

OPENING CHOICES

Otto Preminger's hand in the initial moments of *Bunny Lake is Missing*

Bunny Lake is Missing (Otto Preminger, 1965) opens with a black screen. Out of the darkness, a hand enters the frame from the right side and rips a section off the black screen, now revealed to be paper, exposing the words 'Otto Preminger presents' [Figures 1 and 2]. The loud sound of the paper tearing coincides with the start of the title song, a theme which opens with a melody evocative of the tunes which often accompany popular nursery rhymes. This shot cuts to another black screen, and again, the hand enters the frame, this time from the bottom right side, and removes a different section now revealing the title of the film [Figure 3]. The theme shifts from the simplicity and innocence of the recorder, which can be heard at the beginning, to more developed orchestral arrangements, which fit well with the epic proportions of the anamorphic screen. The whole title sequence is executed in this fashion, and ends with the hand scrunching the entire piece of paper up and removing it, unveiling the first shot of the film. This transition is the culmination of the formal play with textures, resulting from contrasting the flatness of the dark screen to the depth of the hand and the spaces left by the discarded pieces of paper. In this case, instead of a white section with credits, we can see a live action image, which further enhances the sense of depth [Figure 4].

It is tempting to see the hand which invades the frame and reveals the credits as a statement of authorship, inviting us to question aspects of intention. There are two people which we, as spectators, might immediately associate with the hand: the author of the credits and the author of the film. Someone already familiar with graphic designer Saul Bass, will be impressed by this new creation. Those new to his art may wonder who is behind such design and might even look out for his name in the credits. The identity which is revealed to us right at the start is Otto Preminger's. It is hard to miss his name as it is the first element which the hand reveals, so his 'appearance' benefits from the initial impact of the unique design.

The credits are announcing a rhetoric of effort. Usually the work which goes into creating elaborate titles is concealed from the audience. Here not only is it displayed to us, but the effort has been stylised and incorporated to the aesthetic of the sequence. The juxtaposition of the elements which are obscured and those which are revealed mirrors the process of discovery which we will go through in the film. The tearing of the paper, and the subsequent revelation of the credits which are concealed underneath, is asking us to think in terms of negative spaces, in a way which prioritises them over the positive, but in a way which also challenges such denominations. 'For both painters and architects, "negative space" refers to the opposite of solid objects. It describes spaces left open around the objects and the empty hollows within them' (Arnheim 1992: 92). 'Negative space acknowledges the active function of what can no longer be regarded as the empty in-between. At the same time, the term limits what is called "negative" to the subordinate role of the openings around and in the interior of solids' (ibid: 96). The black sections represent the positive and the white sections, resulting from subtracting the paper, account for the negative. However, the fact that the credits are waiting to be revealed (they are not added after the space is created), defies the simplistic dichotomy, as it could be argued that, since the credits are already there, they, as well as the space they inhabit, are the positive space, which is not so much created by the subtraction of paper as discovered or unveiled. In any case, every time a section of paper is removed, our attention focuses on the space which has been created

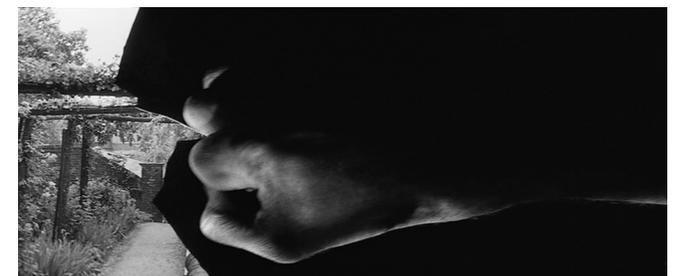
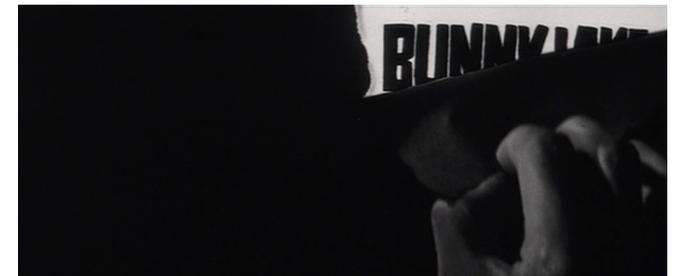
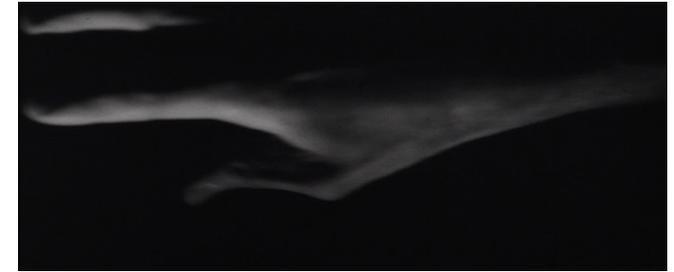


FIGURE 1 The hand enters the frame through the right.

FIGURE 2 The hand reveals the words "Otto Preminger Presents".

FIGURE 3 The hand reveals the film's title.

FIGURE 4 The hand unveils the first shot of the film.

and the information which it contains. This foregrounding of absence and presence seems carefully designed to preface the film which follows. The action concerns distraught mother Ann Lake (Carol Lynley) in her quest to find her four year old daughter Bunny (Suky Appleby), who disappeared from the nursery school where she had left her in the morning. As the story unfolds, the very existence of the child is put into question as nobody (including the audience) seems to have seen her. The removal of the child will prompt the exploration of what we are initially encouraged to believe to be an ordinary family, exposing a series of peculiarities which we could not have anticipated. In other words, the absence of the child reveals more than her presence would have ever been able to.

The design of the titles emphasises the withholding – and the revealing of information. The fact that every time a section of paper is removed, information is revealed, cautions us, in a way, to approach the following shots with the same expectant attitude, for they are also discovered by the hand and offered to us for scrutiny. In these shots, the withholding of information is a key element. The first shot of the film gives us a partial view of what appears to be a spacious garden on a clear day. In the background we can see a smartly dressed young man walking hurriedly towards the garden, beginning to cross it, with the camera tracking right to follow him. He is about to walk past a swing, which is moving, when something off-screen catches his attention. With his eyes aimed at ground, he walks towards the camera, which tilts down as he picks up a little teddy bear, which he quickly inspects, takes with him, and he then resumes walking towards a big red brick house. The next shot is from inside the house, with the camera located right by the door through which he enters. As he collects his belongings, we can see that the house is in a transitional state. White sheets cover the furniture, as well as the carpet on the staircase. As he stuffs the teddy into a bag, we can now see two men, dressed in what appears to be some sort of working attire, carrying suitcases out of the house. No words are uttered between them. They walk towards the main door. The young man closes it behind him and as he is about to close the next one, we match cut to a shot of the front of the house, taken from a crane at a high angle. The crane lowers as the three men walk towards the front gate of the house,

allowing us to see them exit through it from the outside. The young man grabs a key from a place which is concealed to our view, closes the gate and locks it, and putting his arm through the wrought iron returns the key to its enclosure. The camera follows him as he goes towards a van, where the two men are loading some heavy boxes. He puts the bag he is carrying inside the back of the van and advises the two men that ‘She may be a few minutes late’ – going on to ask – ‘Will you please wait for her?’. The two men agree and he thanks them. The camera follows him as he walks towards a small sports car, and the camera goes back to a high angle as he drives away.

Compared to the highly self-reflexive title sequence, these introductory shots are rather self-effacing. The opening is designed to encourage us to make a series of assumptions. The man’s demeanor as he walks with determination through the garden implies that he is the owner of the property, and the moving swing and the abandoned teddy suggest the presence (or absence) of a child. One thing which is safe to assume is that it is moving day; maybe he isn’t the one moving – he could be a real estate agent overseeing the operation – but somebody certainly is. The sign denoting the NW3 postal district which we see on the wall next to the name of the street on the last shot, tells us that the property is located in the affluent London suburb of Hampstead. Until he speaks we may well assume the man to be British, since nothing learned from the shots we have previously seen indicates that he is American.

Viewers familiar with the film will also be surprised to learn that this opening conceals a highly consequential act of withholding – between completion of the final shooting script by John and Penelope Mortimer, dated April 1, and this sequence being filmed, sometime after principal photography began on April 21, a decision was made to drop the first ten shots of the movie.¹ The scripted sequence opens with the camera aimed at the sky, with a child’s voice off-screen shouting ‘Higher! Make me go higher!’. The child’s face is revealed as she ‘sails into view riding on a swing’ (Mortimer & Mortimer 1965: 1). She is Bunny Lake, ‘an American girl of three or so [...] elaborately dressed, wearing patent-leather Mary Janes, a dress, and a navy blue coat with brass buttons’ (1). A cut to the vantage point allows us to see the whole garden where the scene is taking place; described as a large one, ‘even for the well-to-do

London area where it is located’ (1), from this perspective, we can now see the man pushing the child on the swing. Steven Lake, ‘a tall, obviously American man in his late twenties’ (1). A voice off-screen calls for him, and a cut to a close-up of the source reveals Ann Lake, ‘a beautiful American girl of 22’ (2), who informs him that he is wanted on the telephone. He starts towards the house, from where Ann is talking to him, and Bunny toddles after him. The camera follows them inside, allowing us some detailed access to the house’s geography. The furniture shrouded in dust covers, the packed carton, the luggage and other impediments, are indicative of moving day. As Steven goes towards the telephone, Bunny, addressing Ann as ‘mommy’, complains that she needs someone to push her, to which Ann replies that ‘it’s time to get ready for school’ (3). With the audience only able to see and hear his side of the conversation, Steven’s answers reveal that the purpose of the call is to inform him that he has to be at the airport at ten-fifteen. From his reaction we gather that this is an unexpected appointment. After hanging up, Steven joins Ann and Bunny, and tells Ann she’ll have to take care of the remainder of the moving. An off-screen voice coming from the radio informs that the time is nine o’clock, something which neither Steven nor Ann had realised. This triggers an argument between the two, as Ann complains that because of him, they’ll be late for school. Bunny starts to cry as she doesn’t want to be late. Ann decides to telephone the school to let them know they’ll get there as soon as possible, and leaves with Bunny to get the bus to the school.

Compared to the released version, the ten shots dramatising this situation, give the impression that the child’s presence is being insisted on. Her appearance is characterised by a succession of intrusions. She enters the frame of the first shot, and every time she speaks it is to interrupt the action or conversation taking place. Her interventions don’t disrupt the sequence severely, but they require our attention, as well as Steven’s and Ann’s, to focus on Bunny for a moment. It seems like the child doesn’t want to be ignored or forgotten, something common among children, but most importantly, it appears that the script doesn’t want us to ignore her. These initial moments, and whether to show Bunny or not, seem to have been the object of much deliberation. A treatment

dated June 15 1964, also by the Mortimers, envisioned the sequence differently; 'at the beginning of the film, in scenes at Kensington Gardens, in their flat, and at the school, Blanche [in this version Ann is still named as in the novel] and Steven would be shown behaving as if Bunny was there, but the child would remain silent and the compositions would keep her offscreen' (Fujiwara 2008: 332). At some point between the date of this document and April 1 1965, when the final shooting script is dated, the decision was made to change this, unequivocally to show Bunny. Finally, between this date and April 21, when principal photography started, the decision was made to dispose of Bunny altogether.

Preminger's decision to not show the child at the beginning is key to understanding his approach to the film. By not showing us concrete evidence that Bunny exists, Preminger makes a mystery not only of the crime but also of the victim(s), and divides our attention between the questions 'who took Bunny?' and 'does Bunny Lake exist?'.² Had we seen Bunny, we would never question her existence, and by association, the mother's sanity, which is one of the concerns which several characters in the film share and becomes a major dynamic of the film. Had the film followed the script in its opening directions, it would also have revealed a lot more about the status of the three characters. Here Steven's nationality is made 'obvious', as Ann's is likely to be as they talk. In the film, Preminger introduces Steven (Keir Dullea) and Ann separately and we don't learn they are related until later. We are not made aware of Steven's identity until he telephones Ann, and his use of the word 'darling' in reference to her, makes us think that they are a couple. The two proceed with their daily activities and we don't think we are being shown anything other than two people conducting their lives (though it's no ordinary day with the family moving houses and Bunny starting school). The script, however, implies a relationship of a romantic nature between the characters quite early on. The script also gives us greater access to the house's layout. In the film, it is crucial that Preminger decides not to do so, since the climactic final sequence takes place in this location, and part of the chaotic and disorienting effect of the images here, comes from the fact that we have limited knowledge of the space.

The degree to which Preminger is playing with the audience's assumptions becomes obvious after Bunny's disappearance, when it is revealed that Steven and Ann are actually siblings. It is at this point that the active withholding becomes apparent. By means of showing us these characters going about their day, and by looking at their behavior, we are led to assume they are married or, at the very least, engaged in a romantic relationship. As Chris Fujiwara points out, echoing a similar observation previously made by Jacques Lourcelles, we arrive at this conclusion 'not through any misdirection but simply through the absence of contrary indications' (339). After the revelation, Preminger's treatment of the characters remains essentially the same (he is not showing us any more than he had before), but our attitude regarding what we see, however, shifts considerably; something seems inappropriate in the way in which Steven strokes his sister's hair, or asks her to bring him a cigarette when he is in the bathtub. Their unusual personal situation could become a more interesting source of mystery than the kidnapping itself.

The first shots show us Steven exiting the Frogmore End house, for which he has to go through four different doors, two of which he locks. At a first viewing, we may take Steven's authoritative behavior, together with the fact that he seems to be in a hurry, simply as an ordinary character trait which isn't particularly telling. After watching the film and learning that it was Steven who took Bunny in order to kill her, and then returning to these initial shots, the way in which Steven is introduced to us is perhaps the most revealing thing in the sequence. The scene occurs minutes before he kidnaps Bunny, yet neither his behavior nor the film seem to advertise his intention. Almost every character we meet is first seen either walking in or out of a room through a door, or is found by other characters while they are entering a new room (also through a door). It is such a consistent pattern that it cannot be a coincidence.³ While all the other characters are looking for something when they are walking through those doors, Steven is the only one who acts with determination and authority, knowing where he is headed to. After watching the film, we know that the determination and decisiveness we witnessed were directed towards the kidnapping of Bunny. If we contrast it to Ann's introduction, which comes immediately after

Steven's, the first shots acquire even greater meaning. The first time we see Ann, she is coming out of the 'First Day Room' at the school, where she has left Bunny. It's Ann's first time in the school and she seems lost as she looks for members of staff. Her lack of direction and the fact that she is looking for someone, but doesn't know where to find them, succinctly sums up her position throughout the film. Similarly, the way in which Steven is introduced, outlines his determination to do something which neither we, the audience, nor Ann are aware of. This positions him as the main narrative driving force (at least until Ann discovers it was Steven who kidnapped Bunny, at which point she becomes more active).

The fact that the swing is moving when we see it at the beginning doesn't make sense diegetically, as Ann and Bunny are already at the nursery at this point. In hindsight, it might be interpreted as related to the inescapable presence of Bunny in Steven's experience. The way in which he unceremoniously chucks the teddy into the bag can be read retrospectively as an indicator of his desire to suppress the child's existence. If the withholding of the relationship between Ann and Steven is one way which Preminger encourages us to reflect on Steven's inappropriate feelings for his sister when their kinship is later revealed, Steven's resentment of Bunny can be understood both in relation to his resentment at being displaced in Ann's feelings, and to Bunny's presence as evidence of Ann's relationship with another man. Steven's act of clearing away the teddy echoes his later attempt to remove all traces of Bunny, and what she represents to him.

In the trailer for the film Preminger advises that no one will be admitted to the theatre after the film begins. While this most clearly follows the publicity strategy popularised by *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), a film which *Bunny Lake* resembles in a number of ways (the psychologically disturbed young protagonist, the incestuous implications, the gothic resonances), this personal insistence nevertheless indicates similar matters of importance. *Bunny Lake* is not quite a 'suppressive narrative' like *Psycho*, to use Douglas Pye's phrase (1992), but the instruction not to allow patrons into the cinema after the film's opening indicates the importance of the film's play with the cognitive dimension of point of view and the amount of detail which Preminger had packed into

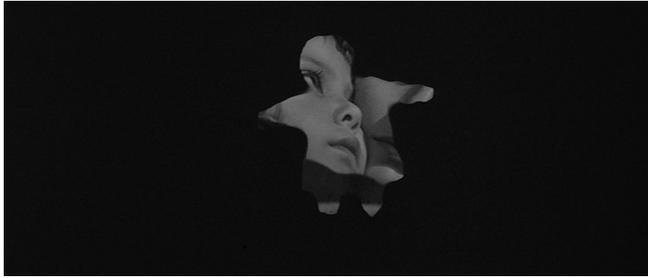


FIGURE 5 The superimposed piece of paper with the carved out doll reveals a partial view of Ann and Bunny.



FIGURE 6 The hand restores the missing piece of paper.



FIGURE 7 The hand closes the film.

in these few shots, making our perceptions of the character significant. Preminger had remarked that 'the ideal picture is a picture where you don't notice the director, where you are never aware that the director did anything deliberately', going on to add that 'naturally he has to do everything deliberately' (Shivas 1962: 20). The film's initial shots do not feel particularly revealing, especially when compared to the flamboyant title sequence which precedes it, but upon closer inspection Preminger's hand is clearly visible through his choices and their consequences.

Creative title sequences are a Preminger staple, particularly since the partnership between the director and Bass began in 1954. Bass would go on to design the titles for the majority of Preminger's productions until his final 1979 film, *The Human Factor*. The titles which he had designed for Preminger in the films prior to *Bunny Lake* tended to encapsulate the theme of the movie. Here they can also be said to reflect a method. In the 1960s, Preminger's films were celebrated by the critics from *Movie* for their 'objectivity', expressed through a 'detached', 'fluid' and an often 'unobtrusive' style.⁴ The highly aestheticised *Bunny Lake* doesn't seem to conform to this model entirely. When asked by *Movie* if *Bunny Lake* would be a different kind of film from *In Harm's Way* (1964), and by extension to the epic subjects of the movies before it, he replied, '*Bunny Lake* is a suspense story. It's the first suspense story I've made in a long, long time, about 20 years.' (Cameron et al. 1965: 16). Until the final movement of the film, at least, it is more accurate to describe *Bunny Lake* as a 'mystery', a whodunit. This shift seems to account, partly, for the film's unique standing in the director's oeuvre at this point of his career. The film is indeed more closely related to the mystery film noirs he made at Fox in the 1940s, such as *Whirlpool* (1949), than to his widescreen productions of the 50s and 60s.

Bunny Lake finishes with the police arriving at Frogmore End to arrest Steven. Ann walks away with Bunny in her arms, and over this image another black piece of paper, with a carved out doll, is superimposed, which only allows us to see Ann's and Bunny's faces partially [Figure 5]. A hand restores the missing piece of paper (the doll-like shape) to its position, completing the sheet of paper which now looks like a dark screen, over which the final credits roll [Figures 6 and 7]. The

statement of authorship made at the start is reinforced by this concluding gesture, which adds to the sense of symmetry of ending the film in the same location in which it started. This film, (and the following film, *Hurry Sundown* [1967]), are considered by many to be the last works by the director over which he had a solid grasp of the production process. In the years which followed, the making of his films became more chaotic, and the results less effective. *Bunny Lake*, however, is a movie which certainly stands the test of close textual analysis, and the hand which so prominently opens and closes the film most definitely belongs to Otto Preminger.

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