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# Narrative Delay and the Nature of Love in the Short Film, Come

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**ABSTRACT**

By showing teenagers falling in love, and then cutting to the loving couple, now elderly, the short film *Come* brilliantly uses the excision of the narrative tradition of delay in order to revolutionize the cinema's presentation of love in theoretical synchronicity with Irving Singer's philosophical study, *The Nature of Love*.

**KEYWORDS**

philosophy of Love

ageism

cinema studies

narrative theory

Irving Singer

**Narrative Delay and the Nature of Love in *Come***

In *Reading for the Plot*, theorist Peter Brooks suggests from a Freudian framework that storytelling is about delay, quickly stating a problem and then invoking schemes to keep it from being solved until the climax (Brooks 1992: 3).

Hollywood feature-length cinema, based on Aristotle's tripartite division of narrative (beginning, middle, and end), via the dominance of the Three-Act Structure script, is a prime exemplar of this storytelling tradition in our era (Aristotle 1961: 3). The consequences of the dominance of this model for the future of humanity are vastly under-studied. For example, the cinema deforms its representation of social behavior via demands caused by the expected length of the narrative. In the case of romantic comedy, generic expectations pigeonhole the development of a couple's love relationship into a clichéd format: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, and boy gets girl.

As Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson argue, the structured nature of Hollywood genre cinema is indeed remarkably fecund (Bordwell 1981: 150). For example, both *Vertigo* and *The Graduate* overcome the purported limitations of the romantic formula to employ convention to shatter audience expectations. In

the former, the male hero falls in love with his lover twice, first as a ghost and then as a real woman; in the latter, boy loses girl only after she has come to realize that he is her mother's lover as well. However, short cinema, because of its different narrative design, provides opportunities for an even more radical resistance to feature-length storytelling than even Hitchcock or Nichols can imagine. A remarkable case in point is *Come*, a four-minute exploration of the nature of love.

The film's structure, an elderly woman's recollection of how she first made love to her current husband, cutting from geriatric present to adolescent past, provides a startling exegesis of philosopher Irving Singer's modern theory of love. In the concluding chapter of his monumental three-volume work on the nature of love, Singer structures the development of love in completely different terms from the Hollywood feature. Instead of the three phases of the boy meets girl model, he argues for an alternative tripartite development: falling in love, being in love, and staying in love (Singer 1987: 370). The beginning and ending of *Come* directly represent the final stage, staying in love, while its middle portion, the flashback, documents the first stage of falling in love. Via conventional filmic ellipsis, *Come* skips over the crucial middle stage of being in love.

At first glance, this choice seems to doom *Come* to conventional Hollywood cliché. We can summon thousands of filmic images of the sexually exploratory teenager. Similarly, the elderly woman gazing out her window at the sea (shot 3), reflecting upon what we at first are led to believe is the loss of her vibrant youth, is a similar familiar image of timeless femininity. Sociologically, the ellipsis seems equally crushing to the artistic aspirations of *Come*. While it is easy to fall in love, and we all know what it is like to be in love, it is the staying in love part (with a divorce rate near 50% in the Western world) that provides the

most interest. To illustrate this crisis, Singer quotes Robert Brin that romantic love “can only eventuate in misery” and Sigmund Freud that “a woman loses her lover when she takes him as a husband” (Singer 1987: 371, 378).

Herein lies the narrative genius of *Come*, whose last shot (Shot 52) seems designed to obliterate Freud as much as Singer’s book does. The elderly woman whispers into her husband’s ear, speaking the only word in the film, “come,” for the second time, initiating a new sexual encounter similar to the one we see begun, but not finished, in Shot 46, as the teenage version of her husband first puts his hand on her breast and moves it down her torso. Director Marianne Olsen Ulrichsen and Singer, artist and philosopher, are best understood as fellow travelers in the defense of modern love as both possible and deeply meaningful. Singer assembles his philosophical reflections to fight against accepting modernity’s collapsing commitment to love. Singer argues, “The devotion one occasionally sees in elderly couples may well have resulted from their having once been in love with each other... The mere passage of time cannot change being in love into staying in love... On the contrary, the aging process often leads to separation—a search for love elsewhere or even a feeling that interpersonal love is futile” (Singer 1987: 387-8). Yet just as *Come* provides an alternative depiction of the nature of love among the elderly, Singer ends his book with a theory of harmonization, a prescription for redeeming love’s possibility and stability: “What I refer to as being in love is itself a kind of harmonization between falling in love and staying in love, between feverish yearning and more or less permanent union” (Singer 1987: 440). While it is many other things, a beautiful aesthetic exploration of the Norwegian seaside, for example, *Come* is most certainly also a film which uses time to express the harmonization of love between two people, exactly resonant with Singer’s philosophy of love.

As a short film, *Come* must, via ellipsis, compact the story of perhaps a sixty-year relationship into four minutes. To do so, Ulrichsen invents a complex symbolic structure to represent Singer's harmonic stage of "being in love." The only tangible visual reference to this stage occurs in Shot 4, as the camera slightly reframes the elderly woman walking around her house. She comes to rest in medium close-up in front of a photograph of her younger self and her husband, perhaps at their wedding. However, the *mise-en-scène* of this image tips Ulrichsen's hand. The elderly woman's face obliterates her younger self's image in the photograph in the background, leaving only her husband visible. The film plays a temporal trick on us, perhaps making us believe that she is a lonely widow. We only come to learn this is not so in Shot 49, 13 seconds from the end of the film, as she again places the man's watch into his pocket.

An unexpected cut from Shot 4 of the elderly woman in front of the photograph to a close-up of a teenage boy's face (Shot 5) engages the film's play with time. Shot 6 rips us back into the present, a close-up of the elderly woman's hand resting on a table upon which also sits a pocket watch. I believe this watch is the allegorical key to *Come*. When the teenage boy in Shot 27 realizes that his pocket is empty, missing his watch, we come to realize that the younger version of the elderly woman has stolen it. The film is ultimately about stealing time, finding the almost impossible harmonization between having found someone to love early in life, not bungling the relationship along the way, and having the great fortune of having lived together for more than half a century. Almost no one is lucky enough to have so many breaks allowing this to occur. However, I believe both Singer and Ulrichsen position this "being in love" harmonization as an ideal goal in life.

This reading of *Come* demonstrates that the short film, because it must rely on the rapid deployment of symbols to tell its story, can offer an alternative model to the Hollywood feature. By projecting the philosophical ideas of Irving Singer onto the film's depiction of the nature of love, I have attempted to show how fertile the project of short cinema can be. I do not mean to denigrate Hollywood filmmaking by doing so. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Professor Dumbledore gives Hermione Granger his "time-turner," a pocket watch that allows the adolescent Ms. Granger to attend many more classes than a 24 hour day will allow. I can't help but think that Hermione's discovery of her own identity, both sexual and intellectual, dovetails with the elderly woman's experiences in *Come*. But that's another, much longer, story.

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#### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Walter Metz, Chair and Professor of the Department of Cinema and Photography at Southern Illinois University, is the author of two books: *Engaging Film Criticism: Film History and Contemporary American Cinema* (2004) and *Bewitched* (2007). His book about the sitcom, *Gilligan's Island*, is forthcoming (2012). He is currently at work on a new book manuscript about Dr. Seuss, *The Simpsons*, and Pixar Animation Studios.

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