

Rediscovering Caroline Avery: Submerged Narrative, Affect, and the Legacy of Minor Cinema

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Abstract

This article makes a case for Caroline Avery as one of the most compelling experimental filmmakers of the ‘minor cinema’ generation through a close analysis of her magnum opus, *Midweekend* (1986). In 2018, I conducted the first interviews with Avery since she began making films in 1982. Based on those interviews, this essay offers an historical and theoretical perspective on Avery’s work, situating her within the context of the 1980s-era avant-garde, investigating her memory-based poetics of cinema, and demonstrating her relevance to contemporary experimental media culture. More specifically, this article examines Avery’s contributions to what I call, following Tom Gunning, ‘submerged narrative’, an attenuated approach to narrative construction that privileges sense impressions, affective environments, and haptic surfaces over characters and causality — or, cultivating the ambiance of a story without providing an actual story. In the second half of the essay, I turn to the work of two contemporary artists, Michael Robinson and Mary Helena Clark, to argue that their similar ideas about affective narrative environments demonstrates the degree to which the ‘minor cinema’ has contributed to the establishment of a shared language within the avant-garde that younger artists can borrow from, revise, and extend.

This article rediscovers the work of Caroline Avery, a significant but neglected experimental filmmaker. Born and raised in Long Island, New York, Avery enrolled at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 1977 to study painting. Her interest in the dynamics of movement in the European avant-gardes of the 1920s prompted a shift to filmmaking, where she combined an artisanal approach to the filmstrip with a found footage collage aesthetic in films such as *Sonntag Platz* (1982) and *Big Brother* (1983). Upon relocating to New York City, Avery expanded her recycling of twentieth century cultural iconography into a more thoroughly deconstructive vein, painting and scratching directly onto found footage to explore memory, allegory, and affect in films such as *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1985) and *Midweekend* (1986). Her affinity for and interaction with filmmakers such as Phil Solomon and Cécile Fontaine, who also used found footage and handmade processes to create evocative, enigmatic films, aligned Avery with the cohort of filmmakers that Tom Gunning identified as forging a ‘minor cinema’

in the 1980s, although Avery never became as prominent as other members of that generation.¹ Disillusioned with internal competition for funding and grants, Avery withdrew from experimental filmmaking in 1989 and moved to Hawaii, where she continues to work as a painter.

In this essay, I have two goals. The first is to make a case for Caroline Avery as one of the most compelling filmmakers of the period through a close analysis of her magnum opus, *Midweekend*. Like many women artists, Avery's work has been difficult to access, and there have been no scholarly articles or book chapters devoted to her work.² In 2018, I conducted the first interviews with Avery since she began making films in 1982.³ Based on those interviews, this article will offer an historical and theoretical perspective on Avery's work, situating her within the context of the 1980s-era avant-garde, investigating her memory-based poetics of cinema, and demonstrating her relevance to contemporary experimental media culture. The second is to examine Avery's contributions to what I call, following Gunning, submerged narrative, an attenuated approach to narrative construction that privileges sense impressions, affective environments, and haptic surfaces over characters and causality — or, cultivating the ambiance of a story without providing an actual story.⁴ For Avery, submerged narrative is also a strategy for replicating the processes of memory in cinema. In contrast to a model that aims to recreate or allude to personal memories, Avery's approach constitutes a set of techniques and working methods grounded in an intuitive theory of memory's sensual effects. *Midweekend* will serve as my central example, but in the second half of the essay, I turn to the work of two contemporary artists, Michael Robinson and Mary Helena Clark, to argue that Avery's ideas about narrative have endured for twenty-first century experimental image-makers.

The Smell of a Rose, But the Rose Is Gone

Before examining Avery's approach to submerged narrative, I will provide a detailed description of *Midweekend*, as well as some production background, to

¹ Tom Gunning, 'Towards a Minor Cinema: Fonoroff, Herwitz, Ahwesh, Lapore, Klahr, and Solomon,' *Motion Picture* 3.1/2 (Winter 1989-90), 2-5. See also *A Passage Illuminated: The American Avant-Garde Film 1980-1990*, ed. by Nelly Voorhuis (Amsterdam: Stichting Mecano, 1991).

² Avery's films are currently in a state of transition. She is aiming to have them restored and back in circulation in the near future. In the meantime, the Paris-based distributor Light Cone has a near-complete set of 16mm prints, which can be viewed on their website in low-resolution digital reproductions. Avery also appears in Saul Levine's film *Raps & Chants 2 with Caroline Avery* (1981-82).

³ The interview with Avery that I quote throughout this article was conducted via Skype on 28 February 2018.

⁴ Gunning, p. 4. The term is Gunning's, although I elaborate on and extrapolate from his conception by identifying and developing additional components.

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situate the film within Avery's oeuvre and convey a sense of its moment-by-moment effects on the viewer. *Midweekend* was the third film (following *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Mr. Speaker*, 1985 and 1986) that Avery made after leaving MassArt for New York, where she worked as a layout artist at the *Village Voice*. It was facilitated by several fortuitous developments. First, the New York Public Library unloaded a cache of educational films (mostly from Coronet Films, a leading producer of shorts for public schools) at the Collective for Living Cinema, which became an important resource for Avery.⁵ Second, the painter Ellen Rothenberg made a lightbox to Avery's specifications by fitting a piece of sandblasted glass to a wooden box, allowing her to work more intensively with cameraless filmmaking methods.⁶ Third, Avery secured a Jerome Foundation grant to purchase a JK optical printer, which she used to blow up 8mm and Super 8 to 16mm, increasing the variety of found footage that she could appropriate.⁷

The statement that Avery provided to distributors with *Midweekend* is resolutely descriptive: 'Great Society Era, social services, "how to" films from the 1960s and other footage from travel, education, documentary, and unsplit 8mm film edited with densely painted film leader in rapid sequences of one-to-three frame splices'.⁸ More recently, Avery explained that the film was inspired by the desperation she sensed in the lives of New Yorkers as they approached the end of the working week:

There was a desperate happiness to the weekends in New York. It was like people had a very short window to lead this totally other life and were trying to get as much in as they could. By Sunday afternoon or evening, a lot of people were, in spite of themselves, looking forward to the routine of going back to work, because [on the weekends] they were left to find themselves on their own without the definition of where they worked.⁹

Apart from its title, the thematics of *Midweekend* are never made overt in the film itself, but intimated through a melancholy undertone, the source of which can be difficult to identify. The majority of the silent, 7'30" film is handpainted, with brief interjections (Avery's indication of one to three frames is generally accurate) of found footage, some of which appears in color, some in black-and-white. Avery's artisanal techniques — using Dr. Ph. Martin's paint, solvents, nail polish, bleach, and a #11 Exacto blade — result in resplendently detailed images, anticipating the intricate surges of rapid color that characterize Stan Brakhage's well-known

⁵ Caroline Avery, interview with the author, 28 February 2018.

⁶ Ellen Rothenberg is married to filmmaker Daniel Eisenberg, who was in Avery's cohort at MassArt.

⁷ All information about the making of *Midweekend* comes from Caroline Avery, interview with the author, 28 February 2018. On the history of the JK optical printer, see John Powers, 'A DIY Come-On: A History of Optical Printing in Avant-Garde Cinema,' *Cinema Journal*, 57.4 (Summer 2018), pp. 71–95.

⁸ *Canyon Cinema Film/Video Catalog 7* (San Francisco: Canyon Cinema, 1992), p. 19.

⁹ Caroline Avery, interview with the author, 28 February 2018.

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handpainted films of the late 1980s and 1990s, albeit more rough-hewn, with an abundance of visible splices, dirt particles, and other pockmarks that lend the painting a fibrous texture. Entirely abstract, Avery's painting simultaneously evokes biology and astronomy, suggesting both the reticular, packed networks of microbes and the celestial webs of constellations in space.

The first thirty seconds of the film alternate rapidly between cellular splotches of orange and white against a bluish black interstellar background and dense arrays of orange, white, black, and purple speckles before the first briefly glimpsed images appear: a band of horseback riders on a pink horizon cut into a horizontal strip and pasted onto the 4x3 frame, a woman with a bouffant in a car, and most prominently, an adolescent boy playing with a pinwheel on a school bus. This sequence initiates a patterning that remains consistent over the film's duration: a cluster of five or six images (painted or photographic) will rise to prominence through breakneck alternation before gradually giving way to others, creating a transient flow out of which images assert themselves for a period and then quietly disappear. Soon, the painting becomes more varied: green, purple, and pink appear more frequently, and Avery adopts more diverse approaches to line, shape, and texture without abandoning her global commitment to a mottled, rapidly evolving surface. New images materialize; some of the more conspicuous include a nurse attending to a small boy at a table, an insert of hands cracking an egg into a bowl, and schoolchildren lined up in single formation, presenting themselves for inspection to a female teacher, who seems to be adjusting their postures.

By the film's midpoint, the barrage of the painting, constantly interrupted by half-glimpsed fragments of found footage — as well as the introduction of a strobe-like yellow and black flicker — induces the palpable sensation that the screen is pulsating, an unrelenting fusillade of haptic sensations. These thousands of congested, painted universes frustrate our ability to fully absorb the referential images, which now include an overhead shot of a cowboy riding a bucking bronco, cavalry officers in white, various shots of assembly line factory work, and a four-quadrant image (from a reel of unsplit 8mm) bathed in blue, which is employed regularly enough to impose a gridlike aspect onto the film. Ethnographic images of an African dancer's legs appear in conjunction with a more rigid painting schema of yellow and green cellular blotches on a black background.

The film's climax is dominated by a ratcheting up of the intensity, as the film threatens to spin out of control. Against a throbbing flicker appear a series of shots of children at windows. In a perspectival image that sets itself off from the two-dimensionality of the painted image stream, schoolchildren pour out of school. A race car driver pulls his helmet over his head and a man moves a piece of furniture, all glimpsed in jagged, flashing bursts. The nurse and boy return, joined by new images of race cars barreling down the track and a bandana-clad woman dusting a shelf. In a final diptych, a child washing his hands turns to the camera to convey a haunted look, and a man in a car covers his face before

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an impending crash. The film ends as it began, with an extended passage of painting, this time a colorful explosion of confetti on a clear background.

As this description intends to convey, in *Midweekend*, fairly inscrutable images materialize out of the exquisite tumult of the paint, which renders the film obscure and dynamic in equal measure. In a statement worth quoting at length, Avery explains that her ambition for the film was to provide the hint of a narrative thread through fleeting sense-impressions, a structure she finds analogous to the processes of memory:

I was really interested in creating an evocative environment in which a narrative might exist, but not actually having the story unfold. It's kind of like the way memory works. You remember having read a story years ago, but you can't remember the details. You can remember how it felt: maybe a detail will surface, like one of those 8-balls where the answer is revealed for a moment. As you remember events, there's a palimpsest of other events superimposed over them. Maybe you're having a cup of tea or an argument, and all of a sudden, a memory will come from another event, and things get scrambled. You end up with a memory of a memory; you remember having done a thing, but the raw direct emotion of having that event happen is long gone. And when we construct narratives for ourselves, we're drawing from memory, and those memories color the narrative that we're creating. So *Midweekend* takes the storyline away but keeps the feel of a story: like the smell of a rose, but the rose is gone.¹⁰

In this statement, Avery links narrative with memory through their shared emotional, associative, and sensual qualities. By instantiating these qualities in the film's form, the filmmaker can conjure a narrative atmosphere without limiting its range of meanings through denotative specificity or a causal chain. For Avery, memory is predominantly affective, preserving not the details of an event, but the emotional states that it aroused. The intensity of emotion fades, but residual traces remain, buried under a patina of time, mediation, and contingency. This would seem to be an unlikely model for narrative structure insofar as the erasure of specificity threatens to invalidate the sources commonly identified by film theorists as facilitating the emotional engagement of viewers, such as allegiances and alliances with characters and what Barthes called the hermeneutic and proairetic codes, the large and small-scale questions and tensions that generate narrative momentum.¹¹ How, then, does *Midweekend* retain 'the feel of a story' without including a story's typical components?

In the absence of causal linkage, individual images bear the weight of developing narrative atmosphere. Thus, each image is effectively promoted to the level of the symbolic, retaining an affective charge that derives from its codified meanings. In *Midweekend*, images of children are heavily allegorized, resonating beyond their

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 18–20. On allegiance and alignment, see Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 142–227.

denotative capacities. Midway through the film, Avery incorporates a black-and-white shot of a girl in plaid dress and boy in striped shirt peering out a window, their backs to the camera. Absent the expectation that the film will provide answers to basic narrational questions about the children's identities, relationship to one another, or the object of their gaze, the image simply registers as a concept — 'children looking' — that invokes emotional associations: intimacy between siblings, childhood as an interminable waiting period for adulthood, and the longing to be released into a world that offers more possibilities than the present one. Similarly, a wide-angle shot of children streaming out of school, lunchboxes in hand, represents the sudden release of pent-up energy, freedom from institutional constraints and pressures, and the exuberance of sharing a collective experience. *Midweekend* does not cue the viewer to draw causal inferences between these images, but to experience them as affective evocations of events whose contexts have long faded from memory.

How is this different from simply asserting that 'childhood' is one of *Midweekend's* themes? After all, a film need not have 'narrative atmosphere' to make meaning, and *Midweekend's* images can be readily organized into thematic clusters: childhood, especially as regulated by routine, surveillance, and hygiene (the children by the window, the boy washing his hands, the nurse inspecting the children); gendered domestic routines (hands cracking eggs, the woman dusting the shelf, the assembly line); western imagery (the horse taming, cavalry, and cowboys); and cars, racing, and accidents (the race car driver with visor, the car crashes). These categories, in turn, suggest readings. One could follow Avery in claiming that *Midweekend* is about the ambivalent dialectic of routine and release, or interpret the film as an ideological critique of 1950s-era conformity.

But *Midweekend* resists such tidy meanings. The ambiguity of the film suggests not a transparent set of themes, but an affective environment, a diegesis constructed entirely from icons and symbols. Instead of an internal storyworld that characters experience and encounter, *Midweekend's* diegesis is posited as a collection of sense impressions, recollections, and associations that seem to occupy the same conceptual space. Conceiving of *Midweekend* as a diegesis clarifies Avery's analogy with memory: the relationships between images are akin to the relationships between thoughts, both of which are enclosed within a figurative space. The actions depicted in the images could be understood to point to specific events that transpired within the diegesis, but it seems more apposite to consider them as symbols working together to produce an emotional valence. That is, *Midweekend's* storyworld is not necessarily one in which a child washed his hands after school let out, but one of adolescence circumscribed by rigidity and routine, a pronounced emphasis on hygiene that is mirrored at home and at school, and a yearning for emancipation inflected with the threat of a destructive abandon. Thus, images relate to each other not solely at the level of formal or thematic correspondences, but as a storehouse of affect-producing sense-impressions that share a kind of mental landscape.

In Avery's remarks on *Midweekend*, her Proustian reference to a cup of tea as a trigger for involuntary memory alludes to a conception of memory as an associative

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chain of linkages. In this way, *Midweekend's* images could be understood as a series of emotional impressions, each inspired by its predecessor. Of course, associative editing is a fairly straightforward way of conceptualizing relationships among images, but of particular interest is the rapidity and repetition of *Midweekend's* associations. Only a few frames each, Avery's images appear in short bursts that the viewer barely has time to assimilate, flashing onscreen in repetitive cycles. This is an effect of Avery's working process. After gathering a batch of handpainted and found footage, Avery would intuitively select images that evoked the emotional state she was trying to cultivate for a film. Each filmstrip would be assigned a number. Avery would then use 'a Cagean process' to write a 'score' for the film on graph paper composed of patterns of repeating numbers (e.g., two, three, five, two, five, three, seven), representing the order in which the strips would be edited. Below each number, Avery would make dots corresponding to the number of frames to be included from each strip. When she performed the actual cement splicing, she allowed herself to deviate from her score, adjusting the order of strips or number of frames intuitively in a process that she describes as 'editing with a flourish'.¹²

This method represents a unique fusion of intuitive editing, metrical editing, and chance operations, but it also instantiates a working process that is itself structured according to memory, translating Avery's central analogy from the film's content to the artist's practice. Unlike many of her found footage peers, Avery does not embrace a juxtapositional approach to editing, avoiding deliberate connections between edits on the basis of formal or conceptual similarities and differences. Instead, she composes her scores abstractly with irregular numbering patterns, lending a randomness to the order in which the images appear. This process resembles the inherent unpredictability of memory — the sudden appearance of an involuntary memory, materializing abruptly to make further connections with other memories. On the other hand, by allowing herself to repeat patterns and improvise intuitively, Avery suggests that one can 'follow' memories, using an involuntary memory as the spark for more directed voluntary recall. In exploring the tension between randomization, patterning, and improvisation, Avery's practice itself becomes an analogue for memory.

That said, *Midweekend's* representational images are often eclipsed by the astounding intricacy of the handpainting, which comprises the majority of the film. In fact, Avery's painting is so elaborate and labored that it became the focal point of a laudatory letter from Stan Brakhage, who used phrases such as 'exhausting,' 'painstaking care,' and, after his initial viewing, 'the work of a compulsive neurotic' to describe her films.¹³ Avery's coarsely textured surfaces convey a palpable sensuality, encouraging the touch-based mode of looking that Laura U. Marks has proposed as constituting 'haptic cinema'.¹⁴ As Marks notes,

¹² Caroline Avery, interview with the author, 28 February 2018.

¹³ Stan Brakhage to Caroline Avery, 23 May 1985, James Stanley Brakhage Collection, box 2, folder 9, Special Collections and Archives, University of Colorado Boulder Archives.

¹⁴ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*

physically working with film's emulsion is a frequent method for producing haptic images, which share with *Midweekend* an emphasis on the striated surface.¹⁵ More specifically, Marks ties cinema's appeal to touch to an embodied knowledge that seeks to recover memories. As she explains, 'senses that are closer to the body, like the sense of touch, are capable of storing powerful memories that are lost to the visual'.¹⁶ That is, haptic cinema is a means of representing unrepresentable memories through an appeal to the senses.

Although Marks's work appeared over a decade after Avery made her last film, there are striking convergences between their articulations of the interconnections between cinema, memory, and sensuality. In Avery's account, memories are triggered by sensual experiences, such as drinking tea or smelling a rose. These experiences function as catalysts for memories to arise and recede out of the streaming substrate of organic unconscious processes, where they become conflated with other memories, superimposed over each other like a 'palimpsest'. In *Midweekend*, then, the painting serves as an analogue for this primordial state of consciousness, a swirling skein out of which sense-impressions emerge and intermix. As much as Avery's painting seems to give rise to the images, it also conceals them, functioning as a thick veil that mediates between image and viewer; our ability to perceive the images is thwarted by the cloak of paint, within which the images seem to be enfolded. This encourages the viewer to adopt a haptic visuality, a mode of viewing that, as Marks explains, 'tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture'.¹⁷ Thus, the handpainted sections of *Midweekend* are not detached from Avery's memory-based narrative structure, but integral components of its realization.

Collecting Clues and Abstracting Emotions

Although Avery's work has not been widely seen, the submerged narrative model that she helped to develop has continued to resonate for experimental filmmakers. In the second section of this essay, I want to chart Avery's indirect influence on contemporary artists by demonstrating the degree to which the ideas and methods instantiated in her filmmaking have become significant points of reference for the avant-garde. To be clear, the relative obscurity of Avery's work prohibits the tracing of a direct line of influence — in fact, the filmmakers I discuss below are unfamiliar with Avery's films. Instead, I argue that Avery's contributions to ideas that were circulating more broadly among the minor cinema generation have been overlooked, and these ideas in turn bequeathed a

(Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 162–82.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 173.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 130.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 162.

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shared conception of experimental narrative that contemporary filmmakers can draw from to contextualize their own practice.

This argument may seem counterintuitive inasmuch as experimental cinema is often considered to be a non-narrative filmmaking mode. Many scholars have countered this mischaracterization by investigating periods of more sustained avant-garde engagement with narrative form (e.g., the trance film of the 1940s and 1950s, the Baudelarian cinema of the 1960s, the New Narrative of the late 1970s). By the late 1980s, a new approach to narrative had emerged, identified by Tom Gunning in 'Towards a Minor Cinema,' a short, incisive piece of film criticism that framed the post-Structural generation of experimental filmmakers as renouncing the 'aspiration to mastery' of their forebears and celebrating their marginal identity.¹⁸ While this aspect of his argument is well-known, less acknowledged is Gunning's concomitant suggestion that the minor cinema generation returned to narrative, albeit in a radically attenuated form. For Gunning, their 'submerged narratives' hovered 'just below the threshold of perceptibility'. He continued: 'The sea swells of these subliminal stories align images into meaningful but often indecipherable configurations. The films invite the reader/detective to pursue the thread of narrative, but no closure is promised, no final answer lies behind the veil'.¹⁹

Although Gunning does not mention Avery specifically — he focuses on similarly minded filmmakers, such as Lewis Klahr, Nina Fonoroff, Phil Solomon, and Mark LaPore (some of whom studied with Avery at MassArt) — his observations are remarkably congruent with her own conception of narrative. Drawing from and expanding on Gunning's formulation, we can posit a loose approach to narrative shared by Avery and her peers that includes some configuration of the following elements: sense impressions over causal linkage; affective environments; allegorized or hieroglyphic images; memory-based structures; intuitive editing; haptic surfaces; and an emphasis on childhood and formative experiences. These concerns paralleled contemporaneous intellectual currents — Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis (cf. Freud's notion of the 'screen memory,' a distorted visual memory arising from childhood), semiotics (see Barthes's exploration of the photographic image in terms of *studium* and *punctum*), and the expanded interest in cultural

¹⁸ Gunning, p. 2.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 4. Although there has not been a single book-length study on the avant-garde of the 1980s, sustained discussions of this period appear in *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000*, ed. by Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2010); Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. by Robin Blaetz (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007); David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005); Scott MacDonald's interviews with filmmakers in his *A Critical Cinema* series; Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993); and Gregory Zinman, *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), among many others.

memory (cf. Huyssen's remarks on the postmodern historical shift from 'present futures' to 'present pasts'), to name a few — that reinforced a more general interest in the sensuality of memory and the iconicity of images.²⁰ But this does not mean that these interests were confined to the minor cinema generation that embraced them.

As evidenced by contemporary experimental practice, the subsequent generation of filmmakers has productively expanded on the submerged narratives of Avery and her peers, now the elder statesmen of the avant-garde. To cite two prominent examples, in their films, videos, and discursive performances, Michael Robinson and Mary Helena Clark develop similar ideas about the possibilities experimental film offers in exploring affective narrative environments, demonstrating the degree to which the 'minor cinema' has contributed to the establishment of a shared language within the avant-garde that younger artists can borrow from, revise, and extend.

In interviews, Robinson has characterized his films as 'narratives created through non-narrative materials,' to indicate a process that, like Avery's, entails constructing submerged narratives that resonate affectively within a diegesis composed of symbols and associations.²¹ He elaborates: 'I like the idea of having the semblance of a narrative without actual characters or plot that carves out the feeling and the emotional thrust of the storytelling'.²² Similarly, Clark describes her approach to narrative as 'filmic shorthand,' 'collecting clues' and 'world-building,' phrases that evoke a spatial form of narration that refigures the filmmaker as an investigator intent on making meaning out of traces of actions and objects.²³ Moreover, both filmmakers place a premium on conjuring uncanny and ominous affective atmospheres, attempting to inspire emotional responses in viewers that are usually associated with plot development and attachment to characters. Robinson admits, 'If I can really scare the audience or really break their heart, that's what I ultimately want to do',²⁴ while Clark suggests that 'many of the emotions in my work include portent, which requires a pause or suspense in story'.²⁵

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. III*, ed. by James Strachey (New York: Vintage, 1999), pp. 303–22; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Andreas Huyssen, 'The Search for Tradition' and 'Mapping the Postmodern', in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 160–78, 179–221.

²¹ Cat Tyc, 'Interview with Michael Robinson', *Incite!*, 2 (2010) <<http://www.incite-online.net/robinson.html>> [accessed 29 September 2019].

²² 'Michael Robinson with Z.W. Lewis,' *The Brooklyn Rail* (December 17, 2017–January 18, 2018), <<https://brooklynrail.org/2017/12/film/IN-CONVERSATION-Michael-Robinson-with-Z-W-Lewis>> [accessed 29 September 2019].

²³ Dan Browne, 'Outside the Text: An Interview with Mary Helena Clark', *Incite!* (October 10, 2016) <<http://www.incite-online.net/clark.html>> [accessed 29 September 2019].

²⁴ Ananda Pellerin, 'Michael Robinson: The Experimental Filmmaker Who Will Steal Your Heart,' *Wheel Me Out* (May 2010) <http://poisonberries.net/wheel_me_out.pdf>, p. 4 [accessed 29 September 2019].

²⁵ Mary Helena Clark, interview with the author, 9 October 2019.

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As we have seen, Avery cultivated narrative atmosphere through the signifying power of the symbolic image, an editing procedure based on memory processes, and a haptic approach to handpainting. Clark and Robinson, however, expand the range of techniques available to experimental filmmakers for submerging their narratives. In *The Dragon Is the Frame* (2014), Clark employs strategies that embolden viewers to attribute logic and motivation to abstract images and situations, or, as Clark puts it, ‘playing with an implied narrative to footage that [is] just “of the world”’.²⁶ Throughout *Dragon*, Clark provides a series of relatively conventional establishing shots to which she insistently returns — street corners, a blooming red tree, Muir Woods, Mission Viejo, and San Francisco Bay (the film is an homage to *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)) — as though to imply that significant events have occurred (or are to occur) there, but these events never materialize. People recur, as well, most conspicuously Mark Aguhar, the late multidisciplinary artist to whom the film is dedicated, who performs for the camera. Familiar musical cues (Bernard Herrmann’s score for *Vertigo*) suggest rising action and climax, as if to lend emotional heft to situations left undramatized. Like Avery in *Midweekend*, Clark fashions an emotionally charged hermetic world of indirect impressions, albeit by different means.

In Robinson’s films and videos, submerged narrative is constructed through an ‘atmospheric web of associations,’ often via the dense interweaving of found materials.²⁷ Echoing Avery’s language in describing memory, Robinson ‘trust[s] that the signifiers or triggers in the film — whether they are pop cultural, or mythological, or whatever — hold both obvious, surface-level connotations, and more residual, subconscious ones’.²⁸ In *Mad Ladders* (2015), many of the surface-level connotations are provided by a fairly direct narrative, presented in voice-over by a YouTube prophet named Sister Donna, who tells a passionate, surreal story about the coming rapture as revealed to her in visions, complete with euphoric violence and hallucinogenic shapeshifting. More residual connotations appear in heavily processed images of American Music Award (AMA) telecasts, as stagecraft by Whitney Houston and Janet Jackson is transformed into a swirling storm of rising curtains and spinning geometric set pieces. Only occasionally recognizable as such, the AMA stage serves as a kind of storyworld, an occult space within which artifactual mythologies rub shoulders with each other. At the end of the film, an overhead shot of women waving to the camera on a beach, arranged in a Busby Berkeley-esque circle and rephotographed from a television set, is strangely moving, as it suggests that these televisual models have ascended to the higher spiritual plane described by Sister Donna. For Robinson, then, ‘memory’ is specifically ‘cultural memory,’ a collective phenomenon rooted in

²⁶ Browne.

²⁷ Luke Goodsell, ‘Familiar Spirit – An Interview with Michael Robinson’, 4:3 (10 January 2019), <<https://fourthreefilm.com/2016/01/familiar-spirit-an-interview-with-michael-robinson>> [accessed 30 September 2019].

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

shared experience and nostalgia, preserved in the low resolution of the virtual online archive.

In *Midweekend*, Avery reoriented the well-established experimental film traditions of handpainting and metrical editing toward narrative objectives, forging a haptic cinematic surface and working process, respectively, that tapped into the sensuality of memory. Similarly, Robinson repurposes entrenched avant-garde techniques such as image layering and flicker to heighten the affective intensity of his narratives. In *Line Describing Your Mom* (2011), an aggressive black-and-neon-green flicker abstracts blurry footage of liturgical choreography while a woman recounts a nightmarish story in voice-over about a disturbed neighbor who committed suicide after threatening his baby with a handgun. The red-and-blue flicker of *Light Is Waiting* (2007) is even narratively motivated, introduced as the result of a dropped television set, which suggests that the rest of the video takes place inside this broken analogue relic. In experimental film history, flicker has served as an ontological inquiry into the fundamental properties of the medium, but Robinson's flicker — which, in its bright uniformity, announces its digital provenance — becomes a strategy simply for escalating the physiological intensity of his films, imbuing otherwise ambiguous imagery with elevated narrative significance. According to Robinson, 'I never want the effects and manipulations in my films to feel purely formal — they all play specific emotional or psychological roles, and are meant to be experienced as parts of an abstract narrative'.²⁹

Clark, on the other hand, merges the first-person camera, theorized within the avant-garde tradition as an imprimatur of the filmmaker's subjectivity, with the more functional use of the point-of-view shot in commercial filmmaking to frustrate our ability to align with the subjectivity of the protagonist.³⁰ In her self-described 'spy film' *The Plant* (2012), Clark surreptitiously films a man in a trench coat as he peers inside doorways, crosses the street, and walks along the city sidewalks of downtown Chicago.³¹ The handheld camera, often looking down from a high vantage point, lurches from object to object, as though the filmmaker is searching for a clue, but the focus of her attention is usually unclear or obstructed by passing cars. Moreover, her images are emphatically amateurish, even clumsy, as she struggles to follow her protagonist, zooms erratically, and loses focus for long stretches. In its formal particulars, the shots evoke the subjectivity

²⁹ Forrest Muelrath, 'Medium of Sand', *Bomb* (27 November 2012) <<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/medium-of-sand>> [accessed 8 October 2019].

³⁰ The argument that the first-person camera aligns viewers with the subjectivity of the filmmaker has been discussed extensively. For its application to Brakhage's filmmaking, for example, see P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd edn. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1974]), p. 160, 166–68, 205–06; and Annette Michelson, 'Film and the radical aspiration,' *Film Culture*, 42 (Fall 1966), pp. 40–42. James Peterson discusses this as a heuristic for evaluating poetic films in Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), pp. 34–40.

³¹ Browne.

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of the Brakhagean handheld camera, but in this quasi-narrative context, our attempts to align voyeuristically with the filmmaker prove futile, as we have no access to the investigative objectives that motivate her movements. According to Clark, 'the inquisitive zoom lens carries story with it, mostly broadly the desire to decode'.³² Thus, Clark draws upon one of the avant-garde's most codified techniques to establish a narrative environment without an actual narrative at its center — a detective film without the mystery.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued for the vitality of Caroline Avery's cinema with the express intention of encouraging experimental filmmakers, viewers, and scholars to rediscover her films. Due to limitations of space, I have been able to examine only one of her contributions to experimental filmmaking: a model for 'submerged narrative', an idea pursued in tandem with other filmmakers of her generation, that holds currency within the contemporary avant-garde. But Avery is not the only woman filmmaker of the 'minor cinema' cohort who demands renewed critical and curatorial attention. While important artists such as Marie Menken, Carolee Schneemann, and Barbara Rubin have seen an exciting surge in scholarship devoted to their work, there remain dozens of filmmakers from Avery's era whose films deserve to be seen and discussed. A very partial list could include: Diana Barrie, Ericka Beckman, Betzy Bromberg, Renata Breth, Sharon Couzin, Sandra Davis, JoAnn Elam, Mary Filippo, Michele Fleming, Amy Halpern, Lynn Marie Kirby, Janis Crystal Lipzin, Pelle Lowe, Vivian Ostrovsky, Dana Plays, Esther Shatavsky, Jean Sousa, and Jacalyn White. Although they have failed to receive the critical attention of some of their contemporaries, these filmmakers contributed films, ideas, and cultural interventions that continue to resonate within experimental film culture — even for a generation of artists who may not yet be familiar with their pioneering work.

³² Mary Helena Clark, interview with the author, 9 October 2019.