EXPRESSION)   AND   (TRANSFORMATION

In Avant-Garde Cinema

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INTRODUCTION

The questions of theory, practice, and
critical methodology have acquired an urgency in this age of reductive
and confrontational ideologies. ~~My initial remarks are directed toward~~
The avant-garde film artist, ~~myself included, who~~ must bear some measure
of responsibility in addressing issues that historically have resided
'outside of' aesthetic practice. It is clear that art can no longer be
conducted 'for its own sake' or 'in spite of it all', and that aesthetic
values do not reside in a transcendental realm that is divorced from
society and cultural transformation. Equally clear is the notion that
aesthetic expression cannot be reduced to didacticism and ascribed a
simple 'use value'. The labor that is art is linked (as any labor) to
an ecological chain -- a hierarchical ordering that proceeds from the
inorganic to the transforming energy that is intelligence[*] -- and in such a
manner that the disintegration of the material base of existence (the
inorganic, organic), followed by the economic and societal, implies the
extinction of knowledge, culture, and art. Therefore, as central to the
propositions set forth in this essay, the questions of ethics and ideology[**]
are to be seen as being concurrent with the capacity of avant-garde film
practice to engage expression and transformation in a manner that supports
a living culture, rather than one bent on destruction.

The experimental film avant-garde, continuing the unfortunate traditions
of 'detachment' and 'planned obsolescence'[++], is ideologically estranged from
society by virtue of its psychology, language, value systems, and methodologies.
As was the case with its predecessor avant-garde, much of it survives only in

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[*] To cite Wilden's observations in <u>Strategy and Tactics</u> (1981, unpublished),
"...the real relationship between culture, society, and nature is the dependent
hierarchy depicted (as) inorganic nature/organic nature/society/culture..."
He later constitutes the hierarchical ordering of information as "sensing/
meaning/signification".

[**]Althusser provides a notable definition of ideology: "the <u>lived</u> relation
between men and their world, or a reflected form of this unconscious relation...
as being defined by the predominance of the practico-social over the theoretical,
over knowledge." (<u>For Marx</u>, p. 252)

the 'sheltered quarters' of gallery environs, archives, and Academia.
This estrangement is mirrored by avant-garde theory and critique which,
equally sheltered, wages discursive battles on the basis of 'after the
fact' theories, promulgated by filiation and advanced by axiomatic incre-
ments, until that day comes when the new 'theory' assumes its dominant
state, only to be displaced in the future by a new theory. In practice
or theory, one cannot afford to 'cease production' for a given time period,
for to do so (within the existing schema) would mean that the "art is no
longer relevant" and the "theory is no longer up to date". This 'manic
productivity' owes primarily to the precedents established by the modernist
art tradition, and as such represents the worst form of utlitarian use-
values, whether they be emanating from "State Socialism" or the "Pragmatic
State Capitalism". It is not surprising that both 'states' prescribe acceptable
norms of codified discourse, grammar, semantics, and substance -- a prescription
that draws from, but is counter to, the avant-garde practice of signifying structure
in relation or opposition to normative practice. The avant-garde in its at-
tempts to deny orthodoxy, embrace ambivalence, and transgress all linguistic,
logical, and social codes, and with an ethics that may be guaged, as Julia
Kristeva posited, "in proportion to the poetry that it presupposes", is a
'kept' and tolerated creature within the society-at-large. Therefore, its
strategems of detachment and planned obsolescence, though not surprising,
are limited attempts to ensure a survival and status, that of 'protected
species' bent on 'continual extinction'.

It is my intention to articulate a different strategem for avant-garde
cinema: one that identifies the conditions under which experimental film
"expresses", and to what purpose, and to identify the conditions that make it
possible for the contemporary avant-garde cinema to contribute to social and
political transformations.

++ The patronage of the wealthy elite and the political ambivalence of the
    avant-garde is noted in examples taken from the more classical (i.e.,
    'Impressionist') avant-garde: Degas, a royalist; Manet, a political
    conservative; Monet, politically indifferent; Renois, blatantly bourgeois.
    Avant-garde tendencies towards detachment and planned obsolescence are
    discussed in The Transformative Vision pp. 151-2.   The contemporary film
    avant-garde is largely supported by government subsidies (e.g., Canada
    Council) which constitutes a system of patronage that allows the artist
    to function 'outside of' the society and culture at large. The question
    that immediately arises, and which will be discussed at great length in
    the body of the essay, is "when is ideological estrangement productive,
    and when is it counter-productive?"

PROBLEMATICITY, METHODOLOGY, AND THE SUBJECT

1.0

> "The activity of our reason consists largely...
> in the analysis of ideas which we already have
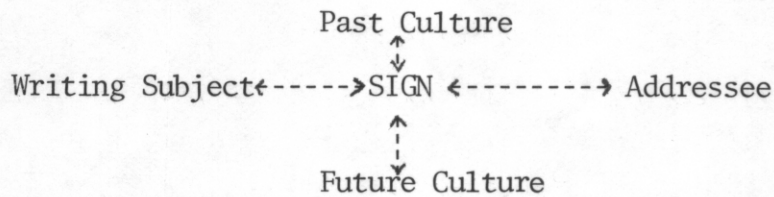> with regards to objects."
>
> -- Immanuel Kant
> KRITIK

That a word or concept cannot be considered in isolation, and that "it only exists in the theoretical or ideological framework in which it is used -- its problematic", is a well known Althusserian axiom. How shall we then circumscribe and identify the problematic that is most appropriate to avant-garde cinema practice? It would be useful to assess the following conditions. In contemporary Western society, the problematic is marked by a separation between discourse with words that codify thoughts and conform to logic and predication (affirmation/denial), and irrational-erotic conception and practice. The former consists of a subject that it explicitly posits, implies, or tries to deny. For example, structural linguistics is a language theory that denies the 'speaking subject' in favor of seeking out the object-utterance's internal coherence. The cinematic object-utterance extends well beyond words (or sentence formation) and includes textual sign systems that can be subject to semiotic analysis. Yet, as Kristeva posits, "the notion of sign (Sr-Sd) is a product of scientific abstraction (identity-substance-cause-goal as structure of the Indo-European sentence), designating a vertically and hierarchically linear division."[7] The vertical (hierarchical) divisions between signifier and signified are only partially useful in deliberations concerning poetic expression, since it is clear that poetic expression contains radical and multi-valent characteristics that are not easily reducible to definitions and determinations. Thus, the use-value of semiotics (and its sub-set, structural linguistics) is most pronounced in attempts to explicate logical and concrete semantic relationships between what is 'expressed' and what is 'understood' and when is the sign-function being utilized in a lie (or to signify something to

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7. Desire in Language, p. 69

which no real state of things exists). We can also readily see that the
status of any sign in a text is <u>intertextual</u>: the sign'belongs'to both
'writing subject' and 'addressee'; the sign is also oriented towards both
anterior and posterior artistic-cultural conventions. (Fig. 1)

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                         Past Culture
                              ↑
                              ↓
      Writing Subject ←-----→ SIGN ←--------→ Addressee
                              ↑
                              ↓
                         Future Culture
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The above schematic can be further complicated by the fact that
cinematic sign systems operate within a cultural matrix that includes
literary, theatrical, photographic, and acoustical conventions (past,
present, and future). In that sense, the cinematic signs are <u>translinguistic</u>
operations. Furthermore, cinema is also a <u>transubjective</u> practice that
functions within the matrix of film-maker(s), film-text, and viewer(s)
subjectivities. (Fig. 2)

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      Film-maker(s) ←-----→ film ←-------→ viewer(s)
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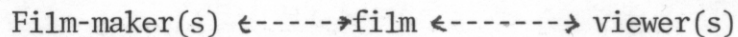
The irrational-erotic condition compounds, even further, our problematic.
Within this latter condition, the subject is posited in an indeterminate, poly-
phonic, and radically translinguistic manner that can best be approached in
terms of conjuncture, similarity/dissimilarity, and crisis. Umberto Eco identi-
fies the synchronic and diachronic characteristics of this process in the following
manner:

> "In this case (of radical inventions) the transformation, the
> realized expression, is a shorthand device whereby the sender
> fixes the results of his perceptual labor. Only after carrying
> out this expressive labor can he arrive at a perceptual model and
> then subsequently a sememic representation. This process has been
> present at all the great innovative moments in the history of
> painting. Take the case of the Impressionists, whose addressees
> absolutely refused to 'recognize' the subjects represented and
> said that they 'did not understand', that the painting 'did not
> mean anything', that real life was not like that, etc. This

(cont.)

"refusal was due to the addressees' lack not only of a semantic model to which the mapped items might be referred, but also of a precept to guess at, since they had never perceived in this way. In such cases what takes place is a radical code-making, a violent proposal of new conventions. The sign-function does not as yet exist, and indeed sometimes fails to establish itself at all. The sender gambles on the possibility of semiosis, and loses. In one or two cases it is only centuries later that the gamble comes off and the convention is established."[8]

It is clear that our problematic must be capable of accomodating both the discursive and illogical textual forms, for to exclude either would be an unecessarily limiting (and overly prescriptive) proposition. The <u>analytical judgements</u> (in which the predicate is contained implicitly in the concept of the subject) and the <u>synthetic judgements</u> (in which the predicate is added to the subject as an entirely new attribute, due to a synthesis obtained from the data of experience) can be seen as existing in a coincident form, operating accoding to codes (which must be acknowledged) and not according to the presumed natural properties of the objects.[9] The 'unsettling process of avant-garde expression' requires the existence of an equally unsettling and open concept of the theoretical and ideological framework which can be occupied by critical and expressive discourse alike.

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8. Umberto Eco, <u>A Theory of Semiotics</u>, p. 254.

9. The use of 'analytical' and 'synthetic' judgmental concepts is derived from Cassirer, as noted by Eco p. 158. The reader will note that this discourse is weighed in favor of the 'synthetic' since these observations arise from experience (i.e., the author as film-maker, rather than 'inexperienced' theorist) with an antagonism, on record, toward prescriptive modeling of theory-criticism.

1.1 (THE UNSTABLE OBJECTS OF THEORY AND PRACTICE)

The interdependence of 'that which is studied' and the 'discourse that studies' suggests a praxis that accounts for meaning production, rather than mere articulation (of cinematic codes, textual forms, etc). This interdependence can best be realized when specific films are presented within the context of critical discourse (or vice versa). However, obvious restrictions exist with regards to publication formats and/or presentation circumstances. These restrictions can be somewhat displaced by a conceptual formula that employs both a working knowledge of theory and practice and a 'lived' existence (ideological, cultural, political, economic) within the arts. A self-reflexive methodology, that is appropriate to the subject, would demand nothing less (of the authors).

The history of film theory and practice suggests that interdependence rarely occurs. (Noted examples may be found in the written-filmic works of Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin, Deren, Brakhage, Godard, Mulvey, Wollen --but these are 'exceptions' rather than the 'rule'.) Many theorists have little (if any) grounding in film practice, and many practitioners have little (if any) grounding in film theory. Yet each 'camp' continues to not only speak for 'itself' but also for the 'other'. The relative estrangement produces pseudo-omniscience, pre-eminence of one over the other, and fragmentation into specialized areas of 'expertise'. It is not surprising, therefore, that contemporary theoretical and critical discourse has itself fragmented into (at least) three subject-oriented camps: film as subject (historicism, genre, structuralism, semiotics, symptomatic psychoanalysis, ideological-cultural use value, personal 'taste'); film-maker(s) as subject (auteurism, psychoanalysis, ideological relationship to social formations, biography); and viewer(s) as subject (theories of the consumer, Lacanian psychoanalysis, socio-economics, politics of entertainment-persuasion). If I were to make a general (and summary) judgement, it would be that theorists who are non-practitioners generally ignore the contemporary avant-garde in favor of society's "good object" (e.g., the populist cinema as described by Christian Metz in The Imaginary Signifier). It is a hollow and contradictory ideological

relationship that is established between 'radical theory' (and we can assume that most contemporary theory intends to be 'radical') and "conservative practice' (predicated on monetary gain, monopoly of production-distribution-exhibition, common denominators of populist entertainment use-value). That radical critique could influence the behavior and power of the 'right' - by offering disdain or 'after the fact sociologism' -- is sheer speculation. Psychoanalytic critique of populist cinema, especially that of a 'psychopatho-logical nature' -- and the list, including Hitchcock, Film Noir, and the more contemporary 'horror genre', could be extensive -- may be beneficial from the standpoint of identifying ppathological practices within our culture, but one can safely assume that the readership is already 'converted' by their abilities to comprehend the vocabulary and theoretical substrates under-lying the arguments. That radical theory is institutionalized (in Academia, in Film Institutes) and radical practice is estranged from institutions pro-duces the 'widening gap' that is characteristic of contemporary praxis.

The cinema-subject presents an expressive and representational schema featuring a high degree of condensation, disguise, contradiction, and codi-fication, which employ both scopic and linguistic registers of 'language formation'. The avant-garde cinema-subject is marked by even greater ambi-valence and instability. There is first its incessant apetite for 'originality', to be contradicted by a desire for 'belongingness' to a school of expression (eg., structuralism, minimalism, etc.). There is the avant-garde's obsession with 'subjectivity', contradicted by its (current) longing for 'reflexivity' and acceptance within the 'modernist' and 'post-modernist' art-historical traditions. We can witness concurrent streams of nihilism, socialism, passivi-ty, violence, integration and disintegration within any given time period. To pass up the contradictions and diversities in favor of the obvious would not "suit the word to the action"[11]; to remain unaffected (by theory and criticism) as film-makers would not "suit the action to the word". I am proposing a compromise: to uncover aspects of theory and practice which have been overlooked or backgrounded in discussions concerning the avant-garde cinema, and wherein

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11. The well-known instructions of Hamlet to the players (Act III, Scene II) contain the relevant revelations of motive: "...the purpose of playing, whose purpose, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure (image)."

I hope to catch a conscience or two concerning the 'king and his imaginary
wardrobe'. The trajectory that I intend to plot will initially concern itself
with the unconscious, employing theoretical models that are derived from Freud,
Melanie Klein, and J. Allan Hobson, in an attempt to account for the subjectivity,
diversity, and fragmentation of avant-garde film practice. It will be demon-
strated that the unconscious substrate contributes to the process of language
formation, sign and code production which assume textual and cultural forms
that are transformational and 'rule-changing' in nature. The metalinguistic
practices of the contemporary avant-garde will be demonstrated as being one
of several outputs of language formation and development.

It is important to note that the ensuing deliberations are inscribed within
a larger theoretical and ideological problematic: a work in progress. Therefore, the
thesis cannot be circumscribed within parameters that are fixed and isolated from
'rule changing' practice.

THE AVANT-GARDE CINEMA AND ITS UNCONSCIOUS

2.0

"The most complicated achievements of thought
are possible without the assistance of consciousness."

-- Sigmund Freud
THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

The historical avant-garde of the Surrealist,
Dada, Expressionist, Symbolist, Constructivist, Futurist, etc. film move-
ments is a near-accomplished fact with few attempts originating to continue
these traditions (on the basis of their originally declared principles) and
many works residing in film study collections throughout Academia and Museums
of Modernist Art. It is not this historical 'unstable object' but the current
(60's to 80's), equally unstable, experimental avant-garde cinema that will be
the focus in the search (as originally cited by Kristeva) "for the crisis or
unsettling process of meaning and subject rather than for the coherence or
identity of either one or a multiplicity of structures."[12] The question im-
mediately arises: search where? The answer would be first "within the unconscious"
and the cinematic practice that emanates from, and is circumscribed by, it.

The unconscious was first described by Freud (1895) as a psychical reality
within which lay the keys to understanding mankind's normal and abnormal psychic
functionings. The beginnings of cinematic practice were also initiated in 1895
by the Lumière brothers, and this new cinematic reality (especially in work of
Méliès) would share a common ground with dream interpretation and be a matter of
ongoing speculation (as to the relationship between dream and cinema) that would
extend to the 1980's. Neither Freud, nor cinema, laid claims to the formation
of a science, capable of causal determination and prediction of phenomena. H.J.
Home commented that, "In discovering that the symptoms (of neurosis) had meaning,

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12. Desire in Language, p.124

and basing his treatment on this hypothesis, Freud took the psychoanalytic study of neurosis out of the world of science and into the world of the humanities, because a meaning is not the product of causes but the creation of a subject."[13]   (Similarly, we may note, the Lumière brothers, followed immediately by Méliès, took cinematic invention out of the realm of technology and into the realm of expression.) Freud proposed that the unconscious contained memory traces and ideational phenomenon that were 'tied to' (though capable of being displaced from) affects. The 'deep memory bank' that was the unconscious exhibited characteristics of 'freedom' and 'mobility' and constant aquisition of multi-sensory information (proceeding from infancy to maturity) that sought access to 'release' (in the fulfillment of instinctual drives for gratification) either via the conscious state or in dreams. In the waking state, the libidinal energy flow would proceed towards the motor end (of the Pcpt-M schema); in dreaming sleep, the direction would be reversed, producing a state of "regression" and perceptual activation realized in dreams. The motivating force for the formation of dreams he regarded as "wishes originating in infancy" (wishes which were submerged in deep memory), but the dream functioned (via distortion and inhibition of affects by censorship) as a modification of the original ideational material featuring the substitutions of new (recent) material. Psychoanalysis, said Freud, can put a hysterical patient on the right path "by recognizing the affect as being...justified and by seeking out the idea which belongs to it but has been repressed and replaced by a substitute."[14]   The unconscious information could pass into consciousness only by way of the preconscious, which provided cathexis (or suppressed the ideational when the cathexis was "withdrawn"), and this passage depended on the "intensity" of, and "attention" to (by consciousness) the trains of thought. Thus, the 'binding qualities' of preconscious activity would either impede or transmit information to the conscious state , and in a form that was <u>synthetic</u> rather than analytical. Although this description tends to oversimplify Freud's elaborate exposition, it nevertheless points the way to the basic relationships between motivational cause, memory, substitution, and language-expression.
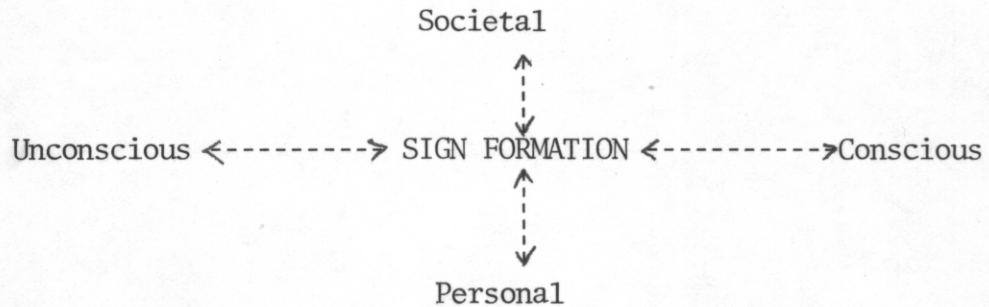
   That the unconscious could be viewer as containing a 'potential lexicon' of **signs** (potential in the sense that are devoid of indexical referent, or 'signified') and a structure (as relations) that is capable of affecting or being

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13.
14. S. Freud, <u>The Interpretation of Dreams</u>, p. 498

employed in language formation, and via the preconscious, in the identification
of subject (and its distinction from objects) and the definition of 'self',
is not a unique observation (on my part). However, the unsettled qualities
of the unconscious produce a continual influence and effect on language, self,
and identification that are both 'motivating causes' for cinema expression and
a continual re-alignment of the matrix of influences that constitute the "voice"
of "personal expression". The fiction of the completely 'independent voice'
is commented on by Kristeva: "Western man's state of 'interiority' is thus a
limited literary effect (confessional form, continuous psychological speech,
automatic writing). In a way, then, Freud's 'Copernican' revolution (the
discovery of the split within the subject) put an end to the fiction of an
internal voice by positing the fundamental principles governing the subject's
radical exteriority in relation to, and within, language."[15]

In light of the previous schematic matrices (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2), we can
posit that any 'subjective' sign formation on the part of a film-maker would be
influenced also in the manner illustrated below (Fig. 3):

$$\text{Societal}$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$\text{Unconscious} \longleftrightarrow \text{SIGN FORMATION} \longleftrightarrow \text{Conscious}$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$\text{Personal}$$

2.1

      The potential lexicon of signs contained in the
unconscious is subject to neural <u>activation</u> and <u>synthesis</u> in a manner that
<u>extends beyond</u> Freud's conception of repression, side-cathexis, and censorship.

15. <u>Desire in Language</u>, p. 90

Freud's conception of dream synthesis was based on a belief that "no internal excitation in the organ of vision" [16] took place while dreaming and that somatic causes were fairly incidental. Since the mid-20th century, neural biology and physiology has enabled us to better understand the workings of the 'dream state' and the relationship of the unconscious to chemical and automatic/internal processes.[17] J. Allan Hobson, a leading proponent of the theory of activation and synthesis, posits that the Freudian conceptions of repression, side-cathexis, and censorship, and possibly wish-fulfillment, must be updated, if not discarded, since these processes (as originally proposed) did not account for neural activation and synthesis employing chance and mutation. The updating of Freudian conceptions does not necessarily invalidate them. Rather, it provides us with an added insight into the mutable nature of our unconscious sign 'pool' and its influence on creativity and expression. Hobson describes mutation and synthesis in the following manner:

> "Recognition of the play of chance in the generation of the dream does not rob the dream of meaning, as is so often feared by the opponents of the new theory (activation, synthesis). Rather, it can be seen as a liberating phenomenon with implications for the biological basis of creativity. Only through the play of chance can new arrangements of biological information be achieved, and these have long been recognized to be the essence of creativity. Mutation -- the chance variation of genetic information -- is well established as the creative factor in evolution. I propose that mutations also occur in the realm of information processing, especially in dreams. The important feature of the new theory of dreams is that it liberates us from the narrow constraints of the narrative approach, which is based on the confining principle of psychic determinism. All is not determined in dreams and thought; rather, there is a large play of chance which allows for the generation of entirely new images, new sequences of images, and new compositions of new sequences."[18]

The introduction of chance and mutation make it possible for us to conceptualize an internally dynamic process of 'potential lexicon' formation,

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16. The Interpretation of Dreams, p. 634

17. An extensive treatment of this subject can be found in Film and the Physiology of Dreaming Sleep: The Brain as Camera-Projector, J. Allan Hobson, Dreamworks, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1981. The questions that are raised concern the extension of our knowledge of the unconscious, rather than 'Freudianism vs. science',a position that would be hopelessly restrictive and archaic.

18. Ibid.,

rearrangement, and the synthetic construction of potential signs that are not necessarily grounded in memory or everyday perception. This process is further complicated in circumstances where waking perception is dominated by, for example, drug-induced psychic abnormalities, sensory deprivation, or environmental effects. Nervous energy arising within the system can either be cancelled through inhibition or extended by the use of psychotropic drugs (e.g., LSD) which prevent the synaptic junctions from inhibiting further energy. A 'stoned' film-maker (or viewer) is actually functioning in a highly 'activated' state which allows for synthesis (of image processes), hallucination (internal and externally-triggered), and 'speed reading' of visual and acoustical stimuli. Although Hobson does not discuss psychotropic drug use, we can observe a certain similarity between drug-induced hallucination and the vivid and more easily accessible reproduction-synthesis found in hallucinoid dreams (as compared to waking fantasy - 'day dreaming'). This similarity may make it easier to understand the attempts of 60's film-makers (and the practice still continues) to achieve a 'functional state of creative unconscious activity' which, by the use of psychotropic drugs, meditation, diet, dream-recollection, would allow for greater cognitive access to the unconscious processing-synthesizing. (And we can agree that the mind is a more sophisticated instrument for aleatory combinational effects.) It is not coincidental, therefore, that much of the work arising in the 60's featured representations of heightened hallucinoid imagery (e.g., intense colours, multiple-overlay imagery, step printing and temporal discontinuity/synthesis, free-association of frames and shots) and an exploration of cine-technology that would make these renderings possible. The introduction of portable video (in the late 60's) also resulted in experiments with film-video 'hybrids' (added synthetic capacity) and 'video-feedback' (activation-synthesis). The resultant changes in the codified and restrictive relationships between psychic normativity and narrative representation could be seen as primarily 'expression-oriented'. (This aspect of creative activity is further discussed in Sections 3.1, 3.3.)

The heightened subjectivity of what I will term an 'unconscious cinema' finds one paradigm in the films of Stan Brakhage, whereby the art of "inner vision" and the ecstasy of creation in pursuit of the 'pleasure principles' prescribe for a return to unconscious synthetic processes. Brakhage's cosmology is subjective and perceptual-neural, demanding of the viewer a 'redefinition' of colour, shape, texture, point of view, and temporal structures -- a 'relearning'

of perception and experience. It is a rejection of the 'rule governed'
(consciously determined) representational codes and a return to the synthetic
possibilities of unconscious activity (in a realized form). (Other paradigms
exist in the equally 'ecstatic' work of Belson, Whitney, and Bartlett.)
That these paradigms of the unconscious cinema exacerbate political and/or
theoretical writers-critics of the avant-garde cinema is not surprising.
The analytical judgement (as outlined in Section 1.0) operates according to
codes that are outside of synthetic norms, and many times is poised as an
opposition to textual work of an 'ungrammatical' kind. (Section. 3.1, 3.3)
The metaphor and metonymy formation that takes place at the translinguistic
and synaesthetic (i.e., multi-sensory) levels occurs with the notion of 'possible
sign' being substituted for 'probable' (rule governed) sign. The suggestion
by C.S. Hall that the dream symbol does not necessarily disguise an underlying
idea (as Freud proposed) but, on the contrary, expresses it, seems even more
plausible when considering that synthesis can be expressive. Cine-language
formation (affecting structure and textual characteristics), arising from
lexicon re-formation, finds its analogic counterpart in the literary work of Joyce
(notably <u>Finnegans Wake</u>)which, coincidentally, was described as "Big Night
Music" by Anthony Burgess, and remains representative of a polyphonic indeterminate
process of dialogic expression.

Another major paradigm of 'unconscious cinema' may be the result of
macroscopic structurings of duration during dreaming sleep. Hobson noted
that the synthesis is not totally chaotic and unstructured but features the
"fitting" of images into wholes, and "where fits are inexact, images and ideas
may actually be synthesized". The 'fitting' in dreams and cinematic structuring
bears some remarkable isomorphisms: the whole cycle of dream and film are
similar (90-100 min.), typical scene duration in dream and film are similar
(5-40 min.), and more notably the saccadic rate of waking perception (between
5 and 20 per second) and frame-projection rate (24 per second), and REM during
dreaming sleep, contain startling similarities. The waking eye - 'the eye that
must move in saccadic movement <u>to see</u>', and the dreaming eye -- 'the eye that
moves' in REM during dreams, feature an intermittency that is approximated by
the intermittent-movement of the 'cinema eye' (camera-projector). The macroscopic
structurings of duration can easily accomodate a simple "fitting" -- for example,

a long scene, or in cinematic terms a long sequence shot. I would propose that dream-cycle structurings bear some striking similarities to temporal structuring found in conceptual-structural avant garde expression, which, rather than being predicated on 'ecstatic' expression is predicated on conceptual 'reformation' and meditation on subjective rule-governed structurings. A major paradigm of this 'minimalist-conceptual-structuralist' cinema is found in the work of Michael Snow, as particularly evidenced in the 45 min. zoom of Wavelength, and the extended 'one-shot' of The Central Region. Rather than being predicated on activation-synthesis, this work is determined by (subjective) macroscopic orderings (duration, space, movement) that extend themselves into a (anxiety producing, on the part of the viewer) reformulations of cinema-dream apparatus and representation. It is not surprising that cine-theorists (e.g., Michelson, Elder) have been more successful in analyzing this paradigm (as opposed to the previous) since it is more in keeping with analytical judgement (in which the predicate is contained within the object -- Section 1.0). The fact that Brakhage and Snow are contemporaries is no more surprising than the fact that Lumiere 'one-shots' were contemporary with Melies fantasies -- each representing a part of the dual-ismorphism of the cinematic-dream apparatus itself.

The avant-garde cinema of the 'unconscious' -- a cinema of 'regression'[19] in which the "fabric of the dream thoughts is resolved into its raw material"[20], allows for the expression of new possibilities of sign-formation (and aesthetic coding -- Section 3.3) at two levels: deep structure (produced by inserting signs from the lexicon into trees created by the phrase-structure rules which are based on logic and predication) and a surface structure (produced by applying trans-formations to the deep structure trees, adding, deleting, or moving material around), and in a manner that is eventually 'rule changing' (that is, the changing of rules governing structure-dependent transformations). Deep and surface structure designations, in this case, are used to indicate the presence of a structured

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19. This term is not being used in the perjorative sense. It merely identifies the 'moving backwards' along the Pcpt-M track, away from consciousness and motor energy release and towards the unconscious.

20. Interpretation of Dreams, p. 582

syntactical output to the unconscious that can be seen operating on levels
that affect hierarchical memory recall, semantic categories, and aesthetic
coding. As such, they are designated as dual and interrelated (not in opposition),
and not exclusive of each other, as the common critical preoccupation with
"West-Coast lyrical expressionism" versus "Eastu-Coast conceptual structuralism"
would suggest. The reader may argue that I have reduced avant-garde cinema
to a status that is overly confining, restrictive, and reductive -- a status
that does not acknowledge the possibilities for diversity and expression outside
of the proposed models. This has not been my intention, and I have not laid
claims to an exhaustive or specific analysis of the films cited. My endeavor
has been not to reduce but to identify potential congruences between film and
a particular aspect of psychic formation, and to accord an unconscious 'status',
as it were, to the object.

2.2   (THE BROKEN MIRROR OF PHANTASY FORMATION)

> "And now, it seems to me, the meaning of the evolution
> of culture is no longer a riddle to us. It must present
> to us the struggle between Eros and Death, between the
> instincts of life and the instincts of destruction, as
> it works itself out in the human species."
>
>
> -- Sigmund Freud
>   CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

When Freud undertook, as his starting point, Schiller's view that "hunger and love are what move the world", he identified the former with instincts "which aim at preserving the individual" and the latter with that "which strives after objects and functions in the preservation of the species."[21]   Implicit in this position is the possibility for conflict between competing instincts directed towards the same object or a single instinct directed towards oppositional objects. The competing instinctual drives for life and death, when directed towards the same object and impelled by phantasies of satisfaction, produce the most notable forms of anxiety, defense, and agression. In the formation of a child's ego, unconscious phantasy is constantly influencing and altering the perception or interpretation of reality; conversely, reality exerts a very strong influence on unconscious phantasy itself. Hanna Segal, introducing the work of Melanie Klein on unconscious phantasy and ego formation, summarizes the key effects as follows: "The structure of the personality is largely determined by the more permanent of the phantasies which the ego has about itself and the objects that it contains (by introjective or projective identification)."[22]   Freud's position that a "conscious wish can only become a dream-instigator if it succeeds in awakening an unconscious wish with the same tenor and in obtaining reinforcement

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21. CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS, p. 117
22. Hanna Segal, Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein, p. 20

from it" can be re-posited (if we accept the isomorphism of dreams and film) as a condition that applies to cinema-instigation as well. To paraphrase Freud further, a wish which is represented in 'unconscious cinema' (a cinema motivated by and returning to the unconscious drives) must be predicated upon infantile conceptions of the ego and unconscious phantasy. It would matter little if the ideational material has undergone displacement and substitution -- in other words, 'disguise'. What would be notable is that the unconscious figures prominently in the strategy of the expression. Therefore, in the following pages, I will attempt to identify a nexus of unconscious anxiety, defense, and aggression that can become a praxis in the art of cinema avant-gardism, the politics of cinema, and the 'splitting' into fragments of the history of avant-garde cinema.

The Kleinian schema suggests that in the pre-Oedipal development of the ego, the infant enters into a "paranoid-schizoid position" wherein the conflict between the life and death instincts results in the splitting of the ego and the projection of "good" and "bad" object qualities to the external world (initially posited as the breast). The death instinct anxiety is converted into a projection 'of the bad', and agression, giving rise to a feeling of persecution. At the same time, the ego establishes a relation with the "good object", the ideal object which is created to satisfy the ego's instinctive striving for the preservation of life. The feelings of persecution arising from the "bad object" are compounded by the fear that the bad object will get inside the ego and overwhelm and annihilate both the ideal object and the self. What is set in motion, in this plane of the imaginary, is a series of defense mechanisms: the defensive use of introjection and projection, whereby the good is introjected and the bad is projected. The permanent feature of this position, comments Segal, is that "in situations of anxiety the split is widened and projection and introjection are used in order to keep persecutory and ideal objects as far as possible from one another, while keeping both of them under control..."[23] In other words, anxiety produces a form of extremist behavior (as projection, introjection) that denies compromise. Introjection can also take the form of introjecting the 'bad' (to assert control over it); projection can take the form of projecting the 'good' (to protect it from feelings of 'badness' inside). From the original projection of the death instinct evolves

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23. Ibid., pp. 25-27

another mechanism of defense which Klein terms "projective identification...(in which) parts of the self and internal objects are split off and projected into external objects, which then become possessed by, controlled, and identified with the projected parts."[24]   The positions that Klein's schema identifies are phases which can recurr at any age.   Introjection and projection are familiar 'adult' conditions (e.g., dealing with a 'hostile world' by introjecting the personal 'good' point of view and projecting/distancing the 'bad') which may, under the above noted circumstances , be a striving for satisfaction of an instinctual drive by the seeking out of an appropriate object. Freud noted that "a normal train of thought is only submitted to abnormal psychical treat-ment...if an unconscious wish, derived from infancy and in a state of re-pression has been transferred on to it." [25]   Within Freud's schema of un-conscious-preconscious-conscious relations, trains of thought which are 'rejected' (by a lack of attention) spin off into the preconscious or are drawn into the unconscious "by attachment to unconscious wishes". Thus, the adult psyche and current trains of thought are succeptible to these unconscious for-mations.

At a latter stage in the Kleinian schema concerning ego development, the child assumes a "Depressive Position" wherein the splitting and projection decrease, the tolerance of the death instinct increases and paranoid fears subside. In the Depressive Position, a relationship is established to the whole object, and the infant discovers the 'whole mother', the father, his jealousy of other people, and his dependency on objects. In other words, this latter position is important in the development of the ego's relationship to societal and linguistic systems (that will now include the Oedipal-triad phase) that extend beyond the primitive binary object-relation.

2.3

               That which is in the unconscious can be concre-tized (reified) within the apparatus of cinematic art. The "free/mobile" functionings can assume a fixated state that is not unlike "fixation" itself.
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24. Ibid., p. 27
25. Interpretation of Dreams, p.637

Reification furthers projective identification since the subject of
unconscious drives is now an <u>object</u> -- one that is identified with and
coded within the subjective matrix of the author. The creation of (un-
consciously motivated) objects can be for the purposes of <u>preservation</u>
or <u>objectification</u>. The former, as 'transcendental function' of the ego's
desire for survival, accords object (and via projective idenfication, the
'self') a 'precious object' status, one intended on archival existence,
fame, or the priveleges that notoriety accords to its subject(s). The
codes of expression that are characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid po-
sition (located within its nexus of 'good' and 'bad' attributes) mediate
the channeling of extremely charged, personal and subjective imagery
(with good/bad attributes) which can be seen as projective identification
with, for example, a highly valued document of childood, personally important
subjects and objects, personal style or 'signature' that are attributed
'good object status' in a manner that is defensive and obscure. The de-
fensiveness (as strategem) allows for the good to be introjected or projected
in order to keep it safe from what is felt to be overwhelming (threathing)
badness 'outside' or 'inside', respectively. Conversely, an extremely
hateful-threatening image (e.g., death, destruction, perversion) can be pro-
jected (as finished film, for example) and divorced from the introjected
idealized qualities that will not be 'polluted' by externalizing them in
conjuncture with the "bad". Many examples could be offered, but within the
confines of this discourse the general typology may be more useful. The
paranoid-schizoid position is typified by a high degree of subjective attach-
ment ot secretive, symbolic value systems, and a special adherence to the
personal gesture, the mark or style, and the refusal (or inability) to reveal
motive or context. The personal-symbolic system can assume forms of 'perfection',
'mythology', 'cosmology' (with its center being the self), mystical configura-
tions of the "ideal", all of which (as codes of substance) are extra-material
or in extreme cases, "extra-terrestrial". Personal gesture (as code of expression)
can be iconoclastic or inscribed with a special ambiguity. The binary nature of
this schema, operating primarily in the unconscious-preconscious, inscribes a
<u>duality and opposition</u> to all efforts and resultant artifacts. The polarities
of order/disorder, beauty/ugliness, normal/abnormal, me/you, us/them, aestheti-
cally pure/commonly vulgar, ideal/material, are all symptomatic of this 'illusion-
ary' aesthetic. And while they can become politicized, by attachment to strate-

gems of action, they are hopelessly estranged from social intercourse by virtue of their subjective exclusivity. This is the aspect of the avant-garde that suffers, but knows not why; it expresses, and knows not why; it strives for preservation (of its personal signature) but for no reason that could be termed 'social'.

That objects can be created for the pupose of objectification (of un-conscious drives) is an aspect of formative avant-garde practice that de-velops towards maturity. In this sense, personal attachments diminish and the objective schema can be analyzed and interacted with, producing added insights, as a form of 'conscious dialectics'. There are two obstacles that continually stand in the way of objectification: the cultural binary system operating in macro-societal forms of commercial-entertainment cinema, and narcissism. The cultural binary system is largely predicated on Eros-Thanatos taking the well-known institutionalized form of "sex" and "violence". This practice, which can be witnessed constantly in commercial cinema houses, consolidates the binary at the level of superego (the 'societal parents'). Therefore, reinforcement, rather than 'guilt' can be obtained from this societal model that is, in effect, equally unconscious and anti-social. Projective identification, a mechanism of defense against the original death instinct, can take the forms of narcissism, in which the artist projects parts of 'himself' into his delusional system in a desparate attempt to deal with his anxiety. An optimal 'host' for projective identification is the technologi-cal medium. The contemporary artist (working in film or video), recreating the images of his body and unconscious in the machine, can conduct his narcis-sitic involvement directly (e.g., rephotographing himself, childhood memoirs, speaking 'to the camera', confessing, 'play acting'), and there are too many examples of this to catalogue, or indirectly through the use of technological interpretants (e.g., a special technique as signature, personal style or formal gesture, personal subjects, personal objects). The reason this works against objectification is that it re-aligns gesture with the concept of the 'split self' and masquerades under the culturally-acceptable headings of 'innovation' and 'high-tech'.

I must reaffirm, once again, that the practices that I am referring to are limited and bound by the unconscious-preconscious (and a return to instinctive drives). There are many cases, which need not be addressed within this discourse, whereby innovation, creation, subjective expression, and preservation are <u>not</u> limited by ego formation, and in effect extend far beyond the parameters established here.

The impoverished state of the 'split ego', an ego weakened continually by introjection and projection (in their multiple forms) results in either psychic collapse (schizophrenia) or a further (Kleinian) stage termed the Depressive position. In considering the former condition (psychic collapse) I would once again make mention of the 60's practice among artists whereby prolonged use of psychotropic drugs (engendering a sense of continuing regression and fixation) not only impoverished the ego but also produced (in situations that I have witnessed) psychosis and psychic collapse. Under 'normal' circumstances, the tolerance of the death instinct increases and paranoid fears subside, and a more direct interaction with societal and conscious formations ensues (the 'Depressive Position'). The ego assumes the capacity to love, tolerate guilt, and sublimation occurs (as the outcome of a successful renunciation of instinctual aims). We can speculate that the art practice predicated on paranoid-schizoid anxieties will decrease, since the projections also decrease. This is not to say that art itself ceases, but that an artistry predicated on unconscious splitting must assume a more developed form if the ego is to survive. Segal offers the following observations concerning symbol and language forma-tion: "If psychic reality is experienced and differentiated from external reality, the symbol is differentiated from the object; it is felt to be created by the self and can be freely used by the self."[26] The assimilation of objects by the self, and the distinction of objects from the self, gives rise to symbol formation and language. In that sense, psychotherapy does not destroy art, but is useful in extending its domain. For, as Freud posited, "psychotherapy can pursue no other course than to bring the unconscious under the domination of the preconscious."[27]

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26. H. Segal, A Psychoanalytic Contribution to Aesthetics, <u>International Journal of Psychoanalysis</u>, 1952.

27. <u>Interpretation of Dreams</u>, p. 617

The entry of the 'unconscious avant-garde' into societal configurations
and pseudo-political arenas can sometimes take a more violent form, the
psychopathology of 'anarchist expression.' There are many possible characteris-
tics of this practice, only a few of which I can summarize. There is first
the actions (outside of any political context) that deny psychic reality
by strenghtening feelings of omnipotence (and omnipotent control of objects)
with the resultant triad of feelings: control, triumph, and contempt -- all
directed at denying dependence or value of objects.[28]   Secondly, psychic
fixations on "smashing the state!", overthrowing all authority, when put to
a practice that is _devoid_ of external reality constructs (as political stra-
tegems aimed at overthrowing societal repression) results in the unleashing
of id impulses and the suppression of the (parental/societal) induced superego. Within
the psyche, the out of control id impulses are typified by a deterioration of
intellect, obsession with sensual activities, increased guilt feelings, and
increased feelings of insecurity -- conditions reflected in the artist and
art work alike. Julia Kristeva, writing on poetic language, identifies similar
"abysses that threaten the unstable object", namely, _psychosis_ -- "the arbi-
trariness of an instinctual drive without meaning and communication...(featuring)
fantasies of omnipotence or identification with a totalitarian leader" -- and
fetishism -- "an objectification of the pure signifier, more and more emptied
of meaning -- an insipid formalism."[29]   For the former, and especially in light
of **obsessio**ns with 'satanic omnipotence' I would cite aspects of Kenneth Anger's
work (although there are many more examples possible); in the latter case, I
am reminded of 'Fluxfilms' or CONRAD'S "FLICKER", as minimalist obsession with signifier. The film
art that is of the id, whether obsessed by fetishism, sado-masochism, mysogeny,
a veneration of omnipotent heroes, or fascism, cannot sustain itself in its deeply
reactionary and asocial position. The uncontrolled id impulses, as retold in
"The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde" prescribe an irreversible finality to
the enterprise. And while some reactionary elements may masquerade under the
guise of 'social critique', and I am thinking specifically of "Punk Film, Video,
and Rock" and its obsessive use of mysogenous and fascistic paradigms, an intelli-

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28. Melanie Klein terms this condition "Manic Defense".
29. _Desire in Language_, p. 139

gent viewer may notice to what economic and cultural end this practice is
employed. Similarly, we may note that the art, dominated by psychosis and
fetishism, serves to provide vicarious satisfaction for a 'bored' public
(and that includes 'high-art curators') that is ideologically, culturally,
and psychologically divorced from its underpinnings.

The historical avant-garde, when partially summed up (as in the author's
"Ghost:Image"), resembles a fractured 'mirror' that reflects a multi-faceted
view of psychic motivation, language, and contradiction;--the "stuff" that
comprises creativity. The 'kingdom of the unconscious', and 'its wardrobe',
can be seen as a beginning, middle, or end in the development of any particular
avant-garde film practice, and as such, its use value is obvious, though not
extraordinary. The act of elevating it to pre-eminent status in history, or
culture, is the act of reifying the unconscious. ~~It is, therefore, indicative
of a certain ideological primacy of art over other psychological factors.~~ Becoming
conscious, posited Freud, "is connected with the application of a particular
psychical function, that of attention." [30] We could ask, 'attention to what?'
Louis Althusser, writing on Brecht, proposes an eloquent solution:

> "Strictly speaking, there is no dialectic of consciousness:
> no dialectic of consciousness which could reach reality itself
> by virtue of its own contradictions...for consciousness does not
> accede to the real through its own internal development, but by
> the radical discovery of what is other than itself." [31]

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30. Interpretation of Dreams, p. 632
31. Louis Althusser, For Marx, p. 143

SEMIOTIC AND IDEOLOGICAL FORMATIONS IN AVANT-GARDE FILM PRACTICE...

AN OBJECT-IN-PROGRESS

> "Society recognizes itself in the mirror (but does not
> know itself)...(and this is) precisely the mirror it
> must break if it is to know itself."
>
> --Louis Althusser
> FOR MARX

3.0

The imaginary of the avant-garde resembles
that of a 'fractured mirror' which reflects all of the pain and loss incurred
in the process of sublimation (the renunciation of instinctual aim) and
assimilation (of objects within the ego). The creative psyche does not
carry on a practice that is predicated on 'happy endings' or a restoration
of "imaginary"unity of the subject, guaranteed by the unity of the body in
the mirror"[32] (as Metz posited the task to be for the "good object" of "filmic
pleasure" in The Imaginary Signifier). The avant-garde cinema of "unpleasure"
(although we have seen cases in the previous sections where pleasure principles
are directly engaged) is the cinema of symbol and language formation. Segal
offers the following: "if the object to be given up can be assimilated in the
ego, by the process of loss and internal restoration...such an assimilated ob-
ject becomes a symbol within the ego. Every aspect of the object, every situa-
tion that has to be given up in the process of growing, gives rise to symbol
formation. In this view symbol formation is the outcome of a loss, it is a
creative work involving the pain and the whole work of mourning."[33]

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32. In the realm of the imaginary this unity "is projected on to the world to
    find in every other both the sameness that was found in the mirror. In
    terms of language this stage can be understood as the conflation of the
    word and the thing...To shatter this imaginary world arrives the moment
    of the real (the learning of language, the fact of difference, contradiction)"p11
33. H. Segal, A Psychoanalytic Contribution to Aesthetics, 1952'

The populist cinema of 'filmic pleasure' and 'unity of the subject'
is predicated on the passive (viewer-oriented) use of Freud's "Two Principles
of Mental Functioning": phantasying, in which the thought-activity is split off
and kept free from reality-testing, and remains subordinated to the pleasure
principle along; and a 'thinking' that is endowed "with characteristics which
make it possible for the mental apparatus to tolerate an increased tension of
stimulus while the process of discharge is postponed."[34]   Escapist-narrative
cinema conforms well to the above 'two principles', although its ideological
"good object" use-value can be seen largely as perpetuating of illusionary
realities (and relations).

Therefore, it is not surprising that the argument whether cinema "serves
mostly to tell stories" (Metz)[35] or whether it is polyphonic and "must always
remain a multiple-meaning ideogram" (Eisenstein)[36] should arise, since the argument
concerns different conceptions of the 'subject' and competing theoretical
and ideological assumptions regarding the expressive cpacity of film. The
narrative/non-narrative argument serves to reveal basic predispositions toward
cinema 'language' (the word and the image), structurings (coherence, levels,
voices, codes), and ideological and cultural use value. It is not a question
of which is to be excluded, but under what terms can cinema's, and particularly
the avant-garde cinema's, function be maximized. We should nevertheless re-
call the possible contradictions (Section 1.1) wherein a 'radical theory'
is applied to 'conservative practice', or 'conservative theory' applied to
'radical practice'. (In that sense, I view Metz's 'radicalness' primarily an
'apologia' for populist cinema and an argument innapropriate to deliberations
concerning the avant-garde.)

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34. S. Freud, "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" (1911),
     Standard Edition, 12.

35. "The cinema, although it could have been used in a great many ways, serves
     mostly to tell stories..." Essais, p. 144

36. "The film frame can never be an inflexible letter of the alphabet, but
     must always remain a multiple-meaning ideogram. And it can be read only in
     juxtaposition, just as an ideogram acquires its specific significance, meaning,
     and even pronunciation (occasionally in diametric opposition to one another)
     only when combined with a separately indicated reading or tiny meaning..."
     Film Form, pp. 65-66

3.1 (THE TWO CULTURES OF CINEMA)

I will propose at this time the following cultural distinctions between avant-garde cinema and populist cinema: avant-garde and populist film cultures represent <u>different and distinct cultures</u>, the avant-garde cinema being <u>textually-oriented</u> and the populist cinema culture being <u>grammatically-oriented</u>. This proposition is not meant to suggest that one culture operates 'outside' of the other, or that they are exclusive of one another. Rather, it is to posit that each has a definite predilection towards form and substance (expression/content), and that the avant-garde is primarily <u>expression-oriented</u> and populist cinema is primarily <u>content-oriented</u>. This observation is supported by the relative histories of both, and more generally by Juri Lotman's modeling (and characteristics derived therefrom) that accounts for the differences between the textual and grammatical. Eco, in <u>A Theory of Semiotics</u>, summarizes Lotman's position as follows: "There are cultures governed by a system of rules and there are cultures governed by a repertoire of texts imposing models of behavior. In the former category, texts are generated by combinations of discrete units and are judged correct or incorrect according to their conformity to the combinational rules; in the latter category, society directly generates texts, these constituting macro-units from which rules could eventually be inferred, but that first and foremost propose models to be followed and imitated." [37] The above distinctions, corresponding to grammatical and textual orientation, makes the suggestion that the former corresponds to content and the latter to expression (orientation) more plausible when one considers the fact that a grammatical culture, which has a highly differentiated expression system, has also evolved a highly differentiated content system. The "formalist" preoccupations of the expression-oriented avant-garde and the 'narrative-substantive' preoccupations of the populist cinema are entirely consistent with the above schema. The above models, however, are not 'monolithic' entities in contemporary society. At the conceptual level, they may suggest difference and distinction; but on the behavioral level the textually-oriented avant-garde society, with its repertoire of etiquette rules, seems to be more grammar-oriented than the populist society, and the populist society seems more prone to free interpretation of behavioral patterns and permissive models. At the conceptual level, these two cultures can also be seen (and this will be

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37. Eco, <u>A Theory of Semiotics</u>, p.138

demonstrated in the following sections) partially _merging_: the populist
culture moving towards textual-orientation, and the avant-garde moving
towards grammatical-orientation.

That the two cultures share a common base in language, a lexicon, and
a common base in the 'means of production', the technology, is entirely within
the nature of their coexistence. The lexicon, as working vocabulary of film
and word-image formation, is informed by the accumulated history (memory) of
its own sign-making process and its capacity to accept and store additional
entries. When this lexicon is actualized in sign-production and code-production,
the two cultures diverge. Previous divergences have been noted in the discussion
on 'unconscious' cinematic processes, and the competing tendencies towards
'fragmentation' and 'unification'. Further divergence can be seen in the
competing practice between 'analytical' and 'synthetic' (as outlined in Section
1.0) as directly influencing narrative and predication, and aesthetics and
synthesis.

3.2   (PARADIGMS OF NARRATIVE-POPULIST CINEMA)

> "Every attempt to establish what the referent of a sign
> is forces us to define the referent in terms of an ab-
> stract entity which moreover is only a cultural convention."
>
> -- Umberto Eco
> A THEORY OF SEMIOTICS

That which we call 'narrative cinema' is predi-
cated on literary and theatrical conventions (concerning 'voice', dramatic
conflict, introduction-development-complication-resolution patternings,
character development) and photographic conventions concerning perspective
and point-of-view. This predilection towards 'story telling' is historically
evidenced, reflected in decoupage (clasique) shot-breakdown, and generally
follows from the specific origin to each narrative film: the screenplay.

At a syntactic-structural level the grammatical operations are organized to conform to deep structurings (the logical ordering of phrases) or surface structurings (adding, deleting, moving material around). The logical ordering of shot 'phrases' (e.g., sequences) are plot-story dependent; surface structurings are style-dependent on cultural semantics and value systems of a given (e.g., North American) society. Eco adds the following observations: "Certainly a plot can be seen as a series of functions, or a structured matrix of functions in alternate opposition, but the isolation of these functions cannot be freed from the preliminary attribution of pertinence (and therefore of meaning) to each of these...the functions of a plot acquire value only when measured against the value systems of a given group. A fact cannot be defined as 'unexpected' if we do not know the systems of expectation of the addressee. Thus even the researches into the structure of narration refer to a socio-historical definition of semantic systems."[38] A study of semantic systems (the 'content orientation' and its systemic nature)of this culture is outside of the capacity of this discourse. Rather, I would like to pursue the paradigmatic (of the various narrative paradigms) at the plane of expression identifying its 'rule governed' grammatical orientation.

The cine-narrative, trading on literary conventions, contains a voice (rarely plural), that of the 'speaker', to whom (by cinematic point of view devices) it can attribute an'attitude' (to assert, deny, question, or shift focus of the main propositions). The narrative-oriented lexicon has the capacity to accomodate complexes of words or signs (e.g., idioms, metaphors, metonymys, technological acronyms -- roughly translated to cinematic use as sequence shot, match-cut or matching composition, detail shot)[39], as single units of 'meaningful expression' which can be recalled (in other films) to suggest a coded meaning. The cine-narrative can appropriate myth and other fictive sign-functions by simply configuring them in a manner that is consistent with the normative syntactic operation and consistent within the fictive diegesis of the film. Thus, we can have a narrative concerning

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38. A Theory of Semiotics, p. 145

39. The translation from literary to cinematic units (of meaning) serves only to illustrate structural congruences; they are not meant to be synonymous or identical.

'Ancient Rome' and the 'Christians thrown to the lions' (e.g., "The Robe")
make perfect sense, even though we know that no such event 'actually'
took place before the cameras. Irregularities arising in syntactic,
grammatical construction or semantic orderings can be disguised by kinesis
(action cutting, match cutting) or by purely formal considerations (rhythm,
matching colour, pov, composition). In cine-narrative, it is common to
see the substitution of an image (or sound) as descriptor, qualifier,
or direct replacement for a word phrase, or vice versa. (This, also,
is in keeping with basic rules of phrase structure.) The forms of narrative
construction are varied,[40] and linear narrativity is but a single paradigm within
the normative narrative paradigmatic.

The capacity of narrative cinema to appropriate mythic forms, fictional
events, and 'naturalize' them within its narrative is indicative of its
ability, via rhetorical construction devices (Inventio, Dispositio, Elacutio),
to disguise, persuade, and emotionally manipulate the addressee. (These
issues are discussed at greater length in Eco's Theory of Semiotics pp 276-
298, and Barthes' Myth Today.) That this practice, in itself, constitutes
a metalanguage is debatable; that narrative cinema extends into metalanguage
is actual (e.g.,"History of the Movies", "Canada At War", "Sneak Previews",
"SCTV", Berger's "Ways of Seeing", etc.) Perhaps I have oversimplified
narrative cinema structurings in this brief description. It does however,
serve to illustrate (outside of a lengthy discussion on diversified content
paradigms that would identify the many genres, formulas, subject matters)
its limited expression-oriented paradigmatic. However, since it is cinema
and not language, the final grammatical rules to make explicit "what is in
the language" and "what is not" (thereby defining the notion of "possible
sign") are impossible to formulate. Therefore, it is not surprising that
populist-narrative cinema features a continual development that extends its
domain of representational and structural conventions -- a development that
is particularly notable in the area of expression, and that takes place largely

40. Pudovkin anticipated this variety when he remarked that 'the units of
     montage were the building blocks employed in the "psychological guidance"
     of the viewer.' The types of 'narrative montage' that he identified
     were: parallelism, simultaneity, leit-motif, contrast, symbol. It is
     useful to note that Pudovkin's conception of 'montage' is at variance
     with Eisenstein in that it features a predilection for narrative and
     therefore the above five categories are more appropriately codes of
     narrative expression.

Rewrite

on the basis of appropriation from the expression-oriented avant-garde.[41]
The apetite for formal innovations in 'commercial' cinema has reached unpre-
cedented proportions (if one is to ascribe importance to the current trend
towards technological fetishism, special effects, and phantastic settings
that are evidenced in the recent 'blockbusters'). A single week's viewing[42]
of commercial offerings indicates (in my mind) a return to the 'basics'
of "sex and violence", wherein a minimal plot-substance serves to 'legitimize'
pathological violence, sexism, special effects, phantasy, technological
fetishism and in a manner that is becomming monologic, reductive, and divorced
from the 'reality' that it pretends to represent. Competing with this 'do-
minant cultural paradigm' -- the "good object" of narrative story-telling
that is predicated on a return to the infantile binary: the paranoid-schizoid
position of introjecting and projecting life and death instincts -- we have
the equally dominant forms of content-oriented documentary films, news re-
portage, 'human-interest' stories, which by and large provide vicarious satis-
faction (though little ideological impact) for a culture that has become in-
creasingly divorced from its own underpinnings: science and content. The
following quotes serve to illustrate ~~(and hopefully to the apologists of
dominant culture as well)~~ the 'value systems' that are operating at the level
of populist semantics:

    "I like my movies made in Hollywood."

                        -- Richard Nixon

    "It is a relief to know that the art of film making still
    exists in the creative mind of Steven Spielberg. He has
    raised himself above the industry's inflated egos and
    bloated budgets to show that there's some glitter left
    in Hollywood."

                        -- Lisa G. Shillingburg
                           Oklahoma City
                           (Letter to the Editor, Time Magazine)
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41. 'Special effects' of various kinds have been appropriated from experimental
    cinema practice (e.g., Kubrick's "star gate effect" in 2001: A Space
    Oddysey is formally derivative of Belson's work; hallucinogenic effects
    in Altered States features appropriation (via Bartlett) of 60's motifs);
    the integration of stock-footage within fictional narrative is a further
    example of 'borrowing'; television commercials are an equally notorious
    example of using experimental formal techniques -- but bigger and more sophistica
                                                                          tec
42. Viewings conducted in mid-June, Toronto: Cat People, Star Trek II, The
    Sword and the Sorcerer, Conan the Barbarian, Christianne F, Prince of the City.

3.3 (SIGN AND CODE PRODUCTION IN AVANT-GARDE CINEMA)

Avant-garde cinema practice lends itself better to
a discussion of sign-production and code-production, rather than structure,
since 'rule-governed creativity' is displaced in favor of a 'rule-changing
creativity'. In a text-oriented/expression-oriented culture, such as the
avant-garde, the notion of sign-referent must be displaced in favor of a
discussion concerning sign-interpretant.[43] Eco summarizes the various forms
that the interpretant can take as being: "the equivalent sign-vehicle in another
semiotic system" (e.g., word/image); "the index which is directed to a single
object, perhaps implying an element of universal quantification ('all objects
like this')"; "a scientific (or naive) definition in terms of the same semiotic
system "(e.g., 'salt' signifies 'sodium chloride'); "an emotive association
which acquires the value of an established connotation" (e.g., dog = fidelity)";
it can be a synonym.[44]   The possibility of interpretants to inferentially de-
velop possibilities suggested by the sign, or to act as a response (behavioral,
cultural) implies that a theory of signification concerning sign and code pro-
duction (and notably in the non-grammatically-oriented art practice) extends
beyond denotative and connotative 'semantic markers', beyond analytical judge-
ments, and into synthetic correspondences.

For the avant-garde film-maker, rule-changing occurs first at the level of
sign-production (i.e., the thinking of what the film-maker would like to say,
how he/she would like to say it, and what it will mean). The thinking of what
the film-maker would like to say is not rule-governed by pre-existent iconic
codes that establish equivalencies between graphic devices (and gestures)
and recognition (code) but rather influenced by transformational conceptions
"by which a point in the effective space of the expression is made to correspond
to-a-point in the virtual space of a content model".[45] In other words, similitude

43. "A sign stands for something to the idea which it produces, or modifies...
    that for which it stands is called its object; that which it conveys, its
    meaning; and the idea to which it gives rise, its interpretant...the object
    of representation can be nothing but a representation of which the first
    representation is the interpretant." A Theory of Semiotics, Eco, p.69
44. Ibid., p. 70
45. Ibid., p. 199

(the dominant iconic code of populist-narrative cinema) is displaced in favor of an expressive <u>transformational code</u>(s) that engages the matrix of interpretants(as set of possibilities) and results in the creation of new codes that are the consequence of new rules and artifice. This new 'similitude' is the product of a new way of coding,[46] and contains a motivation and a set of transformational rules applying to the plane of expression, content, or both. As in the dominant-cinema iconic code, this form of sign and code production must be "learned" for it to convey meaning to the viewer.

The avant-garde film-maker's desire to work outside of conventions (hence premeditating 'originality') gives rise to a range of expressive diversity that may feature a multiplicity of styles or a personal style, a code, (operating on the plane of expression or content), termed an <u>idiolect</u>. We can see that the former case is less congruent to societal expectations than the latter, since diversity would imply that each film-text would have to be separately 'learned' (and decoded), with little assurance that each gesture contributes towards a macroscopic coding that can be assimilated. Diversity runs counter to societal bias towards simplicity, pragmatic use-value, and analytical judgement. Therefore, the latter category, that of the idiolect, is a "preferred state" since it provides (for curators, critics, and an auteur-biased audience) the general code under which, as sub-codes, are read the various expressive and substantive qualities of the work, en-suring consistency, familiarity, and inevitably semantic 'organization'. Idiolects figure prominently in the contemporary film avant-garde (e.g., films by Brakhage, films by Snow, films by Belson, films by Benning, etc.), and they can be seen as giving rise to "schools of expression" (based on imitation, plagiarism, or appropriation) which configure themselves as ideolectical cultural institutions (e.g., structuralism, structuralist-materia-lism, minimalism, etc.), within the more general modernist and post-modernist equations.

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46. Codes provide a correlation between sign and text, between gesture and meaning which are fixed by convention. Codes do not organize signs, but "provide the rules which generate signs as concrete occurrences in com-municative intercourse" (Eco. p. 49). Another definition for codes is provided by Wilden: "a code is a set of constraints on the relative semiotic freedom of the goalseeking subsystems sharing the code..." A code is also viewed as a complex network of sub-codes.

3.4 (UNDERCODING, OVERCODING, EXTRA-CODING)[47]

Traditionally, art practice proceeded in the manner of "undercoding", whereby the non-existent codes (of expression-content) are employed in creative formulations that assume (over time, study, repetition) the status of aesthetic codes. That particular "aesthetic emotion", that is, the feeling of organization or meaning that permits one to gain insight and infer a larger meaning to a whole body of work and its possible combinational rules, is an example of undercoding. In the absence of pre-established rules, certain macroscopic portions of the text are provisionally assumed to be perti- nent units of a code information. For example, a film-maker using 'stock-footage' (as pro-filmic facts) exclusively in the film-text will be suggesting to the viewer that it is the 'combinational'aspects (editing, rhythm, juxtaposition, irony, humor, critique) of the aesthetic gesture which are the pertinent units of code information, rather than the historical/factual aspects (contained within the pro-filmic events). (This condition is further discussed below.) Therefore, we can obtain a particular and different 'aesthetic emotion' from the work of Bruce Conner (e.g., A Movie) as compared to the work of Paul Brekke (e.g., Outtakes) the former being ironic and containing 'black humor', the latter being poetic, meditative, and ontological, though each deals with society, death, destruction, and the death instinct in man.

The traditional undercoding can be seen now as being joined by a more analytical practice, termed "overcoding", which incorporates textual forms that proceed from existing codes (a conventionalization of sign production) to more analytical subcodes. Overcoding creates a new rule which governs a rarer application of the previous (pre-established) rule. Eco posits the following description: "...the operations of overcoding, when completely accepted, produce what has been called a subcode: in this sense overcoding is an innovatory activity that increasingly loses its provocative power, thereby producing social acceptance...Frequently a society does not recognize overcoded rules that in fact allow the social exchange of signs."[48]

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47. These terms and their usage are appropriated from Eco pp 135-143
48. Ibid., p.134

Overcoding, at the level of expression, is visible when a pre-existent formal code (e.g., the 'Lumiere one-shot", the long take) is systematically segmented or optically reprinted to induce step-motion. It is also visible in the above (Conner, Brekke) examples wherein the existing codes of expression-content (deriving from the stock footage itself) are subjected to the more analytical subcodes of aesthetic sign production via reorganization, recombination, re-petition, and juxtaposition. The contemporary stream of "new narrative avant-garde" film-making (currently popular in New York, London) utilizes overcoding in the manner of appropriating dominant narrative codes (expression-content), for example the linear narrative, point-of-view, episodic construction, and subjects them to a systematic reorganization, reduction, redundancy, or frag-mentation. (Specific examples include <u>Riddles of the Sphinx</u> (Mulvey/Wollen), <u>Empty Suitcases</u> (Gordon), <u>Splits</u> (Katz).) Overcoding tends to conform more readily to judgmental qualities of an analytical nature (as discussed in 1.0, 1.1), whereas undercoding conforms more readily to synthetic judgements. It is therefore not surprising that film-texts of primarily an overcoded nature are emanating from the avant-garde that is dominated (or authored) by critics-theorists, whereby the dualism of pre-established codes and theoretical substrates (themselves codes) is seen as the prerequisite condition for the "innovatory activity that increasingly loses its provocative power" and be-comes a socially acceptable creative didacticism.

The combination of undercoding and overcoding produces an "extra-coding" complexity of text and a multiplicity of codes, subcodes, contexts, and circum-stances, which can be decoded from different points of view and interpretant conventions. In other words, a complexity that is only partially 'read', and in a different manner, by each viewer. This complexity "impels one to select the most appropriate code or to isolate a given subcode (thereby governing the choice of connotations). The interplay of various codes and subcodes make the message (or the text) appear as an empty form to which can be attributed pos-sible senses...denotation of a sign vehicle can be understood just as the sender intended it to be, but different connotations can be attributed to it simply because the addressee follows another path on the compositional tree to which the sender referred."[49]

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49. Ibid., p. 139

The current direction of avant-garde film can be seen in light of
the complexity, code variants, and ultra-specificity (affecting expression-
content) that is a result of extra-coding. This complexity places con-
siderable requirements on the knowledge that a viewer should 'supposedly share
with the film-maker', and is perhaps one of the reasons why the avant-garde
remains estranged from the culture-at-large which, as mentioned in the previous
sections, remains committed to simplicity and narrative substrates that are
reductive. The avant-garde, historically and currently, has also exhibited
a 'separateness' from political and ideological struggles by virtue of its
propensity towards "formal subversion" of codes of expression and content.
This 'separateness' is rapidly vanishing as avant-garde film practice begins
to extend itself, by the use of deconstruction and metalanguage, into the
domain of social intercourse.

3.5   (DECONSTRUCTION AND METALANGUAGE CINEMA)

The attempts by the avant-garde to enter into a
more interactive relationship with culture-at-large has produced several strate-
gems which, though limited to expression and unable to compete with dominant-
cinema production, distribution, exhibition bases, are indicative of its future
directions. One notable strategem is the "analytic-deconstruction film"
containing 'cross-coding' of socio-political codes and aesthetic codes.
In this position, the avant-garde film is reformulating its relationship to
narrative, to theory, and to non-cinematic exigencies. The cross-coding
strategem situates cinematic-aesthetic codes in direct relation to dominant
cinema codes or cultural codes to provide a basis under which a set of contra-
dictions, or conversely collocations of meaning, can be observed. The in-
tention of this practice is directed towards identifying formal, intellectual,
ideological contradictions in art, culture, society resulting in a sub-
version of the 'authority' of the dominant cultural codes. Eco posits the
'political aspect' of this semiotic endeavor as follows:

> "If the circumstance helps one to single out the subcodes by means
> of which the messages are disambiguated this means that, rather
> than change messages or control their production, one can change
> their content by acting on the circumstances in which the messages
> will be received...in opposition to a strategy of coding, which

(cont.)

"strives to render messages redundant, in order to secure inter-
pretation according to pre-established plans, one can trace a tactic
of decoding where the message as expression form does not change but
the addressee rediscovers his freedom of decoding." 50

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50. Ibid., p. 150

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FILM AND THE FUTURE

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Dates: June 3 – June 6, 1982

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