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*Visionary*  
**FILM**

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**The American  
Avant-Garde  
1943-2000**

**P. Adams Sitney**

**THIRD EDITION**

**OXFORD**  
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Printed in the United States of America  
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*To the memory of Jay Leyda, Jacques Ledoux,  
and Adam and Oliver Parry*

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## **Preface to the Third Edition**

THE IDEA OF A THIRD edition of *Visionary Film* began in Paris, where in recent years the American avant-garde cinema has found an enthusiastic audience. Christian Lebrat, the publisher of Paris Experimental editions, proposed to translate the book, together with Pip Chodorov. They urged me to write a new chapter that would survey the field since the issue of the second edition.

In those twenty-one years the American avant-garde cinema has changed dramatically, above all, because of the great numbers of film-makers who continue to work in its inherited genres, to transform them, and to invent new ones. The films of the past two decades are so many and so varied that it would not be possible to discuss, even summarily, the best of them in one supplementary chapter. I have decided, instead, to delineate what I take to be the most important historical and morphological changes within the field. Even under that limitation I do not have the space to deal with individual films in the

detail they are afforded in the rest of the book. Even if I had succumbed to the powerful temptation to write only about the newer films of those artists I had previously treated, I could barely touch upon them. The work of Brakhage alone since 1978 would require at least three chapters for discussion on a scale consistent with the analysis of his work before that date. (I say three chapters simply because that is the number I have drafted in an unfinished book.)

I remain convinced that the most conspicuous absence in *Visionary Film* is the magnificent work of Marie Menken. However, I will not be able to remedy that until I have completed another book on which I have been working for some years. There I shall also attempt to correct my neglect of Ian Hugo's films. Of the film-makers who began to attract attention in the 1970s, Ernie Gehr and Robert Beavers, whom I discussed in the supplementary chapter of the second edition, continue to assert their preeminence with their films of the '80s and '90s. However, with the test of time, my failure to write about some of their contemporaries, particularly Warren Sonbert, Andrew Noren, James Benning, and Peter Hutton, grows more conspicuously short-sighted. Furthermore, although I had acknowledged the power of Yvonne Rainer's films in the second edition, I understood them to be outside of the central, visionary tradition within the avant-garde cinema. A recognition of their sources in Godard and Bergman influenced my judgment. But the directions many of the major avant-garde film-makers of the '80s and '90s explored have proven me wrong: Rainer was the most powerful new influence on a new generation of avant-garde film-makers who did not necessarily share her wariness of the pioneer generation and its culture. Films by James Benning, Abigail Child, Su Friedrich, and Marjorie Keller showed me how central she was and how her achievements were to be reintegrated within a tradition she sometimes disdained.

Lack of space is hardly my only reason for writing in the retrospective chapter largely about film-makers long established and many of whom appeared in the two earlier editions. I can no longer claim the familiarity with the scope of American avant-garde film production I had twenty-five years ago. Since then the tribe of professional observers has bifurcated in the face of such widespread film-making. Those most familiar with the new films of the past twenty years are the programmers and curators, virtually full-time viewers, of avant-garde showcases and museums in a few metropolitan centers. As a professor at Princeton University for the past twenty years, I worked necessarily within the second group, the critics and scholars who see (and teach) far fewer new films and who depend upon the advice and decisions of the programmers in a way that had not been essential twenty-five years before. In this respect, avant-garde film-making has mimicked the situation of the other arts where critics and scholars writing on poetry or painting could not be aware of all of the work published or shown. Readers seeking an appreciation of the achieve-



ments of the most important younger film-makers will have to look elsewhere.

The availability of videotapes of some of the films I had described in detail has allowed me to cut about a twelfth of the second edition by eliminating many elaborate descriptions. That space has been reclaimed by the reintroduction of the chapter on Gregory Markopoulos, thanks to Robert Beavers's generous permission to quote from the film-maker's theoretical writings.

I have liberally incorporated into the first few chapters of this edition passages from my "Introduction" to *The Avant-garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, which is no longer in print; for that text had benefited from the revisionary reflections I had inevitably had after *Visionary Film* was first published.

In rewriting the endnotes, I have tried to indicate fruitful directions viewers may turn for critical discussions that amplify or contest the interpretations I offer here. However, that apparatus is far from exhaustive. The bibliography of the avant-garde cinema in English continues to expand geometrically. I am particularly grateful to the scholars and critics who have noted errors in the earlier editions of this book. I have attempted to correct them here. However, I do not have space to respond to critics who have objected to my fundamental theses or critical methods, but to them too I owe a debt of thanks for stimulating my thought.<sup>1</sup>

Owing to copyright restrictions, some non-cinematic art illustrations have been removed from this edition. Some readers may want to consult the first two editions or look up the following works in conjunction with the stills I have included. René Magritte's *La Clef des champs* (1936), *Le Domaine d'Arnheim* (1949), and *La Soir qui tombe* (1964, Menil Collection in Houston, which I had used originally) illustrate his imagery of shattered windows with the exterior image fixed on the shards of glass. These resonate with the sequence from *Meshes of the Afternoon* printed on p. 14. Again, Magritte's *La Condition humaine* (1933), *La Belle captive* (1947, 1948, and c. 1965), and *La Grande Marée* (1951) demonstrate the paradoxes of a frame, which I found relevant to *The Petrified Dog*, p. 60. Any of Willem de Kooning's many *Woman* paintings would provide a parallel to the image from *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular*, p. 170, evoking the tension between iconography and broad painterly marks in Abstract Expressionist space. I had used his *Woman with a Green and Beige Background* (1966, now owned by the Grey Art Gallery at New York University). Similarly, Jackson Pollock's *Cut Out* (1948–1950, now owned by the Ohara Museum in Kurashiki, Japan) had paralleled the play of positive and negative space in the strip from *Dog Star Man: Part Three* on p. 207. Wassily Kandinsky's hard-edged abstractions from the 1920s bear a close resemblance to several of Harry Smith's so-called *Early Abstractions*, p. 244. A sequence of four collage pages from Max Ernst's picture novel, *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1929), where such sequences are numerous, illustrated

the narrative and digressive quality Smith adopted in his long animated film, *No. 12*. Finally, I had rather arbitrarily chosen Joseph Cornell's *Medici Boy Box* (c. 1953, Fort Worth Museum) to stand next to the image of the woman looking out a window in *A Legend for Fountains*, p. 333, to illustrate the veil of glass Cornell put into play in most of his shadow boxes.

*Princeton, N.J.*  
*January 2002*

P. A. S.

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## **Preface to the First Edition**

WHEN I FIRST CONCEIVED of this book in 1968, it was to have been a short collection of interpretations of a selected number of films made by American independent film-makers. At that time I was taking the International Exhibition of the New American Cinema to a number of European film archives and universities. In the repeated screenings of a large collection of films I was able to become very familiar with the works I wanted to interpret, and in my lectures on those occasions I had an opportunity to refine my ideas. Yet when it came to writing a book, two years later, that original plan expanded into this lengthy study.

The interpretation of individual films spread to the consideration of the whole career of their makers. Then the question of the relationship of one film-maker to another arose. Soon I found my work moving in a direction that could lead to a life-long enterprise, a history and analysis of the American avant-garde film in several volumes, continually to be revised to

encompass new films. At that point I had to clarify my aspirations and define my topic.

The earliest American films discussed here were called "film poems" or "experimental films" when they were first seen. Both names, like all the subsequent ones, are inaccurate and limiting. Of the two, the term "film poem" has the advantage of underlining a useful analogy: the relationship of the type of film discussed in this book to the commercial narrative cinema is in many ways like that of poetry to fiction in our times. The film-makers in question, like poets, produce their work without financial reward, often making great personal sacrifices to do so. The films themselves will always have a more limited audience than commercial features because they are so much more demanding. The analogy is also useful in that it does not put a value on the films in question. Poetry is not by essence better than prose. "Experimental" cinema, on the other hand, implies a tentative and secondary relationship to a more stable cinema.

Both terms fell out of use in the late fifties. In their places arose the "New American Cinema" on the model of the French Nouvelle Vague, and the "underground" film, in response to an increased social commitment on the part of certain newly emerging film-makers. Very few film-makers were ever satisfied with any of these labels. "Avant-garde" is itself unfortunate. On the one hand, it implies a privileged relationship to a norm which I do not wish to affirm, and on the other hand it has been used to describe thousands of films which fall outside the scope of this book, some of which are excellent and many of which are very bad. I have chosen to use the term "avant-garde" cinema throughout the book simply because it is the one name which is not associated with a particular phase of the thirty-year span I attempt to cover.

The precise relationship of the avant-garde cinema to American commercial film is one of radical otherness. They operate in different realms with next to no significant influence on each other. In the forties when the first generation of native independent film-makers learned their art, young people could not make films freely within the industry. A long apprenticeship was required and the division of functions (writer, producer, director, cameraman) was jealously protected. In reaction the young American film-makers turned to the European avant-garde tradition. But unlike the painters and poets who had made films in the twenties, they did not stop film-making after one or two efforts when they did not find commercial support. They continued to make films, responding to each other's work and to the forces that were active in American painting, poetry, and dance around them.

The commercial film industry was in fact so conservative that in France a new critical theory was developing in response to the loss of directorial authority in American films. The followers of André Bazin enunciated "la politique des auteurs," which sought out the stylistic constants in the films of directors who had to work under factory-like conditions. This critical method was later imported into America as the "au-

teur theory.” However there have always been two independent strains in the theory of cinema. One goes back to the psychologist Hugo Munsterberg and includes the writings of other psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers such as Arnheim, Kracauer, and Merleau-Ponty, as well as Bazin, and has tried to understand what constitutes the whole cinematic experience. The other strain includes the theories of film-makers themselves from Delluc and Epstein in France through the great Soviet theoreticians Kuleshov, Vertov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein. They have sought the ideal essence of cinema, and their theories have been concerned with how films should be made. While French and American critics were propounding the auteur theory for the cinema of the forties and fifties, major theoretical writing was being produced by the film-makers within the American avant-garde. Deren, Brakhage, Markopoulos, and Kubelka were defining new potentials for the cinema.

American avant-garde film theory has received even less critical attention than the films. Therefore I have assumed the task of commenting on the major theoretical works of the period, and I have tried to analyze the theoretical stance of those film-makers who have responded in their films if not in their writings to these issues. The selection of film-makers to be discussed here has been guided as much by their commitment to the major theoretical concerns as by my original list of films to interpret.

Just as the chief works of French film theory must be seen in the light of Cubist and Surrealist thought, and Soviet theory in the context of formalism and constructivism, the preoccupations of the American avant-garde film-makers coincide with those of our post-Romantic poets and Abstract Expressionist painters. Behind them lies a potent tradition of Romantic poetics. Wherever possible, both in my interpretation of films and discussion of theory, I have attempted to trace the heritage of Romanticism. I have found this approach consistently more useful and more generative of a unified view of these films and film-makers than the Freudian hermeneutics and sexual analyses which have dominated much previous criticism of the American avant-garde film.

In the course of writing, historical patterns emerged which I have allowed to control the structure of the book. I have had to invent a series of terms—the trance film, the mythopoeic film, the structural film, and the participatory film—in order to describe this historical morphology. It is almost too obvious to point out that the film-makers themselves did not think in these categories when they made their films. Many of them will, of course, resist my categorizing them at all.

The thirty-year period which this book covers has seen vast changes in the incidental circumstances of avant-garde film-making and distribution. Many of the film-makers discussed here have been able to earn their living in the past few years as professors of film theory and film-making. This is a function of the increasing interest in this mode of film-making shown by the academic community. Hundreds of colleges now regularly screen avant-garde films; they have become an essential part of the pro-

gram of the nation's few film archives. Literally hundreds of new independent films are made and distributed every year. All this has occurred without any significant influence on the programming of commercial theaters.

Naturally the vast majority of independent films produced in any year are of very low quality, as is the year's poetry, painting, or music by and large. This book does not pretend to be exhaustive of American avant-garde film-making. Nor does it discuss the work of all the most famous and important film-makers. Major figures such as Ed Emshwiller, Stan VanDerBeek, Storm De Hirsch, and Shirley Clarke, to name a few, are not discussed here. This book attempts to isolate and describe the visionary strain within the complex manifold of the American avant-garde film.

*New York*  
*January 1974*

P. A. S.

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## Acknowledgments

### I BEGAN WRITING

*Visionary Film* in 1969 for a series of books on cinema conceived and edited by Annette Michelson. Even though its ultimate publication was not in that series, she has consistently encouraged and aided me in every stage of its production. I am deeply grateful for the advice she has given me concerning both the general structure and the details of the book.

Over the same span of time Ken Kelman has been a sounding board for many of the ideas and observations that I had during the time of writing the first edition. His responses are often reflected in this work. Willard Van Dyke and the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art invited me to give a series of lectures in the spring of 1971 where I was able to give the first public presentation of the central theses of the book.

I cannot imagine how this work would have been possible were it not for Anthology Film Archives. In its theater I was able to re-see numerous times the films discussed here, and its vast library of books and documents on the avant-garde cinema

was the foundation of my research. My assistants there, Caroline Angell and Kate Manheim, spent many hours helping me prepare detailed screening notes from which much of the book was written.

Cecily Coddington who typed most of the manuscript suggested many stylistic changes that were incorporated. Jonas Mekas and Steven Koch read and commented on the typed text. For their insights I am grateful. At Oxford University Press my editor, James Raimés, and Leona Capeless were uncommonly helpful common readers of this specialized book. My particular thanks go to Robert Pattison who worked with me through the more than seven hundred-page typescript with exceptional patience.

The more elaborate and complex stills reprinted here were made by Babette Mangolte; other illustrations were provided by Anthology Film Archives, the Stills Archive of the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art, and *Artforum* magazine. Tom Hopkins kindly helped me through the proofreading and Nora Manheim made the index. Georges Borchardt, my agent, helped me in numerous ways.

Julia Sitney, then my wife, convinced me, in 1968 on a train in Norway, that this book should be written. She was consistently encouraging, especially in my most desperate moments.

The intellectual debts of *The Visionary Film* are numerous. There were no times during the writing of it that I was not covetously reading or rereading articles and books by Maurice Blanchot, Geoffrey Hartman, and Paul de Man. But my debt to Harold Bloom must be singled out. While I was at my typewriter at least one of his books was always on my desk and in continual use.



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THE COLLABORATION OF Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid shortly after their marriage in 1942 recalls in its broad outline and its aspiration the earlier collaboration of Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel on *Un Chien Andalou* (1928). By a surrealistic principle, Dali and Buñuel sought to combine images so that one would bear no logical or rational connection to the next. This principle was not original to the authors of *Un Chien Andalou*, although it never had so rigorous an application in cinema before them. Others, of course, had extended the mechanics of “the Exquisite Corpse” into literature and painting. The Exquisite Corpse, in its purest form, is drawn by a number of persons upon a piece of paper folded so that one can draw the head, another the neck and shoulders, another the trunk, and so on, without any one contributor’s seeing the work of the others. The unfolded paper reveals the synthetic, radically malformed figure—the Exquisite Corpse.

In his first autobiography Dali describes the effect of the film:

The film produced the effect that I wanted, and it plunged like a dagger into the heart of Paris as I had foretold. Our film ruined in a single evening ten years of pseudo-intellectual post-war advance-guardism.

That foul thing which is figuratively called abstract art fell at our feet, wounded to the death, never to rise again, after having seen “a girl’s eye cut by a razor blade”—this was how the film began. There was no longer room in Europe for the little maniacal lozenges of Monsieur Mondrian.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps in 1928 *Un Chien Andalou* looked as indecipherable and shocking as Dali’s account would suggest. I doubt it. Buñuel too has written a note on the film:

In the working out of the plot every idea of a rational, esthetic or other preoccupation with technical matters was rejected as irrelevant. The result is a film deliberately anti-plastic, anti-artistic, considered by traditional canons. The plot is the result of a CONSCIOUS *psychic automatism*, and, to that extent, it does not attempt to recount a dream, although it profits by a mechanism analogous to that of dreams.

The producer-director of the film, Buñuel, wrote the scenario in collaboration with the painter Dali. For it, both took their point of view from a dream image, which, in its turn, probed others by the same process until the whole took form as a continuity. It should be noted that when an image or idea appeared the collaborators discarded it immediately if it was derived from remembrance, or from their cultural pattern or if, simply, it had a conscious association with another earlier idea. They accepted only those representations as valid which, though they moved them profoundly, had no possible explanation. Naturally, they dispensed with the restraints of customary morality and of reason. The motivation of the images was, or meant to be, purely irrational! They are as mysterious and inexplicable to the two collaborators as to the spectator. NOTHING, in the film, SYMBOLIZES ANYTHING. The only method of investigation of the symbols would be, perhaps, psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup>

What Dali and Buñuel achieved through this method of compiling a scenario was the liberation of their material from the demands of narrative continuity. Far from being puzzling, the film achieves the clarity of a dream. The extremity of the violence and the calculated abruptness of changes of time, place, and mood intensify the viewing experience without

satisfying the conventional narrative demands of cause and effect. The concentration on only two actors, male and female, and the insistence on tactile imagery set up a situation of identification that more randomly organized films do not have. The strength of the identification in the context of the abrupt dislocations and discontinuities provides us with a vivid metaphor for the dream experience. Had Dali and Buñuel set about to study their own dreams and clinically re-create a dream on film, they could not have surpassed *Un Chien Andalou*.

The film begins with a cliché and then a paroxysm of violence. After the title "Once Upon a Time," a man, played by Buñuel himself, slowly and carefully sharpens a straight razor and slices the eye of the heroine. The horror of this opening is intensified by an extended visual metaphor. As he is sharpening the razor, Buñuel looks with entranced madness at the moon just as a sliver of cloud is about to cross it. At the moment of cutting the eyeball, the film shows the cloud slicing across the moon's circle. The image is both a reflected horror and a relief: horrible in the precision with which it suggests the cutting of the eye, and a relief in that the viewer for a moment thinks that the metaphor has spared him the actual slicing. But immediately we see the razor finishing its work and the interior of the eye pouring out. The strategies of metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy by which the illusions of causality and simultaneity in the film are sustained become the structural models of the film's formal development. We are forced to see the metaphor of the moon, whose very tranquility evokes terrible violence, followed by an even more violent synecdoche.

The title which follows, "Eight Years Later," seems to promise a causal account. The action disappoints the expectation. A man dressed as a clown, with a striped box held by a thong around his neck, rides his bicycle through city streets. When he falls from it a young woman rushes out of her house, embraces him on the ground, and removes the box around his neck. Back in her room, she lays out the articles of his clothing and the box as if to reconstruct the man from these mute objects. But suddenly she sees that he is at the other end of the room, now dressed in a suit, and staring at the palm of his hand, out of which ants are crawling.

In a series of dissolves the ants become a woman's armpit, which in turn becomes a sea urchin and then the top of an androgynous head. The head belongs to a character who stands in the street where the bicyclist had fallen, poking a dismembered hand with a long stick. A crowd gathers around her like ants around the hole in the hand. The police intervene; they push back the crowd; and one of them picks up the hand, places it in the striped box, and gives it to her. As she clutches it to her breast, an automobile runs her down. The figure of synecdoche is at stake here. The film-makers create the illusion of ants emerging from the hand by means of a model shown in close-up. That illusion immediately engenders a hyperbolical series of metaphors, calling attention to the concept of metaphor. When they use the model hand as a prop in the street scene, it becomes a metaphor for a synecdoche. Similarly, the oozing eyes of the

dead donkeys in the scene that follows this reveal a possible source for the montage substitution on the earlier sliced eye.<sup>3</sup>

The young woman and the cyclist watch this episode from their upstairs window. He is excited to madness. As blood trickles from his mouth, he feels the bare breasts and buttocks of his companion. She tries to escape him, but he pursues her, pulling after him two grand pianos loaded with dead donkeys. She rushes into the next room and slams the door, but she catches his hand in the process. The palm, caught in the door and crawling with ants, horrifies her. Then she notices that he is in the same room with her, although he is now dressed in the clown suit and lying on the bed.

The next episode begins with the title "Around Three in the Morning." A new character, seen from the back for a long time, rushes in on them. He punishes the protagonist by throwing his collar, frills, box, and thong out the window and making him stand in the corner. The title "Sixteen Years Before" appears without a change of scene, but now the action is in slow motion. The features of the newly arrived man look remarkably like the protagonist's. He seems to be chastising the cyclist as he would a schoolboy. The books he gives him turn to guns in his hands. With them the cyclist shoots his tormentor, who falls, not in the room, but in an open field against the back of a naked woman. Strollers in the field are indifferent to his corpse.

Back in the room, the cyclist and the young woman again confront each other. He has lost his mouth. Hair grows in its place. Annoyed by what she sees, she looks under her arm to find the hair there missing. She sticks her tongue out at him, opens the door behind her and finds herself on a windy beach with a new man. They laugh at the remnants of the cyclist—his collar, box, and thong—washed up by the waves. Arm in arm they stroll away.

Finally there is the title "In the Spring" followed by a still shot of the central couple, buried in sand, blinded, and covered with insects.

I have passed over many details of this very intricate film. The outline presented here preserves the abrupt changes of location, the basic action, and all the titles. Let us postpone for a moment further comment on this film, in order to present *Meshes of the Afternoon* and lay the basis for a comparison.

The fifteen years between *Un Chien Andalou* and *Meshes of the Afternoon* were not without scattered avant-garde film production.<sup>4</sup> In America, the outstanding works of this period sought their inspiration from Expressionism or from the achievements of still photography. The sort of dream narrative that the Dali-Buñuel film offered as a new cinematic possibility was not often explored.

Maya Deren's background had been literary and choric. She was born in Kiev in the year of the revolution, emigrated with her parents in 1922 to America, where her father, Dr. Solomon Deren, a psychiatrist, worked for and eventually directed the State Institute for the Feeble-minded in Syracuse, New York. After secondary schooling at the League of Nations

School in Geneva, Switzerland, she attended the University of Syracuse as a student of journalism until she married. She and her husband moved to New York, where they were both active in the Trotskyist movement. She took her Bachelor of Arts from New York University and divorced soon after.

During her first years in New York and until she began to make films, Maya Deren wrote poetry, but she was never satisfied with it. At the same time she developed an interest in modern dance. She was not a dancer herself—at least not a trained dancer. Her mother and friends recall the sudden, inspired, but undisciplined dances she would privately perform, especially in later years after her fieldwork in Haiti and her initiation into voodoo. In the early forties she conceived the idea of writing a theoretical book on modern dance and looked for a professional dancer to work with her. She interested Katherine Dunham in her project and traveled with her on her tour of 1940–1941. The book never materialized, but Katherine Dunham had introduced her to Alexander Hammid when her company was in Los Angeles. They married in 1942.

Alexander Hackenschmied, who later changed his name to Hammid, was a professional film-maker born in 1907 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, then working on a minor Hollywood project. He was well known in film-making circles as a cameraman, editor, and director. The best-known films he had worked on by that time were the documentaries *Zem Spieva* (*The Earth Sings*, 1933), *Crisis* (1938), *Lights Out in Europe* (1939), and *Forgotten Village* (1941).

They shot *Meshes of the Afternoon* in two and a half weeks in their own home with primitive 16mm equipment. They played in the film themselves. There was no script. They worked out the overall outline together and talked over the shooting details while making the film.

It has an intricate spiral structure based on the repetition, with variations, of the initial sequence of the film, and it has a double ending. In the opening shot a long, thin hand reaches down from the top of the screen to leave a flower on a road. A young woman, played by Maya Deren, walks along the road, picks up the flower, and glimpses the back of a figure turning the bend ahead of her.

She goes to the door of a house, knocks, tries the locked door, then takes out her key. She drops it and pursues it as it bounces in slow motion down the stairs. When she finally enters the house, the camera pans a disordered room and ends in a dolly up to the dining room table. There is a loaf of bread, with a knife in it, on top of the table, but as the camera approaches, the knife pops out.

She climbs the stairs, passing a telephone with the receiver off. In the upper bedroom the wind is blowing a curtain. She turns off an unattended record player and returns downstairs to relax in an easy chair by the window. She slowly caresses herself as a shot of her eye and the window are intercut until they are both clouded over. This is the basic movement of the film. In the initial presentation there are no full-figure shots. We see



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