

AVANT-GARDE FILM THEORY AND PRAXIS
AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF
THE NARRATIVE/ANTI-NARRATIVE DEBATE

by

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ABSTRACT

This analysis of the narrative/anti-narrative debate in avant-garde film theory and praxis is contextualized in terms of the developments in Modernism in the visual and plastic arts. The problems raised by the aesthetic strategies formal autonomy versus narrative appropriation are explored by examining several discrete historical paradigms rather than following a strict linear historical chronology of the development of Modernism and avant-garde practices. Therefore the late 1930's East/West debates between the four writers associated with the Frankfurt school were discussed because their discourses reveal a spectrum of possibilities which span each end of this polarized autonomy/efficacy argument. The discourses look at the issues of production aesthetics and reception aesthetics also. Within the parameters of East/West debates, the positioning of the subject in terms of "distracted habit" or "praxis" are critical considerations to a reception aesthetic. Another historical paradigm for this debate was the writing and film practice which emerged from the nexus of the events of May 1968. The East/West debates informed this writing and the development of the aesthetic questions raised by Peter Wollen in the "Two Avant-Gardes." Here the important issues of materialism, ontology, and the development of human perception are raised. The return to narrative is represented by the "second" avant-garde's film practice (Godard, Straub etc.) and informs the issues of new narrative in feminist film practices. This is narrative with a difference however. Here questions of language and the production of culture are critically examined and naturally the narrative/anti-narrative debate continues. Finally, these issues are brought forward to the contemporary context and related specifically to the production of avant-garde film in Canada. One can see this contemporary debate in light of the past, however, the conclusions drawn by the thesis do not presume to resolve the narrative/anti-narrative debate or prescribe one particular approach, since this will arise from actual practice. The intention of the study is to introduce the central issues raised by social commitment/artistic autonomy and contribute to a better understanding of theoretical and practical implications of the debate over the use of narrative.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. Walter Benjamin

The narrative/anti-narrative debate emerging from the critical history of avant-garde film theory and praxis raises a number of theoretical questions about the positioning of the subject that require careful consideration. The aesthetic strategies of formal autonomy versus narrative appropriation will be considered in light of the historical evolution of avant-garde aesthetics, the changes in cultural politics and the various levels of production. For example if a filmmaker adopts an appropriational strategy, then the institutions of distribution/exhibition and the audience's reception/appropriation of the filmic text should be considered carefully. Audience subject positioning is particularly important and the respective positions of self-reflexivity versus distracted habit pose different ideological choices. The focus of this historical analysis, however, is not to argue

for or against the return to narrative but to focus rather on the historical and ideological aspects of this debate. The intention of this study is to introduce the central issues raised, those focused on social commitment and artistic autonomy, to contribute to a better understanding of the theoretical and practical implications of the debate over the use of narrative in avant-garde cinéma. This study will examine, in critical and historical terms, the problems raised by both the narrative and anti-narrative approaches, the advantages/disadvantages of each approach, and will show that either is potentially progressive or regressive in representational terms. Therefore neither approach can be valued more than the other.

The development of new narrative avant-garde film is interesting because the predominant aesthetic approaches of the past, those of radical formal difference and autonomy, are being re-examined. New narrative represents a critique of the traditional oppositions: conventional versus original, narrative versus anti-narrative, representational versus non-representational, and the use of language versus its exclusion. This approach critiques the separation between the high, or elite, art sphere from the popular cultural sphere. It represents an aesthetic populist position within the avant-garde sphere of cultural production.

While these oppositions pose fundamental problems for artists in a "post-modern"¹ context, it is still important to consider the re-appropriation of narrative in terms of aesthetic losses. Does the return to narrative imply losses to the development of a poetic idiom of cinematic expression? The idiom of democratic privilege Maya Deren asserted no man had the right to deny because:

I believe that, in every man, there is an area which speaks and hears in the poetic idiom. . . something in him which can still sing in the desert when the throat is almost too dry for speaking.²

With this thought in mind one must ask, what will become of the great developments in the critique of representation and human perception itself? What are the political consequences of positioning the subject in terms of an identification with narrative enigma, character fate, or destiny, rather than engaging in an objective examination of the cinematic apparatus and spectacle itself? These are pressing questions which Canadian and foreign filmmakers must consider in their debates on avant-garde film aesthetics and praxis.

The debate over the use of narrative emerges from the historical dimensions of the avant-garde, and therefore one must begin by situating avant-garde film theory and practice within a historical context. This will locate a reading of these cultural products in the context of the aesthetic traditions which informed the logic of their production and the specific codes of their formation.

It is useful here to outline the methodological considerations for this setting within a historical context. An attempt will be made to avoid the pitfalls of Positivist historiography, which is the traditional view of history. The traditional view, Foucault says, postulates a linear progression implying a causal force, between "great men, great civilizations, or great events or, alternatively, assume a meaningful continuity founded in a transcendental Logos."³

This critique of history, derived from Foucault and others, refutes the notion that meaningful historical events originate directly in relation to the transcendental subject. Rather than causality and continuity, Foucault proposes the notion of discontinuity and transformation. History is not a "question of progress, but rearrangements in the relations among the multiple forces--material, economic, social--that comprise a social formation."⁴

Foucault's characterization of historical change exemplifies how the notion of the avant-garde, as an historical entity, has been subjected to this transformational process. The traditional notion of the avant-garde, as it was hypostatized in the burgeoning political milieu of French romanticism, for example, changed significantly with its later use in the romantic and symbolist period of l'art pour l'art.⁵ Therefore, we will pursue the aesthetic discourse which informs the issues raised in the present through an examination of several discrete historical paradigms as examples from the past.

The contemporary debate is fundamentally rooted in the historical emergence of modernism and the crisis in modernist aesthetics, since virtually all definitions of avant-garde film are implicated in the development of modernism in the visual and plastic arts in general. So it is valuable to consider the context of European cultural and political life where literary and artistic modernism first developed. A cultural context will emerge by setting this debate against the backdrop of profound change in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century liberal thought. This context informs the diverse movements of modernism, the strategic evolution of the various avant-gardes, and the reasons for the crisis in modernist aesthetics, of which the new-narrative (and the post-modernist) aesthetic is a result. The aesthetic discourse on the relationship between avant-garde film and narrative is informed by the historical debate between l'art pour l'art and l'art engagé.⁶ Questions of aesthetic autonomy versus social commitment are still important issues to contemporary avant-garde filmmakers, while they are compounded by the additional problems that artists who deal with mass culture must specifically address. Understanding this historical context, and analyzing how the institutions which mediate the production, distribution, and exhibition of a work affect its reception and meaning, is essential.

In chapter II, the first task will be to introduce the reader to the genesis of the term "avant-garde"⁷ and to situate avant-garde film in the mainstreams of modernism in

the visual and plastic arts in general. However, one cannot assume, as some critics have, that the two terms "avant-garde"⁸ and "modernism,"⁹ are synonymous. The two traditions are mutually dependant because of their shared features, yet they are essentially different. Furthermore, rather than following a strict linear historical chronology of the avant-garde, one will probe the key historical issues raised by the relationship between art and life. The chapter examines how the various aesthetic ideologies of the avant-garde have posed the issues of aesthetic autonomy and aesthetic efficacy.

After the context which has formed and mediated the present controversy is isolated, it will be useful in chapter II to examine the crisis of the avant-garde and modernism in general. We can analyze why avant-garde artists have not adequately theorized their position within mass culture today. The argument cannot be overstressed that the importance of theory is fundamental to the practice of avant-garde filmmaking, and knowledge of the laws of production in our present context is imperative. Peter Wollen has rightly stated that:

To think about the future of the avant-garde means thinking about its past, not as antiquarianism or as archaeology, but to understand the mechanisms in which we are still caught.¹⁰

Therefore, chapter II will also examine how the legacy

of modernism, the stress on formal innovation as the principal means to transform habituated perceptions and consciousness, rendered modernist art (in the aesthetic populist view) ineffectual. This problem stems in part from the marginalization of the avant-garde in the elite cultural sphere because of the degree of literacy required to appreciate the esoteric and formal signification of the art. This requisite literacy in effect alienates the avant-garde from the very people the work should reach.

Some artists argue, however, that through a filtering down process, the new ideas generated in the high art sphere, move via concentric circles of influence, to the other cultural arenas. Therefore these works exert an indirect influence on those audiences. Rock video is both a good and bad example of how the experimental and artisanal film aesthetic is reaching a broader audience.

Of course, one must recognize the problems inherent in this process of appropriation. One must see that the new ideas of the avant-garde do indeed filter down, but in the process these ideas are assimilated into the mainstream culture without their transformative effects. The new ideas and techniques become part of mass culture, while the artist has no say in how, or in what context, they are

received. The central question which has emerged from this situation is: Can the avant-garde still play a significant and meaningful role in combating the elements of hegemony in form and thought to produce a richer, more heterogeneous political and cultural reality?

Chapter III will refer to an historical paradigm for the present debate--the late 1930's East/West debates. The four writers who were associates of the Frankfurt School--Georg Lukacs and Bertolt Brecht (the eastern debate) and Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno (the western debate)--represent an aesthetic discourse and a body of critical thought about the autonomy versus efficacy issues. These discourses reveal a spectrum of possibilities which span each end of this polarized autonomy/efficacy argument. Thus each of their respective positions have provided a set of alternate vantage points and penetrating insights, which may also provide the means to transcend the binarism of an avant-gardiste opposition to narrative per se. However, the opposition does not necessarily reflect actual avant-garde historical practice in relation to narrative but rather the clear position within the avant-garde to oppose the illusionism and mimeticism of the dominant or classical narrative form. Phillip Drummond notes also that this binarism was useful since it provided the distinctions which indicated past political/aesthetic strategies.

The debates examined the relationship between high art, popular culture, and mass culture. Consequently they have distilled the terms and problems which arise from the marginalization or interpenetration of these cultural spheres. In addition to the exchanges in the debates proper, we will refer to the specific essays by these theorists which are pertinent to the discussion of autonomy and efficacy. Walter Benjamin, for example, has developed his critical insights on post-aural art (Benjamin's use of the term "aura" refers to the ritualistic-magical use of art and the Renaissance cult of beauty) in his seminal essay, The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction, and he addresses the issue of autonomy in The Author as Producer. Adorno's essay, On Commitment, critiques the tendentious aspects of art engagé. His views on autonomous art are compelling because he asserts that theory cannot be compromised to economic, historical, and ideological exigencies, otherwise truth and knowledge (here read aesthetic knowledge) would ultimately be compromised. The ideas in Georg Lukacs's book, History and Class Consciousness, inform his aesthetic realist views, which were then fully developed in The Meaning of Contemporary Realism. Brecht's aesthetic views on the "popular"¹¹ and "realistic"¹² aspects of Epic Theatre are important to our present discourse because of the combined populist and self-reflexive approach. The implications of an appropriational versus oppositional aesthetic strategy are dealt with in this body of theoretical work. Each of these

writers' views on the aesthetic losses or gains derived by these tactical choices raises important questions regarding the positioning of the subject. Within the terms of the East/West debates, the notions of "distracted habit"¹³ (interpretation vis-à-vis alieatory technique and apperceptual habit) and "praxis"¹⁴ (interpretation informed by theory) have significant aesthetic implications and define the subject differently.

Having raised the issues of aesthetics and the role of the subject, chapter IV will continue to develop this discussion by referring to another historical paradigm for this contemporary debate: the writing and film practice which emerged from the nexus of the events of May 1968 in France and the developments in Structuralist-Materialist film, which Peter Wollen termed "the Co-op movement."¹⁵ We will then focus on the differing aesthetic implications of a materialist aesthetic as it was understood by the "two avant-gardes"¹⁶ and to the more complex theoretical apparatus of Semiotics and Structuralism (re the philosophical sense), which informed much of the writing at the time. This will broaden the terms of the aesthetic issues raised by Brecht and continued through his influence on Godard and the Dziga-Vertov Group. Peter Wollen says Vertov was the linchpin that connected the materialist aesthetic of the two avant-gardes despite their differing conceptions of the meaning of a materialist aesthetic. This aesthetic concern

for the materials of production was also derived from the modernist break from Renaissance aesthetics.

The historical thrust of avant-garde film practice has been to define what is essentially cinématique. Therefore, the narrative/anti-narrative debate raises the important aesthetic issues which center on the relationship between the "image"¹⁷(re-presentational codes) and the "text"¹⁸(linguistic codes). The relationship between images, words and the things they perhaps represent is a salient issue in the historical development of the cinématique avant-gardes. Much theoretical discourse has also focused on questions regarding the cinéma's basic nature or, as Andre Bazin puts it, "Qu'est-ce que c'est le Cinéma?"¹⁹

When the first cinématique avant-garde (the Impressionist movement of 1917, with filmmakers such as Germaine Dulac, Louis Dellac, Jean Epstein and others) posed the question: What is the essential quality of this medium? the answers they gave were based on the movement of the image (the photogene) and the time-based essence which the cinéma shares with music (synaesthesia). When Bazin addressed this question, his notion of a cinematic essence was based on the ontological nature of the photographic document--the pro-filmic event that the camera mechanically recorded. However, when a structuralist-materialist filmmaker like Peter Gidal answered this question he said:

The structural/materialist film must minimize content in its overpowering, imagistically seductive sense, in an attempt to get through this miasmic area of 'experience' and proceed with film as film.²⁰

This statement reflects how the subject is positioned in a self-reflexive and critical mode. Rather than seeing the cinema as only a form of entertainment, structuralist-materialist filmmakers focus on the material aspect of cinema which teaches us how the cinématique apparatus conditions human perception. This subject positioning critiques the ideological positioning of the subject in the classical illusionist narrative form.

But it is precisely this ontological tautology that avant-garde critics isolate as the limitation of the film as film approach. The focus on film as film mirrors the modernist historical cul-de-sac of l'art pour l'art, precipitating a return to narrative forms in some avant-garde practices.

Yet feminist avant-garde filmmakers are not unified in their relationship to narrative because some argue that women should develop their own forms of cinématique expression, since the existing narrative forms necessarily draw on a patriarchal discourse through the use of language. This view of women's relationship to language is drawn from women's social experiences and Lacan psychoanalytic theory of language. He proposed that language is a "symbolic,"²¹ order which derives its significance and structure through the "law"²² of the father.

However, feminists who use new narrative forms argue that women have been marginalized-excluded from cultural discourses long enough. The image of women is used as the ground for representation and male subjectivity, yet women are denied a voice to express their particular subjective perspectives. For example, Laura Mulvey's essay, Visual Pleasure In Narrative Cinéma, analyzes the structure of the male gaze through "primary"²³ (camera) and "secondary"²⁴ (character) identification in classical narrative cinema. Mulvey uses narrative in her own films to forge a place for the feminine subject, and many women use narrative forms to foreground the female voice rather than the image. When the image is used, it is used in a self-reflective and critical manner.

The textual issues raised by narrative are an important part of feminist film theory and are linked to the writers associated with the journals Screen and Tel Quel. The theoretical insights developed by these publications were grounded in previous developments in structural linguistics, Neo-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, structural anthropology, Russian formalist theory, and semiology. The original development of semiology as the scientific study of signs and sign systems began with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure when he first published his Course in General Linguistics (1916). Later, the appearance of the work of Charles Pierce (1930-5) was also influential. In addition, the other important figures who provide a theoretical context for this discussion are the French psychoanalyst Jacques

Lacan and the structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. These prominent figures map or simply indicate the fields of discourse from which feminist film theory drew.

The figures of particular interest who emerged from the Tel Quel group to develop the study of cinéma and narrative are Roland Barthes, Jean-Louis Baudry, and Julia Kristeva. Roland Barthes's deconstructive analysis of narrative provided a greater discursive clarity of the subject. His structural analysis in S/Z of the five basic codes that functionally operate in the Balzac novella Sarrasine are invaluable to the study of cinematic narrative.

Baudry's Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus is important to the study of cinéma because he aptly describes how the cinematic text is dependent, by its very nature, on the cinematographic apparatus. The apparatus establishes the attribute of literal succession, which reinforces the fundamental syntagmatic organizational elements (leaving aside the paradigmatic relationships created by editing, fades, dissolves, etc.). In addition, the composition of images within the literal successive chain also contribute to a significant syntagmatic aspect of the cinematic experience. But Baudry also says that the cinéma's psychological apparatus produces "features which are specific to dream: capacity for figuration, translation of thought into images, reality extended to representations."²⁵ He

substantiates this analogy by referring to Freud's analysis in The Interpretation of Dreams.

Julia Kristeva's experience as an analyst has contributed greatly to the theory of desire in language and to the psychoanalytic understanding of the "split subject,"²⁶ that subjectivity is not fixed, unified, and unchanging, but rather that the subject is always a subject in process. Moreover she was responsible for coining the now widely used, however misunderstood, term "intertextuality."²⁷ The idea of intertextuality plays a significant role in the development of the modern "polyphonic"²⁸ novel and its consequential break from the Nineteenth-Century realist "monologic"²⁹ novel. The aspect of singular versus multiple narrative voices is implicated in the development of this debate on narrative.

The semiotic theory of the cinéma, developed by a former student of Barthes, Christian Metz, was also significant to the development of new-narrative because his understanding of the cinéma as a multi-coded system of communication is perhaps as important as the essentialist discourse on the cinéma's basic nature. Metz's stress on the plurality of codes in the cinéma spawned the insight that the film theorist must be a Renaissance person in a sense, if s/he wishes to fully understand the cinématique phenomenon. Therefore one must take an interdisciplinary and pluralistic approach to the analysis of the cinéma.

The concluding chapter will localize this debate in terms of the contemporary discussions amongst avant-garde filmmakers in Canada. Specific reference will be made to the sometimes stormy critical debate in film journals such as Opsis and Cinéma Canada. Chapter IV will also refer to two conferences held in Vancouver, the New Narrative Conference and the panel discussion organized by the writer for National Film Week titled Avant-garde Film Practices: Six Views.

Some of these discussions are polemic in nature, but they reflect many filmmakers' real concerns about alternative film forms and the preservation of the poetic idiom in the cinéma. This is also why some experimental filmmakers ask the question, "So what is new about new narrative?"³⁰ The aesthetic strategies of formal autonomy versus narrative appropriation, however, still must address the positioning of the subject and consider the historical evolution of avant-garde aesthetics, the changes in cultural politics, and the various levels of production. There is value in both the narrative and anti-narrative approaches, however; either approach can contain progressive and/or regressive elements of representation. This is why it would be inaccurate to valorize one approach over another.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

¹The term "post-modern" is used provisionally because many historians find the term problematic. Here refer to the Modernism and Modernity Conference Papers ed. Serge Guilbaut, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and David Solkin (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1981).

²Maya Deren, "Statement of Principles," Film As Film (London: Hayward Gallery published extracts, catalogue, 1979), p.123.

³Charles C. Lemert and Garth Gillan, Michel Foucault: Social Theory as Transgression (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 11.

⁴Ibid., p. 12.

⁵The anarcho-romantic movement of "art-for-art's sake" developed from the work of Charles Baudelaire and the symbolist movement during the mid-1880s. Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud were both very much influenced by the Revolutions of 1830, 1948 and the Paris Commune in France. Rimbaud combined Baudelaire's Swedenborgianism with Fourier to develop his visionary idea of a universal language. The symbolist poets Paul Verlain and Stephane Mallarmé developed the Baudelairean idea of poetic enigma and foreground, the element of chance in poetic composition. This anticipated the anarchic element of chance in later dada and surrealist art. Some of the British exponents of "art-for-art's sake" (influenced by Swinburne) are Oscar Wilde and the pre-Raphaelites Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones.

⁶The reference to this idea of engaged art is derived from Jean-Paul Sartre, "Qu'est-ce que la Literature?", Les Temps Modernes (1947).

⁷The term is derived from the utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon, who was inspired by the idea of progress that developed from the progress in science and technology leading up to the Industrial Revolution. This was how the idea of progress was passed on into the arts.

⁸See chapter II, note 19.

⁹Aesthetic modernism developed in the late nineteenth century as a "revolt against positivism" and the result of the crisis in eighteenth- and nineteenth century liberal thought. Modernism cultivated the formal concerns of spatial montage, paradox, and the fragmented representation of the individual subject reflected the "crisis of individuality."

¹⁰Peter Wollen, Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies (London: Verso Editions, 1982), p.36.

¹¹Brecht's use of the terms are defined in chapter III and he counterposes those concepts with the doctrine of social realism. The aesthetic is derived from bourgeois critical realism.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Distracted habit: interpretation vis-à-vis apperceptual habit.

¹⁴Praxis: interpretation vis-à-vis the practical application of theoretical knowledge.

¹⁵Peter Wollen, Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies (London: Verso Editions, 1982), p. 37.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Image: representational codes.

¹⁸Text: linguistic codes.

¹⁹This refers to Andre Bazin's What is Cinema 4 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958-65), p. 2.

²⁰Peter Gidal, ed., Standard Film Anthology (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1976), p. 2.

²¹The symbolic order is a term derived from semiotics and theory of signification in language. Lacan and Pierce define symbolic signs as specifically linguistic signs.

²²The term is derived from Lacan and refers to the codes or rules which govern linguistic systems. These rules are related in psychoanalytic terms to the Oedipal myth and the rule of patriarchy in language and in society.

²³Identification in the cinema shifts as it does in language from the first person to the second person. Primary identification refers to the camera point of view while secondary identification is the subjective identification with the character.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema," Camera Obscura 1 (Fall 1976): 115.

²⁶In her book Desire In Language Julia Kristeva analyzes the "speaking subject," which is simultaneously a split subject--divided by conscious and unconscious motivation--between physiological processes and social constraints. Therefore the actions and performances of the speaking subject are the result of a dialectical process. Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p. 6.

²⁷Kristeva defines intertextuality "as the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position." This definition is differentiated from the misapprehension that intertextuality refers to the influence of one writer on another. Ibid., p. 15.

²⁸The polyphonic novel has multiple narrative voices and is a open text. The work of M. M. Bakhtin and V. N. Voloshinov analyze the "dialogic" quality of the voice in polyphonic text. Ann Shukman, ed., Bakhtin School Papers (Oxford: Holdan Books, 1983).

²⁹Also derived from Bakhtin and Voloshinov, the term "monologic" (monologicheskii) is defined as the opposite of dialogic and is negatively valued because the text is closed, completed, and therefore not open to response. Ibid.

³⁰Nina Fonoroff and Lisa Cartwright, "Narrative is Narrative: So What is New?", Heresies 16, vol. 4, no. 4 (1983), pp. 52-4.

CHAPTER II

AVANT-GARDE FILM:
THE MODERNIST CONTEXT

The thrust of modernism is "the drive to give works of art the integrity of objects, and to liberate them from the burden of human mimesis." Ortega y Gasset

Literary and artistic modernism was born of the profound changes in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century liberal thought. This context of European cultural and political life informed the diverse movements of modernism and the strategic evolution of the various avant-gardes. The modernists' break with neo-classical, realist, and naturalist aesthetics is a product of a period which saw an unprecedented epistemological critique. Modernist painting played an important role in the aesthetic discourse of avant-garde cinema and, conversely, the advent of mechanical reproduction also revolutionized the codes and conventions in the pictorial arts. The turn of the century, therefore, raised serious questions regarding the function of art in the age of mechanical mass reproduction. This historical context set the stage for the modern/post-modern issue with narrative today.

Modernism: The Historical Context

The two major social forces that precipitated the shift from one problem paradigm to the other were the dual

revolutions--the industrial revolution in England and the political revolution in France. The profound impact of industry and democracy produced radical changes in consciousness, which in turn were reflected in the arts. With the invention of the steam engine and the development of modern cities, man felt able to master the natural environment for the first time.

Along with the population shift from country to city, however, came unforeseen social consequences such as the sense of alienation in the impersonal atmosphere of the city and factory work. As man became separated from the support of small communities and contact with the natural temporality of farm life, he felt an increased sense of anxiety and fragmentation. In this new age, man also felt unable to control the dehumanizing effects of the technology which he had invented because the central focus of his world seemed to shift from man to machine.

Paradoxically, as society appeared more rational, utilitarian, democratic, and the sense of unlimited progress and material wealth was felt by some, the sense of homelessness and alienation intensified for many. Thus the bureaucratic and impersonal mass society of the gaslight cities produced the extreme polarities between harsh factory worker slums on the one hand and the decadence of the elite industrialist's suburbs on the other. These were the conditions that gave rise to the politics of class consciousness.

Man's predetermined, cosmological position also changed significantly with the decline of the traditional authority of state and church during the transition from absolutist to democratic eras. This decentering of world view and decline in religious and political faith signalled an end to absolute fields of thought. New epistemological questions were raised about the nature of the knowledge that had been the basis of political discourse. Then, because those questions radically undermined all previous epistemic premises, political thinkers came to question the legitimacy of the powerful, to penetrate the facades of the powerful elites. Political thinkers such as Sorel explored the "myths,"¹ Pareto the "derivations,"² and Mosca the "political formulas,"³ which the rationalizers and apologists for the powerful had promulgated.

One result of this epistemic and philosophical questioning in the arts was the modernist critique of language, representation, and meaning previously accepted in the production of texts and images. In philosophical terms, Clement Greenberg explains in his article on modernist painting that the imminent self-critical tendency of modernism was influenced by Kant, but he distinguishes that:

The self-criticism of modernism grows out of but is not the same thing as the criticism of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment criticized from the outside, the way criticism in its accepted sense does: modernism criticized from inside through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized. . . . realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; modernism used art to call attention to art.⁴

Aesthetic modernism first began to develop in Paris as an iconoclastic rejection of the academic tradition of painting associated with Bourbon absolutism in France. The painter Jacques Louis David exemplified this estrangement from the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture although his painting was very much influenced by classical aesthetics. Peter Wollen notes that classical representational codes "always posited an essential unity and coherence to every work, which permitted a uniform and exhaustive decoding." ⁵ Modernism decentered the unity of meaning and therefore this fragmentation caused art to become extra-referential. As Wollen explained, modernist art became centrifugal (throwing the reader out of the work to other works) rather than centripetal (held together by the work's own center).

This shift in reader and subject positioning is important to note because of the change in traditional authority. Foucault analyzed the hierarchical positioning of the subject, established through the codes of perspective, in classical painting such as in the Velasquez Las Meninas. A triadic system of social relations is established through the power of the gaze in this painting. Foucault saw in the relationship between the spectating subject, the ostensible subject and model (the Spanish monarchy on whom the painter's gaze is fixed) that:

. . . the painter's sovereign gaze commands a virtual triangle whose outline defines this picture of a picture: at the top--the only visible corner--the painter's eyes; at one of the base angles, the invisible place occupied by the model; at the other

base angle, the figure probably sketched out on the invisible surface of the canvas. As soon as they place the spectator in the field of their gaze, the painter's eyes seize hold of him, force him to enter the picture, assign him a place at once privileged and inescapable, levy their luminous and visible tribute from him, and project it upon the inaccessible surface of the canvas within the picture. He sees his invisibility made visible to the painter and transposed into an image forever invisible to himself.⁶

The painters such as Courbet, Manet, Degas and others who succeeded David, exemplified this modernist rejection of the visual codes perspective definitively established during the Renaissance. There was a clear departure from Nineteenth-Century realism during the early decades of the Third Republic in the painting of the impressionists and then later with the cubist, expressionist, and surrealist movements. The influence of Japanese composition and planar perspective on the painters in these movements reflected the basic critique of a Western epistemic cosmology. Malcom Le Grice astutely connected the decline in religious faith with the development of science through his deduction that:

The Nineteenth Century saw the decline of a religious view of the world, with its basis in faith and underlying quiet replaced by a scientific materialism, with its basis in observation, experiment and technological determination. Photography was a result of this philosophical transition, and, as an observational instrument, still significantly aids scientific research.⁷

The technological development of cinematography and scientific materialism in the arts during the cinema's early decades combined well. Impressionism was born, for example, from a positivist desire to scientifically capture and

accurately record the effects of instances of light on color and hue in the natural environment. The aesthetic influence of photography was considerable since it contributed to the "snapshot"⁸ quality of impressionism. Chronophotography also provided the image base for paintings such as Marcel Duchamp's Bride Descending the Staircase (1911) and Giacomo Balla's Dog On A Leash (1912). In his book Abstract Film And Beyond, Le Grice also notes that impressionist painters such as Monet produced works which were "intrinsically more 'cinematic' than anything which was achieved in cin ma as such."⁹ Of interest is the manner in which artists working in a variety of media were influenced by one another. The advent of photography displaced the painter's role in mimetic reproduction and this initiated an aesthetic discourse among painters, the discourse culminating in the cubist aesthetic assertion of the flat canvas surface. This self-reflexive concern with the flat aspect of the painted surface is also featured in the abstract expressionist painting of Jackson Pollock and the work of minimalist painters such as Don Judd and Robert Morris.

Then, as each of the arts began to examine the processes and effects unique to each respective medium, Greenberg also shows how the modernist methodology, as exemplified by Kantian self-criticism, was fully expressed in science rather than philosophy:

That visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, is a notion whose only justification lies in scientific consistency. Scientific method alone asks, or might ask, that a situation be resolved in exactly the same terms as that in which it is presented.¹⁰

The radical shift in consciousness during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century is manifest in the aesthetic form of modernist art in a number of specific ways. The first feature of modernism is manifest through the aesthetic of self-consciousness or self-reflexiveness. Modernists draw attention to the media and materials with which they work. Thus the very processes of creation and craft are foregrounded. In avant-garde cinéma, this is clearly seen in George Landow's Film in Which There Appears Sprocket Holes, Edge Lettering, Dirt Particles, Etc. (1966).

The altered temporal structures of modern art and literature exemplified the second feature of modernism. The new temporal approaches were precipitated by a radically transformed modernist context that altered the psychological experience of time. The impressionist's emphasis on the temporal moment in addition to the advent of the cinéma further contributed to this new perception of time. Henri Bergson's philosophy and his interpretation of time was very influential because he thought that time was a truly creative force, which was animated with the spiritual content of the present. In the literature of this period, temporality was based on the experience of simultaneity, juxtaposition, and montage. For example, symbolist poetry and the literature of Joyce and Proust

represent this temporal experience in contrast to the linear ordering of narrative structure and sequential presentation of events common to the nineteenth century realist novel. Therefore avant-garde films such as Alain Resnais's L'Année Dernière à Marienbad (1961) or Straub/Huillet's Not Reconciled (1965) broke with the linear ordering of narrative.

The third feature of modernism is the cultivation of paradox and ambiguity as a result of the previously discussed decline in traditional authority. For example, the dialogic novel of modern literature replaces the previous monologic novel. The monologic novel features an omniscient narrator, while the dialogic novel either exemplifies a limited and fallible perspective or provides a number of perspectives for one event. Three avant-garde films which feature multiple perspectives are Maya Daren's Meshes of the Afternoon (1943), Oshima's Death by Hanging (1968), and Louis Bunuel's Un Chien Andalou (1928).

These films also reflected Nietzsche's and Freud's significant contributions to the development of modernist culture. Their research and critical thought began to explain how the unconscious drives of man are often the motivational basis for an individual's, as well as a civilization's, real human attitudes and actions. Freud, a rationalist in the age of irrationalism, felt that unconscious drives could be canalized by the conscious intellect and that this was the real hope for mankind. Nietzsche, on the other

hand, exemplified the pessimism of his age. The notion of a fixed viewpoint was not possible in that general atmosphere of crisis, economic instability, pessimism, decline in religious and political faith, and epistemological critique.

Thus reflected in the artworks of a more complex and enigmatic cultural context, these elements finally contributed to the fourth feature of modernism, the movement away from the depiction of the integrated subject. The highly developed personality or character in the novel, for example, gave way to a stream of consciousness or the depiction of the subject as a psychic battlefield. This was represented in painting by the fragmentation or complete abstraction of the figure. Weimar expressionist cinema featured a fragmentation of the subject in films like The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and Metropolis.

In an atomized, alienated mass society, the demise of individuality and the loss of belief in positivist progress was pictured vividly in these films. The loss of faith in technological progress was reflected in films such as Metropolis, where machines are associated with the dehumanization of man. The loss of individuality is also seen in the literary and historical antecedents of this film. Works such as Villiers de l'Isle Adam Hadaly's L'ève future (1886) and Julien Offray de la Mettrie's L'homme machine (1748), are

examples of this motif of man and machine. The representation of the robot-android was described by Andreas Huyssen in this manner:

The android is no longer seen as testimony to the genius of mechanical invention; it rather becomes a nightmare, a threat to human life. In the machine-man writers begin to discover horrifying traits which resemble those of real people. Their theme is not so much the mechanically constructed automaton itself, but rather the threat it poses to live human beings. It is not hard to see that this literary phenomenon reflects the increasing technologization of human nature and the human body which reached a new stage in the early 19th century.¹¹

Contemporary artists deal with man's dehumanization in an ironic manner as does Andy Warhol when he says "I want to be a machine."¹² This statement is related to the historical avant-gardist criticism of the institution of art and the notion of the artist as genius who creates an original and singular work of art.

The Avant-Garde and Modernism

This historical and aesthetic contextualization of modernism shows how the arts were influenced by the social and intellectual context and indicates how the various avant-garde movements have been implicated in the development of modernism. But the two terms modernism and avant-garde should not be conflated. The meaning of the term avant-garde has been implicated in, yet is distinct from, the term modernism in a number of significant ways.

Traditionally, the avant-garde has signified a position of artistic and social radicalism by small, progressive groups against absolutist and bourgeois authority. The avant-garde held this authority responsible for the social injustices created by class differences that result in the limitation of the social development of individual artists and workers; therefore the cultural historian Donald Egbert says that the response of the avant-garde has been:

. . . to express in some way outrage at the "rules" imposed by authority, whether the rules of the academic tradition in art developed under absolutism and taken over by a Philistine bourgeoisie or the rules determining the economic development of society under the control of bourgeois capitalism since the Industrial Revolution.¹³

The intellectual heir of Rousseau and the enlightenment, Henri De Saint Simon (1760-1825), was the first to use the term "avant-garde." Simon was a utopian socialist and the product of positivist thought; thus he believed that mankind would evolve through the development of scientific progress. His thoughts regarding the avant-garde were rooted in these ideals when he first wrote:

It is we, artists, who will serve you as avant-garde: the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas; . . . and in that way above all we exert an electric and victorious influence. We address ourselves to the imagination and to the sentiments of mankind; we should therefore always exercise the liveliest and most decisive action; and if today our role appears nil or at least very secondary, what is lacking to the arts is that which is essential to their energy and to their success, namely, a common drive and a general ideal.¹⁴

The term avant-garde, from the military genesis of the word for the vanguard¹⁵ of an army, has been criticized by many historians because the military interpretation has no historical relevance to the fine arts. Therefore the term should be understood in the metaphoric sense rather than the literal. Furthermore, with respect to the filmic avant-gardes, Janet Bergstrom characterized these artistic movements as "apart from"¹⁶ rather than "ahead of"¹⁷ the tradition of commercial cinema. Nevertheless, the term avant-garde has primarily referred to new ideas and works that are temporally and intellectually ahead of their time. Matei Calinescu notes that there are basically two etymologic conditions fundamental to the meaningful existence of a social, political, or cultural avant-garde. Calinescu explained that they are:

. . . one--the possibility that its representatives be conceived of, or conceive themselves as being in advance of their time . . . and two--the idea that there is a bitter struggle to be fought against an enemy symbolizing the forces of stagnation, the tyranny of the past, the old forms and ways of thinking that tradition imposes on us like fetters to keep us from moving forward.¹⁸

In Theory of the Avant-Garde, Peter Burger pointed out that the actual historical precondition for the avant-garde took place at the beginning of our century when the "historical"¹⁹ or "classical"²¹ avant-garde, the European avant-garde movements of dadaism, surrealism, and futurism in the 1920s, criticized the autonomous position of aestheticism. Burger explained why artists felt a sense of artistic inconsequentiality:

Aestheticism's intensification of artistic autonomy and its effect on the foundation of a special realm called aesthetic experience permitted the avant-garde to clearly recognize the social inconsequentiality of autonomous art and, as the logical consequence of this recognition, to attempt to lead art back into social praxis.²¹

Burger notes that at the point where artists began to comprehend the social status of art in industrial bourgeois society, the avant-garde started questioning the nature of the institutions which mediated their work. The historical meaning of the term avant-garde, then, implies an artistic and socially radical position, while the term modernism does not necessarily imply this. Burger compared, for example, the conservative modernist Thomas Mann and the classical avant-gardist, André Breton. Their aesthetic ideologies are different because Breton wanted to merge art and life by liberating the unconscious from social repression-oppression, while Mann was not interested in social change.

To understand why the avant-garde has developed this antagonism towards social and artistic tradition (or as in the dada performances towards the public also), one must refer to the economic context. In Renato Poggioli's book The Theory of the Avant-Garde, the avant-garde is characterized in terms such as "activism,"²² and "antagonism,"²³ but there is no explanation of what created those attitudes.

For instance, if one examines the professional position of the artist in the late nineteenth century, one sees a

significant change after the decline of patronage and the rise of the market system. The situation developed where artists were forced to compete in an unstable marketplace. They felt alienated from the uneducated and indifferent middle-class public on whom they depended for their livelihood. This enforced dependence on an often Philistine and crass public alienated the artist from the social establishment.

It is understandable why avant-garde art challenged and questioned the institutions which mediated art because it was recognized that the market undermined that quest for aesthetic and social truth. Andre Breton also asserted that the quest for artistic and social truth could not be subsumed to partisan politics or overt propaganda as was suggested by the "Aragon Affair."²⁴ Therefore, while bourgeois liberalism and capitalism did provide the conditions which brought the avant-garde into existence (the artist is theoretically "free"²⁵ to express him or herself rather than representing the interests of courtly nobility or the church), a greater reliance on the marketplace results in a proscribed freedom that over-stresses originality and innovation. This in turn has created a situation where the new and original ideas produced by the avant-garde are co-opted into the marketplace for corporate gain, yet artists are still marginalized. While European artists dealt with the objective suppression of their freedom of expression by the documented

historical adjudication of aesthetic questions by the state (e.g., by Goebbels in Germany or Zhdanov in Russia), artists in the West deal with hidden constraints on their creative freedom.

Reactionary attitudes, like the above, raise the important distinctions between a progressive and a reactionary view of art. The progressive attitude towards art exemplifies a readiness to revise and questions the premises for judgments, while the reactionary attitude complacently considers itself naturally and everlastingly right. One of the functions of the avant-garde is didactic, in the best educational sense, in order to perhaps change the reactionary's complacent attitude. Hans Enzensberger described how the reactionary expects the arts to supply "lifelike realism"²⁶ and "all-embracing positivism"²⁷ and "to fashion man's future from within."²⁸ These expectations, he says, are bound up in the desire to codify reality and conventionalize notions of social health and sickness. Therefore the reactionary attitude is authoritarian in nature because he says:

. . . "From that there follows"--verbatim!--
 "such a heightening of the watchtower" that it can
 no longer be doubted what sort of strait jacket the
 watchman intends for the arts; the avant-garde,
 whatever that term means to him is "decadent,"
 "perverse," "cynical," "nihilistic," and "sickly."
 This vocabulary will be well remembered from the
 Volkische Beobachter and that the state of mind it
 expresses has not died in our land is
 demonstrated by every second glance into the
 newspapers. . .²⁹

Critics such as Enzensberger have also concluded that the avant-garde has been reduced to mere market research for corporate gain. Therefore it is worth pursuing this recognition of the economic hard facts and the artwork's relationship to the marketplace. In his article, The Aporias of the Avant-Garde, Enzensberger cogently argues:

It thus enters into a state of competition not only with other merchandise but also with every other work of art. The historic contest for future recognition becomes a competition for present purchase. The mechanics of the market imitates the devouring course of history on a smaller scale: it is geared to a rapid turnover in accord with the scant breath and crude eye of planned economy. The anticipatory moment of art is cut down to a mere speculation; its future is charted like that of stocks and shares. Historic movement is observed, comprehended, and discounted--a market trend upon whose correct prediction economic success depends.³⁰

Fredric Jameson also criticizes the "aesthetic of novelty"³¹ because he says it is the "dominant critical and formal ideology"³² which must then "seek desperately to renew itself by ever more rapid rotation of its own axis."³³

This unstable context of artistic production and the problematic issues of formal ontology constitute the "crisis of modernism."³⁴ The avant-garde was implicated in the modernist historical context even while the avant-garde criticized the institutions of art and successfully challenged many preconceptions about art. The historical avant-garde is distinguished from modernism by an attempt to lead art back into social praxis. The avant-garde challenges the notion of the artist as genius and the aestheticist effort to develop an autonomous form of art.

Nevertheless, because artistic energy is co-opted by the culture industry, cultural critics are prompted to conclude that the avant-garde has been reduced to another form of "affirmative culture."³⁵ This term was originally used by Herbert Marcuse to describe cultural artifacts that affirm existing social realities where inequity and human suffering still abound, whereas the avant-garde was traditionally, in Alex Comfort's words, a "voice for the voiceless victims."³⁶ Affirmative culture prematurely resolves conflict through cathartic closure. What are the ideological implications of providing limited options and choices to character fate? Brecht said it produces a political acquiescence. Affirmative culture does not promote critical thought, nor does it, in Benjamin's words, "brush history against the grain."³⁷

The Avant-Garde: Elite, Mass, or Popular Culture

To examine the relation between art and political economy, we must first define our terms. The historical meanings of the terms "popular" or "folk" culture are often confused with the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century phenomenon "mass culture;" therefore consider the specific conditions that relate to the alternative, artisanal film practice in the context of modern mass reproduction.

Popular Culture

Essentially popular culture refers to a system of shared

values and meanings which are common to a majority of people in a given society. These values are made tangible through the production of objects or performances so that they can be experienced by other members of that society. Scholars of popular culture such as Herder said that the term "popular culture" refers to the natural, genuine, and spontaneous concerns of the people, hence the terms "Volksgeist"³⁸ (folk soul) and "Kultur des Volkes"³⁹ (popular culture). He also made the clear distinction between popular culture and "Kultur der Gelehrten"⁴⁰ (culture of the educated).

From the beginning of cultural history, the human subject has been at its center. Evident in mankind's cultural artifacts is the expression of an individual and collective consciousness or "prevailing value system,"⁴¹ which undergirds the artifact's inner meanings. For example, when modern man first uncovered the walls of Altamira (1879), the primitive belief system or the religious views of paleolithic man were also revealed. Those painted images of bison were designed to capture the beast's spirit, which in turn would ensure the survival of the species through a successful hunt. Before the written word was known, Greek bards sang of the accounts of battles to commemorate the struggles of past generations. Classical scholars state, for example, that Homer's Iliad was a combination of folklore, legend, and fiction that was then fused together into unified poems. Later the Romans and Venetians (1500-1800) held carnivals

where plebeian dramas, the Commedia dell'Arté, replete with stock characters and coups de théâtre⁴²(sensational stage effects), were received with favor throughout Europe. The significance of popular culture--the folk entertainments, festivals, songs and ballads, broadsides, and folk art--was derived from the local nuances and allusions which were spoken in a vernacular. These entertainments obviously appealed to a peasant working class because they presented the relevant themes and the essential concerns of the people who produced them. They also reflected the spirit, or Weltanschauung, of their respective times.

Historically, popular culture has been viewed negatively because of its traditional opposition to high culture. Two hundred years ago it was hardly considered a serious subject for investigation and only by the seventeenth century did the term acquire legitimacy. Popular culture was considered inferior throughout the nineteenth century by middle class intellectuals such as Matthew Arnold because it was not deemed sufficiently uplifting to the bourgeois taste. However people such as Shakespeare and Rabelais managed to "cross over"⁴³between the high cultural arenas and the commoners, therefore giving the common man the experience of seeing the struggle of mankind in a profound yet comprehensible light.

Mass Culture

Mass culture is often confused with popular culture; however, it is an historically specific and distinct phenomena that first appeared as a product of the nineteenth- and early twentieth century Industrial Revolution. During this period, folk, craft, and artisan production was displaced with the advent of mechanized production. This new phenomenon of mass culture was also a product of the revolution in distribution and marketing.

The terms of subjectivity present in the previous popular and folk cultures shifted as a result of the Industrial Revolution because the cultural objects produced for mass culture were not the spontaneous expressions, the life experiences or shared inter-subjectivity of people in particular communities. But rather, as Raymond Williams puts it in his essay On High and Popular Culture, after the Industrial Revolution "culture gradually became something for people and not by them."⁴⁵ Mass culture was produced, as a rule, not by local artisans, but by businessmen who produced culture strictly with the profit motive in mind rather than out of the desire to address the particular needs and interests of specific cultural communities. Therefore mass culture has posed new problems for cultural critics because the only interaction people have with these cultural products is by owning or consuming them. Williams considered the

implications of a culture imposed on people rather than produced by them.

Canada's cultural identity and sovereignty, for example, have concerned prominent Canadians such as Pierre Berton and Pierre Trudeau. The Canadian identity problem stemmed initially from the strong influence of British Colonialism. In terms of cultural industries, Canada has not fared well. The Canadian feature film industry was hindered first by the imposition of American patent controls. The Canadian government sealed the fate of an indigenous film industry when it signed the The Canadian Cooperation Project of 1948. We agreed not to stimulate Canadian feature films, as other countries had done after the war, through laws that would restrict the exportation of foreign currency, particularly for film rentals. The advent of television in the 1950s illustrated the powerful influence of American mass culture as Canadians came to identify more with American culture than with their own. So while Marshall McLuhan extolled the virtues of a global village through media messages, some Canadians considered the repercussions of mass culture in terms of the development of a Canadian identity. The Winnipeg Manifesto⁴⁵ of 1974 was signed by Canadian filmmakers and it represented the specific concerns of cultural producers to the Canadian public. Raymond Williams was also critical of McLuhan's media message theory because:

. . . the essentially abstract materialism of its specification of media, rests on the characteristically rhetorical isolation of "mass communications" from the complex historical development of the means of communication as intrinsic, related and determined parts of the whole historical social and material process.⁴⁶

Furthermore, within Canada itself the debates on regionalism versus centralism have also spurred a cultural inquiry into the issues of cultural production as well. This is why cultural critics question the implications of mass culture in terms such as "colonization,"⁴⁷ and "cultural imperialism,"⁴⁸ and "centralism."⁴⁸

In addition to the ideological implications of cultural identity, mass culture raises the issue of social hegemony and this issue is particularly important to the avant-garde. Many artists and critics think that the powerful in society establish the values, goals, role models, and norms deemed desirable through the modalities of mass culture because -- the cultural sphere is where a majority of individuals of all classes and backgrounds are integrated into the status quo. Faced with the problems of universal standardization and the subsequent normative leveling effects of mass culture, cultural critics such as T. W. Adorno are concerned that mass culture fosters totalitarian rather than independent forms of thought. Leo Lowenthal and Adorno say that even though cultural entrepreneurs appear to give people what they want, they are concerned that taste may be not only fed but bred as well. Leo Lowenthal expressed it thus when he said that taste may be "fed to the consumer as a specific outgrowth of the technological, political, and economic conditions and interests of the masters in the sphere of production."⁵⁰ Furthermore, this raises the question that if the

media manager's value system is imposed on ordinary people, do these values become second nature or are they cast off lightly at will? The avant-garde has been concerned with the deconstruction of this omnipresent value system and to find the possible points of resistance or liberation which might be opened up within the interstices of modern mass culture.

Now that popular, folk, and mass cultures have been defined in historical terms and the importance of maintaining and supporting alternative cultural forms in the face of the cultural dominance of mass media is also recognized, it is possible to examine the historical relationship between the traditional fine arts and the mass media as it specifically relates to the new narrative debate.

On the Problem of Autonomy versus Efficacy

One of the underlying issues of the anti-narrative/new-narrative debate of avant-garde film practice centers on the modernist issues of artistic autonomy versus artistic efficacy. Jean-Paul Sartre's Literature Engagé, for example, argues for an art directly involved with life and therefore one that has a political and social significance. Some historical examples of engaged art are David's Oath of the Horatii, Gericault's Raft of the Medusa, Delacroix's Liberty Defending the People, and Courbet's The Stone Breakers. On the other hand, critics such as Adorno think that only autonomous forms allow critical truth

to emerge, since truth and aesthetic knowledge are compromised by "instrumental reason"⁵¹(the Kantian term here refers to the critique of instrumental utilitarianism which permeated vulgar Marxism). Therefore it is important to discuss the notion of autonomy and its pre-history and evolution through the historical development of aesthetic ideas. By doing so, it can be established that the idea of autonomy is a historically specific phenomenon and it can be seen that the aesthetic of autonomy developed in relation to issues of aesthetic efficacy.

Autonomy: Pre-History

The Renaissance transition from Medieval to Modern times brought with it a marked change in the artist's social status because the Quattrocento and Cinquecento ushered in a significant shift in artistic patronage, from the previous ecclesiastical basis to a patronage by a courtly nobility (e.g., the de Medici in Florence). During this period, the guild ties of the past were dissolving under the increased demand for artists with experience to execute the important commissions for this nobility. When artists began to work principally for the courts, artistic achievement tended to be measured not in terms of craft as it had been in the past but in purely intellectual terms.

The Renaissance ideal of an autonomous, versatile, creative individual whose interest centered on the nature of

experience was essential to the aesthetic discourse of the period (and parenthetically is still pertinent to developments in contemporary film). This developing sense of artistic autonomy in Renaissance art also stemmed from the emphasis on a knowledge of classical literature, which was the mark of the educated. In epistemological terms, critics such as Raymond Williams, Leo Lowenthal, and Peter Burger said a lay and international sphere of cultural knowledge was fostered that was independent of, even inimical to, the church. The emancipation of art from the direct tie to sacral and ecclesiastical ritual was also precipitated by the relationship that developed between the arts and sciences during the Renaissance. The process of freeing perception previously subjected to ritualistic ends allowed artists to take more interest in the techniques of representation and the formal qualities of composition and color. Therefore the concept of a free and autonomous art began to flourish.

Autonomy Aesthetic: A Philosophical Concept

At the end of the eighteenth century, after the bourgeoisie seized political power in France, a new conception of autonomy as a systemic aesthetic and philosophical discipline was fully established. At this point there was another economic shift in the art market from the old commission market of the nobility to a new market established by the appearance of the collector, who acquired

selected works of an independent and notable artist (hence an investment in the concept of artistic genius). The gradual emancipation of art from ritual, from the constraints of representation, and from the reproduction of the ideological interests of the nobility allowed for the emergence of new forms of perception not determined by a means-end rationality. Victor Cousin first used the phrase l'art pour l'art in his lectures Le Vrai le Beau et le Bien (1818).⁵² The notion that the value of a work of art would be damaged by serving other values was articulated by Theophile Gautier in his preface to Mademoiselle Maupin (1835) when he said: "Il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir a rien."⁵³

During the nineteenth century aestheticist movement, the aesthetic discourse among artists exemplified a desire to establish an autonomous concept of art as a realm of activity independent of the praxis of everyday life-- independent of an instrumental reason motivated by a rationale centered on strictly definable, adaptational ends. This conception of artistic autonomy is linked to Kant's notion of disinterested beauty. For Kant, aesthetic judgment is disinterested because "the delight which determines the judgment of taste is independent of all interest".⁵⁴ Kant felt that aesthetic judgment should be independent of practical reason and the realization of moral law. Furthermore, Kant felt that this conception of aesthetics was universal

because he thought that subjective experience is filtered through the imagination and understanding.

But this universal notion of aesthetic judgment is a contentious proposition for some critics who recognize that an aesthetic completely independent of practical reason reflects only a bourgeois world view and does not necessarily represent the views of the other classes. Furthermore, the demand that aesthetic judgment has a universal validity actually represents the historical interests of the bourgeoisie in their struggle against the feudal nobility.

This historical discourse continued in England when William Morris and the arts and crafts movement developed an aesthetic of autonomy. This aesthetic was first criticized by Sainte-Beuve in 1829 when he referred to it as the "Ivory Tower."⁵⁵ The conflict caused by the horrors of the early factories during the Industrial Revolution and the Chartist workers' great National Petition to British Parliament certainly gave Alfred Lord Tennyson's poetry a distinctly reactionary edge, as he came to fiercely loath democracy. For example, in 1842 (the year of the worker's petition), Tennyson composed The Palace of Art. His sentiment that art should retreat from life is conveyed by his depiction of the artist's soul. In the poem the artist's soul is cast in a "lordly pleasure house"⁵⁶ on a "huge crag-platform towering above mankind"⁵⁷ where she laments:

O god-like isolation which art mine,
 I can but count thee perfect gain,
 What time I watch the darkening droves of swine
 That range on yonder plain.

In filthy sloughs they roll a prurient skin,
 They gaze and wallow, breed and sleep;
 And oft some brainless devil enters in,
 And drives them to the deep. . .⁵⁸

The doctrine of art for art's sake was actively debated
 in the famous controversy between Whistler and Ruskin.

Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) also grappled with
 these aesthetic issues. The French symbolist poets Baudelaire
 and Mallarmé earlier wanted to free their perceptual capacities
 in order to emphasize the location of aesthetic value in the
 realm of non-purposive creation. Yet Baudelaire did feel
 that an aesthetic school based purely on l'art pour l'art,
 and which ruled out moral content, was "childish utopianism."⁵⁹

Nevertheless, Kant's argument for an autonomous art not
 wholly dictated to by material reality or "instrumental reason"⁶⁰
 was well taken. Historians such as Arnold Hauser and Peter
 Burger recognize that Kant's theory was therefore:

. . . conceived as a sphere that does not fall under the
 principle of the maximization of profit prevailing in
 all spheres of life.⁶¹

Morris was sensitive to this dilemma of instrumentality, which
 implied a retreat of art from life in the nineteenth century
 when he said:

I repeat, that every scrap of genuine art will fall by the same hands (i.e., the hands of those actuated by the greed for Commercial Profit) if the matter only goes on long enough, although a sham art may be left in its place, by dilettanti fine gentlemen and ladies without any help from below;. . .⁶²

Burger also noted that for Schiller the positive social function of autonomous art is found precisely in its fundamental premise--the disinterest which need not serve immediate ends. Therefore the social function of autonomous art is indirect because those forms facilitate the expression of aesthetic and social truths which otherwise might be censored. This is why Adorno thought that truth and aesthetic knowledge would be compromised by instrumental reason. This concept is also derived from Kant's transcendental philosophy, which epistemologically recognized that the precondition of knowledge is not merely found within the constraints of practical reason and objective reality but in subjective knowledge also.

Within the modernist debate between formalism's l'art pour l'art and a contextualist's l'art engagé, there are works of art which combine both a modern formal concern with the creation of an abstract language to communicate significant social issues which otherwise might be censored. A case in point is Pablo Picasso's Guernica. Arnold Hauser interprets Picasso's eclecticism in progressive terms because the work implicitly criticizes the unity of personality and the notion of the alienated genius thus:

Picasso's eclecticism signifies the deliberate destruction of the unity of the personality; his imitations are protests against the cult of originality; his deformation of reality, which is always clothing itself in new forms, in order to more forcibly demonstrate their arbitrariness, is intended, above all, to confirm the thesis that "nature and art are two entirely dissimilar phenomena." Picasso turns himself into a conjurer, a juggler, a parodist, out of opposition to the romantic with his "inner voice," his "take it or leave it," self-esteem and self-worship. And he disavows not only romanticism, but even the Renaissance, which, with its concept of genius and its idea of the unity of work and style, anticipates romanticism to some extent. He represents a complete break with individualism and subjectivism, the absolute denial of art as the expression of an unmistakable personality. His works are notes and commentaries on reality; they make no claim to be regarded as a picture of a world and a totality, as a synthesis and epitome of existence. Picasso compromises the artistic means of expression by his indiscriminate use of different artistic styles just as thoroughly and willfully as do the surrealists by their renunciation of traditional forms.⁶³

Art Engagé Versus Autonomy: Historical Paradigms

An historical paradigm, which addressed the autonomy versus efficacy issues, was the post-revolutionary decade called the classical period of Russian cultural history. During this period there was a great flourish of aesthetic debate among formalist and futurist artists, writers, and filmmakers. It was a rich and fertile period during which various proletarian cultural organizations formed the Proletkult⁶⁴(1917). They proposed policies to retain an autonomous relationship between the cultural sphere and the state. The Proletkult First All-Russian Conference⁶⁵of 1918 recommended "that the cultural movement among the proletariat should have an independent place

alongside the political and economic movement."⁶⁶ Lenin opposed this and later merged the Proletkult⁶⁷ with the organ of the Soviet state, the Commissariat of Education (NARKOMPROS). Yet the new director of the Commissariat, Anatoly Lunacharsky (1917-29), encouraged experimental modes of production and therefore did not pose a great threat to the arts. However, by the 1930s, the Bolshevik Party officially promulgated Soviet socialist realism. One of the reasons for this was inherently connected to the problems of cultural development in Russia. This acute awareness of the problem of mass illiteracy caused Lenin to tell Clara Zetkin that:

. . . it does not matter what art means to some hundreds or even thousands in a nation, like our own, of many millions. Art belongs to the people. Its roots should penetrate deeply into the very thick of the masses of the people. It should be comprehensible to these masses and loved by them. It should unite the emotions, the thoughts and the will of these masses and raise them to a higher level. It should awaken artists in these masses and foster their development.⁶⁸

This argument was fundamental to the social realist aesthetic position regarding the aesthetic issues of artistic autonomy versus engagement with society.

The next chapter will examine another historical paradigm, the East/West debates, which continued to develop the aesthetic discourse on the problems of artistic autonomy versus engagement with society. The eastern debate between Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukacs is constituted by their opposing conceptions of the aesthetic nature of art in relation to the framework of socialist society, while the western debate between

Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno is concerned with the relationship between avant-garde and commercial art in capitalist society. The spectrum of aesthetic views to emerge from these debates then became incorporated in the later discourses of May 1968. The May 1968 historical paradigm in turn has also informed the present contemporary narrative/anti-narrative debate. Consequently, these elliptical historical paradigms develop an aesthetic discourse or conversation which is still relevant to the debate on narrative today.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

¹George Lichthem, Europe in the Twentieth Century (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), pp. 209-20 and 243.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," Arts Yearbook 4 (1961): 103.

⁵Peter Wollen, Signs and Meaning in the Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 162.

⁶Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 5.

⁷Malcolm Le Grice, Abstract Film and Beyond (London: MIT Press, 1977), p. 7.

⁸Ibid., p. 103.

⁹Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁰Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," Arts Yearbook 4 (1961): 9.

¹¹Andreas Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's Metropolis," New German Critique 24-5 (Fall/Winter 1981-2): 225.

¹²Warhol has made this statement in a number of public interviews and this idea is connected to his silk screen "machine aesthetic."

¹³Donald Drew Egbert, Social Radicalism and The Arts (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 741.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁵The Oxford English Dictionary defines "vanguard" as "the foremost part of an army or fleet advancing" and this was the literal meaning. In 1831 Carlyle first used the term "vanguard" with reference to the Oxford definition of the word "van" to translate the French word "avant-garde," which Saint-Simon had used figuratively to describe the role of the artist as the social vanguard. But Simon and Carlyle differed in their social views because the neo-platonist Carlyle believed that life and history are superior to art. His Tory belief in the Great Chain of Being where "a man has his superiors, a regular hierarchy above him: extending up . . . to Heaven Itself . . ." Thomas Carlyle, Critical and Miscellaneous Essays 5 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), p. 189.

¹⁶Janet Bergstrom and Constance Penley, "The Avant-Garde Histories and Theories," Screen, vol. 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1978): 123.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁸Matei Calinescu, "Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde, Postmodernism: The Culture of Crisis," Clio vol. IV, no. III (1975): 19.

¹⁹Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-garde (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p. 67.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 51.

²²Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde (London: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 30.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Malcolm Haslam, The Real World of the Surrealists (New York: Galley Press, 1978), pp. 205-6.

²⁵In a democracy one does not have to abide by the aesthetic dictates of the state.

²⁶Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "The Aporias of the Avant-Garde," Raids and Reconstructions: Essays in Politics, Crime and Culture (London: Pluto Press, 1970), p. 23.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Fredric Jameson, "The Ideology of the Text," Salmagundi 31/32 (1975-6): 240.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Herbert Marcuse, Negations: Essays in Critical Theory (Boston: 1970), p. 95; see also Eros and Civilization (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), which focuses on an analysis of the social psychology of affirmative culture.

³⁶Alex Comfort, Art and Social Responsibility (London: Falcon Press, 1946), p. 16.

³⁷Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 257.

³⁸Volksgeist means "folk soul."

³⁹Kulture des Volkes is the German term for popular culture.

⁴⁰Kulture der Gelehrten refers to the culture of the educated.

⁴¹Prevailing value system, or ideology.

⁴²The French term for sensational stage effects.

⁴³This transgression of cultural arenas is the model for the appropriational aesthetic approach.

⁴⁴Raymond Williams, "On High and Popular Culture," New Republic, vol. 171, no. 21 (November 23, 1974): 15.

⁴⁵Kirwan Cox, "Hollywood's Empire in Canada," Self Portraits (Canada: Mutual Press, 1978), p. 38

⁴⁶Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso Press, 1980), p. 52.

47 These terms refer to the production and dissemination of culture.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Leo Lowenthal, Literature, Popular Culture, and Society (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1961), p. 12.

51 This usage refers to the Marxist aesthetic framework.

52 In translation this means, the true, the beautiful and the good.

53 In translation this statement says, "The things that are really beautiful are useless." Theophile Gautier, Mademoiselle Maupin (Paris: Bibliotheque Carpentier, 1907), p. 22, originally published in 1835.

54 Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgement, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 42, originally published in 1790.

55 Saint-Beuve was a part of the famous literary and artistic Cénacle, which was connected to Victor Hugo. Romantic painters such as Delacroix, Alfred De Vigny and David d'Angers were associated with this Cénacle.

56 A. M. D. Hughes, Tennyson, Poems Published in 1842 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1914), p. 13.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Idem, note, 63.

60 Idem, note, 66.

61 Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p. 42.

62 William Morris, The Art of the People (Nonesuch Press, 1942), p. 527.

63 Arnold Hauser, The Social History of Art, vol. 4 (New York: Vintage Books, n.d.), p. 234.

64The Proletkult, an amalgamation of various proletarian cultural organizations, was founded in 1917. A year later the Proletkult First All-Russian Conference was held during which they proposed that the cultural spheres remain independent of the political and economic sphere and that the proletariat develop new cultural forms which differ from the bourgeois culture of the past. Lenin opposed these motions. In 1920 the Proletkult established the All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers (VAPP), which was later reorganised as RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers). This new group then strictly upheld the "correct party line."

65Ibid.

66Ibid.

67Ibid.

68Vladimir Lenin, Lenin and the Cultural Revolution (Hassock: Carmen Claudin-Urondo, Harvester Press, 1977), pp. 60-1.

CHAPTER III

ART ENGAGÉ VERSUS AUTONOMY:
HISTORICAL PARADIGM

Once the life of the mind renounces duty and
liberty of its own pure objectification, it has
abdicated. T. W. Adorno

The East/West debates of the 1930s represent an important historical paradigm, which delineates the issues of artistic engagement versus autonomy in relation to subject positioning. The four writers involved are: the Hungarian cultural critic Georg Lukacs ("realism")¹ and the dramatist Bertolt Brecht ("popular realism"),² representing the eastern debate on one hand, and the Frankfurt School aesthetic philosophers Walter Benjamin ("popular realism/modernism")³ and T. W. Adorno ("modernism/formalism"),⁴ representing the western debate on the other. All four writers further represent an intellectual field of possibility that expands the parameters of the form/content aspect of this discussion. In addition, Frankfurt School "critical theory"⁵ analyzes the position of the author-producer and the "subject"⁶ as producer in terms of the appropriational and oppositional aesthetic strategies. Finally, critical theory utilizes Marxist dialectical thought as a critical methodology rather than as a cosmology.

The intellectual relationships of these writers should be clarified in order to understand why their discourses are called the "East/West"⁷ debates. By 1938, Adorno had fled Nazi Germany

and moved to New York City, where he was working with the "Institute for Social Research."⁸ At the same time, Lukacs was officially installed in the USSR as Cultural Commissar. Meanwhile, both Benjamin and Brecht were in exile in France and Denmark respectively. The strong intellectual bond between Brecht and Benjamin was based on friendship, while their respective relationships to Adorno and Lukacs were institutionally mediated. The eastern debate between Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukacs involved their opposing conceptions of the aesthetic nature of art in relation to the fabric of socialist society, while the western debate between Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno was concerned with the relationship between the avant-garde and commercial art in a capitalist society.

Lukacs and Adorno represented each end of the aesthetic spectrum and their differences have been contrasted in this way. Lukacs's aesthetic position was essentially Aristotelian and produced a petrification of the subject by her/his "cathartic"⁹ positioning, while Adorno, at the other extreme of praxis, provided a sound intellectual argument but his extreme pessimism potentially led to a paralysis of production. In terms of significant cultural change, Adorno's position is untenable in practice if avant-garde film is to raise the level of cultural literacy and reduce the hierarchical difference between author/producer and subject. Brecht and Benjamin's objective was precisely this: to develop an informed, stimulating, and critical cultural environment.

In the debates on the problem of subjectivity, Adorno was working within a Kantian philosophical framework when he made reference to the subject/object relationship. The Kantian view posited that the subject, individual consciousness, is dialectically related to the object, specific phenomena of experience. This is differentiated from the Hegelian framework, which Lukacs, Brecht, and Benjamin all shared. The Hegelian view posited that the subject, class consciousness, is dialectically related to the object, socio-historical totality. Lukacs at one end of the spectrum was an optimist because he still maintained faith in a post-revolutionary notion of proletarian class consciousness. Meanwhile Adorno took an extremely dim view of the potential emancipation and edification of mass consciousness and therefore had no faith in the notion of an Hegelian subject consciousness. During the course of the debates, Adorno was very critical of Benjamin because he accepted Brecht's Hegelian perspective. There was an affinity in terms of historical imagination between Brecht and Benjamin, because their sense of pessimism was shaped by the historical knowledge of cultural barbarism and particularly by the development of Fascism in Germany. But theirs was a "Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of Will."¹⁰ Brecht and Benjamin's aesthetic views are considered vital today because their arguments provide options while recognizing the situational limitations of a mass cultural context.

Lukacs

Lukacs's History and Class Consciousness (1923) deals with the concept of "reification,"¹¹ the impoverishment of the inner life, and the meaning of aesthetic forms and ideas through the fetishization of commodities. This impoverishment is similar to the way kitsch art empties the original aesthetic import and meaning of cultural artifacts. Lukacs became an influential critic among German literary circles after he left his political responsibilities in the Hungarian Communist Party. His aesthetic views were published in the party periodical Linkskurve and gained considerable attention because of his biting criticism of Willi Bredel, a worker novelist, and Ernst Ottwalt, a close friend and associate of Brecht.

In 1938, Lukacs was appointed Cultural Commissar in the USSR. He then had to reconcile his Marxist political activism to a specifically post-revolutionary context--one which proclaimed a premature resolution to proletarian alienation from political discourse. This is why he was pressured both into recanting his ideas about the development of a class consciousness and accepting the reality of party control. He had to address the Russian cultural context where mass illiteracy was a problem; therefore, he accepted the pragmatic need for the so-called "correct"¹² party aesthetic policy. The social-realist, aesthetic party line profoundly affected artistic production in the most adverse ways and hindered cultural development. For instance, the purges of the 1930s caused the

victimization of Mayakofsky and other artists. Cultural production in Russia after this point became exceedingly pedantic; however, after the Nazis seized power in Germany, Lenin insisted that the Fascist threat required "the active engagement of the total personality,"¹³ and this certainly influenced Lukacs's conservative political position. But his equally conservative aesthetic position was not directly linked to his political position. Rather it was inherited from a bourgeois background, which cultivated an early appreciation of Classicism and nineteenth century humanist, high culture. Lukacs thought that modernism represented the ultimate decay of the harmonious totality embodied in the classical Greek Weltanschauung. His caustic criticism at this time exemplified a limited, retardataire aesthetic, which was perhaps applicable to the nineteenth century, but was not applicable to the twentieth.

Lukacs criticized Brecht harshly for either exemplifying naturalist traits through techniques of journalistic reportage or accused him of formalism because of his anti-Aristotelian aesthetic, the non-classical rendition of character. Lukacs's critique of Brecht was related to his dislike of expressionism, outlined in Lukacs's Grosse und Verfall des Expressionismus (1934). Brecht was influenced by expressionism when he began his career in the early 1920s; therefore Lukacs attacked Brecht for his retrospective artistic development. Lukacs's Erzählen oder Beschreiben? (1936) outlines the main principles

of his doctrine of literary realism. Here he reiterates his critique of naturalism, suggests that the typical character should be the nexus of the society and individual, and rejects both external reportage and internal psychologism. He therefore also distinguishes between passive description and active narration. Lukacs thought that the "critical realism"¹⁴ of traditional bourgeois culture was justifiable because it depicted the world in the process of transformation and the way in which different groups in society responded to those changes. He reiterated his praise of the Greek classical models and the bourgeois critical realist novels of Balzac and Tolstoy, while he pilloried the modernists, who contravened the regulative norms of classic literary canon. Lukacs differentiated between "critical realism"¹⁵ and "social realism,"¹⁶ because "social realism"¹⁷ implicitly confronted society from an internalized, socialist perspective. Officially, socialist realism was defined as:

. . . artistic method whose basic principle is the truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development, and whose most important task is the Communist education of the masses.¹⁸

Lukacs criticized, as much as possible, the bureaucratic narrowness and dogmatism of Stalin's cultural policies. In this respect the more liberalized cultural policies of Lukacs and Lunacharsky are contrasted to those of Shumayatsky, Yezhov, and Zhadanov. The latter tried in fact to destroy all the vestiges of the avant-garde cin ematic heritage by threatening artists with prison or death.

Lukacs's Classicism versus Brecht's Anti-Aristotelian View

Lukacs owed his conception of the dramatic hero to Hegel and conceived of the protagonist as the exponent of will who faces a conflict between two mutually exclusive ethical demands. Here life's potentiality reveals itself in the act of choice as the hero instantiates his will and sole aim against all obstacles. This is his fate, glory, and tragic end, depending on the potentiality in question. Lukacs said these potentialities are represented by "objectivity in narrative"¹⁹ and not in "expressionist schematism"²⁰ or "subjectivity."²¹ The surrender to subjectivity and to the disintegration of the personality also represents the disintegration of the dialectical unity of the individual in a contradictory reality.

When examining Lukacs's and Brecht's argument over the "subject's" possession/dispossession of "truth" in the fictional mode versus the self-reflexive fictional mode, consider the crucial question of catharsis and fate. Lukacs's view of the subject is that through catharsis s/he feels:

A sorrow, and even a sort of shame, at never having perceived in reality, in his own life, something which is given so "naturally" in the work. It is not necessary to go into detail how an initial fetishizing consideration, its destruction by an unfetishized image in a work of art, and the auto-criticism of subjectivity are contained in this setting up of a contrast of this perturbation. Rilke gives a poetic description of ancient Apollo. The poem culminates exactly in the line with our discussion with an appeal by the statue to the person contemplating it: "you must change your life"²²

Brecht, thought that Lukacs was missing (or perhaps could not make) the point. Brecht makes reference to the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach to point out that one should not simply "change one's life, but attempt to change the world"²³also. For Brecht, the fallacy of cathartic theory is the totalizing attempt to essentialize the subjectivity of humanity through a conflict in the hero's consciousness. Brechtian theory suggests that catharsis results in a separation (which is quite different from distanciation) and an absolution from human suffering. Brecht's epic theatre therefore owed more to that period of Greek tragedy which concluded in the "rationalist"²⁴drama of Euripides, than to Aristotelian drama. Benjamin described Brecht as a Socratic dramatist because his plays featured a dispassionate, Platonic hero who is likened to an "empty stage on which the contradictions of our society are acted out."²⁵ The contradictory nature of this character also embodied the Brechtian principles of Verfremdung²⁶(alienation) and montage. Brecht's play Puntilla, for instance, has Herr Puntilla exchange roles to become a pliant, infinitely consenting, and adaptable character. In his essay Lessons from Brecht, Stephen Heath explains the Brechtian (and Platonic) critique of Aristotelian tragedy thus:

In tragedy, that is, suffering is essentialized and so, as it were, redeemed, the spectator absolved in the laying bare of an absolute pattern of meaning, separation, identification, the pity and fear of catharsis.²⁷

Brecht thought this essentialization implied a fatalism about the human condition--"this is how it is"-- which naturally leads to a passivity, acceptance, and thus a petrification of the subject. If one examines the aesthetic debate between Lukacs and Brecht, the crux of their differing definitions of "realism" centers on the issue of the positioning of the subject. The strict formal codes of Lukacs's nineteenth century, realist, literary aesthetic situated the subject in a hierarchical manner through the use of catharsis and fate. Here the aesthetic implications of "mimesis"²⁸ (in cinema "diegesis")²⁹ contribute to this hierarchical positioning of the subject (Hegelian and Kantian). If we describe this in semiotic terms of the two components of the sign, the "signifier"³⁰ directs the subject to the thing "signified"³¹ in an unquestioned manner. In cinema, the ontological quality of photographic realism readily secures the "suspension of disbelief."³² In the dominant narrative film form, the screen is a "window on the world"³³ rather than "a [frame] through which the world is seen."³⁴

Brecht

Brecht objected to the aesthetic and political consequences of Lukacs's hostility to all forms of modernism and the affinity for bourgeois realism. In a conversation with Walter Benjamin, Brecht complained bitterly about the profound consequences of his relationship to the Russian

literary policy of Lukacs, Gabor, and Kurella. Benjamin responded to him by saying, "These people just aren't anything to write home about (literally: with these people you can't make a state)." ³⁵ Brecht replied:

Or rather, a State is all you can make with them, but not a community. They are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is the unforeseeable. You never know what is going to come out. And they themselves don't want to produce. They want to play apparatchik and exercise control over other people. ³⁶ Every one of their criticisms contains a threat.

Brecht fought against the dogmatic demand for "human interest" ³⁷ from the extreme right and the left. In the early 1930s, during the period of Fascism in Germany, he was a target for state control and censorship. When he wrote about the "three-penny lawsuit," ³⁸ and his adamant opposition to the moribund position of the subject as prescribed by fate, he pointed out:

It is they who want to see the element of "fate" emphasized in all dealings between people. Fate which used [once] to be among the great concepts, has long since become a vulgar one, where the desired "transfiguration" and "illumination" are achieved by reconciling oneself to circumstances and a purely class warfare one, where one class fixes the fate of another. As usual, one metaphysician's demands are not hard to fulfill. ³⁹

Yet for Brecht they were hard to fulfill. During the next year (1931), his film Kuhle Wampe was banned by the German censor in that the suicide of the young unemployed worker was not depicted in a "humane enough" ⁴⁰ manner. Brecht and company said they had "esteem for the acute censor" ⁴¹ in that

he saw the ideological aspect of the representation of subject. The censor explained the decision to ban in this way:

We learn too little about him [the worker], but the consequences are of a political nature and this forces me to protest against the release of your film. Your film has the tendency to present suicide as typical, as a matter not of this or that [morbidly inclined] individual, but as the fate of a whole class!⁴²

This sense of fate shifting from individual to class was important because Brecht said the censor "had read us a little lecture on realism from the standpoint of the police."⁴³ Brecht's predilection for the rational was a direct response to the grotesque stress on the irrational during and after the period of Hitler's accession.

During Brecht's lifetime it was (as in ours) important to understand and decode the way representation and ideology function in a symbiotic manner to form and de-form consciousness. Certainly Goebbels understood that entertainment films were essential to a comprehensive ideological program because they lulled audiences, gave them a false sense of security, and, most importantly, brought them back for more. In 1941 Goebbels said, "Even entertainment can from time to time perform the function of equipping a nation for its struggle for existence."⁴⁴ We must therefore weigh carefully Brecht's statement in Das Wort, "Consider literary phenomenon as events and as social events."⁴⁵

In order to fully comprehend what Brecht means, we should first consider the terms "subject" and "ideology." Colin McCabe

noted in Realism and Cinema that the problem with the use of the term "subject" is that it is an ideological notion which is largely derived from modern European philosophy. The term "subject" is often used as a descriptive scientific concept. McCabe proposed an ahistorical view of ideology because, even though specific ideologies have a history involving both internal and external features, the actual form of ideology is the same. In reference to Althusser's essay Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses, McCabe explained:

Althusser argues that the central and unvarying feature of ideology is that it represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. Ideology is always "imaginary" because these representations place the subject in position in his/her society. In other words ideology always has⁴⁶ a place for a founding source outside of real articulation.

Here McCabe also makes the important distinction between Descartes's cogito, "I think therefore I am,"⁴⁷ and Lacan's rewritten version (in light of Freud), "I think where I am not and I am where I do not think."⁴⁸ Lacan's rewritten version exemplifies how the pronoun "I"⁴⁹ has been constructed/deconstructed through the intersubjectivity of language. Subjectivity is shaped by the desire to communicate through language and continues to be informed by the unconscious and language. Further, subjectivity is complicated by the fact that the "I"⁵⁰ present does not recognize the moment in continuum. McCabe therefore says:

The ego is constantly caught in this fundamental misunderstanding (meconnaissance) about language in which from an illusory present it attempts to read only one signified as present in the metaphor and attempts to bring the signifying chain to an end in a perpetually deferred present.⁵¹

To recapitulate, the subject's previous imaginary social definition in language corresponds to the structure of representation in classic realist text and cinema. The dominant form reminds the reader/viewer that they are denied a prominent place in the compositional process of the production of meaning due to the unquestioned status of realist representation.

The subject position was similarly analyzed by Foucault in the painting Las Meninas when he said, "He [the subject] sees his invisibility made visible to the painter and transposed into an image forever invisible to himself."⁵² Through the "suspension of disbelief"⁵³ (a mimetic process), the subject is asked to identify with the individual characters while s/he is proffered a position of pseudo-knowledge and "truth"⁵⁴ (social truth) vis-à-vis the various narratological discourses. Yet an understanding of the larger social truths of the characters is given only in so far as the "closed text,"⁵⁵ narrative framework (beginning, middle, and end) will allow. The nature of the "closed text"⁵⁶ with its formal structure of logical linear coherence and believability cannot tolerate contradiction; therefore the "real,"⁵⁷ which exposes an horizon of polyvalence and contradiction, must be channelled into a narrow spectrum

of choices (both for fictional characters and viewing/reading subjects). The subject must be placed outside the production while continuing to identify with the character fate and narrative enigma. In the closed text, the subject must defer to the divine, hierarchical authority of the producer's truth. Finally, the closed text must rely on catharsis to end, but not disrupt, the ontology of this dominant form of truth.

Russian formalism influenced Brecht's materialist aesthetic. The formalists' interest in exposing the process of production rather than mystifying it appealed to Brecht because he wanted to create a "popular-realist"⁵⁸ art that was accessible to the working class and not only to an artistic-intellectual elite. He wanted the working class to know that "historical conditions may not be conceived . . . as inscrutable forces . . . they are created and maintained by man."⁵⁹

Brecht's desire to merge form and content in theatre was demonstrated by the fact that the focus of his theatre was not the stage but rather the audience. His main objective was to elicit an active critical audience response. This is why he said it is important to "learn the art of seeing."⁶⁰ He sought to serve the interests of the populace with the theatre's capacity to reveal by contradiction in the epic style.

Brecht's thoughts are still considered important to contemporary film production and criticism for these reasons. He gave a clear definition of what he meant by popular and realistic in the following statement:

Our concept of what is popular refers to a people who not only play a full part in historical development but actively usurp it, force its pace, determine its direction. We have a people in mind who make history, change the world and themselves. We have in mind a fighting people and therefore an aggressive concept of what is popular.

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society/unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who rule it/writing from the stand-point of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught/emphasizing the element of development/making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.⁶¹

Brecht's work always practically stated its position as politically committed art in an aesthetic form that was experimental, poetic, and didactic. Against all odds he maintained an irrepressible optimism about our capacity to think creatively and to plan for a better society. In addition, his honest political self-reflexivity produced great social insights that document his critical responses to the historic and aesthetic events which affected him most profoundly.

Benjamin

Benjamin and Brecht shared an historical imagination that was nevertheless informed by the experience of exile

and cultural barbarism. Yet they shared an historical vision which held that the mass audience's critical awareness could be awakened through a process of "distracted habit"⁶² in the viewing of entertainment. Brecht's gestic music was entertaining and was a form of montage that broke the theatrical illusion. This combination of entertainment and montage "obliged the spectator to take a position toward the action"⁶³ through this process of apperceptual habit; therefore, rather than the work of art absorbing you, you absorb it. Brecht characterized Verfremdunseffekt⁶⁴ by distinguishing catharsis from the emotional responses engendered by moral outrage at social injustices or the sorrow which produces critical thought. To Adorno's lament that the masses do not concentrate on art, rather seek distraction only, Benjamin answered:

The film with its shock effect meets this mode of perception half way. The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an almost absent-minded one.⁶⁵

The "cult value"⁶⁶ which Benjamin speaks of refers to the notion of the decay of the "aura"⁶⁷ of the work of art after the advent of mechanical reproduction. The concept of the aura, Benjamin said, was derived originally from the production of art in a ritualistic and magical context. Benjamin referred to the "Renaissance secular cult of beauty"⁶⁸ to show how the aura's decline produced a crisis regarding the function or place of art. L'art pour l'art was one

response to this crisis. Because the authenticity of the original work of art, the hic et nunc⁶⁹(the here and now), was the crux of the issue, Benjamin came to the conclusion that:

From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice--politics.⁷⁰

Benjamin and Brecht thought that there was a positive potential in the technological advent of mechanical reproduction for the arts. Here Benjamin proposed that the:

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes⁷¹ into a progressive reaction towards a Chaplin movie.

Adorno

While in London in 1936 Adorno wrote a letter to Benjamin criticizing his position. Adorno stated that "the idea that a reactionary is turned into a member of the avant-garde by an expert knowledge of Chaplin films strikes me as out-and-out romanticization."⁷² Adorno continued characteristically with the method of critical theory to provide the concrete "particular"⁷³ for this "abstract"⁷⁴ understanding of the whole by citing an example from his own experience. Adorno recounted his experience in this way:

When I spent a day in the studios of Neubabelsberg two years ago, what impressed me most was how [little] montage and all the advanced techniques that you exalt are actually used; rather, reality is everywhere [constructed] with an infantile mimetism and then "photographed." You under-estimate the technicality of autonomous art and over estimate that of the dependent art; this, in plain terms, would be my main objection.⁷⁵

Historians note that after 1933, when Josef Goebbels took control of the German film industry, he focused on the production of mass light entertainment. It was also revealed later that he not only controlled UFA, Germany's massive production complex, but secretly controlled private companies as well. During this period, the Nazis were not interested in awakening the nations critical consciousness. Goebbels said that the newsreels were "used to wage war, not convey information"⁷⁶and, therefore, set out to censor "undesirable"⁷⁷and "unhealthy"⁷⁸films such as the kammerspielfilm.⁷⁹ This was consistent with the period of book burning. The Nazi's were interested in keeping people passively entertained by fulfilling their escapist desires rather than awakening their critical capacities.

The problem which Adorno described and which Benjamin also foresaw, but could not anticipate the extent to which it could dominate experience, was the degree to which affirmative culture usurps any possibility of Erfahrungen (authentic experience). Adorno's perception was that Benjamin promoted kitsch rather than quality films. In contrast, Adorno promoted autonomous, non-bourgeois art. He made the point

that, while he agreed that the aura of the work of art had declined, he also asserted "the autonomy of the work of art, and therefore its material form, is not identical with the magical element in it."⁸⁰ Further, he and his colleague Max Horkheimer had always recognized the political aspect of art (pre-aural decline) in the progressive sense. This political aspect of art expressed "a force of protest of the humane against the pressure of domineering institutions, religious and otherwise, no less that it reflected their objective substance."⁸¹

The objection Adorno voiced regarding the affirmative character of mass film culture hinged on the fact that he did not share Brecht's and Benjamin's "blind confidence in the spontaneous power of the proletariat which is itself a product of bourgeois society."⁸² In fact, he considered Brecht's influence on Benjamin to be unfortunate. He chastised both men for what he called "crude thinking"⁸³ and was particularly critical of Brecht's "political naivety."⁸⁴ Some critics agree with Adorno's political criticisms; however, Brecht was experimenting with new forms and perhaps it is not possible to fulfill every expectation of historical accuracy. Nevertheless, the implication of Adorno's concern with the hegemonic effects of "affirmative culture"⁸⁵ is important to pursue. Raymond Williams defined the difference between the influence of ideology and the pervasive influences of hegemony thus:

Hegemony supposed the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural, like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway.

. . . For if ideology were merely some abstract, imposed set of notions, if our social and political and cultural ideas and assumptions and habits were merely the result of specific training which might be simply ended or withdrawn, then the society would be very much easier to move and to change than in practice it is.⁸⁶

Therefore, Adorno did agree with Brecht and Benjamin's assertion that the "tragic mode"⁸⁷ in modern mass culture is reduced to a threat to anyone who does not comply with the ideology framed within the parameters of the mass media text/image. The Dialectic of Enlightenment (which Adorno co-authored with Max Horkheimer) in fact referred to that element of threat in tragedy. The following passage describes the fate of the female subject:

Tragedy is reduced to a threat to destroy anyone who does not co-operate, whereas its paradoxical significance once lay in a hopeless resistance to mythic destiny. Tragic fate becomes just punishment, which is what bourgeois aesthetics always tried to turn into. The morality of mass culture is the cheap form of yesterday's children's books. In first class productions, for example, the villainous character appears as a hysterical woman who (with presumed clinical accuracy) tries to ruin the happiness of her opposite number, who is truer to reality, and herself suffers a quite untheatrical death.⁸⁸

To conclude, the discord between Adorno and Benjamin represented a fundamental political break during the debates of the 1930s. A hypothetical realm of a future imputed and correct proletarian consciousness was something Adorno

refused to recognize and found completely untenable as a proposition on which to rest theory. Consequently, Adorno felt that Benjamin had betrayed their earlier conclusions during the Konigstein talks in 1929. At that time they had agreed with the anti-metaphysical aspect of the Kantian rule to keep within the data of experience. This insistence that knowledge remain within the realm of empirical experience was the element that defined their immanent approach.

Theorists, however find Adorno's aesthetic theory problematic because of a fundamental difficulty with his theory of negative dialectics and the principle of the "non-identical"⁸⁹ that is pivotal to his philosophical framework. The problem which Susan Buck-Morss noted in her book, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, is that the logic and principle of the non-identical is in the end quite predictable, dogmatic, and therefore ever-identical. The conceptual wholeness of his aesthetic theory mirrored the conceptual wholeness of Schönberg's twelve-tone row. Negative dialectical theory became a prima dialectica⁹⁰ (a philosophical first principle) when Adorno himself had objected to all philosophic first principles. Furthermore, the consequences of his theory took the logic of critical negation to the point of extinction--to ask the fundamental question: Does art have the right to exist after Auschwitz? This line of logic, which questions the effect and meaning of art or lack thereof after the holocaust, only leads to a loss of nerve

whose end point is paralyzed angst. Therefore, the very criticism of "stasis"⁹¹ which Adorno invoked against Benjamin was his own. Hans Ensensberg's reply to Adorno's question rectified his logic of critical nihilism. In terms of the production of art, Ensensberg said:

. . . we must resist this verdict. In other words, be such that its mere existence after Auschwitz is not to surrender to cynicism?⁹²

Adorno's pessimism regarding the production of culture, or its ability to evoke an adequate response to social barbarism, must be viewed in the context of a damaged life after Auschwitz. His chilling thought that "no universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb,"⁹³ is sobering. History is transgressed in this view. The experience of brutality is seen from an ahistorical perspective that cuts across cultural boundaries.

The pessimism and rigor of Adorno's thought is important to comprehend, all the while working toward a progressive, enlightened society. In part, this is why the East/West debates are relevant to the discourses on cinema during the events of May 1968 and to the contemporary discourse on the application of narrative in avant-garde film practice today. These discourses developed the issues regarding the relationship between autonomous art and engaged art (in particular the cinématique arts) and society. The discussions of May 1968 then moved those debates

onto a different plane since they were informed by an historical understanding of the past and by the May 1968 critical context, which involved all sectors of society.

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

¹These terms represent the aesthetic positions of the four writers that are explained further in this chapter.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵For a thorough explanation of the Frankfurt School's critical theory, see John Onell, On Critical Theory (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

⁶Here refer to the Kantian and Hegelian definition in chapter I.

⁷See definition in text.

⁸The Institute for Social Research was originally established in Frankfurt after Felix Weil approached his father for the initial endowment in 1914. After Hitler rose to power, the institute moved to New York.

⁹The climactic outlet to emotion through drama or a social experience.

¹⁰This motto is Hegelian in origin.

¹¹Lukacs's original contribution to the study of culture was his focus on the concept of reification in his chapter "Reification and Class Consciousness." Here he analyzed that the fundamental problem with the tradition of bourgeois philosophy is the problem of idealism and dualistic separation in the representation subject-object. This is why commodities are reified. Products appear as objects separated from the workers who produce them; therefore commodities in a reified form are "fetishes," which appear as separate and obscured from the social process that produces them. Georg Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness (London: Merlin Press, 1967), p. 319.

¹²This "correctness" was shaped by Lenin and the party.

¹³Franz Rosenzweig, The Star of Redemption, 2d ed., trans. William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 238, originally published in 1930.

¹⁴Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, p. 114.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸C. D. Kernig, ed., Marxism, Communism, and Western Society 8 vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 8:1.

¹⁹Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, pp. 22-35.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Georg Lukacs, Die Elgenart des Asthetischen (Berlin: Luchterhand, 1963), p. 818.

²³Stephen Heath, "Lessons from Brecht," Screen, vol. 15, no. 2 (Summer 1974): 109.

²⁴This refers to the rationalist period of Greek drama. Euripides developed this form as an iconoclastic contrast to Aristotelian drama.

²⁵Walter Benjamin based his ideas on Hegel's concept of tragedy and he talks about Brecht's epic theatre in "The Author as Producer," New Left Review, 62 (March/April 1971): 93.

²⁶The concept of Verfemdung was derived from Russian constructivism and futurism and from writers who contributed to the constructivist journals Lef and Novy Lef, such as Mayakovsky, Boris Arvatov, Sergei Tretjakow, and the formalist critic Viktor Shklovky. Brecht was influenced by his friendships with Asja Lacis and Erwin Piscator to develop a "production aesthetic," which caused a defamiliarization and estrangement through the techniques of montage and discontinuity. This quality of discontinuity encourages a rational intervention on the spectator's part, renewing experience and the emancipation of the viewing-working subject.

²⁷Stephen Heath, "Lessons from Brecht," : 109.

28The term "mimesis" is derived from the Greek, meaning the imitation of nature.

29The term "diegesis" refers, according to the Christian Metz, to the denotative material of film narrative (including the fictional space and temporal dimensions of the narrative).

30In semiotic terms, the fundamental unit of signification is the sign. The sign has two components: the signifier that carries meaning and the signified, which is the concept or the thing. The classic example is the word "tree" (signifier), which represents the concept (signified) of the real thing--a real tree.

31Ibid.

32This idea was explained well by Martin Walsh when he said:

The aesthetic position which Eisenstein, Brecht and Godard hold in common is a hostility to illusionism; illusionism being a mode of artistic experience that has as its most central characteristics: a desire to (psychologically) penetrate individual experience; its primary appeal is to the emotions rather than the intellect, desiring the audience's empathetic involvement with the events presented before them, in the passive manner suggested by Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief"; it has a closed form which implies a certain artistic autonomy, a self-validation; it prefers to regard the medium of expression as somehow transparent, neutral, having no "point of view" of its own; language wants to be overlooked, effaced. Brecht's theatrical practice obviously inverts all of these priorities, and his theoretical writings constantly stress the contemporary necessity of a rethinking of dramatic praxis. His theatre may thus be seen as a reaction against the perspectival tradition of the post-Renaissance world; which posited the eye (and the man behind it) as the center of the world, and art as a window (therefore transparent) on that world.

Martin Walsh, The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1981), p. 11.

33Ibid.

34Ibid.

35Bertolt Brecht, "Conversations with Brecht," New Left Review, 77 (1973): 55.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Keith A. Dickson, Towards Utopia: A Study of Brecht (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 49.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 46.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Richard Taylor, Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 161.

⁴⁵ Bertolt Brecht, "Das Wort," Gesammelt Werke, vol. 20 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967) n.p., originally published in 1935.

⁴⁶ Colin MacCabe, "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses," Screen (Summer 1974): 46.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵² Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 5.

⁵³ Ibid., note 37.

⁵⁴ See chapter III.

⁵⁵ See chapter II, III.

⁵⁶ See chapter II, III.

⁵⁷ See chapter III.

⁵⁸ Bertolt Brecht, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), n.p.

⁵⁹ Dickson, Towards Utopia: A Study of Brecht, p. 49.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukacs," New Left Review, 84 (March/April 1974): 74, 85.

⁶²Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," New Left Review, 62 (March/April 1971): 9.

⁶³John Willet, ed., Brecht on Theatre (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 144.

⁶⁴See chapter III.

⁶⁵Walter Benjamin, Illuminations: The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 240.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹See chapter II.

⁷⁰Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 244.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷²Adorno, "Correspondence with Benjamin: March 18, 1936," p. 66.

⁷³Adorno's immanent approach postulated that truth critically challenged the course of history and that social contradiction would be evident within the material of philosophy.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵T. W. Adorno, "Correspondence with Benjamin, London: March 18, 1936," New Left Review 84 (March/April): 66.

⁷⁶Richard Taylor, Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 161.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰Adorno, "Correspondence with Benjamin," p. 65.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 67.

⁸²Ibid., p. 66.

⁸³Ibid., p. 65.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 66.

⁸⁵See chapter III.

⁸⁶Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso Editions, 1980), p. 37.

⁸⁷See chapter III.

⁸⁸Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 152.

⁸⁹Adorno attempted to revolutionize philosophy from within, but the principle of the non-identical and his antisystem became a system unto itself. The notion of "non-identity" was inspired by Benjamin's concept of experience and his attempt to rescue the particular experience from obliteration by the totality. In America, for example, Adorno felt that experiences were repetitious and identical in mass culture; therefore, he saw the particular represented by autonomous art.

⁹⁰Adorno isolated the problem thus "Such ambivalence of identity and nonidentity extends even to logical problems of identity. For those, technical terminology stands ready with the customary formula of 'identity in nonidentity'--a formula with which we would first have to contrast the nonidentity in identity. But such a purely formal reversal would leave room for the subreption that dialectics is prima philosophia after all, as "prima dialectica." Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 154.

⁹¹During the 1960s the New Left criticized Adorno for bringing critical theory to a dead end. Adorno insisted that non-participation was an absolute principle, to preserve the capacity to experience the non-identical. His theoretical logic ensured that reason could never be instrumental and therefore practical work towards a utopian ideal was precluded.

⁹²Ensensberg responded to Adorno's statement "I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric: it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspired committed literature." T. W. Adorno, Commitment (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 84.

⁹³Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 320.

CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPORARY DEBATE:

CONCLUSION

The political question, to sum up, is not error,
 illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is
 truth itself. Michel Foucault

May 1968 -- The Two Avant-Gardes -- Canada

We have established that the contemporary debate on the use of narrative in avant-garde film practice is informed by the development of aesthetic ideas in the modernist context. This context revealed how the multiple forces--material, economic, and social--shaped European cultural and political life. Those social changes redefined the very fabric of man's epistemological cosmology and produced a healthy re-examination of ideas in all fields of thought. In turn, fundamental changes occurred in the aesthetic form/content of the visual and plastic arts to establish the modernist break with neo-classical, realist, and naturalist aesthetics. The modernist aesthetic of self-reflexivity, temporality, ambiguity, and the questions of aesthetic autonomy versus social commitment are still evident in contemporary film culture. The answers given to these aesthetic questions have differed as artists and theorists develop an historical perspective.

The East/West historical paradigm represents an intellectual field that also engages in a critique of modernism, the means of artistic representation, and aesthetic forms. Lukacs/Brecht and Benjamin/Adorno debated the autonomy/efficacy issues as they relate to the positioning of the subject in terms of the ideological implications of self-reflexivity and praxis versus distracted habit. The debates re-examined the relationship between the audience and the producer, developing new insights about the correspondence between the existing relations of production and forms of social organization.

In this chapter these aesthetic issues will similarly lace through the writing and film practice and nexus of events of May 1968 in France. The modernist aesthetic of self-reflexivity and materialism influenced the development of Dziga Vertov and Bertolt Brecht. In turn, their materialist aesthetic has led to the development of two entirely different avant-garde directions: one a narrative direction (the Dziga-Vertov group, Godard, Straub, etc.) and the other a formal, ontological, and anti-narrative direction (the structuralist-materialist co-op movement, Peter Gidal, Michael Snow, etc.). Finally, the contemporary avant-garde issue with narrative in North America examines the aesthetic gains and losses derived from the return to narrative. Thus the relationship between the ontology of the apparatus, human perception and language, and the positioning of the subject in terms of fate, destiny, and representation are still vitally important to the practice of filmmaking.

May 1968

The issues of state censorship raised by student protests during the "Night of the Barricades"¹ stimulated great debates in periodicals such as Cahiers du Cinéma and Cinémathèque. Also seen in context, these debates are particularly relevant given the historical development of modernist culture in France. Film culture became actively involved in the politics of culture in February 1968 preceding the crisis in May, when the government attempted to take control of the Paris Cinémathèque by firing its executive director, Henri Langlois. The "Langlois Affair"² unified the film community and resulted in the formation of the "Committee for the Defence of the Cinémathèque."³ Some of the distinguished people on the committee were: Renoir, Truffaut, Godard, Rivette, and Barthes. French film culture then participated in the student and union protests because of the state censorship of the police brutality when the students raised the barricades in Rue Guy Lussac (May 10). The "Estates General of the Cinéma"⁴ (ECG) formed to support the General Strike, the name "Estates General"⁵ sounding a particular historical resonance. During the French Revolution of 1789 the monarchy conceded to dual representation with the bourgeoisie in the Commons to establish popular support for the Third Estate, then called the "States General."⁶ The image of the French Revolution was particularly significant for French film culture since it also conjured the image of artists, Courbet for example, at the barricades during the "Paris Commune" of 1871. Thus

it was a touchstone to a period that also stimulated a plethora of aesthetic discourses regarding the relationship between art and life.

The writing and film practice that emerged from the nexus of events of May 1968 in France exemplified both the failed potential and a thorough re-examination of all aspects of public and private life. The enthusiasm and public discourse generated during this period is characterized as "a gust of fresh air that blew through the dusty minds, offices and bureaucratic structures in all walks of life in France."⁷ Even though the actual result of these events contributed to the entrenchment of de Gaulle's political power in Parliament, nevertheless, the social protests represented the spirit and desire for social justice and change. A variety of new forms of social criticism emerged that transformed social institutions and developed the analysis of sign systems in contemporary culture. Filmmakers and theorists reviewed the debates of post-revolutionary Russia in the context of the political questions of the day. They discussed the work of the futurists and the formalists, Eisenstien and Dziga Vertov and examined the issues of proletarian art and the problems of literacy owing to their concrete involvement in the working man's struggle. An interesting conclusion drawn from a debate in Cahiers du Cinéma proposes that:

Any consideration of the concept of workers' self expression must encounter, and find, ways of dealing satisfactorily with the twin dangers of unprincipled populism ("if a worker says it, it must be right") and vanguardist elitism ("the workers don't know what's good for them, and must on all occasions be spoken for by the vanguard/Party which does know").⁸

Materialism

Out of this struggle with aesthetic and political ideas, Godard, Straub, and the Dziga-Vertov group considered the material relationship between the audience and producer to promote the audience as the producer of meaning. Exhibition aesthetics as well as production aesthetics were therefore the focus of their discussions and work. Jean-Louis Baudry's analysis of the basic cinématographic apparatus developed the Dziga-Vertov group's understanding of this apparatus which organizes consumption and perception. First they carefully considered Brecht's admonition to avant-garde artists that their relationship to the apparatus of production/reception was ill considered. Brecht contends that:

The avant-garde don't think of changing the apparatus, because they fancy that they have at their disposal an apparatus which will serve up whatever they freely invent. . . . But they are not in fact free inventors; the apparatus goes on fulfilling its function with or without them.⁹

The Dziga-Vertov group therefore focused on the means of production by emphasizing a self-reflexive cinéma. They drew from that thread of materialist logic in Russian formalism/constructivism which was the basis of Dziga Vertov's materialist aesthetic of Kino-Eye:

The decoding of life as it is.
Influence of facts upon the workers' consciousness.
Influence of facts, not acting, dance, or verse.
Relegation of so-called art--to the periphery of consciousness.
Placing of society's economic structure at the center of attention.¹⁰

The Dziga-Vertov group adopted Vertov's concern for the material means of production, which the group said sought to:

. . . make a concrete analysis of a concrete situation . . . to understand the laws of the objective world in order to actively transform that world . . . to know one's place in the process of production in order then to change it.¹¹

Godard engaged in an investigation of the language of cinéma through his didactic critique of the sound/image; therefore the Dziga-Vertov group asserted that the "problem is not to make political films but to make films politically."¹² This echoed Benjamin's statement, "The correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency."¹³

This aesthetic position exemplified the basic opposition between the French Communist Party and the Dziga-Vertov group. The group regularly voiced its criticism of the expectation that artists produce "politically correct,"¹⁴ committed work. They were familiar with Adorno's paper on Commitment, which pointed out that commitment itself remains politically polyvalent even if it is politically motivated, as long, he said, "as it is not reduced to propaganda, whose pliancy mocks any commitments by the subject."¹⁵ Adorno argues that literary realism can accommodate itself to the authoritarian personality because a "conformist respect for a petrified facade of opinion"¹⁶ will not allow the "inner elements of the unconscious to disturb the social order."¹⁷ He deduces that this:

. . . hostility to anything alien or alienating . . . even if it proclaims itself critical or socialist, than to works which swear allegiance to no political slogans, but whose mere guise is enough to disrupt the whole system of rigid coordinates that governs authoritarian personalities. . . .¹⁸

Godard and the Dziga-Vertov group tackled the problems concerning a fusion of the formal and ideological aspects of the cinema with the view to developing a progressive aesthetic that would not revert to an instrumental view of art. They recognized that this instrumental view was simplistic and unproductive. The fundamental question that a progressive aesthetic asks is "Who is speaking in any image or articulation of images and to whom/for whom?"¹⁹

Politics/Ontology -- The Two Avant-Garde

By 1975 Peter Wollen could speak of two avant-gardes in his essay, The Two Avant-Gardes, which analyzed the historical development of the avant-garde in Europe. This development was uneven, he says, because there are two wholly distinct directions in avant-garde film practice. Godard and Straub-Huillet represented one political direction, while the other emerged from the co-op movement and developments in structuralist film. Filmmakers in this avant-garde included Peter Gidal, Malcolm Le Grice, Brigit and Wilhelm Hein, and others. Wollen noted that Dziga Vertov connected the materialist aesthetic of the two avant-gardes despite their differing conceptions of the meaning of a materialist aesthetic. The two avant-gardes then provide another historical paradigm

or model for the present debate on narrative. The structuralist strand of the avant-garde is primarily concerned with the formal ontology of cinéma. Yet the delineation of the two avant-gardes in term of politics is disputed by Wollen because "it is often too easily asserted that one avant-garde is 'political' and the other is not."²⁰ The filmmaker Peter Gidal defends the political implications of structuralist film because this film form radically questions the nature of representation in the cinéma. That is why Gidal said that structuralist films "attempt to get through this miasmic area of 'experience' and proceed with 'film as film.'"²¹ On the other hand, Wollen said that the supporters of Godard and Straub-Huillet distinguished themselves from filmmakers such as Karmitz and Pontecorvo because they understood that being political was not enough to subvert or deconstruct the bourgeois norms of diegesis. Wollen deduces that if the logic of this argument is not carefully thought through, or arbitrarily stopped, it could lead directly back to the other avant-garde position. Mick Eaton, in his article on SEFT/London Filmmakers Co-op and the avant-garde issue with narrative, also stated that the polarization of the material/signification opposition question "itself can no longer be so clearly delineated."²²

Gidal's theoretical and film work clearly questioned the dominant forms, yet his films were criticized for suppressing the imaginary aspect of the image in favor of its objective aspect; however, Gidal responded to this critique with insight by pointing out to these critics that they may not understand

the subject's position within ideology and that the unconscious is always operative through, for example, repression. To invoke the unconscious as a position against knowledge in the attempt to obviate the suppression of the imaginary is not the answer. Gidal therefore reasons that:

. . . one is in ideology and one does ideological combat. One can know of being in process, one can know of constructions operative in image formation/transformation: one does not know, one "misses" or "misrecognises" one's position, one's relation, one's bindings/fractures against that ("It is where I 'am' not"). A film can inculcate positioning which force attempts--moment to moment attempts--at knowledge, attempts at delineating precisely the perception of distance between perception and (absent) knowledge. The apprehension of the functioning of that distance is a position in knowledge.²³

Gidal's work does engage with ideological and political issues, but perhaps the better distinction is that his work is anti-narrative or, as Wollen pointed out, that structural-materialist film is characterized by the exclusion of verbal language and narrative. But it is not accurate to say that language is excluded from non-objective and structuralist cinéma because there is a history of the use of text in those cinematic forms. Scott MacDonald reminds us of this history in his article Text As Image by mentioning the historical predecessor's: Duchamp's Anémic Cinéma (1926) or Man Ray's L'Etoile de mer (1928), as well as recent films such as Michael Snow's So Is This (1982).

While it is true, however, that these films contain elements of narrative, the conventions of "classical"²⁴ narrative

are eschewed. Furthermore, the movement of avant-garde film concerned with "film as film"²⁵ does tend to focus on a formal ontology (or perhaps as Wollen suggested, an anti-ontology) of the cinéma. Wollen explained how the materialist aesthetic of Vertov, Brecht, and Godard was misinterpreted by Gidal thus:

His aim has been to produce films which are materialist precisely because they "present" rather than reflexively "represent" their own process of substance. . . . Gidal's sense of materialism differs crucially from any post-Brechtian sense of materialism, which must be concerned with the significance of what is represented, itself located in the material world and in history.²⁶

But this could also be said of Andre Bazin's idealist aesthetic and ontology. Bazin's ontology was based on a photo realist aesthetic, which posed a mental and perceptual continuum of "reality"²⁷ through the rendering of pro-filmic events with the "long take"²⁸ and "deep focus."²⁹ Ontological realism, in this view, reproduces the conditions of human perception through the capacity of selective focus in human vision, which directs attention to specific elements of sensory data. Narrative plays a role in this aesthetic insofar as a story can emerge from the sensory continuum of information recorded during the pro-filmic event; however, Bazin's ontologic aesthetic denies the materialism with which Gidal is concerned, because the film remains at the level of mimetic representation and elides the role of art and human subjectivity. Rudolf Arnheim notes in The Complete Film that the artistic imperative to be true to nature that had permeated the visual arts in the pre-modern period represented the primitive human desire "to get material

objects into one's power by creating them afresh."³⁰ Bazin's realist aesthetic also precluded "the artistic urge not simply to copy but to originate, to interpret, to mold."³¹

Human Perception

Wollen's analysis of the development of the two avant-gardes and the modernist autonomy/efficacy issue is connected to the contemporary debate on the use of narrative in North America. The North American context is quite, however, different. Malcolm Le Grice comments, for example, in Abstract Film and Beyond, that an apolitical romanticism has no intellectual credence in Europe because of the lack of space, scarcity of resources, and the political conflicts of two major wars. Yet he argues that the shift from the romantic abstract period of post-World-War-II America to the structural formalism of the 1960s indicated that the "frontier mentality"³² could not solve the problems resulting from the increasingly constrained social relationships in urban America. The dramatic change in attitude towards the question of human perception in the context of the shift from Europe to North America, and, particularly, in the comparison between the romantic abstraction of Brakhage, for example, to the formal structuralism of Warhol is therefore significant.

First consider the difference between Bazin's objective view of human perception and the subjective one proposed by Stan Brakhage in Metaphors of Vision. Bazin conceives of the cameraman as a neutral observer who merely records pro-filmic

events to technically replicate the physiological experience of human perception (Flaherty's long take of the seal hunt in Nanook of the North was a case in point). Brakhage, on the other hand, is known for his visionary experiments with human perception. In his "mythopoetic"³³ art, the cameraman is a heroic protagonist.

Now the question of objectivity is also a central issue in the theoretical-practical development of the documentary genre. Brakhage's work produced a greater awareness of the subjective aspect of cinéma through the act of framing. Le Grice compares the documentary and literary quality of Vertov's "essential 'first person' of cinéma,"³⁴ in which the camera still maintains a basic "neutrality,"³⁵ with Brakhage's first-person perspective that is cognizant of the camera's subjective role. Le Grice comments on the objective/subjective first person in this way:

Brakhage appears to create a polarity between objective and subjective cinéma, but what he actually achieves is an awareness that there can be no alternative to the camera's subjective role. In commercial cinéma the false neutrality of the camera is a major cause of its aesthetic and philosophical retardation, its attitude being parallel to the viewpoint of the novelist in the Victorian novel.³⁶

Personal vision and the subjective role of the camera are central to Brakhage's aesthetic view because "if vision is the highest value of film, then the camera (and its man) must allow visions to occur rather than force them (by script) upon subjects."³⁷ Brakhage therefore proposed a cinéma of

freedom and imagination. Human perception is not an external, objective given but an adventure into a new realm of perceptual experience for the filmmaker and spectator alike. In his preamble to Metaphores of Vision, Brakhage framed his aesthetic perspective thus:

Imagine an eye unrul'd by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception.³⁸

Yet Brakhage's work also presents problems for some critics who feel that his films are too personal and narcissistic. They think that his focus on the perceptual act of seeing limits the scope of the work in terms of the broader historical context, whereas in a more objective form, the historical ground would emerge. But these criticisms ignore the manner in which the individual aesthetic act actually reflects the broader historical perspective. Similarly, they do not acknowledge the great contribution he has made to the development of human perception through the experimental film form. Brakhage replies to those criticisms by asserting the value of individual expression and its relation to mankind.

Brakhage argues:

I would say I grew very quickly as a film artist once I got rid of drama as a prime source of inspiration. I began to feel that all history, all life, all that I would have as material with which to work, would have to come from the inside of me out rather than as some form imposed from the outside in. I had the concept of everything radiating out of me, and that the more personal or egocentric I would become, the deeper I would reach and the more I could touch those universal concerns which would involve all men.³⁹

The concept that an individual subject experience connects with the universal human experience is a key element in the argument for autonomous film forms. It is echoed by Maya Deren when she insists that there is this human need-desire to claim a space in our lives for a poetic idiom. Deren's desire to maintain and defend that space for a poetic form of expression, regardless of profit or instrumental constraints, is phrased in political terms when she says "to insist on this capacity in all men, to address my films to this--that, to me, is true democracy."⁴⁰

What emerges from a study of the history of avant-garde film practices therefore is the heterogeneous nature of aesthetic ideas and approaches. Furthermore, for the purposes of clarity, it is possible to say that there are two avant-gardes, yet in reality this delineation does not begin to account for the heterogeneous developments in this history; for example, Warhol's films pose a radical "other"⁴¹ frame of reference to the realm of human perception than do the mytho-poetic practices of Deren and Brakhage.

Warhol's influences are linked to the classical avant-garde and the anti-art movement of dada and surrealism. His automatic machine aesthetic constructs the parameters to record pro-filmic events with a fixed camera frame and camera roll duration in a "neutral"⁴² fashion much like the Lumières did. This notion of neutrality leaves aside for the moment

the subjective fact of selecting a point of view and subject in the first place. Some of Warhol's films work with extended duration; for example, the six-hour Sleep (1963), the eight-hour Empire (1964), or the twenty-five hour The Twenty-Four Hour Movie (1966-7). While these films may bore some audiences, they are enormously important contributions to the historical avant-gardist critique of human perception. For instance, in his films, the spectators' perception over an extended period is changed because the minute event (e.g., the twitch of a man's body in Sleep) is transformed into a momentous occasion. His films illustrate the minimalist aesthetic principle of "less is more."⁴³ So the aspect of boredom is explicitly foregrounded in Warhol films because, as Peter Gidal explains:

Warhol's early film work can be defined as boring or exciting, depending on one's attitude, and then, in turn, the "boredom" can be defined as positive or negative. Rather than overemphasize human feeling, reason, meaning etc. Warhol takes one to the beginnings of confrontation with the "other". The easy vicarious identification in melodrama is simplistic and leaves no time for thought, commitment, or revelation. It is, in practical, human terms, worthless. Crying at the sad parts of movies allows one to vicariously identify with the solidly identifiable "good" against the obvious (usually black-shirted) "evil". This manipulation is both easy and pleasing to the general self-esteem.⁴⁴

Warhol films are loosely based on narrative in some instances; for example, Vinyl (1965) was the first film version of Anthony Burgess's novel A Clockwork Orange. But to say that the film resembles or even suggests a faithful rendition of the novel would be misleading. The story was simply used as guide for performer action. The

camera was set up, turned on, and then performers were subjected to a camera test. Warhol did not direct the performers; he simply observed their pro-filmic activity.

Warhol's work is rooted in an autonomous avant-garde position and it is enigmatic in its play with mass media images. He uses corporate icons, especially in the Campbell's Soup paintings, as an ostensible subject and then formally serializes the image through his silk-screen process. By replicating the process of commodification at the "Factory,"⁴⁵ Warhol implicitly includes the institutionalized meaning of art in its formal content--the subject matter of the painting being mechanical reproduction and the art market. Warhol's art therefore addresses the position of the artist in the context of mass media and the crisis of modernism.

New-Narrative Avant-Garde: Feminism in Canada and the U.S.A.

The return to narrative proposed by the new-narrative emerges from the study of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and feminism. These discourses have focused on an analysis of the positioning of the subject in language and cinéma. Freud, Lacan, and the French structuralist/semioticians Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Christian Metz, all have contributed to the study of the formal, psychoanalytic, and social implications of cinematic narration. During the 1970s, much film theory and practice took a critical attitude towards narrative. In the 1980s, some experimental filmmakers

are incorporating narrative in the conceptual structure of their work. Filmmakers are divided in their arguments for and against this return to narrative. The various positions range from the extreme materialist avant-garde position to a populist avant-garde cinéma, which has reconsidered the relationship between the independent and dominant film forms. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, for example, are British exponents of new-narrative, and their aesthetic ideas have had an impact in Canada and the U.S.A. Their aesthetic has developed out of the previously outlined avant-garde issues regarding the crisis of modernism, a feminist analysis of the position of the female subject in cinéma-history, and the marginalized state of the avant-garde.

From a feminist critique of the representation of women in narrative and in avant-garde cinéma, Teresa De Lauretis concluded that women are in "a zero position, a space of non-meaning in relation to both language and cinéma."⁴⁶ The crux of the feminist, new-narrative concern is the issue of binary opposition, which both Mulvey and De Lauretis have addressed. How does one interject a female subjectivity into a cultural discourse which has historically excluded it, without perpetuating socialized and essentialized notions of masculine/feminine subject identities?

The return to narrative arises also from the feminist analysis of the representation of women in avant-garde

cinéma. New-narrative appears to have threatened some male avant-garde filmmakers, and Patricia Gruben points out in her paper on narrative that this may, in part, be precisely because it is associated with feminism and moves women into the roles that men occupied within romanticism, modernism, and the avant-garde. Narrative is associated with the cheap pleasures of mass culture; therefore, feminists are ironically thought to be guilty of the traditional patriarchal stereotype of the devious female who ingratiates herself to get what she wants. This superficial reading ignores the fact that feminists are reworking the stereotypical roles of woman as manageable Muse and object of desire. Gruben explains that women are:

. . . taking control of some of the stereotypes that associate us with the non-verbal, the Absolute, the mystique of femininity--now that we are re-claiming and radicalizing that type, taking back the position of Other from romantic filmmakers like [Bruce] Elder, we are a threat to the model of "suffering loner" that he would prefer to occupy alone.⁴⁷

Feminists also examine the role and representation of women in avant-garde cinéma; for example, the work of Michael Snow is analyzed from this point of view. Michael Snow's Wavelength (1967) has been influenced by Warhol's structural minimalist aesthetic even though their aesthetic approaches differ. Snow's work embodies a religious, Zen mystical quality that is absent from Warhol's cosmology. In fact, one could characterize Snow's aesthetic framework as more subjective and self-referential than Warhol's films because he describes Wavelength as "a summation of my nervous system, religious inklings and aesthetic ideas."⁴⁸ Snow's film has been described by Manny Farber

as the Birth of A Nation in avant-garde film history. The essential quality of the film's "pure, tough forty-five minute zoom of a room"⁴⁹ is a great historical achievement because it combines pure film space and time with an examination of illusion and "fact."⁵⁰ We see the components of a narrative (four human events, including a death) interrupting the forty-five minute zoom and we reflect on the nature of this film form in relation to conventional narrative films.

Teresa De Lauretis has commented on the aspect of narrative in Snow's film, Presents (1981). De Lauretis questions whether the female subject/viewer is positioned differently in the fragmented modalities of this narrative than in "classical"⁵¹ narrative film. She phenomenologically describes the film which centrally features, among other things, a reclining female nude as the subject and then analyzes the manner in which the female body, selected as a subject/sign, is linked to a variety of other historical modes of visual representation-- painting, photography, video, classical (studio and staged) cinema, and avant-garde or "structural"⁵² film. Here the woman's body as the object and ground for representation is inscribed with the self-referential "scopic drive and sexualization"⁵³ of the male subject who produces the film. But the question that De Lauretis poses is: How does the film address the female subject/viewer? She answers the question in terms of vision by saying:

. . . the nexus of the look and identification is produced and broken in relation to "cinéma" ("It's all pretty self-referential--referential both to itself and film in general," says Snow), hence to its spectator as traditionally construed, as sexually undifferentiated; and women spectators are placed, as they are by classical cinéma, in a zero position, a space of non-meaning. Because the epistemological paradigm which guarantees the subject-object, man-woman dichotomy is still operative here, as it is in classical cinéma, Presents addresses its disruption of look and identification to a masculine spectator-subject.⁵⁴

Here De Lauretis raises a difficult problem in the criticism of hegemony and the socialization of a male and female subject identity. The question of how to work around this binary epistemological model is the problem Laura Mulvey tried to answer in her paper, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinéma, in which she analyzes the movement of narrative in classical cinema vis-à-vis subject identification (both primary--character identification--and secondary--camera identification). De Lauretis has formulated the feminist problem of theory and production in this way:

To negotiate that contradiction, to keep it going, is to resist the pressure of the binary epistemological model towards coherence, unity, and the production of a fixed self/image, a subject-vision, and to insist instead on the production of contradictory points of identification, an elsewhere of vision.⁵⁵

Feminist avant-garde filmmakers are divided also on the question of narrative. Some feel justified in saying that women should develop new forms to interject and convey their female subjectivity into cultural discourse; for example, French feminists Luce Irigaray and Michele Montrelay take this position regarding the use of language. The feminist experimental

filmmakers Nina Fonoroff and Lisa Cartwright also take this position in relation to experimental film form in their essay, Narrative is Narrative: So What Is New? They say a large portion of feminist study has been directed towards the deconstruction of narrative processes through the analysis of the construction of subject identification and viewership (e.g., the study of point-of-view, characterization, narrative temporal continuity, and closure). However, they are critical of the fact that little attention has been paid to the development of experimental feminist films that break with narrative altogether.

Furthermore, these avant-garde filmmakers are critical of the inherent economic motive behind the return to narrative because it can cause filmmakers to capitulate to market concerns rather than foster the development of new forms of cinematic representation. The issue of economic survival has become paramount because of funding scarcities in the system of grant support. However if narrative films are produced with marketing potential in mind, the "formally accessible" films must necessarily employ the sophisticated tools and large budgets of mainstream cinema. Fonoroff and Cartwright therefore argue that:

. . . "better" production values, and more topical themes all signal the move toward making films that are commercially viable products--lifted from obscurity to greater "public acceptance," from small film-screening spaces to art-movie houses, a step away from commercial houses--and, by design or default, a shift from a concern for the possibilities of new uses of film to a concern for marketability and accessibility.⁵⁶

The economic issue may be viewed from a number of different critical perspectives, however. First, the crisis of modernism and the marginalization of the avant-garde, as we have established, historically has produced a particular aesthetic economy in which innovation and inaccessibility work against artists. Nevertheless, the value in Kirk Tougas's insight that "the independent filmmaker must embody the schizophrenia of the film medium with its frequently antagonistic polarity between art and money"⁵⁷ should also be valued. When the choice between artistic integrity and money is to be made, one must agree with Kirk's insistence that:

The integrity of personal expression and conviction, whether in experimental, animated or documentary forms, takes precedence over, and thereby confronts, the film-as-profitable-return-on-capital and film-as-institutionalized-creation⁵⁸ that are the dominant models in this country.

The "integrity of personal expression and conviction"⁵⁹ that is seen in the experimental-artisanal mode of production is worth thinking about in light of the critique of the post-modernist eclecticism and stylistic appropriation of classical forms; for example, Benjamin Buchloh's paper Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression is critical of the return to the figure in post-modernist⁶⁰ painting. Here he also establishes an aesthetic connection between cinéma and painting with his criticism of Cocteau's return to narrative. Cocteau's ahistorical thought and

anti-modernist stance is consistent with the art world's popularization of post-modernism. He states that the use of recycled conventions represents:

The stereotype of the avant-garde's audacity having become convention is, of course, used primarily by those who want to disguise their new conservatism as its own kind of audacity (Cocteau at the time of "Rappel à l'Ordre" had just turned to Catholicism). They deny the fact that conventionalization itself is a manoeuvre to silence any form of critical negation, and they wish to share in the benefits that bourgeois culture bestows on those who support false consciousness as it is embodied in cultural conventions.⁶¹

Buchloh is even more pessimistic about the nature of what might be a new form of affirmative culture in the following passage:

The question for us now is to what extent the rediscovery and recapitulation of these modes of figurative representation . . . reflect and dismantle the ideological impact of growing authoritarianism, or to what extent they simply indulge and reap the benefits of this increasingly apparent political practice, or, worst yet, to what extent they cynically generate a cultural climate of authoritarianism to familiarize us with the political realities to come.⁶²

Yet the return to the figure and to narrative potentially can be used for progressive or reactionary reasons, just as films which employ radical forms can be appallingly sexist as well. At the New-Narrative Cinéma and the Future of Film Theory conference, a series of new-narrative films were shown which, in various ways, were critical and progressive. Some of these were Sally Potter's The Gold Diggers (1983), Laura Mulvey's and Peter Wollen's

Riddles of the Sphinx (1977), AMY (1980), and Crystal Gazing (1982), Pat Murphy's and John Davies's Maeve (1982), Betty Gordon's Variety (1983), and Patricia Gruben's Central Character (1977).

These films exemplify a range of approaches to narrative which do not complacently replicate the conventions of dominant narrative forms. The films employ experimental techniques in a self-reflexive narrative form. Some differ in the manner in which women are represented; for example, Central Character stresses the grain of the voice and its aural representation rather than exploits the culturally over-coded image/sign of woman. The films often feature multiple voices and characters rendered through an extended voice-over narration. Some films explicitly confront the issues of pornography to subtly reveal the complex ways in which media structures and organizes an individual's unconscious mind.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the issues of autonomy and efficacy, the product of historical debate, are still pertinent to the contemporary narrative/anti-narrative controversy. In some of the recent achievements of new American cinema, the films of James Benning or Peter Rose, for example, we see works that increasingly use integrated techniques. Language and titled texts augment rigorous

visual explorations. The text is sometimes used in a humorous manner, as in Snow's film So Is This. Peter Rose also playfully uses subtitles for a voice-over narration, which appears to represent another language but is really a foreign-sounding babble. This use of language is ironic because it defies our conventionalized relationship to the production of meaning in language and therefore questions the authority of the narrator's voice. Rose's films contain a number of narrative voices which comment on and contradict each other. In The Man Who Could Not See Far Enough (1981), Rose, like Brakhage, foregrounds human perception through the representation of the cameraman as heroic protagonist engaged in the ecstatic act of seeing.

The panel discussion titled Avant-Garde Film Practices: Six Views also demonstrates how the modernist historical context informs the work of Canadian filmmakers today. The filmmakers taking part in the discussion, Michael Snow, Dave Rimmer, Patricia Gruben, Joyce Wieland, Ross McLaren. and Al Razutis, represented a variety of aesthetic positions on the narrative debate that are connected to the issues of modernism which inform film theory and practice today.

Michael Snow's presentation questioned the application of the term "avant-garde"⁶³ but did assert an autonomous individualist position which differed from mainstream cinematic conventions. Snow commented that:

I don't claim to be avant-garde but to make the films of Michael Snow, of having made films which can be said with some justification to be different enough from the mass of mechanical applications of the by now well learnable repertoire of cin  matic conventions.⁶⁴

So Is This (1985) was screened and the use of his text as image was discussed in terms of filmic structure and post-modern application.

Dave Rimmer's paper The Repression of the Erotic in Experimental Cin  ma, or Safe Sex for the Literally Minded focused on the importance of pictorial codes in experimental film. Rimmer's position is one of autonomy, and he questions the narrative stress on the text over image. Rimmer said that the problem with experimental cin  ma today is that it starts with the word instead of the image. The image has been reduced to a visual aid, like a slide show that illustrates a lecture and attributes this tendency to people's fear of the "naked power of the image" or, as he put it:

. . . a fear of the erotic power of the visual image, an inability to deal with this image on a direct level, a need to neutralize the image, perhaps, to translate the image to another medium, the convenient one of course being words; to analyze, to interrogate, to investigate, to demystify, and ultimately to sanitize the image; an attempt to reduce the erotic power of the image to a more manageable form.⁶⁵

Rimmer privileges the cin  matic image in experimental film because he enjoys visual pleasure more than content, or what's being said. Because he is primarily concerned with the sensuous erotic quality of the image, he looks for the development of intuition-al-autonomous films rather than ones that are produced according to narrative or rational models. His presentation

harkened back to the aestheticist, "auratic" ideal of art as a sacred object of inexhaustible meaning when he ended his talk with a screening of As Seen On T.V., after which he said, "I'm not going to talk about it."⁶⁶

Joyce Wieland and Ross McLaren gave a joint performance-presentation in which they discussed the scarcity of Canada Council funding. McLaren was particularly critical of the fact that funding bodies tend to work on a binary system of authority figures. In other words he said "you are either a one or a zero"⁶⁷ and this creates a type of cultural necrophilia.

Patricia Gruben produced a thoughtful paper on narrative, the paper seriously engaging in a discourse with the anti-narrative opinions expressed in Bruce Elder's article The Cinéma We Need. Gruben makes the point that in defining the Canadian avant-garde:

. . . too often we're being told what it is not or what it should be rather than what it might be, or best of all, what it is. I believe that the way the avant-garde is currently being defined in this country is an exclusionary, elitist, and fundamentally bourgeois attitude to effect everyone but one's own personal followers or role models from tinier and tinier camps.⁶⁸

Finally, Al Razutis presented a performance/screening which featured a film that was projected and then destroyed as it passed through a bleach bath. Here he made the point that:

The avant-garde is not repeatable. It does not trade on the art commodity market, plugging one's curriculum vitae, hoarding the past and faking the present. . . .⁶⁹

Razutis's performance was followed by a film of the event, titled On the Problem of the Autonomy of Art in Bourgeois Society, or Splice (1986), which in turn was then placed in distribution to be marketed and consumed.

Thus, in summary, the presentations at the panel discussion, Avant-Garde Film Practices: Six Views, reveal how the history of modernism and the avant-garde still inform film practice today. Filmmakers negotiate a tight passage between art and money, autonomy and efficacy. They try to maintain artistic integrity and critical insight while struggling for economic survival. They are products of their social and institutional experiences but they do try, some more than others, to gain social/self knowledge. They seek the impossible, yet this is an age in which the search for truth and social transformation must be made. Subjectivity is fraught with contradiction and attitudes may be reactionary, sexist, or anti-intellectual. But these attitudes have to be confronted so that they can be understood and negotiated. The heterogeneity of avant-garde thought and practice is a constant source of surprise and fascination. Anyone who cares to pursue this pleasure of knowing, or of rather not knowing and searching, should be encouraged. It is therefore not possible to valorize a narrative as opposed to a non-narrative approach. Instead, the artist must continue to search for self-knowledge in a self-reflexive form.

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

¹Sylvia Harvey, May '68 and Film Culture (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1978), p. 5.

²Ibid., p. 14.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 16.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Patrick Seale and Maureen MacConvill, French Revolution 1968 (London: Heinemann and Penguin, 1968), p. 136-7.

⁸Harvey, May '68 and Film Culture, p. 96.

⁹John Willet, trans., Brecht on Theatre (London: Methuen, 1964), pp. 34-5.

¹⁰Dziga Vertov, Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 66.

¹¹Dziga-Vertov Group, "What is to be Done?" Afterimage 1 (April 1970): 14.

¹²Colin MacCabe, Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 51.

¹³Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," New Left Review 62 (March/April 1971): 256.

¹⁴MacCabe, Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics, p. 56.

¹⁵T. W. Adorno, "Commitment," New Left Review (September/December 1974): 302.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹MacCabe, Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics, p. 21.

²⁰Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," Studio International, vol. 190, no. 978 (November/December 1975): 101.

²¹Peter Gidal, "The Anti-Narrative (1978)," Screen, vol. 20, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 79.

²³Mick Eaton, "The Avant-Garde and Narrative Two SEFT/London Film-Makers Co-op Day Schools," Screen, vol. 19, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 130.

²³Gidal, "The Anti-Narrative (1978)," p. 79.

²⁴The 1930s saw the development of the classic narrative. "This structure is that the classic, sometimes also called the "realist" narrative, which calls forth certain modes of narration which are then put into effect by a limited set of cinématic codes". Pam Cook, ed., The Cinéma Book (London: British Film Institute, 1985), p. 212.

²⁵Gidal, "The Anti-Narrative (1978)," p. 79.

²⁶Peter Wollen, "'Ontology' and 'Materialism' in Film," Screen, vol. 17, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 13.

²⁷Bazin's frame of referene is almost archaeological.

²⁸Andre Bazin, What is Cinéma?, p. 38.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Rudolf Arnheim, "The Comlete Film," Film as Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 29.

³¹Ibid.

³²Malcolm Le Grice, Abstract Film and Beyond (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), p. 87.

³³Ibid., 29.

³⁴Ibid., 89.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors of Vision," Film Culture 30 (Fall 1963). n.p.

³⁷Le Grice, Abstract Film and Beyond, p. 89.

³⁸Brakhage, "Metaphors of Vision," n.p.

³⁹p. Adams Sitney, "Introduction to Metaphors of Vision," Film Culture 30 (Fall 1963) n.p.

⁴⁰Marya Deren, "Statement of Principles," Film As Film (London: Hayward Gallery, 1979):123.

⁴¹Gidal's word.

⁴²One must realize that the camera is not neutral because a subject is chosen and framed.

⁴³The idea that less is more was important to Bauhaus art as well.

⁴⁴Peter Gidal, Andy Warhol (London: Studio Vista, 1971) p. 86.

⁴⁵This name was ironic and well chosen.

⁴⁶Teresa De Lauretis, "Snow on the Oedipal Stage," Alice Doesn't (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 71.

⁴⁷Patricia Gruben, in her presentation during the seminar "Avant-Garde Film Practice: Six Views," mod. Maria Insell, FilmWeek 86, Vancouver: 1986.

⁴⁸Peter Gidal, ed., Standard Film Anthology (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1976), p. 39.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Snow's work in general focuses the relationship between these two terms.

⁵¹Structural film is usually viewed with a different set of critical terms, so it is interesting that De Lauretis analyzes the film this way.

⁵²De Lauretis, "Snow on the Oedipal Stage," p.71.

⁵³Ibid., p. 75.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵De Lauretis, "Snow on the Oedipal Stage," p. 77.

⁵⁶Nina Fonoroff and Lisa Cartwright, "Narrative is Narrative: So What is New?," Heresies, vol. 4, no. 4 (1983): 53.

⁵⁷Kirk Tougas, "2: Perspectives," Self Portrait, ed. Pierre Veronneau and Piers Handling, trans. Marie-Claude Hecquet and Antoinette Vidal (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1980), p. 140.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," Modernism and Modernity Conference Papers, ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1981), p. 90.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., p. 82

⁶³Michael Snow, in his presentation during the seminar "Avant-Garde Film Practice: Six Views," mod. Maria Insell, Filmweek 86, Vancouver, 1986.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Dave Rimmer, "Avant-Garde Film Practice: Six Views".

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ross McLaren, "Avant-Garde Film Practice: Six Views".

⁶⁸Patricia Gruben, "Avant-Garde Film Practice: Six Views".

⁶⁹Al Razutis, "Avant-Garde Film Practice: Six Views".

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