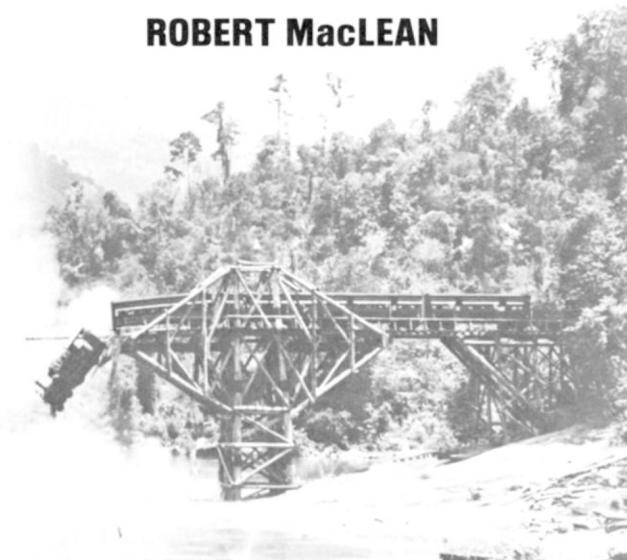


# THE BIG-BANG Hypothesis: Blowing Up THE IMAGE

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It might be argued, employing the traditional triad, that the primary interest of any film is its setting, rather than its plot or its characters. Whether established by complex editing or by long takes, whatever the technical rhetoric regarding the relation between aural or visual images and the reality—the coherent world of tangible things—represented, setting is what a film invariably offers us, what it most properly is. The world, or experience, of a film elaborates one or more of the whole gamut of rule-sets ranging from realism to fantasy, from *cinéma-vérité* to animation. According to widely shared aesthetic codes, plot, character and setting are most successful when most complementary, when each is most a function of the other two. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, for example, may be thought of as a film about snow, documented in a range of phases which filter the action, as the thaw-fed river mediates the image of a dying cowboy hovering eerily beneath its surface; one of the chief characters is a man frozen into an image, a “rep” that precedes and outlives him, just as his contours are swept smooth in the final snowstorm; and its plot concerns his struggle for control with

that matriarchy which usually prevails in Altman’s films, and which here offers shelter from the frozen snowscape. But even films which least satisfy the criteria of aesthetic integrity give pleasure simply by locating us in an environment, by making possible explorations which may be irrelevant either to those of its other inhabitants, the characters, or to its place in the argument of the plot. Godard once remarked that to watch a film is to dream, but that “people prefer to dream in the first degree rather than the second, which is the true reality.”<sup>1</sup>

Not to use the triad too perversely, it should be stipulated that a character is as much a setting as is a landscape. This statement is not applicable to drama, in which the empathetic emphasis is reversed: Denmark is merely an extension of Hamlet; Didi and Gogo can wait anywhere. But when drama is filmed, as when *Waiting for Godot* is incorporated in *Cul de sac*, setting usurps the primacy of the characters, imprisons and is explored by them. That the logic of character itself constitutes a setting, a terrain to be experienced as one experiences the adoption of another personality in dream, is a point argued in *The Ballad of Cable*

*Hogue*, with its motif of “passing through,” its equations of self with landscape, property and collateral, and its acknowledged derivation of “character” from biblical and other archetypes. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s remarks on the personality are appropriate: “If I wrote a book called *The World as I found it*, I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could *not* be mentioned in that book.”<sup>2</sup> The faces and gestures of Vakulinchuk and the sailors of the *Potemkin* are no less settings than the ship and the steps of Odessa: not only is it possible, the film insists, to inhabit such postures and attitudes, but we are enjoined to adopt as ours and extend the revolutionary gesture. Similarly, Shane’s heroic mannerisms and Wilson’s grinning malice define Joey Starrett’s world, and ours, in a fashion that defies distinction between “fantasy” and “reality,” and as inexorably as the mountains that confine his vista and echo his voice hugely as Shane rides off. And plot, which Aristotle calls “the imitation of an action,” is the graph of the characters’ gestures and thus the continuity of setting—the temporal rather than spatial parameter of movement.

Small wonder, then, that the explosion has become such a fundamental element of film vocabulary; explosions destroy settings. To be sure, they have conventionally served to consummate plots, as in Chaplin’s *Dough and Dynamite*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *The Guns of Navarone*, *The Dirty Dozen*, *Operation Crossbow* and several others, so that plot moves toward something more like orgasm than like the peristaltic movement of Aristotle’s account of tragedy. (*Bonnie and Clyde* and *Taxi Driver* argue the sexual nature of our wish to impose plot upon setting: their protagonists literally write and inhabit scenarios which culminate in hip-twitching death, the spending of ammunition in a whore house.) The explosion often signifies something repressed, as in *Village of the Damned*, *Deep Throat*. In *Sink the Bismark*, a strategic commander and his pretty assistant, far underground and constrained by military propriety, plot toward a final explosion: not until they emerge onto the surface does their relationship be-

gin to assume a less sublimated aspect. This pattern of repressed sexuality is satirized in *Dr. Strangelove*, as is suggested by the characters’ names—Mandrake, Jack D. Ripper, Buck Turgidson—by the plans of the elite to inhabit a sealed off mine shaft and by the gradual verticalization of the falling bomb as if to suggest the erection of the Slim Pickens character riding it. The explosion at the beginning of *That Obscure Object of Desire* occurs, in terms of its scrambled narrative, at the apparent end of a prolonged cock-tease, but is a false release, for the series of terrorist explosions with which the tease is associated have the threatening status of interruptions rather than of culminations. The explosions in *White Heat* (the second of which is an apparent allusion to the corresponding event in *The Great Train Robbery*), are counterpointed by images of entrapment—hide-outs, prison cells, the trunk of a car, eyes repeatedly photographed in rectangular frames: Cody Garrett is a man of maniacal energy who cannot be confined, and whose raging migraines, along with some glib psychology, indicate the interior source of the explosions. Nor is it solely this mystique of



Left: BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI.  
Right: MCCABE AND MRS. MILLER.

alienated interiority which points toward a final explosion of the repressed: one of the explosions takes place on a drive-in-movie screen, a shot from an American war film, so that when the detonation of a globular storage tank, heavy-handedly designated “the world,” issues in mushroom-shaped clouds, the film signifies its allegorization of the American lust for power. In these films, with the exceptions of *Dr. Strangelove* and *That Obscure Object of Desire*, explosions express something underlying and continuous, a cumulative energy that blossoms in ambiguous beauty, like Stanley Kowalski’s tantrums, and thus represent that continuity, validate the plots by which they are confined and made possible.

At a critical point in a film called *Mirage*, Gregory Peck, having sorted illusion from reality and within an inch of victory over his adversary, addresses the vascillating good-bad guy who holds the gun and says, “Come on Harry, if you’re not committed you’re just taking up space.” Harry is persuaded, but the force of this rhetoric is the target of several contemporary thinkers. William Burroughs invites us out of commitment, time, plot, redemptive scenario, into space. Kubrick satirizes the fiction of temporal continuity by cutting from a bone tossed by an ape to a space module, and thus bridges the longest time gap in the cinema with horizontal montage—makes of bone toss and space flight a single, continuous gesture, so automatically do we understand: evolution, the dominant myth of our century, is exhibited

as a connective device, and renders credible the equation of “personality” with the sufficiently complex circuitry of HAL; again, we are invited out of time into space, out of plot into setting. If the contemporary disintegration of prose narrative can be thought of as beginning with Alain Robbe-Grillet, the corresponding development in the cinema can be dated from the appearance in 1950 of *Sunset Boulevard*, a film which reduces each of its characters to an absence (even Betty Schaeffer insists, at the Desmond mansion, “I’m not here; I haven’t heard any of this”), and which undercuts its plot by having it narrated by someone who isn’t there either, a quite literal ghost writer and professional juggler of plot clichés whose uninhabited image is caught by the cameras on the rectangular surface of a pool: portrait of the artist as a dead man. Character and plot having been cancelled, there remains only the settings: the streets of Hollywood, Schwab’s, Paramount Studio and the fantastic mansion to which Joe Gillis’s comments do no justice.

The opening sequence of *Sunset Boulevard* blends reality and fantasy, the documentary style with an expressionistically distorted shot from the bottom of the pool, as if from beyond death.<sup>3</sup> Thus the language of realism is rendered obsolete. Godard, for example, claims to occupy a position between Flaherty and Eisenstein, Lumière and Méliès, realism and fantasy; travelling in Hitchcock’s less contentious wake, he argues that our perceptions of causality and continuity are purely



THE  
BALLAD  
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conventional, and that we are obliged to come to terms with the language which regiments those perceptions, and which elaborates and exhibits the commercial nature of the media. Language, as the numerous allusions to Wittgenstein in *Alphaville* and *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* seem to confirm,<sup>4</sup> is primary and pervasive: we learn to talk before we learn to think; language is the setting—"the house," as Juliette says in the latter film, "in which man lives"—and calcifies in the texts institutionalized by the culture. Thus Godard brings together texts by Chandler, Borges and Hawks, Brecht and Faulkner, Eldridge Cleaver and the Rolling Stones, as Burroughs sutures fragments from Conrad and Graham Greene, so that language is exhibited rather than spoken, authorship nullified, forms emptied of content. (In this context, drama is an opposite consideration, as in Beckett's *Endgame*: "What is there to keep me here?" "The dialogue.") The heavy reliance upon quotation by Peckinpah, Scorsese, and De Palma is a derivative manner, and involves the recognition that the events of a plot are conventionally rather than causally determined.

As Ferdinand drives along a Riviera highway in *Pierrot le fou*, Marianne taunts, "Little fool—following a straight line, and he's got to stay with it to the end," whereupon he defiantly drives off the road and into the sea. Plot, our knowledge of sequence and procedure, is a present phenomenon, spatial rather than temporal, something we "grasp in a flash," in Wittgenstein's phrase,<sup>5</sup> and apply securely to the future out of complacency (Hitchcock), paralysis (Godard), naïveté (Leone), lack of alternative (Antonioni) or addiction (Burroughs). The pun in the title of Hitchcock's *Family Plot* brings forward the spatial, grid-like aspects of the plot: as a clergyman invokes God's mercy for the dead Maloney, an overhead camera looks down at Mrs. Maloney, pursued by Lumley through a maze of graveyard footpaths—a visual analogy for the pattern of accidents that bring people together in the film, and are the loci of its editing. That plot limits the world, is finally something one is buried in, or locked into, as into Adamson's soundproof, windowless basement room, gives central importance to Blanche's pose as a medium who communicates with the beyond. This emptying of plot forms and characterizations of substantial content

lends itself easily to trivialization (as in Marcello's remark, in  $8\frac{1}{2}$ , in which the structure of the film is represented visually as scaffolding, "I have nothing to say, and I insist on saying it"), but turns aptly to hand in the suspense film, which is premised upon the instability of the environment. David Hume, arguing that no necessary principle of motivation or interiority stabilizes character, imagines a visit with a trusted friend who might be "seized with a sudden and unknown frenzy" to stab him;<sup>6</sup> one might easily construe the first third of *Psycho* as a gloss on this remark. Hume goes on to discuss earthquakes and the like, but they have been replaced by the explosion in modern symbolism: Hitchcock's use of it in *Sabotage* makes of Stevie, as he wanders with his time bomb among the London crowds, a figure of innocent Death as riveting as Bengt Ekerot's in *The Seventh Seal*. Hitchcock has pointed out that an audience's apprehension before a bomb explodes overrides any of its positive or negative feelings about the involved characters: "And you would be wrong," he told Truffaut, "in thinking that this is due to the fact that the bomb is an especially frightening object."

Rather, impending explosions illustrate the nightmarish instability of experience. The car explosion in *The Big Heat*, its acknowledged descendant in *Mean Streets*, and that which blows apart Michael's medieval romantic world in *The Godfather*, while examples of surprise rather than of suspense, deprive the respective male protagonists of their women, their domestic worlds—their settings. The sympathetic explosives expert in *The Professionals* and his descendant in *Duck, You Sucker!* (indeed both Peckinpah and Leone have made extensive use of the Brooks film) are men who have loved and lost, who have insight into the centrifugal nature of life and who blow things up with amoral righteousness: in the latter film, Sean, who claims to have given up moral judgments for an exclusive belief in dynamite, repeatedly detonates the contexts upon which Juan depends for his sense of identity—moves him from analog to digital, from the continuous to the discrete—as Leone does the myths and stock gestures which are his materials, acceptance of or identification with which constitutes an uncritical failure to duck.

Sean's role as Juan's perfect master extends the logic of samurai discipline and Buddhist gun-

fighter, as represented by Charles Bronson in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, but it also has Christian implications, as in fact all of Leone's films are pre-occupied with Catholicism: in *A Fistful of Dollars*, the man with no name rides humbly into town on a donkey, liberates a new holy family (he too has loved and lost), destroys the old order and announces his triumphant and invincible rise from the dead with a series of dynamite explosions. His demolition of the hold of powerful families on the town is reminiscent of John T. Chances's opposition of the Burdetts in *Rio Bravo*, and his final use of dynamite to blow them out into the open. Moreover, the man with no name raises visible hell and casts in malefactors; and explosions frequently create such hells, as in *The Pirate*, *The Chase*, *The War Game*, and by psychoanalytic implication, the dissilient-shit episode in *La Grande Bouffe*. The explosions that begin *Johnny Guitar* (a film which turns up again, fragmented and rearranged, in *Once Upon a Time in the West*), *The War Game* and *Marathon Man* signal that things are falling apart, the center has not held, and inaugurate a hell through which the chief characters must pass. But mere anarchy is hell only for those obsessed with control: as *Marathon Man*'s detonator-doll in a baby carriage and the final shot of *Duck, You Sucker!* suggest, the explosion can indicate the attainment of maturity, a relaxing of grip on contexts which are unstable, vulnerable to subversion. Like *Marathon Man*, De Palma's *The Fury* deals with an ultra-secret spy organization run by a power maniac: before Gillian blasts her opponent into a suspended, slowly expanding cosmos of burning fragments, she commands, "You go to hell."

Besides completing that film's cyclical eschatology, Gillian's explosive assertion typifies an act of criticism that, since Godard's public theorizing, has proliferated in the cinema. Not only does the photograph codify a scene in terms of color tone and shape, but the moving camera analyzes gesture and progression as a series of discrete pictures which, however scrambled, exhibit order and "sense"; so that "cinema," as Bruno says in *Le Petit Soldat*, "is the truth twenty-four times per second." The obvious parallel to Gillian's explosion, of course, is the one in the final sequence of *Zabriskie Point*, at the death of a rebellious, uncommitted hijacker of an airplane on the side of

which he has written "NO WORDS": explosions, literally rather than metaphorically, blow apart what words (universals, logical connections) hold together and make sense of. By the time of his death, Sky Father has impregnated Earth Mother with his peculiar divinity—another pattern paralleled in *The Fury*—in the filmic epitome of American motorized courtship rituals, and the issue of their mating is Daria's ability to stand apart from organized thinking and explode the trap of commercially controlled signs that keep her earth-bound. Upon learning of Mark's death, Daria looks furiously at the house in which yet another visual grid, a plot, is being imposed upon the desert landscape, and "causes" a slow-motion explosion—whether real or fantastic is, of course, not clear—which sends typical fragments of a middle-class environment floating before the camera. The importance of this explosion is that it implies what the camera can do, and thus elaborates Antonioni's previous *Blow-Up*, which concerns the enlargement of a photograph until it becomes apparent that something, an aimed pistol, is "out there" beyond the configuration of dots which encodes the scene (the setting), giving meaning to the frozen gestures; the photographer is left without unambiguous answers to his questions, performing mime-troupe gestures only "as if" in relation to a contextual reality. In *The Passenger*, Antonioni returns to an explicit consideration of the camera.<sup>7</sup> The association of the explosion with photography has itself become a convention. In Jiri Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains*, another film which ends with a sublimated bang, an anarchic photographer awakens to find that his house has been blown from around him by an air raid, and surrenders to laughter. In a recent commercial, a car is exploded slow-motion in mid-flight from a cliff as the announcer comments on each of its parts. A similar ad shows the detonation of a camera, describes improvements in the construction and has the fragments implode to reassemble as the new model, finishing with the comment, "The Pentax ME: it's dynamite."<sup>8</sup> Like the photograph, the explosion is a violent rupture of context and continuity, imposes decomposition, makes things dead, and is thus a potential tool of liberation. It is Kubrick's claim to have learned to stop worrying and love the bomb.



ZABRISKIE POINT

#### NOTES

1. "Interview with Jean-Luc Godard by Jean Collet," trans. Toby Mussman, *Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 141.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 631. Subsequent references are noted in the text.
3. In style and in function, this shot appears derived from that of the reflection in Miriam's glasses at the point of her death in *Strangers on a Train*.
4. See my "Opening the Private Eye: Wittgenstein and Godard's *Alphaville*" in *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1977-78, pp. 46-49.
5. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 138, 139. Subsequent references are noted in the text.
6. David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), p. 100.
7. See my "The Passenger and Reporting: Photographic Memory," in *Film Reader*, February 1978, pp. 189-96, for a discussion of the film as an allegory of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke's analysis of the empirical world into simple ideas of sensation, his definition of understanding as a taking apart rather than as a putting together ("wit"), and his employment of the *camera obscura* as a model of the mind are considerations here; but he is also worth mentioning because the solipsism explicit in the *Essay* and developed by Berkeley informs several of the films mentioned, particularly *The Fury*.
8. Such TV derivations are common: *2001* is used to sell cassette razors and McLaren's *Pas de deux* to promote feminine hygiene. It might be appropriate to a discussion of *The Fury*'s handling of communication to mention the sequence in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* in which Charley dictates a telegram over the telephone while a game of pool is played in the background—hence the recent Bell Canada panegyric about getting messages through, spoken over film of expert pool shots illustrating the causal sequence of sender-message-receiver.