

()

Morgan Fisher

*2003, 16mm, color/black and white, silent
(24 frames per second), 21 minutes Director: Morgan Fisher*

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

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

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

occasions for expression. (There are exceptions to the degradation that inserts embody. Hitchcock's inserts are beautiful and made with extreme^[1]_[SEP] care; it is all but a certainty that he directed them himself.)

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

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

Inserts are the subject I began with. I gathered inserts from a number of commercial feature films, extracting each insert just as I found it. The question was how to organize them. My purpose, to set the inserts free, ruled out editing. In a film that is edited, each cut is made to produce a specific meaning or a specific

effect. When you edit you impose yourself on the material, and that is exactly what I did not want to do to the inserts. The fact that my purpose ruled out editing was consistent with my earlier films, almost none of which are edited. Editing is an act of composition that as such shapes the material to control the viewer's relation to the work. Instead of being edited, my films are constructed. Construction is impersonal. It tries to get away from the subjectivity of the artist that composition, of which editing is a kind, always entails.

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

what it can to give the work an origin other than the artist who in the end we know made it.

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

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

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

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

(added syllables, unusual contractions, changing the customary word order to put the word that rhymes at the end of the line) remind you that the poet is obedient to a scheme.

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

The rule put the shots one after the other in a relation of simple adjacency. Now this shot, now this shot. But in film, adjacency produces succession: one shot follows another. So the film looks as if it were edited, but it wasn't; it's simply one shot next to another, one shot after another. We call a change from one shot to another a cut, a word that expresses the assumption that the relation between the shots is the result of editing and hence has the intention that editing implies: a synonym for editing is cutting. Because () was constructed instead of edited, what look like cuts are not. The film simply joins one shot to the next without the intention that cutting implies, and so what look like cuts can instead be called joins.

All of the shots in () fall equally under the rule, and the rule's indifference to what happens in each shot makes all of the shots equal. I thought of the shots as units that as such are all identical, as cells in a grid are identical, even though the shots are many different lengths.

What happens at each join is the consequence of whatever two shots the rule put together. The order of the shots is a matter of chance, and so what happens specifically at each join is a matter of chance. It doesn't matter how intentional some of the joins look. They were a matter of chance, just as the joins that don't look

intentional are also a matter of chance. I emphasize that what happens at the joins is a matter of chance because audiences have been so conditioned to understand a succession of shots as edited and hence intentional that they will look for ways to understand the succession of shots in () even though there are none. Even if there are moments where chance has made it possible to suppose there are connections, to think that there is editing, the moment passes soon enough, leaving the viewer to want to look for a new way to make connections between the shots. Whatever connections a viewer may find, I did not put them there.

Broadly speaking, there are two main conventions in editing: the editing in conventional narrative films that produces its effects while remaining invisible; and montage, where the conspicuous disjunctions from shot to shot make the editing visible, to the point where we could say that the visible articulations produced by the disjunctions are a part of the point. We can call both of these conventions positive, in that they both use editing as an occasion for control, even if we can also say that invisible editing is conservative for the very reason that it conceals its workings. () does not fall within either convention. Viewers will try to understand the connections between the disparate shots that they want to suppose the film intends, so they will take it as an example of montage. But () looks like montage without being montage in fact. () is neither form of editing that I have called positive. To say that the two conventions of editing are positive implies there is a kind of editing that is negative. Perhaps there is such a thing, but we can't say that () is an instance of it because () was not edited; instead, () is what I have already called a construction, and as a construction () is a refusal of editing altogether.

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

People want to know what the rule is, as if the rule were the key to understanding the film, but it's not. The specific rule does not matter. What's important about the rule is what it did: it made the film. Other rules could just as well have made the film. A different rule would have produced a different film, but because it would have been made according to a rule, it would in principle have been

not that different from (). I needed the rule to make the film, so I was the one who needed to know what the rule was. No one else needed to know the rule then, and there is no need for anyone to know it now. In fact, you knowing the rule would spoil your pleasure in watching the film, because you would be making the effort to understand how the film enacts the rule instead of taking pleasure in what the rule does, put one shot after another without any intention beyond this simple act. The film itself doesn't tell you that I obeyed the rule, but I did.

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

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

period, I would say that () was in principle made all at once. There are 372 shots, but the rule assigned each shot to its place in the order. The single decision that made the rule determined the order of all of the shots all at once and so made the entire film all at once.

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

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

Inserts in narrative films are meant to perform their functions without being noticed as shots. By consisting only of inserts extracted from their stories, () brings attention to this kind of shot, and by implication to the other kinds of shots that films use to tell stories. Someone who has seen () will be more likely to notice the inserts in narrative films and also more likely to notice the other shots in the system of which inserts are a part. Narrative films do their best to keep invisible the means by which they manipulate the audience, but () will help people to see those means. ()

is an educational film, even if what it educates its viewers about will complicate the pleasure that they find in narrative films, or, more simply, the movies.

Note

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

First published in 2004 as a gallery note for the one-person exhibition “() / Film Cans and Film Boxes,” Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, May 14–June 1, 2004; republished with minor revisions as a gallery note for the one-person exhibition “Aspect Ratio Pieces / (),” Greene Naftali Gallery, New York, 2004; revised 2012 and 2014