

Interrogating Problems of Coherence in Narrative Film

How does the intricacy of a film's formal organisation affect a film's intelligibility? Can a film's baffling formal organisation—rather than merely obstructing the film's capacity to make sense—actually function as a mechanism that nourishes and expands this capacity? The present chapter will initially draw on V. F. Perkins' work because it is the main work in film studies that foregrounds and thematises the relation between coherence and formal intricacy.

From his book *Film as Film* (1972, reprinted 1993) to many of his articles on specific films (1982a, b, 2000, 2005 characteristically), Perkins has repeatedly raised the question on how we can comprehend and, in fact, *assess* the coherent function of intricate formal devices within a film. The first criterion Perkins offers us refers to the 'credibility' of a film's dramatic action (the solidity of the dramatic illusion, as it were) and the second refers to the workings of a film's components as a 'synthesis' (their interaction and unity). This chapter attempts to explain the workings of credibility and synthesis—as well as the extent to which these two are interrelated—through the close analysis of moments drawn from more or less classically organised films (examined by Perkins and others).

The chapter ultimately shows that certain stylistic devices, despite the fact that they are not strictly 'credible' (because they unsettle the solidity of a film's dramatic illusion), still manage to matter in certain ways in relation to the film's context (in a more flexible sense of Perkins' 'synthetic' understanding). In this way, the chapter observes that it is the

significance (and the context) of such devices that contributes to our understanding of their coherent function. Although such devices may sometimes not remain embedded in the film's action (see style-subject integration), their significance and context still constitute integral aspects of their intelligibility.

To further explore the connection between significance, context and intelligibility, this chapter ends by examining George Wilson's analyses of classical films whose style becomes intelligible only if we observe the oblique contextual shifts in the presentation of the action. As Wilson notes, these gestalt-like shifts in the films' visual organisation undermine the linear intelligibility of the films' action and are, therefore, essential if we want to grasp the wider significance of the films' style (see Wilson's analysis of Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937) under the light of his concept of 'unreliable' narration).

V.F. PERKINS: FROM CREDIBILITY TO SYNTHESIS

According to Perkins, any aspect of a film's form is to be appreciated, primarily, in terms of its contribution to the credibility of the film's fictional world. By credibility Perkins does not refer to some principle of verisimilitude or realistic authenticity, that is, to some principle of correspondence between the workings of the film's fictional world and the workings of the actual world outside the film.¹ He rather refers to the 'inner consistency' of the film's fictional world, the internal 'order' and 'logic' that manages to hold the 'reality' of this world together (1993, pp. 121–122). In other words, Perkins' criterion of credibility arises as a principle immanent to a film. As Perkins remarks:

The most 'realistic' films are the ones which convey the most complete illusion ... There is no actuality against which we can check the images ... But the image[s] must be credibly *derived* [my emphasis] from the created world in order to maintain its reality. (1993, p. 121)

But how does a film exactly manage to 'maintain' its reality when it comes to the use of peculiar, elaborate or puzzling formal devices that could unsettle or disrupt the seamless workings of this reality? In other words, how does the use of such devices by a film preserve the film's credibility? Perkins analyses the use of red colour in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Red Desert* (1964) as a paradigmatic instance of a



Fig. 2.1 *Red Desert* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964). Drawn from *Red Desert*, BFI 2008, Catalogue No. BFIVD742

peculiar formal device that comes forth as incredible. As Perkins remarks, ‘we have reasons to question’ the credibility of the use of red in the film because this use encourages our ‘purely cerebral recognition’ (1993, p. 85). More specifically, he writes:

In Antonioni’s *Red Desert*, red is used to represent the threat which the heroine [Gulianna (Monica Vitti)] fears from an alienated, hostile and disintegrating world. Towards the end of the film, the heroine is made love to while on the verge of a complete mental collapse ... From shot to shot the bedpost becomes an ever more threateningly glaring red. We observe that colour is being used to create an effect. Intellectually we can identify the effect required. But of the effect itself we feel no symptom. We are so busy *noticing* that we respond rather to our awareness of the device than to the state of mind it sets out to evoke. (1993, p. 85, see also Fig. 2.1)

Perkins suggests that the use of red is incredible because of the excessive attention that the device draws to itself. This excessive attention seems to be, according to Perkins, the product of a disproportional relation between the effect of the device, on the one hand, and the experience (‘the state of mind’) that the device ‘sets out to evoke’, on the

other. Since this experience actually constitutes our understanding of the meaning of the device, we could initially say that, for Perkins, the credibility of a device is measured by the proportionality or, rather, the *balance* between the effect of the device and the device's meaning.²

Now, one could argue that Perkins' requirement of a device's credibility limits our understanding of the workings of the device. Film critic Robin Wood, for example, has argued that, even though the presence of the red colour in *Red Desert* is felt as somehow obtrusive, this obtrusiveness can be partly understood as a stylistic convention of 'art' cinema. According to this stylistic convention, Wood observes, the attention that the red colour draws to itself can be perceived as signalling the director's subjectivity, as this imbues the film and as this becomes expressively aligned with the protagonist's subjectivity (Wood 1976, pp. 34–35). By referring to the film's capacity to signal the director's subjectivity, Wood refers to the capacity of the film's style to expose or, rather, foreground the director's 'touch', as it were, that is, the director's intervention on the filmed material. According to Wood, the convention of foregrounding the director's touch constitutes a usual aspect of art cinema, a kind of cinema (mostly European) that tends to highlight the fact that it constitutes art as a form of personal expression, that is, as a form of expression of the director/artist (1976, pp. 35–42).

This may be so but, for Perkins, merely the function of a stylistic convention would not suffice to justify the failure of a device's credibility. When 'the director's guiding hand' is 'too heavy', then 'the spectator's belief in the action will decrease or disappear', he writes (1993, p. 77). I will come back to Perkins' appreciation of the obviousness of the 'director's hand' later on, when I will examine a moment from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). For now, though, I would like to note that the mere fact that the use of red in *Red Desert* belongs to a stylistic convention may indeed attribute to the device a certain kind of intelligibility (see Wood's interpretation just above), but this kind of intelligibility would have to be considered, according to Perkins, more 'attached to' and less 'contained in' the *specific* film that uses the device. Perkins uses the terms 'attached to' and 'contained in' (1993, p. 117) in order to demarcate the origin of a device's intelligibility, that is, the context from which a device derives its meaning. Since the meaning of the red colour in *Red Desert* (partly) derives from the convention of a certain stylistic tradition, this meaning is (partly) independent from the internal logic of the film that uses the device. But since the credibility of

a device depends exactly on this internal logic, the quest for the internal logic should not be abandoned.

Perkins recognises that a film 'cannot be both absolutely self-contained and meaningful', since it needs to draw on meanings external to it, which he calls 'given' meanings [Perkins refers to general 'symbolic' meanings, like the general symbolic connotations of an image of the sea, for example, as instances of given meanings (1993, p. 117)]. Nevertheless, as Perkins further suggests, if a film just 'asserts' these meanings, without tightly and precisely integrating them with the workings of the action they refer to, it will allow them to appear both as 'blatant and unclear', like 'slogans' or 'over-amplified noises' coming from a 'faulty loudspeaker' (1993, p. 119). The particular way these meanings are presented, thus, challenges their credible function.

Let us attempt to further unpack this notion of credibility. As noted above, according to Perkins, the images of a film must 'credibly be derived from the created world in order to maintain its reality' (1993, p. 121). But what does this formulation exactly suggest? We could say that what appears to become of primary importance for Perkins' notion of credibility is the way in which the presentation of a film's world relates to the workings of this world. For Perkins, this relation has to be especially intimate. He qualifies this relation by observing that a film image 'must be made to act both as recording, to show us what happens, and as expressive device, to heighten the effect and the significance of what we see' (1993, p. 78). In other words, a film image has to simultaneously depict an action and convey its significance. It should be formed in such a way as to embody, as to incorporate, the significance of the action it presents. So, how does this become possible?

If we go back to the example from *Red Desert*, we can say that the significance of the red colour is not exactly incorporated in the scene of the protagonists' lovemaking for the following reason. The film, apart from pointing to the general significance of red as an expression of the heroine's disturbed, neurotic psyche, does not provide us with a more concrete justification of the physical presence of a red bedpost during the scene. Although red as a colour is frequently used throughout the film, accompanying various activities of Gulianna, the function of red in each specific context of action remains vague and even obscure. For example, the walls of the boathouse in which Gulianna hangs out with some of her friends are also painted red. Similarly, the redness of the bedpost is not sufficiently and precisely explained by the context of the scene of the

lovemaking. In a way, we get the sense that the bedpost just happens to be red. We could, thus, say that the significance of the red bedpost does not appear to be intrinsically related to or, rather, embedded in the content of the scene.

It is in this way, according to Perkins' account of the film, that the image of the red bedpost, rather than coming forth seamlessly as an integral part of the film's action, assumed a quite separate status. By being perceived more as a device designed to create a certain expressive effect, it heightened our awareness of the director's touch or, rather, our awareness of the director's 'control'³ over the presentation of the film's action. By heightening this awareness, it introduced a rift between the presentation of the film's action and our understanding of this action and, thus, ultimately disrupted the credibility of the film.

However, Perkins, in *Film as Film*, does provide us with examples of films that illustrate how the image of a formal device, despite suggesting the director's control over a film's action, can still remain credibly integrated with the content of the depicted action. A characteristic moment Perkins analyses is the use of lighting during the 'chicken run' scene in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Perkins writes:

The hero [Jim (James Dean)] is challenged to a chicken run by the leader of a delinquent gang. The chicken run is a trial of nerves in which the contestants drive two cars at top speed over the edge of a cliff—the first to jump before reaching the edge being declared as 'chicken'. The lighting in this scene stresses the self-enclosed, artificial, excitements of the game. The use of spot—and flood—lights helps to give the scene a feeling of theatre and draws attention to the deliberation with which the event is stage-managed, so that we see it as something very close to a tribal rite, at once gratuitous and intense. The lighting effect is essential to the feeling and significance of the scene, as a channelling of our response, so that we see the events 'in the same light' as the director. But it is not ... obviously controlled from behind the camera. The illumination is traced to a credible source: the headlamps of the cars which other gang members, spectators have drawn up along the sides of the course. Indeed, Ray is able to profit from the necessity of motivating his spotlights: the ritual nature of the action is emphasised by the manner in which, at word of command, all the headlights are directed to the arena. To make the desirable look unavoidable, to take what is available and make it meaningful, that is a large part of the great director's secret. (1993, p. 84, see also Fig. 2.2)



Fig. 2.2 *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955). Drawn from *Rebel Without a Cause*, Warner Home Video 2009, Catalogue No. Z114069

As Perkins' account suggests, the use of lighting in this scene does not become disruptive of the scene's credibility because the meaning of the device is firmly contained, ingrained rather, into the workings of the scene's action. Despite being used to create an 'effect', the lighting here does not stand out as an overt directorial touch, but it is rather motivated by the particularity of the scene's action. Thus, our understanding of the function of the device merges with our understanding of the action. The function of the device is effective not because it is prominent but because it is fitting. Because the attention the device draws to itself is crucial to highlighting the artificial nature of what is going on in the scene, the significance of the device emerges as inextricably bound with the meaning of the scene.

For Perkins, the notion of a film's credibility is ultimately posed in terms of a fusion between the phenomenal and the meaningful. In order to achieve this fusion, a film has to use its formal devices in such a way as to make them contribute—as precisely as possible—to the meaning of the action they portray. The term 'contribute' here is key in order for us to underline that the lighting device in the chicken run scene from *Rebel Without a Cause* cannot be considered *in isolation*, but rather derives its significance from its participation in the meaningful configuration of the

scene. In other words, the function of the lighting is necessarily understood in relation to the content of this scene.

The idea of this relationality has a fundamental place in Perkins' thought throughout *Film as Film*. Perkins suggests that, if we try to understand a moment in a film (i.e. a scene or sequence) through the relations of the elements contained in it, we do not only become able to assess the credibility of the formal devices used at this moment (as we did above) but we also become able to enrich the way we make sense of the moment. Even if a moment does not signal its significance through the use of an overtly symbolic device (i.e. like the red colour in *Red Desert*), the moment will ultimately reveal its significance, if we pay attention to it as a synthesis of elements interacting with each other (1993, p. 131). More specifically, if we respond to a moment's style as a kind of synthetic form, Perkins suggests, we will be able to extend our understanding of the moment.

In *Film as Film*, Perkins analyses a short scene from Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones* (1954) that exemplifies how this becomes possible. I will present here Perkins' analysis of this scene in order to delineate Perkins' synthetic approach to film, as this focuses on certain local aspects of a film's style.

The scene from *Carmen Jones* that Perkins considers consists of just two shots during which the soldier, Joe (Harry Belafonte), drives his jeep down a country road, with his prisoner, Carmen (Dorothy Dandridge), beside him. Joe has been ordered to deliver Carmen to the authorities in a nearby town. The first shot of the scene registers Carmen and Joe frontally (from outside the jeep's windscreen), showing them sitting side by side. Carmen makes an advance to Joe, moving towards him and inviting him—through her singing—to join her at that 'café on the corner'. As Joe does not respond to her advances, she moves to the back seat, and the film, in a second shot, registers both Carmen and Joe from the side of the jeep (the camera moving parallel to the car's movement).

'In synopsis', Perkins observes, the scene portrays 'a rather familiar situation: brassy dame makes unsuccessful play for disapproving male' (1993, p. 81). But, as Perkins suggests, if we attend to the style of the scene as a synthesis of elements interacting with each other, we will be able to appreciate that this style is productive of a plenitude of meanings that unfold and enhance the dramatic function of the scene. More specifically, Perkins pays particular attention to the relation between the presence of the characters and the composition of the shots, as well as to the relation between the different angles of the shots. He describes the scene as follows:

A metal strut at the centre of the windscreen divides the image [of the first shot] so as to isolate and confine each character. But Carmen's movements shatter the rigid symmetry of the image. First she wriggles to Joe's side of the jeep, thrusting herself across the barrier into his cage. Then, her advances rejected, she transfers to the back seat to gain greater freedom of movement in a less restricted space. Preminger stresses the significance of her movement by changing the camera's viewpoint and making the image share in Carmen's liberation. The image achieves a new openness now that the action is seen from alongside the jeep, with the frame of the windscreen no longer enclosing our view. The fresh angle conveys also a much stronger feeling of movement since it brings into play what the previous shot had suppressed, the background scenery ... The first shot began as a graphic expression of Joe's personality, showing us the world as he wishes to see it—a world of order and stability. [In the second shot] ... we are offered a picture of her [Carmen's] world, in direct contradiction to the previous image. This world is open, vigorous, fluid. (1993, p. 80)

Through the developing contrasts (i.e. the contrast between Carmen's unrestrained movement and Joe's fixity, as well as the contrast between the sense of the second shot's mobility and the initially rigid composition of the first shot), the components of the scene come together in a dynamic cooperation. Through this cooperation, what *prima facie* appears as a straightforward rendition of the action is discreetly transformed into an eloquent image able to 'extend our awareness of the characters and of the ways of life they represent' (in Perkins' terms, 1993, p. 81). Thus, through the synthetic form of the scene's style, the film manages to evoke possibilities of the action that would not have emerged had we only paid attention to those parts of meaning that are present in a summary-like approach to the scene.

Paying attention to the synthetic aspects of a film's form will become an important aspect of this book's critical method. And this attention will not only allow the book to observe how a film's synthetic *style* can contribute to the construction of dramatic significance (as it does here). Crucially, it will also allow the book to understand how the synthetic construction of dramatic significance *per se*, can contribute to a film's intelligibility. By gradually moving away from (strict, classical) stylistic integration, as the basic criterion of a film's synthetic function, the book will also begin to focus on the organisation of dramatic significance, as a broader aspect of a film's synthesis (see mainly the films in Part II). It is in this way that synthesis will emerge more clearly as a criterion of

assessing the organisation of a film's dramatic logic, and not only as a criterion of assessing the organisation of a film's style. Stylistic and dramatic organisation, although always remaining intertwined as aspects of a film, will be dissociated as critical concepts in order to allow for an analysis of their complicated relation in the films that follow (Part II). For now, however, we first need to examine some more important ramifications of Perkins' understanding of synthesis as stylistic integration.

Letter from an Unknown Woman: Integrating Stylistic Difference

Apart from enriching our understanding of a particular moment, Perkins' synthetic approach to film style allows us to investigate the presence of meaningful relationships between stylistic elements throughout a film as a whole. Perkins prompts us to 'comprehend the nature and assess the quality of the created relationships' by paying attention 'to the whole content of a shot, sequence or film' (1993, pp. 79, 118). He also observes that 'the extent to which a film manages to reward such complete attention is an index of a film's achievement' (1993, p. 79). But what exactly does Perkins' 'complete attention' entail, and how does a film manage to 'reward' it?

Perkins provides an answer to these questions in his article on Max Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), (1982a, b, pp. 61–72). In this article, he tries to show that the more developed and pervasive the relationships among the various aspects of a film's stylistic composition are, the more unified a film's total visual organisation can be said to be. In order to examine the degree to which a film can be understood as a kind of synthetic stylistic form, Perkins explores the mechanisms through which the atypical style of a sequence from *Letter from an Unknown Woman* manages to become intelligible in relation to the style of the rest of the film.

The sequence Perkins discusses shows the protagonist, Lisa (Joan Fontaine), staying in the town of Linz, after having left Vienna, where she secretly fell in love with the musician Stefan (Louis Jourdan). Lisa flees Vienna shattered after having furtively seen Stefan courting another woman. At Linz, she is introduced to a young Lieutenant Leopold (John Good) who asks her to marry him. The proposal has been arranged by both Lisa's and Leopold's parents.

Before discussing the sequence's style, Perkins points out that the presence of the sequence poses a significant challenge to the workings of

the film's dramatic structure. Although the whole film revolves around Lisa's voice-over recounting moments of longed for, fulfilled or suspended intimacy *with* Stefan, the Linz sequence, as Perkins suggests, breaks with this pattern (1982a, b, p. 62). In other words, although the film's narrative is constructed around Stefan's presence (Lisa's voice-over also asserts that her life can be 'measured' by her moments together with Stefan), the Linz episode is defined by his absence.

This discrepancy between the Linz sequence and the rest of the film calls for an interrogation of the coherent placement of the sequence within the film. Since the workings of the sequence cannot be immediately related to the workings of the film's general dramatic structure, the insertion of the sequence amounts to an increase in the film's complexity that has to be somehow accounted for. One has to be reminded at this point that, according to Perkins' synthetic understanding, any aspect of a film cannot be considered significant in itself, but should rather be considered as deriving its significance from its relation to other aspects of the film. Thus, the absence of Stefan from Linz has to be justified as a lack or, rather, as a sense of presence missing from Lisa's life.

As Perkins argues, it is exactly this absence of Stefan from Lisa's life that can be apprehended through the sequence's style. The stylistic strategies employed by the film during the Linz sequence deviate from the film's predominant stylistic strategies, in order to convey 'the distinct character' of the sequence and to 'evoke Lisa's sense of the absolute separateness of her existence without Stefan' (1982a, b, p. 63).

In order to evoke the difference between Lisa's life in Linz and Lisa's life in Vienna, the film initially portrays Linz as a 'non-Vienna', Perkins observes (1982a, b, p. 65). Linz is seen as an exterior and public setting 'with none of the delicate (and delicately erotic) play between public and private spaces that characterises Vienna' (1982a, b, p. 63). It is 'an entirely daylight world and a summer world', contrasted to Vienna, which is 'mainly nocturnal' (1982a, b, p. 63).

But the distinctness of the sequence is not exhausted in these general contrasts. It becomes more intricate and multifaceted, being worked through various other aspects of the sequence's composition. As Perkins suggests, for example, the presentation of Lisa's face during the Linz episode is very different from its presentation during the Vienna sequences. During the Vienna sequences, Lisa's face radiates, shines—as it were—standing out from and being contrasted to the surrounding nocturnal environment. However, during the Linz episode, this contrast is suppressed, as

Lisa is dressed in white and as the film allows the sun to cast light evenly across the figures and the objects around Lisa (1982a, b, p. 65).

And finally the differentiation of the Linz sequence becomes even more thorough. As Perkins observes, there is a contrasting relation between two patterns of staging Lisa. In Vienna, Lisa usually ‘detaches herself from society, and hastens to an isolated spot where, as a silent, still and solitary figure, she can wait for Stefan’s approach’ (1982a, b, p. 63). In Linz, however, Lisa’s presence is more integrated with the surrounding social environment. The meeting with Leopold ‘is presided over by parents and society’ and ‘its movement is into, rather than away from, the flow of surrounding life’ (1982a, b, p. 64) Lisa ‘is conducted to the appointed place, flanked by her parents, at a regulated pace’ (1982a, b, p. 64) and, as soon as she meets Leopold, the camera follows them both in a tracking shot, as they arrive in the town square, mingling with the crowd that moves into the cathedral (1982a, b, pp. 64–65).

Since the differences between Linz and Vienna become manifest simultaneously at the planes of setting, lighting, staging, character appearance and character behaviour, we could say that the film’s style presents these differences in a manner that is both dense and elaborate. As the contrasts between Linz and Vienna are forged into various dimensions of the film’s style, the interrelation between the different ways of portraying Lisa (and Lisa’s life) is deepened and refined. Perkins’ analyses capture exactly the fine-grained character of this interrelation. Through Perkins’ analyses, the film is shown not to be limited to the presentation of a merely ‘diagrammatic’⁴ opposition between Linz and Vienna, but it is rather shown to hone in very closely on the details that mould this opposition. It is because of the film’s elaboration of these details that the Linz and the Vienna patterns become tightly knit together. Because of the high degree of their relatedness and the extent of their interaction, these patterns are interwoven in such a way as to *sustain* the film’s unity, despite the fact that they are stylistically juxtaposed to one another.

Thus, although the film’s unity is *prima facie* put at stake by the aspect of stylistic complexity introduced by the Linz sequence, the film’s synthetic function manages to temper and, ultimately, integrate this aspect of complexity. One could say that the achievement of the film’s synthesis lies exactly in the fact that it manages to unify the film by *internalising* the aspect of complexity introduced by the Linz sequence. Let me explain this process a bit further.

I would first like to note that, when it comes to assessing the relationship between a film's 'unity' and a film's 'complexity', the function of the latter is usually considered as being set over against the function of the former. The relationship between the workings of these two critical concepts has been examined by philosopher Monroe Beardsley in his work, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1958, reprinted 1981). In this work, Beardsley has systematically tried to shed light on the language of art criticism, setting out to clarify the meaning of concepts used by art critics. As Beardsley observes in his chapter on 'Artistic Form', the concepts of unity and complexity frequently compete with each other, as it were (1981, p. 208). An artwork's unity is understood as being increased by the 'similarities' of the parts of the artwork, whereas an artwork's complexity is understood as being increased by the 'differences' of its parts (as well as by 'the increase of the parts' per se) (1981, pp. 195, 205).

Now, this general understanding of the two critical concepts does not quite capture our final account of their relation in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. As Perkins shows, although the presence of the Linz sequence adds a 'difference' to the film, the film ultimately manages to maintain its unity, by *incorporating* this difference within a coherent stylistic form.

So, unity and complexity can actually cooperate with each other through the function of this incorporation (or, 'internalisation', as I mentioned above). In order to illuminate this function, we can turn to another useful conceptual distinction that Beardsley provides us with. He distinguishes between an artwork's 'extensional' and 'internal' complexity (1981, p. 253). Whereas the first kind of complexity refers to the quantity of an artwork's discernible parts, as well as to the range and scope of its content (i.e. 'the number of characters and events', 'the range of human experience encompassed' or 'the spatial and temporal scope of the action') (1981, p. 253), the second kind of complexity refers to qualities of the artwork's form that derive from the artwork's careful organisation (i.e. 'subtlety of discrimination', 'sharpness of detail' or 'precision of meaning') (1981, p. 253). It is exactly the function of the second kind of complexity that Perkins praises in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and that comes forth as an achievement of the film's synthetic style.

*Letter from an Unknown Woman: Stretching
the Tensions Even Further*

From the analysis above, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is a film that remains unified because its prima facie discrepant stylistic aspects finally turn out to be intimately related to each another, and are very closely and carefully woven together. We could thus say that it is through the high degree of its synthesis or, rather, the tightness of its relationality that the film manages to transform its tensions into elements that enhance its internal organisation.

The tensions characterising the film are not exhausted in the apparent stylistic inconsistencies just examined, however. In a later article on the same film, 'Same Tune Again!-Repetition and Framing in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*' (2000, pp. 40–48), Perkins remarks that these tensions become more radical. More specifically, they touch upon the fundamental logic of the relationship between the narration of Lisa's letter (that is, Lisa's voice-over) and the flashbacks that this narration accompanies. Perkins observes that the film 'systematically displays a mismatch between conflicting narrative assumptions' (2000, p. 41), because its flashbacks systematically depict incidents from which Lisa was absent or to which Lisa was oblivious. This 'impossible continuity' (2000, p. 43) between the letter's narration and the content of the flashbacks becomes an aspect of apparent incoherence that is more extreme and more drastic than the stylistic discrepancy of the Linz sequence. As a kind of empirical and logical impossibility, this impossible continuity makes a claim upon our general understanding of rational plausibility and, consequently, seems to crucially upset the film's basic intelligibility: if it is not to be considered simply as a flaw, as a defect of the film, how are we to understand its function?

According to Perkins, the most characteristic manifestation of this impossibility is an instance of the voice-over that betrays Lisa's awareness of a conversation between her employer Madame Spitzer (Sonja Bryden) and an officer, in the clothing store in Vienna where Lisa works as a model. As Perkins shows, the film presents the conversation in a manner that stresses its furtive and private nature: the camera follows the officer as he moves away from his wife and talks intimately to Madame Spitzer, who is seated at her desk, at the other side of the railing at the level below Lisa's stage. Madame Spitzer tells him that—unfortunately for him—'Lisa is not like that ... She is not like the others ... Every

evening, as soon as the shutters are closed, off she goes, straight home'. And although Madame Spitzer utters these words away from Lisa, Lisa's voice-over seems to pick them up in the next scene, commenting: 'Madame Spitzer spoke the truth. I was not like the others'.

As Perkins notes, Lisa's voice-over response disturbs our understanding, prompting us to interrogate the context of Lisa's utterance. But there is no context, there are no real coordinates, no spatio-temporal parameters that the film provides us with. Lisa's words are manifestly suspended within a realm of 'fictionality' (in Perkins' terms, 2000, p. 42) that remains bracketed from the workings of the actual world. By foregrounding its own fictionality, the film brings us back to the question of how a film can credibly sustain the function of device, which seems to overtly unsettle the seamlessness of its reality. The film, in other words, brings us back to the question of a device's credibility, a question that has been concerning Perkins throughout *Film as Film*.

As Perkins suggests, although the device does indeed pronounce its presence (given that Madame Spitzer's words were overtly withheld from Lisa), the film ultimately manages to integrate it, by subduing its effect (2000, pp. 42–43). Madame Spitzer and Lisa's words are linked by a simple dissolve through time, which brings forth a new action. The dissolve gives way to a shot of women departing from work (Madame Spitzer's store) and moving into the snowy evening. It is then when we hear Lisa's comment. In this way, the film, rather than forcibly alerting us to the impossibility of Lisa's response, allows her comment to be absorbed into a smooth progression of time. Rather than blatantly asserting the impossibility of the response, it allows it to become assimilated by the film's temporal continuity. Thus, as Perkins notes, the film 'ensures', through its 'pacing', that the effect of the device is not to 'explode the narrative into absurdity with a gag' but to 'subtly [my emphasis] position it beyond any real time and space'. 'Boldness is balanced with delicacy in the achievement of this impossible continuity', Perkins writes (2000, p. 43).

It is through the restraint and the balance of its formal design that the film manages to preserve the illusion of Lisa's 'impossible presence' (2000, p. 43). Once again, as was the case in *Film as Film*, the credible function of a peculiar device is not measured by any kind of correspondence of the device to our naturalistic understanding (i.e. how the actual world works), but it is rather measured by the fitting and, hence, persuasive presentation of the device.

The film, by refraining from any heavy-handed emphasis and by keeping Lisa's impossible presence built into the progression of its action, ultimately avoids the effect of a kind of artificiality that would be jolting and, hence, disruptive of its credibility. Perkins' analysis of the moment above from *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is based on the principles analysed in *Film as Film*, but also shows how these principles can be even applied to an example that overtly puts to the test the limits of our naturalistic understanding.

Thus, without falling into an 'impoverishing neatness', *Letter from an Unknown Woman* manages to arrive at 'order and comprehensibility' (in Perkins' terms, 2000, p. 41). By integrating the empirical and logical impossibility of Lisa's words, the film manages to sustain its own, autonomous, fictional logic. Since, as Perkins suggests, the main stake of the film is to consolidate our sense that 'there is no real world' (2000, p. 42) where Lisa's writing of the letter and Stefan's reading of it ever meet, the film uses the fictionality of the voice-over in order to establish a plane of suspended reality where Lisa's impossible presence relives Lisa's life as Stefan reads about it. The function of a film's fictionality will be further elaborated in this book as a more overt 'rhetoric' mechanism, through which a film organises its dramatic intelligibility (see, particularly the chapters on *Passion* and *The Thin Red Line*).

ESTABLISHING AND INTERROGATING THE REALITY OF THE FILM'S FICTIONAL WORLD

So, does our awareness of a peculiar formal device used by a film necessarily disrupt the reality of the film's fictional world?

It is through the absorption of the voice-over's peculiarity into the flow of the film's action that the film managed, according to Perkins, to sustain its credibility. But, what about peculiar devices that are not so firmly contained in the workings of a film's action? In what follows, I would like to examine a moment from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) that seems to expand Perkins' notion of credibility, while remaining consistent with its basic construal. More specifically, I would like to examine the camera movement during the opening of the film in order to explore how the presence of a peculiar formal device can both forge and maintain the reality of a film's fictional world *and* stand out from this reality.

The film opens with a long take of the camera moving head on towards an open window looking towards the rear side of an apartment building. The moment the frame of the shot coincides with the window frame, the film cuts, and the long take is picked up again, from apparently beyond the window frame. The camera tilts downwards and surveys the courtyard in a long shot. It then turns backwards, tilting towards the inside of the room where it begins its movement and recording in an extreme close up of the face of a man lying asleep just beside the window, with his back turned to it. After a couple of long takes recording the people waking up and moving around inside the apartments across the window, the camera turns to the inside of the room again, moves along the body of the sleeping man and focuses on a phrase written on a plaster wrapped around the man's leg: 'Here lie the broken bones of L. B. Jefferies' (James Stewart).

And as the camera keeps moving inside the room, it registers various objects surrounding the incapacitated Jefferies: a photographic camera lying on a table, pictures of a car crash hanging on the wall, a woman's cover picture and its photographic negative.

The basic function of the camera movement in the film's opening is to supply information about Jefferies, the character the film introduces, and, more specifically, information about Jefferies' situation. Stuck in the everyday life of an urban environment, Jefferies is most probably a photographer who, among other things, had been taking on risky tasks (see the photograph of the car crash), which he is now physically unable to pursue. By giving away these clues, the camera movement appears to suggest certain facts about Jefferies' situation, thus beginning to forge the reality of the film's fictional world.

Nevertheless, the function of the camera movement is not exhausted by the camera's capacity to suggest these facts. It goes rather further. Why does the camera initially move away from the inside of Jefferies' room if it is only to go back to it in order to reveal the character sleeping? In other words, what is the significance of this apparent deviation, this detour? And even if we could say (as we did) that the function of this detour is indeed to disclose the setting (the urban environment) that Jefferies finds himself in, wouldn't it hypothetically suffice for the film to introduce this setting just as a background shot that reveals Jefferies? The pressing question, in other words, is: in what way does the particular organisation of the moment matter?

When the camera begins to move from the inside of the room and towards the window, it seems to enact the power of looking at an invisible agency inside the room. This agency, though, rather than referring to a particular character, acquires a distinct status that is liberated from any subjective point of view. The camera's distinct status becomes characteristically evident when the camera, after having surveyed the view outside the window, tilts towards the window, revealing Jefferies sleeping. The character who could have been the agency looking out of the window is instead sleeping with his back turned to the window, and the camera is the one that *watches him* sleeping. This is a moment when the camera's act of watching declares the independence of the camera's presence. It is a moment when the initial indeterminacy regarding the agency of the viewing recedes in favour of the assertion of the camera's autonomy. The use of the device here is not delicate, as was the case with the peculiar voice-over in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, but rather appears to be more exclamatory. The sense of the camera's autonomy is reinforced by the cut that introduced the camera's surveillance of the space outside the window. This cut seemed to separate the act of the camera's surveillance from the act of viewing coming from inside the room. Through this formal arrangement, the film seems to display its fictional status.

Nevertheless, this display coexists with the film's concrete, descriptive function. The direction of the camera's surveillance (looking towards the opposite apartment building) is aligned with the direction of the initial viewing from the inside of the room. The momentary jolt of the cut is overcome by the directional alignment of the two initial shots of the film. So, the viewing of the camera, although disengaged from any particular agency, maintains an ambivalent status: it appears to both derive from the space of the room and remain independent from it.⁵ In this way, when it re-enters the room and reveals the objects surrounding Jefferies, the camera appears to both occupy the reality of the fictional world and remain separate from it. In other words, by recording the reality of the fictional world, the camera both discloses this reality and announces its constructedness, its artificiality.

The peculiarity of the camera movement is striking but it cannot be seen as obtrusive, as was the case with the red bedpost in *Red Desert*. Although the director's hand is pronounced here, the credibility of the film appears to be maintained because the effect of the autonomous camera movement is tied with the camera's descriptive function.

Later on in the book, I show that certain stylistic devices, despite gradually moving away from having a strictly descriptive function, are still able to work intelligibly and precisely in the context of the films in which they appear. I analyse how exactly such devices, despite not being strictly ‘credible’ (in Perkins’ terms), still manage to function coherently, without lapsing into a problem similar to the one *Red Desert* exhibited.

V.F. PERKINS AND G. WILSON: DEVELOPING PATTERNS OF INTELLIGIBILITY

The issue of whether a stylistic device manages to maintain or disrupt the solidity of a film’s fictional world brings to the fore, once again, the more general question of how the particular presentation of a film’s fictional world affects our perception of this world. Now, this question not only arises when we seek to assess the credibility of a peculiar formal device, but it also crucially arises when we seek to figure out how a certain peculiarity in the presentation of a film’s fictional world affects the intelligibility of this world as a whole. For example, it was the peculiarity of the Linz sequence’s style in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* that allowed us to re-examine our understanding of the film as a whole and that activated our effort to make sense of the film in a way that could account for the coherent placement of the Linz sequence. It was the break in the consistency of the film’s style that allowed us to reappraise and expand the intelligibility of the film by making us understand the absence of Stefan from Linz as a lack motivating the ‘distinct’ character of the episode (as Perkins suggested).

In order to discover this expanded intelligibility of the film, we resorted to our synthetic understanding. It was through this kind of understanding that we managed to appreciate how the film’s style, through the tightness of its relationality, managed to ultimately internalise the peculiarity introduced by the Linz sequence, integrating the tension(s) between this sequence and the rest of the film.

In what follows, I will examine films that do not integrate their tensions as tightly as *Letter from an Unknown Woman* does. The films that are going to be examined allow their tensions to acquire a considerable weight that renders the intelligibility of the films quite ambivalent. Instead of harmonising their divergent or conflicting aspects into a solidly unified whole, these films form certain *patterns* that give way to

diverse strands of intelligibility. These patterns prompt us to find different ways in which the films cohere, thus inviting our shifting and variable understanding. Our synthetic understanding will still be at work but it will be geared towards our effort to discern the different ways in which the examined films cohere.

The films I will analyse are *You Only Live Once* by Fritz Lang (1937) and *Bigger Than Life* by Nicholas Ray (1956). My analysis will draw on the work of George Wilson, a philosopher and film theorist, who has shown exactly how these two films use their visual organisation to orient and reorient our understanding towards different directions. In the case of *You Only Live Once*, I will show how the film, according to Wilson, creates a pattern that manages to destabilise the central line of the film's intelligibility. In the case of *Bigger Than Life*, I will show how the film, according to Wilson again, creates a pattern that allows us to interrogate an essential ambiguity at the core of the dramatic action.

Before proceeding to my analysis, I would like to examine a film example from Perkins' work that will allow us to illuminate how a film's capacity to form a pattern contributes to our understanding of the film. The example is Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950).

The film revolves around the life of Dix Steele (Humphrey Bogart), a Hollywood screenwriter with an impulsive and sometimes explosive temper, who has been professionally inactive for a long while but who finally finds work again. Unfortunately, at the time Dix is offered a chance to work again, he also becomes the suspect of a murder, as a girl who offers to discuss the plot of a book with him is found dead after the evening she spends with him. Although Dix is exculpated in the end, the suspicion of the murder burdens Dix throughout the film and ultimately does not allow his girlfriend Laurel (Gloria Grahame) to trust him and marry him, despite being in love with him. Dix's behaviour remains ambiguous throughout the film, since Dix appears to be both kind and aggressive, not only towards Laurel but also generally towards the people surrounding him. In a characteristic phrase that encapsulates the basic drama of the film, Perkins writes that 'neither hero nor heroine is sure whether the man's embrace is protective and loving or threatening, murderous' (1982a, b, p. 1144).

Since what seems to be dramatically at stake in the film is the uncertain understanding of human behaviour, Perkins wonders how the film can introduce us to this kind of uncertainty. In other words, the film has to find a way to establish the unstable legibility of human behaviour.

In a Lonely Place thus begins with three encounters (between Dix and other characters) that revolve around three different manifestations of the same type of behaviour. More specifically, as Perkins suggests, each of the encounters presents a different kind of ‘grasping’ (1982a, b, p. 1144). By creating a pattern around grasping, the film ‘dramatises the ambiguity of gesture’ and allows us to interrogate the variable ways in which we can read the latter. Each time, a character approaches another character from behind and grasps his shoulders with both hands. The first time—when a successful director grasps Dix’s shoulders outside the nightclub—the grasping is a kind of ‘perfunctory and patronising greeting whose pretense of warmth is a bare cover for the assertion of superiority’, Perkins writes. The second time—when Dix grasps the shoulders of an old friend—‘it conveys intimacy and genuine regard’. Finally, the third time, ‘when a large-mouthed producer uses the shoulders of Dix himself as a rostrum from which to publicise his later triumph, it is seen as oppressive and openly slighting’ (1982a, b, p. 1144).

Through the repetition of the gesture of grasping and the variation of its meaning, our attention is directed towards a view of the action that becomes pertinent to the central dramatic stake of the film. Although the importance of the moments above is not highlighted in any way (as these moments appear very ordinary and are carried along in the dramatic flow of the film), the connection between them can organise and inform the way we experience the film, providing us with a way to access its intelligibility. Perkins’ example shows us how a film can reorient our viewing towards a pattern that is not immediately evident when we watch the film. Through the formation of this pattern, the film shapes the phenomenal and renders it revelatory, while *focalising* our viewing experience around specific areas of significance.

Now, in his work *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View* (1986), George Wilson draws on Perkins’ idea of observing how a pattern can organise significance. Instead of showing, though, how this organisation can contribute to our unified understanding of a film (as Perkins does above), Wilson emphasises how this organisation can diversify our understanding. In his examination of *You Only Live Once*, specifically, Wilson analyses how the film manages to arrange and rearrange the relation between its salient and its less salient aspects so as to prompt the audience to reconsider its assumptions about what is actually going on in the film. Before examining how this becomes possible, let me first delineate the dominant dramatic dynamic of the film.

You Only Live Once revolves around the life of Eddie Taylor (Henry Fonda), an ex-convict who is accused of a bank robbery, which he claims he was not involved in. The progression of the film as a whole construes Eddie as an innocent victim of circumstances, trying to find his way through life. Helped by his girlfriend Joan (Sylvia Sidney) and morally supported by his friend Father Dolan (William Gargan), the prison priest, Eddie manages to leave prison on probation and find a job as a truck driver. However, he is treated by his boss with disrespect because of his past prison time and, ultimately, is unfairly fired because of a minor fault. During that time, a bank robbery takes place and Eddie's initialled hat is found in the crime scene. Eddie, who has already married Joan and promised her that he is going to build a good life for them both, steadfastly maintains that he has been trapped, repeatedly proclaiming his innocence. The court, though, finds him guilty and sentences him to death.

Just before his sentence is carried out, Eddie tries to escape from prison. But, during the crucial time of his escape, Father Dolan learns that he has been given a last minute pardon. He rushes towards Eddie and informs him that the body of the guilty bank robber Monk (Walter De Palma) and the getaway vehicle with the stolen money have just been recovered from a lake. Unfortunately, the good news does not stop a—by now—distrustful, hurt and scared Eddie from shooting the priest in order to escape. At last, while driving with his wife towards the country borders, his wife is shot by the police that are after them. While carrying his wounded wife inside the woods, Eddie is also shot. Just before he dies, he stares towards the sky when a voice declares: 'You are free now Eddie ... Free'. After Eddie loses his loved ones, and as he is about to die, his sufferings seem to finally come to a halt within a tragic and redemptive vision.

Wilson argues that, although the conclusion of the film suggests that Eddie was wrongfully accused of the bank robbery, various aspects of the film do not allow this suggestion to be ultimately convincing. Wilson initially reminds us that the film presents the bank robbery scene in such a way as to make it impossible for the audience to see the robber. The film presents a sequence of actions leading to the robbery, but conceals the identity of the agent of these actions (i.e. the man preparing the robbery is wearing an oxygen mask covering half his head). When the submerged car is found with the body of Eddie's friend, Monk, inside, Monk is presumed to be the perpetrator of the robbery, but nothing excludes the possibility of Monk having had a partner during the crime, Wilson notes.

That is also because, during the bank robbery, a man wearing a gas mask bombards the street with grenades and clouds the scene, making it impossible to tell whether any other person is collaborating with the man we see (1986, pp. 19–20).

The film begins to play with our understanding of who perpetrated the crime. But, as Wilson suggests, the aim of the film is not just to create ‘certain effects of irony or suspense’ (1986, p. 19), in terms of this kind of information. The aim of the film is rather to interrogate the incompleteness and the partiality of visual perception *per se*.

In order to do this, the film resorts to a lateral strategy. Without upsetting the main progression of the action, the film subtly undermines the assumptions that the content of this action creates. More specifically, the film creates a specific framing pattern, according to which shots are framed in such a way as to momentarily lead the audience into making ‘a *mistake* [my emphasis] of perceptual judgment’ (1986, p. 18), a mistake that is subsequently corrected when the film reveals a wider context of the scene that is shot. Through this pattern of recontextualisation, the film investigates ‘the difficulty of seeing or seeing clearly’ (1986, p. 21) and creates areas of significance that reconfigure and readjust our understanding of the film. The scene in Eddie’s hotel room and the scene in the office of a newspaper during Eddie’s trial are the most characteristic examples.

In the first case, the scene opens with a tracking shot in close up that reveals a series of objects that the audience already identifies with Eddie. The camera records Eddie’s initialled hat and a picture of Joan, until it completes its movement and records a person lying on a bed. As Wilson observes, ‘because of the overall resemblance to Eddie and the associations with the objects’ (1986, p. 18), we initially think that this person is Eddie. However, the person is actually Eddie’s partner Monk, and we realise this as the film cuts to a shot of Eddie looking out of the window, and then, to a wider shot revealing the whole room and Eddie standing by the window.

In the second case, as Wilson observes, the scene opens with a close up of a newspaper whose headlines announce that Eddie has been found innocent. As the camera pans slowly to the left, it shows another front page announcing that the jury cannot reach a decision. Finally, as the film cuts to a wider shot, a third front page is revealed next to the other two, announcing that Eddie is guilty. The phone rings, the newspaper editor picks it up and, while listening silently, he picks out the ‘guilty’ front page (1986, p. 18).

The momentary conflation between Eddie and Monk and the apparently faulty emphasis on the ‘innocent’ front page reveal the film’s capacity to stress the slippery nature of visual perception. By attributing different levels of prominence to its visual content⁶ and by making room for the possibility of our *misreading* this content, the film calls for our malleable and pliant understanding. Given the lack of actual evidence exculpating Eddie, the film seems to be prompting us to rethink what it is that we see, asking us to take a moment to interrogate what we actually know about Eddie.

Crucially, the ambiguity of the visual configuration of the two instances above (in the hotel room and in the newsroom) is reinforced by the obscure rendition of the bank robbery sequence, during which we are not able to tell who the perpetrator of the robbery is. More specifically, as Wilson suggests, during this sequence, the film focuses on a blurry shot of a pair of eyes, *resembling* Eddie’s eyes, but does not subsequently reveal the person to whom these eyes really belong. The film also shows Eddie’s initialled hat lying next to the bank robber, but the face of the robber is still not revealed (Wilson 1986, p. 20). In these cases, too, we cannot be sure to trust our eyes because, as the visual pattern of the film suggests, what we see can be a mistake, which may be corrected later on (as when the film allowed us to mistake Monk for Eddie), or it can be, at least, one possibility situated within multiple other possibilities (as when the film revealed the two other newspaper headlines next to the one declaring Eddie innocent). The film keeps forging the pattern of mistaken or questionable inferences.

The uncertainty produced by this pattern makes us question who Eddie really is and what he has done, allowing us *not* to take for granted the predominant line of the film’s intelligibility. Although, overall, *You Only Live Once* goes to great lengths to portray Eddie as an innocent victim of the social and judicial system, the moments of misrecognition and uncertainty above prompt us to reconsider our trust in the *prima facie* appearance of the film’s action. And although the ending of the film, that is, the revelation of the guilty robber inside the car, seems to be a vibrant affirmation of the predominant portrayal of Eddie as an innocent man, we could say that instances such as the ones above manage to unsettle this affirmation, shifting the film’s meaning or, more accurately, the centre of the film’s intelligibility.

As Wilson observes:

There are narrative films in which central aspects of their significance bear only an oblique relationship to the forms of dramatic closure they employ ... That is, various factors that appear on the screen ... peripheral to the strict development of the basic tale may be assigned a weight in the narration in such a way that the chief issues raised by the drama come to be modified, displaced or otherwise reappraised ... When this counter-narrative weighting is apprehended, the whole gestalt⁷ of the film seems to shift ... It is quite probable that the subtly weighted patterns of visual content which ought to qualify or subvert the linear dynamics of plot will be experienced in a fragmentary way ... The problem for the viewer of such a film is to locate a 'centred position' from which the oblique strands of narrational strategy can come together in a configuration that reorganises his or her perception and comprehension of the fictional events. (1986, p. 10)

The aim of the film is to discreetly construct an 'unreliable' form of narration—as Wilson calls the film's strategy of opening up a gap in our inferences about what is going on in the film (1986, p. 40)—that can accommodate different perspectives on the film's action. The question of whether and how these different perspectives 'fit or fail to fit together' (1986, p. 40) undercuts the straightforward and monolithic intelligibility of the film, by increasing the ways in which we can understand the film.

I would finally like to examine the case of a film that also undercuts its straightforward intelligibility, but in a somewhat different way. As noted above, the film I will examine is *Bigger Than Life*.

In his article 'On Film Narrative and Narrative Meaning' (1999, pp. 221–238), Wilson shows that, during a critical moment—when the protagonist Ed (James Mason) is about to kill his son—*Bigger Than Life* becomes noticeably obscure and crucially disrupts our understanding. It is through this disruption, though, that the film manages to gather our focus on the issue of its intelligibility. And the question that is raised is: does the obscurity that we encounter merely constitute an obstacle to the film's intelligibility or can it also function as a potentially revelatory locus of significance that can make us re-examine the film as a whole?

Before analysing how Wilson's suggestions help us tackle this question, I will delineate how the film leads up to the moment in question.

Ed Avery (James Mason) is a seemingly happily married schoolteacher who is, nevertheless, under serious stress to meet the financial demands

of his family life. When he goes to the hospital struck by severe seizures of pain, he is diagnosed with a potentially fatal disease. Although having allowed for a connection between the stressful conditions of Ed's life and Ed's seizures, the film suddenly attributes the seizures to biological causes. Ed is submitted to cortisone treatment and, as a result of this treatment, his seizures stop, and he feels well and strong. While being heavily overdosed on cortisone, though, he starts growing delusions of intellectual and moral superiority, criticising the moral disintegration of contemporary life. In a culmination of these delusions, he declares that he has been told by God—as Abraham was told by God—to sacrifice his son. When he rushes off to kill his son, and while standing at the door of his bedroom, an unexpected paralysing seizure, resembling his earlier ones, overtakes him.

But what is it that caused Ed's last seizure? Since the cortisone has apparently treated his earlier seizures, why does Ed's condition seem to reappear—that is—*after* Ed has been shown to be cured from it by the cortisone? And if this seizure is not an instance of reappearance of his old condition, why does it have a similarly paralysing effect as before? The moment becomes increasingly intricate as it blurs the distinction between the physical and the mental causes of Ed's condition, making the film's initial ambiguity about the true causes of Ed's condition resurface in an arresting way.

The scene is likely to seem inscrutable, putting the film's internal consistency at stake. And it remains enigmatic until the end of the film, since there is nothing in the rest of the film to explain the attack of pain. As soon as Ed is taken to the hospital again, he recovers and becomes happily reunited with his family.

Nevertheless, as Wilson suggests, when we are faced with an apparent narrative anomaly, as the one above, we should take 'a wider look' at the film in order to find ways that could illuminate its meaning (1999, p. 229). What allows us to get this 'wider look' at the film in this case is the observation of a particular detail during the moment in question: Ed's attack seems to be induced by the fact that Ed's son stretches his hand towards Ed and presents him with a football. This football, as Wilson suggests, has acquired a 'loaded psychological significance' for Ed throughout the film (1999, p. 228). When the enfeebled Ed is about to go off to the hospital at the beginning of the film, he first takes a look at the ball. The ball has been sitting on the mantel, deflated and unused, as a weak reminder of Ed's past athletic accomplishments, his 'minor heroics' during high school football. Ed asks his son to bring a pump, and

they reinflate the ball, exactly like Ed himself is about to be ‘artificially reinflated’ by the cortisone therapy that will make him stronger. And after Ed’s therapy, he and his son repeatedly play with the ball, but now the ball seems to have become an ‘emblem’, a ‘grotesque counterpart’, of what Ed has become (1999, p. 228). By being overdosed with cortisone, Ed has been turned into a domineering and tyrannical father. The fact that his son points to him the object mirroring what he has become seems to make him finally collapse at the moment in question.

Although the scene of Ed’s last seizure remains ambiguously related to the scenes of Ed’s earlier seizures, Wilson’s analysis provides us with a nodal point (the presence of the football) through which we can access the scene’s intelligibility. By observing the modulations of this nodal point throughout the film, we have worked through the film and found a ‘surveyable pattern of explanatory connections’ (1999, p. 230) that can elucidate the meaning of the scene, Wilson suggests. The film does not actually provide us with an answer to the equivocation around the true cause of Ed’s last seizure (or around the true cause of the rest of the seizures, for that matter) but it does open up another route towards the understanding of Ed’s behaviour.

The fact that the film construes the particular equivocation as an aspect of its organisation and presentation allows us to make a more general observation in relation to the question of what we think we actually ‘know’ about a film. This question is initially raised when we attempt to make sense of a film. Frequently, we begin to answer it by making the distinction between what is somehow clearly ‘present’ and obviously ‘included’ in a film (and, therefore, in a way, immediately and certainly ‘known’), and what is simply ‘implied’ or just suggested by the film (and, therefore, not immediately and certainly ‘known’). This distinction has been conceptualised by David Bordwell as the difference between the ‘explicit’ and the ‘implicit’ meaning of a film.⁸

But, when it comes to the kind of meaning produced by the equivocation above, is this explicit or implicit? The distinction does not really seem viable, but rather artificial here: the function of an equivocation or a logical ambivalence, like the one found in *Bigger Than Life* (or in *You Only Live Once*, for that matter), is literally included in the film, rendering the ‘implication’ or suggestion concerning the causes of Ed’s seizures, actually present, as an element of the film’s formal expression (see the pattern of the football). This is also a basic point of Wilson (1999), who considers the football pattern in *Bigger Than Life* exactly as a means

through which the film makes overt what could otherwise be understood merely as the film's implicit meaning (1999, pp. 226–236).⁹

In this way, the question of what we know about a film does not seem to be productively approached through the explicit/implicit meaning distinction. This is important for this book's method, which intends to show that an equivocation or tension, like the one found in *Bigger Than Life* or *You Only Live Once*,¹⁰ rather than producing some kind of hazy implicit meaning (or obscuring some kind of explicit meaning), can simply be understood as the formal way through which a film can produce a new (present) meaning.

The equivocation of *Bigger Than Life* makes us wonder if the film could also be *seen as* an interrogation of the causes of Ed's seizures. This different 'seeing as' is an outcome of the film's form, as well as a source of a new kind of dramatic significance. It is exactly the capacity of the film's form to create and enhance dramatic significance that has been the basis of evaluating the success of film form, according to the classical conception of film coherence. And it is this capacity that this book is going to keep, as an essential methodological principle, for the exploration of more variegated and expansive forms of film coherence.

CONCLUSION

By drawing on the work of film aestheticians Victor F. Perkins and George Wilson, this chapter has attempted to show how various tensions and aspects of formal intricacy in a film can function as meaningful aspects of the film's organisation. Perkins' understanding of the credibility of a formal device allows us to assess the coherent function of peculiar formal devices in a film (i.e. the emphatic use of the red bedpost in *Red Desert* or the emphatic use of lights in *Rebel Without a Cause*), while his 'synthetic' approach to film form allows us not only to enhance our understanding of the coherence of film form (i.e. in the scene from *Carmen Jones*) but also—crucially—to test the coherent function of puzzling tensions within a film's organisation (i.e. in the case of the Linz sequence or Lisa's impossible presence in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*).

Perkins' synthetic understanding shows how these tensions, despite just increasing a film's complexity, can also be incorporated in a film's organisation through the organisation's tight relationality. This incorporation can be further understood in light of the work of aesthetician

Monroe Beardsley and, specifically, in light of his notion of ‘internal’ complexity.

Now, the chapter, after having examined films that manage to internalise their tensions through their tightly unified organisation, further proceeds by examining films that are not as tightly integrated (as Perkins suggests). By drawing on Wilson’s work, the chapter explores how these films, instead of harmonising their tensions, develop patterns of coherence that produce the films’ diversified and more malleable intelligibility (i.e. the pattern of visual shifts in *You Only Live Once* and the pattern of the football’s use in *Bigger Than Life*).

NOTES

1. For example, for Perkins, the unrealistic and unlikely character of the birds’ attack in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) does not obstruct the film’s credibility. Perkins (1993, pp. 121–122).
2. The particular moment from *Red Desert* is mentioned here simply as Perkins’ example of the incredible function of a formal device in film. As shown in this chapter and, characteristically, in Chap. 5 on Godard’s *Passion*, there are many of the devices used by the examined films that could be described as clearly noticeable, even conspicuous and, therefore, ‘incredible’, in Perkins’ terms (see, for example the portrait shots of Isabelle or the creation of the ‘tableaux vivants’ in the analysis of *Passion* in Chap. 5). Thus, I would like to clarify that the ‘credible’ or ‘incredible’ function of a device, in Perkins’ terms, does not serve as a nodal point or an ultimate criterion of this book’s understanding of what constitutes an even (idiosyncratically) coherent film. What does become more important here (and is derived from Perkins’ argument with regard to the credibility of a formal device) is something slightly different. It is the requirement that the workings of an—even conspicuous—formal device should avoid, as much as possible, a solely ‘formalistic’ understanding (that is, an understanding of the device as devoid of any specific significance related to the dramatic situations developed in a given film). Thus, what the book draws from Perkins’ analysis of credibility is the avoidance of an ‘excess’ of a device, as it were an *over* significance. It will become clear that, even in cases such as *Passion*—which *prima facie* lend themselves to a more formalistic understanding of their devices—there is still a kind of balanced relation between the workings of these devices and their significance, as described above. This relation is indeed frequently obscure, very dynamic (and different) in each examined film, but it does manage to avoid the formalistic reading just mentioned (for a more thorough

elaboration of the function of significance in the examined films, see the book's conclusion).

3. This is a term Perkins uses frequently (1993, pp. 84, 124, 128, for example).
4. A term Perkins uses in his work to capture a schematic, unrefined type of relationality (1993, p. 118).
5. For a further analysis of the ramifications of this double function of the camera throughout the film see Toles (2001, pp. 159–182). Toles draws on the double function of the camera in order to show how the film as a whole functions both straightforwardly as a simple murder mystery *and* as an allegory commenting on the dynamics of viewing and being viewed.
6. The creation of different levels of prominence of the visible (or rather the phenomenal more broadly) is construed by Karl Aschenbrenner as a crucial aspect of how artworks work and make sense. See Aschenbrenner (1985, pp. 13–15). Aschenbrenner highlights and analyses the significance of 'emergent' and 'recedent' features in artworks in general (the differentiation between figure and ground in a painting, for example), although the particular function of such features in *You Only Live Once* is to sabotage subtly the basic line of the film's intelligibility.
7. Wilson uses the term 'gestalt' in order to describe the film's form as a whole. The term derives from German, meaning 'shape' or 'form'. It has been used by a theory in psychology ('Gestalt theory') man perception to apprehend visual phenomena holistically and relationally, that is, to understand them as organised wholes, structures or patterns (as opposed to just regarding them as arrays of disconnected elements). In his work *Film as Art*, psychologist and art theorist Rudolf Arnheim has applied Gestalt theory principles to the study of film. One of the basic implications of the holistic, relational understanding of Gestalt theory is the principle of 'good continuation', that is, our propensity to fill in the gaps in order to make sense of a visual configuration that seems to be missing or, rather, not showing an element. In *Film as Art*, Arnheim shows how films can make use of the viewer's propensity to fill in the gaps, in the service of creative effects. A characteristic example Arnheim considers refers to a shot from *The Immigrant* (1917), where Charlie Chaplin is shown hanging over the side of a boat with his back turned to the audience. As Arnheim writes, the audience first thinks that 'the poor devil is paying his toll to the sea', but then, suddenly, when Chaplin turns around, the audience realises that he has just hooked a large fish with his stick. The initial concealment of the shot is essential to the shot's comic effect, according to Arnheim (2006, first print 1957, p. 36). Throughout *Film as Art*, Arnheim tends to favour modes of visual narration which are—as in the case of the moment just mentioned—indirect or oblique. See also (Dhir 2011, pp. 90–106). Now,

George Wilson is not a proponent of Gestalt theory (nor is he a proponent of its application in art or film theory in particular). His central concern in *Narration in Light* is just to examine the lateral patterns through which specific films unsettle and diversify their overall coherence. However, Wilson's use of the term 'gestalt' can be seen as his way of conveying and emphasising how our understanding of a film's form as a whole can be affected by a gap in the film's apparently straightforward intelligibility.

8. For David Bordwell, a film's 'explicit' meanings are a matter of the film's 'comprehension', whereas its 'implicit' meanings are a matter of another, distinct activity, that of a film's 'interpretation' (Bordwell 1989, see also Wilson 1999). This book does not accept the distinction between comprehension and interpretation exactly because it does not accept the distinction between explicit and implicit meanings. For a further characteristic example demonstrating that the implicit/explicit meaning distinction is not viable, see the analysis of *Madame De ...* in the following chapter.
9. V. F. Perkins also clearly contests the 'explicit'/'implicit' meaning distinction. For an in-depth analysis see Perkins (1990). For the pedagogical significance and implications of productively interrogating this distinction through critical practice see (Klevan 2005, pp. 214–227).
10. I mention these two films specifically, because their tensions are more pronounced. However, the point can be extended to all films examined in this chapter, films containing more subtly rendered tensions and ambiguities.

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