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Macmillan Films Inc.

FILM STUDY EXTRACT

THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE

THE MURDER OF BATALA

Macmillan Films Inc.
FILM STUDY EXTRACT

THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE

(France, 1935)

THE MURDER OF BATALA
15 min.

NOTES AND ANALYSIS

by John Webber

CREDITS

Director ..... Jean Renoir
Screenplay ..... Jean Castanier, Jean Renoir and Jacques Prevert
Photography ..... Jean Bachelet
Music ..... Jean Wiener
Editor ..... Marguerite Noir

CAST

Batala ..... Jules Berry
Lange ..... Rene Lefevre
Valentine ..... Florelle
Young Meunier ..... Henri Guisol
Gauberet ..... Marcel Levesque

Project Director: Willard W. Morrison

Editorial Consultant: Marilyn Fabe

CONTENTS

THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE

Plot Synopsis

A man and a woman arrive at an inn on the French border and request a room. Their furtive behavior arouses the suspicion of the innkeeper and other guests. These suspicions are confirmed when the woman, Valentine, reveals that her companion is Amade Lange, a man whom the police seek for murder. Some of the people present wish to turn him over to the police immediately, but others are convinced that they should hear Valentine's story before making a judgment. The story, told by flashback, occupies the main body of the film.

Lange works in a publishing house and, in his spare time, writes adventure stories about a fantasy western character he calls Arizona Jim. Batala, the owner of the firm, persuades Lange to sell the rights to the stories for a pittance, and makes a fortune for himself when the Arizona Jim tales prove to be a popular success. He make even more money by inserting references to Ranimax Pills throughout the stories. But despite this bonanza, Batala is still unable to pay off his ever increasing debts. To escape his creditors, he flees Paris. When the train on which he is traveling crashes, Batala is presumed dead.

The company is then taken over by the workers with the support of the chief creditor's son, the young Meunier. A successful cooperative begins to flourish, based on the success of Lange's stories and similar publications. Lange becomes attracted to Valentine who runs the laundry downstairs in the courtyard, but finds it very difficult to overcome his shyness. She encourages him and they begin an affair.

While a party to celebrate the success of the cooperative is in progress, Lange returns to his office (formerly Batala's) to jot down an idea for an Arizona Jim story. There he encounters Batala, dressed as a priest, who insists that he will take control of the company which is still legally his. After he departs, Lange, in shock, sits staring at a gun that Batala, when he fled, had

left behind in the desk drawer. Batala then encounters Valentine in the courtyard and begins to flirt with her. Seeing this, Lange, gun in hand, descends to the courtyard and shoots him. Meunier urges Valentine and Lange to flee to the border.

Valentine wins the sympathy of her listeners with the story and they allow the couple to escape across the border.

THE EXTRACT

Plot Synopsis of the Extract

The extract takes place near the end of the film as the party to celebrate the success of the cooperative is under way. Meunier and Lange are too modest to make speeches and give the floor to Gauberet, the janitor, whose drunken singing bores everyone: Lange leaves for his office and encounters Batala dressed as a priest. The extract culminates with the strangely disorienting shot in which Lange kills Batala. In the final shot, Meunier's car speeds Lange and Valentine to the border.

Elements of Renoir's Style

Theories of film divide between those which stress the manipulative qualities of the medium and those which stress its unique ability simply to record. Andre Bazin, the French realist critic, distinguishes between filmmakers who "put their faith in the image," and those who "put their faith in reality." Among the former he cites Kuleshov, Eisenstein and Gance; among the latter, von Stroheim, Murnau, Flaherty, Welles, Wyler and Renoir. Quite simply, Bazin feels that the directors in the first group break up the spatial and temporal unity of their scenes through editing, while those in the second group aim to create the illusion of reality by preserving spatial and temporal unity.[1]

The director who works in the realist tradition attempts to preserve the time-space continuum within a scene in several ways: (1) by placing his actors on different depth planes, thus allow-

ing them to move freely within the frame; (2) by long takes lasting upward of sixty seconds in which the interaction between the characters can continue unbroken by cuts; and (3) by camera movements which preserve the real time of an action and create spatial unity among characters. The realist director, moreover, will generally use a deliberately unobtrusive editing style, cutting on movement so that cuts are almost unnoticed. Finally, his films will be marked by the sparing use of close-ups or of disconcertingly large images shown out of the established context. The most common shot will be the medium shot in which two characters appear on the screen together.

Renoir's style combines all these elements best suited to the preservation of unity: long takes, as opposed to short shots; editing that does not draw attention to itself; camera movements that serve to emphasize the unity of the scene; deep focus. Andre Bazin attests that Renoir's greatness lay in the fact that "prior to LA REGLE DU JEU (he) forced himself to look beyond the resources provided by montage and so uncovered the secret of a film form that would permit anything to be said without chopping up the world into little fragments, that would reveal the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them."[2]

Essential to achieving the natural unity to which Bazin refers is Renoir's unique concept of the frame as a means of excluding only temporarily some part of the world. A conventional approach to the frame is to regard it as a means of excluding all but the space within which the filmmaker composes the elements of his image. The very carefully composed images of Eisenstein (in IVAN THE TERRIBLE) or Antonioni (in ECLIPSE) or Kurosawa (in THRONE OF BLOOD) greatly contrast with Renoir's framing of his shots which appear loose and casual. There is little or no evidence of careful compositional balance within the frame, as is the case of Eisenstein or Kurosawa, or of a precise framing of objects in relation to people, as in Antonioni's films. In Renoir's films, what happens off the screen is as important as what is taking place on it. The prime impression is of life bursting out of the frame and con-

tinuing off-screen while the camera moves on elsewhere. Bazin writes of Renoir's use of the frame:

> He was perfectly aware that the screen was only the geometric surface of the camera eyepiece, i.e., it is the opposite of the frame. The screen is a hiding place whose function is to hide reality as much as it is to reveal it.[3]

In the extract from THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE, life continually spills out over the edges of the frame; the characters' heads or parts of their bodies often appear fractionally on its margins. They are concerned as much with what is going on off-screen as with the action within the frame. Renoir often makes use of the frame to deliberately exclude part of the action, thereby making us acutely aware of an object or character by virtue of its absence from the screen. The analysis that follows will discuss elements of Renoir's style in detail.

ANALYSIS OF FILM ELEMENTS IN THE EXTRACT

PHOTOGRAPHY: RENOIR'S FRAMING

Shots in which Characters Spill out of the Frame (Figs. 1 and 2)

Shots of this type are especially noticeable in the party scene. After the initial establishing long shot, Renoir cuts to sections of the party group. While Gauberet sings his song, the other guests continue to eat and drink, many quite oblivious of the singer. We sense this by the specific framing employed: one man's head is visible fractionally; another's face looks out beyond the camera as he engages in conversation with someone there, and he leans across the table occasionally to pour wine. Our eye is attracted by these and other marginal activities for Gauberet is never alone in the frame. This framing is dramatically quite

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

logical: no one is really paying attention to the old man's singing and Renoir does not want us to concentrate exclusively on him.

During the same scene we find characters walking to the edge of the frame (or the movement of the camera will position them there), their bodies outside it. Once again, Renoir's emphasis is on preserving the impression of the total event. Subsequently all of the participants are united by camera movements.

Shots in which Characters Walk into and out of the Frame

This is especially evident where characters leave and re-enter the frame within the same shot; for example, when Gauberet staggers out of the doorway into the courtyard to get his garbage cans, he leaves the frame while the partygoers laugh and joke about his condition, but then, in the same shot, re-enters it. Later, as he rushes around shouting for a priest, he is ignored by the young lovers and disappears from the frame only to be seen again as the camera continues to pan left.

The effect of this device is to emphasize the impact of Gauberet's behavior on the spectators. As the party group laughs we cannot but be aware of the object of their laughter and the effect that he has upon the courtyard community. At the end of the extract, his shouts for a priest—this time a genuine need—are ignored.

Shots in which the Frame is Partially Filled

The prime example in the extract occurs when Valentine sees Batala and leaves the frame of one shot, entering it again in the succeeding one and approaching him in amazement. Only after we have seen Batala alone for a few seconds, standing on the extreme right edge of the frame, does Valentine enter. The empty space, plus the time which it takes for Valentine to move into it (a preservation in part of the time-space continuum of

the whole scene), creates a sense of expectation. We have seen her disappear from one shot and we expect her to reappear. When this happens our expectations are fulfilled.

Shots in which Off-Screen Space is Brought into the Action

Young Meunier's line, "I give the floor to Monsieur Lange," is followed by his sweeping gesture of invitation. But at this point Lange is entirely outside the frame, having appeared only fractionally during Meunier's speech. By locating him off-screen, the director emphasizes his importance by creating anticipation of his appearance. Meunier's gesture becomes the logical cue for a panning movement to the left to bring both Lange and other members of the group into the frame.

In another instance, Lange and Valentine are in a hallway outside the room in which the party takes place. As Lange leaves to go upstairs, he opens a door and suddenly a whole new area beyond it is brought into play (Fig. 3). Here, the deep focus increases the film's realism by making us aware that we are watching more than a two dimensional, theatre-like set. Finally, when Batala is shot, he cries out and falls out of the frame, away from the couple. The camera moves very slightly to the left to frame Lange and Valentine while they look down at the dying Batala (Fig. 4). Once again, it is Batala's absence from the frame which draws our attention to his presence and, specifically, to the consequences of Lange's action.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CAMERA MOVEMENT

Throughout the extract Renoir employs the moving camera as a means of avoiding cutting. The result is that many shots run continuously for as long as sixty seconds, the longest being a minute and forty-five seconds.

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Camera Movement to Maintain the Temporal and Spatial Unity of a Scene

The primary purpose of achieving this aim is to allow the action to continue without interruption; that is, without cutting the scene into shorter pieces. For example, the director will move the camera from one speaker to another while they converse rather than cut between them, thus achieving an unbroken dramatic interaction.

Following an establishing shot of the whole party group and several medium shot inserts of part of it, is a long take in which the camera moves from Meunier, embarrassed and unable to speak, to Lange, who is reluctant to do so, and then finally to Gauberet who, to the dismay of the group, begins his drunken song once again. Dramatically, the camera movement is crucial to the film. What had begun as a disparate group of workers becomes a homogeneous one through the establishment of the cooperative. In the common effort, the middle-class Meunier as well as the concierge Gauberet, are included. This is the first shot of the film in which the entire group is brought together.

The final shot of the party sequence runs one and three quarter minutes. It begins with Meunier and ends with Lange, whom the camera follows by panning left with him as he leaves the room with Valentine. The shot might just as well have ended with Lange's departure from the room, but the camera then pans right, returning to the party. By having the camera return to the party, Renoir reestablishes its dramatic importance as it relates to the sequence soon to follow (in which Batala insists that he will re-take control of the company).

As Gauberet drags the can in an almost circular movement across the courtyard, the slightly jerky panning camera imitates the uncertainty of his drunken movements. The camera movement here also maintains the spatial coherence of the group by allowing us to see the young people who laugh at Gauberet's antics in the same shot in which we see him pathetically attempting to do his job.

A camera movement that preserves temporal and spatial unity for a highly dramatic effect is seen in the shot which follows Lange's movement across the composing room and down the stairs. We have just seen the dejected Lange looking at the gun. By cutting to Batala and Valentine together in the courtyard, Renoir briefly diminishes any expectation of Lange's taking action against Batala. The possibility is then revived, not by an artificial stimulation of anticipation through cross-cuttng between Lange upstairs and the pair downstairs, but through camera movement in one shot. First the camera tilts up (away from Batala and Valentine) to discover Lange in the window above looking down at them. Then the camera follows Lange as he walks across the building, stopping at the foot of the stairs as he descends. Since we realize that Valentine and Batala are the focus of Lange's attention, we become all the more aware of their presence by their absence on the screen as Lange stalks toward them.

Later, as Gauberet shouts for a priest to attend the dying Batala, the camera follows his drunken walk. He bangs on doors and windows, is ignored by the other partygoers, and lurches to an open window in which a young couple briefly appear. The camera continues its pan across the courtyard, past the garbage can, to end on the dead Batala. In one shot the relationship between the members of the cooperative and Batala is clearly established: Batala is no longer any concern of theirs. The camera's linkage of Batala and the garbage can is significant: Batala is shown to be a worthless member of society, symbolically equated with garbage.

Camera Movement to Create Suspense or Tension

As Lange approaches his office, he stops short at the open doorway, shocked at something he sees. We do not understand the cause of his hesitation until the camera begins to move forward from behind him to reveal Batala dressed as a priest. The time interval between the opening of the door and our seeing Batala is the principal factor creating the tension. A direct cut would not have revealed the object of Lange's shock so suspensefully (Figs. 5 and 6).

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Camera Movement to Emphasize an Object

After Batala has walked away from the office, the camera moves toward Lange and the gun on the desk. Shortly before, Batala had jokingly suggested that Lange kill him; Renoir's emphatic camera movement indicates that Lange may be taking the joke seriously.

Camera Movement to Disconcert the Viewer

The extract contains one of the most disconcerting camera movements in the history of film. After the shot discussed earlier that follows Lange across the composing room and stops at the foot of the stairs that lead into the courtyard, there is an almost invisible cut to a shot in which Lange, gun in hand, begins to walk toward frame right in the direction of Batala and Valentine. We understand that the couple are off-screen right since the camera has previously panned left with Lange during his walk across the building. At this point, the camera resumes its movement and continues to pan *left* (not *right* to accompany Lange) 270 degrees around the courtyard. Lange, accordingly, disappears from frame right to be picked up again entering from frame left to shoot Batala (Fig. 7).

Even after repeated viewings, this shot tends to disorient and confuse most viewers unless they are in on the nature of the complicated camera movement. The disconcerting effect of the 270 degree pan around the courtyard, however, is appropriate in the dramatic context. From a meek and gentle man, Lange suddenly becomes a killer. The irrational camera movement mirrors the irrationality of his act. Like some of the camera movements discussed above, this shot also enhances the tension of the scene. The long pan around the empty courtyard suspensefully delays the denouement. Finally, the bizarre circular pan enables Renoir to show us the couple's reaction to Lange before Lange appears in the frame. This touch subtly enhances both the drama and horror of the moment.

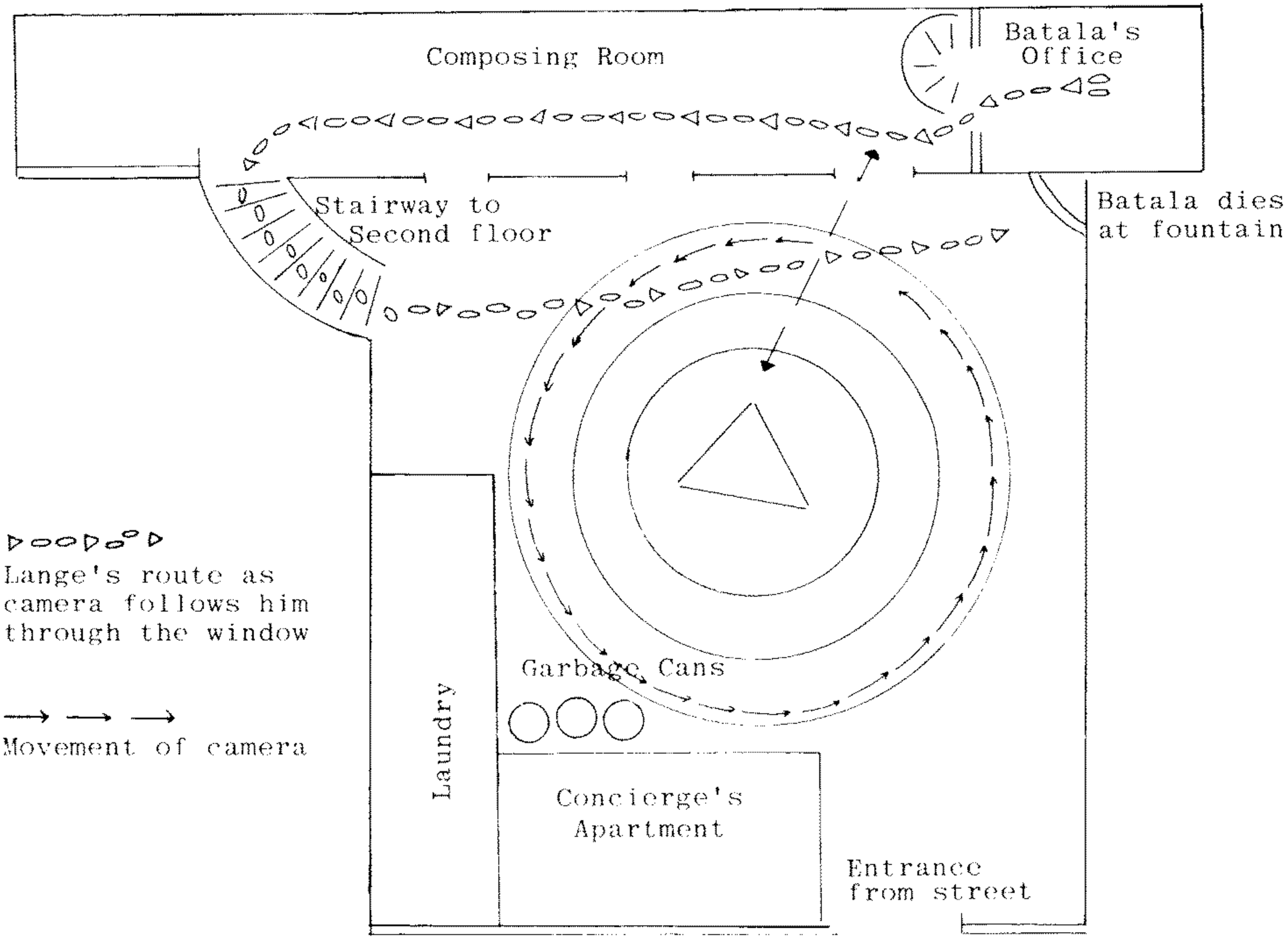

Fig. 7: DIAGRAM FOR THE MAIN SET FOR "THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE"

Invisible Editing

Invisible editing, defined as an editing style in which shots are joined in a way to disguise the impact of the cut, functions to preserve the illusion of temporal and spatial continuity of a scene. In the extract, Renoir regularly disguises his cuts for this purpose by cutting on movement.

For example, in the scene between Batala and Lange, the former moves across the room and sits at his old desk. The cut, to another angle, comes on his movement downwards toward the chair, making it less noticeable. In another instance, after Lange walks through the composing room and down the stairs, there is a cut to a long shot of Lange poised ready to kill Batala. Here the cut is disguised by Lange's arm raising, a movement which is continued smoothly over into the following shot. As a result, our eye scarcely is aware of the transition between shots.

Absence of Jarring Close-Ups

In the extract there are very few close-ups. Most shots contain two or three characters in medium or medium long shot. A rare exception to this rule occurs in the scene between Lange and Batala where Renoir emphasizes the clash between the two men by alternating close-ups of them. Generally, jarring cuts to details of a scene are avoided. For example, in the same scene, Renoir could have cut in separate shots of the gun for dramatic emphasis, or, when Batala is shown leaving the room, Renoir could have cut to Lange looking down at the gun on the desk. In both cases he chooses to retain the spatial integrity of the scene by using a camera movement instead.

Unobtrusive Shot Transitions

Closely related to his invisible editing are Renoir's unobtrusive shot transitions between the various sequences in the extract. Until the final two shots of the extract (in which there

is a lap dissolve of Batala's dead body into the roadway as Lange flees to the border), all the transitions are accomplished through straight cuts. There are no fancy dissolves or fades to remind us of the artificiality of what we are seeing.

The final dissolve makes up in dramatic intensity what it loses in realism. The lingering dissolve of Batala's body into the roadway establishes in a powerful way the causal relation between the two shots: the body is the motive of the frenzied flight. The urgent music (which begins before the dissolve) also helps to cement the shots together in a particularly dramatic way.

APPENDIX

Footnotes

1. See Andre Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of the Cinema," in *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) pp. 23-40.
2. Bazin, *What is Cinema?* p. 38.
3. Quoted in Pierre Leprohon's *Jean Renoir* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1971).

Recommended Readings

Andre Bazin's essay, "The Evolution of the Language of the Cinema," in *What is Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) discusses realism in film style and editing since sound. In Bazin's *Jean Renoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973) there is a long, detailed study of THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE that focuses on the film's style. Noel Burch's essay, "NANA or the Two Kinds of Space," in *The Theory of Film Practice* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973) discusses Renoir's utilization of off-screen space in this early film, a stylistic feature prominent in Renoir's films throughout his career. Pierre Leprohon's *Jean Renoir* (New York: Crown

Publishers, Inc., 1971) is a translation of the Editions Seghers' Cinema d'Aujourd'hui series. The book contains a long essay on Renoir's films by Leprohon, some writings by Renoir himself, and a selection of critical pieces on his films and film style. Two pieces by Bazin, "The Evolution of Jean Renoir" and "The Camera and the Screen," are especially pertinent to THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE. Leo Braudy's *Jean Renoir: The World of his Films* discusses the overall themes rather than the style of Renoir's work. Another excellent source is the recent book by Penelope Gilliatt, *Jean Renoir: Essays, Conversations, Reviews* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).

Suggested Extracts for Comparison

The juxtaposition of the extract from THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE with an extract from POTEMKIN, MOTHER, or NOTORIOUS demonstrates the contrast between Renoir's "realistic style," in which he attempts to preserve the spatial and temporal unity of the action, with the style of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, or Hitchcock (as illustrated in these particular extracts), which is characterized by short takes that continually break up temporal and spatial unity for particular dramatic effects. Such a juxtaposition encourages theoretical discussions about realism in film. Do Renoir's films seem more realistic than Eisenstein's, Pudovkin's or Hitchcock's? The extract from THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS provides an example of film realism achieved through radically different stylistic devices than those Renoir employs in THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE. Finally, the juxtaposition of the extract from THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE with an extract from ECLIPSE, THRONE OF BLOOD, or IVAN THE TERRIBLE demonstrates the dramatic effect of contrasting methods of framing the image.