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Visual Alchemy

by Tony Reif

The early seventies represented a time of prolific output (in the three media of film, video, and holography) for Al Razutis; it was a period of aesthetic and technological invention and a pushing forward of formal parameters. Razutis worked primarily alone, outside institutional contexts (including Vancouver's fine-arts community). His multi-media work tended to align aesthetics with knowledge, technique with invention, metaphysics with physics. Immanuel Kant's credo ("In order to know an object, I must be able to prove its possibility, either from its reality, as attested by experience, or a priori by means of reason") could be applied to Razutis' integration of knowledge and art, but with the notable addition, in the late seventies, of political and ideological concerns. What Razutis desired to "know" was an aesthetic practice that used transcendental signification in personal and societal transformations. This transcendental function was not derived from Oriental cosmology, but fixated on the fusion of science and alchemy. Modern day "alchemy" to Razutis seemed analogous to an artistry that invoked imagination (the knowledge and experience of it) to reach beyond normal experience. If empirical knowledge (science) is predicted on synthetic judgments (arrived at through the data of experience), then Razutis felt that aesthetic knowledge could be gained through the data of visionary experience and the developments of new technologies (of the psyche). The development of the optical printer had been for him the creation of a machine to directly manifest "dreamwork"; new technologies of the psyche could be created in film form, since language and expression constituted "technologies". In 1971, on the basis of a CFDC grant, Razutis completed the shooting (with Tony Westman as principal cinematographer) of an experimental-dramatic narrative, The Beast. Razutis describes the film as a "dreamspeak narrative of sorts..., myth making and myth mocking." After numerous problems in post production, The Beast was finally completed in 1982.
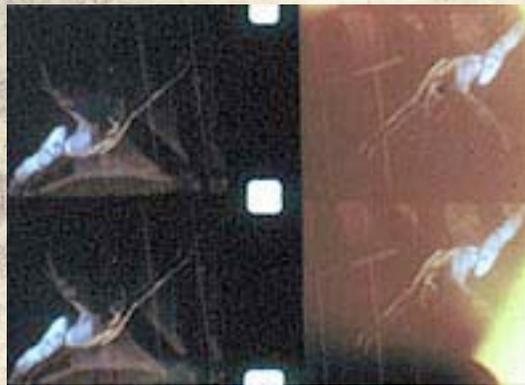
In 1972, Razutis began to experiment with colour video synthesis at Evergreen State College (Olympia, Washington). These experiments were unique to Vancouver video, since B&W was "state of the art" and video synthesis was largely unknown.2 The Evergreen experiments resulted in "hybrid" films which combined film and video techniques and could be distributed in either film or video. The films completed in 1972—73 (and many experiments remained incomplete) included: Software (1972), Vortex (1973), Watercolour Abstract (1973), Aurora (1973), Fyreworks (1973), and Synchronicity (1973), a collaboration with Audrey Doray and Barry Traux. The video synthesis experiments involved generating abstract imagery, reprocessing representational images, and creating film-video pieces using biofeedback techniques. This work would (in 1975) result in the construction of another technology unique to Vancouver: the videosynthesizer.3

Razutis completed five films in 1973 which were indicative of his plural formal interests. 98.3 (KHz Bridge at Electrical Storm is a dazzling synthetic journey across a suspension bridge which engulfs the viewer in video-synthetic "electrical storms" and subliminal sound broadcasts; Le Voyage and The Moon at Evernight explore image cycles, repetition, aleatory combinations, and image-less durations that are structural counterpoints to the mythopoetic image and verbal fragments;

Visual Alchemy (cinematography by Westman) combines visual documents of lasers and holography and Jungian-poetic verbal passages to comment on the symbolic relationship between holography (the "opus") and alchemy; Méliès Catalogue portrays the early creation of films as a dream vision captured on "burning" celluloid. The dominant motifs within these works are image condensation and abstraction, flash- frame punctuations and lightning (as leitmotif), black leader (image less) passages, and complex sound-track constructions.

Razutis' use of structures and shape was usually configured around af fective and psychological strategies; there was little evidence of a predisposition for mathematical or rule-governed procedures. As contrasted to Rimmer's structuralism, Razutis' use of patterns and forms was motivated by rhetorical or poetic considerations that employed the construction of spatial and temporal "figures" in a background continuum that was analogous to "void". His image construction employed the exacting use of optical printing and synthesizing technology which, as in the case of Bridge at Electrical Storm, was conducted one frame at a time until a maximum amount of complexity and control was achieved.

Visual Alchemy alludes to his developing interest in an aesthetic practice that joins psychic and technical discoveries. The technical discoveries that Razutis made in holography included the development of a holographic "motion picture" cylinder4 containing an animated (rotating) holographic image. He applied himself towards the design of a holographic motion-picture projection system, but was unable to gain support from the National Film Board (to which it was submitted). Subsequently, he directed his efforts towards the creation of a thirty-piece holographic art exhibition, Visual Alchemy, which in 1977, organized by Elisa Anstis and Martin Grove of the Burnaby Art Gallery, went on cross-Canada tour.
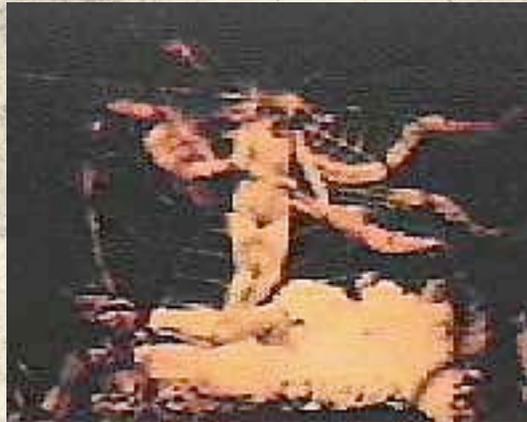
Visual Alchemy was also the name of a studio and stock-footage library established by Razutis. The library was the source of his Visual Essays: Origins of Film which by 1976 included Sequels in Transfigured Time and Ghost: Image, in addition to the already-completed Méliès Catalogue and Lumiere's Train (Arriving at the Station).

Sequels in Transfigured Time is a return to the films of George Méliès (1861—1938), as sequel to the Catalogue, and presents a poetic interpretation of early cinematic vision and imagination. Ghost: Image explores the tradition of "fantastic" films that included Dada, Cubism, Surrealism, German Expressionism, Poetic Realism and concludes with the classic horror genre.

In 1976, Razutis completed Portrait, a pointillist study of his daughter based on Carol Aellen's 8mm footage; macro-rephotography was used to increase detail and grain. The same year, he also completed The Wasteland and Other Stories, and Cities of Eden. These two films added to a longer work in progress, Amerika, which, as a thirteen-part compilation film, draws on the myths and image systems of the post-industrialized world.

By 1977, Razutis' combined work in film, video and holography had brought him to exhaustion and bankruptcy. He moved to the South Pacific. In 1978, he returned to Vancouver and took a teaching position at Simon Fraser University. There he set about constructing a film program that would exhibit a blend of experimental film production, film theory, and contemporary technologies for film practice.

His interest in political forms of experimental filmmaking intensified in 1978—80. In 1980, he published a manifesto on "Cinema Arts" that denounced the Canada Council's policy of generating a secondary "independent" film industry at the expense of arts funding, and he participated in the founding of Cineworks (a film production co-op).

Razutis' late seventies' film work (e.g. The Wildwest Show, A Message from our Sponsor, Motel/Row) turned to the issues of media language and ideology. His work combined textual construction5 with formal subversion (subversion of signification, meaning and styles) and extended the practice of filmmaking into the realm of pragmatics and cultural protest. It is therefore hardly surprising that by the early eighties his work found itself less and less involved with "fine arts" interests.

Magnetic North

by Bruce Jenkins
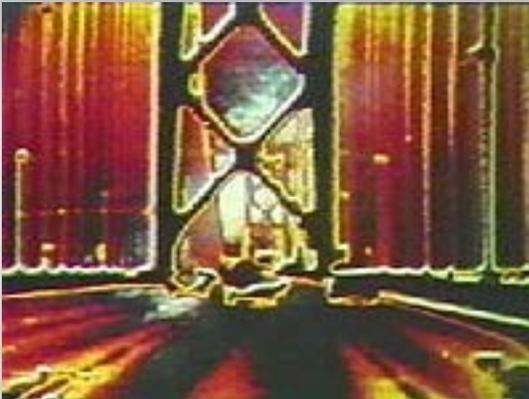
It has been fifteen years since my first critical encounter with the intersection of film and video in general and with the privileged position then held by the wok of polemical media artist Al Razutis. Something of a hybridized figure in his own right – a German-born American living in Canada with a background in nuclear physics and theoretical mathematics, yet working in film and video production – Razutis was at the forefront of a fundamental shift in alternative media practice that had begun in the early 1970s. By 1985 I felt confident in proposing that video "was effectively challenging the experimental cinema at its roots, displacing the older medium in the production of personal, formally rich, conceptually engaging moving-image art."1 Around that same time critic David James, too, recognized what he termed the "gradual supplantation of avant-garde film by video in the seventies."2 But for Razutis, the change held more than merely formal implications.

Razutis' idiosyncratically titled *98.3 Khz: Bridge at Electrical Storm*, made in 1973 – one of the earliest pieces that came to inhabit his feature-length experiment *Amerika* (1972-83) - is a work that began to address the post-filmic arena in relation to independent media production, both by incorporating video into the film as a tool and by addressing the growing presence of the electronic media in the society at large. Although made during the heyday of crude portapak production – the era that Canadian media critic Renee Baert has termed "vintage video" - this film-video hybrid was a sophisticated work that opened onto complex issues involving the relationship not only between film and video but also between American and Canadian practices.3 The work consists of a series of tracking shots taken through the windshield of a car crossing the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. The original footage appears grainy, and the imagery is further degraded through video transfer and the increasing use of several image-processing techniques over the course of the work. Paralleling this movement toward abstracted imagery is a soundtrack that progresses from simple radio broadcasts (the rock song *Ramblin' Man*, a weather report) to a complex sound collage, which interweaves barely audible snippets of historical American broadcasts such as President Roosevelt's 1941

report on the attack on Pearl Harbor and John F. Kennedy's inaugural address with white noise and electronic chatter.

The uncanniness of these archival sound elements shifts the work into the register of quasi-science fiction, a condition that is enhanced by an accompanying temporal shift: from initial daytime imagery through the videographic prefiguring of the electrical storm that is brewing to near total darkness at the end. As Al Razutis has noted, the bridge serves several functions in the work. Viewed as an "electromagnetic tower, (an) antenna for sixty years of radio waves," it is as if the electrical storm has unlocked a vast storehouse of acoustic phenomena.4 The bridge towers, themselves vividly rendered through waveform distortion into a series of fluid electronic patterns, become endowed with the capacity to channel and transmit these retrieved sound elements to itinerant motorists in their range. Through these synesthetic connections, Razutis constructs an alternative space-time continuum. Here, his driving protagonist experiences spatial passage as a temporal regression, and we witness "the disintegration of matter as energy."5
While the subject matter of *98.3 Khz: Bridge at Electrical Storm*, with its implicit journey motif, at first conjures up the poetic cinema of a Stan Brakhage or a Bruce Baillie, the procedures to which Razutis subjects his material (fixed frame, loop printing, flicker) at the same time evoke then-contemporary practices of the so-called "structural film." Yet overriding both of these associations is a driving critical force, perhaps best captured in David James' description of the essential "contradiction… at the centre of the notion of video art and in all the registers of its operation: the irretrievable loss for the media arts of oppositionality, since the very tools deployed in video production are always possessed by the corporation, always besieged by its values."6 Razutis himself succinctly described the manner in which his film-video hybrid allegorized the complicity of intermedia techniques by presciently describing the work's design as
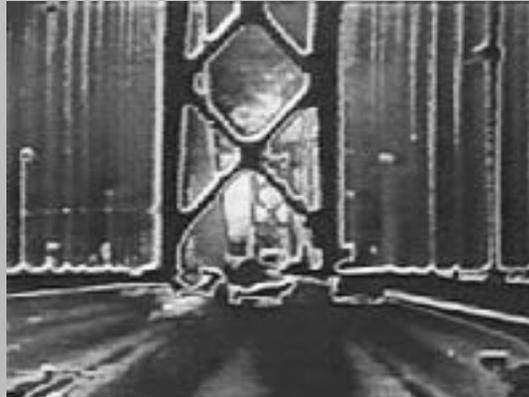
a "spatial image of the transition from an industrial society linked by transport to a post-industrial society linked by communications."7

Razutis' metahistorical narrative effectively reframes literary critic Northrop Frey's celebrated characterization of Canadian poetry as rooted in the centrality of landscape and the natural world. According to Frye, "Nature is consistently sinister and menacing in Canadian poetry."8 In *98.3 Khz: Bridge at Electrical Storm*, the film-poet has enhanced the menacing force of nature by multiplying its effects and upgrading its devastation to an apocalyptic level. One of the most vivid moments in the work is created through the superimposition of rapidly moving storm clouds onto the bridge deck, which effectively removes whatever sheltering relief that structure might provide its travelers. Frye further notes of Canadian poetry that "here and there we find glints of a vision beyond nature, a refusal to be bullied by space and time, an affirmation of the supremacy of intelligence over stupid power."9 Razutis seems to suggest that while human mastery of space and time has been achieved, a new tyranny has emerged, emanating not fro the natural world but from the cultural.

The use of videographic techniques throughout the eighteen elements that comprise Razutis' *Amerika* not only placed the work in the vanguard of intermedia experimentation in North America but also reveled the artist's determination to stake out a critical position on that continent's cultural configuration…

The tale of a malevolent media artist and the surveillance-style subjugation of his unwitting collaborators offers compelling proof that the generation that succeeded the pioneers of Al Razutis' era have heeded the ideological lessons that emanated from a work like *Amerika*. The pervasive and intrusive "messages from our sponsor" that Razutis saw radiating from all directions into the culture here seem to have metastasized into a closed-circuit hell mediating every

aspect of our physical being. Razutis' work was a film aspiring to video; Pelletier's *Die Dyer* is a video aspiring to cinema. Yet despite their significant formal differences, the work of these two artists represent a convergence of advanced media art practice and critical political perspective that remains at the forefront of a cultural shift: one that has taken Canadian media well beyond concerns for nature and technology and into a postmodern quest to retrieve what media theorist Gene Youngblood once called the "cultural context that determines the meaning of our lives."16

1. Bruce Jenkins, "Film in the Video Age: Independent Cinema," in 1985 National Video Festival Catalogue (Los Angeles: American Film
2. David James, "Intervention: The Contexts of Negation for Video and Its Criticism," in 3. Resolution: A Critique of Video Art, ed. Patti Podesta (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1986), p. 86.
4. Renée Baert, Vintage Video: Early Canadian Video Art to 1974 (Toronto: Artculture Resource Centre, 1986), as cited by Dot Tuer in Mirroring Identies: Two Decades of Video Art in English Canada," in Mirror and machine: Video and Identity, ed. Janine Marchessault (Toronto: YYZ Books and Centre for Research on Canadian Cultural Industries and Institutions, 1995), pg. 108.
5. Ibid.
6. James, "intervention," pg. 87.
7. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, Twentieth Anniversary Catalogue, p. 102.
8. Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1971), as cited in Martin Rumsby, Beyond the Wax Museum," in The Invisible Cinema 1989: Avant-garde Filmmaking from North America (New Plymouth, new Zealand: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1989), pt. 10
9. Ibid.

10. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, Twentieth Anniversary Catalogue, p. 101
16. Gene Youngblood, "Media Arts: Reflections and Prescriptions," in The Media Arts in Transition (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), pg. 16.

Al Razutis: Under the Sign of the Beast

What follows is an interview collage. All questions and answers in standard type are from a 1984 interview with David Bryant. All questions and answers in italics are from a 1989 interview with MH and includes further reflections on the 1984 material.

DB: How have you managed to make your films and how do you intend to continue in the future?

AR: My earliest films were produced in California (1966-68) and afterwards I moved to Vancouver (and all of the subsequent work has been produced there). Living in Canada, first as an American expatriate, divorced from the 'American film scene' and not accepted by the 'Canadian film scene' presented a lot of problems initially. (I compounded these problems by withdrawing my films from US film co-ops in the 70's after I was disgusted by what happened in Chicago at the Democratic Convention). The Canadian arts scene in the early 70's was dominated by anti-American chauvinism (doubling as a kind of 'nationalism' and promoted by artists themselves who were trying to advance their own position in the arts) and this has continued in experimental film even into the 80's.

In 1982, after 14 years of making films, teaching and participating in the creation of a number of Vancouver film organizations, I found myself "excommunicated" from the Canadian avant-garde by a person I had (foolishly) considered to be an ally: R. Bruce Elder. This arose on the occasion of his published essay (Parachute #27, Summer 1982), "Redefining Experimental Film: Postmodernist Practice in Canada'; an essay which sought to create a theoretical paradigm (as invention) for Canadian avant-garde cinema. In this essay, Bruce maintained that "Canadian avant-garde cinema is postmodernist cinema precisely because of its commitment to analyzing the nature of the photograph." Well, I thought, he (as anyone) is entitled to theorize and valorize... but it was only in the concluding paragraphs that I realized why my work had been excluded by Elder for so many years in national and international exhibitions. Elder offered: "The contrast between Rimmer's manner of reworking historical footage and that of Al Razutis is a measure of the distance separating Canadian avant-garde filmmaking from its American counterpart."

His observations were that I was "American-born" (which is false) and share "with American Pop artists an interest in visual forms which lie outside the acknowledged Fine Art tradition" (Since when is "Pop Art" outside of Fine Art?) In sum, Elder sought to rationalize why my work should be excluded from a "Canadian" context (to quote him earlier: "Many of our key experimental filmmakers – filmmakers belonging to our central tradition of filmmaking - have explored issues associated with photographic representation."). The films comprising Visual Essays, short films such as Portrait, and much of Amerika dealt precisely with photographic representation, media and interpretation (as history, as myth, as meaning and construction). Yet, here, and his views were, I believe, pivotal in my exclusion from future Canadian

retrospectives, I was declared "unCanadian" (once again}... As for Bruce, I think, more than any other individual, he has strangled experimental film in Canada to the point that many filmmakers now will only imitate his call for 'landscape and alienation' films as true Canadian works. Byron Black, Peter Lipskis, and a number of other filmmakers have been 'sacrificed' (ignored) in favor of consolidating the 'official' Canadian version of history and film.

(from a letter to the editors of Cinema Canada 1985): Elder's cinematic pronouncements concerning the 'true Canadian cinema' are based on an ontological idealism rather than a practice as it exists in fact. He contends that 'the history of the avant-garde cinema reflects changes in the conception of the nature of self' as superseding other concerns (ie. the political, social, cultural contexts of the time) and by definition applies this to his select filmmakers. By definition he excludes the Impact of technology, of media (surely he must have heard of McLuhan?), historical and sociopolitical determinants and contexts ... Elder's 'post-modernism', If we wish to join the bandwagon, is historical and apolitical - it resides with the muses, with Platonic Ideals, with the Immigrants and their Identity crises, and is of the past. His theoretical writings have continually celebrated the cinema no longer in focus: Snow, Chambers, Wieland, RImmer... a cinema that belongs either in the museums or in the academic old folks home at the college. Nowhere has Elder curated or supported anything resembling the plural cinemas that exist or the cinema that he proposes 'we need.' From Berlin to Canadian Images to Festival of Festivals, his programs are essentially the same one. The avant-garde of contemporary thinking is in fact completely deleted from his agenda, as is feminist cinema, as is any attempt at 'new narrative.'

In April of 1989, in Los Angeles, I talked with Bruce (after a lapse of five years). The occasion was the L.A. premiere of his 14 hour epic Consolations (Love is an Art of Time). We talked about his film - a film which I consider to be not only important in international contexts but also a significant challenge to today's postmodern dilemmas as well as to a political avant-garde - the Catholic church, criticism and theory in Canada, Bruce's influence on what I maintained as 'singularizing' theory by the invention of 'strategic paradigms' (theories), and other topics. This was a warm and friendly conversation, in spite of our severe political and cultural differences. (I must resist the temptation to offer comments on his latest film, but will say that his filmmaking poses both a challenge to the 'left' and embraces some very important issues in terms of philosophy and culture.) I have a lot of respect for Elder's dedication to his 'mission' and I think that any criticisms of his position must engage with the scope of his accomplishments (both in film and writing). I also find his moral conceit, and what I term his fanaticism as evidenced in his filmic excesses, alarming. For example, consider this extract from his film program: "Ours is a time that has experienced the darkening of the world, a spiritual decline that results from our having broken with both the earthly and the divine... The radical theology of the Enlightenment put us in the hands of the devil who has lured us with 'truths' that are utterly at odds with our own nature and the nature of the world. We did his bidding and became guilty of moral offenses against the Order of Things, and this has happened primarily because we lack the understanding that there is knowledge that we should not possess... We have been deformed by closing ourselves off from the Divine in existence. " (Bruce Elder, exhibition notes for Anthology Film Archives 1988 'The Book of All The Dead')

Elder's mission is clearly to set the times right, to replace the immoral, the evil ('in the hands of the devil'), with the moral, righteous, good that is an aspect of what he terms "the Divine". And of course, Bart Testa, is always there to lend a helping hand, proclaiming Bruce (in the very same publication) as "heir to the visionary film tradition" and "the leading theoretical writer on Canadian avant-garde film." What is alarming to me is precisely the extreme that Elder's moralizing has gone to, the extreme that his conception of good/evil, truth/lies, vulgar/divine has taken him, and by implication, the 'Canadian avant-garde'. (I need not worry about myself, I have been excommunicated long ago and condemned for 'evil knowledge'.)

Elder is, by his own admission, a 'modernist' and obviously disdainful of postmodernism (and its avant gardes). This point he made quite clearly during our last discussion and implicated Brakhage (not Snow) as one of his prime influences. Of course, Elder's position is somewhat contradicted by his obsessive use of quotation, stock footage (dehistoricized atrocity footage), the collapsing of all discourse (and genres of discourse) into one philosophical (romantic) quest. He has skimmed the 'surface' along with the best of postmodernists. But if one is to take his assertions for the purpose of argument, then a question immediately arises: is not Elder's modernist disdain for postmodernism placing him directly in opposition to what he has valorized as Canada's only legitimate experimental cinema, the postmodern one? I think so. And my observations are supported in some of his 86/87 claims (including 'The Cinema We Need') that he does not consider himself part of what he has been supporting, 0-' attacking. So, all of the above reminds me of what happened in the 70's in terms of xenophobia, nationalism and the privileging of marginal talent. Canadians (and yes, I am still a Canadian

citizen) tend to offer themselves up to what I term 'the cancer ward of suffering romanticism' where they wish to introject the 'good' and expel the 'bad' (usually American). This situation is completely in keeping with what Melanie Klein described as a paranoid-schizoid position' wherein the infant child introjects the 'good object' and projects 'the bad object', or vice versa, and keeps good and bad miles apart. (This of course is the foundation of Metz's 'Imaginary Signifier'). This is precisely what Elder and Bart Testa practice in their theorizing and attacks, and this dilemma of the 'imaginary' is quite outside politics and social analysis. The mirror that Canadian culture, and in particular the experimental film culture in Canada, has held up to itself and promoted through curating and rationalized in anthologies, has been one of self-censorship. This is why it tolerates the hegemony of singularization (the myth of true Canada) and acts in complete denial of plurality, difference, digression and play... And this is one of the reasons that I can no longer work or live in a climate dominated by apologists and amnesiacs.

DB: What about alternative screenings, collective bargaining and especially, with the emergence of cable, the possibility of broadcast as a method of direct access to audiences?

AR: Alternative screenings are a necessity if the avant-garde is to resist being institutionalized by the government, grant agencies, commercial interests, etc... including the university! Collective bargaining at the level of an open shot (not closed, you're in you're out!) where boycott, if necessary, is implemented in the case of exhibition houses not paying artists ... we tried this in Canada several years ago when I attempted to create a Canadian Film Artists Association with members of the Funnel in Toronto. We discussed basic rates for screening, a pay scale similar to that of Canadian Artist's Representation

which has succeeded in negotiating at least reasonable exhibition fees for artists (the basic wage as it were). We discussed boycott, we discussed all kinds of political and economical things and the whole notion and organization collapsed because a) artist's were too insular to care, b) they were too poor to resist the temptation of the meager handout and many were horrified by boycott strategies, c) many are greedy for individual fame and fortune at the expense of everyone else ... it was a sorry sight. Cable and television (contrary to the paranoia exhibited by many experimental film purists) is a legitimate and important venue for experimental films ... most distributors are slow in moving in to it and most artists are too obsessed with their own work to figure out a means of entry into this market that may be both business-like and beneficial to others

MH: At the 1989 Film Studies Conference. Martin Rumsby, an avant-garde film enthusiast, collector and curator, urged the collected membership to begin to buy artist's films. Many people are, at present, developing collections of videotapes because of cost and accessibility. He argued that similar collections should be developed in film. In the discussion that followed Seth Feldman, professor of film at York University, argued that the relation between distribution and production was not an innocent one. One need look no further than to those arts whose works are bought and sold (painting, printmaking, etc.) to evidence this effect. The question of the relationship between distribution and production is especially apt given the North American avant garde's dependence on universities/colleges. 90% of the avant garde screenings in Canada are not held in the Cinematheques or film coops but universities like Concordia, Regina, Ryerson and Sheridan College. So you have to wonder: how is this effecting the kind of films made in Canada?

AR: *When I left Canada in 1977 and lived in Samoa, I thought that was the end for me as far as teaching and making film. Then, in the middle of the rains, a letter arrived from Simon Fraser University offering me a position to teach. I pondered the consequences for at least two weeks and decided to return to Vancouver. I have always (post 1977) argued for avant-gardes of disruption (of norm), ones that are dedicated to social and cultural change. So what the hell was I going to a university for? Well, I thought it would be possible to operate in this position from a university even if it meant that I had to play ball with the administration and assume the tasks of curriculum development, scheduling, grading and departmental politics. For a while it worked: I used university funds to bring in visitors, films, used university facilities to make my own films (after the student work was completed), encouraged the production and study of experimental and avant-garde film and worked to increase faculty numbers. I also was there because I loved teaching and the kind of creative interaction that is possible between student and faculty. In the end, after nine years I gave up and the program was taken over by more shrewd political types. What did this mean for avant-garde film? During this time period (1978-1987), a marked increase in experimental and avant-garde filmmaking occurred in Vancouver, a number of screenings were held, graffiti everywhere, publications and debates, Cineworks was created, CFDW was created as a result of Toronto's centrist policies, and a lot of new ideas and expressions were seen. Before 1978 a lot of experimental filmmakers stopped making film and a kind of vacuum was developing... after 1987 we have also had a lull. I'm not taking credit for everything but in all honesty must say that my strategy of turning to a university (for all of its shortcomings and conservative attitudes it still has most of the $$) as a base of support was a necessary decision-move. As Gass noted in his article on avant-garde:*

'every decision to prolong an avant-garde beyond a certain point becomes suspicious'.

DB: Perhaps I am being idealistic but it seems to me that an increased reliance upon film and video institutions as a source of recognition for the artist has arisen (the syndrome of getting your work in the right places in order to be recognized by the right funding organizations, and thereby becoming a perpetuated artist). This situation leads to several problems, the most outstanding in my opinion being the creation of an economical rift between filmmakers where everyone fights only for themselves. An additional problem has been described to me by a filmmaker as a closed ring, where National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funded institutions show and promote NEA funded films which creates a stasis of NEA funded artists. To further pinpoint the issue, it seems the 'end' could be described as a situation where national media arts centers assume their presence as essential, vital to the furtherance of the arts, to the point of becoming detrimental to the filmmaker and artist. Whereas in actuality, they increasingly play the role of middleman in an economic chain. The resulting effect is that the artist moves from producer to commodity. The film is no longer the sole commodity; now the filmmaker must be saleable as well.

AR: The NEA example is an excellent one, paralleled in Canada by our own Canada Council... CC funds films, funds exhibition houses, funds advertising for these films and may as well fund cab fare for people to go and see them ... does this improve (aside from the simple economic matter of keeping some people from starving) the art or does it (as Mekas asserted in the recent Experimental Film Coalition newsletter) support trivialization and conformism ... 1 think it does both, depending on many factors: who's picking the juries, who they

are, what kind of grant funding is in place, how does the institution exert its influence (ideological and unconscious) on the art ... In Canada in film and video we have seen during the 70's the erasure of videosynthesis by the regressive policies of video officers, a generation of 16mm film/craft/industry masquerading as 'art', the inability of the CC to support experimental film in spite of some good intentions, and generally a fiasco not conducive to 'develop and support' film as art. Political cinema has fared even worse, and the National Film Board in the seventies turned out to be a bureaucratic and overfed animal that benefited primarily the executive process and in-house people and stifled, frustrated and compromised any good works (with the exception of some feminist lobbies). Once again it killed the very offspring that it was mandated to support ... and most people are so cowardly that no criticism of any public kind (a lot of apologists, waiting their next turn at the decision making level) was visible for years, only rumors, allegations, and silence ... and this kind of crap has now made its way into the infrastructure of most bureaucracies and government agencies. This is where many artists are motivated (if they are going to survive) to play politics with these agencies ... this is why a lot of people give up .. .this is why nothing changes ...

DB: It has seemed to me that in the past several years a significant number of media institutions in the United States have avoided taking part in an organized (or even disorganized) investigation of film theory, history and/or practice (as opposed to a random sampling, or greatest hits approach to curation) which has resulted in a situation where no questions are being asked in an effective manner about what is being exhibited. How does this position bode for the future of any investigative or avant-garde approach to filmmaking, and what sort of strategies are available to a

filmmaker (or group) confronted by such obstacles?

AR: Filmmakers and theorists have to communicate, not prescribe or hide and divide into their own cliques (as has happened with the theorists, all friends of a feather attending conferences on 'new narrative' and prescribing from this vantage point what is desirable, healthy, important and useful in cinema (i.e. Films which illustrate their own points well ego Bette Gordon etc.) Filmmakers have to read and write more ... there is no profit in avoiding the curator, academic, critic and theorist - this is what happened in the underground cinema of the 60's and 70's: here we had people producing at a phenomenal level of energy, expanding the range of film and refusing to theorize about it or 'academicize' it or even 'read' (as if that were ever an impediment to vision!) ... and across the Atlantic in France you had the development of the most reductive theories of 'the cinema' imaginable based on linguistics, semiotics, marxism and ultimately on theory itself. Like I said, theory and practice have to come together, to inform each other, and to get rid of the ridiculous and paranoid binarism that separates one from the other...

The 60's (Vietnam, drugs, hippies, new philosophies, an explosion of experimental filmmaking, counter-culture in the true sense of the word) have been absorbed by TV, ad agencies, art curators and government grant agencies - not just absorbed, but taken over and institutionalized, put to a purpose of selling entertainment, diversion, disinformation, a lifestyle of sensuous hysteria where even 'facts' are media contrivances... who's to know the difference? This is why it is so difficult to say something of substance and imagination... and to be politically active… .in an age of simulation. This is why it is important for filmmakers (if they dare call themselves avant-garde) to strive for that which will amaze them and us, if

not scare the hell out of them and us... But TV and the postmod junk yard are not the only reasons why difficulty exists... there is also the 'church of the experimental cinema' of the kind found in most urban centres. These grant funded institutions are like passive prayer meeting halls where touring 'experimental filmmakers' show their work and answer a few questions (to demonstrate that they are in fact 'there')... Like passive audiences attending a sermon on 'culture,' in these contexts even the most outrageous insults to intelligence go (usually) unchallenged... or conversely, even the most sensitive work can go unappreciated.

Example: Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, always on the Goethe hand-out tours, come to Los Angeles a few years ago to show their version of 'political avant-garde': porno home movies of Birgit and Wilhelm fucking, masturbating and trying to be 'outrageous' via obesity and genitalia. I'm sitting in the audience and I can't believe my ears: Birgit is actually saying that these home movies (unwatchable bullshit) is a 'political statement' directed at a culture which can't take eroticism and sexuality. I can't restrain myself and publicly protest calling this nothing but political bulls hit, and suggest that they go down to Western Ave. in Hollywood and check out the porno scene there for 'political content'. End of farce, until they take it to the next stop ... one thing I know for sure: I'll never get invited to Germany. I CAN'T RESTRAIN MYSELF AND PUBLICLY PROTEST CALLING THIS NOTHING BUT POLITICAL BULLSHIT, AND SUGGEST THAT THEY GO DOWN TO WESTERN AVENUE IN HOLLYWOOD AND CHECK OUT THE PORNO SCENE FOR 'POLITICAL CONTENT'

Example: Chris Gallagher screens Undivided Attention in L.A. to a small audience. This film is impressive, formally eloquent and an amazing example of innovation in form induced

content. Gallagher is relatively self-effacing and yet the film's impact is so strong that the filmmaker need not even be there. His film expresses imagination, it doesn't prescribe or preach to the viewer what the viewer 'ought to think', 'ought to do' and neither is he riding high on a nationalist (Canadian) banner ... The questions are meaningless, the impact of the film lingers ... however, there is no possibility of seeing it again. Filmmaker goes off to the next stop on the tour. These churches of experimental film, these simulations of Platonic classrooms don't work and should be abandoned. They draw only a few people and are only 'precious' in the minds of a few. In the meantime, the postmod junkyard is filling up with more 'art'. And you know, it is really ok because in this 'junkyard' one can play. And then of course, there is the 'avant-garde morality squad' telling everyone what they should see, who is important, what is good, what is evil, but we have already covered that ground...

DB: How do you feel about the term 'avant-garde'? Where does it place the avant-garde filmmaker; why is there such a distinction and what purpose does it serve?

AR: I use the term avant-garde instead of experimental because I think it better identifies the kind of cinema that I refer to (the political, the transformational, the artistic, and those historically linked to the other avant-gardes); I don't believe it is 'dead' (Kramer) or has outlived its usefulness in shaking up the status quo. If ever there was a time where shaking up is necessary it is now, in the age of mass communication, mass propaganda, mass conformist lifestyles, an age that is dangerously close to a holocaust...An art for this age is an art that responds, in part or in toto, or is at least conscious of the context, to these world-wide issues. 'Experimental' to me connotes apolitical isolation, applied work.

Peter Lipskis, some time ago, sent me a xerox of an article on the avant-garde, titled 'Vicissitudes of the Avant-Garde' by William Gass. It provoked more than a few thoughts, memories and more than idle curiosity on my part as I thought once again about the 'experimental film scene' in search of its 'avant-garde' be it in Canada or elsewhere. 'Avant-gardes are fragile affairs ', he writes. 'The moment they become established, they cease to be – success as well as failure finishes them off'. I have said many times that there are MANY avant-gardes in film, and all have been specific to a particular epoch whether it be the 20's in France or Russia or the 60's in the US, Canada, etc. The 60's avant-gardes are largely dead, exhausted and the various perpetrators have either abandoned film, settled into university teaching positions or changed over to other filmic endeavours (commercial, documentary, video or new avant-gardes). Those that hang on to the past must necessarily do so in a Conservative environment (the art gallery, museum, university, library); it is rare to see someone from the 60's still practicing their avant-gardism intact today. Rare, but not impossible, as Brakhage and others of his ilk will remind us.

To succeed in maintaining a backward looking view on culture (a romanticism of past dimensions), requires a legion of like-minded and reflationary critics, historians to constantly reinsert this past into the present with a force that many of us would rightly identify with academia and its 'conserving' interests. This is why historicizing arguments which proceed from a paradigm (modernism, postmodernism, structuralism, idealism, etc.) occur in tandem with the re-presentation of the old, the dead, the expired. Even the speculators (of $) in art require a 'handle' on which to hang their inflated valuations of artists and art. More Gass: 'every effort to prolong an avant-garde beyond a certain point becomes suspicious' and he

further states that with regards an avant-garde which is anti-establishment (the avant-garde of refusal, the 'nod, 'society's methods of cooptation and disarmament will, in general, be effective; their (the artists) anger will be softened by success and their aims divided, their attentions distracted; the institutions set up by most Establishments, ever. If assaulted, will take longer dying than most avant-gardes can expect to live... ' I agree with these points, points which should be driven home, and hard, to the 'avant-garde panelists' which, by way of success, university appointments or by virtue of having been 'around the scene long enough to be successful namedroppers', arrogantly make pronouncements as to their 'present tense' views of 'what is happening now' in avant-garde cinema. As for those of us previously involved in refusal and counter-culture the options are clear: give up the past (the battles have been waged, whether they were won or lost!), be honest about the present ... and let us worry less about how the future will treat us, after all we know what happened to Vincent Van Gogh and our many friends...

(INSERT: I turn on the tube: Brian Wilson, burned out Beach boy mumbles something and calls himself an 'artist'; cut to his drugged-out producer who calls Brian a 'great artist'; cut to a blonde beach girl agent who describes Brian as a 'unique artist'; switch channels to MTV: the words 'artist', 'avant-garde', 'postmodern' ooze out from trendy British DJ's ... isn't culture anything you wanna call it? Make it up. Borrow, mix it al/, genre after genre... everyone 's doing 'it' and the terms are meaningless, blurred, trendy sales slips, and even academic conferences are organized around 'it' and 'what is happening now'... only now they term it 'the play of surfaces... in an endless propagation of Gass' final challenge to the avant-garde is interesting. In today's postmodern cultural circus he says "at the present time one can only practice silence, exile,

and cunning" and concludes "that now there is nothing that a group once honestly did... nevertheless, there is one thing... that throughout all common connivances cannot hang its head ... if painters refused to show, composers and poets to publish, and every dance were danced in the dark. That would be a worthy 'no'."

As far as my work is concerned, there is an early interest in pop-culture and political agitation (late 60's), non-oriental mysticism (alchemy) in the early 70's, hybrid media in the mid-70's, openly political and anarchist stratagems in the late-70's and early 80's, with a heightened dedication to political avant-garde practice in the current phase... 1 think it is important to see avant-garde film generally as occupying a relationship to the era and culture within which it exists and that each form of the 'avant-garde' is but a moment in a larger process of perceptual change and perpetual revolution which derives its legitimacy from engagement rather than fixity and essential qualities.

Amerika and the Destruction Aesthetic

by Eric Fergusson

Amerika, a major experimental film by Al Razutis, explores, dissects, and challenges western mass-media and the culture which surrounds it. *Amerika* also aims to challenge and ultimately undermine the perceptual habits of its own audience and, at least ideally, the audience of mass-media. *Amerika* 's methods are diverse and the issues it addresses are often complex. Nevertheless, its many elements tend to converge on a central idea: the notion of destruction. At times the destruction seems nihilistic, but there is method to *Amerika's* apparent madness. Destruction is used here as a solution to or cure for a condition of accelerating social decline - a way of cleaning the system, but with corrosive cleanser. *Amerika* proposes to fight fire with fire. Images and other elements are borrowed from mass-media sources and then re-contextualized to expose and destroy the thought systems which they create and perpetuate. The apparatus of mass-media is used to similar ends by expanding its technical applications well beyond those found in the popular arena. The section titled *Exiles* concludes with an image which to my mind is the perfect abbreviation for the film - an axe buried in the screen of a television set. The television is a media-saturated culture gone insane, and *Amerlka* is the medicinal axe.

Amerlka 's assault takes many forms. There are 17 distinct, separately titled sections in the film, and some of these *(Refrain/*983 *KHz (Bridge At Electrical Storm),* and The *Wiidwest Show*) are themselves segmented and then presented as independent sections. Two of the first three sections and implicitly the fourth end with atomic bomb explosions - and the image of a mushroom cloud. As tempting as it is to interpret this gesture as some sort of statement against war or nuclear weapons, this interpretation - with the possible exception of its use in *Atomic Gardening* - is really only of peripheral importance in *Amerika*. The explosions function here as a series of cataclysms - indeed apocalypses. Their inclusion has the feeling of both social prophecy and prescription.

The implications of the apocalypse in the film's first section, The *Cities Of Eden*, are most intriguing. Placed where it is, apocalypse represents a Fall from Eden and, by extension, the loss of innocence. But what is Eden, and what sort of innocence are we concerned with here? The early twentieth century society alluded to is no paradise, and its people are not entirely innocent - they are slowly managing to get their machines to work and they are marching in large numbers towards universal suffrage. However, in historical terms, this society is at the threshold of an era which it cannot yet comprehend - an era which subsists on its ever-advancing technologies. Perhaps technology is the impetus for the crisis towards which the section builds, and the Fall from Eden is the acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil about that technology and the world that it would shape. By destroying Eden, perhaps *Amerika* is rejecting the innocence of the pre-technology-, and particularly the pre-mass-media-world view. In addition to being a historical predecessor to the society dealt with in the rest of *Amerika,* Eden is a parallel world with its own wars, amusements, and discontents. In a sense it offers an encapsulated view of the whole of *Amerika,* but from a distanced - historical- perspective. The destruction of Eden signals the destruction of our own Eden - the destruction of a more contemporary western civilization which is similarly unable to comprehend the dangers inherent in its own technological crisis: the advent of media technology. More than simply a historical preface, *The Cities Of Eden* functions as an omen predicting the impending and seemingly inevitable apocalypse that lurks over the remainder of the film.

In 983 *KHz (Bridge At Electrical Storm)* we see another sort of destructive tactic at work. In this case the image on the screen and our perceptions of that image are the subjects of our concern. As this section begins, we appear to be in a car driving over a suspension bridge. As time passes our view of the suspension bridge changes and the bridge itself appears to become electrically charged. Through most of the rest of this section we have the sensation of driving through a corridor of violently shifting patterns of light and sound towards another sort of apocalypse. At first, it is the bridge and the world around it being destroyed. However, we quickly become aware that what we are observing is not actually a bridge, but rather an image of a bridge - the colour filtering, the constant colour shifts, and the observable joins in the film quickly undermine any illusions of realism we may have had - and what is actually being destroyed is the clarity of the original image. It seems, then, that we are viewing an apocalypse of the image. This presents us with another problem: deciding whether we are really witnessing a dissolution or rather a metamorphosis of the image. Although it becomes less 'realistic', the image is clearly changing into a distinct visual entity with its own properties and features of interest for the viewer. More than anything else it is our perceptual and interpretative habits being attacked here. The cinematic vocabulary used and the perceptual and interpretative skills necessary to deal with this vocabulary lie outside the conventions of the dominant western media tradition. By creating this deviant visual and sonic environment, 93.8 *KHz (Bridge At Electrical Storm)* challenges its audience and provides an opportunity for liberation from the more confining perceptual habits that accompany the contemporary media experience. Again we see the film's apocalyptic stratagem - the destruction of one system of understanding by way of a violent act -leaving room for a second, broader vision.

A third sort of destruction in the work is the destruction of America itself, or more properly, the image of America presented by the media: an optimistic America filled with shiny glass skyscrapers, luxurious suburban estates, and beautiful people who lead interesting and exciting lives. Razutis' America is gloomy and desolate and full of signs of a civilization in decay. The ever-present graffiti chronicles the discontent of a desperate age along inner city streets and on the disintegrating walls of condemned buildings and houses. The glamour of Las Vegas is trivialized by our penetration into the city's motel rooms - brothels of 1V violence and pornography. Television is everywhere, inescapable, and relentless in its sexism, its violence, and its manipulations. And what of the inhabitants of this wasteland, what are they like? In *Refrain,* we see a confused media-saturated clown. In *The Lonesome*

Death of Leroy Brown (2nd half) we see a violent and obsessive beer-swigging, gun-swinging, iron-pumping thug who gets a disturbing sort of satisfaction – seemingly sexual - while watching a repeated sequence of violence on a television. The only sane people here are the dissidents - the discontented intelligentsia armed with spray paint. According to *Amerika,* the collapse of western civilization is not only inevitable, it is at hand.

Despite *Amerika* 's prevailing pessimism, it appears there is light at the end of this tunnel: "and then we shall start anew ...East of Eden." This statement appears as a caption at the end of *The Cities Of Eden*- the beginning of the film - and is echoed at the very end of the film. Clearly there is an underlying concern in *Amerika* for what will happen after the destruction - beyond the apocalypse. The destruction does indeed seem to be a prelude to the creation of something new. Although this in itself shows a certain optimism, the film reneges on the details of this new start. Considering how intent *Amerika* is on breaking down traditional systems of understanding, it is curious that the film is so reluctant to seize the opportunity to suggest alternatives. We are left to work this out on our own. Yet this apparent omission is itself an important component of *Amerika* 's methodology. Throughout the film we are challenged in this way - we are made to work for our answers- and almost always the answers themselves are elusive. In fact we are quite often faced with the problem of having to sort out or weave together a multiplicity of meanings in a given section. Ambiguities and complexities are created and then left unresolved. Predictably, as we learn in *Photo Spot,* the filmmaker himself - intent on being uncooperative when it comes to resolving the complications that exist in the film and the world to which the film alludes - he is certainly unwilling and perhaps unable to take us by the hand and show us an easily digested new set of truths. It is as though confusion has been introduced as a tool to bait us into thinking for ourselves.

The mechanics of *Amerika* 's presentation seem calculated throughout and we are persuaded that our interpretative efforts will be rewarded. Because so much information is missing, however, piecing together clear and complete interpretations without complications and contradictions is practically impossible. In addition to allowing for the coexistence of multiple meanings, this strategy enables *Amerika* to suggest certain relationships and make certain insinuations without allowing us to feel certain about the conclusions we reach. An elusive presentation in itself is of course nothing new for an experimental film. What is special here is the film's attempt to communicate what appears to be a vital political message. If the film does have a precise political message, and this is

certainly not clear, simpler and more easily digestible formats could have been used, thus greatly increasing the impact of the message. However, simplicity of presentation seems purposefully avoided. Wading through and sorting out the complexities is part of what the film is all about. *Amerika* seems to operate on the premise that the conclusions we reach are all the more valuable if there is a struggle in reaching them.

Atomic Gardening is a classic example of this sort of construction. In this section, we watch time-lapse sequences of simple forms of plant life growing out of panels of electronic circuitry marked "NATO" that have been

submerged in water. The soundtrack is made up of machinery sounds and voices. Some of the voices sound like they are from a military intercom while others appear to be explanations about the operations of various pieces of military equip ment. How do we make sense of these seemingly related but oddly juxtaposed elements? What possible relationship could there be between this plant growth and the military? A multitude of impressions come to mind. For example, on one level the plant growth might be a metaphor for a military build-up or expansionism that is threatening to engulf civilization. At times, the rapid growth we observe looks a bit like a mass launching of missiles or even a series of nuclear explosions. Is there a

pun here on the 'mushrooming' growth patterns we observe and a mushroom cloud - a recurring image in the film? Looked at in a different way the plant growth suggests weeds pushing up through the cracks of sidewalks - ie., plant life as an eroding force. However, is it our cities that are being eroded (by either a growing military presence or a creeping mass of nuclear fallout) or does the eroding circuitry panel in fact represent an eroding military technology? Perhaps we are witnessing the obsolescence of successive generations of

nuclear missile systems - the circuitry panels are indeed presented as castoffs, technology being dumped in the ocean. Rather than being weeds, perhaps the plant growth represents some sort of life force struggling with and engulfing the military *Atomic Gardening* is effective and satisfying precisely because it does not make its intentions clear. All of the interpretations suggested above have some merit although none of them on their own can explain the section fully.

Although we come away from the section with merely a series of impressions about the military presence in western civilization - interpretative fragments – in the process we have been challenged, forced to exercise our interpretative abilities. It is here that the section's greatest value lies. Unlike the products of television and popular cinema, where the thinking

is done for us, *Amerika* asks us to decide for ourselves what is important and how we should think about it is similarly concerned with challenging our ability to come to terms with a multitude of ideas, but here the challenge is taken one step further.

In addition to challenging our interpretative abilities, *(fin)-* attacks our capacity to gather and comprehend visual information. The three coinciding visual elements (the small frame within the parentheses, the faint larger image, and the moving subtitles in neon sign format at the bottom of the screen) compete for our attention and at any given time at least two of these elements are compelling. The visual conflicts created are both stimulating and overwhelming. For example, at the same time that the famous *Psycho* shower murder is displayed in small frame, the subtitles read, "Question: Did Lacan suck Freud's dead phallus so the village elders could masturbate to his older image … Answer: Hubris." Where do we focus our attention? Because of the pace of this sequence, juggling these two elements is practically impossible, but because of the striking nature of the material used we are persuaded to give it a try. In addition to the visual onslaught there are other broader questions raised which further complicate our efforts. In general is it text or image that win our interest? How do our preconceptions about the content of images and the text affect our impressions? What are the relationships between the elements presented, if any, and how do the contents of the elements relate to the motives of this section and the film as a whole? The pace throughout the section is uniformly brisk and we cannot hope to unravel even a fraction of the intricacies of this visual and intellectual labyrinth. Here again the *struggle* to comprehend is of prime importance. Yet *(Fin)-* is more than an exercise, it is a demonstration of the operations of our own information gathering and assimilating facilities, the self-probing we are pressured into elsewhere in *Amerika* .

Throughout the film there is a fundamental mistrust of the influence of our perceptual processes on the content of our thought - a mistrust of how we *see* and think in arriving at what we think we've seen. *Amerika* provides an opportunity for us to expose the workings of our perceptual processes and in so doing encourages an attitude of skepticism towards information received through these processes. *Amerika* is not only an attack on western culture and the social and political apparatuses which sustain it, it is also an attack aimed at the pliant mental process which perpetuates the status quo.

Much of the America we encounter in the film is seen from its streets and highways. In *Motel Row* (parts 1 and 2),983 *KHz*

(Bridge At Electrical Storm), The *Wasteland And Other Stories,* and The *Lonesome Death Of Leroy Brown,* we are on journeys of discovery, exploring numerous features of America's physical as well as cultural landscape. Of these, *The Lonesome Death Of Leroy Brown* is the most far-reaching in its aspirations. A closer look at this section reveals its structure, the insinuations it makes about its audience, and the conditions faced by women in the shadow of mass-media. On our journey from Vancouver to New York City we *see* America through alternating shots from the right and left sides of cars and trains. Despite the changing landscape, we quickly develop an expectation for a structural materialist film- on a superficial level there are
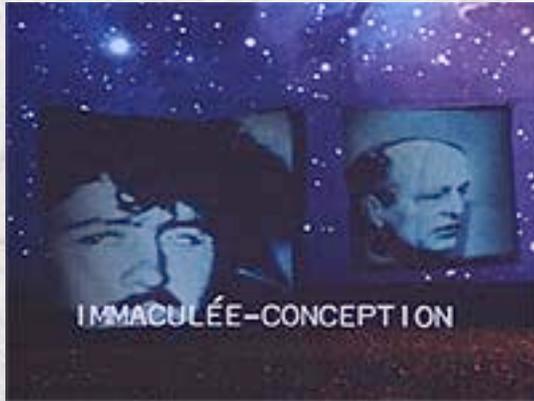
similarities with parts of Snow's *Standard Time,* and Rimmer's *Canadian Pacific.* However, as our journey progresses this expectation is undermined. In Detroit the man in the trench coat from *Exiles* is reintroduced in several shots and by the time we reach New York other familiar features from elsewhere in the film have reemerged. When we finally zero in on the woman character from *Exiles,* the structural/materialist aspect of the section breaks down completely. The development here is interesting not only for its manipulations of form and our expectations about form but also for what it suggests about the historical progression of the experimental film tradition. The structural/materialist concerns break down

seemingly because of the introduction of the politically charged fragments from elsewhere in the film - the film an no longer withstand the intrusion of the political concerns and it breaks under pressure. Clearly the suggestion is that the structural/materialist film had to give way to a more politically vibrant cinema, and indeed for the remainder of the section the political concerns are paramount.

When watching the short segment where the camera pursues the woman, we carry with us a number of important impressions from elsewhere in the film. These impressions shape for us the impact of this segment. As the camera follows its subject it starts literally shooting

snap shots. The woman's space has been violated and she has become an unwilling participant in a voyeur's photo session. Without a doubt we sense a male presence behind the camera. The persistent camera threatens to corner the woman and transform her into one of the media icons we encounter in *A Message From Our Sponsor.* As in *A Message From Our Sponsor,* the camera scrutinizes its female subject - it watches, chases, and fetishizes. The camera robs her of her 'self - she becomes a victim of the apparatus of mass media. In a similar way we are reminded of the treatment of the images of women in *Motel Row* (part 2), where the images respond in accordance to men's sexual desires. Will she

undress for the camera here as the women do in *Motel Row* , or indeed as she did herself in *Exiles? (fin* demonstrates that the popular cinema is no less guilty of victimizing its female subjects. In selections borrowed from *Psycho, Repulsion,* and The *Night Of the Living Dead* , women are murdered, molested, and eaten. When the car begins to chase the woman near the end of the sequence in The *Lonesome Death Of Leroy Brown,* we are particularly reminded of the short part of *Refrain* before The *Wasteland And Other Stories* where a woman is forced into a car on the remote highway. With these images in mind we understand the motivations behind the movements of that threatening camera. We also understand the apprehension the woman is


experiencing. We are shown in *Amerika* what a powerful instrument the camera is for exploiting, reducing, and controlling women, and all seemingly for the benefit of that presence behind the camera. In the first part of The *Lonesome Death Of Leroy Brown* we get a vivid account of this horrifying presence on the make. The "horrifying" presence" behind the camera is of course the film's own audience, and in effect, you and me. It is we who are intrigued by the drama before us, and thirsty for it to continue. In *Refrain,* and especially here in The *Lonesome Death Of Leroy Brown, Amerika* is insidious in its criticisms of its audience, and by implication the audience of mass-media.

In *Refrain,* we watch ourselves watching *Amerika* - we are both frightening and frightened, as well as characterless and confused. In the second part of The *Lonesome Death Of Leroy Brown* we come face to face with one vision of the presence behind the camera (ourselves still?) - and what a truly horrifying presence it is. A man, his face obscured by a nylon mask, points the camera about the room simultaneously controlling and controlled by the images in his narrow world. He is suicidal, but interestingly he is torn between shooting

AMERIKA 1972 - 1983   A. Razutis

himself directly and shooting the camera and in effect us - the audience which he represents. Significantly he is captivated by a television sequence which repeats endlessly. Like the stagnant product so relished by popular culture, this redundancy marks each successive turn in the whirlpool descent towards self-destruction. This section has a curiously Marxist flavour but with some interesting deviations. Media - a proxy for Marx's vision of capitalism - increasingly feeds on and oppresses its co-opted participants and its audience - i.e . the proletariat. In both parts of this section the events build to inevitable crisis points, crises that are answered by violence from the victims of the oppression. However, in *Amerika* simple solutions are avoided with a vengeance and, predictably, we are not indulged with a happy ending. *Amerika's* politics favour revolution - a social apocalypse - but resist any sort of romantic Marxist vision

concerning post -revolutionary society. The Marxist formula is thus incomplete. Yet this gap is consistent with structures found elsewhere in the film and in the film as a whole: we are taken to the dawn of a new social era here, as we are taken just beyond the gates of Eden, to only the threshold of a post-apocalyptic world. In contrast to both Marxist theory and Christian mythology concerning the apocalypse, *Amerika* offers no guarantee of a post-revolutionary, post-apocalyptic utopia for either the chosen social classes or the blessed. Appropriately, revolution itself is viewed with a certain tentativeness.

In the first part of *The Lonesome Death Leroy Brown* , the violence is at best only a qualified success: although the camera no longer follows its subject, it still 'sees', the woman is still on the run, and the horrifying presence spills over into the second part with a new intensity. In the second part the violence is again somewhat of a failure because the suicidal figure remains alive afterwards. Just like the recurring violent

drama on this figure's television, it remains possible that this story will repeat itself endlessly without effecting any sort of real change. In *Amerika,* Razutis offers a vision of a society racing towards self-destruction. Its destruction aesthetic is directed at exposing defects in the complex fabric of western culture. In *Amerika,* nothing is sacred, especially the thought patterns and perceptual habits of its own audience - principal villains in perpetuating the apparatus that is instigating social decline. Our challenge is to reject our Edens and the security and comfort of complacency. Our slates are cleaned - our minds are sharpened and our senses intensified - so that our thoughts become ours to control and not media pre-determined, so that we might" ... start anew ... east of Eden."
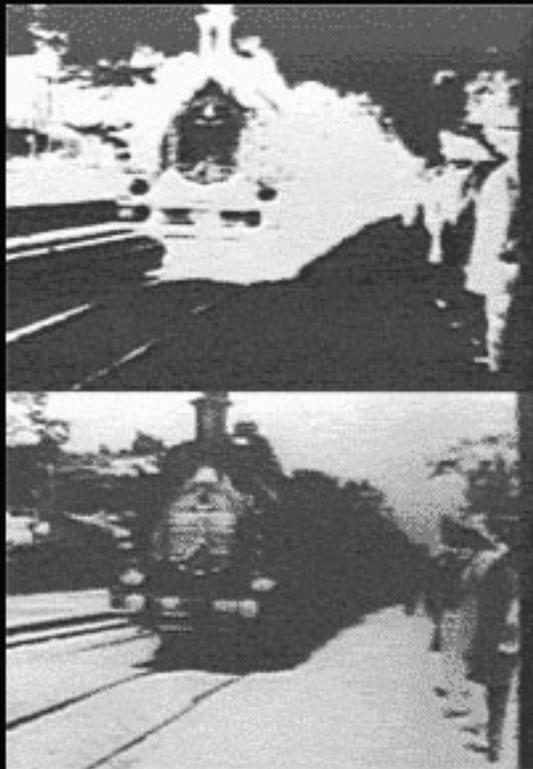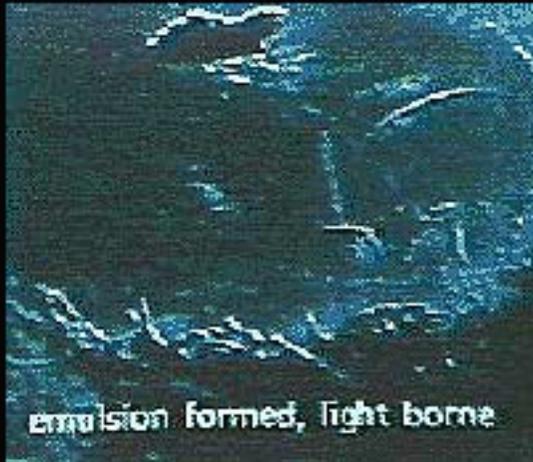
emulsion formed, light borne

The Films of Al Razutis

by Mike Hoolboom

Al Razutis is a Canadian iconoclast, an artist who was instrumental in the formation of two west coast film distributors, a short lived union of Canadian film artists, a production co-op, separate magazines on fringe film and holography and a much publicized battle with Ontario's board of film censors. Along the way he taught media production at the Banff School of Fine Arts, the Vancouver School of Art, Evergreen State College and Vancouver's Simon Fraser University for a dozen years. He has completed some forty odd films and videos alongside various performances, paintings, holograms and intermedia productions. While he has worked hard over the years to secure an institutional base for all aspects of fringe cinema, he is better remembered for his anti-institutional rants. Over and over he has published angry missives against the press, government, art bureaucrats and other artists - decrying in unflinching language the (perceived) abuses of power and privilege. A self-appointed moral standard bearer, Razutis has done much to politicize and galvanize the possibilities of a Canadian avant garde.

Born in Germany in 1946, Razutis studied chemistry and physics at California Western University and did post-graduate work at the University of California, Davis. After dropping out of university he began screening and producing avant garde films in 1967. Shortly afterwards he moved to Vancouver and ran film shows at the Intermedia Artists Co-operative. Razutis' earliest film work is *2 X 2* (17 min 1967) - a double-screen confabulation whose original elements were sold and subsequently lost. Taking parts of this film, Razutis later made a single-screen version entitled *Inauguration*. A frank celebration of 60s counterculture, it reveals a domestic interlude of communal consciousness, transported from the commonplace through good drugs and collage. Awash in a luxuriant sensuality and informed by Jung's archetypal symbology,

Inauguration simulates the drug state with a multilayered superimposition driven by an electronically processed version of Velvet Underground's *Heroin.* It shows day trippers woven into pictures of an upset social order - riot police and marchers, soldiers and martialling arms in foreign lands - as the counterculture trappings of drugs, sex and music join their anti-authoritarian counterparts on the street. Later, Inauguration, fragments of *2 X 2*, and additional footage were collaged together to make *1967-1969*. The new film is a sixties time capsule that draws together images of war and pornography as a reflection on a social order gone wrong. It pits the administration of consent against a hedonistic and personal despair, its drug-addled protagonists lost in a sensorium of fleeting impressions. Cast on two screens set inside a single frame, *1967-1969*'s binary oppositions energetically replay the personal/political dynamics of a society in upheaval.
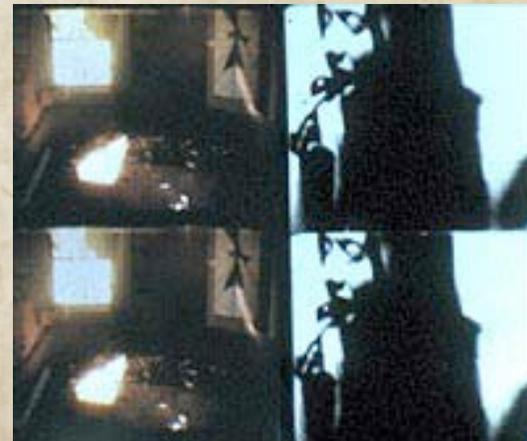
Sircus Show Fyre (7 minutes 1968) is a hypnagogic circus trip – reinventing three-ring conventions according to a childhood imagination. Forced to photograph from ringside, Razutis lends a gestural cadence to his subject, adding layers of superimposition, freeze frames and dissolves through rephotography. His project is a romantic one – the redemption of a childhood vision covered over in subsequent years with an education that destroys this early and innocent sensory revelation through naming and the habits of vision. *Sircus* embraces this romantic ideology, reshaping the circus according to a childhood calling, reinventing vision in a quest for primary consciousness.

Poem: Elegy for Rose (4 minutes 1968) concerns an American sex worker (Rose), photographed at night in a blurry cluster of tenements and high rises. Razutis scrawls a black marker poem over the image, though it can only be read by taking the film out of the projector and examining it by hand. Twenty years ago the filmmaker described it as "filmically, glimpses into the world of a hooker (filmed in s.f. chinatown) and streams of hieroglyph intestinal words - the poem written transversely across the film — lines forming words disintegrating ink textures sometimes recognizable and the intrinsic rhythm of strain-thought. Text: metaphorical poem (which can only be read by TOUCHING the film and READING words on celluloid tape transversely) and it is an elegy for Rose: streetwalker… sound six layers of electronic music and sound poems (the poem read) amidst eerie insanity of a child's laughter assassinated by lies." *Poem* is a kind of anti-film, serving notice of film's double status - as an object in the act of its making and handling, and as a process in the act of projection. The words pass through the projector gate like strangers past a car window - and Razutis insists that if we hope to find out more about our subject, we have to get out of the car. The artist's cinematic scribbling replaces the voyeurism of film with a personal notation, drawing the viewer away from the body of the audience in order to engage experiences that can only be understood alone.

*Black Angel Flag... Ea*t (17 minutes silent 1968) is a film which begins with a long stretch of darkness inside which pictures occasionally appear. They alternately show a woman walking through a set undergoing construction, and television excerpts. Audience upsets led the filmmaker to destroy the film.

The collapse of Intermedia sent Razutis into a wandering tail-spin. He had begun regular avant movie screenings there, and there was a modest equipment cache and a budding distribution effort. For two years he scrambled to pay the rent until a job offer arrived out of the blue from Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Evergreen had a vast array of new colour video processing facilities, far outstripping the black and white possibilities which remained the cutting edge in Vancouver's video scene. Working with a feverish intensity, he produced half a dozen film/video hybrids which he claimed would visualize the inner workings of the mind. These films include *Aurora*, *Watercolour/Abstract*, *Synchronicity*, *Software*, *Vortex*, *Aaeon* and *Fyreworks*. Each of these six films began with film imagery which was transferred to tape, manipulated using a video synthesizer or optical printer, then transferred back to film.

Vortex (12 minutes 1973) enacts a virtuosic display of electronic effects and video synthesis which draws together a starry outer space world with the interior space of the machine. Founded on a succession of collapsing symmetries, the screen doubles and breaks insistently, misshapen heaps of colour turning as if in recoil from its likeness across the dividing line of this fearful symmetry. Twisting in a continual flux of engorged psychedelia, this unfolding phantasmagoria of multi-coloured spectacles is set to an electronic wash of pulsing modes and synthesizer jargon.

Aurora (4 minutes 1974) is a study in blue and orange. Begun with the quietly ebbing strains of a blue tear, a succession of fades pass these cool droplets from stage right to left. These blue remarks take on a prismatic edge before introducing an orange ground behind, simmering, as if it were the source of the image, the sun of this two-headed constellation. Blue shades drift across the screen's surface,

gathering in a slow swell that fills the frame, turning it into a blue sigh that slowly undulates before parting again to reveal its origins in fire.

Owing to the nature of the video synthesizer most of these films possess a theme and variation structure, a single image cycles while shifts in colour, contrast and motion are introduced. All of this work is abstract, psychedelic patterns and space age mantras emerge, electronically circling the deliriously tinted palette. Is it technological narcissism if the machine produces images of itself — or are these experiments a harbinger of things to come, a foresight into the cross currents of that synaptical reality which fires across the brain

A year later, in 1973, Razutis left Evergreen College and returned to Vancouver where he set up an interdisciplinary studio called Visual Alchemy. There he began work on holograms, video synthesis and a new series of films. Acquiring a vast array of equipment, Using a battery of image-manipulating machines, Razutis set to work with characteristic intensity, churning film after film out of his sheltered enclave. *Le Voyage* (8 minutes 1973) turns around the repeating figure of a storm tossed ship. Appearing intermittently between lengths of black leader, it flashes onscreen as if illuminated by the fork lightning which rages overhead. Optically refigured through rephotography, the distorted palette of this ghost ship shimmers in the darkness, its ancient hulk appearing like a recurring nightmare. Owing to the film's disjunctive rhythms of blankness and stormy passage, *Le Voyage* recalls an upset mind's obsession, trying to put to rest the memory of an unforgiven moment.

Visual Alchemy (8 minutes 1973) animates the image and apparatus of several still-life holograms. Begun with a series of snap zooms that convert the vanishing point into lines of attention, each of Visual Alchemy's camera moves is designed to move its subject from one angle to the next, turning over the facets of a three-dimensional concern. Skimming over the red lamp of the laser, the camera dances between the rouged stares of these pictures, always seeking out new perspectives from which to glimpse the workings of the machine. Finally, the holograms themselves are revealed as simple geometrical shapes informed by opposing lasers. The filmmaker's hand appears outstretched in the foreground as if it were supporting this collection of dice and octagons. The soundtrack's low hum is filled with murmurs, as if it, too, were busy keeping a secret.

Moon at Evernight (9 minutes 1974) is a cyclical loop whose theme and variation structure echo the obsessive recall of some nigh time visitation. Like much of his work from this period, *Moon* emerges from a black ground, hallucinogenic figures erupt from darkly silent stretches. The images have been transformed through rephotography, the saturated and contrasty colours lending its subject a frankly abstract expression. Emerging from a scrum of tape effects, the filmmaker's breathy whisper evokes the 'riders of the night,' cast here beneath a moon of perpetual return, its colourized moments of annunciation strewn between the lapses of a dreamer's sleep.

Portrait (8 minutes 1976) offers a reworked home movie fragment. Begun with an 8mm clip of his young daughter walking through a doorway, Razutis journeys into the surface of the image, magnifying its grain until the film materials are equivalent to the film's subject. Figure and ground collapse, instead of the eye being able to organize space around a figure, attention is dispersed across a field of grain as the filmmaker attempts to see this child as she would see

herself. The rephotography camera creates gestural scans inside the surface of the picture which the filmmaker uses to mime the rapid movements of the eye as it scans an object, gathering up moments and accumulating them only in memory, always refusing wholeness and unity.

By 1977, having completed a solo show of holography and a new suite of film and film/video hybrids, the exhausted Razutis sold all his equipment and left North America. He journeyed to Samoa where he taught math for a year. Once again a call arrived out of the blue - this time a job offer from Simon Fraser University. In 1978 he travelled back to Vancouver to establish a film program that would blend ideological critique with formal innovation. In the next ten years he would forge a new body of work remarkably different from the self-enclosed, mythopoeic, musically structured studies of the early seventies. He began to take aim at the media, assuming a more overtly political stance towards his own images and the images that surrounded him. Using technologies of copying and retrieval, he would borrow from film after film, panning through the archives for images that could be used against to protest corporate culture. While he continued to employ an optical printer, his picture transformations were made not simply to further aestheticize them, but to wrench them from their original context and put them in service of an argument. It is a project of deconstruction which Razutis furiously sets upon throughout the 1980s. With characteristic obsession, and a boundless capacity for work, he set about making two collections of film which remain among the most enduring expressions of the Canadian fringe: *Visual Essays* and *Amerika*.

Visual Essays: Origins of Film (68 minutes, 1973-1984) is a collection of six shorts comprised entirely of "found footage." Each work takes up a figure from film's history and reinterpets their original footage using a dominant formal trope. In taking up this old footage, Razutis does not simply copy film for his own purposes, but transforms it formally, lending each of these six "essays" a particular look which is both an organizing principle and the film's central metaphor.

"In 1970, I began to collect films (and extracts) which I believed would soon 'vanish' from contemporary, historical and cultural discourse. These films reproduced work by Lumiére, Méliès, Dulac, Deren, Richter, Cohl, Gance, Bunuel, Griffith, etc. I collected prints that became the source of an 'underground' (i.e. non-commercial) memory bank that was featured in screenings and exchanges. Much of the library dealt with phantasmagoric, dream-like, expressionistic film, and also included the horror genre. In 1973, selecting from a wide range of shorts by Méliès, I undertook to 'represent' this work in an interpretive form: as 'visual essay.' And, rather than resorting to the usual process of 'writing about' the work, I incorporated the work itself (as pro-filmic facts) within the discourse. These essays would be typified by chosen modes of 'framing' (as formal design) and proceed via contextualization and interpretation... In overview, I thought it necessary to engage the original film texts by creating a process of 'discovery' wherein the viewer could partake in the 'myths of creation' without being encumbered by the full questions of ideological significance, historical placement, and authorship. Thus, the focus of these essays is on the nature of the cinematic apparatus as specifically represented in the original works, and its abilities to engender both regression and synchronicity. The original texts would be 'violated,' but with the purpose of gaining understanding. (Al Razutis, Visual Essays)

The series opens with a riff on the first film ever shown, and likewise adapts its name, *Lumiére's Train (Arriving at the Station)* (9 minutes b/w 1979). Razutis returns to the first film as a container for all of the films that would come, as if were a fingerprint that would be laid down on all that would follow. Quickly alternating shots between positive and negative reshape the original into a locomotive charge, but while the original showed a single shot of a train arriving in a station (enough to terrify some early audiences), Razutis ups the spectacle ante as audiences grow increasingly accustomed and innured to cinema's simpler pleasures. The first train is quickly met by new cinema trains, all heading towards each other in a series of collisions which demonstrate the requirements of spectacle.

The next two films concern George Méliès. The first is a catalogue of techniques, a kind of avant garde trailer entitled *Méliès Catalogue* (8 minutes silent 1973). The second, *Sequels in Transfigured Time*, (12 minutes silent 1976) takes a more reviews Méliès work with an aim to reveal the cine-rhetoric at work, to show the magician's secrets. A series of freeze frames and slow motion replays take the viewer 'backstage,' unveiling Méliès' milieu as a construction site. Sandwiching high contrast negative stock with colour positive, reduces the original pictures to a series of line drawings. The film opens with a series of abstract lines which accelerating freeze frames bring into normative movement and colour. The transformation of these flattened drawings into the representation of life reveals the creation of narrative cinema.

As a fantastical montage of night flights and disappearances, creature comforts and galactical backdrops float past, the filmmaker recites: "This then, an elegy for Méliès... Having created films terrestrial, aerial, aquatic, and igneous ... all hieroglyph and metaglyph, emulsion formed, light borne... Having created this, a grand full moon hotel... like tapestry of magic, metaphor and farce... each room, each night these spirits, telescopes, seashells, acrobats and temptresses... fantastic machines, disembodied heads, crazed gods, and quick change artists... chameleons in the guise of planets, and Méliès, the devil's own!... all coming, going... as expeditions to dream... Having created a stop-motion universe, inventing change within a pause... from omnibus to hearse, reapparitions formed... Magician! and mosaic extraordinary... Having created motion pictures as nothing less... Georges Méliès... ghost!" (spoken text from *Sequels in Transfigured Time*)

Al Razutis: *Sequels in Transfigured Time* works to interpret Méliès' mise-en-scene. I used a bipack technique - running a mid-contrast color stock with a high contrast black and white negative. Their slight off register reduces an image to its edges - so as the film begins you're looking at what seems like cave paintings, or stained glass, it's only lines. Then, out of that, you're encouraged to discover the mise-en-scene, and this happens as the freeze frames which begin

the film accelerate into motion, so the viewer can synthesize a landscape. Often the film will slow down to reveal Méliès' invisible cuts - where he turns an omnibus into a hearse or midgets turning into puffs of smoke. I wanted to show how he's making the transformations. There's a series of subtitles relating the elegy I wrote for Méliès… It closes with a passage where Méliès as a necromancer dances before a pyramid in order to raise a spirit from the dead. The spirit is conjured, growing finally into a twenty foot mass before leaving as I recite the elegy and the film ends."

Ghost: Image (12 minutes b/w 1976-79) is the only one of the essays which emerges from a tradition of filmmaking, as opposed to a single figure. It traces a legacy of work around the unconscious, at first articulated by the Dadaists and Surrealists, and eventually by the horror genre. The central formal trope is the mirror image - each image appears doubled, reversed, and flopped back onto its original. If the original film shows a single head turning from left to right, Razutis' mirror image shows two heads - each turning in opposite directions. This mirror image creates a space between the old image and the new, along the mid-seam of the picture. This new space is a dark interior in which the viewer is asked to read the designs of the unconscious. By inscribing a trajectory from avant-garde expression to mainstream teen fodder, Razutis suggests both a co-optation of marginal practice, as well as its conversion from a politics of liberation to sexual repression, from the Surrealist's exquisite corpse to a cinema founded on the threat of bodily mutilation and dismemberment.

For Artaud (10 minutes 1982) concerns a figure only peripherally involved in film history: Antonin Artaud. Author of *The Theatre and Its Double,* Artaud called for a sensory theatre of cruelty and outrage which would overthrow theatre's traditional reliance on narrative texts. Razutis takes images of Artaud from Dreyer's silent classic *Passion of Joan of Arc*. Begun with a photograph of Artaud which is drawn closer in a series of chained dissolves, the filmmaker moves into the eye of the dead poet before dissolving into a constellation of blue dots which dance across the screen. A cacophony of voices

ensues, their broken address rendered unsensical through electronic manipulation, their delivery matching the atomized constituents of a consciousness which has fragmented beyond recognition. Artaud spent the last years of his life in an asylum, and this film returns to him there, unable to image or imagine him as a unified speaker. Instead he is cast across a great expanse of television snow, conscious only of division and the impossibility of coherence. From this starry ground emerge the images from Dreyer's film - tormented faces shown in gestures of distress. As the sounds of an unchecked fire and organ music rise, Artaud embraces his own end and the voices fall quiet. The requiem is over.
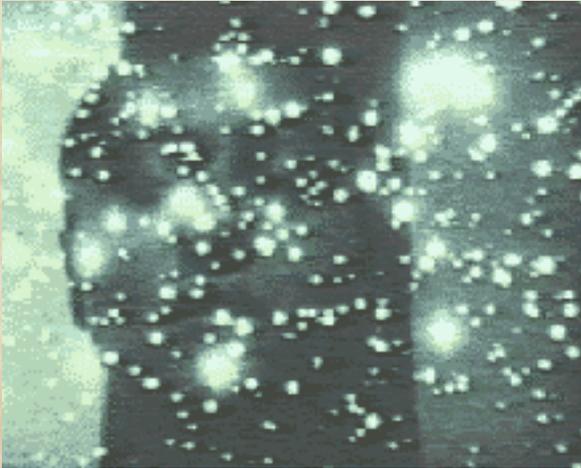
The last visual essay is also the longest. *Storming the Winter Palace* (16 minutes b/w 1984) researches the polemical cinema of Sergei Eisenstein, seeking a marriage of revolutionary form and revolutionary content. Moments of revolutionary struggle, as imaged by Eisenstein in his work, are slowed through step printing, highlighting the rhetoric at work. A voice-over written by Benjamin Buchloh and recited by the filmmaker overlays the image, its Marxist perspective attempting to account for a cinema of resistance.

As a group of films, *Visual Essays* has less to do with an academic understanding than a poetic rendering of homages and influences. If its formal devices are aimed at sometimes polemical ends, its surfaces are awash in a luxuriant silver sheen, even as the brisk montage performs an eccentric archaeology of early cinema. From the harbinger of spectacle warnings in Lumiére's Train to the state-endorsed dialectics of Eisenstein, Razutis reviews his subject with a keen visual wit and intelligence. Visual Essays forges unmistakable links between avant gardes past and present, bearing the dead as a sign of mourning, continuity and renewal.

Razutis' crowning achievement took him eleven years and eighteen films to complete. Taken altogether, these eighteen films make up *Amerika* (170 min 1972-83) one of the great achievements of the fringe. The filmmaker describes it this way: "A feature-length experimental film which was created one reel at a time to function as a mosaic that expresses the various sensations, myths, landscapes of the industrialized Western culture… The predominant characteristic of the entire film is that it draws from existing stock-footage archives, the iconography and 'memory bank' of a media-excessive culture, to locate its 'subject'." (Al Razutis)

Amerika is constructed on three one-hour reels, each roughly corresponding to the 60s, 70s and 80s. Its biblical imperatives cast America as a militarized wasteland of empty highways and motels, underpinned by corporate pictures which produce a numbed simalacrum. The lonely inhabitants, spaypainters, homeless and disenfranchised, are murdered or left to wander without direction. Razutis paints Amerika as a patriarchy held in the thrall of its technology, its atomic science learned as a metaphor for more personal relations.

Al Razutis: "*The Cities of Eden* is the first of the 18 films that make up Amerika. All of its images derive from the 1895-1905 period, and its formal treatment echoes the disintegration of the nitrate stock employed in this work. I used a bas relief effect to amplify the fragility of the medium, its tentative beginnings. It closes with the woman

from the Paramount logo which dissolves into an atomic explosion, the first of many 'endings' evoked in *Amerika*. After this annihilation the second film begins, as if attempting to begin again, to create something out of nothing."

Amerika opens with an evocation of cinema's beginnings, reviewed in a bas-relief, mock ethnographic study detailing the parades and amusements of a century ago, now renamed *The Cities of Eden*. This Eden is set in the infancy of the machine age, where a new middle class avails itself of a scientific positivism, each mechanical stride drawing nearer to a last inventive stroke: the creation of heaven itself. The technocratic march continues of its own accord, shedding any pretense of serving any end but its own will to efficiency, arriving at a conclusion which is both inevitable and tragic: an atomic explosion. The 'new beginning' heralded by the bomb inaugurates the film's technological swoon in *Software*, and then *Vortex*, the second and third of Amerika's 18 parts, which show a city re-formed via video synthesis, turning into an immense psychedelic display of swelling colours and lights. A further evocation of the apocalypse ensues in Atomic Gardening. As a series of submerged plants growing with time lapsed abandon, the soundtrack is filled with NASA chatter as another bomb is put through its test paces.

98.3 KHz: Bridge at Electrical Storm follows, the first of *Amerika*'s many road films. A furious structural exercise undertaken with an exquisite rigour, Razutis subjects an 8mm trip across San Francisco's Bay Bridge to a virtuosic optical treatment. Layer after layer of colours pass over the bridge producing a fantastical electrical storm while thunderclaps and a fragmented radio chatter passes through the speakers. In the words of the filmmaker, *Bridge*'s techno-apocalypse provides a 'spatial image of the transition from an industrial society linked by transport to a post-industrial society linked by communications. In terms of human perception, a transition from linear, materialistic and concrete modes to simultaneous, surrounding, more abstract representations (the electronic media).'

The second of three *Motel* films ensues. While the first pictures an abandoned house whose remains are filled with a random graffiti chatter, the second cruises the neon horizons of Reno, Nevada. Intercut with tracking shots through the nighttime streets of the city are motel interiors, empty save for the interminable glare of the television. The filmmaker has matted in a number of images which show pornography, commercials and sitcom violence - by now the established staples of the vulgar society of spectacle which Amerika has become.

After a reprise of *Bridge at Electrical Storm*, Razutis hurls himself into the televisual vortex with two films that remain his most controversial to date. *The Wildwest Show* shows a number of night time cityscapes, but in place of billboards Razutis has matted in a number of images which offer a game show theme. As a succession of atrocity images ensue, contestants are asked to indicate whether the images are true or false. As the execution of political prisoners gives way to western shoot-outs and the concentration camp murders of the Nazis, the filmmaker indicts the ahistoricizing fictions of the media, as well as its insatiable appetite for spectacle and excess. He follows up with *A Message From Our Sponsor*, a nine minute collage of commercials which are deconstructed to reveal their hidden sexual content.

Al Razutis: "I shot a number of cityscapes, blacked out the billboards and inserted pieces of found footage. So as we see cars passing through the streets, images of destruction are playing overhead. The images follow from a game show in which the contestants are asked whether what they're watching is true or false. The game show, like the media cauldron that follows, all appear in the billboards. Most of the images presented are violent - and they're asked whether this war footage, atrocities, the Vietnam protestor going up in flames, the concentration camp victims are real or not. The film conflates fiction and documentary footage, sometimes in appalling ways. One sequence comes from a John Berger documentary which purports to show a man being executed. But looking closely you can tell there's no bullets in the guns - so they've faked the whole thing for the movie. On the soundtrack I cut a line in from the game show which says, 'All of these people are actors'. In *The Wildwest Show*, none of the cars pay any attention to the images they're passing, as horrific as they are. So images that would normally occupy our attention have become commonplace. I matted all of the images into billboards because I wanted to suggest the replacement of landscape with mediascape. It also extended my earlier practice of projecting into public spaces - we often went out and projected work on billboards and building fronts. The argument that *The Wildwest Show* sensationally obliterates the historical subject is exactly the point: that's what the film is about. In order to illustrate my purpose I've proceeded with such exaggeration and hyperbole that the viewer can't help but feel no sympathy for this process. It had to be presented as a case in the extreme. The viewer can't help but notice the disparity between sound and picture, fiction and documentary, to read the game show as an ironic ploy. The film's not proceeding as an analysis of these events and how they appear on television, it's dealing with our awareness or non of this media scape. Is it any more moral to ignore this train of images - the daily atrocity of the news for instance, or the late night movie? Mainstream media is constructed as a one way communication system and this was a way to talk back.

Halfway through this film it's interrupted by *A Message From Our Sponsor* which reworks a series of commercials to show the rhetorical strategies at work. It concentrates on the sexual subtext of the beauty industry, its privileging of style and surface - all of which takes us back to pornography and the objectification of women. The film mimes commercial rhetoric in a way that makes it intelligible and explicit for the viewer. When *The Wildwest Show* returns, having been interrupted by this long commercial, the host says: 'You've been a great audience, you've applauded just at the right time, you've laughed at the right time.' And now what do we do? We go on, right back into the destruction, it's fucking relentless. Television is our coliseum — we used to watch Christians fed to the lions — today we can watch 40,000 kids starve to death every day, or the latest blood letting in the Middle East. It trivializes morality or makes it impossible. And what are we doing about these images? Who's managing them and why? Well, after the [Canadian] censor board banned *Message* we knew who was managing the images. Obviously *The Wildwest Show* and *Message* are obscene films. But where is the obscenity - in the acts that were depicted? In their recording? Or their consuming?"

After deconstructing the media, the filmmaker takes himself apart in *Photo Spot*. Here he takes a number of phone calls from someone who poses alternately as a fan, critic, curator, and finally a psychoanalyst. Razutis' gruff outbursts are contradictory in the extreme, leaving *Amerika*'s viewer the task of negotiating authorship, of deciding who to believe and why.

The final reel opens with *Exiles*, a musical of sorts, where a young couple spray paint slogans on abandoned buildings. Another travel montage follows, joining passing cityscapes from east coast to west, before the car tracks a young woman who finally shoots out the windshield. In the most sustained dramatic sequence of the film, *The Lonesome Death of Leroy Brown*, the filmmaker returns with a stretch of pantyhose wrapped around his head, drinking and smoking with one hand while he lifts weights and gestures with a handgun with the other. While the radio offers a screaming Jimmy Swaggart, the television replays the death of an anonymous black man over and over. Finally Razutis turns to the camera and shoots out a plexiglass screen placed just before it, eradicating the point of view.

The closing two film segments function as epilogues that both reflect and repudiate what has already occurred. *Fin* is a kind of elegy for the mass media, its flashing images appearing in mirrored state while a scrawling electronic graffiti text reflects on *Amerika*'s making ('this film is about robbery - image robbery'), the vulgarity of America, film theorists ('Did Lacan suck Freud's dead phallus?') and a plaintive cry for the homeless. *Amerika* signs off with *O Kanada*, a closing brief which ensures that Canada is not left behind in this the evangelical uproar. While the Canadian national anthem stutters on the soundtrack, two flags planted on the moon carry images from the French separatist bombings in Quebec in the 1960s and the resultant police crackdown.

The period from 1978-87 completed another cycle for Razutis. His return to Vancouver renewed his engagement with organizations and with political and aesthetic questions. 1987 marked the beginnings of the Pacific Cine Centre, a government funded building that would house a production co-op (Cineworks), a distribution agency (Moving Pictures), and an exhibition space (Pacific Cinematheque). In the week long fete of inaugural celebrations Maria Insell and Elspeth Sage organized a conference on the avant-garde and invited a number of speakers including Razutis. He delivered a lecture via a ventriloquist's dummy, decrying the influence of psychoanalysis in film theory, and closed his address with declarations of avant-gardism. He concluded by scrawling "The Avant-garde spits in the face of institutional art" on the new screen of the Cinematheque, and then announced his resignation as tenured professor of film at Simon Fraser University. He sold much of his film equipment and left for Mexico with his third wife where he designed and built a home in the desert. He has not continued to work in film, video or holography, though his patterns of stopping and starting, of retreating from North America and its media production and then re-engaging, have remained steadfast for the past three decades. He is presently broke and unemployed, spending his spare weeks in Los Angeles where he does construction work under the table.
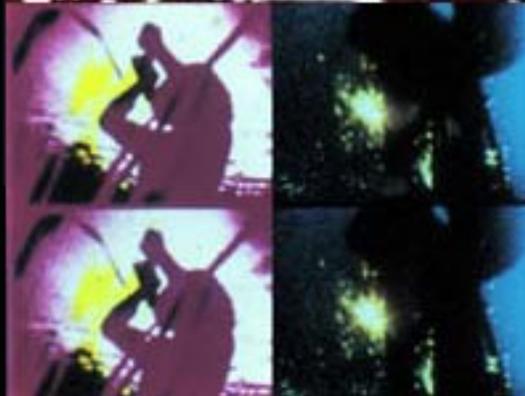
Between Agonism and the Autonomy of Art: The Case of Al Razutis

by William C. Wees

The Razutis phenomenon casts an interesting light on the status of avant-gardefilm today.1 By 'phenomenon,' I mean an amalgam of the man and his films, writings, mixed media presentations, and other public performances in which the central character has the large physique and high, husky voice of the person named Al Razutis, but is more appropriately thought of as a construction of textual extracts, rhetorical strategies, and symbolic gestures suited to the polemical needs of the moment.

Although Razutis has left Canada, where he lived from 1968 until last year, and has separated himself, at least temporarily, from the avant-garde film scene – he claims to be I Baja, California 'devoting his (full) attention to suring'2 – the Razutis phenomenon remains to be understood and correctly placed in the historical and cultural development of avant-garde art. That is what I will attempt to do here, and with the help of two theorists

of avant-garde art, Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger. Although Poggioli and Bürger have little in common as far as their premises and methodologies are concerned (except for their mutual lack of interest in film as a source of avant-garde art), both have proven useful in my own efforts to come to terms with the Razutis phenomenon. I refer specifically to Poggioli's formulation of an avant-garde frame of mind he calls 'agonism,' and Bürger's assessment of collage techniques as the avant-garde's most effective means of undermining the autonomy of art in bourgeois society. In the light of these two considerations, Razutis' accomplishments not only becomes clearer but more defensible than his detractors have been willing to admit.

Poggioli specifies four 'moments' in the psychology of avant-garde movements. The first is *activism*, 'a sportive enthusiasm' and fascination with action for its own sak. The second is *antagonism*, an oppositional stance and combative action directed against traditional aesthetics and social norms. The third is *nihilism*, the most destructive extreme of antagonism, neatly summed up in statements of two seminal figures in the history of the avant-garde. Mayakovsky: "I write nihil on anything that has been done before.' And Tristan Tzara: "There is a great, destructive, negative task to be done: sweeping up, cleaning out.'3 Finally there is *agonism*, the most complex, and, in the my view, the most interesting category of avant-garde attitudes, because it combines elements of the other three – activism, antagonism and nihilism – with a profound sense of alienation that arises

when '(a movement) no longer heeds the ruins and losses of others and ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition. It even welcomes and accepts this self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements.4

Formally, the agonistic moment is translated into what Foggioli calls 'the hyperbolic image,' a mode of expression revealing a Nietzchean 'will to transcend the human condition and the very limits of the real.'5 Hyperbole, in this sense, is not simply extreme exaggeration, but an attempt to express the inexpressible (reflecting the agonistic artist's struggle to attain the unattainable), and it places an unbearable strain on the coherence of the work of art. Poggioli treats Walt Whitman as exemplary of the hyperbolic in literature. A more contemporary example might be *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound. In their effort to recount, and account for, the history of Western culture, The *Cantos* finally break up on the rocks of Pound's outsized ambition. 'I cannot make it cohere,' Pound confessed in *Canto XCVI*. William Carlos Williams' *Patterson*, Charles Olson's *The Maximum Poems* and John Do Passos' sprawling *U.S.A.* trilogy offer similar, if less tragic, symptoms of incoherence. In this sense, incoherence does not mean meaninglessness or a lack of artistic merit, but simply a failure to achieve an organic unity in which all pars cohere into an

imaginatively graspable and intellectually satisfying whole. (By contrast, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Proust's *A La Recherche du temps perdu*e, and Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* might be examples of modern works on a gand scale that do cohere in the sense that I am proposing here.)

The major works of Pound, Williams, Olson, and Dos Passos not only offer examples of Poggioli's 'hyperbolic image,' but exemplify the collage techniques to which I will turn shortly. Before making that turn, however, I want to add another work to the list of hyperbolic texts, or in Bart Testa's apt phrase, 'epics of concatenation.' That work is, of course, Al Razutis' *Amerika* (1972-1983), which Testa compares unfavourably to Laurie Anderson's *United States* in an article published in C Magazine a few years ago.6

The hyperbolic quality of *Amerika* is indicated by its length and heterogeneity: a three-hour film composed of seventeen sections, most of which first appeared as separate films between 1972 and 1983 when Razutis cobbled them together into a single work of vast scope, mixed messages, and an overly ambitious program for the analysis and critique of capitalist, patriarchal, and media-saturated modern society. In calling *Amerika* 'a mosaic that expresses the various sensations, myths, landscapes of the industrialized

Western culture…'7, Razutis reveals his affinity with the grandiose projects of figures like Whitman, Dos Passos and Hart Crane (whose transcendent vision of America past and present, *The Bridge*, offers another example of agonistic hyperbole, as well as another use of collage techniques). Another relevant comment by Razutis appears on the soundtrack of the film itself. In the section called *Photo Spot* Razutis remarks, 'I'm working on a metaphor and the elements are not compatible.' To this equivalent of the Poundian disclaimer, 'I cannot make it cohere,' Bart Testa responds, 'This admission is all too true - the 'metaphor,' the structure, never gels, and that failure leaves only ugly petulance.'8

Setting aside the question of 'petulance' for a moment, I would propose that Amerika's 'failure' is built into its very conception as a 'mosaic' or 'metaphor' of incompatible elements, and that it might be viewed more generously as a demonstration of avant-garde agonism which 'welcomes and accepts (its) self-ruin' in order to pursue a self-imposed mission to expose and exorcise the corrupting influnces of modern culture. In fact, the agonism of *Amerika* approaches the extreme condition Poggioli describes as follows: '… avant-garde artist sometimes allowed themselves to be completely seduced by an agonism which was almost gratuitous, by a sense of sacrifice and a morbid taste for present suffering that was not conceived of as self-immolation on behalf of

future generations.'9 Confronted by a seemingly 'gratuitous' agonism in *Amerika*, unsympathetic viewers like Testa are inclined to treat the film as, at best, a re-hash of 1960s counter-culture critiques of dominant American culture, and at worst an audio-visual tantrum of inordinate length and unnecessary technical virtuosity. Such a response, I suggest, arises from the failure to appreciate the film's tumult of diverse sounds, images, visual styles, cinematic techniques, and rhetoricalgambits, as characteristic symptoms of avantgarde agonism and its penchant for the 'hypberbolic image.'

What Testa dismisses as Razutis' 'petulance' might be seen as the exasperation characteristic of many avant-garde artists who fear that their revolutionary message will fall on deaf ears and blind ears – not because people cannot hear or see, but because their senses have been numbed by habit, by the repetitiveness of everyday life, and most especially in our time, by the incessant stimulation and false gratification manufactured by the mass media. In addition to all this, the avant-garde artist is confronted with our culture's assumption that art is irrelevant to everyday life, that is in, in a word, autonomous.

At the level of theory, the basis for the autonomy of art can be found in Kant's propositions about art's 'purity,' its

total disengagement from practical concerns, be they commercial, ethical or religious. Art's glory is to be use-less in a world where everything else is put to some more or less practical use. At the level of production, Aestheticism, *l'art pour l'art*, most fully embodied this vision of art's autonomy. And at the level of the reception and consumption of art, the autonomy of art suited the evoloving structures of bourgeois society. As Petr Bürger puts it, 'The process by which the social subsystem 'art' evolves into a wholly distinct entity is part and parcel of the developmental logic of bourgeois society.'10 While art's status of autonomy keeps it 'pure,' it also effectively prevents art from influencing the way people live their lives, and indeed, the way they might change their lives – and society – for the better.

To undermine the autonomy of art was, in Bürgers view, the principal project of the avant-garde, and the principal formal technique for accomplishing that goal was what Bürger calls montage or collage, an sums up in the phrase 'the insertion of reality fragments in the work of art.' Here Bürger was following the lead of Thomas Adorno, for whom montage was the sine qua non of modern art. Ever since the beginning of modernism,' says Adorno, 'art has absorbed objects from outside, leaving them as they are without assimilating them (eg. Montage).'11 His model for montage was the papier collée of early cubism, where, as he said, 'the non-illusory debris of real life is to be let into the work.'12 Thus montage was a way to critique art's illusory representations of reality, and at the same time, undermine the presumed unity o art. In Adorno's words, montage 'articulates discontinuity' and 'leaves scars on the dimension of meaning.' It should, he said, 'shock people into realizing how dubious any unity (is).'13

Bürger restates Adorno's argument in the following way: 'The insertion of reality fragments into the work of art fundamentally transforms that work. The artist not only renounces shaping a whole, but gives the painting a different status, since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic work of art. They are no longer signs pointing to reality, they are reality.'14

To the argument that once these 'reality fragments' are inserted into a work of art, they will be decoded according to aesthetic systems of signification, Bürger's response is that the reality of these fragments will force the audience to decode the art's message differently. As he puts it, 'The recipient of an avant-garde work discovers that the manner of appropriating intellectual objectifications that has been formed by the reading of organic works of art is inappropriate to the present object.'15 It is inappropriate because the parts do not cohere into a unified, meaningful, organic whole. 'This refusal to provide

meaning,' Bürger says, 'is experienced as shock by the recipient,' and shock, in Bürger's view, 'is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient's life praxis.'16 This is the crux of the matter for Bürger: 'to break through aesthetic immanence' is to destroy the autonomy of art and open up the possibility of shaping life praxis according to the humane values art has rescued from the inhumane mans-end rationality of bourgeois culture.

In order to apply Bürger's theory of montage to a film like *Amerika*, it is necessary to determine what 'fragments of reality' might be in an art form that cannon include actual pieces of reality such as the scraps of cloth, wallpaper, newspaper, posters, ram tickets and the like, which were stuck on the canvasses of cubist collages. Yet, to be effective, to undermine the work's unity, the fragments inserted into a film should satisfy Bürger's demand for montage elements that 'are no longer signs pointing to reality… but *are* reality.' What, then, are the filmmaker's 'fragments of reality'?

For Razutis, they are extracts from film and television, which are inserted into his film without losing the marks of their origins. The fact that the fragments come from the mass media makes them no less real (one cannot longer exclude the sounds and images of the mass media from the modern paradigm of reality), nor is their disruption of the film's unity any loss apparent because the film and its 'fragments of reality' originate in the same photo-chemical and electronic processes of reproduction. Because the fragments continue to evoke their original contexts so directly and unambiguously, they can be read not only as signs signifying their sources, but as *fragments* of those sources, as 'non-illusory debris of real life.'

In Razutis' *Amerika* most of the 'debris' from television (news, ads, game shows) and from movies is matted into shots of huge urban billboards, thus emphasizing the link between commerce and the iconography of the mass media. For the section called *A Message From Our Sponsor*, however, Razutis adopts the more familiar technique of directly intercutting 'reality fragments' from, in this case, TV ads and a graphically explicit pornographic film. The 'message' from Razutis in this and other sections of the film may be less than surprising: sex sells and ads sell sex; TV reduces everything - from game shows to wartime violence – to the same level of public entertainment; the modern urban environment is an alienating wasteland, etc. But it is the implication of Razutis' method, not his message, that I want to stress here.

While it may not be more original than the methods of Pat O'Neill, Stan Vanderbeek, Bruce Conner, Arthur Lipsett, and a number of other film collagists, I think it *is* more successful in resisting the wholeness and organic unity crucial to the ideology of autonomous art. Whereas most collage-filmmakers use graphic, rhythmic, and thematic associations to create a new kind of unity for the diverse sounds and images they bring into their films, Razutis is more inclined to let the diversity stand, to 'leave scars on the dimension of meaning' and 'shock people into realizing how dubious any unity (is),' to repeat two of Adorno's propositions on montage. Thus, *Amerika*'s failure to cohere into a meaningful whole is not only a sign of avant-garde agonism and its characteristic trope, the hyperbolic image, but a political ploy in an avant-garde campaign *against* the autonomy of art, and *for* the integration of art and life praxis.

But is such a campaign still viable? Bürger readily admits that the most radical goal of the avant-garde – the reintegration of art and life praxis – was never achieved, and that even works of the historical avant-garde have been institutionalized and granted the very autonomy they were intended to challenge (as can be seen, for example, in the 'Duchamp Room' of the new Canadian National Gallery of Art, where copies of Duchamp's 'ready-mades' are disaplyed with the institutional rrespect that the original 'ready-mades' were

supposed to mock). Moreover, today a 'neo-avant-garde,' as Bürger labels it, 'institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions.'17

It is specifically the institutionalizing of 'the avant-garde as art' that Razutis has chosen to attack by reviving the 'genuinely avant-gardiste intentions' of the historical avant-garde – of Marinette, Apollinaire, Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Duchamp, Mayakovsky, Dziga Vertov, the young Sergei Eisenstein, and many others who challenged the time-honoured autonomy of art. The institutionalizing of the historical avant-garde has tended to obscure the degree to which these avant-garde activists could be abrasive, sly, crude, witty, farcical, enigmatic, infantile, scatological in their dealings with the public,, with the institutions of art, and sometimes with each other. Their articles, manifestoes, public performances, and, of course, their art, temporarily opened fissures in the institutional walls of art and let in some of the light and fresh air of life. Though the walls quickly closed again, Bürger argues that the one lasting effect of the historical avant-garde was to make the institution of art clearly visible, so that no one should be able to ignore the role of art as an institution, or subsystem, of bourgeois society.

Razutis has tried to keep the original avant-garde project alive, with the difference that his attacks are not directed at the traditional institution of art, but at its reincarnation in the 'neo-avant-garde.' Hence his diatribes against many of his fellow filmmakers who have taken shelter in universities, curatorial jobs, art magazines, critical journals, and other venues that tend to perpetuate the institution of art and its autonomy. He has attacked these tendencies in articles, manifestos, and mixed media events like 'Kalling All Kanadian Kritics' at the Funnel in Toronto in December, 1986,18 and his intervention at a panel discussion held at the new Pacific Cine Centre in Vancouver in March of the same year. The latter event also provided the material for a film, *On the Problem of the Autonomy of Art in Bourgeois Society, or Splice* (1986, by Razutis with the assistance of Scott Haynes and Doug Chomyn), which draws its title directly from the title of the third chapter of Bürger's Theory of the Avant-Garde.

A brief description of that film can serve as a summary and concluding comment on the Razutis phenomena in relation to the avant-garde today. The topic for discussion at the Cine Centre was 'Avant-Garde Film Practice' and the panelists represented a cross-section of the Canadian avant-garde film world of the mid-1980s: Michael snow, Patricia Gruben, David Rimmer, JoyceWieland, Ross McLaren, and Razutis. The iflm

cobines an edited version of each participant's remarks with a kind of homage-parody of their characteristic filmmaking styles.19

As Snow extols the individualism of avant-garde filmmakers in genral and of his own film practice in particular ('I don't claim to be avant-garde but to make the films of Michael Snow…') an electronic tone slowly rises in pitch, the camera executes a slow zoom-in on Snow as he speaks, and permutations on the words 'so is this' (the title of Snow's 1982 film composed entirely of words appearing one at a time to an accompaniment of total silence) are superimposed on the image. Gruben talks about feminism and narrative in avant-garde film while her image appears on several TV sets stacked in front of a vista of forest, sea and sky, and her words appear as a visual text traveling across the bottom of the screen. Rimmer expounds on the pure visual pleasure offered by the cinematic image, while his image is re-worked through an optical printer and made increasingly abstract in the manner of his *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*. Weiland and McLaren sit at a table, sip wine, chat about film and film criticism, exchange gossip (Weiland refers to 'Laura and Peter whose marriage has broken up'), and comment favourably on the facilities of the Cine Centre. While the camera pans from one to the other, words and dates (as in Weiland's *1933*) are superimposed on the image, and toward the end of this section, calls of a loon

(alluding to Weiland's *The Far Shore*) can be heard on the soundtrack.

Razutis' own section is the longest and least tampered with visually and aurally. Its principal theme is the mystification produced by current film theory and, most specifically, by the way film theory serves the institution of art by insulating the avant-garde from life praxis. After exchange critical jargon with a ventriloquist's dummy, along the lines of the following:

AR: So how does subjectivity fit into this? How is it structured? Dummy: Alienation, gap, castration, the whole ball of wax. AR: What do you see when you look at a movie, a screen? Dummy: The imaginary signifier, don't you?

Razutis then announces that he can 'offer a perspective on direct action and the avant-garde,' and launches into a verbal manifesto characteristic of the historical avant-garde, but adapted to the immediate context: 'The avant-garde does not ingratiate itself to an audience or institution. It kicks ass… Avant-garde does not subordinate itself to collectivism, but is a dialectic between individuality and group… It is not elitist, academic, politically correct… Some things require direct action so that something other than memory remains. A trace of the avant-garde if nothing else. (At this point Razutis takes out a can of spray paint and begins shaking it as he continues speaking.) The academics don't like rude and impertinent behaviour because academia ha a sort of code of etiquette: things that are shit are called problematical. One doesn't get up and do demonstrable things.'

Whereupon, Razutis gets up and uses the spray can to write on the pristine screen of the Cine-Centre, 'Avant-Garde Spits In The Face…' In the film one cannot see therest of the phrase, but it is not hard to guess what it must be.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the International Experimental Film Congress held in Toronto, Canada, May 28-June 4, 1989. With the exception of one of Razutis' 'visual essays,' *Lumiére's Train (Arriving at a Station)* (1979), none of Razutis' work was shown at the Congress, nor was Razutis present.

2. Al Razutis, 'Nothing Personal,' Independent Eye (Newsletter of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre in Toronto), Vol. 10, No. 1, (Fall 1988), p. 21.

3. Quoted in Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde (New York: Harper and Row, Icon Editions, 1968), pp. 62-63.

4. Poggioli, p. 26.

5. Poggioli, p. 182

6. Bart Testa, 'The Epic of Concatenation: On 'Amerika' and 'United States,' C Magazine, No. 10 (Summer, 1986), pp. 46-55.

7. Al Razutis, note on Amerika in the catalogue of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre West (1983), p. 28.

8. Testa, p. 50.

9. Poggioli, p. 67

10. Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, tr. M. Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), p. 32.

11. Theodore Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, Tr. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 193.

12. Adorno, p. 222.

13. Adorno, p. 223

14. Bürger, p. 78

15. Bürger, p.80

16. Bürger, p.80

17. Bürger, p.58.

18. For this event, Razutis invited a number of Canadian filmmakers and critics (including the present writer) to attend and/or submit statements on avant-garde film. Some of the statements were included in Razutis' presentation, as were slides showing some of the invitees receiving their invitations. Speaking through a voice modulator and wearing a peaked white cap suggestive of both a wizard and a potentate of the Klu Klux Klan, Razutis put on a performance that mocked, as it imitated, a pastiche of modern and post-modern critical theories. At various pints the performance also included the projection of slides, film projection, and multiple layerings of recorded and live sound: a performance collage not unlike *Amerika* in many ways. An acerbic critique of the events was published by Bart Testa in the Newsletter of the Film Studies Association of Canada, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring 1987), n.p.

19. Excepts from the filmmakers' statements appear in Speed (Spring 1987), published by Cineworks, Vancouver, Canada, pp. 37-43. I have drawn upon this source for direct quotations from Razutis' filmed version of the event.

Al Razutis: Three Decades of Rage (an interview)

Al Razutis is a Canadian iconoclast, an artist who was instrumental in forming two West Coast film distributors, a short-lived union of Canadian film artists, a production co-op, magazines on fringe film and holography, and who played a role in a much publicized battle with Ontario's Board of Censors. He has completed some forty-odd films and videos alongside various performances, paintings, holograms, and intermedia productions. While he has worked hard over the years to secure an institutional base for all aspects of fringe cinema, he is better known for his anti-institutional stance. In 1986, at the opening of a new artist-run movie palace, Razutis gave one of his unforgettable performances. Before a shocked crowd he whipped out a spray can and scrawled, "The avant-garde spits in the face of institutional art" on the brand new screen, ruining it forever. His filmwork has long established him as the sultan of collage. Rifling the junk bins of Sunset Boulevard he has patiently re-ordered moments from the history of cinema and allowed them to speak again in startling new ways. These have been compiled in two of his finest moments — *Visual Essays*, which offers a retinal massage to silent cinema, and *Amerika*, a three-hour, eighteen-part opera which serves up sex and death in a frothing mediascape. The ability to remember has never looked more dangerous.

AR: I was an undergraduate in San Diego studying chemistry and physics on a basketball scholarship. On my way through the library I noticed a book open on the table. It had a series of colour plates dealing with things I'd never seen before, and the more I flipped through the book the more it enchanted me. What I was looking at was the history of modern art in large colour panels, and that day I went out and bought acrylics, oils, and watercolours, and started painting. I painted for a month and took it to an art teacher who said it was all shit and that I should take an art course, which I did, and

got totally bored. I didn't know why you had to study art because I was experiencing it directly. None of my art ever came out of formal education.

In the late sixties, I started an underground cinema at UC Davis, which is between Sacramento and San Francisco, where I was doing some graduate work in nuclear physics. Then I wanted to expand the underground cinematheque by flying down to San Diego and setting up another one there. I would rent work from Canyon [the distributor], the money would come from the gate, and the audiences were huge. I got my first camera by starting a cinema club at the university, applying for money from the dean, and using it to buy myself a camera. I made my first film there — *2 X 2 (17 min 1967)*, a dual screen film obviously related to Conner and Warhol. It dealt with sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, a typical topic in the sixties. When I finished the film all I had was the original, I didn't know you could make a print then. Some guy in L.A. named Bob Pike was running the Creative Film Society, which distributed a lot of underground work. He said, "I love this film — I'll buy it — but you have to sell me the original, and if I want to recut it, I can." I got $2,000, which is when my girlfriend decided to go back to Vancouver, Canada.

We drove up in 1968. I hooked up with an organization called Intermedia which had a four-storey warehouse on Beatty Street comprised of artists of all disciplines — four floors of free studios, sculptors, dancers, painters. Anybody who was doing crazy, innovative work was doing it there. I convinced them that I could run underground films on the weekend and they said nobody here comes to anything. I asked for the second floor Saturday and Sundays, promising to pay for everything, and I would keep the proceeds. We made hundreds of dollars every weekend — the place was packed. By that time I had some experience of curating for the audience. I never curated auteurs, the Bruce Baillie night or whatever. The audience was interested in looking at the best examples of a certain approach to work.

From the money I made showing these films I financed my own films. Intermedia was a place where different sensibilities could rub together without the usual bureaucracies or jealousy. I made a number of films — *2 X 2* became *Inauguration (17 min 1968); Sircus Show Fyre (7 min 1968)*, a film about the spectacle of the circus using four layers of superimposition; *Black Angel Flag... Eat (17 min silent 1968)* which is mostly black leader with very intermittent shots, so you don't know when the film is over; and *Poem: Elegy For Rose (4 min 1968)* which featured a poem written on celluloid. I hated redundant work, which was part of my take against the institution of art. I thought galleries were a total sell-out, and any artist that would create a style was a cop-out. In any formative or dangerous time of making work, the worst thing you can do is bag your own style. I used to call it a paper bag because you'd throw all your shit into it and shake it around, and it would always come out the same. In every work, I'd try to negate what I'd done previously.

MH: Did you feel a split between formal and political moves?

AR: There was no split at all; that's the thing that was so peculiar and beautiful. This is going to sound extremely sentimental... Take a film like *Lapis* by James Whitney, for example. It's a computer graphic mosaic set to sitar music, an abstract film which serves as a meditation on a state of mind. It externalized what some people experienced on LSD. Formally eloquent in its own right, it had a place in a counter-culture drug culture because people were experiencing these things on a daily basis. What they were celebrating was completely connected to their political beliefs, which were similarly anti-establishment. Everyone was trying to break down conventions and look for alternatives to message systems which they'd grown up with, family systems they'd inhabited, professional systems which they were obligated to. That's why none of this work was touted as art, because the institutions of art were already suspect. How could you reject middle-class America and not reject its art history and universities? The same universities that were teaching a European history of art were teaching the military sciences that fed the war machine. In the time of Intermedia, there was no connection with grant agencies, art galleries, any institutions of any kind. Later on Michelson, Sitney, and Youngblood began making schools and movements, which was the beginning of the end: its professionalization, anthologization, academicization. Underground film became art, and that was the demise of the form. They made it pedagogical, voyeuristic, and auteur-based. That's when the rush for the museums began. If you wanted to become a fixture in the museum of the avant-garde, you had to be legitimized somehow. Do you have a large body of work, or how clean is your technique, or how innovative is it, or who would write about you, or where did you show? And that's part of the difference between then and now — expression didn't depend on mediating influences twenty years ago. The legitimizing histories offered by film schools are a total distortion of what happened. There's a lot of people who went through the process and vanished, whose work in its time was just as important as those who are remembered today.

In my weekly screenings at Intermedia I included the work of local people like David Rimmer and Gary Lee Nova and realized that people in Vancouver were starting to make films. So I thought, let's make a co-op along the lines of and inspired by Canyon or New York Filmmakers. In 1969, I talked to various filmmakers who thought it was a great idea, but they didn't really have the time, so I said, I'll do it. I became the founder/manager/bookkeeper/floorsweeper of the Intermedia Film Co-op, and I drew up some packages and toured them down to the US. It was a distribution co-op that held mostly Vancouver work but also others from the US. Like the co-ops in the US, we had no submissions policy; we took whatever people offered. We had an office and published a catalogue with about 100 films in the collection. Most of the work went to cinematheque, underground-type film screenings. There was a network of venues down the Coast which I'd made contact with as a programmer in the US. The only money we could get was what we took from our cut on the rentals. We ran a couple of years, and my energy evaporated because there weren't enough people willing to go the distance with it.

The birth of the Pacific Cinematheque with Kirk Tougas happened around the time of our demise. He was coming to our screenings and running the Cinema 16 Film Club at the University of British Columbia with an eye to setting up something more permanent. So he started the Pacific Cinematheque, which began screenings in 1971 and is still running today. In 1971, Intermedia moved to another space and new factions grew up which eventually brought the house down. But the different people who left Intermedia formed a number of satellite organizations like Western Front, Video Inn, Intermedia Press and the Grange; so in a sense it evolved, it transformed into these other places. I tried to set up an underground film theatre with Keith Rodan. We had a storefront and built a huge screen and projection booth and pulled some chairs in. We advertised in the *Georgia Straight* and that's where we made our mistake. The fire marshal showed up and said he'd been asked by the BC Censor to check the premises, and we got shut down. They just didn't want us running films. I ran out of money and sold all my equipment. It was a bad time.

There are two people on the institutional side from the late sixties, early seventies, who deserve greater mention. Peter Jones at the National Film Board helped underground filmmakers with stock and processing. He came from the old guard at the Board and had an interest in supporting independent films even though this wasn't part of its mandate. He would come down to Intermedia and offer people assistance; he was amazing. The other guy was Werner Aellen, who was the director of Intermedia. He was my godfather — got me jobs, lent me money. He kept me going for the year or two when I had nothing. Keith Rodan and I went out to Alaska and made a documentary on the Alaska pipeline.

Then suddenly this teaching job appears from Evergreen State College, and that's when I walked into a Disneyland of equipment: a video studio, all kinds of synthesizers and cameras, and a very interesting academic program. That's where *Amerika* started. I made *Software*, *Vortex*, and some of the video components of *98.3 KHz: Bridge at Electrical Storm*. We were doing bio-feedback experiments at the college — setting up film loops and wiring ourselves into EEG machines in order to induce states of meditation. Then these outputs from the brain were fed through amplifiers and directed into a second monitor which mixed the image signal with those from the brain to see if you could affect the image directly through your response. There were a number of film and video hybrid works begun there. I was contemplating staying on at the college until I made an application to the Canada Council for holography and, astoundingly, they gave me a senior artist's grant. I don't know how much money it was then, but it was top of the line, like getting $80,000 today. So I decided to come back to Vancouver, quit teaching, and set up a media studio called Visual Alchemy. I'd finished building an optical printer, built a video synthesizer, had audio equipment, editing rooms, animation stand, a complete holography lab in the back, living quarters, and a projection/living room space. The Canada Council grant paid for some of it, and I started to do optical effects for people for a fee. By 1972, I had the final version of the printer built. Then it became a production machine where I could make special effects for people like Rimmer and Tougas, and I became an optical service for a lot of commercial people. If anybody wanted a freeze-frame they could only get it from me. It was the only optical printer in Vancouver. I rented out my editing facilities and offered courses in holography. I was trying to make a commercial and experimental venture, and the whole system was available for my own work. So it was a very productive place for me, a completely enclosed interior space. Gordon Kidd got his start there. He was an art school student who came over one day, with a rainbow-coloured bow tie, asking to be an assistant, and I took him on. His films were made at Visual Alchemy.

I created *Le Voyage*, *Visual Alchemy*, *Portrait*, and *Amerika* was continued with *Bridge at Electrical Storm*. *98.3 KHz* Bridge *at Electrical Storm (11 min 1973)* was contrived on the optical printer at Visual Alchemy. An extremely laborious film, it was created one frame at a time; sometimes twelve frames would take over an hour to do because it had so much bi-packing and combinations of film and video. The video was transferred to film which was then reprocessed

on the printer. When *Bridge* came out, some people from Belgium looked at it and said, "That's not film, it's video." For them, legitimate film practice had nothing to do with video. But I kept trying to exchange formal values between the two, trying to achieve new forms of film and video making. But the film/video hybrid was not an acceptable form. The policy of Canada Council was that video synthesis was not art. They accepted conceptual video, the beginnings of narrative video, drag queen video and Toronto video. My work in holography had a parallel to my work in video in that it didn't have a place in contemporary practice. Most people were doing toy trains and broken wine glasses, and I was trying to integrate sculpture and holography, making a number of interdisciplinary gestures. I didn't have much contact with the holographic community because I thought their work was shit, and they couldn't understand what I was doing. So I was having problems with filmmakers because I was using video; I wasn't accepted as a videomaker because they said it was all done on film; and the holographers said my work wasn't pure holography. It allowed me a kind of escape from the containers of arts and institutions, and the acclaim people try to achieve early in their careers without doing the work, all of which tended to perpetuate an alienation and anti-social strategy I've already remarked on.

While most of the films made in this period ended up in *Amerika*, there were some autonomous works like *Portrait (8 min 1976)*. It's a study of my two-year-old daughter, Alicia. I made a kind of pointillist examination of her by magnifying the super-8 grain through generations of rephotography. I used a saccadic process to re-scan the image. The eye scans an image, and remembers this scan pattern which is called "feature rings." This is the basis of our visual memory. The second time we see something, we remember it according to this feature ring. So I was trying to create a new way of looking at essentially repeating images. My wife and I had broken up, and I was moved to make this film through the loss of my daughter.

Le Voyage (8 min 1973) was done as a further exploration of black leader and image/sound discontinuity. The title recalls Méliès's *Voyage to the Moon*, which was, for me, a voyage into the unconscious. The image shows an optically refigured ship in a storm that appears intermittently, between irregular lengths of darkness which are used as duration, spacing, and erasure. Its discontinuity gives a sense of arrested process, of subconscious recollection. There was also *The Moon at Evernight (9 min 1974),* which explored abstraction and subliminal imagery.

MH: Many of the films from this period evince structural concerns. They show a contained figure which is made to move through a series of themes and variations.

AR: I think I was more interested in the structure of cognition and in liberating the unconscious processes filmically. I wasn't interested in the machine of cinema — the zoom lens or the long tracking shot. We had long parties, some substance abuse; it was a very intense period that lasted from 1972 to 1977. We were going out on the streets and projecting films on billboards. Gary Lee Nova and I had a screening on the front of the Scientology building, projecting the most violent images we had while they were having their big meeting inside. In 1976, I launched a one-man show of holograms. Then I applied to the Canada Council to finish *Amerika*. I'd finished a dozen fragments, and all I wanted was stock and processing. They rejected it, and I went bananas. Later on I found out who was on the jury and I was going to punch out Peter Bryant, who sat on the jury, at this party in Vancouver. Picard intervened. Gary Lee Nova and I were behaving like gangsters, which probably had to do with overwork, stress, and generally inflated egos, right? Anyways, I burned out, didn't get my grant, finished my holography and film work, and decided to go to the South Pacific. I started to sell all my equipment. I took all my stock footage and shipped it down to Los Angeles and what I couldn't sell, I left in the studio. I left a key under the mat and told all my friends to help themselves. I just walked from the whole scene with my second wife. Off we went to Samoa, and I never wanted to come back to North America; I thought it was all bullshit. I didn't want to have anything to do with any technical forms. I just wanted to write novels. In Samoa, I taught high school math. A year

later I received a message out of the blue asking me to teach film at Simon Fraser University, so we headed back to Vancouver.

This was the beginning of my political phase, because I realized you can't hide from North America and that it was possible to work in institutions. There was a compulsion to explore new things, and to realize there's another form in which you can keep going. And that started a new cycle of works which runs from 1978 to 1987, another nine-year cycle. When that ended, I left Canada again and headed south to live in Mexico. When I got back to Vancouver from Samoa in 1979, I began work on a series of films that would restage moments in film history — and these became *Visual Essays: Origins of Film (68 min 1973-84)*. They deal with filmmakers like the Lumières, George Méliès, the Surrealists, and Sergei Eisenstein. Each film reworks found footage according to a dominant formal strategy.

The first essay *Lumière's Train (Arriving at the Station) (9 min b/w 1979)* concerns itself primarily with the mechanistic quality of cinema. The Lumières were concerned with creating a motion picture record without being overly concerned about further refinements, usually shooting single-reel films from a fixed vantage. What they were presenting were the effects of their invention, the magic of sequential movement. I chose three sources that dealt with trains: the first Lumière film, Abel Gance's *La Roue*, and a Warner Brothers short, *Spills for Thrills*. The film begins with a series of freeze frames with these three-frame aperture opening and closings, so the image seems to breathe a little, and then the train begins to move, the images link one to another, and motion is born. The Lumière film is subject to stop-motion printing which slows it down, and the image rapidly alternates between negative and positive, creating an optical effect where the viewer is made more aware of the intermittent quality of the motion picture image. I used the sound from train recordings to produce a rhythmic pulse against which the image could be measured, especially as it's changing speeds through the step printing. The sound conceptually stands in for sprocket holes. It speaks of the mechanical universe the Lumière brothers created. The narrative elements introduced are consistent with this mechanical universe — they introduce spectacle. Whether recording fiction or documentary, the apparatus leans toward the larger-than-life, the extraordinary versus the mundane. Abel Gance's film is explicit on this point, showing a train derail at the station and unleashing havoc in every direction. The Warner Brothers film is a series of stunts which show trains crashing into cars, chases, special effects. Which goes back to the story of the first projection — the story has it that Lumière's film was mistaken for a *camera obscura*, and upon seeing a train come into the station, the audience leapt from their chairs to avoid being hit. Similar incidents were reported in Canada. But after the initial shock of motion is over, the medium has to reach for this feeling in other ways.

MH: Are you suggesting that Lumière's first film unleashes a spectacle of destruction that naturally follows the invention of motion pictures?

AR: Realist cinema was headed towards hyper-reality and greater impact. The audience demands that the value of the spectacle be increased for every generation — creating vistas which are more than real.

MH: It's an interesting idea in the face of Noel Burch's theory of the development of cinema. He describes the socalled "primitive" period (1895-1905) as an Edenic mixture of styles and genres which was appropriated by American business and recast into illustrations of nineteenth century literature — this progression follows McLuhan's dictum that each new medium will take on the content of the last one. And it's here that film is subject to a rigidly defined series of encodings: the shot/reverse shot ploy, spatial continuity, following the action axis, matching eyeline glances, all of the dramatic baggage that continues to inform the passage of the movies. What you're suggesting is that some of these propensities existed from the very beginning.

AR: When George Méliès arrived looking for a way to spruce up his magic act, the Lumières told him it was an invention without a future.

The second film in *Visual Essays* is called *Méliès Catalogue (9 min silent 1973)*. I'd collected a number of Méliès films, which were part of a piracy network that people were lifting from the Cinémathèque in Paris, and I was concerned that none of this work would be seen. I wanted to create a kind of Sears Catalogue celebrating the mythic, visual vocabulary of Méliès. His films contained an overriding quality of surprise, shock, and spectacle that naturally extended from his work as a stage magician. Many of his stage techniques were utilized in film — like appearance/disappearance, levitation, or instant transformations, which he used in imagery borrowed from classical mythology. I wanted to make a film that could accompany screenings of his films. It's not an academic treatment of the material; it's poetic and personal. I wanted to internalize, ingest, and recreate it.

MH: The images are framed inside burning celluloid, the dominant formal motif of this film. Why the burning?

AR: Because his work was done on a very flammable nitrate stock, much of which was lost or simply disintegrated. He went broke during the First World War, and the government seized his studio and converted his films into industrial cellulose which was made into shoes for the army. The third of the *Essays* also concerns Méliès. It's called *Sequels in Transfigured Time (12 min silent 1976)* and works to interpret his *mise-en-scène*. I used a bi-pack technique, running a mid-contrast colour stock with a high contrast black-and-white negative. Their slight off-register reduces an image to its edges, so as the film begins you're looking at what seems like cave paintings, or stained glass, but it's only lines. Then out of that you're encouraged to discover the *mise-en-scène*, and this happens as the freeze frames which begin the film accelerate into motion, so the viewer can synthesize a landscape. Often the film will slow down to reveal Méliès's invisible cuts, where he turns an omnibus into a hearse or midgets into puffs of smoke. I wanted to show how he's making the transformations. There's a series of subtitles that narrate an elegy I wrote for Méliès. It closes with a passage where Méliès, as a necromancer, dances before a pyramid in order to raise a spirit

from the dead. The spirit is conjured, growing finally into a twenty-foot mass before leaving as I recite the elegy, and the film ends. We saw a magic act a week ago which is exactly the same, where a guy grows inside a shroud. It all goes back to Méliès and beyond.

Ghost:Image (12 min b/w silent 1976-79) is the next film. Its dominant strategy is the Rorschach produced when images are mirror printed, the original image superimposed over itself in reverse. As these two images come together, they create a new space between them, a dark interior that needs to be read in a new way. These were isolated with some primitive rotoscoping I did, projecting onto a mirror which beamed the image up to a sheet of paper, and drawn one frame at a time, then rephotographed onto high-contrast stock to produce the cut-out mattes for the film. The film describes a narrative trajectory that runs from surreal films like *Un Chien Andalou*, *Ghosts Before Breakfast* and *The Seashell and the Clergymen*, to German expressionist films like *Nosferatu* and concludes with more contemporary horror films. All of these images are suggestive of interior states, extreme states of psychosis. For the surrealists, this was a wealth of information that occasioned celebration and the derivation of new forms. But this process degenerated in horror films, until the unconscious became something to be feared, something that could be transformed in terrifying ways; finally the viewer was positioned as an object of attack.

Ghost:Image describes this process of degeneration — from Surrealism to horror films, from representation about a filmmaker, but about a practice more closely associated with theatre — Antonin Artaud and his theatre of cruelty. He released a series of manifestos designed to rid the theatre of its reliance on literary forms and return it to a ritualized state of trance, ecstasy, and madness. I wanted to create a piece that would speak of the self-destructive urge motivating many of the German expressionist films. I wanted to explore this from a poetic perspective and recreate a kind of madness, a cacophony of voices, a situation of heightened anxiety which would be incorporated with its filmic equivalents. I began with

Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*, which is concerned about Joan's possession by what she claims to be angels, but which many others take to be satanic beings. Her only sympathizer is a young priest, played by Artaud. I used a bipacking technique similar to *Software*, where I photographed the white noise from a television set, controlling the number of dots by cranking the white level. This was then used as a matte for Dreyer's images, which grow more visible as the exposure on the matte is increased, causing halation and a starry quality to the image. The soundtrack is a group of people chanting phrases like, "We are the inquisition — speak," and a fragmented monologue from Artaud's writing ("Shit to the spirit") which was then cut up and electronically transformed so the words are rendered unintelligible. It closes with a section entitled "Wedding for Artaud" which shows an immolation; this time it's not Joan who will burn at the stake, but Artaud. The only way this cycle of madness could be completed would be to have the protagonist burned alive with anyone else they could draw into the fire. It's a marriage of your Other through fire. It's a union that's only possible through death, which is the underlying expression of Artaud and that cultural tradition. Artaud could only create his state beyond the logos, which is madness, and beyond madness there's only death.

MH: You begin with a photo portrait of Artaud and zoom in, and as one of his eyes fill the frame, the dotmatte begins to take over, as if he's dissolving into the material itself. He's returned to a ruined and fragmented state, a consciousness scattered across the cosmos, madness. The voice seems to function in the same way — an electronic cacophony that seems to move with the dots in a guttural cadence that exists before or after language, as if the whole body were speaking at once, its hierarchy of organs and senses abandoned.

AR: These dots form themselves around faces which become more and less visible as I'm overexposing the matte and allowing the faces to burn through. I show inquisitors and priests, forces of death and redemption, in order to establish the collapse of a moral order. I'm not happy with the piece these days because it's too long, it's too structural, and has nowhere to go. It's an echo that keeps reverberating and how long can you keep hearing it?

The sixth and final essay is called *Storming the Winter Palace (16 min b/w 1984)*. It replays the films of Sergei Eisenstein. I've always been fascinated by the whole issue of didactic, political cinema and the way it's been the subject of a historical revisionism, which sees it as little more than a series of formal gestures rather than for its political context. The intent of this essay was to reintroduce the political stature of the work. The political and the formal operate together in Eisenstein, but the techniques of montage were later adopted and psychologized through Hollywood. The film opens up with sections from *October* which are shown backwards, and this sequence runs toward an intertitle which reads, "You're all under arrest." I think that's an appropriate conclusion to the Stalinist dictum that affected formalism in general. You will now cease to make work that doesn't advance the party cause as Stalin sees it. Even in *October*, which is a chronicle of the Russian Revolution, you've got Trotsky and his ilk written out of the film. It's printed backwards because this whole policy is reactionary — time isn't marching forwards; we're going into the dark ages. When you're working for the boss you're part of the corporation, and the fact that Eisenstein couldn't escape those conditions is tough shit; he ended up being a propaganda lackey for Stalin. Stalin authorized the making of his films. Take the story of *Alexander Nevsky*'s missing reel. There are five reels in the movie, but when you read the script you can see that there's a reel missing. And the story, as Jay Leyda writes it, is that Eisenstein is sleeping on the editing room floor. Exhausted. Every day he's editing to an impossible deadline, and one morning these party guys show up and say that Comrade Stalin wants to see the finished film, so they take all the reels except the one that's sitting on the editing machine. After Joe approves it, Eisenstein can hardly go back to the omnipotent one and say, uh, it's missing this one reel. *Winter Palace* examines Eisenstein's rhetorical strategies. Some are well known, like his montage of conflict, his juxtaposition of opposing elements which is supposed to create a politically enlightened state in the viewer. In the Odessa steps sequence, step printing is

employed to show the way in which compositions are generated according to graphic considerations, which probably restates the obvious to film scholars. At the end of the film I go through a saccadic eye movement technique. I start scanning the image itself. I added a texture to the screen so you're aware you're scanning an image field, the boundaries of which are uncertain. That was an acknowledgment of Eisenstein's engineering ideas, which are related to the engineering of perception, which is what saccadic eye movement is all about. Saccadic eye movement is the way we perceive things — when scientists are trying to figure how humans look at an image, able to recognize their feature rings, then how does that implicate duration, which is a critical element in montage? What's too short an image? What's too long? All these questions are parts of an engineering issue, the engineering of a political vision. The final sound quote (from Benjamin Buchloh) is about how the work of collage/montage in Surrealism and formalism was appropriated by advertising and propaganda and remains "radical" only in a few instances of the "avantgarde."

MH: Tell me about *Amerika (160 min 1972-83)*.

AR: For eleven years I made a number of short films which were intended to fit together to produce a single work. It was finished in 1983 and called *Amerika*. Nearly three hours in length, it's made up of eighteen short films laid out on three reels which roughly correspond to the sixties, seventies, and eighties. These films are a mosaic expressing the various sensations, myths, and landscapes of the industrialized Western culture. The predominant characteristic of *Amerika* is that it draws from existing stock-footage archives, the iconography and "memory banks" of a media-excessive culture.

The *Cities of Eden (7 min 1976)* is the first of the eighteen films that make up *Amerika*. All of its images derive from the 1895-1905 period, and its formal treatment echoes the disintegration of the nitrate stock employed in this work. I used a bas-relief effect to amplify the fragility of the medium. It closes with the woman from the Paramount logo, which dissolves into an atomic explosion, the first of

many "endings" evoked in *Amerika*. After this annihilation, the second film begins, as if attempting to begin again. *Software/Head Title (2.5 min 1972)* begins with random noise that slowly takes shape around the outline of a nighttime city. I began by shooting the white noise from a television set, using the white level to determine how many dots you see on the screen. The higher the white level, the more frequent the dots. I bi-packed this matte into the optical printer with a shot of a New York cityscape. The television matte starts with a few dots and grows in density until the cityscape becomes visible.

After the creation of *Software*'s synthetic landscape, we move into *Vortex (10 min 1972)* which occupies and articulates that landscape. It is a frankly psychedelic film with synthetic improvisations of video feedback which obviously recall the sixties. It's an extravagant light show that features one technique after another in a completely undisciplined fashion. It represents an aesthetic excess which mirrors a scientific excess. Psychedelia attempted to simulate some aspects of the nervous system that people were experiencing stoned. It exteriorized these states in multi-screen spectacles that allowed audiences to participate in a "sensorium." *Vortex* is an electronic sensorium. Remember, in the sixties, the reconfiguration of space craft and atomic blasts into a colour and light show was an everyday expression. Everything was translated into a happening, and the stoned were processing everything in a very ecstatic way. The politics of that is a very mindless form of sensational experience — to sit and watch an A-bomb go off and say, "Wow, did you see the colours in that thing!" is a pretty reactionary thing to do. The film acknowledges that and lets the viewer proceed from that point, mindful that this moment has happened.

The next film is *Atomic Gardening (5 min 1981)*, which operates in a very different register than the one which preceded it. After this film, it's apparent that *Amerika* will progress through a collision of ideas and strategies. It's a mosaic construction which is made up of seemingly incompatible elements. The soundtrack of *Atomic Gardening* is filled with military chatter — NORAD boys talking shop.

It is lifted from a documentary which visits American missile sites. The image shows a series of time-lapse shots — circuit boards, with NASA stamped on them, immersed in a solution of chemicals out of which crystals are growing. These crystals looked to me like an expanding military virus, the virus in the machine, growing like simultaneous launch patterns. Meanwhile, the boys are talking about the two-key system, one to turn it on and the other to finish the sequence, and once the second key is turned, the missile is away. They run through a simulation and launch a missile as the end of the film whites out. This white screen burn-out reappears in a television set in an empty motel room. Three of *Amerika*'s films are called *Motel Row* because a motel is a temporary residence for the traveller, like so many of these films. In the first of these *Motel*s *(10 min 1981)* I moved from the white screen of the television to a walk around an abandoned, graffiti-filled building with a wide angle lens. I wanted to establish the absence of the protagonist and a neglected, shattered landscape.

MH: The emphasis on the graffiti walls reinforces the gestures of the hand-held camera and the gestures of painting. Both marks are a contradiction in terms: anonymous signatures.

AR: The contradictory graffiti slogans are symptomatic of an American malaise. It's a culture that assimilates contrasts by celebrating and then exhausting them. What I'm presenting is a cacophony of speaking subjects rendered anonymous through the act of graffiti — a superimposition of ideas, slogans, and clichés. It's a wall of noise and political alienation. You put that together as a backdrop for an absent subject in a ruined landscape, and I think the viewer is cognizant of a growing emptiness, all juxtaposed with the fullness of the images we've seen earlier.

MH: It extends the absence of the human subject: the disembodied voices of *Atomic Gardening*, the techno universe of *Vortex*, the mushroom clouds of *Cities of Eden*. *Motel Row* brings us "back to earth," away from the more stylized, technologically reprocessed imagery we've seen so far.

AR: The second part of *Motel Row* is entirely different. It combines three elements: a series of mausoleums, Hollywood soundtracks, and my own film *Egypte*. The mausoleums were shot in New York and Hollywood. It's funny that all the East Coast graves are crammed together while the West Coast folk have manicured gardens separating everything; as in life, as in death. The corpses occupying these mausoleums are obviously on the opposite end of the economic/political spectrum from the anonymous graffiti people in the previous section. The Egyptians, as a culture, believed that the afterlife could only be acquired by rituals reserved for those who could afford the embalming process. So the Egyptians built these immense tombs called pyramids, just like the mausolems I show, which are similarly intended to convey the rich into the after life. Joining the two via montage implicates a mythology that rationalizes money and death. It suggests the metaphysical underpinnings of the ruling class — the Protestant ideal of material riches in one world, spiritual riches in the next. I joined the two by moving into the mausoleums until the screen blacked out, then moving out of the dark of the Egyptian pyramids, or by match cutting Egyptian hieroglyphics with graffiti. The hieroglyphics were a sacred language, so these cuts join the sacred and the profane. After we've laid the dead to rest, we see the first road movie in *Amerika*: *98.3 KHz: Bridge at Electrical Storm (5 min 1973)*.

MH: *Bridge* seems to recapitulates certain imaging strategies in *Vortex*, the constantly changing colours providing variations on a theme.

AR: But it's a very measured structural movement. It was made one frame at a time, so I had a lot of control over the image. The storm is simulated through a variety of optical processes, which changed the colour and contrast of the image frame-by frame. The electronic processing is something that embellishes the movement rather than being the thing itself. In 1966, I shot a heap of super-8 footage driving all day over the San Francisco bridge. We drove from morning to night, and I wanted to release it as a forty-minute film with a radio soundtrack, but I'm glad I spared everyone that boredom. It

was manipulated on the optical printer using a lot of bipacking. The introduction of video continues the movement of the image towards abstraction and a graphic extremism, an apocalypse and rapture. In *98.3 KHz: Bridge at Electrical Storm Pt. 2* I poured acid and hydroxide on the film itself to create bubbles and explosions, to attack the emulsion, then quickly washed and reprinted it before the image dissolved. So there were a number of procedures used to obliterate, alter, synthesize, and make the image fluid, rather than fix it in a documentary fashion. This was related to the sense I had of broadcast and electrical energy. I used to get up early in the morning and noticed that as the city started to come alive electrically I could it in the air, like some people hear AM radio in their dentures. We're being inundated right now with broadcast information that's flowing through us, so the transformation of the image was simply a way to make that concrete.

MH: Hence the electrical storm in the film's title and its soundtrack, which features forty years of radio fragments. The bridge forms an enormous "X," which doubles your own spray-painted signature that figures a number of times in the film.

AR: It's a fortunate coincidence. I tried to have my name legally changed to an "X" but was told I'd need to have a witness every time I signed a document. I wanted to have an institutionalized anonymity. The next piece is *Motel Row Pt. 2 (8 min 1976)*. It's a long tracking shot into Reno, Nevada. Now that you've done the bridge, here's another car movie. And everybody's wondering: where are we going? Are we going anywhere? [laughs] It shows a series of motel façades lit up at night, shot out a car window. One sign simply replaces the next in a long row of spectacle, because spectacle works to evacuate any depth of expression, any emotional attachment, anything that can't announce itself on the surface. There are audio fragments coming in from various TV movies. The façades are intercut with a series of interiors which are basically empty except for television sets, where I matted in a number of found footage images: prehistoric women, male/female relations as perceived by Roger Corman, porno flicks. It shows the dichotomy of

inside and out, glittering façades alienated from their abandoned interiors. This is followed by the first of a series of *Refrains (1 min 1982)* which punctuate the film. Each one is a static shot showing a dummy and a number of theoretical questions which appear as subtitles. These sequences came on the heels of my profound disenchantment with the academic community. The questions were pilfered from my old colleague Kaja Silverman, who could speak this language like no one else. She'd written up ten film studies questions which were part of a proposal for an avant-garde/film studies conference. So at various points in the film these questions arise in a pseudo attempt to theoretically assess the work. The questions are printed over a dummy animated on a turntable with jerky motions, and a fixed, smiling expression on his face. The backgrounds were done with a front screen and often replay parts of *Amerika*. The soundtracks are taken from canned radio plays from the forties or fifties which replay famous comic routines that refer to the question. So the bozo, the backgrounds, and the comic routines act to answer these preposterous film theory questions. The dummy faces the camera so he's not really cognizant of the film material. One of the questions asks: Does sexual differentiation position the viewer?

MH: In other words: does it matter whether you're a male or female?

AR: Behind the dummy, a screen shows an image of a woman taking off her bra, so it's obvious that sexual differentiation does position the male ("voyeur") and female ("looked at") differently. On the soundtrack there's a Marx Brothers skit, where they're talking about marital breakdown and the incompatibility of men and women. So the question is negotiated in these three different ways simultaneously — through the Marx Brothers, the woman undoing her bra, and the dummy. I felt film theory was wreaking havoc with practice, that it was an arrogant and elitist enterprise and I wanted to lampoon it in these sections. The *Refrain* is followed by a film which used to be called *Runway Queen*. It's a forties burlesque number showing a woman stripping, which is run through a video synthesizer to create echoes of her image all around her, multiplying her gestures. This sequence follows from the images of alienated sex in

the motels and the alienated visions of women presented by the film. In the early days of video processing, men would take images of women and fuck them with technique. This scene makes the uses of these technologies explicit; these image technologies work to transform passive and inert figures, which are most commonly associated with women. It's consistent with what music video has done to exploit the human figure. The narcissism involved in the portrayal of the singers is aestheticized and amplified with video special effects equipment. But in my case I don't think anyone could take it as an erotic image at all. She's dancing naked but dressed up with all these special effects.

MH: The echoes of the woman recalled the Busby Berkeley chorus lines where dancers shatter into echoes of the star.

AR: It's a burlesque image from the forties with bumpity bumpity accompaniment. Its placement in relation to the fuck shots inside the motel rooms make it just another look at a displaced and alienated representation, like a floorshow in one of these hotels. And it continues to answer the question: "Does representation proceed along sexually differentiated lines?" Then *Amerika* hits the road again for *The Wasteland and Other Stories (13 min 1976)*. In 1974, I approached the National Film Board with a film about Egypt. After they agreed to it, I conned the Board into letting me go down to Death Valley because it's plenty hot there in August. I said I had to check out my equipment, my stock, and myself to see if I can handle the Sahara. They gave me some stock and I shot *The Wasteland* — it was my camera test. I mounted the camera inside the car with an intervalometer attached and drove from Vancouver to Las Vegas. *The Wasteland* is the torture test — some people find it very meditative, and for others it's the beer break. The mounted camera maintains a fixed car hood and windshield position, while the intervalometer knocks out a frame every three or four seconds. This was then step-printed onto different stocks to destroy the pristine look of the original colour negative. The stepprinting that's used here is 2:3. The first frame is repeated twice, the second three times, the third twice, the fourth three times and so on. Three frames is about

the limit of perceptible change, and two frames is just below that threshold, so the strategy was one of exhausting the viewer. Rather than allowing the viewer to move in a perceptual flow, you get this staccato movement on an almost subliminal level. This drive arrives in Las Vegas at night, which initially appears as a string of abstract lights which become the nighttime façades of the city in a movement that's very much like *Software*. After passing through an electrical storm, again created optically, we arrive in an insane roller coaster ride with intercut images of gambling and car crashes, video games and violence. Many of these images are related to vehicular destruction because the notion of traveling is a fiction — you're not going anywhere. But the progression of my signs are not arbitrary; they organize themselves around the question of the male gaze. The male discourse is guided by machines: the fixed point of view of the car, the pornographic shot, the romanticism of the escape, the techno-fetishism of video effects, and what lies at the end of the road is destruction. But this amusement park of sensations only simulates these impulses, because your quarter runs out and the ride ends. So nothing's changed. The idea of getting anywhere is hopeless.

MH: *The Wasteland* takes up the biblical themes that run throughout *Amerika* — begun in an opening title copped from Genesis, its constant evocations of The End, and its obsession with sexuality, which the Bible is quick to maintain within a genealogical progression that becomes equivalent to knowledge itself. But in your film these blood ties have been long abandoned, replaced by anonymous machine sex and pornography.

AR: Then the *Refrain (4 min 1982)* kicks in again asking: "Is identification the chief means by which a cinematic text structures its viewers?" Well, not in this film. [laughs] So I put the bozo in the driver seat pretending to drive, bewildered, with the backdrop of the casinos. The next question asks: "What does it mean for a viewer to distance him/herself from a film?" [laughs] Well, if you haven't been distanced by this, I don't know what's going to distance you. Next question: "What is the relation between the viewer's subjectivity and that conferred upon him/herself by the film?" With an image of a

roller coaster ride. What is subjectivity? One long scream down the tracks.

 The second part of *98.3 KHz: Bridge at Electrical Storm (6 min 1973)* follows. It brackets *The Wasteland*; it's a kind of way in and way out. This is the last heavy-duty visual display in the film. But by this point in *Amerika* its visual opulence only reads as empty technique, part of an alienated sensibility that has moved men closer to their machines while ignoring everything else, everything but their own death perhaps. *Bridge*'s redundancy is underscored by having it played twice. *The Wildwest Show (11 min 1980)* follows. I shot a number of cityscapes, blacked out the billboards, and inserted pieces of found footage. So as we see cars passing through the streets, images of destruction are playing overhead in the billboards. The images, most of them violent, follow from a game show in which the contestants are asked whether what they're watching is true or false: these atrocities, the war footage, the Vietnam protester going up in flames. The film conflates fiction and documentary footage, sometimes in appalling ways. In *The Wildwest Show*, none of the cars pay any attention to the images they're passing, as horrific as they are. So images that would normally occupy our attention have become commonplace. I matted all of the images into billboards because I wanted to suggest the replacement of landscape with mediascape. It also extended my earlier practice of projecting into public spaces.

MH: There's an accumulation of atrocities in the film — from the Second World War, Vietnam, old westerns. The effect of their rapid-fire progression is to level them out, to strip them of their historical and political contexts and regather them under some essentialist heading of Evil Humanity. While it's clear your critique is aimed at North American media culture in general and television in particular, to what extent is your own film complicit with the practices it decries? The film includes some of the most extreme examples recorded of real people dying on film. Isn't your act of deconstruction also complicit with the dehistoricizing process of television?

AR: The argument that *The Wildwest Show* sensationally obliterates the historical subject is exactly the point: that's what the film is about. In order to illustrate my purpose, I've proceeded with such exaggeration and hyperbole that the viewer can't feel sympathy for this process. It had to be presented as a case in the extreme. The viewer is confronted with the disparity between sound and picture, fiction and documentary. The film's not proceeding as an analysis of these events and how they appear on television; it's dealing with our awareness or non-awareness of this mediascape. Is it anymore moral to ignore this train of images, the daily atrocity of the news, for instance, or the late night movie? Mainstream media is constructed as a one-way communication system, and this was a way to talk back.

Halfway through this film it's interrupted by *A Message From Our Sponsor (9 min 1979)* which reworks a series of commercials to show the rhetorical strategies at work. It concentrates on the sexual subtext of the beauty industry, its privileging of style and surface, all of which takes us back to pornography and the objectification of women. It came out of my collections of stock footage, in this instance, mostly commercials from the sixties. I began looking through them for patterns of organization, rhetorical strategies, and began a work which would deconstruct these practices. The film mimes commercial rhetoric in a way that makes it intelligible and explicit for the viewer. When *The Wildwest Show* returns, having been interrupted by this long commercial, the host says: "You've been a great audience. You've applauded just at the right time. You've laughed at the right time." And now what do we do? We go on, right back into the destruction; it's fucking relentless. Television is our coliseum. We used to watch Christians fed to the lions; today we can watch 40,000 kids starve to death every day, or the latest blood-letting in the Middle East. It trivializes morality or makes it impossible. And what are we doing about these images? Who is managing them and why? Well, after the Ontario Board of Censors banned *Message*, we knew who was managing the images. Obviously *The Wildwest Show* and *Message* are obscene films. But where is the obscenity? In the acts that were depicted? In their

recording? Or their consuming? *A Message From Our Sponsor* was the first film I made in 1979. I optically printed the footage I wanted, cut the film together, added the semiotic intertitles, mixed the sound, and promptly forgot about it. I went on to finish *For Artaud*, *Lumière's Train*, revised *Ghost:Image*, and made the *Motel* films for *Amerika*. Then the shit hit the fan for *A Message From Our Sponsor*. Canada's National Gallery was putting together packages of avant-garde film, which were purchased and circulated, and *Message* was included. I was thrilled. Then suddenly I got a call saying the Censor Board had stepped in and that the Gallery had to remove this film from the package, otherwise the curator, Darcy Edgar, would be arrested. I said, "What! You've got to be joking." It was the first I'd ever heard of the Ontario Board of Censors.

MH: So they couldn't even show it in the National Gallery?

AR: That's right. Darcy called in tears and said, "I'm in a no-win position. I want to show the work but I can't, and how would you feel if we..." But you know me, I said "No fucking way is this film going to be cut or withdrawn; everything remains status quo." I thought this would remain a local quarrel between the Board of Censors and the National Gallery. Then the Funnel, who were going to show the package, were also advised by the Board of Censors that if they showed the work they'd be arrested. So the Funnel withdrew from showing *Message*. Then I got a call from Susan Ditta at the Canadian Images Festival in Peterborough, who invited me to show a program of my work. I told her that I would bring *Message*, which others had been told they couldn't show. She said she would talk to her board, and they gave it the okay. They were warned by the Censor Board not to show the film, and a couple of their board members resigned as a result — Anna Gronau and Ross McLaren, both from the Funnel. So we hit the screening and the place is jammed, people are hanging off the rafters. We start the films and there was this young projectionist there, and I said, "I don't want you to have any problems tonight, so let me turn on the projector." The whole time everyone's waiting for the cops to show, and we had a big discussion about censorship afterwards. Two days later the

Board of Censors charged everybody — the director of the festival, Susan Ditta; the director of the space I showed in, David Bierk; a member of the board, Ian McLachlin (who was the intellectual spearhead against censorship); and myself. Violation of the Theatres Act, they called it. We began with a freedom of expression, constitutional defence which was dismissed by the judge. Then the judge agreed that *Amerika* had to be seen in its entirety, that *Message* needed to be seen in context. What was notable in the proceedings was that Mary Brown, the head of the Censor Board, testified on the stand. She was completely dissected by the defence when she tried to explain the Censor Board's basis which she termed "community standards," but which turned out to be pretty vague. She also alluded to special considerations given "important" artists. The Crown offered a deal — you people plead guilty, and we'll get you off on probation, and we told them to forget it. It tended to divide the film community between those who would deal with the Board and those who wouldn't. I thought the Peterborough action had to come down, somebody had to get charged and go to court and show how ridiculous and dangerous these laws were and why they needed changing. It was important that the practice of the Board, their lies and contradictions, were exposed. One member of the Censor Board who opposed the film took the stand, and when he was asked what his background was, he said he'd been an usher in an Odeon Theatre. [laughs] It became apparent that the make-up of the Board wasn't representative of a community, but of a position that was religious in its inspiration. After four or five days they dismissed the charges against me because they couldn't prove I had anything to do with the screening in a direct way, which I found bizarre. They proceeded with the others, who were eventually convicted and fined $500. After *Amerika* was banned, a group of people came together to fight censorship in Ontario, called the Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society. This group included Anna Gronau and David Poole, and they wanted to take *Amerika* to the Supreme Court and clear it, which they did. By that point Mary Brown was back-pedalling, figuring all this for bad publicity over stuff nobody sees anyways.

MH: It's typical that you should run into censorship problems showing actors fucking in *Message* as opposed to the real people getting killed in *The Wildwest Show*.

AR: Both these films were made shortly after coming back to North America from Samoa, where I couldn't help but be struck by the daily ferocity and excess of the media. If *The Wildwest Show* presents a series of questions which are finally about morality, I felt it was important to introduce the filmmaker to answer some of these charges. What follows is a film called *Photo Spot/Terminal City Scapes (8 min 1983)*. It's set up as a series of three phone calls to which the filmmaker responds. In the first of these exchanges the caller purports to be a fan of my work, in the second a curator, and in the third a psychiatrist. As a fan, he wants to glean technical information, which I deny him; as a curator, he wants to contextualize my work according to false historical paradigms; and as a psychiatrist, he says my work shows I'm psychotic, and he offers to psychoanalyze me. This all goes down on the soundtrack, and you hear only my voice on the phone. What you see is something else again. Each of the three calls begins with a set of technical diagrams that relate to scientific principles of perspective or colour saturation. And each set of diagrams is followed by an example of these principles, as if they were applied experiments. On the phone I talk about *Amerika*'s two orifices — Anaheim and Berlin, Disneyland and the Berlin Wall. The orifice is the place where you eat and excrete — culture comes in, products come out. I think there's a connection with the fantasy city of Disneyland as a perceptual orifice that excretes fantasy on people and Berlin which is the barrier between the illusions of America and Russia. Here is the place where real terror, suffering, and death were institutionalized for decades.

Photo Spot is followed by a discussion between Samantha Hamerness and me about the continuation of the film. We're arguing about the accessibility of *Amerika* and its political efficacy. Samantha argues that without a narrative anchor, the viewers are left adrift in a universe of signs that escape decoding by any but the already informed. In order to take apart dominant ideologies, does one assume their form or create another? And where does that leave the viewer? Samantha argues that for a viewer who isn't aware that the media is predicated on sign systems, my film is largely incomprehensible, its effects relegated to a subliminal level. I reply that all images work on a subliminal level and that it's a reasonable political tactic to be able to articulate the subliminal.

MH: But if most people can't understand work on the level of the signifier, regardless of its message, is formal work, or even art, still politically viable?

AR: I'm not talking about reaching mass audiences; I'm talking about reaching an effective audience — work that's impacting on the culture. If it doesn't impact there, then it's an elitist preoccupation between maker and mirror. If the work can inspire some people or unpack different points of view, that's enough. Fifteen years ago, I toured a show of holography across Canada and I met up recently with a woman from Hamilton who saw that show and was moved to make holographic work of her own, a practice she still continues.

MH: The auto-critique discussion between Samantha and you that opens *Amerika*'s third reel - what conclusions do you reach?

AR: Acknowledging that the subliminal is too narrow a political arena, *Amerika* shifts strategies. The last hour features less image manipulation, a more direct political engagement, and an evocation of several mainstream genres: the musical, the chase scene, the psycho thriller. It begins a narrative of sorts — a musical set to the Velvet Underground's "Black Angel's Death Song." The film is called *Exiles (11 min 1983)* and it's a kind of boy-doesn't-meet-girl story. It's shot in two separate locations and both spraypaint signs and slogans on a number of ruined walls. I like this section. It's very restful after all the hard stuff that precedes it; we can just sit back and watch a couple of people write stuff on walls. Formally, I joined the two by a number of flare outs. I took a 400-foot roll of film and flared it in the darkroom and cut it on the Broll so the image continually goes to white. This eradication of the image echoes the nihilistic iconoclasm

in the film. What follows is the longest film in *Amerika* called *The Lonesome Death of Leroy Brown (28 min 1983)*. The first of its two parts shows *Amerika*'s final road trip — cityscapes across North America shot from a moving car. The film cuts between shots that move left and shots moving right, moving closer to its subject until it arrives at a woman who is stalked into a vacant lot where she draws out a gun and shoots at the camera.

MH: Why is she being followed?

AR: Because we're still not finished with the issue of the representation of women in cinema and I wanted to give it a simple reading. This is about as simple as it gets — voyeurism on a basic level. Male gaze equals violence. Like all of the films in *Amerika*'s last hour, *Leroy Brown* takes off from the discussion that Samantha and I had. Samantha says that what this film needs are more literal stratagems of identification, so I'm capitulating to the argument. The formal techniques haven't worked, so I'm giving you the pop version, complete with chase scene and guns. This is followed by a long interior scene where I'm sitting in a chair with a stretch of pantyhose over my face, drinking beer, smoking, watching TV, and pointing guns around the room. It's a real send up of psycho thrillers — all set in a motel room. The TV is playing out a documentary loop of a black guy getting blown away by the cops. The radio is playing Jimmy Swaggart talking about hell, damnation, and all the shit that's going to befall you. So this room is a meeting of two worlds of violence — moral, religious violence, and authoritarian police violence. I called it the "lonesome" death of Leroy Brown because the black man's death on television is one which occurs anonymously, without history or context. In the end, I turn my gun on the camera and shoot out a Plexiglas screen set up in front of it. At a screening in Vancouver a lot of people were upset about this, claiming that I was directing my aggression against the viewer. I said, sure, I'm shooting out the field of view. We've experienced brutalizations of a secondary nature when we're watching images, but this leads on to the point of view itself getting shot out.

MH: It's as if the camera itself is to blame for images that can only lead to estrangement, alienation, bad sex and violent imaginations.

AR: The film has delivered the viewer to a number of excesses. It has attempted to show how meaning is fabricated, and attempted to implicate itself as a film working, at least in part, within this system of signs. It has demonstrated that the filmmaker/author is capable of lying at any time.

MH: If *Amerika*'s first hour has demonstrated the visionary wonder of sixties filmmaking, its second leads on to an examination of signs and surfaces — Las Vegas fronts and television — and its structural strategies are in keeping with the seventies. This hour closes with the enigmatic *Photo Spot*, a film which reaffirms the filmmaker as an isolated technician, working out problems in the paranoid seclusion of his studio. *Amerika*'s third hour begins the task of reconstructing a social order — raising questions of engagement and accountability which are at once personal and political. This social order is staged in a number of narrative fragments which are no less brutal than some of the borrowed media fragments which have preceded it. It's filled with ruined buildings, smashed television sets and attempted murders. It also makes explicit a theme which grows in importance as the film progresses, namely, a male-female dynamic which insistently returns to the question: what is a women's place in patriarchy? The answer: brutalization, neglect, abuse, or answering the violence of their environment with a violence of their own.

AR: It parodies the male discourse by taking on the film theory fave notion that the male gaze is perverse — it fetishizes, disavows, and fears castration. You've got this played out to its logical extreme. By the film's end the male has become a drunken terrorist, repeatedly consuming images of violence and responding by shooting out the camera. His attitude to women: we'll either fuck you or kill you. If we can't control you, we'll murder. To control we'll use everything we've got: media, pornography, fashion, glamour, money, the works. Males have been controlling the production, sexualization, and dissemination of images, and this is the process that *Amerika*

explores. The technological fetishization of the image in the first hour deals with astronauts, cars, wars, and atomic bombs, all aestheticized in a romantic, universalist fashion. But then it turns to an examination of the media itself in terms of gender representation. Then things get ugly. And stay there. As far as my work is concerned, there is an early interest in pop-culture and political agitation in the late sixties, non-Oriental mysticism (alchemy) in the early seventies, openly political and anarchist stratagems in the late seventies and early eighties, with a heightened dedication to political avant-garde practice in the current phase. I think it's important to see avant-garde film generally as occupying a relationship to the era and culture within which it exists, and that each form of the "avant-garde" is but a moment in a larger process of perceptual change and perpetual revolution which derives its legitimacy from engagement rather than fixity and essential qualities. I use the term "avant-garde" instead of "experimental" because I think it better identifies the kind of cinema that I refer to (the political, the transformational, the artistic, and those historically linked to the other avant-gardes); I don't believe it is "dead" or has outlived its usefulness in shaking up the status quo. If ever there were a time when shaking up is necessary, it is now, in the age of mass communication, mass propaganda, mass conformist lifestyles, an age that is dangerously close to a holocaust. An art for this age is an art that responds, in part or in total, to these world-wide issues or is at least conscious of the context. "Experimental," to me, connotes apolitical isolation.

REGINA vs.
Ian McLachlan, Susan Ditta, Al Razutis, David Bierk The Theatres Act
Provincial Court, Criminal Division
Peterborough, Ontario
June 22nd to June 25th, 1982

By Al Razutis

YOU WRITE WHAT YOU'RE TOLD!

indymedia
Independent Media Network

THANKS, CORPORATE NEWS!
We Couldn't Control The People Without You

A MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTRY OF HOMELAND SECURITY

1.0.0 Introduction

On April 28, 1981 charges were laid for the first time in the history of the Ontario Theatres Act in relation to the exhibition of a film. Four people - David Bierk, executive director of Artspace; Susan Ditta, executive director of Canadian Images; Ian McLachlan, board member of Canadian Images and Artspace; and Al Razutis, filmmaker - were charged with exhibiting a film "that had not been approved by the Board of Censors", to wit: A Message From Our Sponsor.

This charge stemmed from a March 13, 1981 screening of the film at the Canadian Images Film Festival. After numerous delays, the case was finally brought to trial on June 22, 1982. During three days of testimony and the appearance of 15 witnesses, the filing of 32 exhibits, and two film screenings, the case generated scant news coverage. In fact, several days prior to the trial, a feature story on Mary Brown, director of the Board of Censors, and the operations of the board had appeared in the Toronto Star.

By June of 1982, it seemed that this war of nerves between the "Peterborough Four" and the Censor Board, as carried out in the media and the courts, was reaching exhaustion, with the Board demonstrating its upper hand in public relations and legal maneuvers.

1.0.1

The circumstances leading up to the trial bordered on the bizarre. A Message From Our Sponsor (henceforth A Message) was a nine-minute section of a longer work in progress, Amerika, and featured an ironic combination of advertising images juxtaposed with a few stock

pornographic shots. Within Amerika, A Message functioned as a metalinguistic commercial; its intent was to critique and parody sexist advertising, with an explicit focus on connotative codes (arising in images and sounds, character and fable) that appear in the construction of sexual role models and stereotypes.

The theme of the film was the com modification of sexuality and the creation of consumer needs as products; the strategy of the film was to situate the viewer as part of the construction of the subject - an ambiguous subject in this case - as part of a discourse that constantly shifted positioning, meaning and terms of reference. A Message was therefore polysemic and unstable - one could construct no single conclusion or point of view from its narrative.

2.0.0. Chronology.

In June, 1980 the film was exhibited as part of the National Gallery Series IV package in Ottawa without incident. It was only when this package was sent to Toronto for a September screening at the Funnel Theatre that it came to the attention of the Censor Board.

The response of the Board was quick and direct: Mary Brown, director of the Board, contacted the Ontario Provincial Police and relayed through them a directive to the National Gallery curator, Darcy Edgar, that A Message would have to be cut or withdrawn. If the offensive material was not eliminated, the police informed Ms Edgar, she would be liable to arrest and prosecution for distributing pornographic material. Mary Brown went public and asserted (in several news articles) that this film contained material that contravened the Criminal Code of Canada.

While the Gallery administration, over the objections of the curator, was prepared to withdraw the film, a protest was mounted by the participating filmmakers (Patricia Gruben, Rick Hancox et al) threatening to withdraw all the films from the package if A Message was censored. After several months of protest, letter writing and negotiations between filmmakers and Gallery (negotiations by Anna Gronau acting on behalf of the filmmakers), the results amounted to a standoff: the Gallery reinstated the film, but left it up to the provincial censors to decide the fate of each screening, and the filmmakers dropped the proposed boycott.

2.0.1

Early in 1981 several exhibition houses (the Funnel, Art Gallery of Ontario) obtained special permits from the Board for one-time screenings of selected "art films": Rameau 's Nephew... and Presents by Michael Snow, and The Art of Worldly Wisdom by Bruce Elder. The Board said filmmakers of "international reputation" with work exhibiting "artistic merit" qualified for special exemptions.

It is not surprising that these exemptions were granted after personal meetings between Elder, Snow and Mary Brown to discuss how to deal with "art films", since it was in the interest of all parties to safeguard their position, whether political or legal.

What is surprising, however, is that these discussions (and I think "secret negotiations" is appropriate) directly contradicted a public stance (especially on the part of Elder) that portrayed a categorical opposition to censorship. These negotiations resulted in privileging a few artists and dividing the anti-censorship movement between those who sought special

exemption for the arts and those who sought an end to censorship.

Never before had the anti-censorship movement been so cleverly manipulated by a state apparatus that eventually could cancel all exemptions or redefine its standards when and if it so wished. For what was made clear by the Elder negotiations was that the politics of the avant-garde were still tainted with bourgeois and elitist art values synonymous to those espoused by the Board.

2.0.2

On the west coast, though not because of any regional difference in politics, the issues of censorship were pursued in a different manner: Cine works, then a fledgling organization, organized a national tour of its films (including A Message) and boycotted any exhibition house (the first being the National Film Theatre in Edmonton) that allowed censorship of the individual films. The Cineworks stance continued the categorical anti-censorship tradition started by the filmmakers of the National Gallery's Series IV.

By spring of 1981, Not a Love Story, with its anti-pornography and pro-censorship stance, joined the short list of films first banned by the Ontario Board of Censors, then granted special permits. The film featured hard core pornographic imagery similar to that of A Message and in length and number that well exceeded the short fragments found in A Message.

Presumably the Board saw in the NFB film a context for pornography that was not only redeeming but also synonymous with the Board's own position on pornography and violence. The didactic exposition of Not a Love Story, with

its submerged pro-censorship message, proved sufficient reason for the Board to grant the film numerous permits for one-time exhibitions to large audiences. In Not a Love Story the Board had found an ideological ally and a shining example of its "liberal" educational interests in spreading the gospel of restraint and censorship.

2.0.3

Throughout 1982, the one film that remained banned outright was A Message. In the opinion of the Board, this film was "obscene" and represented "undue exploitation of sex". As Douglas Walker (a member of the Board, and the first to recommend the cuts) was later to testify in Peterborough, the only way this film could be shown was "perhaps for a study group... a film study group".
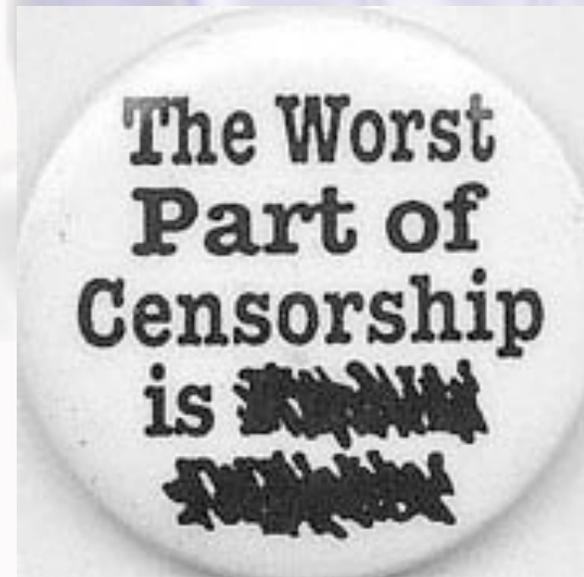
However, Officer Petrozeles of the Ontario Provincial Police "P Squad" felt the film had little film studies merit. Prior to the trial, he candidly remarked to the author that he was convinced the film's analytical material and structure was a smokescreen for the pornography. He further indicated that some (unnamed) academics supported him in these views.

Mary Brown, while concurring with Walker and Petrozeles, added (in a private disclosure to the author during a trial recess) that she believed the film was a rallying point for anarchist attempts to overthrow the authority of the Censor Board.

2.0.4

The various "arrangements" and discussions between the Censor Board, Ontario art exhibitors and the Ontario Arts Council suffered a set back when the film was screened without "permission" at the Canadian Images Film Festival on March 13, 1981.

The collective decision to screen the film was based on discussion and con siderations about what constituted civil and institutional rights to free expression, and was supported by the president of Trent University, which was the festival's main backer. Thus, the screening brought out into the open the ideological differences between a more "fine-arts" (read bourgeois) film practice that sought special exemption and a more socially oriented practice that sought to participate in social and legal change.

A month after the screening, charges were laid under the Theatres Act of Ontario. No charges were ever brought forward under the Criminal Code (the obscenity sections 158-

160 cited by Mary Brown), though this consideration was clearly on the mind of Officer Petrozeles in his new role as a member of a federal task force on pornography. (Petrozeles would continue to maintain, in June 1982, that it was a mistake to charge the film only under a provincial statute, and that an indictment under the federal code would have been appropriate.)

3.0.0 Issues Arising From, and Impinging on, the Peterborough Trial

A trial is hardly a public forum for debate and discussion. Often the case is framed within terms and definitions that are highly procedural, technical if not rhetorical. Thus Mary Brown's declaration that this would be a test case was something of a misnomer. Clearly, she felt the Board's authority was challenged, but aside from the main legal arguments concerning the constitutionality of the Board and its place within a new Charter of Rights, many of the other issues were submerged and deflected.

The defendants, as is common in all criminal proceedings, were advised by counsel to remain silent, to avoid discussing the case or circumstances or issues relating to the screening with the media. In retrospect, this was an unfortunate decision: The silence could be seen as advantageous to the Censor Board and its enforcement allies, the Crown and the police.

The technical advantage of "non incrimination" (and how can defendants accurately gauge what is incriminating?) should be measured against what was lost in public protest, debate and publicity concerning censorship. To be in fear of self-incrimination is to be silent; to be subjected to long waiting periods (the case took over a year to come to trial) is to be
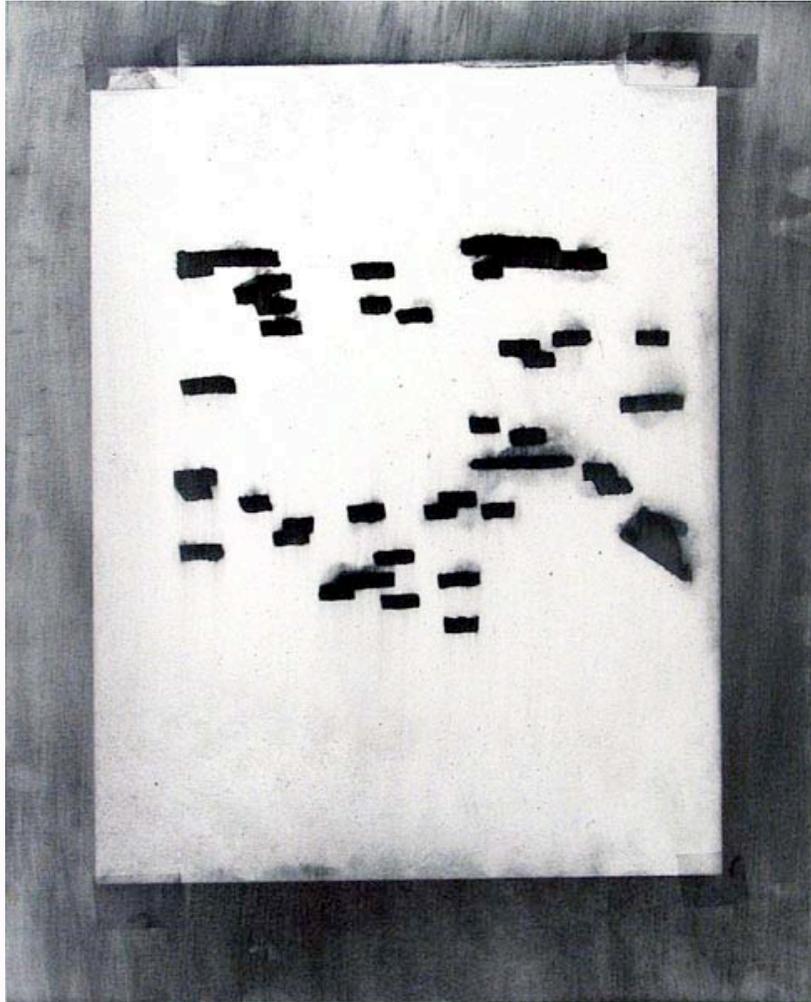
subjected to escalating legal costs and difficulty in maintaining an energetic defence. Fortunately, the defendants never broke ranks (accepting "deals" proposed by the Crown) or abandoned their resistance to the charges. Fortunately also, the arts community rallied in support.

3.0.1

In the escalating debates concerning pornography, censorship, the rights of individuals versus the regulatory powers of the state (or to put it in class terms, the rights of the oppressed versus the powers of the oppressors), much division was evident in both avant-garde and feminist circles.

The avant-garde film community was divided between those who viewed art as a special (valued) practice that should exist outside equal application of the law, and those who viewed its politics tied to social change. The commercial sector was content to sit idly and hope for a more liberalizing outcome than the one that required The Tin Drum to submit to three cuts in Ontario.

Feminist cultural politics were fragmented along ideological lines and on pragmatic issues between those in favor of various forms of censorship and those categorically opposed to any form of censorship. Pro-censorship was a mixed bag of moralizing arguments that, in effect, cut through the ideological barriers separating the Left from the Right.

There were arguments, for example, that justified censorship as the only method of stopping "hate" literature directed against women and children (that is, violent pornography). This argument, as an essentialist defence of love and innocence, found support in moral majority circles as well as

leftist anti-pornography circles, and was fundamental to the anti-pornography lesbian protest.

It was generally agreed that the perversion of eroticism by violence (the introduction of sadism as a term) had to be stopped. What was not clear was what constituted "erotic" expression. To the moral majority, eroticism must be tied to the values that are accept able within fundamentalist Christian dogma; to pro-censorship lesbian-separatists erotic terms are specifically anti-male and support an idealized "essence" of womanhood. For a bourgeois fine-art interest, eroticism (for example, Elder's use of masturbatory images in The Art of Worldly Wisdom) is a kind of "right to expression", outside of ideology and social discourse.

What unified the pro-censorship exponents was their moralist conception that censorship could rid society of "evil" or "hate" and return eros to the status of purity, love and utopian expression. Thus the defence of women and children (a popular reductive slogan) was as important to left-wing pro-censorship interests as it was to Mary Brown and her censorship model (which she testified was based on the example set in England, where "they have a concern for children").

The pro-censorship stance is precisely an essentialist defence of abstractions and idealized conceptions that (by definition) exist outside society, history and ideology. It is also precisely a reactionary form of political activity that suppresses dialogue and dialectics in favor of moral solutions. The alternative is a socialist critique (and action) that situates the protest within a critique of capitalism, commodification and patriarchal norms of language and definition - that is, within the social, economic

and psychic forms of exchange that promote and support pornography.

3.0.2

A socialist-feminist critique such as the one proposed by Varda Burstyn provides the clearest example of analysis, politics and resistance to sexist (hetero- and homo-) dogma. Writing in Fuse (February 1983), Burstyn noted the connection between capitalism and sexism when she deliberated on the characteristics of the "vast and intricate sex industry.., commodity fetishism" that converts sexuality into consumer goods in the capitalist enterprise of wealth and power. "This sexuality is increasingly commodified and commodities increasingly sexualized", she added.

In Burstyn's view, violent sexual representations are not the same as the actions they depict, but represent extreme stages of repression and alienation. The fetishizing of sexuality

through commodity, the setting in motion of denial and compensation (through consumption of surrogate goods), and the place of these fetishizing practices in maintaining patriarchy and misogyny are concerns crucial to her thesis (as well as that of A Message).

Burstyn's arguments are more sophisticated than feminist essentialist assertions of a psycho sexuality based on gender difference and cultural conditioning. Her arguments also avoid a reduction to a simple moral equation that situates eroticism in terms of "good" or "bad", "politically correct" or "politically incorrect". " I don't think it's an accident that social doctrines which advocate sexual repression always also express the view that humans are basically nasty" she concludes.

The pro-censorship moralist argument which acts to specify privilege and virtue to sexual activity (either heterosexual or homosexual) usually includes conceptions of good-bad correct-incorrect binaries situated along gender, class and erotogenic lines. The traditional binary of men (as sadists, voyeurs) versus women (as masochists, exhibitionists) may be satisfactory to a conception that specifies men as rapists and women as victims, but it is precisely this reduction that makes further analysis impossible and any political analysis arising therefrom nonsensical.

The essentialist argument sees nature as something to be feared, some thing to be repressed. It sees human nature intrinsically tied to violence and Thanatos rather than to love and Eros. The essentialist sees culture (and its institutions) as necessary to the repression or subjugation of nature by language. It may be precisely this repression itself that breeds violence and sadism, as the German "experiment" of the 30s and 40s possibly illustrated.

3.0.3

Ian McLachlan's views speak of the bridging of politics and art within a mutual dialectic of struggle. In The McGill Daily (April 8, 1983) he was quoted as saying: "The vitality of any art comes from its resistance to the hierarchies and norms of society... Censorship, on the other hand, is an attempt to suppress such resistance or reinterpretation... Art is always produced as a break from the system."

Clearly, art cannot exist completely outside the system, nor can it act in complicity with dominant social and cultural norms and institutions if it hopes to be an unsettling force of resistance and change. McLachlan's views are generally uncompromising when it comes to activism and resistance, and it is precisely in this spirit of vitality that the Peterborough arts community acted to resist the Toronto-based Ontario Censor Board.

FUCK censorship

A PUBLIC SERVICE OF BUREAUCRASH.COM
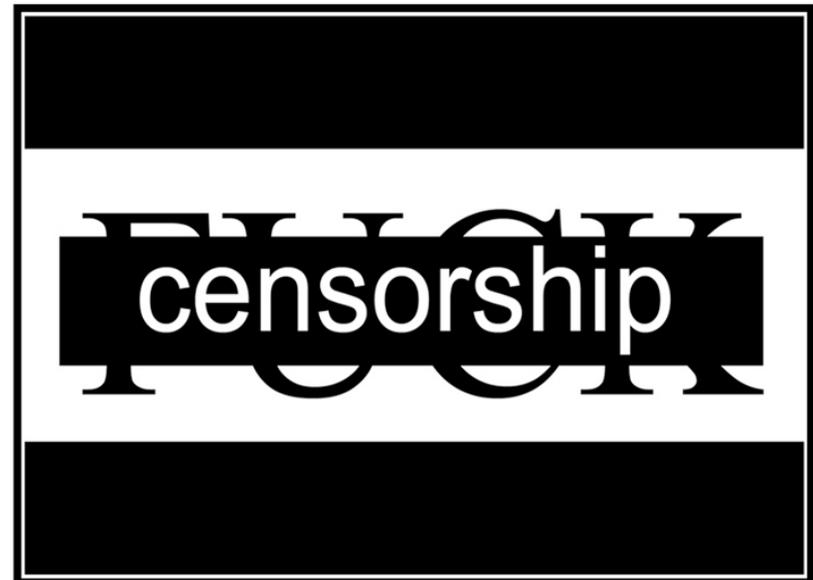
3.0.4

The coming together of a politicized avant-garde film practice, a politicized arts community of educators and administrators, and the present-day contexts of media, representation and activism characterized the Canadian Images film screening of A Message.

The Toronto-based "high-art" values of Elder had proven to be self-serving and politically counter-productive; the hand of the Censor Board was forced, not by secret negotiations, but by a public action that challenged a form of repression that had succeeded in dominating both the Left and the Right.

4.0.0. Excerpts from the Peterborough Trial Transcript

(EXCERPTS OMITTED)
CENSOR BOARD (1984)

A ruling that could severely limit or end the censoring powers of the Ontario Censor Board is being appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada.

The Ontario Court of Appeal had ruled that the Censor Board violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and is therefore illegal. The decision substantially upheld a Divisional Court ruling last year that sections of the Ontario Theatres Act violate the freedom-of-expression guarantee in the Charter.

That decision was the result of a case which challenged the Censor Board's ruling on four films: A Message From Our Sponsor by Al Razutis, Rameau 's Nephew by Michael Snow, The Art of Worldly Wisdom by Bruce Elder and the NFB's Not a Love Story. The Censor Board had ordered cuts on the first three and would not allow Not a Love Story to be shown in general release.

The Appeal Court ruled that the Theatres Act section permitting the board to censor or cut films is "ultra vires as it stands" - meaning the section goes beyond the power the Censor Board is legally permitted. However, while the judgment is under appeal to the Supreme Court, the Censor Board may continue to legally classify and cut films.

The Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society brought the case to court and the Ontario government has been ordered to pay part of its legal costs no matter what the outcome of the Supreme Court ruling, expected next spring. The society's lawyer, Lynn King, had argued that the Censor Board's guidelines left a filmmaker with no way of knowing what was permitted under the law.
Opsis, Spring 1984

Index of OPSIS articles on the web

Nothing Personal

by Al Razutis

It is with some amazement that I still hear the terms 'avant-garde' and 'experimental' tossed around, usually interchangeably, by the film community and worn out academics in search of something interesting to augment their empty agendas. Every several years, in cycles that are both predictable and tedious, a search is conducted in Kanadian (reactionary) film theory as to "what is happening NOW?," who is doing 'important' work suited for inclusion in the latest rehash on Kanadian 'post-modernist' film. We still read about the 'pre-eminence' of landscape, photography and alienation 'mediating reality.' The winters must be long, the tundra everywhere and on everyone's introspective agenda. And yes, there is always the reappearance of typically chauvinist rhetoric: the truly Kanadian fixation on symbol, flag and outdated philosophies like Christian mysticism and the "ontological nature of the photograph." None of this is surprising. Throughout North America we see a resurgence in fundamentalist thinking, ideologies of alienation and a historicizing of mythological codes. Even the unintellectual George Bush these days is wrapping himself in a flag, uttering nonsense about "mainstream" Amerika and the "glorious" past years all the while dismissing realities like poverty and drug financing as "minor errors in judgment." Kanadian film theory, and its academic associations, are largely irrelevant and unable to account for the many film practices. Facing their own impotence they resort to rhetorical havens (the academic-tenured network of obfuscators) in search for that which is truly and only Kanadian: the alienated and apolitical landscape artist pondering his/her own "shroud of Turin." Disseminated in classrooms, anthologies and conferences this fixation on an antiquated metaphysics (structuralism in its most neurotic form) is the last gasp of a dying ideology. But rather than die or be forgotten it hangs on like some patient in a cancer ward, simply because there are no theoretical 'alternatives' for the already intimidated film community to hang on to. Kanadian film theory has produced a condition akin to a state cultural apparatus without which most are unable to work.

After nearly two decades of working outside of and within various academias, teaching, writing and filmmaking, I see the cultural and intellectual (film) paralysis gaining ground. Those who could in the same breath invoke "The Post-Modern Scene"—its "excremental culture and hyper-aesthetics" along with alienation, landscape and ontological "nature" abound. Ironically, there is a conjunction "between those who have nothing to say and the masses who do not speak." Sadly there is an "ominous emptiness of all discourse," a condition that is submerged under the weight of the ongoing Kanadian identity crisis and its own "nostalgia for a sublime transcendent" (the genius in search of his own 'self' in a by-gone landscape).

Rear-Guard Looking for its Avant-Garde:
Networks of influence are the typical output of institutions in pursuit of consolidating their power/influence. These networks in film culture are found in university film associations, their critical journals, their conference activities and film curators eager to ape the latest in-vogue 'discourse.' Rear-guard ideologies are essentially conservative, venerating bourgeois mythologies of utopia and alienation (of the individual in crisis). Universities, by their very design, promote a conservative attitude towards culture and represent the best resistance to culture shock, transgression, disruption (of norm), radical change. Within academic hierarchies are the conditions which are most resistant to avant-gardism. Film departments with their abundance of equipment, library resources and salary base are current havens for many filmmakers, experimental once, now retired. I have seen enough examples of filmmakers, once creative and courageous, now retired in art colleges or universities to make me wonder how long their charade of 'progressive' education can go on. In one particular case, I witnessed an old acquaintance of mine turn to education for the purpose of steady income, seduction of his female students and continuation of creative bankruptcy...

What about the filmmaker who recently posed with a Canadian flag (a penis substitute?) on the cover of Canada's film magazine? For many experimental (and especially avant-garde) filmmakers this would truly be the 'kiss of death.' The formula has always worked and been the same: filmmaker discusses his/her work as biographic preliminaries leading to name-dropping of current personalities, self-inclusive theoretical paradigms and nationalist symbology (the flag, landscape and mediation theories, self-image, etc.) "Raising the standard of experimental film?" Bullshit. This is strictly self-promotion presumably leading to more grants, screenings, invitations to speak, conferences, inclusion in anthologies, tenure and promotion. The network of rear-guard mentality masquerading as progressive (conservatives). The tendency to attach oneself to existing fashionable theory and symbol is symptomatic of creative bankruptcy, intellectual cowardice, if not laziness. Next year someone else will rediscover the same old formula. Anyone who has read this magazine has seen it for decades. And you know what? It works! Because the "ominous emptiness of all discourse" overwhelms the critically incisive, the radical and unsettling factors of living culture. What ever happened to Lacan and New Narrative? One hardly hears about that anymore—it is out of fashion. Even feminists seem to have abandoned it now seeing "the lack" and "castration anxiety" for what it was, a cruel Freudian sexism that was ultimately anti-female in theory and practice. But how many experimental "theoretically informed" filmmakers tried to ape that formula? How many analytical essays were written "informed by Lacan and Freud" before a kind of collective amnesia took place? Yet, many of the perpetrators of this discursive fraud are now entrenched in universities, along with their film noir and Hitchcock collections, along with their English Department cronies (those who conveniently switched to film studies and semiotics), along with their tenure and promotion. I watched for years in a film department I helped create (and which I left) the networking of influence, the ideology of disinformation lead to the consolidation of 'new narrative' vested

Interests, curriculum control and low workload. I should have known better than to assume that debate and discursive differences were possible. After all, culture and education are big business requiring political acumen and a networking of theoretical interests (letters of reference, publishing credits, etc.)

The selling of marginal film talent in Canada depends on the confluence of multiple factors and nowhere better is it typified than in the case of yet another filmmaker-educator-critic (unnamed, because I don't want to be accused of being 'personal') from the Winter Palace in the Great White North. It was absolutely remarkable to see this filmmaker's career take off in a short span of time based on his abilities to control distribution board meetings, hiring of experimental film officers, based on his almost singular control of Canadian curating and export of experimental film to international film festivals and retrospectives. He effected almost a stranglehold on 'experimental film theory' by the mere invention of self-serving paradigms which invoked the Kanadian sensibility of 'man and nature' and the mediating influence of that typically Canadian invention, the 'photographic' image. In all fairness to this filmmaker-critic, his efforts at promoting theory and discourse (however self-serving) would be a welcome addition in the intellectual wasteland of experimental film culture. However, the ethics of control and containment, by which he and his fellow academic cronies conducted themselves is at least questionable if not immoral. How could one defend actions such as his exploitation of censorship (THE issue of Canadian film for a while) by on the one hand promoting himself as a 'victim,' getting press all the time, and on the other hand having clandestine meetings with the Censor to discuss 'what to do about this problem.' In all of this, an indispensable condition of silence by his critics existed. Only back room mutterings, off the record remarks: silence and cowardice on the part of those who do not speak for fear of being theoretically and historically excluded by the literary cronies that run the critical apparatus.

What is at issue here is not only the vacuum of informed criticism but its arrogance and effects on continuing film practice. For what is most alarming now (to this writer) is that much the same old network is resurfacing to ask the question: "What exactly is happening NOW in the international avant-garde film?" (International Experimental Film Congress, 1989, Toronto, Canada). They would be better off to ponder what is exactly happening with rear-guard film and settle down for a week of outs from Canada's long suffering and Christ-like filmmaker, the very same hero for our excremental times.

In the meantime the critical hacks will continue on, assured of success by an apathetic and uncritical film community. Many filmmakers will say, "Why bother? I'll get my turn on the cover of Cinema Canada. I'll get my show and letter of grant reference." The "gimme" mentality of mention, the kiss of death mistaken for affection, the romantic quest for fame (there is no fortune to be made here unless you get your university appointment folks!) drives everyone into the asshole of what really is happening "NOW" in film theory and practice.

As I perceive it, the choices facing most are:

Pass the toilet paper and sit in your cubicle until the sewer system plugs up (that is until the next academic conference).

Get used to the smell of it all and maybe soon you'll develop an appetite for shit (symbolism, obfuscation, the flag, name dropping, experimental film ghettos, travel grants to safe (sponsored) exhibition houses, mention in sponsored/subsidized publications).

Become a clever plagiarist; make your work in a "theoretically informed manner" (don't forget the flag); act non-committal in all political issues and as soon as regionalism, censorship or any number of causes arise make sure your work is included (along with an appropriate quote by you).

Or finally free yourself of this and all kinds of bullshit and be unconcerned whether you fit that school of thought or another, whether your films are "modern" or "post-modern," Canadian, Kanadian or international. Free yourself from determinations and the obligation to identify your inspiration as being the tundra, factories, television, people and/or "Michael Snow." And free yourself from intimidation by scribblers and quasi-theorists (they're looking for a warm place to shit, you need not worry), and free yourself from the notion that history and theory will exclude you.

And then, if you can free yourself from being Kanadian (or anti-Kanadian, un-Kanadian...) then you can discover your own praxis and that creative imagination which is not celebrated in the cancer ward of suffering romanticism.

(Originally published in The Independent Eye, Vol. 10, No. 1, Fall 1988)

SELLING THE PRODUCT

AMERIKA

SINGLE SCREEN LENGTH 170 min. - THREE-SCREEN LENGTH 56 min.

'AMERIKA' REEL ONE - component segments/films:

THE CITIES OF EDEN

8 min. sepia color 1976

Reconstructed from turn-of the century footage, an ironic vision of high industrial pomp and pageantry - in substantial shadows of ancient prerogatives engulfed by history.

The original historic footage is rendered as 'bas relief' in changing sepia tones.

Sections include: **'The Cities of Eden', 'The Parades of Eden'**, the **'Machines of Eden'** and **'The Closing Night of Eden'**

SOFTWARE/HEAD TITLE

3 min. color 1972

The pixel lights of the industrialized world (electrical power) are re-formed in the speckles and patterned light of the video screen -- a metaphor for energy as information transfer, but still at the service of the power structure.

VORTEX

14 min. color 1972

In **VORTEX**, the intense subjectivity of techno-psychedelia converges with the technological gamesmanship of the space race.

This *film-video hybrid*, created from experiments in film and video image manipulation, features some of the earliest analog video synthesizer processing combined with film optical printing and driven by a pulsating ARP synthesizer soundtrack. Analog synthesis as precussor to digital effects. The subject matter, however, is 'space' and extinction.


ATOMIC GARDENING

6 min. color 1981

Biological mutation in the eerie white light of nuclear annihilation and NORAD missle launch countdowns are suggested in macro time-lapse of strange crystaline growth on NATO integrated-circuit boards.

'This is not a test...?'
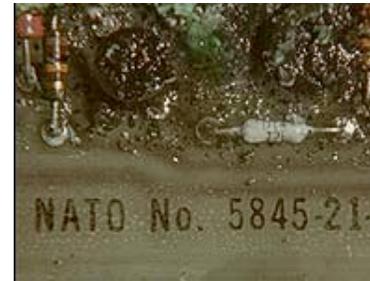
MOTEL ROW - Part One

8 min. color 1982

A vision of the the wasteland, and absence, of image industries, time-capsuled and entombed in our ruined cities. 'Messages to whom?' scrawled on graffiti walls.

'West-Coast' and 'East-Coast' necropolis with inner chambers populated by glowing monitors and historical, mythical, and mystical referents. 'The Somnambulism of the Rich' obsessed with after-life and 'Egyptian' mythos.

Cameo poster appearance by the grave-robbers of 'Wolfman' (sound) and Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher (pictured).

98.3 KHz: (BRIDGE AT ELECTRICAL STORM

13 min. color 1973

The suspension bridge as electromagnetic tower, antenna for sixty years of radio waves and engulfed in video storm. A spatial image of the transition from an industrial society linked by transport to a post industrial society linked by communications.

A repeating journey across the San Francisco Bay Bridge becomes a journey into disintegrating visuals, video transformation, with an accompanying sound track taken from "40 years of Radio". As a film, it anticipated the end of the film medium, and the emergence of the video medium.

Films like these broke new ground in the experimental film 70's because the film-video 'hybrid' tended to violate that 'special insularity' that both film and video artists of that time enjoyed.

As a single element of *AMERIKA*, **98.3 KHz: (Bridge at Electrical Storm** has garnered the most festival awards and exposure.

MOTEL ROW (Part 2)

12 min. color 1980

It's a drive-by journey through Vegas style landscapes where sexual recreation and libidinal flow frozen into electronic signs and signals, voyeurism and commodity, image consumption, and sounds from the mediascape.

Featuring a long tracking shot of the 'motel row' of Reno, Nevada, interspersed with 'adult tv' (pornography clips), this voyage of alienation culminates in a electronic burlesque sequence (**'Runway Queen'**) which teases the viewer with *synaesthetics and noise*.
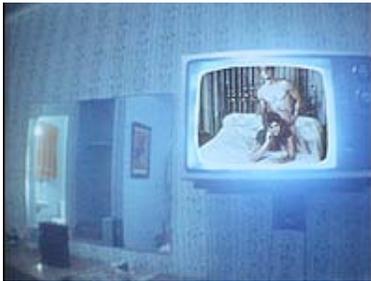
REFRAIN(S)

Various durations - various subjects - 1982-3

REFRAIN(S) is a moment, or a series of moments, on 'theoretically informed reflection' - lampooning the conceits of *Film Theory* and *Film Analysis* (dominated in the 80's by something termed 'psychoanalysis of the cinema' - Mulvey, Penley, et al.)

Each **REFRAIN(S)** combines a disconnected - reconnected soundtrack from Vaudeville radio shows with images from the film (as ground) and an on-screen 'bozo' dummy (as figure). Not for the 'theoretically uninformed'.

AMERIKA REEL TWO FILMS:

THE WASTELAND AND OTHER STORIES...

15 min. color 1976

Travel as mediated spectacle, a time lapse journey from Vancouver to Las Vegas; speed as stasis, abstraction, violence, culminating in a 'televised abduction at the border' and a 'letter to home'.

Who is the voyeur, who is the object of the 'gaze'?

REFRAIN(S)

Various durations - various subjects - 1982-3

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MOTEL ROW (Part 3)

5 min. sepia color 1981

Flash-forward to abandonment, desolation. Empty amusement park(s) of childhood's (and AMERIKA's) 'past'.

WILDWEST SHOW

12 min. color 1980

WILDWEST SHOW re-tells a "day in the life" of "Television City" - an urban landscape that features the most exaggerated moments of Western history iconically portrayed in large billboards.

The main vehicle for the narrative is the game show format, where players attempt to surmise whether the question posed is true or false. We witness a visual panorama that includes footage of stunts, science fiction, war, atrocity, natural disasters, news, and commercial interruptions. This is a society in which meanings are lost, truths are indistinguishable from lies. The society itself, one could say, has lost it, lost a sense of meaning, proportion, authenticity. The film poses the ultimate question: *"Did Amerika really look like this?"*

A MESSAGE FROM OUR SPONSOR

9 min. color 1979

A Message from Our Sponsor   deals with television and its mythologies - the fetishization of violence through competition (seen as a dominant historical process in American culture), and the fetishization of sexuality through consumption. The film uses only 'appropriated footage' (unlicensed, copied, etc.)

The claustrophobia of media "reality" - compartmentalized into game shows, movies, news reports, commercials - is presented as continuous interchangeable spectacle. This film looks at the ideology of misrepresentation, the turning of facts into icons, history into myth. It analyzes the media's metalanguage, especially the image of woman as spectacle and commodity; and the psychology and economics of male voyeurism.

This film was banned (due to some brief hard-core sequences) in Ontario, and Alberta in the 1980's, and resulted in court actions, arrests of Canadian Images Film Festival organizers, and a Supreme Court of Canada ruling in favor of the film - a ruling that effectively dismantled the powers of the **Ontario Board of Censors**.

PHOTO SPOT

10 min. color 1983

The filmmaker, as reluctant host, confronts his audience as pest (art historian, film critic, psychoanalyst).

The direct, personal intrusion of the filmmaker's voice is set against scientific charts about visual perception and film chemistry, and optically constructed scenes linked by the concepts of the photogenic and the pervasiveness of perceptual/technical "error."

You talkin' to me; who's talkin to whom?

AMERIKA REEL THREE FILMS:

EXILES

10 min. color 1983

Urban 'deconstruction' and graffiti is presented as a form of guerilla warfare against current "industry standards" for society, political organization, and cinema; as a form of resistance to the ideologies of naturalism and biologism.

Soundrack of soundscapes and appropriated '**Black Angel's Death Song'** (Velvet Underground - Lou Reed vocal).

THE LONESOME DEATH OF LEROY BROWN

25 min. color 1983

A two-part voyage: the first through the ruins of Amerika, culminating in a voyeuristic stalking of a 'victim'. The second, a meditation on television violence, evangelism and the viewing subject. This film is a culmination of social and personal disintegration, desolation, decay and entropy - the end of western history as male narcissistic fixation on the self.

The absent viewer/subject of Reels One and Two emerges as "the last man on earth," and as either a 'victim', or 'with a captive victim'.

In **Part One**, shot from a car window, the camera tracks back and forth ('the structural avant-garde') until it has located it's 'subject', a blonde female (appearing throughout the film) who suddenly turns on the voyeur-camera and fires her gun, and not killing 'him' flees.

In **Part Two** , we see a similar female sprawled unconsciously on the background bed as the 'drunken pervert' watches a repeating scene of a black man being shot by police on TV. As the 'real' Jimmy Swaggart spews 'fire and brimstone' on the radio, the protagonist is getting 'his nerve up'...and then slowly he turns and blows the observing (tv) screen away.

'AMERIKA': a culture of voyeurism and violence taken to the extreme...beyond what academics can 'ponder' and theorize with all of their own 'subjectivities, this is the stage where pathology becomes Nixon-era 'entertainment'...'tell me it ain't so'.

(FIN)*

10 min. color 1983

As a closing thought, and a sequel to **A MESSAGE FROM OUR SPONSOR**, *(Fin)*** deals with the auto-destruction of *Amerika* as a discourse, ultimately questioning the image, its provenance, authorship, and interpretation. It presents the final deconstruction of the viewer as subject of media metalanguage.

This film features a compilation of clips from 'Cannes Festival Winning Commercials', horror movies, and running subtitles which proclaim that the theme of 'Amerika' is 'image-bank robbery'... 'rip them off....anarchy rules, O.K.!'

O KANADA!

5 min. color 1982

The CBC-TV sign-off in historical and cosmic perspective, with the 60's separatist riots in Quebec as the subject (and backdrop).
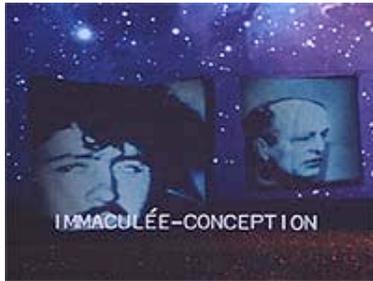
Visual Essays: Origins of Film

56 min. color, sound 1973-1984

These six essays on film/image history attempt to reconstruct the vision of cinematic creation occurring in the minds of cinema's "primitives" ; together they comprise a critical/structural investigation of silent cinema. "I thought it necessary to engage the original film texts by creating a process of `discovery' wherein the viewer could partake in the `myth of creation' without being encumbered by the full questions of ideological significance, historical placement, and authorship." (A.R.)

"Both the visual artist and the educator make their appearances throughout *Origins of Film,* but it looks to be the poet who has the final say. Informing the overall shape of the project is an argument that is presented at a number of levels. Each film is structured around a distinct set of optical printing and collage techniques [and] ... embodies a `look' which becomes the film's central strategy and metaphor." (Peter Chapman, *Independent Eye*)
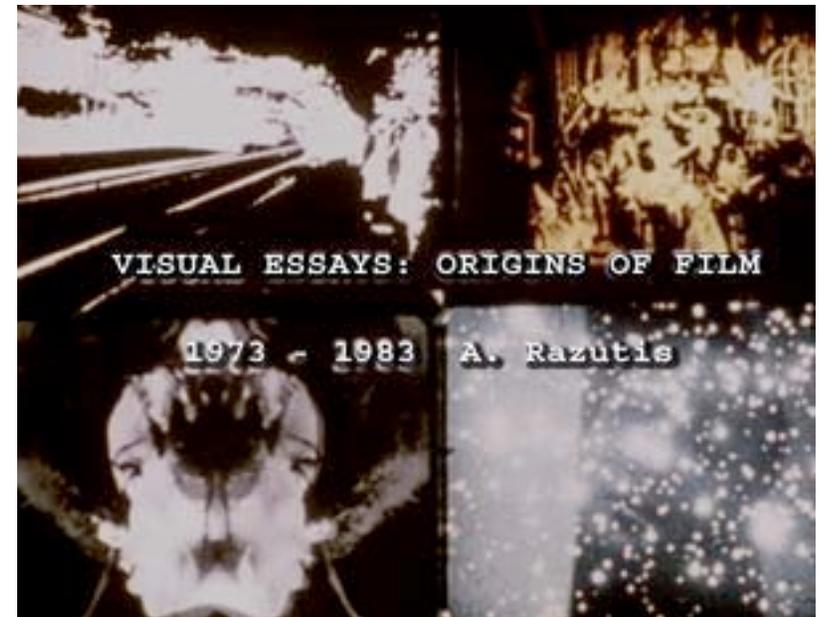
## 'VISUAL ESSAYS: ORIGINS OF FILM' - component segments/films:

LUMIÈRE'S TRAIN (ARRIVING AT THE STATION

9 min. sound b/w 1979

The subject of the first essay is cinema itself: an apparatus of representation wherein fact and fiction are recreated. As such, the pro-filmic facts are necessarily drawn from two of cinema's "pioneers": **Louis and Auguste Lumière** and **Abel Gance** (*La Roue*,), with additional material provided from a Warner Brothers featurette, *Spills for Thrills*.

The film breaks down into four distinct sections and is loosely centred around Lumière's classic one-shot film of a train pulling into a station **Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat, L' (1895)**.

The exposition and form of the film is closely tied to the tradition of cine-structural poems which foreground the materials of the medium (light, dark, form as shadow-projection of the cinematic apparatus). Using alternations between positive and negative, the film chronicles the "coming to life" (of the apparatus) and the resulting action/movement and documentation of events - encompassing incidents (the near mishaps), human expectations (the arrival at the station), and human spectacle(the destruction of the trains, the station in chaos). Towards this purpose, I have used an expanding narrative, a play on the title itself, and the shifting conditions of synchronous and asynchronous sound/image (and image-to-image). (A.R.)
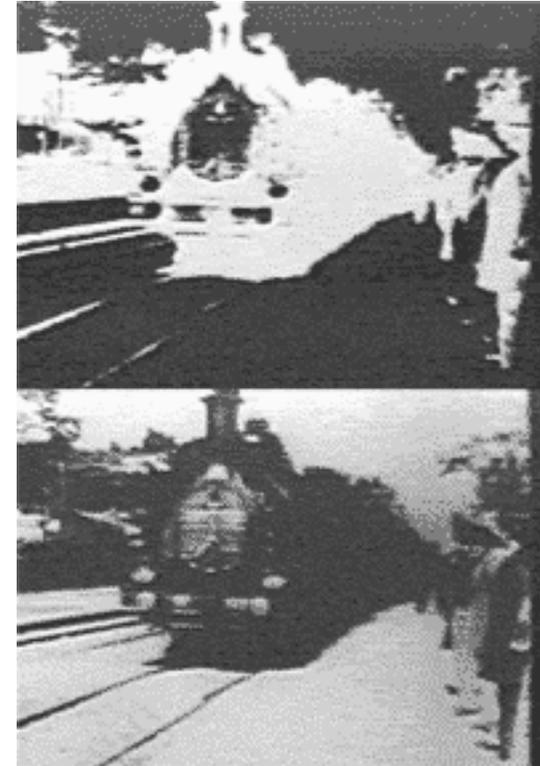
MÉLIÈS CATALOGUE

8 min. color silent 1973

This burning celluloid montage film presents the mythic iconography of the films of Georges Méliès -- a dreamlike terrain, a grab-bag of magician's surprises, a cornucopia of players that proceed from the imagination of that "magician" of cinema - announced by the opening motif, "the expanding head."

These incidents are presented/framed within the graphic form of burning frames, each image-shot erupting and being displaced by the following shot. This is an essay featuring discontinuity and surprise. Images in this piece were compiled from approximately *30 films by George Méliès*, most notably **'A Trip to the Moon (1902)'** -- (A.R.)


SEQUELS IN TRANSFIGURED TIME

14 min. SEPIA-color sound 1976

Sequels in Transfigured Time returns to Georges Méliès and notably portions of A Trip to the Moon (1902) and other early Méliès films (including a *hand-colored early film*, and uses techniques of 'frozen stills becoming movement', still which are initially 'abstractions' through the absence of movement and denial of depth (via graphic solarization). The stills are meditations on the "becoming of motion-picture reality" through movement and seamless editing (the "invisible"cut), mechanisms in the 'creation of narrative' (which Méliès thought to be secondary to 'special effects' for the eye).

This essay is also an elegy for Georges Méliès, his "Eden lost and found," his cine-world becoming obsolete and "ghostlike." This is a 'sound film' with the *'Elegy for Méliès'* occuring at the end (sound). -- (A.R.)

emulsion formed, light borne
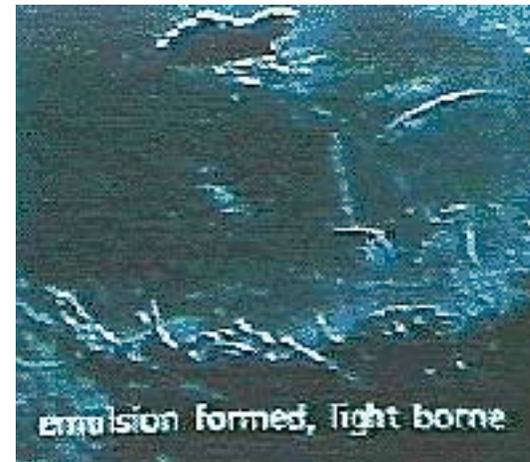
GHOST: IMAGE

12 min. SEPIA-color sound 1976-79

Thematically proceeding from the last film, **GHOST: IMAGE** encompasses that tradition of "fantastic" films that includes *Dada, Cubism, Surrealism, Expressionism, Poetic Realism, Symbolism,* and eventually the horror genre (and of course Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*).

Its formal design, the mirror image, creates a denial of axis and screen direction,with the result that the viewer must read "through the images." At times, the mirror images are reduced to their Rorschach component, and complemented by the presence of fragmented poetry (after T.S. Eliot and automatic writing), a metonymic realm suggesting "automatic disclosures" and unconscious correspondences in the developing discourse.

The familiar myths of woman as 'madonna' / 'victim' / 'temptress', and 'redemption through knowledge and science,' 'fear of the undead," and 'fear of the irrational,' form the signposts of this historical and cultural terrain.

Contains excerpts from aproximately *20 surrealist, dada, horror, films*. (A.R.)

FOR ARTAUD

10 min. color sound 1982

An essay on expressionism and the tradition of Gothic horror. It brings to mind humanity caught between notions of absolutes, evils of monstrous proportions,classicism, and questions of individuation. Artaud, though a figure indirectly associated with film history, is suggested in this essay as *prime provocateur* in the collision between classicism (the "Greek chorus") and romantic expressionism. Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* - *in which Artaud himself appears (as the monk)* - serves to set the stage for this "inquisition." (A.R.)
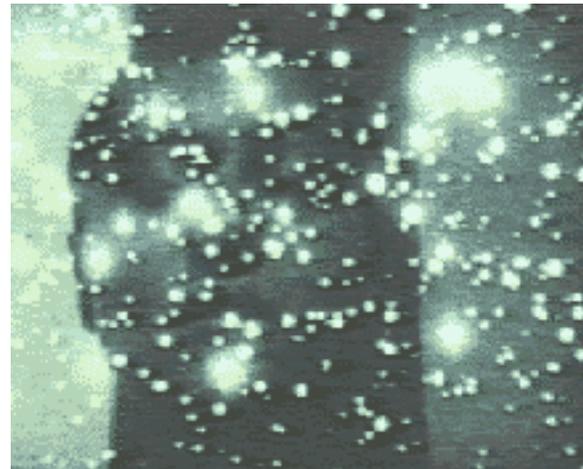
STORMING THE WINTER PALACE

16 min. color sound 1984

This last visual essay focuses on montage and the dialectics of *Sergei Eisenstein's films*, indicating their influence as cornerstones of silent cinema and as major contributions to the evolution of later cinema. Eisenstein's work in the areas of non-verbal signification and allegorical-revolutionary montage is subjected to three "framing" processes: inversion of chronological narrative, fragmentation and repetition of selected montage passages, and the interrogation of selected ***Oktober*** sequences by the application of 'saccadic eye movement' (animated) techniques.

*Contains sequences from **'Battleship Potempkin'** and **'Oktober'** by Eisenstein.*

Spoken text from writings of ***Benjamin Buchloh***, and Soviet Formalist sources (freely adapted).

Al Razutis Films and Videos

2 X 2 17 min 1967
Inauguration 17 min 1968
Sircus Show Fyre 7 min 1968
Poem: Elegy for Rose 4 min 1968
Black Angel Flag ... Eat 17 min silent 1968
Aaeon 30 min 1971
Le Voyage 8 min 1973
Visual Alchemy 8 min 1973
Fyreworks 1.5 min 1973
The Moon at Evernight 9 min 1974
Aurora 4 min 1974
Watercolour/Abstract 6 min 1974
Synchronicity 11 min 1974
Portrait 8 min 1976
Excerpts from Ms. The Beast 20 min 1971-81

Visual Essays: Origins of Film 68 min 1973–84
Lumière's Train (Arriving at the Station) 9 min b/w 1979
Méliès Catalogue 9 min silent 1973
Sequels in Transfigured Time 12 min silent 1976
Ghost:Image 12 min b/w silent 1976–79
For Artaud 10 min 1982
Storming the Winter Palace 16 min b/w 1984

Amerika 160 min 1972–1983

Reel 1 50 min
The Cities of Eden 7 min 1976
Software/Head Title 2.5 min 1972
Vortex 10 min 1972
Atomic Gardening 5 min 1981
Motel Row Pt. 1 10 min 1981
Refrain 1 min 1982
98.3 KHz: Bridge at Electrical Storm 5 min 1973
Motel Row Pt. 2 9 min 1976

Reel 2 53 min
The Wasteland and Other Stories 13 min 1976
Refrain 4 min 1982
Motel Row Pt. 3 2 min 1981
98.3 KHz: Bridge at Electrical Storm Pt. 2 6 min 1973
The Wildwest Show 11 min 1980
A Message From Our Sponsor 9 min 1979
Photo Spot/Terminal City Scapes 8 min 1983

Reel 3 57 min
Refrain 3 min 1982
Exiles 11 min 1983
The Lonesome Death of Leroy Brown 28 min 1983
Fin 8 min 1983
O Kanada 5 min 1982
Closing Credits 2 min 1983

On the Autonomy of Art in Bourgeois Society...
or Splice by Doug Chomyn, Scott Haynes and Al Razutis
23 min 1986

Ghosts in the Machine, 1995
Meditations, 1996
Virtual Imaging, 1996
VR: A Movie, 1996
Why Don't You Just Leave, 1996
Dean Fogal: Corporeal Art, 1997
Discovery of Loss, 1997
Shadows of Love, 1997
Virtual Flesh, 1997
France 1997, 1998
Nagual, 1998
Statues, 1998
1946-2003/Learning to Walk/Bamberg, Germany, 2003

Al Razutis

by Andrew McIntosh

A confrontational iconoclast and cultural activist, Al Razutis is a Vancouver-based teacher, writer, critic, historian and experimental filmmaker. His internationally acclaimed structural films are created in a highly revolutionary spirit and challenge popular cultural and political ideology. His best known works are two major cycles of thematically linked experimental films: Amerika (1972-83), a decidedly dystopian, epic descent into the gloom of Western industrialized society; and Visual Essays: Origins of Film, described by Razutis as a "structural investigation of the primitive silent cinema."

In these larger works and in more recent films, Razutis's frequently ferocious interrogations of contemporary culture utilize a variety of optical and sonic techniques (collage, layering, optical printing, etc.) to penetrate and illuminate the cacophony of modernity. His films – which typically raise questions concerning gender roles, sexuality, film theory, class structure and censorship – are often characterized by phantasmagoric effects and tongue-in-cheek slogans and images.

Razutis graduated with a B.Sc. in physics and chemistry from California Western University before moving on to graduate studies in nuclear physics and nuclear chemistry at the University of California, Davis. He has worked in avant-garde film since 1967 and more recently in the fields of video art, holographic art, stereoscopic 3-D video, digital graphics/web media and web-based virtual reality. He has also written screenplays, prose and prose-poetry and has published two periodicals on film and holography. From 1978 to 1987, he taught film production and film studies at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, where he was also head of the Film-Video Programme.

He was instrumental in forming the West Coast film distributor Moving Images Distribution, as well as a short-lived union of Canadian film artists and the Vancouver production co-op, Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Society. He has completed more than forty films and videos as well as performances, paintings, holograms and intermedia productions. He has worked over the years to secure an institutional base for fringe cinema, but is also somewhat notorious for his anti-institutional stance. His films have received a number of international awards – including a 1988 Los Angeles Film Critics Award for Amerika – and his media art has been exhibited around the world in museums and galleries as prestigious as the Louvre in Paris.

Credits

Visual Alchemy by Tony Reif
Originally appeared in: Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983.

Magnetic North by Bruce Jenkins
Originally appeared in: Magnetic North: Canadian Experimental Video, ed. Jenny Lion, Walker Arts Centre, 2000.

Under the Sign of the Beast: an interview by David Bryant and Mike Hoolboom Originally appeared in: The Independent Eye, vol. 10, No. 3, Summer 1989.

Amerika and the Destruction Aesthetic by Eric Ferguson
Originally appeared in: The Independent Eye, Vol. 11, No. 3,Fall 1990.

Between Agonism and the Autonomy of Art: the Case of Al Razutis by William C. Wees Originally appeared in: Cantrills Filmnotes, 1989.

Three Decades of Rage by Mike Hoolboom
Originally appeared in: Cantrills Filmnotes, 1995

Regina versus… by Al Razutis
Originally appeared in: Opsis, Spring 1984.

Nothing Personal by Al Razutis
Originally appeared in: The Independent Eye, Vol. 10, No. 1, Fall 1988

Al Razutis by Andrew McIntosh
Originally appeared in: Canadian Film Encyclopedia. (http://www.filmreferencelibrary.ca/index.asp?navid=74)

Check out Al's lovely web site: www.alchemists.com Or dig deeper into his web archives: http://xalrazutis.org

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AL RAZUTIS