

### Publication history and sources of English translations

A Bit of History (originally "D'une histoire"), published in *L'analyse du film*, Raymond Bellour (Paris: Editions Albatros, 1979), translated by Mary Quaintance for Indiana University Press.

The Unattainable Text (originally "Le texte introuvable"), published in *L'analyse du film*; originally published in *Ça cinéma*, special Christian Metz issue (no. 7-8 [May 1975]); published in *Screen* (vol.16, no.3 [Fall 1975]) as "The Unattainable Text," translated by Ben Brewster. Reprinted by permission.

System of a Fragment (originally "Système d'un fragment"), published in *L'analyse du film*; originally published in *Cahiers du cinéma* (no. 216 [October 1969]) as "Les oiseaux: Analyse d'une séquence"; published (in mimeo) by BFI Education Department, March 1972, and reprinted January 1981 as "The Birds: Analysis of a Sequence," translated by Ben Brewster. Reprinted by permission.

The Obvious and the Code (originally "L'évidence et le code"), published in *L'analyse du film*; originally published in *Revue d'esthétique*, special issue, *Cinéma: Théorie, lectures* (1973); published in *Screen* (vol. 15, no.4 [Winter 1974/75]) as "The Obvious and the Code," translated by Diana Matias. Reprinted by permission.

Symbolic Blockage (originally "Le blocage symbolique"), published in *L'analyse du film*; originally published in *Communications*, special issue on *Psychanalyse et cinéma* (no. 23 [1975]), translated by Mary Quaintance for Indiana University Press.

To Segment/To Analyze (originally "Segmenter/Analyser"), published in *L'analyse du film*; originally published in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (vol. 1, no. 3 [August 1976]) as "To Segment, To Analyze," translated by Maureen Turim; revised translation by Diana Matias published in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); chapter 5 of *The Analysis of Film* is based on this latter version.

To Enunciate (originally "Énoncer"), published in *L'analyse du film*; originally published in *Camera Obscura* (vol. 1, no. 2 [Fall 1977]) as "Hitchcock, the Enunciator," translated by Bertrand Augst and Hillary Radner (revised by Constance Penley for this edition). Reprinted by permission.

Psychosis, Neurosis, Perversion (originally "Psychose, névrose, perversion"), published in *L'analyse du film*; originally published in *Ça cinéma* (no.17 [1979]); published in *Camera Obscura* (no. 3-4 [1979]) as "Psychosis, Neurosis, Perversion," translated by Nancy Huston. Reprinted by permission.

To Alternate/To Narrate (originally "Alterner/Raconter"), published in *Le cinéma américain: Analyses de film*, ed. Raymond Bellour (Paris: Flammarion, 1980); published by *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* (vol.15/16 [1983]), translated by Inge Pruks (revised by Roxanne Lapidus for this edition). Reprinted by permission.

# The Analysis of Film



Raymond Bellour

Edited by Constance Penley

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bloomington and Indianapolis

## 8. To Alternate/To Narrate

### ■ (on *The Lonedale Operator*)

Here we shall see how the systematicity at the heart of American high classicism is elaborated, proceeding from the reduction of a fundamental form of cinematographic discourse: *alternation*.

I shall not pause to define either the nature or the multiple determinations of a formal principle whose first general formulation—before returning to it more fully—I have already outlined.<sup>1</sup> This will emerge, as in most of my earlier analyses, from a step-by-step textual analysis whose systematic organization is largely regulated by it (even if the organization cannot be reduced simply to this), through the effects of *repetition* and almost deliberate *abstraction* that often characterize primitive works.

In order to follow this process, which sets out to reconstruct (because it is short) an entire film (*The Lonedale Operator*, D. W. Griffith),<sup>2</sup> it will be necessary to try to imagine the deployment of this principle of alternation, its extension, its dispersion, and its diversification, from shot to shot, from segment to segment: in short its *mise-en-abîme* (its *mise-en-volume*) in certain films by Hitchcock or Lang, Mann or Curtiz, Wyler or Thorpe. We must see it where it is at *work*—orchestrated, orchestrating all levels—in the classical cinema.

We must bear in mind that in *The Lonedale Operator*:

- all the shots are fixed; thus the description will specify, when necessary, only the movement of the characters and the objects inside the frame of the frame enlargements reproduced here;

- the shots are always strictly regulated by the immediate needs of the story and its dramatization, which alone determine the sometimes noticeable variations in the length of the shots; and

- there are no intertitles, at least not in the copy to which I had access.

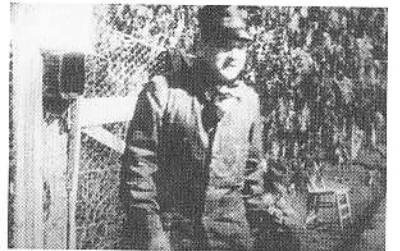
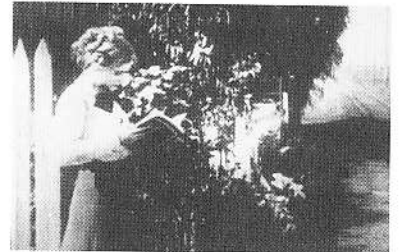
Finally, it would be well to remember that although this exemplarily simple film brings into play textual operations of a certain degree of complexity, we are not concerned here with an analysis as such—that is, with an underlying logic that would be enlightened by a commentary. Rather, I see the following as an ordered description, whose repetition seeks to tease out additional knowledge, on a par with knowledge acquired directly.

He/She/He/She, she and he. At the beginning of the narrative, we have the *diegetic couple*, the mainstay of the story. The couple is the site of the first alternation, placing the film under the sign of the changing form that will be its governing

principle. This first alternation clearly is made in order to be broken, and then to reunite (shot 4) its two terms—the man and the woman, the train engineer and the telegraph operator—in the same frame. The movement of the hero, which brings about, from shot 1 to shot 3, a slight variation in his body (from medium long shot to medium shot) inside an identically arranged frame, produces this break in alternation by making the first term penetrate the frame that until then had been given over to the second. After this, from shot 4 to shot 7, the action continues by repeated shots of the couple, in which, according to the purest romantic code, the ardent tenderness of the hero and the affectionate reserve of the heroine are asserted. We see that the movements of the characters play, in a graduated way, on an opposition between near and far (though in order to show this one would need many more frame enlargements—one always needs too many): the characters leave the field of vision on the right in shot 4 (following a placing similar to that in shot 3) and are framed more and more closely before disappearing, only to appear again in shot 5 far back on the right and framed exactly as they were at the end of shot 4. This operation is more or less repeated in shot 6 (except that the trajectory is inverted: this time the couple arrives on the left of the frame), helping to build the systematicity of the narrative. This is sometimes done, as here, in a pure and insistent way: in these less complex films, filmic writing seems ceaselessly to put to work, as though for their own sake, the potentialities of cinematographic language.

6–9, 9–13. A sequence of frames that the narrative lays out in order to take them up again later, according to an invariable succession, which will gain strength by repetition. The separation in shot 7 prepares the way for the second alternation that arises from it between shots 9 and 10: she/he again. But this time it is with the effect of a liaison implied by the exchange of looks, which makes of shot 10 a semi-implicit subjective shot. A specifically cinematographic code (that of point of view) obliquely takes up the diegetic alternation and incorporates itself into it: their superimposition (which could be layered with other specific codes and has already half done so by the shifts in framing) is the body of the fiction itself.

This alternation continues: shot 11 effects a return to the first term; the alternation develops in this way right up to shot 13. And it is only interrupted to make way

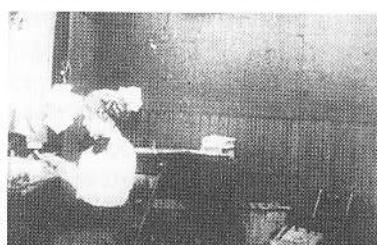
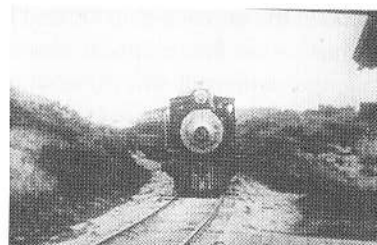
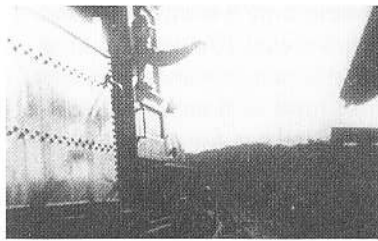
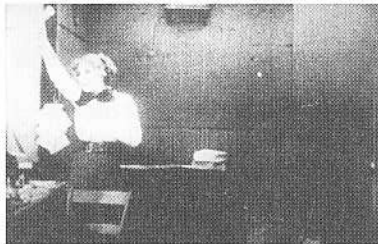
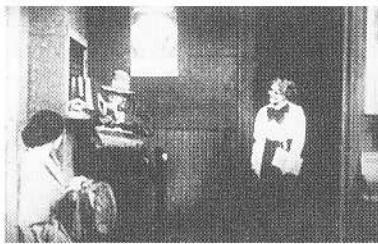


for a new alternation, apparently less rigid, but no less distinct, which contributes to establishing a larger scale for the alternating distribution of the unfolding action.

Another office, in another station. Another train (for a moment we might even think it is the same train we saw leaving in shot 10; but when it stops in shot 15 after a lengthy forward climb, some passengers get off and others board, whereas the train operated by the hero consists of only a single locomotive). Another action: a man with a satchel enters an office, stops near a cashier who hides two bags of money in it, then goes out again by the same door on the left, onto the platform, where he holds out the satchel to a second man who is leaning out of the train we have just seen pulling into the station (15), and which we see leaving again at the end of this very lengthy shot (31 seconds).

This time the alternation is by groups of shots (thirteen shots, from 1 to 13, then two, 14–15, then X number of shots, according to the way one decides to divide up the rest of the action); that is to say, the alternation of actions is connected in a fairly linked continuity of units corresponding to segments or supra-segments, and no longer just from shot to shot. In this sense we can speak of a superior level of alternation since, at least in the first of its terms, it integrates earlier alternations; but it is superior in extent, not in nature: it is always the same process operating between the various spaces, whether close up or further away.

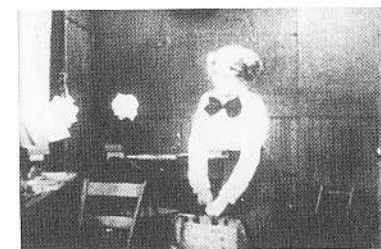
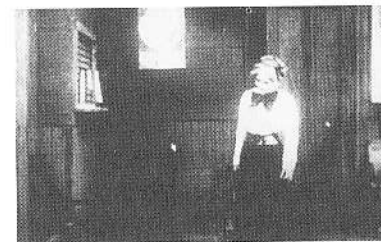
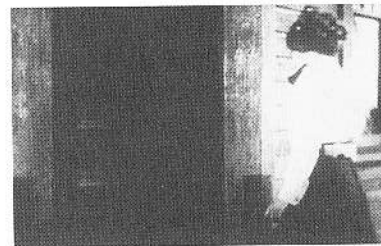
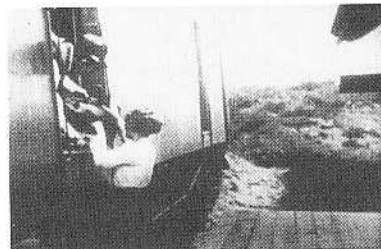
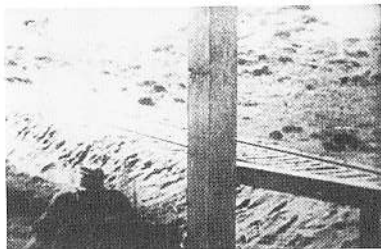
We return now to the office of the telegraph operator. Here there is a closer framing, a medium shot (16), then a medium long shot (17), returning to the earlier framing (9, 11, 13). These two frames (16, 17) thus sketch out an internal alternation within the alternation of the action, which models itself on the latter and develops on its own. We should note that, as with other configurations, this alternation cannot be resolved by the fusion of its two



terms: no shot can maintain two framings at the same time (except by the perfect superimposition of the two shots), to mingle, for example, the subject and the object of its vision. Thus, one might classify the alternations according to this first criterion, which doubles back on itself by considering the specificity or the nonspecificity of the codes put into play.

So we have four shots (16–19) of the telegraph operator. After a glance out the window — analogous to the glance that determined the earlier alternation with the first train — she gets up and goes out of her office in shot 17 (bear in mind that





the shots remain invariably fixed), and retraces her steps exactly, in the opposite direction, from the walk that she accomplished from shots 7 to 9, in an e-quivalent number of shots. These shifts in the fiction are the result of the effects of repetition that carry the story: there is no longer anyone in the office in shot 18, and it is in shot 19 that we see her reappear alone in the doorway, the same spot where, in shot 9, she was saying goodbye to her lover.

In shot 20 the second train—from the other station—arrives, continuing this alternation of actions between the two stations—when it enters the first station, in the frame in which, on two occasions, the motifs of the action have already been inscribed. This alternation, initiated in shot 17 by the look of the telegraph operator (which recalls the farewell to the first train), materializes between shots 19 and 20; but it disappears in the latter part of the very shot that constitutes its second term: there the telegraph operator receives the bags of money from the person who himself had received them in shot 15 (by a left-right inversion in the arrangement of the characters, determined by that of the trains and the platforms), and she hides them in her own satchel. By a very subtle arrangement, the framing of shot 20, which reiterates that of shot 10 (departure of the first train), also repeats very nearly (with more or less floor or roof showing) the framing of shot 6 in which the couple were crossing the tracks, thus further accentuating the effect of inversion between the series that leads the young woman from the platform to her office (6–9) and that which leads her from her office to the platform (17–20). This micro-condensation of the textual system integrates into one of its units components of several earlier units and thus constructs itself by means of displaced similarities that constitute its repeated difference.

20–21. These shots contain a new motif, a third term: the robbers who appear from between the rails, under the train car, and cross

the field from left to right in shot 20. They open an alternation (20/21/22: she-he/robbers/she-he) which, as with that of the two stations, will arrange itself, at first according to groups of shots (she/22–25/robbers/26–27). It should be noticed that:

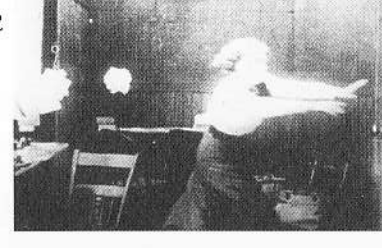
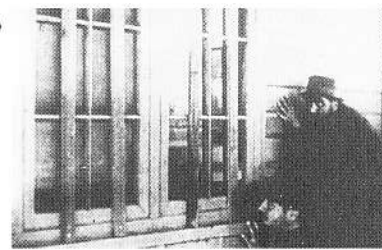
—shots 23–25 reiterate, in the strict succession of their three settings, the first entrance and the exit of shots 7–9 and 17–19;

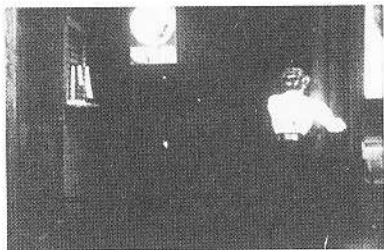
—shot 27, of the robbers, repeats the framing of their appearance in shot 20, which combined the terms of the previous alternation (the telegraph operator/the train from the other station), thus imbricating, through both obvious and subtle interlocking, the two alternating movements, before the second systematizes itself through a relationship determined from shot to shot.

28–42. This time it is not her lover but the robbers whom the operator sees, or rather senses at the end of shot 28, which reiterates exactly shots 9, 11, and 13, even to the position of the chair. The alternation from shot to shot will be broken four times in different ways, without, however, interrupting itself, thus showing that it is the same serial movement, varied according to the dictates of the diegesis, following from shots 20–21, between the two robbers and the operator:

a. 32–34. From the second office to the exit door, three shots of the telegraph operator are repeated 7–9, 17–19, and 23–25.

b. In shot 34, alternation is not established from shot to shot but by means of the door that the operator closes and that serves as a shutter, thus dividing into 34a/34b the very shot in which the robbers appear. (This well-known framing, succeeding that of the window—29 and 31—will from then on be given over to the robbers until shot 70). This example shows very well that diegetic alternation (to show this or that in order to show this *and* that) merely coincides, through a kind of massive coding, with the limits of the shot; but it shows too that it spills over continually, either, as here, by dividing the shot within itself, or as shown





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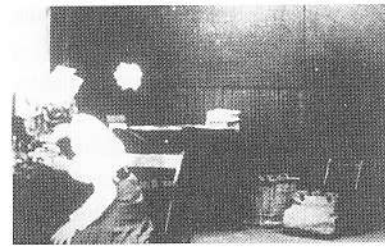
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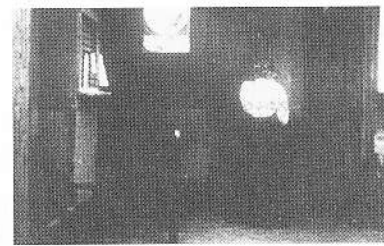
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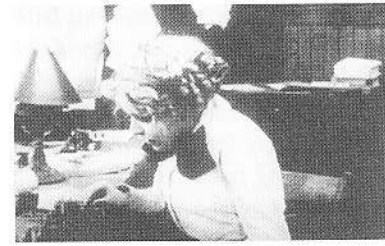
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elsewhere by continuing through diverse regroupings of shots, in an ongoing variation of a single principle.

c. The same again, for shots 37–38 and 40–41.

d. It should be noted how the movement of the operator is accomplished this time:

—shot 34, the third instance of her movement, from her desk to the door, becomes the first instance of a reverse movement, from the door to the desk, for the duration of a half-shot, which serves the theatrical dictates of the action;

—the second shot showing movement (first office) is, in contrast, repeated twice, conforming to the build-up of suspense, of which alternation—by the internal breaking up of motifs—is one of the major instruments (35 and 37: she closes the door, then runs across the room).

40–41. From the medium long shot to the medium shot: this placing reverses shots 16–17, again for the benefit of the suspense and the future alternation that serves it, through identical framings and positions but according to a strict logic that assigns the medium shot to the telegraphic activity.

With shots 42 and 43 a three-term alternation is set up, which will continue further, almost to the end of the film, more or less hiding itself behind the two-term alternations that it forms and the alternations within each of these terms. The heroine, the other operator, and the robbers form a movement that immediately focuses on the orderly exchange of the two telegraph operators at their desks, arranged as mirror opposites, as were the trains on the platforms of the two stations (42–52). A long and exemplary series finds its meaning only in the principle that carries it and is varied within it, even if the principle is triumphant. The second telegraph operator takes the place of the second station; he is the second term representing a distance to be covered; he is the other of a same term of which the heroine is the center, to which all disjunction will return.



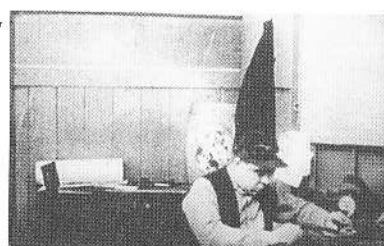
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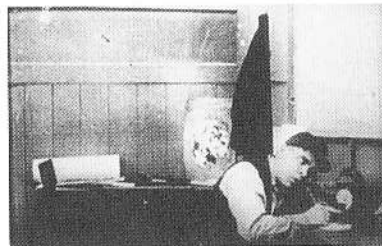


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In an apparently third station, shot 55 allows us again to meet the hero (from now on doubled by a second engineer), whom the male telegraph operator alerts.

(A third station: the economy of the sets that is evident in the entire film seems to prove that if this new station shot were meant to designate the second station, it would have been more or less similar to shot 15. But all the elements regrouped on the left of the frame are different and seem intended to mark that difference, despite a similarity due to the identity of the camera angles.)

The alternation, which is continued in the action, immediately reinscribes its third term (the robbers, 56); thus, by a return to the operator (57) it plays for a moment on what could be called at this stage of the narrative its second and third terms (the other station—itsself divisible into its motifs, locations, and characters—and the robbers) placed first of all in their relationship with the first term (the heroine).

There is a continuous variation of the diegesis: the fainting of the young woman in shot 54 provides the fiction with one of the oppositions that it relishes when it reinstates (57/58/59) the alternation between the two telegraph operators: by calling out, the heroine wakes up the sleeping man in shots 45 and 47, whereas his call in turn cannot, in shot 58, revive the unconscious heroine, whose awakening is delayed until ten shots later, purely for the sake of the drama.

The repetition of shot 55 in shot 60 defers the shot-by-shot alternation with the heroine, whose sleep is used by the diegesis to put to work its other terms. The motifs of the second term, converging in shot 60 (the other station: the operator, the engineer[s]) divide up at first in order to weave together the motif of an internal alternation, almost immediately interrupted (60/61/62), since its only function is to formalize, according to a principle both permanent and variable, an acceleration of the

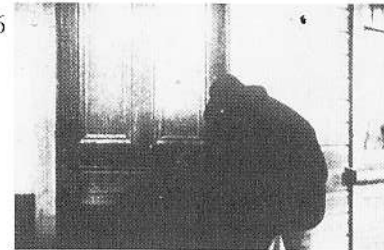
fiction. It is based on two frames, one of which will disappear; the other will regulate the development of the alternations to come: (a) a wide frame, which regroups the whole of the action: the station platform and the other telegraph operator who holds out the message and a gun to the engineer, who runs toward his locomotive; (b) a closer frame: the engineer in his locomotive, which is starting off (with the second engineer, who enters and leaves the field of vision [61]). (a') the same wide frame: the train leaving, facing the screen, and the telegraph operator on the platform (a title added to modern copies justly notes that the engineer runs away from the viewer in shot 60 in order to board his locomotive, which in shot 62 is seen from the opposite direction, turned toward us).

Next, a new alternation is set up, between the second term, made up from now on of the train (64–65, 68) and the third term, the robbers (63–66).

The second term immediately reproduces in this new alternation an arrangement sketched out in the shots that make the transition between the telegraph operator's office and the train (59–62). There is a division, this time, between a shot of the train advancing toward us frontally and leaving on the right of frame (64), and a medium close-up of the engineer (65). Two things are worth noting:

—Shot 65 strictly repeats shot 61 (except for the variable presence of the second engineer and the unavoidable differences linked to the realism of the representation); it thus presumes the ordered progression of the narrative, with differences having been settled by the insistent repetitions.

—In the alternate weaving together of the three terms, shots 61 and 65 open up a potential sub-alternation: this can remain either at the elementary, embryonic stage; develop by the return of one or the other of its two elements; or reabsorb itself by limiting itself to a single element so as to fuse more rigorously with the shot-by-shot development of the gen-



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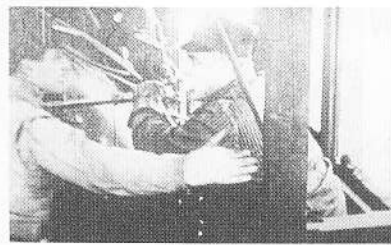
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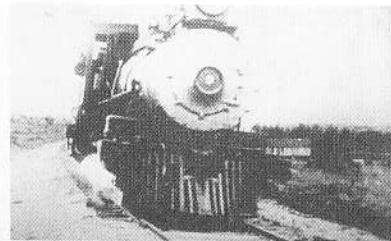
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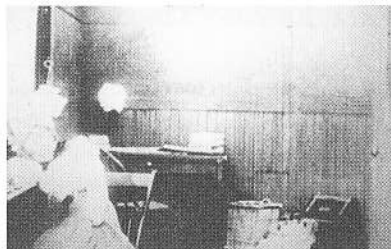
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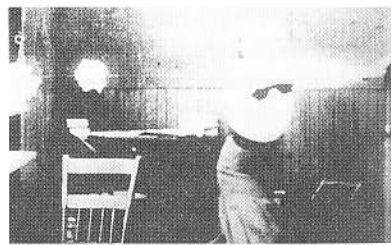
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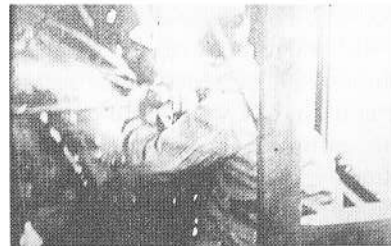
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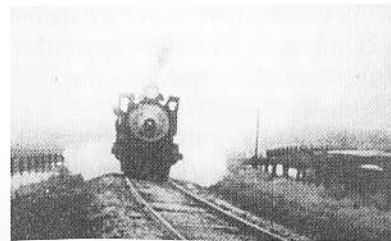
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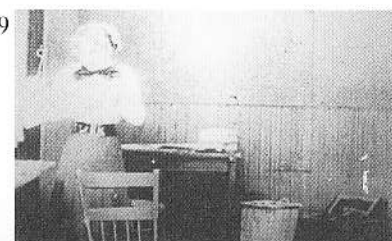
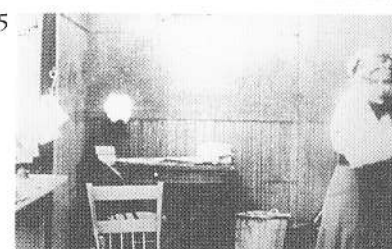
eral alternation. This is the case with shot 67, in which the train appears alone, before the narrative finally comes back to its first term: the female telegraph operator, who regains consciousness.

But there is also the balance of spatio-temporal masses: shot 64, followed by a shot of the engineers, shows the train only on a very short stretch of its journey (it enters from the back and advances to mid-frame); shot 67, which alone maintains the second term, positions the train at a distance and makes it come right up to us and exit on the right of the frame, leaving the field empty. But this balance is also an imbalance: shot 73, which precedes this time a shot of the engineers, noticeably repeats the course of shot 67. The narrative is thus built up by slightly displaced analogies, an accumulation of small differences.

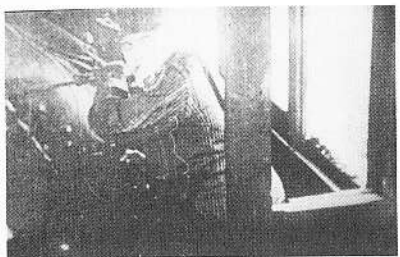
68–71. She/the robbers. This time the shot doubles back on this pairing (69–70), following the latter's movements until they finally succeed in opening the door and entering the first office, thus repeating, through fragments ordered according to the dramatization of the diegesis, the path that has already been completed five times (in both directions) by the heroine.

Until shots 70–71, the alternation was modulated by the prevalent repetitions of the two terms, taken in turn from the three possible relationships (she/telegraph operator or she/train, she/robbers, robbers/telegraph operator or robbers/train). The alternating backtracking that operates on the heroine, opposing her successively to each of the other two terms (train/she: 67/68; thief/she: 69–70/71), while at the same time tightening the alternation a/b/a' between the young woman and the robbers (68/69–70/71), is resolved in favor of a regulated alternation with three terms, which we can write variously: robbers/she/train or she/train/robbers, up to shot 83.

This arrangement in no way hinders the divided arrangement of the second term, which is reaffirmed in shots 72–73, but in-

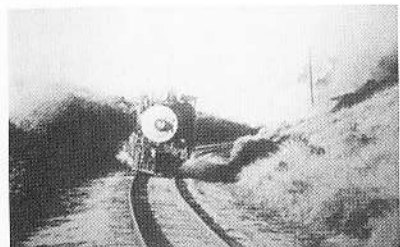






versely: the shot of the engineer this time preceding that of the train, which is contrary to shots 64–65.

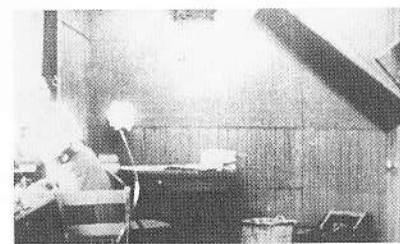
76/77–80/81. Here the arrangement is the same, the only notable variations being: the countryside crossed by the train that is still coming toward us and the path it makes. In shots 77 and 81, instead of arriving from a little closer than in the preceding frames and going out of frame, the train arrives in shot 77 for the first time on the left.



82–85. Alternation is again crystallized in two of the terms, only to disappear in shot 85 when the robbers, after breaking down the door, finally enter the office of the telegraph operator and take their place with her in this frame, which had been devoted to her since shot 9.



It is thus a two-term alternation that now continues between the telegraph operator/robbers, on the one hand, and the train on the other.



Three variations operate on the second term. First, there is a new inversion of the elements, since the train again precedes the detailed shot of the engineers, as it did in shots 64–65. Then the potential alternation between the two elements develops by a return of the first element, the train, which structures shots 86/87/88 according to the scheme a/b/a'. Last, the detailed shot changes (87)—this time no longer showing the engineer in close-up on his locomotive (with the intermittent appearance of the second engineer), but the back of the locomotive, with each of the two men at his post, and a background of sky.



Shots 90–91 repeat this sequence. But the medium close-up of the engineer is substituted for a shot of the back of the locomotive: reiterating shots 64–65, where the same interior shot followed that of the train, and preceded it in the micro-series 71–72, 76–77, 80–81. Moreover, this internal alternation of the second term, which continues with the final arrival of the train in shot 92, is thwarted in

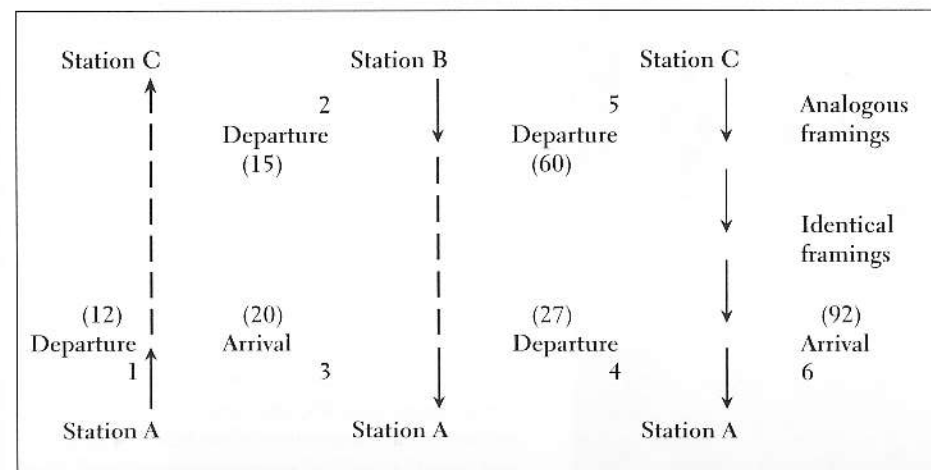
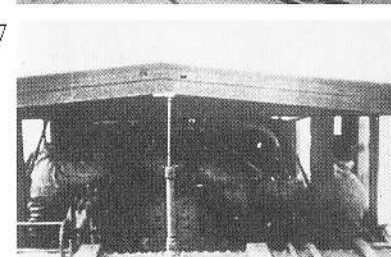


this very shot where the two men jump from the train to hurry toward the telegraph operator's office.

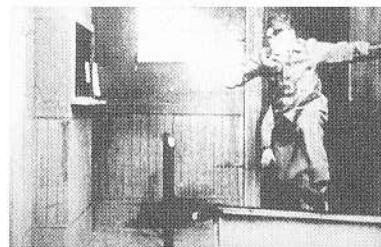
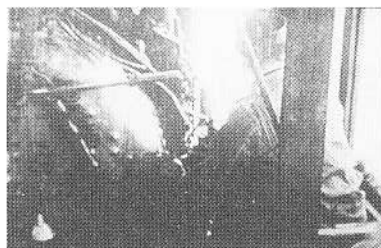
It should be added that in shot 90, where the train enters the setting of the first station (leaving aside shot 92, where it stops), the train covers only a fragment of its course, no longer leaving the field of vision as, till then, only shot 64 had made it do: this is thus a way of distinguishing this from other instances of the train's arrival and departure.

Finally, shots 90 and 92 complete a paradigm: that of train arrivals and departures, which structure the entire film, according to a logic in which symmetry gives rise to dissymmetry and so assures the development of the narrative.

Thus, on the one hand, there are two stations, B and C, from which two departures take place. On the other hand, there is station A, where the narrative begins and ends and where, according to an arrangement of interlocking cross-referencing and alternation, there are two departures and two arrivals: almost at the beginning of the film, there is the departure of the first train, operated by the lover; and there is the almost consecutive arrival and departure of the second train, with an ellipsis of the entire journey; and finally, there is the arrival, at the end, of the last train,







whose journey covers the final third of the film. This third train is, of course, the first, or is presented as such: at first by its engineer, then, as we have seen, because at its departure from station A, this train consists only of a locomotive, in contrast to the second train, which apparently includes two cars.

A relationship of symmetry-dissymmetry is thus set up between the two trains: the first, which will become the third; and the second, of which we also see only two departures and one arrival, according to an arrangement in which the second is inscribed within the journeys of the first like a double motif by which the architecture of suspense is structured and refined. We can also appreciate the neat systematicity of the framing: *analogous*, it could be said, in stations B and C because the train pulls into the station in the same way and is filmed from the same angle (left-right), in spite of the shift in setting and the distribution of the trains' bulk in the frames; *identical* (and inverted, with respect to the camera angle: right-left) in station A, where there are the same frames (with very slight internal variations) and the same distribution of mass in frames devoted to the two departures and the two arrivals.

92–95. The movement that leads the hero from the station platform to the telegraph operator's office reiterates with precision the path she takes at his side, then alone, in shots 6–9, and that she repeats in the opposite direction when she receives the satchel after the arrival of the second train; later it will again be traversed, in more or less fragmented or divided fashion, by the heroine and the robbers.

In one leap, true to the progression of the action, the hero re-enacts the course followed in the initially calm period of the unfolding drama. He thus puts an end to the alternation of the three terms (already reduced to two terms since shot 85, and heavily concentrated on the second term since shots 92–93), by bursting into the field of vision reserved until then

for the first term, then for its conjunction with the third. Thus, the terms of the narrative become combined, and they resolve the division posed by the narrative's premises: the diegetic couple, scarcely formed (4–7), apparently only separates in order to meet again, to strengthen its image by the test of a dramatized separation whose internal form is alternation, orchestrated at multiple levels in order to serve the principle that carries the narrative, by repetition, toward its resolution.

Shot 96 refines this final movement by means of an ultimate alternation: a close-up of the object with which the heroine held the two robbers in check, placed between the two 97a shots that reunite the five protagonists (95 and 97). Hermeneutic resolution. The unseen, or the badly seen object appears in its true colors: a monkey wrench instead of a revolver. There is a rhyming effect, too, with the revolver held by the young man, which re-establishes the distribution of objects according to sex.

But this close-up, the only one in the film, also acknowledges an added meaning, stemming from the rhymed difference that it inscribes between the man and the woman: it unites the couple, as if over and above the action that re-forms it, by isolating fragments of their bodies, which suddenly seem to be made, despite the contrast in the clothes (smooth white of the blouse, black and white stripes of the shirt), of a continuous material: the subject of the story can be read in the meaning of the principle that governs it.

N.B. Another print has since revealed to me another ending (quite simply, ten to twenty seconds were cut from the copy on which I worked), which completes the perfection of the system. Same shot, same frame: the two robbers leave, followed by the second engineer; the hero and the heroine embrace. The kiss that was gently refused in shot 4 is accepted in the final shot. Repetition-resolution. The conjunction of the couple, of the two terms posed by the opening alternation, constitutes the happy ending of the narrative.



1980

TRANSLATED BY INGE PRUKS;

REVISED BY ROXANNE LAPIDUS IN 1999

22. I owe this to the friendship of Thierry Kuntzel.

23. On the eye-phallus relationship, see Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 101–104.

24. In this regard, *Marnie* deals with the reappropriation of the image, whereas *Psycho* deals with its destruction. See “Hitchcock, the Enunciator,” chapter 6 in this volume.

25. Kuntzel, “The Film-Work” and “The Film-Work 2.” See also “To Enunciate” [chapter 6] and similar themes in my essays “System of a Fragment” [chapter 2], “Symbolic Blockage” [chapter 4], and “To Segment/To Analyze” [chapter 5], all in this volume.

26. Metz, “The Imaginary Signifier,” p. 63.

27. Roger Dadoun, in the few suggestive lines devoted to *Psycho* in “Le fétichisme dans le film d’horreur,” *Objets du fétichisme*, special issue of *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 2 (Fall 1970): 238.

### 8. To Alternate/To Narrate

1. In Bellour, “To Segment/To Analyze,” chapter 5 in this volume; and in “Alternation, Enunciation, Hypnosis: An Interview with Raymond Bellour,” by Janet Bergstrom, *Camera Obscura* 3–4 (1979): 71–103.

2. *The Lonedale Operator*, Biograph Company, 1911; 998 feet (16'30" at 16 frames/second); Actors: Blanche Sweet (Telegraph Operator), Frank Grandon (Engineer).

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