

# What Becomes of Things on Film on Film: Adaptation in Owen Land (George Landow)

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**Abstract** The importance of adaptation in studies of the American structural film movement has been underestimated. Three works by Owen Land (George Landow) from the 1970s are analysed in depth: *Remedial Reading Comprehension*, *Wide Angle Saxon*, and *On the Marriage Broker Joke in Sigmund Freud's Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, or, Can the Avant-Garde Artist Be Wholed?* Land's understanding of language and the language of cinema evolves towards a more post-structuralist account of meaning. His development parallels and complements that of Stanley Cavell in the same period.

**Keywords** *Adaptation, avant-garde, Owen Land (George Landow), Stanley Cavell, structural film.*

## INTRODUCTION

Although he has always figured prominently in histories of structural film, Owen Land's particular importance has remained somewhat elusive. With the touring collection of *Reverence: The Films of Owen Land* by Lux, the publication of *Two Films By Owen Land* (2005), and the impending premiere of his first major new work in years, *Dialogues*, now is a propitious moment to reassess his contributions (LA Film Forum). It is a truism that in the first half of the 1970s, Land's work shows remarkable attention to language. I hope to show that over the decade, and in an arc that will be familiar to students of the literary theory of the same period, Land progresses from a materialist and ideological notion of language in *Remedial Reading Comprehension (RRC)* (1971) to something that seems recognizably post-structuralist in *On the Marriage Broker Joke in Sigmund Freud's Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, or Can the Avant-Garde Artist Be Wholed?* (1977–79).

But if Land moves from a structural to a post-structural account of literary and cinematic meaning, he also reconfigures our notion of cinematic adaptation, in part through a typically idiosyncratic notion of fidelity. Even 30 years ago, Land might simply have avoided the questions of adaptation entirely. His institutional audience was overwhelmingly interested in the medium 'as such' and that interest appears to have swamped any attention to his possible investment in adaptation among his viewers and critics alike. To be sure, his adaptations neither look nor sound like mainstream works. But a closer examination of his films in this decade shows that he moves into rather than away from the problem, concluding the decade with a film that constitutes a just-barely-explicit declaration of his practice as a form of 'affectionate adaptation'.

Yet Land warrants our attention as an adapter not simply because he is more classically implicated in the relations of source and adaptation than other avant-garde filmmakers

but also because he encourages that implication as a way of investigating dominant aspects of avant-garde practice that we would not immediately understand as adaptations at all, particularly the widespread uses of found footage and the reliance on rephotography. His films amount to a way of asking how we might distinguish adaptation from those practices we more readily associate with the avant-garde such as use, citation, or rediscovery. Our re-estimation of Land, then, promises to elucidate not only his work but also the ways in which meaning works in adaptation more generally. If the opening sections of the essay delve into Land's work to excavate his account of adaptation, the closing section pairs him with Stanley Cavell. Through this unexpected pairing, we may come to a better understanding of the places of the avant-garde and Hollywood in the economy of film theorizing.

### PUPILS AND STUDENTS

The initial components of Land's critique of adaptation are gathered from discourses as varied as advertising lingo and theology and from the histories of photography and psychology. But at the heart of his work in the 1970s lies an enquiry into the work of his contemporaries. 'Structural film' as a notion was only then emerging in the work of P. Adams Sitney; as a movement, it was perhaps a decade older. 'Theirs is a cinema of structure in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film' (Sitney 2002 348). In Sitney's account, the American avant-garde moved away from Romantic interests in dreams and personae towards a more 'rigorous' investigation of the possibilities of the medium. By 1963, several filmmakers had already begun to chip away at the Romantic impulses of the avant-garde, when Warhol arrived, explosively, on the scene. Structural film then radically extended Warhol's anti-romanticism. Whether this account was adequate to the practice it sought to describe—and Sitney has been criticized from the outset—it provided a point of departure for Land's own reflection on his part in this movement, if it existed.

*RRC* is an odd intervention in this history in the ways it manages to keep those earlier Romantic concerns alive within its 5-minute span. For the first 2 minutes, a dreamer dreams of an audience collecting in an auditorium. They are, we surmise, about to watch a film (someone calls 'Lights!'). When this film within a film begins, we see the low-angle silhouette of a jogger (the filmmaker) against some trees accompanied by the sounds of his breathing and a dog's barking. **THIS IS A FILM ABOUT YOU** appears on the screen. And with the appearance of that line, the film begins its critique of advertising language. At the 4:30 mark, against a similar shot of the jogger and a similar breathing-barking soundtrack, a message enters from the right and scrolls left. In a larger version of the same typeface, the conclusion of the slogan declares, **NOT ABOUT ITS MAKER**. When the first half of the slogan appears, it is quickly followed by the mellifluous tones of a trained announcer, 'This is really a film about you. Let's suppose your name is Madge and you've just cooked some rice'. Yet before one can adequately process why, in a film about me, I must suppose my name is Madge and that I have just cooked some rice, pseudo-advertising chatter touts the virtues of 'processed, precooked' rice, now available everywhere. 'This rice is delicious, Madge', we are told, in direct address to the camera. The ridiculousness of imagining that this film really is

about me, that I really am Madge, and that this rice has any taste at all is part of an effort to train (or at least nudgingly remind), the viewer so that when the film comes round to the second half of its slogan, we are quickly able to decrypt such language.

In its efforts to train the audience to see through the corruptions of language, *RRC* is of a piece with Land's *What's Wrong With This Picture?* and *Institutional Quality*. Its attack is directed at the moral emptiness of the come-on. At the same time, both the processed-rice discussion and the slogan pun on Land's other great topic, the fixation of belief, or the varieties of his religious experience. Land has joked that he has been 'converted more times than Uncle Ben's rice' (110). There is something like a cycle of ironies here. We may learn to see through the egotism of thinking a film, or an advertisement, is really about us, but if we accept the converse—that the film really is about its maker—the film itself becomes an egotistical exercise, and our reverence for its maker only stokes that egotism. Seen as the critique not of our language but of our conversions, *RRC* points up the difficulty of directing our reverence to its proper object, to the Maker and not the maker.

Still, at the heart of *RRC* is a minute-long exercise in reading.<sup>1</sup> At the bottom of the frame, we flicker back and forth between the image of a sleeping woman and a bleached-out image of the same woman sleeping in a large Afro wig. Above and behind her, a page of text appears, but the words are blurred out of focus. Brief chunks of the text are brought into focus, one-third of a line at a time. The soundtrack is a series of electronic bleeps somewhere between a punctual beeping noise and the smeared sound of a laser weapon in a futuristic movie. It gradually falls out of sync with the illuminations, and in so doing suggests a lack of correspondence between the technical and ideological processes of how we read and our ideas of comprehension. Since Land is interested in both processes and ideas, we might deal with each in turn.

The serially focused text is a piece of found footage from a speed-reading course. Speed-reading methods tend to have two general aspects: comprehension training (practice essays and the like) and eye training. The latter allies itself with certain machine-guided reading programmes. In addition to books and other self-help guides, speed-reading courses at their peak of popularity in the middle part of the century usually included a version of a device called the tachistoscope, which illuminated individual lines or chunks of text. As Sue Currell and Charles Acland have described, tachistoscopes began as instruments for measuring visual perception but were repurposed in the 1930s as tools for improving that perception. Commercially available versions were branded with names like 'the Visualizer', which flashed words for one-hundredth of a second, the 'The Pacer', from the Book of the Month Club and Columbia University, or even the 'Tachomatic 500'. In classroom use, market-leader Keystone Tachistoscope promised 'Remedial reading gains as high as 75%'; compared with what Keystone did not say (Currell, Acland).<sup>2</sup>

*RRC*'s film falls clearly on the eye-training side of this divide, pulsing rapidly along across the surface of the text, paying no heed to the semantic integrity of the focused portions. The electronic pulses aid in the conditioning by frustrating our attempts to read 'subvocally', that is, to read silently to ourselves. For the accomplished controlled-eye speed reader, the page of text ideally becomes a screen that can be processed as a collection of images which are then understood (comprehended) after the fact, while for

the speed-reading student, and for us, the movie screen is the emblem of the page-turned screen. Reading becomes the mimesis of movies.<sup>3</sup>

But in *RRC*, the pulsed text appears, like the initial audience, as part of a sleeping woman's dream. More precisely, the controlled-eye-movement exercise would correspond to a period of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. The reading audience does collectively what the woman's unseen eyes might be doing. REM had been discovered in 1953, and as a result, by the mid-1960s research into sleep and dreams had become more physiological than interpretive (Mackenzie). The processes of how we read, or dream, began to subsume the interpretation of what we read, or dreamt.

Yet Freudian theories had not been driven entirely from the field of psychological research in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, experiments with psychotropic drugs suggested that Freud had continuing relevance. *RRC* thus stands at the intersection of two diverging traditions, one technical and one interpretive. The technique and the medical history push towards an understanding of the screen as page-as-screen, while the framing 'narrative' (if it rises to that level) encourages an audience to read through the manifest content of the screen towards the latent, in this case, semantic, content. That is, the double mediation by the speed-readerly manipulations and the figure of the dreamer tells us we should *read the text*.

The text comes from a Jacques Barzun essay, 'Pupils into Students'. Published in *Teacher in America* (1945), it was routinely anthologized with other classics of liberal education. (Leslie Fiedler and Jacob Vinocur, for instance, included it in their *Continuing Debate*.) Barzun's essay turns on questions of good teaching and classroom hierarchies, but it is more famous for its definition of intellectual hokum (the precooked rice of the life of the mind). Hokum, for Barzun, lies not in the repetition of narrative form but in the violation of a semiotic and ethical imperative. 'Words should point to things, seen or unseen. But they can also be used to wrap up emptiness of heart and lack of thought.' And when that occurs, the exchange between student and teacher amounts to an exchange of nothingness: 'The student accepts some pompous, meaningless formula, and passes it back on demand, to be rewarded with—appropriately enough—a passing grade' (Barzun 23). Here, the manifest success of the exchange hides the actual failure to teach or learn. In contrast, the exchange can also fail when it is imagined as a one-way transfer. In these situations, according to Barzun and flashed on the screen in *RRC*, the student resents the teacher's omniscience and resists. Barzun describes this as a failure of adaptation, not in the sense of the repurposing of material but in the sense of an inability to change. It 'makes one feel that the human mind is made of some wonderfully tough rubber, which you can stretch a little by pulling hard, but which snaps back into shape the moment you let go' (Barzun 22).

Read out from this, comprehension becomes a two-way street, one that both requires and makes possible reciprocal adaptation. For the resistant pupil to transform into the adaptable student, the 'master' must seek what Barzun describes as a particular form of 'satisfaction'. The teacher must take satisfaction 'in seeing how a new human being will meet and make his own some part of our culture—our ways, our thoughts, even our errors and superstitions'. Barzun calls this satisfaction 'artistic'. It suggests an improved definition of 'comprehension' that would move beyond semantic decoding to making part of culture one's own.

By enfolding Barzun's text within a dream, *RRC* solicits (but naturally does not require) a Freudian interpretation. Seen as the dreamer's dream and the audience's scene of instruction, it points to a repressed desire for true instruction in place of the usual hokum. But if we understand this latent desire as the manifest content of Land's own page-turned-dream-screen, then a second reading is required. Recontextualized in Land's film, Barzun's point that a teacher's satisfactions are artistic rather suggests its converse, that aesthetic endeavour, artistry, might be a form of instruction. As avant-garde filmmaking became part of the university, the suitability of 'art' to 'instruction' was a live issue. Since the audience we see at the film's outset gathers not in a picture palace but in (something like) a university auditorium, this inversion is even more plausible. Land salvages certain elements of the avant-garde's Romanticism to repurpose them as a warrant for filmmaking inside the university.

If the 1970s found avant-garde filmmakers increasingly parts of university faculties, it also found them breaking with the traditions of the American avant-garde. Where that earlier movement had coalesced around Romantic ideas about the independence of the artist, the centrality of personality, and so on, structural filmmakers questioned these premises more or less severely. In 1970, a good structuralist would have rejected a simple equation of film screen and dream screen as insufficiently attentive to the nature of the medium. But one of Land's signal virtues is that his repressions are woefully incomplete. Barred by structuralist ideology from the simple equation of film and dream, Land recast that ideological prohibition as the mechanism of repression as such. Just as his film stands between technical and interpretive understandings of the dream, so his filmmaking stands between the rigours of structuralist technique (pupil training) and elliptical Romantic narrative (student education). It is this mediating stance that converts Land's use of found footage about adaptability into something more recognizable as an adaptation of that footage. He adapts questions of narrative and interpretation in ways that can resemble both a Deren-esque dream and a reflection on the nature of dreaming as such. By setting his dream film 'inside' the university, though, Land also raises the question of the institutional processes of repression. In his next work, Land will make that philosophical-institutional critique even clearer.

#### READING TO REDDING

*RRC* centres on a bit of already-structural found footage. *Wide Angle Saxon (WAS)* (1975) extends *RRC*'s immanent educational project, but shifts the ground of immanence away from technique to institutions. That is, instead of cloaking his artistic aims in a speed-reading exercise, Land offers an extended parody of Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)* (1971). Frampton's film will serve as Barzun's essay did, as the source of the latent content that defines the artistic aims of Land's own work. But where *RRC* left the content of its found footage relatively untouched while it refigured the training film as REM sleep, *WAS* alters the content of Frampton's film as part of a much broader project of displacement and punning.

In each section of Frampton's film, Michael Snow reads a descriptive or genetic account of a photo we have not yet seen while the photo he has previously described slowly turns to ash on an electric burner. This generative slippage propels the film forward as it compiles an account of Frampton's own photography. Land replaced the

photos with red paint. The film-within-the-film *WAS* is, fittingly enough, called *Regrettable Redding Condescension*, which obviously puns on *RRC*. (Its maker is Al Rutcurts, an anagram of 'structural'.) The screen still carries the 'to-be-read'-ness of *RRC*, only now it is also 'to-be-red'-ness. Deflating puns such as this would come to dominate Land's later work as it moved towards a more radical critique of the self-identity of language and image. To see the found footage elements of *RRC* as adaptations may have seemed tendentious, but to see *Regrettable Redding Condescension* as an adaptation requires only familiarity with the sources.

As part of Land's critique of Frampton, he nests the exhibition of *Regrettable* within the story of Earl Greaves. Greaves, it happens, works at a television station and has seen a performance by Christian rocker Lamb; at the time, it had no effect on him. Only later, when he grows bored at a screening of *Regrettable*, does the message come through. Land attributed his film's conversion narrative to St Augustine's *Confessions*, but explained, 'Rather than write a fictional screenplay, I wanted to use the real life story of an actual person' (Land 94). For Land, the opposition between the actual and the fictional lines up with an opposition between the literal and the conceptual. Speaking about (*nostalgia*), Land explained that he chose it because he 'thought that particular film was hindered by its over-conceptualisation' (Land 105). What seems to have bothered Land about Frampton's film was the artifice of the distance between narration and image. What Land hoped to show in *WAS*, what he was perpetually struck by, was the elusiveness of meaning *within* the actual, between what is red and what is read.

Land's adaptation of Frampton is driven by this literalist or actualist impulse. Yet at the same time a second notion of adaptation is at work, one more centred on the potentials of different media. At the TV station, Greaves cannot convert; at the cinema (the Walker Art Center), he can. Why? Cinema's advantage over television, for Land, stems from its reliance on repetition. Where a filmmaker could simply loop print a segment, a television viewer could not (then) hit the rewind button. Yet Land obviously understood how television was produced and what was possible with video. Rewind and repetition may have been absent from the ordinary 'flow' of television in 1975,<sup>4</sup> but Greaves, as a television professional, *could* have rewound the tape. That he does not do so 'at work', but only in his memory and as a result of his boredom, implies that something *more* than medium, more than technique, is necessary for conversion.<sup>5</sup> Land implies that it is not cinema as such that possesses the truth of television, but rather that the contingent combination of cinema and its institutions do. Like Land's residual interest in Freudian dream interpretation in the face of the evolving science of sleep, his faith in cinema's power to interpret television is both compromised and redeemed by his knowledge of video as a medium.<sup>6</sup>

The opposition between film and television carries over into Land's manipulation of found footage of a TV newscaster struggling with a location report.<sup>7</sup> As he stands alongside the Panama Canal, the reporter repeatedly flubs the name of Omar Torrijos, the ruler of Panama. His mistakes are cycled and recycled in such a way that, as Sitney notes, the repetitions draw our attention away from the names 'Jose Maria Panilla' and 'Omar Torrijos' and towards the opposition between 'the nominal boss' and 'the real power' (Sitney 2002). In *Two Films*, Land implicitly endorses this interpretation by providing the dictionary definition of nominalism in a footnote ('The doctrine that abstract

concepts, general terms, or universals have no objective reference but exist only as names' [Land 19]).<sup>8</sup> The reporter's appeal to 'the real power' is continually undermined by his 'nominal' difficulties, as though there were some power in the name itself. If *RRC* played up the punning ambiguity in the closing half of its slogan, 'not about its maker', *WAS* resolves the nominalist/realist dilemma in a legend Land provides for the reporter: 'A man, a plan, a canal: Panama'. This long palindrome foregrounds the materials of language even as it encapsulates the actual politics of the situation—Torrijos is the man with the plan to seize the canal from the United States, as Land has noted. The power of language and the language of power (an opposition Land also displays as nominalism vs. realism or the conceptual vs. the actual) pass into one another in an exchange that cinema best displays.

The page became a screen and the screen became a page in *RRC*, while in *WAS*, the ideological dynamics of page-screen-text are partially displaced to a concern with the parapraxes of announcers and the contingent reactions of audiences. ('*Wide Angle Saxon* is about the psychopathology of everyday life and the little failures therein' [Land 93].) The materialities of print that Land had enfolded in the hermeneutic context of the dream now become the materialities of speech and language both enfolded and unfolding our attempts to communicate.<sup>9</sup> New to *WAS* is a heightened attention to the artistic and media institutions that subtend these complex attempts to think through our communications. In his next work, Land would further amplify his concerns with medium and materiality, art and institutions. In his most wide-ranging and complex film, he will also take up the problem of adaptation most explicitly.

#### FROM THE COURTSHIP TO THE AFFAIR

In *On the Marriage Broker Joke (OMB)* (1977–79), the imbricated relationships between the pun, the joke, the literal, and the allegorical are brought more directly into collision with ideas about sexuality and more traditional notions of adaptation. Land's 'source' texts include Freud's *Jokes*, a memoir by Mrs Jonathan Edwards, Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, Milton's *Comus*, and others. Most of them will appear in extended quotation. But where found footage seems to be 'merely' cited and to gain its meaning through repetition, selection, and juxtaposition, Land's staged readings look increasingly like the dramatizations that have been the heart of adaptive practice: sustained and avowed investments in particular sources deployed in an altered context.

What is the difference between citation and adaptation? In the case at hand, Freud himself cites not one but several examples of marriage broker jokes. These jokes, as he noted, all revolve around the relations between the broker, the suitor, and the prospective bride. Ordinarily, the suitor notes some possible fault in the bride and the broker not only confirms but also amplifies it. In Land's version, though, the humour disappears, and what is left is angst and structure. The central joke has become this echo of the primal scene:

By mistake I arrived early at the place where the marriage broker had arranged the meeting. He said he had briefly met the prospective bride's family, but he had never met the prospective bride. When I opened the door I heard music and then I saw the marriage broker and the prospective bride dancing together like they had known each other a long time. So obviously the marriage broker lied to me. Why? Was he involved in a plot with the prospective bride?



Why did she dance with him so lasciviously? Is she really a gold digger? And is the marriage broker merely some kind of a pander? I'll never trust another marriage broker (Land 63–65).

If the humour has leached out of the joke, though, it has been displaced. Early on in Land's film, a pair of pandas (people in panda suits) discuss their evening's entertainment. They will play a game in which they imagine experimental films about marriage broker jokes. The first panda says his film will involve a fake panda and Japanese salted plums. A fake panda (another person in a different, faker-looking panda suit) dutifully appears and introduces the experimental film. Only later, after working through the marriage broker material several times, does a lecturer (structural filmmaker Morgan Fisher) appear and explain that the 'panda' may be a linguistic corruption of the 'pander' from the marriage broker joke. And just as the humour of the joke has migrated into the pun, so the role of the pander has been displaced onto that of the structural filmmaker (Land, the pandas).

The lecturer provides a second account of the joke in which the marriage broker (the pander) is God, the suitor is Christ, and the prospective bride is fallen humanity. Given that all the pandas we see in the film might also be called suitors—they wear panda suits, right?—this typology also points towards the consubstantiality of God and Jesus and highlights the duplication of romance and faith. 'The prospective bride is fallen humanity ... willing to put its faith in the ability of the marriage broker to effect a match' (Land 69).

The panda/pander joke becomes ludicrously obvious in the course of the film, but a long sequence in which an offscreen executive and an onscreen executive discuss the marketing of Marriage Broker brand salted plums (an ostensible Japanese product) has remained baffling. (Even Sitney offers no stable interpretation of it except as a continuation of Land's critique of advertising language [1990]). The executives debate the range of possible jar sizes like this:

**First Executive**

Now all that needs to be decided is the number of jar sizes which we will offer. I'd say: small, extra small, medium, large and extra large.

**Second Executive [off screen]**

No. There should be small, large small, small large, large, extra large and jumbo.

**First Executive**

But you left out medium.

**Second Executive [off screen]**

Right, and for good reason. Think of the state of the economy. People want to buy a large jar but they feel guilty. So small large satisfies both their guilt and their gluttony. Whereas people who can only afford a small feel consoled by the availability of a large small, thus giving them a sense of superiority over their neighbour who can only afford a small.

**First Executive**

But those for whom a small is too small and a large ... even a small large ... is too large a medium offers a better alternative.

**Second Executive [off screen]**

No. Medium is a word with absolutely no customer appeal. It is neither small and economical, nor large and lavish.

**First Executive**

That's exactly why it is needed. [Etc.] (58–59)



Implied in this stretch of absurdist humour is a punning notion of ‘medium specificity’, and Land’s decision to recast that debate, long central to discussions of both adaptation and structural filmmaking, as a matter of marketing and not aesthetics, is both in keeping with his inside joking in *WAS* and a crucial elaboration of it (Arthur 2005).

Early in *OMB*, an actor portraying John Milton appears to deliver some lines from his masque, *Comus*. He is quickly followed by Fisher (the lecturer) who recites a poem about sprocket holes, apparently casting Milton aside for the inside joking I have described. ‘Divine philosophy’ gives way to doggerel. Yet just as the Marriage Broker Salted Plums could be understood as an allegory of consubstantial divinity or medium specificity, depending, so Milton’s lines take on an added meaning in their new context. When he speaks of the charms of divine philosophy, he compares them to ‘a perpetual feast of nectar’d sweets/Where no crude surfeit reigns’. Unlike the salted plums, we might say, the nectar’d sweets do not come in jumbo. Land’s marketing discussion turns out to be a version of, an adaptation of, the dialogue from *Comus*. And to the extent that the marketing discussion stands in for critical discussion of structural filmmaking, he is punning on his Miltonic inheritance.

In the final sequence, two voices read passages from different texts simultaneously. One reads Mrs Jonathan Edwards’s account of the (nectar’d?) sweetness of her dreams and her relationship with God. The speaker is offscreen, but the text is reproduced onscreen. The other voice comes from a woman we see lying in bed. She delivers the passage from *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious* in which Freud explains the ultimate significance of the marriage broker jokes.<sup>10</sup> The upshot, she says, is that while the suitor may be correct in every instance as he points out the bride’s deficiencies, he ‘makes himself ridiculous’ when he forgets that he is marrying ‘a human being with inevitable faults’.<sup>11</sup> What is more, ‘the only virtue which might make tolerable marriage ... mutual attachment and a willingness for affectionate adaptation—is not mentioned once in the entire film’. If Land’s film is an exemplary instance of affectionate adaptation—and he is explicit in a footnote that this speech is ‘adapted from Freud’s *Wit ...*’—it is also, necessarily, unfaithful—it has ‘inevitable faults’. For instance, the marriage broker joke Land spends most of his time diagnosing does not occur in Freud. Yet in his allegiance to Freud’s notions of displacement and condensation, parapraxis and paronomasia, Land demonstrates a deep sense of ‘mutual attachment’.<sup>12</sup>

The film is complicated enough that our understanding that it was all along a critique of adaptation comes late. It is what Freud would call *nachträglich*, what we can now recognize Land called ‘remedial’ and ‘regrettable’. But in his mid-1970s emphasis on puns, Land suggests (here with Freud and Derrida) that meaning is not a matter of correspondence but is rather the product of an originary displacement, from one sound or sense or medium to another. That is to say that for Land only in unfaithful adaptation does the meaning of the original become clear. This necessary infidelity may explain why in the last line of the monologue—‘not mentioned once in the entire film’—the word ‘film’ has taken the place of the original word ‘affair’.

#### WHAT BECOMES OF THINGS ON FILM ON FILM

Land’s recourse to Milton in his thinking about medium or his reliance on Freud for a theory of adaptation may seem perverse, but this combination of Milton, Freud,

romance, medium, and adaptive repetition is one that philosopher Stanley Cavell found at almost exactly the same time. Where Land turned to Milton for an experimentally testable notion of medium (no crude surfeit reigns), Cavell took up Milton's description of the fundamental conditions of marriage ('a meet and happy conversation', from *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* [Cavell Pursuits 87]). From that description, Cavell derived a historically testable notion of genre. His *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981) works through the elements of Milton's image of marriage—an equality of voice and audition emblemized by a state of happiness (or comedy)—in something very like the way Land's *OMB* works through Freud's marriage broker jokes. Cavell and Land, then, meet in this Miltonic notion of the 'meet'—the equal, the fitting, the accommodating. I have recounted, in part, Land's circuitous path to Milton above; now I turn to Cavell's own route as a way of clarifying the role of the avant-garde in his philosophy of film. The combination of these two very different lines of development will, I hope, help define the boundaries of the concept of adaptation in the 1970s avant-garde. If I have largely resisted the sorts of play that Land encourages in his interpreters, here I would suggest that this extended comparison of Land and Cavell constitutes an exercise at the level of historical argument in the sort of 'originary displacement' Land is most preoccupied by in his adaptations.

After his investigation of the ontology of film, *The World Viewed* (1971), Cavell moved in two crucial directions. One was essentially historical and resulted in the Hollywood genre studies *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (1996). The second direction was far more fragmentary in its yield, but along this path Cavell pushed to define the limits of his own claims about Hollywood by testing them against instances of art and experimental cinema, perhaps especially the work of Dušan Makavejev (Cavell Makavejev). This work on Makavejev not only provided the occasion for a crucial metareflection on the consequences of explicitly foregrounding the medium but it also allowed Cavell to articulate the complementarity of the two modes.

For Cavell, the difference between Hollywood cinema and its alternatives turns on an axis of explicitness and implication, of what is 'declared' and what is left to interpretation. Hollywood films 'declare' their membership in a genre and compete or contend with other members. He puts it this way:

A new member gets its distinction by investigating a particular set of [generic] features in a way that makes them, or their relation, more explicit than in its companions. Then as these exercises in explicitness reflect upon one another, looping back and forth among the members, we may say that the genre is striving toward a state of absolute explicitness, of expressive saturation. (Cavell Pursuits 30)

But if Hollywood films make their conventions increasingly explicit, they investigate other potentialities of the medium less explicitly or more deniably than the European modernists (such as Buñuel or Bergman) or the avant-garde. Thus, it takes some digging to realize that the sheet that divides Clark Gable from Claudette Colbert in *It Happened One Night* (Capra 1934) is a figure for the movie screen; it takes further digging to understand why that sheet must come down at the end of the film. In contrast, the Makavejev films declare no generic membership. They may refer to or cite or even

conjure such genres, but they insist in an absolutely undeniable way on the importance of their investigations of the medium. So for Cavell *Sweet Movie* (1974) ‘declares that every movie has a documentary basis’ but only ‘imply[es]’ that it is ‘the working out of a group’s genius’, not simply that of an individual (Cavell Makavejev 116–17, emphases added).

The complementarity between Hollywood and the avant-garde becomes even more salient when Cavell considers problems of adaptation (of what counts as adaptation). Discussing *His Girl Friday* (Hawks 1939), he is drawn to the scene in which ‘[Cary] Grant goes into detail about what should be taken off the front page and what left and put where’. He reads this ‘as a fairly strict allegory of Howard Hawks telling his “re-write” man what do with *The Front Page*’, and the point of the allegory ‘would be to declare that the relationship between *His Girl Friday* and its “source” is one of mere practicality’ (Cavell Pursuits 25–26). The upshot is that ‘Not every way of following amounts to an adaptation. The relation, and the purpose, will have to be made out, critically, in the individual case’ (Cavell Pursuits 26). Where we would expect adaptation, we find a prod to criticism.

His essay ‘On Makavejev on Bergman’ would seem to be one of those cases. The occasion for Cavell’s reflection on Makavejev’s work was a 1978 ‘screening experiment’ in which the filmmaker strung together wordless passages from Bergman’s black and white films. Roughly halfway through that new montage, the black and white sequences were flanked by colour sequences from *Face to Face* and *Cries and Whispers* (Makavejev). Makavejev thought of the screening not only as an extension of his pedagogical experiments in ‘compressed cinema’ but also as an answer to the question: ‘Is it possible to construct (or reconstruct) a Bergman film that Bergman never made?’ (Makavejev 187). Makavejev’s destruction of ‘the most important features of Bergman’s narrative films—the verbal plot structure’ creates within the Bergman corpus the opportunity to imagine a Bergman almost beyond storytelling (Makavejev 194).

Is Makavejev’s screening experiment an adaptation or some other ‘form of following’, halfway between the found footage film and oneiric cinema? In its dependence on a particular origin, Makavejev’s work resembles Ken Jacobs’s *Tom, Tom the Piper’s Son* (1969) or Ernie Gehr’s *Eureka* (1974–79). At opposite ends of the decade, Jacobs and Gehr turned to early cinema in order to publicize a cinematographic power that was always present—but was it a power of the medium or of the particular source? How essential are particular examples to the (re)discovery of the potentials of the medium? If we assume the examples are contingent, Jacobs’s and Gehr’s films seem to be announcements or discoveries of something we should have known about cinema or have forgotten about it. But to the extent that we are compelled by these very particular instances—to the extent that we see the later films as *rediscoveries* of the density of a particular narrative or an urban experience—then the power seems to lie in their sources. Surely, we are attending to the medium, but just as surely we are attending to this pig, this street, this background figure, this carter.

Indeed, because the reuses are so total and saturated, the later films may seem less intertextual than *intratextual*. They can dissolve into their sources, and they can do so because we take them to *have* sources. Here is the way Gehr puts it: ‘To some degree, the original film has obviously been transformed, but I hope that this simple muted process allowed enough room for me to make the original work “available” without getting too

much in the way. This was very important to me as I tend to see what I did, in part, as the work of an archaeologist, resurrecting an old film as well as the shadows and forces of another era' (Gehr n.d.). Such dissolutions—Gehr calls it the resurrection of older forces—implicitly question contemporary filmmakers' independence, even authorship. All of which is to say that found footage films can solicit foundational concerns about sourcing and independence, even if they ultimately find refuge in a self-description that holds those questions at bay. Here, then, Cavell's choice of Makavejev as his central example proves particularly apt because it combines an explicit reflection on the limits of narrative with an implicit interrogation of authorship along the lines I have outlined for Jacobs and Gehr. Makavejev constructs 'a Bergman film that Bergman never made'.

In its other aspect, Makavejev's projection finds a place in the canon of oneiric cinema, a canon that depended upon a complementary, and Romantic, notion of authorship. In contrast to the 'intratextualists', we find avant-garde filmmakers whose declarations of independence seem to require the simultaneous invocation and disavowal of particular sources. Extensive quotation—from Freud or Mrs Edwards in *Land* or from Robert Grosseteste's *On Light, or, the Ingression of Forms* in Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton or of the alphabet in Frampton—seems less an adaptation than simply a citation or a use.<sup>13</sup> An independent filmmaker may admit references, even influences, but not sources. (Cavell's analysis of Hawks is in part a defence of his independence.) In the place of the source, the film would derive its power from invocations of a transcendental originator of meaning, whether that be the filmmaker, god, or the medium as such.

Neither form, whether intratextual or citational, is obviously an 'adaptation'. Indeed these alternate 'forms of following' pervade the avant-garde to such an extent that they seem to have crowded more traditional problems of adaptation. However pervasive intertextual concerns were in 1970s experimental filmmaking intertextuality has not been a governing element in the poetics of the avant-garde. Land's work demonstrates that the appearance within the avant-garde of a more classical or source-dependent adaptation leverages the problems of meaning and originality in unforeseen ways. He is able to reactivate questions of adaptation that may lie hidden within experimental practices.<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, adaptation will always be a secondary matter for many avant-garde films and will be irrelevant to others. Yet asking whether and how a particular film systematically revises its sources could reorient our understanding of both that film and forms of following more generally. The diary film, for example, would seem to be the least 'adapted' text, yet we still might ask whether Jonas Mekas's *Walden* (1969) is as complex an adaptation of his own written diary as Thoreau's was. Or do the jumps in medium between the films Mekas made and the diaries he later published erase that question? More fundamentally, what is gained and what is lost in that erasure? If Land taught us to reread and re-comprehend his own work and those of his peers, what sorts of re-understanding might we gain from Mekas's revisitations of his work? To take another example, Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew By Diderot (Thanx to Denis Young) By Wilma Schoen* (1974) is as replete with puns and anagrams as Land's work. How should we understand the dependence of those anagrams on Snow's name? And how does that

relationship compare with or even derive from Diderot's claim about Rameau that 'I do not esteem such originals'?

I have already implied that although 1970s avant-garde practice abandoned usual forms of narrative, that avant-garde was itself structured by the surplus presence of powerful intertextual relations, relations that helped integrate it in the way that Cavellian notions of genre weave together particular clusters of Hollywood films. Two complementary metacritical claims follow from this reconfigured understanding of the complementarity of Hollywood and the avant-garde. In the first, Hollywood finds itself open to avant-garde critique in an unexpected form. Robert Ray, in his programmatic essay on "The Field of "Literature and Film"", argues that adaptation studies should be reoriented away from individual cases and towards a foundational institutional question: 'Why had the cinema committed itself almost exclusively to storytelling?' On his account, the case study method adds to a mountain of 'twenty-page essays', but the field does not progress. Adaptation studies remains 'pre-paradigmatic', and only by reorienting our research around 'a presiding poetics' can it extricate itself from this futile accumulating. To dump yet another collection of case studies on the pile might not seem to constitute progress.

Yet in suggesting that asking adaptive questions of avant-garde films illuminates the process of adaptation in general, I mean something more than that they will add to the field of cases we might investigate. Here, we need to take seriously the oft-repeated claim that avant-garde practice is a form of criticism in its own right (as in Cavell Makavejev 111). Much of Ray's warrant for asking the question of why cinema should be committed to storytelling comes from its apparent repression by 'the overwhelmingly dominant filmmaking enterprise, Hollywood, [which] has always worked as hard as possible to keep that question from occurring to anyone' (Ray 42). For the avant-garde, though, the question of why cinema would commit itself to telling stories has been ineradicable—as irrepressible as its investigations of the medium. Non-narrative, avant-garde films, then, constitute potential answers to Ray's question. They are cases worth studying, even if their answers are more likely to be philosophical and aesthetic than historical and institutional.

The second metacritical claim takes its cue from Land's apparently arbitrary combination of interests in the materiality of language on the one hand and the history of the experimental film movement on the other. His investigations of language and meaning lead him into a punningly literal avowal of the adaptations in his own work. The appearance of an avowedly adaptive relationship within the avant-garde might then pose a question as foundational as Ray's but for a new audience and a new group of practitioners: 'Why has avant-garde cinema been willing to forgo the benefits of enterprise (such as genre) in order to demand independence?' In formulating the question this way, I also mean to suggest that just as case studies of avant-garde filmmakers might provide answers to Ray's foundational question, certain case studies of 'the overwhelmingly dominant enterprise', like *Pursuits of Happiness*, might provide preliminary answers to the avant-garde's foundational question by demonstrating the benefits (or limits) of that enterprise.

What I am calling the avant-garde's foundational question, then, posits a collective cinema where one may not exist or where its existence has been a matter of friendships

or institutions (universities, co-ops, museums, and festivals) or techniques (reshooting, loop printing, and textual display) rather than shared narratives. Are techniques and institutions sufficient compensation? Or are they a form of over-compensation (crude surfeit)? Snow accounted for his turn to narrative in *SSHTOORRTY* (2005) this way:

Writing about my films has sometimes discussed the ‘narrative’ aspect or ‘reading’ of some of my ‘pictorial’ nature, which is much more important. Reflecting on this, I realized that I have never wanted to make a purely narrative film, never had and therefore perhaps I should. Perhaps I should finally make a film that really tells a story. (Snow)

While this suggests that storytelling was simply an experiment he had never tried, it leaves the question of what tipped the balance in favour of mounting that experiment tantalizingly open. In contrast, but similarly tantalizing, is Cavell’s contention that much of Makavejev’s work, particularly *Sweet Movie*, is an ‘excavation’ of a history ‘of a group’s genius, its interactions, not of one individual’s plans’. Snow’s reasons for storytelling are apparently individual but strangely absent; Makavejev’s group genius is strangely present despite the individualism of the work.

The ‘group genius’ of the avant-garde appears fitfully in any case. The 1970s films of Owen Land are more explicit but offer only a partial and immanent history of the movement. Brakhage suggested to him that ‘Someday Hollywood will probably make a film about us’, meaning the experimental filmmakers. Land found the idea ‘totally ridiculous’—ridiculous enough to attempt the film himself as *Undesirables (Work-In-Progress)* (1999) (Land 122).<sup>15</sup> Land’s history had its parallel in Cavell’s work on Classical Hollywood. In his fragmentary meta-reflections on experimental cinema, Cavell sensed the need for Land’s project but did not pursue it because, it turns out, only someone far more imbricated in the avant-garde than he could struggle with its avoidances. The economy of film theorizing in the American 1970s can now appear as a set of mutual exchanges between Cavell’s pursuits of happiness and Land’s declarations of dependence.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Exercise is the right term. As Paul Arthur has put it, Land pursues a ‘calisthenics of vision’ in his work leading up to *RRC*. Describing *Bardo Follies*, for example, Arthur says, ‘It proposes a deliberate, active method for the “reading” of a filmed image, that of close textual analysis’ (76).

<sup>2</sup> The Keystone ad is in Acland, 377. Some of the branded names are from my own research at Harvard’s Gutman Library.

<sup>3</sup> As Acland puts it, ‘One of the tachistoscope’s contributions here was to reorient reading from the page to the screen. ... Hyperreading as promoted by screen projections and illuminations, whether of prose or advertisements, was a pursuit well tailored to the conditions of modern cultural acceleration’ (363). The particular version that Land uses in *RRC* strongly resembles Walter Dearborn’s ‘motion picture technique’. As quoted in Currell, the technique consists of ‘photographing reading material on motion picture film in such a way that when the film is projected, successive units of the separate lines are seen exposed tachistoscopically across the screen ... the reader’s task ... is to keep pace with the rate at which he is being directed through the material’ (ellipses in Currell; 355. See also the figure on 356).

<sup>4</sup> The invocation of ‘flow’ is an allusion to Raymond Williams’s argument in *Television*.

<sup>5</sup> Sitney attributes this investigation, indirectly, to Warhol. Warhol’s films amounted to a ‘great challenge’ for structural film: ‘how to orchestrate duration; how to permit the wandering attention that triggered



ontological awareness while watching Warhol films and at the same time guide that awareness to a goal' (Sitney 2002 351–52).

<sup>6</sup>This grappling with television and repetition is most notably on display in *What's Wrong with This Picture 2* (1972), a work shot on video and then transferred to 16 mm. In it, a man goes on at remarkable length about the difficulties with his hi-fi, and as he talks, a transcription of his speech fills the screen. In the programme notes for 'Reverence', Land calls it 'a play on the difference between film mechanics and video electronics' (Land notes).

<sup>7</sup>The source is undated, but the reporter refers to the governing arrangement 'Since October' and 'Since last Fall'. The footage, then, is likely from the end of 1968 or early 1969. Since Torrijos alone is 'the real power', one might even narrow it further and suggest that the footage post-dates the departure of Boris Martinez and other members of the coup in February 1969.

<sup>8</sup>The notes in *Two Films* are not always attributable. Some are first person (Land), some are third (presumably Webber), and some are neutral (as this one). When there is a citation to a source, I presume it is Land.

<sup>9</sup>It was about this time that Land revisited his film *Institutional Quality* (1969) and released it as *New Improved Institutional Quality: In the Environment of Liquids and Nasals Sometimes a Parasitic Vowel Develops* (1976).

<sup>10</sup>While Land refers to Freud's text as *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, which is today the common title, the passage he quotes comes from A.A. Brill's earlier translation, which gave 'Wit' for 'Witz'.

<sup>11</sup>Again, the suitor who makes himself ridiculous evokes, slantwise, the image of someone in a silly costume.

<sup>12</sup>Arthur puts it this way: 'mistakes or moments of discursive breakdown are not defects to be disavowed; instead they are opportunities for offhanded aesthetic enlightenment' (Arthur 2005 43).

<sup>13</sup>When I use a hammer to drive a nail, I am using it; when I use my shoe, I am adapting it. To the extent that this seems apt, it points at one of the more powerful effects of structural films: their ability to keep the technical ever present, ever available on the surface of the image. It may appear to be a reduction (Is Grosseteste a mere tool? Is the alphabet quotable or simply recitable?) but that appearance only opens the problematic that Land investigates so well: is it *really* a tool or is this a gambit? Are you afraid of your sources or is this the best strategy for managing an audience's attention *to* the source?

In any case, the alphabet is a crucial limit case for both structural film and American culture of the period more generally. Writers make words and sentences out of alphabets without turning the alphabet into a 'source'. But the more important question is whether one could make the alphabet a source if one wanted to. Frampton's *Zorn's Lemma* nearly does so. For a filmmaker, the alphabet is contingent (you make films out of film), so to take it up as an ordering principle inflects the film with certain 'alphabetic' properties (the rhythm of the alphabet song, the compulsive, ludic repetitions that it encourages). Alternately, the alphabetic can be the source of a particular distance from the world as when Big Bird on *Sesame Street* ('ABC-DEF-GHI' Joe Raposo, 1969) sees ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ as 'awful QR'.

<sup>14</sup>Paul Arthur, in one a series of perceptive essays on Land he has written over the years, distinguishes his work from 'current cadres of found-footage *détourneurs*', saying that 'Land has little interest in the so-called politics of the image' (Arthur 42–44). This remark seems typical of the criticism of Land (Mellencamp, Camper) in that in its effort to distinguish him from his peers it risks underestimating the role image politics plays in his work. Land is certainly explicit about the politics of particular images (*What's Wrong With This Picture?*), but more importantly, as I argue at the end of the paper, he solicits our judgement of the relative importance of that critique.

<sup>15</sup>Land's complete description is as follows:

The idea started with a casual comment made by Stan Brakhage, must have been way back in the early 1970s. It stuck in my mind. Now that I think about it, Brakhage may have meant this as a joke. He said, 'Someday Hollywood will probably make a film about us'—'us' meaning the experimental filmmakers—'and I wonder which actors will play us?' Think about that. First of all, the idea that Hollywood would make a film about experimental filmmakers is totally ridiculous. The fact that one would think about which actor was going to play me at some time in the future, I think that's very funny. Eventually it germinated in my mind and I thought it was an interesting idea ... A film about experimental filmmakers, especially in the very formative period, approximately 1968 to 1972 (Land 122, repunctuated).



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