Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics

OCTOBER

17

The New Talkies:
A Special Issue

$5.00/Summer 1981

Published by the MIT Press
for the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies

OCTOBER

OCTOBER (ISSN 0162-2879) is published quarterly by the MIT Press for the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies.
Subscriptions: individuals $20.00; institutions $45.00; students and retired $15.00. Foreign subscriptions including Canada add $3.00 for surface mail or $10.00 for air mail. Prices subject to change without notice.
Address subscriptions to OCTOBER, MIT Press Journals, 28 Carleton Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142.
Manuscripts, accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope, should be sent to OCTOBER, 8 West 40 Street, New York, N.Y. 10018. No responsibility is assumed for loss or injury.
Application to mail at second-class postage rates is pending at Boston, Ma. Postmaster: send address changes to OCTOBER, MIT Press Journals, 28 Carleton Street, Cambridge, Ma. 02142.
OCTOBER is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, and the New York State Council on the Arts.

17

Cover photograph: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's Accompaniment to a Cinematograph Scene. *1972.*

Michael Snow. Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen. *1974*.

The New Talkies: A Special Issue

In this seventeeth issue of *October* we turn to a set of specific interrelated aspects of film theory and practice. From the journal's inception we have addressed issues of this sort in other ways, publishing documents by Maya Deren, Dziga Vertov, Jean Epstein, and Sergei Eisenstein; scripts by Yvonne Rainer and James Benning; and essays on American filmmakers working within the artisanal conditions of independent production. We have also been concerned to offer a forum for those filmmakers who are engaged in theoretical and critical work; foremost among these is Hollis Frampton, whose texts on film and photography have continued to appear throughout a decade which has witnessed the diminution of theoretical production on the part of his contemporaries.

That production was initiated in this country by Maya Deren and strongly inflected by the incisive critique of representation proposed in 1962 with the publication of Stan Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision*. It was sustained and amplified over the next decade and a half in an important and fascinating corpus of theoretical *bricolage*, which still remains to be analyzed in the light of more recent developments. Independent filmmakers in this country, as well as in Canada and Europe, offered from the first a body of theory inflected, like their films, by the material conditions of production.

The texts presented here issue from the entrance of cinema into the academy. They proceed from the radical critique of representation, through methods of textual analysis and deconstruction at work within the disciplines of psychoanalysis and semiotics, towards the analysis of the impact of the recent resurgence of text within film practice, specifically in its claim for a critical, discursive function within cinema itself. The period in which we locate the development of this practice is the past decade, although its origins are seen to derive from issues, events, and methodological options that form during the 1960s. We have chosen to consider European and American practice as interrelated and to focus our analyses around the following issues:

1. The convergence of European and American film practice upon the critical, discursive function.
2. The manner in which film practice thereby claims a theoretical function.
3. The social and political determinants of such developments and the question of the spectator/audience.
4. The relation of formal innovation to the discursive project.
5. The emergence of feminist film theory and practice and their consequences for the discursive project.

*

During preparation of this issue for the press we received a notice from the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre drawing our attention to the recent censorship by the Censor Board of Ontario of Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew*. The notice read as follows:

> The law of Ontario requires that any film or videotape exhibited in this province must be submitted to a Board of Censors prior to its being screened. The Board classifies films and tapes, may demand cuts, or ban a work outright, for all exhibitions involving exchange of money in the form of admission fees received or film rentals paid.[1]
>
> This may mean that even the most obscure screenings of artists'

1. This law specifies that exchange of money also applies to any advertising of screenings, thus further restricting the already limited possibilities of exhibition.

film and videotape are subject to the same restrictions as commercial theatres that show 35 mm. film.

The Art Gallery of Ontario, in conjunction with the Funnel Experimental Film Theatre, organised a retrospective of the films of Michael Snow, which was shown at both centres throughout March 1981. Because neither Michael Snow, nor the Art Gallery of Ontario, nor the Funnel Experimental Film Theatre believes that its is ethical to exhibit a work of art with deletions, the world premiere of Snow's film *Presents* was stopped when the Censor Board demanded a cut. However, after an appeal was made and pressure exerted, the Board reversed its decision.

The film *Rameau's Nephew* had been scheduled for March 26, 1981, to be shown at the Funnel Experimental Film Theatre. Again, one cut was demanded from this film. An appeal was launched by the distributor, with great support from prominent members of the Canadian artistic community. . . . The Ontario Censor Board decided that the film could not be shown at the Funnel Experimental Film Theatre, but that a special exception would be made allowing it to be screened at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Michael Snow, with the full support of the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Funnel Experimental Film Theatre, and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, chose not to exhibit the film at all. It was the feeling of all of us that to show the film under these conditions would be to show approval of the Censor Board's decision.[2]

The movement for an independent film practice and its theory has been largely sustained—as it was, in fact, originally launched—through a concerted questioning of two interdictions: that of the assertion of sexuality and that of access to the means of production and distribution. This conjunction is inscribed within the tradition of radical practice, from Buñuel and Duchamp through Deren and Brakhage to Godard, Duras, and Rainer, to name only these. Snow's film of *Rameau's Nephew* has a particular claim to our present interest, as it represents, through its systematic analysis of the permutations of the sound/image relationship, a filmmaker's formalization of urgent theoretical questions. Its misadventures with official censorship constitute the most recent chapter in the persistent marginalization of a theoretically directed cinema.

THE EDITORS

2. The Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre is soliciting letters of support in its campaign against censorship. Letters may be sent to the Attorney General of Ontario, Mr. Roy McMurtry, 18 King Street East, 18th Floor, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Carbon copies of correspondence may be forwarded to the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 144 Front Street West, Suite 430, Toronto, Ontario M5J 2L7.

The Politics of the Sign and Film Theory

PHILIP ROSEN

I beg your pardon for disturbing you during your class struggle. I know it is very important. But which way to the political film?
—woman to Glauba Rocha in *Wind from the East*

Why these images? Why these sounds?
—Wind from the East

The political events of 1968 produced a politicization of crucial sectors of western European and American film culture, evidenced in the opening of discussion surrounding the film practice of Godard, Straub and Huillet, Oshima, Makavejev, and others. Their practice was given a certain privileged status in influential film journals such as *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Screen*. It was, in fact, proposed that filmmakers working in specified ways at the fringes of narrative conventions were building a politically significant cinema through the introduction of struggle within the *production* of images and sounds. Significant developments in film theory over the past decade are partly grounded in a placement—an identification—of this work as politically important. I want to review the theoretical premises for such claims.

Godard himself has often proclaimed, both in film and in writing, that the matter is as simple as that: the production of images and sounds. But, of course, this simplicity is complex, for neither images nor sounds, nor their combinations, exist solely in the realm of the cinematic or the filmic.[1] If cinema or film is the production of images and sounds, it is only one form among many of such production. No form is socially innocent, nor are their interrelationships. No experience of them is pure, isolated from others.

1. On the cinematic-filmic distinction, see Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*, trans. Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok, The Hague, Mouton, 1974, p. 47.

Furthermore, this nonpurity defines even the discourse which names film as its object. Not only is the object socially complex, but the reflexivity, the sociopolitical self-placement seen by the theoretical discourse in the films of Godard et al. becomes, in turn, a requirement for discourse about film. How can the discourse theorize/analyze/place itself as it theorizes/analyzes/places its object?

The general response has promoted specific kinds of filmmaking under the program of a *politics of the sign* which takes account of the sociopolitical reflexivity required of both filmic and theoretical/critical discourse. This approach entails a full-fledged theory of signification in its defects. (A theory of signification as valid, whole, or pure would obviate a politics of the sign.) The sources upon which post-1968 film theory has drawn for conceptualizations of signification in general are well known. The context is French poststructuralist semiotics—Lacan, Kristeva, Derrida, and Barthes—within which there have been serious disagreements and open debates. All are nevertheless united by commitment to a twofold proposition: the sign as such must be understood as being at fault, inherently inadequate to its uses; the classic concept and experience of the knowing subject as origin of discourse and unified site of understanding is therefore unacceptable.

I shall try to outline in abstract not an opposition, but, more precisely, an uneasiness with certain terms of the project of a politics of the sign in film theory. This will imply the necessity of a development of this line of inquiry, a development which to some degree has already begun. Although this conclusion might be reached from other directions, I will focus on the concept of *écriture*, "writing," since the call for "filmic writing" has been a slogan generated by the theoretical program for a politics of the sign.

*

The politics of the sign as conceptualized in post-1968 film theory is founded on the critique of the sign most persistently and radically proposed by Derrida.[2] Though his work is not very often explicitly cited in film theory, Derrida's arguments, or something like them, are evident in the work of those more

2. "The very idea of institution—hence of the arbitrariness of the sign—is unthinkable before the possibility of writing and outside its horizon. Quite simply, that is, outside of the horizon itself, outside the world as space of inscription, as the opening to the emission and to the spatial *distribution* of signs, to the *regulated play* of their differences, even if they are 'phonic' " (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1976, p. 44). ". . . we shall designate by the term *differance* the movement by which language, or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes 'historically' constituted as a fabric of differences. Here, the terms 'constituted,' 'produced,' 'created,' 'movement,' 'historically,' etc., with all they imply, are not to be understood only in terms of the language of metaphysics, from which they are taken. It would have to be shown why the concepts of production, like those of constitution and history, remain accessories in this respect to what is here being questioned . . . " (Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison, Evanston, Northwestern, 1973, pp. 141–142).

commonly cited as theorists of the sign, such as Kristeva and Barthes. As an example pertinent to film analysis, consider Derrida's analysis of Saussure.[3]

For Derrida, the radical moment in the *Course in General Linguistics* is the insistence that *langue* is a system of pure differences, for this conceives the linguistic system in terms of absence. In other words, the thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign presupposes the structural necessity of signifiers absent from an utterance and against which those present attain significance; and the absence of the signified/referent, which can never be presented in its purity, but only as a sign. The reactionary moment in the *Course,* on the other hand, is Saussure's definition of the sign as the unity of the signifier and the signified, a collective psychological fact grounding the possibility of signification. This definition subordinates the signifier to the signified, thus making it simply the means of the making-present of the signified after all.

Saussure gives spoken language privilege as the source of linguistic evidence insofar as the unity of signifier and signified is guaranteed by the presence of the speaker, who instantaneously translates thought into the material signifier—voice. For Derrida, Saussure is at this point consistent with the tradition of Western metaphysics since Plato, a tradition which denigrates writing as the mere signifier of a signifier (speech). Speech, then, has a uniquely close relation to Being, which exists prior to all signification. Through his deconstructive analysis, Derrida de-marginalizes writing, makes it central by overturning the hierarchical opposition speech/writing, and eventually allowing writing to invade speech.

Such a differential semiotics dispossesses the sign of any relation of adequacy. Signifiers produce meaning through their unending differential play rather than by assuming a secondary position of adequation as expression of thought or the world. The constant referral of signifiers to other signifiers absents meaning as ultimate presence. To be sure, there must be a regulating principle for this play of difference, but its concept is unattainable within the system it regulates. So Derrida designates this principle through certain special terms and neologisms, of which *differance* is perhaps the best known. The necessity of indicating this principle calls into question the theoretical validity of the end of the play of difference which is assumed by common notions of communication. This finality ultimately posits an immediacy of truth, being, meaning that marginalizes the determining force of signification. Derrida attempts to demonstrate the logical impossibility of such assumptions by means of a destruction-construction, that is, a deconstruction, of texts.

The term *deconstruction* has sometimes been loosely used as a synonym for

3. See Derrida, "Writing before the Letter," in *Of Grammatology*; and "Differance," in *Speech and Phenomena*. On the significance of the center-margin opposition, see Derrida, "Limited Inc a b c . . . ," trans. Samuel Weber, *Glyph*, no. 2 (1977), 162–254; and "The Parergon," trans. Craig Owens, *October*, no. 9 (Summer 1979), 3–40. For a more extensive summary of Derrida's project, see the translator's preface to *Of Grammatology*.

ideological analysis. Insofar as it is meant to imply an exposure of the fallacies of any philosophically idealist notion of meaning, this use is justifiable. In considering the construction of a political theory of the sign, however, we may wish to inflect the issues somewhat differently. (Obviously, everything under discussion here bears directly on issues in the theory of ideology.) Can a politics of struggle in and of images and sounds be based on a doctrine of the necessary inadequacy of signs? How can the politicization of film theory and practice be founded on the deconstruction of the sign?

Of course the notion of the inadequacy of the sign as such raises a number of questions for film theory, some of them not directly political and most of them not unprecedented. One question recurs: how can one treat film, a medium of mechanical and/or electronic reproduction of sounds and images, as a system of differences. In fact, the question is one of representation rather than language and the particularities of filmic signification can still provide specific arguments. It has been possible to problematize the supposed universality of forms of representation assumed by the cinematic apparatus. Thus, the argument runs, cinema presents codes of analogy rather than transmitted quasi-precepts. This is an old argument. But in the present context it must be established that one is not obliged to take the image[4] on its "own" terms, as a true imprint, a making-present of an object or a field through its trace. A peculiar reversal is, in fact, possible. Given the ideological and institutional role of the cinematic apparatus (together with the photographic, phonographic, and televisual) as an imprinting machine, it may be that cinema provides an especially productive site for exploring the ideological disposition of the metaphysics of presence deconstructed by Derrida.[5]

General questions are more troubling for a politics of the sign. Let us say that it is possible to treat images and sounds in terms of absence rather than

4. In this kind of argument, it is traditionally the filmic *image* that is dealt with. For examples, see Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor, New York, Oxford, 1974, pp. 111–113; Umberto Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code," in Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, Berkeley, University of California, 1976, pp. 590–607; Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1976, pp. 191–217; and Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," in Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath, eds., *The Cinematic Apparatus*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1980, pp. 121–142. The last is a summary of arguments expounded at much greater length by Comolli in "Technique et idéologie: caméra, perspective, profondeur du champ," a series which appeared intermittently in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, nos. 229 (May 1971) through 241 (September-October 1972).

There has, however, been some work on the sound track linked to the general suspicion of iconicity in cinema. See, for example, Pascal Bonitzer, "Les silences de la voix" in *Le regard et la voix*. Paris, Union Générale d'Éditions, 1976; and certain essays in *Yale French Studies*, no. 60 (1980), including Alan Williams, "Is Sound Recording Like a Language?" pp. 51–66, and Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," pp. 33–50.

5. The most powerful film-theoretical formulation based on a concept of presence remains the work of André Bazin, for example in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray Berkeley, University of California, 1967, pp. 9–52. A classic recognition of the importance of the notion of presence in ideologies of art is, of course, Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken, 1976.

presence. What, then, is the status of the discourse that does so? The critique of the sign has, from the first, complicated questions theorizing politics and signification. A theoretical or critical text must almost certainly begin with more or less determinate categories, even if the result is to be a dialectical and/or deconstructive questioning of those categories. The difficulty raised for any discourse that claims to be participating in the politics of the sign derives from the careful conceptual balancing act required by the deconstructive attitude. To put it crudely, since the discourse of textual deconstruction subjects itself to its own critical analysis, it can also render itself politically ambivalent or even ambiguous.

Now, it can be argued that ambivalence or ambiguity may themselves be valid strategies against the stereotypical certainty of unthought ideological repetitiveness. One example is the incessant journalistic categorization of various elements of the Chinese, or more recently Iranian, leadership as being *either* ideological (read: concerned with measuring policy against theoretical ends and therefore suspicious of political and commercial intercourse with the United States) *or* pragmatic and/or realistic (read: thinking more like us and willing to do business with us). Here is a signifying structure that would benefit from an analysis that would allow its opposing terms to become more ambiguous in their relationship. Note, however, that the discourse of deconstruction cannot stop with the exposure of this ambiguity, for it would thus come to rest on another opposition—certainty versus ambiguity—which could only be employed "under erasure."[6]

Although the two instances are not strictly parallel, this deconstructive movement can usefully be compared to a goal proposed by Brecht: the spectator is to be displaced from the "single track" of the Aristotelian theater so that the play's reception may become more complex. Brecht assumes a historical process determined by class struggle, that history moves in a given direction, and that the experience of the working classes on the leading edge of that historical movement can guide the producer of artistic and theoretical texts. For Brecht, then, the recommended complexity is not an unavoidable end, but a means whose purpose is to stimulate consciousness of a historical situation.[7] Given their emphasis on the endless play of signifiers, however, the practitioners of deconstruction must find it much more difficult to posit a transformation in the forms of knowledge and

6. "Under erasure" is the translation of Derrida's "*sous rature*," a strategy by which a word is crossed out but allowed to remain visible. It is borrowed from Heidegger, who also meant to demonstrate by it the inadequacy of language to the concepts it proposed. But whereas for Heidegger these concepts were anterior and originating presences, for Derrida they are the absence of the presences which language constructs as its effects. The translator's preface to *Of Grammatology* (pp. xiii-xx) outlines the strategy and the comparison with Heidegger.

7. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett, New York, Hill and Wang, 1964, pp. 44, 48. See also Brecht's example, a scene from *Mann ist Mann*, p. 86.

signification, Derrida's references to the closure of historical epochs notwithstanding.

The uses of such a comparison are limited. Given the differences in political and theoretical contexts of the two thinkers, it can serve, however, to bring historical materialism into conjunction with the critique of the sign. It is well known that a conjunction of this sort is one description of the project of post-1968 radical film theory.[8] It leads, also, to another specification of the problem. Historical materialism works towards the identification of political meanings in the face of the complex flux of social processes (often described as opaque, though visual analogies must always be questioned). Through analysis it derives some kind of firm (even if temporary) knowledge which enables the making of choices and decisions. The deconstructivist project works, however, to rob codes of the possibility of such singleness, to expose the fraud involved in the assumption of the exact certainty of reading, understanding, meaning. This exposure is held to stem from the fundamental nature of the language and logics in operation, to be inseparable from the very attempt to make sense.

Imagine, then, a historical materialist, who accepts the critique of the sign, being asked to specify the distinction between, say, *Young Mr. Lincoln* and *Le Gai Savoir*. To begin with, both films are of necessity to be understood within a signifying universe of freeplay or (from other perspectives) contradiction and/or dream logic. Equally important is the reflexive movement demanded of analytical discourse by deconstruction. Were we simply to invert "mainstream" evaluations[9] so that Godard's practice is made central to our discourse and Ford's marginalized, we would then confront another center-margin problematic which would in turn have to be set in motion. What, then, is the possible basis of political discriminations? This is a problem admissible to Derrida, a problem which he attempts to solve by placing the terms of the opposition "under erasure," thus marking them as traces of the unnameable regulative principles that ground representation in general, including his own discourse.

In these terms, the problem can once more be specified. Given the limits marked by such terms as *differance*, the mere existence of textual heterogeneity (however it is defined and located) cannot in itself establish a qualitative distinction, much less a political one. For political analysis and evaluation of the sign to be possible, there must be something regulating the play of difference that is accessible in our discourse and allows a conception of the determinations of that play in its textual specificities. To conceptualize the politics of the sign, we seem to need a conception of an "outside" at work "inside" signs.

The question has become one of positionality without finality in the received

8. For a historical and theoretical summary of this conjunction, see Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture*, London, British Film Institute, 1978.

9. Here assumed as a monolithic bloc for purposes of exposition. In fact the situation is much more complex, for there is obviously a place for "difficult art" in the dominant critical discourses.

sense. This partly explains why the most successful theoretical strategy in the face of these issues has been to engage a critique of the sign with psychoanalytic inquiry. (Derrida himself recommends that privilege be given to psychoanalysis.)[10] The general nature of a deconstructive view of the sign, an insistence on political evaluation of texts, and the use of psychoanalytic concepts is indicated by some of Julia Kristeva's work. Those who have followed the controversies in film theory over the past decade will find certain of her central contentions familiar: that the crucial point of regulation of signification involves the construction of the human being as subject; that a different kind of aesthetic practice would have to propose a different kind of subject; and that this difference has implications for the construction of a different kind of social order.[11]

In this area of subject construction lie some of the major contributions film-theoretical discourse has made to the project of a general semiotics. Certainly the intricate explications of the filmic enunciation and of the functions of voyeurism, exhibitionism, fetishism, and identification in freezing the flow of signifiers to precipitate the subject in meaning represent a highly significant moment in the history of film theory. The notion of the subject as the "outside" which is "inside" the text has been a most productive conceptual wedge into solving the problems posed for a politics of the sign by a critique of the sign.

*

A politics of the sign based on an account of the sign as regulated by and regulating the proposing of human subjectivity should enable one to make political distinctions among film texts. It is interesting to note how this proposal has, throughout its development, frequently been presented as inheriting the Russian formalist distinction between "practical" and "poetic" language. A decade ago, the analysis and defense of the work of certain filmmakers, especially Godard, seemed to require the renewal of those distinctions inherited from the critical current of the avant-garde stemming from the Russian formalist alliance with futurism. Beginning with an association of the formalists' "poetic language" with difference and/or heterogeneity (and/or the unsettling of the subject and so forth), one could conceive of a deconstructive project with political intent.[12]

10. For example, in *Of Grammatology*, p. 88. In some texts Derrida directly confronts psychoanalysis, e.g., "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1978.

11. The most detailed exposition of Kristeva's position is *La révolution du langage poétique*, Paris, Seuil, 1974. She has provided a number of brief introductions to her work; one of the most useful is Julia Kristeva, "Signifying Practice and Mode of Production," trans. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Edinburgh '76 Magazine*, no. 1, pp. 64–76.

12. Kristeva often acknowledges the formalist heritage. See, for example, "Pour une sémiologie des paragrammes," in Julia Kristeva, *Semiotikè: Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, 1969.

The manner in which this is carried over into film-theoretical discourse is quite clearly marked in Noël Burch and Jorge Dana, "Propositions," *Afterimage*, no. 5 (Spring, 1974), 40–65.

These notions were easily assimilated by film-critical discourse. The mainstream ("classical") film, produced by Hollywood, would embody a "practical language" of cinema as against the "poetic language" in the cinema of Godard, among others. In its transgressive operations, the latter would be associated with the "metalinguistic" developments of a semiotics of the mainstream film. Metz's writings are the primary example of this metalinguistics.

Obviously, internal difficulties could arise from a simple equation of mainstream cinema with the formalists' notion of "practical language," and, in fact, such an equation was rarely explicit. Working from a slightly different perspective, Metz was often as concerned to break down analogies between cinema and language as he was to formulate them. Thus, as the formula goes, although cinema is not in the strict sense a language (it has no structure as general and permanent as *la langue*), it resembles language enough to generate a semiology. In the place of strictly linguistic concepts (*langue*, *parole*, sentence, etc.), this semiology would have to develop parallel formalizations, such as code and textual system.[13]

A politics of the filmic signifier might follow. The "practical language" of cinema (mainstream codifications of images and sounds) would be constituted by those practices which do not reflexively explore their own (significatory, formal) conditions of existence, do not deconstruct their own codic interplay by means of that interplay, do not induce crisis with respect to the codes. Disturbances of subject position by means of filmic writing (*écriture*) become conceivable.[14]

In this conceptualization of filmic writing as deconstruction, film theory incorporates the critique of the sign and permits textual discriminations to be made. Nevertheless, the results are not always as satisfying as one might hope. The difficulty in the concentration on the positioning of the subject in meaning by the signifier is exemplified by certain touchstone formulations on the cinematic apparatus. This apparatus has been described as being implicated in an idealist problematic, in metaphysical propositions, and in psychic mechanisms inseparable from patriarchy.[15] This description may well be a result of conflating a

13. See "The Cinema: Language or Language System?," in Metz, *Film Language*, but with attention to the auto-critical footnotes. For a systematic exposition of Metz's semiotic formulations, see his *Language and Cinema*.

14. For examples of analyses of the perturbations of codes, see Noël Burch, *De Mabuse à M: le travail de Fritz Lang*, in Dominique Noguez, ed., *Cinéma: théorie, lectures*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1978. pp. 227–248; and Burch and Dana. Cf. Metz, *Language and Cinema*, pp. 99–105.

For *écriture*, see Jean-Louis Baudry, "Writing, Fiction, Ideology," trans. Diana Matias, *Afterimage*, no. 5 (Spring, 1974), 23–39.

15. For example, Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," trans. Alan Williams, *Film Quarterly*, no. 28 (Winter 1974–75), 39–47. On problems of patriarchy and the cinematic apparatus, see the overview of Teresa de Lauretis, "Through the Looking Glass," in de Lauretis and Heath, pp. 187–202. The positions of de Lauretis and myself are often quite close. Compare her remarks on the relations of cultural meanings to codes and my remarks below on the concept of the sociolect; and her conclusion about the subject of semiosis with my conclusions below.

general theoretical critique (of the sign) with an ideological critique. The immense importance of the critique of the sign cannot be denied (though it can be suggested that further developments are possible and that implications are not yet fully worked out.) But this critique and the resulting conceptions of subjectivity linking Plato, Hegel, and Husserl are being measured in terms of political discriminations. Given the appeal to historical materialism in film theory, should not political evaluation be inseparable from historical specificity rather than seen within a trans-historical unity? The problem remaining, then, is to find a site or sites of such specificity.

*

> *The fundamental characteristic of writing—related to the virtual suppression of the limits created by the advent of the signifying function—is its ontologically essential capacity to "say everything," i.e., to envisage and unveil all the postures and figures implicit in a given* langue. *It is vis-à-vis this possibility, this extension inherent in writing that all discourse based on expressivity — common everyday discourse — will emerge as determined and limited by that order of representation and thus as a part of the collective neurosis; but will also emerge as capable of being perverted, capable of always being taken by* écriture *as object for perversion . . .*
>
> —Jean-Louis Baudry,
> "Writing, Fiction, Ideology"

To approach this problem, consider some of the best-known theoretical functions of the term *writing*, insofar as, since 1968, film theory has had to confront them, beginning with its appearance in the work of Derrida. As we have already seen, Derrida finds that the Western tradition of philosophy and linguistics makes of the written sign a signifier of a signifier, a sign once removed from the presence of the speaking subject and therefore removed from truth and being. The deconstructive move suggests that if writing is only a signifier of a signifier, then it is more typical of signification than is speech. Writing is thus to be conceived in a general way, as underlying all semiosis, including speech.

As developed by Derrida, this is a remarkably seductive and effectively

polemical argument. Furthermore, it is true that, given the generality here assigned to the concept of writing, some distinctions are possible; for example, certain kinds of literary writing can hold a special position for their self-conscious embodiment of the endless play of signifiers that constitutes the whole of signification. Even though we grant the innumerable manifestations of writing presupposed, however, writing must at some point be used as a monolithic concept. The target of the attack is the constitutive unity of several millennia of Western metaphysics. *Historical* discriminations are therefore beside the point. The critique deconstructs philosophy, but only as it remains within philosophy.

Some have nevertheless based their calls for a politics of the sign on this generalized notion of writing. Jean-Louis Baudry (who has produced some of the central formulations in the theorization of the cinematic signifier) draws upon Derrida and Kristeva to make of the term *writing* a kind of battle cry, akin to Kristeva's *signifiance* and Barthes's *Text*. Writing is to appear as writing, text as textuality, and the "strain towards a signified" in reading is to be hindered.[16] One would expect that analogous calls for a filmic writing would have to slip into employing analogous oppositions to promote an emphasis on the filmic signifier as such. This can easily be seen as some version of a "laying-bare of the device," and a consequent return to the formalist heritage which haunts the attempts to politicize structuralist and poststructuralist analyses. That heritage is indeed visible in notions of filmic writing as the displacement of codes, even (or especially) when these notions become the basis for political discriminations.[17]

A question now arises: would not progress be made by inflecting the concept of writing in a less generalized, more historically specific direction? This would require stressing the historical distinctions among different kinds of writing rather than simply identifying various emphases on the signifier. Such a concept of *écriture* in fact predates Derrida's inquiry and the post-1968 film-theoretical project. A tracing of the developments of Barthes's use of that term should be useful at this point, for his understanding of it was initially more historicized.

In *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) Barthes presents a famous tripartite schema in opposition to certain formulations of Sartre. *Langue* is the inescapable social horizon of communicative means confronting an author, while style is an irreducibly individual, virtually biological attribute of the author. Neither exists on a level of conscious choice as far as the author is concerned. But between these two strata delimiting the terrain of literature Barthes locates a third, that of writing.[18] This is an area of conscious choice in the manipulation of the social

16. In addition to Baudry, "Writing, Fiction, Ideology," especially p. 26, see Kristeva, "Signifying Practice and Mode of Production," p. 68; and Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text" in Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977.

17. For a Derridean approach to filmic writing, however, see Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, "The Disembodied Voice: *India Song*," *Yale French Studies*, no. 60 (1980), 241–268.

18. Kristeva has little difficulty deflecting this schema towards her own view of the subject bounded by drives on one side and the symbolic on the other. See her article on Barthes, "How Does One Speak

signs identifying literature as such. As the locus of choice in the construction of literary form, a specific mode of writing represents a specific relation between creation and society. As the level at which form is constructed in intentional response to a social space, writing is therefore the articulation of value. It is this ethical moment which locates a work in history.

It is of special interest here that Barthes can, on this basis, incorporate within *Writing Degree Zero* a rather standard Marxist view of modern French history. The universality of a classical mode of French writing before 1848 is treated as a reflection of bourgeois social hegemony, for that universality was inseparable from the universality of certain myths. After 1848, when bourgeois ideology was no longer the only possible account of the world confronted by French authors, the deployment of the social indicators of literature as such could no longer be automatic. From this point on, each writer had to confront society and hence history anew, had to make semiotic choices which could not be guaranteed by mythical *données*. Hence, after 1848, the crisis of French literature, its dispersal into a number of modes of writing. Once history forced writing to forsake guarantees of its language, modernist plurality was inevitable.[19] Barthes later reworked the classical-modernist distinction, frequently and differently, but I want to focus here on certain developments of his concept of writing. However attractive the historicization of literature in *Writing Degree Zero*, it is clear that certain aspects of this conception are subject to criticism by a poststructuralist semiotics. In particular, finding historical specificity in the juncture of form and ethics maintains conceptual roots in the existential project, which assumes a creative subject as author. This is not to be countenanced within poststructuralism; nevertheless, it allowed Barthes to link writing to something more particular than a general resistance to the signified or to Western metaphysics. And it does not seem easy to dispense with.

Barthes himself later provided comments on his concept of writing in light of the development of semiology and the critique of the sign. In *Elements of Semiology* (1964), for example, the opposition between the inescapably social and individual strata is identified in Saussurian terms, as *langue* (the object of linguistics proper, a relatively stable structure existing only in the collectivity as a whole) and *parole* (the individual, unformalizable, irreducibly accidental speech act). But between them there is again an analyzable third level, which Barthes calls idiolect. In linguistics, explains Barthes, this term designates "the language of a linguistic community, that is, of a group of persons who all interpret in the same way all statements. . . ." A general semiology might use this term to conceptualize "a speech which is already institutionalized but not yet radically open to

---

to Literature?," in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora et al., New York, Columbia, 1980, especially pp. 110–113.

19. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, Boston, Beacon, 1970, pp. 9–18, 55–66.

formalization as the language is." Barthes finds it possible to construct a formalization of syntagmatic regularities that constitute "stereotypical usage"—a level of analysis he considers especially important for the understanding of mass communication. It is this level, Barthes remarks, that he had formerly called writing.

In the context of the relatively rigid structuralist framework of *Elements of Semiology*, much of the stress on subjectivity as a historical indicator is lost. When Barthes does deal with literary language in this book, it is by means of a strictly formalist model of norm and transgression (though he does suggestively refer this object to the discipline of rhetoric). But the linkage of writing in literature and idiolect as a special province of mass communications is of some interest.[20]

Barthes, of course, had already produced semiotic analyses of popular communications, first collected in his *Mythologies* (1957). Looking back at the work in 1971, Barthes produced a brief article which in many ways serves as a useful summary of his work over the last decade or more of his life. He once again glosses the term *writing*, now taking into account the critique of the sign and its development in which he so forcefully participated. Announcing that the demystification of myth has in turn assumed mythical characteristics (for example, the stereotypical certainty of denunciatory phraseology), Barthes embraces a new program: to shake the bases of the representation of meaning, of the symbolic order itself. This involves confronting the whole of Western culture "unified under one theology (Essence, monotheism) and identified by the regime of meaning it practices—from Plato to *France-Dimanche*." When he goes on to note that the endless deferral of signifieds now recognized by semiotics leads to the conclusion that writing is a generalized phenomenon, it may seem that he has abandoned the project of locating writing as a historically specific phenomenon. But this is not quite the case.

Despite his acceptance of the generalized critique of the sign, Barthes's recommendations do not simply operate on that plane. He calls for an evaluation of social "languages" (which should be distinguished from *langue*), with special attention to be paid to the most homogeneous, phraseologically dense among these. Barthes describes them: "woven with habits and repetitions, with stereotypes, obligatory final clauses and key-words, each constitutes an *idiolect*, or more exactly a *sociolect* (a notion to which twenty years ago I gave the name *writing*)." The terminology of semiology (signifier, signified, sign, etc.) is to be displaced by concepts which can better designate phraseological density and interplay (e.g., citation, reference, stereotype). In this study, which we might call a sociolectology, the privilege of literature is not abandoned and the subversive potential of language is not forgotten: literary texts become sites "where writing spreads itself against the idiolect, at its limit and fighting it."[21]

20. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, Boston, Beacon, 1970, pp. 21–22, 86–88.

21. "Change the Object Itself: Mythology Today," in Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*. There is probably no better example of the "sociolectology" of literature than Barthes's *S/Z*.

This review of one aspect of Barthes's work should indicate the possibility of conceptualizing a politics of the sign in ways which do not diminish the importance of more historically specific determinations than the inherent flaws of the sign as such. It is possible to read Barthes on writing by 1971 in the following way: any theory of writing (and therefore—following Derrida—of language and signification in general) must include a concept of ideology. Writing cannot be divorced from the sociality of its situation, its institutionalization as sociolect. Writing is now more than Baudry's "strain against the signified" and it may thereby escape definition through the signifier-signified distinction. It is a general level of discourse (though not the most general) with a range of particular instantiations, of which the battle of the modernist text against a dominant ideology is only one special case. More productive is the proposition that to struggle on the level of modes of writing is to struggle on the level of institutionalization. In the present context, it should be noted that the material of signification for such struggle would certainly not be limited to the paradigm of the writing activity, literature. Indeed, it is possible to suggest that its paradigmatic character might have to be reconsidered.

*

J.-A. Miller: *Given that there are relations of forces and struggles, the question inevitably arises of who is doing the struggling and against whom? Here you can't escape the question of the subject, or rather of the subjects.*
Michel Foucault: *Certainly, and this is what is preoccupying me. I'm not too sure what the answer is.*

When (eventually) a Marxist policy of humanist ideology, that is, a political attitude to humanism, is achieved—a policy which may be either a rejection or a critique, or a use, or a support, or a development, or a humanist renewal of contemporary forms of ideology in the ethico-political *domain—this policy will only have been possible on the absolute condition that it is based on Marxist philosophy, and a precondition for this is theoretical* anti-humanism.
—Louis Althusser, *For Marx*

Several years ago Fredric Jameson remarked that there might be some common ground between the critique of the sign as metaphysical and the Marxist critique of consciousness as secondary with respect to existence. Jameson noted similarities between two theoretical formulations: Derrida's characterization of the instability of signification, hence consciousness, before the past and future of a trace "always already" in operation; and Althusser's argument that the "ever-pre-givenness" of the complex social whole is a materialist premise. But suspicious of the interminability of freeplay which follows from the isolated critique of the sign as such, Jameson pointed out that Althusser can at least *posit* a halt (no matter how far displaced) to the infinite regression of determination.[22]

This commentary indicates the concerns which motivate the present essay. Given the difficulties of theorizing a politics of the sign as such, perhaps we should think in terms of an *emergentism* in the sense that philosophers of science and history use that term.[23] For semiotics this would be a level of analysis of sign use and combination at which different epistemological fields and requirements emerge, different conceptualizations become necessary, different units of definition and regularity become applicable. The summary of Barthes on writing indicates one framework within which such emergence can be understood. Barthes embraces the critique of the sign, but does not allow it to determine all aspects of his work. When he insists on dealing with signs at the level of sociolect, he opens up a promising area of inquiry, and the implications are significant. The generalized concept of writing has often served, as for Baudry, to accentuate the break between a politicized modernism and the dominant ideological formations. It can be used, however, to demonstrate a certain continuity, to stress the fact that *all* modes of writing are sociolects, social institutions.[24] To return to earlier terms,

22. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Princeton, Princeton University, 1972, pp. 183–184. On the "ever-pre-given" see Althusser, pp. 198–199. For a useful critique of Althusser on questions raised by semiotic analysis, see Stephen Heath, "The Turn of the Subject," *Ciné-Tracts*, no. 8 (Summer-Fall, 1979), pp. 32–48.

23. "It [a doctrine of emergence] maintains that many complex systems exhibit traits and modes of action which cannot be explained or predicted in terms of the properties that the component parts of those systems possess when not members of these systems" (Ernest Nagel, "Determinism in History," in Patrick Gardiner, ed., *The Philosophy of History*, New York, Oxford, 1978, p. 203). ". . . descriptive emergence, . . . refers to the occurrence of a property of groups, like the so-called group-mind, which is not definable in terms of the individuals making up that group. Explanatory emergence, however, refers to laws of group behavior, which, *even though their terms are defined as they should be*, are still not derivable from the laws . . . about individual behavior" (May Brodbeck, "Methodological Individualisms: Definition and Reduction," in May Brodbeck, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, New York, Macmillan, 1968, p. 301). These are both widely reprinted articles.

24. For a more extensive, less schematic summary of Barthes on these matters, see Stephen Heath, *Vertige du déplacement: lecture de Barthes*, Paris, Fayard, 1974. In this book, however, Heath is at points concerned to emphasize a break between writing in the special modernist sense of *Tel Quel* and writing as sociolect. This appears in Barthes's later work as an opposition between *écriture* and *écrivance* (*Vertige du déplacement*, p. 40). I find it possible and quite useful to read Barthes for the continuities between the two poles of the opposition by insisting that even modernist writing is a sociolect, albeit a rather "thinned-out" one.

this means that the "outside" at work "inside" the sign must be conceptualized historically. And this is congruent with the limits set by an Althusserian framework on the play of signifiers because the regulation of signification becomes inseparable from the composition of the social whole.

In recent film theory this regulation has been elaborated as a matter of subject construction and positioning. Without questioning the validity of the critique of the sign as applied to filmic signification or the benefits of the appeal to psychoanalysis, it is still possible to suggest that routing the politics of the sign through a theory of the subject requires more explicit attention to the question of determinations in and by the social formation. The problem then becomes how to conceive of the level at which (in analysis) another object emerges: the subject acting in history. How do we analyze that subject as a necessary condition of any politics, including a politics of the sign?

Answers to these questions are not obvious. Consider, for example, my discussion of Barthes's schema. When writing becomes sociolect, what happens to that notion of ethical choice which originally grounded the historicization of the concept of writing? It is true that theoretical work bearing on such questions is under way. So far, the most prominent line has circulated around the notion of discursive formation as a crisscrossing of texts and discourses knotted by the position/positioning of the subject.[25] But the matter is hardly settled.

Future developments should not be predicted, but the general issues at stake must be made clear. The problem of theorizing positionality in the struggle in images and sounds is both profitable and vexing, vexing because it is inseparable from the larger question of conceptualizing human agency in history. This question is usually settled by some kind of metaphysical appeal, but it does remain unavoidable in any attempt to formulate a politics of the sign.

One important point can be noted in passing. Many of the films held up as exemplary for a politics of the sign in post-1968 film theory cannot be easily described in terms of a free play of a textual subject. What really needs to be explored in some of Godard's films, for example, is the way in which a certain troubling of signs and "normal" signifying procedures is combined with and even determined by more or less definite discursive and political positions. It is simply inaccurate to use, say, *Wind from the East* and *Le Gai Savoir* as exemplifications of the deconstruction of positionality as such. It is fruitful to read these films as working on positionality; however, it is also relevant to note that one knows *where these films stand* vis-à-vis the sociopolitical formation.

25. Again, one can refer to various of Kristeva's writings. In film theory, see the interesting debate between Willemen and MacCabe: Paul Willemen, "Notes on Subjectivity: On Reading Edward Branigan's 'Subjectivity Under Siege,'" *Screen*, no. 19 (Spring, 1978), 41–69; and Colin MacCabe, "The Discursive and the Ideological in Film: Notes on the Conditions of Political Intervention," *Screen*, no. 19 (Winter, 1978–79), 29–43. See also Stephen Heath, "Notes on Suture," *Screen*, no. 18 (Winter, 1977–78), 48–76. (The last is, incidentally, of great value for rescuing the concept of suture from the usual narrow compass into which it is wedged by English-language commentators.)

More generally, the dominant tendency in post-1968 radical film theory on matters of positionality and subjectivity as they relate to the social formation has been to embrace Althusser's distinction between a theoretical humanism and a theoretical anti-humanism. This is an undeniably valuable distinction, as far as it goes. Humanism is demonstrably a massive bulwark of the ideological formations of advanced capitalist societies. This is evident both at the level of philosophical discourse (e.g., various schools of phenomenology) and at the level of common-sense sociolects (e.g., the interlinked phraseologies of "personhood," of liberation as self-realization, of individualism, etc.). This ideological centrality of humanism generates the attraction of a theoretical anti-humanism as an alternative. The latter is also associated with the deconstruction of sign and subject promulgated by Lacanian psychoanalysis and poststructuralist semiotics.

Althusser also remarks in his analysis of the ideology of humanism that the concept of the human is not easily elided, politically or otherwise. He warns that the refusal of this concept should not function to obstruct the theoretical process of approaching the problems to which that concept points.[26] We may now ask whether that warning has always been heeded in the attempts to conceptualize a politics of the sign in film theory. Insofar as the opposition humanism vs. anti-humanism is seen as the final measure of theoretical options, films and theoretical discourse will be evaluated on that basis even if the criteria are directed through a theory of the subject (e.g., +position vs. −position, or +cogito vs. −cogito). Thus, the inevitability of formalist oppositions through the critique of the sign may seem unavoidable.

It then seems necessary to posit the possibility that the humanism vs. anti-humanism opposition can be used to aim beyond itself. This means discovering whether and where a theoretical anti-humanism serves to block engagement with questions that involve historical and political specificity. This is a tricky question, for it will appear a retrogressive one insofar as it is formulated within the problematic of the humanism vs. anti-humanism opposition, and this problematic has been immensely useful. But it does not suffice to replace a fundamental metaphysical/ideological concept with a minus sign. There is a need for another concept of human agency—of what now, from other viewpoints, we call the subject; it should not be easily collapsed into dominant ideological formations, nor should it simply leave vacant the "ethico-political" site which traditionally serves as a standpoint for the investigation of the historical.

This, to put it mildly, is a large, complex assignment, and one which extends well beyond the bounds of film-critical discourse. As a problem of film theory, however, it can be approached from a number of directions. Specific historical-textual analyses would, of course, be fundamental. Concepts such as filmic writing, *signifiance*, and textuality must continue to be developed in ways that

26. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York, Vintage, pp. 230–231, 246–247.

advance beyond the post-1968 rhetoric of "rupture." In addition, it remains useful to reconsider other problematics (those, for example, of certain Frankfurt School thinkers) which have some bearing on questions of subjectivity, signification, and social formation.

The critique of the sign cannot stand as the exclusively fundamental grounds for such work. Just as the struggle within images and sounds cannot be conceptualized solely from the allegedly essential properties of images and sounds, so a politics of the sign cannot be theorized solely on the basis of the inherent defects of the sign as such. The "outside" which works as determination "inside" the sign (within the codifications constituting images and sounds as necessary conditions of the latter's existence) is not reducible to signifying units and procedures. What is at stake, then, is the question of determination. Insofar as we are concerned not solely with the interpretation of the sign, we must resort to concepts not definable solely as designations of sign functions. Examples of such concepts might include event, social institution, social structure, and exploitation, in the precise sense of this term within the perspective of historical materialism.

Jean-Luc Godard. Two or Three Things I Know about Her. *1966.*

Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body

MARY ANN DOANE

We know that, for want of a stake, representation is not worth anything.
—Michèle Montrelay

To those who still ask, "What do women want?" the cinema seems to provide no answer. For the cinema, in its alignment with the fantasies of the voyeur, has historically articulated its stories through a conflation of its central axis of seeing/being seen with the opposition male/female. So much so that in a classical instance such as *Humoresque*, when Joan Crawford almost violently attempts to appropriate the gaze for herself, she must be represented as myopic (the moments of her transformation from spectacle to spectator thus captured and constrained through their visualization as the act of putting on glasses) and eventually eliminated from the text, her death equated with that of a point of view. Cinematic images of woman have been so consistently oppressive and repressive that the very idea of a feminist filmmaking practice seems an impossibility. The simple gesture of directing a camera toward a woman has become equivalent to a terrorist act.

This state of affairs—the result of a history which inscribes woman as subordinate—is not simply to be overturned by a contemporary practice that is more aware, more self-conscious. The impasse confronting feminist filmmakers today is linked to the force of a certain theoretical discourse which denies the neutrality of the cinematic apparatus itself. A machine for the production of images and sounds, the cinema generates and guarantees pleasure by a corroboration of the spectator's identity. Because that identity is bound up with that of the voyeur and the fetishist, because it requires for its support the attributes of the "noncastrated," the potential for illusory mastery of the signifier, it is not accessible to the female spectator, who, in buying her ticket, must deny her sex. There are no images either *for* her or *of* her. There is a sense in which Peter Gidal, in attempting to articulate the relationship between his own filmmaking practice

and feminist concerns, draws the most logical conclusion from this tendency in theory:

> In terms of the feminist struggle specifically, I have had a vehement refusal over the last decade, with one or two minor aberrations, to allow images of women into my films at all, since I do not see how those images can be separated from the dominant meanings. The ultra-left aspect of this may be nihilistic as well, which may be a critique of my position because it does not see much hope for representations for women, but I do not see how, to take the main example I gave round about 1969 before any knowledge on my part of, say, semiotics, there is any possibility of using the image of a naked woman—at that time I did not have it clarified to the point of any image of a woman—other than in an absolutely sexist and politically repressive patriarchal way in this conjuncture.[1]

This is the extreme formulation of a project which can define itself only in terms of negativity. If the female body is not necessarily always excluded within this problematic, it must always be placed within quotation marks. For it is precisely the massive reading, writing, filming of the female body which constructs and maintains a hierarchy along the lines of a sexual difference assumed as natural. The ideological complicity of the concept of the natural dictates the impossibility of a nostalgic return to an unwritten body.

Thus, contemporary filmmaking addresses itself to the activity of uncoding, de-coding, deconstructing the given images. It is a project of de-familiarization whose aim is not necessarily that of seeing the female body differently, but of exposing the habitual meanings/values attached to femininity as cultural constructions. Sally Potter's *Thriller*, for instance, is a rereading of the woman's role in opera, specifically in Puccini's *La Bohème*, in terms of its ideological function. Mimi's death, depicted in the opera as tragedy, is rewritten as a murder, the film itself invoking the conventions of the suspense thriller. In Babette Mangolte's *The Camera: Je/La Caméra: Eye*, what is at stake are the relations of power sustained within the camera-subject nexus. The discomfort of the subjects posing for the camera, together with the authority of the off-screen voice giving instructions ("Smile," "Don't smile," "Look to the left," etc.), challenge the photographic image's claim to naturalism and spontaneity. And, most interestingly, the subjects, whether male or female, inevitably appear to assume a mask of "femininity" in order to become photographable (filmable)—as though femininity were synonymous with the *pose*.[2] This may explain the feminist film's frequent

1. Peter Gidal, transcription of a discussion following "Technology and Ideology in/through/and Avant-Garde Film: An Instance," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, eds. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1980, p. 169.
2. This calls for a more thorough dissection and analysis of the assumptions underlying the cliché that male models are "effeminate."

obsession with the pose as position—the importance accorded to dance positions in *Thriller*, or those assumed by the hysteric in Terrel Seltzer's *The Story of Anna O.*—which we may see as the arrangements of the body in the interests of aesthetics and science. In their rigidity (the recurrent use of the tableau in these films) or excessive repetition (the multiple, seemingly unending caresses of the woman's breasts in Mangolte's *What Maisie Knew*), positions and gestures are isolated, deprived of the syntagmatic rationalization which, in the more classical text, conduces to their naturalization. These strategies of demystification are attempts to strip the body of its readings. The inadequacy of this formulation of the problem is obvious, however, in that the gesture of stripping in relation to a female body is already the property of patriarchy. More importantly, perhaps, the question to be addressed is this: what is left after the stripping, the uncoding, the deconstruction? For an uncoded body is clearly an impossibility.

Attempts to answer this question by invoking the positivity or specificity of a definition have been severely criticized on the grounds that the particular definition claims a "nature" proper to the woman and is hence complicit with those discourses which set woman outside the social order. Since the patriarchy has always already said everything (everything and nothing) about woman, efforts to give those phrases a different intonation, to mumble, to stutter, to slur them, to articulate them differently, must be doomed to failure. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx*, for instance, has been repeatedly criticized for its invocation of the sphinx as the figure of a femininity repressed by the Oedipal mythos. Femininity is something which has been forgotten or repressed, left outside the gates of the city; hence, what is called for is a radical act of remembering. The radicality of that act, however, has been subject to debate. As Stephen Heath points out,

> The line in the figure of the sphinx-woman between the posing of a question and the idea that women are the question is very thin; female sexuality is dark and unexplorable, women, as Freud put it, are that half of the audience which is the enigma, the great enigma. This is the problem and the difficulty—the area of debate and criticism—of Mulvey and Wollen's film *Riddles of the Sphinx* where the sphinx is produced as a point of resistance that seems nevertheless to repeat, in its very terms, the relations of women made within patriarchy, their representation in the conjunction of such elements as motherhood as mystery, the unconscious, a voice that speaks far off from the past through dream or forgotten language. The film is as though poised on the edge of a politics of the unconscious, of the imagination of a politics of the unconscious ('what would the politics of the unconscious be like?'), with a simultaneous falling short, that politics and imagination not yet there, coming back with old definitions, the given images.[3]

3. Stephen Heath, "Difference," *Screen*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1978), 73.

What is forgotten in the critical judgment, but retrieved in Heath's claim that "the force remains in the risk"—the risk, that is, of recapitulating the terms of patriarchy—is the fact that the sphinx is also, and crucially, subject to a kind of filmic disintegration. In the section entitled "Stones," the refilming of found footage of the Egyptian sphinx problematizes any notion of perceptual immediacy in refinding an "innocent" image of femininity. In fact, as the camera appears to get closer to its object, the graininess of the film is marked, thus indicating the limit of the material basis of its representation.

Most of this essay will be a lengthy digression, a prolegomenon to a much needed investigation of the material specificity of film in relation to the female body and its syntax. Given the power of a certain form of feminist theory which has successfully blocked attempts to provide a conceptualization of this body, the digression is, nevertheless, crucial.

The resistance to filmic and theoretical descriptions of femininity is linked to the strength of the feminist critique of essentialism—of ideas concerning an essential femininity, or of the "real" woman not yet disfigured by patriarchal social relations. The force of this critique lies in its exposure of the inevitable alliance between "feminine essence" and the natural, the given, or precisely what is outside the range of political action and thus not amenable to change. This unchangeable "order of things" in relation to sexual difference is an exact formulation of patriarchy's strongest rationalization of itself. And since the essence of femininity is most frequently attached to the natural body as an immediate indicator of sexual difference, it is this body which must be refused. The body is always a function of discourse.

Feminist theory which grounds itself in anti-essentialism frequently turns to psychoanalysis for its description of sexuality because psychoanalysis assumes a necessary gap between the body and the psyche, so that sexuality is not reducible to the physical. Sexuality is constructed within social and symbolic relations; it is most *un*natural and achieved only after an arduous struggle. One is not born with a sexual identity (hence the significance of the concept of bisexuality in psychoanalysis). The terms of this argument demand that charges of phallocentrism be met with statements that the phallus is not equal to the penis, castration is bloodless, and the father is, in any case, dead and only symbolic.

Nevertheless, the gap between body and psyche is not absolute; an image or symbolization of the body (which is not necessarily the body of biological science) is fundamental to the construction of the psychoanalytical discourse. Brief references to two different aspects of psychoanalytic theory will suffice to illustrate my point. Jean Laplanche explains the emergence of sexuality by means of the concept of propping or *anaclisis*. The drive, which is always sexual, leans or props itself upon the nonsexual or presexual instinct of self-preservation. His major example is the relation of the oral drive to the instinct of hunger whose object is the milk obtained from the mother's breast. The object of the oral drive (prompted by the sucking which activates the lips as an erotogenic zone) is necessarily

displaced in relation to the first object of the instinct. The fantasmatic breast (henceforth the object of the oral drive) is a metonymic derivation, a symbol, of the milk: "The object to be rediscovered is not the lost object, but its substitute by displacement; the lost object is the object of self-preservation, of hunger, and the object one seeks to refind is an object displaced in relation to that first object."[4] Sexuality can only take form in a dissociation of subjectivity from the bodily function, but the concept of a bodily function is necessary in the explanation as, precisely, a support. We will see later how Laplanche de-naturalizes this body (which is simply a distribution of erotogenic zones) while retaining it as a cipher. Still, the body is there, as a prop.

The second aspect of psychoanalysis which suggests the necessity of a certain conceptualization of the body is perhaps more pertinent, and certainly more notorious, in relation to a discussion of feminism: the place of the phallus in Lacanian theory. Lacan and feminist theorists who subscribe to his formulations persistently claim that the phallus is not the penis; the phallus is a signifier (the signifier of lack). It does not *belong* to the male. The phallus is only important insofar as it can be put in circulation as a signifier. Both sexes define themselves in relation to this "third term." What is ultimately stressed here is the absolute necessity of positing only one libido (which Freud labels masculine) in relation to only one term, the phallus. Initially, both sexes, in desiring to conform to the desire of the other (the mother), define themselves in relation to the phallus in the mode of "being." Sexual difference, then, is inaugurated at the moment of the Oedipal complex when the girl continues to "be" the phallus while the boy situates himself in the mode of "having." Positing two terms, in relation to two fully defined sexualities, as Jones and Horney do, binds the concept of sexuality more immediately, more directly, to the body as it expresses itself at birth. For Jones and Horney, there is an essential femininity which is linked to an expression of the vagina. And for Horney at least, there is a sense in which the little girl experiences an empirical, not a psychic, inferiority.[5]

But does the phallus really have nothing to do with the penis, no commerce with it at all? The ease of the description by means of which the boy situates himself in the mode of "having" one would seem to indicate that this is not the case. And Lacan's justification for the privilege accorded to the phallus as signifier appears to guarantee its derivation from a certain representation of the bodily organ:

> The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire. It can be said that this signifier is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the real of

4. Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1976, p. 20.

5. See, for example, "The Denial of the Vagina," in *Psychoanalysis and Female Sexuality*, ed. Hendrick M. Ruitenbeek, New Haven, College and University Press, 1966, pp. 73–87; and *Feminine Psychology*, ed. Harold Kelman, New York, W. W. Norton, 1967.

> sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) copula. It might also be said that, by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation.[6]

There is a sense in which all attempts to deny the relation between the phallus and the penis are feints, veils, illusions. The phallus, as signifier, may no longer *be* the penis, but any effort to conceptualize its function is inseparable from an imaging of the body. The difficulty in conceptualizing the relation between the phallus and the penis is evident in Parveen Adams's explanation of the different psychic trajectories of the girl and the boy.

> Sexuality can only be considered at the level of the symbolic processes. This lack is undifferentiated for both sexes and has nothing to do with the absence of a penis, a physical lack.
>
> Nonetheless, the anatomical difference between the sexes does permit a differentiation within the symbolic process. . . . The phallus represents lack for both boys and girls. But the boy in having a penis has that which lends itself to the phallic symbol. The girl does not have a penis. What she lacks is not a penis as such, but the means to represent lack.[7]

The sexual differentiation is permitted but not demanded by the body and it is the exact force or import of this "permitting" which requires an explanation. For it is clear that what is being suggested is that the boy's body provides an access to the processes of representation while the girl's body does not. From this perspective, a certain slippage can then take place by means of which the female body becomes an absolute tabula rasa of sorts: anything and everything can be written on it. Or more accurately, perhaps, the male body comes fully equipped with a binary opposition—penis/no penis, presence/absence, phonemic opposition—while the female body is constituted as "noise,"[8] an undifferentiated presence which always threatens to disrupt representation.

This analysis of the bodily image in psychoanalysis becomes crucial for feminism with the recognition that sexuality is inextricable from discourse, from language. The conjunction of semiotics and psychoanalysis (as exemplified in the work of Lacan and others) has been successful in demonstrating the necessity of a break in an initial plenitude as a fundamental condition for signification. The concept of lack is not arbitrary. The fact that the little girl in the above description has no means to represent lack results in her different relation to language and

6. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, W. W. Norton, 1977, p. 287.
7. Parveen Adams, "Representation and Sexuality," *m/f*, no. 1 (1978), 66–67. Even if the phallus is defined as logically prior to the penis, in that it is the phallus which bestows significance on the penis, a *relation* between the two is nevertheless posited, and this is my point.
8. I am grateful to Philip Rosen for this "representation" of the problem.

representation. The work of Michèle Montrelay is most explicit on this issue: "... for want of a stake, representation is not worth anything."[9] The initial relation to the mother, the determinant of the desire of both sexes, is too full, too immediate, too present. This undifferentiated plenitude must be fissured through the introduction of lack before representation can be assured, since representation entails the absence of the desired object. "Hence the repression that ensures that one does not think, nor see, nor take the desired object, even and above all if it is within reach: this object must remain lost."[10] The tragedy of Oedipus lies in his refinding of the object. And as Montrelay points out, it is the sphinx as the figure of femininity which heralds this "ruin of representation."

In order for representation to be possible then, a stake is essential. Something must be threatened if the paternal prohibition against incest is to take effect, forcing the gap between desire and its object. This theory results in a rather surprising interpretation of the woman's psychic oppression: her different relation to language stems from the fact that she has nothing to lose, nothing at stake. Prohibition, the law of limitation, cannot touch the little girl. For the little boy, on the other hand, there is most definitely something to lose. "He experiments, not only with chance but also with the law and with his sexual organ: his body itself takes on the value of stake."[11]

Furthermore, in repeating, doubling the maternal body with her own, the woman recovers the first stake of representation and thus undermines the possibility of losing the object of desire since she has, instead become it.

> From now on, anxiety, tied to the presence of this body, can only be insistent, continuous. This body, so close, which she has to occupy, is an object in excess which must be 'lost,' that is to say, repressed, in order to be symbolised. Hence the symptoms which so often simulate this loss: 'there is no longer anything, only the hole, emptiness . . .' Such is the *leitmotif* of all feminine cure, which it would be a mistake to see as the expression of an alleged 'castration.' On the contrary, it is a defence produced in order to parry the avatars, the deficiencies, of symbolic castration.[12]

There are other types of defense as well, based on the woman's imaginary simulation of lack. Montrelay points to the anorexic, for instance, who diminishes her own body, dissolving the flesh and reducing the body to a cipher.[13] Or the woman can operate a performance of femininity, a masquerade, by means of an accumulation of accessories—jewelry, hats, feathers, etc.—all designed to mask the

9. Michèle Montrelay, "Inquiry into Femininity," *m/f*, no. 1 (1978), 89.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

absence of a lack.[14] These defenses, however, are based on the woman's imaginary simulation of lack and exclude the possibility of an encounter with the symbolic. She can only mime representation.

Montrelay's work is problematic in several respects. In situating the woman's relation to her own body as narcissistic, erotic, and maternal, Montrelay insists that it is the "real of her own body" which "imposes itself," prior to any act of construction.[15] Furthermore, she does, eventually, outline a scenario within which the woman has access to symbolic lack, but it is defined in terms of a heterosexual act of intercourse in which the penis, even though it is described as "scarcely anything," produces the "purest and most elementary form of signifying articulation."[16] Nevertheless, Montrelay's work points to the crucial dilemma confronting an anti-essentialist feminist theory which utilizes psychoanalysis. That is, while psychoanalysis does theorize the relative autonomy of psychic processes, the gap between body and psyche, it also requires the body as a prop, a support for its description of sexuality as a discursive function. Too often anti-essentialism is characterized by a paranoia in relation to all discussions of the female body (since ideas about a "natural" female body or the female body and "nature" are the linchpins of patriarchal ideology). This results in a position which simply repeats that of classical Freudian psychoanalysis in its focus upon the little boy's psychic development at the expense of that of the little girl. What is repressed here is the fact that psychoanalysis can conceptualize the sexuality of both the boy and the girl *only* by positing gender-specific bodies.

Even more crucially, as Montrelay's work demonstrates, the use of the concepts of the phallus and castration within a semiotically oriented psychoanalysis logically implies that the woman must have a different relation to language from that of the man. And from a semiotic perspective, her relation to language must be deficient since her body does not "permit" access to what, for the semiotician, is the motor-force of language—the representation of lack. Hence, the greatest masquerade of all is that of the woman speaking (or writing, or filming), appropriating discourse. To take up a discourse for the woman (if not, indeed, by her), that is, the discourse of feminism itself, would thus seem to entail an absolute contradiction. How can she speak?

Yet, we know that women speak, even though it may not be clear exactly how this takes place. And unless we want to accept a formulation by means of which woman can only mimic man's relation to language, that is, assume a position defined by the penis-phallus as the supreme arbitrer of lack, we must try to reconsider the relation between the female body and language, never forgetting

14. This description is derived from Lacan's conceptualization of masquerade in relation to femininity. See *Écrits: A Selection*, pp. 289–290. Lacan, in turn, borrows the notion of masquerade from Joan Riviere; see "Womanliness as Masquerade," in *Psychoanalysis and Female Sexuality*, pp. 209–220.

15. Montrelay, p. 91.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

that it is a relation between two terms and not two essences. Does woman have a stake in representation or, more appropriately, can we assign one to her? Anatomy is destiny only if the concept of destiny is recognized for what it really is: a concept proper to fiction.

The necessity of assigning to woman a specific stake informs the work of theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, and both have been criticized from an anti-essentialist perspective. Beverley Brown and Parveen Adams, for example, distinguish between two orders of argument about the female body which are attributed, respectively, to Irigaray and Kristeva:

> We can demand then: what is this place, this body, from which women speak so mutely?
>
> Two orders of reply to this question can be distinguished. In the first there is an attempt to find a real and natural body which is pre-social in a literal sense. The second, more sophisticated reply, says that the issue at stake is not the actual location of a real body, but that the positing of such a body seems to be a condition of the discursive in general.[17]

Although the second order of argument is described as "more sophisticated," Brown and Adams ultimately find that both are deficient. I want briefly to address this criticism although it really requires an extended discussion impossible within the limits of this essay. The criticisms of Irigaray are based primarily on her essay, "That Sex Which Is Not One,"[18] in which she attempts to conceptualize the female body in relation to language/discourse, but independently of the penis/ lack dichotomy. Irigaray valorizes certain features of the female body—the two lips (of the labia) which caress each other and define woman's auto-eroticism as a relation to duality, the multiplicity of sexualized zones spread across the body. Furthermore, Irigaray uses this representation of the body to specify a feminine language which is plural, polyvalent, and irreducible to a masculine language based on restrictive notions of unity and identity. Brown and Adams claim that "her argument turns upon the possibility of discovering that which is already there—it is a case of 'making visible' the previously 'invisible' of feminine sexuality."[19] While there are undoubtedly problems with the rather direct relation Irigaray often posits between the body and language, her attempt to provide the woman with an autonomous symbolic representation is not to be easily dismissed.

17. Beverley Brown and Parveen Adams, "The Feminine Body and Feminist Politics," *m/f*, no. 3 (1979), 37.

18. Luce Irigaray, "That Sex Which Is Not One," trans. R. Albury and P. Foss, in *Language, Sexuality, Subversion*, ed. Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris, Darlington, Feral Publications, 1978, pp. 161–172. This is a translation of the second essay in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Paris, Minuit, 1977, pp. 23–32.

19. Brown and Adams, p. 38.

Irigaray herself criticizes the logic which gives privilege to the gaze, thereby questioning the gesture of "making visible" a previously hidden female sexuality. Her work is a radical rewriting of psychoanalysis which, while foregrounding the process of mimesis by which language represents the body, simultaneously constructs a distinction between a mimesis which is "productive" and one which is merely "reproductive" or "imitative"—a process of "adequation" and of "specularization."[20] An immediate dismissal of her work in the interests of an overwary anti-essentialism involves a premature rejection of "the force that remains in the risk."

The criticism addressed to Kristeva, on the other hand, is directed toward her stress on pre-Oedipal sexuality, allying it with a femininity whose repression is the very condition of Western discourse.[21] For Kristeva, the woman's negative relation to the symbolic determines her bond with a polymorphous, prelogical discourse which corresponds to the autonomous and polymorphous sexuality of the pre-Oedipal moment. Brown and Adams formulate their criticism in these terms: "Setting up this apolitical autonomy of polymorphous sexuality is, in effect, the positing of sexuality as an impossible origin, a state of nature, as simply the eternal presence of sexuality at all."[22] However, pre-Oedipal sexuality is not synonymous with "nature"; it already assumes an organized distribution of erotogenic zones over the body and forms of relations to objects which are variable (whether human or nonhuman). Both male and female pass through, live pre-Oedipality. Hence, pre-Oedipality can only be equated with femininity retrospectively, *après coup*, after the event of the Oedipal complex, of the threat of castration, and the subsequent negative entry into the symbolic attributed to the woman. Insofar as Kristeva's description of pre-Oedipality is dependent upon notions of the drive, it involves a displacement of sexuality in relation to the body. As Laplanche points out, the drive is a metonymic derivation from the instinct which is itself attached to an erotogenic zone, a zone of *exchange*.

> The drive properly speaking, in the only sense faithful to Freud's discovery, *is* sexuality. Now sexuality, in its entirety, in the human infant, lies in *a movement which deflects the instinct, metaphorizes its aim, displaces and internalizes its object, and concentrates its source on what is ultimately a minimal zone, the erotogenic zone. . . .* This zone of exchange is also a zone for care, namely the particular and attentive care provided by the mother. These zones, then, attract the first erotogenic maneuvers from the adult. An even more significant factor, if we introduce the subjectivity of the first "partner": these zones

20. *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, pp. 129–130.
21. The critique of Kristeva is based on *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows, New York, Urizen Books, 1977.
22. Brown and Adams, p. 39.

OCTOBER

Please ____ Begin my subscription
____ Renew
Subscriptions for complete sets only
____ Payment enclosed
Prepayment is required
____ Students & Retired $15.00
____ Individual $20.00
____ Institution $40.00
PO # _____

Outside USA please add $3.00 for surface mail or $10.00 for Air Mail

Charge to my ____ Master Charge
____ Visa (Bank Americard)

Expiration Date: _____
Signature: _____
Card # _____

( ) ( ) ( ) ( )
four digits above name
Master Charge only

Name: _____
Address: _____
_____ ZIP _____

OCTOBER

Please ____ Begin my subscription
____ Renew
Subscriptions for complete sets only
____ Payment enclosed
Prepayment is required
____ Students & Retired $15.00
____ Individual $20.00
____ Institution $40.00
PO # _____

Outside USA please add $3.00 for surface mail or $10.00 for Air Mail

Charge to my ____ Master Charge
____ Visa (Bank Americard)

Expiration Date: _____
Signature: _____
Card # _____

( ) ( ) ( ) ( )
four digits above name
Master Charge only

Name: _____
Address: _____
_____ ZIP _____

NO POSTAGE
NECESSARY
IF MAILED
IN THE
UNITED STATES

BUSINESS REPLY CARD

FIRST CLASS PERMIT NO. **309** BOSTON, MASS.

Postage Will Be Paid by Addressee

JOURNALS DEPARTMENT
The MIT Press
28 Carleton Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142

NO POSTAGE
NECESSARY
IF MAILED
IN THE
UNITED STATES

BUSINESS REPLY CARD
FIRST CLASS PERMIT NO. 309 BOSTON, MASS.

Postage Will Be Paid by Addressee

JOURNALS DEPARTMENT
The MIT Press
28 Carleton Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142

> *focalize parental fantasies* and above all *maternal fantasies*, so that we may say, in what is barely a metaphor, that they are the points through which is *introduced into the child that alien internal entity* which is, properly speaking, the *sexual excitation*.[23]

The force of this scenario lies in its de-naturalization of the sexualized body. The conceptualization of the erotogenic zone as a zone of exchange demonstrates that the investment of the body with sexuality is always already social. Since it is ultimately *maternal* fantasies which are at issue here, it is apparent that, without an anchoring in the social, psychoanalysis can simply reiterate, reperform in its theorization, the vicious circle of patriarchy.

The rather long digression which structures this essay is motivated by the extreme difficulty of moving beyond the impasse generated by the opposition between essentialism and anti-essentialism. In the context of feminist film theory, both positions are formulated through a repression of the crucial and complex relation between the body and psychic processes, that is, processes of signification. From the point of view of essentialist theory, the goal of a feminist film practice must be the production of images which provide a pure reflection of the real woman, thus returning the real female body to the woman as her rightful property. And this body is accessible to a transparent cinematic discourse. The position is grounded in a mis-recognition of signification as outside of, uninformed by, the psychic. On the other hand, the logical extension of anti-essentialist theory, particularly as it is evidenced in Gidal's description of his filmmaking practice, results in the absolute exclusion of the female body, the refusal of any attempt to figure or represent that body. Both the proposal of a pure access to a natural female body and the rejection of attempts to conceptualize the female body based on their contamination by ideas of "nature" are inhibiting and misleading. Both positions deny the necessity of posing a complex relation between the body and psychic/signifying processes, of using the body, in effect, as a "prop." For Kristeva is right—the positing of a body *is* a condition of discursive practices. It is crucial that feminism move beyond the opposition between essentialism and anti-essentialism. This move will entail the necessary risk taken by theories which attempt to define or construct a feminine specificity (not essence), theories which work to provide the woman with an autonomous symbolic representation.

What this means in terms of the theorization of a feminist filmmaking practice can only be sketched here. But it is clear from the preceding exploration of the theoretical elaboration of the female body that the stake does not simply concern an isolated image of the body. The attempt to "lean" on the body in order to formulate the woman's different relation to speech, to language, clarifies the fact

23. Laplanche, pp. 23–24.

Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. Riddles of the Sphinx. *1977.*

that what is at stake is, rather, the syntax which constitutes the female body as a term. The most interesting and productive recent films dealing with the feminist problematic are precisely those which elaborate a new syntax, thus "speaking" the female body differently, even haltingly or inarticulately from the perspective of a classical syntax. For instance, the circular camera movements which carve out the space of the mise-en-scène in *Riddles of the Sphinx* are in a sense more critical to a discussion of the film than the status of the figure of the sphinx as feminine. The film effects a continual displacement of the gaze which "catches" the woman's body only accidentally, momentarily, refusing to hold or fix her in the frame. The camera consistently transforms its own framing to elide the possibility of a fetishism of the female body. Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce—1080 Bruxelles* constructs its syntax by linking together scenes which, in the classical text, would be concealed, in effect negated, by temporal ellipses. The specificity of the film lies in the painful duration of that time "in-between" events, that time which is exactly proper to the woman (in particular, the housewife) within a patriarchal society. The obsessive routine of Jeanne Diel-

Sally Potter. Thriller. *1979*.

man's daily life, as both housewife and prostitute, is radically broken only by an instance of orgasm (corresponding quite literally to the "climax" of the narrative) which is immediately followed by her murder of the man. Hence, the narrative structure is a parodic "mime" that distorts, undoes the structure of the classical narrative through an insistence upon its repressions.

The analysis of the elaboration of a special syntax for a different articulation of the female body can also elucidate the significance of the recourse, in at least two of these films, to the classical codification of suspense. Both *Jeanne Dielman* and Sally Potter's *Thriller* construct a suspense without expectation. *Jeanne Dielman*, although it momentarily "cites" the mechanism of the narrative climax, articulates an absolute refusal of the phatic function of suspense, its engagement with and constraint of the spectator as consumer, devourer of discourse. *Thriller*, on the other hand, "quotes" the strategies of the suspense film (as well as individual films of this genre—for example, *Psycho*) in order to undermine radically the way in which the woman is "spoken" by another genre altogether, that of operatic tragedy. This engagement with the codification of suspense is an encounter with

the genre which Roland Barthes defines as the most intense embodiment of the "generalized distortion" which "gives the language of narrative its special character":

> 'Suspense' is clearly only a privileged—or 'exacerbated'—form of distortion: on the one hand, by keeping a sequence open (through emphatic procedures of delay and renewal), it reinforces the contact with the reader (the listener), has a manifestly phatic function; while on the other, it offers the threat of an uncompleted sequence, of an open paradigm (if, as we believe, every sequence has two poles), that is to say, of a logical disturbance, it being this disturbance which is consumed with anxiety and pleasure (all the more so because it is always made right in the end). 'Suspense', therefore, is a game with structure, designed to endanger and glorify it, constituting a veritable 'thrilling' of intelligibility: by representing order (and no longer series) in its fragility, 'suspense' accomplishes the very idea of language. . . .[24]

It is precisely this "idea of language" which is threatened by both *Jeanne Dielman* and *Thriller* in their attempts to construct another syntax which would, perhaps, collapse the fragile order, revealing the ending too soon.

While I have barely approached the question of an exact formulation of the representation of the female body attached to the syntactical constructions of these films, it is apparent that this syntax is an area of intense concern, of reworking, rearticulating the specular imaging of woman, for whom, in the context of a current filmmaking, the formulation of a stake is already in process.

24. Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 119.

India Song/Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert: The Compulsion to Repeat

JOAN COPJEC

One no longer hears the term *profilmic event* (used or mentioned), although not such a very long time ago it was a commonplace of film theory. The term has been allowed to obsolesce as attention has shifted instead to the cinematic apparatus and its ideological inscription—to the scene, that is, of writing. The biological metaphor which defines this simple chronology is, of course, in a sense totally inapt. The profilmic event is not the vestigium, the trace, of a theoretical structure which declined—naturally. Rather the cinematic apparatus has been theorized precisely as an intervention between the profilmic—the natural—and the discourse of and about film.

The chronology has, in fact, been described differently, for example by Christian Metz, who in "The Imaginary Signifier" refers to it as a shift "from attention to the *énoncé* to concern for the *énonciation*."[1] *Énoncé* is best translated, as Ben Brewster does in his notes to Metz's essay, as "statement" and *énonciation* as "speech act"—or, one might add for reasons which will become clear, as "speech event." Metz's distinction here is related to the one he makes (following Benveniste) between history and discourse. Attention to the statement alone suppresses the source of the statement, makes of it an object, a found or historical (or profilmic) object which seems to come from nowhere. Concern for the speech act or event, on the other hand, uncovers the presence of a subject, a point of view, of the statement, locates it in a present moment, a *context* of speaker and speech, rather than a historical, an apersonal past.

There is, however, another linguistic distinction to which we can relate the terms of Metz's chronology. Metz himself does not note this relation, but Roland Barthes, in his structural analysis of narratives, does. Barthes describes the contemporary concern for discourse as opposed to history:

> It is this formal person [the linguistic first person or enunciator] that writers today are attempting to speak and such an attempt represents an important subversion . . . for it aims to transpose narrative from the

1. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," *Screen*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (Summer 1975), 14.

> purely constantive plane, which it has occupied until now, to the performative plane, whereby the meaning of an utterance is the very act by which it is uttered: today, writing is not 'telling' but saying that one is telling . . . which is why part of contemporary literature is no longer descriptive, but transitive. Striving to accomplish so pure a present in its language that the whole of discourse is identified with the act of its delivery. . . .[2]

The distinction—between constantive utterances, descriptive sentences which can be judged true or false as they have their referents outside themselves, that is, outside language; and performative utterances which have no truth value, but have instead a *force*, a power of effecting, of establishing themselves as, events—is taken from speech act theory.

It must be remembered that it is Barthes who makes this connection, and with reference to literature, between a distinction of French linguistic theory and one of Anglo-American speech act theory. The connection has not been made within French film theory, nor have the implications of this connection been examined, by Barthes or film theorists. It is easy to see, however, how, historically, film theory which first formulated the profilmic as an *event* could come to share some common ground with linguists who define speech as an event. It seems that contemporary film theory began by substituting one event for another, by questioning the theoretical limitations of "profilmic" and not of "event." It progressed, like speech act theory, through a critique of the communications model of language which had preceded it. Metz, in his second book, *Language and Cinema*, had himself proposed a communications model of cinematic language, having five matters of expression, five technico-sensorial unities. Under the influence of debates around the cinematic apparatus which raged in the film journals *Cinéthique* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*, however, he began a revision of his theory which meant, basically, a questioning of the scientific neutrality of the "channel" of cinematic communication, the apparatus, and an introduction of the subject of the enunciation, the performer of the film's utterance. It was Jean-Louis Baudry who most clearly argued, in "The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" and "The Apparatus," that the apparatus could not be granted a place apart, but must be examined in the context of its historical development, that is, in the context of the ideology which produced it as an effect. These articles must be read alongside those of Metz written during the same period. For Metz's work becomes a sympathetic response to Baudry, an extension and a clarification of many of Baudry's arguments. Indeed, it seems that the direction which film theory has taken can be traced back to these beginnings. The "subject" with which film theory is now concerned, for example, was introduced

2. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 114.

into theory at this precise moment, at the same time as, *through* the apparatus—through a metaphor which established a relationship between the psychic and the cinematic apparatus (which was defined not simply as the camera, but the whole machinery of relations and meanings, socio-psychic systems which construct the psyche).

The question which should be asked is how this metaphor, this particular historico-technical metaphor, has effected or precipitated the subject which is the reality of film theory. Film theory turned from consideration of its object as a reproduction of reality, the profilmic, and became a critique of this very notion of reproduction in order to consider film as an intervention, an event, which participated in the production of a subject. What remains unclear in the theory is how this production can be anything but a reproduction, how the cinematic apparatus, effect of an idealist, patriarchal ideology can produce, "effect" anything but a transcendent, male "subject." Speech act theory finds itself in the same position. A performative utterance (which is, in the end, the main kind which concerns these theorists, just as it is the only utterance admitted as evidence by American law) can only be said to have taken place, its saying is only said to be (or to make it) so, when it has appropriately, correctly, completely, intentionally, and consistently repeated, reproduced a conventional procedure. A performative, then, can not be either true *or* false because it can *only* be true, that is, according to the laws of logic, identical with itself.

Baudry, in fact, defines the force which activates and is activated by the cinematic apparatus as the "compulsion to repeat . . . a former condition," as "desire as such, . . . the nostalgia for a former state." Cinema, therefore, is like a dream, the fulfillment of a wish for sameness, for "survival and . . . bygone periods," for a repetition of the oneness, the identity, of and with the beginning.[3] Metz also finds the parallel between cinema and dream telling (by which I intend all its possible senses), although he admits that cinema undergoes a process of secondarization further still than the dream. For him also the cinema is "motivated" by the *economy* of the pleasure principle; it is inaugural of a circuit of return. The cinema is, thus, by definition the production of "good objects," that is, pleasurable films. Metz recognizes the existence of filmic unpleasure, "bad objects" or bad films, but these are not "basic" to the institution of cinema, are simply "local failure[s]."[4]

In the same way Austin defines the difference between the "happy" functioning of a performative and the "unhappy" functioning, that is, the "failure" of a performative to take effect, to take place. He admits that "things can go wrong" and he accounts for these things by the "doctrine of the infelicities."[5] This doctrine *extenuates* the possibility of failure, bad illocutionary objects, by attribut-

3. J.-L. Baudry, "The Apparatus," *Camera Obscura*, no. 1 (1976), 108, 121.
4. Metz, pp. 18–19.
5. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1962, p. 14.

ing them to "extenuating circumstances." Only successes are counted, failures are voided. The speech event in its total context is overdetermined to reproduce only itself. Compare this to Metz's definition of the institution as "auto-reproduction":

> It is the specific characteristic of every true institution that it takes charge of the mechanisms of its own perpetuation—there is no other solution than to set up arrangements whose aim and effect is to give the spectator the 'spontaneous' desire to visit the cinema and pay for his ticket. . . . In this way the libidinal economy (filmic pleasure in its historically constituted form) reveals its 'correspondence' with the political economy. . . .[6]

For Austin it is finally the carrying out of the appropriate intentions of the speaker which is determinant of the performative. Although the presence within the speaker of certain thoughts, feelings, and intentions is listed as one of the conditions of the success of the performative, Austin stresses that this is not one circumstance among others, but *the* condition upon which the others depend. For Metz it is the carrying out of the intention of the institution which defines the success of the cinematic performance, "since the institution as a whole has filmic pleasure alone as its aim."[7]

And so we have the same old story—"cine-repetitions," as Raymond Bellour calls them; cinema repeats itself. For "beyond any given film, what each film aims at through the apparatus that permits it is the regulated order of the spectacle, the return of an immemorial and everyday state which the subject experiences in his dreams and for which the cinematic apparatus renews the desire."[8] Cinema accomplishes its aim primarily through narrative. Although, as narrative claims to repeat events which have already taken place, it is possible to define it as it defines itself, as "history," as a constantive utterance which has its referents outside and prior to itself; it may also be considered a force which insures the taking place of events. In this case there would be an implied performative "I sing" behind each narrative. This is what Barthes isolates as characteristic of contemporary narrative, and what Metz eventually proposes as well. But this direction is prepared for at the beginning by Metz, who takes up the study of the *grande syntagmatique* to rescue cinematic language from its "paradigmatic"—and here we would say constantive—"poverty." Narrative, from this perspective, does not merely refer to some prior reality; it predicates. The force of narrative is generated through repetitions which contain differences and, hence, space, mark out its limits, and produce its homogeneity. Bellour puts it succinctly: "Repetition saturates the narrative space."[9] That is, through systems of alternations

6. Metz, p. 19.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Raymond Bellour, "Cine-Repetitions," *Screen*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Summer 1979), 71.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

(between shots and reverse shots, syntagmatic units, etc.), *mise-en-abyme* constructions, smaller units get locked into, absorbed by the larger unit of the complete narrative, its resolution. Just so does the performative take place, in and only in a total situation, a "saturated context," which is to say, one that is "exhaustively determined."[10] The performative takes place only as it is an exact repetition of a conventional procedure, uttered by a person fully conscious of and intending this procedure, absorbed, as it were, by the convention.

At the end of his analysis of cine-repetitions, Bellour includes a reference to Thierry Kuntzel's work on the "scene of repetition" in *King Kong*:

> King Kong appears, provoking the full repetition of the cry; the cry, which is now the woman's real cry, was expected, remembered, and almost uttered by the viewer. The latter, of course, knows that he is 'at the cinema' as Metz says. Yet, in the shadow of that knowledge the film does indeed repeat *his own* dream, his desire to dream.[11]

The *effect* of repetition is clearly identification—which brings with it this "purificatory effect," this catharsis. But we have heard this before: "A tragedy . . . is the imitation of an action that is serious and also . . . complete in itself . . . with incidents arousing pity and fear wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions."[12] And again: "It is clear that in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life and that in doing so they abreact the strength of the impression, . . . make themselves master of the situation."[13] As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has pointed out, the (speculative) philosophy of tragedy, of representation, has remained, since the beginning, a theory of tragedy's *effect*, of the catharsis of the "menace which the contradiction illustrated by the tragic conflict represented."[14] Repetition has this effect—of heterotautology. Of interiorizing difference, contradiction, distance, making them self-same. Of converting contradictions into "metaphysical pitch and toss,"[15] that is, into an idealization of movement itself whereby pitch is absorbed by toss, hurly by burly, fort by da, death by life, body by soul and so on and so forth. That is to say, into no movement at all, into similarity, the "at home" status of homeostasis.

One may find this argument *heimlich*, and pleasurable for that, for its familiarity. There is certainly no disputing this effect—the "subject effect," the

10. Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," *Glyph 1*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
11. Bellour, pp. 71–72.
12. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b.
13. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, New York, W.W. Norton, 1961, p. 11.
14. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Caesura of the Speculative," *Glyph 4*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 66.
15. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 83. This phrase is quoted from L. C. Knights by Kermode, whose own book remains one of the best considerations of the way beginnings are absorbed by ends.

"cathartic effect," the "performative effect": these *eventual effects*. And one may appreciate the advance of this argument which speaks in terms of forces, of knowledge in terms of relations of power rather than in terms of "true" or "false"; the foundation in psychoanalysis which also tells us that repetition is the reexperiencing of something identical, is a source of pleasure; the advance in considering language, rather than the body, as the "house of being," language rather than biology as destiny. For as this parallel consideration of film and speech act theory has intended to indicate, the exclusion of the profilmic by theory from film discourse is a repetition of the exclusion of the body—the external referent—from discourse in general.

Still there are some (not quite included in "one") who are not happy with this resolution. These "infelicities" are women. For it is they, finally, who are the difference, the external who are repeatedly excluded by the homeostatic system—the constant reproduction of the male by the patriarchal mechanisms of film, language. Film theory has turned from ontological analysis, a concern with essentialist questions about what is, to textual analyses of the effectivity of point of view, of the speech event. Yet the point of view and the structures of voyeurism, exhibition, identification which follow from it are always, repeatedly, male. Women, therefore, can not look, can not be represented—as women. They do not exist, according to Lacan, as women. This very nonexistence is the effect of the repetition of the same. Women are not in a position to contest the force of this conclusion, the "male effect" of repetition. But they must and can find ways to break into this system, this theory, perhaps by first breaking from a theory of effects which remains in their imaginary—that is, consistent and plenitudinous—hold. Psychoanalysis can provide a model for this break, for it has progressed from the "happy" (I am tampering with Lacan's descriptive, "optimistic") days of catharsis upon the discovery, in the transference, of another kind of repetition, repetition in act, by which it recognized the significance of missed encounters, of events that never took place—in an infinity, a beyond, of the pleasure principle. And a before—by which we may be able to break cinema from the hold of the eternal return of the dream analogy: "If there is a 'beyond the pleasure principle,' it is only consistent to grant that there was also a time before the purpose of dreams was the fulfillment of wishes."[16] Freud turned his attention to this beyond when he observed that certain of his patients, in their dreams or in their analysis, exhibited a compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences. It was this observation that forced Freud to supplement his theory of dreams so that it could include those dreams which did not fulfill wishes; to question the priority of the pleasure principle, the tendency of the psychic system towards constancy, and to assert instead a more radical tendency towards zero; to grant a metapsychological status to aggressiveness, that is, to affirm the existence of a death drive. The compulsion

16. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 27.

to repeat is definitely not, according to psychoanalysis, what Baudry describes. It is definitely not an attempt to return to a previous state of satisfaction; rather it is the return to a trauma which is conceived, psychoanalytically as it is medicosurgically, as a wound, a break in the protective skin which triggers catastrophe, misfortune throughout the whole of the organism.

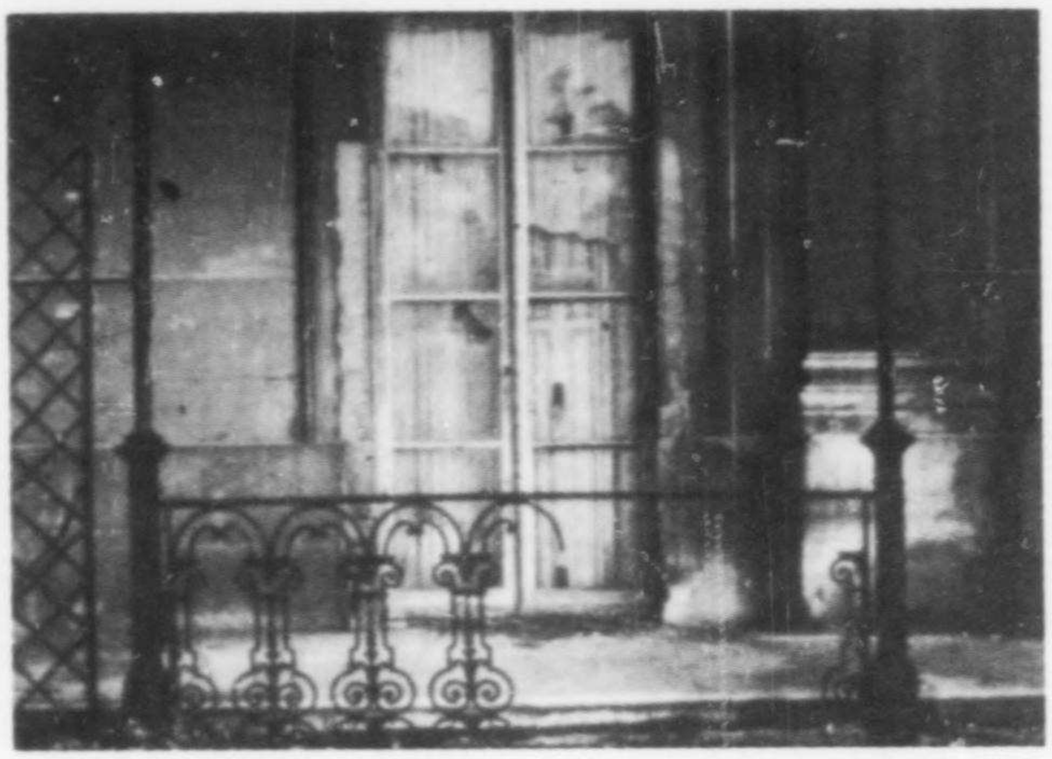
This brings us once again to the question of the profilmic and of the body and their relation to discourse. Most philosophical, psychoanalytic theory has dismissed the essentialist assertion of a simple causal relation between the somatic and the psychic, in which the one is directly eventuated by the other, as theoretically unsound, politically useless. Yet the anti-essentialist position which eschews any but a parallel relation by which soma and psyche are seen to run along side by side, each totally the outside of the other (like two clocks wound by a cosmic grand*father*), ends up constructing a kind of monadology which is equally unsound, equally regressive politically. It seems that we must begin to specify a different kind of relation between these two terms, one which focuses on the breaks between them, in order to prepare the way for an introduction of women, the outside, into the systems which repeat their absence. It is important to recognize, however, that this will be no easy task, that it will often look like a return to biologism. Freud himself, who began psychoanalysis with the study of hysteria, that is, the study of the relationship of soma to psyche, came back, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to a reconsideration of this same relationship between the biological and the psychological organism. But he passed, as we have said, from a study of catharsis, which is precisely a freeing or clearing a place of dead bodies, to a study, simultaneous with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, of "The Uncanny," which is the place of the return of bodies once dead.

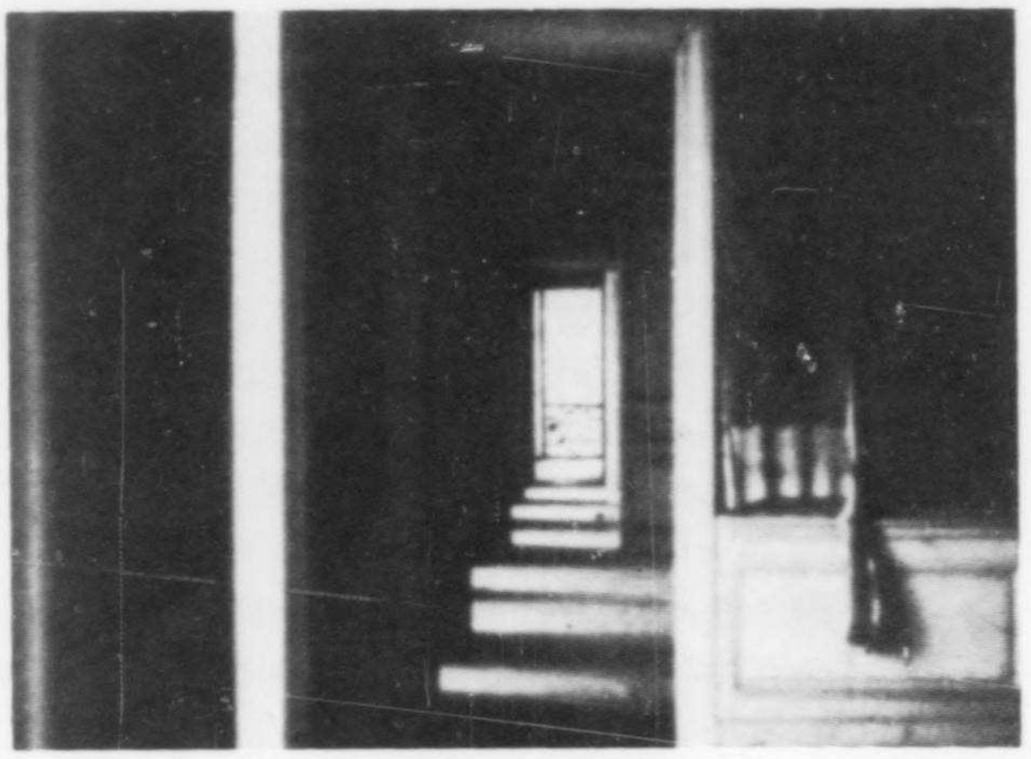
The pleasure principle would be, according to Freud's definition, on the side of the *heimlich*, the canny which is "friendly, intimate, homelike; the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of peaceful pleasure and security as in one within the four walls of his house," rather than the *unheimlich*, the uncanny. An example of such domestic pleasure: "A careful housewife who knows how to make a pleasing *Heimlichkeit* (*Häuslichkeit*) out of the smallest means."[17]

*

Marguerite Duras reused, cited in its entirety, the sound track from her previous film, *India Song*, in the making of *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*. The second film merely adds a new visual track, consisting almost completely of images of the deserted, deteriorating Rothschild palace near Reims (no human figures appear until the final minutes of the film) to this already-paid-for sound track. A frugal gesture, surely—and some would find *Son nom de Venise*

17. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *On Creativity and the Unconscious*, New York, Harper and Row, 1958, p. 126.





Marguerite Duras. Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert. *1976.*

pleasurable to watch (few have even had the chance to see it, however, so seldom is it screened)—but clearly an economic failure. An homage, it would seem, to the death drive rather than the pleasure principle. Bellour has included the "remake" among his list of cine-repetitions (cine-pleasures), noting that it is a particularly "triumphant" form, for it simultaneously repeats and interlocks its historical past and its historical present. But Duras is no careful housewife and her "remake" is directly ruinous of the very image of "home," of the *heimlich* notion of historical context. The repetition which is involved in the making of *India Song/Son nom de Venise,* this doubling of the "*son,*" alienates the name, here a place name, from itself. Replaces the singularity of name, origin, place—familiarity, finally—in the uncanny of "*désert.*" Naming is an effect of repetition, but Duras's films desert the *da* of repetition, the "here" of the *énonciation,* of the speech event, the effect of mastery, for the *fort* of alienation. Hers are not films of illusionary effects, but of the lost causes of repetition, of the xenopathology of the proper, the home.

That I suggest *India Song/Son nom de Venise* be read in tandem with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* as an example of the repetition compulsion delineated there, will perhaps surprise no one. Certainly not those familiar with Duras's other works. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier has isolated from these, three novels (*Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein, Le Vice-Consul, L'Amour*) and three films (*La Femme du Gange, India Song, Son nom de Venise*) which she refers to as the *cycle durassien.*[18] Each of these works cycles around, repeats, and disfigures the same "protextual" event, the ball at S. Thala, the Michael

18. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, *L'Avant Scène Cinéma,* no. 225 (April 1979), 5.

Richardson-Lol V. Stein-Anne Marie Stretter configuration. I am also suggesting, however, that all of Duras's films, from *Hiroshima Mon Amour* to *Le Camion*, display the workings of this compulsion, extend their analyses, like Freud's own, from a recognition of traumatic war neuroses to a theory of the drives, beyond the pleasure principle. Like Freud also, the films displace the trauma from the immediacy of the present, the present unfolding of the film, exteriorize it in some vague profilmic, make of it an event which never takes place. *Le Camion*, in which Dépardieu and Duras read the script of a film that they would have made had they had the economic means, is most ostensibly concerned with this not-taking-place of the profilmic, but *India Song*, which substitutes the reception of the middle section for the traumatic ball at S. Thala, and *Son nom de Venise*, which substitutes other images for even this substitution, defer, take the place *of* the profilmic event, preventing it from taking place. The profilmic maintains a genitive relation to the film, but it is partitive rather than possessive.

The question the films and their repetitions compel us to ask is *where* can we locate possession when it is defined by an utterance which can not hold its own, but rather must always depend for its meaning on its context—is always only partial, ideologically inscribed? The performative utterance which distinguishes itself from the constantive does so by virtue of the fact that it is in possession of its own referent, which means that something is being done at the moment of the person's uttering. But when Austin allows himself to "step out into the desert of comparative precision," he momentarily loses track of this person who utters. Although the performative usually takes the form of the first-person singular, present indicative, active (as in Benveniste's "discourse"), sometimes this active and singular first person's presence is not indicated grammatically (or lexicographically) in the sentence. In other words, sometimes there is no "I" to indicate the utterance's source, who is thus left out of the "picture," or the "speech-situation." When this happens, when the purely grammatical context is not sufficient to define the "happiness" of the performance, Austin, who is at this point marking his break from "obsessional logicians," looks to the extra-grammatical, to another context, for clues. The speaker, not present in the grammatical sense, is "referred to" (Austin places the phrase in quotation marks to indicate his distance, the difference he implies by his use) in verbal utterances by the physical-speaking presence, in written utterances by the signature, of the source of the utterance. The utterance is thus "tethered" to its source, whose word becomes its bond. Derrida's critique of speech act theory, in "Signature, Event, Context" ("Sec"), ends with this discussion of signatures. There are, no one will deny, effects of signature observable in everyday life, but Derrida is interested in the xenopathology (the alterity tied to repetition), rather than the effect of these effects. In order for a signature to be effective, it must have a recognizable, that is, a repeatable form, and it must be able to function in the absence of the signatory. The pleasure, the constancy of the signature effect—the recognizability and economic circulation it ensures—is thus marked by the absence, even the radical absence—the death—of

the signatory. The utterance functions in the absence not only of its source, but also of its referent and its context. These absences are not merely "infelicities," but the condition, the mark of any utterance, any sign, oral or written. The identity or identifiability of a sign, that is, depends upon its being recognizable outside its source, referent, context—in their absence. Identity, therefore, is assured only by otherness, the otherness of the sign to itself. By way of clarification Derrida offers this:

> By virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of "communicating," precisely. One can perhaps come to recognize other possibilities in it by inscribing it or *grafting* it onto other chains. No context can entirely enclose it.[19]

It is this "untetherability" of the utterance which constructs it from the beginning in repetition and in otherness and suspends its source in the position of receiver.

The nosology of voices in *India Song*, the tabulation of the different disturbances between them and the visual images of the film, has been undertaken elsewhere.[20] It is sufficient to recall here that the voices are not "tethered" to the visual images as utterance to source, and so when one of the final, and most "authoritative" voices of the film is identified as Duras's own, it barely has the effect of "signature," barely closes a full meaning over the images. *Son nom de Venise* further attenuates this effect by contextualizing the voices differently. Placed within a film that images the hollows of deserted rooms, empty spaces, the voices become uncanny echoes of voices themselves.

They become, that is, the acoustic equivalents of the mirror reflections which reverberate through the previous film, which are so endemic to it that they make *India Song* a reverberation of itself. Duras has turned the canniness from her four-walled house, made it uncanny, by covering one of these walls with a mirror. The function of mirrors, of course, is to allow the self to observe itself. But the doubling, the repetition, which mirrors perform in order to serve the self's

19. Derrida, p. 182.

20. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier in her introductory essay in *L'Avant-Scène* and "The Disembodied Voice (*India Song*)," *Yale French Studies* no. 60 (1980). Also Michel Marie, "La parole dans le cinéma français contemporain: l'exemple d'*India Song*," and Marie-Françoise Grange, "Un systéme d'écriture: *India Song*," both in *Ça cinéma*, no. 19 (1979). See also Elizabeth Lyon's "The Cinema of Lol V. Stein," *Camera Obscura*, no. 6 (1980). Although this article focuses more on the primal scene of fantasy and less on the voices that narrate it, I include it here to indicate the extensive work that has already been done on the text of *India Song*. While my essay supports the work of textual analysis, it is obvious that it does not engage in it, even as it is committed to the analysis of one textual nexus. It inserts itself instead in the space of otherness opened up by textual analysis—its insistence, in principle, on the way particular texts *disturb* codes of cinema, their authority, binding, and finitude, the way they differ from the very codes which maintain their identity—inserts itself as a kind of contextual analysis.

Marguerite Duras. India Song. *1975.*

narcissistic regard and, hence, its self-protection, entails[21] an exteriorization as well which makes the self foreign to itself, makes it its own aggressor. It is the central section of *India Song* which has the highest concentration of mirror images. For this section is a series of alternating exterior and interior shots, and all the interiors are of the physical space of the drawing room, which has a mirrored rear wall. The diegetic space of this section is that of a reception, of the "pursuit of Anne-Marie Stretter, her hunting down by death, by . . . the Vice-Consul of Lahore."[22] Anne-Marie *Guardi*-Stretter, one should say, her Venetian name, a command to look, doubled by a foreign name and on *that* account hunted down by death. It is in this section—obedient to all the laws of classical beauty, laws of repetition, symmetry, harmony, in which perception is doubled, precisely a *re*ception—that the primary object of narcissism, Anne-Marie Guardi-Stretter, is

21. Part of the context, the total speech act which defines the performative, are the other propositions which the performative proposition "entails." To say that *p* entails *q* is to say that the truth of *q* is not in conflict with the truth of *p*. Those schooled in this type of logic will find the Freudian concept of the death drive, which is entailed by the pleasure principle, difficult to grasp.

22. Marguerite Duras, "Notes on *India Song*," *Camera Obscura*, no. 6 (1980), 45.

suspended in the space of a mirror, and is there, in the mirror, met by the principle of death. Her mirror image, which stands between her and the Vice-Consul, does not protect, but is turned instead to receive the bearer of her extinction. The Vice-Consul, exiled by a xenophobic, conservative society, invades it, nevertheless, as one of its own invited guests.

As we pass from a discussion of the relationship of the sound to the image track, of the "disembodied voices," their disembodiment from one film and grafting onto another, to a discussion of the diegetic space of bodies and sounds, we pass to an important criticism which is sometimes lodged against the work of Duras. Though everywhere her disjunctive use of sound and image is acknowledged as "progressive," her films are sometimes accused of replaying a regressive essentialism. The sensuousness of the images, the mysterious rhythms and silences of speech which yoke women to a sublime language of madness and love, the forests which are symbolic of the priority of nature, all suggest, so the interpretation goes, that it is the natural body which is the real voice of the films and that we are being asked to listen to its direct speech. Besides reiterating the point of this essay, that the disjunction, through doubling, of speech from itself renders direct speech—the full presence of speech to a total context within which it takes place—impossible, something more must be said about this relation of body to speech, and of body to speech act theory.

Bodies act, but do speeches . . . act? *Do* they, really, or is this just a metaphor? Perhaps not, since even psychoanalysis through its own metaphor, the transference, asserts that we can do things with words, cure things with talk. Derrida's critique of speech act theory is founded in psychoanalytic theory, its concept of the unconscious which undoes Austin's concept of context as a fully determinable entity. This unconscious is the effect of speech, of the rupture from the body which is the condition of speech and of representation in general. To say, however, that this rupture excludes the body from speech and from the psyche which speech structures, to say that the somatic and the psychic bear no relation to each other is to misread the theory which began with Freud and his compulsive return to the biological order. It is in the works of the French psychoanalysts, Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, and the Hungarian, Nicholas Abraham, that we find the most extended analyses of the somatic-psychic relationship which is inherent in Freud's theories. Abraham, in "The Shell and the Kernel," deals directly with this relationship as it is developed in *The Language of Psycho-analysis* and Derrida introduces himself (his own theoretical complicity) and Abraham's work in "Me-Psychoanalysis," and "Fors." Briefly, the relation, specified in all these works, between the two terms, soma and psyche, is one of mission, of psychical representatives, delegates, and foreign service. Laplanche and Pontalis define "psychical representative" in their dictionary of psychoanalysis:

> This term cannot be understood save by reference to the concept of *instinct*—a concept which in Freud's view bridges the gap between the

> somatic and the mental. On the somatic side, the instinct has its source in organic phenomena . . . but at the same time, by virtue of its aim and of the objects to which it becomes attached, the instinct undergoes a 'vicissitude' that is essentially psychical in nature. This borderline position of the instinct no doubt accounts for Freud's calling upon the notion of representative—by which he means a kind of *delegation*—of the soma within the psyche . . . though in principle he is nothing more than the proxy of his mandator, the delegate . . . enters into a new system of relationships which is liable to change his perspective and cause him to depart from the directives he has been given.[23]

Laplanche, in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis,* extends this Freudian analogy into a detailed account of anaclisis,[24] or, as he translates it, "propping"—the process by which the drive leaning on the instinct, much as a delegate leans on the mandator by performing its function, deviates metaphorically from its aim and metonymically from its object. The deviation is caused by fantasy, the introjection, the reflection, of a scene of satisfaction into the subject. The fantasy is, of course, not the scene itself, but a representation which points to its absence. The instinct, turned away from the vital order of the biological towards the object of the displacement, is turned onto the subject itself, wherein the fantasy resides, to become the drive. It is this moment of reflection which constitutes sexuality, which is nothing else but this perverse movement, this deflection of instinct by fantasy. And as the fantasy disjoins the biological subject who needs from the sexual subject who desires, as it is an *infraction,* a trauma, it is the first psychic pain. The sexual drive which emerges from the fantasy is thus established as primarily masochistic. The ego is the first fantasmatic, the first sexual, object which is produced. In defining the *limits* of the psychic apparatus (as its surface, which is contiguous with the body and everything else outside, and its form, which is a metaphor of the body) it also defines the threshold through which pain breaks. The ego, then, which is the ballast of the psychic system, that which binds energies and seeks equilibrium by maintaining them at a certain minimal level, seeks, in short, the preservation of the system, introduces a masochism which threatens the system with annihilation.

From this brief summary we can make two important points about the relationship of the body to the psychic apparatus: although we cannot say that the body causes the psyche, we can say that it has a structuring function, is its

23. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1973, pp. 364–365.

24. As it is translated by Laplanche and by psychoanalysis generally, *anaclisis* comes from the Greek verb, *anaklino*, which means "to lean one thing against another," "to lean back." In fact, Liddell and Scott define it as a noun which is derived from the verb, *anakaleo*, which means "to call up, especially the dead; to call back, especially from exile." This definition seems more appropriate and accurate.

organizing metaphor; body and psyche are related through the radical *insufficiency* of the former. The biological fact of prematuration entails that the satisfaction of the infant is attainable only from the field of another, or more precisely, of others, since the supplementary field of the other, the body's context, can never be saturated, determined fully. Desire corresponds to what Derrida, in "Sec," calls *restance*, a neologism translated as "nonpresent remainder." It is a metonym, the contiguous margin of body and psyche, the measure of their difference, their inadequation.

Baudry, in "Ideological Effects," links his project to Derrida's by citing his essay "Freud and the Scene of Writing." The two projects are, indeed, generally consonant—both attempt to define the ideological stake of the Western metaphysical tradition in maintaining a concept of an originating subject and— specifically in these essays—both are concerned with the relationship between the historico-technical fact of the nonpsychic apparatus and the analogy with the psychic apparatus which it makes possible. But there are also important differences. Baudry describes the "return effect" in cinema as the repetition of a time when "representation and perception were not yet differentiated." Derrida's essay, on the other hand, is a direct refutation of such a distinction, is "polemical on the very threshold of what we persist in calling perception."[25] Perception is, according to his reading of Freud, from the very first, repetition and representation, which is to say that it exists only as a relationship of the body to otherness. Desire is, for Baudry, a "nostalgia for a state in which desire has been satisfied through the transfer of a perception to a formation resembling hallucination which seems to be activated by the cinematic apparatus."[26] Derrida would disagree, insisting instead upon his concept of *restance*. Desire has definitely never been satisfied; it is instead that which is missed by satisfaction. This error, in considering desire as a matter of sufficiency rather than insufficiency, is compounded by Baudry's further, concluding speculation that unconscious desire represents itself to the subject through the cinematic apparatus. By folding this summary statement over his own analysis of the ideology of scientific invention, the system of science, he begins to undermine his project. Desire becomes an originating force with an attainable end and systems of ideology are given an unconscious aim. The cinematic apparatus becomes, once again, a tool that restores the integrity of the subject, supplies the subject's demand. Derrida avoids this incipient anthropomorphism by relating the technical apparatus of the writing pad to the insufficiency of the psychic apparatus, by exposing its supplementary (rather than complementary) status. The invention becomes the effect of the psyche's Being-in-the-worldness, its insertion into an otherness upon which it depends. It is proof of the psyche's inability to maintain itself even as it is the psyche's metaphor. There may be no way of getting

25. Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, ed. and trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 113.
26. Baudry, p. 121.

around the observation that the apparatus fulfills an ancient dream of man, but at least we can see by Derrida's analysis that this dream is itself a psychic supplement, the indication within the subject of its unfulfillment.

It may be necessary to add that the target of this essay is neither Metz nor Baudry, both of whose work has made some of these arguments possible, has propelled the valuable work of textual analysis as well as the work on the apparatus. Rather it is an attempt to locate those points to which the *reductio ad absurdum* of their arguments attaches itself. In "The Uncanny," Freud quotes and affirms this important observation of Otto Rank: "The 'immortal soul' was the first 'double' of the body. This invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams, which is fond of representing castration by a doubling or multiplication of the genital symbol."[27] It is important to guard against a tendency in film theory to make of language or the cinematic apparatus an "immortal soul" with a life all its own, unthreatened by the death drive, to guard against a "multiplication of the genital symbol" by subscribing to a nominalism that begins with and repeats endlessly the name of the father. This can only be done by recognizing that language and the apparatus are constructed out of relations of otherness, which means also, of otherness to the body. To say that there is no outside of language, no extra-textual, is not to say that there is an inside which is not Imaginary. Being, in short, is no more housed in language than it is in the body; it resides rather in the otherness of body and language each to the other. Otherness, death, the body are the preconditions of language and are operant there, represented in its repetitions. What is most compelling about the compulsion to repeat is the way it returns difference always at the expense of the same. And desire is the xenogenetic offspring as well as the compulsion of this difference of repetition. It is always as other, in some other place, that desire is. Therefore, as Lacan is fond of repeating, the question which it poses for the subject is not *what* (this is a question for demand), but *where* it desires.

Laplanche makes a crucial distinction between the hallucination of satisfaction and satisfaction through hallucination. Hallucination of satisfaction, "the reproduction of the pure feeling of discharge even in the absence of discharge," is, in fact, impossible to conceive. For what need would provoke the organism to hallucinate if satisfaction were self-contained? Satisfaction through hallucination, "by virtue of *the very existence* of the hallucinatory phenomena,"[28] implies the insufficiency of the organism which must supplement itself, introduce into itself fantasmatic objects produced by the symbolizing mechanisms of hallucination. Those theorists who maintain that at the cinema only men can look would have to

27. Freud, "The Uncanny," p. 141.
28. Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 71.

deny this very existence of cinema, of representation in general, would have to ask us to believe that we hallucinate satisfaction.

The cinema of Marguerite Duras not only exists, but exists to point out the very conditions of its existence. It makes a statement against a patriarchal monadology by representing the xenophobia at work within pleasure itself. To call it essentialist by merely pointing to its mysterious rhythms and its silences is to invoke an argument which may itself be essentialist. It is to ignore the importance as well as the limits of context, the predicative movement of conflict. For the mysterious, the exotic of place, is set precisely and conflictually within the familiar of the same, and the repetition of trauma, of difference, within the repetition of pleasure. It presents not a cinema of the sublime, of the sublimity of desire, but rather of the limits of the pleasure principle to which desire attests, through its disjunction of image and sound, a hendiadys of desire.

The Field of Language in Film

PETER WOLLEN

The three films which Laura Mulvey and I have made together (*Penthesilea*, 1974; *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977; *AMY!*, 1980) all attack a single set of problems which are at the same time political, psychoanalytic, and semiotic. According to the Lacanian schema, each of us is subjected to the symbolic order, the superimposition of social law and regulation on the needs and instincts of nature. This symbolic order, this law, is authorized in the name of the father, the third term which intervenes to break up the dyad of mother and child at the joint moment of entry into the Oedipus complex and acquisition of language. Thus the symbolic shatters the imaginary plenitude of the mother-child relationship and restructures the course of our identifications. We must find our places, as men or women, within that symbolic order, an order which is constituted through verbal language and on the alienation of sign from object.

The patriarchal character of this symbolic order necessarily makes it problematic for women and *a fortiori* for feminists. In our films we have tried to investigate the limits of a validation of the imaginary (the myth of the Amazons, the dyadic mother-child relationship, the exemplary heroine) as a form of resistance to patriarchy and the possibility and implications of transforming the symbolic order to one which is nonpatriarchal. Since the symbolic order is tied to the acquisition of language, this has involved paying particular attention to the place of verbal language within our films, which in many respects are interrogations of language itself, symbolic quests in search of the place from which women could utter the repressed counter-meanings of patriarchal discourse.

One possible strategy, which we have always rejected, would be to avoid verbal language altogether and produce a kind of film which, lacking the explicit presence of words, was made only of icons and indices, images and traces. From the beginning of cinema, again and again, we can find an impulse on the part of filmmakers to banish language and reduce film to the status of a "pure" visual art. Not only was the advent of sound resisted (seen as tributary to verbal language) but there was a campaign, within silent cinema, against the written intertitle, both in commercial and avant-garde film. Up to this day, many avant-garde filmmakers persist in refusing verbal language or reducing it to a minimal and epiphe-

nomenal role. Another possibility, the inverse of this, would be to restrict ourselves to writing and not make films at all.

In fact, however, it is precisely the interface between image and word which concerns us. It is here that sexual difference, the subject of our films, takes shape. To restrict ourselves to the imaginary would be to restrict ourselves to the (prolonged) pre-Oedipal phase which, even if it could be interpreted as a form of resistance, would involve, in psychoanalytic terms, both a repression and a regression, and, in political terms, a flight from the society in which we are in fact living and from history. To restrict ourselves to the symbolic, on the other hand, would involve a denial (or, at least, an undervaluation) of the persistence of the pre-Oedipal and of the imaginary within and alongside the symbolic, ceaselessly structured by it yet escaping it in the form of desire. This would be to deny history in another way, by revoking wish and memory in their full force.

Verbal language is a crucial component of film, both as signifier and as signified, as crucial as the image. Each is deprived of a dimension of its sense in the absence of the other. This is not to argue, of course, for a mutual reinforcement of the two—standard practice in commercial cinema, where word and image are used to add more and more reciprocal redundancy. On the contrary, it is in the dialectic of fit and misfit that the value of working with both word and image lies, as well as in the heterogeneity of the registers of each. Language is the component of film which both threatens to regulate the spectator, assigned a place within the symbolic order, and also offers the hope of liberation from the closed world of identification and the lure of the image. Language, therefore, is both a friend and a foe, against which we must be on our guard, whose help we need but whose claims we must combat. Hence the fractured and dislodged body of language in our films.

*

Penthesilea is constructed around two theoretical axes—the myth of the Amazons, shown as a palimpsest, whose genealogy reveals in every repetition its status as an inscription of male fears and fantasies, and the symbolic blockage of woman's voice, unable to find a place from which to speak against the order of patriarchy. The myth can only be reinscribed as a myth of and for women when the historic place of women is changed. The film then sets up a problem, contrasting the graphic inscriptions on the picture track with the voice on the sound track, unable to speak its desire. This exclusion from the symbolic leads to the demand for a change in the field of language, but without any indication of how this might come about.

In all three films we have made, woman's voice predominates rather than man's. In *Penthesilea,* there are four modes in which we hear this voice. In the first section of the film, we hear women's cries and groans—the absence of language is underlined by the fact that we are seeing a version of Kleist's play, *Penthesilea,* renowned for its language and its status as literature, reduced to a mime. In the

third section, we hear a woman's voice, with music, striving to articulate sounds into a language, but not yet succeeding, poised still on the brink. In the fourth section, we hear the words of an American suffragist, Jessie Ashley, who ends by lamenting her inability to speak as she desires and proclaiming her return to silence, contrasting her sense of failure with the delusion of success among those women who have learned to speak from within the patriarchal order, to accept the place of servitude, and its language, in asking for women's rights from their masters. Finally, at the very end of the film, the actress who had played the part of Penthesilea in the mime removes her make-up and calls for a new language, direct to camera, though hesitatingly, as if unused to speaking.

The emphasis throughout is on exclusion from language (the only man's voice—mine—is the only articulate one) or rather on exclusion from the possibility of speaking against the symbolic order because of the insistent subjection of women within it. Thus to speak, to quote the words of Lacan which form the epigraph to the third section, is to use those "seals of phobia," symptomatic emblems of male fears, which thereby become "blazons of self-punishment" when adopted by women. *Riddles of the Sphinx* goes a stage further than *Penthesilea.* It sets out to capture not only the predicament of women, but the outlines of a prospect of change. It takes as its starting point not the Amazons, the site of imaginary identification, but the sphinx, interpreted metaphorically as the repressed signifier of the mother in the female unconscious. To be heard, woman's voice must come from this place, the place of the sphinx.

The concept of the "female unconscious" does not imply any essential or natural "femaleness" of the unconscious. It gives a name to what was described by Freud in his paper "A child is being beaten"—because the trajectory of the girl through the Oedipus complex is different from that of the boy, so the pattern of repression is different for her and the genealogy of her fantasies and unconscious desires. Freud uses the beating fantasies of men and women to trace quite different and distinct histories of repression and regression, based on the different attitudes taken up by boys and girls within the Oedipal constellation, quite distinct contents of the male and female unconscious, in effect. Here, as elsewhere, he openly argues against "essentialist" explanations: the contents of the unconscious, together with sexual difference itself, are historically formed.

In *Riddles of the Sphinx*, we were concerned with the fact that whereas within the patriarchal order the image of the mother was offered to women for identification, her symbolic place was occluded by that of the father, and this involved a repression—perhaps a primal repression. We conceived of this place of the maternal instance, metaphorically like that of the sphinx, as "outside the gates of the city" and returning, for Oedipus, as the repressed always must, in the fateful prize of marriage to his actual mother, Jocasta, awarded to him for his destruction of the power of the sphinx by answering her riddle. By producing order in the symbolic (answering the riddle), Oedipus produced disorder in the real (incestuous marriage). Thus the mother, whose symbolic power he has destroyed, returns

to destroy him as he assumes the mantle of patriarchy. The myth, like that of the Amazons, is sealed by male phobia.

The sphinx, however, unlike Penthesilea, exists differentially within language. Penthesilea is locked in the imaginary symmetry of struggle and love with Achilles, but the sphinx speaks from a distinct place with a distinct form of language. The riddle is metaphoric, interrogative, and incomplete; it involves wordplay, enigma, and disguise. The language of Oedipus, by contrast, is transparent, assertive, and closed. It is important to stress that the sphinx represents an alternative form of language—she is not outside language as she is outside the city of Thebes, the realm of patriarchy, but is able to offer a different discourse, potentially the nucleus of a nonpatriarchal symbolic, based on a different Oedipal structure—or, perhaps it would be better to say, a different mode of entry into language, kinship, and history.

The voices in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, like those in *Penthesilea*, are predominantly those of women. The only man's voice heard is that of Louise's husband, Chris, who speaks a few lines, redolent of the goodwill and sound sense of patriarchy in its full banality. The first woman's voice is that of Laura Mulvey, speaking, as I did in *Penthesilea*, from the position of filmmaker. Thus the symbolic role of author is opened for female identification. Moreover, Laura not only speaks to introduce the voice of the sphinx, but also listens finally to the voice of the sphinx herself, thus repositioning herself as author. As she listens, Laura writes: her inscription is a function of the voice to which she is listening. She is no longer origin of the discourse but an instance of its intertextuality. The tape recorder to which she listens, like the video monitors at the end of *Penthesilea*, represents an access to memory which produces a new discourse.

The second voice is that of the sphinx. The sphinx is introduced first on the picture track, with lips sealed: she is to be voice-off, her symbolic function separated from her image, which must be dissolved before she can be heard. Even then, she can only be heard with difficulty, "buried" beneath the music. The voice of the sphinx has three modes: poetic (structured around allusion to the role and experience of motherhood); questioning (about politics and the unconscious); and remembering. This third mode is the most complex because in it the voice of the sphinx uses the first person pronoun with an unanchored reference, shifting between herself, Louise, and Louise's daughter (perhaps) in an ambiguous play of signification of the shifter. It is no longer possible to "fill" the symbolic place of the sphinx with a single fixed identification. There is a dispersal of the subject, dissociated from a single ego or consciousness.

The last words of the sphinx appear on the tape to which Laura listens. They run as follows:

> I was looking at an island in the glass. It was an island of comfort in a sea of blood. It was lonely on the island. I held tight. It was night and, in the night, I felt the past. Each drop was red. Blood flows thicker than

Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. Riddles of the Sphinx. *1977.*

milk, doesn't it? Blood shows on silk, doesn't it? It goes quicker. Spilt. No use trying. No use replying. Spilt. It goes stickier. The wind blew along the surface of the sea. It bled and bled. The island was an echo of the past. It was an island of comfort, which faded as it glinted in the glass.

Like a riddle, the sphinx's words are based on repetition (of words, syntactic forms, and rhymes), metaphor, wordplay, and subtexts—especially of the two proverbs, "Blood is thicker than water," with its reference to the order of kinship, condensed with other senses of blood, having to do with menstruation and injury; and "No use crying over spilt milk," with its similar reference to mother's milk and its displacements, via "water," to the mother-child dyad (subordinated to the order of kinship) and, via "spilt," to bloodshed. Finally, blood too is linked to water, to the sea, and hence to the womb. It is a riddle without an answer, whose meaning is dispersed.

The third set of voices are those of women placed within the diegesis and the symbolic order. We do not hear the voice of Louise, the protagonist, until the moment we see her face, the moment when she is parted from her daughter and enters the public realm. Embedded within the dialogue are three monologues: one, a political voice, speaks about the attitudes of trade unions to women's demands for day-care nurseries; the second, a theoretical voice, speaks both about her own child and, in Lacanian terms, about "weaning from the dyad"; and the third, the voice of the protagonist, Louise, reads the narrative of a dream from her friend's diary. This series of voices signals a movement from the politics of consciousness through theory to the problems of the unconscious, leading finally to Louise's attempts to read the language of hieroglyphs, a metaphor for the enigmatic voice of the sphinx.

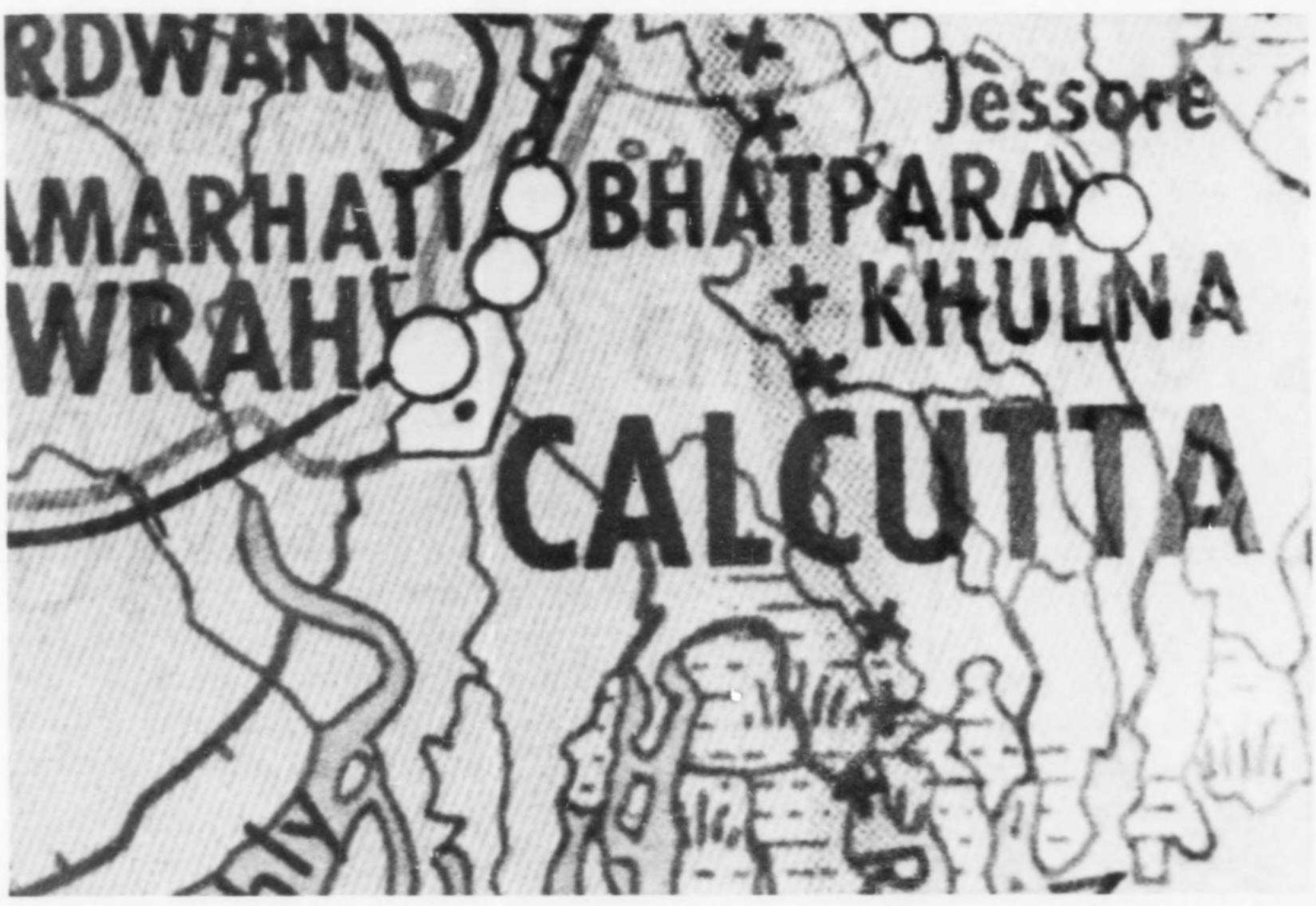
The theoretical voice, that of Mary Kelly, which supplies some elements of a metalanguage, is distanced from the mainstream of the diegesis in order to mark the movement to a different level of language. This speech could not be spoken by the sphinx because the sphinx uses not a metalanguage, but a counter-language. Access to a metalanguage, like access to memory, is, however, a condition of possibility for a counter-language, a necessary phase of Louise's journey through the word; and hence it is crucial that she (and the spectator of the film) should encounter this difficult theoretical text and, of course, that it should be spoken by a woman.

The third film, *AMY!*, recapitulates and extends the registers of language and voice used in the first two. The key speech, placed in symbolic contrast to the male voices of newspaper headlines and popular love song, is a montage of fragments from a number of texts. It is impossible to identify a continuous source for the writing, which is heterogeneous and disharmonic, but different in form from the experiments in counter-language attempted in *Riddles of the Sphinx*. It is placed in a metaphoric relationship to the perversity of Amy's flight, the thrill of which is suppressed as it is rewritten into the form of legend, based once again on male fantasy, within the patriarchal order. This speech is placed between her refusal of the name-of-the-father and the identity assigned her by the patriarchy and her transcription into a fetishized emblem within the museum-morgue of patriarchal legend (the plane in which she made her flight suspended motionless from the roof of the Science Museum).

*

The project of a counter-language necessarily involves more than the ways in which verbal language is used on the sound track. Words also appear on the picture track, in the form of titles, epigraphs, intertitles, and superimpositions. In *AMY!* the flight around which the film pivots is presented as a process of reading, as Amy's journey is followed across the map. The text is both a litany and an itinerary through a series of languages, as the morphology of the place-names changes, until the original English is reencountered finally in Australia and the flight is stopped, to be transcribed into the language of the Empire in legend. The map, too, is contrasted with the letters that Amy burns in an earlier scene, which in turn are transformed into the language of the engineering manual and the daily drill of the mechanic.

There is another sense, however, in which the concept of language relates to the picture track, apart from the presence of written words as "graphic enclaves" within the sequence of images. Freud himself described how the mise-en-scène of the dream produced a form of displaced writing, a pictograph, rebus, or emblem. In our three films the images themselves are designed to have this kind of pictographic or emblematic force. The films have a module construction, in which individual shots are treated as tableaux, as text rather than representation. Thus,



Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. AMY! *1980.*

in *Penthesilea*, each section is transcribed through a different cultural form: mime and gesture, writing, painting and sculpture, cinema, and, finally, video. The governing image of the last section is that of memory as a form of writing (Freud's "Mystic Writing-Pad") by which the previous sections of the film are interwoven, as in Griffith's *Intolerance*, through retranscription.

The camera, too, is treated as a *camera-stylo* (camera-pen), in Astruc's phrase. Camera position and camera movement are elements of design (*disegno*) in the historic sense: frame determines the geometrical limits of the picture-space and movement inscribes the trajectory of the frame within a geometrically interpretable space. Thus 360-degree pans, which make up most of *Riddles of the Sphinx*, inscribe the form of a circle; tracks inscribe straight lines; the complex camera movement of the second section of *Penthesilea* inscribes an elaborate arabesque, and so on. Cinematography itself is a form of inscription, rather than a capture and reproduction of the world.

In *Penthesilea* an epigraph drawn from Mallarmé suggests that the face of a mime and, by extension, the screen itself, is like "a not-yet-written page." I was always struck by the Mallarméan resonances of Hitchcock's dictum that "there is a rectangle up there—a white rectangle in a theater—and it has to be filled." A film is like a book whose pages are extended in time, to be inscribed with graphic signs. The project of a counter-language, then, is one which implies a transformation of the symbolic order of these graphic inscriptions, neither a refusal of "writing" and a relapse into a realm of the image as such, nor an acceptance of the canonical codes of the dominant narrative cinema, the cinematic law, so to speak. Here, of course, the same attention must be paid to the place of the look as is paid to the place of the voice on the sound track.

Film in the House of the Word

HOLLIS FRAMPTON

In 1928 Sergei Eisenstein published a brief manifesto on film sound that has met with no direct critique or reply in more than half a century. In his statement, written within a euphoric moment of convergence between theory and practice that gave us *October* and *The General Line,* and suggested to him the grand project of an "intellectual montage," Eisenstein began an effort that precipitated in a group of empty centers and their satellite notes and essays: the hypothetical cinematic "realizations" of three written texts—*An American Tragedy, Ulysses,* and *Capital.* Eisenstein himself, under the extreme pressures of the Stalinist "restoration," largely abandoned his research into intellectual montage for extended meditations on synaesthesia, the microstructure of the frame, and the architectonics of film narrative, in a resurrection of the quest for a fusion of the arts; the man who directed a production of *Die Walküre* in Moscow must have seen, in the musical drama of Wagner, a prefiguration of some of film's boldest ambitions. These ambitions still obtain; that research, advanced by Vertov, has never entirely languished.

"The dream of a sound film has come true. . . . The whole world is talking about the silent thing that has learned to talk." Eisenstein awakened to the factualization of desire with surprised ambivalence, as if discovering the Silent Thing to have been carved by Pygmalion—for film, perennially associated with music, had never been generically silent. It had been mute, once an apprentice mime in a precinematic (and prelinguistic) theater, now a journeyman aspiring to an intricate mimesis of thought, to whose construction a sound-on-film technology was as vital as cinematography itself.

It was not simply sound, then, that threatened to destroy all the "present formal achievements" of montage, but the dubious gift of speech, the Prime Instance of language, the linear decoding of the terrain of thought into a stream of utterance. Thus film, from its first word, was to be perceived in a double posture of defilement and fulfillment, and Eisenstein found himself present at a rite of passage; the end of the Edenic childhood of montage was accompanied by a wistful vision of "fading virginity and purity."

The syndrome of logophobia has been pandemic throughout recent practice

in the visual arts. "How many colors are there in a field of grass," Stan Brakhage asks in *Metaphors on Vision*, "for a crawling baby who has never heard of green?" We are prompted to enter into complicity with the author: the word is anaesthetic, truncating the report of an innocent sensorium, depriving thought of that direct Vision of a universe of ideal forms that would pierce, sweep away, the clutter of denatured simulacra created by language; and so the infant, traversing the fulsome excellence of a Garden that somehow exists without the intervention of the Word, must see an infinitude of colors.

Others reason that the crawling baby sees no "colors" at all, since the notion of color is a complex abstraction, closely bound to language and culture (there are natural languages that make no distinction between "green" and "blue") that brackets a neurophysiological response to a portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. The field of grass is without form, and void.

During painting's culminating assault on illusion, in the 1950s and '60s, one often heard the epithet "literary" applied as a pejorative to work that retained vestiges of recognizable (and thereby nameable) pretext sufficient to the identification of an embedding deep space, although the presence of the word as a graphic sign (in Robert Motherwell's *Je t'aime* paintings, for instance, or Frank Stella's *Mary Lou* series) was accepted with routine serenity. One heard Barnett Newman admonish Larry Poons when the younger painter had published, as a show poster, a photograph incorporating an assertive pun on his own name; saw Carl Andre in ardent moral outrage at the very mention of Magritte's name; witnessed the monolithic public silence of the generation of abstract expressionists.

The terms of the indictment were clear: language was suspect as the defender of illusion, and both must be purged together in the interest of a rematerialization of a tradition besieged by the superior illusions of photography. Only the poetics of the title escaped inquisition, for a time. If there is some final genetic bond between language and illusion, then the atavistic persistence of illusion—fossil traces, upon the painterly surface, of thickets, vistas of torn gauze, spread hides, systems of tinted shadows, receding perspectives of arches—affirms, at the last, the utter permeance of language.

Now we are not perfectly free to make of language an agonist in a theater of desire which is itself defined by the limits of language. Every artistic dialogue that concludes in a decision to ostracize the word is disingenuous to the degree that it succeeds in concealing from itself its fear of the word—and the source of that fear: that language, in every culture, and before it may become an arena of discourse, is, above all, an expanding arena of power, claiming for itself and its wielders all that it can seize, and relinquishing nothing. In this regard, Eisenstein is characteristically abrupt, claiming for film, in accord with Lenin's own assessment of the revolution's priorities, something of the power of language: "At present, the film, working with visual images, has a powerful affect on a person and has rightfully taken one of the first places among the arts."

Film, like all the arts, was to instruct, to move; its considerable privilege

derived, ironically, from a double illiteracy: its diegesis was legible to a mass populace that could not read, and its formal strategies were largely illegible to a burgeoning elite that could. Eisenstein was at some pains to preserve film's claim to political efficacy: in the midst of the short text he paused to offer a gratuitous recantation for the "formalist" errors of *October*, submitting that the advent of sound would spare the director from resorting to "fanciful montage structures, arousing the fearsome eventuality of meaninglessness and reactionary decadence." Invoking the power of language, he issued preliminary disclaimers for near occasions of sin not yet contemplated; in 1932, in *A Course in Treatment*, he was to write of "wonderful sketches," never to be expanded, for montage structures that anticipate a much later historical moment in film, fanciful enough to normalize the "formalist jackstraws" of *Man with a Movie Camera*.

Sound, we read, will ameliorate film's "imperfect method," improve its thermodynamic efficiency: what brings the menace of speech abolishes writing and the mode of reading that accompanies it, eliding those discontinuities in an illusionist continuum introduced by the intrusion of the graphic intertitle. Parenthetically, as well, it will restore to equilibrium an imbalance in film's psychological distance from the spectator by obviating "certain inserted close-ups" that have played a merely "explanatory" role, "burdening" montage composition, decreasing its tempo. However, and above all, complete dissynchrony between sound and image is to be maintained (Eisenstein did not, for the moment, insist on more drastic disjunctions), since the permanent "adhesion" of sound to a given image, as of a name to its referent, increases that image's "inertia" and its independence of meaning.

Thus far, we find no single imperative that requires Eisenstein's logophobia. But suddenly (the adverb is peculiarly his own: an intertitle that announces the massacre on the Odessa Steps in *Potemkin*) one may recognize, within the diction of a text that adroitly warns us away from language, a crucial agenda: the preservation of a dim outline of what it is that he is so anxious to protect from language. One may imagine something whose parts are to be denied, and protected from, independence and mutual adhesion; it is not to be burdened, nor its inertia increased, nor its tempo retarded; it is to remain portable across cultural boundaries, and its elaboration and development are not to be impeded.

There are only two hypothetical symbolic systems whose formal descriptions meet such requirements. One is a universal natural language; the other is a perfect machine. As one recalls that the two are mutually congruent, one remembers that Eisenstein was at once a gifted linguist and an artist haunted by the claims of language—and also, by training, an engineer. It seems possible to suggest that he glimpsed, however quickly, a project beyond the intellectual montage: the construction of a machine, very much like film, more efficient than language, that might, entering into direct competition with language, transcend its speed, abstraction, compactness, democracy, ambiguity, power—a project, moreover, whose ultimate promise was the constitution of an external critique of language

itself. If such a thing were to be, a consequent celestial mechanics of the intellect might picture a body called Language, and a body called Film, in symmetrical orbit about one another, in perpetual and dialectical motion.

It is natural that considerable libidinal energy should be expended to protect such fragile transitions in thought. The ritual gesture that wards off language also preserves language, as well as film, for a later moment of parity.

All of Eisenstein's bleakest predictions came true; the commercial success of the talkies polarized the development of a system of distribution that virtually guaranteed the stagnation of the sound track as an independent and coeval information channel sustaining the growth of a complex montage in consensual simultaneity.

Even if the requirements of socialist realism had not supervened, the vicissitude of specialism might well have prevented even Sergei Eisenstein, the director, from attempting the expected "first experimental work" with sound along the lines of "distinct non-synchronization" with images.

Nevertheless, the work goes on, and filmmakers have responded with increasing rigor to the urgent contradictions he first expounded. Not through immediate design and cathexis, but by way of a historical process of the exhaustion of its alternatives, the deferred dream of the sound film presents itself to be dreamed again.

*

A man condemned to death begged Alexander to pardon him, vowing, given a year's reprieve, that he would teach Bucephalus (who already spoke Bulgarian, Farsi, and Greek) to sing. When his friends derided him for a fool who merely postponed the inevitable, he replied: "A year is a long time. The king may die; I may die. Or—who knows!—maybe the horse will learn to sing!"

Looking Myself in the Mouth

Sliding Out of Narrative and Lurching Back In, Not Once but . . . Is the "New Talkie" Something to Chirp About? From Fiction to Theory (Kicking and Screaming) Death of the Maiden, I Mean Author, I Mean Artist . . . No, I Mean Character A Revisionist Narrativization of/with Myself as Subject (Still Kicking) via John Cage's Ample Back

YVONNE RAINER

I. *A Likely Story: What I Know and What I Think I Feel*

She says, "Yes, I was talking with Joan Braderman about the subject in signifying practice, and she brought up the idea that everything is fiction except theory."

Hard as she tries to focus on this most intriguing idea, she finds herself distracted by the recognition of an annoying habit to which she reverts whenever discussing theory, viz., a tendency to transform theory into narrative by interpolating what she calls "concrete experience" in the form of a first-person pronoun and progressive verb, such as "Yes, I was talking with . . ." or "I've been reading this book by . . ." or, even worse, "Yesterday as I was walking down Broadway I was thinking . . ." The obvious motive might be to bolster or support her own argument by referring to known and respected figures who have advanced similar arguments, or to make an analogy that might illuminate the issue at hand. There is, however, another way to describe the phenomenon which points to either a conflict or a contradiction—depending on how one looks at it.

(Artist as Exemplary Sufferer)
(Artist as Self-Absorbed Individualist)
(Artist as Changer of the Subject)

She knows that the content of her thoughts consists entirely of what she's read, heard, spoken, dreamt, and thought about what she's read, heard, spoken, dreamt. She knows that thought is not something privileged, autonomous, originative, and that the formulation "Cogito ergo sum" is, to say the least,

inaccurate. She knows too that her notion of "concrete experience" is an idealized, fictional site where contradictions can be resolved, "personhood" demonstrated, and desire fulfilled forever. Yet all the same the magical, seductive, narrative properties of "Yes, I was talking . . ." draw her with an inevitability that makes her slightly dizzy. She stands trembling between fascination and skepticism. She moves obstinately between the two.

"Yes, I am constructed in language," she thinks. "And no, I don't think I've ever really advocated a 'restored integrity of the self.'" She pauses, bites at a cuticle, and finally—in a burst of sheer exasperation—faces the camera squarely and blurts, "But when I say, 'Yes, I was thinking. . . ,' you'd just better believe me!"

> Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.
>
> —Roland Barthes[1]

(Artist as Medium)
(Artist as Ventriloquist)

II. *The Cagean Knot*

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the ongoing modernist assault took as its targets certain assumptions by then codified in the institution of American modern dance: the necessity of musical accompaniment; the inadmissability—and necessity of transformation—of everyday movement; the rigid and inviolable separations between humorous, tragic, dramatic, and lyrical forms; the existence of rules governing sequence climax and development of movement ("theme and variations"), and the relationship of movement to music, clichéd notions of coherence and unity, and exact conditions under which "dissonance" might replace "harmony" (as in "modern" themes of "alienation"). You heard a lot of Bartok at dance concerts in those days.

The forerunners of this assault were Merce Cunningham and John Cage.
(Artist as Innovator)
In mutual determination they succeeded in opening a veritable Pandora's Box, an act that launched in due course a thousand dancers', composers', writers', and performance artists' ships, to say nothing of the swarms of salubriously nasty ideas it loosed upon an increasingly general populace, ideas which are apparent even today in fluxus-like punk performances. I would venture to say that by now the

1. "The Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 145.

"Cagean effect" is almost as endemic as the encounter group. I say "Cagean" and not "Cunninghamian" because it is Cage who has articulated and published the concepts which I shall be addressing here and which have been especially problematic in my own development. It is not my intention to force the lid shut on John's Box, but rather to examine certain troubling implications of his ideas even as they continue to lend themselves to amplification in art-making.

Only a man born with a sunny disposition could have said:

> This play, however, is an affirmation of life, not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements on creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.
>
> —John Cage[2]

(Artist as Consumer)

Let's not come down too heavily on the goofy naiveté of such an utterance, on its invocation of J. J. Rousseau, on Cage's adherence to the messianic ideas of Bucky Fuller some years back, with their total ignoring of worldwide struggles for liberation and the realities of imperialist politics, on the suppression of the question, "*Whose* life is so excellent and at what cost to others?" Let's focus on the means by which we will awaken to this excellent life: by getting our minds and desires out of the way, by making way for an art of indeterminacy to be practiced by everyone, an art existing in the gap between life and art. All this and more has been stated hundreds of times in more ways than one.

Who am I and what is my debt to John Cage? My early dances (1960–62) employed chance procedures or improvisation to determine sequences of choreographed movement phrases. At that point, for some of us who performed at Judson Church in New York City, repetition, indeterminate sequencing, sequence arrived at by aleatory methods, and ordinary/untransformed movement were a slap-in-the-face to the old order, and, dimly beknownst to us, reached straight

(Artist as Transgressor)

back to the surrealists via the expatriated Duchamp. Our own rationales were clear, on-the-offensive, and confident. We were "opening up possibilities" and "thwarting expectations and preconceptions." A frequent response to the bafflement of the uninitiated was "Why not?" We were received with horror and enthusiasm. I can't beguile myself into thinking that the world has not been the same since.

What is John Cage's gift to some of us who make art? This: the relaying of conceptual precedents for methods of nonhierarchical, indeterminate organization which can be used with a critical intelligence, that is, selectively and

2. Quoted in Richard Barnes, "Our Distinguished Dropout," in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, New York, Praeger, 1970, p. 51.

productively, not, however, so we may awaken to this excellent life; on the contrary, so we may the more readily awaken to the ways in which we have been led to believe that this life is so excellent, just, and right.

The reintroduction of selectivity and control, however, is totally antithetical to the Cagean philosophy, and it is selectivity and control that I have always intuitively—by this I mean "without question"—brought to bear on Cagean devices in my own work. In the light of semiological analysis I have found vindication of those intuitions. In the same light it is possible to see Cage's decentering—or violation of the unity—of the "speaking subject" as more apparent than real.

Before going on I wish to say that it makes me mad that, as important a figure as he is to any discussion of American modernism, John Cage has not to my knowledge been examined within the framework of the various reworkings of Freudian and Marxist theory that have been accumulating with such impressive results over the past two decades. In France and England this is in part attributable to the fact that such theoretical writings have concentrated on literature and film to the exclusion of music. Not that the French—with their tendency to romanticize American "irrationalism"—could do him justice at this point. The English know little about him, and the Germans zeroed in on him too early to make use of French critical theory. I am ignorant of writings on him that may have appeared in other countries in which he has performed and lectured extensively, such as Sweden and Denmark. In America I tend to blame the avant-garde critical establishment for its neglect of this most influential man. So whom does that leave? Me?! Well, sometimes artists rush in where critics refuse to tread. In

(Artist as Failed Primitive)
(Artist as Failed Intellectual)

the noisy silence that surrounds the man, I shall produce a few semiotic chirps.

III. *Five-Hundred-Pound Canary*

What are the implications of the Cagean abdication of principles for assigning importance and significance? A method for making indeterminate, or for randomizing, a sequence of signifiers produces a concomitant arbitrariness in the relation of signifier to signified, a situation characterized not by an effacement of signifiers by signified as in *Gone with the Wind*, nor by a shifting relationship of signifier to signified whereby the signifier itself, or the act of signifying, by being foregrounded, becomes problematic, but by a denial and suppression of a relationship altogether.

What is this but an attempt to deny the very function of language and, by extension, the signifying subject, which is, according to Lacan's definition, dependent on and constructed through and in systems of signification, i.e., language?

> A *signifying practice* . . . is a complex process which assumes a (speaking) subject admitting of mutations, loss of infinitization, discernable in the modifications of his discourse but remaining irreducible to its formality alone, since they refer back on the one hand to unconscious-instinctual processes and, on the other, to the socio-historical constraints under which the practice in question is carried on.
>
> —Julia Kristeva[3]

> The highest purpose is to have no purpose at all.
>
> —John Cage

For Cage, either to problematize, i.e., call into question, a "purposive" subject, or to grant admission to a "mutating," finite one, would have been to risk becoming reentangled in those hated measurements of genius and inspiration

(Artist as Shaman)
(Artist as Visionary)

that particularly infested the world of music, and in those "ambiguities, hidden meanings (which require interpretation), . . . silent purposes and obscure contents (which give rise to commentary)."[4] Cage's solution was to throw out the baby with the bathwater. In the absence of a signifying subject, not only "modifications of discourse" become untenable, but also the concept of an unconscious which manifests itself in the heterogeneity and contradictions of the subject as it is positioned in relationships of identity and difference by "socio-historical constraints," not the least of which is the patriarchal order itself. Trying to operate outside of these processes, a Cagean "nonsignifying practice" sees itself as existing in a realm of pure idea, anterior to language—without mind, without desire, without differentiation, without finitude. In a word, that realm of idealism which so much of our capricious, wavering, flawed, lurching twentieth-century art has similarly failed—while being so committed—to violate.

> Surrealism, unable to accord language a supreme place (language being a system and the aim of the movement being, romantically, a direct subversion of codes—itself moreover illusory: a code cannot be destroyed; only 'played off'), contributed to the desacralization of the image of the Author by ceaselessly recommending the abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning.
>
> —Roland Barthes[5]

From the standpoint of consumption, if meaning is constantly being subverted before a practice that refuses to make or break signs, if the avowed goal of a work is a succession of "nonsignifying signifiers," one is left with an im-

3. "The Subject in Signifying Practice," *Semiotext(e)*, no. 3 (1975), 19.
4. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" *Screen*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Spring 1979), 17.
5. "Death of the Author," p. 144.

penetrable web of undifferentiated events set in motion by and referring back to the original flamboyant artist-gesture, in this case the abandonment of personal taste. The work thus places an audience in the "mindless" (sensual?) position of appreciating a manifestation of yet one more

Artist as Transcendental Ego

and excludes it from participation in the forming of the meanings of that manifestation just as surely as any monolithic, unassailable, and properly validated masterpiece. John Cage can now—and perhaps always could—be safely taught in any high school music appreciation course. His genius is beyond question; the product of that genius beyond ambiguity.

> What was it actually that made me choose music rather than painting? Just because they said nicer things about my music than they did about my paintings? But I don't have absolute pitch. I can't keep a tune. In fact, I have no talent for music. The last time I saw her, Aunt Phoebe said, "You're in the wrong profession."
>
> —John Cage[6]

(Artist as Misfit)

I was telling some of my students at the Whitney Independent Study Program that ten years ago I had been invited there to conduct a seminar. I had begun by playing a record of Billie Holiday singing "The Way You Look Tonight," repeatedly lifting and replacing the arm of the record player as, with increasing difficulty and embarrassment, I tried to learn the melody. I couldn't get it and had at length to give it up. At this point in the story Marty Winn said, "So they hired you!"

IV. *Bang the Tale Slowly*

> After I had been studying with him for two years, Schoenberg said, "In order to write music you must have a feeling for harmony." I then explained to him that I had no feeling for harmony. He then said that I would always encounter an obstacle, that it would be as though I came to a wall through which I could not pass. I said, "In that case I will devote my life to beating my head against that wall."
>
> —John Cage[7]

I was just beginning to congratulate myself for having finally triumphed, in *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, over the tyranny of narrative. I didn't need it

6. *A Year from Monday*, Middletown, Wesleyan University, 1967, p. 118.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

anymore, I told myself. The distinct parts of that film never come together in a spaciotemporal continuity. From this point of view, narrative seemed no longer to be an issue. If the film made any effort toward integrating the separate "speakers," it was at the level of another kind of discourse, propelled not by narrative, but by a heterogeneous interweaving of verbal texts acting on/against/in relation to images. What a thrilling idea: to be free of the compelling and detested domination of cinematic narrativity with its unseen, unspoken codes for arranging images and language with a "coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure," so lacking in the imperfect reality it purports to mirror.

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that a particular aspect of narrative, namely character, is a consistent presence in *Journeys from Berlin/1971* as it is—often by dint of its conspicuous absence—in my three previous films. It was, in fact, a decisive factor in a move from dance to film in the early '70s. Upon closer examination it seems to me that I am going to be banging my head against narrative for a long time to come.

> But once we have been alerted to the intimate relationship that Hegel suggests exists between law, historicality, and narrativity, we cannot but be struck by the frequency with which narrativity, whether of the fictional or the factual sort, presupposes the existence of a legal system against or on behalf of which the typical agents of a narrative account militate.
>
> —Hayden White[8]

"Language knows a 'subject,' not a 'person,'" says Barthes. A central presumption of narrativity is that "subject" may become synonymous with "Authority of the Law" in an unseen leap that is implicit in every instance of narrative discourse. In literature it has traditionally been the author-conflated-with-narrator that has occupied this position of authority. In mainstream cinema a more encompassing illusionism tends to suppress the presence of the writer/director to a greater degree. As a consequence, authorial status is assumed exclusively by a "character," a designation which—with all of its implicit compounding of self-contained narrator, "person," "persona," and legal/psychological existence—blocks the intrusion of an anterior authorship, at once embodying the representation of, and unseen leap between, subject and legal system.

Godard was probably the first director working within the illusionist narrative film tradition to "meddle" with the integrity of this usually singular speaking position. He accomplished this by having a given character speak from different authorial positions, including that of performer, but also by introducing the presence—usually in voice-over—of another authorship, a commentator neither sufficiently "filled in" to be a character, nor sufficiently "omniscient" to be a

8. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1980), 17.

narrator, nor identifiable with any conclusiveness as speaking the opinions of the director/writer himself, even when it is unquestionably the voice of the director that we hear. The tension attendant on this splitting of authorship among character, performer, commentator, and director/writer produces fissures and contradictions which the viewer must consciously register in order to "get" anything from the film.

> *Who speaks* (in the narrative) is not *who writes* (in real life) and *who writes* is not *who is.*
>
> —Roland Barthes

The thing that pushed me toward narrative and ultimately into cinema was "emotional life." I wished not exactly to "express" emotion, certainly not to mimic it, and I wasn't sure whether a recognizable social context would play a part. I knew little more than that its means of presentation would be largely language, and that when spoken, it would be spoken by someone. Not that I hadn't used spoken texts before. In every case, however, either disjunction between movement and speech or the separation inherent in dance presentation between what is performed and the person performing it had prevented the speech from being received as "belonging to" the performer uttering it. Upon taking up film, I would perforce be dealing with an entirely different register of relationship between "spoken" and "speaker." The problem would be not so much in getting them together as tearing them apart.

I was not only entering a new medium, but was jettisoning a whole lexicon of formalized movement and behavior, realizing instinctively that certain concessions to "lifelikeness" would have to be made. For the most part my speaking performers would be doing what people, or characters, so often do in "the movies": sit around, eat, walk down the street, ride bicycles, look at things, etc. If they danced in my early films, I gave them good reason by assigning them the occupation "dancer."

From the beginning I used a loose, paratactic, nondramatic construction, more narrative in feeling than fact. My primary "mission," as I see it now, was to avoid narrative contextualizing that would require synchronized, "naturalized" speech to continue for very long in any given series of shots. I could never quite satisfactorily account—publicly—for the necessity of my particular alternatives to conventional narrative films. I veered unsettlingly close to formalist generalizations ("It hasn't been done; it's there to do; it's another 'possibility'") to the point of almost denying altogether that my enterprise had any significance as social criticism, or that it was an "intervention" against illusionist cinema. Or I about-faced and took up the cudgels of the illusionist-cinema-produces-passive-viewer argument. I felt inadequate to the task of advancing a more pertinent argument to support my aversion to the "acting" and "acting out" required by the narratological character.

As recently as summer of 1980 I find myself saying in *Millennium Film Journal*:

> Previously I used whatever interested me. I was able to absorb and arrange most materials under some sliding rule of thumb governing formal juxtaposition. Everything was subsumed under the kinds of collage strategies that had characterized my dancing, and could even include a kind of mechanistic, or quasi-psychological narrative.[9]

Still laboring under long-standing Cagean habits of thought about what I'd done—and here I'm talking literally about doing one thing and describing it as another—I was willing to annex my labors to that segment of the surrealist tradition which, from Schwitters to Cage to Rauschenberg, has used "collage strategies" to equalize and suppress hierarchical differentiations of meaning. On another face of it, my work can be, and has been, read as a kind of reductivism coming out of '60s minimal art, a view which I myself held when I was making dances. It still seems that the refusal to invest my film performers with the full stature and authority of characters shares at some level the same impulse that substituted "running" for "dancing" many years ago. What marks this refusal in the medium of film as not simply an obsolescent holdover from an earlier way of doing things is that from the the very outset it was brought to bear against a full-blown institution and manifested itself in specific, pertinent, and contesting strategies.

Speaking of the medieval annals, an early form of European historiography, Hayden White writes:

> For the annalist, there is no need to claim the authority to narrate events since there is nothing problematical about their status as manifestations of a reality that is being contested. Since there is no "contest," there is nothing to narrativize. . . . It is necessary only to record them in the order that they come to notice, for since there is no contest, there is no story to tell.[10]

The implied narrator of the annalist's account is the "Lord," whose supreme authority has subsumed all human need to change "the order [in which things] come to notice." Here we can discover the story of John Cage come full-circle. For all of John's Buddhist leanings and egalitarian espousals, for all of his objections to hierarchies and consequent seeming to operate in the space left by the absence of God, his ideas lead inevitably back to the "no contest" of White's early historian. We can't have it both ways: no desire and no God. To have no desire—for "improvements on creation"—is necessarily coequal to having no quarrel

9. Noël Carroll, "Interview with a Woman Who . . . ," *Millennium Film Journal*, nos. 7-9 (Fall-Winter 1980-81), 44.
10. White, p. 22.

with—God-given—manifestations of reality. Any such dispassionate stance in turn obviates the necessity of "retelling" the way things have been given. The converse of this situation is a state of affairs which Cage—rightfully—most feared: we are surrounded by manifestations of reality that are not God-given but all fucked up by human society and that must be contested and reordered by a human "Narrativizing Authority" which, by so representing them, will impart to events an integrity and coherence cut to the measure of all-too-human desire.

Maybe I'm being simple-minded when I say the problem (not the solution) is clear: to track down the Narrativizing Authority where it currently lives and wallop the daylights out of it. And where does it now live? The battle zone is not a serene plane of indeterminacy outside of the overdeterminations of narrative, nor, as I put it in 1973, "somewhere between the excessive specificity of the story and the emotional unspecificity of object-oriented permutations,"[11] thinking it would be something like steering between the narrativity of Scylla and the formalism of Charybdis.

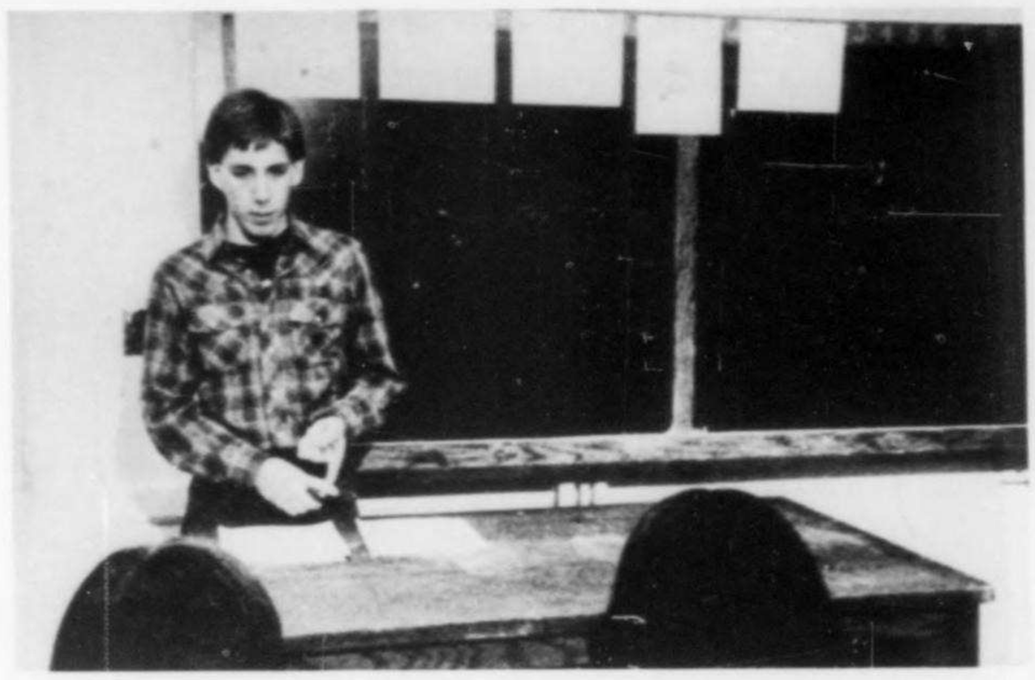
(Is *who speaks* [in the essay] *The Artist*
[in real life] and is *The Artist who is*?)

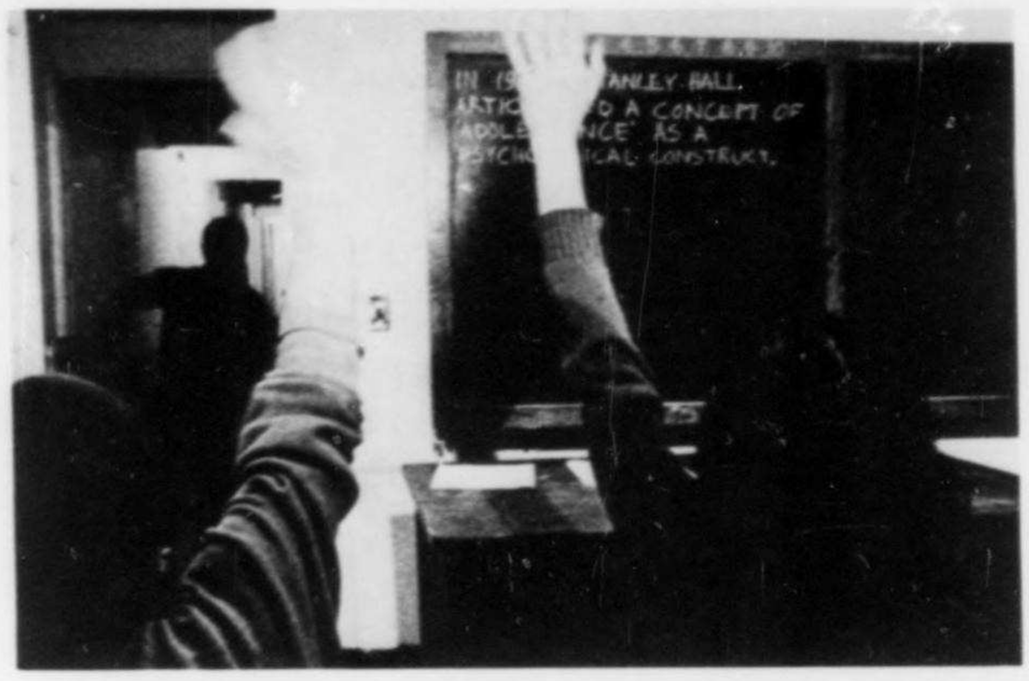
In cinema the battleground is neither between nor outside. The battleground is narrativity itself, both its constructs/images and the means by which they are constructed; both its signs and its signifiers.

V. *In the N.A.'s Lair*

> The reluctance to declare its codes characterizes bourgeois society and the mass culture issuing from it: both demand signs which do not look like signs.
>
> —Roland Barthes[12]
>
> By refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), [writing] liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.
>
> —Roland Barthes[13]

11. Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961-73*, Halifax and New York, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design/New York University Press, 1974, p. 244.
12. "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," *Image-Music-Text*, p. 116.
13. "Death of the Author," p. 147.





Dan Walworth. A House by the River: The Wrong Shape. *1980.*

Arguing with Douglas Beer about Dan Walworth's film, *A House by the River: The Wrong Shape,* stirred up some thoughts. There are a number of clues in this film pointing to the instability of the narrative, I mean a fragility in the relationship of speech to speaker, action to actor. This instability in turn tells us that we are to listen to the verbal text, a historical critique of the bourgeois family, in its own right, at least not to judge it primarily and absolutely from the standpoint of its having emanated from the lips of a "bad actor" or a particular character, in this case a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old student. True, recognition of the character: "student," and situation: "presentation of paper," does affect our reception of the text. Whatever one's initial impulse, however, to discredit or be inattentive because "it's only a student's term paper" is quickly mitigated by a number of factors. In this kind of film the various representations of social reality do not have, necessarily, equivalent relations to their referents with respect to meaning. The "classroom" is stable as a signified insofar as it consistently illustrates those parts of the text that deal with school. The "student," on the other hand, is not. What with the prolongation of the classroom shot, the formality of its fixed framing, and the density and duration of the student's reading, our "reading" of the performance moves back and forth from "character" to "agent-for-transmitting-a-text." The effect of this movement is to put both the representation and the verbal text into a precarious balance: the characterization constantly dissolves and reforms—the signifier-performer alternately exposed and covered over—and at the same time the unstable signified-"student" spills over as a kind of metaphor, rather than identity, informing the spoken text as being other than authorial, as being in a state of flux, in process, to-be-scrutinized by the artist-filmmaker and "audience-filmmaker." The audience, rather than moving from perception/recognition to identification/repulsion now passes from recognition to critical attention.

Do I seem to be paraphrasing Brecht? Yes and no. I'm not mentioning knowledge/understanding. You can lead a horse to water; you cannot make it drink.

This text has been concerned with the necessity for problematizing a fixed relation of signifier to signified, the notion of a unified subject, and, specifically, within the codes of narrative film practice, the integrity of the narratological character. Any such problematizing, calling into question, or "playing off" of the terms of signification of necessity involves an "unfixing" of meaning, a venturing into ambiguity, an exposing of the signs that constitute and promulgate social inequities.

I have also analyzed the contradictions in John Cage's concepts of indeterminacy. It is important that Cage's efforts to *eliminate and suppress* meaning should in no way be confused with the refusal to *fix* meaning of which Barthes speaks. Cage's *refusal of meaning* is an abandonment, an appeal to a Higher Authority. The refusal that has been of more concern to me is a confrontation with—and within—authorial signifying codes. I wouldn't go so far as Barthes in calling such confrontation a revolutionary activity, at least not at this point in time. Nevertheless, insofar as it involves a certain amount of risk and struggle, it is an important and necessary activity.

A last paraphrase on the battleground of cinematic narrativity: As the character dies it is not inconceivable that some members of the audience will come to their senses. And I don't mean Aristotle.

Interview with Martha Rosler

JANE WEINSTOCK

Weinstock: Like many feminists working today, you seem unwilling to confine yourself to the constraints of a single medium. In fact, the range of your practice—from garage sales to cultural theory—generates a list: film, photography, performance, installations, "fiction," postcards, and audio, and you write theory and criticism as well.

Rosler: The question of medium per se isn't terribly interesting to me. Meaning is, and I use the appropriate medium. Often it's not a decision so much as it is a matter of the way the work presents itself to me. If a text unfolds in my mind, I may wind up with something written. If I want a greater intensity of address, something seen, that may become a script for a videotape. Sometimes I want video's lack of definition; at other times I want the sharpness of film. Most of the video I do addresses television forms. In installations and performances, I pose a question: "What if . . . ?" "What if people were to find themselves in such a situation, physically present?" *Presence* makes a great difference. Voyeurism, for example, in relation to women, functions differently when projected on a screen than when physically present. Sometimes I just want people to be *in* a situation or to participate actively, as in the two garage sales. Sometimes, though, I want a work to be discontinuous and weightless. The postcard works were just carried in on a card, with a stamp, an address, a printed text. The week's interval between episodes meant that the depth of the work had to be enacted in the reader's mind. Duration was important, but the physical medium was nothing.

Weinstock: To whom did you send the cards?

Rosler: The mailing list for each work was somewhat different. Friends, acquaintances, people whose names I knew and to whom I wanted to send the cards—some in art circles, some not. I added names given to me and those of people who wrote in because the work was written up in the *Village Voice*. The lists were very limited. The postcards were certainly not a work of mass address. My work in video is my closest approach to a general audience.

My work is didactic and expository; it makes an argument. I tend to think of everything as presenting a text of some kind. Yet oddly enough, my work isn't hortatory. It doesn't insist on an avenue of action, or say, "Do this!" Ultimately it's more contemplative, in that it does not answer the questions it poses. I don't often take a firm line. There are vacillations, changes of direction meant to point to a panoply of ways of thinking about a question, even if they're mostly contiguous points of view. It's not so unidimensional and coherent that you can sum it up in a sentence. I think propaganda has to be clearcut, with easily articulated motifs.

Weinstock: Then your work is not addressed to the organizing of a working-class audience.

Rosler: No. If I were to do that sort of work, the organizing effort would have to exist in advance. Art doesn't create a movement or an organization.

Weinstock: But you do see your work as creating an audience different from that of the art world.

Rosler: Yes, though *creating* is the wrong word. That's not a task for a single work, nor work by a single individual. I want to address a general audience. Sometimes, though, it's useful and important to address an art-world audience. Performance, for example, is generally restricted to the art world, and if one doesn't know that, one's work will be very ineffective. I think video is particularly useful because it's portable and easily available, and it's a form with which people are familiar. My video confronts many of the comfortable patterns of response. So when I'm using the TV set to address an issue, I also take account of what normally appears on the set. But even though my work is critical of TV, audiences tend to accept it simply because it comes out of the set: it *is* TV, though strange TV.

Weinstock: How do your experiences in showing specific tapes to different audiences vary?

Rosler: The East Is Red, the West Is Bending (about Chinese cooking) usually elicits stories about women's somewhat confused relation to foreign cooking. The more educated the audience, the more they want to talk about how *other*, more naïve people might or might not see the work. With *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, another cooking demonstration, this time of utensils, everyone talks about anger, violence, and entrapment. Hip audiences also talk about semiotics and distantiation. And with *Losing*, a fictional interview with the parents of an anorexic, people talk about starvation, being a woman, dieting, family dynamics, lying, and contradiction. And of course educated audiences talk about television forms and

acting. *Losing* is very theatrical, and I used stage actors because I felt they wouldn't know how to act on TV and so would seem to be acting.

Weinstock: I didn't feel that. I wasn't certain they were actors. Is everyone else sure?

Rosler: Most people schooled in film or art or theater recognize them as actors. Last year a film student (and he was not the first one) complained that the acting made it impossible for him to take it seriously. On the other hand, some people in a graduate photography and video program recently asked me if it was a documentary. But people often don't ask, "Are these actors?" until I raise the issue. They accept what they see and don't think about its precise relation to fact; it's their working hypothesis, and the boundaries of its fictionality remain vague until questioned.

Weinstock: But that's very different from the other tapes, where you *have* to ask, because the theatricality is much more exaggerated; *Losing*, however, verges on a documentary, at least for the uninitiated.

Martha Rosler. The East Is Red, the West Is Bending. *1977.*

Rosler: Yes. *Losing* was closest to a TV program, to the interview with nonactors. It's ambiguous in its relation to soap opera and to the interview (in this case to the interview with the victim or relative-of-victim). I wanted it to be as much like a TV interview as I could make it, and I also wanted to ring certain changes on that form. There are possibly people exactly like the characters in *Losing* but it's easy to apprehend them as too young and improbable in their talk. The fact that there are such people is immaterial to their plausibility.

Weinstock: Still, it seems to me that the other tapes are more distanced, more analytical, because there's almost always a text across the image or on the soundtrack. As you've said, your critical work is almost always carried out through the use of verbal language, except when you use parody.

Rosler: The other tapes tend more toward burlesque, and they're more like performance works. *Losing* follows several realist or naturalist forms: interview, documentary, soap opera. Soap opera is obviously fiction, but of a naturalistic sort, in real time: a pseudolife. It follows people as you might follow your neighbors; it's like a hole drilled in the wall. But some of the other tapes also follow genres whose realism is not observed: *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and *The East Is Red* adopt the form of a cooking demonstration, which is neither fiction nor narrative.

Weinstock: But those tapes are parodies. You say *Losing* is acted and playing on these forms. But it's not clear what you want to do with that play.

Rosler: In *Losing* I wanted not to make a point, but to create a distance so that your position as viewer in relation to the characters is altered. I wanted to do a coherent script, but to use acting to breach it, to question the coherence of an account of life (and death) events, the adequacy of it. I wanted the characters to be very thin.

Weinstock: Thin parents and a thin daughter—weightlessness personified.

Rosler: A film person said, "Why, it could have been about that chair," because the camera is stationary and then moves away and fixes on a corner where there's a chair, and then comes back. I said, "Well, of course it's about the chair. It's an empty chair, her chair." That's like the thin parents and the thin daughter: the chair without a person in it which just happens to appear in a work that doesn't otherwise present objective correlatives. At the end the parents tell a little anecdote about a starving couple who ate the body of their dead daughter and then were overcome with remorse. Do people notice that they are also talking about themselves? I don't necessarily expect them to, but I often use that kind of rhyming or punning.

Weinstock: Since this piece is less playful than the others, it seems quite different.

Rosler: You probably see my video work as disjunct: parodies as against texts. I do not see them as disjunct. In *Losing* some absurd things are said, but my intention was not humor but rather *penetration*. Humor is deployed; spectators laugh and so do I, although this was a very painful work to write. Humor, though, is just one mode of contradiction and penetration. With this text I tried something you've noticed me doing formally and more overtly in other work: I joined two things that do not go together. Ideologically speaking, the world is divided into nontransferable oppositions: victim-aggressor, American against the world, the family against the public world. I join the terms of these dichotomies together. I have them talk. More specifically, I have them overlap—notions of causality in the

Martha Rosler. Losing: A Conversation with the Parents. *1977.*

private world; self-starvation and the starvation of other people. If these people were really bereaved, if their daughter had starved herself to death, the chances of their talking in that way about world starvation on a TV interview would be very slim. That's the point at which I tried to make a noticeable break with the form. I used a number of contradictory elements: the characters circle around notions of responsibility, guilt, cause and effect, the relationship of public to private worlds, of femaleness to maleness, between femaleness and its contents. But they never end with a solid assertion; instead they exhaust the logical possibilities. One character makes an assertion, breaking it off to make another, or one cuts the other off and changes the direction of argument. Or their gestures contradict what they say—the woman grabs the man's arm for reassurance, say. What you have is neither parody nor burlesque, but rather contradiction. My work is a series of decoys; a work briefly masquerades as one thing, following a given form, until you soon realize that something is amiss. I tried to do it internally in *Losing*. The seams of ideology are somewhat frazzled. The characters are, I hope, revealed as caught in their ideology of liberalism, shared, I suspect, by most viewers. I hope to propel the viewer toward a transcendence of which the characters are clearly incapable. I tried to use the camera in a gross way, in an overdramatic parody of camerawork. The camera is stationary, as in *Vital Statistics*. The characters are situated uncomfortably in the frame; the camera moves ponderously and rests, moves back ponderously, cuts overtly, pans down to an unthinkable shot of people's knees and the table . . .

Weinstock: You couldn't miss the fact that the camera wasn't doing anything and then suddenly went to an empty chair and then to the album. I guess this tape feels so different because the contradictions occur primarily within the text. In the other tapes the contradictions are split among the words, the acting, the images, etc., and, for me, the result is a more pronounced fragmentation.

Rosler: They all disrupt some form that would prefer to be left alone—to start at the beginning and run through to the end. It's difficult for me to think about their differences even though I know how to account for them, because those differences now interest me less than the similarities. It's true, though, that I was trying to hold the work together as a narrative rather than as a collage of elements; I tried to do all the disruption through the script and the camerawork.

Weinstock: But we're leaving *Losing* without even talking about the lost object—the anorexic daughter. Here, I think, we must talk about difference. You use food as a metaphor for consumer society, but also for many other things. Anorexia, however, is a problem specific to women. Do you see anorexia more as a metaphor for consumer society and less as a feminist issue? Let me read you a quotation from your own work: "Our entire outlook is conditioned by the love and terror of consumption." All your work seems to be about that on some level.

Rosler: Yes, it probably is, though that's a quotation from an old work and a polemical one. But the commodity form *is* the basic capitalist form: consumption is proposed as a substitute for all kinds of human satisfaction and it is never adequate. But food is an interesting issue for a number of reasons, not just as a metaphor. It's so closely allied to what a woman is supposed to be. Food figures in the dichotomy between producer and consumer, which has been complicated by the disappearance of servants; women must be both specialized producers and connoisseurs. There are multiple and conflicting relations of production and consumption of food that women must assume: those of high art and popular art. There is also the notion of gift: giving oneself gifts of food versus the incessant pressure to deny oneself. Food represents a place where the social and the biological coincide that is not sex.

Weinstock: Well, that's not certain. I think it's more a matter of displacement.

Rosler: "Displacement" is correct. Sexuality does inhere in matters of food, of course, but I don't address sexuality directly. So far I haven't explored the overt expression of sexuality in my work. It's incredibly difficult not to be pornographic.

Food offers a giant arena in which the social overwhelms the biological, often to its detriment. Anorexia is one limiting case, and the starvation of poor or subject peoples is another, in which the social demands are so strong that the biological must yield. In one case the social directives are internalized; in the other they are imposed in the most brutal way, by the withholding of food.

I'm also interested in food as a metaphor for art-making, because of the centrality of the idea of transformation from natural to cultural in food preparation. Gourmet food is about the will.

Weinstock: And taste.

Rosler: Very much so. I have a massive unfinished script called *The Art of Cooking*, a "dialogue" between Julia Child and Craig Claiborne. The central subject is "What is art?" What is art and what is artifice, what are taste and connoisseurship? The two cookbook people are differentiated by gender and by certain intraclass distinctions. Late in the dialogues, a housewife enters to break their interactions within class. The work is almost totally composed of quotations from cookbooks—"ideology speaks."

I dealt with a less elevated part of the cooking-eating spectrum in *McTowers Maid* and in *North American Waitress, Coffee Shop Variety*, which was about the link between production and consumption, namely, service. This work was subtitled No. 1 of the "Know Your Servant" series. The symbolic dress and deference patterns derive from vestigal systems of class demarcation. I see class as flickering in and out of the relations to food within the family, in which the woman, as Marx and Engels observed, can be seen as the proletarian, or the slave in the master-slave dialectic.

Weinstock: But when you use food as a metaphor for a consumer society, the differences between the oppression of women and class oppression are somewhat elided.

Rosler: Sometimes it's convenient to talk about the differences and sometimes to act as though they're similar. That's why I'll sometimes assert something I might contradict in another context. I don't mind overstating something or eliding certain differences if it will open the issue. So if there's a problem in my conjunction of class oppression and women's oppression, I hope that it becomes a problem for the viewers or readers upon which they can work. In *Domination and the Everyday,* for example, the crawling text says things I would quarrel with, yet I felt it was necessary to present them.

Weinstock: Which ones?

Rosler: When I say, for example, "we," whom exactly do I mean? That's always a question in my work. But I prefer to remain silent on it, except in indirect discourse. If I *were* to do a work about it, then I'd have to say it means this class but not that, this group but not that. Defining *we* as opposed to *they* is a matter of struggle. Other crucial questions are: what *are* the similarities between women's position and the position of working-class people? What is the working-class? What are its boundaries? Who is likely to ally with it? Where are the intelligentsia ultimately located?

Weinstock: But that raises the whole question of feminism and the Left. Within the Left, feminism is often treated as just a liberal concern.

Rosler: I don't agree. There may be people in various Left groups who would like to see feminism as liberal, but many others don't think so. Feminism is very much a Left issue, and I think it's both theoretically and strategically wrong to give in to the idea that somehow feminism has to take a back seat or a subordinate position.

I, too, would reject bourgeois feminism. But that's not the same as saying that feminism is bourgeois. Feminism is on the Left's "agenda," and it belongs there, together with questions of economic restructuring. Especially now, when it is clear that the Right is using women's issues to gain control of the direction and meaning of social life. Also, feminism has informed Third World struggles since the late '60s. Many have incorporated women and adopted feminist goals and reforms. I remain skeptical about the *degree* of commitment of various revolutions to feminist ideals and rhetoric; nevertheless, the participation of women has increased enormously, and feminist issues are almost taken for granted.

Weinstock: But including women is not the same as feminism.

Martha Rosler. Semiotics of the Kitchen. *1975*.

Rosler: That's why I remain skeptical. Still, the participation of women and the attention to feminist issues is a gigantic step forward in world history. I make no assertion larger than that; I'm just addressing the question of the recognition by the Left—the international Left—of the importance of feminism. Its implementation, however, involves a very long and complicated fight.

Weinstock: I'd like to talk about *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, in which you're not making a straight theoretical argument, but in which you're talking about language. Can you discuss your intentions and, in retrospect, your achievement in that work?

Rosler: I was concerned with something like the notion of "language speaking the subject," and with the transformation of the woman herself into a sign in a system of signs that represents a system of food production, a system of harnessed subjectivity.

Weinstock: And you use the alphabet; you're dealing with both letters and words.

Rosler: Yes, although many people don't realize that the work is alphabetically ordered. A letter is such a nakedly reduced thing. It has no meaning, no weight, but it's essential in constructing a system of meaning, of written language. It names a sound, arbitrarily, not an idea. I was suggesting that the signs imposed on women are extremely diminishing. This woman is implicated in a system of extreme reduction with respect to herself as a self.

Weinstock: But women also produce meaning. They are speaking subjects.

Rosler: As she speaks, she names her own oppression. She thinks she is voluntarily naming something in the world, a kitchen instrument, but by acting within that system, she unwittingly names and instrumentalizes herself. She names the implements, ordered according to the alphabet, but by the time she reaches the last letters, she is being named, transformed into reduced, essentially meaningless signs—*x, y, z.* There's an irrational mysteriousness, a kind of residual magic. But at the end she shrugs; she minimizes the degree of power and aggression she has displayed. Resistance is still there, and I've seen this tape function in a liberating way for audiences of women. They laugh, and they recognize the logic of an aggression which is unfocused and undirected. She's not a victim in the sense of someone crushed. She's still there at the end, stuck to the spot, no further brutalized than at the beginning.

Weinstock: But the tape doesn't suggest a way out.

Rosler: That's true. But—unusually for me—there's no explicit text at all. The argument I've just outlined is tendentious. The meaning derives from your experience of the action as it proceeds and from the apprehension of a system of signs. The protagonist is seen as aggressive and expressing anger in a situation in which that doesn't usually occur (though women most often murder their husbands in the kitchen). Audience reaction, particularly early on and with nonacademic spectators, has been of that kind. The very expression of anger in a context of everyday life is liberating for women.

Her not leaving isn't meant as definitive. The tape presents a moment of expression; it isn't saying, "This is for all time nothing but passive and pessimistic."

Weinstock: You're saying that anger has a certain political function at this point.

Rosler: Very much so. The expression of anger is a step toward resistance and change and, as the women's liberation movement discovered, it's a step that can't be bypassed. Until you face your own anger, you can't get rid of it or channel it constructively.

Weinstock: There is an implicit utopianism which I don't share.

Rosler: Yes, it might involve an implicit utopianism.

Weinstock: We didn't finish with semiotics. You say that cinematic and TV language, every language, is oppressive. But that could be interpreted as rather a monolithic view.

Rosler: If that is true, how would I imagine that I could penetrate it at all?

Weinstock: Only in terms of a purely "counter"-practice, rather than working with it.

Rosler: Anyway, did I say language is oppressive? It can be. Language can be an instrument of control, or of liberation. In doing work on oppression, it's handy to talk in instrumental terms. Yet some of my resistance to the idea of an "ideological apparatus" is that it seems to reduce things to a purely instrumental level. I don't think that language can be characterized as only one thing, such as oppressive. Language is the ocean of civilization; everything is enacted within it; it is both oppressive and emancipatory.

Weinstock: But even if you say that everything occurs through language, your conception of what language is can vary; it can be semiological, or psychoanalytic, or Lacanian, or instrumentalist.

Rosler: I don't have settled views of language. Language is *used* to direct the development of the self; it centrally determines people's conceptions of themselves and of their functions. No one is wielding the instrument; images and language represent a number of different streams of discourse on meaning. Lines of argument appear in people's lives almost as directives. Ideology permeates activity and directs how it shall appear. When I write—polemically—that we best recognize ourselves through images, I mean something similar: one recognizes oneself as a coherent self through a defined image one can see, identify with, and follow as a directive. This holds, as well, for verbal texts, which are sometimes externally articulated and internalized, consciously or unconsciously—texts cobbled together from childhood clues or conveyed directly to us. These are cultural directives about what it means to be a woman, a person, an American. These are what I once referred to—again polemically—as "the myths that cover everything thinkable," the ideology of everyday life, the linguistic and imaged accompaniments to existence that determine that it *is* existence, how it is to be conducted, what it means. But to suggest that there is no self-determining subject residing within all these texts is wrong, because language is a primary site of struggle. I feel that the more conscious one is of oppressive namings, the more likely one is to be able to transcend language as instrumentality, situated within the self but operating against it. I very much believe in the idea of liberation, which I see as a personal project within a social project. I think it's possible to gain some degree of self-determination within a capitalist system. But ultimately there is no liberation without a complete change in society.

Weinstock: But you're still saying that in a classless society there's a possibility of an unalienated self.

Rosler: Shall we say that the unalienated self is an asymptote toward which we can move?

Weinstock: Then you must reject psychoanalysis—at least Lacanian psychoanalysis—because it's grounded in a notion of the divided subject, divided in relation to language. There is no coherence ever possible.

Rosler: I should say that my work does not have a "theoreticist" bias; and Lacan's theory does not inform my work, except for some critical writing, where I find him useful to a degree. The limit is the following: what he sees as absolute I see as contingent, or even metaphoric.

Weinstock: But I don't see how his work is at all useful to you. You presuppose a conscious subject—a conscious or perhaps an unaware subject that can be brought to consciousness—a final cure.

Rosler: I have found Lacan useful in a restricted area—in the notion of the construction of the self (though I'm more and more willing to see that as metaphoric) and in the notion of the giving over of direct action into symbolic action. Once language is implicated, the intrusion into development marks a fundamental break with a nonlinguistic self—if such a thing can be thought to exist—a protoself. It hasn't been demonstrated to my satisfaction that a grievously irreconcilable alienation is involved.

Weinstock: Well, it's only on the basis of that alienation that the subject comes to speak; if total coherence were possible, there would be no reason to speak. For the notion of the subject that does not preexist, which you claim to find useful, you have no need of Lacan. When you talk about the audience, you talk of a conscious audience, a conscious viewer. You're not talking about the unconscious at all. You're not talking about the viewer as subject, but as a kind of conscious, oppressed person.

Rosler: Often I do. I situate my work on the level of argument, which means that I have to address the conscious self. And I can live without Lacan.

Weinstock: But you could also address your work to the unconscious of the viewer, which you're not doing.

Rosler: That's right, I don't, especially in the video tapes. That is because I saw a neglected area in art: the psychosocial, or, to put it another way (though they aren't equivalent), the ideological, the ways in which social necessity or custom defines attitudes and actions in everyday life. The psychoanalytic has been used to evoke the internal relations of the subject and the relation to other singular selves

in a universalized matrix. I decided to take a standpoint over and against that; to say, in effect, that I want to think about real, historically grounded social relations and the ways in which they inform the personal. I start not with the self and its reflection in social interaction, but from the outside.

Weinstock: But the question does not end there. You can still consider the effects of social relations on a particular subject; a lot of work on film and the subject does so. It's not just a matter of starting with the personal. Your theory of the subject is very different from the psychoanalytic one.

Rosler: It has to do with partisanship; I want to argue for political action, and I feel that the social use of psychoanalytic discourse has been to turn people away from mass action or political behavior. Hence my choice of the presentation of the self and its relation to the world.

Weinstock: To talk about a fully conscious self implies a certain kind of control that I don't think exists.

Rosler: But sometimes it's a convenient fiction, the idea of full consciousness, of the ability to move toward remaking one's self. I don't want to get stuck in theory, in discourse. A lot of film work involves petty-bourgeois self-preoccupation.

Weinstock: That doesn't seem quite fair, to base your criticism on its abusive cases. You've just talked about discourse. Is there anything outside of it?

Rosler: There's political action.

Weinstock: That's always mediated through discourse.

Rosler: Oh, yes, but discourse becomes a stopping point, because you can always have another argument, you can always say, "But wait. . . ."

Weinstock: But now you're talking about discourse in another way.

Rosler: But don't the levels tend to slide, one into another?

Weinstock: I think we should talk not of specific instances of discourse but discourse in its relation to the individual.

Rosler: I must insist on some crude observations as to the manner in which occupation with discourse as such has tended to function: it academicizes questions of everyday life, of meaning, of interaction, and social change. It fetishizes theory, and creates a relation to an audience that I don't want. When I

say that I want audiences to think, it's true. But I don't want them to think about action. I think, though, that times have changed: work about the "social" is now much more acceptable than when I began to work, so I'm a little more relaxed about the whole issue. I find, though, that I have not been moved to do video work about interiority. But I have done a performance concerned with it. Another mail work, *Letters on Abusing Women and Trying to Blame Them for It*, broached the issues. But I'm not crazy about the varieties of Freudo-Marxism now current, and I still want my work to be accessible, to avoid sliding into recherché theorizing that general audiences won't get.

Weinstock: Right, but then you have to say, "Okay, these are the abuses, we cannot do this." You cannot, however, use what you call "convenient fictions" because you're then in the position of the manipulator. You say, "I know better but this is a convenient fiction because it will get people to . . ."

Rosler: Oh, but it's also a transparent fiction. Don't you agree?

Weinstock: I don't know. Transparent to whom?

Rosler: Whoever sees this as an issue in the work also knows it's a strategy. It's not an assertion about fundamental human truth. Remember what I said about the possibility of saying something, forming a hypothesis, that I might not fully accept as "truth"? I see my work as broaching problems, not presenting eternal truths. People do not feel empowered by psychoanalysis. It has functioned as a powerful dampener, insofar as one feels as though a part of oneself lies beyond one's grasp. The idea of a divided self is seen in terms of a vulgarized notion of "civilization and its discontents," a conflict model in which one must reconcile oneself to the choice between public action or self-knowledge and the acceptance of personal reality as enacted on a completely private state. Bruno Bettelheim, throughout his works, and Kenneth Keniston, in *Young Radicals*,[1] explained activism away as unresolved Oedipal conflict. I think it's important to combat this very powerful instance of ideology. I don't think you do that through argument. At least I generally don't in my work. I think one acts as though the functioning self can act outside the strictly private sphere. I want to concentrate on the private individual's mode of relation to the larger world. This is a profoundly feminist issue, because women are the locus of distinction between private and public, at least since the nineteenth century. It's against women that the distinction between the social and the psychoanalytic has been most heavily deployed, the psychoanalytic, that is, not as a means of understanding but as an instrument of social policy.

1. Kenneth Keniston, *Young Radicals: Notes on Committed Youth*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968.

Weinstock: But you're speaking of psychoanalysis as an institution, and American psychoanalysis, at that.

Rosler: Yet British women are supposedly the most heavily drugged in the world. In Britain, lobotomies are sometimes performed on anorexic women. These abuses stem directly out of psychotherapy.

Weinstock: Psychotherapy indeed, which is not to take the most radical implications of Freud.

Rosler: I agree. I even agree with Russell Jacoby—his book *Social Amnesia*[2] is a polemic against psychoanalysis as a handling institution—even though I'm exasperated by his contempt for the very notion of therapy, which I don't disown. He attacks the "post-Freudians" for betraying Freud's radical social understanding in developing therapies of accommodation. But that is just where the psychoanalytic resides in American life. And I would rather deal with American life than with discourse per se. Let others do that. In *Vital Statistics* I attack the oppressive use of the institutions of "science" in our society. It is very difficult to extricate theory, like a chestnut, from its oppressive institutionalizations; the same is true of Marxism, of course. I feel it's very important to do work that is somehow empowering, but through thought.

Weinstock: But one of Freud's greatest discoveries was the extent to which sexuality is a part of everyday life, and it's that which you're ignoring. To stop at the individual's sexuality is, of course, the danger. But that is not to say that sexuality and the unconscious and the relation to the social must therefore be ignored.

Rosler: You don't see that this is central to *Losing*?

Weinstock: Well, that's tricky, because the extent to which anorexia becomes a metaphor for other kinds of oppression is not clear. When you talk about the relation of anorexia to starvation in the Third World, you are not talking about sexuality.

Rosler: But *Losing* isn't meant to convert anorexia into a metaphor. It doesn't attempt to eradicate it as a subject of the work and replace it with starvation in the Third World. It was meant to put them in balance, not to say one is more real, and the other illusory, but that in both, food is a weapon. It's very important that anorexia not disappear as the subject of the work.

2. Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1975.

Weinstock: I agree. But I don't think it is interpreted psychoanalytically.

Rosler: Anorexia defines the identity of this child. If pressed, I'd say this absent child's definition of self is feeding-upon-herself-and-not-feeding-herself in the attempt to create an ideal female self in culture. She had to die because the female self is not allowed to nurture itself into a full self.

Weinstock: The self again. I don't think there can ever be a full self, an unproblematic "I." So perhaps we should talk more specifically about your "I" 's. Most of your work is about an "I," but your "I" is not just you. There's an explicit reference to "Martha the child" in *She Sees in Herself* and also in the two videotapes in which you're with your son. But if you put all the stories together, the "I"'s are too different, from the Spanish maid to the art student, with two daughters. So this "I" has to be generalized (which reminds me of Rainer's *Film about a Woman Who . . .*, where there is a generalized "she"). For me, this raises the "personal is political" issue. For if the "I" were the real you and you were saying, "The personal is political, this is my experience," then the others would have to be "she."

Rosler: In the three postcard food novels collected in the book *Service*, each woman represents a class or a class function. The first is a rather well-to-do woman married to a petty-bourgeois: a professional, a businessman, or a manager. The second woman is much more marginal, working-class or possibly lower middle-class in origin, with certain idealistic "hippie" views. The third is an undocumented foreign worker, working-class, and in fact a servant. These women, although united in their oppressed relation to food and production, and in particular to the male world, the corporate world, are divided by class. An employer-employee relation between the first and the third woman is possible, and this division by class allows the first to transmit her oppression to the third.

Weinstock: But why unite them with an "I" rather than a "she"?

Rosler: They're joined as women oppressed within the relations to food and service, and none is an exploiter, after all. But I'm not sure that the "I" unites them so much as it addresses the reader in a certain way. The use of the first person singular gets readers to pay attention. It is not used much in art-world fiction, so people had to fight off presuppositions of truth-telling—to suggest the possibility of a deep recognition, if not a relation of identification. I wanted to block the response, "That's not me." I was trying to block distantiation by using an "I," at the same time encouraging it through a character who is impossibly verbal, impossibly aware. By having ideology speak with a personal voice, I hoped to make it a central subject of the work. You are likely to question less an assertion about a third person. Differences between uses of "I" and "she" interest me. When

"she" is used in performance, the resulting self-distancing inclines the work toward an illustration; it's not so much an individual story. With "I," one directly confronts a self, one tends more to quarrel with what is said. There's also the question of narcissism and of a precious, preternaturally aware character when you put metacommentary into her mouth. I wanted some of that artificiality in the postcard work, but in others I used "she" to diminish pathos. In one, *Letters on Abusing Women*, the work begins with "I" in the early episodes about the sexual assaults and shifts to "she" in the later ones to signal a move out into the more public arena. Film and video can suggest both "she" and "I."

Weinstock: Have you made films as well?

Rosler: I have an unedited film in 16 millimeter that I'd love to finish. Like the postcard novel, *Tijuana Maid*, it is also about a Mexican maid in southern California. Most of it has been shot, but the lab ruined some of the film and, since I'd have to go back to San Diego to reshoot it, I just put it aside. I've always wanted to work with film. There are times when I'd like the sharp, clean image you can't get with video.

Weinstock: How is the film different from your video work?

Rosler: Inevitably, it is different spatially. But that's a pretty formal remark. It's much more traditional and filmic in its division into scenes and shots. It has a slower narrative pace; it's firmly narrative, but interrupted. It's more relaxed than video. Because of its greater image resolution and size, film is more easily watched; since it's easier to relax into a film, the film itself can be more relaxed. I feel more comfortable about varying camerawork in a film than I do in video. Video is a very tiny thing; you have to move carefully. I think my video has been influenced by the Straub-Huillet films, though. At least I felt a strong sympathy when I saw them, but I don't think I use film as they do. I'm not sure when I saw their work, but I'd be willing to admit either influence or similarity.

Weinstock: In what aspect?

Rosler: The aggressively self-conscious camerawork; the insistence that every movement counts; the way shots are edited together; a distantiation in acting; a cool, formalized relation to subjectivity—I always think of Gustave Leonhard playing the harpsichord in the Bach film.

Weinstock: What about your texts? They seem very dissimilar to those of Straub and Huillet.

Rosler: Really? Including *History Lessons*?

Weinstock: Yes. They use a preexistent text, one of Brecht's.

Rosler: Yet because of the film's meditative setting, it floats free of the narrative and becomes a philosophical text.

Weinstock: But there's time for that to happen in a way that there isn't in your tapes. For example, in *Domination and the Everyday*, several conversations are going on at the same time, from the most everyday sort to that of the art dealer in a radio interview. So the viewer can't possibly follow all the material you present.

Rosler: Right. I have a compulsion to present a clear line of argument and, at the same time, to interrupt it, in the way in which things really occur, interrupted and fragmented. That's my own sense of life; you have to fight for the time to read and think and to comprehend the meaning of things that are important and determinant in your life. It's very difficult to make the connection between big events and small events, as the tape says. In *Domination* I was making the argument and interrupting it. I repeat the "argument," the images and crawling text, in order to salvage it from its interruptions, so you can actually read it. I also want to suggest that it describes something that is not merely ephemeral and tentative but actual. And yet, things like "commodity fetishism" or the "economic order" or the "movement of history" are abstractions, not tangible. They don't have the kind of reality that feeding your child does.

Weinstock: This raises the question of a distinction between the contradictions which exist between levels and those which exist within them. You seem to hold to a purity of theory, to the idea that an objective theory is possible, whereas I would want to look to the contradictions within the theory as much as I would among the different levels.

Rosler: There are certainly contradictions within the theory. In fact, the theory is in a way no theory at all; it verges on the evangelical. This work begins in irony, making jokes in the face of what seems like someone else's tragedy—namely, Chile's—but it's not just someone else's, it's also ours. (Tragedy is such a suspect word and a suspect genre!) It goes on to describe what can be interpreted as a totalized domination, but the text finally asserts merely that "we" will collectively take control of our own lives. I don't really think it's totalized, but it probably tends toward that. Simply to assert that people will take control is, then, to leave a wide gap.

Weinstock: But you don't assert your consciousness of that gap.

Rosler: I don't? You mean that the doubt expressed is not embedded in the text.

Weinstock: An outsider could see that contradiction, but you are not working with that.

Rosler: I'm aware of the contradictions, and I tend to assume the audience is, too. That's part of my irony, asserting something, yet knowing I haven't set up sufficient grounds for the assertion.

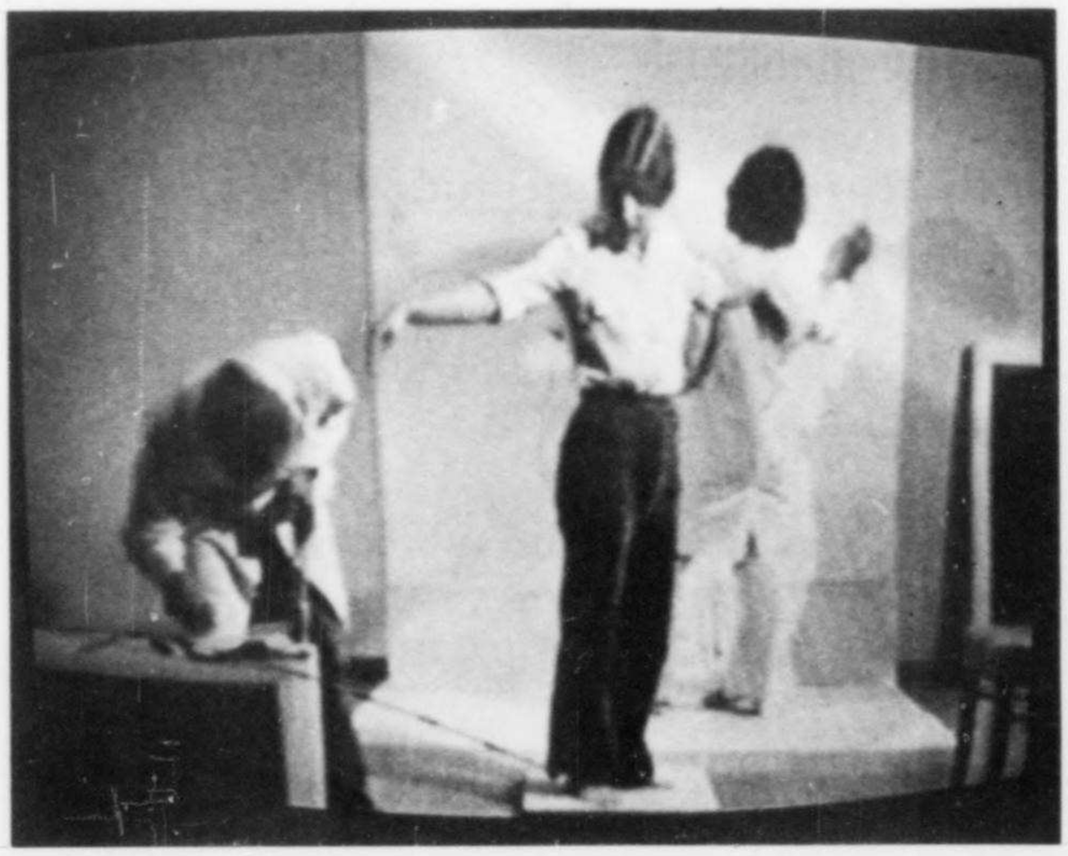
Weinstock: I want to talk also about *Vital Statistics,* because I like it very much. How do its three parts work together?

Rosler: There's a voice-only prologue, like an introducer who appears before the curtain rises on a play and glosses the entire work. Though, as it says, I see the tape more as an opera than as a play. Then there's Act I, which is a long continuous take, in real time, that breaks at the end into a measured series of cuts through two parallel-edited sequences. The long take is very much a meditation. I was thinking of Greek drama as well: the three women in lab coats are the chorus, reduced commentators on the action. The voice that speaks on the track is mine.

Weinstock: A man's voice speaks as well.

Rosler: The man's voice is theatrical, heavily ironic, reading something inserted as another text, not as commentary. There's only one commentary on meaning, in my voice.

Martha Rosler. Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Attained. *1977.*



Weinstock: Is that marked in the work? Is there any way for someone who doesn't know you to know that?

Rosler: What you know is that it's a female voice and that there's a female central character. All the other voices are either the little narrative on the child "Tommy Smith" or are part of the process of measuring the character. The only voice of female subjectivity is the voice-over, and it doesn't matter whether or not you know it's mine. It's difficult not to apprehend it as related to the subject's thoughts, even though it's distanced by her thoughts being described, rather than expressed. This is not the level of self-consciousness within experience. You hear, "She is learning what to think, how to think." That's not the kind of thing one says about oneself. Since it's metacommentary, no speaking person appears. But whose voice can this be? Not God's.

Weinstock: It could be another woman's. But since you claim responsibility for the images, the marking of that utterance makes a difference.

Rosler: Because it is the voice of the argument, the woman's identity doesn't matter. I assume that the metacommentary will be understood as approaching "truth," although there may be no single statement that is "true."

Weinstock: We differ over the truth of theory.

Rosler: Sure. I'm very tempted by the idea of truth's being somewhere, and you're not. Do I really believe in truth and objectivity? I think that we can't achieve perfect knowledge, of course, but I certainly believe that there are some theories that are right and others that are wrong or inadequate.

Weinstock: But knowledge is constantly changing.

Rosler: Knowledge may be constantly changing, but the truth doesn't.

Weinstock: Well, that's where we differ.

Rosler: You think there's no objective reality?

Weinstock: No, I think that there's only a relation of the subject to the Real.

Rosler: But even Lacan thinks that the Real exists; he just feels you can't know it.

Weinstock: There's no access to it, whereas you're talking about an access.

Rosler: Access is never complete; you will never know the world except through the mediation of . . .

Weinstock: But you're talking about a meaning outside, whereas a meaning can only be seen through a subject.

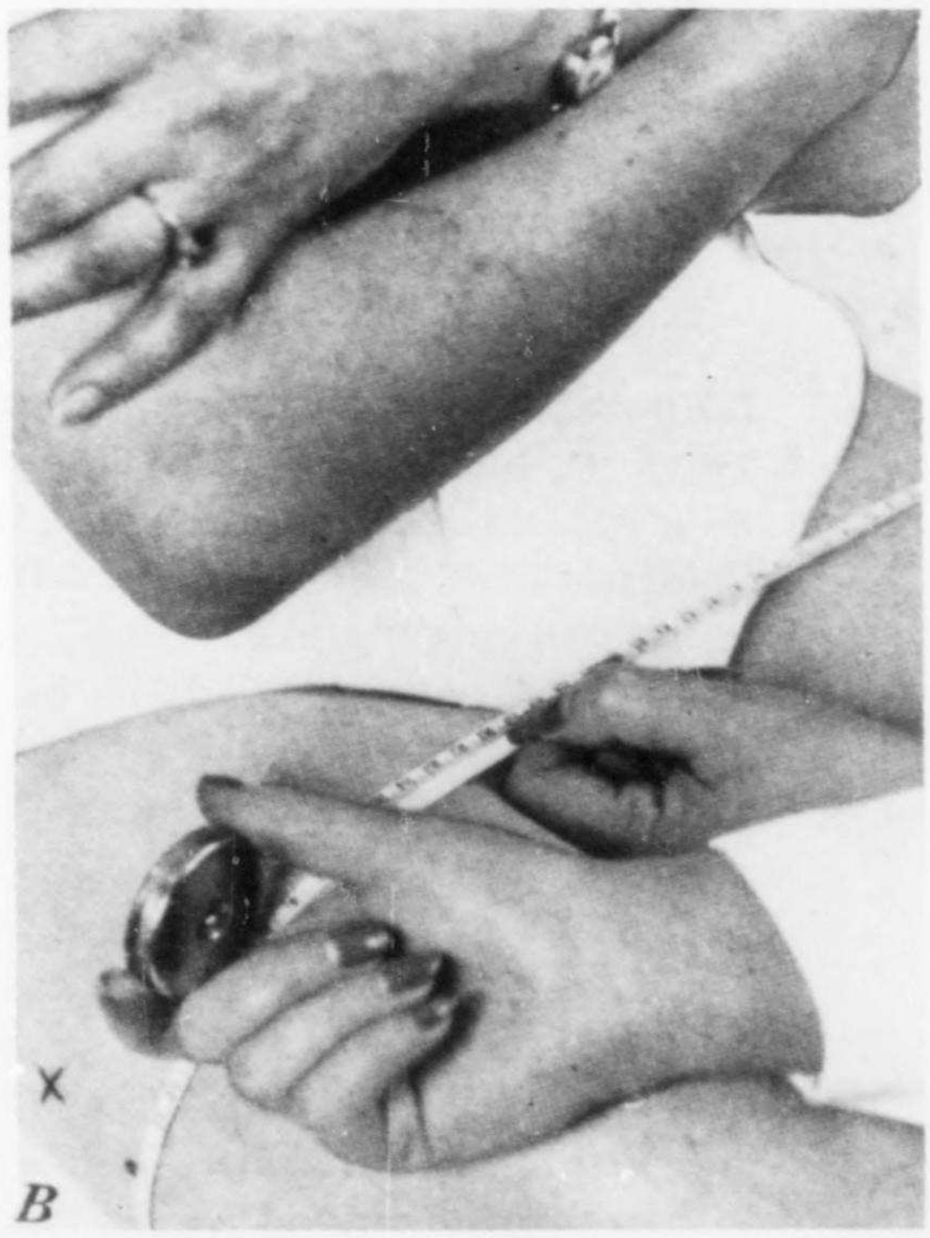
Rosler: That's true.

Weinstock: But the meaning is produced by the subject.

Rosler: Meaning may be produced by the subject, but on the basis of a relation to real conditions.

Weinstock: Let's return to *Vital Statistics*, and to the middle section in particular, wedged between the two others.

Rosler: The neat little ovoid wedge is broken by a trumpet call that's both nostalgic and muffled, and both an elevated sound but also obviously a recording. The voice-over that follows, with a litany of crimes against women, is also obviously spoken into a microphone that makes microphone noises. The photographs of women and children being measured that make up this section are framed as photographs rather than filling the screen. They float in darkness, so that you see them framed and reframed; within the frame of the screen, they are again framed, distanced, rather than presented as visual truth.



Martha Rosler. Vital Statistics. *1977.*

Weinstock: So it's text as well.

Rosler: Yes. It's another level of access to the idea of naming and determining the meaning of women's being. It's a ritualistic response to terrorism, acts that fix subjectivity in a colonized state. The "crimes" have the effect of diminishing our capacity for self-control, independence, and confidence. Many are physically dangerous and damaging assaults, on the person as well as on subjectivity and potency. The list repeats because, again, things do repeat. The enumeration is meant to suggest that it's incomplete; enumeration reveals its own inadequacy. The voice is meant to be very personal; as in Act I, although it speaks the "truth," it's not the truth of God but the truth known to women, spoken by a real, not an idealized, voice. The words naming the crimes are definitive words, though—*femicide* is a meaningful term, as are *childbirth torture, wage slavery.* They allow for no argument.

Weinstock: You're assuming a female viewer.

Rosler: Not necessarily, but yes, I do. Most of my work at that period was really made for women, although I know that men are interested as well. The issues are important to men, too; *Vital Statistics,* for example, *is* also about men. I care that they hear and understand me, but far less than I care that women hear and understand me.

"In the Destructive Element Immerse": Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and Cultural Revolution

FREDRIC JAMESON

Had Syberberg not existed, he would have to have been invented. Perhaps he was. So that "Syberberg" may really be the last of those puppets of mythical German heroes who people his films. Consider this, which has all the predictability of the improbable: during the war a certain stereotype of the German cultural tradition ("teutonic" philosophy; music, especially Wagner) was used by both sides as ammunition in the accompanying ideological conflict; it was also offered as evidence of a German national "character." After the war it became clear that: 1) the history of high culture was not a very reliable guide to German social history generally; 2) the canon of this stereotype excluded much that may be more relevant for us today (e.g., expressionism, Weimar, Brecht); and 3) the Germany of the economic miracle, NATO, and social democracy is a very different place from rural or urban central Europe in the period before Hitler. So people stopped blaming Wagner for Nazism and began a more difficult process of collective self-analysis which culminated in the anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. It also generated a renewal of German cultural production, particularly in the area of film.

The space was therefore cleared for a rather perverse counter-position on all these points: on the one hand, the affirmation that Wagner and the other stereotypes of German cultural history are valid representations of Germany after all; and, on the other, that the contemporary criticism of cultural "irrationality" and authoritarianism—itself a shallow, rationalistic, "Enlightenment" enterprise—by repressing the demons of the German psyche, reinforces rather than exorcizes them. The Left is thus blamed for the survival of the Fascist temptation, while Wagner, as the very culmination of German irrationalism, is contested by methods which can only be described as Wagnerian.

As Syberberg undertakes in his films a program for cultural revolution, he shares some of the values and aims of his enemies on the Left; his aesthetic is a synthesis of Brecht and Wagner (yet another logical permutation which remained to be invented). The Wagnerian persona is indeed uncomfortably, improbably strong in Syberberg: witness the manifestoes which affirm film as the true and ultimate form of the Wagnerian ideal of the "music of the future" and of

Gesamtkunstwerk; poses of heroic isolation from which he lashes out at philistine fellow artists and critics who misunderstand his work (but who are, for him, generally associated with the Left); satiric denunciations in the best tradition of Heine, Marx, and Nietzsche of the anti-cultural *Spiessbürgers* of the Federal Republic today, complete with a *sottisier* of the most idiotic reviews of his films.[1]

Meanwhile, Syberberg is both predictable and improbable in yet another sense: in a high-technology medium, ever more specialized and self-conscious, in which the most advanced criticism has become forbiddingly technical, he suddenly reinvents the role of the naïf or "primitive" artist, organizing his vision of the filmic art of the future not around the virtuoso use of the most advanced techniques (as Coppola or Godard do, though in very different ways), but rather around something like a return to home movies. What he produces is the low-budget look of amateur actors, staged tableaux, and vaudeville-type numbers, essentially static and simply strung together—all of which must initially stun the viewer in search of vanguard or "experimental" novelties.

Though initially astonishing, however, Syberberg's strategy is quite defensible. As in the other arts, the stance of the amateur, the apologia for the homemade which characterizes the handicraft ethos, is often a wholesome form of de-reification, a rebuke to the *esprit de sérieux* of an aesthetic or cultural technocracy; it need not be merely machine-wrecking and regressive. Nor is his seemingly anachronistic position regarding the German cultural past without theoretical justification: in the work of Freud, first of all, and the distinction between repression and sublimation which we have come to understand and accept in other areas;[2] in an orthodox criticism of dialectical reversals by which a binary or polar opposite (rationalistic Enlightenment forms of demystification) is grasped as merely the mirror replication of what it claims to discredit (German irrationalism), locked within the same *problematic*; in a perfectly proper reading of German history which defines imprisonment in essentially Jacobin, pre-1848 (*Vormärz*) forms of bourgeois ideology critique, for which Marx, Marxism, and the dialectic itself still remained to be invented, as the price which oppositional movements have traditionally had to pay for German political underdevelopment; in a new

1. See in particular his two books, *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland*, Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1978; and *Syberbergs Filmbuch*, Frankfurt, Fischer, 1979.

2. "Syberberg repeatedly says his film is addressed to the German 'inability to mourn,' that it undertakes the 'work of mourning' (*Trauerarbeit*). These phrases recall the famous essay Freud wrote during World War I, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' which connects melancholy and the inability to work through grief; and the application of this formula in an influential psychoanalytic study of postwar Germany by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, published in Germany in 1967, which diagnoses the Germans as afflicted by mass melancholia, the result of the continuing denial of their collective responsibility for the Nazi past and their persistent refusal to mourn" (Susan Sontag, "Eye of the Storm," *The New York Review of Books*, XXVII, 2 [February 21, 1980], 40). The trauma of loss does not, however, seem a very apt way to characterize present-day Germany's relationship to Hitler; Syberberg's operative analogy here is rather with the requiem as an art form, in which grief is redemptively transmuted into jubilation.

conception of cultural revolution, finally, which, drawing its inspiration from Ernst Bloch's aesthetics and his "principle of Hope," his impulse towards a utopian future, is not merely unfamiliar outside of Germany, but has also—until Syberberg's own work—been untested as an aesthetic program for a new art language.

If the films were not worth bothering about, of course, it would be idle to debate these questions. But what would it mean to employ traditional judgments of value for something like the seven-hour *Our Hitler*? With what would we emerge except formulations such as the "not good but important" of a German newspaper critic ("Kein 'guter' Film, dafür ein wichtiger.")? The Wagnerian length involves a process in which one must be willing or unwilling to immerse oneself rather than an object whose structure one can judge, appreciate, or deplore. My own reaction is that, after some three or four hours, it might as well have lasted forever (but that the first hour was simply dreadful from all points of view). Perhaps the most honest appraisal is the low-level one which chooses the episodes one likes, complains about what bores or exasperates. The dominant aesthetic of this film, which works to produce an "improvisation effect," seems, at any rate, to block all others.

This improvisation effect is clearly derived from the interview format of cinema-verité. Against the composed and representational scenarios of fiction film, cinema-verité was read as a breakthrough to the freshness and immediacy of daily experience. In the hands of filmmakers such as Syberberg or Godard, however, the illusion of spontaneity is exposed as a construct of preexisting forms. In Godard's films the interview is the moment in which the fictional characters are tormented and put to the ultimate test: full-face, head and shoulders against a dazzling monochrome wall, they reply with hesitant assent or inarticulate half-phrases to the demand that they formulate their experiences, their *truth*, in words. The truth of the interview, however, lies not in what is said or betrayed, but in the silence, in the fragility or insufficiency of the stammered response, in the massive and overwhelming power of the visual image, and in the lack of neutrality of the badgering, off-screen interviewer. It is in Godard's recent television series, *Tour de France*, that the tyrannical and manipulative power of this investigative position is most clearly exposed. There the Maoist interviewer questions school children whose interests, obviously, are radically different from his own. At one point he asks a little girl if she knows what revolution is (she does not). If there is something obscene about exhibiting something—class struggle—to a child who will find out about it in her own time, there is, no doubt, something equally obscene about the Syberberg child (his daughter) who wanders through the seven hours of *Our Hitler* carrying dolls of the Nazi leaders and other playthings of the German past. These children can, however, no longer be figures of innocence. Rather they mark the future and the possible limits of the political project of these filmmakers, each of whom inscribes his work within a particular conception of cultural revolution. In Syberberg, then, a mythic posterity, some exorcised future

Germany, its bloody past reduced to the playroom or the toybox; in Godard, the vanishing "subject of history," the once politicized public that will no longer reply.

Syberberg's documentary and interview techniques are developed in a whole complex preparatory practice which precedes his major films, from an early documentary on Brecht's training methods, through interviews with Fritz Kortner and Romy Schneider (and an imaginary one with Ludwig II's cook, Theodor Hierneis), to a five-hour "study" of Winifried Wagner. The background of a Syberberg interview, characteristically unlike the nonplace of the Godardian wall (with its properly utopian colors, as Stanley Cavell has noted[3]), is generally a house or mansion whose monumental and tiered traces of the past gradually absorb the camera work in such a way that what began as an interview turns into a "guided tour." This unexpected formal emergence is a stunning solution to the dilemma of the essentially narrative apparatus of film as it confronts the absences of the past and the task of "working through" what is already over and done with. So in the Wagner documentary,

> you come to see how the bourgeois utopia of private life turns into idyll, how the whole system breaks down without that music which the master was still able to bully out of himself and life. Without the music of Wagner, Wahnfried [the family estate] was doomed to decline and fall.[4]

The very primacy of the great house, as well as the form of the guided tour, is dictated by Syberberg's material and by the weight of the essentially bourgeois past of German cultural history as he conceives of it—from the nineteenth-century palaces of Ludwig II, or of Wagner, or Karl May's Villa Shatterhand, all the way to Hitler's Reichskanzlei, that is to say, to the ultimate destruction of those buildings and the emergence of the misty placelessness (better still, the scenic space) of *Our Hitler*. It is not easy to imagine anything further from the Parisian outer belt of Godard's films, with their shoddy highrises, noise, and traffic; nor can one imagine Godard filming a documentary on Versailles, say, or the houses of Monet or Cézanne. Yet this effort of imagination, as we shall see, is the task which Syberberg has set himself, the form of his "estrangement effect": imagine Godard listening to Wagner! Or, to turn things around, imagine Syberberg confronting middle-class prostitution, the commodification of sexuality.

Similarly striking is the contrast between Godard's deliberate revelation of his interviewer's manipulations and Syberberg's sense of the *tendresse* and self-denial demanded of the maker of documentaries and interviews:

3. In *The World Viewed*, New York, Viking, 1971.
4. *Filmbuch*, pp. 81–82.

> The maker of such films must *serve* in the archaic, virtually monastic, sense; with all his heightened attention and his superior knowledge of the motifs and the intersections or lateral relationships of what has already been said and what is yet to come, he must remain completely in the background during the process, he must be able to become transparent. . . . You come to understand the grand masters of the medieval *unio mystica* . . . and maybe that is why we get involved in such a suicidal business. It costs sweat and effort, often more than the kind of excitement one feels in realizing the fantasies of fiction film. You're completely washed out in bed at night, still trembling all over from having had to listen, comprehend, and direct the camera. You are directing from the score of another composer, but in your own rhythm.[5]

Yet it is perhaps this very conception of the self-effacing mission of the documentary artist which underscores the complacencies of *Our Hitler*, the lengthy indulgences which it allows itself. Such complacency is the consequence of a self-serving glorification of the artist and the overemphasis on the function of art in social life in general. It is characteristic of the auto-referentiality which informs modern art, a pathology which results from the instability, the effacement often, of an institutional role for the artist in modern, or more specifically, capitalist society. Artists working in a social system which makes an institutional place for cultural production (the role of the bard or tribal storyteller, the icon-painter or producer of ecclesiastical images, even the roles foreseen by aristocratic or court patronage) were thereby freed from the necessity of justifying their works through excessive reflection on the artistic process itself. As the position of the artist becomes jeopardized, reflexivity increases, becomes an indispensable precondition for artistic production, particularly in vanguard or high-cultural works.

The thematics of the artist novel, of art about art, and poetry about poetry is by now so familiar and, one is tempted to say, so old-fashioned (the generation of '50s aesthetes was perhaps the last to entertain aggressively the notion of a privileged role for the poet) that its operation in mass culture and in other seemingly nonaesthetic discourses passes, oftentimes, unobserved. Yet one of the forms taken by a crisis in a discourse like that of professional philosophy is precisely the overproduction of fantasy images of the role and necessity of the professional philosopher himself (Althusserianism was only the latest philosophical movement to have felt the need to justify its work in this way, while the Wittgensteinian reduction of philosophical speculation marks a painful and therapeutic awareness of its loss of a social vocation). It was thus predictable that the emergence of that new type of discourse called theory would be accompanied by a number of overweening celebrations of the primacy of this kind of writing.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 85–86.

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. Our Hitler. *1976–77.*

Yet the "alienation" of intellectuals, their "free-floating" lack of social function, is not redeemed by such wish-fulfilling reflexivity. Political commitment, for example the support of working-class parties, is a more concrete and realistic response to this dilemma, which is the result of the dynamics and priorities of the market system itself, its refusal of institutional legitimation to any form of intellectual activity which is not at least mediately involved in the social reproduction of the profit system.

In mass culture, popular music, through its content and its glorification of the musician, provides a most striking example of the workings of this thematics of crisis. The rapidity with which the role of the musician has become mythicized is particularly evident in the instance of rock music: first as a balladeer (Bob Dylan, for example), and then as a Christ figure, through the fantasy of universal redemption or individual martyrdom (as in *Tommy* or many David Bowie cycles). My objection to the overdetermined content of such works (which, it should be understood, have social and psychic resonance of their own, quite distinct from the supplementary fantasies about their own production) is a reaction to the tiresomeness of their continued and outmoded appeal. Surely the "hero with a thousand faces," let alone the Christ figure, excites no one any longer, is imaginatively irrelevant to the problems of consumer society, and is a sign of intellectual as well as aesthetic bankruptcy.

Yet this is precisely the solution to which Syberberg rather anachronistically returns in *Our Hitler*, spreading a panoply of mythic images before us. His conception of the mythic derives, it is true, more from Wagner than from Joyce, Campbell, or Frye, but it is no less exasperating for all that (even Syberberg's philosophical mentor, Ernst Bloch, has suggested that it would be desirable to substitute a fairy-tale, that is a populist, Wagner for the official epic-aristocratic one). Initially, however, the complacent and auto-referential developments in Syberberg seem to derive from the anti-Wagnerian tradition of Brecht, with whom he also entertains a "mythic" identification: the circus barker of the opening of *Our Hitler* surely has more in common with the streetsinger of *The Three-Penny Opera* than with the nineteenth-century religion of art. Yet very rapidly the apologia of film as the Wagnerian "music of the future" and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of our time, the loftiest form of artistic vocation, emerges from the populist framework. A miniature replica of the first movie studio, the little wooden shack which Thomas Edison called the Black Maria and in which he experimented with the "kinetoscope," the ancestor of the movie camera, becomes the Holy Grail. And the quest, then, becomes the yearning for a well-nigh Lukácsian "totality," the impulse towards a Hegelian Absolute Spirit, the self-consciousness of this historical world and the place from which, if anywhere, it might hope to grasp itself through the medium of aesthetic representation.

The problem of totalization is surely a crucial one in a world in which our sense of the unity of capitalism as a global system is structurally blocked by the reification of daily life, as well as by class, racial, national, and cultural differences

and by the distinct temporalities by which they are all defined. But the film goes beyond this crucial concern to make an outrageous proposal: we are not merely to accept the filmmaker as supreme prophet and guardian of the Grail, but Hitler as well.

The conjunction of Hitler and film, the interest which he had in the medium, is, of course, historically documented. Syberberg provides some of the most interesting specifics: He liked Fred Astaire and John Wayne movies particularly; Goebbels would not let him see *The Great Dictator*, but screened *Gone with the Wind* for him as compensation—which he thoroughly enjoyed; after the first reverses in the East, he began to restrict himself to the viewing of newsreels and documentary footage from the front—to which he occasionally offered editorial suggestions. But by 1944 he had even stopped watching these and reverted to his old Franz Lehar records.

Syberberg, however, proposes that we see Hitler not merely as a film buff, nor even as a film critic, but as a filmmaker in his own right, indeed, the greatest of the twentieth century, the *auteur* of the most spectacular film of all time, World War II. Although interpretations of Hitler as a failed artist have been proposed in the past (and renewed by the memoirs of Albert Speer, himself the prophet of an unrealized architectural "music of the future"), they have generally been diagnostic and debunking, rejoining a whole tradition of analysis of political visionaries, especially revolutionary leaders, as failed intellectuals and bearers of *ressentiment* (thus, even Michelet described the more radical Jacobins as so many *artistes manqués*). There is, indeed, a striking science-fiction idea (not so strikingly realized in its novel form, *The Iron Dream*, by Norman Spinrad) in which, in an alternate world, a sidewalk artist and bohemian named Adolf Hitler emigrates to the U.S. in 1919 and becomes a writer of science fiction. He incorporates his bloodiest fantasies in his masterpiece, *Lord of the Swastika*, which is reproduced as the text of Spinrad's own novel: "Hitler died in 1953, but the stories and novels he left behind remain as a legacy to all science-fiction enthusiasts."

Syberberg's purpose is, however, a good deal more complicated and sophisticated than this and aims at no less than a Blochian cultural revolution, a psychoanalysis and exorcism of the collective unconscious of Germany. It is this ambition with which we must now come to terms. Bloch's own "method," if we may call it that, consists in detecting the positive impulses at work within the negative ones, in appropriating the motor force of such destructive but collective passions as reactionary religion, nationalism, fascism, and even consumerism.[6] For Bloch, all passions, nihilistic as well as constructive, embody a fundamental

6. See the chapter on Bloch in my *Marxism and Form*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970. In a seminal essay, whose diffusion in Germany was surely not without effect either on Syberberg's own aesthetic or on the reception of his films, Jürgen Habermas attributes a similar method to Walter Benjamin; see "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism—The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," *New German Critique*, no. 17 (Spring 1979), 30–59.

drive towards a transfigured future. This Blochian doctrine of hope does not moralize; rather it warns that the first moment of collective consciousness is not a benign phenomenon, that it defines itself, affirms its unity, with incalculable violence against the faceless, threatening mass of Others which surround it. The rhetoric of liberal capitalism has traditionally confronted this violence with the ideal of the "civilizing" power of commerce and of a retreat from the collective (above all, from the dynamics of social class) into the security of private life. Bloch's gamble—and it is the only conceivable solution for a Left whose own revolutions (China, Vietnam, Cambodia) have generated a dismaying nationalist violence in their turn—is that a recuperation of the utopian impulse within these dark powers is possible. His is not a doctrine of self-consciousness of the type with which so many people, grown impatient with its inability to effect any concrete praxis or change, have become dissatisfied. Rather, it urges the program so dramatically expressed by Conrad's character, Stein (in *Lord Jim*): "in the destructive element immerse!" Pass all the way through nihilism so completely that we emerge in the light at its far side. A disturbing program, clearly, as the historical defections from the Left to various forms of fascism and nationalism in modern times must testify.

In accordance with this doctrine, the vision of history which emerges in Syberberg's trilogy[7] is not simply one of the "road not taken," not simply a Lukácsian project to rescue and reinvent an alternate tradition of German culture. Syberberg's fascination with Wagner's royal patron, Ludwig II of Bavaria, results not from the identification of a moment of cultural choice, a historical turning point which might have changed everything. Although it is that too, of course, and he represents Ludwig as a form of artistic patronage and cultural development which he systematically juxtaposes with the commercialism of the arts and cultural illiteracy of the middle-class in Germany today. (Indeed, in one of his most interesting proposals, especially in the light of the neglect of his own films within the Federal Republic, Syberberg imagines a "Bayreuth" for the modern film where special state theaters for avant-garde filmmaking would be supported by the various provincial governments.) Even more significant, however, is his representation of Louis II as the anti-Bismarck: the tormented and dilettantish, unheroic, and often ridiculous symbol of a non-Prussian Germany, of the possibility of a German federation under the leadership of Bavaria rather than that unified state under Brandenburg and the Junkers. Yet Syberberg's treatment of the "virgin king" in *Ludwig* is no less deliberately ambivalent than his treatment of Hitler, as we shall see.

It is the second film in the trilogy which most faithfully sets out on the Blochian quest for an earthly paradise, the search for utopian impulses within the

7. The trilogy consists of the following films: *Ludwig—Requiem for a Virgin King* (1972), American Zoetrope; *Karl May* (1974), Universal Life; *Our Hitler* (1976/77), American Zoetrope.

contingent forms and activities of a fallen social life. The film takes as its theme the popular writer Karl May, who, as a kind of late nineteenth-century German combination of Jules Verne and Nick Carter, made the Western over into an authentically German form that was read by generations of German adolescents, including Hitler himself. The juxtaposition of Wagner's patron and this immensely successful writer of bestsellers is the strategic isolation of a moment of crisis in modern culture, the moment at which high culture and emergent mass culture began to split apart from one another and to develop seemingly autonomous structures and languages. This dramatic moment in the development of culture marks a break, a dialectical leap and transformation in capital, just as surely as, on the level of the infrastructure and of institutions, the coming into being of the monopoly form. Syberberg has, it is true, expressed this emergent opposition in what are still essentially unified class terms, for the villa of Karl May and the palaces of Ludwig can still be seen as two variants of a culture of the upper bourgeoisie, or, perhaps, of the high bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, but then only on the condition that Ludwig's "residual" aristocratic style is viewed as already infected with the kitsch of nineteenth-century middle-class taste.

Clearly the film's diagnosis transcends the individual writer and can be extended to all the national variants of the popular literature of nascent imperialism, of the mystery of these last "dark places of the earth" (Conrad) which suddenly become perceptible at the moment of their penetration and abolition—as in the novels of Verne or, in another way, of Rider Haggard (and even of Conrad himself), in which the closing of capitalism's global frontier resonates through the form as its condition of possibility and its outside limit.

> Through its monologue form, the film presents the inner world of "the last great German mystic in the last moment of the decline of the fairy tale," and presents it as a monstrous kind of closet drama, developing according to the laws of some three-hour-long chamber music: "The soul is a vast landscape into which we flee." One can thus seek one's paradise, as the historical Karl May did, in so many trips and voyages to the real sites of his fantasies, thereby knowing ultimate failure, as May himself did in his breakdown. . . . Karl May transposed all his problems and his enemies into the figures of his adventures in the wild West and in an orient that extended all the way to China. [In the film] we return them to their origins and see his filmic life as the projected worlds of the inner monologue. A man in search of paradise lost in the typically German misdirection, restlessly seeking his own salvation in an inferno of his own making. Job and Faust, combined, with a Saxon accent, his fanatical longing dramatized in a national hero for poor and rich alike, a hero both for Hitler and for Bloch, and acted out with all the familiar faces and voices of the *Ufa* [the major German film company up to 1945], with Stalingrad music at the end which swells relentlessly out of history itself. It may be that other nations can rest at

> peace in their misery (perhaps also it is not so great as our own), but here we can see it percolating and seeking its own liberation as well as that of others.[8]

Nowhere, then, is the utopian impulse towards the reappropriation of energies so visible as in this attempt to rewrite the fantasies of a nascent mass culture in their authentic form as the unconscious longing of a whole collectivity.

Ludwig, however, presents a more complex and difficult vision, as we may judge from its delirious final image:

> After his resurrection from the scaffold of history, Ludwig throws off his kingly robes and in a Wagnerian finale yodels at the Alps or Himalaya landscape from the roof of the royal palace. . . . Even the bearded child-Ludwig from Erda's grotto is included, with his requiem-smile through the mist. The curse and salvation of the legendary life of the child-king spreads out our own existential dream- and wish-landscape before us in amicable-utopian fashion.[9]

The bliss or *promesse de bonheur* of this kitsch sublime, as glorious as it is, is deeply marked, both in its affect and in its structure as an image, by its unreality as the self-consciously "imaginary resolution of a real contradiction."

Yet such a moment will perhaps afford us a surer insight into the dynamics of Syberberg's aesthetic, and of his "salvational critique," than the narrative analysis we have hitherto associated with the "method" of Bloch (and in which the very shape of the story or tale, or the narrative form, expresses the movement towards the future). Since Syberberg's are not in that sense storytelling films (although they are films *about* stories of all kinds), a narrative or diachronic analysis does them less justice than the synchronic focus to which we now turn, and by which the movement of filmic images in time is grasped as the "process of production" of relatively static tableaux similar to this one of the Ludwig apotheosis. Such moments, so characteristic of Syberberg's films, can become emblems of the films themselves—as in the widely reproduced logo of *Our Hitler* in which Hitler in a toga is seen rising from the grave of Wagner. Such quintessential images, which share, certainly, in the traditions of symbolism and surrealism, are, as Susan Sontag has pointed out, more accurately understood according to Walter Benjamin's conception of the allegorical emblem.

Yet the originality of Syberberg's images, related as they are to his political project, his attempt at a psychoanalysis and exorcism of the German unconscious, advances beyond these historical references. The surrealist image—"the forcible yoking of two realities as distant and as unrelated as possible"—and the Benjaminian allegory—a discontinuous montage of dead relics—each in its own way

8. *Filmbuch*, pp. 39, 45-46.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. Ludwig—Requiem for a Virgin King. *1972*.

underscores the heterogeneity of the Syberberg tableau without accounting for its therapeutic function, since the surrealist aesthetic aimed at an immediate and apocalyptic liberation from an impoverished and rationalized daily life, and the Benjaminian emblem, while it displayed the remains and traces of "mourning and melancholia," was not an active working through of such material; it was perceived as a symptom or an icon rather than, as in Syberberg, a "spiritual method."

Such a "method" may be characterized as a forcible short-circuiting of all the wires in the political unconscious, as an attempt to purge the sedimented contents of collective fantasy and ideological representation by reconnecting its symbolic counters so outrageously that they de-reify themselves. The force of ideological representations (and what we call culture or tradition is little more than an immense and stagnant swamp of such representations) derives from their enforced separation within our minds, their compartmentalization, which, more than any mere double standard, authorizes the multiple standards and diverse operations of that complex and collective Sartrean *mauvaise foi* called ideology, whose essential function is to prevent totalization.

We have, in American literature, a signal and programmatic enactment of this short-circuiting in Gertrude Stein's neglected *Four in America*, in which Ulysses S. Grant is imagined as a religious leader, the Wright Brothers as painters, Henry James as a general, and George Washington as a novelist.[10] There is but a step from this "exercise" of a reified collective imagination to Syberberg's presentation of Hitler as the greatest filmmaker of the twentieth century. The force of his therapy depends on the truth of his presupposition that the zones of high culture (Wagner, Ludwig's castles), popular and adolescent reading (Karl May), and petty-bourgeois political values and impulses (Hitler, Nazism) are so carefully separated in the collective mind that their conceptual interference, their rewiring in the heterogeneity of the collage, will blow the entire system sky-high. It is according to this therapeutic strategy that those moments in Syberberg which seem closest to a traditional form of debunking, or of an unmasking of false consciousness (as in the reports of Hitler's bourgeois private life) must be read. The point is not to allow one of the poles of the image to settle into the truth of the other which it unmasks (as when our sense of the horror of Nazi violence "demystifies" Hitler's courteous behavior with his staff), but rather to hold them apart as equal and autonomous so that energies can pass back and forth between them. This is the strategy at work in the seemingly banal monologue in which the Hitler puppet answers his accusers and suggests that Auschwitz is not to be judged quite so harshly after Vietnam, Idi Amin, the torture establishments of the Shah and the Latin American dictatorships, Cambodia, and Chile. To imagine Hitler as Nixon and vice versa is not merely to underscore the personal peculiarities they

10. *Four in America*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1947.

share (odd mannerisms, awkwardness in personal relations, etc.), but also to bring out dramatically the banality, not of evil, but of conservatism and reaction in general, and of their stereotypical ideas of social law and order, which can as easily result in genocide as in Watergate.

It is important at this point to return to the comparison between the different "cultural revolutions" of Syberberg and Godard. Both filmmakers are involved, as we have noted, in attempts to de-reify cultural representations. The essential difference between them, however, is in their relationship to what is called the "truth content" of art, its claim to possess some truth or epistemological value. This is, indeed, the essential difference between post- and classical modernism (as well as Lukács's conception of realism): the latter still lays claim to the place and function vacated by religion, still draws its resonance from a conviction that through the work of art some authentic vision of the world is immanently expressed. Syberberg's films are modernist in this classical, and what may now seem archaic, sense.[11] Godard's are, however, resolutely postmodernist in that they conceive of themselves as sheer text, as a process of production of representations that have no truth content, are, in this sense, sheer surface or superficiality. It is this conviction which accounts for the reflexivity of the Godard film, its resolution to use representation against itself to destroy the binding or absolute status of any representation.

If classical modernism is understood as a secular substitute for religion, it is no longer surprising that its formulation of the problem of representation can borrow from a religious terminology which defines representation as "figuration," a dialectic of the letter and the spirit, a "picture-language" (*Vorstellung*) which embodies, expresses, and transmits otherwise inexpressible truths.[12] For the theological tradition to which this terminology belongs, the problem is one of the "proper" use of figuration and of the danger of its becoming fixed, objectified into an externality where the inner spirit is forgotten or historically lost. The great moments of iconoclasm in Judaism and Islam, as well as in a certain Protestantism, have resulted from the fear that the figures, images, and sacred objects of their once vital religious traditions have become mere idols and that they must be destroyed in order that there may be a reinvigoration by and return to the authentic spirit of religious experience. Iconoclasm is, therefore, an early version (in a different mode of production) of the present-day critiques of representation (and as in the latter, the destruction of the dead letter or of the idol is, almost at once, associated with a critique of the institutions—whether the Pharisees and Saducees, the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, or the "whore of

11. This is, I take it, what Sontag means to stress in her characterization of Syberberg's essentially symbolist aesthetic.

12. See the chapter on religion in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*; Rudolf Bultmann's work is the most influential contemporary treatment of the problem of figuration in theology.

Babylon," or modern-day ideological state apparatuses such as the university system—which perpetuate that idolatry for the purposes of domination).

Unlike Hegel—whose conception of the "end of art," that is, the ultimate bankruptcy and transcendence of an immanent and figural language, foresees a final replacement of art by the nonfigural language of philosophy in which truth dispenses with picture-making and becomes transparent to itself—religion and modernism replace dead or false images (systems of representation) with others more lively and authentic. This description of classical modernism as a "religion of art" is justified, in turn, by the aesthetic reception and experience of the works themselves. At its most vital, the experience of modernism was not one of a single historical movement or process, but of a "shock of discovery," a commitment and an adherence to its individual forms through a series of "religious conversions." One did not simply read D. H. Lawrence or Rilke, see Jean Renoir or Hitchcock, or listen to Stravinsky as distinct manifestations of what we now term modernism. Rather one read all the works of a particular writer, learned a style and a phenomenological world. D. H. Lawrence became an absolute, a complete and systematic world view, to which one converted. This meant, however, that the experience of one form of modernism was incompatible with another, so that one entered one world only at the price of abandoning another (when we tired of Pound, for example, we converted to Faulkner, or when Thomas Mann became predictable, we turned to Proust). The crisis of modernism as such came, then, when suddenly it became clear that "D. H. Lawrence" was not an absolute after all, not the final achieved figuration of the truth of the world, but only one art-language among others, only one shelf of works in a whole dizzying library. Hence the shame and guilt of cultural intellectuals, the renewed appeal of the Hegelian goal, the "end of art," and the abandonment of culture altogether for immediate political activity. Hence, also the appeal of the nonfictive, the cult of the experiential, as the Devil explains to Adrian in a climactic moment of *Doctor Faustus*:

> The work of art, time, and aesthetic experience are one, and all now fall prey to the critical impulse. The latter no longer tolerates aesthetic play or appearance, fiction, the self-glorifications of a form which censures passions and human suffering, transforms them into distinct roles, translates them into images. Only the nonfictive remains valid today, only what is neither played, played out, or played away [*der nicht verspielte*], only the undistorted and unembellished expression of pain in its moment of experience.[13]

In much the same spirit, Sartre remarked that *Nausea* was worthless in the face of the fact of the suffering or death of a single child. Yet pain is a text. The death or

13. Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, Frankfurt, Fischer, 1951, p. 361.

suffering of children comes to us only through texts (through the images of network news, for example). The crisis of modernist absolutes results not from the juxtaposition of these fictive works with nonfigurative experiences of pain or suffering, but from their relativization by one another. Bayreuth would have be to built far from everything else, far from the secular babel of the cities with their multiple art languages and forms of postreligious "reterritorialization" or "recording" (Deleuze). Only Wagner could be heard there in order to forestall the disastrous realization that he was "just" a composer and the works "just" operas, in order, in other words, for the Wagnerian sign system or aesthetic language to appear absolute, to impose itself, like a religion, as the dominant code, the hegemonic system of symbols, on an entire collectivity. That this is not a solution for a pluralistic and secular capitalism is proved by the fate of Bayreuth itself, yet directs our attention to the political and social mediations which are present in the aesthetic dilemma. The modernist aesthetic demands an organic community which it cannot, however, bring into being by itself but can only express. Ludwig II is, then, the name for that fleeting mirage, that optical illusion of a concrete historical possibility. He is the philosopher-king who, by virtue of a political power that resulted from a unique and unstable social and political situation, holds out, for a moment, the promise of an organic community. Later, Nazism will make this same promise. Of Ludwig II also, then, it may be said that had he not existed, he would have to have been invented. For he is the socio-political demiurge, a structural necessity of the modernist aesthetic which projects him as an image of its foundation.

What happens, then, when the modernisms begin to look at one another and to experience their relativity and their cultural guilt, their own aesthetic nakedness? From this moment of shame and crisis there comes into being a new, second-degree solution which Barthes describes in a splendid page so often quoted by me that I may be excused for doing so again:

> The greatest modernist works linger as long as possible, in a sort of miraculous stasis, on the threshold of Literature itself, in an anticipatory situation in which the density of life is given and developed without yet being destroyed by their consecration as an [institutionalized] sign system.[14]

Here, in this contemporary reflection on the dialectic of figuration and iconoclasm, the ultimate reification of the figural system is taken to be inevitable. Yet that very inevitability at least holds out the promise of a transitional moment between the destruction of the older systems of figuration (so many dead letters, empty icons, or old-fashioned art languages) and the freezing over and institutionalization of the new one. A rather different Wagnerian solution may be taken

14. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, London, Cape, 1967, p. 39.

simultaneously as the prototype and the object lesson for this possibility of an aesthetic authenticity in the provisory. Bayreuth was the imaginary projection of a social solution to the modernist dilemma: the Wagnerian leitmotif may now be seen as a far more concrete, internal response to this dilemma. For the leitmotif is intended, in principle, to destroy everything that is reifiable in the older musical tradition, most notably the quotable and excerptable "melodies" of romantic music, which, as Adorno noted, are so readily fetishized by the contemporary culture industry ("the twenty loveliest melodies of the great symphonies on a single long-playing record"). The leitmotif is designed, on the one hand, *not* to be singable or fetishizable in that way and, on the other, to prevent the musical text from becoming an object by ceaselessly redissolving it into an endless process of recombination with other lietmotifs. The failure of the attempt, the reconsecration as an institutional sign system, then comes when we hum Wagner after all, when the leitmotifs are themselves reified into so many properly Wagnerian "melodies," of which, as familiar known quantities, one can make a complete list, and which now stand out from the musical flow like so many foreign bodies.

It is not to be thought that a postmodernist aesthetic can escape this particular dilemma either. Even in Godard, the relentless anatomy and dissolution of the reified image does not prevent the latter's ultimate triumph over the aesthetic of the film as sheer process. Godard's structural analysis—by which text is sundered from image, sound from sight, words from writing, in an implacable demonstration of the structural heterogeneity of such Barthesian "mythologies"—demands in some sense that the film destroy itself in the process, that it use itself up without residue, that it be disposable. Yet the object of this corrosive dissolution is not the image as such, but individual images, mere examples of the general dynamic of the image in media and consumer society, in the society of the spectacle. These examples—represented as impermanent, not only in themselves, but also by virtue of the fact that they could have been substituted by others—then develop an inertia of their own, and, vehicles for the critique of representation, turn into so many representations "characteristic" of the films of Godard. Far from abolishing themselves, the films persist, in film series and film studies programs, as a reified sequence of familiar images which can be screened again and again: the spirit triumphs over the letter, no doubt, but it is the dead letter that remains behind.

Syberberg's "cultural revolution" seems to face quite different problems, for the objects of his critique—the weight of figures like Karl May, Ludwig, or Hitler himself as figures in the collective unconscious—are historical realities and thus no longer mere examples of an abstract process. Late capitalism has elsewhere provided its own method for exorcizing the dead weight of the past: historical amnesia, the waning of historicity, the effortless media-exhaustion of even the immediate past. The France of the consumer society scarcely needs to exorcize De Gaulle when it can simply allow the heroic Gaullist moment of its construction to recede into oblivion at the appropriately dizzying rate. In this respect, it is

instructive to juxtapose Syberberg's *Our Hitler* with that other recent New York sensation, Abel Gance's *Napoleon*. Even if we leave aside the proposed critique of Napoleonic politics in the unfilmed sequels, this representational reappropriation of the past is only too evidently ideological: the idealization of Napoleonic puritanism and law and order after the excesses of the Revolution and the Directory (read: the great war and the twenties), the projection of a Napoleonic unification of Europe (this will come to sound Hitlerian in the 1930s and early '40s, liberal once more with the foundation of NATO and the Common Market). These are surely not attempts to settle accounts with the past and with its sedimented collective representations, but only to use its standard images for manipulative purposes.

Syberberg's aesthetic strategy presupposes some fundamental social difference between the Federal Republic of the social establishment, of the *Berufsverbot* and the hard currency of the *Deutschmark*, and the other nation states of advanced capitalism with their media dynamics, their culture industries, and their historical amnesia. Whether Germany today is really any different in this respect is what is euphemistically called an empirical question. Syberberg's idea is that the German *misère* is somehow distinct and historically unique and can be defended by an account of the peculiar combination of political underdevelopment and leapfrogging "modernization" that characterizes recent German history. Still, there is some nagging doubt as to whether, even in the still relatively conservative class cohesiveness of the *Spiessbürger* which dominates Germany today, the secret of the past may not be that there is no secret any longer, and that the collective representations of Wagner, Karl May, even of Hitler, may not simply be constructions of the media (perpetuated and reinvented by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, among others).

But this must now be reformulated in terms of Syberberg's filmic system and of what we have described as his political project, his cultural revolution, or collective psychoanalysis. In order for his method to work, these films must somehow continue to "take" the real world, and his Hitler puppets and other Nazi motifs must somehow remain "referential," must preserve their links as allusions and designations of the historically real. This is the ultimate guarantee of the truth content to which films such as this lay claim. The psychodrama will have no effect if it relaxes back into sheer play and absolute fictionality; it must be understood as therapeutic play with material that resists, that is, with one or the other forms of the real (it being understood that a collective representation of Hitler is as real and has as many practical consequences as the biographical one). Clearly, the nonfictional nature of the subject matter is no guarantee in this respect; nor is this only a reflection of the "textual" nature of history in general, whose facts are never actually present but constructed in historiography, written archives. Aesthetic distance, the very "set" towards fictionality itself, that "suspension of disbelief" which involves an equal suspension of belief, these and other characteristics of aesthetic experience as they have been theorized since Kant also

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. Our Hitler. *1976–77.*

operate very powerfully to turn Hitler into "Hitler," a character in a fiction film, and thus removed from the historical reality which we hope to affect. In the same way, it is notorious that within the work of art in general, the most reprehensible ideologies—Céline's anti-Semitism, for instance—are momentarily rewritten into a thematic system, become pretext for sheer aesthetic play and are no more offensive than, say, Pynchon's "theme" of paranoia.

Yet this is not simply to be taken as the result of some eternal essence of the work of art and of aesthetic experience: it is a dilemma which must be historicized, as it might be were we to imagine a Lukácsian defense of the proposition that, in their own time, Sir Walter Scott's historical romances were more resonantly referential and came to terms with history more concretely than do these equally historical films of Syberberg. For the imperceptible dissociation, in the modern world, of the public from the private, the privatization of experience, the monadization and the relativization of the individual subject, affect the filmmaker as well, and enforce the almost instantaneous eclipse of that unstable situation, that "miraculous suspension," which Barthes saw as the necessary condition for an even fleeting modernist authenticity. From this perspective, the problem is in understanding Syberberg as the designation of a particular modernist language, a distinctive modernist sign system: to read these films properly is, as I have said, a

matter of conversion, a matter of learning the Syberberg world, the themes and obsessions that characterize it, the recurrent symbols and motifs that constitute it as a figural language. The trouble is that at that point, the realities with which Syberberg attempts to grapple, realities marked by the names of such real historical actors as Wagner, Himmler, Hitler, Bismarck, and the like, are at once transformed into so many personal signs in a private language, which becomes public, when the artist is successful, only as an institutionalized sign system.

This is not Syberberg's fault, clearly, but the result of the peculiar status of culture in our world. Nor would I want to be understood as saying that Syberberg's cultural revolution is impossible, and that the unique tension between the referential and aesthetic play which his psychodramas demand can never be maintained. On the contrary. But when it is, when these films suddenly begin to "mean it" in Erikson's sense,[15] when something fundamental begins to happen to our collective representations, to our very master narratives and fantasies about history itself, then the question remains as to which played the more decisive role in the process, the subject or the object, the viewer or the film. Ultimately, it would seem, it is the viewing subject who enjoys the freedom to take such works as political art or as art *tout court.* It is on the viewing subject that the choice falls as to whether these films have a meaning in the strong sense, an authentic resonance, or are perceived simply as texts, as a play of signifiers. It will be observed that we can say the same about all political art, about Brecht himself (who has, in a similar way, become "Brecht," another classic in the canon). Yet Brecht's ideal theater public held out the promise of some collective and collaborative response which seems less possible in the privatized viewing of the movie theater, even in the local Bayreuths for avant-garde film which Syberberg fantasized.

As for the "destructive element," the Anglo-American world has been immersed in it long before Syberberg was ever heard from: beginning with Shirer's book and Trevor-Roper's account of the bunker all the way to Albert Speer, with sales of innumerable Nazi uniforms and souvenirs worn by everybody from youth gangs and punk rock groups to extreme right-wing parties. If it were not so long and so talky, Syberberg's *Our Hitler*—a veritable summa of all these motifs—might well have become a cult film for such enthusiasts, a sad and ambiguous fate for a "redemptive critique." Perhaps, indeed, this is an Imaginary which can be healed only by the desperate attempt to keep the referential alive.

15. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, New York, Norton, 1958.

KNOWLEDGE, POWER, HISTORY.

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO THE WORKS OF MICHEL FOUCAULT

A conference sponsored by the University of Southern California Center for the Humanities.
October 29–31, 1981

SPEAKERS:

David Carroll, **Disruptive Discourses: The (Dis-) Orders of History and Fiction**
Michel de Certeau, **Panoptic Discourse and Micro-Techniques**
Ian Hacking, **Power and the Avalanche of Numbers**
David Hoy, **Power, Repression, Progress: Foucault and the Frankfurt School**
Frank Lentricchia, **Reading *Discipline and Punish***
Mary Lydon, **The Question of Sexuality**
Mark Poster, **Mode of Production, Mode of Information**
Paul Rabinow, **Auto-Civilization: Bio-Power in the French Colonies**

WORKSHOPS:

Production, Discourse, Social Theory
Robert D'Amico & Dick Howard, codirectors
The Question of Sexuality
Peggy Kamuf & Richard Klein, codirectors
Intellectuals and the Disciplines
Jonathan Arac & Paul Bové, codirectors
The Panoptic Model: Confession, Crime, Control
Robert Nye & Patricia O'Brien, codirectors
Discourse, Text, Framing: The Marginal and the Abandoned
Patricia Mellencamp & David James Fisher, codirectors
Episteme or Archaeology
Suzanne Gearhart & Linda Orr, codirectors
The Future of History: Narrative, Genealogy, Authority
Svetlana Alpers & James Clifford, codirectors

CONFERENCE CRITIQUE:

Michel Foucault

FOR INFORMATION:

Susan Crow
Assistant Director
Center for the Humanities
University of Southern California
University Park
Los Angeles, CA 90007
(213) 743-5838

MARY ANN DOANE is a feminist film theorist who teaches film and semiotics at Brown University.

HOLLIS FRAMPTON, filmmaker and critic of film and photography, teaches at the Center for Media Studies at SUNY, Buffalo. His and Carl Andre's *12 Dialogues 1962–1963* were published this year by the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

FREDRIC JAMESON is Professor of French at Yale University. His most recent books are *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, The Modernist as Fascist* (University of California, 1979) and *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University, 1981).

YVONNE RAINER's most recent film is *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, completed in 1980; its script is published in *October* 9. She is artist-in-residence at the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York.

PHILIP ROSEN, a critic and theorist of film, will begin teaching at Columbia University this fall.

MARTHA ROSLER works in a wide range of art mediums, including performance and video. She teaches photography at Rutgers University. The Nova Scotia Pamphlet Series has recently issued her book, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*.

JANE WEINSTOCK was a member of the collective that made the film *Sigmund Freud's Dora*. Her film criticism has been published in various journals.

PETER WOLLEN is a British filmmaker and theorist. He is the author of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Indiana University, 1972) and the script of Antonioni's *The Passenger*.

OCTOBER 18 & 19

Yve-Alain Bois	*The Academy of Modernism*
Noël Carroll	*Hollywood in the Seventies*
Joan Copjec	*The Iconography of Hysteria: The Photographs of Charcot's Female Patients*
Douglas Crimp	*Sculpture Exceeded*
Arthur C. Danto	*Nausea and Noesis: Some Philosophical Problems for Sartre*
Rosalind Krauss	*The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition*
Stephen Melville	*How Should Acconci Count for Us?*
Dana B. Polan	*Roland Barthes and the Moving Image*
Abigail Solomon-Godeau	*A Photographer in Jerusalem, 1855: Auguste Salzmann and His Time*