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Openness and Closure in Modernist Cinema: Antonioni/Resnais/Haneke/Martel

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OPENNESS AND CLOSURE IN MODERNIST CINEMA:
ANTONIONI/RESNAIS/HANEKE/MARTEL

By

Oscar Jubis

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OPENNESS AND CLOSURE IN MODERNIST CINEMA:
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Narrative exposition evokes questions about characters and events. A narrative opens gaps when information necessary to interpret the plot has yet to be offered. Some questions perform what Barthes calls primary or “hinge” functions. Narratives revolve around these presiding questions or gaps while secondary questions serve complementary purposes. The opening of gaps and the timing of their closing are the means by which narratives incite our curiosity, foment our interest, and hold our attention. Most narratives aim to achieve resolution and grant a sense of closure by filling the gaps with sufficient certitude.

A degree of ambiguity is present in most narratives. However, in the early 1960s, two modernist films broke radically from classical narrative convention by not answering one or more presiding questions, thus imbuing their plots with “openness”. Michelangelo Antonioni’s L'avventura and Alain Resnais’ Last Year at Marienbad are the canonical examples of this strategy. Modernist cinema continues to matter in what some call a post-modernist era. The strategy of permanent gaps demonstrates its enduring effectiveness and relevance in the films of contemporary auteurs such as Michael Haneke (The White Ribbon) and Lucrecia Martel (The Headless Woman).
I ask, declaring allegiance to a rhetorical and functionalist theory of narrative: what communicative purposes are served by permanent gaps? One consequence applies to every usage: it demands a more complex and active engagement on the part of the viewer since he or she shall construct, project and imagine what is missing. The rhetorical reasons for adopting such a reticent approach to narrative are infinite and can only be properly explored through close reflection on each text. This dissertation will explore the rationale for permanent gaps in the films directed by Antonioni, Resnais, Haneke, and Martel and the effect of their openness in the achievement of narrative closure.
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Chapter I
Introduction
I have an enduring fascination with films that prompt me to anticipate an outcome to a conflict or an answer to a question raised by the plot but come to an end without realizing my expectations. My interest was generated by Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’avventura* (1960) and Alain Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). I watched these films in the early 1980s at one of those repertory theaters modeled after Henri Langlois’ Cinémathèque Française that started to dwindle once VHS made it possible to bring home the world’s cinema.

I was intrigued by the fact that by the end of *L’avventura* we still do not know what happened to Anna, the young socialite who gets lost island-hopping off the coast of Italy and becomes the subject of a search. *Last Year at Marienbad* concludes with the unnamed woman abandoning her husband and choosing to leave with the also unnamed protagonist/narrator who claims to have met her the previous year. The film resolves the prototypical conflict engendered by the ancient scenario in which two men covet the same woman. However, an equally primordial question, one contained in the title, remains unanswered: did the narrator and the woman actually meet the previous year at Marienbad or elsewhere, and if so, did she forget or did she pretend to forget their meeting? If she is putting on
an act, so to speak, what is the function of her theatricality? Is her forgetting psychologically motivated, perhaps a form of repression, as Freud would claim? What is the existential nature of the voice-over narration and how reliable is it?

These and other questions impressed me as important while I watched the film. I ask myself: what purpose does it serve to leave them unanswered, or to barely hint at possible answers? What is gained and lost by failing to achieve sufficient resolution? What effect does it have on its rhetorical aims and the feeling of closure narratives typically aim to provide?

This dissertation will elaborate answers to these questions specific to each film. However, I presuppose that generally modernist films may induce disengagement and disinterest on a sizable segment of their potential audience. In many cases, what is lost due to insufficient resolution is the possibility of catharsis. Furthermore, the films keep reminding us of their constructedness so we lose any benefit derived from the belief that the world-on-film was there before cameras were trained on it and will be there after they are turned off.

Dissertations have small, erudite audiences but as I write I think of a larger, indistinct group of persons yet
to encounter modernist cinema. Foremost in my mind are former and prospective students whose understanding and appreciation of cinema I have the responsibility to facilitate and guide. Because my teaching defines me as much as my criticism, the value of this dissertation is partly dependent on its ability to underpin and inform my pedagogy. My research into the reception of L’avventura and the critical reputation of Antonioni, not only serves the need to historicize or locate the films in proper historical context but also serves as a way to acknowledge and accept the various challenges they pose to future audiences, including my students.

What the films stand to gain from their reticence and frugality is highly variable because it depends on the rhetorical intents of each film. These qualities are congruent with a common need in many modernist films to replicate a contemporaneous existential condition characterized by anxiety, aimlessness and uncertainty. In every case though, the participation of the viewer is augmented and enriched by the possibility of projecting one’s selfhood into these spaces of indeterminacy created by gaps in narrative knowledge. The critic must make a concerted effort to practice self-awareness, vigilance, honesty and transparency in order to avoid producing
something closer to autobiography than criticism, or ascribing qualities to a film based on highly subjective and idiosyncratic interpretations.

My dissertation aspires to be a work of film criticism that thinks across academic boundaries in its active engagement with the fields of history, narratology, phenomenology, film analysis and philosophy. The first and second chapters will consider films by Antonioni and Resnais that consciously deviate from normative narrative filmmaking. The films discussed in chapters two and three were produced during the 1960s and 1970s. As such, they require consideration of their historical contexts, including their positioning and significance as part of the history of the medium.

Theory and methodology will be subservient to a phenomenological approach that privileges reflection on personal experience with film. Indeed, my embrace of narratology is motivated largely by my intuition that viewers approach film with unequivocally narrative expectations, that the ordinary expectation of a movie is that it tell a story that constitutes what Aristotle called “a complete action”, that the experience of film is inherently, albeit partially, narrative. My methodology includes film analysis in that I normally select and
describe shots, scenes and sequences in order to evince my claims and consider their role within the work as a whole. Images captured from the films, an admittedly incomplete way to excerpt or quote from movies, will be used throughout to illustrate analyses.

It is presumptuous for one not educated in philosophy to delve into philosophical reflections, but it is unavoidable if you subscribe to the Cavellian notion that certain films are “differently configuring intellectual and emotional avenues that philosophy is already in exploration of; [that] the latest of the great arts shows philosophy to be the often invisible accompaniment of the ordinary lives that film is so apt to capture.”¹ To ignore the philosophy in film is to fail to acknowledge its transcendent power.

Moreover, philosophy as construed by Stanley Cavell has clear correspondences with criticism. His understanding of philosophy as a response reaction within a conversational context is inferred from a tradition leading from Plato’s Myth of the Cave to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations, “with their depictions of being lost, stopped, and the recurrent demand to turn and to return.”² The practice of both philosophy and criticism involves a “going-back-over” after being stopped. The ending of a narrative imposes an automatic, calculated halt
to our direct experience with it, but we are complicit with other moments that for various reasons compel us to stop and dwell on them. There are moments in cinema that stick in the mind, become memories. Criticism is a going-back-over to find the words that best convey our experience with these particular moments and with the narrative as a whole.

**Homo Narrans**

Science adopts the term “homo sapiens” for human being based on the essentiality of our capacity to generate knowledge but that capacity is so dependent on storytelling that “homo narrans” would also be appropriate nomenclature. Humans are narrative-generating beings. There is preponderant evidence that storytelling has been a universal and consistent phenomenon throughout human civilization. Narratives are omnipresent in everyday existence. They are containers and transmitters of knowledge. Our understanding of anything in the world, our cognition of an event for instance, is dependent on the application of narrative schemata that compel us to locate it within a temporal and chronological sequence and to hypothesize about its relationships of cause and effect. In other words, human beings need to account for the unavoidable dimension of time by considering the event in relation to what came before and what may come after. The
generation and transmission of knowledge has a centrally narrative quality, hence the relevance of narratology, the study of narrative phenomena, to efforts to understand the human condition.

In the earliest surviving work of narrative theory, *Poetics*, Aristotle proposes that the construction of plots or stories is the expression of a human instinct to imitate that is evident in children. Toddlers become storytellers when they learn to form sentences with subordinate clauses. Imitation or mimesis is the essence of our first lessons in life, the catalyst of a transformative and incessant endeavor to apprehend reality and understand the world. It is human nature to create imitations or representations of things in the world.

The earliest surviving examples of mimesis in action are the paintings discovered on the walls of caves in Europe. For *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), Werner Herzog brought his camera crew into Chauvet Cave in France. The drawings discovered there evidence the artist’s consideration of the topography of the walls and the play of shadows to animate representations of humans and animals, to create the illusion of action and movement. Anthropologists estimate that these Paleolithic mementos were drawn 30,000 years before Aristotle encouraged the
artist of antiquity, “as he constructs his plots” [to] place the action before his eyes, seeing the events with the utmost vividness, as if they were taking place in his very presence.”

Film is the most perfect realization of the impetus of man since the Paleolithic era to imbue representations with vividness, to tell stories that capture and reveal reality. Film is the art form that provides the most satisfactory heeding of Aristotle’s advice. Film places the world, a world otherwise extinct, in our very presence, time and time again.

Film and Narrative

Tom Gunning and Andre Gaudreault introduced the term “cinema of attractions” to argue that the dominant mode of cinema until 1906 was the showing or “monstration” of a variety of spectacles designed to attract an audience: displays of exotic, erotic, grotesque, beautiful, and sensational occurrences. Gunning states that his “point is not that there are no narrative films before the nickelodeon era but rather that attractions most frequently provide the dominant for film.” Indeed the foundational exhibition of ten films by the Lumière brothers in December of 1895 included Le Jardinier, the undeniably narrative film that inspired the first movie poster, and eight (or
more) remakes according to research conducted by Jane Gaines. Copying or striking duplicate prints was also common practice during cinema’s first decade. Film historians agree that Georges Méliès established an American branch of Star Films mainly to attempt to curb the extensive copying of Voyage dans la lune (1902), a movie that exemplifies what would happen to attractions in the post-nickelodeon era: they were embedded within requisite narrative frameworks.

There is evidence to suggest that the movies more frequently remade or copied during this era of cinema of attractions were those that tell a story. Charles Musser has further challenged the claim that narrative played a subordinate role in cinema’s first decade by, for instance, pointing out that narrative might have played a greater role than the films themselves indicate because their exhibition was often accompanied by live commentary that provided the attractions or spectacles with a narrative context and because exhibitors “sequenced them into narrative-based programs of greater or lesser complexity and length.”

Narrative was an essential aspect of the art of film from its inception even if, as Gunning claims, it was not dominant until the first decade of the 20th century. Since
then, narrative has definitely been the cinema’s organizing structure and audiences approach films expecting a story to be told. Thus it is problematic for film studies, as William Rothman observes, to have adopted “an antinarrative bias it has not yet fully outgrown.”

Modernism in Art

My understanding of modernism involves an art form’s conversation with itself. Modernism in my estimation is what happens within a medium or art form: a) when an artist wants to express something that cannot be expressed, or appropriately or compellingly expressed, while adhering to norms and conventions of the art form that have achieved a classical status, b) when an artist has lost conviction in the power of these classical conventions to communicate with an audience and seeks alternative means of expression, or c) when an artist lives in a society that has changed substantially enough to render obsolete the classical forms as presently configured. For instance, it would be illogical to expect the cinema to remain impervious to the cataclysmic effects of WWII, nuclear proliferation, and the Cold War on humanity. Modernism constitutes the overcoming of doubts regarding the art form’s power and ability to express serious or profound ideas in a constantly and rapidly changing world.
Films with self-consciously artistic aspirations have been produced since the film d’art movement began in France in 1908 with the release of *L’Assassinat du duc de Guise*. Two years later, Louis Feuillade published a manifesto that laid claim to film as a form of art equal to the established arts because of its aesthetic effects. This position was adopted and furthered by many scholars including pioneering psychologist Hugo Münsterberg and theorist Ricciotto Canudo, who coined the term “the seventh art”. Debates regarding the ontology of film ensued, but early film theorists assented that film is an art form. And yet, there is an obstinate stance in (our?) society that may be informally expressed as “but it’s only a movie!” as if it is unnatural for film to be examined or taken seriously. Perhaps this is characteristic of art in general: Roland Barthes laments that “the artist is threatened by a collective feeling, even latent, that a society can get on very well without art.” Confronting this attitude constructively is part-and-parcel of teaching film studies. Art in general must constantly uphold its value in the face of allegations of being expendable. Thus, as Cavell observes, “modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art (that is almost a definition of modernism, not to say its purpose).”
Barthes promotes the idea that the project of the modernist artist is not only to renew and readapt the art form in the face of changes at the macro level but also in a way that reflects the artist’s own becoming. In his “Dear Antonioni...” address, he stated:

For you the Modern is not the static term of facile opposition; the Modern is on the contrary an active difficulty in following the changes of Time, not just at the level of grand History but at that of the little History of which each of us is individually the measure.10

I figure modernism as something that is by definition a keeping-faith with the expressive powers of an art form by having a conviction that the classical conventions or norms of the art form can be revised or transformed in such a way, sometimes in a radical way, that the art form may continue to show its bounties and serve its loftier purposes. My viewpoint on modernism is deeply indebted to the work of American philosopher Stanley Cavell and the teachings of my mentor William Rothman, who regard modernism as a way to overcome modern skepticism, a way to resist the temptation to yield to the idea that we no longer believe in art’s saving importance, in its ability to express self-hood and to reach the world, in its ability to be a serious and popular art that can acknowledge the modern human condition.
Modernist Cinema

Modernism in older art forms began earlier than modernism in cinema. In painting, the modernist period begins in the 19th century. Some experts identify Édouard Manet’s *Picnic on the Grass* (1863) as the work that inaugurated the modernist era; others single out Edvard Münch’s *The Scream*, painted in 1893, the year Thomas A. Edison first demonstrated his Kinetoscope to the public. Cinema would gradually develop a “language”, a sense of its own powers of expression, by passing through developmental stages.

During its last decade, silent cinema gained great complexity and sophistication and produced films of superior quality. It is at this time, during the 1920s, that something that may be called a modernist or avant-garde strain in cinema first emerges. The resultant films, by the likes of Luis Buñuel, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp, are non-narrative shorts exhibited outside the commercial theater circuit. They were released before sound and image can share celluloid space; before films are transformed by the acquisition of spoken dialogue and ambient sound; before film as an art form matures into a classical period.

As András Bálint Kovács states in his book *Screening Modernism* (2007), “early modernism was cinema’s reflection
on artistic or cultural traditions outside of the cinema”¹¹ (my emphasis) not a reaction to classical narrative standards of filmmaking.

A full-fledged modernist movement does not emerge until the late 1950s. Until then, films regarded as avant-garde or experimental exist in isolation from the narrative cinema shown in theaters. The modernist cinema that develops in the second half of the 20th century is closely linked with the French Nouvelle Vague and similar new waves in other national cinemas. It is cinema that self-consciously posits itself as an alternative and a reaction to cinematic conventions and narrative norms that have achieved classical status while aiming for the same audience as mainstream movies or, more accurately, a sizable segment of that audience.

_L’avventura_ and _Last Year at Marienbad_ are highly celebrated expressions of a modernist wave in cinema that was in its ascendancy when they were first released. Despite their avant-garde or modernist features, both films were exhibited commercially to relative success. It was a special time when cinephilia reached maturity and a sizable segment of the American audience showed increased interest in foreign films and challenging fare. The number of so-called art cinemas in the U.S. increased along with gross
revenue by foreign films, which grew from $39.6 to $69.2 million between 1959 and 1961.\textsuperscript{12}

In his scholarly work on narration in cinema, David Bordwell promotes the use of the term “art cinema” rather than modernism. One issue I have with his terminology is that he creates a dialectic between two terms, classical and art, which are not naturally agonistic. In the history of art it has become established practice that a classical period in the history of an art form is followed by a modernist period of change and innovative development of practice modalities that have become traditional or conventional. I think this development also applies specifically to the history of film. The use of the term modernist cinema in opposition to a dominant, mainstream cinema that continues to adhere to classical, often genre-based, narrative conventions, is congruent with research into the developmental phases in film history and with the historical use of the terms \textit{classical} and \textit{modernist} in esthetics and art criticism. Modernist cinema is significantly different than classical cinema but it does not represent a qualitative improvement or a loftier expression than classical cinema, as proposed by Noël Burch. There is continuity in the relationship between classical and modernist, which may be viewed as an actualization of the
former. This understanding of modernist art’s relationship with classicism is shared by Resnais and becomes manifest in his films, as I will demonstrate in chapter three. One of the consequences of pitting “classical narrative cinema” against “art cinema” is the unfortunate, value-laden implication that the former is not-art or that it is less-art than the latter. I think this is worth pointing out because in my experience the usage of the terms art cinema and art film has steadily increased over the past decades despite its heuristic impotence. The use of terms like “art film” supersedes crucial differences exhibited by the films categorized as such. Bordwell regards art cinema rather glibly as the domestication or softening of modernism’s attack on narrative causality by means of emphasizing realism and authorial expressivity. Bordwell finds the need to use this term for a kind of cinema that exists between classical and modernist cinema since he regards the latter as a radical negation or rejection of classicism rather than something that maintains a continuity and grows out of the classical.

Modernist cinema was to the movies what punk rock was to popular music. L’avventura was a work of art whose sociocultural resonance was augmented by its ability to generate controversy, like Never Mind the Bollocks Here’s
the Sex Pistols (1977). Robert Christgau coined the term “semi-popular music” to refer to 1970s rock that was no longer intended or expected to have the massive, heterogeneous popularity of 1950s and 1960s rock ‘n roll. Punk rock was a minority music and movement in the U.K., a subcultural phenomenon, and even more so in America where radio stations refused to program it. It was easy to hear about punk rock but not to listen to it. The grotesquerie and nihilism of the Sex Pistols on their worst behavior befit the alarmist and sensationalistic praxis of the news media but the piercing rebel music was too dangerous for broadcast. L’avventura (and Last Year at Marienbad and most of the films discussed in this dissertation) is a subcultural film, a semi-popular film, meaning not for everyone, and that is no honor or virtue. As I elaborate below, it is simply a matter of course.

In the 1930s, 1940s, and even into the 1950s, one benefit of going to the movies was a feeling of cohesion, solidarity or affinity with viewers who were often quite different from yourself; a sense of community out of a pleasurable perhaps edifying experience shared with a sundry crowd. It was obvious in the 1950s, once television became a mass medium and rock n’ roll exposed and urged generational divisions in society, that it was no longer
possible for any film to have the heterogeneous popularity of *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Gone With The Wind* (1939), or *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), films that were seen by a larger, perhaps more age-diverse proportion of American society than any film released since then. The classical-era film audience was fragmented by suburbia, television, and other sociocultural phenomena.

Modernist cinema in general can be construed as a multipronged movement of sorts that instigates a questioning of the conventions and their functions. Modernist films must uphold the value of film, by enacting demonstrations of the capacity of the art form to grow and renew itself, by adapting the conventions to new purposes and new realities, and by transcending them to show how film can find new rhetorical and stylistic modes of expression.

The principal aim of this dissertation is to explore the effects and rhetorical purposes of the open-ended, enigmatic, or reticent narrative style evident in many films associated with this modernist turn in the history of cinema.

**Contemporary Modernism**

We ignore the constantly self-transforming nature of the modern, its inherent and ruthless
dynamisms. Instead we fantasize its overthrow, see it as something already in the past. Often the 'post-modern' reveals itself in part as the symbol of an ideology of consumerism... the 'post' prefix becomes a stand-in for concepts yet to be invented. Changes of form are commodified as absolute breaks with the past and prefixes become labels of convenience. The cinema is not so easy to prefix.\textsuperscript{13} (John Orr, Cinema and Modernity, 1993)

This dissertation aims to provide evidence to support the claim that contemporary films continue to utilize modernist narrative strategies even though the modernist era or movement is said to have concluded, circa 1980 according to Kovacs. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson prefer to use the term “art cinema” when discussing films typically labeled “modernist”, such as L’Avventura. For these scholars, art cinema is situated somewhere between the classicism of Rio Bravo (1959) and the avant-gardism of Stan Brakhage’s Mothlight (1963). They choose to cite these films as examples because they are contemporaneous thus serving to promote the position that classical, modernist or art cinema, and avant-garde cinema were coexistent at the time, and I would argue, continue to coexist. Modernist cinema was and remains an alternative to a more abundant and disseminated commercial cinema that still yields gems occasionally, while adhering to conventional practices that have served cinema well. Recent and notable films that reflect modernist narrative traits include

The Holy Girl ends before Amalia, the teenage protagonist, finds out that her best friend Josefina has betrayed her confidence by telling her mother about her secret relationship with Dr. Jano. When the film ends, Josefina’s mother is waiting in the hotel lobby for Amalia’s mother, who is attending the medical conference, while the girls are swimming in the pool. Jano’s wife and kids are also at the hotel. The Holy Girl ends prematurely, before the dramatic payoff audiences expect.

The Headless Woman revolves around a car accident that is not shown in a manner that would lead to unequivocal conclusions. It does not resolve the presiding question regarding the protagonist’s culpability in the death of a boy whose body was found in the vicinity of the accident site. The resultant lack of closure mirrors the experience of the boy’s loved ones, who do not know who is culpable, and other particulars of his death. Similarly, A number of criminal acts occur in The White Ribbon but Michael Haneke refrains from providing the evidence the spectator needs to
identify who is precisely to blame. Chapters four and five of this dissertation will cover the films written and directed by Haneke and Martel that are most relevant to a study of modernist narratives.

**Auteurism**

The auteurist organization of this dissertation is underwritten by the working assumption that these films materialize the personal creative vision of their directors and that each film has more commonalities and correspondences with other films by the same director than with any other film to which we could relate it. This is most applicable to Haneke and Martel, who write their own scripts based on original material. Conversely, Antonioni and Resnais often enlist writers as artistic partners, thus these films result from reciprocal processes of inspiration, negotiation, and accommodation. Often the contributions of the writers are of sufficient magnitude to consider the films as cases of divided authorship. Moreover, the indispensable input of performers, cinematographers and others involved in film production shall not be dismissed or diminished.

Each director-assigned chapter yields material relevant to generalizations about each director’s narrativity, rhetoric and aesthetics but the scope of each
chapter is too narrow and specialized to serve as a credible auteurist study, which is not what I strive to produce here. This clarification applies especially to Antonioni and Resnais, given their extensive and diverse filmographies.

The Phenomenology of Narrative

The phenomenology of film, the accounting for an experience with film, is closely related to the manner in which we experience works of narrative in general. I propose that the dynamic and interdependent relationship between human being and narrative involves three basic processes: 1) immersion in a fictional world and orientation to its persons, places, and historical period, 2) stimulation and maintenance of viewer interest in the persons, places, and events that constitute it by appealing to human inquisitiveness and emotional responsiveness, and 3) resolution and termination.

For film criticism to have an experiential grounding, it must consider how each film exposes and orients the spectator to a particular world-on-film and aims to foster and sustain interest in that world. This interest is expressed by paying attention and the spectator anticipates
something of value as a return on that investment; the viewer expects to profit from it.

I propose that to notice and acknowledge how each film endeavors to achieve these objectives is an important part of a conscious effort, as Cavell advises, to allow each film to teach us how to consider it. This teaching starts during the process of immersion and orientation that narratives activate at the beginning. It is then that the particularities of the film prompt viewers to adjust their premature expectations and anticipations of the film based on information about it and lifelong experience with all kinds of audiovisual material.

Theory/Criticism/Experience

A man goes to the movies. The critic must acknowledge that he is that man. (Robert Warshow)

'Tis the good reader that makes the good book; in every book he finds passages which seem to be confidences or asides hidden from all else and unmistakably meant for his ear; the profit of books is according to the sensibility of the reader. (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Society and Solitude”)

In order to respect the uniqueness of each film and keep faith with the marriage of criticism and experience, the generalizing and abstracting contributions of theory shall be brought to bear on the condition that one is aware of its effects and recognizes its limitations. For
instance, in my bibliographic research in preparation for this dissertation, I encountered many reductive, inadequate, or misguided attempts to “theorize the viewer” or create “models of spectating”.

The theorist must accept the indispensability of interpretation and the subjectivity of this hermeneutic enterprise. The critic must reciprocate by checking his perceptions and insights relative to the evidence on film and guide the reader along a trail of thought that avoids eisegesis in favor of a well-reasoned interpretation. The critic must strive to be true to the sequential views and sounds that constitute its topic and to the details of his or her own experience with it. We cannot uncomplicatedly presume that a “typical individual” produces this criticism, this secondary text. We can only gauge a critical position relative to other interpretations by entering into a special kind of conversation with them. It is the best we can do.

Critics may wish to personify a “typical viewer” and presume to speak for others, or consider themselves “ideal readers” based on expertise, but the best critics are aware of the effects of the unique history, psychological makeup, thought and value systems, and aesthetic predilections they bring into the narrative experience. Criticism both
benefits from self-knowledge and, in turn, facilitates and updates it.

Another issue inherent to film criticism is the need to avoid what is ordinarily referred as “reading too much” and “reading too little” meaning into any given film. Barthes proposes that what gives Antonioni’s films the “subtlety of meaning” he admires is “this conviction that meaning does not crudely limit itself to the thing said, but goes on, even further”\(^\text{16}\) which corresponds to a complementary demand that interpretation does not “crudely limit itself” to the objective and metonymic. Barthes’ wording insinuates that meaning-making has movement, progresses in time and space awaiting reciprocation by a search for meaning that is free-spirited but has directedness. I restate my conviction that it is crucial to accurate, insightful and productive criticism of modernist films for hermeneutic thinking to proceed from the concrete to the abstract, from metonym to metaphor, from the realistic to the poetic. Interpretation of open-ended, abstract, and metaphoric elements involves selecting from a “surplus of possibilities”, as expressed by Mikhail Bakhtin, in a diegesis with chances in it, with the built-in contingency and randomness of reality. Interpretation of these more abstract or symbolic aspects needs to be stem
from their relative congruence with an internal logic
derived from the more univocal, fixed, and factual
elements. Of course, a piece of criticism resulting from
the interpretive thought process may be organized in many
productive ways, and need not follow a prescribed route.

Openness and Ambiguity

In his influential book “The Open Work”, Umberto Eco
observes that “openness”, to varying degrees, is
characteristic of all works of art. He states that there are
no unequivocally and completely “closed” works of art. The
terms “open” and “closed” are not absolute. They are used
by Eco to designate tendencies of narrative structures with
regards to resolution and closure. Along similar lines,
Vivian Sobchack advocates for a phenomenological approach
that aims to restore to criticism “the existential
experience of the medium’s openness and the spectator’s
freedom.”

Openness is a quality of the medium of film in
general because meaning cannot be contained by intention,
design, ideology, or convention.

Ambiguity, a deficiency in clarity and definitiveness,
is pervasive, and desirable. It seems unavoidable, in life
as well as art. It is difficult to think of any narrative
work that is completely devoid of ambiguity. Indeed, it is
the ambiguity in works of art that allows them to be “open”
to variable degrees thus amenable to criticism. Consider the masterful Hollywood comedies of the 1930s and 1940s envisioned by Cavell as belonging to a genre of “comedies of remarriage”. They conclude with the leading couple achieving genuine forgiveness and a new perspective on past experience that set the conditions for a future together, or together again, but no guaranties of “happily ever after”, just a willingness to venture in pursuit of happiness. Consider the deaths of protagonists in Hitchcock thrillers such as Shadow of a Doubt and Vertigo, shot and edited so that death is not only a final answer but also a new question.

In his ample work on film narration, Bordwell includes “increased ambiguity regarding the interpretation of the story”18 as a feature of “art-cinema” narration. The qualifier “increased” suggests that classical works are also ambiguous, only less so. One issue I have with his terminology is that he creates a dialectic between two terms, classical and art, which are not ordinarily in contradiction. In the history of art it has become established practice that a classical period in the history of an art form is followed by a modernist period of change and innovative development of practice modalities that have become traditional or conventional. I think this
development also applies specifically to the history of film. Bordwell creates this term for a kind of cinema that exists between classical and modernist cinema since he regards the latter as a radical negation or rejection of classicism. A number of film theorists seem to regard classical Hollywood cinema as an illusionist, ideologically regressive cinema with no room for ambiguity. Kovacs for instance, seems to underestimate the complexity and indeterminacy of classical Hollywood cinema when he states that, “narrative ambiguity was introduced into modern cinema by Alain Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet.”

I would agree that in general modernist films are significantly more open and ambiguous than classical films, that the most open and ambiguous films are modernist or avant-garde, and that it is advisable for any academic treatise on resolution and closure in modernist cinema to address *Last Year At Marienbad*. I believe that the films authored by Antonioni, Resnais, Haneke and Martel most compellingly expose the medium’s openness and utilize the spectator’s freedom, and I am happy to put mine to use.

**Permanent Gaps**

Care must be taken that every hole is plugged; that every loose string is tied together; that every absence is fully explained...that no baffling question marks are left over at the end of the
picture to detract from the audience’s appreciation of it.\textsuperscript{20}
(Lewis Herman, A Practical Manual of Screen Playwriting, 1952)

Noël Carroll ascribes an “erotetic” quality to narrative. The adjective is most commonly applied to a branch of logic, one that concerns itself with patterns of questions and answers. Narrative film is thus construed as erotetic in that a number of questions of varied importance are evoked in the mind of the viewer by means of exposition; questions that demand to be answered by the end of the film. A film can be said to have achieved resolution when it answers to a satisfactory degree the most salient questions posed by the narrative discourse. Carroll persuasively argues that his erotetic or question/answer model for the analysis of film narrative is superior to the conflict/resolution or problem/solution model because it is more universally applicable. He explains: “Though all problems may be translated into questions, it is not evident that all questions can be translated into problems.”\textsuperscript{21} Preference for the question/answer model seems to just make common sense, perhaps because it is attuned to our natural and defining epistemic drive.

The innate cognitive activity used to generate questions based on received information about the world at
large is also enlisted to comprehend the narratives we consume. Carroll’s erotetic model implicates the viewer since problems and conflicts exist in the fictive narrative whereas the questions elicited by it are located in the consciousness of the reader or viewer. Thus the question/answer model suits and supports my phenomenological disposition.

Bordwell furthers Carroll’s model by proposing that the mental questions involved in making sense and constructing meaning during the viewing process come in four varieties: referential, symbolic, extra-textual and hermeneutic. By categorizing the questions posed by narratives into presiding, macro-questions and sustaining, micro-questions, Carroll incorporates the analogous division of story components, formulated by Barthes, between primary, cardinal or “hinge” functions and complementary, secondary functions or catalysts. Questions posed by narrative have a diversified and hierarchical relationship. In other words, questions serve many functions within a fiction and some questions are more important, significant, salient or permeative than others.

Narratologist Meir Sternberg envisions these elicited questions as epistemic gaps waiting to be filled and expected by the reader to be filled; holes to be plugged
says Herman. The gap becomes permanent when a narrative comes to an end without doing so, an occurrence characteristic of modernist narrative. Sternberg’s scholarship aspires to demonstrate how the “size” and the placement of gaps within the temporal progress of a narrative and the extent, timing, and manner in which they are filled are issues worth the attention of students and scholars interested in narrative works in any medium. I shall attend to this synergistic interplay between the interrogative and the declarative that narratives enact as they unfold.

Sternberg has consistently insisted on the limited value of theories that regard elements of form and style in isolation. He champions criticism that reflects on how these aspects have an effect on the reader, particularly the reader’s interest, and how they contribute to what each narrative aims to communicate. Sternberg’s functional/rhetorical narratology befits my critical orientation.

Termination

_In all things, one must take the end into account._22 (Jean de la Fontaine’s Fables 1668-94)

Noël Carroll points out that his theory pertains “narrative closure, not the stylistic closure of the coda
of the finale of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony [or the rhythmic structures used] as a way of rounding off and closing up a sequence of verse.”²³ Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s Poetic Closure and David Richter’s Fable’s End are two works of literary theory that discuss this stylistic or structural “closure”. It refers to the use of devices to terminate a narrative that bear a relation to the overall style and structure of the work, strategies to be judged according to their relationship with what precedes them. No type or style of ending is ipso facto appropriate or accomplished. The appropriateness and effectiveness of an ending, of all endings, requires careful consideration of how it relates to the beginning and middle of the narrative, to the work as a whole, and to the rhetorical themes that the work has developed over the course of its telling.

Termination strategies include reinserting an omniscient narrator who has instigated or initiated the telling of the story in order to bring it to conclusion. This type of bracketing device is utilized in both literature and cinema. A reprise of musical themes is a device found in both music (for instance, in musical theater and in classical music, when a rondo form is used for the last movement of a symphony) and films that utilize a music score. The return of the narrator, sometimes an
unseen voice-over narrator, and the reprise of musical themes are termination strategies that imbue films with a completeness or roundness that is independent of their degree of resolution. Antonioni’s *Blowup* (1966), for instance, is a film that leaves permanent gaps but has a neat, perfectly circular narrative structure. The ending of the film recalls or evokes the beginning by means of what Marianna Torgovnick calls a “frame technique”. My reflection on resolution and closure will also pay attention to the manner in which films are brought to “the end”.

**A Theory of Closure**

I will use the term *closure* to designate something that belongs to the realm of human experience. Closure is a sense or emotion or intuition that a story has been told to a satisfying conclusion; that it concludes at just the right moment rather than simply stop. Narrative involves placing discrete elements in a sequence; to tell a story is to recount it. Narrative is a cumulative process; it develops through addition. The narrative artist must figure out when and how to stop so we may informally say that the story “adds up”, that the result amounts to something that feels correct, harmonious, consistent, and significant; that it concludes in a manner that satiates our curiosity
about the characters and concurs with the rhetorical purposes of the narrative. Closure is what happens to the spectator when a narrative provokes a feeling of finality about the events that have transpired.

The use of the word closure is often imprecise in academia. Carroll rather casually refers to closure as both a feature of plot structure and the phenomenological event I take it to be. In his view, this feeling of closure is a correlate and a direct effect of the answering of the major questions educated by the narrative, or what I call resolution. Consequently, he sees no pressing need to differentiate them. Instead, he often conflates them. Can narrative resolution alone account for the existence of closure? Susan Feagin remonstrates Carroll’s point by observing that “though there is a connection between raising questions and generating emotions, especially emotions of uncertainty, there is no simple correspondence between the answering of the questions raised and feelings of satisfaction.” Closure entails a degree of subjectivity that calls forth acts of criticism. Closure is a more delicate, more elusive concept than resolution. It is about the thoughts and feelings a movie leaves you with.

I think this potential feeling of satisfaction and sense of finality can be attributed to something besides “the
answering of the plot questions raised”. In fact, I theorize closure as a function of three variables:

1) Resolution (Carroll’s “narrative closure”),

2) Effects of termination strategies (often referred by literary theorists as “stylistic” or “structural closure”),

3) Rhetorical justification, which I discuss in the next paragraph. I figure the state of this theory, of theory in general, as perpetually probationary. It is something achieved retrospectively, a generalizing and abstracting activity that follows unique and intuitive experiences with the films under consideration. It is not intended to be applied to any specific film a priori.

The permanent gap in *L’avventura* and the prematurely arrested ending of *The Holy Girl* impress us as something calculated to have a conspicuous effect on the viewer. The pronounced intentionality of these narrative phenomena demands that viewers engage in the mental activity required to justify them. The thinking about the film needs to move beyond comprehension of the story into interpretation, into reflection on the manner of discourse as a function of rhetorical intents. When faced with a permanent gap, you may find that your interpretation provides substantial justification for its existence. For example, you may decide that the theme of *L’avventura* is the aimlessness and
incertitude of modern existence and conclude that the meanderings and vacillations of the characters, the temps morts, and the unanswered questions are thematically and rhetorically congruent. You may assign great value to realism and derive satisfaction from movies like _L’avventura_ and _Last Year in Marienbad_ in which, as it happens in ordinary life, mysteries often remain mysteriez
Chapter II
Michelangelo Antonioni
The people were sneering and we could not understand why. They were laughing at the gravest sequences, those we had labored over the most. And this went on through the screening... When I came out of the theater I was crying like a little girl. I was desperate.¹ (Monica Vitti, Cannes 1960)

At Cannes, attention had to be agonizingly divided between the screen and one’s neighbor. A long love scene set off a fusillade of angry jeering and one wondered whose moral sensibilities were being outraged; a reiterated shot of a girl running down a corridor brought bellows of ‘cut’; and the last scene went through derisive howls of ‘He’s crying! Look, he’s crying!’² (Penelope Houston)

The infamous premiere of L’Avventura, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (1912-2007), has been canvassed extensively. I take it as a defining moment in a centenarian schism between film as artistic experience and film as entertainment; a schism not a dichotomy because the categories often overlap. If there is one film that forcefully signals a split in the cinema audience, it is L’avventura. It was a divisive film even among foreign-film or “art film” enthusiasts.

There was a counterpunch to the vitriolic behavior of the Cannes audience: a public statement of support signed by a coterie of illustrious admirers, an impromptu second screening at the festival, and an improvised jury prize “for the beauty of its images, and for seeking to create a new film language”. L’avventura was eulogized when selected
as the second best film of all time! in the 1962 Sight & Sound critics’ poll, which normally includes only films that have circulated for at least a decade and proven their worth over a history of viewings (the only film from the previous ten years in the Top 10 was Ugetsu).

L’avventura was immediately and simultaneously vilified and canonized. The bipolar reception of the film that made Antonioni and Monica Vitti internationally famous may indicate a tension between film as art, thus worthy of examination, and film as disposable entertainment. L’avventura withholds some of the readymade satisfactions of mainstream cinema, such as witnessing how a plot is brought to a conventionally satisfying conclusion, and this withholding incites intense, sometimes melodramatic responses. It is unfair though to characterize its detractors by the philistine behavior of the Cannes audience, and it is inaccurate to say critics, especially newspaper critics, were uniformly favorable to Antonioni. If my partial sampling of both journalistic and academic criticism in this chapter slants towards affirmed challenges, resistances, and limitations, particularly those pertaining to narrative aspects, it does in order to substantiate their colossal, discordant cultural impact and
to acknowledge and address allegedly detrimental effects of modernist narrative strategies.

The films of Antonioni (and those directed by Resnais albeit to a lesser extent) have inspired copious and largely productive scholarship in many languages. It is justified by the subtlety and virtually inexhaustible richness of his films. Complicit with my decision to address them is the sense that they remain unique, vital and relevant, perhaps now as much as ever, and that new acts of criticism are required to support this claim. Broadly speaking, the unscientific and inconclusive nature of all esthetic judgments indicates that no film that makes an appeal to our artistic sensibility, like all the films broached in this dissertation, is ever truly unworthy of forthcoming critical attention.

When L’avventura was released in the U.S. in April 1961, Bosley Crowther of The New York Times, the critic who could make or break a film at the box office, wrote a scathing review dripped with sarcasm.

Signor Antonioni...omits such little details as whatever happens to some key characters and why others turn up in certain places and do what they do. For instance, it might be helpful if he would have the kindness to explain what gives on a curious, barren island, where his drama presumably begins.
Not long thereafter, Andrew Sarris, the critic who had become a champion of the auteur theory, coined the term “Antonioni-ennui” to refer to the particular brand of tedium and weariness his films inflict on him. Pauline Kael, who disagreed famously with Sarris on auteurism, the production history of *Citizen Kane*, and other topical issues, took a similar position on Antonioni, in devastating essays such as “The Come-Dressed-As-the-Sick-Soul-of-Europe Parties”, which is also caustically critical of *Last Year at Marienbad*. Kael’s review of Antonioni’s *Red Desert* (1964) is one of her most oft-quoted: “If I’ve got to be driven up a wall, I’d rather do it at my own pace—which is considerably faster than Antonioni’s.”

It is interesting that, although Sarris and Kael are considered rivals, both of them liked *L’avventura* and found most of Antonioni’s subsequent films slow, indulgent, and boring. They positioned themselves on the same side in polemics regarding Antonioni’s merits as a film artist.

Some of the harshest critics of Antonioni are fellow filmmakers. Ingmar Bergman, who died the same day as Antonioni (30 July 2007), told a Swedish newspaper in a 2003 interview:

*He’s done two masterpieces; you don’t have to bother with the rest. One is Blow-Up, which I’ve*
seen many times, and the other is La Notte, also a wonderful film, although that's mostly because of the young Jeanne Moreau. In my collection I have a copy of Il Grido, and damn what a boring movie it is. So devilishly sad, I mean. You know, Antonioni never really learned the trade.\(^5\)

François Truffaut was consistently and openly hostile to Antonioni. I find it telling that, in the middle of an interview of Truffaut in which Antonioni has not been mentioned, critic Charles Samuels can request point-blank: “Please explain why you hate Antonioni so.” Truffaut:

First, for his lack of humor. He is so terribly solemn, so terribly pompous. I don’t like the image he projects of himself as the psychologist of the feminine soul... And he follows the fashion. That’s why he was arrested the other day at the London airport with hashish in his shoe.\(^6\)

Throughout the 1960s, leftist critics and intellectuals reproached the films for their concentration on the bourgeoisie, alleged and allegedly decadent formalism, and for their lack of political engagement. British critic Robin Wood, for instance, complained that a defeatist attitude permeates the films of Antonioni, a complacent gloom that inspires indolence, narcissism, and acquiescence to the status quo.

It is hard to ascertain Antonioni’s contemporary critical reputation. L’avventura fell off the top 20 in the 2012 Sound & Sight critics’ poll, but there are five
Antonioni films in the Top 250: *L’avventura* (#21), *L’eclisse* (#73), *The Passenger* (#110), *Blowup* (#144), and *Red Desert* (#202). More than either Bergman or Truffaut, cattiness intended. Film directors, polled separately, ranked *L’avventura* at #32, *L’eclisse* at #54, and *Blowup* at a very respectable #59, perhaps not a surprise given that the protagonist is a photographer who serves as director surrogate. There is still, however, much opprobrium of Antonioni’s filmmaking. Jonathan Rosenbaum’s 1993 assessment of Antonioni’s popularity still applies today:

> Although he is hardly known at all to younger viewers, that’s not because his films have dated in any significant way; it points, rather, to the fact that the critical community and most of the rest of world cinema have regressed to the point where they can no longer even remember why such a fuss was made over Antonioni in the 60s — or even that there was a fuss. Because of the basic challenges his work has posed from the beginning — challenges to our notions about storytelling, realism, drama, society, the modern world, and reality itself — he has been more consistently misunderstood and attacked than any other modern filmmaker of comparable importance.  

Ann Hornaday, longtime critic at *The Washington Post*, serves as a good example of the contemporary misunderstanding decried by Rosenbaum because of the consistency of her criticism. Her review of *The Passenger* (1975) on the occasion of its 2005 re-release states:
His is a cerebral, supremely visual style of filmmaking, which allows for beguiling surfaces but doesn't go any further. His fans argue that this leaves the viewer to read the master's meanings between the lines, but there are some of us who think that what you see is what you get, and that is all Antonioni was ever interested in. Ultimately, there's something heartless about Antonioni's filmmaking.\(^8\)

On the occasion of a posthumous retrospective at the National Gallery of Art in 2008, she wrote: “Because Antonioni was so influential, it's easy to overpraise films that, upon reflection, often seem pretentious, obtuse and inert.”\(^9\) Gilberto Perez, in his excellent 1998 essay “The Point of View of a Stranger”, claims that Antonioni is “out of fashion”. Indeed, college students enrolled in courses in history of international cinema are less likely to learn about Antonioni than De Sica, Rossellini, Truffaut, Godard, and even Resnais.

In my pedagogy, I have operated on the intuition that Bicycle Thieves; Rome, Open City; The 400 Blows; Breathless; even Hiroshima mon amour are films more likely to evoke a receptive disposition in students than any of Antonioni’s, including his commercial hit Blowup. I aspire to introduce Antonioni into a film history curriculum and I hope this work helps to prepare to do so. What makes Antonioni’s films challenging may be perceived as a narrative deficiency or deviance relative to normative
expectations of what narrative is and how it behaves. The anger of the Cannes audience seems to have resulted from their focus on plotting that is erratic, as I hope to show, besides failing to answer what it appears to have set up as its principal question. This is how the film enacts the challenge to our narrative notions that Rosenbaum relates to the “attacks” against Antonioni and misunderstandings of his work as a whole. “What gives?” asks Crowther, about the plot of L’avventura. However, it is this uncertainty that he criticizes and the openness of the films that imbue their rhetoric and characterization with special powers.

Antonioni and his films were serially enmeshed in a variety of esthetic, social, and political polemics including the manner in which cinema shall engage the world and the parameters of theatrical exhibition. The films of Antonioni and most of Resnais are to be located just inside a border that separates films that have “theatrical runs” and films shown only in museums, as part of specialized series or retrospectives, or in the festival circuit (these included some films by Renais and most of the filmography of Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Luc Moullet, Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, and other modernist filmmakers).

It is typical for viewers to approach a film with preconceived ideas about it based on information obtained
in order to select a particular movie from myriad alternatives. Perhaps a viewer has seen a trailer, they are ubiquitous these days, but titles alone often convey a great deal about what one should anticipate from a movie. We generally approach a film with a notion of the type of film it is, including the genre or sub-genre to which it belongs by convention. A break with tradition severs the community that forms around it. By shedding or radically altering conventions, modernist films cannot help but disperse the audiences that coalesce around the traditions of genres.

Genre is not only indicative of content but also conveys expectancies of viewer attitude and response, especially the emotions a film is likely to provoke. As a matter of fact, their intended emotional effects determine the nomenclature of genres such as horror and suspense. The nearly 40 million Netflix subscribers receive recommendations based on presumably favored categories. In the company website, *L’avventura* is coded as “classic”, signifying old and venerable not necessarily classical, “foreign”, “Italian” and “drama”. Any label attached to a film will generate preliminary assumptions. It is therefore relevant to consider what type of film *L’avventura* is and what type(s) of film it sometimes appears to be. I perform
this task partly by comparing _L’avventura_ to other films with which it may bear a relation.

_L’avventura_ (1960)

Foreign films in general do not aspire to the audience size of English-language films such as _Psycho_ and _Let’s Make Love_, to name two of the highest grossing films of 1960. Yet _L’avventura_ was, despite its notoriety, not even nearly as successful anywhere as, for instance, Vittorio de Sica’s _Two Women_ and Federico Fellini’s _La Dolce Vita_ (also 1960). With modernist films like those of Antonioni, a popular art becomes a semi-popular art. One operative question as I proceed is: what is it that _L’avventura_ and subsequent Antonioni films require of the appreciative viewer that relegates them to the condition of being films for an elite of sorts? It is the task of the critic and the educator to devise strategies to share what the films teach us about how they are to be approached and considered, and to find ways to foment the formation of new audiences, or a new _cinephilia_ in current parlance.

The New Wave films released prior to _L’avventura_: Claude Chabrol’s _Le beau Serge_ (1958), François Truffaut’s _The 400 Blows_ (1959), _Hiroshima mon amour_ (1959), and Jean Luc Godard’s _Breathless_ (1960) are modernist films that sufficiently resemble the genres whose conventions they
appropriate and revise. They manage to deliver, more or less, on the pleasures and satisfactions normally yielded by those conventions. *L’avventura* enacts a more transgressive deviation from convention and disregard for audience expectations. One aspect that is often overlooked is duration. At two hours and twenty-five minutes, *L’avventura* is forty minutes to one hour longer than any of the early New Wave films listed at the beginning of this paragraph. For some viewers, the film may feel distended or bloated due to its near epic length and highly incidental, rather than eventful, plotting. The effect is compounded by the fact that the disappearance of Anna occurs a mere half-hour into it so the gap that will become permanent exists in a suspenseful state of potential resolution for nearly two hours.

Before Anna disappears, she talks to her boyfriend Sandro about her intensely ambivalent feelings for him and about her wish, perhaps her plan “to get away for a while and be alone”. Sandro makes a vulgar retort, sarcastically observing she was not complaining when they had sex, which naturally upsets Anna and ushers in silence. Anna is frustrated by his obliviousness to the problems in their relationship and disenchanted by the way the other couples in the group behave towards each other. In the middle-
ground of the shot, Sandro lies down, closes his eyes, and dozes off while Anna, with her back to the camera, occupies the foreground. The shot transitions to the next one by means of a dissolve in which the portion of the image occupied by Anna fades out before the rest of it. The shooting script published in 1960 and translated to English by Louis Brigante in 1963 states that Anna “walks away in a rage” but on screen she just fades away, her head and shoulders turned from the camera towards the sea. The published shooting scripts of Antonioni’s films support his claim that significant decisions, substantial changes, are made during the shooting and editing stages.

The script refers to the next shot simply as follows: “the sky is completely filled with clouds. It is early afternoon, the atmosphere has darkened and occasional sounds of thunder are heard”. The actual shot lasts about
nine seconds and shows a distanced, side view of cliffs descending to the sea and the launching of a small boat not mentioned in the original script. The continuity script devised by Seymour Chatman, his transcription of what can be seen and heard in the film itself, acknowledges “sounds over of a motor launch, off, and of the waves breaking against the shore”¹² but ignores the fact that the boat is patently visible. Everything in the shot is static except for the boat, which emerges out of the cliffs and moves towards the center of the image. In the book written by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith dealing exclusively with the film, there is a chapter dedicated to “a viewing” of it but the sequence gets no attention. Gene Youngblood, who wrote the foundational book on video and new media studies in 1970, asks in the commentary track of the Criterion DVD of
**L’avventura:** “She could have just left on that boat, could she not?” and points out that the importance of the shot would not register with a first-time viewer who would not know that Anna has exited the film. I would add that viewers are generally unable to recognize the significance of the scene retroactively because it is likely to have been forgotten when we receive the contextual information necessary to infer its potential implications, that Anna might have managed to slip away unnoticed on that boat to her desired solitude. The shot might be ignored altogether, or deemed to serve only to signal a temporal interval between Sandro dozing off in the preceding shot and Giulia waking up in the next one. That Anna’s disappearance happens between these two events gives it an oneiric quality, as if it is a collective or shared dream that begins when Sandro closes his eyes and ends with Giulia opening hers.
I was intrigued and fascinated by a first viewing of *L’avventura*. I wanted to watch it again as soon as possible. I vaguely remember thinking it was probably too drawn out, and wondering whether a second viewing would confirm that impression and perhaps reveal a clue to Anna’s disappearance I might have missed. That clue, so to speak, is the launching of the boat that may carry Anna and serve to reinforce the notion that she leaves, willfully. This interpretation is congruent with her words, her comportment, and her observations, but it is not preponderant enough to rule out other possibilities. The view is too distant to reveal who is on the boat. Anna could have died by accident or suicide but this shot combined with her expressed desire to be alone and gestures of exasperation and turmoil leads me to conclude that the most probable explanation is that Anna has intentionally vanished from her world in protest or renunciation of it, just like young heiress Ellie Andrews in *It Happened One Night*. However, the shot does not prove anything and no other clues are forthcoming. One possible exception is the finding of a bible in Anna’s luggage, which her father considers evidence that she did not commit suicide. The open-endedness of the film widens the interpretive range, leaves more elements open to interpretation, thus gives the viewer unusual freedom and
responsibility to create a reading of the film that is responsive to its essential succession of sounds and images.

It is extraordinary for a film to provide such scarcity of clues to the disappearance of a major character. I still marvel at the audacity of what I call the permanent gap in the plot. What is striking is the absence of a sense of finality and completion about the events depicted, a lack of closure on the issues of Anna’s disappearance and, to a lesser extent, the state of the relationship between Claudia and Sandro that becomes the crux of film about a third of the way into it. To my young self, this aspect alone made _L’avventura_ a brand new experience at the movies. Well, I had seen _Picnic at Hanging Rock_ (1975), an Australian film often compared to _L’avventura_, during its belated American release in 1979. Below I ponder why this notable film involving unexplained disappearances failed to make an equally indelible impression.

Peter Weir’s film is faithful to the source novel’s pretense of telling a true story. Anna’s unexplained disappearance is an authorial imposition some construe as effrontery whereas Weir’s fidelity to the bestselling novel, and the purportedly true story it recounts, can only please its primary, built-in audience of book fans. The following expository text precedes the opening credits of _Picnic at
Hanging Rock as if it was fact before film intervened to visualize the story:

On Saturday 14th February 1900, a party of schoolgirls from Appleyard College picnicked at Hanging Rock near Mt. Macedon in the state of Victoria. During the afternoon several members of the party disappeared without trace...

Picnic at Hanging Rock is a period film with excellent recreation of turn-of-the-century Australia and authoritative titles identifying period and place. These aspects reinforce its verisimilitude. Unlike L’avventura, it has turning points that forward the disappearance plot: a flashback motivated by a witness’s account, the return of one of the missing girls, albeit amnesiac, and so on. L’avventura becomes increasingly digressive while Picnic at Hanging Rock is plot-focused and relatively adherent to the conventions of the mystery and fantasy genres. There is a key scene that depicts the moment the girls vanish from the perspective of a chubby girl trailing behind them. She suddenly becomes hysterical and runs back to camp. She is unable to explain her deportment but the style of this scene and no other: slow motion, color filters, quick edits, ominous whooishes, fast panning, and “god’s eye” views assertively impute supernatural causes, namely the trope of a portal to another existential dimension. The combined
action of these aspects renders *Picnic at Hanging Rock* a more conventional narrative experience than *L’avventura* despite also having a disappearance as a catalytic event. The scene effectively and substantially narrows then hermeneutic range of the film. Other memorable movies that revolve around the disappearance of a character include: Hitchcock’s *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), Val Lewton’s *The Seventh Victim* (1943), Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (1949) and Otto Preminger’s *Bunny Lake is Missing* (1965). They are all conventionally and satisfactorily resolved with the return of the missing person.

The beginning of *L’avventura* educes genre expectations and presents Anna, a brunette in her 20s, as the protagonist only to have her replaced by another character as happens to Marion Crane in *Psycho* except that Marion is murdered whereas Anna can potentially return at any moment. The title and the propulsive and incisive music that plays over the opening credits of *L’avventura* augur excitement. The opening scene introduces Anna saying goodbye to her disapproving father outside their villa before going on a yacht cruise for a few days. Perhaps this is the titular “adventure”. The film succinctly sketches a generational rift between Anna and her father, who describes his
diplomatic career as “thirty years of not telling the truth”.

The clash of old and new is highlighted by backgrounds showing St. Peter’s Basilica in the distance and nearby half-built structures turning what was once a country village into a suburb. In every film, Antonioni’s mise-en-scène envisions a dynamic relationship between person and environment, both natural and constructed. Antonioni wants his characters “to be so powerfully realized that we cannot imagine them apart from their physical and social context even when we see them in empty space”\textsuperscript{13} since the larger entities in which we are embedded, such as a social class, professional organization, religious community, or even geographical area, are a meaningful aspect of our existence and identity. Antonioni draws out the intimacy between human beings and the spaces we occupy, physically, socially, and figuratively. The inextricability of human being from milieu has been a constant motif since his first film, the neorealist documentary short Gente del Po (1943), a title that directly and literally conveys the essential connection the film establishes between a people and the Po river (and valley) in Northern Italy.

The relationship between characters and the places they occupy becomes gradually more intricate in his 1960s
films. Some critics and scholars consider *L’avventura*, *La Notte* (1961), *L’eclisse* (1962), and *Red Desert* (1964) as a tetralogy even though the films were not intended to be grouped together, according to Antonioni. Each film is quite distinctive but there are commonalities that justify their retrospective grouping including the dynamic between character and milieu but most importantly: the centrality of a female protagonist who shows more potential for moral and emotional growth than anyone else because she is more open, aware, honest, or free while remaining just as vulnerable as anyone else to the malaise in the affective fabric of society. Everywhere Antonioni looks he sees symptoms of a general malaise that pervades modern society.

The female protagonists in the tetralogy are searching for meaning and self-realization in a world that is often at odds with these projects. Their strength and vitality comes from their intuitive understanding that, to paraphrase Cavell, social relatedness and acknowledgement are required if we are to transcend our existential isolation and realize a genuine, distinct sense of self. Selfhood demands both receptiveness and reciprocation. The achievement of personhood requires a willingness to adopt an intentional stance, a purposeful relatedness towards others, and being the kind of thing that attracts
intentional stances or attitudes from others. That this is true of the protagonists of the films in the tetralogy reveals their potential for genuine spiritual growth. This capacity stimulates our interest in them, which is facilitated by the quality of the performances.

In the book Michelangelo Antonioni, or The Surface of the World (1986), Seymour Chatman characterizes Antonioni as an artist who had to be made since his greatest achievements, the ones that crystallized his unique vision, were these films produced in the 1960s when the auteur was well into middle-age. It is then, Chatman argues, that Antonioni manages to render the surface of the world so that it reveals the “depths of personality” of its inhabitants. I find this quality already evident in his first feature, Cronaca di un Amore (1950), a film that examines, like L’avventura, the troubled relationship between a woman and the man who used to be her best friend’s boyfriend.

Seven years before the plot unfolds, lovers Paola and Guido drifted away after failing to avert the preventable, accidental death of his girlfriend. Now Paola enjoys the life of leisure and luxury provided by a husband she does not love, a man who hires a detective to inquire into her secret past. Guido contacts Paola to alert her that someone
is investigating her and their passion, as well as nagging feelings of guilt and regret, is rekindled. This dramatic set-up evokes “film noir” as much as Ossessione (1943), Luchino Visconti’s adaptation of James M. Cain’s The Postman Always Rings Twice, and introduces one of Antonioni’s characteristic strategies to stimulate narrative interest: summoning scenarios from the mystery genre and then subjecting them to eccentric or minimal development, as it is the case in L’avventura, Blowup (1966), The Passenger (1975), and The Mystery of Oberwald (1980).

A pivotal early scene in Cronaca di un Amore, in which Guido and Paola divulge their miseries to each other, utilizes an intricate choreography of camera and actors as they cross a park under a cold drizzle and exit through an iron gate. The camera frames them standing next to an s-shaped road at the precise moment the putative femme fatale begins to plant vaguely malicious suggestions. The grey skies, wet streets, naked and gnarled branches, etc. create a gloomy atmosphere but it is the insistent juxtaposition of the twisted road and the characters in the shot that potently evokes their deviousness and shiftiness before it manifests in the plot. The mise-en-scène, as well as the
long duration of the shot (one minute, thirteen seconds),
calls attention to itself, invites the viewer to stop and
interpret its significance.

The resolution is predicated on a twist that
exemplifies Antonioni’s moralist preoccupations and his
respect for the contingent nature of reality, for the role
chance and unexplained phenomena play in it. Paola’s
husband dies in an accident just before the lovers can kill
him but their guilt conscience compels them to separate
again. Antonioni has contrived a dramatic scenario in which
the principals are not legally responsible in order to
broach purely moral issues. Seven years earlier, they had
sinned by omission and now they sin by intention. That
their moral conscience does not allow them to stay together
despite mutual desire, that morality is still of some
consequence in the world of the film, might be regarded as a sign of hope.

Beginning with L’avventura and increasingly in subsequent films, the connections between characters and elements in the landscape become more ambiguous, more open to interpretation. Take the shot of Anna’s father, which seems designed to show how his bald head is shaped like the dome of the Basilica. A critic may make a claim for an unequivocal association between Anna’s father and traditional values or institutions, and go as far as linking Anna with the rejection of those values. There is evidence to support that inference but doing so entails overlooking the fact that there is also a shot of Anna alone against the same background, and that Anna packs a bible to a pleasure cruise.

Youngblood explains in the DVD commentary track that the suburban condos under construction and the basilica are
not symbols or metaphors of the new world and the old one. They are concrete examples, just like Anna and her father are young and old. Following Chatman’s lead, Youngblood advocates for a strictly “metonymic approach” rather than a “metaphoric approach” to the reading of the images which I take to mean that the people and things that reveal themselves through the medium of film shall be related or subjected to comparison only in terms of associations that are well-established or well-known. We use metonymy when we substitute “the White House” for “the executive branch of the federal government of the United States”, and when we associate St. Peter’s Basilica or Italian nuns with tradition or religion or with the Catholic Church. However, the films of Antonioni sometimes harness the potential of things and people to represent something based on associations that are not well established, the kind of correspondences between things found in poetry. A strictly metonymic reading is hard to sustain, especially in Antonioni’s films, as demonstrated inadvertently by Youngblood when he ascribes purely metaphorical meanings to the extinct volcano that stands in the background, between Anna’s friend Claudia and Sandro as we view them on their first rendezvous, at the highest elevation on the island of Lisca Bianca on the morning after Anna disappears. A solely
metonymic reading is partial and poor because it lacks engagement with the poetic dimensions in Antonioni’s work. To consider him only as a practitioner of realist fiction when he is also a visual poet does a disservice to the films and impoverishes our appreciation of them. As Perez puts it, “Antonioni is as subtle and evocative a practitioner of metaphor [as he is] a master of the pregnant metonymy.”\textsuperscript{14} In my opinion, choosing one approach at the expense of the other results from an either-or fallacy or false dilemma. One may begin by weighing the most obvious and concrete associations but need not stop there.

In \textit{The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni}, Peter Brunette points out that the degree to which modernist films are open to interpretation “causes them to become vast blackboards on which individual critics scrawl their own desires and obsessions... [and] sometimes leads critics to postpone a close engagement with the particulars of any given film by attempting a comprehensive description of what might be called the \textit{world} of these films.”\textsuperscript{15} He is rightfully warning against a top-down approach to film criticism in which a favored thesis or theory is promoted on the basis of a prejudiced selection of elements. Nonetheless, he also warns against “symbol hunting” or
aggressive symbolic readings of Antonioni films with a conviction that places him along with Chatman and Youngblood on one side of an important debate regarding how these images, these films, are to be read. To the contrary, the criticism of Barthes, Rosenbaum and Perez, which I endorse, insists that the presence of symbols and metaphors in Antonioni’s films compel us to read them for what they are. This conflict, which one is tempted to simplify as reading-too-much versus reading-too-little into the objects of our attention, is a major finding of my research into the scholarship on Antonioni over the past few decades. Perez provides a good example of the insights yielded by an approach that is sensitive to the poetics of L’avventura when he discusses in detail a moment aboard the yacht that finds Claudia in the stern of the boat with her back to the others. First she sees the pages of a newspaper flying about and falling in the ocean; moments later she sees Anna in the air following the same path as the pages. Claudia’s perspective of both events is provided by shots that use the same rightward panning movement thus creating a visual parallel that could not be anything but a metaphor, as Perez states:

As a painter may compare the shape of a raised arm to that of a raising branch, the color of the sky to that of a Virgin’s mantle, so Antonioni,
through the parallel arrangement of moving images, compares the movement overboard of printed pages in the wind to that of a restless woman impatient for a swim.¹⁶

It becomes clear that there is a difference between Claudia’s limited understanding of these events, provided by the panning shots, and the viewer’s point of view which is also partial but includes views and words of Sandro and Anna that connect both events to the state of affairs between them. When the pages suddenly enter Claudia’s field of vision, they may look to her, for an instant, like birds happily flapping their wings but we know they are newspaper tossed in frustration by Sandro. The sequence is part of a strategy that establishes Claudia as a witness to this world, who is inside but also outside of it, whose perspective on the truth is limited by her partial knowledge, just like that of all human beings. By “engaging with the particulars” to point to the visual metaphor in the sequence, Perez enriches my understanding of L’avventura, including my understanding of what it has to say, in ways that escape an austere, strictly “metonymic” methodology.

From the beginning, L’avventura elicits certain narrative expectations and provides interpretive instruction. After saying goodbye to her father, Anna is so
preoccupied and exasperated that she fails to greet the blonde woman, her friend Claudia (Monica Vitti), who apologizes for her lateness. They are chauffeured to a Roman piazza. The trio of black-cloaked nuns who emerge out of a dark shadow and cross the sun-drenched square just as the modern women arrive are not symbolic of the Roman Catholic Church, they are a part of it says Youngblood, who advises that any significance we attach to the coexistence of both groups in the same public and filmic space be based on realistic, metonymic associations. Doing so may suffice for now but subsequent images will evoke and refer to this one and make it resonate poetically in a way that escapes strictly objective construals. For example one may note that it is common and probable to see nuns walking across a plaza in Italy. A strictly objective interpretation of the presence of the nuns in the shot would attach no other significance to it.

Claudia is mystified by Anna’s whim to go to a café across the street instead of promptly rejoining Sandro, the boyfriend she has not seen for a month. Anna verbalizes her deep ambivalence about her relationship with him. It becomes apparent when, instead of waiting downstairs after he emerges from a 2nd floor window and says “I’ll be right down”, she brazenly marches to his apartment and initiates
sex bereft of passion and joy, sex that seems intended as a retort to Claudia, who can see into Sandro’s apartment from the street and is forced to wait alone. Anna exhibits in this early sequence the contrasting impulses of approach-avoidance conflicts so characteristic of the female protagonists in the tetralogy.

We are swiftly introduced to two more troubled couples aboard a yacht sailing south towards the Aeolian archipelago near Sicily: Corrado, a short, middle-aged man who wastes no opportunity to slight and mortify his longtime companion Giulia, an emotionally fragile woman in her early 30s; and the apathetic, cold, and self-absorbed Patrizia, the vessel’s owner, who flaunts her lack of interest in the woefully insubstantial Raimondo, and her lack of love for anyone, children included. At this point, the film seems to adopt a scenario typical of mystery or detective fiction, like the Agatha Christie novels I read in middle school, in which hostilities between members of an affluent group simmer as they cruise down the Nile, cross Europe on the Orient Express, or are forced to spend extended time on an island, as it happens in “And Then There Were None”, only to eventually boil over and culminate in surprising revelations.
It is conventional in the mystery genre for a disappearance to quickly lead to the discovery of a corpse, the refutation of reasons except murder, and the unfolding of a whodunit teeming with true and false clues, and orchestrated by a perspicacious detective engaged along with the reader in a process of deduction. But in *L’avventura*, all the clues turn out to be red herrings. Searches are conducted by land, sea and air but Anna does not turn up. An old fisherman, young cigarette smugglers, and an odiously married couple who own a pharmacy are questioned based on rumors. I pause to note how the scene in the pharmacy is representative of narration that does not move the plot forward, that slows down the pace of the film. The sequence reflects a sideways movement, a rhetorical digression for the sake of social commentary, to reinforce the problematic of love and marriage present from the start. It is another simultaneous variation, here involving a Sicilian working-class couple, on the same theme. This narrative strategy brings to mind the term “sideshadowing” coined by literary theorist Gary Saul Morson. If foreshadowing is the introduction of an event that presages or casts a shadow on a future event, “sideshadowing” points to events occurring concurrently and to the existence of alternatives to any circumstance. The
particularity and vibrancy of the character sketches of the pharmacist and his wife are also indicative of the novelistic riches found in the films of Antonioni, in the succinct but exact characterizations at the periphery of these narratives.

As the film proceeds, Sandro and Claudia chase a couple of vague leads while they anxiously initiate an affair. The ending is set at an old palace converted into luxurious lodgings where Sandro and Claudia rejoin the others. Claudia wakes up the next morning to find Sandro sharing a couch with an entertainer that goes by the stage name Gloria Perkins. He struggles to find something to say and fails. He cries and looks distraught and bewildered. He seems helpless, unable to control his own instincts, rather pathetic. She goes outside the imposing building and stands next to the rail. A disconsolate Sandro drags himself outside and sits on a bench. As Claudia walks towards the back of the bench, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of the sobbing man— is the protruding tower in the background a phallic symbol because this man is driven by his libido?

Sandro becomes aware of her presence but still cannot utter a word. The camera tilts up for a medium close-up of Claudia, who takes a deep breath, composes herself, and looks down—the music heard at Lisca Bianca returns mid-
shot for added poignancy. Insert shot of Claudia’s right hand as she begins to raise it, diffidently, towards the back of his head and extends her fingers, before retreating to the initial posture. One may say that her hand has become the objective correlative of her thinking, the visible, outward manifestation of an interior debate. Anna viewed from the chest up again; her eyes tell you she is thinking, for fifteen seconds, then a cut to her hand rising swiftly, the moment accentuated by musical crescendo, to comfort Sandro by stroking his hair. The use of close-ups, especially the one that focalizes our attention on Claudia’s hand, and the purposeful use of the music score point to the significance of the gesture that culminates a development, that becomes evident about midway through the
film, involving Claudia’s loss of innocence and the corresponding gain in self-knowledge afforded by a particular set of new experiences over the course of only a few days. She seems at peace with herself and her surroundings in the extreme long view of Sandro and Claudia that ends the film.

Claudia’s gesture calls for interpretation. Of course, all human expression requires interpretation to be understood but this particular moment is privileged from the rest of the film by its condition of being what its makers decided would be “the final word” on what it has to say, and what was deliberately chosen to be the last expression of the subjectivity of the protagonist, to be our most recent memory of Claudia. The words I choose to describe the images and sounds already constitute an interpretation of sorts, that Claudia makes a conscious choice to respond to human weakness with compassion and affiliation, that she has come to know herself as the kind of person who is capable of such a humane response. The word “pity” has often been used to characterize Claudia’s gesture. If it is pity, it is pity augmented by a feeling of solidarity with Sandro, a sense of complicity in betrayal, in that Claudia has been vocal about feeling she is disloyal to Anna by taking up with Sandro. Dominique
Fernandez, in her essay “The Poet of Matriarchy”, describes the gesture as a sort of maternal coddling that would be the meager basis of a future relationship between them. I can justify regarding the gesture as maternal because of Sandro’s immaturity not because there is anything essentially “maternal” about Claudia’s behavior, although I am not inclined to rule out the possibility that Sandro will grow from this intense emotional experience. It is Claudia’s gesture though and it matters most as an indication of her affiliation and compassion in defiance of modern isolation.

The achievement of closure in L’avventura is dependent on our recognition of the significance of her deliberate final gesture as a declaration of selfhood, as a decisive step in the development of the character, and our retrospective acknowledgement that it is Anna’s sustained absence, the permanent gap in the narrative that conditions Claudia’s emotional odyssey. Moreover, if Anna vanishes in protest against a world she finds deplorable, her perennial absence lends poignancy to her renunciation of it. These justifications of the permanent gap, this understanding of how it functions relative to the whole film, contribute to my sense that the film ends on the right note partly as a consequence of not resolving the mystery of Anna’s
disappearance and not predicting the future of the relationship between Claudia and Sandro, only that there is still one, as Claudia’s decisive gesture attests.

There is an element of circularity at play, in that the problematic relationship between Sandro and Anna at the beginning of the film is matched by the quandary of the relationship between him and Claudia at the conclusion of the film. This circularity is reinforced stylistically by the last-minute reprise of the “Lipari theme”, the non-diegetic music heard on the island, which reiterates the emptiness of Anna’s continued absence. This rounding up of the structure of the narrative is also found in L’eclisse, which begins with Vittoria in the process of concluding one relationship and ends just a few weeks later when her budding relationship with Piero (Alain Delon), her mother’s handsome stockbroker, is aborted by what seems like a separate but equal decision not to keep a promise to meet at a designated place and time.

L’eclisse does not pose early questions that remain unanswered in the manner of L’avventura. It presents to the viewer a last-minute enigma concerning what motivates Vittoria and Piero’s absence and whether it marks the end of their romance. Because Piero is a more desirable or less objectionable partner for the protagonist than Sandro, the
end of their affair has a more universal gravity. Nothing goes wrong, not really, between the couple in their moments together, which fluctuates between sensual abandon and a reasoned resistance that is never verbalized. Antonioni’s reputation for sparse or minimal dialogue is truly evident only in L’eclisse and, to some extent, in Red Desert and The Passenger. The speechless ending of L’eclisse amounts to a declaration of skepticism about the prospects of finding lasting happiness in romantic entanglements. "Two people shouldn't know each other too well if they want to fall in love. But then maybe they shouldn't fall in love at all", Vittoria says at one point. The ending of L’eclisse is the wordless, “cinematic” equivalent of that devastating statement. Antonioni teases us with the appearance of strangers strolling or exiting buses who momentarily resemble Vittoria or Piero proceeding to the designated corner but our hopes will be dashed.
The ending of _L’avventura_ is more open-ended and uncertain. Anna’s disappearance has more in common with Dame Christie’s own unexplained 11-day absence in 1926 than with any incident in her astutely plotted novels. There are clues in _L’avventura_ not to a disappearance but to the mysteries of Eros who is malato, said Antonioni in a statement released simultaneously with the film. In Italian, _avventura_ is a word also used to denote a fling, an unrestrained pursuit of desire, a lively frolic perhaps but not without risk. You can tell Eros is sick in the films of Antonioni because people are having sex to escape or to avoid intimacy not to deepen it.

It is interesting that the trailer for _L’avventura_ made by U.S. distributor Janus Films does not mention the disappearance or play up the mystery angle. Paradoxically, it markets the film as “an erotic adventure [and] a new experience in motion picture eroticism that travels from the core of human desire to the surface of casual passion”, as a voice announces over a 2-minute montage of every sexy scene in the movie. The trailer misrepresents the film, creates false expectations of titillation, perhaps even nudity, when in fact the sex scenes are quite modest in presentation and generally show sex as a mania or something to regret or as a weapon (Giulia has sex with a teenage
lothario mainly to spite Corrado). You’d be better off watching Bergman’s *Summer with Monika* (1953) or *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955) if you sought the pleasantly erotic experience promised by the trailer for *L’avventura*, or perhaps a nudie flick like Doris Wishman’s made-in-Miami *Hideout in the Sun* (1960). Antonioni was serious in his critique of sexual mores in the 1960s and his films provide unequivocal evidence, particularly *L’avventura* and *La notte*.

It is important to point out that Antonioni does not confine his critique to the upper echelons of society, or even to just males. Twice in *L’avventura* we are subjected to public displays of sexually suggestive behavior by large groups of ogling, lascivious working-class men. For instance, there is a menacing, predatory quality in the male gazes directed at Claudia as she walks alone in a Sicilian town. In the other scene, it is a woman, Gloria Perkins, who incites men into a sexual frenzy for the sake of cheap publicity. These scenes serve a decidedly rhetorical function; they digress from the main plot thread and may contribute to the tedium reported by some critics and audiences who may be highly invested on plot.

You can tell Eros is sick in these films because, at this time in this place, feelings are too volatile, too fleeting to build lasting relationships based on them.
Claudia is mesmerized and stupefied by the suddenness of her desire for Anna’s boyfriend, by her willingness to be seduced by Sandro soon after her disappearance. How can emotions be so evanescent, so voluble? The indeterminate nature of Anna’s disappearance creates a state of constant, neurotic anticipation since she can potentially return at any moment and immediately threaten Claudia’s protagonism and her budding relationship with Sandro. This scenario generates an unrelieved tension that nags at the viewer as much as it burdens Claudia. We all find ourselves in the temporality of an eternal return. This suggests that ultimately, perhaps surprisingly, by the end of most of the films of Antonioni, there is an unabashed effort to make an emotional impact on the viewer.

Eros is sick, according to the films of Antonioni, because men pursue wealth and power at the expense of their honest realization. Men like Sandro, who makes easy money as a construction estimator rather than practicing architectural design; Marcello Mastroianni’s novelist in La notte, who weighs a lucrative but compromised offer as a corporate publicist when confronted with a creative impasse; the shallow stockbroker Piero in L’eclisse who is upset about the damage to his car but not about the drunk who died in a crash after stealing it; and Giuliana’s
workaholic, dispassionate husband in *Red Desert*; the common flaw of these men is their soul-draining materialism. The archetype is different than the male protagonist in the genre of remarriage comedy proposed by Cavell, whose affluence is designed to free him from material concerns that would distract from the pursuit of happiness in marriage, or remarriage. The male protagonist in the tetralogy only knows how to “make” money, or has sacrificed other projects to that mission. There is little subtlety in the films of Antonioni in their consistently unfavorable view of the pursuit of wealth and profit. Eros is sick because many people lack the genuine, positive self-regard required to extend it towards others. Wealth and the power that comes with it do not seem to provide it, or to endow the lives of these characters with meaning. Old values lost sway, perhaps more so among those profiting the most from Italy’s miraculous economic growth in the 1950s and into the 1960s.

People like Patrizia, who is unmoved by people but manages to pity “islands...with all this water around them, poor things...” (Is this how Claudia feels about Sandro at the end?) When she says this, Patrizia is framed in what, for Antonioni, qualifies as an unusual medium close-up, thus bestowing importance on what is being said. This
concretely expressed personification trope or anthropomorphism reinforces decidedly metaphorical associations between the craggy islands and the characters insinuated by the images. Thus L’avventura instructs the viewer on the necessity of symbolic interpretation. People exist as if we were islands when we become disconnected, alienated or estranged from each other, when there is a failure of communication and affiliation that in Antonioni’s films affects most acutely the romantic relationships between the characters. I notice how Corrado’s bitterness and Patrizia’s smug condescension are aimed primarily at their sentimental partners. They are otherwise pleasant and quite considerate of others.

To a large extent, every Antonioni feature before Blowup is a cronaca di un amore, the chronological account of a failed or failing love affair. The adventure in L’avventura is Claudia’s sentimental journey. Indeed, what I find most satisfying about the film is the minutely calibrated, complex characterization of Claudia and the nuanced, breakthrough performance by Monica Vitti that bears it. Claudia becomes the protagonist when she announces she will scour the islands to look for Anna, having evaded and surrendered to Sandro’s passionate kiss inside the yacht, before brusquely breaking their embrace.
From this moment on, Claudia’s decisions drive the plot, become the plot, in particular her recurrent deliberations about whether it is wise and just ("non e giusto", she says) to indulge her desire for Sandro. They come together and apart throughout the remainder of the film as her internal struggle is carried out in the context of the absence of Anna. They meet again, at the small waiting room of the Milazzo train station where Sandro has tracked her down. The camera stays on Claudia for ten or fifteen silent seconds after he asks pleadingly “when will I see you again?” Her gaze conveys both joy and apprehension, her lips struggle to say something but her mouth won’t open. She adjusts her body posture and looks away when she realizes she is not ready to answer; turns to him again, swiftly this time, to look intently, maybe hungrily into his eyes, and mouth, but she shakes her head in rejection of those impulses, before the counter-shot that registers Sandro’s reaction. Antonioni gives Vitti the time and space to give full expression to her complicated feelings and thoughts in their films, sometimes silently, or alone in front of mirrors, or positioned so that her feelings are revealed to the camera but not to her male counterpart. What is gained by sustaining the mystery of the disappearance of Anna is the forging of a specific scenario.
that allows for Claudia’s “depths of personality” to be revealed to us.

Monica Vitti’s roles in the tetralogy show her facility with highly charged dramatic material as well as comedy. There are many moments of whimsy and unbridled joy in L’avventura, La notte and L’eclisse that allow Vitti to display a playfulness and spontaneity that seem to escape notice of those who find the films “dour”. However, I recognize that generally the films do not reach optimistic conclusions. Additionally, in L’eclisse and Red Desert there is little movement in the romantic relationships that constitute what we can call plot, which most often does not move forward in a chain of causally linked events (and may account for complaints of dramatic inertia). Instead, doubt and indecision make the progress of the relationships ebb and flow capriciously without a discernible trajectory. Antonioni’s films are most accessible as character studies since the characterization of the protagonist takes precedent over the plot, or we may say the study or analysis of the protagonist in the context of a specific scenario turns out to be the “real” plot. Because they are, more than anything else, character studies, the films of Antonioni are satisfying to the extent that the viewer takes an interest in the protagonists. In L’avventura, no
action by Sandro, Claudia, or the authorities brings us closer to knowing what happened to Anna. Rather than properly propel the plot, the various sequences are subservient to rhetoric and characterization.

The tetralogy films tell love stories defined by romantic disbelief and hence they are not romances in the traditional sense. Perhaps they are melodramas because they do, eventually and reticently, appeal to our emotions. “Heartless”, a critic tagged Antonioni unfairly, as if these films were unkind or unsympathetic to the characters, or glib about their sorrows. Then again, often the films are dispassionately analytic, clinically symptomatic, detached in a way that may prevent some viewers to engage with them. Antonioni’s point of view is that of a stranger with an insatiable curiosity about the mysteries of personality and about the future of humanity.

The partnership between Vitti and Antonioni in the tetralogy is often compared to the contemporaneous partnership between Anna Karina and Jean-Luc Godard. “Much as Antonioni was charting aspects of his relationship with Monica Vitti, Godard was examining his relationship with Anna Karina in most of the films that immediately preceded and followed Contempt.”17 It is hard to imagine how most of
these films would work without Karina’s charisma but Vitti’s characters are generally more complex and nuanced.

The Antonioni-Vitti films are more analogous with the groundbreaking, controversial-at-the-time collaboration between Roberto Rossellini and Ingrid Bergman in *Stromboli* (1950), *Europa '51* (1952) and *Voyage To Italy* (1954). They are highly dependent on and demanding of Vitti’s talent to portray characters who endure contradicting and fluctuating emotional states. So much is made, and rightly so, of Antonioni’s expressive imagery that Vitti’s vital contribution is undervalued. In her performances, there is an intricate, fascinating interplay between approach and avoidant stances towards the objects of her wavering desire that exudes pure dramatic artistry.

What makes Claudia, Vittoria (*L’eclisse*) and Giuliana (*Red Desert*) waver and vacillate are not feelings or
desires per se, but internal deliberations on whether it is moral or wise to succumb to them given a particular set of circumstances. Vitti’s men are beautiful, more conventionally so than she is, and outwardly successful but often unworthy of her affections. Giuliana’s callous husband chooses to remain in England on business rather than return to Italy after a near-crash traumatizes her. Sandro is too immature, never more so than when he becomes so pathetically envious of a young architecture student that he knocks down a china-ink bottle to spoil his drawing of a baroque vault. A likely confrontation is avoided when Sandro and the aggrieved student are distracted by a long row of black-clad seminarians emerging out of the palazzo and crossing the light-colored piazza in a manner reminiscent of the three black-clad nuns crossing the
square in front of Sandro’s apartment, and evocative of the black ink spilling over the white paper to ruin the sketch.

The original script describes Sandro’s feelings of regret and resentment upon noticing the artistry and dedication of the student but no vengeful action taken by Sandro, and no mention is made of the seminarians filing out. Antonioni describes himself as a secular artist, one whose films lack “the authentic Catholic nostalgia in Fellini’s work and even in Rossellini’s.” In addition, it is safe to assume that when Antonioni refers to old, obsolete values in the context of Italy in mid-20th century that he is speaking about Catholic dogma and tradition. It is generally assumed that he regarded religion as a regressive force in society because he was a secular, leftist intellectual. However, he refrained from criticizing Catholicism directly. Rhetorically speaking,
Antonioni was blunt in his condemnation of greed and debauchery and quite subtle in his criticism of institutional religion. As Fernandez has pointed out:

The statement he has made to the press on the archaic state of our civilization remains vague and confused. One wonders in particular how much blame he imputes to Catholicism, to the Vatican. Not a word is said on this subject in the film, apart from a parade of little seminarians kept in military order by priests, black against the white stucco of the church.\(^\text{19}\)

She interprets the scene as being a “word” of blame against Catholicism and I concur. My conclusion is based on a metaphorical reading, a symbolic association between the ink spreading over and tainting the visual representation of beautiful architecture and the subsequent displacement of the clerics over the actual locale. In addition to the associations suggested merely by the juxtaposition of the two shots, it is also significant that first Sandro and then the student stop what they are doing and gaze at something off-screen, which is followed by a cut to a view of what has captured their attention. Consequently, the montage of the two shots is an example of both intellectual and continuity editing. It is not only the authorial presence that focalizes our attention and our associative thinking by means of editing, but the characters themselves redirect our gaze and our sense of what is important. I am
also struck by the purely aesthetic or pictorial commonalities between the two images, simply the movement of dark elements in the images over the bright or light ones, which figures into my thinking of them as a pair.

There is an imagistic poetry in some works of cinema and it behooves the critic to attend to it. The argument has been made that since a photographic image presents the actual thing, the thing itself, it lacks the ability of signs and words to be detached from their original meaning in order to signify elsewhere. It is one thing to give priority to the ability of images to represent or to present again, to us, actual things; or to prioritize what film can do because of its automatism. It is something entirely different to deny or ignore the metaphoric potential of images, either alone or in combination with other elements such as sound, music, and dialogue, which is a valuable resource for creators of visual media.

I do not claim that my reading of the sequence is categorical or preclusive. How can it be? Antonioni was fond of quoting the ancient poet Lucretius: “Nothing appears as it should in a world where nothing is certain. The only thing certain is the existence of a secret violence that makes everything uncertain.” 20 Antonioni endeavored to saturate his films with the uncertainty
created by the protean nature of human beings and our correct perception of the world as something that is perpetually transforming itself, as something that cannot be fixed because it is by nature in a state of becoming. Bakhtin praised the novels of Dostoevsky for their *unfinalizability* in a way that resonates with my experience of modernist films. Bakhtin application of the term included the *diegesis*, the world created by Dostoevsky on the page: “the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.”

The reappearance of Anna is always in the future for the characters and the viewers of *L’avventura*.

All the theatrical fiction films Antonioni directed after *Red Desert* have male protagonists who are photographers, writers, or film directors undergoing some kind of professional crisis. This aspect alone clearly distinguishes the tetralogy from the films that followed. After the breakup with Vitti circa 1966, Antonioni ventured outside Italy to make *Blowup* (London), *Zabriskie Point* (California), the documentary *Chung Kuo-China*, and *The Passenger* (Algeria, Spain, Germany, London). I will close this chapter by considering exposition, plot development,
denouement, openness and closure as manifested in the first and last of these films.

The Passenger (1975)

The Passenger marks the only time that Antonioni filmed a story written by someone else: Mark Peploe, who also wrote most of the script. The Passenger is Antonioni’s most formally experimental film. It is not the last film directed by Antonioni to push the boundaries of his iconoclastic style of artistic expression but it is the last one to be fully successful. The seven-minute panning shot that moves through the metal bars of a hotel window, around a dusty plaza and back inside to find our protagonist murdered is worthy of its notoriety. Equally impressive is an unorthodox editing style that shuns establishing shots, and the in-shot flashbacks in which the camera moves away from character in the present until he disappears from view to find him again at a moment from the past.

Scene analysis: in postcolonial Saharan Africa, documentarian David Locke (Jack Nicholson) sits on a desk gluing his photograph to the passport of Robertson, a man who has died of natural causes in the adjacent room and resembles Locke. While we look at Locke working silently, we hear a voice-over conversation between him and Robertson
and we assume, based on convention, that we are hearing Locke’s subjective memory of it. Cut to a close view of a tape machine placed on a low chair that is playing-back the actual conversation. Antonioni is fond of springing all kinds of surprises on viewers. He provokes brief experiences of temporal disorientation and character misidentification effecting fluid, transformative notions of space, time, existence, and selfhood (use of doppelgangers for instance).

The camera pans diagonally from the tape machine to Locke sitting at his desk shirtless. He looks screen left and the camera follows suit by panning gingerly in that direction, past the bare wall behind the now off-screen tape recorder, to rest on a window with a view of the
balcony where a man looks out at the vastness of the landscape. From this distance, with his back to us, he could be either man. As the camera pushes towards the balcony, Locke enters frame right and continues the conversation with Robertson. Now we realize that we are actually seeing the conversation that was recorded on the tape. This time we are not getting an aural, subjective flashback, nor a recording played back in the present. As
the camera glides from the present into the past of the characters, the shot becomes a full-fledged flashback to the conversation between the two men. It eventually becomes apparent that we have listened to a single, uninterrupted conversation that first appears to be subjective recollection, then revealed via editing to be a recorded conversation that morphs into a flashback within the same shot by means of camera movement. The Passenger is replete with artfully assembled sequences like this one that comment and elaborate preoccupations with the nature of reality, memory, reproduction, representation, existence and subjectivity.

The film unfolds as a sequence of events that is logical and distributed throughout the film at a pace that sustains and deepens our interest and curiosity. The viewer is wise to attend to the dialogue spoken during the “bravura” shot described above as it provides exposition about character and situation to begin the formulation of hypotheses natural to the narrative experience. Locke decides to become a passenger in Robertson’s journey by carrying out the assignations in his agenda, a chronological itinerary that arouses expectancies in the viewer and grounds the tale in specifics of time and place.
Attention to detail is rewarded by revelations that answer, to a certain extent, questions posed during the narrative.

We do find out, if we pay attention, the identity of the character, named simply “the girl” (Maria Schneider) in the credits, who seems to cross paths with Locke by mere coincidence. Like all plots that end with the death of the protagonist, this one grants a feeling of tragic finality to the proceedings. There are codes and clues, secret meetings and even a car chase in The Passenger. The action, the what-happens and who-done-it, moves the plot forward and is largely resolved but the presentation of events is oblique or indirect. The open-endedness is manifest only at the level of psychological motivation but it is still central to the overall narrative strategy. The enduring enigmas involve the role of “the girl” in the murder and the motivation for Locke’s death-and-rebirth project: annihilating himself and assuming Robertson’s identity, particularly after it is revealed to Locke and the viewer that he is not impersonating an average businessman but a gunrunner and Locke accepts a large payment for weapons he does not know how to procure.

At this point, it begins to become apparent that Locke’s project of assumed identity is quite risky. When asked by the Avis employee how long he intends to keep the
rental car, he quips: “for the rest of my life”, a phrase he reiterates half-jokingly when he telephones to report he will return the car in Spain. This is the rare instance when Locke seems aware that his life is in serious danger. The Passenger expounds on his failed marriage, and the meaninglessness and alienation he feels in his professional role which seems to prompt the switch of identity. (Of course Locke is named after John Locke, the theorist of identity and consciousness who postulated that the mind was a tabula rasa). When opportunity knocks, Locke abandons the passive role of objective, detached, renowned reporter. He becomes “a man of action”, a man who plays a consequential, life-threatening role in a violent civil war. Even though it is never spelled out, I believe that circumstantial evidence indicates that Locke willingly and consciously stays on a death path that negates the possibility of future existential embodiment.

I find The Passenger to be Antonioni’s most technically awesome and his most dispiriting film; it is, as Bergman would say, “devilishly sad”. It is a tragedy and as such, intended to have an intense emotional impact on the viewer. I find depictions of Antonioni as “cold”, “cerebral” or “heartless” hard to explain. It is vital for the success of the films of Antonioni for the viewer to
develop feelings in response to the disappearance of Anna, Claudia’s confusion and disillusion, Sandro’s wretchedness, the marital dissolution in La notte, Vittoria and Piero missing their rendezvous and missing from the last seven minutes of L’eclisse, and Locke’s suicide by proxy. His intentionality, albeit veiled, makes the ending of The Passenger much more pessimistic than the quasi-accidental death of Aldo in Il Grido (1957), who falls from the refinery smokestack where he works by the combined action of dizziness, exhaustion, and amorous despondency; it gives me the same gut feeling as Judy’s fall in Vertigo.

Antonioni had already addressed suicide directly in “Tentato suicidio”, his episode from the anthology film L’amore in città (1953). It is a documentary/fiction hybrid about four women recounting and partially reenacting their suicide attempts. In every case, the rationale for suicide is explicitly revealed to be penury or personal tragedy. Suicide remains only one possible explanation at the end of L’avventura but Locke dies with The Passenger and his acquiescence to his own murder cannot be explained away by melodramatic impulse. The Passenger has a generalized, nihilistic tone that may be construed as skepticism about the possibility of transcending meaninglessness and alienation in modern society. However, the film refrains
from being emphatic about this generalizing claim. The open-endedness of the narrative allows the viewer to also ascribe Locke’s behavior to his individual psychology. The narratives in the films of Antonioni do not conform to what Aristotle called “a complete action”, not even The Passenger due to its motivational uncertainty. The absences or gaps in these films complicate the sense of closure that is an expected result of representing complete actions in the narrative arts. The permanent absences and gaps require justification based on considerations of their function and consequence. The open-endedness and partial resolution facilitate a realism that acknowledges the multiplicity and complexity of the factors that contribute to an actuality, and the partiality of the individual’s perspective on cause-and-effect relationships.

**Blowup** (1966)

More people have seen Blowup than any other film by Antonioni. It was his first English-language film and first with a single male protagonist, a photographer named Thomas, an unsympathetic one at that. This is not surprising; with the possible exception of the businessman played by Richard Harris in Red Desert (even if he is a passenger like Locke, pitifully “not happy here or there so I have to be on the go”), no male principal in his films is simpatico. Thomas
is even more of a chauvinist than the others and just as narcissistic and materialistic ("I wish I had tons of money. Then I'd be free", he tells his manager). His arrogant self-confidence is shaken by an epistemic crisis of sorts, when he realizes that the photographs he took offhandedly one afternoon in a park cannot ascertain that a man was murdered there. He produces blowups to help him figure out the truth but the images only grow more abstract. He finds a corpse in the park that evening but it is gone when he returns in the morning.

The strategy of permanent gaps in Blowup is openly declared when Jane (Vanessa Redgrave), the young woman surreptitiously photographed in the park with the man who might have been murdered, improbably walks to the entrance of Thomas’s place at the precise moment he arrives in his convertible hours later. A visibly baffled Thomas confronts her: "How did you manage to find me!?" She takes a long pause and answers with a question. Thomas decides not to press the matter and moves on, and so shall we as the film instructs. There are inconsistencies regarding his marital status, and the murder plot is dropped immediately after the corpse disappears from the park so the viewer never learns about the particulars, especially the nature of Jane’s involvement. Permanent gaps abound in this tale of a
day in the life of a “mod” photographer in “swinging London”. The viewer walks away with dangling questions. Who breaks into the studio to steal the negatives? *Blowup* provides murder-mystery exposition to elicit these questions with rhetorical intentions that are unusual for the genre. We may say, in Carroll’s terminology, that the narrative or erotetic resolution of the film is weak, that we do not derive closure in *Blowup* from the answers to the enigmas it elicits. The film’s open-endedness, the way various potentialities are still open when it stops, allows the film to offer insights into the nature of truth, knowledge, and reality. For this purpose, the film dramatizes, constructs a demonstration of, Thomas’s realization that the nature of knowledge and truth is more uncertain and slippery, harder to capture, than he had assumed. He thinks he knows a man has been murdered but, what kind of truth is one not shared by anyone? He figures the camera is a tool that faithfully creates a record of reality but it fails him and his assumptions and beliefs collapse under the weight of that failure. The photographs do not prove anything. What kind of verity is one that cannot be verified?

*Blowup* has an elegant, double-bracket structure that gives it a sense of being complete as is. The first and
last scenes feature the same patch of emerald green grass that fills the whole frame. The other bracket, a correspondence between the second and the penultimate sequences, involves the appearance of a raucous group of revelers in mime costume. In their final performance, they play a game of imaginary tennis on the park’s courts. The camera declares itself, takes a stand, by suddenly panning back and forth to track the imaginary ball as it moves from one side of the court to the other. One player hits the ball over the fence and it falls nearest Thomas who has been spectating from a corner with no airs of superiority or omniscience. Thomas experiences momentary hesitation just like Claudia when she ponders how to respond to Sandro at the end of L’avventura. Then Thomas locates the ball, a mime has pointed to it, picks it up and throws it back into
the court. The camera stays on Thomas while we hear the sounds of ball bouncing on court and hit with a racket and so forth, as if the ball was visible, or as Thomas imagines or recalls these sounds. Thomas looks more happy and free than riches could ever make him, at least according to the films of Michelangelo Antonioni. In this film, the ending grants closure to the extent that one recognizes the transcendence in this moment, and the role played by narrative uncertainty and open-endedness in showing a development in an individual’s belief system.

Uncertainty has unleashed its secret violence on Thomas’s epistemic beliefs bearing an attitudinal transformation, a newfound receptiveness and reciprocation. Simple moment perhaps, but a leap in Thomas’s sense of his being in the world; selfhood achieved through the
acknowledgement of others. This moment that compels us to stop and reflect is an epiphany, a rare instance of enlightenment or recognition that a new perspective on truth and reality holds. When Blowup ends, barriers that alienate and isolate, and inspire metaphors about human beings and craggy islands, have been surmounted by consensus and communion.
Chapter III
Alain Resnais
At once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.\(^1\) (John Keats, 1817)

*Last Year at Marienbad* has kept me company throughout adulthood and intrigued me as much as *L’avventura*. Multiple viewings over the course of three decades have yielded a deeper appreciation of it. I may wish to trace distinct steps leading to this piece of criticism but memories of old viewings are like tributaries that have joined a single stream. Albeit vague and unverifiable, I have a sense that each viewing of *Last Year at Marienbad* (henceforth LYAM) revealed something new, spurred a new reflection, had a different effect. As Emerson states in his essay *Experience* (1844):

> A deduction must be made from the opinion, which even the wise express of a new book or occurrence. Their opinion gives me tidings of their mood, and some vague guess at the new fact but is nowise to be trusted as the lasting relation between that intellect and that thing.\(^2\)

A great film is a thing that encourages the intellect to keep it present in thought and to experience again; a great film rewards subsequent viewings with newfound pleasures and edifications. I think most of the films discussed
herein fit that bill. My thoughts on these films are the product of on-going relations with them, some long-term.

This dissertation aims to give concrete expression, to pay tuition to intuition as Emerson says, to thoughts of long gestation, meditations on reality and art and narrative and film generated by long-ago viewings of these two films. There was a marked difference between my thoroughly engaged but irresolute experience with LYAM and L’avventura, and my fervor for films that became instant favorites: Vertigo, The Rules of the Game, Los Olvidados, Ugetsu, The Searchers, The Spirit of the Beehive, and many more. The modernist films in focus had a more pronounced formative impact because they posed challenges to my assumptions about such narrative aspects as exposition, resolution, and closure. LYAM is a movie I revisit like an old friend. I take measure of the change in me; I view it anew in the context of experience accrued since the last visit. Films, like novels, can become intimate things, lifetime companions, but modernist films do so grudgingly, ambivalently.

The inspiration for this brief personal recollection is the keen treatment of the nature and phenomenology of memory in Resnais’s documentary shorts: Guernica (1950), Statues Die Also (1953), Night and Fog (1955), and All the
Memory of the World (1956); and in the fiction features: Hiroshima mon amour (1959); LYAM (1961); Muriel, or The Time of Return (1963); and Je t’aime, Je t’aime (1966). These films not only challenged my younger self’s narrative concepts but also my understanding of what I know and what I remember, epistemic and mnemonic reflections that are more variable in youth. There is an intimate connection between the event of narrating and the workings of memory for the reason that recalling and recounting are activities inherent to storytelling. Themes that will become salient in subsequent films: the relations between reality and theater, between theater and film, between filmmaker and diegetic narrator, between human agency and contingency, are present during the first twenty years in the long and prolific career of Alain Resnais (b.1922 France) but the issue of memory dominates this early phase. I proceed to tersely examine issues of authorship, reception, development and distribution of Resnais’s oeuvre before dwelling into details of the films most pertinent to my arguments and themes, with the canonical LYAM receiving most of my attention.

Biographical accounts by Gaston Bounoure, among others, reveal Resnais’s early and eager acquaintance with both
popular and “high” culture. Exposure to French and American cinema of the 1920s and 1930s was as vital to his
cultivation as literature. A performance of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* in 1937 inspired sustained interest in the theater
and in performance. A teenage stint in stage acting was
followed by a year in film school and participation in the
making of several documentaries in the post-war years, with

Nicole Védrès’s *Paris 1900* (1947) designated by Resnais as
particularly instructive. After his *Van Gogh* (1948) won an
Oscar for Best Short Film, Renais accepted propositions
from producers that resulted in a series of exceptional
documentaries about historical trauma, the conflicting
requires to remember it and forget it, and the impossibility of representing it satisfyingly. Resnais stated that “what had to be filmed is the impossibility of filming it”3 and yet, sometimes Resnais and his collaborators manage the seemingly impossible. In Documentary Film Classics, William Rothman eloquently argues that in the shot in Night and Fog that pans along a stone ceiling, retracing the fingernail markings of victims of Nazi concentration camps, “the past is present [and] the reality of the world of the past is restored.” It is as sublime as any shot in Resnais’s oeuvre. It reminds me of the memorable shot in Statues Die Also showing a Frenchman who takes mallet and chisel from an African youth to show him how to make markings on stone that will be sold as “African art”. The image encapsulates a long history of white supremacy, if not quite the horrors of colonialism. What is most distressing is that the camera is capturing a moment from the present not restoring the reality of a world that progress has effaced.

These documentaries tackled the massacre of innocent civilians by the German bombardment of the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War (Guernica), the damage to traditional African culture precipitated by French imperialism (Statues Die Also, recently available after decades of governmental censorship), and the Holocaust
(Night and Fog). These three short and medium-length films alone would guarantee the inclusion of Resnais in any respectable account of the history of cinema. These are films that had to be made, a claim that may be extended to Hiroshima mon amour, a film about nuclear warfare that also dramatizes the punishment of French citizens who collaborated or fraternized with the Germans occupying France during World War II, and Muriel, which tacitly admits to atrocities committed by the French during the Algerian War of Independence. François Chalais interviewed Resnais after the release of LYAM on the TV program Cinepanorama and pointed out that these films are unprecedented. He asked Resnais if he feels he is making “a new cinema”.

Resnais: “No, on the contrary, I feel that I belong squarely within the traditions of the cinema...I think I am much more in direct contact with the cinema of the past than I am an innovator.”

Chalais: “You don’t consider yourself an avant-garde auteur?”

Resnais: “I don’t understand that term.”

Resnais thinks of his cinema as existing in a state of continuity with classical cinema, with the cinema of his youth. Resnais subscribes, it appears, to Stanley Cavell’s understanding that the essence of the modernist situation “lies in the relation between the present practice of an
enterprise and the history of that enterprise," that this history requires acknowledgement so that current modernist practice can be identified as being responsive to it in some significant way. There is a productive tension in modernist art between a visionary quest for innovation and a dialogic continuity with classical and older modes and conventions.

Renais has also resisted the label auteur, preferring to use the designation réalisateur. Sometimes he accepts credit for mise-en-scène or montage, with his name appearing inconspicuously in the middle of credit sequences. Biographers invariably describe Resnais as modest and cordial; I consulted numerous interviews on film and print that evince his good-humored, unassuming demeanor, but Resnais is not being coy or diplomatic when he insists that the authorship of the films is divided, mainly between himself and the writer of the text or script. There has never been “un film de Alain Resnais” because “his films” result from a creative tension he seeks between the words of a literary author, who is accorded expressive space and relative independence, and the sounds and images Resnais conjures up reciprocally. I refer to “the films of Resnais” with an understanding that Chris Marker is also the author of Statues Die Also and that there would be no Night and Fog
or Muriel without Jean Cayrol. The documented evidence of extensive negotiations between Resnais and screenwriters Marguerite Duras (Hiroshima, mon amour) and Alain Robbe-Grillet (LYAM) does not minimize the indelible contributions of these famous literary figures. It is predictable then for Resnais to use the pseudonym Alex Preval to covertly account for his work on the scripts of his last two films: Wild Grass (2009) and You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet (2012).

With Hiroshima mon amour, Resnais turned to fiction features as his primary mode. Mélo (1986) constitutes a less remarked turning point: instead of continuing to collaborate with poets and novelists, Resnais began to dedicate himself to adaptations of works written originally for the stage that manage to be vitally “cinematic”, the uses of the camera and the sequencing of the shots add substantially to what script and performance convey, while flaunting their theatricality. As Jonathan Rosenbaum observes:

*He proceeds in Mélo as if film and theater were kissing cousins rather than natural enemies or mutually exclusive options. Like Cocteau in Les Parents Terribles and Ichikawa in An Actor’s Revenge, he makes the theatrical cinematic, and the cinematic theatrical. By never letting us forget that we’re watching a play, he allows us to yield the maximum from the fact that we’re watching a movie.*"
André Bazin also praised *Les Parents Terribles*, in the context of a defense of filmed theater that rather boldly claims that “the influence, as unconscious as it was unavowed, of the repertory and traditions of theater has been very marked on that class of film considered purely and specifically cinematic.”

Beginning with Mélo and consistently thereafter, Resnais indulges his lifelong passion for theater, including musical theater. Generally speaking, these films have been celebrated in France and parts of continental Europe and underappreciated in America and England, that is, whenever the-powers-that-be deemed them worthy of distribution. *Smoking/No Smoking* (1993) was not released in the U.S. and the thoroughly delightful *Not on the Lips* (2003) was a “straight-to-DVD” release even though it features Audrey Tautou fresh off *Amélie* (2001), the highest grossing French film in the U.S., ever.

Perhaps melodramas, musicals, and farces with theatrical stylization are no longer popular genres, in any language. Perhaps these films, with their lightness of tone and overtly theatrical presentation, do not fit the image of Resnais as an intellectual and formalist director adopted by those who know him only from his grave films of
the 1950s and 1960s. The tonal change can already be
glimpsed in his funny and witty English-language debut, 
*Providence* (1976), best film of that year according to the
French Academy and largely neglected in the U.S. Since
foreign films usually open in New York City before
expanding to other markets based on their box-office
performance there, blatantly unfavorable reviews by Vincent
Camby of *The New York Times* and Pauline Kael of *The New
Yorker* had a detrimental effect on the film’s prospects in
America. Rosenbaum, author of a most lucid treatise on
American film distribution and exhibition, *Movie Wars: How
Hollywood and the Media Limit What Movies We Can See*,
argues that what makes this situation especially
deleterious to films without corporate backing is that “New
York film critics tend to be more aesthetically
conservative and uninformed about the history of the medium
than many of their counterparts in other cities.”

The films “realized” by Resnais since 1986 are quite
accomplished in their own right and deserve concomitant
attention and scholarship. Resnais’s “theatrical turn”,
which includes melodramas, musicals and comedies, is
surprising until one learns of his teenage stage acting,
his championing of théâtre-de-boulevard giant Sacha Guitry
when it was uncool to do so, the inclusion of five Golden
Age comedies in the top-10 list of underrated American films he submitted in 1976 at the behest of the Royal Film Archive of Belgium: *Safety Last, The Awful Truth, His Girl Friday, Sullivan’s Travels* and *The Lady Eve*, and the inclusion of the following Hollywood musicals in the best-of lists he shared with *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 1950s:
*The Band Wagon, It’s Always Fair Weather, The Pajama Game, Funny Face* and *South Pacific*.

The theater is explicitly invoked in one of the most important scenes in *Last Year at Marienbad*, a foundational work of modernist cinema based on an original idea proposed by Alain Robbe-Grillet, a writer who spearheaded the literary movement known as *nouveau roman*. The austere premise can be synopsized in one sentence: a guest at a baroque mansion attempts to convince an apparently married woman that they met the previous year, and to persuade her to leave with him. The opening sequence is a tour of the sumptuous mansion via traveling shots juxtaposed to a rhythm that effects a pleasant, trance-like sensation, augmented by the drowsy voice-over that is sometimes overwhelmed by organ music. It is reminiscent of the sequence that introduces the Manderley grounds in *Rebecca* (1940) and the balletic maneuvers of the camera in *The Earrings of Madame de...* (1953) and other films directed
by Max Ophüls. The voice-over description of the architecture and interior decoration we begin to hear in mid-sentence, in the middle of the opening credits, is repeated like an incantation for over eight minutes, but there are unexpected pauses, words murmured, or drowned by music, and substitutions of words creating a type of patterning that teaches the viewer that the film will display “an obsessional inventory of a limited universe ruled by repetition and permutation, [thus] this beginning functions as a true set of instructions.”\textsuperscript{13} The viewer recognizes that this voice-over eschews narration and exposition, provides redundant descriptions because it adds little information to what can be inferred from visuals alone, and constitutes an interior, stream-of-consciousness rumination. The voice-over enacts what Jürgen Habermas considers “the fundamental experience of aesthetic modernity, namely the revelation of a decentered subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{14}

The roving camera passes by a placard on the wall close enough to make the word “ROSMER” legible, the only word in the film that is not spoken. The screen is black for two seconds while the camera travels through a dark vestibule into a huge space where silent, impeccably dressed adults (no children vacation at Marienbad) sit as
they look in the same direction (an audience?) The sequence that surveys this luxurious crowd juxtaposes several shots in which the camera is in perpetual motion but the subjects of it are perfectly still. The camera follows their gaze screen left, to a shot of a woman, inanimate like a statue, in front of a theatrical backdrop. When the constantly traveling camera comes closest to her, there is a cut to a shot that covers the audience again but paradoxically moves opposite their gaze and the stage, if it is a stage. The camera’s independence from the characters and from the soundtrack, including the narration, is already declared although sometimes the camera adopts a character’s point-of-view and sometimes it confirms or complements what the narrator says. The cut to a view of the theater patrons is synchronized to this disembodied dialogue:
She: We must wait a few minutes, a few seconds, a few...

He: A few more seconds, as if you were still hesitant to separate from him, from yourself, as though his fading image might reappear in this place where you imagined it, fearfully or hopefully. Such was your fear of losing this link...

A swift cut to a shot that begins in the dark, cavernous ceiling and tilts down slowly to reveal a man with a severe expression accompanies the following response.

She: No! This hope is now pointless. Gone now this fear of losing such a link, a prison, a lie. This story is already over.

We continue to listen to this dialogue without being able to identify the interlocutors because the sequence never shows anyone speaking until the camera tracks towards the actor as he says:

I advanced to meet you_ between hedgerows of faces, masklike, attentive, indifferent_ towards you as you still vacillate, perhaps gazing at the entrance to this garden.

Three bell rings are synchronized to a cut to a view of the actress who comes to life, as if the bells broke a spell, to exclaim: “Voilà! Now I am yours.”

The camera commemorates that he and she are now together by means of a lateral movement that allows them to share the frame for the first time. It is followed by a shot that finally shows the totality of the stage as the
curtains fall. Even though the words spoken are not colloquial, they sound poetic rather than language spoken in daily life, the film waits until the last moment to declare a separation between life and theater, between the reality of the diegesis and the representation of it in this smaller space demarcated for artistic purpose. The introduction of LYAM ends with a shot that finally reveals the totality of the space, an establishing shot from the back of the auditorium as the masklike faces in the audience come to life and the curtains reopen so that the actors can get their just rewards. A shot from this perspective would conventionally come immediately after the shot in which the camera penetrates the space through the pitch-black vestibule.

Conventional films aim to provide temporal and spatial orientation to the viewer swiftly and to introduce characters and provide a sense of their modes of being.
LYAM endeavors to make things strange, to delay our orientation as long as possible, to sustain ambiguities between life and art, between reality and representation, between actor and character, between actor and spectator, between mansion and garden or inside and outside, between truth and memory, between past and present, and between life and death. Had this orientation shot been inserted where it normally belongs, the viewer would not be lost in-between (some of) these binaries and would not be inclined to reflect on them. Moreover, the sequence demonstrates the function of the establishing shot by having the viewer experience its absence and withholding its appearance until the last possible moment; it facilitates our appreciation of what we would ordinarily take for granted. It is absences that shine the brightest light on what is missing; it is gaps that make the case for what fills them. We might say that conventions become conspicuous by their absence, or by differences in their mode of employment (out of sequence or delayed, for instance).

The direct use of theater takes the form of the staging of “Rosmer”, the name of the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen’s Rosmersholm (1886). The title means “Rosmer’s manor”, a stately home and gardens not unlike the setting of LYAM. Ibsen’s play also begins a year after an event
with dubious particulars and involves Rosmer’s efforts to persuade a woman (to marry him). The ending of “Rosmer”, which I described, is quite different than the ending of Ibsen’s Rosmersholm but it has great affinity with the ending of LYAM; it anticipates what will eventually become the film’s central scenario. In critical theory, the term mise-en-abîme is often used, after novelist and essayist André Gide, to refer to this strategy of embedding a work of art with a smaller one that contains part of its essence.

This definitive correspondence between beginning and ending demonstrates, like Antonioni’s Blowup, the framing technique associated by Torgovnick with stylistic closure, which imbues narratives with an aura of wholeness or completeness by means of strategic structuring. The relation between “Rosmer” and LYAM is similar to the presaging function of the newsreel “News on the March” in Citizen Kane (1941). In this case, the ending of the play-within foreshadows the ending of the film: the twelve chimes of the clock signaling the midnight hour reanimate the woman, prompting her to stand up and walk next to the protagonist/narrator into the depths of the frame, out of the manor and out of our gaze. Voilà! The framing or bookended structure is reinforced by the simultaneity between the lovers’ escape and a new performance of
“Rosmer”, which is both the film’s framing device and its 
mise-en-abîme.

As I explained at the beginning of this dissertation, 
LYAM resolves one of the prominent questions it elicits: 
the narrator successfully persuades the woman to leave with 
him, but almost everything else is open-ended, including 
whether they met the previous year, or ever. I think it is 
important to reiterate that this film offers contradictory 
or inconclusive information because many critics insist on 
identifying things like the exact geographical setting or 
the chronology of events. Consequently, any absolute 
identification of location, or ascription to past or 
present, is based on partial evidence and against the 
principle of openness that radically guides the film. The 
names of people and locations are irrelevant here whereas 
Hiroshima mon amour is built around tragically familiar 
moments in the history of Hiroshima and the French town of 
Nevers during World War II. Indeed, the French actress and 
the Japanese engineer achieve an epiphany or transcendence 
by purposefully adopting those geographical names for each 
other when they separate. Her departure to France concludes 
the relationship and concludes the film on a resolute note 
that promotes a sense of closure.
Resnais and Robbe-Grillet want us to name neither places nor persons in *LYAM*, or don’t want to do it for us. By refraining from ascribing names and psychological individuation to the characters, they are imbued with an archetypal quality. The script assigns a letter to each of the three main characters but the film itself does not. It would be correct to use the last names of the actors who perform these roles: Delphine Seyrig, Sacha Pitoëff, and Giorgio Albertazzi. I usually prefer to give primacy to the function of the character played by Albertazzi by calling him “protagonist” or “narrator”._ French critics have described him as “the man with the Italian accent”, which marks him different than the others in a way that a non-francophone would not recognize.

The narrator/lover refers to “the other man” twice as “son mari, peut-être” (her husband, perhaps) and the letter “M” is used in the script because it is the first letter of “mari”, perhaps. I think it is accurate to say that he is the archetype of the powerful, jealous, often older antagonist who has or assumes to have a right, or a legal-not-moral authority over the woman; he has a hold over her, so to speak, “a link, a prison, a lie”, she names it. The film displays the full gamut of narrative events associated with this primordial scenario, at least as old as Greek
mythology, so that its multivalent ramifications or narrative potentialities can become manifest. Robbe-Grillet’s original script describes “M” as “tall, grey-haired, about 50” but Resnais ignored that and cast the youthful Pitoëff. More than one critic figures him to be a representative of her father, her brother perhaps, sent to “keep an eye on her” like someone named “Frank” who is never seen, only mentioned in two conversation fragments. Jacques Brunius states that Robbe-Grillet’s intention was to make “M” “old enough to be her father [and that] the suggestion of possible incest was unmistakable.” He thinks the film substitutes a brother for the father figure in Robbe-Grillet’s script, and that their relationship suggests incest. Brunius is at pains to find anything concrete in the film, other than a general sense of the way Pitoëff behaves around the woman and the line about “Frank”, to base his interpretation which, he wisely asserts, does not preclude others, that “M” is an incestuous brother, going as far in search of proof as citing what he believes to have been Ibsen’s intention of planting indirect suggestions of incest in the minds of readers of Rosmersholm (that are absent from “Rosmer”). This evidence does not persuade me that there is a probable family relationship between them, only that it is possible.
M and the woman share her bed in the scene that reveals the most intimacy between them. He calls her “mon amour perdu” (my love lost) and commands the whole frame when, looking mournful and resigned, he declares: “Tomorrow I will be alone”. It is the most moving moment, an unusual moment in a film whose abstraction and fragmentation serve to discourage emotional responses. The scene may not provide any conclusive evidence but it calls into question Brunius’s generalizations about M’s behavior and it is certainly more relevant to a piece of film criticism than what Ibsen’s play may suggest. The systemic openness in
LYAM makes it possible to take a line of dialogue or narration, and match it to an allusion to construct an interpretation that is overwrought or insufficiently supported yet difficult to dismiss. One may cite the photo of the woman sitting on a park bench, which the narrator gives to her as evidence that they have a past together, but anyone could have shot it. This photograph, like the ones taken in the park in Blowup, does not prove anything. It only points to one of many possibilities at play.

Brunius’s essay on LYAM is typical of several others that enrich one’s appreciation of the film by probing one of these possibilities, even if some their claims are overstated or wrongheaded.

LYAM includes one scene that reflexively justifies, by means of analogy, the strategy of character anonymity. The narrator and the woman try to figure the meaning of an old statue of a couple which flanks a terrace. They wonder who are the persons represented by the statue. She wants to
name them but he dissuades her because as long as they remain abstractions, the statue could “mean so many things”. And the sculpted couple “could as well be you and me... or anyone.” Jean-Louis Leutrat identifies the statue as the mise-en-abîme of LYAM because it teaches us that the film likens itself to statuary, for the reason that it cannot be understood from a fixed perspective. It demands that the spectator take a panoptic view. LYAM instructs us to identify with the narrator and embrace his openness, which stands in contrast to the epistemic certitude of “M” when he walks into the frame occupied by the narrator and the woman, stands between them to form a triangular composition, looks at the camera to address the viewer directly, and identifies the sculpted couple and the precise historical moment being depicted with the same omniscient airs as the psychiatrist at the end of Psycho.

The film even raises the possibility that the characters are not living anymore, that they are ghosts or
spirits, especially the woman and the narrator. Some viewers assume that the recurrent moving shots inside the mansion, which often hover near the high ceilings, are point of view shots that show precisely what the narrator sees as he narrates/describes. They cite these shots, along with the funereal ambience of its enclosed world as evidence that the protagonist is a roaming spirit. Bits of narrations such as “...these immobile, silent, perhaps dead people, still guarding the web of corridors along which I advanced to meet you...” can be summoned to make the case. The chateau guests often strike poses like living statues. Seyrig often adopts frozen expressions that remind me of the mie poses used in the “out of the ordinary” mode of Japanese kabuki theatre to spotlight a specific emotion at peak intensity. It is best for this regard for characters as spirits or statues to remain at a hypothetical state lest it blind the viewer to alternative elements, such as scenes in which Seyrig performs with a more natural style that fosters verisimilitude. It seems more prudent, productive, and in the spirit of the film, to watch LYAM with an open mind relative to questions it poses about its characters, places, and events, to form tentative answers rather than rigid or premature ones based on partial or insufficient evidence.
In *LYAM*, the contradictions in the spoken text are matched by visual incongruities, achieved for instance, by trompe l'oeil effects, or by combining shots taken at disparate locations (including a studio set) to create an odd, composite, imaginary architectural structure where elements of décor evoke the outdoor terraces and surrounding gardens so that the barrier between interior and exterior is collapsed at key points. In *Muriel*, the widow Hélène runs an antique business from the apartment she shares with her stepson Alphonse, a veteran of the Algerian War who complains of the dislocation and disorientation caused by the constant appearance and disappearance of furniture and bric-a-brac from many historical periods. For the viewer of *Muriel*, the setting of most of the narrative is an unrecognizable space but there is a clear and logical reason for that, whereas the rarefied world of *LYAM* is mysterious; and the place where the lovers go when they walk away together at the end is
even more enigmatic.

The end of "Rosmer" is followed by a sequence in which almost every shot includes a snippet of a different conversation between duos that concerns a moment from the past ("I think we’ve already met" or "It must have been 1928, or ’29?"). There is a shot of "the husband" and a group shot that includes the female lead but their narrative status at this moment is equal to everyone else we see. There is a cacophony of lines of dialogue but often the views do not identify the speaker, and sometimes we see characters moving their lips close to the camera but we do not hear them. There is a shot whose only function is to show a life-size blowup of a photograph of Alfred Hitchcock in a shadowy area by the elevator as if he were snooping on the spiffy guests. Rosenbaum has noted correlations between specific shots or scenes and films as varied as *Gilda*
(1946), *The Band Wagon* (1953), and Louis Feuillade’s high-society crime serials (1910s). The continuity between the cinema of Resnais and the cinema and cultural production of the past is evident in its copious and diversified allusions, in its nimble engagement with all kinds of art. The cinema of Resnais, like that of Godard, is characterized by its allusiveness (a word I prefer to the more fashionable “intertextuality”).

We are past the ten-minute mark and the film has not identified its three principals, including he whose consciousness is being streamed. Any of these fragmented conversations may generate the story to be told in the remainder of the film. *LYAM* incorporates into its very form the concept voiced-over at the end of *The Narrow Margin* (1947): “There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them.” The idea is to emphasize the arbitrariness of the selection and rejection involved in deciding to tell one story and not many more that can potentially be told in the context of a city, or a chateau full of guests. There is a concerted aim in the films of Resnais to make the viewer conscious of potentialities and possibilities and their reduction in the selection processes involved in creating a piece of dramatic art.
The beginning of Mon Oncle D’Amérique (1980) serves as a clear example: an iris opens in the center of a collage of photographs of persons, places and things arranged in a checkerboard pattern. At least three different persons are heard speaking simultaneously on the soundtrack while the iris moves around to show different sections of the collage, including elements from the film one recognizes on second viewing (the face of the actor named simply Roger-Pierre, for instance). The shot acknowledges that other images and voices could have been selected from those available to fashion a Mon Oncle D’Amérique that might have little in common with the one you can watch. Illustrated, voiced-over profiles similar to the mini biography of Charles Foster Kane in “News on the March” are used to identify the three protagonists systematically and immediately. On the contrary, LYAM postpones identification of its three main characters as long as possible. This retardant strategy deliberately delays the exposition of words and images necessary to identify the principals and their vague relationships. As a result, the film sustains for an extraordinarily long time the possibility that the narrator and the woman he covets “could as well be anyone”.

The first time the camera finds the character we will only later know as the one narrating, or giving us access
to his consciousness, he appears in close-up on the left side of the frame with the other half occupied by a mirror reflection of one couple in the middle distance and another in the back of the frame. We hear a conversation between a woman and a man whose voice is distinctly not the narrator’s voice. The camera seems to give importance to the couple in the middle-ground because it pans along when they walk to the other side of the room even though it forces the actor seen close-up to disappear from view. The man in the mirror tells his partner at one point: “These days worse than death, we live through, side by side, like two coffins buried together in a petrified garden...” which may be used to suggest both that the guests are dead or that they are alive. These words reverberate in other bits of narration and dialogue and belong to a systematic patterning of repetition and alteration discernible throughout LYAM. The camera and the soundtrack tend to this
conflicted couple for a considerably long time compared to other fragments, but the desire of the viewer for protagonists is frustrated at this time since this couple is never again differentiated from the group.

Another relatively long scene comes soon thereafter, the first of five games played, involving the same rule-bound removal of different objects (cards, matchsticks, dominoes, photographs, etc.) from a triangular pattern, which are always initiated and won by “the husband”. Albertazzi is seen speaking to him, in a natural tone and briefly, for the first time during this losing game. Perhaps francophones who are sensitive to the actor’s accent can match his voice to the voice-over but I cannot.

The film seems to signal who is the female lead when a woman played by Delphine Seyrig is first, and only, to respond directly to the still disembodied male voice. She responds to his stately “You look the same” by commanding a cut, in the middle of a clockwise twist of her body, to a view of her that shows her completing the movement, engaged in the same displacement, but wearing completely different attire: from a sleek, black gown to a demure, light-colored two piece outfit, in the blink of an eye like the sequence in The Earrings of Madame de... which tracks the arc of an affair between characters played by Danielle Darrieux and
Vittorio De Sica by juxtaposing shots taken at different society balls while they smoothly appear to dance a single waltz. It is part of a same-but-different aesthetic that permeates the whole film. This shot is also *her* retort, her show of intimacy with the camera, and a demonstration of her powers within the world of the film, which are manifest in the realm of image-making. The mise-en-scène and the editing indicate that sometimes the woman is as responsible
as the narrator in visualizing or conjuring certain images or scenes, especially her bedroom scenes and the first of a series of meetings in the terrace revolving around hermeneutics. At other times, the images do not appear to emerge from the consciousness of any character but from the creative force outside the world of the film.

Finally, seventeen minutes into LYAM, we recognize who is the narrator because we are now allowed to observe him speaking, having a conversation with the woman who changed her dress to prove him wrong. He comments about the architectural style of the room. She compliments him on being “a good guide”. She reciprocates every smile, every flirtation, at first. She is pleased when he asks her to dance. “If you want”, she says warmly, seeming to welcome his desire for her. A process of persuasion or seduction ensues, in which it is part of what becomes their shared fantasy for her to forget and resist before she can “remember” and yield to their mutual desire or, in other words, to vacillate between approach and avoidance like Claudia from L’avventura until the bells ring. This persuasion is not the one-sided phenomenon often made out to be, perhaps because it is the male who instigates and narrates it.
Emma Wilson enlists Slavoj Žižek’s notion that fantasy prompts and props desire, that all relationships that have a sexual or erotic aspect are harmonious to the degree that each partner fits into the other’s fantasy, or construct a mutually satisfying shared fantasy, to rightly argue “that this fantasy is erotic for her also, that this scenario construct the man himself as desirable to her [...] that the film plays with the possibility that these are shared images that the lovers conjure between them.”¹⁶ I take it one step further when I argue that there are some images that belong to her alone, such as the dress-changing shot I use as an example.

A more compelling one: the narrator tells her that he heard that a cold spell froze the lakes the previous year. This two-shot is followed by a view of a self-absorbed Seyrig, alone in medium close-up, staring into space, not listening. A cut shows us what it is in her mind’s eye: a
view of the terrace that overlooks the Cartesian gardens where she tells him that a relationship between them is “impossible”, then the film returns to the previous shot of Seyrig lost in thought, oblivious to what he tells her. It is clear when the narrator speaks again that he has no awareness of this mental image. It is hers alone. It is important to note that the presence and relevance of fantasy is not something that depends on whether or not the couple has a shared past, so if the film is “about the role of fantasy in supporting desire”\textsuperscript{17} as Wilson figures, it is not crucial to this understanding of \textsc{lyam} whether or not the couple met the previous year at Marienbad, or anywhere else. It does not matter whether the woman is remembering or fantasizing the view of the terrace and her rejection of him at that moment since imagination plays a role in both instances.
At the beginning of the chapter, I listed LYAM among films that reveal Resnais’s preoccupation with memory. More specifically, we may say that many films directed by Resnais deal with the nature of traumatic memories, or aim to demonstrate how fantasy, or the imaginary, distorts our remembering, and how the telling or recounting of a memory, transforms it into a kind of fictive narrative. There are no, may I say, verbatim memories. This idea harks back at least as far as Freud’s essay “Screen Memories” (1899):

It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all from our childhood: memories relating to our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, emerge; they were formed at that time.¹⁸

When the French actress tells the Japanese man about her tragic love affair with a German soldier in Nevers, when Bernard invents a French Muriel because he is unable to come to terms with a traumatic, war-time experience involving the victimization of a young Algerian woman presumably named Muriel, when the narrator and the woman remember/fantasize/imagine same-but-different shared pasts, they enact present-tense, dramatic demonstrations of the complex interplay between our capacities to recall, imagine, and dream that are quite sophisticated and unprecedented in
cinema at the dawn of the 1960s. However, LYAM differs significantly from *Hiroshima mon amour*, *Muriel or The Time of Return*, and other films directed by Resnais that transcend our resistance to acknowledge a terrible reality from the past.

Resnais may claim continuity with the culture of the past, with Ibsen, silent cinema, and ancient sculpture for instance; I imagine him saying that Seyrig’s instant costume change is no more avant than the magic of Georges Méliès, and still, the intense and pervasive uncertainty built into the narrative of LYAM had no precedents and remains a uniquely disorienting, discomfiting, and liberating experience. The triangular relations at the core of the film are not apparent until almost mid-film, when it becomes clear that this “M” who always wins and knows things with certainty, free of any skepticism or sense of his own partial perspective on truth, has a link to the woman, claims an authority over her, that she regards or will come to regard as a prison and a lie. *L’avventura* and *Blowup* pretend to be stories about the resolutions to a disappearance and a murder only to be displaced by other concerns, leaving permanent gaps in their narrative structures. However, these gaps stand out because there is a degree of solidity to the rest of the narrative structure
while in *LYAM* we are uncertain about the existential nature and the relationships of the characters and even about the reality of the setting. Why is it that sometimes the manicured trees in the garden do not cast shadows like the people strolling nearby? There are more gaps in this narrative than space between them, and this radical uncertainty that breeds a radical openness sets the film apart from the rest of the films under consideration.

It has been fascinating to review the scholarship on *LYAM* because its “surplus of possibilities” yields a wide variety of hermeneutic analyses. My long experience with the film involves failed attempts to construe an interpretation that withstands a minimally rigorous confrontation with the totality of its audiovisual material. I consistently encountered discrepancies between the film and my efforts to create what Russian formalist theorists call the *fabula*, which I define as the product of phenomenological processes to organize the story elements according to the rules of chronology, logic, and causality, to re-order them purposefully. Many pieces of criticism that reflect these processes are insightful and stimulating by probing specific narrative hypotheses in depth (i.e. “M” murdered his wife and the narrator is an angel of death coming to claim her soul). My point is that, in the case of
this film in particular, such hermeneutic products are inevitably partial and speculative, which shall be disclosed and acknowledged in keeping with the spirit of openness endorsed by the film. Emerson proposed that all objects are characterized by evanescence and lubricity, which causes them to slip through our fingers when we clutch hardest. *LYAM* is particularly lubricious, more so when the viewer or critic aims to clinch it by means of a reductive, totalizing interpretation that denies, to paraphrase Cavell, the “standoffishness” of objects. Emerson’s “unhandsome clutching” evokes the “irritable reaching after fact and reason” decried by John Keats in the opening quote, which he imputes to an inability or difficulty to dwell in indeterminacy and uncertainty.

The realism of *LYAM* is not the surface realism of films that aim to achieve verisimilitude but a realism that acknowledges that reality is transformed by subjective perception and other workings of the human mind. It is thus indeterminate and uncertain. It is more accurate to regard the film then as surrealistic, although I hesitate to use that word casually because it has connotations in everyday usage of being synonymous with “unreal”, which is not at all what I intend it to signify. It is a reasonable expectation of a piece of criticism to deliver a reading of
a work of art with a degree of conviction. In the case of *LYAM*, doing so necessarily involves maneuvers to reduce its complexity, surrealism and pervasive uncertainty, ranging from blatantly and conveniently ignoring elements that refute the interpretation, to more subtle presumptions.

A most interesting and useful example of the latter is Wilson’s implicit belief that just like the voice-over presents the stream of consciousness of the protagonist, all the images in the film are “mental images” produced by the protagonist, the woman, or both. In other words: since the words *belong* to characters, especially the intra-diegetic narrator, so do the images. One may call this reductive strategy “the death of the author” because it obliterates the authorial presence outside the diegesis, behind the camera.

This reduction underpins Wilson’s interpretation that the woman fantasizes the possibility of her own rape, and that “this is disturbing to X, disturbing his authorship, letting him be fantasized as a rapist by her lover.”\(^{19}\) This is one way of understanding his repulsion at the suggestion he may have “taken her by force”, treating his response as an indication that he plays no active part in it, that he is being objectified by the woman. This reading is congruent with two scenes in which the woman flinches or
recoils from him melodramatically or theatrically as if he presents a danger to her when no word, gesture or demeanor indicates predation or violence. However, it remains just as likely that his intense revulsion is incriminating, that he is disturbed by traumatic memories of events he regrets and wishes to repress, like Bernard’s memories of torture and murder in *Muriel*. It is characteristic of *LYAM* that both “solutions”, as well as others, remain possible at film’s end. It is just as valid to think of the suggestion of rape as imposed by an authorial entity outside of the film, by Robbe-Grillet, who included a scene in the shooting script described therein as a “rather swift and brutal rape scene”, which Resnais refused to shoot. It is supposed to follow a distant view of the narrator slowly approaching the bed where the woman strikes a terrified pose, frozen in fear of him, thus raising viewer expectations of violence. By including this shot, Resnais
allows the film to insinuate sexual violation, a dramatic
element adamantly spelled out by Robbe-Grillet ("brutal
rape") that could not be obliterated without tilting the
creative balance Renais seeks in these collaborative
enterprises. The excised scene would appear at this point.
This is how Robbe-Grillet wrote it:

X appears in the foreground, seen from
behind. Rather swift and brutal rape scene. A is
leaning back, X is holding her wrists (in one
hand) below her waist, and a bit to one side, her
chest thus not lying flat. A struggles, but
without any result. She opens the mouth as though
to scream; but X, leaning over her, immediately
gags her with a piece of fine lingerie he was
holding in his other hand. The gestures of X are
precise and rather slow, those of A are chaotic:
she turns her head once or twice, to the right
and to the left, then stares again, her eyes wide,
at X who is leaning more directly over her...The
hair of the victim is spread out and her clothes
in disarray. Fade.²⁰

Instead of that scene, Resnais devised a cinematic
correlative of his refusal to realize or dramatize the
rape: a shot that retreats rapidly from the view of the
woman gazing in fear at X who stands near her bed at the
same time as the voice-over protests: “No, no, no! It was not like that”, which could be directed at the woman if this fantasy belongs to her and nobody else, but I figure as an address to the camera, or the author without, who grants him a do-over, a same-but-different take, and the protagonist is again far from her bedroom, in a point-of-
view shot that careens down the long, deserted corridors, through the wide open doors of her boudoir, to her smiling face and welcoming arms, with the last movement repeated nine times in rapid succession, back and forth, so that this embodied camera penetrates her space with erotic fervor over and over. The script includes the shot of the camera advancing rapidly down empty corridors but it leads “onto the garden at night” not back to her bedroom for consensual sex. Is this unscripted scene a product of the narrator’s imagination because the camera adopts his point of view? Is a product of the woman’s agency, as Wilson affirms by stating: “we see her choose to play out her fantasy as she opens her arms to X”?

Perhaps both are true but it definitely belongs to Resnais and evinces differing artistic sensibilities between him and Robbe-Grillet that would continue to be apparent as their careers progressed.

James Monaco, who dismisses both Hiroshima mon amour and LYAM as “lugubrious” in his book on Resnais, nonchalantly writes that the woman “fantasizes rape, murder, and suicide” without providing any evidence. The claim of suicide is rather unique and unendorsed by other critics but there is a scene in which M indeed fires a gun once in her direction. However, it is a brief scene, highly stylized (no signs of injury, Seyrig’s and Pitoëff’s
stilted acting in this scene; she seems to be mocking the act of slumping from a gun wound), spatially incoherent (she stares with fear at something off the left side of the frame but the next shot shows him on the right side), and juxtaposed by a scene in which she is again alive and well (the narrator takes credit for disallowing that specific ending of the story but it feels like an afterthought). Nevertheless, it is sometimes cited as unequivocal proof that she is dead from here thereafter, or that she has been dead all along. In prior experience with LYAM, I have overvalued or weighed heavily on this scene because the firing of a gun, which is all we see of the alleged murder, is an event among mere occurrences. It is memorable and inherently of grave consequence. I realize now that in the context of the film and its “set of instructions”, in the strange, artificial and eerily beautiful world-on-film it conjures up, it is of no more importance than a showdown at the nim table. The film gives them equal weight; they exist within a type of serial construction with distinct potentialities placed side by side.

I will follow the lead of Last Year at Marienbad by alluding to a work of art or rather a type of art that functions as a metaphor for the film. What I have in mind is certain paintings by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and
others characterized by simultaneity and associated with the artistic movement known as cubism. In many of their paintings, fragments of an object or person from a plurality of viewing vantages coexist on a single plane, thus creating more complete or thorough representations that juxtapose sides of things or persons normally not appreciable from a single angle. However, it is not possible to reorder the parts or sections of the fragmented paintings to recreate the depicted person or object in its original and integral form, before it was transformed by art.
Chapter IV
Michael Haneke
As soon as spectators find themselves alone with the questions posed by the story, without instructions for their ready interpretation, they feel disturbed and begin to assemble their defenses. A productive conflict, I would think. The more radically the answers are withheld, the sooner they will have to find their own.¹

(Michael Haneke)

Michael Haneke (1942–) worked for German-language television for fifteen years before making his film debut, *The Seventh Continent* (1989), when he was in his late forties. Since then, Haneke has been consistently associated with a modernist wave in the cinema that had presumably ended a decade earlier, according to many film theorists and historians. However, a growing number of scholars including John Orr, P. Adams Sitney, and Hamish Ford regard modernism in the cinema as extending into the present. Film scholars who have written extensively about the films directed by Haneke: Paul Arthur, Alexander Horwarth, Catherine Wheatley, and Peter Brunette, among others, regard him as “something of a throwback to an earlier generation, or perhaps a younger member of a modernist group of directors that includes canonical figures like Antonioni, Resnais, Godard, Bergman and Tarkovsky.”²
There are certainly multiple affinities and correspondences between the work of these directors and Haneke’s films. Wheatley states that: “his films belong to a modernist tradition both in form and intention. [His] modernism is reflected through the withholding of narrative information and of psychology, ellipsis, fragmentation and the foregrounding of the medium.”³ I will attend to all of these strategies and characteristics of modernist cinema evident in Haneke’s films, but I will focus primarily on the withholding of answers invoked by the writer-director in the opening quote, on the openness that complicates the sense of closure narratives conventionally aim to facilitate. I will give a succinct account of Haneke’s late-blooming, and most certainly blooming career, and then concentrate on the films that most vigorously utilize the strategy of permanent gaps: 71 Fragments for a Chronology of Chance (1994), Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys (2000), Caché aka Hidden (2005), and The White Ribbon (2009). Among them, the first two films will receive most of my attention.

During most of the 1990s, Haneke alternated between television projects and theatrical films, and completed what became known, to his chagrin, as the “emotional glaciation trilogy”, with the release of Benny’s Video
and 71 Fragments for a Chronology of Chance. These bleak, often brilliant films received scant distribution outside German-language territories. They are based on newspaper and television accounts of particularly extreme and senseless acts of violence. In The Seventh Continent, a bourgeois married couple destroys all their belongings in a manner reminiscent of the destruction of consumer goods at the climax of Antonioni’s Zabrieski Point; then they kill their daughter and themselves with overdoses of barbiturates. In Benny’s Video, a morbid 14 year-old meets a girl about his age at the video store, brings her home, kills her because he “wanted to know how it is, probably” and videotapes the crime scene. The next day he shows the video to his parents; Dad decides to get rid of the body and send mother and son abroad on vacation. In 71 Fragments for a Chronology of Chance, a college student kills three strangers at a bank out of sheer frustration and then commits suicide.

The central question the trilogy explores is: How does society or civilization contribute to the formation of individuals who perpetrate such violence? The films suggest a multiplicity of factors predominant among them a disconnect from reality effected by mainstream media, especially Hollywood-style violence, and a disconnect from
others, a “glaciation” of human solidarity at all levels of society, from the nuclear family to all of Western civilization, effected by consumerist commodification, technological mechanization, and bourgeois conformity. Wheatley correctly refers to Haneke as a moralist. His overriding theme is violence, in all shapes and forms, perpetrated by individuals but symptomatic of the immorality of larger, more powerful forces or structures. The first and second films answer salient questions posed by their plots. Their ambiguity resides in the elaborate, multi-faceted way the films address the issue of how psychological and sociological forces inform the phenomena of violence, how the individual and modern civilization contribute to its manifestation.

Funny Games (1997) was Haneke’s first film to have a theatrical run in the United States, albeit limited to a few theaters nationwide, on the basis of buzz generated by the controversy about its not-for-the-squeamish treatment of sadistic violence (Wim Wenders was reportedly among “the walkouts” at Cannes). Funny Games adopts the conventions of the home-invasion thriller (Key Largo, Suddenly, The Desperate Hours, In Cold Blood, etc.), a genre that has been a staple of the cinema for over a century (Georges Méliès’ Not Guilty, D.W. Griffith’s The Miser’s Heart, Lois
Weber’s Suspense, and others). When the sadistic, young duo terrorizing a family in Funny Games break the fourth wall by directly addressing the audience, they bring the issue of our enjoyment of violence to the forefront. The killers mock and entice our narrative expectations of terrors to come and the pleasure we may derive from them. Additionally, the villains become filmmakers of sorts by videotaping their atrocities, like Benny from Benny’s Video, so that sometimes we do not know if we are watching the film per se or images from the video within it. The killers and the authorial entity behind the camera become related by function, by the act of recording visual images. In the most noteworthy scene, the mother/wife seizes a gun tantalizingly left on the table and avenges the murder of her son. His partner reaches for the remote control and rewinds Funny Games. Haneke grants this villain a do-over, a chance to save his partner in vicious crime, a same scenario with the crucial difference that now he grabs the gun before she can. It is reminiscent of Resnais allowing the protagonist of Last Year at Marienbad to reject the act of rape by means of a fast, backwards tracking shot that suggests a rewinding of the action. In Funny Games, Haneke yields his authorial prerogative to the villains, enlists himself in their cause. The nuclear family is victimized in
the movie and the viewer is made to suffer by it. This emotional assault is augmented by the identification between filmmaker and sadist murderers. It leaves the viewer with no recourse. They have power over the lives of their captives and they have complete control over the movie. It leaves the viewer with no recourse. *Funny Games* is unconventional because it consistently breaks the fourth wall and because Evil triumphs over Good not due to its openness.

The critical reception of *Funny Games* was divided but reviews by the three critics I read consistently at that time, J. Hoberman, Jonathan Rosenbaum, and Dave Kehr, confirmed my impression that, even if we assume that Haneke’s intentions are pure: to call attention to an enjoyment of screen violence he genuinely considers immoral and destructive, *Funny Games* is a provocative failure, like the ending of *Taxi Driver*, which is supposed to be ironic according to Marty Scorsese but manages to glorify vengeful violence and vigilantism. My impression is partly based on reviews and commentary that bespeak of enjoyment of the film as a violent thriller, precisely what the film seems to condemn. Ordinarily, the enjoyment of screen violence depends on the characters’ ignorance of our gaze and on the separation between our world and theirs. Ordinarily, the
endings of violent movies restore some semblance of order and justice to their dramatized world. Yet apparently, the extraordinary breaking of those rules in *Funny Games* does not interfere with the enjoyment of screen violence by a sizable segment that includes *The Miami Herald*’s film critic René Rodriguez. He notes that the movie “leaves you as twisted and wrung out as a dirty dish towel (that, by the way, is intended as high praise).” Well, I can only guess, different strokes for different folks.

In *Funny Games*, Haneke seems to make a highly dubious moral equation between the popular consumption of violent images for entertainment and the family’s bourgeois sense of privilege and security on one side, and the torture and murder perpetrated by the psychopaths, who literally get away with murder and have already selected their next victims when the movie ends. Go figure: a decade later, Haneke remade the film shot-by-shot, in English, with the very talented Naomi Watts (who is also the executive producer) in the role of the female victim. The film failed at the box office and the reviews were substantially more negative than the original, subtitled version. It is important to acknowledge the controversy generated by the 1997 film and its role in making a name for Haneke, bringing him to the attention of cinephiles worldwide, and
bringing him to Paris to make his fifth feature at the
behest of the popular actress Juliette Binoche and Marin
Karmitz, producer of films by Resnais, Chabrol, Kieslowski,
Kiarostami, and other notable directors.

Haneke’s fifth feature, Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales
of Several Journeys (2000) was an artistic breakthrough and,
as you would guess from the title, a film I shall address
in detail. The film had a very limited theatrical release
in the U.S. at the end of 2001, but it did not include
Miami. I was not inspired to seek out Haneke’s trilogy (The
Seventh Continent had become available on VHS in 1995)
until I watched Code Unknown on DVD in the summer of 2002,
soon after the U.S. theatrical release of The Piano Teacher,
which won multiple awards at the Cannes film festival,
including the first of many awards bestowed on Isabelle
Huppert, for her characteristically no-holds-barred
performance as a prim piano teacher who lives with her
overbearing mother (Annie Girardot) and develops a
sadomasochistic relationship with a young male pupil
(Benoit Magimel) with predictably tragic denouement. It had
the widest distribution of any Haneke film to date,
surpassing the $1 million mark at the U.S. box office.
The Piano Teacher inspired association with films grouped under the rubric “extreme cinema” to designate “art films” with visceral, disturbing imagery and/or taboo or “transgressive” subject matter. For this reason, Haneke is sometimes associated with filmmakers such as Catherine Breillat, François Ozon, Kim Ki-duk, Bruno Dumont, Lars von Trier, and Gaspar Noé. Huppert also played the leading role in the post-apocalyptic slice-of-life Time of the Wolf (2003), a less successful film both commercially and artistically than the previous two. Caché aka Hidden (2005), starring Juliette Binoche and Daniel Auteuil as marrieds mystified by a series of surveillance videos left on their doorstep, was a success in every sense, and the film by which Haneke becomes globally recognized as a masterful screenwriter and film director. It was at this time that the early trilogy became widely accessible, via DVD releases and retrospectives, and that Haneke and his films inspired an upswing of academic interest. Caché was picked up for U.S. distribution by Sony Pictures Classics, which released it at 90 theaters nationwide for a box office gross of $3.69 million. Then the baffling decision to remake Funny Games, followed by two films with wider art-house appeal and impeccable artistry: the black & white, period film The White Ribbon (2009) and Amour (2012), a
chronicle of the last days in the lives of an octogenarian couple played by Jean-Louis Trintignant and Emmanuelle Riva (Hiroshima mon amour).

Michael Haneke became the first director in the history of the Cannes Film Festival to win the Palme d’Or with two consecutive releases. The White Ribbon was nominated by the American Academy for Best Foreign Film and Best Cinematography. Its release coincided with the publication of several English-language books dedicated to Haneke’s work. Given the publicity and excellent reviews, it is disappointing that a substantially smaller audience than Caché saw it even though it was exhibited at more movie theaters. Perhaps the lack of internationally recognized actors limited its commercial appeal. Amour won the best foreign film Oscar and received nominations for
Best Film, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay and Best Actress, making Mme. Riva the oldest female nominee ever. It was the second highest grossing foreign language film released in 2012, with a box office of $6.7 million, more than thrice the take of The White Ribbon. If anyone can be considered the face of contemporary European art cinema, or the European auteur par excellence, it is Michael Haneke.

71 Fragments for a Chronology of Chance (1994)

Is the fragment the aesthetic response to the incomplete nature of our perception? (Michael Haneke)

The title is accurate. This is a film composed of 71 scenes separated by two seconds of black screen and shown in chronological order. Most of them are comprised of a single shot but others include as many as twenty. The duration of the fragments ranges from only a few seconds to nine minutes. The film is divided in five parts, each corresponds to one of five days in 1993: October 12th, October 26th, October 30th, November 17th and December 23rd. Each part begins with a couple of minutes of the day’s television newscast that serves to place local frictions in the context of global, large-scale violence. Haneke adopts a realist, long take/deep focus aesthetic: increasing the duration of a shot by a combination of factors including
the use of a large depth of field that grants the viewer the life-like ability to see the front-to-back space with clarity and sharpness.

The brisk editing and omniscient tone of the newscasts is contrasted to the rest of the film by means of simple juxtaposition. The inclusion of the newscasts in this context qualifies as a critique of televisual representation, specifically the newscast format. The film illustrates arguments made by Mary Ann Doane in her influential essay “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe” in regard to the “banalization” of reality and the “leveling of signification” produced by the medium of television. These processes are the result of the newscast format’s packaging and severe condensation of information into easily digested segments of roughly equal duration in which, as it happens in the last newscast montage in 71 Fragments, news of massive ethnic cleansing in the Baltics may be followed by news of Michael Jackson disrobing to police to show discrepancies between his genitals and their description by a 13 year-old alleged victim of sexual abuse.

71 Fragments for a Chronology of Chance ends with the sudden interruption of this sixth newsreel and begins with the following text over a black background: “On 12/23/93, Maximilian B., a 19 year-old student, shot 3 people in a
Viennese bank and killed himself with a shot in the head shortly afterwards.” 71 Fragments consistently orients the viewer to time and place, and demarcates film images from televisual ones. It also foretells the ending, to an extent, and prompts the viewer to anticipate the introduction of “Max” and to consider questions about his possible motives. Another salient question posed by 71 Fragments for a Chronology of Chance concerns the identity of the three victims. The fragments introduce about a dozen characters in piecemeal fashion, some appear briefly, others benefit from longer screen time, such as the lonely, elegantly dressed older man who comes to the bank where his daughter works to collect his pension, and a Romanian street urchin of about 12 years of age who sneaks into Vienna in the back of a commercial truck and settles in and around a subway station until cold weather forces him to seek help. The foreshadowing of fatal violence in the print text that precedes image and sound places this ensemble portrait of a society in a dramatic context and gives poignancy to the experience of gaining acquaintance with personalities whose life may soon be lost, gone too soon.
The newsreel that ushers in the third part concerns the Romanian boy, Marian, and reports on the controversy over whether immigrants entering Austria illegally like he did should be allowed to stay. It is a “fake documentary”, shot at Haneke’s behest by a television crew, which inspires a married couple to become Marian’s foster parents. There is one other family prominently featured: a religious, cash courier, his wife, and their sickly baby. Some of these characters will be at the bank during the “act of insanity” that has “stunned the people of Vienna on the day before Christmas”, in the words of a final television newscast that knows less about the incident than we do and thus fails to fill a substantial and permanent gap in our narrative knowledge: the identity of two of the people shot.
Films are composed of fragments, Alexander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* (2002) and Jean Rouch’s *Les Tambours d’avant: Tourou et Bitti* (1971) being my favorite exceptions to the rule. Conventionally, the rationale for the selection of each fragment is clear: to orient the viewer to period and setting, to show actions that forward the plot and to provide any information required to understand it, to spotlight elements of characterization such as revealing gestures, etc. Some of the 71 fragments are included for such reasons but others seem superfluous or irrelevant, or include unnecessary shots such as close-ups that detail a couple’s morning routine or the process of transporting metal suitcases full of money out of an armored truck and into the bank vault.

Conventionally, the duration of a shot is determined by its purpose or function within the narrative. Here, one of the fragments is a three-minute shot of Max B. returning ping-pong balls served by a machine, and another shows the retiree talking on the phone with his daughter and granddaughter for nine minutes. The segment is not insubstantial but we would certainly learn more about the characters if we could listen to both sides of the telephone conversation. Haneke could intercut views of the daughter, or split the screen, or manipulate the soundtrack
so we can also hear what she says to her father, but that would give us an advantageous access to the world-on-film that is often not replicated in our experience of the real world.

Haneke invokes time and time again his devotion to a strictly realist aesthetic to justify a myriad of creative choices. In his films, being realistic necessarily includes giving the viewer an expository access to narrative events that is fragmented, susceptible to perceptual distortions, and generated from a single point of view or perspective that lays bare its limitations. This is the perspective of a camera that does not get close or reverse direction to bestow epistemic plenitude. Part of the rhetorical impetus behind 71 Fragments for a Chronology of Chance is to dramatize how the conclusions we reach and the interpretations we make in our daily lives are based on information derived from a limited, fragmented, prejudiced, and filtered access to reality. Our understanding of a person or phenomenon is predicated on our openness to incoming information about it, on our realization that what we think we know is partial, on our ability to receive input that may contradict it, on our capacity, to paraphrase John Keats, to linger in a state of relative uncertainty and doubt. Our minds are open to truly listen
to others and to view things in our world in alternative ways to the extent that we adopt this epistemic attitude.

In *71 Fragments*, Haneke is committed to represent, as realistically as the parameters of the fiction feature film permit, a cross-section of the people of his hometown of Vienna at a historical moment that is assertively specified via newsreels and superimposed text with dates. The surrealism and theatricality of Resnais are beyond his range and predilection. The utilization of extremely long takes and sequence shots, such as the two abovementioned, puts Haneke in the company of contemplative cinema masters Chantal Akerman, Gus Van Sant, Tsai Ming-liang, Béla Tarr, Albert Serra, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Carlos Reygadas, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Lisandro Alonso, Jia Zhang-ke and other present-day filmmakers who perpetuate the legacy of André Bazin and Kenji Mizoguchi.

The central claim of John David Rhodes’s essay “The Spectacle of Skepticism: Haneke’s Long Takes” is that the “frequent and paradigmatic deployment of the long take...to capture the space-time of reality as it bodies forth is one of Haneke’s most persistent traits.” Additionally, as Bazin explained, the large depth of focus characteristic of most long takes “brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality... The
uncertainty is built into the very design of the image” because it includes myriad things vying for our recognition of their significance. The presentation of the killer is more surreptitious than the introduction of his potential victims. The first time he appears onscreen, when he is only someone who might be Max B., he is playing a game of tangram: a dissection puzzle of Chinese origin that involves forming a predetermined, complete figure out of geometric fragments. Max is shown failing to form a cross with seven paper cutouts in the time allotted by his college roommate. Like the protagonist of LYAM, Max is a
loser at such games of skill. Like Resnais, Haneke shows several instances of a game, including a computer version, but the purpose for the series of “game segments” is more meaningfully aligned with the use of the statue in LYAM as a mise-en-abîme. The tangram game teaches us that 71 Fragments for a Chronology of Chance likens itself to a puzzle we piece together out of fragments. We will also fail at the game, because there are pieces needed to complete the puzzle, to fill the holes in it, to represent a complete action, which are not available to us. The mysteries of life sometimes make it seem like a puzzle. Haneke offers a puzzle set of a movie with missing and ill-fitting pieces.

I have thus far showed how such permanent absences and gaps can be artistically productive in varied ways in the modernist films of Antonioni and Resnais. This second half of my dissertation explores the keen and fresh utilization of these narrative strategies in contemporary cinema, in the films of Haneke and Martel I exhibit as evidence of the perpetuation of the modernist project: a keeping-faith with the expressive powers of an art form by having a conviction that conventions or norms can be revised or transformed in such a way, sometimes in a radical way, that the art form
may continue to show its bounties and serve its loftier purposes.

Armed with the knowledge that we are looking for a 19 year-old will-be killer named Maximilian who is a college student, we look for characters who fit the description and attend to the use of first names in the spoken dialogue but the fragments that include young men do not identify him readily. The viewer must infer his identity based on attentive observation. Indeed, there is a substantial amount of narrative material in Haneke’s films the viewer can know with certainty by means of observation and inference. 71 *Fragments* neither strains to obfuscate nor to make anything clear and obvious by, for instance, adding dialogue for expository purposes or by having the camera adopt the most revealing perspective or point to what is most relevant in a scene by cutting to closer views. In the fourth fragment, a young man who could be Max steals guns and ammunition from an armory. It is nighttime and the scene is lit only by the flashlight used by the thief, who is only seen in profile here and in the segment where he manages to abscond from the military facility with the stolen guns. There is a fragment in part two that shows him selling the guns but it is a long shot through a café’s large glass window that reflects the street view and there
is distracting activity inside the locale the camera never penetrates.

In his book on Haneke, Peter Brunette erroneously states that this character is “the young military cadet who turns killer, Maximilian B.”\(^9\) The mise-en-scène, the delayed identification of the killer, and a physical resemblance between the two actors contribute to such errors, which are plentiful in pieces of criticism about the film as well as public forums like the IMDb message boards. We know with certainty that there are two intermediaries between the character Brunette calls a “cadet” (we actually do not know what his rank is) and Max, but sometimes the views of the gun exchanges are brief or distant or include other elements competing for attention. However, alert and attentive spectatorship certifies aspects of the film that are perfectly resolved.

know which of the characters was killed” when in fact the scene of the shooting leaves no doubt that one of three victims is the middle-aged cash courier. Wheatley calls the catalytic event a bank robbery when it is abundantly clear that theft is not a motive. In fact it is the lack of apparent motive, not greed nor vengeance or ideology; it is the mystery of this incident that allows Haneke to ponder how society or civilization may be encouraging such tragic acts, like the recent, indiscriminate mass shootings occurring in the United States.

Wheatley draws a contrast between Haneke’s film and Last Year at Marienbad in which “it is impossible to distinguish spatial or temporal coherence [while] 71 Fragments is subordinated to the film’s linear chronology, allowing us to ‘make sense’, to some extent, of the various fragmentary images and stories.” There are indeed some questions the film answers conclusively although to realize it demands alertness and attentiveness, and maybe a second viewing. It is incorrect, not a matter of interpretation, to claim that the incident is a robbery, or that we do not know the identity of any of the victims, or that the character who steals the guns is the shooter. We know that the gun is in the hands of three young men before Max purchases it. One mystery we are left to ponder is why this
middle-class, college student with no apparent enemies or criminal intentions desires or feels a need to own one. The fragments involving Max that precede the day of the shooting characterize him as overly sensitive and impulsive, but neither violent nor paranoid (or anything that explains his purchase of a gun).

On the day of the shooting, he is in good spirits when he stops by a gas station to fuel his car for the holiday trip to his hometown. He fills up the tank but he does not have enough cash and the attendant won’t accept payment by “check card”. The ATM across the street is out of order. He goes inside the bank but there is a queue and his attempt to jump the line results in a scuffle with another customer. We notice the old man, the foster mother, and the boy waiting for service. She decides to exit with the kid as soon as the scuffle begins. In the next segment, a somewhat agitated Max goes back to his car and sits mulling what to do. Foster mother tells the boy to wait in the car and that she will return shortly. She does not say where she is going but it is most logical to assume she is returning to the bank now that presumably the danger has passed. A driver waiting behind Max’s car for his turn to gas up scolds him. These fragments are relatively short and the editing establishes an urgent rhythm. A few interspersed
segments show cash courier Hans making a delivery and having documents signed by the old man’s daughter. Max gets out of the car and locks it (we see no gun). Inside the bank, Hans is making his way towards the entrance with the metal suitcases. There are about fifteen people in this area of the bank. If you pay close attention during this long shot that tracks along Hans, you notice that the retiree and the foster mother are there. Then Max enters, lifts his gun, and shoots about ten times in different directions. The camera adopts the visual perspective of the potential victims without following the convention of cutting to a reverse shot that would allow the viewer to
watch the bloody mayhem and could allow the film to adopt the point of view of the shooter as violent video games always do, and perhaps even foster identification with the shooter. Instead, we get a very partial view of Hans. This time the camera is closer than convention dictates but we know it is Hans slowly bleeding to death for one and a half minutes because the previous shot has established his vulnerable location relative to Max as he begins to target innocents and because Hans has worn the same long-sleeved, gray uniform sweater throughout the film.

The last image rendered by Haneke’s camera, which precedes an epilogic newscast that includes existing footage of the real event on which the film is based, reveals Marian obediently waiting for his foster mother. It is quite moving if one entertains the possibility that he might have lost the nurturing mother figure who has been
long absent from his life of deprivation, and that she might have saved his life by asking him to stay in the car.

As a realist dramatist, Haneke aims to depict a world where things happen because of a combination of human agency, sheer chance and dint of authorial prerogative. It is also accurate to say that the boy is safe because of the random coincidence of his presence in the bank during the unpredictable scuffle that motivates his foster mother to tell him to stay in the car. The film states categorically that the Romanian boy is safe and that the cash courier is one of the three victims. The identity of the other two is a permanent gap. We only know that the foster mother, the retiree, and his daughter are possible victims, but it also remains a possibility that none of them was shot. As I remarked in the introduction, this openness allows for the possibility of projecting one’s selfhood into the spaces of indeterminacy created by gaps in narrative knowledge, by
imagining possible pasts and possible futures, by filling the gaps ourselves. Viewers who relish the opportunity to put imagination to such use, who recognize how the experience of the film may be enriched by the multiple possibilities that remain open when it stops, will find therein justification for the incompleteness of the action represented.

The factual errors of comprehension found in criticism and commentary about *71 Fragments*, and other Haneke films to some extent, speaks to me about the narrative functions of conventions of editing and mise-en-scène, Haneke’s cinematic praxis in relation to these conventions, and how audiences have been lulled into a passive experience of film. It is the implicit expectation of the viewer that a film will emphasize and underline its revelations, pointing and directing our attention throughout the narrative. Viewers have been conditioned by the medium to expect narrative comprehension to be achieved at relatively low levels of alertness and attentiveness.

I remember discussing D.W. Griffith’s *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912) after screening it in class. One student asked me if the Snapper Kid flings Lillian Gish’s glass because he covets her and does not want another guy
buying her a drink at the saloon. She was among several students who reacted with incredulity when I pointed out that Snapper Kid notices, as we should since it happens in plain view, that his presumed rival slips a chemical powder into her soft drink. Another student explained that the
cigarette smoke billowing from the upper left corner of the frame, which discloses the Snapper Kid lurking behind curtains, diverted his attention away from the action in the middle of the screen. What is “missing” from the scene, what would soon become de rigueur in mainstream cinema, is a cut to a closer view calling attention to the devious sleight of hand involved. The absence of an establishing shot at the beginning of “the Rosmer scene” in LYAM demonstrates its orienting function. The absence of closer views or insert shots in this scene from The Musketeers of Pig Alley and multiple scenes from Haneke’s films testify to the significant role that analytic editing plays in our comprehension of narratives on film.

At the risk of being perceived as a pious admonisher, as Haneke has, I bring up these errors because they speak to me about Haneke’s filmmaking and how practices involving mise-en-scène and editing have developed into conventions that structure and condition the participation of the audience and the qualities of our experience with film. There are consequences to deviations from convention. Generally speaking, narrative comprehension of Haneke’s films necessitates significantly higher degrees of alertness and attention than the contemporary, big-budget
films that constitute the bulk of our formative experience with the medium. They demand a more active engagement.


Haneke’s fifth feature could have been called “41 Fragments for a Chronology of Chance” just like _71 Fragments_ consists of incomplete tales of several journeys. These fragments are also separated by seconds of black screen and most of them are long takes with deep focus. _Code Unknown_ is to Paris what _71 Fragments_ is to Vienna: a portrait of the people of the city using multiple story threads. The structure of the Haneke film has been tweaked to take advantage of the star presence of Juliette Binoche. For the first time in a Haneke film one character is more important than the rest of the ensemble. Although _Code Unknown_ does not certify its temporal trajectory, there is no reason to consider any of the fragments to be out of Haneke’s typically linear chronology.

The threads converge in _71 Fragments_ whereas in _Code Unknown_ they disperse from their origin in a highly touted 9-minute sequence shot set in a busy sidewalk where Anne (Binoche) walks out of her building to find Jean, her live-in boyfriend’s teenage brother, waiting for her outside because the code to enter the building has been changed.
Anne, an actress, tells Jean that his brother Georges, a war correspondent and photojournalist, is on assignment in Kosovo and that it is not a good idea for Jean to stay with them anyway. When an irritated Jean thoughtlessly throws a crumpled paper bag on the lap of a beggar, a black youth named Amadou accosts him and demands he apologize to the beggar for this humiliation. Jean’s offensive act is so brief and offhanded that it is not clear to what extent it is also deliberate. The ensuing shouts and shoves between Jean and Amadou attract the attention of police resulting in Amadou’s being roughed up and a brief incarceration and, paradoxically since Amadou intervened on her behalf, the deportation of Maria, the middle-aged beggar who had entered France illegally. *Code Unknown* follows Maria to Romania and back to France and introduces us to Amadou’s immigrant family. Haneke’s skill as a dramatist, his conjuring of discrete moments of dailiness that add up to
vivid and specific portrayals is underappreciated because it is as old as theater. For instance, the fragments involving Jean and his farmer father, who wants him to follow in his footsteps in spite of Jean’s adamant protestations, are brief but manage to depict both men with richness and specificity of character. Their tale may be the most incomplete since Jean has been gone for six weeks and his whereabouts are unknown when the film ends. If he were to return, he’d find out his father has come to accept his decision to leave the countryside for city life. We also get a good sense of the life Maria leaves behind in Romania when she returns to Paris (on the back of a commercial truck like the boy in 71 Fragments) and the complexity of her decision to do so.

In his films, Haneke enacts collisions between different modes or forms of media. In 71 Fragments the contrast is between highly condensed, quickly edited newscast excerpts and the fictive, temporally extended scenes produced by the film camera. The documentary element in Code Unknown is Georges’s photographs of war-torn Kosovo and Parisian metro riders, shown in slide-show format, and often contrasted with banal or irrelevant voice-over that may be indicative of the photographer’s superficial involvement with his subjects. In Code Unknown, there are two kinds of film
images: Haneke’s one-shot fragments, and scenes in which Anne shows off her acting chops, in the rushes of a conventionally edited, Hollywood-style thriller titled “The Collector” and the auditioning for a role in a French-language adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. The scenes in which Anne is acting do not announce themselves as such. We do not know Anne is not quite herself in some of these scenes until we notice the contrasting aesthetics of the image, or until something like a director yelling “cut” intervenes to reveal the genesis of the images we have seen. As a result, the viewer is “manipulated” (Haneke uses the verb *manipuler* a lot in interviews) into recognizing the characteristics and effects of different modes of representation.

*Code Unknown* uses a bracketing device: scenes involving deaf-mute kids playing charades that function structurally as prologue and epilogue. We watch a girl who
looks over her shoulder, retreats and recoils from an unspecified danger she cannot escape. Several children use sign language and gestures to try to interpret correctly what the girl is acting out but they fail every time. The scene is *Code Unknown* in a nutshell, its mise-en-abîme, and it warns of hermeneutic challenges and failures to comprehend. A number of reviews ignore the charades game or regard it as separate from the rest of the film, as if its relation to the rest is analogous to that of a frame to a painting. However, one of the disabled kids trying to give the correct interpretation is Amadou’s younger sister (who, later in the film, in its most obvious and maybe also dubious moment, asks: “Where’s Africa?”) and several others appear as part of a huge, multicultural drumming circle that provides a kind of exemplary communicative act, and a ray of hope for a society defined by failures to acknowledge and understand one another.

One of the moments of dailiness shows Anne ironing and watching TV for a long time, like Delphine Seyrig in Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, when she hears a girl’s loud cries and a man’s shouts. She mutes the TV and listens to the jarring sounds
of family disturbance for a half-minute before they abate and stop and Anne resumes her ironing. A few segments after, she finds an anonymous note under her door that we never see. She asks her elderly neighbor Mme. Becker if she wrote it but she denies it. Anne asks Georges for advice in deciding what to do about this plea signed “a defenseless child” even though the calligraphy and vocabulary indicate an adult wrote it. Georges shrugs off Anne’s concerns, which elicits an argument about his general nonchalance. Carroll would categorize the identity of the note author, one of the permanent gaps in the film, as a “micro-question” because it is not crucial to our understanding of the film. In Barthes’ formulation, it performs a complementary or secondary function in relation to the totality of events
that shape the plot. It lacks the saliency of, for example, the question about the identity of the two victims in 71 Fragments.

A few fragments later, Code Unknown cuts from black to a funeral service, in medias res, for “la petite Françoise”, a name we have not heard before. However, it seems most reasonable that this is a funeral for a girl and that the 40ish couple who are first to back-fill the grave are her parents. The only people there we recognize are Anne and Mme. Becker, whom the camera captures with a long tracking shot as they walk away silently and mournfully. Do we know enough to say Françoise is the girl whose off-screen suffering disturbed Anne, but not enough to intervene? It is necessary to be attentive enough to recognize the imperative to join or piece together the ironing scene and the funeral one in order to understand this narrative thread and to be emotionally affected by it. Doing so renders Anne’s pious reproach of Georges for his estrangement from the suffering subjects of his photographs of war and for his general disregard as ultimately hypocritical.

Every Michael Haneke film prominently features an act of senseless, death-dealing violence. One common misconception is that Code Unknown is exceptional because,
as Mattias Frey claims, “it lacks the deadly teleology, [the] ‘big bang’ act of violence.”⁰¹² There is senseless tragedy here but in a more covert and reticent fashion as if to make the viewer earn access to it. The movie is reluctant to profit from the plight of a child, like the scene from “The Collector” Anne is filming that manufactures facile suspense out of the possible death of a little boy who has climbed the balcony railing in his parents’ penthouse apartment. *Code Unknown* deliberately forces the viewer to have to watch closely and find a way to put the pieces together in order to drink from its wellspring of emotion.

I find it productive and compelling to integrate into the puzzle the very first piece, the charades scene, to confront the germinal challenge of interpretation. The charades game is not theatrically cordoned off from the rest of the film in the manner of “Rosmer” in *Last Year at Marienbad*. However, it is largely treated as such, as if it was a given that we lack the code to play charades with the deaf kids Rhodes calls “our onscreen doubles”¹³, as if there is nothing the movie teaches us that can help us to understand it retrospectively, as if we also must give up on the girl I figure to be “la petite Françoise”. What she imitates for her peers is a terror from which she sees no
escape because someone responsible for her nurture and protection perpetrates it. The retrospective association of this girl’s bit of performance with the ironing scene, the anonymous note, and the funeral is the hermeneutic maneuver that grants me a feeling of closure, one that back-fills the gap in the most wrenching of these incomplete tales.

*Caché (Hidden)* (2005)

What the characters named Georges (Auteuil) and Anne (Binoche) in this film find on their doorstep is no mere note but a series of videotapes and creepy childish
drawings that increasingly point to a few weeks in Georges’s childhood when his parents decided to adopt Majid, the son of Algerian employees who were among the victims of “a bloody purge led by the Paris prefect of police that resulted in the murder of at least 200 people of Arabic origin, many of their bodies simply thrown into the Seine.”¹⁴ Tens of thousands were placed in internment camps. It is the kind of history governments wish to keep hidden. It is interesting to think that at that time, in Paris in late 1961, Resnais was working with Jean Cayrol on the script for Muriel or The Time of Return, their film about the traumatic memory of French abuses in Algeria. Like Muriel, Caché explores themes of guilt and responsibility at the nexus between the personal and the political.

In Caché, one or more persons are heavily invested in an elaborate campaign to force Georges to take responsibility for telling his parents lies that forced them to rescind their decision to adopt Majid. He was sent to a state orphanage and had to contend with a life of struggle and deprivation. This harassment campaign is the most elaborate narrative conceit in any Haneke film. The tapes and drawings do not only appear in Georges’ home. Georges and Anne’s 13 year-old son Pierrot receives a
postcard at school that reads “To Pierrot from Papa” and one of the videotapes is sent to Georges’ boss.

The first of the videotapes is a two-hour surveillance tape of Georges and Anne’s house taken from a street that runs perpendicular to it (rue des iris, not coincidentally). The second one shows Georges walking towards and past where the camera would be without noticing it. The shot indicates that the camera was placed on the sidewalk about six feet off the ground, which makes it improbable that Georges would not notice it. One tape shows the drive to the country estate belonging to Georges’ parents where the childhood episode took place. Another
tape adopts the perspective of someone traveling by car and
by foot to Majid’s apartment in a poor section in the

outskirts of Paris (the banlieue). Georges follows the path
that leads to Majid, who looks aged beyond his years and
too listless to have acted on his own. George tells him
that he refuses to feel guilty and threatens Majid with
violence despite his calm demeanor and apparently honest
claim not to know anything about the materials involved.
The next day Georges and Anne receive a tape of his visit
to Majid shot from inside the apartment, from a camera
position that makes you wonder how George could have failed
to see it. Majid has a son in his late teens who will also
deny having anything to do with the tapes and sound
convincing. The salient question posed by Caché that
becomes a permanent gap is: who is the person or persons involved in this highly complicated, multi-faceted, project?

Viewed as a whole, the campaign seems unnecessary, unlikely, and perhaps impossible. Certainly Haneke did not need such an overwrought ruse in order to explore notions of personal and collective guilt, bourgeois privilege, colonialism, human rights violations, childhood trauma, and marital mistrust (Georges responds with silence, secrecy, and deception to Anne’s queries about his past and his visit to Majid’s apartment. As a consequence, their marriage suffers).

The final fixed-camera long take of the entrance of Pierrot’s school hints at a possible collaboration between Majid’s son and Pierrot, who have what seems from the distanced perspective of the camera to be a friendly conversation (left side of the frame, over the roof of a car, which makes the shot look like the work of amateurs). This is the first time we learn that they know each other which generates questions about how they met and about the nature of their relationship. Many viewers completely fail to notice the meeting as a result of the lack of guidance from the film as to what is significant in this shot that includes a great deal of activity not involving the two
characters. The distance between camera and subjects is such that the smaller the screen used for viewing, the more likely the viewer will miss it.

The ambiguity in Caché does not keep several potential resolutions at play. I figure that Majid’s son would have to have played a role in the making and delivery of the videotapes and other materials. However, instead of offering several potential plausible solutions Caché offers none. The film’s ambiguity is a byproduct of the lack of realistic explanations. What the film asks of the viewer is not to meditate on different scenarios that remain possible when the film ends, but something much more conventional: to suspend disbelief, to consider the videotapes in a manner similar to the “letters of transit” signed by Gen. Charles de Gaulle that have the magical power to allow a
major leader of the French Resistance to leave Nazi-controlled Morocco in Casablanca (1943), as a “McGuffin”. Thus what matters is not who makes and sends the tapes and notes or how the campaign is accomplished but its effects on Georges and what his reactions reveal about him as a stand-in for people and governments that endeavor at all costs to deny and keep their past sins hidden.

*The White Ribbon* (2009)

*Raise ravens and they will pluck out your eyes.*
(Spanish proverb)

Haneke’s tenth feature film is his only period film and his only film to use voice-over narration. It is set in Eichwald, a small farming village in northeast Germany during the 15 months prior to the onset of World War I. The narrator is the town’s 31 year-old schoolteacher who is recalling and recounting these incidents as an elderly man sometime after WWII. Haneke refers to the voice-over as a “distanciation” strategy but its most apparent effects are to give the viewer a ready figure of identification and to provide clear exposition. *The White Ribbon* does not tell us his name or that of several adults, emphasizing the importance of their social roles within a tightly-knit, tradition-bound community rather than their individuality.
or psychology. This strategy does not interfere with exposition and mise-en-scène that renders the numerous characters easily identifiable and keep the viewer oriented to the location and chronology of overt narrative events.

The teacher begins by addressing the viewer directly. He is the most sympathetic and progressive character in the film. His older self wants to tell us this story because “it could clarify some things that happened in this country”. Haneke removed the explanatory subtitle “a German Children’s Story” for release outside German-speaking territories because The White Ribbon is not only a film about the roots of fascism in Germany but also, to paraphrase the filmmaker, about the process by which any ideal or ideology becomes corrupted and radicalized into forms of terror or terrorism. However, there is nothing in the film, including the narration, to encourage the viewer to make this extrapolation, nothing that explicitly resonates beyond the confines of a specific place and time the film recreates with impressive craftsmanship and attention to detail.

The teacher sounds like a Haneke stand-in when he wonders if he remembers correctly and warns us that he does not know if the story is “entirely true”, that some of it he knows “only by hearsay”, and most importantly, that
“many questions remain unanswered”. The White Ribbon depicts a community where a feudal Baron has a monopoly over the economic resources and a strict and puritan Lutheran pastor is the sole moral authority. They maintain their power and educate their children by means of punishment, fear mongering, and humiliation and the young ones will respond in kind. The title refers to the ribbon the pastor orders his older children, 13 year-old Martin and 14 year-old Klara, to wear in public to remind them to adhere to the values of innocence and purity (Martin will also be forced to sleep with his hands tied up to prevent masturbation). This is a patriarchal society in which several women and most children are serially subjected to abuse of various kinds that the film displays explicitly.

The general repulsiveness on view is counterpoised by the genuinely pure, innocent, and enduring romance between the schoolteacher and a young woman who serves as nanny for the youngest children of the Baron. The only woman with the pecuniary means to escape her plight is the Baroness, who eventually migrates to Italy with her children because she does not want them to grow in an atmosphere of “greed, brutality and malice”.

At the very beginning of *The White Ribbon*, a wire stretched between two trees trips up a horse and causes serious injury to the town doctor riding it. It is the first of a series of “whodunits” involving devious acts of violence and destruction. The Baron’s epicene son and the midwife’s mentally disabled boy are subjected to kidnapping and torture in separate incidents to which we are obviously not privy because the film is consistently reflecting the unprejudiced but limited perspective of the benevolent teacher. It is apparent that these boys from disparate social classes are not victimized in retribution for some misdeed but as a consequence of their perceived weakness and inferiority. The plotting is highly engaging and eventful: the Baron’s huge barn is set on fire, his son is nearly drowned in the river, a baby is maliciously exposed to cold weather, etc. We never learn who is specifically responsible for the offenses that are not directly shown but increasingly the teacher comes to suspect that the older children, roughly between the ages of ten and fourteen and including the pastor’s deeply anguished son and Klara, his unflappable, eerily precocious daughter, are colluding to mete out punishment on the weak and wicked. The teacher comes to this conclusion based on their clandestine afterschool meetings at the village gate, their
collective presence near the sites of incidents, "dreams" a girl shares with him with content related to these incidents, and his observations of the behavior of the children in and out of the classroom.

The doctor is eventually revealed to be a sadist and a misogynist who is sexually abusing his daughter and might have been responsible for his wife's death four years earlier, with assistance from the self-loathing, blindingly obedient midwife. Armed with this information, the placing of the wire that injures the doctor may be regarded retrospectively as justice doled out by the children in the
context of the ineffectiveness and hypocrisy of the adult system. Perhaps the episode most suggestive of the ideology behind the activities of the younger generation concerns Klara’s retaliation for being publicly chastised by her father during a confirmation ceremony. She rams scissors through the pastor’s beloved parakeet and arranges it on his desk with the blades wide open to make it look as if the bird has been crucified. The biblical quote below is written on a piece of paper that is part of the display:

*I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations*15

*(Deuteronomy 5:9-10)*

I interpret her quoting this particular passage, which is later contradicted in the same book16 and elsewhere in the Bible, as indicating that Karla believes God will punish the children for the sins of their parents and that she must remind her father of this and teach him a lesson so that he will repent and make the prescribed act of contrition.

*The White Ribbon* implies that these crimes are symptomatic of a generalized, generational malaise and that there is a code of secrecy that shields the individual behind the group, which is the rationale or justification for the strategy of permanent gaps in this instance, for
not revealing who is individually culpable. The success of the film is predicated on whether it manages to persuade the viewer to recognize that it is unimportant to know precisely who-done-it. The White Ribbon evinces that the rigid, authoritarian, absolutist society that the men in power have fashioned motivates the children to form a cruel and punitive secret collective. The suggestion is that these children belong to a generation of Germans primed and ready to follow Adolf Hitler into the bowels of hell.
Chapter V

Lucrecia Martel
If anyone can be considered the face of contemporary Latin American art cinema, or the Latin American auteur par excellence, it is Lucrecia Martel. Consider that the extensive and selective best-of-the-decade poll conducted by Film Comment in 2010 includes five Latin American films in its top 100 and three of them are the three features Martel has written and directed to date: The Swamp (La ciénaga, 2001), The Holy Girl (La niña santa, 2004) and The Headless Woman (La mujer sin cabeza, 2008). The debut was selected as the best Latin American film of the 2000s in a poll of distinguished critics, scholars and filmmakers conducted by Cinema Tropical, the most important distributor and promoter of films from the region in the United States. The Holy Girl and The Headless Woman also placed in the top 10.

Lucrecia Martel (1966) became the most celebrated film director from Argentina over the course of only a few years. Her three features have brought her worldwide recognition as an important and accomplished filmmaker. The Swamp had its world premiere at the 2001 Berlin International Film Festival, where it received the Alfred Bauer Award. It also won the Grand Prix at the Toulouse Film Festival, the most important European showcase for films from Latin America. Both The Holy Girl and The
*Headless Woman* premiered at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival, where Martel was a member of the jury of the 2006 edition.

The films of Lucrecia Martel have received more widespread distribution around the globe than it is typical of films from Latin America. For instance, *The Holy Girl* enjoyed commercial runs in Turkey and Israel, countries where audiences normally have access to Spanish-language films only when screened as part of film festivals. The three features had their American premieres at the very selective New York Film Festival and were subsequently distributed commercially, albeit in limited release, in the United States. Their critical reception has been almost uniformly positive, with the most enthusiastic reviews coming from the most experienced and reputable critics. Among her most fervent admirers is Kent Jones, who wrote in a *Film Comment* essay, “Filmmakers all over the world, good and bad, beat their brains in trying to achieve what comes most naturally to this director—it’s difficult to think of anyone else who manages such a precise balance between all the various elements of cinema with such apparent ease.”

Lucrecia Martel was born and raised in the province of Salta. Her films are set in its rural small towns and unassuming cities. This province, located far from
cosmopolitan Buenos Aires, borders Bolivia and shares that
country’s ethnic division between upper and middle-class
descendants of European immigrants and an indigenous lower
class. The whole northeast region of Argentina, including
Salta, has been marginalized culturally. The country’s
cultural identity is tied to its wine regions, the beef-
producing Pampas, the tango, and Buenos Aires, a city still
referred as “the Paris of South America”. Salta has not
been incorporated into the formulation of the national
character. Martel’s films, given their cache and
recognition, insert the landlocked province into the
cultural map of a nation engaged in an ongoing process of
self-definition. Her three features constitute what many
now call: the Salta trilogy.

Martel’s father’s purchase of a movie camera was an
event of significant formative import. Perhaps due to the
bulk and weight of amateur cameras sold in the 1980s, or
perhaps out of sheer intuition, little Lucrecia would
simply place the camera in a high traffic area of the house
(atop the kitchen counter, for instance, as she has
explained) rather than attempt to track the action. Martel
was fascinated by the sounds and images captured by a fixed
camera as people moved in and out of frame. She developed a
sense of realism characterized by overlapping layers of
audiovisual activity and grasped the concept of off-screen space at a very early age.

Martel’s most noteworthy film before the trilogy is the short *Dead King* (*Rey Muerto*): a woman’s revenge story, a feminist western with an uncharacteristic palette of saturated, bright colors. The title refers to both the heroine’s husband and a small town in the province of Salta. Unlike the features, *Dead King* has clearly demarcated heroes and villains and, consequently, a narrow interpretative range. Martel refers to it as “my first little film school, an attempt to make a Western of my own, and [something that] feels separate from my other movies.”² *Dead King* is Martel’s contribution to the anthology film *Historias breves* (1995), which includes shorts by Pablo
Traperó and other emerging directors. Its release marked the birth of Nuevo Cine Argentino (New Argentine Cinema).

Lucrecia Martel is typically associated with Nuevo Cine Argentino (NCA), a flourishing of filmmaking of distinction by a heterogeneous group of filmmakers who attended film school in the 1990s and have produced consistently interesting films since the second half of that decade. It exists alongside a relatively small but vibrant mainstream film industry—the 2010 Oscar-winner The Secret in their Eyes is a good example of its output. A detailed exploration of the social, political, economic and cultural factors that facilitated the development of NCA is beyond the scope of this dissertation. My Master’s thesis, “The Salta Trilogy of Lucrecia Martel”, broaches the topic in more depth. Generally speaking, NCA directors Adrian Caetano, Albertina Carri, Lisandro Alonso, Martin Rejtman, Pablo Traperó, Ana Katz, and Martel aim to make films that avoid (or radically revise) genre formulas and costumbrismo, an artistic tendency to romanticize and trivialize representations of social customs. The films made by NCA directors are almost invariably set in the present, intimate rather than epic in scope, and are scripted by the directors. Quintín, perhaps Argentina’s best-known film critic, observes that:
These films share a desire for cinematic truth and an air of being an artistic adventure with no safety net. At a time when most of the world’s films are moving towards a hybrid cinema, adding local, exotic elements to conventional and globalized dramatic developments, Argentina has the luxury of producing a collection of works which are genuinely local, more free than perfect, more valuable as explorations than as merchandise.³

I have had the opportunity to incorporate the films of Lucrecia Martel into my pedagogy, in the form of lectures and discussions, and I hope to continue to do so. When screening any film for students, I always ponder what would be beneficial to say beforehand in the form of an introduction. Typically I prefer not to say much, not to interfere with the spontaneous experience the students would have if they were watching the film outside the context of a course of study, in a non-academic setting. Nonetheless, my working assumption is that when a film deviates substantially from the characteristics of the mainstream cinema and television that constitutes the bulk of our formative experience with audiovisual storytelling, it is beneficial to prepare the students for what is likely to be an extraordinary experience by spelling out where the differences lie. My concern is based on reviews and reports from students who find the films gallingly confusing and
disorienting. I think Roger Ebert was right when he opined in his review of *The Swamp* that:

*It's better to know going in that you're not expected to be able to fit everything together, that you may lose track of some members of the large cast, that it's like attending a family reunion when it's not your family and your hosts are too drunk to introduce you around.*

I also think that, in the case of all three films, it is helpful to “know going in” the challenges the films pose because it fosters the disposition or attitude conducive to an appreciation of the films. What I have in mind is an attitude or stance Keats called “negative capability”, an ability to remain at ease and engaged with works that lack certainty, closure, and clarity. My analysis of the trilogy reveals a personal filmmaking praxis that could be largely explained as a set of self-imposed limitations or obstructions, not unlike the rules formulated by Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in the manifesto for their Dogme 95 movement. A Martel manifesto, her vow of poverty, would include the following rules:

1) No transition shots, which effect a smooth transition from scene to scene. No dissolves, wipes, or fades between shots to suggest the passage of time, or to separate parts of the story. No two seconds of black screen to demarcate fragments à la Haneke.
2) No establishing shots that orient the viewer to the space and/or time in which the action is set. For example, a shot of a building at night that precedes a scene indoors in order to convey the scene is happening at night inside that building. It is telling of the personal, sometimes autobiographical, nature of Martel’s filmmaking that her explanation for eschewing establishing shots is simply that they are “impersonal”. It also bespeaks of her personification of the camera, her thinking of the camera as a character, perhaps a little girl Martel says, who is neither seen nor heard but sees and hears everything from a circumscribed perspective.

3) No top-down views, including aerial or helicopter shots, and bird’s-eye or God’s-eye views. In other words, no shots in which the camera is placed above human-eye level. No shots that could not show the ordinary visual perspective of a person.

4) No cut-in or insert shots. There are abundant close-ups in Martel’s films, especially intimate views of faces and sensory organs, but no cuts to a close view of an object in order to impart information: the face of a clock, a book a character is reading, the contents of a letter, a newspaper headline, etc. However, the infiltration and impingement of visual culture in our lives, especially
television, is made apparent in scenes that allow televisual and video images to overtake the screen. Examples include newscasts of an alleged apparition of the Virgin Mary and the infomercials that seduce Mecha in The Swamp, and Vero’s wedding video in The Headless Woman.

5) No flashbacks. The narrative events are always sequenced chronologically. The central mystery of The Headless Woman could be swiftly resolved with a clarifying flashback but it never comes.

6) No surreal scenes, or views that depicts a character’s interior mental processes such as remembering, dreaming and imagining. In The Headless Woman, we can only infer the mental condition of Vero after a traumatic accident based on observable behavior. We are not privy to her consciousness.

7) No musical score, only music generated within the world of the film (“diegetic music”). The choice of music used in the films is symbolic or revelatory but it is never imposed on the characters from outside the world on film to incite or augment emotional responses.

I could add an eighth “obstruction”: a restriction of camera movement, as there are no elaborate sequence shots like Antonioni’s or the balletic gliding of Resnais’ camera, and only minimal panning in indoor scenes. However,
there are plenty of traveling shots (with the camera placed inside a moving automobile) and a long tracking shot of kids running merrily along the highway at the start of *The Headless Woman*, for instance. Martel does not adhere strictly to this “rule” but there is an undeniable tendency to minimize camera movement. This is practical indeed yet, more importantly, keeping the camera in place is simply natural for Martel and it allows her to call attention to off-screen space and to explore the expressive possibilities of acousmatic sound, or the sound one hears without seeing an originating cause.

The self-imposed formal limitations help to shape the content of the films and structure the manner in which information about characters and events is exposed: reticently and obliquely. The style of filmmaking demands a more active engagement on the part of the viewer, a higher level of alertness and attentiveness than it is typically prescribed, which is also the case with many films of Michael Haneke, especially *71 Fragments* and *Code Unknown*. Both Haneke and Martel deny us the “plenitude” of classical and mainstream cinema. Their films seem to have had pieces removed, views necessary for the narrative to be complete. It is incumbent on the viewer to be keenly attentive and observant to the mise-en-scène, dialogue, and performances.
in order to recognize characters and how they are related, and to achieve temporal and spatial orientation by inference. Other characteristics or tendencies of Martel’s esthetics will surface in the narrative-centered readings of the films that follow this general introduction.

The films of Lucrecia Martel reveal a number of preoccupations and thematic concerns. The list below summarizes the ones I deem most prominent:

a) The coming-of-age of provincial, middle-class girls grappling with a conflict between a powerful, natural sensuality versus religious dogma and social convention,
b) The exercise of patriarchal power, race and class privilege, and the disavowal of social responsibility,
c) The decadence of bourgeois society,
d) The transmission of dysfunctional patterns of behavior across generations, and
e) The moral imperative to hold oneself accountable and to assume personal responsibility.

After the release of *The Headless Woman*, Martel invested considerable time scripting an adaptation of “El Eternauta” (Sailor of Eternity): an allegorical, serialized, science-fiction novel written by Héctor Oesterheld in the 1950s. It revolves around an extraterrestrial invasion of Buenos Aires. Martel was
attached to this project since May of 2008. In December of
2009, Martel made public her divorce from the project due
to creative differences with the producers and the holders
of the rights to the bestselling novel. Martel’s interviews
and her interest in such a project, a genre film set in the
capital and based on a literary source, imply that a phase
in her artistic trajectory has ended and a distinctive new
phase in set to begin. Finally set to begin, with the
announcement that Martel will shoot an adaptation of
Antonio di Benedetto’s 1950s existentialist classic Zama in
mid-2014. Recent interviews indicate that Martel intends to
set the film in the 18th Century like the novel but will not
generally be faithful to it. My estimation is that Zama,
which is budgeted at €4 million, will be ready to debut at
Cannes 2015 and then have a U.S. premiere at the New York
Film Festival.

The Swamp (2001)

I never had the pretense to make something
strange or difficult. What I felt was that I
could not fit these occurrences within a
conventional dramatic construction, because that
meant to constrain reality and deprive it of the
most tremendous thing, for me, about our
existence: that it’s very difficult to discern
the plot.5
(Lucrecia Martel on The Swamp)
The Swamp concerns two families: one living in the city of Salta and another living a few miles away, in a decaying estate called La Mandragora, Spanish for mandrake, a plant with alleged hallucinogenic and sedative effects. Mecha lives there with her husband Gregorio, teenage daughters Vero and Momi, and pubescent son Joaquin. The first scene shows an indolent, inebriated middle-aged group at the edge of a dirty oval pool. The metal chairs they use make a harsh, grating sound when dragged over the concrete floor. When Martel isolates and amplifies this sound for our perception, it acquires a power of signification the sound does not have naturally. Perhaps we are meant to associate the unpleasantness of the sound with this bunch, dragging their deck chairs like the debris of their own lives. Mecha trips on a chair and falls down, breaking the empty glasses she has collected from her guests, and cutting herself in the chest. Gregorio says, “Get up, It’s going to rain”, walks away and pours himself another glass of wine while she bleeds on the ground. Luciano Monteagudo points to the significance of the scene: “Mecha trips or collapses in a haze of alcohol. Something besides broken glass remains on the ground. It would seem that along with Mecha, whom nobody is fit enough to help out, something
else collapses, maybe a social class or certain notion of a country.”

Joaquin, Mecha’s youngest child, is introduced as part of a group of boys chasing after their dogs to the titular swamp that borders La Mandragora. The smell and the bawling of a cow stuck in the mud, fated to die a slow death, guide them. A brief close-up of Joaquin shows his scarred face and injured right eye. We later learn that he had an accident that permanently damaged his eye and that he needs plastic surgery. Mecha and Gregorio, who are habitually inebriated, have waited almost two years to take him to the doctor. It is a glaring example of their general neglect and apathy. Theirs is a family in decadence. They have stopped taking care of themselves, their kids and La Mandragora. The Swamp takes place over the course of a week or so but it is the digital clock in Mecha’s room, blinking 12:00 because no one cares to set it, that defines its temporal orientation. Mecha’s family is caught in their own swamp; an existential, moral one. The allegorical implication is that perhaps a social class or a whole society is stuck in a kind of morass.

Inside the house, the young women slumber. A bedroom scene, the first of many, introduces 15 year-old Momi and Isabel, the maid. Momi wakes up from a siesta next to
Isabel, grabs the edge of Isabel’s sleeve, inhales and sighs, “Thank you, God, for giving me Isabel.” This is the first of a type of image that is characteristic of the trilogy: characters caught in the act of perception. Martel isolates characters engaged in seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. In *The Holy Girl*, the emphasis on these activities becomes even more pronounced by means of close-ups, of ears and hands for instance. The interaction between Isabel and Momi has a definite sensual quality. Their special intimacy is depicted with wordless clarity when Isabel, in the most casual manner, feeds Momi by hand. Perhaps the young maid occupies a place in Momi’s affective universe that her mother has vacated. Mecha has been too
wrapped up in her own problems and too intoxicated to properly care for her children.

Momi overlooks or ignores certain unwritten norms about relationships between people of different race and social status in the provinces. Even if one disregards the sensual nature of their behavior towards each other, there would still remain a subversive, taboo aspect to the emotional proximity between Momi and Isabel. Judging by the pejoratives used liberally in the film to refer to the subaltern, the class divide is inherently racial. Even Momi resorts to ethnic slurs when upset with Isabel. Momi’s emotional attachment and dependence on Isabel becomes intensified by Mecha’s threats to fire her for allegedly stealing towels and sheets. Momi lives in a state of anguish because she fears losing Isabel. When Momi confides to her sister Vero that she “doesn’t want to be with anyone but Isabel”, her feelings are tinged with nascent sexual desire that remains latent throughout the film. Momi’s emotional conundrum becomes more complicated by visits from Isabel’s boyfriend, known as “Perro” (Spanish for dog). It is significant that a close-up of Momi gazing longingly or anxiously at the couple precedes every view of Isabel and Perro together. It signals that the camera is adopting her
point of view and marks Momi as the character most likely to be designated as protagonist.

In a film with a decentered plot and multiple characters competing for screen time, Momi gets more than her share. There is a certain ambiguity as to whether Momi regards Perro as simply someone who could take Isabel away from La Mandragora or more specifically, as a romantic rival. Until the surprisingly devastating finale, this romantic triangle of sorts is the most emotionally affecting narrative
thread. That it is presented exclusively from Momi’s perspective cements her protagonism.

The narrative strategy at play is to make it difficult to discern the plot in the service of Martel’s conceptualization of realism, not to open gaps that become permanent. The openness of The Swamp rests in the multiplicity of characters, gestures, actions, and overlapping voices originating from characters in and off the frame, on views teeming with life that resist but demand incorporation into a fabula because there is indeed a plot. The basic method Martel uses to achieve that purpose is to disperse the action, to show a series of seemingly insignificant quotidian moments involving more than a dozen principal characters always coming and going. The film acquires meaning and resonance as the moments
accumulate and build on each other. Having messily introduced Mecha’s family, *The Swamp* takes us into the home of Mecha’s “half cousin” Tali, her husband Rafael, and their four children. Luciano, the youngest one is bleeding from a cut in his leg that requires stitches. Thus both families are introduced in scenarios involving accidental injury.

Besides Momi, Mecha and Tali are the two other characters who may be regarded as protagonists. One is tempted to refer to the actors in *The Swamp* as an ensemble cast. However, unlike prototypical films with ensemble casts like *Grand Hotel* (1932) and *Dinner at Eight* (1933), these three characters gradually become more conspicuous than the rest. Slowly, over the course of several dispersed scenes, the two women plan a weekend trip to Bolivia without their husbands. The importance of this project to Mecha and Tali comes progressively into focus. The most salient and persistent questions *The Swamp* poses are modest but ultimately quite eloquent in their aftereffects: Will Isabel leave? If so, how will it affect Momi? Will Mecha and Tali go to Bolivia?

All along, Rafael has tried to dissuade Tali from taking the trip for one reason or another. The couple experiences a failure to communicate. Tali wants to go to
Bolivia to have a project of her own, to experience a bit of adventure, and to give her cousin Mecha a respite from the stifling atmosphere of La Mandragora. This is not what she tells her husband. She has told Rafael she wants to go because school supplies are cheaper across the border. Rafael does not understand, apparently, that there are much more important reasons. He sabotages Tali’s project when he buys all the school supplies without telling her. There is no denying Tali’s dejection and disappointment when she finds them in the trunk of the station wagon. She walks away; she does not even want to touch them. Tali and Mecha will not go to Bolivia, or anywhere else. The characters of The Swamp are like the bourgeois revelers in Luis Buñuel’s The Exterminating Angel (1962) who continuously run into
obstacles that keep them confined to their host’s living room, trapped by forces they scarcely comprehend.

All along, Mecha’s worthless marriage to Rafael has stood in contrast to the apparently functional and supportive relationship between Tali and Rafael. He repeatedly pitieds Mecha for being married to a “no good” guy and wonders why she has not divorced him but he does not actually treat Tali as an equal partner in their relationship. The symptoms might be different but Tali’s marriage is likely to devolve into a union not dissimilar to that of the couple at La Mandragora. Later, Tali tries to persuade herself that it was too dangerous and too expensive to make the trip. She phones Mecha who characterizes Rafael’s purchase of the supplies as an act of gallantry. “What an extraordinary man you have” Mecha tells Tali. “We’ll go some other time, no doubt”, she adds, without conviction. The small bedroom refrigerator advertised in the infomercial she watches while convalescing at the beginning of the film has just been delivered. No need to leave the bedroom to mix her drinks. It brings her a step closer to her mother’s legendary social isolation; a step closer to virtual entombment.

The Swamp also answers the other major question posed. Isabel hesitantly tells Mecha to look for another “girl”
because her sister needs her and she is going to live with her. The young maid looks troubled in our views of her near the conclusion of *The Swamp*. Mecha calls her an “ingrate” and insinuates she is pregnant. Isabel’s silence does not confirm pregnancy is her reason for leaving but it raises the probability without precluding other contributing factors. To a large extent, Momi serves as Martel’s alter ego. She confides, “The fundamental conflict from which I attempted to explain the world to myself was the moment when I stopped believing in God, after being a very fervent Catholic. That moment of divine desertion...to feel one is alone in the planet with other people and there is nothing else.” This is precisely the moment dramatized in that powerful shot of Momi in the center of the frame, weeping against the wall in the shower stall not simply to mourn
Isabel’s parting but also God’s failure to respond to her prayers.


The opening credits are accompanied by a Bach piece played on the theremin that segues to the voice of a woman singing a musicalization of Saint Teresa de Avila’s poem “Vuestra Soy” (I Am Yours). Sound precedes image in a manner that recurs throughout the trilogy. Surprisingly, the first image shows not the woman singing but a group of girls, an audience witnessing a performance before we can. This inversion of the classical order of action and reaction shots is another tendency of Martel’s filmmaking
praxis. The camera increasingly privileges two of a dozen teenage girls packed tightly inside the room. As Kent Jones observes,

The faces of Amalia and her friend Josefina are caught in a state of rapt/hostile absorption as they watch their off-screen teacher singing. Separating the reaction from the action gives a rich sense of the utter weirdness of adolescent girlhood, equal parts tenderness and ferocity, innocence just starting to mingle with experience.

Josefina is peculiarly invested in telling her friend Amalia about being a witness to the heavy petting of the seemingly pious and modest Inés, an older teen who leads their catechism group. The topic of the meeting is how to discern God’s plan and prepare to hear his calling.

Male voices filter into the room where the girls have congregated before the film shows that the voices belong to a group of ear, nose, and throat specialists who have
checked-in for a medical convention at the family-owned hotel. Viewers of *The Swamp* would not be surprised by the absence of establishing shots indicating where the girls are meeting relative to the hotel. At this point, background sounds are the only clue that the girls are very near or in the hotel. Freddy, one of the owners, guides a handful of doctors to their rooms, including his college friend Dr. Jano, who will emerge as the principal male in the film, in fact the only male character we might call protagonist in the whole trilogy.

*The Holy Girl* returns to the catechism group. Inés, emphatically: “What is important is to be alert to the call from God. He calls us to save and be saved and that is the only meaning our life should have.” The valid questions the girls pose frustrate Inés because she does not have the answers. Again, Josefina whispers to Amalia rumors about the erotic exploits of Inés. The film postpones our recognition that Amalia is “the holy girl” and that her divorced mother Helena and divorced uncle Freddy co-own the hotel where the bulk of the action is set. Meir Sternberg and “cognitivist” film scholars David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Noël Carroll use the term “delayed exposition” to refer to the manner Martel’s narratives dispense information.
Additionally, in their first scene together, before we know that Helena and Freddy are siblings, Freddy enters her room in the middle of the night and gets in bed with her in a manner that suggests a romantic liaison. Sternberg calls this type of misdirection “discordant anticipatory hints that have been smuggled [as part of a] rhetoric of anticipatory caution.” In other words, the retrospective awareness of this misinterpretation serves as a warning to the viewer not to form strong or absolute hypotheses about characters and events in the film. Martel often makes us acknowledge, by means of deferral and misdirection, how we are quick to assess and judge based on insufficient or misleading information.

Several catechism girls walk across the street from the hotel to watch a public theremin performance. Dr. Jano stands behind Amalia and molests her by pushing his crotch against her buttocks. Amalia remains quiet, perplexed, and unable to react for twenty-five seconds that feel like an eternity. She turns around and manages to get a glimpse of Jano as he scurries away. She smiles faintly at Josefina who was standing next to her without realizing what happened. Later, Amalia recognizes Jano in the medical conference brochure but does not tell Helena about it.
There is a long scene showing Amalia and Helena sunbathing on a terrace that overlooks the pool. Their furtive gazes at Jano down below disclose a shared but veiled interest in him. This sequence establishes her agency and willfulness and introduces her merging of faith and natural instinct. It visualizes the film’s predominant erotic triangle and defines the coordinates of desire. In *The Holy Girl*, the central premise or scenario is easier to discern than in the case of *The Swamp*, but there are still a plethora of ancillary plot threads vying for our attention.

The sense of sight is given a position of prevalence within the world of *The Swamp*. In that film, a woman becomes a celebrity based on her alleged vision of the Virgin, Joaquin loses an eye in an accident and Luciano’s accidental fall is precipitated by his need to see what is behind a high wall. Moreover, faith in God was symbolized
by seeing versus not-seeing. In *The Holy Girl*, the signifying modes of perception are hearing and touch, licit and illicit.

Amalia’s gradual pursuit of Jano advances with a scene that mirrors the molestation scene, but reverses their roles. She is quietly standing in the corner of the hotel elevator when Jano and two other doctors get inside. Amalia approaches Jano from behind and touches his hand. He moves his hand away without looking back and exits the elevator. Amalia walks down the hall to Jano’s room, which is being cleaned. She enters and puts a dab of his shaving cream on the collar of her blouse and smells it. Amalia’s gesture is reminiscent of *The Swamp*’s Momi smelling Isabel’s clothing.

The next morning, Jano talks to his wife and kids on the phone and meets with two colleagues to discuss closing the conference with a dramatization of an ideal patient interview. One doctor mentions the need to illustrate the
“difficulties of interpretation”, meaning the ability to understand the patient’s description of symptoms in order to diagnose accurately. However, the importance of the term for the viewer concerns the misreading of behavioral signs within the intricate web of relational connections between the characters.

We know enough about Jano (Spanish for Janus) at this stage to begin to consider the implications of his given name. In Roman mythology, Janus is usually depicted with two faces or heads looking in opposite directions. Dr. Jano is by all appearances a good husband and father, and a doctor who is highly respected by his peers. Yet he has this other face; he displays a regressive perversion; a juvenile, sexual acting-out. Freddy introduces Jano to Helena, who suffers from an ear disease. They chat after a medical lecture and he inquires about her condition. She invites him to sit at her table for dinner. He could meet her daughter then, she says. One question posed saliently is when and how will Jano learn that Amalia is Helena’s daughter.

In the third meeting of the catechism group, Inés attempts to give closure to the debate by reading a quote that states, among other things, that God’s mysterious callings utilize all means available to him. The quote
seems to corroborate Amalia’s intuition that God wants her to save Jano. While smelling his scent on the collar of her blouse, she says to Josefina, “I think I already have a mission.” Amalia regards someone with Jano’s perversion with empathy and pity. In her eyes, he is someone who needs to be “saved”, unburdened of his sin.

Helena and Jano dine together but Amalia is absent. There is mutual attraction between them, particularly on the part of Helena, who is having difficulty coping with her ex-husband’s wife giving birth to twin boys. Jano diagnoses Helena’s malady as tinnitus, a condition that involves the hearing of sounds not having concrete, external provenance. Helena agrees to play herself in the clinical demonstration being staged as the closing event of the medical conference.

People congregate in the street to witness another theremin demonstration. Amalia is near the front with a few friends. She sees Jano joining the spectators. Amalia walks to the rear, where Jano stands, and positions herself with her back to him. It is not coincidental that the tune being played is the habanera from Georges Bizet’s “Carmen”. The lyrics of the aria include this recurring line: “si je t’aime, prends garde à toi!” (if I love you,
you’d best beware!). This time, she chooses to stand immediately in front of Jano. When Jano initiates the frottage, she grasps his hand. Jano is visibly startled. Amalia turns to look him in the eye before he flees. She assumes complete control over the situation. That night, Amalia opens the door of Jano’s room just to look at him. At the pool, the next morning, she spies on him and appears
to be summoning him by tapping on the metal rings of a plastic screen. Jano is discomfited by Amalia’s stalking. He gets out of the pool and walks to his room. He catches Amalia tracking behind him and orders her not to follow him. Jano has been effectively transformed from predator to prey, from master of the action to subject in someone else’s project.

Amalia divulges her mission only to Josefina, who promises not to tell anyone. Amalia tells her, “No one needs to know. It’s my mission. I know that.” Amalia believes God has called her to save this clearly tormented, perverse man. Then again, Martel makes us aware of Amalia’s budding sexuality. For instance, she is shown masturbating under the covers and, later, she shares a casual but sensual kiss with Josefina. The girls are resting on a cot in a corner of the hotel’s laundry room when they kiss. It is the clearest example of the collapsing of public and private space observed throughout a film dealing with a family making a home out of a hotel. More importantly, as Gonzalo Aguilar phrases it, “For Amalia, desire does not establish a system of prohibitions and hierarchies; it is an energy that runs through everything without guilt or conventions.”10
Amalia sincerely wishes to hear God’s calling and to abide by the Church’s teachings but she is also responding to natural urges, to the undeniable forces of nature acting upon her body. Her mission constitutes a synthesis of the spiritual and the corporeal. As Joanna Page observes, Amalia’s “profane and anarchic interpretations of the nature of salvation and vocation threaten the sacred authority of the words [read by Inés thus] creating subversive meanings not programmed by the Church.”11

Jano unavoidably runs into Amalia and Helena together. As expected, he is shocked to learn that Amalia is Helena’s daughter. He is paralyzed by the news but manages to leave without saying anything. Helena notices his behavior is odd. Jano’s wife phones to tell him she and their children are ready to come join him as planned. Jano tries to dissuade her but fails.

There is a swift cut to Josefina in bed with her cousin in their grandmother’s house. Josefina’s mother and father come in unexpectedly. She manages to pull up her panties, pull down her skirt and sit on the bed as they walk in. Mother gasps: “My God! What have you done to Grandma?!” It is unclear whether the statement implies they have defiled her home by having sex there or whether she is more concretely referring to the messy condition of the
room. The quick-witted Josefina deflects the situation: “Something horrible happened!” She breaks the promise she made to Amalia by telling her mother that one of the doctors at the conference molested Amalia. Josefina’s mother decides she must go to the hotel and tell Helena immediately.

At the hotel, Jano’s wife and children leave their room to go for a stroll. Jano will save a front seat for his wife at the conference. The voices of Jano’s kids can still be heard on the background when Amalia sneaks into his room. He looks at her with a grave expression. The camera is placed so that we see Jano looking in one direction towards Amalia while his reflection in the mirror faces the opposite direction. He is split in two like the mythical Janus. The splintered Jano, absorbed in thought,
makes himself whole by moving within the frame so that the camera no longer sees his reflection in the mirror. Then he announces with a calm, clear voice, “I will tell your mother everything.” Jano’s short physical movement corresponds to a significant spiritual advancement. Martel devises the appropriate images to express the psychological growth of the character with elegant understatement and visual economy. Amalia sits next to Jano. She whispers something in his ear. Jano sighs and shakes his head. She puts her head on his shoulders then puts her arms around his neck and says softly, “You are a good man.”

She does not dissuade him from telling Helena, as one might expect. Jano looks down, furrows his brow, and shakes
his head in disagreement. His breathing is labored. She
repeats the phrase and tries to kiss him. He rebuffs her,
and pinches her eye unintentionally. She lays down and
covers her eyes with her hands. Jano turns to check on her,
clearly concerned. She sits up and opens her eyes. There is
a satisfied expression on her face and a faint smile, as if
she has just realized that she has indeed been instrumental
in saving Jano, who is now willing to take responsibility
and be held accountable. Note that Jano has no idea that he
is about to be denounced by Josefina’s mother. His
resolution to come clean is genuine. He is clearly
remorseful. Martel insinuates that someone who behaves as
objectionably as Jano is worthy of compassion and capable
of redemption.

The title of the film is not meant to be taken
ironically. The healing and rehabilitation of people like
Jano require remarkable, visionary individuals like Amalia.
Eva-Lynn Jagoe and John Cant elaborate as follows:

Martel proposes that a post-Catholic culture of
the body is possible without an abandonment of
notions of solidarity and personal
responsibility. The girl’s progress towards a
more humane culture contrasts with the confusions
and sufferings of her parents’ generation, who
struggle with the contradictions inherent to
their traditional culture and their
authoritarian, irrational, and guilt-ridden
visions of love, sexuality, and eschatology.\textsuperscript{12}
Jano goes to Helena’s room. He is seen visibly struggling to find the right words and muster up the courage to say what he came to say. We are aware of Helena’s “difficulties of interpretation” so we are not surprised when she impatiently assumes that what mortifies Jano is his extra-marital passion for her. Helena kisses him and he responds. He leaves without saying a word. I propose that Jano is aware that Helena craves the stage, that she needs to indulge her acting bug, and that the convention needs to be given proper closure, so he merely decides to defer his confession for a few hours.

Jano’s and Josefina’s family share the lobby. Jano’s daughter overhears a conversation about a wayward doctor. In the conference room, she tells Jano’s wife that there is going to be a scandal involving a doctor who molested “the girl from the hotel.” Jano is summoned backstage to prepare for his entrance. The speaker introduces Helena and the audience applauds. Backstage, Jano puts on his white coat and composes himself as he prepares to enter the stage. There is a cut to Josefina’s parents waiting in the lobby as we hear the applause, which indicates the dramatization is ready to commence. Josefina’s parents have arrived too late to prevent Amalia’s triumphant rehabilitation of Jano and Helena’s moment in the spotlight.
The narrative fuse is suspended just before the fireworks. The scandal never becomes manifest before our eyes. The viewer has a clear understanding of what has transpired up to this point. There are no lingering questions about it. The permanent gap is created at the end of the film, by having it stop just before the climax or denouement. It could be argued that *The Holy Girl* is resolved to the extent that Amalia accomplishes her mission. The viewer may experience a degree of closure from the recognition that the scene in Jano’s hotel room evinces the completion of the mission or project that is the focal point of the plot. The narrative gaps that become permanent and complicate the sense of closure we may derive from the narrative involve the repercussions of Josefina breaking her promise to Amalia by divulging her deepest secret. How will Helena react when Josefina’s mother accuses Jano of molesting her daughter? How will it affect the relationship between Amalia and her dear friend?

The viewer may derive a degree of closure by considering that the rhetorical impetus to emphasize and celebrate Amalia’s (and Jano’s) accomplishment justifies the permanent gaps. The viewer may also find justification for the permanent gaps by appreciating the freedom to imagine and ponder multiple possible futures. The film’s
incompleteness allows the viewer to entertain different scenarios regarding the consequences for all involved. Perhaps the denouement will not be as devastating as anticipated. However, it is up to the viewer to imagine how it will unfold.

I find it conceivable that someone like Amalia can forgive Josefina’s betrayal. I wonder if, just as Momi came to the conclusion that there is no Virgin to see and that God does not answer her prayers, Amalia will conclude that God does not call. Or perhaps, that it is the Church and its most righteous members who most grievously misinterpret the message of God. The fate of Jano is also difficult to predict and highly dependent on how Helena handles the accusations delivered by Josefina’s mother, a bastion of traditional, bourgeois culture. Helena, who is favorably predisposed toward Jano, may not simply take the accusations as fact. Regardless of the outcome, Jano is a better man now than when he arrived and Amalia knows she played a major role in his growth. She has come closer to the spirit of the Judeo-Christian exhortation to “love thy neighbor” than anyone else.

The final scene brings us back to the pool, where Amalia is seen in the background immersed in the warm, blue
water and Josefina stands in the foreground. Amalia smiles broadly, thrilled to see her friend. Her face has never registered such joy and warmth before. She laughs when Josefina gets into the pool in her underwear. Josefina declares their sisterhood. The girls float on their backs, swimming slowly by moving only their lower legs, enjoying each other’s company and the smell of orange blossoms.

The Headless Woman (2008)

Lucrecia Martel’s camera struggles to keep up with boisterous boys and a dog running along the embankment of a country road. The opening shot of The Headless Woman has two surprises for spectators familiar with her previous films: it is a long tracking shot and it adopts a frame with a 2.35:1 ratio, often called Cinemascope (or simply ‘Scope). Martel’s first-time use of this widescreen format is most significant. One of the director’s trademarks is
the synchronous occurrence of more than one action or event. She likes to think of these actions or events as co-existing “layers” that take center stage alternately. Sometimes there is a primary locus of attention in the foreground of the frame with something of lesser importance occurring in the background but, more often than not, secondary events within the diegesis are often expressed by means of acousmatic sound. Martel does not abandon her characteristic use of sound that originates outside of the visual frame. However, the extra visual space of the Cinemascope frame facilitates, whenever she feels inclined to do so, the visual representation to two narrative layers within the frame.

One of the boys disappears from view when he somersaults into a canal that borders the road. The shot’s foreboding nature can only be realized in retrospect.
There is a typically abrupt cut to a view of a well-dressed woman helping another adjust her false eyelashes. This scene is linked to the previous one sonically by the voices of kids at play heard in the recesses of the sound mix. Subsequent shots make us aware of a large group of middle-aged women and their kids preparing to return home after a visit to their country club. The Headless Woman exposes the insularity and exclusivity of the social class to which these women belong.

Toward the end of the sequence, the views single out Vero, a tall, warm and lively woman with newly-tinted blond hair. She gets into her car alone. A view of the same curvy winding road seen in the opening scene is followed by a profile view of Vero driving as she listens to the innocuous pop song “Solay, Solay” on the radio. We hear a phone ring. The second ring causes Vero to take her eyes
off the road to search for the phone. The camera is fixed on Vero and we hear two loud thuds. The car lunges as it collides with something and then lunges again as it hits something a second time. We also hear objects being displaced about the cabin and tires coming to a stop. Vero catches her breath, reaches for the door handle seemingly intending to go out to see the damage done, but opts not to do that. Then she picks her fashion sunglasses off the floor, puts them back on, restarts the engine and drives away. The 77-second take concludes with a cut to a long shot of a dog lying motionless on the road. It reflects the perspective of someone inside the car looking backward through the rear window.

The final film of Martel’s Salta trilogy will follow Vero for the remainder of its duration. All three films are equally ambitious in their thematic resonance and feature complex, multi-layered plots. However, the narratives of the films evidence a reduction in the number of leading characters and important secondary characters. The Swamp has at least three characters, Momi, Mecha and Tali, whom one can call protagonists. The narrative of The Holy Girl is more concentrated, not only because most of the action is set in and around a single location, but also because the number of secondary characters is reduced slightly and
Amalia emerges as more of a protagonist than anyone else. In *The Headless Woman*, there is no doubt that Vero is the leading character.

The sequence I proceed to describe is quite elliptical and consists of relatively brief scenes that show a series of actions involving Vero that demand attention, even concentration, to follow. Blame it on Martel’s “vow of poverty” that eschews establishing and transition shots, and her preference for circumscribed visual perspectives.

It is raining now and Vero rides in the passenger seat of a car driven by an unidentified person. The next shot finds her already inside a hospital or clinic displaying a small bandage on her right temple. When Vero goes to the bathroom, a little girl gives her a hug and pulls the side of her mouth to show her that another tooth had fallen out. Vero does not recognize the girl. She undergoes a cranium x-ray. The slowness of her movements and the paucity of her verbal responses indicate she is in shock. In the registration form, Vero writes the name embroidered on the nurse’s coat rather than her own. Then she walks away before signing the form.

Again, Vero is riding as a passenger in a vehicle. This time we figure it is a taxi because we hear the voice of the dispatcher. There is another elliptical cut, inside
a dark hotel room. Vero takes a nap and goes to the cafeteria. A man walks in and they talk. They go up to her room. When he says he is leaving, she grabs him, pulls him toward her, kisses him, and begins to take off his shirt. They spend the night together. We do not know his name or how he is related to Vero, but their familiarity with each other gives the impression it is not the first time they’ve had sex, although we are not certain.

In the morning, Vero’s phone rings while they are getting dressed. Of course, it is the same ringtone heard during the accident. The ringing of the phone is the first of many instances in which sounds and images evoke the film’s precipitating event. Vero answers but hangs up when she hears a man’s voice. The unidentified lover drives her home. Vero’s husband arrives a bit later. When he walks into the foyer and greets her, Vero runs up the steps and locks herself in the bathroom. He follows her. He asks where her car is but gets no answer. Vero gets in the shower with her clothes on. There is something undeniably comical about Vero’s daffy behavior. Is she so beside herself that she forgets to undress? Is she washing off her lover’s scent? Her husband tries to coax her into coming out but she is unresponsive to him. As her husband leaves, the maid answers the phone. She tells Vero that they are
waiting for her at the clinic. Since Vero does not have her car, the maid arranges for a taxi to pick her up and take her to the “odontology center.” A trace of recognition crosses Vero’s face when she hears her destination, but she looks puzzled. This is the first leading role for Maria Onetto, who exudes anomie and an air of mysteriousness.

The patients waiting to see the dentist at the odontology center and the receptionist are astonished and bemused when Vero walks in and sits in the waiting room. She has “lost her head”. She seems to suffer from depersonalization, a common symptom of acute stress reaction. Vero is a dentist and the little girl who hugged her at the hospital is likely her patient. We learn she left her car keys at the hospital. Later she fails to recognize her car and does not seem to remember the name of her daughter. Vero suffers from severe emotional shock.
The viewer may resist identification with such an opaque, imploded character as Vero but there is congruence between her mental condition and the viewer’s disorientation with regards to time, place, and the identity and nature of the characters. To put it simply, we never know more than what Vero knows and that is a disquieting place to be. The viewer is empirically aligned with her. I think this revelation by critic Amy Taubin, who greatly admires *The Headless Woman*, is instructive: “My desire to distance myself from the film and its spoiled, neurasthenic protagonist obviously paralleled said protagonist’s desire to disavow a crime she may have committed.”¹³ The camera may not represent her point of view but her centrality and her protagonism invite us to identify with Vero. Her lack of agency, her passivity, and her disavowal provoke the viewer to reject that invitation.

A boy comes to the door of Vero’s house asking if they need a car wash. The use of shallow focus causes the boy to appear like a disembodied spirit. It resonates later when we hear of a boy’s disappearance. At the moment, it can be read as a visualization of the anonymity and insubstantiality of the members of the lower class to bourgeois eyes. The use of short focal lengths becomes more pronounced with each film. The resulting shallow focus is
used to direct our attention to one particular “layer”, to visualize the fuzziness of a character’s perception, and to express the relative invisibility of the subaltern.

There are several scenes that evoke the car accident and manifest Vero’s recurrent memory of the traumatic event. One that will serve as an example finds Vero at the country club among several women walking around the perimeter of a soccer field for exercise. At one point, a strange clashing sound, a thud and a dog’s bark is heard, immediately followed by a view of a boy lying motionless on the ground. It is too much to bear; as if the whole world is conspiring not to let Vero forget the immorality of not getting out of her car to find out the consequences of her negligence. In the bathroom of the club, Vero breaks down and weeps. There is a worker doing some welding in the room. Vero composes herself and tells him the water is not running. Then she cries again, puts an arm around the man’s
shoulder and gasps. The man comes back with a tall bottle and pours water on her hand and neck. Vero exhales loudly, puts her sunglasses on, and says goodbye. While in a checkout line at the store, Vero matter-of-factly tells her husband Marcos, “I killed someone on the road.”

They drive by the accident site. Marcos is convinced all she hit was a dog that is still by the roadside but Vero’s worry is not assuaged. Next morning, Vero’s brother tells her he will see her patients with emergencies. He is wearing a camouflage vest as if going into battle. Marcos recruits Juan Manuel, who is his cousin and his wife’s lover. Juan Manuel explains that he has not heard of any deaths on that road. He says that he would know because the police would have to inform him (he is a doctor, perhaps he works at the emergency room or the morgue). Vero explains she did not get out of the car, perhaps regretting not doing so. Marcos and Juan Manuel examine the front of Vero’s car and conduct phone inquiries. It is noteworthy that Marcos asks the maid to leave the room and close the door before these calls are made. It turns out nothing has been reported. The next morning it has finally stopped raining and Vero appears more upbeat and responsive.

Vero and Josefina drive out of town to a plant nursery. On the way back to the city, on the canal road,
onlookers and rescue personnel have congregated. They learn that the water flow in the canal is obstructed, perhaps by a drowned animal or even a person. At her cousin’s house, eccentric aunt Lala remarks that Vero’s voice sounds strange and speaks about the spirits of the dead. “Ignore them, and they go away,” she tells Vero.

When Vero wakes up the following morning, Marcos has already left in her car to have the damage repaired in nearby Tucumán to avoid attracting attention from the locals. In her backyard, the gardener tells her there is something buried deep in her yard, perhaps a small pool. Vero plans to go to the nursery to buy huge clay pots because the buried structure would inhibit the growth of trees planted directly on the ground. She picks up a newspaper brought by the gardener and becomes absorbed by it but there is no shot to show us what she reads.
Later that day at her cousin’s house, Vero’s niece Candita, who makes no secret of her attraction to Vero and sends her love letters, complains, “I’m bored. I want to see where they found the boy that was murdered.” “He drowned,” retorts Vero. The old man who manages the nursery reveals that the boy who died worked there, along with his brother. Vero remains silent when he tells her: “What a disgrace for his family, after almost a whole week looking for him”.

Vero stops by the hospital. Her admission record and x-rays cannot be found. It is as if she was never there. Her brother tells her he retrieved all her records, and that there is no reason to worry. To varying degrees, every Martel film takes gender politics into consideration. Even though in The Headless Woman the class divide predominates, it is no coincidence that it is the men in Vero’s life who have the access to the evidence and the power to conceal it. The secrecy that characterizes their manipulation of the system contributes to Vero’s disorientation. Vero gradually becomes aware of what is being done for her protection. Her attitude toward this cover-up is one of passive acquiescence.

She is resting the next morning when someone rings the doorbell. It is the boy who washes cars. Vero asks him to
unload the plants from the SUV. We notice she has tinted her hair brown. She is overly obsequious toward the boy, offering him food, drink, even some clothing to take with him. At an elementary school, she gives complimentary dental check-ups to the kids. Vero’s professionalism is a sign of her recovery. Maybe her head is back on.

The change in her hair signifies a willful desire for transformation, like the protagonist in Agnes Varda’s Cleo from 5 to 7 (1962) and the Kim Novak character in Vertigo (1958). Marcos returns from Tucumán in Vero’s car, which has been repaired. However, Vero points out that there is still some minor but visible damage to the side of the chassis. The traces of the accident have not been erased completely. Likewise, the effects of the accident on Vero cannot be undone. A residual effect lingers. The pick-up truck from the nursery arrives. The “new boy” who carries the pots into the house has replaced Aldo, the boy found dead.

It is Friday evening. Vero’s family and friends are having a get-together in a meeting room at the hotel where Vero spent the night of the accident. In the bathroom, Vero cries in private then composes herself. Vero goes to the reception desk and asks if room 818 was occupied last weekend. The receptionist indicates the room was vacant.
The metal keys to the hotel rooms begin to tinkle in the backboard as if trying to say something. Is this the work of Aldo’s ghost? Will Vero be able to ignore him, like aunt Lala would recommend, so that it goes away? My sense is that she will continue to cry private tears, that she will again need to compose herself to show her face to the world, that the accident will be her cross to bear.

The camera stays just outside the nicely appointed meeting room’s swinging glass doors for a long time. It signifies a border between them and the outside world that is not easy to penetrate. When we go inside, the crowded shots depict Vero’s mingling elegantly and smoothly. This is her world.

Well, did she hit Aldo causing his death or did the boy fall into the canal for some other reason and drown? Where is the omniscient narrator or the tell-all flashback to give us concrete answers? *The Headless Woman* gives the
impression of belonging to the mystery genre, but how can it ultimately fit within that tradition when the mystery is never solved? How can a mystery incorporate a newspaper with a headline about the precipitating incident and not offer a close-up so that we can read it? The evidence needed to arrive at an unequivocal solution is repressed because it does not really matter. What is important is that Vero chooses not to get out and find out what her carelessness has caused and that the mere possibility that she accidentally killed someone sets in motion a protective cover-up and a disavowal of responsibility. It is also significant that there is nothing specific about Vero and her men indicating they are behaving differently than it is characteristic of their class under these circumstances. The hit-and-run narrative provides commentary on class privilege, or a demonstration of how it functions, that is reminiscent of Jose Antonio Bardem’s masterpiece *Death of a Cyclist* (Muerte de un Ciclista, 1955).

*The Headless Woman* pretends to be a mystery to engage the viewer’s attention only to deliver a character study and a social exposé. It illustrates and dramatizes how a social class conspires in order to maintain their grip on wealth and power and how they exercise their privileges in order to protect their own and maintain the status quo. The
justification for the permanent gap is the transference of signification from accidental, unintentional negligence to the uncovering of an unjust, unequal, secretive, and corrupt social system. The resolution to the mystery is unimportant because *The Headless Woman* assumes the perspective of the ruling class for whom the life of a low-class person, a *chango*, does not have the same value as that of a member of the ruling class. For them, boys like Aldo and the one who goes from house to house offering car washes are anonymous and easily replaceable. They might as well be ghosts.

Reviews of *The Headless Woman* often reference Michelangelo Antonioni and several of his films from the 1960s that use premises and tropes of the mystery thriller without delivering the payoff. Stephen Holden’s New York Times review is representative:
In its depiction of willed amnesia and collusion to conceal a hidden current of remembrance, The Headless Woman recalls Antonioni’s L’Avventura, in which a woman’s disappearance on a boating expedition is quickly forgotten once the mainland is reached. Like that same director’s Blow-Up, The Headless Woman is a metaphysical ghost story in which enigmatic clues are dropped about a possible crime that is never solved. The more closely you study The Headless Woman, the deeper and more unsettling are its mysteries.14

The ironic title of the L’Avventura seems to take pleasure in “cheating” the audience by not providing the eventful and exciting movie it promises. I am sure some viewers also feel cheated by The Headless Woman. Several critics and reviewers have also pointed out similarities between Vero and the disturbed woman played by Monica Vitti in Red Desert, as well as common themes between Antonioni and Martel such as the (im)morality of the bourgeoisie.

What is most specific and most local about The Headless Woman is its political subtext. Its subtlety and obliqueness makes it invisible to the vast majority of critics who are not Argentinean, or Latin American. I have omitted to mention a crucial detail of the last scene. Demis Rousseau’s “Mamy Blue” is played at the social gathering that closes The Headless Woman. As James Quandt notes, the use of this song “at this juncture has the shivery effect of a cold coin pressed to the nape of the
Like the song playing on Vero’s car radio during the accident, it is a banal, escapist, easy-listening hit tune from the 1970s. The anachronistic use of these songs connects this generation of upper-class men and women with their 1970s counterparts. Martel calls it “the soundtrack of the dictatorship.” This story about a boy who disappears mysteriously evokes the fate of the desaparecidos, the thousands of young people arrested by the right-wing dictatorship that governed Argentina in the 1970s. Years later, it was revealed that they were thrown into the Atlantic Ocean from airplanes or buried clandestinely. Many in the upper class who were not directly implicated in the conduct of the government chose to enjoy their pleasures and privileges while turning a blind eye on the atrocities. The possibility that Vero threw Aldo in the canal with her car and that she could have offered assistance, perhaps saved his life, but chose not to even get out to look, create strong cross-generational parallels. The finding of something sinister buried in Vero’s backyard and the song selection serve to augment these parallels and strengthen, by association, the piercing indictment of her own post-dictatorship generation.
There is room for compassion, nonetheless. There are no real villains in Martel’s films, and witness how the camera lingers empathically on Vero’s troubled, anguished expression in the penultimate scene. The director neatly reflects this multi-faceted attitude in the following comment:

This woman is going to carry this on her back like a corpse, like a bag of bones, forever. In Argentina, I see people who still carry the weight of the really bad stuff that they did not denounce back when it happened under the dictatorship. And now the same process is occurring, but it’s in relation to poverty. What we try not to see is that the entire legal system, health system, and education system are structured by social class. The same mechanism that we used in the past to ignore the suffering of others is still very present today.\(^1\)

The fact that the films of Lucrecia Martel depict the particularities of life in a remote province far from the metropolises where her films are exhibited and that they are inspired by the director formative memories of
provincial life during the 1970s and 1980s, do not keep the films from having contemporary relevance and from addressing themes of universal importance. Amy Taubin’s final analysis of her evolving, personal reaction to The Headless Woman over the course of several viewings is illustrative of the effect the film aims to have:

If, however, we resist Martel’s invitation to identify, it is not simply because Vero is an unlikeable character or that we are ignorant of Argentine society. Rather, it is that we are all, to one degree or another, headless women. I would not leave a dog or a child to die alone in the road, but the suffering I turn my back on every day is beyond measure. 

The Headless Woman is Martel’s “political movie.” The film bracingly lays bare the mechanisms by which the rich exercise their political power. And yet, there is such grounding on the specifics of daily living as perceived subjectively that the film is no less personal and intimate than The Swamp and The Holy Girl. The Salta trilogy ends with a film that reasserts the need to acknowledge the full humanity of everyone and to take responsibility for our actions and omissions.
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Chapter II


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11Ibid.


Chapter III


9http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=foreign.htm


11www.listal.com/list/allain-resnais-underrated-american-films


16Ibid, 143-144.

17Emma Wilson, Alain Resnais (Manchester University Press, 2006), 76-77.

18Ibid, 71.


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22Antonioni held shots longer than necessary and devised elaborate camera maneuvers to lengthen them whereas Resnais typically incorporated montages or sequences with fast editing, like this one.

24 Emma Wilson, Alain Resnais (Manchester University Press, 2006), 83.

25 James Monaco, Alain Resnais (Oxford University Press, 1979), 70.

Chapter IV


2 Peter Brunette, Michael Haneke (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 8.


4 www.miamiherald.typepad.com/reeling/2008/03/funny-games-red.html


9 Peter Brunette, Michael Haneke (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 42.

Chapter V


5Deuteronomy 5:9-10

16“Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.” (Deuteronomy 24)

Chapter V

1Kent Jones, “In the Thick of It”, *Film Comment*, Volume 41, Issue 2 (March/April 2005), 22.


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13 Amy Taubin, “Identification of a Woman”, *Film Comment* (July-August 2009), 21-22.

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