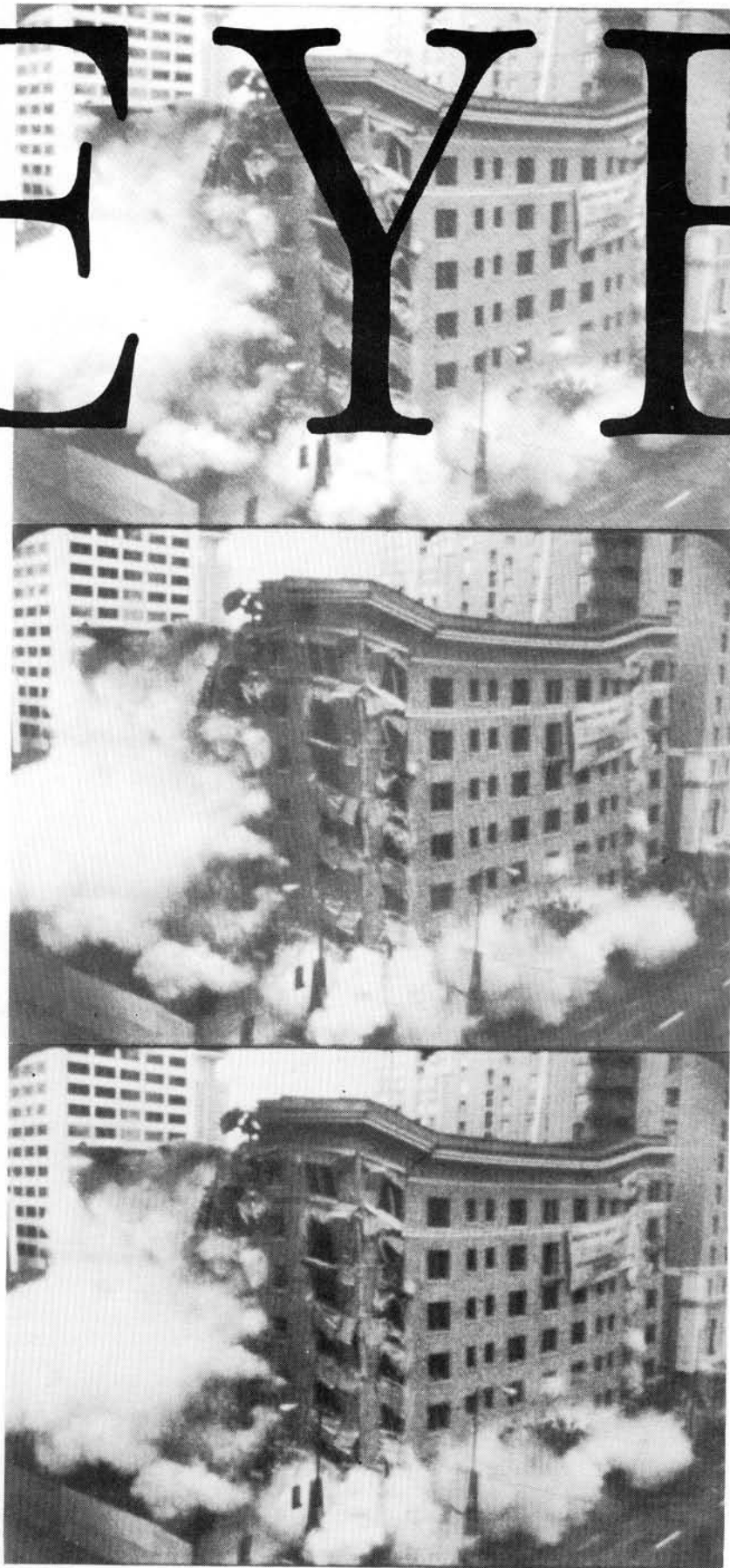


DESIRE IN RUINS  
I N D E P E N D E N T

# EYE



DESIRE MINER UINS



ECHOES  
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CANADIAN  
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EN GARDE

**CINWORKS CO-SPONSORED THE PACIFIC CINECENTRE FILM WEEK IN MARCH 1986 TO INAUGURATE THE OPENING OF OUR HOWE STREET LOCATION. ONE OF THE MOST HEATED FILM WEEK EVENTS WAS 'AVANT-GARDE FILM PRACTISE - SIX VIEWS',**

DESIRE IN RUINS

AVANT-GARDE

A SEMINAR ORGANIZED AND MODERATED BY MARIA INSELL WITH SPEAKERS MICHAEL SNOW, PATRICIA GRUBEN, DAVID RIMMER, JOYCE WIELAND, ROSS MCLAREN AND AL RAZUTIS. THE FOLLOWING EXCERPTS HAVE BEEN TAKEN FROM THE FIRST ISSUE OF SPEED, A MAGAZINE PUT OUT BY CINEWORKS IN VANCOUVER. THEY ALSO FORM THE NARRATIVE SPINE OF 'ON THE PROBLEM OF THE AUTONOMY OF ART IN BOURGEOIS SOCIETY, OR SPLICE' BY CHOMYN/HAYNES/RAZUTIS.

**MARIA INSELL**

THE PURPOSE OF THIS DISCUSSION IS TO TALK ABOUT THE IDEA OF THE AVANT-GARDE IN CANADA...HENRI DE ST. SIMONE FIRST USED THE TERM AVANT-GARDE AT A TIME WHEN THERE WAS A DESIRE AMONG ARTISTS TO BRING ART AND LIFE TOGETHER AND TO MAKE THE ARTS SEEM RELEVANT TO SOCIETY. Simone said, "It is we artists who will serve you as the avant-garde. The power of the arts is, in fact, most immediate and most rapid when we wish to spread new ideas among men we inscribe them on marble and on canvas and in that way, above all, we exact an electric and victorious influence. We address ourselves to the imagination and to the sentiments of mankind. We should therefore always exercise the liveliest and most decisive action."

Some historians believe that the etymological roots of the avant-garde as the vanguard or an army have been overstressed since it really should be understood in metaphorical terms rather than emphasizing the militaristic connotations. The avant-garde primarily has to refer to new and original ideas and works which are temporally and intellectually ahead of their time.

The cultural historian Donald Drew Eckbert, characterizes the avant-garde in this way: "Traditionally the idea of the avant-garde has connoted rebellion by relatively small progressive groups

against established authority whether absolutist or bourgeoisie. To the avant-garde such authority has been responsible for injustices, especially class imposed injustices which have prevented social progress and the development of individual persons, particularly the individual artist or the individual working man. The reaction of the avant-garde has been to express in outrage at the rules imposed by authority...whether the rules of the academic tradition in art developed under absolutism and taken over by a philistine bourgeoisie or the rules determining the economic development of society under the control of bourgeois capitalism since the industrial revolution."

Most historians agree that the classical manifestation of the avant-garde was during the twenties with the Russian constructivists, the surrealists, and the dadaists, and that the avant-garde movements criticize the institution of art and examined how art functioned within society. Of course, in terms of film, many people have interpreted the avant-garde in various ways. Peter Wollen will say there are two avant-gardes, the first of Godard and Gorin represents a kind of narrative approach, and then the other a more formalist-structuralist approach. Of course critics have at various times stated that the avant-garde is dead or that it is in decay or decline, and so the purpose of this discussion is to feel its pulse, to see whether it exists or not. To quote Walter Benjamin from his thesis on history: "In every era an attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism which is about to overpower us."

**MICHAEL SNOW**

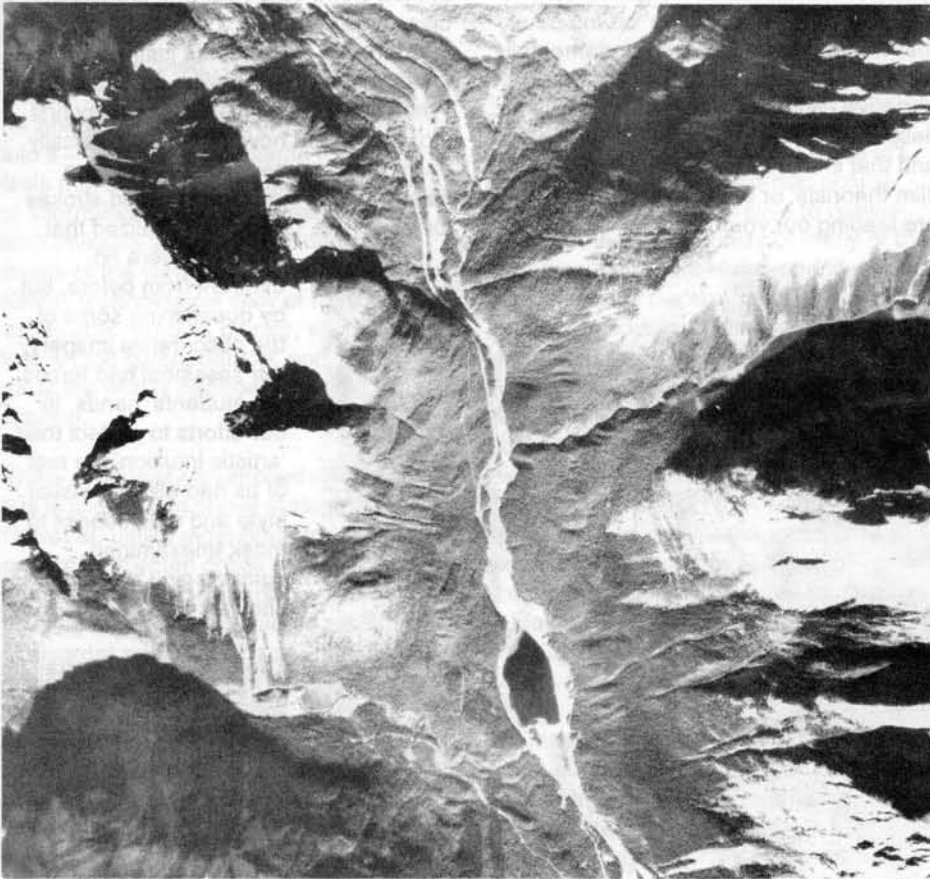
I WOULD NOW LIKE TO CONSIDER WHETHER MY OR OUR 'FILM PRACTISE(S) ARE 'AVANT' OR BEFORE ANY OTHERS, THAT IS, WHETHER I OR WE ARE LEADING IN ANY WAY...I COULD SAY THAT THE INFLUENCE OF MY 'FILM PRACTICE' SEEMS OCCASIONALLY TO BE DISCERNIBLE. I COULD EVEN SAY THAT THE EXISTENCE OF MY 'FILM PRACTICE' APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN ACKNOWLEDGED BY SOME REFERENCES IN SOME OF WHAT I'LL CALL COMMERCIAL FICTION FILM. Avant-garde implies explorative hence at some point new. I have been interested in making an addition to what exists in trying to do something new and apparently have done that. Influence seems to support the argument that at some stage of its reception some aspect of the work was different enough to be thought of as new. Avant-garde seems to apply to my work in some respects but I'm uncomfortable with it in others. Creative activity exists in so many areas of so many fields and in context makes something more or less new, whether what can be said to be new in my work, or in that of the other members of the panel can be said to lead or go before the others, the rest of the army, is extremely questionable. I don't think that it does. I believe that what I am doing and have done is distinctive, original, and has value and values, but I would never claim that it leads. There is some risk and danger involved in going ahead, in discovering in any area of the arts or of scientific



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research, but using a still somewhat military term which furthermore implies a group move is inapplicable to my practice. If the artists themselves don't make the claim that they are avant-garde, which of course happens but is rare, who or what does?

To sum up, I'm a bit wary of the term avant-garde and some of the kind of claims it seems to make, although there



are some aspects of its meaning that seem applicable to my own 'film practices'. I don't claim to be avant-garde but to make the films of Michael Snow, of having made films which can be said with some justification to be different enough from the mass of mechanical applications of the by now well established, learnable repertoire of cinematic conventions. To be noticeable and memorable, is what distinguishes the filmmakers on this panel. "Six Views": distinction, distinctiveness, creativity, originality, are their characteristics. But are those characteristics avant-garde? I think not. I see some strong individuals, a situation more anarchical than hierarchical.

## PATRICIA GRUBEN

I want to talk about the relationship of narrative to the avant-garde. This is a debate that is becoming obsessive in North America, where we have so little tradition of an art cinema and where consequently until recently there seems

to have been an almost total polarity between dominant and experimental cinema in people's minds.

The avant-garde in visual arts has often been characterized as a division from the mainstream that is determined historically rather more than economically and formally, as in film. In visual arts, the avant-garde may eventually be incorporated into the cultural mainstream of art practice; whereas in film the avant-garde is constructed often in terms of its opposition to dominant cinema, which has different values and audiences and does not 'catch up' to experimental film in the same way. This is not to deny that

in visual arts the historical avant-garde has typically defined itself in opposition to mass culture and to art institutions, or that many formal innovations of the modernist period have never become 'traditional'; but in comparison to film, the avant-garde has functioned in the visual arts within the larger sphere of 'fine art', whereas in North American film practice the values of the avant-garde are not perceived as relevant to the makers or the popular critics of dominant cinema. In mass film culture there has been some small acknowledgement of the avant-garde; for instance Scorsese has cited the influence of *Wavelength* on *Taxi Driver*, and more recently, rock videos have begun to exploit some of the techniques of underground cinema of the sixties, like scratching and painting on film, use of hand-held out of focus camera, etc. But experimental film has been defined by many of its practitioners in terms of its opposition to the mainstream, rather than its position in the vanguard. That stance is at various times and by various people accepted as the political mission of experimental film.

Certainly there have been many avant-garde filmmakers working in the great anti-imperialist days of the seventies who did not reference mass culture at all — with narrative or without. Even among this group however there has been an increasing borrowing of the formal elements of other media, particularly television — with narrative or without. I am thinking off the top of my head of David Rimmer, James Benning, Peter Rose. This does not necessarily imply an oppositional stance, as in the old modernist use of elements from mass media to comment on 'alienation', 'imperialism', 'materialism', etc.; but if any analysis is built in to the work (as in Rose's 'linguistic' films and tapes) it tends to be simultaneously cooler, more formal, less judgmental.

Now, along comes 'new narrative', whatever that is, to confuse the issue. It's been used to describe everything from *Stranger Than Paradise* to *Adynata*. If it is simply defined as reflexive narrative then it isn't new at all. This 'new narrative' is typically characterized by experimental filmmakers of the modernist school as some gigantic

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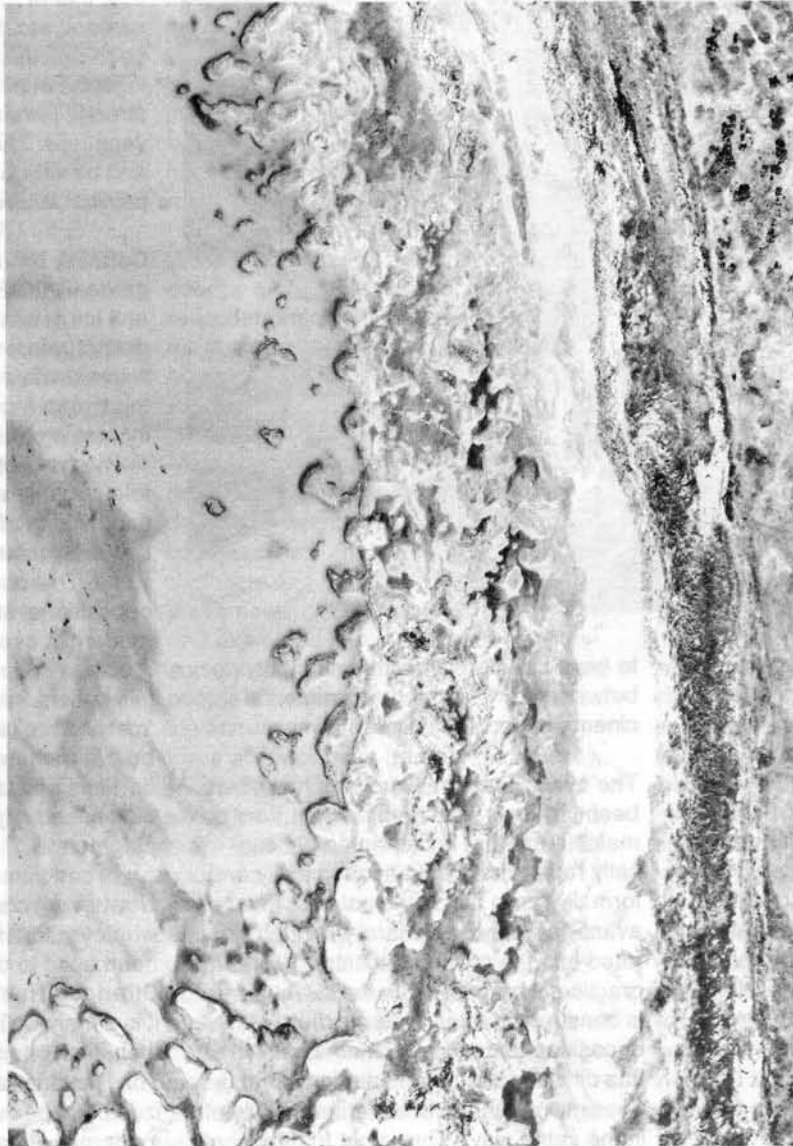
conspiracy that steals the soul of the avant-garde and uses its hard-won techniques as gimmicks to spruce up conventional little story films in order to win attention from novelty-hungry academics and journalists. So to add to the basic nightmare of Hollywood pop culture and shrinking audiences, now we have the little magpies of new narrative, running off with all the best ideas and leaving the real experimental filmmakers pillaged and abandoned.

Here's an example of this attitude, which I quote from the short-lived American experimental film journal *Spiral*. In every issue they invited their readers to comment on topics of interest; in Spring of 1986, the question to be addressed was framed like this:

"There is the perception that at this point in time it is very fashionable to be considered a 'narrative' filmmaker; in fact, entire conferences and academic journals have addressed these narrative directions, and how many filmmakers today seem intent on working a narrative structure, no matter how obscure, into their films simply because it's the thing to do? Some people have asserted that this dramatic shift away from modest, personal visions (made on small budgets, but allowing for more improvisation, more freedom to take chances, and the opportunity to develop a visual aesthetic) toward the narrative form (which usually involves a larger budget, more fundraising, and less risk taking) to be a reactionary movement, and have pointed to a plethora of poorly made, misguided and thoroughly unaccomplished 'narrative' films to illustrate their argument. It might be stated that the narrative film is alluring because it

is popular now in academic circles; it is also 'safe' and more accessible to contemporary audiences of avant-garde film, which seem to exhibit less interest in and tolerance for the visual, abstract, and reflexive forms of cinema."

Implicit in this request for readers' opinions on the subject is the implication that people working in narrative are positioning themselves in the middle of a continuum that has 'avant garde' on one end and 'dominant cinema' on the other; that working in narrative is fundamentally a compromise between the two; that narrative filmmakers are selling out in a desperate quest for a popular audience; and that it is the dangerous incursions of 'film theorists' or at least 'academics' that are leading our youth astray.



I question this assumption that narrative filmmaking is 'safe' and automatically involves 'less risk-taking'. If one accepts the debatable argument that narrative is more accessible than non-narrative film, it remains true that the more accessible a film is, the more vulnerable to criticism from its audience. My film students at Simon Fraser University, for example, have always tended toward the formally adventurous and the politically left-wing in their work. This year one production class was taught by a sessional who insisted that his students justify their film ideas with more discipline than usual. When I saw their finished work, my first thought was of how unusually politically naive they seemed to be — blaming 'television' or 'Amerika' in broad strokes for all our ills. Gradually I realized that

the ideas were no different from before, but by questioning some of the obscure imagery, our sessional had forced the students' hands. In our efforts to protect their 'artistic intuition' the rest of us had allowed visual style and obliqueness to mask unexamined opinions and aesthetic choices.

The devaluing of narrative cinema on the grounds of its 'popularity' is rampant in Canada as well as the U.S. avant-garde. Bart Testa in *Cinema Canada* claims that, as a result of all this interest in "new narrative", the films of Snow, Rimmer, Razutis, Hancox, Wieland, Hoffman and Elder will "appear to be an irrelevance of dubious political significance." Elder has taken it upon himself as we all know to define for us the cinema we need, and it is definitely not narrative. He conflates all contemporary narrative film together, calling it in *Cinema Canada* and elsewhere, "the artistic structure of technocracy."



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In an interview in the above-mentioned issue of *Spiral*, he describes narrative film's ability to elicit desire and then satisfy it, both intellectually and emotionally. He goes on to say, "That the film satisfies the viewer's demands makes the viewer feel that he is in control. Furthermore, that viewer is safely positioned outside the narrative —

he looks in on it but never really enters into it — and yet at the same time he feels that he actually regulates the flow of information that it provides. So he is both inviolate and powerful. Now this image of the viewer is consistent with the liberal, technological view of the individual as autonomous, private, with a being that is God-given, natural, and whose parts are wholly harmonious with one another."

There is certainly an implied criticism of this illusion in the above statement. However, unlike most other formally- or politically-oriented critics of narrative, he doesn't seem to be attacking it for its unifying quality, its simulated resolution of disorder and imposition of normative social values. In another article, he states that in ancient times, stories reinforced the cultural belief in the Absolute, the Holy; but that narratives now "have lost their roots in the realm of the transcendent. Their telling has become a ritual that has entirely lost its inner meaning....Now....they reinforce the liberal world view."

He goes on to denounce contemporary narrative for addressing problems of personal psychology. "Consider how often our narratives depict the individual as the maker of his own destiny, and how rarely the hero of the psychological narrative is depicted as answering the call of the Divine or as responding to the mystery of the Holy.... Consider how often it is the quest for the healing of wounds. Consider how rarely it concerns the Good....Our narratives — narrative itself — have become as worthless as emptied-out rituals are. They further the disenchantment of the world."

**THE TWO ARGUMENTS AGAINST NEW NARRATIVE: THAT IT "CONSPIRES", AS IF MOUNTING A CONCERTED ATTACK ON THE AVANT-GARDE IN ORDER TO UNDERMINE IT FROM WITHIN; AND THAT IT COMPROMISES IN A "SIDEWAYS MOTION", AS IF THE DECONSTRUCTION OF NARRATIVE WERE MERELY A COMPROMISE ON THE PART OF FORMER MEMBERS OF THE AVANT-GARDE WHO SECRETLY WANT TO BE SPIELBERG BUT KNOW**

**IT ISN'T COOL.**

Thus Elder's complaint is not that narrative sucks us in, but that it doesn't. He claims it is akin to scientific positivism. He reduces all narrative to realism, ignoring the mythic quality of many of the most popular recent Hollywood films; and never explains the source of its ongoing attraction for us in the face of its lack of meaning, its emptiness. He certainly does not address all the multiple forms of narrative, either the art cinema of Europe, third world films, or this pesky 'new narrative' except for a few insults in passing, to the effect that as mentioned above it merely steals the ideas of real experimental filmmakers: "Such breaches of convention have little lasting value, for what seems unconventional one day often becomes a cliché the next."

We must turn again to his Boswell, Bart Testa, for further illumination. "I also think there are reasons to take his warnings seriously, if not whole hog. The critical confusions that attend 'new narrative' films and the foolish try at moving Canadian art film from its shrunken domain to the tiny island of experimental cinema probably do conspire to damage the further possibilities of the best avant-garde cinema being done in Canada. This will benefit no one, least of all the feckless filmmakers who want to make movies like *Low Visibility*, a perfect and sad example of what comes of such ill-considered sideways motion, as Elder fears and predicts." Again in a nutshell, the two arguments against new narrative: that it "conspires", as if mounting a concerted attack on the avant-garde in order to undermine it from within; and that it compromises in a "sideways motion", as if the deconstruction of

narrative were merely a compromise on the part of former members of the avant-garde who secretly want to be Spielberg but know it isn't cool.

I don't want to spend too much time on Elder's argument because I believe it's pretty aberrant from the mainstream of anti-narrative criticism in its relentless Romanticism. I want instead to propose what is possible in working within narrative forms if one does not use the non-narrative avant-garde as the moral delineator of what is properly Cinema.

Peter Wollen, in *The Two Avant Gardes*, uses (like many theorists) structural materialism as a convenient synecdoche to represent all experimental film of the seventies, and then opposes it to a practice that he characterizes as more directly political and relevant to a larger audience, for which he takes Godard as a paradigm. I don't want to get into the whole argument about this article right now; I just want to use his description of Godard's work after May '68 to begin dealing with the question of narrative as a political form: "We glimpse something of an alternative route between contentism and formalism, a recognition that it is possible to work within the space opened up by the disjunction and dislocation of signifier and signified....Godard's view of bourgeois communication is one of a discourse gaining its power from its apparent naturalness, the impression of necessity that seems to bind a signifier to a signified, a sound to an image, in order to provide a convincing representation of the world. He wants not simply to represent an alternative 'world' or alternative 'world-view', but to investigate the whole process of signification out of

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which a world view or an ideology is constructed."

For another approach to a description of 'new narrative': Stephen Heath, in his article **Narrative Space** contrasts deconstructive narrative with the deconstructionism of structural materialism. And again I don't at this point want to address the conflation of avant-garde practice into the historical blip of structural materialism. (You see, theorists do it to everyone, not just the story-tellers.) Heath says, "Deconstruction is quickly the impasse of formal actuality, an aesthetics of transgression when the need is an activity of transformation, and a politically consequent materialism in film is not to be expressed as veering contact past internal content in order to proceed with 'film as film' but rather as a work on the constructions and relations of meaning and subject in a specific signifying practice in a given socio-historical situation, a work that is then much less on 'codes' than on the operation of narrativization. At its most effectively critical, moreover, that work may well bear little resemblance to what in the given situation is officially acknowledged and defined as 'avant-garde,' in particular, and in the context of the whole

Thus new narrative is definable in terms of — although not reducible to — an opposition to dominant cinema. Why then do many filmmakers and critics within the avant-garde find it so threatening to their own interests?

The most obvious reason is the one referred to above — some filmmakers feel that because their work cannot do fit into a currently fashionable theoretical model, it will be ignored. And yet I think the backlash against theory in this country is far stronger than the support for it ever was. My own defense is really a plea for heterogeneity more than it is a theoretical presentation in itself.

The claim is often made that new narrative has been invented by theorists for their own benefit, and that it is constructed by theorist-filmmakers according to prescriptive recipes. Of course that is true in some instances — notably Mulvey and Wollen, Bette Gordon, Joanna Kiernan. However there have always been filmmaker-theoreticians, and some of them have been among our most inspired and radical filmmakers: Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Richter, Godard, Pasolini, Brakhage, and

is reduced to a very few academics.

Part of the artist's resistance to psychoanalysis, to semiotics, to all forms of structuralism is that they posit paradigms of any kind, not entirely because those paradigms are inappropriate for dealing with some issues about all films or many issues related to some films. It is the task of theorists to look for and to invent categories; otherwise they are only critics, dealing with individual works on their own merits. When Razutis writes his polemics against psychoanalysis and structuralism, he never proposes an alternate theory; when he writes about not only his own work but the work of other avant-garde filmmakers, his whole thrust is to describe the ways in which they don't fit into categories; and of course that's his prerogative and I think a necessary one for all of us as filmmakers and as critics of each other's work.

But what underlies this is an opposition to structural theory because it is not something that it doesn't claim to be — an aesthetic principle. As we all know, it's based on a non-valuation approach derived from linguistics and social sciences, not a Platonic or Aristotelian concept of Beauty and Harmony. Thus it's fundamentally not prescriptive in terms of formal issues. It is sometimes prescriptive in suggesting what is always characterized as areas of research. And I agree, I find it personally annoying to hear theorists calling for certain types of films to be made. But I don't think that invalidates the theory, or the value of working from a theoretical perspective — within a personal aesthetic.

a personal aesthetic.

But as I said, I'm not really here to defend theory; I'm not a theoretical filmmaker myself. I simply want to find a place for narrative in its heterogeneity, its radical possibilities. I think that to use narrative to critique itself is no more questionable than to use images from the mass media or 19th century Romanticism in ones' films in order to critique mass culture or to invoke historical

**I BELIEVE THAT IN DEFINING CANADIAN AVANT-GARDE, TOO OFTEN WE'RE BEING TOLD WHAT IT IS NOT OR WHAT IT SHOULD BE RATHER THAN WHAT IT MIGHT BE, OR BEST OF ALL, WHAT IT IS. I BELIEVE THAT THE WAY THE AVANT-GARDE IS CURRENTLY BEING DEFINED IN THIS COUNTRY IS AN EXCLUSIONARY, ELITIST, AND FUNDAMENTALLY BOURGEOIS EFFORT TO ELIMINATE EVERYONE BUT ONE'S OWN PERSONAL FOLLOWERS OR ROLE MODELS FROM MORE AND MORE EXCLUSIVE ARMED ENCAMPMENTS.**

account offered here of film and space, it may well involve an action at the limits of narrative within the narrative film, at the limits of its fictions of unity." (Questions of Cinema).

So here is suggested the possibility of using familiar forms to critique themselves. This is more than simple reflexivity, this is a fundamental reordering of structure in an attempt to deconstruct it and open up our ability to perceive it.

many others have published manifestoes and schemata to contextualize their work.

And yet at the same time it is the job of the filmmaker to resist categorization and reduction into a school, a theory, a linguistic analysis. We all resist, we all attempt to redefine ourselves and our work out of the structures into which we're put. This includes new narrative filmmakers as well, unless that category



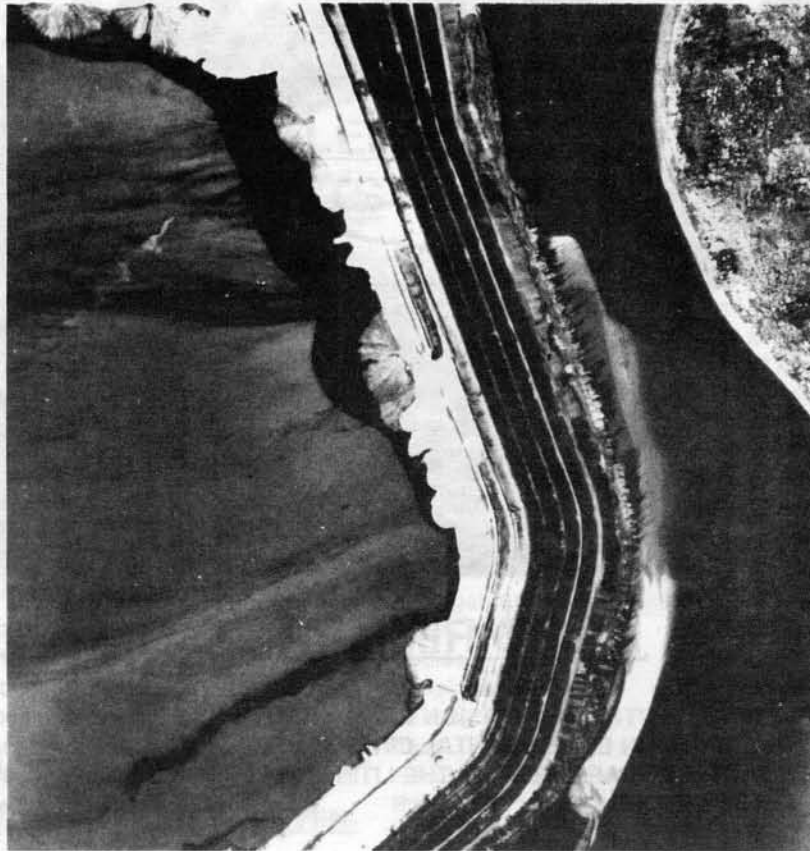
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nostalgia.

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

I think part of the threat of new narrative is that it is associated with feminism, and it deploys feminist concerns into areas which have within Romanticism as well as modernism and the avant-garde been roles for men — specifically, opposition to bourgeois culture. Andreas Huyssen in a recent lecture in Vancouver developed an interesting analysis of this role-playing in a lecture on the male mystique in art history that characterizes the Artist as outside of culture.

In the eighteenth century, the artist emerged from a system of patronage into the Industrial Revolution as visionary, one who is privy to non-verbal states of being, and defined in terms of opposition to mass culture. This trend continued into modernism, so that Huyssen could say about Flaubert, who is considered one of the fathers of modernism: "Such imaginary femininity in the male writer...has a lot to do with the increasingly marginal position of literature and the arts in a society in which masculinity is identified with action, enterprise, and progress, with the realms of business, industry, science and law. At the same time, it has also become clear that the imaginary femininity of male authors, which often grounds their oppositional stance vis-a-vis bourgeois society, can easily go hand in hand with the exclusion



of real women from the literary enterprise and with the misogyny of bourgeois patriarchy itself."

However, as modernism developed in the twentieth century, it came to embrace the opposite values of the post-industrial revolution: action, enterprise and progress, as Huyssen says. Modernism, which found its end-point in the minimalist painting and sculpture of the sixties and in the structural-materialist film of the early seventies — separates itself from mass culture through a process of reduction which Huyssen describes as: "...self-referential and self-conscious, frequently ironic, ambiguous, and rigorously experimental...the expression of a purely individual consciousness rather than of a Zeitgeist or a collective state of mind...Its experimental nature makes it analogous to science, and like science it produces and carries knowledge."

Throughout the history of modernism, from its development out of the Romantic tradition of the artist as suffering Other in the nineteenth century, to its culmination in the late Sixties with the model of the

artist as scientist, its opposite, mass culture, has been characterized as feminine in its seeking of cheap pleasures as typified by women's novels, soap operas, etc. Huyssen, referring to another of the founders of modernism, says, "Significantly, Nietzsche's ascription of feminine characteristics to the masses is always tied to his aesthetic vision of the artist-philosopher-hero, the suffering loner who stands in irreconcilable opposition to modern democracy and its inauthentic culture."

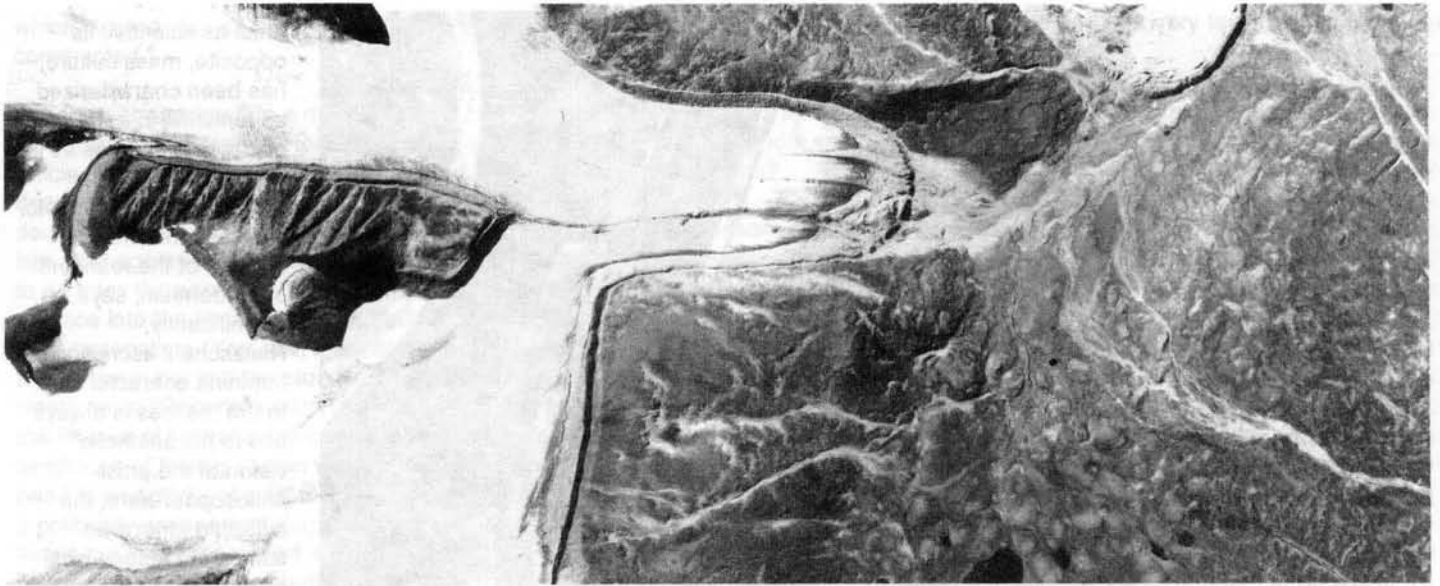
I think the feminist interest in narrative and in theory threatens both those positions of male superiority, in three ways. First, because feminists are taking

control of some of the stereotypes that associate us with the non-verbal, the Absolute, the mystique of femininity — now that we are re-claiming and radicalizing that typage, taking back the position of Other from romantic male filmmakers, we are a threat to that model of 'suffering loner' that they would prefer to occupy in exclusion. We can no longer be contained within the manageable roles of Muse, or object of desire. Women and third world filmmakers have a claim to that role outside of the bourgeoisie which is obviously more fundamentally grounded in real social exclusion than that of the self-imposed Otherness of the bourgeois male artist.

Second, because narrative is associated with mass culture and cheap pleasures, women who work within it for political and/or aesthetic reasons are suspected of (as usual!) ingratiating ourselves to get what we want in devious ways, of lacking the 'irreconcilable opposition' of the modernist male artist and thus of somehow being morally compromised, as women are so often seen to be. This I think is the origin of the paranoia that people working in 'new narrative' are



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pillaging the avant garde to popularize what should be reserved for the Illuminati.

And third, at the same time as narrative evokes pleasure in the audience and seems to threaten the position of the avant-garde by contaminating it with popular forms, a theoretical analysis of narrative usurps the traditional position of the male, especially the modernist male artist, as purveyor of scientific rationality that I think is expressed in the structural filmmaking of the Seventies.

So both as scientists and as visionaries men are displaced by new narrative and its association with both theoretical and popular feminism. Just as the heterogeneity of women's natures has always been reduced into a few clichés whose contradiction of each other does not invalidate them in the minds of those who apply them selectively, the work of women filmmakers in its heterogeneity, especially in its use of narrative as instrument of pleasure, political tool, and auto-critique — sometimes all at once — is reduced again into a few paradoxical and threatening contradictions which modernist filmmakers use to dismiss the work by reductive operations. It's too bad, because as Huyssen remarks, feminist artists have done quite a bit to bring us out of modernism's dead end. But in film, a medium that still seems to attract megalomaniacs, we are still fighting the old prejudice and paranoia as they stagger back for yet another battle.

## DAVID RIMMER

### 'THE REPRESSION OF THE EROTIC IN EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA' OR 'SAFE SEX FOR THE LITERALLY MINDED'.

For me cinema begins with the image, and one of the problems, I think, with cinema today, with experimental cinema, is that it is starting with the word rather than the image. This is a problem in experimental film but even more so, I think, a problem in video. I think we've all seen, or been forced to sit through long video tapes with a lot of indecipherable text rolling over the top without any visual appeal at all.

So somehow the image has lost out to the word and the image has become something that accompanies the word, a kind of a visual aid, almost a slide show to go along with a lecture. This kind of filmmaking has been bothering me for a long time. I see a lot of these illustrated lectures masquerading as films whereas I don't think these should be films at all. I think they should be lectures or talks, or books, or something in a different form. They really don't have a place up there on the screen. And this problem is compounded even further: we have the word being translated into the image which is bad enough, but then, at the end of the film, they want to translate it back to the word again. There are a number of reasons for this. There seems to be a

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

This then, to me, is a refusal of people to accept the image for what it is, a refusal to accept the direct experience of looking at an image. It's actually a puritanical response and it comes up in all sorts of strange ways with the sort of writing that goes on about film these days. A need somehow by a number of analysts and writers to repress what's really happening up there, and, as I say, to neutralize that image, and rob it of its energy - a denial then of the pleasure of the image. For me, why I like cinema so much is because it gives me pleasure. There is a certain sensuous quality of light and dark and colour and shade up there on the screen. It doesn't really matter too much what's being said. If that quality, that sensuous erotic quality of the image is not there I'm not interested.

So I see a need, an erotic need, to strip the image of its mystery, of its ambiguity, of its soul, its spirit, and to classify, categorize it as something which is easier to digest. Perhaps it's that way with a lot of things in society today, that

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desire not to confront reality or anything directly. We want to mediate it, we want a lesser version of it, almost a Reader's Digest version of reality. I think that as filmmakers we must look at our images. I feel a lot of filmmakers don't see. They can't see their image at all. They've no idea of what they're putting up there. It's in their head and not in their eyes.

Filmmakers must look at their images, listen to their images. Audience must listen to the images, and try to experience those images in a much more direct way. Resist the temptation to explain

**THERE SEEMS TO BE A FEAR AMONGST PEOPLE OF THE NAKED IMAGE: A FEAR OF THE EROTIC POWER OF THE VISUAL IMAGE. AN INABILITY TO DEAL WITH THIS IMAGE ON A DIRECT LEVEL, A NEED TO NEUTRALIZE THE IMAGE, PERHAPS, TO TRANSLATE THE IMAGE TO ANOTHER MEDIUM, THE CONVENTION ONE OF COURSE BEING WORDS: TO ANALYZE, TO INTERROGATE, TO INVESTIGATE, TO DEMYSTIFY, AND ULTIMATELY TO SANTITIZE THE IMAGE; IN AN ATTEMPT TO REDUCE THE EROTIC POWER OF THE IMAGE TO A MORE MANAGEABLE FORM.**

them away. As soon as you've explained an image away it's forgotten. Dead. That's the end of it. The beauty of an image is that it cannot be explained or that it's ambiguous, or that it's maybe this or maybe that, and it sits and it revolves and goes 'round and 'round in your head for quite awhile after you've seen the movie.

Cinema then must be freed with the obsession of words and their meaning. Not that cinema can't mean anything. That's all I'm going to say in terms of words because I think if I talk anymore I'm going to defeat what I'm saying. So I want to show a film, and after it I'm not going to talk about it.

**JOYCE WIELAND,**  
**ROSS MCLAREN**  
**AND LENORE**  
**COUTTS**

**RM:** I thought it was pretty smart of David to show his film in the context of a prospective talk...

**JW:** It's an excellent context.

**RM:** ...an excellent idea because you get so many more people when you speak than when you show your films.

**JW:** But it could be wonderful, you know, if we get out of our heads and into our bodies. I mean people think that their hearts are in their head...I think it's really sad, like about the whole Freudian psychological whatever-it-is semiological scene in that it's created by men and I thought that women were going to create the next stage of evolution, which I think they are doing anyway, and I'm disappointed and so I feel like breaking out and I feel a lot of

things...very strongly about a kind of freedom and a sense of liberty to be involved with passion and my soul and humour and poetry and to relate to other people in a way that I feel that I've been gyped out of by looking a lot at certain kinds of film. What do you think, Ross?

**RM:** Well I think that ideally there would be some balance between theoretical response and the filmmaker's creation. What disturbs me, it's down to earth, but, I have to talk about funding structures. I have to talk about them because it's part of the means of production, etcetera, and the fact that it seems that more and more of the funding structures are relying on the authority figures who are working on a binary system.

**JW:** The binary?

**RM:** You're either a one or a zero. It's fun being a zero. It gives you a lot of room to move around.

**LC:** Do you feel you have to produce government art in order to be paid by the government?

**RM:** Well I don't. It's a very tricky thing. I think that a lot of artists refuse to look at the ramifications of that kind of state control of their work...I see all of these friends of mine who are doing...hmm, friends of mine, you get money for friends of yours, of course...the objective arms length...anyway, I see all these great films being made and all that, so I say, "Go for it. Apply for it, apply for it." And, rejection after rejection of all this great work. I mean it's ridiculous that the kind of people you have to submit to get...

**JW:** Submission isn't really the answer. Submission is really hard.

**RM:** Submission is what it's all about. It's really, completely...

**JW:** When you put your front paws out, you know, and you lie down like a wolf.

**RM:** Yeah.

**JW:** That's when you're loved, though. When wolves are in love they do that, actually.

**RM:** I showed a film in the Funnel program last week, probably half of you weren't there. It was just a three minute tilt over a decaying dead animal, and to me that was my policy position on the state of the avant-garde, whatever that means.

**JW:** I'm just worried about the commercial cinema and the Freudian-Marxist-semiological-cinema and in between being this creative fountain. That's really hard. It's wonderful to have that fountain and it's unique because you struggle to open the fountain, it takes a long time, and the fountain is flowing and it nourished other people. It's hard to make a paper about protecting that fountain and to communicate with others with your fountain of creativity.

**RM:** But I don't think it's the semiological Freudian misogynists, or whatever, and the commercial cinema. It seems to me it's the avant-garde traditionalist protectionist group that is trying turn off the tap of the fountain. It seems to me that the strategy is like cultural necrophilia. There are certain elements that are trying to position themselves in the American avant-garde of 1969 and plagiarize all



## DESIRE IN RUINS

the stuff that Brakhage was writing about in the 60's.

**JW:** But I don't think there's any problem about any cinema if you can make something that's very much to do with knowing yourself as a human being and giving that to other people. It doesn't matter whether you make a commercial film or whether you make this and that and the other, binary weaving of your brain. I mean, you're free to do it if you can get a hold of the money, either way, or no money. There's nothing to stop you to communicate with other people. There

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is nothing in the world that can stop it. Maybe it's only to communicate with a small group, or a big group, what does it matter. Right?

**LC:** The lights are very hot.

**RM:** It is a very nice theatre, though. I wonder if the filmmakers will get to show their own work here. I certainly hope so. I saw the floorplans and things before I came and I thought, 'this is fantastic...a temple'.

**JW:** It is though, isn't it? A temple. It's wonderful here.

**RM:** But I sincerely hope there will be the possibility for artist filmmakers to show their work here...Fellini is good too...

**JW:** And Jean Vigo. That's the total cinema. But maybe the disaffected children of Ontario will be able to come here for film studies. there's a camp of disaffected close to Lake Ontario...Escapes from theory. Well, have we had our half hour?

**AL RAZUTIS**

I am tired of mystification, of repetition. The avant-garde does not repeat itself. I am tired of stolen speeches, of political masquerades. So I have invited a guest...to speak with authority. Speaking about you and I and the cinema...

The material fact is a film that will self destruct upon the occasion of illumination/projection. The film will run continuously and in the open, and be processed by the projector, erased in a bleach bath - all save the frames covered by tape splices. The title of the film is also Splice. Like the splice of then and now, the material fact is both real and a memory. It cannot be repeated, there are no other copies. That which will remain will be a record of erasure and absence. This is not Freud. This is avant-garde. The avant-garde is not repeatable. It does not trade on the art commodity market, plugging one's curriculum vitae, hoarding the past and faking the present...

The Social is you and I...usually docile, stupefied, indifferent. From my guest's perspective, it may be that you and I are asleep, sitting in a state of constant denial of ourselves, watching but not acting. The film that is shot and reconstructed will reconstruct you and I...and this is open to interpretation.

The Institution is the Cine-Centre. It is accountable to the prospects of the avant-garde, the mere thought of it (!) existing even for a moment within its otherwise clinical, curated and institutionalized walls - like a cage for animals to perform in, for fifteen minutes.

(Bringing ventriloquist's dummy 'The Professor' out of case and onto knee)

**Dummy:** Did you mention my books and my love of cinema?

**Razutis:** I mentioned the apparatus.

**Dummy:** It is all the same. One big

illness. One big problem.

**Razutis:** The topic I believe is the avant-garde.

**Dummy:** That's what I said...A place of infinite regression, mirrors, scopophilia, voyeurism, and you castrated artists. Fetishists!

**Razutis:** What do you see in all of this? I mean, imaginary Canadian...

**Dummy:** Well, what I look at is never what I wish to see...

**Razutis:** Do you see that you're talking to me?

**Dummy:** Well, you never look at me from the place I see you...Everything emerges from the structure of the signifier.

**Razutis:** So how does subjectivity figure into this? How is it structured?

**Dummy:** Alienation, gap, castration, the whole ball of wax...

**Razutis:** What do you see when you look at a movie, a screen...

**Dummy:** The imaginary signifier, don't you?

**Razutis (Dummy has nodded off):** Now that he's asleep, I can offer my perspective free from the chain of institutional discourse, free from the leash of having to prop it up, play the music, arrange travel and accommodations. I can offer a perspective on direct action and the avant-garde. Sitting here, you and I, somnambulists, easy targets for the business of the unconscious and analysis in neat rows...The avant-garde does not ingratiate itself to an audience or an institution. It kicks ass...Avant-garde does not wait for the Canada Council to confirm its practice...Avant-Garde does not subordinate itself to collectivism, but is a dialectic between individuality and group...It is not elitist, academic, politically correct...This institution has invited avant-garde, and it will be baptized in writing, if it can stomach it, if the yuppie clean-up squads don't freak out...some things require direct action so that something other than memory remains. A trace of the avant-garde if nothing else. (Shaking spray bomb). The academics don't like rude and impertinent behaviour because academia has a sort of code of etiquette: things that are shit are called problematical. One doesn't get up and do demonstrable things.