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AND THE ABSENCE OF CAUSAL
NARRATIVE PROGRESSION
IN *LOREN CASS***

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1. Introduction

The overwhelming majority of fictional films and television shows make use of narrative structures based on the ‘three Cs’ of classical drama—causality, conflict, and change—which can be traced to the continued influence of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and its stipulation that good plots will involve a “hero passing by a series of probable or necessary stages from bad fortune to good, or from good to bad”,¹ along with its denigration of episodic plots “where there is neither probability nor necessity in the sequence of [their] episodes”.² Many screenplays that offer variations on linear, classical three act structure—combining multiple storylines, e.g. *Short Cuts* (Altman, 1993), presenting scenes out of chronological order, e.g. *Memento* (Nolan, 2000), or doing both, e.g. *21 Grams* (Inarritu, 2003)—are arguably only superficially ‘alternative’ since they still conceive of and structure their plots as a series of causally connected events, even if the order of presentation obscures the connections and delays comprehension of the underlying causality. Since a causal relation between events underlies both conflict and change, insofar as conflicts are based on the potential for situations to change where such change is the effect of some action or set of actions that brings it about, causality is the most fundamental principle of narrative in classical drama: one event occurring not just after, but *because of*, another.

Such structures give a framework for a relatively easy understanding of the meaning or significance of events—i.e. in terms of their relation to events in the scenes preceding them, of which they can be understood as effects or consequences—thereby contributing to a film’s

or show's consumability and so its potential for commercial success. However, this further entrenches this approach to storytelling as predominant, since screenplays that don't organize their events in terms of causal connections will be seen as 'uncommercial' and so will have almost no chance of finding the funding to produce them or the means of distribution needed to reach an audience. This is especially the case given the influence on producers and financiers of what is taught in film schools, screenwriting workshops, and 'how-to' screenwriting manuals, nearly all of which advocate some form of linear, cause-and-effect-based structure as the 'right' way to tell a story.³

Having most or all stories told in a similar way, regardless of differences in content, is limiting both for the kinds of stories that can be told and for the modes of understanding audience members are exposed to and to which they can become habituated.⁴ These limitations obviously reinforce each other: the more people take for granted any one approach as *the* way to tell a story, the fewer stories there will be that are told differently; the fewer alternatives that people can experience, the more likely it is for them to take for granted the dominant approach. A film that *doesn't* take this approach and still 'works' is worthy of attention for the possibilities it suggests for genuinely alternative forms of cinematic and narrative construction. Such a film it is also worth attending to for what it can reveal about the concept of narrativity itself; as Gregory Curry (2006) writes, "one way to test any theory about what [the determinant features of narrativity] are is to construct cases in which those determinants—or the things you claim are determinants—are varied, in the service of then seeing whether, intuitively, this results in a variation in the narrativity of the discourse".⁵ While causality, conflict, and change are almost universally held to be necessary conditions of narrativity itself,⁶ not every fictional work that plausibly counts as a narrative in fact contains these elements.⁷

Among the small number of films that downplay or de-emphasize causal connections between scenes and events, most tend to fall into one of two groups. The first consists of films containing multiple storylines that are only loosely related—e.g. *Nashville* (Altman, 1975), *Code Unknown* (Haneke, 2000) and many of Guillermo Arriaga's screenplays. The second consists of anthology films comprised of a number of separate, self-contained segments linked by a common thread or theme—e.g. *Dreams* (Kurosawa, 1990), *Slacker* (Linklater, 1991), and *Three Times* (Hou, 2005). What is notable about the film I want to focus on here—Chris Fuller's *Loren Cass* (2007)—is not only that it eschews all 'three Cs' (causality, conflict,⁸ and chance) but that its non-causally-based plot doesn't fit into either of the above groups, more closely resembling other 'outliers' such as *Gummo* (Korine, 1997), *Killer of Sheep* (Burnett, 1977), and *The Exiles* (Mackenzie, 1961) in its approach to structure and character.⁹ These last films fall within a sub-

genre of American independent cinema that has received relatively little attention for the way in which both narrative events and images and sounds are structured—often without prioritizing the structuring of one over the other, seeing narrative events as being more closely tied to the combined images and sounds the audience encounters and the audience’s experience of them, and with less distinction between form and content, or *how* the story is told and *what* it is about, than is usual outside of more overtly ‘experimental’ non-narrative films.

Four aspects of *Loren Cass* are particularly worth attention: (i) the way its structure creates non-causal connections between scenes and sequences, and how this leads to a different viewing experience than traditional causally-based plots; (ii) the ways in which images and non-diegetic sounds are combined, and how this mirrors the way scenes are combined in the structure; (iii) how the absence of a linear progression itself reflects and expresses the emotions and psychology of the characters; and (iv) what its structure reveals about how cinematic narratives work in general, and how they can be designed in ways that differ from those prescribed by the dominant screenwriting paradigm. My approach to analyzing these aspects of the film involves a close examination of its scenes and sequences and how they relate to each other, to show how they form what could be called an associative rather than causal or linear structure, where the way this structure shapes the meanings and significances of events has close parallels to certain of V. I. Pudovkin’s (1929) writings on editing. Because my claim concerns *Loren Cass*’s narrative as a whole, it is necessary for the close reading that follows to cover all of the film’s sequences as arranged in its plot, in order to demonstrate that the absence of a causal progression does not pertain only to certain scenes or sequences, but to the plot as a whole.

2. Close Reading and Analysis

The film focuses on three characters—a mechanic named Cale (Fuller, credited as Lewis Brogan), his punk friend Jason (Travis Maynard) and a waitress named Nicole (Kayla Tabish)—who come together and drift apart in the racially charged atmosphere following the 1996 riots in St. Petersburg, Florida. Additional to the scenes featuring these characters, which make up the film’s primary narrative threads, are several secondary characters and events: a hardcore punk concert intercut with archival footage of the ‘96 riots, aimless destructive activities of unnamed youth, and the self-inflicted death of a character referred to as The Suicide Kid (Jacob Reynolds). These secondary threads expand the scope of the film beyond the primary characters, suggesting that Fuller sees the film as expressing a collective experience (of post-‘96 St. Petersburg, of punk subculture, and/or of millennial youth in general) with Cale, Nicole, and Jason exemplifying certain attitudes and ways of living rather than functioning as traditional protagonists actively working towards determinate goals.

(a) Opening Sequence

The film opens with a static shot of a street of commercial buildings at night, accompanied by a voice-over stating “Back in nineteen-ninety-seven...” The film cuts inside a garage where Cale is lying on the floor, his back to the camera. He slowly stands and walks out into daylight, gets into a grey car and drives away. We are then introduced to Jason as he lounges in his room; he gets up, goes out through his living room where his father is asleep on the couch in front of the TV, and exits his house first to sit on the curb and then to lie down in the middle of the road, stretched out as if waiting to be run over. The next scene shows Nicole in her room, getting out of bed and dressing. The bedcovers shift, revealing a young man; she tells him not to be seen on his way out, and she passes through the living room where her mother and father sit awake but motionless on opposite couches, and leaves. Outside, she drives off in a red convertible.



After these characters are introduced, Cale picks up Jason and drives to a school; Nicole drives there as well, arriving just after the others. A montage of deserted hallways and stairwells creates the impression that the school is empty, but it is ambiguous whether this is the case; either way, it establishes the school as a sterile, soulless environment, an effect heightened by the inclusion of close ups on security cameras and a sign about locker search policies. The only people we see in the building are someone whose identity is obscured loading a gun in a toilet stall, and the assistant principle sneaking a drink in his office.

Following these images, Cale and Jason return to the parking lot, now empty save for Cale's car and a white van. As they drive away, Jason throws a bottle at the van, prompting its owner to run out of the building and drive after them. The driver, a young black man, catches up with them at a stop sign, jumps out and starts punching Jason through the open window. Cale gets out and fights the driver, with the scene ending with an abrupt cut as Cale pushes the other man to the ground and drop-kicks him.

In these first ten minutes of the film nothing 'happens' in the traditional dramatic sense until the bottle-throwing and the ensuing fight. These two events *are* causally connected, although this causal link is self-contained, since Jason's throwing of the bottle is not depicted as being caused by anything, and since the fight doesn't stand in a causal relation to any of the subsequent events in the plot. Despite the lack of traditional dramatic action here, the opening sequence introduces the main characters and the setting and, crucially, establishes the structural and editing strategy that will be used throughout. With the exception of the bottle-throwing leading to the fight, there is no causal progression from scene to scene other than in the most basic temporal sense (e.g. a scene of a car driving followed by a scene of it arriving somewhere). However, rather than the opening sequence being a random jumble of scenes, it is highly structured on a formal level to make associative links between the people, places and events we are shown, where these associations function in place of causality to carry the film—and the viewer—from one scene to another.

The use of structure to make parallels and comparisons is evident from the start, as the first image we see of each character shows them rising and going out into the world. Furthermore, a formal pattern of escalation develops: in the first scene, Cale is alone both in the garage and outside; in the second, Jason is initially alone in his room, but is then seen with his father as he passes through the living room; in the third, Nicole is seen with one person in her room and two others as she leaves her house. Additionally, a comparison is made between Jason and Nicole, as both his father and her parents appear as uninvolved presences in their lives, with the former literally being asleep. Taken together, these first three scenes imply through association that the characters have something in common and that we should attend to this commonality. What the characters share seems, based on these scenes, to be a sense of alienation and disconnection from others, and a feeling of aimlessness, as we see each one rise from an initial state of stasis and set out with no apparent purpose.

Another example of how the structure is used to associate, and thereby link, two distinct moments with no clear causal relationship can be seen in the cut from the third scene, when Nicole drives away from her house, to the fourth, where we return to Jason lying in the road. The viewer is led to expect that Nicole and Jason will meet, thus implying that the three people

we have been shown are, or will be, connected. Not only does the cut to Jason break the pattern of the first three scenes, as for the first time we return to a character we have previously encountered, but there is also a relation in terms of the content and framing of both shots; not only do both involve roads, but Nicole's car drives out of the left side of the frame, the same area that contains the negative space we expect to be filled in the shot of Jason. Thus, when we hear the off-screen sound of a car approaching, we expect Nicole's car to enter the shot. When Cale drives into the shot, we find our expectation denied at the same time that another expectation—that two of the three characters will come together—is confirmed, but with a different character than we anticipated.



The shot holds as Cale and Jason drive off, the reason becoming apparent when we see Nicole's car enter the shot several seconds later and drive over the part of the road where Jason lay. Here, it is as if the film is playing with our engagement by delaying confirmation of our expectation that Nicole's car would drive down that road until after we have dismissed it.¹⁰ When we then see both cars together at the same red light and again at the school parking lot, the movement of this first sequence is fulfilled. This movement also serves as a microcosm for that of the overall film, with the characters starting out apart, then coming together, then separating again.

(b) First Encounters

The next sequence begins with a slow fade up on Jason walking down a street at night, as a voice-over identifies the setting as St. Petersburg. It would be hard to consider a moment like this a scene in the traditional sense, as there is no event or dramatic action (Jason's walking doesn't count, as it is neither motivated nor purposeful). Nevertheless, it functions within

the structure by providing a bridge between the fight that precedes it and the scene that follows of Cale and Nicole on opposite sides of a gas station, creating a continuity of affect where the feelings of the one scene (adrenaline, anger) develop into those of the next (disconnection, emptiness), possibly reflecting how the characters feel in the aftermath of random, pointless violence. Transitional moments consisting of black screen and non-diegetic voice-over occur throughout the film as a way for groups of scenes to be framed as self-contained sequences, asking us to consider what these scenes share. The formal associations between scenes, and their affective continuity, give the film a sense of progression in lieu of the directionality of temporal and spatial continuity, linear causality, and character motivations.

The sequence that follows revolves around Cale and Nicole meeting in what seems like the start of a romantic sub-plot. The first few scenes of this sequence involve the characters sharing locations without knowing or recognizing one another: they drive down the same streets, Cale and Nicole fill up at a gas station at the same time, and Jason wanders into the diner where Nicole works. When Nicole goes to take Jason's order, it is the first time she has any direct contact with another character (approximately fourteen minutes into the film), and because of this we might expect these two to form a connection, but this exchange is a dead end, not only because Jason doesn't order anything but also because these characters don't come into contact again.



What we expect once again fails to happen, only to occur immediately after in a different way than anticipated, when Nicole brings her car in to the garage for Cale to fix and it is implied that he is interested in her. It is notable that Fuller doesn't set up or establish this scene, which is an important one as it joins two of the main narrative threads (and could, in a traditionally structured plot, be considered a 'turning point'). Unlike Nicole and Jason's encounter in the

diner, which was preceded by shots of both of them arriving at and entering the location separately, so as to lead us to expect something to come from their meeting, there is no scene of Nicole having car troubles that would motivate and allow us to anticipate her taking it to Cale; instead, Nicole simply shows up at the garage. Just as the scene begins without having been set up, it ends on an unresolved note with Cale's offer of a ride and Nicole's ambiguous wave, leaving the possible connection between them hanging.

Following this, the structure returns to its prior pattern of alternating between scenes of Cale and Jason (sometimes together) and Nicole. We see Cale and Jason hanging out at the garage while the non-diegetic voice of Omali Yeshitela (a St. Petersburg-based African-American activist) is heard praising the "advanced character of resistance" displayed by protesters in the '96 riots. Cale and Jason then cruise down the street and stop their car near a group of black youths hanging out near a white vehicle, leading to a brawl.¹¹ The way the fighting is staged and filmed—the combatants standing with heads lowered and touching, lashing out aimlessly with a flurry of punches—suggests that compulsive and random violence is, in these characters' world, a means of connecting to others. This is compared structurally to Nicole's way of finding connection in the next scene: through a one-night stand. Rather than being depicted as a positive alternative to violence, sex in the world of the story is just as compulsive and random, and just as much of a dead end.



(c) Connections and Collisions

In the next scenes, the characters continue their normal routines: Jason waits on the curb outside his house; Cale picks him up and they drive around; Nicole engages in casual sex and drives to and from work. A change occurs twenty minutes into the film when the presence of the police is

introduced. Jason and Cale are once again hanging out drinking beer with Cale mentioning plans to move to Chapel Hill. Their dialogue, which we might be tempted to read for information about Cale's personality, motivations, and so forth, is interrupted by the sound of a siren and the arrival of a police officer. The officer's search and ID check is accompanied by another voice-over from Yeshitela, this time describing the burning of police cars during the riots.

This voice-over segues into the first scene of the punk concert that will become a recurring secondary thread in the structure. The concert scenes have a linear, continuous development, which provides a counterpoint to the non-linearity of the other scenes and lends the middle of the film a sense of momentum that might otherwise be lacking. On a thematic level, because the concert scenes are the only ones in the film that develop by linear progression towards a clear conclusion, it is possible that Fuller is proposing music and subcultural community as a constructive outlet for the kinds of frustrations and negative feelings experienced by the characters in the other scenes, who are not shown at the concert.



Interwoven with the concert footage, which itself is intercut with archival images of the '96 riots, are scenes depicting Cale and Nicole connecting and appearing to form a relationship, and scenes of Jason alone and with various punks whose actions become increasingly destructive. The plot alternates between these story threads, juxtaposing them to create a contrast in emotional tone. The scenes of Cale and Nicole progress as their relationship develops, heading in an apparently positive direction, while the scenes of Jason become more negative in counterpoint to the high notes of the Cale/Nicole scenes. If one were to graph the story threads in this section of the plot, it would result in a rising line (the Cale/Nicole thread) and a descending line (the Jason/punk scenes) mirroring one another around a horizontal line

representing the scenes of the concert. While not likely to be noticed consciously by viewers, this sort of patterning in the construction of the plot gives a sense of ‘intelligent design’ in absence of the overt organization of a traditional linear structure.

At the end of this sequence, both threads reach their peaks at a point that coincides with the climax of the concert. In the former, just as the music from the concert grows louder and the crowd’s dancing becomes more intense (as does the archival footage of the riots), Cale is shown sitting in his room looking restless. He suddenly jumps up and runs outside, hops a fence, and sprints down the street, intercut with shots of Nicole driving her car. Since both are moving in the same on-screen direction (left to right), we may be surprised when Nicole’s car hits Cale. This only knocks him down, and as Nicole gets out of her car to check on him there is a jump cut to the two of them kissing while backlit by the car’s headlights. As with the earlier depictions of fighting and anonymous sex, this scene shows two people who have to crash head-on into each other, propelled by restless energy, in order to make a connection.

(d) Self-Destruction

Nicole and Cale’s embrace is followed by what is possibly the bleakest moment in the film. While riding a bus, Jason fantasizes about burning himself with a cigarette and spontaneously combusting in an armchair, an image which encapsulates the film’s tension between external stasis and the explosion of repressed internal energy. After the bus ride, he is ambushed while walking home by a group of four youths¹² who beat him up and leave him with a bleeding nose and mouth. This low point in Jason’s story thread is followed by a shot from after the concert, with the band dismantling their gear on stage in near-total darkness, which recalls the shot of the concert’s set-up and works to bookend this sequence before the film moves to its final few scenes.



After the fight and the concert we see Jason washing his face and rubbing blood into his sideburns, leaving his skin red and raw. This image cuts to a shot of Jason lying on his couch, idly picking at the strings on a bass guitar, which transitions into an establishing shot of several cars, Nicole's red convertible among them, parked in front of a house where a party is in progress. A voice-over announces "The last days of the Suicide Kid". Inside, we don't first see Nicole as we might expect from seeing her car in the previous shot—rather, we see Jason, who wanders into an empty bedroom and drinks two bottles of beer, with quick fades marking the passage of time. Back in the main room, an adolescent (identified in the credits as the Suicide Kid) sits and drinks while the party goes on around him. Nicole and Cale are now among those in the crowd; they make their way to the bedroom, now empty except for Jason's discarded bottles, and have sex. Afterwards they talk but their dialogue is made inaudible by music. We see Jason leaving the party, and when we return to the bedroom, Cale is watching Nicole get dressed. They exchange looks but nothing is said; Nicole then leaves the party and drives away on her own. The Suicide Kid leaves the party after her, getting into a car parked beside where hers was.



A shot of Jason drinking and wandering down a street towards a group of youths may lead to expectation of another fight, but instead Jason lies down and smashes his bottle on the pavement. This image cuts and then fades up on a shot of a bridge where the Suicide Kid pulls up, gets out of his car and tosses a coin off the bridge before stepping out of frame after it. The film then cuts to archival footage of politician R. Budd Dwyer's infamous live televised suicide, showing it in full, graphic detail. Not only is this footage used to stand in for the fictional suicide that has just occurred, but the fact that it is real footage suggests that the problems,

frustrations, and emotions the characters in the story face echo real-life human concerns in the actual society and culture of which the film is a product.

(e) *No Future*

The final scenes return the three primary characters to the isolated states in which we first encountered them. Presumably following her departure from the party, Nicole enters her room where a young man is waiting for her in the dark. Meanwhile, Jason searches a dumpster behind a tattoo parlour where he finds a discarded needle, with which he inscribes ‘Loren Cass’ onto his arm (these words never being explained). This scene parallels the earlier one of the punk in the other alley due to the similarity of the two characters searching through dumpsters, an act that occurs in only these two scenes. This association may be suggesting a possible future for Jason after his disillusionment by the events of the narrative; showing him in a situation similar to the one in which we saw the homeless punk suggests that Jason has given up at this point, and while not literally homeless, is as isolated as the character sleeping in the back-alley shelter.

In the last scene we see of Cale he walks to Nicole’s doorstep, sits, and waits. In her room, Nicole (now alone) smokes and looks out the window—possibly at Cale outside, though there is no point-of-view shot to confirm this. The film ends on Jason, who in the penultimate scene swallows handfuls of pills only to vomit them up again. In the final scene, he emerges from his house and sits on the curb once again. He waits all day, with quick fades again used to mark the passage of time; when night has fallen, he walks back inside with the shot freezing on his angry face as a voice-over says “This is their story, and it’s all a motherfucking lie.” As in *The 400 Blows* (Truffaut, 1959), the freeze-frame is used to create a feeling of uncertainty for the future along with a sense of the absence of meaningful options or solutions to character’s problems in the present.

3. Narrative by Association

As the preceding breakdown and analysis of the plot shows, *Loren Cass*’s narrative defies typical dramatic and screenwriting conventions in nearly every way. In addition to the absence of causal connections between scenes, the film lacks a significant change from beginning to end in the characters or their circumstances. One of the fundamental principles of the classical understanding of drama, from which nearly all popular screenwriting instruction is derived, is the plot’s “passing ... from bad fortune to good, or from good to bad”.¹³ Instead, *Loren Cass* ends with the characters in similar situations to they were in at the start; nobody changes, develops, or ‘grows’ over the course of the plot, nor is there a change in the world of the story. Yet the film clearly presents a narrative, however minimal and open,¹⁴ contains a unified style

and expresses a worldview, and rewards the engagement of attentive viewers. Therefore, a change in the characters' fortunes or in the story's world is not a necessary condition of dramatic narrative.

Another fundamental principle of classical narrative is the conflict of opposing forces embodied by a protagonist and an antagonist or obstacle. *Loren Cass* goes against this 'rule' as well, lacking any conventionally dramatized conflict. While several scenes contain specific, one-off conflicts—such as the fights Jason and Cale get into, the footage of the riots, or the punks getting arrested—these don't function as traditional dramatic conflict within the narrative. These incidents don't cause or accomplish anything, nor are they motivated by character objectives of which we're made aware: we don't know why Jason throws the bottle at the van, why the driver pursues them, why Cale gets out to fight instead of driving away, and why he and Jason instigate the other fights. We also don't know why Nicole has anonymous sex with others even when seeming to be attracted to Cale, why Jason attacks the garbage can, why the Suicide Kid steps off the bridge, etc.

In the absence of motivations and objectives by which to define the characters' actions, the moment-to-moment particulars of what they do and say are foregrounded. We watch them without any explanation, giving many scenes an almost abstract quality and allowing characters' actions to become representative of general types of behaviour and ways of being in the world. As well as imparting a certain sense of universality, the lack of motivation makes these actions seem random and purposeless; however, rather than this being a flaw, it seems precisely the point that Fuller wants the film to make. Watching characters engage in aimless behaviour gives us a better understanding of the aimlessness of the lives they lead, and how they feel in them, than if we saw them take action towards the attainment of clearly defined goals, since these characters don't understand their lives in terms of goals and seem not to regard their actions as having the ability to change or accomplish anything.

If *Loren Cass* doesn't rely on the 'three Cs' typically held to be necessary conditions for dramatic storytelling, then how *does* its structure work, and how does it manage to be meaningful as opposed to a collection of random moments? Given my emphasis above on parallels and contrasts between shots or scenes, one might think the film employs what David Bordwell (1985), following Noël Burch (1981), calls 'parametric narration'.¹⁵ However, as Bordwell conceives it, parametric narration is largely if not exclusively a matter of repetitions and variations of *formal* patterns in the camera placement, camera movement, editing rhythms and shot durations, etc., whereas the parallels and contrasts in *Loren Cass* are more often between the action of a scene or its affective qualities than between the formal elements of framing or editing.¹⁶ Instead, the film employs an associative structure wherein meaning is made

primarily through the associations made between adjacent scenes, not just between their formal elements but also, and mainly, between aspects of their content—i.e. the events and the characters' situations within the world of the story, as well as their psychological and affective states implied by the events and situations depicted—where I take this form of structure to be distinctly *narrative* because the associations concern this content and not only elements of form.

While Aristotelian principles of drama do not account for how such a structure functions, those developed by Soviet filmmaker and theorist V. I. Pudovkin in relation to film editing do when they are expanded to include the combination of scenes as well as of images. Unlike Eisenstein, Pudovkin focused not on the collision of shots in montage but on the linkage between them, seeing them as building blocks to be joined together such that the film's content is expressed by the cumulative effect of the audience experiencing these 'blocks' in a certain order and attending to the relations created between them. Many of the techniques of linkage Pudovkin discussed in *Film Technique* (1929) can be found in *Loren Cass's* structure. The main technique used is parallelism, or the linking of parts based on similar factors so as to emphasize these similarities,¹⁷ particularly in the opening sequence described above. As well as the more direct parallels between scenes (e.g. Jason's sleeping father and Nicole's unresponsive parents), Fuller's choice to combine moments of the characters' lives invites us to see them in relation, so that two events that differ on the surface, e.g. Cale's fighting and Nicole's casual sex, are correlated—here, as attempts to alleviate boredom and emotional isolation by connecting with others, however self-destructive these connections may be. Pudovkin's technique of contrast between parts¹⁸ is not relied on as much, since Fuller's point seems to be that the characters share a common experience of the world and have similar feelings of frustration, loneliness and lack of purpose, although a contrast between parts can be seen to an extent in the juxtaposition of the Cale/Nicole scenes with those featuring Jason in the sequence surrounding the concert. Additionally, many of the apparently unrelated scenes make sense in light of what Pudovkin calls leitmotif, or the restatement of a theme.¹⁹ When we're shown a character with no direct connection to other scenes engaged in unmotivated activity (a punk searching through dumpsters, someone yelling at a passing car), on one level it functions as a reminder of the feelings of aimlessness and frustrations at the heart of the film, providing emotional continuity while expanding the film's world beyond the primary characters.

A central principle behind Pudovkin's theories is that the selection and arrangement of shots (or in this case, scenes) creates the context in which the audience experiences and understands them. Each time we encounter a scene similar to one we've already witnessed (e.g. Cale and Jason's fights, Nicole's sexual encounters, the concert, unnamed punks drinking), not only does it add to our understanding of the other scenes to which it is linked by parallels and

contrasts, but our understanding of it changes due to the new context in which we're seeing it, based on the cumulative effect of the preceding scenes. The first time we see Cale get into a fight it may be unexpected and may strike us as particularly brutal because nothing we've seen has established him as the kind of person we would expect to engage in such behaviour, but after the first fight our impression of Cale is shaped by this scene and we will view his subsequent scenes in the context of it. The second time we see him fight, our understanding is different from when we saw the first fight because we're seeing it in the context not only of the first one, but of everything else we've seen in between.

Just as the scenes are ordered to invite comparisons and contrasts between characters' situations and actions so as to build significance out of these relations, the way sounds and images are combined in the film works to build meaning associatively. A recurring strategy is the use of non-diegetic voice-overs from Blag Dahlia and Keith Morris, lead singers of bands who are well known within the hardcore punk scene, Omali Yeshitela, an activist based in St. Petersburg where the film was made and set, as well as stream-of-consciousness reflections, lines of poetry from Charles Bukowski, and musings on the setting and the 1996 riots. Not only are these voices interwoven on the soundtrack to suggest multiple perspectives or fragments of meaning rather than a single authorial voice, but what these voice-overs say always relates, though never directly corresponds, to what we see on screen as we hear them, which adds another layer to the scenes in which they are featured and asks the audience to understand the associative relations between what is being said and what is being seen, and vice versa, creating a different experiential context for each than if we were to hear the words or see the images on their own.

One example is the scene in which Cale and Jason get checked for ID by a police officer. Along with the visuals of this search we hear Yeshitela's voice discussing the civilian resistance to the police during the riots. While the connection between the police check and the commentary about resistance to the police is obvious, the fact that the voice we're hearing is that of an African-American activist talking about a civilian resistance that crossed racial lines contextualizes the ID check of the two white characters and builds an association between them and black citizens mistreated by the police during the riot. This creates a further association between this scene and those in which Cale and Jason fight young black men with no reason given within the plot. Whereas otherwise we might be tempted to understand these scenes mainly in terms of race, the fights can now appear even more purposeless and self-defeating, with both white and black characters being seen as held back by police and societal authority more broadly, allowing their altercations to come across as misdirected in-fighting between people with common problems rather than as a conflict between genuinely opposing sides, where the misdirected aggression and self-defeating actions echoes other self-destructive

behaviours showcased in the film, including the motif of both metaphorical and literal suicide.

Overall, the film works in the absence of many elements traditionally thought to be necessary in dramatic fiction, where it ‘works’ because the viewer’s understanding of the story changes and develops as the scenes unfold, with this developing understanding being what gives continuity to the viewing experience in place of the narrative continuity provided by causal relations between events. Even though the characters and their lives are static and relatively unchanging from beginning to end, the audience’s experience of the film is dynamic and continually evolving from scene to scene, with the film’s progression occurring here rather than at the level of plot. I would argue that this is what the traditional techniques themselves are used for, and why they work when they do—i.e. in a typical narrative the plot coheres, changes, and comes to a culmination *in order that* the audience’s experience of the plot will do the same—but if this can be done in other ways, the traditional techniques no longer appear to be ‘rules’ that must be followed in order for a story to work.

When analyzing the structure of a particular narrative, it is always important to consider the relationship between the content of the story and the way in which it is told. For a film to have a sense of being a unified, coherent whole, the manner in which the events of the story are structured should work to express the meaning of those events in the most fitting way possible.²⁰ It is apparent that the lack of linear progression, causality and change in *Loren Cass* reflects how its characters feel about and experience their world. While it would be possible to tell a story about characters who had similar feelings by using a classical linear structure with three acts and a causal progression from beginning to end, such a film would not put the audience ‘in the characters’ shoes’ as effectively (or as *affectively*)—we might understand the story on an intellectual level, but the form wouldn’t express the content in the same way. Likewise, the characters’ aimlessness and lack of hope might not seem as justified, since the very presence in the structure of causality, change and linear progression would present the audience with a worldview at odds with the sense of ‘going nowhere’ experienced by Cale, Jason and Nicole. Applying the conventions and formulas espoused in nearly all screenwriting instruction would be the ‘wrong’ way of telling this story, since these conventions and principles, being too rational and teleological, would work against the best expression of its theme and worldview which has to do with the feelings of purposelessness, stagnation, and contingency in the lives of the characters. The “lie” referred to in the voice-over accompanying the last scene of Jason waiting all day for something that never arrives can be taken to refer both to the expectation of meaningful change in one’s lifetime that a person like Jason would have been given growing up, as well as to the audience’s expectation that there will be some meaningful change to the story world as a result of the events and actions presented in the plot.

4. Conclusion: Narrative Structure and Modes of Thinking

In addition to considering relations between structure/form and story/content, it is important for filmmakers to be aware of the effects that a given structure is likely to have on viewers, since selecting and ordering the scenes is ultimately not only a matter of structuring the story as it is of structuring the audience's encounter with the story and their experience and understanding of the events depicted. A classical linear/causal approach leads the audience to think ahead and look forward, predicting and anticipating the outcomes or effects of the events they're encountering in a given scene; this is what traditionally allows for both curiosity (“*what* will happen?”) and suspense (“*will* X happen, and *when*?”), the two main sources of engagement and audience pleasure in mainstream dramatic narratives.²¹ However, this approach places little importance on, and so leaves little room for, what could be called immersion in the moment, since the significance of any one part of the narrative is generally reduced to its being the cause of a subsequent part or the effect of a previous one. Instead, in a film like *Loren Cass*, which is not based on ‘thinking ahead’ in this way, the meaning of any part of the narrative is to be found in its present particulars and the way they relate to what has already been seen, which allows the viewer to ‘be in the moment’ and attend primarily to what is occurring as it occurs, and secondarily to how it fits it into what has already occurred, rather than prompting them to guess at how future events in the story will fit into it. Not only does this reflect an understanding of events and actions as being inherently meaningful, rather than being significant only because of what else they make happen, but it also enables the viewer to be more aware of the meanings created through the associations with other scenes, since the parallels, connections and contrasts between things are not as likely to be perceived without attention to and awareness of their particulars.

Even if one accepts the contention that films like *Loren Cass*, by employing associative rather than causal approaches to narrative structure, serve as counter-examples to the common idea that a plot based on causal connections, conflicts, and change is necessary for a fictional narrative, one might wonder why this is important to recognize. For one thing, a greater range of approaches and ways of telling and conceiving of stories allows for an expansion of expressive and artistic possibilities, as opposed to unnecessary or arbitrary limitations being imposed on stories for which they may not be best suited. There is also reason to think the (expressively appropriate) use of associative structure—or of Pudovkin's associative editing within a traditional, causally-based plot structure—can have certain advantages over a causal structure based on the ‘three Cs’ of classical drama.²² For instance, it could be said to create a more active type of audience engagement that involves a richer, more complex, and arguably more realistic way of understanding the meaningfulness of events,

characters and behaviour, both on the part of the film's maker(s) and its viewers. The differences between these ways of engagement with a film, and the modes of thinking and understanding they involve, can be seen to map onto Heidegger's (1959) distinction between calculative and meditative forms of thinking.²³

Heidegger sees calculative thinking, understood as instrumental or means-end thinking that deals with conditions that are already known and works towards an end conceived in advance of its realization, as the common mode of thinking in modern life. While he doesn't see this mode as intrinsically bad, it is limited to understanding the meaningfulness or significance of things—objects, events, experiences, etc.—only in terms of their relation to a future goal, looking to this anticipated end in order to give meaning to the present, with the result that the things themselves are held to be meaningless apart from this relation. It is the exclusivity of this way of thinking that Heidegger sees as problematic, especially when it operates at the expense of what he calls meditative thinking, which involves seeing the meaningfulness that is immanent in a given object, event, or experience by 'dwelling' with things as they appear to us in experience. As he puts it, "[c]alculative thinking races from one prospect to the next. Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself. Calculative thinking is not meditative thinking, not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is".²⁴

The linear, causal elements of classical narrative structure are also goal-oriented and forward-directed, "rac[ing] from one prospect to the next", insofar as the vast majority of screenwriting courses and manuals take the significance of any action or line of dialogue to lie in how it moves the plot forward, with any moment in the narrative that doesn't either further or hinder a character's goals being seen as unnecessary. If frequent exposure to a certain way of thinking and of registering things as significant is likely to form habits of thought that extend to other areas of life, the dominance of causally-based, forward-looking narratives in film and television dramas can be thought likely to further our tendency towards calculative thinking. On the other hand, instead of pointing ahead to the anticipated achievement of a goal or resolution of a conflict, the scenes in a film with an associative structure such as *Loren Cass*—or *Killer of Sheep*, *Gummo*, etc.—point to a range of other scenes and moments in the narrative, and are pointed to in turn, forming a web that highlights the significance of these scenes and moments themselves, rather than subordinating them to the needs of a plot, and where registering this significance could be described as "contemplat[ing] the meaning which reigns in" the scene or moment.

Fictional works that use associative structures not only present alternative forms of narrative but also promote alternative modes of understanding and meaning-making on the

part of viewers, giving us practice in analogical rather than teleological thinking. Moreover, because meanings and effects are created by the associations of scenes internal to the narrative, each narrative structured in this way will work differently, since the scenes and associations between them will be particular to that narrative. Hence, this way of approaching narrative is less susceptible to being reduced to a formula that can be applied equally to multiple different stories, as classical structure has been, with ultra-formulaic plots seeming to be increasingly the norm in 21st century mainstream entertainment.²⁵ This absence of formula is itself a way in which an associative structure can encourage us to engage in and understand a narrative artwork in a more ‘meditative’ way, in which we are required to take it on its own terms and engage with it as a particular, rather than as a thing of a familiar general kind, in order to understand it. The broadening of our capacities to attend, to register meaning, and to think that genuinely alternative narratives allow can help viewers rely less on habits of linear, calculative, instrumental thinking by bringing attention back to particular moments or events and highlighting their non-instrumental significance, making viewers better able to see associations and connections between aspects of their lives outside the fiction, and more likely to grasp the imminent, non-instrumental significance that events and experiences can have when seen in the light of other, non-teleologically related events.

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, VII, 1451a13-14.

² *Ibid.*, IX, 1451b34-35.

³ See Murphy (2010) for a similar point.

⁴ Since a way of telling stories in which meaning is primarily found in the causal relations between events is likely to be (though perhaps isn’t *necessarily*) teleological in its orientation—in the sense that its plot is likely to be structured around the pursuit and attainment of one or more of its character’s goals, with an action or event in the plot being seen as *meaningful* or *significant* because of how it helps or hinders the attainment of said goal(s)—a comparison can be made to what Heidegger (1959) calls calculative thinking. Although it’s hard to defend a necessary connection, it is plausible that being habituated to understand the meaning of actions or events in narratives solely in terms of what caused them, or what they will cause, will habituate one to understand meaning generally (i.e. outside of narratives) in teleological or ‘calculative’ terms.

⁵ Currie, ‘Narrative Representation of Causes’, 311.

⁶ Of recent theories, Noël Carroll’s (2001) is prominent as one in which causality is central—specifically, causal necessity, or the figuring of one or more events within “the causal network that gives rise to later events” (Carroll, 125). Although J. David Velleman (2003) opposes Carroll’s theory with his own, which takes emotional coherence and completion to be central (see Velleman, 18-19: “a description of events qualifies as a story in virtue of its power to initiate and resolve an emotional cadence in the audience” where the resolution at the story’s end is achieved by leading the audience to form “a stable attitude towards [the events of the narrative] overall”), he also takes causality to be a necessary feature of narrativity, writing that “the idea of a plot without causality is absurd” (Velleman, 4).

⁷ One might ask whether my assertion that such works plausibly count as narratives in the absence of these conditions that are usually held to be necessary for being a narrative is merely stipulation on my part. To address this worry, it is

worth clarifying what sense of narrative I am presupposing in this claim. I take the ‘fuzzy-set definition’ of narrative proposed by Marie-Laure Ryan (2007) to be the most inclusive starting model and hence the one that begs the fewest question and best avoids mere stipulation. Like Currie (2006), Ryan recognizes that narrativity comes in degrees, and contends that the degree of narrativity of a work is based on how many of, and the degree to which, eight conditions are fulfilled. As Ryan lists them, these conditions are: “(1) Narrative must be about a world populated by individual existents; (2) This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations; (3) The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events; (4) Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world; (5) Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents; (6) The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure; (7) The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the storyworld; (8) The story must communicate something meaningful to the audience” (Ryan, 29). Despite the language here (i.e. “must”), on Ryan’s definition none of these conditions alone is necessary for something to count as a narrative; rather, some combination of some of these conditions is sufficient, with the degree of narrativity increasing as more conditions are met, or certain conditions are met to a greater degree. Since what I have been calling the ‘three Cs’ relate only to condition 6, and to one half of condition 2 (i.e. “undergo[ing] significant transformation”), something can fail to meet these conditions while meeting most or all of the others and still plausibly count as a narrative.

⁸ While the film contains incidents that involve conflict, e.g. physical altercations, they are not conflicts *as traditionally dramatized*, since they are not motivated by characters’ goals the audience is made aware of, and the characters’ actions here do not clearly aim at a resolution.

⁹ It resembles another Harmony Korine film, *Trash Humpers* (Korine, 2010), in its structure, although that film was made after *Loren Cass* and so couldn’t have been an influence on it whereas *Gummo* certainly was, given what Fuller has said in interviews (see, e.g., Guerrasio, 2009) and the casting of *Gummo*’s ‘poster boy’, Jacob Reynolds, in a small role.

¹⁰ This way of engaging the viewer by creating expectations only to avoid fulfilling them while still acknowledging them, by presenting something counter to what we expect, is mirrored by the drunken ditty we hear sung over a black screen later in the film, in which the lyrics make us anticipate profane rhymes at the end of every line, but where the ends of the lines turn out (a) to be ‘clean’ rather than profane, and (b) not even to rhyme.

¹¹ This is likely the same white van from the earlier scene, and the fights Cale and Jason get into may be meant to be seen as a series of escalating retributions stemming from the initial throwing of the bottle in the school parking lot. However, it is left ambiguous since the van and the other characters are never shown clearly or in close up, and because it is unclear why Cale and Jason would be the ones to seek out another fight at this point. If these fights are indeed results of the earlier incident, this would be a causal link running through these scenes, albeit a weak one since it is under-explained and does not stand in a causal relation with anything other events in the plot.

¹² Once again, it is ambiguous whether these are the same people he and Cale fought previously, as their faces are not shown clearly.

¹³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, VII 1451a13-14.

¹⁴ Returning to the conditions of Ryan’s ‘fuzzy-set definition’ of narrative (see fn. 2, above), it is apparent that *Loren Cass* fully meets conditions (1), (4), (5), (7), and (8) [as the story is capable of communicating something meaningful to at least some audience members], and partially meets conditions (2) and (3), in that the storyworld is situated in time and a number of events within that world are depicted, although, as I have been arguing, the *significance* of these events is found in their associative relations and not in the transformations to the diegetic world that they cause. The only condition *Loren Cass* fails to meet outright is (6), relating to causality; however, meeting the others to the degree that it does is enough for it to count as a narrative on Ryan’s definition. Moreover, Ryan writes that condition (6) is meant to eliminate “lists of causally unconnected events ... as well as reports of problem-solving actions that stop before an outcome is

reached” (Ryan, 29), where *Loren Cass* does not obviously fall within the kinds of cases this condition was meant to stop from counting as narratives.

¹⁵ See Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, chapter 12; see also Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, chapter 4.

¹⁶ The opening sequence is a partial exception; here there are parallels and patterns to be found in the framing, mise-en-scene, and editing. However, these uses of form are still not as precise or obvious as Bordwell’s examples of parametric narration. It makes sense that the stylistic or formal associations would be stronger in the film’s beginning, where we don’t yet know the characters or their situations and so have less to draw on to understand their actions or what they might be experiencing when we first encounter them. Fuller’s use of formal patterning in the camerawork, the mise-en-scene, and the editing here not only gives coherence to the first several scenes which otherwise might appear unconnected, but also cues the viewer to attend to similarities and differences in the situations and actions of the characters, setting us up to be receptive to the associations between scenes in the rest of the film and disposing us to be thinking of what we’re seeing and hearing in terms of how it compares to or contrasts with what we’ve just seen and heard in adjacent scenes.

¹⁷ Pudovkin, *Film Technique*, 48-49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

²⁰ To use a well-known example, the flashback structure of *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941) is justified by the story involving an investigator looking into another character’s past, and the choice to use multiple narrators rather than an omniscient point of view is justified in light of the film’s theme of the inability to sum up or explain a person’s life by a single incident or fact.

²¹ Cf. Carroll, 1988: 170-181 and his theory of erotetic narration. It is worth noting that Carroll attributes this theory originally to Pudovkin (170, fn.34). However, Carroll concludes this by assuming that what Pudovkin wrote about parallelism, symbolism, and leitmotif are not relevant to a discussion of the fundamentals of narrative structure and leaving these out of his consideration, whereas my appeal to Pudovkin above, in connection with what I am calling associative structure, takes into account all the ways that Pudovkin held that images or scenes could meaningfully be joined together.

²² Or at least has artistic, cognitive, and perhaps even ethical advantages, in terms of the value of the mode of engagement it promotes, even if it would be *commercially* disadvantageous insofar as a more familiar causally-based structure will be more easily consumable, and so easier to sell as a commercial entertainment product. This difference in what counts as valuable for a film as a commercial product, vs. what counts as valuable for a film as an artwork, and the fact that the latter can be argued to have cognitive and ethical, and not just aesthetic, advantages forms the basis of an argument for valuing artworks over commercial entertainment products that is beyond the scope of this paper to explore further.

²³ See fn.4, above.

²⁴ Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 152.

²⁵ It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for this claim—which would be the task of another paper—but I trust that this will be seen by anyone who honestly compares the variety of types of stories found in the mass entertainment of two or three decades ago with the mass entertainment available today. Although there is quantitatively more to choose from now than, say, in the 1990s, and although mainstream commercial entertainment has always been formulaic in its attempt to appeal to wide demographics, the films and television shows from which people have to choose are increasingly similar, with less variety in the choices available on television and at mainstream cinemas. One need only consider the dominance of sequels, re-makes and ‘reboots’, and superhero and dystopian sci-fi/action films at the box office in the last few years, or of genre-based television series (e.g. *Law & Order* and *CSI*, and their various spin-offs and copycats) featuring characters or teams of characters with archetypal, often interchangeable roles and cookie-cutter plot lines. It might be objected that many recent HBO-type series are original and not formulaic; however, even if the content of the stories are different, there is a noticeable HBO formula when it comes to structure, with resemblances to soap-operas’ structures:

cross-cutting between multiple storylines involving multiple protagonists, each with their own clearly defined goals, and with the pursuit of these goals being the basis of the development of each of these storylines. (Such shows are of course not limited to those actually produced by HBO; I am using this somewhat synecdochally to refer to a style of multi-protagonist, multi-plot serial fiction.) The impression of dramatic richness in such ‘multi-plots’ comes more from the addition of protagonists and their long-term goals, and how different protagonists’ goals intersect or come into conflict, than it does from the dramatic content of any one storyline itself. This, I think, can be seen by considering how dramatically simple any one of these storylines in a given multi-plot series would be if the scenes that pertained to it were viewed together, without being intercut with scenes from other storylines. This is not to say that plots that focus only on single storylines and protagonists aren’t themselves often formulaic, but only that the multi-plot structure of serial television has increasingly become its own formula rather than an ‘alternative’ approach to storytelling—and that many multi-plots of this sort require each of their subplots to be easy to comprehend and remember to increase the likelihood of the greatest number of viewers following the episode overall rather than getting lost in the changes between storylines, where the familiarity and simplicity of formulaic stories is one way to achieve this.

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