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EDITED BY

BRIAN HENDERSON

AND ANN MARTIN

MARSHA KINDER

THE SUBVERSIVE POTENTIAL OF THE PSEUDO-ITERATIVE

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The *iterative* was introduced into contemporary narrative theory by French narratologist Gérard Genette in his ground-breaking work *Narrative Discourse,* where he considers "*narrative frequency*, that is, the relations of frequency (or, more simply, of repetition) between the narrative and the diegesis," which he claims is "one of the main aspects of narrative temporality." He describes the iterative as a type of narrative "where a single narrative utterance takes upon itself several occurrences together of the same event (in other words, . . . several events considered only in terms of their analogy)"—as in the example "every day of the week I went to bed early." Genette acknowledges that the *identity* of these multiple occurrences is debatable (i.e., that each instance of going to bed has its unique variations) and "that the 'repetition' is in fact a mental construction, which eliminates from each occurrence everything belonging to it that is peculiar to itself, in order to preserve only what it shares with all the others of the same class, which is an abstraction." Nevertheless, he defines the iterative as "*narrating one time* (or rather: *at one time*) *what happened* n *times*"; as opposed to narrating one time what happened one time (the *singulative*—as in the example "Yesterday, I went to bed early"); or narrating *n* times what happened *n* times (the *anaphoric*, as in "Monday I went to bed early, Tuesday I went to bed early, Wednesday I went to bed early, etc.," which is merely a multiple form of the singulative); or narrating *n* times what happened one time (the *repeating* narrative, as in "Yesterday I went to bed early, yesterday I went to bed early").[1]

Usually signalled in verbal discourse by the use of the imperfect tense ("I used to go to bed early") and normally limited to a subordinate descriptive function in classical literary narrative, the iterative aspect, according to Genette, can be traced all the way back to Homer, but was first liberated from "functional dependence" by Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* and most fully expanded "in textual scope, in thematic importance and in degree of technical elaboration" by Proust in *A la Recherche du temps perdu,* where it becomes

a key component of his radical innovation. What I intend to do in this essay is to explore how the elaboration of the iterative functions in filmic narrative and the filmic means by which it is signalled, particularly in works that attempt to make a radical break from existing narrative conventions.

THE PSEUDO-ITERATIVE IN HOLLYWOOD CLASSICAL CINEMA

Although Genette's elaboration of the iterative is commonly assumed to be one of his most important contributions to narrative theory, there has been surprisingly little application of this concept to cinema. A notable exception is Brian Henderson's essay, "Tense, Mood, and Voice in Film (Notes After Genette)," in which he attempts to describe how the iterative functions in classical Hollywood cinema in contrast to classical literary narrative. After noting that "in classical cinema, as in the classical novel, the iterative nearly always has an information or background function subordinate to singulative scenes," Henderson perceptively observes that what is far more central to cinema than to literature is the "pseudo-iterative"—an unusual mode that Genette finds in Proust and that he defines as "scenes presented, particularly by their wording in the imperfect, as iterative, whereas their richness and precision of detail ensure that no reader can seriously believe they occur and reoccur in that manner, several times, without any variation" (Genette, p. 121). Henderson notes:

> This happens occasionally in Proust; in cinema it is pervasive because "richness and precision of detail" seem to be inherent in photography and sound recording, at least in those practices of them engaged in by most films.[2]

Pursuing his comparison of the ways the iterative functions in cinema as opposed to literature, Henderson describes the opening scene from *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), where Huw's voice-over first establishes the iterative mode through his description of a typical day and through his repeated use of the word "would" (e.g., "Someone would strike up a song and the valley would ring with the sound of many voices . . . ") and then slips almost imperceptibly into the singulative ("It was on this afternoon that I first met Bron . . .").

Henderson observes:

> Most interesting, theoretically, is how and why such a slippage is possible in cinematic iterative; it would not be in literary narrative. Are the images neutrally either iterative or singulative, depending upon a voice-

How Green Was My Valley

over to define their temporal status? If so, then the continuity of the images may sustain us through a shift in tense, while the changed verbal tense tells us how to read the images. (Henderson, pp. 11–12)

Genette interprets analogous slippages in Proust (i.e., when he "inadvertently lets a necessarily singulative *passé simple* into the middle of a scene presented as iterative") as "so many signs that the writer himself sometimes 'lives' such scenes with an intensity that makes him forget the distinction of aspects." Rather than seeing them as a conscious artistic strategy, Genette reads them as "confusions" that "reflect in Proust a sort of *intoxication with the iterative*" (p. 123)—an intoxication that presumably is transmitted to the reader. I would argue that the particular form of pseudo-iterative that operates in classical Hollywood cinema generates in the spectator an *intoxication with the singulative*—an intoxication which uses iterative implications to naturalize the singulative and which renders the slippage between the two aspects invisible.

But this explanation doesn't really address Henderson's question of why subtler slippages are possible in classical cinema in contrast to classical literature. One could argue that (even beyond the issue of fictional reference within the diegesis) the specific nature of the cinematic apparatus constructs an inevitable slippage between the singulative and the iterative, which are established and associated respectively with the stages of production and exhibition. That is, in front of the camera and microphone, the footage seemingly speaks in the singulative, either in the present tense or in the simple past by

capturing and embalming the present moment ("this event is happening now as it is being recorded," or "this event happened in front of the camera and microphone").[3] In the theater at the point of exhibition and reception (and even during the post-production stage, where a single utterance may be constructed out of multiple takes), the footage of images and sounds recorded in the past could be read as speaking in the iterative ("the event now being uttered/projected used to occur while this scene was being shot and in all previous projections"). In a discourse that tries to efface all traces of this dual system, such as Hollywood classical cinema, the emphasis is primarily on the singulative and on the illusory construction of a present tense; references to the past tend to be clearly marked out by voice-overs and/or flashbacks, as in the example Henderson cites from *How Green Was My Valley*.

One could also argue that the slippage into the iterative is more easily accomplished in cinema because, unlike the sentence, the film utterance is initially atemporal and its tense is therefore established contextually by discourse. That is, the film utterance is not *required* to have a tense and therefore (unlike the literary utterance) there is not always a clearly established tense for the iterative to suspend or displace. On the other hand, as Edward Branigan has pointed out, spatial relations in the film utterance must be clearly defined (that is, the camera must be *somewhere*).[4] This might suggest that in cinema there is a tendency to spatialize the iterative—i.e., to use spatial relations to generate iterative implications of frequency.

Thus, I would argue that it is not only voice-overs that can redefine the aspect of frequency of any cinematic image or scene, especially those involving spatial relations and representations of typicality, but also other stylistic operations within a narrative. In classical Hollywood cinema, it's the iterative aspect that tends to remain hidden; and that's why, as Henderson observes, when the iterative aspect is acknowledged, it is nearly always subordinated as mere descriptive background to what appear to be singulative events, whose distinguishing details are frequently accentuated by close-ups, editing codes of continuity (such as shot/reverse shot), or foregrounding of linear plot structure. This emphasis is hardly surprising since, as Genette observes, the singulative form of narrative is "so common, and apparently considered so 'normal' that it bears no name" (p. 114); that's why he coins the neologism *singulative*. Thus, it's the singulative nature of cinema that always tends to be foregrounded in classical cinema, even when those singular events take on what I would call an "iterative implication." This implication suggests that this particular narrative is a single telling of a class of events that habitually or typically occur in this set of circumstances, period, or culture—a dimension that is consistent with Aristotelian norms of probability and strongly reinforced by the normative power of popular Hollywood gen-

res. Yet because this iterative aspect is only implicit (and somewhat analogical rather than strictly grammatical) and the precision of rich detail literally foregrounded, "some [as Henderson cautiously observes] might take an ultra-literal position and say that this makes the iterative impossible in cinema; its images and sounds are always singulative" (p. 12).

I am arguing precisely the opposite position: namely, that the iterative is inherent in cinema, either through the pseudo-iterative (as defined by Genette and modified by Henderson, where there is an explicit acknowledgement that the event is presented in the iterative aspect despite the rich perceptual detail in the image), or through the iterative implication (where the acknowledgement of the iterative repetition is only implicit and positioned within a scene presented as singulative). One might reasonably object at this point that my usage of the term iterative may have moved too far away from its strictly grammatical usage in *Narrative Discourse*, yet Genette himself acknowledges that his grammatical terms "are merely borrowed" and that he makes "no pretense of basing them on rigorous homologies" (p. 32).

Genette confines the iterative to temporal relations and to utterances about past events. Yet by acknowledging that iterative repetition depends on the mental construction of a class (or paradigm) of similar instances, he opens a space within the iterative for the issue of typicality. Since temporality, as we have seen, is not foregrounded in film the way it is in literature, I am arguing that it is this issue of typicality that is usually foregrounded by the iterative in cinema. Within Hollywood classical cinema, the combination of rich perceptual detail and strong emphasis on genre not only generates iterative implications, but also uses them to naturalize the singulative event. The combination suggests that this particular narrative utterance is realistic or truthful in the sense of being habitual, typical, or inevitable, while the determination (the diachronic limits of the series) and the specification (of how frequently it occurs) are significantly left indefinite. Often a classical film will begin with scenes depicting normal, typical actions, from which the singulative narrative will soon deviate; though such scenes are technically presented in the singulative, they carry iterative implications (particularly through spatial relations) that are extended to the singulative plot.

Two brief examples should suffice. *Duel in the Sun* (1946) opens with an extravagant prologue, in which a lushly colored landscape and overblown literary voice-over boldly place the story of Pearl Chavez in the mythic past. Although we are told that this legend and the figurative stone that commemorates it have withstood the test of time, it's the dramatic setting (rather than the particular moment) that is truly singular. Pearl's uniqueness is explicitly symbolized by a rare cactus flower that blooms every year, but only here in this unique space

where she and her lover died. Though clearly presented as extraordinary, this opening supposedly depicts what happened many times (the blooming of the flower, the survival of the stone, the telling of her story). Yet, this prologue arouses our curiosity not about these repetitions (which are only the background), but about the dramatic climax—the death of "the wild young lovers"—which already occurred in the past, but toward which the singulative narrative will inevitably be moving.

Once inside the story, we are immediately confronted with the same conflation of the habitual action with the extraordinary singulative event. We move directly to a close shot of the young Pearl as she dances seductively for a group of youngsters outside the Presidio, and then inside where her mother is doing a similar dance for scores of men and where her father is losing at cards ("broke again?") and being humiliated by the other players ("he's not so fancy about his wife"). By being introduced to these characters through these actions, we assume that they perform them every night, yet simultaneously we realize that this night will lead to a singulative climax. Both dancers are approached by a man who makes the iterative trace between them explicit (telling Pearl, "like mother, like daughter") and who triggers the slippage into the singulative (by kissing Pearl's mother in front of her husband and by taking her off to make love). While implying the previous series, this single utterance explicitly depicts only the *final* humiliation, which leads Pearl's father to shoot his wife and her lover as Pearl and we look on, intoxicated with the singulative. Yet the prologue enables us to see the iterative implications in this action: to realize that Pearl met a fate similar to her mother's, and to read both of these framing melodramatic climaxes as probable, inevitable, foretold.

A Place in the Sun (1951) opens with a long shot of a hitchhiker with a suitcase trying to thumb a ride from a passing car on a curved highway. It's a familiar image we all recognize, although the time, place, and character are ambiguous. At first we can't see him very well because he has his back to the camera and his body is partially covered by the opening titles which appear over this scene. But, because of his suitcase, we assume he has hitchhiked a long way, and that this filmic utterance is meant to depict an action that has been repeated along many different stretches of highway. Gradually, as the titles conclude, he backs toward the camera in the foreground. As soon as he turns around, this image ceases to function as background and slips into the singulative: for we recognize the extraordinary face of the young Montgomery Clift and the camera moves in for a tight, fully lit close-up of his half smile as something unusual captures his attention. Then there's a cut to the object of his gaze—an outdoor poster of a glamour girl, with the headline "It's an Eastman." At that very moment a horn from a passing car draws his attention back to the road just in time to see Elizabeth Taylor (who turns out to be his rich cousin, an Eastman) driving

by in a Cadillac convertible. The contrived convergence of image, name, and vehicle prefigure the inevitable conclusion toward which the singulative linear narrative will be driving. Like the roadside collision of Oedipus and Laius, this coincidence appears to be predestined. It expresses the young man's intoxication with the singulative assumptions of romance: the belief that she's the love of his life, his single chance for happiness, his missed opportunity—a belief that will lead him to consider murder. But now this elusive object of desire drives out of sight and, as if awakened from his revery, he goes over to the dilapidated truck that has stopped to give him a ride. In this opening, the contrast between typicality and singulative romance is figured as a choice between two narrative vehicles (the truck that could have driven out of *Grapes of Wrath* and the glamorous convertible that belongs to bourgeois melodrama) and between the long shot and the large facial close-up. The narrative will constantly maneuver between these two modes, using the iterative traces of drab typicality to intensify the desirability of the singulative romance.

Although (unlike *How Green Was My Valley*) neither of these openings uses the pseudo-iterative, they still use iterative implications to naturalize the linear drive of the narrative and to intensify the intoxication with the singulative. Yet the slippage between the iterative and the singulative remains barely visible.

But if the iterative implications and the slippage between the two aspects were ever foregrounded, then they would potentially call attention to the process of naturalizing ideology through the reading of singulative events of fiction as universal truth, a reading that reinforces the dominant cultural paradigms and genres. This is precisely what happens in a wide range of films where the narrative experimentation is designed to make a sharp break from the prevailing conventions of narrative discourse.

In the rest of this essay, I will explore a few examples of how such foregrounding functions in two quite different filmic contexts: Italian neorealism, where narrative discourse was intentionally distinguished from the dominant practice of Hollywood classical cinema; and the radical feminist avant-garde of the late 1970s and 80s, where one of the primary goals of narrative experimentation was to subvert the sadistic drive of the oedipal plot, that key master narrative of Western patriarchal culture.[5] I will argue that, despite the striking differences in the historical, cultural, and stylistic contexts of these two kinds of subversive film practice, the specific texts under analysis all use the foregrounded slippage between iterative and singulative to undermine the linear drive of the narrative and to retrain the spectator for a more attentive, speculative reading of richly detailed images and sounds. In these analyses, I do not mean to exaggerate the stylistic unity of these two contexts or to suggest that either of them functions as a monolithic entity; rather, I merely want to sketch some broad stylistic tendencies in their usage and signalling of the iterative aspect of narrative.

ITALIAN NEOREALISM: THE PSEUDO-ITERATIVE AS NARRATIVE RUPTURE IN *UMBERTO D* AND *IL POSTO*

Within the neorealist aesthetic, rich photographic detail frequently functions to express not the singulative (as in Hollywood classical cinema) but the iterative. Although the iterative is sometimes signalled by voice-overs (as in films like *La Terra Trema*, *Paisà*, and *Amore in città*), it more typically is marked by visual operations, particularly through spatial determinations. The referential interplay between the singulative event and the paradigm it represents is frequently played out spatially in terms of foreground and background. Yet, the iterative background is not merely "descriptive" or subordinate as in Hollywood classical cinema, but at least co-equal, normative, and determinant in ideological terms—relations that can be established by spatial or temporal continuity through depth composition or long takes punctuated by ellipses. Individuals and their actions are chosen precisely because they are representative and typical in an iterative sense; the anonymous characters in the background are not used merely as a backdrop against which to distinguish the singularity of the protagonist (a singularity which then is invisibly transformed into a norm as in classical Hollywood cinema), but rather as a means of explicitly acknowledging the iterative aspect and the slippage between it and the singulative dimensions of this particular occurrence within the series.

For example, the singular protagonists of DeSica's *Bicycle Thief* and *Umberto D* are introduced within a crowd, from which they are visibly selected for foregrounding during an habitual event (a daily hiring of workers, or one of the frequent impromptu demonstrations in postwar Rome). Yet it's the typicality of these characters and their events that are valued and repeatedly emphasized, not their singularity. Similarly, the multiple protagonists of Rossellini's *Open City* and *Paisà* emerge from events involving large numbers of people, events that are already in progress and that are presumed to be illustrative of a common series that frequently occurred during a specific historical period in a specific location. The precision of detail in the image helps identify the paradigm to which the particular characters and events belong; the long take and depth focus, and even the montage structure at the opening of *Umberto D* and *Shoeshine*, continue to acknowledge the connection between the individual and the paradigm, between the singulative and the iterative aspects.

UMBERTO D (1951)

The use of visual codes to express the neorealist intoxication with the pseudo-iterative and to control the slippage between the iterative and the singulative can be demonstrated in a celebrated sequence from *Umberto D*, which is frequently

cited as the "purest" example of the neorealist aesthetic. The sequence where the pregnant maid does her morning chores seems to contribute nothing whatever to the advancement of the narrative line; rather, it merely presents her ordinary daily moves. Bazin calls it "a perfect illustration of [the DeSica–Zavattini] approach to narrative, . . . the exact opposite of that 'art of ellipsis' . . . [which] presupposes analysis and choice." He defines it as "the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis."[6]

By presenting the maid's ordinary morning routines, this totally nonverbal sequence clearly foregrounds the iterative. Yet, perhaps even more important for my argument here, it also trains the spectator in how to read the familiar moves both of the maid and of the camera and editing and to thereby deduce what she is probably thinking. Moreover, these cognitive tasks will be required later in the two singulative events that *are* crucial to the narrative line—the two moments when the old man Umberto contemplates suicide. Thus, in this sense, the sequence *does* contribute to the narrative by renegotiating the relationship between the iterative and the singulative, a relationship which proves essential to our understanding of what happens in the film.

In the representation of this particular morning our attention is first drawn to the old man Umberto who stands in the foreground, phoning the ambulance to take him away to the hospital, arranging a singulative event that will distinguish this day from all others. The maid appears behind him in the background, as part of the ordinary context against which Umberto's singulative event is to be read. When the film cuts to the maid, lying on her back in bed, there is a noticeable slippage to the iterative, which now takes over the foreground. Her ordinary morning routines fill in the time (or temporal gap in the narrative) that it takes the ambulance to come for Umberto. As Bazin suggests, this sequence rejects narrative ellipsis.

Yet Bazin fails to notice that the way her actions are represented visually is not always consistent with what we normally identify as the neorealist aesthetic. For example, this sequence does not rely on the long take, but has at least seventeen intra-sequence cuts. In the very first shot, the maid rubs her eyes, drawing our attention to her gaze. Then there's a cut to the object of her gaze—an upward-angle long shot of a cat walking across the roof seen through a screen-like surface with a striking graphic design. This shot stands out, not because it depicts an unusual event (undoubtedly, like the maid, the cat is pursuing its daily morning routines), but because the almost abstract formalism of the visuals is not characteristic of the neorealist aesthetic. This shot is followed by a cut back to the maid, which then moves in closer to her gaze, anchoring it firmly within the suturing structure (shot/reverse shot/shot) normally associated with classical Hollywood cinema. This suture works toward the kind of emotional identification that is also typical of DeSica and Zavattini. Then the camera follows the

Umberto D

maid into the kitchen where we see her performing a number of household tasks in a series of long and medium shots more typical of neorealism. Three shots later there is a medium shot of her through the window, and then she and the camera move toward each other, a convergence which again calls our attention both to her gaze and to our own. The reverse shot reveals the object of her gaze in an exterior long shot—a white cat walking along the slanted roof, evoking the earlier more abstract image of the cat through the screen, and then there's a cut back to her gaze through the window.

Despite Bazin's claims that no one instant in this sequence is more important than any other, the formal repetition (of the shot/reverse shot suture, of the camera moving in closer to her gaze, and of the cat imagery) privileges these two moments. This repeated pattern leads us not only to identify with the young maid, but also to speculate on her thoughts: perhaps she, too, is identifying with the feline, envying its freedom, particularly in light of her pregnant condition. This hypothesis is strengthened a little later when she looks down at her slightly swollen belly,

and the camera moves in tighter, almost to a close-up of her face, which reveals her eyes blinking, as if to ward off the tears that will appear a few moments later. What's really at stake here is not whether we reach a "correct" interpretation of what she is thinking, but rather that we learn how to read the phenomenology of her moves and how to recognize the filmic codes that elicit such speculations.

All three of the visual codes that have been foregrounded in this sequence through repetition—the shot/reverse shot suture, the striking camera movement (or zoom) that closes in on the gaze, and the accelerated tempo of the cutting—are used again later (and intensified through the accompaniment of dramatic non-diegetic music) in the two melodramatic sequences, where Umberto considers suicide: first, when he stands at his window staring at the streetcar tracks below, and finally, when he carries his dog to the railroad tracks and nearly lunges in the path of an on-coming train. In both cases he is prevented from acting out his suicidal impulse by the presence of the dog, another inarticulate creature (like the cat in the maid's morning sequence, or like the anonymous poor backgrounded by the narrative) whose readable gestures serve as the basis of emotional identification for spectators trained by the neorealist aesthetic. If we are *un*able to read these silent moves and gestures (or what Pasolini would later call *im-signs*), then we prove to be less trainable than Umberto's clever little mutt, whose ability to decipher these nonverbal signs saves both himself and his master.

IL POSTO (1961)

The spectatorial retraining function of the neorealist pseudo-iterative is perhaps most notable in Ermanno Olmi's *Il Posto* (*The Job*, aka *The Sound of Trumpets*, 1961). Unlike the earlier classics within the movement, this latter-day neorealist work documents not the economic failure of the poor but rather the "successful" entry of a timid young man from a Lombardy suburb into the dehumanizing world of bureaucracy in Milan—"that city" which (we are told in an opening title) "is primarily a place to work." Not only is Domenico's typicality underlined by this title and by the scores of other young people who surround him at work, in the busy streets of Milan, or in his own suburban tenement, but at one point in this fairly conventional linear narrative there is a dramatic rupture that marks a sudden slippage into the iterative—a rupture that is far more blatant than the maid sequence in *Umberto D.*

Up to that point the narrative has consistently followed the inarticulate Domenico, leading us to focus on his closely observed movements and to read his facial expressions and gestures (almost as if we were watching a silent film). Now it presents a series of brief elliptical scenes (linked by dissolves) which show how five clerks from one office typically spend their evenings: working on

a novel, cultivating a dashing appearance, retaining vestigial possessions from a lost aristocratic past, singing arias at a cafe, interacting with a difficult son. Ironically, though these scenes differentiate the clerks by revealing the various ways in which they try to preserve their individual identity, the narrative form in which they are presented suggests an illustrative montage, which stresses the typicality rather than the uniqueness of the behavior depicted. Depending on how one sees its articulation with the scene that introduces it, this sequence could be read either as what Genette calls the *generalizing, external iteration,* where an iterative passage within a singulative scene "opens a window onto the external period," or as the *internal, synthesizing iteration,* where there is an "enumeration of a certain number of classes of occurrences, each of which synthesizes several events . . . not over a wider period of time, but over the period of time of the scene itself" (pp. 118–119).

The series is introduced by a conversation in the office between two co-workers who are speculating about a near-sighted clerk, calling him "a sneaky type." Then there's a cut to that same clerk at home alone in his sparsely furnished room, laboring over a manuscript. When his landlady spies on him through a keyhole, she admits that she's unable to tell what kind of writing he's doing ("God knows what he's writing!") but she does identify the activity as iterative by explicitly telling us that he does it every night. The voyeuristic motivation for the scene, its minimalism and ambiguity, its emphasis on interpretation, its punctuating dissolves—all raise the additional possibility that this scene may represent not what the near-sighted clerk *actually* does on that or any other specific night, but rather merely a reasonable speculation.

By the time we reach the fifth scene, where the middle-aged woman clerk discovers her wallet is empty and painfully concludes that she's been robbed by her son, the narrative seems to have slipped back to the singulative, preparing us for the cut back to the office where the camera pans across the other clerks as they stare at the same poor woman who sits at her desk silently weeping. This narrative continuity tends to anchor this particular elliptical scene temporally, locating it specifically during the previous night, but still leaving ambiguous whether the scenes of the other four clerks also took place during that same night, or whether the scene leading into the montage (the co-workers speculating about the "sneaky" near-sighted clerk) occurred on the same day as the scene that followed it. Yet, since we learned in an earlier scene that this same woman had previously been late to work three times this month (presumably because of similar problems with her son), even this specific incident could be read as merely one typical illustration of what causes her daily misery.

This disruptive sequence of elliptical scenes is evoked again near the end of the film, when there's a direct cut from the gaiety of a New Year's Eve party to the silent panning across the same clerks as they grimly stare at the empty desk

of their near-sighted co-worker, and then to a montage of artistic stills of his empty room, linked by dissolves. Not only does this dramatic rupture signify death (both in the narrative and in the linear structure of a man's life), it also creates an opening for the protagonist Domenico, which allows him to advance from messenger boy to clerk. Thus, this rupture helps to transform our reading of the film—from the singulative story of a young white-collar worker finding his place in the world, to an iterative account of the recurring cycle in which workers struggle to maintain their humanity within a dehumanizing bureaucracy, a cycle which is part of Italy's so-called economic miracle. This rupture also exposes the narrative gaps that have been there all along (e.g., the stories of minor characters or losers, like the married man who failed the examination and didn't get the job). It also brings to mind earlier montage sequences in the film, like the montage of urban construction that is part of the literal background for Domenico's and Antonietta's lunch break in the city and also the historical background of industrialization, which proves more instrumental than the narrative in determining their future. And, on a more abstract level, it also reveals the structural similarity between ellipses and montage (which had always been so ambiguous in Bazin's treatment of Rossellini and the neorealist aesthetic).

The blatancy of the iterative dimension in these narrative ruptures also calls attention to the more subtle iterative implications in other, more conventional sequences—i.e., to the various ways in which characters and actions are positioned within paradigms and repetitive cycles. For example, we see how Domenico's interaction with the cold patriarchal boss and his warm, mediating maternal secretary echoes his relationship with his parents. We perceive how the spatial arrangement of the rows of clerks facing their supervisor duplicates the classroom hierarchy between students and teacher. We recognize traces of the dehumanizing fascist aesthetic in the over-sized scale of the corporate lobby, with its rigid rules (only four to an elevator) and uniformed staff (someone even jokingly asks Domenico whether he's a member of the Gestapo). We recall the book-strap that Domenico is forced to pass down to his younger brother in the opening sequence, or his careful observance of other customers in the coffee bar to learn how to tip and what to do with his cup, or his watching through the window to see how the previous group of applicants is responding to the physical exam.

By specularizing this iterative aspect, the film reminds us that we also learn such conventions from watching movies. Even *Il Posto* is self-consciously positioned within the paradigm of neorealism, but with its historical "difference" duly noted. In one scene an old man enters the corporate building, having mistaken it for the welfare office. When he asks for the office that gives out money to the poor, he's told he's in the wrong building. He could just as easily have been told that he's in the wrong movie, for clearly he belongs in a neorealist classic like *Bicycle Thief* or *Umberto D.* Yet it's easy to understand his error

Olmi's *Il Posto:* The spatial arrangement of the rows of desks facing the supervisor duplicates the classroom hierarchy between students and teachers.

because the architecture (of the corporate building and welfare office) and the film aesthetic (of *Il Posto* and neorealist classics) look very similar.

The neorealist classic that is singled out for specific comparison is quite properly *Umberto D*, which helped to mark the end of the movement as well as its entry into the world of middle-class white-collar workers. *Il Posto* recycles many images that are found in *Umberto D*: the cafeteria with its cheap food, the niggardly landlady who harasses the lonely bureaucrat, and the old man with a small dog riding on a streetcar. In one sequence, when the young applicants are being led down the street in an orderly line, an old man with a dog asks what is going on. When Domenico tells him it's for a job, the old man remarks, "That's a laugh!" We can't help but be reminded of the retired bureaucrat Umberto, who knows from bitter experience that disappointment awaits these prospective white-collar workers. Yet while he probably thinks it has to do with material conditions like inadequate pensions, here the problem is seen as the dehumanization of the individual. Such a view can also be found in the silent comedies of Chaplin and Keaton, many of whose conventions are also absorbed in *Il Posto* and whose basic humanism was seen by Bazin as compatible with neorealism. Thus, *Il Posto* is not merely an updated version of *Umberto D*; rather, it offers a different analysis of the problems, one that extends ever further back to the beginnings of both cinema and industrialization. In this way, the film's intertextuality (both with neorealism and American silent comedy) names the paradigm to

which the film belongs and becomes another means of marking a slippage into the iterative.

In such a reading of the film, there is no need for narrative closure. Thus, we are not disappointed that we never find out whether Domenico gets the girl or gets ahead to the front row. What we see represented is one man's entry and another's exit from the same subject position, which has been constructed by the economic system of postwar Italy. The linearity of the narrative is shown to be merely an illusion of progress, of getting ahead. This reading is underscored by the emblematic ending, where the "personal" belongings (including the unread life work) of the dead clerk are carelessly tossed aside while another worker turns the handle of a mimeograph machine, producing identical copies from a single master. As we see a large facial close-up of Domenico, blinking with discomfort in his new post, and then see the film title *Il Posto* (which in Italian refers both to the "position" and to the victorious sound of trumpets) superimposed on his face, we hear the repetitive droning of the mimeograph machine. The extreme length of the close-up gives us time to speculate on what the young man may be thinking: perhaps, that this is a sound, not of economic triumph, but of spiritual defeat.

In these sequences from *Umberto D* and *Il Posto*, the neorealist *intoxication with the iterative* immerses the spectator not in the emotional intensity of personal memory as in Proust, but in the ideological relations between individual and collective experience.

THE FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE: THE PSEUDO-ITERATIVE AS SEMIOTIC TRANSGRESSION IN *TOUTE UNE NUIT*

The radical experimentation in Chantal Akerman's *Toute une nuit* (1982) goes much further in deconstructing traditional narrative and in revealing how the slippage between the iterative and the singulative helps to naturalize dominant ideology. The film challenges not only woman's position in narrative, but also the very structure of narrative and language, for they are the primary signifying systems that have held women in captivity under patriarchy by making their subordination seem natural and inevitable rather than culturally inscribed.

Instead of leading us into emotional identification with the characters on screen, the film enables us to see that, as in all movies, the specific images and sounds have been selected from familiar cultural paradigms and combined to generate narratives. In *Toute une nuit* we find the traditional vocabulary and moves of the melodramatic narrative: the rendezvous, separations, and reunions, the

romantic triangles, balcony scenes, and slow dances, the taxis, telephones, and cigarettes, the waiting women and even waiting men—in short, the problems of the couple. Yet there is no driving linear thrust and no climactic "big bang" resolutions. Instead, these familiar components are positioned within a comfortably paced, rhythmic cycle of recurrence that grants us plenty of time for the perceptual pleasure of savoring the painterly visuals (with their strong graphic compositions and lush colors) and the rich textures of sound and image (with their unpredictable rhythms). And also plenty of time for the conceptual pleasure of enjoying the wit and of figuring out how these components are connected.

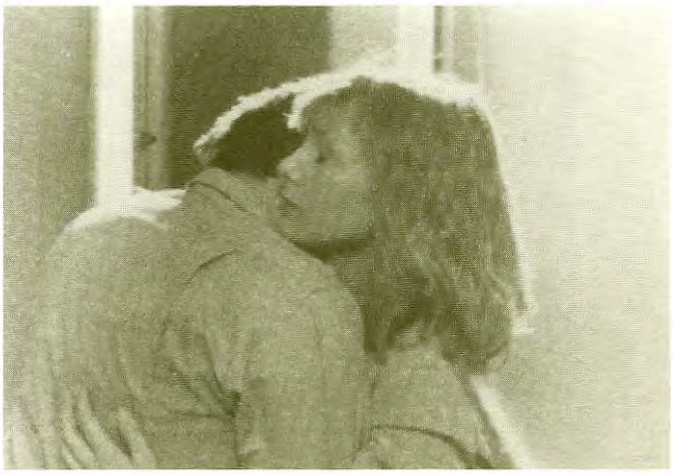
The title, *Toute une nuit* (a whole night), immediately foregrounds the dual axes of selection and combination—those linchpins of Saussurian and Jakobsonian semiotics. On the one hand, the title designates a temporal unit based on a natural cycle, night and day (a primordial opposition like male and female). Yet, since the film is only 91 minutes long, there must be omissions, so the artistic process of human selection (which is necessarily culturally coded) is also involved. While the *toute* stresses the illusion of unity and completeness, the indefinite article *une* acknowledges the selection of one discrete unit from the paradigm.

Both Roman Jakobson and Roland Barthes recognized that the reversal of these axes of selection and combination is a form of "semiotic transgression" with great subversive potential. According to Barthes,

> It is probably around this transgression that a great number of creative phenomena are situated, as if perhaps there were here a junction between the field of aesthetics and the defections from the semantic system. The chief transgression is obviously the extension of a paradigm on to the syntagmatic plane, since normally only one term of the operation is actualized, the other (or others) remaining potential: this is what would happen, broadly speaking, if one attempted to elaborate a discourse by putting one after the other all the terms of the same declension.[7]

In *Toute une nuit* Akerman commits this "semiotic transgression" by reversing the two axes of selection and combination. Instead of selecting units from different paradigms and combining them together in a linear fashion to create a story, she strings together units from the same paradigm, thereby extending a paradigm on to the syntagmatic plane. This transgression reveals the grammar of melodrama and its naturalized slippage from the singulative to the iterative and frustrates the conventional demand for the linear drive of the story.

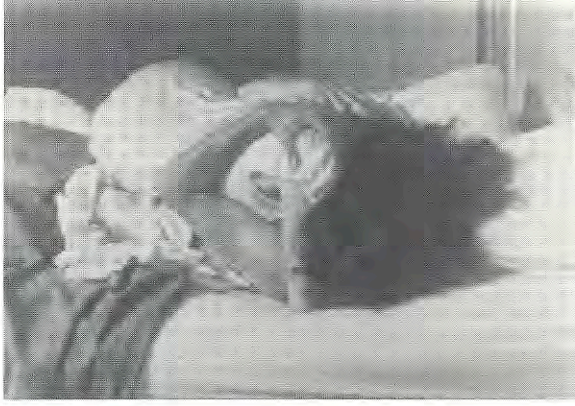
The opening montage immediately foregrounds the cinematic process of selection and combination. It selects and combines images—of a street, traffic, a



Toute une nuit

fence, a woman walking, a man going downstairs, someone getting on a streetcar, a car driving toward the camera, its headlights beaming, a very young couple huddling together inside—and sounds of traffic, of a pop song on the radio, of footsteps. These typical sights and sounds of a city at night are mobile units of signification that will be recombined in a variety of ways to generate mini-stories in the 90 minutes that follow. We don't yet know whether this is documentary footage of ordinary people or actors performing in a fiction. We don't yet understand the connections between the shots—if the couple in the vehicle is in any way connected to the woman walking or to the man descending the stairs. Yet the formal structure of the editing leads us to consider such connections. This opening also strongly evokes the iterative—or more specifically, what Genette calls "the synthesizing iteration," where the scene is "synthesized by a sort of paradigmatic classification of the events composing it" (pp. 118–119). The brief scenes are presented in such a way as to suggest that these or similar events occur every night—an aspect that was already implicit in the title *Toute une nuit* and that will be intensified in the sequences that follow by having so many different sets of characters of different ages, gender, and class perform similar moves. Thus the film demonstrates the iterative's subtle slippage, not only with the singulative, but also with the anaphoric (narrating *n* times what happens *n* times) and the repeating form of narrative (narrating *n* times what happens once). It extends onto the syntagmatic plane the full paradigm not only of melodrama but also of narrative frequency.

The first dramatic sequence that follows seems to narrow the narrative choices. It moves indoors to observe a single character in a long take with a distanced, static camera. We recognize signifiers of fiction: the actress Aurore



Toute une nuit

Clément, who starred in a previous Akerman film, *Les Rendezvous d'Anna*. We also recognize conventions of melodrama: the red low-cut dress that suggests she's not a virgin. After restlessly pacing, phoning a man and then hanging up, she says dramatically, "I love him." Suddenly she leaves the room and goes out into the night to hail a cab, walking past men loitering in the street and past the cafe which is the diegetic source for the Middle-Eastern music on the sound track. After she and the taxi have driven off, the camera holds on the space, raising the question: what is more important, the characters and their actions, or the spaces in which they are positioned? Such spaces are foregrounded in the film's opening montage, are associated with the role of women in the traditional male-dominated narrative, and are privileged by the Proustian form of iterative (for, as Genette observes, the "Proustian creature" is "as little sensitive to the individuality of moments as he is spontaneously sensitive to the individuality of places," p. 123). Eventually the camera leads us to the woman's destination, the man's apartment where she watches him pacing upstairs, just as she had earlier been pacing.

This sequence leads us to believe *the story has begun,* but it has its deviations from traditional narrative: not only the pause at the space left by the taxi (which suggests a reluctance to pursue the linear drive of the story), but also the reversals in gender. Here it's not the man but the woman who actively pursues erotic desire. Here it's the woman who leads the camera and the story to her destination, controlling the erotic gaze as the voyeur, and the man who is the object of her gaze.

Much later in the film we will return to this same woman, admitting a man (perhaps the same man) into her apartment. And in the final sequence, we will return to this same woman reflecting on this or a similar object of desire, even though she will be in the arms of another man. It doesn't seem to matter

whether it *is* the same man, for they all seem to function as substitutable members of the same paradigm, the object of desire, just as she (as a shifter) has been selected from this same paradigm by the man whom we now see embracing her. And we recognize a similar interchangeability for all of the characters in the film—all belonging to the paradigms of pursuer and pursued within this grammar of romance. In the final sequence she will receive a return phone call from her lover and deliver a repetitive monologue on their relationship, which will fragment him as she considers why she loves him ("Maybe it's his mouth . . . or his eyes . . . or his chin . . . or the way he talks . . ."), just as women have traditionally been fragmented in Hollywood classical cinema. This monologue also offers other reasons for her desire that depend on the contexts of the setting ("I'm so tired . . . it's so hot . . . I should have gone on holiday . . . the music is so lovely") and on the strangeness of the narrative ("I can't understand it"). Ironically, these recurrences of this woman's pursuit of desire provide the film with a false promise of narrative continuity and perfect narrative closure for a film without a story, or more precisely, a film with too many stories that are unconventionally short, or a film with all of the linguistic signs of melodrama but combined in an unconventional syntax.

The three brief sequences that follow make us realize that our initial expectations about the first dramatic sequence are wrong. They provide no linear development of that story; the same woman does not reappear. Eventually we realize that all four sequences are examples from the same paradigm: of a man and woman getting (or not getting) together, four variations on the problematic couple in the same situation all strung together on the syntagmatic plane. And this situation is merely one paradigm in the grammar of romance. Moreover, all four sequences function as pseudo-iterative. Like Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu,* the narrative which Genette selects as the single focus of his theoretical analysis, *Toute une nuit* liberates the iterative from its purely descriptive function. In showing not what happened a single time, but what used to happen and still happens, typically, regularly, ritually, or every night, it explores and expands the iterative aspect—"in textual scope, in thematic importance, in degree of technical elaboration" (p. 117). Akerman demonstrates how such elaboration can take on a subversive function in cinema where, because of the realistic (or indexical) potential of the photographic image, the iterative aspect calls attention to the process of naturalizing the ideology carried by singulative instances of fiction—as if they were the inevitable Truth, as if we spectators can never escape these paradigms of gender and romance.

Here is what we actually see in these three sequences. In the first, a woman in a red jacket is seated in a cafe, waiting in the foreground, with men shooting pool in the background. A man enters, pauses at the door, and then he and the

woman passionately embrace. This scene brings to our attention certain binary oppositions: coming together or not coming together (as in the previous sequence), foreground versus background, stillness versus movement. These binary oppositions apply not only thematically to the issue of romantic relationships but also reflexively to the issue of what constitutes narrative.

In the second sequence, a man and a woman are seated apart at separate tables in a cafe. Each stares at a glass, each turns to the other as the other turns away. The man gets up to leave, then the woman gets up to leave. The man returns and they suddenly embrace. Their actions are separate but parallel, like the sequences in this narrative, but then they unpredictably cohere, like the film's false narrative closure in the final sequence. The dynamics of space and the gestural movements of the characters become pointedly expressive. There is no verbal language to distract us. We recognize the meaning of these gestural movements by comparing and contrasting them with the similar movements we saw in the previous two sequences. The repetitions with variations help to code them and make us read them as language. It's a language we know from our past: from silent cinema, and from our infantile days before speech. It's a gestural language that semioticians like Pasolini and Eco have tried to theorize and that was foregrounded in the sequences we analyzed from *Umberto D* and *Il Posto*. After seeing this sequence in *Toute une nuit*, we will be more conscious of gestural and spatial language in all of the scenes that follow.

In the third sequence, three persons (two young men and a woman) are seated together in the same cafe, smoking. Suddenly one man gets up and leaves, then the second young man follows, then the woman. All three stand outside the cafe in the street. The blond man asks the woman: "Who are you going with?" After pausing a moment and getting no verbal response, both men walk off screen in opposite directions (left and right), and the woman moves directly toward the camera out of the frame. It's the first scene that explicitly foregrounds the romantic triangle and the dynamics of selection that control narrative as well as romance—the choice of which character to follow. It also evokes the first dramatic sequence with Aurore Clément in at least three formal ways: by returning to the use of verbal language (with only the second line of dialogue in the film), by repeating the option of *not getting together,* and by relying on the combination of interior and exterior scenes. In struggling to perceive coherence, we find ourselves making connections between sequences on formal rather than on narrative grounds.

At this point, the film makes another unexpected move. For the first time it returns to characters from an earlier sequence—to the lovers who had sat apart at the cafe. Now we watch them dancing passionately to a romantic song on the juke box. Once again, the narrative rules of the film are altered, causing us to adjust our expectations, but also granting us an immediate sensory pleasure in

the schmaltzy music on the sound track and in the lyrical image of the lovers dancing in the smoky cafe. Within the luminous blue-green light, the movements of the woman's vibrant hair and the couple's swaying bodies compete with the slow graceful swirling of the smoke deep in the background. Sound and image also compete for our attention. The emotional excessiveness of the music underlines the recurrence of getting together—not only the romantic reunion of the dancing couple, but also the narrative reunion of subject and spectator.

After this first reappearance of characters, the film can move on to other paradigms—of waiting and meeting, of coming and going, of sleeping and waking. The reappearance of the characters at this point no longer threatens to undermine the radical ruptures of the narrative, but to extend their scope. From here on, there will be many such reappearances, including those of Aurore Clément that offer false narrative continuity and closure. We are led to realize that such reappearances are merely another form of structural repetition—like the reappearance of actions, settings, objects, and sounds. The characters are no longer singular, they no longer hold a privileged place in the narrative; no longer can they draw our attention away from all of the subtle perceptual shifts that comprise the text. The film is free to create a rich intertextuality among its own mini-stories which comprise their own paradigm—one that partially overlaps with melodrama, that most pervasive and malleable of all movie genres.

By repeatedly seeing the same banal actions freed from the context of a single continuous story, we are led to observe (almost from an ethnographic perspective) how the subtle differences in their performance communicate meaning. They become defamiliarized; they become an infinite play of difference within a closed system. For example, one woman leans against a wall as she anxiously waits for her lover, then paces restlessly before she impatiently walks off alone into the night. Later, in a different sequence, another woman, somewhat older, also appears to be waiting as she leans against a wall and smokes a cigarette. Yet she displays no restlessness or impatience, but rather a savoring of the slow pace. Then we hear someone calling "mama" from inside the building. At first the woman doesn't respond. Finally she turns, puts out her cigarette, and goes inside. We realize she hasn't been waiting at all, but temporarily suspending her role as mother, taking a break. (I am told this woman is Chantal Akerman's actual mother.) The single word confirms how we read the subtle differences in the images. It also makes us see how we privilege verbal language, which is controlled by patriarchy, and how we distrust gestural language, so crucial to mother-child intersubjectivity during the pre-oedipal phase.

In another sequence a young girl enters a cafe and approaches a middle-aged man, saying, "Let's dance." He begins to clown, parodying his version of how young people dance these days. But her moves prevail: she wants to slow dance in a close embrace. Despite her age and gender, she leads every aspect of

the encounter and also decides when the dance and the sequence are over, as she abandons her partner and the frame. From this point on, we watch the age of the characters more closely and the power dynamics of their movements.

In another sequence a young man goes upstairs with loud footsteps that express a bold defiance and determination mixed with anger. Then he knocks on the door, at first playfully, tapping out a well-known rhythm; then his tone shifts and his knocks become loud, insistent, and aggressive. Suddenly he stops, sits on the stairs and waits, and listens to the footsteps of someone else we never see. The sounds of the footsteps and knockings at the door, which recur throughout the entire film, communicate with such specificity in this sequence that their meanings cannot be missed. They lead us to listen to all other sounds in the film with far greater attention.

By denying us a single unifying story, by frequently pitting word against visual image and nonverbal sound, by discouraging us from identifying with any of the anonymous characters, by denying us a single unified subject position, by calling our attention to the blatant stylization of structure, by reversing the axes of selection and combination, by elaborating the iterative aspect and by foregrounding the slippage between the iterative and the singulative, *Toute une nuit* makes us change the way we read a film.

Though perhaps less radical in their demands on the spectator, the two neorealist films discussed in this essay also require a similar shift in reading, one that de-emphasizes the narrative line and that leads one to interpret gestural language and rich perceptual detail. It's as if the foregrounding of the slippage between the iterative and the singulative helps one to see both the distinctiveness of the present image and its deep immersion in a system of representation. And it's the duality of this perception that helps empower one as an active spectator who is capable of resisting the singular closed reading and of perceiving the iterative traces of collective history and dominant ideology.

1. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. Jane F. Lewin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980, pp. 113–117.

2. Brian Henderson, "Tense, Mood, and Voice in Film (Notes After Genette)," *Film Quarterly,* XXXVI, No. 4 (Summer 1983), 11–12.

3. Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text,* trans. by Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday Press, 1977, p. 40.

4. Edward Branigan develops this kind of argument in *Point of View in the Cinema,* where (explicitly echoing Genette) he observes that whereas "in a verbal narrative the temporal determinations of the narrating act are more salient than the spatial determinations. By contrast, this dissymmetry is exactly reversed in pictorial narration . . . The spatial properties of a picture are at least initially more important than other properties and hence may serve as a reference with which to measure the general activity of narration." Edward R. Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film.* New York: Mouton Publishers, 1984, p. 45.

5. According to Laura Mulvey, "Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occuring in a linear time with a beginning and an end." ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* [Autumn 1975]). Teresa de Lauretis reverses the formulation, suggesting that all traditional male-dominated narrative demands sadism, figuring women only as obstacles that delay the male quest or as markers of the positions and settings through which the hero and his story move to reach their destination and to accomplish meaning. *(Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, pp.103–119.)

6. André Bazin, "*Umberto D*: A Great Work," in *What Is Cinema?,* Vol. II, trans. and ed. by Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p. 81.

7. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology,* trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970, p. 86. For an application of this principle to the narrative experimentation of Luis Buñuel, see also Susan Suleiman, "Freedom and Necessity: Narrative Structure in *The Phantom of Liberty,*" *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Summer 1978), 277–295.

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