



STANDARD GAUGE

Morgan Fisher

1984

16mm, color, optical sound, 35 minutes

Director and camera: Morgan Fisher

Principal assistant: Susan Rosenfeld

Production assistants: Grace Barnes, Alex Gibney,

Mark Stahl, and Christopher Williams

Sound: Cinesound

Consultants: Thom Andersen and Pete Comandini

Narration written and spoken by: Morgan Fisher

Standard Gauge in Three Parts

1.

A frame of frames, a piece of pieces, a length of lengths. Standard gauge on substandard; narrower, yes, but longer. An ECU that's an ELS. *Disjecta membra*; Hollywood anthologized. A kind of autobiography of its maker, a kind of history of the institution from whose shards it is composed, the commercial motion picture industry. A mutual interrogation between 35mm and 16mm, the gauge of Hollywood, and the gauge of the amateur and independent.

2.

The above paragraph was the first note I wrote about *Standard Gauge*, a film I finished in 1984. I liked it because it was terse. It's a collection of sentence fragments, which I meant to reflect the fragments that make up the film. Later on I wrote a longer note, which here I have revised only slightly:

Standard Gauge is an autobiographical account of a few years in the film career of its maker. Such, at least, is its ostensible form and purpose.

The material from which the film is composed is pieces of 35mm motion picture film, a width known in former times as standard gauge, that its maker collected while working in and around the commercial motion picture industry. The pieces are a miscellaneous assortment, and include narrative features, trailers, newsreels, commercials, and pieces of head and tail leader.

The method of the film, which was shot in 16mm, is to show these pieces one after the other in an extreme close-up that is one continuous shot lasting thirty-two minutes. This is a minute short of the maximum length of a scene in 16mm, and is nearly three times longer than what 35mm is capable of. The body of the film is this single continuous scene, and it is preceded by an extended written text, presented by means of a crawl, that gives a brief history of how 35mm came into being. It explains that 35mm became the gauge of the commercial film industry, and that, with the emergence of other gauges, 35mm came to be known as standard gauge. As each piece of film is shown—there are about thirty in all—a narrative spoken by the maker describes some point related to it: the

circumstances under which it was collected, for example, or a technical aspect of the image, such as the process by which it was produced.

So *Standard Gauge* is a kind of collage or found-footage film. But instead of being spliced together and projected, and so brought to life, as in the films of Bruce Conner, the pieces of film in *Standard Gauge* remain separate, and are presented one after the other for inspection by the audience as inert pieces of film, translucent objects made of celluloid. They are thus experienced by the viewer of the film as they would be by someone, such as an editor or a negative cutter, who handles and organizes film as material.

Although the film is one continuous shot, each piece of film fills the frame and so inflects the embracing shot, creating within it the effect of a succession of shots. So the film combines two conventions usually held to be mutually exclusive, or even antagonistic: editing—the construction of a film through montage—and the long take, the impassive recording of a scene that has been arranged with some purpose in mind.

Just as *Standard Gauge* amalgamates the two great modes of film syntax, it

also brings together narrative and non-narrative filmmaking. By examining the shards of the industry frame by frame, it discovers some of the means and themes of experimental film living, so to speak, in Hollywood. And at the same time, the film engulfs and usurps the material of the commercial motion picture industry, turning it into its subject.

Thus *Standard Gauge* proposes a kind of mutuality or interdependence between two kinds of filmmaking that by conventional standards are thought to be divided by an unbridgeable chasm. By means of a mutual interrogation between 35mm, the gauge of the industry, and 16mm, the gauge of the independent and amateur, *Standard Gauge* proposes to unify film of every kind.

3.

Recently I've written more.

When I say in the first note that the film is standard gauge on substandard, I am only repeating the language that was in use at one time. There was a time when 16mm film was called substandard. The prefix "sub-" is logical because 16 as a number is less than 35, below it. But when the prefix is added to "standard" it creates a word that even if correct in the narrow sense carries with it the whiff of the pejorative that is echoed in what Hollywood editors used to call 16mm film: spaghetti. So in the view of Hollywood, 16mm wasn't just below, it was also beneath.

To explain "An ECU that's an ELS": ECU means an extreme close-up, and, as you might now guess, ELS means extreme long shot. Of course the short and long refer to the subject's distance from the camera. The stagecoach racing in the distance across Monument Valley is an ELS of the stagecoach. So, to state the obvious, I was playing with the meaning of "long," turning it from meaning far away to meaning lasting a long time.

People have asked me if *Standard Gauge* is itself shot in 35mm. No, it's not, as they would have realized if they knew a little more about the technical aspect of 35mm. The narration says that takes in *Under Capricorn* were as long as was possible at the time and

that I thought this length was still the longest possible. I didn't give the length of this take in the narration because I didn't want to belabor the point. But to repeat what I said in the second note, the take that is *Standard Gauge* is nearly three times longer than the longest

take that is possible in 35mm. So *Standard Gauge*, a modest little film in 16mm, does something that no film made the industry can do. So much for 16mm being beneath 35mm.

But I am happy that people ask this question, because I think it suggests that *Standard Gauge* really does make you think about the material base of the film that is the origin of the image on the screen. You see on the screen the pieces of film in their entire width, from one edge to the other. So you see all of what is within that width: you see the frame, and you also see the margins beyond the frame, occupied by the sprocket holes, the sound track, and so on. What you see is the literal difference between the width you know that film has and the width of the frame that you see on the screen that you know is less than the width of the film. I think that seeing on the screen these things that are a part of the facts of a piece of film but are always excluded from the image you see on the screen makes you think about these same things in the film in the projector, the film you are watching. You already know there is more to any film than the partial shadow of it that you see on the screen, but *Standard Gauge* shows you what this margin looks like and shows you some varieties in the things you find there: the names of different film manufacturers, and so on. (*Standard Gauge* also shows you some varieties of what occurs in another margin, the margin of the leaders at the head and tail of a film print.) So I think people ask if *Standard Gauge* is in 35mm because what they see on the screen is 35mm, and they suppose, quite reasonably, that, like the pieces of film they see on the screen, the film that shows those images of 35mm is itself in 35mm. It isn't, but that is less the point than the fact that people are thinking about the film itself. If people think about the film in the projector when they see *Standard Gauge*, perhaps they are more likely to think about it when they see other films.

The ultimate subject of *Standard Gauge* is how a single continuous take can be a complex event. *Standard Gauge* raises the question in an acute way because the

film consists of only one shot. The film isn't just one continuous take, it's a static shot, and an extreme close-up. In their modest ways, these are all extremes, and together they emphasize the radicality, if I can call it that, of the continuous take that is the foundation of the film.

The film's procedure of showing a series of pieces of film as objects is possible only in a single take. It may be the case, as I say above, that the pieces of film one after another within a continuous take create the effect of a succession of shots. But between each piece of film the frame is empty. The empty frame is the field into which each successive piece of film is inserted, and this empty frame is a reminder of the continuing and unvarying field of *Standard Gauge*. The empty frame between the pieces emphasizes that the pieces are materially separate objects, and this in turn points to the continuous take that contains them all.

Beyond this simple procedure, I tried to point to the continuous take in *Standard Gauge* without talking about it directly by means of some of the fragments I included and by what I said about them.

As the narration makes clear, the piece from the leader of *The Naked Dawn* is really only an excuse to talk about another film by Ulmer, *Detour*. The last shot in *Detour* is a

continuous take in which very complicated things happen. What I say in the narration remarks only on how the shot moves from the present to the future. Of course what happens later in any shot is the future in relation to what happened earlier, but in this shot in *Detour* there's a jump ahead in time that lies beyond the sense of the continuing present that a continuous shot usually implies. The main character, nearly at the end of his rope, is delivering an interior monologue. We hear the words that he speaks, but we don't see him say them. He says, "But one thing I don't have to worry about—I know: someday a car will stop to pick me up..." He makes a prediction, and on the screen we see his prediction come true. His saying the word "will" shifts the scene to the future, and the action that fulfills his prediction confirms this shift. The disjunction in time between present and future that these tenses mark in language operates with equal force in the scene. Within one continuous shot, the continuing present ends, and we are suddenly in the

future.

But in fact what happens in this shot is even more complicated than that. I was worried that it would be too complicated to explain and would take too long, so I didn't go into it. Before the last shot, the main character is sitting in a diner looking resigned as he delivers his interior monologue. You see his face in a close shot, so you are looking at the face of the man from whose mind the voice you hear is coming. The monologue continues over the cut to the last shot, but in this shot the character is suddenly far off in the distance, even though the voice continues as it did when you saw the character in close-up. Then he makes his prediction, and we see it come true. The shift in tense that the prediction and its coming true produce is reinforced by the character's being off in the distance, as though his distance off in space corresponds to a distance off in time. But his being off in the distance has another effect: even though he speaks in the first person, his being in the distance results, for me at least, in the inner voice no longer seeming to come from the man whose body we see in the distance, but from someone else. It can't be anyone else in the scene, so it has to come from outside of the scene, that is, from a narrator. A narrator isn't really in the film, just as the musicians who play music for the soundtrack aren't in the film. They are in a space outside of the film, except when Godard makes a joke about it by having a pan reveal the musicians who until then were off screen, and you see them producing the beautiful music that until you see them actually playing you took to be normal movie music.

So even though the scene in the diner made it clear that the origin of the voice was the mind of the character, in the last shot the character splits in two. There's a body on the screen, but the body is so far away that the voice no longer seems to come from it, but instead shifts to coming from someone we can only take to be a narrator. And in making this shift the voice leaves the space of the film and crosses over into a space that we know is outside of it. These two things together in the same shot, the change in tense and the character's splitting in two, produce a real vertigo.

The piece from *Under Capricorn* is another case of pointing to the long take, but beyond that, I also wanted to suggest that directors that work in the commercial

film industry are sometimes interested in working in relation to the material constraints of film, just as avant-garde filmmakers are. I think it's clear that the long take was a part of Hitchcock's thinking about the film from the beginning, not a technical procedure that he added as an embellishment to a film that he had already conceived separately from it. He conceived of the device of the long take and the subject together. In thinking up *Standard*

Gauge, I did the same thing. The long take is ultimately a limit; there is a length longer than which a shot cannot be. And the shot in *Standard Gauge* is one minute short of it. Of course I wanted the shot to be the maximum possible length, but it didn't quite work out.

Comparable thinking about limits is in some of Hitchcock's other work, notably *Rope*, which takes as its founding rule the appearance of taking place in continuous time. There are cuts but it appears that there are no lapses in time between the shots that they join. I say "appears" because of course the shots were not made one after the other without a lapse in time between them, as the shots appear to be in the film. And after the first shot, which is an exterior, the camera never leaves the room that the first shot cuts to, so the film depicts a space that is as confined as the continuity of time would imply. Films usually elide time, and usually space too; they omit the time that the story doesn't need, and they jump from one space to another, as the story requires. So it's as if Hitchcock decided to make a film by refusing to resort to treating space and time with the usual liberty that film so easily makes available and that almost all commercial films depend on. And I note that the title of *Rope* names a material that is characterized by being a continuous length (and one that you don't cut unless you have to), and so calls attention to the long takes that make up the film, and by implication the film's apparent continuity of time. And we think of a rope as characterized more by its length than anything else.

The same impulse to reverse orthodox conventions lies behind *Lifeboat* and *Rear Window*. They're not temporally continuous, as *Rope* gives the appearance of being, but they are spatially continuous, in that they each take place in only one relatively confined space. After the montage of the ship's sinking that begins

Lifeboat, and except for five underwater shots in the fishing sequence, for the entirety of the film the camera is in the lifeboat. *Rear Window* is only a little less strict. For almost every shot in the film the camera is within James Stewart's apartment. For the few shots where the camera is not in his apartment (several in the sequence following the death of the dog and several at the climax of the film), it is within the confines of the courtyard that his apartment looks out on, a space of course much bigger than his apartment but almost as circumscribed by walls as the apartment itself. There are lots of shots from James Stewart's apartment that are his POV,¹ and these POVs are cuts to spaces outside his apartment, but the camera remains in his apartment. When his POVs are through a telephoto lens, as they frequently are, what he sees is sufficiently alienated by distance that it creates the effect of a spatial discontinuity even though we know this can't be so because a POV in itself is a guarantor of spatial continuity. What look like spatial discontinuities are in fact inflections within the spatial continuity that we know *Rear Window* observes. I allow myself to suggest that the fragments of film within the continuity of *Standard Gauge* function in a comparable way: they look like cuts to other spaces, but in fact they are not.

My point is simply that in these films Hitchcock chose to work within limits: temporal continuity, spatial continuity, the material continuity of a roll of film. It was a question of his finding limits and a story that suited each other. So at least one director working in the commercial film industry sometimes looked at the limits that govern film, limits in both its conventions and its material, as being generative; and in thinking this way he was doing what many filmmakers have done who are far away from the industry. That doesn't make Hitchcock an independent filmmaker, of course, but I want to point out the similarity in thinking between these two very different spheres. What makes the

similarity in thinking possible is film as a material and the continuity that it both embodies and implies.

This interest in working in relation to limits is a specific case where it is possible to think of film as a unified field. Film of all kinds is unified by its material facts. I think this is true of film as it is true of no other medium. I wanted *Standard*

Gauge to act out this idea of unity both in its form, combining 16mm and 35mm, and in its allusions. There are the allusions to commercial directors—Ulmer and Hitchcock—and in the same space, so to speak, are allusions to filmmakers not in the industry.

I mention Bruce Conner by name, but other filmmakers are as present as Hitchcock and Ulmer and Vincente Minelli, the director of *The Bandwagon*. The principle device of the film, a close-up of a series of pieces of photographic material with voice-over commentary, bears enough of a resemblance to (*nostalgia*) to remind us of Hollis Frampton. The sprocket holes and edge lettering and dirt particles and the China girls all remind us of Owen Land (formerly known as George Landow). And Paul Sharits is there in the frames that are one solid color. The long take could be taken as a reference to Ernie Gehr as well as to Warhol. I suppose that the 20th Century Fox logo could be taken as an oblique allusion to Jack Goldstein, not a filmmaker as these others are, but an artist who as one part of his practice made films, and one of his films was an adaptation of the logo of another Hollywood studio, the MGM lion.

I was also thinking about painters. Ed Ruscha is there in the 20th Century Fox logo, Brice Marden is in the logo for Movielab, Ellsworth Kelly is in the solid blue frame, and Barnett Newman is in the frame that is solid blue except for the narrow vertical white band at the far right edge. And Adolf Gottlieb is there, if obliquely, in the two blobby shapes on a plain background that must have been created by some chance event in the lab. I feel it is only fair to Gottlieb to mention him. There was a time when he meant more to me than he does now, but he is in the film.

This was important to me, that a film could contain all these people in such a way that it was possible to think there was something that unified them besides their all being in the film. Maybe it's as simple as wanting to think that they are all artists, in the truest sense.

At the first screening of the film someone remarked that there was much in the film about death: the crash of the *Hindenburg*, the execution of the Fascist prison official, a director planning to make a film in which you saw people actually die, the death of a soldier in newsreel footage, figurative death in the decay of

nitrate film and in the signs of the passing of time that so many of the pieces bear. I suppose this is true, but I really don't know what to make of it. Maybe it's an unconscious prefiguration of the death we know that film will suffer. I wonder how long 16mm will survive. The day will come when you can't buy 16mm film to shoot with, instead there will only be 16mm print stock to make prints from existing materials. Then they'll stop making black and white print stock, and make only color print stock. Then some day they'll stop making 16mm altogether. I suppose the same will happen for 35mm, although that day is further off.

This possibility of the end of film is the negative implication of my saying that film is unified by its material facts as no other medium is. The absolute uniformity of film as a material (and the many things that spring from this simple fact) is the fundamental source of its appeal as a medium, but this uniformity is possible only because film is produced on an industrial basis. The origin of film's single most salient property in industrial

production also gives film a vulnerability that no other medium has. The companies that make it can decide to stop making it. Already the companies that still make film make it in fewer varieties. An individual can't manufacture film, so filmmakers are at the mercy of the companies that make their raw material as people who work in other media and

other forms are not. I suppose that a similar claim could be made for video, but film as film will someday be gone, while video in one form or another will go on indefinitely. I wish there were a way to make a connection between this presence of death in *Standard Gauge* and the fact that the film is a single take. Maybe the connection is that in a long take we have the chance to experience real time and the continuity of space that it implies. Real time is the time in which we live, and that means it's also the time in which we die.

Note

¹ POV is short for “point of view.” For more on point of view shots see “Screening Room and Death,” pp. 87-93 in *Morgan Fisher. Writings*, ed. Sabine Folie and Susanne Titz (Vienna: Generali Foundation; Mönchengladbach: Museum Abteiberg; Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012).

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