MILO LETHORN
KARLSTAD UNIVERSITY
APRIL 2018

CUT/UNCUT: THE THEORY OF EDITING

EXAMINATION QUESTION III:

"This part departs from your own practical work during the course. Use your films and exercises from the workshops and put them in a wider context of film editing. Compare your own work to other works from film history and analyze your work together with the discussions found in your literature for the course."

EXAMINER: PATRIK SJÖBERG
GRADE: VÄL GODKÄND

"Excellent analysis of both texts and films. Very attentive and full of the type of insights that attests to careful reading and consideration. Well done."

Cinema, on an entirely surface level, might be closely linked to photography[1] as an artistic genre. Whether the intent of such being document or fiction, both rely on the predication of an audience experiencing the replication of an image. Beyond, however, the obvious aural element being lost in the translation of cinema [2] to what will be characterised as *still* (immobile*)* photography, one might note that the overarching separation of the two is with regards to the *binding* of both forms. A drive towards having photographic practice realised as single bodies of work as opposed to fragmented and unresolved images has seen the rise of the photobook as a primary means of dissemination. Locking otherwise isolated frames to a single volume, the order of which cannot be changed, might suggest a move towards an existence as a postdigital response to cinema, the premise for such extrapolating the ideology of film and showing it outside of its motion.

However, as Susan Sontag notes in her acclaimed *On Photography*, the book is not 'wholly satisfactory' (2005: p.3) as a means of deliberate dissemination. Although the sequential narrative is established in a linear progression through the pages, nothing *holds* the reader to following this linearity, or starting and finishing at a particular point. Perhaps more damning than this, the book allows no indication for the amount of time one should spend on a particular photograph. Sontag instead notes a need for a 'subtler and more rigorous' (p.3) packaging of this cross-medium integration.

Before continuing, it is imperative to stop and consider why one would even want to splice the two. The still photograph in its isolation and lack of motion asks its reader/audience to internally animate and infer meaning (Barthes

1978: p.66). The placing of two such frames together, either as a diptych or in individual succession, breeds a rapport as one consciously or unconsciously links the two and deduces narrative. This ideology is of course mirrored in motion film with the work of Eisenstein; in Battleship Potemkin for example one is presented, at its climax, with a portrait of an elderly woman, presumably facing the oncoming soldiers, before the shot is directly replaced by the same face being bloodied. The audience equates the two shots as being indicative of the woman being shot, despite any explicit evidence of a bullet, gun or killer. It is only the 'impression of movement' that is given 'through the organic connection implied from one image to the next' (Sutton 2009: p.149). The narrative is ultimately contained between the shots, existing entirely within the audience's logical reading of these cues. In providing less information than its ever-moving counterpart, in the still image lies a potential for greater external projection upon it. Just as the photobook became such via the inseparability of photography from the book format, the still photograph must have the same treatment with relation to moving-image, what will be referred to moving forward as the photofilm.

Chris Marker's dystopian *La jetée* of 1962 can be viewed in retrospect as work that pioneered and brought to light many of the benefits subsequent to the use of the still photograph in film. It is a 28-minute fictional photofilm set in the aftermath of a post-apocalyptic Paris. The story, a series of attempts at sending survivors back in time to seek help, is told almost exclusively through black and white photographs and aurally accompanied by scored background music, rare diegetic mutterings and the constant feeding of plot provided by an unidentified narrator (Jean Négroni). Despite a singular shot of a woman waking up from sleep existing in literal filmic motion (an unexpected reminder of the primary medium used), with a plot grounded in the idea of time-travel and memory, Marker's use of the still photograph is of great significance.
Indeed in his seminal work on the very subject, *Photography Cinema Memory*, Damian Sutton hails it a 'dissertation on the paradox of time that the photograph represents', one that 'throws the image into both past and future...even though it is essentially mute' (p.151). Whilst motion-picture cannot escape 'logical unity of time and space' (Arnheim 1957: p.21), the eponymous stillness of the still photograph places it outside of time, to the point that such becomes malleable in its exclusive use. At birth, 'the (photographic) still throws off the constraint of filmic time' (Barthes 1977: p.67), which, as established, is terminal. Marker's use of temporally-limitless media within a temporally-defined medium (via editor Jean Ravel) adds critical weight to the treatment of the still photograph. Consciously freed of any particular timescale, every take and cut becomes deliberate.

Groomed by the principles already expounded, *Beyond Blue Shadows* uses the still photograph as a material aid to it's own narrative. The short film could be categorised as a suspense thriller and in respect of such the photograph as a means of both telegraphing and hiding the story works harmoniously. In brief, the seven-minute photofilm establishes its unidentified female protagonist (Isabelle Northgate) as a student photographer who, in the blue hour, ventures outside to take pictures of the surrounding topography bordering her student village. Whilst conducting a series of long-exposures

the girl hears a rustling in the dark distance and, curious, takes a picture in that direction before moving on. Having finished her photography the girl walks home, unwitting of the figure following her. Visually established already as having a perversion to locking her door and maintaining her room as a safe haven, she settles to processes her images. She sees the figure in the tree-line of an image as her door is knocked. In this moment of realisation, armed with her tripod the girl hides from the intruder (Kai Langenekert) as he searches for her, knife extended. A flurry of successive faux-motion shots track their mutual confrontation and the film fades to an image of blood stained tiles and then, without resolution, to black.

Lev Manovich in his 2001 *The Language of New Media* charts the rise of digital cinema (and photography as its still equivalent) as a 'particular branch of painting' (p.308) with the transition from analogue to digital being more akin to that 'between fresco and tempera to oil...' (p.295). That is to say that with the readily available technology for non-destructive editing, the digital 'redefines what can be done with cinema' (p.305). Once again it must be acknowledged that as technology of the medium advances, so too does the scale of intent in what tools are used. It is with hindsight of this potential for such punctilious reworking of digital media that *Beyond Blue Shadows* can be broken down on a technical level. The photofilm exists within a constant frame, the choice of which remains deliberate and potent in its reading. This 2.35:1 (W:H) ratio, mimics the widescreen anamorphic visuals established in the time following Classical-Hollywood-Cinema and today commonly characterised by the colloquialism "the cinematic look". In short, the presentation of still photography in such a way mimics the aesthetic of fictional cinema with the intention of the audience sub-consciously recognising this. By frame alone one is placed at ease, reading the photofilm as a work of fiction and so accepting the unfolding narrative more openly.

To some degree the use of post-production colour grading strengthens this effect whilst also having ulterior implications. The existence of an artificial colour palette is subtle but noticeable, being controlled, still photograph by still photograph, based on the stage of narrative and physical space. In our introduction to the eventual protagonist we are placed in the orange-yellow glow of the flat (Fig 1) this is in line with the idea of her room being a secure and safe retreat. The world outside, as referenced by the title, is bathed in the cold light of 'blue hour'[3] (Fig 2) and so is a striking opposition both figuratively and visually to the protagonist's flat.
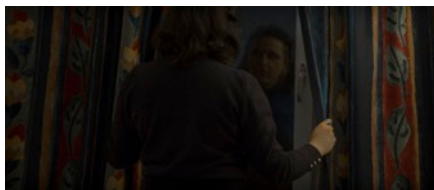

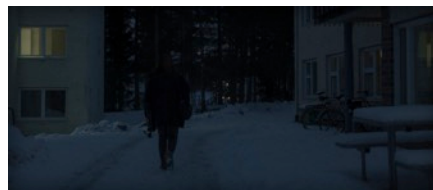Figure 1.   Figure 2.

The space in between these two opposites, from the hallway to the stairs case, are presented in green, respective of that position as liminal space between safety and danger (Fig 3). It's important to note the subtlety with which the audience sees these colours degrade as the intruder nears and then enters the room (Fig 4), there is a responsive neutralisation of tint and a lowering of saturation and across the frame as the intruder as an outside threat brings the cold blue of the outside into a once warm habitat.
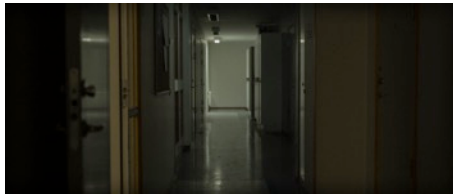

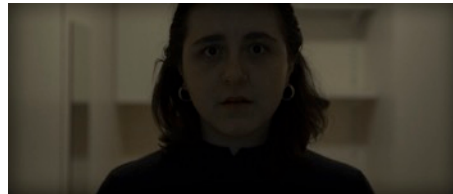Figure 3.   Figure 4.

Audio within the photofilm remains nuanced, used sparingly to contextualise images and aid a following of the narrative, in addition these aural features springing from silence serve to reinforce the immediacy of shock-moments [4]. The sounds, for the sake of stamping the protagonists isolation, is kept diegetic and without dialogue, at times fragmented but far from existing as a soundscape. There is no exterior narration, nor background music as experienced in *La jetée*.

As already implied, the exclusive use of the still photograph presents an opportunity for a greater reading into and judgement of the tempo-rooted editing of "cuts" and "takes". The montage of the visuals, much like La Jetée, varies wildly in the lengths at which each still "take" exists. Though it is simple enough to track an average time for this of 3.5 seconds across the entire photofilm, there is an existing dichotomy in the film that gives a better account of narrative-led timing. This divide occurs, far from accidentally, at the exact midpoint between first and last take[5] (Fig 5); everything before the protagonist, upon her return, opens the door to the building constituting the first half and everything thereafter the second. This first act, a tense but relatively uneventful set up for the eventual drama, is reflected in its average take length of almost five seconds. In stark contrast to this, with its staggered but rising pace leading up to the climactic confrontation, the latter half presents less than three seconds in average take[6].

Figure 5.

The freedom with which take length is manipulated strengthens the potential of the photofilm as a narrative vessel and so *Beyond Blue Shadows* as a product. The longest takes are perhaps here the most interesting cases; in the first act the audience sees the female character from the front composing yet another shot, as she does so (signalled by the sound of the shutter opening) the frame cuts to black. In this absence of image or sound the audience is presented with a moment of latency. Anything could follow this blackout, and what does is a single wide shot of the entire scene, almost in itself a visual response the call out of the title screen. The girl is seen the background with her back to the audience but the sudden addition of an unidentified figure in the bottom right foreground, watching her from a distance (Fig 6). This is a moment of grand exposition on the part of the audience and so warrants the six seconds it is shown before returning into the darkness; in seeing what their vulnerable lead character has not, they become an omniscient witness to the narrative.

Figure 6.

If this long take is considered as making the audience think, the other most extreme example, occurring in the second "act", is to conjure feeling. Following the girl's realisation that she is powerless against the intrusion of her room, she hides, supposedly moments before her door is unlocked. During this time, the audience remains with the intruder as he shifts from picking the lock, to erecting his knife and then entering the room in an elongated fading of one frame to another. As unsure as the man of where the girl is hiding, the audience is presented with their first clear frontal look at the character as he seems to scan the room (Fig 7). This ten-second take makes the audience uncomfortable and nervous, the image seems to remain for an impossible amount of time and is charged with the subtext of inevitability.
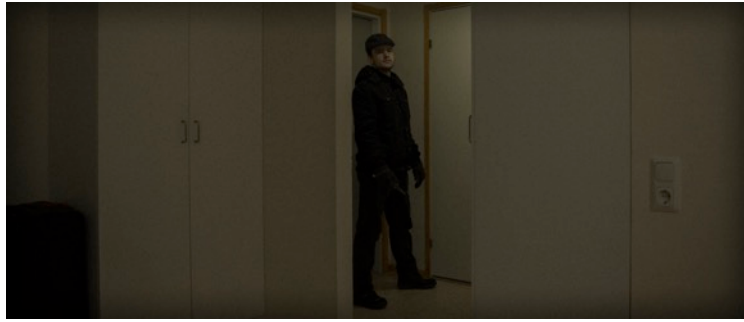
Figure 7.

As previously noted in relation to the framing and aesthetic of this photofilm, *Beyond Blue Shadows* houses forms of established classically-cinematic visual-grammar to both smooth and challenge the audiences reception. One will notice that images are often featured more than once. In the case of the door-locking this use is clear, used to translate the banal efforts of the protagonist's near-OCD in protecting their room. Ultimately this example amplifies the great irony of the intruder being able to pick locks rendering her precautions futile. Attempts at employing a Kuleshovian approach to montage-based reinterpretation can be seen in the close, neutral shots of both the protagonist and antagonist (Fig 8). The presence of such in light of new information might for example enforce the paralysing atmosphere of the situation; the audience is presented with a static canvas on which they, consciously or not, project their situational reading.
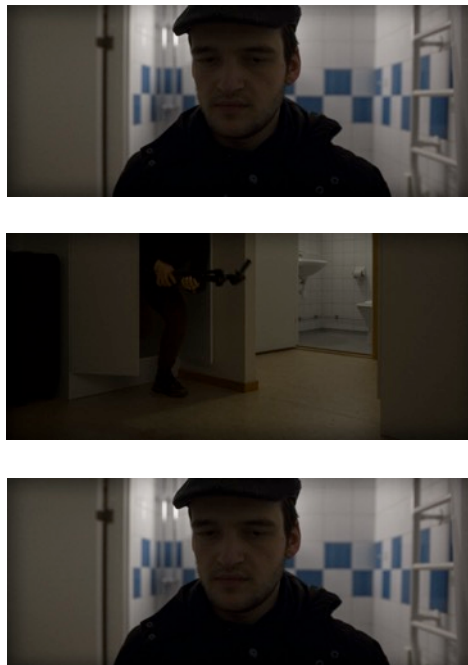

Figure 8.

As the two characters are seen to "meet" on either side of the door (Fig 9), the omnipresent camera maintains spatial continuity in documenting from the same side, observing the 180-degree rule and almost presenting a mute shot/reverse-shot conversation as they prepare to engage. As stated though, whilst observing this rule gives the audience a sense of space, it is broken with opposite intention: 'the camera must not cross...Should this happen, the spectator could feel disorientated' (Orpen 2003: p.17). In the final silent crescendo the screen pulses with varying angles and perspectives of the same sequence, as the girl springs from the wardrobe and runs at her intruder, tripod in hand. Cutting across the 180-degree line and from close up to wide-shot, the spectator is indeed disorientated, as Orpen suggests, here once again finding oneself a witness to the frenzy without knowledge of what might happen. In what is the only case of "flash-forward" featured in *Beyond Blue Shadows*, the audience is shown amidst the noted "pulsing" from black-screen to confrontation, three images of blood stained tiles. In moving from white to blue to white, it is made obvious that these tiles are those of the bathroom. Although there are grounds for speculation on the outcome (if closely thought about) the audience is largely unaware of whether a stabbing or bludgeoning occurs, the only definite is that blood will pattern the walls.
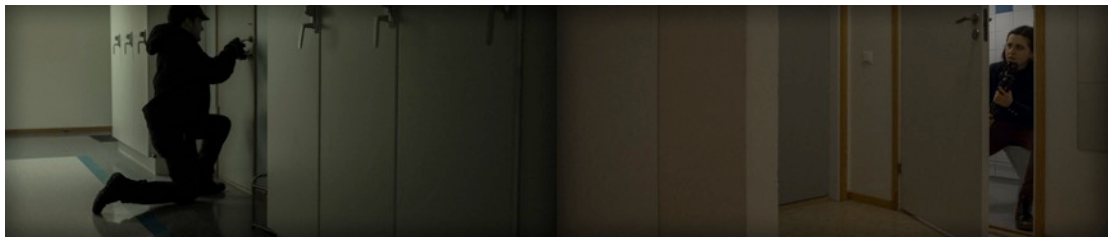

Figure 9.

Writing retrospectively of *Beyond Blue Shadows*, one can see elements and themes that bear a striking resemblance to Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 *Blow Up.* The film has a surface reading in which Thomas (David Hemmings), a fashion photographer, unwittingly captures a murder on camera and discovers such through the obsessive enlargement of the print. However, teasing the audience with a secondary reading, Antonioni is seen to imply that this "murder" may be entirely fabricated in Thomas' mind. With each expansion of the "murder" one is given a more distorted image yet the photographer seems to become more definite in his assessment. Much like the famed Rorschach test, from the messy grain of the bushes Thomas sees an arm holding a gun and from the constructs a whole narrative to fit. In the final scene Thomas sees two mimes playing tennis, but hears the ball being hit, indicative of the human instinct to fill in the gaps left by a seemingly illogical reality. Thomas fades away and the credits roll, reminding the audience that they are watching a film and ultimately this event is fiction, the vision of Antonioni. With respect to *Beyond Blue Shadows* then of course there is the visual similarity in the protagonist discovering a sinister anomaly in the shadows of a photograph post-incident, however, thematically there is more than that. The title itself is literal, the intruder of course enters from the distant blue tree-line. As noted however, this is "blue hour", a window of time

before dawn where the sun is not visible but there exists a soft, low contrast, light that glows blue. With that in mind it's important to note that during blue hour there are no natural shadows (the sun has not yet risen) so a "blue shadow" can't possibly exist. The narrative at its very inception is a visualisation of a paranoid personal musing extending from taking photographs at night. The story itself is a "blue shadow" in that it is fictional and realistically far from likely to happen. With this in mind, much like Antonioni's *Blow Up* all that follows, the warped sense of time, the impossible literal shifting of colour [7] and the improbable "plot", could be indicative of the events simply existing as a nightmarish day-dream. A complex narrative spun from the girl's intense pareidolia at hearing a noise in the bushes.

This potential reading does not replace that of the original narrative, for those events are physically seen to take place [8]. The editing techniques and narrative remains, albeit on a parallel track. The two can exist simultaneously and is ultimately dependent on the audience's own understanding.

As a photofilm *Beyond Blue Shadows* recognises the potential in post-digital cinema for the use of the still photograph as a tool allowing a more specific and deliberate utilisation of previously elaborated aspects of cinema. When 'both the order and exact time for looking are imposed' by the film format, 'there is a gain in visual legibility and emotional impact' (Sontag 2005: p.3). The still photograph offers as much to cinema as the film format does to photography.

[1]: That is, the immobile and motionless photograph, not simply that which is materially photographic.

[2]: Even a conscious silence is here still considered to be of aural importance.

[3]: Approximately 20 minutes before dawn, characterised for it's blue light and sought after by photographers for being naturally shadowless.

[4]: The rustling of bushes, shutter release and sudden door knocking, for example.

[5]: 03:25 (screen-time of credits deducted).

[6]: 03:25/43(takes) vs 03:25/71.

[7]: Not just the colour of the room: outside the sky lightens as time progresses (as dawn approaches) but the moment the rustling of bushes is heard the sky turns very dark, as if the audience is experiencing the situation from the girl's state of fear.

[8]: Whether it be in that reality or the protagonist's imagination.

Bibliography:

Sontag, S. (2005) *On Photography*. New York: RosettaBooks

Barthes, R. and Heath, S. (1977) *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press, HarperCollinsPublishers

Sutton, D. (2009) *Photography Cinema Memory*. Minneapolis (Minn.): University of Minnesota Press

Arnheim, R. (1957) *Film As Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press

Manovich, L. (2001) *The Language Of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press

Orpen, V. (2003) *Film Editing: Art Of The Expressive*. London: Wallflower Press