

FILM AND THE RADICAL ASPIRATION

BY ANNETTE MICHELSON

No. 42, Fall, 1966

For Noel Burch

The history of Cinema is, like that of Revolution in our time, a chronicle of hopes and expectations, aroused and suspended, tested and deceived. I came to know and care for film in a city that has traditionally sheltered and animated these hopes and expectations. It is not only the political and intellectual capital of its country, but the film-making capital, as well. Quite simply, the distance between the Place de l'Opéra and the studios at Joinville is a matter of a subway ride, not of a transcontinental jet flight. I shall ask you to bear this elementary fact in mind because it has determined much of what I would ever have to say about most things. More than that, it provides the terms of a general, if somewhat crude, metaphor for my concern today. To speak of Film and the Radical Aspiration is necessarily to evoke instances of convergence and dissociation.

404 Annette Michelson

Two statements, first, however: not mine, but drawn from the writings of men of quite dissimilar sensibilities and vocations, living and working at a distance of almost two generations. The first, Benjamin Fondane, a writer and critic, a man of the Left, died, when still young, in a German concentration camp. Writing in 1933, he said:

We are committed with all our strength to the denunciation of a world whose catastrophic end seems more than ever before inevitable. We demand its rightful liquidation, whether that liquidation produce an irremediable vacuum of nothingness or a sovereign renewal through revolutionary means. Such should be—and this regardless of the deep inner wounds inevitably involved in such an aspiration—the aims of will and consciousness today. . . . As for film, the curve of its development has rapidly ascended, only to sink into an immediate decline. Stuffed to bursting, tricked out with an absurd and meretricious pomp, with every kind of frill imaginable, it has hypertrophied into a monstrous industry. The attraction was merely potential, the magic contained . . . the seeds of an unpardonable decay until, with the abruptness of a volcanic eruption, the huge shambles collapsed beneath the weight of its own emptiness. And yet, the cinema continues to interest us for that which it is not, for that which it failed to become, for its ultimate possibilities. . . . It may be that film is the expression of a society unable to sustain a world . . . of the mind. It may be that this tardily conceived art, child of an aged continent, will perish in its infancy. It may be, too, that the Revolution is not utterly to be despaired of.

The second statement—just one sentence—was written by a movie star and published in *Film Culture* a year or two ago. The movie star in question, a performer of quite extraordinary charm and originality, is Taylor Mead, and I presume that some of you have seen him in independently produced films. Taylor Mead has said, "The movies are a Revolution."

* * *

Film, our most vivacious art, is young enough to remember its first dreams, its limitless promise, and it is haunted, scarred, by a central, ineradicable trauma of dissociation. The attendant guilt and ambivalence, their repressive effects, the manner above all, in which a dissociative principle has been alternately resisted or assumed, converted into an aesthetic principle, the manner in which this resistance or conversion modified or redefines cinematic aspirations are,

Film and the Radical Aspiration 403

like everything concerning film, unique in the history of Western culture.

A dream, a presentiment of the medium traversed the nineteenth century. Almost every form of popular diversion characteristic of the era—the family album, the wax museum, the novel itself, the panopticon in all its forms—can be read as an obscure, wistful prefiguration of cinema. My own revelation of the wax museum as prefiguration came a year or so ago when I chose, as a Christmas treat, to accompany a bright little American, French-educated boy to the Musée Grevin. It struck me, as we went slowly through the long, dark, labyrinthine corridors, punctuated by the rather grand tableaux that chronicle the whole of French history, from the early Gauls until the Gaullist regime, that the wax museum, in its very special, hallucinatory darkness, its spatial ambiguity, its forcing of movement upon the spectator, its mixture of diversion and didacticism, is a kind of protocinema.* And of course the historical mode of discourse is, above all, that of the earliest films, which celebrated state occasions, public festivities, followed monarchs to christenings and assassinations. The extraordinary rapidity of the cinema's growth seemed to confirm this vision of a century's wistful fantasy (only seventy years have passed since Méliès witnessed the Lumières' demonstration and produced his own first reel). So, too, did the general climate of anticipatory enthusiasm and accord that animated film-making and criticism in their early, heroic period. That climate seems, in retrospect, Edenic.

Consider the atmosphere surrounding the early theoretical discussions: the Eisenstein-Pudovkin debate on the nature of montage, involving the conception of images as "cells, not elements" engaged in dialectical conflicts, as opposed to the "linkage of chains." Or the discussion, somewhat less familiar to historians, of the function of the subtitle as it crystallized during the 1920's in France: Kirsanov's

* For this reason, Erwin Panofsky's remarks on the waxworks in *Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures* (Transition magazine, No. 26, New York, 1937) would seem to misinterpret the order and reverse the intention and significance of things. I would argue that film, rather than "adding movement to stationary works of art," fulfilled the desire for movement which informs the conception of the wax museum itself. This becomes apparent, of course, only when one considers the experience, both kinetic and visual, within the whole space and sequence of the spectacle, rather than the aspect of the individual tableau as such. This aspiration toward movement and the heightened immediacy that it confers upon the experience is, I believe, borne out by the additional spectacle provided by the Musée Grevin in "The Chamber of Transformations," a remarkable early instance of an "environmental" fusion of changing light, sound, and décor.

elimination of the title in the interest of visual explicitness; René Clair's reduction of the title's role to the strictest minimum; the stress placed by Desnos and the Surrealists on its exclusively poetic use; on the subversion of "sense in the interests of poetry." While the controversy developed—and with the unique intensity and inventiveness that characterize critical discourse in France—technology was preparing to transcend the problem. The claim that the "shriek" or "grinding of brakes" was no less real or "present" for being understood rather than heard was rendered comically irrelevant; the problem was simply canceled by the arrival of sound.

Generally speaking, however, discussion, fruitful or academic, took place within a context of broad agreement as to the probable or desirable directions of the medium. Styles, forms, inventions and theoretical preoccupations were largely complementary, not contradictory. A spectrum, rather than a polarity, of possibilities was involved. The Surrealists' admiration of American silent comedy, reflected in the work of Artaud and Dulac among others, the universal excitement over the achievements of Russian film, Eisenstein's openly acknowledged debt to Griffith and that of the young Dreyer to both, testify to a certain community of aspiration. Eisenstein, in the very beautiful essay on *Griffith, Dickens, and the Film Today* said that "what enthralled us was not only these films, it was also their possibilities." And speaking of montage: "Its foundation had been laid by American film-culture, but its full, completed, conscious use and world recognition was established by our films."

The excitement, the exhilaration of artists and intellectuals not directly involved in the medium was enormous. Indeed, a certain euphoria enveloped the early film-making and theory. For there was, ultimately, a very real sense in which the revolutionary aspirations of the modernist movement in literature and the arts, on the one hand, and of a Marxist or Utopian tradition, on the other, could converge in the hopes and promises, as yet undefined, of the new medium.

There was, among the intellectuals concerned with cinema's revolutionary potential, both social and formal, a general and touching reverence for an idea of its specificity. There was, above all, an immediate apprehension, cutting quite across theoretical differences, of its privileged status, its unique destiny.

In an essay on *The Work of Art in the Era of Reproduction Techniques*, whose influence is so strongly evident in Malraux's aesthetics, Walter Benjamin attacked reactionaries, such as Werfel, who, by relegating the movie to the articulation of fantasy and fairy

were engaged in a reduction of its scope, a tactics of repression. The most intensely euphoric expression of the new passion, of the convergence of modernist aesthetics and an Utopian ideology is Elie Faure's *Art of Cineplastics*, really an essay in aesthetics-as-science-fiction that predicts the cinema's radical transformation of the very nature of spatio-temporal perception, of historical consciousness and process.

Anticipations and speculations and, more significantly still, the inventions and achievements of the Americans, Russians, French, Germans, and Scandinavians were predicated, then, upon complementary apprehensions of the morphological and syntactical possibilities of the medium evolving within a framework of concord and mutual recognition, shattered, ultimately, by the growing, the traumatic, awareness of a principle of dissociation inherent in the art and its situation.

The point of shock is easily located in history: that moment, at the end of the 1920's in which the "hermaphroditic" nature of a craft that had already expanded and hardened into an industry, could no longer be ignored. The classical instrument of industrial revolution being division of labor, a generation of hardy adventurers, artists-entrepreneurs, director-producers, such as Griffith, were replaced by paid employees. The ultimate consequences involved something analogous to a dissociation of sensibility. This, in turn, rapidly engendered a register of limits and conventions that have acted to inhibit, divert, and reshape cinematic effort.

We are dealing with a Fall from Grace. For men like Griffith, Eisenstein, von Stroheim, Welles, and many more of the most brilliant and radical talents, it created, as we know, in the gardens of California an irrespirable atmosphere, a corruption that was to impair much of the best work done anywhere.

Intellectuals and film-makers alike, here and abroad, reacted with an immediate tension of distrust and, in many instances, withdrawal. The widespread resistance to the introduction of the soundtrack, for example, could certainly be shown to mask or reflect a hostility to the prospect of the medium's accelerated development into an instrument of mass culture. A French philosopher of my acquaintance claims to have stopped going to the movies in 1929. For Fondane, "the sound film is good only in so far as it is dumb." And for Artaud, "cinematic truth lies within the image, not beyond it." The resistance to sound—and it was a resistance to the Word, not ever to music which had, from the beginning, found a place in cinematic convention—expressed a nostalgia for an era of mute innocence and untested hope. It was, in short, a pastoral attitude.

The disenchantment, the sense of moral and aesthetic frustration expressed by Fondane were general. The history of modern cinema is, nevertheless, to a large degree, that of its accommodation to those very repressive and corrupting forces of the post-1929 situation. A complex register of limits and conventions engendered by that situation has been *productively* used. Historical precedents abound, but few or none have attained a comparable degree of dialectical paradox, intricacy, and scandalousness.

* * *

It is the acceptance of the dissociative principle, its sublimation and ultimate conversion to aesthetic purposes that characterize recent, advanced film-making in France and elsewhere in Europe. It is the almost categorical rejection of that principle and the aspiration to an innocence and organicity that animates the efforts of the "independent" film-makers who compose something of an American avant-garde. All discussion of the nature and possibilities of advanced film-making today, of film aesthetics and of future possibilities must, I believe, take this divergence of radicalisms into account. It must also take into account the fact that the question is, as Walter Benjamin remarked, "not whether we are dealing with an art" (and some, apparently, still ask that question), "but whether or not the emergence of this medium has not transformed the nature of all art."

The general resistance in this country to the notion of this transformation assumes its most crucial aspect, not in circles unconcerned with film, but rather in those presumably animated by a commitment to its development. The discomfort and hostility of many, indeed most, film critics to those aspects of contemporary cinema that bypass, contradict or transcend the modes and values of psychosocial observation is familiar; they provide, in fact, both context and target for this series of occasions known as a "festival." Certainly it is true that the generally *réfardaire* character of our film criticism reflects an anxiety about the manner in which postwar cinema, in Europe and America alike, has, at its best, transcended the conventions of a sensibility formed by the modernist canon of a primarily literary nineteenth century. Both Amos Vogel and Richard Roud have quite rightly called attention to this fact in texts published on the occasion of the Festival's opening. Sadder and more disturbing still, I think, is the revelation, through this fact, that critical rejection of the formal principles and techniques of disjunctiveness involving sound, cutting, or any of the other parameters of film as represented in the work

of Bresson, Resnais, or Godard, on the one hand, or in that of Anger, Breer, and Peter Emanuel Goldman, on the other, is part of a more general, basic, powerful contradiction or regression. One simply has to face the fact that a great part of a generation who came to maturity in the 1920's, who were nourished by and committed to, the formal radicalism of a Pound, a Stein, or a Joyce, are these days concerned—absurd and incredible as it seems—with, let us say, the novels of Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer! If the crux of cinematic development lies—as I think it does—in the evaluation and redefinition of the nature and role of narrative structure, we may say that the history of academicism in film-making and film criticism has been that of the substitution of novelistic forms and values for theatrical ones—and this in a century that saw a flowering of American poetry.

* * *

Critical malaise and contradictions, therefore, quite logically, focused last season on two films of Jean-Luc Godard: *Le Petit Soldat* and *Alphaville*, first presented in New York within the context of the Lincoln Center Festival. I say "logically" because it is precisely in so far as *Alphaville* constitutes a really remarkable instance of a reconsideration of the nature and possibilities of certain narrative conventions that I wish to consider it ever so briefly at this point.

Alphaville is an anxious meditation, in the form of a suspense story, on the agony and death of love, liberty and language in a society trapped in the self-perpetuating dialectic of technological progress. It is about feeling in deep freeze. Now, to argue or contest the validity of that idea as a theme of discourse seems to me somewhat questionable in itself, but to attack the "story" except in so far as it served as a support for a cinematic structure was, above all, to betray insensitivity to the film's central "statement."

The violent rehearsal of the content-versus-style liturgies that greeted *Alphaville* not only testified, in negative fashion, to Godard's central importance. Together with a few of his European contemporaries, he does dominate cinema now, and much of what is done anywhere has to be situated in relation to the work of these men. Above all, however, the complex *statement* of the film in regard to the possibilities of narrative convention transcends, in interest and importance, the nature of its *discourse*, and the hostility displayed toward that *discourse*. I take to represent simply a displacement (or dislocation) of hostility to its formal, cinematic statement.

* * *

François Truffaut, reflecting somewhat casually on the history of film, once divided its protagonists into two sorts: the creators of "spectacle" or entertainment, such as Méliès, and the experimenters or inventors, such as Lumière. To this, Godard replied that he had always tried to make "experimental" films in the guise of entertainments. *Alphaville* is such a film. Its conceptual and formal complexities fuse into an elaborate and precisely articulated metaphor of immanence, of the ambiguity of location and dislocation, in both their spatial and temporal modes.

Paris now, her public buildings, offices, hotels, garages, corridors, staircases, and escalators are revealed to those on intimate terms with her landscape, as invaded by the Future. Frontiers between past, present, and future are—like the distinctions between invention and entertainment—abolished through a series of formal strategies: a *prise de conscience* secured through a *prise de vues*, or revelation through imagination. This film, shot entirely on location, is the film of *Dis-location*. And, as narrative structure, lighting, cutting, produce a visual, temporal, or situational transformation, so a continual play with language transforms things known and seen. Thus, the low-income housing developments of post-1945 Paris, known as *Habitations à Loyers Modiques* are the clinics and insane asylums of the future: *Les Hôpitaux des Longues Maladies*. The city's peripheral avenues, *les boulevards extérieurs*, shift and expand into an irrevocably disquieting suggestion of the routes of interplanetary space. Function and scale of object and place are continuously altered, as image and sound converge upon site and situation in the exploration of the cinematic figuration of dislocation, of the ambiguities of time and history. As Gertrude Stein said, "Composition is not there, it is going to be there and we are here. *This is some time ago for us naturally.*" The shifting—within—simultaneity of sameness and difference, of being and going-to-be, while we *are*, "some time ago, naturally," structures the time-space within which the mind (and *Alphaville* is "about" the birth of mind and sensibility, the rebirth of language as a rebirth of love) is constrained to function: that of a dislocation with respect to time. The "past-future" tense of which Godard speaks is our *present situation*.

The progress or plot of *Alphaville*, is, therefore, the passage from one revelation to another; its peripeties are perceptions, structured by the pace and tension of a detective story, of "finding truth." In the face of this, the accusations of "triviality" or "pretentiousness" became embarrassingly irrelevant. The film "states" its concern with the creation of a morphology; the concentration is on pace, tension, weight, and syntactic coherence through narration—narration being

in this instance a form of "relating" in the fullest possible sense of the word: a manner of creating *relational* strategies through telling.

Alphaville stands, then, as a remarkable instance of a *critical* allegiance, shared by the major European film-makers, to the conventions of Hollywood's commercial cinema, and of the conversion of those conventions to the uses of advanced cinema. For the allegiance has acted as context and precondition of formal radicalism. [And it is interesting to consider that Godard's attachment to the Monogram film, the "B series" production, is paralleled, or anticipated by, Eisenstein's life-long affection for the early films that began to come to Russia when he was a boy. He speaks with tenderness of films like *The House of Hate* and *The Mark of Zorro*.] The importance of the suspense story, as refined by Hitchcock for the further use of men such as Resnais and Godard, lies in its paradigmatic character as narrative form, as a "vehicle" of dramatic and formal invention. Perfected in the Hollywood of an era following upon the Crash, it was adopted and refined, sublimated in the interests of a formal radicalism.

The earliest and certainly the most sumptuous, anticipation of this strategy is Feuilleade's *Vampires*, shown in its entirety here for the first time during last year's festival. Together with *Alphaville*, it dominated the occasion. Made by a man of utterly intrepid imagination, its formal inventiveness is supported by a firm commitment to a notion of film as a technique of narrative for a mass public. I have discussed elsewhere the manner in which *Vampires* not only sets forth the themes developed in *Alphaville*, and the way in which the cinema of Méliès and Feuillade adumbrated, within the context of the medium's earliest stages, the principles and strategies of which Surrealist art and film provided a subsequent résumé.

"Please believe me," said Feuilleade, "when I tell you that it is not the experimenters who will eventually obtain film's rightful recognition, but rather the makers of melodrama—and I count myself among the most devoted of their number. . . . I won't in the least attempt to excuse (this view) . . . I believe I come closer to the truth." It was strict adherence to the logic of this view that guaranteed, for Feuilleade, a margin of improbability, of openness, of that oneiric intensity that gives *Vampires* a place among the masterworks of cinema.

Predicated on the development of a narrative convention both strict and elastic enough to accommodate a tension between dramatic probability and fantasy, between the continuity of suspense

and the discontinuity of structure—between discourse and poetry, in short—Feuilleade's work relates more to the future of film than to its past. Which is to say, as Robbe-Grillet has said, that "Imagination, when really alive, is always of the present." Alain Resnais's fascination with Feuilleade might partly confirm this. Resnais's work, like that of his European contemporaries perpetuates the commitment to the constraints and stimuli of a given form; above all, in its straining of the limits of that form, it exemplifies a commitment to the value of Form, as such, which animates the best of advanced European cinema today.

* * *

Now, if we assume, as I shall, that the revolutionary aspiration, both *formal* and *political*, achieved a moment of consummation in the Russian film of the 1920's and early 1930's, we know, too, that the paradigmatic fusion was dissolved by the counterrevolution of Stalinism. As this happened (and the installation of Stalinism in its more or less definitive form, dates from 1927, the year of Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union, only two years before the introduction of sound into film), European cinema and European art as a whole, abandoned a certain totality of aspiration. The process of dissociation, the split between formal and political aspects of radical or revolutionary efforts was created, irremediably so—at least through our time. The result was either reaction or a sublimation of the revolutionary aspiration into a purely formal radicalism. The vestiges of the politically revolutionary experience and tradition are henceforth expressed in the form of nostalgia and frustration. Politically oriented art at its best became a chronicle of absence, of negation, an analysis of dissociation, and, in the best modernist tradition, a *formal statement of the impossibility of discourse*.

The nostalgia and frustration are explicitly stated in Godard's *Le Petit Soldat*, by Michel, the hero: "In the early thirties, young people had the revolution. Malraux, for example, Drieu la Rochelle and Aragon. We don't have anything any more. They had the Spanish Civil War. We don't even have a war of our own." The formal articulation of this nostalgia for a revolutionary impulse and hope involves a succession of fascinating paradoxes and failures. The case of Resnais, who, almost alone of his particular generation, has attempted to articulate a strong personal political commitment, is particularly fascinating. I have in mind not only *Hiroshima* but *Muriel*. In both films, he has visible difficulty in *situating* the com-

mitment within the total structure of his work, in finding a visual trope that will not infect the style, or distend the structure. The result in a rhythmical, dramatic, and visual caesura, the stylistic articulation of aphony.

The two explicitly political passages in these films are both distanced, bracketed as spectacles or diversions. In *Hiroshima*, the anti-war demonstration is inserted as a film sequence enacted within the film, while, in *Muriel*, the Algerian war is evoked, not shown, in an amateur movie, by an agonized verbal commentary (the account of a young girl's torture by French soldiers) in counterpoint to the series of innocuous amateur shots that parody the myth of barracks-life hilarity.

This sequence constitutes the most brilliant, the definitive articulation of the disintegration of a cinematic arena for political discourse. The despair over that disintegration is the film's central political "statement." The "statement's" intensity, however, is further amplified through the further distancing of bracketed statement from *itself* (the distance between image and commentary). Its isolation within the texture of the total work, its particular, stylistic disjunctiveness, its own colorless color, are slightly at odds with the disjunctive and stylistic refraction, Resnais proposes an image of the shameful scandal that generated the Fifth Republic. His trope is that of the caesura. The crack, the flaw, the rhythmic, visual gap or caesura created by this interlude or "diversion" is the form of Resnais's declaration of aphony. It declares his nostalgia for the film that could not be made; it incarnates the artist's struggle with the dissociative principle and the politics of dissociation.

And it is fascinating, but distressing beyond telling, to see, in *La Guerre Est Finie*, Resnais's ultimate attempt to assume what he obviously regards as the discursive responsibility of his position, the diabolical logic of that principle in operation. Like *Alexander Nevsky*, *La Guerre Est Finie* is the chronicle of an artist's defeat; it represents a total inversion, the most concrete negation, of a form and a style. In this film, it is the erotic sequences that assume the aspect of interludes or diversions within the total structure and the reversion to a hieraticism of style we have, of course, known and loved: that of *Hiroshima* and, above all, of *Marienbad*. These passages now produce the caesuras that arouse our nostalgia. Far more painfully, however, they declare Resnais's own nostalgia for his past achievements. *Vivement Harry Dickson!*

Lucien Goldmann, writing a few years ago in *Les Temps Mod-*

ernes of the supposed atrophy of historical and social consciousness in the New Wave directors, remarked, with a sigh, that political energy and vitality seemed concentrated in the Left, while cinematic talent was reserved for the Right. Goldmann's characteristically Marxist conservative taste and aesthetics aside, the problem needs to be restated—and far more explicitly than is possible on this particular occasion. Most briefly put, however, one might formulate it in the following manner: If, for the young Russians of the immediately post-Revolutionary period, the problem was, as Eisenstein said, "to advance toward new and as yet unrealized qualities and means of expression, to raise form once more to the level of ideological content," the problem for Resnais and his peers is to raise, or rather accommodate, ideological content to the formal exigencies of a modernist sensibility. Ultimately, ideology of any kind—whether that of Surrealism, Marxism, or the antihumanism of the New Novel—provides, at best, a fruitful working hypothesis for the artist. Eisenstein's conception of montage, derived from the orthodoxy of the Dialectic is not really so theoretically convincing as it was aesthetically regenerative. The energy, courage, and intellectual passion that sustained both theory and work were, of course, among the noblest of our century. Eisenstein is a model of the culture of our era—in his defeat as in his achievement, and down to the very fragmentary quality of his work!

One's sense of his defeat, visible in *Alexander Nevsky*, is so particularly agonizing because it constitutes a unique example of what one might call the pathos of dissociation pushed to an extremity of academic style. This pathos writers like Babel and Mayakovsky were spared—through death or suicide. What remained of the aspiration toward a revolutionary art in the Soviet Union after the defeat of Eisenstein had thenceforth to capitulate. In Europe, that aspiration was eventually, in the cinema that interests us, to be sublimated into a concentrated formal radicalism; elsewhere, it assumed the aspect of subversion. This brings us to American film of the "independent" persuasion.

* * *

Though generalization about American film is subject to the usual objections, one must, as I briefly indicated at the beginning of this talk, begin one's consideration of this film-making with a recognition of its almost categorical rejection of the aesthetic grounded in the conventions hitherto discussed. The film-makers with whom we

are concerned have, in fact, been lead to abandon the tactics of reconciliation basic to European film as a whole. Most importantly, this rejection is in turn predicated on a negation, critical or apocalyptic, of the middle-class society that supported Hollywood, its aesthetic, industry, and art, and that continues to sustain—however precariously and capriciously—the activity of most major European directors. This basic dissimilarity of commitment is beginning, moreover, to make itself felt in discussions between French and American film-makers and critics. When Louis Marcorelles of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* claimed, as he did this last spring while addressing a group of independent film-makers and critics, that American films are unprofessional, unconcerned with the problems of mass communication, and, therefore, negligible, he is, of course, indulging in the polemical luxury of ignoring the immense difficulties confronted by artists who, working in a society that, unlike that of many European countries (and especially his own), preserves the sanctity of “free enterprise” by withholding the state subsidies that create a more open situation for the young European. He betrays, however, an extraordinary insensitivity to the pressures that force artists into an artisanal relationship to a powerful industry. He mocks, above all, the steadfastness with which they have undertaken to re-create cinematic language for themselves and their contemporaries.

Many of our best independent film-makers, such as Kenneth Anger, Robert Breer, Peter Emmanuel Goldman, Jonas Mekas, Shirley Clarke, are committed to an aesthetic of autonomy that by no means violates or excludes their critical view of the society in which they manage, as they can, to work.

There is, within “independent” circles another direction or style of effort which I now want to consider, as it represents a militant aspect of a radical aspiration in American film. It is postulated on a conception of film as being, in the very broadest sense, redemptive of the human condition itself. This attitude, however estimable, generates the most difficult and inhibiting contradictions for contemporary radicals. Beneath the burden of redemption, the formal integrity that safeguards that radicalism must and does, ultimately dissolve. I am referring to a cinema represented by the work of Stan Brakhage, and, to some extent, by the criticism of Jonas Mekas—who is sitting in the first row with a tape recorder. I would have wanted, of course, to screen some films or sequences to illustrate this consideration, but must content myself with some quotations from critical writings—and from Brakhage’s voluminous correspondence.

“What’s the use of cinema if man’s soul goes rotten?” says Mekas. “It is not a question of film being good or bad artistically. It is a question of . . . a new understanding of Life.”

Brakhage, speaking before a gathering in Berlin in December, 1965 (and this passage, somewhat longer, is extracted, unlike the preceding ones, not from *Film Culture*, but from a report on that Berlin occasion in an article published, according to my recollection, last year in *The Village Voice*).

“This camera,” said Brakhage,

I take with me everywhere now. . . . I took it last night into East Berlin. I was, from the very entrance, in a state of terror that I had not imagined existed before. Finally the tension mounted till I felt compelled to take an image, which is the only time when I do work, when that compulsion or need arises directly from something in living. I had nothing to work with but empty streets and a few lights, and as I worked with those, with a fast-speed color film, and I tried to make an impression of my feelings from just those lights as I was there, inside, that which was an incredible experience for me. I have always taken seeing to be anything that comes to me in the form of an image, whether it be closed-eye vision, the dots and whirls and shapes that come when the eyes are closed and that can be seen when they are open. Memory, the remembering of images or the in-gathering of light in the immediacy of the eyes opening. I took images as I could, according to feeling. So that as I’ve trained myself to hold this camera so that it will reflect the trembling or the feeling of any part of the body; so that it is an extension, so that this becomes a thing to in-gather the light . . . I do not know what I will need to do when I get home in editing to capture the quality of that feeling and to say something of that experience.

Now for many of us, I imagine, and particularly for those who, like myself, have been for some time concerned with contemporary painting and sculpture and the problems of critical method deriving from this development, this statement has a very familiar ring indeed—and highly problematic implications. If, for men like Anger and Breer, or for Resnais and Godard, art and the radical aspiration supply a ground for an ethos, art really does become, for Brakhage, “nothing but a construction in ethics,” and the artist a tintype of the “moral hero.” The rhetoric is that of abstract expressionism, and I dare say that the Rosenberg pages of *Film Culture* represent in the New York of 1966 the last precinct of the action painter’s active authority.

As a prelude to a brief consideration of the nature and conse-

quences of this authority, here is a passage from an essay on de Kooning by Harold Rosenberg:

Since, for de Kooning, art must discover its form in the actuality of the artist's life, it cannot impose itself upon its practitioner as other professions do upon theirs. Art becomes a way by which the artist can avoid a way. . . .

By a mutual indetermination, art and the artists support each other's openness to the multiplicity of experience. Both resist stylization and absorption into a type. The aesthetic aim to which de Kooning applied the label, "no style," derives from and is the experience of this philosophy of art and of the self.

In conceiving of art as a way of life, de Kooning makes his engagement in his profession total in the sense of the absorption of a priest or saint in his vocation. The idea is faulty. Painting lacks the structure of values by which ethical or religious systems can sustain the individual.

This lucid expression of reserve from the theoretician of action painting with regard to an aesthetic-as-morality is not ultimately surprising; it is the inevitable recognition of the perils and limits of a certain radicalism and its rhetoric.

Here, however, are Godard's thoughts on the matter (and we must have some day a *Wit and Wisdom of J. L. Godard*; he is an aphorist in the grand tradition of Chamfort): "Between aesthetics and ethics, a choice must be made, of course. However, it also goes without saying that each word contains a bit of the other." "Trusting to luck means listening to voices." "If the ways of art are unpredictable, this is because the ways of chance are not." And finally, "Making films resembles modern philosophy, Husserl, let's say . . . an adventure, plus the philosophy of that life, and reflecting on life."

* * *

Painters, sculptors, and their critics are involved, at this very moment, in a kind of chastening reappraisal of a rhetoric that passed for the thought of action painting, in a critical surveyal of the arena whose space measures the relation of its philosophical assumptions to its metaphors. It may be premature too soon to demand from the independent or underground film-maker (confined, as he is, to an even more marginal position in society) the critical stringency now beginning to inform the reassessment of action painting and its aesthetics.

To return, briefly but more specifically, to the work and thought of Brakhage, I would argue that the notion of the camera as an extension of the body or its nervous system seems to me highly questionable, and that, ultimately it limits and violates the camera's function. Certainly, this way of thinking calls into question the instrument's fundamental power as expressed in the metaphor of the camera as eye, a marvelously sensitive and flexible one to be sure, that supreme instrument of *mediation*, which is also the "mind's eye," whose possibilities infinitely transcend the limitations of a crude automatism. If cinema is to embody, as according to this aesthetic, it does, the drama and pathos of creation itself, then one may ask whether the history of academicism in film—which, as I have already suggested, proposed the substitution of novelistic forms for the theatrical ones—is not thereby simply extended by the uncritical parody of abstract expressionist orthodoxy.

My own feeling is that the work of Resnais and Godard (to mention only artists represented at this festival) constitute renderings of the agonistic dimension which are infinitely more radical and powerful; their "statements" proclaim the recognition of the dynamics of the medium—and this in the most open and least prescriptive manner possible.

These "statements" by no means necessarily exclude the possibility of stimulus or nourishment from other, developing arts. In America, the work of Robert Breer, for example, has an immediacy produced by the elimination of narrative as plot, or plot re-conceived as progress, involving a complex visual logic, high speed of images, the use of subliminal vision. All these factors articulate a cinematic aspiration toward the condition of the "object" instantly apprehended, an aspiration shared by our most advanced painting today. Rather than fusing in a con-fusion, this work proposes a situation in which film and painting may converge within a tradition of formal radicalism. These films, in their intransigent autonomy, make an almost wholly plastic use of reference and allusion, by no means excluding extra plastic resonances, but animated by a sense of structure as progress-in-time so absolute and compelling that very little else has room or time enough in which to "happen."

The extraordinary advantage of American cinema today does lie partly in the possibilities of these convergences and cross-fertilizations. It may be that American film is unique in its access to a multiplicity of vital efforts unprecedented since the immediately post-Revolutionary situation in Russia. One thinks of its already established, though still embryonic, contacts with a new music,

dance, theater, painting, and sculpture. And all these are, in turn, of course, heightened, and perhaps somewhat endangered, by a forced confrontation with technology in its most paroxysmic and pervasive form.

It is precisely at this point that one may anticipate the difficulties that may soon confront the great figures of European cinema, most particularly in France. If cinema and literature have so wonderfully nourished and sustained each other in postwar France (and this within the context of an antilitary ontology of film), this is, I believe, in so far as they were both involved in a refining of their respective ontologies: The Robbe-Grillet-Resnais collaboration is, of course, a supreme instance of this kind of intimacy of independent forces.

Interestingly enough, however—and disquietingly, too—the extracine-matic, the intellectual context of French film has been (with the exception of Resnais and Bresson) and continues to be, almost exclusively those of Romanticism and Surrealism. In the entire corpus of postwar film, I would cite offhand only four examples of the really significantly composed musical or sound track, and this during France's remarkable post-Weberian renewal of music: Michel Fano's serially composed soundtrack for *L'Immortelle*, Henze's score for *Muriel*, Barbaud's interestingly conceived, though questionable, score for Varda's *Les Créatures*, and above all the utterly remarkable spoken soundtrack of Jacques Tati's *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*—certainly, the most deeply Weberian of all in its exquisite economy, in its inventive use of silence!

In our country, the questioning of the values of formal autonomy has led to an attempted dissolution of distinctions or barriers between media. Perhaps, however, this is because our social and economic hierarchies and distinctions remain pretty well impervious to the radical aspiration of film-makers and of artists in general. The hierarchical distinctions, the barriers between forms are, of course, infinitely more vulnerable. Cinema, on the verge of winning the battle for the recognition of its specificity—and every major film-maker and critic the last half-century has fought that battle—is now engaged in a reconsideration of its aims. The Victor now questions his Victory. The emergence of new "intermedia," the revival of the old dream of synaesthesia, the cross-fertilization of dance, theater, and film, as in the theater pieces of Robert Whitman, the work of Ken Dewey (and both are, significantly, represented in this year's festival) constitute a syndrome of that radicalism's crisis, both formal and social.

In a country whose power and affluence are maintained by the dialectic of a war economy, in a country whose dream of revolution has been sublimated in reformism and frustrated by an equivocal prosperity, cinematic radicalism is condemned to a politics and strategy of social and aesthetic subversion.

"To live," as Webern, quoting Hölderlin, said, "is to defend a form." It is from the strength of its forms that cinema's essential power of negation, its "liquidation of traditional elements in our culture," as Benjamin put it, will derive and sustain its cathartic power.

Within the structure of our culture, ten-year-olds are now filming 8mm serials—mostly science fiction, I am told—in their own backyards. This, perhaps is the *single most interesting fact* about cinema. Given this new accessibility of the medium, anything can happen. Astruc's dream of the camera as fountain pen is transcended, the camera becomes a toy, and the element of play is restored to cinematic enterprise. One thinks of Méliès, both Child and Father of cinema, and one rejoices in the promise of his reincarnation in the generation of little Americans making science-fiction films after school in those backyards. Here, I do believe, lies the excitement of cinema's future, its ultimate radical potential. And as André Breton, now a very venerable radical, has said, "The work of art is valid if, and only if, it is aquiver with a sense of the future."