

## 12. Parametric Narration

This is the least "public," most rarely discussed sort of narration I shall consider, and it will be the most controversial. The very name poses a problem. I could call it "style centered," or "dialectical," or "permutational," or even "poetic" narration. "Parametric" was chosen in reference to Noël Burch's *Theory of Film Practice*, in which he uses the term "parameters" to describe what I call film techniques. But nomenclature is only the start of the difficulties. This type of narration is not linked to a single national school, period, or genre of filmmaking. Its norms seem to lack the historical concreteness of the three modes I have considered so far. In many ways, the pertinent historical context is less that of filmmaking than that of film theory and criticism. To some extent, then, this mode of narration applies to isolated filmmakers and fugitive films. I shall also be pointing to formal processes that film criticism typically ignores, even when studying the films I will mention. Making these processes my central focus will inevitably strike some readers as implausible. Here I can ask only patience and a willingness to consider that, at least in some films, apparently trivial aspects may turn out to be essential.

### A New Role for

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### A New Role for Style

As previous chapters have shown, stylistic patterns tend to be vehicles for the syuzhet's process of cueing us to construct the fabula. This is most apparent in classical narration, in which film technique, though highly organized, is used principally to reinforce the causal, temporal, and spatial arrangement of events in the syuzhet. The "invisibility" of the style is a function both of its role in supporting the syuzhet and of its conformity with extrinsically normalized principles and procedures. In art-cinema narration and historical-materialist narration, style is more prominent by virtue of its deviation from classical norms and its tendency to deviate, however slightly, from extrinsic norms of the mode. But the film's unique deployment of stylistic features nonetheless remains subordinate to syuzhet-defined functions: to create realism, expressive subjectivity, authorial commentary, or a play among such factors (art-cinema narration); or to create vivid perceptual heightening of a narrative/rhetorical construct (historical-materialist narration).

Yet there exists another sort of narration, one in which the film's stylistic system creates patterns *distinct from the demands of the syuzhet system*. Film style may be organized and emphasized to a degree that makes it at least equal in importance to syuzhet patterns.

Most critics and theorists are inclined to recognize the dominance of style only in abstract or nonnarrative films, when there is no syuzhet present at all. Yet there is also the possibility of what Tynianov called as early as 1927 "style-centered" narrative cinema.<sup>1</sup> We can imagine a narrative cinema in which there is still a syuzhet, but "the rise and fall of the stylistic masses" come to the fore.<sup>2</sup> This split, however, is too simple. We must also allow the possibility that syuzhet and style may become equal in importance. Moreover, since a film operates through time, we must consider that syuzhet processes and stylistic processes may alternate in emphasis.

Analogies with other arts may be helpful here. Most films resemble novels or short stories in that the stylistic surface functions chiefly to expose syuzhet patterns. But parametric narration is more like what goes on in "mixed" arts. In a

narrative poem, the construction of a story is often subordinated to the demands of verse. Poe's Raven croaks "Nevermore," and the narrator loves someone named Lenore, partly because of the requisites of rhyme. In opera or the art song, the music's unfolding may not simply accompany the text but impose its own patterns on it. Cinematic style, the repetition and development of instantiations of film technique, may likewise become what Tynianov calls the "dominant," the factor that is pushed forward at the expense of others, "deforming" them.<sup>3</sup>

Another way to clarify the parametric idea is to trace its historical development. Certainly the notion that stylistic organization could achieve formal saliency has been around for some time. As my citations from Tynianov imply, the Russian Formalists granted stylistic factors considerable importance. In poetic language, writes one Formalist, "linguistic patterns acquire independent value."<sup>4</sup> The Czech structuralist Jan Mukařovský distinguished between linguistic distortion that was motivated by the poem's subject matter and linguistic distortion operating for its own sake.<sup>5</sup> This tendency was not confined to the criticism of verse. As early as 1919, Viktor Shklovsky argued that narrative involved parallels between syuzhet composition and linguistic patterning—a distinction which presumed the possibility of noncoincidence between the two systems.<sup>6</sup> In the domain of cinema, Eisenstein suggested that in shot conflict and "over-tonal" montage, purely stylistic features can create patterns independent of immediate narrative needs.<sup>7</sup> Still, it was not for some decades that such ideas were systematically applied.

One of the most important trends in European music of the 1950s was "total serialism." The model is usually held to be Messiaen's 1948 piece, *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*, which extended the idea of the scale from pitch to the spheres of duration, loudness, and attack. Young composers such as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Nono, and Jean Barraqué began to use Schoenberg's principles of the twelve-tone row to generate music of unprecedented formal complexity. By assigning codified values to the intervals in the pitch row, or series, the composer could systemat-

ically vary meter, rhythm, timbre, dynamics, and attack. Schoenberg had chiefly used the row for harmonic and melodic purposes, but according to the young composers, Webern had glimpsed the generative possibilities of serial functions. Now, wrote Boulez, "the architecture of the work derives directly from the ordering of the series."<sup>8</sup> The composer could select certain "parameters" (pitch, rhythm, etc.) to be serialized and then lay out a table of all possible permutations based on intervals in the row, or rhythmic "cells," or whatever.<sup>9</sup> The goal of integral serialism was a new unity, in which a single structure dictates the entire piece, from local texture to overall form.<sup>10</sup> For our purposes, the crucial aspect of serialist doctrine is the possibility that large-scale structure may be determined by fundamental stylistic choices.

Although exact causal links are hard to find, many experimental trends in French literature of the period resemble serial thinking. The *nouveau roman*, which rose to prominence in the mid-1950s, was also concerned with the generation of large-scale forms out of limited verbal material. Michel Butor's *L'emploi du temps* (1956), Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La jalousie* (1957), and Claude Mauriac's *Toutes les femmes sont fatales* (1957) mixed together fragmentary blocks of time in a way that suggested a hidden formula controlling surface variants. The so-called *nouveau nouveau roman*, associated with the journal *Tel Quel*, went still further in exposing the novel's structural armature. At the same time, Raymond Queneau and other writers formed OuLiPo, a group devoted to building new poetic texts out of existing ones by use of rule-governed procedures.

Structure, wrote Boulez in 1963, was a key word in his theory, and he went on to cite Lévi-Strauss as showing that this concept transcended the dichotomy of form and content.<sup>11</sup> That heterogeneous intellectual movement known as structuralism significantly changed the way linguists, literary critics, and philosophers conceived of textual form. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, several influential structuralist thinkers introduced concepts that encouraged "parametric" thinking. Although we must take care not to conflate serialism and structuralism, there are several im-

portant points of similarity. All involve the relation of local structure, or stylistic events, to large-scale structure.

Both serialism and structuralism held that textual components form an order that coheres according to intrinsic principles. In more technical terms, the structuralist looks first at the organization of signifiers; only then does the analyst correlate that to a system of references or signifieds. Roman Jakobson's theory holds poetry to be autotelic, relying upon the play of linguistic categories to block referential meaning. Similarly, Boulez emphasizes that the series creates its meaning immanently, by virtue of its unique ordering of parameters. Many literary experiments in the wake of the *nouveau roman* rely solely upon the generative powers of the signifier—anagrams, puns, or other verbal ploys that get stretched out to form large-scale patterns.<sup>12</sup> This line of thought suggests that style (often called *écriture*) may form an independent structure in the text. Style need be governed only by internal coherence, not by representational function.

Serial and structuralist theory also treat textual form as a "spatial" phenomenon. This notion can be defined in two ways. First, the "visible," phenomenal text gets treated as a configuration whose parts exist simultaneously. In analyzing a myth, Lévi-Strauss lays out the actions in a horizontal line.<sup>13</sup> Boulez speaks of a piece as a "concrete sound object" occupying "musical space."<sup>14</sup> Jakobson tends to treat the poem as a simultaneous order, a design in language stretched across the page. Claude Simon's novel *La route de Flandres* (1960) possesses an overt shape: there are three passes through the same point, and successive events are presented as if simultaneous. In a 1964 essay, "Le langage de l'espace," Michel Foucault discusses several other *nouveaux romans* which undertake a similar project.<sup>15</sup> The outstanding spokesman for the spatiality of the literary text has been Michel Butor, who suggests taking the three-dimensional connotations of *volumen* literally. He treats the book as possessing "a mobility which most nearly approximates a simultaneous presence of all parts of work."<sup>16</sup> He itemizes many features—horizontal and verticals, oblique patterns, margins, typography, layout—through which the text creates a spatial order.

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There is another sense in which the aesthetic text may be considered as having spatial form, and this bears on "invisible" properties. The ordering of parts can be treated as a *distribution* of elements drawn from a fixed storehouse "behind the scenes." In serial music, the series is not a simple succession of pitches but what Boulez calls an underlying hierarchy of functions.<sup>17</sup> Strings of notes, rhythm, attack, and other temporal features of the piece spring from an unchanging generative formula. In other media, this process was theorized by Jakobson and Roland Barthes according to the Saussurean principles of syntagm and paradigm. The syntagm is the combined string of items visibly present in the text. The paradigmatic axis is that set from which each item is selected. The presence of one item thus inevitably signals the absence of others that could substitute for it.

That the paradigmatic dimension creates a "virtual space" in the text is especially emphasized in the work of Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson. In 1955, Lévi-Strauss argued that myth is a particular kind of story composed of "gross constituent units." These are defined not only by their position in a horizontal chain of actions but by their relation to purely conceptual ("vertical") categories. The mythologist could analyze the text by spatializing it: write each action on a card, then lay out the cards in a two-dimensional array in order to discover both the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axes.<sup>18</sup> At a 1958 conference, Roman Jakobson proposed a comparable theory of stylistic construction in poetry by claiming that the poetic function of language was characterized by the projection of "the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination."<sup>19</sup> That is, in poetry, a string of signs tends to embody in linear form the paradigmatic groups basic to its constitution. "The cat sat on the mat" projects the paradigmatic category of phonological similarity (rhyme) onto the syntagmatic level of the line. Any sequence of units—phonological, syntactic, semantic—strives to build an equality with others, creating designs within the poem, "similarity superimposed upon contiguity."<sup>20</sup>

One consequence of these ideas is that the phenomenal form of the text tends to be seen as a permutational distribu-

tion of the invisible set. According to Boulez, the piece is only "a sort of probable fragment" drawn from hundreds of possible variants of chosen parameters.<sup>21</sup> Lévi-Strauss treats different versions of myths in the same way; any one mythical text is only one manifestation of a larger permutation group. The *nouveau roman* and its successors made much of this principle. Robbe-Grillet's novels characteristically make each scene a slightly incompatible variant upon a central event, which may never be presented in an authoritative fashion. Jean-Louis Baudry's *Personnes* (1967) contains eighty-one sections, each one playing out a different combination of personal pronouns; the last page obligingly maps out all the possibilities on a nine-by-nine square. Perhaps the limit case is Marc Saporta's *Composition no. 1* (1962), an unbound sheaf of leaves without pagination, to be read in any order. "The number of possible combinations," the author announces, "is infinite."<sup>22</sup>

Where, one might now ask, does all this leave the perceiver? Perceiving a poem, novel, or a piece of music is a time-bound activity; yet the concept of a frozen textual design deliberately ignores that process. The perceiver may not grasp the signifiers as forming a total order, and the paradigmatic dimension and permutational play may go unnoticed. At one point, Boulez admits that serial music's structures are not necessarily audible.<sup>23</sup> I shall consider this point in more detail later, but it is worth mentioning that both serialism and structuralism are often hard pressed to show that the work's formal principles are registered by the perceiver.

In sum, serialism and structuralism both reveal new conceptions of form that give style great significance. In integral serialism, local textual choices could be seen as generating the entire work's form. The self-referring aspects of stylistic patterning could create an independent level of the text, as in Jakobson's account of poetry. At the macroscopic level, structuralism and serialism provide a conception of spatial form which treats any discrete configuration as one paradigmatic possibility, and thus only a variant of a hidden order. There are, however, important differences between the two schools. Serialism is a means of composition, struc-

turalism a method of analysis. For Lévi-Strauss, structuralism is to serialism as religion is to free thought.<sup>24</sup> Umberto Eco develops this point by suggesting that, as a musical practice, serial composition challenges the intertextual codes which are the chief objects of structural analysis.<sup>25</sup> Both schools emphasize the organization of signifiers, the spatialization of form, permutation, and nonperceptible structures, but serialism values transgression and the need for each artwork to construct a unique system. In other words, structuralist thought tends to emphasize the extrinsic norms that constrain syntagm and paradigm, while serialist thought emphasizes the creation of prominent intrinsic norms. It is significant that when self-consciously parametric films and a theory of parametric cinema emerged, both owed more to serialism and the *nouveau roman* than to structuralism.

Two films are landmarks in the cinema of parametric narration. *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), the product of a collaboration between Robbe-Grillet and Alain Resnais, is virtually a *nouveau roman* on film. Each scene, while teasing the spectator with the possibility of causal and temporal relations with other scenes, remains finally significant as a variant of abstract narrative topoi (e.g., a man tries to persuade a woman to leave with him). In this respect, the film relies on what Stephen Heath calls Robbe-Grillet's characteristic *bricolage* of "syntagmatic elements of traditional narrative."<sup>26</sup> At the same time, *L'année dernière à Marienbad* elevates various stylistic features to the level of intermittently dominant structures: the splitting of image from sound, the use of false eyeline matches and matches on action, the refusal of camera movement to adhere to the action or to reveal a coherent offscreen space.<sup>27</sup> The film thus treats *syuzhet* and style as organizations of fixed elements, varied and circulated across the text, suggesting a coherent fabula world while again and again denying that any such entity can be constructed.

What *L'année dernière à Marienbad* was to the *nouveau roman*, *Méditerranée* (1963) was to the *Tel Quel* group. Few films can have been so seldom seen and so often cited. Like *Marienbad*, *Méditerranée* resulted from a collaboration,

here between poet and novelist Philippe Sollers and filmmaker Jean-Daniel Pollet. The film consists of 261 brief shots, musical passages, and a poetic commentary by Sollers. The visual track is based on a small set of elements: the sea, statuary, pyramids, ruins, an ingot forged in a factory, a garden, a bullfight, a woman on an operating table, and so forth. Most of the shots are clichés of "the Mediterranean," and it is part of the film's aim to recombine images in ways that drain them of their stereotyped associations. *Tel Quel* adherents praised the film as an "open" text, organized wholly as a play of signifiers, and Pollet has suggested that the film was composed by permuting a series.<sup>28</sup> *Méditerranée* thus operates with a thoroughly spatialized form, putting itself, according to Sollers, within a cinema of "differed presence": "literal but also partial presence, a presence which presents an absence and, here, a film which manifests another, invisible film of which the voice injected into the film records the fluctuations."<sup>29</sup>

Both *L'année dernière à Marienbad* and *Méditerranée* were made in full consciousness of the serialist aesthetic. It remained to show that this esthetic could be applied to films that had no direct influence from experimental literature or music. In 1967, Noël Burch published several articles in *Cahiers du cinéma* that were later collected in the volume *Praxis du cinéma* (1969; in English, *Theory of Film Practice*, first published in 1973). These writings constitute a powerful argument for a serialist theory of film.

Burch arranges film techniques into parameters, or stylistic procedures: the spatial-temporal manipulation of editing, the possibilities of framing and focus, and so forth. He constructs each parameter as a set of alternatives: sometimes as oppositions (soft focus/sharp focus, direct sound/mixed sound), sometimes as sets (the fifteen types of spatiotemporal matches, the six zones of offscreen space). He goes on to extend the concept of parameter to include narrative factors (subject matter, plot line, etc.). Burch then takes a crucial step. He posits that technical parameters are as functionally important to the film's overall form as are narrative ones. "Film is made first of all out of images and sounds; ideas intervene (perhaps) later."<sup>30</sup> Instead of simply man-

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This is accomplished, Burch suggests, by a process of dialectical structure. Here "dialectics" refers to "the conflictual organization to which these elementary parameters have been subjected."<sup>31</sup> The poles of selected parameters are in effect paradigmatic alternatives. Burch thus expects both poles of the dialectic to be manifested in the film, just as Jakobson treats poetry as projecting paradigmatic equivalences onto the text's syntagmatic succession. The film's dialectic must also be justified by some systematic quality, by an overall structure possessing its own logic. Burch evidently has permutational principles in mind. The fifteen different ways of combining shots, for instance, are capable of "rigorous development through such devices as rhythmic alternation, recapitulation, retrogression, gradual elimination, cyclical repetition, and serial variation, thus creating structures similar to those of twelve-tone music."<sup>32</sup> Thus stylistic structure can become as thoroughly organized as narrative structure. "It is only through a systematic and thorough exploration of the *structural* possibilities inherent in the cinematic parameters I have been describing that film will be liberated from the old narrative forms and develop new 'open' forms that will have more in common with the formal strategies of post-Debussy music than with those of the pre-Joycean novel."<sup>33</sup>

Burch's debt to serial thought is already evident in these quotations. In 1961, he had translated into English André Hodeir's *Since Debussy*, a book deeply infused with serial assumptions and a model, in its use of terms like "dialectics" and the "spatial organization of sound," for Burch's nomenclature. Boulez's *Penser la musique d'aujourd'hui* (1963) is another source for the exhaustive taxonomies and the polemical fervor of *Praxis du cinéma*. Both Hodeir and Boulez emphasize the way in which serial practice challenges established procedures, a point echoed constantly by Burch in his assault on "zero-degree filming." And Burch often uses serial music as a formal model, as when he suggests that the film's narrative can be generated out of technical parameters, just as the tone row generates large-scale

forms.<sup>34</sup> But he is careful not to push the analogy too far. A film cannot be organized as rigorously as a musical piece, for the former is not susceptible to mathematical schematization and is usually committed to concrete representation. Musical practice offers a suggestive analogy, not a recipe.

The years immediately after the publication of Burch's volume reveal that he had some influence on the *Cahiers* group.<sup>35</sup> Oudart's theory of the "suture" and Bonitzer's 1972 essay on offscreen space can be interpreted as complex replies to Burch's work.<sup>37</sup> On the whole, though, the idea of a parametric cinema became of secondary importance in a film culture drawn to semiology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism. After May 1968, not only did these theoretical systems seem more politically pertinent, they also allowed critics to turn their attention to films which Burch frankly despised—the products of Hollywood classicism. Not until somewhat later did his work start to appear more significant. In America and Britain, the serial implications of Burch's theory had some impact.<sup>38</sup> Participants in a 1977 colloquium, "Cinemas of Modernity," used Burchian concepts to analyze films by Eisenstein and Robbe-Grille.<sup>39</sup> And Burch's next major book, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in Japanese Film* (1979), aroused considerable interest—partly for its contribution to a stylistic history of the cinema, but also perhaps because its limitation to the conventional category of a national cinema and its eclectic Marxism made its argument seem less intransigently "formalist" than the ultimately more fruitful reflections of *Praxis du cinéma*. That very few film scholars have followed up Burch's insights (and those of Eisenstein and the Formalists, for that matter) is no reason to ignore them, especially if they can help us explain the specific workings of particular films.

This history of the concept of "parametric" narration sketches the outline of an aesthetic theory, but it cannot provide a rationale. In logical terms, it is difficult to deny that style could be promoted to the level of a shaping force in film, but many critics will suggest that in practice this never happens. It remains to show that such objections fail and to suggest how style may achieve this role.

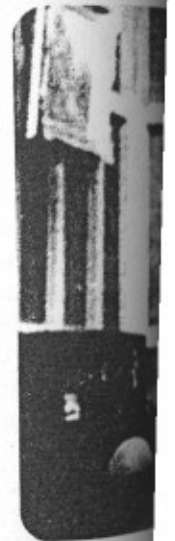
## Shapes and Strategies

In general, a film's stylistic patterning splits away from the *syuzhet* when only "artistic" motivation can account for it. That is, if the viewer cannot adequately justify the stylistic work as necessary for some conception of realism, for trans-textual ends such as genre, or for compositional requirements, then he or she must take style as present for its own sake, aiming to become palpable as such.

Let us take a set of comparisons involving one stylistic procedure, the "graphic match." This is inherently a non-narrative device: lines, shapes, colors, movement, or other graphic qualities in one shot are closely "matched" by a similar configuration in the next shot, regardless of the space or time depicted. Consider first of all two contiguous shots from *Lady Windermere's Fan* (figs. 12.1–12.2). The overall similarity of composition is apparent—each figure is in the same spot, head and body are roughly comparable, light and dark values are somewhat consistent. In the classical narrative cinema, this "approximate" graphic match screens out irrelevant data and guides our attention to narratively salient differences from shot to shot, such as expressions and angle of character orientation. Next, consider the graphic matches during one of Diego's reveries in *La guerre est finie* (figs. 10.19–10.21). Here the graphic continuity is much stronger, and it is motivated for compositional ends typical of art-cinema narration. The matches convey the subjective alternatives that Diego posits: Nadine may look like this, or this, or that. . . . In comparison, there is the vivid graphic match of father and son arguing in *Earth* (figs. 7.26–7.27). Here again, the stylistic device is subordinate to *syuzhet* ends—thwarting the construction of a denotative space and cueing a connotative construction (the expression of fierce opposition). Finally, consider the graphic match of two schoolboys playing with a globe in Ozu's *What Did the Lady Forget?* (figs. 12.3–12.4). The similarities of composition across the cut create a much more precise graphic match than in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. And these cuts are not explicable on art-cinema or historical-materialist grounds, unless one contends that the cuts present a narra-



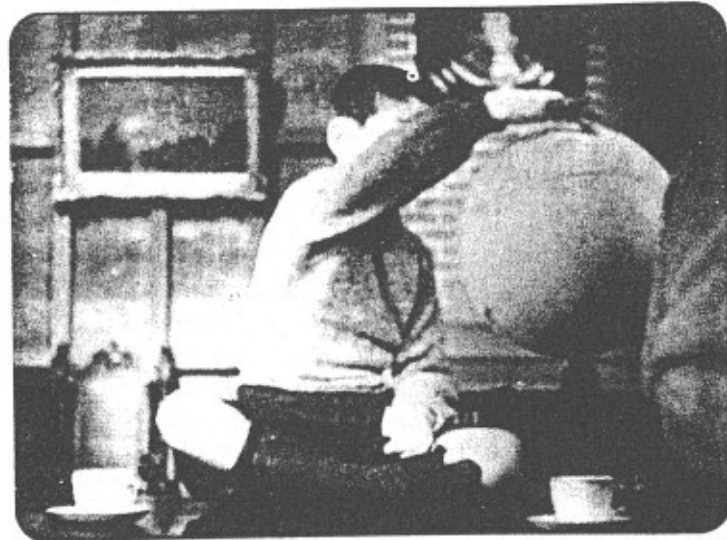
tional commentary that the boys are somehow "alike." But this justification would be unspecific (it could apply to any of the graphic matches we have considered) and banal (I shall suggest shortly why parametric narration drives critics to banality): in a word, desperate. The most adequate motiva-



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12.3. What Did the Lady Forget?

12.4. What Did the Lady Forget?



tion for Ozu's cut is a purely aesthetic one. Incongruity and humor arise from the palpable manipulation of the stylistic parameters of composition and cutting. Syuzhet needs are subordinated to the play of graphic space.

Now, any film might contain an aesthetically motivated

flourish—a gratuitous camera movement, an unexpected and unjustified color shift or sound bridge. In the visual arts, the flourish is an embellishment, expressing what E. H. Gombrich describes as “the joyful exuberance of a craftsman who displayed both his control and his inventiveness.”<sup>104</sup> The flourish exhibits aesthetic motivation because it makes the artwork's materials and forms perceptually salient. Ozu's graphic match, however, is not a flourish; the device recurs frequently and systematically. (Here is another reason for resisting the banal interpretation that these boys are “alike” for to apply this principle to all of Ozu's graphic matches would lead merely to vacuity.) In parametric narration, style is organized across the film according to distinct principles, just as a narrative poem exhibits prosodic patterning or an operatic scene fulfills a musical logic. Godard's *Vivre sa vie* will illustrate this process.

*Vivre sa vie* announces itself as “a film in twelve episodes.” Each episode includes one or more scenes and is bracketed off by fades and numbered intertitles. At the level of visual style, each segment is characterized by one or more variants on possible camera/subject relations. In the credits sequence, Nana is presented in three close-up views: one of her left profile, one frontal shot, and one of her right profile. This announces the “theme” of varying camera/figure orientations. In the first episode, the camera presents Nana talking with her husband; both are framed from the rear. This completes the circuit around her begun during the credits and emphasizes that in the film's narrative, Nana's spatial relations with her surroundings will function as material for the stylistic variants. Later sequences explore a range of alternatives. Two characters in dialogue will be filmed by a camera right on the 180-degree line between them (Episodes 4 and 5). There are various options with respect to camera movement as well: a laterally tracking camera (Episode 2), a forward tracking camera (6), a simple pan shot (12). There are variants upon an arcing camera movement, one in which the conversing figures are arranged perpendicular to the lens axis (Episode 3), another in which they sit parallel to it (Episode 7). Episode 8 is a montage sequence highly fragmented by editing, while E-



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sode 9 consists of very long takes. The only moments in which a conversation is handled in classical shot/reverse shot come within a "quoted" passage—the excerpt from Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* in Episode 3—and within the penultimate episode, during the conversation with Brice Parain. "Quoting" and postponing the most orthodox stylistic option throw the other alternatives into higher relief. Stylistically, the film moves through a paradigm of alternatives to orthodox shot/reverse shot, forming a clear instance of what Jakobson calls the projection of the axis of selection into the axis of combination.<sup>41</sup>

A skeptic cannot, I think, deny that the stylistic organization of the film exhibits these features. The problem is what to do with them. Someone might claim that they are just ornamentation. But this would be like saying that rhythm and rhyme merely embellish a poem. The exhaustive way in which these stylistic alternatives are presented in the film would militate against their being simply filler material. V. F. Perkins writes of the film as "a series of dialogues on which Godard's camera plays a suite of variations, offering both an actual *mise en scène* and a string of suggestions as to how one *might* film a conversation."<sup>42</sup> Against the background of classical narration, *Vivre sa vie's* stylistic devices achieve a structural prominence that is more than simply ornamental.

Granted that these stylistic patterns are present and important, the critic is tempted to "read" them, to assign them thematic meanings. My skeptic might posit that *Vivre sa vie* is about the problem of communication, and therefore the stylistic devices can be taken as symbolizing the distance between people. Or—to take a currently fashionable interpretive line—perhaps *Vivre sa vie* is actually "about cinema." On this account, the filmmaker's ambivalent relation to his medium is represented through a varied camera handling. Such interpretive moves seek to insert parametric narration into the art-cinema mode. Yet although films like *Vivre sa vie* are made and seen within the art-cinema institution, it does not follow that they answer to the sort of symbolic readings we have seen art-cinema narration solicit.

The urge to read stylistic effects in this way must also be traced to a broader tendency, that of assuming that everything in any film (or any good film) must be interpretable

thematically. Thematization of this sort typically loses the specificity of a film's narrational work. Every stylistic element gets read the same way: long shots unite characters, cuts divide them; vertical lines isolate or split a character, horizontal lines evoke freedom; point-of-view shots create power relations by making one character the "object" of another's look. In this game, though, every card is wild. Whenever Nana is in the same shot with the pimp Raoul, the interpreter can posit a "unity" between them. If you point out that Raoul will exploit her and eventually let her be killed, then the critic claims that Godard is being ironic in positing such a unity. If Nana and her lover look at each other, and if this is rendered in alternating optical point-of-view shots, then the critic can say that Nana remains feminized (object of the male look) or not (appropriation of the power to look). If we are prepared to equate camera and director, every film can be interpreted as "making a statement" about cinema.

Interpretation of this sort is wholly appropriate to such narrative forms as allegory, in which abstract, often doctrinal meanings constitute the dominant structuring force of the text. In other forms, however, thematic meaning is only one component in the system, and not necessarily a very important one. The critic who thematizes technique in every film risks banalizing works which take as their "dominant" the perceptual force of style. For the problem is not just that thematization tends to rely on the clichés of sophomore literary criticism. Even at its best, thematization aims to assimilate the particular to the most general, the concrete to the woolly. It is perhaps for this reason that parametric filmmakers have tended to employ strikingly obvious themes. Not much acumen is needed to identify *Play Time* as treating the impersonality of modern life, *Tokyo Story* as examining the decline of the "inherently" Japanese family, or *Vivre sa vie* as dealing with contemporary urban alienation and female desire. It is as if stylistic organization becomes prominent only if the themes are so banal as to leave criticism little to interpret.

Possessed of a *horror vacui*, the interpretive critic clings to theme in order to avoid falling into the abyss of "arbitrary" style and structure. The critic assumes that everything in the film should contribute to meaning. If style is not decora-

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tion, it must be motivated compositionally or realistically or, best of all, as narrational commentary. Yet the error lies in assuming that style and syuzhet have a fixed relation to one another. It is important to recall that in any film, syuzhet structure—the selection and organization of story events—does not unequivocally determine a single stylistic presentation. (See p. 50.) There is always a degree of arbitrariness, which parametric cinema exploits. In the first episode of *Vivre sa vie*, Nana's conversation with Paul could be staged, shot, and cut in many ways and still convey the fabula information about their separation. As Perkins puts it: "Scenes whose action is static are filmed with a mobile camera, but the precise nature of the camera's movements is so far irrelevant to the recorded settings, faces, movements, and gestures that the various treatments could be interchanged from scene to scene without affecting our knowledge or understanding of the action in any substantial way."<sup>43</sup> If a film's stylistic devices achieve prominence, and if they are organized according to more or less rigorous principles, independent of syuzhet needs, then we need not motivate style by appealing to thematic considerations.

Is such narration a widespread filmmaking strategy? No, but significant filmmakers have employed it, especially those not aligned with national schools or movements. Some, such as Ozu and Bresson, seem to have done so intuitively; others have been more theoretically self-conscious, as we have seen in French cinema of the 1960s. Godard, for example, could not have been unaware of combinatory theories of serial music and the *nouveau roman* when he made *Vivre sa vie*. And what of the spectator? Do parametric principles constitute a widespread viewing norm? Certainly not as such. I shall suggest later, however, that parametric narration does tend to produce effects that many spectators register. Furthermore, as Perkins's remarks on *Vivre sa vie* suggest, viewers who are sensitive to style can notice such patterns. Of course, many viewers do not have such a sensitivity. Just as serial music may require training, practice, and some theoretical knowledge to become intelligible, so too may parametric narration. Burch puts it corrosively: "And why shouldn't the eye exercise itself? Why should filmmakers not address themselves to an

elite, just as composers have always done at different periods? We define 'elite' as those people willing to take the trouble to see and resee films (many films), as one must listen and relisten to a lot of music in order to appreciate the last quartets of Beethoven or the work of Webern."<sup>44</sup>

I can imagine one more objection to the concept of parametric narration. Can the play of style in such narration possess the perceptual and cognitive coherence that the syuzhet patterning does? The spectator unifies the syuzhet system causally, temporally, and spatially. Its units are events. We can identify intersubjective assumptions, hypotheses, and inferences with respect to it. If the syuzhet system omits a story event, we can make more or less sound guesses about it. But what does stylistic patterning offer us? It cannot have causal unity, and it must achieve an "immanent" organization of cinematic space and time. It seems to have no clearly designated units, perhaps only the notion of the "stylistic figure." And how could a spectator create a purely stylistic hypothesis or inference, or know that a stylistic element has been omitted, or that a stylistic development is taking place? If a stylistic pattern is not dependent on the syuzhet, it would seem at best highly unpredictable and at worst simply random, never salient. Could the spectator ever perceive the stylistic structures of parametric narration?

This is a very strong objection. A counterargument could start with Gombrich's suggestion that there is a difference between the perception of *meaning*, which he links to representational art, and the perception of *order*, which he associates with decorative and abstract art.<sup>45</sup> Normally, the activities are not easily distinguished, since our perception of order is shot through with assumptions and expectations about meaning. But in art, representational meaning may be played down or withheld, and sheer perceptual order may become strongly profiled. This happens in abstract painting which either expels denotative meaning or overwhelms it by pure design. One can see a table and a guitar in a Cubist still life, but their identifiable meaning is secondary to the spatial organization of the whole. Much the same thing occurs through the organization of cinematic space and time in parametric cinema.

Can this order be empirically perceived? We know that

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this problem has haunted discussions of integral serialism in music. Many composers and theorists, anxious to permute every sonic parameter, recognized that the new music was so complex that the generating series and its transformations might never be grasped in performance.<sup>46</sup> The "spatial" structuring was evident on paper but not necessarily in performance. The result, as Nicolas Ruwet suggested in 1959, is often a perceived *simplicity*, as if the intricate manipulation of pitch, duration, timbre, dynamics, and touch yielded only a music of brute instants.<sup>47</sup> A sharp theoretical challenge has been laid down by Leonard Meyer, who has sought to show that the form of serial music tends to be imperceptible on four grounds.<sup>48</sup>

1. All communication requires redundancy, but serial music is insufficiently redundant. The total ordering of all parameters makes the basic formal pattern difficult to perceive. Serial music also relies upon subtle shades of difference among various parameters, but when no parameters are held constant, such differences cannot be spotted.

2. Because serial music rejects traditional forms, we have no schemata as aids to memory or guides for anticipation. When every piece is unique, no one can grasp any of them.

3. Some tonal combinations are more easily perceived and recalled than others; specifically, pitch and duration seem more "basic" than timbre and attack. But serial music ignores natural patterns of comprehension.

4. Attention is a matter of allocating perceptual-cognitive resources. The perceiver thus has a limited "channel capacity." By packing so much novelty into a piece, the serial composer creates an overload that prevents more and less relevant events from being distinguished. Meyer is not saying that ordinary listeners typically cannot follow serial music. He is proposing that total serialist works may be formally imperceptible to all listeners. "Even if . . . a coterie of aficionados devoted their full perceptual capacities to this music, it is doubtful that they would ultimately succeed in really learning to *understand* it aurally."<sup>49</sup>

It is possible to agree with Meyer and hold that a wholly parametric use of film style is not perceivable in viewing. Noël Burch writes: "A structure exists when a parameter evolves according to some principle of progression that is

apparent to the viewer in the theater, or perhaps only to the film-maker at his editing table, for, even though there may be structures that are 'perceptible only to those who have created them,' they nonetheless play an important role in the final aesthetic result."<sup>50</sup> This sounds much like Boulez's claim that even if the ear does not perceive serial structures, it "registers" them.<sup>51</sup> The locus classicus of this sort of defense has been Berg's opera *Wozzeck*, which unifies its score by an intrinsically musical logic: each act consists of pieces in different forms; each piece's tempo evolves from that of the preceding passage; each act ends with a cadence to the same chord; and so on.<sup>52</sup> Yet Berg insisted that his particular achievement was the music's "invisibility":

No one in the audience, no matter how aware he may be of the musical forms contained in the framework of the opera, of the precision and logic with which it has been worked out, no one, from the moment the curtain parts until it closes for the last time, pays any attention to the various fugues, inventions, suites, sonata movements, variations, and passacaglias about which so much has been written.<sup>53</sup>

Later I shall suggest that "unseen" structures can play some broader role in our response to a film. In general, however, an appeal to objectively present but imperceptible structures does not offer a strong explanation of parametric practices. After all, many structures in an artwork go unnoticed but also remain irrelevant to the work's aesthetic effect. Michael Riffaterre, in a devastating critique of Roman Jakobson's poetic analyses, has shown that not every pattern in a work is aesthetically functional or perceptually salient.<sup>54</sup> A better line of defense is to argue that the most clear-cut cases of parametric narration can definitely be perceived in viewing.

In a parametric film, stylistic events can be noticed, their relation to the syuzhet can be hypothesized, aspects of their patterning can be noted and recalled. Parametric narration meets all four of Meyer's criteria:

1. *Sufficient redundancy*. Parametric cinema is not totally serial, since typically only a few parameters are highlighted and varied across the film. *Vivre sa vie*, for instance,

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operates with distinct camera positions and editing options. Moreover, the syuzhet often provides a constant basis for stylistic change.

2. *Prior schemata.* Parametric narration does not as a whole reject schemata as sources of order and expectation. The syuzhet will often be comprehensible according to the norms of classical narration or art-cinema narration. (There is in fact a predilection for quite predictable plot patterns.) Stylistically, the film will have a strong inner unity: a prominent intrinsic norm and patterned reiterations of that. Moreover, the style can be seen as "preformed" to a great degree, especially across a body of work. Ozu, Bresson, and other directors possess virtually preexistent stylistic systems which can reduce almost any subject to their own terms.

3. *Recognition of "natural" predispositions.* Burch has pointed out that certain parameters seem more basic than others: image/sound relations, onscreen/offscreen space, editing alternatives. Whether these are more "natural" or not, it is likely that these are the most obvious targets of attention.

4. *Recognition of limited "channel capacity."* Since cinema normally programs the order and duration of viewing, questions of redundancy and allocation of cognitive resources become pertinent. Parametric cinema is not totally serial, so the viewer's capacities are not necessarily taxed by an overwhelming range of stylistic elements. There is also, as we shall see, a tendency for this mode to work with simply additive forms. But there is no hiding that some parametric film do create "overload"; Tati's *Play Time* is a famous case.<sup>55</sup> And even with more ascetic films, such as those of Bresson and Dreyer, the overall organization of parameters may well exceed detailed comprehension. At the close of this section I shall try to show that particular connotative effects may follow from the spectator's limited ability to construct intelligible patterns of style. Parametric cinema is thus, theoretically at least, perceptible in Meyer's terms. As we consider this mode's principles of organization, we must concentrate upon those that yield precise and intersubjective aesthetic effects.

In order for style to come forward across the whole film, it must possess internal coherence. This coherence depends

on establishing a distinctive, often unique intrinsic stylistic norm. We can distinguish two broad strategies. One is the "ascetic" or "sparse" option, in which the film limits its norm to a narrower range of procedures than are codified in other extrinsic norms. The Mizoguchi of the mid- and later 1930s selects the long take in long shot or medium long shot; Bresson confines himself to the straight-on medium shot, often of body parts; Tati utilizes long shots with decentered framing in deep space; and so on. Announced at the film's outset, such a limitation of devices constitutes a powerful intrinsic norm which "processes" each syuzhet event according to a recognizably "preformed" style.

By contrast, a more "replete" intrinsic norm creates an inventory or a range of paradigmatic options. We have already seen that *Vivre sa vie* brings many disparate stylistic procedures to bear on the problem of representing character encounters. Burch has found the same to hold true in Lang's *M*, in which each sequence plays a variant upon spatial and temporal discontinuity.<sup>56</sup> Typically, the ascetic option presents a material similarity of procedures across differentiated syuzhet passages; the replete option creates parallels among distinct portions of the syuzhet and varies the material procedures used to present them. The strongly articulated sequences in *Vivre sa vie* and *M* permit a clear comparison of different paradigmatic options at the level of style. Redundancy is achieved either by limiting the range of stylistic procedures or by strictly paralleling segments of the syuzhet.

Establishing a distinctive intrinsic norm, either sparse or replete, may create deviations within the film. The replete approach is constantly foregrounding stylistic events in that each discrete stylistic event will tend to instantiate a deviant procedure. More complex cases are Dreyer's *Ordet* and *Gertrud*. Each film takes a "sparse" approach by restricting itself to slow lateral camera and figure movements and long takes; but each also sparingly cites isolated devices more characteristic of classical style (shot/reverse shot, eyeline matches, analytical cutting). Thus Dreyer's foregrounded moments achieve a kind of "repleteness," sampling—but only in passing—a wider paradigmatic range than the film draws on generally.<sup>57</sup> More often, the ascetic tendency in

paradigmatic narration tends to conform closely to its intrinsic stylistic norm. This is achieved by creating a narrow and strongly individual bunch of parametric qualities and then repeating them regularly across the film. In particular, the ascetic mode plays upon what psychologists call "just-noticeable differences." Given a stringently limited range of procedures, the sparse approach can create a barely perceptible threshold between identical repetition and slight variation. In the films of Ozu, for instance, a return to a familiar locale will be treated in a slightly rearranged sequence of views or with small changes of objects. How noticeable the differences are will vary. I shall suggest shortly that they cannot be minute, since spectators cannot spot or recall very slight changes; but it is one aim of the sparse approach to explore the boundary between what is and is not recognizable.

Once the intrinsic stylistic norm is in place, it must be developed. Style must create its own temporal logic. But because the viewer's schemata for film style are limited, it is unrealistic to expect parametric form to exhibit detailed intricacies. As in serial music, the more convoluted and the less redundant such form is, the more imperceptible it is likely to be. Consequently, parameters cannot all be varied simultaneously. Several must be held constant if repetition and variation are to be apparent. Moreover, the spectator is less likely to observe an isolated parameter than the stylistic "event," a recurrent local texture created by a cluster of devices. In *Vivre sa vie*, it is the combination of several factors—characters in spatial proximity, varied camera positions, and the editing patterns (or lack of them)—that creates the stylistic event that the narration permutes. Ozu's style achieves prominence through a similar effect of the interaction among figure position, frame composition, camera placement, use of offscreen space, and so on; the typical Ozu "moment" is a node of such parameters. This is not to say that each event will repeat every parameter, or that parameters cannot move off and recombine elsewhere in the film—only that if parametric play is to be perceived as ordered, it will be grasped in relation to some recurrent factors.

Despite Burch's call for "rhythmic alternation, recapitulation, retrogression, gradual elimination, cyclical repetition, and serial variation," parametric form must develop simply. The most adequate musical models are additive forms such as strophic patterns, the rondo, and theme and variations. Here parts are related not by a hierarchical process but by structural parallelism and/or similarity of device. In parametric narration the syuzhet may well possess a cumulative overall shape, often of great structural symmetry, but the stylistic patterning tends to be additive and open-ended, with no predictable point of termination. *Vivre sa vie's* survey of paradigmatic options betrays no evolving logic, while the succession of slightly varied procedures in Dreyer or Ozu is completely "reversible." As in the musical rondo or the theme and variations, the number of stylistic events can be indefinitely large, and there is room for many unexpected repetitions and differences.

In the replete approach, additive development displays a tendency toward permutational exhaustion of options within a paradigm. This we saw in *Vivre sa vie's* variants on "how to shoot and cut character interaction." Burch has been astute in finding films possessing paradigmatic principles; among his examples are *Une simple histoire*, *Cronaca di un Amore*, and Renoir's *Nana* ("a model of the exhaustive use of offscreen space").<sup>58</sup> The sparse approach, as I have mentioned, uses additive form to create "just-noticeable differences." Kristin Thompson has revealed this process at work in *Play Time* and in Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac*.<sup>59</sup> To take another instance: One does not think of Fassbinder as an ascetic filmmaker, yet his *Katzelmacher* (1969) exemplifies how the sparse approach can produce slight variations. By reducing the number and types of setting, the angle of view (perpendicular, with few depth cues), the number of shots (one per scene), character movements (typically a tableau), shot transitions (the cut only), and camera movements (none, except as noted below), *Katzelmacher* creates a sparse intrinsic norm. An ambiguous durational scheme also encourages us to arrange the scenes in "columnar" rather than linear fashion. The narration develops as a combinatory scheme: same locale, different characters; different locale,

same characters; same ment. One shot, which camera movement, at film's intrinsic norm, e a dialectical structure the two poles of a param once."<sup>60</sup> As the film goes also repeated, each tim tering into the overall Dreyer, Ozu, Bresson, tive form invites us to

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ernation, recapitulation, cyclical repetition, must develop simply. Additive forms such as theme and variations, a musical process but by means of device. In parametric narration, to possess a cumulative structure, symmetry, but the structure is open-ended, as in *Vivre sa vie's* surviving logic, while in Dreyer or Ozu the musical rondo or the stylistic events can be for many unexpected

same characters; same locale, with or without figure movement. One shot, which includes nondiegetic music and camera movement, at first works as a deviation from the film's intrinsic norm, exemplifying Burch's suggestion that a dialectical structure can operate by "emphasizing one of the two poles of a parameter by using it rarely or perhaps only once."<sup>60</sup> As the film goes on, however, this stylistic event is also repeated, each time with different characters, thus entering into the overall variation structure. As in the films of Dreyer, Ozu, Bresson, and Mizoguchi, *Katzelmacher's* additive form invites us to notice nuance.

In this mode, the spectator's task becomes one of recognizing stylistic repetition and staying alert for more or less distinct variations. We may speak of suspense hypotheses (how will this scene be handled?) and a "scanning" strategy that compares one stylistic event with preceding ones, giving the earlier one the status of "statement." For instance, in *Ordet* and *Gertrud*, the lateral tracking shots following characters build up purely spatiotemporal expectations. When and where will the character pause? Will another character enter the shot? Mizoguchi uses long takes to generate hypotheses about whether a character will fill a vacant portion of the frame. Ozu achieves a more playful rotation of hypotheses by juggling shot combinations in unpredictable ways. In *An Autumn Afternoon*, the first transition to Tory's Bar employs three shots: medium shot of a row of bar signs, none of which is Tory's (so will we now move inside one?); then a long shot of the street (so will a scene take place on the street?); then a medium shot of Tory's sign (so will the action take place inside?). The next transition to this locale begins in more orthodox fashion, with a shot of Tory's sign. This should suffice to signal any future scenes in Tory's. Yet the next scene at the bar begins with a long shot of the bar signs across the street; there follows a cut to a long shot (comparable to shot 2 in the first series) as our protagonist, Hirayama, staggers down the street and into the bar; cut inside as he arrives. The narration spreads the three shots of the first set out in different order, across two other transitions. This cues the spectator to notice the variants. Moreover, of the two earlier scenes in Tory's Bar, one had ended with a cut back to

the sign, and one had not. A cut to the sign in this last variant is thus not clearly likely. And yet when Ozu does cut to the sign at the end of the third scene, this shot is revealed to complete the theme-and-variations pattern, since this shot is the one "missing" from the most recent variant! Such playful, constantly self-correcting shot combinations are among the most salient aspects of Ozu's parametric narration.

Additive stylistic structures do not have a strong directional quality, but the syuzhet does. Even if style becomes the "dominant," in Tynianov's sense, the syuzhet system operates partly to throw repeated and varied stylistic shapes into relief. Like the guitar in a Cubist still life, the syuzhet episode—a character conversation in *Vivre sa vie*, a visit to a bar in *An Autumn Afternoon*—becomes a reference point for stylistic departures, a stable support for a freer pattern-making.

Parametric narration can make syuzhet and style interact in three ways. Style may completely and constantly dominate the syuzhet. This occurs rarely, but *Wavelength* (1967) affords a clear example. A plot (the events of a routine day and a mysterious murder) is wholly subordinated to the internal progression of cinematographic parameters (lens length, light, color). Or style may be seen as equal in importance to the syuzhet. Burch has suggested the possibility of "cellular" form analogous to that in serial music, whereby a single structure dictates both local texture and large-scale form. This might seem to resemble the "generative" poetics of narration associated with the later films of Robbe-Grillet. As Robbe-Grillet explains: "*L'Eden et après* (1970) is doubtless the only fiction film—or in any case the first one—where the story itself is produced by the organization of themes into successive series according to a system that is somewhat comparable to that of Schoenberg in music."<sup>61</sup> But in Robbe-Grillet's films these themes are only motifs, such as objects or colors, or abstractions, such as "opposition." The themes give rise to syuzhet patterning, but as Roy Armes points out, they determine nothing about stylistic configurations.<sup>62</sup> A more truly generative account of parametric narration is Burch's description of *Play Time* as possessing a "cell"—a dialectic between gags centered in the shot and gags in a

development displays a rotation of options within its variants on "how to proceed." Burch has been astute in his application of these principles; among them, *Cronaca di un Amore*, the exhaustive use of the camera, as I have mentioned, is a noticeable difference in this process at work in *lot du Lac*.<sup>59</sup> To take the example of Fassbinder as an alternative, *er* (1969) exemplifies the use of slight variations. By changing the angle of view and the number of shots in a scene (typically a tableau), the camera movements in *Katzelmacher* creates a parametric scheme also in "columnar" rather than in "row" develops as a combinatory system of characters; different locale,

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"bad" position—which generates the overall structure of the film's sequences as well.<sup>63</sup> Kristin Thompson's analysis of *Ivan the Terrible* shows how a basic opposition controls both the syuzhet structure and the stylistic patterning.<sup>64</sup> In her work on *Les vacances de M. Hulot*, Thompson demonstrates that a very Robbe-Grilletian variation among sequences (the various routines of a vacation week) proceeds from the same "cell" as do the manipulations of film technique.<sup>65</sup>

Even if syuzhet and style do not issue from a single *donnée*, they can function as equals. In Dreyer's *Ordet*, repeated camera movements across a parlor create a systematic scanning independent of local narrative needs; the camera will track only with characters "going its way," able to assist its achievement of a global, nonnarrative pattern. Late in the film, when a group of mourners has assembled in the parlor, the camera punctiliously surveys the space, tracking right and then back left with a striking lack of economy. Stylistically, this is another variant on the to-and-fro movements of earlier scenes. Yet in its summative quality the shot signals the exhaustion of this locale (we will not see it again) and prepares not only for a shift in style but for narrative closure.<sup>66</sup> Style indubitably comes forward, but it functions to mark both its own functioning and syuzhet patterns. In what Burch calls "a fully composite work," stylistic structures "retain their autonomous, 'abstract' function, but in symbiosis with the plot which they both support and challenge."<sup>67</sup>

In most parametrically narrated films, syuzhet and fabula shift in importance. This is not surprising. An analogous situation occurs in opera: The story action needs to continue, but the music needs to repeat. Hence the levels alternate in significance. In parametric narration, style will sometimes accompany the syuzhet, reinforcing it. For example, Nana's conversation with Brice Parain in *Vivre sa vie* is handled in conventional shot-reverse-shot fashion, which makes syuzhet construction dominant. At other times, parametric narration will subordinate the syuzhet to stylistic structures, as in the back-to-the-camera sequence of *Vivre sa vie*. When this occurs, the constant potential tension between style and syuzhet can manifest itself—as it does often in *Vivre sa vie*,

whose "gratuitous" survey of paradigmatic options frustrates our fabula-constructing activity. Burch describes this alternating process as "a dialectical rhythm that sometimes joins and sometimes separates what used to be called form and content."<sup>68</sup>

Note, however, that even when the syuzhet comes forward, it tends to do so on the style's own terms. Once the intrinsic stylistic norm has established itself, the syuzhet is grasped and the fabula constructed within the constraints of that norm. For instance, after *Katzelmacher's* combinatory patterning becomes apparent as a stylistic principle, we can take it for granted, and the syuzhet becomes easier to assimilate. And even the relative downplaying of style in *Vivre sa vie's* scene with Brice Parain is achieved within the framework of a string of codified alternatives.

The parametric syuzhet will thus tend to be recognizable by its deformities. One symptom is an abnormal ellipticality. Causes and effects may be disjointed, major scenes may be omitted, duration may be skipped over. *M* is one example, but *Katzelmacher* and *Vivre sa vie* are better ones. Each has an episodic construction that yields only glimpses of character psychology and presents unmarked excerpts from an indeterminate fabula duration. A contrary symptom is an abnormal repetitiveness, such as that in Dreyer's *Ordet* and *Gertrud*. Here the syuzhet is telling us too little too often, flattening big scenes and trivial gestures to the same level. Some filmmakers are notable for using both tactics. The films of Ozu and Bresson manage to be both elliptical (omitting big scenes, halting a scene before its climax, suddenly switching locale, not marking duration) and repetitious (reiterating trivial linking actions in Bresson, locales in Ozu). Both severe ellipticality and repetition indicate that the constraints of stylistic patterning are imposing their will on the syuzhet, or at least that the narration limits itself to presenting events that display the style to best advantage.

To sum up: Parametric narration establishes a distinctive intrinsic norm, often involving an unusually limited range of stylistic options. It develops this norm in additive fashion. Style thus enters into shifting relations, dominant or subordinate, with the syuzhet. The spectator is cued to

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the syuzhet comes forth in its own terms. Once the syuzhet is defined itself, the syuzhet is defined within the constraints of *Katzelmacher's* combinatory stylistic principle, we can become easier to assimilating of style in *Vivre sa vie* achieved within the alternatives.

They tend to be recognizable in an abnormal ellipticality. In *M*, major scenes may be over. *M* is one example, there are better ones. Each has only glimpses of characterized excerpts from an contrary symptom is an that in Dreyer's *Ordet* and that gives us too little too often, structures to the same level. Using both tactics. They can be both elliptical (omitting before its climax, suddenly variation) and repetitious as in Bresson, locales in which repetition indicate that they are imposing their will on the narration limits itself to the style to best advantage. It establishes a distinctive and an unusually limited range of this norm in additive fashioning relations, dominant or The spectator is cued to

construct a prominent stylistic norm, recognizing style as motivated neither realistically nor compositionally nor textually. The viewer must also form assumptions and hypotheses about the stylistic development of the film.

The strategy of treating the stylistic pattern as a rigorous but additive set of differences laid over the syuzhet does challenge our normal processes of perceiving a film narrative. In particular, it thwarts the chief method of managing viewing time—constructing a linear fabula. The parametric film battles against time, carrying to an extreme the tendency toward "spatialization" which we observed in historical-materialist narration. This is very evident in *Katzelmacher* and in Ozu's films, in which stylistic repetition encourages the viewer to "stack" scenes by technique, in opposition to the horizontal unrolling of the action. This mode strains so vigorously against habitual capacities that it risks boring or baffling the spectator. *Vivre sa vie* or *Katzelmacher* can be treated as art films by critics who neglect the workings of style. Because of the complex and inherently open nature of stylistic construction in such films, a viewer may move quickly to connotative interpretation and miss the parametric play.

Here we can locate the more general effects of a mode whose structures may be invisible but still "registered" in the sense remarked by Burch and Boulez. It is significant that the most celebrated exponents of the sparse parametric strategy—Dreyer, Ozu, Mizoguchi, and Bresson—are often seen as creating mysterious and mystical films. It is as if a self-sustaining style evokes, on its edges, elusive phantoms of connotation, as the viewer tries out one signification after another on the impassive structure. The recognition of order triggers a search for meaning. Noncinematic schemata, often religious ones, may thus be brought in to motivate the workings of style. It is possible to recuperate these films in art-cinema terms, invoking subjectivity or authorial commentary to explain isolated stylistic events. But one reason to hold onto the possibility of parametric narration is that it points up the limits upon the art film's extrinsic norms—limits, we have seen, of insipidity and banality—and lets us acknowledge a richness of texture that resists interpretation.

### The Parameters of *Pickpocket*

Michel takes up a life of theft, while his friends Jacques and Jeanne and a police inspector try to dissuade him. Close to being captured, he flees Paris and returns two years later. Jeanne now has a child and has been abandoned by Jacques, the father. Michel offers to take care of them. He gets a job and gives Jeanne money. Tempted to return to picking pockets, he succumbs and is arrested. Jeanne visits him in prison, where they declare their love for one another.

Such an emaciated outline of *Pickpocket's* story cannot suggest the rich play of syuzhet and style in the narrational activity of the film. This process gets set in motion from the film's first frame. There is initially a prologue, a crawl title on a black ground while a Lully piece swells up on the sound track.

The style of this film is not that of a thriller.

The author attempts to explain, in pictures and sounds, the nightmare of a young man, forced by his weakness into an adventure in theft for which he was not made.

Yet this adventure, by strange paths, brings together two souls who otherwise might never have known one another.

And within this extradiegetic frame there is a recounting in the story world. After the credits, a hand writes in a notebook while a voice (later to be identified as Michel's) recites the text. The first entry follows the prologue.

I know that normally those who have done these things keep quiet, while those who talk have not done them. And yet I have done them.

We could not ask for a more blatant signal of the difference between syuzhet and style: Michel's hand and voice telling the things he has done, an omniscient authorial voice announcing that these events will be "explained" in images and sounds. There is much to be said about this double-barreled opening, but let us first consider the syuzhet's relation to the fabula in the film as a whole.

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There are two lines of story action: the relation of Michel to his mother and to his friends Jacques and Jeanne; and Michel's pickpocket career. In syuzhet presentation, these two lines are initially linked by the actions of various characters. Jacques tries to find Michel a job so that he won't steal, while the inspector steps into Michel's life, apparently to warn him off. But not until the inspector visits Michel does the fundamental causal connection emerge. The inspector announces that a year previously Michel's mother had reported a robbery and then sent Jeanne to withdraw the complaint. Thus the police have suspected Michel of being a thief all along, and his personal life has been bound up with the investigation from the start. The Russian Formalists would here point out that the protagonist, far from being a creature with great psychological depth, is constructed as the point of intersection of two lines of material, becoming the splice between domesticity and petty crime.<sup>69</sup> This conclusion gains some weight when, in the next scene, Michel comes as close as he ever does to naming the cause of his actions. "I couldn't achieve anything," he says. "It drove me mad." If this is the weakness mentioned in the film's prologue, it is explained in fairly perfunctory fashion. What did he try to achieve? And why theft rather than other acts? The film does not posit psychological ambiguity, as in art-cinema narration, but opacity.

The syuzhet also brings out certain temporal patterns. Here is an outline of the *fabula*.

- A. Michel's mother reports the robbery to police.
- B. A month later: Michel robs the woman at the racetrack.
- C. Over the next eleven months: Michel meets Jeanne, his mother dies, and he becomes a professional thief. He flees to England.
- D. Over the next two years, Michel stays in England.
- E. He returns to Paris.
- F. Over one or two weeks: He works to support Jeanne and her child. He is arrested at the racetrack.
- G. Over several weeks: He is in prison.

The syuzhet manipulates our construction of this *fabula* by starting (like Michel's written account) in *medias res*,

with (B), the racetrack robbery. The first three-fifths of the film are concerned with the eleven-month series of events in (C). Near the end of this section, Michel learns of event A, his mother's report to the police, and it is only then recounted to us. The syuzhet goes on to render the sojourn in England (D) by a single laconic journal entry, thus letting two years elude dramatization. The rest of the film dramatizes events in (E), (F), and (G). There are, however, equivocations. Within the *fabula* world, it is hard to tell how much time elapses, chiefly because the seasons seem constant and Michel wears an unvarying costume. In *La guerre est finie*, Diego wears the same suit throughout the film, but there costuming functions as a cue for a short syuzhet duration. Here the same device renders *fabula* and syuzhet duration vague.

The syuzhet goes further in marking its manipulation of the *fabula*. Story events are buckled into loops. The first scene shows Michel stealing at Longchamps racetrack; three years later he is caught in the same locale. After his capture, a series of scenes in prison, itself symmetrically constructed, forms a pendant to the main syuzhet action. Retardation is also flagrantly present. As Roy Armes has pointed out, "The whole film is ultimately a vast *temps mort*, a detour that takes in exile and imprisonment for [Michel] and abandonment and an illegitimate pregnancy for Jeanne, only to bring the two of them back to a love they could have enjoyed to begin with."<sup>70</sup> From this standpoint, Jacques, the inspector, and the entire adventure in crime constitute an extensive series of realistically motivated delays in the consummation of the couple's relations. When the inspector objects to Michel's belief in superior thieves on the grounds that these men would not stop stealing, his remark prophesies Michel's persistence in folly and at the same time justifies the inclusion of more robbery scenes. Indeed, the acts of theft are remarkably "dysfunctional," concentrating upon Michel's progress toward self-sufficient virtuosity, with no concomitant effects on his attitudes. Similarly, the encounters which Michel has with Jacques and Jeanne are highly repetitious and contribute little to any linear development. The retardation is laid bare in the prologue, with its warning

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that "strange paths" will eventually unite two souls. This is quite analogous to Shklovsky's example of *Tristram Shandy*, in which the narrator graphs the book's digressive syuzhet as a knot of squiggles and whorls.<sup>71</sup>

In most respects, the syuzhet reflects the constraints of Michel's written text. We are confined almost completely to his range of knowledge at the moment when the story events occurred. Indeed, the diegetic recounting in the notebook does not as rule fill in prior information or anticipate events. And the device of the written record enables Michel to explain his feelings and thoughts. In thirty-six of the forty-nine sequences, his voice will interject a report of his mental state. There is thus some "subjective" depth on the sound track to compensate for the notable impassivity of face and demeanor. Ellipses are also subjectively motivated by the recounting. When Michel goes abroad, his notebook summarizes the hiatus with two sentences, and we never see him in England. On either side of this gap there is also a revealing asymmetry. He rides to the station in a cab, tensely expecting pursuit and arrest. Upon his return, however, we dissolve from the railroad station to him climbing a flight of stairs. Why no shot of him driving from the station to the apartment? "I was there again," the commentary explains, "without knowing how."

In a classical film, technique would faithfully reflect the syuzhet's degree of communicativeness and its limited range and depth of knowledge. But this film's prologue announces the overt presence of an omniscient narration which will operate through style. The crawl title ("The style of this film is not that of a thriller . . ." and so on) is highly self-conscious, emphasizing the spectator as someone in a theater to whom pictures and sounds can be explicitly addressed by an "author." Here is a case where the narrational process mimics a communication from sender to receiver. (See p. 62.) It is significant that the credit sequence follows the prologue, as if identifying Bresson the filmmaker with the self-nominated source of images and sounds. Furthermore, the prologue claims absolute knowledge of distant origins (Michel "was not made" for theft), immediate causes (he has a "weakness"), psychological reactions, vari-

ous events along the way, and the eventual outcome. The narration also proposes particular schemata to try on the film. We are to watch for theft, for the motivation for actions, and for digressive developments that will eventually unite two characters. This prologue is also more communicative than its Hollywood counterpart, but it remains tantalizingly obscure on certain points. What are the "strange paths"? Is Michel one of the two souls? Who is the other? Certain explanations will be kept vague, such as the exact weakness that led Michel into thievery. By such gaps and equivocations, the narration maintains an overt uncommunicativeness that provokes our curiosity about how the predicted events will occur.

From the start, Michel's diegetic writing and voice-over commentary are at the mercy of the extradiegetic voice. The master of "pictures and sounds" chooses to start at a point well along in Michel's text. A bit of the preceding paragraph (*dans la rue . . .*) can be seen. Did it recount his theft from his mother a month before? We will never know. Nor will we learn the context of Michel's act of recounting. Is this a diary, addressed to himself? Is it a confession to the police? Is it a letter to Jeanne? (Compare the relatively explicit definition of the narrating circumstances in *Murder My Sweet*, discussed on pp. 66-67.) By not revealing Michel's recounting in its entirety, the overarching narration cuts it free of immediate fabula causality and makes it a self-conscious address to the audience. (This will lead to a crucial equivocation at the very end.) Furthermore, Michel's writing is not clearly located with respect to the events it recounts. How long afterward does it take place? The narrating situation is never defined as it is in, say, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Indeed, at the film's close we do not return to Michel's written record at all—another indication of the power of extradiegetic narration to curtail syuzhet information.

Narration in *Pickpocket* would be highly self-conscious by virtue of the striking syuzhet handling alone, but the syuzhet is in turn subjected to an internally organized parametric system, preformed and defined wholly in terms of cinematic space and time. Using a "sparse" approach, the film selects only a few technical procedures from the class-

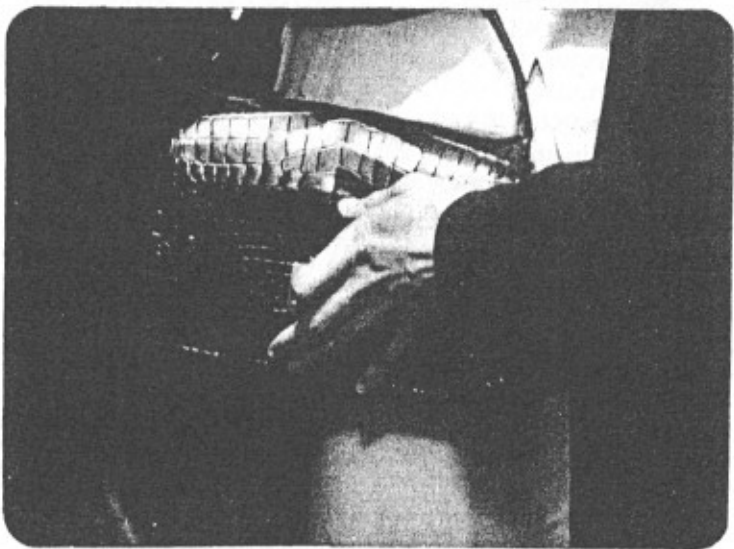
first three-fifths of the month series of events in Michel learns of event A, is only then recounted the sojourn in England thus letting two years film dramatizes events however, equivocations. to tell how much time as seem constant and In *La guerre est finie*, out the film, but there short syuzhet duration. and syuzhet duration

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cal paradigm. These devices become organized into an additive, spatialized form that coheres as a unique stylistic world. *Pickpocket's* intrinsic norm thus achieves prominence by virtue of its narrow range of technical choices, its quantitative repetition of those, and its qualitative subordination of Michel's recounting to stylistic patterning. The crawl title defines the work's prominence immediately: "The style of this film is not that of a thriller." Thereafter the narration literally *stylizes* the represented events; images and sounds stand like translucent filters between the syuzhet organization and the spectator.

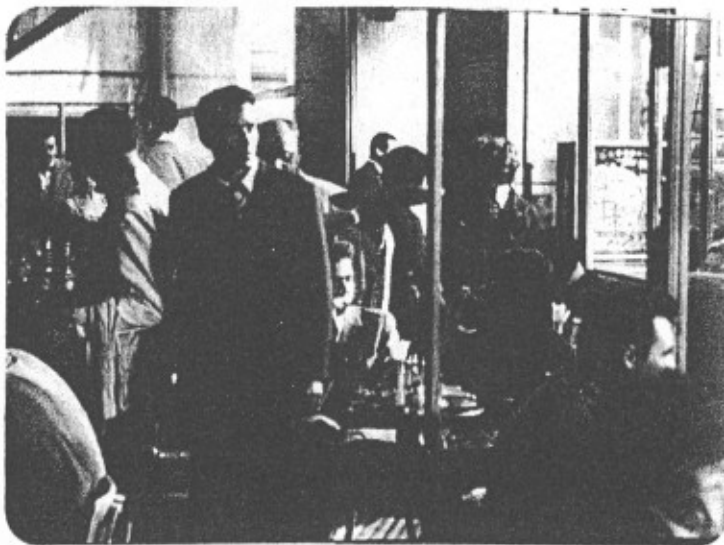
The work on film style begins with the organization of the profilmic event itself. Although shot on location, *Pickpocket* is hardly "realistic." The manipulation of the sound track owes nothing to classical verisimilitude. No métro platfoms ever sounded so quiet; in these bank lobbies and train stations you can hear every rustle of banknotes, each footfall. The figures' behavior is equally stylized. After Jeanne and Jacques return to a cafe table where Michel had been sitting, they sit down, pause, and only then does Jacques lift his eyes and remark that Michel is gone. In the bank, Michel blocks the exit of a businessman by simply stepping up to him; the two hold their postures for a long moment before they separate. Such abstraction of figure movement is at its height during the pickpocket scenes. These passages are not the plausible representations of efficient thievery which classical cinema would present. Victims stand unnaturally still and let strangers grasp their wrists or lapels with impunity. When Kassagi steals from a man about to take a cab, the gull must halt motionless and silent before climbing in. At the racetrack, there is an unnatural divorce between the rigid position of Michel's body (in frontal shots) and the flexible mobility of an arm creeping toward a purse or pocket. (See figs. 12.5–12.6.) The stylization of the profilmic event includes costumes as well. Black suits mask off chunks of space and allow diving hands to stand out against a neutral ground. Perhaps the most outrageous example is Michel's outfit, his rumpled dark suit and his loosened tie that is usually skewed a constant angle. One function of the unvarying costumes, as I have mentioned, is to create uncertainty about duration. But Michel's suit also acts as a uni-



form, so that we can always pick him out of a crowd or identify him in a frontal midriff shot. Michel's suit and tie could stand as emblems of the extent to which rigorous and restricted regularities of mise-en-scène bear the trace of an all-powerful parametric system.



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A comparable restraint operates in the choice of framing and cutting patterns. Bresson restricts his camera to a straight-on or a slightly high angle, most typically in medium-shot or medium-close-up range, and he uses only a 50-mm lens. He relies upon eyeline matches and shot/reverse-shot combinations. The recurrent devices derive from the paradigm characteristic of classical Hollywood narration. Yet in Bresson's films devices gain great prominence with respect to the classical norm, for several reasons. First, Bresson typically does not employ other classical devices, such as the establishing long shot, the low-angle framing, match-on-action cuts, or analytical editing. Certain devices thus get pried loose from their codified role and move forward as pure parameters. Second, there is the matter of timing. In a classical film, the completion of the glance determines the moment of an eyeline-match cut, as we saw in *Rear Window*. Jeff looks, we see what he sees, then we see Jeff reacting. In *Pickpocket*, though, the cut will be delayed. In a favorite variant, a figure will look, lower the eyes, look again, lower the eyes again, then finally raise them; only then will we see the object of the glance. A slower timing is also created by having characters leave a shot and then

holding the empty framing for a noticeable interval before cutting away. With Bresson, the urge to "cover" offscreen movement by the slight lag in cutting away that we saw in William deMille and Lubitsch (pp. 171, 182) becomes a palpable emphasis on vacant space. The same prolongation of what Hollywood would accelerate occurs in conversation scenes. In a Hollywood dialogue, the pace is often governed by cutting to the listener before the speaker has finished the line. Bresson instead makes his speaker pause after every line, so that the cut to a reverse angle never interrupts dialogue. This simple device (also used by Ozu) makes the cut slightly more apparent than when continuous dialogue smooths it over. Bresson thus "defamiliarizes" classical *découpage* by prolonging what leads into and out from cuts.

All these parameters of sound, *mise-en-scène*, framing, and cutting break sharply from the realistic and compositional motivation codified by classical norms. As a result, the relation of *syuzhet* and style becomes more dynamic. *Syuzhet* patterning comes forward at various points when the style is most palpable, such as the opening racetrack scene, in which Michel's first theft is represented through point-of-view shots and close-ups of details. At other points, the *syuzhet* and style become more or less equivalent in interest. The best examples of the latter are the film's several shot/reverse-shot scenes.

As a classical figure of style, the shot/reverse shot is readily graspable and thus well suited for the neutral transmission of story information. The device is easy to motivate compositionally; each cut shows each character as she or he speaks. But in Bresson's hands the device gains a new emphasis. We have already seen how the general tendency to omit establishing shots gives more prominence to other *découpage* devices. A Bresson scene will typically start in one of two ways. The camera may frame a detail which will then be situated in a wider locale (by camera movement or figure movement).<sup>72</sup> Or the scene will start with a character's entering a space which is defined as contiguous to that occupied by another character; the relation of the characters is defined through glances and/or portions of a body intruding into the shot. Once the scene has begun, it tends to be



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analyzed—or, rather, processed—by a ruthless shot/reverse-shot technique. For example, when Michel first goes to the cafe, a panning long shot follows his scanning of the crowd for Jacques (fig. 12.7). Michel enters the cafe. Dissolve to the two of them at the bar, seen from the outset in a shot/

reverse-shot configuration (figs. 12.8–12.9). After several exact repetitions of these setups, Michel notices the inspector offscreen and walks to him; the inspector comes into the frame and creates a new over-the-shoulder composition (fig. 12.10). Dissolve again as the three men go to a table and sit,

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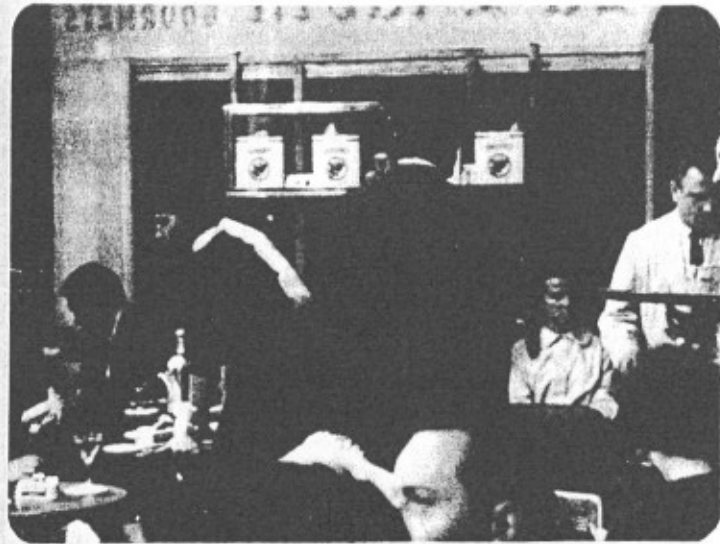
creating another over-the-shoulder setup (fig. 12.11). They talk, and there follows a shot/reverse-shot passage of only four setups, two of which (figs. 12.12–12.13) are presented eight times apiece. After another dissolve, Michel and Jacques come to the cafe door and talk. This initiates a brief

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shot/reverse-shot sequence (figs. 12.14–12.15) before Michel drifts off into the night (fig. 12.16; cf. fig. 12.7). The three brief scenes are unusual by virtue of their refusal of variety: no variation of camera angle or distance within each shot/reverse-shot stretch and nearly none between the two

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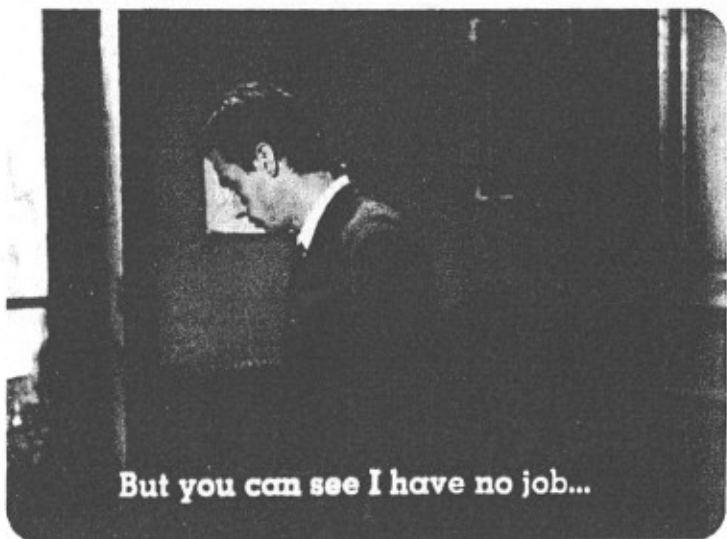
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exchanges between Michel and Jacques (figs. 12.8–12.9, 12.14–12.15); no figure movement that would change the relative positions of the interlocutors. Striking also is the “preformed” nature of the *découpage*, whereby characters *move into position* for the shot/reverse-shot combination, as

if figure behavior and camera position secretly collaborated to fulfill an abstract stylistic formula. With the establishing shot virtually abolished, the very first shot in a character encounter must become the first phase of a shot/reverse-shot exchange.

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The sense of characters moving to fulfill a preordained découpage is even stronger in the remarkable scene in which Michel visits Jeanne to ask about the police investigation. Their talk is presented in twenty-eight reverse shots. Here the repetition is nuanced in that a shot will start to

develop in a way that varies slightly from the norm. At one point, Michel begins to pace, turning from Jeanne (fig. 12.17), and the camera follows him by tracking in (fig. 12.18). He turns to her and walks back (fig. 12.19), and the camera tracks back to its initial position over Jeanne's shoul-

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der (fig. 12.20). She replies to him in a reverse shot. Cut to a repetition of the earlier setup, and track in again as Michel once more moves to the window (figs. 12.21–12.22). He turns and comes forward again, but now her shoulder is not in the frame (fig. 12.23). The shifting distance between the characters is measured by a precise découpage: one step makes a “just noticeable” compositional difference. Later in the scene, when Michel asks her if she thinks he is a thief, she retreats out of the frame, he takes one step forward, and the camera tracks back far enough to reposition her shoulder exactly as at the outset (fig. 12.24). Thus, repetitions and minute variations reveal powerful but simple rules of framing and cutting which figure movement must obey, beyond the dictates of the syuzhet. Unlike Soviet historical-materialist narration, which often withholds spatial cues entirely, *Pickpocket's* narration reorients us hyper-redundantly through a very narrow range of cues.

In the shot/reverse-shot scenes, stylistic rigor and syuzhet development operate as equals. In other passages, stylistic devices and patterns subordinate, even deform, syuzhet operations. At the very start, the extradiegetic narration declared itself to be an explanation “in pictures and sounds”:

cinematic style may take charge of the syuzhet. The tendency is apparent at a very local level. The first shot of the first scene of story action is a close-up: a woman's gloved hands take bills out of a purse and pass them to the hands of a man. One aspect of the stylistic norm, the close-up of hands, is thus supplied at the outset. Later, a scene may begin in an apparently comparable way but then go on to disorient us. Michel watches a theft on the subway. The scene ends with a close-up of the thief's hand as it grasps a newspaper in which a wallet has been nestled. Dissolve to a close-up of a hand sliding a notebook out from a creased newspaper. But this hand belongs to a different thief: a track back reveals Michel at home practicing the feat. Similarly, when Kassagi instructs Michel in picking pockets, we get a dissolved “montage sequence” of hands executing moves. We cannot tell if these all take place in a single evening's session or if they are excerpted from many days or weeks. A shot of Michel flexing his fingers on a table's edge retrospectively becomes at once the last shot of the montage and the first shot of a new scene. Unlike the narrative “hooks” between scenes in classical films, here Bresson creates purely visual and sonic linkages that make syuzhet relations equivocal.

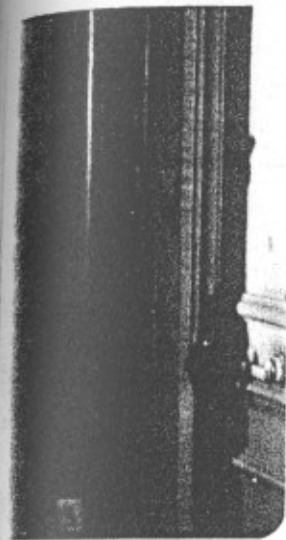
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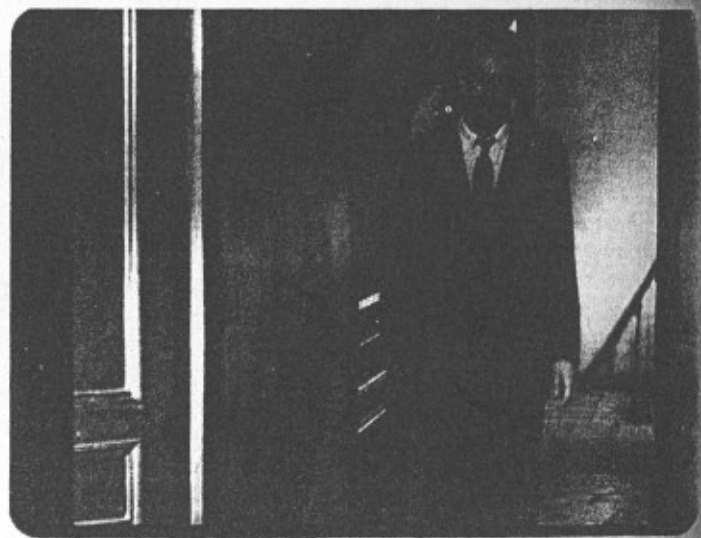
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At a broader level, the sparse techniques become palpable through development of a richly spatialized form. A simple example is offered by the portrayal of "insignificant," often routine story actions. In shot 22, Michel enters his apartment building and leaves the frame (fig. 12.25). Cut to a shot

of the top of the stairs; Michel passes through, walking up (fig. 12.26). In shot 24, we see the door of his room standing ajar, and he enters (fig. 12.27). The spatial gaps here invite us to imagine Michel starting at the foot of the staircase (an absent shot between shots 22 and 23), arriving at his land-



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ing, and walking down the hall to his room (two shots to be inserted between shots 23 and 24). Later in the film we get to see the first flight of stairs, when Michel stands looking out at Kassagi (fig. 12.28). Still later do we see him walk down the hallway outside his door (fig. 12.29). The trivial process

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of Michel's coming and going has been broken up into several bits, and all of them are never present in any one sequence. The narration plays a remarkable series of variants on these simple elements and even extends the handling to other locales. The first time Michel visits his mother, we start with a shot of him leaving the front doorway (fig. 12.30) and cut to a shot of him climbing the stair (fig. 12.31), very much as we have seen in the earlier scene. Behind all these "surface" manifestations there lurks an absent structure, a "shot row" which, like the series in music, can only be inferred.

These examples also suggest how the "spatialized" tendency of the narration emerges through unusual regularities of stylistic handling. However classical the sources of *Pickpocket's* parametric operations, through rigorous repetition those procedures form a closed system unique to this film. Now, every narration requires repetitions in order to reinforce spectatorial assumptions and to signal the intrinsic norms that will govern the work. Normally, however, stylistic repetitions operate to emphasize syuzhet informational processes without calling attention to style as such. Consider, for instance, the reiterated camera setups in the sequence from *Miss Lulu Bett* analyzed back in Chapter 9. The repetition of orientation and framing sinks below awareness because our perception is geared to noticing significant changes in the characters' behavior—expression, gesture, or dialogue. But by Bresson's famous tactic of expressionless performance, *Pickpocket* deprives the shot of much informational content. When each character wears a blank face and stands motionless or walks without idiosyncrasy, the repetitions of camera setup come forward to a greater degree. It is not just that 36 per cent of the shots in *Pickpocket* repeat earlier setups in the scene, for a classical film might have an even higher degree of spatial redundancy. (In *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, one out of every two shots repeats a setup.) In a classical film, repeated camera setups serve as a neutral ground for changes in the human agents. In *Pickpocket*, the neutrality of performance makes the repetition of camera position part of the film's intrinsic norm.

The "preformed" quality of framing, cutting, and figure movement becomes most prominent across scenes, when



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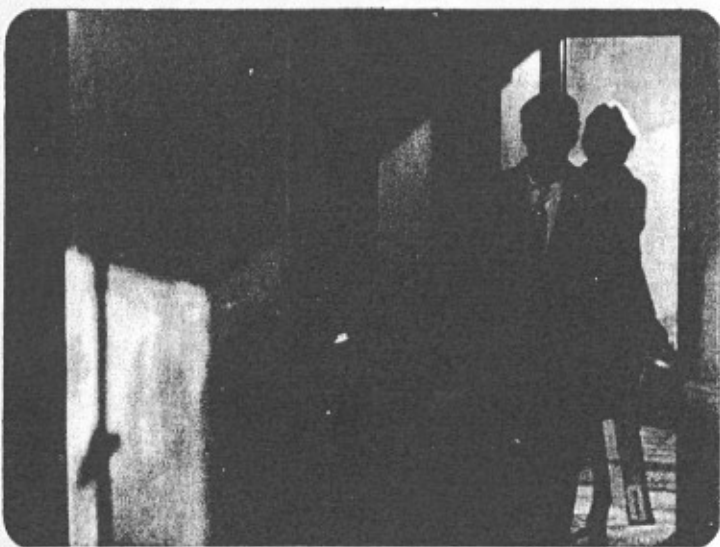
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repetitions and variations of prior camera setups create a strong sense of a style that reduces every event to the same coordinates. Sometimes the symmetries are in neighboring shots, as when we see Michel descend to the métro platform

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train and walk up the opposite stairs. A similar effect proceeds from the graphically matched dissolves to newspapers, hands, door frames, and so forth. More powerful are the far-reaching parallels. Each time Michel visits his mother's apartment, the same camera movement follows his route

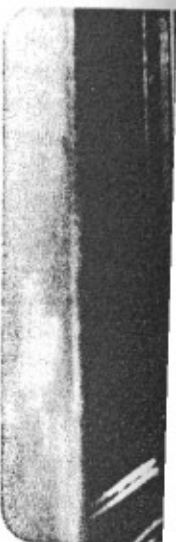
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On the second and third occasions that Michel meets Jacques at their cafe, shot/reverse-shot series are played out in terms very close to the first one (figs. 12.32–12.33; cf. figs. 12.14–12.15). On his third visit to the cafe, he talks with the inspector, in a series that recalls the first occasion (figs.



12.34–12.35; cf. figs. 12.12–12.13). Michel's two visits to the inspector's office are rendered in strikingly similar reverse shots, and Michel's visit to Jeanne, discussed above, is an echo of their first meeting on the landing outside his mother's room. The repetition becomes dizzying in those



oblique shots of Jeanne and Michel arriving. Jeanne arrives, Michel enters, and Michel

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oblique shots of the hall outside Michel's apartment: when Jeanne and Jacques visit (fig. 12.36), when Michel and Jeanne arrive after his mother's death (fig. 12.37), when Michel enters to meet Jacques (fig. 12.38), when Jacques and Michel go to meet Jeanne (fig. 12.39), when Michel

teases Jacques into leaving (fig. 12.40), and when Michel goes to interrogate Jeanne (fig. 12.41). Another director would vary our views of this locale far more. The fact that this narration usually lingers on the hallway after the characters have gone only augments the tendency of these events to register as nearly identical variants of a single stylistic unit.

The hand that writes in the notebook implies, I have suggested, that we will be restricted to Michel's range and depth of knowledge in spelling out the syuzhet. But the narration of images and sounds creates a further set of restrictions on our knowledge, somewhat analogous to the sheerly stylistic constraints on knowledge which we saw in Jancsó's long takes in *The Confrontation*. The style confines itself to those syuzhet acts it can "process" within its own limits and with regard to its own patterns. To get to the formulaically edited exchanges, the narration excludes certain other activities, such as striding across a room. In the cafe scenes, for instance, Michel is never shown walking to the bar; the film regularly omits this slight action. At one remarkable point, a dissolve skips over only a few seconds—just enough to move the inspector, Jacques, and Michel from one shot/reverse-shot passage at the bar to another one at a table. The syuzhet might have rendered Michel's theft of the man's watch at the carnival in intensely subjective terms, but the style diverges from the terms of the written recounting: Michel leaves the frame, and the camera holds on the empty table. Later we will learn that he had run and fallen, scraping his hand. It is as if such a melodramatic action cannot be sufficiently transformed by the style, so it is omitted. The most flagrant example of the style's exclusivity is Michel's trip abroad. The elision is partially justified by a syuzhet tactic: Michel's passage in his notebook summarizes the hiatus in two sentences. But the style processes the ellipsis in a thoroughly characteristic manner. In scene 38 Michel leaves his apartment house. In scene 39, after he has boarded the train, the camera pans left with the train as it pulls away. Dissolve to his hand writing in his notebook. Dissolve to the train platform two years later, and pan right with Michel walking through the crowd. Dissolve to a shot of him climbing a staircase (fig. 12.42), in a framing that calls

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up the whole set of such shots earlier in the film (e.g., figs. 12.25–12.29). The syuzhet has not followed him to England, and the style has treated his departure and return just as symmetrically and repetitively as it had treated his life in Paris.

We come at last, and again, to the problem of perceptibility. How does *Pickpocket's* narration engage the spectator by means of processes characteristic of parametric cinema? As usual, the initial portions of the film establish the intrinsic norm. The prologue, the credits, and the hand writing emphasize narrational authority and the calculated play between extradiegetic and diegetic factors. The first ordinary scene, in which Michel steals from a woman's purse and then is quickly captured by the police, sets out several stylistic features: the close-up of hands, the repetition of setups, the use of Michel's optical point of view, the sparse sound track, the impassive figure behavior, and so on. I would argue, though, that the style does not dominate syuzhet patterning in this or in other early scenes. The style is neither as obtrusive nor as equivocal as it will later become. Rather, it is somewhat suited for the scene, and the fabula action is presented with sufficient suspense to make syuzhet

construction the primary interest. Gradually the stylistic rules begin to assert themselves. Michel returns home in the spatially "gapped" fashion we have already considered (figs. 12.25–12.27). He visits Jacques in the cafe, and the scene's symmetries, both of shot/reverse shot (figs. 12.8–12.15) and of scenic construction, begin to emerge. The parametric system becomes apparent, however, only after the syuzhet starts to recycle itself.

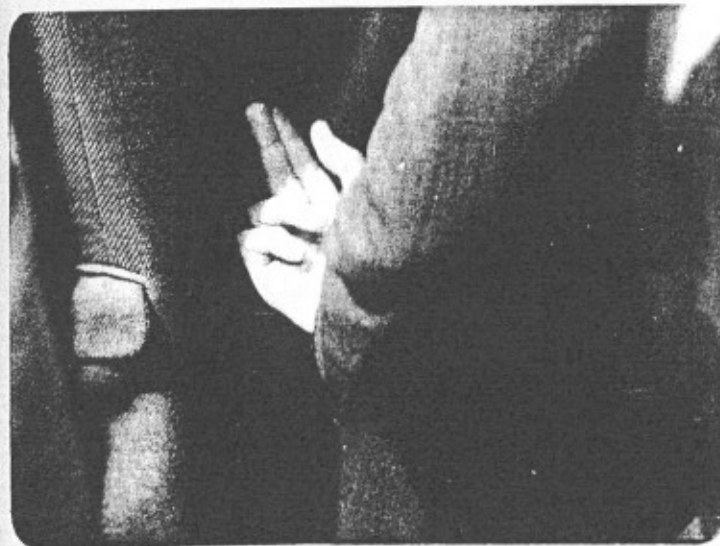
After the prologue and the shot of the hand writing, the first five segments constitute a condensed phase within Michel's life. He commits the theft at Longchamps, is taken to the police station, is interrogated and freed, returns to his room, visits his mother and speaks with Jeanne, and meets Jacques at the cafe. These sequences introduce all the major characters and locales and establish a rhythm of theft/interrogation/encounter that will be repeated throughout the film. After Michel leaves the cafe, he goes to the métro, where he spies a pickpocket at work. We are back to the theft phase. As Leonard Meyer notes, "Immediate repetition tends to emphasize the differences between like events, while remote repetition—that is, return—tends to call attention to their similarities."<sup>73</sup> Soon the viewer is able to assume that a narrow set of parallel syuzhet units is at work. There are scenes of Michel alone, practicing in his room or on the street. There are scenes of Michel's encounters with Jacques and Jeanne, at a cafe or in Michel's room. There are the discussions with the inspector, again at the cafe or in his room. There are also scenes of tutelage, either by the anonymous pickpocket on the métro or by Kassagi later. We can also predict the outcome of most of these scenes: Michel will try to increase his virtuosity; he will bait the inspector and remain unrepentant; in any encounter with Jacques or Jeanne he will probably rebuff them and leave abruptly. And in general the stylistic handling comes to be taken for granted: shot/reverse shot for character confrontation, sudden transitions on details, interjections of the voice-over, and so on. The overall repetition of syuzhet modules, the combinations of relatively fixed character relations, and the narrow range of stylistic variation create very firm assumptions and hypotheses.

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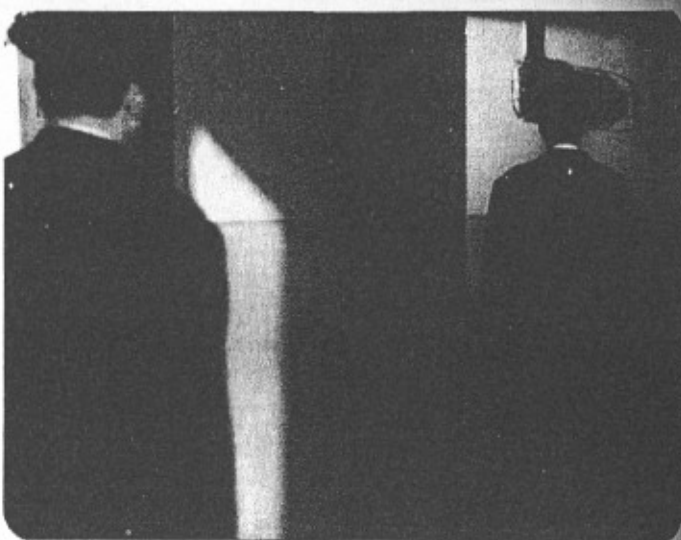
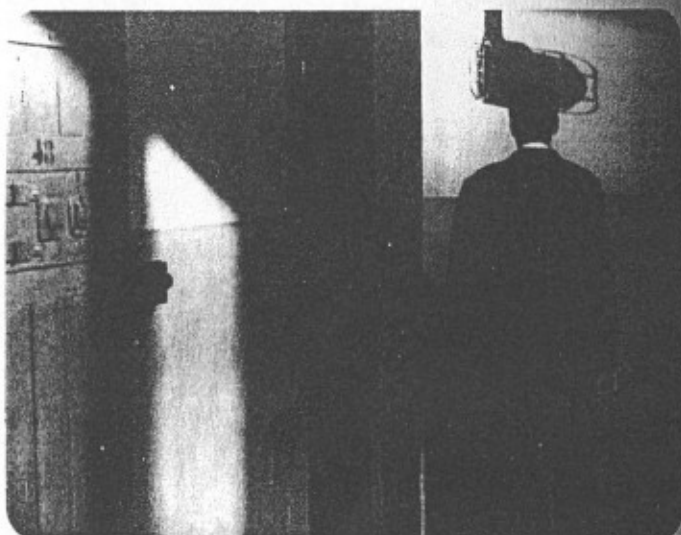
ceptual norms of the cinema as we know it. More is put in than we can assimilate, even on repeated viewings. Like decorative art, parametric cinema exploits the very limits of the viewer's capacity.<sup>75</sup> The sense of an order whose finest grain we can glimpse but not grasp helps produce the con-

notative effects of which thematic criticism records the trace. These effects arise from a formal manipulation that is, in a strong sense, *nonsignifying*—closer to music than to the novel.

*Pickpocket's* stubborn resistance to interpretation, its preference for order over meaning, reappears in the final four segments. After a great many repetitions of the theft/interrogation/encounter cycle, the film's major portion completes itself with a second visit to the racetrack. Enticed by a plainclothes policeman, Michel attempts to pick his pocket. Predictably, his effort is rendered as a variant upon the first scene (compare figs. 12.43–12.44 and figs. 12.5–12.6). The last four scenes take place in prison and constitute a new cycle with its own symmetrical *syuzhet* structure. In scene 47, Michel leaves his cell and goes to the visitors' room to talk with Jeanne. In scene 48, he waits in his cell, but Jeanne does not return. In scene 49, he gets a letter from her announcing that she will come see him. In scene 50, Michel leaves his cell and goes to the visitors' room. Jeanne is there, and they embrace. As an obsessive itinerary of Michel's comings and goings, the scenes recapitulate in tiny compass his movement in earlier parts of the film. The same camera movement tracks Michel back from his bed and through the cell doorway in scene 47 and scene 50. The style also creates a negative symmetry in the two scenes of Jeanne's visit. In (47), he leaves his cell and we dissolve to him in the visitors' room; we never see him arrive, but we do see him leave. In (49), we see him leave his cell and arrive to stand before Jeanne, but we never see him leave the visitors' room. Bresson's "preformed" style goes still further, making the prison scenes exact extensions of earlier ones. The beginnings of the shots in his cell echo shots of Michel on his bed in his apartment. The encounters with Jeanne are handled in scrupulous shot/reverse shot like those earlier in the film (figs. 12.45–12.46; cf. figs. 12.17–12.24). Most remarkably, the prison corridor is filmed to resemble the hallway outside Michel's apartment (figs. 12.47–12.48; cf. figs. 12.36–12.41). The prison scenes thus summarize both *syuzhet* patterns and stylistic protocols.

The final scene continues the trend toward symmetries.

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Michel and Jeanne face each other in a pair of reverse shots (figs. 12.49–12.50) barely different from prior ones. He presses the bars and she rises and comes to him (fig. 12.51). A shot/reverse-shot series (figs. 12.52–53) recalls their brief embrace in her apartment (figs. 12.54–12.55). As the Lully

music starts, and while he kisses her forehead and she kisses his hand, the camera tracks slowly forward to them (fig. 12.56). In but one other scene has the camera tracked in during a shot/reverse-shot exchange, and that was the scene in Jeanne's apartment (figs. 12.17–12.23). Only in the con-

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interpretation, its appears in the final editions of the theft's major portion com- pectrack. Enticed by a ts to pick his pocket. variant upon the first figs. 12.5–12.6). The and constitute a new et structure. In scene e visitors' room to talk his cell, but Jeanne ts a letter from her . In scene 50, Michel room. Jeanne is there, itinerary of Michel's tulate in tiny compass m. The same camera s bed and through the The style also creates es of Jeanne's visit. In to him in the visitors' e do see him leave. In arrive to stand before ie visitors' room. Bres- ter, making the prison es. The beginnings of chel on his bed in his ne are handled in scru- arlier in the film (figs. Most remarkably, the e the hallway outside 12.48; cf. figs. 12.36– 12.48) summarize both syuzhet

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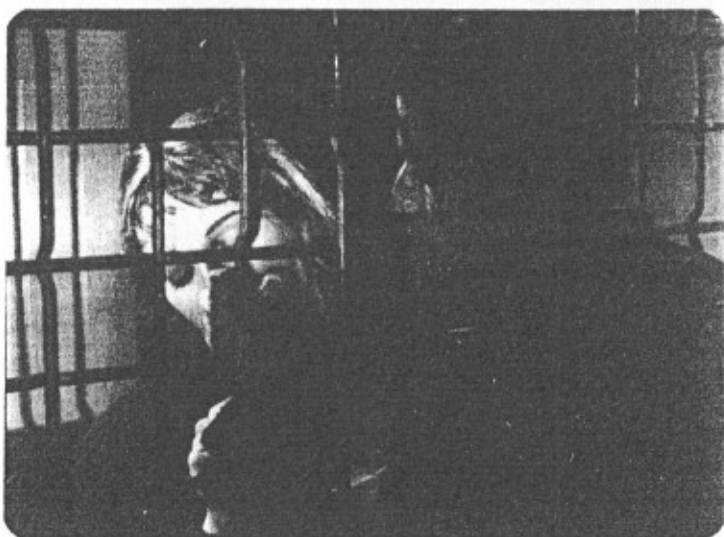
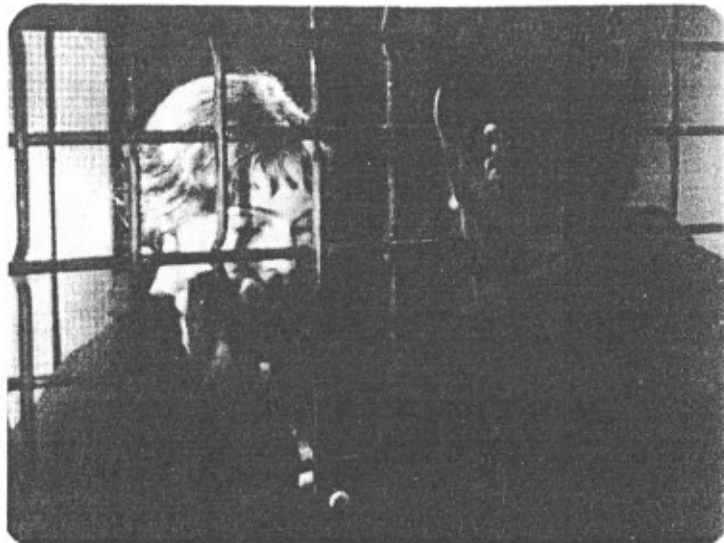
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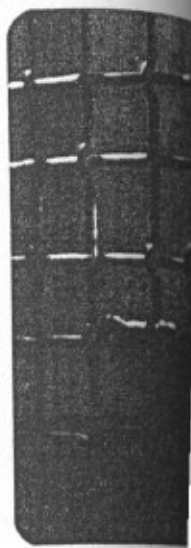


text of such a sparse style can such a simple device and such a minute variation of an intrinsic norm take on such perceptual power.

The stylistic symmetries become even more significant in relation to the asymmetrical presentation of the framing

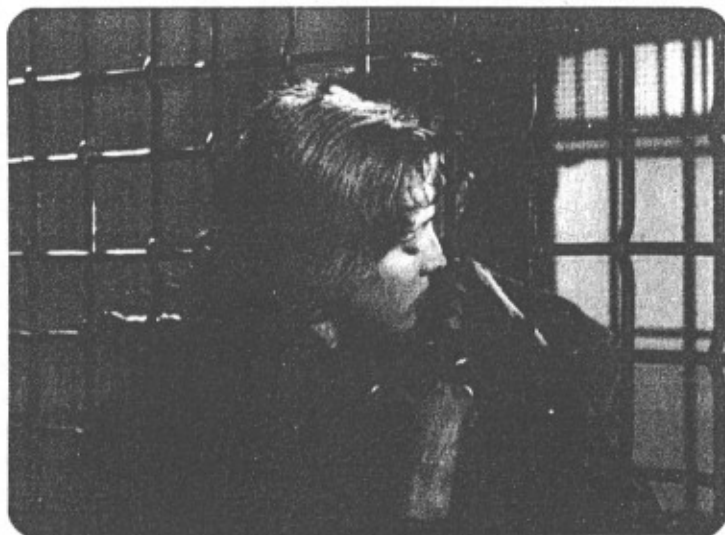


narration. The shot of the couple (fig. 12.56) is the film's last image. Since we never return to Michel's journal, our initial "frame" of his recounting is left incomplete. The shot we get forms a stronger *stylistic* coda than would a neutral shot of the hand writing. We do, however, hear Michel's voice: "O



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Jeanne, what a strange way I had to take in order to reach you." Since Jeanne's face blocks Michel's mouth as this line is heard, we cannot tell if it is a line of dialogue he murmurs to her, or the final voice-over commentary. Thus the narration creates a partial frame and a diegetic effect simul-

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taneously. Similarly, there is no return to the extradiegetic voice of the prologue. But again an implicit, partial symmetry emerges. As the image fades out, the Lully music continues over the black frame for almost a full minute. *Pickpocket* ends as if the images and sounds with which the tale was to

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### The Problem of Modernism

Throughout this book I have refrained from using the term "modernism." By spelling out the differences among various modes and norms, we can see that several different sorts of narration could qualify as "modernist." If we look to the traditions of twentieth-century fiction and drama, running roughly from James, Proust, Joyce, and Kafka through Faulkner, Camus, and the Theater of the Absurd to Cortázar and Stoppard, we find that art-cinema narration could be called modernist; for these are among its important sources.<sup>76</sup> If we take modernism to be more closely allied with the experimental work of political artists like Grosz, Lissitzky, Heartfield, Brecht, and Tretyakov, then historical-materialist narration will be a better candidate for the label.<sup>77</sup>

And if we consider parametric narration as a distinct mode, its modernist pedigree can be traced back to the work of the Russian Formalists—a movement deeply involved with contemporary avant-garde poetry and fiction—and to the continental serialism and structuralism of the 1950s and 1960s. Thus parametric films might be considered modernist.<sup>78</sup> The important difference is that we cannot posit any influence of such movements upon all parametric films. For reasons that have to be explained in each particular context, filmmakers in widely differing periods and cultures have utilized parametric principles. Some have done so consistently (Ozu, Bresson), others sporadically (Lang, Dreyer, Fassbinder, Godard). Whether we call this "modernism" is not as important as recognizing that only after an aesthetic was formulated explicitly was it possible for critics and spectators to construct an extrinsic norm that helps us grasp certain problematic films. Comprehension of films changes through time as we construct new schemata. In their ability to change our perspective on films both old and new, the norms of parametric narration epitomize the historicity of all viewing conventions.