

THE REPETITION OF REPETITION

Steven Eastwood

Stuart Croft has adapted Aesop's fable number 214, The Lion, The Fox and The Stag, for his latest circular narrative *The Stag Without a Heart*, continuing a methodology begun with the use of the shaggy dog story in *Drive In* (2007). Once again, this is a story being told in monologue within an elliptical scene. Where before in *Drive In* the story was recounted to a silent counterpart, here a weary man tells the tale mournfully to the white pillow of a perfectly made but empty bed. We do not learn who is absent. The story he is telling – a moral tale – is familiar to us, and although modified from the original, it retains much of its essential detail and is populated by the same creatures.

In Aesop, a wily Fox lures a Stag to his master, the sick Lion, on the basis that the Stag will replace the Lion as King of the forest. The Lion wants to devour the Stag but only manages to scrape him in his attack. The Stag escapes and the Fox is sent once again by the hungry Lion to persuade the wounded animal to return. The Fox cunningly elevates the Stag above lesser contenders to the crown: Wolf, Leopard, Tiger, Boar. Incredulous at first, the Stag is seduced by this false praise and duped by the Fox to come before the Lion once more, convinced he will be King. Instead he is eaten. The Fox polishes off his brains in fact. The moral given to the original fable is that vanity and the desire for power can impede the intellect and make one easily suggestible to the same trick twice. In Aesop, the repetition of events is teleological: the story builds within and along a line, where the Stag repeats a mistake, but nonetheless in the direction of a definitive fate, which is his death. The Lion is thus satiated, the Fox the intellectual victor, the Stag the fool.

In order to craft a seamless loop, Croft has edited the story, removing the event of the Stag's death in order to endlessly recreate for us the potential of the animal's demise. The arabesque of the story has had its curves perfected so as to create the circle, producing a rocking and rolling narrative effect, in which the Lion must seek to consume the Stag's heart (and indeed achieve this) only to regret his actions, then seek out the dying animal so as to reanimate it with a younger Deer's heart. A new character, the Hunter (Croft?), is drafted in. This Hunter is a peripheral player but nonetheless vital as the supplier of the replacement organ. He is the instrument of suture, so to speak, in the older story's dismembered body. The heart itself – visceral engine – provides propulsion for the story, as it is torn out and reinstated, torn out, reinstated, with the Stag endlessly reanimated, only to go on the run once more. The repetition produced by the loop has an interminable effect, in which the choices the Stag makes to return with the Fox (again and again) seem pre-written, inevitable, and ultimately auto-destructive. And yet, because the tale has been engineered to form a Möbius strip, there is no worsening of events. We cannot will the Stag to be less gullible, for it is now the Stag's very function to nearly die (but live), forever, just as the Lion must eternally go from gratification to remorse and back again.

Which creature of film theory might one inhabit to think about the film? The Boar of Structuralism perhaps, or the Tiger of Post-Structuralism, the Leopard of Phenomenology, or the Wolf of Psychoanalysis (which threatens to engulf all others)... And what of the Hunter? This re-stitched version is being told by a troubled man, a senior man of privilege, whose veiled wife (we assume) looks on from the recesses of a stately and cavernous wood-panelled room. If we choose the Wolf from the inventory then we might conjecture that this is a father speaking to a child who has died – a son most likely. All of the signs of mourning are there, if we wish to see them: the funeral attire, the flowers presented by the servant, the sense of regret and loss in the delivery of the character. In such a reading the monologue repeated becomes the product of a damaged psychology, of a man who has caused harm perhaps, a patriarch (a Lion) who has brought about familial devastation. These prone figures then take on the mantle of bereaved parents, whose son we might guess was the Stag. Thus the monologue is a eulogy, and if the monologue never ends, then the bereaved need never vacate the room and move forward in time to face the guests at the wake. Indeed, post-trauma or grieving

behaviour is often characterized by repetitive acts; the bereaved attempt to hold in suspension the spaces of those they have lost – vacant bedrooms are visited every night, maintained but not permitted to change...

These are the psychological conventions of the cinema, and they are the conventions of psychology itself, which says there is a self and that self is invariably traumatized (but it can be healed). In this psychological reading the loop comes to the fore as a fundament in our encounter with others. Then, we might say (from the Analyst's chair) this man and this film are articulating something: the hell of human relationships is that we make the same mistakes over and over, that we fail to learn. In fact it is the very job of the psychotherapist to prize a person out of his or her so-called vicious circle. From our vantage point where we watch this man play out the recursion of his past, we can comprehend his pattern, as can he, now that the possibility to break the cycle has expired, and the counterpart in his behavioural loop has either abandoned the family or died. Such a response helps recuperate the loop back into the narrative, as both text and subtext. I know that I am doing what I have done many times before, but I cannot stop it. The duration of a life is peppered with gains and losses, we want one thing and then we decide on its opposite: we pity the Stag as we desire to destroy it; we despise the Stag as we save its life...

If we are hunting for surrogates and symbols in the *mise-en-scène* of the room and the tale, then perhaps the forest that forms the backdrop for the fable signifies wealth and privilege, or better still family, with its hierarchical roots and branches. We might conjecture that this was a family trapped in repetitive negative circles, behaviourally caught in dysfunction. The film certainly looks dynastical (the Man even resembles Carrington from the 1980s TV mega-series *Dynasty*), so we could be persuaded to read the piece as a commentary on a certain class, an American class; how it wields power and yet cannot control guilt or loss. Croft clearly has a predilection for the semiotic value of the North American voice (*Drive In; Century City* (2006)), perhaps using the shorthand of the vernacular to position the viewer as watching 'the cinema.' Told in this context the content of the story is unavoidably Oedipal (Oedipus also being a classic narrative structure, a template for re-use). Certain phrases uttered by the Man ("Losing the crown and all that comes with it;" "That sweet speech of yours") have an overt metaphoric property. A younger man may have threatened to usurp this Man, to overthrow the old guard.

Provisional clauses are used here deliberately, for being drawn into explicit readings would be a mistake. Interpretation, analysis, speculation, these are staple responses in the pursuit of meaning. But in a loop, the meaning is always chiefly about our very struggle to acquire meaning. It is our habit to extrapolate sense, to discern progression. The loop is masochism for the viewer. It is an affront to the desire for what happens next – never fully disabling that compulsion but instead always toying with it. Here we have entered the de-stratified territory of the Tiger from our menagerie, where structures are provisional and slippery. Many claim to see difference in looped installations, but the difference is always of course the changes which have taken place in ourselves as watchers, in our attentive recognition, in the way that we differently scrutinize the image, the differences in our patience. In *Difference and Repetition*, philosopher Gilles Deleuze argues that what we identify as repetition is always merely generality, for an object, an event, an attribute can never be perfectly repeated because of the different spatiotemporal position it occupies. For Deleuze, repetition is far from being an objective fact – rather, it is an act of our habitual mind, which, in perception, overlooks inconsequential difference in order to represent a repetition of the same. As Deleuze famously wrote, "it is grass in general that interests the herbivore" rather than individual and different blades. Deleuze regards Being itself as constituted of Difference, a concept that he eventually developed into the doctrine of the eternal return, which argues that what eternally returns (what repeats) is not the same, but difference itself. Pure difference can be viewed as the intuitive, pre-conceptual experience of reality. But we find it hard to grasp pure difference. Instead we seek to contain difference as that which is not the same, thereby creating a hierarchy where difference is subordinate to the thing that does not change.

Eternally returning forms are reliant on certain attributes. In the case of *Stag*, in order for the loop to repeat, repetition must be an aspect of the internal narrative, a key factor in the monologue. This is much harder to achieve in call and response or other dialogue exchanges, although Croft has managed this previously in *Century City*. Here, the words "Again" and "Over and over" are engines for this perpetual motion; they are grease on the cogs. But over successive cycles of *The Stag Without a Heart* we can latch onto or dissolve the words being spoken, we can scan the picture plan for irregularities and continuity breaks; we can study the text of the story or choose instead to study the text of the space, or of the face of the speaker. In one pass, what we might notice most is the stray hair standing out from the actor's forehead; in another one might swear that it was the Lion who ate the heart and not the Fox. For more than a minute during one turning of the loop I found myself repeating the mantra "Hastefully/hastily, Hastefully/hastily..." until both words were stripped of their correctness. My own difference let my mind wander on a further loop, back to the Aesop original, which, as we have considered, focuses on the foolishness of the victim of the trick – the Stag – and never proposes any attitude of regret for the Lion. Perhaps the written words you are reading now will serve a similar purpose, in relation to the film loop, as the moral summing up after each of Aesop's fables. The conventions of interpretation, or even of anti-interpretation, are inexorable. They always return.

Narratives are schemas, inevitable, inescapable, inexorable. The Fox is also a schemer. When the Fox says, "The Stag knows what we are up to," there is the sense that the mechanisms and corruptions ("Skilful and cunning ways") of their forest regime are about to be leaked. Similarly, the structure of the loop threatens to expose the backstage workings of the cinema transaction, for in repetition the action-image cannot thrive (there is nowhere for it to grow). As a result of repetition, the viewer has uncommon exposure to every detail within the frame and can see artifice where before it was masked by story's insidious momentum. We can know much more fully what the film operation is up to, which is principally to privilege top-down operations and conceal bottom-up operations. Ordinarily the stray hair overlooked by the make-up artist in one shot would not be discernable, for we would not see that shot again. Bottom-up operations such as a scratch or a boom pole or an unintentional stray hair can release perception and open it on to physical and phenomenological responses. If we adopt a phenomenological disposition, we might be able to distinguish the appearance of a Lion's face in the blurred reflection of the Man in the rich wood of the bed's headboard.

What other dynasties might the film be referring to? Perhaps these woods signify the cinema itself, with its bloodlines: film theory, film history. "What have I done?" says the Lion, the animal who, we might say, is the action-oriented structure of normative cinema: "I gave plot to cinema." We might equally recognize in the cast of animals surrogates for film orthodoxies, where the Old Boar fool is the avant-garde, the Tiger so full of himself is artists' moving image, the Leopard storytelling and the ruthless and terrible Wolf spectacle for spectacle's sake. Croft's project cuts across and combines a number of disciplines and discourses in a manner that will undoubtedly be challenging to certain communities. The piece was academically funded, by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and will be disseminated via the gallery (it will be first exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp in 2011), although its languages are entirely specific to the cinema. Croft adopts a recognisable vocabulary of shots (establishing, mid, close-up, reverse, continuity cutting, and so on) in order to interrogate the cinema narrative's material and structural propensity for recursion. Traditionally the looped moving image – chiefly an instrument of structural filmmaking and expanded cinema – negated overt narrative structures, preferring instead to work with the material and sculptural potentials within the medium as it is imprinted and/or projected back. Looped films have tended to take on scratches, to become distressed, this distress becoming as informational as the image it alters.

This kind of film loop only changes by way of degeneration, as the print is worn over time by the mechanism of its projection. Croft is not interested in materiality. He works extremely hard to eradicate it. Like the Lion this film object has a silvery heart – the artist deliberately opting for a classical image, shooting on 35mm black & white stock, (a vanity, a sign of prestige, which mimics the

protagonist). Director of Photography Jean-Louis Schuller frames the central character with elegance and precision. With its languorous tracking shots, the film resembles Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), a film whose veneered interiors provide a thinking space for the endless revisiting by the characters of a fabled prior event. *Marienbad* attempted to articulate the agony of being sentient in time, offering what writer Robbe-Grillet hoped might be a novel form of engagement with the cinema, which was to bypass the habits of narrative and instead encounter the temporality of uncommon assemblages. The privilege the moving image has over other art forms is its verisimilitude to the lived world, and yet whilst resembling our experience, film is able to freely disregard such things as teleology and thermodynamics. Suture can make sensible impossible spaces; it can produce temporal woofs and warps. The theoretical-medical concept of suture permeates throughout *The Stag Without a Heart*. The Stag's body is neatly stitched up "with some old sinew", in other words with film language, with the structures, values and devices of classical cinema. In many ways the heart that is cut out and replaced is the cinema's absent centre (the camera), which shot/reverse-shot relations work hard to delimit. And in any case, all films are dead objects that do not change and cannot react, addressing a vacuum, a space that may or may not be populated by an audience.

Croft is also interested in architecture and the topography of film space. The wide shots of the bedroom are reminiscent of Kubrick's compositions (*Barry Lyndon*; *2001 A Space Odyssey*), Greenaway's also (*A Zed and Two Noughts*). There are overtones of Buñuel and also of Hitchcock, particularly in the strong presence of the actor's back. These references to the cinema are overt, but the work is not alone in this. Rodney Graham's *Vexation Island*, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *The Berlin Files* and Stan Douglas's *Journey Into Fear* are all highly cinematic loops, shot on film and installed in the gallery. Douglas' 16mm film installation if seen in full has a running time of 157 hours, although the film itself is a loop lasting only 15 minutes and four seconds. This is because Douglas works with indeterminacy derived from a computer algorithm, where a few scripted pages of dialogue can produce almost a week of possibilities. Croft's film is conversely a locked system, a circular regime, turning on a centre we cannot agree upon, although we may endeavour to find the script and identify the first word. There is no choice here. There is no indeterminacy either, and in fact there is very little aberration or error of any kind in Croft's practice. The viewer however will always look for the error, the fissure, for the join, the start. One critic elected an involuntary trip from one of the performers in Douglas's *Journey Into Fear* as the join. In *The Stag Without a Heart*, my own engagement was interrupted by the words "Come in," uttered by the Man, and the arrival of the servant bearing a bouquet of flowers that produces a break, not only in the monologue, but also in the fabric and overall attack of the film. The servant's carefully blocked performance, his hand moving to cough so perfectly matched from mid-shot to close, is a moment of over-determination, a minute fissure that breaks the spell. It is the event when I know what the Fox is up to, although in a moment I will forget that I know it.

In many ways, Croft's entire body of work (exemplified by *The Stag Without a Heart*) deals with the trap of the same, offering the claustrophobia of psychologies that do not possess, and can never have, difference. This is the resonance and unsettling power of the work. The protagonists – the male narrator, the woman in the wings, the servant entering and leaving – are not psychologies, they are devices, animals in tableau, who possess substitute hearts which beat differently to the hearts in the bodies on the other screen, the sensible cinema which bears little resemblance to our cycles and where stories resolve.

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