

Standard Gauge

1984

16mm, color, optical sound, 35 minutes

Director and camera: Morgan Fisher

Principal assistant: Susan Rosenfeld

Production assistants: Grace Barnes, Alex Gibney, Mark Stahl, and Christopher Williams

Sound: Cinesound

Consultants: Thom Andersen and Pete Comandini

Narration written and spoken by: Morgan Fisher

Standard Gauge in Three Parts

1.

A frame of frames, a piece of pieces, a length of lengths. Standard gauge on substandard; narrower, yes, but longer. An ECU that's an ELS. *Disjecta membra*; Hollywood anthologized. A kind of autobiography of its maker, a kind of history of the institution from whose shards it is composed, the commercial motion picture industry. A mutual interrogation between 35mm and 16mm, the gauge of Hollywood, and the gauge of the amateur and independent.

2.

The above paragraph was the first note I wrote about *Standard Gauge*, a film I finished in 1984. I liked it because it was terse. It's a collection of sentence fragments, which I meant to reflect the fragments that make up the film. Later on I wrote a longer note, which here I have revised only slightly:

Standard Gauge is an autobiographical account of a few years in the film career of its maker. Such, at least, is its ostensible form and purpose.

The material from which the film is composed is pieces of 35mm motion picture film, a width known in former times as standard gauge, that its maker collected while working in and around the commercial motion picture industry. The pieces are a miscellaneous assortment, and include narrative features, trailers, newsreels, commercials, and pieces of head and tail leader.

The method of the film, which was shot in 16mm, is to show these pieces one after the other in an extreme close-up that is one continuous shot lasting thirty-two minutes. This is a minute short of the maximum length of a scene in 16mm, and is nearly three times longer than what 35mm is capable of. The body of the film is this single continuous scene, and it is preceded by an extended written text, presented by means of a crawl, that gives a brief history of how 35mm came into being. It explains that 35mm became the gauge of the commercial film industry, and that, with the emergence of other gauges, 35mm came to be known as standard gauge. As each piece of film is shown—there are about thirty in all—a narrative spoken by the maker describes some point related to it: the

circumstances under which it was collected, for example, or a technical aspect of the image, such as the process by which it was produced.

So *Standard Gauge* is a kind of collage or found-footage film. But instead of being spliced together and projected, and so brought to life, as in the films of Bruce Conner, the pieces of film in *Standard Gauge* remain separate, and are presented one after the other for inspection by the audience as inert pieces of film, translucent objects made of celluloid. They are thus experienced by the viewer of the film as they would be by someone, such as an editor or a negative cutter, who handles and organizes film as material.

Although the film is one continuous shot, each piece of film fills the frame and so inflects the embracing shot, creating within it the effect of a succession of shots. So the film combines two conventions usually held to be mutually exclusive, or even antagonistic: editing—the construction of a film through montage—and the long take, the impassive recording of a scene that has been arranged with some purpose in mind.

Just as *Standard Gauge* amalgamates the two great modes of film syntax, it also brings together narrative and non-narrative filmmaking. By examining the shards of the industry frame by frame, it discovers some of the means and themes of experimental film living, so to speak, in Hollywood. And at the same time, the film engulfs and usurps the material of the commercial motion picture industry, turning it into its subject.

Thus *Standard Gauge* proposes a kind of mutuality or interdependence between two kinds of filmmaking that by conventional standards are thought to be divided by an unbridgeable chasm. By means of a mutual interrogation between 35mm, the gauge of the industry, and 16mm, the gauge of the independent and amateur, *Standard Gauge* proposes to unify film of every kind.

3.

Recently I've written more.

When I say in the first note that the film is standard gauge on substandard, I am only repeating the language that was in use at one time. There was a time when 16mm film was called substandard. The prefix “sub-” is logical because 16 as a number is less than 35, below it. But when the prefix is added to “standard” it creates a word that even if correct in the narrow sense carries with it the whiff of the pejorative that is echoed in what Hollywood editors used to call 16mm film: spaghetti. So in the view of Hollywood, 16mm wasn't just below, it was also beneath.

To explain “An ECU that's an ELS”: ECU means an extreme close-up, and, as you might now guess, ELS means extreme long shot. Of course the short and long refer to the subject's distance from the camera. The stagecoach racing in the distance across Monument Valley is an ELS of the stagecoach. So, to state the obvious, I was playing with the meaning of “long,” turning it from meaning far away to meaning lasting a long time.

People have asked me if *Standard Gauge* is itself shot in 35mm. No, it's not, as they would have realized if they knew a little more about the technical aspect of 35mm. The narration says that takes in *Under Capricorn* were as long as was possible at the time and

that I thought this length was still the longest possible. I didn't give the length of this take in the narration because I didn't want to belabor the point. But to repeat what I said in the second note, the take that is *Standard Gauge* is nearly three times longer than the longest take that is possible in 35mm. So *Standard Gauge*, a modest little film in 16mm, does something that no film made the industry can do. So much for 16mm being beneath 35mm.

But I am happy that people ask this question, because I think it suggests that *Standard Gauge* really does make you think about the material base of the film that is the origin of the image on the screen. You see on the screen the pieces of film in their entire width, from one edge to the other. So you see all of what is within that width: you see the frame, and you also see the margins beyond the frame, occupied by the sprocket holes, the sound track, and so on. What you see is the literal difference between the width you know that film has and the width of the frame that you see on the screen that you know is less than the width of the film. I think that seeing on the screen these things that are a part of the facts of a piece of film but are always excluded from the image you see on the screen makes you think about these same things in the film in the projector, the film you are watching. You already know there is more to any film than the partial shadow of it that you see on the screen, but *Standard Gauge* shows you what this margin looks like and shows you some varieties in the things you find there: the names of different film manufacturers, and so on. (*Standard Gauge* also shows you some varieties of what occurs in another margin, the margin of the leaders at the head and tail of a film print.) So I think people ask if *Standard Gauge* is in 35mm because what they see on the screen is 35mm, and they suppose, quite reasonably, that, like the pieces of film they see on the screen, the film that shows those images of 35mm is itself in 35mm. It isn't, but that is less the point than the fact that people are thinking about the film itself. If people think about the film in the projector when they see *Standard Gauge*, perhaps they are more likely to think about it when they see other films.

The ultimate subject of *Standard Gauge* is how a single continuous take can be a complex event. *Standard Gauge* raises the question in an acute way because the film consists of only one shot. The film isn't just one continuous take, it's a static shot, and an extreme close-up. In their modest ways, these are all extremes, and together they emphasize the radicality, if I can call it that, of the continuous take that is the foundation of the film.

The film's procedure of showing a series of pieces of film as objects is possible only in a single take. It may be the case, as I say above, that the pieces of film one after another within a continuous take create the effect of a succession of shots. But between each piece of film the frame is empty. The empty frame is the field into which each successive piece of film is inserted, and this empty frame is a reminder of the continuing and unvarying field of *Standard Gauge*. The empty frame between the pieces emphasizes that the pieces are materially separate objects, and this in turn points to the continuous take that contains them all.

Beyond this simple procedure, I tried to point to the continuous take in *Standard Gauge* without talking about it directly by means of some of the fragments I included and by what I said about them.

As the narration makes clear, the piece from the leader of *The Naked Dawn* is really only an excuse to talk about another film by Ulmer, *Detour*. The last shot in *Detour* is a

continuous take in which very complicated things happen. What I say in the narration remarks only on how the shot moves from the present to the future. Of course what happens later in any shot is the future in relation to what happened earlier, but in this shot in *Detour* there's a jump ahead in time that lies beyond the sense of the continuing present that a continuous shot usually implies. The main character, nearly at the end of his rope, is delivering an interior monologue. We hear the words that he speaks, but we don't see him say them. He says, "But one thing I don't have to worry about—I know: someday a car will stop to pick me up..." He makes a prediction, and on the screen we see his prediction come true. His saying the word "will" shifts the scene to the future, and the action that fulfills his prediction confirms this shift. The disjunction in time between present and future that these tenses mark in language operates with equal force in the scene. Within one continuous shot, the continuing present ends, and we are suddenly in the future.

But in fact what happens in this shot is even more complicated than that. I was worried that it would be too complicated to explain and would take too long, so I didn't go into it.

Before the last shot, the main character is sitting in a diner looking resigned as he delivers his interior monologue. You see his face in a close shot, so you are looking at the face of the man from whose mind the voice you hear is coming. The monologue continues over the cut to the last shot, but in this shot the character is suddenly far off in the distance, even though the voice continues as it did when you saw the character in close-up. Then he makes his prediction, and we see it come true. The shift in tense that the prediction and its coming true produce is reinforced by the character's being off in the distance, as though his distance off in space corresponds to a distance off in time. But his being off in the distance has another effect: even though he speaks in the first person, his being in the distance results, for me at least, in the inner voice no longer seeming to come from the man whose body we see in the distance, but from someone else. It can't be anyone else in the scene, so it has to come from outside of the scene, that is, from a narrator. A narrator isn't really in the film, just as the musicians who play music for the soundtrack aren't in the film. They are in a space outside of the film, except when Godard makes a joke about it by having a pan reveal the musicians who until then were off-screen, and you see them producing the beautiful music that until you see them actually playing you took to be normal movie music.

So even though the scene in the diner made it clear that the origin of the voice was the mind of the character, in the last shot the character splits in two. There's a body on the screen, but the body is so far away that the voice no longer seems to come from it, but instead shifts to coming from someone we can only take to be a narrator. And in making this shift the voice leaves the space of the film and crosses over into a space that we know is outside of it. These two things together in the same shot, the change in tense and the character's splitting in two, produce a real vertigo.

The piece from *Under Capricorn* is another case of pointing to the long take, but beyond that, I also wanted to suggest that directors that work in the commercial film industry are sometimes interested in working in relation to the material constraints of film, just as avant-garde filmmakers are. I think it's clear that the long take was a part of Hitchcock's thinking about the film from the beginning, not a technical procedure that he added as an embellishment to a film that he had already conceived separately from it. He conceived of the device of the long take and the subject together. In thinking up *Standard*

Gauge, I did the same thing. The long take is ultimately a limit; there is a length longer than which a shot cannot be. And the shot in *Standard Gauge* is one minute short of it. Of course I wanted the shot to be the maximum possible length, but it didn't quite work out.

Comparable thinking about limits is in some of Hitchcock's other work, notably *Rope*, which takes as its founding rule the appearance of taking place in continuous time. There are cuts but it appears that there are no lapses in time between the shots that they join. I say "appears" because of course the shots were not made one after the other without a lapse in time between them, as the shots appear to be in the film. And after the first shot, which is an exterior, the camera never leaves the room that the first shot cuts to, so the film depicts a space that is as confined as the continuity of time would imply. Films usually elide time, and usually space too; they omit the time that the story doesn't need, and they jump from one space to another, as the story requires. So it's as if Hitchcock decided to make a film by refusing to resort to treating space and time with the usual liberty that film so easily makes available and that almost all commercial films depend on. And I note that the title of *Rope* names a material that is characterized by being a continuous length (and one that you don't cut unless you have to), and so calls attention to the long takes that make up the film, and by implication the film's apparent continuity of time. And we think of a rope as characterized more by its length than anything else.

The same impulse to reverse orthodox conventions lies behind *Lifeboat* and *Rear Window*. They're not temporally continuous, as *Rope* gives the appearance of being, but they are spatially continuous, in that they each take place in only one relatively confined space. After the montage of the ship's sinking that begins *Lifeboat*, and except for five underwater shots in the fishing sequence, for the entirety of the film the camera is in the lifeboat. *Rear Window* is only a little less strict. For almost every shot in the film the camera is within James Stewart's apartment. For the few shots where the camera is not in his apartment (several in the sequence following the death of the dog and several at the climax of the film), it is within the confines of the courtyard that his apartment looks out on, a space of course much bigger than his apartment but almost as circumscribed by walls as the apartment itself. There are lots of shots from James Stewart's apartment that are his POV,¹ and these POVs are cuts to spaces outside his apartment, but the camera remains in his apartment. When his POVs are through a telephoto lens, as they frequently are, what he sees is sufficiently alienated by distance that it creates the effect of a spatial discontinuity even though we know this can't be so because a POV in itself is a guarantor of spatial continuity. What look like spatial discontinuities are in fact inflections within the spatial continuity that we know *Rear Window* observes. I allow myself to suggest that the fragments of film within the continuity of *Standard Gauge* function in a comparable way: they look like cuts to other spaces, but in fact they are not.

My point is simply that in these films Hitchcock chose to work within limits: temporal continuity, spatial continuity, the material continuity of a roll of film. It was a question of his finding limits and a story that suited each other. So at least one director working in the commercial film industry sometimes looked at the limits that govern film, limits in both its conventions and its material, as being generative; and in thinking this way he was doing what many filmmakers have done who are far away from the industry. That doesn't make Hitchcock an independent filmmaker, of course, but I want to point out the similarity in thinking between these two very different spheres. What makes the

similarity in thinking possible is film as a material and the continuity that it both embodies and implies.

This interest in working in relation to limits is a specific case where it is possible to think of film as a unified field. Film of all kinds is unified by its material facts. I think this is true of film as it is true of no other medium. I wanted *Standard Gauge* to act out this idea of unity both in its form, combining 16mm and 35mm, and in its allusions. There are the allusions to commercial directors—Ulmer and Hitchcock—and in the same space, so to speak, are allusions to filmmakers not in the industry.

I mention Bruce Conner by name, but other filmmakers are as present as Hitchcock and Ulmer and Vincente Minelli, the director of *The Bandwagon*. The principle device of the film, a close-up of a series of pieces of photographic material with voice-over commentary, bears enough of a resemblance to (*nostalgia*) to remind us of Hollis Frampton. The sprocket holes and edge lettering and dirt particles and the China girls all remind us of Owen Land (formerly known as George Landow). And Paul Sharits is there in the frames that are one solid color. The long take could be taken as a reference to Ernie Gehr as well as to Warhol. I suppose that the 20th Century Fox logo could be taken as an oblique allusion to Jack Goldstein, not a filmmaker as these others are, but an artist who as one part of his practice made films, and one of his films was an adaptation of the logo of another Hollywood studio, the MGM lion.

I was also thinking about painters. Ed Ruscha is there in the 20th Century Fox logo, Brice Marden is in the logo for Movielab, Ellsworth Kelly is in the solid blue frame, and Barnett Newman is in the frame that is solid blue except for the narrow vertical white band at the far right edge. And Adolf Gottlieb is there, if obliquely, in the two blobby shapes on a plain background that must have been created by some chance event in the lab. I feel it is only fair to Gottlieb to mention him. There was a time when he meant more to me than he does now, but he is in the film.

This was important to me, that a film could contain all these people in such a way that it was possible to think there was something that unified them besides their all being in the film. Maybe it's as simple as wanting to think that they are all artists, in the truest sense.

At the first screening of the film someone remarked that there was much in the film about death: the crash of the *Hindenburg*, the execution of the Fascist prison official, a director planning to make a film in which you saw people actually die, the death of a soldier in newsreel footage, figurative death in the decay of nitrate film and in the signs of the passing of time that so many of the pieces bear. I suppose this is true, but I really don't know what to make of it. Maybe it's an unconscious prefiguration of the death we know that film will suffer. I wonder how long 16mm will survive. The day will come when you can't buy 16mm film to shoot with, instead there will only be 16mm print stock to make prints from existing materials. Then they'll stop making black and white print stock, and make only color print stock. Then some day they'll stop making 16mm altogether. I suppose the same will happen for 35mm, although that day is further off.

This possibility of the end of film is the negative implication of my saying that film is unified by its material facts as no other medium is. The absolute uniformity of film as a material (and the many things that spring from this simple fact) is the fundamental source of its appeal as a medium, but this uniformity is possible only because film is produced on an industrial basis. The origin of film's single most salient property in industrial

production also gives film a vulnerability that no other medium has. The companies that make it can decide to stop making it. Already the companies that still make film make it in fewer varieties. An individual can't manufacture film, so filmmakers are at the mercy of the companies that make their raw material as people who work in other media and other forms are not. I suppose that a similar claim could be made for video, but film as film will someday be gone, while video in one form or another will go on indefinitely.

I wish there were a way to make a connection between this presence of death in *Standard Gauge* and the fact that the film is a single take. Maybe the connection is that in a long take we have the chance to experience real time and the continuity of space that it implies. Real time is the time in which we live, and that means it's also the time in which we die.

¹ POV is short for "point of view." For more on point of view shots see "Screening Room and Death," pp. 87-93 in *Morgan Fisher. Writings*, ed. Sabine Folie and Susanne Titz (Vienna: Generali Foundation; Mönchengladbach: Museum Abteiberg; Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012).

First published in 1985 as a program note for a screening at the Collective for Living Cinema, New York; excerpt from a later and undated note published in *Indipendenti USA, Charles Burnett, Stan Brakhage*, ed. Francesco Bono, Quaderno Informativo (Pesaro: XXVII Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema, 1991); expanded version published in *Fate of Alien Modes*, ed. Constanze Ruhm, Annette Südbeck, and Rike Frank, exh. cat. (Vienna: Secession, 2003); republished with minor revisions in *Los Angeles: Eine Stadt im Film. A City on Film*, ed. Astrid Ofner and Claudia Siefen (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2008); condensed version published in *Morgan Fisher. Two Exhibitions*, ed. Sabine Folie and Susanne Titz, exh. cat. (Vienna: Generali Foundation; Mönchengladbach: Museum Abteiberg; Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012); this version a slightly revised reprinting of the version published in *Los Angeles: Eine Stadt im Film. A City on Film*, 2008.

()

2003

16mm, color/black and white, silent (24 frames per second), 21 minutes

Director: Morgan Fisher

The origin of () was my fascination with inserts. Inserts are a kind of shot that is crucial to the syntax of narrative film. Inserts show newspaper headlines, letters, and similar sorts of significant details that have to be included for the sake of clarity in telling the story. I have long been struck by a quality of inserts that can be called alien, and also alienated.

Narrative film depends on inserts (it's a very rare film that has none), but at the same time inserts are utterly marginal. They are far from the traffic in faces and bodies that is the heart of narrative film. Inserts have the power of the indispensable, but in the register of bathos. Inserts are above all instrumental. They have a job to do, and they do it; and they do little if anything else. Sometimes inserts are remarkably beautiful, but this beauty is usually hard to see because the only thing that registers is the news, the expository information, that the insert conveys. That is the unhappy ideal of the insert: you see only what it does, and not what it is. This of course is no more than the ideal of all the devices of narrative filmmaking and the rules that govern their use.

So inserts, like all shots in narrative film, are purely instrumental, but they embody this fact to the most extreme degree. If there is one kind of shot in the movies in which there is the least latitude for the exercise of expressive intelligence, it is the insert. This is because all considerations in composing the shot must bend to the single imperative of making something clear. If there is a hierarchy in the prestige and glamour of the different kinds of shots in narrative film, inserts are at the bottom. In the old days, inserts were sometimes directed, if indeed that is the word, by someone other than the director. That is how little inserts matter as occasions for expression. (There are exceptions to the degradation that inserts embody. Hitchcock's inserts are beautiful and made with extreme care; it is all but a certainty that he directed them himself.)

I wanted to make a film out of nothing but inserts, or shots that were close enough to being inserts, in order to make them visible. The way to do this was to release inserts from their self-effacing subordination to their stories. Liberating inserts from their stories would raise them from the realm of Necessity to the realm of Freedom.

By chance I learned that the root of "parenthesis" is a Greek word that means "the act of inserting." And so I was given the title of the film.

Inserts are the subject I began with. I gathered inserts from a number of commercial feature films, extracting each insert just as I found it. The question was how to organize them. My purpose, to set the inserts free, ruled out editing. In a film that is edited, each cut is made to produce a specific meaning or a specific effect. When you edit you impose yourself on the material, and that is exactly what I did not want to do to the inserts. The fact that my purpose ruled out editing was consistent with my earlier films, almost none of which are edited. Editing is an act

of composition that as such shapes the material to control the viewer's relation to the work. Instead of being edited, my films are constructed. Construction is impersonal. It tries to get away from the subjectivity of the artist that composition, of which editing is a kind, always entails.

One way to construct a work is with a rule. A rule has enormous power: it provides the reason for the work to be as it is. The rule can be stated, and its being stateable locates the origin of the work outside the artist. The artist didn't make the work, the rule did. The rule produced the work from which we understand the rule that produced the work. This reciprocity, or circularity, between rule and result leaves the artist out. One of my favorite artists is Sol LeWitt. His classic work relies on rules, and he underscores the wish to leave himself out of his work that a rule implies by hiring art workers to execute the work. Of course, ultimately, any work made by a rule can only point back to the artist as its origin because the artist composed the rule. But at least the rule introduces an intermediate term that does what it can to give the work an origin other than the artist who in the end we know made it.

A rule's property of producing a predictable result is usually one of the reasons for using one. The rule predicts what will happen, and what happens confirms the rule and so points to it. Our being able to see the relation between origin and result is one of the pleasures that a rule produces. But the predictability that is the origin of that pleasure would interfere with the freedom I wanted to give the inserts. If what the viewer saw in the relations among the shots was the rule that assigned them to their places, to the extent that the shots confirmed the rule and so pointed to it they would lose their freedom.

A rule is predictable only if it is apparent. So the solution was to devise a rule that was invisible. Then there would be no relations among the shots for the viewer to see as enacting and confirming the rule. Without a visible rule to predict it, the film would be unpredictable, and so each shot would have as much freedom as possible. In a film that is unpredictable, you can't anticipate, you can't expect a shot, you can't see a shot as confirming what you knew should happen; you have to take each shot as it comes. In following a rule, the film has affinities with structural film,

The rule I devised did what I wanted it to do: it relieved me of the necessity of doing any composing beyond choosing the rule. All I had to do was choose the shots. I chose shots that I thought represented the range of what inserts are. I acknowledge that this is composition of a kind, but I would say that in this case it is not a central issue. I was glad that sometimes the same sort of shot occurred twice, or sometimes more than twice, for example, shots of wristwatches. And I'm glad there are shots that showed the operation of chance, for example those of dice.

Related to choosing the shots was deciding how long to make the film. This was a compositional decision, but there was no way around it. I chose enough shots to add up to a length that was not too short and not too long. I added and subtracted shots in accordance with the rule, as a poet adds or subtracts syllables to make the meter work out. In the end, the place of every shot was in accordance with the rule. There are some shots that I would call weak, but that's all right; their presence tells you that I was obedient to a scheme, just as the occasional awkwardnesses in poetry (added syllables, unusual contractions, changing the customary word order

to put the word that rhymes at the end of the line) remind you that the poet is obedient to a scheme.

And the rule that made () is invisible. A poem as you hear it or read it tells you what rules it is obeying: the rules are evident in the meter and the rhyme scheme. And your knowing that the poem is obeying its rules is one of the things that tell you it's a poem. In order to make invisible the rule that made (), there had to be a disjunction between the rule and any aspect of what is visible in the shot. And that is the case. The rule that put the shots in an order has nothing to do with what is happening in the shots, and vice versa. You can't read a succession of shots as confirming the rule; you can't trace the rule from a succession of shots. The film is the result of a rule that keeps the rule that produced it invisible. I thought this procedure would do the most to give the shots their autonomy, a condition necessary for their freedom.

The rule put the shots one after the other in a relation of simple adjacency. Now this shot, now this shot. But in film, adjacency produces succession: one shot follows another. So the film looks as if it were edited, but it wasn't; it's simply one shot next to another, one shot after another. We call a change from one shot to another a cut, a word that expresses the assumption that the relation between the shots is the result of editing and hence has the intention that editing implies: a synonym for editing is cutting. Because () was constructed instead of edited, what look like cuts are not. The film simply joins one shot to the next without the intention that cutting implies, and so what look like cuts can instead be called joins. All of the shots in () fall equally under the rule, and the rule's indifference to what happens in each shot makes all of the shots equal. I thought of the shots as units that as such are all identical, as cells in a grid are identical, even though the shots are many different lengths.

What happens at each join is the consequence of whatever two shots the rule put together. The order of the shots is a matter of chance, and so what happens specifically at each join is a matter of chance. It doesn't matter how intentional some of the joins look. They were a matter of chance, just as the joins that don't look intentional are also a matter of chance. I emphasize that what happens at the joins is a matter of chance because audiences have been so conditioned to understand a succession of shots as edited and hence intentional that they will look for ways to understand the succession of shots in () even though there are none. Even if there are moments where chance has made it possible to suppose there are connections, to think that there is editing, the moment passes soon enough, leaving the viewer to want to look for a new way to make connections between the shots. Whatever connections a viewer may find, I did not put them there.

Broadly speaking, there are two main conventions in editing: the editing in conventional narrative films that produces its effects while remaining invisible; and montage, where the conspicuous disjunctions from shot to shot make the editing visible, to the point where we could say that the visible articulations produced by the disjunctions are a part of the point. We can call both of these conventions positive, in that they both use editing as an occasion for control, even if we can also say that invisible editing is conservative for the very reason that it conceals its workings. () does not fall within either convention. Viewers will try to

understand the connections between the disparate shots that they want to suppose the film intends, so they will take it as an example of montage. But () looks like montage without being montage in fact. () is neither form of editing that I have called positive. To say that the two conventions of editing are positive implies there is a kind of editing that is negative. Perhaps there is such a thing, but we can't say that () is an instance of it because () was not edited; instead, () is what I have already called a construction, and as a construction () is a refusal of editing altogether.

The hidden rule that governs () produces an unlikely hybrid. Because its construction follows a rule, () is a structural film, but since the rule produces cuts that are a matter of chance, () is at the same time a Surrealist film.

People want to know what the rule is, as if the rule were the key to understanding the film, but it's not. The specific rule does not matter. What's important about the rule is what it did: it made the film. Other rules could just as well have made the film. A different rule would have produced a different film, but because it would have been made according to a rule, it would in principle have been not that different from (). I needed the rule to make the film, so I was the one who needed to know what the rule was. No one else needed to know the rule then, and there is no need for anyone to know it now. In fact, you knowing the rule would spoil your pleasure in watching the film, because you would be making the effort to understand how the film enacts the rule instead of taking pleasure in what the rule does, put one shot after another without any intention beyond this simple act. The film itself doesn't tell you that I obeyed the rule, but I did.

Sometimes several inserts come from the same film. The rule keeps these shots from occurring in succession to forestall what would otherwise be an unmistakable moment of narrative coherence. Occasionally there is an alternation between shots from the same two films that lasts long enough to suggest the convention of cross-cutting, a standard device in narrative films. An example of cross-cutting is the last-minute rescue. We cut from the settlers fighting off the outlaws to the posse galloping to their rescue, then back to the settlers, now more desperate, then back to the posse, now closer than before. The two spaces that the cutting had separated finally converge: the posse arrives and drives off the outlaws, rescuing the settlers. The pleasures of suspense and anticipation and then satisfaction that cross-cutting produces depend on our knowing that the cutting back and forth will be resolved by there no longer being a need for it: the posse, formerly in a separate space, arrives in the space where the outlaws and settlers are. Cross-cutting demands this resolution, that the action first depicted in two spaces finally converges in one space. In fact we can say that the invention of cross-cutting was only possible in relation to the resolution that, as if by law, it must end with. But in these passages in () the resolution that cross-cutting promises never occurs.

Editing takes time. You work through the film cut by cut. You find the part of the shot you want, then you find the right frame to begin with in relation to the shot you're cutting from, and you find the right frame to end with in relation to the shot you're cutting to. You do this for each cut, and in most films there are hundreds of them. The finished film is the result of an enormous number of decisions each made independently of the others, all of them together made over a long period,

usually months.

With () it was different. Instead of () being built up cut by cut over a long period, I would say that () was in principle made all at once. There are 372 shots, but the rule assigned each shot to its place in the order. The single decision that made the rule determined the order of all of the shots all at once and so made the entire film all at once.

I think this all-at-once character of the construction of the film can shift how we think about film from one thing succeeding another to a lot of things happening all at once, even if we can't see them all at the same time. This is a conception of construction, or at least the consequences of a method of construction, that I would call spatial. A spatial conception of film implies that the film can be thought of as an array or a matrix. When we see all of a film all at once, as we do when we see a *Frozen Film Frames* by Paul Sharits,¹ we see it as a matrix or array. We see all at once what in seeing the film as a projected image we see happen as one thing after another. I would be happy if people could watch () as they would any other film, as a succession of images one following the other, but if they could at the same time imagine the film as an array that is there all at once, even if they can't see all of it all at once.

To be polemical about the identity of () that I hope its construction proposes, I would say that a collection of inserts entirely different from those in () but organized according to the same rule is the same film as (). It would look different, but the rule is the same, so the film is the same. And I would say that this would be the case no matter how many inserts there were. There could be so many that the film could be hours long, or days or weeks or months or years. What makes () is a rule applied to a quantity of shots of a certain kind. If the rule is the same, and the shots are of the same kind, the film is the same.

Inserts in narrative films are meant to perform their functions without being noticed as shots. By consisting only of inserts extracted from their stories, () brings attention to this kind of shot, and by implication to the other kinds of shots that films use to tell stories. Someone who has seen () will be more likely to notice the inserts in narrative films and also more likely to notice the other shots in the system of which inserts are a part. Narrative films do their best to keep invisible the means by which they manipulate the audience, but () will help people to see those means. () is an educational film, even if what it educates its viewers about will complicate the pleasure that they find in narrative films, or, more simply, the movies.

¹ Paul Sharits made his *Frozen Film Frames* (1960s–70s) by cutting 16mm film into strips of equal length and mounting them one next to the other between sheets of Plexiglas, creating a matrix-like array that presented the frames, ordinarily seen one after the other, all at once.

Picture and Sound Rushes

1973

16mm, black and white, optical sound, 11 minutes

Director: Morgan Fisher

Camera: John Terry

Sound: Sandy D'Annunzio

Performer: Morgan Fisher

Notes from which the performance was improvised written by: Morgan Fisher

Picture and Sound Rushes unites terms from the motion picture industry, and hence the conservative model of filmmaking that these terms imply, with compositional devices that are alien to the kind of film production in which they arose.

The title of *Picture and Sound Rushes* already signals its acceptance, so to speak, of the motion picture industry, although it is an acceptance that the film goes on to contradict. “Rushes” is a term from the industry that means the totality of what has been shot, with only the waste between shots removed. Rushes are all the shots from beginning to end, just as they came from the camera, before there has been any editing. Rushes are literal. (This literality is a large part of the power of Andy Warhol’s films. In their being what came from the camera, that is, in their being rushes, they are inscribed with the reality of the moment of their production—people in front of the camera, the camera itself, people behind the camera—a truth that reinforces the truth of the photographic.)

When directors in the industry are in production, they look each day at the rushes from the day before (rushes are also called dailies). But even in attaching itself to the film industry by using the term “rushes,” *Picture and Sound Rushes* is already perverse, because the rushes that directors are concerned with are the picture rushes. If the picture was shot with sound, the sound is played with the picture rushes. But if the sound isn’t right, it doesn’t matter, it can always be looped or otherwise created in post-production. It is the perfection of the picture that directors are obsessed with. There are also rushes that are only sound, but they are not the object of the obsessive concern that picture rushes are. In the commercial motion picture industry, “rushes” means effectively picture rushes; picture is primary, sound an afterthought. So even though *Picture and Sound Rushes* begins by aligning itself with the industry, at the same time it contradicts the conventional industry attitude about the relative importance of picture and sound. *Picture and Sound Rushes* reminds us that just as there are picture rushes, there are also sound rushes, and the film puts sound rushes on the same level as picture rushes: picture and sound are equal.

Picture and Sound Rushes uses other terms from the industry besides “rushes.” The original production of a sound film in the commercial film industry requires two pieces of equipment, a camera and a sound recorder. During production of a sound film, the camera can be on or off, and the sound recorder can be on or off. These possibilities produce the three combinations of picture and sound that are standard in production in the industry: sync, MOS, and wild sound.

The recording of picture and sound together is called synchronous sound, or sync. Picture recorded without sound is called MOS, a term that originated in the early days of the sound era, when a German émigré director would say they were going to shoot the scene “mit out sound.” When a scene is shot MOS, the sound is added to the picture afterward in the cutting room; for example, tire squeals are added to a car chase. Sound recorded without picture is called wild sound. The term does not mean a lapse in decorum; it means only that the motor for the sound recorder is not a sync motor but a wild motor, one that runs close enough to sync speed to produce a usable result even if it does not run precisely at sync speed. Examples of wild sound are gunshots, door slams, and a word or two of dialogue. Just as sound is added afterward to picture that is shot MOS, picture is added afterward to wild sound, although picture is so much the fundamental element that an editor wouldn’t think of it as adding picture to that sound, but rather as adding that sound to picture.

But there is a fourth possible combination of picture and sound, when an action is staged but neither the camera nor the recorder is on. This doesn’t happen in the production of films in the commercial motion picture industry, so the industry has no name for it. But it happens in *Picture and Sound Rushes*, so I had to give it a name. I called it the null case. I wanted a term that suggested something beyond absence, a term that evoked something that was never there in the first place. Calling the lack of both picture and sound the null case was the best I could do.

So in *Picture and Sound Rushes* there are four combinations of picture and sound. Three of these occur as a matter of routine in the production of sound films in the industry and have names of long standing. The fourth is, in relation to industry practice, an anomaly. But *Picture and Sound Rushes* asserts the existence of this fourth possibility, that there can be a passage in a film that represents a moment that was staged in front of the camera and the recorder, as if to be filmed and recorded, but the camera and recorder were not on to register it.

Picture and Sound Rushes not only asserts the existence of this hitherto neglected combination of picture and sound, it places this fourth possibility in the same field as the first three, giving them all the same standing. Unlike the first three instances, which are, so to speak, positive acts, the null case is a kind of refusal. The camera and the sound recorder refuse to register an event staged to be photographed and recorded, and this event continues even when the camera and recorder are not on to register it. Whatever happens during this moment is forever lost. Within *Picture and Sound Rushes* the existence of these lost moments is inscribed by intervals when there is no picture and no sound, that is, during moments of blackness and silence.

Picture and Sound Rushes shows a performer (the filmmaker) who, seated behind a table, delivers from notes an improvised description of the systematic changes between sync, MOS, wild sound, and the null case that the film enacts. The camera operator and the sound recordist each has a score that tells him when to turn his apparatus on and off. So, like the performer in front of the camera, the camera operator and the sound recordist are performers too. The moments of darkness and the moments of silence, or the moments of darkness and silence together, were achieved not by removing segments of picture and sound afterward

in the cutting room, but during production when the operators turned off their pieces of equipment.

The performer in front of the camera gives a continuous performance, and the performances of the camera operator and sound recordist are likewise continuous. Like musicians, the camera operator and sound recordist are waiting for their cues. When their equipment is on, they are waiting for the moment to turn it off. When it is off, they are waiting for the moment to turn it on. Once the film has started, the three performers carry through to the end. But while the three performers perform continuously, the performances of two of them result in the intermittent recording of the performance of the third, the performance that is the ostensible occasion for the film. *Picture and Sound Rushes* is not a one-take film, but its duration, like the duration of the performances of the camera operator and sound recordist, coincides with the duration of the continuous performance that was its occasion. If it had not turned out right, I would have had to do it all over again from the beginning.

The film breaks down into pieces the recording of a continuous event. The composition of the film is an act of decomposition. The film is divided into four sections: sync, MOS, wild, and the null case. The first section, the sync section, begins with sync, then changes to the three other combinations—MOS, wild sound, and the null case—returning to sync between each of the other combinations. The second section begins with MOS, then changes to each of the other combinations, returning to MOS between each of the other combinations. And so on. It is exceedingly simple.

Against the practice of the industry, where the length of each shot in the finished film is organic, so to speak, shaped by the demands of telling the story, *Picture and Sound Rushes* asserts the principle of the module, a repeated unit. In *Picture and Sound Rushes* the modules are the four combinations of picture and sound that I have described. They are all the same length, as I will go into in a moment.

A construction based on the module is totally at odds with the imperative of editing, which gives complete liberty to shape the material to optimize telling the story, for which the criteria are clarity and emotional impact. *Picture and Sound Rushes* is akin to a filmed lecture, a form that doesn't suggest much latitude for the interventions that constitute the process of editing, such as cutting from one angle to another, cutting or adding dialogue, condensing it or stretching it out, omitting shots, shortening or lengthening shots, always to regulate the emphasis and rhythm of the scene to best serve the story. But in any event, the modular construction of the film rules out such interventions in advance.

The decomposition of the film into modules disrupts the talk that the narrator gives as a continuous event. He is cut off in mid-sentence, or we hear the end of a sentence the beginning of which is lost to us. And the film's literally being rushes, that is, an unedited continuity of everything that was shot and recorded, preserves intact the many flaws in the narrator's performance that editing would eliminate: his hesitations, his tic-like repetitions of phrases, his long, awkward pauses as he gropes for words.

The four cases—sync, MOS, wild, and the null case—are present in equal number: there are six instances of each, giving a total of twenty-four segments. All of the segments are the same length. The length was obtained by dividing the length

of the film, 400 feet, by the number of segments, twenty-four. So the length of each of the twenty-four segments is $16 \frac{2}{3}$ feet. Expressed in time, each segment is $27 \frac{3}{4}$ seconds long.

The six instances of each of the four different cases are not distributed evenly throughout the film. Three instances of any one case occur in the section that begins with that case, and one instance occurs in each of three other sections. Sync occurs three times in the sync section, and once each in the MOS, wild, and null sections. Of the six segments of the null case, one is in each of the first three sections, and three are in the null section. So most of the sync segments are in the first quarter of the film, and most of the null segments are in the last quarter. *Picture and Sound Rushes* puts sync first and the null case last, but because all the cases are present in equal quantities, the film embodies the principle that all the cases are equal and so all are equally important.

Because sync, MOS, wild, and the null case are present in equal quantities, one quarter of the film is sync, one quarter is MOS, one quarter is wild sound, and one quarter is the null case. But these quarters also add up to two pairs of halves. Half of the film consists of picture (the sync segments and the MOS segments), and half consists of no picture (the wild sound segments and the null segments). And half of the film has sound (the sync segments and the wild sound segments), and half has no sound (the MOS segments and the null segments).

Even if *Picture and Sound Rushes* appears to align itself with the motion picture industry by using its terms and by placing sync first, and even if the performer says explicitly that he regards sync as the primary or fundamental case of film, the film nonetheless acts against the visual pleasure that the industry routinely provides. At a minimum, this pleasure depends on the continuity of the image. *Picture and Sound Rushes* interferes with visual pleasure by disrupting and fragmenting the continuity of the film, even if the performance that it disrupts is not Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse in Technicolor speaking to each other, but a black and white scene of a man delivering a monologue.

Picture and Sound Rushes begins with sync, the most accustomed form of the movies, but then it passes through MOS and wild sound, two cases that do occur in commercial films but only with the greatest rarity, and ends with the null case, which to my knowledge has never occurred in a commercial film or for that matter in any film. The film may begin with the visual and aural continuity that we find in a conventional narrative film, but instead of continuing in this mode, and at the end gathering to the climax and resolution that are the hallmarks of a commercial motion picture, and so producing the satisfaction that a climax and resolution always do, *Picture and Sound Rushes* modulates systematically into darkness and silence.

Production Stills

1970

16mm, color, optical sound, 11 minutes

Director: Morgan Fisher

Camera: John Bailey

Sound: Nancy Young

Photographers: Thom Andersen and Morgan Fisher

Photographers' assistant: Fay Andersen

Production stills are what the name implies, stills taken during the production of a film. Production stills give a behind-the-scenes view of movie-making: the director directing an actor or gesturing to show the camera operator where the edge of the frame should be, the director of photography looking through a contrast viewing filter, and so on. The subject of production stills, the production of a movie, contrasts with the movie that is the result of the process they document. We do not see the movie and its documentation at the same time; they are mutually exclusive, but they have a relationship that can be called complementary.

A movie and the production stills that document its production are not seen in each other's proximity. We see the movie in a theater, and we see the production stills elsewhere: in publicity for the movie, or in a film magazine, or in the library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. This separation in both space and time between seeing the movie and seeing the documentation of its production accords with the knowledge we have of film. We know that films are made by people and machines, but we also know that to give us pleasure a film must conceal all signs of the production that otherwise we know had to have taken place. The one thing that can never appear in a commercial film is any sign of its own production. The slates that Godard sometimes included in his early films are a gesture against this prohibition, but they are only that, a gesture.

A movie and the glimpses behind the scenes of its production have recently been brought closer together, not just in DVDs that include interviews and omitted material but in the comic outtakes that are included at the end of the film when we see it in a theater. But this proximity of acknowledgements of a film's production to the film itself doesn't make a difference in our experience of the film. The film observes the law of concealing the means of its production and so excludes from our consciousness the knowledge we have about its production, no matter how immediate to our experience of the film the source of that knowledge is.

Production stills, as documentations of the means by which a film is produced, are necessarily excluded from the film whose production they document. This is a law, and this is the law that *Production Stills* violates. *Production Stills* is a close-up that shows one after the other a series of Polaroid photographs that are production stills taken during the production itself. So *Production Stills* does what films cannot; it includes within itself the documentation of its own production.

Production Stills is a kind of documentary. A documentary film usually treats a subject that existed in the world before the production of the film. There is already a subject, and the maker of the film chooses the subject and makes a film about it.

But because the subject that *Production Stills* documents is its own production, the film's subject did not exist before the film was made. The film and its subject were created at the same time. It could be said that the film was made in order to provide a production to document.

Production Stills enacts the model of a Hollywood production: a Mitchell camera on a Moviola crab dolly on a sound stage, a Fisher sound boom for the microphone, and, in a condensed form, a Hollywood crew, including a still photographer. The film shows us the array of equipment and people that we see in a commercial film about the making of movies, for example, *Two Weeks in Another Town*,¹ a film that like other films that show film production does not show the people making the movie that we are watching. But *Production Stills* is not fiction, or at least not in its usual form. It does not rehearse the energetic self-celebration that is the usual thing in movies that depict Hollywood production. There is no tyrannical, manipulative producer, no self-absorbed star having a temper tantrum, no egomaniacal director making a fool of himself. The people who are making *Production Stills* are just doing their jobs without being dramatic about it.

The equipment that is making the film is, so to speak, underused. There are no pans or tilts, no elaborate tracking shots; instead, the camera never moves: it is trained on a section of a wall that is perhaps six inches wide. And of course the syntax of *Production Stills* differs radically from that of the films made in the industry that its equipment was made to serve. It consists of only one shot, so there is no cutting from one scene to the next, a device that stories demand. No cutting, no story. So there are none of the things that stories rely on: no close-ups of beautiful faces throbbing with erotic energy, no vistas of spectacular scenery, no car chases, no lavish production numbers, no sweeping romantic scores, no love scenes, no good guys, no bad guys, no sidekicks, no schoolteachers from back East, no hate, no murder, no revenge, and so on. The absence of these things means that the elements of story that they are expressions of—conflict, complications, tension, rising action, a climax—are equally absent. The array of equipment used to make *Production Stills* is ordinarily devoted to registering just those things that *Production Stills* by its nature has no place for.

By showing this panoply of Hollywood equipment being used to make a film that is far from Hollywood, *Production Stills* embodies a contrast between the ordinary use of its technical means and the film that those means are making. The rhetorical device that depends on the contrast between the literal meaning of an utterance and its intended meaning is irony. *Production Stills* depends on a contrast of a kind that I think can be called ironic. And I would say that the effect of the irony in *Production Stills* is satire.

One of the means of satire is to describe events or behaviors that in fact are familiar as if seen from an alien point of view. This creates a distance, and this distance turns the familiar into the unfamiliar, so we can see the familiar with new eyes. Satire takes a moral view of its subject. It judges and criticizes. The distance that is embodied in *Production Stills* points to the usual nature of the films that Hollywood makes, and so expresses an attitude toward those films that can be called satiric. A criticism that *Production Stills* seems to invite is this: look at all the resources that the film had at its disposal, and look at the film that was made

with them. In seeming to invite this criticism, *Production Stills* suggests that the same can be said of films made in the industry.

Production Stills has a relation to the commercial motion picture industry, but it also has a relation to the history of modern and contemporary art. Its impersonal mode of composition—a series of identical units that receive equal emphasis, its fixed, impersonal view of its subject, its use of a task-based procedure—were at the time of its making standard strategies for composing in art.

And *Production Stills* also has a relation to the readymade. Duchamp said that a tube of paint, because it is manufactured, is a readymade, and so a painting, because it combines readymades, is itself a readymade.² *Production Stills* combines two manufactured objects, a roll of motion picture film and a pack of Polaroid film, and so is a readymade too. In the same passage, Duchamp said that a readymade is a work of art without an artist to make it. He proposes the possibility—utopian and profoundly subversive in its implications—that there can be art without artists. A work made by no one is a work that made itself. *Production Stills* is a film that almost made itself, and so fulfills Duchamp's prescription almost literally.

I tried to remove myself from the making of *Production Stills* as much as I could. The procedures and decisions that made the film were impersonal. The roll of movie film was a standard unit of length, 400 feet, and the pack of Polaroid film was another standard unit consisting of eight exposures; the film was made by integrating two standard units. The camera angle was equally impersonal. It enacted the relation between camera and subject that is used in copy photography, in which a flat object is placed directly in front of the camera. Copy photography is not an interpretive or expressive activity; on the contrary, it is a technical procedure to convey information about its subject in as neutral a way as possible. The person who made the decisions about the production stills that are what we see was not me, it was the still photographer, who took all of the stills except for the last, and was free to document the production as he chose. I accepted in advance the loss of control that ordinarily a director insists on. I took the last production still only so that the photographer who took all the other stills would appear in the film.

However much I would like to say that *Production Stills* follows the model of the readymade and so is a film that made itself, I have to acknowledge that despite my wish to remove myself from its making, the film in the end had a maker, and the maker was me. But once the movie camera was turned on, the movie made itself. I had nothing more to do or say about what happened, with the exception of taking the last photograph, and then I asked the still photographer for guidance.

I was surprised that no one else had made the film before I did. Once I had the idea, it struck me as completely obvious (the same is true of a lot of my other films). As an idea, everything was there. The idea was so simple that it seemed as if it had just been waiting to be turned into an actual film. If I hadn't made it, it seems highly likely that someone else would have. This theoretical possibility that someone else could have made the same film confirms in principle that the film's identity is that of an idea. This condition, all of a work being contained in a simple expression, has a relation to the readymade. A readymade is an object, almost always mass-produced. A readymade is tangible. A readymade isn't composed, it is something

that already exists in its entirety and is then selected. The act of selection makes it a readymade. I want to suggest that there can be such a thing as a readymade in the abstract, a readymade as a conception. The identity of *Production Stills* lies in its scheme: a film of standard length shows the pack of Polaroids that documents its production. The entirety of the film is contained in this simple idea, which, so to speak, already existed and so was available to anyone to select, just as a manufactured object is. The idea could have occurred to anyone, and it could have been selected by anyone it occurred to. Because the identity of the idea is in its scheme, any realization of the scheme is as good as any other, which is to say that all versions of the film would be the same, just as all examples of a manufactured object are the same, any one of which could become a readymade. The person who selected the idea that made *Production Stills* happened to be me.

¹ *Two Weeks in Another Town* (USA, 1962). Director: Vincente Minnelli; with Kirk Douglas, Edward G. Robinson, Cyd Charisse; based on a novel by Irwin Shaw.

² Duchamp concludes: "Since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and readymade products, we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are 'ready-mades aided' and also works of assemblage." Marcel Duchamp, "A Propos of Readymades," a three minute talk delivered at the *Art of Assemblage* symposium at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on October 19, 1961; reprinted in *Art and Artists 1*, no. 4 (1966), p. 47.

First published in 1985 as a program note for a screening at the Collective for Living Cinema, New York; published with revisions in the gallery brochure for the film and video program in "Afterimage: Drawing Through Process," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, April 11–August 22, 1999; published with further revisions in *Fate of Alien Modes*, ed. Constanze Ruhm, Annette Südbeck, and Rike Frank, exh. cat. (Vienna: Secession, 2003); revised 2012 and 2014.