

Precious Images

By Dale Hudson and
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Produced to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Director's Guild of America (DGA) in 1986, Chuck Workman's "Precious Images" is one of the most significant U.S. short films. Condensing decades of totemic images produced by Hollywood, the film operates as a trailer for the fantasy-producing machinery of the studio system. However, it also operates as meta-cinema—a film that thinks about film. "Precious Images" defies categorization: it is simultaneously a trailer, commissioned film, advertisement, experimental film, and compilation-film-as-documentary on Hollywood.¹

Workman salutes Hollywood through editing strategies derived outside the studio system's classical continuity style. He deploys tour de force cumulative montage with experimental editing strategies emphasizing visuality over story, transforming studio narratives into archival materials. In the late 1970s, he began editing trailers for low-budget films. He later progressed to high-budget films, including "Star Wars." Drawing upon his earlier work in advertising, he is driven by a desire to please audiences rather than critics.² He also brings an avant-garde sensibility to his montages from his study of experimental filmmaking under Amos Vogel. Best known for his Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences montages, Workman also made documentaries on Beat poets, experimental filmmakers, U.S. politicians, pornography, and narrative features, such as "The Money" (1976) and "A House on the Hill" (2003).

Commissioned by the Director's Guild of America, "Precious Images" draws on nearly 470 films, spanning 1915 to 1985. The film mobilizes a contradiction between spectator expectations and cinematic form: as spectators work to identify the films, genres, and stars imbedded in Hollywood visual culture, the film's formal structure embraces an avant-garde strategy that displaces narrative to focus on composition and movements in the materiality of the shot.

The film condenses seventy years of Hollywood narrative studio history into eight minutes. The film triggers audience memories through iconic images of



"Precious Images" is filled with scenes from Hollywood's most iconic films, like this image of a snow globe from a pivotal scene in "Citizen Kane."

Greta Garbo on the prow of a ship in "Queen Christina" (1933), Julie Andrews serenading the hills in "The Sound of Music" (1965), and Gene Kelly tap-dancing in "Singin' in the Rain" (1952). It mobilizes a cumulative montage strategy, where scenes from disparate studios and time periods advance concepts of genre. Kinetic cuts on action defy time, space, historical period, and studio link shots, pushing an endlessly forward movement. Workman has argued the structure is "a sprint, you take a breath and you go."³

"Precious Images" is organized around genre and star, two key classical studio system operational tenets. It progresses through romance, Westerns, musicals, horror/thriller, and comedy. The film begins with an image of a house in a crystal ball from "Citizen Kane" (1941), suggesting gazing, desire, and idealized fantasy. It ends with Dorothy, the Cowardly Lion, Scarecrow, and Tin Man in "The Wizard of Oz" (1939) skipping down the Yellow Brick Road, a metaphor for "Precious Images'" fascination with movement. The last sequence focuses on etherealized star visages with male stars Marlon Brando, Clark Gable, and Clint Eastwood and female stars Gloria Swanson, Lauren Bacall, and Jane Fonda.

The rhythms of cumulative editing counterpoint the musical score. "As Time Goes By" from "Casablanca" (1942) plays over the romance sequence. The "William Tell Overture" from "A Clockwork Orange" (1971) combines with the Western sequence. "Singin' in the Rain" frames the musical sequence. Bernard Hermann's "Psycho" (1960) score plays over the horror sequence, while the

Henry Mancini “Pink Panther Theme” (1963) glides over the comedy sequence. The final montage of stars is cut against “The Final Game,” composed by Randy Newman for “The Natural” (1984). Each piece of music represents a different decade of studio production. As Workman has pointed out, “I was playing with genre assumptions: I was questioning genre because I don’t believe in it.”⁴

With “Precious Images,” Workman discovered he did not need to sell anything, as with advertisements and trailers.⁵ Critics note his montages “sell” Hollywood hits as an all-inclusive “movie” history.⁶ Meaning emerges not through narrative causality, but through an accumulation of iconic images and scenes. Lisa Kernan argues Workman’s shorts evoke nostalgia and cultural capitalism, communicating “a sort of cult of the cut, ultimately naturalizing quantity (the fast-paced abundance of images) as quality.”⁷ Workman himself likened them to “making a fruit cake,” contending “you don’t want to have too many raisins, too many nuts, but you wanna have *plenty* of raisins and *plenty* of nuts.”⁸ Cutting from a bird’s-eye crane shot of Esther Williams in a swimming pool from a Technicolor finale to one of Busby Berkeley musicals to a shark’s eye underwater shot in of a soon-to-be-eaten female swimmer “Jaws” (1975) and then a killer’s-eye view of Janet Leigh in the Bates Motel shower in “Psycho”, for example, emphasizes a fluid movement through some of Hollywood’s most memorable representations of women.

Other sequences bring humor, such as the movement from Moses parting the Red Sea in “The Ten Commandments” (1956) into Pacific Ocean waves crashing onto the lovers in “From Here to Eternity” (1953) under Gene Kelly’s performance of “Singin’ in the Rain.” A dolly-up to John Wayne in John Ford’s Western “Stagecoach” (1939) followed by a dolly-out of Cleavon Little in Mel Brooks’s satire “Blazing Saddles” (1974) with Barbara Streisand singing “As Time Goes By” suggests Hollywood’s efforts toward self-reflection and desegregation. Comparably, images of Bruce Lee in action dissolve amidst close-ups of Charlton Heston driving a chariot in “Ben-Hur” (1959) and Sylvester Stallone arising from a swamp in “Rambo: First Blood Part II” (1985)—and long shots of Gena Rowlands firing a pistol in the streets in “Gloria” (1980), suggest the emergence of female action heroes.

“Precious Images” sports an unusual exhibition history. Its production budget was a scant \$30,000. Every major studio and union in the industry lent support and material. Because of copyright issues, “Precious Images” cannot be sold commercially. The film won the 1986 Academy Award as “Best Short Film/Live-action” and is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. “Precious Images” recycles as a canonical work regularly screened in introductory courses on Hollywood aesthetics and history at universities and film schools.

¹ Jack Matthews, “Precious Indeed Is Precious Images,” *Los Angeles Times* (10 December 1985): http://articles.latimes.com/1986-12-10/entertainment/ca-2231_1_scenes.

² Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, vol. 4 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 235.

³ MacDonald, 238

⁴ MacDonald, 240

⁵ MacDonald, 239.

⁶ Lisa Kernan, “Hollywood on the Head of a Pin: Montage and Marketing at the Oscars®,” *MediaScape* (spring 2005): http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring05_HollywoodOnTheHead.html.

⁷ Kernan, n.p.

⁸ As cited in Nela Ulaby, “King Of Condensed Films: Meet Chuck Workman, The Oscars’ Montage Master,” *NPR* (21 February 2015): <http://www.npr.org/2015/02/21/387814405/the-king-of-condensed-films-meet-hollywood-s-montage-master>.

⁹ MacDonald, 230–238.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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