Cinema's Poetic Function: Creating an Amorous Distance

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Cinema’s Poetic Function: Creating an Amorous Distance

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I am indebted to my advisor, Dr. Kelli Fuery, without whom I would not be where I am now. Thank you to Cole Clark and Mason Dickerson for their friendship and critique, and to my family for their love and support.
The aim of this thesis is to examine how cinema can embrace its poetic function to avoid its assimilation into preexisting hermeneutic structures, which would leave it vulnerable to myth as defined by Roland Barthes, and instead be a generative force, encouraging its viewer to engage with the full potential of the text. This mode of spectatorship is termed the “amorous distance,” which Barthes describes as his simultaneous fascination with the film and that which exceeds it. The amorous distance finds further articulation through the work of Roman Jakobson and Julia Kristeva. Jakobson’s schema of six language functions describes the poetic function as that which orients a message toward itself, highlighting its own signifying status to bring attention to the process through which it acquires meaning. Kristeva’s distinction between the Semiotic and Symbolic modes illuminates the scope of that process, the former mode referring to the preverbal bringing together of nonsignifying materials into meaning connection, and the latter to the solidification of those materials into an exclusive unity. By synthesizing Barthes, Jakobson, and Kristeva, this thesis argues that the poetic function of cinema puts the viewer at an amorous distance whereby they actively engage with the signifying process in its full involvement of the Semiotic and Symbolic modes. This argument is supported through a close reading of several films: the experimental short film “Psalm II: Walking Distance” (1999), the silent test film “Monkeyshines No. 1” (1890), and the narrative feature films 71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance (1994) and Code Unknown (2000).
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**Introduction**

How can a film avoid locking its viewer into ideological immobility? Film undoubtedly has the power to absorb a viewer into a wholly constructed world, so how can a film avoid making that absorption mythic? How can it express to the viewer that the way it presents things and creates meaning is not all that can be done? Jean-Louis Baudry (1974-1975: 41) would argue that a film must reveal its own construction within the text for such an effect to be achieved. However, myth does not have to hide its own construction for it to affect its reader’s outlook. Seeing a newspaper being printed will not halt the meaning conveyed by the front page’s headline. Additionally, Baudry’s (2009: 184) claim that the ideological effect of cinema relies on the ritual of immobile spectators devoting their attention to the screen does not account for the digital age, where the cinematic apparatus is fragmentary, split off into countless small screens that can draw viewers into a film world at any moment. Furthermore, their viewing can be interrupted by notifications, buffering, or events outside the device, such as a friend trying to get the viewer’s attention, and nonetheless, in all these cases, the film can still have its ideological effect. What becomes apparent is that a film’s mythic qualities rely on the social structure through which the viewer orders the world. Myth can be successfully transmitted if the viewer can incorporate that text into their preexisting structure, and this is the crux of our issue. As Susan Sontag (2001: 13) writes, “What we decidedly do not need now is further to assimilate Art into Thought, or (worse yet) Art into Culture.” My introductory question is therefore: what role does the film text play in the prevention of such assimilation?

It is not enough for a film to avoid being mythic by exposing the cinematic apparatus. In this thesis, “myth” is understood within the scope of Roland Barthes’ definition as presented in his essay “Myth Today” (1990): a semiological system wherein a sign is made the mere signifier
of a second-order concept that distorts the contingency of the sign’s original meaning. A mythic
text does not hide the original meaning but instead shifts focus toward a new concept brought by
forces that did not influence the content of the original sign. The role of myth is to “naturalize”
the new concept by relying on a reader who “sees a kind of causal process” in the relationship
between signifier and signified, as if myth was “a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological
system” (Barthes 1990: 131). The mythic character of cinema is not solely the result of a
mechanical apparatus locking the viewer into a certain way of seeing things, as Baudry claims,
but the fact that the film text cannot meaningfully prevent a second order of meaning, a trait
common to all semiological systems. Consider what Barthes has to say about the contemporary
poetry of his time, its apparent goal to be “anti-language” and capture “all the potential” of “the
thing in itself” before it can be subsumed into an ideological framework that robs this potential
(1990: 133). Contrary to contemporary poetry’s aims, Barthes argues that this literary form is a
prime target for myth. Speech becomes mythic because the easiest default reading appeals to the
reader’s ideological inclinations. Therefore, a contemporary poem’s “apparent lack of order of
signs” appeals to the reader’s assumptions of what such poetry looks like, rendering itself
vulnerable to the simplest reading possible: it represents the entire medium of poetry (Barthes
1990: 134). Likewise, to strive for this aim with cinema would render such a film a mythic
signifier. However, the aim of contemporary poetry has more to it than what Barthes lets on here.
After all, he is taking issue with its programmatic nature, the fact that it “fiercely refuses myth”
to such an extent that it renders its practice into convention and habit (Barthes 1990: 134). Poetic
texts are not doomed to have their meaning robbed by myth, but considering an alternative
possibility requires an understanding of the forces at play.
Contemporary poetry is an ideal victim for myth because of the inherent paradox of its intentions. By trying with systematic determination to retain the full range of possible meanings conveyed by the text, contemporary poetry denies the possibility that the meaning of the text could become fixed. Therefore, the full range of contingency in poetic practice is left unexplored and thus vulnerable to its mythologization as a closed practice devoid of change. The goal of a cinema against myth is therefore not to avoid settling on a certain meaning but to convey the contingency of that meaning in exposure to the viewer’s consideration.

In his essay “Leaving the Movie Theater” (1986), Barthes articulates the realization of contingency within spectatorship as what he terms the “amorous distance.” This distance consists of his simultaneous attachment to the film world and his recognition of that world’s externality. In his words, it consists of “letting oneself be fascinated *twice over*, by the image and by its surroundings—as if I had two bodies at the same time” (Barthes 1986: 349). In this way, the film becomes simultaneously abstract, analogous to some unified narrative, and concrete, put in material relation to “precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of other bodies” and so on (Barthes 1986: 349). This assertion comes in sharp contrast to Baudry’s claim that the cinematic apparatus enforces strict adherence to the film’s ideology. Philip Watts comments that Barthes’ concept of the amorous distance represents “one of the very first attempts to resist what is now widely recognized as the overreaching universalizing gestures of Paris School apparatus theory by opening up a space to reflect on desire and on the sensuous world of the film spectator” (2016: 67). While Baudry assumes that the film experience categorically enforces ideological boundaries, Barthes posits that the film experience involves the film text coming into relation to a broader process of significance in which the viewer is involved. The viewer facilitates this relation through their amorous distance,
their engagement with “all the potential” of what the film expresses, their holding of fixed and unfixed sense in simultaneous consideration. While Barthes places emphasis on the viewer’s role in their entrance into the amorous distance, I want to look at how the film text itself facilitates this amorous distance and how it may enable the viewer to engage with “all the potential” of what it conveys. After all, as Watts notes, Barthes did not “[feel] the need to mention specific films” (2016: 67). Looking at the broader process of cinematic significance involves both the viewer and the film, so expanding on Barthes’ notion of the amorous distance requires taking the latter into account as well.

The aim of this thesis is to examine how cinema can work like poetry to avoid its assimilation into preexisting hermeneutic structures, which would leave it vulnerable to myth, and instead be a generative force, encouraging its viewer to engage with the full potential of the text. To do this, I will first elaborate on the connection of Barthes’ work on myth to cinema using Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One (Christopher McQuarrie, 2023) to exemplify how a film can appeal to the sentiments of viewers to naturalize a concept, in this instance AI as a threat to humanity. Metz’s (1974) work helps articulate what the first order of meaning in film is and, in conjunction with Pier Paolo Pasolini’s article “The Cinema of Poetry” (1976), exemplifies how cinema is an inherently poetic semiological system. The theoretical core of my deliberation on cinema as poetic text and its function with the general process of signification will be a synthesis of Roman Jakobson’s (1960) and Julia Kristeva’s (1984) writings on the nature of the poetic text, its fullness of meaning including the possibility of stasis. Jakobson’s notion of the poetic function of language, that facet of a text whereby it simply asserts its own presence, articulates how all texts are necessarily filled with meaning insofar as they enter a semiological system and that they are poetic insofar as they assert the primacy of this meaning-
filling quality instead of the meaning with which it is filled. Kristeva’s distinction between the Semiotic and Symbolic modes of signification illustrates how this poetic function is possible due to the inherent role of significance in the formation of subjectivity. The fullness of possibility in Jakobson’s poetic function indicates a full range of motion between the Semiotic, that preverbal mode of signification wherein meaning is continually generated, disintegrated, and regenerated, and the Symbolic, that mode wherein certain signifieds are bound to the signifier at the exclusion of other signifieds. A poetic film text lets the poetic function dominate, thereby engaging both the Semiotic and Symbolic modes and, by this same criterion, facilitating the viewer’s amorous distance.

Myth, Cinema, and Poetry

Myth is a connotative system; in a connotative system, a sign is made into the connotator of a second order of meaning (Barthes 1977: 91). Myth, in particular, “naturalize[s]” the system that brought this second-order concept in as if it were a matter of facts instead of values (Barthes 1990: 131). Being a producer of connotations, the mythic only takes hold when someone reads the text and assumes beyond the base denotation that the text indicates a certain order of things. Thus, myth convinces a reader that whatever mythic world-ordering they receive results from a system of facts as if the text is not constructed to approximate the way things are but directly correlates to it. An approximation masquerading as an equation, myth derives from unchecked omission and thus thrives on “poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for a signification, such as caricatures, pastiches, symbols, etc.” (Barthes 1990: 127). It slips between the cracks of critical thought when readers forget that they build their understanding of the world from a complex history of material and concepts being played with,
cognized, recognized, forgotten, and so on. Of course, it is impossible for one person or text to take in the sublime totality of reality, so a person or text will necessarily omit an infinite number of perspectives. Myth takes advantage of when one forgets that they omit something, calcifying the gap with obliviousness to the fact that there are more avenues to explore.

While myth espouses its ahistoricism, it is constructed by historical forces. Thus, the mythic text is itself contingent on extratextual factors. Barthes notes this at the very beginning of “Myth Today”: “…one can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language” (1990: 110). This is not to say that speech cannot willingly enable myth, but its effect will always rest on the addressee. Jakobson (1960: 355) argues that the connotative function of language is oriented toward the recipient of a message, which he argues is best observed in imperative sentences. The phrase “read this paper!” does not offer itself to interrogation as the declarative “this paper is readable” does, as the former implores immediate action on the reader's part, as opposed to the latter, which offers a characteristic of the paper that can be engaged with but does not insist on such an engagement. Imperative sentences clearly take on the uncritical characteristic of myths. While mythic speech orients itself toward its addressee insofar as it relies on them to find its secondary meaning, its trick is to make one forget that it orients itself toward them. Myth, after all, “has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification” (Barthes 1990: 142). An imperative sentence implores obedience without taking questions. Thus, it is primed to become a myth if the addressee believes the sentence must be acted on.

Cinema is capable of mythic speech because it is a semiological system. Metz describes how cinema expresses the presence of what it represents; thus, the factuality of that which stands
before the camera lens is always imbued with significance on the film screen (1974: 67). A shot of an apple, for example, is not a sign in the way the word “apple” is, an abstract, modular unit, but a proclamation that “this is the apple that is here.” Metz compares the shot, what he considers the smallest unit of meaning in a film, to a sentence in the way that a shot is never purely systematic like a linguistic code but actualized like speech (1974: 84). My emphasis is not on notions of the quantifiable units of cinema but the fact that, like the written word, cinema contains signifiers (the shot of the apple) and signifieds (“this is the apple that is here”) that are brought together to become signs. Therefore, they are texts whose meaning is full of potential and contingency and are therefore susceptible to naturalizing distortion by myth. Some, such as Baudry, would consider cinema uniquely vulnerable to myth; after all, cinema calcifies movement and time into an impenetrable work of fiction, impenetrable insofar as the world being represented cannot be directly interacted with. A viewer cannot physically enter the film, they cannot talk to the characters or move objects around, and neither can the reality projected on our screen leap beyond the screen, so the viewer must be able to identify with the world on screen, or in other words, assimilate the text into their thought. As Metz writes, films are “unable to resist our constant impulse to invent them with the ‘reality’ of fiction..., a reality that comes only from within us, from the projections and identifications that are mixed in with our perception of the film” (1974: 10). However, cinema is no more helpless against our projections than any other semiological system. After all, the cinematic apparatus is now as diffuse as the written word; we regularly encounter television and phone screens as often as we do books, magazines, billboards, and so on. Cinematic myth comes into existence through the same system that produces non-cinematic myth, through the projection of a system of values onto a sign through which that system becomes read as a system of facts. The film is as equally impenetrable
as the written word (you cannot step inside of a book either), so the “reading of a myth is exhausted at one stroke” all the same (Barthes 1990: 130). In all cases, myth involves the inhibition of certain avenues of thought. Instead of framing myth as the passive acceptance of a text’s ordering of the world as enforced by some external apparatus, it ought to be understood as the activity of closing off means of reordering. Thus, a film can be rightly considered “mythic” if it externalizes the avenues of thought to which the viewer is already inclined.

To illustrate how myth involves the viewer’s system of values, I will look at how Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One (Christopher McQuarrie, 2023) relies on the viewer’s anxiety toward AI to prevent critical thought about it being a villainous entity and accept a myth wherein AI’s mechanical omniscience poses a threat to the fallacious but just morality of human beings. A critical part of the film’s narrative sees headstrong secret agent Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) negotiating with a group of unsavory characters who want to obtain a key that will give them access to a powerful AI capable of controlling any country’s remote-controlled weaponry and digital technology. Hunt and the villains sit in a club lounge displaying computer-generated graphics on the walls in cool colors that contrast against the warmth of their human skin. The projections tower above the characters, fill in the space left open by the boundaries of their silhouettes, and thus overwhelm them in the composition as if they are puny and helpless in the face of this extensive technology. In one stroke, the film establishes an irreconcilable separation between humanity and digital technology, signifying that the latter is necessarily enigmatic and a threat to the paradoxically immutable essence of human righteousness. Things take a sinister turn as the villains reveal they are merely the liaison for an interested party, at which point the blue particulate projected on the wall suddenly rearranges around a circular gap such that it resembles an iris surrounding a pupil, revealing that the villains
were servants to the AI the entire time. Interestingly, despite this moment suggesting that the AI possesses consciousness and, therefore, agency, it is at this point when the myth of AI comes to its most blatant fruition. While now personified, this eye-like appearance is shallow, an incomplete indication of its agency expressing its choice to pose a threat to humanity, immune to the influence of empathy or alternative considerations. This reading relies on the viewer to feel such shock and panic that they, too, cannot reconcile the differences between humanity and the technology they use or even confront the reality of AI’s capabilities. By identifying the AI and its human puppets as essentially villainous, *Dead Reckoning* propagates the myth that technology is an eternal threat to humanity, something that good people like Ethan Hunt must avoid, even if the cost of such avoidance is high.

The cinema of myth is a practice that presents a system of values as a system of facts; what then characterizes the cinema of poetry? In the first place, there are arguments that cinema is inherently poetic. Roberto Rossellini mentioned once that he considers cinema a “poetic language” insofar as it is not systematic (quoted by Metz 1974: 44). Cinema is free to choose how it delivers meaning through its images and never has to decide between obeying or rejecting a grammatical system; thus it is “immediately and automatically situated on the plane of rhetoric and poetics” (Metz 1974: 81). Pier Paolo Pasolini brings this notion of cinema as poetry into clearer fruition. Like Metz, Pasolini claims there are no cinematic units of meaning equivalent to linguistic signs, but unlike Metz, he argues that there is no such thing as the smallest unit of cinematic meaning. “A dictionary of images does not exist,” and thus a filmmaker does not pull signs from a collection of images but forges them “from chaos, where an automatic or oniric [sic] communication is only found in the state of possibility, of shadow” (Pasolini 1976: 545). In this way, claiming that cinema transmits meaning through “sentences” is going too far, as a sentence
is a manifestation of a system of signification that has processed the world into a collection of signifieds bound to signifiers and has established rules through which these signs may be put into relation. Even if this collection of signs and set of rules are subject to change, they are not subject to “infinite possibilities” at any one time (Pasolini 1976: 545). By contrast, a shot selects a portion of material from a continual flow of light, sound, patterns, and concepts and therefore is capable of an infinitesimal degree of selection. Metz anticipates the continuum of cinematic signification articulated in Pasolini’s claims when he says regarding montage and cinematic narrativity: “[they] are only the consequences of that current of induction that refuses not to flow whenever two poles are brought sufficiently close together, and occasionally even when they are far apart” (1974: 47). Cinema signifies not through a system but a “current of induction,” an assumption that the objects juxtaposed together (the mise-en-scène of a single frame, two shots in sequence, etc.) relate to each other in some way. Both Metz and Pasolini indicate that such a current involves the continuum of reality that extends beyond these juxtaposed objects.

Pasolini articulates how a cinematic sign, the shot, is carved directly from the flow of reality and thus reaches for “the meaning of things themselves.” Barthes speaks of how the signifier and signified of a sign before it becomes mythologized came together through a complex historical development, and likewise, Pasolini notes the “fundamental pre-eminence of the pre-grammatical character of objects as symbols of the visual language” (1976: 547). Both language and cinema are products of a historical process that brings together heterogenous elements (signifiers and signifieds), but while there is a preverbal history to verbal signs, this fact must be set aside to permit their inclusion in a language system. The codified verbal sign is drawn into speech as if its usage does not alter its discrete, unmodifiable essence. Cinema, meanwhile, signifies by actualizing preverbal material as images. There is no cinematic code;
modifying or reordering the objects in a shot impacts its significance, unlike how a word mispronounced or written in cursive as opposed to print will not alter its dictionary definition. Cinema is principally concrete; its images are always that particular image, unlike language, where signs are composed of an abstraction of a concrete referent. Pasolini argues that the preverbal, concrete nature of the cinematic image is what makes film akin to poetry. Even if the things represented in the image “have a grammatical history that is conferred on them” in that particular moment of the film through montage, music, or other formal elements of cinematic expression, they “have nonetheless a pre-grammatical history which is already long and intense” and therefore leave open the film’s expressive potential through their concreteness (Pasolini 1976: 546).

While this concreteness may be a fundamental characteristic of cinema as a signifying system, a film like *Dead Reckoning* illustrates that the medium can nonetheless be used to create a text that is not akin to poetry if poetry is understood as a practice that pushes against the limiting structure of language. The poetic character of cinema that Metz and Pasolini postulate does not account for the amorous distance, the viewing position wherein the film text is put into contact with a broader process of signification in which it and the viewer are involved. While these two writers describe the poetic character of cinema in medium-specific terms, the next section will elaborate on the function of this poetic character in facilitating an amorous distance.

**Poetic Function**

Pasolini’s line of thinking leads to something of an impasse. He describes the cinematic sign as a unit of style, what he calls a styleme (Pasolini 1976: 545). The styleme is a bracketed portion of chaos collapsed into a single capsule; objects and sounds that appear simultaneously
are not a syntagm because they are put in expressive relation to each other. Thus it is that relationship within the boundaries of the screen and speakers that constitute the unit of which Pasolini speaks. This term certainly provides an alternative to the strain caused by deliberating over the possibility of a cinematic code. Alfred Guzarri (1973) strains over Metz’s description of chiaroscuro as a code of expression, but just because chiaroscuro is not systematic, this does not mean that it has no effect on the meaning. The inky shadow cast by Orson Welles in *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949) as he runs through the Viennese sewers conveys an array of feelings and themes, even if this array cannot be abstractly codified as to be included in some dictionary. As Welles’ character, Harry Lime, stares with his back to the camera at a search party as their flashlights cast a long shadow across the wet floor, all these elements are put into relation with each other to form a styleme. The concreteness of this shot occurring strictly here and now brings together the preverbal history of the moisture coating the sewer floor, the political organizations for which the members of this search party work, the flashlight from which the light emanates, and so on into a web of relations whose significance can be explored in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, the greater flexibility Pasolini’s model offers buckles under the description of a “unit” of style. Perhaps the styleme can be thought of as a unit of analysis, a bracketed portion of film content like the image of steam foregrounding train wheel that Pasolini describes, but to say that a filmmaker creates stylemes is not entirely accurate because, being products of chaos swayed into place by the impulse of the filmmakers, they bleed into each other. Denotation in film bleeds into connotation, form and content merge, and thus the borders of these “units” of meaning are inevitably fuzzy. To conceive of cinema as consisting of units implies a consensus of their delineation and, therefore, a program of creation, which is what should be avoided lest
the conventions of a cinema of poetry become so programmatic as to become a mythic signifier like contemporary poetry.

As an alternative to Pasolini’s concept of a cinema of poetry, I turn to Jakobson’s concept of the poetic function of language. While he applies this term to the verbal arts, he insists that his model applies to all art forms (Jakobson 1960: 350). This function constitutes one of the six functions of language in Jakobson’s model for semiological analysis, a model that focuses on messages, some chunk of text that carries significance using whatever signs are organized however paradigmatically. Those six functions of language all orient the message toward a different factor. Five functions (referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual) are oriented beyond the message. For instance, the connotative function, which I have earlier said dominates myth, is oriented toward the addressee, the message's recipient. Myth orients itself toward the addressee in its suggestion that they experience whatever meaning they read into the text as if derived from the message itself. Jakobson rightly notes that these functions orient the message because these extraneous factors that contribute to the meaning of the text are not necessarily present and thus do not constitute the message in itself. While myth asserts its immortality, it has no power over an addressee who will not read that immortality into it. As Barthes writes of myth: “It is turned toward me, I am subjected to its intentional force, it summons me to receive its expansive ambiguity” (1990: 124). Framed with this model, myth is not constituted by its immortality, nor its reader, but by its orientation toward a reader who will read immortality. One function, however, is constituted by its object of orientation. According to Jakobson, this is the poetic function, oriented toward the message itself, the function that, if dominant, transforms a message into art.
This is not to say that a poetic text is devoid of its other functions; in this model, all six language functions are always present in texts, although to varying degrees. In Jakobson’s words, “Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function, whereas in all other verbal activities it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent” (1960: 356). In all texts, there is an orientation toward the addresser and addressee, a concern for the message itself and the code underneath, the channel through which the message travels, and a concern for mutual understanding. Likewise, all texts are in at least some part oriented toward themselves for their own sake, the signifier without any concern for the signified or referent, without attachment to any reader or writer or the mutual understanding between the two. The message is the nexus through which all these other functions pass, so the message itself is where the opportunity for signification lies. However, the sheer existence of a message does not qualify it as a piece of art. For it to be oriented toward itself, a message must expose the process through which it acquires meaning, highlighting its own signifying status.

For a moment, let us consider the poetic function in isolation. If the poetic function is that part of the message that is oriented toward itself, then all messages have a poetic function by sheer virtue of their existence. All texts have signifiers, the part of the message that makes meaning shareable, but the poetic function is not merely emphasis on a signifier but the insistence on the speech act as a process of signification. The poetic function insists not only on the concreteness of form but that meaning can be added to a form. Imagine that Dead Reckoning existed without a filmmaker or spectator, without the lineage of the history of the cinematic medium against which to compare it. Applied to Jakobson’s model, the film would still have its poetic function because it itself still exists as a signifying act. The poetic function of, for instance, the AI-entity would still be there; the neon blue particulates composing it would assert
their own significance through the sheer fact of their presence on screen. Would Dead Reckoning then be dominated by the poetic function? Obviously not. Such a claim depends on ignorance of the fact that a message considered alone can still orient itself toward a filmmaker, a spectator, and a lineage of filmmaking practice without such objects being present. Even in this conceptual vacuum, Dead Reckoning orients itself toward a viewer positing the AI-entity with panic and hostility so that someone will read such hostility as its eternal character.

To borrow an example of a message whose poetic function dominates, “I Like Ike” is, in proper context, the campaign slogan of Dwight D. Eisenhower. It functions poetically in its playful and snappy form, the rhyming of “like” and “Ike,” the triplet of three stressed syllables, the fact these three syllables each get their own word, going from the drawn-out vowel “I” to the two staccato words “like” and “Ike” which end in consonant sounds, giving the whole slogan a jumpy feeling. These poetic elements draw attention to the message beyond denotation; before “I Like Ike” makes one think of Eisenhower’s campaign, they experience the sensation of the “I” vibrating in their throat, followed by two bursts of air escaping from between their soft palate tongue, or in the case of reading the slogan silently, they imagine these sensations and notice the orthographic similarities of capital I and L and the repetition of lowercase K. “I Like Ike” does not merely transmit meaning but magnetizes meaning, make itself available to the investment of meaning. Consider what Barthes claimed was the goal of contemporary poetry: “its ideal, ultimately, would be to reach not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves” (1990: 133). Meanwhile, the poetic function of language, by asserting the message’s independence from the significance it meditates, illustrates how things in themselves do not mean but are invested with meaning, and in making itself available to the reader in this way, a poetic text opens itself to polysemy.
The poetic function of *Dead Reckoning*, meanwhile, cannot do so when it implores the viewer to ignore that the text is making itself available for meaningful investment—in other words, to make a myth of the film. The AI entity, in the fact of its amorphous glow and its digital particulate emanating across the walls of the club, provides a vessel for the viewer to fill with their preconceived concepts of AI. However, this does not qualify *Dead Reckoning* as a poetic text. Certainly, the image of the AI in *Dead Reckoning* devotes very little of its constitution to its poetic function. Given the fragmentary editing of the film, which abstracts the space, the camerawork that places the heroes and villains in the center of the frame, and the panicked orchestral score (“no time to assess, get out of there!”), the function of this depiction of AI is primarily connotative, relying on the uninquisitive panic of its viewer to create a myth of computer intelligence. The material texture of this particular set piece, the microcosmic genealogy of how it came here, is abstracted away by other formal elements as much as possible, scrubbed of any trace of its history. Of course, as Pasolini points out, cinema carves out a portion of the chaos of the world to represent on screen and excludes all else. However, not all exclusion imposes a boundary. In the case of *Dead Reckoning*, the formal exclusion of the AI’s history as a machine and the AI image’s history as a sign does a great deal to close the scene off from other possible meanings. The cinema of myth attempts to persuade the viewer that nothing of worth is being excluded, enabling one to forget that such an exclusion occurred at all. A film that allows the poetic function to dominate, meanwhile, does not impose such borders; it merely asserts the existence of a particular image, not that this image must exclude others.

The notion of the poetic function of language fits in with revised notions of how to analyze a text that Roland Barthes pointed out so aptly. He, too, writes about the message being the nexus that connects all other facets of communication, how “the speech-act in its entirety is
an ‘empty’ process, which functions perfectly without its being necessary to ‘fill’ it with the person of the interlocutors” (Barthes 1986: 51). Here Barthes’ speech-act echoes Jakobson’s poetic language in the former’s description of the speech-act as empty, which mean in other words that the speech-act is not constituted on anything but itself, even if it is oriented in such a way to catalyze with interlocutors. With respect to film, this emptiness plays a role in the generation of a spectator’s amorous distance, which results from the simultaneous catalyzation of the film with the sense-making faculties of the viewer and the viewer’s experience of the emptiness of the film recognized as an object composed of nothing but itself.

While I argue that the poetic function makes the form of the text available for meaningful investment, Jakobson does not explicate the role of subjectivity in significance. Julia Kristeva develops the text’s relationship with subjectivity in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) by making the distinction between Semiotic and Symbolic modes of signification. Unlike Jakobson’s language functions, Kristeva’s modes do not each designate a side of the transmission of a sign; she does not designate one to belong to the speaker and the other to the listener. Rather, she conceives of significance as “the natural dialectic” of the Semiotic and Symbolic, “which is constitutive of the subject” (Kristeva 1984: 24). On this front, Barthes has more in common as he writes that “language knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person’” (1986: 51), but Kristeva explores the topic of language’s “subject” much more deeply. Her distinction between the two modes is thus: the Semiotic is the pre-verbal mode of signification where the material for meaningful expression develops. It involves a subject’s continuous bringing together and separating of material; sound becomes patterned, presentations are brought together into concepts, signifier and signified are brought together into signs, and then this work is undone to enable other linkages. The Semiotic is that mode of signification in which the work is never complete, in
which the constituents of signs never quite crystallize into signs themselves. The Symbolic, on the other hand, is that mode which would see that work complete, where signs are crystallized, where the totality of other possible signifiers and signified are excluded from this sign, where signifiers and signified become isolated from that chaos from which they were brought out. The products of this mode are symbols, defined by Kristeva as “any joining, any bringing together that is a contract—one that either follows hostilities or presupposes them” (1984: 49). The Symbolic assembles signs into a certain binding, whereas the Semiotic dissolves those bonds while nonetheless remaining in the realm of expression. The former approaches stasis, while the latter remains mobile.

This distinction works aptly to deliberate the signifying process of cinema because it articulates explicitly the process that creates the foundation for all signifying systems, that which takes material external to significance and brings it into meaningful connection with other heterogeneous material. In the first place, the Semiotic modality helps reconfigure Metz’s assertion that the shot is akin to a sentence. The shot instead recalls those “concrete operations” that constitute the Semiotic and set the stage for language acquisition, operations that “[govern] the connections between the body (in the process of constituting itself as a body proper)” and external objects (Kristeva 1984: 27). Within the shot, the objects are made significant and put into meaningful relation with each other by the fact that the frame distinguishes them from the surrounding space; furthermore, these objects form a meaningful connection with the position and duration of the camera and microphone, the perceiving body of the film whose concrete act of recording is stripped of its finitude by the abstraction of montage. However, while cinema, like all signifying systems, relies on the Semiotic to enable meaning, this is not to say that the entire medium is dominated by the Semiotic. As I observed with Dead Reckoning’s
representation of AI, cinema is certainly capable of a “bringing together that is a contract,” a Symbolic union of signifier (the image of an AI) and signified (threat to humanity). One could not speak of the category of mythic film without understanding that the Symbolic modality can structure a cinematic text.

At this point, one may be inclined to characterize the mythic film as belonging to the Symbolic and the poetic film as Semiotic. After all, my description of the Semiotic recalls what Pasolini wrote of the styleme, a sign drawn out of chaos. Like the cinema of poetry, the Semiotic describes a generative space that brings some sample of non-signifying material into the world of significance, a process that is infinite and, therefore, incomplete. It is also right to say that the Semiotic resists the assimilation of things into a pre-made structure of understanding, which a mythic film, by contrast, fully embraces. The Semiotic is “a psychosomatic modality of the signifying process,” a drawing of connections between “the zones of the fragmented body to each other and also to ‘external’ ‘objects’ and ‘subjects,’ which are not yet constituted as such” (Kristeva 1984: 28). In other words, the Semiotic is that modality which invests things with meaning without then excluding other meanings, draws connections between sensual materials without delineating absolute boundaries. By contrast, the Symbolic mode, constituting a contractual binding of signifier and signified, would appear more akin to myth. Kristeva affirms this assumption: “All things stemming from social symbolism, hence kinship structures and myth itself, are symbolic devices” (1984: 74). This makes sense as Kristeva’s definition of the symbol involves hostility toward that which transgresses the Symbolic bond of signifier and signified. However, the relationship between the Semiotic and Symbolic is not as simple as a binary wherein a subject or text belongs to one side or the other. Remember, it is the “necessary dialectic” between the Semiotic and Symbolic that constitutes the subject. Likewise, the poetic
text for Kristeva is not merely a programmatic chaos of heterogeneous materials being brought together. For her, the poetic text is an ethical practice that “dissolves those narcissistic fixations (ones that are narrowly confined to the subject) to which the signifying process succumbs in its socio-symbolic realization” (Kristeva 1984: 233). The “signifying process,” the creation, consumption, and use of a text, is “narrowly confined to the subject” insofar as one treats this process as internal, unable to reconcile with the fact that the text’s signifying material is both internal and external, both structured by subjective drives and influenced by contingent historical forces. Kristeva understands the poetic text as the mediator of this reconciliation with the fullness of the Semiotic-Symbolic spectrum. The mythic text, by contrast, orients itself toward the viewer’s narrow fixations and therein conveys an eternal character to the content it signifies. The AI entity of Dead Reckoning convinces a viewer to remain fixated on their internalized reading of the text and assume that the world is exactly as they assume it is, that AI is as essentially antithetical to humanity as they are inclined to think. The threat that myth poses is not its Symbolic structure but its inability to leave that structure. On the other hand, remaining within the realm of Semiotic a-sociality, a text “condemns itself to the confines of the mirror held out to it by a coagulative, restrictive, paranoid ideology” (Kristeva 1984: 195). This articulates in another way how contemporary poetry becomes a myth. Because it remains so fixated within the boundaries of its pages to reject social paradigm at all costs, it becomes a statis in the grand

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1 Kristeva’s characterization of this kind of fixation as narcissistic draws from Sigmund Freud’s (1989) work on narcissism. While a full exploration of her use of Freud is beyond the scope of this thesis, I would like to note his description of narcissism, which is as follows: “The libido that has been withdrawn from the external world has been directed to the ego and thus gives rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism” (Freud 1989: 546). In other words, narcissism is characterized by a withdrawal of psychic energy from external objects that is instead invested by the subject into themself. While Kristeva does not claim that the “narcissistic fixations” of signification’s “sociosymbolic realization” indicates the subject’s total withdrawal of libido from the external world, she does suggest that a narcissistic attitude can manifest discreetly in refusals to engage with the text as it exists external to an individual subjectivity. The poetic function of the text is to facilitate the reader’s reinvestment in the external currents of the signifying process, in her words, to “dissolve those narcissistic fixations.”
scheme of significance as thus can be easily assimilated into a symbol composed of a contractual binding of the work, now rendered a hollow signifier by the Symbolic, to the abstract concept of poetry. Because this type of poetry so deliberately and totally tears apart the syntagms and paradigms that enter it, leaving its content so distorted as to not reenter the reader’s Symbolic understanding in the same way, it lends itself to being symbolized as simply impenetrable. Myth (as understood by Barthes) is, therefore, not a product of the Symbolic mode per se but the immobility of signifying practice manifesting as patterns that can then be assimilated into a Symbolic structure.

This is not to say that a poetic text’s seeming impenetrability makes it inherently mythic. Boredom, or an inability to meaningfully engage, does not negate the text’s generative potential, even if it does ignore it. Barthes, in his book *The Pleasure of the Text*, speaks to the fickle nature of boredom. In his words, “there is no sincere boredom: if the prattle-text bores me personally, it is because in reality I do not like the demand” (1975: 25). To be bored by a text is, therefore, to be unable to reconcile with its defiance of the reader’s expectations. The poetic text presents a meaningful structuring of material unfamiliar to the reader and thus demands the reintroduction of the Semiotic for it to be re-symbolized; a bored reader merely refuses to do this. Myth, on the other hand, takes advantage of the reader’s incentive not to use the text but instead let it be, to allow themself and the text to sit inert, related through the Symbolic order insofar as their contingent histories do not interact. Mythologized poetry is thus poetry with which a reader is bored, poetry engaged with only enough for it to be called “poetry.” Furthermore, this is not to say that boredom is a condemnable roadblock in the way of a poetic text achieving its ethical function. Adam Phillips, in his essay “On Being Bored” (1993), notes that boredom should instead be seen as an opportunity to find new ways of investing psychic energy, or rather the
opportunity to discover the object in which psychic energy can be invested. In his words: “In boredom, [...] there are two assumptions, two impossible options: there is something I desire, and there is nothing I desire. But which of the two assumptions, or beliefs, is disavowed is always ambiguous, and this ambiguity accounts, I think, for the curious paralysis of boredom” (Phillips 1993: 80-81). The “something,” the poetic text in this case, is present before the bored reader or bored filmgoer, and by extension the opportunity for engagement, or “desire” in Phillips’ terms. We can thus reconfigure boredom as that first step of the poetic text’s generative effect. The bored viewer, presented with a film whose call for a certain mode of engagement they deny, is, in fact, waiting to discover how to internalize the film such that they can use it for self-transformation. Boredom is not far off from the amorous distance; the former leads to the latter once the viewer discovers the film text and sees it as significant.

The poetic film resists mythologization by exposing the mobile process of meaning founded on the essential dialectic between the Semiotic and Symbolic, wherein the Symbolic approaches unity while the Semiotic puts the previously structured materials into motion such that they can approach a new unification. Such is what constitutes subjectivity to Kristeva: in her words, the subject is “only the signifying process and he appears only as a signifying practice, that is, only when he is absent within the position out of which social, historical, and signifying activity unfolds” (Kristeva 1984: 215). While Jakobson hints at the position of a subject in the signifying process by articulating the presence of the connotative and emotional (oriented toward the addressee) functions of language, these functions highlight the text as a strictly social practice, one oriented toward mutual understanding and therefore stability of meaning. By contrast, Kristeva argues that oscillation between the Semiotic and Symbolic modes constitutes the lifelong process of becoming a subject, that “the unity of reason which consciousness
sketches out will always be shattered by the *rhythm* suggested by drives [...] preventing the stasis of One meaning, One myth, One logic” (original emphasis, Kristeva 1984: 148). This is to say that the Semiotic and Symbolic modes, which together constitute the realm of the significant, reflect the dynamic relationship between a subject and the society of fellow subjects in which they find themself. She writes:

What we call *significance*, then, is precisely this unlimited and unbounded generating process, this unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language; toward, in, and through the exchange system and its protagonists—the subject and his institutions.

This heterogeneous process, neither anarchic, fragmented foundation nor schizophrenic blockage, is a structuring and de-structuring *practice*, a passage to the outer *boundaries* of the subject and society. (Kristeva 1984: 17).

Kristeva stresses that the Symbolic is not the problem but a fixation within the Symbolic.

When one enters the realm of language proper, this development “represents the acquisition of a capacity for symbolization through the definitive detachment of the rejected object, through its repression under the sign” (Kristeva 1984: 152). This repression is not inherently problematic, as it allows for the acquisition of the capacity to use language, which comprises a key portion of one’s social life. The role of poetic language is to bring out that which was “expelled by the sign and judgment from first symbolization,” not to be intellectualized into the Symbolic structure that forced its expulsion but to be “organized into prosody or rhythmic timbres” (Kristeva 1984: 163). In other words, a poetic text reintroduces the Semiotic to bring that which was excluded back into the fold of a subject’s navigation of the realm of the significant to restructure their understanding of things. A poetic film, therefore, resists the unifying boundaries of myth if it presents itself wholly to this generative signifying process that
constitutes subjectivity. By insisting on its existence for its own sake, unconstrained by Symbolic contract, the material that a film renders into images brings with it its totality of possible relations to the world around it. The film, in its concreteness, will resist assimilation and thus lend itself to mythologization by the bored viewer. While the poetic film cannot control whether a viewer will use it to generative ends, it can orient itself toward the full spectrum of signification, not merely those Symbolic structures to which the viewer is already inclined.

It is with this characterization of the poetic film as that which enables complete mobility between the dialectical modes of the Semiotic and the Symbolic that I find Barthes’ amorous distance finds its most complete articulation. As discussed with Metz, a film cannot resist the values projected onto it by the viewer, and indeed, a film can orient itself to these values to achieve verisimilitude. By extension, the poetic film, the one that orients itself to the full Semiotic-Symbolic spectrum, will present itself in contrast to that order and, by underscoring such a dichotomy, will “[reconstitute] real objects, ‘[create]’ new ones, [reinvent] the real, an [re-symbolize] it,” all in complete exposure to the viewer (Kristeva 1984: 155). The poetic function of cinema is, therefore, to facilitate the viewer’s amorous distance. This function constitutes not a programmatic reinsertion of the Semiotic as insulation from Symbolic unification but the film presenting itself so that it may be used instead of consumed. Using the material of a cinematic image to reintroduce the Semiotic, therefore, rests on the viewer to hold an amorous distance, an acceptance of the film’s external characteristics to enable its total and, therefore, infinite integration into the subjective network of signification.
Examples of Poetic Films: “Psalm II: Walking Distance” and “Monkeyshines No. 1”

Jakobson writes that the poetic function, “by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy between signs and objects” (1960: 356). While one would think that emphasizing the objectivity of a film’s image would strip it of significance, it, in fact, opens the image to significance by dissolving the hostile contract of the Symbolic. In Kristeva’s words, “All [of the poetic function’s] paths into, indeed valorizations of, presymbolic semiotic stases […] serve signification, even when they dislocate it” (1984: 65). By highlighting the heterogeny between the objectivity of signs and the objectivity of non-significant objects, a poetic text invites a reader to consider what exists beyond the sign—in other words, enabling the amorous distance. While, as discussed earlier, even mythic films retain some constituent poetic function, there are certainly films in which the poetic function dominates and films in which it does not. A particularly apt illustration of how these various arms of the poetic function all coalesce is in Phil Solomon’s short film “Psalm II: Walking Distance” (1999). My choice to use an experimental film as the inaugural example of a film text that facilitates amorous distance is not meant as a return to the problematic aspirations of Barthes’ contemporary poets whose programmatic insertions of the Semiotic made their work uniquely vulnerable to myth. I am not arguing that the poetic film is necessarily experimental or abstract. In fact, it could be argued that a film can also facilitate an amorous distance if its Symbolic structure is novel to the viewer. I chose “Psalm II” because I find that its formal techniques aptly visualize the motility of intra- and extra-subjective processes involved in cinematic signification.

The conceit of the film is thus: the celluloid has been distorted through some chemical process so that the pigments of the film stock sit in a thick layer, and the sequence of frames makes it seem as though the chemicals are boiling over the screen. Droning sounds of static and
rumble are heard. From this mass, from the blotches of colored material drifting across the screen, from the incessant rumble emitting from the speakers, a meaningful image will occasionally emerge. Areas of different colors will suddenly be recognized as the contours of a face. The low-frequency rumble will gradually become the crashing of waves and the blowing of winds. Eventually, these representative images return into blobs and vibrations.

Writers have articulated the realist potential of photographic images, such as André Bazin (1960) who proclaimed that photography freed the plastic arts from the necessity to be representative. For him, photography’s chief power is to reveal the world as it really is, something that other visual arts, such as painting, can never really achieve. Therefore, photography has had the double effect of “[allowing] us on the one hand to admire in reproduction something that our eyes alone could not have taught us to love, and on the other, to admire the painting as a thing in itself” (Bazin 1960: 9). In this formulation, the photographic image is best engaged with not as a thing in itself, heterogenous from the world of which it makes an index, but as a transparent window revealing to us in unbiased clarity the reality of what sat in front of its lens, making more of the world available to significance. I would add that the motion picture camera similarly reveals the world to us with the additional capability to capture the duration and position of lit objects, and likewise, the microphone records the duration of sonic vibrations.

“Psalm II” demonstrates how these realist ideals fail to address the totality of expressive possibilities of which the audiovisual image is truly capable. Certainly, at some point in the history of the materials that came together to create this film, somebody had to reflect photons into a camera lens, which shuttled this light into film stock, causing a chemical reaction that indexed the light. However, the film stock has been manipulated in such a way that the presence
of these technologies has been rendered opaque to the viewer. Now, my goal here is not to belabor the ontology of the image. As Barthes points out, “nothing can prevent the Photograph from being analogical; but at the same time, Photography’s noeme has nothing to do with analogy” (1979: 88). In terms of motion photography’s relationship to its referent, what matters is not its representative quality but its mechanical process, the physical fact of silver halogens or digital light sensors being affected by photons, or of a microphone’s diaphragm being affected by vibrations in the air. In terms of motion photography as a signifying process, however, I must take notice of the heterogeneity between this mechanical process and the identifications at play. Barthes describes his belabored realization that while he feels there are “lineaments of truth” in the photograph, the image can only be a likeness to an identity, “imprecise, even imaginary,” given to the referent (1979: 100). Motion photography remains in the Symbolic mode when its mechanical process is the subject of an unwavering identification of values, when the image recording the thing that was is read as the image representing the thing that must have been.

“Psalm II,” meanwhile, reintroduces the Semiotic by rendering palpable the heterogeneity of its representation to its own objectivity. When the image of a face reveals itself in the shifting mass of photosensitive ooze, a shock of recognition occurs despite the graduality with which the image moved itself into frame; a disconnect occurs between the ignorance recognition affords us of the technology rendering this face and the unavoidable fact of the screen’s heterogeneity to the world we recognize in it. We are at once confronted by two facets of the image: in Jakobson's terms, its dual status as sign and object. On the one hand, we identify with the world the image presents us, experience the confidence of recognizing a face in the ooze, and ignore, on some level, the fact that this is merely ooze arranged in a certain way. On the other hand, we see the image as a thing in itself, sit with the actuality of how it fits into the present moment, appreciate
the fact that the image is composed of ooze arranged in a certain way. We at once revel in the
world the film briefly projects us into, “[passing] beyond the unreality of the thing represented,”
and accept the film as it exists in the actual world, an object in a network of other objects
(Barthes 1979: 117). In other words, we are put at an amorous distance from the image.

One may be inclined to say that “Psalm II” is only able to reintroduce the Semiotic
because a lineage of filmic practices precedes it. This, however, is not so. The Semiotic is a
mode, not a system, therefore its boundaries are not finite like the isolated history of the
cinematic medium. An artwork reintroducing the Semiotic does not merely destabilize the
notions of what can be done within the parameters of its medium but the very notion of what
those parameters can be. Take, for instance, “Monkeyshines, No. 1” (1890) by William K.L.
Dickson and William Heise, a film made more than a century before “Psalm II.” Produced in the
Edison labs, the film was made as a camera test meant to prove the technology’s potential (Spehr
2008); it was never exhibited, so it never signified anything to its contemporary viewers besides
a proof of concept. Nonetheless, the film, like “Psalm II,” puts the viewer at an amorous
distance. In the seconds-long sequence, we see a man’s pale figure making several gestures
against a black background, such as putting hands together as in prayer or sticking one arm out.
The image is severely out of focus, so features such as visage and digits are smudged out, the
silhouette blurred into a vaporous mass. Moreover, the celluloid is damaged such that every
frame is uniquely distorted with some combination of scratches, folds, and warping. Far from the
ideal of transparency sought by Bazin, “Monkeyshines” obstructs the real world that sat before
the camera lens and instead presents only itself to the viewer’s eyes. On the one hand, the viewer
recognizes the silhouette as a person, conscious that somebody was standing in front of that lens.
On the other hand, the objectivity of the film does not elude. As such, the viewer is put at an
amorous distance, presented with material exposed to the full range of potential signifying links extending beyond the screen. For instance, I am made to recognize something spectral about the blurry silhouette, to read into it a paranormality that was not intended.

By embracing their material contingency, “Psalm II” and “Monkeyshines” put the viewer at an amorous distance. Despite the latter film not coming from the tradition of experimental filmmaking that preceded “Psalm II,” both films nonetheless sit firmly in the signifying practices of the avant-garde, distorting the very grain of celluloid and sound to illustrate its infinite potential. In this way, they incline heavily toward the Semiotic mode but present just enough of the people who originally stood in front of the camera to inject themselves into the Symbolic structure of the viewer’s recognition and rupture it therein, leaving the identity that the viewer reads into these figures unstable. However, I am not arguing that experimental filmmaking is the necessary antidote to the cinema of myth. To prescribe the widespread creation of only the most avant-garde films would be inappropriate, as complete disassociation of any possibility to re-enter the Symbolic would mean, as Sontag puts it, “to commit art to being perpetually on the run” (2001: 11). After all, when it comes to qualifying the amorous distance with the ideas of Jakobson and Kristeva, we are speaking of the poetic function of cinema, not a cinema of poetry bound to certain anti-linguistic conventions. We are speaking not of works here but of text, not of “fragments of substance” but of a “methodological field,” not of units in a system of meaning but modalities of significance (Barthes 1986: 57). “Psalm II” and “Monkeyshines” are effective at enabling the amorous distance insofar as they encourage a generative restructuring of the viewer’s Symbolic structure of engagement, not merely because they distort images to the brink of nonrecognition. Because the poetic function encourages mobility between the Semiotic and
Symbolic modes, narrative films, which encourage identification on the part of the viewer with the world they construct, are also capable of deliberately enabling the amorous distance.

**Poetic Function in Narrative Films: 71 Fragments and Code Unknown**

Narrative film presupposes a subjectivity, one that already distinguishes itself from the world of external objects, one that makes Symbolic contracts that bind certain things together so that they may exist in the realm of significance to the exclusion of all else. In Kristeva’s terms, narratives in any medium create a nondisjunction between distinct terms (1984: 90). In narrative film, this becomes apparent in the associative power of editing wherein two shots of the same person from two different angles will be united in the viewer’s understanding as the same person within the continuity of duration. Due to the narrative’s ability to unite distinct terms into a whole, narrative structure “tends to center on an axial position that is explicitly or implicitly called ‘I’ or ‘author’” (Kristeva 1984: 91). While the narrative film presupposes an “I,” it can also put itself as a distance with that “I” by focusing on images for their own sake, negotiate their contractual binding to a Symbolic structure that the “I” would otherwise easily assimilate.

Two films by Michael Haneke, *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994) and *Code Unknown* (2000), exemplify how narrative cinema can facilitate an amorous distance. Both films utilize similar techniques to tell their fragmented narratives that follow a cast of characters whose lives are tenuously entwined, sometimes assembling in the same location or experiencing the same emotions, but mostly occurring in overt independence of each other. Both films switch focus between their respective strands, breaking up their sequence into fragments divided between black screens. These black screens thrust the viewer out of the film world, both signifying the complete disassociation between one character’s life and another and suddenly
confronting the viewer with the objectivity of the film, that is, making its externality to them unignorable. As such, the viewer assumes an active position of forging the significant links between the narrative threads, unlike a film such as *Dead Reckoning*, which does the Symbolic structuring in anticipation of the viewer. In other words, these films expose the viewing process as a creative practice wherein the spectator is put at an amorous distance and given the aim of navigating between the unified film world and the contingent real world.

71 Fragments begins with a text card that frames the viewer’s understanding of the film they are about to watch. Stark white text on a black background describes in the past tense how 19-year-old Maximilian B. (Lucas Biko) fatally shot three people in a bank before turning the gun on himself. This text puts the viewer into a Symbolic mode of engagement as it encourages them to read Max’s actions as a unified narrative in isolation from the myriad influences of internal and external forces that would characterize his historical reality. At the start, the film makes a myth of Max, introduces his character with the grave assumption of his inevitable life trajectory. His interiority is hollowed out, the infinite possibility of what he could have done instead shut out from our reading of him; he is reduced to this single action. One would, therefore, expect Max to be the film's focal point, but quickly, the film troubles this notion. The first character we see in the film is a young Romanian boy (Gabriel Cosmin Urdes) trudging across a field at dusk before stowing away in the back of a truck. One would think he was Max if he were not clearly younger than 19. The next fragment shows a young boy robbing an armory, methodically prying lockers open and collecting the firearms in a bag. This is not Max either, despite his possession of firearms and apparent inclination to transgress socially enforced morality. While the opening moments of the film imply that a narrative or thematic throughline will link the lives of these characters together and put them in relation to the shooting at the end
of the film, the film refuses to serve the structure that the opening text card imposed. While
certainly as a narrative film 71 Fragments cannot avoid making an analogical identity for the
people it represents, it leaves these identities incomplete and open, refusing to bind their actions
together into a coherent symbol of their character. This subversion of expectations in the opening
moments of the film, where two people who are not Max are nonetheless presented without their
names being given, thus leaving the viewer to guess if one of them is Max, does not play into the
interpretive frame presented by the opening nor outright negate it. Instead, the immediate
presence of these two characters is embraced, the scope of whose significance involves but is not
limited to their similarity to Max and his situation. They and Max are presented in their
unassimilated state to the viewer, who then must participate overtly in the unification of the
images into a narrative whole.

By introducing characters in isolated fragments, the film leaves the borders of their
identities open to the viewer. This can be seen in the lengthy shot of Max at a ping pong table,
endlessly paddling an automatic dispenser’s volley of balls. His movements are strained; he does
not hit every ball but swings at each regardless. This situation forces the viewer into the present
minutiae of what is going on. While a sense of Max as a frustrated person pushing himself too
hard looms, the duration of the shot and the stillness of the camera refuse to make his action into
mere myth or complete symbol. After a while, the connotations of pained athleticism fade, and
we are left with an infinitely workable present. We notice that he adjusts his rhythm when the
machine jams, that he shifts his paddle into place every time he tries to make contact with
another ball. In this way, the Semiotic restructures this fragment as we see the “cutting up of the
corporeal and social continuum” as his rhythmic movements clash with the arhythmic scattering
of ping pong balls on the table and swaying of the net, its objectivity rupturing the dogma of his
disciplined training (Kristeva 1984: 40). Max’s introduction thus straddles the line of giving him an identity and rendering him external to any such identification, and likewise the viewer is given the opportunity to explore these two options at once.

In this way, the film illustrates how we reinvent ourselves with each moment, a theme also expressed in the use of the black screen to thrust the viewer out of sync with the narrative world, conveying the fluid nature of identity, how one person is necessarily different at two different times. For example, the Romanian boy falls asleep in the truck in one fragment, and then the black screen cuts in to signify to the viewer another separate fragment, but then we cut back to the truck from the same camera angle, except it is now morning, and the boy is waking up. Between these two scenes, the boy is asleep, but instead of making an abstract synthesis of this action, the film uses the black screen not merely to stand in for the time lost but to sanction these two different moments from each other, to trouble the viewer’s urge to synthesize these two fragments into an identity for the boy. By contrast, the boy is given his most coherent identity in a later scene involving a news report of his story. We finally learn his name is Marian as the interviewer asks questions worded in such a way to craft a narrative of his life on the streets leading to his immigration to Austria. We see this broadcast through several layers of mediation, first through the interviewer and translator whose role in this scene illustrates how Marian’s identity is constructed through the careful wringing of several different handlers and through the television screen whose buzzing display puts us at a distance from the report. Again, we are made to engage doubly with the film as this sequence is at the same time narrativized through the news report and objectified by filtering the report through the impassioned functioning of the television display. This also goes for all of Max’s actions leading up to his sudden outburst of violence. Instead of weighing his frustrations together and making a myth of his story to convey
an inevitable tragedy hiding within a man silently angry with the world, the film highlights the supremacy of his present choices that build off of the past but whose movement into the future is not determined by it. The fragmentary structuring of his actions, intercut with the lives of others, demonstrates the fallacy of their union in myth. Every new action he takes reinvents who he is instead of solidifying it.

Not only are the characters’ identities troubled, but the narrative “I” is also continually questioned by the film's reoccurring embrace of its poetic function manifest as an interest in the scene in total disregard of the narrative surrounding it. Such is the case in the strand of a couple trying to adopt the young girl Anni (Corina Ader), for example. In one fragment, Inge (Anne Bennett) meets Anni for the first time, but Anni runs off, and another girl tugs on Inge’s jacket, asking if she’s her new mommy. In this sequence, Inge and Anni are the focal points of the scenes; they are what the narrative discourse centers on. Likewise, the camera makes these two the center at the expense of everyone else. We do not see the little girl tugging on Inge’s coat but see within the close-up frame the fabric tense in several rapid bursts. However, in the next fragment, the camera peers down a hallway at Anni sitting in her new bedroom clutching her new jacket. While she is the focal point of the frame, the distance the camera puts between itself and Anni and the lack of edits to abstract the space keep us exterior to her state of mind. The composition would imply that Anni is being watched, but Inge is absent. The disjunction between these two fragments, a black screen dividing them, strains the axial “I” with the task of reconciling the inherent isolation of these two moments. In another such troubling of the axial “I,” a static shot captures a television with a recording of one of Max’s matches being paused, rewound, and replayed in slow motion by an offscreen coach berating his performance. As the coach’s rant escalates, he leaves the recording playing. At first, the dialogue and footage
complement each other, as the coach describes Max’s mistakes while the television replays those mistakes for us, but the longer the coach speaks, the more the footage moves out of sync with him. It now shows Max dejectedly walking away from his opponent while his coach repeats how he must follow the ball. Focusing on the television allows it to exist for its own sake, independent from the framing of Max and his coach, whereas intercutting between these two parties would have indicated a Symbolic unity between their conflict and the televisual image. Instead of a neat thematic interpretation, the film invites the viewer to consider the disjunction between the television and the discourse of the coach interpreting the footage, presenting the uninterpreted interaction to the viewer who may symbolize these objects after parsing them at an amorous distance.

News reports of overseas conflict interject throughout the film. The reporters’ relaxed cadence, a familiar convention of the job, renders emotionally inert the subject matter they report on. Images of lines of Bosnian refugees, US helicopters firing indiscriminately from the skies of Somalia, a Haitian man pulling a gun out in a crowd, and so on, are presented coldly, rendered into myth as the news channel puts these disparate conflicts in sequence, a transition back to the newsroom bridging between each of them. These non-Austrian locales are symbolically categorized as foreign, “not us,” by the news, presented to its Austrian audience not as they really are but as what they signify for them: an apolitical symbol of overseas conflict. Denotatively, these are foreign countries with material local histories, but connotatively, they signify “not-us,” an understanding that neutralizes inquisitiveness. These reports take on shocking resonance at the end of the film. Three-quarters into the film, we see a report from December 23, 1993, informing the viewer about the stage of the siege on Sarajevo. The formal conventions of newsroom filmmaking take authentic footage, whose recording was contingent on
whatever happened to occur while the cameraman was there, and work it into the Symbolic structure of its audience. “People run, trying to dodge sniper’s bullets,” says the reporter as the footage quickly cuts between different shots of people running through the streets, their backs to the camera. Without showing anything abject to the viewer, anything that would threaten to disrupt the order of things, the newscast instead broadcasts a myth of the residents of Sarajevo by evoking a diffuse threat with no cause and a situation with no depth. Once again, however, we are watching this through the mediation of a television screen whose analog display chaffs against the second level of recording by the movie camera. The news, determined to make an abstraction of real conflict to fit their Symbolic structure, is made into an object, signaling to the viewer the boundaries of its rhetorical strategy, and eliciting a distanced engagement.

This takes us to the film’s climactic act of violence. Refusing to neutralize its gravity through Symbolic abstraction, instead of making the violence an analogy for some axiomatic theme, the film lingers on this action to illustrate how violence disrupts order. The act of violence is spontaneous; no earlier scenes of premeditation being shown, Max simply enters the bank and fires at offscreen victims with a pistol. The film does not make a tragic symbol of those who happened to be in the bank. We do not bear direct witness to any of the people being shot, and because of this, the film does not reduce the lives of these victims to mere symbols of innocents harmed in the fray of violence. Due to the lack of cuts within this fragment, excluding Max’s point of view, the unsymbolized presence of his act ruptures the symbolizing impulse of the spectator latent from the title card at the beginning. While Max is made the focal point, giving him some Symbolic weight as the thing around which the world at this moment is structured, the camera’s unbroken hold on him simultaneously gives him an objective quality, presenting his exteriority to our structure of how things ought to be. Later, in the film’s final scene, the report of
the siege of Sarajevo is replayed, but this time we see what preceded the small section we viewed earlier. Before the Sarajevo report, Max’s shooting is reported with the same externalizing rhetoric as the other reports. We are suddenly made aware not only of the drastic omission of Max as a subject capable of infinite interactions with the world around him, but we also feel the weight of excluding the wide breadth of the humanity of those Serbians. We are disquieted both by the realization of our earlier manipulation by the rhetoric of the newscasters and the current mystification of Max, whom the film had illustrated to us in his uncontained multitude.

From its opening moments, *Code Unknown* is even more explicit about its aim to explore the heterogeneity of those parts that constitute significance and hone the objectivity of signifiers to pluralize meaning. We open on the image of a game of charades at a school for deaf children. The camera points at a girl who tenses her shoulders and backs into a wall before crouching to the floor. Suddenly her demeanor changes; she relaxes her face and stands up casually, now waiting for her peers to start guessing. In this unbroken long shot, the girl projects two different messages: firstly, her riddle, and secondly, her solicitation for guesses. The film form, however, troubles the clear delineation between these two messages. The image of her tensed and cautious, seemingly cowering against a wall, is the film's first image, provided no explanation through preceding context. Because the camera holds unbroken as she goes from playing the game to waiting for guesses, the film orients itself toward the isolated objectivity of the substance (gesture) channeling her messages, and the effect is such that, between her crouched and her standing, ambiguity dominates. The viewer’s eventual arrival at the delineation of these distinct messages is thus experienced as a mobile process.

After this first scene, *Code Unknown* goes even further to extenuate the “fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects” by using unbroken long takes in its fragments, unlike 71
Fragments, which often uses expressive editing to bring the viewer closer to the inner discourse of a character’s subjectivity. With its stricter adherence to long takes, Code Unknown illustrates the ununified nature of society, where although entrance into a Symbolic register is necessary for entrance into it, society itself is a collection of multiple Symbolic orders, each asserting its own supremacy. As Barthes writes, the phrase “dominant ideology” is better understood as “ideology of the dominant class” because ideology “is precisely the idea insofar as it dominates: ideology can only be dominant” (1975: 32). Every character in Code Unknown engages with the world through their own Symbolic structuring of things, through an idiosyncratic binding of certain meanings to certain facets of the world they live in, and while much of these structures are shared among a society they are by no means universal to the group. The viewer, engaging with the film at an amorous distance, observes the ideological discrepancies not as the myth of unavoidable conflict between members of society but as the historical reality of the polysemic signifying process in which they are all involved. We see this all play out in the film’s inciting incident, where Jean (Alexandre Hamidi) throws a piece of trash at Maria (Luminița Gheorghiu), a Romanian immigrant, which prompts Amadou (Ona Lu Yenke) to assail him, insisting he ought to apologize. As the conflict draws attention from passersby, more and more people commentate on what’s going on: a shopkeeper calls the two of them hooligans; Jean’s sister-in-law, Anne (Juliette Binoche), yells at Amadou to let Jean go; police officers detain Maria for not having a French ID and Amadou for not wanting to be touched. We see a vast network of interpretations of what’s going on, what ought to be done, and what should be felt; in other words, we see a variety of Symbolic orders butting up against each other, each insisting on their own validity and each unable to reconcile with each other. We the viewers, however, are put at a distance; the long take makes the space and duration of the scene concrete and immediate, oriented toward nothing
but itself, amoral and affective. The film form does not sign a contract with any one structure but elevates the image’s objectivity to an explicit degree to allow motility between Symbolic structures such as the ones the characters try to express to each other in this scene.

Exploring discrepancies in the film’s significance does not preclude certain avenues of Symbolic reading but exposes the motility of the signifying process that imbues the text with meaning. This is apparent in a shot where we see an analog television display showing footage of Anne in front of a camera in a dilapidated room, talking to an offscreen man who says the room is filling with poisonous gas and that he wants to watch her die painfully. With no context, this fragment being isolated in the film’s sequence between two black screens, the viewer takes an active role in configuring the significance of what is in the frame, and thus narrative and affective readings clash with each other. Anne looks at the camera with grave facial expressions and eventually starts crying and responding to the man’s voice in a distressed tone. While on a narrative level, this is merely an audition for a film, the panic of this mini-fiction is nonetheless transmitted. Through an investment in the immediacy of the grimy walls of the room, Anne’s face, the vintage grunge of the display through which the footage is playing, and so on, the articulable narrative of the film can coexist with its pre-verbal, affective quality, both transmittable to the viewer, both variously intersecting with and diverging from each other. Later in the film, when Anne is finally on set acting out the scene we previously saw as an audition, we first observe from outside her camera crew, observe the apparatus that transfers the image, continent on the minutiae of her performance and the coordination of the crew in each take, into a narrative. We then enter the perspective of the crew’s camera and see Anne from that film’s axial “I.” We then briefly see the footage extend beyond the narrative, see as the director calls cut when Anne looks directly into the camera lens, then footage of the next take, including Anne and
her costar preparing for the director to say “action.” We observe the multiplicity of the poetic text from an amorous distance. We have access to it all: the terse narrative of this thriller-within-a-film and the behind-the-scenes construction of this narrative. All are given a seat at the table; all are given a chance to contribute to the significance of the image. In the culmination of this thread of Anne as an actress, we watch in a new fragment a scene from Anne’s movie (which we intuit from the rapid editing that suddenly makes itself present). After the drama, the camera pulls back to reveal that we were watching a projection of the film in the studio. With this camera move, we discover that, in fact, this excerpt we just watched was separate from the real world, yet affected us viewers all the same. This shot aptly illustrates the concerns of the amorous distance; the poetic objectivity and abstract narrative unity of a film are presented simultaneously, and the viewer takes in these two presentations simultaneously but chooses how to invest meaning in them.

Pushing against the nondisjunction of its narrative, *Code Unknown* will instead linger on the singular impact of scenes and stretch what is understood to be the “I” of the author. At one point, Anne is ironing clothes when she hears screaming from another apartment emanating loudly enough to peek above the sound of the television. She turns down the program, stops what she is doing, and listens with her head down; then, when the screaming stops, she turns her television back on and goes back to ironing clothes. Now, while the interruption of Anne’s routine does not motivate her to discover the source of the cries, the rupture of her routine does have a lingering effect. The yelling she hears does not bind itself to anything else in the shot—the camera does not press into Anne’s face to evoke the sound’s emotional impact, music does not start to indicate the urgency of the situation—and thus, it beckons one to fill in where this object stops, to begin imagining what it signifies and what brought this sound to be. Who
screamed? Why? What is there to be done? Moreover, why will the film not assimilate this scream into some structure of understanding? Through an investment into the scream for its own sake, the film poses these questions to the viewer, pushes them to re-symbolize what is going on rather than do that work for them.

In the film’s penultimate sequence, several characters return to a place they would like to call their own, attempting to imbue the space with a Symbolic structure of meaning. All throughout this sequence, however, the class of deaf children is shown drumming in the streets, and in a startling transgression of the film’s most frequent convention, the sound of the drums carries over into the black screens that otherwise divided the fragments in silence. This incessant beat soundtracking the last minutes of the film recalls Kristeva’s description of how the Semiotic’s “establishment of a distinctiveness and its ordering” occurs “in a rhythmic but nonexpressive totality,” a pattern of affective surges occurring temporally (Kristeva 1984: 40). Despite not articulating a contractual binding of this sequence to a theme or message, the drumming that plays over this final sequence of fragments illustrates the characters’ and our process of imbuing the space with significance. Maria returns to the same space as the confrontation at the film’s beginning, looks at the flowers next to which Amadou assaulted Jean and the old corner she would sit, and the pounding drums that persist on and on evoke the Semiotic binding of the present moment with our memories of the past. While no flashback occurs, the lack of cuts presents the block to us in full, ready to be brought into our world of significance, which at this point includes Maria’s narrative. After cutting to black, the film presents two respective shots of Anne and Georges returning home. We see Anne quickly enter a passcode, unlocking the front door to her apartment complex. Meanwhile, Georges inputs the wrong code and needs to call Anne to ask for the right one, the camera lingering as he waits at
the payphone, anticipating his wife’s response. The discrepancy in duration between both of their efforts is apparent, with Anne’s lasting a few seconds and Georges needing to take some minutes. Despite this discrepancy, the drumming continues at a steady tempo with predictable rhythmic patterns, dividing the time each of them takes to enter the apartment into the same enduring substance of time’s duration, offering both Anne and Georges the same impulse to imbue every moment with meaning, to bind the current moment with significance and Symbolic structures.

The film’s final shot returns to the classroom seen at the beginning, centering now on a boy standing before the same white wall. Devoid of immediate context, one assumes he is playing the game of charades, but his gesturing involves a sequence of hand movements longer and more intricate than the girl’s careful retreat. Presumably, the boy is signing, but the film presents no translation, so the meaning of the boy’s message is lost to anyone not literate in French Sign Language. Nonetheless, his messaging undoubtedly belongs to the realm of significance. The absence of translation is not a negation of meaning but an underscoring of its contingency. The guessing game that the viewer is here meant to play is both an obstacle to immediate Symbolic structuring and a generative demand characteristic of all significations but made explicit in this shot. Such is the potential of a cinema that orients toward itself, thereby facilitating an amorous distance.

Jakobson’s model places the message in the center of communication as the seam that distinguishes and yet connects the other facets. The message itself enables the creation of meaning. To ignore the material of the message, to pretend as though the material cannot exist separately from any other piece of signification, is to stifle oneself under the myth that the pieces of a cultural text function in lockstep with each other, that newness is not achievable, that culture is and does not do. Likewise, a message is not merely its material; the other functions allow a
text to be a cultural text, for it to travel from one person to another. Hence the poetic function of cinema allows for polysemy, not the absolute dismissal of all meaning, for such a model of poetic function would be a stifling myth of a message’s eternal, unusable materiality, and certainly not its simple assimilation into an unwavering Symbolic structure. As Sontag writes of art criticism: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (2001: 14). A poetics of cinema should therefore be an “erotics” of cinema, the study of the pleasure found in the moviegoing subject’s amorous distance. The amorous distance is amorous because it is mobile; the viewing subject takes pleasure in moving between the twin realities of the film as a unified world and the film as an immediate, infinitely configurable object. Barthes articulates the location of the erotics of any cultural text: “Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so” (1975: 7). Pleasure comes from the here-and-now presence of the Semiotic and the Symbolic, that which exists on either side of the screen providing itself for the viewer to use.
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