FROM THE WRITER

All semester in WR 150, I had been waiting for the appropriate moment to integrate film into my discussion of modernist poetry as it is an art form I am a great admirer of. Coincidentally, my final paper on the Beat movement proved to be the best suited to the visual medium of film. I was particularly interested in how one technique or theme can be utilized across different mediums, styles, and time periods. Using the organizational device of montage as a jumping-off point for this essay, I explored how Allen Ginsberg's seminal poem "Howl" represents a multilayered cultural, social, and historical montage made up of various film styles, movements, and themes. As a result, Ginsberg, either consciously or unconsciously, uses montage to create more meaning out of what some may claim to be a rambling or even nonsensical poem, one that breaks quite radically from the more outwardly formal, academic, and elitist poetry that had preceded it. "Howl" not only resembles the cinema verite style that was becoming increasingly popular at the time, but it also captures one of the central tenets of another less mainstream film movement called Underground Film, as well as avant-garde film in general. "Howl" and the Beat Generation and style it represents address many taboo topics, such as race, homosexuality, and drugs just as Underground films of that time did. Both were completely unabashed in their disdain for and protest against formal institutions and in their ultimate call for more human understanding and equality. Underground Film and "Howl's" exploration of these sensitive and divisive topics served to jolt the reader out of their mundane and cyclical everyday lives in order to prove to them that the only reason they were so shocked was because they had hardly bothered to expose themselves to those issues before.

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CLAIRE HOWARD

"HOWL" AS LITERARY MONTAGE: CINEMA'S INFLUENCE ON THE BEAT GENERATION

Allen Ginsberg's landmark poem "Howl" has come to epitomize society's perception of the Beat Generation in 1950s America. The movement stands as a symbol of counterculture, completely unabashed in its renunciation of the establishment, violence and war, particularly as it applied to America's involvement in Vietnam at the time, and any external force that attempted to limit genuine self-expression. As a result of their non-conformist mindset, the people in the poem often find themselves at odds with law enforcement, academia, and even the constraints of time. Its narrative tone closely resembles that of cinéma vérité, characterized by its documentary style and often shot on a handheld camera, which added a sense of realism not found in typical mainstream films. Thematically, the poem is very similar to Underground Film, which was a term used to describe the more countercultural and experimental subset of avant-garde film.

In the poem's exploration of the aforementioned topics, Ginsberg manages to combine the styles of multiple film movements and themes into a collection of images and sensations captured through his own unique lens. What is the purpose of combining so many cinematic influences, especially in a literary medium? The answer lies in the film editing technique called montage, which was first brought to American films via the Soviets in the early 20th century. David Bordwell states in his essay "The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film" that "Montage was used to build a narrative (by formulating an artificial time and space or guiding the viewer's attention from one narrative point to another), to control rhythm, to create metaphors, and to make rhetorical points" (9). "Howl" therefore finds its unity through the use of this technique, making its particular narrative more coherent while demonstrating that, like film, one of its main purposes is to serve an audience.

A question that should be answered before investigating exactly how "Howl" applies montage as an organizational technique is why it's beneficial to read the poem through a cinematic as opposed to exclusively literary lens at all. Firstly, Part 1 of "Howl" begins from a visual perspective, with the speaker saying in the first line "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by/madness, starving hysterical naked" (9). The past tense verb "saw" automatically puts the speaker in the position of a spectator who is not only watching the events of the poem unfold, but is more specifically looking back on them. Therefore, though he may at first seem like a passive observer, the fact that he has a memory of such specific details reveals that he was most likely part of the activity at the time it was happening. The retrospective nature of the poem is also significant as it relates to montage because it creates a sense of what Bordwell called "artificial time and space." In other words, the events described in the poem seem almost mythic as they are being retold and compressed within the inappropriately short length of a poem. Similarly, montages in films are used to condense events that may have taken place over the course of hours or even days into a shorter span of time.

"Howl" displays a montage made up of the influences of two major film movements, but the style and themes those film movements tackle themselves are also used in the poem to create montages of their own, though these are more thematic than structural. The use of the first, cinéma vérité, often catches the people in the poem in very private moments. In Parker Tyler's book, *Underground Film,* he states that "Cinéma vérité (when genuine rather than faked or mimicked) may be an openly announced, often publicly practiced form of eavesdropping, like asking someone, entirely without notice, to sit, walk, and/or talk for portrait" (38). Similarly, "Howl" shows the reader the people in the poem when they are "cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear" and "crying in white gymnasiums naked/and trembling before the machinery of other/ skeletons" (10, 13). Moments like these catch people in vulnerable situations, either "cowered" or "crying" while occupying seemingly vacant and the unsettling and strange spaces of "unshaven rooms" and "white gymnasiums."

On the other hand, Tyler argues that cinéma vérité is "fraudulent" if "individuals are eager to be photographed (and/or interviewed)" because "one can only assume that they wish to publicize what they do naturally, willingly, and ordinarily" (38). "Howl" is most definitely a representation of "genuine" cinéma vérité, however, because the people in the poem are completely unaware that they are being documented since the documentation (i.e. the writing of the poem) is taking place after the actual events occurred. Cinéma vérité therefore adds a sense of spontaneity and authenticity to the poem, which is strengthened by Ginsberg's own close connection to the subjects he's writing about, who one can assume are his fellow Beat friends. The singular speaker recounting the events in the poem acts just as dexterously as a handheld camera does when shooting in the cinéma vérité style.

Underground Film in the 1950s also captures a similar sense of realism and authenticity, and both Underground films and "Howl" provide the audience with an inside look into their respective movements. Tyler claims "The Underground has enshrined the camera as a wild, willful, inquisitive eye, disposed to give graphic publicity to everything that has remained taboo in the realm of popular commercial films, even the most serious and artistic among them" (35). One could just as easily use this description to characterize the central ethos of the Beat Movement that is highlighted in "Howl." The people in the poem are often described as "crazy," "obscene," and "mad," people who "distributed Super Communist pamphlets in Union/Square," "lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate," and "bit detectives in the neck and shrieked/in police cars for committing no crime but their/own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication (9, 12, 13, 14). The reference to homosexual love and the sadistic pleasure they get from physically harming law enforcement officials are both "graphic" and touch on topics that were "taboo" during 1950s America and, to some extent, today.

After returning from a trip to India in 1963, Ginsberg himself commented on the state of current avant-garde film, saying, "This is the film of cranks, eccentrics, sensitives, individuals one man one camera one movie—that is to say the work of individual persons not corporations ("Back to the Wall" 8), (Kane 123). His characterization of avant-garde film as being made by "one man one camera one movie" echoes the intimate documentary style of cinéma vérité, while the description of its filmmakers as "cranks, eccentrics, [and] sensitives" is very similar to how Ginsberg describes the people in "Howl."

Also central to the Beat Generation that "Howl" documents, as well as the avant-garde film movement, was a rejection of institutions and organized thought, just as he claims that avant-garde films were the product of individuals rather than corporations. From the very beginning of "Howl,"

the speaker tells us that the people described in the poem "were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull" and "threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism" (9, 18). These instances of revolt are almost certainly autobiographical, referring to Ginsberg's own expulsion from Columbia and Ginsberg's friend and the man he dedicated "Howl" to, Carl Solomon, respectively.

The people in the poem also "fell on their knees in hopeless cathedrals praying/for each other's salvation and light and breasts" (18). While their actions initially appear sincere, describing the cathedrals as "hopeless" minimizes the effectiveness of religion and the progression from "salvation" to "light" to "breasts" quickly moves away from the holy and into the sacrilegious. Instead of abiding by-pre-established authority, the people in the poem create their own. In a strange role reversal, the people in the poem "reappeared on the West Coast, investigating the/F.B.I. in beards and shorts with big pacifist eyes" (12). Here they continue to make a mockery of law enforcement by assuming those positions of authority themselves while being obviously ill-equipped to do so. The F.B.I. are described almost too casually with their "shorts" and "big pacifist eyes," diminishing whatever imposing authority they might have had before.

Clearly displaying such graphic and taboo topics could lead to the misconception that "Howl's" sole achievement is its shock value, but as Tyler says about Underground Film, "if what is shown is rare, tempting, unusual, thrilling, it is only because big commercial film has so long neglected its natural opportunities" (2). "Howl" serves the same function for poetry, making readers aware that the reason they may be so shocked by some of the content of the poem is most likely due to problems of public exposure on those topics rather than problems with the content itself.

Both Underground films and "Howl" therefore showed their audiences what everyone else was afraid to expose. Audience is an important element for both the medium of film and poetry. "Howl" in particular engaged with its audience through numerous live readings Ginsberg gave of the poem. Another one of Ginsberg's poems, "America" acknowledges the audience even more directly, saying in one of the lines, "I'm addressing you" (40). Such obvious and almost abrasive remarks immediately attract the reader's attention, making them more open to receiving the message trying to be conveyed.

However, the style in which "Howl" is written in is not entirely emblematic of the avant-garde films and their filmmakers that the poem was inspired by. Tyler notes that "…a great pride of the true avant-garde filmmaker is that he can produce extraordinary effects through manipulations that in themselves are not costly" (4). Ginsberg, on the other hand, does not use the same economy with his words in "Howl." Made up of three parts and a footnote, it is significantly longer than his other poems in the same collection, such as "Sunflower Sutra" and "Transcription of Organ Music." The extended length, however, is appropriate for the content of the poem, which is much wider in scope than the two aforementioned poems.

Ultimately, Tyler claims that the most meaningful connection between these two respective film and literary movements is their expression of "universal tolerance" (32). Besides the Beats' acceptance of people from all backgrounds, races, and sexualities, "Howl's" incorporation of various cinematic influences also demonstrates a more intellectual and ideological openness completely accepting of these different artistic mediums and styles while also being unafraid to stretch the boundaries of formal poetry. It is also important to note that Underground Film's influence on

Ginsberg and his writing of "Howl" represents just one side of a mutually beneficial artistic exchange, one that sought to "blur the lines between text and image," as Daniel Kane claims in his book *We Saw the Light: Conversations Between the New American Cinema and Poetry*(124). The result of such blurring lead to the montage that makes up "Howl."

A more minor cinematic influence on Ginsberg and "Howl" is slapstick comedy, which actually juxtaposes with the cinéma vérité style in other parts of the poem. Rather than being natural and spontaneous, slapstick comedy is exaggerated and unnatural, often juxtaposing violence and absurdity to create humor. Comic actor Charlie Chaplin was a leading figure in the genre with his famous character of the Tramp. In Susan King's article "The Evolution of Charlie Chaplin's Tramp," she cites documentarian and film preservationist Serge Bromberg's description of the Tramp as being "a character of some vulgarity, a bit violent, very funny, but very slapstick" (Bromberg). "Howl" also includes moments of "vulgarity" and violence, but the style in which they are written and even more so the way Ginsberg chose to read the poem to audiences brought out a lighter and surprisingly comedic tone.

After unsuccessfully searching for Eternity (a hopeless venture since their lives are already metaphorically contained within the confines of the poem), the speaker describes how the people in the poem:

> "cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old and cried" (16).

Somewhat surprisingly, these lines were met with laughter when Ginsberg read them to a crowd. While suicide is not typically discussed in a humorous way, the peoples' unsuccessful attempts to cut their wrists not once, but three times could be read as twistedly comedic. They were subsequently "forced to open antique/stores where they thought they were growing/old and cried," which makes a mockery of their humorously pitiful and depressing circumstances by emphasizing their dramatic reaction to the natural process of aging. Slapstick comedy is necessary in this moment in order to maintain the overall lightheartedness of the poem, whereas cinéma vérité and Underground Film might have taken this moment too seriously. Each cinematic influence that makes up the montage therefore serves a very specific purpose in maintaining the unity of the poem.

Kane also mentions that "Ginsberg's published statements on Chaplin overall suggest that he finds Chaplin anticipating the improvisatory, madcap, and nonconformist sensibility so crucial to the formation of what we can tentatively call the Beat aesthetic" (113). There is no doubt that the people in "Howl" embody the "nonconformist sensibility" predated by Chaplin, with their rejection of the establishment as illustrated previously. While slapstick comedy does in some ways seem to contradict cinéma vérité, its "improvisatory" style is actually similar to the spontaneous and unstaged quality captured in cinéma vérité. This improvisatory style naturally shows more diverse content as is the case in "Howl," with people who travelled from the streets of Manhattan to Mexico and Colorado and "wandered around and around at midnight in the/railroad yard wondering where to go," a scene that highlights their incurable restlessness (11).

Reading "Howl" illuminates how the poets depicted in the poem were striving to escape the physical, spiritual, and temporal constraints of their current world, but ultimately to no avail. In Part I, Ginsberg's "angelheaded hipsters" "threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot/for

Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks/fell on their heads every day for the next decade" (16). When Ginsberg read these lines aloud, the audience again burst into laughter. Here the reference to voting with the word "ballot," which represents a uniquely democratic institution, sharply contrasts with the tendency of both Underground Film's and the Beat Generation that is described in "Howl" to reject any formal institutions. Nevertheless, they keep getting literally and metaphorically hit in the head by time itself. They appear completely out of tune with reality as if they're sleepwalking through life. Indeed, the "alarm clocks" falling on their heads seem to be an attempt to wake them up out of their idealistic dream. Lastly, the description of them as "angelheaded" also conveys the sense that they do not quite belong to the mundane earth below.

Given that one of the characteristics of a montage is juxtaposition, it makes sense that "Howl" would incorporate styles that clearly contrast with each other. Mark Reid asserts in his essay "Cinema, Poetry, Pedagogy: Montage as Metaphor" that "The juxtaposition of unrelated shots into new relations would jolt the reader out of a kind of political somnambulism and into a new awareness of the political relations of things. Montage would punch people into political consciousness" (61). Not only does "Howl" attempt to "jolt the reader," but the people in the poem as well, who sometimes aimlessly drift from one place and time to another with seemingly no purpose. The poem is able to deepen its political impact by being able to achieve something as a written art form that a visual medium such as film cannot. Ginsberg illustrates each moment in just enough detail to welcome the reader into the world of the poem's inhabitants, but ultimately it is left up to the reader's imagination to finish constructing the images in their own minds. Ginsberg therefore does not necessarily do all of the work of piecing together the montage that is "Howl" because to do so would defeat the poem's attempt at actively engaging the reader.

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