Color and Empathy

Essays on Two Aspects of Film

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Preface

The present volume – *Color and Empathy* – brings together a number of essays on two areas of research that have been at the core of my work for several decades, in my writing as well as in the classroom. Although both areas firmly belong to the center of the discipline, they had until recently been marginalized in film studies.

In the case of cinematic color, the neglect might have to do with the uniquely sensuous nature of color, whose elusiveness makes it difficult to name, gauge, and analyze chromatic phenomena. But there is also the fact that Western culture has accorded color a minor, even lowly status for many centuries – a Puritanical attitude which peaked in the 19th century. At the same time, however, color has been of eminent importance in the world of fashion, and there is, of course, a rich tradition of color in painting and the art of design. Cinematic color can be seen in this tradition, and film history can boast many examples in which color has been orchestrated with artistry and sophistication.

In the case of empathy, neglect stemmed from a lack of attention to the viewer as an entity crucial for understanding films and the cinema. Early on, there had been the seminal work of Hugo Münsterberg on silent fiction film, but few scholars chose to follow in Münsterberg’s wake. The psychology of the audience was mainly left to psychologists whose findings were rarely taken up in film studies, or to Hollywood producers and critics who commented upon the experience of the viewer in vague terms like “identification” or “vicarious experience.” In another field, in German art theory of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, empathy had figured quite prominently as a factor in the reception of art. But it was only in the middle of the 1990s and in step with the so-called “emotional turn” in cultural theory that empathy suddenly entered center stage in audience studies.

Since the essays in this volume were first published, much work has come out on both subjects: books and articles on cinematic color now cover a whole range of aspects, and studies on empathy have become ever more variegated and differentiated. But there are still many white spots on the map that continue to present a challenge – viewer responses to different kinds of documentary as well as ethnographic film, chromatic patterns in animation, or the effects of muted, desaturated colors on audience emotions, to name but a few.

The essays were written in German between 1995 and 2012 and were originally published in a number of German, Austrian, or Swiss journals and books. Most of them have never appeared in translation before. In preparing
them for this collection, I have revised and abbreviated the manuscripts wherever it seemed advisable, but have resisted the temptation of updating them – incorporating more recent scholarly literature would have opened a huge can of worms. And it would have misrepresented the historical moment in which the essays were written and blurred the order in which the arguments developed: the essays frequently build on each other or take up aspects that were introduced in an earlier text, thus forming an ongoing discussion that serves to unify the present volume.

Help I have received in writing the essays and preparing this book came in many different forms and at different stages. My thanks go to Wolfgang Beilenhoff, Daniel Brinckmann, Till Brockmann, Matthias Christen, Jens Eder, Thomas Elsaesser, Holly Fisher, Barbara Flückiger, Bettina Friedl, Jane Gaines, Jeanpaul Goergen, Roy Grundmann, Malte Hagener, Britta Hartmann, Eva Hohenberger, Frank Kessler, Joanna Kiernan, Andreas Kirchner, Guido Kirsten, Gertrud Koch, Eric de Kuyper, Mariann Lewinsky, Stephen Lowry, Brigitte Mayr, Jenny Okun, Karl Prümm, Heide Schlüpmann, Harro Segeberg, Gerald Silverberg, Tereza Smid, Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, Georg Stefan Troller, Eva Warth, Grahame Weinbren, Constantin Wulff, and Hans J. Wulff. I also wish to thank my translators Brian Currid, Ben Letzler, Steven Lindberg, and Steve Wilder, as well as many editors, known and unknown, who have detected and corrected flaws in the manuscripts. William Wegman has graciously allowed me to use his Cinderella photograph and kindly furnished me with a high resolution file of the image.

My apologies to anyone I have inadvertently omitted.

Christine N. Brinckman
Berlin, September 1, 2014
As soon as a piece of nature becomes an image, we consider it with different eyes. – Rudolf Arnheim
Cinematic Color
as Likeness and as Artifact

I.

It is a common belief that colors can be reproduced in photography and film with utter naturalness, that they can remain legible as in reality itself and reveal the beauty and meaning of nature. But whereas the colors of the world are generally regarded as an embellishment, albeit a superficial one, the color photograph that captures them is often less beautiful. What is the reason for this failure? What are the factors that so often make color photography – and even more so color film – aesthetically unsatisfying? Why is it so much easier to take a good black-and-white photograph? As if nature, which quite obviously comes in color, were resisting the chromatic reproduction of its charms.

With just a modicum of skill or with a little luck, black-and-white images succeed. One need only compare old-fashioned passport photographs with their color counterparts from a photo booth. Although reduced to graphic values, the black-and-white face is of a more essential, more delicate, artful, and yet fascinating similarity, while the color photograph is blotchy, slightly bloated, less flattering, and also less similar. Shouldn’t color be truer to life and more expressive, as it conveys more information about the circumstances recorded than a black-and-white image? But paradoxically, the additional information rarely seems an improvement and is more often a tiresome excess. Monochrome photography, as Gerald Mast has noted, selects visual beauty “of necessity, since it ‘sees’ shapes, shadows, forms, and

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1 The superficiality of color, its lack of substance, has led to it being regarded in Western culture as an incidental, inferior quality of objects – an assessment that was reinforced by puritanical ideas and even today has not completely receded: see David Batchelor, Chromophobia (London: Reaktion Books, 2000). The influence of this attitude on the study of art is described in Max Imdahl, Farbe: Kunsttheoretische Reflexionen in Frankreich (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1987), using the example of the “primacy of drawing”, a view that values the conceptual over the sensory.

textures that the human eye cannot."³ By contrast, the color photograph captures much of the insignificant and ephemeral that we have learned to overlook in reality, and it tends to exaggerate the phenomena.⁴ Moreover, the incidental and the essential are mixed in such a way that we are unable to subtract one from the other. Color portraits have to be conceived very carefully in terms of lighting and composition in order to create a successful image we can accept as a likeness.

The group photograph offers a good example of the problem in question. In a black-and-white class photo, all the children are lined up more or less equally, only individualized by their specific features of face and form. At most, a position in the center or on the end of a row creates privileges, and strong contrasts of brightness can seem unfairly eye-catching. In most cases, however, the composition takes on a nice “democratic” uniformity. In color, many disruptive elements threaten to break up the image. A red sweater can attract the eye as if it were the most important thing and the child wearing it the main character. If the color red appears at the margin, the whole image is thrown out of balance; if red appears in the background, it seems to push its way forward, because red is perceived as closer to the viewer than blue or green. Moreover, irrelevant connections are established: clothes of the same color seem to signal friendships, while clashing shades express antipathies – a dramaturgy of the accidental, which suggests false hierarchies and interferes with the meaning of the photo. We read the photograph as intentional, even though we know it is a snapshot, and we tend to blame random features on the subject matter depicted. In the words of Rudolf Arnheim: “As soon as a piece of nature becomes an image, we consider it with different eyes.”⁵

Both examples, the passport photo and the class photo, indicate that color photography is afflicted with visual data difficult to control and plan. The sheer number of hues – and the human eye can discriminate between thousands of them – represents a challenge that can easily become too much to handle. Other parameters include the degree of saturation, brightness values, contrasts, harmonies and disharmonies, effects of warmth or cold, effects of proximity or distance, matte versus glossy, primary colors versus mixed colors, balance within the composition, transparency versus

⁵ Rudolf Arnheim (see note 2), 161.
opacity, restraint versus chromatic richness, or vibration versus steadiness. Compared to the two basic parameters of black-and-white – the dualistic polarity of brightness versus darkness on the one hand, and the continuum of gray shades on the other – this represents a bewildering abundance.6

Alongside Western culture’s general skepticism about color, two conflicting reasons may have been responsible for the neglect of color photography in the art world: the belief that the “automatic” reproduction of all natural data is an aesthetic mistake – it is too simple and too uncreative – and the fact that the aesthetics of color photography are as complex as they are. While fathers had been taking family snapshots in color for decades, most art photographers stuck with black-and-white for a remarkably long time.7 The aesthetic bonus that black-and-white photography offers – the bringing out of textures, the illusionary effect of space, the graphic unity of the image, and the impression of abstraction – weighed more heavily than the challenge of overcoming the aesthetic handicaps of color.

It goes without saying that the difficulties of color photography are multiplied when movement is added to the composition, and when the image is projected. In film, the composition changes over time, and with every moment the balance of the colors shifts, needing to be readjusted or ceasing to correspond to its subject. It is difficult to maintain the optimal lighting, which in color is incomparably more relevant than in black-and-white, as cinematic color is crucially tied to the quality of the light. The position of the sun already affects the color temperature as a warmer or colder cast, and white surfaces or even a white shirt can reflect the surrounding hues and distort the intended values. Whenever objects move from one light zone to another, undesirable fluctuations of color may result. With the advent of the digital age in recent decades, there has been enormous technical progress, especially in color photography, but problems still exist – and viewing films from earlier times makes us fully aware of them again.

Whereas our brain usually ensures that we perceive the color of an object as stable despite changes of light, sitting in the darkness of a cinema we lack the points of reference for such a correction. Although we have learned to deal with the inconstancy of color in film without being conscious of this effort, unexplained fluctuation tends to cause a slight uneasiness. And although some lighting mistakes could always be compensated for in

6 See again Arnheim, and also Gerald Mast’s brief but lucid description of the differences between color and black-and-white (see note 2), 87ff.
postproduction, until recently many problems of color persevered. We are all familiar with the disturbing effect when a dress seems cherry red at one instant and orange the next. Even the color of an actor’s eyes can change from moment to moment.

The introduction of the three-strip Technicolor process in the mid 1930s was not greeted with undivided enthusiasm. Unlike color photography in the art world, it was however taken for granted by the American film industry that this was a new sensation that had to be exploited, no matter how costly or how intricate. At first, one of the main concerns was that color might come across as too vulgar, too garish to conform to the standards of good taste. Many strategies to escape “vulgarity” were developed in the 1930s and 1940s: reducing the number of hues per scene, avoiding large zones of primary colors, withholding certain colors in order to play them out at a climax, meticulously harmonizing the costumes of the ensemble, or even copying the palettes of established painters to prove an affinity to high culture. At the same time, the wonders of “glorious Technicolor” had to be exhibited.

The first projects considered for color were costume spectacles, musicals, and fairy tales – films of opulent decor, where fantasy and escapism could reign – rather than realistic material such as war and gangster dramas, or psychological conflicts and social problems. Obviously, it had been decided that color was not a way of conveying naturalistic information, but could be treated as a pleasant and more or less extravagant addition. This view only began to change over the course of the 1950s, as color gradually became the norm, and it is interesting to see how one bastion of the black-and-white film after another fell, until black-and-white became a creative option only rarely chosen today.

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9 On Hollywood’s hesitant transition to color, see Gorham Kindem, “Hollywood’s Conversion to Color: The Technological, Economic and Aesthetic Factors,” in *The American Movie Industry. The Business of Motion Pictures*, Gorham Kindem, ed. (Carbondale etc.: Southern Illinois University Press), 146-158. On the critical reservations and theoretical proposals made when the new color system was introduced (and also later), see Wulff (see note 3). Julia Schmidt/Hendrik Feindt describe how skeptical European authors were initially about color in “Farbe im Film – ein traumatisches Verhältnis?,” *Frauen und Film* 58/59 (1996): 59-75.

10 One early and spectacular example is Rouben Mamoulian’s *Blood and Sand* (1941), a bullfighter film in which many scenes cite the palette and style of a famous Spanish painter.

During the 1950s, Hollywood began to drop its precautions, at least in the lighter spectrum of entertainment. As will be shown below, the color schemes of musicals and comedies were quite flashy, although still following a set of rules. For the western genre, different conventions applied – landscape colors would dominate, while color stimuli would be reserved for saloon scenes or an occasional necktie or bandana handkerchief. And for more serious subjects like social dramas or gangster films, black-and-white still prevailed.

In the course of the 1960s, styles in Hollywood as well as in other filmmaking traditions became more variegated. The many parameters that color offers led to a general proliferation of approaches, some films relying on strong differences from scene to scene, while others created color chords that would function selectively and independently of the subject matter. In some cases during this period, color was used symbolically, or to provide leitmotifs throughout the entire work. Some films employed color to set off their characters against each other or from the background, while others attempted to fuse them with the ambiance. Colored lighting and filters that produce a particular color were also used to affect the mood of a scene or to establish a stylish look. In general, color values are very much subject to fashion, though the audience may not be too aware of these ephemeral styles. But copying nature has not been a priority in the color aesthetics of the fiction film: “No program of realism is evident,” as Hans J. Wulff has noted. Michelangelo Antonioni went so far as to have the landscape and objects in Il deserto rosso (1964) painted in order to achieve the appropriate atmosphere.

As the above should have made clear, there is no one-to-one translation of natural color values, no mimetic reproduction of color. Even if the palette of a film seems rather authentic, it has often been created with great care and artifice. Where control or sensitivity are lacking, cinematic color quickly becomes unattractive, arbitrary, or straining. Color is a very delicate factor, and many directors, cinematographers, and set designers have capitulated to the problems, satisfied with a cautious middle ground.

12 On the films and traditions mentioned, and others with interesting use of color, see James L. Limbacher, Four Aspects of the Film (New York: Brussel & Brussel, 1968); William Johnson, “Coming to Terms with Color,” Film Quarterly 20, 10 (Fall 1966): 2-22; Frieda Grafe, FarbfilmFest: Begleitheft der Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek zu einer Berlinale-Filmreihe (Berlin: Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 1988); and especially Jacques Aumont, ed., La couleur en cinéma (Milan: Mazzotta; Paris: Cinémathèque française, 1995).
13 See Wulff (see note 4), 183.
II.

Of the many approaches to and stylistic possibilities of cinematic colorization, two contrary practices will be taken up and juxtaposed in what follows. My first example is a melodramatic backstage musical produced in Hollywood in the late 1950s, at a time when light entertainment stood out for its pointed use of color. The second example is an auteur film from Hong Kong situated in the urban subculture and intensifying a modern cinematic tradition that is based on virtuoso camera movement, a rapid action tempo, and visual effects.

Pal Joey, the American example, was directed by George Sidney in 1957, based on the eponymous stage musical by Rodgers & Hart. George Sidney specialized primarily in musicals and had been shooting in opulent color since the early 1940s. In the history of film, he is regarded as an old hand with no particular personal features: “If he has a special characteristic, it is his skill at deriving an extra, animated voluptuousness from such as Lana Turner, Esther Williams, Kim Novak and Ann-Margret.”15 In the case of Pal Joey, the stars were Rita Hayworth, Kim Novak, and Frank Sinatra. The director of cinematography was Harold Lipstein, Walter Holscher took care of the art direction, and an experienced color consultant from Technicolor, Henri Jaffa, supervised the color scheme. In those days, Technicolor only provided its services if a representative of the company was hired along with the camera to safeguard that the production displayed the Technicolor process to its best advantage.16

At the time Pal Joey was produced, a Technicolor style had evolved in Hollywood that was observed from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s mainly in musicals and comedies, but not exclusively so. Many features of the style can also be found in melodramas and other genres, though they were not as consistently and obtrusively employed as in light entertainment.

One of the priorities of the style concerned the natural colors of the actors and the way these could be matched and heightened by the ambiance. Whether a star was a blonde or a brunette, what color her eyes were, and


16 On color consultants, see Haines (see note 9), 27.
which male star she could be paired with were often crucial factors for a 
career. Doris Day may have set standards with her deep blue eyes and 
golden hair; and Rock Hudson, with his black hair and bronze skin, offered 
himself as a perfect partner. Kim Novak also met exacting demands, thanks 
to her green eyes and her bright and even complexion. Rita Hayworth had 
already been effective in black-and-white as an erotic actress and dancer, 
but her chestnut hair provided an additional attraction. Sinatra was less 
rewarding in this respect, as his hair was bland and scarce, and at best his 
blue eyes – which could also look brown – could be exploited as an accent. 
His charms lay elsewhere, more on the graphic level of individual lines and 
edges (his face was better suited for black-and-white).

The overall color style in question can be described as follows. The 
background of a scene (and most scenes would take place indoors) was 
usually rather restrained – all variations on off-white, dove blue, silver 
gray, beige—so that the costumes could be set off against it. Particularly 
for a male ambiance, these hues could be inverted, so that walls would be 
chocolate brown, anthracite, or a deep blue. Against these backgrounds, 
the characters would be wearing relatively vivid clothing, preferably single-
colored and slightly off the pure, saturated primaries, which would be 
reserved for special use. Among the most popular mixed colors were tomato 
red, rust, sorrel or cinnamon, porcelain blue, turquoise, chartreuse, and corn 
yellow, and they would reappear over a variety of films. Diffused but strong 
top lighting ensured a luxurious, high-key brightness. Shadow zones were 
largely avoided, so that the characters stand out like colorized figurines. 
To enliven this palette, smaller objects or clothing accessories would often 
display clashing, contrasting colors. So-called “split complementaries” were 
the rule here: for example, a bluish mauve and a variation on orange

University Press, 1985), especially the brief chapter “Colour and the Female Image.”
18 Alongside Pal Joey, the following Hollywood films are examples of this style: *Torch Song* 
(Charles Walters, 1953), *Love Me or Leave Me* (King Vidor, 1955), *Designing Woman* 
*Ask Any Girl* (Charles Walters, 1959), *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959), 
*Bachelor in Paradise* (Jack Arnold, 1961), *Boys’ Night Out* (Michael Gordon, 1962), 
*Lover Come Back* (Delbert Mann, 1962), *Sunday in New York* (Peter Tewksbury, 1963), 
*Strange Bedfellows* (Melvin Frank, 1964). Melodramas were occasionally produced in the style as well: *Butterfield 8* 
19 See Leatrice Eiseman/Lawrence Herbert, *The Pantone Book of Colors. Over 1000 Color 
Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 18.
would sit next to red – the hue between them on the color wheel – or chartreuse would pair with light turquoise in the proximity of a true green.

The characters could thus be marked in terms of narrative similarity or difference; in terms of past, present, or future liaisons, of antitheses or antipathies, and, where brightness is concerned, of importance. Much like film music, color sometimes anticipates what is coming in order to express, for instance, that two people belong together or that the protagonist will fail in his or her endeavor. Often color conveys subjective states of mind, and in that, too, it is related to music. In this tradition, the characters were not clothed consistently according to a leitmotif, but rather according to the particulars of mood and situation or to the coloring of the other characters on screen. As mentioned above, much attention would be directed to the personal colors of the actors and actresses, which could be picked up in the details of their costumes or brought out by means of complementary colors. This program may sound simple, yet it achieves quite striking results, and in spite of its obvious points allows for a subtle orchestration of the story.

As a backstage musical, PAL JOEY alternates between nightclub sequences – sometimes featuring song-and-dance numbers, sometimes altercations between the protagonists – and sequences in apartments or outdoors. The plot revolves around a love triangle between the shady entertainer and nightclub proprietor Frank Sinatra, his more mature lover and financial backer Rita Hayworth, and the young bar singer Kim Novak. As it gradually escalates into a conflict, the color is staged accordingly. After a number of initial sequences, kept mainly in shades of ivory, beige, and gray, the scenes become increasingly vivid. Rita Hayworth reaches a color climax around the sixtieth minute, in a private moment after a night of love, while her rival, Kim Novak, builds herself up color by color until she succeeds in outplaying Hayworth during the final sections of the film. Hayworth’s scene is narcissistic and glamorous, and it takes place in the simultaneous harmony and contrast of an elegant selection of the spectrum. But Novak’s gradual victory develops step by step, and her costumes mark this development in a series of successive colors.

Rita Hayworth’s morning after begins as she wakes up at home (fig. 1a). She is alone, and her solitary presence anticipates her later fate: although

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20 See the color wheel on page 74 in the present volume.
21 On simultaneous and successive contrast, see Hilmar Mehnert, Film, Licht, Farbe: Ein Handbuch für Filmschaffende und Filmfreunde, 2nd ed. (Halle: VEB Fotokinoverlag, 1963), 251 and 268.
Fig. 1 a-d: Pal Joey
erotically successful at this point, over the course of the plot she will lose Frank Sinatra’s love. A luxurious bed, its headboard padded with shimmering lime-green silk, stands next to gathered curtains in shades of a gentle green that inclines toward turquoise, and a gentle olive with a shimmer of greenish gold. The lime green of the headboard seems to support and refresh these shades, and its organic hue establishes a connection with the fruity colors of the actress, mediating between the areas. Spread out on the bed we see creamy white silk bedclothes and Hayworth herself, putting on an alluring, peach colored negligee, against which her complexion stands out delicately and to which her chestnut hair corresponds elegantly. Saturated primary hues – especially red – are avoided, as are dark shadows. All the various shades of the ambiance combine to create an ensemble in pastel. Rather than intense contrasts, faintly clashing background notes give character to the composition – adding just the bite it needs to avoid looking sweet.

Hayworth is preoccupied with herself and slightly melancholy. Taking a shower voluptuously (fig. 1b), she sings the famous song “Bewitched, bothered, and bewildered” all to herself – Pal Joey is, after all, a musical – while a series of details of her room come into view. Depending on the lighting, her hair looks sometimes almost blonde, sometimes dark or chestnut, and, depending on the mood, rust-red, dark brown, and corn yellow pieces of furniture appear, so that the initial chord of colors shifts and intensifies from moment to moment. However, the colors remain within the selected scheme, and red, green, and blue exist only as mixed values. There is not a single moment in which the colors do not conform to Rita Hayworth’s person; everything is coordinated to flatter her beauty. Later in the film, Hayworth’s wardrobe will lose its vividness to the same extent that her rival asserts herself through the coloring of her clothes.

Kim Novak wears monochromes almost exclusively. If all her dresses were lined up in one shot, they would produce an Easter-egg effect. Progressing by way of a subdued red, a porcelain blue, a clear purple, at a decisive point in the plot she finds herself in a brilliant emerald green and then moves on to its complementary color, an equally brilliant primary red, as will be described below (figs. 2b and c). At the very end she is dressed in a creamy white; a raincoat tailored from the same fabric as Frank Sinatra’s coat, with whom she will now remain together (fig. 2d).

The crisis around Kim Novak arises when Sinatra’s business partner, Rita Hayworth, becomes jealous. At first the color green appears to be assigned to Hayworth. In front of the green chairs of the nightclub (fig. 1c), which she
Fig. 2 a-d: Pal Joey
and Sinatra designed together, Hayworth is involved in conversation with Sinatra as Novak performs her next number onstage. Novak, inserted in occasional close-ups (fig. 2a), conforms to a reddish color scheme – healthy and contrary to the cool subtlety of Hayworth, whose greenish-beige costume fits into the decor in the way described above, rounded off with ivory-white trimmings and a small hat. Sitting on a chair between her and Sinatra is his shaggy little dog, also ivory in color, suggesting a family of three. But the conversation is hostile; Hayworth demands that Novak be fired immediately.

Sinatra joins Novak in her dressing room. She has changed into a green dress that fits around her body like a case. After all the green upholstery in the nightclub, we associate her retrospectively and subliminally with the furniture. In her proper dress, she appears respectable and rather buttoned up. It is therefore particularly out of place when Sinatra, who has come to humiliate her, proposes she do a striptease number as her new act. Novak agrees with a forced smile but breaks out in tears as soon as he has left. The little dog, who had slipped in with its master, jumps on her lap to console her. And we realize that its fur and her hair are identical in color – if only in this shot (fig. 1d). Apparently the family relationships are not what the previous scene has led us to suppose: not Hayworth but Novak is “the right one,” even though for the moment she will have to content herself with the dog. When she subsequently enters the nightclub, we get the message spelled out clearly: her colors fit better than those of Hayworth, and it is unmistakable that she belongs there.

After a few more complications, the striptease number is being rehearsed, with pastel rococo costumes and Mozart’s _A Little Night Music_. Novak, whose unexpectedly plump legs suit neither striptease nor Mozart, works with valiant determination, until Sinatra’s better impulses take hold and he cancels the number. In response, out of anger and disappointment, Hayworth decides to close the nightclub. Defiantly, Novak chooses a triumphant red for her next performance. It is as yet undecided what her prospects will be – she is still fighting – but her dress betrays the outcome. It may seem the wrong choice for her emotional state, but it expresses her dramatic potential, especially in contrast with the green dress of the previous crisis scene. In the succession of the two complementary colors that clearly dominate all the other hues, she develops into the center of energy. The subtlety of the nuances that connote Hayworth’s wealth and cosmopolitanism succumb to the simple, loud color scheme of the little singer from a small town – the “mouse with the build,” as Sinatra puts it appreciatively.
III.

**Chungking Express** (Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong 1994) is probably one of its director’s most famous films, even though it was made spontaneously and with a low budget during a lull in the production of Wong’s ambitious *Ashes of Time.* An unconventional auteur filmmaker who writes his own screenplays and ensures maximum control over his films, Wong Kar-wai has often been called a postmodernist and an “Asian Godard.” He prefers to work with a long-standing team which includes, along with the production designer William Chang Suk-ping, the Australian cinematographer Christopher Doyle, who at that point was active mostly in Asia.

Among the favored expressive means of Wong and Doyle are a handheld camera driven to the extreme and moving so rapidly that often only blurred shreds and strips can be made out; selective racking of focus; lighting that alternates between neon brightness, colored filters, and glimmering residual light; slow motion; and accelerated motion. In particular, their style is characterized by an eccentric manipulation of time. The actors sometimes move before the camera at reduced speed – in a kind of natural slow motion – but will be accelerated by the camera to a degree that their gestures look almost normal on screen, while other people in the image seem to be moving much too quickly. Sometimes acceleration, with its correspondingly longer exposure times, is also employed so that movements blur, and this effect is later combined with another technique, so-called step printing. This involves copying individual frames several times, thereby extending the material until once again twenty-four frames per second are reached. The result is a visual paradox in which the image carries the signs of long exposure but the actions seem to correspond to real time. Wong and Doyle refer to these techniques as their “signature style,” and its nervous surreality lends visual flair to the film and to its strangely convoluted, erratic—at once halting and explosive—narration.

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22 Thanks to the intervention of Quentin Tarantino, who brought the film to the United States, *Chungking Express* became a cult film.


24 One has to keep in mind that the accelerated-motion effect results when fewer frames per second than normal pass through the camera, and the slow-motion effect when more than 24 frames per second do. Both techniques affect the exposure time.

Chungking Express consists of two episodes – two short stories, so to speak – which are linked by the common location of Hong Kong, by casually recurring visual motifs, by the same snack bar with a paternal proprietor (who anchors the events in each case), and by the fact that both episodes feature a young policeman as the main character. A third episode had been planned, which would have balanced out the narrative while making it more conventional, but the script for it was reworked and extended for the film Fallen Angels (1995). Now the two remaining parts stand in an interesting, unresolved tension to each other. In addition, there is an unusual soundtrack with a first-person voice-over that at times narrates the story and at times articulates the thoughts of a protagonist; unlike mainstream cinema practice, it can belong to different characters, characters who appear in parallel stories and only occasionally meet. The camerawork and the jittery editing with abrupt cuts and jump cuts is so dynamic and autonomous that the narrative structure seems almost natural in comparison.

The two stories are told with a similar point of departure. Each of the two compliant, sentimental, rather passive young policemen (Takeshi Kaneshiro and Tony Leung Chiu-wai) has recently been left by his girlfriend. Each pursues different strategies to get over this loss: lonely monologues, absurd commemoration programs, forced new encounters, playing with chance, excessive alcohol, or self-imposed rituals of liberation. Each of the policemen is assigned a female counterpart. In the first story, she is a drug dealer with a blond wig and sunglasses (Brigitte Lin Chin-hsia), who is the head of an Indian gang. She solves her conflicts with a gun, and seems to belong in a different genre of film. In the second story, she is a young waitress from the snack bar (Faye Wong) who falls in love with the protagonist but does not receive much attention. In an effort to be close to him anyway, she gains access to his apartment, cleaning it with abandon and redesigning it step by step behind his back. Each woman lives in her own world, which they arrange with imagination and autonomy, although in very different ways. In both cases, the encounter leads to nothing, but without leaving behind any bad feelings or regrets. We get the impression that everyone involved will manage to deal with his or her daily life in an entertaining and satisfying way.

In what follows, I will examine only the first of the two episodes, since its coloring is more extravagant. Fig. 3a, with its blurred background, illustrates the “signature style” – unfortunately, it is hardly possible to capture the dynamics of the image in a screenshot. Wong and Doyle employed slow motion plus step-printing in combination with a blue filter, turning all
Fig. 3 a-d: CHUNGKING EXPRESS
colors into cloudy, glazed hues of blue, from a man's originally white shirt to the rear wall. A considerable portion of the film is in this blue, which serves to announce not so much the time of day as a sensuous atmosphere; night scenes in CHUNGKING EXPRESS can also be tinted purple or brownish. The blue comes across as more peculiar than the conventional day-for-night coding of classical Hollywood film, which merely served to indicate that a scene is taking place at night. In recent global cinema, especially in police and action genres from the United States, France, and East Asia, the use of filters to level out the colors of the image is not unusual. But the films often stick to a gloomy indistinctness and only occasionally achieve the sensuous effects the filters have in Wong Kar-wai’s film.

The filters affect the whole image. As most objects appear to be the same color, they can easily fuse together. Fig. 3b shows a moment from a sequence where this is particularly noticeable. The drug dealer, lingering in a murky lane, appears almost non-chromatic, her silhouette emerging only faintly against the background. A green shine, which does not come from any visible source, seems to swim over her head without illuminating her at all. The woman’s golden wig and khaki trench coat combine into a continuous dark form that fuses with the actress’s complexion. The glow of a cigarette that flashes for a fraction of a second provides the only warming accent.

Fig. 3c shows the drug dealer in the light-flooded terminal of the airport. The filter has been changed to yellow, which makes the yellow of the signs stand out as unusually saturated and pure. The coloring of the woman in the trench coat is affected in a different way: she has now almost totally transformed into a gentle beige. The bright yellow of the destination board behind her competes with her, but also flatters her, heightening and supporting her own coloring. Her sunglasses, which were previously as dark as the wall, now stand out distinctively. They seem almost justified in this gleaming brightness. The exotic character of the drug dealer, otherwise a mysterious shape in the dark, now asserts itself clearly: a Chinese woman masking her ethnicity.

The parallel plot about the lovesick policeman also takes place in the artificial light of downtown Hong Kong, a city in which the streets look like interiors. Again, the filters create distortions of color in which the characters only assert themselves through movement. At the snack bar (fig. 3d), the mustard-colored ceiling panels attract attention, as does the Coca-Cola logo, which has taken on an unhealthy bluish red; both hues are echoed in the sauce bottles on the counter, which stand like horizontal columns within the vertically articulated image. The watery blue light has usurped nearly all the other objects. Basically, filter effects are easy to achieve. But in the work of Wong and Doyle, the filters are superimposed on a color scheme that
Fig. 4 a-d: CHUNGKING EXPRESS
interacts with the lighting and is tailored to the composition of the scenes. The many whites in the image, which never look white in this film, and the meticulous approach to color accents results in a very special style with an appeal of its own. Large zones of the image are leveled out, while some objects emerge as strangely sculptural and establish new affinities with each other.

Figs. 4a and 4b are bathed in a shimmering, fluid green. The protagonist is at home, ready to spoon out his cans of pineapple, all of which have his birthday as their expiration date – a philosophical idea that elegantly runs through the film. He has opened the first can sitting next to his fish tank, which fills the screen during the opening of the sequence and in which the young policeman is now reflected, glassy and watery among the fish. The green coloring denatures the pineapple, making it appear strange and inedible. The viewer’s attention shifts to the expiration date, to the process of eating, and to the young policeman’s state of mind. In the remainder of the sequence – after he has spoken to his (green) dog – he moves to the back of the room, balances on a kitchen stool, and wedges himself against the wall as he empties more cans: an image of melancholy, thought-filled isolation in a space that seems to glow from within like a neon lamp.

In the next sequence, the two main characters are brought together. Determined to meet an attractive woman, the policeman approaches the drug dealer, who is sitting alone and similarly displaced at the same bar. Fig. 4c shows the two of them in a long, rather one-sided interaction – in a two-shot drenched in golden light that seems part gloomy, part intimate. The lighting is now more conventional than before; the faces are photogenically modeled by shadows, and the ambiance of the bar could realistically account for the color of the light. However, after all the filter scenes thus far, the scene looks like another variation on artifice. The difference between the two main characters, their contrary professions, their incompatible mood and nature, is bathed for a moment in a golden light, shown as a shared but tenuous experience.

Fig. 4d is an example of the shots that occasionally punctuate the film and show objects not assigned directly to one of the characters. The jukebox with dancing records appears several times throughout Chungking Express, filmed from different angles. Pointing self-reflectively to the score and source music of the film, it also contributes to its overall pop atmosphere and alien coloring. The golden light of the bar, though in this motif more

26 The film’s soundtrack corresponds to its narrative style: “The soundtrack by Frankie Chan and Roel A. Garcia out-pastiches their previous work […]. The score is an almost discordant mix of up-to-the-moment synthesizer cues, wailing electric guitars, source music from various ethnicities, Hindi chanting, and various pop songs,” Curtis K. Tsui (see note 23), 114f.
Cinematic color as likeness and as artifact

transparent and shot through with yellow neon spots, fills the juke box with a vivid glamour. The records, with their sheen and glitter, appear to be from another world. Subliminally, we sense that they look like the slices of pineapple that we briefly saw in the scene with the expiration date.

IV.

Chungking Express makes us aware of a fact mainstream films usually avoid disclosing: the dependence of the image on lighting and camera technique. Whereas Pal Joey employs defused light that is “invisible” for the viewers in order to produce an almost shadowless brightness that results in constant, solid color surfaces, the film from Hong Kong operates with unstable light and the manipulation of color filters. Whereas the Hollywood camera of Pal Joey behaves conventionally and hence transparently, not drawing the viewers’ attention to itself, Christopher Doyle’s camera proceeds dynamically and surprisingly, to the limits of its capability. A constant excess of clarity in the one film is contrasted with blurring, confusion, and virtuosity in the other.

In its color scheme, Pal Joey sports Easter-egg effects and pleasant, single-colored costumes. Each color event is either echoed or has a complementary contrast in the ambiance. The primary hues of the spectrum are never all united in one composition; but there are always as many present as necessary to make the scene look fresh and lively. Chungking Express, by contrast, avoids clear, saturated hues over long stretches of film. By using color filters, each shot obtains a dominant basic color, and most hues exist only as muted mixed tones. The result is frequently a kind of underwater effect in which the colors appear to be wet or seen through glass, and the boundaries between objects are largely eliminated.

Whereas Pal Joey regards the characters as the main issue, so that they stand out against the background in every scene, the characters in Chungking Express often fuse with their surroundings. They are treated as part of the ambiance. Whereas the characters in Pal Joey keep their colors as constant as possible while moving around, in Chungking Express they are in permanent chromatic metamorphosis. Pal Joey is largely organized by object colors, Chungking Express by fluid movement and colored light, and even skin color is subjected to flux. In the classic Technicolor films of Hollywood, skin color was sacrosanct. It was the most sensitive element in each shot, and all the other elements had to resonate with it. Consequently and without exception, the complexions of the actresses in Pal Joey look
rosy, milky, and delicate. Often the background is in neutral, inorganic colors in order to bring out this effect even more. By contrast, Chungking Express shows no qualms about making its characters look green or purple, and it does not seem to matter if their faces blur in the filtered light.

Both films structure color for narrative ends. In the case of Pal Joey, this is expressed, on the one hand, by particular color chords for different locations, so that each place radiates a specific atmosphere and corresponds to the characters assigned to it. On the other, the costumes are changed frequently, so that the characters are constantly being redefined in their mood and status within the constellation of the ensemble. Each protagonist is systematically and individually emphasized. At the same time, each new costume renders a new dramatic impulse. The green costume calls out for red, as it were, and the colors gear into one another and intertwine in the course of the action. In the case of Chungking Express, clothing remains rather constant from scene to scene, and when it is changed, the color is not the main motif. It does not serve to mark the characters as individuals, since they are all subjected to the same filter effects. In this film, too, the shots and sequences are contrasted with one another successively, but this is mainly achieved through the changing color cast. Moreover, the color does not follow a continuous, incremental arc; rather, the film often returns to a filter already used previously. The changes of color are based on variations of the segments, not on a goal-oriented, linear progress of the action.

As to the relative verisimilitude of the two color systems, both are probably equally far removed from the real world, but they achieve their artificiality in contrary ways. Pal Joey attempts to present a prettified, over-determined reality. Everything is as visible and clearly defined as possible under the best lighting conceivable. But the preference for bright colors and their spreading across large expanses with few shadows seems artificially exaggerated. Also, the clothing obtains all too much presence and tends to overpower the characters. As certain objects in their surroundings correspond with the characters, the images look coordinated, staged, and devised in advance. More so than in Chungking Express, the actors emerge as players of a role they have put on along with their costumes. And many of the images resemble comic strips with their fixed and solid object colors and their intensification in terms of significance.

At first glance, Chungking Express seems much more distorted: the changing of filters is exhibited so obtrusively that the technical aspect is unmistakable, and the way the filters attack all the other colors represents a strange leveling out of the spectrum. On the other hand, the muted quality of the colors is certainly in keeping with everyday urban experience, just
as much as its opposite – harsh points of neon lighting – is in keeping with night in the city. The way the characters blur with their ambiance is another phenomenon familiar to us from dim lighting in which the objects no longer assert themselves against their surroundings. On the whole, what counts in CHUNGKING EXPRESS is not the consistent quality of certain objects, but the flow, the color of the moment that manifests itself like an aroma.

Translated by Steven Lindberg
Fig. 1: Overture to Frank Tashlin’s *The Girl Can’t Help It* (US 1956).
The image changes from standard gauge in black-and-white to Cinemascope in color at Tom Ewell’s command.
It is not without reason that we speak of color *tones* and color *compositions* in art, and of tone *color* and *chromatic* scales in music. Analogies and metaphors run in both directions, art borrowing terms from music, and music terms from art in order to label phenomena that otherwise have no name.

When talking about the orchestration of color, we imagine that the colors adopt roles not unlike those of musical instruments in a concerto: they can establish relationships of tension or harmonic vicinities, can reinforce or disturb one another, take over from one another in terms of dominance, play a solo or a duet, or merely function as accompaniment. Thus we can imagine a kind of score, according to which certain colors sound simultaneously or in sequence, are loud or quiet in terms of their degree of saturation, and lavish or sparse in their application depending on their extent on the plane of color. Certain notes can come together in constellations of three or four to form color chords, appearing together for a while and acting out a relationship.

In general, the analogy to music is rather flowery and approximate rather than exact and revealing, but it is by no means futile. Above all, it can illustrate how color in film occasionally becomes autonomous in order to perform a concerto of its own kind.

*What follows is intended as a contribution to a *historical poetics of the color film.* Using examples from a corpus that is rarely regarded as a unified group in film studies (indeed, seldom regarded at all) – namely, light entertainment from Hollywood between 1956 and 1964 – I will attempt to work out the then prevailing style of color. It can be described as an excessive, often self-reflective, playful approach that was employed for a few years across genres in Hollywood. The style was constructed on the plateau of the “classical” principles developed through two decades of Technicolor, but at the same time it parodies and undermines them.

In the mid-1930s, with the introduction of the three-strip Technicolor process which covered all the colors of the spectrum, a discussion ensued
in Hollywood over the “correct” use of color. On the one hand, it seemed regrettable to bid farewell to the achievements of black-and-white cinematography, which had accomplished great mastery in lighting. Furthermore, black-and-white might be replaced by garish colors, setting Hollywood further back in the hierarchy of the arts. On the other hand, new possibilities arose to compete with painting or to develop new aesthetic potentials and sensuous pleasures. At first, however, the goal was to establish artistic principles that would enable the color film to prove its worth.

In order to address the reservations of the film industry, to take the wind out of the sails of critics, and to confront the initial technical difficulties, the Technicolor corporation attempted to control the use of its three-color process. Its new, intricate and unwieldy cameras were not sold but rather leased to the studios, together with trained personnel – camera operators and so-called color consultants. The color consultants were responsible for supervising each production in order to avoid mistakes and demonstrate the strengths of the expensive technical process. Natalie Kalmus, ex-wife of Technicolor’s president, Herbert T. Kalmus, was the first such consultant and shaped the image of the profession. She described her approach as follows:

In the preparation of a picture we read the script and prepare the color chart for the entire production, each scene, sequence, set and character being considered. This chart may be compared to a musical score, and amplifies the picture in a similar way.²

Significant in Kalmus’s description of her work is the comprehensive approach. The goal was to develop nothing less than a chromatic score, which

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would determine not only the set design of individual scenes but establish a continuous scheme, an orchestration of color. Nothing should be left to chance; everything was developed from a tabula rasa, with great art and scrupulousness. Natalie Kalmus, who had quickly assembled a whole department of color consultants under her direction, developed a guideline for treating color aesthetically, complementing the “rules” Hollywood had already established. All in all, the Technicolor concept remained valid until well into the 1950s and beyond the company’s sphere of influence. Other manufacturers of color stock, such as Eastman Color (Metrocolor), also employed consultants to keep an eye on the cinematic use of color in Kalmus’s spirit.

The five most important principles of these aesthetics were naturalness, conventionality, artistic restraint, a clear hierarchy of characters and events, and narrative functionality.3 Naturalness meant a use of color in which the real world was taken as the standard, so that the sky should look blue, the leaves green, and above all human skin tones realistic (and attractive). Conventionality implied that strategies for cinematic color were based on concepts common in fashion, design, and art, and should make use of culturally established color symbolism. Artistic restraint was demanded in order to prevent the dreaded vulgarity and to ensure that the color did not intrude and was not exhibited for its own sake. Hierarchical arrangements regulated the structure of priorities: the stars – Hollywood’s main attraction – always had priority when it came to color; the protagonists were a clear level above the secondary characters, who were in turn a clear step above the props. Finally, narrative functionality was intended to ensure that color did not serve merely as surface decoration or accessory but became a significant, overarching factor in the narrative structure. It could be used as a principle of articulation or leitmotif, to mark climaxes, to indicate similarity or contrast, to anticipate, associate, or provide a metaphorical charge.

All these principles make sense. They make color seem natural in a pleasing way, and they offer the set designers a broad field of activity with clearly outlined tasks. Nevertheless, as easy to grasp as these principles might seem, they were not entirely unproblematic, for they established priorities and led to one-sided decisions that perpetuated themselves, while divergent approaches were rarely taken. Certain aesthetic solutions were repeated across all genres of film, and certain shades of color or harmonies that were perceived as pleasant or effective were used again and again. Only in exceptional cases did anyone experiment with differing concepts. Appar-

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3 On the aesthetic principles of Kalmus/Technicolor, see especially Neupert, “Technicolor and Hollywood” (see note 1).
ently no one in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s was prepared to pursue genuine alternatives such as impressionistic, atmospheric photography, or a documentary style in which the color was left unpretified and subject to coincidences and technical limitations.

By 1950, a period style had been established that easily complied with the principles of Technicolor. It is possible to identify a kind of standard, a backdrop against which variations could evolve without infringing on the fundamental validity of the principles. For example, there were special conditions for some genres or situations: it was permissible to fall back occasionally on the shadow aesthetics of the black-and-white film in order to produce a threatening atmosphere; westerns favored earthy landscape tones, except in saloon scenes; social problem films, to the extent they were photographed in color at all, preferred an unobtrusive look avoiding bright colors; for costume films and musicals, the principle of restraint was shelved, and show interludes in particular were allowed to indulge.

The standard for color films at the time can be summed up prototypically in the following eight points:

1. The lighting is usually bright, defused, and indirect; stark contrasts and chiaroscuro effects – essential stylistic means in the black-and-white film – were avoided. As a result, the saturation level and nuances of the colors seem as constant as possible; the bleaching of color into white spots or saturation into black are considered professional flaws. The hues are bright and clear, exhibiting the attractiveness of color.

2. The palette is reduced and oriented toward dominating hues reappearing from sequence to sequence. Usually only two or three basic colors occur, dominating the entire screen in slight variations. Especially in the red part of the spectrum, mixed colors such as rust, chestnut, mauve, or bordeaux are more popular than primary ones. Pastel shades are preferred to saturated colors, producing a delicately illuminated image soothing to the eye. All of this corresponds to the principle of restraint, but also permits conventions and trendy preferences to come through.

3. The backgrounds in interiors are reduced in terms of color and tend to be monochrome with nuances of off-white, ivory, light gray, beige – an almost inorganic palette that aims in the direction of black-and-white and is sometimes carried to the point of a veritable grisaille.

4. Against such backdrops, the actors and actresses can play their game with organic body colors and colorful costumes; they are supported in this by a few important props whose colors are adapted to the characters. This accentuation demands that the portrayal be clear and functional.
It emphasizes the essential, in keeping with the hierarchy of the various elements. Moreover, men and women are usually clearly distinguished: female stars wear colorful costumes whereas the men, as in real life, are dressed in darker, more austere hues.

5. The relationship between the background and the characters can be inverted. In order to express sudden changes in the plot, the costume colors of a scene may be used for the stage sets of the following scene, while the protagonists are now dressed in black/white/gray. In this variation, too, they remain clearly contoured against their surroundings. By sticking to its color scheme – which is merely inverted – the film retains its unity, in accordance with the principle of artistic restraint and the claim to conceptual consistency.

6. Intricate patterns of fabric or tapestry – popular in black-and-white films – are rarely seen. They are difficult to control in color film and risk disturbing the image. As a result, basic colors and monochrome fabrics dominate, directing or forcing the gaze on the characters. Women often stand out like figurines or models, their clothing setting them off against the background.

7. The palette is adapted to the actresses and actors, in particular to the hair and eyes of the female stars. The protagonists of a love story are typically chosen to be complementary to each other: a blonde or redhead versus a dark-haired suitor and vice versa. Such contrasts were also cultivated in black-and-white films, but in color more nuanced, individual, and less dualistic combinations offer themselves, making it possible to bring out triangular relationships as well.

8. Typically, the color concepts follow symbolic conventions. Dull, inconspicuous costumes express apathy or unhappiness; saturated colors represent vital force. Conflicts tend to be in strong colors: red stands for blood and aggression or passionate love. Depressive moods or emotional coolness are connoted in blue; yellow conveys hope but also signals envy; violet points to vanity, and so on. Color symbolism applies to characters as well as to entire sequences.

These tendencies in the use of color serve many narrative requirements and can be carried out either inconspicuously and blandly, or brilliantly and opulently. The style is oriented primarily around the protagonists, their relationships, and the space they occupy. Great or even excessive clarity is sought, and possibilities open up to group the figures effectively and shift them in relation to one another. Apparently, the principles apply mainly to interior shots in the studio: for exterior shots, they were less binding. As the classical
color style is to a large degree dependent on the lighting being controllable, it works best where most elements of the scene can be designed freely.

One result of these stylistic guidelines is that the world shown seems rather simplistic. The basic colors and consistent lighting produce flat planes rather than depth in space. Everything can be taken in at a glance, nothing remains ambiguous or enigmatic – at least not on the level of pictorial composition. In addition, the characters seem to be cut out, so to speak, and to move dominantly and autonomously relative to their surroundings, rather than blending with them.

This style is as ill-suited to fateful, mysterious, chaotic, and irrational subjects as it is to naturalistic milieu studies that seek to show how people are dependent on the world they live in. The black-and-white film continued to be a common option for such projects: war films, gloomy melodramas, and urban crime films tended to remain faithful to black-and-white well into the 1950s, as did documentaries and other non-fiction films (with the exception of travelogues, which already offered color in the 1930s).

During the second half of the 1950s, a group of films began to push the tried-and-tested system to its limits, or at least to approach color more creatively and excessively. It goes without saying that light entertainment was a suitable playground for this. Comedy allows for formal jokes and stylistic ruptures; parody can enter in, and the set can be designed in a mannerist or unrealistic way. In comedy, a fictional creation of illusion or continual immersion of the viewers is less desirable than variety and surprise on whatever level.

The corpus considered here consists primarily of sex and marriage comedies, lightweight love romances, backstage and pop musicals, situation comedies of a socio-critical bent with comical characters and a penchant for slapstick. Color is just one element among many, all of which move in the same direction and seek satirical, parodistic, or self-reflective effects. Correspondingly, the genres also run together, so that the corpus can more easily be defined by its tone and style than by the usual genre boundaries. Moreover, it does not seem to matter which directors were at work – promi-

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4 An interesting exception is Desert Fury of 1947, directed by Lewis Allen, which can be categorized as a melodramatic film noir. Using chiaroscuro effects and discordant colors, it produces an equivalent to the gloomy black-and-white style of the period. See my essay “Desert Fury: a Film Noir in Color” (2012) in this volume.
nent auteurs are found alongside relatively unknown names – or which studio was responsible for the production. Apparently, what mattered more for the color style were the aforementioned color consultants and certain set decorators, costume designers, and architects, whose individual styles can occasionally be recognized and traced.

The period 1956 to 1964 suggested itself according to the notes I had gathered in order to keep track of interesting color schemes throughout film history: my files produced a cluster of such examples for the time frame in question. One explanation on the technical level is that the use of color negatives lowered the cost of filming in color in the early 1950s. Furthermore, the switch to widescreen formats also invited the use of color: widescreen compositions are based less on spatial depth than the 3:4 aspect ratio of the classical period, and the use of color that articulates the plane is well-suited to the format. The widescreen gauge was mainly developed as a result of competition with television, which at the time was still in a narrow format and in black-and-white. While all these factors contributed to the rise of color, Natalie Kalmus’s aesthetics had reached a point of maturation that called for variations. Mannerisms and parodies were in the air, and light entertainment offered itself as the right field to play with color.

The phenomenon raises the question why light entertainment had a heyday in the postwar period, whereas the era did not produce a genuine comedy format of its own – and indeed, even a “dearth of comedy” could be detected. Changes in the social climate during the second half of the 1950s can be assumed to have affected the mood of filmmakers and audiences. The initial phase of the Cold War with its paranoia and witch hunt in domestic politics was over, and the Korean War had ended. The grim years had driven Hollywood to preemptive obedience: many names in the film industry were on the blacklist, and those who were permitted to work tended to conform. But by the mid-1950s a kind of normality had set in, even if the repressions had not exactly turned into an overall liberalization. The populace was dominated by consumerism, and with the election of Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower as president in 1952, capitalism and prosperity could unfold in a stable, conservative environment. This only

5 See Gordon Gow, *Hollywood in the Fifties* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1971), 168. Gow offers the following explanation for the lack of comedies: “One theory about this was based upon the fact that the majority of good comedy writers and performers are inclined to take life seriously; therefore, since times were grim, not only in regard to Hollywood’s precarious status but in respect of world politics, a sense of humour no longer came easily to practitioners in what has always been regarded as a very difficult field at the best of times.” There were, of course, exceptions. In a survey well worth reading, Gow describes a number of comedies that were both funny and relevant to the time.
began to change over the course of the 1960s, when new international and domestic political problems set the tone. The protest movements, political assassinations, and the escalating Vietnam War led to far-reaching changes in domestic politics, to which Hollywood also reacted – with greater or lesser delay. The era of the so-called New Hollywood ultimately brought the classical style and its late variations to a close.

To film historians, light entertainment of the 1950s and 1960s was probably less interesting than the social problem film of the same period because of the briefness of the time span and the generic heterogeneity of the corpus, as well as the mentality and ideology conveyed by the films. On the one hand, the films were still produced under the Production Code, which prohibited sexual permissiveness; at the same time, they were riddled with suggestive remarks, which often come across as relatively clumsy. The relationship between the sexes unfolded on the conservative ground of the Eisenhower era: even though the films try to break out of it in many respects, the spirit remains pre-feminist, often almost misogynistic. Moreover, the corpus is dominated by an unsympathetic attitude to the characters in general, even when the films are close to melodrama or romance. All of these traits distinguish the corpus unfavorably from the much warmer and subtler screwball comedies of the 1930s, with which they are sometimes compared. The penchant for rumpus and corny jokes calls for a particular form of humor that prefers silliness to amusing wit and elegance. Hence the comedies of the period often seem strained and unkind, and they are frequently all too strident. But viewed from a historical distance and in the right mood, their exaggerations and simple-mindedness can be quite enjoyable.

It is this concept of entertainment that allows color to accent and accelerate the narrative, to caricature the characters, to intensify situations, or to point to the artificiality of the production. Color also lends itself to taking up vernacular trends, as the films were typically set in the present day, and usually in the fast-moving, trendsetting metropolis of New York. In the age of consumerism, color had become eminently important in American life. Interior decoration and fashion celebrated triumphs: nylon, acrylic, and plastic permitted new designs; automobiles were marketed in brilliant colors. It was part of the style of the era to coordinate the colors of objects – certain combinations marked countless homes. So it is not surprising that the excessive color style of the films in question is often based on chords of color that extend across several scenes – a narrative strategy that was easily derived from the classical color style described above.

In the search for precursors to the specific use of color, only a few exceptions announce the upcoming stylistic direction: for example, Vincente
Minnelli’s *An American in Paris* (1951), especially in the bold and simple serial design of the colors in the imaginary dance scenes; Howard Hawks’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), whose satirical tone and pink/red numbers with Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell stand out extravagantly; or several of the musicals with Esther Williams: *Neptune’s Daughter* (Edward Buzzell, 1949) or *Million Dollar Mermaid* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1952).


Preferred actresses were Kim Novak, Lana Turner, Shirley MacLaine, Doris Day, Lauren Bacall, Rita Hayworth, Janis Paige, and Debbie Reynolds; the preferred actors were Rock Hudson, Frank Sinatra, Gregory Peck, Rod Taylor, Gig Young, and David Niven. As for the field of comedy, only Tony Randall, Jerry Lewis/Dean Martin, Red Skelton, and Tom Ewell did truly belong – another expression of the tendency to mix genre elements by bringing together actors of different provenance.

**The Girl Can’t Help It** (Frank Tashlin, 1956)

Tashlin’s films are shrill in more than one respect – “garish, vulgar, excessive, chintzy, and blatantly exploitative,” as J. Hoberman has put it – and it

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6 For a detailed color analysis of *Pal Joey*, see my essay “Cinematic Color as Likeness and as Artifact” (2001) in the present volume.
7 See the color analysis dedicated to this film in Marschall (see note 1), 323f.
may be related to Tashlin’s origins in the world of cartoons⁹ that he liked to employ color in a flat and loud way for special effects. The Girl Can’t Help It is a satire of the pop music milieu and at the same time a love fantasy in which a crumpled, mouse-gray alcoholic (Tom Ewell) falls in love with a platinum blonde with incredible curves (the Monroe imitation Jayne Mansfield), who nevertheless turns out to be unassuming and domestic – and to return his feelings.

The film begins in black-and-white and in the standard gauge, and it sets out self-reflectively and playfully: Tom Ewell addresses the public from a music studio. He speaks in part in the intonation of advertising, in part in the style of film noir about what is to be expected, and he complains about the narrow image, which suddenly expands to Cinemascope as he pushes the side walls apart. Then he asks for color, and as if by magic everything becomes colorful: “gorgeous color by De Luxe,” as he comments (fig. 1). This opens the way for a comedy that operates as satire, situation comedy, and slapstick, with fast-moving rock ’n’ roll and bold color effects. All this adds up, again in Hoberman’s words, to a “supremely unfunny comedy,” “banal beyond anyone’s dreams,” that has stood the test of time as camp.

Most of the images follow a single color chord consisting of black, white, bright red, pale red, and purple (with an occasional shot of emerald green), working a lot with spotlights and changing filters – atypical for the era of uniform lighting unassociated with any concrete light source – and employing an approach that is on the whole more colorful than conceptually striking. Yet amid all of this appears the comic figure of Jayne Mansfield, who is dressed in white, black, yellow, and bright red, standing out against the background like an artificial figurine. There is, however, also a male character, a retired gangster (Edmond O’Brien), seen in a bright red jacket and a huge red dressing gown with white polka dots, forming a visual counterpart to Mansfield (who owns a white dress with red polka dots) – an expression of excess that continues through the film like a running gag and reduces the symbolic value of the color red to the absurd (figs. 2c-d). The gangster is a secondary figure, and his romantic relationship to Mansfield has already ended, so that their pairing by means of color is misleading.

Jayne Mansfield picks up Tom Ewell for a picnic at the beach. As is to be expected, her oversized convertible is the same brilliant red as her many items of red clothing. Yet Mansfield is now wearing a yellow dress – a color

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⁹ Tashlin illustrated children’s books and drew both caricatures and models for animated films: see Greg Ford, “Cross-referred Media: Frank Tashlin’s Cartoon Work,” in Roger/Garcia (see note 8), 79-84; the book is also filled with illustrations from Tashlin’s graphic work.
Fig. 2 a-d: *The Girl Can't Help It* (Frank Tashlin, 1956)
that occurs nowhere else in the film and can almost be classified as a breach of the system (fig. 2a). Red and yellow dominate the image in an overwhelming way – and ultimately overwhelm Tom Ewell – as if the car and the blonde had stepped into a fantastic cartoon in which the elements mutually reinforce their intensity. In the end, Mansfield hides modestly behind a bush to remove her yellow dress, revealing an equally yellow bathing suit beneath it, and walks into the blue sea against the blue sky (fig. 2b).

Color in animated films was already well developed before color gained a foothold in feature films. Walt Disney, for whom Tashlin worked for a time, was one of the pioneers. Individual exposures of drawings permitted much better control of color than live-action films; moreover, there were no (unwanted) shadows, so that the figures could stand out clearly from one another in distinct planes of color. No matter whether this was the result of working in animated films, of the one-dimensionality of the characters, of Mansfield’s extremely eroticized, doll-like body, or of many factors coming together, Tashlin, his art directors (Lyle R. Wheeler, Leland Fuller), set decorators (Walter M. Scott, Paul S. Fox), and his color consultant (Leonard Doss) chose an approach to color that was based on the style of the time but took it to the extreme. The Girl Can’t Help It breaks from the artistic restraint advocated by Natalie Kalmus in favor of the vulgarity and garishness she tried to prevent, and eschews the advocated narrative functionality and consistency of the color concept. Other films followed this extreme example only to a limited degree, each production liberating itself from the imperatives of restraint in its own way.

**DESIGNING WOMAN (Vincente Minnelli, 1957)**

Vincente Minnelli was no run-of-the-mill director, and the decor of his films tends to be deployed very artfully. Already in the 1940s, he had demonstrated an unusual sensitivity to color in Meet Me in St. Louis (1944) and The Pirate (1948); and in the 1950s his aforementioned musical An American in Paris (1951) and the van Gogh biopic Lust for Life (1956) showed sumptuous and original color compositions.

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10 On the early three-color process in animated films, see Scott Higgins, “Demonstrating Three-Colour Technicolor” (see note 1), 359ff.

11 In his next work, Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter? (1957), Tashlin did not continue his play with color; the film is rather moderate in this respect.
Designing Woman is, however, a rather marginal phenomenon within Minnelli’s oeuvre, lacking the originality of an auteur film, as it belongs stylistically and thematically to the gender comedies from the late 1950s. The scholarly literature acknowledges the film only in passing, and even Minnelli himself dedicated little space to it in his autobiography, *I Remember It Well*. The venue of the plot is the trendy milieu of designers and theater people in contemporary New York. It revolves around a marriage concluded hastily between two headstrong individuals, and the casting of dark-haired Gregory Peck and blonde Lauren Bacall – the even blonder Grace Kelly had originally been planned – follows the polarizing color style of the era. Minnelli’s creativity is palpable more in the precision of the design within the framework of the existing parameters than in a break with traditions. Nevertheless, he reveals a relatively playful approach to motifs and genre elements, which he employed – or had his collaborators employ – with virtuosity. The film pushes the established color system further in a trendy direction and occasionally, in brief sleights of hand, to extremes.

Minnelli worked with a staff of proven collaborators – the art directors William A. Horning and Preston Ames, the set decorators Henry Grace and Edwin B. Willis, the cinematographer John Alton, and the color consultant Charles K. Hagedorn – and in many cases their collaboration dates back to the 1940s. In his autobiography, Minnelli mentions his coworkers in the field of sets and costumes: “The art direction of Preston Ames and the set decoration of Henry Grace were a marvel – slick and colorful.” But he discusses his own artistic decisions only in the area of sound, e.g. the subjectivizing of noises when the protagonist is dealing with a bad hangover and hears every rustling as painfully loud. The fact that the same scene exceeds all bounds in terms of color but is not mentioned by Minnelli – the sky radiates magenta-red, a break with the dictate of realism (fig. 3d) – seems to be an indication, if not complete proof, that the color design was in the hands of others.

A sports reporter (Gregory Peck) has married a fashion designer (Lauren Bacall) without knowing her cultural background – or the woman herself – in detail. He is a happy-go-lucky type who lives in a small disorderly

14 Ibid., 203.
apartment and loves proletarian rounds of poker (a milieu in which the elegant Peck is not very credible). By contrast, his bride is rooted in the worlds of haute couture and the theater, lives in luxury, and cultivates friendships in high society (Grace Kelly would have been more plausible here). Shortly after their wedding, friends arrange a surprise party for the young couple in their apartment.

Peck enters the scene hesitantly and remains on the periphery – in the kitchen, beyond which the broad field of the salon opens up (fig. 3a). The room has a platform on the far end, on which some members of the party are presented as if on a stage. Thanks to this terracing, the scene is clearly articulated, despite the crowd of people. Peck, to whom one of the guests is explaining who the other guests are, observes the events. We watch him as he does so, allowing our views to be in part guided by him, and in part to glide past on their own.

The two men in their dark suits stand in the foreground, fiddling with translucent bottles and glasses. Behind them, in the middle of the room, many guests are having cocktails. Most of them are also dressed in black: dark, interchangeable figures, with a corpulent woman in turquoise between them and, diagonally behind her, a turquoise painting; occasionally a turquoise pillow can be seen as well, lying next to her on the white sofa. Her dress has spawned offshoots of color, so to speak, to liven up the view into the throng and make it more interesting.

Then there is the third level of the platform in the background, also filled with people in dark clothing, and Bacall, viewed from behind or frontally in a brilliantly red dress, who goes around offering drinks. After a while, a third colorful figure, a man in a bluish-purple suit, enters the middle ground and contrasts with the woman’s turquoise – their colors clashing suggestively, but to no narrative avail. Contrary to story-telling traditions, this man does not come into conflict with her; indeed, neither he nor she plays a role in the events.

What is the meaning of this composition? On the one hand, it is functional, since it structures the space in a three-dimensional terracing; it directs attention; it provides the right mix of movement with points of stability; it accounts for the fundamental homogeneity of the guests, although some of them, being artists and intellectuals, are allowed to step out of line; and it opens up the stage so that Bacall remains present as a vanishing point. After all, she is what matters to Gregory Peck. Thus, the scene corresponds to the usual demands for directing attention. On the other hand, it offers a surplus of color, particularly in the exact repetition of turquoise in objects of secondary importance, rivaling the bright red of Bacall’s dress.
Fig. 3 a-d: DESIGNING WOMAN (Vincente Minnelli, 1957)
Yet the color chord proper and the aesthetic surplus will only be completed in the following scene. It evolves around the agitated dialogue of the young couple, who sit facing each other on the white sofa. Bacall has removed her red dress and is wrapped in an ivory negligee; Peck is still wearing the black suit. There are three pillows stacked on each side of the sofa, and as if by chance they take up the colors of the party: red, turquoise, bluish-purple, and, on the other side, bluish-purple, turquoise, and red (fig. 3b). The color chord of the party becomes an end in itself, and the composition obtains a playful intrinsic value. The pillows have taken control, as it were, and hence a lightness dominates the scene, so that the altercation between the spouses cannot be taken too seriously. More essential than the conflict – about the polarization of the sexes and issues of gender politics – is the “musical” element of the color chords that twine from one scene into the next.

The remainder of the film is correspondingly unserious, ignoring the dramatic and realistic elements in favor of comedic effects and choreographed action moments. Later scenes also feature striking color concepts, always in alternation with less conspicuous passages in the pastel style of the period. The color is made particularly aggressive in a scene with a former lover of Peck’s, when the woman (dressed in red) tips a bowl of tomato soup into his lap. Or when the colors of the woman’s apartment are inverted (fig. 3c), so that the walls and furniture are slate gray and tomato-colored objects abound, while the characters stand out in light gray.

Les Girls (George Cukor, 1957)

The design concept of George Cukor’s Cole Porter musical Les Girls is less playful and more artistic in nature than the examples discussed thus far. The melodramatic action – a rather protracted and dull story about three female and one male dancer (Gene Kelly) – has little to recommend itself, which may explain why Les Girls was not particularly successful. Yet the film takes the sensuous opulence of color to genuine climaxes – especially in the beginning, in the early musical numbers and their surrounding scenes. Even the more belabored plot strands – the scenes in court – benefit from the color concept introduced in the first sequence. Thus there are again color chords that remain constant over an extended period.

Les Girls was released in 1957, the same year as Designing Woman, an especially fruitful year for color. Moreover, the set designer William A. Horning worked on both productions, so that one could speculate about influences. On the other hand, Cukor relied particularly on the fashion
photographer George Hoyningen-Huene, a friend who functioned on the set as a color consultant and made crucial suggestions. Thus it was Hoyningen-Huene who — according to Patrick McGilligan’s anecdotal biography — developed the initial ideas for LES GIRLS, especially the idea of using a lot of gray:

Huene blew a puff of cigarette smoke and said, “The whole thing should be in this color – the background, the set, the girls’ clothes.” Cukor asked, “Won’t that be drab?” Huene replied, “No, no.” Cukor’s éminence grise explained that it would be a discipline: the removal of color. Huene was a one-man art and research department. His memos covered script, authenticity of European details, the title sequence, the extras, makeup (lipstick shiny and glossy), and precise description of light and colors (the Daumier-type drab courtroom), many elements that might be outside the normal purview of an art director.

As a comparison with Natalie Kalmus’s principles and with the majority of the films of the era shows, gray backgrounds were not exactly original, but perhaps in Hoyningen-Huene’s imagination they were to be taken to the extreme. Strangely, McGilligan pays no attention to the actual color concept. In the text that follows the quotation, it is described only as “stunningly beautiful.”

In addition to the principle of chromatic reduction, the use of one predominant color is particularly striking: a rusty red that occurs both as a metallically gleaming copper tone and as a warmer shade. In the first big musical number, this color is employed only sparsely: of the graphical, almost black-and-white events on the stage, all that stands out are the flesh tones of the faces and hands and the red shoes of the female dancers (fig. 4a). The impression is a little arty yet irreproachable, and so perfect that the number can play for several minutes without losing its shine. The shoes emphasize the dance, and they move agilely and simultaneously in a constant shifting and reappearing, in time with the music. The elaborate elegance of the concept befits the stage number. It was common to give free

15 In his book George Cukor: A Double Life. A Biography of the Gentleman Director (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), McGilligan remarks on the director’s collaboration with his team: “Cukor’s set designers were to function as much more than just that, it was they who would orchestrate the visual design – freeing Cukor to deal with the actors. Just as it became part of Cukor’s mystique – though it was not so unusual among directors – that he rarely looked through a lens, so it was that the art director, with Cukor’s blessing, often laid out the camera setups” (98).

16 Ibid., 250.
reign to the design and coloring of the show in order to distinguish it from the more realistic narrative.

Yet the show within the film ends without the color concept being abandoned. At first, as a caesura, a brass-colored curtain is lowered, filling the entire screen and reinforcing in retrospect the metallic components of the red shoes. Then the events move from the stage to adjacent areas: a tumult of female dancers on the stairs and in the dressing rooms whose shimmering skin, silky hair, velvety or feathery or transparent costumes provide interesting haptic contrasts (fig. 4b). Suddenly the brass and copper hues are dominant and cover nearly all the other shades – an inversion of the previous composition that is like an explosion of saturated color after the delicate restraint onstage.

The chord of black/white/gray, rusty red, and pink is successively retained, but after the caesura of the curtain there is a leap from the graphical style of the dance number to the painterly style backstage, from a rather geometrically designed and rhythmically accentuated show to a loose, erotic/organic ambiance that announces the transformation of the dancers into fictional characters (fig. 4c). Whereas at first, on the stairs, the copper color was nearly omnipresent, now in the intimacy of the dressing room the bright pink shades of lingerie and flesh tones become more and more dominant. The colors from the red spectrum mutually reinforce their luminance in that copper tends toward yellow and is highly saturated, while the delicate pastel pink of the fabrics tends toward gray. The skin tones – a bright, pink-heightened beige – mediate between the two.

The shifting emphasis of the color chord characterizes the doubling of interests typical of the backstage musical, moving back and forth between the spectacle of the numbers and the melodramatic or comic action. The characters operate in both registers. It is unusual, however, that the dressing rooms are more opulently designed than the stage numbers, which in retrospect seem almost like a preparation for the former: the intimate scene of changing clothes and applying makeup, and the easy-going conversation, savored for quite a while, provide a sumptuous climax to the initial sequence of the film.

What begins in LES GIRLS as functional coloring continues as a relatively schematic concept, a formal principle with no compelling basis in the plot. This gives some sequences a pleasing appearance (fig. 4d) but, owing to a lack of sustained creative impulses and a repetitive clinging to the color scheme, this effect fizzles and becomes predictable. It would appear that Cukor and his team overspent their aesthetic potential in a showpiece placed too early in the film. Yet as an abstract display of extravagant and
Fig. 4 a-d: Les Girls (George Cukor, 1957)
artificial color, Les Girls is interesting enough in the context of this essay, since the color chord becomes independent of the plot and betrays an energetic will to style.

**Bachelor in Paradise (Jack Arnold, 1961)**

This film can also be considered atypical of its director and is clearly not a major work. Jack Arnold was known for his science fiction films in the spirit of the Cold War (It Came from Outer Space, 1953; Tarantula, 1955), shot in a sober, documentary, high-contrast black-and-white and sporting aliens or giant spiders as their protagonists. Bachelor in Paradise, a satirical, erotic comedy with Red Skelton and Lana Turner, is scarcely related to these works, being shot in Cinemascope in rather vulgar candy colors and displaying many instances of color coordination. The art directors were George W. Davis and Hans Peters, set decorators Henry Grace and Keogh Gleason; the color consultant was once again Charles K. Hagedorn (of Metrocolor).

Bachelor in Paradise tells the story of an unmarried pollster (Red Skelton) who is sent to a newly constructed small town in California to submit the population – which mainly consists of frustrated housewives whose husbands commute to the city – to a special opinion poll. He falls in love with a real-estate agent and interior designer (Lana Turner) who rents a bungalow to him; like the entire town, which has been produced out of thin air, it is based on the latest design. The rest of the tangled and rather silly plot is of no further interest here.

Immediately following the arrival of the “bachelor,” the film begins its manifest play with color. The real estate agent’s office has carpet samples on the wall showing a range of colors on small rectangles (fig. 5a). They appear on screen unremarked upon and imprint on our memory as color fields in a more or less subliminal way. As characteristic paraphernalia of the milieu, their existence is plausible enough. But at the same time they form a display of sheer colors, prefiguring things to come.

Thus it quickly becomes apparent that this exhibition of colors means more than one might initially expect. “In the paradise of the early 1960s, the houses glowed lime green, cream white, sky blue, lemon yellow, and pink,” as Daniela Sannwald has put it. On the drive through the town to

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Fig. 5 a-d: BACHELOR IN PARADISE (Jack Arnold, 1961)
the rented bungalow, the small rectangles from the office enlarge into walls, painted in striking colors. The garage door is a brilliant pink – a first shock for the new renter: “California coral,” as his landlady explains (fig. 5b). The rooms are presented as correspondingly planar, broken down into fields of color with softly clashing pastel shades of blue and turquoise (fig. 5c). The shelves and the kitchen are color-coordinated according to the standards of modern interior design, so that the furnishings are reduced to a few basic colors, including even small objects such as ashtrays and napkins (fig. 5d). To ensure that this design does not fall flat and unnoticed, the dialogue is filled with ironic commentaries. Speaking of “early Disneyland,” Red Skelton asks, “Who thinks up all the colors – Tennessee Williams?” and he mumbles, “Painter couldn’t make up his mind.”

Ridiculing the color preferences of the trendy middle-class, BACHELOR IN PARADISE attempts to be critical of the tastes of its time. But we also experience the color as a sensuous formal element that becomes autonomous. Both levels dovetail in an intense and insistent way when Skelton takes offense at the omnipresence of the monochrome color fields that decorate all paintable surfaces. The world of sunlight-flooded American suburbs is exposed as a superficial culture whose obtrusive colors cannot gloss over its dearth of ideas. The color coordination of the furnishings sticks in our memory and inspires us to reflect on the function of color in society as well as in the cinema: do we move – and with us the film, both as a specific work and as a symptom of Hollywood – toward pretty, colorful rectangles with no meaning? Yet at the same time, color, whether vacuous or not, can be a means of artistic design that causes a film to shine in its own way.

LOVER COME BACK (Delbert Mann, 1961)

Delbert Mann is a competent director of many styles, and his film starts off in the well-beaten path of Rock Hudson/Doris Day romances. It was conceived as a spin-off to Michael Gordon’s PILLOW TALK (1959), with the same actors, the same art director (Alexander Golitzen), and presumably the same color consultant (Henry Jaffa), and an almost similar plot. In both films Doris Day is a well-mannered, gullible, talented designer and Rock Hudson an unabashed skirt chaser. Both feature a happy ending, although doubts remain about Hudson’s suitability as a husband. But Day exhibits enough vitality to avoid being a victim. On the whole, the tone is light and silly; the film moves along without great intellectual aspirations, garnished with visual and verbal jokes.
Pillow Talk had already established the motif – as in so many films from the period, the protagonists are professionals in the field of design. But the follow-up film goes much further in this respect. Lover Come Back offers costumes and apartments that must have been conceived as a kind of consumer advice for the audience. Doris Day’s kitchen, for example, is decorated with cabinet doors in different colors that recall the modernist paintings of Piet Mondrian, and the handles of her kitchen appliances are color-coordinated – much as they are in Bachelor in Paradise – to produce a pleasant, cheerful, yet contrived ambiance. The costumes take up Day’s blonde hair and blue eyes, and when a street scene does not have enough yellow, a taxi drives past to provide the appropriate color.

This meticulousness is seconded by a running gag: the plot calls for a chemistry laboratory in which an as-yet-unidentified product is supposed to be developed, but for a long time it causes only explosions. Now and again, yellow, orange, red, purple clouds pour out of the basement (fig. 7a-d), filling the screen with an opaque, colored veil – a kind of caesura similar to the stage curtain in Les Girls. Once again, color becomes autonomous as a result of exaggerating a plot element to the point of absurdity, thanks to the sensuous appeal these color interludes possess.

A purple cloud explodes and fills the screen. We see the couple, Doris Day and Rock Hudson, first on a sailing boat (in red and yellow), then in a long dialogue passage on the beach. The colors are limited to gold, pink and blue: gold for Day’s hair, and, in a suitably darker variant, for the sand; her bathing suit and sun hat range from pink to mauve; her eyes are blue, and the deck chairs and towels light blue and dark blue; Rock Hudson’s hair is bluish-black, and he wears blue bathing trunks; the light beige of the woman’s skin color and bronze of the man’s are additional variations on gold. Green is found only in a minimal dose, as a tiny decoration on Day’s hat (fig. 6a).

A humorous interlude follows: standing in the drab, brownish-gray office of the advertising firm Tony Randall, whose face has been colored purple by one of the explosions, is asking for help: “Is my face still that horrible color?” “No, I wouldn’t say that,” replies Rock Hudson, who has applied alcohol to Randall’s face, causing it to turn blue – a reference to the film’s play with color.

The scene changes to Doris Day’s apartment. She is moving about the kitchen, which subtly varies the colors of the episode on the beach (fig. 6b): the general atmosphere is very bright, very white, with few shadows; the doors of the kitchen cabinets gleam in tomato red, lemon yellow, and a brilliant porcelain blue. Hence the color chord remains faithful to the
established principle, even if the dominant white tends to the sterile. Day looks out the window and sees the competitors’ billboard: “V DAY IS COMING” in yellow with blue emphasis – another reinforcement of the color concept and a reference to the actress’s name, undercutting the illusion. She realizes that only her competitors can be responsible for this billboard and flees – ill-advisedly – to Rock Hudson for comfort, not suspecting that he is her competitor.

Hudson’s apartment turns out to be the somber counterpart to Day’s (fig. 6c). Everything tends to dark nuances: the walls are medium gray, with occasional surfaces in tomato red or orange, and specific objects in marine blue or ocher. The triad is, in principle, retained, but transposed to a masculine, more austere tone. In the following scene, Day hijacks Hudson into her own apartment, which now adapts to her guest with some darker shades: a saturated orange is emphasized – it represents the medium value in both apartments – and all the other colors play along to produce a compromise between the sexes. But the plot does not support this hopeful amalgamation, as now Hudson’s lies, deception, and betrayal are exposed.

The next level of color extravagance is of a more formal variety, lacking the symbolic background. Rock Hudson presents the product developed in the laboratory to his company. It turns out to be candy with an alcoholic effect, wrapped in colorful tin foil. In lieu of the screen-filling monochrome clouds of color and the structured color coordination of earlier scenes, a torrent of metallically shining sweets rains down on the table – an event that is privileged with a close-up, justified solely by the fascination of the colors (fig. 6d). Only later is it revealed that the sweets will affect the plot: Rock Hudson and Doris Day are completely intoxicated when they marry, and now they will have to see how to get along.

The color chords are thus not a throwaway gag but a well-calculated concept that asserts itself through several sequences, bringing out the contrasts and commonalities of the protagonists, establishing caesuras, and building up the plot. Contemporary design is combined with narrative functionality to produce a structuring chain that is sometimes only amusing and surprising, sometimes material to advancing the plot. Color is sporadically freed from the obligations of naturalism in order to go its own playful way, pushing the action into the unreal.

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Considering this corpus of films, we can discern a tendency to ignore or even break with the restraints and controls prescribed by Technicolor. In
Fig. 6 a-d: **LOVER COME BACK** (Delbert Mann, 1961)
each case, the color is presented as a formal factor. This results in an art direction active beyond the plot, developing its own vectors and releasing a visual, sensuous energy.

This mannerist style manifests itself as the final phase in a lengthy process involving the exploration, assimilation, aesthetic embellishment, and finally exaggeration of color. The style was, however, not a blueprint for the bulk of Hollywood productions of the era, let alone a prelude of things to come. Most films continued for a while to be made in the earlier style, or at least took up its thread. But things were beginning to change. In light of the aesthetics of the next decade, especially bold fields of color, color coordination, and color chords looked old-fashioned.

With the emergence of New Hollywood, the style of American films underwent an amazing metamorphosis. The principles of classical Technicolor made room for a type of photography that included available light on location, bleached-out zones from overexposure, impenetrable night scenes, reflections on the lens, desaturation (low color), or working with filters. A series of different approaches evolved as modern variations on the color film: a spontaneous, often rough style that took its lead from the documentary and seems to accept images just as the camera captures them; an impressionistic style that employs colors subjectively or distorts them to the point of psychedelic hallucination; a realist style that carefully composes its images but does not emphasize the artificiality of the colors; a symbolic style that makes a signifying use of color; and mixtures of all of these and other possibilities. The uniform streamline that Technicolor strove to establish was thus broken up once and for all.

*Translated by Steven Lindberg*
Fig. 7 a-d: Clouds of pure color in Delbert Mann’s **Lover Come Back**
Fig. 1: Frame from JOUEURS DE CARTES (France 1897) in its original size, to be colored with a brush.
When I was a little girl I loved coloring books, especially those with lots of human or animal figures, and I imagined that they waited fervently to be animated with color. They positively cried out for it, so that great haste was called for in coloring them and rescuing them from their plight. Completeness was the motto, but living creatures naturally had priority and came first; the objects followed, and finally the background, the earth, and the sky. This memory often comes alive when I see partially colored films. I intuitively feel sorry for the figures who were not blessed with color and ask myself what made them so unattractive that they were neglected and left black-and-white.

These childlike thoughts do not occur to me with monochromatic tinting and toning, since these processes are not selective but affect the entire image systematically, according to the relative density of the black-and-white. In the transparent areas of the frame, certain objects or zones will stand out – as pure white in the case of toning, as clear color in a tinted film; and dark areas will register as black or nearly black in either method. Yet overall a democratic principle seems to reign. In the case of polychromatic coloring with brush or stencil, however, there often seems to be a random form of privileging at work, assigning certain colors to certain objects and

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thus attracting attention to them. This renders an arbitrary quality to the images, an off-hand sensuality, so to speak.

All the aforementioned possibilities for applying color – which are also found in combination\(^3\) – are distinguished by a certain artificiality, since their colors are not photographic.\(^4\) They are added to films that were previously completed without color (and were also screened in black-and-white versions). Yet colorization by brush or stencil represents a more striking intervention in the image than toning and tinting. On the one hand, it seems to offer more possibilities to imitate natural appearances, since it provides individual objects with local color. On the other, the number of hues applied is rather limited for practical reasons. Hand coloring, which was popular in the early days of film (1895-1905), is particularly difficult and costly to execute; but the stencil technique that more or less replaced it and was practiced until around 1925 requires a separate process for each color as well. For that reason, stenciling was usually also limited to three or four colors, which appear identically in various places in the frame – similar to the few colors of a map that mark different territories. In both cases, the disparity between the photographic process and the subsequent application of color is quite obvious, so that the images have a distinctly hybrid character.

Hand and stencil colorizations have a specific creative potential, developing an aesthetic that superimposes itself on the photographic image. This can lead to great beauty, but it can also come across as amateurish and crude. Delicately colorized films have a charm uniquely their own; from today’s perspective, they seem rare and strange.

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Today it strikes us as particularly odd that in both hand and stencil techniques only some elements of the image are emphasized with color, while others have been left untouched. Many examples seem almost unfinished, as if they were half-hearted attempts to compensate for the film’s lack of color. Contemporaries may have seen it differently, as they were familiar

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4 In this essay, I cannot discuss the various methods for photographing directly in color, of which there were early experiments. They are described in Koshofer (see note 2) and Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema. An Introduction* (London: BFI, 2000).
with the application of color to black-and-white images from engravings and photographs, magic lanterns, and other projection techniques. Perhaps colorization was also welcomed as a triumph over technology, since the lack of color in photography had been deplored as a shortcoming. Moreover, the manual, human touch may have been appreciated as an extra bonus accompanying a “mechanical” process.

The brief actuality film **Cortège fleuri** (anonymous, F 1900, sepia-toned and hand-colored) presents a procession of flower floats as a spectacular attraction (fig. 2). As usual, only a few colors were employed, unmixed and in the exact same shades: a radiant golden yellow, an equally saturated, brilliant turquoise, and a few watery, transparent nuances (faint green, pale blue, brownish orange). The golden yellow and the turquoise – the two main colors and the “protagonists” in this short scene – provide a fresh and vivid contrast. They are applied mainly to the flower float in the center of the image but also to a few items of clothing in the crowd – a turquoise hat and another one in golden yellow at front right have been accentuated as if to create a compositional balance. The spots of color add a tension to the moving image as they change position over time, recombining differently. And they emphasize the surface of the frame, even though the moving float

5 This was at least true in the late phase of the magic lantern, which employed colored photographs rather than glass painting. On the aesthetic orientation of other media such as colored engravings, photographic postcards, or magic lanterns, see Stephen Herbert, “An Indescribable ‘Something’: The Magic Lantern and Color,” *The Journal of the Popular and Projected Image Before 1914*, 2, 2 (2003): 4-13. Certain patterns had already proven effective in these media. The palette was usually limited, and the colors were applied in prefabricated tones. On the proliferation of color in popular culture in the late 19th century, see Gunning (see note 1), 6-9. Also comparable in terms of their hybrid technique were drawings and sketches, for which there was a long tradition of partial coloring.

6 Caution is in order when assessing colorized films on the basis of videos and DVDs, since the conversion to a different storage medium often results in distortions; moreover, the colors vary from monitor to monitor. In the present case, using videos was unavoidable. They are taken from the edition **Les premiers films coloriés** (1897-1928), Lobster Films, Arte (France 1995). Presumably and quite probably, the films had the color structure found in the video versions, although specific tones may have shifted slightly. The overall impression of the examples certainly coincides with that of well-preserved nitrate prints. Due to signs of decay, surviving nitrate prints can also give a deceptive impression of the original. Moreover, not all copies of the same film are identical; in some cases, different color versions are extant, particularly in the case of hand coloring. Basically, every copy is a unique work. In stencil coloring, prints are, of course, less variegated, but the nuances originally chosen can be revised in a new release – e.g. substituting tomato red for cherry red. See Nicola Mazzanti, “Colours, Audiences, and (Dis)continuity in the ‘Cinema of the Second Period’,” *Film History*, 21, 1 (2009): 67-93.
seems to mark a clear progression into the depth of the background.\(^7\)

The distribution of colors documents that the colorists of CORTÈGE FLEURI had no intention of establishing connections between objects of the same color – the principle that similar-looking objects should be related in one way or another was evidently foreign to them. From today’s perspective, in which such connections are expected and sought, this is slightly disconcerting, but at the time it might not have bothered anyone – it is a characteristic of many early films and probably a legacy from traditions like that of the magic lantern. Equally, it seems to have been accepted as a matter of course that people’s faces and hands were frequently left uncolored. One reason for this resulted from technical problems: on a film frame the size of a postage stamp, it is difficult to paint tiny objects with a brush (fig. 1, preceding this essay). Faces also posed the problem that the delicate gradations of flesh tones could scarcely be reproduced realistically.\(^8\) Dimly lit zones register as gray, and the darker the gray, the more impossible it becomes to cover it with a lighter hue – pastel colors in particular could not assert themselves against this predicament. With fabrics and other objects the effect is less precarious, as they need not be represented in their original colors.

So the colorization of CORTÈGE FLEURI has little to do with the profilmic appearance of the scene, and it lays no claim to “naturalness” or indexical reference. This is already evident from the choice of turquoise – a popular shade in early film, especially in the work of Georges Méliès (fig. 7). It appears not to have mattered that hardly any flowers in nature display this rather inorganic hue: to be sure, the supposed roses, tulips, or dahlias on the float cannot have looked like that. Although the degree of deviation from profilmic reality varies from case to case, the disregard of naturalness is a consistent tendency in films with applied color. In CORTÈGE FLEURI, this

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7 See Jelena Rakin, “Bunte Körper auf Schwarzweiß. Flächigkeit und Plastizität im Farbfilm um 1900,” *Montage AV*, 20, 2 (2011): 24-39, where the tension between planarity and depth is also discussed.

8 See Susanne Marschall’s description of the difficulties of depicting flesh tones: *Farbe im Kino* (Marburg: Schüren, 2005), chapter 2, “Kostüm und Maske.”
tendency continues, on a different level, in the impasto application of the two main colors, which almost cover up both the outlines and the modeling of the photographic image. This contributes to making the objects seem planar, depriving them of their three-dimensional illusionary potential.

The difference in dimensionality reinforces the difference between colorized and uncolorized elements, making us aware that two very different processes were at work. If the untreated zones are slightly at a disadvantage as far as the spontaneous attention of the viewer is concerned, their black-and-whiteness serves to make the miracle of color in the other parts of the image all the more striking. The vividness of the effect is further heightened by a delicate pulsation of color that occurs from frame to frame. This pulsation can scarcely be avoided with hand coloring, since the small images could not be painted precisely and with the same color density. Tom Gunning has beautifully described the immaterial effect of applied color: “The colours seem to lift themselves off the surface of reality and quiver in a scintillating dance.”

In Cortege fleuri, the pleasure in the color and the pleasure in intervening in a photographic image are conveyed as living principles that animate the image. This is achieved without imitating the appearance of the natural world; nor does the color increase the information content of the scene or generate metaphorical meanings. Cortege fleuri contains no message beyond its factual representation and charming chromatic embellishment; the little film consists entirely of what it shows.

* Color can perform very different functions in an image. In the following list, I attempt to bring together several central possibilities that are particularly relevant to the colorization of films:

9 The practice of colorizing seems to stand in contradiction to the chromophobia of Western culture as described by David Batchelor (Chromophobia, London: Reaktion Books, 2000), since the color applied covers up the “essential,” the line of drawing, the gestalt in favor of ephemeral surface values. That color was supplied so often in early films in spite of high costs and certain shortcomings could perhaps be explained by the fact that cinema did not belong to the realm of serious high culture and hence did not suffer from chromophobia.

10 Tom Gunning (see note 1), 11.

Color can sensualize the image, making it more present, more concrete, more tactile, and more opulent. It can orchestrate the course of events, causing the different colors to work together like the instruments in a concert.

Color can provide order: it can differentiate objects from one another, creating hierarchies by emphasizing the relevant and making the inessential inconspicuous; it can produce connections by making the similar look similar, so that relationships assert themselves. It can direct attention. Yet color can also engender disorder and chaos.

Color can support the dramaturgy, for instance by changing the palette or reverting to black-and-white for a while in order to clarify a detail or to express the passage of time.

Color can produce atmosphere, rendering a scene opulent or dull, gentle or hard; it can express harmony or disharmony; it can appear pleasing or shrill, ominous or erotic; it can express changes and transformations (what was once colorful and cheerful is now gray on gray and vice versa). But the chromatic mood can also contradict the character of the plot and thus produce a dissonance.

Color can adapt the image to the natural world, individualizing the appearance of things and representing them as realistically as possible; or it can doctor and alienate the image, making it over-beautiful, kitschy, fantastic, horrendous. It can subordinate itself to reality (and its random qualities) or become aesthetically autonomous.

Color can open up its own system, for instance when complementary colors evoke one another for the sake of harmony and completeness, or when the omission of a certain color makes it special when it finally does appear, or when primary colors are placed against secondary colors or saturated colors against pastel shades. Colors develop their own field of tensions, both in simultaneous contrast within a single image and in successive contrast in a series of images.

Color can alter the impression of space, as warm colors seem to lie closer up and cooler ones appear to be more distant; or it can create planes of color that stress the surface of the frame. It can override the three-dimensional modeling of shadows on objects as well as the illusion of depth resulting from central perspective and other indicators in the image.

Color can add symbolic and metaphorical meanings (blood and passion are red; mourning, white or black; flag colors identify a nation).
With so many possibilities at stake, it is not surprising that the functions of color sometimes collide with one another or with other aesthetic functions. Adjacent nuances can clash with each other, symbolism can demand a particular choice of color, or the aesthetics of colorization can run counter to naturalistic depiction – as in CORTÈGE FLEURI. All of this is far trickier in film than in the still image since the composition is constantly changing, producing new emphases and ever new juxtapositions. Color opens up a polydimensional, dynamic force field.

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At the Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna in 2010, the curator Mariann Lewinsky presented the program Il Colore del muto (The color of the silent screen). It contained an Italian film colorized by stencil and featuring a particularly sumptuous approach to color: IL RE FANTASMA by Ugo Falena (Film d’Arte Italiana, 1914). Lewinsky commented on it by observing that she had problems getting into the story as the color fascinated her so much that she had eyes for nothing else. What she appreciated as a triumph of colorizing can at the same time cause a problem that easily occurs and occasionally gains the upper hand in a film: the conflict between the demands of the narrative and those of the colors applied. And it can occur not only, as in Lewinsky’s experience, in moments of excess but also in more moderate cases.

A masterfully colorized film such as IL RE FANTASMA uses all of the possibilities the image offers to celebrate its own virtuosity. The film is a historical spectacle set among aristocrats, playing out largely in interiors, all but necessitating that the props and costumes come to the fore in brilliant colors. Textiles, unlike faces or hands, are particularly well suited to colorization: items of clothing, sofa coverings, and curtains – whether made of velvet, damask, or batiste – can be colored so persuasively that they appear to the eye as more real than life. The color seems to intensify their materiality, accentuating their textures or patterns and causing them to flow and shimmer; or modeling the billowing, stretching, ruffling, and draping of the materials. The characters are thus degraded to the second rank, while the decor is shown to its most attractive advantage. The viewers

12 Unfortunately, I was unable to get hold of a video copy to provide screenshots: apparently the only surviving print is in Tokyo and would have been too complicated to obtain.
13 Understanding the film is furthermore compounded by the facts that the two protagonists are played by the same actor and that the film survives only as a fragment.
become fascinated by the almost haptic materials and in the process miss out on the progress of the plot. They are torn between these two claims, distracted and consumed in the tension between dramaturgy and opulence.

*Ignoring the demands of the narrative is, as noted above, not limited to films with virtuoso colorization. *IL RE FANTASMA* is not an exceptional case, just a particularly unrestrained one. An early, rather simple example of this phenomenon is the short film *JOUEURS DE CARTES* (anonymous, F 1897; hand-colored on sepia toning), a little genre scene from everyday life (fig. 3). It has been left black-and-white in many places and the color emphasis is limited to items of clothing (complemented by a shimmer of blue for the sky and some pale or faded green for the foliage in the background). Just four hues have been used for the characters: a relatively shrill magenta for the shawl and hat of the woman in the center, a lively turquoise found on the vest of one card player and the cap of another – both on the right side of the table – and a rather inconspicuous matte yellow (only vaguely to be sensed in fig. 3) for the straw hat of the player on the left and the innkeeper on the right. The color turquoise – already familiar from *CORTÈGE FLEURI* – connects the two men on the right in a mysterious way: why are they both wearing a turquoise item of clothing, as if they had split up an ensemble between them? No costume designer would choose the same rare color for two individuals, unless they were soldiers in uniform. But the expanse of the turquoise in the frame corresponds approximately to the expanse of the magenta – and both have roughly the same degree of saturation – so that the distribution of color makes sense on the level of visual balance. As in *CORTÈGE FLEURI*, the principle that the same color establishes a relationship between the persons or objects depicted apparently plays no role, nor does the colorization follow the presumed profilmic reality or any concept of verisimilitude.

The result is a highly centered composition, which, though pleasant to look at, makes little sense in terms of the situation shown. The card players that provide the title and are supposed to be the protagonists of
the scene seem rather secondary in comparison to the striking woman displayed frontally, even though they are located in the foreground, while she occupies a separate table behind them. Moreover, the men on the right have to sit close together to free up the view of the woman. From a realistic perspective, this cannot be beneficial to the game, since each player can get a glimpse of the other’s cards. In another version of the popular motif of card players – found, for example, in an early Louis Lumière film as well as in a film by Georges Méliès (and can probably be traced back to a painting by Paul Cézanne) – the players are grouped in a triangle around the table, with the side facing the camera (or painter/observer) remaining empty in order to provide a view of the action. A woman meddling and complicating the card game does not appear in these examples.\textsuperscript{14}

The woman thus creates a tension between the declared subject of the film and the mise-en-scène – an effect that would also be true of a black-and-white image but is more obvious in the colorized version. In black-and-white, the action would stand out more, though the composition would have less \textit{gestalt} and less life. Apparently, the filmmaker succumbed to the temptation of including a woman in the composition to liven things up and heighten interest. Accordingly, she was colorized as a special attraction,\textsuperscript{15} with the feminine cut of her voluptuous blouse and the ribbon piled on her hat as an eye-catcher in strident pink. She seems almost out of place in the scene, especially as she interferes with the card game by pouring from a bottle and raising the glass. We will never know whether this disruptive gesture was intended or merely happened in the course of filming. The little scene is too short to decide whether it is telling a fictional anecdote or wants to describe a typical situation from life.

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\textsuperscript{14} In Louis Lumière’s \textit{Partie d’Écarté} (1896), we see a group of three players sitting at a table and a waiter entering from the right. In Georges Méliès’s \textit{Une Partie de Cartes}, also from 1896 but produced after Lumière’s film, two card players in profile are placed opposite each other; a man seen frontally between them is reading a newspaper. A waitress enters from the left, bringing a bottle of wine. The man in the center is Méliès himself. As far as I know, neither of these films was ever colorized. See the discussions in Malthête-Méliès/Jacques Mény, curators, \textit{Georges Méliès. Le Cinémagicien}, broadcast from Arte/La Sept, December 1998, with appearances of Paolo Cherchi Usai, André Gaudreault, Laurent Manoni, et al. The discussion in question occurs around 30 minutes into the film.

\textsuperscript{15} See Jelena Raking (see note 7), 32f.
A later, differently constructed, perfectly executed example of applied color can be found in a sequence from the Italian melodrama **Stellina, la pescatrice di Venezia** (Itala Films 1912; colorized in the Pathé stenciling technique). Here, too, only parts of the image were emphasized with color, and again the colors of the clothing draw attention.

The sequence depicts a farewell: a fisherman and his daughter Stellina (played by the French star Madeleine Céliat) walk through picturesque streets to the harbor; she is dressed in bright pink and brambleberry red, while his clothes are less flamboyantly colored (fig. 4). Although his jacket seems to be of the same red as her blouse, probably to indicate that they belong together (here the principle would apply), the color hardly makes itself felt on the dark fabric. Apparently the narrative intent to signal a relationship between the two people was stronger than the possibility of emphasizing the color on the photographic foundation. The background is mostly brownish, with a few fishing nets in a gentle pink in front of the buildings, the ambiance taking up the colors of the protagonists in paler variations, so that everything harmonizes organically as tone on tone.

The couple reaches the quay. He places a paternal kiss on her forehead and climbs into a sailboat with a group of fellow fishermen. The men and the departing boats have been left sepia-toned; only the jacket of the father still shows faint traces of red. The sea has a touch of bright blue; the boats are reflected in the water. Within this palette, only a small range from the spectrum comes into play. And again we sense just a weak impulse to achieve a simulation of natural color: the sea is blue, but the principle of verisimilitude is not taken much further than that. The color of the clothing and the background of the characters primarily answer to aesthetic considerations.

After their farewell kiss, the scene is divided by a camera movement that follows the fisherman across a narrow wooden plank to the boat on the left. Two shots alternate in sequence: in a medium close-up the young woman

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16 See the notes on this film in the catalog for *Il Cinema Ritrovato* (Bologna 2002, 73). A contemporary source cited in the catalog emphasizes the excellent colorization of the film (*L'Illustrazione Cinematografica* 5-10, 3, 1913). The stencil technique of Pathé color was known for its perfection. See Mazzanti (see note 6), 78ff.
is seen on the shore, waving; in a long shot, the boats with their filigree rigging are setting sail. They seem almost graphic in the gentle light, like maritime engravings, since the details of fishermen and boats are delicately sketched against the smooth sea (figs. 5 and 6).

Male and female worlds – father and daughter – were at first united and bracketed together by color; the farewell separates them, placing them in two different images (it would have been possible to keep them in one frame). Yet the film continues to hold them in a close emotional relationship across the distance. The young woman on the quay is mainly seen from the side, her expression suggested more than explicitly shown. That her face is in black-and-white is scarcely disturbing in this context; indeed, it contributes to making the scene seem like an atmospheric, situational whole rather than part of a psychological narrative. Her clothing – a bright pink skirt and dark red blouse (two colors that reinforce each other) – heightens her erotic appeal. The fabric seems to welcome the color, which gently enlivens her figure with a strong presence and models her form by means of shadowy folds and curves. This not only renders the image pleasant but also lends it a vivid beauty – only a colorized film could achieve this particular effect, in which the miracle of moving pictures mixes perfectly with the miracle of local colors, and graphic values are balanced with painterly values.

Several oppositions characterize this brief moment: on the one hand, the polarization of the worlds of men and of women, of sea and land, of setting off and remaining behind, of activity and passivity; on the other, the tension between the different materials in the image, the abstracted (uncolored) parts of the face and hands contrasting with the clothing in its concrete luminosity. They all contribute to the scene fading out in an equilibrium of emotion and aesthetic pleasure.

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It can probably no longer be determined to what extent filmmakers planned colorization when shooting their films and whether they had a say in it later on. In the serpentine dance films that were so popular at the turn of the century, such as Annabelle’s Butterfly Dance (Edison, US 1894), color must have been intended from the outset. Films of this sort were shot against a black background, facilitating the application of color with a brush, since overpainting does not show, and the wafting colors of the veils of the dancer represented a central attraction.

Negatives of films in which scenes were supposed to have toning or tinting were usually accompanied by instructions as to how the color was to be carried out. But it is not clear who made these decisions.\(^{17}\) It has been established that Méliès had his films colorized by Mme. Thuillier, a specialist in coloring magic lantern slides. When designing his backdrops, Méliès created transparent zones for the purpose, obviously taking into account that color would be added.\(^{18}\) It is, however, not known whether he also predetermined the choice of hues. He might have delegated this responsibility to Mme. Thuillier and her experienced coloring lab.

In other cases, no information is available. But given that often different colorizations of the same film exist and that sometimes the colors run counter to the logic of the narrative, it would appear that frequently enough the filmmakers were not involved.\(^{19}\) Basically, the films were already complete in their black-and-white form, and the color often seems like a subsequent extra, an addition, a makeover. But the self-confident arbitrariness and surprising – at times almost uncurbed – beauty of applied color render it a delightful addition.

*Translated by Steven Lindberg*

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17 See Cherchi Usai (see note 3), 29f.
19 Even Nicola Mazzanti, one of the leading scholars in the field, could not find any general information as to the person responsible for the selection and distribution of hues. Apparently, no sources have survived (see note 6, 69f).
Fig. 7: Georges Méliès’s *LE PAPILLON FANTASTIQUE* (France, 1909), colorized in yellow and turquoise
Fig. 1: The Color Wheel according to Paul Klee
The designs and aesthetic principles of Structural Film already seem part of the past, although this current of the avant-garde was very much alive into the 1980s. What is more, experimental film assisted the “other cinema” in gaining a moment of cultural recognition of a magnitude it has rarely enjoyed in its turbulent history.

It is characteristic of experimental film that its variants are heterogeneous, displaying only distant commonalities. The films can sketch out dream visions, provide a contemplative look at a landscape, offer variations on visual themes (the view out a window, the movement of water), toy with remembrance and autobiography, compile found footage, upend narrative structures, associate streams of consciousness, or alienate the illusionist character of photography – to name but a few approaches. Even within these differing categories, the films adopt formal languages of their own and are difficult to classify. Structural Film, by contrast, seems to be unified by a cogent program.

Structural Film began to challenge the dominance of the New American Cinema and the Underground Film in the late 1960s. It arose in a climate that had become characterized by a subjective, sometimes lyrical, sometimes consciously anarchistic style – Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneemann, Jonas Mekas, Kenneth Anger, and Jack Smith come to mind. For all of them, personality was at the fore, whether through the experiential self, as subject or object of subcultural art, or through extravagance, sexuality, and other heightened personal experiences. In each instance, the photography and editing reflect an individual, spontaneous style. Sensation, atmosphere, empathy, improvisation, performance, radical gestures, vitality, and sensuality were more crucial than polished precision, conceptuality, self-reflection, consolidation, or formalism. In contrast, Structural Film would mainly pursue the second list of characteristics, signaling a shift of style. Moreover,
Structural Film’s clear affiliation with the concerns of contemporary visual art, and Minimalism in particular, also marked a major change of direction.

Structural Film follows a conceptual program explorative of its premises. The works revolve around the characteristics of the medium, whether to make a certain parameter visible or to run through variations of it. STASIS (1976), for instance, from the Californian filmmaker David Wilson, set up a relationship between zoom and camera movement used simultaneously and in opposition to explore their effects. However, neither Wilson nor other Structural artists approached their issues in the spirit of the natural sciences. Their interest was always focused on aesthetic experience.

A particularly pure example, and a good one for presenting principles of Structural construction, is J.J. Murphy’s PRINT GENERATION (1974). The film is made up out of sixty color takes of one second each, appearing over and over again in the same order, repeating fifty times. They change only in one regard: Murphy copied his initial sequence of sixty takes serially, making each copy from the previous one so that the images become more and more blurred with each cycle. PRINT GENERATION begins with the last, totally blurred copies, in which only diffuse spots of color can be made out. Minute by minute the images emerge, becoming ever more concrete, until at last there is perfect sharpness. At this point the film changes course and proceeds in reverse order and descending clarity until it reaches its end, which is just as abstract and diffuse in appearance as was the beginning.

This description sounds rather technical. Yet when viewed, PRINT GENERATION stimulates an ongoing process of perception and contemplation, offering a fascinating experience in many phases. As we confront the abstract points of light that scatter swiftly like fireworks for the third or fourth time, we suspect that the film consists of cycles; and as the definition of the initially amorphous points of light increases systematically, we begin to understand its principle of construction. This, in turn, prompts speculation as to what might lie hidden behind the abstractions, and


impels the observation that different visual motifs offer varying degrees of resistance to their identification. At the same time, we begin to register how effortlessly and organically the blurred images flow into one another. As their definition increases, they become distinct and assert themselves as individual moments. Over time, one also sees that blurredness creates the impression of flatness, whereas sharpness creates an illusion of depth. Blurredness has an aesthetic appeal of its own if we yield to it, rather than seek to decode it; certain shots even look better before they gain in clarity.

It becomes apparent halfway through that Murphy has used rather trivial starting material – all sorts of everyday footage, none of it particularly interesting in content, composition, or use of color. What is more, the montage has been done in a seemingly aimless fashion. At this point, the guessing game, the detective-like anticipation of what will eventually emerge ends in disappointment. Have we followed the wrong clues or applied our energies to an ungrateful object? We begin to doubt the validity of the film’s aesthetic program, its underlying assumptions and foundations. Or we wonder whether the filmmaker chose his nondescript images and bland editing to present the film’s principles of construction with greater purity. Or would the film have been richer if its material had revealed an additional level of meaning?

But soon we have passed the zenith of development and are now confronted with the reverse process, the abatement of definition, the decay of the images. We are astonished to realize that we have already forgotten what was to be seen in each shot, and that the simple formula of reversal is everything other than a repetition. The film glides back, phase by phase, into its flat, flowing abstraction, and we follow the many-colored points of light as they flare up and then subside – a contemplative experience with rewards of its own. Reflection, cognitive participation, and self-abandonment merge pleasurably into one another.

As can be seen in the example of Print Generation, Structural Film is not about opening a window onto reality. It is an enterprise against the pull of illusion,\(^5\) effected by reference to the process of its own creation, to how it has been assembled, and to the characteristics of the medium. It does not record an event as it would have existed without the filmic apparatus, but seeks to show how this apparatus functions and what it is

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able to accomplish. At the same time, however, Structural Film consists of photographic images, recorded from reality, and therefore oscillates in ceaseless tension between illusionary reproduction and the structure of its own aesthetic program. In PRINT GENERATION, the moments of illusion, though intentionally minor relative to the concept that contains them, cause friction precisely through their incidental and unwieldy independence. While diegetic cohesion is usually stronger in other Structural Films than in PRINT GENERATION, the controversy between illusion and program always tends to manifest itself in one way or another, differing in prominence and sophistication.

The cognitive participation of viewers is indispensable for Structural Film. Without it, the works remain opaque and silent. In considering cinematic parameters, artistic decisions, functional interactions, and conceptual steps, we observe the work as it comes into being, taking part in the process. We thus become filmmakers ourselves, at least to a degree—what we see is, after all, a work of art that has been formed already. In many ways, Structural Film demands and intensifies an approach to reception that is potentially the same as in every experimental film (and indeed all art), even when not explicitly required or prompted. But in Structural Film, participation in the process of creation clearly dominates other options.

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Jenny Okun, on whose film the following analysis will focus, was born in New York in 1953. In 1971, she came to England to study painting, photography, and film. Between 1975 and 1980, she made about a dozen short experimental films; later she shifted her attentions to art photography, in particular architectural photography. STILL LIFE was created in 1976.

As Okun has explained, the idea for STILL LIFE had its origin in irritation over the way in which many filmmakers of the 1970s integrated negative film stock into their works as a sort of fashionable gag. Okun therefore resolved to make a film in which color negative played a leading and essential role. The basic idea was to arrange a still life of fruit and vegetables and to photograph it on negative film stock, which would not be printed as a positive, but was to be copied and projected in its negative form. She would,
in front of the camera, paint over the produce, whose colors would look strange on negative, with their complementary colors to make them appear natural in the finished film. A simple idea, or so it seems. The preparation and execution were to be straightforward and inexpensive, too – the lack of means typical of independently produced work was to be inscribed in the film. All Okun needed was a table, a wall, paints and brush, two kilograms of mixed produce, two small reels of negative film, and a second person to operate the shutter release. In-camera editing was done whenever possible to save film stock.

**Still Life** is only six minutes long, and silent. The first, motionless shot shows a table laden with objects, some round, some curved, some smaller, some larger (fig. 2). They seem to have been poured out, tumbling over one another until they came to a rest. The result is a spontaneous but agreeable composition. At left is a purple grape in front of a number of round, ultramarine-blue, turquoise and purple balls, resembling spherical Christmas tree ornaments more than fruit. A few small, very dark objects are situated at the center somewhat farther back. Behind them and beside them are several balls, including two whitish ones, one behind, one in front. On the right side, a blue curving peak juts upward out of the sea of objects. The tabletop is black, the wall behind it white. The dividing line between the two, although largely obscured by the assembly of produce,
Figs. 3-5 *Still Life in metamorphosis*
marks the median of the frame, bisecting it horizontally. The effect of the composition is a cool one and, despite the nonchalant arrangement, a bit synthetic or inorganic. The shades of blue and turquoise militate against the character of the fruit, and the abstract surfaces of black and white prevent the emergence of any sense of space. Moreover, there are zones and spots that resist interpretation. Lights of some sort surround the objects, in particular where they crowd each other densely. Something like cores lies inside some of them, as though they were transparent; black spots recall the indentations on apples where the blossoms grew, but are at the wrong places. Also, the photographic character of the image is not entirely convincing: The contours are not precise enough, and it is difficult to distinguish between concave and convex shapes.

After thirty seconds, a small commotion occurs, a tremor of color. One does not immediately understand what has taken place until one notices that a small purple grape in the left foreground has changed to a light green. A second and a third one follow, and likewise one of the larger balls in the right foreground changes its color. Okun must have employed the stop-motion trick of turning off the camera to alter the appearance of things. The metamorphosis has made them less glassy, more solid, and round; and the black spots, which have in fact not changed at all, seem more substantial and more uniform now. It is peculiar that the first transformations of color have affected the purple grapes, which looked comparatively naturalistic from the start. We recall that grapes come in two colors; perhaps this applies to other fruit as well. The dark ball that has become bright poses fewer questions. It resembles its neighbor in shape and texture; most likely, these are two peaches, ripe and creamy and peeled, since they do not seem furry at all.

Then a drastic measure is taken. A pale blue hand enters into the frame to deposit a fruit. The seams of light within the inner contours, as well as the general distribution of light and dark on fingers, hand, and arm – a sort of X-ray effect – confirm that we are looking at a photographic negative. This is immediately followed by the appearance of a human figure behind the table, visible as a torso up to the shoulders. The figure vanishes – the composition reverts for a moment to a still life – then returns, this time with a can of paint and a brush. One of the purple balls is painted light green before our eyes. Another tremor of the image brings about further mutations to the same effect, seemingly without the help of the painter. The objects change into their inverse, sometimes with, sometimes without human involvement. The three initial hues – turquoise, ultramarine, and purple – successively give way to the complementary triad of dark red, pale
yellow, and light green. Black and white change places. One begins to sense that what is occurring might be the transformation of an inorganically colored photographic composition into a naturally colored painting.

Complementary colors are opposites, even though one may not have learned to perceive them as such; and it is not until we look at the spectrum systematically that a conformity to certain laws becomes apparent. The colors of the rainbow are arranged according to the principle of continuous affinity; but if one closes the gap in the natural spectral band (there is no magenta in the rainbow) and puts the colors into a circle, complementaries will line up opposite one another: red opposite green, orange opposite blue, yellow opposite violet. In between, vermilion pairs with turquoise, maize with ultramarine, olive green with purple. The circle may be subdivided ad infinitum into further shades and their complements (see fig. 1, preceding this essay).

All of this has been known and demonstrated for centuries, though the systems have differed in the details. Nonetheless, the color wheel remains somewhat confusing. Our daily perceptions are dominated by four base colors – red, yellow, blue, and green – and thus we intuitively expect yellow to be the complementary color to blue; and as a matter of fact yellow and blue provide the strongest possible color contrast, since they display the maximum difference in brightness. As can be seen in the diagram, however, six base colors exist – black and white, as unchromatic colors, are not included in this system. Orange and purple, which we have learned to view as mixtures, are inserted among the other four colors. There is also a hierarchy within the wheel: the three primaries – blue, red, and yellow – are distinguished from three secondary colors – green, orange, and purple, which may be mixed from the primary trio. Green must therefore be demoted into the second rank of base colors, a fact that contradicts everyday experience but will not surprise anyone who has mixed the occasional watercolor.

In this light, the complementary colors for the negative images in Still Life can be predicted. The purple of the grapes must have been a yellowish green; the turquoise balls were a dark tomato red, the ultramarine ones a saffron, the black objects bright, the white objects dark. The viewer can compute

8 Newton and Goethe disagreed in their divisions of the spectrum, and other scientists and artists have created their own fascinating variations of the schema: color stars, color globes, color rhombi, etc. See The Pantone Book of Color, Leatrice Eiseman/Lawrence Herbert (eds.) (New York: Harry N. Abrams 1990), 14-20, in which several ways of constructing color wheels are discussed. On color theory, see Johannes Pawlik, Theorie der Farbe (Cologne: DuMont, 1969); Thomas Lersch, "Farbenlehre," in Realexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte VII (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1981), 7-274; John Gage, Color and Culture. Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), especially chapters 9 and 11.
the reversal of brightness values and hues for each object. Oranges, apples, peaches, and bananas all suddenly become identifiable. Perhaps bell peppers and mushrooms too, although their textures have a misleading look as negatives; it is difficult to say whether they are glossy or matte, waxy or velvety.

However, many of the metamorphoses are too abrupt, occurring without warning or without a possibility of comparison, and even though they follow a given system, they are not brought about with scientific rigor. The fruit are mottled and many-hued, and the light falls irregularly across their surfaces, modulating and shading them. Okun also makes a visible gesture of pragmatism – the paint can reveals that she is not working with art paints but with ordinary pre-mixed house paint. When identifying those pieces that have not yet been painted, or when anticipating further metamorphoses, we must accept that the color system is observed only approximately. Here the filmmaker progresses rather generously – or has planned a special scheme for the chosen palette.

Just over two and a half minutes have elapsed. Some things have changed, but the basically blue-turquoise-purple character of the still life (and of the filmmaker acting upon it) remains. Now an orange-colored brushstroke travels from the left edge of the frame across the white wall. Hand, brush, and figure come into view. Okun paints the surface methodically until it is half done (fig. 5). Another elliptical tremor, and the whole wall shines forth in contrasty orange, a color neglected until now. The principle of complementary transformation thus comes out of joint for the viewer. The process of recoloration has not been completed, nor has there been time to think the system and its implications through to the end. Many pieces of fruit are still unidentified, our anticipations of what they might be are still rudimentary. And why orange, the complementary of blue, instead of white, the complementary of black?

But it has to be granted that the composition is very appealing. The orange – a rusty, reddish shade – adds new accents. It also spills over into the rest of the image, giving a warmer as well as brighter appearance to many pieces of fruit. Yet at the same time, these pieces also pale beside a hue so dominant that other colors seem to lose saturation. The arrangement on the table now looks more diversified and concrete, while the composition on the whole has become softer and fuller. The white wall had been almost abstract, its distance difficult to assess, holding the background open rather than delimiting it. Now, with its new paint, the wall comes to life. The ingrain wallpaper takes on texture, with a seam testifying to its ordinary existence. And though the room now closes in on itself, appearing smaller, it also gains in plasticity.
But why this specific shade of color? Perhaps the theme of complementarity is to be addressed in another way, one as yet untried. For a moment, the program of the film seems to have shifted from transforming negative into positive to a more general juxtaposition of opposing or clashing colors. The orange tone stands in dramatic contrast to turquoise, the most synthetic and most brilliant color in the image. The result is that the few apples that are still turquoise glow in complementary contrast. The tension between artificiality and nature, which had seemed to diminish in favor of nature, is rejuvenated for a spell by other means.

It might be suggested that the color of the wall was chosen for the benefit of filmmakers and photographers in the audience. Negative film stock is produced with an orange mask, an underlying tinge that may be seen pure
and unadulterated at the edges of a filmstrip, an unmistakable imprint alongside the images. The introduction of just this color may have been an intuitive act by Okun – or a conscious play on the material peculiarities of the medium. Following the filmmaker’s association, one will delve more deeply into the process of production, crossing mentally from the site of reception to the site of authorship.

Okun continues to paint, taking and coloring other fruit or, to speed things up, dropping them straight into the paint bucket: a very rude and unhouswifely way of treating the gifts of nature. She also picks a grape and does not put it back (will she eat it?). She works eclectically, addressing herself in a seemingly arbitrary way to particular objects, or effecting transformations through elliptical tremors (fig. 6). At last, almost all of the turquoise is gone, replaced by a dark red. Here and there, Okun will take her brush into the interstitial spaces and shadow zones, onto the tabletop. Finally she profligately pours the light paint onto the dark surface until she has covered it completely (fig. 7). The wet paint is strongly reflective, adopting the wall’s orange-red in shimmering striations. A short hectic period follows in which we see Okun apply finishing touches. Her form appears, at times from the right, at times from the left, making minor corrections, until she ultimately enters the foreground, the space between the camera and the still life – a site to which she has never yet been. It is this break with prior principles that signifies the end of the film: the artist’s work is done.

The film’s last thirty seconds are devoted to the finished work. There are no more tremors, no more stop-motion tricks or incursions by the filmmaker; the image is before us for our study (fig. 8). We ask, are unsure, whether the project of recoloration has really been completed. A few pieces are still dark – or are these black fruit? It strikes us again that the work was not carried out with the utmost meticulousness. But the alteration of negative into positive colors has also changed the character of the image from photography into painting: the hasty brushstrokes, the viscous paint, and the sketch-like manner have all contributed to the image’s now organic aesthetic effect. All that seems to be missing for the painting to resolve itself is a picture frame – excluding forever the off-screen space from which the artist could enter.

This notion proves premature, however. The conveyance of the composition from one medium into another was not to occur so smoothly or free of residue; the initial recording of the scene on film – and on negative stock at that – could not have been performed without leaving a trace. No amount of painting and alteration of color can overcome two optical effects: highlights
and shadows will always remain. On canvas, a painter is free to include or omit shadows, color them *ad libitum*, or remove them altogether to her or his pleasure. In the photographic medium, however, if no light falls on an area, it will be dark no matter what its actual colors, and the reverse applies for highlights. Okun plays with this fact, alienating it and rendering it enigmatic. She uses negative film that registers shadows as bright and highlights as dark in order to endow the “photographic painting” with its own peculiar aura.

*Still Life* is an example of how Structural Film can combine theory and didactics with sensuous opulence, so as to provide not only for rational recognition but visual pleasure as well. The film’s basic idea is conceptual, a sort of formula that could also serve as a basis for other works. But in practice, it brings additional ideas and effects into play. A personal, artistic temperament is reflected in the decision to make do with rough equivalents when inverting complementary colors. Speed, nonchalance, and practicality have the upper hand over technical correctness, giving the work the charm of a first draft. Okun trusts the viewer to understand the complementary concept, so as to gain additional stimulation from the cavalier realization. She also plays with the divergence between the schema and its execution. Based on a clear-cut system or program, the color composition that unfolds fulfills aesthetic aspirations of its own and results in a painterly work of art (a painting, however, that has no material existence).

The initial concept is thus enriched with a second and equally substantial one. As is already expressed in its title, *Still Life* is about a borrowing from painting, an excursion into the domain of another art. Here the film, the medium of living movement, runs up against its limits; to create a cinematic still life heralds a challenge. It is one Okun meets with wit and ingenious elegance by concentrating on the process of alteration – complementary correction on the one hand, and the metamorphosis from photography to oil painting on the other. The personal appearance of the filmmaker is also relevant to this; the project of the film demands that she work in front of, not behind, the camera, even if her identity is not apparent to viewers who do not know her. It is in front of the camera that the film’s execution is overlaid on its concept and the aesthetic performance takes place. That the figure of the artist remains a photographic negative even as she ‘translates’ the rest of the image makes palpable both the contrast of media and the interdependencies between the two arts.
Jenny Okun’s ideas could only have been realized with a film camera and, with its reversals of negative and positive, through the photographic medium. Here she fulfills Structural Film’s ambitions to make visible something that could have been rendered neither in reality nor with the means of other art forms. In a number of respects, however, her work stands outside the mainstream of Structural Film. Its brevity and simplicity, its sketchbook ease and its inscription of the personal exist in a certain tension with the – at the time male-dominated – Structural canon.

_Translated by Benjamin Letzler_
Fig. 1: Mary Astor in color
Desert Fury: A Film Noir in Color

[2012]

I.

Film noir owes its name not least to its distinctive, somber black-and-white photography. High-contrast shots in the low-key lighting style, in which black can swallow up entire areas of the image and prominent shadows structure the composition, became the supreme form over the course of the 1940s. The ascendancy of film noir was due to expressionist influences from European immigrants among the camera operators, but also points to an awareness of the beauties of the black-and-white film at a time when color was beginning to prevail. Above all, however, low-key lighting, which traditionally was characteristic of dark moods and whole genres such as the gangster film and the war film, was now further refined and more consistently deployed in order to conform to the atmosphere of the films.¹

In the controversy over whether film noir is a genre, a cycle, or a style, the fact that light plays such a central role causes the pendulum to swing toward style. And so diverse works that would otherwise be categorized as thrillers, woman’s films, melodramas, revenge plays, or police films are assigned to this corpus because their lighting clearly speaks the noir language.² But patterns for narrative structures and the creation of characters may also condense into a style and infiltrate other traditions of the feature film: subjectivity, voice-over, flashbacks, and dream scenes together with psychologically unstable or criminal protagonists are typical of this trend.³ Thus, it is difficult to make clear generic distinctions, and it is little wonder

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² On the various forms and hybrids of the genre, see especially Frank Krutnik, In a Lonely Place: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity (London: Routledge, 1991), and Norbert Grob, ed., Filmgenres: Film Noir (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2008).
³ See J.P. Telotte, Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Maureen Turim, Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History (New York: Routledge, 1989); my essays "Ichfilm und Ichroman" (1981) and "Der Voice-over als subjektivierende Erzählstruktur im Film Noir" (1984), both reprinted in my book Die anthropomorphe Kamera und andere Schriften zur filmischen Narration (Zurich: Chronos, 1997), 82-112 and 114-29 respectively; Matthias Brütsch, Traumbühne Kino: Der Traum als filmtheoretische Metapher und narratives Motiv (Marburg: Schüren, 2011).
that, beyond a small number of core examples, the film noir canon varies from one film historian to the next.

It is, however, striking that the few films with noir qualities that are shot in color rather than black-and-white hardly ever appear on any of the influential lists. For example, the film to be analyzed below, Desert Fury (Lewis Allen, 1947), was long ignored by the scholarship on film noir:

Desert Fury? You haven’t heard of it? [...] A 1947 Paramount release starring Lizabeth Scott and Burt Lancaster, this turgid melodrama about a gambling casino owner’s daughter infatuated with an underworld gambler suspected of murder figures in no known pantheon or cult. Its director, Lewis Allen, is devoid of auteur status. Its performances are, by and large, not of award-winning stature. Its composer, Miklos Rosza, has certainly written more interesting musical scores. [...] It’s “just a movie” – produced, consumed, forgotten. Not good. Not bad. Mediocre. In fact, one might even go so far as to call it quintessentially mediocre.

David Ehrenstein wrote this in 1988 and dedicated an extensive essay to the film, probably the first ever written about it. But even Ehrenstein would not have warmed to his subject if the film had not had a special, risqué interest as a kind of camp, in which homosexuality is indeed treated in a strange way, in both text and subtext. Ehrenstein demonstrates with fascination and verve how the female lead falls in love with the wrong man, even though – or precisely because – he lives together with another man who refuses to let him go. Ehrenstein also reveals the narrative convolutions and inhibitions that result from this state of affairs, how ambiguities in the dialogue provide unambiguous hints, and how the casting helps to make the complications clear.

Since 1988, the film that Ehrenstein rescued from oblivion has been having a successful career. It is now available on DVD, and, according to the Internet, has become a kind of cult movie in certain circles. On
April 2, 2012, it was proclaimed “the wackiest movie of 1947,” since it has “gay undertones strong enough to power a small city for a year.” And as if that were not enough, various authors believe that, in addition to the obvious gay relationship between the male lead and his sidekick, lesbian undertones can be detected in the central mother-daughter relationship – and they support their impression with several observations. But I do not intend to focus on this juicy context, though it cannot be ignored completely. For in addition to its subject matter, DESERT FURY is primarily interesting as a film noir shot in color – almost a contradiction in terms, and one of the few oddities in Hollywood’s product line of the period.

But first, continuing with the details from Ehrenstein cited above, it is in order to provide a little more information about the production, design, and themes of the film. Like nearly all film noirs, this one was not a prestige product: DESERT FURY was not an A film. But in contrast to many B films that were produced quickly and cheaply by little-known talents – and sometimes were forces of innovation for precisely that reason – a team of renowned filmmakers was assembled for the production of DESERT FURY, and the cost-intensive decision to film in color suggests that Paramount expected this project to succeed.

The producer responsible for the film, Hal B. Wallis, was one of the most enterprising exponents of his trade; he had produced such successful films as THE MALTESE FALCON and CASABLANCA. Wallis hired the screenwriter Robert Rossen, the composer Miklós Rózsa, the cinematographers Charles Lang and Edward Cronjager, the costume designer Edith Head, and an ensemble of actors that included Mary Astor, Lizabeth Scott, John Hodiak, Burt Lancaster, and Wendell Corey – a number of promising names. Only the director, Lewis Allen, had no major successes to his credit, and he is scarcely mentioned in the history of film.

But if we look (or listen) more closely, we can only agree with Ehrenstein that Rózsa clearly did not feel very inspired; his music, though forceful, is lacking in nuance and originality. The two cinematographers had hardly

10 Wallis had been working with Mary Astor for several years. His astute eye led to the discoveries of Lancaster and Corey.
11 Lewis Allen had directed two supernatural melodramas, THE UNINVITED (1944) and THE UNSEEN (1945), among a few smaller productions. He is mainly remembered for his TV work, especially the BONANZA series for which he directed 42 episodes.
any experience working with Technicolor, and even the “queen” of the color consultants, Natalie Kalmus, who supervised the color design, allowed it to fall short on one of her principles, that of artistic restraint.  

By contrast, Edith Head indulged herself with costuming to such an extent that the female protagonists constantly had to change outfits, presenting a fashion show that was ill-suited to the plot. (Ehrenstein suspects, probably rightly, that the decision to shoot Desert Fury in color was partially guided by the intention of presenting female moviegoers with fashion they could wear in daily life.) Moreover, the casting was not perfect: Mary Astor stole the show from the other actors; the male lead was played rather blandly by John Hodiak, while his rival Burt Lancaster had to waste his talent on a supporting role; and Lizabeth Scott was a little too old for her part of the rebellious daughter who has fled school. There is also a strange technical mistake in the editing, as we will see.

The unclear character hierarchy goes back to the screenplay, which is based on the successful novel Desert Town (1946) by Ramona Stewart. It would appear the writer could not make up her mind which character to focus on, and so the perspective changes from scene to scene. Consequently, the three most important secondary characters of the film – if we assume the central heterosexual couple constitutes the leads – are also given the status of main characters at times. They contribute to the action, have powerful lines in the dialogue, and are granted close-ups – a shift in dramatic weighting rare in classic Hollywood films. None of the characters are even remotely established as a subjective focus or even sufficiently explained psychologically to attract particular empathy. In that respect, the film deviates from the typical patterns of film noir, which usually aligns us closely with a central figure.

Thus Desert Fury lacks consistency, an overarching concept, and the coordinating hand that would have ensured that its overall effects are smoothly meshed and effectively balanced. Yet, blaming these problems

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12 For many years Natalie Kalmus, former wife of the owner of Technicolor, had a monopoly on the supervision of the color design for all productions filmed using the new technology. In order to retain complete control, Technicolor leased its cameras only in combination with the company’s own color consultants. Natalie Kalmus published a key text on the use of color in film; “Color Consciousness,” Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers 25, 2 (August 1935): 139-47. See Richard Haines, Technicolor Movies: The History of Dye Transfer Printing (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003; orig. pub. 1993), also available on Google Books. See also my essay “Chords of Color” (2006), in the present volume.

13 Ehrenstein (see note 4), 7. Mary Astor and Lizabeth Scott present around thirty outfits in the film. Ehrenstein also notes that clothing is repeatedly mentioned in the dialogue.
on the director alone may not be justified, given that the system of the division of labor in the film industry would not have granted him that much creative power. Rather, Hal B. Wallis seems to have lost sight of his project, or perhaps he found it interesting to let the film go off course. In any case, Desert Fury gives the impression that some of the departments involved in its production had acted independently, as if one hand did not know what the other was doing. Thus it appears to me that David Ehrenstein’s verdict that the film is “quintessentially mediocre” does not quite hit the mark. Rather, it is a product of remarkable hybridity – interesting not only for its underlying discourse on the genre of film noir, but also for its unbalanced aesthetics and its dramaturgical hysteria.

Unlike most film noirs, Desert Fury takes place not in the urban jungle but in a small town on the edge of the wilderness which would have been a suitable location for a western. The film features a lot of landscape – shot in California and Arizona – and even a romantic ride into the countryside and the breaking in of a horse in a corral. The plot vacillates between the melodrama of a mother-daughter conflict and sequences about crime, betrayal, and an unresolved past. It offers an emotional roller coaster of difficult love affairs, tense character interactions, and fast-paced action scenes including a chase. Hence the film comprises a mix of genres, as is characteristic of many film noirs, albeit rarely in this extreme form.

Both the leads and the minor characters in Desert Fury derive from noir stereotypes. The film is about an imperious casino boss (Mary Astor) whose turbulent past includes an affair with her daughter’s new lover. The daughter (Lizabeth Scott) is more interested in the casino than in school and rejects the upright sheriff (Burt Lancaster), as she prefers her mother’s shady ex-partner, the male lead (John Hodiak). He is a psychopathic homme fatal and a case of ego weakness who has murdered his wife and lives with

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15 “Hollywood deftly drew on the principles of genre hybridity in order to maximize audience appeal,” writes Roy Grundmann in “Taking Stock at War’s End: Gender, Genre, and Hollywood Labor in The Strange Love of Martha Ivers,” in The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film, vol. 2: 1929 to 1945, Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon, eds. (Chichester: Blackwell, 2012), 495-529, esp. 498. Grundmann’s case study concisely sums up the social, political, economic, and cultural backgrounds of film noir. His example, The Strange Love of Martha Ivers, which was released in 1946, the year before Desert Fury, has much in common with the latter film – in addition to the mix of genres and diverse thematic parallels, they also share the producer, screenwriter, composer, and the actress Lizabeth Scott. It was, however, shot in black-and-white and has proved to be a coherent, interesting, successful noir melodrama.
a gay sidekick (Wendell Corey) consumed with jealousy of his partner’s new love. All of this leads to a surprising finale, in the course of which the male lead shoots his partner when the latter reveals the truth about him; he himself is subsequently forced into a fatal car accident, whereupon mother and daughter are reconciled, and the daughter enters into a romantic future with the sheriff.

II.

The following analysis revolves around a number of questions. Can the aesthetics of color be reconciled with the visual style of film noir, which is so centrally based on the potential of black-and-white? Is it possible to bring out the vivid colors of the costumes and decors without foregoing film noir’s established practice of lighting? Can such a venture succeed at all? And in what cases and constellations is the use of color particularly precarious or even counterproductive?

When we inquire into the principal differences between black-and-white and color, it becomes clear that each acquires its own aesthetic status through a whole series of factors. The scale of shades of gray, from snow white to jet black, is replaced in the color film by a large number of hues whose relationships can only be depicted on a wheel which contains, between the three primary colors red, yellow, and blue, mixed shades complementary to them. White and black come into play as well and complicate the possibilities to the point of perplexity. It is also necessary to consider the saturation of the hues and their mixing ratios, as well as their relative brightness and grayness, in terms of their complementarity or similarity in simultaneous interplay; and to consider their placement on a scale of cold to warm, and of differences in their apparent distance from the viewer.

Whereas in a black-and-white image all zones of equal gray can be related to one another, thus readily producing graphic patterns, framings, and concentrations that are aesthetically attractive, the polychrome image is usually unbalanced in its diversity. It is much more difficult to compose, but at the same time it permits a complex structure with numerous internal

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16 I have presented these factors in greater detail in “Cinematic Color as Likeness and as Artifact” (2001), in the present volume.

17 On the color wheel system, see Leatrice Eiseman and Lawrence Herbert, *The Pantone Book of Color* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 14-20. A diagram of the color wheel is included in this volume, p. 74.
references, gradations, and contrasts: thus, attention can be guided by means of maximum bright or dark levels or by maximum color saturation, by clashing complementary colors, or by the appearance of a color that does not occur elsewhere in the image. This opens up possibilities that can be developed from different stylistic and dramaturgical concepts.

Film noir’s approach to light has been discussed frequently, often all too simplistically. It was not limited to the oft-mentioned high-contrast chiaroscuro and amorphous darkness, which made for a gloomy mood, but was also characterized by precise silhouette-like shadows cast on walls. At times, they articulated and characterized the spaces: striped patterns of loosely lowered venetian blinds or the graceful form of a fan were particularly popular. Sometimes the silhouettes were used for enigmatic depictions of the characters, whose actions are revealed by the play of shadows, whereas their faces can only be identified in profile, if at all. The effects of cast shadows are thus not limited to decoration but also contribute to the narration, indirectly relating what takes place. Not every film noir pushes this style to its limits, and certainly not for the entire length of the plot – film scholars and critics tend to exaggerate here. But where a film is most genuinely “noir,” it operates in the manner described.

Similarly, there were also detailed concepts for the use of three-strip Technicolor in the 1940s, as well as original solutions – after all, more than a hundred color films had been made in Hollywood since the late 1930s. The bulk of these productions kept to approaches that correspond to the conventions of the film industry and to Natalie Kalmus’s principles: either bright – but not garish – colors (the assertive mode) in order to achieve an opulent look, or moderation (the restrained mode) to avoid appearing too strident or even vulgar, which would draw attention away from the action and onto the form. In both cases, colors were to be selected and distributed with great care in order to create an aesthetically satisfying picture. The decision when to use which concept was based on conventions of genre and subject: historical spectacles, musicals, and fantasy films could boast color, and vividness and contrasts could be increased at high points in the action.

As noted above, the lighting for black-and-white photography is rather different from that for color photography, especially when one considers the state of technology in the 1940s and the conventions that dominated

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19 See Scott Higgins, who has studied Hollywood’s approach to color in the 1930s in detail. His *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), is an extremely informative book, to which the present essay owes a great deal.
Hollywood. Initially, filmmakers switching to color were not entirely prepared to abandon the lighting concepts of black-and-white film, but the aesthetics of each mode demanded in some respects an approach almost opposite to that of the other. In the low-key style of film noir, chiaroscuro called for effects with shadows created by powerful, focused, often tilted spotlights with relatively low basic lighting. There was a tendency to underscore what should be seen; the rest of the image remained more or less in the dark. This deliberate emphasis through lighting also accentuated the affective qualities of the image: fragmentation supported the impression of mystery, ambiguity conveyed a sense of threat or dread, and the pervasive lack of light (with nothing radiating, gleaming, or shining) generated an air of gloominess. The effect is of an abstraction that expresses the essential. It makes faces look more individual than they are in reality, lending them distinctiveness, since random details disappear and wrinkles stand out. An image based on powerful black-and-white values also tends to be graphically articulated and generates its illusion of depth primarily by means of lines and gradations, or occasionally with haze and fog. All of this gives the image a specifically photographic beauty that has no equivalent in reality.

The color film of the period tended to be based on so-called high-key lighting in which bright and evenly diffused light dominates, so that all the white objects gleam and true black objects are the only things that look black. It was a style chosen for luxurious ambiances and carefree entertainment, i.e. musicals or sophisticated comedies. Similarly, in the late 1930s and the 1940s, Technicolor was primarily reserved for films in which color as spectacle paid off. Otherwise pastel shades dominated in interiors, while natural earth tones or the stony gray of cities prevailed in outdoor shots.

In order to present the new attraction of color in a particularly beautiful and pure way, in both cases there was a preference – as in the high-key style – for uniform brightness, strong overall light rather than focused spotlights, and special fill light to brighten faces or clothing. Lighting too intensely risked bleaching out the affected zone, and shadows made the colors go to black, causing them to drown in dark areas of the image. Whereas in a black-and-white film, black appears both on black objects and in zones of shadow so that they intermesh organically to form a coherent composition, black shadows run the risk of looking like “holes” in a color film. On the other hand, bright, diffused lighting produces highly consistent color, which was often further emphasized by single-color costumes and objects. The result was a rather planar image that was, however, enlivened by the sensuous,
dynamic, vivid, and immediate character of the color, whereas the black-
and-white image seems more mediated, even distanced.

Finally, there is another phenomenon to be considered: since the colors
of directly illuminated objects look brighter and more yellow so that the
lighting stands out, viewers expect a plausible source to be suggested for
the light. 20 Techniques of light and shadow that are perceived as natural
or unobtrusive in a black-and-white film can thus quickly look artificial
in a color film. This was particularly true in the 1940s, when the technical
problems of color had not yet been fully mastered.

If we consider the differences between black-and-white and color, it
becomes clear that the two stylistic systems were difficult to reconcile at
the time. Today we have become less sensitive to blackened or bleached
colors, which can be employed as a stylistic device. But film stock has
also become far more photosensitive, and lenses are much more powerful.
The neo-noir style in color has demonstrated as early as the 1980s that a
dramaturgy of light can be achieved that represents the color equivalent
to the black-and-white aesthetic of film noir: films such as BODY HEAT
(Lawrence Kasdan, 1981) or BLOOD SIMPLE (Joel Coen, 1984) testify to that.
But DESERT FURY was produced in the 1940s and clung to the traditions and
technical possibilities of its time. 21

III.

In what follows, I will analyze several passages from DESERT FURY to il-
lustrate and reinforce the issues discussed thus far. The passages run along
the course of the action and evince diverse lighting and color effects — with
the exception of the romantic, western-like episodes around Burt Lancaster,
in which no effort was taken to achieve noir effects. They play no role in
the hybrid aesthetics of the film.

20 For this observation I am indebted to Hans J. Wulff. See also his “Die Unnatürlichkeit der
Filmfarben: Neue Überlegungen zur Signifikation und Dramaturgie der Farben im Film (Zwei
21 Two other Technicolor films from this period that have a certain noir character struggle
with problems similar to those of DESERT FURY, though they show a greater awareness of the
problems of color and lighting: the melodrama LEAVE HER TO HEAVEN (John M. Stahl, 1945)
and the psychological western DUEL IN THE SUN (King Vidor, 1946). Neither film shows much
restraint in form or content, but both try to follow a functional concept for color, peaking only
at high points in the plot.
In the office of the casino

This type of scene – a conversation behind closed doors with muted light and an edgy mood – occurs in countless films and is rarely lacking in a film noir. Desert Fury has many precedents here, not least The Maltese Falcon (with Mary Astor in a starring role).

The space seems overall dark. The casino might be a seedy one, operating on the borders of legality, but there is no reason not to light the office brightly. Apparently the filmmakers were trying to achieve a noir atmosphere by structuring the space with darker areas, by casting shadows and by placing small light sources between the characters to establish relationships between them, regardless of whether the influx of light was plausible within the realistic framework of the plot or not. There may be lamps located off-screen, though these would be but partly responsible for the irregular bright and dark spots in the room, to say nothing of the frontal lighting of the faces or the sidelight on the profiles.

Also striking is a beam of shadow that runs diagonally above the door in the background and for which there is no realistic explanation (fig. 2a). The diagonal orientation of the beam causes a spatial instability; its inexplicability gives the room a touch of mystery, and it also serves as an immaterial barrier between the characters. On the whole, the type of lighting chosen for this scene is quite common in black-and-white films of the time but rather unusual in color films. In the latter, one would expect uniform overall lighting or a number of diegetic light sources of sufficient brightness.

The room seems cluttered, containing too many details. This may be due to the fact that it is a woman’s office, which would not have been as soberly furnished as a male workspace. To a large extent, however, the impression of excess results from the attempt at guiding our attention by means of strategies from both black-and-white and color films. Whereas the shadows articulate the room sufficiently to situate the characters and establish the mood, the color accents add further stimuli that demand attention. This carries the risk of causing viewers to be too concerned with the room, distracting attention away from the characters, even though the lighting emphasizes them. On the whole, there are more hues in play than the scene requires, and they underscore incidental details, such as the golden, gleaming wood of the obligatory venetian blind (though here it casts no shadows) or the brilliantly blue mountains in the landscape painting behind Mary Astor (fig. 2b).

The colors of the costumes do not stand out in this scene, and they serve primarily to differentiate the characters, to clearly establish their relation-
Fig. 2 a-c: DESERT FURY
ship to one another from moment to moment. Mary Astor, the head of the 
operation, wears an elegant, cognac-colored dress. While it has rhinestones 
on the sleeves and neckline, it is rather restrained in color compared to 
her wardrobe in other scenes. This moderation is motivated not least by 
the dramaturgy: it prepares the appearance of Lizabeth Scott, who will 
enter through the door like a white specter, drawing all eyes and abruptly 
changing the mood (fig. 2c).

Hence the office scene represents a compromise between different con-
cepts. It fulfills its narrative function but would be more effective without 
so many spots of light and more characteristic of the genre without the 
additional accents of color.

The mother-daughter conflict

The conflict between the generations occurs primarily in the mother’s 
home. This ambiance is designed to function as a counterpart in color to 
the casino, but similar formal decisions are made with regard to lighting 
and the structuring of space (figs. 3a and 3c). The rooms are “chockablock 
with iconographical bric-a-brac,” as Ehrenstein puts it.22 The lighting can 
only in part be explained by lamps – consider, however, the brightly lit 
green costume in fig. 3c. There are shadows on the wall, at times cast by 
people or the banister, at times by leaves that seem to be hit by nonexistent 
sunshine. In many film noirs, but not exclusively there, patterns of leaves 
are cast on walls, trembling slightly and suggesting vegetation surrounding 
the building.23 Desert Fury does not dispense with this device, employing 
it both in the mother’s house and in other locations, even where color alone 
would have provided enough visual diversity.

The stairs play a central role – a reliable convention in both melodrama 
and film noir – to express a disparity of power between the characters and 
to underscore unstable emotional states or precarious moments in the plot. 
At the same time, stairs are an excellent way to savor noir lighting: balus-
trades look like black silhouettes in the light of the stairwell, and shadows 
appear on the walls, making material reality and immaterial appearance

22 Ehrenstein (see note 4), 5.
23 Especially for leaves, there were so-called cookies, stamped sheets of metal, or stands with 
mounted tree branches which could be placed in front of a light source and moved to create the 
corresponding shadows. See John Alton, Painting with Light (Berkeley: University of California 
Press, 1995; orig. publ. 1949), 14f – a handbook for camera operators that is a valuable compendium 
on matters of cinemetic technique of the period.
Fig. 3 a-c: DESERT FURY
indistinguishable. Stair landings offer dark corners and opportunities to skew lines or draw diagonals. In DESERT FURY, the staircase in the living room is prominently visible, and it is constructed in the elaborate style of “female Gothic,” the popular horror genre of that period. As needed, it can be featured with greater or lesser prominence, cast more or fewer shadows, and serve as an escape route or an arena for conflict. In figure 3b, the daughter is waylaid by her mother when she returns contritely from an attempt to escape. As in the earlier office scene, there is a dark beam of shadow in the background that destabilizes the image and causes us to sense greater menace than is called for at this point.

In their domestic ambiance, mother and daughter appear in constantly changing costumes – participants in the aforementioned fashion show. As for the colors of the costumes, they revel in pastel shades that are picked up by small objects decorating the room, conveying a contrived effect. The daughter’s bedroom in fig. 3a is typical of this. Most of it is a soft blue, the exact shade of Lizabeth Scott’s negligee, complemented by a bedspread with pink flowers and white, transparent curtains, and even by the view out the window. In her yellow blouse, Mary Astor looks like a foreign body that has forced its way into the girl’s harmonious room – except that its unruly occupant is anything but typical of such a room. We note an excess that goes beyond the narrative function. The patchily dispersed light does its part to make the picture look artificial and elaborately encoded.

The sunbath

This scene occurs just after the middle of the film. We see John Hodiak and Wendell Corey at a breakfast table in front of their house in Arizona’s heroic landscape: Hodiak sunbathing shirtless and Corey, less of an exhibitionist, in a T-shirt (fig. 4a). At first, this male idyll is unspoiled: Corey is playing the role of a housewife, providing coffee for Hodiak. But then Lizabeth Scott’s car arrives (fig. 4b). It is amazing how much the editing violates the rules at this point, making it all but impossible to comprehend the spatial layout. Hodiak is sitting at times with his back against the house and at times against the open landscape. The scene does not establish a coherent perspective, nor does it maintain consistent lighting. Clearly, rear projections and real shots have been combined clumsily, and the axis of action is crossed against all rules.

But it is primarily color and light that interest us here. It becomes evident that in the “exterior” shots it was thought necessary to enliven the picture
Fig. 4 a-c: DESERT FURY
with shadows on the wall (fig. 4a), and even Hodiak’s bare, velvety upper body – he is shot like a male pin-up, which was rare at the time – is covered with a layer of plant shadows (fig. 4c). Hodiak’s make-up was obviously applied with care, as his chest looks uniformly tan; and his large black sunglasses and the pointed aloe leaves around him give him more character than he otherwise manages to express in this film. One is reminded of his role in Hitchcock’s Lifeboat (1943), in which Hodiak – a few years younger, slender, and shot in black-and-white – shows off his (tattooed) upper body to Tallulah Bankhead.

The color composition is carefully worked out: Hodiak’s pants pick up the mauve of the rock formations; the color of the coffee cups harmonizes with the armchair upholstery, whose wooden frame matches the paneling of the station wagon; the colors of the plants are limited to the dusty green of the desert (fig. 3b). On the one hand, there is the effect of formal coherence; on the other, the subject matter is presented quite daringly and ultimately unrealistically as a result of the bizarre lighting and the botched editing.

**Nocturnal events**

The black-and-white films of the 1940s increasingly tended to shoot nighttime exteriors at night, rather than use the day-for-night technique that had been common previously. But night shooting would not have resulted in sufficient visibility in a color film, so Desert Fury did not follow the noir model in this respect. Correspondingly, during the chase scene the sky is a brilliant deep blue with radiantly white clouds, and a filter ensures that the car’s headlights nonetheless appear as dots of light. For the close-ups of characters sitting at the wheel, a golden light is added.

The result is an emotional roller coaster. On the one hand, the heroic landscape formations can fully unfurl their power in the semidarkness of the artificially produced night (fig. 5a), and the relative distances and speeds of the vehicles can be measured clearly in the chase scene. On the other hand, the close-ups of John Hodiak and Lizabeth Scott, who is fleeing from him after learning the truth, could belong to another moment in time. They seem static, even though the lighting expresses intense physical movement. This corresponds to the conventional traditions of classical Hollywood: close-ups are shot under different conditions than the other scenes and lit in specific ways. In this case, however, as a result of the color, the light seems particularly artificial. The small highlights in the eyes and meticulous shadows on the edge of the faces (fig. 5b) seem particularly
unfounded – further proof that viewers expect plausible light sources in a color film.

The final image signals a happy ending (fig. 5c), even though it seems emotionally misplaced after all the shocks and deaths of the preceding minutes. It pulls no punches in terms of color – here the day-for-night technique helps create an atmosphere of melodramatic overexcitement and generates a purple vortex into the depths. The image is held for a long time as the couple moves away toward the light: a worthy ending for this hysterical film.

A simple test

Even when the TV monitor is set to black-and-white, it is usually possible to assess whether the film in question was shot in color or in black-and-white: deprived of its color, the image looks matte and dull. For color photography, scenes are mostly lit indirectly in order to avoid shadows and bring out the full effect of the colors. Color, not lighting, is responsible for the contrasts in most color films.

This is not the case with Desert Fury: in figs. 6a-c, several of the shots discussed above have been transposed to black-and-white, and they are totally convincing in terms of film noir, which has no need of color. On the contrary, excessive detail disappears, the faces seem clear and prominent, and the question of where the light is coming from never arises. Sometimes a simple test suffices to verify the findings of an analysis.

Translated by Steven Lindberg
Fig. 2 a

Fig. 3 b

Fig. 5 b

Fig. 6 a-c: DESERT FURY in black-and-white
Fig. 1: Sentain gets a haircut in Claire Denis’ BEAU TRAVAIL.
Claire Denis is an auteur who works in close collaboration with an established team. This makes it both difficult and methodologically questionable to break down her films according to elements attributable to individual team members. Camerawoman Agnès Godard, whose work I intend to address here, has of course collaborated with other directors as well, including Agnès Varda and Erick Zonca, so to some extent one could extrapolate her personal style; and she is a highly articulate artist capable of explaining her decisions.1 Godard has expressly emphasized that with BEAU TRAVAIL (FRANCE, 1999), and in other films of Claire Denis, she contributed to the development of the filmic concept almost from the beginning, just as she was present in the cutting room after the conclusion of principal photography. As a cameraperson she is thus integrated into the entire project, even into the work of the actors and the selection of the music. This applies as well to other members of the team, each exerting an influence on the style of the film, such that all of the branches of filmmaking mesh smoothly with one another. In the analysis of a Claire Denis film, this aspect of mutual collaboration has to be kept in mind, and it is especially advisable to approach the camerawork together with the mise-en-scène and the montage.

On the other hand – and this does not contradict what has been stated above, as it expresses a very specific way of working – Agnès Godard enjoys a great deal of freedom with Claire Denis. After months of intensive joint preparations for a film,2 spontaneity is allowed during the shooting. Improvisation can take place because creative convergence is guaranteed by a deep overall understanding shared among the members of the team.

1 I draw on Agnès Godard’s remarks at the Berlinale Talent Campus workshop held on February 17, 2005, as well as in her interview with Françoise Audé and Yann Tobin, “Regarder jusqu’à vouloir toucher,” Positif 471 (May 2000).

2 In an interview, Claire Denis recounted that she collaborated intensively with the actors for about two months, though without the screenplay (which left a great deal open anyway). The aim was to amalgamate the performers into a collective – akin to real recruits to the Foreign Legion, encouraging them to grow together as bodies, as dancers. To prepare, the performers moved to music from Benjamin Britten’s opera Billy Budd, which is also played in the film during the legionnaires’ exercises. See “Entretien avec Claire Denis,” Cahiers du cinéma 545 (2000): 50.
The direction and the camera have a close relationship of trust: “Il y a entre nous une complicité et un rapport passionnel étrange, une intimité dont le centre est le cinéma.” Thus Agnès Godard understands herself not as a functional tool carrying out a task but as someone who, within the context of a collaborative project, performs independent work that remains, and should remain, tangible as such.

It is obvious that this way of working affects the relationship between the images and the fictional events – events that are not entirely fixed at the beginning of shooting but take shape in the course of rehearsals. Claire Denis favors scenes to arise ad hoc on the set, without preconceptions. Moreover, the set is not a studio but a real location in which artificial light is often neither available nor necessary. The work of the camera is thus in many ways intuitive. Agnès Godard does not realize a storyboard that breaks down the plot into visual components but pursues her own spontaneous view of the events, endowing the scenes with a particular perspective. In so doing, she is palpably free to take an interest in aspects that are different from those laid down in the script (to the extent a script exists at all) or demanded by the logic of the plot or the expectation of the actors. At the same time, the photography must help to create the material that will later, in the cutting room, merge into a story.

Although the plot of Beau Travail comes out with sufficient clarity, the film retains a slightly disturbing quality: something ambiguous, inconclusive, troubling, that oscillates only emotionally and never enters completely into the causal construction of the plot. In this essay I will not argue that the camera alone is responsible for this quality. But I will leave other parameters aside or touch upon them only briefly in order to grasp the specific visual style of the film.

Shadows ahead

Before the opening credits have appeared, we see a dancing, flirtatious North African woman in a disco, then other dark-skinned women and white legionnaires: a short glimpse into everyday life in Djibouti (where the French Foreign Legion is traditionally stationed), loud and colorful.

3 “There is a complicity and a strange emotional rapport between us, an intimacy whose center is the cinema.” Interview in Positif (see note 1), 133.

is clear at once that two sexes from two different worlds are interacting. On the one hand, there are the women in brightly colored garments – attractive, pleasure-seeking, and self-confident. On the other, there are the immaculately uniformed soldiers – some merry, some gloomy, some potentially in erotic competition and ready for conflict. Those familiar with them may already identify the main actors Denis Lavant (Galoup) and Grégoire Colin (Sentain).

The film does not linger long in the disco, but seems to begin again after the title fades in. Luminous shots in a train car with colorful African garments and blue seat upholstery make for an exotic, opulent picture. Outside, the desert extends as far as the eye can see. Another angle from the window shows the rectangular shadow of the train wandering alongside, including the silhouettes of narrow, amorphous figures who seem to be leaning to the left, in the direction of travel. It is only after a while that one realizes that these are the shadows of passengers riding on the roof. Both the train and the movement to the left recall the beginnings of other films in which a protagonist travels back into the past. Departures into the future generally move from left to right, following the Western direction of reading.5

The African populace and the pale brown desert combine with breathtaking beauty: a strange and foreign country. It is not clear whether any legionnaires are present, or whose point of view we are supposed to adopt. At least in principle, this footage could equally well be documentary. More shots follow of the train, then stationary images of military equipment and dry grass in the desert; a shot of the sand, then again long shadows of amorphous figures – the same motif, now in a new context. Again, we are uncertain at first to what or to whom these shadows belong, then a movement of the camera reveals the group of young legionnaires, extending their arms ceremoniously up into the light, as though in prayer: harmonic bodies making powerful, dancer-like gestures (fig. 2a-c), as we hear the solemn, fateful chorus from Benjamin Britten’s opera *Billy Budd*.6 These men do not look like mercenaries, or like our idea of a mercenary.7 We still know nothing about them (apart from

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5 This symbolism of the direction of camera movement need not always apply. It was a dominant convention in classical Hollywood film which one sought – intuitively or consciously – to uphold. Other filmic traditions may follow different rules.

6 *Beau Travail* is an adaptation of sorts of Herman Melville’s novella *Billy Budd* (left unfinished at the author’s death in 1891); the novella was also the basis of Benjamin Britten’s opera of the same name which premiered in 1951.

7 My conception of members of the Foreign Legion has been influenced by Romuald Karmakar’s documentary *Warheads* (Germany, 1993), which portrays and interviews authentic mercenaries.
the dancing at the disco). Even now no information is given; there is only a moment in which we are encouraged to register their various physiognomies, muscular torsos and skin colors. The gaze of the camera is admiring, erotic, as though they were being caressed before our eyes. Exposed to our scrutiny the men shut their eyes; they will not return the gaze.

A little later a second traveling shot resumes the direction of the train’s progress, moving along a canal and a clothesline with soldiers’ laundry hung up to dry, again without offering us a moving or looking subject. And again the shot appears to imply that someone is gliding back into the past, remembering. A slight feeling of tension or confusion arises as the key to understanding is still missing. Does it make sense to look for a remembering or viewing subject, or would that be missing the film’s semantic structure?

Agnès Godard’s camera and Claire Denis’ direction have proceeded in many films according to this enigmatic, elliptical way: showing a great deal, presenting intense images heavy with meaning, but granting no initial explanation. In Beau Travail, the point of view is almost always outside of the characters and, for the present, no narrative authority can be made out either. Instead, the camera selects whatever fascinates it visually, apparently unconcerned about whether the spectators can catch on to the plot. To a certain extent this is a documentary attitude, of the kind that does not invite empathy, lacking the fictional shift into interior perspective. Yet the camera does not simply record what is taking place in front of it: the images are too precisely composed, with too many nuances of color and too many virtuoso interconnections. They respond to one another as in the two images of shadows, or the two traveling shots, arising independently and seemingly incidentally, but subtly related to one another within the filmic text.

It is symptomatic of the Denis/Godard style that many things, and many different sorts of thing, become visible and strike our eye before their meaning can be discerned. One could call this strategy inconsiderate, ignoring the needs of the audience – if this were not contradicted by the loving composition that pleases us aesthetically, in a sensory, haptic way. Yet a feeling lingers of subjection, distress, and hence inner agitation. An unresolved tension points to what is to come without allowing us to anticipate its content: we know that the events the film is going to narrate will be grim in one way or another. Although at first there are only images of the legionnaires’ everyday life and of the beauty of the landscape, with little that is ominous about them, we have grasped that the film will proceed without the reassurances of conventional storytelling. It will follow laws of its own, and what is shown will not necessarily be the same as what drives the plot or offers explanations according to psychological and causal principles.
Fig. 2 a-c: BEAU TRAVAIL
The scarlet tablecloth

The soldiers’ everyday life is elaborated across many minutes: maneuvers, physical exercises, swimming, fishing, ironing; occasionally, groups of African women are seen watching the doings of the legionnaires from the periphery. Throughout, male bodies are at the center, for the most part with the torso nude or in military green against the dull, dusty background of the desert or the glittering blue sea. Sometimes small scenes evolve or there is a cumulative capturing of the characters through close-ups, including the commandant Forestier (Michel Subor) and his adjutant Galoup. Then, after all of the variations of blue, khaki, green, brown, and ash, suddenly a flamboyant scarlet tablecloth is laid on the terrace table with the same meticulous domesticity as the legionnaires show ironing their shirts or shaving their faces. Although there is a tangle of chain-link fencing closing off the terrace, the tablecloth seems curiously unmilitary in color, much too garish and inorganic for this setting, an unexpected foreign object – but pleasing all the same, since it is so effective a contrast to the material world of the military (fig. 3b). Only when watching the film for the second time will one recognize that this color had precedents: for example in the garment of an African woman, and in a plastic washing bowl. And also, slightly shifted in hue, in a powerful explosion along the coast that tints the entire image flaming red. More importantly, there are patches of saturated red during a military funeral and in the details of the parade uniforms: red and green are the traditional colors of the Foreign Legion.

The tablecloth is employed extensively and impressively across multiple shots. Perhaps its function is to keep us on guard – anything can happen in this film, even the improbable. Or perhaps its function is to affix a dramaturgical seal to the first third of the plot – a conventional structuring achieved here in an unconventional way. Or again, perhaps it offers another example of ambiguous statements that astonish and fulfill us visually but remain uncommented upon. On the one hand, the tablecloth is too bright and in disproportionate contrast to the peaceful meal and the birthday cake served on it; on the other hand, it furnishes a high level of appeal, attesting

8 Martine Beugnet terms the perspective of the indigenous population “postcolonial” and speaks of a reversal of the structure of the gaze, since the legionnaires provide the Africans with an exotic spectacle they observe attentively (see Beugnet’s monograph Claire Denis, Manchester 2004, 104ff). Anke Zechner also discusses the representation of the African women, for whom she sees a primarily documentary camera that inscribes in the film two different narrative postures; see “Landschaften wie vor dem Auftauchen des Menschen: Zum Filmspezifischen in Claire Denis’ Beau Travail,” Frauen und Film 46 (2004): 61.
Fig. 3 a-c: BEAU TRAVAIL
Color and Empathy

to the filmmakers’ control over their in fact unpredictable and precarious material. After all, as one knows, or believes oneself to know, the men of the Foreign Legion had good reasons to abandon their former identities and social context to begin a hard new life anonymously, under a false name that masked their crimes. One expects roughness and raw adventurers, but what is emphasized instead is the ersatz familial bond that the Legion gives to its otherwise homeless members (“legio patria nostra”) – a bond that is not without its contradictions.⁹

We may also be aware that the film team was predominantly female, thus the choreographed beauty of the young legionnaires, superimposed on the narrated story like a second discourse, gains an appeal of its own. Through the camera – and through the mise-en-scène – a discourse is generated that animates and undermines the fiction at the same time. A scarlet tablecloth and dancer-like, smooth legionnaires, gliding like fish through water or slithering like lizards under obstacles (fig. 2b), create attractions, surplus values of tactile, ambivalent eroticism. The martial, very masculine plot is mystified and made unreal by Claire Denis and Agnès Godard in a peculiarly feminine way, narrated festively so that a new, rather unfamiliar masculinity unfolds. The homoeroticism that characterized Herman Melville’s novella *Billy Budd* is there too, but it is neglected more than put on display.

Memory images

Many things suggest that *Beau Travail* is a first-person narrative, a look back into the past, causing us – depending on the variant of this narrative form – to read the filmic images as memory images. After about five minutes of shots unaccompanied by commentary, the glittering sea dissolves into the lines of a diary (fig. 4a), held on the screen for a long time and apparently initiating the subsequent entry of Galoup’s voice-over, later to be heard again and again. At times the film seems to endow the diary with a voice, to read aloud from it; at other times it is free-floating over the images like a stream of consciousness. The result is a voice-over so flexible and adaptable that it can be expected, or imagined, anywhere. It can creep into the images to intensify their presence, or can withdraw for a time to permit other ways of seeing. After all, fictional

⁹ On the contemporary self-portrayal of the Foreign Legion, see the website of the French Embassy, “La France de A à Z,” subchapter “La Légion étrangère” (www.ambafrance-us.org/fr/aaz/legion/soldat/asp). It contains many formulations that still derive from the nineteenth century, evoking the romance of the lawless men who find a new family in the Foreign Legion.
Fig. 4 a-c: BEAU TRAVAIL
narration is not bound to follow logical rules: whatever works well within a
given context and serves to gratify the audience is acceptable and welcome.

Many images obviously function as memory images, with clear evidence
supporting this reading: one need only think of the traveling shots at the
outset, or of sudden intensities, such as the red explosion of the helicopter,
or the image of the sleeping lover the narrator left behind. Galoup’s flashback
brought about by his exile in Marseilles can be understood, like so many
flashbacks, as a confession, buckling under the weight of guilt, seeking clarity,
taking stock of what has happened and of his own actions. And as in so
many films with a flashback structure, an interesting question remains as
to whether the first-person narrator remembers “right,” that is, makes a full
confession, or whether he or she presents the story selectively, distorting it
subjectively or even retouching and falsifying it. In the case of BEAU TRAVAIL,
the elliptical structure of the flashback in which the significance of images
is often apparent only in retrospect, fits well with the hypothesis that what
we have before us are the fragments of obsessive recollection. Also, many
insights seem libidinously tinted. This also fits with the associative image
constructions that evoke what is currently emotionally relevant without
regard for the linear progression of the plot. Sentences like “Now, when none
of that exists anymore, when the past plays out in my inner eye […],” or “What
have I seen of the wild dromedaries, of the shepherds who came from who
knows where, what have I seen of the women in their shimmering scarves
on the stony fields,” also point in this direction. In this way the images of the
desert take on a hallucinatory quality, since they must replace actual memo-
ries and may overcompensate for the scarcity of the teller’s own experiences.

Yet perplexingly, these observations seem to miss the essence of the
film, as though the question as to subjectivity was posed wrongly. Instead
of shunting this question into the foreground, regarding it as the logical
backbone of the images and montage – so as to find a truth “behind them,”
revealing the “correct” course of events – it may be justified to view entirely
different formal principles as the dominant ones. Claire Denis has remarked
that “for me, cinema is not made to give a psychological explanation, for me
cinema is montage, is editing.”10 As already observed, the camerawork in this
film is not so much a straight linear presentation of causal events as a second
presence alongside the verbally narrated story or the discernible plot, the
fabula. The camerawork liberates itself from the task to depict events one
to one, or to show them at greater length or with more brevity according
to their causal relevance. It rather distills those meanings that fascinate it

10 Interview with Jonathan Romney (see note 4).
at a given moment. And although the result may resemble the subjective coloring of a fictional character, it is motivated in more and different ways. What the camerawork is primarily about is not the individual standpoint of the outcast legionnaire but the camera’s own point of view on the events.

These findings are not impeded by the fact that the narrative is enriched both verbally and visually by subjective traces of Galoup. Here a sort of narrative side motif is opened in the hierarchy of motifs which touches upon and clarifies certain things, but is often led astray in favor of attractions located elsewhere: for example, the interest in the elaborate choreography of the legionnaires. The scenes in which the legionnaires train or perform dance-like exercises possess a physical presence that vitally contradicts the nostalgic status of the flashbacks. The fictional narration comes almost to a halt in favor of a more poetic or musical principle directed towards distilling the libidinous essence of the characters – a principle that cannot be reconciled with Galoup’s confession of guilt or his coming to terms with his life. This is a discourse that occurs between the camera and the actors, the camera and the landscape, the camera and the music.

The object of jealousy

Sentain, the new recruit, whose spirit of solidarity, amiable nature, beauty, and courage make him universally beloved – causing Galoup’s jealousy and with it the catastrophe – is introduced casually, indeed cumulatively. He comes into the picture very early, and reappears now and then, usually being present a bit longer than the other legionnaires. However, one’s certainty that the voice-over narration is about this soldier solidifies only gradually. This absence of insistence can also be seen in the way Sentain is treated explicitly in the retrospective diary, although the images do not move in parallel with the text. Thus Sentain’s arrival in the camp is reported in the voice-over but is not shown. At the time of our arrival/the arrival of the camera after the train journey, he is already present in the group as though he had always been there.

Although Sentain may be more beautiful and, with his high cheekbones and oddly Asian eyes in an otherwise European face, more mysterious than the other legionnaires, he differs from them much less than Galoup. The latter’s pockmarked, irregularly weathered face stands out disquietingly, and he moves more eruptively, almost like a predator (fig. 3a). By contrast, Sentain can disappear into the mass of athletic young men, his head shaved like theirs. The camera likes to capture him together with his comrades, dedicating the same gaze of approval to him that seems neither voyeuristic nor
homoerotic but appropriate in view of these exquisite creatures: “Je ne suis pas voyeuse, mais spectatrice,” as Agnès Godard asserts. And the camera captures Sentain’s particular charm once only, when his head is shaved by another soldier who, with a hint of tenderness, runs his fingers over Sentain’s skull. A sudden contented smile, winning and childlike, spreads across Sentain’s face, signifying a moment of well-being (fig. 1, preceding this essay).

Likewise, the attraction that Sentain holds for the commandant Forestier is shown only discreetly. Sometimes the commandant’s pensive gaze seems directed at Sentain (fig. 4b), but this is not verified unambiguously: Forestier could also be looking into the distance, or at other recruits. Exactly those structures of the gaze that would clarify their relationship in another film remain ambiguous. A brief chat between the two – one of the few dialogues in this low-dialogue film – culminates in the commandant acknowledging the young soldier as a “pretty find” (in Melville’s novella, he is a foundling). It is a surprising compliment in the disciplined military context, and one with emotional vibration, but it is given no chance to resonate, the camera moving swiftly on as if nothing had happened. As so often, the film plays with expectations and touches on some motifs, only to cut the thread before it might connect the elements.

**Landscapes**

A characteristic of the camera style of Agnès Godard is that she photographs objects, architecture, and nature with the same attention and aesthetic devotion she applies to people. And a characteristic of the shared style of the Claire Denis films is that shots like these, which in many cases make do without human figures, are often just as relevant to the narrative as the close-ups of faces. These shots are also sometimes held longer than would be necessary in the economy of traditional narratives. The breadth of variation in the orchestration of light and colors and in the pictorial composition of these shots, in particular the landscapes, seems inexhaustible: “Images that make possible a view of things as though for the first time by directing the gaze not at all, or unfamiliarly.” The barren desert with occasional scree slopes, the overexposed salt flats, and the lava rocks in the ocean possess an unforgettable individuality. Times of day with long or short shadows, cooling or hot air,

11 “I am not a voyeur, I am a spectator.” Interview in *Positif* (see note 1), 134.
12 Anke Zechner (see note 7), 64.
zones of dry dust, sunset, back-lighting, and deep darkness give the locations a sensuous structure that acts as a counterbalance to the male bodies.

The landscapes are often complexly graded into multiple foregrounds, middle grounds, and backgrounds (fig. 3c), with the colors differentiating the individual layers in almost supernatural fashion – an aesthetic that could be inspired by the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. Large panoramas alternate with precise shots of salt crystals and dry tufts of grass. As Galoup moves alone among the barracks in the dusk, only the ocean and the lava islands glow in the cool light that remains, and he consumes himself in the furor of his hatred and his plans for revenge. As the plot advances towards the catastrophe, the landscapes grow more sublime, hostile, and inhospitable. Similarly, the light becomes more extreme and the characters more strongly integrated into the terrain. Sentain gets more and more encrusted with salt on his march through the desert, until his jacket is so hard that he can stand it up next to his body, and he himself is more akin to an inorganic object made of salt than a human being. The camera emphasizes the centrality of the landscape by attaching more relevance to the pictorial composition than to the narratively “correct” field of vision: the characters are often fragmented or either too far away or too close; or they are captured from an angle outside the range of human vision.

The smooth flow of the montage, in spite of this deviation from the conventions of continuity and spectators’ visual habits, corresponds with the fact that the shots have a high degree of independence. We are being trained in a system in which fracturing of content is a distinct component, and the images’ interlinking satisfies graphical and poetic principles more than the logic of the plot. The result, as Jonathan Rosenbaum has written, is a “poetic rumination that pointedly doesn’t discriminate between major and minor events, intertwining both into a kind of endless magical tapestry.”

The ecstatic dance

The film ends with the protagonist’s wild dance (fig. 4c). The intensity of this at once peculiarly disturbing and euphoric finale is due above all to the strength and energy of Denis Lavant as a dancer. No performer could be more physical. His centered body language, controlled by discipline and eruptive all the same, has acted as a threat throughout the film, a sign of the build-up of immense psychological capacity and suppressed aggression. This build-up

was discharged once before, when Galoup’s jealousy had reached an apex: in a short, violent surge of frustration, he flings his jacket to the ground with a vengeance. Although the other legionnaires appear to be exceptionally physical through their choreographed training, only Galoup has this menacing muscular tension that seems to well up from an embittered, corroded soul.

At the end of the film, Galoup lies motionless on his bed, ritually made according to military rules, his firearm pressed to his bare chest; in his body only the veins pulse. A tattoo can be seen on his skin, and quietly he speaks its words: “Ser la bonne cause et meurs” (“Serve the good cause and die”). Obviously, he has resolved to kill himself. Stock-still, he concentrates and a vision appears, an inner image of his agitated constitution: he is suddenly back at the disco, as before in Djibouti, but now all alone. He stands in front of an expanse of mirrored tiles, doubling him in fragments, as they reflect the lights differently: a recurrence of the mirrorings in the brief disco scenes that punctuate the film and of the motif of the chain-link fence that characterizes the legionnaires’ world. Galoup’s clothing is black, as it had been at times before; what is unexpected are the professional black-and-white dance shoes, glowing like the paws of an animal. The dance floor is a radiant oily yellow, reminiscent of the streetcars in which Galoup rode to Marseilles. The color yellow was omitted almost entirely in the world of the legionnaires, reserved for the African women and for Galoup’s solitude after his expulsion from the military.

The camera creates a sort of stage for the final dance. Galoup/Lavant stands with his back turned to the right corner of the room, as if to block his movement to the right and into a future of any kind. The camera frames him relatively closely, but takes care that whenever possible the entire figure stays visible, down to his tango shoes. The camera remains static, so as not to disturb the performance, neither to add nor omit movement, and thus to allow the tour de force of dance to unfold authentically and without interference. In this last scene of the film, the spectator is totally fused to the character, experiencing a sudden surge of sympathy and emotion, of affective empathy as well as motor mimicry. Galoup not only sets himself free and dances off his own frustrations but simultaneously dispels those of the audience.

Galoup begins hesitantly, dancing in short, abrupt phases. His cigarette seems to involve him more than the dancing. But then he intensifies into ecstatic devotion. His body bounces like a rubber ball. The black-and-white, animal-like shoes underscore his powerful steps and kicks on the floor, on which he ultimately spins, rolls, turns, only to jump back upright again. The open space to the dancer’s left is incorporated with increasing vigor, filling the entire frame. Closeness thus contributes to the expression of this
acrobatic burst – Galoup blasts open the boundaries of the real, but hardly the boundaries of the space allotted to him. His explosion is thus at the same time implosive and a moment beyond which there can be no continuation. This degree of vitality can be maintained only for a spell, facing death.

The unreality of this dance, in which a character finds salvation from the repressions, muscular armor, and aggressions of his life, is bolstered further by a caesura dividing the performance into two parts. The film seems to be at an end when the screen goes black and the credits appear, although the Corona song *This is the rhythm of the night, this is the rhythm of my life*, continues to play. Galoup’s energy cannot be controlled, however; the credits stop and he appears again, at first with arms hanging at his sides in a brief static moment. Then the dance goes on with undiminished power. He even catapults himself off-screen to the left, but is back at once to surpass the climax, exhaust himself, and finally vanish or melt rapidly into the dark. Only now is the film over.

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Whereas the primary function of images in conventional narrative cinema is to drive the plot, with other functions serving only as secondary matter, this approach is altogether reversed in the films of Claire Denis. The primary function lies in the image itself, in its visual poetic presence and emotional charge, and it is only later that the involvements, conflicts, and events of the plot emerge or are allowed to shine through. The essential responsibility for this is borne by the work of the camera. The camera expresses such willfulness, aesthetic power, subject-like presence, and erotic attention to whatever it shows as to draw the spectators into the enthrallment of the sensual moment. The result for the characters is that they are compelled not only to obey the fictional hierarchy but also to lead a physical life of their own. As Agnès Godard has formulated her approach to filming:

> J’aime autant filmer les hommes que les femmes. C’est regarder jusqu’à vouloir toucher. Je peux oberserver sans fin les visages, les corps, c’est ce qu’il y a de plus inépuissable au monde. La magie du cinéma est dans cet effet produit.14

*Translated by Ben Letzler*
Fig. 1: William Wegman’s Cinderella, 1992 (reproduction courtesy William Wegman)
Empathy with the Animal

[1997]

I.

In her short story “Painwise,” the science fiction author James Tiptree, Jr.¹ describes creatures endowed with an excess of empathy. These “empaths” seek to be exclusively in the presence of happiness, since they immediately assume both the pleasurable and the painful feelings of others. They often struggle to distinguish their own thoughts from those of other beings, and they say what their dialogue partner was in fact going to say or wanted to say. There are three kinds of empath: the golden-yellow bushbaby monkey, soft, relaxed, and pliant, like a child in a fur coat too large for it; the butterfly with enormous compound eyes, feathered antennae, and sheer rainbow wings; and the boa constrictor, tightly wound, smooth, and cool, with a wedge-shaped head and ice-gray eyes.

“Touch, taste, feel” is the empaths’ motto. Now and then, three of them come together to organize a “lovepile,” an amorous heaping of a “great palatal-olfactory interplay” in which they blend tastes and smells as well as other unnameable euphoric sensations. The mutual aim is to taste all the contradictory haptic textures and materials of the three heterogeneous partners. At the same time, the reciprocal assumption of feelings engenders a kind of self-pleasure that only processes of empathy allow, and thus an immense increase in desire. For in infinitely spiraling reactions to reactions, a cumulative mise-en-abîme, everyone feels like everybody else, and everyone feels the feelings in everybody else, and everyone feels themselves amidst the feeling of all of these feelings.

James Tiptree, Jr. sounded out various aspects of the phenomenon of empathy, taking them to the telepathic, erotic, and unreal extreme in her story. In reality, empathetic processes are far more ephemeral, and it is generally not hard to distinguish between oneself and another person. But in reality, too – particularly in moments of heightened sensuality and in the reception of works of art – a sort of emotional understanding of another

¹ “James Tiptree, Jr.” is the pen name of the author Alice Bradley Sheldon. The short story “Painwise” is included in her A Thousand Light Years From Home (New York: Ace Books, 1973), 117-143.
being occurs, and the other being can be of an entirely different composition than oneself. Empathy does not rely on similarity.

II.

The inexhaustible attraction of the zoo may be explained in part by way of empathetic processes. Even nature lovers who would rather set the animals free cannot deny the appeal of the direct encounter, the mirroring, and the involuntary comparison with the animal. They look at the lion and sense themselves muscular and covered in silk fur the color of sand – or small, weak, upright, and naked by comparison; or they look at the birds and know what it feels like to stand on two plastic sticks with talons that are much too long and folded up when in flight – or to wear shoes that fit well and provide a firm grip on the ground. In each case, empathy shoots out towards the animal, announces what it would be like if..., and then, relenting, permits the return of the subjective sense of one’s own body – undermined, changed, strengthened, enriched.

Visitors to the zoo are particularly fascinated by the faces of the animals with their alien physicality and their supposed expression of character. These faces are compared to human physiognomies and anthropomorphized. One imagines slipping into these other faces or tries to project them onto one’s own face. What would it be like if my eyes were so close to one another – a mien of distrust or of penetrating, resentful attention; if the nostrils were so broadly flared – a mien of wild, dull thoughtlessness; if quick eyes could become entirely round, the limp corners of the mouth could hang down, bony lips were opened by a crack. This is a source of amusement and delight not only for children.

The empathetic experience usually goes no farther than this pleasurable play of the imagination, and the zoo experience generally stops with the visual comparison. It is different from the case of Tiptree’s empaths, who wish to touch, taste, and feel, and thus to intensely taste-with, feel-with, and indeed think-with the other. In our world, the distance between the self and the other may be reduced when we empathize, but it remains fundamentally there. We do not confuse ourselves with the others. And when, now and then, we encounter disagreeable bodily conditions – in animals that are infested with vermin or have running eyes – we quickly break out of the shared experience and react with pity, horror, or disgust. In such cases, empathy forms only a short transitional stage towards understanding the condition of the other being.
Empathy with the Animal

III.

Images, statues, and particularly photographs and films can likewise trigger empathetic processes, but the encounter takes a different course than it does in reality. Even though only limited sensory data are available – images have no smell and are not three-dimensional – similar attainments of shared feeling can occur. The extent to which a work stimulates empathy is thus of tremendous relevance for aesthetics, as Theodor Lipps already emphasized in 1903. For Lipps, such acts of empathy are not only triggered by humans and other creatures but also by architecture in its palpable power relationships of burden and support, and in its colors, lines, and rhythms. Even if Lipps may have overestimated their potential for a general theory of art, these are interesting observations in which the phenomenon manifests itself as something very basic.

Every conceivable variant of empathy can have importance for a filmic response theory, in particular empathy with persons and other beings in whom stories or emotional developments may be observed. Film, in its frontal attention to animated faces and its deploy of movement that exhibits the play of muscles, engenders more impulses for emotional and somatic empathy than do other representations, and thus has a more powerful capacity to involve its viewers. The motionless attention directed entirely at the screen, liberated from any need to act, also makes the cinema an ideal site for empathetic understanding. Compared to the novel, film has highly specific means to intensify the relationship between the recipient and the characters.

The reactions of spectators are at the center of contemporary film theory, in particular in discussions from the standpoint of cognitive psychology, a psychology in which “empathy” is of increasing importance as a keyword. Lipps’ aesthetic observations on *Einfühlung* were a starting point for German approaches to viewer responses. With the English term “empathy,” Anglo-American psychological research took another path, with an empirical orientation towards the natural sciences. Their findings now make it possible for reception theory to dispense with the potentially misleading and overused term “identification,” and in its place to draw on a nuanced terminology to describe many variations of the integration of the viewer into a film.

This progress is due to two books in particular: Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, and Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and

2 Theodor Lipps, *Grundlegung der Ästhetik* (Leipzig: Leopold Voss), 1903.
the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine. Both works were apparently written contemporaneously but largely independently of each other – one in England, the other in the Netherlands – yet they address quite similar processes and arrive at comparable models and conclusions. While Smith was coming from the perspective of the humanities, drawing on the discipline of psychology to support his investigations, Tan’s starting point was the other way around, as a psychologist active in the field of narrative film theory.

Empathy is viewed in this context as a basic factor in filmic understanding, one that takes on a number of forms. Smith distinguishes between “emotional simulation,” in which the spectator puts himself in the shoes of his or her fictional counterpart to test out how a situation is experienced, and “affective mimicry,” in which gestures and facial expressions evoke the other subject’s sensations directly (although usually in a weaker form). The two phenomena have in common that they occur involuntarily and swiftly, and that they dissipate with equal speed.

The simplest form of affective mimicry, the interior imitation of feelings, reacts on an expressive scale of the so-called basic affects: fear, surprise, rage, disgust, grief, joy, interest (the list varies slightly from school to school). These facial equivalents of affects appear to be universally comprehensible, presumably being based on an inborn code. We are able to quickly interpret facial expressions that are indignant, frightened, or distorted with rage, and we react with a sort of distant echo of the same affect. More complex emotions – envy, shame, disappointment, and so forth – can also be comprehended empathetically, but require a higher degree of cognitive cooperation and insight into the situation, since they are experienced and expressed differently in different cultures. At the physical level, motor mimicry corresponds to affective mimicry, involving parallel muscular activity to bodily exertions observed in other beings. Motor mimicry ranges from subliminal innervation to slight, intuitive, at times anticipatory mirror movements when another person is perceived, and sometimes to more substantial, more extensive muscular imitation. One need think only of the soccer fans whose feet twitch in front of the television when a player needs to kick the ball, or of the mother who opens her own mouth when

5 On this, see my essay „Motor Mimicry in Hitchcock” (1999) in the present volume.
spoon-feeding a baby – though here empathetic mimesis is often mixed with gestural demand.

The various forms of empathy elicit more or less the same emotions and motor impulses in the audience as in the counterpart observed. This is not the case, however, with other forms of viewer response. In the register of sympathy or its opposite, antipathy, independent feelings can rise up among the viewers – for example being moved, amused, revolted, or touched by pity at the sight of a person experiencing fear. These responses are dependent on spontaneous affection and narrative point-of-view, as well as moral approval and shared view of life. Over the course of a film, sympathy tends to solidify gradually into allegiance or partisanship for certain characters, but empathetic and sympathetic forms of reaction can also occur simultaneously. They often have a strengthening effect on one another, and they occasionally contradict each other: it is thus possible at the cinema to both hope and fear that the murderer will be caught.

IV.

But back to empathy with the animal. Motor mimicry appears frequently in animal films, particularly in shots that illustrate the play of the muscles so clearly that one senses analogies to the pattern of one's own body. In horse shows, for example, frontally filmed hurdle races trigger little empathy, whereas the opposite is the case with side views that show us the work of the four legs and hooves: a trivial observation, but one that attests to the fact that it is possible to empathize with foreign anatomies (also the reason why millipedes make us nervous).

At least as important as an advantageous angle is the anticipatory understanding of what an animal is planning to do. Leaping over a hurdle requires momentum and precision, a particular dynamism to be dealt with according to the obstacle and also in relation to one’s stature. Watching the horse jump, we mix our own experiences of jumping with the facts of the animal's musculature and volume, and we experience the successful jump as a triumph over gravity in which we inwardly participate.

Empathy of this kind reacts to the animal as animal, independent of the anthropomorphizing processes animal films often strive to arouse. Animal films draw first on impulses of the sort described above for the real-world zoo experience: similarities between animal physiognomies and human expressions lead to intuitive projective attributions. They can occur freely since most animals lack, or seem to lack, the capacity for affective
expression. One knows, of course, what it means when a predator shows its fangs or a dog wags its tail; but in general the facial expressions and body language of animals remain opaque. Thus the anthropomorphizing can proceed apace without taking animal conditions into account, filling in the blanks with human emotions.

V.

The American art photographer and video artist William Wegman has worked almost exclusively with his beloved dogs. His Weimaraner “Man Ray” achieved great photographic prominence in the 1970s, and other dogs followed. More recently, Wegman has created a book version of Cinderella, lavishly illustrated with photographs, in which all of the characters are embodied by hybrid creatures with costumed human bodies and canine heads. Cinderella, the serving girl who will marry the prince, wears the floor-length, long-sleeved, dowdy dress of a simple maiden, and looking out from this dress is the head and the sturdy furry neck of a Weimaraner with the characteristic lop ears, wrinkled forehead, and worried-looking eyes (fig. 1, preceding this essay). The prince is a costumed Weimaraner as well, as are the stepmother and stepsisters; appearances are also made by cats (as cats) and other breeds of dogs (as carriage horses).

Comparing female and male characters, a certain disparity, a “gender trouble,” becomes evident. Dog ears that hang down can be read as hairstyling, as an equivalent to feminine curls, and thus the female characters are at first glance more credible than the male ones. But on closer inspection, the hairy surfaces and strong necks disrupt the illusion. Above all, there is something disturbingly unfeminine in the black lips, half-hidden beneath the muzzle, instead of the red mouth associated with femininity. The result is that the young women, Cinderella and her sisters, appear almost like transvestites. Equally disruptive are the deep canine wrinkles, running counter to youthful beauty. The male characters, by contrast, seem more convincing in this respect and less grotesque. But at the same time they are less interesting and on the whole seem weaker than the women, as they are so similar to them: the heads and necks of male dogs differ little from the heads and necks of bitches.

From the perspective of empathy, the appeal of Wegman’s approach lies in the opposing impulses that the images trigger. On the one hand, the dogs are anthropomorphic fictional characters animated by attributes, situations, and modes of action, as well as the accompanying emotions with which we involuntarily supplement them. Thus one reacts to these characters effortlessly with affective mimicry. On the other hand, at the level of the animal faces a resistance arises, because reality and appearance are too divergent. With the faces one is grasped by a direct response to the animal as animal. One can experience empathetically the sturdy neck musculature, for example, as well as the fact that the dogs have probably been forced to stand upright, and one can feel their discomfort in human clothing. Or one reacts, as at the zoo, to the animal compared to and contrasted against humans, thus attributing to the Weimaraners a disposition that is in part anxious, in part devoted, somewhat supercilious, and both obstinate and good-natured – and all of this entirely apart from the roles they play in the fairy tale. Whereas anthropomorphizing is easier to achieve with “normal” animal stories in which the fictional characters are either seen as actual animals or, in the case of drawings, are already given strongly human traits (Mickey Mouse expresses the basic affects entirely), a viewing of Wegman’s hybrids prompts a deep ambivalence or a conception of the characters that, tipping to and fro, remains unsettled.

There are instances – pinnacles of the approach – in which the various elements flow together in a way that is witty and moving. Occasionally Wegman makes use of the typical posture of canine interest, in which the head is extended crookedly forward, the ears perked up slightly, the eyes rounded to express the attention and enthusiasm of his characters: Cinderella sews herself a dress for the ball, and the Weimaraner seems ardently concentrated on the sewing machine. Or the red-rimmed dog eyes and the anxious wrinkles stand for pain and distress: Cinderella lies on her bed, her ears pressed tousled between pillow and blanket, and cries herself to sleep.

VI.

Whereas Wegman’s photo books are colorful and luxuriant and his art photos are choice and perfect, his early video works limit themselves to a
meager, flat black-and-white. The technical absence of luster that was specific to the simple video cameras of the era is accepted here, perhaps even consciously made use of. Each video presents a concept, a small idea, never played out for longer than necessary, and each video seems to complete itself spontaneously: laconic sketches of two or three minutes with an air of modesty that can deceive the viewer into overlooking how subtle they are.

Man Ray, Do You Want To? from 1973 shows, against a neutral background, the dog’s head and neck reacting to his master’s questions. The dog’s understanding of language and imaginative freedom to make choices are assumed. Questions like “Man Ray, do you want to see Jane?” or “Do you want to go to the beach?” permit the dog to listen attentively and signal his understanding through small gestures and sounds. An admonishing “Man Ray!” calls him back to order when he begins to turn away; shaking the head seems to signify rejection, raising the muzzle a heightened interest, winking a waiting position, and licking the lips an incipient boredom. When the dog finally stands up, Wegman quickly says, “Let’s go,” and the little film is over. The concept is achieved: to give expression to the gulf between animal and human communication by overtaxing plausibility and thus to deconstruct the anthropomorphizing impulse. At the same time, the loving connection to the animal and the intensive communication between dog and master attest to the fact that anthropomorphizing is not needed at all.

Still more ascetic is Wegman’s three-minute video Two Dogs and Ball (also known as Dog Duet) from 1974, which does without sound altogether. A frontal view is shown of two Weimaraners, a smaller one and a larger one, sitting next to each other in front of a dark wall and moving their heads, eyes, and ears simultaneously. Their expressions appear identical – attentive yet annoyed, arrogant yet slightly duped – but the smaller dog appears to be more obtuse than the larger one, and the movements of one are sometimes delayed a few fractions of a second after the movements of the other. Their gazes apparently follow an object that means something to them even though they are unable to grasp what is happening, and without their interest being sufficient to prompt them to stand up. The title already gives away what sort of object is involved (and the tennis ball appears at the end of the piece), but for the spectators the real situation pales in comparison to the mysterious, nearly telepathic simultaneity of the two animals. They almost seem to follow a choreography. Yet they lack rhythmic grace, so that the impression that prevails is one of useless effort, undignified pathos, and

misunderstanding. Unintended comedy as the consequence of relatively complicated head movements ensues when the dogs turn in various directions. Contributing to this effect is that they are pointed at the camera – and thus at the viewer – but are reacting to something that exists invisibly in the space near, behind, and above the camera: in a visual void.

As in the previous film MAN RAY, DO YOU WANT TO? Wegman plays with the viewers’ knowledge of the pro-filmic situation coming into conflict with the perception and comprehension of what is shown. What is more, one reads feelings into the animals that are in no way appropriate. One endows these feelings with an anthropomorphic charge, but then slides away from them, defeated by the absurdity and minimality of what is shown, until ultimately reacting again to the reality of the dogs as dogs.

*Translated by Ben Letzler*
Fig. 1: FRENZY (Alfred Hitchcock, US 1972): The foot of the victim in the face of the murderer.
Motor Mimicry in Hitchcock

[1999]

Various new publications in the field of cognitive theory of the audience¹ have encouraged me to contribute my own findings regarding a certain phenomenon in the work of Alfred Hitchcock: the prominent placement of moments that trigger motor mimicry in the viewer. Using myself as a kind of guinea pig, I observed my personal reactions while watching one Hitchcock film after another, until a pattern emerged.

My project had a dual focus. It was intended, on the one hand, as a contribution to Hitchcock scholarship, in particular to Hitchcock stylistics; on the other, as a study of motor mimicry in the cinema – the physical response of the audience to specific visual stimuli. Both issues share the observation that nearly all of Hitchcock’s films, from his early silent period to his late work, include passages in which the viewers are so powerfully involved in observing the physical acts onscreen that their own muscles begin to join in.

Motor mimicry belongs in the spectrum of empathy² and is one of a number of related processes: for example, “affective mimicry,” which is an involuntary (but reduced and fleeting) sharing of basic feelings that can be read from another’s facial expressions and body language; or “emotional simulation,” which is an attempt to imagine oneself in another’s situation as a way of exploring his or her state of mind or need to act. In each case, there is feedback about the other person’s concerns that can produce insights or anticipations. Empathetic processes should not be equated with processes of identification, however, since they represent only a temporary, partial equalizing with the person observed. Even if that person’s emotional and physical experiences become the observer’s own feelings for a moment, preoccupying his or her body, the person observed and the viewer remain separate entities.³

² Psychological theories on empathy were inspired in many ways by Theodor Lipps, Grundlegung der Ästhetik (Leipzig: Leopold Voss, 1903). According to Lipps, “empathy” (Einfühlung) is “the inside of mimesis” (ibid., 120).
³ See Smith (see note 1), chapter 3.
Empathetic processes are universal everyday reactions, which also occur in chimpanzees and probably serve to preserve the species by ensuring that members of the same species will intuitively understand each other’s predicaments and offer immediate assistance. In general, however, the occasions are rather trivial. For example, everyone knows the twitchy fingertips you get watching someone occupied with a tricky manual task; and everyone is familiar with how this somatic response can increase to the point of stepping in if the worker is clumsy, or a screw threatens to get loose. This form of empathy occurs whether or not the worker seems likeable (although familiarity with a person will set empathetic processes in motion more quickly), and it occurs most readily when it involves a task whose intention, consequences, difficulty, and management the observer can assess. The more obvious the manipulations necessary to achieve the goal, and the more protracted the attempts to solve it, the more nervous and willing to intervene we become. The so-called Zeigarnik effect, which says that the unfinished acts of others are unnerving, even if they have nothing to do with us, also plays a reinforcing role: the fact that a task is not completed can occupy us mentally and emotionally for quite a while.

It seems reasonable to apply the everyday situation of watching another person to that of an audience in the theater, a stadium, or a circus. Motor mimicry is centrally important in sports, where we anticipate or savor the physical performance of the athletes. In ballet, we experience the breathtaking precision of the dancers or their overcoming of gravity, and in the circus we get involved when dangerous acrobatic acts elicit the thrills of fear, or when escape artistes à la Houdini free themselves from straitjackets and handcuffs. In all these cases, the performers are actually present – a circumstance that heightens the viewers’ excitement, even if the separation of roles between the audience and the performers, and of their respective spaces, entails no obligation or possibility to take part or intervene in the events. But this very circumstance seems to intensify motor mimicry all the more, since the impulse to act is pent up and cannot be acted upon. We can come to the aid of the clumsy mechanic mentioned above, but not to the aid of the circus artiste.

Thanks to its photographic representation, film permits realistic perception and reaction, triggering processes in the viewers similar to those of other forms of performance. Yet the separation between the space of the

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4 Many games of skill derive their appeal from motor mimicry with fellow players, for example, the pick-up sticks game Mikado.
5 The effect is named after Bluma Zeigarnik, a Russian psychologist of the 1920s.
viewers and the space of the action is even more radical, since the performers are present only as likenesses on the screen. But what cinema lacks in actual reality is compensated for by the option of showing a situation from all sides, and of following the physical activity of the performers in detail: the distance from events onstage can be bridged with close-ups from privileged standpoints. Moreover, the darkness of the auditorium offers seclusion from the rest of the audience. Thus the apparatus of the cinema provides a heightened viewing experience, and it facilitates the forgetting of one’s own body in favor of the body of another.

Not all viewers are equally open to empathy, however; what provokes manifest physical reactions in some people, pleasant or unpleasant, will in others only generate a distant echo of the movements and muscle tensions observed. Likewise, the stimuli that trigger empathetic reactions seem to vary from person to person. Additional empirical research and clarification is necessary here.6 Nor is every director equally sensitive to the dramaturgical use of motor mimicry, and not every film fully exploits the opportunities the medium offers. On the contrary, the play with the viewer’s physical reactions is often ignored, even if the nature of the action presented would offer excellent opportunities for it.

Certain conditions of representation have to be fulfilled for the process to be effective. It is not only necessary, as described above, that situations be clear and the physical tasks comprehensible and foreseeable, it is also important that the muscles of the performers be displayed. Moreover, spatial orientation should not be impeded by too much editing (shifts in axis or inserted material tend to cut off the connection to the performers’ bodies). Likewise, the distance from the camera – the scale of the shots – should remain more or less constant; and the action should be shown in its duration and continuity (real time causes impatience and hence the urge to intervene).

In the classical system of Hollywood genres, one can identify specializations in the degree and type of empathetic processes set in motion.7 For example, a special appeal of the musical is based on the harmonious movement of the dancers. Fred Astaire in particular knew how to handle this appeal, not only in the conception of his numbers but also in their

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6 It would be interesting to know whether the oft-asserted thesis that women are more inclined to empathy than men is true. It has been argued that women have to anticipate their children’s movements and are hence equipped by nature for this task.

7 See the related but different approach in Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, 4 (1991): 2-13.
cinematic presentation: whenever possible, he tried to get by without edits and fragmentation. By presenting the entire person in the image, the flow of movement could be captured, and the audience could resonate along with it. Whereas such dance scenes aim at empathetic viewers, slapstick comedy addresses patrons who are more distanced and can perceive sadistic affronts as jokes. Too much empathy would be counterproductive, and slapstick would become unbearable if every mishap were felt in one’s own body. The action film primarily conveys experiences of physical omnipotence and dynamic acceleration, while the gangster film or some westerns involve the audience in violent fights, destruction, and injury. The cowboy film can make us physically aware of what it means to break in a horse, and the melodrama appeals to erotic sensations when caresses are exchanged or withheld, effects taken to extremes in the case of pornography. Finally, the thriller – and this brings us to Hitchcock – prefers anxious physical predicaments, encounters in the dark, attacks out of the blue, or the despair of an eyewitness incapacitated to help the victim. Thrillers tend to freeze rather than activate the audience, which can lead to a diffuse muscular nervousness or a rigid, painful blockade.

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Not all of Hitchcock’s films are full-blown thrillers. Typically, they mix elements of suspense, crime, melodrama, and comedy, which offer a variety of possibilities to approach the audience and stimulate reactions on all levels. Secret Agent (UK 1936), for example, has a grim, oppressive plot interwoven with comic and erotic aspects, mitigated by folkloristic absurdities and witty dialogue.

Secret Agent begins with an episode only slightly connected to the main plot, tightly constructed and as yet mysterious (fig. 2a-c). We see a wake in which a series of somber guests have assembled around the catafalque. They bid farewell to the deceased man’s valet, a decorated veteran whose left arm has been amputated. He seems to be deeply affected, but as soon as he knows he is alone, he drops the mask of mourning and sets to work – in an action that turns out to be a macabre, impious little farce. First, with admirable agility, he removes a cigarette from a pack with his one remaining hand and lights it with one of the tall candles standing around the coffin. Already we are watching with fascination and growing nervousness. But the situation gets worse as the amputee starts tampering with the coffin and begins to lift it. Unpleasant premonitions creep over us – empathetic feelings triggered by the man as well as the corpse, which is presumably about to slip out of its
Fig. 2 a-c: SECRET AGENT (Alfred Hitchcock, UK 1936)
coffin. With mixed feelings we sense the valet’s second, missing arm, which he would need to balance the coffin and prevent its desecration. Despite our physical impulse to interfere, we are condemned to watch impotently as the man knocks over several burning candles, and to follow his clumsy manipulations and ineffective thrashing. But the fire we expect never breaks out, and the scene ends with a surprising effect: the lid opens, revealing an empty coffin light enough to be moved with one arm. The audience’s inner tension gives way to curiosity for what this story is going to be about.

A second, more elaborate, and much longer example is found in Hitchcock’s FRENZY of 1972. A sex killer has strangled a young woman, and he has managed to cram her into a potato sack and load her onto a truck unnoticed. But he has failed to see that she is holding his tie pin in her fist. During his desperate effort to retrieve the pin, the truck starts, and the murderer has to continue his quest in the dark among the potatoes, in a vehicle moving at full speed. Moreover, he has failed to close the tailgate of the truck, so the back is wide open.

The murderer’s task is clearly defined and highly physical. Numerous precarious moments enable us to follow empathetically what is being done or what might have to be done, and diverse physical stimuli cause us to experience the situation haptically as well. The contrast between hard, cold metal and dusty, sandy potatoes, the coarse structure of the sack which arouses the sense of touch, and the dark image – all combine to make viewers (much like the murderer) sense they are feeling more than seeing. The muscles are also addressed early on, when one understands how hopeless it is to raise the heavy tailgate from inside the truck. But the real test of strength is yet to come: rigor mortis has set in, and it is all but impossible to pull the dead woman out from the potatoes. Her stiff limbs, with her feet in front, are unwieldily hooked together (fig. 1, preceding this essay). Among the potatoes her naked, dry, smooth, and dusty toes look almost like potatoes themselves – a fact that is somehow comforting. There is nothing revolting about the young woman’s body. The horror, the repulsive thing, is the murderer, even though he feels horror himself, a sensation easy to share.

Finally, he manages the almost impossible: he reaches the victim’s hand – but she is holding the golden pin in a fist turned to iron. Even the pocketknife he uses to force her hand open fails. But he continues working doggedly, breaking the dead woman’s fingers one by one, until the incriminating pin is freed. The violent destruction, the grating, cracking, and giving way of bones, the rigidity of the woman’s hand withstanding even the metal of the blade, the superhuman power it requires to complete the task – all this is reflected in the bodies of the viewers as a parallel experience and inner
activity, as if they were at once perpetrator and victim. Not even the fact that Hitchcock fragments this scene into many brief shots can diminish its intensity. In the tightness of the space, the action is close enough to maintain contact with the audience, while cutaways contribute to heightening the suspense and reinforcing the physical discomfort. Shots of the blithely steering driver or the passing, freely moving cars provide momentary relief, but the contrast only makes the murderer’s situation more unbearable. The truck swerves as it overtakes another vehicle; and when the driver brakes, a sack of potatoes slides out, dropping onto the road and breaking open, so that we can anticipate what it feels like when the corpse falls out as well.

But this will only happen later, in the next sequence. The murderer gets out before his victim does, when the truck reaches a rest stop, and he plum-mets, completely broadside, from the truck bed. Enervated, sweating, and covered with dust, at the end of his strength, he flees into the men’s room to freshen up. He has survived everything. Despite all our disgust, we can also feel and relish his relief, his regained freedom.

Hitchcock knows precisely what he is doing to his audience, how he gets them physically involved in the predicaments of his characters. And he takes up the most excruciating passage of the potato sequence again. When the detective in charge describes and discusses the case with his wife over dinner, she plays with a dry bread stick. Riveted by the events, she breaks the bread into finger-length pieces – a macabre echo effect of the truck scene that mobilizes the audience’s empathetic feelings once again, while it also bares the device of the repetition.

Partly in similar, partly in different ways, the two examples document the value that Hitchcock attributed to physically activating the audience: how consciously, and with what virtuosity, he employed the effects of motor mimicry to his ends. In both examples, he has made us familiar with all aspects of the situation before he plays out his trumps. The somatic aspects of tactility, the perfidy of the object, or the nature of the impediment are already installed as known quantities, as is a certain single-mindedness of the characters. The transparency of the action and its consequences, the duration or continuity of similar shots and effective camera angles (especially on arms and hands) contribute to the intensification. Both films involve a corpse, real or imaginary. The basic mood in both is creepy and grisly, owing to our profound anxieties about bodily harm, although in both scenes made bearable via black humor. In each case, our discomfort is savored sadomasochistically, but also elegantly overdrawn. Likewise, we have not invested any sympathy in the characters; we disapprove of their actions, yet wish them to succeed.
Dramaturgically, however, there are differences. Whereas the opening scene from Secret Agent is rather short and peripheral to the film, the sequence in Frenzy serves as an extended climax. Whereas Secret Agent subsequently begins again in a new and different way, so that the passage described leaves only a faint touch of morbidity behind, in Frenzy Hitchcock takes the events to excess and even beyond by citing them ironically in a later scene. Pointed placement, excessiveness, irony, and self-reflection are indications of the director’s awareness of the power of the effect and its contribution to his style.

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It remains to be shown how consistently motor mimicry is used in Alfred Hitchcock’s oeuvre and which motifs he employs to achieve the effect. In conclusion, I will therefore list a selection of striking examples, culled from Hitchcock’s early silent films to his late work, in chronological order:

- **The Lodger** (1926): the motif of handcuffs as awkward encumbrance, at the end of the film.
- **Murder!** (1930): the overactive small children who bounce around Herbert Marshall’s bed as he tries to drink his tea at breakfast (disturbance in a precarious situation).
- **Rich and Strange** (1932): the jostling at the beginning, and an umbrella that will not open (restrictions on free movement, and the perfidy of the object).
- **The 39 Steps** (1935): the motif of handcuffs as awkward encumbrance, almost throughout the film.
- **Young and Innocent** (1937): the attempt to pull a young woman from a car that has crashed and is sinking into mud; desperately raised hands; a rescue with one’s last ounce of strength (extreme strain from stretching muscles).
- **Saboteur** (1942): the final sequence, in which the criminal hangs from the Statue of Liberty by his sleeve.
- **Shadow of a Doubt** (1943): another breakfast in bed with corresponding pressure to keep still under the breakfast tray; and the long struggle

8 In the context of this essay, it is not possible to present evidence that other directors operate less consciously or skillfully with motor mimicry. I would merely like to point to Mel Brooks’s High Anxiety of 1977, which parodies many Hitchcock passages without employing somatic effects at all.

9 This passage is also discussed in Smith (see note 1), though not as an example of motor mimicry.
between the uncle and niece at the end, in which both are wedged and cling together to avoid falling from the train.

– **NOTORIOUS (1946):** the love scene with Ingrid Bergman and Cary Grant, which is filmed as a single shot over many minutes, becoming more and more intense; the bottle in the cellar of the enemy, which slowly begins tottering and finally falls (somatic impulse to hold or catch it).

– **STRAngERS ON A TRAIN (1950):** the murderer’s desperate attempts to reach through the narrow grid of a sewer to recover the incriminating lighter that has slipped from his hands (extreme strain from stretching muscles).

– **REAR Window (1954):** forced immobility caused by a cast on the protagonist’s broken leg combined with the urgent necessity to intervene; at critical moments, the protagonist himself experiences impotent motor mimicry.

– **VERTigo (1958):** the opening situation in which a policeman is holding on to the roof gutter of a high building with his last ounce of strength.

– **NORTH BY NORTHWEST (1959):** Cary Grant’s drunken tour-de-force on a mountain road; his effort to hold Eva Marie Saint by one hand to prevent her fall from the cliff.

– **PSYCHO (1960):** in addition to the shower scene, the passage in which a dying man falls down the stairs backward (precarious fall with nothing to cling to).

– **THE Birds (1963):** the persistent clawing of the birds on the heads of the school children, the impossibility of shaking or brushing them off.

– **TORN Curtain (1966):** the grim, protracted life-and-death struggle, filmed more or less in real time, between the American, the peasant woman, and the Stasi officer.

– **FAMILY Plot (1976):** racing in a car with failing brakes as the female passenger panics and frantically obstructs the driver’s actions.

These examples not only confirm that Hitchcock repeatedly and masterfully used the effect of motor mimicry, but also how much he liked to return to earlier moments in order to vary them or build on them. It is also interesting to see how he concentrates again and again on unwieldy impediments, extremely urgent feats, or the desperate struggle between two opponents of equal strength. Excruciating, agonizing situations, moments of losing control, or claustrophobic panic and fear of heights take precedence and are savored visually as well as emotionally. But much has been written about Hitchcock’s sadism.

*Translated by Steven Lindberg*
Fig. 1: Walther Ruttmann's animation stand (reproduction courtesy Jeanpaul Goergen)
Abstraction and Empathy
in the Early German Avant-garde

[1997]

Form speaks only for itself; it does not stand in for something else and has no link to natural phenomena.
Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, "Der absolute Film." ¹

I.

Seen in terms of film history, “abstract” or “absolute” film seems to have emerged from out of nowhere in the early 1920s.² At any event, it was not rooted in the fiction films or documentaries shown in the cinema, even if the artists were quite familiar with developments in the medium. Nor was the aim to create a counter-cinema. The brief, non-representational, painterly-musical films of the early German avant-garde did not seek to compete with commercial film production but were conceived as art. If shown at all, they were screened at special exhibitions.

I have chosen three films to explore more closely: Viking Eggeling’s Symphonie Diagonale (1921-24), Walther Ruttmann’s Opus I (1921) and Opus III (1923-24). The early works of Hans Richter or Oskar Fischinger also came into question, for these films are likewise abstract animations based on successive synthetic steps and have no correlation in an existing profilmic reality that could be captured photographically. Light projections like those created by Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack might also have been

¹ Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart’s conclusion to his introduction to the film program Der absolute Film, screened in Hannover in 1925. Reproduced in Die zwanziger Jahre: Manifeste und Dokumente deutscher Künstler, Uwe M. Schneede, ed. (Cologne: DuMont, 1979), 258.
² Yet there were predecessors that seem to have anticipated these developments, e.g. the painters Hans Stoltenberg and Léopold Survage or the Italian Futurists Bruno Corra and Arnaldo Ginna. But they represent individual cases, and their work was most likely not accessible to the artists in discussion. On early experimental film, see Birgit Hein/Wulf Herzogenrath, eds., Film als Film, 1910 bis heute: Vom Animationsfilm der zwanziger zum Filmenvironment der siebziger Jahre (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 1977); also available in English: Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975 (London: Arts Council of Britain, 1980).
considered, for they are related to the genre as well. But it would be beyond the scope of this essay to explore the broader spectrum of abstract works.

The film examples were selected because they mark the beginning and the height of the movement respectively. The two painters, Walther Ruttmann and Viking Eggeling, discovered the visual possibilities of the new medium at around the same time but independently of one another at the start of the new decade. Their works document the formal range of absolute film by their strikingly different sensibility and orientation. Eggeling, who died in 1925, only completed a single film. But in the case of Ruttmann, it is possible to trace from OPUS I to OPUS III a leap from early, painterly-graphic approaches to a complex way of proceeding. OPUS III is a mature work that uses a whole range of approaches and thus forms a link to later works of the film avant-garde.

In the following, the films will be situated historically and biographically and discussed in terms of their visual characteristics. The techniques used by the artists will also be addressed as far as they can be reconstructed. But at issue are primarily a series of questions directed at all three examples to explore their aesthetic concepts. In what sense, in what way are they “abstract” or “absolute,” what ideas and compositional forms are hidden behind these terms? How can we explain, and what is the significance of the recourse taken to the realm of music, as is expressed programmatically with the words “symphony” and “opus” in the titles? How “filmic” are these works if they do not take the cinema as their point of departure but painting and drawing? Do they deal with the illusion of depth, or do they emphasize the compositional surface? Do they use light in a sculptural way, as in photography, or only as a technical means to make the images visible? Is their orientation centrifugal or centripetal, do they open a space to be imagined off-screen, or do they limit themselves to the projected


4 For more comprehensive information on the early avant-garde film and its situation in contemporary fine art, see Hein/Herzogenrath (see note 2). See also the still essential (but long out of print) reference work by Hans Scheugl/Ernst Schmidt jr., Eine Subgeschichte des Films: Lexikon des Avantgarde-, Experimental-, und Undergroundfilms (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974); Monika Zurhake, Filmische Realitätsaneignung: Ein Beitrag zur Filmtheorie, mit Analysen von Filmen Viking Eggelings und Hans Richters (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1982); and Holger Wilmesmeier, Deutsche Avantgarde und Film: Die Filmmatinee “Der Absolute Film” (3. und 10. Mai 1925), (Münster/Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1994).
rectangle? And finally: to what extent does the filmic composition favor or limit the development of empathy? Is the viewer invited to empathize with the figures on screen, to anthropomorphize or animate them, or do the events that take place remain abstract?

II.

At the end of the 1910s, the apocalyptic experience of World War I was still acutely present and the shock of the Russian Revolution had not yet dissipated. Visions of social chaos, of the decay of values, of becoming overwhelmed by technology were accompanied by a spirit of cultural restoration, but also by an eager departure into new patterns of thought and new aesthetic, political, and social models. In European art, the 1910s and 1920s were the time of manifestos and “isms”: futurism, vorticism, constructivism, technicism, cubism, abstractionism, suprematism, expressionism, Dada and Merz, to name but a few.5 Several of these aggregations were local and short-lived, but others were persistent and international, grouped around the cultural centers of Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, Munich, Zurich, Vienna, and Budapest, and engaged in lively exchange with one another. They all shared an inner restlessness and the search for innovative forms of representation and perception inspired by technology and the spirit of acceleration.6 At the same time, a departure from realism, now considered outdated by the avant-garde, manifested itself. Wherever the program was not infused by anarchy and negation, the focus was placed on the overcoming of the material world, be it through metaphysical spirituality or abstraction and atonality. Art was supposed to express the timeless, to develop systematics and intellectual regularities, to bring artists and audiences alike to a higher intellectual clarity and perceptive awareness, or, in the words of Kandinsky, “to cause vibrations in the soul.”7

7 This formulation is a kind of leitmotif in Kandinsky’s 1911 text Concerning the Spiritual in Art (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947).
As the innermost function of art was at stake, the lines between genres and categories became immaterial. Everywhere overarching affinities, analogies, and synesthesias can be found that instigated the fusion of the arts in the Gesamtkunstwerk. Thanks to this programmatic permeability, there was close contact among painters and poets, architects, designers, dancers, and musicians, often resulting in long-term symbioses. Many small art journals promoted international communication. A group like Der Blaue Reiter in Munich had published its Almanach not just for the inner circle; the Dutch journal De Stijl or the Hungarian journal Ma also reported about currents of the avant-garde elsewhere. They served as a forum for theoretical self-representation that was taken very seriously by the artists. Especially the abstract painters, whose works required explanation, registered an increasing alienation from the audience, which continued to favor a representational realism; art and commentary suddenly were placed in one and the same hand. Yet the commitment to intervene in the cultural process already sprang from the artists’ moral-didactic claim. If they wanted to truly confront the world of materialism, they needed to ensure that their potential was fulfilled and their concepts understood.

In the Bauhaus as the largest and most influential grouping of the 1920s, these theoretical, pedagogical, aesthetic, and social impulses converged in an exemplary fashion.

Moreover, several classic texts served as a conceptual basis shared by the artists. Alongside Goethe and Novalis, themselves transgressors between theory and practice, Henri Bergson’s philosophical work L’évolution créatrice (1907) was enthusiastically received. Also of relevance were the music theories of Ferruccio Busoni (Entwurf einer neuen Ästhetik der Tonkunst, 1907) and Arnold Schönberg (Harmonielehre, 1911). Especially for the creators of absolute film, two texts were of primary importance: Wassily Kandinsky’s slim volume Über das Geistige in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art) from 1911 and Wilhelm Worringer’s dissertation Abstraktion und Einfühlung:

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8 In the exhibition catalog edited by Karin von Maur (see note 3), the links between the arts are discussed and illustrated in many ways. See also Wilmesmeier’s chapter “Der abstrakte Film und die Musik” (see note 4); Karl Sierek, “Die unterirdischen Kanäle: Zur Beziehung zwischen Musik, Malerei und Film,” Art of Vision: Zeitfluß 93 (Salzburg, 1993). On the relationship between film and painting, see the exhibition catalog Peinture, cinéma, peinture, Stefan Gyöngyösi, ed. (Marseille: Édition Hazan, 1989/90).


Kandinsky also turns to Goethe, albeit only in passing, and he engages with Schönberg, who was a personal friend. His plea for abstract painting treats music as playing a pioneer role, for music is understood as the “most non-material of the arts.” It serves as the foundation for a conceptual paradigm, namely the analogy between the genres which should learn from one another to find their own essence. Central to Kandinsky’s discussion is the notion of the inner necessity of all aesthetic form, to set art free from the imitation of nature for the representation of the mental or the spiritual. Kandinsky’s summary of tendencies towards abstraction in literature (Maeterlinck), music (Debussy, Scriabin, Schönberg), painting (Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso), and in dance (Isadora Duncan) climaxes in the notion that a new “stage composition” (Bühnenkomposition) – using painterly, musical, and dance components – indeed a “monumental art” could be realized in the fusion of genres. *Considering the Spiritual in Art* continues to fascinate still today due to its unique mixture of lucid, precise observations with notes of mysticism.

Wilhelm Worringer’s theoretical work, as he himself stated in retrospect, “became an ‘Open Sesame’ for the formulation of a whole range of questions important to the epoch.” That his work was “in a deeper sense of a topical concern,” was something that Worringer knew already in the preface to the first edition. His theory takes Alois Riegl’s *Stilfragen* from 1893 and Theodor Lipps’ *Grundlegung der Ästhetik* from 1903 as points of departure for defining the “urge” to abstraction or to empathy as two polar impulses behind the creation of art:

> Just as the urge to empathy as a pre-assumption of aesthetic experience finds its gratification in the beauty of the organic, so the urge to abstrac-

10 Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 54. In a letter from April 9, 1911, Kandinsky writes: “How endlessly good (if only in comparison) the musicians have it in their art that has accomplished so much. True art that has the luck to forgo all purely practical purposes. How long will painting have to wait until its time has come?” See Helena Hahl-Koch, “Kandinsky und der ’Blaue Reiter’,” which explores the many interrelations of the Munich group between painting and music (in: Karin von Maur, see note 3, 414ff).

tion finds its beauty in the life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline or, in general terms, in all abstract law and necessity.12

Even if natural models are abstracted, this is at best obtained with “the endeavor to redeem the individual object of the outer world, in so far as it particularly arouses interest, from its combination with, and dependence upon, other things, to tear it away from the course of happening, to render it absolute.”13 Worringer goes on to explore the conditions within a culture that lead to the dominance of either an “urge to abstraction” or an “urge to empathy”:

Whereas the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect, it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions. We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space.14

The abstract painting of the 1910s and 1920s as well as absolute film seem to be prophetically anticipated in this text as a reaction to the specific “outside world” of the time. But we should not overlook that abstraction, as the departure from the figurative, cannot be equated as a whole to Worringer’s urge to abstraction, which may also obtain within a figurative mode of representation. Equally, an abstract form of the empathetic urge cannot be excluded. Thus, the material sensuality of much non-representational art is on closer inspection not a contradiction of Worringer’s theory. And the fact that many abstract painters took recourse to Worringer’s book has probably less to do with the context of his theory than with the search for a prominent ally.

The applicability of the terms “abstraction” and “empathy” to absolute film, as suggested by the title of this essay, is thus in a number of ways limited. Worringer, by examining static artworks from previous periods, has no notion of and categories for the processuality of music, or the dynamization of perception, or the moving image as such. Motion almost by necessity implies a sense of space and thus relativizes Worringer’s Raumscheu, the “dread of space.” But my aim is not to transfer Worringer’s dualistic, speculative, ideologically loaded perspective to the current study; rather, I will be using

12 Ibid., 4.
13 Ibid., 21.
14 Ibid., 15.
his ideas as a kind of historical springboard. The two terms “abstraction” and “empathy” provide—then as now—a suggestive set of heuristic tools, even beyond the original conception of their creator. They are a useful means of getting a grasp on several key distinctions in the works of Eggeling and Ruttmann. Their differences can already be seen in that Eggeling engages intensely and directly with Worringen’s ideas, while Ruttmann received them rather osmotically, in the expressionist context of Der Blaue Reiter, which early on had sought to legitimate itself by taking recourse to Worringen’s text—albeit not without “creative misunderstandings.”

III.

The painter Viking Eggeling was born in Sweden in 1880 and came to Switzerland in 1918 after stops in Berlin and Paris. In Zurich, he joined the Dada group and began a collaboration with Hans Richter that would last for several years. When the Zurich group disbanded, the two moved to the Berlin area to continue their experimentation. Eggeling had been developing abstract drawings for some time, exploring basic shapes, especially analogies and polarities; although static, his work already contained a latent dynamic element. Yet this tendency did not derive from the painting of the 1910s and 1920s, where the aspiration was often to refer to aspects of motion within a stationary image or, in the abstract realm, to transmit successive processes of perception within the image to the eye of the beholder.

Working together with Richter, the first steps toward film consisted in developing scroll images, a technique borrowed from East Asian art, where phases of an event are lined up in sequence. This work was followed by a translation of such processes in the film Das Horizontal-Vertikale Orchester (1920, unfortunately lost), which was based on scroll sketches. Eggeling accompanied this pioneering work with the theoretical manifesto

15 See Gregor Wedekind, “Die Verdoppelung der Kultur um ihren Gegensatz: Über den Kunsthistoriker Wilhelm Worringen,” Neue Zürcher Zeitung (March 8-9, 1997): 70. Wedekind points to profound differences between the conservative Worringen and the artists of Der Blaue Reiter, emphasizing that he “nonetheless readily had himself drawn to new shores he had not strived for.”


17 Descriptions of this lost work by contemporaries as well as many drawings can be found in O’Konor, ibid., 46–51 and 208–217.
“Prinzipielles zur Bewegungskunst” (written in collaboration with Richter and published in several European avant-garde journals in slightly varied versions). The manifesto calls for an art that serves an extremely ambitious, ethical aim: “the completion of the individual in a higher form of organization.” The text continues in a programmatic vein:

Art is not the subjective explosion of an individual but the organic language of man of the most serious importance, and therefore must be so error-free and basic in its foundations that it can be used as a language of humanity.19

This was to be achieved by way of a “formal language” that could emerge from a kind of alphabet, or, as Eggeling would later call it, a “basso continuo,” an analogy borrowed from Goethe. With this “alphabet,” it would be possible to create “compositional evolutions and revolutions in the sphere of the purely artistic […], analogous to musical events familiar to our ear.” And the article ends as follows:

Undoubtedly the cinema as a new field for fine artists will quickly and decidedly be used for productions of fine art […]. For this new art, it is absolutely essential to have clear elements. Without these elements, a play can emerge, no matter how seductive, but never language.20

It is characteristic for Eggeling – in contrast to Richter – that he sought to implement these utopian demands to the utmost. His film work, which has nothing in common with the pleasant affability of many animated films, springs from a deeply transcendental philosophical spirit. Even though the aesthetic realization of theorems might trigger other processes in the audience than Eggeling’s visions foresaw, the work clearly gains in transparency when its intellectual foundations are kept in mind.

Eggeling and Richter went separate ways after a falling out in 1921. So Eggeling’s main work and only extant film, SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE, was created without the collaboration of Richter, although it uses shared ways of working. These techniques were of a simple nature,21 but nevertheless

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18 Published under Eggeling’s name in the Hungarian journal Ma, and under Richter’s name (with additional text) in the Dutch journal De Stijl, both in 1921.
19 O’Konor (see note 16), 90.
20 Ibid., 91.
21 Eggeling and Richter undertook various attempts at UFA’s animation department, making themselves familiar with the state of the art. But the results and the costs kept them from continuing down this path.
Fig. 2: Viking Eggeling’s SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE
represented a challenge to Eggeling, since they needed to be carried out frame by frame and with great precision in order to do justice to his complex theory. The tools consisted of a 35mm camera with a single frame shooting mechanism, allowing one to rewind the film for double exposure; a rudimentary animation stand; light bulbs underneath its glass top; and aluminum foil thick enough to lie flat on a surface, but fine enough to cut filigreed shapes from it.22

Eggeling’s figures are intricate, partially geometric, two-dimensional structures (that can be found in almost identical form in the drawings he had been refining for several years). They consist of delicate lines and ribbons varying in thickness, bent arches with bar-like markings within them or on the outside, rectangles open to one side with wavy lines placed adjacent, triangles with rounded flanks of parallel stripes, zigzag and curved miniature elements, large S-shape conglomerates that combine with comb-like brackets, and the like (fig. 2). Eggeling cut the figures as slits in the foils, placed a foil on the glass plate, and exposed it from beneath so that the slits formed a self-illuminated shape against a dark background. By raising and lowering the glass plate, it was possible to generate the impression that the figures emerged out of nowhere, or disappeared into the void. By moving the foils horizontally or vertically frame by frame, the figures seemed to move across the surface. And double exposure could make different formations change, move, or move in contrary motion at the same time.

The film minimalistically limits itself to black-and-white, a polarity only occasionally abated by moments of a faint gray (due to the dimming of the light or to double exposure). The figures – small, fragile, weightless, and rather anemic – do not seek to fill the image, and they scarcely generate an illusion of depth, although they move about and are sometimes present at the same time. Eggeling avoids any overlappings that might suggest three-dimensionality and creates only scant movements from the depth of the image or into it. As all the forms emerge and dissipate within the rectangle of the screen, wandering across the frame but never making it beyond the edges, no off-screen area is constituted.23 The image surface itself also remains immaterial, a black nowhere that provides no anchor and offers no obstacles. Nor is it clear whether the scene is being observed from

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22 See Ré Soupault “Erinnerungen an Viking Eggeling” (1977, in Hein/Herzogenrath, see note 2, 24ff). A former assistant to Eggeling, Soupault, reports on the technical difficulties involved in animation.

23 Karl Sierek (see note 8, 92) observes that Eggeling’s earlier drawn shapes already avoided the edge of the image and thus represented “no connection” to a “realm beyond.”
the front or from above. All this seems to be a tribute to Worringer’s “dread of space” characteristic of abstraction – and consciously so, as Eggeling’s documented engagement with Worringer’s theory suggests.²⁴ Not a lack of cinematic imagination but the will to radical, absolute abstraction informs the spatial and formal asceticism of SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE.²⁵

Eggeling’s urge toward abstraction is also expressed on another level. Unlike a painting, a drawing, or, as will be shown, Ruttmann’s films, SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE does not refer back to its creator or the process to which it owes its existence. There is nothing comparable to a brushstroke nor any hint to the technique or the materials used. On the contrary, the figures seem to emerge “absolutely,” and in their inorganic abstraction seem to exist only immaterially.

This can be linked to a special quality of Eggeling’s figures: in other animated abstract films, for example those of Oskar Fischinger, the audience quickly gets the feeling that the figures are literally “animated,” with emotions and a will of their own. As soon as they are identifiable as distinct units, they are attributed intentions and interactions as if they were fictional protagonists. The figures of SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE resist such empathy. This could be the case because they are constantly caught in a process of transformation in which no stable shapes emerge that can appear as individual creatures. Even if several figures are active at the same time, any supposed relationship between them immediately dissolves again, for they configure and disconfigure only themselves instead of reacting to one another. Perhaps one should not speak of figures at all, but of some essence that creates ever new signs in various locations, without rest or stability, a “magical writing” that maintains a floating balance between metamorphosis and figuration.

The result is by no means diffuse; Eggeling’s film is highly disciplined. It has already been pointed out that he felt that his art – and perhaps all art – should illustrate universal polarities. Accordingly, SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE lives from binary contrasts such as open/closed, full/empty, heavy/light, large/small, strong/weak, straight/bent, symmetrical/asymmetrical, complete/fragmentary, single/multiple, horizontal/vertical, and not least, orthogonal/diagonal. These polarities offer a rich potential allowing the

²⁴ Louise O’Konor (see note 16, 73ff) extracted an art theory from Eggeling’s extant manuscripts and notes in which Worringer’s influence, like that of Kandinsky and Bergson, is thoroughly present.
²⁵ We need, of course, to consider the extent to which Eggeling’s animation technology limited and defined the film’s aesthetic. Yet it seems unlikely that Eggeling intended something different than what is expressed in SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE (see Wilmesmeier, see note 4, 126).
forms to emerge without taking recourse to repetition. And in addition to the principle of polarity, the principle of analogy dominates, which explores affinities and operates with similarities.

Another aspect of Symphonie Diagonale is that it is difficult for the viewer to capture the overall structure, let alone memorize it. Not only is there a lack of narrative development that would engender a causal succession and an irreversible sequence of events; the movements also seem not to follow any definable cycle of tension or dramaturgical concept. Nor does the film provide any conflictual engagements among the elements depicted that could lead to exhaustion. In nervous simultaneity, subtle processes occur in various areas of the image that cannot be summed up in a single concept. The film seems to move in place, but it fascinates the viewer nonetheless, continuing for eight minutes without interruption: a time-consuming timelessness, as postulated by Bergson in his theory of the interpenetration of present and past. The small figures are captured in a moment of becoming and passing, and they encompass both states in a mysterious, radical way.

Although this impression of a self-contained processuality remains even after multiple viewings – and need not disappear – some authors have attempted to distill structures of development. Louise O’Konor describes a dialectical process of movement and counter-movement, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis that takes place mainly in the realm of the dominant diagonals in combination with horizontal and vertical motifs.26 Monika Zurhake has decoded the filmic segments according to musical principles: to half, quarter, and eighth notes, triplets or quartets, forms of meter, syncopations and pauses, establishing a complex web of various movements.27 But this form of inaudible musical structuring transposed to a graphic language is strange and difficult to grasp, even if its effect is communicated subliminally. It remains foreign to us, like the system of pitch in the Chinese language or the longs and shorts of ancient Greek meter.

Symphonie Diagonale is to be projected silently; no musical accompaniment was intended and indeed would have violated Eggeling’s concept of absolute art – an art that claims a total and essential validity, seeking to represent the mental universe in all its polarities and analogies. When

26 O’Konor (see note 16), 133.
27 Monika Zurhake (see note 4), 108f. Apparently Zurhake only saw a two-minute version, perhaps from the compilation Forty Years of Experiment: Hans Richter, 1921–1961, in which Richter placed a fragment of Symphonie Diagonale before his own films without indicating the incompleteness.
music is added to the film, the result is not a complement or an enrichment but a disturbance of its subtle visual rhythm. The film's relationship to music is one of inner affinity, not one of complementarity or cooperation. For Eggeling, at issue was the Gesamtkunstwerk not in the sense of a fusion of the arts but in the sense of taking recourse to their shared intellectual principles.

IV.

Walt(h)er Ruttmann, born in Frankfurt am Main in 1887, was almost eight years younger than Viking Eggeling. He studied painting at Munich's Kunstkademie, met Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger, and the composer Max Butting, and by the outbreak of World War I had become a successful painter and graphic designer. During the war years, which he experienced as a soldier, he underwent a re-orientation. Moving through preliminary steps in expressionist painting, in which movement is taken almost to the point of explosion, Ruttmann arrived at film early on. In his manuscript “Malerei mit Zeit” (“Painting with Time,” 1919/20) he develops a vision of painting inspired by cinematography that could develop rhythmically, dynamically, and abstractly. An entirely new, “until now latent type of artist will emerge that stands around midway between painting and music,” he claims. And he describes fictive (expressionist) examples of such an art in which “an unending number of possible uses of light and darkness, rest and movement, straightness and rounding, mass and delicacy, and their countless intermediate levels and combinations” could come to fruition.

Ruttmann, like Eggeling, thinks in polarities and nuances, albeit in less absolute terms and with less of a philosophical-metaphysical orientation. He derives his vision from the analysis of a palpable deficit of contemporary art, whose “strict, reduced, timeless forms” he counters with the “tempo” demanded by the technical revolution of the period. In so doing, the “time-rhythm of the visual event” becomes an important element of a new art. As a whole, the text represents a mixture of essayistic and sensuous/aesthetic

28 Ruttmann removed the “h” from his first name at the end of the 1920s as a tribute to the Neue Sachlichkeit (“New Objectivity”).
29 The biographical information on Ruttmann, along with many ideas and quotations on the following pages, are taken from Jeanpaul Goergen’s Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation (Berlin: Freunde der deutschen Kinemathek, 1989). I am also indebted to Goergen for a perfect copy of the drawing of Ruttmann’s animation stand.
30 The undated manuscript can be found in Goergen, ibid., 73f.
notions that take on a highly concrete shape. Ruttmann concludes with a personal remark:

For almost ten years now, I have been convinced of the necessity of this art. It is only now that I have been able to master the technical difficulties that counter the implementation, and today I know that the new art will be and will live, for it is a rooted growth and not a construction.  

And indeed, Ruttmann achieved success with the filmic medium much more quickly than Eggeling, who was faced with many setbacks. Ruttmann experimented with the camera, and he invented his own animation stand for “creating cinematographic images” that was so refined by 1920 that it could be patented (fig. 1, preceding this essay).  

The animation stand consisted of three glass plates assembled one on top of the other, partially adjustable from side to side, and illuminated from below. Thus, a combination of various visual levels was possible, and alterations of the motifs could be undertaken on either a single level or on all levels. The single-frame camera installed above the animation stand was fixed in place, but by adjusting the height of the platforms the distance between object and camera could be changed step by step. Thus, the impression of moving toward or moving away could be simulated. Ruttmann used a viscous paint that remained wet for a while, allowing the composition to be manipulated from shot to shot.

Ruttmann saw no reason to abstain from color. Several techniques for providing color to film were available: toning (the monochromatic coloring of the dark parts of the image during development), tinting (monochromatic baths of the finished print, where only the bright parts of the image take on the color), stencil coloring (in which objects in the image appear in preordained shades), and the manual application of color with a brush. The techniques could also be combined with one another to achieve a wide range of effects. Disadvantages included the fact that each print had to be prepared individually and that hand coloring in particular was very painstaking. Ruttmann seems to have thought in color from the very start, while Eggeling, albeit envisioning color as the genuine completion of his art, was for the time being satisfied with black-and-white.
Fig. 3: Walther Ruttmann’s Opus I
Lichtspiel Opus I (created in 1921) is almost 10 minutes long. In comparison to Eggeling’s delicate lines and abstract vocabulary, Ruttmann’s figures seem more painterly and, at the same time, tactile (fig. 3). Using his patented animation stand, they were achieved through dark paint wiped away from the glass plate, thus creating transparent surfaces through which the light penetrated from below. Most of them bear the sensual traces of their genesis: hard edges and occasional remains of viscous paint or manual blurring in the form of a soft, cloudy texture; in addition, sometimes (and perhaps less intentionally) haloes of paint surround the figures. Ruttmann’s creations are abstract, yet in the sense of non-figurative representation rather than in the sense of immaterial spirituality. In part taken from a geometric-stereometric store of circles, squares, triangles, cones, or parallelograms, in part of an organic, biomorphous shape and texture, they appear more substantial through their dimension and extension, and develop more energy than the delicate ethereal shapes of Symphonie Diagonale.

Like Eggeling’s shapes, Ruttmann’s figures float in undefined blackness, which could either be a background or a dark abyss – a “container without dimensions,” as Malevich once put it. Yet it is filled with three-dimensional life. The molded grain on their surfaces lends the figures a certain fullness or spherical curvature, and the color contributes to this impression. Apparently, Ruttmann first toned his film blue in the developing bath, but the blue only shimmers through on the margins of the figures and in less opaque zones. Where the shapes are strongly defined and clean, they set themselves apart in white from the black of the background. Here, color was sometimes added by hand in a second step. Some shapes glow in a rich red-orange, while others are immersed in a gentle pink, purple, or blue-green, or proudly assert their whiteness. Since the color blue (which usually marks the “rear,” the blunter edge of the figures) suggests greater distance, and the color red suggests greater proximity, the tension between the two colors adds to the illusion of space.

33 Opus I was long thought lost, the negative is still lost today. It was only in 1977 that Enno Patalas succeeded in identifying the film in a Soviet archive, as part of some material Ruttmann had left behind after a trip to Russia in the 1920s (see Goergen, note 29, 97f). The print is complete, with applied color.
34 Quoted in Rudolf Kurtz, Expressionismus und Film (Berlin: Verlag der Lichtbildbühne, 1926), 88.
35 One should keep in mind that for hand coloring there is no original, for every print had to be treated individually. Discrepancies in the descriptions of contemporary critics, for example in the text below by Alfred Kerr, could be due to individual perception, or mistaken memory, but could also result from actual differences in the works shown. The color prints included in this essay are taken from the Ruttmann DVD issued by Filmmuseum München et al. in 2009.
But the main factor in the illusion of depth is motion. Ruttmann's figures come and go in constant activity, and their musical rhythm accentuates the tempo. They arch, turn inside, slide in a slight spin through the image, stick out diagonally from the corners, fall from both sides symmetrically to the center, or sway back and forth, whereby they tend to lose their form like organic objects, compressing and stretching. The contrast between soft and hard outlines also contributes to the impression of movement; the hard edges become more defined in the front, the direction of movement, while the softer edges allow the shapes to fade off at the rear (like a comet tail). Movements from or towards the depths – the shapes becoming larger or smaller – also take place occasionally. In addition, Ruttmann plays with the frame: often, it seems that the figures withdraw to the terrain beyond the limits of the screen, an off-screen realm of unknown extension whose existence defines the image as if looked upon through a window. Or they meet the limits of the frame, bouncing against them like against imaginary walls. They appear to recognize space and materiality, and a tentative engagement with the third dimension takes place.

The figures move quickly or in a stately fashion, but always unerringly and self-confidently, as it were, even if they are subject to metamorphoses and instabilities. However, they always find their way back to graspable, more or less familiar and suggestive shapes. Usually, two agents, each of a different ilk, seem to take hold of events: spikes against tongues, or circles against beams. But the coloring also results in alliances. Often, several versions exist of the same form, which act in cahoots with one another. They play about with choreographic precision, pass by one another in elegant curves or crouch back as if to avoid contact. Near misses – a playful risk of collision – mark these events. Sometimes moments of aggression occur: the figures run over or race after one another down into the depths.

In light of such goings-on, the viewer is tempted to identify the shapes as living beings and to grant them awareness and intentions. In describing the film, such attributions take place almost automatically, for all linguistic description works with comparisons, similarities, associations. Yet not every abstract film evokes concrete equivalences to the same extent: in this aspect, Eggeling's and Ruttmann's works differ at the core. This is already evident in the contemporary texts dealing with the two artists, which in

36 A letter to Oskar Fischinger from July 17, 1922 documents that Ruttmann placed great importance on the contours of the moving figures. See Hein/Herzogenrath (see note 2), 22.
the case of Ruttmann veritably luxuriate in biological attributions, while in Eggeling’s case strict abstraction dominates: “As in music, here too any association with objects or processes of nature is excluded.”

Texts about Symphonie Diagonale are typically rather theoretical and restrained. In contrast, Alfred Kerr’s review of Opus I in Berliner Tageblatt from June 16, 1921 all but wallows in comparisons:

What Ruttmann allows to shimmer forth is but a mixture of floating-scurrying-shrinking-shaking curls, rings, spheres, tips, roundings; with glowing outlines, vague filling, colorful additions; of things immersed and sinking.

Somewhere a violet caterpillar grows to become a crooked shank; rolls into an Edam cheese, into a moon, to an ever smaller Edam, to a little orange. Fishlike, like an unknown magical animal, all sorts of glowing shapes pass in noble loops gently across the shimmering cloth ... a ray of sun, lemony, sweeps like a broom from left to right, fades, dies out. A yellow triangle shoots up high ... shivers and dissipates. Something glittery green swells, swims, fades away. (This is not exactly the case, but language can only evoke what is seen.)

Expressionist paintings come to mind, but they are too immobile. Chagall’s paradises of light ultimately remain rigid. The glittering futurisms of the latest Parisians petrify motionless in the frame. Here, things scurry, row, burn, rise, push, bubble, soar, step, wilt, flow, swell, fade; they develop, arch, spread, narrow, ball up, contract, sharpen, ascend, fill, empty, blow up, duck; they bloom.

In a word: expressionism in movement. A delirium for the pupils... but not a human film.

Kerr’s accentuation of biomorphous processes is supported in many ways by the film. Already the shape and gesture of some of the figures prove him right, especially the body behavior of the “fishlike” elements that slide up and down as if cavorting in an aquarium. Ruttmann’s borrowing of somatic forms has a similar effect, like the pointed front and soft rear of many figures, which seem to imitate natural phenomena. Moreover, the main

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37 Apparently, Ruttmann’s forms were also sexually suggestive to his contemporaries. The erotic character of the Opus films is often emphasized, often disapprovingly. Opus II was even declared unsuitable for children – whether this was for erotic reasons or because hypnotic reactions of the audience were feared, remains unknown. See Wilmesmeier (see note 4), 51.

38 B.G. Kawan, Film-Kurier 276 (Nov. 27, 1924).
motif of the film, the figures avoiding each other, almost automatically generates a sense of life, for the figures seem to perceive and react to one another.

Yet Kerr lets himself get carried away. Words like “Edam cheese” or “little orange” overshoot the mark. Ruttmann’s film has little that is cute about it, although the reservation of Bernhard Diebold (who actually admired the film) is not entirely unfounded: “This attempt has an element of the arty-crafty, despite its inner desire.” Ruttmann compensates for his borrowing from nature and narrative by frequently using abstractions and formal tensions. At issue are visual polarities such as light/darkness, color/black-and-white, angularity/roundness, lines/surfaces, and basic musical structures such as motif, variation, changes in instrumentation, and changes in tempo. The fact that this formal aspect was somewhat lost in the reception of the film – due perhaps to the empathetic draw of the shapes – may be attributed to Ruttmann’s inexperience. As a painter, he had never before created non-figurative shapes that could be “animated” by way of movement and take on a life of their own.

Ruttmann, who was interested in combining as many arts as possible in a film that was as sensually rich as possible, asked Max Butting to create music for the film. Butting himself was not entirely convinced of such an interaction between the arts. And there is indeed the danger that the structure of the film itself, which has three movements like a sonata, might compete with the music. Moreover, the music must “avoid becoming high-handed, otherwise the visual art becomes mere illustration.”

40 See the quotations from a letter by Butting (September 5, 1950 to Filmhistoriska Samlingarna) in Goergen (see note 16), 22f. In a review of Alexander Laszlo’s Farblichtmusik, Butting formulated his fundamental skepticism vis-à-vis the synaesthetic euphoria of his contemporaries: “Are there at all phenomena that can be spontaneously grasped through two senses? When several years ago Walther Ruttmann’s film Opus I was screened with my music, composed in agreement with Ruttmann, the ‘listeners’ considered the music, the ‘spectators’ the film as the dominant event. Those present proved to be either visual or acoustic types. The use of the term ‘color’ to describe an orchestra or the ‘sound’ of an image does not seem to provide evidence for positing a unity of the two senses.” (Sozialistische Monatshefte 32.63 [1926], 881). In his autobiography, Musikgeschichte, die ich miterlebte (East Berlin: Henschel, 1955), Butting only writes a few lines on his cooperation with Ruttmann: “Musically speaking, the task was not important to my mind” (135), a surprisingly succinct statement in light of the dedication shown by the composition created. But this downplaying may also be due to differing political attitudes that became manifest in later years: Butting was a committed antifascist and Communist, while Ruttmann made Kulturfilme and propaganda for the Third Reich in the 1930s and 40s.
41 Bernhard Diebold, see note 39.
string quartet that Butting composed does not justify this apprehension.\textsuperscript{42}

Without redundant parallelization, without any Mickey Mouse effects, and without any sweetness, it renders body and depth to the film.

OPUS III was created in 1923-24 with the collaboration of the Bauhaus student Lore Leudesdorff. It was originally three and a half minutes long, as Berndt Heller has ascertained on the basis of Hanns Eisler’s accompanying music.\textsuperscript{43} Longer prints that are also extant contain motifs from OPUS I and OPUS II, robbing the work of its closure and disturbing its rhythm. The DVD version (see note 35) I had access to is in segments tinted in various muted colors. This coloring seems appropriate for the film and is probably authentic, for here, unlike in OPUS I, there are no shapes that would have been suited to hand-colored accents, as most figures are either black silhouettes or structured in themselves. Ruttmann initially had no accompanying music for the film but chose ad-hoc musical/acoustic solutions: for a 1925 London screening, he used drums. Hanns Eisler’s \textit{Prelude in the Form of a Passacaglia}, a work for chamber orchestra that was later performed with the film, was not composed until 1926.\textsuperscript{44}

OPUS III, like OPUS II or the last film of the series, OPUS IV, takes up some of the forms and structural principles of OPUS I. Ruttmann continues to develop earlier material and advances to new motifs and structures at the same time. Some issues that had remained undecided in the first film are now elaborated and clarified, sometimes leading to a more profound ambiguity. OPUS II had revealed new conceptions: already here the solid black depth of the visual space that marked OPUS I – as well as SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE – is replaced by a structured (and occasionally colored) treat-

\textsuperscript{42} In light of many skeptical voices, the list of composers who worked in the 1920s with experimental filmmakers is impressive and suggests a considerable estimation of their work: Hanns Eisler, Edmund Meisel, Hans Heinz Stuckenschmid, Paul Hindemith, Erik Satie, and George Antheil, in addition to Max Butting.

\textsuperscript{43} See Berndt Heller’s explanations on the reconstruction of the film in Film in den Niederlanden gestern und heute (Berlin: Kinemathek 62, June 1983), 21f.

\textsuperscript{44} The music is included in the DVD version of Opus III (see note 35). Eisler’s composition was premiered in 1927 at the Baden-Baden Kammermusiktage, both with a live orchestra and with an integrated soundtrack based on the Tri-Ergon technique. Unfortunately the print has been lost. Eisler’s composition has become the first movement of his \textit{1. Orchestersuite op. 23}. See Berndt Heller and Christian Kuntze, eds., Hanns Eisler: Komposition für den Film. Dokumente und Materialien zu den Filmkompositionen Hanns Eislers (Berlin: Kinemathek, Materialien zur Fimgeschichte 12, 1982), 43.
Fig. 4: Walther Ruttmann’s Opus III
ment. In Opus III, grain, flickering, glimmering light, change, and movement come everywhere to the forefront and suspend the difference between the figure in action and the surrounding free space (fig. 4). As the arena is often kept rather light, the values of figure and background are repeatedly reversed. Usually, no consistent figurative life asserts itself, and there is, as mentioned above, no special use of color for the shapes. Rather, the image transforms in a process that can embrace all zones. It thus abandons the impression of a three-dimensional void for an ambiguous spatial event with gradual transitions between surface and depth. And while spatial relations are repeatedly alluded to, they do not consolidate to an illusion as in central perspective. On the one hand, Opus III is hence less spatial than Opus I, but on the other there seems to be no “dread of space,” no isolation of the figures in the void: the film is “absolute” not in Eggeling’s intellectual sense, but in the sense of a non-figurative sensuality or abstracted reality.

This finding corresponds to the character of the shapes. Only in exceptional cases do they bear an organic likeness, reminiscent of living beings, or move in biomorphic gestures. Instead of the intertwining tongues, rounded shapes and fish-like slices of Opus I, tectonic structures dominate the screen. Rods that divide the composition contrast with spots and smears lacking a clear contour; rectangles pile on top of one another; the shapes shift, replace, overlap, and form frames within the frame or pedestals where further events can take place; they lie on foundations of amorphous texture or are covered by them. Some shapes resemble technological objects, and movements tend to follow machine-like patterns, in their dynamism recalling the turning of shanks, the ramming of pistons, or the twisting of a conveyor belt. The film attempts to capture the essence of the machine; the contemporary fascination with technology is unmistakable.

In the face of such a composition, empathy in the viewer or processes of “animating” the figures stand back or occur only in minimal form, for instance when gravity seems to pull an object downwards. The interest in the figures’ intentions is replaced by a rich offering of complex events. The technique has become more differentiated, the catalog of shapes is expanded and refined. Compositions change or transform quickly and often radically, rhythmic tensions and counterpoints build up and dissipate, transitions and reversals take place elegantly and surprisingly. Above all, a dimension has been added that was hardly palpable in Opus I, yet already anticipated in Opus II: the use of light and shadow, a central principle of photography. In Opus I, the role of light had been restricted. It penetrates through glass plates and smears of color, of course, but – similar to its pragmatic use by Eggeling – it is rarely an active factor. If the cloudy or
grainy patterns contain a certain flickering, this is less prominent than the treatment of color. In Opus II, the effects of light were already given some attention, the surfaces oscillate, the figures glow from the inside with a pulsating beat, and in so doing gain a lively depth. But a sculpting through light and shadow does not assert itself until Opus III.

Here, the pulsating light generates an aura around some figures or creates spots of illumination in their own right. Blazing shapes or silhouettes set themselves apart from contrary backgrounds, and – surprisingly – occasional shadows appear, cast by the figures on the backdrop as if they had a solid body. Almost concealed in this opulent array of forms is another surprising break with Ruttmann’s previous approach: a three-dimensional, real object appears, a black spiral rod or drill that was filmed spinning slowly, its bulges becoming apparent through reflections of the light. The rod joins the series of other shapes, yet takes on a special place due to the duration of the image and the white background. Clearly fascinated by the authentic tool and its photographic potential, Ruttmann allowed himself to move to a heterogeneous register, anticipating the dynamic machine images of his later work.45

Ruttmann, in the words of Rudolf Kurtz, “is not interested in expressing the forces of life in mathematically precise, timeless shapes. He includes empathy, decorative attraction, the psychological effect in his calculations.”46 While Eggeling radically refrains from encouraging empathy or allowing an impression of space to emerge (and thus remains “absolute”), Ruttmann seeks to engage a more variegated and lavish mode of abstraction. Although he develops away from the empathetic animation of Opus I towards a more rigorous form, his shapes take on a lively, haptic sensuality and fuse with an equally haptic foundation. Thus, Ruttmann strays rather far from Worringer’s characterization of the urge to abstraction, where “life as such is felt to be a disturbance of aesthetic enjoyment.” At issue for him is by no means “an urge to seek deliverance from the fortuitousness of humanity as a whole, from the seeming arbitrariness of organic existence in general, in the contemplation of something necessary and irrefragable.”47

In their view of their roles as artists, Ruttmann and Eggeling also differed markedly. While Eggeling avoids all personal traces, removing himself from his own work, as it were, since he sees himself as only a mediator of

45 In 1933, Ruttmann made ACCIAIO (Steel), a fiction film about a metalworker. Documentaries about industrial plants and arms factories followed.
46 Kurtz (see note 34), 102.
47 Worringer (see note 11), 24.
ethereal timelessness, in Ruttmann’s abstract films a processual, impulsive, pleasurable gesture is perceptible that refers to the artist, his emotional tension, and his approach to the material.

IV.

The differences and commonalities in Eggeling’s and Ruttmann’s formal language were displayed to their contemporaries in 1925 at the legendary film matinee Der absolute Film, held at Berlin’s Ufa Theater – which sat 900 – on May 3 by the Novembergruppe in collaboration with the cultural division of UFA. The program was introduced by Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack’s light reflections DREITEILIGE FARBENSONATINE and REFLEKTORISCHE FARBLICHTSPIELE. Eggeling’s SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE preceded Ruttmann’s OPUS II–IV (OPUS I was omitted). As an additional abstract film, Hans Richter’s FILM IST RHYTHMUS (1921–24) was screened. And as a counterweight to the abstract German work, two French films in the Dadaistic-surrealistic mode were shown: Fernand Léger/Dudley Murphy’s IMAGES MOBILES from 1924 (known as BALLET MÉCANIQUE) and René Clair/Francis Picabia’s ENTR’ACTE, also from 1924.

The matinee proved to be both a success and a scandal. On the one hand, it met with such interest that it was repeated a week later (and shown in Hannover as well). But at the same time, a large part of the audience responded with incomprehension or even blatant aggression. Most reviews reflected such an attitude, abounding with expressions of disapproval, illustrating an “unmistakable lack of sophistication” among the critics, by and large novices to film. Although the shortcomings of the audience and the press could not have escaped the filmmakers, the reaction might well have had its effect, discouraging them to continue their painstaking work at the animation stand.

The brevity of the heyday enjoyed by absolute film is striking. In light of the great hope that was set on it, the manifestos that demanded it, and the euphoria of those artists and critics that celebrated it as a new art

48 Perhaps the film seemed outdated due to its technique, or it appeared too similar to the well-known advertising films that Ruttmann was creating parallel to his OPUS cycle.
49 Wilmesmeier (see note 4) has analyzed the reception at the film matinee in detail.
50 Ruttmann, accustomed to success and intending to achieve it, suspected that abstract avant-garde film would suffer the same fate as atonal music. “Should it retreat into poorly visited concert halls, monastically distilled for a small community of the aesthetically adept, who guard over the ‘purity’ of its structure?” Quoted in Goergen (see note 29), 37.
and a necessary development, a greater vitality could have been expected. However, it should be noted that many principles and theories to which German abstract film referred were rooted in the past: the filmmakers took up painterly trends and adapted theoretical positions that had shaped the first two decades of the century. But the medium of film contained possibilities of photography and montage that in a very different way, on a very different level, challenged the contemporary aesthetic.

The French film BALLET MÉCANIQUE, for example, which was included in the matinee, is based on a vivid collage of heterogeneous elements. It integrates painterly or graphic images with photographic abstractions, kaleidoscopically de-familiarized everyday utensils or machine parts, and includes shots of streets, staged scenes, fragmentary faces, or stylized writing. Central-perspective photographic illusion alternates with geometric compositions; brilliant light reflections contrast with expanses of color. At the same time, another French avant-garde approach, the so-called cinéma pur, focussed primarily on the specific qualities of the medium, which were explored in a lyrical fashion. In Henri Chomette’s films, JEUX DES REFLETS ET DE LA VITESSE (1923-25) and CINQ MINUTES DE CINÉMA PUR (1925), there are flowing transitions from abstract photography to representational images, technical de-familiarization by way of manipulated speed, multiple exposures and interspersed negative images, as well as atmospheric motifs of nature.

At the same time, László Moholy-Nagy, who joined the Bauhaus in 1923, propagated the artistic, “productive” use of photography and film, which he opposed to its “reproductive” use. “The photographic device has provided us with surprising possibilities that we have only begun to explore,” he wrote in 1925 in his book Malerei, Fotografie, Film (Painting, Photography, Film). And two years later, he enumerated the cinematic functions of light:

Changing light intensities and light speed. Movement variations of the space through light. The extinction and flashing up of the entire movement organism, of our brain. Light tangibility, light movement. Light distance and light proximity. Saturating and reinforcing radiance. The strongest optical experience that we can partake of.51

Moholy had written a “sketch for a film manuscript” as early as 1921/1922: Dynamik der Großstadt, a project that was never carried out. Intended were

51 László Moholy-Nagy, “Die beispiellose Fotografie,” published in the journal i 10, 1,3 (Amsterdam 1927; quoted in Schneede, see note 1, 245).
images of technological processes like construction work, a switching yard, or street traffic. They were to be edited in motion contrasts and formal analogies, in alternation of visual abstractions and concrete images.52

After 1925, only Oskar Fischinger continued to work in abstract animation, illustrating classical works of music in a light and pleasant vein. Viking Eggeling had passed away. Hans Richter’s Filmstudie (1926) combined abstracting and figurative photography according to the French style. While his experimental documentaries played virtuosically with montage effects, Walter Ruttmann confined his technique of animation to advertising. His famous 1927 documentary, Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt (fig. 5), recalls Moholy’s Berlin project and attests to Ruttmann’s fascination with the modern world and the infinite potential of photographic film.

Translated by Brian Currid

52 Moholy-Nagy’s “sketch” is included in his book Malerei, Fotografie, Film (Munich: Bauhaus-bücher 8, 1925), 122f.
Fig. 5: Ruttmann’s BERLIN DIE SINFONIE DER GROSSTADT – from quasi-abstract machinery to representational verisimilitude.
Fig. 1: BEGEGNUNG IM KMAST (Georg Stefan Troller, Germany 1984)
The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study

[2005]

I.

The following essay is a study of the processes of viewer empathy and associated feelings while watching a documentary. To my knowledge, the numerous studies on and theories of reception that have been published in the past ten years are almost exclusively based on the model of fiction. Noël Carroll, Dolf Zillmann, Murray Smith, Ed S. Tan, Alex Neill, Torben Grodal, Carl Plantinga, and Hans J. Wulff,¹ to name just a few, all consider the fiction film when they record, analyze, and differentiate the complex processes of sympathy and empathy, viewer allegiance, participation, central and acentral imagining, emotional contagion, autonomic emotional arousal, affective empathy, and motor mimicry.

Usually, the more or less explicit focus of these discussions is the psychological-realistic variant of the fiction film. I will also refer to this tradition when I speak of “fiction film” here, for psychological realism is specifically tailored to immerse the viewers into the events and, depending on the genre and work, to grant emotional involvement of many sorts. Empathetic processes contribute significantly to intensify involvement.

The documentary depends less than the fiction film on illusionary experiences. Instead, it sets itself the tasks of conveying information about reality, exploring problems, providing arguments, and – at least in its tradition of

social criticism – of altering the viewers’ consciousness in accordance with humanitarian, political, and moral principles. Although the documentary should be counted among the “discourses of sobriety,” to use Bill Nichols’ salient phrase,² the films are often anything but dry. Many documentaries strive to involve the viewers in the events and to present interesting and sympathetic people who will become familiar as individuals. In this respect, the documentary is related to the fiction film, and in part adopts the latter’s narrative arc of a crisis or conflict that gets resolved in the end. But since documentaries and fiction films start out from different preconditions and requirements, differences as well as commonalities should be noted even where the subject matter and structure of events are comparable.

For the present study, it seemed advisable to select a documentary in which a conflict comes to pass and the parties collide in the process. I wanted to be able to pinpoint strong as well as ambivalent responses in the audience in order to be able to analyze when and how they evolve. My example, on which the following analysis will focus, is therefore a rather extreme one: BEGEGNUNG IM KNAST (“Encounter in Jail”) by Georg Stefan Troller (Germany, 1984). The film is not part of but does follow the tradition of American observational or Direct Cinema,³ containing no staged sequences, no suggestion of subjectivity in the persons on screen, no chains of association, no music accompanying the conflict, and no other fictionalizing elements to bolster the viewers’ emotions. As in most observational films, Troller and his collaborators had no control over the central situation, could not and did not wish to intervene, and were merely tolerated as a small team. It should be assumed, however, and can occasionally be sensed, that their presence did have an effect on the events.

The following study is a preliminary approach to the workings of empathy in a documentary film. Methodologically, my findings and suggestions are based on close introspection during viewing, and they have been supplemented, sharpened, and largely confirmed by a number of friends, colleagues, and students. I am aware that introspection and collective discussion cannot make up for rigorous empirical research, and I can only hope that this study helps to encourage further approaches to the subject.

³ On the method of Direct Cinema and its contradictions, see Monika Beyerle, Authentisierungsstrategien im Dokumentarfilm: Das amerikanische Direct Cinema der 60er Jahre (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1997).
As a side effect, I also want to draw attention to my example, a documentary of great impact and originality that might otherwise be neglected by film scholars, historians, and the general public: BEGEGNUNG IM KNAST.

II.

In everyday life, empathy is understood as the ability to experience or sense another’s feelings through simulation or analogy and to understand his or her state of mind, albeit usually in a weaker form and mixed with feelings of one’s own. Different types of empathy and various levels of intensity can be distinguished. We speak of “motor mimicry” when watching someone causes our muscles to tense in analogy, and of “affective empathy” when we feel (approximately) the same emotions we perceive in another person. We simulate the emotions of others in order to imagine what is happening to them and what they are up to; and we empathize (and are able to do so) because we connect to analogous experiences from our own lives that rise up in us again.

Affective empathy can be triggered by facial expression and body language, by voice and wording, or by an observed situation, presuming we understand or can imagine what is happening. When we watch a boy being caught on the train without a ticket, we understand his embarrassment because we are familiar with the situation; perhaps we have even had a similar experience ourselves. Sometimes, hearing the voices of the persons in conflict is sufficient: we need not see either the child or the man harassing him. But our affective empathy will arise more quickly and intensely if the child is facing us: we can read his emotions on his face, and we sense his embarrassment vicariously. We can also feel affective empathy for the ticket inspector if he has good reason to be annoyed with the child. Alternating or even simultaneous empathy with both parties is possible. Our reactions are complicated, and they come and go quickly and involuntarily.

In addition to understanding the emotions of both parties, we might react in various ways, depending on our assessment of the situation and

4 Empathy with animals and other creatures – indeed, even with buildings – can also be observed. See my essays “Empathy with the Animal” (1997), “Abstraction and Empathy in the Early German Avant-garde” (1997), and “Casta Diva: An Empathetic Reading” (2008), all in the present volume. In the context of art history, concepts of empathy (Einfühlung) can be traced back to Alois Riegl, Theodor Lipps, and Wilhelm Worringer – that is, to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

the attitude we take toward it. Thus we could become outraged about the
ticket inspector’s severity, or might feel sympathy for the boy, or react to his
plight with disapproval, schadenfreude, or amusement. In these cases we
develop independent emotions as an observer analyzing the situation. This
distinction between analogous sympathy with somebody and the parallel
development of our own emotions is usually discussed as “feeling with”
versus “feeling for.”

One emotional state does not rule out the other; on the contrary, a mixture of different reactions, which can be very ambiguous and unstable, is the rule.

III.

Even though we tend to perceive documentary events as largely realistic – as recordings of something that happened in reality – our responses in the cinema depend upon the circumstances of the viewing situation as well as on the way events are depicted on the screen.

A great deal of attention has been paid to the so-called dispositif, or apparatus, of the cinema. The dark auditorium, the comfortable seat, eyes and ears directed at a luminous rectangle where an oversized drama materializes— all of this contributes to making the audience particularly receptive, open to experience, and sensitive to emotions. Moreover, the fact that a film (like a photograph) presents something that has already taken place and is no longer part of our world relieves us of all responsibility to intervene. Hence the requirements for developing empathy are more favorable in the cinema than in reality.

In the cinema we can empathize with the fare-dodging boy and the ticket inspector freely and from a safe distance. And we can stare, indiscreetly and with impunity, at those involved – something that would ordinarily collide with social norms. Our relationship to the people on screen may remain one-sided, parasocial, and mediated, but that does not seem to matter much in the development of empathetic processes. It is more important that we have a good view of faces and bodies and can hear what is being said. As real witnesses, we might be too far away, and we would first have to focus on the event and separate it from the rest of the chaos around us in order to place it

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in the kind of mental rectangle the cinema provides. For the film chooses a privileged perspective for the audience, presumably the best one conceivable.

Perception in real situations is potentially richer in its complete, sensory, three-dimensional tangibility; we can always perceive more details if we make the effort. The cinematic image offers a reduced reality – in terms of flatness and limited depth of field – and what takes place off-camera is often irrevocably removed from view. There are, however, sufficient formal strategies to compensate for such limitations or to transform them into aesthetic and narrative advantages. The precise framing of the image, its expressive composition, and the ingenious use of off-screen space – to name just a few devices – convey a different kind of richness, contributing to focusing our emotional attention and reinforcing our empathy.

In real life, we have to reckon with crises that quickly abate, with the drama of everyday life fading or shifting to another location inaccessible to us. In this case, our heightened emotionality dissolves, since the drama remains open and we do not get to experience the conclusion. By contrast, films select, condense, and intensify, making images and sound more concise and choosing their protagonists according to their ability to reveal themselves on screen. And most importantly, they only select worthwhile events endowed with meaning.

IV.

Since the theoretical turn to viewer cognition and emotion, film scholars have begun to investigate shots, sequences, and even entire fiction films in search of characteristics that encourage empathy and sympathy. Sometimes the accent has been more on the characters and the way they are presented; sometimes more on the situations to which they are subjected. Thus it has been established that viewers spontaneously take sides with someone who is being treated unfairly, especially if he or she is wrongly accused, or with whoever is in the role of a victim. We simulate the situation of the weaker person and feel the entire emotional scale from helplessness or despair to anger, resistance, or outrage. Such viewer emotions are tied to a situation that can be clearly evaluated, and they occur most promptly if we have already found ourselves in a similar position.

Research has also demonstrated that empathy arises more easily if the character on screen is likeable. Sympathy is, however, not an indispensable requirement for empathetic processes, which can also occur when we re-
ject a person. Sometimes a situation is so clearly defined that we develop sympathy for someone even though we find him or her unattractive (but in such a case our emotions will dissolve more quickly). Moral conviction and viewer emotions can conflict when a film reveals what a certain event means for a character. Sometimes we emotionally sanction deeds we would condemn in reality, because we understand the motives of the perpetrator empathetically: in fiction, murder and mayhem can turn out to be the only adequate things to do.

In most cases, our sympathy or empathy does not focus continuously on the same character throughout the film. Empathy can quickly swing back and forth between different parties, can focus on an entire situation, can be reserved exclusively for a specific character, or can suddenly jump over to another, changing horses in midstream, as it were. Following Hans J. Wulff, we can say that, as a rule, “a field-like context of counter-perspectives of the characters involved and the interpretations of their situation represents the ‘genuine’ target of empathetic activity.” In that sense, empathetic processes do not correspond with what was for a long time rather simplistically referred to as “identification with the main character.” Strangely and counter-intuitively, it was assumed that viewers choose a protagonist, usually the most likeable one and the one most similar to themselves, and then stick with him or her through thick and thin. If there was no suitable sympathetic character, viewers would not get their money’s worth.

Formal aspects of a film can help increase our readiness to empathize. Empathy needs time to develop, so the editing should not be too fast. Closeness and frontality naturally encourage empathy – as in the example of the fare-dodging child – because more indications of someone’s state of mind are visible than would be in profile or from a greater distance. Not for nothing is the face in frontal close-up a specific and favored device in the fiction film. Plantinga points out that the involuntary imitation of an intensely observed facial expression often triggers the same emotion in the viewer. This recursive effect of facial expression on emotion – so-called facial feedback – can invert the causal chain.

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9 Wulff, “Empathie als Dimension des Filmverstehens” (see note 1), 139.
10 For a long time it was believed that the audience would automatically “identify” with the main character of the same sex – a theory valid only to a limited degree.
11 See Plantinga, “The Scene of Empathy” (see note 1), 243. Plantinga points out that the involuntary imitation of an intensely observed facial expression often triggers the same emotion in the viewer. This recursive effect of facial expression on emotion – so-called facial feedback – can invert the causal chain.
Moreover, devices to increase subjectivity also encourage empathy: the more we know about the inner life of the characters – the more insight we have into their feelings, values, hopes, and plans – the more closely we react to them and the more precisely we sound them out emotionally. Another important instrument is the choice of actors, in terms of both the portrayal of roles and the constellation of the cast as a whole. Miscasting can block viewer emotions or guide them in the wrong direction, so that the layout of the plot gets out of joint. On the other hand, talented actors can increase the emotional impact of a scene.

V.

It has not been evident thus far why viewer empathy would develop differently in a documentary than in a fiction film, since both genres present emotionally charged situations as well as people whose expressions make their emotional states visible. Moreover, there are numerous hybrid forms, especially in contemporary cinema, that tend to blur or dissolve the generic boundaries.

Nevertheless, it is possible to determine some essential differences between the genres. The fiction film, as mentioned above, has strategies to intensify emotions that the documentary film cannot employ as much or even at all. Background music, for instance, that comments on and emotionally charges events, is used in the observational documentary mode, if at all, only at the beginning and end or at transitional moments. Other important means to intensify emotions include the use of color, lighting, or mise-en-scène. But in a documentary filmed spontaneously on location, the circumstances have to be accepted as they are, and the result is a rather limited control over form. Often it is simply too dark to film an event in all its details, or the weather suggests a mood that runs counter to the given situation. Moreover, staged actions can be repeated whereas real events occur only once. In the metaphorical phrase of Georg Stefan Troller, the documentary film hunts “in the wild,” while the feature film operates “on a shooting range.”

12 In “Wir sind alle Menschenfresser”: Georg Stefan Troller und die Liebe zum Dokumentarischen, Susanne Marschall/Bodo Witzke, eds. (St. Augustin: Gardez!, 1999), 61.
It is, however, above all the nature of the people presented to us that mark the difference between the genres: it is no coincidence that one speaks of characters in a fiction film but of persons or subjects in a documentary.\textsuperscript{13}

Fictional characters are designed as artifacts, and they all derive from the same source: the script. As a result, characters are not autonomous entities but part of a structure, a field endowed with meaning. When the script is turned into a film, it is subjected to yet another structuring process by the director and his or her team, who see to it that all of the elements are woven and orchestrated into a single text. Both processes of creation and control serve to make the characters transparent and plausible, and to distinguish them from one another.

By contrast, the textual character of the observational documentary, which is neither scripted nor staged, is far less determined, far more subject to chance. Even though the shots coalesce into a cinematic text in the course of editing, it is a text that never ceases to wrestle with the material. For extended passages, it will give room to persons and events without gaining control over them. Usually, documentaries present ensembles of people who already interact in real-life constellations. These may not be conducive to spreading sympathies or developing empathy according to the filmmaker’s intentions. Some people may seem likeable despite their role in the film, while others seem unattractive, even though the film is trying to advocate their interests. Some may resemble each other, even though they are worlds apart, and others do not fit together, even though they are fellow sufferers or sit in the same boat politically. In short, real people are often improbable representations of their group, or of what they are supposed to convey in a given film. And rather than accepting the filmmaker’s instructions, they often behave unpredictably.

Professional actors try to show the states of mind of the characters they embody, whereas most real people do not wish to turn their innermost selves outward. They seem aloof and uncertain, inconsistent and not very coherent – or they overdo it, performing their presumed roles amateurishly or currying favor with the filmmakers and the future audience. The success of a documentary depends largely on the filmmaker’s ability to be in the right place at the right time, to approach the right person in the right way and, with tact and sensitivity, make the impossible possible. For Nichols, documentary filmmakers wrestle with the paradoxical desire for their subjects to remain

nonprofessional, but to express their personalities and feelings nonetheless. They try to find amateurs able to fulfill the task of actors.¹⁴

Not being able to describe interiority directly, as the novel can, the fiction film has developed many ways to suggest subjectivity. After all, the complete accessibility of its characters, the insight into every conceivable perspective, is a fundamental trait of fiction, no matter how much use a work makes of this possibility. The range of cinematic means encompasses, next to the formal devices already mentioned, such diverse elements as suggestive close-ups, subjective camera angles, point-of-view structures, dialogue statements and voice-over, memories and dreams or other forms of mindscreen,¹⁵ stream-of-consciousness, and associative montage.¹⁶ Thus Ed S. Tan speaks of the fiction film as a genuine “emotion machine” that produces feelings.¹⁷

The documentary has a much harder time in overcoming the limitations of its medium. Strictly speaking, only that which can be photographed and recorded on location is an option. Especially in the observational mode, subjective camera positions and even point-of-view shots are hardly permissible, although they are occasionally smuggled in. And narrative devices like internal monologues or memories and dreams are, of course, out of the question. If filmmakers want to offer insights into someone’s feelings, they have to rely on somatic indications and verbal pronouncements; they must heighten the events by means of editing or concentrate on situations where emotions can be inferred easily. Early Direct Cinema therefore specialized in crisis situations in which the protagonists were already engaged in a kind of role playing, confronting each other and becoming so agitated in the course of the process that they forgot the presence of the camera.¹⁸

The documentary can and must trust in the viewer’s ability to derive inferences about the feelings of other people, even when they do not say much or appear unfazed. Whereas the fiction film relies on intersubjec-

¹⁴ See Nichols, Representing Reality (see note 3), 121.
¹⁵ See Bruce Kawin, Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and the First-Person Film (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978). By “mindscreen,” Kawin means the cinematic depiction of imaginary content, such as dreams or visions, as if they were “photographable.”
¹⁷ “Film as an Emotion Machine” is the subtitle of Tan’s book (see note 1).
¹⁸ In crises such as predictably escalating confrontations (police actions, race riots, election campaigns), people either no longer notice that they are being filmed, or are so accustomed to appear in public that they do not shy from the camera. See the chapter “Direct Cinema and the Crisis Structure” in Stephen Mamber, Cinema Verite in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974).
tively comprehensible simulations of subjective experience, documentaries often confront us with highly individual behavior. We accept it as real because it has obviously taken place in the profilmic reality. So whereas the fiction film is usually based on the most likely and plausible behavior of its characters (in order to ensure credibility), people in documentaries tend to display an improbable, idiosyncratic expressivity. That much remains inexplicable accounts for a special appeal of the documentary and is a sign of its authenticity – or condemns it to fail if the gulf cannot be bridged.

Fictional characters are finite, so to speak, because they are artifacts; they possess only those traits, feelings, and experiences contained in the text. But people in a documentary are as unfathomable as people in real life; each has his or her own universe, revealing only a fraction of their essence on screen. So whereas fictional characters are exposed to the audience in their constructed readability, people in a documentary often resist reading and remain opaque in many respects. The audience is aware of this and therefore expects only limited, sporadic insights into morality, personality, or the sum of experiences.

Again unlike fictional characters, people in documentaries are as of one piece: they do not break down into the components of actor and role, whose precise mixing ratio can never be gauged and can collapse at any time (but is a source of pleasure nonetheless). Whereas the aggressiveness of someone in a documentary seems threatening because it truly exists and can flare up uncontrollably, the aggressive behavior of a fictional character is quickly attributed to the actor’s craft and hence defused as an artifact. Moreover, the outward appearance of a real person is the result of a lived life whose traces it bears, not borrowed from the completely different biography of an actor. Persons in a documentary are thus less transparent than fictional characters but at the same time often richer, more revealing, and more mysterious. Their emotional expression is less coded and more ambiguous, less balanced, and only occasionally infectious; but it will also be the more surprising, persuasive, and intense. Many documentary films depend on such unexpected, spontaneous moments – moments of serendipity that cannot be planned.

VI.

As already noted, BEGEKNUNG IM KNAST belongs in the category of the observational documentary, even if it oversteps the methods of this mode
with a dose of commentary and a few introductory questions.\textsuperscript{19} In its reliance on uncontrolled observation, the film is in fact not typical of the oeuvre of its creator, Georg Stefan Troller,\textsuperscript{20} although it is part of his famous \textit{Personenbeschreibungen} ("Descriptions of People") – a series of seventy portraits produced between 1972 and 1994, broadcast on German television (ZDF) and mainly based on interviews. There are, however, a few more examples of observational and situational approaches in the series. Troller does not cling dogmatically to a specific method but takes his lead from the subject matter and the material.

Georg Stefan Troller was born in Vienna in 1921 to Jewish parents. He emigrated to the United States in 1941 and returned to Europe during World War II as an American soldier, later working as a radio journalist and for German television. Troller first received recognition with his \textit{Pariser Journal} (WDR, 1962-71), which, much like the \textit{Personenbeschreibungen}, often focuses on interesting individuals. He likes to portray artists and celebrities, but also knows how to find the focal points of social conflict. He portrays drug dealers, Vietnam veterans, and felons in their specific circumstances with just as much commitment as when trying to get behind the façade of the privileged. Troller has also written screenplays, e.g. for Axel Corti's feature film \textit{Der junge Freud} (\textit{Young Dr. Freud}) (Austria/Germany, 1976) and the trilogy \textit{Wohin und Zurück} (Austria/Germany/Switzerland, 1982-86), for which he drew on his own biography.

One of Troller's trademarks is his voice. He always provides his own commentaries, clinging closely to the events, taking advantage of slow points and gaps to add, briefly and subjectively, information and assessments.\textsuperscript{21} Walter Jens wrote about the distinctive qualities of Troller's voice in \textit{Die Zeit} in 1968:

> With his conversational bass, and stressing the consonant S with an exotic, striking sibilant, he speaks the words in a singing intonation, placing the accents of significance on the final syllables of the brief coda, which

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Begegnung im Knast} can be viewed on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGM1pQoUEQGE.

\textsuperscript{20} The information incorporated in what follows comes from three sources: a television interview with Bodo Witzke, which was broadcast on ZDF as part of an extensive retrospective in April 1998 on occasion of Troller's eightieth birthday; Marschall/Witzke (see note 12), a book containing interviews with the filmmaker and his collaborators, texts by Troller, background materials, and various essays on and analyses of his works; and finally a long telephone conversation with Troller in June 2002.

\textsuperscript{21} See also Norbert Grob, "Tief die Stimme, sinnlich das Timbre: Eine Hommage," in Marschall/Witzke (see note 12), 185-88.
breaks off with a masculine caesura ... no, neither *caesura* nor *masculine*, because in fact he raises his voice, so that the periods dissolve into colons, the incisions become connections, and the antitheses, determined by the law of *coincidentia oppositorum*, cease to be antitheses.\(^{22}\)

Troller’s documentary films are marked by a profound humanitarian curiosity, which the people being filmed can scarcely not respond to, and by – as he puts it – “cynicism” and “romanticism” (usually displayed in that order).\(^{23}\) So the spectrum of his attitudes ranges from defense, callousness, irony, and amusement to astonishment, admiration, shock, deep sympathy, and concern. Troller’s style, from the camerawork to his humanitarian approach, is, however, due not only to the filmmaker himself but also to his decades-old collaboration with a regular team: the cinematographer Carl Franz Hutterer and the editor Elfi Kreiter. While it is difficult to assess Kreiter’s creative contribution to their collaboration in the cutting room, Hutterer’s camera style is unmistakable.

Hutterer prefers to work without additional lighting or indeed any intervention into local conditions, thus putting up with blurriness, under-exposure, and incidental backlighting – “calculated messiness,” as he calls it\(^ {24} \) – in order to convey a specific atmosphere. He is not interested in the perfect shot. This led to the decision to work largely without a tripod and without looking through the viewfinder. “The rhythm of the camera’s pan and movements corresponds to the twists and turns of the cinematographer’s body, which seems to have merged with the camera.”\(^ {25} \) Hutterer can anticipate what will occur and intuitively, with lightning speed, decide what or whom to focus on. Often, his shots are so logical and so close to the action that the sequences barely need editing.

The project *Begegnung im Knast* evolved when Troller learned that an unusual correctional measure was being explored in West Virginia, intending to bring young offenders back on the straight path. On the initiative of a court psychologist, juveniles from a reformatory institution were exposed to a group of adult criminals from a prison in order to bring them to their senses. The prisoners were supposed to intimidate and shock the kids with their many years of prison experience and with autobiographical reflections...

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\(^{22}\) Quoted in Marschall/Witzke, “Vorwort,” ibid., 11.

\(^{23}\) See Troller in Marschall/Witzke, ibid., 60.

\(^{24}\) Hutterer in an interview with Bodo Witzke, in Marschall/Witzke, ibid., 78.

on their careers as criminals. It was up to them to decide whether or not to take part in the experiment and how to present themselves. The young people, by contrast, had no choice, as long as their parents had consented to the measure.

The program had already been changed by the time Troller had obtained the necessary permission from all parties and was ready to start filming. Following an extremely sadistic confrontation, a girl had had a nervous breakdown, so subsequent encounters were defused. Hence, what the film shows can be thought of as a moderate version compared to the way the experiment was originally conducted. And shortly after BEGEGNUNG IM KNAST was completed, the program was canceled altogether. Although successful in terms of prevention – a significant percentage of the juvenile delinquents did not reoffend – the whole venture proved to be too costly for the prison as well as the reformatory institution, and perhaps too risky as well.26

VII.

BEGEGNUNG IM KNAST begins almost peacefully. We see inmates in prison uniforms singing melodically and fervently in a choir: “It won’t be long, soon we’ll be leaving here” – strange lyrics for men serving life sentences. Further images from the prison follow—bars, walls, guards, cells, and inmates—as Troller’s voice informs us about the context: 650 felons, 240 guards, a monotonous institutional life that “damns both groups to the deadly meaninglessness of their activity.” It is a breeding ground for violence, where desperate revolts, sexual infringement, and homicide among the inmates are on the agenda and where drugs play an important role. Troller presents several prisoners and reveals that nearly all of them were under the influence of drugs when they committed their crimes. He lists these crimes laconically: murder, robbery, and rape, in many variations. The result is a brief but comprehensive picture of the penitentiary in Moundsville, Virginia.

26 I am not in a position to comment on how common such correctional measures are in the United States or elsewhere. However, Tom Noga, “Statt ins Disneyland in die Strafkolonie,” Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag, October 13, 2002, describes a comparable measure: “In the United States, overtaxed parents bring their children to extracurricular training in education camps, where military toughness is supposed to teach them decency, respect, and humility.” Noga describes ten-year-olds being subjected to army drill officers and prison psychologists to terrorize them into docility.
The film does not call on us to take sides with specific people. Next to the prisoners, the guards could be the target of such an emotional investment, since they are “innocent but condemned to share the life of the inmates,” albeit without any of their privileges, such as a well-equipped legal library or sports and music programs. But Troller dwells only cursorily on the guards; we are not invited to empathize with them.

The institution for juvenile delinquents also has bars and a group of supervisory personnel – “liberal educators,” who have few ideas to offer “because they don’t have any themselves,” as Troller comments. Some of the kids, of both sexes, are still children – the youngest is twelve – and they clearly come from poor and difficult circumstances; some look apathetic, others recalcitrant or grumpy. Their offenses are not yet felonies, but their refractory natures, their readiness to commit violence, and their drug consumption add up to bad prognoses. “What is wrong with these kids? Nothing other than what is wrong with the adults: they simply do not know why they are in the world. So they want to amuse themselves at least, by punching, pinching, and smoking grass. And now they are being taught a lesson.”

Troller offers brief insights into everyday life at the institution and expresses surprise that it is “even worse than prison.” “The need to nurture the minds, the sense of beauty, and the imagination of the kids has not yet occurred to anyone here.” We meet a few inmates, seemingly a rather random assortment. Here, too, we might have been prompted to empathize and form allegiances; here, too, both sides of the special power relation within an institution could have been called into question, but the film again refrains from bringing us emotionally closer to either the juveniles or their guards. Instead, there is a cross-section-like presentation of typical cases. Troller offers pointed comments – some cynical, some humanitarian – and allows the camera to pause only briefly on each person. It is hard to say whether the unimaginative, overtaxed educators or their unpleasant charges are the weaker ones.

“We are on an excursion from the little prison to the larger one, from purgatory to hell, to a drastic cure that is meant to wipe the grins off their faces.” The kids are shackled with leg irons like dangerous criminals for the bus ride to the site of the event proper. Although slightly nervous and confused, they are in a fairly good mood and talk among themselves as if on a field trip from school. After twelve minutes of introduction we have

27 The juvenile prison is located in an economically underdeveloped mining region with high unemployment. Most residents are poor whites.
Fig. 2a–d: BEGEHNUNG IM KNAST
reached the destination, as the “Department of Corrections” sign on the gate announces (fig. 2a). Twelve minutes represent more than a quarter of the forty-five minute film, and yet hardly any feelings have been mobilized apart from a certain interest or perhaps regret about the social conditions, as well as skepticism about this experiment. Such a ratio between the time for the exposition and the action proper would be inconceivable in a fiction film. By this point, we would have entered into an emotional conflict between well-defined characters; sympathies and antipathies would have been developed, and expectations about the conclusion would have been formed.

What follows is the visitors' initiation via barren corridors and unfriendly guards, who routinely frisk the kids and order them around. The grins have already been wiped off their faces, anxiety and muffled obedience spread. Meanwhile, we begin to recognize several youngsters who keep reappearing. The body searches in particular bring us close and invite us to empathize with them. We experience the male and female guards going through all their pockets, but it is especially the grasping of hair that triggers our somatic responses (fig. 2b). We now begin to take sides, as the juveniles become victims of hostile behavior. At the same time, Troller's comments, which until now have provided a footing via his authority and have occupied us with their ambiguity, decrease in frequency and duration. Like the young visitors, we feel a little abandoned, left alone in the threatening world of the prison.

But the guards' brusqueness turns out to be a mild preliminary of what the prisoners have in mind for the younger generation. Recognizable from afar in their red institutional outfit, several of them lead their young guests into the gymnasium, where a larger group is waiting for the experiment to begin. A choreography for this encounter has been worked out, in which the prisoners – more than twenty of them, the majority of them Afro-American – sit in a row along the wall, lounging or smoking (fig. 2c), while the teenagers are perched like birds on the benches opposite them (fig. 2d). For the following hours, they will barely be allowed to budge, while the prisoners move freely – an arrangement that, for once, gives them power.

It is surprising that so many volunteers have been selected, since a few of them would have been enough for this lesson; but the sheer number is all the more overpowering. Initially, we observe the prisoners from the uneasy perspective of the teenagers. What might these hardened and embittered men have up their sleeves? How dangerous are they? Will the kids be able to get away unscathed? The fact that the prisoners do not introduce themselves by name but by the length of their sentence is suggestively frightening
Fig. 3a-d: BEGEGNUNG IM KNAST
(twenty, thirty, forty years, or life without possibility of parole). Neither the presence of the film team nor the prison personnel standing at a distance offer any guarantee that the criminals will not resort to rash action or even take hostages.

The beginning of the “lesson” is shrewdly devised: like real prisoners, the kids are reduced to numbers which replace their names, and they are shouted at and forced to give up their jackets and shoes – an exercise in humiliation in the unheated gymnasium. (Later, their things will be returned, but the film does not show how that happens.) The next moves in this game seem equally manipulative and disgraceful. Some kids are singled out and confused with nonsensical questions (fig. 3b), or an inmate orders them to do something that another one forbids them. They are placed in a double-bind situation and a process of group dynamics in which all the others will identify with the victim. A kind of emotional, but also physical, chaos breaks out. Clothing lies everywhere on the floor; several prisoners are moving at the same time in different areas of the room; some of the youngsters are standing, while others, pressed closely together, lower their heads. The language of the criminals is bristling with obscenities, and their tone recalls the vulgar bellowing of a sergeant at basic training intended to break the will of the recruits, as we recognize from countless American films about the military. Clearly, the prisoners are slipping into fixed roles and mounting a spectacle in the arena between themselves and their young guests.

At this point, Troller’s commentaries cease entirely. We are now guided by the camera instead of the filmmaker’s voice. But the cinematographer does not have an easy time of it. Hutterer’s handheld camera must capture the strained, confusing atmosphere and at the same time focus quickly on everything that is happening. He has to be everywhere at once, and now his technique of not looking through the lens but keeping an eye on the whole room bears fruit. Responding with intuitive confidence to the chaos around him, Hutterer is able to pick out individual reactions or follow lines of sight among the many people in the room, so that the chain of connections among the participants is not broken. At one point, he gets too close to a prisoner who hisses “fuck this dude with the camera.” Sometimes it becomes necessary to zoom back suddenly to open up from a close-up to an

28 This is particularly effective in Stanley Kubrick’s Full Metal Jacket (US, 1987), in which a real veteran was cast as the drill officer. Another example is Ridley Scott’s G. I. Jane (US, 1997), an unpleasant story about a female soldier. Documentaries such as Basic Training by Frederick Wiseman (US, 1971) or Soldier Girls by Nick Broomfield/Jane Churchill (US, 1981) prove that the fictional depictions are realistic.
entire group or to make a risky pan over the ceiling to another point of the action. Several off-center, tilted, and blurry shots bear witness of Hutterer’s spontaneity, while the pallid backlighting from the large windows proves that no artificial light was used. This contributes to the grim atmosphere, since it generates washed-out colors and makes it impossible to see outside (fig. 3a). As a result, the hermetic quality of the prison, which otherwise could be lost in the spacious room, is conveyed by the milky impenetrability of the windows.

The second act of the encounter is dominated by presentations in which each of the prisoners plays out the program in his own way. It starts with a white inmate who is serving thirteen years for acts of violence associated with drug addiction. He provides insight into his career as a criminal and life behind bars in an alert, candid, thoroughly merciless, and aggressive manner. We judge him with caution, since we cannot tell how honest or pedagogically committed he is. What motivated the men to take part in this experiment becomes a relevant question at this point. To answer it, we have to observe and listen to the speakers closely, to employ empathy, and to draw upon our own life experience. In the process, we develop an attitude that deviates in some respects from that of the kids. On the one hand, we are observing an exotic experiment and are fascinated by a kind of theatrical performance whose nature and goal we want to figure out. On the other hand, our fear and horror are undiminished, and we take the side of the kids and pity them. So our participation is complex, even contradictory in certain ways.

The prisoners’ scenario – and the film, which presents it in a slightly elliptical way – is structured dramaturgically so that one “number” after the other comes down on the participants without a break. When there is an interaction between a prisoner and a kid, the gym gets quieter for a moment, but the level of terror does not decrease. It is dismaying to watch as two or three men take individual kids to task, including visibly frightened girls, and get far too close to them – abandoning the appropriate social distance in favor of an intimate one – whispering personal advice or ominous information to them and bringing sexual undertones into play (fig. 3c). The treatment oscillates between confidential solidarity and threatening gestures of educational intent. The young ones are the new generation, the successors of criminals that have no other family they could call their own. Or, in Troller’s words: “The big wolves look out for the little wolves.”

29 Telephone conversation with the filmmaker (see note 20).
The camera often focuses on prisoners who lecture for an extended period, usually in frontal close-ups. Reaction shots are relatively rare, even though Hutterer repeatedly succeeds in capturing the complete misery of the kids (fig. 3d), arousing our protective instincts. Some of the prisoners have a perfect command of rhetoric, especially of the sort cultivated by male Afro-Americans. There is also something of the pathos-laden performance of preachers: the laying out of details, rhythmic repetition, and gradual intensification, as well as artificial pauses and modulations of the voice. The prisoners repeatedly ask rhetorical questions like: “Do you understand what I’m saying?” – to which the kids have to reply, in a collective ritual, with “Yes, sir.”

The lessons concentrate mainly on two themes: how the prisoners drifted into their criminal careers and what happens in prison. The consequences of their crimes for the victims, or for their own families for that matter, are left out. Some of the lectures are brutal and violent in tenor, following a strategy of deterrence. Other prisoners are more lachrymose. Some of them depict their experiences in harsh detail; others summarize and moralize. Now and again, there are didactic high points: one of the inmates has brought along newspaper clippings about young criminals, which selected kids have to read out (even when their throats choke up), as if it was a list of their own sins. Another man has “instructional material” from the prison archive: a series of large-format photographs showing mutilated naked corpses and a display case with weapons used to murder guards or fellow inmates. Furthermore, there is a lot of lugubrious talk about death and graves on the hill that no one comes to visit.

No moment of glory is admitted. No one embellishes his deeds, alludes to the fascination of crime, or conforms to the mythical figure of the outlaw as we know it from the movies. “Am I your hero or something?” is the only question from a prisoner that even points in that direction, but he does not see himself as a hero, and none of those listening would think of him as such. The patterns of social reformist Hollywood are not in demand here, although there would seem to be an obvious analogy to a film like ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES (Michael Curtiz, US 1938), in which a charismatically self-confident James Cagney affects fear of the electric chair in order to discourage his young admirers from pursuing a career in crime.

We cannot, however, rule out that self-denial and magnanimity, or moral transformation in general, are motives for the prisoners, especially if we take their didactic fervor into account or the self-demonization and admission of ghastly details. The prisoners reveal themselves to their shocked audience without regard to their self-image. None of them makes an attempt
to appear likeable – and this renunciation of recognition by others gives us much to think about. Troller’s introductory remark that the experiment represents “a kind of therapy for both parts” – for the criminals as well as the kids – remains in memory. An authentic earnestness about working out their own lives is evident in many of the prisoners’ statements. On the other hand, they might hope for benefits or consideration for parole if they play their part well. But the pure pleasure of the rhetoric and the power the confrontation provides could also be motives – a theater workshop as a relief from the frustrating monotony of life in prison.

Because of the broad range of possible motives, and because we have no chance to verify our assumptions, our participation fluctuates between empathy, fascination, antipathy, dismay, searching for symptoms, assessing behavior, and judging or condemning the educational effort and its effects. In their diversity, and the deviation from or partial fulfillment of stereotypes, the prisoners are good for many surprises – surprises that are not predefined in a script (like James Cagney’s late remorse), but result from the improbability and mysteriousness of authentic behavior. This opens up an unfathomable psychological depth, a depth to which the filmmaker has little access, even if he knows more about some of the men than the film betrays.30

If we consider the course of events and sequence of speakers, it is striking that ex-cathedra teaching is employed with aggressive agitation, and that this intensity is maintained across many speakers – a merciless procedure that never becomes dull, thanks to the variety of faces and methods of presentation. The passion of their performance makes the prisoners seem credible, and in confronting the kids they present themselves in a way that almost demands that we hear them out and try to read them empathetically. For an extended period, we remain emotionally and mentally absorbed, focusing with fascination on the sheer performance at the same time that we are preoccupied with exploring the men’s motivations. Only the final speaker, “Big Charlie” – whom Troller brought to our attention early on and who is serving life as a three-time brutal rapist – interrupts this sequence of intense participation. The film gives him the most space, but over the course of his performance he begins to lose our attention. Big Charlie is all too virtuosic, speaking like a preacher and savoring his words with self-satisfaction. Although he addresses the kids with the essential question – “Is this what you want in life?” – he seems less personally involved than the

30 Troller knew that the inmate who warns the kids about drugs was also the most active drug dealer in prison, but this point is never brought out in the film (telephone conversation, see note 20).
previous speakers. He is also the one who presents the display case and the shocking photographs, who speaks most coherently, and who offers the most information – in that respect, he marks the high point of the presentation. But he also marks its conclusion, since now the excitement subsides, and a certain relief sets in with the recognition that the most dangerous of them all is content with rhetorical fireworks. As viewers, we can now let go.

*Begegnung im Knast* does not end explosively but rather on a quiet, exhausted note. We see the juveniles leaving the building in silent discipline without anyone having to push or pester them. They do not look at each other, creeping out with their tails between their legs, as it were. On the bus that brings them back to their “little prison,” they stare out the windows, lonely and, we would like to believe, pensively. But the relief that they have gotten off lightly diminishes our empathy with them. We no longer see them as scared, anxious, unfortunate wretches, but wonder what this tour-de-force may have achieved (or if a smaller dose would have sufficed). Our perspective has changed from protective to pedagogical. A challenge for the educators and a social problem, we now view these young people less as subjects than as objects of the experiment.

Troller leaves us alone at the end. He remains silent and offers no commentary on the mood of either the kids or the prisoners. We do not learn how they process the experience or assess the experiment. Nor do we hear from experts, social workers, educators, psychologists, or directors of institutions. Troller releases his viewers back into reality, now enriched by a trying and complex experience. The film is over, but its images and words remain in our heads and stimulate reflection on the ambiguity of influence and punishment, on the effectiveness of deterrence, the relativity of educational means, and the destructive power of social circumstances. The documentary argument, which Troller makes only indirectly, continues in our minds (and perhaps conversations). The observational documentary has thus transcended its *modus operandi*, not just placing something before the viewers’ eyes but conducting a kind of experiment with them as well.

**VIII.**

Georg Stefan Troller is proud to mention that an important documentary film award, the Prix Italia, was denied him because *Begegnung im Knast* was believed to have been staged.31 It is not known whether the members

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31 See the interview “Wir sind alle Menschenfresser,” in Marschall/Witzke (see note 12), 61.
of the jury simply thought that an authentic event was recreated with the people involved, or rather believed that a fake documentary was made with actors. In any case, we can assume that the jury’s concerns were triggered by the film’s perfection: the successful dramatic structure of symmetrical introduction and ending, of anticipation, belated development, reversal in the emotional structure, aggression and eruption, relief, fading out; the astonishing precision of the camera’s reactions, always seeming to capture the right person and to take the atmosphere of the moment miraculously into account; and finally the performance of the prisoners, who act with great confidence, with pleasure in their educational function, and rhetorical pathos. So the denial of the award is really a compliment – and Troller saw it as such.

On the other hand, the jury was clearly not able to read the signs of the documentary or to imagine that such a film would have been staged differently if actors had been performing a script. Obviously, anything can be faked, and waving a handheld camera around to make the results look like a documentary is not all that difficult. But it would border on the impossible to think up this film and make it the way Troller, Hutterer, and Kreiter did with the material recorded spontaneously on site.

Would a filmmaker who was staging the events first show the pile of clothes on the floor and later the teenagers in all their gear without explaining how they got their things back? Could someone think up the animalistic sounds that the murderer attributes to his victim – a kind of rising, distressing “hoahhh”? Or would a filmmaker who was deliberately strewing signs of authenticity be satisfied with a single case in which a person is annoyed by the camera? Wouldn’t he or she rather elevate this to a stylistic principle and show it off? And finally, would it occur to someone reconstructing the situation to have the camera pan across the ceiling in order to capture an event on the other end of the room (and, again, to do so only once)? Such a bold movement results from the urge and passion of the moment, whereas in a fake documentary the filmmakers would either fall in love with such acrobatics, or their approach would be more restrained. Similarly, staging the film would presumably not have permitted a turning point in audience involvement before the ending. Most of Troller’s devices would be considered mistakes in a fictional context, but BEGEGNUNG IM KNAST as a documentary seems neither pieced together nor inconsistent, as its structure contributes organically to the goal of affecting the audience cognitively and emotionally.
IX.

In conclusion, I want to focus on the role of empathy by means of which BEGEGNUNG IM KNAST develops its potential to shock and to provoke thought. In this film, empathy seems to be deftly and shrewdly taken into account in order to guide us from one position to another and to produce specifically documentary insights in the process.

For example, the long exposition is clearly intended to provide information about actual conditions in Virginia and to promote awareness of the problems – a strategy that would not be functional in a fiction film. In the latter, a few sympathetic characters would have been drawn up early on in order to involve the viewers in the fictional events. But overly hasty empathy with the subjects presented would have been counterproductive in Troller’s film, since once we are “into” the dramatic situation, our connection to reality lessens, and we demand emotional excitement. Likewise, the ending of the film is evidence of the documentary intention to have an enduring effect on the viewer without offering a clear solution. Although the film does permit a modicum of hope for the kids, it leaves open to what extent the therapeutic approach was beneficial for the prisoners as well, as if neither the viewer nor the filmmaker could claim to see behind their individual façades and tear down the last bastion the prison has left them.32

In many respects, Troller leads us against the grain of usual audience reactions. In both fiction films and documentaries, we would be initially inclined to side with the teenagers, or at least expect the film to expect that of us. But as the analysis has shown, we get involved with the weaker party only peripherally and take sides with them only temporarily – they offer too little individual impetus and thus remain an amorphous group. Rather, BEGEGNUNG IM KNAST counts on us empathizing with the prisoners as soon as they stand out as individuals, even though they fall upon the kids in an aggressive and terrorizing way. We never neglect the perspective of the kids entirely, but our feeling for them grows weaker rather than stronger over the course of events.

Our attention and emotional inclination have shifted from the little wolves to the big ones, in part because the kids show no marked development once they are subjected to the educational measure. They just cower

32 That Troller does not rule out exploring the emotions and thoughts of inmates is demonstrated by his documentary MORD AUS LIEBE (“Murder for Love,” 1996). At the same time, the film makes clear how precarious the venture is and that it is neither desirable nor always successful to break through the refusal or reserve of the subjects.
and wish they were far away. The criminals, by contrast, are anything but static, and good for a surprise at any moment. Fulfilling their mission, they develop a living presence and an explosive energy, which transcends both the gray context of the penitentiary and our ideas about them. In the words of Susanne Marschall, the film reflects “the schizophrenia of the psyches of men who unscrupulously commit brutal crimes but who are anything but unemotional and stupid in their reflection on their own histories.” The attempt to understand these people emotionally and cognitively swings from initial reserve, uncertainty, antipathy, and outrage to curiosity and fascination, pity or regret, and if not directly to sympathy, at least to a kind of respect. The fact that their physiognomies and their tone are often anything but pleasant does not stand in the way, because we do not want to and should not forget that we are faced with murderers – therein lies their fascination and their mystery, but also the humanitarian quality of our empathy.

In a fiction film, such characters would appear implausible and constructed, or they would, as in Angels with Dirty Faces, succumb to an anticlimactic, sentimental morality. The observational documentary is capable of putting improbable people and unexpected modes of behavior on screen in ways different from fiction, and this is perhaps its special domain. Because we view a documentary under the premise that everything it shows existed thus and not otherwise (even if the film adjusts and condenses it), we get involved with and take offense at the real world. Feeling a need to come to terms with the world, we invest our affective empathy and mental curiosity in the people appearing on screen, even though they reveal themselves only partially and momentarily.

*Transcribed by Steven Lindberg*
Fig. 1: Tracey Emin in *Top Spot* (UK 2004)
Questions and method

My approach to this text began with two theoretical issues. One of them concerns the observation that we react differently to *documentary persons* or *subjects* than we do to *characters* in a *fiction film*.1 How can these differences be described, and what are the reasons for our genre-specific response? The other issue concerns the question of so-called F emotions (which result from fiction) and their potential conflict with A emotions (which result from the nature of a work as artifact). What happens if different kinds of response assert themselves simultaneously? And what happens to A emotions in non-fiction films? Can they be separated as neatly from empathetic reactions as they are in a fiction film?

As this terminology already reveals, my second question arose from a reading of Ed S. Tan’s inspiring study *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film*.3 In tandem with Murray Smith’s equally seminal book *Engaging Characters*,4 which came out almost simultaneously, this work has spawned a wealth of research on viewer response in the cinema. Both studies focus on the fictional film, but while Smith approaches the subject primarily from the discipline of narratology, Tan’s approach is primarily a psychological one. And it is probably on account of this difference that both books can be fruitfully read back to back.

Tan’s introduction of artifact emotions alongside fictional ones is particularly relevant to this essay. According to Tan, the source of A emotions is first of all an overarching interest in film as such: factors that elicit A emotions include formal aspects of rhythm or color that produce aesthetic

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1 In a short paper from 1997, Margrit Tröhler and Henry Taylor ruled that individuals appearing in a documentary should not be referred to as “characters” but as “persons.” It is a very useful distinction. See Margrit Tröhler/Henry Taylor, “De quelque facettes du personage humain dans le film de fiction,” *Iris* 24 (Fall 1997): 33-57.
2 On this issue, see my essay “The Role of Empathy in the Documentary Film: A Case Study” (2005) in the present volume.
pleasure; spectacular scenes and tours de force that trigger astonishment, 
or flawed passages to which one reacts with irritation. But whereas many 
scholars have elaborated on the differentiation of F emotions, A emotions 
have attracted little attention. Much still remains to be discovered.

The same lack of scholarly interest concerns the range of viewer responses 
to the nonfiction film. Astonishingly, research has remained within the 
terrain of Tan and Smith, focusing almost exclusively on the fiction film. The 
huge and rewarding field of the documentary and the so far only sketchily 
defined field of the personal, autobiographical, or experimental film have 
been widely neglected.5

In order to clarify my thoughts on the issues in question, I looked for an 
example: of a film that would offer itself as a case in point, partaking of a 
variety of genres and modes and giving all kinds of clue to the viewer. Close 
analysis, so I hoped, might help develop a number of hypotheses on the 
matter. My choice fell on Tracey Emin’s Top Spot, a film which fascinated 
me without giving me much pleasure, and which at first viewing had made 
me rather nervous.

In Top Spot, a headstrong and willful formal presentation meets rather 
unruly characters – intractable, sexually experimenting, uncertain teenag-
ers who are closer to chaos than to order. They appeal to our empathy, 
as their problems are urgent and their desires clearly recognizable. They 
are, however, subjected to an insistent control and manipulated – or even 
denounced – rather than portrayed with sympathy. F and A emotions 
conflict already on this level. Secondly, at times it is scarcely possible to 
determine whether the film consists of fictional scenes, documentary 
material, or something else difficult to define – Top Spot comes across 
as alternating disruptively between a whole range of generic modes and 
references to reality.

My approach consisted of introspection combined with a close reading 
of the example. During repeated viewings, I tried – as “the viewer” – to 
garner personal responses, insights, and hypotheses which I then tried to 
sort out and corroborate analytically. In this I hoped to move to heuristic

5 Torben Grodal has addressed the question of specific responses to lyrical passages, but 
according to the thematics of his book, he only considers lyrical moments within a work of 
fiction. See Torben Grodal, Moving Pictures. A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition 
propositions about how A and F emotions differ according to fictional and nonfictional modes, and to thus expand Tan’s schema. I am, however, aware that the path via introspection plus analysis poses high risks of subjectivity, besides frequently resulting in the phenomena under review becoming increasingly complex rather than clearer. Moreover, the multiple viewings necessary for analysis generate methodological problems. Is a willing suspension of knowledge about how the film continues possible at all, and to what extent can one watch the film and observe oneself at the same time in order to catch one’s responses in flagrante?

**Tracey Emin’s Top Spot**

*Top Spot* is, at sixty-two minutes, the first full-length film from the artist Tracey Emin. Born in 1963 and raised in the seaside resort of Margate under difficult circumstances, Emin left her hometown early on and began her career as an enfant terrible of the British art scene. Her oeuvre transcends traditional divisions: she has painted and drawn, knit and done appliqué, made sculptures and designed neon forms, photographed, filmed, created music videos and installations, appeared in performances, and posed as an avant-garde model (for Vivienne Westwood). In 1994, at thirty-one, she came up with an autobiographical essay, *Exploration of the Soul*, published in a limited personal edition. In 2005, *Strangeland*, a more straightforward autobiography, followed.6

Emin’s subject is sexual experience, usually of a traumatic kind, and usually based on her own adolescence. She refers to rape, abortion, masturbation, and promiscuity in ever new, exhibitionist presentations, and she stylizes herself as “Mad Tracey from Margate,”7 prepared to transgress all boundaries when it comes to autobiographical truths. In addition, she gives explicit interviews in which she explains her work as a cathartic experience. The art world and the general audience respond with either hate or fascination based on love-hate. 8

Tracey Emin’s earlier films and videos were brief, personal aperçus, marked by pain and passion, made with simple means, and often exhibited

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8 When Emin is not being savaged as a skandalon, she is paid respect; see ibid.
as installations.9 **Top Spot** was her debut as a director, produced in 2004 for BBC310 and announced as a “feature film,” although the term applies only in a limited sense. As in most of her works, Emin connects her film autobiographically to her own youth, although in this case she presents it disguised as the experience of young women in a provincial town during the 1970s. At the same time, however, she insists that the film essentially concerns today’s youth. It is, in her words, “a poetic evocation of teenage life.”11 Emin’s declared target audience was adolescents, but the British Board of Film Classification approved **Top Spot** only for audiences eighteen and older because it depicts an abortion and a suicide. Tracey Emin reacted with anger and forbade any cinematic release. Hence the film can only be seen on television, at festivals, or on DVD.12

**Top Spot** is about a group of young girls whose experiences and moods are depicted in fragmentary episodes. They are shown playing on the beach, visiting an amusement park, conversing in a café after school, working at a pub, or enjoying a slumber party. The film explores their feelings about their bodies and their real or imaginary love relationships; it deals with sexual harassment and unwanted pregnancies, imaginary travels, ecstasies, acts of desperation, and being stuck in a narrow-minded small town. There is no linear narrative: the chronology of the events plays, at best, a marginal role. Despite many motifs that could develop into a plot – dark secrets, mad love, attempts to break out – the fictional and narrative elements are only vaguely developed. Sometimes lyrical or essayistic passages are inserted, sometimes home-movie images on Super 8. Several of the scenes appear to be authentic documentary material, as if young people were being observed or put in front of the camera to make a statement; others have the flavor of hallucinations or memories; still others are clearly staged.

The status of many of the segments, in terms of genre or their basis in reality, remains uncertain, so that viewers feel prompted to restructure their reading again and again. Moreover, the artistic quality of the scenes varies. Whereas some parts could exist as autonomous short films, containing images of great intensity, other parts seem like padding, or like slips into

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10 Emin was pursuing a suggestion from the producer Michael Winterbottom, a controversial filmmaker in his own right. In his 9 Songs (UK 2004), sex of all varieties is practiced live in front of the camera.
12 BBC3 showed **Top Spot** on December 18, 2004, at 10:50 p.m. A DVD with an introduction and bonus material was released in April 2006.
self-indulgence. The filmmaker is occasionally present as a voice, and she is tangible as a lyrical subject in many shots. But she appears personally – as Tracey Emin – only at the end, in a strange finale (fig. 1, preceding this essay). Elegantly dressed up, she climbs into a helicopter on Margate pier and triumphantly escapes, while the place goes up in flames (a compilation of wartime footage). The teenagers remain behind in their provincial town.

Reviews of Top Spot have been largely negative. The film has been called “rubbish,”13 “a shapeless, facile bore,”14 and a “dispiriting exercise in navel-gazing […] that considers it a virtue to confuse and wrong-foot the audience.”15 Yet there are also voices that develop another perspective. For example, Amy Lane emphasizes the anti-bourgeois character of Top Spot,16 and Christine Fanthome recognizes it as an original contribution to autobiographical art.17

A description of the beginning

Top Spot opens with an introductory passage. In the style of an amateur film, a subjective camera gropes about toward an iron fence, followed by touristic impressions of vacationers playing ball, of seagulls, embankments, the weather over the town. The section is accompanied by the song “Sea Breezes” (Roxy Music, Bryan Ferry, 1972) and edited rhythmically to match the music. The lyrics are about separation and the past: “I’ve been thinking now for a long time / How to go my own separate way / It’s a shame to think about yesterday / It’s a shame.” This opening could serve as an introduction to many different kinds of film: a nostalgic work of fiction could ensue just as easily as a documentary about the seaside resort of Margate.

But the next segment does not follow through on any of this. The camera gazes into a rotating blue cupola; a female first-person voice is heard, identifying the building as the disco named “Top Spot” from her youth:

Top Spot was here, here somewhere – giant ballroom with chandeliers and red velvet curtains. We’d snog and kiss, be fingered and titted up, it was a place to experiment. – You know what “top spot” is, don’t you? Top spot is when a man has sex with a woman or a girl and his penis hits the neck of her womb, that’s when it hits top spot. – I mean, who would ever call a teenage disco Top Spot?

Is this mock or authentic outrage? And does it honestly address Emin’s professed target group?

After the harmlessness of the initial images, we are unprepared for the sexual themes of this segment. The view into the cupola, interesting as an example of period architecture, takes on obscene overtones. The change in attitude is also striking: the voice at first treats the experiences of teenagers sympathetically, then puts a direct question to the audience, which she answers undaunted, only to adopt a pose of responsibility. Viewers familiar with the conventions of the personal essay will suspect the voice belongs to the filmmaker, and British viewers may also recognize Emin’s slightly aggressive articulation from her appearances in the media. Such a first-person narrative could, however, also introduce flashbacks in a fiction film – which, based on the BBC classification of Top Spot, is what we are expecting: Tracey Emin could, for example, be presenting herself in a fictional role. But whom is she speaking to in direct address?

Without further transition, we find ourselves facing a girl with long blonde hair, wearing the white blouse and striped tie of a school uniform, and sitting behind a heavy table as if pinned in (fig. 2a). The camera records her in a frontal close-up, so that every movement of her face and every gesture of her nervous hands can be followed clearly. The rigid focus on the girl and her obvious discomfort quickly lead the viewer to take her side and develop empathetic reactions: she is trapped, exposed to our gaze, a victim of the dispositif. The barrier of the table and the bench, whose backrest frames her symmetrically, seems to block any attempt to flee, and it conveys a sense of a superior cinematic power. Moreover, from off-stage a voice is heard – the same one as in the previous segment – uttering a series of commands and touchy questions. Is Emin impersonating a teacher trying to resolve a case of insubordination? Or a juvenile court judge, a social worker, or someone conducting sex research à la Kinsey? In any case, it seems strange that the girl’s replies are addressed to two audiences simultaneously: acoustically to a disembodied voice and visually – due to the look into the camera – to the audience.
Fig. 2a-c: Three girls from Top Spot
The exchange of words begins in medias res. We see the schoolgirl swallow and turn, and we hear the first question: “So what’s there on your neck?” She answers in embarrassment: “What?” – a rhetorical dodge to gain time – then quickly says: “Oh, it’s nothing.” Nothing can be seen, in fact, but the voice does not let up: “Pull your hair back!” and, when the girl does not react, it continues with piercing severity: “Move your hair out of the way and turn your face!” Then, reproachfully: “There’s a love bite on your neck.”

The girl hastily complies with the order, but stubbornly keeps her neck covered with her hand. Apparently the voice knows more than we can see, since she insists that the evidence be revealed. (But evidence of what? And for whom? After all, the voice already knows.) The girl is not at a loss for an explanation: “We did that with a Hoover.” And she adds that she and her girlfriends bruised themselves with a vacuum cleaner – a foolish yet harmless game.

The voice is not satisfied; vacuum cleaners do not leave teeth marks. The girl admits that a mysterious woman forced them “to do things;” she cannot or dares not say more. Because of the omniscient interrogator’s unfriendly tone and unwillingness to reveal herself, she attracts antipathies and speculations. But she also shows understanding and unexpectedly calms the girl: “There’s nothing wrong with having a love bite.” Apparently the interrogation is not about prohibiting or punishing early sexual experience. This undermines the viewers’ interpretive hypothesis, and the situation becomes all the more puzzling. What sort of film can comprise such a scene?

A second schoolgirl follows, again in uniform and nailed down behind the heavy table (fig. 2b). The conversation is innocuous at first, revolving around Christmas and the girl’s delight that her front teeth will be replaced. The voice quotes an old hit for six-year-olds: “All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth” – an inappropriate association whose humor escapes the girl, who gives a forced smile. The voice relents: “You don’t look so happy, you don’t seem to be smiling very much.” Now it comes out that the girl is a rape victim, as she reports in the uncouth jargon of teenagers, frequently interrupted by a helpless “you know what I mean?” Despite the gravity of the confession, the voice barks at her: “No, I don’t know what you mean. Would

19 In her autobiography from 2005 (see note 6, 23), Emin relates that her front teeth were replaced for Christmas when she was a teenager.
you please stop saying: you know what I mean!” – a linguistic correction that has little to do with the incident but unnerves the girl: is this about her being raped or about how she talks?

Three further interviews follow, each with a schoolgirl, filmed in a similar way and with similar questions, albeit a little milder than before. But we already know how quickly the tone can change and how unrelentingly the voice can press the girls. The third schoolgirl suffers from panic attacks because someone broke into her room at night – is she an incest victim? A fourth girl speaks candidly of her promiscuity; a fifth (fig. 2c) wants to travel to Egypt, where she imagines her boyfriend awaits her. All five appear to be friends.

**Problems with the fictional reading**

One feels fascination and a growing interest watching these scenes. Expectations (and with them the willingness to become emotionally involved) are directed at a dynamic unfolding of the events, since many details require explanation or clarifying continuation. Yet the connections are still too undirected to integrate us into a fictional illusion, and the mise-en-phase20 does not take full course.

Initially, we feel sympathy and empathy for the girls, who are clearly having a hard time with the interrogation situation as well as the experiences they report. The dialogue evokes memories of films about the sexual initiation of young women, and the situation recalls courtroom dramas in which we are accustomed to take sides with the wrongly accused; the blocking of the girls’ movements and their evident nervousness trigger motor mimicry.21 Moreover, it concerns us that personal secrets are brought to light so indiscreetly, which results in impulses to protect the girls and outrage at the questions and the way they are posed. Resistance to and resentment for the invisible woman who relishes her superiority grow. But the interrogation could also be justified: the girls could be afraid or might be notoriously lying; indeed, they seem somewhat unruly, negligent, and reckless. Possibly, then, there are good reasons to probe them so harshly. In

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21 On this point, see my essay “Motor Mimicry in Hitchcock” (1999) in the present volume.
the course of these evaluations, our spontaneous empathy tends to waver or even turn in favor of the voice, but empathy with the girls will reassert itself.

Alongside such F emotions pro and contra the characters or in harmony with them, A emotions arise, such as uneasiness or even annoyance about the form of the sequence and the conveyance of information. Why does the voice remain disembodied? Why are the girls looking into the camera? Is this truly an interrogation? Why is there no explanation of what is happening here? Viewers do not appreciate being deliberately left in the dark; our failure to come to terms with the film can damage our sense of self-worth and weaken our pleasure in the text.22 But fascination with the situation and the characters keeps us in line. And disruptive emotions like annoyance, confusion, and frustration are joined by more positive ones such as astonishment at the originality of the passage, or admiration with how well-crafted the dialogue is. The A emotions combine subliminally with the emotions generated by empathy and sympathy, heightening our interest.

One of our options as viewers is to alternate between A and F emotions, which tends to weaken the F emotions that want to flow freely. Another option is to experience both types of emotion simultaneously, which will result in nervous tension and a growing sense of irritation. A third option is waiting to see how the film continues – David Bordwell’s “wait-and-see” strategy23 – postponing greater emotional investment because the scene is all too ambiguous. This also results in F and A emotions, albeit in weakened form, because we are preoccupied with cognitive tasks that diminish the illusion: we hold back, become impatient, absorb the situation only conditionally, and at the same time begin to make reproaches to the film (as artifact). Should the negative emotions dominate, we would even consider cutting the viewing short.

In all these cases, the question arises, more or less urgently, whether what we are watching is truly a fiction film. Are we supposed to produce a fictionalizing reading or a documentarizing reading (in the sense of Roger Odin)?24 There is much to suggest that the interrogation scene is

22 As Peter Wuss has written: “Increased competence of control that drives back uncertainty is accompanied by positive emotions, and loss of control by negative ones”; see Wuss, Filmanalyse und Psychologie: Strukturen des Films im Wahrnehmungsprozeß (Berlin: Sigma, 1993), 321.

23 See David Bordwell, Narration in the Fiction Film (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 38.

24 See Roger Odin, “Film documentaire, lecture documentarisante,” in Cinémas et réalités, Jean-Charles Lyant/Roger Odin, eds. (Saint-Étienne: Centre interdisciplinaire d’étude et de recherches sur l’expression contemporaine, Université de Saint-Étienne, 1984), 263-78; and “A Semio-Pragmatic Approach to the Documentary Film” [1989], in Buckland (see note 20).
authentic documentary – that is, real girls are being interviewed:25 their looking into the lens/at the audience (unlike fictional characters, they acknowledge the existence of the camera); the invisibility of the owner of the voice (documentary filmmakers often remain off-camera while posing their questions); the apparent spontaneity of the dialogues and gestures (the script as well as the actresses would have to be very good to achieve this impression); the credible individuality of the girls (their faces are not familiar from television or the cinema); and the elliptical nature of the information (many statements do not appear to lead anywhere; no tangible conflict results).

But there are also signs and clues that Top Spot is not a documentary. Would any filmmaker place his or her volunteers so awkwardly before the camera and question them so harshly and indiscreetly? Would the subjects put up with such treatment? Would they be prepared to reveal their secrets – especially those that the school and their families are not supposed to know about? Would so much be discussed so readily and in such compressed form? And so we begin to return to the “fiction option”: could Top Spot be a feature film faking the documentary mode? That would explain the rigid camera and perhaps also the disembodied voice asking the questions.

Prototypically, a fiction film is supposed to set a conflict in motion that ultimately leads to a solution, a point of closure. Fiction usually presents characters who work off one another and whose problems are interconnected. For example, the schoolgirls could be involved in a crime, perhaps as perpetrators, perhaps as victims, or as witnesses; they could be planning plots together, such as acts of revenge for a sexual attack. But in Top Spot, the girls’ confessions do not condense into any joint action; they are thematically intertwined rather than dramatically dynamic. Sexuality seems to be a problem the group has in common, but it affects each of them in different, personal ways. Meanwhile, a tenth of the film has passed without a conflict emerging: on the contrary, the final interview opens up new motifs with the obsession of one of the girls for Egypt (and indeed the next images take us to an imaginary Cairo).

25 The performers are from Margate and are not professional actresses (but might hope for a career). Despite the impression that several scenes give, they were not encouraged to improvise or otherwise help shape the dialogues; they were performing the lines as they were fed to them. See Emma Brockes, “Two Go Mad in Margate,” in Guardian Unlimited, accessed August 3, 2006, http://www.film.guardian.co.uk/interview.
So the hope for an overarching conflict and rapid dramatic compression begins to fade. Our willingness to immerse ourselves weakens accordingly, since no events ensue that point to the future. Hence the curve of emotional intensity flattens out, the mise-en-phase decreases, and indifference, if not boredom, sets in. We take refuge in our own thoughts and memories, as the hypotheses we have formed of the plot are not fulfilled in time and the pace becomes slack.

**Problems of the documentary reading**

If we ignore the fictional signals and provisionally decide to regard the passage as documentary, then “documentary” has to be qualified: Top Spot could be an interview film focused on a social problem such as “sexual initiation” or “feminine adolescence in a small town;” but it could also be the “portrait of a group” of young working class women.

If we make the former generic assumption, we will invest our feelings differently than we would in a fiction film. For one thing, in a documentary the interviewees are often only brought in for specific statements; the structure is thematically oriented rather than centered on a plot and protagonists. Documentary films of this type are primarily about information. In most cases, people are presented to us as paradigmatic links in a chain. Although they might appear more than once during the film, no interacting field or coherent action results from this. However, interviews would be pointless if those questioned were not also relevant as individuals. Their specific experiences and behaviors are always part of the documentary fabric, and it is intended as well as inevitable that the viewers establish some kind of emotional contact with them, however sporadic or fleeting. In a group portrait, there is of course more room for characterization and empathy, but again the thematic thrust of the film will be on the typical, not on the individual.

The persons in a documentary – of the “thematic type” as well as of the “portrait type” – are fundamentally different in kind from the characters in a fiction film: they are not imaginary, and they are not played by actors.

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27 There are, however, variant traditions (e.g., in the documentary film of the 1930s, which employed staged scenes) and numerous hybrid forms. See Margrit Tröhler, *Walk the Walk*; oder,
As non-professionals, it is to be assumed that they will have less talent for expression and less willingness to express themselves than actors do. Correspondingly, we relate to them in a way similar to the way we do to people we encounter in real life: we subject them to quick, involuntary scrutiny to determine whether they are sympathetic or not, and we look for indicators in their faces and gestures in order to assess them. If we regard the schoolgirls as real people, we adopt a more active relationship to them than we would with fictional characters, who are usually “served up” to us so that their plans and feelings become transparent. We also assume the girls to be autonomous human beings, not constructs of a script. Thus, we expect more individuality from them, and also perhaps some surplus, random qualities that do not contribute to the subject of the film. As real people, they also have more depth, more lived experience, than fictional characters. But this experience cannot be revealed through subjectivizing them, as documentary persons are accessible to us (and the camera) only from the outside. Hence they lack the transparency of mind and feelings that is one of the crucial foundations for our emotional engagement with fictional characters.

Thus the very thing that intensifies and accelerates our relationship to people also leads to distance and a certain flatness of our involvement. The willingness to empathize with the girls or the acousmatic voice is therefore different from – and presumably less intense – than it would be in a work of fiction; in a documentary, our emotional engagement with the persons on screen usually remains temporary, a transitional stage. This may provide a kind of relief in our reception of Top Spot, liberating us from a number of previous problems. As there is no prospect for a long emotional curve nor the need to concern ourselves with how the characters develop in the larger context, many of the problems that would arise in a fictional reading are eliminated. Hence we can concentrate on the moments in which the

28 People in documentaries are often overzealous on the one hand, or less cooperative, reticent, or devious on the other. On the performance of individuals in documentaries and the problem of their selection for a given film, see Bill Nichols, Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), esp. 121f.
29 On this point, see my essay “The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film”, in the present volume.
30 Subjectivity in feature films is not based solely on explicit means such as the subjective camera or audible inner voices, dreams, and fantasies; rather, there is always a suggestion of inner processes at work, thanks to the facial expressions of the actors, point-of-view shots, background music, or the use of color and light.
girls – precisely because they are not professional actresses – suddenly trigger our empathy, quite independently of whether they are protagonists or not. This can happen at any point, but it is most likely when they relate shocking experiences, lose their composure, or let their gestures or facial expressions take their course. There are several such moments interspersed in the interview segment, especially on account of the girls’ body language. But as in most documentaries, emotions peak only sporadically; they are reserved for moments of particular intensity.

Artifact emotions in the documentary regime also have different bases than those of fiction. Aware of the problems of filming on location and with a low budget, viewers place fewer demands on formal artistry. The interview segment in Top Spot is, however, not typical in this respect, since its setup is very precisely constructed; better examples can be found in later passages of the film, which were obviously produced under more spontaneous circumstances. Some of the images have relatively poor tonal contrast and bland colors; others are framed imprecisely. Yet such variations in quality, as distracting as they would be in a fiction film, are less crucial in a documentary. We tend to be generous, making allowances for flaws, and giving the filmmaker credit for the successful passages only.31

This points to an important generic difference: in documentary films – at least of the “interview type” – A emotions appear to be more closely linked to the filmmakers; we relate what we see to them, calling them to account. Whereas we tend to lose sight of the director in a fiction film (substituting an impersonal enunciator),32 we remain conscious of documentary filmmakers as the organizers and decision-makers. Moreover, filmmakers can appear at any time as partners in, or commentators on, the dialogue. Because they are “real enunciators,”33 in Odin’s terminology, they have the same reality status as the people interviewed; they live and operate in the same world.

This means that in a documentary, a disembodied voice is evaluated far more critically by the viewers than the voice-over of a fictional character would be: Tracey Emin herself is responsible for the attitude of the voice. This applies to the authoritarian tone of her questions and the way she exposes the girls, as well as to the decision to remain off-camera, ensuring

31 It is striking that most critics have regarded Top Spot as a fiction film, reproaching it for amateurishness and poor technique – criticisms that would not occur if the film had been read as nonfiction.

32 Tan (see note 3, 135) states this as a principle: “The traditional feature film is designed to maintain the diegetic illusion at the expense of the viewer's awareness of the artefact. The intentions of the maker are not taken into consideration.”

33 See Odin, “Film documentaire, lecture documentarisante” (see note 24).
special status for herself. Both can be felt as an abuse of her role as filmmaker, increasing the irritation that accompanies the viewers’ response to the film as a whole.

Should these feelings be categorized as A emotions, or are they more comparable to F emotions? Although it is theoretically possible to separate the personality of the filmmaker from that of the interviewer, the two flow together over the course of the film’s reception. The spheres blend, and the emotions that the work triggers as an artifact are colored by emotions that react to the intentions and moral attitude of the filmmaker. Our resistance to Tracey Emin whenever she pesters the girls or narcissistically brings herself into focus oscillates between a reaction to her person (vaguely equivalent to F emotions) and a reaction to the cinematic process unfolding before our eyes. The relationship of the filmmaker to her subject and her relationship to the girls thus opens up a genre-specific source of emotion. The feelings have to do with documentary questions of ethics,34 and they affect all levels of the film. Especially in the interviews, the A sphere is closely intertwined with the events.35

To sum up, the passage can neither be clearly classified as fictional nor as authentic, non-staged documentary. In either case, there are indicators of genre that leave us in doubt, so that we feel we are on the wrong path. If Top Spot is taken to be a work of fiction, the rigid camera seems rather unlikely; moreover, the disembodied voice is perplexing, and so is the lack of narrative density that fails to produce a conflict. If Top Spot is taken to be a documentary, the filmmaker’s rude behavior is disturbing, and the readiness of the girls to make intimate statements defies credibility. In each case, artifact emotions of uneasiness and discomfort interfere with emotions having to do with the persons on-screen, so that we cannot get intensely and continuously involved with what is shown, even though there are fascinating moments and strong stimuli.

The obstruction of immersion may have graver effects for a fiction film than for a documentary. On the other hand, with a documentary we are less willing to accept nebulous circumstances; tension engendered through obfuscation is not part of the game. We tend to attribute it either to the

35 The situation is similar in the portrait film, which typically focuses on just one or two people, and in the observational documentary that follows the tradition of Direct Cinema.
Filmmaker’s lack of craftsmanship or to a cheap trick to achieve creative originality.

**TOP SPOT as a personal film**

Fiction and documentary are not the only modes that come into question in the case of TOP SPOT. There is also the large, if somewhat fuzzily defined field of the experimental, the poetic, the essayistic, and the autobiographical – all variants of the personal mode, which can (to make things even fuzzier) incorporate elements of or fuse with the documentary as well as, to a lesser degree, with the fictional. In a personal film, the first-person narrator (the filmmaker) is palpable as a subjective, authorial power. Such films are basically or mainly nonfiction, although largely of an imaginary nature, like works of fiction. In light of Emin’s penchant for the art of confession, it seems appropriate to place her film predominantly in the autobiographical category, despite TOP SPOT’s narrative and documentary elements. But the decision to override both the fictionalizing and the documentarizing reading only evolves over the course of the film’s reception. Through long stretches of TOP SPOT, we juggle all three modes simultaneously or in alternation.

But to return to the beginning of the film, to its first three segments: if we try to read the selected passages as autobiographical and perhaps poetic, we take the filmmaker as the vanishing point, as an “I” that can enter, shift, and manipulate at any point. In this reading, it makes sense that TOP SPOT begins with a handheld, subjective camera: Emin is feeling her way to her memories, allowing us to sense her personal steps in the shaky image. (Yet the home-movie gesture already gives way to a more conventional camera in the second shot.) It also makes sense that Emin’s voice-over in the disco segment connects the film to her biography, guiding us into her past, and

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37 See Karl Sierek, “Stimme Lotse auf der Reise Du: Die törende Seite des filmischen Versuchs,” in Schreiben, Bilder, Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film, Christa Blümlinger/Constantin Wulff, eds. (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992), 95-107, esp. 96. Sierek attributes a particular function to the filmmaker’s voice: “With this sign, the speaker lends his signature to the image. He signs it with his voice.”
that she structures the interviews and poses the questions. The leaps from the opening sequence with its atmospheric images of the place where she grew up (“Mad Tracey from Margate”), to the reminiscences in the disco with the obscene name (which suits the artist’s scandalous image), and to the teenagers (adolescence as a source of creative furor) all turn out to be ways of approaching Emin’s own experiences, with which she comes to terms gradually, through various steps and strategies.

The autobiographical center of the film allows both imaginary characters and real individuals to appear, but they are all at the service of an essentially personal project. Emin has woven her own memories into the scenes of the film, employing the teenagers as facets of her earlier self. She is in a sense dramatizing and interrogating herself, questioning her own past, and consequently she feels authorized to place her representatives before the camera, to boss them around, and to compel confessions. Read in this way, the film loses its inconsistency and fragmentariness. It obtains the structure of a poetic psychodrama whose authorial “I” functions as a higher-level source of emotional stimuli.

As soon as the insight that Top Spot is a personal film takes root, a whole series of expectations about the progress of the plot fall apart. Emotional investments that had been based on the assumption that it was a work of fiction and, perhaps to a lesser extent, a documentary film, simply vanish. At the same time, our relationship with the persons on screen changes; the emotional contact abates. As Emin’s proxies, the girls are less in need of protection, inspire less sympathy, and shock us less with their stories of suffering, their prevarications, and their incompetence. Instead of being authentic teenagers or created imaginary characters respectively, they become projections of the filmmaker. At the same time, the question of whether they are actresses or not loses its relevance.

In the genre of the personal film, lyric aspects come to the fore, demanding more attention and hence re-centering our reading. If one goes along with Patricia Hampl, the most essential task of the personal mode, especially of autobiography, is not so much the depiction of facts or objects: “Autobiographical film is preoccupied not with telling a life story but with conveying perception itself, with searching for the peculiar character of the perceiving consciousness.”38 Hence the sensuous fabric, the texture of the film, and its poetic structure gain significance. The atmospheric power of images and sounds is central to reminiscences; they must be

made from the material of the subjective in order to touch or integrate us. Associative passages, metaphors, ambiguities, and ellipses are elements that in other genres come into play more peripherally or as stretches of lull, suspending linear time and causal thinking, transforming us with their power of suggestion to a state of inner perception. According to Torben Grodal, we attribute what we feel not only to a screen event “out there” but also simultaneously perceive it as “in here.” Thus the personal film performs a kind of countermovement to the documentary, which leads outward into the real world.

In such a context the girls, in the disconnectedness and fragmentation of their presence, take on a floating, hallucinatory quality – for example, when they are obsessively dancing or appear between palm trees and pyramids in the Egyptian twilight. Empathy, sympathy, and antipathy are no longer at stake. Rather, we react immediately to sensory stimuli and the mood of the scenes. Actions and words become less important than the way the figures are placed in the image and how they join with the other elements of the film to make a composition: colors, lighting, and visual motifs that recur or contrast; and also the music and the repeated cries of gulls on the soundtrack, which resonate in the viewer. What unfolds are arcs of mood that linger and have a lasting effect. “Moods have an inertia. They tend to keep us oriented toward expressing and experiencing the same emotion,” as Greg M. Smith notes. And since moods are experienced by the viewers as their own rather than another person’s, it is neither possible nor necessary to separate A and F emotions here.

Many elements and features that had initially impeded our understanding of Top Spot thus begin to make sense or even thrive in a reading of the film as personal or lyrical. Ultimately, however, such a reading does not work out totally satisfactorily either. The subjective stance is not strong enough, the aesthetic quality of the images is too uneven, and the relationship to a creative self is not realized sufficiently, being mainly suggested and interspersed. The subjective camera or, more generally, the impression that the filmmaker herself has created the shots is repeatedly lost. The first-person voice also ebbs after a brief period, and the rhythm as a whole seems more random and harsh than meditative. Moreover, the stimuli from the persons

39 See Grodal, Moving Pictures (see note 3), 167.
40 See Greg M. Smith, “Local Emotions, Global Moods, and Film Structure” in Passionate Views. Film, Cognition, and Emotion, Carl Plantinga/Greg M. Smith (eds.) (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 103-126, here 113. Smith is speaking only of the role of moods in the fiction film, but his findings can be modified for other modes.
on screen and questions that concern them are, for all the fragmentation of the presentation, too powerful not to continue to have an effect. Sometimes Emin even deliberately works with such remnants of fictional anticipation, and now and then returns to and elaborates on some narrative motifs. Thus a brief scene inserted later in the film shows the first schoolgirl in front of a mirror looking at the previously hidden love-bite. Most scenes do remain on the threshold of a narrative story, eliciting fictional expectations and imaginings, however vague.

The experience of *Top Spot* is thus constituted by oscillating between genres and by the impression, which repeatedly flares up, that we have landed on the wrong foot in the wrong segment. Nevertheless, to do Tracey Emin justice, it must also be noted that she knows how to benefit from the hybridity of her approach. The film certainly has fascinating, moving, beautiful, and bold passages. On the whole, however, *Top Spot* seems like a puzzle in which only certain parts fit: we construct either a fragment with fissured boundaries or a rectangle too small to integrate all the circumstantial material.

**Genre-specific emotional processes**

Exaggerating somewhat, one could say that *Top Spot* becomes a different film with each reading, depending on the prototypical genre presumed. In each case, the viewers bring their own expectations to the work, reacting to a certain set of clues and stimuli, and get involved in the events in deviating ways; their emotions are mixed and weighted accordingly, and they vary in intensity and progression.

As a cautious theoretical summary of this analysis, we could say that the fanning out of the viewer’s emotional processes is essentially a matter of generic assumptions. Depending on the weight a given reading attributes to certain cues, our emotional investment shifts in varying directions. This can lead to conflicting emotions in some cases, especially in a film like *Top Spot*, which positions itself at the far end of the generic intermingling of modes, demanding a constant – and ultimately tiring – reorientation of viewer response. But genre boundaries are, of course, always permeable, in general as well as in a given work, and they are also subject to historical change. A fictional, documentary, or lyrical mode can sometimes even prevail despite a contrary generic categorization.

The following overview of the emotional reactions that different genres elicit should therefore be understood to be provisional. More research and
a substantial number of case studies will be necessary to establish a closer, more differentiated grid of viewer responses.

– In the fiction film, emotions usually begin to flow as soon as the cinematic illusion takes hold, constantly becoming more intricate, peaking at crisis points, then fading toward the end. They are triggered primarily by the characters and their conflicts, with protagonists made transparent through all kinds of narrative devices, and the ensemble as a whole representing an interactive field, shedding light on each other and providing shifts of perspective. In the process, factual information or lyrical passages can be inserted episodically, changing the nature of the viewer’s response for a while. Being subordinated to the fictional experience, however, they can only diminish but not demolish it.

– Empathetic emotions in the documentary film do not so much flow as come and go, depending on the intensity of the persons on screen. Typically, documentary persons serve the purpose of illuminating an issue, a purpose which has priority over individual or interpersonal conflicts, although those may be part of the film as well. As documentary subjects are not professional actors, they will not express themselves with equal ease and control, sometimes holding back their feelings, sometimes unexpectedly exploding with anger or becoming overwhelmed with grief. Thus, emotional investments of the viewer will be more sporadic than in the fiction film but can at times run deeper and have a lasting effect on the viewer’s reality. An additional source of emotion is provided by the documentary filmmakers themselves, especially when they interact with interview partners. Their simultaneous status as a deciding authority behind the film can also demand attention, prompting the viewer to evaluate documentary strategies, particularly documentary ethics.

– Emotions in the personal film are in general less empathetic and also less intense. Rather, there is a mood over the whole work that gradually condenses into a contemplation of subjective mental and perceptive processes. The viewers react mainly to aesthetic, sensory stimuli, which become effective as inner perceptions. Thematic aspects can also lead to a turn inward: to associations and reminiscences that establish analogies to one’s own life and feelings, running parallel to the events on the screen. The hybrid character of such films can result in emotional processes that change in phases, depending on the status of the persons shown and the prevailing mode of presentation.
Whereas *A emotions* in a fiction film can be separated quite well from *F emotions*, viewer responses in the documentary are more variegated according to the usual heterogeneity of the material and approach, but they also tend to amalgamate. Empathetic emotions being less based on immersion and rarely streaming in constant flow, other types of response evolve and gain importance. Within this process, filmmakers constitute an intermediary presence, belonging to the world presented as well as being responsible for the way the film has turned out. Viewers are aware of this, evaluating the shooting situation and reflecting not only on what is on screen but also on what might lie behind the scenes presented. *A emotions* are thus part and parcel of the documentary experience.

The same applies to the personal film, at least to a degree, in that the viewers relate directly to the creative enunciator – if he or she inscribes himself or herself into the work as a filmmaking subject – so that the form and the depth of the subject matter are both considered as a personal statement. Moreover, sensuous aesthetic demands typically come to the fore, whereas in both the fictional and the documentary case they tend to be perceived less consciously. In the personal film, the viewers become potential filmmakers, for whom *A emotions* and other feelings flow together.

*Translated by Steven Lindberg*
Fig. 1: Frederick Wiseman’s PRIMATE
Viewer Empathy and Mosaic Structure in Frederick Wiseman's PRIMATE

[2009]

I.

In what follows I will attempt to describe the empathetic processes that (presumably) take place in the audience while watching Frederick Wiseman’s documentary PRIMATE (US, 1973). Whereas many studies have been undertaken to analyze viewer responses to fictional films, studies on the effects of documentaries are still rare. Documentaries and fiction films have a lot in common, of course, and many findings can be transferred from one field to the other. But the genres also differ in significant ways, as most documentaries do not follow scripts, are not staged, and do not use actors. The lack of scholarly interest in the subject is thus on the one hand astonishing, since so much has yet to be discovered; on the other hand, studies in documentary response are compounded by the fact that the films vary strongly in their strategies of presentation, some resembling fictional models more than others, some more dedicated to establishing facts and causes, or to persuading the audience to take action. It is thus difficult to generalize viewer responses, let alone develop a theory that applies to the genre as such.

As a preliminary step, it is therefore useful to conduct bottom-up case studies of a whole range of documentary films.1 Only after a considerable number of close readings have been undertaken will response patterns emerge so that approaches can be systematized and assumptions verified. My analysis of Wiseman’s PRIMATE, based on personal introspection and on findings garnered from the analysis of other works or from the field of psychology, is therefore meant to provide material for further research.

1 As for German film studies, see my essays “The Role of Empathy in Documentary Film: A Case Study” (2005) and “Genre Conflict in Tracey Emin’s Top Spot” (2007), both in this volume; Christina Naber, “Alles andere als nüchtern. Der aktuelle Dokumentarfilm und sein emotionales Wirkungspotenzial,” in Emotion – Empathie – Figur. Spielformen der Filmwahrnehmung, Thomas Schick/Tobias Elbrecht, eds. (Berlin 2008: Vistas), 107-127. The articles deal with different types of documentary film.
II.

Frederick Wiseman’s oeuvre differs more radically from fiction film than most documentaries. On the one hand, he follows the observational mode of Direct Cinema: Wiseman attempts to film real events as they happen, does not stage anything, does not intervene, does not use explanatory voice-overs or mood-setting music. But unlike most of his Direct Cinema colleagues – e.g. Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, and the Maysles Brothers – he does not use the observational mode to create a causal-linear chain of scenes around a central conflict; nor does he focus on individuals as protagonists or antagonists. Rather, a large group of his films (to which PRIMATE belongs) is dedicated to portraying American institutions – hospitals, schools, the military, etc. According to Bill Nichols, who has analyzed Wiseman’s work astutely and extensively, the whole of these films “is not organized as a narrative but more poetically, as a mosaic; only the parts have a diegetic unity.” Nichols continues to describe Wiseman’s sequences as “facets:”

[These facets] help complete our picture [of the portrayed institutions] but also constitute it in such a way that completion in any absolute sense becomes impossible (each new facet proposes a new lack at the same time as it fills in a previous one). Thus, whereas a narrative can be complete when the ending resolves a lack initiated in the beginning, Wiseman’s films lack narrative closure itself. They are associational rather than expository, or poetic rather than assertive or narrative.²

PRIMATE was filmed at the Yerkes Primate Research Center in Atlanta, Georgia in 1973 and came out in 1974 after an extended period of structuring in the editing room.³ Due to the Direct Cinema approach, the film shows only what would have happened (more or less) similarly without the presence of the camera team. Thus, Wiseman had to depend on fortunate coincidences and muster up great patience during filming in order to have sufficient material available for editing.

³ Wiseman was responsible for the production, direction, sound, and editing; William Brayne operated the camera. The film was shot in black-and-white and runs for 104 minutes. Wiseman had a general permission to film, and all the employees of the Center had been informed of the presence of the team and were aware when they were being filmed.
Emotional scenes or moments in which people open up to disclose their innermost thoughts occur only rarely within the mosaic structure – a structure that hardly leaves sufficient time to prepare and savor such moments. Also, the large number of people working in an institution like the Yerkes Center prohibits our getting to know anyone closely. Nevertheless, personal confrontations and polarizations come into play sometimes, but they do not lead to a central conflict that intensifies and explodes in a finale. Consequently, the empathetic processes involving individual persons can only develop within the framework of single episodes – in the microstructure – and they are accordingly short-lived. But Wiseman makes up for this lack of emotional depth by concentrating on situations that are immediately understandable as well as hard to take: his films frequently contain scenes in which our sense of justice is violated, in which somebody misbehaves or experiences embarrassment. It is also striking to what extent physical action and evident traumatization occur, leading to motor mimicry in the viewer and the (reduced) reliving of the event within one’s own body.⁴

In PRIMATE, Wiseman’s strategies of emotional involvement are particularly intriguing. The subjects displayed fall into two extremely different groups: humans and apes, which on the one hand makes it easier to expose the structures employed, but on the other results in special conditions, as I intend to show in the following.

III.

Before the title sequence of PRIMATE appears, we are confronted with a portrait gallery of the ancestors of the Yerkes Center – we recognize Charles Darwin, and we can assume that the other portraits are also those of renowned scientists. Given the title of the film, one might have expected a portrait gallery of primates to illustrate the descent of man. But as soon as the name of the research institute appears onscreen, we understand that the film will show contemporary scientific experiments. After the title sequence, however, following an establishing shot of the institute’s building, we see only anthropoid apes – chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas – in cramped, sterile cages that indicate their status as laboratory animals.

So we are not surprised to hear the dialogue of two researchers standing in front of a cage and observing the animals it contains, the ones we have just been shown. This already establishes an essential theme of the film:

⁴ See my essay “Motor Mimicry in Hitchcock” (1999) in this volume.
researchers watch animals while the film audience watches the researchers. Or, from the filmmaker’s perspective, Wiseman employs “one observation technique to observe another observation technique.”

As we have already seen some of the apes, it is now time to take a look at the human beings. This certainly pays off: the two scientists in front of the cage appear to belong to different subspecies, even though they are both white males (fig. 2). One has a thick mat of curly, graying hair, with carefully trimmed sideburns that loom into his face; he sports a luxuriant moustache and a soft beard. His polka-dot tie against a dark shirt provides pleasing decor, as does the pipe he holds in his hand. His face is muscular, his nose fleshy. His colleague, by contrast, has a pointy nose and a rather delicate build. His smooth, glossy black hair is pulled back into a loose ponytail, and his beard begins at his ears and spreads on his chest like a straggly triangle. This researcher is also dressed in black, but without any decorative attributes. Both of them reveal themselves to be representatives of an academic elite from the 1970s. They look casual but styled, and their

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hair and beards recall the Southern generals of the Civil War. All this serves to make the content of their dialogue all the more surprising.

Without further ado, one primatologist explains to the other the projects underway at the Yerkes Center: they concern “sex testing,” the copulation behavior of apes, especially their positions during sex and the nature of their ejaculation (fig. 3). Continuous observation of the animals is essential: “We don’t want them doing things sexually when we are not in a position to see it.” And it becomes evident that the animals are not only scrupulously observed, but their semen is also drawn by special methods and devices. Many intimate details are discussed or seen for which we are not at all prepared at this point in the film. Quite the reverse is true of the researchers: for them, the sexuality of apes appears to be a matter they approach coolly and neutrally, as if it were the most natural thing at a high-technology site like the Yerkes Center.

As viewers, we quickly decide that these researchers are not suitable for sympathy, since their point of view differs significantly from ours. And we begin to ask ourselves whether they can really remain so detached. Don’t

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6 Wiseman admits that he placed the two scientists at the beginning because of their entertaining appearance; see Barry Keith Grant, *Voyages of Discovery. The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1992), 109f.
they find their own conversation a little risqué? Aren't they exaggerating their task? Do we succumb to voyeurism when we watch what they observe? Are we perhaps a bit too squeamish? Is it really that useful to learn how apes manage to procreate? These and other questions point in various directions, but it is unmistakable that the copulation behavior of the animals and the scientists' approach to it triggers confusing emotions. With this opening, Wiseman jumps *in medias res* both in terms of the work at the Yerkes Center and in terms of the viewers, who immediately have ambivalent feelings as to what might follow.

During the rest of the film, the comparison of apes and humans never quite fades away, but it frequently changes aspect and never leads to a convincing result. The similarity between the species is repeatedly demonstrated when laboratory animals and researchers are seen in alternation, evincing analogies and parallelisms. For example, when the scientists, keepers, or nurses wear the obligatory hygienic masks, their noses and mouths are covered with a bulge that resembles an ape's snout. One of the researchers has a protruding jaw that makes him resemble the orangutans; others have hairdos or beards that make them seem as hairy as the animals – even though *homo sapiens* is one of the least hairy primates. Humans and apes move their hands with astonishingly similar gestures, and they drink from similar cups. Surprisingly, apes are called by human first names, while the primatologists remain anonymous. Many of the researchers and keepers almost look alike in their white lab coats and aforementioned masks. The general tendency is to treat the humans as interchangeable and to not let them become protagonists or figures for identification even when we encounter certain individuals several times.

Where do such comparisons and strategies lead? It is nothing new, after all, that human beings evolved from apes or that both belong to the order of primates and the family of hominids. Yet Wiseman insists on constantly occupying us with this fascinating game; and we engage in it almost automatically. We seem to slip mentally into the bodies of the apes, then into the bodies of the researchers, or vice versa. Superimposing one on the other, we register all the congruencies and deviations and imagine what it must feel

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7. It is strange that he also resembles the “human” apes in Franklin J. Schaffner’s *Planet of the Apes* from 1968.

8. Grant (see note 6, 114) describes other similar observations and points out that the treatment of the animals often recalls scenes from Wiseman’s earlier films – the shaving of the apes resembles the shaving of the recruit’s heads in *Basic Training* – and that this also contributes to equating apes and humans.
like to look like this – or perhaps like that. As noted above, these parallelisms and comparisons form one of the principles of the *découpage* of *Primate*, confronting us with ape and human faces, human and ape hands, in alternation. Which species is the more attractive remains to be determined.

Within these processes of comparison, which are based on spontaneous empathy, one analogy turns out to be particularly insidious. There are, of course, Afro-Americans working at the research institute – if only as laboratory assistants, keepers, or caretakers. Especially in a black-and-white film, there is greater visual resemblance between Afro-Americans and their animal charges than there is with the (white) researchers: when only the chests or backs of the keepers are seen, their black arms stand out against the white lab coats just like the dark hairy arms of the apes that sometimes cling to them like black clasps. The film seems to demonstrate *ad oculos* that Afro-Americans are closer to apes than whites are in evolutionary terms. This is, however, not explicitly stated, and surely Wiseman would not want to say so.

Why would he put himself on such ideologically precarious, politically incorrect, humanistically dubious terrain? One answer might be: because blacks and apes happened to appear together during filming. The camera simply recorded what was going on (in keeping with Wiseman’s cinematic method, the observational mode). Another answer, in the spirit of Marxist analysis, might presume that Wiseman’s “disillusionment” with American society and its false hierarchies made him seize the opportunity to point out the social differential between blacks and whites. Yet another answer, probably equally true, argues that Wiseman wants to confront us with the visual stereotypes to which we are at mercy – for example, if we allow ourselves to believe that things that appear similar are similar. Stereotypical assessments occur involuntarily; they have to be first recognized before being rejected in order to obtain an undistorted image of the world. *Primate’s* particular merit is setting this process in motion by making the analogies it produces a problem for the viewer.

But I have strayed from the film’s opening and moved into the middle of its structure. Various themes that require more detailed analysis have already

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been raised in the process: the problem of voyeurism, for example, which is always a factor in Direct Cinema’s observational method but is brought to bear especially in PRIMATE; the intriguing anthropomorphism of the apes, which is closely connected with a differential in power and a discourse of perpetrator/victim, both prompting empathetic processes; and, finally, the question of what a research project is meant to do, should do, and is permitted to do – an ethical question that Wiseman, with his method of dispensing with commentary, does not address directly, even though it is emphatically implied.

Voyeurism is a term that is overused, often loosely, in film journalism. As a psychological term, it refers to the pathological obsession with spying on others during intimate actions, whereby the risk of being caught offers additional thrills. In this sense, one should not speak of voyeurism in the cinema, since the viewers do not intrude but rather are invited to watch what is shown. We can, however, experience the voyeurism of a documentary filmmaker vicariously – and in this case, the term is used in a broader sense – when he or she works with a hidden camera or shows private events not intended for the public eye. The observational mode of Direct Cinema can easily result in such moments, especially in projects in which the filmmakers are extensively present among the people filmed and hence are trusted like friends or family. Ethically sensitive filmmakers are aware of this risk and tend to shut off the camera at precarious moments or to eliminate all-too-intimate passages in postproduction.

In PRIMATE, however, the problem takes a different form than it would in a film about a family conflict. The observation concerns the intimate sphere not of people but of animals, and it remains open as to whether the apes would raise objections to being observed during the sex act. Being held in transparent cages has probably long since desensitized them to all gazes. Nevertheless, and probably because of their similarity to human beings, one feels uncomfortable when watching them. Wiseman deftly metes out such scenes, not savoring them excessively, and he delegates responsibility to the researchers. He may sometimes be “tactless,” as Nichols observes of Wiseman’s early films, but he is aware of the problem and does not cultivate tactlessness for its own sake.

The primatologists constitute a constant connection to the animals. Even when none of them are onscreen, we imagine their presence and look into

11 Allan King’s A Married Couple (Canada, 1969), for instance, shows extremely intimate exchanges between man and wife and tests the limits of the bearable. See Alan Rosenthal, The New Documentary in Action: A Casebook on Film Making (Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 1971), 21–65, containing interviews with the filmmakers.
12 Nichols (see note 2), 209f.
the cages with their eyes – after all, we have learned right at the beginning that the apes should not have intercourse unsupervised. This awareness mitigates the voyeuristic effect for the audience, but observing the observational team can at the same time result in a kind of second-degree voyeurism. For now we indeed observe the observers’ behavior and how they deal with their indiscreet presence or their interventions in the sexual apparatus of the animals. Little happens here, however, since the researchers are, as mentioned, always objective, concentrated, and impassive. We are thus after all thrown back on our own voyeuristic interests. Wiseman keeps his cards close to his chest; the researchers show no emotion, and the apes gaze opaquely into the camera.

Another problem the film raises is dividing the protagonists into perpetrators and victims. That the apes are kept as “guinea pigs” is a matter of course, but it seems unnecessarily cruel to lock them up in cramped cages with no place to withdraw and without daylight, plants, or toys – quite unlike animals at the zoo that are kept in environments more or less appropriate for their species (if only to prevent us from pitying them). But a research laboratory is not set up for visitors who want to sympathize or empathize with the animals. The personnel is guided by pragmatic principles, concerned only with keeping the apes healthy. Animal happiness is not on their agenda, but neither do they pursue sadistic scenarios.

However, for long stretches the researchers and keepers seem like prison guards or even torturers, and viewers may have associations with doctors in concentration camps conducting experiments on humans. Once again, Wiseman’s images suggest such associations without actually making them explicit. The long, windowless corridors of the institute, lined with barred cages, are powerfully reminiscent of American penitentiaries, familiar to us from countless Hollywood films. Dangerous criminals are kept in such cells, always exposed to the gazes of the guards and only able to communicate without seeing each other and to witness acoustically what is going on. When in Primate the – protesting? – screams of the apes in the neighboring

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13 See Nichols, ibid., 213f, who places the “complementary relationships” present in most of Wiseman’s films in a larger framework.
14 Although there is a consensus in the Western world about how animals are to be treated, there are countless exceptions as soon as human welfare is affected: thus vipers, cattle, and laboratory animals are partially exempted from animal protection. See Wikipedia: “Animal testing on non-human primates;” Jean-Claude Wolf, “Menschen und Tiere: Über die Schwierigkeit, Tierrechte zu begründen,” in Tiere: Eine andere Anthropologie, Hartmut Böhme et al., eds. (Cologne: Böhlau, 2004), 301-17.
cages are heard, they seem like unjustly convicted inmates with whom the audience empathizes and sides.

The friendly gestures with which the keepers sometimes pass fruit through the bars and pour juice into cups, or the affection with which the nurses cuddle and wrap the baby apes sometimes cause the pendulum to swing to the other side. And not all of the experiments are painful or harmful – for example, a chimpanzee learns to communicate symbolically by pressing certain buttons, or a gorilla in pain is treated by a dentist. Wiseman often demands of his viewers that they restructure and revise the expectations or judgments they have just made. On the whole, however, especially in the second half of the film, the attitude of the primatologists seems increasingly inadmissible and shocking.

Worse than the incarceration and constant supervision are the surgical procedures to which many of the animals are subjected. These rarely seem to be in their best interest. Often we look with growing horror at the operation table where ever new mutilations take place. As Wiseman does not insert commentaries, and the doctors give rudimentary information at best about their activities, our recrimination increases, since the experiments seem to make no sense.\(^\text{16}\) In one episode, a rhesus monkey gets a “box” implanted in his head: a cruel game, one may think at first. Only later does it become clear that it is a device to turn the animal’s sexual arousal on and off by remote control, or to measure reactions to changes in gravity. When such information is conveyed subsequently, it does not neutralize the initially bewildering and disturbing impression, but at least the purpose of the operation is evident, even if we are left in the dark about its real meaning. As a byproduct of this play with empathy and moral guilt, an arc of tension results that lasts until the end of the film, since some of the experiments are explained and appear to be justified, while others are not.

But to return to empathy with the victims. The graceful, nervous rhesus and squirrel monkeys are particularly touching because they are so tiny – they seem to need protection, like young children, but are even smaller and more delicate – whereas the near-human size of the hominids means that we look them in the eye and can imagine ourselves in their position. One orangutan evokes particular compassion, its shaven body naked and vulnerable, as does a gorilla lying anesthetized on a stretcher, or a chimpanzee that is tossed into its cage after surgery, where it remains lying on the floor, groaning and raising its head in profound anguish. The primatologists appear to

\[^{16}\text{Grant (see note 6), 110.}\]
be interested only in the results of their research; their technology, scientific approaches, and methods are more important to them than the creatures on the operating table. This serves to further reinforce our empathy with the apes. As we are reluctant to share the point of view of the researchers and establish a moral distance from them, their victims represent the emotional center all the more.

An operation on a squirrel monkey seems particularly grim – indeed, it marks the climax of the horror.\textsuperscript{17} The scene occurs relatively late in the film, at a point when we believe we have already grown accustomed to the way the researchers work. Interestingly, the surgeon performing the operation speaks with a Slavic accent and also corresponds in other ways to the cliché of the “mad scientist.”\textsuperscript{18} This is another example of Wiseman using a stereotype to evoke associations and to cause us to make a judgment that on closer reflection is untenable: the surgeon is clearly neither crazy nor sadistic but an esteemed colleague on the team of primatologists.

Again, we are not provided with any conclusive information about what is happening, so it comes as a shock when the monkey’s chest is cut open and its beating heart exposed. Open-heart surgery or vivisection? But the surgeon's intentions quickly become clear, when he suddenly severs the monkey’s head with his forceps. A loud, grinding noise – did Wiseman amplify it? – accompanies the act and is repeated several times over this excruciatingly long sequence.\textsuperscript{19} We see in detail how the small head with large black eyes is put into a vise for further examination. Was this murder necessary? Does it advance science? Later, a group of scientists bend over the microscope viewing a slice of the monkey’s brain and exclaiming at the finding: “Beautiful!”

This raises the question of the extent to which Wiseman deliberately manipulates the audience in order to trigger certain associations, feelings, and judgments; or of the extent to which the meaning of his film was determined by the profilmic reality. Obviously, Wiseman stays true to the observational

\textsuperscript{17} Squirrel monkeys, native to Latin America, were popular as pets in the United States until 1975, when this was prohibited for reasons of animal protection. It can be assumed that the original target audience of \textit{Primate} had an emotional relationship to these monkeys.

\textsuperscript{18} The mad scientist is a popular figure in the history of cinema, especially in science fiction and horror films. During the Cold War, these eccentric, destructive figures often had Russian characteristics and were a source of black humor.

\textsuperscript{19} The length of this sequence, unusual for Wiseman, could be explained as a metaphorical intention: “The ‘de-animalization’ of the monkey becomes a metaphor for the subtler kind of de-humanization afflicting our social institutions generally – emergency room, classroom, monastery, barracks.” See Chuck Kraemer, “Fred Wiseman’s \textit{Primate} Makes Monkeys of Scientists,” \textit{The New York Times} (December 1, 1974), sec. 2, 1 and 31, quoted in Atkins (see note 5), 123.
mode in that he neither stages scenes nor includes additional footage from outside the range of the Yerkes Center. But he ingeniously rearranges the chronology of the scenes or transposes passages from their original context, thus creating a new reality by means of selection and juxtaposition:

For PRIMATE I filmed things that existed in so-called real life, but structured them in a way that has no relationship to the order or time in which they actually occurred – and created a form that is totally fictional.20

Arrangement and thereby manipulation of the material in order to make a film meaningful, moving, and interesting is, of course, a standard procedure of nearly every documentary. However, in the non-intervening mode of Direct Cinema, manipulation is a sensitive matter that often serves as a point of attack for critics. According to Jean-Louis Comolli, the “basic deception” of Direct Cinema is that “it claims to describe truly the truth of life” while concealing that “manipulation lies at the very heart of non-intervention.”21

But Wiseman takes manipulation a step further than most observational filmmakers. He rearranges his material so openly and artistically that “deception” loses its deceiving quality. The result is an amalgam of Direct-Cinema-directness and witty or revealing juxtapositions or calculated emotional stimuli. Never on safe ground, the viewers remain puzzled about the status of what is shown, a puzzlement compounded by the fact that Wiseman solicits responses without forwarding answers to the problems posed in his film.

An extreme example of Wiseman’s strategy in PRIMATE is a brief series of simian “portraits” that is inserted two-thirds of the way through the film. We see the faces of various anthropoid apes in close-ups edited together (figs. 4a–c), recalling the heads of the scholars from the opening – the group of primates standing parallel to the group of the founding fathers of primatology. At first glance, every species looks and seems different in character: their expressions range from astonished to wise, patient, sad, simple-minded, and wily – much like human beings. But with the difference that with people we make inferences about the personality we believe we recognize behind their physiognomy, and to the momentary mood it reflects. We subtract, as it were, the genetic facts from the use the owner makes of them.

20 Wiseman, quoted in Atkins, ibid., 44f.
Fig. 4a-c: Three faces from PRIMATE
As Paul Ekman and other psychologists have established, basic emotions such as fear, sadness, joy, rage, disgust, and interest are expressed more or less identically by all people, and everyone is in a position to tell from another person’s facial expression intuitively what he or she is feeling. With apes, however, we – non-experts, that is – can scarcely distinguish individuals. We only assume that their species-specific faces convey personal character. Nor do apes have highly differentiated facial expressions (an exception being their way of conveying rage by baring their teeth). So we can easily fool ourselves, interpreting feelings into them that do not exist.

Alongside the photogenic qualities of their fur and form, it is precisely this pleasure in attributing human emotions to animals that makes animal photography so fascinating and popular.

Wiseman’s apes seem to address us directly as if they wanted to ask, accusingly, how we assess what has been shown and request us to speak for them who are not capable of language themselves. Several individuals appear to have been united into a chorus to protest the conditions of their confinement. Although they turn their eyes to the camera only randomly, even such momentary, assumed visual contact (which does not occur with the primatologists) can be very effective. Moreover, our solidarity with the apes, based on their imagined appeal as well as our anthropomorphizing their “faciality,” is reinforced because the primatologists seem rather inhuman and emotionless. Lacking a human center for empathy, we take to the apes. As Grant has noted, “It could be argued, in fact, that the animals seem more expressive, more alive, than the Yerkes researchers.” Wiseman uses this mechanism to produce outrage and empathy without having to criticize the primatologists explicitly. Not for nothing was he trained as a lawyer.

But this does not mean that the film manipulates us to emotional participation for the wrong reasons. Recourse to stereotypical sentimentality is part of the cinematic concept that revolves around changing perspectives and hence around changing viewers’ minds. Wiseman appeals to the competence of autonomous individuals, whose ability to think for themselves he

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22 This is, by necessity, a highly abridged depiction of the findings. See especially Paul Ekman, Emotion in the Human Face, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
23 See Grant (see note 6), 112f.
24 Grant, ibid., 14, points out that Wiseman in fact eliminates gazes into the camera on principle, since it would destroy the illusion for the viewers. There are, however, occasional exceptions.
25 Koch (see note 9), 47.
26 Grant (see note 6), 115.
trusts.27 And he accepts that his films are open to diverse readings: “Since the reality is complex, contradictory and ambiguous, people with different values or experience respond differently.”28 Wiseman uses each element of his film both as a document of reality and as a discursive mechanism to develop a structure of ideas above or behind the world the film unfolds. He transcends the here and now of what he is observing in order to reveal a more general set of social issues and involve the viewers in the analysis. It is up to us whether we think primarily of mankind’s respect for Creation – especially for the creatures closest to us – or read the film primarily as symptomatic of the relation of American institutions to their clientele. These and other lines of interpretation are equally inherent to PRIMATE.

The main part of the film, which concerns everyday life at the Yerkes Center, is followed by two sequences that function in different ways, changing the register, as it were. The first concerns a meeting of the primatologists which touches on the future of scientific work, and the second, at the very end, is an episode that leaves the confined space of the research center and acquires symbolic overtones.

Information on how the Yerkes researchers assess their experiments and observations – how they position themselves scientifically, socially, and ethically – was not pursued during the first ninety minutes of the film. Consequently, many questions have accumulated in the audience, in some cases perhaps from the moment when “sex testing” was mentioned. We expect that the meeting will relieve this pressure, and initially this appears to be its function. As soon turns out, however, the real subject of the meeting is not the meaning of or justification for the research projects but rather concern about the flow of public funding. Solemnly, the director explains that the politics of science have changed, and as of now the relevance of all projects will have to be demonstrated. Now we prick up our ears, for it seems the time has come for the primatologists to take a position. But the director wallows in commonplaces: “All research is useful, even though that usefulness is not apparent at the time that it is done.” And he continues that the time of the “usefulness of useless knowledge” often dawns much

27 See also Wiseman’s statement in an interview with John Graham from 1976: “‘There Are No Simple Solutions’: Wiseman on Film Making and Viewing,” in Atkins (see note 5), 33-45, here 37: “I like the material to speak for itself. I think the films that I have done, documentaries, all have – to me at least – a very clear point of view, but it’s a point of view the audience has to work with the events of the film in order to ... in a sense they have to fight the film, they have to say, ‘what the hell’ is he trying to say with this? – if indeed I am saying anything.”

28 Wiseman in Graham, ibid., 49f.
later, when other research findings join to support them, so that unsolved problems can suddenly be solved.

We have the sobering impression that the Yerkes Center is conceding the uselessness of its projects. This insight topples one of the main pillars of our tolerance for what we have seen in the past hour and a half: the assumption that science is of value. Yet the director’s words might have been taken out of context by Wiseman, as we clearly witness only an excerpt from the meeting, and his speech may ultimately have little relevance. The problem of how to assess primate research is left open.

Viewers have now reached a point where some of the questions that have hitherto remained latent can be articulated more precisely. The discomfort that had snuck up on us as a result of the treatment of the apes changes its level: we are ripe for the suspicion that the experiments into the control of sexual and aggressive behavior in animals could represent a preliminary stage to controlling undesirable human behavior – that is to say, that the experiments conducted at the Center are of questionable relevance for society.\(^{29}\)

The final episode of the film follows the meeting like an epilogue. It forms a bracket with the beginning by showing an exterior view of the institute, this time with a transportation vehicle driving away. It soon becomes evident that the small rhesus monkey that was implanted with a measuring device is inside. Now he has to cope with a ride in a car, and even though the device sits on his head like a jaunty cap, he looks stoic, grim, and frightened. The drive ends at an airfield, with a plane already waiting, and the experiments suddenly make sense. The airplane is labeled “U.S. Air Force,” which reminds us of the primatologists’ conversation about the financing of their research. We suddenly realize with a chill that the experiments must be connected to military projects.

The cargo is loaded, and the airplane takes off. Via a video monitor, the research team watches the monkey becoming more and more flabbergasted as the airplane goes into spins and gravity decreases. Although not a spacecraft, the plane brings to mind the newspaper photographs of rhesus monkeys and chimpanzees shot into space from 1958 onward. It feels strange to see anthropomorphic creatures in a kind of astronaut’s outfit, astronauts against their will, subjected to a masquerade.\(^{30}\) The whole craziness of monstrous, technologically and financially extravagant research

\(^{29}\) Atkins (see note 5), 26.

\(^{30}\) The “primate” entry of Wikipedia has an illustration of the rhesus monkey Sam on board a rocket launched in 1959. Today the term “chimptronauts” is sometimes used, and an animated movie called Space Chimps came out in 2008.
which is, at best, useful to the military is stored in such images and can be integrated into PRIMATE’s structure of meaning. At the same time, the plane’s high altitude reduces it to a dot in the sky – a distancing from the tortured monkey that corresponds to the final moments in a fiction film when the camera moves back, releasing the protagonists and returning the viewers to everyday life. But the ending does not grant closure to the problems raised nor to the emotions evoked by the film.

IV.

Wiseman has used the editing structures, emotional strategies, and representational motifs employed in PRIMATE also in other films from the same period: HIGH SCHOOL (1968), LAW AND ORDER (1969), HOSPITAL (1970), BASIC TRAINING (1971), JUVENILE COURT (1973), and WELFARE (1975).

It is typical of these films that they are interspersed with moments of strong (usually negative) bodily sensation. The sexual behavior of apes and the surgical procedures in PRIMATE correspond to operations, injuries, or physical demands in dance, gymnastics, sports, and military drills in Wiseman’s other films.31 Or we witness how people try to express themselves (in foreign language classes or as inferiors in a hierarchy), to make themselves heard in public (by giving commands and speeches, or by singing), or to behave properly at ritual occasions (school functions, the awarding of military honors, court appearances). Even the smallest vocal stress or slip, every clumsy, tense, or graceful and elegant gesture can trigger motor mimicry in the audience. This also applies when we watch apes in the constricted spaces of cages, or people in cells or military barracks, and of the relief felt when the camera leaves these interiors to go outdoors. All these moments can bind the viewers empathetically to the screen.

Also typical of the period under discussion is Wiseman’s none-too-gentle approach to the persons shown. At times, he does not shy away from exposing someone or making him or her seem unsympathetic, though he does not zero in on specific individuals. Because the scenes are brief and manifestly taken out of context, the characterization remains ambiguous: the films merely show what happened in front of the camera at a given moment, for whatever

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31 On the physical “impositions” of the “usurpation of the body” in BASIC TRAINING, see Josefine Carls and Heinz Steinert, “Militärästhetik: Über einige Probleme der dokumentarischen Methode am Beispiel von Frederick Wisemans Basic Training,” in Der amerikanische Dokumentarfilm der 60er Jahre, Monika Beyerle/Christine N. Brinckmann, eds. (Frankfurt/Main: Campus 1991), 211–32.
reasons. If a negative quality is assigned to someone, this is often due to coincidence, or the footage is included because it lends itself to illustrate a certain state of affairs; the same person may well turn up in a later scene as a sympathetic figure. Because no deeper relationships form with individuals, and empathetic participation remains sporadic, the audience feels free to mock a person or to develop rash antipathies without having to feel unjust or thoughtless. This makes the films entertaining, on the one hand, but also unassailable in a disconcerting way. Thus it comes as no surprise that even the researchers and keepers shown in Primate were uncertain whether they should approve of a given scene or reject it as defamation.

More important than the individual persons in Wiseman's films are the roles they play within the system analyzed – a system that is marked by the confrontation of polarized groups: teachers versus students, sergeants versus recruits, doctors versus patients, social workers versus the poor, custodians of the law versus offenders. The films are about typical constellations and behavioral patterns – negative and positive ones, in both groups – that run through the entire film and appeal to the audience to form a judgment and take sides. Whether a person belongs to one group or the other is readily evident from external signs – based on divergent age groups (teachers/students), clothing (white lab coats; uniforms; class-specific civilian gear), or biological features (apes/humans); and often the representatives of each group are largely interchangeable. Within Wiseman's cosmos, apes occupy a special position. In Primate, the hierarchy between the two collectives is obvious at every moment, and clearly the apes have no humanitarian rights.

For the viewers' emotional processes, Wiseman's polarizations generate special moments of audience participation, which lead to additional arcs of tension. Empathetic involvement with the weaker party or those more challenged and enmeshed in problems leads to taking sides temporarily. These collectively oriented reactions reinforce one another in both cumulative and contrasting ways. On the one hand, the various mixed feelings evoked in specific scenes play a part; on the other, the overriding arc develops its own polarizing dynamic, which in turn has an effect on later scenes. The result is as interesting as it is strenuous: sometimes clarifying, despite subtle nuances, sometimes diffuse.

A good example of this strategy is found in High School: a teacher looks through a peephole into the girls' gymnasium as if for voyeuristic stimulation, but perhaps he was just checking whether all of them were there.

On the disagreements with the management of the Yerkes Center that arose after Primate was completed and the controversial reactions of critics and the public after the film was televised, see Grant (see note 6), 110ff.
In the justice system as in schools, in the military and in hospitals, specific power relations exist in which hierarchies apply, and certain rights are annulled for the sake of “higher goals” or for pragmatic reasons. In that respect, PRIMATE offers just one extreme on a sliding scale whose opposite end is taken up in HOSPITAL by its committed doctors and nurses, who may have power over their patients but are equally subject to social injustices. The films are about administrative and legal discretion, control and subordination, traumatization and survival. For the viewers, taking the side of the weaker for emotional reasons is always in conflict with insight into practical necessities, social rules, and humanitarian aims.

Wiseman is essentially concerned about this oscillation of assessments. The most important quality of his films lies not in any pro or contra with respect to specific measures and forms of social organization, but rather in the multilayered perspective on conditions and the moral and emotional uneasiness of the viewers that goes hand in hand with those conditions and has to be accepted and coped with.

*Translated by Steven Lindberg*
Fig. 1: Eric de Kuyper’s storyboard for CASTA DIVA
CASTA DIVA: An Empathetic Reading

[2008]

I.

CASTA DIVA is the first film by Belgian director, screenwriter, novelist, film theorist, and archivist Eric de Kuyper.¹ Produced on a tiny budget and with the help of his friends – a work of cinéma copain – CASTA DIVA is now considered an original masterpiece of the queer avant-garde.

The film hardly fits into any conventional genre categories. Vaguely fictional at best, it is neither documentary nor lyrical, neither autobiographical nor an essay; rather, this is a show – consisting of episodes, like acts in vaudeville, or song-and-dance numbers in an American musical. There is no single main character, central conflict, or conclusive temporal order, and no diegetic dialogue. Instead, the music gives the individual numbers their particular mood and ironic tone. In a series of short sketches depicting everyday activities, the film displays a chain of motifs involving attractive young men posing in front of the camera or a mirror, washing, putting on or removing their clothes, waiting for or observing one another. CASTA DIVA, in rich black-and-white, was filmed in long sequence shots, as if it had been left up to the actors to play their roles spontaneously and according to their own ideas. At the same time, all their movements are perfectly choreographed, precisely matching the chosen framing.

The episode to be discussed here is at the film's beginning. Preceded by opening credits that, in addition to providing the obligatory information about the film crew, include pin-ups of the actors and a door that opens and closes, a projected beam of light and part of a soundtrack² from early 1930s Hollywood: a self-reflective gesture toward the medium and an ironic introduction to the nature and theme of the film to follow.


² The sound was taken from KING KONG (Ernest B. Schoedsack/Merian C. Cooper, US 1933). Snatches of dialogue can be heard from the audience, which has gathered for the spectacle of the huge gorilla in chains.
The episode provides the film with its title. After a moment of silence, the aria “Casta Diva” from Vincenzo Bellini’s 1831 opera *Norma* is introduced as the single acoustic element. We see an old building with a baroque balcony; a young man steps onto it, disappears, then reappears, changes clothes, lingers idly. The camera observes him from a house across the street, remaining fixed in place and recording the action in a single uninterrupted shot. Just before this nine-minute sequence ends, a second man enters the picture. Visible solely as a silhouette, he stands at the window, his back to the camera, positioned in such a way that he can observe the young man on the balcony. This is the action in its entirety, accompanied by minor changes of the light, and structured by the beginning and end of the music – a collaboration of elements to redirect the viewers’ attention and affect their empathetic relationship to what is being shown.

The sequence at issue is deceptively simple, but describing its subtle elements and their combined effect takes up a number of pages. In what follows, I will try to dissect the sequence and analyze the way it involves its audience. In a kind of accumulated report of my own responses, I will present the observations collected during several screenings in order to throw light on the way the film affects its audience cognitively, emotionally, and sensually.

II.

The “Casta Diva” episode seems ideally suited for such an analysis. Its reductionist style limits the number of parameters involved, and as each one unfolds, it is spelled out almost didactically. Moreover, all of its elements seem to contribute to the stimulation of viewer empathy in their own specific way. It is their complex, synaesthetic interplay that ensures the audience’s bond to the events on screen.

Ten central elements can be determined in the sequence that lie at the basis of its structure and provide its dynamics: the framing and the static camera; the architecture; the light; the figure on the balcony; the silence; the musical prelude; the *bel canto* aria; the second figure at the window; the window pane, and, finally, the sequence’s temporality. Although they flow into each other seamlessly, belonging to different levels of form and substance and depending on each other, I will describe each element separately. Whenever possible, the descriptions follow the chronology of the sequence, focusing on the elements in the order of their appearance.
The framing and static camera

The camera, mounted on a tripod and motionless, is directed at the front of a building that nearly fills the frame. Only two narrow, symmetrically sized strips showing a glimpse of the sky and the tops of far-away buildings are visible to the right and left. Our gaze meets the façade at a right angle so that all the architectural lines run parallel to the frame’s edges, the eaves forming its upper and the balcony its lower border. The composition is well balanced, signalizing that there is something special about the building, something worthwhile to be explored or watched.

A dark margin surrounds the precisely centered and lovingly framed image. Could this be a projected film that does not fill the whole screen? A moment of film-in-the-film had appeared at the opening, in the credit sequence – so this seems to be a possible explanation. But on closer inspection, the impression vanishes: apparently, we are looking through a window from the depths of a room. The black margin must result from the – underexposed – walls surrounding the window. A shelf seems to be running parallel to the picture’s lower edge, holding, barely visible, a white telephone; to the left, the outline of a window jamb or a curtain suggests itself. While these ingredients of the image do not attract much attention, they create a slight sense of mystery, a feeling that a number of factors could play a role in this film, the nature of which we are as yet unable to fathom.
Obviously, we are on the second floor of a building directly across from the one being observed, at the same height as the balcony. The distance between the two buildings is about that of a street, allowing our gaze to bridge it without difficulty. But as we are aware of being on this side of the gap and on the second floor, the proximity is felt to be mental rather than physical – an impression underlined by the camera’s stillness. Its fixed position is comparable to that of a motionless observer who, while enjoying a privileged vantage point, has no access to the object. This could be the position of a neighbor (similar to that of the protagonist in Hitchcock’s Rear Window), or that of an involuntary or voluntary voyeur waiting in his hidden compartment for something to happen across the street. But as yet no human being has appeared.

The framing and fixed camera serve to arouse expectations and forebodings. That there has been no sound so far is another reason that eyes and ears remain glued to the site before us, waiting for things to come.

The architecture

The building does not display any stylistic features specific to a certain place. It could be located almost anywhere in the Western world, although its pastiche-like quality evokes the Italian Renaissance and the Baroque. According to Eric de Kuyper, the building used to house a clinic in Amsterdam; it was empty when the film was shot and has since been demolished. The ladders connecting the floors lean against the walls in a somewhat forlorn and useless manner, perhaps indicating that construction work is underway, as does the scaffolding over the balcony door. Freestanding like a palazzo, each floor structured differently, and with three-dimensional decorative accents and clear proportions, the building invites contemplation or scrutiny, opening up its cave-like interior through the large middle door and pushing its broad balcony toward us. At the same time, the stocky, cubic mass and the solid upper floor, punctured by only a few narrow openings, make it resemble a fortress. All in all, it seems rather severe and a bit pretentious.

The frontality of the shot exhibits the façade perfectly, and numerous lines and points of focus – some of them graphical, others three-dimensional – invite us to scan it with our eyes. The striking alternation between light and dark, created by the white wooden elements and horizontal dividing lines in the masonry, contrasting with the opaque, almost black, panes of glass and the shadows, seems graphical in nature. The position of the two high, narrow windows on either side of the wide center door adds to this
geometric impression, and the upper floor's two small windows are placed next to each other above it, centered and symmetric. The distinct structure of the balustrade as well as the ladders, with their parallel rungs and side rails, contributes to this effect.

But all these elements can also be read in three dimensions: the lad-
ders stand a short distance from the wall, casting clear-cut shadows; the balustrade consists of a row of pillars, their round forms modeled by the light, the gaps between them drawing our gaze inward. The shadows in the window openings indicate their distance behind the wall's surface, and the small semicircular arches of brick that span them are crowned by projecting keystones. Short, complexly structured buttresses pretend to support the overhanging roof. The graphic effects lend a sense of rhythm to the image, structuring its surface, while the three-dimensional effects underscore the architectural construction, evoking the laws of gravity. The building's floors seem to weigh down heavily upon each other – an impression probably due to the fact that the image shows only a fragment: all we can see is a torso, a building without its full roof or ground floor.

We are looking at the front of the building, its façade and therefore its face. And it can indeed be read as a face – the eaves as the hairline, the balustrade as a row of teeth, the windows as eyes returning the viewer's gaze. This makes the building seem alive, intentional, somewhat grotesque, though it displays a gloomy and abandoned air as well. However, even if we empathize with its expression for a moment, this anthropomorphism does not hold up under prolonged observation, as a human face is merely implied (and not as salient as the factory's face in Fritz Lang's METROPOLIS of 1927). Much stronger are the impulses to explore the object's physical aspects, to touch them in a virtual way. These impulses result from the haptic qualities of the architectural details, the sculptural elements and various kinds of surfaces: ledges, niches, gaps, indentations, parallel lines, layers, barriers, concavities, perforations, and openings; rough, smooth, stony, woody, glassy. The relief-like stonework in particular speaks to the tactile sense of the fingertips, demanding that its patterns, differences in height, convex structures, and grooves be experienced almost in three-dimensional terms. Perhaps the specific attraction of reliefs as an aesthetic form lies in such an appeal, making them essentially different from fully formed, three-dimensional sculpture. A free-standing sculpture exercises less of an appeal to the fingertips; it does not rise from a plane, inviting tactile exploration of the contrasting surfaces. Rather, we feel instigated to investigate it with the palm of the hand, to grip or stroke it – as if we were children who touch and probe whatever they find attractive. The palm
is, however, less sensitive to details than the fingertips. Essential to the façade's tactile appeal is also that it is depicted at a right angle to our gaze. The light plays an extremely important role too, but more about that later.

Along with the building's anthropomorphic appearance and its tactile appeal, the empathetic imagination is occupied first and foremost with two elements: the ladders and the balcony. The ladders' function as climbing aid has a suggestive effect. One can imagine gripping the side rails and placing one's feet on the rungs in order to get from one floor to the next – a somatic fantasy triggered by the ladders' apparent function and thereby differing from the well-known phenomenon of motor mimicry (which involves a human or animal figure whose movements we imitate mentally). Rather, what takes place here is an imaginary act more closely related to a daydream than to the processes of empathy: a kind of self-projection into the picture, a way of mentally playing with the object in view. While our empathy with the building never completely fades, the imaginary use of the ladders becomes more prominent over time, as does the potential for action displayed by the balcony. In our mind, we climb the ladders or attempt to surmount the balustrade, then step onto the balcony and look at ourselves/the camera.

The longer the image remains on screen unaltered, the more fantasies arise concerning what could happen at the building – narrative hypotheses or anticipations of events. Perhaps the ladders were put there to help someone scramble up the building, or escape from it; a fire could start, and someone would have to be rescued; thieves could try to break in; a man could attempt to kidnap his lover, and he or she could slip and fall in the attempt. Or the ladders might refer to an event that has already taken place, and we are supposed to infer what happened from the signs left behind. But as none of that is confirmed in CASTA DIVA, the ladders will be forgotten by the sequence's end, written off as contingent relics of a real site, present but unused.

Balconies possess a particular architectural character as transitional zones between interior and exterior, attached to the house but not protected from wind and weather. On the one hand, they represent private spaces:

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3 This phenomenon involves involuntary mental imitation when observing someone who acts with obvious and understandable intention, e.g. a soccer player who is about to score a goal. See my essay “Motor Mimicry in Hitchcock” (1999) in the present volume. Recent neurological research has shown that so-called mirror neurons in the brain are responsible for such processes.

4 Such imaginary self-projections can be triggered in everyday life by sports equipment or games of skill when their uses or rules are obvious. Similarly, dangerous structures – such as a bridge in need of repair or a loose railing – can trigger fantasies of catastrophes which serve to help us gauge the amount of risk they involve.
jutting outwards, accessible from inside the building only, and excluding the public. Hidden to the waist by the balustrade, inhabitants can enjoy balconies in their nightclothes, while outsiders are not welcome to observe what takes place up there. On the other hand, balconies permit communication with the public sphere, especially when they face the street and are located on the second floor. From this vantage point, rulers address their people while leaning out over the parapet. Elevated majestically and at the same time untouchable and located at a distance, they are protected from physical assault. But they can also interrupt their performance at any time, if necessary, and disappear inside. And so the balcony is both, can become both: a private area, a small garden and place for sunbathing, or an impressive stage; an intimate place for relaxing or an exhibitionistic venue. And this makes it suitable for ambiguities, for half-hearted or playful appearances, pseudo-monologues, self-presentation, illegitimate observation, furtive communication, unresolved relationships. In Casta Diva, everything is left open at first, nothing happens for a while. It is up to the viewers to populate the balcony in their imaginations with themselves or others. The building has dramatic potential, its balcony and windows almost demand to be filled with people and action, and we can imagine standing on either side of the stage.

The light

At first glance, the image remains completely motionless, it could be a photograph. But soon a faint flickering becomes noticeable, the light brightens and then dims, activating and animating the building, making its shadowy areas more tangible and increasing its plasticity. It is as if the light, in a way similar to our probing gaze and imaginary index finger, had touched the façade, thereby intensifying our own impulses.

While most of these changes are subtle, some occur more abruptly and drastically, so that the façade suddenly takes on a different character. When the sun disappears behind clouds and the image darkens, divisions, architectural flourishes, and even the ladders almost disappear with it. Shadows and three-dimensional features are swallowed up. The building seems gloomier, its fortress-like character more evident. Touching it seems less inviting now. But as soon as the picture lightens, the urge to explore it with our fingertips returns, keeping our relationship with the building alive.

In fiction films, spotlights or other artificial sources of illumination are usually employed for creating and regulating expressive changes.
They take place at moments of dramatic significance, whether to alter the atmosphere, create metaphoric overtones, or indicate a jump forward in time. In Casta Diva, some such moments seem to have been chosen with care: for example, the image suddenly goes dark when the aria begins, as if to focus our attention. But other changes in the light are obviously arbitrary and thus incompatible with a controlled film production. After a time, it becomes evident that they can only be attributed to the movements of clouds over Amsterdam as they rush in from the sea, obscuring the sun and animating the light. At times, nature's actions seem magical, as if it had been summoned; at others, it misses its cue. The sunlight plays its role unpredictably and according to its own rules.

When shooting a long continuous take on location, filmmakers are at the weather's mercy. They have to accept it as a player in their film. In Casta Diva, the appearance, confirmed by each flicker, that the building was shot in real time and under documentary conditions is relevant to the intended effects. The film makes use of what reality has to offer, and thus the lighting helps direct our response to the circumstances of the shooting and creation of the film.

In this context, considerations concerning the medium and its sensitivity to light can come into play. As the brightness of the strips of sky to the building's right and left remain stable even when the façade is plunged into darkness, the viewer can understand that this is a result of the particular quality of black-and-white film stock. Film reacts much more intensely to a
decrease in the amount of light than the human eye, to the effect that the grayer parts of the image tend to disappear in darkness while its brighter areas remain almost unaffected. The building darkens, overreacting, as it were, to a cloud, and the light seems to act of its own accord. The scene takes on animistic qualities.

The figure on the balcony

After a while, a young man appears on the balcony. Though this figure is relatively small in relation to the façade – providing a point of reference to the size of the building – it attracts the viewer's total attention. The man's human presence, his living body, his movements contrast with the architecture's rigidity. A protagonist has arrived. The action can begin.

But the meaning of the young man's actions is less clear-cut than would seem at first, and they hardly represent a plot as such. On the one hand, what he does is wholly personal and casual: he stands around, removes his shirt, stretches a little, steps back into the building, reappears. On the other hand, he seems to be using his balcony as a stage, inviting others to watch as he lasciviously displays his body. He demonstrates that he is alone, that he has time to spare and is possibly bored. Or is he putting on

5 This is, of course, much less the case with digital film.
a show, flirting with someone across the street that he pretends not to have noticed?

When the young man disappears for the first time, we sense a subtle tension due to our uncertainty as to whether he will return, whether he is in fact alone, what his intentions could be. This passes when it becomes evident that he has no particular plan, as he casually takes a seat on the balustrade. Our empathy – which has been rather restrained so far – focuses on his body language, the way he walks, supports himself on the balustrade, removes his shirt, chooses a place to sit and lowers himself into place. However, the music, which begins shortly after his appearance, alters the viewer’s emotions and comprehension of this scene.

The factor of silence

At first, there is nothing to hear – two minutes of silence that stand out all the more because we know from the opening sequence that this is a sound film. Perhaps this silence is diegetic, and there was in fact no noise at the location where the film was shot. But the scene is much too quiet: some subtle ambient sound at least should be audible. So this silence represents a kind of artifact. Or perhaps it is a reference to film history, intended to evoke silent film. But the silent image is soon joined by a recording of an opera performance (rather than the piano accompaniment expected for a silent film). Both the silence and the music create a certain diegetic effect, making a reference to the situation portrayed, even though we clearly sense – both technically and aesthetically – that fictional illusion is not intended.

The silence heightens our visual concentration and increases the tactile activity in our gaze. As mentioned above, it makes the building seem massive, heavy, solidly compact, possibly even threatening, dangerous, and uncertain, as no rhythm has been provided to enliven or explain the scene. Silence draws time out – sounds, and especially music, would provide us with a sense of time’s passage, though this could also lead to stagnation. But as we are not certain what purpose the silence might serve, it simultaneously heightens our expectations. When will a sound bring release, signal the beginning of the action, direct and stir our emotions? Whatever happens after such a period of silence should have considerable dramatic impact.
The musical prelude

When the music – the aria's prelude – begins to play at top volume, we have a sense of relief, “a liberation from the imprisonment in the image by the absence of sound,” as Eric de Kuyper puts it. The music seems jubilant, a gush of harmonic effortlessness that opens our senses, a revelry of bows and gliding leaps, a feast of strings. It sweeps around the building, virtually invading its niches and cavities. Music and building combine to become a unified ensemble, fusing to form a three-dimensional, synaesthetic impression.

An unmistakable product of Italian opera, the prelude affects the building's character, making it look more Mediterranean, more theatrical. At the same time, this combination includes an ironic component: the music is several sizes too large for the pastiche-like architecture, which is not overly refined or true to a certain style, and much too familiar. The use of Bellini's opera could be read as an aesthetic impropriety or a sign of pretentious arrogance by the filmmaker, but to read it as campy and charming is more in keeping with the film's style.

The orchestral music is, as mentioned above, nothing more than a transitional phase, a prelude to the actual aria. This preparatory dramatic function is inscribed into it; expectation of its beginning, the diva's dulcet voice, is the main thing. Apparently, the film was made with an awareness of how to bring its elements to bear one after the other: first the empty building, then the figure on the balcony; first the silence, then the orchestra, then the bel canto.

The aria

The orchestra's prelude flows around the building, and the singer's voice breaks like waves against its walls. The famous aria “Casta Diva” begins purely and clearly, the height of perfection. This underlines the assumption that creating an ironic contrast is the goal here, one between a low-budget film and a showcase piece of great opera. But the fact that the singing is from an easily available recording is obvious – a discrepancy that can be savored by the viewer. It also signals to the audience that they should not

6 In a letter to the author dated January 1, 2007.
7 The aria is sung not by Maria Callas, but by one of her colleagues, Italian soprano Anita Cerquetti, who had her first great success in the 1950s with Norma.
expect a great tragedy. To the contrary, the important thing is employing the music for new, less serious, more personal purposes – reassigning it.\(^8\)

In Bellini’s *Norma*, the protagonist, a priestess, sings her aria to the chaste moon goddess. She has sinned and passionately begs for help, as if trying to soften a heart of stone. The words of her song contain various cues that can be connected to the film image in one way or another: the moonlight is mentioned – as if referring to the light falling on the façade, even though the sun is shining in Amsterdam. The adjective “casta” (*chaste*) opens up – *ex negativo* – the topic of sexuality, applying indirectly to the attractive young man who puts himself on display. “Diva” shimmers in a variety of meanings: as a reference to the famous soprano singer, and as a designation of someone who is worshiped and implored wistfully, but seems to refuse a response.

As the aria is addressed to the goddess, it implies the presence of a counterpart in the film, even though the singing does not come from a live performance, is disembodied, and seems to spring from nowhere. Are we supposed to regard it as part of the diegesis? Should we assume that a character in the film can hear it? The young man hardly seems to be a possible listener, as he is too far away for this extremely present, extremely loud music. As there is no other subject as yet, no one who would come into question in the diegetic world, the aria throws us back upon our own listening experience. As a result, our immersion in what is being shown shifts from the tactile experience of the building to the libidinous feelings conveyed by the aria.

But there is more. Disembodied voices demand that the person who is singing or speaking materialize, or “de-acousmatize,” as Michel Chion puts it,\(^9\) so as to return the voice’s corporeality. And a voice not only reveals its location in the body of the person from whom it emanates, it also finds an equal in the listener. This is even more the case the more melodic, flexible, full or modulated it becomes, reaching the height of its intenseness in the virtuoso soprano voices of the *bel canto*. Wayne Koestenbaum wrote a beautiful explanation of this phenomenon:

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8 It is certainly no coincidence that this same aria is frequently used in campy films, such as Wong Kar-wai’s *2046* (Hong Kong, 2004). It represents a kind of counterpart to Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries”, which has been heard frequently in movie theaters since D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (US, 1914), often to create a serious mood, but sometimes as an ironic element.

A singer’s voice sets up vibrations and resonances in the listener’s body. First, there are the physiological sensations we call “hearing.” Second, there are gestures of response with which the listener mimics the singer, expresses physical sympathy, appreciation, or exaltation: shudder, gasp, sigh; holding the body motionless, relaxing the shoulders, stiffening the spine. Third, the singer has presence, an expressive relation to her body – and presence is contagious. I catch it. The dance of sound waves on the tympanum, and the sigh I exhale in sympathy with the singer, persuade me that I have a body – if only by analogy, if only a second-best copy of the singer’s body. I’m a lemming, imprinted by the soprano, my existence an aftereffect of her crescendo. Straight socialization makes queer people discard their bodies; listening restores queer embodiment, if only for the duration of a phrase. Forceful displays of singing insist that the diva has a body and so do you because your heartbeat shifts in uncanny affinity with her ascent. Listening, your heart is in your throat: your throat, not the diva’s.10

Koestenbaum is explicitly addressing gay opera fans, so-called opera queens, and his euphoria represents an effusive pose at the same time. However, this phenomenon, in which listeners empathetically analogize themselves with the body of a singer, is widespread. Most viewers of CASTA DIVA will feel the diva’s voice in their own throat.

The figure at the window

The second figure appears near the end of the sequence and a few moments after the music has stopped. At first, nothing more than a slight movement is visible at the frame’s left edge, possibly that of a black curtain filling out. But it soon becomes evident that a man has stepped to the window, silhouetted against the light, his back to us. He moves slowly, at a barely noticeable pace, places his left hand on the window pane, then stands motionless until the scene’s end. His eyes seem to be directed to the right, where the young man still lingers at the balcony’s end, a diagonal counterpart. A homosexual scenario, in other words, heralded by the young man’s actions and the choice of music, and confirmed by the configuration

of the two men, who are linked by the axes of their gazes in a kind of mirror scene.\textsuperscript{11}

![Image](image-url)

The appearance of the second man is accompanied by a distinct restructuring of the scene, as he becomes the focus of our interest. This turns the young man on the balcony into a secondary figure whom we now see from the observer’s point of view. Suddenly, the action takes on a greater degree of narrative fictionality. The viewer’s reactions, now directed at the figures’ mental states, intensify. Although the film does not offer any supporting evidence, the now-ended aria seems to be connected with the second figure. Because of the music’s volume and clarity, the position at which it was heard must be closer to the camera’s placement, closer to us and to the second figure. He stands on the camera’s territory, as it were, and on this side of the gap that separates it from the building opposite.

One can imagine that the man who stepped to the window was either listening to a recording of the aria before entering our field of vision, or that the music was added in postproduction to underscore the image. In the first case, the music should be comprehended as part of the diegesis; in the second case, it is external to it. In both cases, it serves to reveal the feelings of the figure at the window. While the difference between the two

\textsuperscript{11} Numerous varieties of mirror scenes can be found in other episodes of CASTA DIVA; the pool scene in particular, approximately in the film’s middle, seems to echo the sequence described here.
interpretations may be theoretically crucial, it is not relevant to how the scene is received. The status of the music can therefore remain undecided, like so many elements in this sequence. The important factor is the aria's overpowering emotionality and its physical energy, which links it with the shadowy silhouette and almost motionless figure at the window, charging it with emotion, no matter how realistic or fictional the viewer chooses to regard the scene.

As part of the restructuring that follows the second man's appearance, the space surrounding him also redefines itself. The presence of the telephone at the lower edge of the frame once again becomes obvious to the viewer. It is a device that enables communication, suitable for bridging distances and connecting individuals. But it remains unused.12

And so the isolation of the man at the window solidifies.

The window pane

While some elements in the picture's composition clearly indicate that we are watching the scene through a window, the glass that separates interior and exterior was at first not perceptible. The building and its balcony seemed to be directly open to our gaze, and this impression changed only when the second figure appeared. With the gesture of placing his hand on the glass, he defines the invisible pane as if by means of a magic trick. At the same time the space closes, transforming itself from a theater box for the audience to an enclosure for the man at the window.

This gesture, too, can be read as an invitation to feel empathy. Figures with their backs turned toward us and their gaze directed in the same direction as ours serve as representatives for their observers. In this way, the composition of the image creates an inner affinity to the man, who is virtually anonymous and visible solely in silhouette. Thanks to the tactile exploration of the façade described above, which animated our fingertips to virtually caress the building, the current impulse is to lay our palms on the cool, smooth glass, which is inviting and pleasant.

The pane is parallel to the frame's edge in the same way as the building's façade. A planimetric layer has been added to the composition, an additional level which makes the action on the balcony suddenly seem farther away.

12 Eric de Kuyper explained that the telephone was crucial for the filming because it helped him direct the movements of the young man on the balcony. Not only was the camera set up inside the room, the filmmaker was there also, and the telephone indicates how the mise-en-scène was done.
But at the same time, a diagonal tension is created when the second figure attempts to catch the young man’s attention across the divide. This, however – if we imagine a story to unfold – augurs little hope of success. The dark elevated hand resembles a stop sign, suggesting that the sequence has come to an end without providing narrative closure.

The factor of time

The episode lasts nine minutes, sustaining its tension throughout and without losing the viewers’ interest. The amount of time we are able to observe this image, immobile but submitted to subtle changes, forces or allows us to closely discern all its ingredients and carefully measured phases. We follow the visual and acoustic stimuli that bind us to the screen and try to construct a lyrical or fictional context for what we are seeing. At first, during the silence that begins the episode, time almost seems to stand still, or is at least difficult to measure, and it stretches as in everyday life, when one gazes out a window. When the music starts, time flows dynamically, rhythmically, and is charged with emotion. Later, when the silence returns, time could theoretically stop again, although so much in the scene has changed.

The second period of silence has a different character than the first, despite the fact that it completes a symmetrical formal framework. On the one hand, it demonstrates the prevailing impact of the music, which still resounds in one’s ears, and for that reason the silence now resembles a pause rather than a gap in the film’s soundtrack; on the other, the music has triggered sensations and expectations regarding the narrative that would seem to herald its continuation or a change in the nature of what is being shown. But the longer the second man stands at the window, the more certain it becomes that the episode has come to an end. In the figure’s motionlessness and the silence in the room, time plays out without purpose. We soon realize that nothing more will happen.

In this way, the flow of time helps structure the action, and not just emotionally, but conceptually as well. As there is no indication that the story will progress – there is no reverse shot – the episode has become autonomous, isolating itself as a kind of lyrical sketch; or concentrating completely on a dispositif of the gaze, with a subdued fictional core. In retrospect or when viewed a second time, it therefore seems more dense, in a way homogenized, and less and less linear.
III.

In conclusion, I would like to review the processes that (could) take place with regard to the viewer's response. These processes involve a sensory reaction and empathy with the film in the broadest sense – projections and anticipations included – which intensify each other in synaesthetic interplay, thereby heightening our viewing pleasure.

Empathizing with the building can proceed according to various patterns: through the façade's anthropomorphic “facial expression”; as somatic empathy with the architecture's tactile appeal, especially when the light passes over it; as empathy with/projection into the building's potential use. The instrumental music provides us with an inner rhythm, moves us along in time, and surrounds the building. In addition, the strings mobilize sensations of climbing upward, opening oneself, a preparedness to experience ecstasy. The human voice, on the other hand, binds the music to the listener, as it can be perceived empathetically in one's own throat. Thus, the music serves a dual function: it fills the space, making it tangible in three dimensions, and it synchronizes the audience with the creation of notes in the singer's body. Lastly, we empathize with the figures: the young man, the one on the balcony, triggers a modicum of motor mimicry as we follow his movements, and affective empathy when we try to puzzle out the situation; moreover, there are processes of simulation, exploration, and, to an extent, projection. In contrast, the second figure becomes the viewer's representative – this is in a sense our own back in front of the window, our own hand being laid on the glass: processes of identification with the observer's point of view which are stronger than our empathy for the object of his gaze. We are also closer to this figure emotionally, as we imagine his mood and fantasize about the nature of his relationship with his counterpart on the balcony. The result is voyeuristic fascination, regret concerning the inaccessibility of the figure across the street, or an impulse to pick up the telephone.

Not only are our eyes and ears included in the process of reception, there is also a sense of touch. The fingertips in particular are affected, at times the throat, at times the entire body as a locomotor system. The empathetic and projective processes intensify one another, though in different ways. At first, the receptiveness to sensory stimuli increases when they are perceived accumulatively – and in the image, in the situation being portrayed and the action, they combine to create a total experience. On the other hand, there are shifts in emphasis, adjustments in the dominance of certain types of response. This takes place whenever a figure appears, and as a result the
exploration of the architecture fades into the background (though without stopping completely). This is also the case when the aria begins, when the light dims, and the listening experience predominates at certain points. When the silence returns, these two phases are combined. The effects of the music continue as an overall sense of excitement. Haptic exploration of the façade strengthens the motor mimicry we feel with regard to the second figure. And the heightened observation of the building carries over to the diagonal configuration of the two men. The “Casta Diva” episode does not fade out: it ends in concentrated sensory empathy.

*Translated by Steve Wilder*
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