

Penelope's Odyssey: Film Form as Meaning

By Andrea Eis*

Film theorist/critic David Bordwell once noted that film scholars “know how to make movies mean.” Filmmakers, regardless of their receptiveness to critical interpretations of their work, might find some irony in this locus of the meaning-maker’s identity. Through their choices, filmmakers are the ones who “make movies mean” in the first place. In my film-in-progress, Penelope’s Odyssey, I decided to consciously engage with the post-facto vision of meaning-making. Employing a purposeful approach to film form, limited dialogue, and minimal narrative-driven action, I “make my movie mean” and make viewers’ interpretive activity requisite to understanding. Penelope’s Odyssey consists of short sections set apart with intertitles that are both precise and elusive (Year One: Settling, Year Ten: Slipping, Year Fifteen: Pushing, etc.). Each section has a distinctive schematic of film technique and visual content, making film form the power source of narrative changes in Penelope’s emotional journey over the twenty years of Odysseus’ absence. One year employs quick straight cuts, another slow fades to black, another superimposes images with dissolves – establishing a different mood, rhythm, and pace to the passage of time for each year. Penelope’s perspective and world view change: from images filling the frame to ones cropped, reduced, and nearly overwhelmed by a black background; from the domestic sphere to scenes in nature; from point-of-view to omniscience. Close-ups connote intimacy – or is that claustrophobia? Long shots, a sense of emotional and physical distancing – or perhaps contemplative ease? By deliberately emphasizing variations of form, I aim viewers’ attention at a highly premeditated, mediated, and intentional space, encouraging reflection and meaning-creation. Ambiguity is inherent in this process, and viewers’ interpretations may result in alternative narrative conclusions. I made my own meaning out of Penelope’s twenty years, and I actively offer the same option to my viewers.

Introduction

Theorist/critic David Bordwell once noted that film scholars know “how to make movies mean.”¹ Nearly thirty years earlier, Labarthe had declared:

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[the] work of the film-maker is no longer to tell a story, but simply to make a film in which the spectator will discover a story. The true successor of the traditional filmmaker is...the spectator...²

Filmmakers, regardless of their receptiveness to critical interpretations of their work or to spectators' alternate readings, might find some irony in these loci for the meaning-maker's identity. *Filmmakers* "make movies mean" in the first place, through their own technical and creative choices.

Reception studies and debates over authorship have been abundantly covered in years of film, art and literary scholarship. Ultimately, I agree with film scholar Dittmar's broader perspective (here referring to a screenplay) that the "experience consists of a transaction in which the author, the narrative voice or voices, and the reader all engage in shaping meaning."³ Filmmakers have always deliberately manipulated form to suggest certain meanings, and viewers have then "read" that form. With my current film-in-progress, *Penelope's Odyssey*,⁴ I decided to more consciously engage with post-facto meaning-making. I focus on the deliberate fusion of form and meaning: in form that specifically echoes and converses with content, that becomes an equivalent for psychological and emotional meaning. I employ a purposeful approach to film form, to 'make my movie mean' *and* to require viewers' interpretive activity as a means of understanding the content through form.

Penelope's Odyssey is an experiment in multiple forms of content presentation. Drawing on literary precedents in hybrid textuality, I developed a structure alternating textual and visual narrative. An **informational, literal, narrative arc** is created by contextualized quotes from Homer's *Odyssey* and third-person voice-overs, serving as a commentary running perpendicular to the **emotional arc** of Penelope's abstracted visual narrative over the twenty years of Odysseus's absence. Penelope's fluctuating perspectives are represented through image choices, composition and in metric and rhythmic editing patterns, rather than direct dialogue and narrative-driven action. This hybrid structure –split into literal/abstract, informational/emotional, verbal/visual, narrator/character – emphasizes the constructed nature of the recounting, as well as the active participation required of viewers to construct meaning.

¹Bordwell, D. 1989. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 256.

²Labarthe, A. S. 1986. Marienbad Year Zero (Marienbad année zéro, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 123, September 1961). *Cahiers du Cinéma: 1960-1968: New Wave, New Cinema, Reevaluating Hollywood*. Hiller, J. ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 57.

³Dittmar, L. 1980. Structures of Metaphor in Robbe-Grillet's *Last Year in Marienbad*. *boundary 2*, 8:3 (Spring 1980), 218. JSTOR Arts and Sciences III. Web.

⁴Eis, A. (Director). 2014, in-progress. *Penelope's Odyssey*. Eis Films.

Film Form as Meaning: Editing Patterns

The meanings suggested by filmmakers' manipulation of technical elements and structures often remain at a subconscious level for viewers, even if the techniques themselves are highly visible. Narrative progression is usually understandable without consciously perceiving these formal constructions. We might notice "the stronger contact and coherence"¹ of two images superimposed over each other at the midpoint of a dissolve; we might even sense a thematic or character-driven meaning behind the technique. We would not need to acknowledge that or consciously grapple with the meaning to follow the arc of the narrative. As Zirnite notes in discussing Alfred Hitchcock's films, certain shots "[work] on a purely connotative level...there is no explicit narrative purpose"² for the form they take – the form is not used to move the narrative forward or explain a narrative action.

In Hitchcock's *Notorious*,³ characters are regularly blocked, often quite literally, from seeing what is occurring or about to occur. Objects obscure or restrict their vision, or, a character looks in the wrong direction until it is too late. Literal blindness and metaphorical obliviousness reverberate throughout the film. Viewers are always, however, fully aware of the impending dangers. Hitchcock uses editing rhythms to increase the suspense, in patterns that do not expand viewers' understanding of the narrative itself, but which change their emotional response to its flow. The patterns also serve to emphasize what the characters *do not* know.

Figure 1 shows a section of scene from *Notorious* in which fifteen cuts occur in twenty seconds. Devlin (Cary Grant) searches for suspicious details in a wine cellar, while Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) keeps watch. They are unaware of the impending disaster that Devlin will accidentally create, until it is too late. The stills are gridded here, to highlight the rhythms of visual repetition and change, as well as to suggest the metric pattern of shot lengths.

Figure 1. *Exploring the Wine Cellar, Notorious*



¹Arnheim, R. 1969. *Film as Art* (7th Ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press, 131.

²Zirnite, D. 1986. Hitchcock, on the Level: The Heights of Spatial Tension. *Film Criticism*, 10:3, 8.

³Hitchcock, A. 1946. *Notorious*. United States: Vanguard Films, RKO Radio Pictures.

Shot 3



Shot 4



Shot 5 (continues Shot 2)



Shot 6 (continues Shot 3)



Shot 7 (continues Shot 4)



Shot 8 (continues Shot 2)



Shot 9



Shot 9



Shot 10



Shot 10



Shot 11



Shot 11



Shot 12



Shot 13 (continues Shot 10)



Shot 14 (continues Shot 11)



Shot 15 (continues Shot 12)



In a largely silent scene that offers no dialogue and minimal gestural action, the audience becomes deeply entangled in suspense mainly as a result of an editing pattern that intensifies expectations and prolongs tension.

In *Penelope's Odyssey*, a text-based narrative, set in a conventional chronological flow, alternates with image sequences edited in visual and metric patterns. Penelope's life is delineated with intertitles that are precise yet elusive (*Year One: Settling*, *Year Ten: Slipping*, *Year Fifteen: Pushing*, etc.), and narrative quotes from Homer's *Odyssey*. The images in each year-section are structured in distinctive schematics of film technique and visual content, but contain no conventional narrative action or dialogue. In the image sequences, film form becomes the power source suggesting Penelope's subjective, inner, emotional journey. Camera distance, camera movement, color palettes, editing transitions, editing patterns: all change by year, establishing a different mood, rhythm and pace to the passage of time for each year.

Editing rhythms in narrative films are, in general, heavily subject to the pacing of dialogue and ongoing action. In a film based on formal structures, editing rhythms are more fluid. They can be radically altered to echo emotional permutations and the 'feel' of time passing, even of its repetition or stoppage. In Figures 2 and 3, schematics show the editing patterns for two year-sections of *Penelope's Odyssey*. In *Year One: Settling* (Figure 2) straight cuts, represented by thin black lines, create abrupt transitions from one shot to the next, between images unconnected in a chronological or location-based logic. The varying width of the white spaces in the schematic represents the different shot durations. The pattern is very unsettled – shots lengths change irregularly, and at times are extremely short. The disconnected visuals in these shots (shown in Figure 4) combine with this editing pattern to suggest an agitation concealed under the 'settling' that Penelope is ostensibly experiencing.

Figure 2. Editing Patterns. Year One: Settling

Year Nineteen: Resounding (Figure 3) has longer shot lengths, and fades or cuts to black to transition between them. The diagonal lines at the ends of shots represent the fades, and the varying widths of the black bars represent the duration of the black shots.

Figure 3. Editing patterns. Year Nineteen: Resounding

Visuals that are evocative of grief, as Penelope loses hope of Odysseus's return, are set in an editing pattern implying that Penelope's life is, at this point, one of dark gaps and drawn-out emotions.

Literary Influences: Ezra Pound's "Aesthetic of Glimpses" and H.D.'s Hybrid Textuality

Imagist poet Ezra Pound noted that "[the] artist seeks out the luminous detail and presents it. He does not comment."¹ Pound scholar Kenner named this an "aesthetic of glimpses,"² asserting that Pound was interested in "elevating the glimpse into the vision."³ Pound's poem "Shop Girl" includes what Kenner calls a "molecule of the merest encounter"⁴:

For a moment she rested against me.
Like a swallow half blown to the wall⁵

"In a Station of the Metro," a poem of only two lines, tightens the glimpse to an even more static image:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.⁶

My own interest in an aesthetic of the glimpse is visual not verbal, founded directly in my background in still photography.¹ As noted earlier, the shots in

¹Pound, E. (1973). I gather the Limbs of Osiris. *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*. New York: New Directions, 23.

²Kenner, H. (1971). *The Pound Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 71.

³Kenner, 183.

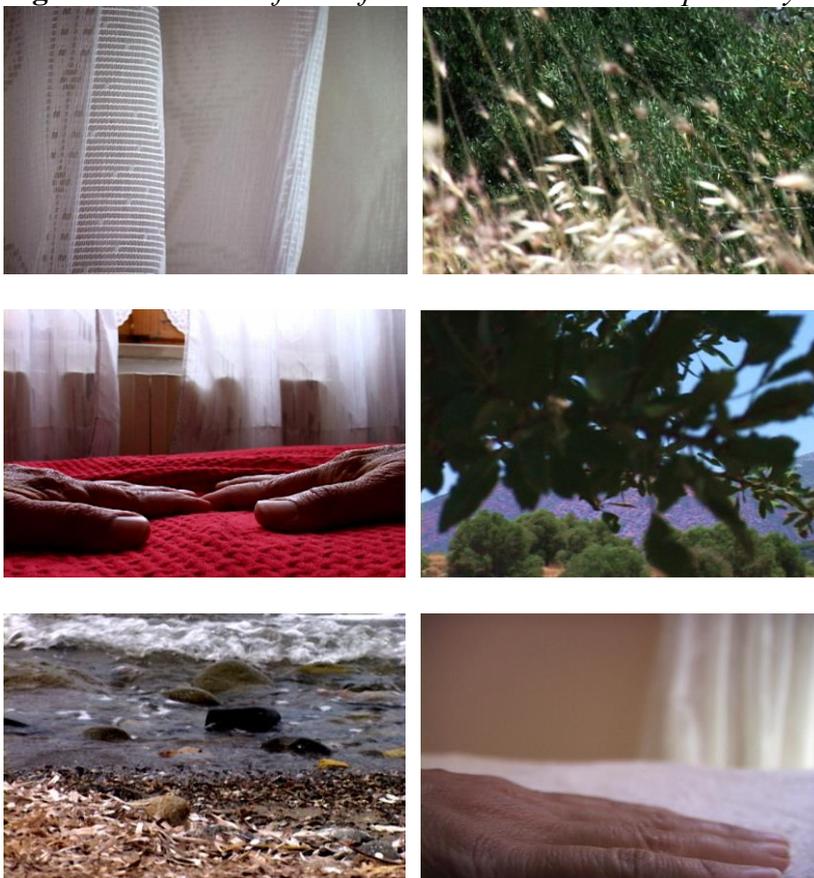
⁴Kenner, 63.

⁵Pound, Shop Girl, quoted in Kenner, 63.

⁶Pound, E. 1916. In a Station of the Metro. *Lustra*, 53. *The Internet Archive*. Web.

Penelope's Odyssey are not logically sequenced in chronological or geographic unities, but jolt unconnectedly from one to the next. (Figure 4)

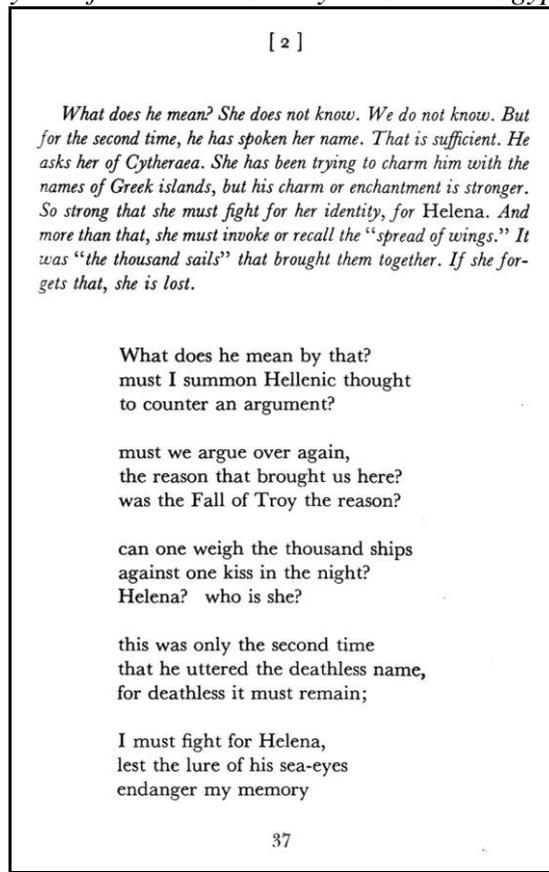
Figure 4. Selection of stills from Year One in *Penelope's Odyssey*



The images are simultaneously ordinary and vivid, detailed and generic. The shots in this sequence are visually figurative but narratively abstract, representing Penelope's thoughts and feelings rather than delineating her life. The textual form and structure that I developed for *Penelope's Odyssey* draws directly from the hybrid structuring in *Helen in Egypt*,² a book-length poem by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle). H.D. inserted prose paragraphs (italicized portion in Figure 5) before each section of the poem.

¹Kenner uses a photographic metaphor when describing Pound's *Lustra* poems: "the eye's shutter captures faces and gestures...", 69. Kenner also references the paintings of Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, as well as Pound's original influence, fragments of Sappho's poems.

²Doolittle, Hilda (H.D.) 1961. *Helen in Egypt*. New York: New Directions.

Figure 5. Page Layout of Prose and Poetry in *Helen in Egypt*.

The prose is essential and ancillary, correlative and independent, yet seamlessly interwoven into the poem's overall impact. Certain prose passages directly anticipate subsequent poetic lines:

Prose:

What does he mean? She does not know.

Poem (Helen speaking):

What does he mean by that?¹

Other prose passages are more complex in their relationship to the poetic action. Literary scholar Mandel noted that H.D.'s prose parallels how, as we watch a film, "a certain conscious intellect stays alive...interpreting, analyzing, drawing conclusions or demanding answers to the succession of images."² In this prose passage, the author suggests a conundrum for the reader to work on, supplying a range of options:

¹H.D., 37. As seen in Figure 5, prose passages are italicized in the original.

²Mandel, C. 1983. The Redirected Image: Cinematic Dynamics in the Style of H.D. (Hilda Doolittle). *Literature Film Quarterly*, 11:1, 37. *Film & Television Literature Index*. Web.

Achilles himself might be thought to lose stature by apology. Can he apologize? Or does he bargain, in a sense, play for time?

In the first-person dialogue that follows this prose passage, Achilles speaks for himself:

No – I spoke evil words,
I forget them, repeat them not;
only answer my question,

how are Helen in Egypt
and Helen upon the ramparts
together yet separate?¹

My aesthetic and conceptual interests harmonize well with H.D.'s hybrid style and approach to content. Her variations in technique, purpose and emotional tone in using the hybrid form have inspired and informed my filmic structure. My films rarely incorporate dialogue, but the interleaving of aural and written textual elements into the yearly structure is allowing me to suggest possible readings of the images that follow, without elucidating them through dialogue.

Reading Penelope's Character

Re-readings of Homer's *Odyssey* have revealed new perspectives or emphases in Penelope's character, often with feminist resonance. Levine reads Penelope's laugh in 18.163 as a sign of "her cunning as well as her surprise...she is capable and clever."² Marquardt notes that while one of Penelope's Homeric epithets is *periphron* ('very intelligent'), "the rare quality of her intelligence [is] more elusive than her celebrated loyalty"³ and is given less scholarly attention (at least prior to Marquardt's article appearing in 1985). Marquardt sees Penelope as "the intelligent woman whose cleverness made her the ideal counterpart of Odysseus...fitting mate for her wily husband."⁴ The aspects of character that Penelope shares with Odysseus are facets of their like-mindedness, their unity of mind and spirit, or *homophrosyne*,⁵ which Odysseus

¹H.D., 63.

²Levine, D. 1983. Penelope's Laugh: *Odyssey* 18.163. *The American Journal of Philology*, 104:2. (Summer, 1983), 178. JSTOR Arts and Sciences II. Web. Unfortunately, Levine also concludes that the "general" interpretation of Penelope's laugh as "her frail feminine reaction to a shocking and embarrassing idea" was "valid to an extent."

³Marquardt, P. 1985. Penelope ΠΟΛΥΤΡΟΠΙΟΣ *American Journal of Philology*, 106, 32. *JSTOR Arts and Sciences II*. Web.

⁴Marquardt, 48.

⁵*Homophrosyne* (= *homonoia*): oneness of mind or thought, unity, concord. Liddell, H.G. and Scott, R. 1968. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*. London: Oxford University Press, 557.

specifically states is one of the requirements of a good marriage (*Odyssey* 6:183-189). Bolmarcich sees the marriage of Penelope and Odysseus as unique among Homeric spouses: “one between comrades and equals.”¹ Their ability to reunite at the end of a twenty-year separation could perhaps be seen as strengthened by their *homophrosyne*.

In popular memory, Penelope is generally recollected as faithful (unlike Odysseus), but also as a “waiting wife,” and therefore a relatively passive secondary character. Contemporary reinterpretations have emphasized that she is neither passive nor insignificant. Bolmarcich notes that Odysseus compares Penelope to “a just king,”² at 19:109, using the same description that has been used several times for Odysseus,³ thereby signifying Penelope’s role for many of the years in which Odysseus was absent. She did not just wait passively, she ruled. Odysseus stated, before leaving Ithaca, that this was to be her role (*Odyssey* 18.299: “all things here must rest in your control”⁴). Bolmarcich goes on to observe that “Penelope does not fade into her husband’s shadow.”⁵ Revisiting Penelope’s agency, power, and intelligence, her *homophrosyne* with Odysseus and the equality of their marriage – these are elements that attracted me to her story in developing my film.

In the text panels in *Penelope's Odyssey*, italicized authorial comments introduce Homeric lines that offer specific context for Penelope and give ancient weight to a re-evaluation of Penelope’s role:

INTERTITLE:

Penelope quotes what Odysseus told her before he left for Troy:

So I cannot tell if the gods will sail me home again
or if I’ll go down out there, on the fields of Troy,
but all things here must rest in your control.⁶

— *The Odyssey*, 18:297-299.

Authorial voiceovers frame a re-interpretation of Penelope’s character, drawing evidence from the Homeric text and my own gloss on it.

¹ Bolmarcich, S. 2001. ΟΜΟΦΡΟΣΥΝΗ in the *Odyssey*. *Classical Philology*, 96:3 (July 2001): 212. *JSTOR Arts And Sciences II*. Web.

² “Just king” is Bolmarcich’s translation of *basileos amymonos* at 19:109 (Liddell and Scott, 46, list “blameless, noble, excellent” as possible translations for the adjective).

³ Though it is too complex a point to address in depth in this essay, I disagree with Bolmarcich on the exactness of the comparison. The same adjective is *not* used of Odysseus in the lines she cites (2:231; 5:9) – he is called a “sceptered” king (*skeptoukos*, Liddell and Scott, 733). Regardless of adjectival specifics, Odysseus does clearly compare Penelope’s fame to that of a ruler at 19:109 however, which is most relevant to my point.

⁴ Homer. 1996. *The Odyssey*, (trans. R. Fagles.) New York: Viking, 384.

⁵ Bolmarcich, 212.

⁶ *Penelope's Odyssey*. All quotes used in the film-in-progress are from the Fagles translation.

VOICEOVER:

*Penelope's ultimate position is not clear. But that is for later.
Now there are tasks. Ithaca to be kept whole and prosperous.
Who better to do that? All things rest in her control.*¹

The informational arc, based in these contextualized Homeric quotes and voice-overs delineating apparent authorial intent, offers a commentary that is conceptually perpendicular to Penelope's abstracted visual narrative. The emotional arc, engulfed in a range of meaning based in image and sequence composition, represents Penelope's fluctuating frame of mind.

Ambiguity as a Deliberate Formal Strategy

Artistic ambiguity is generally considered more acceptable than political or scientific ambiguity, though not necessarily in commercial/Hollywood narrative film. Some critics still excoriate films containing ambiguous scenes, characters, or endings, pointing to them as evidence of the directors'/screenwriters' lack of control of the medium, or as an abdication of one aspect of a director's role: to construct an intelligible and believable film world.² Without a final narrative resolution in a film, viewers often left unsatisfied. However, as one film critic noted in 2013, "we've had a half a century of increasingly cynical acceptance of ambiguity [since Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up*]...some Americans now take all our irresolvable ambiguities for granted."³ Ironically, a deliberately ambiguous ending at times seems to prompt viewers to decide that they actually do know what happened. Viewers of the film *All Is Lost* at the 2013 Telluride Film Festival were nearly evenly split on whether the final scene, which ended with a fade to white, signaled life or death – but they did have definitive opinions on its meaning.⁴

Writer/director Wigon, speaking from his double perspective as writer and filmmaker, appreciates the intellectual stimulation of filmic ambiguity: "...the most powerful stories open up new ways of thinking and being, rather than closing any."⁵ From the literary perspective, Dracopoulos, in his review of Cavafy's "Young Men of Sidon," echoes descriptions of the filmic complexity and famed ambiguity of Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*⁶: "The use of dilemma and the resultant ambiguity of the poem...engage the reader in a game

¹*Penelope's Odyssey*.

²This critical requirement for a good film has, of course, been debated for many decades, though until recently, audiences seemed generally to agree.

³Cullum, J. 2013. Review: At {Poem 88}, the ambiguity of Antonioni's 'Blow-Up,' seen through 47 years *Artsat* (25 April 2013).. Web.

⁴Wickman, F. 2013. *All Is Lost*. Or Is It? What to make of the ending of the new Robert Redford movie. *Slate* (18 October 2013). Web.

⁵Wigon, Z. 2012. The Truth in Ambiguity. *Filmmaker Magazine* (12 December 2012). Web.

⁶Resnais, A. (Director). 1962. *Last Year at Marienbad* [*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*]. France: Cocinor, Terra Film, Cormoran Films. Various translated as *Last Year in Marienbad* or *Last Year at Marienbad*.

of revelation and concealment...and possibly acceptance, of the existence of different, even conflicting truths.”¹ It is this “game of revelation and concealment,” and the possibility of “different, even conflicting truths” that animated my choices of film form.

Last Year at Marienbad is a film that powerfully activates my cinematic attention. Its visual and chronological dislocations create, as Dittmar noted, “equivalency...of form and content: the work concerns entrapment in a labyrinth, and the form dramatizes it.”² Uncertainty fills each frame, whether a result of spatial complexity (Figure 6), chronological displacements, or an ambiguity about whether a scene is ‘real,’ a dream, or in a character’s mind.

Figure 6. Still from *Last Year at Marienbad*



In one image (Figure 7) in *Marienbad*, visual ambiguity is deliberately and utterly unresolvable in the diegetic framework of the film, as the people have shadows, but the trees do not.

Figure 7. Still from *Last Year at Marienbad*



¹Dracopoulos, A. 2010. The Rhetoric of Dilemma and Cavafean Ambiguity. *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture*. 12:4 (2010). Web.

²Dittmar, 231.

Authorial control creates and directs meaning in *Last Year at Marienbad*, but does not dictate meaning. Dittmar clarifies the distinction, one that is also crucial to my film:

It is the audience's task to translate the [clusters of visual and acoustic] signals into recognizable signification and to integrate the clusters into a coherent whole. The audience's active role does not mean that the emergent coherence derives from mere subjective projection...Robbe-Grillet charts its course and controls it...clusters of meanings exist mainly as explorations of alternative versions.¹

Last Year at Marienbad's tangled narrative raises, but does not resolve, the question of whether two of its characters had met the previous year at Marienbad. Even director Resnais and screenwriter Robbe-Grillet disagreed on the answer. Coincidentally, a similar uncertainty roils around Helen and Achilles in *Helen in Egypt*:

*Had they met before? Perhaps.*²

Helen questions everything around her, even her own existence:

where are we? who are you?
where is this desolate coast?
who am I? am I a ghost?"³

Some twenty pages later, H.D.'s readers have their own uncertainty about the narrative foregrounded, even validated, by the text. Not only is Helen uncertain of what Achilles means, but the reader (and supposedly the author) is uncertain as well: "*What does he mean? She does not know*" is followed by "*We do not know.*"⁴

Ambiguity can be seen as a core narrative thread in Homer's *Odyssey* as well. Odysseus uses cleverly ambiguous wording against the Cyclops, for example. Penelope matches his verbal skill when she responds to her situation with words and actions that can have different meanings depending on the listener's perspective. With her vague replies to her suitors, and her puzzling dream recitations, enigmas surround Penelope's character. When Odysseus returns, Penelope questions his identity, and tests him with deliberate deception. She drags Odysseus (and the reader) through long passages of doubt about her feelings, and about the ultimate likelihood of a reunion.

¹Dittmar, 233. Dittmar concentrates on Robbe-Grillet's screenplay; I consider authorial control in the film to be more equally split between Robbe-Grillet and director Resnais.

²H.D., 7.

³H.D., 16.

⁴H.D., 37.

In *Penelope's Odyssey*, ambiguity is textual (quoting Homer) and visual, based on such elements as gesture, or camera proximity, or light. Close-ups (Figure 8) connote intimacy – or is that claustrophobia?

Figure 8. *Comparison of Close-ups. Left, Year Ten: Slipping. Right, Year Fifteen: Pushing*



Reading other aspects of this pair of shots, should lighting and contrast weigh more than tight framing? Are the gestures those of anger, sensuality, loneliness, tension, tenderness, anxiety? Or all of these? While the images are obviously carrying an evocative emotional charge, the precise reading of meaning is deliberately left open.

T.S. Eliot, Objective Correlatives, and *Red Desert*

“Objective correlatives,” as originally defined by T. S. Eliot, can be used to evoke emotion.

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’... a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events...the emotion is immediately evoked.¹

The following line from the essay “The Metaphysical Poets” exemplifies Eliot’s embodiment of an objective correlative (my emphasis): “Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; *but they do not feel their thoughts as immediately as the odour of a rose.*”²

The visual objective correlative has been extensively explored in film scholarship. Film historian Bonadella noted that:

The visualization of subjective, often irrational states of mind by representational means – what one film historian has aptly termed

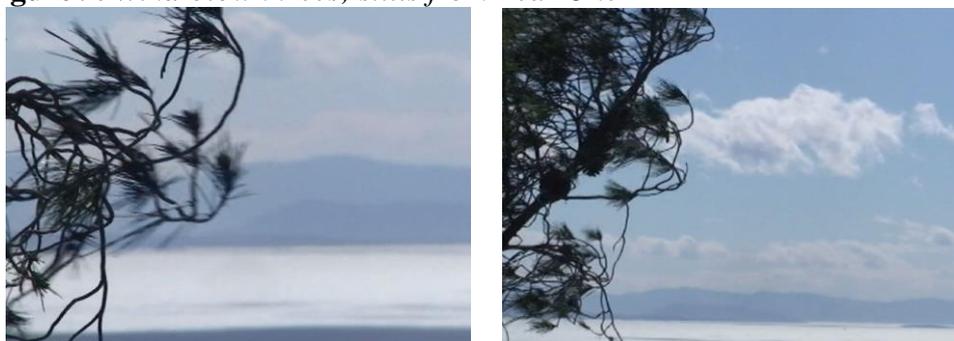
¹Eliot, T. S. 1950. *Hamlet and His Problems. Selected Essays 1917-1932*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 124-5.

²Titus, T.K. 1999. *Critical Study of T.S. Eliot's Work*. New York: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 7. Quoting from Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” *Homage to John Dryden: Three Essays on Poetry of the Seventeenth Century*.

‘objective correlatives, visual embodiments of pervasive mood and specific psychological states’ – becomes, with Antonioni, an original approach to cinematic expression.¹

Visual content can, of course, be totally literal. In my film, wind-blown trees (Figure 9) connect to past events: the Greek warriors needed wind to start their ships off for Troy. The wind-blown trees can represent the destructive power of nature that might endanger Odysseus over the years, and then can also function as fairly conventional objective correlatives (nature always seems to be stirred up when characters, either literary or filmic, are in turmoil). Is the constant and violent intensity of the wind battering the trees emblematic of Penelope’s mental state? Or does the scene correlate simultaneously to the experiences of both Odysseus *and* Penelope?

Figure 9. *Wind-blown trees; stills from Year One*



Brunette, referring to Antonioni’s *Red Desert*², comments on a spatial approach:

Space functions...as an objective correlative for Giuliana’s state of mind [in *Red Desert*]...she often positions herself in spatial settings that corroborate or complement what she is saying.³

Figure 10 shows Giuliana variously framed and physically separated from the world by a window (top); visually attacked by background lines aimed at her head (center); and overwhelmed by an expanse of blankness, stopped short by a wall, and loomed over by vaguely foreboding architectural element (bottom).

¹Bondanella, P. 2001. *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*. New York: Continuum International, 215. A note: to date, I have not been able to track down the original ‘film historian’ to whom Bondanella refers.

²Antonioni, M. (Director). 1964. *Red Desert [Il deserto rosso]*. Italy: Film Duemila, Federiz, Francoriz Production.

³Marcus, M. J. 1986. *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 205.

Figure 10. *Stills from Red Desert*

In *Penelope's Odyssey*, I use both space and framing to suggest Penelope's state of mind. As her perspective and world view change, images shift from filling the frame to being cropped, reduced, and nearly overwhelmed by a black background. (Figure 11) Images of hands predominate in some years, a marker of Penelope's identity, moods, and connection with the physical world. Tracked by the camera that has to continually readjust as she moves through space, Penelope runs her shaking hand along a wall (left). Crouching low, the camera tilts down to watch as she presses her hand down onto a shawl that drapes across the floor (right). She exists in a private world of her senses, as she is concurrently prevented from any physical contact with Odysseus.

Figure 11. *Left, Year Ten: Slipping, Right, Year Nineteen: Resounding*

Locations shift (Figure 12) from nature scenes to interior scenes. Some of the nature scenes offer the seeming freedom of expanses of space, though they simultaneously reduce Penelope to a minor player in a world she cannot control. Others are more noticeably ominous, as the camera perspective shifts to a point-of-view shot blocked by plants that loom so close that they turn into unrecognizable blurs (left). An omniscient camera invades the comfort of Penelope's domestic spaces, suggesting surveillance, whether benign and helpful (the goddess Athena, who watches over and aids Odysseus as well) or dangerous (the maid who betrays Penelope to the suitors).¹ Whether Penelope surveys her world from a hidden perspective, or is scrutinized in a private space, her detachment is as evident as her presence.

Figure 12. *Left, Year One: Settling, Right, Year Nineteen: Resounding*

Point-of-view shot; nature scene

Omniscient camera; interior setting

Antonioni's use of color, again specifically in *Red Desert* (Figure 13), is another of my touchstones for formal development in *Penelope's Odyssey*. Marcus establishes a connection between the lack of narrative resolution and Antonioni's use of form, specifically color, as an objective correlative:

The absence of resolutions on the narrative level leads us back to the visual style in search for an answer to the alienation that blights Giuliana's world. It is only aesthetically that Antonioni is able to offer some consolation...through the use of the objective correlative

¹Penelope is the only character who physically appears in the film; text suggests the others.

which posits a continuity between character and setting, between the inner life of the psyche and its outward reflection in the phenomenal world.¹

Figure 13. *Stills from Red Desert*



Bilious yellows and greens, deep browns



Bright green, soft yellow, deep brown, strong white

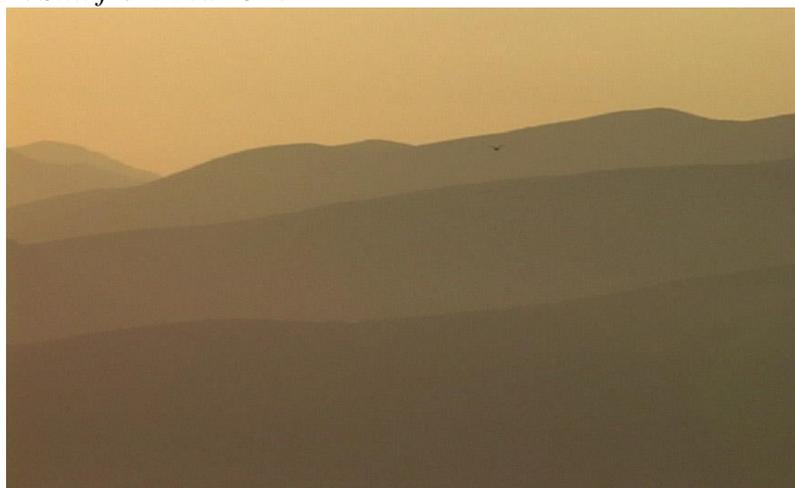
Antonioni even went so far as to paint parts of his location shots to make them the color that expressed his vision, such as the overwhelming gray of the scene shown in Figure 14. Fruits, vegetables and other objects piled on a street cart, barely visible in the background in this screen shot but filling other frames, are also painted gray. Giuliani's world has gone literally and emotionally monotone, in dull shades that leach any energy, even the negative kind, out of her surroundings, just as she is sensually inert, apathetic and unresponsive.

¹Marcus, 203.

Figure 14. *Still from Red Desert*

Almost exclusively in tones of gray and black

In *Penelope's Odyssey*, I alter shots through digital manipulation to suggest similar concurrences of Penelope's outer world and her inner life. Mountains form bands of soft, but obviously artificial, monochromatic hues (Figure 15).

Figure 15. *Still from Year One*

Monochromatic range of soft yellows

Does the unnatural color make us uneasy, implying an unacknowledged discomfort already permeating Penelope's first year? Or does it simply represent an alternate image of beauty? Is the air polluted, figuratively as well as literally? Is the long shot, combined with a slow pan and long take, suggestive of emotional and physical distancing – or perhaps contemplative ease? Form seems significant, but is infused with ambiguity, with the results left for each viewer to decide individually.

Few shots in my film retain their original color range, with their contrast and saturation often altered in post-production. (Figure 16) Tones in a point-of-view shot (left) are darkened, intimating impending obstacles or grief. Colors are amplified (right), suggesting inflamed emotions.

Figure 16. *Stills from Year One*

Deep blue, green, black

Intense red, filmy white, shadowed skin tones

Conclusion

By deliberately emphasizing variations of form, I aim viewers' attention at a highly premeditated, mediated, and intentional space, encouraging reflection and meaning-creation. Viewers' interpretations may result in varying conclusions. I make my own meaning out of Penelope's twenty years, reinterpreting Homer for my own purposes (as he reinterpreted years of earlier stories). I actively offer my viewers the same option.

Viewers who are committed to engaging with *Penelope's Odyssey* formal structures and visual patterns will be able to "make my movie mean," each in their own way, but they will not be engaging in an authorial void. They will start with my structure, my form, my approach. Everything they see is constructed and intentional, each element a facet of my artistic endeavor to use film form to create meaning.

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