

Introduction to
Curious Impossibilities: Ten Cinematic Riffs
by Carla M. Wilson
by
James R. Hugunin

The concealed essence of a phenomenon [herein, film] is often given by the past events that have happened to it, so that a concealed force continues to operate upon a phenomenon [film] as a kind of transcendental memory.

— Philip Goodchild, *Deleuze and Guattari* (1996)

True aesthetic innovation can only come from reworking and transforming existing imagery, ripping it from its original context and feeding it into new circuits of analogy.

—Andrew V. Uroskie, “Between the Black Box and the White Cube” (2014)

I remember the ashtrays. God, the number of cigarettes they burned up in the movies in those days.

— “Don’t Even Try, Sam,” William H. Gass in *Cinema Lingua, Writers Respond to Film* (2004)

I have been totally spellbound by cinema. Hitchcock, Max Ophuls, Bergman, Godard, Truffaut, Marker, Fellini, all have enriched my imagination. I take photographs. I've tried my hand at films. I've worked on the special effects in Hollywood films. I study the history of photography and film. I dig film noir. I write criticism. During its heyday, I read *Screen*, *Screen Education*, and *Cahiers du cinema*, religiously; carried Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier* (1977) around like some people do the Bible. Now I write fiction, fiction influenced by film.

Early on, I noticed that the interaction between film and literature has been a rich one — writing influencing film, film influencing writing. An example of the latter I encountered in college was American writer John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, which makes use of the language of the new medium of film and its supposed objectivity to convince readers of the veracity of his writing.

Dos Passos was writing during the decade when the aesthetic of New Objectivity dominated painting, photography, and cinema. He uses the "Camera-eye" (recall Ukrainian filmmaker Dziga Vertov's term "Kino-eye" for his documentaries) to denominate fifty-one sections as objective views ("draining off the subjective" is how Dos Passos puts it) re-enforcing his trilogy as a document of American life. The "camera-eye" fragments, autobiographical stream of consciousness writing encourages the feeling that *you*, through the author's eyes, are a witness too, *you* identify with that camera-eye. Then there are the *Trilogy's* "Newsreels" sections, consisting of front page headlines and article fragments from various newspapers, as well as lyrics from popular songs.

An example of the former is, of course, filmmakers adapting novels to film, resulting in the development of the conventions of classical Hollywood realist cinema. Even Godard was citing Dostoevsky in his interviews. But after World War II, avant-garde art and fiction started influencing film. There was the American "underground cinema" railing against the standard narrative Hollywood film stressing, instead, subjectivity and non-linear narrative, creating "film poems" in which dreams, stream-of-consciousness, extreme montage, and so forth challenged the viewer's attention.

In France, Hitchcock's films, Hollywood "B-movies" and what became dubbed "film noir," were inspiring both writers and filmmakers. New Wave cinema was matched by the New Novel. (Robbe-Grillet managed to bridge both). Conventions were challenged or appropriated and refunctioned. It was a time of great creative vitality. I remember spending hours in a large dark room (no lit iPhones) intrigued by the new visions offered me by my soon-to-be favorite directors.

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in this era of art film, often driven by nostalgia, in which Brakhage, Bergman, Truffaut, Godard, Fellini, and others have played a major role. In France, Gilles Deleuzes's series of Bergsonian-influenced film studies *Cinema I: the movement image* (1983) and *Cinema 2: the time-image* (1985), eventually translated into English, became well-known in academia here. In 2002, the updated third edition of P. Adams Sitney's study of avant-garde cinema, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943 - 2000*, was published, with its noteworthy positing of a polarity emerging in filmic practice then between the use of "trance forms/psycho-drama," and "graphic cinema." Sitney's 1970 anthology of film criticism from *Film Culture Reader* was also republished in 2000. Soon followed major retrospectives of films of that period. Across the country, artists and film buffs, fed by postmodernist appropriation theory and nostalgia, began to take notice, see possibilities.

Many contemporary artists began doing visual riffs on cinema. There were video installations (Bill Viola) and other recent postmodernist engagements with the concepts of spectatorship (emphasis on the audience rather than the artist/director) and the *tableau* foregrounded: Jeff Wall's large still photograph, *Movie Audience* (1979), Thomas Struth's photographs of museum-goers, such as *Audience 2, Florence* (2004), the glass-factory *tableau* staged early into Werner Herzog's *Heart of Glass* (1976), Peter Greenaway's "Darwin" (1993), as well as the suspense-draining time-stretch of Hitchcock's original 105 minutes to 24 hours in Douglas Gordon's *24-Hour Psycho* (1993) meant to inspire viewers to see the original film with fresh eyes and, finally, the slow pans across near-static scenes projected large onto three walls by Chicago artists Yoni Goldstein and Meredith Zielke in their installation, *The Jettisoned*

Project (2011), which makes one hyperconscious of movement, topology and time, creating an illusion one is *inside* time, inhabiting a sort of “time-machine,” expanding seconds into minutes.

An analogous engagement, a u-turn back to film history and the great *auteurs*, has arisen within contemporary literature. New York-based (Westchester county) writer Yuriy Tarnawsky, in *Claim to Oblivion* (2016), admits to being deeply influenced by film, especially Buñuel (dream and memory), and offers insightful essays therein on Bergman’s *Persona* (de-centered subject) and Antonioni’s *L’eclisse* (the famous last seven-minute visual riff). Another essay in his book, giving insight into his own writing, is devoted to “adopting static images to narration,” and mentions Georges Perec’s use of such in his *Life: A User’s Manual* (1978). In 2004, Bard University’s periodical *Conjunctions:42: Cinema Lingua, Writers Respond to Film* (Spring issue) featured writers of such stature as William H. Gass, Joyce Carol Oates, and John Yau riffing on cinema. For instance, one of Yau’s poems included therein is titled “Coming Attractions: Bela Lugosi contemplates all the movies he never made.”

It is within this exciting context of aesthetic exchange between literature and film, theory and nostalgia, that we are now offered Carla M. Wilson’s literary homage to key directors of significant art films, *Curious Impossibilities: Ten Cinematic Riffs*. In her “viewer-response” approach to riffing on film, Wilson mines the potential of riffing on post-modern literary theory’s “reader-response” and “reception aesthetic” analyses of texts rooted in Roland Barthes’ groundbreaking 1977 declamation that, “A text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination . . . The birth of the reader [*viewer*] must be at the cost of the death of the Author [*Director*]. Appropriately, Wilson’s clever riff on Robbe-Grillet begins with a quote from him: “Trust the spectator and make a film in which, past and present, memory and reality, fact and fiction are juxtaposed without transition or explanation.”

Ms. Wilson, a film aficionado, re-functions pre-existing film scenes/dialogues, such that one could retitle Wilson’s efforts here as *Ten Cinematic Riffs: The Birth of the Viewer as Re-writer*. Just as Pictures Generation photographer Richard Prince, a quintessential postmodern appropriationist, took pre-existing advertising imagery and “re-photographed” it to new effect, so does Wilson appropriate and re-write filmic material from her chosen beloved directors/films and developing a fragmented narrative, which the book’s editor, Norman Conquest, has keenly visualized in his cover design.

Wilson’s fragmented narrative strategies plays on the “tough dialogue” of film noir, of Godard’s scripts, and the radical jump-cuts of New Wave, while also giving homage to her mentor, experimental writer Harold Jaffe. Jaffe’s writing often originates in news reports from disparate sources that Jaffe “treats” in a technique he has described as “inserting a line or two, or rearranging the format, or simply setting the original text in a different context, not altering the figure but the ground,” as seen in *Induced Coma: 50 & 100 Word Stories* (2014), in which is his language is at its tersest.

Ms. Wilson has spoken of her passion for film; how childhood remembrances of her father waxing eloquent over old movie houses, hours spent watching everything from newsreels, to Buck Rogers, to film noir, to Hitchcock thrillers. His fascination became hers. Later, she and her father regularly went to the movies together. A father-daughter bond grew over shared cinematic experiences. They even attended lectures by the likes of Vincent Price, Orson Welles, and John Houseman. All later became important sources for a creative writing rooted in an early state of ecstatic development and connection with her father, something akin to what Virginia Woolf, referring to her own childhood experiences, called “the base upon which life stands.” One thinks here of British novelist Henry Green, whose 1929 book, *Living*, is constructed of quick-fire editing and imagistic economy influenced by the cinema he addictively attended.

Wilson’s early experiences (very similar to my own childhood introduction to great films by my cinephile father and my subsequent fascination with film noir and Hitchcock) were reactivated years later when she began her M.F.A. studies in writing, after completing a B.A. in Communications, fortuitously stumbling upon a Film and Fiction class that began to again focus her earlier interests in the “darkened room,” but now directed onto a soon-to-be-exposed white screen of the writer’s page.

Wilson does extensive research on the films and directors she's "played with" in these cinematic riffs. She watches the films over and over, taking meticulous notes on dialogue and scene, camera-eye and space. She seeks a point of entry into key aspects of each film. In her "take" on Fellini, she opens with a characteristic Fellini-esque setting that captures that director's skill at blending the real and the surreal:

A white, sandy beach stretches out before the camera, which pans slowly across a wide shot. Three small children are playing in the sand. A well-dressed man floats high above the beach, tethered at the ankle by a long length of rope, held loosely by another man below. The man on the beach is laughing, calling to the floating man to come down.

Then she segues to Fellini strutting around with his megaphone, accosted by an Italian reporter querying, "Frederico, do you believe that life is like a film?" Then his producer worriedly asks, "We're going to begin soon, Fellini, where is your lead actress? Where is your cast?" That reporter goes on to ask the director about his shift from Neorealism "to filmmaking that was 'primarily oneiric'?" Further into the riff, Wilson has an American reporter ask about the director's intention in telling a story about a director's story; Fellini replies, "I hoped to convey three levels on which our mind lives: The past, the present, and the conditional . . . and of course, the realm of fantasy."

Wilson has here done more than give us a feeling for Fellini, evoking a nostalgic response — ah! those hilarious opening scenes of controlled chaos we associate with his films — but here she also introduces us readers to her location (a sandy beach, i.e., San Diego, where she lives), the critique of the objective god-perspective (the floating man who is chided to come down to earth), the terms of her engagement in her writing (the blending of fact and fiction, the element of time and memory), herself as author (the lead actress), and her characters (the cast). The initial riff, the Fellini riff, superbly introduces all the key terms of the whole book's aesthetic.

The next riff takes Andrei Tarkovsky's film *The Sacrifice* as a point of departure. The film's plot begins on the coast of Sweden with Aleksandr (Erland Josephson) celebrating his birthday with family and friends when they hear jets thundering overhead and receive stunning news from the radio. World War III has erupted, and the end of the world is near. In order to avert the apocalypse, Aleksander makes a bargain with God: He'll give up everything he values in life, including his beautiful home and beloved, but mute, son (Tommy Kjellqvist). So, eventually, Aleksander sets about doing just that. He tricks the family members and friends into going for a walk, and sets fire to their house when they are away. As the group rushes back, alarmed by the fire, Alexander confesses that he set the fire himself, and furiously runs around. Maria, their maid, who until then was not seen that morning, appears in the fire scene. Aleksander tries to approach her, but is restrained by others. Without explanation, an ambulance appears in the area and two paramedics chase Aleksander, who appears to have lost control of himself, and drive him off. Maria begins to bicycle away, but stops halfway to observe Little Man, the mute son, watering the dead tree he and Aleksander planted the day before. As Maria leaves the scene, Little Man, lying at the foot of the tree, speaks his only line, which quotes the opening Gospel of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word [*and after that there is only the Quote?*]. Why is that, Papa?"

The main themes Wilson plays with in her Tarkovsky piece are: fragments/ collage/circus/ impending war/madness/too much talk/map and territory. In a section subtitled "MAPS AND TRUTH," one character, Otto, says "Maps reflected humanity's true view of the world." To which Aleksandr sniffs and replies "Truth . . . maps have nothing to do with truth," i.e., films are purely constructs. Which brings to mind Polish-American scientist and philosopher Alfred Korzybski's famous remark that "the map is not the territory" and that "the word is not the thing," encapsulating his view that an abstraction derived from something, or a reaction to it, is not the thing itself. Korzybski held that many people do confuse

maps with territories, that is, confuse models of reality with reality itself. Wilson, through Tarkovsky, brings up the epistemological status of filmic representation, and by extension her own writing.

In the short section on (Marguerite) Duras, scriptwriter on Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*, Wilson has REALITY dialogue with MEMORY. This creative response to the film creates a nice segue to the next section, a response to Robbe-Grillet's paean to time and memory, *Last Year at Marienbad*.

Wilson's section on Robbe-Grillet's film was culled from a study of both the book and the movie. In it, two interlocutors (X = Man, A = Woman) go through three repeated cycles of dialogue and setting, each with small variations, mirroring the filmic device the author/director used to evoke differing memories rooted in the experience of different subjects (no god perspective here). As these dialogues progress then repeat, I found myself visually retrieving those scenes from the original film, vividly seeing myself in the very theatre where I first experienced this film, even sensing the presence of my then girlfriend beside me, our excited discussion after the viewing.

Alphaville, Godard's celebration of the sci-fi/noir genres — one of my favorite films — is a dystopia where there is an absence of beauty, truth, and love. To say the word "love" is punishable by pain. It is celebrated by Wilson's excellent mimicry of the tone of the dialogue and stark scenes in Godard's dark masterpiece. Her text and Godard's film (Lemmy Caution you!) interweave like a helix of recombinant DNA. In the film, in Wilson's riff, life and death are interwoven: "Natacha: This evening we learned that life and death exist all within the same circle." Natacha is the daughter of scientist Von Braun, the creator of Alpha 60, a computer that uses mind control to rule over residents of Alphaville and who the secret agent Lemmy C. is teamed up with against her father. At one point, Natacha says, "The words seem oddly familiar, but I'm still not sure what they mean," a wonderful nod to the film, a self-reference to Wilson's own text, and to the quandary of the discourse coming out of Washington these days. The dystopian theme of the film is even more relevant today, given our current President and the rise of the Alt-Right, than when it was released.

Mirroring Wilson's play on her own appropriation of pre-existing fragments is her choice to riff on Chris Marker's film *San Soleil*. This experimental film by French director Chris Marker (of *La Jetée* fame) collects stock footage recorded in various countries around the world and presents it in collage-like form, using no synchronized sound, but instead ties the various segments together with music and voice-over narration, which ponders the topics such as memory, technology and society. Expanding the documentary genre, this experimental essay-film is a composition of thoughts, images and scenes, mainly from Japan and Guinea-Bissau, two extreme poles of our global condition. Other scenes were filmed in Cape Verde, Iceland, Paris, and San Francisco. As a female narrator reads from letters supposedly sent to her by the (fictitious) cameraman Sandor Krasna, Wilson describes her character: "She took a sketchbook and a camera with her everywhere." Here we see how appropriate this film is as it plays upon the role Wilson herself has taken *vis-à-vis* her filmic material in the whole book.

The Truffaut section, a witty riff on *Day for Night*, was well chosen. I think it's the best of all the sections. The title in French is *La Nuit Américaine* (*American Night*), a term for using film stock balanced for indoor tungsten light outdoors in the daytime, underexposed, then futzed with in post-production to simulate night scenes. Day for night may be, then, understood as a code for filmic simulation, deceit, the collapse of any distinction between the real and the fictional, a blurring of sharp distinctions, an attack on binary thinking. This section is appropriately prefaced with a quote by the director: "I have always preferred the reflection of the life to life itself." Wilson takes this section's inspiration from the friendship between the key innovators of New Wave cinema, Truffaut and Godard, and their later conflict and falling out, the cord between them decisively severed after the release of Truffaut's immensely popular *Day for Night*, which Godard found to be dishonest and told Truffaut as much in the first of a series of angry letters between the two men.

For all his radical Marxist politics, Godard in his feud with Truffaut, comes off like a Fascist. Given the current tendency toward "fascism of the Left" in many of our institutions, Wilson's point to

make something of Godard's elitist snobbery, hits home, but does so humorously, a true-*faux-pas*. How? She gives Godard a cameo appearance in her narrative riff. In fact, a Truffaut fan and a Godard fan take potshots at each other in the narrative. A narrative that begins with an excited Spectator #1 declaiming, "Cool, we get to watch a film being filmed!" His interlocutor, Spectator #2, replies, "It's a film about filmmaking." (Here my thoughts flew back to Dziga Vertov's film about filmmaking, *The Man with the Movie Camera*.) This is, of course, a reference to what Wilson herself is doing and what the reader also experiences when reading this re-writing of Truffaut in this section. What the spectators are discussing is the film-within-the-film, a *mise-en-abyme* scene showing the filming and directing of a film inside the main film titled *Je Vous Présente Pamèla* (*Meet Pamela*) occurring within *Day for Night* (search Youtube for a clip of this scene).

In the Ershadi section, Wilson takes as her starting point Homayoun Ershadi's friendship with Iranian New Wave director Abbas Kiarostami and the latter's 1997 award-winning film *Taste of Cherry*. In the story a Mr. Badii (played by Ershadi) is a man in a Range Rover driving through the wastelands outside Tehran, crisscrossing a barren industrial landscape of construction sites and shanty towns, populated by young men looking for work. The driver picks up a young serviceman, asking him, at length, if he's looking for work: "If you've got money problems, I can help." Is this a homosexual pickup? Kiarostami deliberately allows us to draw that inference for a time, all the while offering "red herrings" to mislead the spectator, before gradually revealing the true nature of the job, someone who can carry out the task of burying him after he commits suicide. Wilson's conceit here is to herself play a role, that of an interviewer of Ershadi on set after filming has concluded. Asking HE why his character takes so long to find just the right person for the grisly task, HE replies that every person Mr. Badii encounters spans a cross-section of humanity: "Ultimately, in my view, is about having a choice and having a voice. . . . By using every-day people as actors the director gives us an undistilled version of culture that is embodied in the individual, even as s/he is part of a collective society. . . . Even in the depths of sadness or despair, we may still see a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel [*the light projected onto the screen?*] when we remember the taste of cherry [*sweet memories of films viewed?*]."

Responding to CW's questions, Ershadi talks about his long friendship with Kiarostami. Ershadi has offered his friend (off set) a cigarette, a gesture that also showed up in the last "controversial scene of the film," of which CW asks HE: "Was it intentionally included?" and HE replies, "Yes, Mr. Kiarostami wanted the familiarity between us shown. He wanted the audience to get a sense of real life continuing even as the film, and perhaps my character's life, concluded." Again, Wilson invites us into an awareness of the blurred line between reality and fiction rooted, I believe, in Wilson's early formative experiences in moving into and out of that dark room, the movie theatre, in and out of dream and reality until they began to merge in her imagination. It is this dialectic — realized in dialogue — that interests this very talented author.

In concluding this essay, let me cite at length CW asking HE about the film's conclusion and HE's response:

*CW: So what about the conclusion? Why does Mr. K. [Kiarostami] bring us all the way to the end, to the scene where Badii lies in his grave in the rain, only to have the screen go black? [This particular scene recalls to mind a similar, but more comic one, in Russian director Aleksandr Medvedkin's early silent film *Happiness*, where a forlorn, abused Kulak jumps into a coffin and refuses to come out.] . . . We have come all this way, became involved with Badii's narrative, only to find that the climactic build up provides no relief. . . . we are faced with the reality that, yes, we are watching a film, and the entire film has been a construct of the director's imagination.*

HE: Yes, the film is a construct. In this way, you can compare Mr. K.'s filmmaking to conceptual art. There are no concrete answers. . . .

CW: Yes. And next we see the film crew and the director, and you giving your friend, Mr. K., the cigarette.

Can we not read into this a thinly veiled allusion to Wilson's own project where concrete interpretations elude us and polysemy reigns? Isn't she, both actor and director in these riffs, handing us, too, a "cigarette" in a friendly gesture of readerly collaboration?

Paul West in "Voice Over" (in *Cinema Lingua, Writers Respond to Film*) gives us something to think about here: "Is a movie the equivalent of a last smoke? Good swap if so." I ask, is a written equivalent to a movie a good swap, too? My answer: Wilson's book is "Smokin!"

— The End —

James R. Hugunin is an Adjunct Full Professor in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1983, he won the Reva and David Logan Award for Distinguished New Writing in Photography. He also writes experimental fiction.