

Winter 2016

Perambulation, or the Real Miracle of Morgan's Creek

Walter C. Metz

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wmetz@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cp_articles

Recommended Citation

Metz, Walter C. "Perambulation, or the Real Miracle of Morgan's Creek." *Mise-en-Scene: The Journal of Film and Visual Narration* 1, No. 1 (Winter 2016).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Cinema and Photography at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

“Perambulation, or the Real Miracle of Morgan’s Creek”

by Walter Metz
Southern Illinois University

To walk is to do that which cannot be done in a darkened movie theater. Or, to put it differently, despite the fact that what defines human bodies is their ability to perambulate, we go to the cinema to exercise that other part of ourselves, our minds. But while we can dream of things that our bodies cannot do, isn’t it more than a bit odd that our cinematic fantasies are so often about the banal, about things like walking?

The visual design of the cinematic image, long ago described by a mysterious French term, *mise-en-scene*, sadly fading from our critical language, is grounded in the representation of movement, of both the camera and the characters. When characters walk, or cameras relocate their position via the walking of crewmembers, the cinema becomes an art form of moving images. This is why the discourse of art history, the composition of the two-dimensional image, fails to encapsulate the cinema. The discipline of film studies needed to turn to theater to capture the time-based, three-dimensional status of the cinematic image.

The great studies of *mise-en-scene* were produced in the 1970s, establishing a formalist language for understanding the cinema. In the wake of these sophisticated studies of the visual design of the image, critical theory methods displaced the solitary attention to formal design. However, with the bathwater, out went the baby. What can be done about this lamentable situation? The *mise-en-scene* critics of the 1970s formalist school attended almost exclusively to masterpieces. Vlada Petric’s “From *Mise-en-scene* to *Mise-en-shot*” analyzes

Jean Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game* (1939); Brian Henderson’s “The Long Take” compares the visual design of films by F.W. Murnau, Max Ophuls, Orson Welles, and Kenji Mizoguchi. I would advocate something more populist. This essay intervenes by using a traditional *mise-en-scene* analysis of a Classical Hollywood film comedy, where zany antics purportedly trump studied masterful image construction.

This essay offers an aesthetic study of walking in Preston Sturges’ *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek* (1944), in which Trudy (Betty Hutton) gets drunk and impregnated by an unremembered soldier (“ratzky-watzky”) on leave from World War II, only to have the governor declare at film’s end that her devoted, schlemiel boyfriend, Norval (Eddie Bracken) has always been the true father of the sextuplets to whom she gives birth. The film relies on four long take walking sequences to narrate its story of Norval’s love for Trudy. Early on the film establishes that Norval and Trudy’s walk from screen right to screen left involves leaving her home and heading toward the dangerous downtown. Late in its second act, the film violates its established aesthetic rules. In the fourth and last walking sequence, Trudy and Norval’s walk screen right to screen left circumvents the downtown and brings them unexpectedly to her house, thus showing ideologically that no matter what direction Trudy may walk in, the film will ultimately lead her back home.

My pedagogical encounter with *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek* is perhaps as good as any place with which to begin this analysis. One of the things that fascinates me about academic study is how much of what we do is a set of “bequeathed” tools from those who trained us. In the early 1990s, I served as a teaching assistant for Thomas Schatz’s introductory film aesthetics course, “Narrative Strategies” at the University of Texas at Austin. In the course, Prof. Schatz performed a three-week



Fig. 1: During the first walking sequence in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (Preston Sturges, 1944), the camera frames Norval (Eddie Bracken) and Trudy (Betty Hutton) without clutter

reading of Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), demonstrating that the film is an aesthetic ballet of editing, moving from "the park bench" scene with virtually no editing, to the "key scene" consisting of dozens of short shots, to the "party scene" full of dizzying shifts between long shots and close-ups. For many years as a graduate student, I stole this analysis (well, delivered it with attribution), but after a few iterations in my own classroom as an assistant professor, the guilt utterly overcame me. I set out on a mad quest to find a replacement that would serve the same purpose of demonstrating how a Hollywood film, in the hands of a great visual and narrative stylist, could modulate its aesthetic practices across its structure to create a meaningful encounter with the social world.

After literally watching hundreds of films—both canonical and virtually unknown—about which I had absolutely nothing interesting to say about aesthetics, I stumbled upon *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, my *Notorious*. The film redeems Trudy after she is impregnated and abandoned by a soldier on leave, marrying her off to Norval, who has long been in love with her. Early in the first act, Trudy convinces Norval to let her borrow his car so that she may go to a party with the soldiers, against her father's wishes. During a three-minute



Fig. 2: At the end of the first walk, Trudy must cry on cue to manipulate Norval into letting her borrow his car

walk downtown, the *mise-en-scene* of the shots features nothing between camera and characters, and relatively deserted streets at night. (Fig. 1) Sturges shoots the entire scene in one take. The shot establishes the film's geographical rules, that the characters walking from screen right to screen left involves a journey from Trudy's residential neighborhood to downtown. (Fig. 2)

Then, in the first moments of Act II, after she has discovered she is pregnant and unable to locate the father, Trudy and her sister walk back home from the doctor's and lawyer's offices downtown. The *mise-en-scene* suddenly features a tremendous amount of clutter between camera and characters,



Fig. 3: During the second walk, the camera frames Trudy and her sister, Emmy (Diana Lynn) behind a military jeep a bustling street in broad daylight, including soldiers in a jeep drinking wantonly in the bright

Featurette: Perambulation

light of the morning. (Fig. 3) Again, the short scene of one minute is shot in one take. While the characters are now walking screen left to right, this reinforces the Act I operating rules, as Trudy and her sister are walking from downtown back home.

In the third walking sequence, in the middle of Act II, Trudy tells Norval that she is pregnant. This is a reprise of the first walking sequence, as Trudy stumbles over telling Norval the truth, in the same way she stumbled over conniving him out of his car earlier in the film. Again, they are walking screen right to left, heading away from Trudy's home toward the downtown. While the *mise-en-scene* generally replicates the first walking sequence, with little between camera and characters, the streets are noticeably less deserted this night. Potential small-town busybodies populate the porches of the homes they pass, capable of overhearing Trudy's secret at any moment. At one moment, Trudy is almost run over by a horse and buggy, demonstrating that it is not merely the modernity of the borrowed car that has led Trudy to ruin, but traditional small-town life itself. (Fig. 4) Suddenly, in



Fig. 4: During the third walk, a horse and carriage almost run Trudy and Norval down while they are crossing the street

the midst of this one take sequence built on the same aesthetic foundation as the first walking sequence, Sturges cuts to an insert shot, a close-up of Trudy's face. (Fig.)

Was this cut forced by an inability to film the long take during production? Almost certainly! Yet it is equally certain that the shattering of the film's aesthetic rules is a stroke of genius. As Norval discovers Trudy's secret as they arrive downtown, the film's stylistic practices spiral into chaos. When Norval reels backwards, realizing that Trudy's father, Constable Kockenlocker (William Demarest) will think that he has defiled his daughter, the camera stops its inexorable movement left, to instead follow Norval's fall back screen right. Thus, the direction of character and camera movement still maintains its rule-based deployment of space, but now with significant disruption in the inexorable flow from home to downtown. (Fig. 6)



Fig. 5: An insert shot of Trudy during the third walk breaks the two-shot, long take pattern of the film's representation of walking established by the first two sequences



Fig. 6: At the end of the third walk, Norval sits down when he figures out that Constable Kockenlocker (William Demarest) will assume he is the father of Trudy's baby

Finally, during the last moments of Act II, Trudy and Norval try to solve her problem together. Trudy suggests suicide, but Norval, remarking that one is not supposed to use one's tires during wartime for such frivolousness, suggests marrying her. The *mise-en-scene* has reverted to the Act I sparseness, nothing between camera and characters. The town's streets are now deserted in broad daylight, indicating that Norval and Trudy are on their own; the community will not intervene to help them out of their mess. The editing of this fourth walking sequence is full of insert shots and close-ups; the orderliness of the one take walking sequences from earlier in the film has been completely decimated.

Finally, the direction of character movement tricks us: the characters are walking screen right to left, proposing a journey downtown, but the sequence comes to a shocking conclusion when Constable Kockenlocher brandishes his gun from his front porch at Norval's line, "What's the matter with bigamy?" (Fig. 7) The ideological point of the film is finally expressed, that all roads lead back to Trudy's house; the home is the place wherein one's problems will be solved. Act III will merely involve a mopping up, as Trudy delivers the litter of



Fig. 7: At the end of the fourth walk, Trudy and Norval greet Constable Kockenlocker on his porch, interrupting the cleaning of his service revolver

potential new soldiers, and the governor decrees with the force of law that the children have all along been Norval's.

In as frenzied a comedy as ever produced in the Hollywood studio system, *mise-en-scene* analysis reveals that, as with the studied compositions of the films of the great masters—Bergman, Mizoguchi, Welles—the language of cinema is a mobile one. When people walk in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, things happen, and Preston Sturges' cinema must move along with them to capture the aesthetic, narrative, and ideological implications of their mobility, both physical and psychological.

Works Cited

- Henderson, Brian. "The Long Take." *Movies and Methods*. Volume 1. Ed. Bill Nichols. Berkeley: U of California P, 1976.
- Petric, Vlada. "From Mise-En-Scene to Mise-En-Shot: Analysis of a Sequence." *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*. 7.3 [1982].

