful critique of the Socratic method.⁶⁸ Asking the question “Which one...?” implied “an original conception of essence, a whole

⁶⁷ Jonathan Kahana, “General Editor’s Introduction,” in *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*, 1–9, ed. Kahana (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

⁶⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, tr. Hugh Tomlinson (Columbia University Press, 1983), 76.

sophistic art which was opposed to the dialectic.”⁶⁹ It constituted “an empirical and pluralist art”—an art that, in Deleuze’s view, finds its completion in Nietzsche.⁷⁰

In considering the essence of documentary, then, we may start by adopting the sophistic form of questioning. Thus, rather than back into a definition of what documentary *is*, we will develop a classification of four non-fiction forms, thereby answering the alternative question “Which one?” To do this, I will draw mainly from the sixth chapter of Deleuze’s *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, “The powers of the false.” Here, in passages saturated with references to Nietzsche, Deleuze lays out a highly suggestive pair of oppositions: the first between two poles of the “cinema of reality,” the second between two “regimes of the image.”⁷¹ I will systematize these distinctions in a way Deleuze himself does not, but I will start by developing each of them separately.⁷²

2.1.1 Chronicle and Portrait Forms

The first distinction is between two poles of “the cinema of reality”: the documentary or ethnographic pole and the investigation or reportage pole. Films localized in the documentary pole “claimed objectively to show us real settings, situations and characters,” a tendency Deleuze associates, naturally, with Robert Flaherty’s 1922 film *Nanook of the North*.⁷³ In this pole, we see individual actions always in relation to a larger social context or setting. As one finds in the extraordinary documentary work of Vittorio de Seta, such as *Isole di fuoco* (*Islands of Fire*,

⁶⁹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 76.

⁷⁰ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 76.

⁷¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, tr. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 126–149.

⁷² The argument of this chapter has parallels with Northrop Frye’s classification of prose forms. Frye, *Anatomy*, 303–314.

⁷³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 149.

1954), *Lu tempu di li pisci spata* (*Age of the Swordfish*, 1954), and *Parabola d'oro* (*Golden Parable*, 1955), the preservation of event, custom, and ritual takes precedence over a record of individual personality. We will call this form the *chronicle*.⁷⁴

The decades-spanning career of Frederick Wiseman, singular in its breadth, depth, and consistency of focus, exemplifies the form's main features. From early work like *Titicut Follies* (1967) to more recent films such as *At Berkeley* (2013) and *Ex Libris: The New York Public Library* (2017), Wiseman has chronicled the workings and mechanisms of various institutions. Whether it be the Yerkes Primate Research Center (*Primate*, 1974) or the Neiman-Marcus store and corporate headquarters in Dallas (*The Store*, 1983), his films operate within more or less stable frameworks, in which individuals perform their social functions, their social masks in place. Toward the end of *High School* (1968), a schoolteacher reads out a letter from a former student and current Vietnam War soldier, who writes that he is "only a body doing a job." However damning as an indictment of the ongoing war, the phrase also expresses the general perspective of the chronicle, which takes an external, impersonal view of individuals, observing them as they move and operate in a world of action and event.

At the opposite end of the chronicle is the investigation or reportage pole, which Deleuze associates with John Grierson and Richard Leacock.⁷⁵ Instead of claiming to show us real settings, situations, and characters, as the chronicle does, investigation or reportage films claim to show how the characters themselves see their situations, their settings, their problems.⁷⁶ In this pole, Grierson's early *Housing Problems* (1935) is the paradigmatic example. One could also

⁷⁴ The term "chronicle," also used in Erik Barnouw's classic textbook, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford University Press, 1974), has associations with the Russian *khrónika*, early Pathé journals, and newsreels more generally, and these provide some reasons for adopting the word. But it is also worth clarifying that its use throughout this chapter should not be taken as a primarily historical account.

⁷⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 149.

⁷⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 149.

point to a politically engaged tradition of reportage stretching from *Comizi d'amore* (*Love Encounters*, 1964), in which Pier Paolo Pasolini took to the streets of Italy asking citizens their thoughts on sex and love, to *Futura* (2021), a pandemic-era portrait of Italy's youth, co-directed by Pietro Marcello, Francesco Munzi, and Alice Rohrwacher. Both films may incidentally reveal something about their contemporary social context, but their primary emphasis is on personal, individualized worldviews as expressed—verbally or otherwise—by their subjects. We will call this form the *portrait*.

Albert and David Maysles's *Grey Gardens* (1975), co-directed with Ellen Hovde and Muffie Meyer, is a classic example. Following an eccentric, reclusive mother-daughter pair in their derelict East Hampton mansion, the film demonstrates how the portraitist, unlike the chronicler, is not bound by contemporary significance, and can therefore offer a more existential perspective. Thus, *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (1997) and *A Brief History of Time* (1991), Errol Morris's portraits of four eccentric American professionals and Stephen Hawking, respectively, can ruminate equally on the meaning of life. Given that the portrait's main point of interest is the subject's unique perspective and worldview, the artist-portrait is unsurprisingly a favoured sub-form: Jacques Rivette's *Jean Renoir, le patron* (1967), Claire Denis's *Jacques Rivette, le veilleur* (1990), Michael Almereyda's *William Eggleston in the Real World* (2005), and Pedro Costa's *Où gît votre sourire enfoui?* (*Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?*, 2001), are some examples.

The main difference between the chronicle and portrait is the perspective on character or personality involved. The chronicle takes a more social, external view of character, throwing its emphasis on portraying people as they act in a larger setting, institution, or environment; the portrait by contrast takes a more individualized, personal point of view, showing how the

characters themselves see this larger social context. This understood, it should be evident how Louis Malle's *Humain, trop humain* (1973) fits more with the chronicle and his *Place de la République* (1974) with the portrait. But it should likewise be evident that the two forms are not fully separable, and indeed mix together in varying degrees. It is difficult, if not impossible to find "pure" forms of either. Biographical films almost always incorporate aspects of both chronicle and portrait, as in the ambitious, decades-spanning *Up* series, started by Paul Almond (*Seven Up!*, 1963) and continued by Michael Apter (from *7 Plus Seven*, 1970 to *63 Up*, 2019). Similarly, films such as Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) and Penelope Spheeris's *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981) work both as chronicles of an era and as portraits of a subculture or community. The purpose of recognizing the chronicle and portrait as distinct forms, then, is to allow filmmakers and artists to be recognized within the traditions and conventions they have chosen. The distinction should allow one to recognize, for instance, how a chronicle like Wiseman's *High School* differs from Abbas Kiarostami's *Mashgh-e Shab* (*Homework*, 1989), whose interest in the interiority of its schoolchildren subjects aligns it with the portrait form. Or, to keep with similar subject matter, how *Approaching the Elephant* (Amanda Rose Wilder, 2014), about the Teddy McArdle Free School, aligns more with the chronicle, and *Herr Bachmann und seine Klasse* (*Mr. Bachmann and His Class*, Maria Speth, 2021) with the portrait.

The chronicle and portrait also differ in their relation to contemporaneity. The chronicler, as the name suggests, finds their material largely in contemporary events, and thus requires some political, social, or cultural significance, as canonical documentaries like *Primary* (1960) and *Gimme Shelter* (1970) clearly demonstrate. The portraitist, by contrast, tends to be more restricted by contemporary significance. In this regard, it is instructive that *The Fog of War*

(2003) and *The Unknown Known* (2013), Errol Morris's portraits of former U.S. Secretaries of Defense Robert McNamara and Donald Rumsfeld, respectively, were both made *after* their subjects were in office; consequently, their import and interest as chronicles is peripheral. This is in clear contrast to Morris's more recent *American Dharma* (2018), in which considerations around giving its subject, former Trump strategist Steve Bannon, a platform, could not be ignored, hampering not just the integrity of the project, but also Morris's efficacy as a portraitist.

The portrait, which often takes the form of an oral history, is of particular significance when no contemporaneous chronicle of events is available. This is clear in the case of Claude Lanzmann, whose films from *Shoah* (1985) to *Shoah: Four Sisters* (2017) constitute a scrupulously recorded archive of Holocaust witness testimony. Wang Bing's *Si Linghun* (*Dead Souls*, 2018), whose eight-hour runtime comprises interviews with elderly survivors of reeducation camps in northwest China, deemed "ultra-rightists" in the Communist Party's Anti-Rightist campaign of 1957, lies also in this tradition. Some of Jia Zhangke's non-fiction films operate similarly: *Haishang chuanqi* (*I Wish I Knew*, 2010) explores Shanghai's legacy as a cultural center by interviewing artist-émigrés in Hong Kong and Taiwan, while *Yi zhi you dao hai shui bian lan* (*Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue*, 2020) interviews multiple generations of Chinese authors. There is a historical principle involved here: As both chronicle and portrait films age, they also gain in appeal as their counterpart forms. The oral history clearly shows how a portraitist's material may, as time goes on, serve as a *de facto* chronicle. The reciprocal movement may be seen in Bill Morrison's *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (2016), which derives its appeal from how the silent-era newsreel footage of the Dawson Film Find (the accidental 1978 discovery of 533 reels of silent-era nitrate film buried beneath a decommissioned swimming pool

in Dawson City), by virtue of its temporal distance, radiates a subjective intensity characteristic of the portrait form.

2.1.2 Organic and Crystalline Description

For all their differences, however, the chronicle and portrait remain connected in a crucial way—this having to do with the distinction in *Cinema 2* between “two regimes of the image,” one organic, the other crystalline, which Deleuze contrasts on several points. One point of contrast is that of “story,” defined in relation to subject–object adequation: Beginning with the conventional notion that what the camera ‘sees’ is objective and what the character sees is subjective, Deleuze defines “story” as the development of subjective and objective images throughout a given film.⁷⁷ In the organic regime, this development is eventually resolved: “We might say that the film begins with the distinction between the two kinds of images, and ends with...their identity recognized.”⁷⁸ A second point of contrast between organic and crystalline regimes has to do with “descriptions.” A description is organic if a given setting or situation is presented as *independent* of the camera’s description and therefore “stands for a supposedly pre-existing reality.”⁷⁹ With crystalline description, by contrast, the setting or situation is *dependent* on the camera’s description, which replaces, *re-describes*, or even reconstitutes it. If organic description can be thought of as a window that opens onto a pre-existing setting or situation, then crystalline description can be seen as emphasizing the translucent pane of glass, as it were, in which the setting or situation is crystallized.

⁷⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 147–148.

⁷⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 148.

⁷⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 126.

The distinction between organic and crystalline regimes of the image, which can be contrasted in terms other than “story” and “description,” is of major importance in *Cinema 2*. Here the essential point is that the non-fiction forms we have discussed lie in the *organic* regime. Certainly the “cinema of reality,” polarized into chronicle and portrait forms, deviated from established practices of fiction filmmaking. “But, in challenging fiction,” Deleuze writes, “[the cinema of reality] also preserved and sublimated an ideal of truth *which was dependent on cinematographic fiction itself*: there was what the camera sees, what the character sees, the possible antagonism and necessary resolution of the two (emphasis in original).”⁸⁰ Non-fiction, “the cinema of reality,” may differ from fiction in the *kind* of story resolution it offers, but the crucial point is *that* a resolution still obtains in both. Whether in chronicle or portrait forms, subject–object adequation—the necessary resolution between subjective and objective images—remained *the* model of the true. The cinema had not yet absorbed the Nietzschean critique, which is “that the ideal of the true was the most profound fiction, at the heart of the real.”⁸¹

The contrast between organic and crystalline regimes, then, is not a break between fiction and reality, but rather “a new mode of story which affects both of them.”⁸² In the crystalline regime, subject–object adequation collapses as model of truth because narration is neither true nor false, but *falsifying*: subjective and objective images do not reach a relation of satisfaction or resolution, but a relation of mutual tension. Under Nietzsche’s critique, the “form of the true” gives way to the “power of the false.”⁸³ In the next section, we shall further explore this notion of crystalline description in relation to the forms we have looked at. Thus far, we have identified

⁸⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 149.

⁸¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 149.

⁸² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 150.

⁸³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 131. For a useful discussion of the “powers of the false,” see Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema* (Routledge, 2003), 147–63.

two forms in the organic regime: the chronicle and portrait (see Fig. 2). What remains then is to identify two counterpart forms in the crystalline regime.

	Documentary/Ethnographic Pole	Investigation/Reportage Pole
Organic Regime	CHRONICLE	PORTRAIT
Crystalline Regime		

Image 2: Two organic forms of non-fiction cinema.

2.1.3 Diary and Anatomy Forms

The crystalline counterpart of the portrait is the more familiar and intuitive one. If the portrait deals with how a particular person sees the world, its crystalline counterpart presents more reflective, irresolvable descriptions of personality and subjectivity, which we should find most naturally in various forms of autobiography or autoethnography. In keeping with an already established tradition, we may call this form the *diary*.⁸⁴ A well-known, if unusually concentrated example is *Blue* (1993), where the narration by Derek Jarman and some long-time collaborators, describing his life and vision, plays over an all-enveloping field of International Klein Blue. The film's formal extremity makes clear the more reflective, mental aspect of the crystalline regime, in which we find shimmering subjectivities that do not resolve but rather multiply as the film goes on. Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (1982) is a virtually perfect diary, with its stream-of-consciousness voiceover, its unstable narrator and traveler personas, its dense layering of sound

⁸⁴ The use of the term "diary" here is intended neither to affirm nor replace any one definition, but rather to expand the term's range of expressibility in relation to a system of non-fiction forms. For a well-known use of the term diary, see Jonas Mekas, "The Diary Film," in *The Avant-Garde Film*, 190–198. For the term's relations to autoethnography, see Catherine Russell, "Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self," in *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, 157–190 (Duke University Press, 1999).

and image, its intellectual interest in a wide array of subjects, and its quixotic dream of a vast audio-visual archive in “The Zone.” In his legendary unfinished project, *Le Livre*, Mallarmé famously remarked that everything in the world exists in order to end up in a book. So *Sans soleil*, perhaps like the diary form in general, sees the world as existing in order to end up in a movie.

Marker’s work in general shows how the diary can easily accommodate a vast range of intellectual, even theoretical material—a feature elsewhere exemplified by Morgan Fisher’s 1984 masterpiece *Standard Gauge*. Here Fisher combines a materialist personal history, exhibiting scraps of film collected from his time in Hollywood’s post-production sector in the 1970s and 1980s, with a materialist film history built on these very scraps, offering a meandering monologue filled with both technical detail and references to a wide range of films including Edgar G. Ulmer’s noir classic *Detour* (1945), Bruce Conner’s experimental collage *A Movie* (1958), and the cult film *Messiah of Evil* (1975). All this Fisher captures in a single take that runs exactly thirty-five minutes, a duration corresponding to a 1000-foot reel of 16mm film (with which *Standard Gauge* was shot), and which goes far beyond the durational capacities of 35mm, Hollywood’s “standard gauge.”

It should be said that the subject of a diary need not be the person credited as director. Chick Strand’s *Soft Fiction* (1979), for example, combines intensely personal stories from five women (each dealing with subjects such as incest, erotic fantasy, trauma) with sensuous, “soft” imagery that both expresses and contains the narration, in effect creating a collective audio-visual journal. Likewise, there is no reason that a diarist should not make use of material once intended for rather different purposes. In fact, it should be expected that in proportion as filmic material is detached from its original context—whether by authorial intervention, the passage of

time, or both—it should become more available to the diary filmmaker, more conducive to the *re*-description associated with the crystalline regime. Kirsten Johnson's *Cameraperson* (2016) illustrates this well. The film comprises footage that Johnson shot as a cinematographer of *other* filmmakers' documentaries (including the 2014 Edward Snowden documentary *Citizenfour*), but the footage, as it is edited together, is clearly less about the original subjects than about Johnson herself, the eponymous cameraperson. Another diary of this sort is Michael Almereyda's *Paradise* (2009), in which fragmentary episodes culled from ten years of travel footage float free from their original contexts, transforming into pure crystalline descriptions, shimmering moments out of time.

The fourth and last non-fiction form is the crystalline counterpart of the chronicle, which we may call the *anatomy*.⁸⁵ If the chronicle presents us with real settings, situations, and characters, the anatomy, as its name suggests, is a dissection or analysis of the very same. Whatever situation, setting, and character we start with, that initial description gives way to other descriptions which contradict, displace, and modify it—or, in short, to crystalline descriptions. The paradigmatic example is Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's pioneering cinéma vérité film *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1961). The title clearly suggests the intent to chronicle, but as the film goes on, scenes continually give way to re-descriptions and analyses of previous ones. The subjects of a given scene will later reflect on the very experience of filming or on the resultant footage; the relationship between subjective and objective images remains in continual flux throughout, finding no resolution. *Chronicle*'s famous final scenes show the subjects and filmmakers reflecting on, dissecting, and indeed anatomizing the film itself. In a

⁸⁵ The term anatomy comes from Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, already mentioned, and refers to the lineage of the Menippean satire in literature. For a relevant discussion of the Menippean satire as a cinematic genre, see Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 410–24.

similar vein, William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968) sees a film shoot paralyzed into a series of recursive meta-arguments, expanding from a screen test into a veritable catalogue of competing approaches to life in late-sixties America.

Unlike the chronicle, portrait, and diary, which are more or less restricted in terms of material, the anatomy is able to take on seemingly any sort of subject matter. Indeed, the anatomy is arguably at its most concentrated when reflecting on, or satirizing, the three other forms. *Chronicle of a Summer*, already mentioned, operates in this way, as does Luis Buñuel's much earlier *Las Hurdes* (1933), whose highly stylized script, intentionally affectless narration, and quasi-surrealist leaps anatomize the chronicle form. *David Holzman's Diary* (Jim McBride, 1967) proceeds as a self-portrait of a young independent filmmaker—that is, until its closing credits identify L. M. Kit Carson as “David Holzman,” revealing the film to be a scrupulously crafted mock-diary. Anatomies of the portrait include Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* (1967) and Andy Warhol's *Beauty No. 2* (1965), both of which work to multiply rather than resolve their respective subject's personas: Clarke using false continuity (scenes are connected by conspicuous stretches of black film leader and long out-of-focus passages), Warhol using heightened continuity (the runtime comprises two fixed frames lasting thirty-five minutes each), and both incorporating hostile verbal provocations from off-screen presences.

In our earlier discussion of the diary, with *Cameraperson* and *Paradise* in particular, we saw that filmic material tends to be more conducive to crystalline description when it is detached from its original context. As Sergei Loznitsa's recent archival films demonstrate, this principle applies just as well to the anatomy. *Prozess* (*The Trial*, 2018), which reassembles archival recordings of Stalin's infamous 1936–38 Moscow Trials while eschewing commentary, is in effect a fastidiously reconstituted account of a fastidiously composed fiction, and is an anatomy

for how it cannily inverts the usual interest of courtroom proceedings: The emphasis falls not on the legal process, but on the incidental reactions of individuals trapped in a scripted drama whose outcome they are powerless to alter. *Gosudarstvennyye Pokhorony* (*State Funeral*, 2019), which repurposes footage intended for *The Great Farewell* (a contemporaneous, never-released chronicle of Stalin's 1953 funeral), is an anatomy for how it sets grandiose found-footage visuals of crowds in mourning against a tricked-out, post-synced soundtrack of intermittent coughs, muffled sobs, and eulogies from various apparatchiks, creating a powerful impression of a nation united by what it could not yet say. The contrast between *State Funeral*, made years after the title event, and *Kino-Pravda No. 21* (1925), a contemporaneous newsreel about Lenin's death, is instructive of the differences between chronicle and anatomy.

Like the diary, the anatomy displays a more overtly intellectualized approach than either chronicle or portrait forms. Hence it is no surprise when an anatomist makes use of direct address or on-screen text. Examples of the first would include Hollis Frampton's *A Lecture* (1968), a quasi-performance piece accurately described by its title, and James N. Kienitz Wilkins's *This Action Lies* (2019), which sustains its 32-minute runtime with an image of a Styrofoam cup of coffee and an associative monologue about topics ranging from genericide to Dunkin' Donuts branding to questions of "insulation" in the art world. The second tendency one finds in *Arabian Nights: Volume 3, The Enchanted One* (Miguel Gomes, 2015), which after various fabulist renderings of news stories from austerity-hit Portugal, segues into an "inebriating chorus" of chaffinch facts delivered via a deluge of on-screen text.

Given its propensity for dealing with ideas rather than characters, mental attitudes rather than people, the anatomy sometimes takes the form of a dialogue in which the driving interest is not dramatic but conceptual. Heinz Emigholz, previously best known for his architecture films,

has produced some highly original instances of this form. *Streetscapes [Dialogue]* (2017) transports two speakers across various locations in Montevideo as they converse on material drawn from Emigholz's own psychoanalyst sessions, treating everything from his own aesthetic theories to anxiety-dreams about WWII. Similarly, *The Last City* (2020) presents a series of daisy-chained dialogues across five locations (Be'er Sheva, Athens, Berlin, Hong Kong, and São Paulo), impelled not so much by character or story as by conversational momentum, and treating such topics as weapons design, generational divides, incest, war guilt, and cosmology with a pervasive tone of intellectual irony.

It is the direction of intellectual interest that ultimately separates the diarist from the anatomist. Whereas the diary tends to turn inward, to the workings of an individual mind, the anatomy turns outward, and at its most concentrated presents "a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern."⁸⁶ Deleuze once remarked that "theoretically, Godard would be capable of filming Kant's *Critique* or Spinoza's *Ethics*," and however seriously one takes this claim, Godard's oeuvre exemplifies the free intellectual play so characteristic of the anatomy form, whose practitioners tend to possess distinctly metaphysical casts of mind.⁸⁷ Godard's 1972 film *Letter to Jane* (co-directed with Jean-Pierre Gorin), which dissects a photo of Jane Fonda in Vietnam, taking a Marxist analysis of production to its absolute limit, is an exuberant, exhausting display of erudition, and thus a perfect anatomy. Even more significantly, the film's discussion of Fonda as a "militant actress" as opposed to an "actress militant" sees Godard employing a type of crystalline description unique to his cinema. Here, as in so much of his work, objects,

⁸⁶ Frye, *Anatomy*, 310.

⁸⁷ Deleuze, "On Nietzsche and the Image of Thought," in *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953-1974*, 135–42, ed. David Lapoujade, tr. Michael Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2004), 141.

settings, and situations are replaced not by contradictory re-descriptions, but by intellectual or conceptual *categories*.

Godard's famous remark regarding the violence in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), "Not blood, red," expresses very clearly his tendency to turn problems into categories, even if those categories lead to new problems. And so also with the reflexive genre play of early films such as *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960), *Une femme est une femme* (*A Woman Is a Woman*, 1961), and *Les carabiniers* (1963). As Deleuze writes, *Les carabiniers* is "not another film *about* war, to glorify or attack it," but rather "films the categories of war, which is something quite different."⁸⁸ For Godard, categories are "never final answers but categories of problems which introduce reflection into the image itself."⁸⁹ It is this tendency of his work that makes Godard an anatomy filmmaker *par excellence*, taking us to the virtual limit of the form, and confronting us with a veritable universe of conceptual categories that we cannot seem to do without.

2.2 From Documentary to Description

Thus far, we have identified four distinct forms of non-fiction cinema: chronicle, portrait, anatomy, and diary (see Fig. 3). It is worth reiterating that these forms are not intended as pigeonholes, but as strands or strains whose myriad combinations can be seen across the history of non-fiction cinema. This schema is meant not to classify every conceivable non-fiction film, but to provide an intuitive means of dealing with a workable range of them.

⁸⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 186.

⁸⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 186.

	Documentary/Ethnographic Pole	Investigation/Reportage Pole
Organic Regime	CHRONICLE	PORTRAIT
Crystalline Regime	ANATOMY	DIARY

Image 3: The four forms of non-fiction cinema.

Some advantages should follow from this. For one thing, the schema should allow for artistic innovations to be seen in a clearer light: The famous “re-enactments” of *The Thin Blue Line* (1989), to take a familiar example, can now be figured as departures into pure crystalline description, but which eventually resolve in the organic regime. For another, the schema should establish a context for comparisons and contrasts between artists and works which might otherwise go unnoticed. Jonas Mekas, Anne Charlotte Robertson, and Agnès Varda are routinely—and I think rightly—described as diary filmmakers. But with this schema, it should also be clear how they are distinct from each other: how Mekas has affinities with the chronicle in *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), Robertson with the anatomy in *Apologies* (1984) and her *Five Year Diary* (1981–1997), and Varda with the portrait in both *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000) and *Visages, Villages* (*Faces, Places*, 2017).

The schema should also clarify tendencies or features of already-recognized genres. A full treatment of the essay film, which Phillip Lopate once described as “a cinematic genre that barely exists,” lies beyond the scope of this discussion.⁹⁰ Still, we may with this schema remark that the essay film, with its propensity for ideas and conceptual thought, will involve some aspect of diary or anatomy forms. Varda, just mentioned, has produced numerous examples of the

⁹⁰ Phillip Lopate, “In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film,” in *Essays on the Essay Film*, 109-133, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 109.

portrait-diary hybrid; Alain Resnais's *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1956) may be described as a mix of chronicle and diary; while many recognizable film-essays are combinations of diary and anatomy, such as Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003), with its scintillating, highly idiosyncratic forays into film history. Likewise, Harun Farocki's accomplished oeuvre, particularly *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1989), comes into focus as a multivalent exploration of the anatomy form.

Finally, this four-fold schema should prevent any sort of provincialism in one's conception of non-fiction cinema. A rigidly organic-centered view of non-fiction can lead to blind parochialism, while the opposite view, which would see films in the crystalline regime as *a priori* more worthwhile than those in the organic regime, can lead to work being shunted off into a vague limbo of "experimental documentaries." The schema developed should prevent narrow judgments of this sort, allowing us to recognize a broader compass of artistic originality. For instance, we might see how John Gianvito's stark use of on-screen text in *Her Socialist Smile* (2020) draws out a crystalline dimension in otherwise nondescript images, thereby functioning as a veritable study in (cinematic) rhetoric. Similarly, we might recognize that the originality of *Episode of the Sea* (2014), a portrait-chronicle of the Dutch fishing village of Urk and its inhabitants, lies in how filmmakers Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan enfold reflexive cinematic gestures (journal entries about the film's production, theoretical ruminations linking filmmaking and fishing) into a genuinely organic whole.

No doubt readers can find other examples; this discussion can hardly claim to be exhaustive in that regard. Still, it may strike the reader as odd that an essay on non-fiction forms has not discussed Dziga Vertov's epochal *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929), and I would now like to account for this absence.

The four-form classification, again, is built on two poles of the “cinema of reality” and two “regimes of the image.” Given that we have figured the contrast between organic and crystalline regimes mainly in terms of “description,” however, it may be preferable to adopt the term “descriptive” (as opposed to “non-fiction”) as an overarching designation. The word would have the advantage of foregrounding the notion of subject–object adequation which, despite collapsing as a model of truth in the crystalline regime, remains operative insofar as diary and anatomy forms still depend on recognizing subjects and objects at all. With this in mind, we can see the four-fold classification as constituting a region of filmmaking activity we will call *descriptive*. This descriptive region is where the notion of subject–object adequation is most useful. It is also where the forms of chronicle, portrait, anatomy, and diary all properly belong. Thus, although Brakhage, for example, may claim to be “the most thorough documentary film maker in the world,” his films are *not* descriptive in the sense we have defined.⁹¹

And so too perhaps with Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, Michael Snow’s *La Région Centrale* (1971), and Jodie Mack’s *The Grand Bizarre* (2018), to name just a few notable examples. These films may uncontroversially be labeled “non-fiction,” but like Brakhage’s work they are perhaps better discussed in terms of ambiguities of sound and sense. Indeed, the previous chapter is where we mentioned films by Snow and Mack, and there, too, is where we might discuss Vertov’s originality, which is concerned less with description, as we have defined it, than with using the camera-eye to probe the limits of movement and perception.⁹² This is not to say that one absolutely *cannot* discuss *La Région Centrale* or *The Grand Bizarre* in terms of

⁹¹ Brakhage, *Scrapbook*, 188.

⁹² Vertov’s emphasis on the “perfection” of the kino-eye for “the sensory exploration of the world through film” has been variously interpreted, but what is relevant here is the aspiration to establish a domain of objectivity proper to his filmic investigations. Dziga Vertov, “Kinoks: a Revolution” (1923), in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga-Vertov*, 11–21, ed. Annette Michelson, tr. Kevin O’Brien. (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 11.

subjects and objects—only that such a discussion may be limited in comparison to an approach that examines them in terms of their lyrical or structural tendencies. In the works of these filmmakers, the subject–object relation is not necessarily contradicted, but loses its efficacy as a critical framework.

2.3 Types of Descriptive Ambiguity

But having defined an area of description through the identification of four non-fiction forms, we may now (re)define an “experimental documentary” as a film that develops, explores, or otherwise exemplifies a *descriptive ambiguity*. Given the definition of ambiguity we started with, a descriptive ambiguity specifies any means of examining the descriptive region’s conditions of possibility. If the descriptive region is the cinematic region where the notion of subject–object adequation is most fully developed, then a descriptive ambiguity is one that looks at what makes subject–object adequation possible in the first place. What are the conditions that allow us to see anything we could call a “description” at all? The remainder of this chapter will identify three types of descriptive ambiguity—recognition, identification, and relation—examining works which thematize the conditions necessary for a “description” to arise.

2.3.1 Ambiguities of Recognition

For there to be anything like a subject–object relation to begin with, we must first be able to recognize what we see *as* entities (whether subjects or objects) at all. In our everyday experience, this recognition happens transparently, without directed intention. We move and act in a space where things have an implicit, socially constituted significance based on our involvement with them, an involvement we only notice—which only becomes conspicuous to us—when our

habitual actions are interrupted, halted, or made unavailable in some way. In such situations, we are made to notice that our capacity to recognize things *as* entities depends upon our ability to place them—not necessarily consciously—into a local, pre-existing, social background context of understanding. Our recognition of entities depends on a larger totality which we *already* understand—or what Heidegger terms the “as-structure of interpretation.”⁹³ For Heidegger, it is not the case that we look out onto a world of isolated subjects and objects which we, by some intentional mental act, subsequently give significance, as if we were “adding on” a subjective component to a pre-constituted objective world. Rather, the significance we are able to give anything depends on our capacity to recognize them as part of a larger involvement whole which we *already* understand. This involvement whole is the *as-structure* of interpretation.

Brakhage’s *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes* (1971) should help clarify what Heidegger means by this as-structure. Across its 32-minute runtime, *The Act of Seeing* presents us with graphic autopsy and embalming footage filmed in a Pittsburgh morgue (the title is a literal translation of the word “autopsy”): bodies being cut open, organs removed, skin being peeled off muscle, and so on. And if the film is a grueling watch, it is largely because of the tenacity of the as-structure in relation to the human body: Even though the images are presented without sound, we feel the difficulty of draining them of their social, conventionally *human* significance. It is hard to see these bodies as “just” material stuff. In short, despite our best efforts, what most of us recognize in *The Act of Seeing* are not bodies but *death*.⁹⁴

⁹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 200.

⁹⁴ Jonathan Rosenbaum: “Stan Brakhage’s convulsive personal and silent documentary about a Pittsburgh morgue, made in 1971, is one of the most direct confrontations with death ever recorded on film.” Rosenbaum, “The Act Of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes,” *Chicago Reader* (September 1, 1988).

The first descriptive ambiguity we will examine, then, is that of *recognition*: the process by which we come to see (or fail to see) entities as part of an as-structure. Films that embody this ambiguity examine how recognition does or does not arise in a given situation. Such works thematize the process by which entities come to fit into a pre-existing as-structure of interpretation. Artaud puts this thematization at the forefront of cinematic exploration when he writes that “The first step in cinematographic thought seems to me to be the utilisation of existing objects and forms which can be made to mean everything, because nature is profoundly, infinitely versatile.”⁹⁵ The “objects and forms” he refers to are those that already fit into a public, shared, pre-existing as-structure of significance; and he envisions cinema as asking, in effect, whether this *as-structure* is necessary or contingent. If it is necessary, then are there a finite number of forms we can discover and enumerate? If it is simply contingent, then how do things come to be recognized as they are in the first place, and how does this recognition change over time?

These questions constitute at least one foci of interest of Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL), “an experimental laboratory that promotes innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography,” headed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor.⁹⁶ Some fifteen years since its founding, the films made under that banner cannot be subsumed under one aesthetic program; the SEL’s stated goal is suitably open-ended. But the notion of “sensory ethnography” exemplified by Castaing-Taylor’s films, especially those made in collaboration with Véréna Paravel, may be seen as exploring ambiguities of recognition.

⁹⁵ Antonin Artaud, “Cinema and Abstraction,” in *Collected Works of Antonin Artaud, Volume Three*, 61–62, tr. Alastair Hamilton (London: Calder & Boyars, 1972), 61.

⁹⁶ “Sensory Ethnography Lab,” accessed February 9, 2023, <https://sel.fas.harvard.edu/>.

Take for example Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's latest, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (2022). Titled after Andreas Vesalius's sixteenth-century volumes on anatomy, the film comprises a range of footage taken in various French hospitals over several years. We see prostate surgeries and C-sections, a back-straightening surgery and a close-up of an eye procedure. We see hospital workers in a morgue dressing dead bodies and an intensive penis-related procedure. Periodically, we cut to elderly patients wandering the halls of a psychiatric ward. Unlike Wiseman's *Hospital* (1970), which chronicles the workings of New York's Metropolitan Hospital Center, *De Humani* does not detail the ins and outs of the hospital as an institution; nor does it describe the social existences of its workers and patients. Despite the variety of specialized medical footage on display, the film cannot even be said to take a primarily *procedural* interest in the operations we witness. Rather, what Paravel and Castaing-Taylor examine in *De Humani* is how the battery of specialized medical imagery does (or does not) take on meaning for the viewer. Given medical footage that is, because extremely specialized, virtually abstract, will the lay-viewer come to recognize what they see as having significance? And what does the answer tell us about the necessity or contingency of this recognition, especially given the ostensible intimacy (or at least proximity) of the bodily materials being presented?

A brief early scene in *De Humani* observes a procedure in which screws are tapped into a man's skull. The scene opens only on the man's face, so we see nothing of the procedure, and though we hear the doctor verbalizing what he is doing, the man's occasional grimaces remain somewhat abstract; but once the camera tilts upward, and we see the screw-tapping action in the same frame as the man's expressions, the scene transforms irreversibly. Contrast this to the open back surgery presented later in the film, where despite the graphic nature of the scene, its

separation from any recognizable human markers of pain prevents it from taking on the same kind of discomfort for the viewer. *De Humani* at one point shows us hospital workers dressing dead bodies before wheeling them into a refrigerated room, and as in *The Act of Seeing*, it is difficult for most viewers to see “only” corpses. But in contrast to Brakhage’s film, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel emphasize how the hospital workers, precisely because their job requires it, *can* see the bodies as “just” bodies, listening to music and radio programs while working, chatting casually, and moving with a practical efficiency that may seem to us inappropriate to the solemnity of death.

Much of *De Humani* derives its tension from the contrast between visceral bodily imagery, which would seem to have a necessary relation to the significance we give it, and extremely abstract, specialized imagery and procedures, which would seem to have an only contingent meaning attached. The beep and whir of certain medical machines, for instance, contrasts starkly with the sounds associated with breaking bone, which we hear during the back surgery. Likewise, the visceral impact of a penis-related procedure, initially filmed in grayscale, changes significantly when the scene shifts to colour and we see fleshy tones and the bright red of blood. Conversely, when we are presented with a doctor reading various cancer biopsy slides, the colourful images remain completely unreadable to a non-specialist, looking less like anything related to the body than abstract paintings.

De Humani includes a dazzling progression of scenes that starts with a 3-D image of a fetus within the womb, transitions into a C-section procedure, and then, after the birth, follows the newly delivered infant as a pediatrician carries it off and performs a check-up. And what the concatenated sequences trace with such acuity are the seemingly involuntary differences in our reactions to the infant at those three stages. Even though the images refer to the same entity, and

despite their temporal proximity to each other, their recognizability and significance *as* something (an infant, say) is starkly different in each case. It is in examining our relation to various as-structures that the originality of *De Humani* resides. Such an exploration need not be solely centered on the human body, but the contrast between the processes attached to medical science, with their specialized as-structures, and the as-structures that we think of as innate, natural, even immutable, provides especially fertile ground for probing such ambiguities of recognition. To the apparent distrust of some, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel do not explicitly conceptualize their material.⁹⁷ This is not the place to address the philosophical underpinnings of such criticisms, which are in many cases directed as much at the reception of (and discourse surrounding) the SEL films as at the works themselves. Within the framework of descriptive ambiguity, however, we may say that such criticisms ignore just this aspect of such “sensory ethnography.” For to ask a work like *De Humani* to conceptualize its material or articulate an explicit thesis is to *assume* a pre-existing as-structure into which its imagery is meant to fit, whereas the film, as we have examined it here, seeks to explore how images become conceptualizable in the first place.

2.3.2 Ambiguities of Identification

A genuine subject–object relation requires, however, more than just recognition. It is one thing to examine the process by which entities take on significance and become recognizable *as* the entities they are; it is another to examine how we distinguish those entities as subjects or objects across a range of identification. It the latter process that we shall examine next. The issue here is

⁹⁷ See Christopher Pavsek, “*Leviathan* and the Experience of Sensory Ethnography,” *Visual Anthropology Review*, 31:4–11.

no longer *whether* we recognize an entity *as* something, but *what kind* of significance we give it. The chronicle and portrait forms discussed previously develop stable frameworks for identification; and even the anatomy and diary forms, although they shift the terrain to more intellectualized material, still rely on a conventional, stable framework of subject and object. Whether the focus on human personality is more extroverted (chronicle, anatomy) or introverted (portrait, diary), what remains consistent is the conventional *human* reference of the subject–object relation. But what are the conditions that allow us to distinguish subjects and objects in the first place? Why do we identify *with* some entities and not others? Films which thematize these questions examine a second type of descriptive ambiguity: ambiguities of identification.

To examine ambiguities of identification, we should turn to those films that foreground this issue of human reference. Again, Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab offers a useful set of examples. Beyond its astonishing, vertiginous GoPro footage of churning waves and sea life, Paravel and Castaing-Taylor’s *Leviathan* (2012) is notable for maintaining the same observational stance toward its human as well as its non-human subjects. Its human figures (the fishermen) never emerge as centered subjects around whom the footage is organized. Rather, the film revels in extremes of movement, upsetting not just our orientation in space, but also the conventional human coordinates of our identification. In so doing, *Leviathan* examines the connection between the two, raising the possibility that our ability to identify with certain entities and not others depends upon (or is coterminous with) a particular view of space. The scenes in *De Humani* which follow several dementia patients in the psychiatric ward at Hôpital Bretonneau, raise related, and more ethically discomfiting, issues. If much of *De Humani* confronts us with abstract imagery whose human significance we only belatedly recognize, these sequences work in the opposite way, placing us in front of people whom we immediately

recognize, but whom we also, because of their mental state, are unable to accord more than “abstract right.”⁹⁸ The legal issues of consent involved in the filming of these patients should help illustrate this point. In interviews Paravel has spoken about consulting with the hospital’s ethical committee about whether one could accept a “yes” from a patient who, two minutes later, forgets that they have been asked a question: “Basically, he told us that if we ask permission from someone who has an altered consciousness, and they say ‘yes,’ we must accept that ‘yes’ for a ‘yes.’ If we don’t, it means that we don’t consider that person to be a person.”⁹⁹ Such a statement exemplifies what we have called “abstract right,” because it denotes the basic imperative of right (“Be a person and respect others as persons”) but no more.¹⁰⁰ The challenge of the psychiatric ward scenes in *De Humani* ask us whether our identification with these patients can go beyond this formal, abstract right.

Similar questions emerge in Wang Bing’s *Fang Xiuying* (*Mrs. Fang*, 2017), which observes the days leading up to the death of its eponymous subject, an elderly woman with Alzheimer’s, as she lays on her deathbed surrounded by relations and friends. Following a brief prologue where we catch a glimpse of Mrs. Fang standing outside her home, we cut to a close-up of her on her deathbed, paralyzed, unable to speak, her face frozen in a kind of death-mask. And it is around this central image that Wang’s observational camera flows. Family members remark that she should be moved onto her side, that there are tears in her eyes, or that her back should be cleaned, but generally talk as if she isn’t there. Conversations drift to the details of the impending funeral ceremonies and absent family members. Wang’s camera even follows as some relations

⁹⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, tr. T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), §36.

⁹⁹ Blake Williams, “Gross Anatomy: Véréna Paravel & Lucien Castaing-Taylor on *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*,” *Cinema Scope* 91, Summer 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, §36.

go night fishing with an electrified dip net, this act of waiting juxtaposed against the funereal vigil. Through all this, the close-up of Mrs. Fang on her deathbed becomes an icon or principle against which we take in the flow of life, asking about the nature and limits of our identification. Indeed, *Mrs. Fang* operates like a variation of a Kuleshov experiment, with the close-ups of Mrs. Fang transforming our identification with the world around her and those within it.

Ambiguities of identification emerge even more insistently—certainly with more ethical unease—in Paravel and Castaing-Taylor’s *Caniba* (2017), centered on Issei Sagawa, a Japanese man who in 1981 mutilated and cannibalized Renée Hartevelt while a student in Paris, but who was controversially released in Japan after two years of pre-trial detention. The film may reasonably be described as a kind of portrait-diary: Apart from documenting his (and others’) past attempts to capitalize on his infamy—gruesome manga illustrations of his crimes, forays into pornography, among other exploits—*Caniba* also observes the fraught relationship between the now-paralyzed Issei and his caretaker brother Jun, who has masochistic tendencies to match his brother’s sadistic ones. Such a description, though, does not fully capture the film’s ambiguities and ambivalences. The tension between Sagawa’s desire to speak and the filmmakers’ desire to record pervades every frame—as do questions of exploitation, further complicated by Issei’s mental state and failing health. Much of the film comprises partial close-ups of Issei Sagawa’s face and flesh, the focus drifting in and out as we hear of heinous acts, disturbing fantasies, and morbid confessions; and it is through this continual weaving and unweaving of the human body, coupled with the alienating material, that Paravel and Castaing-Taylor challenge our capacity to identify *with* the film’s subject. As in *De Humani*, *Caniba* thus raises the issue of “abstract right,” which applies, by definition, to all persons and is not merited

by good or ethical behaviour. In so doing, it asks what phenomenological structures ground our capacity to identify with a subject at all.

Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez's ingeniously simple *MANAKAMANA* (2013) raises similar phenomenological questions, albeit in a gentler, more playful register. The film comprises twelve fixed shots of people riding a cable car along a Nepalese mountain, each lasting roughly nine minutes. As in a structural film, there are some permutations—the first six rides are ascents, the last six are descents; the choice of which direction to face the camera does not follow a strict pattern—but the fixed frame and strict segmentation of the rides remains consistent throughout. What is fascinating about the setup is how our attention to the filmed subjects shifts throughout each ride. In some rides, we may be engaged in (what we perceive to be) a human drama playing out before us, sensing a possible tension between the riders; in others, especially the wordless rides, our attention might relax into pure contemplation, a kind of abstract looking by which we see the riders as just another element in the landscape. In one ride, where two women eat rapidly melting ice cream bars, we become completely absorbed into the action; in another, a solitary woman at certain point seems to suppress a smile, and we find ourselves contemplating her degree of camera-awareness. The core fascination of the film is not (just) that our attention is allowed to drift to different parts of the frame, but that we find the *nature* of our engagement with the film's subjects in constant flux, ranging from identification with them as full active, conscious subjects to a kind of pure objectification. It is instructive that two of the groups of riders have animals with them, as this draws attention to the contrast in our capacity to identify with them (a kitten, a rooster), as opposed to human subjects. It seems no coincidence, either, given this film's playful ambiguities of identification, that the first five rides gradually increase in conventional human interest—only to climax in the sixth with a ride

featuring a cage of goats. Recent films such as *Los Reyes* (Iván Osnovikoff and Bettina Perut, 2018), *Gunda* (Viktor Kossakovsky, 2020), and *Cow* (Andrea Arnold, 2021) have attempted to probe the limits of human identification by centering on animal experience (two dogs who live in a Santiago skate park, a sow, and a dairy cow), and this is a natural approach. It makes a good deal of sense that to examine the limits of human identification, one should look at non-human entities.¹⁰¹ *MANAKAMANA*, though, achieves its phenomenological ambiguity by going in the opposite direction and returning to the mysteries of the human face.

For this reason, it may be tempting to compare *MANAKAMANA* to Warhol's Screen Tests. The difference, though, is that Warhol's project provides a context—typically the Factory, with its associations of glamour, performance, fame, and so on—that limits the possible range of identification in a way that Spray and Velez's conception does not. In the Screen Tests, we are almost exclusively interested in the people in front of the camera as *performers*. Kiarostami's *Shirin* (2008) provides another useful point of contrast to *MANAKAMANA*: Although the film maintains a similar focus on the faces of its subjects, who are ostensibly watching a film, it is their status as *spectators* that remains central to the project. Spray and Velez's project may be more instructively compared to Tsai Ming-Liang's *Ni de lian* (*Your Face*, 2018) and James Benning's *Twenty Cigarettes* (2011), where our attention to each human subject is left more open, allowed to move along a range of identification that is, in a word, ambiguous.

¹⁰¹ Such an approach, however, is no guarantee of ambiguity, nor even of artistic success: *Gunda* and *Cow* operate mainly by blatantly anthropomorphising its subjects (a sow destined for slaughter and a dairy cow, respectively), meaning that whatever relation developed in the film remains firmly grounded in human reference. *Los Reyes*, though, manages some of the ambiguities we are concerned with. The title comes from a skate park in Santiago, which is home to two stray dogs (Chola and Football in the credits) whose close-ups become the measure by which the life around them is measured: not just the home lives of the Chilean skaters and slackers who frequent the park, but even the insects which the filmmakers' camera captures in extreme close-ups of the dogs' fur.

2.3.3 Ambiguities of Relation

Having now examined two types of descriptive ambiguity, each related to aspects of the subject–object relation, we may look at still a third. The first, ambiguities of recognition, had to do with how we come to recognize things *as* the entities that they are; the second, ambiguities of identification, had to do with how we distinguish those entities as subjects or objects. The third (and last) we may simply call an ambiguity of *relation*: Now that we have a realm of subjects and objects we have recognized and identified (with), how do relations between them arise?

In its most fundamental significance, a relation designates what the American logician C. S. Peirce simply calls “Thirdness.” It is a kind of signification or law connecting two other terms—for as Deleuze writes, “relation is always a third, being necessarily external to its terms.”¹⁰² Such a definition is arguably too broad to be of much use, and we may with reason examine *Zorns Lemma* in terms of its ambiguities of relation. It is worth reiterating, however, that this section is concerned with *descriptive* ambiguity. Those films that will be most illustrative, then, will foreground ambiguities of relation *without* thematizing the other types of ambiguity we have previously dealt with. In *Profit Motive and the Whispering Wind* (2007), for example, John Gianvito documents various American monuments and historical sites, creating a filmic corollary to Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*. Here we are not concerned with either ambiguities of recognition or identification. Indeed, the film to a large extent depends on the absolute clarity of its images, which do in fact document the “whispering wind” across a range of locations across the United States. The implication, suggested by the title, is that the profit motives of capitalism are just as “invisible” as the wind—in other words just as real, material, and palpable. Gianvito’s editing, however, proceeds without explicit

¹⁰² Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 198.

commentary, unfolding mainly via simple juxtaposition, with frame A placed next to frame B.

The responsibility for supplying a relation—the task of going from “A; B” to “A is like B” or “A is (as) B”—is left for the viewer to make.

To take another example, consider Godard’s *Ici et ailleurs* (*Here and Elsewhere*, 1976), which Deleuze analyses alongside the twelve-part made-for-TV program *Six fois deux* (1976). Made with Anne-Marie Miéville, whose collaboration with Godard during this period is instrumental to the films’ ambiguities of relation, *Ici et ailleurs* presents two main sets of images: those of the Palestinian fedayeen and those of a French couple watching television in their home. The central question, as suggested by the title, is what sort of relation forms between the two sets of images? Deleuze argues that in Godard’s method, the relation “is not a question of association”—for if it were, “images like those which bring together Golda Meir and Hitler in *Ici et ailleurs* would be intolerable.”¹⁰³ If one sees relation only in terms of association, relation depends on a pre-existing significance, whereas in *Ici et ailleurs* the “interstice” between two images is “not an operation of association, but of differentiation.”¹⁰⁴ It is in foregrounding the possibility of this alternative view—and thus questioning the conventional one—that the film exemplifies an ambiguity of relation. In Godard’s method, the interstice, the fissure between “here” and “elsewhere,” becomes primary:

It is not a matter of following a chain of images, even across voids, but of getting out of the chain or the association. Film ceases to be ‘images in a chain...an uninterrupted chain of images each one the slave of the next.’ and whose slave we are (*Ici et ailleurs*). It is the method of BETWEEN, ‘between two images,’ which does away with all cinema of the One. It is the method of AND, ‘this and then that,’ which does away with all the cinema of Being = is. Between two actions, between two affections, between two perceptions, between two visual images, between two sound images, between the sound and the visual: make the indiscernible, that is the frontier, visible.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 179.

¹⁰⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 179.

¹⁰⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 180.

Perhaps the most exemplary recent work in this connection is Harun Farocki's *Zum Vergleich (In Comparison, 2009)*, which documents the manufacture and use of bricks in areas of Africa, India, and Europe. Running just 61 minutes, the film is divided into ten sections, each section detailing a particular brick production method, and each method preceded by a computer-generated illustration of the final product. With no voiceover and minimal context—across the film there are twenty-one intertitles providing basic contextual information—each production method is shown with its attendant brickmaking, brick-firing, brick-carrying, and brick-laying methods. And though the film does not intentionally document aspects of the wider community, by the very act of filming the brick-making process, it shows us the specifics of time, place, and culture into which these processes fit. In parts of Africa, we see entire villages taking part in the process, while in Germany we see large, industrialized machines with a relatively small number of operators. In this way, the brick shapes shown at the opening of each section become the locus of an entire set of practical relations, a referential whole embedded in a particular culture and way of life.

These individual sections, each devoted to a particular brick method, may recall the famous language-game Wittgenstein introduces in §2 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, which is similarly concerned with the fundamental act of building:

The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words “block”, “pillar”, “slab”, “beam”. A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. — Conceive this as a complete primitive language.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §2.

I make this connection to highlight two points of interest. First, note the extraordinary variety of possible language-games we see across *In Comparison*. Without imputing any value judgments on the methods presented, we observe that they differ greatly, each one constituting not just an entire sphere of practical activity, but an entire form of life. At the same time, we may note, secondly, that these language-games (or “primitive languages”) are not completely formalizable, are impossible to fully make explicit in linguistic rules. As the film delineates each brick-making process, we are made aware of an entire background of referential relations into which each brick fits—a referential whole that remains largely transparent and implicit. This is not to say that one *cannot* verbalize or formalize the rules involved. Rather, it is to say that our transparent practical understanding—our ability to act within a referential whole—*always* outstrips our ability to formalize these actions in rules. In the section on ambiguities of recognition, we saw that our capacity to recognize things *as* entities depended upon a local, background understanding that Heidegger calls the *as*-structure of interpretation. Here, we see that this *as*-structure includes the issue of relation as well. Furthermore, we see that the attempt to formalize these implicit relations into explicit rules is not necessarily wrong but limited.

There are anthropological and ethnographic implications involved here. In his commentary on Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Hubert Dreyfus illustrates this point by citing Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist theory of gift exchange and Pierre Bourdieu’s critique of it: “Bourdieu’s point is that Lévi-Strauss’s abstraction of pure objects of exchange leaves out something essential—the tempo of the event that actually *determines what counts as a gift*.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, if we are to place various brick production methods “in comparison,” Farocki shows

¹⁰⁷ Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), 204 (emphasis in original).

us that we cannot start by abstracting “pure objects.” We cannot start by seeing bricks as just a conjunction of material properties (shape, size, weight, density, and so on), on top of which we would *add* relations and significance. Indeed, *In Comparison* shows us that such a procedure would leave out the referential whole into which the brick *already* fits and which gives it significance. To abstract the bricks into pure objects in the way that Lévi-Strauss’s theory abstracts gifts would be, in a sense, to leave out the tempo of the event that actually *determines what counts as a brick*. The perspective that sees bricks only as materials with properties is not wrong, *per se*, but it cannot help us understand the referential whole, the cultural activity into which such objects fit. The mistake is to take the “pure objects” view of bricks as ontologically primary. Instead, we should first see the bricks as already fitting into something we can call a *world*. (The view of bricks as materials with properties is ontologically secondary—de-worlded so to speak.)

This understanding is crucial to *In Comparison* not because the film offers explicit statements on any given brick-making procedure, but because it probes the grounds of any possible critique. Farocki was, throughout his life, a committed Marxist. And what he shows us in this film is that one’s critique should not and cannot proceed from abstraction, from a perspective that is de-worlded. It may be true that bricks, being necessary for shelter, are a “universal” need, but a genuinely Marxist perspective cannot start from an abstract “universal.” Rather than see each brick only as a conjunction of physical properties, one should examine the entire context, the referential whole into which it fits. Likewise, if one is to compare different production methods, one cannot simply compare brick properties and production rates in abstraction, but must take into account the totality of relations into which these methods fit.

The elegance of Farocki's conception is that these conceptual dynamics are redoubled in the film's larger structure. Just as each brick, though spatially and material segmented, still fits into a larger sociocultural whole, so each of the film's discrete sections fit into a referential whole. It is not necessary for explicit conjunctions to be placed between the discretized sections for there to be a relation between them. This is not to say that one cannot form assertions and make explicit conjunctions between the sections, only that this possibility rests on their *already* forming a shared world. It would not be possible to place things "in comparison," to make judgments between things, if they did not first belong to a relational whole. In refusing explicit judgments, *In Comparison* raises the question of how it is that such assertions (of relation) are possible at all, and hence exemplifies what we've called an ambiguity of relation.

In summary: with the aim of providing some clarity to the rather amorphous species of the "experimental documentary," this chapter first developed a four-fold classification of non-fiction forms, which together define a "descriptive" region of cinematic activity; and second, identified three types of descriptive ambiguity. The descriptive region we saw as being dependent upon the notion of subject-object adequation. Taken together, the three descriptive ambiguities we have looked at—recognition, identification, relation—probe the conditions necessary for a notion of subject-object adequation to become intelligible, for there to be anything we could even call "description" to begin with. Films which embody such ambiguities may thus be said to exemplify at least one aspect of the subtle but crucial notion that, as Deleuze puts it, "The cinema does not just present images, it surrounds them with a world."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 68.

Chapter Three: Ambiguities of Myth

In 1975 Peter Wollen wrote that “in Europe today there are two distinct avant-gardes.”¹⁰⁹ The first group, “identified loosely with the Co-op movement,” he associated with filmmakers like Brakhage; the second, the so-called “political” avant-garde, he identified with Godard, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Marcel Hanoun, and Miklós Jancsó.¹¹⁰ His influential, contentious essay has drawn much criticism—particularly for the difficulties involved in labeling one group “political.” Indeed, although Wollen himself cautions that “it is too often asserted that one avant-garde is ‘political’ and the other is not,” it may be that the word “political” is too amorphous and flexible to be of much use as a film-theoretical term.¹¹¹

Still, there do seem to be clear differences between, say, the films of Brakhage and those of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, whether one wants to call those differences “political” or not. The present thesis operates on the critical principle that there is value in distinguishing where we cannot divide. So, recognizing that there may be something to Wollen’s identification of a “political” difference, this chapter will distinguish what I will call *ambiguities of myth* as a way of better specifying this difference. The category, as we shall see, is a rather restricted one, and so, rather than survey a range of work, this chapter will take the form of a case study of Straub-Huillet, whose work best exemplifies this ambiguity. As the existing literature on the filmmaking pair is considerable, this chapter will be briefer than the others, isolating only those aspects necessary to delineate how an ambiguity of myth may clarify what we may mean by a “political avant-garde.”

¹⁰⁹ Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes,” 133.

¹¹⁰ Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes,” 133.

¹¹¹ Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes,” 139.

For Frye, in its simplest and most conventional signification, a myth is “a certain kind of story, generally about a god or other divine being.”¹¹² Thus we speak of the myths associated with Artemis, Greek goddess of the hunt, who is the equivalent of the Roman Diana, and heavily identified with Selene, the Moon. In contrast to folktales and fables with which they share many structural features, myths relate to specific *social* functions: “They are stories told to explain certain features in the society to which they belong. They explain why rituals are performed; they account for the origin of law, of totems, of clans, of the ascendant social class, of the social structure resulting from earlier revolutions or conquests. They chronicle the dealings of gods with man, or describe how certain natural phenomena came to be as they are.”¹¹³ Consequently, myths have a conventional, colloquial association with *false* history: they are not a presentation of what happened in the past, but what is said to have happened in the past to justify what is in the present. A myth “presents, in short, a society’s view of its own social contract with gods, ancestors, and the order of nature.”¹¹⁴ Myths may or may not be codified into writing, but when they are, as in the Christian Bible, we have a full-fledged mythology: a definitive canon of stories and a community for whom these stories are socially significant.

In the first chapter, we saw the tendency of certain filmmakers to produce a cosmogony, a mythological universe of mysterious names and beings. The difference between such cosmogonies and the definition of myth we are working with here is that the former has no assumed community of which it serves as a focus or centre: The mountaintop ascent of the “Dog Star Man” in Brakhage’s *Dog Star Man* cycle of films does not have the same social

¹¹² Northrop Frye, “Literature and Myth,” in *The Critical Path and Other Writings on Critical Theory, 1963-1975*, 238–255, eds. Jean O’Grady and Eva Kushner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 239.

¹¹³ Frye, “Literature and Myth,” 239.

¹¹⁴ Frye, “Literature and Myth,” 240–241.

recognizability as, say, the Old Testament story of Moses's ascent to the mountain and the subsequent handing down of the Mosaic code. This is not to say that Brakhage's films cannot ever serve such a social function, becoming the focus of a community—perhaps in the way that Nathaniel Dorsky writes of in *Devotional Cinema*. Indeed, Markopoulos's Temenos cycle, and the screenings in Greece which have the religious aspect of a pilgrimage about them, is on one level an attempt to codify this ritual aspect and make the artist's body of work the explicit focus of a community. But we should also recognize that there are *degrees* of recognizability, and that a film like *Moses und Aron* (*Moses and Aaron*, 1975), Straub-Huillet's adaptation of Schoenberg's opera, will pose questions about myth that Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* cycle does not.

The salient feature here is a given work's relation to an assumed audience. By exploring various ambiguities of sound and sense, the filmmakers discussed in Chapter One give the impression of having to create their own audiences, so to speak: to teach them how to watch the films. This contrasts with works that, at least historically, have an assumed community of which they serve as a focus, as the centre of a ritual activity. The scriptural plays of the Middle Ages, for example, were what Frye terms *myth-plays* or *autos*: "a somewhat negative and receptive form," which "takes on the mood of the myth it represents."¹¹⁵ The auto presents a myth already familiar and significant to its audience and is therefore "designed to remind the audience of their communal possession of this myth."¹¹⁶ Shakespeare's history plays, such as *Richard II* and *Richard III*, are more dramatically flexible than the medieval scriptural plays, but they nonetheless served a very particular function in their original Elizabethan context, with its central

¹¹⁵ Frye, *Anatomy*, 282.

¹¹⁶ Frye, *Anatomy*, 282.

theme of unifying the nation: The plays reminded the audience that they are “inheritors of that unity, set over against the disasters of civil war and weak leadership.”¹¹⁷

An ambiguity of myth, then, is one which interrogates the relationship of a myth to its assumed audience, and in so doing asks about the myth’s source of coherence or authority. It is important to note that this definition *necessitates* a certain disproportion or incommensurability between the means by which the myth is conventionally portrayed and the means by which this “interrogation” is carried out. Using the terms developed in this essay, we may even say that an ambiguity of myth is one that makes use of ambiguities of sound and sense, *but in a context which is ostensibly disproportionate to it*. In frequently returning to old texts, operas, dramas, dialogues, and the like, Straub-Huillet’s work often operates on such incommensurability—and hence exemplifies what we are calling ambiguities of myth.

Take for instance *Les Yeux ne veulent pas en tout temps se fermer, ou Peut-être qu’un jour Rome se permetta de choisir à son tour* (*Eyes Do Not Want to Close at All Times, or, Perhaps One Day Rome Will Allow Herself to Choose in Her Turn*, 1970), also known as *Othon*, the title of Pierre Corneille’s 17th-century tragedy about the power-grab which occurs in the wake of Emperor Nero’s death. What is most notable about Straub-Huillet’s adaptation is that while they remain faithful to the letter of the text, they deviate from it in the delivery and presentation. Most of the actors are non-native French speakers, and this, coupled with the bewildering speed with which the lines are delivered, challenges the (French-speaking) viewer’s ability to grasp the meaning of what is being said. (Deleuze on *Othon*: “what they [the actors] tear from language is an ‘aphasia’”).¹¹⁸ Like the coda of *Zorns Lemma*, in which the one-word-

¹¹⁷ Frye, *Anatomy*, 283-284.

¹¹⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 253.

per-second delivery makes it difficult to grasp the “sense” of the theoretical text, the unusual line readings here make it hard to make sense of the dramatic events unfolding before us.¹¹⁹ The effect of this disjunction between word and image is to restore the ambiguity to the historical myth being represented, and in doing so question the assumed authority. It is, in this sense, a way to render a dominant, institutionalized myth ambiguous. As Marguerite Duras observes of *Othon*: “All accents are allowed except that of the *Comédie Française*—in other words, the accent of camouflaged meaning, of authority.”¹²⁰

In considering mythic ambiguity in *Othon*, the main thing to note is the clear disjunction between the expectations created by the text’s genre (dramatic tragedy) and the emphases of the representation, which clearly prioritizes textural unity (both visual and aural) over semantic meaning and dramatic coherence. In the first half of *Dalla Nube alla Resistenza* (*From the Clouds to the Resistance*, 1979), adapted from Cesar Pavese’s “Six Dialogues with Leucò,” Straub-Huillet depict a series of conversations between mythological figures: Ixion and the cloud nymph Nephele, Oedipus and the seer Tiresias, and so on. The dialogue form recalls those of Plato, and these passages may on one level be seen as a philosophy-play, placing an emphasis on concepts and ideas. The most striking aspect of the dialogues in *From the Clouds*, however, is the filmmakers’ emphasis on those aspects of person and setting which we tend to ignore when we see dialogues solely as a vehicle for ideas. One sequence sees a conversation between Tiresias and Oedipus as they ride a mule-cart along a noticeably bumpy dirt road; and the physicality and tactility of this journey, conveyed with the camera conspicuously rocking back

¹¹⁹ For the English subtitles of their work, Straub-Huillet have insisted on only partial translations of the dialogue. Whatever one makes of this general policy, it is, in the case of *Othon*, one way of (artificially) replicating the effect of the French dialogue to a French speaker.

¹²⁰ Marguerite Duras, “*Othon*, by Jean-Marie Straub,” in *Outside: Selected Writings*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), 157.

and forth, makes it all but impossible to ignore the knowledge of the prophet's blindness and Oedipus's impending fate. Likewise, a conversation between two hunters is bookended by close-ups of a live fox that's been captured and bound to a rock, shots which vibrate with an unusual intensity for cutting so disjunctively against the substance and flow of the conversation. The late historical films of Roberto Rossellini provide an instructive point of comparison. In presenting the central events of Plato's *Apology*, *Socrates* (Rossellini, 1971) also brings to life those details of the text which we might so easily ignore: the heat of the square, the murmuring of the audience, the presence or absence of specific people (Plato himself, in this case), and so on.

Straub-Huillet's methods, then, are designed to move away from the abstract and the general in favour of the concrete and the particular. More precisely, their style confronts us with the notion that the means of representation is *not* secondary to the significance of a myth. "Cinema is not descriptive," Straub says, "What interests us is how the text is embodied in human beings, dialogues, not the plot."¹²¹ And what Straub-Huillet's films often show us is that the embodiment of a myth, the act of representing it, far from being arbitrary, may in fact *condition* the meaning we derive from the myth, which is by no means fixed. It is through this emphasis on embodiment that ambiguities of myth emerge in their oeuvre. While engaging with a great variety of texts, the one constant in their method is that the text never takes on a pre-existing (social) significance for an assumed audience. *How* the text is embodied and represented is never determinable beforehand; and it is in this way that they extract from their texts "a pure speech-act, creative story-telling which is as it were the obverse side of the dominant myths, of

¹²¹ Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, "Sickle and Hammer, Cannons, Cannons, Dynamite!": Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub in Conversation with François Albera," in *Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet*, 109–126, ed. Ted Fendt (Vienna: Austrian Film Museum, 2016), 120.

current words and their supporters; an act capable of creating the myth instead of drawing profit or business from it.”¹²²

In the first dialogue of *From the Clouds to the Resistance*, the cloud nymph Nephele informs Ixion that one age is passing into another, and humans will no longer be able to converse with the gods, whom they once saw face to face. The film’s second half, adapted from Pavese’s *The Moon and the Bonfires*, traces the consequences of this shift. Set in a rural region near Turin, it addresses the murders of Italian anti-Fascist resistance fighters during the Second World War. Here, the gods are, if not dead, then invisible. In such a situation, traditional sources of authority (church, government) are thrown into question, and an uncritical acceptance of them becomes difficult to distinguish from superstition and taboo. (Pavese’s novel derives its title from the local belief that if one burns bonfires at the edge of a farm, the crops will grow quicker and heavier.) And it is in this second part that the film confronts us with the responsibility of accounting for the myths handed down from antiquity. The challenge Straub-Huillet set themselves is, as Deleuze says, “to extract the speech-act from the myth,” and writing on *From the Clouds*, he remarks that “it is perhaps only in the second, modern part that it manages to overcome the resistance of the text, of the pre-established language of the gods.”¹²³

Arguably the most lucid, forceful expressions of this relationship between myth and representation in Straub-Huillet’s oeuvre are their Schoenberg adaptations, *Einleitung zu Arnold Schönbergs ‘Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene’* (Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg’s “Accompaniment to a Cinematic Scene,” 1973) and *Moses and Aaron*. In the former, a commissioned response to Schoenberg’s orchestral piece *Accompaniment to a Cinematographic*

¹²² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 269–270.

¹²³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 253.

Scene, Straub himself appears on-screen, providing some information about the music. He observes that save for a subtitle, “Threatening Danger, Fear, Catastrophe,” Schoenberg provided no other writing or commentary on the orchestral piece, which was atypical for a composer who usually provided detailed stage directions. In this case, the music was meant to be *un-*accompanied by visual imagery—a decided irony, given the piece’s title. To Schoenberg’s anti-representational irony, however, Straub-Huillet provide their own. The short incorporates two early correspondences from Schoenberg to the painter Wassily Kandinsky, related to the changing political situation in Germany, a letter from Brecht, as well as reference to such events as the Paris Commune of 1871, the Vietnam war, and the acquittal of the architects responsible for designing the Auschwitz gas chambers. In this way, *Introduction* may be seen as “framing sound” so to speak, as providing a context for Schoenberg’s musical “unrepresentable” expressions of “threatening danger, fear, catastrophe.” And what Straub-Huillet’s methods demonstrate is that their film—very much despite its unobtrusive, prosaic title—cannot fail to affect one’s perception of the piece itself. In short, there neither is nor can be such a thing as a “pure” expression of “threatening danger, fear, catastrophe.” In providing an “introduction” to Schoenberg’s orchestral piece, they demonstrate that “threatening danger, fear, catastrophe” cannot but have a form, that this form is anything but fixed, and that the act of representation—the task of questioning it, probing it, exploring it—is for this reason a perpetual issue. Whatever meaning or significance an event or text or document or myth may have had in its original social context cannot simply be taken for granted.

In *Moses and Aaron*, adapted from Schoenberg’s opera of the same name, these concerns develop into a veritable dialectic: Moses, who throughout makes frequent reference to “unrepresentable God,” becomes representative of the pure idea, while Aaron emblemizes the

will to represent, a drive which takes literally iconic form in the golden calf. And across the film, this conflict emerges through a variety of image-sound relationships. In the opening scene, we witness a “conversation” between Moses and God—except that we are presented with the back of Moses’s head (so we do not see his mouth moving), while the words of the latter are delivered by an unseen chorus. In what way are these sounds being “framed”? Is this meant to be an internalized conversation, occurring within Moses’s mind? Or is it meant to be an externalized conversation, with the sounds literally reverberating through space? If the latter, where is the voice of God issuing from? And what are the implications of such representational questions for the concept of God?

Such questions recall those asked by the literary theorist Erich Auerbach in the opening chapter of *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, where he contrasts the representational assumptions of the so-called “Elohist,” in the Genesis story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, with those of Homer in Book X of the *Odyssey*.¹²⁴ As his book’s title makes clear, for Auerbach the representational mode of a text is far from being an arbitrary or dispensable aspect of it. Rather, it is constitutive of the social contract or worldview of the society the text is bound up in, the community for whom it is significant. He goes so far as to say: “The concept of God held by the Jews is less a *cause* than a *symptom* of their manner of comprehending and representing things.”¹²⁵ The force of the statement here is worth stressing. In contrast to a perspective that would see the meaning of a social group’s mythology as primary and their “manner of comprehending and representing things” as secondary, Auerbach identifies the former (the concept of God) as a symptom of—as *deriving from*—the latter (the Elohist’s

¹²⁴ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 1st Princeton Classics ed., 50th anniversary ed, tr. W. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 3.

¹²⁵ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 8 (emphasis mine).

spatiotemporal representation of God). These representational concerns are forcefully, lucidly expressed in *Moses and Aaron*, which is in this respect an ideal conjunction of form and subject; but they extend, as we saw, throughout most, if not all of Straub-Huillet's films. The ambiguities of sound and sense we examined in the first chapter may also be seen as foregrounding issues of representation. But, again, what distinguishes a mythic ambiguity, as we have defined it, is the sense of disproportion between the assumed significance of the myth and the representational emphasis. And it is by foregrounding such issues in relation to the texts they adapt, draw from, or otherwise represent, that Straub-Huillet explore what we have called ambiguities of myth.

With this notion of mythic ambiguity in mind, we are in a better position to see why, and in what way, Straub-Huillet's work may be considered "political." "Political films," Straub says, "start with realism. The kind of realism which, Brecht says, starts with the particular, and only once well rooted in it rises to the general."¹²⁶ So if Straub-Huillet's films are "political," it is in their attention to the representational coordinates of "realism" (in Brecht's sense), or the "representation of reality" (in Auerbach's sense). Their films are "political" in their emphasis less on the assumed, pre-given, semantic meaning of a myth than on the peculiarities of a landscape or face, the intonations of a line delivery, the wind in the trees—all the things, in other words, that are taken for granted when a dominant myth has taken hold. In refusing to accept the dominance of a given myth—by representing it within a region of cinematic ambiguity—Straub-Huillet thus express an ethos of resistance. "The word 'resistance,'" Deleuze observes, "has a lot of meaning with the Straubs."¹²⁷ But its core significance is ably encapsulated by *From the Clouds to the Resistance*, whose two-part structure moves from the pre-established myths of the

¹²⁶ Huillet and Straub, "Sickle and Hammer, Cannons, Cannons, Dynamite!," in *Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet*, 120.

¹²⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 255.

gods (the clouds) to a situation where our engagement with myth must now account for the coherence of that meaning (the resistance). Like the other types of ambiguity we have looked at, ambiguities of myth confront us with the problem of accounting for the genesis of the meaning we derive.

Chapter Four: From Ambiguity to Genesis

To recapitulate the ground covered so far, the present thesis has surveyed a range of experimental works through the guiding notion of ambiguity, which we defined as “any means of probing cinema’s boundaries of intelligibility, and thereby thematizing the process by which the medium becomes intelligible in the first place.” Rather than confront the definition of experimental cinema head on, I have developed a region of cinematic ambiguity, and specified various types (and sub-types) within it, identifying patterns and commonalities among a range of artists and works.

In the process, we have found ourselves repeatedly confronted with various metaphors of “generation” or “genesis.” In examining what Pasolini called the “pre-grammatical” background of images, the question arose about how it was that meaning could arise—how it was that this pre-grammatical background should become, so to speak, grammatical. Likewise, in examining types of descriptive ambiguity, we asked about the source, as it were, of the subject-object relation: What conditions are necessary for anything we can call “description” to be intelligible? In identifying types of (cinematic) ambiguity, this thesis has in a sense identified various conditions of cinematic possibility. And in asking about the intelligibility of various works, we have dealt with several motifs of *genesis*. Picking up on this notion of “genesis” I would like in this last chapter to forward a definition of experimental cinema, drawing mainly from two books I have already referred to repeatedly: Deleuze’s *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, collectively known as the *Cinema* books.

Specifically, I would like to build on what Deleuze calls “signs of genesis” or “genetic signs” and see how these may be used to develop a workable, useful definition of experimental cinema. These genetic signs are just one aspect of Deleuze’s much larger project, which he calls

“a taxonomy, an attempt at the classification of images and signs.”¹²⁸ Thus, before turning to the definition of experimental cinema, we should first examine Deleuze’s broader concerns. Section 4.1 introduces Deleuze’s taxonomy of images and signs as a film-theoretical issue, returning to some material we covered in the introduction, particularly the notion of a non-linguistic semiotics. Section 4.2 presents an overview of Deleuze’s taxonomy, focusing for practical reasons on the affection-image of *Cinema 1*. Section 4.3 further develops the affection-image in terms of what Deleuze calls “genetic signs,” an important and heretofore neglected aspect of the taxonomy. Section 4.4 looks at how films in the experimental tradition show up in *Cinema 1* and 2, emphasizing how Deleuze sees them as exploring these genetic signs. Finally, Section 4.5 raises the possibility of defining “experimental cinema” in terms of these genetic signs and provides some reasons for doing so.

4.1 Deleuze’s Non-Linguistic Semiotics of Film

Immediately the question arises: Why a taxonomy? Why after all should the study of the cinema be a classification of images and signs? In the Preface to the English edition of *Cinema 1*, Deleuze writes, “The cinema seems to us to be a composition of images and of signs, that is, a pre-verbal intelligible content (*pure semiotics*).”¹²⁹ Since movies become intelligible to us as a totality of images and signs, which are simply units that can be isolated for critical attention, then by Deleuze’s own definition, the study of cinema would naturally take the form of a study of the images and signs it presents—in short, a taxonomy.

¹²⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, xiv.

¹²⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, ix. Emphasis in original.

This is of course a very tidy telling. To get a fuller sense of Deleuze's project, we should consider the *Cinema* books in relation to the film semiotics of the 1960s, especially as propounded by Christian Metz's *Film Language*.¹³⁰ Deleuze, it should immediately be said, is about as far as possible from wanting to revive that period of film theory. Indeed, although he generally refrains from commenting negatively on other theorists, he devotes an appreciable amount of space to refuting Metz's linguistic semiology.¹³¹ Deleuze, too, sees his project as a kind of semiotics, but he forcefully distinguishes it from a "semiology of a linguistic inspiration," which "abolishes the image and tends to dispense with the sign."¹³² In contrast to Metz, Deleuze aligns his taxonomy with that of C. S. Peirce, whose "strength, when he invented semiotics, was to conceive of signs on the basis of images and their combinations, not as a function of determinants which were already linguistic."¹³³ *Cinema 1* and 2, then, constitute a semiology that is not paradigmatically linguistic—a *non-linguistic semiology*.

Deleuze was neither the first nor the only one to recognize the pitfalls of a fundamentally linguistic semiology. Pasolini's "The 'Cinema of Poetry'," which we examined in the Introduction, was a direct response to the film semiotics of the time, built on his belief "that it is no longer possible to begin to discuss cinema as an expressive language without at least taking into consideration the terminology of semiotics."¹³⁴ In discussing what he called a pre-grammatical background of im-signs, we saw him as raising the possibility of a semiology of im-signs—a non-linguistic semiology. We also saw, however, that without a *positive* sense of what

¹³⁰ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, tr. Michael Taylor (Oxford University Press, 1974).

¹³¹ See the "Recapitulation of images and signs" in Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 25–30.

¹³² Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, ix.

¹³³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 30.

¹³⁴ Pasolini, "The 'Cinema of Poetry'," 167.

that non-linguistic semiology might look like, Pasolini falls back onto an analogy to poetry. In this connection, we might also consider Lucien Castaing-Taylor's seminal 1996 essay "Iconophobia" which takes issue not with semiology as such ("Semiotics is not all wrong"), but with the linguistic framework that its practitioners work with, and acknowledges that films must be "imbued with at least paralinguistic qualities."¹³⁵ But again, without a positive sense of what this alternative framework might be, or what these "paralinguistic qualities" are, Castaing-Taylor, despite writing over three decades after Pasolini, likewise falls back onto a poetic analogy: "Might it be that anthropologists resent documentary's resemblance—insofar as it may be said to resemble literary forms at all—not to their own plain prose, but to poetry?"¹³⁶

The point here is not to criticize either Pasolini or Castaing-Taylor for failing to offer a non-linguistic semiotics of film, but to illustrate the difficulties of operating without one. Both essays end up in a kind of double bind, recognizing that a linguistic reduction of cinema is untenable, while having only linguistic analogies to turn to. Again, Whitehead's Fallacy of the Perfect Dictionary rears its head.

In the Introduction we said that the development of a non-linguistic semiology was "too large a question to directly confront." For this reason, the present thesis developed the more restricted notion of cinematic ambiguity. But having now done this, we may examine how it fits into a non-linguistic semiotics of film—which is precisely what Deleuze presents in the *Cinema* books. In setting out a classification of images and signs, the books attempt to give a positive, worked-out sense of what exactly a non-linguistic semiotics might look like. As Deleuze insists on the final page of *Cinema 2*, "theory too is something which is made, no less than its

¹³⁵ Lucien Taylor, "Iconophobia: How anthropology lost it at the movies," *Transition* No. 69 (1996), 87.

¹³⁶ Taylor, "Iconophobia," 88.

object.”¹³⁷ In their development of “cinematographic concepts,” which are simply “the types of images and the signs which correspond to each type,” the *Cinema* books construct a systematic theory of film. *Cinema 1* deals with the first part of the system; *Cinema 2* deals with the second. Let us now examine Deleuze’s taxonomy in more detail.

4.2 *Cinema 1* and the Affection-Image

In claiming that the *Cinema* books present a non-linguistic semiotics of film, I am claiming that Deleuze’s taxonomy shows how images and signs in the cinema become intelligible. At minimum this requires two things: first, a specification of descriptive categories (Which units of analysis?); second, an account of how meaning arises from the ordering and pattern of these units (How are they linked?). In the case of studies with words, these requirements are fulfilled by studies of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, not to mention modern investigations in linguistics, semantics, and semiotics. What would count as providing an analogous account in the cinema?

Fulfilling the first requirement in *Cinema 1* are the six varieties of movement-images—principally perception-image, affection-image, and action-image—derived from Henri Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*.¹³⁸ (The related sign structure will be dealt with in Section 4.3.) Fulfilling the second requirement is what Deleuze calls the sensory-motor schema, also derived from Bergson, which specifies the possible links that can form between types of movement-images.¹³⁹ Affection, for example, is defined as the interval between an incoming perception and an outgoing action. In the sensory-motor schema, affection-images can link up between a

¹³⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 280.

¹³⁸ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, tr. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (Zone Books, 1988).

¹³⁹ See “The movement-image and its three varieties: Second commentary on Bergson” in *Cinema 1*. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 56–70.

perception-image on one “side,” so to speak, and with an action-image on the other. Not all links between the types of movement-images are possible; and the sensory-motor schema, which dominates the classical regime of cinema, specifies which ones are possible and which ones are not.¹⁴⁰ It provides the necessity of the connections by which images become intelligible to the viewer.

This has two main consequences. First, it means that within the sensory-motor schema, viewing is primarily a process of anticipation and integration: The possible linkages between perception, affection, and action being predetermined, our concern is less with reading each image for itself than with integrating it into a continuum of movement, with ordering each spatial presentation in an empirical succession of time. Second, it means that while most films comprise a variety of movement-images, the development of one type of image *necessarily* restricts the development of another. If the types of movement-images designate potential tendencies of a given film, then the elaboration of one tendency precludes the elaboration of another. The sensory-motor schema thus implies *modal* relations between the categories of movement-images.¹⁴¹

Take for instance the affection-image, elaborated across Chapters 6 and 7 in *Cinema 1*. Affection, again, is the interval between an incoming perception and an outgoing action. From Bergson Deleuze derives a notion of affection as “a motor tendency on a sensitive nerve,” and elaborates this notion by focusing on close-ups—specifically close-ups of the face.¹⁴² In a close-

¹⁴⁰ The term “classical” here conforms to Bazin’s analyses in “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” of films whose “analytic” storytelling fulfills two main criteria: the preservation of spatial coordinates, and the predominantly dramatic and psychological effects of the cutting.

¹⁴¹ To more specific, the sensory-motor schema implies what the philosopher Robert Brandom calls *modal relations of incompatibility and consequence*. Variations on the phrase recur throughout his work in inferential semantics.

¹⁴² Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 66.

up, we observe how some external perception has registered as an *expression* but has not yet linked up with—or given way to—action. The affection-image thus exists *prior to* any actualized action and is therefore opposed to the action-image. The action-image involves what we usually think of as dramatic conflict between two opposed forces, and exemplifies what Deleuze, using Peirce, calls Secondness: two together. The affection-image, by contrast, is not Secondness but Firstness, one in itself: It is not action or conflict but rather an affect considered for itself as a pure *expressed*. This affect, which can exist as a “power” or “quality,” is *not* actualized in a dramatic field of action. If it were, it would cease to be an affect and would become a *force*. It would pass out of the affection-image into the realm of the action-image.

The reason Deleuze associates the close-up with the affection-image is that the close-up has the capacity to *isolate* affect from a dramatic field of action. The conventional view of the close-up sees it as offering a “partial object,” a more detailed view, or an enlargement of something. Against this notion, Deleuze, like Béla Balázs before him, contends that if the close-up implies a change in dimension, it is not a relative but “an absolute change.”¹⁴³ What is presented in close-up exists on a different *order* than the dramatic field of action: In other words, the close-up does not so much frame as *de-frame* the object being presented. In so doing, the close-up “*abstracts [the object] from all spatio-temporal co-ordinates,*” transforming it into a complex Entity that expresses an affect.¹⁴⁴ This is a highly abbreviated account. But it may be made less abstract if we now consider Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928), which Deleuze considers an affection-image film *par excellence*, and which concretizes much of what has been said thus far.

¹⁴³ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 96.

¹⁴⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 96. Emphasis in original.

No one writing on *Passion* will fail to note Dreyer's remarkable use of close-ups. Balázs sees it as an "example of one very powerful film whose wealth of savage, passionate life-and-death struggles is portrayed using *only the face*," and proceeds to analyse the long scene with the Inquisition: "For a thousand metres of film, nothing but heads. Heads without spatial context. But this spatial absence does not alarm us. Why should it? This is not a scene of horse-riding or boxing. It is not within space that these raging passions, thoughts, beliefs clash."¹⁴⁵ With the concept of the affection-image, the necessity of this account is made explicit. For its use of close-ups, we see how the film is concerned less with opposed *forces* in a determinate field of action (dramatic conflict), the proper domain of the action-image, than with the pure *affects* taken for themselves, prior to their actualization. We see how Dreyer is less concerned with the historical situation (social roles, political conflicts, antagonisms, the balance of power), than with those aspects of the event that escape any historical account (the bishop's anger, the martyr's faith and doubt). In short, we see how the film presents us not with a trial, but a *passion*.

As Balázs demonstrates, one can give a satisfactory account of Dreyer's *Passion* without reference to either the affection-image or the sensory-motor schema. Indeed, for his account of the affection-image Deleuze in fact draws from Balázs, who very early on recognized the unique cinematic possibilities of the close-up. In the manner of much early film theory, Balázs then proceeded to consider the close-up as *the* essence of cinema, claiming that "the close-up is the technical precondition for the art of facial expression and hence of the higher art of film in general"; that "close-ups are film's true terrain"; and that "in a good film, the decisive moment of the film is never shown in long shot."¹⁴⁶ The prescriptivism of these statements is easily

¹⁴⁵ Béla Balázs, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, ed. Erica Carter, tr. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 102.

¹⁴⁶ Balázs, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, 37-38.

countered: We can, after all, think of several good films whose decisive moments *are* shown in long shot. At the same time, we should recognize that the prescriptivism is no coincidence. As we saw earlier, trial and Passion, action-image and affection-image, are *modally* incompatible: The choice to elaborate one necessarily precludes the elaboration of the other. Far from being incidental, this shows that a modal relation of incompatibility is a *pre-condition* for a descriptive category—in this case a type of movement-image—to be recognized in the first place. A descriptive category that can apply equally to all films is no descriptive category at all.

The only “mistake” Balázs makes, then, is that in recognizing *a* genuine cinematic possibility, he then declared it to be *the* one. In asking the question “What *is* cinema?” he identified the close-up, and in *The Spirit of Film* worked out its consequences. But he did not consider that one could step back and ask “Which one?” With decades of hindsight, and a wealth of other theorists to draw from, Deleuze in the *Cinema* books raises this latter question more systematically. The descriptive categories of Deleuze’s taxonomy, then, identify myriad regions of cinematic activity, no one privileged over the other. Moreover, the taxonomy provides a framework in which to see the relations between these descriptive categories, rendering explicit the assumptions underlying, say, Balázs’s account of Dreyer’s *Passion*. Having such a framework, in which the affection-image is but one of six other types of movement-images, permits one to see where a particular theory of film has most purchase. It allows one to take value in the writings of Balázs, for example, without committing to his notion of what cinema essentially *is*. Deleuze’s taxonomy of images and signs thus develops a critical framework in which to see a very wide range of artists, films, and theories, rendering explicit the modal relations between them. That these modal relations are built into the taxonomic system, so to

speak, is how we should understand Deleuze's remark that with *Cinema 1* he sought to produce a "book on logic, a logic of cinema."¹⁴⁷

At this point, however, one might reasonably ask: Where, in all this, are the signs? And it is this question I would like to consider next.

4.3 Genetic Signs and the Any-Space-Whatever

Earlier we saw that the sensory-motor schema determines the possible links that can form between the types of movement-images. This is not wrong, but it is partial. And it is partial because one can without error reverse the statement, which is, to use the proper term, biconditional. That is, it is equally correct to say that the movement-images determine the sensory-motor schema. And what makes this reciprocity possible in *Cinema 1* is the sign structure of Deleuze's taxonomy.

We looked in some detail at the affection-image and saw how it is the interval between an incoming perception and an outgoing action. From the perspective of the affection-image, then, there are two options: The affection-image may either link up with outgoing action-images, *or*, alternatively, it may lead into other affection-images, thereby inhabiting the affection-image category more fully. Each of these options are respectively made possible by two kinds of signs: *signs of bipolar composition* and *signs of genesis*. The former, as the name suggests, specifies how a type of image may connect to another type on the other "side" or "pole" (hence the term "bipolar"). The latter indicates what Deleuze calls the "genetic" or "differential" element of a movement-image.¹⁴⁸ The term "differential," with its deliberate echoes of calculus, indicates the

¹⁴⁷ See Deleuze, "On *The Movement-Image*," in *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, 46–56, tr. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 47.

¹⁴⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 85.

minimum “slice” of movement, so to speak, required for perception to be recognized *as* perception, or for affection to be recognized *as* affection, and so on with the other types of images. The genetic sign, then, specifies the minimum conditions for a type of movement-image to be recognized *as* that movement-image. Earlier we quoted Deleuze’s notion of cinema as a “pre-verbal intelligible content.” Genetic signs, then, specify the minimum conditions of intelligibility for the associated type of movement-image.

Let us now consider the affection-image in relation to this sign structure. The sign of bipolar composition of the affection-image is the *icon*, defined as the “set of the expressed and its expression, of the affect and the face” or “a facial equivalent.”¹⁴⁹ Again, this indicates how the affection-image can either be *actualized* in determinate spatiotemporal coordinates in a field of action; *or* taken as “potentiality considered for itself as expressed,” as “expression, not actualisation.”¹⁵⁰ The sign of bipolar composition indicates how the icon can either connect to the domain of the action-image, where things are defined by opposition, conflict, and Secondness; or continue to inhabit the affection-image, which is affect taken for itself, Firstness, the category of pure potentiality or possibility.

The important thing to note in this definition of the *icon* is the reference to the face (or facial equivalent). This indicates that affect has a conventionally *human* reference, that the potential of an affect being actualized in action is proportional to the image’s “faciality,” its recognizability as an expression of (human) emotion. But what happens, Deleuze asks, when we aren’t dealing with close-ups of the face? What happens when we consider affection-images not in terms of faciality, but with *any* sort of space? When confronted with the face of a donkey, for

¹⁴⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 97.

¹⁵⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 97.

instance, the very fact that we can speak of a “face” means that we are still in the domain of recognizable human emotions: pain, joy, sorrow, and the like. But what affects are present when we see only an anonymous patch of fur or a hoof? What about a blank wall? In this more ambiguous region of the affection-image, we are no longer dealing with the icon, the affection-image’s bipolar sign of composition, but rather its genetic sign: the *qualisign* or *any-space-whatever*. The any-space-whatever is not an “abstract universal” but a “perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity,” extracted from the real connections it would form in the determinate milieu of the action-image: It is, Deleuze says, “a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible.”¹⁵¹

This can sound vague and abstract, but we may concretize this discussion by considering one of Deleuze’s signal examples of the any-space-whatever: Robert Bresson. If a viewer were to list what they found impressive about Bresson’s films, they would likely note their tactile, sensuous use of image and sound; their fragmentation of space and action; and their stark opposition to conventional dramatic values, most evident in Bresson’s preference for performance styles which deny external signifiers of psychological transformation or spiritual revelation. The any-space-whatever, as the sign of genesis of the affection-image, clarifies how these aspects fit together. Bresson’s compositions tend to de-frame their objects, thereby extracting the pure expressed of the image as affect and emphasizing its tactile qualities, as in *L’Argent* (1983), with its notable rustle of paper and sounds of money exchanging hands. His fragmented decoupage, as in *Pickpocket* (1959), serves to loosen the necessities of action, allowing each shot to radiate as pure potentiality, such that the viewer can re-link the images in different ways, as if charting alternate paths through the same space. Finally, Bresson’s denial of

¹⁵¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 109.

conventional dramatic values, as in *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966), confronts the viewer with the more ambiguous region of the any-space-whatever, where “we seem to enter a ‘system of emotions’ which is much more subtle and differentiated, less easy to identify, capable of inducing non-human affects.”¹⁵²

This is not to say that Bresson’s films are *only* composed of any-space-whatevers. Again, movies comprise different types of movement-images, and in discussing a film in relation to one type, we are often speaking of a dominant tendency. Then again, the notion of a genetic sign raises new questions—for if we can identify a tendency, we are also capable of asking what it would mean for an artist to develop that tendency to its utmost. What would it look like for a film to fully explore a genetic sign, to probe its bounds of intelligibility? With this question, we arrive—finally—at Deleuze’s treatment of experimental film traditions. In keeping with the discussion so far, I will limit my remarks to the affection-image of *Cinema 1*, but its ramifications should extend beyond this case.

¹⁵² Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 110.

4.4 Deleuze and Experimental Cinema

Near the end of his second chapter on the affection-image, Deleuze discusses arguably the most famous of all experimental films, Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967). He writes:

In *Wavelength* Snow uses a forty-five minute zoom in order to explore a room lengthwise from one end to the other, as far as the wall on which a photograph of the sea is stuck: from this room he extracts a potential space, whose power and quality he progressively exhausts. Some girls come to listen to the radio, they hear a man climb the stairs and collapse to the floor, but the zoom has already passed him, giving way to one of the girls who is describing the event on the telephone. A phantom of the girl, in negative superimposition, redoubles the scene, whilst the zoom continues as far as the final image of the sea on the wall which it has now reached again. The space re-enters the empty sea. All the preceding elements of the any-space-whatever, the shadows, the whites, the colours, the inexorable progression, the inexorable reduction, elevation plane, the disconnected parts, the empty set: all come into play here in what, according to Sitney, defines the 'structural film'.¹⁵³

Deleuze thus observes how every zoom adjustment, every re-framing, is also a *de*-framing. Each adjustment does not simply provide a partial view of space, but enacts an absolute change in dimension, transforming and then exhausting the space's pure potential.

Taken in isolation, this account is not striking for its originality. Indeed, Deleuze here is indebted to, and explicitly cites, Sitney's famous "Structural Film" essay, and his observation that "the insight of space and, implicitly, of the cinema as potential, is an axiom of the structural film."¹⁵⁴ What *is* interesting is how *Wavelength* figures into Deleuze's discussion of the affection-image as a film that explores the genetic sign—the any-space-whatever—to its utmost. Across the *Cinema* books, experimental films figure into the system in this way: as veritable limit-cases of an image's genetic conditions.

Now Deleuze's use of the term "experimental" across the *Cinema* books is mainly historical and refers to the American avant-garde canon of Sitney's *Visionary Film*. But if we

¹⁵³ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 122.

¹⁵⁴ Sitney, "Structural Film," 332.

follow out Deleuze's placement of these films within his taxonomy, we can discern a notion of "experimental" that is not historically bound in this way, one that instead has to do with the genetic conditions of his taxonomic categories. The definition of the genetic sign as a "differential" is instructive in this regard: It specifies the minimum conditions required for an image to be individuated or differentiated, to become recognizable *as* something. The term "experimental," then, may be used to designate an exploration of *genetic conditions*. Experimental works, in other words, are those that explore the medium's minimum conditions of intelligibility, *the minimum conditions required to individuate or differentiate an image or sign*.

Already, this notion of genetic conditions should resonate with our definition of ambiguity as "any means of probing cinema's boundaries of intelligibility, and thereby thematizing the process by which the medium becomes intelligible in the first place." The difference is that the genetic sign makes explicit how this ambiguity fits within the context of a larger taxonomy. The earlier discussion of *Wavelength* already shows this definition of "experimental" in practice. But we may also look to films outside the *Cinema* books. Morgan Fisher's exemplary 2003 film (), for instance, consists exclusively of inserts culled from Hollywood B-movies—letters, newspaper headlines, the barrel of a gun, roulette markers, and the like—arranged in a random algorithmic order. Extracted from their narrative contexts, these inserts become any-space-whatevers, floating points of pure potentiality, isolated from any possibility of being actualized in action. A similar case is the perception-image, whose genetic sign is the *photogram*, "the differential of perception itself."¹⁵⁵ Deleuze discusses the photogram in relation to Vertov and the "hyper-rapid montage" of filmmakers like Brakhage, and we might also consider Jodie Mack, Sylvia Schedelbauer, and Scott Stark, whose films, discussed in the

¹⁵⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 83.

first chapter, seem to probe the very conditions of perception. And these are just two of the six types of movement-images in *Cinema 1*, which after all presents just one part of the classification. *Cinema 2* introduces yet more complications, but also other possibilities for experimentation in the way we have defined. With this genetic definition, developed in the context of the *Cinema* books, we can thus designate an entire region of experimental practice.

4.5 Toward a Genetic Definition of Experimental Cinema

Why define experimental cinema in this way? In the Introduction we saw how the definition of ambiguity in this thesis fit into existing accounts of experimental cinema—not just MacDonald’s “critical cinema” or Small and Johnson’s “direct theory,” but also the associations with the poetic process. The genetic definition being forwarded here, which sees experimental works as exploring the minimum conditions of intelligibility, is consonant with these notions, which provides one reason for defining experimental cinema in this way. In the space that remains, I would like to discuss two others:

(1) This genetic definition gives consistency to the use of the term “experimental,” which is far from being a settled term. And in the absence of any consistent framework, the term gets used arbitrarily as a value judgment, recalling the tendencies of twentieth-century modernism, particularly Clement Greenberg’s infamous program of “self-criticism,” as enunciated in “Modernist Painting”:

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered “pure,” and in its “purity” find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. “Purity” meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.¹⁵⁶

In the decades since this essay was published, the difficulties of Greenberg’s view have been treated time and time again—but two issues concern us here. The first is the implicit value judgment attached to “purity,” which creates a hierarchy that places the most “self-critical” works at the top. The second is the issue around what exactly constitutes what is “unique in the nature of [an art’s] medium.” As one might expect, both concerns also show up in film theory—especially experimental or avant-garde film theory. Fred Camper, for instance, writes that films “should use that quality which is unique to cinema.”¹⁵⁷ Fair enough—one can hardly disagree with such a statement. The problem comes when he then specifies that uniqueness as “the ability to engage the viewer in light patterns occupying a pre-determined flat space and precisely controlled in time.”¹⁵⁸ At best, this says roughly nothing at all, claiming only the fact that there *is* a pre-grammatical continuity of im-signs. At worst, it performs an untenable modernist reduction to “pure” form, while neglecting to specify what that form is.

The genetic definition of “experimental” being forwarded here offers an alternative. The genetic signs in *Cinema I* indicate that all films—whether Hollywood or independent, whether “narrative” or “documentary” or experimental—emerge from a pre-grammatical, pre-individuated continuity. Films may thus be distinguished by the *degree* to which they investigate these genetic signs. By this criterion, Snow’s *Wavelength* and Fisher’s (), in investigating the

¹⁵⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Art and Literature*, no. 4 (Spring 1965): 193.

¹⁵⁷ Fred Camper, “The Myth of the Avant-Garde Film,” *Foco* 8–9, 2021.

¹⁵⁸ Camper, “The Myth of the Avant-Garde Film,” *Foco*.

any-space-whatever more intensively, would indeed be more “experimental” than Bresson’s *L’Argent*. But having made explicit the grounds on which this statement is being made, we are also free to recognize that there is no need to attach a value judgment to this distinction. No one film can contain every kind of excellence, and with the genetic sign of the any-space-whatever, we can acknowledge how *L’Argent* is related to () without having to reduce one to the other. There is no need to say that Bresson’s films are good because they are “really” experimental works. Far from reifying hierarchies of value, then, the definition of “experimental” this essay forwards should forestall narrow judgments of this sort. The genetic definition is not meant to ground value claims, but to give consistency to an area of study.

(2) This genetic definition does *not* depend on an oppositional stance and can thereby make explicit how experimental films are in fact *related* to a range of cinematic phenomena. As we saw earlier, with Balsom’s intentional overload of descriptors, experimental works have traditionally been defined in terms of negation, positioned against industrial and commercial concerns. Sitney writes that “insofar as it calls itself *independent* or *avant-garde*, admirably introducing a negative element into its epithet, it reflects back upon another cinema.”¹⁵⁹ But in the decades since *Visionary Film*, the limitations of discussing experimental works in isolation have only become clearer. The 1980s saw crucial re-considerations of—and attacks on—the notion that experimental cinema could be considered a separate cinematic realm.¹⁶⁰ The so-called “institutional turn” of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the increasing acceptance of avant-garde traditions into the academy and film festivals, further blurred the borders between experimental practices and international “art cinema.”

¹⁵⁹ P. Adams Sitney, “Introduction,” in *The Avant-Garde Film*, vii.

¹⁶⁰ See especially Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Film: The Front Line, 1983* (Denver: Arden Press, 1983) and David Ehrenstein, *Film: The Front Line, 1984* (Denver: Arden Press, 1984).

In response to these changes, experimental media scholars have naturally turned to the study of exhibition and production contexts, analyzing material modes of circulation and reception. This is valuable work, and may be said to trace what Annette Michelson called the “radical aspiration” of film across a range of historical contexts.¹⁶¹ The genetic definition of experimental cinema forwarded here does not seek to negate or replace such historical studies, but to complement them. The genetic definition designates an area of study of experimental cinema apart from a study of its specific historical manifestations, much in the way that literary critics can study tragedy as a genre apart from its Greek or Elizabethan varieties. The obvious limitation of such a study is that it does not deal with problems of origin: It does not trace material chains of influence or account for contingencies of production and reception. The advantage is that it can study experimental films apart from a history of taste. The genetic definition is unbound by notions of what is considered “radical” or “experimental” at a given point in time, notions that are necessarily defined in opposition to—or as a reflection on—“another cinema” against which radicality and experimentalism are measured. With this genetic definition, we can study experimental works without recourse to false, or at least contingent oppositions, showing how they are in fact *related* to all other forms of cinematic activity. In this way, we may even expand our notions of artistic originality.

¹⁶¹ Annette Michelson, “Film and the Radical Aspiration,” in *Film Culture Reader*, 416.

Conclusion

In dealing with types of cinematic ambiguity, the present thesis has attempted to give consistency to the term “experimental,” while also avoiding contingent oppositions. Chapter One examined two established traditions of experimental cinema, the lyrical and structural film, seeing them not so much as fixed or impermeable categories, but as cardinal tendencies of expression. Examining them alongside what in literature are known as charm and riddle, we saw them as polarizing into ambiguities of sound and sense. The starting point of Chapter Two, “Ambiguities of Description,” was the so-called “experimental documentary.” To explore it, we first developed a four-form classification of non-fiction cinema—chronicle, portrait, anatomy, diary—to define a region of cinematic *description*. This, we saw, was dependent on the general notion of the subject-object relation or adequation. Then, we defined a descriptive ambiguity as one that asked about the *conditions* for us to be able to differentiate a subject-object relation to begin with (What are the conditions necessary for anything we could call a “description?”), and identified three sub-types: ambiguities of recognition, identification, and relation. Starting with the notion of a “political avant-garde,” Chapter Three dealt with the more restricted ambiguity of myth, which we explored using the films of Straub-Huillet.

For reasons of scope and space, however, I have largely had to forego showing how these exemplars of cinematic ambiguity are related to various other forms of cinematic activity. In working backwards, so to speak, from a schema of non-fiction cinema, the second chapter went some way to doing this—but by and large this thesis has left such connections implicit. The genetic definition of experimental cinema forwarded in Chapter Four indicates a line of further investigation which might build on the present study, showing how different types of ambiguity

may fit into a larger non-linguistic semiotics of the cinema. It opens the door for a subsequent study in which such connections might be brought to light.

In developing a taxonomy of images and signs, the *Cinema* books are by definition systematic, and at least one purpose of systematic study is to render explicit the assumptions underlying our engagement with the field of objects being studied—not just in order to enrich one’s experience of the field, but also because it is arguably only on this plane of explicitness that discussion can take place without recourse to contingent value judgments. That the *Cinema* books are systematic does not, of course, mean they are complete—still less that Deleuze follows through on all the paths of investigation he sets out. For example, although he identifies genetic signs for each of the six movement-images of *Cinema 1*, he does not always present detailed discussions of films that intensively probe these genetic conditions. The perception-image and affection-image receive this treatment, but the impulse-image, action-image, reflection-image, and relation-image do not. Far from being a deterrent, this gap should encourage further investigation along the lines just laid out. The types of ambiguity identified in this thesis cannot and should not be simply mapped onto the genetic signs of Deleuze’s taxonomy, but the region of filmmaking activity they define should provide some suggestive conjunctions. At the very least, it will provide a large pool of examples to draw from in developing this genetic definition. The usefulness of novel examples should not be undervalued. Indeed, it is arguably only by extending Deleuze’s classification that we may eventually see where it breaks down.

Deleuze wrote the *Cinema* books in the 1980s, and the canon of films he treats, while considerable, reflects the limitations of his place and time. The task of building on the *Cinema* books should be to test Deleuze’s taxonomy against a range of films both new and newly discovered. In the case of the affection-image, for example, we might look to the formidable

oeuvres of Angela Schanelec and Jean-Claude Rousseau, paying attention to how they transform their Bressonian inheritance. For highly original explorations of the impulse-image, Alan Clarke's *Elephant* (1989), Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001), and Ruben Östlund's *Involuntary* (2008), all bear investigation. The action-image opens an even wider domain of investigation—though for an exploration of its genetic conditions, we may look to the great Iranian director Sohrab Shahid-Saless, and films such as *Still Life* (1974) and *A Simple Event* (1974). These films may not necessarily fit existing notions of what an experimental film is—but we should not rule out the possibility that in giving consistency to our use of the term, we may end up expanding our notion of what an “experimental” work can be.

These are just some possible lines of inquiry, the validity of which cannot be established here. Given that the usefulness of systematic studies of art has been called into question, however, perhaps one final justification is in order. That is, it should be said that the purpose of a taxonomy is not to pigeon-hole artists or films, but to develop a critical framework that allows for the appreciation of the widest range of possibilities with the greatest possible depth. Indeed, a systematic framework should, in laying all its critical cards on the table, so to speak, provide a way to get clear of narrow prejudices and untenable assumptions. For Aristotle in his *Poetics*, such a framework necessarily took the form of classification: the development of categories, distinctions, and terms for differentiation and individuation; and I take Deleuze's *Cinema* books as working firmly in that tradition. This thesis, by identifying various types of cinematic ambiguity and forwarding a genetic definition of experimental cinema, constitutes a preliminary effort at contributing to the very same.

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