Chris Gallagher's
Undivided Attention

Undivided Attention is a feature-length experimental film by Chris Gallagher which could be seen as part of a trend in Canadian experimental film which has surfaced in the last few years. This trend can be defined as a move away from the purely structuralist inspections of time and space to include elements of character, narrative, emotion and text.

Other films by Gallagher have been fashioned primarily in the structuralist mode, for example, Atmosphere (1975) or Seeing in the Ratio (1981). Undivided Attention is essentially a non-linear, narrative construct (with a voice-over text and an original musical score) which uses structural devices like Godard or Straub. Gallagher relies heavily on a collage technique which uses the film elements like puzzle pieces, that only come together as an emotional and narrative whole in the viewer's mind.

Gallagher's metaphor for narrativity, and construct of the film as journey, is a recurring shot of a man and woman in a small sports car travelling through various urban and rural landscapes. We always see the couple from the back of the car where the camera has been placed and travel with them, in what seems to be a cross-country journey, through a series of jumpcuts which destroy the illusion of a continuous time and space.

This emblematic couple is always crossing bridges, just as Gallagher's film attempts to bridge the gap between the dichotomies that define his filmmaking and his self. This film seems to be dealing with the split in the postmodern world, between the natural and the civilized, the emotions and the intellect, woman and man, art and theory, sign and meaning, and what we see and what we know. These splits are imaged through a collage which becomes a three-way relationship between perceptual disorientation, an ambiguous conceptual relation to the world, and the problematical of male-female relationships.

The recurrence of perceptual, cinematic games is the most notable feature of the film. Aside from the numerous uses of rhythemically edited jump cuts, we also get many shots which serve to disorient the viewer's relationship to the visual world of the film. One often-used device is that of isolating a part of the frame, usually some sort of symbol (such as a picture, a postcard, or a wheel) and holding it steady while the rest of the frame — a conventional, realistic shot — spins out of control. At the beginning of the film Gallagher does this, with a strip which goes horizontally across the center of the frame, showing a picture of a toy boat, while in the background is a shot of a real boat. The real is set spinning but the sign remains in control.

Another type of shot which Gallagher uses to question and distort our sense of space and control of the view, is one where the camera is seemingly directly attached to some object in the frame. In the most spatially disorienting shot of this type, he mounts a camera on a shovel with the shovel blade in the center of the frame. This at first seems to give us a point of reference but as soon as the manipulator of the shovel (maybe the cameraman/filmmaker) starts to shovel, the background space becomes real and yet a virtually unreadable, swirling sea of matter. The central view changes to the shovel but disorients us in space. The background and foreground seem separate realities but become one as the shovel picks up snow. The soundtrack also disorients as the live synthesized sound is intentionally put out of sync, thereby creating a further feeling of a world out of order. Gallagher's perceptual games and intentional blurring and undermining of an easy viewing or reading of his work is implicitly a call to pay attention (Undivided Attention) to his mode of construction of a work of art, his style of representation, and his version of a cinematic self.

The previously described shots could be seen as pure structuralist constructs, questioning the relationships between viewer, film and reality. However, Gallagher, in this film, often uses these structuralist devices to put forth an emotional reality. As in a Brakhage film, we share the filmmaker's subjective point of view. The narrative line of this film, as disjointive as it is, seems to follow the progression of a sexual relationship. The emblematic couple in the recurring car scenes is replaced by other actors in different scenes, but these scenes when strung together do make a poetic and narrative whole. The feelings of disorientation, which the perceptual trickery conveys to the viewer, are not only feelings of disorientation towards the perceptual world, but also towards the conceptual and emotional world.

A scene central to the definition of the male/female relationships in the film is that of a man typing up a shot by shot description of The Blue Angel by Von Sternberg, while a part of the film plays on a television set in the background. The scene on the TV is that of Marlene Dietrich in the cabaret singing Falling in Love Again while the German professor,
T he first thing you see in Kay Armatage's Artist on Fire is a joke. Joyce Wieland, a Canadian artist, is not the only one to see her as a femme fatale. A camera appears to be directly attached to the typewriter and moves across the floor in small jarring motions dictated by the way a woman walking over the bridge, which are intercut into this scene, so as to suggest that the camera is a part of the image. The camera is seen as a description of the relationship between a sexual woman and a camera, and a real camera is shown. The director seems to be dealing with a conflict between a man who is typing the words. The typing falls and as the camera goes into a scene starts with an overhead shot of a woman reading a book held up. The question is: how effective is the filmmaker’s attempt at a polyvalent voice, speaking both personal and critical statements. This is not a distanced, objective, documentary; Armatage has called it an ode.

Or perhaps a chorus. Armatage's use of voice in Artist on Fire is characterized by her work. She blends the commentaries of Denis Reid, Joyce Zemans, and Michael Snow, which include both personal and critical statements, into a polyvalent voice, speaking about Wieland and her work, overlapping and intersecting one another. The effect isn’t as strong here, but the voices do convive, and that causes some problems. Interweaving voices would seem to solve the problem of the 'authority' of the traditional document.