

# 'No Trickery with Montage': On Reading a Sequence in Godard's *Pierrot le fou*

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Because of the range of its possible uses and the versatility with which it can adapt to the most diverse circumstances, the eye is far superior to the microscope. Considered as an optical instrument, to be sure, it exhibits many imperfections, which ordinarily remain unnoticed only on account of its intimate connection with our mental life. But, as soon as scientific goals demand greater sharpness of resolution, the eye proves to be insufficient. The microscope, on the other hand, is perfectly suited to precisely such goals, but that is just why it is useless for all other.

– Gottlob Frege<sup>1</sup>

The problem which has long preoccupied me . . . is: why do one shot rather than another? . . . What is it ultimately that makes one run a shot on or change to another? A director like Delbert Mann probably doesn't think this way. He follows a pattern. Shot – the character speaks; reverse angle, someone answers. Maybe this is why *Pierrot le fou* is not a film, but an attempt at film.

– Jean-Luc Godard<sup>2</sup>

If the work of Jean-Luc Godard has received consistent attention over the past decades, there has been a lack of writing that has tried to look in detail at the way his films are put together.<sup>3</sup> Most analyses have dealt with his political ambitions for the cinema, with thematic readings of films (or groups of films), or with broad discussions of stylistic features such as jump-cuts, slow-motion photography, or images of nature. There is something odd in this. Godard's films actively invite reflection in a way few others do. They ask us to think of them as being made by a person who has paid close attention to their structure, who acknowledges both the presence

and the analytic habits of the critic. It's a feature that is perhaps related to Godard's oft-repeated assertion that filming, for him, is an extension of essay writing.<sup>4</sup>

If we are to take Godard's claims of being a critical film-maker seriously, we should look at the films differently: as capable of bearing up under the pressure of close analysis. His stance as a film-maker who is also a critic, as someone who treats these activities as performing parallel functions, in a sense obligates us to study carefully the way his films are put together, to see how their meanings are constructed in the details. Godard's films are always to some degree self-reflexive; they are films that concern film. Whatever else they are about, they explore and analyze other films, the medium in general, and, in particular, their own conditions and way of being. It may not be unreasonable to suppose as well that they reveal something about the activity of criticism itself.

This paper is organized around a detailed analysis of a short sequence from Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965), in which Ferdinand (Jean-Paul Belmondo) and Marianne (Anna Karina) flee an apartment in Paris and start their road journey. Although it appears to be structured by a series of repetitions, and has been read this way by critics, a shot by shot analysis reveals the sequence to be in fact a single event presented in a carefully fragmented order. The temporal logic of events is discontinuous, but there are no repetitions or variations of any action. This unexpected fact generates a series of questions about the way we analyze the film, and perhaps film more generally. How should we account for the relation between our initial beliefs about the

organization of the sequence and our knowledge of its actual structure? On what grounds do we conduct a shot by shot analysis? Should we take the results we get from this procedure as constituting the 'fact' of the film on which we then base our interpretation? The way we engage this line of argument will depend on a more basic question: what is it that prompts us to look at the sequence again? what suggests that we need to get a clearer sense of how it is constructed?

These are neither self-evident nor trivial matters. As I will argue, there are good reasons for taking both the judgments made on the basis of ordinary viewing and those founded on the work of analysis as having a viable claim to interpretative authority. Through a reading of the sequence in *Pierrot le fou*, a sequence that explicitly challenges our standard analytic procedures and assumptions, we can derive a methodological framework flexible enough to account for the different demands each approach to the analysis of (this) film makes.

## I

To understand why the sequence raises the problems I claim for it, we need to see how it is actually constructed. As I mentioned above, it appears to be organized according to a series of repetitions or variations, and critics such as Christian Metz, Alfred Guzzetti, and Richard Roud have assumed that to be the case. Godard, on this view, returns on several occasions to earlier events in the sequence, repeating actions that have already happened. I want to investigate why we think there are repetitions, and how this belief – one that does not correspond to the actual structure of the images – is generated.

The sequence begins in the middle of a long, three-minute shot, after Marianne has hit Frank on the head with a bottle of wine. It consists of 13 shots. They run as follows:

1 a. Ferdinand lifts an unconscious Frank up by the armpits, and drags him towards a door to the rear and left. Marianne follows, the camera tracking right and then back while panning left.

As the camera continues to move, Marianne runs across the balcony from the right, goes to the railing, looks out, and then hurries into a different room – the camera panning right to follow her. Ferdinand is dragging Frank through a door on the right; Marianne walks towards them as they exit, turns, goes to the left, picks a rifle up off a table, and walks towards the camera.

Voice-over: M: 'a story;' F: 'complicated;' M: 'leave in a hurry;' F: 'escape from a bad dream;' M: 'I know some people;' F: 'politics;' M: 'an organization;' F: 'get away;' M: 'gun-running;' [pause]; F: 'in silence . . . in silence' [Marianne re-enters apartment]; F: 'in silence' [he exits to the right]. There is no music.

1 b. Continues 1a without a cut. As Marianne goes out the glass door onto the balcony, non-diegetic music, present earlier in the shot (but before shot 1a), starts up. The camera tracks and pans to a medium shot, showing Marianne as she goes to the railing, looks out over the city, then turns in profile to the right as the music swells. The camera tracks left, and, after a beat, she moves in the same direction. Poles come between her and the camera; there is a cut as she walks between them.

Voice-over: M: 'It's me, Marianne;' F: 'he kissed you;' M: 'a story;' F: 'complicated;' M: 'I know some people.' The music starts at the beginning of 1b, as if in the middle of a phrase, and continues for the rest of the sequence



• Ferdinand opens the car door.

2. The cut is before the word 'people.' Marianne drives a red sports car from left to right in front of a wall. Between the camera and the car, a gridded metal structure is now where Marianne was at the end of the previous shot.

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The camera pans to the right to follow the car; Ferdinand opens the door and gets in, but there is a cut before he closes the door.

Voice-over: F: 'you were lovers;' M: 'using my apartment'

3. The cut is on the word 'apartment.' They are in the bathroom of the apartment in shot 1. Frank's body is in the bathtub, just visible at the bottom-right of the frame. Marianne leads Ferdinand towards a door in the left foreground, the camera panning left and tracking slightly to the right. She opens the door.

Voice-over: F: 'it was like during the Algerian war'

4. The cut is on the word 'Algerian.' We see a highway, with the river to the right and the Eiffel Tower in the distance. A red sports car drives away from the camera, which follows at a similar speed. The car goes under two red and white arches.

Voice-over: M: 'I have a brother'

5. The cut is on the word 'brother.' They emerge from a door on the right, stepping outside onto a rooftop. Marianne (carrying the gun) and Ferdinand walk across, the camera panning left. There is a cut as the edge of the roof comes into view at the left of the frame.

Voice-over: F: 'escape from a bad dream'

6. Overhead shot of a parking lot. A man and a dwarf walk quickly between two cars towards the left of the frame.

Voice-over: M: 'leave in a hurry'

7. The cut is on the word 'in.' Marianne and Ferdinand crouch by the edge of the roof, the city in the background; she is looking down. There is a slight movement by Ferdinand.

Voice-over: M: 'leave in a hurry'

8. A wall with a drainpipe is in the background, the metal structure from shot 2 in front of the camera. Ferdinand is stumbling away from the pipe to the left as if he had just dropped to the ground from a height. Righting himself, he puts the gun down and goes back to the pipe, the camera panning with him. Marianne's feet are visible at the top of the frame; there is a tilt up as Ferdinand helps her jump down. As he picks up the gun, she runs off left and the camera pans with her, cutting as she

goes behind the metal structure.

Voice-over: M: 'leave in a hurry;' F: 'reply;' M: 'bored to death;' F: 'argument;' M: 'garage;' F: 'who is it?'

9. As in 2. A red sports car is entering the frame from the left as Ferdinand turns to reach for the handle. The camera pans right with the movement of the car, cutting before he opens the door.

Voice-over: M: 'in the Midi;' F: 'getting away'



- Marianne and Ferdinand exit the bathroom; Frank's body visible in the bathtub.

10. The arch from shot 4 is in the distant background. There seems to be a jump in the music on the cut from shot 9 to shot 10. A red sports car drives under an overpass; the camera follows, cutting as the car emerges from the shadow.

11. A parking lot. Marianne opens the door of a red sports car, gets in, turns the car, and drives off to the right. As the camera starts to pan with the car, there is a cut.

Voice-over: F: 'It was time to leave this rotten world anyway;' M: 'We left Paris by a one-way street' [the car begins to move]; F: 'Recognizing . . .'

12. The red sports car is driving towards two arches. When the shot starts, the car has just passed a fork in the road; there is a cut before it gets to the position it occupies in shot 4.

Voice-over: F: '. . . two of her children . . .'

13. The camera looks out the window of a moving car to the right, framing the replica of the Statue of Liberty. A blue street sign flashes in front of the camera, followed by a red and white checkered arch (as in shots 4, 10, and 12).

Voice-over: F: '. . . the Statue of Liberty gave us a friendly wave'



- Marianne and Ferdinand look over the rooftop.

We can describe this sequence, in general terms, as a flight or escape from an apartment and the city of Paris; there seems to be little to dispute in that. But where does the sequence begin? Or, to ask a different but related question, why have I decided that it starts in the middle of a shot?

It's a complicated issue. Christian Metz's description of the sequence – 'the two protagonists hurriedly leave the white-walled Paris apartment by sliding down a drain pipe, and flee in a red 404 Peugeot along the banks of the Seine'<sup>5</sup> – implies that he thinks it starts with what I have called shot 2. Not only does he begin with Ferdinand and Marianne leaving the apartment, whereas I have them inside at the outset (as Ferdinand drags Frank out), Metz, in his analysis of the sequence, fails to mention that shot 3, which shows Frank's body in the bathtub, returns us to an earlier scene of action. For him, shot 1 (a and b) does not concern the central montage sequence. One can understand Metz's motivation. Shot 1 constitutes more than 30 seconds of the minute-long sequence, and seems to lack the temporal and spatial elisions so prevalent in the other shots – it has a different rhythm. Moreover, while shots 2–13 clearly present a flight, shot 1 shows the events leading up to the departure. Finally, shot 1 is actually the final piece of a much longer 3 minute shot; under normal circumstances, it would likely constitute an end to that sequence rather than the beginning of a new one.

Metz's description reveals an assumption about what constitutes or defines the structure of a sequence: it must begin with a cut to a new shot. This is not particularly surprising. We tend to see films as driven primarily by their visuals,

with sound functioning mainly as a complement or, in some cases, as a comment. Thus, when Metz sets out his typology of syntagmatic units, he divides sequences into sets of discrete shots combined into different types of segments.<sup>6</sup>

There are at least two things in shot 1a that lead me to doubt Metz's claim. First, a shift in the action occurs at its outset. Earlier in the shot, before the sequence begins, Frank had entered the apartment; after hiding, Ferdinand confronts him. As they talk (there is no dialogue audible here, only music), Marianne goes behind Frank and hits him over the head with a bottle, knocking him out. At the level of the narrative, the sequence starts when Ferdinand grabs Frank beneath the arms and starts to drag him away. It marks a clear change in the story from confrontation to flight; until the end of shot 13, we only see the attempt of Ferdinand and Marianne to leave Paris, a course of action not previously indicated.

Second, at the moment Ferdinand lifts Frank up – the start of shot 1a – the music abruptly stops and there is complete silence. The cessation of sound marks the end of the previous sequence, constituting a 'beat' in the rhythm of the film. Coinciding so precisely with the change in action, it creates a break in the flow of the film, a break of sufficient strength to justify starting the sequence in the middle of a shot.<sup>7</sup>

Shot 1a, however, produces further difficulties. Its beginning, as I noted, is marked by a sudden silence: for a moment, no diegetic or non-diegetic sounds are heard. Ferdinand drags Frank out, Marianne runs onto the balcony, and, after looking around, hurries back inside. As the camera starts to pan away from Ferdinand and toward the balcony, the edge of the glass door comes into view. (Here, their voices begin a kind of contrapuntal conversation in voice-over that will continue through the entire sequence.) When Marianne re-enters, we see Ferdinand again dragging Frank across the room, this time to the right. It's like a comic routine: Frank is dragged into one room and then, as if something were wrong with it, he is dragged into another. Marianne walks after them, then

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goes to a table on the rear wall, picks up a rifle, and walks back out onto the balcony.

What is odd about shot 1a is that, though it appears to repeat certain events, it does not contain an explicit repetition, nor is there a jump back in time to produce a variation. Rather, it seems to contain a starting over, a kind of re-doing. When we see Ferdinand dragging Frank out to the right, it is a moment of defamiliarization: haven't we just seen him perform this action? and in the same shot as well? It makes strange the continuous temporal sequence we have just witnessed, retroactively transforming it into dead time and marking shot 1a as the transition from the end of the previous sequence to the beginning of the new one.

It is with the return of the music, the second major shift on the sound track, that the escape really gets underway. As Marianne passes the glass door to go outside for a second time, the music suddenly starts up again, in mid-phrase.<sup>8</sup> This is where the dead time ends, and shot 1b, the first 'true' element of the new sequence, begins. Marianne does not return from the balcony this time; instead, rifle in hand, she exits to the left. Her action, coinciding with a swelling of the music, precipitates the flurry of shots that follows.

Despite the difficulty in defining its beginning, it is the body of the sequence – shots 2–13 – whose logic feels especially obscure. Metz, summarizing these shots, argues that they are structured around a set of 'several unusual repetitions.'<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Alfred Guzzetti, in an article on Metz's semiotic analysis of the cinema, claims that 'Godard . . . includes corresponding bits from different camera-takes in which the action happens to differ slightly.'<sup>10</sup> On their view, Godard gives us a series of variations on a single event.

Both Metz and Guzzetti, however, describe the sequence incorrectly. Notwithstanding the fragmented structure, there are no repetitions, no overlaps of time or action between any of the shots. Strictly speaking, the 'correct' temporal order of the shots would be: 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 9, 2, 10, 12, 4, 13.<sup>11</sup>

Can this be? Surely some of them overlap. An example will show how precisely Godard



- Ferdinand approaches the car door.

matches his shots. In shot 2, we see Ferdinand in the process of opening the door to the sports car and climbing in. When we return to the same action in shot 9, in what seems to be a virtually identical shot, it feels like a repetition or variation. He got in the car earlier; now he's doing it again, but slightly differently. A careful examination of the two shots, though, reveals that Ferdinand actually ends shot 9 in the exact position with which shot 2 begins. The shots match, but do not overlap. Indeed, it may be the fact that no overlap exists (and therefore the shots cannot be identical) that makes the sequence feel as if it contained variations rather than simple repetitions.

It is not enough, though, to demonstrate that no shots overlap. That we, along with such perceptive and careful commentators as Metz and Guzzetti, miss this fact is significant. What needs to be understood is how the sequence works, why it produces the effect of apparent repetitions. We need to account for our mistaken judgments.

A close look at shots 2–5 helps explain how the sequence generates false beliefs. After shot 1b, there is a cut to Ferdinand opening the door of a red sports car and getting in. The shot ends before he closes the door, and we return to looking into the apartment as Ferdinand and Marianne leave the bathroom, with Frank's body sprawled in the bathtub. Before they exit the room, there is a cut to a long shot of the car driving down a highway. A cut to a shot of a rooftop follows, as the pair enters from a door at the right and walks across to the left.

What is the logic of these shots? Is there an order behind the sense of a disorienting chaos?<sup>12</sup>

Let's focus on the source of the disorientation. It has, first, to do with the basic fact that there is a shift in the rate of cutting, a new emphasis on speed. Whereas the first shot of the sequence lasts 37 seconds, none of these four last longer than two seconds. Second, because none of the actions actually finish – Ferdinand does not close the door, they don't get out of the bathroom, we don't know where the car is going – there is a strong sense of incompleteness. No action is given the chance to lead naturally into another. Third, we cannot place these shots into a coherent linear temporal order as we watch the film. We accept shot 2 as their escape from the apartment, but then they are returned to it in shot 3 only to be seen in shot 4 as already driving away. We experience a breakdown in the normal causal pattern of narrative, and this feeling, once established, colors the way we read the rest of the sequence. Fourth, although the voice-over provides a general semblance of continuity, it does not help place or locate the action.<sup>13</sup> While at certain points their voices do seem to remark on events taking place (as in shots 1a and 11), the phrases they speak by and large do not bear on the actions with which they are matched.

No part of the film has prepared us for this kind of narrative disruption; we have no models to which we can fit the sequence.<sup>14</sup> In the midst of our disorientation, then, it is understandable that we conclude that the returns to earlier moments (e.g., when shot 3 takes us back to the apartment we thought we left) are repetitions or variations of an event.

It is not simply the jumps backward in time that confuse us. Even when shots do follow each other in a linear progression, the way they are connected is not clear. Shots 5–8 provide an example of this. The story goes: Marianne and Ferdinand go onto the rooftop, look over the edge, see a man and a dwarf walking through the parking lot, and then drop down onto a lower level to get their car. Between shots 5 and 7, we assume that, in the time it takes for us to look at the man and the dwarf, the two should cross the rooftop and arrive at the edge. As we explore the way the transitions between the shots actually

work, however, this assumption becomes difficult to maintain. In fact, the transitions perform an ambiguous function that is part of what makes these shots, despite their apparent chronological linearity, seem temporally disjointed.

According to the norms of classical editing, we should see the pair looking over the edge, then the shot of the man and the dwarf from above, culminating in a return to the first shot. But something is missing here: the initiating look. The cut to the man and the dwarf occurs before Marianne and Ferdinand get to the edge, when we have only just begun to sense that the edge might be at the extreme left of the frame. That the overhead shot of the parking lot is from their perspective is only established retroactively, with shot 7 showing Marianne peering down in a slightly more distant framing. Ordinarily, perhaps, such ambiguity might not bother us. But in the context of a sequence where the spatial and temporal relations between shots are uncertain, we do not feel as secure in making such judgments; we are wary of inferring the position of shots from what we have just seen. Nor are we comfortable trying to fit shots into a coherent pattern once we are given more information from subsequent shots.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from its temporal ambiguity, shot 7, along with shot 8, has another function. Occurring at roughly the mid-point in the sequence, these shots represent a kind of transitional point. Shot 7 is notable for its immobility, the only shot in the entire sequence in which neither camera nor characters are in motion (with the exception of a slight movement by Ferdinand). Perhaps, like the sudden silence that marks the beginning of shot 1a, the stillness of shot 7 signals an end to the first part of the sequence – even if its duration of little more than a second makes a strong version of this claim suspect.<sup>16</sup> Regardless, shot 8 gets the sequence going again. Not only is it, at 5 seconds, the longest shot since 1b; it returns to the quick movement by characters and camera that began to slow down in shot 6 and ground to a halt in shot 7. Further, the non-linear ordering of shots returns, and for the rest of the sequence no shot follows another in a linear temporal progression.

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One reason we believe the sequence to contain visual repetitions is that there are in fact repetitions in the voice-overs. Marianne, for example, repeats the phrase, 'Leave in a hurry,' several times in succession over shots 6–8. But there are reasons to think that aural repetitions don't function in the same way that visual ones do. First, they exist as a part of ordinary conversation. It is perfectly natural to repeat phrases, whether because someone didn't hear, to emphasize a particular point, or for poetic effect. Visual repetitions, by contrast, are rare, perhaps existing only in *déjà vu* (and there only as the impression of a repetition). Second, repeated phrases like Marianne's 'I know some people' appear to be motivated by questions Ferdinand asks her. These repetitions are naturalized within the diegetic world of the film: she reiterates a generic response to his inquiries. Thus, before the sequence begins, Marianne repeats, 'I can explain everything,' several times in voice-over. Each utterance seems to be prompted by a different question from Ferdinand, and the repetitions do not so much disturb as confirm our reading of that dialogue: something has gone wrong, but specific questions are useless. Third, the relation of the voice-over to the diegetic events is never made clear. Are the words from a later time, responding to the memory of the actions? Are they the thoughts of each character as the events take place? An imagined conversation?

The repeated phrases nevertheless color the way we treat the visual dimension of the sequence. They set a prevailing mood, a context in which we assume that anything looking like a repetition is in fact a repetition. They help us feel secure in our judgments, as if we had no need to further justify them.

The visual basis for our belief that the sequence contains a series of repetitions or variations, and not a fragmentation of an event, can most clearly be seen in the last set of shots (8–13). In shot 8, Ferdinand and Marianne drop down from the rooftop (presumably), and she runs off to the left. There is a cut to an almost identically framed shot, except that the car is now present and Ferdinand is reaching for the

door handle. Initially, this seems to be one of Godard's jump-cuts, where a block of time is elided without transition but the logic of temporal linearity is preserved. We are then given a shot of the car driving away down a highway, again an apparent jump forward in time which is here emphasized by a shift in the music. (Whereas up to this point, the music had continued its romantic theme, the cut between shots 9 and 10 produces an evident jump: the song moves to a new point without transition and in apparent violation of continuity.<sup>17</sup>) Finally, there is a cut to a shot of a parking lot (is it the same one as in shot 6?) as Marianne gets into a red sports car and drives off.

Shot 9 contains what seems to be a repetition. The shot of Ferdinand moving to open the car door looks like another form of shot 2, either a shot which overlaps with the earlier action or a different version of it – an alternate take.<sup>18</sup> But this doesn't trouble us too much: we have accepted a kind of returning to earlier events as a feature of the sequence. Moreover, coming immediately after their descent from the rooftop, we feel as if we are finally on a straightforward path that will lead us out of both Paris and the sequence. This feeling is confirmed by shot 10, which seems to directly follow the events in the previous shot.

Shot 11 quite simply surprises us. It represents a perfect example of the way Godard breaks up the temporal order of the sequence in order to defamiliarize its events. We accept the jumps of the previous two shots, and even what seems to be a repetition of an earlier event. We do this, however, on the basis of a belief – what could almost be called a tacit contract with the film – that *this time* we are going to get a linear, even if not continuous, temporal order. What shot 11 does is return us to a moment in time we thought we would not see: in between shots 8 and 9, Marianne gets the car. We knew it happened, but had assumed it was jumped over in the cut between shots. Shot 11 does not fill in missing information; instead, it destroys the sense of order the previous shots built up. What belief we had in the linear movement of the narrative is shattered. We seem to have gone

back in time, and may, for all we know, start up again, going through the same events once more in a new variation.

There may be one temporal overlap in the whole sequence, but it is not really a repetition (nor is it exactly a variation). In shot 12, we see the car driving toward the position it occupied in shot 4. In voice-over, Ferdinand starts to say, 'Recognizing two of her children, the Statue of Liberty gave us a friendly wave.' As he begins the phrase, there is a cut to what appears to be a shot looking to the right out of a moving car. We see the replica of the Statue of Liberty, and then the arch we saw in shots 4 and 12 passes in front of the camera. The view to the right appears to be a point-of-view shot: we know Ferdinand is sitting on the right side of the car, and assume that we are seeing what he sees. The shot also seems to repeat a span of action that took place in shot 4, when the car passed under the same arch. This reading, though, is not certain: there is no explicit indication that we are seeing, as it were, through Ferdinand's eyes, nor is it clear that the arch in shot 13 is the same as that in shot 4. But if there were a repetition in the sequence, it would be here.

The sequence does not end with shot 13; it bleeds into an additional shot, also the start of the next sequence, in which Ferdinand and Marianne pull up at a gas station. As the car comes to a halt, so does Ferdinand's voice-over. A second later, the music ceases as well. Like the beginning of the sequence, the end arrives *in medias res*, marked primarily by a change in sound but also by a shift in the action. The car stops; their flight from Paris is over.

## II

I take it as given that, without conducting this shot by shot analysis, we see the sequence as a series of repetitions or variations.<sup>19</sup> Even after multiple viewings at normal speed, we don't seem to alter our initial reading. For the purposes of interpretation, then, why shouldn't we simply stay with our experiential judgments?

The answer seems obvious. We are justified in claiming that there are no repetitions because, in

fact, no repetitions actually occur. But this answer ignores the significance of the question. What is at stake is the status and weight of our considered judgments (which are not limited to our immediate responses) about the film with respect to the results of close analysis. If our beliefs can *only* be disproved by means of a detailed, and artificial, analytic technique, is that sufficient ground for the claim that our initial judgments were in fact wrong?

It is not obviously incorrect to say that we should avoid taking the results of analysis to be the final arbiter when we attempt to interpret the sequence, or at least that we should not accord them central importance.<sup>20</sup> Why should they matter if we can't get to them through our ordinary viewing? Films are made to be seen in a theatre,<sup>21</sup> not on an editing table or a television where stopping their forward movement is easier and more habitual. Since most people see films projected on a screen, or see them as if they were on a screen, our interpretation should be based on the ordinary experience of viewing a film, and not on the artificial fragments close analysis produces.<sup>22</sup>

What I am calling an 'experiential judgment' needs to be explained. The notion of 'experiential' is meant to capture the way we respond, either emotionally or intuitively, to what is happening on the screen. We get a quick sense of what something – an event, a symbol, or a gesture – means, or form expectations about future narrative events.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, another factor is at work. The use of 'judgment' qualifies the sense of immediacy 'experiential' carries with it. The 'data' of experience is modified, reworked. The term expresses the extent to which our ordinary act of watching a film involves reflection, deliberation (by ourselves or in conversation with others), and the formation of considered opinions. It does not preclude our watching a film again, perhaps so that we can better grasp its structure and recognize mistakes we made in our initial appraisal. Experiential judgments include, but are not limited to, our immediate responses. They range from what Stanley Cavell calls 'humane criticism'<sup>24</sup> to more formal considerations of the

way sequences are constructed. What is necessary, though, is that the material entering into the judgment is limited to what we can get from viewing a projected film without resorting to shot by shot analysis.<sup>25</sup>

The interpretations given by Metz and Guzzetti assume such an approach, as their accounts correspond to what the sequence appears to be on the basis of a viewing at normal speed. Metz, when he describes the sequence, calls it 'dislocated . . . highly expressive of the mad rush, the fever, and the randomness of existence.' He argues that it presents 'as equal possibilities' several variations of an escape. We will never know exactly how the event took place; each variant is 'as probable as the possibility that is realized.'<sup>26</sup>

Metz labels the sequence a 'potential sequence,'<sup>27</sup> meaning, it would seem, two things: it is a sequence about potential events (i.e., they are not real), and it is potentially a sequence (i.e., though it has all the elements necessary to constitute a sequence, they are not realized). Although we might dispute Metz's second point – it is potentially a sequence only with respect to narrative film – his description is intuitively compelling. If we follow our experiential judgments, there is a definite sense in which the organizing principle is one of possibility, freedom, and a sense of openness. The editing pattern, the breaking up of a single linear and teleological narrative, comes to the front, while other elements, such as the generic status of their escape, are pushed into the background. There is no set pattern of events that must be followed; we can delight in the sense of choice the sequence appears to offer.

Guzzetti criticizes this analysis, suggesting that Metz implicitly denies that an event takes place at all – a position that would be similar to Richard Roud's claim that it is 'the first sequence ever shot in the conditional tense.'<sup>28</sup> If Metz maintains such a position, he is mistaken. After all, something does happen: Ferdinand and Marianne flee Paris.<sup>29</sup> Rather than indicating uncertainty, Guzzetti argues, 'Godard makes such a gesture [the use of repetition] because at this moment he sees no alternative but to ask us

to participate in his work of examining the world by means of the cinema, not because he is unsure how things happened.'<sup>30</sup> As I will argue below, Guzzetti's claim that not only do our judgments have a large degree of certainty but that our belief in repetitions functions as an invitation to examine the film, to think back on it, is more or less correct. But it is not clear what he means when he says that the sequence leads us to 'examin[e] the world by means of cinema.' Though the way cinema can discover things about the world is certainly a major theme throughout Godard's work, it does not seem to be a primary concern here. The kind of examination the sequence asks us to perform has more to do with the organization of the narrative – the narration – and the structure of the images themselves.

Nor is Guzzetti's argument against Metz entirely compelling. Metz's reading of the sequence can be improved, or clarified, to account for Guzzetti's criticism. Suppose we take him to mean that the choice is not in what Ferdinand and Marianne do – they must escape, after all – but in *how* they do it. Perhaps Metz's claim is that Godard achieves something like Brecht's wish for the actor: 'he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one of the possible variants.'<sup>31</sup> That is, although Ferdinand and Marianne must, within the diegetic world of the narrative, escape, the way their actions are depicted suggests to us that there are other ways of going about it. The sense of openness is not constrained by what actually happens.

The problems with Metz and Guzzetti's readings should be fairly clear. That what they take to be a series of repetitions or variations is actually a fragmentation of a single linear narrative event is a fact that cannot be ignored. The argument that the sequence offers a sense of openness and possibility, at least insofar as the grounds of the argument are the formal arrangement of shots, cannot be valid, or at least not entirely so. It is not possible to stay with an interpretation of the film based solely on our ordinary viewing.<sup>32</sup>

We can reformulate the problem in a helpful way by looking at the question of when and how close analysis can be justified. Ordinarily, we do not feel we need to get what we might call the 'finer structure'<sup>33</sup> of a sequence in order to determine what happens. The judgments we make on the basis of ordinary viewing tend to be sufficient for constructing a plausible reading. So why should we undertake a close analysis of the sequence from *Pierrot le fou*? From what does our need to look in more detail derive? Are we trying to find stronger proof to back up our experiential judgments? Do we in fact doubt them? What reasons do we have to want confirmation or certainty?

I want to make two points. First, our experiential judgments are incorrect but they are not wrong. If our belief that the sequence contains repetitions or variations does not ultimately correspond to the facts of the sequence, the reasons or grounds we had for arriving at that judgment were sound. Given what we knew (or could know) from ordinary viewing, we drew legitimate conclusions. It's just that what we thought we knew to be the case turns out to be not the whole story.<sup>34</sup>

Second, the desire to look more closely at the way the sequence is constructed is part of our initial experience of it. As Guzzetti notes, we are not uncertain about what the sequence is doing when we see it in the context of a continuous viewing: we believe we see repetitions or variations of an event. All the same, we recognize that it is unusual, that how it is put together is not entirely clear. The strikingness of the sequence generates a desire to see how it works; we want, in short, to see it again.

But why do we want to look again? One way to understand this desire is as a result of the development of video recordings and flatbed editing tables (and perhaps analytic projectors as well). We are used to stopping films and looking more carefully at the way they are constructed. But such an argument implies that an impulse to repeat, to break down and analyze, is dependent on a specific set of technological innovations. Here, the desire to stop and go back arises from within the sequence itself.

Another account could hold that the sequence creates a set of doubts about our judgments that need to be dispelled. The sequence, so the story might run, is unusual enough to throw into question the ordinary procedures by which we read a film; it creates an uncertainty sufficient to justify a closer look to see what's actually going on. We seek firmer ground – a more detailed knowledge of the structure – to give a greater degree of certainty to our judgments.

To an extent, this account is compelling. An obvious way in which a closer look could be justified is if we felt that what we took to be going on in the sequence was not certain, or at least that we had good reasons to question our judgment. It's not obvious, however, that we lack any confidence in our initial beliefs about the sequence. Neither Metz nor Guzzetti ever expresses reservations about their judgment, and the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma* note that the film is 'classical – no trickery with montage.'<sup>35</sup>

If we do have a feeling of uneasiness about the sequence, it seems more to be the sense that we might not have gotten all of what went on, that there were too many shots happening too quickly and in too unusual and complicated an order for us to feel that we have mastered it. We believe there are repetitions in the sequence, but we can't exactly say what or where they are, or even the reasons we have for thinking that they are present. We find ourselves slightly confused – which is not the feeling that we might be mistaken – and so want to confirm our judgments.<sup>36</sup>

The wish for confirmation trades on our knowledge that the medium of cinema involves the possibility of repetition, that we are able to see a part of a film again and in exactly the same way we saw it the first time. We know how to satisfy any curiosity about what it was we saw. But the sequence in *Pierrot le fou* is more than an instance of this general feature of film; it specifically accesses and generates a desire for repetition, a desire to stop the film and go back to see what has just happened.<sup>37</sup>

There are three ways in which repetition functions here. First, if we believe the sequence to contain repetitions or variations, part of the

content of that belief is the postulate that alternate takes of the same action are involved in what we see (Metz and Guzzetti, for example, appear to assume this). It is an aspect of our knowledge of what films are that we know their manufacture to involve certain kinds of repetitions that can then be used within the film itself.<sup>38</sup>

Second, the way we read a film, in experiential judgments as well as in close analysis, depends on the fact that what we see can be repeated. We know we can always go back over a fragment, or the film in its entirety, if we feel such a need. Yet the way we do this differs from our experience of going back over a work of literature, both prose and poetry. There, we can stop at any point and re-read a passage, whether to see how an element of style is constructed, to cover over a lapse in concentration, or to check if a character appeared earlier in the story. But in re-reading, we place the given material into any sequence we wish. It is an activity that involves a creative reworking of previously read elements, and thus is not really the same form of repetition.

Subsequent experiences of a film, by contrast, involve the identical order of images and sounds we initially perceived. It is a feature of the way we go back over a film that we cannot place its elements into an order of our choosing; the temporality of our viewing is determined by the film itself. The medium does not contain the possibility for willful, creative activity that would allow us to change the structure of our encounter with the film.<sup>39</sup>

Third, there is a way in which the self-reflexivity of a high modernist aesthetic of the kind Godard periodically inhabits turns on a use of repetition. Put briefly, one of the ways a film can reflect on itself is by quoting images, a practice that involves a degree of repeatability. When a film quotes itself (or other films), it does not merely incorporate that footage seamlessly into its flow but of necessity engages in a kind of commentary on it. Quotation changes the referent of the image from its content to the quoted 'phrase' as a whole; it thereby permits and enables the explicit investigation of the

medium from within the film itself.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the sequence from *Pierrot*, by suggesting the existence of repetitions, indicates the conditions for analysis: the way we engage the film's capacity for repetition becomes an indicator of how we should read the sequence. We are invited to see it again. If the sequence engages in a degree of self-reflexivity, commenting on events as they happen, it does so in the form of repetitions, whether real or apparent.

Though the desire for repetition does reflect a need for intellectual mastery and control over an elusive object, it is not simply, as one might take out of Freud, a general psychological or biological imperative.<sup>41</sup> Rather, it is a particular feature of our knowledge and experience of film – and this film in particular. And it is the desire to repeat, to watch again and break down, that the sequence in *Pierrot le fou* evokes.

Yet what we do when we break a film down, what the claims and implications of the practice of close analysis are, is not yet clear. A more detailed look at this procedure will help us understand how we should analyze the sequence. It will also show why the problems it raises, both interpretative and methodological, are so serious.

One model of analysis, which we might call 'explication,' involves evaluating the judgments we form from ordinary viewing.<sup>42</sup> Given a sequence or a series of shots, we arrive at an initial reading and then test it by investigating how the sequence is put together. The goal is to get more solid and certain ground for our judgments than is possible from ordinary viewing alone, and so we try to determine the exact composition and combination of shots. On the basis of this work, we can evaluate our initial judgments and determine whether the reasons we had for making them are justified by the underlying structures we find in the film.

Suppose we think that the use of tracking shots towards the beginning of Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) not only evokes a kind of coherent space but at the same time destabilizes it. The aim of close analysis, on this model, is not (or at least not at first) to question the truth of this interpretation. We want to figure out *why* the

tracking shots cause these beliefs to be formed. David Bordwell, discussing these shots, writes, 'When David Gray [the central character] enters the doctor's office from frame left, the camera leaves him to pan and track right to another door; Gray now comes into the frame *from the right* and exits through the door.'<sup>43</sup> From a series of similar examples, he concludes, '*This is what has been so often sensed*: the film's obsessive obliqueness, its refusal to address the 'action' head-on.'<sup>44</sup> As Bordwell suggests, close analysis is being used to confirm our initial impressions – what has been 'sensed' – and ground them more strongly in the details of the film itself.

The other model – 'discovery' – employs close analysis to reveal new facts that can then be used to construct a reading of the film or sequence. Because we stop the film and proceed, in an extreme (but not uncommon) case, frame by frame, we can recognize new features of individual images and the general structure we did not, or could not, pick up at normal speed.<sup>45</sup> Incidental features, figures moving by at the edge of the screen, may suddenly become visible to us and turn out to be significant for the way we understand the film.<sup>46</sup> The new information may give us reasons to re-evaluate our initial judgments, but it can also lead us to produce alternative readings of the film.

Raymond Bellour's analysis of a sequence from *The Birds* (1963) uses close analysis in this way. Breaking it down into a series of 84 shots, themselves grouped into distinct sets, he is able to see new affinities between the parts of the sequence and uncover otherwise hidden relations and structures at work.<sup>47</sup> Bellour writes, for example, 'We still have to explain why shot 73 is in movement while shot 24 is static, whereas their homology is implied by analysis.'<sup>48</sup> On the basis of this kind of analysis, he can point out systematic affinities between the shots of the gulls and those of Mitch's gaze, showing how the threat of violence is implicitly displaced onto Mitch. Arguments of this sort cannot be made from ordinary viewing, or at least not with such precise detail and structural acuity. The new facts about the sequence that close analysis discovers, whether they are within or between images,

allow for readings of the sequence unavailable outside these analytic procedures.

The way we analyze the sequence in *Pierrot le fou* employs both models. We begin by taking a detailed look at the sequence with the hope of explicating our experiential judgments of the film, but they are found not to correspond to the finer structure of the sequence. The close analysis then turns into the model of discovery, in which the information we gain – that there are no repetitions or variations – forms the basis for a new reading.

Is the appropriate response, then, to treat the finer structure of the film, the knowledge we gain from close analysis, as the real 'fact' of the film? Despite the assumption that an interpretation should correspond to the experience of the projected film, there are reasons to think so. If we know that the sequence is different than we initially thought, can we still hold the conclusions of our experiential judgments to be true? The impression we get from our ordinary viewing, of there being different ways to perform the same action, no determined path by which Ferdinand and Marianne must do things, is exposed as mistaken. We simply have a single event proceeding in a linear manner from start to finish, in which the sense of openness and possibility we thought was present proves to be just a lie, or perhaps a bitter joke. What lies at bottom is a harsher reality, a deep pessimism that presents a fundamentally determined course of events with no room for delusions of freedom or choice.

I don't think we can be satisfied with this as an interpretation of the sequence. Even if we know perfectly well what the real structure of the sequence is, the feeling of hope, excitement, and possibility does not go away. It re-emerges on every subsequent viewing. But how we can account for and explain the way a sense of freedom continues to pervade the sequence is not clear. We need a methodology, a structure of interpretation, that will incorporate our experiential judgments as well as the conclusions we get from close analysis, understanding the truth claims of the latter while acknowledging the power of the former.

- On Reading a Sequence in Godard's *Pierrot le fou*

Underlying the practice of close analysis is a powerful assumption. According to the picture I have sketched, we see something that confuses us, or that makes us feel we haven't grasped everything, and are therefore drawn to look more closely to find out what is really happening. When we do this, though, we implicitly treat the relation between ordinary viewing and close analysis as corresponding to the model (or metaphor) of appearance and reality. The underlying structure is taken as what is 'real,' as the final arbiter of the grounds for our interpretation; experiential judgments become at best impressions and at worst illusions.

The sequence from *Pierrot le fou* complicates matters: there are good reasons to take both our initial impressions and the results of analysis as having authority. If it is hard to ignore the knowledge we obtain from close analysis, that this just is how the sequence is put together, it is also troubling to think that our experiential judgments count for nothing once we do this work – our experience, after all, continues to tell us otherwise. Nor do the interpretations we get from each method seem similar enough to be compatible. There is no grey area in which they overlap, no obvious way to reconcile their differences. If we take the problem seriously, we have to accept that there is a very real question – and one whose stakes are relatively high – as to what constitutes the fact of the film, the data we should use for our interpretation.

The status I am claiming for the sequence – that it throws our habitual analytic procedures into question – can be seen more clearly if we look at a different film which involves a certain amount of visual play but where similar issues do not arise. In *Citizen Kane* (1941), Orson Welles uses a device in which a break in the continuity of the film, a trick that's about to be employed, is covered by a visual and aural bridge. Thompson's first visit to Susan Alexander's nightclub is the occasion for a virtuoso display of camerawork. Starting outside the club, the camera moves up and over the building, going between the 'El Rancho' and 'Floor Show' on the sign, then down through the glass skylight

and into the club's interior. It is a movement that should be physically impossible, and indeed it is. As we near the skylight, an extended lightning flash covers a dissolve that moves us into the room below, where the camera continues its downward tracking. The lightning flash is a masking gesture that blinds us at the exact moment the 'trick' occurs; the overall effect is to produce an illusion of (impossible) continuity.<sup>49</sup>

Compare a similar camera movement in F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1926). As the doorman receives the notice of his demotion, the camera lingers outside the glass doors of the office and observes the dejection registered on his back. Slowly, it moves towards the door, executes a dissolve, and arrives inside the room. There is a kind of illusion here, a flaunting of realistic space to embody our wish to be closer to the action, but there is no gesture to distract us from the camera, nothing to pull our attention away from the flourish.<sup>50</sup>

It is part of Welles' skill as a film-maker (and as a magician) that he does more than simply perform the trick. In Thompson's second visit, later in the film, the extended tracking shot is quoted (perhaps 'paraphrased' is a better term) but without the lightning flash. Welles reveals the secret, lifts the veil on his earlier illusion – but he does so in a way that relishes the fact that, once performed, the gesture is no longer necessary: we will not question an impossible shot in his film.

What is important about Welles' gesture for my purposes is that it lacks the confusion Godard creates. If Welles puzzles us, he also reveals the solution. Not only is it the case that once we look more closely at the pair of shots we realize how the trick works, but he literally shows us how it's done at a later point in the film. This is not to say that the sequence in *Citizen Kane* is banal, or that it does not both use and reveal important features about the way films bleed sound or image over cuts in order to mask a break in continuity.<sup>51</sup> But these shots do not raise questions about what the *object* of analysis is – whether the film is a continuous experience or a sequence of fragments laid out on an editing table – nor do they challenge the belief that a

closer look at the sequence will show us its 'real' nature.

If the discovery of how the trick works in *Citizen Kane* resolves our initial confusion, the same kind of knowledge about the sequence in *Pierrot le fou* does not. Instead, the analysis raises a new set of questions about the procedure just performed. It presents us with a problem: if we decide not to ignore what we initially believed about the sequence, we have to figure out how to square the different conclusions. Do we trust our experiential judgments or the results of close analysis? Does the sequence, for the purposes of interpretation, contain repetitions or not? Which belief counts? It is precisely the assumption that there is a clearly defined hierarchy of interpretative authority that Godard challenges.

If we take it to be the case that Godard is aware of at least some of the questions the sequence poses, that it is not simply a vast miscalculation on his part or sheer trickery, we must try to develop a method that acknowledges the problems we face as real.<sup>52</sup> We need a position, a stance toward the film, that does not force us to choose between experiential judgments and the results of close analysis, between the sense of freedom in the sequence and what we might call its determinism or destiny. It does not have to be an either/or situation. Neither position is wrong, but neither, once we actually do the work of close analysis, can be thought of as sufficient by itself; each must be allowed to condition the other. If the sequence is not just a celebration of possibility, neither is it solely a structure of determinism.

I am trying to avoid, or sidestep, the temptation to assign a *priori* authority to either our experiential judgments or the results of close analysis. Both must be incorporated within the methodological framework if it will be able to acknowledge the complexity of this, and perhaps any, sequence. The precise authority given to each, the relative weight they have in determining our interpretation, needs to be established in the activity of reading the sequence itself. If we were to elevate this position into a principle, we might say that we

can only see what we're doing in the process of doing it.

Two examples will help us develop the stance we ought to take for the sequence in *Pierrot*. In shot 11, as Marianne gets the car out of the parking lot, we hear her say in a voice-over, 'We left Paris by a one-way street' – followed by a shot of the car driving down what appears to be a one-way street. I read this conjunction as a kind of joke, a literalization of the phrase that is also an ironic comment about the structure of the sequence. What we take to be a set of variations, of possibilities, is nothing more than different perspectives on the same, pre-determined event: the path down a one-way street. As if to make the point more explicit, we see that the car has *already passed* a fork in the road. The choice is no longer available: it is only from our vantage point, as viewers of the film, that we can see other possibilities. Once they are on the road, the path of their escape can only follow a single route. Yet to us the feeling that other possibilities exist – that they could have taken (and could still take) the other fork – nevertheless persists. These intuitions and feelings matter. Despite what we know about the sequence, and its inclination toward a kind of determinism, the sense of freedom and choice colors the way we read it.

A similar structural subtlety can be seen in Ferdinand's comment made over the final two shots: 'Recognizing two of her children, the Statue of Liberty gave us a friendly wave.' Initially, it would seem as if Ferdinand and Marianne were claimed as the inheritors of a kind of freedom; they are children of liberty, able to do what they will. A closer reading, however, suggests that what is going on is more complicated. We might note that the statue they see is not the real Statue of Liberty, but the smaller version in Paris. Does it matter that the statue we see is an imitation? It functions, in a sense, as a reminder of the relations France has to America. But these are relations whose moral valence is none too clear, especially for Godard.<sup>53</sup> What does America stand for? What does the statue stand for? Kafka, after all, thought it carried a sword instead of a torch.<sup>54</sup> And is the

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wave an acknowledgment of kinship, of mutual liberty, or is it a (friendly) wave of goodbye? Whose children are they, anyway?<sup>55</sup> Perhaps they are not liberty's children so much as the statue's – and is she free to go where she pleases in whatever manner suits her best? It is not wrong to follow our intuition that Ferdinand's phrase claims their freedom. But such a reading on its own is incomplete; it misses the deeper irony, the way the idea of liberty in our initial interpretation is undercut by the results we get from a closer analysis.

These moments exemplify the reading of the sequence at which we ultimately arrive. Rather than being structured by a sense of freedom or, as Metz says, 'randomness,' the sequence reveals itself to be based on an undercutting of such freedom by a kind of determinism. Godard remarks, in connection with the film, 'We know from Sartre that the free choice which the individual himself makes is mingled with what is usually called his destiny.'<sup>56</sup> An idea or action is followed through to its logical conclusion, but the starting point is not already determined. There is something like choice or freedom at the outset; it is only once a decision has been made that the following events are firmly set. It is not, then, that one way of reading the sequence triumphs over the other. The impression of openness and possibility remains, but is now placed into a complex relation with the underlying logic – that is, the determinism – of the events.

I take this position to bear an affinity to a version of popular existentialism. The way Godard develops it is connected to an emphasis he places on fact: what happens cannot be undone, nor can its consequences be avoided. Godard invokes this idea by having the initial event of the sequence be an assault, a paradigmatic example of an event that cannot be taken back.<sup>57</sup> It is the fact, or actuality, of Frank's injury that compels Ferdinand and Marianne to flee. Once the act is done, they are destined to their actions – and to the constraints of the '*roman policier*' genre they will themselves to inhabit.

Still, something is troubling about the way we have arrived at these conclusions. The

methodological position I have laid out does not seem necessary for this final understanding of the sequence. The interpretation of the two examples above appears to depend only on a careful consideration of features we know to be present from an ordinary viewing, such as the correlation between Marianne's comment and the events we are shown. It does not seem to require close analysis at all. In what sense, then, does our reading depend on a method whose aim is to integrate experiential judgments and the results of close analysis? What purpose did the investigations into our analytic activity actually serve?



- Marianne drives out of the parking lot.

It is true that the reading of the two moments at the end of the sequence does not directly depend on new data obtained from close analysis, or on throwing our habitual procedures of criticism into question. My claim, though, is that without understanding how these methodological questions are present in and effectively structure the sequence – the way we need to get experiential judgments and close analysis up and running at the same time, feeding off each other – we cannot interpret the two examples in the way I proposed. That reading, in which a sense of freedom is conditioned (but not negated) by determinism, makes sense and has power as an interpretation of the sequence *only* if we have been attentive to the problems of analysis Godard raises.

Take the context in which the two examples are found: shots 8–13. Shot 9 is part of the same action as shot 2; shot 11, the shot in which Marianne gets the car and makes the remark about leaving by a 'one-way street,' returns us to

a time in the narrative we thought had been skipped. Both shots feel, on the basis of ordinary viewing, like repetitions.

If we stay at this level, the way we interpret the two examples will be different. We will focus on Ferdinand's comment that precedes Marianne's remark, 'It was time to leave this rotten world anyway,' and assume that the one-way street refers to a desire to get out of their mess as quickly as possible, without the chance of returning the way they left. Details like the fork in the road they have passed at the start of shot 11 may be noticed, but they will not be taken as significant.

When we do the close analysis, our experience of repetitions slides into the knowledge that what we see is really the fragmentation of a single event. We no longer focus on the way features of the shots appear to repeat earlier events, or struggle against the feeling of repetition in the sequence. Instead, we can begin to pay attention to the more complicated relation between the two levels of experience: ordinary viewing and shot by shot analysis. It is the tension between our experiential judgments and the results of close analysis that allows Marianne's phrase to resonate: we understand that the one-way street has been there all along. And yet our experience, as with Ferdinand and Marianne's, is one of freedom. The joke on the 'one-way street' and passing the fork in the road lead into Ferdinand's remark, 'Recognizing two of her children, the Statue of Liberty gave us a friendly wave.' Though that phrase, too, has a similar ironic play, it more explicitly refers to the sense of freedom that colors our experience of the sequence – even after we know that everything is laid out in a single, fixed line. The openness that shades the determinism only arises within the context of a consideration of method.

The structure of analysis developed in this paper, the simultaneous holding of experiential judgments and the results of close analysis, can be found at every level of the sequence. The considerations that guide the way we evaluate the procedures of our judgments and analysis also form the basis for our reading of the sequence itself.<sup>58</sup> A strong claim might be that

we cannot correctly interpret the sequence except on the grounds of the methodological concerns.<sup>59</sup>

Something like the following line of argument is what Godard accesses in the sequence. Films present us with constructed worlds, frozen and determined actions. We cannot alter the way a film is put together no matter how many times we see it; nothing will change. The repetition of a film is exact and (potentially) infinite. And yet each time we see it we get a new impression of openness and choice. We always believe that things could turn out differently, that there is more than one way the characters can go about things. Ferdinand does not have to abandon his family for Marianne; she does not have to betray him at the end of the film. We can wish that they did something different, even as we know it to be impossible (either because we've seen the film before and know what happens, or because of basic conventions of the genre).

The sequence in *Pierrot le fou* makes this general feature of the experience of film its explicit topic. The apparent variations, which turn out to be only the fragmentation of a single line of action, operate according to this dynamic. Even though, at the most basic level, the sequence of actions is determined – within the diegetic world of the film, there is only one way in which the escape from Paris can happen – we nevertheless have the impression of possibility. What we know, on the basis of close analysis, to be the case is not the only thing that motivates our reading of the sequence.

Godard plays with the way we read the sequence, giving our critical activity a narrative of investigation, discovery, and interpretation. He counts on our tendency to fully trust what we initially believe to be the case, to believe the conclusions of our experiential judgments. But then we conduct a close analysis and are forced to modify our reading. At the same time, we retain our initial judgments; elements of the sequence, such as Ferdinand's final phrase, continually recall our initial experience of it as suggesting a kind of freedom. Our reading of the sequence becomes a kind of sliding back and forth between the two positions in a movement that does not

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negate either. If we are to get a handle on its richness, its full complexity, we have to let the two methods of analysis engage in a continuous and shifting interplay. We must hold our experiential judgments and the results of analysis simultaneously, allowing each to condition and constrain the imperatives of the other.



- Ferdinand and Marianne just past a fork in the road.

In *Pierrot le fou*, the two interpretations – coupled with the two forms of analysis – are moments in a rough dialectic. It is not the case that the two readings and methods exist side by side, so that we shuttle back and forth between them in our minds, holding first one and then the other. Rather, as the two examples show, they operate simultaneously and in such a way that their interplay generates a new reading of the sequence. The shift we experience as we move between one interpretation and the other, between experiential judgments and the results of close analysis, ultimately transforms our interpretation of the sequence as a whole. It is not a question of choosing either experiential judgments or close analysis, freedom or determinism. We can hold both; the antitheses are, to an extent, overcome.<sup>60</sup>

If we now have a framework within which we can articulate the methodological tensions, recognizing how they guide and structure our interpretation, a question nevertheless remains: how wide is the range of these arguments? What authority do the conclusions we reached have? Have I set out a model that is valid for this sequence alone? for all of Godard's work? for film in general?

Some distinctions need to be made between the levels of argument in this paper, and the

consequences that follow from them. First, the dialectic between freedom and destiny in the sequence is a recurrent trope in Godard's work, helping to articulate the thought of his films. We can see it at other moments in *Pierrot le fou*, such as the way Ferdinand and Marianne worry about which genre to inhabit: the romantic adventure or the gangster story. Each has its own well-defined range of possible actions, events, and outcomes. *Bande à part* thinks it through in terms of the difference between a crime and a seduction. How can an improvised relationship be formed and maintained within a carefully planned activity? *Prénom: Carmen* picks it up in the form of a debate between improvisation and planning, individuals and types. If there is a set framework for an action – the score of a Beethoven quartet, the plan to rob a bank, the story of Carmen – there are nonetheless different ways of going about it. If the final result seems pre-determined or fixed, Godard suggests that it is due to a failure to recognize the choices available for doing it differently.<sup>61</sup>



- The Statue of Liberty seen out the car window.

Second, the sequence in *Pierrot le fou* is notable in Godard's work for its type of editing. Though certainly a prolific and virtuosic editor, a marked feature of his style is the way it resides on the surface of the image. The jump-cuts in *À bout de souffle* (1960) and the slow-motion photography in *Sauve qui peut* (1979) are complex practices whose meaning (or use) is at the very least difficult to state clearly. At the same time, we are never in doubt as to what is going on; the techniques are, to a certain extent, obvious. We recognize the skipped bits of time, the elongation and fragmentation of the film's

temporality, for what they are. With the sequence from *Pierrot*, however, the point is precisely that the actual method of its editing is hidden.

The specific form the problem of interpretation takes here is not applicable to all Godard's films: it is doubtful that, in each instance of a virtuoso display of editing, our belief in what is happening is going to be mistaken. Yet there is something else that has wider applicability. The sequence alerts us to the need to pay careful attention to the details of the way Godard constructs a film. The way images and sounds are put together is not contingent, or dependent, on external supports. It is what constitutes and creates the meanings of the film, and we should be willing to give the details the attention they require.

The sequence also suggests Godard's preoccupation with the procedures by which we go about reading a film. He constructs a sequence whose success and power depends almost entirely on playing with and challenging habitual analytic procedures. It's not just that he makes films for critics; he makes films as if he were a critic, demanding our attention both as general spectators and as analysts. Such a position is, I take it, one of Godard's more important reflexive gestures: his films are not just about film, but about the ways we see and understand films.

Finally, the sequence raises a general question about the extent to which the critical method I have described – the simultaneous interplay of experiential judgments and the results of close analysis – applies outside Godard's oeuvre. I believe it has a significant range. Although Godard's specific concern with the way we analyze film is not shared by all directors, particularly those who are not as self-conscious or reflexive, the questions with which he is grappling, if we take them seriously, are central to the way we read a film. The problems he raises do, and should, arise with frequency.<sup>62</sup>

The use of close analysis to help us get a sense of the way a film or sequence constructs its meaning is a common tool of critical work. What the sequence from *Pierrot le fou* emphasizes is

the fact that a crucial piece of the general method of analysis ought to be our experience as a film viewer. The meaning of the sequence cannot be brought out in its full complexity unless, at the same time as we do the work of close analysis, we recognize the value and importance of the initial beliefs we formed while watching the film.<sup>63</sup> If these ultimately turn out to be mistaken, they are not irrelevant for the purposes of interpretation. In this paper, I have tried to articulate one particular form an understanding of the relation between experiential judgments and more precise analytic work might take. But the specific balance between the two methods for a film can only be determined by the work of criticism itself.<sup>64</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Gottlob Frege, 'Begriffsschrift' in *Frege and Gödel: Two Fundamental Texts in Mathematical Logic*, ed. Jean van Heijenoort (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 6.
- 2 Jean-Luc Godard, 'Let's Talk about *Pierrot*' in *Godard on Godard*, ed. Tom Milne (New York, Da Capo Press, 1972), pp. 215–34; p. 223.
- 3 A notable exception is Alfred Guzzetti, *Two or Three Things I Know about Her: Analysis of a Film by Godard* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981).
- 4 For example: 'As a critic, I thought of myself as a film-maker. Today I still think of myself as a critic, and in a sense I am, more than ever before. Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed. I think of myself as an essayist . . . only instead of writing, I film them' (Godard, 'Interview with Jean-Luc Godard' in *Godard on Godard*, pp. 171–96; p. 171).
- 5 Christian Metz, *Film Language* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 218.
- 6 He writes, 'One can decompose a shot, but one cannot reduce it' (Metz, *Film Language*, p. 116).
- 7 I am claiming that three variables are at work in segmentation: not only images, but sound and narrative events as well. In a similar vein, Brian Henderson criticizes Metz's theory of segmentation because it lacks an account of the formation and significance of narrative units (Cf. Brian Henderson, *A Critique of Film Theory* (New York, E.P. Dutton, 1980), pp. 118–43). I want to emphasize that I am not trying to set out a theory of segmentation based on a specific combination of these three variables.
- 8 This music, though similar to what we heard before

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the sequence began (and what played over the opening credits), has not yet appeared in the film.

- 9 Metz, *Film Language*, p. 218.
- 10 Alfred Guzzetti, 'Christian Metz and the Semiology of the Cinema' in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 2nd Edition, eds Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York, Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 184–203; p. 195.
- 11 Although the position of shots 6 and 13 is somewhat ambiguous, it is probable that they occupy the position in which I have placed them. The reconstructed narrative, then, goes something like this: Ferdinand and Marianne put Frank's body into the bathtub, go out onto the roof, see the man and the dwarf walk below them, wait, and then drop down; Marianne gets the car, Ferdinand jumps in, and they drive down the highway and out of Paris.
- 12 This worry is encapsulated in a brief exchange early in the film. Marianne, riding in the car with Ferdinand, remarks that she wishes life were as it is represented in books: 'clear, logical, organized . . . But it isn't.' Ferdinand replies: 'Yes it is . . . a lot more than people think.'
- 13 Alfred Guzzetti has suggested to me that the sound helps to fix the meaning of the sequence; for example, the repeated phrase, 'partir en vitesse [leave in a hurry],' motivates the flurry and speed of the shots. I do not wish to contest Guzzetti's claim, but it is important to note that it deals with an internal justification for the form of the sequence, and the problem of motivation is not my concern here. There is, however, a broader methodological worry. I do not mean to reduce Godard's complex modernist practice to the dimension of narrative. Metz makes this error, and in so doing he ignores the strong materialist and non-narrative impulses in the sequence. Part of what I hope to do in this paper is suggest that questions of narration and narrative comprehension are central to the more general concerns of Godard's modernist cinema.
- 14 Two examples might be thought to qualify this claim. One is the opening credits, where a series of seemingly disordered fragments (the letters placed on screen in alphabetical order) combine to produce a unified whole. The other is the party scene, where a brief repetition occurs as Ferdinand walks by a couple talking about 'Olympia's melancholy.' As he passes them, there is a cut that moves us back in the action, so that Ferdinand in effect retraces his steps (although the conversation continues). The repetition is disguised, on the one hand, by a shift in the color of the tinting and, on the other, by the fact that Ferdinand's shadow at the start of the second shot is in the exact position his body occupies at the end of the first. Neither example, though, engages in the kind of systemic disorientation and confusion the sequence discussed here produces.
- 15 There is another problem: we are not sure who the dwarf and the man are, or why they are significant to the story. We don't find this out until much later in the film.
- 16 We might also take into account the voice-over, which has Marianne saying 'leave in a hurry,' and the music, which continues uninterrupted.
- 17 Cf. Brecht's remark: 'Music does not 'accompany' except in the form of comment' (Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre' in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. John Willet (New York, Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 179–205; p. 203).
- 18 As I demonstrated above, it isn't. Shot 9 is the immediate predecessor to shot 2, and so the two do not overlap; but this fact does not take away the feeling of repetition the shot evokes.
- 19 This reading seems consistent over time. In 1992, T. Jefferson Kline wrote: 'Godard has Belmondo and Karina articulate the voice-over narration, alternating every other word. Then images begin to be repeated, but not quite, suggesting not only that visual linearity has been forsaken but also that visual reliability has been compromised. It is as if the camera is trying to 'get it right' by repeating their flight from this apartment in a variety of slightly different takes'. Quoted in Angela Dalle Vache, *Cinema and Painting: How Art Is Used in Film* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 124.
- 20 Merleau-Ponty, for example, writes: 'analytical perception, through which we arrive at absolute value of the separate elements, is a belated and rare attitude – that of the scientist who observes or the philosopher who reflects. The perception of forms, understood very broadly as structure, grouping, or configuration should be considered our spontaneous way of seeing' (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Film and the New Psychology' in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 48–59; p. 49).
- 21 This is not an essential, trans-historical feature of cinema, but something like what Michael Fried calls a 'deep convention': if it were absent, 'the enterprise of [cinema] would have to change so drastically that nothing more than the name would remain' (Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 148–72; p. 169 n. 6).
- 22 The imperative form of this position might be Nietzsche's call to 'to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 8.
- 23 I hope it is clear that 'experiential' is not to be equated with 'naïve' or 'natural.' Nor is it the case that there is something we should call *the* experience.
- 24 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, Enlarged Edition (New York, The Viking Press, 1979), pp. 12–3.

- 25 An important corollary to this argument has to do with how we remember a film: what sticks in our mind and what we mis-remember. The mistakes we make when we think back to a film and call it to mind should be incorporated into our analytic work; error is part of the way we experience film. (Cavell, pp. ix–xi).
- 26 Metz, *Film Language*, p. 219. If we follow Metz's argument, we might ask: do we know from the sequence itself that the event took place? or is it merely from the place it occupies within the broader narrative logic of the film?
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- 28 Richard Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 75.
- 29 Here Guzzetti's remark, 'after all, nothing 'happened'; the story is made up, and its author would seem intolerably pretentious if he demanded that we forget this fact in the midst of a sequence that so clearly shows his hand,' seems perplexing (Guzzetti, 'Christian Metz and the Semiology of the Cinema,' p. 196). Metz is not concerned with the relation between events on screen and those in the world; his claim is that the events are 'potential' within the diegetic world itself.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 195–6.
- 31 Bertolt Brecht, 'New Technique of Acting' in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 136–47; p. 137.
- 32 This hesitation is mirrored in Cavell's changing view of what criticism of a film should comprise. Initially, he says that it is a way of understanding the experience of a film (and his memory of that experience), and that 'it is arguable that the only instruments that could provide data for a theory of film are the procedures of criticism' (Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 12). In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell continues to argue that criticism involves finding words to articulate his experience, but experience here is more explicitly a modality that can be educated and refined (Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 11, pp. 41–2). His position radically shifts in a later article, when he asserts the value of analytic criticism: '[films] lend themselves to the same pitch of critical scrutiny as do any of the works we care about most seriously' (Stanley Cavell, 'The Fact of Television' in *Themes out of School* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 235–68; p. 239). This shift does not seem so much a negation of earlier positions as the voicing of a desire for a complementary form of analysis; Cavell's criticism of literature and theatre has always exhibited a careful and nuanced attention to detail.
- 33 Guzzetti uses the term 'deep structure' for much the same purpose (Guzzetti, 'Christian Metz and the Semiology of the Cinema', p. 195).
- 34 The distinction between 'wrong' and 'incorrect' made here is not entirely natural. Because there is no clear distinction between these terms in ordinary language, I have stipulated their respective meanings. A way to get clearer on the distinction as I am using it is to think of mathematical proofs: a result is correct or incorrect, whereas the procedure by which we arrive at the result is right or wrong.
- 35 Godard, 'Let's Talk about *Pierrot*,' p. 221.
- 36 In saying that we desire confirmation, I am trying to avoid the implication that the impulse to look more closely at the sequence means that we experience the sequence as a problem to be solved. If we are confused about what happens, it is different than the sense that our judgments may be wrong or are threatened in some particular way. Confirmation has more to do with a general desire to be certain, to ensure that we stand on a solid foundation, than with a response to a specific challenge or doubt. Nonetheless, the certainty is not absolute. I read much of the opening of *Pierrot* – the speeches about Velasquez and Picasso, the worry about the private lives of men in photographs – as articulating the impossibility of getting a clear view of things. The film invokes the aura of uncertainty (Velasquez), or the multiplicity of viewpoints (Picasso), that surrounds an object.
- 37 Whether or not we act on this urge is another story altogether, and one not relevant to this argument.
- 38 In *Prénom: Carmen* (1984), there are several occasions where Godard follows a shot with an alternate take.
- 39 I suspect that the inertia that accompanies ordinary viewing – the extent to which an interruption to repeat a passage feels like a radical disruption – changes over time. Whereas in the 1950s, the shock of stopping *in medias res* would have been great, the promulgation of videos in the 1980s changed our relation to the linearity of viewing. Similarly, the possibility for non-sequential viewing that computers present may change our habits as well.
- 40 Raymond Bellour, when he discusses the way a film can quote itself, fails to note that in doing so it changes the reference of the original material, becoming a reflection on itself rather than a simple repetition (Raymond Bellour, 'The Unattainable Text,' *Screen*, 16:3, 19–27). Cf. Gottlob Frege. 'On Sinn and Bedeutung' in *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, ed. Brian McGuinness (New York, Blackwell, 1984), pp. 151–71; Donald Davidson, 'Quotation' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 79–92.
- 41 An obvious area to which this argument leads is Freud's discussion of repetition and compulsion, along with Lacan's subsequent reading. Though it would be a fruitful line of inquiry, and I by no means want to close it off, the point here is that my

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- account does not require Freudian meta-psychology to be valid.
- 42 These could be intuitions, inferences, or responses to a certain 'atmosphere' the film generates.
- 43 David Bordwell, *The Films of Carl Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981), p. 103.
- 44 *Ibid.* My emphasis.
- 45 An example of this model can be found in Vlada Petric, *Constructivism in Film* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 46 This kind of gesture is described by Laura Mulvey in a comment on Chris Petit's *Negative Images* (1998), which at one point shows a slowed down sequence from Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1954). Mulvey writes, 'Later, the tape slows down the sequence of Alex and Katherine driving through the crowd in the streets of Maiori. While Ingrid Bergman's intricate changes of expression are in the foreground, outside the car, three of the children running alongside it are suddenly made visible in detail, rather than lost in the swift movement of twenty-four frames per second. [We can] slow down film and make the incidental and the arbitrary visible' (Laura Mulvey, 'Vesuvian Topographies: The Eruption of the Past in *Voyage to Italy*' in *Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real*, eds David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London, BFI, 2000), pp. 95–111; p. 110).
- 47 The analysis, he writes, 'aims to demonstrate how meaning emerges in the succession of a story in pictures by the double constraint of repetition and variation, hierarchized according to the logical progression of symmetry and asymmetry' (Raymond Bellour, 'System of a Fragment' in *The Analysis of Film* (Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 2000), pp. 28–67; p. 28).
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 58–9. Having uncovered deeper structures in the sequence, Bellour then speaks of shots that, by virtue of the logic he sees, 'should' follow others – even if they don't (*Ibid.*, p. 62).
- 49 Curiously, James Naremore does not list this pair of shots in his catalogue of forward movements coupled with dissolves (James Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles* (Dallas, Southern Methodist University Press, 1989), pp. 56–7). Nor does he mention anything unusual about it when he discusses the scene (*Ibid.*, p. 61).
- 50 Tom Gunning has noted another example. In Fritz Lang's *M* (1932), there is a moment in the scene in the beggar's hall where the camera tracks upwards, moves towards a window, and goes through it. A closer look, however, reveals that the window in fact slides open to allow the camera to pass through. The trick is visible on an ordinary viewing if one knows what to look for: the pane of glass sliding open is briefly visible as the camera moves forward.
- 51 As so much of *Citizen Kane* does, the trick here trades on our desire for the camera to have access to knowledge in ways ordinarily unavailable to us. The illusion is part visual, part epistemological.
- 52 Godard's interest in thinking through these questions can be found in his declaration, used as an epigraph to this paper, that his interest in *Pierrot le fou* was to see why one shot follows another. It can also be seen in the way the detailed analysis of images becomes the explicit content of films such as *Letter to Jane* (1972) and *Comment ça va?* (1978). Thus, although one might argue that the whole sequence is nothing but an experiment or game on Godard's part, that he wants to see if he can produce the impression of repetitions without actually repeating anything, I find the sequence to be too carefully crafted for that, and that such a reading is out of place with Godard's general interests – though Welles might do such a thing.
- 53 It is in *Pierrot le fou* that Godard begins to develop a more critical relation to America, specifically around the questions of violence. In his earlier films, Godard is careful to distinguish the violence of the gangster genre from the violence of real-world politics. *Bande à part* (1964) is relatively unconcerned with political events, while *Le petit soldat* (1960) bears almost no relation to the genre films. In *Pierrot*, not only does Ferdinand watch newsreels from Vietnam; the violence of the political world now motivates the violence of the genre: the trouble they're in is a (somewhat indirect) result of gun smuggling for militant groups. In this sense, *Pierrot* is a break film for Godard; the concerns, styles, and representational strategies of the previous series of films end and a new, more politically motivated series begins.
- 54 Franz Kafka, *Amerika* (Norfolk, New Directions, 1940), p. 3.
- 55 Ferdinand says, later in the film, that they are the children of Captain Grant – the title of a novel by Jules Verne.
- 56 Godard, 'Let's Talk about *Pierrot*,' p. 219.
- 57 Stanley Cavell drew my attention to this point.
- 58 This is a position I see as one of Godard's deeper connections to a kind of high modernist aesthetic.
- 59 Traditionally, the gap is between form and content. Bazin, for example, speaks of 'a convincing affinity' in the relation between form and content, of analogies between formal structures and meaning (André Bazin, *Orson Welles* (New York, Harper & Row, 1978), p. 75). Here, the problem is similar, but we have to go about it in a different way. Rather than thinking about the relation of form to content, of the way style generates meaning, we need to move from considerations of how the sequence is put together – of what counts as its 'fact' – to an investigation of what it could mean, or at least how we should take it to produce meaning.

- 60 The argument in this paper does not exhaust the richness of the sequence. More interpretative work should be done, for example, on the visual composition of the shots and their formal interaction across cuts.
- 61 In *Prénom: Carmen*, we can find this dynamic in the connection between shots. Godard gives, in immediate succession, a shot and an alternate take of it, thereby suggesting, as I read him, that it didn't necessarily have to look either way. There are always other ways of showing what happened, and hence other ways the action could have been done. The dominance of the given is an illusion of (false) perspective.
- 62 One way to grasp Godard's project is as a hyperbolization of a basic problem in thinking about film; by foregrounding it, he makes the issue unavoidable.
- 63 Robert Warshow writes, 'A critic may extend his frame of reference as far as it will bear extension, but it seems to me almost self-evident that he should start with the simple acknowledgment of his own relation to the object he criticizes; at the center of all truly successful criticism there is always a man reading a book, a man looking at a picture, a man watching a movie' (Robert Warshow, 'Author's Preface' in *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, Anchor Books, 1964), pp. xxiii–xxviii; p. xxv).
- 64 I want to thank Stanley Cavell, Alfred Guzzetti, Barbara Herman, and Mickey Morgan for many conversations on these issues, and for their generous comments on drafts of this paper. Tom Gunning in particular deserves thanks; he first suggested that I develop my intuitions about the sequence into a more formal argument, and then gave invaluable comments and support throughout the process of writing this paper.