

# The Sound of Chaos: Christopher Richmond's Cinematic Discourse

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Can culture be political, which is to say critical and even subversive, or is it necessarily reappropriated and coopted by the social system of which it is part? Marcuse argues that it is the very separation of art and culture from the social—a separation that inaugurates culture as a realm in its own right and defines it as such—which is the source of art's incorrigible ambiguity. For that very distance of culture from its social context which allows it to function as a critique and indictment of the latter also dooms its interventions to ineffectuality and relegates art and culture to a frivolous, trivialized space in which such intersections are neutralized in advance.

- Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*

Christopher Richmond often discusses his films in relation to a “fugue state.”<sup>1</sup> By this he means a state of disorientation, like that of a dream, in which characters are nameless, time is indeterminate, locations are familiar but elusive, and multiple points of view dissolve the illusion of a reliable narrative.

Richmond's notion of a fugue state—a concept he borrows from the psychiatric diagnosis of dissociative fugue, but bends to his own purposes—can be applied equally to frame the disorientation the viewer experiences when watching his films, as well as the displacement that affects characters within the film. The latter occurs when his characters encounter evidence that the film itself is an elaborate construction, and the factitiousness of the film becomes apparent from within the fictional frame of the film—or as he puts it, where the “fissure between story and discourse” opens.<sup>2</sup> This motif, woven throughout Richmond's new SciFi film, *Hyperway* (2018), reaches a kind of apogee near the film's end. An astronaut wearing a space suit begins to fade from view as he walks through what appears to be a special effects set. This cosmic wanderer gradually becomes transparent and disappears amid the ephemera and hardware of the film's physical structures.

1. Christopher Richmond, conversation with author: August 18, 2018.

2. Christopher Richmond, email correspondence with author: July 2, 2018.



Richmond explores that fissure with a degree of amusement, gleefully exploiting the intersection between the living, breathing world, and the fictional realm of illusion that we willingly submerge ourselves in. Here, he establishes tension between the immersive power of fiction and disruptively unraveling its sway by drawing attention to the “how” of the fictions we construct and the narrative and cinematic structures that sustain those illusions and reinforce our suspension of disbelief.

His interest in complicating immersive narrative comes at least in part from recognizing its power over our imaginations. In the novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), David Foster Wallace depicted a fantastical video capable of putting its viewers into an irreversible catatonic state. Richmond’s answer to the medium’s sedative power is to pull back the curtain—and he has fun doing it. His films shift from absurd scenes in which characters directly address the camera, to mesmerizing space scenes and sweeping aerials of otherworldly landscapes. *Hyperway* features multiple vistas of the Trona Pinnacles, rock formations in the Mojave Desert north of Los Angeles, which have been the setting for numerous SciFi movies and TV shows. And then, after using widely understood cinematic language to establish that intoxicating vision, Richmond uses something out of place to destabilize the viewer; a dusty La Croix soft-drink can appears in the apparently alien desert, complicating our sense of the landscape as the first glimpse of some distant planet. Another of Richmond’s strategies for pulling back the curtain is through discourse. In his films, there are soliloquies that instead of revealing a character’s inner state are lectures on linguistics, phenomenology, and cinematic history. But the discourse in Richmond’s films can be widened to include nonfiction generally: documentary, philosophy, theory, and even breaking down the fourth wall by alluding to the actors’ identities beyond the fiction of the film.

When viewing *Hyperway*, one might be inclined to ask, what happens when a character discovers they are a fiction, and the corollary, how is fiction altered when a real-life person becomes a character in a fictional narrative? These ideas have been addressed in commercial films—the former in *The Truman Show* (1998) and *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), the latter in *Being John Malkovich* (1999)—though, they are just one element of what Richmond is interested in or does with his films.

The role played by the art-writer and teacher Jan Tumlir in Richmond’s *Hyperway* inserts nonfiction broadly into the film’s structure. Tumlir’s monologues are adapted from his

lectures and discussions. Richmond uses these strategically to complicate the relationship between film and reality. Appearing first as himself and then, later, as a fictional version of himself, in the guise of a space suit-clad intergalactic traveler, Tumlrir is transposed into a parallel realm that remains familiar but decontextualized. His monologues tie the two frames of reference and the two identities together while introducing the central philosophical concerns of the film. Richmond calls the scenario “a fugue episode of a dissociative fugue.”<sup>3</sup>

An analogue of Richmond’s fugue state surfaces in Jean-Luc Godard’s SciFi noir film *Alphaville* (1965). Natacha von Braun, the film’s heroine, discovers that words are being excised from the dictionary that is circulated in the film’s dystopian city-state—a new edition is distributed every day. She realizes that not only has she forgotten certain words, but the concepts represented by those words have been erased from *Alphaville* in a kind of collective amnesia. In a larger sense, reading *Alphaville* from outside of the frame, this scenario posits an analogy for the ways that the structures of language and society constrict people in unconscious ways.

Caution: You’ve really no idea what this is?

Natacha: It reminds me of something. I don’t know what.

Other aspects of *Hyperway* and *Alphaville* invite comparison: both use contemporary settings—rather than elaborate staging—creating spatial and temporal ambiguities; both draw attention to film’s apparatus; and they rely on non-fiction, or discourse, as a major element of the story.

In the opening scene of Godard’s film, *Lemme Caution*, an agent of the free Outlands, pulls up in front of a Parisian hotel, draws a cigarette from its pack and lights up. Snapping shut his Zippo, which makes a distinctly metallic clapping sound—a bit too loud for the scene, it seems—he shoves it in his pocket and climbs out of his Ford “Galaxie.” This immediate reference to the scene marker, the clapperboard that snaps shut at the beginning of each scene in the making of a movie, to synchronize visual and audio, illustrates Godard’s comment on the French New Wave as “both cinema and, at the same time, the explanation of cinema.”<sup>4</sup>



3. Christopher Richmond, email correspondence with author: October 12, 2018.

4. This Godard quote appears in a discussion of French New Wave film as informing the development of “self-reflexive” modernist cinema on an international stage in Naomi Green, *The French New Wave: A New Look* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007) 2.

While a dichotomy is invoked by calling attention to the film's apparatus, Richmond's use of discourse rather than a narrative dialogue shifts the focus of the film away from a strictly narrative form to one that opens up a multivalent patchwork of events and ideas. The centrality of discourse—that sometimes, but not always, refers back to the structures of film itself—invites further comparison to Godard's films, especially later works, for example, *Goodbye to Language*, in which Godard employs the use of various texts. But even in *Alphaville*, an early film that is consistent with the parameters of the French New Wave, Godard uses texts that have been recombined or adapted from others, for example, surrealist poet Paul Éluard's *Capital of Pain* (1926) and excerpts from essays by Jorge Luis Borges.

Richmond's film narrows Godard's example. In the first minutes of *Hyperway*, Tumlir's discussion on how the introduction of sound changed the development of cinema amplifies the preceding illusionistic sequence that unfolds soundlessly. A prologue of sorts, it depicts an asteroid—or a simulacrum of an asteroid—floating through space. Tumlir might as well be talking about the film in which he is now a character, as he is describing what has just transpired on screen: "...before sound, the film camera wouldn't simply follow people who were talking. The film camera could go anywhere... So it had this freedom of movement. Suddenly when people started talking, the camera would point at them, and what they were saying became all important... There is nevertheless, this kind of implicit freedom to break from that. So, simply put, when you're making a film, and somebody is talking, there are other things that are happening around them. These things constitute an equal reality to what these people are saying. They could be completely contradictory. But we wouldn't know it because we're simply having a conversation. But in a film, you frame that event. You frame the co-presence of people talking and other themes around them."

Film's autonomy, as Tumlir describes it, is the same kind of freedom that enables art, or culture, to exist in its own right, yet still comment on what we consider reality, as discussed by Fredric Jameson in the introduction to his collection of essays on SciFi literature, *Archaeologies of the Future*.<sup>5</sup>

Richmond has asserted indifference to narrative—which coexists with his interest in discourse. But paradoxically, his films follow a narrative visual structure—that is, the imagery forms a loosely structured narrative—even when a coherent narrative or script

5. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005) xv.

does not guide the actions or dialog of his characters.

Are we supposed to make sense of the discontinuous mashup his films present? I think we are obliged to, although making sense does not mean establishing a continuous, coherent argument or narrative structure. Rather, it is a way to identify a gestalt of ideas and narrative direction that generates a semi-lucid oneiric state, as Richmond asserts for the intention of his films.

Even as he has insisted on this orientation to narrative, in a recent conversation, he acknowledged, “I’ve discovered that my films are narrative. I used to say they were experimental narrative, but then it dawned on me that my work is not experimenting with narrative, it’s experimenting with its relationship with the viewer [the terms of viewership and narrative suspension of disbelief], where it oscillates between these spaces where it engages the viewer in suspension of disbelief, and then suddenly at the drop of a dime, the fourth wall crumbles, and there’s an address to the viewer, and characters are taking their costumes off.”<sup>6</sup>

There is a case to be made that narrative fiction is just as embedded in the real world as is discourse. This can be extrapolated from Jameson’s observation, made during his discussion of the work of SciFi novelist Olaf Stapledon, of the empiricist idea that what is in the mind comes only through sensory acquisition. This does not necessarily mean the failure of SciFi, as Jameson points out, although it does mean that SciFi is closer to home than we may have thought. It is necessarily restricted in its imagination of possible worlds by the limits of the writer’s experience.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it can be expanded to collective experience, but it limits literature and film to a basis in what actually is. This dictum could be generalized to all fiction—that is, it is compassed by the possibilities imagined collectively within the human organism, socially and politically, and what actually exists.

The narrative urges in Richmond’s films share oxygen with his interest in discourse; it is discourse that grounds *Hyperway* within the interplay between the terrestrial and the extraterrestrial, between what is known and what is unknown, and what is real and imagined. This is embodied in *Hyperway* with the presence of Tumlrir and his monologues—you might even call them soliloquies, in that the lines of the character with whom he carries on his conversation/dialog are purely for the purpose of drawing out the soliloquy. Tumlrir’s discussion lays out the structural/narrative/discursive urges of



6. Christopher Richmond, conversation with author: August 18, 2018.

7. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005) xiii.

Richmond's film. At the same time it illuminates the collaborative aspects of the project and the influence Tumlir's discussion, which Richmond encountered years before, has exerted on Richmond's thinking. As Tumlir examines the question of perception and epistemology, how we can perceive or understand Earth—or not—the sense dawns on the viewer that this also functions as an analogy for the viewer's relation to the film.

The sound of chaos, as Richmond has described his cinematic dialogues, requires a willingness to allow confusion to exist alongside and within something that makes sense. His films open up spaces in which discourse informs narrative, and to some extent, in which narrative becomes a form of discourse. Within this paradigm, the disjointed narratives require a premium of engagement from the viewer/reader. His discontinuous narratives leave space for the viewer—indeed—require the viewer to co-create meaning as his films unspool.

Photo Credits:

**p. 271, 272, 274:** *Hyperway*, 2018, video still