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The Reality Blowing In

BY HILLARY CAMPBELL '00

I spotlight burning coldly down on leafless trees and feel the words, the effort, the ambition to make black—true. Dowell says. All fall into place, and points will be made. Before written the sun sets.

Dowell is nodding at Bernard. "That was the saddest story I have ever heard" (FORD 11). That was just remarkable. That was just the sort of thing Edward would have liked to quarrel with you about. Or Leonora. Or even poor Florence. Yes, yes—quite remarkable.

"You sound like that book they made us read last semester. I read the whole thing but I still have no clue what the thing was about," Temple says, glaring at Bernard.

"It was interpretive," I say, opening my eyes toward her in an effort to seem friendly and accepting. But they tell you to never look an animal in the eye. I should have remembered that.

"It was b.s., is what it was. Ambiguity out the wazoo and all these words making no sense and pointless stories in a bigger pointless story and—"

"I could make a dozen stories of what he said, of what she said—I can see a dozen pictures. But what are stories? Toys I twist— the world. Sometimes I feel that if everyone was exactly like me, things would run a hell of a lot more smoothly. Trying to impress and be different just doesn't cut it sometimes."

"Look at the way your lights wind up around the windows," Bernard says. "Do you keep them on all the time? Your face is throbbing. Constancy runs through the meadows out there, where no one waits to find it, he once said to me. If you want to find it, you are acknowledging self-acknowledging need and desire and you, I, me, because none of us knows a 'right' definition of ourselves. It is all make-believe and taking photos like those up on the wall there. Why? A glory you is not the real you, and yet you pant and stick because you want to be associated with that happy, smiling you. A faux reality. A proposal of the delighted girl by the beach in California, with hair that is longer now. And yet you claim that that is who you were and are and want to be. But you don't know."

"That's in Florida," I say.

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"What the hell is he talking about?" Temple's voice crackles. She runs her fingers through her hair, and the way her tense body lays makes the beanbag seem like it's made of stone. Dowell is nodding at Bernard. "That was the saddest story I have ever heard" (FORD 11). That was just remarkable. That was just the sort of thing Edward would have liked to quarrel with you about. Or Leonora. Or even poor Florence. Yes, yes—quite remarkable.

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"That's in Florida," I say.

Temple rolls her eyes. "That that novel I read was good because of the way it talked. No one I knew speaks that way."

"But what you said before—that it's human to tell stories... that's exactly it," Bernard says. "That novel bothered you like it did because it connected to some part of your heart—some corner, and shuttered like it was glass. It was pink, and it was hard, and it was familiar, and you realized that you had inhaled life. Putting together your own reality for the submission of others—that's how we deal with the shaky ground and the unearthing of sponges and 'arrows of sensation' (WOOLF 239).

"To break the uncertainty, we create universes of our own."

"We create the interpretive in order to turn jello into concrete. To give meaning to the meaningless."

Bernard is whispering. I've told them that these walls are thin.

"But what if you already had meaning? I mean, what if the meaningless was your meaning, and by 'lifting the curtain' as it were—by hearing the stories of others, you're turning your own world into nothing? Dowell asks."

"Poor Florence? I say."

"Indeed poor Florence. Or poor Edward. Or poor any of them. If we only keep to our own worlds, there would be no hurt or pain or revelation! One can learn of life, but what if that is too much?" He's becoming terribly excited. Temple shuts his head, and stares.

"I believe I read the novel you're speaking of, or at least the sort of novel you're speaking of," Dowell says eagerly. "I kept telling myself as I read it that I had life there in my hands—on paper! For once, I knew exactly how things were because I was hearing everyone's side of it, and nothing could surprise me later on that would make me change it all later. I repeated to myself, I said: 'I console myself with thinking that this is a real story and that, after all, real stories are probably told best in the way a person telling a story would tell them. They will then seem most real' (FORD 167)."

"If I'm not able to take all this down, I'll have to remember it. But even then, how will I know what order to put all in, or if it will even make sense?"

"So what—it's human to tell stories? Is that what you all are saying? That that novel I read was good—"

"Brilliant," Dowell interrupts.

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Articulate · 1998
and I know she has only taken the book to tell her­
self she at least tried to work. In this current sea of
stress and academia, though, I know she won't last
long. No one will want to talk back to her. No one
will want to tell her stories to keep her from book.
In the silence, the candle flickers. We can all
hear its silent fury; and we can all hear the car roar
outside. The darker it becomes outside, the fuzzier
it becomes inside, and the light from above heats us
all like a red hot lamp. We make lines up next to
each other on the desk—leaning and depending and
ready to fall. Bernard's weight creates a spring.
Dowell's breath sounds like another candle. Temple
remains uncomfortably wedged in the beanbag,
her plane flies overhead, I notice that I've been talking.

"...so Derrida says that the word is arbitrary—
that anything relating to language is arbitrary. If this is
... if what you say ... if what Dowell believes is
ture, then stories only help to let us know what shift­
ing sands we stand
on."

"Reading about it has made her see it. Know
it," Bernard says.

"I believe I wouldn't ever want to know that,"
Dowell says.

"What sort of a name is 'Temple'?" Bernard
mumbles/asks/says half-heartedly from the bed. He's
writhing the tassels of his blanket in his fingers.
The beanbag makes a crunching, forgiving sound
when she comes and says, "My father gave me that
name!" she shouts. I know it's useless to tell her
(again) that the walls are thin, so I'm quiet. "And I
don't want to read about life, because mine is per­
fectly fine as it is!" She whirls about the room like a
cornered animal. She looks like she wants to run.

"Do you know what I did? Do you know what I
made them think, and what I let them do so that
I could have him around? I tasted the drink so I could
feel it on my tongue and know that the light was on!
Do you know what I did? Hell no! I don't
need to learn anything from a book that doesn't make
any sense and pretends to know what I'm living just
the same."

"I can tell stories from everyone's point of view!"

"Tell stories to stop ourselves from
seeing the falseness of it all—again, the displaying
sweep of his arm—and yet in order to remain sane,
we must make sure we don't believe that those stories
are completely true."

"...if what you say ... if what Dowell believes is
ture."

"And why? For what purpose? To point what
lesson? It is all a darkness' (Ford151)," Dowell says.

"Darkness," Temple says.

"Darkness," Bernard says.

"Do I need a book to tell me that? Hell no! I don't
need to learn
any more than we already have. There are the facts, and
we are losing sight of what is important, of what I
narrate?"

Bernard says.

"Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment
we give it when we try to tell it' (Woolf 267).

I look desperately, clawing for solid ground,
head swiveling, to Dowell, who only shakes his head
and says softly, "I leave it to you' (Ford 220).

Gathering limbs and sentences and movement,
they leave my room of light slowly, one by one, slip­
ping out as Lisa did such a seemingly long time ago.
I feel completely at a loss—completely helpless and
hopeless and without answers. And yet, somehow,
with
They are gone. I am alone. Perhaps I dreamed
of their stay, and of what was said. Perhaps in the
morning it will all be like evaporating mist, and my
bed will not have his imprint on it anymore. The
throttling in my cheeks has stopped. My foot is awake.
And looking for life to narrate, there is nothing but
she, who swims through my eyes, and reminds me of
the electricity and the falseness of the students and
the need to finish this, this, this. There is nothing
but she, the reality blowing in...

"...which is the ultimate irony, is it not?
Bernard (216)."

"Popeye believed they were true."

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The Evolution of the Avant-Garde: Towards Impressionism in Cinema

BY AMY L. SPEARS '98

From Surrealism to Trance Film and Beyond

Trance films in general ... tend to resist specific interpretation. (Sitney 23)

In his book, Visionary Film, P. Adams Sitney describes the trance film as the link between earlier surrealist film and the later mythopoetic and structural films of the avant-garde cinema. Trance films in general seem indeterminate in meaning; it is difficult to say that they literally mean some specific thing, as they seem poetic in form, like metaphors for their subjects. Often, trance films or their precursors in the surrealist tradition employ psychological symbols and themes in order to suggest an overall idea or feeling to the viewer, as opposed to a straightforward or literal interpretation. Sitney says that they... seem poetic in form, like metaphors for their subjects.

The fundamental change of the early 1960s within the avant-garde film, as I have shown in several places, was the emergence of the mythopoetic film, a direct descendant of the trance film, which had undergone a gradual but fragmented evolution in the 1950s. (Sitney 36)

The mythopoetic film is similar to the trance film in that it also concentrates on the "primacy of the imagination." But whereas the trance film concentrates on a dream-state, the mythopoetic film focuses on ritual and myth, whether already established or created in the diegesis (Sitney 123). As in its precursors, mythopoetic film has an ambiguity surrounding the meaning or plot of the film, giving it as well a sense of indeterminate meaning.

As I discuss the individual films I have chosen (from surrealism: Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's Un Chien Andalou, from trance film: Maya Deren's Meshes of the Afternoon and At Land and from mythopoetic film, Kenneth Anger's Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome), I hope to make clear the evolution of the avant-garde film as Sitney has described it, from the surrealists of the 1920s to the trance films of the 1940s and then to the mythopoetic films of the 1950s and 1960s. Also, I hope to show that it is possible that the further evolution of the avant-garde may branch off from the current structuralist trend into something which most closely resembles "cinematic impressionism."

Un Chien Andalou and Trance Film Elements

Un Chien Andalou (1928) by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, has long been heralded as the definitive surrealist work of the cinema. As Buñuel himself wrote after the film had been made: It should be noted that when an image or idea appeared the collaborators discarded it imme-

diately if it was derived from remembrance, or from their cultural pattern or if, simply, it had a conscious association with another earlier idea. They accepted only those representations as valid which, though they moved them profoundly, had no possible explanation ...

The motivation of the images was, or meant to be, purely irrational! They are as mysterious and inexplicable to the two collaborators as to the spectator. NOTHING, in the film, SYMBOLIZES ANYTHING. (Mullen 153)

It would seem from this emphatic note from the filmmaker that in fact, trying to find any coherent meaning in the film would be futile. However, because the characters are seen throughout the film, it seems impossible for the viewer to perceive some sort of linearity or continuity (of which Buñuel also writes), "Far from being puzzling, the film achieves the clarity of a dream." (Sitney 4)

However, because of the intertitles which make clear that the film actually spans a period of eight years, confusion sets in. Without these indicators of time, one could attempt to view the film as a somewhat chronological narrative, albeit in the form of a dream. With these intertitles, there is some ambiguity as to the order of the events. The most ambiguous perhaps is the phrase "eight years later" which follows the eye-slash ing scene and precedes the scene in which the main female character rushes to assist the cyclist, her eye now intact. There is no cause and effect type of action occurring here; events may seem to proceed in an order, but they are never as a result of anything else in the film.

But most of the two genres because of its heavy reliance on Freudian psychological symbols mixed into a dreamlike diegesis. Another filmmaker praises this use of such symbols:

The Denisonian - 1998

The Evolution of the Avant-Garde

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The Denisonian - 1998

The Evolution of the Avant-Garde
Meret does more ordered than a surrealism film because it does portray a continuous story, but the objects which are central to the film (telephone receiver, flower, knife, key) are reminiscent of the striped box in Un Chien Andalou in that they reappear throughout the film, linking the scenes together, but not in any way which would suggest traditional continuity. In fact, her collaborator on the film and then husband, Alexander Hammid had made several surrealist films in Prague (Fabe 138).

Meret does have several of the elements which become important to Sitney's definition of trance film. Deren the filmmaker is cast as the protagonist, and the film does seem to deal with the articulation of space. One example of this comes in the sequence of close up shots of her feet as she walks. The motion is entirely continuous; the action is matched perfectly and the shots are all framed identically. The non-traditional articulation of space. Different scenes seem to merge and the continuity of setting.

Deren's career moved on, she seemed to fall away from the pure trance film element and move into a more mythopoeic form for the creation or revelation of new mythic form in American avant-garde film. (Sitney 124). However, the film also contains remnants of the trance era as well. The heavy layering of superimpositions, giving the ritual a sense of richness and lairness. In Inauguration, Anger displays a somewhat bizarre "magickal" ritual, not unlike what he himself undertook in his occult practices, only the participants in this ritual are gods from Greek, Roman and Egyptian and Christian mythology. The film is imbued with rich colors and at times up to five layers of superimpositions, giving the ritual a sense of rich, intense luminance. Inauguration does seem to embody what Sitney means when he writes, "The triumph of the mythopoeic film .. spring from the filmmakers' liberation from the repetition of traditional mythology and the enthusiasm with which they forged a cinematic form for the creation or revelation of new myths" (124). However, the film also contains remnants of the trance era as well. The heavy layering of superimpositions and the strangely trance-like movements of many of the characters evoke the dream-like mood that the avant-garde has long been known for. The strange orgy which ensues after Pan's poisoning (although not exactly for sexual identity).

Looking Forward to "Impressionism Cinema"

The term "impressionism" was first used to characterize the group in response to the first exhibition of independent artists in 1874. Louis Lenoir and other hostile critics seized on the title of a painting by Monet Impression, Sunrise, as exemplifying the radically unfinished character of the works. The term "impression" to describe the immediate effect of a perception was in use at the time by writers on both psychology and art. Jules-Antoine Castagnary's review (1874) demonstrates that it was not always used in a negative way: "They are Impressionists in the sense that they render not the landscape but the sensation produced by the landscape..." The term is sometimes used to describe freely executed effects in works of other periods in which the artist has presented an impression of the visual appearance of a subject rather than a precise notation. (Turner, Vol. 8 151-152)

The above dictionary definition of impressionism could be effectively applied to many of the films I have discussed from the surrealistic trance and mythopoeic genres. Especially because of the inde­terminacy of meaning which is prevalent in all of these films, "impressionistic" would seem to be a term which could be readily applied to such works. Much like impressionist paintings, in which the subject is seen through a sort of haze of brush strokes, the subjects of these films are somewhat hidden behind the effects of their means of representation onstage. Whether due to lighting effects, rephotography, or even the thematic or nonlinear construction of plot, these films might seem to give just an impression of meaning, a sort of fluid idea upon viewing them. This is not to say however that any or all of these films could fit into a category of cinematic impressionism; it does belie the surrealistic trance or the historical model which Sitney has provided in his book, perhaps impressionistic film is a genre which could be looked forward to, branching out of the avant-garde alongside structural and social patterns.
with “finding a technical means to express individual sensation” (Turner 151). It seems then that impressionist cinema would be autobiographical in the sense that it would pay attention to more private experiences and trying to convey the actual feelings of these to the viewer. Here the analogy of experimental film as “film poem” (Sitney vii) becomes useful as we imagine a sort of synesthesia as the poet/filmmaker endeavors to give visual representations of the tactile elements of an experience.

It is difficult to predict where the avant-garde cinema will next lead us, but I do believe that perhaps this sort of impressionism is possible as long as one intensely studies the subtle differences between the already established genres and builds upon the development which has occurred over the past seventy years. If a project is consciously undertaken to build upon the past historical development of the avant-garde cinematic art form, perhaps impressionism is a possibility.

Works Cited


